

# Colonialism and sexuality

GEORGE PAUL MEIU

Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, United States

Colonialism and sexuality represent entangled historical processes that tie together matters of economy and intimacy, politics and pleasure, reformist interventions and carnal desires. Broadly construed, colonialism refers to the expansion and maintenance of the sovereignty of one group of people over another. Anthropologists and historians of sexuality, however, most often use “colonialism” to refer more specifically to the implications of the conquest, pacification, and control of American, Asian, African, and Pacific territories and populations by Western European states. This specific instance of colonialism began in the sixteenth century with the “discovery” of new lands and peoples, and their subsequent annexation by a growing network of commerce controlled by Europe. In addition to commerce, a strong emphasis on reforming the minds and bodies of the natives gradually became a central dimension of colonialism. Starting at the beginning of the nineteenth century, colonial administrators and missionaries increasingly strove to transform the lives of colonial subjects so that they would desire the moral and material goods of “civilization,” commodity consumption, and Christianity. Certainly, the various agents of the empire—traders, administrators, missionaries, and settlers, among others—held different, often conflicting, ambitions and ideological motives. Nevertheless, they operated with relatively similar frameworks of racial and cultural Otherness. Informed at times by the Christian rhetoric of paganism, at times by scientific theories of evolutionism, colonials saw their subjects respectively as “heathens,” “degenerate races,” or, more nostalgically, as “noble savages.”

Sexuality represented a central domain of colonial imagination and intervention through which various social actors, who were involved in the politics of the empire, constructed and contested arguments about race and culture, difference and

sameness, superiority and inferiority, morality and indecency. Most scholars of colonialism do not take sexuality to be an unquestionably universal bodily realm or a biological given of human existence. Rather, drawing on the work of Michel Foucault (1926–1984), they take sexuality to refer to a modern domain of discourse that posits such a universal, biological realm in the human body in order to serve the purposes of the disciplinary and regulatory power of the modern state. Foucault (1978) argues that, from the nineteenth century, in Western Europe, the desires and pleasures derived largely from the genital realm came to be classed together as “sexual” and treated as natural objects of knowledge. In so doing, discourse named and classified sexual types, such as the homosexual, the hermaphrodite, and others, thus enabling modes of control over bodies and populations. In this way, Foucault argues, modernity *produced* sexuality as an effect of its new forms and figurations of power. The expansion of Western European colonial powers throughout the nineteenth century offered scientists and moralists an important source of “knowledge,” with which to describe, classify, and eventually reform the various intimate practices and desires of non-European populations. Deemed sexual, such practices and desires fed the colonial imagination about other peoples and places, and offered a source of moral legitimacy to colonial reforms.

The language of sexuality played a central ideological role in the making of empire. By classifying the intimate desires and bodily pleasures of the colonized as “sex,” colonials could prove that these deviated from bourgeois standards of morality and thus required their “enlightened” intervention and reform. For example, in the pre-colonial kingdom of Buganda in East Africa, intimate relations between the king and his male pages represented an important mode of asserting political obedience. As missionaries reconfigured these intimacies under the generic category of the “sexual” and associated them with the Christian notion of “sin,” some pages began to refuse yielding to what seemed now to be their

king's "unnatural desires." Consequently, in 1886, the king burnt 30 pages alive on a pyre. Neville Hoad (2007) reads these historical events to suggest that the way in which missionaries recoded the significance of bodily intimacies as "sex" gradually eroded political loyalties to the African king and legitimized the "necessity" of British paternalism. Here, reorganizing African intimacies, desires, and pleasures under the generic notion of "sexuality" of the Euro-American bourgeoisie represented an ideological mechanism of colonial power.

Colonial representations of so-called "native" sexualities used a wide variety of textual and graphic motifs to depict the carnal desires of the colonized as devious, whether excessive or underdeveloped. Deeply fascinated with the bodies and sexual practices of racial and ethnic Others, metropolitan scientists and popular audiences read oversized genitalia, protruding buttocks, and large breasts to be iconic of an inherent hypersexuality in colonized men and women. The case of Saartjie Baartman, the so-called "Hottentot Venus," is suggestive in this regard. Born and raised among the Khoisan of South Africa sometime before 1790, Baartman sailed for England in 1810. There, her Dutch "master" exhibited her as a prototype of a primitive African woman in so-called "freak shows." Her body was to speak to large audiences of the savage sexuality of Africa. After Baartman's death in France in 1815, her body was bought and dissected by scientists and later exhibited at the Musée national d'histoire naturelle in Paris (Gilman 1989; cf. Magubane 2001). Subjected to a white (male) gaze, the black female body came under colonial control.

Similarly, colonial iconography depicted the conquest of foreign lands as a sexual conquest by European men of the non-European female bodies. Anne McClintock (1995:1–4) describes a map drawn by a Portuguese trader, Jose de Silvestre, in 1590, and reproduced by Henri R. Haggard in his memoir. The map depicts the trajectory to the treasure chambers of the King Solomon's mines in South Africa as a journey across a female bodily shape. The male explorer must pass between the "breasts" to eventually find the treasure in the "vagina." The symbolic moment of penetration serves here as a metaphoric representation of the colonial conquest.

And if colonial representations often carried negative messages about the sexualities of the colonized, they often also fueled erotic fantasies through which metropolitan audiences could imagine "paradises" devoid of the constraining sexual norms of the European bourgeoisie. Since the time of Captain Cook, for example, the Pacific Islands were imagined as spaces of sexual freedom (Wallace 2003).

The notions of sex and sexuality also offered a vocabulary for drawing and policing boundaries of intimacy between races, tribes, ethnic groups, or cultures. Most significantly, the seeming fragility of boundaries of race sparked deep anxieties among authorities in the colonies and in the metropole. Eugenicists and proponents of the "degeneracy theory" posited that miscegenation (sexual reproduction between members of different races) would weaken the white race, which was presumed to be superior to other races. In various colonial contexts, at particular moments in time, the danger of miscegenation informed radical legal interventions into the intimate domains of domesticity, family, and sexual life. Ann Stoler (2002) shows how, for example, by the end of the nineteenth century, in the Dutch colony of the West Indies, colonial authorities tolerated relationships between Dutch men and local concubines, as these allowed them to avoid the costs of bringing Dutch women to the colony. With the rise of the number of *metis* children, however, the authorities had to face the threatening possibility of the blurring of the divide between ruler and ruled. As a result, by the 1920s, European women were encouraged to migrate to the colonies, to marry Dutch men, to give birth, and to raise their children to become "Dutch" (Stoler 2002). It was thus through sex that racial boundaries were both threatened and (re)traced (see also Nagel 2003; Stallybrass and White 1986).

Colonial reforms of bodies and polities, economic production and social reproduction also gave rise to new forms of intimacy, desire, and pleasure, as well as to new sexual subject positions (e.g., Ghosh 2006; Sigal 2000). Luise White (1990) shows how, with the rise of male labor migration in colonial Kenya, there was a simultaneous rise in female prostitution in the cities. Various types of prostitution emerged, including streetwalkers (*watembezi*), prostitutes who invited clients to their rooms (*malaya*), and others who called out

to potential clients from the doorsteps of their homes (*wazi-wazi*). In the absence of pimps, some of these women became powerful landlords in the city. White shows that authorities, at times, tolerated prostitution for it was of strategic importance in maintaining a low cost of labor in the colony. By maintaining prostitution in town, the colonial government could provide male labor migrants with the “comforts of home” and encourage them to keep their wives and children in their rural homes, where they subsisted on agriculture rather than the subsidies of the state. In the mines of southern Africa, so-called “boy-wives” (young men who entered into domestic and sexual relationships with older male wage laborers) performed a similar function. Same-sex relationships substituted here sex and kinship for male laborers, while sustaining a cyclical system of labor migration (Epprecht 2004).

Sexuality played an important role, among other things, in the representation of the colonized Other, in the drawing and policing of racial, ethnic, and cultural boundaries, and in the ways in which colonial subjects came to produce livelihoods and imagine futures. Yet the story is not over. The historical legacies of colonial sexual politics continue to shape the lived realities of postcolonials, whether through global imaginaries of exotic bodies in sex tourism and pornography, through racialized notions of excessive sexualities in developmental and health discourses, or through arguments that legitimize the unequal distribution of rights and citizenship by referencing sexual difference.

SEE ALSO: Discursive Construction of Sexuality; Eugenics and Sexology; Globalization; Medicalization of Sexuality; Race and Sexology; Social Construction Theory

## REFERENCES

- Epprecht, Mark. 2004. *Hungochani: The History of Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*. Montreal: McGill-Queen University Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1978. *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, Vol. 1. New York: Vintage.
- Ghosh, Durba. 2006. *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gilman, Sander L. 1985. “Black Bodies, White Bodies: Toward an Iconography of Female Sexuality in Late Nineteenth-Century Art, Medicine and Literature.” *Critical Inquiry*, 12(1): 204–242.
- Hoad, Neville. 2007. *African Intimacies: Race, Homosexuality, and Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Magubane, Zine. 2001. “Which Bodies Matter? Feminism, Poststructuralism, Race, and the Curious Theoretical Odyssey of the ‘Hottentot Venus.’” *Gender and Society*, 15(6): 816–834.
- McClintock, Anne. 1995. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. New York: Routledge.
- Nagel, Joane. 2003. *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Sigal, Pete. 2000. *From Moon Goddesses to Virgins: The Colonization of Yucatecan Maya Sexual Desire*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Sallybrass, Peter, and Allon White. 1986. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Stoler, Ann Laura. 2002. *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Wallace, Lee. 2003. *Sexual Encounters: Pacific Texts, Modern Sexualities*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- White, Luise. 1990. *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

## FURTHER READINGS

- Aldrich, Robert. 2003. *Colonialism and Homosexuality*. New York: Routledge.
- Fanon, Franz. 2008 [1952]. *Black Skin, White Masks*. New York: Grove Press.
- Lyons, Andrew P., and Harriet Lyons, eds. 2011. *Sexualities in Anthropology: A Reader*. Oxford: Wiley Blackwell.
- Najamabadi, Afsaneh. 2005. *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stoler, Ann. 1995. *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Thomas, Greg. 2007. *The Sexual Demon of Colonial Power: Pan-African Embodiment and Erotic Schemes of Empire*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.