

The Great Lakes Journal of Undergraduate History

Volume 9 | Issue 1

Article 4


12-28-2023

Race, Gender, Sexuality, and the Pursuit of Modernity: British Biopower and Female Sexuality in Domestic and Colonial Practice

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Recommended Citation

Tomas, Alana (2023) "Race, Gender, Sexuality, and the Pursuit of Modernity: British Biopower and Female Sexuality in Domestic and Colonial Practice," *The Great Lakes Journal of Undergraduate History*. Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/gljuh/vol9/iss1/4>

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Abstract

This paper explores how female sexuality became a primary site for the exercise of British biopolitical regulation as illustrated both in colonial Hong Kong and Singapore, and in domestic practice within the metropole. The application of biopolitical regulation on the subject of female sexuality was based on a discursive production making indissociable the success of the imperial project and the survival of the imperial race and the control of the female body. This discursive production mobilized intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality through the Victorian cult of domesticity, resulting in a racialization of female sexuality with implications transcending the permeable frontier between the metropole and the colonies. Making “the prostitute” the exemplar of deviant, dangerous, and immoral sexuality had discursive repercussions for female sexuality more broadly; explained in contrast to “the prostitute,” the construction of sexual deviance had implications for understandings of sexual conformity and acceptability both in Victorian society and abroad.

In 1870, Doctor William Acton published a revised edition of his 1857 treatise, *Prostitution, Considered in Its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects, in London and Other Large Cities and Garrison Towns, with Proposals for the Mitigation and Prevention of Its Attendant Evils*. In this text, Acton warned of the threat posed by the “prostitute” in the “perpetual presence among men of the daughters of shame.”¹ With this aim, his treatise identified data exemplifying the moral peril of the presence of prostitution in Victorian society. The availability and usage of census data testifies to the increased surveillance of Victorian bodies. This practice, in being carried out in the service of the modern, liberal state, reifies the perception of its status as the producer and defender of progress. He stated that, in 1868, he counted the presence of 1,756 brothels; 210,000 unmarried women in the country participating in sex work; in addition to 1,229,051 unmarried women between the ages of 20 and 40 in 1851; and estimated that 42,317 children of these unmarried women were born each year.² More specifically, in the late nineteenth century, the surveillance of *female* bodies came to be understood as crucial to the survival and well-being of the imperial state. To this end, discourses on venereal disease were almost always produced alongside debates on prostitution. This emphasized the dual nature of the discursive production around sex work in Victorian society, which underlined both a concern for public health and a concern for the control of women and their sexuality.³

The purpose of this paper is to explore how female sexuality became a primary site for the exercise of British biopolitical regulation as illustrated both in colonial Hong Kong and Singapore, and in domestic practice within the metropole. Through the punitive nature of sex work regulation carried out by the British state, one can infer the positioning of the *femme débauchée* as a locus of blame⁴ in the liberal, bourgeois conception making sex incompatible “with a general and intensive putting to work.”⁵ Consequently, making “the prostitute” the exemplar of deviant, dangerous, and immoral sexuality had discursive repercussions for female sexuality more broadly. Explained in contrast to “the prostitute,” the construction of sexual deviance had implications for understandings of sexual conformity and acceptability in Victorian society. These implications on the dichotomy of sexual deviance and conformity will be studied through a discursive analysis of biopolitical regulation of sex work, childbirth, and motherhood that represent the two poles of the “acceptability” for female sexuality. The moral contrast drawn between the prostitute and the domestic woman can be observed through Acton’s prescriptive statement that “in proportion as they are assisted or neglected in their evil days will they assume the character of wives and mothers.”⁶ Therefore, this paper will carry out a discursive analysis of biopower and its application on female sexuality. Through an intra-imperial perspective, the clinical vocabulary used by imperial discourse in the regulation of venereal disease was coupled

¹ William Acton, *Prostitution, Considered in Its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects, in London and Other Large Cities and Garrison Towns, with Proposals for the Mitigation and Prevention of Its Attendant Evils*. Monograph. London: John Churchill and Sons, New Burlington Street. From Nineteenth Century Collection Online, viii.

² Acton, *Prostitution, Considered in Its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects*, 7-9.

³ Philippa Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 45.

⁴ Philippa Levine, “Public Health, Venereal Disease and Colonial Medicine in the Later Nineteenth Century,” in *Sex, Sin, and Suffering: Venereal Disease and European Society Since 1870*, ed. Roger Davidson and Lesley A. Hall (London: Routledge, 2001), 161-162.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité, I: La volonté de savoir* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1976), 12. (translated from “avec une mise au travail générale et intensive”)

⁶ Acton, *Prostitution, Considered in Its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects*, xi.

with moral connotations, allowing the reproduction of a discourse of racial difference racializing sexuality both in British society at home and in its colonies abroad.

The content of this analysis will primarily look at the period starting from the implementation of the first Contagious Disease Ordinance in Hong Kong in 1857 up until approximately the early twentieth century. The Straits Settlements that included Singapore as their capital were officially established as a crown colony in 1867. Used as a commercial hub for colonial trade, Singapore quickly became a center for Chinese immigration predominately by men, and “by the 1860s, over two-thirds of Singapore’s population was Chinese.”⁷ Population growth in Hong Kong was encouraged by the commercial attractiveness of the British colony. Similarly to Singapore, Hong Kong was quickly characterized from the perspective of the colonial administration by its demographic imbalance favoring the presence of single male laborers and inviting the existence of a parasitic “brothel culture.”⁸ Justifying the implementation of severe regulation around sex work, first through the 1857 ordinance in Hong Kong and later in its 1870 Singaporean rendition, the two colonies were considered in tandem in the creation and implementation of policies regulating prostitution.⁹ The ordinances were aimed at regulating sex work in the colonies namely through provisions for the licensing of brothels, but mainly through increased surveillance of female bodies with dispositions in the legislation that would go as far as allowing officers to “examine” women they suspected to be participating in sex work.¹⁰ In domestic practice, the Contagious Disease Acts that were sequentially implemented in 1864, 1866, and 1867, and interacted with existing continental regulationist discourse in order to police contact between the sex worker and the military man. The integration of conversations around sexuality in public discourse contributed to their evolution through the rest of the century to include issues of sexual morality and their relation to the state and society.¹¹ It is in this context that this discussion takes place around the question of the modernization of Victorian society, of its conceptualization of gender relations, and of the interconnectedness of these questions with the imperial project.

The main concepts underpinning this argument relate to the relationship between the subject and the object of the question of the exercise of biopower on female sexuality. Thus, it is important for us to define the modalities of control enacted by British biopolitical regulation. The concept of biopolitics was first conceived by Michel Foucault in his 1976 *La volonté du savoir*, the first volume of his *Histoire de la sexualité*. He defines it through the “disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population”¹² that exemplify the two poles of state control on life. This analysis will allow us to examine two main forms of state control and regulation: legal (through legislative mechanisms) and moral (through education and propaganda). Furthermore, Foucault

⁷ Philippa Levine, “Modernity, Medicine and Colonialism: The contagious diseases ordinances in Hong Kong and the Straits Settlements,” in *Gender, Sexuality, and Colonial Modernities*, ed. Antoinette M. Burton (London: Routledge, 1999), 36.

⁸ Levine, “Modernity, Medicine and Colonialism,” 37.

⁹ Levine, “Modernity, Medicine and Colonialism,” 37.

¹⁰ Levine, “Modernity, Medicine and Colonialism,” 37.

¹¹ Lesley A. Hall, “Venereal Diseases and Society in Britain, from the Contagious Diseases Acts to the National Health Service,” in *Sex, Sin, and Suffering: Venereal Disease and European Society Since 1870*, ed. Roger Davidson and Lesley A. Hall (London: Routledge, 2001), 121.

¹² Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité, I*, 183. (translated from “les disciplines du corps et les régulations de la population”)

will also contribute to the understanding of (female) sexuality and gender mobilized in this analysis as it was constructed by Victorian society to benefit its ideal of bourgeois modernity. Brown defines modernization as “a process in which people turn to new, more productive methods in virtually all economic spheres,”¹³ which allows us to relate it to Foucault’s understanding of the repression of sexuality as inherently linked to the development of capitalism and of the bourgeois order.¹⁴

As previously mentioned, this analysis will rely on historiographical contributions on the topic of biopolitics and the regulation of venereal disease and prostitution in British domestic and colonial contexts produced by authors such as Anne McClintock, Phillipa Levine, Phillip Howell, and Michel Foucault. The discussion of primary material is unfortunately limited to second-hand and heavily biased accounts of the experience of sex workers in Britain, Hong Kong, and Singapore, as well as testimonies from external actors discussing their perspective on the issue. The absence of material putting forth the voice of a group on which so much debate was produced unfortunately reflects the status and value accorded to them and supports the argument of their conscious marginalization and repression at the hands of the British imperial state.

Biopolitics and the Construction of Female Sexuality

This first section of this article will work to conceptualize the nature of biopolitical control as it relates to sexuality in the context of Victorian society. Primarily through the work of Michel Foucault in his treatise on the history of sexuality *La volonté du savoir*, this analysis will discuss the process of the construction of female sexuality as it worked to serve the interests of bourgeois society in Victorian Britain. These understandings of acceptable femininity will also allow us to elucidate the relationship between modernity, womanhood, domesticity and imperialism, and its expression in the regulation of female sexuality both abroad and at home.

“The [heterosexual] couple, legitimate procreator, makes the law.”¹⁵ This statement by Foucault captures in a few words his argument on bourgeois control over sexuality, as well as its applications in the context of colonial regulation of female sexuality. The two qualities Foucault relates to the subject, being “the [heterosexual] couple,” creator of the law itself, are its legitimacy and its procreative capacity co-constitutive and suggestive of the only acceptable form of sexuality in bourgeois society or what is referred to as the construction of bourgeois sexuality.

The procreative character inherent to (legitimate) bourgeois sexuality is relatively self-explanatory. Through the emergence of capitalism and productive society in the modern era, Foucault argues that sexuality should embody the same rationale of productivity. Thus, the movement towards the repression of sexuality therefore coinciding with the emergence of a capitalist society in the seventeenth century.¹⁶ With the interests of capitalism in the production of both goods and labor, sexuality was therefore imbricated within the necessity of the

¹³ Richard D. Brown, “Modernization: A Victorian Climax,” *American Quarterly* 27, no. 5 (1975): 533.

¹⁴ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, I, 12.

¹⁵ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, I, 10. (translated by me from original quote “Le couple, légitime et procréateur, fait la loi.”)

¹⁶ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, I, 12.

reproduction of a collective labor force. This necessarily excluded the existence of non-reproductive sexuality, which suggests two main implications for the framework of this analysis. First, the procreative premise excludes homosexuality from a conception of legitimate sexuality. The violence that resulted from this discursive construction is still evident to this day. In his 2008 report, *This Alien Legacy: The Origins of "Sodomy" Laws in British Colonialism*, Alok Gupta describes the devastatingly violent legacy left behind by "sodomy" laws implemented under British colonial rule.¹⁷ Contemporary homonationalist constructions of Western identity are also conceived in parallel with Orientalist discourse. The historicity of the latter stems from the evolution of the perception of homosexuality that is now positioned next to tolerance and sexual freedom as a marker of modernity.¹⁸ Consequently, the incorporation of certain forms of homosexuality, acceptable according to the construction of Western identity, results from the constitution of homonormativity that, according to Foucault's analysis, would conform to neocolonial, capitalist interests.

Moreover, and related to this paper's thesis, the question of the productivity of sexuality and its procreative premise can also be related to sex work, understood as a pleasure-seeking, unproductive form of sexual activity to the capitalist agenda. By disengaging individuals from the Victorian family structure, prostitution is positioned as a threat to the integrity not only of the family but to the state itself. By conceiving the legitimate couple as heterosexual, and confined to the hermeticism of the domestic sphere, sex work disengages the two possible partners from their productive contribution to the development of modern Victorian society. The woman is torn away from her (re)productive task of motherhood, and the man is victimized by the debauched woman and taken away from his responsibilities as head of the household. It is through this conception of the threat that sex work represents to the integrity of the patriarchal order that a work of marginalization, both material and discursive, between acceptable and deviant forms of sexuality is carried out; "[i]f it was truly necessary to make room for illegitimate sexualities, it was reasoned, let them take their infernal mischief elsewhere."¹⁹ As will be discussed further in this analysis, the exteriorization and resulting otherness of the immoral beast represented by sexual deviance is all the more interwoven within a discourse of racial differentiation composed of transnational implications in both Britain and in its colonies abroad.

The analysis thus far has suggested that imperial interests were highly invested in the control and regulation of female sexuality and its confinement within the bounds of productivity. The creation of this acceptable form of womanhood and female sexuality is reflected in the regulation and marginalization of 'othered' expressions of femininity and female sexuality that, in Foucauldian terms, were understood in opposition of bourgeois interests. The concept of the cult of domesticity emerged from this discursive confinement of womanhood within the material space associated with the family structure: the home. Similarly, the concept of the Family of Man exemplifies the co-constitutive existence of class, gender, race and sexuality through the

¹⁷ Alok Gupta, *This Alien Legacy: The Origins of "Sodomy" Laws in British Colonialism* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2008), 5.

¹⁸ Rosa dos Ventos Lopes Heimer, "Homonationalist/Orientalist Negotiations: The UK Approach to Queer Asylum Claims," *Sexuality & Culture* 24, no. 1 (2019): 3.

¹⁹ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. 1st American ed. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 4.

Victorian cult of domesticity.²⁰ This analysis will contend that this conception of the Victorian, self-conceived in the realm of domesticity, is actively realized through a process of construction of racialized otherness. Thereby, “the very constitution of that bourgeois self depended on the conflicts and comparison with this external racial other, as well as the internal sexual and class other,” allowing for both a lateral and vertical process of distancing.²¹ This process is attested to through countless testimonies printed in publications, such as *The Morning Post*, denouncing the presence of female prostitution in the metropole. One such example from December 17, 1814 comes from an individual who, signing as a “Friend to all,” lamented “the abominable scene of human depravity” when describing prostitutes at work.²² This concept of lateral distancing was expressed through the material exteriorization of “deviant” sexuality outside of the home, where, as within societal space, exists “a single place of recognized sexuality, useful and fruitful: the parents’ room.”²³ Vertical distancing is interpreted as the moral and immaterial marginalization and resulting hierarchization resulting from the creation of “deviant” sexuality, which also intersects, as noted by McClintock, with notions of race, gender and class.

The concept of the cult of domesticity therefore allows us to understand the processes of othering inherent in the conception of bourgeois identity. It is both the creation of this otherness in service of capitalist interests and its underlying morality allowing its reproduction that produce the foundations of racist and classist discourses justifying the civilizing mission of imperialism both abroad and at home. The white man’s burden subjects him to his responsibility towards modernity while also empowering him to implement the mechanisms of its expansion.

A “Terrible Peril to our Imperial Race”: Transnational Regulation of Sex Work in Domestic and Colonial Practice

The clinical vocabulary of modernity used by imperial discourse in the regulation of venereal disease and sex work was coupled with moral connotations allowing the reproduction of a discourse of racial difference racializing sexuality both in British society at home and in its colonies. The construction of women as subjects of regulation and surveillance through the regulation of sex work thus resulted from the productive intersection between the categories of class, race, and gender.²⁴ This section of analysis will investigate these interactions of class, gender, and race by examining the terms of regulation of sex work both in domestic and colonial policy. These two contexts mobilized different iterations within this matrix of alterity through which the dichotomy of internal and external enemies will be examined, as well as the similar mechanisms that controlled them.²⁵

²⁰ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 44.

²¹ Philip Howell, “Prostitution and Racialised Sexuality: The Regulation of Prostitution in Britain and the British Empire before the Contagious Diseases Acts,” *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space* 18, no. 3 (2000), 336.

²² “FEMALE PROSTITUTES.” *The Morning Post*, December 17, 1814. British Library Newspapers.

²³ Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité, I*, 10. (translated from “un seul lieu de sexualité reconnue, mais utilitaire et fécond: la chambre des parents”)

²⁴ Howell, “Prostitution and Racialised Sexuality: The Regulation of Prostitution in Britain and the British Empire before the Contagious Diseases Acts,” 335.

²⁵ 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), 96.

The daunting, menacing presence of the internal enemy: the prostitute, the spinster, the homosexual, the impoverished. These figures all carried in their discursive construction the specter of contagion represented by the degeneration of the domestic Victorian middle-class. The concept of contagion made it possible for the bourgeois imagination to pathologize and thus externalize the disease of poverty and racial difference. In this process, sexuality outside the bounds of the home constituted the point of contact for the transmission of this disease, making it particularly crucial to regulate. As has already been presented, the legitimization of bourgeois sexuality was achieved through the construction of the cult of domesticity posing sexual activity taking place outside this space as particularly threatening to its integrity.²⁶ The notion of contagion stemmed from a sanitization of the language around sexuality that obscured a moral consideration allowing the creation of relations and subject positions within domestic society. The use of pseudo-scientific language allowing the rationalization of the contagion of degeneration unfolded under the veil of objectivity and neutrality of modernity and claimed the existence of “empirically knowable ‘risk populations.’”²⁷ In this regard, the issue of venereal disease received separate treatment in debates around public health. Regulationist issues were often excluded from discussions on public health policies such as those concerning drainage and sewage or wash-house regulations. This is explained by the both individual and collective implications associated with the regulation of venereal disease, Lord Sydenham’s Royal Commission on Marriage and Divorce declaring it to be a “terrible peril to our Imperial race.”²⁸

The issue of racial degeneration in the metropole intersects with the same class and hygiene consideration that we previously discussed. As remarked by Levine, “[d]irty women, the inhabitants of the greasy brothels, were, after all, also racially marked women.”²⁹ As presented previously, the exteriorization of the sexual deviance of prostitution allowed for both a material and moral distancing between the sanitized, domestic Victorian home and the filthy slums where prostitution was believed to be taking place. The moral dimension of this differentiation is mainly characterized by its racial connotations. In his *Prostitution, Considered in Its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects*, Acton notably speaks of “the prevalent notion that houses of ill-fame are frequently kept by Jewesses.”³⁰

Moreover, the issue of racial differentiation and white degeneration is also significant at the particular intersection of race, gender and sexuality that takes place through the practice of European prostitution in colonial settings. Anxiety around the existence of European prostitution in colonial contexts raised concerns with the preservation of racial distinction and white superiority³¹. Indeed, by occupying an ambiguous space weakening the perception of white moral superiority, white sex workers abroad threatened the legitimacy of imperialism itself.

In the 1879 *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the Working of the Contagious Disease Ordinance, 1867, in Hong Kong*, colonial reports stated that, “Chinese prostitution is essentially a bargain for money and based on a national system of female slavery; whilst European prostitution is more or less a matter of passion, based on the national respect for

²⁶ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 47.

²⁷ Levine, “Public Health, Venereal Disease and Colonial Medicine in the Later Nineteenth Century,” 161.

²⁸ Levine, “Public Health, Venereal Disease and Colonial Medicine in the Later Nineteenth Century,” 161.

²⁹ Levine, “Public Health, Venereal Disease and Colonial Medicine in the Later Nineteenth Century,” 164.

³⁰ Acton, *Prostitution, Considered in Its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects*, 23.

³¹ Levine, *Prostitution, Race, and Politics*, 232.

the liberty of the subject.”³² The racialization of what was interpreted as sexual deviance and economic hardship at the same time allowed for the reproduction of these discourses and justified the imperial project of modernization. It was reported that Hong Kong and Singapore were described as “two vast plague spots... two putrid sores... infecting an ever-widening circle of human creatures.”³³ As has been previously discussed, the use of medical language in discourse on the issue of venereal diseases worked to sanitize broader concerns with the maintenance of a racial order where, in the case of Hong Kong and Singapore, Chinese people occupied the lowly dirty space where sexual deviance was understood as integral to a “national system” and where Victorians were isolated and kept clean in the domestic sphere. In an article published in the October 19, 1928 edition of the periodical *The Woman’s Leader*, an individual named F. K. Powell referred to these presumptions of a racial pathology of both physical infection brought by venereal disease and to the moral infection associated with the experience of sex work. She noted that, of the 500 brothels contained in the two main vices areas of Singapore, “358 of these houses sell Cantonese girls only.”³⁴ This testimony underlines the separation made between the national cultures of colonized peoples, understood as inherently plagued by Oriental sensuality and deviance, and the presumption of British superiority. Moreover, these discourses justified the imperial project of the exportation of modernity through which the surveillance, control, and regulation of colonial, female bodies became the primary instrument of the imperial state.

By virtue of their prosperity as commercial hubs of the British Empire, the success of the colonies of Hong Kong and of Singapore as the capital of the Straits Settlements imposed on them certain aspirations as exemplary figures of the potential success of colonial modernity. That being said, in this “route towards the modern” the methods employed revealed interesting contradictions between the theory and practice of this modernity. Often coercive and violent while under the guise of modern rational science, contagious disease ordinances and their implementation reified the racial pathologies foundational to the maintenance of the colonial order. On the implementation of the Contagious Disease Ordinance in Hong Kong, Howell reports that:

The ordinances licensed and inspected brothels, allowed the breaking and entering of suspected houses, employed paid informers and agents of a morals police - the inspectorate of brothels - to track down ‘sly’ brothels and unregistered prostitutes, fined and imprisoned women convicted of passing disease on to healthy men, and paid for the administrative expenses by levying fees on the brothelkeepers and prostitutes themselves.³⁵

The particularly severe and detailed nature of regulation, particularly through its control of Chinese female sexuality, is justified by the inherently deviant and pre-modern character of

³² “Copy of Report of the Commissioners appointed by the Governor of Hong Kong to inquire into the Working of the Contagious Diseases Ordinance of 1867; and Copy of the Despatch of the Secretary of State for the Colonies in reply thereto.” *Papers relating to Contagious Diseases Ordinance, Hong Kong*. 1880. From Cornell University Library, *The Charles William Wason Collection on China and the Chinese*, 19.

³³ Levine, “Modernity, Medicine and Colonialism,” 40.

³⁴ F. K. Powell, “Tolerated Brothels in the Federated Malay States,” *Woman's Leader and The Common Cause*, vol. XX, no. 37, 19 Oct. 1928, p. 287. Nineteenth Century Collections Online.

³⁵ Howell, “Prostitution and Racialized Sexuality: The Regulation of Prostitution in Britain and the British Empire before the Contagious Diseases Acts,” 329.

Chinese culture, requiring colonial intervention for its emergence in the era of modernity. In his 1879 publication titled *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese of the Straits Settlements*, J. D. Vaughan, solicitor of the Supreme Court of the Straits Settlements, writes of the

[...] untiring exertions of the gentlemen appointed by Government to carry the provisions of that ordinance into effect (Mr. Cousins the Registrar General, and Messrs. Phillips and Cooper his assistants) to set these women free and encourage them to lead pure and virtuous lives; many have through their influence left the brothels and married, and are happy and contented.³⁶

The discursive production supporting the regulation of female sexuality in its deviant expressions through sex work reflected different assemblages of race, gender, sexuality, and class that resulted in the construction of parallel universes of transnational regulation of female sexuality at home, and abroad in colonial settings. As will be explored in the following section, this construction of the alterity of sexual practice also had implications for the conception of the legitimate expression of female sexuality understood in the space of domesticity and motherhood.

The Domestication of Empire

As has already been discussed, the regulation of female sexuality through the exercise of imperial biopower was built on the presumption of a dichotomy between illegitimate and deviant expressions of sexuality and its legitimate expression within the framework of the domestic sphere. This section will discuss the implications of the discursive construction of deviant female sexuality on the acceptable form of female sexuality in domesticity. As a foundational institution of Victorian society, the family as a social space existed as a recipient of imperial control in such a way that “as domestic space became racialized, colonial space became domesticated.”³⁷

In its legitimate form, sexuality conceived by and for the bourgeois order is understood as being productive. The productivity of bourgeois sexuality was thus conceived in terms of its service to the empire. The “mothers of the race,” in their reproductive task, had to work for reproduction and the well-being of the nation underpinning motherhood with notions of racial health and purity.³⁸ Consequently, the regulation of female sexuality in the domestic sphere took on more of a moral expression, in contrast to the legal instruments that controlled sexual deviance. The regulation and moral codification of motherhood was therefore supported by a set of standards of this new science of mothercraft, through which doctors and nurses prescribed methods of child-rearing supportive of national interests and discouraged and denigrated traditional practices of child-rearing as dirty, backwards, and dangerous³⁹. The creation of this necessity of educating motherhood through the construction of a code of morality relating to child-rearing practices therefore placed a moral value on practices that did not align with standards of modernity and domesticity. These necessarily intersected notions of race, gender, sexuality, and class. This was

³⁶ Jonas Daniel Vaughan, *The Manners and Customs of the Chinese of the Straits Settlements*. Monograph. Singapore: Mission Press. From National University of Singapore Libraries, 10.

³⁷ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 36.

³⁸ Anna Davin, “Imperialism and Motherhood,” in *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler (Berkeley: University of California Press. 1997), 91.

³⁹ Davin, “Imperialism and Motherhood,” 92.

particularly notable in the case of female workers and concerns about their “unsexing.” By existing within their gender outside the domestic sphere in their work as laborers, these women were faced with the threat of their “unsexing.” Their attire and overall physical appearance, chosen with consideration to their manual work, deprived them of the aesthetics of femininity. Through becoming “unsexed” by their occupation and physical appearance, these workers became deprived of attributes understood as necessary to their maternal task and were therefore subject to a discourse stigmatizing their “disgusting kind of male attire.”⁴⁰

The moral regulation of female sexuality through their duty as “mothers of the race,” as well as its practical implications, stigmatized practices conceived to not conform with the standard of modernity. That being said, the dichotomy between tradition and modernity with regard to motherhood is particularly notable in the colonial context that existed as a parallel space to that of the exercise of imperial control in the metropole.

The colonial export of the cult of domesticity had implications for the practice of motherhood in terms of the dichotomy between modernity and tradition and the moral connotations of these two poles. In particular, in the metropole “care by anyone except the mother: neighbors, grandmothers, and older children looking after babies were automatically assumed to be dirty, incompetent, and irresponsible.”⁴¹ Necessarily, these same conceptions of the bad mother, through its racial and class implications, were transposed to perceptions of colonial maternity understanding Indigenous mothers to be “lacking a maternal instinct or of being careless or incompetent mothers.”⁴² Furthermore, indigenous Southeast Asian practices of

[...] dietary and sexual abstinences in pregnancy and postpartum were ridiculed or lamented; modes of delivery, ways of cutting the cord or dealing with the afterbirth were attacked; withholding colostrum or feeding pre-masticated food to neonates was admonished; suckling was often perceived as too protracted and sometimes the bottle and cows' milk was promoted in lieu of the breast.⁴³

The implementation of biopolitical control therefore acted in the form of moral codification rendering Indigenous women fundamentally inadequate in their role as mothers. As the passage from Jolly's text reports, this form of regulation transcended all moments of motherhood from the moment of conception to practices of childcare. Thus, even in a space supposedly legitimizing the sexual existence of women, their sexuality was still strictly morally policed in terms of race and class. For example, a working woman who entrusts the care of her children in her community was understood to be a bad mother, neglectful of her children, endangering the integrity of the nation, and threatening the imperial project.

Just as has been previously discussed in the case of deviant sexuality and the legal regulation of sex work, a woman's legitimate sexuality was subject to the same kind of regulation under the

⁴⁰ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 116-117.

⁴¹ Davin, “Imperialism and Motherhood,” 92.

⁴² Margaret Jolly, “Introduction: Colonial and postcolonial plots in histories of maternities and modernities,” in *Maternities and Modernities: Colonial and Postcolonial Experiences in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Kalpana Ram and Margaret Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4.

⁴³ Jolly, “Introduction: Colonial and postcolonial plots in histories of maternities and modernities,” 4.

duplicitous veil of morality. This codification of the practices of motherhood through the cult of domesticity mobilized intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality supporting the deployment of the imperial project in the very confines of the family structure. As Howell points out, “the very constitution of that bourgeois self depended on the conflicts and comparison with this external racial other, as well as the internal sexual and class other,” a process of construction of alterity that had equivalent implications in the imperial discursive production on sexuality.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The application of biopolitical regulation on the subject of female sexuality was based on a discursive production making indissociable the success of the imperial project and the survival of the imperial race and the control of the female body. This discursive production mobilized intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality through the Victorian cult of domesticity resulting in a racialization of female sexuality with implications transcending the permeable frontier between the metropole and the periphery of empire. By legitimizing female sexuality in the domestic space, it was intrinsically associated with the productivity criteria of the bourgeois order, requiring not only the reproduction of a collective labor force but also the survival and expansion of the race through the imperial project. Female sexuality thus had to align with a national duty confining it to the domestic sphere. Simultaneously, this process stigmatized any form of sexuality taking place outside of the domestic space through a matrix of alterity mobilizing notions of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Consequently, this article has argued that making “the prostitute” the exemplar of deviant, dangerous, and immoral sexuality had discursive repercussions for female sexuality more broadly. Explained in contrast to “the prostitute,” the construction of sexual deviance also had implications for understandings of sexual conformity and acceptability in both Victorian society and abroad.

Further research would allow us to examine how biopolitical regulation affected material expressions of masculinity and femininity through gender presentation and expressions of gender diversity. As has been briefly mentioned and as Anne McClintock discusses in *Imperial Leather*, the racialization of female sexuality necessarily impacted intersections of race, class, as well as gender. That being said, it would also be relevant to study the impact of colonial bioregulation on bodies that did not conform to “legitimate” expressions of femininity and masculinity particularly on what would anachronistically be referred to as trans and/or non-binary identities.

This research and the nature of bioregulation itself reiterates and emphasizes the extent and pervasiveness of colonial violence, not only abroad but also in the imperial metropole. This violence was expressed and persists within the most intimate aspects of the identity of victims of colonialism in their very relationship to their body. Moreover, structural manifestations of colonialism still have lasting effects to this day, notably through the stigmatization of sex work and its continued violent regulation. The criminalization of sex work in the United States puts the lives of trans people at risk every day with 9 out of 10 trans women who participate in sex work reporting to have been assaulted by police.⁴⁵ It is thus crucial to educate ourselves, and to take

⁴⁴ Howell, “Prostitution and Racialized Sexuality: The Regulation of Prostitution in Britain and the British Empire before the Contagious Diseases Acts,” 336.

⁴⁵ Kaniya Walker, “To Protect Black Trans Lives, Decriminalize Sex Work,” *American Civil Liberties Union*, <https://www.aclu.org/news/lgbtq-rights/to-protect-black-trans-lives-decriminalize-sex-work/>.

responsibility, not only in respect to our colonial past, but also to its legacy in the persistence of its mechanisms to this day.

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