Colonised Bodies:

How Pre-modern Trans Historians Have Aided the Reclaiming of the *Non-Cisgendered Racialised Body.*

by Emma Stinchon

This essay argues that contemporary Western narratives framing non-cisgendered and racialised bodies as "unnatural" are deeply rooted in the enduring legacy of colonial ideology, which privileges a white, European, cisgender norm. In response, it positions pre-modern trans historiography as a critical intervention that challenges and destabilises these narratives by demonstrating the historical presence and cultural legitimacy of diverse gender expressions across time and place. Ultimately, the essay contends that pre-modern trans historiography not only recovers marginalised identities but also actively reclaims the "othered" body as natural, complex, and historically grounded. In doing so, it challenges the authority of contemporary exclusionary discourses and contributes to a broader reimagining of gender beyond colonial binaries.

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The residual ideology of Western colonialism has dictated that the white, European, cisgendered body is culturally understood to be the 'natural' body. It is celebrated in beauty standards reflected globally and there remains a societal pressure to reject the bodies that transgress this image. Contemporary political discourse often focuses discriminatory narratives on these 'othered' bodies, attempting to write them out of society, and framing them as 'unnatural'. In the face of this large-scale cultural and political rejection, this essay resists the hateful rhetoric that appears constantly in contemporary political discourse in the West through demonstrating how the work of pre-modern trans historians can negate this narrative and promote the reclamation of non-cisgendered racialised bodies in all their natural beauty.

To best articulate pre-modern trans historiography's reclamation of the 'othered' body, it is important to outline the extent of the field's engagement with racial history in its initial conception. Rebecca Hickman observes that the pioneering historians of pre-modern transgender scholarship, such as Leslie Feinberg, were overly Eurocentric in their literature.[1] Despite this, when justifying hir thesis, Feinberg relied on evidence from "far-flung cultures all over the world", citing North American Two-Spirit Indigenous identities and individuals from pre-colonial India who did not conform to strict Western gender binaries.[2] Colonial implications are evident from the conception of this field as ze makes little reference to the methodological complexities of relying on this evidence to justify the ever-present existence of a modern Western trans identity. As a result, the scholarship that has emerged from Feinberg's seminal text has a deeply Eurocentric focus and has neglected the implication of race and colonialism in its initial construction. It is from this criticism that the following literature emerges.

Deborah Miranda and Saylesh Wesley's literature, published in the early 2010s, kickstarts this conversation. This emergence comes as a rallying cry for precolonial Indigenous identities to be accurately located, to be remembered in the face of imperial violence. It is important to note that these authors have borne witness to the impact of colonialism as descendants of the Stó:lō and Indigenous Californians, respectively. Both have seen the diversity of their cultures diminish as Western gender norms were violently enforced. Wesley's 'Twin-Spirited Woman' is written as personal act of healing and reconciliation. She describes her grandmother's difficulty in accepting her granddaughter's gender queerness despite being descended herself from a Two-Spirited community. Colonial ideology has criminalised Wesley's identity in her community and forced her grandmother to forget her gender-diverse heritage.[3] She writes this history as a reminder to her own people of their heritage and to challenge the universality of fixed binary gender. Miranda's motivations mirror Wesley's, naming the mass destruction of the joyas in California by the Spanish imperial forces in the late eighteenth-century as a gendercide, shifting the narrative of the history. Spiritual leaders were decimated by the Spanish because they did not conform to Catholic gender norms, and thus they have been erased from the

colonial narrative. While the modern Western world searched for their trans ancestors, Miranda notes their ignorance of the spiritual ancestors of Indigenous tribes that the West exterminated for their own imperial gain.[4] This work represents the moment pre-modern trans historiography broadened its scope to engage with the issue of race, however, only when forced to by authors of targeted communities who refused to let their stories be neglected. This has created the space for reclaiming the othered body and reinstating the organic nature of its being.

C. Riley Snorton's 'Black on Both Sides' was a further disruptive text, bringing attention to Black gender experience in postcolonial discourse. Inspired by Africana philosophy, Snorton extends Fanon's claim that the Black body is excluded from personhood to suggest this necessarily excludes the Black man from gender.[5] Colonial narratives manipulate this philosophy, framing the Black body as the opposite to the 'normal' white body of anatomical congruity.[6] This contributes to the celebration of the white cisgendered body and provokes questions about the connections between Blackness and transness in the Western psyche as both are considered radically 'other'. Snorton's observations have inspired a revision of various gender histories that concern race. Jamey Jesperson identifies this historical ungendering and its fungibility with Blackness in the case of Mary Jones (1836), who was described as a "man-monster" after her lack of vagina was discovered. The British colonial narrative used this example to suggest all Black men in New Orleans dress as women, leading to the demonisation of the Black transfeminine figure.[7] Sydnee Wagner extends Snorton's argument to the global South, suggesting the Amazonian woman is written into sixteenth-century European travel literature as a transmasculine savage to naturalise white masculinity.[8] While Snorton's work is more a series of political statements and theories, it exposed a truth to trans history: it cannot be understood in isolation from broader histories of systemic racism and colonialism. Snorton's literature proves to be a seminal text, shifting the paradigm of pre-modern trans historiography from its Western-centred focus, to engagement in the conversation surrounding racialised gender. This allows the 'othered' Black body to enter the discussion and expose the problematic relationship it has been forced into with the white body.

The Ottoman eunuch proves to be a figure of constant scrutiny and fascination in this discussion. The eunuch was an elite slave, able to transgress the strict gender-segregation of the harem, presenting a distinct gender category that existed beyond the male-female binary. Historical and literary studies have paid significant attention to the eunuch as a trans figure, yet often, their racialisation is overlooked.[9] Abdulhamit Arvas is the most prevalent voice in disrupting this tendency. Influenced by Snorton's appeal for the trans historian to focus on the Black body, he draws attention to the racial marking of Ottoman eunuchs. Black eunuchs underwent forced castration and were associated with the inner-most feminine spaces of the harem. In contrast, white eunuchs were granted the choice of castration and associated with the masculine duties of gatekeeping.[10] Black eunuchs' forced castration insinuates that the Ottoman imagination conceived of the Black body as enslaved and could more easily conceive of the Black body crossing genders. Therefore,

Ottoman society could justify stripping them of their autonomy.[11] Necessarily, the white body's masculinity is more permanent. Analysis of the feminisation of the 'othered' Black eunuch exposes the impact of Western colonialism in enforcing their gender norms and how this continues to influence our contemporary understanding of gender norms. This begs the question, can the colonised body ever be free?

Since, this problematic relationship between gender, race, and colonialism has become a major historiographical theme. The investigations of pre-modern trans historians appear to be unavoidably imposed by Western gender norms. At this stage, it appeared impossible to understand non-Western trans identities within their own context. The sources do not provide a window into the lived experience of the gender variant subjects, rather they reinforce the colonial interpretation of race and gender, supporting the larger biopolitical systems imperialism instigated.[12] Kit Heyam despairs that no matter how liberal or pro-queer they are as a historian, the discipline is inherently oppressive as a result.[13] This has presented a significant challenge to pre-modern trans historians in considering if a truly liberated history can be written at all. The narrative of the coloniser is deeply intrenched in both language and social understanding, meaning that any trans history is immediately labelled as other, and therefore perceived as unnatural. From this discussion, pre-modern trans historians have undertaken the task of uncovering this colonial imposition in the scholarship and liberating the othered, colonised body.

In an attempt to rectify this oppression, recent historiography takes on the task of reclaiming marginalised pre-modern gender non-conforming identities. Kai Pyle advocates for the necessity of recovering Indigenous language and cultural revitalisation to achieve this. Histories of Indigenous tribal identities, such as Ojibwe and Plains Cree, cannot be meaningfully interpreted if the culture is not understood nor reasonably communicated with. Naming and claiming these cultures has power as it opens up space for a trans existence that is separate from colonial language.[14] Jesperson offers an alternative method of reaching past the colonial regime. She reads against the Spanish colonial sources of their invasion of Panama, in the hope that the trans women murdered can speak through the sources and the fragments of the transfeminine past can be pieced back together, subverting the colonialist narrative. While colonialism dismembered these women and 'cistorians' misread them as queer men, Jesperson calls for trans historians to 're-member' them and, therefore, reclaim them.[15] The archival injustice instigated by colonialists promotes ignorance of these women's survival, diminishing their vibrant, multidimensional lives to endorse the idea that all gender is binary. If trans historians can re-instate these silenced women, then the colonial binary falls apart. As a result, recent pre-modern trans scholarship demonstrates that active, healing engagement with the othered body is achievable and it can be reclaimed.

Arvas considers the disappearance of the köçeks as a further striking example of a colonised gender expression uncovered. Once a desired figure of extreme beauty in eighteenth-century Ottoman culture, the köçek demonstrated an understanding of gender determined by age, appearance, and religion rather than by biological indicators.[16] The köçeks represented a queer and desirable performance of gender that could not be understood by a Western imperial gaze. Their criminalisation as sodomitical and their eventual disappearance after the arrival of European colonialists highlights the role of

imperialism in criminalising gender plurality. This criminalisation has informed Western scholarship resulting in a representation of the köçeks as cross-dressers who substituted women in the strictly gender-segregated space, rather than a celebration of androgynous gender expression.[17] Arvas demonstrates the evident preference in the Western scholarship to present these figures as queer and cisgendered, rather than simply inhabiting a gender identity outside the male-female framework. This suggests Western scholarship can make space for queer identities more easily than gender variant ones. This has resulted in a misinformed understanding of gender in the Ottoman world. Pre-modern trans historians must read against this to reinstate and liberate the köçek, allowing them to be perceived as their own form of gender expression, rather than forced to into the mould of European gender norms. By pitting the köçek against this Western model, they can easily be perceived as 'unnatural' in contrast. What is unnatural to the Western conception has been refashioned to be perceived as universally unnatural. This demands us reject this idea and allow the köçeks identity validity in its own right. Simply because it transgresses a Western gender conception does not negate its natural existence. It is the rigidity of the Western framework, not the existence of the köçeks, that is unnatural in this case.

It is not just the task of uncovering pre-modern trans experiences that this historiography undertakes. Arvas' research demonstrates the important task of interrogating those figures who enter the canon. Pre-modern trans history has relied on the eunuch as evidence of a pre-modern trans identity. However, as Arvas has demonstrated, the Black eunuch did not exercise consent in their castration and subsequent stripping of gender.[18] Susan Stryker's definition of a trans individual necessarily relies on a willingness to transition from "an unchosen starting place".[19] The pre-modern trans historian can never access the knowledge that the Black Ottoman eunuch disliked their 'starting place' and wished to transgress it. Therefore, this highlights a significant issue in the Black eunuch place in this historical canon.[20] This also exposes the Western obsession with genitalia and gender being coherent. Clearly this narrative has been too simplistic for our understanding of gender expression and has allowed us to falsely enforce trans identity onto bodies that the West has made no attempt to understand. Evidently, Arvas' research demonstrates the implications previous ignorance of race has as his interrogation of the Black Ottoman figure complicates and reframes the picture that traditional pre-modern trans history presented. Scholarly language regarding the eunuch remains unnatural and problematic as it frames the eunuch as a natural trans ancestor, while ignoring the role of enslavement in their experience.[21] While the intention here is well-meaning, it only demonstrates the Western habit of enforcing its own understanding on colonised bodies. In this way, the eunuch is liberated by its exclusion from the canon, rather than its integration to it.

S. P. Gannon observes a tendency of Western scholarship streamlining gender variant expressions into one, generally criminalised identity. His work uncovers the gender diversity of the hijra that had been erased by nineteenth-century British colonisers who shoehorned the various forms of gender expression they encountered in India into a monolithic category of existence.[22] British censures of the Indian population enforced a two-sex model, which proved difficult as they encountered the fluid gender identities of the South Asian hijra. The people who inhabited this space embodied transgender, intersex, and gender fluid identities, yet they were categorised by British colonisers as castrated men, to fit both their census structure and

their own rigid conception of gender. In addition to this blatant ignorance of hijra gender expression, the colonial gaze criminalised them due to their refusal to comply with 'natural' binary gender norms; their marginalised status prevails.[23] This highlights the necessity of pre-modern trans history in shining a light on the gender expressions that have been silenced by white colonialism. Gannon's research continues the theme of uncovering and liberating silenced gender expressions, highlighting the implications this colonial silencing has had on modern gender non-conforming individuals, as the colonial narrative continues to encumber their lived experience.

Methodologically, pre-modern trans history faces a significant issue of language when engaging with non-Western identities, highlighting the next step the historiography must take in its engagement with race. Aixia Huang draws attention to this, highlighting that most theorising and knowledge production in pre-modern trans scholarship has been produced in the Anglophone sphere.[24] She highlights the difficulty in conveying the complex gender transitions in Ming-Qing China as she is limited to Anglophone pronoun rules. The pronouns and language her subjects would have used have no direct translation into English; as a result, it is virtually impossible to accurately represent these gender experiences in the scholarship. She queries, therefore, how well we can engage with them if we are restricted to monolingualism.[25] Her history of Chinese trans identity focuses on the objects rather than individuals, as she believes focusing on materiality avoids this methodological concern.[26] Centring objects in transgender history is a new way of thinking beyond Western categories and frameworks, allowing us to access the individual on their own terms. More significantly, this shift in method highlights a turn in the direction of pre-modern trans historiography. If it is to engage meaningfully with race, it must be presented in a dynamic, multilingual discipline. The attempt to understand the broad and varying gender expressions and experiences throughout history in one linguistic sphere is academically problematic. It forces us to express such non-Western identities into models the Anglophone sphere can comprehend, which necessarily denies true expression. This provides a possible conception of how future pre-modern trans historiography might develop as it moves beyond uncovering and reclaiming identities, into letting them speak for themselves in their own natural mother tongue.

Here, we can see an emerging historical field that is working to restructure the narrative surrounding the non-cisgendered racialised body. This work questions the authority of contemporary right wing political claims that impose a hierarchy on the expression of bodies and attempt to force a multitude of identities into a white, European binary that is, in itself, a construction. By rewriting this narrative, and establishing the non-cisgendered, racialised body as a natural and ever-present identity predating modernity, pre-modern trans historians allow this body to speak for itself as it always should have been able to - separate from the confines of European colonialism.

Footnotes

1. Rebecca Hickman, "What Is 'Trans History', Anyway?: Historiographical Theory and Practice in a Flourishing Field", *Midlands Historical Review* 5 (2021), 22.

2. Leslie Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 21 and 44.

3. Saylesh Wesley, "Twin-Spirited Woman: Sts'iyoye Smestiyexw Slha:li", *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 3 (January 1, 2014): 338–51.

4. Deborah A. Miranda, "Extermination of the Joyas: Gendercide in Spanish California", GLQ: *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 16, no. 1-2 (January 1, 2010): 253–84.

5. C. Riley Snorton, *Black on Both Sides* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 105.

6. Hickman, "What Is 'Trans History', Anyway?", 18.

7. Jamey Jesperson, "Trans Sex Work in Colonial North America", in Catherine Phipps, *Histories of Sex Work around the World* (Taylor & Francis, 2024), 61-64.

8. Sydnee Wagner, "Racing Gender to the Edge of the World: Decoding the Transmasculine Amazon Cannibal in Early Modern Travel Writing", *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019), 137-143.

9. Abdulhamit Arvas, "Early Modern Eunuchs and the Transing of Gender and Race", *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 19, no. 4 (2019): 118.

10. Arvas, "Early Modern Eunuchs", 119-20.

11. Arvas, "Early Modern Eunuchs", 121.

12. Wagner, "Racing Gender to the Edge of the World", 151.

13. Kit Heyam, *Before We Were Trans* (Seal Press, 2022), 209-10.

14. Kai Pyle, "Naming and Claiming", *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (November 1, 2018): 586.

15. Jamey Jesperson, "Trans Misogyny in the Colonial Archive: Re-Membering Trans Feminine Life and Death in New Spain, 1604–1821", Gender & History 36, no. 1 (September 17, 2023), 94.

16. Abdulhamit Arvas, "Performing and Desiring Gender Variance in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire", in Trans Historical: Gender Plurality before the Modern (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University, 2021), 161.

17. Arvas, "Performing and Desiring Gender Variance", 161-170.

18. Arvas, "Early Modern Eunuchs", 121.

19. Susan Stryker, *Transgender History*, 2nd ed. (2008; repr., New York, NY: Seal Press, 2017), 1.

20. Arvas, "Early Modern Eunuchs", 131.

21. Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant : Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 29.

22. S.P. Gannon, "The Colonial Censu(re/ses) of Transbodies in Nineteenth-Century South Asia", in Douglas A. Vakoch, *Transgender India: Understanding Third Gender Identities and Experiences* (Cham: Springer, 2022), 77-96.

23. Gannon, "The Colonial Censu(re/ses) of Transbodies", 81.

24. Aixia Huang, "Trans-Gender Things: Objects and the Materiality of Trans-Femininity in Ming-Qing China", *Gender & History* 36, no. 1 (January 7, 2024), 55.

25. Huang, "Trans-Gender Things", 66.

26. Ibid.

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