

“Closer to Nature”

Colonial Anthropology and the Sexualisation of Indigenous Women:

How did colonial anthropology construct Indigenous women as "natural" — that is, primitive, hypersexual and biologically determined — to legitimise racial hierarchy and imperial domination?

by Tara Laize

This article examines the construction of the figure of the Indigenous woman in the colonial contexts of the nineteenth century, showing that it does not come from an empirical observation, but from a discursive and complex material device at the crossroads of anthropology, iconography, biopolitics and imperial spatialisation. I argue that the representation of the colonised woman as "closer to nature" — hypersexual and primitive — constitutes a central operator of colonial naturalism, making it possible to transform historical relations of domination into supposedly objective biological truths.

First, the article analyses the emergence of physical anthropology and racial taxonomies, which replace religious hierarchies with a scientific classification of bodies, anchoring inferiority in biology. The sexuality of racialised women is constructed there as instinctive and excessive, serving as proof of their alleged civilisational backwardness. The second part examines the iconographic production of this knowledge, showing how figures such as that of Sara Baartman crystallize a racial and sexual otherness, transforming the black body into a pathological sign and an object of knowledge. This process of iconisation erases the historicity of the subjects in favour of a fixation in archetypes.

The article then demonstrates that this construction is a true imperial technology. By pathologising the sexuality of colonised women, colonial knowledge organises surveillance, segregation and reproductive control devices, while stabilising the standards of respectability within European societies. Finally, the analysis of the colonial space as a sexual theatre highlights the interweaving of body and territory, where the feminisation of space and the territorialisation of the body participate in the same logic of domination.

By articulating these different levels, this article shows that the hypersexualisation of colonised women is not a marginal effect, but a structuring mechanism of the colonial order, at the crossroads of gender, race and empire.

Edited by Ruby Scott, Copyedited by Leyla Kaban Bowers,
Juliette Pepin & Emilia Manning-Gaona,
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Introduction:

Since the 19th century, the figure of the indigenous women in colonised contexts has occupied a central place in the European scientific and colonial imagination. In travel narratives, treatises on physical anthropology, and medical iconography, her body appears as the privileged site where nature, sexuality, and racial difference are articulated. Presented as “closer to nature”—primitive and hypersexual—the colonised woman is constructed and circulated through anthropological treatises, medical imagery, and colonial exhibitions as visible proof of a racial hierarchy that science now claims to objectify. Far from being a mere ethnographic curiosity, this representation is part of a broader epistemic apparatus through which 19th-century imperialism transforms historical relations of domination into biological certainties.

This article argues that the figure of the indigenous woman “closer to nature” constitutes a central operator of colonial naturalism. By representing the sexuality and fertility of racialised women as instinctive, excessive, and governed by biology rather than reason, colonial anthropology reconfigures sexual difference into a marker of civilisational hierarchy, while simultaneously elevating them to territorial metaphors for imperial conquest. The sexualisation of colonised women is therefore not merely a side effect of scientific racism; it constitutes one of its fundamental mechanisms. By combining the history of anthropology, postcolonial theory, and intersectional feminism, this article demonstrates how the scientific production of “nature” contributes to the simultaneous construction of gender, race, and empire.

Building “Nature”: Anthropology, Science and Racial Hierarchies:

The 19th century marks an epistemological break in which the legitimization of colonial power shifts from a religious foundation to a rigorous scientific naturalism. Physical anthropology replaces the metaphysical hierarchy of the “Great Chain of Being” (Reynolds, 1974, p. 47), a traditional cosmological structure that classified all living things on a scale of immutable perfection going “from mollusc to God” with a biological taxonomy based on craniometry (Young, 1995, p. 89). This “science of races” uses body measurements to

anchor intellectual inferiority in bone structure (Young, 1995, p. 170). Carl Vogt thus argues that “the place they occupy in relation to cranial capacity and cerebral weight corresponds with the degree of their intellectual capacity and civilisation” (Reynolds, 1974, p. 49). This social Darwinism fosters a deliberate confusion between biology and morality, where the pathologisation of physical traits serves to justify political exclusion. As Young points out, racism no longer operates solely through exclusion, but also through the calculation of deviations from the white norm: “Racism operates by the determination of degrees of deviance in relation to the White-Man face” (1995, p. 169).

In this framework, the Indigenous woman is constructed as the quintessential figure of the “primitive,” whose naturalised sexuality becomes proof of racial backwardness. As “carriers of the race,” women are perceived as the potential vector of a “contamination of dark blood” (Young, 1995, p. 165). Colonial anthropology fantasises about an “uncontrollable sexual drive of the non-white races” (Young, 1995, p. 170), transforming the female body into a territory to be policed. The figure of the “Sable Venus” embodies this biologisation of difference (Young, 1995, p. 142): her “delicious fecundity” is simultaneously the object of fetishistic desire and institutional repulsion (Young, 1995, p. 170). This biologisation of difference transforms the female body into a “phobogenic object” (Fanon, 1967, p. 154), a stimulus of anxiety where territorial conquest is reenacted on the genital level: “in relation to the Negro, everything takes place on the genital level” (Fanon, 1967, p. 157). By inextricably linking female sexuality to a “licentious primitive sexuality” (Young, 1995, p. 170), imperial discourse transforms racialised bodies into metaphors for a wild landscape to be conquered and domesticated.

The Black Body as a Scientific and Sexual Icon:

Beyond the general physical taxonomy, the colonial device of the nineteenth century operates a semiotic reduction of the black body, transmuting it into a real scientific and sexual icon (Gilman, 1985, p. 15). Sander L. Gilman demonstrates with surgical rigor that the artistic and medical representations of this period do not constitute neutral descriptions at all, but produce rather than individual types (Gilman, 1985, p. 21). These images act as ideological icons

where the Hottentot woman is erected as an archetype of black sexuality, materialising a radical otherness essential to the definition of the white norm (Gilman, 1985, p. 16). This archetype refers to the Khoisan women of Southern Africa, whom nineteenth-century naturalism positioned as the terminal link in the "Great Chain of Being" to establish a biological antithesis to European paradigms of beauty and virtue. Sara Baartman (c. 1789–1815) historically personified this construction as the "Hottentot Venus". A native of the present-day Eastern Cape region in South Africa, she was torn from her condition as a servant in Cape Town to be exhibited in London in 1810, she undergoes a double reduction: that of the freak show and that of the anatomical specimen (Johnson and Rolls, 2023, p. 171).



This process of fetishisation is based on an iconographic fusion (Gilman, 1985, p. 27) between the figure of the prostitute, paragon of deviant female sexuality, and that of the "Venus Hottentote". The body of the black woman thus crystallises the European anxiety about female sexuality, becoming the receptacle of a libido fantasised as excessive and primitive (Young, 1995, p. 170). By this construction, the body is no longer a living organism but a pathological sign: the bodily features, "steatopygia" (the exaggerated accumulation of fat on the buttocks) and the "apron" (an elongated fold of abdominal skin) become visual "proofs" of moral inferiority, through which specific anatomical features are selectively exaggerated and racialised within a colonial gaze. These embodied markers are not neutral descriptions but are discursively produced as signs of difference, fixing the subject in a racial epidermal

schema (Fanon, 1967, p. 112), where it is "overdetermined from without" (Fanon, 1967, p.116), a condition in which the self is denied individual agency and becomes a "slave of their own appearance". In this sense, Fanon's notion of overdetermination refers to the imposition of externally constructed meanings onto the body, such that the subject's identity is no longer self-defined but constituted through the stereotypes and racial fantasies of the dominant (colonial) other.

Sara Baartman's itinerary, from her exhibition in London and Paris (1810-1815) (Crais & Scully, 2009, p. 172) to her museum posterity, embodies the climax of this reification. The anthropological gaze, obsessed by its nymphs and its steatopygia (Cuvier, 1817, p. 182), transforms its anatomy into an ethnopornographic display (Mattosco, p. 117). After her death, Georges Cuvier completed this undertaking with a dissection aimed at producing a racial specimen (Lyons, 2009, p. 330). By comparing her skull with that of the apes (Cuvier, 1817, p. 186), Cuvier inscribes it in a zone of non-being, between the human and the animal. The exhibition of her remains at the Museum of Man until 1974 (Mattosco, 2015, p. 57) testifies to the longevity of this symbolic crime.

Nadja Durbach and Zine Magubane criticise the propensity of European archives to have essentialised it as the pure embodiment of African sexuality, preferring an analysis of social relations rather than psychological dispositions (Magubane, 2001, p. 48). Research reveals that Baartman possessed an awareness of her economic rights (Magubane, 2001, p. 58), and her categorical refusal to allow herself to be examined naked during her lifetime (Johnson & Rolls, 2012, p. 179) constitutes a sovereign act of resistance against the intrusive curiosity of scholars.

Hence, the iconisation of the black body obliterates the historicity of colonised women (Mattosco, p. 58). By transforming a person into a specimen, anthropology allows a double naturalisation: a racial naturalisation, anchoring inferiority in the skeleton, and a sexual naturalisation, reducing femininity to a primitive organic function, thus legitimizing imperial hegemony.

Sexuality as an Imperial Technology:

Postcolonial historiography, under the impetus of Ann Laura Stoler, has carried out a critical revision of Foucauldian biopolitics by emphasizing that Michel Foucault has tended to "short-circuiting empire" (Stoler, 1995, p. 7) in his genealogy of Western modernity. Stoler demonstrates that European bourgeois sexuality was not an isolated metropolitan formation, but that it emerged on an "imperial landscape" (Stoler, 1995, p. 5) where class distinctions were inseparable from the contrasts forged by the language of race. The discourse on sexuality thus becomes a dense transfer point of the colonial power: it is no longer just a question of repressing, but of producing a "grid of intelligibility" (Stoler, 1995, p. 11). This grid makes it possible to trace the "interior frontiers" (Stoler, 1995, p. 7) of the nation, delimiting who is an authentic, first-class citizen and who is the other racialised.

Zine Magubane enriches this perspective by specifying that the discourse on degeneration was not only a response to external otherness, but a control technology in the face of the jamming of class hierarchies within the European metropolis itself (Magubane, 2001, p. 49). The figure of the indigenous woman "close to nature" functions here as a lever to stabilise bourgeois identity: by pathologising her libido as a "primitive sexuality" (Gilman, 1985, p. 17), imperial science erects the European woman as a paragon of culture and domestic virtue.

Far from being an epiphenomenon, colonial sexuality is at the heart of what Robert Young defines as the imperial "desiring machine" (Young, 1995, p. 151). This machine does not just extract resources; it produces fantasies of fusion and repulsion that structure the social order. Andrew P. Lyons describes this process as "negative conscription" (Lyons, 2009, p. 328), where data on the sexual practices of "others" are enlisted in metropolitan discourses of power and morality. The obsession with the "apron" or the "steatopygia" is no longer a simple anatomical curiosity, but a semiotic proof of an "excess of fertility" (Young, 1995, p. 91), perceived as a threat of "contamination of dark blood" (Young, 1995, p. 165).

This sexualisation of the indigenous woman then justifies the deployment of specific domination technologies: the constant "monitoring" of the bodies, the spatial "segregation" and the "reproductive control" (Stoler, 1995, p. 4). This device reduces the colonised woman to a racial specimen, erasing her historicity in favour of a biological fiction. In short, the sexual nature of the indigenous is a political construct that allows the Empire to manage its vulnerabilities (Stoler, 1995, p. 2) and to legitimise the guardianship of fertile bodies in the name of the preservation of white hegemony.

Colonial Space as Sexual Theatre:

The imperial space does not constitute a simple geographical expanse to be administered, but is organised as a real sexual theatre where sovereignty is staged by the mediation of the gaze. Anne McClintock analyses these imperial exposures as a device where Africa is transmuted into a visual spectacle (McClintock, 1995, p. 41). In this economy of visibility, the colonised woman's body is exposed as the metonymy of a territory ready to be conquered, illustrating what McClintock calls articulated categories where gender, race and class are structurally inseparable (McClintock, 1995, p. 5).



This dramatisation of power is based on a fundamental biopolitical asymmetry. As the historiography of the Dutch East Indies suggests, the management of the bodies responded to a highly differentiated gender logic. Frances Gouda demonstrates the emergence of a rhetoric making colonial practices "normal" and "natural", where anthropology served as a substitute for military power (Gouda, 1995, pp. 550-551). This strategy favoured unions with the Nyais (Javanese women) to guarantee a cultural and linguistic acclimatisation of European agents (Stoler, 2002,

p.523), they simultaneously deployed coercive devices to monitor white women. The introduction of measures such as the Crewe Circular aimed to prevent any relationship between European women and Indigenous men, betraying an anxiety of "contamination" (Young, 1995, p. 109). In this device, concubinage becomes an institutionalised access to Indigenous women and the prohibition of relationships with Indigenous men shows the protection of racial hierarchy. This asymmetry reveals that the female body was an object of colonial consumption. The indigenous woman's body is thus mapped as the colonised earth.

The geographical imagination of the body completes this undertaking by merging the indigenous anatomy with the "wild" landscape. McClintock demonstrates how geographical metaphors serve to sexualise imperial space: the feminisation of the soil naturalises European male domination by presenting it as an immutable law of nature (, 1995, p. 41). The colonised earth, like the racialised female body, is perceived as a surface for the recording of the entire process of production of desire (Deleuze & Guattari, 1972, p. 33).

In this context, the Indigenous woman is not only the object of an exotic libido; she becomes the very place where the imperial project is inscribed. This territorialisation (Young, 1995, p. 161) transforms her body into a political palimpsest where fertility is reduced to an archaic organic function, justifying constant biopolitical monitoring. By thus linking female physiology to a wild nature, colonial anthropology transforms racialised bodies into biological evidence of racial inferiority. The colonial space therefore functions as a vast desiring machine where the capture of land and the surveillance of women are governed by the same logic of predation (Young, 1995, p. 151), sealing the alliance between anatomical knowledge and imperial hegemony.

Conclusion:

In short, this article has shown that the figure of the Indigenous womanV` ` "closer to nature" does not come from an empirical observation, but from a discursive and material device where anthropology, iconography, biopolitics and imperial spatialisation are intertwined. From the scientific production of racial hierarchies to their visual fixation in archetypes such as that of Sara Baartman, then to

their inscription in technologies for governing bodies and territories, the same process unfolds: naturalisation. The hypersexualisation of colonised women thus appears not as a marginal effect, but as a structuring operator, making it possible to translate historical relationships of domination into supposedly biological truths.

By articulating these different levels of analysis, this article highlights that the "nature" invoked by colonial knowledge is less a given than a product, stabilised by the repetition of scholarly, visual and administrative practices. Therefore, the sexuality of racialised women can only be understood as the effect of a regime of know-how which, by constructing it as instinctive and excessive, simultaneously ensures its management and legitimisation.

Therefore, undoing this heritage does not consist solely in correcting representations, but in disarticulating the structures that continue to make the naturalisation of certain bodies as "others" governable. In this sense, the challenge is not only critical, but epistemological: it is a question of rejecting the very categories through which colonial modernity has learned to classify and prioritise bodies, in order to restore to these subjectivities their historicity and their agency.

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