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Hegemonic Femininities and Intersectional Domination

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Abstract

We examine how two sociological traditions account for the role of femininities in social domination. The masculinities tradition theorizes gender as an independent structure of domination; consequently, femininities that complement hegemonic masculinities are treated as passively compliant in the reproduction of gender. In contrast, Patricia Hill Collins views cultural ideals of hegemonic femininity as simultaneously raced, classed, and gendered. This intersectional perspective allows us to recognize women striving to approximate hegemonic cultural ideals of femininity as actively complicit in reproducing a matrix of domination. We argue that hegemonic femininities reference a powerful location in the matrix from which some women draw considerable individual benefits (i.e., a femininity premium) while shoring up collective benefits along other dimensions of advantage. In the process, they engage in intersectional domination of other women and even some men. Our analysis re-enforces the utility of analyzing femininities and masculinities from within an intersectional feminist framework.

Keywords

gender, femininities, masculinities, social inequality, intersectionality

The Root, an online magazine of Black news, opinions, politics, and culture, published an article by writer Michael Harriot in 2017 defining "Becky" as "a white woman who uses her privilege as a weapon, a ladder or an excuse" (Harriot 2017). He argued that "White womanhood is a credit card with an unlimited balance. After all, if you are born with the ultimate privilege of white womanhood, why not use it to your advantage?" Becky also made an appearance in Beyoncé's 2016 song "Sorry," in which she calls out "Becky with the good hair." Abigail Fisher, plaintiff in the 2016 anti-affirmative action case *Fisher v. University of Texas*, was anointed "Becky with the bad grades" (Pettit 2016). Becky, and the earlier colloquial designation of "Miss Ann," succinctly capture the idea that white women's racism is gendered.[1,2]

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The privileges of "Becky" are racial but are also derived from performances of particular femininities. Feinstein (2017) provided a historical example, arguing that slaveholding white women seeking to divorce their husbands framed themselves as meeting ideal standards of white womanhood. Their constructions of virtue and purity were made in opposition to accusations of Black women's hypersexuality. For example, one woman petitioned for divorce on the grounds that her husband engaged in "a promiscuous illicit intercourse with his own negroe wenches and continued . . . for the space of fourteen years" (Feinstein 2017:557). Successful claims of piety and for protection allowed white women to achieve their goal of divorce—but they did so by cruelly defining Black women's repeated rape by slaveholding men as evidence of promiscuity.

The role of femininity in social domination has not been a core concern in gender theory. This article addresses that omission by theorizing the role of women who occupy "unmarked categories where power and privilege 'cluster'" (Choo and Ferree 2010:133). We first engage in a critical comparison of two traditions that have theorized femininities, arguing they provide divergent starting points. The masculinities literature builds on the work of R. W. (Raewyn) Connell (1987, 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) and is centered on the concept of the "gender order." It focuses on the relationship between hegemonic masculinities and complementary "emphasized femininities" that ensure women's passive *compliance* in reproducing gender. In contrast, Patricia Hill Collins's (1990, 2004) intersectional perspective is grounded in the concept of the "matrix of domination." This approach highlights the relative privileges of those performing what she called "hegemonic femininity." By focusing on reinforcing axes of oppression instead of exclusively on gender, this social location comes into view as actively *complicit* in the reproduction of inequality. Clarifying these differences is a contribution as neither set of theorists points out areas of divergence or highlights what is at stake.

We argue that an intersectional formulation offers a more robust framework than the masculinities tradition for examining the role of women in the reproduction of domination. Drawing on intersectional feminism, we next examine the construction of hegemonic femininities as cultural ideals of womanhood that are simultaneously raced, classed, and (hetero) sexualized. We argue that cultural beliefs about gender complementarity play a unique role in weaving together the matrix of domination; they help construct and defend boundaries demarcating race, class, nationality, and other social groups.

Finally, we examine hegemonic femininities as complex and powerful "intermediate positions" in the matrix of domination. From these positions, some women perform deference to men embodying hegemonic masculinities while also engaging in domination of everyone else (Collins 2004:188). Performances of hegemonic femininities are motivated, whether intentionally or not, by the pursuit of a *femininity premium*—a set of individual benefits that accrue to those who can approximate these ideals. For individual women, the collective costs of performing hegemonic femininities are often far outweighed by the individual promise of a femininity premium. Successful performances of femininity also reinforce benefits accrued along other axes of domination, such as race and class. White, affluent, heterosexual women are typically best positioned to collect a femininity premium. Women who embody hegemonic femininities may draw on their social location—not just in race and class but also in gender—as a source of power over other individuals and groups in a process that we call *intersectional domination*.

THEORIZING THE ROLE OF FEMININITIES IN SOCIAL DOMINATION

We first highlight the shared foundational assumptions of the masculinities literature and intersectional feminist theory because both emerge out of and were contributors to social constructionist theories of inequality. We then turn to how key authors' distinctive conceptualizations of structures of inequality give rise to consequential differences in their definitions of masculinities and femininities. We conclude that intersectional feminist theory, grounded in the insights of Patricia Hill Collins, offers a more powerful tool in accounting for privileged white women's complicity in the reproduction of domination.

Starting Points and Convergences: Connell and Collins

Connell's and Collins's careers parallel each other. Connell's most influential book, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics*, was published in 1987, and Collins's *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* was published in 1990. Over the next several decades, Connell and Collins both developed, refined, and advanced their theories.

Although these traditions originated separately, both contributed to the foundational assumptions on which contemporary feminist sociology rests. They treated gender, race, and other forms of social inequality as political, historical, and social products produced and reinforced through macrolevel processes (i.e., colonization and globalization), organizational arrangements, cultural beliefs, social interaction, and individual socialization (see also Butler 1990; hooks 1984; Hurtado 1996; Lorber 1994; Lorde 1984; Martin 2003, 2004; Mohanty 2003; Nagel 2003; Ridgeway and Correll 2004; Risman 2004; Rubin [1975] 2011; Scott 1988; West and Zimmerman 1987). Categories, such as men and women or white and Black, are defined in relationship to each other rather than in reference to some biological essence.

In *Black Sexual Politics*, Collins (2004) integrated some key concepts and ideas from the masculinities literature, drawing on and citing Connell (1992, 1995) and Messner (1990, 1998). For example, the term *hegemony*—key to Connell's (1987) *Gender and Power*—is picked up by Collins (2004). Both traditions emphasize the discursive nature of hegemonic power, in which cultural beliefs and ideas justify social hierarchies, making them appear normal, natural, and inevitable (Collins 2004; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Hegemony need not rely on violence or coercion, nor does it require individuals to perfectly embody cultural ideals. Rather, hegemony is about how discourse, practices, and relationships become instantiated in institutional and organizational arrangements, collectively channeling individuals toward conformity. As Collins (2004:314) explained, "In hegemonic situations, power is diffused throughout a social system such that multiple groups police one another and suppress each other's dissent."

Both traditions recognize complex relationality between and within gender categories. The masculinities literature attends to cross-gender and intragender relations (internal to masculinities), emphasizing men's potential to be both oppressors and oppressed (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Connell 1987, 1995, 2012; Pascoe and Bridges 2016). Messerschmidt (2016:34), building on Connell (1987), defined "hegemonic masculinity" as "those masculinities that legitimate an unequal relationship between men and women, masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities." Collins (2004:186) also endorsed the conceptualization of masculinities as multiple and hierarchically ordered, noting "hegemonic masculinity is fundamentally a dynamic, relational construct."

As intersectional frameworks gained recognition, masculinities scholars became increasingly aware that they had to grapple with this approach. Yet Connell (1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) and Messerschmidt (2016, 2018) did not cite Collins or deeply engage with intersectional theories. Some masculinities scholars did build on Collins (see e.g., Bridges and Pascoe 2018; Hondagneu-Sotelo and Messner 1994; Messner 1992; Pascoe 2007), and some intersectionalities scholars studied masculinities (see e.g., Hoang 2015;

Lopez 2003; Morris 2011; Oeur 2018; Wingfield 2009). Yet, the core of the masculinities tradition has yet to wrestle with the implications of Collins's framework for their concepts. In general, masculinities scholars part ways from Collins and other intersectional scholars (see Crenshaw 1991, 2016) in the *extent* to which they theorize systems of domination in isolation from each other. The concepts of *gender order* and *matrix of domination* describe how these traditions conceptualize the systemic nature of inequality.

Gender Order Versus Matrix of Domination

For Connell (1987:183), the gender order, or the "interrelation [of masculinities and femininities,] is centered on a single structural fact, the global dominance of men over women." In a volume synthesizing the state of gender theory, Messerschmidt and Messner (2018:36) emphasized the centrality of the gender order concept to masculinities scholarship:

> The potential of Connell's concepts can only be realized when coupled with what we see as the theoretical heart of *Gender and Power*: chapter 6, the centerpiece of three chapters in which Connell elaborates a structural theory of "the gender order" (the state of play of gender relations in a society).

Messerschmidt and Messner (2018:36) argued that if readers deploy the concepts of hegemonic masculinity without grasping "gender order," which they describe as the "structural foundation of Connell's theory," then readers descend into "decontextualized, ahistorical, and individualized descriptors disguised as 'theory.'" In short, the concept of the gender order remains the starting point for much contemporary masculinities scholarship.

The concept of gender order, however, exemplifies what Collins and Chepp (2013; also Collins 2015) called *monocategorical thinking*: It is focused on a single system of power—not the interrelation of systems of domination (see Hancock 2007 on a "unitary approach"). This is clear in Connell's explication of gender order and Messerschmidt's (2016) definition of hegemonic masculinity (presented earlier). Race, class, and other systems of domination are not given mention. Messerschmidt (2016:11) argued that masculinities scholars should appreciate "the mutual conditioning (intersectionality) of gender with such other social dynamics as class, race, age, sexuality, and nation"—but examination of this mutual conditioning is layered on *after* analysis of the dynamics of the gender order. Mutual conditioning does not capture what intersectionalities scholars describe as interlocking systems, as we will detail.

Masculinities scholars have also developed the term "marginalized masculinities" to refer to the masculinities of those marginalized by race and/or class. Yet, marginalized masculinities are not viewed as internal to the gender order; instead, they result from the interplay of gender with distinct race and class structures (Connell 1995:80; for commentary, see Demetriou 2001:341–42). This is in contrast to "subordinated masculinities," which Connell (1995) viewed as internal to the gender order and exemplified by the hegemony of heterosexual men over gay men or, to a lesser extent, men who perform effeminate masculinity.

By comparison, a primary premise of intersectional scholarship is that systems of power are not discrete or additive (Collins 1990, 2004; Combahee River Collective [1977] 1983; Crenshaw 1991; Glenn 2000; Moraga and Anzaldua 1983). As Collins and Bilge (2016:2) articulated, "When it comes to social inequality, people's lives and the organization of power in a given society are better understood as being shaped not by a single axis of social division, be it race or gender or class, *but by many axes that work together and influence each other*" (emphasis added). A central goal is to move beyond attending to one system in relative isolation or focusing on cross-cutting categories only after theorizing a primary system of oppression (see Hancock 2007). The result is a perspective in which "there is no pure racism or sexism. Rather, power relations of racism and sexism gain meaning in relation to one another" (Collins and Bilge 2016:26).

For Collins (1990, 2004), axes in a matrix of domination are inextricably bound and mutually dependent from the start. They often share resources and cultural understandings available in a particular time and place. For example, a joint reading of Davis (1981) and Beisel and Kay (2004) reveals that fears about the loss of Anglo-Saxon control over the state and declining "racial purity" in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States were used to motivate laws prohibiting white women's abortion and promoting forced sterilization of Black women (and men). These gender and race discourses draw on a similar resource (women's reproductive capacity) and cultural understandings (racialized understandings of the nation-state) to support gendered/racialized forms of oppression.

In this example, one could analytically identify an axis focused on men's control over women and another focused on the maintenance of racial hierarchies. Gender and race as axes of domination are not the same thing here—in fact, the power of the matrix of domination comes in part from the weaving together of multiple forms of domination. Yet, attempting to analyze either axis alone would miss fundamental aspects of how domination operated. As Beisel and Kay (2004) argued, gender projects relied, in part, on race for the justification necessary to control women's bodies, and as Davis (1981) made clear, racial projects used gender as a medium to reinscribe racialized hierarchies.

Monocategorical and intersectional approaches thus offer fundamentally different starting points for theorizing masculinities and femininities. In *Black Sexual Politics*, Collins (2004:186) provided a definition of hegemonic masculinities that, while rooted in a particular context, is intersectional from the outset:

> In the American context, hegemonic masculinity becomes defined through its difference from and opposition to women, boys, poor and working class men of all races and ethnicities, gay men, and Black men. In other words, hegemonic masculinity is a concept that is shaped by ideologies of gender, age, class, sexuality, and race.

Collins, who started from the position that inequalities are generated through a matrix of domination in which race, class, gender, sexual, and other inequalities are mutually constituted, saw hegemonic masculinity as about more than gender.

In her view, there is no masculinity that is not already inflected with and defined through all the other dimensions of power in play in a particular context (see also Hoang 2015). Indeed, Collins's understanding of hegemonic masculinity and hegemony in general is created through the bundling of binaries (see also Myers 2012). As Collins (2004:96–97) described, systems of inequality:

> Share a common cognitive framework that uses binary thinking to produce hegemonic ideologies. Such thinking relies on oppositional categories. It views race through two oppositional categories of Whites and Blacks, gender through two categories of men and women, and sexuality through two oppositional categories of heterosexuals and homosexuals. A master binary of normal and deviant overlaps and bundles together these and other lesser binaries. . . . In essence, to be completely "normal," one must be White, masculine, and heterosexual, the core hegemonic White masculinity.

This captures the density and complexity of cultural ideals of masculinities (and as we will see, femininities) as they are woven together in the matrix of domination. Ideas about "normal" race (which masquerades as racelessness), "normal" gender (making men's experiences the standard), and “normal” sexuality (heteronormativity)—essentially, the privileged side of all these dualisms—are packaged together.

Collins (2004:333) highlighted that attempting to theorize gender in isolation risks participation in the naturalization and normalization of whiteness, middle-class status, and heterosexuality:

> The power relations that construct these relational masculinities enable the erasure of whiteness, class privilege, and assumptions of heterosexuality, in short, the workings of hegemonic masculinity itself. As a result, hegemonic discourses of American masculinity operate as unquestioned truths. Ironically, despite the ubiquity of gender, race, class, and sexuality in constructing American masculinity, masculinity can be discussed without referencing these systems at all.

Collins sidestepped a direct confrontation with masculinities scholars about what is at stake in her redefinition of this core concept, but we read her as implying that theorizing a raceless masculinity (especially in the U.S. context), even just for analytical purposes, risks participating in the normalization of whiteness.

Whether one starts from gender order or the matrix of domination also has implications for theorizing femininities. Scholars often cite both Connell (1987, 1995) and Collins (1990, 2004) without reconciling the differences in their conceptualization of core concepts (e.g., Cole and Zucker 2007; Musto and McGann 2016). The implications of these different ways of thinking come into sharp relief when femininities are considered, as illustrated in Table 1. Masculinities scholarship often treats women as passive and relieves them of responsibility for oppression, at least as gendered actors.

Emphasized Femininity Versus Hegemonic Femininity

The masculinities literature has had a troubled relationship with the concept of hegemonic femininity. Citing the universality of male dominance and the limited opportunities for women to have power over other women, Connell (1987:183) stated, “There is no femininity that is hegemonic in the sense that the dominant form of masculinity is hegemonic among men.” The form of femininity most culturally valued is referred to as “emphasized” and is “defined around compliance with subordination and is oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men” (Connell 1987:187). The word *compliance* denotes passive acquiescence to the gender order. In this framework, particularly in earlier versions, femininity is treated as a static contrast to or a negation of active and dominant masculinities (Demetriou 2001). Not seeing any form of femininity as central to hegemonic power relations is a function of a monocategorical approach to gender—that is, attending only to gender relationships (among men and between men and women).

Scholars often use the concept of emphasized femininity to describe women’s compliance with gendered expectations (see e.g., Carlson 2010; Currier 2013; Paechter 2003). But it raises a troubling conundrum: Why do women invest in emphasized femininity when this leads to their own subordination? Within this framework, there is no way to conceptualize the benefits associated with women’s investments in femininity. We are left with the suggestion that women suffer from “false consciousness” (see e.g., Cowan 2000; Ringrose and Renold 2012). That is, women only invest in femininity because they internalize men’s interests while suppressing their own, failing to recognize that they have little to gain and much to lose by complying with the gender order.

Table 1. Two Traditions Conceptualizing Femininities.

	Masculinities	Intersectional Feminism
Authors	Connell, Messerschmidt, Messner	Collins, Glenn, Pyke and Johnson
Structure	Gender order	Matrix of domination
	Monocategorical	Intersectional
Concept	Emphasized femininity	Hegemonic femininity
	Compliant	Complicit
	Passive	Active

From this perspective, the only way women can demonstrate agency is to oppose, resist, or reject emphasized femininity. Rejecting emphasized femininity has been defined as an "act of renouncing powerlessness, of claiming power for oneself" (Paechter 2003:257). Indeed, when women and girls attempt to perform masculinities, they are described as accruing a small measure of the benefits available to boys and men (e.g., Boyle 2005; Halberstram 1998; Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie 2005; Reay 2001). Within a masculinities framework, there is no performance of femininity that is truly advantageous for women.

Emphasized femininity does not account for the fact that locations in the gender order are always also locations in other dimensions of power. All femininities may be subordinate to hegemonic masculinities, but some femininities play powerful roles in reproducing other forms of inequality. By allowing whiteness, for example, to remain unmarked, white women's participation in racial and other forms of inequality is rendered invisible. If gender is considered only as a penalty for otherwise advantaged women, then women can never be held fully accountable for the ways they draw on femininity to engage in harmful actions toward others. Notably, we see the dearth of femininities research relative to masculinities research as another logical consequence of constructing femininities as derivative and inconsequential.[3]

Some femininities scholars have attempted to reject the concept of emphasized femininity in favor of a more agentic conceptualization of hegemonic femininities while still operating within the gender order framework. That is, they define hegemonic femininities only (or primarily) in relation to hegemonic masculinities (see e.g., Charlebois 2011; Finley 2010; Schippers 2007; Stone and Gorga 2014) rather than (also) in relation to other femininities. The construction of race, class, and other dimensions of inequality with and through gender is unrecognized. This obscures the harms inflicted by those who mobilize hegemonic femininities to their advantage by minimizing the power they wield over others.

In *Black Sexual Politics*, Collins (2004:187) did not explain her choice to abandon "gender order" or "emphasized femininity." These concepts simply drop out:

> *All* women occupy the category of devalued Other that gives meaning to *all* masculinities. Yet, just as masculinities are simultaneously constructed in relation to one another and hierarchically related, femininities demonstrate a similar pattern. . . . Thus, within hierarchies of femininity, social categories of race, age, and sexual orientation also intersect to produce comparable categories of hegemonic, marginalized, and subordinated femininities.

Collins's definitional structure departed dramatically from Connell's—and other scholars working within a monocategorical framework—because she assumed the impossibility of separating out gender from women's other social locations. Women's positions in the matrix of domination are always necessarily gendered, raced, and classed, as well as defined by their status in terms of age, sexual orientation, and other social locations (see also Acosta 2013; Bettie 2003; Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Feinstein 2017; Garcia 2012; Mears 2011).

Collins (1990:78) indicated that "controlling images" of Black women "provide effective ideological justifications for racial oppression, the politics of gender subordination, and the economic exploitation inherent in capitalist economies." These images exist in relation to hegemonic cultural ideals about womanhood ("the cult of true womanhood"), which are used by and on behalf of some women to perpetuate domination based on race, class, gender, and other statuses. Extrapolating from Collins (2004), we offer a more general definition: *Hegemonic femininities are the most celebrated cultural ideals of womanhood in a given time and place that serve to uphold and legitimate all axes of oppression in the matrix of domination simultaneously*. These femininities justify the relative status and power of some women over other women (and some men), thus linking and locking in multiple axes of oppression. They are hegemonic in the sense that they legitimate multiple sets of unequal power relations—not just gender, as implied by Connell's (1987) concept of gender order.

Other scholars who start from an intersectional approach similarly argue that many forms of privilege—including whiteness, affluence, heterosexuality, cisgender status, nationality, citizenship status, youth, and ability status—are "baked in" to hegemonic femininities (see Acosta 2013; Adjepong 2015; Bettie 2003; Chavez and Wingfield 2018; Garcia 2012; Mears 2011; Morris 2007; Myers 2004, 2012; Wilkins 2008). Pyke and Johnson (2003) anticipated the move that Collins (2004) made in *Black Sexual Politics.* As they explained in their study of Asian American femininities, "Other axes of domination, such as race, class, sexuality, and age, mold a hegemonic femininity that is venerated and extolled in the dominant culture, and that emphasizes the superiority of some women over others, thereby privileging white upper-class women" (Pyke and Johnson 2003:35). Women who embody hegemonic femininities, therefore, are not passive victims of social structure but are instead actively complicit beneficiaries of the matrix of domination (see also Crenshaw 1989; Feinstein 2017).

Because there is no location outside of the matrix of domination for Collins, her use of marginalized and subordinated masculinities and femininities also deviated from Connell (1995). As Collins (2004:186) explained (using masculinities as an example):

> Those closest to hegemonic masculinity, predominately wealthy White men, but not exclusively so, retain the most power at the top; those men who are situated just below have greater access to White male power, yet remain marginalized (for example, working-class White men and Latino, Asian, and White immigrant men); and those males who are subordinated by both of these groups occupy the bottom (for example, Black men and men from indigenous groups).

Here, Collins explained relationships among masculinities within the matrix of domination, which necessarily also relies on race and class. Elsewhere in the text, she used this framework to discuss femininities. Consequently, marginalized femininities are those cultural ideals of womanhood that sit just below hegemonic femininities and sometimes even benefit from hegemonic femininities, while subordinated femininities (e.g., those that reflect Blackness and poverty) hold the bottom.

Intersectional feminism, in fact, is focused primarily on the femininities and experiences of women of color. This is part of the intellectual project. But processes of privilege and inequality cannot be adequately captured by only highlighting differences between subordinate and dominant groups within individual axes of domination (Choo and Ferree 2010). There are, in fact, many locations in the matrix of domination from which dominance is exercised and the matrix is upheld. Thus, intersectional feminism also draws attention to the power inherent in a "discourse of a hegemonic (White) femininity that becomes a normative yardstick for all femininities" (Collins 2004:193).

Hegemonic femininities occupy primarily privileged locations in the matrix of domination, given that those who can instantiate them are typically located on the advantaged side of most binaries. Studying these locations in the matrix of domination requires analysis at multiple levels of social structure; we might, for instance, examine how these cultural ideals of womanhood are produced, circulated, and deployed by individuals, groups, and organizations. Such a task is too expansive for any single article. In the next two sections, therefore, we focus first on the construction of hegemonic femininities as abstract cultural ideals and then on their deployment by individuals within the matrix of domination.

HEGEMONIC CULTURAL IDEALS AND THE MATRIX OF DOMINATION

We are not interested in identifying static, universal characteristics of a single unitary hegemonic femininity. Intersectional and masculinities theories, along with other gender theories, presume the political and historical construction of categories. Hegemonic femininities are always contested, variable, and constitutive of and constituted by the operation of the matrix of domination in a particular context.

Nonetheless, we offer two anchoring points. First, cultural beliefs about gender complementarity (and the naturalness of heterosexual, procreative, monogamous marriage) are widespread and frequently deployed in constructing and defending race, class, national, religious, and other social boundaries. This suggests there is something about the logic of the gender axis—and how it works across a variety of contexts—that makes it remarkably useful in weaving together multiple forms of inequality. Second, axes of domination tend to be durable over time and are increasingly global in scope. Gender scholars have, for instance, observed patterns of fluidity in gender performance but enormously resilient gender power relations (see e.g., Bridges and Pascoe 2018:254).

The Logic of Gender in the Matrix of Domination

Scholars from Collins (1990, 2004) to Ridgeway (2011, 2014) have suggested that gender as an axis of domination operates differently than race or class. Race and class boundaries are often marked by social, physical, and sometimes legal segregation. In contrast, men and women are typically expected to be intimately involved (e.g., to be sexually attracted, fall in love, and marry). Marriage usually involves coresidence and often the merger of property and kin. It is often expected to be monogamous and produce progeny that carry on an enduring legacy. Complementary masculinities and femininities are thus anchored by the presumption of cross-gender sexual desire between presumably biologically distinct men and women (Butler 1990; Schippers 2016).

Social segregation and group continuity depend on the routine (monogamous, heterosexual, procreative) pairing of men and women within class, nationality, and race (Nagel 2000, 2001; Rich 1980). For instance, the consolidation of class privilege in the hands of a few relies in part on affluent and well-educated women partnering with affluent and well-educated men (Schwartz and Mare 2005; Sweeney 2002). Mating within the imagined bounds of the nation-state and among those with legal citizenship limits the extension of benefits to "outsiders" (Nagel 2000). The construction of "racial purity" depends on the legal and social regulation of erotic pairings (Beisel and Kay 2004; Daniels 1997; Frankenberg

1993). Thus, gender complementarity serves not only to define masculinities and femininities but is often enlisted to construct class, racial, ethnic, or religious segregation. Most of the time, these boundaries are reproduced through complicity. But gender complementarity in the context of group segregation can also be violently enforced (Collins 1998).

Heightened cultural interest in feminine beauty is consistent with the naturalization of active masculine desire for women as sexual or romantic objects. What is considered beautiful in any given context are typically the forms of embodiment, adornment, and deportment that display valued sides of all relevant binaries in a given matrix of domination and thus signify complicity and support for existing power structures (Cottom 2019). Investment in "beauty" is thus a way to display investment in shared class, race, and national projects. As Collins (2004:194) noted, in the U.S. context, this means idolization of "young women with milky White skin, long blond hair, and slim figures." Not everyone who approximates cultural ideals necessarily does so with the intent of supporting these arrangements, but the fact that these ideals are virtually impossible to instantiate without effort means success at accomplishing them may be read as complicity. "Gender rebels" who reject hegemonic femininities and masculinities outright are punished (West and Zimmerman 1987)—often severely, and this is generally as much about class or race as it is about gender.

Alignment with the politics underwriting hegemonic masculinities, even when against the interests of women as a collective, is another cultural feature of hegemonic femininities. Exactly what this alignment entails varies. However, cultural ideals of womanhood build in assumptions that women will choose the "velvet glove" of "sweet persuasion" offered by men in ruling positions rather than expose the iron fist of oppression (see Jackman 1994). As Junn (2017) argued, in the United States, this has meant white women form an essential "swing vote" between white men who are solid Republican voters and voters of color (both men and women) who are solidly Democratic. Because a majority of white women typically choose to vote with white men, they "have long been a buffer protecting white males at the apex of power" (Junn 2017:346). These alignments also occur in the workplace and in community politics.

Scholars of race have done the most to recognize the centrality of gender logics and their emphasis on complementarity to racial dominance. This work investigates cultural ideals surrounding "white womanhood" and highlights the centrality of alliance with white men (Beisel and Kay 2004; Frankenberg 1993). For instance, in *White Lies*, Daniels (1997) presented the results of a content analysis of American white supremacist publications (e.g., *The Klansman*) from 1977 through 1991. She reported obsession with assurances of white women as racial patriots (and proof they were not racial traitors) through the personification of white beauty, confinement of (hetero)sexual activity to relationships with white men, production and protection of white children, sexual availability to white men, and chastity outside of the white family. Her argument underscores the centrality of white women's gender performances to the reproduction of white supremacy.

Hegemonic Femininities and Continuity

Hegemonic femininities, because they are composed of the more valued binaries in a particular context, change in sync with the matrix of domination. This means the study of hegemonic femininities is intimately tied to the study of continuities and transformations in the operation of power. To dramatically alter cultural ideals of womanhood (e.g., such that darker skin is celebrated), race, class, and other supporting axes must also undergo simultaneous changes.

The basic dimensions of axes internal to any given matrix of domination are often exceptionally durable. For example, the Black/white binary in the U.S. context persists despite undergoing different "racial formations" that reflect "distinctive links among characteristic forms of economic and political exploitation, gender-specific ideologies developed to justify Black exploitation, and African American men's and women's reactions both to the political economy and to one another" (Collins 2004:55; see also Omi and Winant's [2015] definition). As a result, the binaries feeding into hegemonic femininities are hard to challenge. Gender performances may increase in variability and the specific content of hegemonic femininities may change (e.g., what body type is most revered) without altering the general relationships between gender, race, and class.

Matrices of domination may be nested within each other or organized in a loosely hierarchical way. Local social contexts often venerate specific ideals of femininity—which may work somewhat differently across domains of social life (e.g., work, family, religion, and school) and in different places (e.g., one bar vs. another, online vs. in real life; Green 2008; Musto 2013; Pyke and Johnson 2003). Segregation along age, race, class, religion, and other lines contribute to what appear to be distinct differences in hegemonic femininities; for instance, those at play in a Midwestern college residence hall populated entirely by 18-year-old white women versus those among residents in a nursing home. But while the particularities of locally revered femininities or masculinities vary, there are some commonalities that reflect the macro conditions of power in which contexts are embedded. Across much of the United States, for instance, youth, whiteness, slenderness, affluence, able-bodiedness, extroversion, and erotic interest in men are valued.

Subcultures (e.g., goth, LGBTQ+, communities of color, religious movements, fat acceptance groups) may value femininities that run counter to hegemonic cultural ideals. These spaces serve as a form of protection and escape from mainstream social life, although the impact of alternative criteria seldom touches the outside world. Subcultures may, intentionally and unintentionally, incorporate some dominant values. Acosta (2013), for example, found that some Latina lesbians privilege respectability and feminine deportment. Even when subcultures deliberately challenge hegemonic femininities, it is often through exaggeration or refusal—tactics that may emphasize or draw attention to hegemonic ideals of womanhood.

As the operation of power shifts from local to translocal contexts, an increasingly coherent macrolevel matrix of dominance exerts pressures on local structures. Neoliberal capitalist power and white supremacy, for instance, depend on the flow of people, labor, goods, and culture across borders, putting people in the Global South in greater contact with the ideals of hegemonic femininities and masculinities in the Global North. Thus, as Mojola's (2014) study of African women and AIDS suggested, the notion of a modern "consuming woman" leads young women into sexual relationships with older men who can economically support them. The result is devastatingly high rates of HIV infection among young African women. Mojola's work indicated that the globalization of hegemonic ideals of femininity helps cement power relations between wealthy advanced democracies and developing countries, whites and (Black) Africans, the wealthy and the striving, and men and women.

Because the greatest continuity exists in relationships among axes that lock in oppression—not the highly specific content of hegemonic ideals—the study of hegemonic femininities is most usefully rooted in deployment and practice. That is, rather than exploring a laundry list of traits, we stand to gain the most from asking *how* femininities are deployed in the context of a given matrix of domination. For example, in *Dealing in Desire*, Hoang (2015) focused on how the enactment of femininities in bars catering to different groups of men cements global power dynamics. Vietnamese women sex workers assist the domestic elite in closing deals and projecting an image of Asian ascendancy to foreign investors while also helping Western businessmen recuperate failed masculinities associated with Western decline. Hoang (2015) argued that these women act as "shrewd entrepreneurs," skillfully deploying tailored femininities to advance their material needs (see also Choo 2016).

We argue that relationships among axes of oppression remain robust in part because many individuals can extract personal benefits in the matrix of domination. Our interest in this dynamic is centered on performances of femininity among those who have a great deal to gain—social actors who mostly occupy "unmarked" social categories (Choo and Ferree 2010). Thus, we now turn to an examination of the ways individual women (particularly white, heterosexual, affluent women) are positioned to deploy hegemonic femininities for personal benefit—and to the detriment of many others.

NAVIGATING THE MATRIX OF DOMINATION

Collins (2004:188) referred to locations on the advantaged side of some binaries and the disadvantaged side of others as "intermediate positions." Most locations are intermediate in this way, but the primarily privileged locations of those who can at least partially instantiate hegemonic femininities are particularly consequential. Without the participation of women who seek to perform hegemonic femininities, the matrix of domination risks collapse as hegemonic masculinities depend on the ongoing complicity of women. Gender performances oriented toward achieving hegemonic cultural ideals are not innocent; although successful performance requires women to defer to some men, motivations for doing so often involve pursuit of considerable individual and group benefits.

We will next scrutinize the actions of women who strive to achieve hegemonic femininities. We focus on the particular incentives, tactics, and consequences associated with these locations in the matrix of domination (Feinstein 2017), arguing that individual rewards, drawn from across all axes in the matrix, motivate women's attempts to embody cultural ideals of womanhood. The ability to instantiate hegemonic femininities serves as fungible currency women can strategically deploy for individual benefit—but also to secure the collective position of their social groups along race, class, and other axes. Women can dominate each other (and some men) in part by leveraging investments in hegemonic femininities.

Premiums, Taxes, and Ceilings

As Collins (1990:225) noted, all individuals navigate within the matrix of domination and derive "varying amounts of penalty and privilege from the multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone's lives." Feinstein (2017:549) built on Collins (1990) to develop the concept of "intersectional incentives," or "motives associated with the social norms and expectations which are unique to one's intersectional location and include the advantages of adhering to one or more institutions of domination and oppression." Because hegemonic femininities sit near the center of the matrix of domination, women who instantiate these cultural ideals are motivated by significant intersectional incentives.

We contend that skilled performances of hegemonic femininities confer a femininity premium to individual women. Those who strive for—but do not achieve—hegemonic femininities may also reap some benefits; their efforts may be read as evidence of good character, morality, and commitment to the project of producing cultural ideals of femininity and other identities. An intersectional approach makes it much easier to recognize the magnitude of benefits flowing from hegemonic femininity. These benefits are almost entirely obscured in monocategorical approaches that focus on women's position in relation to men. The perks of "being good at being a girl" also draw on whiteness, affluence, heterosexuality, and other axes—even though they may be packaged and interpreted primarily in terms of gender.[4]

What does a femininity premium look like? In the context of the contemporary United States, women who perform hegemonic femininities may more easily locate and secure sexual and romantic partners who have access to racial privilege, greater education, wealth, income, attractiveness, and popularity (Adler, Kless, and Adler 1992; McClintock 2014). They may have heightened ability to set the terms of sexual judgment, framing their own behaviors and attitudes as the norm by which others are measured (Armstrong et al. 2014). Men may offer these women longer-term commitments and more positive treatment (Stombler 1994; Sweeney 2014). In Willis's (1977) famous study, for instance, British working-class "lads" treated "girlfriends" (the category reserved for women with good reputations) with greater regard than other women. Performing hegemonic femininities may thus help women secure greater access to the economic and social benefits that come with marriage (Schmidt and Sevak 2006; Vespa and Painter 2011).

Successful performance of hegemonic femininities entitles (white) women to protection. Their purity and respectability are to be defended, which often involves invoking the violence of white men, the police, or other authorities. In contrast, Cottom (2019:180, 193) described the pain of learning "that black girls like me can never truly be victims of sexual predators" because "what did not qualify as rape was anything done to a black girl" (see Crenshaw 1991 on the harsher penalties for raping white vs. Black women). Notably, many of the gains of white feminism, including protections against domestic violence, increase state involvement in family life in ways that may benefit white women but have disproportionately negative effects on people of color and undocumented immigrants (Bernstein 2012; Richie 2012). Rather than the pedestal of the past, white women performing hegemonic femininities are offered a platform—provided they stay on script. They can be cruel, nasty, rude, or simply inconsiderate and then use their tears or discomfort to silence the objections of those in less powerful positions (Accapadi 2007; DiAngelo 2018).

There is also a "beauty premium" and "plainness penalty" in earnings and career success, determined in part by conformity to gendered appearance ideals (Cawley 2004; Cook and Mobbs 2018; Hamermesh and Biddle 1994). Hegemonic performances of femininity are reinforced by general expectations for women workers, who are rewarded when they are nurturing, polite, and friendly (Eagly and Carli 2003; Quadlin 2018). These traits may be particularly valued in service, care, and media-based industries (Huppatz 2006, 2009; Huppatz and Goodwin 2013). Celebrity status for women is also tightly coupled with the ability to perform hegemonic femininities.

Performance of hegemonic femininities confers power over same-gender peers. Women who sit at the top of gender hierarchies frequently serve as gatekeepers of intragender status (Mears 2011; Myers 2004; Pyke and Johnson 2003). Gatekeeper status can be institutionalized in exclusive social organizations led by women, such as sororities or junior leagues, but it can also be more informal. Because high-status women often recruit and select incoming members, they are in the position to decide to whom and on what basis inclusion should be extended (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013).

The size and scope of the femininity premium varies. In some contexts, such as when women are categorically denied control over reproduction or access to educational and work opportunities, a femininity premium may be minimal because the potential status afforded to any woman may simply be too low. Yet women who can best approximate cultural ideals of womanhood can still obtain some benefits (see e.g., Kandiyoti's [1988] discussion of hierarchies among femininities in sub-Saharan Africa, Southeast Asia, and the Muslim Middle East). In other contexts where some women—usually those with race, class, caste, or other advantages—are allowed greater freedom of movement and autonomy, hierarchies among femininities are expanded and more elaborate, resulting in a larger femininity premium.

The femininity premium may appear to be an advantage based exclusively on gender performance. We argue this is an illusion—and one that obscures the operation of other axes in the matrix of domination. For example, when people swoon over Grace Kelly or Marilyn Monroe as iconic images of feminine beauty, their whiteness is idolized as much as their femininity. White affluent U.S. women often collect their race, class, and other dividends as a result of their ability to express a particular form of femininity (see Bettie 2003). If they cannot demonstrate at least some effort toward achieving hegemonic femininities, they do not get all the rewards otherwise available to those in their same race and class groups. Thus, the privileges of whiteness flow to women, in part, through performances of hegemonic femininities.

Women have differing abilities to instantiate hegemonic femininities; knowledge, access to resources, materiality, and identities matter (see Bridges 2009). For instance, it may often be easier for bodies classified as female to perform femininities and bodies classified as male to perform masculinities; these individuals receive a lifetime of training given that gender socialization as either a girl or a boy typically begins at birth. Because the feminine beauty ideal of blondeness is racialized—privileging lighter hair, lighter skin, and blue/green eyes—many Black and Brown women are categorically excluded (Collins 2004; Cottom 2019; DuCille 1996; Hunter 2007). Blondeness is a potentially expensive and time-consuming achievement; it is not a natural state for most adult women (with a few geographic exceptions) and thus also flags class privilege.

Hegemonic femininities require a demonstration of "respectability," but some women are routinely at the wrong end of sexual respectability politics. In the United States, affluent white women, along with affluent white men, often stereotype Black, Latina, and working-class women and girls as promiscuous and hypersexual (see Bettie 2003; Collins 1990; Garcia 2012). The interactional styles of affluent white women become coded as "classy" and styles of those who are less economically privileged or nonwhite as "trashy" (Armstrong et al. 2014; Bettie 2003). As a respondent in Garcia's (2012:100–101) study of Latina youth noted, "Regardless of what we do, white people are always gonna talk shit about us [Latinas] . . . being ghetto and baby mommas." In contrast, young, white, blonde girls and women become the cultural ambassadors of purity and are coded as the "correct" objects of affluent white men's affections.

As noted earlier, affluent white heterosexual women often consolidate privilege by mating with heterosexual men in the same social categories. Alignment with elite, white, heterosexual men may be politically, psychologically, or socially impossible for other women—such as when it requires negating one's community and personhood or necessitates unwanted sexual interactions. For some groups, it may be difficult to gain access to these men in any way other than as servants or laborers. Data on interracial marriage patterns in the United States, for instance, indicate that only around 12 percent of white men marry someone who is not white—and white men very rarely marry Black women (Livingston and Brown 2017).

This does not mean, however, that the ability to perform hegemonic femininities is reducible to category membership. People may cross into the other side of dualisms by "passing"—making it more possible (at least temporarily) to approximate hegemonic femininities. Furthermore, not all affluent white women successfully perform this style of femininity. Some women of color may come very close—despite the ways the game is rigged against them. For instance, Mears (2010:22) argued that although the modeling industry is organized around "a narrow definition of femininity in white terms," being white is no guarantee of securing a spot in an elite agency. Few women from any race or class location can achieve the exacting physical criteria required by agency gatekeepers. Nor do the standards entirely preclude the success of a few women of color who embody white beauty standards, whom she referred to as “high-end ethnics.” As a stylist in her study explained:

> Basically, high-end ethnic means, the only thing that is not white about you is that you are black. Everything else, you are totally white. You have the same body as a white girl. You have the same aura, you have the same the old, aristocratic atmosphere about you, but your skin is dark. (pg.39)

We can also observe variation in the relative ability to exemplify cultural ideals of womanhood among individuals who share the same social categories. Intersectional scholars of color, in fact, remind us not to ignore intracategorical complexity (Anzaldúa 1987; Crenshaw 1991; hooks 1984; see reviews in Hancock 2007; McCall 2005; Prins 2006). Differential success in embodying hegemonic femininities creates hierarchies *among* rich white women living in New York City and *among* affluent Black women in Atlanta, as the competitions detailed in the *Real Housewives* television series demonstrate. Women of color are often judged (and judge each other) on their relative abilities to meet racialized standards of beauty central to hegemonic femininities (Hunter 2002, 2007). The tight but inexact relationship between hegemonic femininities and categorical membership encourages all women to strive for these ideals.

The potential to access a femininity premium is a particularly strong motivator for women who are positioned for success. Skilled performances of hegemonic femininities provide access to an array of benefits accrued along multiple axes. This is why white affluent heterosexual women, in particular, are so often complicit in the matrix of domination. They are not cultural dopes, engaged in passive accommodation, or victims of false consciousness, but actors strategically navigating for advantage. The matrix of domination endures in part because many women and men, as individuals, have something to gain from it.

Tactics and Trades

At this point, we turn to navigation of the matrix of domination—that is, how people act in the effort to access greater premiums and evade penalties. Feinstein (2017:549) referred to these actions as “intersectional tactics.” Intersectional tactics often involve complex trades both within and across systems of oppression. The trades that are available and enticing are predicated on the degree to which individual and collective standing in the axes comprising the matrix of domination align. We argue that some women strategically use hegemonic femininities to make an array of personally and collectively beneficial trades as they move within the matrix of domination.

Table 2 offers a visual. The columns represent some axes in the matrix of domination in operation in the context of the contemporary United States. The “individual” row attends to the overall sum of “penalty or privilege” accrued by an affluent white heterosexual woman when she manages to instantiate a hegemonic femininity; the “collective” row examines the overall sum for people who share her respective social categories. Note the exceptionally large number of positives in this table, indicating a high degree of alignment across axes and between individual and collective benefits.

The femininity premium, as discussed in the prior section, is represented by the row of plusses along the individual benefits row. Here we can envision the constitutive (race, class, gender, and [hetero]sexual) benefits that often flow through performances of hegemonic femininities. For women who sit on the advantaged sides of all dualisms, there is no tension at the level of individual benefits. That is, across all axes, women’s individual benefits exceed their costs when performing hegemonic femininities.

Table 2. Penalties and Privileges of Hegemonic Femininities.

	Gender	Race	Class	Sexuality
Individual level	+	+	+	+
Collective level	−	+	+	+

We do not deny that there may be individual costs—what we call a *femininity tax*—associated with performing culturally celebrated femininities. This tax can include a reduced sense of ownership over one's own sexuality, reliance on men's wealth, physical and psychological damage, and disinvestment in intellectual development (Bordo 1993; Rubin [1975] 2011; Skelton, Francis, and Read 2010; Tolman 2012) As the notion of a tax suggests, however, only a portion of the overall benefits is surrendered.[5] Because hegemonic femininities do not hold the most elevated positions in a matrix of dominance, the advantages that can be gained by performing them are also capped by a *femininity ceiling*. Cultural expectations associated with the highest power, income, or status positions often explicitly preclude the performance of hegemonic femininities. For instance, it may be difficult, if not impossible, to become the president or CEO of a company while strictly adhering to cultural ideals of womanhood. The existence of a femininity ceiling and a tax, however, does not negate or overshadow the existence of a sizable femininity premium.

Although rarely recognized, women performing hegemonic femininity also align personal and collective benefits on all axes, with the single exception of gender. They can simultaneously improve their individual positioning along *all* axes of the matrix and secure the collective position of the dominant social groups to which they belong. Achieving this high degree of alignment is possible through the embodiment of cultural ideals of womanhood. The women of the Klu Klux Klan, for example, maintain what Blee (1991:31) called a "feminine" style of political involvement—that is, they are "politically active without 'sacrifice of that womanly dignity and modesty we all admire.'" This allows them to be personally involved, rather than on the sidelines, in the racist political activities of men in their lives, which brings them status in their communities. At the same time, through their Klan involvement, these women help secure the ongoing power of whites in U.S. society—a racial group to which their family, friends, and community members typically belong. Here we see how adhering to hegemonic feminine ideals also helps uphold collective racial benefits obtained by white women.

Women who are complicit in upholding the matrix of domination must concede on one dimension: They gain individual benefits while supporting gendered forms of oppression that disadvantage women as a group. The tradeoff of individual benefits for collective subordination within the gender axis is captured by the concept of the "patriarchal bargain." Kandiyoti (1988) explained that women conform to men's domination as a means of accessing financial, psychological, social, or other personal benefits (see also Schwalbe et al. [2000] on "trading power for patronage"). Men do not make this concession. Performances of hegemonic masculinity only help to reinforce their collective advantages in the matrix of domination. Indeed, men who embody hegemonic masculinities in a matrix of domination always operate from a position of both individual and collective advantage. Their table is filled with plusses.

It is no mystery why men strive to embody hegemonic masculinities. Table 2, however, makes it far easier to understand why many women try to approximate hegemonic femininities that hurt women as a group. Not only can they obtain a femininity premium that outweighs any femininity tax, but women who embody hegemonic femininities also ensure that virtually every other collective to which they belong will be advantaged by their actions.

Most women, however, occupy positions within the matrix that reflect a complex mix of plusses and minuses. Women may attempt to "trade on" individual or collective advantages in one axis to boost premiums or reduce taxes in others. Occasionally, women may, consciously or not, draw on their abilities to approximate hegemonic femininities to compensate for class or race disadvantage. Personal mobility projects often involve these kinds of trades because women who can do so may opt to affiliate with affluent, white men. Investments in hegemonic femininities may help women improve their own class or race standing—but in ways that do not challenge (and may even uphold) the axes of oppression that make painful trades necessary.

In the contemporary United States, racial privilege may be enough to claim (or attempt to claim) premiums in class and gender. For example, white women with relatively limited privilege on other dimensions may call the police on Black men in their surroundings. These women reaffirm their racial privilege by demonstrating their ability to invoke the state against people of color. In doing so, they are also making claims involving class (by positing themselves as upstanding community members with authority) and gender (as women whose femininities are worthy of "protection" from imagined threats). Thus, they attempt to use individual and collective racial advantages to gain individual advantages in gender and class—while causing harm to people of color.

The extent to which people are conscious of the trades they make varies considerably. What is thinkable in a particular social location frequently restricts strategies in ways that obscure complicity with the matrix of domination. For instance, upper-class white young women seldom conceive of the decision to restrict childbearing to a heterosexual monogamous marriage with an individual of the same race, class, educational, and religious group as reproducing social inequalities along multiple axes: It just seems like the "normal," "right," or "appropriate" thing to do.

Some people refuse to deploy the privileges associated with their location in the matrix for personal gain. For example, individuals who identify as gender nonbinary or gender queer reject gender categories and thus the possibility of a femininity premium (see Darwin 2017). People may also use privilege to intervene on behalf of others—such as when white women join Black Lives Matter protests to reduce violence against Black bodies. Few people do these things, in part because few recognize their own privilege. It is much easier to recognize benefits others receive on the basis of their social locations (Donadey 2002).

Some individuals may be able to identify their collective advantages in the matrix of domination (e.g., as men or white people). However, recognizing the individual advantages accrued along axes that otherwise disadvantage one's group is more challenging (e.g., light-skinned Latinas benefiting from racial hierarchies). For people in more middling intermediate or near subordinate positions in the matrix of domination, it often seems necessary to leverage the few plusses one has to mitigate injustices on other dimensions.

Intersectional Domination

Feinstein (2017:549) argued that consequences flow from intersectional tactics: "Intersectional consequences" include "varying degrees of harm or disadvantage to subordinate groups, which are unique to each group's intersectional location" and the "reproduction of institutions of oppression." Both can occur when members of subordinate groups act in ways that may be individually advantageous (or expedient) but negative for their group. We now focus on a particular consequence of how women navigate the matrix of domination—the potential for *intersectional domination*.

Intersectional domination results when individuals use their intersectional location to exercise power over other individuals. The more benefits individuals accrue from their social location in the matrix of domination, the more potential they have to effect intersectional domination. Thus, as masculinities research amply documents, self-interested actions by the men who successfully achieve hegemonic masculinities are destructive for everyone else attempting to negotiate for position in the matrix of domination (Connell 1987; Messerschmidt 2016).

However, individuals do not have to hold the position of highest power in all axes to use their position as a resource. Women who instantiate hegemonic femininities can draw on their intersectional location, including their relative individual advantages in gender, to subjugate not only other women but some men as well. In doing so, individual women work against the interests of women in general but toward their personal advancement, which, in combination with the advancement of racial or class-based goals and interests, provides substantial individual rewards. Thus, as women pursue a femininity premium, they reinscribe the matrix of domination.

We started this article by examining the gendered nature of white women's racism. We demonstrated that hegemonic femininities crystalize women's advantages across multiple axes in the matrix of domination. We will now show that affluent white heterosexual women often weaponize their performances of femininity against others—in part to shore up their own position in the matrix. We offer a historical example that has gained fresh attention as an illustration of women's intersectional domination as well as a more contemporary depiction of the same dynamic.

In 1955, Emmett Till, a 14-year-old Black boy, was lynched by two white men on the word of a white woman, Carolyn Bryant, who claimed Till grabbed and verbally harassed her. Six decades later, Bryant finally admitted her incendiary allegations were false (Tyson 2017). At the time, Bryant was performing hegemonic femininity: She was a white woman married to a white man, a co-owner of a store in the Mississippi Delta region, and pictures suggest she was attentive to appearance and beauty norms of the time. This was essential to her ability to make credible claims against Till and to the horrific consequences of her actions. On the stand, Bryant claimed, "I was just scared to death"—a statement that incited white men, including her husband, to defend her honor against a mythical threat (Weller 2017). As a white woman in 1950s Mississippi, Bryant's rights and privileges, relative to white men, were constrained. Yet, the power that she, and others like her, had to instigate white men's violence was derived from the status of Bryant's hegemonic femininity, and it ended in Till's brutal murder.

The intersectional dynamics at play in the Emmett Till case remain relevant. Jordan Peele's 2017 horror film *Get Out* offers biting commentary on race, class, and gender in the contemporary United States. In the movie, a Black man, Chris Washington, who is dating a young, attractive, wealthy white woman, Rose Armitage, is invited to visit her family on their large estate. Chris's best friend, Rod, alerts him of the dangers that white women like Rose present to Black men—but Chris fails to heed this warning.

On the way, an accident with a deer leads to an interaction with a white police officer. Rose and the officer initially engage in a friendly conversation, until the officer asks for Chris's identification, even though he was not driving. As Chris moves to comply, Rose refuses. (We eventually discover this is to avoid a paper trail linking Chris to her parents' estate.) She tells the police officer "fuck that" and "that's bullshit"—while smiling and looking down. Rose uses her knowledge that as an affluent, young, attractive, white, heterosexual woman, she can get away with using this language to a police officer. Her evident pleasure in escalating the situation disconcerts both Chris and the police officer and puts Chris in danger. The disconnect between her aggressive language and her submissive interactional style conveys both the power and the hypocrisy of hegemonic (white) femininities—and the risks inherent in trusting white women.

As is gradually revealed, Rod's advice was right on target. Rose's job in her family is to use her femininity to lure Black men to the estate. She uses these men for her sexual and romantic pleasure and then offers them to her parents, who surgically alter Black bodies into servitude. Rose's position in the matrix of domination provides her unique access to inflict harm on her victims in a way that is distinctly and simultaneously raced, classed, and gendered.

One consequence of intersectional domination, as illustrated in *Get Out* and the Emmett Till case, is how damage to the bodies, status, and well-being of people of color results from privileged white women's efforts to access a femininity premium and advance their own position. The potential for domination is derived from women's relative degree of status and power, not just through race, class, or sexuality but also through gender. Indeed, femininity helps bind these axes together.

What makes particular performances of femininity hegemonic is the simultaneous reproduction of multiple structures of oppression. Gender as a system is reinforced when women claim a pure and respectable femininity in need of protection and use femininity in service of white men's projects. At the same time, women's actions contribute to the endorsement and support of racial meanings, practices, and structures that elevate white men and women to the top, and relegate Black men and women to the bottom, of racial hierarchies (see Omi and Winant [2015] on "racial projects"). In defining Black men's masculinities as a threat to white femininities, or something to be controlled, white women sustain both their purity and privilege in terms of gender and race simultaneously.

Intersectional domination also occurs around social class. As Ostrander (1984:91) discussed in her analysis of upper-class women, "[E]xclusivity as a way of life means that some people are 'in' and others are 'out.'" Affluent women (who are often but not always white [see Lacy 2007]) actively police the boundaries of social class to keep out those who would, as Myers (2004:18) put it, "pollute the image. Cloaked in gentility and politeness, ladies patrol their hallowed dominion." Ladies are often active in shaping community dynamics. They deploy ideas about motherhood and concerns about protecting their children to push the homeless out of city boundaries and to keep poor Black and Brown children out of their schools—and if that fails, out of their children's "gifted and talented" classrooms (see Lewis and Diamond 2015). These actions, while indirect, are an exercise of classed, raced, and gendered power over the lives of others.

Examples of intersectional domination suggest varying degrees of intentionality with regard to the harm others experience as a result. However, as Collins (1990) and other feminists of color have argued, structural location can make it difficult—although not impossible—for individuals to see how efforts to advantage the self or their group come at the expense of others. Claiming benefits in the name of gender, for instance, can mask the ways women's actions may uphold oppression along other axes. Even well-intentioned social movement activists can contribute to intersectional domination when they focus too intently on a single form of oppression. Crenshaw (2016), for example, used the term "intersectional failure" to describe how feminist and antiracist activists have failed to combat ongoing violence against women of color.

This is why Collins (2004:200) argued that a more progressive Black sexual justice politics cannot rely on the subordination of anyone within the matrix of domination. If everyone is working to leverage the benefits they may access within the matrix, people who are disadvantaged along all or most axes will be subject to near constant intersectional domination. Dismantling the matrix of domination thus requires greater understanding of how the vast majority of individuals operate in intermediate positions within the matrix. Their efforts to seek advantage come at the cost of others and strengthen the ties between axes of oppression, reinforcing the system as a whole.

CONCLUSION

This article originated with a puzzle: The young, privileged, white American women at the center of our prior research (see e.g., Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Armstrong et al. 2014; Hamilton 2007) benefited from the ways in which they embodied and deployed femininity, yet little gender theory offered tools for recognizing such rewards. Far too slowly, we came to see that an intersectional perspective provided the framework and concepts necessary to identify these benefits. Women striving to approximate hegemonic cultural ideals of femininity are actively complicit in reproducing a matrix of domination, receiving individual and collective advantages through their successful efforts.

It has been nearly 30 years since the publication of *Black Feminist Thought*. Yet, most gender scholarship, even much research that claims to be intersectional, does not fully reckon with the insights of intersectional theory. For example, the 2018 edited volume *Gender Reckonings: New Social Theory and Research* begins with the concept of gender order. The editors acknowledge that intersectionality is important (Messerschmidt et al. 2018), but most of the essays take a monocategorical approach, failing to cite Collins or other feminist scholars of color. This is not just an issue of failing to acknowledge a major sociological thinker. It illustrates that the core theoretical contributions of intersectionality scholarship are incorporated thinly or not at all.

Going forward, masculinities and femininities research will need to grapple with this foundational shift in thinking, which challenges the original work of Connell (1987, 1995), on which so much scholarship has built. It is not possible to simply add an intersectional "patch" to the gender order framework. Instead, scholars might usefully pause, read (from front to back) the intersectional feminist theory developed primarily by scholars of color (e.g., Collins 1990, 2004; Collins and Bilge 2016; Crenshaw 1991, 2016; Glenn 2000; Pyke and Johnson 2003—and many more), and see how it is extended and developed in a growing body of intersectional research (e.g., Acosta 2013; Adjepong 2015; Bettie 2003; Garcia 2012; Hoang 2015; Lopez 2003; Mears 2011; Mojola 2014; Morris 2007; Wingfield 2009).

Our article contributes to this broader project. As Choo and Ferree (2010) articulated, scholars rarely apply an intersectional framework to the study of people who hold positions of relative power in the matrix of domination. We offer the concept of the femininity premium to describe the wide array of personal benefits that flow to women who can approximate culturally valued performances of femininity that are as raced, classed, and [hetero] sexualized as they are gendered. Women who are white, affluent, heterosexual, and cisgender are in the best position to perform these femininities, which often help shore up group advantages. Women's efforts to navigate for personal and group gain help uphold the matrix of domination. When these women leverage their privileged intersectional locations to exercise power over others, they engage in forms of intersectional domination that have damaging consequences for people of color, in particular.

Without grounding our theoretical work in an intersectional approach, there is much we would have missed. The role that cultural ideals of womanhood play in binding axes of oppression, the costly tactics women in powerful positions use to navigate the matrix of domination, and women's role in upholding multiple forms of oppression are all obscured. Indeed, without an intersectional approach, it is difficult, if not impossible, to recognize cultural ideals of womanhood and efforts to achieve these ideals as tools of oppression wielded by some women for personal gain. Given these insights, this article underscores the need for scrutiny not only of multiply marginalized locations in the matrix of domination but also of locations that are primarily privileged.

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NOTES

1. Urban Dictionary offers two definitions for "Miss Ann": "1. Historical—White mistress of a slave plantation or any white woman of authority in the southern United States during slavery and the Jim Crow era. 2. Current—Derogatory term for any difficult, bossy or perceived racist/bigoted white woman."
2. Whether or not to capitalize racial groups is a political decision. We elect to capitalize *Black* to emphasize the political agency, collective identity, and solidarity of African Americans in a racist society. White supremacists capitalize *white* to emphasize white racial solidarity. To emphatically reject the notion of whiteness as a collective identity or source of pride, we do not capitalize it. However, we recognize and support the choice of critical race scholars who capitalize *white* to highlight the ubiquity of white participation—consciously and unconsciously—in projects of white racial domination.
3. Scholarship has developed in a lopsided fashion—with a burgeoning masculinities literature juxtaposed against an anemic femininities literature (see also Finley 2010; Pyke and Johnson 2003; Schippers 2007). A search of the *Sociological Abstracts* database, for instance, suggests there were more than three times the number of articles focused solely on masculinities as there were articles focused solely on femininities published between 1953 and 2019.
4. The femininity premium rarely, if ever, equals the benefits men accrue in approximating hegemonic masculinities. Connell (1987, 1995) described a patriarchal dividend that includes wealth, security, respect, autonomy, authority, and sexual access to women viewed as desirable. The patriarchal dividend is not just gendered but also raced, classed, and (hetero)sexualized. It draws on, for instance, what Du Bois ([1935] 2017; see also Roediger 1999) referred to as the *psychological wage of whiteness*—benefits that are more than monetary and depend on the devaluation of Blackness. This wage motivates whites to reinforce and uphold racial boundaries in their performances of gender.
5. Furthermore, the matrix of domination taxes everyone, even men collecting a patriarchal dividend, who may, for example, be forced to restrict emotional expression ("real men don't cry") or fail to seek help when needed (Haenfler 2004; Messner 1992; Nixon 2009).

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