George Webb Hardy's The Black Peril and the Social Meaning of 'Black Peril' in Early Twentieth-Century South Africa

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Abstract

The 'Black Peril' — the threatened rape of white women by black men — was an important factor in the moral economy underpinning colonial debate about the 'Native Question' in early twentieth-century South Africa. This essay gives sympathetic consideration to studies which have attempted to link the recurrence of Black Peril panics with specific disturbances in the economy or body politic, before offering symptomatic readings of two pieces of writing by George Webb Hardy, the article 'The Black Peril' (1904) and the novel The Black Peril (1912). These readings suggest that the rape threat was essentially a rationalization of white men's fear of sexual competition from black men. The imagery of purity and contagion, in terms of which the 'endogamous imperative' is typically represented in such texts, suggests that the idea of caste may usefully be invoked in attempts to explain the seemingly irrational public hysteria surrounding the Black Peril phenomenon.

Introduction

In the early decades of this century, the phrase 'Black Peril' recurred like a refrain in the South African debate about the Native Question. At certain times, flaring up like an infectious rash, it dominated the columns of the national press. Although it served as the signifier for a range of emotions, ranging from sexual jealousy over the seduction of white women by black men to a general apprehension of native rebellion, 'Black Peril' was most commonly understood to refer to the threat of black rape.

Black rape scares were not, of course, unique to South Africa: well-documented parallels range in place and time from the southern United States in the late 1860s[1] to Papua in the 1920s.[2] But what was unusual about the South African case was both the duration of the historical period in which the major scares occurred (about forty years) and the lasting political impact of public response to them. The Black Peril was an important constant in the moral economy of the white South African ethnie - indeed, as a rallying point for English and Afrikaners in the post-Anglo-Boer War years, it helped to constitute that ethnie - because what was at stake was the integrity of the white female body, mythologized by a frontier society as the last and most intimate frontier of all. As Frantz Fanon has suggested, in the colonial context the literal and the symbolic are virtually indistinguishable, the individual body and the ethnic body are one.[3] In the patriarchal construction of the sexual act, whether forced or not, the male is dominant and the female is subordinate: the political scandal of the Black Peril is the subjection of a woman of the
dominant race to the power of a man of the subordinate race; the penetration of a white woman by a black man is an act of insurrection.

It is therefore tempting to construe the fear of black rape as a mere symptom of a more general political fear. This is the conclusion reached by Norman Etherington in his investigation of the earliest documented Black Peril 'moral panic'[4] in South Africa, the rape scare which gripped the colony of Natal in the early 1870s. Etherington advances the hypothesis that fear of losing control was a constant undercurrent in the thinking of the settler minority. This substratum of anxiety rose to the surface in the form of a moral panic whenever disturbances in the economy or the body politic were severe enough to unsettle the mask of composure worn by the face of public authority. In a patriarchal society where women were part and parcel of property to be defended against threats from below, fear of rape was a special concern of white males.[5]

Etherington cites several factors which were working to increase fears of losing control at the time of the Natal rape scare, notably, powerful forces of change, including the emergence of Africans as 'formidable competitors' in agriculture and transport in Natal, and the migratory labour pattern established by the rush for diamonds at Kimberley, where a 'peculiarly lawless and wild society' unprecedented in South African experience was springing up.[6] He does not discount psychological explanations - for instance, the idea that 'fear of competition from more virile, potent black rivals has been deep-seated in the psyches of white males for centuries and that white women in colonial situations encourage such fears to revenge themselves on men who impose chastity on them while freely enjoying sexual connexions with females of the subject people' - but maintains that the supposition of a persistent anxiety does not 'in itself offer an adequate explanation for outbreaks of limited duration'.[7]

Etherington's point is well made, and his study powerfully highlights some specific causal factors from the muddy flux of history. However, these factors are not always easy to identify, and seem to have been sometimes present and sometimes absent in subsequent Black Peril scares, the major ones being in Natal in 1886, in the Cape, Natal and Transvaal in 1902-1903, and in the country generally in 1906-1908 and 1911-1912. The moral panic immediately after the Anglo-Boer War, for instance, seems largely to have been provoked by the influx of white prostitutes with their eye on soldiers' pay-packets. These women injected a political flavour into their sexual commerce by failing to discriminate between black and white clients, and the scandal which ensued, especially as the prostitutes' ranks were swelled by poor white women drifting to the towns from the war-torn platteland, resulted in legislation in the Cape (Act 36 of 1902), the Orange Free State (Ordinance 11 of 1903), Natal (Act 31 of 1903) and the Transvaal (Ordinance 46 of 1903). The account given in the 1937 Report of the Commission on Mixed Marriages in South Africa makes interesting reading:

During the South African War (1899-1902) and for some time afterwards the presence of large bodies of troops in the country attracted numbers of loose European women, mostly of Continental origin, to the seaports and larger inland towns, to which they resorted for the purpose of prostitution. The brazen manner in which they paraded the streets and accosted men, extending their attentions also to natives and other persons of colour,
became a public scandal and in 1902 and 1903 brought about legislation for the suppression of immorality, not only in the Colonies of the Cape and Natal, but also in the two new Crown Colonies. The general purpose was to check immorality, but it was also regarded as a matter of particular importance that the white women of the country should not, through the example of easy virtue given by this disreputable sisterhood, be brought into contempt in the estimation of native or coloured males, as appeared to be the case from the number of sexual assaults occurring at the time. (Emphasis added)[8]

It is surely significant that these measures were introduced by British administrations and were aimed at preserving the prestige of whites through the conservation of the symbolic virtue of their womenfolk. As the Report points out, '[a]s women of the class concerned were well acquainted with the methods of contraception, there was little, if any, chance of offspring resulting from this traffic, so that these provisions cannot be said to have been directed against miscegenation'.[9]

The first legislation avowedly directed against the dynastic implications of race mixture was the Immorality Act of 1927, but even this Act contradicted its stated aims by allowing for 'miscegenation'[10] within matrimony. There seem to be adequate grounds for supposing that fears about the disappearance of the white race through race mixture were merely a rationalization of the demand of white men for exclusive access to women of their caste. The claim that there was a concomitant increase, during 1902-1903, in the number of sexual assaults by black men on white women was entirely spurious, as the statistics given in the Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire into Assaults on Women of 1913 attest. [11]

The next Black Peril panic of 1906-1908 may well have been fuelled by general anxiety of the sort described by Etherington following the Bambata Rebellion in Natal in 1906: certainly a spate of reports of 'Native Outrages' followed hard on its heels and the Report of the Native Affairs Commission in Natal of 1906-1907 made specific mention of sexual relations between the races as a significant factor in the Native Question.[12] Yet the major public convulsion of 1911-1912, which led directly to the appointment of the Sixth Commission of the General Missionary Conference of South Africa to investigate 'the incidence of so-called Black Peril cases' (1912), and the State Commission of Enquiry into Assaults on Women, which reported in 1913, had neither basis in objective fact nor ostensible historical 'cause'.[13]

Tim Keegan's useful investigation of this moral panic, particularly as it manifested itself through the columns of The Friend newspaper in Bloemfontein, endorses the general trend of the present argument in identifying an irrationality 'which cannot be explained in terms other than a crisis in consciousness'.[14] The fear of the 'lessening of sexual respect of the servant for his master' was precipitated mainly by the burgeoning problem of degenerate 'lapsed whites':

The significance of poor whiteism was that it threatened the psychological underpinnings of the control culture at a time when it was at its most vulnerable and insecure. If the prescription for reasserting psychological distance, submissiveness and deference
between 'superior' and 'inferior' races lay in the magic formula, 'segregation', then that too was the first step toward moral rehabilitation of whites.[15]

Compare the above with these extracts from the Report of the Commission Appointed to Enquire into Assaults on Women:

The condition of the debased poor whites with whom the natives are brought into contact, cannot but have an evil effect on the mind of the natives in diminishing the respect in which the white race is held by them . . . . It has been pointed out that a class of poor whites is becoming more and more degraded; poverty drives them to seek their living by undesirable methods. On the other hand, it is asserted that, whilst these whites are sinking in the scale, the natives are rising, and that the poor white children are becoming the dregs of the population . . . . disreputable and unscrupulous persons of the white race . . . are one of the causes of the native losing that respect for the white race, which is one of the strongest factors calculated to restrain him from even entertaining the idea of the possibility of having any sexual relations with a white woman.[16]

In addition to the consequences flowing from the status of poor whites, the Commission identified the consumption of alcohol by black men and the employment of black men as domestic servants as major contributing factors to the incidence of assaults on white women.[17]

The role of poor whiteism in devaluing the white ethnicity's symbolic ascendancy and eroding its confidence as a ruling caste should not be underestimated. While poor whites in one sense constituted a disavowed 'residuum',[18] the reproach of their identity as members of the social body of the ruling caste could not be repudiated, and initiatives to 'reclaim' them would eventually culminate in the Carnegie Commission of 1929-1932. Yet the fear to which the poor white problem gave dramatic focus was the more general apprehension of contamination by the different and inferior. This contagion, according to J.M. Coetzee, is to be seen as the 'meta-metaphor' of racialist discourse.[19] Poor whites collectively comprised the most obvious fissure in the white social cell, a fissure permitting not only the leaking out of ethnic capital ('loss of respect') but also contamination from without (e.g. 'The lowest strata of our civilization . . . on coming into contact with demoralized natives, batten upon their weaknesses while descending to their level'[20]). Sexual congress across the colour line provided the obvious metonym for symbolic traffic at this site of degradation.

Although it does not address the poor white question, George Webb Hardy's novel The Black Peril, published in 1912, focuses on the subject of sexual relations between white and black and thus recapitulates and elaborates almost all the major themes of the contemporary discourse on the Native Question. Hardy's novel was not the only contemporary fictional text to deal with the subject: the Black Peril alarm is also sounded by Perceval Gibbon's Souls in Bondage (1904) and, especially, Francis Bancroft's Of Like Passions (1907).[21] (That fictional representations of such a topical issue were not more numerous is presumably because the matter touched so sensitive a nerve in the white colonial psyche as to be almost 'unspeakable'.) In construing the rape of white women by black men as revenge in kind for the debauching of black women by white
men, Of Like Passions provides a logical link with a topos more frequently observed in South African writing of the time: the cautionary tale concerned with the consequences of undue familiarity and consensual sex across the colour line.[22] Ahead lay the oeuvre of Sarah Gertrude Millin, which, over a period of more than thirty years, obsessively returned to the fantasy of contamination and degeneration through race mixture.

George Webb Hardy was a journalist who had achieved some notoriety for publishing an article containing graphic details of sexual misconduct at a prominent girls' school in Durban (see below); the public outcry which greeted this article led to his prosecution and imprisonment for obscenity. These events are given fictional treatment in his novel, The Black Peril. Although the literary merits of the text are few, its form, eccentric and hybridized, treading an uncertain line between fiction and autobiography, exhibits to a marked degree the heterogeneity typical of colonial texts of the time.[23] Like so many colonial fictions dealing with the subject of race, it is a roman a these, actively seeking to vindicate a set of ideas or beliefs and intervene in the real world. But what sets it apart from the run of colonial racial melodrama is the searching honesty of its attempt to come to terms with the realization that "the "native question" . . . is an emotional "question" and not a political one", as Roy Campbell was later to remark of William Plomer's novel Turbott Wolfe.[24] In the way the narrative plays off rational belief and ethical commitment against 'instinctive' emotional reaction, The Black Peril in some ways anticipates the story of Plomer's eponymous protagonist. For what Hardy's tale seeks to dramatize is the conversion of its autobiographical hero, by way of an intense emotional conviction which defies his reasoned political judgement and moral principles, to elements of the policy of segregation.

The novel's protagonist, Raymond Chesterfield, arrives in the colonial town of Mosquito (clearly modelled on colonial Durban) where, increasingly dismayed by the spineless cant which serves for journalism in the colony, he starts his own paper, The Argonaut, which is dedicated to the pursuit and exposure of Truth. His uncompromising integrity loses him advertizers and makes enemies in high places, but wins him the respect of a wide readership. Believing he is acting in the public interest, Chesterfield then publishes an expose of the sexual shenanigans between some white schoolgirls and a black labourer. He has been led to regard sexual relations between blacks and whites as a major social problem by the narrow escape of a woman to whom he is attracted, Mary Roseberry, from the lustful attentions of a 'houseboy' she has befriended. Chesterfield's article causes a sensation and he is successfully prosecuted under an obscenity law. The next section of the narrative consists of a series of letters written by Chesterfield from gaol in Mosquito, mainly about the appalling conditions there. After his release he returns to England, where he and Mary Roseberry are reunited. The tripartite structure of the book -- the sections are entitled 'The Ideal', 'The Truth' and 'The Reward' -- reflects its argument that liberal ideals are incompatible with the reality of race relations in South Africa, and that the reward of the prophet bearing this truth is martyrdom.

The text, particularly in Part One, is peppered with satirical deflation of the hypocritical pretensions of Imperialism and the civilizing mission, construed as the 'self-imposed task of grabbing country from the natives'. 'If the Chinese [mineworkers] were in a state of slavery in the Golden City', the narrator remarks, 'so were the natives before the [Anglo-
Boer] war and so they are today; 'slaves who have become partially free and cannot be got rid of. It is a crime to be a black man in a "white man's country" that was originally stolen from black men'.[25] Claims to the contrary were 'all hypocrisy and sham and cant . . . masking as respectability and holiness among the civilized nations', and '[i]f the flogging that goes on in Mosquito Gaol is a necessary part of the Christianizing of the natives, our boasted civilization is a farce'.[26]

Living his own life in the kraals, free from the whiskey and the vice of the white man who is supposed to set him an example of the things which are pure and of good report, [the native's] morality is at least equal to that of the civilized races. And when, as a raw and uneducated creature, he comes into the circle of men and women ennobled, as he has been taught, by two thousand years of the Christian religion, in a land where, to say the least, morality (using the word in its broadest sense) is not exactly conspicuous for its altruistic tendencies -- is it any wonder that the simple native, child that he is, does as all children do -- imitates like a mummer the worst phases of the people with whom he has suddenly been brought into contact? It has taken two thousand years of civilization to bring the white man to the point at which his gaols are full to overflowing, his workhouses redolent of broken-down manhood, his factories stained with the bloody sweat of underpaid human machines, his miners and his railwaymen ground down until they have to stop the commerce of England before they can get a living wage, and the streets of the proud metropolis the refuge of outcast women, manufactured into poor lost souls by the very white men who will lie to you until they are black in the face about the immorality of the native races of the Empire.[27]

However, this rhetoric of shame and contagion could service the conscience of the principled segregationist as nicely as that of the liberal assimilationist.[28] Although the novel's protagonist, Raymond Chesterfield, remains a champion of 'the slaves of industrialism',[29] he finds his universalist socialist beliefs increasingly subverted by the 'ethnic imperative' attaching to the colour of his skin in South Africa. Initially he conceives of two possible solutions to the Native Problem: 'segregation of the blacks or, in the end, the social and political equality of the races'. The former seems 'outside the range of practical politics' because 'nothing could possibly stop the blacks from rising higher and higher in the social scale'. But it begins to dawn on him that the full racial equality which reason prescribes as both desirable and inevitable would merely preface 'a third possibility from which he shrank, like a boat-load of wrecked men and women who fear to return to save one or two of hundreds of moaning souls, hanging on to their life-belts as a great liner takes her final plunge . . . [South Africa as] a veritable black man's land'.[31] Most whites are blinded by their conviction of racial superiority to this presentiment of disaster (the 'wreck' of Western history which Plomer's Turbott Wolfe will later attribute to the triumph of 'the hidden force'[32]); and Chesterfield realizes that as a journalist he has a special responsibility to tear the scales from their eyes and alert them to 'the great Black Peril . . . the real shadow that hung over the land'. His particular mission is to raise the subject that nobody likes to think about -- let alone talk of -- . . . the phase of the Black Peril question that, more than any other, needed determined action, without any squeamishness or false modesty, if anything was to be done to place the social relations of black and white on a proper footing. Raymond saw the danger under which the white woman had to live in the country -- a danger inseparable from a land that
contained a mere handful of whites as against millions of blacks, the majority of whom were only in the first stages of human evolution. He knew of these blacks, what many white women did not appear to know, that they were men of like passions to white men and were very far from being the mere automatons that, apparently, they were thought to be, judging by the way in which they were handled by white women.[33]

How is it that the same signifier -- the Black Peril -- can be invoked simultaneously to designate the distant prospect of political defeat and social absorption, and the immediate threat of black rape (here somewhat coyly qualified as a 'phase of the Black Peril question')? One answer is that the two are linked by the notion of retribution through revolution,[34] the idea of the black man's exacting a symbolic revenge on the white man by violating his most sacred possession (this is more or less the argument of Etherington). Klaus Theweleit has suggested that this is simply a projection of the typical bourgeois fantasy of mobility in a class-stratified society:

the boss's wife as object of desire in the masturbation fantasies of men . . . . In this context, 'making revolution' also means taking the 'high-born' woman by force. That explains why on the day after a revolution is reported, bourgeois newspapers are full of rape stories. The reporters are simply reporting what they would have done in a similar situation. It's not even the case that they are lying; they are merely translating the report of the revolution into their own system of relations, in which 'revolution' means taking the boss's wife.[35]

Agreeing to take this with a pinch of salt, we should nevertheless be mindful of the connection Theweleit proposes between political power and/or symbolic ascendency, and sexual access. Hardy is at some pains in his novel to stress that the African is not 'a wild and lustful savage, roaming the land seeking whom he may devour . . . [indeed,] it is doubtful whether he is more a creature of animal passion than the majority of the superior race'. Most vice 'was foreign to the native soul until he was tampered with by the whites', and the 'debased' native is exclusively a product of urban contamination.[36] The problem is not the difference of the black man from the white but his similarity to him: as Raymond's friend Mark Shepherd (modelled on John Shepstone) puts it, 'Human nature is human nature . . . and there's a good deal of the animal in it, whether black or white'. Under the influence of Shepherd, Raymond was led to modify his views regarding the native races. He abated not one jot of his passion for the cause of absolute justice to them, of political equality of whites for educated men with coloured skins. He gave up nothing of his opinion that blacks ought to be allowed to sit in Parliament and enter into the commercial life of the country that was their home -- just like a white man, whether the country were natural or adopted . . . . But he had got to the point where social equality between blacks and whites was an impossibility. He did not believe, with Mr Mark Shepherd, in segregation of the blacks. But he did believe that it was for statesmen to find some way in which whites and blacks could live together as members of the same community, interested in the same things, striving for the welfare of their country with equal chances and equal fights, and yet apart as the poles on questions of marriage and the relations of the sexes. He admitted he found it difficult to explain precisely why mere colour should place a definite line between, say, a highly educated Indian and an English girl. Some of the prejudice of the land might have got into his soul -- he quite admitted
that -- but there it was, and the situation had to be faced. The prejudice might be cowardice, it might be lack of charity, it might be supremely illogical. But when Raymond faced the idea of a Kafir kissing the girl he loved, and, with his strong imagination, pictured that Kafir becoming an educated civilized being and capturing the soul of one who was dear to him, perhaps his own sister, his whole being revolted against intimate relations between black and white in any shape or form.[37]

For a character like Raymond Chesterfield, who prides himself on his hard-nosed rationality, this confession of an unconquerable, 'supremely illogical' emotion is embarrassing and demeaning, and redeemed only by the authenticity of the personal experience which informs it. Scientific racism provides affective rather than intellectual support: urged by Shepherd to study the 'anthro-sociological superior-race theories of Gobineau, Lapouge, and Galton', he is sensible enough to reject 'their conclusions in their European aspects'; however, 'they bore for him a psychological interpretation under the peculiar sociological conditions of the land of the Southern Cross that he was compelled to acknowledge'.[38] The political formula that would square Raymond's 'instinctive' aversion to blacks with his democratic principles and translate the contradictions in his heart into a workable policy is no doubt a chimera, as the whole sorry subsequent history of South Africa attests.

But what this lengthy passage reveals with perfect clarity is that, for the character Raymond Chesterfield, the Black Peril has ultimately little or nothing to do with the fear of rape. The Black Peril is rather the threat of sexual competition from black men, and the fear is really the fear of 'losing' willing white women to black suitors. That this was also Hardy's point of view is confirmed by the article entitled 'The Black Peril' which appeared in The Prince in 1904 and caused so much trouble for its author. The article also reveals the intensity and ambivalence of Hardy's libidinal investment in the scene which so revolts the fictional Chesterfield -- 'a kafir kissing the girl he loved' (which, significantly, his 'strong imagination' equates with 'a kafir . . . capturing the soul of . . . his own sister'. (Emphasis added).

Hardy's article, 'The Black Peril', written eight years before the publication of the novel of the same name, is an hysterically racialist document pitched at a level of emotional intensity which nothing in Hardy's novel would lead one to expect. A portentous preamble alerts the reader to the existence of young, well-bred white schoolgirls in Durban 'who are cognizant of the most filthy form of immorality that can be practised by womankind'; and, 'not content with knowing of methods of vice that would do honour to a Parisian brothel, these girls have actually brought their hellish knowledge into practice, and have disgraced the image of God in which they were made by giving themselves over to the most loathsome of sins'.[39] Lest the imagination of today's reader run riot, let me intervene to point out that Hardy is merely warming to his subject, and has so far only told us that the girls have been indulging in sexual intercourse:

But, horrible as are revelations of bestial immorality on the part of young and beautiful girls who, to look at, are among the finest flowers of human culture, they are a million times worse when they betray what must be the unknown sin against the Holy Ghost himself. What this sin is, in very truth, the Almighty alone can tell. But if it is anything
worse than the carnal and mental corruption involved in the willing prostitution of merry maidens before the loathsome lust of the natives of South Africa, then God help the miserable souls who are guilty of it.[40]

Hardy claimed to have evidence that the girls had been having secret trysts with a black school gardener. The article outlines how, having been tipped off by a pharmacist who had supplied them with contraceptives, a detective hid himself in the school grounds and observed one girl 'openly and with consent seduced by the kafir boy', the others keeping cave. 'Horrified and almost paralyz[ed] at the sight he had seen, the detective hardly knew what to do'. But what he eventually did, was to procure a group of male witnesses to accompany him 'to see for themselves a comer of hell dumped right down amid the sanctity of Durban life'; the spectacle was (according to Hardy's article) duly re-enacted for their benefit. The notion of several 'reliable gentlemen' crouching in the bushes watching a black man having sex with a white girl, too fearful of scandal to apprehend the miscreant, may well have been as ludicrous to Hardy's contemporary readers as it is to us today: certainly, he failed to prove his allegations in the legal proceedings which ensued.[41]

Whatever its basis in fact, the scene so carefully set out for public consumption is a voyeuristic fantasy in which the father witnesses the seduction of his daughter, his sexual titillation and excruciating jealousy cathed[ed] into outrage against the seducer. Hardy's constant invocation of the participants in the taboo-laden family romance helps to displace the intensity of his own ambivalent response: the girls concerned 'are to be the mothers of the generations that are yet unborn'; and he defends his journalistic exposure on the following grounds:

The turning loose into society of girls who have been defiled, and have consented to be defiled, by the black wretches who are the most cursed things that God ever made? Is not that a matter of public interest? The marriage of your brothers and sons in years to come with those who are not what they seem, with girls who have reeked of vice in the past and will, as sure as God made them, reek with it in the future? Is that not a matter of public interest?[42]

Clearly there is more at stake in the 'defilement' of white girls by blackness than the jealousy of the man who discovers that his wife is not a virgin or has been unfaithful to him, although I would suggest that the feeling of revulsion which informs Hardy's article as a whole is indistinguishable from the visceral pang of sexual jealousy.[43] What bears stressing here is that, although, quite illogically, the threat of rape arises in Hardy's peroration, ostensibly 'justifying' the call for lynching that he (and his fictional counterpart, Raymond Chesterfield) later so regretted (see The Black Peril, p. 218), for him the real threat of the Black Peril is the sexual response of the while woman to the man of colour, that 'consent to be defiled'. The Black Peril has even less to do with 'miscegenation', the adulteration of racial bloodstock: the girls concerned use contraceptive devices, there is no mention of procreation in the article whatsoever, and the contamination which is so deplored is entirely invisible (the 'reek of vice').
Hardy's attitude towards women in The Black Peril reveals a set of male prejudices typical of the era (and is strikingly similar to that of Perceval Gibbon in his novel of 1904 about the problem of 'half-castes' in South Africa, Souls in Bondage[44]). The novel tells us that Chesterfield didn't understand women. They were strange, unknown, and fathomless creatures to him. Perhaps it was because the necessities of civilization have covered them with an unnatural veneer that hides their souls from all but the inspired. Perhaps it was because he thought that there was about that veneer a suspicion of the hypocrisy and affectation that he loathed more than anything in any phase of life.[45]

His feelings are confused, to say the least. The fact that the language he uses to depict the strangeness of women is identical to that widely used at the time to evoke the enduring otherness of 'educated' or 'civilized' blacks is no coincidence: the affective structure -- of despising someone who pretends to be other than what you would in any case despise them for being -- is identical.

When Raymond meets Mary Roseberry, a professed Radical and Socialist who has a 'hatred of the squeamishness and pseudo-propriety of the Victorian era', he is relieved to find that he can be frank with her, as man to man: 'For the first time in his life he felt on common ground with a woman . . . he felt that he was talking to a human being, and not to a dressed-up doll . . . He felt that he had met a friend'.[46] Hardy's resentment of women is sometimes overtly misogynistic: for instance, the narrator refers to 'married women who fancied themselves immensely because foolish men had taken them out of the rut, and had attempted to make human beings of them'; but typically it expresses itself in the time-honoured double standard: Mary is 'to a really wonderful extent for a good woman, a woman of the world' -- virtue and experience remain at opposite poles.[47]

Mary's 'Exeter Hall' principles induce her to take an interest in the 'houseboy' Jim, and she tries to teach him to read. This is how Hardy describes him as seen through her eyes:

The Kafir was a young strapping fellow . . . of fine, athletic build, the sort of physique that would have received early attention from the captain of the boats if it had belonged to a freshman at Oxford or Cambridge . . . His bull-like neck and chest and splendid limbs were visible for all to see . . . She loved to hear him laugh, even when he was obviously laughing at her. And she could not help but admire his fine physique . . . . Mary could not conceal her admiration of his magnificent manhood, although she treated him as a boy and could not get it out of her head that so he was. He had a chest as wide and deep as that of a champion bull-dog, a neck like an Ayrshire Bull, a loosely built frame as erect as a soldier in uniform, and thighs and calves that would have delighted the heart of Hackenschmidt.[48]

Although the narrative insists that Mary merely 'admires' the young man, Jim certainly thinks that her interest in him is more than platonic, and the meaning of the eroticism in the description quoted above is spelled out by the narrator:
And virtuous and holy as [Raymond] knew the majority of white women to be, and deeply as he revered the sanctity that rightly clings to the mothers of men, as a man of the world he was compelled to put two and two together, whether he liked the arithmetical results or not. In his travels all over the world he had seen women in almost every phase of civilization, of evolution, of savagery, of temptation. And he knew that after all women were human beings, and that Nature, in all her beauty and in all her ugliness, had not passed them by. And then the gruesome discovery came to him, as it has come to all the whites of the Southern land, although they will not admit it, that there is a small minority of white women in the country who, to put it in plain words, encourage Kafir immorality. And the more he lived in the country the more he discovered that so-called assaults of blacks on whites were, in a minority of the cases, due, directly or indirectly, to the lasciviousness of white women.[49]

The problem with women, no less than with blacks, is not after all their difference from (white) men, but their similarity, their endowment 'with like passions'[50] The discourse on gender and sexuality in which both Chesterfield (the character) and Hardy (the writer) are implicated, is simply not equipped to deal with such a recognition.

The 'relationship' between Mary and Jim, which culminates in a feebly dramatized attempted rape (a kiss, during which Mary obliges with the conventional swoon), is exploited by Hardy to convey a warning about the consequences of undue familiarity between 'madam' and servant. This was a tirelessly reiterated commonplace in the public discourse of white South Africa at the time, replete with images of 'Jim' scrubbing his mistress's back in the bath or buttoning up her dress.[51] The link between 'Black Peril' panics and domestic service has been thoroughly investigated by Charles van Onselen, who speculates that the incidence of consensual sex between white mistress and black manservant was considerable in the Johannesburg area at this time. Van Onselen finds an interesting correlation between economic recession and rape scares, suggesting that in depressed economic conditions the coercive nature of black employment became more obvious, inducing among whites a greater awareness of the fragility of the social system and a greater fear of black reprisals, an argument which usefully complements that of Norman Etherington.[52]

In the novel in question, the shocked Raymond is led to conclude that 'Mary, by her kindness and consideration for a black man before he had arrived at a definite stage of civilization, had herself contributed involuntarily towards the natural result [the sexual assault]'. But the point that Hardy is concerned to make is that Mary and others like her have erred in not treating their male servants with full respect for their humanity -- as men 'with like passions', rather than as boys ('Why, "Tom" is a harmless, useful boy', Mary's friend Mrs Armitage remarks of her children's 'nanny').[53] But, here as elsewhere, Hardy endeavours to have his cake and eat it. He makes it utterly impossible for Mary to recognize the full equivalent humanity of Jim by having her instinctively repelled by his colour, and, especially, his smell:

Then a feeling of utter repulsion came over her. For the air around the bed was suddenly suffused with an aroma that sent a sickly feeling through her. Instinctively she turned on her left side, and crept to the other side of the bed . . . . The fact was, the sickly aroma of
the perspiring Kafir hung on to her and permeated the room like the vilest scent . . . the
colour of [Jim] . . . made her shudder a little and gather the bedclothes around her.[54]

Mary's reaction is shared by Raymond (p. 216) and, it would seem, by Hardy himself.
Raymond's letters from prison are little more than edited extracts from a series of articles
which Hardy published in The Prince after his release.[55] We have thus no reason to
doubt that Mary's responses are put forward as serious evidence of insurmountable racial
difference. Elsewhere in the novel, the jailed Raymond is appalled by the racial
promiscuity of prison life:

In a civilized country, in a tiny exercise yard about twenty yards by ten, white men and
semi-savages, many of the latter reeking with dirt, disease and filth, were herded together
like the Christians of old waiting for the lions.

. . . my miserable little cell, that reeked with the malevolent odours rising from the bodies
of the Kafirs and blacks quartered just below me . . . a horrible tin dish used
promiscuously by blacks and whites

. . . the prison razors, which were used alike by blacks and whites, healthy and diseased . .
. a sure way of conveying loathsome diseases from one prisoner to another. Three in a
cell -- think of it -- with the same bucket of water from which to drink, the same bucket to
use as a latrine, the same blankets continually interchanged, the same filth, and insect-life
creeping and crawling from white to black and from black to white![56]

(This underworld which respects no distinction of race or rank is strongly reminiscent of
Kipling's memorable projection of that authentic colonial nightmare of abject
promiscuity, the mysterious pit in 'The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes'.[57])

There may well have been reasonable grounds for Chesterfield/Hardy's fear of
contracting illness. But it is worth emphasizing that the notion of disease, although
arising as a consequence of metonymic slippage, in fact functions as a metaphor enabling
the objectification and rationalization of a primitive and 'instinctual' fear of contamination
by the different and inferior. Like the powerful taboos which sustain the system of caste
in India, racial consciousness has an enormous investment in the notion of kinship as a
discrete essence or shared bodily substance. The ingestion of bodily substance, whether
in the form of smell, 'germs' or, especially, semen, from a member of a lower caste is
experienced as a pollution which compromises the very identity of the polluted. In a
useful recent reappraisal of the parallels between caste in India and race in America,
Andre Beteille has argued that inequalities of caste are illuminated in the same way as
those of race by a consideration of gender. There are two aspects of the problem. There
is, firstly, the sexual use and abuse of women, which is an aspect of the inequality of
power, seen in its most extreme form in the treatment of women of the lowest rank by
men of the highest . . . . There is, in addition, the unremitting concern with the purity of
women at the top, associated with ideas of bodily substance . . . [58]

There is no space here to address the question of 'the sexual use and abuse' of black
women; suffice it to observe that discussion of the Black Peril in South Africa in the early
years of this century was increasingly linked, especially by white women, to the much more widespread problem of the unscrupulous exploitation of black women by white men.[59]

The correlation of the social meaning of race in South Africa with the notion of caste can be traced at least as far back as 1940, when Max Gluckman observed that 'Black and White are two categories which must not mix, like castes in India, or the categories of men and women in many communities'.[60] Since then, anthropologists like Louis Dumont who have made a special study of India have argued that, in relation to the social system as a whole, caste is a radically different category from either class or race. Dumont, for instance, while allowing that race relations in the United States manifest certain features of the caste system (the role of endogamy, the prohibition on commensality), observes that 'the Indian system is a coherent social system based on the principle of inequality, while the American "colour bar" contradicts the egalitarian system within which it occurs and of which it is a kind of disease'.[61] In The Black Peril, Chesterfield's embrace of segregation as a hierarchy of prestige rather than power is certainly consonant with Dumont's understanding of the ideology of caste. Yet the fact that he continues to support the principle of full political participation and civil rights for blacks (see pp. 188, 194-196), whilst rejecting only 'social equality' for the races, indicates that he is operating within a discursive field quite remote from that of the Indian caste system. Chesterfield's modern, Western dismissal of the notion of automatic inequality suggests that his feelings about race are -- as he himself freely admits -- an aberrational, atavistic phenomenon peculiarly cathetted to the question of sexual intimacy.

I am not sure, therefore, that one can proceed much beyond the observation that colonial attitudes towards racial difference in South Africa, like those traditionally ascribed to whites in the southern United States, have a loose affinity with attitudes towards difference in caste-structured societies. Beteille seems correct in suggesting that in matters pertaining to gender, sex and procreation it is more useful to view a social order like the South African one as a caste system rather than a class system crazed by the idea of race. Certainly, it makes more sense to seek an 'explanation' for the apparent irrationality of racialism in patterns of kinship relations[62] rather than in, say, the domains of political economy or psychoanalysis. The iron role of endogamy at the heart of the notion of caste helps to explain why 'miscegenation' has been such an obsession amongst white South Africans, and confirms that the old racialist chestnut, 'How would you like your daughter/sister to marry a kafir?', is a lot closer to the crux of the matter than conventional liberal wisdom would allow. As we saw in Hardy's 'Black Peril' article, when it comes to the exchange of intimate bodily substances, every high-caste woman is the high-caste man's mother, sister, daughter or potential sexual partner: ethnicity is kinship, race is a family affair.
Notes


4. The notion of 'moral panic' elaborated by Stanley Cohen in his study of British media treatment of the Mods and the Rockers is invoked by both Etherington and Keegan (S. Cohen, Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers [Oxford, 1980]). Cohen's work is useful in its insistence on the degree to which moral panics are created and sustained by the mass media, and it should be stressed that the role played in the Black Peril phenomenon by sensational journalism in South African newspapers cannot be overestimated. The phrase 'The Black Peril' itself (why not simply 'danger' or 'threat'?) smacks of journalistic hype.


6. Ibid., p. 50.

7. Ibid., pp. 52, 53.


9. Ibid., p. 14. The fact that in the Transvaal Republic, inter-racial marriage was illegal while cohabitation was not, suggests that Afrikaners at this stage had a more pragmatic, class-based attitude toward sexual liaisons between blacks and whites, the crucial question being the legitimacy of the offspring and their entitlement to parental status and property. The British, on the other hand, were more motivated by an upper-caste aversion to the idea of 'immoral' contact, but were obliged by religious principle to recognize duly solemnized marriages.

10. In his Black Scare: The Racist Response to Emancipation and Reconstruction, Forrest Wood gives a full account of the origin of the word (pp. 53-57). 'Miscegenation' was a coinage of the American journalists David Goodman Croly and George Wakeman, who in December 1863 anonymously published a 72-page booklet 'Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and the Negro'. The booklet advocated race mixture in order to improve the national stock: purporting to represent Republican policy, it was a hoax perpetrated by Democratic Party lobbyists. G. Duncan Mitchell's New Dictionary of Sociology (London, 1979) observes: 'Use of the word is to be avoided since, apart from its
disreputable origins, it reinforces a pre-Darwinian theory of human variation' (p. 127).

15. Ibid., pp. 6, 10.
17. Ibid., pp. 15-20, 24-26.
21. These include J.P. FitzPatrick's 'The Outspan' and 'Induna Nairn' in The Outspan (1897); W.C. Scully's 'The Fundamental Axiom' and 'Kellson's Nemesis' in Kafir Stories (1895); N. Fincher, The Heir of Brendiford (1909). The locus classicus is probably Kipling's memorable story 'Beyond the Pale', Plain Tales from the Hills (1890).
22. Perhaps the most useful concise commentary on this feature is to be found in M. Shum, 'The Content of the Form: Romance and Realism in Douglas Blackburn's Leaven', English in Africa, 21 (1994), pp. 100-101.
25. Ibid., pp. 101, 283.
27. The moral economy of segregationism was indisputably driven by recoil from what was perceived as the mutual contamination and degradation of the races. See for the instance the argument outlined in H.J. Crocker, The South African Race Problem: The Solution of Segregation [Johannesburg, 1908], pp. 10-11. See also F.W. Bell, The South African Native Problem: A Suggested Solution [Johannesburg, 1909], p. 3.
28. Hardy, Black Peril, p. 133.
29. Ibid., pp. 135, 136.
30. Ibid., p. 138.
32. Hardy, Black Peril, pp. 188, 194-196.
33. See Hardy, Black Peril, p. 140.
35. Hardy, Black Peril, pp. 160, 188, 189. On the last-mentioned point, compare the following:
36. As a clinching argument that our civilization may have a tendency to demoralize the native, take that terribly grave feature of town life -- owing its origin in Johannesburg and Durban to the kafir, and in Cape Town to the coloured population intermixing with the white - the Black Peril (a theme it is impossible to ignore, as it cuts at the roots of our public morality, the sacredness of family life, our national honour, and the future prestige and purity of our race). That this is the direct outcome of our attempts to foist civilization on the native is only too evident by comparing him in his natural surroundings. (L.E. De Payre, 'Should We Civilize the Kafir?', The State [Apr. 1910], p. 546.)

37. Hardy, Black Peril, pp. 188, 194-196.
38. Ibid., p. 196.
40. Ibid.
42. Hardy, 'The Black Peril', pp. 607, 609.
43. For a contrasting contemporary comment published in 1922, see Peter Nielsen's The Black Man's Place in South Africa (Cape Town, Juta):

Racial repugnance . . . arises naturally and spontaneously and, in this sense, instinctively, through the feeling of jealousy which is caused, in both men and women, by fear of losing their natural mates to rivals of both sexes from another and disparate race. (p. 113)

Nielsen's book argues for the complete equality and 'assimilation' of black people, and is to my knowledge by far the most sensible and prescient treatment of the 'Native Question' dating from the period.

44. See Cornwell, 'Ambiguous Contagion', pp. 75-81.
45 Hardy, Black Peril, p. 40.
46 Ibid., pp. 67, 57, 59; compare the character Joyce and his 'little chum' in Souls in Bondage.
47 Hardy, The Black Peril, pp. 65 (cf. p. 71), 176.
48 Ibid., pp. 73, 164, 165.
49 Ibid., p. 147.
50 Ibid., p. 11.

51 Compare, for example, W.C. Scully, Daniel Vananda: The Life Story of a Human Being (Cape Town, 1923), pp. 201-204. See also the responses to Question 9 in the protocol for evidence submitted to the 1912 Commission of the South African General Missionary Conference: 'Are there any circumstances in the mode of life of the native in the part of the country with which you are familiar which might be regarded as predisposing to such crime [sexual assault].?' Respondent after respondent brings up the instance of the lax, careless or wanton white housewife and the virile young black 'houseboy'.

Hardy also tackles the related question of employing black male 'nurses' to care for young white children of both sexes (pp. 95, 97, 230-231).


53 Hardy, Black Peril, pp. 191, 97.

54 Ibid., pp. 72, 74, 73; compare p. 76.

55 Rees, 'George Webb Hardy', p. 76.


57 R. Kipling, The Phantom 'Rickshaw and Other Tales (London, [1890]).


59 The parallel between the two varieties of sexual 'Peril' is identified as a relationship of causation in the plot of Francis Bancroft's novel Of Like Passions; see also her article 'White Women in South Africa', The Englishwoman 9 (January-March 1911), pp. 262-269. The discourse on the 'White Peril' reached its fullest elaboration in Sol Plaatje's pamphlet of 1921, 'The Mote and the Beam: An Epic on Sex-Relationship 'Twixt White and Black in British South Africa,' reprinted in English in Africa, 3, 2 (1976), pp. 85-92.

60 M. Gluckman, 'Analysis of a Social Situation in Modern Zululand,' Bantu Studies, 14 (1940), p. 13.
