

1998

The Race to Innocence: Confronting Hierarchical Relations among Women

Mary Louise Fellows

University of Minnesota Law School, fello001@umn.edu

Sherene Razack

University of Toronto, Department of Social Justice Education, sherene.razack@utoronto.ca

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarship.law.umn.edu/faculty_articles



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack, *The Race to Innocence: Confronting Hierarchical Relations among Women*, 1 J. GENDER RACE & JUST. 335 (1998), available at http://scholarship.law.umn.edu/faculty_articles/274.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University of Minnesota Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in the Faculty Scholarship collection by an authorized administrator of the Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact lenzx009@umn.edu.

The Race to Innocence: Confronting Hierarchical Relations among Women

Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack***

INTRODUCTION

We came to write this Article after reflecting on the many times that feminist political solidarity has failed because of what we identify below as the problem of “competing marginalities.” These moments of conflict and political immobility seem to center around the deeply felt belief that each of us, as women, is not implicated in the subordination of other women. When we view ourselves as innocent, we cannot confront the hierarchies that operate among us. Instead, each woman claims that her own marginality is the worst one; failing to interrogate her complicity in other women’s lives, she continues to participate in the practices that oppress other women. We have named the process through which a woman comes to believe that her own claim of subordination is the most urgent and that she is unimplicated in the subordination of other women as the “race to innocence.”

Our contention is that any theory, strategy, or practice based on competing marginalities and the race to innocence will inevitably fail because it ignores the relationships among hierarchical systems. Systems of oppression (capitalism, imperialism, and patriarchy) rely on one another in complex ways. This “interlocking” effect means that the systems of oppression come into existence in and through one another so that class exploitation could not be accomplished without gender and racial hierarchies; imperialism could not function without class exploitation, sexism, heterosexism, and so on.¹ Because

* Everett Fraser Professor of Law, University of Minnesota.

** Associate Professor, Department of Sociology and Equity Studies in Education, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.

1. Patricia Hill Collins, writing about African American women, is one of the first scholars to use the term “interlocking” in the way we are using it in the text:

Additive models of oppression are firmly rooted in the either/or dichotomous thinking of Eurocentric, masculinist thought. . . . This emphasis on quantification and categorization occurs in conjunction with the belief that either/or categories must be ranked. The search for certainty of this sort requires that one side of a dichotomy be privileged while its other is denigrated. Privilege becomes defined in relation to its other.

Replacing additive models of oppression with *interlocking* ones creates possibilities for new paradigms. The significance of seeing race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression is that such an approach fosters a paradigmatic shift of thinking inclusively about other oppressions, such as age, sexual orientation, religion, and ethnicity. . . .

Placing African-American women and other excluded groups in the center of analysis opens up possibilities for a both/and conceptual stance, one in which all groups possess varying amounts of penalty and privilege in one historically created system. . . .

Embracing a both/and conceptual stance moves us from additive, separate systems approaches to oppression and toward what I now see as the more fundamental issue of the

the systems rely on one another in these complex ways, it is ultimately futile to attempt to disrupt one system without simultaneously disrupting others.

When a woman fails to pursue how she is implicated in other women's lives and retreats to the position that the system that oppresses her the most is the only one worth fighting and that the other systems (systems in which she is positioned as dominant) are not of her concern, she will fail to undo her own subordination. Attempts to change one system while leaving the others intact leaves in place the structure of domination that is made up of interlocking hierarchies. Because the problem has been that we, as women, often *know* the futility of the race to innocence but seldom *feel* it, this Article asks how interlocking systems that secure the power of the dominant group produce and sustain our feelings of innocence.

In Part I, we describe the problem of competing marginalities and the race to innocence. We draw the conclusion that the systems of domination that position white, middle-class, heterosexual, nondisabled men at the center continue to operate among all other groups, limiting in various ways what women *know* and *feel* about one another. Feeling only the ways that she is positioned as subordinate, each woman strives to maintain her dominant positions. Paradoxically, each woman asserts her dominance in this way because she feels it is the only way she can win respect for her claim of subordination. We describe this practice as securing a "toehold on respectability."

Building on the idea that each woman tries to secure justice by making the dominant claim that she is not like other women, Part II explores the pursuit of "respectability" itself—a descriptive term for how the dominant group secures its position of dominance through the margins. How groups on the margins are positioned in relation to one another on the disrespectable, or more aptly, the degenerate side of the divide, is of central importance to understanding how the dominant group produces and sustains feelings of innocence for itself and groups on the margin. The analysis of respectability in Part II focuses on nineteenth-century Europe and the making of the middle class.

In Part III, we look at the continuing vitality of the concept of respectability in the late twentieth century. Relying on the contemporary feminist debate about prostitution, we show how the race to innocence and the related practice of securing a toehold on respectability currently serve to reinforce systems of domination and maintain hierarchical arrangements among women. In the Conclusion, we reiterate the reasons why feminists committed to social change must feel compelled to transcend the race to innocence, and

social relations of domination. Race, class, and gender constitute axes of oppression that characterize Black women's experiences within a more generalized matrix of domination. Other groups may encounter different dimensions of the matrix, such as sexual orientation, religion, and age, but the overarching relationship is one of domination and the types of activism it generates.

PATRICIA HILL COLLINS, *BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT: KNOWLEDGE, CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE POLITICS OF EMPOWERMENT* 225-26 (1990) (emphasis added).

we suggest some strategies for how they might begin the process of feeling less innocent.

I. THE PROBLEM OF COMPETING MARGINALITIES AND THE RACE TO INNOCENCE

Many feminists have gained an intellectual understanding of complicity—how we, as women, participate in the oppression of one another.² Yet in political encounters, many of us find it difficult to take actions built on the recognition that we are both oppressors and oppressed. Although we *know* we are complicitous in the oppression of other women, we seldom *feel* this to be true. Thus there have been, and there continues to be, destructive and painful moments in feminist politics, moments of failed conferences, coalitions, and dialogues. There are, of course, many moments when identity politics based on a solidarity as women has prevailed and effective political action has ensued. Yet even these moments are often beset with incidents of high conflict.

2. There is substantial literature mapping white women's participation in the subordination of women of color, a position of dominance they occupy while remaining subordinate to the men of their class and race. For examples of discussions of racial hierarchies among women in a historical context, see JENNY SHARPE, *ALLEGORIES OF EMPIRE: THE FIGURE OF WOMAN IN THE COLONIAL TEXT* (1993); VRON WARE, *BEYOND THE PALE: WHITE WOMEN, RACISM AND HISTORY* (1992); Antoinette M. Burton, *The White Woman's Burden, in WESTERN WOMEN AND IMPERIALISM, COMPLICITY AND RESISTANCE* 137 (Nupur Chadhuri & Margaret Stroebel eds., 1992). For examples of similar discussions in a contemporary context, see BELL HOOKS, *TEACHING TO TRANSGRESS* 77-92 (1994); AUDRE LORDE, *SISTER OUTSIDER* 114-23 (1984); Patricia Hill Collins, *What's in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism and Beyond*, 26 *BLACK SCHOLAR* 9 (1996); María C. Lugones, *Hablando cara a cara/Speaking Face to Face: An Exploration of Ethnocentric Racism, in MAKING FACE, MAKING SOUL HACIENDO CARAS: CREATIVE AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES BY WOMEN OF COLOR* 46 (Gloria Anzaldúa ed., 1990) [hereinafter *MAKING FACE, MAKING SOUL HACIENDO CARAS*]; Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Under Western Eyes, in THIRD WORLD WOMEN AND THE POLITICS OF FEMINISM* 51 (Chandra Talpade Mohanty et al. eds., 1991).

Feminists have shown how heterosexual women gain privilege by engaging in practices that subordinate lesbians. See, e.g., LORDE, *supra*, at 114-23; CHERRIE MORAGA, *LOVING IN THE WAR YEARS: LO QUE NUNCA PASO POR SUS LABIOS XX* (1983); Patricia Cain, *Feminist Jurisprudence: Grounding the Theories*, 4 *BERKELEY WOMEN'S L.J.* 191, 205-14 (1989); Audre Lorde, *I Am Your Sister: Black Women Organizing Across Sexualities, in MAKING FACE, MAKING SOUL HACIENDO CARAS, supra*, at 321; Adrienne Rich, *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*, 5 *SIGNS* 631, 657-60 (1980).

For how nondisabled women are implicated in discrimination against women with disabilities, see JENNY MORRIS, *PRIDE AND PREJUDICE: TRANSFORMING ATTITUDES TO DISABILITY* 169-93 (1991); Yvon Appleby, *Disability and "Compulsory Heterosexuality," in HETEROSEXUALITY: A FEMINIST AND PSYCHOLOGY READER* 266 (Sue Wilkinson & Celia Kitzinger eds., 1993); Sherene Razack, *From Consent to Responsibility, from Pity to Respect: Subtexts in Cases of Sexual Violence Involving Girls and Women with Developmental Disabilities*, 19 *L. & SOC. INQUIRY* 891, 899-903 (1994).

Aboriginal women also have traced the role non-Aboriginal women have played in the genocide and continuing colonization of Aboriginal peoples. See, e.g., JANICE ACOOSE/MISKO—KISIKÁWIKWĒ (RED SKY WOMAN), ISKWEWAK—KAH'KI YAW NI WAHKOMAKANAK. NEITHER INDIAN PRINCESSES OR EASY SQUAWS 47-49 (1995); BETH BRANT, *WRITING AS WITNESS* 25-34 (1994); JANET CAMPBELL HALE, *BLOODLINES, ODYSSEY OF A NATIVE DAUGHTER* 109-40 (1994); LEE MARACLE, *I AM A WOMAN* 180-83 (1988); PATRICIA MONTURE-ANGUS, *THUNDER IN MY SOUL: A MOHAWK WOMAN SPEAKS* 169-88 (1995); Chrystos, *Interview, in THE COLOUR OF RESISTANCE: A CONTEMPORARY COLLECTION OF WRITING BY ABORIGINAL WOMEN* 263 (Connie Fife ed., 1993).

A failed conference brought us together and led to our exploration of hierarchies among women.³

At a conference on law and feminism, when a woman who is a survivor of prostitution challenged participants to take the violence in prostitution seriously, and not to deny it by calling prostitution "an expression of our sexual autonomy," or a job like any other, some participants insisted that some women viewed their involvement in prostitution not as violence but as a job. She felt the need to leave the conference because she believed that once again feminists had erased the violence in prostitution. The next day, during a discussion about race discrimination and racial subordination in feminist publishing, Sherene considered how to ensure that each of us is challenged at the sites of our dominance. At that moment, Mary Lou noted that we had all failed to challenge ourselves the day before when many of us had resisted the idea of prostitution as violence. Her statement turned the discussion away from race and feminist publishing toward how people in the audience and panel participants felt about what had happened the previous day. Neither prostitution nor racism was ever discussed, and a fracture developed between us as co-organizers of the event.

The conflict between us emerged because Sherene viewed Mary Lou's statement as putting an end to an important discussion on racism led primarily by women of color. She considered Mary Lou's intervention to have come either from a desire to shut down a discussion about racism, or from a perception that challenging racism was not as important a political goal as the goal of acknowledging and ending the violence of prostitution. Mary Lou remained frustrated that few women present, including Sherene, seemed able to acknowledge the violence of prostitution or to see that their resistance came out of their positions of privilege as women who had something to gain from denying the violence of prostitution. Our first response to the conflict, which felt like competing marginalities, was to call it a breakdown in communication. Viewed in this light, we imagined that, if we had each had more information, we could have avoided the conflict between us. If Mary Lou had more information about how women of color experience the interruption of a discussion of racism by a white woman as part of the widespread denial of racism, and Sherene knew more about how prostituted women experience the widespread denial of the violence of prostitution and how that denial serves to maintain the violence, we would not have come to the impasse at which dialogue ends. To cast the problem, however, as one of information and comparable ignorance (white supremacy versus prostitution) reduces the impasse to a temporary interruption easily solved through education. It fails to recognize the connection between what we know and the interests we protect through our ignorance. Had we had the information, perhaps Mary Lou would not have intervened and Sherene would have said more about prostitution, but we still would not have transcended the impasse. That is, each of us would

3. See Mary Louise Fellows & Sherene Razack, *Seeking Relations: Law and Feminism Round Tables*, 19 *SIGNS* 1048 (1994).

continue to *feel* that our truth was the right one and our sense of superiority (as the possessor of truth) would have remained unshaken. What remains in place is the separation of prostitution from racism as if they were independent systems—as if they were competing parallel narratives.

A parallel narrative precludes an interrogation of prostitution as a practice that develops out of, and simultaneously sustains, racism. Similarly, it prevents tracing how racism is upheld by and upholds prostitution. Race must be understood not simply as complicating prostitution but as enabling it. Further, ablism, economic exploitation, heterosexism, and sexism also are upheld by and uphold prostitution. In other words, competing parallel narratives ignore the interlocking nature of systems of domination and the complex ways in which they simultaneously secure relations and sites of domination.

In retracing the steps at the conference on law and feminism, we noticed that two moves were routinely made by many of the participants, including ourselves: 1) many of us viewed the places on the margin as unconnected and 2) many of us felt it imperative to secure our own places on the margin; not to do so felt like erasure. We name the process initiated by competing marginalities as the race to innocence. Women challenged about their domination respond by calling attention to their own subordination. The impasse that results depends on the idea that if a woman is subordinate herself, she cannot then be implicated in the subordination of others. The race to innocence confines us to an additive model for understanding oppression, where we try to add up oppressions and to gauge whether a white disabled heterosexual woman is more or less subordinate than a Black nondisabled lesbian, and so forth. Measuring who is most oppressed is unproductive. The rancor and dissension that it sows, as well as the political immobility, make clear the urgency of abandoning positions of innocence—the belief that because we are ourselves in a subordinate position, we are unimplicated in the oppression of others.

The frequency with which the race to innocence happens demands that we, as women, inquire into the forces that lead us so often into the trap of competing marginalities. Why does our intellectual understanding of hierarchies among women not enable us to acknowledge how we oppress other women? One reason we feel compelled to secure our own place on the margin as the most oppressed is that not to do so is to risk erasure. If lesbians, for example, do not insist that the strategies of resistance explicitly address the oppressive force of heterosexuality, heterosexual women may, as lesbians fear, leave heterosexism unexamined. In other words, the oppressive practices that regulate the lives of lesbians will remain invisible if they themselves do not raise the issue.

A second reason why we are trapped in the framework of competing marginalities is that it is productive for us. Recognizing one's own specific position on the margin is the first step toward liberation. Once we understand and act from the site of our own marginality, we can begin to protect ourselves

and take actions for change. Focusing exclusively on one's own subordination is a productive defensive response to oppression.

Yet a third reason why we pursue a place on the margin for ourselves and discount the narratives of subordination of others is that we hear these narratives in the same way as dominant groups hear the stories of subordinate groups. Because we do not experience the specific forms of oppression that other women do, and are in fact privileged in that respect, we are likely to consider their claims as unfounded. In essence, we view other women through the lenses of our own superiority and utilize dominant explanatory frameworks to explain to ourselves the meaning of their lives. Although we may be able to resist these frameworks when they concern our own particular marginalized positions, they effectively regulate how we view women who are marginalized in different ways. Each of us has a stock of dominant representations of the Other (prostitution is simply work not violence; women with disabilities suffer from their disabilities and not from the systems that are organized to benefit nondisabled women) that we draw from to convince ourselves why the Other's claim is not as legitimate as our own. The fact that each of us knows and feels the inaccuracy and injustice of the dominant group's representations of ourselves does not immunize any of us from giving credence to the inferiorizing constructs applied to others.

Given the benefits and necessity of concentrating on the sources of our own subordination, it is not surprising that each of us does not easily endanger our place on the margin by an examination of our complicity in the oppression of others. To acknowledge that we oppress other women not only *feels* like a risk; *it is* a risk. Our own claim for justice is likely to be undermined if we acknowledge the claims of Others—competing claims that would position us as dominant. The compelling reasons, then, for our race to innocence have to do with how the systems of domination operate *among* subordinate groups, limiting both what we can know and feel and what we can risk acknowledging about one another and about ourselves.

The race to innocence depends on the idea that the systems of domination are separate. This leads to women making a truth claim that they are subordinate in one system and failing to see their domination in another. Failing to see one's domination in another system, however, and acting from that basis not only leaves the systems that privilege us intact, but it leaves the system that subordinates us intact as well. Although we may believe we are advancing our own claim for justice by distinguishing ourselves from other women, we are assuring injustice for all.

One possible way to stop racing to innocence is to examine how all the systems operate simultaneously, not only to make the center, but also to structure us, as women, hierarchically and thus to condition our responses to one another. This is, of course, an intellectual solution to a problem that is clearly beyond the cognitive. If we start, however, from the premise that what underlies the race to innocence are, as Jane Flax suggests, "motives and desires (including unconscious ones) [that] drive us to make the kinds of claims about

ourselves" that we do,⁴ perhaps we can push intellectual inquiry further to ask why we feel consistently innocent of one another's oppression.⁵ This question is addressed in Part II through a consideration of how the center is made through the margins (dominance through difference).

II. DOMINANCE THROUGH DIFFERENCE

Identity, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is derived from the Latin word *idem*, meaning the same.⁶ Its various dictionary meanings focus on sameness. Yet in our social, political, economic, and legal worlds, the word *identity* is far more likely to be heard and read as connoting *difference*. Those who can be simply human, or simply women, María Lugones reminds us, are not allotted specific identity boxes.⁷ Their membership in the human community or the category "woman" assured, dominant groups are not specifically labeled. White people need not and do not define themselves as members of a race; heterosexual people do not define themselves as having a sexual orientation. Thus identity comes to bear an intrinsic relationship to subordination. Identity boxes contain those excluded from the dominant group. Conversely, to be unmarked or unnamed is to belong to the dominant group.⁸ The marking of subordinate groups and the unmarking of dominant groups leaves the actual processes of domination obscured, thus intact. Subordinate groups simply *are* the way they are; their *condition* is naturalized. To be unmarked or unnamed is also simply to *embody* the norm and not to have actively produced and sustained it. To be the norm, yet to have the norm unnamed, is to be innocent of the domination of others.

Innocence as intrinsic to the making of the dominant group has yet to be formally investigated, although some feminist scholars have explored how innocence, domination, and a sense of self are all connected.⁹ How do the

4. Jane Flax, *The End of Innocence*, in *FEMINISTS THEORIZE THE POLITICAL* 445, 446 (Judith Butler & Joan Scott eds., 1992).

5. See RAYMOND WILLIAMS, *POLITICS AND LETTERS: INTERVIEWS WITH NEW LEFT REVIEW* 182 (1979) (suggesting we ask how the repressions each individual experiences as an individual are in fact socially produced out of material realities).

6. OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY 1368 (compact ed. 1971).

7. Lugones, *supra* note 2, at 49.

8. As George Lipsitz comments with respect to whiteness, as "the unmarked category against which difference is constructed, whiteness never has to speak its name, never has to acknowledge its role as an organising principle in social and cultural relations." George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the "White" Problem in American Studies*, 47 AM. Q. 369, 369 (1995); see also Richard Dyer, *White*, 29 SCREEN 44, 46 (1988); Cheryl Harris, *Whiteness as Property*, 106 HARV. L. REV. 1707, 1777-81 (1993).

9. See, e.g., MARY LOUISE PRATT, *IMPERIAL EYES: TRAVEL, WRITING, AND TRANSCULTURATION* 7 (1992); Flax, *supra* note 4; Donna Haraway, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, 14 FEMINIST STUD. 575, 579 (1988).

identity boxes into which subordinate groups are placed secure innocence and power for the dominant group? Put another way, how do those who are most unmarked—white, middle-class/elite, heterosexual, nondisabled men—come to know themselves through the containment or marking of others, both symbolically and materially? Ultimately, this question leads to another with which we are concerned: How do identity boxes continue to operate among subordinate groups (where any one group is simultaneously marked and unmarked) so that subordinate groups come to know themselves as innocent? To answer these questions, we examine the marking of subordinate groups and the process of securing the center through the margins as it first emerged in liberal democratic states.

In making the transition from feudalism to liberal democracies, Europeans began in the eighteenth century to develop new ideologies to legitimate the power of the emerging middle class. The Enlightenment idea of the rational man unconnected to a bloodline or community was a central idea required to rationalize the rule of the bourgeoisie, and thus the cornerstone of liberalism. A man was defined by his capacity to reason; all men were equal by virtue of possessing this trait, hence equally entitled to participate in governance.¹⁰ The contradiction between the belief in the fundamental equality of men and the structures of domination required to create the middle class produced what David Goldberg has termed the paradox of liberalism, where all is race, but race is irrelevant.¹¹ Linda Alcoff, commenting on the paradox, describes its consequences: "The universal sameness that was so important for the liberal self required a careful containment and taxonomy of difference."¹² Brutal colonial regimes, the extermination and enslavement of subject peoples, the exploitation of the working class in Europe, and the gender hierarchies that enabled the new Enlightenment man to participate as a citizen in the new social order had to coexist in the bourgeois imagination with the philosophy of liberal equality.

The problem for the Enlightenment man, the European bourgeois male, is how to reconcile the exclusion of those who are not equal—all people with disabilities; lesbians, gays, and bisexuals; women; racial minorities; nonprotestants; and people who are poor—within a framework of the fundamental equality of all human beings. The solution, as Alcoff observes, is that "[w]here rights require sameness, difference must be either trivialized or contained in the Other across a firm and visible border."¹³ Physical and spatial markers of those who are not human, including skin color, physical features, persons found in certain locations, persons unaccompanied by more respectable

10. See DAVID THEO GOLDBERG, *RACIST CULTURE: PHILOSOPHY AND THE POLITICS OF MEANING* 2-6 (1993).

11. *Id.* at 4.

12. Linda Alcoff, *Philosophy and Racial Identity*, 75 *RADICAL PHIL.* 5, 5 (1996).

13. *Id.*

persons (for example, women alone), all help to draw the firm and visible border between those who are different and those who are unmarked. Equality, in its liberal meaning, could not be attained by those who were physically or spatially marked as different.

The containment of the Other is a making of the dominant self. To exclude Others from membership in the human community, that is, to name, classify, and contain the Other through a number of representational and material practices, assures the material basis for domination while enabling the members of the dominant group to define themselves. Patricia Hill Collins makes this point in the context of the marginalization of African American women, showing how identifying the Other concurrently identifies the dominant group. "As the 'Others' of society who can never really belong, strangers threaten the moral and social order. But they are simultaneously essential for its survival because those individuals who stand at the margins of society clarify its boundaries. African-American women, by not belonging, emphasize the significance of belonging."¹⁴ Although the symbolic and material practices used to exclude are not the same for all groups designated as Other, the various strategies collectively enable the formation of the dominant group.

As Hill Collins observes, without the contrast the dominant group would not know itself.¹⁵ The way in which the dominant group imagines the Other "is not merely looking or looking at; nor is it taking oneself intact into the other. It is . . . *becoming*."¹⁶ The dominant group *makes* itself through imagining itself as everything the Other is not. As David Roediger has commented about race, there is no content to whiteness outside of domination: whiteness is the "empty and terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn't and on whom one can hold back."¹⁷

When dominance is contested, dominant group members experience an engulfment, a literal loss of self that can feel extremely destabilizing. It is this, among other things, that we see exhibited in the race to innocence when an intellectual understanding of how women oppress women competes with an emotional attachment to innocence. What cannot be admitted, what is, in other words, repressed but always feared, is the permeability of the boundaries, the fact that they are never securely in place and have to be made and remade until the difference between the self and the subordinate Other appears natural and thus fixed.

14. COLLINS, *supra* note 1, at 68.

15. *Id.*

16. TONI MORRISON, *PLAYING IN THE DARK: WHITENESS AND THE LITERARY IMAGINATION* 4 (1992).

17. DAVID ROEDIGER, *TOWARD THE ABOLITION OF WHITENESS: ESSAYS ON RACE, POLITICS AND WORKING CLASS HISTORY* 13 (1994).

Identity as lack of dominance through difference occurs in specific historical contexts. Below we trace the process through which the European middle class first legitimated its power and began to consolidate it in liberal democratic states. In doing so, we are confining our observations to a specific historical context, contending that this context is an important historical moment for tracing the hierarchical arrangements among women with whom we are concerned.¹⁸ In addition to being sustained by colonial capitalism, the making of the middle class as a class distinct from the aristocracy, the working class, and colonial Others required the class, gender, and race arrangements in which North Americans now live.

We recognize the dangers inherent in transposing to North American soil the making of the European elite in the nineteenth century. Although the histories of European and North American nations differ, a powerful argument can be made for their interconnectedness both in the nineteenth century and today. With European empires expanding to link vast sections of the globe, nineteenth-century imperialism laid the groundwork for today's global world.¹⁹ As Edward Said observes, "[I]n Europe itself at the end of the nineteenth century, scarcely a corner of life was untouched by the facts of empire."²⁰ The American experience, he continues, was from the beginning founded on imperialism; as the century progressed, the extermination of native peoples, the enslavement of Africans, and the displacement of populations the world over through American interventions, both direct and indirect, continued apace.²¹ Although legitimating ideologies vary from one period to the next, and from one locale to another, they all bear the hallmarks of these arrangements founded in imperialism.

What then were the specific hierarchical arrangements required to allow the European middle class to legitimate and consolidate its power in liberal democratic states, and how did these arrangements structure relations among women? The middle-class home and the respectability attained through the making of the middle-class home are key concepts to understanding the hierarchical arrangements used to legitimate and consolidate middle-class ruling power. Michel Foucault's pathbreaking work in the *History of Sexuality* traces the making of the bourgeois subject as an identity rooted in the sexual politics of the home. Foucault began by rejecting the hypothesis that European sexuality in the nineteenth century was repressed. Foucault concluded that sexuality—much talked about during this period even as it was ostensibly

18. See 1 MICHEL FOUCAULT, *HISTORY OF SEXUALITY: AN INTRODUCTION* 17-35 (Robert Hurley trans., Vintage Books 1979); GOLDBERG, *supra* note 10, at 43-46; ANNE MCCLINTOCK, *IMPERIAL LEATHER: RACE, GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE COLONIAL CONTEXT* 21-61 (1995); PRATT, *supra* note 9, at 9-10.

19. See EDWARD W. SAID, *CULTURE AND IMPERIALISM* 6, 8 (1993) (stating that by 1914 Europe had laid claim to roughly 85% of the globe).

20. *Id.* at 8.

21. *Id.*

repressed—was only a manifestation of a larger project: to bring “life and its mechanisms into the realm of explicit calculations and [make] knowledge/power an agent of transformation of human life.”²²

The home was central to the emerging social order of “explicit calculations.” Close control over the manner of living made the bourgeois home the site of self-control, self-discipline, and order. Leonore Davidoff reminds us that in the nineteenth century, domesticity “as a concept as well as the home as an actual space were coined and elaborated beyond recognition on a much wider scale and further down the social hierarchy than ever before, in the countryside as well as in towns.”²³ The home came to mean much more than a place where a family resided. It marked the site where a class was produced and reproduced and where the life of the individual was connected to the making of a liberal democratic social order that replaced feudalism. Disciplined, self-regulating bourgeois bodies were emboldened to claim the right to participate as citizens in the body politic.

The power of the king was being replaced in this period by the rule of the middle class. Seeking to justify its right to rule, the middle class engaged in activities that would distinguish it from both the aristocracy (the ruling class in feudalism) and the lower social orders. These activities, involving the discipline of individuals and a close regulation of social life, consolidated the right of the bourgeoisie to hold political and social power.²⁴

The middle-class home, the middle class, and ultimately the nation all had to be protected from the contamination of the lower orders. Society had to be cleansed of degeneracy, abnormalcy, excess—in short, all the “internal enemies,” to use Foucault’s terms,²⁵ that would weaken the vigorous bourgeois individual and by extension, the state. George Mosse elaborates on how the intellectual construct of middle-class respectability, the term that described the ordered, self-regulating state of bourgeois homes and persons, came to distinguish bourgeois life:

22. FOUCAULT, *supra* note 18, at 143; see also ANN LAURA STOLER, *RACE AND THE EDUCATION OF DESIRE* 3 (1995) (further explaining the ties between the nineteenth-century bourgeois order and sexuality).

23. LEONORE DAVIDOFF, *WORLDS BETWEEN: HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND CLASS* 9 (1995).

24. As Ann Laura Stoler writes, Foucault saw the making of life and the manner of living as central to how the bourgeoisie justified its control, its right to rule, and indeed its very existence as a social class:

In the *History of Sexuality*, he has already described this “how to live” as central to the cultivation of the bourgeois self. It is through the technologies of sexuality that the bourgeoisie will claim its hegemony, its privileged position, its certified knowledge and jurisdiction over the manner of living, over the governing of children, over the civilities, conduct and competencies that prescribe “how to live.”

STOLER, *supra* note 22, at 83.

25. See *id.* at 10 (discussing Foucault’s use of the term in his College de France lectures).

Through respectability, they [the middle class] sought to maintain their status and self respect against both the lower classes and the aristocracy. They perceived their way of life, based as it was upon frugality, devotion to duty, and restraint of the passions, as superior to that of the "lazy" lower classes and the profligate aristocracy.²⁶

Mosse, echoing Foucault, notes that once national survival begins to be defined in terms of physical and moral health, and manliness comes to describe those who can possess these qualities, the concept of degeneration emerges as its antithesis. Degeneracy, for Benedict Augustin Morel, who first formulated the concept in medical terms in 1857, is a process of destruction that is brought on by moral and physical poison.²⁷ Mosse writes:

This deviance from the norm, as Morel called it, could be brought about by such poisons as alcoholism and the use of opium, by debilitating diseases like malaria, but also by the social environment, a nervous temperament, diseased moral faculties, or inherited bodily and mental weakness. Several of these poisons usually combined in order to begin the relentless process of degeneration.²⁸

Respectability and its converse, degeneracy, were part of the nineteenth-century ideological language expressing relations of domination and subordination. Respectability became an assertion of membership in the middle class and the basis on which one had the right to dominate others, those classified as degenerate. The pursuit of respectability, that is, the pursuit of domination through difference, required the simultaneous operation of all the systems of domination. Respectability and degeneracy marked not only class distinctions, but also gendered and raced social arrangements.

The middle-class home—the emblem of respectability—required a gender hierarchy and a colonial economic order to finance it. A number of discursive arrangements sustained these interconnections. As Ann Laura Stoler argues in her examination of Foucault's work, nineteenth-century bourgeois sexuality was situated on an imperial landscape. One could know a healthy bourgeois person only in contrast to that person's racial opposite, first encountered in colonization and later projected onto the working class at home.²⁹ In *Imperial Leather*, Anne McClintock has convincingly shown the crucial relation between middle-class domesticity and empire. In contrast to bourgeois males, women were featured as primitive and archaic; the female body itself was thought to inhabit anachronistic space, space inherently out of time with

26. GEORGE MOSSE, NATIONALISM AND SEXUALITY: RESPECTABILITY AND ABNORMAL SEXUALITY 5 (1995).

27. *Id.* at 34-35.

28. *Id.* at 35 (footnote omitted).

29. STOLER, *supra* note 22, at 5.

modernity. Women who transgressed the boundaries of Victorian respectability “became increasingly stigmatized as specimens of racial regression.”³⁰ McClintock shows the depiction of female domestic servants in Victorian times as “plagues,” “black bodies,” “slaves,” and “primitives,”³¹ and concludes:

By the latter half of the nineteenth century, the analogy between race and gender degeneration came to serve a specifically modern form of social domination, as an intricate dialectic emerged—between the domestication of the colonies and the racializing of the metropolis. In the metropolis, the idea of racial deviance was evoked to police the “degenerate” classes—the militant working class, the Irish, Jews, feminists, gays and lesbians, prostitutes, criminals, alcoholics and the insane—who were collectively figured as racial deviants, atavistic throwbacks to a primitive moment in human prehistory, surviving ominously in the heart of the modern, imperial metropolis.³²

Her argument suggests a second feature of respectability and its role in the making of the middle class. Respectability not only signified the simultaneous operation of social hierarchies, but also structured relations among women.

One way that the respectable middle-class home was distinguished from the degenerate slum was through women. To be a slum, an area had to be inhabited by prostituted women (among other members of the degenerate classes), and the women in slums had to be prostituted women. Both the slum and the women in it were further defined in opposition to the home and the “lady” in it. Davidoff demonstrates the relation between the home and the slum and the relation between ladies and prostituted women when she states:

Prostitutes, who were seen as the potential source of both physical and moral contagion for middle-class men, were also cast into this region [the slum]. Defenders of prostitution saw it as a necessary institution which acted as a giant sewer, drawing away the distasteful but inevitable waste products of male lustfulness, leaving the middle-class household and middle-class ladies pure and unsullied. None of the inhabitants of this twilight zone could ever aspire to be included in the “body politic” but had to be hidden and controlled wherever possible.³³

While prostituted women epitomized degeneracy, domestic workers were another class of women used to distinguish the lady and her home from the slum. Bourgeois households could not be maintained as the clean, ordered spaces of respectability without Others to do the work. Domestic workers

30. MCCLINTOCK, *supra* note 18, at 42.

31. *Id.*

32. *Id.* at 43.

33. DAVIDOFF, *supra* note 23, at 105.

absorbed "dirt and lowliness into their own bodies" and thus made it possible to mark the distinction between classes.³⁴ As Davidoff remarks, "The shining brass ornaments and daily whitening of doorsteps, the variety and upkeep of furniture, crockery and dozens of other household items, the servants in neat, clean uniforms to open the front door to visitors, were part of elaborated codes of gentility and respectability."³⁵ It was not possible to achieve respectability without domestic workers. Yet, the domestic worker represented the very degradation that the respectable home was by definition not supposed to contain. The domestic worker knew the truth that middle-class life was designed to eradicate—she knew its dirtiness. To make it not matter that she saw and knew intimately middle-class dirt, she had to be stripped of the ability to know. She had to be stripped of her subjectivity. By degrading her and her work, the middle-class family transformed her from a knowing subject into an invisible object and in the process made the reality of its dirt a nonreality.³⁶

The nineteenth-century dichotomy of respectability/degeneracy allows us to trace the hierarchical relations among ladies, domestic workers, and prostituted women. Ladies who, as McClintock observed, were distinguished from men by being characterized as primitive and archaic, pursued respectability by distancing themselves from dirt and degradation. That distancing could not occur either in the lady's imagination or in her middle-class home without the economic and sexual exploitation of domestic workers and prostituted women. She achieved and maintained her toehold on respectability through the economic and sexual exploitation of other women, and that exploitation was itself the product of class, gender, and racial hierarchies. The pursuit of respectability undoubtedly provided the lady some protection from economic and sexual exploitation. Freedom from economic and sexual exploitation for the lady, however, is only made possible by her complicity in maintaining class, gender, and racial hierarchies that resulted in the economic and sexual exploitation of other women.

34. *Id.* at 5.

35. *Id.* at 4.

36. See DEBORAH VALENZE, *THE FIRST INDUSTRIAL WOMAN* 158 (1995) (stating that hierarchical dimensions associated with the cult of the lady "depended absolutely on the denigration of household tasks"). McClintock expands on the ideological implications of dirt:

Dirt was a Victorian scandal because it was the surplus evidence of manual work, the visible residue that stubbornly remained after the process of industrial rationality had done its work. . . . Dirt is by definition useless, because it is that which belongs outside the commodity market.

. . . [D]irt was the memory trace of working class and female labor, unseemly evidence that the fundamental production of industrial and imperial wealth lay in the hands and bodies of the working class, women and the colonized. Dirt, like all fetishes, thus expresses a crisis in value, for it contradicts the liberal dictum that social wealth is created by the abstract, rational principles of the market and not by labor.

McCLINTOCK, *supra* note 18, at 153-54.

Domestic workers' toehold on respectability was more tenuous than it was for the lady because of their close connection to dirt and other degeneracies, but a toehold nevertheless was possible for those domestic workers demonstrating devotion to duty, restraint of passions, and hard work.³⁷ The means by which a domestic worker claimed respectability was, in the context of the home and slum, a disavowing of prostituted women. While such a disavowal could not provide her complete protection from economic and sexual exploitation, it meant that sexual exploitation might be only one condition rather than the entire substance of her working life. Her protection from the prospect of continual sexual violence was made possible by her complicity in maintaining class, gender, and racial hierarchies that resulted in other women paying the price for her protection.

A study of respectability in the nineteenth century not only allows us to identify the hierarchical relations among women, but it also allows us to appreciate how much a woman had invested in not *feeling* complicit in the lives of other women. What she had invested was her own self, and her self depended in material and symbolic ways on disavowal of membership in other degenerate groups. The question yet to be addressed is how can we use the concept of toehold on respectability, and the related notion of disavowal, in the twentieth century to explain why we, as women, do not *feel* complicit in one another's lives. In effect, how do we disavow our connections to other women and secure for ourselves a toehold on respectability today?

III. TOEHOLDS ON RESPECTABILITY IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

Respectability has continuing vitality in the twentieth century in sustaining hierarchical arrangements. Respectability in the twentieth century, Mosse concludes, "provided society with an essential cohesion that was as important in the perceptions of men and women as any economic or political interest. What began as bourgeois morality in the eighteenth century, in the end became everyone's morality."³⁸ Mosse, through his study of national socialism in Germany up to World War II, shows that respectability has had a continuing role in the twentieth century.³⁹ It marks the boundaries between those who are included in the body politic and those who are not, just as it did in the nineteenth century.⁴⁰ As long as it continues to determine who has a rightful

37. See DAVIDOFF, *supra* note 23, at 22, 27.

38. MOSSE, *supra* note 26, at 191.

39. See *id.* at 181-91.

40. See *id.* at 133-52.

claim to citizenship, the construct of respectability remains important in uncovering practices of domination.⁴¹

We suggested at the beginning of this Article that women are able to discount other women's claims for justice when they believe that the systems of domination are essentially unconnected and when they understand their own claims to be more just than the claims of other women. Both beliefs sustain respectability because each woman fails to see how her own subordination depends on the subordination of another woman. She is thus unable to challenge the structure of domination that is supported by multiple women in various subordinate roles. If, as women, our liberation leaves intact the subordination of other women, then we have not achieved liberation, but only a toehold on respectability.⁴² The political lesson to be drawn from the idea of a toehold on respectability is that a claim for justice cannot be transformative if it depends for its success on marking the distinction between ourselves and other women who can then be labeled degenerate. An exploration of current feminist understandings of prostitution demonstrates how the race to innocence and the related act of pursuing a toehold on respectability reinforce systems of domination and maintain hierarchical arrangements among women.

Contemporary Western feminists generally have two irreconcilable analytical frameworks for understanding prostitution.⁴³ For some feminists,

41. In using the construct of respectability to chart domination, however, we must be wary of positing a straightforward correspondence between the hierarchical arrangements of the nineteenth century and those of the twentieth. As Anita Levy writes, the contemporary task is to trace the nineteenth-century middle-class power that has in the twentieth century "vanished into the common sense norms of self and identity." ANITA LEVY, *OTHER WOMAN: THE WRITING OF CLASS, RACE AND GENDER, 1832-1898*, at 5 (1991), cited in REINA LEWIS, *GENDERING ORIENTALISM: RACE, FEMININITY AND REPRESENTATION* 27 (1996). In other words, the practices of domination that established the middle class in the nineteenth century have become everyone's morality today. Although the goal of identifying hierarchies remains constant across time and location, the arrangements that mark the distinction between respectability and degeneracy—thus maintaining the dominant group—change from one period to the next and from one locality to another.

42. Regina Austin makes reference to a similar idea when she comments that Blacks who are considered deviant by whites are excluded from standing in the Black community "because they undermine our claims to greater respect and a larger share of the nation's bounty." Regina Austin, *Black Women, Sisterhood, and the Difference/Deviance Divide*, 26 NEW ENG. L. REV. 877, 878 (1992). She concludes:

But black women have reason to challenge the appraisals of black female deviants, whether they are based on the standards of the dominant society or those prevailing in the black community. In the name of a "black sisterhood," a "community" within "the community," we might respond to female deviance with understanding, support, or praise based on the distinctive social, material, and political interests of black women. In doing so, however, we risk being labeled deviant ourselves. For this and other reasons, we tend to differentiate ourselves from those whose conduct falls within traditional definitions of deviance when we advance our claims for greater esteem and resources.

Id. at 879.

43. For a discussion of the range of views feminists hold on prostitution, see Margaret A. Baldwin, *Split at the Root: Prostitution and Feminist Discourses of Law Reform*, 5 YALE J.L. & FEMINISM 47 (1992); Christine Overall, *What's Wrong with Prostitution? Evaluating Sex Work*, 17 SIGNS 705 (1992);

prostitution is work and prostitutes are sex-trade workers. They have put their legal reform efforts into gaining respect for "sex-trade workers" by improving their working conditions. Although acknowledging that many prostituted women experience violence, they argue that the violence occurs because prostitution is illegal and prostituted women are treated as criminals. The solutions they propose range from decriminalization to unionization. For other feminists, prostitution is sexual violence. These feminists have put their legal reform efforts into decriminalizing prostitution for prostituted women and increasing the criminal and civil penalties for those who purchase sex for money and for those other than the prostituted woman herself who profit from prostitution. To debate prostitution as either work or violence leaves the hierarchical arrangements that sustain prostitution intact, because neither framework challenges the respectability/degeneracy dichotomy. On the contrary, both positions share the same goal—achieving respectability for women used in prostitution.

The historical role of respectability as dominance invites us to trace the hierarchical arrangements embodied in prostitution through an interrogation of the sites where prostitution occurs and the women found in those sites. As in nineteenth-century Europe, the sites of prostitution in the late twentieth century are places associated with crime, disease, poverty, and deviance. Women in prostitution, even when in respectable places (such as luxury hotels), carry these associations. Prostituted women, wherever found, become the place where men buying sex for money temporarily abandon their routines of duty, self-control, civility, and obligation. Their temporary abandonment, rather than weakening these men's claim of respectability, puts the mark of degeneracy on the women in prostitution, thus reaffirming the men's position within the dominant group. In this way, prostitution reaffirms not only the hierarchies of gender, but also of class, race, and sexual orientation.

By seeing respectability as embodying the structures of domination, prostitution becomes denaturalized. Instead of the "world's oldest profession," a benign construct that suggests prostitution's immutability and inevitability, prostitution is reconceptualized as a practice of domination through difference. If the very function of prostitution is to affirm the dominant group by marking the boundary between respectability and degeneracy, then prostitution cannot be made into a respectable activity, as those feminists advocating it as work propose to do. If prostitution became respectable, it would not be prostitution.

Those feminists who seek not to legitimate but to end prostitution by naming the women in prostitution victims of violence essentially are trying to unmark the women as degenerate; they are seeking respectability for women. The dominant group is making itself through prostitution; to demand the end of prostitution is to demand that the dominant group abandon a practice and an ideological construct that determines its very identity.

Laurie Shrage, *Comment on Overall's "What's Wrong with Prostitution? Evaluating Sex Work,"* 19 *SIGNS* 564 (1992).

Although our analysis seems to lead to the gloomy conclusions that prostitution can neither be ended nor its violence diminished, it in fact provides new directions for a politics of ant subordination. Through the concept of respectability, feminists committed to social change have a way to trace the stake all subordinate groups have in ending prostitution. Respectability suggests that none of the systems of oppression can exist without prostitution, and prostitution cannot exist without these systems. Prostitution is a prominent feature in urban areas of the world. It is also a prominent feature in areas surrounding military bases. To identify these sites exposes the class, gender, and racial hierarchies that sustain and are sustained by prostitution. Our task as scholars and activists is to trace all the hierarchical connections for the purpose of developing strategies for change.

Seeing respectability as dominance through difference also suggests that the goal of any ant subordination strategy cannot be the pursuit of respectability. Respectability is a claim for membership in the dominant group; attaining it, even one aspect of it, requires the subordination of Others. Moreover, because subordinate groups that gain a measure of respectability do not by definition possess all of the attributes of respectability, they are in an inherently unstable position. Those attributes that remain classified as degenerate will always threaten their toeholds on respectability. If a woman claims respectability on the basis of her formal education, for example—placing herself in a hierarchical relationship with women who have less formal education—whatever respectability she attains based on her education will inevitably be challenged. A stock of dominant narratives based on her disability, race, sex, sexual orientation, or other construct will be used to undervalue her accomplishments and highlight her mistakes.

CONCLUSION

The structure of dominance we have been calling respectability shows us how, as women, we are positioned in hierarchical relation to one another, to make the dominant group. It is a structure that causes us to secure our own toehold on respectability by disavowing other women. We are able in this way to maintain our innocence and to consider that the systems that oppress us are unconnected from the ones in which we are privileged. If we constantly remind ourselves of the interlocking structure of dominance, however, and specifically its powerful inducements to see ourselves as innocent, perhaps we can be better prepared to recognize and disrupt the discourse of competing marginalities and the race to innocence. Some of the questions we must ask of ourselves include: Where have we positioned other women within our strategies for achieving social justice? What do we gain from this positioning? How are we implicated in the structures of dominance? Only as we learn to distinguish between a toehold on respectability and a liberation strategy that truly undermines the dichotomy of respectability/degeneracy can we begin the process of *feeling* less innocent.