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What's Wrong with the (White) Female Nude?

Abstract

In "What's Wrong with the (Female) Nude?" A. W. Eaton argues that the female nude in Western art promotes sexually objectifying, heteronormative erotic taste, and thereby has insidious effects on gender equality. In this response, I reject the claim that sexual objectification is a phenomenon that can be generalized across the experiences of all women. In particular, I argue that Eaton's thesis is based on the experiences of women who are white, and does not pay adequate attention to the lives of nonwhite women. This act of exclusion undermines the generality of Eaton's thesis, and exposes a more general bias in discussions of female representations in art. Different kinds of bodies have been subjected to different kinds of objectifying construal, and the ethics of nudity in art must be extended to take such variation into account.

Key words

female nude, art history, contemporary art, sexual objectification, bias, nudity, race, whiteness

In "What's Wrong with the (Female) Nude?" A. W. Eaton argues that the female nude in Western art promotes sexually objectifying, heteronormative erotic taste, and thereby has insidious effects on gender equality.¹ Eaton defines the female nude as "the genre of artistic representation that takes the unclothed female body as their primary subject matter."²

¹ A. W. Eaton, "What's Wrong with the (Female) Nude? A Feminist Perspective on Art and Pornography", [in:] *Art and Pornography: Philosophical Essays*, eds. H. Maes, J. Levinson, Oxford 2012, p. 4.

² Ibidem, p. 3.

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A critical premise in Eaton's argument is that the female nude is both *generic* and *ideal*, and consequently bears on the objectification of 'women in general,' as a social group. Eaton appeals to Martha Nussbaum and Rae Langton to give an account of how pictures have the power to sexually objectify.³

In my reply to Eaton, I reject the claim that sexual objectification is a phenomenon that can be generalized across the experiences of women. I argue that Eaton's thesis is contingent upon a tacit assumption: an account of sexual objectification can be inferred from theorizing the experiences of *white* women. The effectiveness of Eaton's project turns on the justificatory role played by this implicit racial generalization. In her analysis of generic and ideal beauty (and thereby sexual objectification), Eaton does not consider the reification of sexual objectification as it operates in the lives of nonwhite women. This act of exclusion is not a concomitant of Eaton's thesis – it functions as a theoretic foundation.

I intend for my reply to act as a supplement to Eaton's analysis of sexual objectification; I make a plea to extend Eaton's argument to different social groups. I will not be challenging her claim that nudes in Western art are problematic for certain groups in the ways that she described but, her tone gives the impression that these problems apply universally. My goal is to correct that impression. Accordingly, while my project acts as an extension of Eaton's important evaluation, it can't leave her original analysis untouched.

Eaton's appeal to white experience exemplifies a broader trend in what is sometimes called "white feminism" (I will elucidate my use of this term presently) to implicitly deny the role that racial privilege and oppression play in *all* women's experiences of gender inequality. To use a discourse introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw, this can be thought of as a single-axis framework of analysis;⁴ gender is taken to be the point of departure for the analysis of oppression. Eaton says that "the feminist critique of the female nude depends on a generalization about the *dominant mode* of this genre, namely that it sexually objectifies women."⁵ By treating gender as the primary cause of women's experiences of sexual objectification, Eaton's thesis is necessarily racially reductive. White

³ Ibidem, p. 4.

⁴ K. W. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color", *Stanford Law Review*, 1991, 43.6, p. 1244.

⁵ A. W. Eaton, op. cit., p. 5.

racial experience silently subsumes that of nonwhite women, and any analysis of racial oppression becomes parenthetical.⁶

The patterns exhibited in certain parts of Eaton's work are illustrative of the problem of employing a single-axis framework of analysis. My criticism of this method of analysis resonates with critiques of what is sometimes referred to as "white feminism."⁷ For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to this type of analysis as *gender-first*. My objective is not to prove that Eaton as a scholar is an unequivocal representative of the *gender-first* method, but rather to explain how her approach to theorizing sexual objectification participates in a kind of feminist scholarship that fails to successfully address race. This problem is not unique to Eaton. Her paper is presented as an encapsulation of work in analytic aesthetics, written for an academic philosophy volume on art and pornography, and there is no discussion of race therein. Eaton analogizes gender oppression to race oppression in a footnote,⁸ but neither she nor the other contributors take up the possibility that the ethical issues of pornography may intersect with issues of ethnicity in important ways. Eaton and the other authors thereby reinforce the notion that gender is the most informative dimension of a woman's experience of oppression;⁹ whereas race can be read onto a woman's body secondarily and analyzed accordingly.

One form of feminist discourse that rejects single-axis analysis is intersectional theory. Rather than examining gender, race, class, and other oppressed social identities as ontologically separable and analyzable independently of one another, intersectional accounts theorize

⁶ E. B. Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race", *Signs*, 1992, 17.2, pp. 251–274. p. 5.

⁷ For some influential analyses of this trend in "white feminism," refer to the following: P. H. Collins, "Toward a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection", *Race, Sex and Class*, 1993, 1, pp. 25–45; Crenshaw K. W., "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics", *Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, 1, pp. 139–167; *The Center Must Not Hold: White Women Philosophers on the Whiteness of Philosophy*, ed. G. Yancy, Plymouth 2010; hooks bell, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, Boston 1984; Mohanty Ch. T., "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", [in:] *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, eds. Ch. T. Mohanty, A. Russo, L. M. Torres, Bloomington 1991, pp. 333–358; E. V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought*, Boston 1988.

⁸ A. W. Eaton, op. cit., n. 37, p. 294.

⁹ Ch. W. Mills, *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*, London 1998, p. 115.

oppressed identities as necessarily constituted from multiple systems of oppression – each distinct, yet interlocking and often parallel.¹⁰

Admittedly, Eaton focuses her critique on the dominant representations of nudity in Western canonical museum pieces, which predominantly represent white women's bodies. But the omission of nonwhite bodies within dominant representations demands discussion as well. In my critique, I want to focus not only on how nudes *are* represented in the Western canon, but also on the nudes that are *omitted*, and moreover why the representation of the omitted nudes would raise some different questions than the nudes that come into Eaton's critique.

Eaton's argument is premised on the assumption that at least some aspect of the social dimension of being a woman is homogenous; this assumption inhibits her thesis from incorporating racial analysis. Eaton's totalizing message calls for a corrective – a critical analysis of the constitutive role that race plays in defining generic and ideal beauty, and sexual objectification. I will attempt this corrective. I argue that the almost exclusively white female nude in Western art is not only a source of sexual objectification, but simultaneously upholds the normative valuing of white femininity, sexuality and bodies, over the bodies, sexuality and femininity of nonwhite women.

In a nontrivial way, my paper also focuses on whiteness. Unlike Eaton, I address whiteness explicitly. In doing so, I attempt to make a modest intervention into *gender-first* philosophy. I engage with Eaton's argument in the hope of locating some of the racial blind spots that her and I share as white women philosophers. These blind spots have not gone unexamined; the matter has received ample attention in fields of philosophy beyond what I am referring to as *gender-first* philosophy (predominantly by nonwhite thinkers). By appealing to some of this literature, I hope to encourage self-critical dialogue within *gender-first* philosophy.

The obfuscation of race in Eaton's paper effectively reduces all women's bodies to the white body. This enables Eaton to discuss sexual objectification without reference to race, and consequently, to treat whiteness as a non-racial property. White women simply become women, and these women's experiences are treated as representative of all women's experiences.¹¹ The white body is treated as the raceless norm, and the nonwhite

¹⁰ P. H. Collins, op. cit., p. 26.

¹¹ Ch. W. Mills, op. cit., p. 115.

body as a deviation from this norm, thereby racialized.¹² And so, Eaton's interpretation of the female nude cannot detect the ineliminable causal role that race plays in gender oppression – of nonwhite *and* white women. Charles W. Mills addresses this type of problem:

[...] typically what one gets (insofar as any effort is made at all) is an attempt to piggyback the problem of race on to the body of respectable theory [...] But race is still really an afterthought in such deployments, a category theoretically residual. That is, one is starting from a pre-existing conceptual framework [...] and then trying to articulate race to this framework.¹³

Eaton's analysis is unable to understand gendered experience as always *already* racialized. By discussing women's experiences of oppression *qua* women, Eaton erases the experience of those women who do not have the privilege to theorize gender inequality separate from white domination.¹⁴ Crenshaw contends that the inseparability of nonwhite women's race and gender identities means that when race and gender are treated as mutually exclusive, a black woman's identity becomes defined as the experience of being a 'woman in general' combined with the experience of being 'black in general.' This reduction eliminates the dialectical nature of black women's gender and race.¹⁵ And so, by drawing race-neutral conclusions, Eaton effectively treats sexual objectification as separable from racial objectification. The relevance of her conclusions are then limited with regards to the dialectical experiences of nonwhite women.¹⁶

¹² Ibidem.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 106–107.

¹⁴ Ch. A. Nelson, *The Color of Stone: Sculpting the Black Female Subject in Nineteenth-Century America*, Minneapolis 2007, p. 15.

¹⁵ K. W. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins...", op. cit., p. 1252.

¹⁶ Throughout my paper the examples I choose – both theoretical and in terms of specific artworks – will primarily address the sexual objectification of black bodies. My own analysis entails that any interpretation of sexual objectification that generalizes across the experiences of women will not be tractable. Accordingly, I not only argue that white and nonwhite women's oppression cannot be generalized, but moreover, that different nonwhite women's experiences cannot be treated as homogenous. This implication extends further when we consider other forms of oppression that particularize women's experiences of racial and gender inequality. For example, classism, ableism, transphobia, fatphobia, whorephobia, xenophobia, homophobia, etc. One upshot of my argument, *inter alia*, is that any definition of sexual objectification will necessarily be noncomprehensive. I focus my examples on anti-black racism with this ineliminable theoretical open-endedness in mind.

Eaton criticizes philosophy of aesthetics for commonly failing to be applicable beyond the scope of pure theory, by “allowing one’s theory to hover at such a level of abstraction that it’s difficult to see how it speaks to actual works of art.”¹⁷ I contend that Eaton’s theory itself is subject to a variant of this accusation. Although her argument *does* speak to a host of actual artworks in the Western canon, it is not obvious which actual women Eaton means to address. This ambiguity arises from Eaton’s failure to ask one fundamental question: *which* women’s bodies are objectified via the particular erotic characteristics delineated in this account of the Western female nude?

Eaton is aware that her argument hinges on the proof that the female nude objectifies (and thereby oppresses) women in general rather than only the specific woman or women whose bodies are represented by the works she references.¹⁸ She says: “with few exceptions [the female nude] would seem to represent individual women in all their particularity; that is, they seem to offer us tokens, not types” which raises the question, “how can a visual representation stereotype women as a whole?”¹⁹ Her response to this claim “has two parts: the female nude in European tradition is almost always both generic and idealized.”²⁰ Eaton argues that the female nude does not represent women as subjects with individuality; but rather, represents woman as an object — this object being the ideal or generic woman. The ideal woman is not real, she is a possibility not an actuality; the generic woman lacks visible individuality and is ultimately fungible. I argue that here Eaton misses a fundamental question that weighs heavily on the strength of her argument: which women’s bodies set the standard for what is considered to be *ideal* or *generic*? As I will go on to argue, the ideal and generic woman’s body in the European tradition is necessarily a white woman’s body.

This inadvertence on Eaton’s part has a more deleterious effect upon her argument than it may initially appear. The keystone to Eaton’s denunciation of the female nude is her argument that artworks of this genre are made to represent *all* women, thereby sexually objectifying women as a type, rather than being responsible for token instances of the sexual objectification of individual women. In turn, Eaton justifies this argument

¹⁷ A. W. Eaton, op. cit., pp. 3–4.

¹⁸ Ibidem, p. 14.

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Ibidem.

from generalization by claiming that by being represented as ideal and generic, women are denied individuality and thereby subjectivity. Women in general become object. Ironically, in her attempt to condemn European art for treating women monolithically, Eaton falls subject to the same criticism: she argues that women (as such) have been objectified by the female nude, and in doing so, she treats “women” as a generic. In fact, the ways in which women’s bodies have been objectified in Western art has (and continues to have) different harmful implications for different women; this heterogeneity undercuts the success of any monolithic critique.²¹ Importantly, the “universal” harms that Eaton identifies are harms against white women.

An adequate account of the generic or ideal woman’s body requires that we look at whiteness. Whiteness is the *predominant* shared characteristic of the women’s bodies represented in the many examples Eaton surveys. On Eaton’s account, the ‘generic’ and ‘ideal’ are sexually objectifying traits of the female nude. This claim is premised by her discussion of ‘the male gaze’: “[T]he female nude, it is often said, is first and foremost characterized by works that cater to male interests and desire [...] ‘the male gaze’ should be understood as *normative*, referring to the sexually objectifying ‘way of seeing’[...] that the work in question solicits.”²²

The problem with this definition is that it treats ‘the male gaze’ as conceptually isolatable. The ‘way of seeing’ Eaton attributes to the male gaze turns on her methodological approach – gender difference is the essential factor informing this ‘way of seeing.’ When ‘the male gaze’ is treated as a singular social phenomenon, the consequence is that the plurality of ways in which different women are objectified by ‘the male gaze’ are conflated. The ‘way of seeing’ nonwhite and white women’s bodies is not generalizable. Nor can white and nonwhite men’s ‘male gaze’ be generalized.

The normative ‘way of seeing’ a *white* woman’s nude body is internalized differently by white men (as sexually entitled to her body) versus nonwhite men. And the experience of internalization becomes even more heterogenous when we understand white and nonwhite men intersectionally. For example, black men in the US are delimited to a ‘male gaze’ that is co-constituted by ‘the white gaze’ – they are prescribed a masculinity

²¹ C. Korsmeyer, “Perceptions, Pleasures, Arts: Considering Aesthetics”, [in:] *Philosophy in a Feminist Voice: Critiques and Reconstructions*, ed. J. A. Kourany, Princeton 1998, pp. 153–154.

²² A. W. Eaton, op. cit., p. 12.

that is understood through whiteness as inherently criminal, unintelligent, violent, or sexually dangerous. Thus 'the male gaze' as embodied by a black man does not imply the same entitlement to white women's bodies. A more apt concept is 'the white male gaze.' The way Eaton defines 'the male gaze,' and its impact on women, reveals a gaze that is defined by implicit appeal to the experiences of white men and white women. The complex and inherently racialized way that 'the male gaze' is prescribed to and experienced by nonwhite folks are erased. When 'the male gaze' is understood as a unitary phenomenon, it is also being understood through the lens of whiteness.

Eaton uses 'the male gaze' as a central premise in her argument, attributing to it a specific function. With reference to the female nude, 'the male gaze' describes "the 'way of seeing' proper to someone in the masculine social role, a role which, it should be noted, is avowedly heterosexual."²³ Here Eaton points to the intersection of gender and sexuality contained in 'the male gaze,' as necessarily both masculine and heterosexual. And yet, race is not addressed as an inherent component of this gaze. In the same way that 'the male gaze' as a normative force is avowedly heterosexual (I would propose 'heteronormative' as a more accurate descriptor here), it is also avowedly white.

Eaton claims that "[her] account of the problems with the female nude will be grounded in the material and historical specificity of the artworks in question."²⁴ Because the artworks she discusses almost exclusively represent white women, the historicity of Eaton's argument is selectively white. And so, nonwhite women's history of oppression is excluded by virtue of invisibility. In "Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude," Lisa E. Farrington explains that due to a US history of white racism, colonization and slavery, presenting the problem of the female nude without reference to race actively excludes implications that apply specifically to nonwhite women. Moreover, it erases the history of nonwhite women's bodies in European art.²⁵ Nonwhite women are represented in a distinct way, or not at all, in the European female nude. The ways in which nonwhite women internalize erotic norms cannot be addressed by Eaton's argument. Moreover, *different* nonwhite women embody *different* narratives

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 4.

²⁵ L. E. Farrington, "Reinventing Herself: The Black Female Nude", *Woman's Art Journal*, 2003, 24.2, p. 15.

of how to view themselves through 'the white *and* male gaze.' Both the white female nude, as well as the nonwhite female nude have implications for the objectification of nonwhite women that are erased when gender is the only axis of analysis at play.

By only criticizing the female nude for devaluing women's bodies as sexual objects designed for 'the male gaze,' Eaton indirectly deprioritizes the function the female nude serves to reinforce racial objectification. Again, we see how *gender-first* critiques implicitly sustain the hierarchical valuing of certain women's experiences of objectification over others. In other words, Eaton's thesis incidentally sidelines the examination of how the female nude carries with it the history and perpetuation of white supremacy.²⁶

Eaton argues that the female nude "eroticizes, [and] also aestheticizes" the female body.²⁷ At the same time, it eroticizes and aestheticizes *whiteness*. According to Eaton, the gender hierarchy that is enforced by the female nude is built upon sociocultural myths and stereotypes that work to totalize women's bodies as primarily sexual objects rather than subjects. These tropes are sustained by a patriarchal social context. However, the works of art that Eaton comments on purvey a particular repeating set of stereotypes, which are primarily associated with white femininity. Some of the stereotypes that are portrayed by the artworks Eaton surveys are passivity, innocence, naivety, maternalism, child-likeness, sexual availability and *simultaneous* sexual purity. One of the many examples that Eaton brings up that incite such tropes is Antonio da Correggio's *Venus, Satyr, and Cupid*; it is easy to read each of the aforementioned stereotypes off of this piece.²⁸

The problem is, these hegemonic stereotypes about women's bodies are often not applicable to nonwhite women. This is true to differing extents for nonwhite women depending on what other intersecting forms of oppression they experience; classism, colorism, xenophobia, transphobia and fatphobia to name a few. At the same time, Eaton's paper leaves unmentioned many of the stereotypes that work specifically to objectify the bodies of nonwhite women. By not explicitly addressing the ways in which gendered stereotypes are also always racialized, Eaton excludes the ways in which social gender narratives function in the lives of nonwhite women.

²⁶ A. M. Mann, "Race and Feminist Standpoint Theory", [in:] *Convergences: Black Feminism and Continental Philosophy*, eds. M. del Guadalupe Davidson, K. T. Gines, D.-D. L. Marcano, Albany 2010, p. 108.

²⁷ A. W. Eaton, op. cit., p. 2.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 10.

The stereotypes Eaton highlights as examples of objectification are deemed harmful and so it appears that to *not* be stereotyped in these ways is a good, or better, position for a woman to be in. However, many of the objectifying stereotypes or dominant social beliefs about women that come up in Eaton's paper *already* are not attached to the bodies of many nonwhite women. For one example, in the US, black women are generally not stereotyped as passive, sexually pure, modest, or conventionally feminine. Black women instead become subjected to a white-racist ideology that views them as loud, impure, hypersexual, immodest, vulgar, unfit to mother, aggressive and masculinized.²⁹ These stereotypes are racial, but they are also judgements about black femininity. Gira Grant gives the following example of this interplay of racial and sexual objectification: "For some white women, slut transgresses a boundary they've never imagined crossing. Women of color, working-class women, queer women: They were never presumed to have that boundary to begin with."³⁰

In this case, *not* being subject to the objectifying (white) stereotypes that Eaton outlines, is inseparable from *being* the subject of other oppressive stereotypes – stereotypes that are a source of gendered, racial, physical, and sexual violence for many women. Although white and nonwhite gender stereotypes alike are products of patriarchy and white supremacy, the particular consequences of these different stereotypes and who carries the weight of them, cannot be generalized. Nonwhite women are subjected to stereotypes that are distinct from – and oftentimes in direct opposition with – white counterparts.

Another example is the exotification of Muslim women by 'the white male gaze.' In this case, the sexual objectification of many Muslim women is directly linked to a *lack* of nudity, and perceived sexual *unavailability*. Head coverings, for example, become sexualized by the 'white male gaze' in this way. The Muslim woman becomes infantilized and totalized by the white fantasy of colonizing her untouchable, or inaccessible body – a fantasy that turns her into an object of sexual fetish. This idea is articulated in a blog post on *Feminazery*: "It's almost as though their sweet, brown flesh – so inviting – is not their own and, by covering it up, they're depriving these white men of their right to feast upon the exotic beauty."³¹

²⁹ L. E. Farrington, op. cit., p. 17.

³⁰ M. Gira Grant, *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work*, London 2014, p. 78.

³¹ "Exotification and Infantilisation: Even though the sound of it is something quite atrocious" (*Feminazery*, March 24th, 2010).



Fig. 1. Antonio da Correggio, *Venus, Satyr, and Cupid*, 1528
Musée du Louvre, Paris



Fig. 2. Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

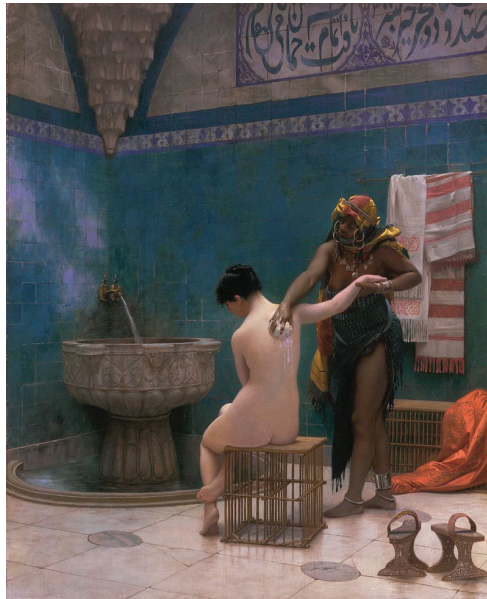


Fig. 3 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Bath*, 1880–1885
The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco



Fig. 4 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Great Bath at Bursa Turkey*, 1880–1885
Private collection



Fig. 5. Reneé Cox, *Yo Mama's Pieta*, 1994 (photography)
New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York



Fig. 6. Reneé Cox, *David*, 1994 (photography)
New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York



Fig. 7. Mickalene Thomas, *Maya #6*, 2014 (color photograph and paper collage)
Lehmann Maupin and Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



Fig. 8. Kara Walker, *Sugar Baby*, 2014 (polystyrene core with white sugar coating)
Domino Sugar Factory, New York

What if, for example, Eaton were to have discussed Manet's *Olympia*, rather than his *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*?³² Eaton uses Manet to address "works where a sexually objectified female nude appears with clothed and active men who are not sexually objectified."³³ *Olympia* likewise presents a nude female in the presence of a clothed person; however in this case, the clothed person is a woman – a black servant. This painting offers fertile ground for a material and historical analysis of objectification that addresses both the sexualization of a woman's body *and* the simultaneous prizing of white femininity by contrast to a nonwhite woman's body. The nonwhite body is represented as servile and covered, which relays the message that comparatively, her naked body must lack ideal beauty. Zacharie Astruc's "La fille des îles" (an excerpt of which appeared with *Olympia* when it was first exhibited in the Salon in 1865) highlights the way in which Manet uses a black woman's body (like the "amorous night") to accentuate the ideal beauty of the primary (white) woman (the "day beautiful to behold") in the painting:

Spring enters on the arms of the mild black messenger / She is the slave who, like the amorous night / Comes to adorn with flowers the day beautiful to behold.³⁴

Jean-Léon Gérôme's *The Bath*, and his *The Great Bath at Bursa Turkey* demonstrate this same instrumentality of the clothed nonwhite woman's body. Eaton argues that when it comes to high art "it *does* matter who's speaking: the message one gets strolling through the great museums of the world, or even just flipping through an art history textbook, is that women are connected to great art not as its creators, but simply as bodies, as the raw material out of which men forge masterpieces."³⁵ While this is true, it is also true that (almost) only white women have even *this* location in the Western canon. Nonwhite women's bodies are nearly absent altogether – as both artist and object of art. When nonwhite women's bodies *are* present in European art galleries, the internalization of these representations cannot be solely linked to an erotic taste that caters to men, but also needs to be analyzed as catering to *white* erotic desire. Feminist critiques of sexual objectification that only address the relegation of (white)

³² Édouard Manet, *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, 1862–1863, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

³³ A. W. Eaton, op. cit., p. 17.

³⁴ A. Pontynen, *For the Love of Beauty: Art, History, and the Moral Foundations of Aesthetic Judgment*, New Brunswick, New Jersey 2006, p. 41.

³⁵ A. W. Eaton, op. cit., p. 19.

women to the position of object perpetuates the domination of whiteness and the tokenization of nonwhite women's bodies in the Western canon. The simultaneous apparent silence on race and tacit role of whiteness in Eaton's work comes forcefully to light in the following excerpt:

[T]he individual unclothed females comprising the genre tend to lack distinctive qualities that suggest individuality and set each apart from the rest. Instead, there is a strong tendency for nudes to exhibit qualities common to a group [...] female nudes tend to share physiognomic qualities as well. Regardless of time period, nudes are regularly pale and without any trace of body hair [...] Facial features are also quite similar, particularly within the context of an oeuvre: for instance, all of Titian's nudes, whether Venus or Danaë or some other goddess, have the same facial features, the same skin tone, the same long blondish wavy hair, and even almost always wear the same pearl earrings [...] The resultant nude would be both everywoman (generic) and what every woman should be (ideal). This ideal, I argue, is a sexual object.³⁶

Now we return to the concepts of the ideal and the generic. Eaton claims that the women subjects of the female nude are fungible. She points out physiognomic qualities (being pale, hairless, having the same skin tone and long blonde hair etc.) that reoccur in the artworks she references and ascribes them as the traits of an 'ideal and generic woman,' a 'sexual object.' These are physiognomic characteristics of the *white* woman. The ideal type of beauty and the erotic excellence that Eaton criticizes give no reference to whiteness, and yet they are fundamentally inscribed by it. In a cultural context of both misogyny and white supremacy, ideal beauty is framed by a generic femininity that is necessarily white.³⁷

A clear case of this double standard can be found in Francisco Goya's *La Maja Desnuda*.³⁸ Drawing on Eaton's account, Goya's depiction of a naked woman's pubic hair breaks the mold of the predominant female nude. However, for those nonwhite women who are *not* presumed to be "pale and without any trace of body hair,"³⁹ the depiction of pubic hair fails to challenge the dominant representations of their bodies in Western art.

Another evident example of Eaton's conflation of femininity and white femininity is her use of Paul Gauguin's work. First, she uses Gauguin's

³⁶ Ibidem, p. 14.

³⁷ M. Miller-Young, "Putting Hypersexuality to Work: Black Women and Illicit Eroticism in Pornography", *Sexualities*, 2010, 13.2, p. 228.

³⁸ Francisco Goya, *La maja desnuda*, 1797–1800, Museo del Prado, Madrid.

³⁹ A. W. Eaton, op. cit., p. 15.

*Two Tahitian Women*⁴⁰ as an example of an objectifying female nude that “suggests an analogy between a person and an inert thing through visual similarity and proximity,”⁴¹ in this case, by posing women’s bodies with fruit. What she fails to consider here is that this artwork represents two women of color, whereas all of the other artworks she notes as examples of this particular trend are white. *Two Tahitian Women* offers an opportunity to analyze the representation of non-white female nudes, but this opportunity is lost via the *gender-first* model of critique. Eaton also mentions Gauguin’s *The Bathers*⁴² as an illustration of the generic woman’s body. However, as aforementioned, in her definition of the generic woman’s body, she appeals to physiognomic characteristics that are typically *white*. Gauguin’s bathers, then, in fact stands as a counterexample to her description of the generic female nude.

Eaton argues that “through genericization and idealization the object of that sexual objectification is ‘woman’ as a *type* rather than a particular *token* woman or group.”⁴³ Woman as a ‘type’ here is by default a white woman. Nonwhite women’s bodies are always already determined to be deviant and non-ideal in judgements about beauty. In the context of white racism, genericization and idealization are constructed such that non-white women are ‘taught’ that they both should and never can embody ideal beauty. This process of internalization of hegemonic erotic taste informs both sexual and racial objectification for nonwhite women. This cannot be encompassed by Eaton’s treatment of internalization as related to sexual objectification *simpliciter*.

Nonwhite women are perceived through a ‘white male gaze’ that will always define their bodies as lacking in beauty and erotic excellence, due to their lack of whiteness. The form this ‘lack’ takes and the extent to which it projects inadequacy upon nonwhite women’s bodies varies in accordance with the racial stereotypes attached to different nonwhite bodies. But in all cases, the generic ideal of beauty is necessarily inaccessible to the nonwhite woman.⁴⁴ Moreover, the white women who can and do embody this ideal beauty (again, to different extents and in different ways),

⁴⁰ Paul Gauguin, *Two Tahitian Women*, 1848–1903, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

⁴¹ A. W. Eaton, op. cit., p. 9.

⁴² Paul Gauguin, *The Bathers*, 1848–1903, National Gallery of Art.

⁴³ A. W. Eaton, op. cit., p. 15.

⁴⁴ M. Miller-Young, op. cit., p. 228.

are in fact granted many social privileges because of it. It is not my purpose to dismiss or belittle the multitudinous ways in which white women are sexually objectified, as gender inequality and the violent effects of misogyny are inescapable by all women. However, many white women also have access to economic and social currency, and power that is not accorded to nonwhite women. This privilege is founded upon the classification of white women's bodies as potentially, or actually, instances of ideal beauty.⁴⁵ And so, while sexual objectification has harmful implications for all women, (many) white women are also privileged by the norms and stereotypes that inform this normative perspective. In contrast, (many) nonwhite women experience multiple forms of violence interconnected with sexual objectification.⁴⁶

The upshot of Eaton's conclusion, at least implicitly, seems to be that the female nude in Western art is ultimately harmful. However, she leaves a critical question unanswered. Whether the female nude is deemed to be wholly bad, or bad in particular ways that promote gender inequality, we ought to ask: What reparative possibilities or mechanisms of aesthetic resistance can be discovered in Eaton's conclusion? And what sorts of prescriptive, ameliorative possibilities might we theorize that go beyond the scope of Eaton's thesis? These questions suggest exciting avenues of future research. Perhaps one starting point for developing a normative way forward in this debate would be to examine existing female nudes (or nudes of all genders) that seem to employ anti-oppressive and liberating imaginative resistance. It is not difficult to point to artworks that seem to perform this function, both historical and contemporary. These artworks could motivate questions such as: What can we learn from female nudes that represent non-ideal or non-generic women's bodies? What happens as the artwork of underrepresented women begins to take up more space in high art and visual culture more generally? What are the political possibilities of using feminist parody to challenge the harmful consequences of the traditional female nude?

I won't attempt to answer these questions here. However, keeping them in mind, I'll end with a few examples of artworks that use the naked body to challenge ideals of gender and race in Western art. To do so I will draw on Lynda Nead's *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*. In her analysis of the female nude, Nead proposes mechanisms in feminist

⁴⁵ Ch. A., Nelson, op. cit., p. 70.

⁴⁶ K. W. Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins...", op. cit., p. 1265.

art and criticism that can be used to disrupt and redefine the female nude. Nead explains these possibilities for resistance in a powerful statement:

The patriarchal tradition of the female nude subsumes the complex set of issues and experiences surrounding the representation of the female body within a single and supposedly unproblematic aesthetic category. If one challenges the boundaries of this category, it is at least possible to propose not a single aesthetic register but a range of possibilities and differences – distinctions of race, size, health, age and physical ability which create a variety of female identities and standpoints. In its articulation of differences, an engaged feminist practice necessarily breaks the boundaries of the high-art aesthetic symbolized by the female nude.⁴⁷

In Figure 5 and 6, from Renee Cox's infamous series *Flippin the Script*, Cox exchanges figures in European religious masterpieces with contemporary black men and women; Figure 7, a multimedia piece by Mickalene Thomas, portrays women's bodies that are underrepresented, and discounted by hegemonic beauty ideals; and Figure 8 shows Kara Walker's giant sugar-coated sculpture known as *Sugar Baby*. The complete title is, "A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby, an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant."

Ultimately, I argue that the success of Eaton's project is inherently limited to *white* women's experiences of sexual objectification and gender oppression. The justificatory role whiteness plays in Eaton's paper renders her conclusions not only insufficient, but also insidious. Eaton's thesis contributes to a *gender-first* discourse in philosophy that fails to self-critically account for the foundational role that white race plays in all gendered experience. This problem cannot be resolved by adding a racial analysis to conventional methodologies. So long as *gender-first* philosophy continues to theorize gender inequality by assuming a universal account of women's experiences of oppression, white domination will continue to infiltrate and overdetermine this work. A. W. Eaton's "What's Wrong with the (Female) Nude" falls subject to this concern. Consequently, her analysis of sexual objectification is in need of an important corrective. In my reply to Eaton, I have attempted this corrective work.

⁴⁷ L. Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, New York 1992, p. 33.

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