



Towards a Slow Decolonisation of Sexual Violence

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Abstract: *This paper explores how we could approach the decolonising of the debate on sexual violence within the South African post-colony. For this purpose, a historical event is analysed: two presbytery hearings of 1843 and 1845, both involving Xhosa convert John Beck Balfour, at the Scottish mission station of Burnshill based in Xhosaland (later called British Caffraria). The hearings involve (extra-)marital and sexual behaviour. Walter Dignolo's notions of border thinking and colonial difference, further complicated with the idea of colonial-sexual differentiation, are employed to show aspects of what is at stake in a decolonising reading of Xhosa convert sexual behaviour.*

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Introduction: setting the scene

The larger project framing this article aims to better identify the roots of the very high levels of sexual violence in contemporary, post-colonial South Africa, through a more adequate contextualisation and historicization of the phenomenon. In particular, the current pervasive call to decolonise social knowledges and epistemologies in the South African context implies, in the case of interpretations of contemporary sexual violence, that the key sexual dimension of colonial-racist subjugation and its resistance be more clearly brought into focus¹. This larger project thus requires several aspects and periods to be investigated, in order to excavate the historically embedded meanings and (political, psychological, social) functions underlying and driving the current sexual violence epidemic.²

Here, I limit my attention to critical analysis of the 19th century Xhosa – Scottish missionary encounter as represented by only two Glasgow Missionary Society (GMS) presbytery hearings of the Xhosa convert John Beck Balfour's sexual and marital conduct, in 1843 and 1845,

¹ See Azille Coetzee & Louise du Toit, "Facing the sexual demon of colonial power: Decolonising sexual violence in South Africa," *European Journal of Women's Studies* 25/2 (2018): 214-227.

² The attempt to interpret post-colonial (contemporary) sexual violence against the backdrop of colonialism's sexual dimension should by no means be read to imply that either the former colonisers alone, or only the formerly colonised, carry moral guilt for the present crisis of sexual violence. To the contrary, the point of this paper is to show how and why a certain obsession around sexual conduct, together with a strange kind of patriarchal impunity, developed precisely in the asymmetrical colonial *encounter* between differently positioned groups. It is the historical encounter and the differentiating and bordering processes inherent in it that in general terms left women (and colonised women in particular) sexually vulnerable.

respectively.³ The focus is thus on an early colonial encounter, in which sexual control and resistance to it are central. This narrow historical focus is justified because of the specific colonising role occupied by the Christian missions through their focused intervention in the sex lives of the indigenous peoples in the supposed attempt to convert and civilise them, and is further justified because of the wealth of the presbytery texts available for analysis. Although only the second hearing deals explicitly with a sexual violence complaint, the logic of reading the two cases together, and of casting the net wider to include other aspects of the sexual dimension of the colonial project, will become clear in the course of the discussion. The choice of these specific hearings is motivated by several factors, which can only be listed briefly.

(i) The availability⁴ of the transcripts of the Balfour hearings⁵; (ii) the timing of the hearings: at the time, Xhosaland still exists in precarious political independence, and the missions find themselves as invited guests on the margins of Xhosa society⁶; (iii) the geographical-temporal positioning as multiply-bordered: Xhosaland was called “The Border,” and treated as a shifting and contested space, from a British Imperial perspective; the missions in their turn had been invited into Xhosaland to form a kind of strategic buffer or intermediary between the amaXhosa and the colonial forces; and finally the converts in their turn performed the strategic bordering function of linking, separating and interceding between missions and Xhosa centres of power⁷; (iv) the presence of diverse Xhosa voices in these trials – those of John Balfour, his accusers which included a number of women, and of the Xhosa elders⁸; (v) the highly contested larger colonising context⁹: Xhosaland of the mid-19th century was sim-

³ My reading is strongly indebted to Natasha Erlank’s detailed historical discussion of the Balfour hearings in Natasha Erlank, “Sexual Misconduct and Church Power on Scottish Mission Stations in Xhosaland, South Africa, in the 1840s,” *Gender and History*, 15/1 (2003): 69-84. My interpretation goes beyond her article in that I critically relate the details of the case to decolonising thinking, the notion of bordering processes and the contemporary sexual violence crisis in South Africa at large.

⁴ My thanks go to Natasha Erlank for providing me with the original, unpublished, transcript of the Balfour case.

⁵ Feminist theorists like Liz Thornberry and Linda Martín Alcoff have warned against an over-reliance on legal texts for interpreting sexual violence. The rich data should thus be analysed, while keeping in mind the specific purposes served by the presbytery hearings at the time, resulting in important blind-spots and exclusions. See Elizabeth Thornberry, *Colonizing Consent: Rape and Governance in South Africa’s Eastern Cape* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Linda Martín Alcoff, *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018).

⁶ Their marginal position served Xhosa, but not missionary purposes: for the amaXhosa the missions were an important ally and mediator with the British; on the missionary side there was growing frustration with how little inroads they were making in their attempts to “convert” and “civilise” the amaXhosa. See Natasha Erlank, “Sexual Misconduct and Church Power”, 80.

⁷ According to Erlank, most converts were “peripheral to Xhosa society.” See *ibid.* 77. Similarly in Igbo context, Ifi Amadiume, *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture* (London & New York: Zed Books 1997), 146, states the first and easiest converts to British Christendom were marginalised individuals who were attracted to alternative sources of power and influence.

⁸ While there are many sources detailing missionary attitudes toward Xhosa sexuality, there is a scarcity of sources that reveal Xhosa attitudes towards Christian sexual morality. Natasha Erlank, “Sexual Misconduct and Church Power”, 70.

⁹ Sundhya Pahuja’s notion of different competing and enabling, colonising ‘jurisdictions’ arising out of, and at the same time fundamentally shaping, European modernism, helped me to make sense of these surface contradictions. Sundhya Pahuja, “Laws of encounter: a jurisdictional account of international

ultaneously the scene of the longest-running military conflict in the history of African colonisation, and the “most heavily missionized region of Southern Africa”¹⁰; and (vi) the explicit focus of the hearings on sexual behaviour. All of these factors work together to make these hearings a fruitful micro-cosmos for the analysis of the meanings of sex and sexual violence in the borderlands of colonial South Africa, and in British colonisation more broadly. Because of the proliferation of borders in and on the Border, then, at the time of our narrative, a precarious and uneasy balance of power could still be discerned. In the minutiae of everyday encounters, there was fierce contestation over conduct and its meanings, over customs, over ways of life and ultimately over whole worlds of meaning¹¹ and their destinies, as we shall see.

Before turning to the hearings themselves, a few further comments on the sexual dimension of colonisation are in order. It should be noted that also in Scotland at the time, the bulk of Church business was focused on the sex lives of its members. The churches played a key role in defining and upholding bourgeois culture and in particular, the sanctity of monogamous marriage and marital sexual fidelity as its prime markers.¹² To an extent, then, the Scottish social situation, in which the poverty of the poorer classes tended to be blamed on their supposed lack of sexual self-restraint and was contrasted with middle-class sexual respectability, was transferred to the Eastern Cape, where sexual purity, closely linked with the institution of monogamy, became the prime marker of conversion. Church scrutiny and anxiety regarding the sexual behaviour of male missionaries as the prime models for the converts was also pronounced.¹³ The correlating primary sins were “adultery” and “fornication.” However, there was an important further dimension at play in the colonial situation, perhaps best captured by Achille Mbembe’s claim¹⁴ that the western imaginary ascribes a natural or pre-political existence to Africans under the figure or sign of the animal and the beast. Under this sign, Africans had long been designated from European perspective as animal-like, hyper-sexual, and as existing on the outside of history, culture and politics.

Elsewhere, I have argued with Azille Coetzee¹⁵ that the sexual dimension of colonisation and of colonial control of large populations has been under-theorised, unlike its racial aspect. In fact, we argue that colonial racism’s powerfully dehumanising effects cannot be properly grasped without an understanding of how sexual denigration was central to the process.¹⁶ In this respect, I contend, Michel Foucault’s detection of the emergence of bio-power as a form of governmentality in 18th century Europe could be shown to have at least some of its main

law,” *London Review of International Law* 1/1 (2013): 63-98. It is important to acknowledge that the missions and Church constituted a third competing jurisdiction, after State and Company. The colonised noticed the differences and started to capitalise on them.

¹⁰ Natasha Erlank, “Missionary Views on Sexuality in Xhosaland in the 19th Century,” *Le Fait Missionnaire* 11 (2001): 12.

¹¹ By “world of meaning” I mean a comprehensive, shared, and more or less coherent symbolic universe or worldview that underlies practices, institutions and customs, and thus serves as a guide for living. For the remainder of the paper I will use the term “world-sense,” coined by Nigerian scholar *Oyèrúnké Oyèwùmí* as part of her criticism of Western approaches that prioritise sight over all the other senses. See *Oyèrúnké Oyèwùmí, The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

¹² *Ibid.* 10.

¹³ Julia C. Wells, “Curing the ‘Public Evils’. The Contested Terrain of Male Missionary Sexuality in Early 19th Century LMS Missions at the Cape of Good Hope,” *Le Fait Missionnaire* 11 (2001): 45-72

¹⁴ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony* (Berkeley: University of California Press 2001), 1.

¹⁵ Azille Coetzee & Louise du Toit, “Facing the sexual demon”, 215.

¹⁶ See also Louise du Toit, “The African Animal Other: Decolonising Nature,” *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 24/2 (2019): 130-142.

historical roots in the Protestant missions under colonial conditions. In his lectures of 1977-78, he describes bio-power as follows:

By this I mean a number of phenomena that seem to me to be quite significant, namely, the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the eighteenth century, modern western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. This is roughly what I have called bio-power.¹⁷

According to Alcoff,¹⁸ Foucault did not in fact link his analyses of knowledge and the role of bio-power to colonialism, but if we accept what Pahuja and other decolonial thinkers¹⁹ state, namely, that European modernism was profoundly shaped by the colonial project, then it would make sense to trace these links more carefully, and to expose how colonial conditions both required and facilitated early large-scale control of subjugated populations and that this was done by focusing on their biological and species traits, sexual behaviour in particular. The Christian colonial institutions played a key role in this endeavour.

I contend, then, that what we see at work in the Balfour hearings, is a profound tension within the missionary perspective on Xhosa socio-sexual arrangements. On the one hand, there is the limited acknowledgement that the Xhosa world-sense is in fact an alternative comprehensive symbolic universe, which still exists intact at that point, and competes for the converts' allegiance and therefore has to be negotiated by the missionaries. On the other hand, there is the more pernicious view that what poses as an alternative sexual morality or Xhosa custom is really only an excuse for sexual "lapses" or the breakdown of sexual self-restraint, thus a kind of return of nature or animal. This ambivalence manifests in the emotional response of the missionaries towards what they call Xhosa "custom": convert sexual misconduct, which sometimes entailed a return to Xhosa custom, or "going native," is commonly described in terms of "lapses" or "fall backs," in other words, in terms of a failure of the demands of the supposed higher moral code of Christian sexual self-restraint.²⁰ There was thus a slippage in the missionary view between adherence to Xhosa custom and losing self-control. Xhosa ways of organising and limiting sexual activity were viewed as particularly pernicious, degrading and harmful, especially to women and girls. To the extent that the colonising gaze framed Xhosa sexual practices as indicative of a *lack* of culture, civilisation and control, and a return to "nature," they were predisposed to read them in a gendered way, namely as male hyper-sexuality unleashed against passive and vulnerable female sexuality. Thus, by splitting the indigenous population into two, they could argue that unchecked sexual freedom (on the side of men) led to untold degradation (on the side of women), and they would couch their "civilising" mission in similarly gendered terms, within a vision to "raise up the poor degraded daughters of Africa."²¹

These "problematic" practices or customs included *ukumetsba* (a form of non-penetrative youthful sexual activity, also called "choosing of wives"), initiation ceremonies, as well as certain dances, polygamous marriage, the payment of *lobola*, and the relative tolerance of free

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977–1978*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1.

¹⁸ Linda Martín Alcoff, "Mignolo's Epistemology of Coloniality," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 7/3 (2007): 81.

¹⁹ See Azille Coetzee & Louise du Toit, "Facing the sexual demon."

²⁰ Wendy Urban-Meade, "'Girls of the Gate': Questions of Purity and Piety at the Mtshabezi girls' primary boarding school in colonial Zimbabwe 1908 – 1940," *Le Fait Missionnaire* 11 (2001): 75-98.

²¹ Natasha Erlank, "Missionary Views", 30.

adult sexual activity.²² All of these practices were seen as obvious obstacles to conversion (equated with “civilisation,” and finally, with fully human status) and thus as unequivocally harmful to their practitioners’ bodies and souls, and were often described and discussed in hyperbolic terms of scandal, shock, and outrage. For example, “adultery” was an umbrella term used by the missionaries to describe all sexual activity outside of monogamous marriage, and therefore missionary John Ross describes *adultery*²³ as “a sin universal in Cafferland.”²⁴ The missionaries moreover created an alternative power base within the margins of Xhosaland and used access to their resources rooted in “the emergent colonial economy” to reward convert adherence to the Christian sexual moral code, and to punish its transgression.²⁵

I. The Hearings

John Beck Balfour²⁶ was born around 1822 and grew up near the Scottish mission station of Burnshill.²⁷ He was the son of Robert Balfour, a leading first-generation convert of the early missionaries.²⁸ Robert had been an elder, translator and teacher in the “fledgling mission church” since the early 1820s. Father and son were both important figures on the station: they were translators between two socio-moral codes and two world-senses, and were thus adept at alternating, interweaving, mediating and negotiating between “Xhosa and Scottish Presbyterian meanings and intentions in complex ways.”²⁹ The Balfours and others like them thus obtained a high degree of independent power made possible by the new hybrid colonial spaces and structures. John had been baptised in the church, and also initiated into the Xhosa community through the usual circumcision ceremonies³⁰; although born into a leading convert family, he was thus also versed in Xhosa socio-sexual practice.

When John started school at the mission school of Lovedale in 1841, he was already married to Christina, a daughter of another prominent Xhosa catechist, Thomas Fortuyn. By 1843, stories started to circulate that Christina was being “*adulterous*,”³¹ by which extra-marital sexual relations were meant, and that John was being physically abusive towards her. The Church leadership comprising of missionaries and Xhosa elders, all of whom were male, initially advised John to “put Christina away,” in line with Xhosa custom. This meant she was to be sent back to her parents’ home in exchange for the *lobola* or bride price and the couple could be separated according to Xhosa custom without having to go through the (for the missionaries) more onerous process of a church divorce between two children of prominent

²² Ibid. 12-3.

²³ The word “*adultery*” will henceforth be printed in italics, like the term “*ukumetsba*,” in order to remind the reader of the cultural baggage of both these terms and the difficulty of translating them into the other culture’s language.

²⁴ Natasha Erlank, “Missionary Views”, 13.

²⁵ Natasha Erlank, “Sexual Misconduct and Church Power”, 76-7.

²⁶ Sometimes he is called “Jan” or “Jan Bek.” Today’s reader is struck by the complete erasure of Balfour’s and the others’ Xhosa nomenclature in favour of uniformly English / Dutch names.

²⁷ Near today’s Kingwilliamstown in the Eastern Cape Province.

²⁸ Natasha Erlank, “Sexual Misconduct and Church Power”, 70.

²⁹ Ibid. 71.

³⁰ Ibid. 70.

³¹ Keep in mind this is a Christian term here used to interpret different aspects of Xhosa convert behaviour. The word is marked in order to alert the reader to the complexities surrounding the term, and to how the different speakers try to imprint this ‘priority sin’ of the Christian world-sense with their own interpretations.

church members.³² The group of Xhosa elders (converts) were thus confronted with Christina's alleged sexual misbehaviour in a Christian sense, but they decided, together with the missionary leadership, to respond to this infringement upon Christian sexual mores using an element of Xhosa sexual-moral tradition or sanction. This was done.

Christina, however, ran back to John – likely an indication of the more flexible Xhosa approach to adult sexual behaviour – and after that the church men became worried that John was seen to be living with an *adulterous* woman, and held a presbytery session to dissolve the church marriage on the basis of her alleged *adultery*. John agreed to this. These events taken together already give us a clear indication of the gendered power relations within mission spaces, in spite of the mission claim to save indigenous women from degradation: male converts were strategically important because they acted as intermediaries with the larger Xhosa society, their schooling was given priority, and they were incorporated into the all-male Church leadership, whereas female converts were valued mostly for their role as wives to male converts.³³ Furthermore, the dominant Xhosa marital form of polygamy was itself considered as a form of *adultery*, and while most early women converts remained tied to polygamous marriages, it was expected that male converts would become monogamous – yet another reason why male converts were strategically more valuable to the missionaries.³⁴ Moreover, it seems from the documents that Christina's alleged infidelity was not investigated, but the allegations were viewed as damaging enough to John's standing in the community that the marriage had to be dissolved.

At this same session of the first hearing, however, Christina took advantage of the public, formal situation to accuse John of also having been “*adulterous*,” before their marriage, with a girl called Veni. Since the Christians viewed all sexual activity outside of marriage as “*adultery*,” or at least as a serious sexual transgression such as *fornication*, John's participation in the accepted Xhosa practice of *ukumetssha* before his marriage should have been equally sinful in the eyes of the church, and viewed as having sullied his marital sexual purity. Yet in his case, the church men (comprising both Scottish and Xhosa) found John not guilty of *adultery*, even though he had admitted to participation in premarital *ukumetssha*, but denied that it entailed or implied *adultery* in the Christian sense.³⁵ They thus decided, as with the putting away of Christina, to rule in John's favour, yet ironically again using Xhosa rather than Christian social codes to respond to a problem created by the application of Christian sexual morality.³⁶ Arguably, this was a pragmatic move, a politics of interpretation, used to protect John's and his father's status within the community, rather than an acknowledgement of the independent value of Xhosa sexual custom.

Apart from the *adultery* charge against John, Christina's father Thomas Fortuyn wanted at the same hearing to press the charge of physical abuse against John. He claimed that John

³² Natasha Erlank, “Sexual Misconduct and Church Power”, 71.

³³ Wendy Urban-Meade, “Girls of the Gate”, 76.

³⁴ Natasha Erlank, “Missionary Views”, 14.

³⁵ Natasha Erlank, “Sexual Misconduct and Church Power”, 72.

³⁶ There seems to have been an additional dimension to the *ukumetssha* charge against John. According to Erlank, “those young men who had already undergone the circumcision ritual, like Jan Beck, did not engage in this sexual play.” See Natasha Erlank, “Sexual Misconduct and Church Power”, 72. Thus it would seem that John's *ukumetssha* involvement should have brought him sanction from the side of the Xhosa elders, in so far as they were still concerned about preserving the integrity of Xhosa sexual morality, as well as from the side of the missionaries, who should have chastised him for adhering to Xhosa sexual custom as a Christian convert. In the end, however, he was found not guilty on both of these charges. Christina must have expected that at least one of the two sides, if not both, would find John guilty of some form of sexual or marital misconduct.

had beaten the girl Veni, his partner in *ukumetsba*, before his marriage, and also his wife Christina, during their marriage, the latter moreover on a Sabbath day. John (as possibly Thomas Fortuyn) must have anticipated that the part of the charge most likely to be considered as serious by the church leadership was the aspect related to the Sabbath, and so he explained that he had beaten her precisely because she would not go to church. The missionaries and the Xhosa elders finally accepted his explanation, although there is some indication that the latter were more concerned about the alleged violence than the former – which spelled the end to Christina and her father’s attempt to get John found guilty of anything, and thereby to restore a balance of power between the estranged spouses³⁷. Thus, we see a clear double standard in the church leadership’s treatment of the two spouses and their respective grievances, in spite of some reservations expressed by the Xhosa elders.

Two years later, in 1845, John was again called before the presbytery³⁸, this time on the charge that he had assaulted a teenage girl called Jean Henry, daughter of yet another Xhosa catechist, Charles Henry. In this instance we see John adopting a more active role in playing off the two sexual-moral codes against each other, not only in his formal defence during the hearing, but even in the very attempt to seduce Jean. The four younger people involved in the events, sisters Jean and Frances Henry, daughters of Charles Henry, and their male friends Goliath and Zitana, seem to have collectively brought the case before the presbytery after John had attempted to cover it up. From the different testimonies, the events might be reconstructed as follows.

Jean and Frances had been sleeping inside a hut, when John came by and discovered the two boys there with them. Asked what they were doing there (by John, acting as older³⁹, prominent church leader holding the younger people to moral account), Goliath said he had accompanied Zitana who was “courting” Frances, by which *ukumetsba* might have been meant, because in the transcript morally acceptable “courting” is consistently contrasted with morally unacceptable “sleeping with”, which would imply sexual penetration. John refused to believe them and accused Goliath and Zitana of intending to sleep with Jean and Frances respectively, risking the pregnancy of girls without husbands, and “exciting desire in the minds of Church Members.” In John’s testimony, he said the two boys had confessed to their sin of coming to sleep with the girls. In contrast, Zitana in his testimony denied sleeping with Frances and said that John had threatened him by saying “I will tell the people of the place where I caught you.”

After the boys had exited the hut, John called Frances outside too, and scolded her for her sexual behaviour, first by referring to her father’s role in the church, and to the expectation that she would become the wife of a believer.⁴⁰ Then he mentioned the pregnancy risk, saying “to be pregnant is a shame in this land; you know that it is a shame to be pregnant to [sic] a man that is not married, and a still greater shame to be pregnant by a[n] uncircumcised] boy.” He thus assumed that the couple had not been engaged in *ukumetsba* only but rather in

³⁷ Ibid. 72.

³⁸ The description of the trial follows in some detail the unpublished transcript obtained from Erlank.

³⁹ This evocation of a contrast between maturity and immaturity is strengthened later in the hearing, when John accuses the church leadership of laughing at him, and of “believing what these boys (young men) and Jean say” and not believing what he says (instead).

⁴⁰ In Frances’ testimony, she said John Beck had asked her, “how is it that you allow the child of a Kafir man and woman to court you?” And, “we expected you would be a wife of a Christian.” The implication seems to be that Zitana and / or his parents had not been converted, and his Xhosa name would also suggest as much.

full penetrative sex. According to John, after hearing that the boys had confessed, Frances said “I have done so, because I had not power – I am a female.”⁴¹

Next, John called Jean outside, and told her that the other three had confessed their sexual transgressions and that she should do the same. She denied sleeping with Goliath and wanted to confront Goliath who had presumably confessed to sleeping with her. Now John did an interesting thing – he first asked whether she would be willing, to prove her innocence, to allow her virginity to be tested (for “the women to examine her person”). According to Xhosa custom, sometimes an older woman such as a mother would inspect whether a girl had lost her virginity. If it were found to be the case, a fine was payable by the offender to the girl’s male guardian.⁴² This practice may thus be read as a way of holding men accountable both materially and publicly, for engaging in risky sex that might lead to pregnancy outside of wedlock, with many difficult long-term social and material consequences for the girl or woman involved. Keen to prove her innocence, Jean answered, “Yes, I desire it.” In response, John then posed a second question, asking, “If I were a woman would you allow me to examine your person?” He warned her that she should speak the truth and she protested that she was indeed speaking the truth. He then posed a third question: “If it were the law⁴³ that I should feel with my hand, would you consent?” And then a fourth question: “If it were the law that I should feel with my body, would you be willing?” Jean refused. The questions were followed up with a threat to Jean: “You should speak or Goliath and I will accuse you falsely.” The overall impression of John’s confrontation of the four young people is that he realised he had caught them in a sexually compromising position and wanted to assert maximum authority in the situation by threatening to expose them to their parents and the larger community. At first it seems as if the assertion of Christian authority and the policing of Christian sexual morality are his main concerns, but later it becomes clear that his actions were ultimately aimed at a more tangible advantage.

Jean’s testimony was similar to John’s but with some telling differences. She affirmed that she had denied sleeping with Goliath and that she had wanted to confront Goliath about the matter in front of John. He then accused her of denying the truth (the transgression) out of fear of the shame, and she replied, “If I had committed that sin, it would not have been against men but God.” According to Jean, John then responded by asking the questions, “If I were a woman, would you consent that I should see you?” and “If it was the law that I might feel with my hand, would you consent?” These questions were clearly manipulative, because if Jean were to say no, it could be construed as an admission of sexual transgression, according to both Xhosa and Christian custom, and if she said yes, it could be construed as permission for John to penetrate her with his hand. He thereafter switched register, departing from the hypotheticals and asking directly, “Allow me to feel with my hand?”- Jean refused. Then he said, “Let me feel your breasts whether they are as large as Frances’ breasts,” and later on again, “if it were the law would you allow me to feel with my body.”

All of these requests Jean refused, by implication because it was not the law and John was not a woman, whereupon John threw Jean upon the ground and proceeded to rape her even as she was saying, “Stop Jan Beck, you have not come to say anything to me, but to do the same that you say Goliath did.” She said he then confessed his long-standing desire toward her, which had been thwarted by “her people” hindering him to court her. Jean reported the

⁴¹ It is possible that John (rather than Frances) here panders to the missionary view of Xhosa women as sexually powerless.

⁴² Natasha Erlank, “Missionary Views”, 24.

⁴³ Upon being asked during the hearing to which law he was referring to in these questions, John said, “the law of God.” However, as the conversation was reported, he seemed to deliberately mix up Xhosa and Christian moral codes.

incident to her mother and with her mother's aid, to some of the church elders, who followed it up with the presbytery hearing. This time, John was found guilty of "aggravated guilt" on a "very serious charge" (taking advantage of a young woman and abusing his authority as a church leader) and punished with the public shame of deposition as teacher, and excommunication.

II. Analysis

A. *An encounter between worlds?*

Throughout the two hearings, the reader remains aware of the Xhosa and Scottish-missionary world-senses as two competing systems and jurisdictions brought into contact with each other, even if the missionary context was supposed to break definitively with Xhosa custom. We have seen that in order to explain and justify their actions, different actors at different times draw upon elements belonging to the two distinct ways of organising sexual relations. It is striking that the male church leadership in the 1843 hearing at least twice draws on elements of Xhosa sexual morality to trump Christian sexual morality: as shown, they agree with John that *ukumetssha* as accepted Xhosa practice in John's case does not constitute *adultery* or sexual transgression in the Christian sense, and they initially follow the Xhosa practice of "putting away" a wife instead of pursuing a Christian divorce for Christina and John. Yet, when John defends himself against the charge of physical abuse towards Christina, they accept his explanation that he was merely forcing her to attend church, thus, in this case favouring a certain Christian-patriarchal interpretation over the Xhosa elders', including Thomas Fortuyn, and Christina's interpretation, by implying that failure to attend a church service is morally worse than beating one's wife.

We thus see that in the first hearing there is no simplistic suppression of Xhosa sexual codes in favour of Christian sexual codes; rather, the church men strategically pick and choose between different elements, interpretations and understandings of the two sexual moralities with quite practical aims in mind. The reservations expressed by the Xhosa elders during both hearings and Christina's and her father's complaints taken together should alert us to the extent to which Xhosa custom is manipulated within these contexts. The fact that some aspects are pragmatically deployed in a decontextualized way – for example, Christina may be "put away" but cannot be allowed to return again later, thus the flexibility characteristic of Xhosa marital arrangements is only allowed to work in one direction – does not point to missionary acknowledgement of an alternative, legitimate and competing way of organising sexual relations within the Xhosa world-sense. Instead, these incorporations should be viewed as pragmatic strategies in a situation that is overall precarious – a situation in which the missions depend for their continued existence upon the larger Xhosa society's, and the Xhosa elders' toleration of their attempts to police Xhosa sexual relations.

The extent of the pragmatism and distortion becomes clearer when one looks more closely at the "different moral imagination" through which the amaXhosa in fact viewed marriage.⁴⁴ In Xhosa society, the regulation of sexuality took a very different form: it was less concerned with marriage and did not link the institution closely to sexual exclusivity. Instead, their sexual morality and social organisation was concerned with regulating fertility and reproduction and the relational networks into which children were born. This explains the social acceptance of *ukumetssha* as non-reproductive sexual play and exploration.

Children were important in themselves and in what they represented – the perpetuation of lineages, the extension of a family's labour force and the realisation of future wealth via

⁴⁴ Natasha Erlank, "Sexual Misconduct and Church Power", 73.

bride-wealth payments.⁴⁵ Because children had these roles and meanings, and also because of the ancestors' role of protection, it was important that a child had a clear lineage. The lineage positioned a new child within an intergenerational and interfamilial network of relations of duties, rights and obligations. This is why Xhosa sexual sanctions focused mainly on preventing pregnancy in unmarried women of child-bearing age, and were quite relaxed otherwise: marital sexual "infidelity" was "not of primary concern for the [amaXhosa]," and in fact, "many married men and women routinely became involved in" extra-marital sexual relations, because the primary focus of moral concern was the status of children and thus the avoidance of pregnancy outside of wedlock.⁴⁶

On the other hand, for the Scottish missionaries, any forms of sexual behaviour that threatened the sanctity and "sexual purity" of monogamous marriage, including any kind of pre- or extra-marital sexual encounter, were classified under the broad sins of "adultery" and "fornication" – at least, such was the stated principle. Nevertheless, we see the missionaries manipulating the tension between the different sexual codes and *applying the prohibition of sexual transgression in a gendered way*, in order to protect John and his standing in the mission community, and to vilify and get rid of Christina and her accusations. Thus, hidden underneath the more salient, if uneven, clash between Christian and Xhosa sexual morality, we see a deeper and more covert bordering process playing out, namely the process of *colonial-sexual differentiation*. Let me explain this process. Both John and the missionaries manipulate the uncertainties created by the untranslatability of central concepts such as *ukumetsba* and *adultery* – in 1845 he takes to new extremes the example they had set in 1843 – to advance their own agendas. By drawing on a mixed bag of Christian and Xhosa sexual codes, first the Church leadership and then John, bolster their authority to intervene in and control the sex lives of others, women in particular. Where in the case of the leadership this interference extended to nullifying Christina's marriage and ignoring her complaints of physical abuse, in the case of John it extended to the rape of Jean. One cannot help but wonder to what extent John had honestly thought his behaviour towards Jean and the other young people might be approved by the Church leadership, given their proven investment in his patriarchal authority as religious leader and teacher, their negligence of his alleged interpersonal violence against his former partners, and the centrality of sexual matters to church affairs.

Given the way in which the missions framed Xhosa sexual practices as bestial or uncontrolled, and moreover justified their interference on the basis of saving the women, one can easily lose from sight the consistent erosion of women's actual control over their sexuality which accompanied conversion. I earlier noted that Christina was not allowed to return to John after having been "put away" – an option that would have been available to her in the more relaxed traditional approach to marital arrangements, and given the greater tolerance of adult sexual freedom as long as no children were involved. We should add to this the striking implication of Xhosa sexual morality, namely that men could not finally own their wives sexually, and no such exclusivity was socially enforced, apart from the mentioned concerns around children. The amaXhosa thus had no similar association of sexual exclusivity ("purity") with spiritual or religious standing or social respectability and apart from concerns over children's lineages, seem not to have applied a gendered double standard in this regard. Moreover, there are indications that the amaXhosa had a dual-sex system similar to that described by Amadiume⁴⁷ among the traditional Igbo: according to her, women had considerable spheres of collective autonomy in association with goddess worship, and under a dual-sex

⁴⁵ Ibid. 72.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 73.

⁴⁷ Ifi Amadiume, *Re-inventing Africa*, 146ff.

system as opposed to the mono-sexual system⁴⁸ of the west and of Christianity. The dual-sex system meant that women as a group controlled significant domains of life such as crop farming and trade and could thus as a group confront and limit male power, as happened in the Xhosa practice of virginity testing, for example. For this reason, some of the strongest instances of resistance to colonial subjugation came from women, from whose perspective the constraints of western-Christian patriarchal monogamy and its accompanying (gendered) demands of sexual purity must have seemed excessive.

The reference in the second hearing to virginity testing as a domain of the women and as a bastion of women's power that may have been used to limit male sexual freedom and irresponsibility, read together with John's brazen attempt to insinuate himself within this sphere of women's exclusive power, is thus indicative of the ways in which the encounter / contest / conflict / collusion between colonising and colonised men (predominantly) led to an erasure of converted women's traditional power bases and left them vulnerable to sexual control and abuse from Church authorities, Christian men, and finally also the colonial state. What I thus mean by colonial-sexual differentiation, is that colonial powers (and missionaries most centrally) read traditional societies in a gendered way, which convinced them that their interference in the sex lives and sexual organisation of these societies was justified – this led them to gendering convert lives in new ways, and led them to insert a stark hierarchical opposition (or “cut”) between Xhosa and Christian sexual moralities which both glossed over or erased, and fundamentally rewrote, *gendered power relations*. In the process, the erasure entailed that convert women lost their unacknowledged traditional power bases in women-controlled spaces and domains, and the rewriting entailed that they were subjugated to patriarchal monogamy and sexual purity impositions, which rendered them vulnerable individually to patriarchal men backed up by Christian institutions, in a move that was generally presented as unambiguously salutary to them.

Based on the Xhosa elders' hesitations around the early allegations of intimate partner violence against John Beck, and around his manipulation and perversion of virginity testing practice in the second hearing, even though they went along with the interpretation of *ukumetsba* as not implying Christian sexual transgression in John's case, and with the use of the “putting away” custom in Christina's case, we might assume that as cultural hybrids, early converts, they would have been alert to the specific ways in which Xhosa sexual morality was being interpreted, subjugated, and partly also appropriated within this inter-cultural encounter. Their partial resistance and partial capitulation draw our attention to how the missionaries played the intercultural encounter to their own advantage, in full confidence that the Christian world-sense would finally triumph over the Xhosa world-sense. Thus we see how it is that *a specific Christian-mission version of the (colonial) difference between the Xhosa and Christian sexual moralities* finally decides the outcome of the first hearing and sets the scene for the events of 1845.

Any alternative ways of differentiating between the two sets of sexual organisation as rooted in their respective encompassing world-senses, so as to emphasise women's traditional power and relative sexual autonomy, get erased in the establishment of a hierarchical difference, distinction or “cut” that serves and rationalises the colonising project. Different voices are differently positioned *vis-à-vis* this loss and / in closure, with the missionaries having a central role, and John clearly being complicit, but with the Xhosa elders resisting the erasure through voicing their objections (albeit ineffectively) and Christina, Veni, and Jean, together with Christina's father (also an elder), Jean's mother, and the two male friends, offering most resistance to the symbolic violence. The different interpretations of the values that are at stake in these two hearings suggest that neither of the two supposedly stable sets of sexual codes can be said to be pure, internally consistent, fully bounded and completely insular. Different

⁴⁸ The terms mono-sexual and dual-sexual are discussed in more detail below.

interpretations are always possible, and in the concrete high-stakes encounter, even Christian sexual morality might be re-interpreted and might draw on Xhosa practices in order to maintain its precarious and contested hold on power. We also see Xhosa interpretations of what Christian sexual morality should mean, such as Christina's and Jean's protests about how it is applied in their cases, and how a gendered double standard works to dilute the supposedly strict Christian value of monogamy. There is also the general indignation about John's attempts at perverting and appropriating the Xhosa custom of virginity testing. From these diverse and dynamic stances, we may conclude that neither world-sense with its associated sexual morality is static, closed or univocal. Instead, they are dynamic, contested, internally unstable, and open to interpretation, and here they obtain specific identities from the differences generated between them through the concrete and specific, unequal encounter. An example is the way in which the Christian sexual paradigm becomes paradoxically inscribed as the protector of Jean's sexual "purity" even as its facilitation of John's presumption of sexual authority over her is glossed over.

B. Processes of differentiation

The discussion of the Balfour hearings alerted us to the pitfall of taking seriously the surface differentiation that the missionaries made between Christian and Xhosa socio-sexual mores. This is because they never took seriously the integrity of the latter, and their rootedness in a radically different world-sense. Instead, they looked at sex- and marriage-related "customs" in isolation and identified them as the preferred markers of Xhosa lack of civilisation, as expressed above all in a supposed lack of sexual self-restraint. Crucially, an altogether different way of organising human sexuality was lost on them, because it was systematically read as a lack of, the absence of, social organisation as such. Considering difference only in terms of lack and inferiority rather than incommensurability, similarly characterises on a more general level, the western mono-sexual symbolic order, as I show below.

Because of the hierarchical binary in terms of which the colonisers and missionaries couched every interpretation of the Xhosa world-sense, along a narrowly defined axis or measuring rod calibrated by the ideal of "civilised" monogamous sexual exclusivity, other ways of distinguishing between the two world-senses, and alternative values embedded in the Xhosa world-sense, were erased. It would thus be a mistake to think of the missionary – Xhosa encounter as a simple meeting of two worlds, because even how they are distinguished and how resulting "differences" are named, utilised or erased by the dominant view is always already unilaterally predetermined by colonial preoccupations, backed ultimately by the superior military force and resources that a few decades after the Balfour hearings finally subjugated the amaXhosa to the British. Those "differences" that mark the Xhosa sexual morality as different from Christian sexual morality are from the start only rendered legible in terms of their contrasting lack, deviance, and backwardness; yet, for this purpose, they must be kept alive, for example in the putting away of Christina – a practice which is at first followed as a kind of compromise, and then delimited through a stricter Christian approach which prevents Christina from returning to John.

For focussing on these *processes of hierarchical differentiation* rather than on the supposedly stable positive identities (Christian, Xhosa) which are thought to underlie and motivate the differentiation, the work of anti-colonial thinker Walter D. Mignolo⁴⁹ is fruitful. This is because he gives the processes of contact and differentiation a certain preference over the presumed

⁴⁹ Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000). Walter D. Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

identities. He directs our attention to the epistemic effects of colonialism, which he views as “its most damaging, most far-reaching and least understood” aspect.⁵⁰ Because of the pernicious and pervasive power of the colonial-Christian hierarchical binary system, and its effects of erasure and distortion, Mignolo wants decolonisation to proceed more cautiously and, on my reading, in effect more slowly, than is advocated by some other anti-colonial theorists such as Glissant and Zea.⁵¹ The call for a slow decolonisation must be understood against the backdrop of the complexity introduced by the way in which the colonial world-sense has dominated the very processes of differentiation between the west and the rest, and the need to avoid a problematic repetition of these differentiations in the legitimate search for what once lay properly outside of the modern system and displayed a genuinely different logic. One might also say that because of how the colonised cultures’ “differences” were framed through western lenses (including epistemic projects such as the missions, the various sciences and colonial governments) and these domesticated and functionalised differences built into the foundations and self-understanding of western modernity, different ways of differentiating have become largely lost (unreadable, and finally untraceable) to the global world and its signifying systems, and decolonising readings must work to unearth traces of alternative differentiations as well as unexpected similarities and overlaps.

For Mignolo, this modern symbolic order has hijacked all the most basic categories of description such as language, religion, space, time, history, and bodily meanings, and we should add sexuality, and used them against the colonised to demean them as lacking in humanity and to justify the ongoing exploitation of their lands, labour and bodies. At the same time, however, as said, it would be a mistake to conceive of western modernity as having arrived fully formed at its encounter with, for example, the amaXhosa. Instead, for Mignolo, as for Pahuja, western “modernity emerged from colonialism, not after it or simply alongside.”⁵² Against this background, Mignolo is wary of an overly quick reconstruction of lost or subjugated knowledges and calls for “a more extensive period of epistemological reflection,”⁵³ lest we repeat and reinforce “the colonial difference,” which may result in both old and new exclusions and new forms of epistemic violence. As explained, and as excavated also in the Balfour cases, the colonial difference is the “evaluative binary structure” that serves empire and “nourishes western modernity”⁵⁴: it comprises of epistemologies that situate the colony at modernity’s (= “the”) periphery, spatially, and in its (= “the”) past, temporally, along the single linear axis of value propagated by modernity.

For an example of how the colonial difference is still active in global media, consider a recent article by Helen Frost⁵⁵, comparing how the international media dealt with the gang rapes-and-murders of Indian national Jyoti Singh, and South African national Anene Booysen on the one hand, and how Booysen’s case was dealt with by the South African media, on the other. Rather predictably, but not less alarmingly, the international media used these cases and some poorly concocted “impromptu” interviews held with a random handful of Indian and South African men, to activate the colonial difference and thereby to recreate and reinforce the superiority of the North over the Global South. She detects a shift in the meaning of the term “rape culture”: with reference to the North, it refers to structural and institutional

⁵⁰ Linda Martín Alcoff, “Mignolo’s Epistemology of Coloniality,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 7/3 (2007): 80.

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 80.

⁵² *Ibid.* 83.

⁵³ *Ibid.* 86.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* 87.

⁵⁵ Helen Frost, “‘There’s Plenty of Rapists Here’: ‘Rape Culture’ and the Representation of Anene Booysen’s Rape in the International and South African Press,” *Cultural Critique* 100 (2018): 176-195.

arrangements that facilitate rape and impunity, while, with reference to the South, it neatly fits into and reactivates all the old-familiar tropes around the unruly sexualities and masculinities of black and brown men populating colonial imaginaries, coupled with “black women’s bodies as sites of unrestrained sexuality.”⁵⁶ Whereas the term “rape culture” in the Northern context highlights structural arrangements that facilitate rape, in the Southern context it criminalises racialised men and locates in them “a disturbing mindset” seemingly flowing from their unmodern and anti-western cultures and the inability or unwillingness of these cultures to inculcate sexual self-discipline. Re-enter the figure of the black or brown man governed by his sexual urges as justification for existing global relations of domination.

Against this construction of difference, which freezes the colony outside of “real” (modern western) history, Mignolo and others propose instead that “colonialism is constitutive of both the base and the superstructure of (European) modernity”⁵⁷ and the latter derives its main form and content precisely from the bordering or differentiation processes associated with “the colonial difference.” Thus, this stabilised difference forms the hidden heart of European modernity. Colonial difference further refers to how western modernity variously attached itself to, by simultaneously detaching itself from, the colonies and colonised others; how it imagined, created and sustained the difference between itself and its others. For example, modern European state formation on this understanding was profoundly shaped by this colonial history and the ways in which the colonising states both engaged and excluded the indigenous populations of the colonies. Broadly speaking, “colonial difference” refers to *attachment* through conquest, subjugation, conversion, control and exploitation, with the simultaneous moment of *detachment* entailing exclusion, exception, and the denial of fully human and citizenship status.⁵⁸

In response to the dilemma created by the colonial difference, Mignolo therefore draws on Moroccan scholar Abdelkebir Khatibi⁵⁹, with his concepts of “double critique” and “une pensée autre,” together with Gloria Anzaldúa’s⁶⁰ work on frontier thinking, to develop his own notion of “border thinking” or “thinking from the border.” It is necessary to think from (within) the border where dynamic and contested processes of differentiating are taking place, as I have positioned my thinking within *The Border* with its multiple frontiers or bordering logics between Xhosaland and the British Empire. This is necessary, because supposedly stable identities such as uncivilised Xhosa sexual customs versus civilised Christian sexual morality / marriage have always been artificially frozen and fixed in response to strategic processes of differentiation. This means crucially, that decolonial thinkers should resist the temptation of searching for a pure and often a-historical outside to colonial logic. It is all too easy to position oneself in an alterity that was itself prepared by colonial differentiation, and which

⁵⁶ Ibid. 181.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 87.

⁵⁸ A concrete example of this notion of colonial difference is demonstrated in great detail by Ann Stoler: in the Dutch East India Company, the ‘sexual’ policy was to employ young unmarried men and encourage them to use indigenous women as concubines during their colonial stay (i.e. ‘attachment’), but then to leave behind those women and children when returning to the Netherlands. These expendable women and children would never qualify for Dutch citizenship (i.e. ‘detachment’), because to give them full Dutch citizenship would blur the distinction (‘colonial difference’) between the exploiters and exploited and undermine the enterprise in financial terms. See Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, [2002] 2010).

⁵⁹ Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Love in Two Languages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983).

⁶⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

is therefore always already based on the entrenched and overarching hierarchical binary of colonial difference. As Alcoff⁶¹ puts it:

If the subaltern simply champions what the west has disparaged, there is a risk that what is being championed is a western construct, represented through the concepts and imaginary of the colonial world. Yet border thinking is a "double critique" that implies an ability "to think from both traditions and, at the same time, from neither of them."⁶²

And Khatibi⁶³ says, "Each society or ensemble of societies is a halt and a crossroads of global structuring," and so, how Britain and the Glasgow Missionary Society came to understand themselves was importantly shaped by the colonial difference at play in, and emerging from, their missionary encounter with the amaXhosa. Through this formative, contested, and pragmatic encounter, both "entities" have been shaped historically, and therefore both are hybrid identities and crossroads of global structuring. Yet, taking up such a position of double critique and border thinking, and resisting the lure of a pure binary and pure outside, should not lead us into despair about the possibility of critique. By scouring historical borderlands it is possible to detect something of the turmoil of dynamic differentiation, the power struggles and contestations, and to glimpse traces of alternative understandings, as for instance represented by the Xhosa elders, by Christina and Jean and Jean's mother, even if they cannot be rendered fully present and full-blown. Not even in what one might imagine as "pristine" Xhosaland untouched by colonial forces would such a pure and full presence have been conceivable. Also there, one would have found hybridity, borderlands and dynamic and contested processes of differentiation, among them of sexual differentiation. But these insights do not mean that we cannot develop a sophisticated, concrete critique of the colonial difference and specific aspects of its heritage. If we attempted to do so "from nowhere," a-historically, it would be futile, but we may do so from within the borderlands. Instead of responding to the epistemicide of colonialism by filling the historical erasures with our unconscious desires and with everything that we think or hope the west is not, we should rather search out "the moments in which the imaginary of the modern world system cracks."⁶⁴

C. Western-Christian metaphysics' mono-logic and the collapse of the ethical

In our search for traces of what was erased and what distorted, we need to understand very well how the process of colonial differentiation has worked, which might also be called an immoral in-difference and, paradoxically, a non-differentiation. Numerous authors both "western" and "non-western" have analysed the particular inability or unwillingness of western metaphysics and philosophy to recognise and engage ethically with their Other/s. Congolese philosopher V.Y. Mudimbe says, "African societies, cultures and peoples [function] as signs of something else"⁶⁵, i.e. their international representation has more to do with the pre-occupations and unconscious drives of the "inventors" than with anything actually happening in Africa. Nigerian-Yoruban anthropologist Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí⁶⁶ makes a similar point

⁶¹ Linda Martín Alcoff, "Mignolo's Epistemology of Coloniality," 93.

⁶² Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 67.

⁶³ Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Love in Two Languages*, 61.

⁶⁴ Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 23.

⁶⁵ V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), ix.

⁶⁶ Oyèwùmí, Oyèrónké, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997).

about the western epistemological “invention of women” in Africa – an untranslatable western gendered subject-notion linked with a systematically degraded and excluded social status for which there was no equivalent in extra-colonial⁶⁷ Africa. And we have seen that Amadiume⁶⁸ argues that Africa’s dual-sex social system was illegible to the Europeans, who could only read African socio-sexual relations through the western mono-sexual, colonial lens and could consequently only find that African women are systematically “degraded” by their own sexual cultures.

Similarly, Levinas, Irigaray and Butler have all also recognised in their different ways that “the central tradition in modern European philosophy has no place for, or interest in, the Other qua Other, that is, as that which resists or refuses the ego’s powers of conceptualisation and thematization.”⁶⁹ This means that western-Christian metaphysics has a thoroughly monological character, and it seems to me important to relate this insight to the colonial difference. Luce Irigaray⁷⁰ finds that at the heart of the west’s inability to relate to otherness, lies an original matricide which has negated and erased sexual difference and the conditions for its acknowledgement. Consequently, what passes for a socio-symbolic ordering of sexual difference in the west, is actually an order of masculine sameness, which views only the masculine form and its idealisations as fully human and which ultimately negates the reality of sexual difference. She calls this a mono-sexual symbolic order, and for her, its mono-sexual arrangement is foundational and subtends all other non-differences, or the characteristic western immoral in-difference.

What thus remains of female (or colonial, or animal) “difference” as legible within the dominant epistemic order, is only whatever could be fully tamed and functionalised in the service of (White, Christian) male domination, even while being framed as the marker of a less than fully human status, (e.g. birth-giving in women). What difference remains legible is thereby distorted, perverted and alienated from those “different” subjects themselves. Those aspects of otherness that cannot be domesticated and made serviceable, are rendered illegible, monstrous, and “wild,” and get abjected by the same order, e.g. female sexual desire and agency, and, we could add, African dual-sex systems, and the function and meaning of something like virginity testing within that world-sense. Similarly, in considering the western abjection of the visibly non-hetero-normative body, Butler says that compulsory heterosexuality contains the hidden threat: “you-will-be-straight-or-you-will-not-be.”⁷¹ And Mbembe says:

... here is a principle of language and classificatory systems in which to *differ* from something or somebody is not simply *not to be like* (in the sense of being non-identical or being-other); it is also *not to be at all* (non-being). More, it is *being nothing* (nothingness)... [T]hese systems of reading the world attempt to exercise an authority of a particular type, assigning Africa to a special unreality...⁷²

⁶⁷ My use of the term ‘extra-colonial’ is motivated by the hopeful claim that not everything that is radically different from western epistemologies has been definitely destroyed during the colonial period.

⁶⁸ Ifi Amadiume, *Re-inventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture* (London & New York: Zed Books 1997).

⁶⁹ See Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 149.

⁷⁰ See Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993), 140, 177.

⁷¹ Judith Butler, *Gender trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 147.

⁷² Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, 4.

Against this background, Mignolo's attempt to simultaneously reveal and displace the logic of the same by which Europeans have represented their others makes a lot of sense. Alcoff fleshes out the implications in what is by now a familiar vocabulary:

Non-Europeans are seen as existing on the same historical trajectory, but further behind; their goals are the same, but not achieved to the same degree; their knowledge is subject to the same justificatory procedures, but it is less well-developed. In this way, true otherness or difference is invisible and unintelligible.⁷³

Thus, Mignolo's concept of "colonial difference" is closely analogous to Irigaray's concept of "sexual difference." Both thinkers identify the need to resist a system of differentiation that poses as natural even as it erases true and radically disruptive otherness (or in Irigaray's terms, "the other of the other"), and demeans, distorts and appropriates those differences amenable to exploitation. As we have seen, the attribution of colonial and sexual "differences" to designated groups is already a form of violence; this process of differentiation is fully in the service of the mono-logical system which erases any truly alternative order of organisation and interpretation. For the recipients of colonial and sexual and colonial-sexual differentiation, the result of this attribution and splitting is typically deeply embedded self-alienation and internalised dehumanisation. Drucilla Cornell calls the colonial encounter (or non-encounter) in the sense described here, a "collapse of the ethical."⁷⁴ The colonial difference is essentially a deeply immoral, destructive in-difference towards the other who is encountered and towards the value and meaning they might possibly bring (in)to the shared world. One example of this collapse we have touched on is the Christian designation of the Xhosa sexual organisation of polygamy as "*adultery*" or lack of sexual organisation. Decolonisation efforts therefore must contend with, confront, expose and displace a dominant order of sameness that hides its strategic non-differentiation beneath a set of naturalised binary and hierarchical oppositions or differentiations. The project to slowly and deliberately start decolonising epistemologies and representations of sexual violence in contemporary South Africa will have to contend with a colonial epistemology in which these two orders of naturalised sameness – the colonial and the sexual difference - are moreover inextricably interwoven, with continuing devastating consequences for black and brown women in this country.

Thus, when we start our slow decolonisation of sexual violence in contemporary South Africa by looking at our colonial and missionary histories, we cannot afford to neglect the system of naturalised sexual differentiation that is tightly interwoven with, and serves to uphold, the system of naturalised racist-colonial differentiation. The colonial hierarchy in which the "differences" ascribed to the colonised can only be read as deviance, lack and backwardness, cannot be separated from the system of sexual differentiation without gross distortion. The colonial assumption that every instance of difference points to backwardness and lack of self-control, and provides further justification for the colonial project itself, meant that they placed African societies within the pre-formed "state of nature,"⁷⁵ and because of the western ideology which naturalises patriarchy, they could not but read African societies as exploitatively and oppressively patriarchal because of their supposed individual as well as social lack of sexual control and organisation. In the name of civilisation, mono-sexual fraternal patriarchy was enforced, and the dual-sex system was erased.

⁷³ Linda Martín Alcoff, "Mignolo's Epistemology of Coloniality", 87.

⁷⁴ Drucilla Cornell, *Moral Images of Freedom: A Future for Critical Theory* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 106.

⁷⁵ See Louise du Toit, "The African Animal Other."

Conclusion: towards decolonising sexual violence

In conclusion, I only have space to point to a few guardrails that should accompany the necessary work of decolonising sexual violence in the South African post-colony, as emerging from the analysis above.

In the first place it seems to me imperative to do the patient work of historical excavation which searches for traces of radical alterity that have been lost within the epistemological devastation brought about by colonisation and especially by the unleashing of the “colonial-sexual difference.” Such slow and patient excavation, in which one is open to being surprised by one’s concrete findings, stands in sharp contrast with those who cling to a-historical, sweeping statements about the supposedly essential differences between African and western value systems and practices. Far too often, as Mignolo cautions, such sweeping differentiations hold in place the original colonial difference and its extensive violences. We should be more sceptical about our suppositions regarding a pure outside to the colonial difference, and carefully discern its traces in what often today poses for “tradition.”

In the second place, as a strategy to avoid the above pitfall, it makes sense to reject the assumption that either African or western value systems have been stable, coherent and insular wholes that may be studied objectively or “from nowhere.” Instead, as decolonising scholars we need to position ourselves within the borderlands and scrutinise the dynamic and highly contested processes of differentiation, distinction and discernment that always underlie assertions about stable and enduring identities. We would do well to heed Mignolo’s suggestion that we focus on the tensions, contradictions, breakdowns and cracks, especially those that accompany the “modern world system.” These indicate that the system does indeed have an outside, but also that its outside is not the same as the outside it has itself created for its own purposes. By this I mean that every system of differentiation and organisation can always be different from what it is, and thus its “real outside” is its radical contingency: the fact that it had a historically particular origin and history and is fraught with contradictions, cracks and ironies and is likely to be eventually destroyed by these, even if the system nevertheless generates enduring legacies with material effects.

We should however not confuse this externality to the system with a supposedly pure outside – the outside superficially created by the system itself – which contains everything the system finds repulsive, monstrous, illegible or threatening. When we find the cracks in the system, we should look for how they challenge the master preferential distinctions of the system and suggest other ways of ordering the world that might be more beneficial. The truly revolutionary potential of this work is thus not that we may resurrect the supposedly fully intact and present-able pre-colonial Xhosa world-sense of the early 19th century, but instead that we will find ways of cracking open the oppressive systems of sexual organisation that we have inherited from our colonial history. For example, the dual-sex system should be scrutinised for how it facilitated women’s solidarity and concrete power to balance out or delimit patriarchal power, thus for non-western forms of anti-patriarchal or feminist resistance that developed locally. We should be more vigilant about our colonial inheritance of a supposedly African (Xhosa, Zulu, Tswana) “difference,” which also serves to strip women once more of political power and create new exclusions and violence actions.

Finally, we need to be simultaneously more modest in our epistemic aims and more radical. We should aim more modestly to confront and transform the excessive rigidity of our current system of sexual organisation as we have inherited it from the colonial past: rigidities that play out in our starkly embedded distinctions between Africa and the west, and man and woman, colony and pre- and post-colony, for example. This is a more modest approach than to pretend that we can return to a pure difference outside of western modernity. We should start by denying the supposed purity and stability of historical and contingent categories, by

investigating in detail how they have been formed and stabilised through processes of hierarchical colonial-sexual differentiation, silencing, erasure and other forms of violence, as we have seen happen to Christina, and to some aspects of the Xhosa elders' concerns. Put in abstract terms, we should linger longer and more attentively in the borderlands, and extend their dynamic and prominence, at the expense of supposedly purified interiorities. We should thus work on the border – that is, consciously and vigilantly investigating how processes of differentiation and bordering constitute identities and how such identities get stabilised in the service of relations of domination - in order to slow down the over-hasty transitions or passages from this to that as if either this or that or both are statically present. At the same time, this approach is more radically transformative, because of its direct and unflinching confrontation with the colonial-sexual difference. Once this edifice starts to be get eroded, the implications for kindling alternative socio-sexual arrangements become far-reaching indeed.

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