Racial Language in Early Sexual Science

As theorist Michel Foucault has noted, 19th-century medical researchers inaugurated a “species” of person called the “homosexual.” This paper examines racial and colonial presences in the narrative construction of that “species.” I closely read initial accounts of the “homosexual” in U.S. medical journal articles from the 1880s. Unlike with the early-19th century interest in the Hottentot Venus, or the focus on Chinese female sexuality that was an impetus for the Page Act of 1875, medical authors on homosexuality appeared to be more interested in uncovering domestic sexual secrets than foreign ones. Medical researchers rarely mentioned race overtly, but their case studies often centered on learned white men. I ask why this was.

The terms “neurasthenia” and “degeneration,” for instance, were often applied to the “homosexuals.” They described physical symptoms of civilizational decline. They were founded in the idea that industrialized modernity’s advances, and the vigorous mental activity upon which they depended, were slowing. “Neurasthenia,” as explained by U.S. neurologist George Beard, referred to the fear that urban whites were losing their energy due to the fast-paced life of cities. Instead, energy was wasted on excessive spendings: pointless homosexual desires, or ejaculatory fluid lost in sodomy or masturbation.

I focus on a few narrative devices used by the researchers: narratives of historical and global ethnographic comparison, which situated their objects of study mostly within Western nations; narratives of reproductive waste; and narratives of complex psychic interiority. I compare them to contemporaneous narratives of reproductively excessive “savages,” of black “rapists,” and of Chinese “prostitutes.”

Biography
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