Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule

Ann Laura Stoler
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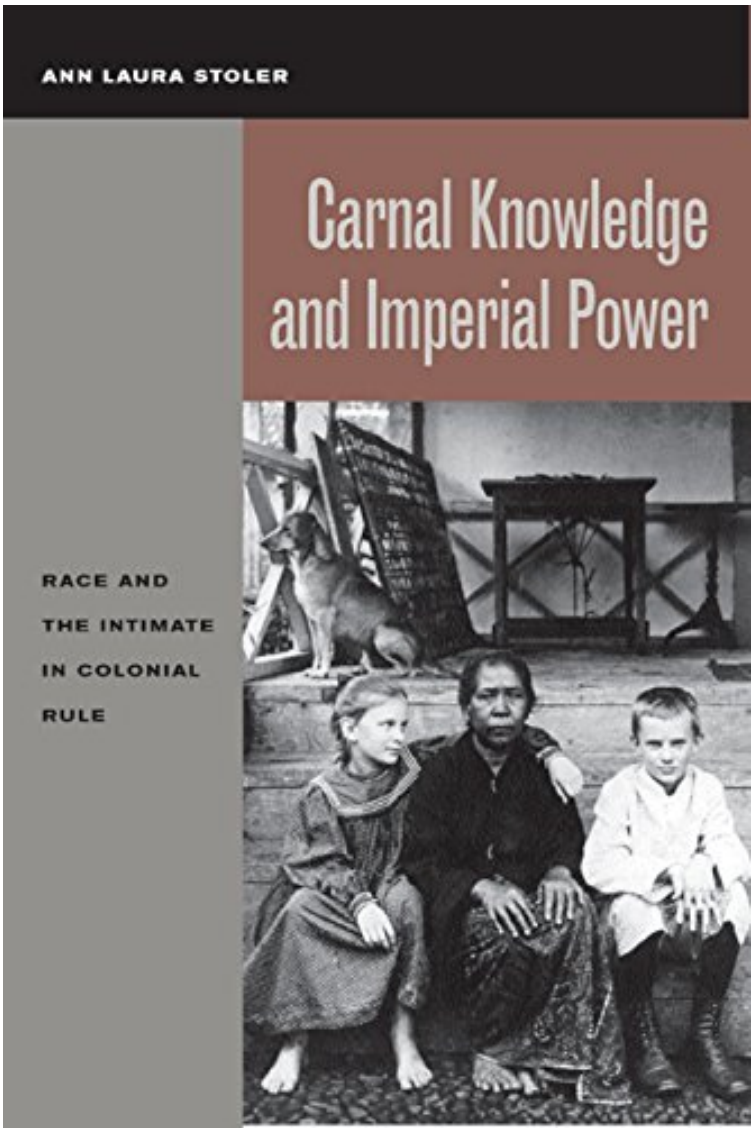

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Ann Laura Stoler : Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule:

11 of 11 people found the following review helpful. Colonizer and Colonized in the Dutch East IndiesBy Frank BellizziIn this highly-acclaimed book, first published in 2002, Ann Stoler identifies and explains what she calls

"connections between the broad-scale dynamics of colonial rule and the intimate sites of implementation." The author, who teaches anthropology and history at The New School for Social Research in Manhattan, points to Jean Taylor's 1983 book, The Social World of Batavia, as one of her primary sources of inspiration. What seems clear, however, is that Stoler has moved beyond the mostly-descriptive approach found in Taylor's work, and has gone on to build a sophisticated interpretive framework for understanding colonial rule.In Chapter 1, Stoler offers a rationale for her approach: it is rooted in her observation that "domains of the intimate figured so prominently in the perceptions and policies of those who ruled." These, she says, "are the locations that allow us to identify what [Michel] Foucault might have called the microphysics of colonial rule. In them I locate the affective grid of colonial politics." Stoler emphasizes that historians of colonialism have typically ignored or completely missed "the intimacies of empire." Her goal is to explore them primarily at a certain place and time in colonial history, "the Netherlands Indies of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century" (7-8). Beginning on page 13, the author describes each successive chapter of her book, adding that the overall structure is both "modular and recursive." That is to say, while each chapter has a stand-alone quality, the book is not a simple conglomeration; later chapters sometimes refer to and connect with ideas presented in previous ones. The chapters appear in their chronological order of composition. But this is not to say that the chapters are "linear," although Stoler regards the sequence as "logical" (20).Chapter 2 begins with Stoler's complaint that conventional histories entirely miss an interesting possibility: colonial experiments impacted colonizers as much as the colonized. By way of correction, she notes that colonial projects typically gave rise to "new constructions of what it meant to be European." And, she adds, while racism "is an inherent product of the colonial encounter," the character and intensity of racism varies widely among different times and locales (24). The emergence of "poor whites" and the arrival of white women in the colony provide plenty of examples. Both categories, says Stoler, "marked and threatened the limits of white prestige and colonial control" (26). By comparing the boisterous Dutch plantation belt in Sumatra with the older, more-settled colonial estates in Java, the author is able to show that the lines dividing the colonizer from the colonized were neither straight nor fixed. Instead, they constantly shifted so as to properly limit "who had access to property and privilege and who did not" (39).In Chapter 3, Stoler explores her idea that "sexual control was more than a convenient metaphor for colonial domination." More to the point, it was "a fundamental class and racial marker implicated in a wider set of relations of power" (45). She points, for example, to a typical arrangement in the colonies according to which a European man would take an Asian concubine. These relationships turned complicated and troublesome whenever European men became emotionally attached to their concubines, and especially when children were born. The ambiguous racial character and social standing of the child created an array of problems. In time, because of such dilemmas, prostitution and marriage replaced concubinage. By way of comparison, Stoler notes that this changeover mirrors the Spanish colonization of Mexico during the sixteenth century. At first, concubinage was condoned. But once offspring began to confuse the distinctions between ruler and ruled, colonial authorities imposed sanctions so that either marriage or prostitution would satisfy the sexual desires of colonial men. That factors other than traditional Christian morality were at work is clearly demonstrated by the fact that concubinage was tolerated and even encouraged at certain times, but discouraged and even condemned at others.Chapter 4 focuses on "the construction of colonial categories and national identities" and on those people "who ambiguously straddled, crossed, and threatened these imperial divides" (79). As an example, the author tells the story of an 1898 court case in Haiphong, French Indochina (modern Vietnam) that involved a mtis young man and his French father. The son was convicted of having committed a violent crime. Before sentencing, the father appealed to the court to be lenient to his son who was, after all, of French descent. In response, the attention of the proceedings turned to a different sort of affront; namely that in the eyes of the court the alleged father had apparently so neglected his son that the young man was illiterate and did not bear the qualities of a French subject. Quotations from the record reveal a court in which prejudice and hypocrisy were the rule. Interestingly, at this exact time, Dutch sentiment concluded that anyone who had been raised and educated in the Indies could not possibly be a bearer of Western culture and civilization. Commenting on the Mixed Marriage Law of 1898, Stoler says, "Nowhere in the Dutch colonial record was the relationship among gender prescription, class membership, and racial category so contentiously debated and so clearly defined" (101). In keeping with the new law, a European or Indo-European woman who dared to marry a native man was said to have "already sunk so deep socially and morally" that her decision did not result in ruin. It merely served to "clarify her situation" (103).According to its subtitle, Chapter 5 takes up the topic of "Children on the Imperial Divide." Stoler observes that European policy makers and those who commented on the colonial experience seem practically paranoid about the upbringing of children. Parental neglect and the dangers associated with delinquents among the colonized are common themes. In response to such fears, Dutch authorities established schools in the colonies, particularly kindergartens, in order to curb what they saw as the decadence of language and morality in European and Indo children. (Of course, colonizers first had to answer the question of the political identity of a child. Would a mixed-blood child be incorporated or excluded?) Turning from school to the home, Stoler notes that, while having servants represented the wealth and prestige of colonial families, the very presence of those servants were a threat to the "Dutchness" of the children growing up in those families.Chapter 6, "A Colonial Reading of Foucault," is the most theoretical section of the book. Throughout this

complicated segment, Stoler writes about a previous book of hers, Race and the Education of Desire, and also about the publications and theories of the highly-influential French philosopher and historian Michel Foucault. Because I have not read any of these works, I found it difficult to follow Stoler's questions and lines of reasoning, in spite of her summaries. What seems clear enough is that, in this chapter, she attempts to resolve her enthusiasm for Foucault's ideas with what seemed to her a critical gap in his writings: "the issue of race" (140). This omission had created a dissonance for Stoler, who was convinced from her research that "the making of race" was a significant factor in the placing of sexuality "at the center of imperial politics" (142). Listening to a series of recorded lectures delivered by Foucault in 1976 was a revelation to her: in fact, Foucault had at least taken up the subject of race in these lectures which were transcribed and published relatively late. Stoler seems relieved and reoriented when she says,No one would argue that the 1976 lectures offer a comprehensive analysis either of racial discourses or of racisms of the state. On the other hand, few others have asked such discomforting questions about modern state formations or explored the reversibilities of racial discourses and the process of reversal. If Foucault pressed on some questions more than others, it is for us twenty years later to take on the ones he could and did not (160).And with that, she states that it is up to the current generation of scholarship "to understand the conditions of possibility that give racial thinking its continuing and refurbished currency." In fact, the attempt to discern "what joins racisms, biopolitics, and modern states" serves to extend the legacy of Foucault, who encouraged "the writing of histories that nourish reversals, recuperations, and insurrections within them." She says that next chapter "is an effort in that direction" (161).Chapter 7, written with Karen Strassler,"attempts an about-face." It turns away from the viewpoint of Dutch colonizers and focuses on "the ways in which Javanese women and men who worked as servants in late colonial Indonesia saw their Dutch employers" (162).Throughout this chapter, the authors struggle with theoretical and practical issues like the historical value of personal interviews and the dynamics of younger, western scholars posing questions to older, Asian former servants. Questions about how to conduct interviews in ways that generate candid, accurate, and relevant responses, how to account for facial gestures and body language, and how to interpret what was said, are just as important to the authors as the transcripts of the interviews. Eventually, they put aside their inhibitions and allow the reader to listen in as it were. When they do, conspicuously absent is the nostalgia commonly reported by the Dutch. Javanese former servants rarely speak of emotional attachment to their colonial overlords or their children. What they do remember is that their jobs working for the Dutch were simply that. This book includes several dozen remarkable photographs, many of which appear in this chapter. One of the more remarkable features of several of the photos is how the Asian servants often seem more like props than people, often unnamed and unacknowledged in the original captions. More than anything else, perhaps, this chapter points to an alternate direction for future research.The book's epilogue is titled, "Caveats on Comfort Zones and Comparative Frames." Here, Stoler takes up a phrase coined by Friedrich Nietzsche and repeated by Foucault. By "comfort zones" Nietzsche meant those familiar areas of research that scholars mark off and within which they conduct their work. I take the expression "comparative frames" to mean the recognition or establishment of categories for the sake of comparison. Along these lines, Stoler reflects on the lack of precision and on the interpretive issues yet to be worked out in the field of colonial studies. Stoler's "Preface to the 2010 Edition" extends that discussion by taking up what she calls "four broad problematics." These have to do with "(1) the analytics of comparison and (2) the treatment of the intimate and what such a focus is expected to yield." Stoler says that both of these "put insistent demands (3) on how we read colonial documents." And each "bears on (4) the relationship between colonial pasts" and "the debris they leave behind" (ix-x).Clearly, among other things, this book represents a tremendous amount scholarly work. In addition to the foregoing report, the book's seventy pages of endnotes, with a bibliography running to some twenty-eight pages, testify to years of careful research. Just a glance at the endnotes reveals the author's knowledge of a wide array of both primary and secondary sources, not to mention her own field work. Further, Stoler does not merely cite sources. She also describes and discusses them. Consequently, a good number of the endnotes read like short bibliographical essays that take up some aspect of the topic.So what is the upshot? What are the outcomes that readers should take away from Stoler's work? First, to use different words in order to repeat the author's most basic point,"[p]rivate sentiments and public policy come together in the colonial . . . because domestic and familial intimacies were critical political sites in themselves where racial affiliations were worked out" (210).Second, historians must recognize, as Albert Memmi insisted, that "colonialism creates both the colonizer and the colonized" (40).Third, although conventional historiography emphasizes the differences between the various colonial experiments, what is striking is that "similar discourses were mapped onto such vastly different social and political landscapes" (80). Stoler indicates that this is the case because, although the particulars are always different, what is always at stake are interests like racial superiority and colonial control.Fourth, probing the intimacies of colonial rule reveals that the historical truth is stranger than the innocent, or not so innocent, "fictions" of traditional historiography.Fifth, colonial categories should not be understood as fixed, because they were "binding but unbound by those within them, were excessively rigid and exceeded their limits, had nuanced criteria for inclusion that were reworked by people who made them and by those who could not contain them" (8-9).My main criticism and reservation about this book relates to its complexity. As critics on all sides point out, or concede, the cultural turn has lead to more-sophisticated readings of sources and, therefore, more-nuanced understandings of the past. This is

commendable. But when reading Stoler's book, I could not help but think that here we have an example of sophistication that's just too much. In my opinion, Stoler could have brought the same very high level of scholarship, and could have provided the same nuanced understandings of the colonial and postcolonial experience, without using such complicated language.0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. This is microhistory at its best, the hidden humanBy Elizabeth MedinaThis is microhistory at its best, the hidden human, political, race dynamics between colonizer and colonized. I have never come across another treatment as yet of this topic from this angle, the photographs are also quite special and the testimonies and the author's reflections on them give me a chance to reflect on a more insightful level than I could before. Sure there are parallels with the narrative of slavery in the United States, but colonization in Southeast Asia has its own fascinating nuances. How do white men control a huge population of brown or black people with a different religion and the inevitable miscegenation. We need to understand the phenomenon of colonialism, this book is academic but it goes beyond mere intellectual exercise, to integrate the experience of both sides.4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. The Biopolitics of EmpireBy Etienne RPAnn Laura Stoler writes about the intimate, but very seldom, if ever, about sex. As a scholar, her main concern is with issues of gender, sexuality, and race in the context of colonial history. But she does not address these issues directly. Instead, she is interested in "the ways in which gender was regulated, sexuality was patrolled, and race was policed" in the Indies under Dutch and French colonial rule. Her exploration of "the education of desire", the subject of a previous book, turns her less into sexual desires per se than to the wider array of sentiments that were woven into the fabric of colonial governance. The "carnal knowledge" of this book's title should not be taken literally as the sexual consumption of the flesh, but rather as the body of knowledge, rules and norms that colonial authorities accumulated over the private lives and sexual mores of their denizens. Inspired in part by the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault, who wrote a book on the history of sexuality without any reference to sex acts, Stoler is interested in "the relationship between colonial technologies of rule and the management of sex."Why this avoidance of sex in favor of the intimate? I can see several reasons for that. The first is a matter of common decency. Focusing on "sex in the tropics", even by inverting the racial prejudices that are abundantly reflected in the literature on the colonies, risks reenacting the inquisitive gaze that was the mark of the "will to knowledge" exerted by colonial administrators. In European literature, the colonies were always a sexually charged site, invested with sexual fantasies that construed the "Orient" or "Asia" as an erotic other. No subject was more frequently invoked to foster the racist stereotypes of European society. Who could be intimate with whom, and in what ways, was a matter of intense concern for the bearers of official authority. Colonial rule intruded into the private lives of European residents and native subjects in a way that was deeply resented, especially by the individuals who were seen as straddling both categories: mestizos, parents of mixed-blood children, and Europeans gone native. It was they, in critiques of such intrusions, who referred to the Indies administrators as an "inquisitorial state".Although Stoler does not put it this way, the proliferation of discourse on sexuality in postcolonial studies somehow reflects the inquisitorial gaze of the state. Postmodern critics track all references to sexual inclinations and erotic longings as proof that power was always about sex, that colonial domination was a sublimated expression of frustrated desires in the West, and that the Orient was the stage where the repressed bourgeois self played its revenge. A hint at homoerotic desire sends them into delirious mode. This is not only a misconstruction of colonial power, which was as much about repression of others than repression of the self, but also a misreading of the theories of Freud and Foucault that are often invoked by these authors as theoretical alibis. As Stoler states, reflecting upon Foucault, "Thinking about `the education of desire' more broadly may help avoid a quandary, that is, reproducing the very terms of high imperial discourse that reduced and read all desires as sexual ones. It offers another option--looking to a wider range of affective dispositions and cultural transgressions that informed what was unspeakable and what had to be said."Stoler constructs her historical account of the colonies against the reification of categories that was so apparent in the handling of sex by colonial authorities. Her goal is to propose working concepts--concepts that work in describing the subtle dynamics of volatile situations, but also concepts that reflect a work in progress, that are subject to revisions and adaptations. As "studies of gender, empire, and colonial sexualities are no longer a cottage industry but a major one", she guards other scholars against the risk of treating analytic notions such as "sexual management" and "bourgeois morality" as dead metaphors, devoid of their original power to question and unsettle. Similarly, Stoler acknowledges that the effort to identify colonies as "laboratories of modernity" may have been applied too mechanistically: "The point here is not simply to turn the tables and thus argue that `modernity' or `capitalism'--fill in the blanks as you will--was invented in the colonies rather than in Europe." Like Marx's turning tables, theory as elaborated by some postcolonial critics acquire a kind of fetish character, and substitutes for the patient archival work that underpins all historical reconstructions.Giving attention to "uncertain racialized regimes of truth" leads the author to construct a different sort of colonial archive. When she researched the French Indochina's archives in Aix-en-Provence, she noticed that dossiers pertaining to prostitution, venereal diseases or other sexual matters were missing. By contrast, she gave her full attention to different kinds of stories: a French father's plea to a Haiphong colonial court that his mixed-blood son was really his son and therefore entitled to the privileges attached to French citizenship; pictures from family albums showing the special efforts to recreate a European environment and isolate children from cultural contagion; case reports from a child relief agency

in the Dutch Indies documenting the condition of abandoned, neglected, homeless, orphaned, abused, and apparently "slow" children; etc. These archives can also be read as "ethnographies of empire that document living arrangements, social acts, and cultural practices that rarely appear in the history of the colonial." They challenge the fixity and immobility of colonial categories, focusing on identities who straddle race and social conventions, and leading to a blurring of division between the public and the private.There may also be a gendered aspect in Stoler's focus on sentiments rather than sex. The objectifying intrusion of the state in the private life of its colonial subjects is akin to what feminist theory has constructed as the male gaze: an asymmetric power relationship that reinforces hegemonic norms and categories. By contrast, the historian proposes a different kind of gaze: taking a position in between, she is attentive to identities in flux, categories in the making, norms that also contain their undoing. She shares the feminist insistence that the personal is political, but her analysis gives credence to a different public domain, less logical and hierarchical, in which power circulates by capillary action through an intricate network of sinews. French philosopher Gilles Deleuze has proposed the metaphor of the rhizome to characterize this mode of organization that runs underground and by which any point can be connected to any other point. A rhizome regime of power is very different from the tree and its roots: it can be broken without any damage to the whole, and indeed seeks fractures and divisions in order to expand and colonize other terrains.Control over sexuality and reproduction was at the core of defining social privilege and its boundaries in the colonies. Racial membership was more determined by how people conducted their private life than by what they did in public. Where they lived, with whom they cohabited, what they ate, how they raised their children, what language they chose to speak to servants and family at home was all within the purview of colonial rule. In turn, European legal standing provided access to education, jobs, privileges, and social services. Knowing one's race and knowing one's place were intrinsically linked. There was therefore a considerable amount of interest put into people and situations that were seen as endangering the racial divide. By exploring the distinction between the ruler and the ruled, Stoler confirms Albert Memmi's insistence that colonialism creates both the colonizer and the colonized.

Why, Ann Laura Stoler asks, was the management of sexual arrangements and affective attachments so critical to the making of colonial categories and to what distinguished ruler from ruled? Contending that social classification is not a benign cultural act but a potent political one, Stoler shows that matters of the intimate were absolutely central to imperial politics. It was, after all, in the intimate sphere of home and servants that European children learned what they were required to learn of place and race. Gender-specific sexual sanctions, too, were squarely at the heart of imperial rule, and European supremacy was asserted in terms of national and racial virility.Stoler looks discerningly at the way cultural competencies and sensibilities entered into the construction of race in the colonial context and proposes that "cultural racism" in fact predates its postmodern discovery. Her acute analysis of colonial Indonesian society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries yields insights that translate to a global, comparative perspective.

"To my knowledge, there simply is no one else writing on questions of colonialism, gender, race, and intimacy who brings this depth and reach of historical and anthropological illumination to bear."-Nancy F. Cott, author of Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation "This new book brings our collective agenda forward with a degree of maturity and flexibility that makes narrow academic preferences both unnecessary and misleading."-Doris Sommer, author of Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the AmericasFrom the Inside Flap"To my knowledge, there simply is no one else writing on questions of colonialism, gender, race, and intimacy who brings this depth and reach of historical and anthropological illumination to bear."Nancy F. Cott, author of Public Vows: A History of Marriage and the Nation"This new book brings our collective agenda forward with a degree of maturity and flexibility that makes narrow academic preferences both unnecessary and misleading."Doris Sommer, author of Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas