

Sex, Soap, and Colonial Studies

Ethnic Pride and Racial Prejudice in Victorian Cape Town: Group Identity and Social Practice, 1875–1902. By VIVIAN BICKFORD-SMITH. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Pp. xxiii+281. \$64.00.

Lifebuoy Men, Lux Women: Commodification, Consumption, and Cleanliness in Modern Zimbabwe. By TIMOTHY BURKE. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996. Pp. ix+298. \$45.00 (cloth); \$17.95 (paper).

Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Imperial Contest. By ANNE McCLINTOCK. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. Pp. xi+449. \$80.00 (cloth); \$18.95 (paper).

Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things. By ANN LAURA STOLER. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1995. Pp. xiv+237. \$45.00 (cloth); \$16.95 (paper).

Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race. By ROBERT J. C. YOUNG. London and New York: Routledge, 1995. Pp. xiv+237. \$75.00 (cloth); \$16.95 (paper).

Perhaps not even the best academic trend setters could have predicted the now long-term popularity and complexity of colonial studies. For most historians of the formerly colonized world, the very creation of graduate programs, journals, and courses in the study of India, or Africa, or the Middle East meant liberating it from its debilitating association with imperial history. In many fields, the rise of national, postcolonial historiographies and literary studies accompanied the birth of new nations; historians and critics were to provide the history in which—and with which—the citizens of renewed sovereignties could take pride. Anthropologists had a somewhat rougher road. On one hand, they were said to be implicated in the colonial project; on the other, they were the only people who had been studying local history and culture in the colonies in this century. More often than not, this particular history has made them reluctant to reclaim their own studies of the colonial experience.¹ Besides, historians and literary critics claimed methodologies—archeology, the study of oral tradition, linguistics, and so on—that enabled them to read beyond the recent colonial past to see the precolonial one. Indeed, fifteen or twenty years ago, studying the colonial experience was not considered a good career move—I can think of half a dozen scholars who were so warned—and topics that tried to link colonial practices in transnational ways were thought to silence those African or Indian or Melanesian voices garbled in translation in so many white-authored texts.

Those days are long gone. Not only was colonialism seen as a key to understanding the failure of new states, but as the state form itself faltered and became ethnically charged in the late 1980s, colonialism came to be seen as a moment of forced cultural exchange that took on

¹ The most obvious examples are Georges Ballandier, "La situation coloniale: L'approche theoretique," *Cahiers internationaux sociologique* 11 (1951): 44–79, and much of the rich work done through the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute in Lusaka, in what is today Zambia. This work documented colonial modernity long before anyone put these two terms together. See, e.g., the articles from the late 1950s reprinted in A. L. Epstein, *Scenes from African Urban Life: Collected Copperbelt Essays* (Edinburgh, 1992), and Hortense Powdermaker, *Copper Town: The Human Situation on the Rhodesian Copperbelt* (New York, 1966). A superb, recent publication concerning fieldwork conducted over forty years ago suggests the extent of anthropologists' confusion over what they could say about the disruption they observed in colonial times (see Greta Kershaw, *Mau Mau from Below* [Athens, Ga., 1996]).

a shape of its own, obscuring local rivalries and articulating visions of internationalism that would, it turned out, not last all that long. The notion that there was something essential about colonialism, regardless of who practiced it on whom, where, and for how long, led to a tendency to use "colonial" as haphazardly as "postcolonial." In much academic usage, it became a term that conflated analysis with periodization, as if it could, simply by its deployment, encompass Barbados in 1784, Mauritania in 1925, and India in 1944. Nevertheless, this inaccurate use of the term "colonial" produced some stunning insights, which local and comparative studies had not done.² But these studies generated a powerful critique, that is, that imperial agendas were never so clear or capable that they could reliably be taken at their word, nor were they able to contain all the contradictions of governing settlers and subalterns and the locals who mediated between them while keeping metropolitan parliaments off their backs.³

The books discussed here continue to unpack colonialism and locate it in imperial ideas and local practices; each one makes important and original contributions to our understanding of the colonial world and the imperial project. Robert Young's book explores the very discomfiting parallels between nineteenth-century racial theories and the colonial discourse of today. Ann Stoler plays out Foucauldian notions of sexuality and discipline in terms of colonialism and race. Anne McClintock's collection of essays reveals the subtle terrains and terrors of domesticity that linked colony and metropole. Timothy Burke studies this history in colonial Zimbabwe, interrogating the uses to which European clothing and toiletries were put. Vivian Bickford-Smith offers a history of Victorian Cape Town, where the division of labor and the racial distinctions of poverty and pathology were to be reshaped by the mineral revolution.⁴ But taken together, or read in concert with each other, these books push colonial studies in powerful new directions; they not only restate, but they also relocate a dissatisfaction with the colonial as an analytical frame and remind us that the specificity with which race and power were inscribed on subject peoples was matched by the specific ways subject peoples refashioned the vocabularies of race and power in their own images.

And these vocabularies have not come as far as we might like to imagine. Young is perhaps the most forceful of these authors in noting

² The best known of these is Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literature* (London, 1989).

³ For the classic statement of this, see John Lonsdale and Bruce Berman, "Coping with the Contradictions: The Development of the Colonial State in Kenya," *Journal of African History* 20 (1979): 487–506; but also see the introduction and the articles collected in Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1997).

⁴ For the record, I was one of the publisher's readers for Stoler's book, and for my own research, I had read an earlier draft of Burke's manuscript.

the similarities of the colonial studies of today and the racial theories of 150 years ago: “the racial was always cultural,” he notes (p. 28). Nowhere is this clearer than in Bickford-Smith’s account of the changing descriptions of the “Malay” community in Cape Town, a supposedly Muslim group poised between Africans and Coloreds. In 1855, the author who helped establish “Malay” as an enduring racial category observed that the community consisted of Muslims, Arabs, Hottentots, Christians, and “Mozambique prize-negroes” the complexions of whom varied “from a light brown to a dark olive.” Within twenty years, Malay became a racial term for the respectable, nonwhite poor: they were the nonwhites who made the best domestics, horsemen, and artisans. They had been “trained to habits of decency and order.” The classification of people of mixed race, of hybrids, was imaginative in Victorian Cape Town: there were no clear stereotypes, no fixed imaginings of what a mixed race person would look like or sound like. A successful novel of 1884 told of an illicit union between a wealthy white woman and an African chief; their son passed himself off in high society as a German music professor until, “unpretentious and abashed,” he realized he did not possess the natural superiority of whites and went off to a remote corner of the Cape Colony (pp. 70–71, 24, 88).

What accounted for such multiple, if not casual, meanings of race? Nothing in the supposedly liberal heritage of Cape Town, according to Bickford-Smith. But Stoler provides a broader and more disturbing answer. Imperialists were desperate for ways to manage the exclusions of their dreams and took whatever theories and rhetorics they needed, regardless of the extent to which they were dingbat, discredited, or at odds with the theories and rhetorics in vogue a few years before. Put bluntly, white men of the empire knew that race was such an artificial and arbitrary category: there was no way to ascribe specific features and qualities to any particular group. It made as much sense to change racial definitions every few years as it did to have a biological notion of race. Cape Town was more pragmatic than liberal. The racial theories of Europe had originated in vague debates about blood lines, aristocracies and their property, and almost teleological notions about population.⁵ These theories broke down in the nineteenth century—just as they were exported wholesale to the colonies—as they failed to explain the conditions in industrial slums or the conquered sovereignties of India or Africa or the continued domination of Ireland. Stoler notes that blood purity, for example, was rejected in Europe but came into its own in Caribbean colonies at the end of the nineteenth century where it provided a legal mechanism for marriage laws after emancipation. But even as the colonial world took rejected notions from the metropolitan one, the two sites were linked. McClintock argues that “the iconography of *domestic degeneracy* was

⁵ See Anna Davin, “Imperialism and Motherhood,” reprinted in Cooper and Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire*, pp. 87–151.

used to mediate the manifold contradictions in imperial hierarchy,' not only to account for what racial theories could no longer explain but to help explain why some people had to be excluded and segregated more urgently than others (pp. 53–58).

But degeneration, redolent as it might be, may be too linear a way to map the many intersections of race, class, gender, and empire. Any number of embodied categories—pollution, contamination, and above all hybridity—were the means by which European biopower made itself expansive after the eighteenth century. More to the point, as Stoler points out, these concepts naturalized European biopower. But how did biopower spread to so many places? Giving too much attention to images and too little attention to commodities focuses our gaze on the production of those images; it takes us back in the metropole, often taking imperialists at their word, and we risk ignoring all the conflict and contestation embedded in any site of colonial production. Race and class were set in every bar of soap, every garment. Bickford-Smith cites a Cape Town magazine in the 1880s as complaining about Malay tailors: “We have seen a sickly mass of drunkenness, pallor and dirt, stitching a dress suit destined to . . . our merchants and our husbands” (p. 71). Racial categories contaminated production; there were no untainted commodities made in the empire: the ideas about race and filth that the pragmatists of Cape Town tried to change when it suited urban policies were in fact impressed into the fabric of social and economic exchange.

But clothing destined for merchants and gentlemen could not be controlled once it was sold and resold. Burke’s important study of the marketing of clothes and toiletries in colonial Zimbabwe reports the extent of early colonial self-doubts about their own efforts to clothe Africans. Missionaries worried that Africans would never learn to wash clothes and later worried about the delight with which Africans approached their clothing purchases and the skill with which they shaped the practice of retail trade.⁶ By the late 1930s, however, Africans were as offended by well-dressed Africans as any official might have been. Newspaper articles responded to African correspondents who complained “of the contempt and ridicule they are subjected to when they are wearing their best clothes” by saying that “these remarks are justified.” Africans in top hats, spectacle frames, and gloves were laughable; such clothes “were doing great harm to their race” (Burke, p. 103). But Africans with walking sticks and imported trousers did not indicate a tragic submission to imperial authority or the export of the grossest consumerism; rather these were men whose hybrid dress challenged the purity of

⁶ Burke, *Lifebuoy Men*, pp. 39, 63–80. In South Africa, doctors and mine managers blamed the incidence of tuberculosis on Africans miners’ inability to wash their clothes properly; see Randall M. Packard, “The ‘Healthy Reserve’ and the ‘Dressed Native’: Discourses on Black Health and the Language of Legitimation in South Africa,” *American Ethnologist* 16, no. 4 (1989): 686–703.

the concepts on which hybridity was based. No longer did European clothes convey meanings that resonated in Europe, but in Africa. Once commodities crossed cultural borders, their use changed, too: toothpaste, for example, was a popular Zimbabwean skin medicine. Not only were the meanings of these goods assimilated and refashioned, but talk about commodities and their meanings was also taken over and reallocated by subject peoples themselves.

And some of these commodities made it difficult to claim that colonial rule was based on hegemonies of race, whiteness, and respectability. Whites might be able to legislate who was white, but they could never control the meanings of whiteness or aspirations thereto: Africans used margarine as skin cream as beauty and respectability and commodity culture were inserted into African epistemologies. McClintock's wonderfully illustrated argument that imperialism exported and then reimported the domestic domain is forcefully augmented by Burke's work. The maps of South Africa that spell out Bovril or the advertisements showing Africans awed by Pears Soap must be reread after Burke's book: what happens to imperial power when the colonized use Bovril as foot powder and believe that Pears Soap increases male potency? It may not be possible to talk about the export of commodity culture: once a product crossed a cultural frontier, it became part of that culture. This is in fact Young's ending: "A culture never repeats itself perfectly away from home. Any exported culture will in some way run amok, go phut or threaten to turn into mumbo jumbo" (p. 174).

The same may be true for whiteness and the respectability thereof. Only South African segregation equated whiteness with respectability and social standing, and even then it took a gold rush to make it policy. Bickford-Smith notes that in 1880 the Cape Town agricultural show only admitted "wealthy Malays" after noon, the same time when "white loafers" were allowed in. Within a decade—after the discovery of diamonds and then gold—first class hotels did not admit nonwhites at all (p. 86). Indeed, these books share a grudging sense that being white was not any clearer than being any other race. In the colony, whiteness was another colonial expedient, another cultural category run amok and then contested by metropolitan officials who found colonial whiteness wanting. Stoler identifies the struggle for control of domestic space as central to colonial categorizations; the sexual ease of the servants had to be countered by high morals of the parents. Otherwise, as J. F. H. Kohlbrugge, a doctor in Indonesia, wrote in 1906, "It is impossible to cultivate a European in Java, whether the child is born of pure European parents or by crossing with another race" (p. 157). Growing up in Java was as contaminating as any locally sewn dress suit; the taint came from proximity, not birth or upbringing. The problem was not racial purity or the various configurations of gender that went on in every settler home, but that imperial subjects were inserting themselves into the fabric of empire every chance they got.

Indeed, reading these books together suggests another insight altogether, that is, that colonialism was not about whiteness at all. The self-confidence with which whites in Africa manufactured, marketed, and sold skin lighteners reveals that imperialists were willing to sell whiteness as if it were another rubber concession. Why? McClintock sees Hannah Cullwick and A. J. Munby as a microcosm of imperial problematics. She contends that their hybridizing, inverted home life was one of cross-dressing and blacking up, and that Hannah's well-recorded submissions were reinscribed with race: being a drudge was not erotic enough. McClintock argues that race and skin color were made into fetishes in the imperial world, and that race itself and skin color itself (or approximations thereof) have less meaning, and less importance, than the fantasies they arouse and the bundled associations and connotations they generate. It follows from her work that whiteness, not unlike walking sticks or spectacle-frames, was as much ridiculed as admired, that the whiteness opened up a space of revulsion and desire every bit as much as blackness did in the imperial world. Africans in Zimbabwe attached only slightly more meanings to skin lighteners than they did to walking sticks. Almost everyone Burke interviewed had used the products or knew someone who did when they were in their teens or twenties. Only a few talked of their use in terms of class aspirations. Many more spoke of the banning of these products in the 1980s and how such a ban misrepresented these products as an identification with whites. Africans—usually men—had their own blistering commodified critiques of those who used skin lighteners—usually women—calling them “Fanta [orange soda] face, Coca-Cola legs” (pp. 189–93, 196). The newly independent state of Zimbabwe may have overestimated the power of whiteness when it took skin lighteners off the market; Africans knew that these commodities, like any other cosmetic product, were imbued with all the insinuations of the struggles of gender and courtship in which consumption, women's disposable incomes, and notions of beauty played a part. Once they crossed the cultural divide, skin lighteners in Africa were not about whiteness. African men who complained that women who used these products would make bad wives were not talking about whiteness; they were talking about how they spent their money.

The gap between Young and Stoler and Burke—or McClintock and Bickford-Smith for that matter—is not so great. All these books locate desire firmly within the imperial project. In so doing they move the study of sexuality and colonialism far beyond the anecdotes of boys' sexual adventures, cross-dressing and experimenting their way through the empire.⁷ Instead these books, firmly and forcefully, reveal that what made biopower so biological was the premise of miscegenation, the erotic promise of race and class, and the anxieties poor whites and well-to-do

⁷ See, e.g., Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (Manchester, 1990).

blacks aroused in these fantasies. The real power of whiteness may have been in the ease with which it could be diluted. This theorizing of how hybridity would or would not work is what Young's book is about. Nineteenth-century theories of hybridity stumbled not on race but on theorizing desire. This is Bickford-Smith's implicit terrain, although he seems to argue that race was so artificial and overconstructed in Victorian Cape Town that no one thought twice about desire.

But Stoler cuts to the chase. Her chapter entitled "Domestic Subversions and Children's Sexuality" is perhaps constrained by Foucault's own obsessions, but she gives us a new optic with which to interrogate colonial rule. In her concluding chapter, she describes the scientific pornographers of colonial Indonesia, firmly located in an eighteenth-century tradition of making race scientific, who could barely keep their gaze fixed on adult women and all but drooled over the erotic cleanliness of young Javanese women. In these chapters Stoler points to a new direction that may show how ideas of domination and the fantasies embedded in color could readily slip into fantasies of domestic bliss. Stoler's most disturbing, and hence most important, insight suggests that we should place children's and adolescents' sexuality in the foreground of colonial politics. The very servants whose intimacies could make pure-blooded Europeans Javanese could perform other seductions as well. But Stoler places the children firmly and actively at the center of these interventions: children, said to be overly indulged by servants who were considered bad mothers themselves, could not then be disciplined by parents themselves. If the children sought out native lovers, it was not a Freudian desire for their mothers, but their own ambiguous, anxious confusion over how much of their distinctively European upbringing was actually native. To put it simply, those children who never could grow up to be pure Europeans did not end up with purely European fantasies.

Although Stoler's examples are primarily from Indonesia, readers familiar with Britain's African empire know of the large number of child rape cases that constitute the most outrageous incidents of Black Peril cases in settler societies. In each of these, the accusations of eight-year-olds or their mothers, with evidence based on remembered glances or soiled underwear, led a servant directly to the gallows. Stoler's work—particularly when read with Burke, Young, and McClintock—makes me think it is time to go back to these cases, to look at the fantasy—both of miscegenation and of incest—of family, discipline, domination, and domesticity. The constantly changing categories of race that Bickford-Smith reports reveal more than the sloppiness with which segregation and imperialism were practiced on the ground; they foreground the ways that racial identities could never be fixed in rulers' thinking. The disciplined Malay worker of yesterday was today's drunk; the German immigrant could be revealed to be half-African in a split second. It was a sloppy way to run an empire, but it made every servant, every bootblack, and every music instructor more exciting and revolting than they might

otherwise have seemed. The very way that racial categories took on characteristics of work and health meant that they became likely repositories for the other fantasies of empire as well—ideas about domination and submission, about dirt and cleanliness, about politics and parenthood came to be housed in racial categories. Colonialism was not about whiteness, and certainly not about blackness, but in practice it came to be about all the things people in colonies imagined color and its gradations to mean. These books provide the beginnings of a map for the twists and turns of this particular history, and their impact will have a salutary impact on future studies of colonies and metropole.

LUISE WHITE

University of Florida, Gainesville