

communities. Its depth and breadth make it a valuable resource for anyone committed to understanding and advancing the possibilities of African feminisms in the contemporary world.

Melaine Ferdinand-King

Department of Africana Studies, Brown University, Providence RI, USA

Email: [melaine\\_ferdinand@brown.edu](mailto:melaine_ferdinand@brown.edu)

doi: [10.1017/S0001972024000706](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000706)

Elizabeth W. Williams, *Primitive Normativity: Race, Sexuality, and Temporality in Colonial Kenya*. Durham NC: Duke University Press (hb US\$102.95 – 978 1 4780 2071 4; pb US \$26.95 – 978 1 4780 2549 8). 2004, 256 pp.

It is a testament to the extent to which histories of colonialism have been shaped by the turn to the intimate that almost all general histories now include at least some discussion of sexuality and gender. Scholars of settler-colonial Africa are now well familiar with the recursive panics around ‘black peril’, the closeness of state surveillance into settlers’ domestic lives, and the constant, fretful attention that was paid to the perceived problems of interracial sex and the decline of poor or ‘degenerate’ colonial Europeans. Amidst this body of work, Elizabeth Williams offers something entirely new. By analysing colonial discourses towards African sexuality in colonial Kenya – framed under the rubric of what she terms ‘primitive normativity’ – Williams reveals the centrality of sex in the making of race. That sounds straightforward; it isn’t. Scholars, Williams suggests, have tended to either assume or overstate the degree to which Africans were perceived as hypersexual. Throughout the colonial period in Kenya, colonial discourses tended towards a very different emphasis. Ideas about African sexuality, Williams argues, ‘were tied to a temporality, to an evolutionary narrative that placed African peoples in a prior moment in time’. African sexuality was ‘normative’ in its temporality – in the extent to which it was deemed consistent with the ‘evolutionary stage of “primitive” people’ – but also because it supposedly lacked all those ‘deviant’ sexual practices (prostitution, rape, homosexuality) that were associated with the disruptive presence of colonial Europeans. Sexual deviance was a ‘product of civilization’; African sexualities were backward *and* normative. That insight enables a profound rethinking of colonial ideologies: to assume a binary logic whereby whites were deemed moral, ‘civilized’ and self-controlled while Africans were condemned as lascivious, predatory and disorderly is far too simplistic. Only by plotting sexuality, race and temporality *together* can we appreciate the instability and complexity of colonial ideologies and the significance of sexuality therein.

Williams develops her argument over the course of five substantive chapters. The first charts the intellectual background to primitive normativity. This is especially valuable and well done: Williams traces shifting currents of thought in anthropology and psychoanalysis through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, then examines how sexuality figures in Jomo Kenyatta’s 1938 ethnography *Facing Mount Kenya*. This is a well-studied text already, but Williams shows – as she does throughout the book – what is hiding in plain sight: the centrality of sex and sexuality to debates

that were not just *about* race and empire but that drew upon – and contested – ideas around intimacy and violence, culture and contamination, patriarchy and the family, and, perhaps above all, the prospects for colonial rule to stabilize or ruin what ‘authentic’ African lives were imagined to comprise. Succeeding chapters focus on the 1908 Silberrad scandal (when a colonial administrator at Nyeri was discovered to be living – and having sex – with a number of Kikuyu and Maasai girls); the 1923 ‘Indian crisis’ (when Kenya’s Indian population resisted their exclusion from political participation and land ownership in the so-called ‘White Highlands’); debates during the interwar years around interracial sex; the romance novels of popular white settler author Nora Strange; and the Mau Mau Emergency during the 1950s. These chapters are each quite distinct – involving different kinds of sources and different approaches to reading them – but together they create something of a chronological narrative, from the onset of white settlement at the turn of the century to the colony’s demise after World War Two. Scholars are familiar already with the fundamental ambivalence of the colonial ‘civilizing mission’: Africans who moved to towns, took on the trappings of ‘European’ culture and developed strategies to survive and prosper outside the control of both colonial and African authorities troubled social boundaries and racial taxonomies in manifold ways. That sexuality was the core element in this construction, however – as with the construction of the degenerate European – has not been fully recognized or understood. For that alone, this book marks a major advance. Just as importantly, Williams shows how colonial attempts to manage African sexuality justified – indeed, propelled – the exploitation of Africans’ labour, the denial of their mobility and the suppression of their resistance.

Those who know colonial Kenya well may spot one or two missteps. Williams claims that the Nora Strange novels have been overlooked by historians but there is no sign of Duder’s 1991 essay on precisely this. More substantively, I am not entirely convinced that queer theory and settler-colonial studies (the two frameworks by which Williams orientates her work) generate quite as much fresh insight as is claimed. The fact that, in Kenya, the settler-colonial demand for land and, crucially, labour clashed with the imperial ideology of trusteeship (Kenya was the only settler colony in Africa that was governed directly from Westminster) has long been understood as the key to explaining why the colony’s politics were so conflicted, and its ideological justifications so contorted. Settler-colonial studies (itself a diverse body of work) isn’t necessary to see that.

But these are minor complaints. This is a book crackling with insight, wide ranging, incisive and beautifully written. For historians of colonial Kenya, this will be an essential addition to their bibliographies and reading lists. More broadly, this is a book that compels anyone interested in race and its relation to the intimate to think again about the making of difference and the reverberations of seemingly disparate bodies of knowledge through ordinary citizens’ and subjects’ lives.

Will Jackson  
 University of Leeds, Leeds, UK  
 Email: [W.Jackson@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:W.Jackson@leeds.ac.uk)  
 doi: [10.1017/S0001972024000718](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000718)