

Carmen Nocentelli. *Empires of Love: Europe, Asia, and the Making of Early Modern Identity*.

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This ambitious study takes a broad transnational approach to analyzing the discursive structures that underpinned cross-cultural encounters between Europeans and Southeast Asians in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The overarching claim is that sexuality should be construed as a structure of identity that overlaps with race, an intersectional approach that the author playfully describes as the interplay between eros and ethnos. Such an argument comes at a crucial juncture in early modern race studies, reminding us that racial ascriptions are mobile, adaptable, and strategic discursive processes that draw on biological, but also cultural and psychological markers to bound identity. The same is true, she shows, for ascriptions of normative sexuality, which morph in response to changing historical conditions.

In tracing a dizzying range of representations of Southeast Asia, Nocentelli tracks a crucial epistemological shift. She argues that mid-sixteenth-century Europe was defined by the rise of “domestic heterosexuality” (8), whereby the meanings of marital sex were expanded beyond procreation to include spousal affection, and that this concept took shape in relation to the crystallization of race as a category. In the “imperial periphery,” where sexual practices were hyperscrutinized, some practices were identified as proper while others began to assume “an identitarian valence,” marking an “alterity increasingly conceived of as ontological” (8). If sexuality could ascribe difference to some, it could also function to enable racial absorption for others. Asian women, in particular, tended to be viewed by European colonizers as “more malleable, and therefore more assimilable than their male counterparts” (11), a process facilitated by interracial marriages.

If Nocentelli identifies the possibility of Western assimilation for Asian women, her opening chapter identifies some of the ways Asian men were associated with a more intractable kind of difference. Here she assesses a fascination with male genital alteration characteristic of many Western travelogues, not least Pigafetta’s account of Magellan’s circumnavigation, which exhibits a voyeuristic attentiveness to Palang piercing, just as the Italian Conti’s account of India fixates on implanted penile bells. For Nocentelli, this transnational discourse bespeaks a growing “chasm between Europeans and Asians” (36), one that identifies a deviant sexuality with Asian men who are seen to mutilate their bodies to satisfy the rapacious sexuality of Asian women. While Nocentelli encourages us to view these practices as attaching moral valences to phenotypical qualities in ways that align with racial thinking (27), one might also argue that since genital mutilation is, in theory, a reversible practice, it expresses the lability of early modern discourses of difference.

Nocentelli is at her best when describing the intersections of heterosexual romance and imperialism. One chapter uncovers the erotic “power exchange” that informs the Isle of Love segment of Camoë’s *Os Lusíadas*, which she reads in relation to Portuguese intermarriage policies that promoted racial mixing as the “cornerstone” of imperialism (53). An episode often viewed as a titillating digression from the epic’s focus on hero worship, the orgy that occurs between nymphs and Portuguese sailors emerges for Nocentelli as a rewriting of the Sabine myth, in which the West learns “to wield power” in the form of connubium while the East learns “to submit” (56).

Far from being an aberration, the ideology of connubium between colonizer and colonized was prevalent across Europe, a crucial insight that corrects a tendency among critics to see early modern texts as opposed to exogamous mixture. As Nocentelli demonstrates, even in the Netherlands and England, “cross-race” alliances for those living in colonial contexts tended to be the norm during most of the period she covers. The massively popular *Itinerario* by Linschoten evidences these continuities of practice and ideology by upholding the value of mixed marriages in the colonies, even as it pushes such arrangements in a new disciplinary direction, toward “politico-erotic reform” (70). Nocentelli parses the heterosexual romance of Fletcher and Massinger’s *The Island Princess* in a similar light, reading the play as molding a form of desire between the “stranger” Armusia and the Moluccan queen that is predicated on election and reciprocity, while also being doggedly “hierarchical” (136).

Another chapter reads the growing aversion to polygamy among European writers as an attempt to massage a contradiction that resulted from the “harnessing of eros to matrimony” (94). Through a reading of Argensola’s *Conquista de las Islas Malucas*, Nocentelli associates the criminalization of polygamy with an attempt to domesticate desire by splitting it off from lust, which becomes a marker of “Eastern inferiority” (114). In Nocentelli’s account this process gathers momentum across the seventeenth century, so that by the time Dryden comes to stage the spice islands in *Amboyna* in 1673 or Richard Head to recount the adventures of *The English Rogue* in Bantam, the pathological associations with Eastern sexuality have become so pervasive that they taint cross-racial desire of every kind, blocking assimilability through marriage.

Nocentelli’s account of how “sexual practices and erotic proclivities” serve as a measure of “racial belonging” (9) is nuanced and richly researched. Occasionally the story she tells does register strains, not least because a shift in emphasis is all it takes to distinguish between a racial, as opposed to a redeemable, difference. But when one considers the array of texts covered, Nocentelli’s story of an era when eroticism could shape racial identity and vice versa emerges with cogency and should be read by scholars investigating the histories of eroticism, racialism, and imperialism.

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