Bernard Cohn

Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India

Historical anthropologist Bernard Cohn, whose work has focused mainly on colonial India, has been a major influence on many younger practitioners of 'critical colonial studies' and a 'new imperial history'. Here, in the Introduction to his book Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge, he summarises many of his key arguments on the relationship between colonial knowledge and power.

Stephen Howe

In the premodern state, in Europe as elsewhere, power was made visible through theatrical displays, in the form of processions, progresses, royal entries, coronations, funerals, and other rituals that guaranteed the well-being and continued power of the rulers over the ruled. The theater of power was managed by specialists (priests and ritual preceptors, historians and bards, artists and artisans) who maintained the various forms of knowledge required.

From the eighteenth century onward, European states increasingly made their power visible not only through ritual performance and dramatic display, but through the gradual extension of 'officializing' procedures that established and extended their capacity in many areas. They took control by defining and classifying space, making separations between public and private spheres; by recording transactions such as the sale of property; by counting and classifying their populations, replacing religious institutions as the registrar of births, marriages, and deaths; and by standardizing languages and scripts. The state licensed some activities as legitimate and suppressed others as immoral or unlawful. With the growth of public education and its rituals, it fostered official beliefs in how things are and how they ought to be. The schools became the crucial civilizing institutions and sought to produce moral and productive citizens. Finally, nation states came to be seen as the natural embodiments of history, territory, and society.
The establishment and maintenance of these nation states depended upon determining, codifying, controlling, and representing the past. The documentation that was involved created and normalized a vast amount of information that formed the basis of their capacity to govern. The reports and investigations of commissions, the compilation, storage, and publication of statistical data on finance, trade, health, demography, crime, education, transportation, agriculture, and industry—these created data requiring as much exegetical and hermeneutical skill to interpret as an arcane Sanskrit text.

The process of state building in Great Britain, seen as a cultural project, was closely linked with its emergence as an imperial power, and India was its largest and most important colony. It is not just that the personnel who governed India were British, but the projects of state building in both countries—documentation, legitimation, classification, and bounding, and the institutions therewith—often reflected theories, experiences, and practices worked out originally in India and then applied in Great Britain, as well as vice versa. Many aspects of metropolitan documentation projects were first developed in India. For example, the Indian civil service provided some of the models for the development of the Home services. Conversely, the universities and public schools in Victorian Great Britain were the factories in which the old aristocracy was associated with the new middle class, and new governing classes for the empire were produced. These models were exported to India and the other colonies to produce loyal governing elites. And the central symbol of the British state and the focus of national loyalty, the Crown, was reworked in the second half of the nineteenth century in relation to India and the rest of the empire. A guiding assumption in my research on the British conquest of India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been that metropole and colony have to be seen in a unitary field of analysis. In India the British entered a new world that they tried to comprehend using their own forms of knowing and thinking. There was widespread agreement that this society, like others they were governing, could be known and represented as a series of facts. The form of these facts was taken to be self-evident, as was the idea ‘that administrative power stemmed from the efficient use of these facts.’

What were these ‘facts’ whose collection lay at the foundation of the modern nation state? To the educated Englishman of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the world was knowable through the senses, which could record the experience of a natural world. This world was generally believed to be divinely created, knowable in an empirical fashion, and constitutive of the sciences through which would be revealed the laws of Nature that governed the world and all that was in it. In coming to India, they unknowingly and unwittingly invaded and conquered not only a territory but an epistemological space as well. The ‘facts’ of this space did not exactly correspond to those of the invaders. Nevertheless, the British believed they could explore and conquer this space through translation: establishing correspondence could make the unknown and the strange knowable.

The first step was evidently to learn the local languages. ‘Classical’ Persian, Arabic, and Sanskrit as well as the currently spoken ‘vernacular’ languages were understood to be the prerequisite form of knowledge for all others, and the first educational institutions that the British established in India were to teach their own officials Indian languages. The knowledge of languages was necessary to issue commands, collect taxes, maintain law and order—and to create other forms of knowledge about the people they were ruling. This knowledge was to enable the British to classify, categorize, and bound the vast social world that was India so that it could be controlled. These imperatives, elements in the larger colonial project, shaped the ‘investigative modalities’ devised by the British to collect the facts.
An investigative modality includes the definition of a body of information that is needed, the procedures by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, its ordering and classification, and then how it is transformed into usable forms such as published reports, statistical returns, histories, gazetteers, legal codes, and encyclopedias. Some of the investigative modalities of the colonial project are quite general, such as historiography and museology, although they might include very specific practices such as the location and description of archaeological sites. Other modalities, such as the survey and the census, were more highly defined and clearly related to administrative questions. Most investigative modalities were constructed in relation to institutions and administrative sites with fixed routines. Some were transformed into ‘sciences,’ such as economics, ethnology, tropical medicine, comparative law, or cartography, and their practitioners became professionals. A brief discussion of a few of these modalities will illustrate my approach.

The historiographic modality

In British India, this modality is the most complex, pervasive, and powerful, underlying a number of the other more specific modalities. History, for the British, has an ontological power in providing the assumptions about how the real social and natural worlds are constituted. History in its broadest sense was a zone of debate over the ends and means of their rulership in India. From the beginning of their large-scale acquisition of territorial control and sovereignty, the British conceived of governing India by codifying and reconstituting the ruling practices that had been developed by previous states and rulers. They sought to incorporate, as much as possible, the administrative personnel employed by previous regimes. Thus knowledge of the history and practices of Indian states was seen as the most valuable form of knowledge on which to build the colonial state.

Starting in the 1770s in Bengal, the British began to investigate, through what they called ‘enquiries,’ a list of specific questions to which they sought answers about how revenue was assessed and collected. Out of this grew the most extensive and continuous administrative activity of the British, which they termed the land-settlement process. Embedded in this enterprise was the collection of ‘customs and local histories,’ which in the British discourse related to land tenure. The process culminated in the production of settlement reports, which were produced on a district-by-district basis.

A second strand of the historiographic modality involved the ideological construction of the nature of Indian civilizations, as typified in the major historical writings of Alexander Dow, Robert Orme, Charles Grant, Mark Wilks, James Mill, and James Tod. The historiographic practices and narrative genres of these writers can obviously be subjected to critical analysis, but beyond this they can be seen to have begun the formation of a legitimizing discourse about Britain’s civilizing mission in India.

A third historiographic strand involves histories of the British in India. This entails what might be thought of as ‘popular’ history – the study of representations, whether in England or in India, of specific events. Thus stories of the Black Hole of Calcutta, the defeat of Tipu Sultan, or the siege of Lucknow involved the creation of emblematic heroes and villains, as individuals and types, who took shape in illustrations, various popular performances, and poetry; their ‘history’ was made concrete through the construction of memorials and sacred spaces in India.
The observational/travel modality

The questions that arise in examining this modality are related to the creation of a repertoire of images and typifications that determined what was significant to the European eye. It was a matter of finding themselves in a place that could be made to seem familiar by following predetermined itineraries and seeing the sights in predictable ways. Two itineraries seem to have provided the narrative structure for many of the early travel accounts, and reflect the routes that brought Europeans to India. The earlier accounts follow the seventeenth-century trade pattern that brought merchants to the west coast of India, usually to Gujarat. The traveler then proceeded down the west coast to Ceylon, and up the east coast. By the eighteenth century much of British traffic to and from England went directly to Madras or Calcutta, and in the second half of the eighteenth century through the nineteenth century, arrival in Calcutta was followed by what became the standard traveler/tourist route – by boat up the Ganges, then to Delhi and either further north into the Punjab or southwest through Rajasthan and Gujarat to Bombay, then down to Malabar, Ceylon, and up the east coast to Madras. Although the travel routes were conceived as linear and continuous, there were particular things that had to be included: the river front in Banaras, the fort at Allahabad, a visit with the Nawab of Oudh, sightseeing in Agra and Delhi. In addition, travel accounts included set pieces, such as the description of Indian holy men and their austerities, encounters with traveling entertainers, and a sat seen or heard about. Increasingly in the nineteenth century, these accounts included discussions of historical sites – Hindu, Muslim, and British.

Although the itineraries and the particular sites, social types, practices, and encounters with India and Indians that are reported show considerable consistency through a two-hundred-year period, their representation changed through time. What is observed and reported is mediated by particular socio-political contexts as well as historically specific aesthetic principles, such as the ‘sublime,’ the ‘picturesque,’ the ‘romantic,’ and the ‘realistic.’

The survey modality

The word ‘survey’ in English evokes a wide range of activities: to look over or examine something; to measure land for the purpose of establishing boundaries; to inspect; and to supervise or keep a watch over persons or place. In other contexts it can mean to establish the monetary value of goods and objects. For the British in India in the late eighteenth century, it also meant a form of exploration of the natural and social landscape. The survey as an investigative modality encompasses a wide range of practices, from the mapping of India to collecting botanical specimens, to the recording of architectural and archaeological sites of historic significance, or the most minute measuring of a peasant’s fields.

Although the mapping and establishment of routes were part of the mercantile history of India, the beginning of a systematic survey of India can be dated to 1765, when Robert Clive assigned James Rennell, a naval officer turned surveyor, the task of making a general survey of the newly acquired Bengal territories. In the context of colonial India, the concept of the ‘survey’ came to cover any systematic and official investigation of the natural and social features of the Indian empire.

The result was the vast official documentation project that included the Survey of India, under the direction of George Lambton, which eventually covered India with an imaginary grid on which the government could locate any site in India. Upon the acquisition of each
new territory, a new survey was launched, which went far beyond mapping and bounding to describe and classify the territory's zoology, geology, botany, ethnography, economic products, history, and sociology. The history of this documentation project has tended to be written in terms of the 'genius' and/or obsessions of great surveyors – James Rennell, William Lambton, Colin Mackenzie, Alexander Cunningham, and Francis Buchanan Hamilton. But this 'great man' theory of surveying can be enriched by a study of the structure of the practices by which such knowledge was compiled, the underlying theories of classification and their implications for the governing of India, and the process by which these vast amounts of knowledge were transformed into textual forms such as encyclopedias and extensive archives that were deployed by the colonial state in fixing, bounding, and settling India.

The enumerative modality

For many British officials, India was a vast collection of numbers. This mentality began in the early seventeenth century with the arrival of British merchants who compiled and transmitted lists of products, prices, customs and duties, weights and measures, and the values of various coins. A number was, for the British, a particular form of certainty to be held on to in a strange world. But when they turned to early attempts to enumerate the population of India in various localities, as part of early surveys, they found that even the simplest of enumerative projects raised problems of classification.

As part of the imperial settlement project after the repression of the Indian uprising of 1857–1858, the Government of India carried out a series of censuses which they hoped would provide a cross-sectional picture of the 'progress' of their rule. By 1881 they had worked out a set of practices that enabled them not just to list the names of what they hoped would be every person in India but also to collect basic information about age, occupation, caste, religion, literacy, place of birth, and current residence. Upwards of 500,000 people, most of whom were volunteers, were engaged in carrying out the census. The published census reports not only summarized the statistical information thus compiled but also included extensive narratives about the caste system, the religions of India, fertility and morbidity, domestic organization, and the economic structure of India. The census represents a model of the Victorian encyclopedic quest for total knowledge.

It is my hypothesis that what was entailed in the construction of the census operations was the creation of social categories by which India was ordered for administrative purposes. The British assumed that the census reflected the basic sociological facts of India. This it did, but through the enumerative modality, the project also objectified social, cultural, and linguistic differences among the peoples of India. The panoptical view that the British were constructing led to the reification of India as polity in which conflict, from the point of view of the rulers, could only be controlled by the strong hand of the British.

The museological modality

For many Europeans India was a vast museum, its countryside filled with ruins, its people representing past ages – biblical, classical, and feudal; it was a source of collectibles and curiosities to fill European museums, botanical gardens, zoos, and country houses.
Until the 1860s the generation and transmission of knowledge of the antiquities of India—its art, architecture, scripts, and textual traditions—were largely left to individuals and scholarly societies, and were the by-products of other investigative modalities. In the late eighteenth century artists who traveled in India in pursuit of commissions and patronage, such as the Daniells brothers, William Hodges, and George Chinnery, sketched and painted not only landscapes and portraits of opulent princes and British officials but also created a visual record of the monuments of past dynasties. There was a large market in Great Britain for illustrated books, portfolios, prints, and drawings of oriental scenes and depictions of the people of India.

As a by-product of the revenue surveys and the settlement proceedings, many archaeological sites were identified and mapped. The first large-scale excavation of an Indian archaeological site was directed by Colin Mackenzie who, in addition to his official duties, carried on a twenty-year project in south India which involved the collection of archaeological specimens, texts, manuscripts, and oral histories. James Ferguson, who had gone to India as an indigo planter, traveled widely in India in 1837–1842, and wrote a series of accounts of its art and architecture, which established a hegemonic history and evaluation of Indian art and architecture. He was active in the planning of the Crystal Palace exhibition, and became the “official” connoisseur of India’s artistic achievements.

An army engineer, Alexander Cunningham, who had developed an interest in Indian archaeology, successfully lobbied Lord Canning in 1859 to establish the Archaeological Survey of India, of which he was to become the first director. The primary concern of the ASI was to record important sites on the basis of topographical research. In addition, the Survey became responsible for the preservation of historical sites, and began to develop on-site museums as well as to build a national collection of archaeological specimens. The first large-scale museum in India was built in Calcutta in the 1840s by private initiative, under the aegis of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. The museum developed into the India Museum, which is the largest general museum in India today with large collections and displays of archaeological, natural historical, and ethnographic specimens.

Representations of India bulked large in the international exhibitions and world’s fairs of the second half of the nineteenth century, which in turn provided the basis of private and public collections of India arts and crafts, paintings, and antiquities. The power to define the nature of the past and establish priorities in the creation of a monumental record of a civilization, and to propound canons of taste, are among the most significant instrumentalities of rulership.

The surveillance modality

The British appear in the nineteenth century to have felt most comfortable surveying India from above and at a distance—from a horse, an elephant, a boat, a carriage, or a train. They were uncomfortable in the narrow confines of a city street, a bazaar, a mela—anywhere they were surrounded by their Indian subjects. In their narratives of their lives and travels in India, few Indians are named other than royalty and personal servants. Indians who came under the imperial gaze were frequently made to appear in dress and demeanor as players in the British-constructed theater of power, their roles signaled by prescribed dress, their parts authored by varied forms of knowledge codified by rulers who sought to determine how loyal Indian subjects were to act in the scenes that the rulers had
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constructed. Everyone — rulers and ruled — had proper roles to play in the colonial sociological theater.

There were, however, groups and categories of people whose practices threatened the prescribed sociological order. These were people who appeared by their nature to wander beyond the boundaries of settled civil society: sannyasis, sadhus, fakirs, dacoits, goondas, thugs, pastoralists, herders, and entertainers. The British constructed special instrumentalities to control those defined as beyond civil bounds, and carried out special investigations to provide the criteria by which whole groups would be stigmatized as criminal.

Starting in the late eighteenth century, certain clans, castes, and villages were accused of practicing female infanticide, a crime that was difficult to prove in British courts, in which only an individual and not a group could be proven guilty. Female infanticide became a "statistical crime" for which corporal punishment could be administered. In 1835 a Thagi and Dacoity Department was created to investigate and punish gang robberies and murders. The first task was to devise means for gathering information on the practices of those the government accused of committing a ritual form of murder, particularly of travelers. This involved primarily the use of informants who turned state’s evidence, and acted not only as witnesses but also as informants on the ‘culture’ of the Thags. The work of the Thagi and Dacoity Department led to the formation of an archive of criminal ethnography and the designation of increasing numbers of people as members of ‘criminal tribes and castes.’

The British in India (like the police in urbanizing western Europe) faced a problem identifying those who were suspected of antisocial, political, and criminal activities that the state sought to control or eliminate. The ideal was to create a systematic means of recording and classifying a set of permanent features that distinguished an individual. Although photography offered some possibilities for recording a physiognomy, India’s size required a schema by which one could recover each of thousands from among potentially millions of images. Toward this end, in Paris in the late nineteenth century, Alphonse Bertillon, prefect of police, devised an anthropometric system that was believed to have the potential of providing the descriptive as well as classificatory power to identify individuals accurately.

At much the same time as Bertillon was carrying out his investigations, William Herschel, a civil servant in India, was experimenting with the use of fingerprints to individualize documents, as a means of preventing fraud and forgery. Herschel continued his explorations even after he left India and later Sir Francis Galton, in cooperation with Herschel and a number of Indian police officers, devised a system of classification that made possible fingerprinting as a means of identifying individuals.

Investigative modalities in the postcolonial world

Both historians and anthropologists — though the latter might not have labeled themselves as such — were always directly involved in the colonial situation. The origins of anthropology as a distinctive form of knowledge lay, in fact, in the internal and external colonies of the Europeans. Throughout the colonial period, some anthropologists argued, in a highly ambivalent fashion, that they had a particular role to play in mediating between the colonial subjects and rulers. In the colonial history of India, there were explicit efforts made to construct an ‘official ethnography’ at the moment that anthropology was beginning to be
defined as a distinctive form of knowledge. Anthropologists developed practices through which they sought to erase the colonial influence by describing what they took to be authentic indigenous cultures. Their epistemological universe, however, was part of the European world of social theories and classificatory schema that were formed, in part, by state projects to reshape the lives of their subjects at home and abroad.

Since the early twentieth century, there have been internal professional discussions among anthropologists about their responsibilities for their chosen subjects, who were frequently defined as ‘native’ or ‘tribal’ or ‘wild men,’ in relation to state policies and practices which sought to control them. With the end of political colonialism, anthropologists have translated their colonial past into history, and into a site for the critical and epistemological exploration of their own construction of knowledge.

Notes

1 Some of the material in this chapter has appeared in ‘Beyond the Fringe: The Nation State, Colonialism, and the Technologies of Power,’ by Bernard S. Cohn and Nicholas B. Dirks, in Journal of Historical Sociology, 2 June 1988, 1, 224–9.
2 Benedict Anderson has established the parallel growth of ‘imagined communities,’ based upon mystical notions of the common origins of nations, of shared blood, descent from mythical heroes, or membership in nations which have fathers and mothers, whose male descendants are constituted as ‘brothers.’ Imagined Communities (London, 1983). In their book The Great Arch, Peter Corrigan and Derek Sayer (Oxford, 1985) described and analyzed how the British state was constructed as a repertoire of rituals and routines of rule that legitimized the state’s powers to control its subjects’ activities.
3 It is ironic that the twentieth century, which has seen so many radical breaks with the past, has been marked by the production of innumerable new histories. With the establishment of each ‘new’ nation out of the old European colonial order, each has to be equipped with an official history of its preccolonial past and its freedom struggle.
7 See Bernard S. Cohn, ‘The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia,’ first published in the 1960s, frequently reprinted, including Bernard Cohn, An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays (Delhi, 1990) 224–54.
Ann Laura Stoler has been among the most innovative and important historians of gender roles and relations in colonial situations, especially the 'intimate politics' of sexuality, and this is one of her greatest essays in that field. Here even more than with some of the other pieces reproduced here, it was sadly necessary for reasons of space to leave out much of the rich empirical detail of her analysis, and most of the references.

Stephen Howe

OVER THE PAST FIFTEEN YEARS, the anthropology of women has fundamentally altered an understanding of colonial expansion and its consequences for the colonized. In identifying how European conquest affected valuations of women’s work and redefined their proper domains, feminist scholars have sought to explain how changes in household organization, the sexual division of labor, and the gender-specific control of resources within it have modified and shaped how colonial appropriations of land, labor, and resources were obtained. Much of this research has focused on indigenous gendered patterns of economic activity, political participation, and social knowledge and on the agency of those confronted with European rule – but less on the distinct agency of those women and men who carried it out.

More recent attention to the structures of colonial authority has placed new emphasis on the quotidian assertion of European dominance in the colonies, on imperial interventions in domestic life, and on the cultural prescriptions by which European women and men lived. From an earlier focus on how colonizers have viewed the indigenous Other, more work is beginning to sort out how Europeans in the colonies imagined themselves and constructed communities built on asymmetries of race, class, and gender-entities significantly at odds with the European models on which they were drawn.
Feminist attempts to engage the gender politics of Dutch, French, and British imperial cultures converge on some strikingly similar observations; namely, that European women in these colonies experienced the cleavages of racial dominance and internal social distinctions very differently than men precisely because of their ambiguous positions, as both subordinates in colonial hierarchies and as agents of empire in their own right. Concomitantly, the majority of European women who left for the colonies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century confronted frequent constraint on their domestic, economic, and political options, more limiting than those in metropolitan Europe at the time and in sharp contrast to the opportunities open to colonial men.\footnote{1}

In varied form these studies raise a basic question: in what ways were gender inequalities essential to the structure of colonial racism and imperial authority? Was the strident misogyny of imperial thinkers and colonial agents a by-product of received metropolitan values (‘they just brought it with them’), a reaction to contemporary feminist demands in Europe (‘women need to be put back in their breeding place’), or a novel and pragmatic response to the conditions of conquest? Was the assertion of European supremacy in terms of patriotic manhood and racial virility an expression of imperial domination or a defining feature of it?

In this chapter I further pursue the premise that imperial authority and racial distinctions were fundamentally structured in gendered terms. I look at the administrative and medical discourse and management of European sexual activity, reproduction, and marriage as part of the apparatus of colonial control. Here I attend more to the dominant male discourse (less to women’s perceptions of the constraints placed on them), arguing that it was how women’s needs were defined, not by but for them, that most directly shaped specific policies. The very categories ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’ were secured through forms of sexual control that defined the domestic arrangements of Europeans and the cultural investments by which they identified themselves. Treating the sexual and conjugal tensions of colonial life as more than a political trope for the tensions of empire writ small but as a part of the latter in socially profound and strategic ways, this chapter examines how gender-specific sexual sanctions and prohibitions not only demarcated positions of power but also prescribed the personal and public boundaries of race.

Colonial authority was constructed on two powerful but false premises. The first was the notion that Europeans in the colonies made up an easily identifiable and discrete biological and social entity — a ‘natural’ community of common class interests, racial attributes, political affinities, and superior culture. The second was the related notion that the boundaries separating colonizer from colonized were thus self-evident and easily drawn. Neither premise reflected colonial realities. Settler colonies such as those in Rhodesia and Algeria excepted – where inter-European conflicts were violent and overt — tensions between bureaucrats and planters, settlers and transients, missionaries and metropolitan policy-makers, and petits blancs and monied entrepreneurs have always made European colonial communities more socially fractious and politically fragile than many of their members professed. Internal divisions grew out of competing economic and political agendas – conflicts over access to indigenous resources, frictions over appropriate methods for safeguarding European privilege and power, competing criteria for reproducing a colonial elite and for restricting its membership.

The shift away from viewing colonial elites as homogenous communities of common interest marks an important trajectory in the anthropology of empire, signaling a major rethinking of gender relations within it. The markers of European identity and the criteria
for community membership no longer appear as fixed but emerge as a more obviously fluid, permeable, and historically disputed terrain. The colonial politics of exclusion was contingent on constructing categories. Colonial control was predicated on identifying who was 'white,' who was 'native,' and which children could become citizens rather than subjects, on which were legitimate progeny and which were not.

What mattered was not only one's physical properties but also who counted as 'European' and by what measure? Skin shade was too ambiguous. Bank accounts were mercurial. Religious belief and education were crucial markers but never clear enough. Social and legal standing derived from the cultural prism through which color was viewed, from the silences, acknowledgments, and denials of the social circumstances in which one's parents had sex. Sexual unions based on concubinage, prostitution, or church marriage derived from the hierarchies of rule. But, in turn, they were provisional relations, based on contested classifications, that could alter individual fates and the very structure of colonial society's ultimately, inclusion or exclusion required regulating the sexual, conjugal, and domestic life of both European colonials and their subjects.

**Political messages and sexual metaphors**

Colonial observers and participants in the imperial enterprise appear to have had unlimited interest in the sexual interface of the colonial encounter. No subject is discussed more than sex in colonial literature and no subject more frequently invoked to foster the racist stereotypes of European society. The tropics provided a site for European pornographic fantasies long before conquest was under way, with lurid descriptions of sexual license, promiscuity, gynecological aberrations, and general perversion marking the Otherness of the colonized for metropolitan consumption. Noting the rigid sexual protocols of nineteenth-century Europe, some colonial historians, such as Ronald Hyam, have suggested that imperial expansion itself was derived from the export of male sexual energy.² Gann and Duignan saw colonialism as 'a sublimation or alternative to sex [for European men].¹³ Both statements misconstrue the case, but one thing is clear: with the sustained presence of Europeans in the colonies, sexual prescriptions of varied sorts and targeting different actors became increasingly central to social policy and subject to new forms of scrutiny by colonial states.

The salience of sexual symbols as graphic representations of colonial dominance is relatively unambiguous and well established. Edward Said, for example, argued that the sexual submission and possession of Oriental women by European men 'fairly stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West, and the discourse about the Orient that it enabled.'⁴ Orientalism was described as a 'male perception of the world . . . a male power fantasy,' 'an exclusively male province,' in which the Orient was penetrated, silenced, and possessed.⁵ Sexuality, then, serves as a loaded metaphor for domination, but Said's critique was not (nor did it claim to be) about those relations between women and men. Sexual images illustrate the iconography of rule, not its pragmatics. Sexual asymmetries and visions convey what is 'really' going on elsewhere, at another political epicenter. They are tropes to depict other centers of power.

If Asian women are centerfolds for the imperial voyeur, European women often appear in male colonial writings only as a reverse image fulfilling not sexual but other power fantasies of European men.⁶ Whether portrayed as paragons of morality or as parasitic
and passive actors on the imperial stage, they are rarely the object of European male desire. To assume that European men and women participated equally in the prejudices and pleasures that colonial privilege bestowed on them eschews the fact that European women took part in colonial relations in ways that imposed fundamentally different restrictions on them.

Sexual domination has been more often considered as a discursive symbol, instrumental in the conveyance of other meanings, but less often as the substance of imperial policy. Was sexual dominance, then, merely a graphic substantiation of who was on the bottom and who was on the top? Was the medium the message, or did sexual relations always 'mean' something else, stand in for other relations, evoke the sense of other (pecuniary, political, or some possibly more subliminal) desires? This analytic slippage between the sexual symbols of power and the politics of sex runs throughout the colonial record—as well as through contemporary commentaries on it. Some of this may reflect the polyvalent quality of sexuality—symbolically rich and socially salient at the same time. But sexual control was more than a convenient metaphor for colonial domination. It was a fundamental class and racial marker implicated in a wider set of relations of power.

As a critical interface of sexuality and the wider political order, the relationship between gender prescriptions and racial boundaries is a subject that remains unevenly unexplored. While recent work shows clearly that European women of different classes experienced the colonial venture very differently from one another and from men, we still know relatively little about the distinct investments they had in a racism they shared. Feminist scholars have made efforts to sort out the distinct colonial experience of European women, how they were incorporated into, resisted, and affected the politics of their men. Studies of the intervention of state, business, and religious institutions in the reproductive decisions of colonized populations are now joined by those that examine the work of European women in these programs, the influence of European welfare programs on colonial medicine, and the reproductive constraints on colonial women themselves.

This notion of sexuality as a core aspect of social identity has figured importantly in analyses of the psychological motivation of and injuries incurred by colonial rule. Here, sexual submission substantiates colonial racism, imposing fundamental limits on personal liberation. Among colonial and postcolonial male authors, questions of virility and definitions of manliness have been placed at political center stage. The demasculinization of colonized men and the hypermasculinity of European males are understood as key elements in the assertion of white supremacy. But these are studies concerned with the psychological salience of women and sex in the subordination of men by men. They only incidentally deal with sexism and racism as well as racism and sex.

An overlapping set of discourses has provided the psychological and economic underpinnings for colonial distinctions of difference. These discourses tie fears of sexual contamination, physical danger, climatic incompatibility, and moral breakdown to the security of a European national identity with a racist and class-specific core. Colonial scientific reports and the popular press are filled with assertions varying on a common theme: native women bear contagions, white women become sterile in the colonies, colonial men are susceptible to physical, moral, and mental degeneration when they remain in the tropics too long. What work do such statements perform? To what degree are they medically or politically grounded? We need to unpack what is metaphor, what is perceived as dangerous (is it disease, culture, climate, or sex?), and what is not.
Sex and other categories of colonial control

The regulation of sexual relations was central to the development of particular kinds of colonial settlements and to the allocation of economic activity within them. Who bedded and wedded whom in the colonies of France, England, Holland, and Iberia was never left to chance. Unions between Annamite women and French men, between Portuguese women and Dutch men, between Inca women and Spanish men produced offspring with claims to privilege, whose rights and status had to be determined and prescribed. From the early 1600s through the twentieth century the sexual sanctions and conjugal prohibitions of colonial agents were rigorously debated and carefully codified. It is in these debates over matrimony and morality that trading and plantation company officials, missionaries, investment bankers, military high commands, and agents of the colonial state confronted one another’s visions of empire and the settlement patterns on which it would rest.

In 1622 the Dutch East Indies Company (VOC) arranged for the transport of six poor but marriageable young Dutch women to Java, providing them with clothing, a dowry on marriage, and a contract binding them to five years in the Indies. Aside from this and one other short-lived experiment, immigration of European women was explicitly restricted for the next two hundred years. VOC shareholders argued against female emigration on multiple counts. First, they maintained that the transportation costs for married women and daughters were too high. Second, they argued that Dutch women (with stronger ties than men to the Netherlands?) might hinder initiatives for permanent European settlement. By goading their burgher husbands to quick profits through nefarious trade, they would then press for repatriation to display their newfound wealth. Third, the VOC feared that Dutch women might engage in private trade and encroach on the company’s monopoly. Fourth, the objection was raised that European children would become sickly, force families to repatriate, and deplete the font of permanent settlers.

The East Indies Company regulated against female migration by selecting bachelors as their European recruits and by promoting both extramarital relations and legal unions between low-ranking employees and imported slave women. There were some Euro-Asian marriages among the colonial elite, but government regulations made concubinage a more attractive option by prohibiting European men from returning to the Netherlands with native wives and children. For the middling colonial staff, the East Indies Company firmly discouraged Euro-Asian marriages. Households based on Euro-Asian unions, by contrast, were seen to bear distinct advantages. Individual employees would bear the costs of dependents, mixed unions would produce healthier children, and Asian women would make fewer financial and affective demands. Finally, men would be more likely to remain if they established families with local roots.

Concubinage served colonial interests in other ways. It permitted permanent settlement and rapid growth by a cheaper means than the importation of European women. Salaries of European recruits to the colonial armies, bureaucracies, plantation companies, and trading enterprises were carefully calibrated and kept artificially low. Eliminating expenses for family support and transportation costs was only part of the story. As important, local women provided domestic services for which new European recruits would otherwise have had to pay. In the mid-nineteenth century such arrangements were de rigueur for young civil servants intent on setting up households on their own. Despite clerical opposition (the church never attained a secure and independent foothold in the Indies),
by the nineteenth century concubinage was the most prevalent living arrangement for European men. Nearly half of the Indies' European male population in the 1880s were unmarried and living with Asian women. Government decrees designed to limit barrack concubinage in 1903 were never enforced. It was only in the early twentieth century that concubinage was more actively condemned.

The administrative arguments from the 1600s invoked to curb the immigration of European women, on the one hand, and to condone sexual access to indigenous women, on the other, bear a striking resemblance to the sexual politics of colonial expansion in other times and places. Colonized women living as the concubines of European men—referred to as nyai in Java and Sumatra, congai in Indochina, and petite épouse throughout the French empire—formed the dominant domestic arrangement in colonial cultures through the early twentieth century. Unlike prostitution, which could and often did increase the number of syphilitic and therefore non-productive European men, concubinage was considered to stabilize political order and colonial health. It kept men in their barracks and bungalows rather than in brothels or hospitals or, worse, in 'unnatural' liaisons with one another. Although prostitution served some of the colonies for some of the time, it often proved medically and socially problematic. It had little appeal for those administrations bent on promoting permanent settlement, and venereal disease was difficult to check, even with the elaborate system of lock hospitals and contagious-disease acts developed in parts of the British empire.

Across Asia and Africa, colonial decision makers counted on the social services that local women supplied as 'useful guides to the language and other mysteries of the local societies.' Their medical and cultural know-how was credited with keeping many European men alive in their initial, precarious confrontation with tropical life. Handbooks for incoming plantation staff bound for Tonkin, Sumatra, and Malaya urged men to find a bed-servant as a prerequisite to quick acclimatization. In Malaysia, commercial companies encouraged their European staff to procure local 'companions' for psychological and physical well-being, as protection against the ill health that sexual abstention, isolation, and boredom were thought to bring. Even in the British empire, where the colonial office officially banned concubinage in 1910, it was tacitly condoned and practiced long after. In the Indies a similar sanction against concubinage among civil servants was only selectively enforced. It had little effect on domestic arrangements outside of Java and no real impact in Sumatra's new plantation belt where Javanese and Japanese huisvrouwen (as Asian mistresses were sometimes called; lit. 'housekeeper') remained the rule rather than the exception.

Concubinage was the prevalent term for cohabitation outside marriage between European men and Asian women. But the term ambiguously covered a wide range of arrangements that included sexual access to a non-European woman as well as demands on her labor and legal rights to the children she bore. If glossed as companionship or cohabitation outside marriage, it suggests more social privileges than most women who were involved in such relations would have enjoyed. They could be dismissed without reason, notice, or severance pay. They might be exchanged among Europeans and 'passed on' when men left for leave or retirement in Europe. The Indies Civil Code of 1848 made their position poignantly clear: native women 'had no rights over children recognized by a white man.' Some women combined sexual and domestic service with the obsequious status of slave or coolie and lived in separate quarters. On East Sumatra's plantations, where such arrangements were structured into company labor policies, Javanese women picked from
the coolie ranks often retained their original labor contracts for the duration of their sexual and domestic service.

Most of these women remained servants, sharing only the beds of European staff. But some combined their service with varied degrees of independence and authority and used their positions to enhance their economic and political standing. In Indochina and the Indies, officials complained that local women provided employment to their own kin, making sure that the houses in which they served were peopled with gardeners, washwomen, and night watchmen from their own families. Working for colonial men of higher station, these "huishoudsters" might run parts of the businesses of the men with whom they had arrangements, hire and fire the servants, and manage shopping budgets and other household affairs. Javanese women (like the European-born in a later period) were called on to keep men physically and psychologically fit for work, to keep them satisfied without distracting them or urging them out of line. Women who worked in such capacities in remote districts and plantation areas provided for the daily needs of the lower-level European staff without imposing the emotional and financial obligations that European family life would demand.

Concubinage reinforced the hierarchies on which colonial societies were based and made those distinctions more problematic at the same time. In North Sumatra, grossly uneven sex ratios often made for intense competition among male workers and their European supervisors for women who would perform these services. Javanese women were not the only ones requisitioned for such jobs. Elsewhere in the Indies, impoverished Indo-European women lived in situations that blurred the boundaries between companionship, concubinage, and paid-for sex. And it was that very blurring that disturbed the racial sensibilities of the Dutch-born elite. Metropolitan critics were openly disdainful of these liaisons on moral grounds—all the more so when these unions became sustained and emotionally significant relationships. Such affective ties defied the racial premise of concubinage as no more than an emotionally unfettered convenience.

The tension between concubinage as a confirmation of racial hierarchy and as a threatening compromise to that order was nowhere more visible than in reactions to the progeny that it produced. Mixed-bloods, poor Indo’s, and abandoned mitis children straddled the division of ruler and ruled as they threatened to blur that divide. Referred to by the common Dutch term voetkinderen (children from a previous marriage or union), in the colonies the term was racially marked to signal illegitimate children of a mixed union. Economically disadvantaged and socially invisible, they were sent ‘back’ to native kampongs or shuttled into the shoddy compounds of impoverished whites.

Concubinage was a domestic arrangement based on sexual service and gender inequalities that ‘worked’ efficiently by some criteria and badly by others. When European identity and supremacy were thought to be vulnerable, in jeopardy, or less than convincing, concubinage came under more direct attack. At the turn of the century and increasingly through the 1920s, colonial elites responded by clarifying the cultural criteria of privilege and the moral premises of their unity. Sex in the politically safe context of prostitution and where possible in the more desirable context of marriage between ‘full-blooded’ Europeans, replaced concubinage. As in other colonial regions, the ban on concubinage was not always expressed in explicit racist language. On the contrary, difference and distance were often coded to mark race in culturally clear but nuanced terms.
Restrictions on European women in the colonies

Most accounts of colonial conquest and settlement concur in suggesting that European women chose to avoid early pioneering ventures, but the choice was rarely their own. In the Indies, a government ordinance of 1872 made it impossible for any soldier below the rank of sergeant major to marry. Even above that rank, conditions were very restrictive. In the Indies army, marriage was a privilege of the officer corps, with barracks concubinage instituted and regulated for the rank and file. In the twentieth century, formal and informal prohibitions set by banks, estates, and government services operating in Africa, India, and Southeast Asia restricted marriage during the first three to five years of service, while some prohibited it altogether. In Malaya, the major British banks required their employees to sign contracts agreeing to request permission to marry, with the understanding that it would not be granted in less than eight years.

Many historians assume that these bans on employee marriage and on the immigration of European women lifted when specific colonies were politically stable, medically upgraded, and economically secure. But marriage restrictions lasted well into the twentieth century, long after rough living and a scarcity of amenities had become conditions of the past. In India, as late as 1929, British employees in the political service were still recruited at the age of twenty-six and then prohibited from marriage during their first three probationary years. In the army, marriage allowances were also denied until the same age, while in the commercial houses, restrictions were frequent but less overt. On the Ivory Coast, employment contracts in the 1920s denied marriage with European women before the third tour, which meant a minimum of five years' service, so that many men remained unmarried past the age of thirty.

European demographics in the colonies were shaped by these economic and political exigencies and thus were enormously skewed by sex. Among the laboring immigrant and native populations as well as among Europeans in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the number of men was, at the very least, double that of women and sometimes exceeded it by twenty-five times. Although in the Indies the overall ratio of European women to men rose from 47:100 to 88:100 between 1900 and 1930, representing an absolute increase from 4,000 to 26,000 Dutch women, in outlying islands the ratios were kept far more uneven. On Sumatra's plantation belt in 1920, there were still only 61 European women per 100 men. On Africa's Ivory Coast, European sex ratios through 1921 were still 1:25. In Tonkin, European men sharply outnumbered European women as late as 1931, when there were 14,085 European men (including military) to 3,083 European women. While these imbalances were usually attributed to the physical hazards of life in the tropics, political explanations are more compelling. In controlling the availability of European women and the sorts of sexual access allowed, colonial state and corporate authorities avoided salary increases as well as the proliferation of a lower-class European settler population. Such policies did not mute the internal class distinctions within the European communities. On the contrary, they shaped the social geography of the colonies by fixing the conditions under which European privileges could be attained and reproduced.

As in North Sumatra, the marriage prohibition was both a political and an economic issue, defining the social contours of colonial communities and the standards of living in them. But, as importantly, it revealed how strongly the conduct of private life and the
sexual proclivities individuals expressed were tied to corporate profits and the security of the colonial state. Irregular domestic arrangements were thought to encourage subversion as strongly as acceptable unions could avert it. Family stability and sexual ‘normalcy’ were thus concretely linked to political agitation or quiescence.

Domestic arrangements varied as government officials and private businesses weighed the economic versus political costs of one arrangement over another, but such calculations were invariably meshed. Those in high office saw white prestige and profits as inextricably linked, and attitudes toward concubinage reflected that concern. Colonial morality and the place of concubinage in it was relative. Thus in Malaya through the 1920s, concubinage was tolerated precisely because ‘poor whites’ were not. Government and plantation administrators argued that white prestige would be imperiled if European men became impoverished in attempting to maintain middle-class lifestyles and European wives. In late-nineteenth-century Java, in contrast, concubinage itself was considered a major source of white pauperism, condemned at precisely the same time that a new colonial morality passively condoned illegal brothels.

What constituted morality vacillated, as did what defined white prestige — and what its defense should entail. No description of European colonial communities fails to note the obsession with white prestige as a basic feature of colonial thinking. Its protection looms as the primary cause of a long list of otherwise inexplicable postures, prejudices, fears, and violences. But what upheld that prestige was not a constant; concubinage was socially lauded at one time and seen as a political menace at another. White prestige was a gloss for different intensities of racist practice, gender-specific and culturally coded. Although many accounts contend that white women brought an end to concubinage, its decline came with a much wider shift in colonial relations along more racially segregated lines — in which the definitions of prestige shifted and in which Asian, creole, and European-born women were to play new roles.

Colonial communities were not generic; sharp demographic, social, and political differences existed among them. Colonies based on small administrative centers of Europeans (as on Africa’s Gold Coast) differed from plantation colonies with sizable enclaves of European communities (as in Malaya and Sumatra) and still more from settler colonies (as in Algeria) with large, heterogeneous, and permanent European populations. But these ‘types’ were less fixed than some students of colonial history suggest, such as Winthrop Jordan, who argued that the ‘bedrock demographics’ of whites to blacks and the sexual composition of the latter ‘powerfully influenced, perhaps even determined the kind of society which emerged in each colony.’ North Sumatra’s European-oriented, overwhelmingly male colonial population, for example, contrasted with the more sexually balanced mestizo culture that emerged in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in colonial Java.

But these demographics were not the bedrock of social relations from which all else followed. Sex ratios themselves derived from the particular way in which administrative strategies of social engineering collided with and constrained people’s personal choices and private lives. These demographic differences, and the social configurations to which they gave rise, still need to be explained, as do some of the common politically charged issues that a range of colonial societies shared. Some of the similar — and counter — intuitive ways in which the construction of racial categories and the management of sexuality were inscribed indicate new efforts to modernize colonial control.
European women and racial boundaries

Little is as striking in the sociological accounts of European colonial communities as the extraordinary changes that are said to accompany the entry of white women. These adjustments are described as shifts in one direction: toward European lifestyles accentuating the refinements of privilege and new etiquettes of racial difference. The presence of European women was said to put new demands on the white communities to tighten their ranks, clarify their boundaries, and mark out their social space. The material culture of European settlements in Saigon, outposts in New Guinea, and estate complexes in Sumatra were re-tailored to accommodate the physical and moral requirements of a middle-class and respectable feminine contingent. Housing structures in the Indies were partitioned, residential compounds in the Solomon Islands enclosed, servant relations in Hawaii formalized, dress codes in Java altered, food and social taboos in Rhodesia and the Ivory Coast codified. Taken together these changes encouraged new kinds of consumption and new social services that catered to these new demands.

The arrival of large numbers of European women coincided with new bourgeois trappings and notions of privacy in colonial communities. And these, in turn, were accompanied by new distinctions based on race. European women supposedly required more metropolitan amenities than did men and more spacious surroundings for them. Women were claimed to have more delicate sensibilities and therefore needed suitable quarters – discrete and enclosed. Their psychological and physical constitutions were considered more fragile, demanding more servants for the chores they should be spared. In short, white women needed to be maintained at elevated standards of living, in insulated social spaces cushioned with the cultural artifacts of ‘being European.’ Whether women or men set these new standards and why they might have both done so (and for different reasons) is left unclear. Who exhibited a ‘need for’ segregation? In Indochina, male doctors advised French women to build their homes with separate domestic and kitchen quarters. Segregationist standards were what women ‘deserved’ and, more important, what white male prestige required that they maintain.

Racist but moral women, innocent but immoral men

Recent feminist scholarship has challenged the universally negative stereotype of the colonial wife in one of two ways: either by showing the structural reasons why European women were racially intolerant, socially vicious, abusive to servants, and prone to illness and boredom, or by demonstrating that they really were not. Some scholars have attempted to confront what Margaret Strobel calls the ‘myth of the destructive female’ to show that these women were not detriments to colonial relations but crucial to bolstering a failing empire and to maintaining the daily rituals of racialized rule.¹⁴

Colonial discourses about white women were full of contradictions. At the same time that new female immigrants were chided for not respecting the racial distance of local convention, an equal number of colonial observers accused them of being more committed racists in their own right. Insecure and jealous of the sexual liaisons of European men with native women, bound to their provincial visions and cultural norms, European women, it was and is argued, constructed the major cleavages on which colonial stratification would rest. Writing about French women in Algeria, the French historian Pierre Nora...
once claimed that these ‘parasites of the colonial relationship in which they do not participate directly, are generally more racist than men and contribute strongly to prohibiting contact between the two societies.’ Similarly, Octavio Mannoni noted ‘the astonishing fact’ that European women in Madagascar were ‘far more racist than the men.’ For the Indies, ‘it was jealousy of the dusky sirens . . . but more likely some say . . . it was . . . plain feminine scandalization at free and easy sex relations’ that caused a decline in miscegenation.

What underwrites these assessments? Are we to believe that sexual intimacy with European men yielded social mobility and political rights for colonized women? Or less likely, that because British civil servants bedded Indian women, Indian men had more ‘in common’ with British men and enjoyed more parity? Colonized women could sometimes parlay their positions into personal profit and small rewards, but these were individual negotiations with no social, legal, or cumulative claims. Sex was not a leveling mechanism but a site in which social asymmetries were instantiated and expressed.

European women were positioned as the bearers of a redefined colonial morality. But to suggest that they fashioned this racism out of whole cloth is to miss the political chronology in which new intensities of racist practice arose. In the African and Asian contexts already mentioned, the arrival of large numbers of European wives, particularly the need for their protection, followed from new terms and tensions in the colonial contract. Their presence and safety was repeatedly invoked to clarify racial lines. It coincided with perceived threats to European prestige, increased racial conflict, covert challenges to colonial politics, outright expressions of nationalist resistance, and internal dissension among whites themselves.

If white women were the force behind the decline of concubinage, as is often claimed, they did so as participants in a broader racial realignment and political plan. This is not to suggest that they were passive in this process, as the dominant preoccupations in many of their novels attest. Many European women opposed concubinage but not because they were categorically jealous of and threatened by Asian women. More likely, it was because of the double standard concubinage condoned for European men. Some Dutch women championed the cause of the wronged nyai, while others urged improved protection for non-provisioned native women and children as they did for themselves. Still, few went so far as to advocate the legitimization of these mixed unions in legal marriage. Significantly, what European women had to say had little resonance and little effect until their objections coincided with a realignment in both racial and class politics in which they were strategic.

Race and the politics of sexual peril

If the gender-specific requirements for colonial living imposed specific restrictions on women, they were also racialized assessments of danger that assigned a heightened sexuality to colonized men. Although novels and memoirs position European women as categorically absent from the sexual fantasies of European men, these very men imagined their women to be desired and seductive figures to others. Within this frame, European women needed protection from the ‘primitive’ sexual urges aroused by the sight of them. In some colonies that sexual threat remained an unlabeled potential. In others, it was given a specific name. The ‘Black Peril’ referred throughout Africa and much of the British empire to the professed dangers of sexual assault on white women by black men.
In southern Rhodesia and Kenya in the 1920s and 1930s, preoccupations with the Black Peril prompted the creation of citizens’ militias, ladies’ rifled clubs, and commissions to investigate whether African female domestic servants would not be safer to employ than men. Some colonial states went further still: in New Guinea the White Women’s Protection Ordinance of 1926 provided ‘the death penalty for any person convicted for the crime of rape or attempted rape upon a European woman or girl' and in the Solomon Islands authorities introduced public flogging in 1934 as punishment for ‘criminal assaults on [white] females.'

What do these cases have in common? First, the proliferation of discourse about sexual assault and the measures used to prevent it had virtually no correlation with actual incidences of rape of European women by men of color. Just the contrary: there was often no ex post facto evidence, or any at the time, that rapes were committed or attempted. Sexual assaults may have occurred, but their incidence had little to do with the fluctuations in anxiety about them. Moreover, the rape laws were race-specific. Sexual abuse of black women was not classified as rape and therefore was not legally actionable, nor did rapes committed by white men lead to prosecution. If these accusations of sexual threat were not prompted by the fact of rape, what did they signal, and to what were they tied?

Allusions to political and sexual subversion of the colonial system went hand in hand. The term ‘Black Peril’ referred to sexual threats, but it also connoted the fear of insurgence, and of perceived non-acquiescence to colonial control more generally. Concern over protection of white women intensified during real and perceived crises of control-threats to the internal cohesion of the European communities or infringements on its borders. Thus colonial accounts of the rebellion in India in 1857 contain detailed descriptions of the sexual mutilation of British women by Indian men although no rapes were recorded.

In Africa too, although the chronologies of the Black Peril differ — on the Rand in South Africa peaking a full twenty years earlier than elsewhere — we can still identify a patterned sequence of events. In New Guinea, the White Women’s Protection Ordinance followed a large influx of acculturated Papuans into Port Moresby in the 1920s. Resistant to the constraints imposed on their dress, movement, and education, whites perceived them as arrogant, ‘cheeky,’ and without respect. In post-World War I Algeria, the political unrest of pieds noirs (local French settlers) in the face of ‘a whole new series of [Muslim] demands’ manifested itself in a popular culture newly infused with strong images of sexually aggressive Algerian men.

Second, rape charges against colonized men were often based on perceived transgressions of social space. ‘Attempted rapes’ turned out to be ‘incidents’ of a Papuan man ‘discovered’ in the vicinity of a white residence, a Fijian man who entered a European patient’s room, or a male servant poised at the bedroom door of a European woman asleep or in half-dress. With such a broad range of behaviors defined as dangerous, most colonized men were potentially threatening as sexual and political aggressors.

Third, accusations of sexual assault frequently followed on heightened tensions within European communities — and renewed efforts to find consensus within them. Rape accusations in South Africa, for example, coincided with a rash of strikes between 1890 and 1914 by both African and white miners. Similarly, in Rhodesia, after a strike of white railway workers in 1929, otherwise conflicting members of the European community came together in a common cause. The threat of native rebellion produced a ‘solidarity [that] found sustenance in the threat of racial destruction.’ When labor actions by Indonesian workers and European staff were most intense, Sumatra’s white community
White degeneracy, motherhood, and the eugenics of empire

European women were vital to the colonial enterprise and the solidification of racial boundaries in ways that repeatedly tied their supportive and subordinate posture to community cohesion and colonial security. That contribution was reinforced at the turn of the century by a metropolitan bourgeois discourse (and an eminently anthropological one) intensely concerned with notions of ‘degeneracy.’ Middle-class morality, manliness, and motherhood were seen as endangered by the related fears of ‘degeneration’ and miscegenation in scientifically construed racist beliefs. Degeneration was defined as ‘departures from the normal human type . . . transmitted through inheritance and lead[ing] progressively to destruction.’ Degeneracy, brought on by environmental, physical, and moral factors, could be averted by positive eugenic selection or, negatively, by eliminating the ‘unfit’ or the environmental and more specifically cultural contagions that gave rise to them. Eugenic discourse has usually been associated with Social Darwinian notions of ‘selection,’ with the strong influence of Lamarckian thinking reserved for its French variant. However, the notion of ‘cultural contamination’ runs throughout the British, US, French, and Dutch eugenic traditions. Eugenic arguments used to explain the social malaise of industrialization, immigration, and urbanization derived from notions that acquired characteristics were inheritable and thus that poverty, vagrancy, and promiscuity were class-linked biological traits, tied to genetic material as directly as night blindness and blond hair. This Lamarckian feature of eugenic thinking in its colonial expression linked racial degeneracy to the sexual transmission of cultural contagions and to the political instability of imperial rule.

Appealing to a broad political and scientific constituency, Euro-American eugenic societies included advocates of infant welfare programs, liberal intellectuals, conservative businessmen, Fabians, and physicians with social concerns. By the 1920s, however, it contained an increasingly vocal number of those who called for and put into law if not practice the sterilization of what were considered the mentally, morally, or physically unfit members of the British, German, and North American underclass.

Eugenics reverberated in the colonies in predictable and unexpected forms. The moral, biological, and sexual referents of ‘degeneracy’ (distinct in the dictionary citation above) were fused in how the concept was actually deployed. The ‘colonial branch’ of eugenics focused on the vulnerabilities of white rule and measures to safeguard European superiority. Eugenics was designed to control the procreation of the ‘unfit’ lower orders and to target ‘the poor, the colonized, or unpopular strangers.’ But eugenic thinking reached further. It permeated how metropolitan observers viewed the degenerate lifestyle of colonials and how colonial elites admonished the behavior of degenerates among themselves. Whereas European and US studies focused on the inherent propensity of the impoverished classes to criminality, in the Indies delinquency among ‘European’ children was linked to the proportion of ‘native blood’ that children of mixed unions had inherited from their native mothers. Eugenics provided not so much a new vocabulary as a new biological idiom in which to ground the medical and moral basis for anxieties over European hegemony and white prestige. It reopened debates over segregated residence and education, new standards of morality, sexual vigilance, and the rights of certain Europeans to rule.
Eugenic thinking manifested itself, not in the direct importation of metropolitan practices such as sterilization, but in a translation of the political principles and the social values that eugenics implied. In defining what was unacceptable, eugenics also identified what constituted a ‘valuable life’ and ‘a gender-specific work and productivity, described in social, medical and psychiatric terms.’ Applied to European colonials, eugenic statements pronounced what kind of people should represent Dutch or French rule, how they should bring up their children, and with whom they should socialize. Those concerned with issues of racial survival and racial purity invoked the moral duty of European colonial women to fulfill an alternative set of imperial imperatives. They were to ‘uplift’ colonial subjects through educational and domestic management and attend to the family environment of their men. Sometimes they were simply encouraged to remain in the metropole and to stay at home. The point is that a common gender discourse was mapped onto different imperial situations that celebrated motherhood and domesticity.

If in Britain racial deterioration was conceived of as a result of the moral turpitude and the ignorance of working-class mothers, in the colonies the dangers were more pervasive, the possibilities of contamination worse. Proposals to secure European rule pushed in two directions. On the one hand, they pushed away from ambiguous racial genres and open domestic arrangements. On the other hand, they pressed for an upgrade and homogenization of European standards as well as a clearer delineation of them. The impulse was clear: away from miscegenation toward white endogamy; away from concubinage toward family formation and legal marriage; away from, as in the case of the Indies, mestizo customs and toward metropolitan norms. As stated in the bulletin of the Netherlands Indies Eugenics Society, ‘eugenics is nothing other than belief in the possibility of preventing degenerative symptoms in the body of our beloved moedervolken [people, populace], or in cases where they may already be present, of counteracting them.’

Like the modernization of colonialism itself, with its scientific management and educated technocrats with limited local knowledge, colonial communities of the early twentieth century were rethinking the ways in which their authority should be expressed. This rethinking took the form of asserting a distinct colonial morality, explicit in its reorientation to the racial and class markers of being European. It emphasized transnational racial commonalities despite national differences. Not least it distilled a notion of Homo europeus for whom superior health, wealth, and education were tied to racial endowments and a White Man’s norm. Thus, Eugene Pujarniscle, a novelist and participant observer in France’s colonial venture, wrote: ‘[O]ne might be surprised that my pen always returns to the words blanc [white] or “European” and never to “Français” . . . in effect colonial solidarity and the obligations that it entails allies all the peoples of the white races.’

Such sensibilities colored imperial policy in nearly all domains. Fears of physical contamination gave new credence to fears of political vulnerability. Whites had to guard their ranks, to increase their numbers, and to ensure that their members respected the biological and political boundaries on which their power was thought to rest. In Europe the socially and physically ‘unfit,’ the poor, the indigent, and the insane, were either to be sterilized or prevented from marriage. In the colonies it was these very groups among Europeans who were either excluded from entry or institutionalized while they were there and eventually sent home.

To sustain the notion that good health, virility, and the ability to rule were inherent features of being European, colonial rulers invested in a politics of exclusion that policed their members as well as the colonized. Such strategies and concerns were not new to the
1920s. In the 1750s the East Indies Company had already taken 'draconian measures' to control pauperism among 'Dutchmen of mixed blood.'

In the same period, the British East Indies Company enforced policies that discouraged lower-class European migration and settlement and argued that such populations would destroy Indian respect for 'the superiority of the European character.'

Patriotic calls to populate Java with poor Dutch farmers were also blocked for similar reasons in the mid-1800s and then again with new urgency in the following century as successive challenges to European rule were felt more profoundly.

Measures were taken both to avoid poor white migration and to produce a colonial profile that highlighted the manliness, well-being, and productivity of European men. In this equation, evidence of manliness, national identity, and racial superiority were meshed. Thus British colonial administrators were retired by the age of fifty-five, ensuring that 'no Oriental was ever allowed to see a Westerner as he ages and degenerated, just as no Westerner needed ever to see himself, mirrored in the eyes of the subject race, as anything but a vigorous, rational, ever-alert young Raj.'

In the twentieth century, these 'men of class' and 'men of character' embodied a modernized and renovated image of rule. They were to safeguard the colonies against the physical weakness, moral decay, and inevitable degeneration that long residence in the colonies encouraged and against the temptations that interracial domestic situations had allowed.

**The strategies of rule and sexual morality**

The political etymology of colonizer and colonized was gender- and class-specific. The exclusionary politics of colonialism demarcated not just external boundaries but also interior frontiers, specifying internal conformity and order among Europeans themselves. The categories of colonizer and colonized were secured through notions of racial difference constructed in gender terms. Redefinitions of acceptable sexual behavior and morality emerged during crises of colonial control precisely because they called into question the tenacious artifices of rule within European communities and what marked their borders.

Even from the limited cases reviewed here, several patterns emerge. First and most obviously, colonial sexual prohibitions were racially asymmetric and gender coded. Sexual relations might be forbidden between white women and men of color but not the other way around. On the contrary, interracial unions (as opposed to marriage) between European men and colonized women aided the long-term settlement of European men in the colonies while ensuring that colonial patrimony stayed in limited and selective hands. Second, interdictions against interracial unions were rarely a primary impulse in the strategies of rule. For India, Indochina, and South Africa, colonial contexts usually associated with sharp social sanctions against interracial unions, 'mixing' in the initial period of colonialization was tolerated and even condoned.

The focus here has been on late colonialism in Asia, but colonial elite intervention in the sexual life of their agents and subjects was not conformed to this place or period. In sixteenth-century Mexico, mixed marriages between Spanish men and Christianized Indian women were encouraged by the crown until mid-century, when colonists felt that 'the rising numbers of their own mestizo progeny threatened the prerogatives of a narrowing elite sector.'

In eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Cuba, mild opposition to interracial marriage gave way to a 'virtual prohibition' from 1864 to 1874 when 'merchants, slave dealers and the colonial powers opposed [it] in order to preserve slavery.'
Changes in sexual access and domestic arrangements have invariably accompanied major efforts to reassert the internal coherence of European communities and to redefine the boundaries of privilege across the colonial divide. But sexual union in itself did not automatically produce a larger population legally classified as 'European.' On the contrary, even in early twentieth-century Brazil—where miscegenation had made for a refined system of gradations, 'most mixing [took] place outside of marriage.' The important point is that miscegenation signaled neither the presence nor the absence of racial discrimination. Hierarchies of privilege and power were written into the condemning of interracial unions, as well as into their condemnation.

The chronologies vary from one context to another, but parallel shifts are evident in the strategies of rule and in sexual morality. Concubinage fell into moral disfavor at the same time that new emphasis was placed on the standardization of European administration. This occurred in some colonies by the early twentieth century and in others later on, but the correspondence between rationalized rule, bourgeois respectability, and the custodial power of European women to protect their men seems strongest during the interwar years. The success of Western technological achievements was being questioned. British, French, and Dutch policy makers had moved from an assimilationist to a more segregationist, separatist stance. The reorganization of colonial investments along corporate and multinational lines brought with it a push for a restructured and more highly productive labor force. With it came more vocal nationalist and labor movements resisting those demands.

An increasing rationalization of colonial management produced radical shifts in notions of how empires should be run, how agents of empire should rule, and where, how, and with whom they should live. Thus French debates concerning the need to systematize colonial management and dissolve the provincial and personalized satraps of 'the old-time colon' invariably targeted and condemned the unseemly domestic arrangements in which they lived. British high officials in Africa imposed new 'character' requirements on their subordinates, designating specific class attributes and conjugal ties that such a selection implied. Critical to this restructuring was a new disdain for colonials too adapted to local custom, too removed from the local European community, and too encumbered with intimate native ties. As in Sumatra, this hands-off policy distanced Europeans in more than one sense. It forbade European staff both from personal confrontations with their Asian field hands and from the limited local knowledge they gained through sexual and domestic arrangements.

Medical expertise increasingly confirmed the salubrious benefits of European camaraderie and frequent home leaves. A cordon sanitaire surrounded European enclaves, was wrapped around mind and body, around each European man and his home. White prestige became redefined by the conventions that would safeguard the moral, cultural, and physical well-being of its agents, with which European women were charged. Colonial politics locked European men and women into routinized protection of their physical health and social space in ways that bound gender prescriptions to the racial cleavages between 'us' and 'them.'

It may be, however, that we should not be searching for congruent colonial chronologies attached to specific dates but rather for similar shifts in the rhythms of rule and sexual management, for similar internal patterns within specific colonial histories themselves. For example, following the Great Rebellion in India, political subversion was tied to sexual impropriety in new ways. Colonial politicians and moral reforms stipulated
new codes of conduct that emphasized respectability, domesticity, and a more carefully segregated use of space. All of these measures focused on European women. Virtually all resonate with those developed in Africa and Southeast Asia but were instituted a half century earlier than in colonies elsewhere. Looking to a somewhat longer durée than the colonial crises of the early twentieth century, we might consider British responses to the 1857 rebellion not as an exception but as a template for colonial responses elsewhere. The modular quality of colonial perceptions and policies was built on new international standards of empire and specific metropolitan priorities. New standards in turn were responsive to local challenges of those who contested life and labor under European rule.

Sexual control figured in the substance, as well as the iconography, of colonialism’s racial policies. But colonial politics was not just concerned with sex; nor did sexual relations reduce to colonial politics. Sex in the colonies had to do with sexual access and reproduction, class distinctions and racial demarcations, nationalism and European identity — all in different measure and not all at the same time. Major shifts in the positioning of women were not, as we might expect, signaled by the penetration of capitalism per se but by subtler changes in class politics and imperial morality and in response to the failures of specific colonial projects. Ethnographies of empire should attend both to changing sensibilities and to sex, to racialized regimes that were realized on a macro- and micro-scale. They may begin to capture how European culture and class politics resonated in colonial settings, how class and gender discriminations were transposed into racial distinctions that reverberated in the metropole as they were fortified on colonial ground. Such investigations may show that sexual control was both an instrumental image for the body politic — a salient part standing for the whole — and itself fundamental to how racial policies were secured and how colonial projects were carried out.

Notes

1. Some women’s sojourns in the colonies did allow them to pursue career possibilities and independent lifestyles barred to them in metropolitan Europe at the time. However, the experience of professional women in South Asia and Africa highlights how quickly they were shaped into ‘cultural missionaries’ or, in resisting that impulse, were marginalized in their work and social life.


5. ibid., 207.


10 ibid., 16. European-born women also were excluded from much of the Portuguese empire from the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. C.R. Boxer, The Portuguese Seaborne Empire, 1415–1825 (New York: Knopf, 1969) 129–30.


19 James Boutilier, 'European Women in the Solomon Islands,' in Denise O'Brien and Sharon Tiffany (eds), Rethinking Women's Roles: Perspectives from the Pacific (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 197.


21 Boutilier, 'European Women,' 197; Inglis, White Women's Protective Ordinance, 11.


26 Ernest Rodenwaldt, 'Eugenetisch Problemen in Nederlandisch-Indie' in Ons Nageslacht, 1928, 1–8, 1.


29 Quoted in David Arnold, 'White Colonization and Labour in Nineteenth-Century India,' Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History, 1983, 10(2), 139.

30 Said, Orientalism, 42.

31 June Nash, 'Aztec Women: The Transition from Status to Class in Empire and Colony,' in Etienne and Leacock, Women and Colonization, 140.


33 Degler, Neither Black nor White, 185.