



THE SCANDAL OF THE WHOREARCHY: PROSTITUTION IN COLONIAL NAIROBI

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“North of here, where Islamic conservatism prevails, there is nothing with beer and sex,” writes Jane Perlez, *New York Times* correspondent, from Mombasa, Kenya. With the balance tipped for appalling havoc in the Middle East, the *New York Times* voted Mombasa, Kenya’s lush port in the Indian Ocean, as the “logical spot” for the U.S. Army’s bouts of “rest and recreation,” before returning north to a zone inconsiderately voided by Islam of the usual imperial perks of women and beer.

Perlez portrays Mombasa as a feminized port waiting “with open arms for U.S. sailors.” What type of female “rest and recreation,” one wonders, will be offered to the imperial women in desert khaki who now comprise 11 percent of the U.S. Army? Prostitutes, Perlez tells us, are flocking from as far as Zaire to ply their sexual wares with U.S. sailors, yet the only person she cites to prove this African enthusiasm for a military embrace is the male manager of Kenya Breweries. Ac-

ording to Perlez, however, more and more prostitutes are being rebuffed by American sailors well briefed about the threat African women might pose to the genital hygiene of the imperial army. Perlez does not pause to consider that the prostitutes themselves might be at even greater risk from American troops.

In the current climate of sexual anxiety and the increasingly vigilant, even paranoid policing of sexuality, many governments and medical establishments are calling for the rigorous regulation of sexworkers and mandatory testing for AIDS. Yet as sexworkers themselves tirelessly point out, contrary to the contagion of fear that figures prostitutes as sewers for sexual disease, safer sex has been practiced by sexworkers far more consistently than in the population at large. Prostitutes emphasize that the exchange of cash never transmitted a disease. The U.S. Department of Health, in fact, confirms that prostitutes account for only 3 to 5 percent of all cases of venereal disease, and cases of AIDS

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among sexworkers who are not also IV drug users have remained consistently low.

Exotic ports, pale sands, and dangerously wanton women: as quick as Perlez is to traffic in such colonial coinage, as quickly does Luise White dispel them in her pioneering account of prostitution in

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colonial Nairobi: *The Comforts of Home*. One of the many merits of White's history is her refusal to talk about prostitution in the western idioms of victim and vice, pathology and pollution. Indeed, White recalls, it was Kenyan prostitutes themselves who challenged her to see prostitution as a defiant form of labor. The prostitutes themselves insisted that their work finds its meaning in relation to their families and farms, kin and cattle, their access to housing and property. For these women, prostitution is the best defense against colonialism, against forced marriage, hunger, and destitution. Prostitution is about women accumulating money and property; it is a strategy for survival, a device against oblivion.

Indeed, the imperial paranoia sounded by Perlez is a vestige from late Victorian Britain. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the infamous Contagious Diseases Acts gave British police the right to

forcibly impose physical examinations ("instrumental rape" as outraged women called it) and quarantine on women suspected of working as prostitutes in designated garrison towns in Britain and its colonies. The initial impetus for the Acts came from blows to male national self-esteem in the arena of empire, in resurgent militancy in India, South Africa, Ireland, and elsewhere. The argument ran that the real threat to the potency of the imperial army lay in the sexual bodies of transgressive women. If working women could be cordoned off, the purity of the army and the imperial body politic could be assured. With the Acts, the policing of sexuality became both metaphor and means for policing unruly working-class, feminist, and colonized peoples at large.

At about the same time in Kenya, toward the end of the nineteenth century, prostitution emerged as an identifiable form of women's work. Prostitution was born in the collision of natural catastrophe and empire. Cattle epidemics swept through the country in the last decades of the nineteenth century, followed by locusts, famine, and the failure of rain. Refugees foraging for food spread smallpox: in some areas of central Kenya an estimated 70 percent of the population died. Nairobi, Kenya's capital, was founded in 1899 in the stunned aftermath of these calamities, and the British conquest of Kenya swiftly followed. Settlers set about systematically plundering African lands, stealing vast numbers of cattle, and dragooning the inhabitants into cramped reserves. Since Africans showed no particular enthusiasm for building the

foundations of colonialism, they had to be forced by rifle-butt, starvation, and a punitive system of taxes to grow crops for whites, build their streets, and clean their houses. It was from these disruptions of African agriculture and African resistance to colonial wage labor that prostitution emerged.

The history of prostitution is not a litany of victims

Yet the singular lesson of White's book is that the history of prostitution is not a litany of victims. Rather, White argues, working prostitutes became Kenya's "urban pioneers," among the first residents to live year-round in Nairobi. Contrary to western mythology, these women frequently came not from weak families, but from strong families. Dodging colonial wage labor, many of the women sent money home to bolster rural family fortunes wracked by the upheavals. Others used the cash to buy cattle, to build houses and found the "nearly revolutionary notion" that women can control their own money and property as independent heads of households.

As White's book attests, there is not one privileged narrative of prostitution, nor only one correct politics. For some women, prostitution was casual and intermittent. To the paltry pennies they earned for fieldwork, some women occasionally added the more generous cash they received for "digging with their backs." A simple arithmetic of need drew them into the trade on a temporary basis: "he was

hungry for sex and I was hungry for money." "Scrounging" was a frank refusal of poverty: "we were hungry, we had to go with men to get money or have no money."

Following the terms the prostitutes use, White identifies three forms of professional sexwork that emerged in Nairobi, each taking a different shape from different rural and urban situations. *Watembezi* prostitutes offered brief "short-time" sexual services along the streets, *malaya* prostitutes offered more prolonged, indoor domestic and sexual services, while *wazi-wazi* prostitutes sat in front of their houses raucously and aggressively calling out their prices.

Watembezi prostitution (from the Swahili word *kutemba*, "to walk") is street-walking. Under colonialism, space is criminalized and enters the realm of law. *Watembezi* prostitutes work the urban

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spaces called "public": bars, hotel lobbies, and the streets. Yet contrary to western stigma, streetwalking was by all accounts safer than indoor work; indeed, the greatest peril to most streetwalkers is the police. The *watembezi* women, White points out, had greater control over their customers, put in less labor time for their money, and were certainly not seen as more "de-

based.” Whether a woman works on the streets or from a room speaks not of her self-respect or moral values, but of her access to property and housing. Indeed, one might add, the demonizing of streetwalking reflects deeply felt anxieties about women trespassing the dangerous boundaries between “private” and “public,” visibly and publicly demanding money for sexual services that men expect for free.

Malaya prostitution mimicked marriage, with the radical difference that the women exchanged for money the domestic, emotional, and sexual services most wives perform unpaid. Working in their own rooms, *malaya* prostitutes sold hot baths, food, sex, tea, security, a night’s shelter, and at least the illusion of intimacy. As a man left her room in the morning, the woman would tot up all the costs of the sugar, water, cups, plates, tea, conversation, security, and sex she had provided. Sometimes women were paid only for companionship and conversation. By and large, the women recall, they were treated with deference and respect: “men came to my room with respect.” As White stresses, these women were hardly the passive victims of tabloid lore. Rather, they were actively helping to maintain African communities under conditions of considerable hardship. Fostering values of respectability, tenant responsibility, female and community loyalty, these women struggled to shape the colonial urban scene to meet African women’s needs.

In many respects, White’s work bears out Engel’s dictum that marriage and prostitution “are indeed contradictions, but inseparable contradictions, poles of the

same state of society.” Prostitution in colonial Nairobi cannot be understood outside the founding social practice of cattle marriage. In pre-colonial society, the daughter’s marriage was the source of the father’s accumulation of property and power. Since women did the bulk of the work and were the chief reproducers of life and labor, they were the single most valuable resource, apart from the land itself. Thus when a woman married and left her family homestead, her husband sent cattle

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to her father, compensating him for the loss of her work and future children. With these cattle, the father could acquire another wife to work the fields and bear him children, or barter the cattle for political and military loyalty.

In cattle-marriage societies, livestock are the symbolic coinage of women’s labor power. More wives mean greater wealth and more cattle for men. Women and cows thus generate each other in a cycle of male accumulation and family formation. The wealthiest men own the most cattle and have the most wives. Cattle-marriage is therefore the fundamental institution by which women’s labor power is metamorphosed into male political power. Through male control of female sexuality and marriage, cattle and cash were redistributed through male familial networks.

In these societies, the loss of cattle through ecological disaster and the vicious drubbing of colonial conquest profoundly disrupted the fundamental symbolic exchange of cattle and women. Through prostitution, however, many women provided their fathers with wealth as surely as they would have done had they been married for cattle. Only now, the sale of services was in women's hands, and women began to negotiate, strategize, and above all, buy their own property. If marriage was a source of fathers' accumulation, prostitution became the source of daughters' accumulation.

In *malaya* prostitution, women offered tasks normally available to men only through marriage, but were often paid far in excess of the value these tasks had in a cattle marriage. Paradoxically, it was the *wazi-wazi* prostitutes, aggressive and scandalous, yelling out their wares from window and stoop, fighting men who robbed or abused them, who were in fact the most dutiful of daughters, obediently sending money home to support their families. *Malaya* women, on the other hand, waiting discrete and decorous, peaceful and polite in their rooms, were the ones who flung off family ties, disinherited fathers and brothers, and kept their money and their bodies for themselves.

Many of the *malaya* prostitutes were runaway wives or came to the city to escape forced marriages. The real risks for many women came from marriage, not from prostitution. Now, instead of sending their money back to the male-headed homestead, women bought livestock and houses, became independent heads of

households, initiating and moving a whole cycle of female family formation into the new urban centers. As Kayaya Thababu put it: "At home, what could I do? Grow crops for my husband or my father. In Nairobi I can earn my own money, for myself." Others insisted: "I wanted my money to do me good." By the early

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1930s, half of Pumwani's landlords were women.

Many of the women consciously refused to pass their property back through the male system. Windfalls went into helping women friends, and into creating new, explicitly female lineages. *Malaya* prostitution expressed a clear rejection of traditional male family ties. Women deliberately made sure that their property did not return to the patrilineage by designating female heirs. As the women told White, a prostitute would choose another woman, and tell everyone "this is my heir." Designating female heirs indicated the emergence of powerful gender identification: according to White, no woman she spoke to ever designated male heirs. The women also consciously took control of social opportunities. Many of them deliberately converted to Islam, which allowed them to own and sell their huts. *Watembezi* women shared rooms and work rhythms, paying each others' fines, cooperating to

protect each other and distribute working space. Female friendships, says White, were seen as more important than any number of customers. Not surprisingly, both traditional family members and the state took deep umbrage at such effrontery, and the women had to negotiate constantly to keep their property out of the hands of irate fathers and brothers, and the state.

White emphasizes again and again that prostitution can best be understood in terms of labor and housing, and she has certainly done her empirical homework to shore up her claims. Indeed, though *The Comforts of Home* is written in a lucid, if unexciting, prose, it tilts at times towards a specialized readership. While I am entirely persuaded by White's fundamental arguments, I wished she had spent less time cataloging the minutiae of rent, bean, and cabbage prices, and more time letting

Prostitution represents the erasure of female sexual pleasure in exchange for money

the women's voices echo through her text. I realize that all oral histories are mediated and interrupted forms, but White could have done more to keep alive the recorded conversations with the women. Much of the valuable empirical data on housing that she amasses could have been contained in footnotes. I would gladly have bartered some of her patient chronicles of fluctuations in room rent for an enlivened sense

of the women's social lives, their relations with their children, their friendships, what forms of contraception they used, and their sexual and health needs. In an excellent introduction, White has some important insights into the political dilemmas of oral history-making, yet across the span of the book the voices and memories of the women are muffled to barely a murmur.

Whatever else it is, prostitution represents the erasure of female sexual pleasure in exchange for money. White does not explore the history of the gendered imbalance in sexual pleasure, an imbalance by no means limited to sexwork. I would like to have known, moreover, about male prostitutes, if they existed, as I suspect they did. White is curiously silent about women's sexual needs, and says almost nothing about clitoridectomy. I am aware of the sorry controversies over genital mutilation, and the very real dangers of western women imperiously interfering in issues about which they know little. But to be silent about genital mutilation in a book on sexual services seems an odd omission. If genital mutilation is related to male property transmission and the control of female sexuality within male-managed marriages, prostitution might amount, in part, to a complex renegotiation and refusal of the economic foundations of genital mutilation.

The book is excellent on prostitution's intimate links with the fate of the rural economy, but for readers who are not already experts on East African history, an enlarged sense of Kenyan colonization and African resistance would also have been welcome. Some of the most tantalizing

pages are on prostitutes' relation to the Mau-Mau, yet we are given too cursory a sense of this and other wider aspects of political life of the country.

From what one can make out, however, the colonial state's response to Nairobi prostitution was riven with paradox. On the one hand, prostitution was essential to the smooth running of a migrant labor economy. *Malaya* prostitutes offered domestic services that urban workers could otherwise only receive from wives, and thus saved the state the cost of servicing these men, as well as forestalling the perils of settled African communities taking root in the urban areas. Yet the earnings of prostitution also allowed women and men to elude the depredations of colonial wage labor. Settlers constantly carped at African scoundrels and slothful layabouts who lived off women's earnings and refused to work for whites.

In Kenya, as elsewhere, the state objected less to prostitution itself than to the women's accumulation of money and houses. In a world where colonials sought constantly to control the lives of Africans through housing, marriage, and migrant labor, prostitutes' owning property and passing on the values of community, self-respect, and gender loyalty was a constant affront to the white male management of power.

In this respect, colonial Kenya was not exceptional. In 1855 in New York, the Trinity Street Church vestryman George Strong confided to his diary that "what the Mayor seeks to abolish, is not the terrible vice of prostitution, but the scandal and

offense of the whorearchy." Indeed, states have seldom sought to abolish prostitution, but rather to abolish the scandal and offense of women's control of the sex trade. The scandal of the whorearchy amounts to flagrant female interference in male contests over property and power. Prostitution presents not the scandal of moral degradation, but the scandal of female property ownership and sexual and fiscal control. Not for nothing did the Parisian public health official, Alexandre-Jean-Baptiste Parent-Duchâtelet, call prostitutes "the most dangerous people in society."

That men had access to prostitution did not mean they had control over prostitutes

Certainly, prostitution is a realm of contradiction. Prostitution may very well have confirmed colonial fantasies about white men's privileged access to the bodies of black women, but it also confused racial segregation and the racial and gendered distribution of money: in the bodies of the prostitutes the liquid assets and body fluids of white and black men mixed promiscuously. Prostitutes also obliged white men to pay far better than usual for African women's work, and, at least temporarily, subjected white men to African women's control. The women stress their inventive strategies for negotiating around male violence. The fact that men had access to prostitution did not mean that they had

control over prostitutes. As White points out, it was the women who controlled the prices, the types and times, the length and intensity of the services they preferred to exchange. "Prostitutes in their own rooms exerted immense control over their customers, black and white."

The moment of paying a prostitute is structured around a paradox. The client touches the hand of the prostitute in a fleeting moment of physical intimacy in the exchange of cash, a ritual exchange that confirms and guarantees each time the man's privileged access to women's sexuality, work, and time. At the same time, however, the moment of paying confirms precisely the opposite: the client's need, his dependency on the prostitute's sexual and domestic power. Historically, the law has attempted, usually with great violence and inclemency, to police the contradiction between male dependency on women's sex-

uality and childbearing power and the male juridical definition of women as inherently the property of men. The sex-worker exists at the flashpoint of the gendered division of money, sexual pleasure and labor, at the flashpoint of marriage and the market. For this reason, prostitution has historically been subject to constant and vigilant policing.

Perhaps the greatest virtue of White's book is her attention to nuance and paradox. Refusing to patronize prostitutes as the embodiments of female sexual degradation or to glamorize them unduly as heroines of female revolt, she steadfastly focuses on sexwork as a form of gendered work that takes its meaning from the society as a whole. *The Comforts of Home* might, as a result, serve in no small measure to counter the ignorance and stigma that polices the scandal of the whorearchy.