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J D. Lyell
Portland State University

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Perversion: A Genealogy of Deviance and Creation of the “Other”

By

J D. Lyell

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Albert R. Spencer

Portland State University

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Introduction and Overview

My initial idea for this project was to investigate a moral history of sex, looking to discussions and definitions of *perversion* from various philosophers throughout history. It was in this research that I grew interested in the beginnings of perversion and how it was initially defined (at least in western culture), which led me to Aquinas and his theory of Natural Law in the thirteenth century. The concept of human nature or naturalness suggests the existence of the unnatural person – this led me to consider the power that rests in assigning values of *naturalness* or *unnaturalness* to behaviors and people, and how different structures of power have utilized this rhetoric to oppress minority groups.

Since I decided to focus on the enforcement of sexuality and gender norms in the Americas, the major structures of power that I will be discussing are settler colonialism and slavery. Both of these structures have worked together for centuries to shape the nation we know today as the United States through atrocious acts of genocide and exploitation. Without the land stolen from under the feet of Indigenous communities and the forced labor of stolen African people, this country would cease to exist in the way it does today. White settlers utilized various methods of *other*-ing to disempower these groups, establishing whiteness as standard, moral, and natural. My main work here is to investigate and analyze examples of these structures being used to enforce norms of sexuality and gender which center whiteness. It should be noted that this paper could be rewritten many times over using a multitude of different examples – the examples I reference are simply the most prominent that came up in my research. There are many cultural groups that have been *other*-ed throughout the development of white supremacist America, but I will be focusing on examples involving Indigenous and Black communities since they are most deeply involved in American structures of settler colonialism and slavery.

The body of my paper is divided into two main sections: “Rationalizing Conquest and Colonization of the ‘New World’” and “The Age of Reason, Scientific Racism, and Early Sexology.” In my first section, I will discuss the roots of Aquinas’ theory of Natural Law and how it was used by Spanish colonizers to claim moral superiority over Indigenous populations in the Americas at the time of conquest. I point to Indigenous family and gender structures that were cast as *deviant* by colonizers for not fitting European cultural standards – the label of deviance was then used as a tool of oppression to rationalize the conquest of Native land and villainize peoples who held onto their traditional ways of life. Coinciding with the long process of settler colonialism, white settlers utilized their stolen land for profit through enslaved labor of kidnapped Africans. I investigate the framing of sexuality of enslaved peoples by white landowners and intellectuals, focusing particularly on the over-sexualization and dehumanization of Black enslaved women as a settler tactic for upholding the structure of slavery. The *other*-ing of non-white bodies and expressions of sexuality and gender point to a white supremacy culture of the West, which centers its white bodies and Christo-heteropatriarchal standards as normal, moral, and natural to maintain dominance over the land, resources, and cultural expectations of the so-called United States.

Stemming from white supremacist notions of the *other* in America, my next section discusses the role of the Enlightenment in establishing Europe as an intellectual authority of the world. The Enlightenment, or Age of Reason ushered a new western fixation on the field of science, framing it as a fail-proof system of finding “truth.” However, many front-running scholars who produced major ideas at the time simultaneously held biases against certain groups, which allowed for racist, sexist, and queerphobic ideas to permeate under the guise of truth. This led to a phenomenon called scientific racism, where white scientists used various methods to

scientifically “prove” the superiority of European (particularly Aryan) blood against other races. I draw from examples in early sexology which used anatomical measurements to label bodies as *normal* or *perverse*, with the bodies of people of color overwhelmingly categorized in the latter.

By tracing western notions of perversion back to Aquinas’ theory of Natural Law, we can see how the idea of *naturalness* (or acting in the order of God) came to intertwine with notions of white supremacy rooted in the conquest of the land and colonization of non-white *others*, particularly Indigenous and Black groups in the United States. In this paper, I connect ideas and events spanning from the thirteenth century to the twentieth century which speak to the colonization of sexuality and gender in America. My conclusion draws from contemporary discussions of *perversion* in western philosophy to argue for the eradication of the term. I also present a brief look into an era of decolonization and resurgence of non-western configurations of gender and sexuality, pointing to new avenues of research on this topic.

Rationalizing Conquest and Colonization of the “New World”

When considering a western genealogy of perversion, its roots can be found in Thomas Aquinas’ concept of Natural Law – this is the foundation of categorizing human acts as *natural* or *unnatural* based on religious morals and ideas of normalcy. Aquinas presented the idea that “all creatures are ordered to an end, have natures whose fulfillment is what it is because of those natures” (McInerney and O’Callaghan). The “natures” he discusses refer to specific ideas about the ways people were expected to act by the order of God – in contrast, the act of breaking these expectations about human nature caused for a new category of the unnatural person (in other words: perverse, deviant, immoral) to emerge.

On the basis of sexual norms in this context, sexuality was constrained. The only moral way to engage in sexual activity was through a goal of reproduction between a male and a female – therefore participation in acts such as casual sex, premarital sex, masturbation, oral sex, queer sex, and other expressions of sexuality widely accepted today would have been deemed deviant, resulting in social and societal consequences for the sexually immoral individual. Through this model of reproduction-focused sexual practice, heteropatriarchal gender norms were able to take root in concepts of human nature. Aquinas’ Natural Law theory backed up heteronormative family structures as godly and natural, automatically denoting deviations from this structure as deeply perverse and shameful. The structures of natural versus unnatural configurations of sexuality and gender, as I will demonstrate in this paper, lay the foundation for various western-created dichotomies used to rationalize the ongoing project of settler colonialism in what we know as the United States. Aquinas’ Natural Law paved the way for identifying and naming *otherness*, which eventually became a distinct weapon of colonization in the European construction of the “New World” and white settler domination for centuries after.

Following the 1492 expedition of Christopher Columbus and his initial invasion of the New World, Spain saw an opportunity to seize power over the land and resources, however, the Native inhabitants of the land posed a threat to Spain’s conquest. Based on reports from Spanish explorers (and later soldiers and missionaries) who interacted with Native communities, the Spanish characterized the Native populations in ways that cast them as deviant and in need of moral intervention from the Church. The Valladolid debate (1550-1551) was the “first serious theoretical attempt by Europeans to understand the diverse native cultures of the New World,” from which emerged a dichotic viewpoint between *civilization* and *barbarism* (Hernandez 96). Hernandez continues, “In the ensuing decades after Valladolid, Europeans, as well as American-

born peoples, tended to see Native American cultures through this polarized framework, considering themselves to be part of the civilized world” (96). It should be noted that neither side of the Valladolid debate was advocating to leave the New World and its peoples alone – rather, the controversy lay in whether the Spaniards should wage war or use peaceful methods to convert Indigenous peoples to Euro-Christian ways of life. The argument supporting evangelization through war was led by Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda, while his counterpart Bortolomé de Las Casas argued for conversion through peaceful persuasion. This debate marks the beginning of a European line of thinking which situates itself as civilized in contrast to cultures of the New World as barbaric, which gave birth to the self-assigned mission of enforcing European culture on tribal communities. This debate also marks the beginning of a colonial pattern of discussing Indigenous nature and fate without any consideration of Indigenous perspective. We start to see a shift from the moral dichotomy of natural/unnatural to civilized/uncivilized, which permeates into European thought for centuries after in the framing of the *other*.

Sepúlveda’s argument supporting a violent approach to colonizing the Americas can be summarized in the following: “First, the Indians were barbarians; second, they committed crimes against natural law; third, the Indians oppressed and killed the innocent among themselves; and fourth, they were infidels who needed to be instructed in the Christian faith” (Hernandez 99). His basic argument for waging war against these peoples lay in the fact that he viewed the Natives as “irrational beings whose inherently inferior condition immediately made them slaves by nature” (Hernandez 98). The specific point that I want to highlight in these arguments is Sepúlveda’s reference to Natural Law – adhering to the idea that naturalness is the order of God and noncompliance to Natural Law is against the order of God, Sepúlveda framed forced evangelical

conquest of the Americas as a moral duty to God and to the Indigenous peoples themselves. Some of the “crimes against nature” that Sepúlveda placed on Native communities included idolatry, sodomy, and cannibalism. The accounts by Spanish explorers of these behaviors were typically taken out of context, dramatized, or fabricated – additionally, these behaviors were connected to the overall image of Natives as a group despite the vast diversity of practices, traditions, and cultures across different tribal nations.

A major marker of deviance through Euro-Christian eyes was the perceived immorality of sexual practices across various Indigenous cultures. Westerners “found the native peoples alarmingly innocent and dangerously sexual” (Bronski 2) for various practices such as wearing little or no clothing, engaging in non-reproductive sexual activity, having extended family structures with multiple spouses, and transcending boundaries of sex and gender. In many Indigenous cultures, certain individuals took on the tribal duties and dress of the opposite sex and often held respected positions in the community. For example, “Among the Crows, men who dressed as women and specialized in women’s work were accepted and sometimes honored; a woman who led men into battle and had four wives was a respected chief” (Bronski 3). These fluid gender identities have been named in many ways, depending on cultural language and context: *nadle* from the Navajos, *winkte* (biological male) or *koskalaka* (biological female) from the Lakotas, or *mexoga* from the Omahas (Rupp 17), just to name a few. Within European contexts, these gender non-conforming individuals were typically referred to as *berdache* (a French word implying ‘young male sodomite’) (Bronski 3) or *joyas / jotos* (Spanish word for third gender / Spanish derogatory word for homosexuals) (Miranda 255). As I will discuss later in this paper, a contemporary resurgence of Indigenous cultural sexuality and gender has ushered the English phrases *Two Spirit* or *Twin Spirit* to refer to these identities.

Early European explorers of the Americas were perplexed at the existence of third-gender individuals in Indigenous tribes. For centuries after, the notes of Spanish priests and soldiers reflected this sentiment and used it to fuel their own agenda of Christianizing the New World. Here is an example of a report from a Spanish soldier's memoir from 1775 California during the construction of missions:

“I have substantial evidence that those Indian men who, both here and further inland, are observed in the dress, clothing, and character of women – there being two or three such in each village – pass as sodomites by profession (it being confirmed that all these Indians are much addicted to this abominable vice) and permit the heathen to practice the execrable, unnatural use of their bodies. They are called *joyas* and held in great esteem. [...] But we place our trust in God and expect that these accursed people will disappear with the growth of the missions. The abominable vice will be eliminated to the extent that the Catholic faith and all the other virtues are firmly implanted there, for the glory of God and the benefit of those poor ignorants” (Miranda 256-257).

A brief analysis of the language used to describe gender-variant Natives and Native people in general exposes disdain held for them in the Euro-Christian eye. Words such as “abominable,” “heathen,” “execrable,” “unnatural,” “accursed,” and “ignorants” demonstrate how Native people and cultures were characterized as deviant by their colonizers and accused of perversity for failing to meet Euro-Christian norms of gender and sexuality. Unfortunately, most of the information that is accessible about traditional Indigenous structures of gender and sexuality comes from reports written by colonizers who were strongly influenced by the Church.

In Deborah Miranda's article “Extermination of the *Joyas*: Gendercide in Spanish California,” we see how European perceptions of sexuality and gender came to be dominant among Native tribes in Spanish California through tactics of violence and fear. One example is the use of large dogs as weapons to kill Natives engaging in what Euro-Christian norms considered perverse sexual activity:

“On September 23, 1513, the explorer Vasco Nunez de Balboa came on about forty indigenous men, all dressed as women, engaged in what he called “preposterous Venus.” He commanded his men to give the men as “prey to his dogges,” and the men were torn apart alive” (Miranda 258).

This example of extreme violence in response to non-conforming sexual behavior sparked fear in Indigenous communities – it prompted the “rounding up” of gender-variant individuals to be turned over to Spaniards in exchange for the survival of the remaining community. Spaniards made it clear that to “tolerate, harbor, or associate with the third gender meant death,” likely at the jaws of war dogs (Miranda 259). In tandem with murder, the gendercide of third-gender people in Spanish California took place through renaming, regendering, and replacement in an attempt to erase the existence and cultural memories of them.

Another example of Native deviance (as framed by Euro-Christian whites) can be seen in traditional family and relationship structures. Indigenous practices of premarital sex and plural marriages were used as examples of immorality, despite the acceptance of such practices within their own cultural communities. As explained in the book *Intimate Matters*,

“In the case of the Plains Indians, for example, whites wrote that polygamy demeaned women. In fact, women in these tribes enjoyed a fairly high status, and polygamy, often the product of unbalanced sex ration after wartime losses, offered women the benefit of sharing domestic work with other wives. Polygamous marriage also lessened the reproductive labors of each wife. (...) Missionaries to various Indian tribes failed to recognize the advantages of this practice and demanded that Indian converts adhere to strict monogamy” (D’Emilio & Freedman 87).

The framing of Native cultures and people as unnatural and immoral by Euro-Christian norms of Natural Law allowed for rationalization of the conquest of the land, resources, and peoples of the Americas. In situating Native populations of the New World as inferior, European colonizers viewed their colonizing efforts as making improvements to societal structures and norms. The

dichotomy of naturalness/unnaturalness was reborn into notions of civilized/uncivilized, paving the way for arguments of western superiority to continue pervading European thought as the culture saw itself as the pinnacle of progress.

Following the immoral framing of Indigenous peoples to acquire land, similar techniques of *other-ing* were applied to African people who were kidnapped and brought to America for labor. When considering the white framing of sexual deviance in the United States, the role of slavery plays a major part in its construction. The enslavement of Africans for labor was a crucial component for the economic growth of America as a settler-colonial society, which was only able to take place on the land after the removal of the original Indigenous inhabitants. Legacies of settler colonialism and slavery are deeply intertwined in American history and are both shaped by notions of white supremacy. One system eradicated populations from the land in order for the settlers to establish the other – a system of stolen labor for white profit.

The roots of slavery in the Americas run deep, with the first kidnapped Africans being brought to Santo Domingo in 1501 and the first enslaved Africans transported to Jamestown, Virginia in 1619 (Sears 39). The institution of slavery existed legally until the ratification of the thirteenth amendment in 1865, but anti-Black racism is still rampant in social, political, medical, and academic spheres to this day. In this section, I will be pointing to the framing of enslaved African people, particularly African women, as over-sexualized and inhuman to serve a larger goal of white dominance and economic growth during the era of slavery in the U.S.

The topic of sexuality and gender roles became relevant in this sphere, as colonizer-slavers defined their own regiment which best supported their economic growth. Under slavery in the U.S., Black bodies were considered property – to the white slave owner, these bodies were

available for exploiting sex as well as labor. Since the impregnation of a Black enslaved female meant another child born into the structure of exploitation that ultimately benefited the slave owner, there was a huge economic advantage to the framing of African women as loose and overly sexual. There were no protections for these women, as “both law and social thought encouraged white men to assume sexual access to female slaves. By legal definition, a slave could not be raped, since she was the property of her master” (D’Emilio & Freedman 101). With no one to hold white slavers accountable for the rape and abuse of the people they enslaved, paired with the economic advantage of impregnating enslaved women, these obscene occurrences were extremely common. The characterization of the promiscuous Black female was constructed to support the structure of slavery in America – however, the image of excessive sexuality remained intact in the white framing of Black sexuality long after slavery was ended in 1865.

Similar to other groups *other*-ed by the West, part of the project of colonizing the sexuality of African people depended on a theme of dehumanization. For example, popular anthropological illustrations depicted “women who shamelessly suckled their offspring in public with breasts so long they could be flung over their shoulders,” which “evoked images of animal teats” (Fischer 10). By drawing connections between African bodies and wild animals, practices of reproduction were seen by slavers as breeding rather than family building. As Kirsten Fischer explains, “represented as both sexual and savage, African women appeared perfectly suited for the productive and reproductive labor of slavery” (10). The framing of African American women in this way benefitted the structure of slavery and cultural/economic domination of western whites. Even after slavery was officially ended in law, ideas of inhuman-ness and excessive sexuality were still deeply tied to the Anglo vision of Blackness as deviance. A new era of

science, reason, and proclaimed “truth” allowed for these views to be integrated into western academia, enabling racist ideas to permeate dominant white western society for centuries after emancipation.

The Age of Reason, Scientific Racism, and Early Sexology

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries hosted a western explosion of intellectual ideas, commonly referred to as the Enlightenment or the Age of Reason. Also known as *modernity*, “the Enlightenment provided the spirit, the impetus, the confidence, and the political and economic structures that facilitated the search for new knowledges” (Smith 117). This period of intellectual development is credited with centering rationalism, scientific thought, and organization of knowledge in a larger project of constructing a new all-knowing western structure of academia. The focus on reason and rationality characterized the production of information at this time to be unbiased, further establishing European intellectual authority over the “truth.” In reality, many Enlightenment thinkers credited with modernist ideas were simultaneously engaged with racist, sexist, and homophobic ideas which inevitably shaped their thinking.

One example of a prominent Enlightenment thinker is Immanuel Kant, known for his writings on autonomy, dignity, and public reason. Less often discussed are Kant’s writings which supported the idea of race as an indicator of one’s rational and intellectual ability, presenting whiteness at the apex. He also believed that women were intellectually inferior to men, referring to them as “second class citizens” or “domestic animals” (Sticker and Bakhurst 8). His stance on sexuality is sympathetic only to married heterosexual couples, casting queer sex, casual sex, and masturbation off as immoral sexual practices. In his writings, it is clear that he viewed women,

people with non-European blood, and queer people as intellectually and morally inferior to the white male thinkers who defined the dominant ideas of the Age of Reason (Sticker and Bakhurst, 2021).

The Age of Enlightenment represented a new era of rationality and reason – however, European thinkers were able to define and create these concepts in a way that still supported their world views and ultimately made themselves the intellectual authorities of the world. In their pursuit of knowledge, the practice of *culture collecting* from Indigenous cultures became a standard practice in the colonizer’s framing of savagery, and played into a narrative of the white savior of knowledge and information. Smith explains, “The idea that collectors were actually rescuing artefacts from decay and destruction, and from indigenous peoples themselves, legitimated practices which also included commercial trade and plain and simple theft” (Smith 122). The artifacts and knowledge that were appropriated from Indigenous cultures were reinvented as new western discoveries, placed behind glass in careful western categorizations of knowledge and renamed as western intellectual property.

By establishing academic authority in a way that privileged the white men who created the ideas, theories of white western intellectual superiority were backed with science to maintain that power. Built on the academic authority given to white thinkers in the Enlightenment and the bulletproof ideas about the “truth” of science, theories such as *Social Darwinism* were able to enter the intellectual sphere and ingrain further ideas of white supremacy into western science and academia.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, built on the foundation of a white supremacist intellectual authority, a new racial science emerged which changed western notions of race and situated whiteness as the most advanced. Referred to as *scientific racism*, this ideology relied on

polygenist notions of race and biological determinism to “prove” inherent differences and establish a hierarchy of races (Jackson and Weidman, 2005). Polygenism assumes that divisions between races are ancient and fixed, while monogenism refers to the idea that all humans come from a single origin. Biological determinism refers to the practice of using anatomical measurements to derive meaning about the individual, rather than social characteristics such as language, behavior, or clothing (Somerville 250).

In the establishment of biological determinism as a method of further attempting to prove white superiority, comparative skull anatomy was prominent. Samuel George Morton used this method to rank races by cranial capacity. His results reflected that Caucasian races had the largest cranial capacity, followed by Mongolians, then Malayans, Native Americans, and lastly Africans and African Americans (Menand, 2002). In his analysis, Morton correlated larger cranial capacity to a higher intellectual ability, following in the predictable pattern of scientific racism which places whiteness at the top of a racial hierarchy.

Following this line of racial “science,” Herbert Spencer, a prominent supporter of polygenism and forerunner in scientific racism, asserted the idea that “evolution was a struggle between races rather than between individuals” (Jackson and Weidman 66). The notion of competition between races echoes an *us versus them* rhetoric, which easily falls down a slippery slope into ideas of eugenics with its implications of “weaker” races facing the possibility of extinction.

The establishment of a hierarchy of intelligence based on race came to be intertwined with Social Darwinism in a way that paved the way for eugenic thought. One influential eugenicist at the time was Francis Galton, who advocated for the sterilization of those with “lower intellectual ability” to breed a society with more “geniuses.” Consistent with his peers at

the time, Galton determined that white European minds were superior to the minds of non-white non-Europeans. He believed that “improving the race meant that the government should encourage breeding among the best people and take steps to keep the superior stocks from mixing with inferiors” (Jackson and Weidman 68). This statement points to sentiments against interracial mixing, encouraging white populations to see themselves as different and superior to other races. It also cast interracial mixing as a new type of perversion, this time directed by science instead of religion to maintain a dichotomy between the civilized and uncivilized.

Following the model of comparative anatomy of cranium size to indicate the intelligence of individuals based on race, early sexologists derived meaning from comparative anatomy of genitalia. According to scholar Siobhan Somerville, “women’s genitalia and reproductive anatomy held a valuable and presumably visual key to ranking bodies according to norms of sexuality” (253). Black female bodies, in particular, were scrutinized by the western racial eye of sexology and directly compared to the centralized “normal” anatomy of white females. By framing Black bodies as *abnormal*, we see a reincarnation of the same western-enforced dichotomy drawn between the moral and immoral or civilized and uncivilized, positioning whiteness as normal/moral/civil above all other races.

An example of a racially motivated sexological study is the 1867 “Account of the Dissection of a Bushwoman,” published by W.H. Flower and James Murie. The scientific exploitation of this unnamed woman and her body had the following results:

“Flower and Murie’s account lingered on two specific sites of difference: the “protuberance of the buttocks, so peculiar to the Bushman race” and “the remarkable development of the labia minora.” (...) The racial difference of the African body, implied Flower and Murie, was located in its literal excess, a specifically sexual excess that placed her body outside the boundaries of “normal” female” (Somerville 252).

Also included in Flower and Murie's account was the reference to the woman's genitalia as "appendages" (252), which not only placed her outside of normalcy but further dehumanized her and other Black women. Unfortunately, Flower and Murie's publication was only one of many which framed Black female genitalia as abnormal and excessive in comparison to white "normal" female bodies, establishing a pattern in western thought about the norms of sex characteristics and sexuality. Many sexological accounts pointed to the "unusually large clitoris" found in the anatomy of African American females as well as lesbians (Somerville 253). One gynecologist established a perceived distinction between "the "free" clitoris of "negresses" and the "imprisonment" of the clitoris of the "Aryan American woman" (Somerville 253), which points again to the constructed notion of Black women as promiscuous and overly sexual while white women are perceived as modest and pure. A connection here can be drawn between racist sexological accounts and racialized conceptions of sexual deviance.

By 1930, some publications were advocating for a new conception of human sexuality, such as Magnus Hirschfeld's *Sexological Visual Atlas*. Hirschfeld's goal in this atlas was to outline universal truths about sexuality from around the world. A closeted gay man himself, "Hirschfeld assumed that the sexological way of dealing with sexuality, which he believed to be scientific and objective, would put an end to prejudiced and moralized understandings of sexual behavior and would thus lead the way to a happier, sexually reformed world" (Egelmeers 30). However, in his attempts to pave the way for this sexual reformation, he utilized imagery and photographs which invited direct comparison between European and non-European cultures. He used colonial structures to privilege white images of sexual variation, playing into the rhetoric of whiteness aligning with normalcy and non-whiteness taking the position of *other*.

Here is an example of the ways in which direct comparisons between cultures were framed: “As the women of color are naked and more objectified, they appear more natural and sexual than the clothed white woman, whose figure is artificially changed to present ‘enlarged buttocks’ -- a matter of culture instead of nature” (Egelmeers 43). It should be noted that Magnus Hirshfeld was reportedly opposed to racism, but inevitably his research was still guided by colonial structures and racist ideas already deeply established at the time. Images of mostly nude African and Indigenous women were placed adjacent to portraits of lavishly dressed white European women, with Hirshfeld’s main argument attempting to highlight the similarities in embellishment to establish universality. However, the direct comparison of these images translated more as an invitation to see non-Europeans as exotified *others*, while images of white people were used as a reference for the standards of civilization and normalcy.

The comparisons drawn between white bodies and bodies of color in early twentieth century sexological reports echo the eugenic centering of whiteness as normal and pure. The perceived abnormal bodies of women of color were often tethered to a perception of promiscuity, which sparked white America’s fear of over-populations of *others*. In a continued effort to maintain power over the land and population, thousands of Black and Indigenous women (and other marginalized groups) were subjected to non-consensual sterilizations at the hands of white-sanctioned medical institutions and lawmakers.

The violent act of sterilizing Black and Indigenous bodies for the “good of society” in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is juxtaposed with the equally violent acts of slave owners raping Black enslaved women and settlers raping Indigenous women. The framing of Black sexuality in particular as loose and excessive served to benefit the structure of slavery by keeping it populated – once this framing no longer served the dominant culture of whiteness in America,

the rhetoric of forced sterilization sought to prevent the Black population, as well as other “undesirables,” from growing. The characterization of sexual deviance, as established by white colonial authority in their ideology of white supremacy, was used to both invite reproduction and deny it depending on how it served the production of white wealth and status. Jane Lawrence discusses the impact of this practice on Indigenous communities:

“Native Americans accused the Indian Health Service of sterilizing at least 25 percent of Native American women who were between the ages of fifteen and forty-four during the 1970s. The allegations included: failure to provide women with necessary information regarding sterilization; use of coercion to get signatures on the consent forms; improper consent forms; and lack of an appropriate waiting period (at least seventy-two hours) between the signing of a consent form and the surgical procedure” (Lawrence 400).

These targeted sterilizations of marginalized women expose the racist and eugenic ideas rooted in the American medical system even in the latter half of the twentieth century. They point to a continued American legacy of dominating the *other* through genocidal means, hidden behind the guise of moral, intellectual, and eventually medical authority to serve a white supremacist agenda. While there are a multitude of factors that led to targeted forced sterilizations, I point to Aquinas’ Theory of Natural Law as a starting point for the practice of labeling groups as *other*, which shaped the initial colonization of the New World and its Native peoples by Europeans. Through a continued Euro-Christian practice of framing and punishing *otherness* over centuries, these ideas came to be ingrained in essential American institutions and social thought. By tracing back this history, we can start to uncover the structures that enforced societal norms of gender and sexuality and understand them as constructions rather than truth.

Conclusion

When considering contemporary discussions of perversion, we can see how the term has been made more ambiguous over the years as our understanding and social acceptance of various sexual practices have shifted. As suggested by Igor Primoratz in his article “Sexual Perversion,” (1995) we should abandon the notion of perversion altogether due to its inconsistency in meaning and application, despite the attempts of many philosophers to accurately define it. In this paper, I am most concerned with traditional accounts of perversion as a category of *unnaturalness*, defined by deviation from western Christo-heteropatriarchal norms of sexuality and gender. I analyzed some of the ways *perversion*, or *otherness* has been enforced over several centuries and used as a weapon in the project of setting sex and gender norms in so-called America.

Most western philosophical articles concerning perversion analyze the individual sense of the term – they attempt to define what perversion is and who it applies to based on individual behaviors. My work with perversion differs by viewing it as a form of oppression of entire groups – in my analysis, the use of perversion to label “others” is controlled by white greed for land, resources, and cultural domination of the New World.

It is difficult to picture what the norms of gender and sexuality in this country would be without the violent enforcement of European heteropatriarchy from the beginning of its making. However, avenues of decolonization and resurgence of traditional identities are currently underway within colonized groups due to centuries of resilience. While many gender-variant peoples from Indigenous communities were eradicated by re-gendering or murder, these traditional identities were not forgotten. Existing for centuries under countless names in different tribal languages, in 1990 the English term *Two Spirit* was adopted at the third annual spiritual gathering of queer Native peoples to indicate a “presence of both a feminine and masculine spirit

in one person” (Balestrery 635). This term now serves as an umbrella term for the cultural/sexual identities of Indigenous peoples who identify outside the constraints of Euro-established heteropatriarchal roles.

In an adjacent avenue of decolonization of sexuality and gender, Indigenous Two Spirit scholar Qwo-Li Driskill employs the term *Sovereign Erotic* to refer to “a return to and/or continuance of the complex realities of gender and sexuality that are ever-present in both the human and more-than-human world, but erased and hidden by colonial cultures” (Driskill 56-57). It is explained,

“To decolonize our sexualities and move towards a Sovereign Erotic, we must unmask the specters of conquistadors, priests, and politicians that have invaded our spirits and psyches, insist they vacate, and begin tending the open wounds colonization leaves on our flesh” (Driskill 54).

Driskill points to the importance of identifying, or “unmasking” structures of colonization as a prerequisite for healing from colonial violences. The unmasking of colonial heteropatriarchal structures could be considered a start to one’s *erotic knowledge*. As Audre Lorde, a Black lesbian thinker and poet, writes: “Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives” (Lorde 51).

The main outcome of my research is the realization that the task of unmasking colonial biases is a process which requires time, commitment, critical thinking, and access to decolonial scholarship. I have just begun my lifelong journey of unmasking notions of white supremacy which are woven into the fabric of our country, through our legal systems, education systems, and other integral institutions. In tandem with identifying sources, events, and effects of colonization, this project has brought my attention to avenues of sexual decolonization within

colonized communities that I plan to engage with as I continue unlearning and learning. Ideas of the Sovereign Erotic and erotic power speak to a reclamation of sexuality by peoples who were forcibly separated from their traditional ways, allowing them to reconnect with their identities outside the confines of Euro-Christian standards.

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