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The State of Renaissance Studies II

RETHINKING EARLY MODERN SEXUALITY THROUGH RACE

MARIO DIGANGI

When *English Literary Renaissance* launched in 1971, early modern sexuality studies did not exist. Then again, neither did the feminist, new historicist, post-colonialist, or other “political” approaches that have significantly reshaped early modern literary studies (and the humanities) over the last forty years. Yet whereas feminist and new historicist essays began thickly to populate the pages of Renaissance journals in the early 1980s, studies of sexuality—and of lesbian, gay, or queer sexualities in particular—were slow to arrive. During the 1980s, *ELR* published only a handful of essays that centered on sex or eroticism. The first explicit treatment of homoeroticism in *ELR* appeared in 1992 with Joseph Pequigney’s essay on Shakespeare’s two Antonios, followed by my own essay on non-Shakespearean satiric comedy in 1995.¹

In *Sodomy and Interpretation* (1991), a book that contributed to the first wave of lesbian/gay early modern scholarship, Gregory Bredbeck remarks on the belatedness of sexuality studies by quipping that the analytic triangle of race, class, and gender was never a pink triangle.² Yet Bredbeck’s confidence in the critical predominance of race is odd, since, with few exceptions, race was also marginalized in early modern scholarship of that era.³ Certainly in the studies of sexuality published by Pequigney, Bredbeck, Bruce Smith, Jonathan Goldberg, and Valerie Traub in 1991–1992,

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1. Joseph Pequigney, “The Two Antonios and Same-Sex Love in *Twelfth Night* and *The Merchant of Venice*,” *English Literary Renaissance* 22 (1992), 201–21; Mario DiGangi, “Asses and Wits: The Homoerotics of Mastery in Satiric Comedy,” *English Literary Renaissance* 25 (1995), 179–208.

2. Gregory W. Bredbeck, *Sodomy and Interpretation: Marlowe to Milton* (Ithaca, 1991), 25.

3. One important exception from this period is Ania Loomba’s *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester, 1989), which includes a chapter on “Sexuality and Racial Difference.”

race as a category of analysis was largely absent.⁴ One reason for this absence is that in scholarship of this era, “race” mainly signified the representation of African characters such as Shakespeare’s Othello or Cleopatra; most of the texts analyzed by early sexuality scholars—prominently including Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, *Henry IV*, and *Sonnets*; and Marlowe’s *Edward II* and *Hero and Leander*—did not contain (or were not thought to have contained) black characters.⁵ Thus it is hardly surprising that even as Bredbeck acknowledges the importance of race in literary studies, his analysis of the fluidity of gender and erotic identity in Shakespeare’s *Sonnets* takes no account of the poems’ gendering or eroticization of racial discourses. Another reason for the lack of attention to race had to do with these scholars’ efforts to position early modern lesbian/gay approaches in relationship to early modern feminist scholarship, which had largely focused on gender to the exclusion of sexuality or had addressed sex exclusively in terms of heterosexual desires, acts, and institutions—and which also did not generally address race.⁶

My purpose in citing this history, in Robyn Wiegman’s words, is not to “generate a narrative of progressive critical or theoretical correctness,” but to acknowledge the “discordant temporalities” of academic discourses based in identity knowledges.⁷ These initial studies of sexuality in English Renaissance texts, building on Michel Foucault’s and Alan Bray’s foundational histories of premodern homosexuality and sodomy; feminist, psychoanalytic, and deconstructive readings of gender and sex in Shakespeare;

4. Bruce R. Smith, *Homosexual Desire in Shakespeare’s England: A Cultural Poetics* (Chicago, 1991); Jonathan Goldberg, *Sodometries: Renaissance Texts, Modern Sexualities* (Stanford, 1992); Valerie Traub, *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama* (New York, 1992). In *Sodometries*, Goldberg cites the differences of “class, race, and gender” that inform Europeans’ violent treatment of Native Americans (184). Goldberg’s *Queering the Renaissance* (Durham, 1994), the first anthology to address sexuality in early modern literature, contains no sustained analysis of race, an absence remarked by Margaret Hunt in her Afterword (370).

5. Kim F. Hall’s groundbreaking *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, 1995) expanded early modern racial analysis beyond the explicit presence of black-skinned or African characters (62–122). In his analysis of “miscegenational rape,” Arthur L. Little, Jr., *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice* (Stanford, 2000), shrewdly unpacks the racial ideology of chaste whiteness and “black lust” (5, 46). Although Little’s book doesn’t focus on homoeroticism, it marks an important development in early modern race/sexuality scholarship.

6. A significant breakthrough in this regard was *Women, “Race,” and Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (New York, 1994). Hendricks and Parker continued to produce important work on early modern race, gender, and sexuality.

7. Robyn Wiegman, *Object Lessons* (Durham, 2012), 117, 120–21.

and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's account of anti-homophobic inquiry's complex relationship with feminist studies, faced the signal pressure of articulating for the first time—in part through a divergence from feminist studies of both gender and sex—the historical as well as contemporary importance of sexuality (particularly, homosexuality) as a meaningful category of critical analysis and political experience.⁸ Consequently, they did not recognize race as relevant to the definitional questions foregrounded in the study of premodern sexuality, questions that for many years continued to shape work in the field, including my own: for instance, when (and how) did a “homosexual identity” emerge? Can we speak of premodern homosexuality without anachronism? How did literary, legal, or religious texts register the cultural presence of homosexuality? How can we distinguish among homosocial, homoerotic, and sodomitical relationships? In hindsight, it's easy to see how the framing of these questions simply takes white Englishness for granted.

To put this another way, the influential Foucauldian inquiry into the periodization of “homosexual identity” was really an inquiry into a European historical development that failed to consider how sexual identities in Europe might have been shaped by the sexual practices and identities of various ethnicities and nationalities both within and outside of Europe, through encounters of travel, colonialism, imperialism, slavery, and trade.⁹ Jonathan Burton observes that Foucault's division between a premodern, Eastern *ars erotica*, and a modern, Western, *scientia sexualis* has had the unfortunate effect of separating out the histories of race and sexuality that linked early modern Europe with the rest of the world.¹⁰ Citing an archive

8. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1980); Alan Bray, *Homosexuality in Renaissance England* (London, 1982); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York, 1985).

9. Accounts of sexuality in cross-cultural encounters include Abdulhamit Arvas, *Beautiful Boys of the Renaissance: Travelling Sexualities and Homoerotics of Difference in Anglo-Ottoman Encounters, 1500–1650* (in progress); James Axtell, “The White Indians of Colonial America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 32 (1975), 55–88; Nabil I. Matar, “Sodomy and Conquest,” in *Turks, Moors and Englishmen in the Age of Discovery* (New York, 1999), 109–27; Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Gender and Reproduction in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia, 2004); Carmen Nocentelli, *Empires of Love: Europe, Asia, and the Making of Early Modern Identity* (Philadelphia, 2013); and Valerie Traub, “Sexuality,” in *A Cultural History of Western Empires in the Renaissance*, ed. Ania Loomba (London, 2018).

10. Jonathan Burton, “Western Encounters with Sex and Bodies in Non-European Cultures, 1500–1750,” in *The Routledge History of Sex and the Body, 1500 to the Present*, ed. Sarah Toulalan and Kate Fisher (New York, 2013), 495–510 (496–97). Ania Loomba similarly critiques Foucault and the influence of his paradigm on early modern sexuality studies, “Identities and Bodies in Early

of non-European sexualities—as recorded, for instance, in Leo Africanus’ *History of Africa* or in Spanish accounts of Native American Two-Spirit people—Burton suggests that, “rather than emerging in Europe and only later being exported to the rest of the world, European notions of sexual identity may have also formed through encounters with non-European cultures and then filtered back into the urban centres of Europe.”¹¹

In the ever-growing body of scholarship on early modern race and sexuality, I have been most intrigued by work that uses the conceptual complexities of race to challenge, reframe, or revise the conceptual complexities of sexuality.¹² A passionate advocate for epistemological and methodological transformation in sexuality studies, Roderick Ferguson has called for “multidimensional and intersectional” histories and theories of race, sexuality, class, and gender. In *One-Dimensional Queer*, an account of the US gay liberation movement and its neoliberal aftermath, Ferguson argues that “divorcing queer liberation from political struggles around race, poverty, capitalism, and colonization helped to conceal the historical and political complexity of queer liberation itself.”¹³ Of more immediate relevance for humanities scholars, Ferguson has also advocated the study of race as “an epistemological intervention into the study of sexuality—that is, as something more than a lever for pluralistic and multiculturalist articulations of queer studies.”¹⁴

Theorizing race as an epistemological intervention into sexuality is, to my mind, an attractive and productive agenda for early modern sexuality scholarship.¹⁵ At its most challenging, such work promises to transform the very terms and frameworks of our analyses. I offer the following as models of the kinds of questions some recent scholars in the field have been asking, and that we might continue to explore and refine: How

Modern Studies,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Shakespeare and Embodiment: Gender, Sexuality, and Race*, ed. Valerie Traub (Oxford, 2016), 228–45 (230).

11. Burton, 498.

12. Space limitations prevent me from acknowledging much worthy scholarship, including contributions to the field that haven’t pushed the conceptual borders of race/sexuality as deliberately as I am advocating here.

13. Roderick A. Ferguson, *One-Dimensional Queer* (Cambridge, Eng., 2019), 8.

14. Roderick A. Ferguson, “The Relevance of Race for the Study of Sexuality,” in *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Malden, Mass., 2007), 109–23 (121).

15. Cf. Loomba, “Identities”: “Even as we try and ‘connect’ them, for the most part, we still largely theorize gender and sexuality as categories that are separate from the structures of race or the histories of global contact” (230).

did the ideological and material instantiations of race as embodied difference shape fantasies of romantic male–female desire in an era in which heterosexuality as such did not yet exist? How did awareness of race materialize whiteness out of or through discourses of sexuality? How did racial similarities or differences affect the social and moral valuations of relations of erotic similitude (e.g., friendship, homoeroticism) or difference (e.g., cross-sex or cross-status desire)?¹⁶ How did concepts of race as physical embodiment converge or overlap with concepts of sexual or “sodomitical” embodiment in fashioning English and non-English identities?

I’d like to conclude with some brief accounts of scholarship that I believe has been moving the study of early modern sexuality and race in exciting directions. Although he refers to Foucault’s familiar definition of sodomy as an “utterly confused category,” Ian Smith makes an innovative argument in showing how a “multicultural” figure such as Othello can become the subject of a “traveling narrative of lust, women, sodomy, and bestiality, whose fluid, seemingly borderless categories lead inevitably to an unsavory, unchristian outcome.” In his reading of *Othello*, Smith shows how a paradoxically fluid (in its associations) and fixed (in its outcome) narrative of racialized sodomy functions through Iago’s “prodigious, promiscuous puns”—language that associatively “travels” only to “entrap Othello in its sexual web.”¹⁷ Focusing on Iago’s report of Cassio’s dream-sex with Desdemona via Iago’s body, Smith traces the “fluid, seemingly borderless categories” of an adulterous male–female desire that morphs into male–male kissing and groping, which morphs into the proffered fantasy of Othello “the centaur-figure” replacing Cassio and penetrating Iago in a sodomitical/bestial act.¹⁸ Smith uses this reading to illustrate the theoretical and historical claim that “[s]odomy and blackness intersect and function together as corporal, differential signs to contest the alien presence within Europe.” According to Smith, race requires “an obsessive,

16. See Lara Bovilsky’s compelling reading of *Othello* in *Barbarous Play: Race on the English Renaissance Stage* (Minneapolis, 2008), 37–65.

17. See also Jeffrey Masten’s compelling analysis (in *Queer Philologies: Sex, Language, and Affect in Shakespeare’s Time* [Philadelphia, 2016]) of the overlapping rhetorics of sodomy, bestiality, and race in *Othello*’s language of sexual positionality. Observing that queer philologies “must inevitably engage intersecting philologies of class and race,” Masten argues that the category of race can help us to think more fully through the early modern relation between sodomy and bestiality (220–21).

18. In his analysis of Cassio’s dream, Arthur Little similarly concludes that “the fluidity of Venice fuses cultural/racial and sexual identities into a single horrific scene”; hence, “[b]estiality, homosexuality, and black sexuality (or blackness) are essentially one and the same horrific trope” (85–86).

essentializing investment in an array of body discourses, including sodomy,” which can be understood as “coincident with the discourse of corporeal materialization that has, historically, become a feature of race construction.”¹⁹ In my understanding of Smith, sodomy might thus be considered not only a category of forbidden or “unnatural” sexual acts, but also a “natural” (embodied) feature of certain persons that helps to construct (embodied) racialized identities for non-Europeans and Europeans alike.²⁰ For my purposes, Smith’s approach also has the virtue of revealing how race and sexuality can exert epistemological pressure upon each other as overlapping conceptual categories.²¹

In “The Ethiop’s Ear,” Nicholas Radel takes the presence of a black, gay Mercutio in Baz Luhrmann’s film *Romeo + Juliet* as an occasion for positioning Shakespeare’s play in “an overlapping history of homophobia and racism in the West.” The appearance of a black, gay Mercutio “reveals ways contemporary idealizations of love in the play may always already be silently coded white and normatively heterosexual.” Citing Romeo’s comparison of Juliet to a pearl in an Ethiop’s ear, Radel argues that the “Ethiop is necessary to Romeo to signify the social transgressions of his love for Juliet as being elsewhere, just as the dark signifies what he otherwise does not wish to articulate in his own idealizations of her.” In other words, such light/dark imagery, which inscribes “the Other as a sign of disorder that actually proceeds from within,” reveals “how thoroughly saturated with one another are our categories of race and sexuality.”²² Radel’s reading opens up the unsettling implication that the very concept of idealized romantic love in Shakespeare is grounded in a fantasy of racial pureness that abjects and displaces onto black bodies the “dark” (socially transgressive) sexual desires inherent to heteroerotic desire as embodied difference.²³

19. Ian Smith, “The Queer Moor: Bodies, Borders, and Barbary Inns,” in *A Companion to the Global Renaissance: English Literature and Culture in the Era of Expansion*, ed. Jyostna G. Singh (Malden, MA, 2009), 190–204 (190, 193).

20. Compare Emily C. Bartels, *Speaking of the Moor: From Alcazar to Othello* (Philadelphia, 2008) on the representation of a Moor’s lust “as an innate racial trait, a sign of a deviant identity not just a deviant behavior” (124).

21. Cf. Loomba, “Identities,” who argues that we need to “ponder more deeply the conceptual overlaps between what we understand as race and what we understand as sexuality” (232).

22. Nicholas F. Radel, “The Ethiop’s Ear: Race, Sexuality, and Baz Luhrmann’s *William Shakespeare’s Romeo + Juliet*,” *The Upstart Crow* 28 (2009), 17–34 (28–29).

23. Radel’s observation that in *Romeo and Juliet* the metaphorical darkness of heterosexual desire resides within the families and “social fabric of Verona” (29) chimes with Urvashi Chakravarty’s argument that the presence of black servants as members of early modern English families produced

Whereas Radel pulls from the imagery of *Romeo and Juliet* a kind of racist unconscious for heteroeroticism, Melissa Sanchez, in an essay devoted to exposing the explicit “assertions of racial and ethnic hierarchy” that inform Amelia Lanyer’s *Salve Deus*, demonstrates how the poem both eroticizes and sanctifies the whiteness of virtuous male-male and female-female relationships. Even as the homoeroticism Lanyer associates with the same-sex communities of early Christian male martyrs and contemporary English noblewomen “challenges modern heterosexual and patriarchal norms,” the exclusive whiteness of these virtuous communities renders homoeroticism a force for naturalizing racist hierarchies of value. Lanyer’s racism, in short, cuts against any transgressive or progressive claims we might wish to make for her homoeroticism—or for her position as a woman writer. Moreover, Sanchez observes that in *Salve Deus* the word “sweet” registers both homoeroticism and racism, since it “associates internal virtue with external, racialized forms of beauty.”²⁴ Although she doesn’t cite Masten’s account of “sweet” as a pervasive vehicle of male homoerotic expression in early modern culture,²⁵ Sanchez’s analysis enriches and complicates Masten’s by allowing us to see that the valuation of similitude in homoerotic friendship (e.g., as equivalence of age, status, or temperament) might convey the imperative of racial commensurability as well.

If we have grown collectively weary of the blunt “acts vs. identities” debate that derived from a notorious passage in *The History of Sexuality* contrasting the early modern sodomite with the modern homosexual, these innovative approaches provide alternative ways of apprehending the ideologically complex positionings of sexual agents as well as the racial identities that might attach to their acts, desires, and bodies. They suggest some promising ways forward in rethinking race and sexuality as interanimated concepts, tropes, and forms of embodiment in early modern culture.

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“a mode of proximity predicated on difference” (“More Than Kin, Less Than Kind: Similitude, Strangeness, and Early Modern English Homonationalisms,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67 [2016], 14–29 [22]).

24. Melissa E. Sanchez, “Ain’t I a Ladie? Race, Sexuality, and Early Modern Women Writers,” in *The Routledge Research Companion to Women, Sex, and Gender in the Early British Colonial World*, ed. Kimberly Anne Coles and Eve Keller (New York, 2019), 15–32 (23–24).

25. Masten, 69–82.