

# Critical Race and Whiteness Studies



[www.acrawsa.org.au/ejournal](http://www.acrawsa.org.au/ejournal)

**Volume 9, Number 2, 2013**

SPECIAL ISSUE: RACIALISING DESIRES

## **Racialised Desires: The Colonial Preoccupations of Fantasy**

**Gilbert Caluya**

University of South Australia

*The articles in this special themed section were submitted by presenters at the Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association's 2012 Annual Conference on the theme 'Racialising Desire'. This introduction briefly outlines the subject of 'racialised desires' while canvassing the articles collected within.*

In this so-called 'post-race' age, the perpetual racialisation of desire and the anxieties produced by interracial sex and romance, serve as embarrassing reminders of the continuing intimacies of coloniality. To recognise the existence of racialised desires means insisting upon the sociality of fantasy. The fact that our carnal lusts, erotic daydreams and romantic longings are racially inflected (if not delimited) is symptomatic of the intimate reach of the empire. Racialised desires survive as the seductive workings of coloniality. They testify to the extent to which coloniality embeds itself in the personal, the private and the psyche, making it difficult to dislodge without in some sense dismantling modern subjectivities.

Historically speaking, the workings of racialised desire were most evident in the angst surrounding miscegenation, which was rooted in the colonial regime's desire to manage sex and marriage as privileged sites for the racial reproduction of the colonial order (see McClintock, 1995; Stoler 1996, 1997, 2002). The opening article of this themed section by Erin Claringbold continues this line of research in 'The lascivious Afghan and the threat of "brown babies"'. Claringbold analyses Australian representations of Afghan men and sexuality in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by drawing on a vast array of historical sources—newspaper reports, serial novels, early Australian films and cartoons. Through close readings of these texts she shows how the dangerously hyper-sexualised

figure of the Afghan man became, on the one hand, a locus for cultural anxieties about Whiteness and national vulnerability, and on the other, mobilised as a cultural vehicle for imagining White romantic unions.

While many (though not all) colonial administrations have since been dismantled, racialised desires remain at a cultural level to frame the ways we long, lust and love. They are the erotic detritus of colonial societies. Ethnic stereotypes and racially encoded images and signs survive as the verbal and visual grammar for the articulation of erotic fantasies, even if disgust for interracial breeding has been displaced by a proliferation of racial fetishises, and even when racially different bodies are not present. One obvious example is the continued use of master/slave role-play in bondage and S/M practices. While race is not the only thing happening in these intimate events, it nevertheless says something that slavery's trappings, techniques and theatrics persist as a primary erotic code for imagining sex and power. Similarly, the recent emergence of 'Arab porn' in America, which features non-Arab female models posing as 'Arabs' by simply wearing cloths over their heads, highlights the capacity for racially encoded signs (veils) to generate Orientalist erotic fantasies, in which White men are portrayed as 'teaching' the 'Arab bitches' a lesson for protesting, building bombs or just hating Americans.<sup>1</sup> These sexual fantasies cannot be disentangled from the wider socio-political context of post-9/11 America in which they simultaneously function as revenge fantasies. Shifting from props to backdrops, in a different vein, exotic landscapes continue to serve as fertile environments for White imaginings of desire or as sexual playgrounds. Both the sex trade industries (legal and illegal) of South-East Asia and the tourism industries of various Pacific islands serve to support differing Western imaginations about sexual practices, from child sex tourism to romantic honeymoons.

The second article returns us to this contemporary context, focusing on the imbrication of racial and sexual preoccupations in contemporary Orientalist gay desires. Emerich Daroya's 'Potatoes and Rice: Exploring the Racial Politics of Gay Asian and White Men's Desires and Desirability' continues a body of writing on anti-Asian racism in gay cultural and sexual practices (see Eng, 2001; Fung, 1999). Drawing on Bourdieu's habitus and Butler's theory of performativity, Daroya extends the concept of 'erotic habitus' to articulate the performativity of gay Asian-White men's interracial desires and desirability. He employs this framework in his analysis of Gawthrop's *The Rice Queen Diaries* and online personal advertisements in order to show how racialised desires emerge through the internalisation of Orientalist discourses and taxonomies while the display and performance of racial norms produce sexual subjectivities. Daroya, like the writers he draws from, reminds us that the trick of racialised desires is that they appear as our own will. They feel like they emerge from within when in actuality the racial coordinates of our fantasies are threaded into the core of ourselves, our psyche, and our bodies only to reappear as our own lust and longing.

---

<sup>1</sup> The website analysed in this passage is Arab Street Hookers at: <http://www.arabstreethookers.com> (Accessed December 2, 2013).

But the contemporary coordinates of racialised desires are difficult to map partially because it grows increasingly difficult to single out any particular agenda of racial reproduction and also because the political relationships between people and between countries are not so easily reduced to a coloniser/colonised binary. From illegal forced sex trafficking of Third World women and children to consensual mail-order bride industries, from the growth of interracial pornography to racism in Western gay communities, from justifications of the War on Terror via suspicious rhetorical appeals to feminist and queer politics to the heightened scrutiny of intimate relationships in border surveillance regimes—across these cultural sites the relationships, industries, governance structures and socio-cultural support mechanisms involved differ widely. There are many more examples that we could name but it is enough to signal the scope of what ‘racialised desires’ might contain, the unevenness of the topography and the difficulties these bring to analysing the conditions for their continuation in a post- or neo-colonial era. Often we are dealing with a concatenation of various political, cultural, social and economic agendas servicing differing but overlapping communities and geographies fought between lobby interest groups, minority communities, businesses, illegal industries, political parties and governments in a globalised economy.

If we return to the affinity I suggested above between ‘the child sex tourist’ and ‘the romantic honeymooners’ in exotic locales, we can see that the slippage between these two figures indicates some of the difficulties in analysing the politics of racialised desires across various sites. In instances where gross discrepancies of power are involved, such as forced sexual trafficking of women and children, the arguments are relatively easy to grasp and political positions easy to take. But when it comes to analysing consensual intimate relations or common sexual fantasies and romantic longings the picture is much more difficult to analyse politically, in part because to question it is often felt as undermining the love or intimacy subjects feel for one another.

‘Racialised desires’ should therefore not be reduced to interracial intimacy alone. Rather the phrase highlights the very racial constitution of desires themselves. This is what we glimpse in the following article by Dona Cayetana, ‘Waging a War of Terror: Invasion, Surveillance and Desire in Robert Drewe’s *Grace*’. The premise of Cayetana’s article is simple: if the War on Terror was justified through the image of oppressed Muslim women, then this simultaneously entails imagining Western, White women as signifiers of freedom and sexual liberation. As Cayetana points out though, this contradicts the political reality of Western neoconservative governments that have slowly rolled back women’s (and gay) rights in the name of ‘family values’. It is from within these global and domestic political shifts that Cayetana embarks on a nuanced meditation of White desire and desirability in Robert Drewe’s *Grace*. Focusing on the terrorised and territorialised body of the White female protagonist, Grace, Cayetana draws on feminist analyses to highlight Grace’s imbrications with sexual and racial anxieties across personal and national scales and differing temporal locations. Her article underscores literature’s ability to explore the complex webs in which we find ourselves, especially when the connections are still difficult to pinpoint or map.

Perhaps what is needed is a new language for discussing racialised desires. Too often the conceptual tools, analytical techniques developed for analysing gross discrepancies in colonial power are simply imposed onto different phenomena in completely different contexts which, while sharing a family resemblance, are not entirely or sometimes fairly captured by these models and theories. The final paper by Rikke Andreassen pushes in this direction without providing definitive answers. In 'Alternative stories about race, gender and interracial intimacies at the turn of the twentieth century', Andreassen draws on archival material to analyse Danish exhibitions of exotic people in the late nineteenth/early twentieth century. Through her reading of photographic images and newspaper reports of interracial romance (Asian men with White women), Andreassen shows that, rather than being portrayed as feminine, passive and asexual as much scholarship argues, Asian men were often portrayed as masculine and sexually attractive. This discrepancy between widely held theories about Asian masculinity and her archival material opens an opportunity for Andreassen to re-envision her approach to the archival data in order to make evident other alternative stories while paying heed to the political dimensions of race. Her paper functions as an injunction to researchers to look again at historical material and see what else we might find.

What has been less explored, not only in this themed section but more widely in the literature, is the productivity of racialised desires themselves. If racialised desires were purely oppressive, negative or repressive they would have a short lifespan. Their survival cannot be accounted for without understanding how they function productively in our lives, our relationships and our families. Analysing the productivity of racialised desire need not replace analyses of its politics. Indeed, I would suggest that understanding the productive, fertile, generative potential of racialised desire would go a long way to explaining the power of racialised desires to survive into and thrive within various postcolonial presents. At the same time it might open up different avenues for resistance. Perhaps these are avenues that future researchers might like to chase.

\*\*\*

Included in this special issue are general articles by Rob Cover, Jennifer E. Cheng, Finex Ndhlovu, Stefan Haderer and Micaela Ash.

Rob Cover analyses racist comments made by Australian politician Teresa Gambaro in 2012, who asserted that temporary migrants did not embody 'Australian values' through appropriate hygiene in public spaces. He argues that such comments are representative of racialised practices which work to construct non-white Others as malodorous in comparison to a non-smelly, because white, normative Australian subject. Jennifer Cheng's article continues the critical interrogation of ostensibly non-raced 'Australian values' by looking at the strategies Australian politicians used to contest the culturally racist framing of legislation such as the *Australian Citizenship Bill 2005* and the citizenship test implemented under the former Howard government. Finex Ndhlovu presents interview data with post-refugee Africans, originally from Sudan, South Sudan and the

Democratic Republic of Congo, who now live in Victoria, Australia. He argues that their experiences of racism in public spaces speaks to a distinction between an ostensibly non-raced formal conception of citizenship and the informal social and cultural practices of citizenship which construct belonging in Australia as connected to a white phenotypical appearance and the embodiment of 'Australian values'. Stefan Haderer analyses shifting governmental policy with respect to the management of Indigenous peoples through the lens of biopower. He argues that the earlier protectionist and segregationist strategy of management gave way to flexible and arbitrary deployment of whiteness that served to reinforce governmental and institutional control over Indigenous peoples, culminating in the brutal Stolen Generations policies. The final article by Micaela Ash situates moral panics about the spectre of polygamy in Australia as being based on the racialisation of Islam as an oppressive and foreign religion.

### **Author Note**

Gilbert is an ARC DECRA Fellow and Research SA Fellow at the International Centre for Muslim and non-Muslim Understanding, University of South Australia. His work crosses feminist, queer, critical race and postcolonial theories in the analysis of contemporary political and cultural publics. He has been involved in queer and anti-racist activism and has published on anti-Asian racism in gay Australian communities. His current ARC-funded research project focuses on the ways intimacy serves as a site for managing Muslim's access to citizenship in the West.

### **References**

- Eng, D. (2001). *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America*. New York: Duke University Press.
- Fung, R. (1999). Looking for my penis: The eroticized Asian in gay video porn. In Gross & Woods (Eds.), *The Columbia Reader on Lesbian & Gay Men in Media, Society and Politics*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- McClintock, A. (1995). *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*. New York: Routledge.
- Stoler, A. L. (1996). *Race and the Education of Desire*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- . (1997). Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and the Cultural Politics of Exclusion in the Colonial Southeast Asia. In Cooper & Stoler (Eds.), *Tensions of Empire* (pp. 198-238). Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- . (2002). *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*. Berkeley: University of California Press.