

The Prostitute's Body in Imperial and Military Contact Zones

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Throughout history, women's bodies have served as potent symbols and boundary markers within the narratives of imperial and colonial power. Among these, the figure of the prostitute emerges as a particularly complex and contested site of meaning. This figure often reveals the self-interest and elite-subaltern divide central to the colonial project, especially in the context of imperial rule and military contact zones from the 18th to the 21st centuries. Prostitution has historically occupied a discursive space where conflicting narratives are continuously produced and contested, mirroring the intricacies of imperial control and individual resistance.

The spatialization of prostitution within colonial contact zones underscores how colonial and military authorities sought to demarcate and regulate sexual behaviors to align with larger ideological and political objectives. The establishment of red-light districts, military brothels, and regulated zones for sex work was not solely about public health or morality but also served as a tool of spatial control to segregate and contain behaviors deemed dangerous or subversive. These zones became focal points where racial, sexual, and class hierarchies were simultaneously enforced and challenged, creating arenas of both conflict and negotiation.

Far more than a simple moment of intimacy or economic exchange, prostitution consistently functioned as a site where fixed ideologies were contested, and fluid dynamics of segregation and interaction emerged. These spaces reflected the politics of both movement and enforced fixity, where issues of morality, race, class, and national identity were actively negotiated. The literature reveals that sex workers' ability to navigate these profoundly unequal settings varied: while some exercised agency and resisted colonial impositions, others were constrained by systemic barriers and exploitative frameworks inherent in the imperial order.

The regulation and construction of prostitution in colonial contexts reflects the intricate sexual politics of empire and the complex negotiations between colonial officials, military personnel, reformers, and sex workers. Notably, a colonial history of prostitution diverges from a global history. While colonial histories emphasize the specific power dynamics, control, and exploitation intrinsic to imperial frameworks, global histories prioritize transnational patterns and broader socio-economic trends. This distinction is crucial as it shapes interpretations of agency, regulation, and systemic inequities experienced by sex workers across varying historical and geographic landscapes.

Prostitution in colonial settings was more than an everyday occurrence; it served a calculated political function, supporting the objectives of imperial governance. Most scholarship has concentrated on regions such as South and Southeast Asia, the Caribbean, and parts of Africa, where colonial and military prostitution were institutionalized as mechanisms of control. These areas are well-documented due to their extensive colonial archives, the scale of military operations, and recorded interactions between authorities and local populations. Conversely, regions with less documentation or looser colonial oversight remain underexplored, leaving significant gaps in historiography.

Colonial authorities leveraged prostitution to manage both the sexuality of their own men and that of the colonized populations. This dual strategy exploited sex workers while positioning them as essential instruments of colonial order. The intersections of racialized and gendered power dynamics inevitably played out on the bodies of prostitutes, rendering them symbols of both imperial expansion and colonial moral degradation. Their presence simultaneously embodied tools for social control and sites of contested meaning within the imperial narrative.

The experiences of sex workers under colonial rule are marked by their interactions with the legal and social frameworks imposed by colonial powers. These interactions varied across time and place, but the colonial authority (with the exception of Korea under Japanese control) is overwhelmingly a European state asserting dominance over indigenous people through the deployment of government officials, military personnel, and reformers who enforced regulatory measures. The sex workers themselves, who navigated and often resisted these oppressive structures, are subalterns: distinct from other oppressed groups, not merely members of the lower social classes, but instead inscribed as the Other.

From the racial hierarchies that positioned white sex workers as superior to their native counterparts, to the legal mechanisms such as the Contagious Diseases Acts, prostitution was deeply embedded in the colonial governance. The Contagious Diseases Acts were a series of three acts enacted in the mid-19th century in Britain and its colonies, with enforcement efforts aimed primarily at colonial territories such as British India, Southeast Asia, and parts of Africa. These acts were designed to control venereal disease among soldiers by regulating and surveilling sex workers through invasive medical examinations and the arrest of those deemed 'common prostitutes,' illustrating the colonial state's exertion of power over marginalized populations. While the bodies of prostitutes were commodified, regulated, and disciplined in ways that reflected broader patterns of control that the colonial state sought to impose upon colonized societies, sex workers were not merely passive subjects. They exhibited agency, engaged in resistance, and navigated the complexities of colonial authority in ways that highlighted their autonomy.

Through attempts at regulation, such as the passage of the Contagious Diseases Acts, colonial authorities often positioned sex workers as symbols of moral degradation. However,

they were simultaneously legitimized as necessary components of society, in cases like the Japanese military-facilitated brothels inherent to the comfort women (ianfu) system, where sexually available women were deemed essential for maintaining social and sexual order among male officials and soldiers. This paradoxical representation showcases one of the primary ideological conflicts inherent in colonialism, as moralizing rhetoric about 'civilization' and 'moral uplift' clash with the pragmatic, often exploitative demands of empire, making prostitution and sex work a kind of “special domain” where the ideals of “civilization” diverged from the lived experiences of both the colonizers and the colonized.

The literature on this topic is organized around three general themes, each of which is present to some degree in each work: militarization, racialized regulation, and the spatial control of sex work. The degree of militarization in colonial sites differs wildly between colonial Mexico during the Spanish colonial period (beginning as early as the 16th century), Puerto Rico under Spanish and American control before, during, and after the Spanish-American War (*Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870–1920* specifically covers 1870–1920), British India during the Raj (1858–1947), Singapore under British colonial rule in the 1930s and 1940s, and South Korea under occupation by Japan (1910–1945) and later by the United States (1945 onward). The degree of militarization significantly shaped how prostitution and contact zones were conceptualized and managed, often resulting in varying approaches depending on the specific colonial context. Studies within this theme highlight the interplay between military needs, colonial policies, and the lived experiences of sex workers. Scholars such as Katharine Moon, an American Political Science and Asian Studies professor, as well as an expert on the U.S.-Korea alliance (beginning in 1953), have pointed out how military contact zones created environments in which sex work was not only facilitated but actively coerced,

making militarization a dominant framework for understanding colonial prostitution. Meanwhile, other writers like Philippa Levine (a British-American professor of History and historian of the British Empire with a focus on gender and race) emphasize how regulation is intertwined with racial ideologies, revealing a disjointed yet systematic effort to control sexuality in ways that reflected broader racial and moral anxieties of the empire. These themes are further complicated by voices from sex-positive scholars and those focusing on agency, such as Nicole von Germeten (Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Oregon State University and historian of crime and sexuality in Latin America), who shed light on the ways in which sex workers actively negotiated these oppressive frameworks. Some of these volumes are particularly insightful in illustrating the nuances of colonial sex work, while others present a more fragmented view. In my opinion, I find that the texts with a closer examination of sex worker agency present the most compelling counter-narratives to traditional colonial histories, especially when they allow the audience to hear from the women in their own voices, like in Katherine Moon's 1997 book *Sex Among Allies: Military Prostitution in U.S.-Korea Relations*. 'Sex Among Allies', emphasizing the resilience and complexity of individuals who were too often reduced to mere instruments of imperial projects. The timing of the release of this book is of particular significance: while a later release could have provided a more Marxist rhetorical landscape more accepting of some of the assertions Moon has regarding feminized labor, the 1997 release date allowed her to have access to first-hand accounts from the women she writes about that were not previously recorded and could, had she not published when she did, have gone to the grave alongside their stories.

In more heavily militarized areas, prostitution was institutionalized as a strategy to maintain military morale and order. Katharine Moon, in her book 'Sex Among Allies', articulates how camp towns around U.S. military bases in South Korea became sites where the boundaries

between coercion and consent were blurred, as women were often forced or economically coerced into sex work to serve the needs of the military, and where women, often labeled by themselves and their communities as "fallen women," were exploited to sustain the American military presence. These zones, subjected to intense regulation and surveillance, transformed women's bodies into instruments for preserving colonial stability and discipline. The women who lived and worked in these camp towns were systematically dehumanized, by both the American and Japanese occupying forces.

The extreme militarization of sexual labor during the Japanese occupation is vividly captured in both Yoshimi Yoshiaki's *Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery in the Japanese Military during World War II* (1995) and Yuki Tanaka's *Japan's Comfort Women: Sexual Slavery and Prostitution during World War II and the US Occupation* (2002). Both works reveal the systematic nature of sexual slavery under the Japanese military, illustrating how the state facilitated the exploitation of women's bodies as resources for imperial aims. However, in a comparative review of both texts, historian Bob Tadashi Wakabayashi critiques their activism-focused approach, suggesting that it risks exacerbating Korean-Japanese tensions and may overlook historical complexities. Despite these criticisms, Yoshiaki and Tanaka emphasize that militarized sexual violence was not isolated but rather indicative of systemic imperial power dynamics, where women's bodies were commodified for military and national objectives. This analysis underscores how colonial and military authorities used sexual exploitation not only for immediate tactical advantage but also as an instrument for broader projects of power, dominance, and racial subjugation. The testimonies of comfort women, as recounted by Yoshimi and Tanaka, serve as a particularly poignant form of resistance. By coming forward to share their stories, these women challenged the Japanese government's attempts to erase or minimize their

experiences, demanding recognition and justice for the atrocities they endured. Their narratives have since become central to the ongoing struggle against the sexual violence perpetrated by militarized colonial regimes.

Further East from South Korea, J Y Chua, in *The Strange Career of Gross Indecency: Race, Sex, and Law in Colonial Singapore* (2020), demonstrates how prostitution and non-normative sexual expression (including same-sex sexual activities) were regulated through colonial legal frameworks to control racial dynamics. In Singapore, laws racialized sexual behavior, criminalizing it based on the ethnicities of the participants. This regulation was not merely about controlling sexuality, but it was also in an effort to manage the demographic composition of the population. Colonial authorities turned Native and Non-European women's bodies into battlegrounds for definitions of morality and racial purity. The colonial legal apparatus sought to impose rigid control over human interactions, reflecting an anxiety to control any behavior that might blur the racial and social distinctions critical to sustaining imperial dominance. The legal regulation of sexuality in colonial contexts was a means of asserting control over both the colonized and the colonizers. At the same time as the activities of female prostitutes were being over-regulated, the legal regulation of sexuality also served to discipline European men, ensuring that their sexual activities did not undermine the authority of the colonial state or lead to alliances that could challenge colonial power.

Further East again, in British India, colonial authorities condemned prostitution as an immoral practice even as they facilitated and institutionalized it to ensure social order and control over soldiers and administrators. Philippa Levine, in her 2003 book *Prostitution, Race, and Politics: Policing Venereal Disease in the British Empire*, explores this duality through the lens of the Contagious Diseases Acts. The contradictions inherent in colonial sexual politics were

not merely rhetorical; they had profound material consequences for the lives of sex workers. The imposition of regulatory frameworks such as the Contagious Diseases Acts subjected women to invasive medical examinations, forced detention, and public stigma. These measures were justified under the guise of protecting public health, yet they disproportionately targeted Indigenous prostitutes, reflecting the racialized logic of colonial governance. While white women were afforded a degree of protection and were often seen as victims in need of rescue, women of color were depicted as vectors of disease and moral corruption.

In Sagaree Jain's 2017 examination of the Contagious Diseases Acts, *The Queen's Daughters: White Prostitutes, British India and the Contagious Diseases Acts*, they underscore how the regulation of prostitution functioned to prop up racial boundaries within the empire. White sex workers were often valorized as "Queen's daughters" and seen as deserving of protection, whereas South Asian women were subjected to harsh regulatory measures. This categorization reveals how prostitution became a tool for upholding racial purity and asserting colonial superiority. The dual regulatory system reinforced the racialized priorities of the colonial state, systematically exploiting the bodies of Indian women while framing white women as bearers of racial and moral superiority, even among 'fallen' women.

Across the world, in the Americas, colonial authorities continued to impose morality upon women and women's bodies. In *Imposing Decency: The Politics of Sexuality and Race in Puerto Rico, 1870–1920* (1999), Eileen Findlay offers another example of these contradictions by examining how colonial elites sought to regulate sexuality in Puerto Rico to enforce racial and class disparities, with prostitution becoming the focal point for efforts to impose certain ideas about respectability on lower-class women. These women, however, frequently resisted these impositions and asserted their autonomy over their sexual practices: the figure of the

prostitute, therefore, became symbolic of broader conflicts over race, class, and gender, ultimately exposing the limitations of colonial authority. Findlay's research shows that attempts by the colonial state to regulate sexual behavior were not always successful and were met with persistent resistance by the individuals they sought to control.

Nicole von Germeten, in *Profit and Passion: Transactional Sex in Colonial Mexico* (2018), discusses individual agency more than institutional regulation. Her research discusses how women in colonial Mexico often leveraged their relationships and social networks to avoid criminalization or gain favorable treatment. Unlike many scholars who primarily highlight the repressive nature of colonial regulation, von Germeten spotlights the agency of sex workers, revealing the diverse strategies they employed to assert control over their own lives. By emphasizing personal narratives, von Germeten complicates the one-dimensional portrayal of sex workers as victims and instead presents them as active agents who navigated, resisted, and sometimes subverted the colonial structures imposed upon them. Many sex workers found ways to navigate these structures to their advantage. They used their relationships with colonial officials, their knowledge of the legal system, and their social networks to resist criminalization and improve their circumstances. This resistance was not always overt or revolutionary, and it often took the form of everyday acts of defiance and negotiation that allowed sex workers to maintain a degree of autonomy within oppressive systems. By highlighting these acts of resistance, von Germeten and other scholars challenge the narrative of sex workers as victims, instead portraying them as individuals with agency who actively shaped their own lives within the constraints of colonial power.

Each of these testimonies highlights how memory and storytelling can serve as powerful tools against historical injustices, challenging both the perpetrators of violence and the broader

social structures that allowed such exploitation to occur. Colonial authorities frequently constructed the very problems they claimed to address, framing prostitution as a moral and social crisis that only they could resolve. This framing re-centered colonial power by legitimizing invasive regulatory measures under the guise of reform and governance. The figure of the prostitute in colonial contexts thus serves as a critical lens through which to explore the complexities and inherent contradictions of imperial rule. Colonial state actors, such as legislators and military officials, implemented policies like the Contagious Diseases Acts to enforce control, while reformers and medical professionals often echoed similar narratives. By blending moralistic rhetoric with pragmatic concerns about public health and order, they all similarly reinforced the colonial agenda, even if their roles appeared distinct. This convergence suggests that their goals were closely aligned as facets of the same overarching colonial project. Prostitution functioned simultaneously as a tool for colonial control and as a site of resistance, where women's bodies became focal points of both authority and defiance. Examining the regulation, representation, and resistance of prostitution within these colonial frameworks reveals that sex workers were not merely passive objects of exploitation but active participants in the historical process, negotiating power in ways that highlighted their agency.

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