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Recommended Citation

Eric B. Song. (2015). "Review Of "Empires Of Love: Europe, Asia, And The Making Of Early Modern Identity" By C. Nocentelli". *Modern Philology*. Volume 112, Issue 3. E220-E223. DOI: 10.1086/678499
<https://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-english-lit/235>

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Carmen Nocentelli, Empires of Love: Europe, Asia, and the Making of Early Modern Identity
Empires of Love: Europe, Asia, and the Making of Early Modern Identity by Carmen Nocentelli

Review by: Eric B. Song

Modern Philology, Vol. 112, No. 3 (February 2015), pp. E220-E223

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/678499>

Accessed: 17/12/2015 12:44

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BOOK REVIEW

Empires of Love: Europe, Asia, and the Making of Early Modern Identity. Carmen Nacentelli. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013. Pp. ix+262.

Empires of Love begins with the story of John Leachland, a factor in the English India Company who fell in love with an Indian woman named Mānyā. The two had a daughter around the year 1625; the couple baptized their daughter as Mary, and despite discouragement from English officials, Leachland stayed with Mānyā. English authorities in India continued to cast aspersions upon Mānyā's character and attempted to take custody of Mary. Eventually, however, the company conceded that Mary had maintained an upright character, and her marriage to William Appleton received more approbation than her parents' interracial union. This multigenerational saga signals in miniature the overarching concerns of Carmen Nacentelli's book: how interracial encounters in the East led Europeans to decry indigenous vices and create ways of regulating racial identities and sexual behaviors. Marriage emerges as the normative model imposed on such erotic encounters. Nacentelli borrows from Valerie Traub's account of domestic heterosexuality in *The Renaissance of Lesbianism in Early Modern England* (Cambridge University Press, 2002) to argue that fully understanding the ascendancy of this form of marriage requires a global outlook.

Nacentelli's introduction describes the critical tendencies that she seeks to redress: "Students of early modern race have rarely problematized the erotic dimensions of racial discourses, whereas students of early modern sexuality have traditionally privileged the experience of the European metropole" (8; she qualifies this claim by references to scholars who have started to trace the connection between race and sexuality in the early modern period). The author proves an adroit guide to such locations as the Philippines, the Moluccas, and Amboina through texts written in Spanish,

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Portuguese, Dutch, and English. Her ability to mine a polyglot archive is matched by the balance of wit and acumen in her own prose. Yet the introductory account of the book's aims leaves largely implied an argument that would unify the larger concepts in play: the disciplining of sexual encounters in Eastern locales, the communication of such experiences through both reportage and more imaginative writings, and the pronounced shift in attitudes concerning sexual behaviors in the East. The introduction effectively establishes the conceptual arc of the book: in the second half of the seventeenth century, Nocentelli explains, "eros and ethnos . . . were parting ways: race no longer served as a measure of sexual orthodoxy" (13). Yet key components of the argument are left to develop across the ensuing chapters.

The first and third chapters trace the ascent of norms designed to regulate erotic encounters. Chapter 1 examines the forms of penis piercings described in texts such as Niccolò de' Conti and Poggio Bracciolini's *India recognita* (1492), João de Barros's *Décadas da Ásia* (1552–1615), Jan Huygen van Linschoten's *Itinerario* (1596), and Thomas Herbert's *A Relation of Some Yeares Travaille* (1634). The fascination in these texts with *palang* piercings in the Philippines and with bell-shaped penile implants in Java, Burma, and Siam manifest the writers' attempts to supplement religious identities with physiological markers of difference. Conti's refusal to experiment with penis bells, for example, draws attention away from his own status as an erstwhile Muslim (and thus circumcised) convert seeking readmission into the Roman Catholic Church. Accounts of penis piercings define European and Christian masculinity against Eastern counterparts. Yet at the same time, Nocentelli argues, these accounts reinforce a normative heterosexuality perceived as universal. Barros and other writers describe how penis bells not only enhance women's pleasure but also prevent sodomy.

Chapter 3 focuses more specifically on Linschoten's *Itinerario*, which documents his forays in the Portuguese Indies. Having since his travels left Catholicism to join the Dutch Reformed Church, Linschoten retrospectively identifies in his account the wayward libidos of indigenous women as a source of the erosion of Portuguese power. Yet the *Itinerario* does not reject "racial mixing as a strategy of colonial rule" but rather "locates in domestic heterosexuality a crucial instrument of social, personal, and economic discipline" (70).

Chapter 2 intervenes with a key component of the book's argument: that attending to erotic encounters in the East refines our approach to the early modern literary imagination. More specifically, Nocentelli argues that critics have downplayed the historical import of the Isle of Love episode in Luís de Camões's *Os Lusíadas* (1572). She cites David Quint (from his *Epic and Empire: Politics and Generic Form from Virgil to Milton* [Princeton University Press, 1993]) as one reader who has taken the erotic nature of this episode

seriously, but she nonetheless decries the tendency to view the nymphs of Camões's isle and the topic of sex more generally as mere tropes. Nocentelli's reading directs our attention to Afonso de Albuquerque's endorsement of interracial reproduction as a way of promoting Roman Catholic interests above Muslim ones. Yet fears of cultural debasement became the grounds of opposition to his plans. Nocentelli is right that such ambivalences matter for our reading of Camões. Yet when she claims that Camões relegates the nymphs of the isle "to the unwritten corners between history and allegory" (62), the description of how poetry registers cultural ambivalences implicitly relies on a well-worn subversion/containment model of historicism. The chapter prepares us for this kind of historicism by describing how Camões might have situated contemporary realities within classical and mythic patterns, especially by way of Ovid. It thus remains unclear how the chapter recalibrates our existing modes of relating the historical to the literary.

Chapter 4 returns to the regulatory function of marriage. Nocentelli argues that the need to regulate sex in Asia accelerated the ascendancy of monogamy over the possibility of Christian polygamy—a possibility that became resurgent after the Reformation. Nocentelli documents how Antonio Pigafetta's account of Ternate and Tidore (ca. 1526) describes concubinage as a cornerstone of indigenous polity. In Bartolomé Leonarado de Argensola's *Conquista de las islas Malucas* (1609)—"a piece of official historiography written by a priest" (107)—the desire to impose Christian monogamy onto native populations underwrites a Habsburg ideology whereby marriage becomes "a synecdoche for political reduction ad unum" (110). Yet Nocentelli provides less direct evidence for the claim that such accounts of the East were not only read with great interest but also helped to shape European, Christian forms of marriage. The overview of theological debates about monogamy versus polygamy remains sealed off from the rest of the chapter; the argument for the fully two-way exchange between colony and metropole must operate in part by implication.

It falls upon the final two chapters to unify the book's conceptual movements. Returning in chapter 5 to the role of imaginative works in mediating interracial encounters abroad, Nocentelli attends first to John Fletcher's *The Island Princess* (composed 1619–21). Fletcher adapts a lurid and murderous story of interracial desire found in Argensola's *Conquista*; the tragicomedy alters this story to conclude with the ostensibly happy union of Quisara, the princess of Tidore, and the Portuguese Armusia. For Nocentelli, Fletcher's revised plot relies on the "analogy between Armusia's courtship and England's interests in Asia" (123). Yet Nocentelli argues against reading the plot as a "mere metaphor" and wants to consider it instead as "a point of imbrication between early modern ideologies of love and empire" (120). In Fletcher's play, Quisara must accept her Portuguese suitor willingly rather than under duress. Female voluntarism is thus called upon to

accommodate the political allegory, but this very fact drives a wedge between vehicle (dramatic love) and tenor (the history of more coercive power relations).

According to Nocentelli's final chapter, the metaphorical link between marriage and imperium breaks down later in the seventeenth century. In *Amboyne; or, The Cruelties of the Dutch to the English Merchants* (1673), John Dryden returns to an Eastern conflagration of Anglo-Dutch tensions that had taken place half a century earlier. The celebration of the English Tower-son's marriage with the native Ysabinda offsets the Dutch Harman Junior's rape of Ysabinda—an act that threatens to darken her morally and even ethnically. For Nocentelli, an allegorical reading of the superiority of English practices proves facile, as the play instead lays bare the flimsiness of contractual connubium as a political metaphor. Attention to Richard Head's prose romances confirms the sense that in the second half of the seventeenth century "intermarriage ceases to function as a means of and metaphor for European conquest" and that "eros and ethnos began to grow apart" (154–55).

Nocentelli's book recounts a fascinating and important story. The strong argument about causation, whereby encounters in the East change the cultural logic of love and marriage in Europe, gives way to a methodological claim for the function of eros in our considerations of history and literary form. Questions about literary mediation develop somewhat unevenly across the book, but the later chapters refocus our understanding of the political, ideological, and imaginative work that contracts perform. Although Nocentelli does not cite Victoria Kahn's influential scholarship on contract as a political and literary form, especially in *Wayward Contracts: The Crisis of Political Obligation in England, 1640–1674* (Princeton University Press, 2004), examining interracial marriage in the East adds a valuable dimension to this knowledge. Nocentelli has assembled an impressive range of texts to describe a historically specific alignment of sex and racial identity that would have momentous consequences.

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