

# Sexing Empire

## Editors' Introduction

A common, obvious sexual metaphor for *empire* equates it with rape; yet empire, to some, has felt at once like rape and like seduction. Let us consult, for example, the *New York Herald* of October 8, 1847. At this late hour in the United States' war with Mexico, the *Herald* forecast that "like the Sabine virgins, she [Mexico] will soon learn to love her ravisher." As Amy Greenberg shows us, this was a vision of lusty imperial adventure, pregnant with the combined possibilities of territorial and bodily ravishings, seductive both to virginal Mexico and to "her" North American rapists. The central tension—seduction of *both* parties—subsumed imperialism into a gendered, sexual, and racial metaphor in which "the Spanish maid, with eye of fire" and "budding charms," "await[ed]," pantingly, the rape of "Yankee chivalry."<sup>1</sup>

It would appear that today's imperial subjects—inhabitants of several subjectivities within imperial power relations—continue to pant with desire. Mimi Thi Nguyen pinpoints for us the ways in which femininity and sexuality can simultaneously, even bizarrely, serve the need to "forgive" atrocity and to shore up empire. As made famous by Phan Thi Kim Phuc's iconically photographed 1972 flight from Trang Bang, her "desires for beauty and romantic love" enable a redemptive narrative in which empire magnanimously remakes her, physically and sexually. Via consumption of beauty products, Kim Phuc becomes "a woman like any other," incorporated into an imperial plotline of "civilizational thinking." Kim Phuc's use of "rouge, lipstick, and eyeliner," her desirability to "boys," signal, in imperial eyes, the stitching up of the Vietnam War's multiple wounds.<sup>2</sup>

From where we stand, then, empire has reasserted itself as "liberal"—and, moreover, as a "gift." This is a sexualized and gendered fantasy of gift giving, of

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“freeing peoples from unenlightened forms of social organization.”<sup>3</sup> Hence neo-medievalists reiterate cultural hierarchies inscribing various others into a religious, raced, gendered matrix of chivalry versus barbarity, masculinity versus femininity, Occident versus Orient. Such thinking celebrates the incursions into Iraq and Afghanistan as exercises in eradicating “medieval barbarians” whose principal crimes include “unenlightened” approaches to gender and to sex.<sup>4</sup> Across the political spectrum, pundits and policy makers affirm that the United States and its allies have brought the gift of freedom to oppressed, orientalized women. To take this at perhaps its most obvious and raw, George W. Bush argued in 2011 that the United States must not “leave” Afghanistan, because “women would suffer again. . . . We don’t believe that’s in the interest of the United States or the world to create a safe haven for terrorists and stand by and watch women’s rights be abused.”<sup>5</sup>

The ramifications of such fantasy are among the many ways in which empire is sexed in these pages. This issue began with a call for thinking about sex and—and also *in*—empire, with an eye to taking stock of our ongoing conversations about sexuality, gender, race, and cultures of empire. In the 1990s, Anne McClintock and Ann Laura Stoler, among others, produced critical points of departure for bringing feminism to the study of colonialism—not only gendering empire but also calling for detailed analysis of the interweavings of sex, gender, and the economic and cultural processes of imperialism. As consensus formed around the notion that sexual practice, discourse, and representation lay at the cornerstone of the “colonial order of things,” *Imperial Leather* challenged scholars to attend to three key areas of inquiry: “intimate relations between imperial power and resistance; money and sexuality; race and gender.”<sup>6</sup>

The intervening decades have given such inquiry room to breathe and expand. Building on Stoler’s postulation of “imperial formations,” Nayan Shah’s *Stranger Intimacy* investigates the construction and deployment of gendered and sexual order—that is, regulated “companionship, domesticity, and public life”—as inextricable from other regulatory schematics (of space, of property holding, of work, of citizenship, and of access to privilege and capital).<sup>7</sup> The richness of Shah’s analysis lies in his attention to the everyday details of intimacy, the records of individual “strangers.” As he points out, intimacy and its regulation could both undergird and destabilize imperial boundaries. “The paradox of stranger intimacy,” that is, “offers a way of conceptualizing everyday encounters that can either invest in sustaining hierarchy or produce egalitarian social and political arenas, ethics, and associations.”<sup>8</sup>

Sex in empire, then, is at once large and superstructural—bound up in McClintock’s broad strokes of power/resistance, money/sexuality, race/gender—and small and detailed, contained within Pears soap, Hannah Cullwick’s performances, and the everyday forms of “companionship” enabled by stranger intimacy. To “sex” empire is to engage both master narratives of sexual and gendered power (the abstract “rescue” of orientalized women) and to lend attention to the intimate spaces

and relations in which such power is exercised, challenged, reiterated, and distorted. As Andrew Friedman reminds us, empire comprises “emotional life and manifold gendered racial relationships,” propagated in spaces that, in some sense, transcend geography via intimacy. For the Vietnam War’s agents of empire, house parties in northern Virginia and “hootenannies” in South Vietnam equally facilitated imperial closeness. The similarity of domestic spaces, of intimate socializing and relationships, obscured or elided the physical distance between McLean and Saigon, reinstating the cultural and geopolitics of empire while troubling its physical and individual boundaries.<sup>9</sup> Empire, then, is as much about physical fucking as it is about “fucking empire”—the latter, participial form denoting both empire’s sometime technologies and its unwieldy, bamboozling scope.

What happens, then, between McClintock and Stoler, Greenberg and Shah, Nguyen and Friedman? If our point of departure is that processes of pleasure and desire have shaped the regulation and classification of bodies, that sexual discourse and practice form and are formed by imperial power relations, then what kinds of questions is it now possible to ask? What insights do the now decades-old move to rethink empire, sexually and in terms of gender, grant us?

Empire, we find, is a complex topography of mismatched, multidirectional desires. More than that, it is a matrix of presumptions about and deployments of desire—the desire to be free, to fuck, to be feminist. As contributions herein show, evolving colonialities shape those presumptions in ways that are hidden or implicit, as well as in ways that are, to turn a phrase, nakedly articulated. The latter is nowhere more clear than in essays by Elizabeth Mesok and Keith L. Camacho, where the superstructures of gender and of sexual orderliness are spoken aloud as the legitimators of politics and geopolitics. These and other contributions in this issue demonstrate ways in which the lines traced by *Imperial Leather, Race and the Education of Desire, Cultures of US Empire*, and other foundational works have generated fecund inquiry. As Matthew Frye Jacobson pointed out in 2013, the legacy of those foundations lies in scholarship that carries forward the work of tracking sex in empire—such that “affect, haunting, intimacy, and sexuality hold a much larger place in our interpretive lexicon nowadays.”<sup>10</sup> This issue of *Radical History Review* thus builds on and contributes to a conversation at the nexus of intimacy, sexuality, and violence. We use the gerund form—“Sexing Empire”—to indicate fluidity and continuity in the relationships between sex and imperialism, across traditional periodizations and geographies.

What began for us, as the editors of this issue, as “Racialized Erotics in the Americas” in the summer of 2011 has become something more powerful and potent in its current formation. Out of a series of sessions on sex at the Tepoztlán Institute for Transnational History of the Americas, we thought that historicization of sexual acts and erotic identities embedded in the racial dynamics of colonialism were best exemplified in the “New World.” Focus on Spanish, Portuguese, French, US, or

British empires grounded the first iteration of this project. Instead, we decided on a more vigorous idea that follows Stoler's notion that in imperial statecraft "colonial intimacies are first and foremost sites of intrusive interventions."<sup>11</sup> Thus colonial expectations and colonized responses were bound not only in the social realities of racial hierarchies or material labor demands but also in the realms of imaginary and cultural construction of the imperial subject. As we proposed the examination of erotics to describe the heightened processes of pleasures and desire that shape the ways in which bodies become sexualized, raced, classed and gendered in a space that has been historically defined by centuries of colonization, slavery, sharecropping, underemployment, and other forms of economic exploitation, we wanted to examine power in sex by uncovering how and why colonial regimes and actors contain and justify the practices of landholders, military personnel, and other authorities, as they engage(d) in sex acts and erotic exchanges, which, in turn, created the logic of hierarchy and exploitation, often violently.

While sex and erotics were central, they nonetheless were limiting when focusing on only one hemisphere or one set of temporalities—after 1492, that is. By broadening the geography of our focus and shifting away from a singular narrative of *the* ambiguous colonizer's projection of racial deviance as well as the reproduction of domestic relationships onto the racialized, sexualized subject, we failed to account for those subjects on the other side of colonization, on the side of power, which too created, participated in, and continue to participate in the construction of national imaginaries and state formations. In "Sexing Empire," we do something radically different by flipping the conversation on lingering racial, cultural, and economic remnants of a global geography of sex and empire—here there are no pure victims of empire, only actors. As some of our essays focus on normative ideologies that were reproduced in the very practices of marriage, family, and kin, all of which were a way to contain sex and eros as colonial and postcolonial discourses, the role of militarism is far more central to this debate than we understood at the outset. Militarism in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries is more than occupation; it is most profoundly documented in the reproductive labor performed by female cisgender and transgender subjects in allied forces or in previous sites that allied forces occupied. Trans- and cisgender women's role as agents of empire through sex (gender performance) recalibrates previous feminist articulations such as those astute observations by Cynthia Enloe in her groundbreaking *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases* where she argues that "the normalcy that sustains a military base in a local community rests on ideas about masculinity and femininity. A foreign base requires especially delicate adjustment of relations between men and women."<sup>12</sup> As the following essays demonstrate, relations between women and men do not just occur between the "native" and the "occupying force," nor are they normalized presences given the violence of contemporary military occupations across the globe. Now, occupying forces rely on women's bodies in combat to perform masculine femininity to nego-

tiate women's aid to ground troops, and call centers rely on transgender women's performances of feminine docility to remake former military bases into new sites of profit from affective labor. Thus new gender formations through military presence and even after withdrawal, both historic and contemporary, put pressure on how we imagine reproductive sex, sex for pleasure, sex as affective labor, and gender as affective labor, because the reach of empires past and present do indeed reconfigure not just how gender is understood but why social relations are complicated and messy in the context of empire. For us, empire's uptake of sex, sexuality, and sex as gender demonstrates not just how we discuss erotics across space and time but that we need to theorize how empire and the tentacles of imperialism make the intimate a rather public affair.

We suggest that the sex-as-empire lens allows scholars to renew their approach to radical history. By historicizing individual and national traumas through militarism as sexual exchanges or the production of sex as gender, we can see that love and hate are similar emotions of extreme desire in opposite directions entangled through military occupation, religious proselytization, and even an academic boycott. As a radical epistemology for thinking through sex and empire as a global phenomenon that spans the early Americas and the contemporary Pacific Rim, colonial desires also provide locations from which to analyze these intersections through an inherently feminist project. While such intersectional categories might seem like well-trodden ground, religious practices, illicit affairs with military high command, and gay marriage mandates reveal political tensions between various orders jockeying to promote new forms of power and governance. What we learned is that the Pacific Rim is a hotbed for sexual liaisons produced in militarism and the policing of queers through marriage laws in Hawai'i and Guam. And the deep historicization of how these sites come to have new meaning is a feminist lineage that we can trace through the McClintock-Stoler-Shah genealogy cited earlier. Thus we ask, What work did sex do in mapping the imaginary of empires past and present? How do subjects in empire use experiences of sexual violence, pleasure, and gender transformation to reposition violence as self-realization, a provider of legibility, and state formation within colonial regimes and governance? How do empires provide flexible technologies of self for some subjects and their bodies and restrictions for others? By contrasting the shared and distinct geographies of empire, we demonstrate how sex is key to understanding racial, gender, religious, and military hierarchies as change over space and time.

Key, sometimes taken-for-granted, concepts like indigeneity and diaspora get reworked in this issue by demonstrating continuity and change across the colonial and contemporary—herein indigeneity is recast through the cover image as a violent threat and in Camacho's article on Hawai'i and Guam as a conservative native traditional justification for denying gay marriage. Diaspora and legal legacies about marriages, for example, are integral to understanding Pacific Rim cultures and prac-

tices of coupling through the emergence of what Camacho calls “homomilitarism.” In other aspects, gender and sex are remade because of the possibilities of empire as post-9/11 US military presence throughout the globe. Thus to limit the historical field to erotics simply as imagined and material practices is a mistake. “Sexing Empire” challenges all of us to think about how sex is remade in Iraq and Afghanistan at the exact same temporal moment it is transformed in the Philippines, Guam, and Hawai‘i.

In these configurations we recognize the radical force of race in making sex and empire as material history with political consequences. From the colonial to the contemporary, we sought essays that analyze the intersections of violence and pleasure within the context of empire and that provide methodological innovations for how historians do work. Meticulously archived practices of empire demonstrate and define sex as an unintended or explicitly intended act, an identity, as a belief, as embodiment, and as law. Such results give rise to a section never before seen in *Radical History Review*, Histories of the Present. Here we publicly acknowledge the ways in which empire as a never-ending project in our contemporary moment (sexing) has a direct correlation to how imperial regimes disseminated different kinds of governance. Sex determines knowledge of subject and nation through the juridical and cultural realms. As we curate empire, we provide a map for scholars to write histories of the unimaginable.

This issue brings together a diverse set of voices to intervene in the historiography we have described above. Laura Briggs reflects on some of the key sites of empire studies and how they have resurfaced in the face of intellectual and political exigencies, reminding us why the study of imperialism matters again and why feminism is the logical lens through which we should critique contemporary modes of empire. Katrina Phillips draws on the visual culture related to her work on Indian historical reenactments. The provocative photographs she assembles introduce her work on Indian pageantry; we have chosen one, in particular, for the cover of this issue because it so succinctly captures certain fantasies regarding Indian threats to white female safety and propriety.

In our Histories of the Present section, Emmanuel David examines Filipina call center workers and some surprising forms of intimacy forged in the outposts of empire that serve as their workplaces, while Camacho’s essay puts contemporary activism for same-sex marriage equality in conversation with the imperial histories of Hawai‘i and Guam.

Taken together, the articles in the Features section provide deep historical insight into the conditions that predate and return us to the imperial present. Rachel Sarah O’Toole looks deeply into cases of “bewitching” in colonial Peru to reveal how the sexually fantastical exposes the gendered mechanisms of dominance in the Spanish empire. Vernadette Vicuña Gonzalez considers US empire in the Pacific through the story of General Douglas MacArthur’s spurned mixed-race Philippine-

born mistress and illuminates the intimate relations and choices (or lack thereof) about intimacies that underpin the project of US imperialism. Elizabeth Mesok brings us back to a history of the present by positing that female counterinsurgents' gendered acts of labor in Iraq and Afghanistan represent a key aspect of US empire in the Middle East and Central Asia.

We, the editors of this issue, first met one another at the wonderfully fertile intellectual environment fostered by the Tepoztlán Institute for the Transnational History of the Americas, where we also met the radical historian María Elena Martínez, who died on November 16, 2014. Martínez was a key organizer and former director of the institute, so we have asked some who knew her from Tepoztlán or who attended the institute along with her to reflect on her life and work. We see the final pages of this issue, "Sexing Empire," as a fitting place for the difficult and sad work of remembering a friend and colleague who is gone far too soon.

—Benjamin A. Cowan, Nicole M. Guidotti-Hernández, and Jason Ruiz

### Notes

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1. Quoted in Amy Greenberg, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 22–23; emphasis added.
2. Mimi Thi Nguyen, *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), 105–7.
3. *Ibid.*, 3.
4. Bruce Holsinger, *Neomedievalism, Neoconservatism, and the War on Terror* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm, 2007), 8.
5. George W. Bush, interview by Greta Van Susteren, "For George W. Bush Empowering Women in Afghanistan Lays a Foundation 'For a Lasting Peace,'" *On the Record*, Fox News, March 31, 2011, [www.foxnews.com/on-air/on-the-record/transcript/george-w-bush-empowering-women-afghanistan-lays-039foundation-lasting-peace039](http://www.foxnews.com/on-air/on-the-record/transcript/george-w-bush-empowering-women-afghanistan-lays-039foundation-lasting-peace039).
6. 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; Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5.
7. Nayan Shah, *Stranger Intimacy: Contesting Race, Sexuality and the Law in the North American West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011), 3.
8. *Ibid.*, 273.
9. Andrew Friedman, *Covert Capital: Landscapes of Denial and the Making of U.S. Empire in the Suburbs of Northern Virginia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 147–54, 300.

10. Matthew Frye Jacobson, "Where We Stand: US Empire at Street Level and in the Archive," *American Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (2013): 272.
11. Ann Laura Stoler, "Intimidations of Empire: Predicaments of the Tactile and Unseen," in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*, ed. Ann Laura Stoler (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 4.
12. Cynthia Enloe, *Bananas, Beaches, and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*, updated ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 67.