

Ethnopornography Coda

Although studies of ethnopornography are not new, several previous analytical approaches have tended to separate readings of colonial sexuality from the violence of colonialism more generally, emphasizing instead the emergence of gender categories and modes of sexuality as forms of symbolic and ideological violence. Certainly, the gender categories and sexual modalities fostered in colonial contexts are still with us and, ontologically speaking, the postcolonial will never actually arise since it is a temporal and not a historical construct. So, if there is no final escape from the legacies of colonialism, only a reworking of colonial legacy—in itself a highly contingent and variant set of circumstances when viewed cross-culturally—then the roles of the sexual and the violent in cross-cultural relationships are ever present and always connected with each other—a concern about today no less than about yesterday.

Anne McClintock, in *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, proposes that such legacies might be dealt with through a distinction between textual and material violence, with the idea that material violence was used to resolve the indecisiveness of colonial text and representation.¹ However, violence, like, sex, is a way of knowing—a social relationship, not the absence of interactional meaning. For this reason, the focus here is on the synergy of sexuality and violence in the colonial

process, and on how that history becomes a legacy in the ethnological (or archival) gaze, as practiced both by professional anthropology (and history), and also by cultural commentators more widely. Such an epistemological regime is pornographic not because of the fact that other bodies are being represented but rather for the way in which such representations circulated and informed their own usage. However, the notion of “ethnopornography” defies simple definition, as the term is the attempt to call attention to the multiple histories and positionalities present in the history of colonial relationships while at the same time suggesting a regularity to the modes and purpose of certain forms of representation and cultural practice that share an ethnological aesthetic and style.

As a result of historical conditions, the ethnological gaze is always potentially pornographic, but at the same time sexuality is not simply comprised of desire for others’ bodies but also of their possession in other modes of interaction, such as violence. Likewise, visual and textual representations may be differently inflected with these modalities of sexuality and violence, and so it becomes possible to appreciate the layers of meaning and signification in such “ethnopornographic” representation as being capable of performing the cultural work of colonialism at multiple levels. Subject bodies are thus disciplined and controlled through an interlaced regime of violence and sexuality that is at one and the same time possessive, destructive, and transformative.

However, the enactment of colonialism brings with it consequences for the colonizer no less than the colonized. As José Esteban Muñoz points out in *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, it is the self-consciousness of the colonizer under the native gaze that drives the need for a mimetic representation of the native.² Native potential for both violence and sexuality thus threatens to destabilize the project of colonial control, the paradox being that the violent sexuality of the colonizer is no less in need of control, lest the political and economic potential of the colonial relationship be undermined by an excess of killing, rape, and miscegenation.

Following the writings of Ann Laura Stoler in *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things*, we note that stabilized structures of colonial power and hierarchy become the means through which this potential excess of native and colonial lust and violent desire is domesticated.³ The failure of the indigenes to “live up” to this imagining is thus always met with a colonial response that is not just instrumentally violent in terms of economic and political repression

but also sexually inflected and patterned by the categories of ethnological representation.

Is the anthropological project inherently pornographic? In one sense the answer is clearly “yes,” especially if “pornography” is understood as the production and circulation of representations that invite sexual response. The cultural meaning of anthropology itself is in this way part of the epistemological heritage of colonialism. However, in a historical sense, such an epistemology of others is also the inevitable outcome, in all cultures, of the human potential to form relationships through violence and sex. So, the “ethnopornographic” need not be thought of as a unique aspect of Western sociocultural knowing, and decisions to “fuck or fight” are implicit in a wide array of non-Western theories of social interaction, as the anthropological literature from Amazonia to New Guinea amply illustrates.

As an idea, ethnopornography points to the analysis of the sexualities of others and how they might be engaged, understood, and entailed in our own processes of sexual understanding. The intellectual project this implies is therefore both historical and anthropological, self-reflective and perhaps ultimately redemptive of the possibility for forms of sexual engagement that do not endlessly reproduce the oppressive and repressive categories of colonial sexualities.

What, then, is this object we have termed “ethnopornography”? We see that ethnographic imaginations and practices, colonial appropriations, and even the postcolonial use of images in the anti-imperial project are related to pornography. The reader understands that such pornography has appropriated a sense of indigenous eroticism, a notion of native truth, to reflect upon European desires. We witness amateur and professional ethnographers alike using their perceptions of indigenous sexualities as a foil against Victorian repression. And we note particularly the figure of the sexually seductive “native” woman as a supposed signifier of truth; it is through her penetration that the European or Western man attempts to fulfill his desire for complete knowledge and control.

Here I wish to offer a few concluding observations related to the concepts of the native, the gaze, and the importance of the ethnopornographic relationship. For here we have thought seriously about ethnopornography, but we can imagine ethnographers (or historians of sexuality) saying, “Yes, we know about this relationship. So what do we do about it?” We would answer that recognition of the problem is key but not sufficient. Instead, we must work to disrupt ethnopornography by developing an alternative reading practice.

We must recognize that, in the work we are doing here, we face a series of problems. First, we must avoid the tendency to assume any transhistorical, transcultural unity in pornographic formulations. While it appears to us that, in a wide variety of times and places, colonizers, explorers, and ethnographers have sought to eroticize the populations with which they came into contact, each group did so in vitally different ways. Hence, my own work participates in ethnopornography when I discuss and analyze the kanaimà—dark shamans in the upper Amazon River basin in Guyana and Brazil—who violently mutilate the mouth and anus of their victims, and then suck the juices of putrefaction. As I have written, part of the ritual is as follows: “A stick is inserted through the ground directly into the cadaver, then the stick is extracted and the maba (honey-like) juices sucked off. . . . If the corpse is indeed sufficiently ‘sweet,’ it will be partially disinterred in order to recover bone material and, ideally, a section of the anal tract.”²⁴ Such an ethnopornographic representation is significantly different from the ways in which colonial French officials portrayed, for example, African men and women.

Second, we must note that commodification is a key component of pornography. Modern pornographers (minimally) frame narratives in such a way as to sell an audience on the power of sex. In this, they attempt to directly show the “truth” of the sex act. Linda Williams argues that this truth is envisioned as experiencing the pleasure of the other: “Hard-core pornography is a speculation about pleasure that begins . . . from a phallic perspective, journeys to the unseen world of the sexual other, and returns to tell the story.”²⁵ This sounds so much like early ethnography—like the final chapter, “Ethno-pornography,” of Walter Roth’s *Ethnological Studies among the North-West-Central Queensland Aborigines* (1897)—that we cannot ignore the parallels. As we expand the framework for understanding pornography into other contexts, we must continually keep in mind the relationship between pornography and the direct portrayal of the sexual “truth” of the other for the express purpose of selling a commodity to somebody willing to purchase it.

Finally, we must consider the ways in which pornographers and ethnographers use “racialized sexuality” to maintain particular discourses of power that often are different from bourgeois sexual discourses. Here we must understand that studies of pornography have shown that racialized sexuality alternates between a massive attempt at silencing the discussion of race in the nonpornographic sexual realm and an erotic exoticism that foregrounds race in the pornographic sexual realm. We must acknowl-

edge the knowledge practices involved in the ethnographic relationship. At the outset of the professionalization of ethnography in the nineteenth century, anthropologists configured the practice as a search for the truth of the Other; hence its object became the native informant. In this regime of knowledge, the ethnographer must always seek to get “under the skin” of the informant in order to get the necessary information to write the ethnography.

Of course, much recent work in anthropology has critiqued the concept of ethnographic truth, but the other model that they have proposed involves self-reflexivity, acknowledging the presence of the ethnographer in the ethnographic space. And they have not answered the key question: what is the goal of anthropology, ethnohistory, and ethnography, at least in their early disciplinary iterations, if not to seek out the truth of the Other? In our critique of ethnopornography, we have attempted to show that anthropologists and historians, much like the hard-core pornographers that Linda Williams describes in *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the “Frenzy of the Visible,”* have used the body of the Other as a particular kind of sign and, in particular, how indigenous bodies are rendered as signifiers of “true” uninhibited sexual desire. For early anthropologists, ethnographers, and cultural commentators repeatedly envisioned them as unlocking the desires of their audience, repressed by centuries of civilization.

Some readers might rightly critique the decision to use images—either visual or textual—in *Ethnopornography*. Rey Chow, for one, in “Where Have All the Natives Gone?,” asks how scholars can engage in such a project while not reinvesting in ethnopornography, and we answer that we cannot.⁶ But still she asks vital questions of us: Can we struggle against such representations without reifying the position of the native woman as Other, without promoting the very symbolic violence to her person that here we seek to discuss? How can we rerepresent the imagery, yet at the same time disrupt its symbolic power? Chow reminds us that we cannot simply seek to get behind the image of the native, get to the reality beneath it, to the true native, as if such a subject can exist in our society. The preference for no images, however, runs the risk of producing an ignorance related to the production of ethnopornography. Thus, when the image is read about without being presented, the reader cannot see the ethnopornographic representation. Still, if the reader does see the representation, then a certain amount of symbolic violence is destined to occur. And, even with a careful reading of the materiality of ethnopornographic images, we always will partly fail in our attempts at resignification. While such a failed reading will produce violence, it also will create a greater understanding of

the symbolic presence of ethnopornographic violence and its circulation throughout society.

To the extent that relations of power are implied by the knowledge project in its entirety—not just in an ethnographic sense but also, for example, in history, sociology, and psychology more widely—then it may be that neither abstinence from ethnopornographic imaging, nor trying to disrupt its reading, is sufficient. In other words, as ethnography has itself become a postmodernist answer to the collapse of enlightenment structures of knowledge by replacing such “knowledge” with “experience” and its literary or media expression (paper and print culture, photography, sound recordings, moving images, etc.), then this may also reveal a way out of this otherwise impossible dilemma. If we are desiring subjects, then the open acknowledgment of that and its incorporation into the practice of ethnography and ethnohistory does not end the potential and possibility for the production of ethnopornography within academic frameworks, but it does change the purpose of ethnographic engagement and writing.

It may not be possible to “save” ethnography as we know it, but we can reinvent it to serve other purposes than those of normative, modernist social science. Just as we have repositioned our relations with animals, distancing ourselves from ideas of other animals as merely “zoological objects” and attempting rather to find a route to see ourselves and other animal as potent subjectivities, so too “other humans” are no longer to be simply understood as culturally distorted versions of ourselves. Incorporating emerging ideas from cyberanthropology, we identify the possibility for a truly posthuman anthropology in which the ethnographic object becomes visible only through the overt and explicit engagement of our own subjectivity. Sexualized and violent engagements thus become explicit, and the ethics of such engagements visible.

Notes

This coda has been compiled and edited by Zeb Tortorici and Pete Sigal. Before he passed away, Neil, in consultation with Pete, wrote an introduction to what would eventually become this volume. While the volume has changed far too much to include that introduction, we have incorporated many of Neil’s ideas into the final introduction. We decided then to compile some remaining ideas from Neil as a sort of final word and provocation on ethnopornography.

- 1 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
- 2 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
- 3 Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995).
- 4 Neil L. Whitehead, *Dark Shamans: Kanaimà and the Poetics of Violent Death* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 15.
- 5 Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 279.
- 6 Rey Chow, "Where Have All the Natives Gone?," in *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, ed. Angelika Bammer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 125–51.