The Race/Reproduction Bind
in Modern Transatlantic Thought

Wayward Reproductions: Genealogies of Race and Nation
in Transatlantic Modern Thought
by Alys Eve Weinbaum

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Scholars of modernism will no doubt admire Alys Eve Weinbaum's revisionist readings of key players in the modern transatlantic debates over race and reproduction, not to mention her artful recuperation of literary texts that engage critically with those debates. In general, Weinbaum's theoretical approach gestures toward a common trend in both feminist and queer theory that focuses on the intersectionality of identity categories (as opposed to considering them in isolation) when she identifies the "race/reproduction bind" as the organizing "conceptual unit" of the modern episteme (5). The "notion that race can be reproduced" forms the underlying assumption of this bind, which leads Weinbaum to the conclusion that "racism and sexism cannot be thought separately precisely because reproduction is a racializing force" (4, 37).

The book begins its dense, richly substantiated narrative of modern thought in the United States. Building on theories of nationalism (such as those proposed by Benedict Anderson, Ernest Gellner, George Mosse, and Anne McClintock) and theories of genealogy (as articulated in the works of Michel Foucault and Friedrich Nietzsche), Weinbaum's first chapter uses Kate Chopin's short story "Désirée's Baby" to prove how genealogy may be used "to contest the same biological 'truths' that [it] claim[s] to trace, identify, and sanction" (18). For instance, Weinbaum suggests that while Chopin's story hints at the impossibility of discovering the origins of the genealogical "contamination" that blackens Désirée's baby, it also exposes the logic that holds Désirée solely responsible for the failure to properly reproduce race, since the maternal body was conceived of in contemporaneous thought as the vehicle through which "racial property" was passed down (21).
Weinbaum’s second chapter exposes Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s overarching eugenic project, which cast women as “the primary agents of racial ‘purity,’ superiority, and nationalism” (78), in order to critique the unproblematized situation of Gilman as a feminist foremother. In reaction to trends in scholarly approaches to Gilman that either conclude that her political beliefs about race are secondary to her feminist politics or marginalize her theoretical essays in favor of her literary texts, Weinbaum warns against privileging a feminist genealogy that fails to recognize its own complicity with colonial, racist, and imperialist projects (87). She continues the project of “mak[ing] feminism more historically minded” (117) in the next chapter by reexamining the role that race plays in Engels’s *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, thus questioning unselﬁsh feminist appeals to Marxism. Here Weinbaum demonstrates how Marx and Engels take the matriarchal society of the Iroquois as a representative example of all primitive peoples, an assumption that forms the basis of their theories. As she elucidates, “the overturning of matriarchal kinship systems that results in women’s subordination is [made] tantamount to the subordination of Western civilization’s other, principally the Iroquois” (125), which provides further justiﬁcation for the argument that feminists cannot posit racism and sexism as independent ideologies or practices.

Building on her observation that women have become the medium through which race is reproduced, chapter 4 highlights the means by which “wayward female desire” becomes an object of scientiﬁc scrutiny and a matter of increasing social exigency. In this chapter Weinbaum juxtaposes Darwin’s *Sexual Selection* with Freud’s essay “The Aetiology of Hysteria” to demonstrate how “racialization is intimately bound up with women’s sexual agency and wayward desire” (171). In the case of Darwin, female desire is positioned as central to the process of sexual selection, and therefore women’s choice of partner directly determines the racial health of the nation. On the other hand, through his deracialization of his hysterical patient Bertha Pappenheim (to whom he gives the pseudonym Anna O.), Freud pathologizes and universalizes incest as the cause of hysteria. According to Weinbaum,

incest, far from being regarded as a “universal” experience, was within the scientiﬁc and medical literature of the period invariably cast as a Jewish racial trait characteristic of a people who were thought to be mired in tribal exclusiveness. (165)
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Scholars of Freud and modernism will appreciate Weinbaum's astute attention to language in this chapter, as she reveals the racial etymology of the term *jargon*, which was used to describe Anna O.'s language in her hysterical state as associated with "Jewish talk" or Yiddish. Based on this clarification, Weinbaum traces Anna O.'s cure in racial terms, as she "progresses" from talking "jargon" to speaking proper German (181).

In the last chapter we return to the other side of the Atlantic, where the writings of W. E. B. Dubois construct, for Weinbaum, the possibility for a "genealogical counternarrative" in "refusing to construct the maternal body as the source of racial identity" (197). Here Weinbaum finds in W. E. B. Dubois's novels a reformulation of the mother-child relationship as primarily based on spiritual connection and a passing down of traditions, a "universalizable cultural inheritance" rather than a strictly biological connection (195, 199). As such, W. E. B. Dubois posits the existence of a "black All-Mother" in his conception of what Weinbaum designates as "racial globality": "a form of international kinship that encompasses all the darker peoples of the world, and constitutes a refutation of U.S. racial nationalism" (208). However, in response to more recent calls to move beyond race as a result of the human genome project, Weinbaum's coda demonstrates how "new genomic technologies and biotechnologies [are used] not so much to transcend race as to reproduce already existent racial identities and hierarchies" (230). She reminds us that technology is never neutral and that "race and reproduction remain tightly bound, even as race loses its status as biological essence, and reproduction assumes previously unimagined forms" (231, 242).

Weinbaum's book possesses an internal logic insofar as she traces the progression from local to global articulations of the complex "race/reproduction bind." Still, the reader is left with questions about the transatlantic aspects and formal implications of her study. How are we, for example, to understand the specific subjects of her study in dialogue or conversation with one another, beyond the boundaries of the chapters? Also, why is her decision to focus on literary texts in the United States and theoretical texts in the European context left unexplored, as are differences of genre? Regardless of these unanswered questions, however, the exigency for Weinbaum's text is undeniably present throughout her analysis. The epigraph to the final chapter excerpted from Donna Haraway summarizes the urgency of Weinbaum's project well:
Review

Ties through blood—including blood recast in the coin of genes and information—have been bloody enough already. I believe that there will be no racial or sexual peace, no livable nature, until we learn to produce humanity through something more and less than kinship. (227)

Moreover, as Weinbaum demonstrates, it is women who suffer the material effects of this discourse, as both female bodies and female desires are co-opted for the sake of maintaining racial/national genealogies. As such, she reminds us of the subversive and transformative potential of wayward reproductions.