Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies

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This essay takes as its subject two distinctive historiographies, one in postcolonial studies and the other in North American history, that both address how intimate domains—sex, sentiment, domestic arrangement, and child rearing—figure in the making of racial categories and in the management of imperial rule. It examines two prevailing trends: on the one hand, an analytic convergence in treatments of, and increasing attention to, intimacy in the making of empire; on the other, recognition of the distinctive conceptual commitments and political investments that shape the fields as separate disciplinary ventures and historiographic domains.

I use the terms “postcolonial studies” and “colonial studies” interchangeably, although those who identify themselves with one do not always identify with the other. Some scholars use the term “postcolonial” to signal a cross-disciplinary political project, analytically akin to cultural studies, that rejects colonial categories and scholarship that takes them for granted. Others retain the term “colonial studies” to underscore more concern for the local and labor history of colonial societies while similarly acknowledging the continuing political, economic, and cultural landscape in which populations who have been colonized are subjugated and now live. The

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former tend to treat colonialism as a history of the present, to focus on the aftermath of empire and on contemporary hybrid metropolitan cultural forms that follow from it. The latter is less attentive to analytic orientation and more centered on the period of formal colonial rule. Here, I go back and forth between the two literatures without close concern for those gradations of difference, which are neither consistent nor always substantive.¹ Both designations indicate a concern, albeit differently framed, with the politics of scholarship and knowledge.

For some two decades my work on Indonesia’s Dutch colonial history has addressed patterns of governance that were particular to that time and place but resonant with practices in a wider global field. My perspective thus is that of an outsider to, but an acquisitive consumer of, North American historical studies and one long struck with the disparate and congruent imperial projects in Asia, Africa, and the Americas.² This essay invites reflection on those domains of overlap and difference as it registers the profusion of new insights about “becoming colonial” that students of North American history and colonial studies increasingly share. It looks to the mutual relevance of the two historiographies and the grounds for further conversation.

My concern is not to recommend the initiation of a project already underway. Comprehensive reviews of historians’ treatment of empire and efforts to internationalize United States history and to trace its transnational linkages have been high on the agenda of students of North American history over the last decade: they are not my task here.³ This is not an essay against notions of exceptionalism, though it substantiates the reasoning of those who have argued that United States history is not unique. Nor is this a review of the vast range of research on gender and colonialism that cuts across both fields.

My interest is more specifically in what Albert Hurtado refers to as “the intimate frontiers” of empire, a social and cultural space where racial classifications were


² See, for example, Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, “Between Metropole and Colony: Rethinking a Research Agenda,” in Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley, 1997), 1–56. Motivation for taking on this task derives from my own pedagogic, political, and archival trajectories. On my research in the late 1970s in North Sumatra’s multinational plantation belt (now the home of Reebok and Nike shoe factories), see Ann Laura Stoler, Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra’s Plantation Belt, 1870–1979 (New Haven, 1985). For a reappraisal of that work, see Ann Laura Stoler, “Preface,” in Ann Laura Stoler, Capitalism and Confrontation in Sumatra’s Plantation Belt, 1870–1979 (Ann Arbor, 1995).

defined and defied, where relations between colonizer and colonized could powerfully confound or confirm the strictures of governance and the categories of rule. Some two decades ago, the historian Sylvia van Kirk urged a focus on such “tender ties” as a way to explore the “human dimension” of the colonial encounter. As she showed so well, what Michel Foucault has called the “dense transfer point[s]” of power that generate such ties were sites of production of colonial inequities and therefore of tense ties as well. Among students of colonialisms in the last decade, the intimacies of empire have been a rich and well-articulated research domain. A more sustained focus on the relationship between what Foucault referred to as “the regimes of truth” of imperial systems (the ways of knowing and establishing truth claims about race and difference on which macropolities rely) and those microsites of governance may reveal how North American histories and those of empires elsewhere compare and converge. Pursuing connections between the broad-scale dynamics of rule and the intimate domains of implementation may suggest more lines of overlapping inquiry and a rethinking of our respective frames.

This essay is in three parts. The first looks briefly at recent attention to the intimacies of empire in colonial studies and in research on North America. Part 2 turns to four colonial moments in United States history and European expansion that have been extensively compared on some fronts—and that could be on others. Part 3 focuses on comparisons that both reinforce recent claims about the limitations of nationally focused comparative history and point to circuits of knowledge production and strategies of racial differentiation with wide resonance. The examples in part 3 are of three different kinds: (1) an analysis of mid- to late-nineteenth-century debates about nurseries that addressed the making of sensibilities, citizens, and race; (2) a comparison of vocational schools in the nineteenth-century Dutch East Indies and those designed for Native Americans; and (3) a tracing of the expert knowledge that went into the South African Carnegie Commission of the late 1920s. I draw on them to illustrate the value of looking comparatively at circuits of knowledge production, governing practices, and indirect as well as direct connections in the political rationalities that informed imperial rule. Each raises questions about what categories are taken to be commensurable in historical analysis. Throughout the paper I call for more reflection on the history and politics of comparison, on the importance of doing a certain kind of comparative cultural history, and urge attention to practices of colonial comparison by colonial governments themselves.

4 Albert L. Hurtado, Intimate Frontiers: Sex, Gender, and Culture in Old California (Albuquerque, 1993); Sylvia Van Kirk, *Mary Tender Ties: Women in the Fur-Trade Society in Western Canada, 1670–1870* (Norman, 1983); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1980), 103. On “regimes of truth” (and “grids of intelligibility”), see Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago, 1982), 120–21. Sexual and affective intimacies are not the only microsites of governance from which to explore the relationship between metropolitan and colonial histories. Studies in public health and histories of deportation, labor, communication, and transport provide other nodal points. I thank James Vernon for making this point. Still, I would argue that sexual and affective intimacies are a privileged site on which those other sites invariably turn back and convere.

The examples sketch ways intimate matters and narratives about them figured in defining the racial coordinates and social discriminations of empire. Common to all was a fashioning of moral policies that shaped the boundaries of race. Each points to strategies of exclusion on the basis of social credentials, sensibility, and cultural knowledge. Foucault defined such technologies of rule as “biopolitics”—as part of the political anatomy of states, governing techniques that relied on “the disciplining of individual bodies and the regulations of the life process of aggregate human populations.”6 For those impatient with Foucault, let us say they joined the making of an imperial body politic to the making of sexualized and racialized selves.

Colonial state projects, such as those in the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Dutch East Indies, attended minutely to the distribution of appropriate affect (what sentiments could be shown toward, and shared with, whom), to the relations in which carnal desires could be safely directed, to prescriptions for comportment that could distinguish colonizer from colonized—and, as important, to those that finely graded the distinctions of privilege and class among colonizers themselves. My own interest has been in the relation between prescription and practice, in those frequently-entered-into domestic arrangements that could blur distinctions of color and culture but also those that reiterated relations of dominance in kitchens, bedrooms, and nurseries—and behind the barely screened partitions of the colonial army’s “family” barracks.7

But there is still much more to ask about how civility and racial membership were measured less by what people did in public than in their private lives— with whom they cohabited; who slept with whom, when and where; who suckled which children; how children were reared and by whom; what language was spoken to servants, friends, and family members at home. When Dutch children in the colonial Indies were forbidden to play with the children of servants lest they become too comfortable “babbling and thinking in Javanese” or when Javanese nursesmaids were instructed to hold their charges away from their bodies so that the infants would not “smell of their sweat,” more was going on than peevish squabbles over cultural style. Such standards were designed to ensure that European children in the colonies learned the right social affiliations and did not “metamorphize” into Javanese. They were part of the colonial state’s investment in knowledge about the carnal, about sensibilities and familiarities, its preoccupying commitment to what I call “the education of desire.”8

6 On “biopower” as a political technology focused on individual and aggregate bodies, see Foucault, History of Sexuality, I, trans. Hurley, 139–46. For a helpful explication of his historical treatment of biopower, see Dreyfus and Rabinow, Michel Foucault, 133–42.


Historians of European expansion in North America as distinct from Asia and Africa often subscribe to a different conceptual vocabulary to describe cultural and racial mixture, the sexual opportunities afforded to colonizing men, the ways native women parlayed their services into private advantage, and the categories designating the children they produced. In turn, my Foucauldian identification of this domain as part of the “microphysics of rule” may be very different from vocabulary current in North American scholarship, whether Gary Nash’s “intimate contact zones” or variations on Richard White’s richly evocative “middle ground.” But those differences in lexicon should not get in the way. Both fields are concerned with the nature of this contested terrain, with fundamental sites of power in the making and unmaking. Both are attentive to the fixity and fluidity of racial taxonomies and those sexual and affective transgressions that formed and refuegure the distinctions between ruler and ruled.

Part I: Crosscurrents in Colonial Studies and American History

Students of colonialism might all agree that gender and race have been high on the agenda of historians studying the United States. We might also all agree that William Appleman Williams’s 1955 observation that American empire is absent from American historiography no longer fits the case. Few would argue that American exceptionalism with respect to colonialism remains a prevailing paradigm. Nevertheless, many United States historians are still unfamiliar with the new currents in scholarship that have animated colonial studies over the last fifteen years. Students of colonialism, for their part, still pay insufficient attention to early American history and to the work on “tensions of empire” that American historians have long produced.10

Some reasons for this disjuncture are suggested in the introduction the American studies scholar Amy Kaplan provided for Cultures of United States Imperialism, published in 1993. As she then described it, a “resilient paradigm” of United States domestic and foreign scholarship of the 1950s and 1960s cordonned off empire as a “mere episode” in American history, little more than a twenty-year blip on the democratic and domestic national horizon. In her formulation, the denial derived from three phenomena: an absence of culture from the study of United States imperialism, an absence of empire from the study of American culture, and an absence of the United States from postcolonial studies of empire.11 While some American historians


10 William Appleman Williams, “The Frontier Thesis and American Foreign Policy,” Pacific Historical Review, 24 (Nov. 1955), 379–95. For the contrary argument that exceptionalism was “present at the very creation of America,” not the imposition of later historians, see Jack P. Greene, The Intellectual Construction of America: Exceptionalism and Identity from 1492 to 1800 (Chapel Hill, 1993), 6. As good an example as any of a colonial reader in which United States history does not figure is Cooper and Stoler, eds., Tensions of Empire.

11 Amy Kaplan, “‘Left Alone with America’: The Absence of Empire in the Study of American Culture,” in Cultures of United States Imperialism, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham, 1993), 3–21. As she put it, the absence of the United States from postcolonial studies “reproduces American exceptionalism from without”—
adamently disagreed. Kaplan’s point was instructive and productively disquieting at the time. Her citations were from an earlier United States historiography that often conceived American empire as a short-lived moment and a contained project. For that earlier generation, the Philippines, Fiji, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and certainly the informal empire that gave United States capital, products, and personnel a strong presence throughout the European colonial world of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Indochina were outside United States history proper, unregistered in public memory, and off the popularized map.

But Kaplan’s timely assessment was of another moment. A whole generation of social historians, historical anthropologists, and students of American culture have begun to reconsider what in United States domestic history relates to its expansionist strategies of empire, where studies of empire speak to the concerns of United States history, and—not least—what is colonial about “colonial America.” Students of Filipino history are demonstrating the parallels between American empire in the Philippines and within United States borders and between the United States and British empires, bridging what they describe as a sustained separation between historiography on the Philippines and on mainstream America. Edited volumes such as Close Encounters of Empire have turned away from how United States imperialism “consolidated” North America and how empire influenced domestic policy to view American racial politics from the regions that were colonized. They look to the “representation machines” to which colonized populations were subject, that is, to the ways colonizing populations depicted and categorized them, with emphasis “on the ground.” Others have found colonial inflections elsewhere: on the borderlands of Mexico or in regions of western expansion, in the sexualized contact zones of Texas and Arizona where poor whites, Native Americans, and African Americans met, producing what Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aron have referred to, in a recent essay in the American Historical Review, as “hybrid residuals of these encounters.”

Gary Nash’s presidential address to the Organization of American Historians in 1995, “The Hidden History of Mestizo America,” marks a cusp, the moment of recognition of a “zone of deep intercultural contacts” understood as a space of cultural


merging and conjugal relations more than a battleground. But it is the quantity and quality of edited volumes on the intimacies of empire appearing in the last few years that is staggering. All attest to the activity of scholars—both those of a new generation and those already established—who are reframing their questions to consider as fundamental the proposition that if race matters to the history of United States empire, then, as John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman insisted a decade earlier, intimacies must matter as well. American historians across a wide spectrum have sought to understand how political authority was secured and how it worked through the management of marriage, domesticity, child rearing, and paid-for and unpaid-for sex. More telling still, even in volumes not explicitly devoted to intimacies, a focus on domestic life, miscegenation, and family signals both a broadening trend and a new understanding of why and how those sites are political.14

Still, what is striking from the perspective of colonial studies is the circumscribed purview of even some of the best of the new historical scholarship. Nash’s elegant and sweeping survey of United States historiography, which places mixing at the heart of American history and recognizes race and the affective as a potent political terrain, has a very clear political agenda—directed more at the present than at the past. It reads as an originary narrative of the deep rootedness of multiculturalism, rather than biracialism, on the North American landscape. Despite his reference to Salman Rushdie and obliquely to ethnic dislocations elsewhere in the world, Nash’s story of crossing racial boundaries remains a celebration of “hybridity” as a source of national redemption and of “mixedness” in the making of the contemporary United States.

To an outsider looking in, Nash’s luminous essay invites more than a genealogical reworking of the national narrative of the United States. It invites inquiries that engage both the historical specificity of mixedness and its widely varied and changing political meanings. Such approaches must work productively off the distortions of a closeup and wide-angle lens, reaching for distant and counterintuitive transnational comparisons as well as those more obvious and oblique to national borders. It invites a wider treatment of mixedness, showing debates about mestizos, métis, “Indos,” and “half-bloods” as sites of imperial anxieties in colonial contexts much farther afield than the Spanish Americas: in Dutch-ruled Indonesia, in British India, in French-ruled Vietnam and Réunion.15


15 On mixedness, métisage, and mestiza in other contexts, see Jean Gelman Taylor, The Social World of Bata-
From the Indiys to South Africa, mixed unions not sanctified by the state as well as those legally sanctioned in marriage were condoned and actively encouraged as part of the strategic tactics of conquest. Only later were they condemned as encroachments upon, and threats to the privileges of, an overseas colonizing settler population. How being mestizo played out elsewhere raises other questions: mixing could provide access to some privileges while it sharply blocked access to others. Carl Degler’s notion that a “mulatto escape hatch” marked the difference between the racial politics of Brazil (where it existed) and the United States (where it did not) not only downplays a more complicated set of racialized practices and representations. It also flattens out colonial histories in which claiming to be of “mixed” origin at one historical moment and being designated as “mixed” by those who ruled at another moment produced a range of different political practices. In those histories mixedness itself was a moving and strategic category.16

Sumptuary laws tell a tale of their own: Laws in the colonial Spanish Americas, where being mestizo was often equated with illegitimate birth, legally excluded those who were mixed from holding public office, owning property, and adopting elite forms of transport and dress. In the Indies, on the contrary, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century sumptuary laws “standardized personal vanity” by regulating visible symbols of wealth that valorized the Javanese markers of status of the Dutch East India Company’s mestizo elite.17

This is not to make the obvious point that mixedness meant different things in different places at different times. As Craig J. Calhoun warns in a study of contemporary social theory, “translation adequate to comparative analysis requires an interpretation of a whole organization of activity, not just the matching of vocabulary.” Rather, it is to argue that shifts in the density, frequency, and sequence of state atten-


17 Taylor, Social World of Batavia, 66–68.
tion to mixed unions should turn us to the historical specificities of a social category’s occurrence, the rules that governed its appearance, the ways a set of relations and discourses about them could “arouse opposing strategies” and make it possible, “with a particular set of concepts, to play different games.”18 In some colonial contexts, such as British India, mixedness was conceived as a threat to the state’s racial taxonomies and was heavily policed. Elsewhere, as in the early-twentieth-century Netherlands Indies, discourses about the dangers of mixing provided the contexts in which mixed unions continued to thrive. Clearly, discourses about the political hazards of mixing did not necessarily have the same effects. As in the profusion of scientific debates about the perils of mixing in French Indochina, such debates could serve as forceful reminders of the validity and purity of those racialized categories of persons who were clearly “native” and firmly “white” and knew where they belonged.

But discourses about mixedness were requisitioned to more than the service of colonial regimes, their agents, and those who produced their expert knowledge. Scholars have placed an ideology of mestizaje at the core of Latin America’s varied nationalist narratives, with elites embracing mixedness to render nationalist rhetorics—which were ostensibly inclusionary, equalizing, and popularizing—as projects that targeted indigenous Indian populations for exclusion. Doris Sommer and Vera M. Kutzinski more specifically regard the sexual and erotic dimensions of mestizaje as at the heart of Latin America’s national paradigms.19

My point is not that Nash’s argument about mixing was amiss. The more interesting issue raised by his piece has to do with the breadth of comparison. When historians of the United States look in a transnational direction, it often tends to be south, to Latin America and to border crossings at the historical and contemporary frontiers of the United States.20 But comparisons with historical studies from elsewhere highlight other features of mixing and of discourses about it that emphasize the tactical mobility of concepts, how mixed marriages and unions were used in strategies of governance that joined sexual conquest with other forms of domination. As North American history is becoming more international, the imperial politics of intimacies begs for broader comparisons as well.

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Feminist scholarship has made important moves in that direction. Despite the bracketings that Kaplan noted in earlier scholarship—of culture out of empire, empire out of history, and United States empire out of postcolonial studies—feminist scholars have sought to document the interlocking of sexual and racial patterns of dominance that crisscross historical fields. The insistence that the “personal is political” has informed efforts to address how specific colonial conditions made that so. The direction set by Verena Martinez-Alier’s research on interracial marriage in Cuba’s nineteenth-century slave society, like that of Patricia Seed’s on marriage choices in eighteenth-century colonial Mexico, helped those working in other colonial contexts appreciate how regulations on marital choice were transformed as those societies became increasingly racially organized and racially diverse. Recent work, such as Sharon Block’s on comparative sexual coercion in early America, does what we need more of: She questions what counted as sexual coercion by examining accounts of such acts and the discursive categories of accusation. She treats the coercion of slaves and servants, that is, of African American and white women, in a comparative frame that tells more than either instance could alone about the historical relationships between social and sexual power.21

But even in feminist scholarship, borrowings have often been of a particular kind. Students of American history may avidly reference postcolonial theory (that of Edward Said, Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, to name only the luminaries) and its founding fathers (Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi), but they seem to consider less relevant the specific colonial histories in which colonial relationships and their gender dynamics were produced. Similarly, historians of sexuality and race in the United States, although aware of theory, do not seem conversant with the studies of whiteness that feminist historians of the Pacific and Southeast Asian colonial contexts have been carrying out for some time.22

But borrowing in the other direction can be similarly selective and problematic. When students of colonial studies, myself included, have drawn on Jacquelyn Dowd Hall’s work on racial violence and white women’s quest for suffrage, Patricia Grimshaw’s on Hawaii’s nineteenth-century missionaries, or Mary P. Ryan’s and Nancy F. Cott’s on domesticity, we have often done so for the conceptual form rather than the historical content of their analyses. Postcolonial scholars of British empire in India avidly read United States scholarship on whiteness, but they still treat North America’s racial history as a case apart. Feminist scholars may push shared analytic concepts up against gendered political relations in other times and places, but the history of American imperial expansion usually remains another story.23

22 For a conceptual use of métissage in other contexts that does not pursue a historical comparison, see Jennifer Spear, “They Need Wives’ Métissage and the Regulation of Sexuality in French Louisiana, 1699–1730,” in Sex, Love, Race, ed. Hodes, 35–59.
Still, the exceptions are instructive. Laura Wexler’s analysis of photographs taken by middle-class white women during the war in the Philippines places the violence of United States empire up against the shaping of a gendered domestic space overseas and in the racialized space of the United States. Transnational histories of social movements, such as Ian Tyrrell’s work on missionaries and cultural imperialism or Susan Thorne’s on “missionary-imperial feminism,” have demonstrated with striking consistency that such transnational global ventures “rested on the existence of a degraded female Other in the colonies and at home.” Donna Guy’s examination of the discourses about “white slavery” in Argentina shows how perceptions of emigrant women as “loose,” and their own practices, “affected the rights and inherent restrictions of citizenship beyond national frontiers.” Sometimes connections emerge from unlikely places. Elizabeth van Heyningen’s interpretation of the contagious diseases acts in South Africa’s Cape Colony in the late nineteenth century as imperial legislation moves her to look to the unexpected agents of their implementation: local branches of the Young Men’s Christian Association, the Salvation Army, and institutions staffed by American women and affiliated with the Mount Holyoke Female Seminary in Massachusetts. So what dissuades more archival ventures in such directions? Is it because archival sources make such connections difficult to pursue, because disciplinary convention ignores them, or because our paradigms render these histories as noncommensurable nation-making projects?\(^{24}\)

Part II: Colonial Comparisons; or, What’s “Colonial” about North America?

The task of comparing the racial and sexual entanglements that preoccupy students of colonial studies and those that preoccupy historians of North America raises questions about what is “colonial.” One issue is clear: depending on how “the colonial” is defined, both the possible terms of comparison and the issues are different. By way of illustration, we can look briefly at four moments in United States history. There has been extensive comparative work on all four, and all could be construed as colonial in that they involved European settlement, exploitation, and dominance of separate “others” that transformed social organization, cultural convention, and private life. All suggest what Stuart Hall has called “structures of dominance,” relations of power

that depended on the management of sex in the making of racialized forms of rule. Such structures figured prominently in both North American history and in Europe’s Asian and African colonial expansions.25

An obvious point of departure is the first of the four moments, “colonial America.” There is no period for which historians have more thoroughly detailed the convergent and competing strategies that pitted French, British, and Dutch in distinct ways against Native American populations, against each other, and among themselves. Similarly, the Spanish roots of colonial American policy have been richly documented. Still, the cultural critic Michael Warner blames the disjuncture between that history and postcolonial scholarship on “the old imperial school” (which he identifies with Charles Andrews and George Louis Beer, among others) whose commitment to teleologies of nationalist narratives rendered what was colonial in colonial America irrelevant to those studying the colonial elsewhere. In Warner’s telling, the conflicting agendas of historians of “colonial America” concerned a “future nation” rather than the characteristics of a historically specific “colonial culture.” Instead, he urges a rethinking of British colonialism in the broader context of all the European empires, an approach that would be “attentive to the cultural patterns by which such disparate ventures were able to elaborate, for all their differences, a European colonial project, distinct from each of its manifestations but necessary to each.” Indeed, Warner points to common imperial concerns over reproduction, domestic space, and identities forged in the process of settlement (suggesting parallels with Anne McClintock’s work and my own) that could draw students of North American history beyond the nation to a broader colonizing world.26

Still, the onus of rethinking the scope of analysis should not fall on North Americans alone. Students of Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Africa too have subscribed to models that privilege metropolitan-colony exchanges rather than circuits of people, produce, and narrations that might track common gendered principles of governance through this broader global frame. If they ignore North America, it is certainly not because colonial America is not resonant with other colonial contexts, nor because the concerns of American historians are so differently posed. The sheer volume of work on sexuality and race relations in early America, the rich sources on domestic arrangements and on mixed-marriage and slave households at the very least invite mutual recognition.

25 See the definitions of colonialism in Catherine Hall, ed., Cultures of Empire: Colonizers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: A Reader (Manchester, 2000), 1–36. J. Jorge de Alva notes a “profound shift” in the concept of colonialism since the late 1970s, from a “structural” focus on economics and politics to one highlighting “cultural, discursive and power formation in everyday life.” But the more producitive shift has recognized how economic and political structures are transformed in the power relations of everyday life. See de Alva, “Postcolonization of the (Latin) American Experience,” 263. Stuart Hall, “Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance,” in Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism, ed. UNESCO (Paris, 1980), 341.

For these early periods, Ramón A. Gutiérrez has shown us how marriage structured racial inequalities in New Mexico, as Jennifer L. Morgan, in her survey of sixteenth-century travel literature, has detailed how gender was imbricated in the racial ideologies and strategies of rule. Such studies as Kathleen M. Brown's on gender, race, and power in colonial Virginia speak directly to Jean Gelman Taylor's ethnographic history of the same issues in seventeenth-century colonial Java, halfway around the world. Both document the centrality of women in shaping the contact zones of colonial cultures that became increasingly distinguished by race. Tracing genealogies of kith and kin five generations deep, Taylor showed how the political alliances of Dutch rule were forged by men through female networks that placed domestic arrangements, parenting styles, and education at the center of administrative efforts to shape cultural norms and secure authority. Taylor's focus on the dislocations that colonialism imposed on both colonizers and colonized is a forceful reminder that innovation and improvisation, rather than the mere import of European norms, characterized the cultural ground on which racial differences were consolidated and the terms on which people met.

Parallel patterns of colonial intimacies in early America are well documented. Those that produced “tender ties” between fur traders and Native American women in the Canadian northwest and those that produced a vast mestizo population under Spanish rule to the south suggest manipulations of sexual access that resonate with the ways colonial administrations in South Africa and Southeast Asia watched over those intimacies—and the ways colonized women turned them to their own ends. An older historiography that sustained the myth that New England colonists and Native Americans did not mix has little currency today, as scholars have detailed their sexual arrangements, the children they produced, and the affections and disaffections that grew out of those intimate encounters.

If comparisons between early American contacts and other European colonial contacts are still to be made, a larger literature addresses the second moment, comparing the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century plantation societies of the “Old South” with plantation societies in British, French, and Dutch colonies of Asia, Africa, and the


Caribbean. As Eugene D. Genovese, among others, has shown, plantation households in Georgia and South Carolina were similar to those in the West Indies on which they were initially modeled.29

Indeed, United States economic and social historians such as Genovese have clearly sought to write against American exceptionalism in comparisons with the West Indies and Spanish America. But the labor processes that created such plantation households, as a generation of scholars devoted to world-systems analysis has shown, were realized in congruent ways in other parts of the world. The long-distance displacements of people that split up families and took persons as property in the pursuit of white profits were not unlike the later forced recruitments of workers from Java and China to Malaysia and Sumatra, of indentured workers from south India to Fiji, and of workers from Jamaica to Costa Rica, to name but a few. Much depended on managing the domain of the domestic, on adopting differential pay scales for women and men, on encouraging concubinage and paid-for sex, on condoning sexual coercion, on policing sexual access and intimate encounters. Workers responded with despair and desertion and violence toward Europeans, other populations against whom they were pitted, or even their own families.30 Women were compelled to sell their bodies and give up their children. Others used illicit unions with European men in exchange for more educational opportunities for their children and economic security for themselves. Racialized assessments of ability and worth structured these plantation societies across the board.

Although the plantation households of the Old South depended on slave labor and the colonial households of the Dutch, French, and British in Asia employed “contract coolies” and wage labor, anxieties within European colonial communities over intimacies and fear of contaminations by those who performed domestic service were strikingly the same. Those who worked as nursemaids, cooks, and houseboys were objects of both fear and desire.31 In the vulnerable domestic sphere, they were seen to transgress the protected boundaries of the very white homes where their presence allowed for the production of a particular kind of cultural space: the leisure, ailments, and sensibilities that defined class privilege and distinctions of race.

Representations of, and reactions to, those domestic subversions and transgressions derived from local tensions and produced very different historical effects. But local explanations alone may occlude the powerful parallels expressed in discourses

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around sex, contamination, and colonial vulnerabilities that fears about racialized intimacies shared. The domestic morality that American slaveholders saw as so tied to the subject of sex, described by the American historian Willie Lee Rose, was the object of vigilant attention in the Dutch East Indies and South Africa in the same period. Nor was the “culture of dissemblance”—Darlene Clark Hine’s term, borrowed by the historian Michelle Mitchell to describe the “code of silence around intimate matters” that African American women developed during Reconstruction—so different from Javanese women’s practice of recounting their memories of domestic work in Dutch colonial homes in ways that “protected their ‘inner lives and selves.’”

White men used the protection of white women as a defense against imagined threats—“the red peril,” “the black peril” (in Africa), the “yellow peril” (in Asia). They imposed—and women actively participated in—protective models of womanhood and motherhood and prescriptions for domestic relations that constrained both the women and men in servitude and those who ostensibly ruled. Nor were such “perils” abstract fears. Invocations of the threat of sexual assaults on white women by native men in British India, South Africa, and New Guinea repeatedly returned to incidents of male servants—washermen, sweepers, cooks, and houseboys—poised at bedroom doorways, at thresholds of European homes, intruders into the very domestic spaces where they worked, where women were confined, and where white children were reared. At issue were servants who did not know their “places” and white (often young or working-class) women who did not know the standards for keeping theirs. All confirm Albert Memmi’s insistence that colonialism produced both its colonizers and its colonized in the banal and humble intimacies of the everyday. Such sites were neither metaphors for empire writ large nor metonymic of broader patterns of rule. The politics of intimacy is where colonial regimes of truth were imposed, worked around, and worked out.

A third moment inviting further comparison is highlighted in the model of internal colonialism used to describe the contact zones of the Native American colonial encounter. While some American scholars mark the “imperialist epoch” as spanning the period from 1870 to 1920, others note that as early as the 1850s, “evidence of empire was widely apparent in many forms.” Others, such as Francis Jennings, set North America’s “empire of fortune” earlier. Indeed, such scholars as the anthropologist Eleanor Leacock and the historian Theda Perdue have long treated the dislocations of Native Americans and the warping of their domestic arrangements as a

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colonization process in which women have played a key role. The “internal colonialism” model has been applied broadly to describe modes of interaction between Mexican farm workers and Anglos in the cotton culture of Texas, Mexican miners and Anglos in the copper towns of Arizona, and black sharecroppers and the dominant white culture in the South.34

If the debate over whether the United States could be characterized as a context of internal colonialism waned by the 1990s, attention to the political import of comparing the colonialism of the United States to that of other colonial regimes has not. Linda Gordon’s treatment of the Arizona orphan train scandal in the first decade of the twentieth century—a struggle over which women of which color were more appropriate foster mothers—reflects anxieties over rearing and race that resonate with concurrent discourses in a wider colonial field.35 The struggles were much like those in the Dutch East Indies, which turned on family life, sexual access, and mixed-race children who were abandoned, absconded with, or adopted or who remained precariously perched on societies’ racial divides. White women were again charged with maintaining the prestige of their race while women of different hue were seen as a threat to it.

Mary P. Ryan’s observations about gender in nineteenth-century urban America apply equally well to many European colonies. Gender “supplied the sexual prohibitions, codes of segregation and rhetorical power with which to mortar the rising wall of racial segregation.” White women were subject to, and joint wardens over, structures that made investments in racial uplift and reform—rather than social equality between races—the principle of their acceptance and participation in social life. Indeed, in the nineteenth-century Netherlands Indies, white women could lose their legal rights to European status if they married native men, on the argument of colonial lawyers that their feelings (rather than acts) betrayed cultural dispositions that were less Dutch than Javanese.36

Elaborate codes of conduct that affirmed manliness and virility arose from colonial cultures of fear—white men making vulnerable claims to legitimate rule saw their manhood bolstered by perceptions and practices based on their racial superiority. The displays of manliness in French Indochina, the Dutch East Indies, and Victorian


35 Gordon, Great Arizona Orphan Abduction.

36 Mary P. Ryan, Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley, 1997), 296. On racial membership and mixed-marriage legislation in late-nineteenth-century colonial Indonesia, see Stoler, Tensions of Empire, 198–237.
India had features similar to those described by Gail Bederman for the United States and by Kristin L. Hoganson in her account of the gender politics that “provoked” the Spanish-American and Philippine-American wars.37

But there were differences. When white men in British New Guinea promulgated a White Women’s Protection Ordinance in 1926 to guard their women against the threat of sexual assault by native men, there was no Ida B. Wells to mount a campaign that turned the discourse of manliness against itself. Nor was there a movement of white women in the Indies or New Guinea to galvanize revolt against the duplicitous chivalry of their protective, insecure, and racially fretful men. On the contrary, in India, when the Anglo-Indian press reported rumors of native assaults (and more often “attempted” ones) on white women, middle-class white women successfully led the boycott of a bill that would have allowed such cases to be tried by high-placed functionaries who were native men. Similarly, in colonial Sumatra, when a Dutch planter’s wife was murdered “with a butcher’s knife” by a Javanese worker in 1929, the 167 planters’ wives who signed and dispatched a letter to the queen of the Netherlands called upon their “womanly instincts” to beseech her to “change the regime”—not to investigate labor abuses but to tighten the rein of a “laboring people . . . on the road to unruliness and insubordination.”38

If some comparisons entail a stretch, the fourth moment, the conventionally defined “age of American imperialism” starting with the Spanish-American War, lends itself to more obvious commensurability. Between 1898 and 1914, the United States acquired territories in Cuba, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, Guam, the Philippines, and Eastern Samoa. In the Pacific, Micronesia, Palau, and the Caroline Islands were brought into the American empire thirty years later. This was the heyday of European colonial ventures, if somewhat longer than Eric Hobsbawm’s “Age of Empire.”39

The British, Dutch, French, and German empires were moving rapidly in two seemingly contrary directions: toward more social reform, education, and philanthropy (as in the Dutch Indies “Ethical Policy” and the French “civilizing mission”) and toward increasing attentiveness to racial distinctions and social policies that consolidated those distinctions. Racial discrimination and social reform, as students both of colonial studies and of “benevolent colonialism” in United States history have learned, were not contradictions but complementary political impulses, created out of the same cloth.


38 Inglis, White Women’s Protection Ordinance. This is not to exaggerate the breadth of the white women’s antilynching movement or to ignore the fact that a much larger population of the white women in the U.S. virulently upheld racist practice. Sinha, Colonial Masculinity, 52–63; “Political Report No. 6,” July 16, 1929, American Consulate, Medan, Sumatra (microfilm: roll 51, M 682), Records Relating to the Internal Affairs of the Netherlands, 1919–1929, Records of the Department of State, rg 59 (National Archives, Washington, D.C.). I thank Frances Gouda for calling my attention to this document.

Not unlike the American Republic at the time of its making, as Edmund S. Morgan described it, nineteenth-century European colonialisms celebrated inclusionary visions that were realized through exclusionary practices. As colonial states expanded the scope of their moralizing missions, their administrators worried over the increasing numbers of impoverished Europeans in the colonies and particularly in the civil service ranks. Emergent debates over the state’s responsibility for social welfare reworked the mid-nineteenth-century discourse that marked off the “deserving” from the “undeserving” poor. Now, however, the goal was to distinguish “subjects” from “citizens,” the “real” Dutch and French from their “fabricated” variants of local origin, and poor natives from pauperized Europeans.

For some historians, the tactics of rule that have concerned postcolonial scholars become relevant to the United States only with the winning of the Spanish-American War. For others, the parallels seem apparent over a longer period and suggest comparisons of a longer durée. Both American and European empires not only produced their overseas others but also carefully monitored the borders that the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte saw as the site of nation-making projects, what he called the nation’s “interior frontiers.” Those sites of affiliation making allowed “enclosure and contact as well as passage and exchange.” The discriminations made by agents of empire drew on assessments of moral attitude, cultural competence, and racial disposition to determine who should be granted citizenship and who should not. Both American and European imperial discourses subscribed to universalist principles and particularistic practices. In the Indies, Dutch administrators rejected the principle of racial inequality, but they made access to legal European equivalency dependent on whether applicants “felt at home” in a European milieu. Entrance exams for European schools in the Indies did not discriminate by race but by cultural and linguistic proficiency. What the student of French colonial policy Gary Wilder calls the “colonial humanism” of the late nineteenth century was not an oxymoron, but a defining feature of imperial rule.41

Part III: Thinking through Connections and Comparisons

A comparative project should identify topics of comparison and criteria of commensurability. Should we, for example, be comparing the manipulation of domestic arrangements in the making of race? Would it be more fruitful to compare the governing strategies of colonial regimes or “the regimes of truth” that informed colonial

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cultures in different times and places? Should we consider only moments when a specifically colonial language was used or a formal taxonomy of race was operativenote

Critics of the comparative method have long suggested that methodological and analytic problems lie in the very assumptions of comparison. Raymond Grew, a historian of modern France, argued, and more recent critics have agreed, that the problem may be in “a tendency to make the nation (and the nation as defined by the state) the ultimate unit of analysis.” Such comparisons preserve the notion of “the [discrete] case,” take the political territoriality of the emergent nation or full-fledged state as the historiographic directive, and privilege nation-making priorities and projects. The historian Robert Gregg makes the appeal yet again, urging that we “go beyond the boundaries of the nation-state to understand the larger dimensions of the imperial system.”note

The challenge is of several kinds: First, to acknowledge colonial state projects without writing histories shaped only by state-bound archival production, state legal preoccupations, and realized state projects; second, to use comparison, as the historian Frederick Cooper and others have advocated, as a window onto specific exchanges, interactions, and connections that cut across national borders without ignoring what state actors do and what matters about what they say.noe The refocusing on an imperial field highlights the contradictions between universal principles and the differentiated imperial spaces and particularistic ways in which they were applied.

But it may also do something more, helping identify unexpected points of congruence and similarities of discourse in seemingly disparate sites. It may prompt a search for common strategies of rule and the sequence of their occurrence that questions the relationship between imperial expansion and nation building and that asks why sex was a politically charged “transfer point” for racisms of the state. It may point to techniques for managing the intimate that spanned colony and metropole and that constrained or enabled both colonizer and colonized. Not least, such an exercise may challenge cherished distinctions between the dynamics of American internal empire and European overseas ones—or undo those distinctions altogether.

Another potentially informative comparison turns on colonial studies’ insights about the relationship of core and periphery—a relationship pre-interpreted by that skewed analytic language. Increasingly, work in colonial studies has recognized a richer set of transnational connections. Transnationalism, however, as historians of early empires have shown, is neither a postmodern phenomenon nor a postmodern

42 On the legal system as a productive site of racial ideologies, see Peggy Pascoe, “Miscegenation Law, Court Cases, and Ideologies of ‘Race,’” in Sex, Love, Race, ed. Hodes, 464–90.


discovery. Colonialisms of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries drew upon and animated circuits of movement that crisscrossed metropoles and peripheries, that disregarded official histories and national borders. Akira Iriye describes the Asia-Pacific region in the first half of the twentieth century as replete with cross-national figures—moving between cultures as journalists, students, artists, scholars, and musicians—who forged notions of internationalism that existed alongside, and despite, hostile relations between governments and nations. Similarly, colonial regimes recruited and dismissed colonizers who saw themselves as “world citizens,” who followed career itineraries and personal trajectories that led them in and out of explicitly racialized contexts, from imperial to domestic missionizing projects, through locations where modernity was differently conceived and across imperial maps.  

Growing attempts in colonial studies to treat metropole and colony as one analytic field, as Frantz Fanon, George Balandier, and Bernard S. Cohn each urged decades ago, have yielded new ways of imagining and documenting how knowledge was produced along paths that went from metropole to colony and the other way around. Arguing that the colonies were “laboratories of modernity,” Gwendolyn Wright has suggested that the principles of French urban planning were first played out on a colonial “experimental terrain.” Elizabeth van Heyningen has made a strong case that the British Contagious Diseases Acts were “pre-eminently imperial legislation,” implemented more directly in South Africa, India, and Malta than in Britain itself. Others have emphasized other aspects of the exchange between colony and metropole. Mary Louise Pratt’s work disrupts commitments to unidirectional historical framing by showing how eighteenth-century bourgeois notions of social discipline may have first developed in seventeenth-century imperial ventures. Similarly, I have sought to identify the colonial etiologies of European bourgeois notions of sexuality and social reform. A new generation of students of colonialism are bent on showing that innovations in political form, social reform, and modernity itself were not European exports and inventions but traveled as often the other way around.


Those postcolonial insights travel well, addressing similar questions about etiologies of race in North America. Although not all American historians agree with Kaplan’s statement “that foreign relations do not take place outside the boundaries of America, but instead constitute American nationality,” few deny that she has raised pressing questions about how best to study the relationship between nation making and empire building and what scope and level of comparison with other colonial contexts enable one to do so. Some, such as Hazel M. McFerson, have argued that the United States “exported to overseas territories racial attitudes at home.” Others, such as Robert W. Rydell, have portrayed the rampant racisms of world’s fair expositions in Chicago and St. Louis as instrumental in assuaging class tensions in the United States. Despite the different emphases, both retain a myth of the United States steered by its own political rudder and on its own racial course.

Others disagree. Models of race relations in early America suggest that they too went the other way around. Peter H. Wood’s observation that the Carolina lowlands were a “colony of a colony,” modeled on Barbados in the late seventeenth century, resonates with other scholars’ suggestions that New Orleans be construed as a colony of St. Domingue. Edward L. Ayers also doubts that domestic race relations in the United States were a template for America’s overseas racial policy. Rather, the character of United States race relations tracked other colonial models, first of Spain and post-Restoration England, later of Victorian Britain and the social reform policies of colonial France. Ayers writes: “in the 1850s, white Southern nationalists eagerly pored over the newspapers, journals and books of Britain and Europe, finding there raw material with which to create a vision of the South as a misunderstood place. The founders of the Confederacy saw themselves as participating in a widespread European movement, the self-determination of a people.” In Ayers’s view, the segregation policy forged during Reconstruction took its precepts from British colonial rule and its rule of law. Local struggles to retain southern power in the face of those bent on increasing northern profits were only part of the story. Those patterns of segregation were produced, as Winthrop D. Jordan argued for an earlier period, through notions of servitude and strategies of racial domination refracted from elsewhere. But sometimes the refractions were in directions we have not been schooled to expect. Jennifer Pitts looks to Alexis de Tocqueville’s letters and essays of the 1830s on Algeria to show that he considered America a “model” for the imperial project in French Algeria.

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48 Peter H. Wood, Black Majority: Negros in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion (New York, 1974). Ayers identifies a striking pattern in U.S. historiography on race: the racial thinking of an early-seventeenth-century moment is seen as borrowed and imported; the racial perceptions and practices of an eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century period are seen as autonomously “American,” internally induced and home-grown; America’s domestic racial system in the third, early-twentieth-century “age of imperialism” is seen as exported overseas. See Edward L. Ayers, “What We Talk about When We Talk about the South,” in All over the Map: Rethinking American Regions, ed. Edward L. Ayers et al. (Baltimore, 1997), 62–82. Ibid., 76. Winthrop D.
Such lines of inquiry suggest that circuits of knowledge production and racialized forms of governance spanned a global field. The section that follows turns to three registers of comparison that involve two different sorts of connections: one, concerning child care, has elements of both direct and indirect connection; the second, concerning vocational schools, suggests no direct connection; while the final case, that of the South African Carnegie Commission, entails the most sustained convergence. All the comparisons invite attention to parallel principles and modes of governance. Each invites closer readings of the relationship between racial categories and state intervention in intimate practices. Each suggests that the power and authority wielded by macropolities are not lodged in abstract institutions but in their management of meanings, their construction of social categories, and their microsites of rule.

**On Empire, Nurseries, and the Cultivation of Race**

Would not such a nursery school be a heaven on earth for the child of the Indies’ popular class who often vegetates amidst chickens and dogs in a village hut tended—not raised—by a mother, who does not know what rearing is?

—Dr. D. W. Horst, 1900

Colonial regimes based on overseas settlements did more than produce their overseas others. They also policed the cultural protocols and competencies that bounded their “interior frontiers.” In monitoring those boundaries, they produced penal and pedagogic institutions that were often indistinguishable— orphanages, workhouses, orphan trains, boarding schools, children’s agricultural colonies—to rescue young citizens and subjects in the making. Such colonial institutions, designed to shape young bodies and minds, were central to imperial policies and their self-fashioned rationalities. Colonial states had an abiding interest in a sentimental education, in the rearing of the young and affective politics. Antonio Gramsci was only partly right when he defined the function of the state as the education of consent. To educate consent to a colonial rule of law, to educate colonial and colonized women and men to accept, conform to, and collaborate with the colonial order of things, the state had first and foremost to school their desires.

Nowhere was this concern for the schooling of desires and the learning of social place more baldly stated than in the nineteenth-century debates that surrounded the creation and failure of nurseries for children of European descent in the Dutch East Indies. Strict surveillance of domestic servants was one way to protect children;


removal of them from the home was another. In the Indies, concerns for children’s moral environments and for their sense of racial affiliation were deeply meshed. To trace the embeddedness of race in discourses about morality, sentiment, and sensibility, prescriptive child-rearing manuals are a useful place to turn. As Emile Durkheim argued, “moral maxims are actually living sentiments.”51 If to be white and respectable meant to acquire behaviors that prescribed restraint and civility, they also prescribed something else; racial and class “lower-orders” did not share the prescribed attributes. Becoming adult and bourgeois meant distinguishing oneself from what was uncivilized, lower class, and non-European.

The social anxieties over European identity were amplified in anxieties about the young. In the Indies, the debate was politically charged, taking place in classified state documents, public addresses, and scientific proceedings. It was dominated, not by women, but by men. The nurseries were not unlike ones in the United States designed to eradicate prostitution and crime. Both were about how to make subjects of a particular kind. Debates about both can be read, as Nancy F. Cott suggested about antebellum child-rearing manuals and I have suggested about such manuals in colonial Java, as prescriptive texts directed at schooling young citizens in a sense of morality and a proper tempering of their desires.52 What seems different is the emphasis in the Indies on the deleterious effects of native nursemaids on the sexuality of children, on the contaminations that those servants might convey, and thus a strong inflection on race. But how different were they?

In the Indies, there was an unremitting refrain: “the damaging influence of the native nursemaid.” One colonial doctor, in an 1898 handbook for European mothers in the Indies, warned of the “extremely pernicious” moral influence of native nursemaids and advised that “children under no circumstance should be brought to bed by them and should never be permitted to sleep with them in the same room.” But “the threat of irreparable damage [done] to the child” by servants—incanted in Dutch colonial child care manuals—was a central theme of contemporaneous American child care manuals that warned against “bad handling.” When the American observer Lewis Hough wrote in 1849 that “the coarse hugging, kissing, etc. which the children are sure to receive in great abundance from ignorant and low-minded domestics are certain to develop a blind precocious sexualism of feeling and action,” how different were his concerns?53

At issue were not only the problem and definition of “parental neglect.” When Charles Loring Brace wrote in 1880 in The Dangerous Classes of New York about the orphan children of Irish and German immigrants, comparing them to children at the

French reformatory of Mettray, he noted that the majority were the progeny of “concubinage” and that “the tendencies and qualities of their parents” encouraged them toward moral destitution and crime. Child-saving reformers in the United States held that the working classes did not know “what love really is” much as reformers in the Indies thought mixed-blood and native mothers did not know “what rearing is.” Child savers of whatever name, in metropole and colony, in the Indies, England, the United States, and France, worried loudly over inadequate parenting, feared the desires of their young, and distrusted the influence of class and racial others on them.54

Such concerns were not new to the nineteenth century nor limited to Europe. On South Africa’s Cape of Good Hope in the eighteenth century, new models of the domestic family dictated that the widespread use of slave wet nurses be replaced by mothers’ nursing their children themselves. As in upper-class England, “it was claimed that the nurse imprinted her personality on the child and won his strongest affection.”55 Nurseries were designed to protect the sexual innocence of small children from the immoral influence and possible predations of domestic servants but also to cultivate sensibilities that underwrote their identification as white and privileged and, in the Indies, to ensure their distance and disaffection from those once charged with their care.

Class-specific theories of child development were exemplified in the first kindergartens and nurseries that emerged in Germany and England in the late 1820s and in the Netherlands in the 1850s. As distinct from the first nurseries for working-class children, called bewaarscholen, the kindergartens developed by Friedrich Froebel in the 1830s appealed to the patriotic sensibilities of the middle class and had a strong nationalist bent. Spurred by the conviction that bourgeois households were providing “poor child management,” the Froebel movement recommended that toddlers and even infants were better off in kindergartens than in an unschooled nursemaid’s or servant’s care. Kindergartens were envisioned as “microcosms of the liberal state,” stressing not only independence but also self-discipline, citizenship, and “voluntary obedience to general laws”—qualities that lower-class servants could not be expected to value, nurture, or protect.56

Experiments in social reform and child welfare were played out across a transnational and imperial field. Nor did they necessarily follow the administrative channels that joined metropole and colony. Some followed circuits of knowledge production and exchange carved out by philanthropic organizations, others moved along the shipping lines that rounded the Cape of Good Hope in South Africa. Some followed

mail boats that collected news on what transpired in 1848 in France when they docked in Marseilles. The French government education official Joseph Chailley-Bert culled his lessons on how to deal with “les métis” in Indochina from Dutch counterparts in Batavia and bypassed the metropole altogether. Agents of empire were themselves rarely stationary. They moved between posts in Africa and Asia, schooled their children in international Swiss boarding schools, read avidly about other colonies, visited colonial expositions in Paris and Provence, came together in colonial hill stations around the globe, and had a passion for international congresses where their racial taxonomies were honed and their commonsense categories were exchanged.

**Educating for Empire and the Politics of Race: Native American Boarding Schools and Vocational Schools in the Indies**

Were I to fix the date of completion of the carceral system, I would choose not 1810 and the penal code, nor even 1844, when the law laying down the principle of cellular internment was passed. . . . the date I would choose would be 22 January 1840, the date of the official opening of Mettray. Or better still, perhaps, that glorious day, unremarked and unrecorded, when a child in Mettray remarked as he lay dying: “What a pity I left the colony so soon.” . . .

. . . in the arrangement of a power-knowledge over individuals, Mettray and its school marked a new era.

—Michel Foucault, 1977

Some “cases” seem so striking that they make one ask why they have not been compared. But more elusive circuits of knowledge production are instructive as well. Successive state commissions on European poverty in the Indies in the second half of the nineteenth century looked to one of Europe’s most acclaimed experiments with agricultural poor colonies, that instituted in the 1840s in France and the Netherlands and widely known as Mettray. In this model of reform, a rural setting and a disciplinary structure and layout emphasizing moral and physical surveillance played a key role.

As part of a wider campaign to rescue children who were orphaned or subject to “parental neglect,” Mettray resembled the new reformatory rural institutions that were appearing in Germany, England, the Netherlands, France, and the United States. But Mettray stands out as the quintessential example in its detailed disciplinary design. Foucault singled out Mettray as the beginning of the “carceral archipel-

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ago” of discipline and punishment in its modern European form. Similarly, in England the Red Hill reformatory was said to bring rural reform into the “modern age,” and the many new reformatory and industrial schools were envisioned to be among the “truest and noblest glories of [the United Kingdom’s] island empire.”

As in Europe’s colonies, debates about the need for and management of such schools revealed specific concerns. The debates were about mental capability and moral worth, about tempering aspirations, about which classes, ethnic groups, and races should be schooled to work with their hands. The frame of reference was Lamarckian notions of race, environment, and character. The focus was on the moral benefits of schooling young men for craft and artisan work that required limited industrial know-how and of schooling young girls in domestic science—to sew, cook, and care for homes.

The Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan’s observation that many industrial and artisan schools in the eighteenth century failed because their purpose was “not so much to prepare children for the labor market, but to render them virtuous, patient and industrious through the practice of traditional arts” takes on a different political meaning in relation to nineteenth-century reformist projects. They were less about the production of labor markets than about disciplining desires and policing the boundaries of race.

The parallels between the debates about vocational schools for the impoverished mixed-blood population in the Indies in the 1870s and 1880s and those about the establishment of boarding schools for Native American girls and boys in the same period are striking. As Dutch colonial officials so clearly argued, what the colonies needed were “not imitation Europeans, but perfected natives”—the creation, out of a mixed-blood population mired in poverty, of one whose members would no longer be objects of pity and agents of threat. Under adverse conditions, they loomed as “white haters” (blanken-haters); under proper tutelage they would be the future vanguard of a modernizing colonial rule.

Decades of debate about creating ambachtscholen (artisan/vocational schools) tied to the Indies’ orphanages centered on recurrent themes: the inherent capabilities of such a population and what could be expected of its members. Lodged within detailed discussions of curriculum, food expenditures, building costs, and the preparedness of the prospective pupils were the calibrations of other “costs.” At issue was the racial scope of social reform (who should be included), the moral scope of the state (whom it should assist), and, not least, the management and distribution of sentiments as a part of social policy. Participants in the debate shared a notion that indolence and insolence had to be checked, that respectable, skilled manual labor could craft respectable subjects and transform political beings. Reformers were convinced that a “desire to work” was the ingredient lacking; it was sentiment that had to be kindled and redirected, not opportunity that needed to be changed.

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60 Dekker, Straffen, Redden en Oppwoeden, 55, 76.
But the “desire to work” had to be of a specific kind. Efforts to teach crafts or trades were based on a common contention that the colony’s economic and political viability depended on educating the hearts and minds of those who were a danger to it, on managing their aspirations in an Indies world. As the director of the Indies department of education put it in 1869, the impoverished “mixed-bloods” who were partial descendants of Europeans “must not [conceive of themselves] as heeren (bosses/masters), they must not be burdened with more skills than they need, but only practical know-how for the tasks to which they are geared.” Whether this population should be educated to be workers for Dutch use or for costly political and economic entitlements? Could they be forced to work in a modernizing economy without political rights in it? Self-worth in labor and political independence were seen to go dangerously hand in hand.

What is striking in these conflicting and confused arguments is how much they changed. Over a fifty-year period between the 1840s and 1890s, appraisals varied widely as to whether orphaned and abandoned mixed-blood youths could become an artisan class. Craft schools, heralded in the 1860s as the solution to pauperism among the indigent mixed-blood population, were seen as badly misguided twenty years later. By the 1880s, both artisan and industrial visions were sidetracked by designs for discipline that looked more to industrial colonies for boys and girls. Those visions focused less on changing the recalcitrant than on shaping children in their tenderer years.

It was the institutions of the 1880s that were modeled on Mettray and guided by the notion that young vagrants and urban delinquents could be taught respect for religion and family by doing agricultural and domestic work. Such work would allow them to develop their skills and character, to learn self-discipline, and spartan conditions of labor and living would constrain expectations. Again, not everyone agreed. One Indies director of education thought the plans looked more like those for a penal colony, a “depot for delinquents,” than anything else.

Debates over federal policy toward Native American education in the same period were marked by similar principles if by differently framed concerns. Manual labor schools were envisioned as part of a moralizing mission, policies of uplift that would wed citizens in the making to the “virtue of industry and the ability of the skillful hand.” As in the policies directed at the Indies’ mixed-blood population, the focus was less on labor than on instilling a desire to perform it. As the commissioner of Indian affairs, John H. Oberly, wrote in 1888, the Indian “should not only be taught how to work, but also that it is his duty [to do so].” As the anthropologist Janet Finn notes, fears of the girls’ “moral delinquency” occupied an inordinate amount of administrative time. Solutions were similar in part because the problem was seen as

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63 Indies Department of Education to Governor-General, KV March 13, 1869, *ibid.*
64 Letter, KV March 28, 1874, *ibid.*
largely the same. In the Indies and among the Native American population, boarding schools, craft schools, and agricultural colonies were a means to remove children from the influence of their intimate environments—families on the reservations in the one case, servants and their natal families in the other.\textsuperscript{65}

School routines aimed to instill discipline of sundry kinds. As Richard Tennert writes of the boarding schools for Native American girls, school routines were organized in “martial fashion,” with strict timetables. Nor were the similarities to penal institutions, as noted by the Indies director of education, coincidental. Richard Henry Pratt, founder of the boarding school system, was a military warden for Indian prisoners at Fort Marion from 1875 to 1878.\textsuperscript{66}

Debates that made a “love for work,” in the one case, and “\textit{werklust}” (a desire for work), in the other, the test of innate capacity, constitution, and preparedness for citizenship join these distant projects as congruent strategies of reform. But their conclusions and outcome were not the same. In the Indies, girls were trained to be competent marriage partners and mothers on modest family farms devoted to “agriculture, animal raising, butter and cheese production, and the tending of orchards”—a vision wildly out of sync with the reality of the Indies economy. The Native American girls trained in the boarding schools of Arizona, Pennsylvania, and Oklahoma were similarly educated for domesticity and trained for subservience but destined for a different fate: to use their skills as servants in Anglo households, as employees of the Indian Bureau.\textsuperscript{67}

The differences between the cases are as important as the similarities. One could argue that one was a colony based on the extraction of labor and produce and the other one of settlement or that the reservation system in the United States attempted to obliterate an entire culture while the Dutch East Indies variant did not. Still, the comparison warrants consideration. Both policies were elements of political technologies that crafted microenvironments to carry out public policy on race. Both reinforced inequities based on assessments of innate capacity and disposition. Both made children temporary wards of the state, removing them from their home environments while offering high doses of discipline and limited industrial skills. Both embraced reformist efforts for the remaking of racialized selves and the tempering of desires.\textsuperscript{68} Not least, both suggest colonial genealogies of social welfare that were grounded in imperial concerns over the distinctions of race.


\textsuperscript{67} Tsinaina Lomawaima, \textit{They Called It Prairie Light: The Story of Chilocco Indian School} (Lincoln, 1994). But Devon A. Mihesuah describes a differentiated “class system” in the school that distinguished between girls from “indigent,” “traditionalist” families and those who were from “progressive,” “mixed-blood” backgrounds. See Devon A. Mihesuah, \textit{Cultivating the Roebirds: The Education of Women at the Cherokee Female Seminary, 1851–1909} (Urbana, 1993).

\textsuperscript{68} Such prescriptions for success were not embraced only by federal bureaus and colonial policy makers but
The Carnegie Commission on Poor Whites: Logics of Differentiation in South Africa and the United States

If circuits of knowledge production connecting boarding schools for Native Americans and vocational schools in the Indies seem difficult to trace, those that shaped the study of poor whites in the United States and South Africa between the 1880s and 1930s are far clearer. Comparative work from the early 1980s treated the development of racialized social formations in South Africa and the United States as discrete cases, if highly relevant national stories, appropriate to compare. I think here of George M. Fredrickson’s important comparative project on white supremacy and the essays that appeared in a volume edited by Howard Lamar and Leonard Thompson, *The Frontier in History*. As more recent work reminds us, the state racisms of the United States and South Africa both produced forms of resistance that cut across their borders. What has been less noted is how much those state racisms in the making produced their policy, expert knowledge, and racialized practices in dialogue.

The discourses used, the policies pursued, and the definitions of the poor white problem were intimately tied through experts on race. Social scientists employed by and working for government agencies in the United States and South Africa compared and equated the two situations. The South African Carnegie Commission on the problem of poor whites of the late 1920s was a multiyear project fashioned by American-trained social scientists and funded with American dollars. Financed by Andrew Carnegie’s Carnegie Corporation, established in 1913, the commission drew on the Dominions and Colonies Fund earmarked for educational and social research in British dependencies. Exactly how and where the particular fund was to be used was not specified at the start. But the fact that the corporation already funded the Eugenics Record Office in Cold Spring Harbor, New York, between the 1910s and 1939, endorsed the racist views of Madison Grant, and overtly sought to “preserve the racial purity of American society” shaped its scientific priorities and social policy. Charged with the fund’s proper use, Carnegie’s president Frederick Keppel (former dean of Columbia College) and later James Russell (dean of Teachers College at also by some reformers within subordinated groups. See Lee Polansky, “I Certainly Hope You Will Be Able to Train Her: Reformers and the Georgia Training School for Girls,” in *Before the New Deal: Social Welfare in the South, 1830–1930*, ed. Elna C. Green (Athens, Ga., 1999), 149; Booker T. Washington, *Tuskegee & Its People: Their Ideals and Achievements* (New York, 1905), 21; and James Douglas Anderson, “Education for Servitude: The Social Purposes of School in the Black South, 1870–1930” (Ph.D. diss., University of Illinois, 1973).

Columbia University) made several reconnaissance visits to Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa in the mid-1920s. When Russell met one of his former students, E. G. Malherbe, who had already written on South Africa’s poor white problem in 1921, the commission began to take shape with Malherbe as one of its prime architects. 70

But it was not only Malherbe whose understanding of the poor white problem was framed by his American contacts. The commission was staffed with American university social scientists. South African psychologists in its employ made visits to the psychology laboratories at Harvard and Yale universities. Most had received their Ph.D.’s or, at the very least, studied in Britain or the United States. Advisers to the Carnegie Corporation such as Kenyon L. Butterfield, who spent several weeks with the commission in 1929, identified “the Poor White question” as one of the “key problems” of South Africa and as an “economic menace,” with an estimated three hundred thousand whites who fell into the category of the “very poor.” To Butterfield the main issue was clear: “there can be little doubt that if the natives were given full economic opportunity, the more competent among them would soon outstrip the less competent whites.” The recommendations of the Carnegie Commission were part of a broader set of plans to ensure that that did not happen.71

The commission was presented as a South African initiative of local origin whose concerns were localized. But its scientific resources were not local, nor were its points of reference Cape Town Boers and South African Bantus alone. Its recommendations were drawn from studies of “feeblemindedness” in Appalachia, its experts from New Mexico, Georgia, and Tennessee. Its “intelligence surveys,” based on eugenic testing honed in the United States, concluded “that the average intelligence of the poor whites was lower than that of the European population as a whole.” and that “mental defect was an inborn condition.” It was a study grounded in the production of racialized knowledge in the United States and reflected efforts to identify commensurable kinds of persons who could be compared, differentiated, and then singled out for policy and prevention. Designed to deal with the poor white problem in rural South Africa, the commission’s work displayed priorities, principles, and solutions that grew out of a joint-venture project on segregation—out of production of knowledge and

70 Waldemar A. Nielsen, The Big Foundations (New York, 1972), 32–33; Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, The Politics of Knowledge: The Carnegie Corporation, Philanthropy, and Public Policy (Middletown, 1992), 30, 81. The Carnegie Corporation retracted its funding of the Eugenic Records Board in 1939 because of increasing condemnation of the board’s overt racism, especially that of its superintendent, Harry Laughlin. I thank Alexander Stern for making this point to me. This section is based on the published Carnegie Commission reports from South Africa, the Carnegie Corporation archives at the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Butler Library, Columbia University, New York; and the Kenyon Butterfield Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

distribution of resources that were part of the consolidation of state racism in the United States.72

The Carnegie Commission offers a window onto the transnational currency of racial reform that circulated between such unlikely participants as officials in the Kimberley mining region of South Africa, the Commission on Interracial Cooperation in Atlanta, Georgia, and the state inspector of high schools in Nashville, Tennessee. But it also presages the conditions of possibility for a racialized welfare state. Prescriptions for family life, child rearing, and education were critical to it. The poor white problem was fundamental to the making of apartheid, and the commission’s recommendations laid its concrete foundations. At the heart of the investigation was one finding: “unrestricted competition on the labour market between the unskilled non-European and the poor white creates conditions of poverty which have a demoralising effect on the latter. Measures for restricting such competition should aim at counteracting this demoralisation.” On the argument that the poor white “could not live like a white man without charitable aid” and without a built-in structure of differential access to employment, land, and social services, fundamental hierarchies of personhood and basic elements of a discriminatory welfare state were born.73

But as virtually every member of the commission noted, the problem of poor whiteism was poor whites themselves. R. W. Wilcocks, one of the commission’s authors, concluded that “isolation” and the consequent “frequent intermarriage of blood-relatives” with “deleterious mental and physical effects among the offspring” were common denominators among poor whites in the Ozarks and Appalachia and constituted one “cause of poor whiteism” in South Africa and the United States. Commissioner M. E. Rothman’s detailed report, The Mother and Daughter in the Poor Family, noted that “much can be learned from the order or disorder in a home, from the attitudes of family members to each other, from the behavior of children.” Psychological assessments took up much of the commission’s time. Poor whites were not competitive with South Africa’s native populations. They displayed a “lack of industriousness and ambition” and a “lack of self-reliance.” Their “irresponsibility,”

72 See L. R. Wheeler, “The Intelligence of East Tennessee Mountain Children,” Journal of Educational Psychology, 23 (May 1932), 351–70; R. W. Wilcocks, “Psychological Observations on the Relation between Poor Whites and Non-Europeans,” Social and Industrial Relations, 50 (May 1930), 3941–50; R. W. Wilcocks, “On the Distribution and Growth of Intelligence,” Journal of General Psychology, 6 (April 1932), 233–75. (Wilcocks was an investigator for the Carnegie Commission, but this subsequent research was carried out at the University of Stellenbosch and funded by the South African government.) On the prominence of “racial thinking . . . in the early years of Carnegie Corporation grant-making,” see Lagemann, Politics of Knowledge, 30.

73 The Carnegie grant for the poor white study provided for participation by experts from the United States, and the study was later disseminated to educational facilities throughout the United States. Studies of “race crossing” were simultaneously carried out by the Carnegie Institute in Jamaica and Central America. See C. B. Davenport and Morris Steggerda, Race Crossing in Jamaica (Washington, 1929); Morris Steggerda, Anthropometry of Adult Maya Indians: A Study of Their Physical and Physiological Characteristics (Washington, 1932). I thank Alexander Stern for providing these references and those to the Web site below. For studies carried out by the Carnegie-funded Eugenics Records Office, see Dolan DNA Learning Center, Image Archive on the American Eugenics Movement <http://vector.cshl.org/eugenics> (July 17, 2001). This is not to suggest that central premises of apartheid policy were not formulated earlier. See Martin Legassick, “British Hegemony and the Origins of Segregation in South Africa, 1901–1914,” in Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth-Century South Africa, ed. William Beinart and Saul DuBow (London, 1995), 43. Carnegie Commission, Joint Findings and Recommendations of the Commission, Report of the Carnegie Commission of Investigation on the Poor White Question in South Africa (Stellenbosch, 1932), xix.
“untruthfulness and lack of a sense of duty” were constant refrains. In the commission’s language, racial demoralization and white immorality went hand in hand. As the South African historian Saul DuBow has noted, “poor whiteism came to function as an important comparative discursive site for the expression of racial anxieties and the testing of racial theories.” But these were neither generic nor abstract assessments of race, as the linking of “feeble-mindedness” to the incidence of masturbation by poor white children attests. Repeatedly, architects of national labor and welfare policy sought to do what Foucault has argued all racist states do, “defend society against itself” by remaking the domestic, by regulating appropriate intimacies, and by carefully monitoring the care and cultural grooming of the young.74

The commission returned again and again to the uplifting of “ignorant” women in poor white households who were unable to equip “their children with a normal home and social training.” In detailed analyses of “home conditions,” schoolgirls were coded as “listless” and “fatigued,” with “sagging” and “distended” abdomens from malnourishment caused by their mothers’ ignorance of the simplest rules of hygiene. Children’s health, commission members believed, was made worse by the native population on whom poor white families were dependent and with whom they lived. As the Carnegie commissioner W. A. Murray, senior assistant in the Health Office in Pretoria, reported, many of the home remedies in such families “bore the hallmark of the barbarism with which these people were in daily contact in the persons of their ‘raw’ native servants.”75

The commission’s conclusion was not that tropical climate created poor whites, a popular hypothesis that Malherbe disputed. Rather, it was due to competition with native labor and to contact with natives. To ensure the moral integrity of poor white young women, the commission made three strong recommendations: (1) introduction of “special training in home-making” on the argument that it was a “good investment for the state”; (2) establishment of boardinghouses for indigents to promote their “social education” and domestic skills, culminating in a “national housewife certificate” when they completed the course; and (3) encouragement of factory work in conditions set by Cape Town’s “leading firms,” “applying a wise and fair segregation of European and non-European female labour.” Whites’ willingness to live “cheek by jowl” with South Africa’s black population and worse, to engage in intimate relations with them, were taken as “a clear indication of absence or loss of self-respect on their part.”76

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Built into the cultural machinery of empire in the 1920s were paradigms of progress that reverberated across a global field. Just as United States psychologists studying poor whites in the American South offered expert counsel to the British South African colonial state, the American managers of Uniroyal’s and Goodyear’s rubber estates worked with members of the Dutch colonial administration in the Indies to modernize estate management and to develop racially rationalized systems of labor control. As the historian Frances Gouda has noted, United States State Department files from the 1920s document exchanges between the American consul general in the Indies and the United States secretary of state over “half-caste girls,” as both worried that they posed a threat to racially bifurcated principles of governance. Gouda refers to a florid commentary on the beauty of Eurasian girls as an “undiplomatic flight of fancy,” but as she would undoubtedly agree, in general such remarks were not outside diplomats’ ken. Discourses around racial aesthetics, mixed unions, and people of mixed race appear too often to be considered aberrant indiscretions or archival asides. In high-level communications between governors-general and ministers of colonies and between ministers of colonies and whoever occupied the Netherlands’ throne, they appear with a consistency that suggests they were the grist of governance, a site of vulnerability, and an integral element in the lexicon of rule.77

**Comparative Connections and the Politics of Comparison**

Politically, the Americans keep aloof from local issues and socially they are inclined to keep to themselves. America is too young in overseas enterprise and too full of opportunity at home to have developed a class with the true overseas point of view—such as the British have. The Americans all keep one eye on home and feel themselves temporarily in a strange land.

—Consul General Coert du Bois, 192878

The breezy dismissal of American interest in intervention by the United States consul general in Java reads effortlessly as conventional wisdom and common sense. Indeed, his report of October 1928 expresses two widely shared sentiments: (1) the United States was a passive participant in an empire not its own; and (2) neither the United States nor its agents were imperial. But Consul General Coert du Bois’s description of that “universal aim of the Dutch business group,” namely, “to clean up a fortune in the fewest possible years and retire” home, was not so different from that of their American counterparts and colonialism’s agents in other parts of the world. As Albert Memmi noted in *The Colonizer and Colonized*, written on the cusp of the Algeria war, the prevailing definition of a colony for French nationals in North Africa was strikingly clear: “a place where one earns more and spends less,” a place were “jobs are


guaranteed, wages high, careers more rapid and business more profitable.”

Profi
t and privilege came faster and in larger measures than in Akron, Delft, Toulouse, or
Colmar.

The vocabulary was drawn from economics, but the cultural coordinates and inti-
mate interventions that allowed it were not. It is no accident that Consul General du
Bois’s comments on “American aloofness” came in a classified report to the United
States secretary of state on “the Problem of the Half Castes,” which asserted that it
was “the acutely race conscious . . . Dutch half-caste that constitutes a problem.”
But United States agribusiness was “acutely race conscious” as well. For race mattered
to Goodyear, Uniroyal, and the twenty-five thousand Indonesians whose jobs on
their estates were racially scaled. Carefully monitored domestic arrangements and
gender demographics were written into plantation strategies of labor control from
the start. Labor and social policy fixed the lower, differential wages for Javanese
women who were then forced to “choose” prostitution and concubinage as not
unreasonable options. Specific relations of dominance were worked through a capi-
talist world economy and colonial technologies of rule. Both that economy and those
technologies were founded and thrived on racial differences and a sexual economy
that depended on the learning of place and race and on the distribution of desires.

Such connections are less evident if we buy into colonial scripts themselves, if we
abide by the strictures of national archives, state projects, and their historiographies.
Indeed, research that begins with people’s movements rather than with fixed polities
opens up to more organic histories that are not compelled by originary narratives
designed to show the “natural” teleology of future nations, later republics, and future
states. We might instead want to think, as Frederick Cooper and I have suggested
elsewhere, about colonialism’s modular qualities, how different regimes built projects
with blocks of one earlier model and then another, projects that were then reworked
by the colonized populations that those models could never completely master or
contain. Rather than compare United States empire with a host of others, we might
imagine nineteenth-century history as made up, not of nation-building projects
alone, but of compounded colonialisms and as shaped by multinational philanthro-
pies, missionary movements, discourses of social welfare and reform, and traffics in
people (women in particular) that ran across and athwart state-archived paper trails.

If comparison of discrete “cases” is so problematic, another line of inquiry might
treat comparison, not as a methodological problem, but as a historical object. We
might historicize the politics of comparison, tracing the changing stakes for polities
and their bureaucratic apparatuses. What did agents of empire think to compare and
what political projects made them do so? What did comparison as a state project
entail? Scholars who have attempted to write against colonial histories have noted
how our concerns have been contained by statist historiography, shaped by the

(856d, roll 33, M 682), ibid.; Memn, Colonizer and the Colonized, 4.
81 On this modular quality, see Cooper and Stoler, “Between Metropole and Colony,” 1–58. Robert Gregg,
too, argues that the international traffic in women between London, South Africa, and the New York Bowery is a
prime subject for studying intersecting histories. See Gregg, Inside Out, Outside In, 9–18.
archived grooves that colonial states carved out for themselves. Some of our problems with comparison may derive from the fact that selective comparison was itself part of colonial projects that also served to secure relations of power.

Colonial regimes were not hegemonic institutions but uneven, imperfect, and even indifferent knowledge-acquiring machines. Omnisience and omnipotence were not, as is so often assumed, their defining goals. I refer to them as “taxonomic states” whose administrations were charged with defining and interpreting racial membership, requirements for citizenship, acts of political subversion, and, not least, with determining what intimate practices and what sorts of persons confirmed or threatened European notions of morality. Such states as that of the Dutch in the Indies demanded that their agents master not only ethnographic details but also broad sociological generalizations, encouraging their agents to pay less attention to detail and more to gross-grain codes. In the Indies, social categories provided sociological shorthands that pared down what colonial recruits and residents thought they needed to master—what information and how much one needed to know.

Colonial bureaucracies were therefore invested in selective comparison with other polities: with highlighting their similarities to some and difference from others. A case in point is the commensurabilities they found in such “folk” categories as “white prestige,” “mixed-bloods,” and “poor whites.” Such category making was, as Ian Hacking wrote of statistics, part of the moral science of statecraft, of the technology that created censuses and their commensurabilities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.82 Category making produced cross-colonial equivalencies that allowed for international conferences and convinced their participants—doctors, lawyers, policy makers, and reformers—that they were in the same conversation, if not always talking about the same thing.

If the above is granted, historians of the colonial might move in another direction. Not to ask whether métissage (mixing) was similar in the Indies, India, the Caribbean, and the American Southwest but to ask what distinctive work such a designation did in narrations of empire and nation, how and why people could talk about what mestizo-ness entailed without agreeing on who was included in that category. We might treat those comparisons as part of the politics of knowledge, as ethnographic evidence of historically shifting strategies of rule that joined sexual arrangements to racial formations. We might treat the comparisons as technologies that produced truth claims about normalcy and race that were predicated on what Michel Foucault called a “will to knowledge”—that Nietzschean notion that the weapons of reason were forged as elements of the tactics of rule.83 Such comparisons then were part of the cultural work sustaining colonialism’s reformist and racist strategies. The focus would be on the political task of comparing as much as—or more than—on what was compared. We might ask, not about the similarities of particular (racialized) entities, but about the relationships (of power, sexuality, and race) they shared and that made such comparisons pertinent and possible.

83 On the relationship between Friedrich Nietzsche’s concept of a “will to knowledge” and Foucault’s reworking of it, see Alan Sheridan, Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth (New York, 1980), 118–23.
There are still other questions to ask. How do we acknowledge similar configurations of rule without undermining the historical specificity of their content? Should we be comparing varied colonial projects in the same place, or similar colonial projects at different points in time? What about comparisons from disparate moments and without common vocabulary that nevertheless speak to common technologies of intervention and common anxieties of rule? Should it be similar rhythms of rule to which we attend or similar sequences in how sexuality was politicized in the making of race, in how assessments of sexual morality were tied to racial worth?

To argue that management of the intimate defined the scope of colonial governance and its specific technologies is not to suggest that interventions were carried out with uniform intensity or uniform effects. It is to suggest that we focus on those political technologies that joined the cultivation of a social body to the cultivation of a self to rethink the boundaries of our analytic and historical maps. A question posed by one skeptical reader, “Were the intimacies vastly different outside of imperial domains at similar points in time?,” points to another: Was there an “outside of empire”? If colonialism is the “underside of modernity,” as the Latin American social theorist Enrique Dussel held, and if the epistemic and political field has been shaped by an imaginary of the Occident since the sixteenth century, as Fernando Coronil and Walter D. Mignolo have separately argued in studies of Latin America’s colonial history, then colonial differences and their sexual and affective entailments must pervade a far broader set of cultural and political practices than those captured by colonialism’s most direct encounters.\(^4\) Even unlikely comparisons may be instructive, for they prompt us to ask whether disciplinary conventions, sheer irrelevance, or different notions of empire and colonialism explain the silence.

There are several choices, as I have argued here: to do better comparisons, to pursue the politics and history of comparison, or to reach for connections that go beyond comparison altogether. These are not mutually exclusive, but they do place the analytic emphasis on different historiographic zones and archival places. One thing is increasingly clear as colonial studies reconsiders the breadth of its locations and its analytic frames. It was not only empires that reshaped the “interior frontiers” of the nation; people who moved within, between, and outside of imperial boundaries were also reshaping them. Women may have been the boundary markers of empire, as Anne McClintock has argued.\(^5\) But it was in the gendered and racialized intimacies of the everyday that women, men, and children were turned into subjects of particular kinds, as domination was routinized and rerouted in intimacies that the state sought to know but could never completely master or work out.


The colonies located in Asia and Africa were sites for experiments in urbanism, hygiene, and social reform but also sites where the vulnerabilities of imperial projects were in sharp relief and where bourgeois prescriptions for family life, morality, and sexual protocol were challenged and rejected. In the Dutch East Indies in the early twentieth century, creole Dutch, Indos (mixed bloods), Chinese, Javanese were appropriating discourses, comportments, and communication networks—railways, telegraphs, telephones, and radios—to rework their possibilities for themselves. What was modern was not only exported from Europe nor invented in the colonial laboratories of public housing and estates landscaped by European colonial administrations. As students of colonialism are learning, it was invented outside of those laboratories and in contradistinction to them.  

The incommensurabilities between North American empire and European colonial history diminish when the intimacies of empire are at center stage. Sexual violence was fundamental to conquest, as was colonizing the hearts and minds of women, children, and men. A new generation of scholars in the making, if we attend closely to their bibliographies, citations, archival trajectories, and the multi-sited fashion in which they choose to work, are well aware of it. A scholarship looking to the tense and tender ties of empire and to sex—who with whom, where, and when—opens in two related directions: to rethink what political narratives inform our comparisons and to reassess what questions about the management of the intimate will allow for more effective histories of empire’s racial politics. The task is not to figure out who was colonizer and who was colonized, nor to ask what the difference between metropolitan and colonial policy was; rather, it is to ask what political rationalities have made those distinctions and categories viable, enduring, and relevant.

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