

It has been suggested that 'sex' is at the root of many problems in the racial field.

John Dollard (1937)

The 'white man's burden' thus becomes his sexuality and its control, and it is this which is transferred into the need to control the sexuality of the Other, the Other as sexualized female. The colonial mentality which sees 'natives' as needing control is easily transferred to 'woman' – but woman as exemplified by the caste of the prostitute.

Sander Gilman (1986)

That western attitudes towards the non-western world are fundamentally ambivalent has often been observed. The most sensitive area of this ambivalence lies, possibly, in attitudes towards sexuality. The non-western world – whether the warm South or the sensual Orient – is idealized and eroticized on the one hand as a paradise on earth, and on the other hand rejected and condemned. Such attitudes play a part in the *amor et timor*, love and fear, which often characterizes relations that cut across cultural frontiers. The contradictory western attitudes towards the non-western world seem to culminate in contradictory attitudes towards non-western sexuality, and these in turn reflect ambivalent feelings on the part of westerners about their own sexuality. On one hand 'Others' are sexualized, and on the other, declared sexually taboo. The uninhibited, extroverted sexuality which westerners attribute to 'primitives' also serves as a reason for rejecting the primitive as a stage that is past, condemned, and even feared – as in the metaphor of the German anthropologist J. J. Bachofen, who called this stage the 'morass'. In this force-field of attraction and repulsion, an ambivalence towards one's own sexuality is experienced and projected on to the outside world, which appears the more primitive and uninhibited the greater one's fears as to one's own sexuality. Under such pressure subliminal sexuality takes on larger, more extravagant forms. Subsequently, a connection can arise between the control and repression of one's own sexuality and the control and repression of 'Others'.

In Europe the belief that people from the south are more lascivious than northerners goes back a long way. European sexualization of the non-western world, notably of Africa, dates from at least the Middle Ages. In the twelfth century the Jewish traveller Benjamin of Tudela described a people 'at Seba on the river Pishon . . . who, like animals, eat of the herbs that grow on the banks of the Nile and in the fields. They go about naked and have not the intelligence of ordinary men. They cohabit with their sisters and anyone they can find. . . . And these are the Black slaves, the sons of Ham.'¹

In *The Fardle of Fashions* (1550), William Waterman wrote of the after-dinner habits of the Ichthyophagi, or fish-eaters, in 'Affrike': 'They eat as I have said in the savage field together abroad, rejoicing with a semblance of merriness and a manner of singing full untuned. That done they fall upon their women, even as they come to hand without any choice: utterly void of care, by reason they are always sure of meat in good plenty.'² In the sixteenth century Leo Africanus characterized the morals of West Africans: 'They have among them great swarms of Harlots; whereupon a man may easily conjecture their manner of living.'

From early on uncontrolled sexuality formed part of the profile of savagery. In Shakespeare's *Othello* there are several allusions to stereotypes of black sexuality. Thus Rodrigo speaks of Desdemona as in 'the crude embrace of a

lascivious Moor', and Desdemona's father refers to the coupling of a black ram and a white ewe. Leo Africanus' work was among Shakespeare's sources. But in Elizabethan England there were few blacks, so that racial mixture could hardly have been a social problem. Hence it has been argued that Shakespeare, to judge by his metaphors, was alluding to 'a contrast between the relatively open and earthy sexuality which was traditionally associated with rural England and the conventions of respectability and restraint which began to be introduced among the urban middle class. As would happen in other times and other places, blacks could be used to symbolize tensions and fears in the creation of which they had had little or no part.'³ Figures from other cultures were invoked to symbolize internal tensions.

This perspective reached its apogee in the nineteenth century, both in European repression of sexuality in the Victorian age and in racist attitudes towards the non-western world. The psychiatrist Dominic Mannoni has referred to the tendency of Europeans 'to project on to . . . colonial peoples the obscurities of their own unconscious – obscurities they would rather not penetrate'.⁴ In European colonial fiction and adventure stories Africa is represented either as an unspoilt paradise or as a dark labyrinth. The continent is also represented as a seductive, destructive woman, while Europeans are combatting dark, evil forces. Whether the image of Africa is a benevolent or a derogatory one, it remains bound up in certain conventions; as Hammond and Jablow conclude: 'The image of Africa remains the negative reflection, the shadow, of the British self-image.'⁵

What was the myth of Africa as 'the Dark Continent' but a symbol of the Victorians' own dark subconscious, projected upon a continent? What was the terminology applied to explorers who were said to 'penetrate' the 'interior' of Africa but a cryptogram for European expansion subliminally presented as sexual penetration?⁶ From time to time colonial abuses are cast in the allegory of rape – the rape of a continent, the rape of Bengal, the rape of the Congo. But, conversely, metaphors of the Dark Continent and the voyage of 'discovery' also occur in the terminology of psychoanalysis:

Thus when Freud, in his *Essay on Lay Analysis* (1926), discusses the ignorance of contemporary psychology concerning adult female sexuality, he refers to this lack of knowledge as the 'dark continent' of psychology. In using this phrase in English, Freud ties the image of female sexuality to the image of the colonial black and to the perceived relationship between the female's ascribed sexuality and the Other's exotism and pathology. . . . Freud continues a discourse which relates the images of male discovery to the images of the female as the object of discovery.⁷

There is a parallel between Victorian anthropology and its view of 'primitive peoples' as 'contemporary ancestors', and psychoanalysis, in which the unconscious is regarded as a stratum that is both older and infantile. In C. G. Jung's view, the unconscious is identified with the collective and the unindividualized. Thus Jung writes: 'he [the black] reminds us – in not so much our conscious but our unconscious mind – not only of childhood but of our prehistory, which would take us back not more than twelve hundred years so far as the Germanic races are concerned.'⁸

Childhood or prehistory: this is a recurring doubt in European narratives about Africa. Europeans view Africa either as the original unspoilt land, un-

spoilt like a child, or as a land of evolutionary regression or stagnation (of 'contemporary ancestors', peoples 'without history').

One does not have to be a psychoanalyst or a Freudian to be aware of the importance of sexuality also in white-black relations. Generally, as Sander Gilman puts it, sexuality is the most salient marker of otherness.⁹ Psychoanalysis itself, however, is part of the process of 'othering': psychoanalysis, in the words of Karl Kraus, is a symptom of the disease of which it claims to be the cure. This is unquestionably true of the deeply entrenched racism of the epoch, whose anthropological commonplaces psychoanalysis both reflected and reproduced.¹⁰

Over time this complex of attitudes has found increasingly divergent expression in America and in Europe. While there was no significant black presence in Europe (although Europe has an 'Africa complex'), the American situation has been entirely determined by the relationship of whites to the black minority.

America: Libido and Lynching

Black bodies swinging
in the Southern breeze;
Strange fruit, hanging
from the poplar trees.

Billie Holiday, 'Strange
Fruit' (1941)

An important reason for the institutionalization of slavery in America and the West Indies was, according to several authors, the regulation of sexual relations. In North America slavery was made legal for the first time in Virginia in 1661 and in Maryland in 1663. In Maryland this was preceded in 1661 by a statute aimed specifically at white women who showed a preference for black men: the white woman who married a black slave had as a disincentive to serve the slave's master for as long as her husband lived; all children of the union had the status of slaves. Legal restrictions were imposed on interracial relations in several states between 1691 and 1725.¹¹

Many white men viewed the black male, slave or free, as a serious threat to their own sexual prerogatives. Many white women not only believed themselves disgraced by the brazen affairs conducted by their husbands with black women but that their own social position and authority over the household were jeopardized by the extra-marital affairs of their husbands. Hence, both white men and women were convinced of the necessity to impose serious legal restraints to control, if not prevent, cohabitation across the color line.¹²

The Black Code or *code noir* which defined the social status of blacks as black, i.e. slave, therefore also served as a code for regulating sexual conduct. The ambivalence referred to earlier – the sexualization and tabooization of the Other – here took a form aimed specifically at controlling the sexuality of the black man. It was the black man who was declared taboo, not the black woman: especially because a mulatto born of a black woman who remained with his mother was not as threatening to the status quo as a mulatto born of a white woman – a woman who would be able to give her children an upbringing and education that would afford them access to social opportunities, and would thus disrupt and undermine the colour-based social hierarchy.

For white males this situation meant a sexual gain, because it gave them access to white women as well as black.¹³ Also black women could have either black or white partners, but they were the disadvantaged party in gender hierarchy. So it was black men and white women who were restricted in their

sexual choice. To justify these restrictions, certain myths were propagated, such as that of the black male as being hypersexed and of the white woman on the pedestal – the idolization of the white female in the American south. Black men were said to have an exceptionally large penis, as well as an insatiable animal sexuality. 'The black male was variously described as a "walking phallus"; an animalistic satyr possessed with insatiable sexual appetites, . . . a sexually uninhibited man preoccupied with sex.'¹⁴

The myth of the large penis had a history. English authors in the seventeenth century explained the vehement sexual activity which they attributed to Africans by the size of the African penis. Mandingo men, according to Richard Jobson in 1623, were 'furnisht with such members as are after a sort burthensome unto them'.¹⁵ Medical research has long since established that as regards penis size there is the usual variation *within* ethnic groups, but no uniform difference from one ethnic group to another. The black man as 'walking phallus' and 'super-stud' was both sexualized and made taboo, and was thus promoted to being 'America's fearsome sex symbol'.

The sexualization of black men may also have its roots in the guilty conscience of whites. 'The presence of large numbers of mulatto children betrayed the sins of white men', according to Ronald Takaki. 'Not only did whites classify the mulatto as "Negro" and thereby try to deny that sexual intercourse had ever taken place between whites and blacks; they also transferred their own lusts and their anxieties of black male retaliation to their fear of black men as sexual threats to white women.'¹⁶

We see here a link between sexual politics and racial politics. This forms part of a larger complex. As D'Emilio and Freedman observe in their history of sexuality in America,

Ever since the seventeenth century, European migrants to America had merged racial and sexual ideology in order to differentiate themselves from Indians and blacks, to strengthen the mechanism of social control over slaves, and to justify the appropriation of Indian and Mexican lands through the destruction of native peoples and their cultures. In the nineteenth century, sexuality continued to serve as a powerful means by which white Americans maintained dominance over people of other races. Both scientific and popular thought supported the view that whites were civilized and rational, while members of other races were savage, irrational, and sensual.¹⁷

Wilhelm Reich in his interpretation of Nazism focused on the interface between sexual repression, racial oppression, and power. He saw a connection between race and class oppression: areas that are often kept separate or played off against each other. In the views of Nazi ideologues such as Alfred Rosenberg, Reich noted,

Members of the suppressed class are equated with those who are racially alien. . . . behind the idea of the interbreeding with alien races lies the idea of sexual intercourse with members of the suppressed class. . . . sexual interbreeding between classes means an undermining of class rule; it creates the possibility of a 'democratization'. . . .¹⁸

The connection between sexual repression and power also plays an important role in Michel Foucault's work. Foucault identified two divergent and competing views of power: the tradition of Hegel, Freud, Reich, in which power is

**Every
thing
you
ever
heard
about
black
men...**

**is
TRUE!**

Caption on a folding picture postcard showing a black man in a suit who, when the card is opened out, exposes his large penis. (USA, 1986)

'In the United States the mob lynches negroes, accused of the murder of a white woman.' *Le Petit Parisien*, 1901. A French view of an American lynching seems sensationalized in several respects: the accusation was likely to have been rape and not murder, the man in the top hat does not belong in this crowd, and the victims depicted are rather too numerous.



viewed as repression, and that of Nietzsche and Clausewitz, where it is viewed in terms of force and conflict.¹⁹ But is there not also a connection between the dimension of violence and that of sexual repression? Not necessarily a direct, but a perverse, connection.

In the United States the twin myths of the 'black beast' and the 'white goddess', and the social structure based on the two, were upheld by means of force – a use of force which after Emancipation and Reconstruction turned into violence. In the United States between 1884 and 1900 more than 2,500 blacks were lynched. While the lynchings were in themselves perverse, they were often coupled with additional manifestations of perversity. According to Gunnar Myrdal, the fact that in a lynching the black man was often castrated indicated 'a close link between lynching and repressed sexual drives'. 'When a white feels so personally involved with a Negro', noted the actor

James Earl Jones, 'that he takes the time to cut off his penis and torture him, then it has to be something sexual, the result of repressed sex. . . . Everywhere in the world men kill each other, but nowhere do they cut off penises and lynch each other.'²⁰

The turning-point came in 1889, according to Joel Williamson, a historian of the American South. Prior to that lynchings took place mainly in the Western states and among whites, with cattle thieves as the main victims. By the 1890s lynchings had shifted to the South and blacks became the victims. Before that the main fear among whites had been that the blacks would massively rebel and attack the whites or their property. Now the accusation of rape emerged, the 'new crime' which was the motive (rather than murder) for most lynchings of blacks. The myth of the black rapist of white women may have surfaced as a reaction to the status insecurities of white Southern males.²¹ White males in the South identified with the Victorian code of morality which dictated that they had to be breadwinners, but the economic depression of the 1890s, the vulnerability of the Southern plantation economy and the advance of industrialization, coupled with their losing the Civil War, undermined their position. The political and economic insecurities of the South found a psychic outlet in the inflammable combination of 'race' and sexuality, the myth of the black rapist and the collective ritual of lynching. Between 1889 and 1899 a person was lynched every other day, and in nine cases out of ten the victim was a black who had been accused of rape. Books like *The Leopard's Spots* (1902), an instant bestseller (the title refers to the passage in Jeremiah about the leopard who cannot change his spots), and *The Klansman* by Thomas Dixon, jr., voiced the new myth of the 'black beast'. D. W. Griffith's film *Birth of a Nation* (1915), based on the latter book, glorified the development of the Ku Klux Klan. By that time lynchings of blacks accused of rape had peaked, although they were not over: one took place as recently as 1946. But the 'second KKK', which grew up after 1915, was aimed not at blacks but at Jews and Catholics.

(Repressed) sexuality, white male domination and violence are so closely interwoven here that they merge with one another. The regulation of white male sexuality goes along with the sexualization of the female and with the repression of female sexuality, with the sexualization of the black male and with his castration. Jealousy and fear of the black man's sexuality, and the inability or unwillingness to accept the masculinity, the virility of black men, play a key part in the American racial psycho-drama. The castration of the black man takes various forms – not in the first place physical, through murder and lynching, but chiefly through his humiliation as a man, economically in the labour market and in his role as breadwinner, socially in terms of status and prestige, legally in *de facto* restrictions on his right to self-defence or to carry arms, politically by withholding, until recently, the vote from him. The black male's access to the white man's world is conditional: as servant or entertainer who does not threaten the status quo; as desexualized figure such as a minister, a notable, a scholar; or, conversely, if he conforms to the stereotype of the bestial black, as the brainless athlete or super-stud.

The social and psychological castration of the black male is a concrete as well as a subtle reality, which is experienced at various levels: 'Because he must act like a eunuch when it comes to white women, there arises within the Negro an undefined sense of dread and self-mutilation. Psychologically he experiences himself as castrated.'²²

Big headlines in the black press about an event in Georgia: 'a Negro had failed to help a desperate white woman escape from the flaming wreckage of an automobile, because he had been afraid of the consequences of laying his black hands on her flesh in order to pull her free. The woman had perished.'

Everything indicates that this principle of emasculation has 'inverted' consequences. It destabilizes black male-female relations because the black man cannot function as breadwinner, has little status socially, is thus in a weak position *vis-à-vis* the black woman – all of which can lead to more relations being formed between black men and white women.²³ The African-American question of the fatherless or 'matrifocal' family is directly related to the emasculation of black men: because of this he cannot function as a father either – a role withheld from him since the days of slavery, when the figure of the black 'Uncle' first appeared.

The American complex about race is geared chiefly to suppressing black males, and in this context two stereotypes predominate alternately: Sambo, the black eunuch (clown, buffoon, entertainer, happy to serve), and the black man as brute, the 'brute nigger' (virile to the point of bestiality). At the bottom of the social hierarchy is the black woman, suppressed both as woman and as black woman, the cheapest item on the labour market, manipulated as sexual object or as servant.²⁴ Here also two images predominate: the black woman who is regarded as sexually available and equated with the prostitute – 'Brown sugar'; and the desexualized mammy of the Aunt Jemima type. In American iconography the former virtually invisible and the second ubiquitous. In American art and advertising black female beauty has rarely been depicted, while European artists painted black female nudes and European poets sang of the black Venus, Americans, although black women were obviously far more numerous in America than in Europe, did not.²⁵ This is one of the notable differences between European and American imagery about Africa and blacks. In America this did not change until after the 1950s and '60s. In the '60s 'black is beautiful' changed the landscape of fashion and style. In 1984 Vanessa Williams became the first black Miss America.

Europe: Venus and Eunuch

In Europe ambivalence towards the non-western world developed in a different manner. For Europe it was not slavery but colonialism that was the central process through which the eroticization and tabooization of other cultures took shape. This was an intensive involvement which yet, for Europe, took place at a distance. These features alone were to give greater play to fantasy, along with domination, in the European 'othering' complex. Immigrants from the plantation colonies of the West Indies and from Africa become numerous only in the second half of the twentieth century.

The perspective on the black male is not really different on the two sides of the Atlantic. In the terms of a popular pamphlet published in England in 1772: 'The lower class of women in England, are remarkably fond of the blacks, for reasons too brutal to mention.'²⁶ The Moorish servant of old bore erotic connotations, and in eighteenth-century art there was a symbolic association of the Moor with deviant sexual behaviour and with illicit relationships.