Deciphering Race
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CHAPTER 2

“Life Clothed in Forms”

RADICAL RACISM AS FORMALIST AESTHETIC IN
ROBERT KNOX’S THE RACES OF MEN (1850)

The 1850 publication of Robert Knox’s The Races of Men stands at a crisis point in mid-Victorian attitudes about race. Public support for the abolitionist rhetoric evident in Harriet Martineau’s The Hour and the Man was eroding, and the influence of radical and polemical scientific racism was growing. Race had been of paramount interest to naturalists and anatomists beginning in the late-eighteenth century. However, by the mid-nineteenth century, an overtly racist scientific agenda was fully in place (Stepan, ix). The Races of Men blends sociological, biological, environmental, and aesthetic concerns into a treatise arguing for the centrality of race in all human endeavors. Knox seeks to classify and contain what he sees as the crises precipitated by races coming into contact with one another, inappropriately taking on one another’s political structures, and attempting to blend or change what he argues are biologically rooted predispositions for particular cultural forms. Knox’s notorious descriptive, taxonomic project is suffused with a sense of racial antagonism, most specifically in its engagement with such conflicts as the Haitian Revolution, as well as Knox’s experiences in the Kaffir War in South Africa.

Throughout the text, Knox constructs his argument in part by using race as an empty trope, within which he places all of the social conflicts he sees as critical in his time. Functioning as a kind of linguistic scapegoat, the term “race” becomes at once a definitional certainty and a site in which ideological conflicts regarding shifting relationships within the imperialist project are negotiated. Knox situates race as an elastic and central concept in all human endeavors, which leads him to address issues of history, colonialism, nationalism, and progress. Although he generally takes the stance
of radical and offensive racialist, contradictions in his presentation suggest a more ambiguous position than this label implies. The primacy of form over content typifies Knox’s work. *The Races of Men* culminates in a formalist aesthetic premised on the importance of exteriority in an organic ideal of beauty. This aesthetic philosophy functions as a temporary resolution for the wide-ranging, multifaceted, and often contradictory uses of the term “race” throughout his study. This chapter will explore the contradictions at the heart of Knox’s understanding of race and argue that the work’s turn to aesthetics in its concluding chapters becomes a resting point for the erratic and complex nature of the narrative.

Scientific Racism and the Question of Aesthetics

In the final few chapters of Knox’s *The Races of Men*, the author turns, rather abruptly, to the role of aesthetics in his racial system. Knox explains this move in the following passage: “The introduction of the disquisition into a theory of the beautiful was forced upon me here by the necessity of connecting the history of race with the perfect; to trace to it the laws of formation, leading to the perfect; and from it the laws of deformation, leading to the imperfect; or, in other words, to explain the origin of race, or at least to connect the history of race with the great laws regulating the living organic world” (*Races*, 419).

Leaving aside the provocative use of passive voice (“was forced upon me,” which of course begs the question of “by whom?”), Knox here makes the connection between scientific understandings of racial identity and aesthetic systems of evaluating the beautiful. Delineating a somewhat detailed aesthetic based on racial identity, scientific anatomy, and complex nineteenth-century understandings of the natural world, Knox argues that the most advanced and beautiful of races, the ancient Greeks, resulted from a historical deformation which happened to produce this kind of beauty. This race has vanished from the earth, Knox argues, but has left behind evidence of its aesthetic superiority in the Classic Greek marbles and the figure of Venus. The Classical Venus figure functions as an ironic counterpart to another “Venus,” Sara(h) Ba(a)rtman(n), the so-called Hottentot Venus, a Khoi-Khoi woman brutally exploited by early racial scientists. In fact, in *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman*, “The Hottentot Venus,” Yvette Abrams argues that “[s]cientific racism . . . was built on [Sara(h) Ba(a)rtman(n)’s] body.” And the French scientists Cuvier, de Blainville, and Saint-Hillaire, the first the dissector of Ba(a)rtman(n)’s
body, became the biographical heroes of Knox’s 1852 work, *Great Artists and Great Anatomists: A Biographical and Philosophical Study*.

In *Great Artists and Great Anatomists*, Knox asks directly, “What is the relation of Science to Art?” (xii). His answer lies in the relationship of both disciplines to form, and the primacy of structure in the biology of race. Knox argues for a static racial taxonomy as a way to understand the nature of biology and its relationship to aesthetic evaluation. The tangible defined the perfect for Knox, while at the same time, his evaluative criteria betray his obvious cultural and racial biases: “The correct mind rejects everything which is ideal, or what never had an existence. The monstrous creations of the disordered Hindoo, Chinese, and Saxon minds; these are ideal, fictitious, false; the Venus is real” (*Races*, 419). Thus the connection between artistic philosophy, imperial ideologies of racial domination, and scientific violation of the racialized body are enacted within the structure of Knox’s work itself: an elaborate taxonomy that he argues is based on “real” empirical data.

The link between science, aesthetics, and race began much earlier than 1850, of course. In *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th Century*, David Bindman argues for the development of this link in the work of prominent Enlightenment aestheticians. More specifically, Bindman asserts the importance of connections between artistic instruction and racial theory, such as in the work of Pieter Camper, proponent of the famous “facial angle” theory of racial identification (206), as well as many physiognomists, that certainly had its roots in Classical discussions of art. However, Christine Bolt argues that the bringing together of the realm of art and race in the nineteenth century brought race out of the realm of biology and gave it a broader social role: “Race became far more than a biological concept: race and culture were dangerously linked” (9).

Bindman points to George Mosse’s study of European racism, *Toward the Final Solution*, as an inspiration for his study, and presents these chilling words from Mosse: the “‘continuous transition from science to aesthetics is a cardinal feature of modern racism. Human nature came to be defined in aesthetic terms, with significant stress on the outward physical signs of inner rationality and harmony’” (quoted in Bindman, 14). And as Peter Fryer argues, regarding the influence of pseudo-scientific thought, “Long after the material conditions that originally gave rise to racist ideology had disappeared, these dead ideas went on gripping the minds of the living” (190). Thus, unpacking the rhetoric evident in this material provides us with insight into the development of structures of contemporary racism that still underpin global relations and policies at the current time.
Robert Knox, Lecturer, and the Problem of Reception

Knox’s early professional development nurtured his interest in human form and racial dynamics. He began his career as a medical student in his hometown of Edinburgh. After studying his craft, Knox left Edinburgh in 1815 to serve as a doctor to soldiers wounded in the battle of Waterloo, a position in which he apparently received some of his most important training as an anatomist (Rae, 12; Lonsdale, 9). After finishing his work with these soldiers, he then went to South Africa in 1817, where George Stocking notes that Knox performed dissections on the bodies of fallen black fighters. Henry Lonsdale argues that it was his experiences observing the different populations in South Africa that sparked Knox’s ethno-logical interests. From the beginning, Knox was interested not only in the darker-skinned races, but in the attributes of races across the spectrum of color (Lonsdale, 12).

After returning from the Cape, Knox then went on to Paris to study anatomy under Cuvier and Geoffroy Saint-Hillaire, both of whom had just recently dissected the body of Sara(h) Ba(a)rtman(n) in 1816. Knox then returned to his home in Edinburgh to begin what looked to become an exemplary career (Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 64; Lonsdale, 12, 17). Knox actually nurtured three successful careers simultaneously: he was a talented anatomist, popular lecturer and dedicated teacher, and conservator at a natural history museum (Rae, 37). As a student, and then, by all accounts, as a phenomenally successful lecturer in comparative anatomy, Knox found himself in the heart of the early nineteenth-century study of racial difference. His promising future evaporated, however, when he was implicated in the notorious Burke and Hare scandal.

As an anatomist, Knox constantly confronted the problem of finding subjects for his dissections. Grave-robbing became a lucrative industry in Edinburgh. However, Burke and Hare took it a step further and actually killed their victims and sold them to willing medical and anatomical schools. Knox was implicated in this scandal because one particular woman’s body was taken by accident to the wrong location: “On 2 November, the discovery and identification of a woman’s body in the cellar of Dr. Knox’s anatomical school had revealed the nefarious practices of the murderers Burke and Hare” (Rae, 1). Because there was nothing directly linking Knox to the victims, he was never tried for complicity in the murders. But in the eyes of the public, Knox was guilty, and he was hanged in effigy on February 12, 1829, by an angry mob (Rae, 91; Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 64). Knox’s biographer Rae argues that because
"Dr Knox has rarely been considered apart from Burke and Hare" (1), the loss to the scientific community of this promising anatomist and researcher has not been properly acknowledged.

After the events of the Burke and Hare scandal, Knox perhaps was not entirely inaccurate in feeling that every man's hand was against him. Rae argues that the incident changed Knox's personality forever. “Gone was the genial host, the man who made friends so easily: the new and embittered Knox had venom on his tongue, and his wit had a cruel sarcasm that it had not had before” (114), although both Rae and Lonsdale agree that Knox could be impolitic in his statements at times (Lonsdale, 152–53, 233). Rae claims that the events of the scandal combined with perceptions that Knox was “not only politically a 'radical,' a dangerous thing to be in the aftermath of the Reform Bill, when Britain was highly nervous of 'left' opinion; but he was also an unbeliever, a member of no recognised church, an 'atheist' and an 'infidel'” (121). Such a combination turned him into something of a social pariah. Although after the incident Knox attempted for some time to resume his several careers, Stocking argues that “eventually the odium roused by the murders and by his radical political and religious views forced him to leave Edinburgh” (Victorian Anthropology, 64). The final blows came in 1841, when his wife died, and in 1842, when he lost his four-year-old son to scarlet fever. According to Rae, Knox accepted by 1842 that he needed to leave his hometown (124–25).

The Races of Men began as a series of lectures given in a number of English cities, including Newcastle, Manchester, and Birmingham, as a way to support his children and himself (Stocking, Victorian Anthropology, 64; Rae, 127). The choice of race, in light of Knox's pressing financial considerations, implies his knowledge of the potential popularity of the topic with British audiences. Lonsdale characterizes Knox as bitter and disappointed as he took on the responsibilities of this tour. By all accounts, Knox should have been at the top of his profession and in a position of high esteem. However, the arguably unfair judgment of his centrality in the Burke and Hare scandal never allowed him to return to his level of professional success. Although both biographers confirm that Knox's interest in race fully developed in his time in South Africa, one cannot help but wonder at the relationship between his personal disappointments and circumstances and the vituperative and erratic nature of the discourse of the published version of these lectures. In 1850, Knox published his lectures on race in book form as The Races of Men: A Fragment. Knox noted that he specifically tailored the form of the written piece in order to ensure wide access to his ideas: “After various trials I have decided on the following; it
may not be the best: it is not systematic; it is not methodical; but it seems to me adapted to a very numerous class of readers, who, though highly educated, are yet not scientific” (Races, 7). Knox’s decision to put readerly interest before system and methodology suggests his desire to appeal to a wide audience, rather than to contribute to the more limited debates of scientific research.

Scholars debate the influence of the more radical racial ideas on the general British population. Nancy Stepan argues that Knox had an immediate if peripheral effect on racial science (41). Bernard Lightman widens the scope of Knox’s possible influence by asserting that “British scientists were deeply involved with general culture,” and that “Victorian science and culture were inextricably linked in the eyes of the Victorians themselves, scientists and nonscientists alike” (3). At the other end of the spectrum, Lorimer argues against the idea of Knox and his protégé James Hunt having significant influence: “Knox and Hunt may share a fate common among many Victorian authors. The two racial determinists have had far more readers between 1963 and 1995 than between 1863 and 1895” (“Science and the Secularization,” 215). Although he also argues that “From the 1830s through to the 1870s, Victorian racial discourse took place within a common context in which scientific papers presented at learned societies were indistinguishable from the books and articles seeking to address an educated public” (“Science and the Secularization,” 213). However, as Gillian Beer suggests, the power of particular ideas is perhaps less related to the actual reading of them and more dependent on their general circulation within the culture: “Ideas pass more rapidly into the state of assumptions when they are unread. Reading is an essentially question-raising procedure” (6). The question exists as to whether current scholarly interest derives from the benefit of hindsight on the genocidal horrors of the twentieth century and the related hypothesis that explanations for these events can be found, at least in part, in racial ideologies articulated by Knox and others, or if the radical racialists in fact did hold sway over their contemporaries. For the purposes of this study, Knox’s strategic deployment of the site of race as a point of engagement with the pressing controversies of his day suggest a paradigm shift and elasticity of meaning in the term that carry over into our current ideas and struggles with race.

Knox’s emotional and fragmented presentation contributes to the indeterminacy of “race” in his study. In the transformation from oral presentation to published book, Knox’s writing seems haunted by the original form of the lecture. He digresses, for example, bringing himself back on
topic with reference to his formal difficulties: “but I again forget that I am busy, or ought to be, with the introduction to my lectures, and not with the lectures themselves” (Races, 19). Lonsdale discussed the limitations of content and style in the published version of The Races of Men. He saw the work as “exceedingly characteristic of its author, his vices and his virtues. His discursiveness and repetitions are vastly too common; even the pictorial part, the woodcuts, are made to do duty over and over again, and for what purpose the said deponent knoweth not” (328). It is certainly true that some of the illustrations appear several times, sometimes without even a change in the captions. But this repetition points to Knox’s formalist emphasis throughout the work. Three times in the text, he uses a picture of an English country house to describe the character of the Saxon and the Anglo-Saxon. The caption reads first, “A Saxon House; standing always apart, if possible, from all others” (Races, 40); then “An Anglo-Saxon house; it always, if possible, stands detached” (56); and, finally, “The Anglo-Saxon House” (136). For Knox, the house represents the basic character and temperament of the Saxon and Anglo-Saxon races, and he declines to represent them by the detailed and sometimes derogatory drawings used to describe other races within his study. Architecture representing home, family, social position, and domesticity stands synecdochically for the Anglo-Saxon race, the one most favored by Knox in his work.

If race is, at least in part, a discursively produced concept, then Races of Men suggests the anxiety and indeterminacy at the heart of the project within the very form itself. Knox’s inability to create a coherent narrative, which only achieves minimal resolution in the turn to aesthetics at the end of the text, creates the open-ended presentation of race in particularly vivid form. This choice of narrative style can also be seen as influenced by the author’s most frequent reading material. Both Rae and Lonsdale point out what appear to be Knox’s most significant literary influences: “He used to say that two books were always to be found on the table of his dressing-room, the Bible and ‘Don Quixote,’ whom he used to style the beau idéal of an accomplished gentleman; their positions might be incongruous, and to some it would appear profane or immoral to associate them: he could not help it; there they were for his reading and instruction” (Lonsdale, 240). Both texts provide interesting points of structural comparison with the erratic, formal nature of Races of Men: one, a satiric reflection on the picaresque and chivalric forms that provides an ironic commentary on perceptions of reality and absurdity; the other, the fragmented and multi-voiced text that provided the moral framework upon which Christian Victorian England rested. The tension in these texts between certainty and
fragmentation mirror in many ways the formal challenges of *Races of Men*.

The work’s fragmented structure reflects its fractured and ambiguous content regarding a variety of social issues. Exploring Knox’s work brings us into the most vehement of racist conversations, and understanding the work helps us to understand the social tensions regarding race Victorian culture experienced at midcentury, by illustrating the associations and connections that informed the construction of these ideas. As Lonsdale’s critique suggests, Knox’s work employs a variety of formal and discursive methods, producing a narrative that is as much a work of historical and racial fiction as it is a work of science. Knox’s rambling and imaginative style suggests the perspective of the anatomist, the experience of the colonist, and the creator of images feeding Britain’s colonial imagination. The inconsistencies, ambiguities, and contradictions contained within the argument often sound like a madman’s rantings, then moderate to a humanitarian plea against colonialism, and finally revert to the clinical tone of a scientist. By tracing a path through his racial theories, we begin to see how Knox came to the conclusion that formal distinctions are of central importance in the study of races and communities. True to Victorian racial discourse, however, this path is often a meandering journey through a variety of topics, bringing together disparate ideas and opinions within the organizing signifier “race.”

**Progress, Politics, and Imperial Policy**

Knox considered his study a variation of the standard historical text. Rather than offering history as the narrative of nations and great events, Knox saw history as the delineation of the individual capacities and limitations found in each of the static, permanent racial groups of the world. As Knox explains on the first page of the work, he uses the descriptive term “fragment” for this reason: “I disclaim all pretensions of attempting a complete history of mankind, even from the single point of view from which I contemplate Human history. No materials exist for such a history” (1). Thus, the author makes clear from the work’s opening page that race and history are interdependent terms, and that the history of race implies the history of humanity. However, by changing the paradigm within which history is framed, Knox finds himself without the data to complete what he calls a “complete” history, thus the term “fragment” in the title. Knox organized his study by racial categories, and he includes two chapters that outline general points about physiological laws and dominance.
Early in the work, Knox tries to answer a number of methodological questions suggested by his shift in historical perspective. According to Knox’s new historical paradigm, “Race is everything: literature, science, art—in a word, civilization, depends on it” (Races, v). The way that individual distinctions among different racial groups should be explored is by “[p]hysical structure” (1), an understandable methodology for a skilled anatomist. Distinctions among racial groups are absolute, static and permanent: “Men are of various Races; call them Species, if you will; call them permanent Varieties; it matters not. The fact, the simple fact, remains just as it was: men are of different races” (2). And owing to this permanent distinction, racial categories are the fixed lens through which Knox tries to understand the history of civilization. Race is the great driving force behind group activities, structures, and dynamics: “in human history race is everything” (2).

Knox’s doctrine leads predictably to some strongly offensive statements about particular races. He specifically identifies differences among the races in a moralistic and defamatory manner, justified by what he believes is an inherent biological determinism. Races can never permanently blend, because the primary races are fixed. Mulatto people will eventually revert to one of the “dominant” racial types in their genetic makeup. According to Knox, racial relations are generally antagonistic. He argues that the Saxon, Celtic, and Sarmatian races are particularly prone to the destruction of races other than themselves: “What a field of extermination lies before the Saxon[,] Celtic[,] and Sarmatian races!” (229). Although in Knox’s schema races are fixed by their nature, they are also organic entities with a birth, maturity, and eventual extinction. Many of the darker-skinned races are not undeveloped, he argues, but are actually overdeveloped and moving toward extinction: “Extinction of the race—sure extinction—it is not even denied” (229–30). In discussion of this point, Knox can be particularly crass, as when he focuses on two particular African races: “Have we done with the Hottentots and Bosjeman race? I suppose so: they will soon form merely natural curiosities; already there is the skin of one stuffed in England; another in Paris if I mistake not.... They are shrewd, and show powers of mimicry—acquire language readily, but never can be civilized. That I think quite hopeless” (238–39). That he speaks of stuffed people as easily as he would of animals in a natural history exhibit cannot fail to bring up visions of Sara(h) Ba(a)rtman(n)’s dismembered and dissected body.

But within his discussion of African people lies a contradiction between his violent criticism of their nature and hints of residual tender-
ness in his sense of how Europeans have warped their “childlike” manners. In his discussion of the effect of European contact on the “Caffre,” for example, he says that “they had neither ships nor boats, nor any human arts; properly speaking, they were mere savages, but at that time mild and, to a certain extent, trustworthy; now, by coming into contact with Europeans, they have become treacherous, bloody, and thoroughly savage” (240–41).

Although Knox argues that the “Caffre” are certainly inferior to the European races, his belief that the Caffre’s childlike innocence has been ruined by the act of domination is curiously, if problematically, sympa-thetic. In another passage, Knox argues that the British would cheer if American slaves rose up and threw off their chains: “A million of slaveholders cut off in cold blood tomorrow would call forth no tear of sympathy in Europe: ‘Bravo!’ we should say; ‘the slave has risen and burst his chains—he deserves to be free’” (245). This passage suggests that if a race can rise in status within the culture, it would earn Knox’s esteem and modify slightly his claims about the race’s characteristics. This argument seemingly places his pre-evolutionary claims of racial fixity at odds with an apparent flexibility regarding racial potential. Additionally, the argument conveys a conflicted view of the relationship between colonizers and colonized. Although relationships of domination and submission between races are “natural” in Knox’s presentation, a colonized race could earn the respect of the dominating race only by overthrowing the subjugating force.

Feeding the fears outlined in the previous chapter about the ways in which the Haitian Revolution signified in midcentury English culture, Knox argues that the “Negro” could perhaps threaten the European races because of his ability to function and thrive in environments where white races cannot: “If there be a dark race destined to contend with the fair races of men for a portion of the earth, given to man as an inheritance, it is the Negro. The tropical regions of the earth seem peculiarly to belong to him; his energy is considerable: aided by a tropical sun, he repels the white invader. From St. Domingo he drove out the Celt; from Jamaica he will expel the Saxon; and the expulsion of the Lusitanian from Brazil, by the Negro, is merely an affair of time” (456).

It would appear from these examples that, for various environmental reasons, the “Negro” race has at least an opportunity to achieve a superior position among the races of the world. Knox also has a somewhat detached, uninvested view of the dark-skinned races’ potential to succeed. He directly states that “the European has, in my opinion, erred in despising the Negro, who seems to me of a race of occasionally great energy”
One could almost argue that a kind of cautious moderation surfaces in the author’s extreme views.

In other passages, however, Knox’s potential leniency toward other races, especially the “Negro” race, deteriorates into fits of rage and ranting, displaying, I argue, an irrationality and inconsistency evident at the heart of racial paradigms in general. Belittling the sincerity of English people dedicated to humanitarian causes, he says the following: “What an innate hatred the Saxon has for [the ‘Negro’], and how I have laughed at the mock philanthropy of England!” (243). Turning then to the victory of the blacks in the Haitian Revolution directly, he rationalizes the outcome of the conflict in ways quite different from Martineau. Knox strongly argues for white superiority: “Already they defeated France; but, after all, was it not the climate? for that any body of dark men in this world will ever fight successfully a French army of twenty thousand men I never shall believe. With one thousand white men all the blacks of St. Domingo could be defeated in a single action. This is my opinion of the dark races” (243–44).

As I have already noted in my discussion of _The Hour and the Man_, the English, along with the French, did in fact play a large part in the Haitian conflict, thus making this argument appear pure posturing on Knox’s part. However the issue further complicates the contradiction between this quotation and the assertion discussed earlier, in which he suggests that the “Negro” race could potentially overthrow the white race because of environment. Knox vacillates among varying levels of sympathy for African races. Although he validates the influence of climate on relations among the races, his position also appears guided by his critical attitudes regarding the colonial project, and his own sense of race loyalty.

### Institutionalizing the Science of Race

Although most often summarily dismissed as a fanatical racist, in “The ‘Moral Anatomy’ of Robert Knox,” Evelleen Richards argues that Knox’s work needs to be read in light of his complex position as social determinist, political radical, and, after Burke and Hare, institutional outsider. Knox was greatly influenced by the events of the French Revolution in his youth, and, as we have seen, had an open contempt for many of the policies of imperial domination. Nonetheless, Knox remained grounded in his static racial taxonomy: “In spite of the Jacobin origins of his radicalism, Knox did not subscribe to an Enlightenment egalitarianism and environmentalism. He was uncompromisingly a man of the nineteenth century in his
insistence on the universality and inevitability of natural law, and a rigid determinist in his views on social organization and the essential inequality of humanity, which from an early period he linked to race and grounded in materialism” (386).

We begin to understand Knox’s seemingly contradictory attitudes by placing his study within the context of humanitarian and scientific explorations of race. The study of race over the first half of the nineteenth century moved from a more humanitarian stance, influenced by the anti-slave trade and abolitionist movements, to a split within the scientific population dividing a less influential humanitarian branch from a more flamboyant and derogatory anthropological vein. Knox was a key figure in the break between these two factions, influencing the move away from humanitarianism.

The seeds of early anthropological exploration were embedded within the early humanitarian organizations, however. An early group formed in 1837 to “civilize,” Christianize, and, to a certain extent, monitor the treatment of colonized populations was the Aborigines Protection Society (APS) (Stocking, Victorian Anthropology, 242–44). Although the main impulse of the organization was humanitarian concern for the welfare of colonized peoples, “some of its central activities were,” Stocking suggests, “at least in a broad sense, ‘anthropological’” (“‘What’s in a Name?’” 370). This tension between the humanitarian and anthropological impulses in this early organization became increasingly polarized over the next thirty years, splintering this early organization into several different groups before it was brought back together in the later nineteenth century Anthropological Institute.

Motivated by a desire to pursue the “scientific impulse” rather than “humanitarian” causes, and exacerbated by “the general waxing and waning of the Society’s fortunes,” a movement of scientifically oriented members began to push the organization toward a more dispassionate analysis of other races (Stocking, “‘What’s in a Name?’” 371). In 1842 “the printed statement of the object of the Society was changed: rather than ‘protecting the defenceless’, it would ‘record the[ir] history’, and a resolution was passed to the effect that the best way to help aboriginals was to study them” (371). The more religiously inspired benevolence of the APS was slowly eclipsed by the drive for scientific research, though the organization still retained the illusion of humanitarian emphasis. Keeping in mind Johannes Fabian’s assertion that “there is no knowledge of the Other which is not also a temporal, historical, a political act” (1), we can understand this institutional switch in emphasis as representing a modified attitude towards
aboriginals from individuals requiring care (understanding the fraught meanings this term can contain in a colonial relationship) to objects requiring study. This split in the APS was formalized in late 1843 and 1844 with the founding of the Ethnological Society of London (Lorimer, “Race, Science, and Culture,” 25; Stocking, “‘What’s in a Name?’” 372). Stocking argues that although “those who entered the ESL had decided it was a good idea to separate humanitarian purpose and ethnological research” (“‘What’s in a Name?’”, 372), the organization retained the Biblical roots that inspired a belief in monogenesis, or a unitary source for all human peoples on the planet.

Lorimer suggests that monogenesis, represented most prominently by the work of James C. Prichard, first gained authority early in the nineteenth century because it fit well with humanitarian attitudes toward race and racial relations (Colour, Class and the Victorians, 134). Rather than challenge the commonality of ancestry, Stocking argues that ethnology’s primary goal “was in effect to document that unity, to fill the gap between the dispersion of the tribes of man over the earth and the first historical records of each present nation, and in doing so to tie all men together into a single ethnological family tree” (“‘What’s in a Name?’” 372). In early scientific explorations of race, the impulse to keep all the planet’s peoples organically connected remained intact. The fracturing influence of later anthropological “scientists” was yet to be felt. Here again we see the tension between fragmentation and unity evident in the very structure of Knox’s work. The unifying impulse, however, began to lose favor in the mid-nineteenth century, and was replaced by a more widespread, if still by a minority, embracing of the theory of polygenesis (Stepan, 3). Proponents of this theory argued that the different races have different origins, that they remain different even in the face of racial mixing, and that the Biblical genesis story is about the origin of white cultures rather than all the races of the planet. During the early 1850s, a group of young anthropological scholars supporting polygenesis reinvigorated the diminishing popularity of the Ethnological Society. This group included Robert Knox who, Stocking says, “after being blackballed in 1855—was made an honorary fellow in 1858” (Victorian Anthropology, 246). The incorporation of Knox into the organization in such a celebratory manner suggests the radically modified trajectory of the organization’s attitudes toward their scientific objects. However, Stocking’s study of the transition suggests that the “incorporation of these newer trends . . . was not accomplished without friction between the Society’s older Quaker humanitarian element and the racialist current represented by several of the younger members” (247).
The most prominent of these young anthropologists was the radical racialist James Hunt, who claimed Knox as a significant influence on his thinking (247). Richards argues that it was James Hunt, founder of the radical and openly racist Anthropological Society, who brought Knox’s ideas into institutional relevance (386).

Looking at the ideological trends fueling these movements within the ethnological and anthropological communities, we begin to see the truth of Lorimer’s observation that during this period, “racism grew in power, in sophistication and in intensity” (“Race, Science and Culture,” 32). By 1850 the protectionist impulse toward indigenous races had waned, and what Lorimer calls a “revived polygenesis,” represented in large part by the work of Knox, took its place (Colour, Class and the Victorians, 136–37). Tim Barringer suggests that the idea of the “savage as a natural man” was slowly replaced by “the idea that savagery resulted from a process of degeneration from a state of primal grace” (37). Lorimer’s work supports this assertion by arguing that the “sentimental caricature” made popular in abolitionist rhetoric was replaced by “a more derogatory stereotype of the Negro” (Colour, Class and the Victorians, 12). This movement was not limited to English culture, but was a “general phenomenon within Europe” (206). Key to the transition was a move toward biologically rooted explanations of racial difference. Environmental and theological explanations of racial differences were increasingly challenged by static biological paradigms such as that put forth by Knox (Stepan, 4). Knox’s lecture series and publication of The Races of Men occurred just before the general proliferation of a belief in polygenesis, and was often invoked as an inspirational text, especially by Hunt (Stocking, “‘What’s in a Name?’” 374).

The actual break between the two factions of the Ethnological Society occurred over the admission of women to its scientific discussions. In 1863 Hunt broke from the organization to form the Anthropological Society of London (Lorimer, “Race, Science and Culture,” 25–26; Stocking, “‘What’s in a Name?’” 376; Lorimer, Colour, Class and the Victorians, 138). The gender component of this shift usefully brings together scientific research, race, and the question of women’s place in mid-Victorian culture. Although they had been prominent members of the abolitionist movement earlier in the century, women were increasingly excluded when changes funneled interest from humanitarian concern for other races toward scientific study. The Anthropological Society excluded women completely; the Ethnological Society excluded women from some discussions but not all; and the Aborigines Protection Society, which retained the humanitarian focus through these changes, had a membership that was
roughly 40% female. The participation of women appears to have been confined to organizations that had an ostensibly humanitarian or religious emphasis, whereas science remained the exclusive preserve of men (Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 256; Richards, “Huxley and Woman’s Place in Science: The ‘Woman Question’ and the Control of Victorian Anthropology”).

Scholars disagree about how strongly the Anthropological Society influenced the British public’s racial attitudes. Lorimer argues that scientific racism was “symptomatic of the changing values within English society,” but that the “anthropologicals” “attracted only a limited following, failed to meet the tests of mid-Victorian science, and were not a significant cause of the change in racial attitudes” (*Colour, Class and the Victorians*, 204).10 He suggests instead that a constellation of issues—including strong ethnocentrism, scientific and philosophical doctrine, and a generally hierarchical view of social structure—paved the way for a view of the races that put English men in a comfortable place of racial and gender superiority (*Colour, Class and the Victorians*, 133).

Eric Hobsbawm addresses the fundamental contradiction existing between hierarchical capitalist social structures and Enlightenment egalitarian ideals that arguably formed the root of inconsistencies in contemporary racial thinking. Racism, Hobsbawm argues,

> [a]part from its convenience as a legitimation of the rule of white over coloured, rich over poor . . . is perhaps best explained as a mechanism by means of which a fundamentally inegalitarian society based upon a fundamentally egalitarian ideology rationalized its inequalities, and attempted to justify and defend those privileges which the democracy implicit in its institutions must inevitably challenge. Liberalism had no logical defense against equality and democracy, so the illogical barrier of race was erected: science itself, liberalism’s trump card, could prove that men were not equal. (268)

This argument places the rise of scientific racism in the context of a class bound society in which social roles were understood in terms of vertical relationships of economics, lineage, and profession. Anthropology partly served this social stratification by balancing the leveling forces of democracy and capitalism, providing a justification and rationalization for keeping other races in a subservient position.

According to Lorimer, the shift toward a more racist culture was most evident in the way African and West Indian individuals began to lose the
opportunity to achieve the status of “gentleman” in British culture. The “racial theorizing” of the “anthropologicals,” he argues, “did not have much bearing upon mid-Victorian behaviour. The experience of eminent black abolitionists shows that the mid-Victorians did not treat all blacks alike.” In social interactions in mid-Victorian England, it was “still bad manners to object to the colour of a black gentleman” (Colour, Class and the Victorians, 53). The change came, Lorimer argues, when the white population began to believe that blacks could only “perform labouring tasks and never approach gentlemanly status” (60). Thus, respectable Victorians simply applied to all men with black skins the same judgments, manner, and bearing that they adopted toward their social inferiors within English society. When this association between African descent and lowly social status became more firmly fixed, and was added to the latent suspicions and aversions produced by xenophobia and ethnocentrism, racial attitudes became more rigid and emotive in character, and a new inflexibility and contempt characterized English attitudes to the Negro. (60)

Therefore, according to Lorimer, it was the meanings attached to class, rather than to race, that contributed most significantly to the increase of contemptuous attitudes toward the black races as the nineteenth century progressed. I argue that there was a relationship among science, class, and race that produced an environment that curbed the earlier humanitarian emphasis on liberty and opportunity and replaced it with a picture of static and inferior darker-skinned races that justified withdrawing economic, social, and professional opportunities. Although I certainly agree with Lorimer that class held a significant role in this transition, I argue that scientific racism, especially in light of Knox’s popular lecture tour, was certainly an influential part of the discursive mix circulating at the time.

Of central importance throughout this discussion is the flexibility of race to accommodate the particular social changes taking place within the culture. Racism was a strategy by which to manage the social and ideological contradictions at the heart of English culture. It justified repressive action in a culture motivated by Christian and Enlightenment ideologies. In addition, racial and class distinctions overlapped in an attempt to shore up social structures that were cracking under the influence of agitation by working-class and women’s groups. Although anthropological discourse may have exerted limited influence on the culture at large, Knox and the doctrine of physical anthropology were certainly crucial factors (Stocking,
In a society in which the need for a clear delineation of class structures was an increasing source of anxiety, and imperialist and nationalist ideas gained strength, “educated men,” Lorimer argues, “found the ideas of the scientific racists attractive.” Race and physical determinism were remarkably close to the idea of superior aristocratic blood, and for a segment of the population “lacking an aristocratic lineage, and yet seeking the trappings of gentility, pride of race formed one substitute” (Colour, Class and the Victorians, 159). Racism buttressed historically established social power. Racial background provided the rising middle-class, educated Englishman his opportunity to claim hereditary superiority.

This overlap between hereditary power structures and biological determinism is central to Knox’s argument. Stocking characterizes Knox’s *The Races of Men* as “hereditarian racial doctrine in an extreme form” (Victorian Anthropology, 64). “With me,” Knox writes, “race, or hereditary descent, is everything; it stamps the man” (Races, 6). Knox finds it curious that so many in the population do not acknowledge the crucial importance of race in the development of social hierarchies:

the statesman, the historian, the theologian, the universalist, and the mere scholar, either attached no special meaning to the term, for reasons best known to themselves; or refused to follow out the principle to its consequences; or ascribed the moral difference in the races of men to fanciful causes, such as education, religion, climate, &c.—and their physical distinctions sometimes to the same haphazard influences—sometimes to climate alone—sometimes to climate aided by a mysterious law. (7–8)

Knox denies the importance of many traditional ethnological explanations for the distinctive characteristics of different races, such as geographical location, climate, education, social position, and religion. Although Knox argues that each of these issues had an impact on racial development and historical progression, the basic and immovable nature of racial identity remains permanent, and has been so from the point of creation. Social stratification is rooted in biology. Race, increasingly in Victorian culture, is not an influence that can be overcome.

The Role of Form: Political, Biological, and Fictional

For Knox, monogenesis and humanitarianism divert the public from a true understanding of the central importance of race in history and social
organization. Taking on the doctrine of monogenesis directly, Knox asserts that “the illustrious Prichard, with the best intentions in the world, has succeeded in misdirecting the English mind as to all the great questions of race” (Races, 23). The result of the inaccurate and misleading doctrine is that it educates the English subject to see racial distinctions as an element of colonial geography rather than as a part of the everyday lives of citizens in the metropolis:

As a consequence of its misdirection, on the mere mention of the word race, the popular mind flies off to Tasmania, the polar circle, or the land of the Hottentot. Englishmen cannot be made to believe, can scarcely be made to comprehend, that races of men, differing as widely from each other as races can possibly do, inhabit, not merely continental Europe, but portions of Great Britain and Ireland. And next to the difficulty of getting this great fact admitted to be one, has been an unwillingness to admit the full importance of race, militating as it does against the thousand-and-one prejudices of the so-called civilized state of man; opposed as it is to the Utopian views based on education, religion, government. (23–24, original italics)

Knox breaks down the distinctive nature of the colonizer/colonized relationship in English culture, with its profoundly geographical component represented in the establishment of limited freedom for slaves while on English soil in the late eighteenth century. Instead, Knox suggests that racial difference manifests itself in the streets of England by focusing not only on the darker-skinned races of the colonial context, but also on the racial distinctions evident within England, Wales, and Scotland.11 Robert J. C. Young notes that Knox, with a colleague, “liked to analyse racial types” while walking “about the streets of Paris or London” (76). Thus, Knox uses the more expansive definition of race, frequently evident in the nineteenth-century use of the term to impart hereditary relationships, to describe not only the colonial subject, but also the everyday English citizen. Just as class was part of the English construction of the “Negro,” according to Lorimer, Knox wanted to make race a broader part of the construction of the Englishman. For Knox, race is the crucial element in distinguishing among the hierarchically defined social groups composing the general English population.

Moving into larger social groupings, Knox further expands his discussion of race by confronting what he regards as the problem of nationalism. The overlap of conceptions of race and understandings of nationalism was critical in the mid-nineteenth century. Definitions in Victorian culture
about what constituted a national body, what defined citizenship within a particular nation, and what characterized the relationships among different nations, all became vital concerns. Tensions among nationalities, according to David Wetzel, were the result of shifting definitions for the nation-state’s cohesive force: “Previously theoreticians had invoked ‘language’ or ‘collective conscience’ as the basis of national claims. In the 1850s these fell increasingly by the wayside. ‘Race’ took their place” (14). Read in the light of Lorimer’s discussion of the diminishing opportunities for black citizens to achieve the status of gentlemen in England, social and national definitions arguably began to display a deterministic certitude that excluded those who did not fit the racial criteria, regardless of individual ability.

Knox found in the 1848 revolutions clear justification for his argument that mid-Victorians needed to transform the paradigm through which they viewed social interaction to one exclusively based on race. Describing the 1848 revolutions as the “war of race against race, which has convulsed Europe during the last two years” (Races, 16–17), Knox argues that his work creates an outline of the history of what has been considered the nation-state by “viewing them, not as nations, but as races” (76, original italics). He notes that when he first offered these ideas five years previously, the “opinions they contained were opposed to all the received opinions of the day. The world was so national, and race had been so utterly forgotten, that for at least two years after delivering my first course of lectures at Newcastle I had the whole question to myself” (76, original italics). But in the space between the lecture tour and the publication of the book, “the press, even in insular England, has been, most reluctantly I believe, forced to take it up; to make admissions which I never supposed could have been wrung from them; to confess it to be possible that man, after all, may be subject to some physiological laws hitherto not well understood; that race, as well as ‘democracy,’ or socialism, or bands of peri-patetic demagogues, or evil spirits, may have had something to do with the history of nations, and more especially with the last revolutions in Europe” (76–77, original italics).

The Races of Men is a work caught in an ideological struggle between the construction of the nation state as a geographically and linguistically determined entity, and one where the only significant defining factor for a particular population is its race. And changing attitudes in the reception of Knox’s ideas suggest a culture increasingly receptive to the more biologically deterministic way of understanding current events.

Knox vigorously criticized the structure of the nation-state because he
believed that it was built on the false foundation of culture rather than on race. Margot Finn argues that nationalism is a discursive strategy that “first gained currency in the spiritual and institutional upheaval of the Protestant Reformation” (15). Nationalism gained strength as a concept in the late eighteenth century for three reasons: “the Enlightenment revolution of intellect, the industrial revolution of the economy, and the French revolution of 1789” (Finn, 23). Knox argues that this late-eighteenth century nationalist fervor was a misguided way to organize populations into functioning administrative units; it was a failed political strategy. Nationalism helped control populations by alluding to fictional, grandiose roots: “it is and always has been the practice of every race and nation, whose intellectual faculties were sufficiently elevated, to connect their history with the origin of all time, and, under one denomination or another, to identify themselves with the great creative Power” (Races, 386). Nations, according to Knox, achieve preeminent status as the determining structure of social interactions because they are constructed as historically destined for greatness. Moving away from a geographically and historically determined nation to a racially determined, transtemporal grouping, Knox contradicts the 1850s idea of the nation by posing a series of questions: “Forget for a time the word nation, and ask yourselves whence come the people composing any ancient assemblage called a nation, a state, a republic, a monarchy, an empire? Ask yourselves this plain question, are they indigenous to the soil, or have they migrated from somewhere else? and if so, have they altered in structure, in character?” (Races, 10, original italics). This issue of geography ties in with one of Knox’s most persistent criticisms of the national system, the idea of passports and their incompatibility with human liberty (374). Thus, nations emerge against the current of nature, and work against the appropriate path of human survival and organic progression that defined the lifespan of a certain race of people. They are discursive and administrative constructs working against the true—that is, “natural”—order of things, thus they often revert to force to retain their cohesion.

Knox argues that the 1848 revolutions resulted from the disruptive friction of different races trying to form racially mixed nation-states. Knox’s biographer Lonsdale asserts that Knox believed that peace “prevailed in a community consisting of one race only, and there public sentiment was respected” (319). For this reason, “empires like Austria, composed of many and diverse ethnological elements . . . must in the course of time go apart, or succumb to greater and more lasting disintegrations” (319). As Knox puts it, “Woe to the empire or nation composed of divers
elements, of different races, and discordant principles!” (Races, 292). The reason that collections of races cannot form stable national units is that different races apparently have different “natural” propensities for social cohesion: “Each race has its own form of civilization, as it has its own language and arts; I would almost venture to say, science,” and so the structure of each society provides “the result and test of the qualities of every race” (57). Lonsdale asserts that Knox “looked upon the homogeneity of Race as the only reliable basis of a well-founded nationality” (290). Knox’s most pervasive example is “Hayti” because in that nation’s development, an African race tried to take on the social structures of a European country. “Look at Hayti” Knox suggests, “with a deepening colour vanishes civilization, the arts of peace, science, literature, abstract justice” (Races, 107). The culture brought to the island by the French, Knox argues, disappeared with the white inhabitants, in much the same way as the mixed-race individual apparently reverts to one race with the passage of time. Social organizations have the same organic components as biologically based racial distinctions.

Knox’s references to other points of view help us to understand the discursive climate in which he advanced these ideas. He knew his readers would not be entirely receptive to his view of nationalism: “that human character, individual or national, is traceable solely to the nature of that race to which the individual or nation belongs, is a statement which I know must meet with the severest opposition” (Races, v). But, he asserts directly that “nationalities, however strong, could never in the long run overcome the tendencies of race” (317, original italics). Because the construction of the nation-state works against the natural force of race, governments apparently must resort to drastic measures in order to maintain their boundaries: “Empires, monarchies, nations, are human contrivances; often held together by fraud and violence” (4). The figure for which Knox had the most contempt is the statesman: “to mystify, to job, to rob, to plunder. It is a portion of the organized hypocrisy which marks the statesman wherever he exists” (309). Therefore, claims that nationalism is the way to liberate people leads a population down the road to oppression because, Knox argues, a nation unnaturally yokes together unsuitable races under one governmental entity, thus requiring force to establish unity.16

Even if humans were separated into homogenous racial units, however, racial conflict apparently is inevitable. The author argues that the predictability of this animosity is “wonderful” because it is universal: “There is, there can be, nothing more wonderful in human history than this dislike of race to race: always known and admitted to exist, it has only of late
assumed a threatening shape” (Races, 332–33). This mutual dislike is “innate” (89), not modifiable by social or political policies, and perhaps relates to what Knox identifies as “man’s” natural ability to destroy. “Man’s gift is to destroy, not to create” (464–65); and though we have already seen Knox argue that men cannot create anything new, Knox takes this idea a step further here to say that man tries to eradicate what is in front of him. Yet although man tries to destroy everything, ultimately he is unsuccessful in his goal: “he has not yet succeeded in destroying all nature’s works, although he labours hard to effect this” (41). The colonial enterprise, then, is just the result of the natural impulses that drive men toward destruction.17

In fact, for Knox the need for alignment between political structure and racial characteristics is what made the dynamics of colonial domination detestable. “When the race attempts the civilization of another,” he argues, “the whole affair becomes a ludicrous farce, and even grave men laugh at it” (Races, 452). Again, he refers to Haiti as an example of the folly of the enterprise, because the new black government took an emperor for its leader. Instead, “each race must act for itself, and work out its own destiny; display its own tendencies; be the maker of its own fortunes, be they good or evil. A foreign civilization they cannot adopt; borrow they may, and cunningly adapt, calling it national, native; but the imposture, like all impostures, becomes manifest in time” (452).

When a race acquires an inappropriate social structure as its own, the interesting result for Knox is that the enterprise takes on a fictional quality. The process becomes a performance that lacks genuine reality: “The whole is a farce when acted in Hayti; a melodrame with tragic episodes when Gaul is the stage; and so it is ever with the most skilful and able of impostors, that is, of imitators; sooner or later the trick comes out” (Races, 453). Knox creates an elaborate drama in which races interact in an eternal crisis enacted by their racial origins; this drama is determined entirely by race. The line between racial fiction and valid racial reality, therefore, becomes the appropriateness of the cultural form adopted by the group. The criteria for discerning the line between fiction and validity in Knox, however, are not properly established.

Therefore, in this enactment of global racial dynamics, Knox occupies the ambiguous position of both an advocate for the oppressed colonial “other” and a committed racist. When he observes that the statesman acts with cold assurance as he carries out his diplomatic “act of appropriation,” Knox suggests that it is a method “quite unparalleled in the history of aggressions” (Races, 222). Using the example of the acquisition of New
Zealand, he argues that “a slip of parchment signed officially is issued from that den of all abuses, the office of the Colonial Secretary, declaring New Zealand to be a colony of Britain, with all its dependencies, lands, fisheries, mines, inhabitants” (222). He mocks language, suggesting that the “aborigines are to be protected!” (222–23). And he suggests that “if the Crown will let them alone, they can protect themselves; but this would not suit the wolf who took care of the sheep” (223). Instead, the state functioned as caretakers for those they wished to dominate, and Knox makes it very clear that he views this policy as “organized hypocrisy . . . the aborigines are not declared Britons; they are merely to be protected!” (223). The colonial administration does not bring those conquered into national citizenship; it acts as a caretaker, a role that masks the true dynamic of oppression.18

In Knox’s critique of the nineteenth-century reverence for progress, however, the author seems to lose his sympathy for the victims of colonial oppression. Knox appears decisive in his views about progress when he says, “no greater error was ever committed than that of supposing that the mass of men change or progress” (Races, 405–6, original italics). However, the group included in this statement is narrowly restricted to the non-European races, because he suggests that the reader “look all over the globe, it is always the same; the dark races stand still, the fair progress” (222). Further complicating the issue, he argues in another section that “neither nations nor individuals stand still; onward they must go, or retrograde: there is no middle course; no fixity, no finality, in that sense” (262). Although the author seems vehemently against the idea of progress, as with his attitude towards colonialism, a contradiction appears. Knox both criticizes progress as an ideology he attributes to a British disregard for the real forces shaping human existence, and he makes clear that in the hierarchy of races, lighter-skinned people are superior because they strive and reach beyond the point at which they stand.

Knox’s emphasis on history, rather than progress, makes clear that the main concept at work is physical determinism. As we saw earlier, distinct races and species do not vary from the point of their origin: “so far back as history goes, the species of animals as we call them have not changed; the races of men have been absolutely the same” (Races, 36). History becomes predictable and decipherable by reference to the static nature of living creatures. This predictability becomes important in Knox’s references to art. Nationhood and history overlap in Knox’s reflection on the relationship of the arts to social development: “Human history cannot be a mere chapter of accidents. The fate of nations cannot always be regulated by chance; its literature, science, art, wealth, religion, language, laws, and
morals, cannot surely be the result of mere accidental circumstances” (5–6). Race is brought into the equation as the baseline structure of history because it is the force of permanence in human interactions. For Knox, race seemed to be the immovable force that gives structure and reason to the study of human social and physical natures. History—once the emphasis shifts from politics and nations toward physical determinism, toward what Knox called “the physiological history of man” (45)—provides a record of the essential natures of each of the differing human races.

For Knox, therefore, conventional history “offers us no guide, no data, for the composition of a systematic work on man; chronologies are mere fables” (Races, 150). The lens through which conventional history views human events offers a tainted perspective. Knox is particularly hard on English travelers who explore other cultures and governments. Rather than providing a resource for those like himself who wish to study the races, he says that travel writers “are so occupied with their personal adventures, and French with political intrigue, that there is no getting a single new or valuable fact from their silly books” (179). This critique becomes interesting in light of the reality that many Victorians did, in fact, derive their understandings of different races from this material. As Christine Bolt argues, misconceptions about race were related to a lack of direct contact between the races, because people found their information about other populations through biased and sensationalized narratives (5–6). Knox wanted data from these studies that would contribute to his theory that “the history of man is included in the history of the organic world. He is of this world; he did not create it, he creates nothing; you cannot separate his history from the organic world” (Races, 11). History, then, becomes an organic process of birth, achievement, and decay, in which all human, natural, cultural, and social forms participate. It seems a logical conclusion for an anatomist that structure is the window through which the answers to human history and development could be understood. What Knox called “the unity of organization” suggests that man is “connected with all life—past, present, and to come” (11). But a slight difference occurs in distinguishing animal history from human history, for “animals have but one history, their zoological; man has two, the zoological and the intellectual. The latter must ever, to a certain extent, be regulated by the former” (11–12). In Knox’s formulation, physical and structural elements determined the intellectual or artistic nature of a race.

The unifying concept in Knox’s emphasis on physical structure is the idea of “transcendental anatomy.” Ironically, he replaces the idea of a unitary creation of all human races with the idea of the connectedness of all
living creatures’ anatomical structures within the polygenesis framework. Transcendental anatomy seeks “to explain in a connected chain the phenomena of the living material world; to connect the history of living plants and animals with those which now lie entombed in the strata of the crust of the globe; to explain the mysterious metamorphoses which occur in the growth of animals and plants from their embryonic state to their maturity of growth and final decay; to trace a plan of creation, and to guess at that plan—these are the objects of transcendental anatomy” (Races, 167).

Blending history, geography, anatomy, and embryology, Knox suggests that the basic anatomical structure of all animals and humans is the same, and that they differ in the point where they achieve developmental maturity. Therefore, Knox places their limitations or abilities on a hierarchical structure of physical development. The hierarchy of structures is transcendental, Knox argues, because it never changes, and it has been the way that it is from the point of creation. Variations within a species “proceed only to a certain length—they are constantly checked by two laws, the laws maintaining species as they exist,” which are “the tendency to reproduce the specific form instead of the variety” and the “non-viability or non-reproduction, that is extinction.” This stability is what “checks deformations of all kinds” (Races, 102, original italics). Race, biology, and anatomy are constant and unmodifiable attributes of the human animal.

Progress, then, takes place along a hierarchy of structures visible in the development of the embryo. Within the embryo, there appear to be an infinite number of structural plateaus at which each of the forms of life takes its place:

We discover structures in the embryo . . . that the individual is in fact passing through a series of metamorphoses, expressed briefly by the term development; passing through forms which represent the permanent forms of other adult beings belonging to the organic world, not human, but bestial; of whom some belong to the existing world, whilst others may represent forms which once existed, but are now extinct; or, finally, forms which may be destined some day to appear, running their destined course, then to perish as their predecessors. Thus in the embryonic changes or metamorphoses of man and other animals, are shadowed forth, more or less completely, all other organic forms. (Races, 29)

Progress is the action of passing through each of the developmental stages of embryonic growth. The embryo becomes a window into all the forms of life—past, present, and future—that exist at any time. This transtemporal
vortex explodes the idea that beings develop or change, because at each point in the developmental ladder a particularized and individual creation comes into existence, and then remains there forever. The force that determines the forms—or determines when the form will come into existence—is not identified.

In Knox’s text, what results is a tension between the forces of unity and the forces of particularity. All living things share the same collection of structural qualities, and have throughout all time (Races, 30). Particularity exists in the individual manifestations of these structures, which differentiate species and races. However, Knox removes darker-skinned races from this universal grouping when he denies the African races any history:

The past history of the Negro, of the Caffre, of the Hottentot, and of the Bosjeman, is simply a blank—St. Domingo forming but an episode. Can the black races become civilized? I should say not: their future history, then, must resemble the past. The Saxon race will never tolerate them—never amalgamate—never be at peace. (244)

History, then, begins to lose clarity in Knox’s writing, as do many of his principles, because he uses it in contradictory ways. We just saw that Knox locates history in the embryo, which holds the key to all life. But the African races do not have a history, except in a momentary blip, when the race achieved autonomy in Haiti by winning independence from France, an action that Knox alternately celebrates and denies ever occurred. And even if the distinction of the races implies a different developmental scale in their separate embryonic growth processes, the African race would apparently still have its own particular history. Civilization is the litmus test for the ability of a race to actually achieve a history—certainly a common nineteenth-century belief—and civilization resulted from contact with the lighter-skinned races. When the French (as well as the British and the Americans) withdrew from Haiti, they took civilization and history with them. Along with the white men goes history and civility. Therefore, when Knox argues that all beings are connected, the African races appear to hold a liminal position on his ontological scale.

Knox, however, does not limit himself to the colonial context in his discussions of race, nationhood, progress, and history. As noted earlier, his scientific gaze focuses as much on the metropolis as on the colonial context, which brings Knox’s views to bear on not only the colonial site, but also the domestic site, and, by extension, on women (Young, 75). Stocking argues that in the nineteenth century there was “a close articulation, both
experiential and ideological, between the domestic and the colonial spheres of otherness” (Victorian Anthropology, 234). The architecture—both urban and domestic—of the nineteenth-century metropolis was devised deliberately to keep different social spheres distinct and apart: “the segregation of social classes into different urban and suburban residential areas helped to keep the slum world out of sight and mind” (Victorian Anthropology, 215). The arrangement of different communities into a spectacle of historical development occurred as much in the metropolis, then, as in the colonial sphere. The separation of groups into discrete entities characterized by their development on a unitary developmental scale—which, in the case of Knox, is characterized by embryonic developmental stages—came to serve the needs of social control both in the colonial context and the metropolis. Wherever communities needed watching, the temporal and spatial sequencing provided the tools to justify separation and study.20

Form, Gender, and the Aesthetic

Knox’s primary consideration is form—physical, political, and architectural. This emphasis leads him to develop an aesthetics of surface and appearance that engages with all of the previous issues discussed in his work—science and art overlap. Knox’s biographer, Isobel Rae, argues that in 1849, Knox lived in London and “spent many of his hours of enforced leisure in the British Museum, studying [the] Greek sculptures with the keen eye of the artist and the anatomist” (Rae, 147). For Knox, Greek culture represented the height of civilization (Races, 408), and he believed that through Greek statues it is possible to discern the perfection of human form: “The perfect type of man was discovered by the ancient sculptors of Greece: it cannot be surpassed; all attempts to improve on it have failed. Towards this, nature constantly tends” (446). In the history of humanity, the perfect man appeared early in Western culture: “When the world was yet, as it were, in its infancy, a race of men appeared in the stream of human history, with intellects and frames so glorious, that no parallel to them was ever found in history. That race was the ancient Greek” (395). The figure representing this perfect form in art is the Venus statue (413).21

Knox consistently emphasizes the beautiful particularity of form over the horrific universality of content. Because the internal structures of living animals and humans are generally unified, the exterior or the outward form is where “we must look for the more remarkable characteristics of
animals; it is it alone which nature loves to decorate and to vary” (*Races*, 227–28). Everything within form “is frightful and appalling to human sense—never beautiful, but the reverse; always horrible. In proportion as any figure, whether human or bestial, displays through the exterior, that unseemly interior, which has no form that sense comprehends, or desires, so in the same proportion is that figure beautiful or the opposite” (415). Thus, the body acts as a kind of empty signifier, like the concept of race itself, which creates meaning only in its surface presentation. Beauty, then, signifies an act of concealment that is rooted in anxiety about “dissolution and death” (415). The signifier “race” ends up also concealing the multivalent nature of issues of racial stratification that are much more about the need within the capitalist and imperialist imaginary to create discrete and manageable communities than about any essential nature or definition.

This aesthetic philosophy, which seems nothing less than bizarre for an anatomist who studied passionately both the internal and external structure of animals and humans, leads, in his writing, to a celebration of external characteristics. However, in *Great Artists and Great Anatomists*, he seems to argue exactly the reverse. There, Knox suggests that knowledge of the interior as well as the intellectual facets of the human form provide the basis of a theory of art (*Great Artists and Great Anatomists*, 144, 192). He first says that “a knowledge of the interior of man’s structure is essential to the surgeon and physician, to the zoologist and to the transcendental anatomist; it furnishes to the artist, as its highest aim, a theory of art” (144, original italics). In distinguishing between great portrait artists and poor ones, for instance, he argues that “the great artist looks through the material mask and reads the nature, that is, the truth, which lies beyond it” (192–93). Here, he seems to be arguing that the truth of man’s mind is some kind of abstracted understanding of the nature of subjective essence, rather than the literal insides of the person, which he finds horrifying. However, this abstracted essential identity seems to contradict a rather anti-Platonic emphasis on the empirically discerned “real” throughout his work.

But perhaps by understanding the word “nature” as containing elements of both God and the natural world, as existing as a kind of liminal scientific term that lives in a space between science and theology, we can see that Knox argues for art to explain something about life essence: “There is but one school of art—Nature. But, to read her volume profitably, artists must study profoundly the antique Greek, and ancient Italian school, formed by the era of Leonardo, Angelo, and Raphael” (*GAGA*, 202). He also argues:
The relation Anatomy holds to Art is to explain—first, how far the shapes and figures of the inward structures modify the external forms of man and woman;—second, it informs the artist of the meaning of such forms;—third, it explains to him the laws of deformation; that is, of variety in external forms; the causes of these varieties, and the tendency to which they lead. As an artist he must represent them, no doubt; but in doing so let him wisely follow Nature rather in her intentions than her forthcomings, and return to the perfect or to its approximation, whenever time and circumstances permit him to do so. (GAGA, 203–4)

Knox thrives on delineating the particular variations in the external structures of different beings, with relatively few—and these are generally offensive—references to internal qualities. But when Knox places his observations within the hierarchical structure of his own racially stratified opinions—and these observations are reflected on many different discursive planes in mid-Victorian culture—Knox’s thought becomes a radically derogatory racialism.

Further refining his connection between structure and the beautiful, Knox asserts that “man alone is beautiful; the human form alone satisfies the human mind” (Races, 410, original italics). He narrows this definition by suggesting that “woman presents the perfection of that form, and, therefore, alone constitutes ‘the perfect’” (411, original italics). In the female form, Knox sees “the perfection of Nature’s works: the absolutely perfect; the beautiful, the highest manifestation of abstract life, clothed in a physical form, adapted to the corresponding minds of her race and species” (38). It is not surprising that the white female form came to represent such a point of perfection or centrality in this text about race. Mary Poovey argues that in “the Victorian symbolic economy” (Uneven, 12), the representation of white woman could be included among issues defined as under “cultural contestation during the middle of the nineteenth century” (9). And in scientific discourse, in particular, and scientific institutions in their general practices and policies, this contestation took a very practical and visible place. Evelleen Richards notes that “Mid-Victorian science was an all-male preserve, which women entered, if they entered at all, only as spectators—at the most as fashionable dabblers, not to be taken seriously” (“Huxley,” 257). The Anthropological Society arose partly because of disagreements over women’s attendance at scientific discussions, as was noted earlier. The exclusion of women from these meetings implies an overlap in contemptuous attitudes toward women and darker-skinned races, because “Hunt and his fellow Anthropologicals were as scientifically certain of the
intellectual and cultural inferiority of the female as they were of the Negro” (Richards, “Huxley,“ 265). In his 1865 essay, “Emancipation—Black and White,” Thomas Henry Huxley himself equated the emancipation of blacks with giving full equality to women, arguing that giving full opportunity to those who will never rise to the level of the white male would prove only more clearly their inferiority. For Knox, however, it is the abstract female form as embodied in the Greek marble statues, rather than the character or intellectual capacity of individual living women, which signified perfection.

Knox uses the figure of the woman in four significant ways. As I already stated, the Venus statue represents the height of formal perfection. His more general discussion of women’s form takes on racial distinction in his delineation of Hottentot women who “are not made like other women” (Races, 236), a common misconception developed over the previous 200 years of exploration and in the resulting narratives, and which fueled the inhuman degradation of Sara(h) Ba(a)rtman(n)’s body by scientists and voyeurs alike. He also uses images of women as prominent examples of the inability to transmit physical changes genetically: “For four thousand years have the Chinese been endeavouring to disfigure the feet of their women: have they succeeded in making the deformation permanent? Corsets have been worn time out of mind: Galen complains of them; he ascribes to them all sorts of bad results, deformities of spine and chest. Have such become hereditary? All matrons still produce virgin daughters” (Races, 100–101).

Finally, Knox presents women in a more abstract sense as the opposite of man, just as black seems the opposite of white, so indicating women’s subservient position on the developmental ladder: “Mind is everything: the history of man is the history of his mind. What is the quality of mind which most distinguishes one race from another; one individual from another; man from woman; the dark from the fair portion of mankind? It is the power of generalization; of abstract thought; of rising from detail to general laws” (341–42).

Therefore, the overlap between race and gender categories takes on institutional, intellectual, and social components. Poovey argues that this type of denigration of female intellectual capacity was used to prevent women from entering “the economic and political fray” (Uneven, 11), thus suggesting a connection between Knox’s racial arguments and the greater issue of women’s increased agitation for opportunity at midcentury. This connection was commonly made during the period: It has been argued that “this equation of woman and black is one of the most important features of the Woman Question” (The Woman Question, 2:91). The relationship
between blacks and women is “tirelessly discussed by transatlantic anthropologists after 1865” (2:57). Not only were the mental capacities of the two groups made analogous, but physical similarities were also drawn between the white woman and the black male (2:91). The discourses of race and gender suffused the meaning of “race” in mid-Victorian culture, influencing the valences of the term as much as did considerations of skin color and geographical locale.

Therefore, although Knox argues that the female form is perfect, he does not suggest that women, in general, are morally or intellectually perfect. The perfect Greek Venus statue represents no extraformal qualities in its nature, and Knox removes the figure from historical specificity: “It is not youth, nor intellect, nor moral worth, nor associations of any sort, which constitute the beautiful and the perfect; nor is life required, nor complexion, nor motion; it is form alone which is essential” (Races, 411, original italics). The effectiveness of form was that it “satisfies the eye for form, and by so doing the highest and deepest of all human feelings; for on form depends the living world in as far as we are concerned. The material world itself—the stellar universe itself—all is form” (414, original italics). What we see becomes paramount to our appreciation and access to the beautiful, because it is essentially a structural and visual attribute. And biological form, as we saw earlier, is the window through which the history of both creation and the individual races becomes discernible. This move also resolves the problem of history with which Knox struggles throughout the text. By moving into what he constructs as the static world of aesthetics and understanding the ideal Greek Venus statue as a finite and extinct figure, Knox temporarily resolves the struggle over historical paradigms between race, nation, and time. Like Rae’s description of Knox sitting in the British Museum, the narrative rests for a moment, taking a break from the ideological fray of nineteenth-century racial ideologies to relax in the realm of the beautiful.

Knox’s Legacy

Praising Knox’s work eight years later, Lonsdale argued that The Races of Men “can hardly fail to obtain a place in history; and when it comes to be read by the light of another century, by which time human prejudices, now very much on the wane, will no longer affect a free expression of thought on all matters affecting the social and religious position of our species” (330).
Although Knox’s notorious work is better known for its racism than for its wisdom, *The Races of Men* helps us to understand the late-1840s cultural environment in England, when humanitarian racial arguments held diminishing power, and racist anthropological arguments flourished. The conflicted and contradictory nature of the text reflects the contested nature of the category “race” at the time. Violent rhetoric in the work suggests the reality of the relationship between colonizer and colonized, a relationship further strained by the 1857 Indian Rebellion, an event allegorically presented in Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins’s “The Perils of Certain English Prisoners,” the subject of the following chapter. Knox’s interweaving of race, history, nation, progress, gender, and, finally, aesthetics reflects the way in which Victorian writing about race became a layered discourse encompassing various discussions of these topics. *The Races of Men* stands as a compelling example of the fractured and often irrational meanings attached to the term “race” in mid-Victorian England.