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DOI

[10.5117/TVGN2019.2.001.COLP](https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGN2019.2.001.COLP)

Publication date

2019

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Colpani, G., & Isenia, W. J. (2019). Editorial: Imperial Entanglements and Archival Desires. *Tijdschrift voor Genderstudies*, 22(2), 113-123.
<https://doi.org/10.5117/TVGN2019.2.001.COLP>

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Editorial: Imperial entanglements and archival desires¹

Gianmaria Colpani and Wigbertson Julian Isenia

TVGEN22 (2): 113–123

DOI: 10.5117/TVGN2019.2.001.COLP

What does it mean to look for queerness in colonial, anticolonial, and postcolonial archives?² What can these archives tell us about formations of queer desire and sexual politics across times and places? And what can queerness tell us, in turn, about colonial domination, struggles for decolonisation, and the configuration of postcolonial societies? Equally important, what investments come to shape our work when a search for queerness orients our mining of colonial, anticolonial, and postcolonial archives? The essays collected in this special issue offer some answers to these questions by discussing the place of sexual politics in the colonial and postcolonial relations between the Netherlands and the Caribbean. In order to do so, they draw on postcolonial studies, cultural studies, feminist and queer theories, as well as current debates on the archive taking place across these fields.

The question of the historical archive has been foundational to postcolonial studies since its inception. In his seminal *Caribbean Discourse* ([1981] 1999), Édouard Glissant started from the observation that the Caribbean is a site marked by rupture and discontinuity, originated from the violent dislocations of colonialism and the slave trade. In his view, Caribbean people cannot readily access a coherent historical consciousness, but only traces: 'Because the collective memory was too often wiped out, the Caribbean writer must "dig deep" into this memory, following the latent signs [traces] that he has picked up in the everyday world' (p. 64). At the same time and on the other side of the postcolonial world, Ranajit Guha and his colleagues in the Subaltern Studies Group set out to reconstruct a history of colonialism and anticolonial struggle in India that would make room for subaltern resistance made invisible by existing historical records. This demanded that the authority of both the colonial archive *and* the archive produced

by Indian bourgeois nationalism be displaced through a practice of history from below (Guha, 1983). Finally, in his *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Edward W. Said proposed to read the European 'cultural archive' in relation to the project of colonial expansion and the forms of resistance against it. Said famously deployed a musical metaphor to qualify his reading practice:

As we look back at the cultural archive, we begin to reread it not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts. (p. 51)

In different ways, Glissant, Guha, and Said insisted that archives are not transparent sites for the extraction of knowledge, but opaque power formations that require critical reading practices.

As is well known, the opacity of the archive was brought to its extreme consequences by Gayatri C. Spivak, who argued in 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988) that the voice of the subaltern woman could not be retrieved from the historical record. Falling into the cracks produced by the interplays between colonial domination, patriarchy, imperial feminism, and cultural relativism, the subaltern woman cannot speak, for her subjectivity is prevented from taking shape precisely by the cultural and political transformations invoked *in her name*. In her classic essay, Spivak formulated this argument by looking at the archival evidence of the process that led to the abolition of *sati* in colonial India, which she regards as a process that failed to touch the subject formation of the women themselves. Spivak argued that this gap between legal transformation and subject formation – which one can identify only by attending to the silences in the archive – continues to manifest itself today as the trace of colonial violence (and of the failures of decolonisation) in postcolonial times.

The encounter between postcolonial theory and feminist theory has generated, from the 1980s to the present, some of the most original and critical approaches to the archives of colonialism and anticolonial movements. Instead, a sustained encounter between queer theory and postcolonial studies, as well as black studies and theories of diaspora, has taken place only more recently (e.g. Arondekar, 2009; Boone, 2014; Ferguson, 2004; Gopinath, 2005; Hoad, 2007; Massad, 2007). This has coincided with an increasing interest in archival matters, which some scholars have not hesitated to term an 'archival turn' in queer theory. The overlap of the two theoretical moments is not coincidental. In fact, as many argue, contemporary queer engagements with the archive are *mediated* by the encounter between queer

and postcolonial theories (see Marshall, Murphy, & Tortorici, 2015). Thus, the 'archival turn' in queer theory has been emerging hand-in-hand with critical accounts of how queer desires and sexual politics are shaped by histories of colonialism, slavery, racialisation, and diaspora.

In her pioneering *An Archive of Feelings* (2003), for example, Ann Cvetkovich significantly expands our very notion of the archive beyond the written historical record to include forms of embodied memory. While the book is primarily devoted to tracking the formation of lesbian public cultures, two of its key historical anchor points are the AIDS crisis and, significantly, the history of racialisation in the United States. The very notion of 'lesbian culture', which works as the organising principle of the archive of feelings assembled by Cvetkovich, is fundamentally fragmented and partly displaced by intersections of class and race (p. 11). More recently, Gloria Wekker has reworked the notion of the archive in *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (2016), in which she offers a postcolonial and intersectional analysis of the construction of Dutch whiteness. Wekker adopts a queer 'scavenger methodology' (Halberstam, 1998) that grants her access to an expanded version of what Said had termed 'cultural archive'. The Dutch cultural archive assembled by Wekker includes popular culture, historical records, interviews, as well as her own daily encounters with gendered and sexualised racism. Finally, in *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (2009), Anjali Arondekar draws on the legacy of the Subaltern Studies Group – especially Spivak's warning against any residue of empiricism in postcolonial historiography – in order to engage 'sexuality's recursive traces in the colonial archive against and through our very desire for access' (p. 1). Thus, Arondekar interrogates not only the relation between sexuality and the colonial archive, but also the investments and fantasies that animate such a queer postcolonial research project. Taken together, these three interventions (amongst many others) testify to the expansive nature of current debates on the archive at the intersection of feminist and queer theories, postcolonial studies, and cultural studies.

The essays in this special issue engage with these debates with a particular focus on the colonial and postcolonial relations between the Netherlands and the Caribbean. In so doing, they also contribute to the scholarship on gender and sexuality in the Caribbean and, at the same time, to an emerging conversation on queer of colour and queer diasporic formations in the Dutch and European contexts. We already noted that, unlike the earlier encounter between feminist and postcolonial theory, the one between queer and postcolonial theory has been substantially developing only through the past 20 years. The same can be said about the study

of gender and sexuality in Caribbean societies. With the exception of few pioneering works on sexuality in the 1990s (Alexander, 1994; Wekker, 1992), sexuality (unlike gender) fully entered the scope of Caribbean studies only in the 2000s (Kempadoo, 2003, 2009). According to Wekker, a possible explanation for this delay is to be found in the fear of reproducing the historical association between blackness – especially black women – and sexual excess (Wekker & Gosine, 2009, p. 2). Jenny Sharpe and Samantha Pinto (2006, p. 247) agree and add that the silence on sexuality in the Caribbean is also an effect of the Victorian attitude and respectability culture that European colonialism brought to the region. By now, a rich body of critical scholarship is available on sex work, sex tourism, HIV/AIDS, queer sexualities, as well as sexual formations that cannot be fully subsumed under a Western sexual epistemology.³ However, only a minor portion of this work pays attention to the specificities of the Dutch Caribbean, both historically and in the present.⁴

The long-lasting silence on gender and sexuality in Caribbean scholarship has been paralleled, on the other side of the Atlantic, by the difficult emergence of work on queer of colour and queer diasporic formations in Europe. With the partial exception of early analyses produced in the British context (see Mercer, 1994), a broader European debate on the postcolonial intersections of sexuality and race – especially diasporic blackness – was opened up by the publication of Fatima El-Tayeb's *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe* (2011). El-Tayeb's work has the merit not only of historicising a number of queer of colour organising efforts across the continent (including the Netherlands), but also of interrogating what shape might be taken *in Europe* by queer of colour and queer diasporic critique as a theoretical project. The debate is now on-going and is producing a quickly expanding field.⁵ Importantly, its stakes cannot be reduced to a politics of diversity on European soil. Mining the archives of European sexual politics from queer of colour, diasporic, and postcolonial vantage points demands a reconceptualisation of the very boundaries of Europeanness. How was European sexual politics affected by colonial expansion, decolonisation, and postcolonial migrations to the former metropolis? Hence, what counts as *European* sexual politics?

The relation between the Netherlands and the Caribbean proves to be an excellent site to pose these questions. It is perhaps no coincidence that Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley (2008) begins her discussion of the queer black Atlantic with a reference to *mati* work amongst Afro-Surinamese women (see Wekker, 2006). For Tinsley, the queer black Atlantic defies all illusions of transparency as it can be accessed only through 'imaginative archives'.

This radical epistemological starting point is due to her particular focus on the ocean and the ship as sites for the emergence of queer racialised formations:

The ocean obscures all origins, and neither ship nor Atlantic can be a place of origin. Not of blackness, though perhaps Africans first became *negros* and *negers* during involuntary sea transport; not of queerness, though perhaps some Africans were first intimate with same-sex shipmates then. (p. 192)

While the essays collected in this special issue also presuppose that the archive is not a transparent site for knowledge retrieval, they do work with what Cvetkovich (2003) has termed ‘actually existing’ archives. Thus, they contribute to delineate a queer black Atlantic space by locating the formation of queer desire and sexual politics between the Netherlands and the Caribbean as variously recorded by colonial, anticolonial, and postcolonial archives.

In the opening article, ‘Looking for *Kambrada*: Sexuality and Social Anxieties in the Dutch Colonial Archive, 1882–1923’, Wigbertson Julian Isenia follows the traces of female same-sex desire in the colonial archive. At the same time, he interrogates from a queer postcolonial perspective the very desire to locate queer desire in the archive. Isenia focuses on the first three (known) sources that mention the phenomenon of *kambrada* in Curaçao, that is, a specific form of relationship amongst women comparable to other forms to be found across the Caribbean, such as *mati* and *zami* (Tinsley, 2010; Wekker, 2006). Even if the sources discussed by Isenia belong to different genres (an anthropological study, a travelogue, and a novel), were written at different moments in the history of colonial Curaçao, and were meant to address different audiences, they are brought together as cultural articulations of sexuality. For Isenia, this cultural archive (Wekker, 2016) grants us no straightforward access to the voices and experiences of the women who engaged in *kambrada* relationships. Yet, as cultural articulations, the texts he analyses shed light on the role played by sexuality in the articulation of broader social anxieties concerning the stratifications of class, race, and gender in colonial society.

The article by Chelsea Schields, ‘Eros Against Empire: Visions of Erotic Freedom in Archives of Decolonisation’, shifts the attention from the colonial archive to archives of anticolonial movements. Schields discusses the interventions of *Kambio* and *Vító* – groups that emerged from the radical student movements of the 1960s – as well as *Union di Muhé Antiano*

(Union of Antillean Women, UMA), an anticolonial feminist group active on Curaçao between the 1970s and the 1990s. Engaging with their archives, Schields makes two interrelated arguments. On the one hand, she highlights how these groups located struggles for sexual freedom and erotic autonomy at the core of their anticolonial visions. On the other hand, she asks why historians have not paid attention to these legacies so far, assuming the absence of movements for decolonisation in the Dutch Antilles. She proposes that these rich archives have remained undetected by the historiographical gaze because the history of decolonisation has been approached with a normative focus on national independence and territorial sovereignty. But, the archives of *Kambio*, *Vitó*, and *Union di Muhé Antiano* suggest that we may have to unsettle and broaden our very notion of decolonisation in order to appreciate the radical legacy of anticolonialism in the Dutch Caribbean.

The historical journey continues in the roundtable conversation 'Archiving Queer of Colour Politics in the Netherlands', compiled by Gianmaria Colpani, Wigbertson Julian Isenia, and Naomie Pieter. In the wake of postcolonial migration from the Caribbean, South Africa, and Indonesia, and so-called labour migration from other non-Western countries through the 1960s and 1970s, the 1980s witnessed an explosion of feminist and queer of colour organising in the Netherlands. Importantly, these groups did not simply leave archives behind but turned the practice of archiving into one of their main interventions. The roundtable gathers four activists and cultural workers active in the Dutch context – Tieneken Sumter, Anne Krul, Andre Reeder, and Marlon Reina – as well as Ajamu, the British activist and artist who, in 2009, curated the first exhibition on queer of colour life and politics in the Netherlands, *We Are Here*, at IHLIA. The five participants in the roundtable discuss the history of groups such as SUHO (Surinamese Homosexuals), Sister Outsider, Flamboyant, Zami, and Strange Fruit, as well as the promises and pitfalls of archiving in the Dutch context.

As this roundtable conversation shows, queer of colour activists share with artists a long trajectory of joint critical engagement with the archive. Indeed, archives of colonialism and anticolonial resistance offer invaluable material to artists who work through postcolonial configurations of sexuality, race, gender, time, and space. Inez Blanca van der Scheer introduces an example of such work in her visual essay on Curaçaoan-born artist Nash Caldera. Caldera uses elements from Afro-Caribbean syncretic religions in her performances. It is believed that syncretic religious processions were not openly practised on Curaçao, because of the fact that the enslaved were

not allowed to congregate and due to the so-called 'civilising work' of the Roman Catholic Church (Allen, 2007, p. 242). Yet, precisely because of this context, syncretism and creolisation have been forms of (cultural) survival in the Caribbean. Caribbean artists such as Caldera, who use syncretic religious elements in their practice, can be said to appropriate these rituals and cultural forms to create works that point 'to folklore without being folkloric' (Fusco, 2015, p. 44). Moreover, Van der Scheer argues that, through bodily performances, Caldera's work shows the inextricability of spirituality, heritage, language, gender, and queerness.

Finally, the volume also contains an article by Nella van den Brandt, titled 'Religion, Gender, Race, and Conversion: *Soumission* by Michel Houellebecq and *Onderworpen* by Johan Simons and Chokri Ben Chikha'. Although this article does not form part of the special issue, some of its concerns overlap with our discussion of colonial and postcolonial sexual politics. Indeed, Van den Brandt departs from an analysis of Michel Houellebecq's controversial novel *Soumission* and the Flemish theatre adaptation *Onderworpen* in order to interrogate the intersections between gender, migration, and racialisation in European postcolonial societies, with a particular focus on current debates and representations of Islam and secular modernity. The author argues that both the novel and the play generate or reinforce amongst their audiences fears and anxieties vis-à-vis Islam as a threat to Western European culture. While the theatre adaptation could provide an opportunity for a critical reinterpretation of the original narrative, Van den Brandt's analysis shows how this adaptation reiterates representations of Islam as antithetical to secularism and gender equality. Moreover, the structural gender inequalities inherent in Western and secular modernity remain invisible and unchallenged.

* * *

Taken together, the contributions collected in this special issue testify to the increasing engagement with archival matters across queer postcolonial theories, politics, and artistic practices. In fact, the special issue was conceived of in dialogue with several projects emerging in the Netherlands at the moment, such as the collective Black Queer & Trans Resistance NL. The latter, in which Wigbertson Julian Isenia and Naomie Pieter are involved, organised a public panel on the history of Dutch queer of colour activism at the Amsterdam Museum on August 2, 2018, which was the starting point for the roundtable conversation published here. Yet, reflecting on the relations between theoretical, artistic, and political practices, Tavia Nyong'o warns:

I sense that praxis, or struggle, and poetics, or making/production, remain in tension within queer circles today. Praxis-oriented activists are not in automatic congruence with poetics-driven artists. To the contrary, their happy meeting often seems like an ephemeral miracle. I don't believe in their conciliation, personally... (Nyong'o in Marshall, Murphy, & Tortorici, 2015, p. 225)

Hence, he continues:

The drive to merge queer activism, theory, and artistic production, I would go so far as to argue, is part of the flattening out of counterpublics we can associate with communicative capitalism and neoliberalism. José Esteban Muñoz's recent theorizing of the incommensurable is equally pertinent here. [...] The incommensurable points to the spaces between us, across which we touch and are touched. It sounds a little poetic, but that is my preferred image for how queer activism and art can encounter each other without becoming each other. (Nyong'o in Marshall, Murphy & Tortorici, 2015, p. 226)

Following Nyong'o's insight, we did not collect the essays in this special issue under the assumption that these theoretical contributions shall simply mirror the heterogeneous field of queer of colour activist and artistic practices engaging with archival matters today. For example, a postcolonial insistence on the opacity of the archive and the impossibility of full access and recovery may tend to clash with activist efforts to locate one's past as an intervention in the present. The two practices need not invalidate nor become each other. Yet, it is by interrupting and questioning each other that they might help push a collective conversation forward.

Notes

1. This special issue emerged from a panel we organised at the Council for European Studies (CES) conference in Chicago, United States, in 2018. In that panel, we addressed the historical links between race, sexual politics, and (post)colonialism, focusing on the relations between European countries and their (former) colonies. The panel included papers on the Dutch and French contexts. For this special issue, we decided to restrict the focus to the Netherlands and the Dutch Caribbean. More specifically, we address the relations between the Netherlands, Suriname, and Curaçao. More work should be done on the other islands that form part of the current Kingdom of the Netherlands (Aruba, Bonaire, Saba, Sint Eustatius, and Sint Maarten).
2. With the term 'queer' we refer to sexual and gendered identities, experiences, and practices that do not conform to heteronormative and/or homonormative ideas of gender and sexuality. At the same time, this special issue is located within the field of queer of

colour and queer postcolonial theories, whose focus on colonialism, enslavement, neo-colonialism, and racism troubles our very ideas of queerness and sexual cultures. This need not imply a dismissal of queerness as category of analysis and object of inquiry. A troubling impulse, in fact, is what characterises queer theory from its inception.

3. See for example Alexander, 2005; Cabezas & Alcázar Campos, 2016; Glave, 2008; Kempadoo, 2004; King, 2014; Lewis, 2003; Murray, 2009; Nixon, 2015; Padilla, 2007; Puar, 2002; Smith, 2011; Tinsley, 2010.
4. See for example Allen, 2017, 2018; Clemencia, 1996; Martis, 1999; Schields, 2018; Wekker, 2006.
5. See for example Bacchetta, El-Tayeb, & Haritaworn, 2015; Dahl, 2017; Ellis, 2015; Haritaworn, 2015.

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