

Book Review: Ethno-Pornography: Sexuality, Colonialism, and Archival Knowledge by Pete Sigal, Zeb Tortorici & Neil L. Whitehead

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Sigal, Pete, Zeb Tortorici, and Neil L. Whitehead, eds. *Ethno-Pornography: Sexuality, Colonialism, and Archival Knowledge*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020. 280 pages. Paperback, \$26.95

When does the scholarly gaze of ethnographers become pornographic and exploitative of their subjects? Pete Sigal, Zeb Tortorici, and the late Neil L. Whitehead address this question in their edited collection *Ethno-Pornography: Sexuality, Colonialism, and Archival Knowledge*. The editors define ethno-pornography as the production of eroticized material regarding people deemed different from the people expected to digest the material (p. 4). Pete Sigal is a Professor of History and Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at Duke University where his research focuses on constructions of gender and sexuality in colonial Latin America particularly among indigenous groups. Zeb Tortorici is an Associate Professor of Spanish and Portuguese Languages and Literature at New York University. His research focuses on gender, sexuality, and religion in Colonial Latin America. The late Neil L. Whitehead was a Professor of Anthropology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he explored dark shamanism in the Amazon basin and the Caribbean. This collection of essays pays homage to the important work that Whitehead began over a decade ago, which asserted that ethnography can be understood as a form of pornography invested with institutional power (p. 2). This collective work argues that scholars must rethink their ethnographic gaze and acknowledge the legacy of colonial fetishization that shapes researcher's consumption and articulation of non-white sexuality.

The editors position this collection in direct conversation and opposition to Walter Roth's 1898 work *Ethnological Studies among the North-West-Central Queensland Aborigines*. In this narrative Roth first uses the term "Ethno-pornography" when describing his observation of the intimate behaviors of the Aborigines. The editors acknowledge Roth's contribution to the

scholarship but also identify it as being problematic because it presented colonial subjects within a voyeuristic gaze, which promoted the fetishization of indigenous populations.

The first section, “visualizing race,” explores the depiction of the exotic other in ethnographic research, particularly the constructions of Blackness and its relationship to the ethnographic gaze. What makes this section unique is the presence of self-reflexivity within each chapter. For example, Mireille Miller-Young’s chapter explores how empire shaped pornography and how pornography shaped empire (p. 42). She details how images of Black women’s bodies were circulated during the late nineteenth century by white spectators who sexualized these images. In her chapter, we see how imperial knowledge shaped how Black women’s bodies are viewed today. Miller-Young emphasizes that archival images of Black women are seen as pornographic, not historical. Bryan Pitts further interrogates the sexualization of Black bodies in his chapter over the presence of African decedent models in *G Magazine*, a gay porn publication in Brazil. Beatrix McBride’s chapter, “The Ghost of Gaytanamo” explores the meaning behind the absence of Arabic actors in that particular pornographic film. As a stand-alone chapter it is quite powerful but within the overarching flow of this section it disrupts the building dialogue that is exploring the impact of colonial constructions of Blackness and the self-reflection that the editors are asserting. The final chapter written by Sida Lawrence explores the intersections of personal desire and Lawrence’s ethnographic work in Ghana and Burkina Fuso. Lawrence interrogates the gendered power structures in the communities that she studies and attempts to untangle the complicated interpersonal relationships that arose. The chapters in this section push the reader to reflect on their own work and successfully calls into question the power of ethno-pornographic scholarship in shaping perceptions of sexuality.

The chapters in the second half of this work entitled “Ethno-pornography as Colonial History” bring archival material to the forefront of the conversation and further interrogates the ethnographic gaze. Pete Sigal’s chapter details how sixteenth century ethnographers used their voyeuristic gaze to advance colonial perspectives of indigenous populations rooted in sex and violence. Joseph Allen Boone’s discusses the multi-directional power paradigms present in the creation and dissemination of Middle Eastern homoerotic images and literature throughout Europe. Pernille Ipsen moves the narrative from examining the Ottoman Empire to pornographic travel writings about West African women. Helen Pringle’s conclusion to this section places the work back in conversation with Roth by challenging his scholarly gaze. This section reveals that the archive allows for perpetuation of colonial violence and sexualized narratives of through ethno-pornography.

The editor’s ability to position this collection within broader discussions of gender and sexuality is a significant strength of this work. Although the editors and authors are discussing material that is rich in theory it is written in such a way that the content is accessible to a reader unfamiliar with the topic. Readers who are familiar with the subject will find themselves digging deeper and understanding their role in the production of scholarship that can be identified as ethno-pornography. This work would be perfect for a graduate seminar because of its diverse narratives that focus on similar themes that would allow emerging scholars to self-reflect on their own research. The editors put together an engaging collection of essays that challenges its readers to grapple with the implications of their own scholarly gaze and interrogate the lasting impact of colonial narratives that has historical sexualized the other. As a whole, the arguments presented in this edited collection act as a call to action for scholars to no longer use methodology that perpetuates colonial power paradigms.

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