

THE MIRROR OF THE BLACK BODY: COLONIAL DESIRES AND CIVILIZING MISSIONS

Luís CORDEIRO-RODRIGUES*

- **ABSTRACT:** Richard Burton's *The Lake Regions of Central Africa (1860), Volume I* has been studied as an example of British Imperial values regarding the settling in Africa in the late nineteenth century. Broadly speaking, most works have focused on how the text expresses these ideas and very little work has been carried out on researching the meanings of the imagery used in the text. In this short piece, I look at how the original frontispiece of *The Lake Regions of Central Africa (1860), Volume I* is revealing of colonial desires and civilizing missions. Particularly, I argue that the image reveals a projection of white through the expression of sexual desires towards the black body, settling fantasies and civilizing mission goals.
- **KEYWORDS:** Psychoanalysis of colonialism. Black body. White fantasies. Settler colonialism. Richard Burton. Civilizing mission.

Introduction

The economy of British Empire entered in a decline towards the end of the nineteenth Century. The profits in the Caribbean have substantially diminished and there was not sufficient money and resources to manage mainland Britain (DAVIS, 2009; JACKSON, 2013). This impact on mainland forced governmental discourse to adapt to the new socio-economic reality. Now the governmental discourse needed to give an incentive for people in Britain to explore the world, as in mainland the hopes for a good life were less as a result of the declining economy. In fact, this change of discourse is even noticeable in the proliferation of stories about explorers at the time. Routinely, many stories praised how young men ought to be adventurous and explore the world. This proliferation is not accidental; rather it is a consequence of precisely Imperial goals of giving incentives for people going abroad (BUTTS, 1992; DAWSON, 1994; DUNAE, 1980).

* Hunan University. Yuelu Academy - Department of Philosophy. Changsha – China - lccmr1984@gmail.com - The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. This research has been funded by Hunan University's Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities, fund number 531118010426. 本文受湖南大学“中央高校基本科研业务费”专项资金资助 (531118010426).

Artigo recebido em 22/11/2020 e aprovado em 15/04/2021.

Nevertheless, the British and, in fact, the Europeans in general, had very little knowledge of the interior of Africa. Most of their trade has been done on the coast and, particularly, the West Coast of Africa, for Chattel Slavery. It was then necessary to explore more the interior of Africa to know it (BIRMINGHAM, 2016; CHABAL; BIRMINGHAM; FORREST, 2002). Royal scientific organizations gained a very important role during this time. Many of these organizations were an instrument for this imperial goal. They could provide the knowledge to explore these places for colonial settle to take place. Hence a number of expeditions were organized for these imperial purposes (BETHENCOURT, 2015).

One of these expeditions was the famous one of Richard Burton and John Speke, commission by the Royal Geographical Society in 1856 to search for the sources of the Nile (NEWMAN, 2010). Together, they discovered the Lake Tanganyika in February 1858. There was a dispute between them and Burton as a defence of his views and himself wrote *The Lake Regions of Central Africa (1860), Volume I*, where he describes this expedition (BURTON, 1860).

This manuscript plays an important part in natural history. It is an expression of how discourses on natural history at the time were closely intertwined with Imperial goals. In fact, various studies on Imperial natural history and, in fact, on Burton, have suggested precisely how this is an expression of Empire thinking (CHEW, 2019). Nevertheless, even though much has been written about Burton's text, very little has been said about the imagery used and how this also expresses these colonial goals. In this short note, I wish to address precisely this by interpreting how the original frontispiece of *The Lake Regions of Central Africa (1860), Volume I* is an expression of this colonial ideology.

Figure 1: The Ivory Porter



Source: Burton (1860).

My goal here is to understand how much this image can tell about Imperial desires and goals. More precisely, I wish to explore how much is revealed in the symbolic

imagery, taking into consideration Burton's identity as a white Victorian male. I argue that there are indeed elements of white Victorian masculinity that are symbolically expressed in this image. I contend that the representation of the black body and the surrounding environment perform symbolic functions that aim at reinforcing white Victorian masculinity in a context of incentivizing settle colonialism. More specifically, the frontispiece reveals prohibited sexual fantasies, colonial desires of settlement and civilizing mission goals. I argue this by combining an analysis inspired in psychoanalysis with historical contextualization of the *The Lake Regions of Central Africa (1860), Volume I*.

I divide this short note into two sections. In the first section, I explore how the black body in the frontispiece is simultaneously depicted as a site of moral and civilization inferiority and a representation of white desires. In the second section, I turn to exploring the possible meanings that the surrounding environment represent. Hence, I contend that the symbolism in both the black body and the surrounding environment are suggestive and try to be justificatory of a desire for whites to come and fulfil their desires and civilizing goals in the African continent. Together, these two sections forward the argument that the frontispiece is an instance of colonial desires and goals present in the white imaginary.

Some methodological points are important to clarify. Firstly, it starts with the assumption that humans do represent symbolically their unconscious desires into forms of art, actions and so forth. Hence, there is an assumption of a symbolic world that is expressed unconsciously (FREUD, 2002, 2005). Secondly, it is assumed that much of this symbolic world is inextricably connected with sexual meanings underlying it (FREUD, 2002, 2005; KILOMBA, 2018). Thirdly, there is the assumption that colonialism is not just material, but it also has a psychological dimension (MANNONI, 1990; MEMMI, 2016; FANON, 2012; KILOMBA, 2018; NANDY, 2009). Finally, the choice of the frontispiece is for two order of reasons. Firstly, the frontispiece is the first image that the reader has contact with. Therefore, it is the most significant advertising image of the book. Secondly, the frontispiece has, as the article will show a significant amount of symbolism that can be decoded.

The Representation of the Black Man

There various ways that the projection of colonial desires and the project of a civilizing mission can be found in the representation of the black man in the frontispiece. Firstly, the phrenological-inspired representation of the head of the black man also suggests a belief in black inferiority. Phrenologists argued that the differences sizes of white and black skulls were proof of distinctive psychological attributes of races and, particularly elucidative of the inferiority of black people. In the above image, the shape of the skull of the black man displays this belief to the extent that it exaggerates the size of the lips, and it gives an unusual curvy shape at the top and back of the head. This latter point is particularly revealing, as phrenologists affirmed the back of the skull was what revealed black people's tendency for submission (BETHENCOURT, 2015). This

perceived inferiority provides the conceptual framework to justify an Imperial civilizing mission.

Secondly, the fact that the black man is represented as wearing very few clothes suggests a belief in black inferiority (HOOKS, 1987; MBEMBE, 2019; MBEMBE; DUBOIS, 2017). The idea of black inferiority, in turn, validates the Imperial goal of settling in Africa to civilize black people. In other words, the representation of the black man with very few clothes is not just a mere anthropological description of local costumes by Burton. Rather, the representation is a way to symbolize the inferiority of black people and this inferiority justifies in the Imperial imaginary the colonial settling.

Since the Middle Ages to at least the beginning of the twentieth century, gradually equated being civilized with the restriction and hiding of emotions and the body. In general terms, it could be stated that the European tendency has been to understand that the public hiding and restriction of emotions and the body as a sign of civilization and, not doing these, as a sign of its opposite (ELIAS, 2000, 1988; FREDRICKSON, 2003). This was certainly the case during some discourses Victorian England, especially elite ones where Burton is included. Elite sexuality in Victorian England perceived masculinity as restriction and self-control (SWEET, 2002; BRODY, 1998; HYAM, 1991). Thus, given the time that Burton is writing, the display of the body performs the symbolic function of his belief in the lack of civilization of black people. Moreover, note that as Sander Gilman has pointed out, that when bodies are represented this is not only about the bodies themselves; bodies are routinely understood as a mirror to the psyche in the West. To take Gilman's examples, imaginary features of the Jewish body, such as the curvy nose and the defective foot, have been routinely associated in Western imagination with Jewish inferiority (GILMAN, 1992).

In addition, the nakedness of the black body is also a way to project the Imperial desire to go to Africa. As mentioned, during the Victorian period that Burton wrote, sexuality was, broadly speaking, substantially repressed and controlled. Although there was a repressed and controlled sexuality, a variety of forms of sexual desire cease to exist; rather, the repression only gave them a different shape where they could be manifested in different more socially acceptable ways (FREUD, 2005, 2002). Particularly, fantasies towards the black body were still existing in the white collective memory; for, during Chattel Slavery, black people were routinely used as sexual objects (HOOKS, 1987; MBEMBE; DUBOIS, 2017) and these forms of imaginary cannot simply disappear and remain existing in the collective memory, despite the attempts to repress it during Victorian England. The naked black body has therefore a double function. It is a projection of the negativity of desire into the body of the black. The blackness of the body is the negative other where the immorality resides (KILOMBA, 2018; TSRI, 2016; FANON, 2012). The sexual desire gains a negative self-interpretation and it needs to be projected on the other and it is, indeed, the black body in the picture that is the symbolic locus of this. Note particularly that blackness has had precisely routinely this attached meanings of negative sexuality since, at least the Middle Ages (TSRI, 2016; BETHENCOURT, 2015). Likewise, in Victorian England, blackness was a colour that represented sin and sexual impurity.

At the same time, the naked black body is also a locus where the desire can be fulfilled. It symbolizes, firstly, the repressed desire towards the black body. It sublimates in a more acceptable manner the desire by placing it into an image with a semi-naked body doing a different function that is not, at first sight, sexual. In addition to this it also symbolizes how Africa is a land of promise to realization of desires. Africa is a land that has the elements for the realization of dreams. Hence, the nakedness of the body represents an attractive function for the realization of sexual and colonial desires.

Finally, the fact that the black man is carrying the ivory is also embedded in these meanings. Note that the original image had the inscription “The Ivory Porter”. The black man is therefore represented as the submissive individual who is serving the white and therefore, again projecting Imperial desires to go to Africa. The ivory also has a symbolic sexual function that symbolizes the white penis dominating the black body. Note that the ivory’s phallic shape, white colour and exaggerated size is nearly the size of the black man. The white penis is dominating and powerful when compared to the body of the black. Moreover, given this meaning, the porter is not simply an ivory porter. Rather the porter here is a black body carrying white phantasies. The desire for the black body repressed in the white imaginary is sublimated and symbolically expressed in a more morally acceptable manner for the self and society. On top of this, the exaggerated white penis is an envious reaction to the perceived vigorous black sexuality. The idea that black people were sexually vigorous was not uncommon in Victorian England and, indeed, this was understood as a sign of black inferiority (BRODY, 1998). This view contrasted with their perspectives about many Victorians own sexuality, as sexually self-contained. The exaggerated penis is therefore an envious representation that expresses the hidden desire to sexually liberate. At the same time, the dominance of the white penis over the black man responds to potential sexual anxieties that the colonizer may have regarding black male sexuality. Routinely, in Victorian England, black men sexuality was understood to be a threat to the purity of white women and the manhood of white men. Hence, the dominance of the white penis over the black man in the image symbolizes that white male sexuality will be dominant over black male’s sexuality.

Moreover, the carrying of the ivory also indicates what was perceived at the time to be the important role of the white person in the African continent as protector of the environment and animal (DECKHA, 2013). Elephants were, during the British Empire, routinely understood as a superior kind of animal in some cases superior to Black people (JOHNSON, 2019). Even though there was substantial trade of ivory, there were also complex regulations on how to use this with defining some uses as civilized and uncivilized (DECKHA, 2013; JOHNSON, 2019). The existence of elephants in Africa and the black person using the ivory in the morally right way spells out precisely this idea that the white person is needed there to civilize black people.

What can be seen in the representation of the black man is that there is a reinforcement of white masculinity. The frontispiece depicts the black man as inferior, uncivilized and this serves as a contrast with the white male who is civilized and superior. The image of the black man is not just about himself or blackness; rather it is a negative mirror, where white masculinity can positively reflect. At the same time, there are various

repressed desires and anxieties that the white Victorian male may have. The image expresses how these anxieties can be surpassed and desires can be fulfilled in the African continent and therefore providing an incentive for settler colonialism.

The Environment in need for Whiteness

The environment surrounding the black man in the image is also revealing of these colonial desires and civilizing missions. To start, the mere placement of the black man in the midst of the natural environment is already revealing of the dehumanization necessary to justify the Imperial settlement. Note that Burton's expedition was commissioned by the Royal Geographical Society (NEWMAN, 2010). This society's guidelines for studying the African continent and, indeed, non-Europeans in general, was to understand natives as simply one more natural element of the fauna and flora (NEWMAN, 2010). Placing this image in a frontispiece of a book that aims at being an expedition to understand the natural environment of the surrounding environment and the sources of the Nile, then suggests precisely this dehumanization of the black as an element of nature along with non-human animals.

There are also elements in the surrounding environment that indicate a desire to justify British settlement. The placing of the black man in an African environment is also revealing of Burton's belief of polygenism. Polygenism, as the pseudo-scientific theory that racial groups perceived as different has different geographical origins. This different geographical origin, in turn, was used as an explanation of inferiority of non-whites (BETHENCOURT, 2015; FREDRICKSON, 2003). This belief is expressed in the frontispiece to the extent that the natural environment where the black person appears is one that sharply contrasts with the British one and thereby implicitly alluding to a contrast with the civilized British origins. This idea is reinforced by the fact that Burton was a founding member of the Anthropological Society of London, an institution which was partly responsible, at the time, for forwarding polygenism and other forms of scientific racism (NEWMAN, 2010).

Finally, note that the surrounding environment is nearly empty and, in some respects not well taken care of (note, for example, that the trees on the left are dead). This imagery of lack of care for the environment has a double function. On the one hand, it creates a space for the imaginary of British to settle and the place for the realization of desire. In the sight of a British economy in crisis, Africa is a place for the realization of broken dreams. On the other it also shows that blacks cannot take care of their own land and that British have a civilizing mission to come.

The surrounding trees also have a symbolic role in signalling white desires. Even though most trees are dead, there is a tree with a phallic shape that has flourished. This symbolizes the African land as a land that, despite its current state, can be fertilized by the white. This fertilization is not only the colonial literal settlement, but also the sexual one. The flourished tree is the white penis entering the African body which is the African land. The flourished tree is a sign of hope that Africa is a place for colonial dreams and a symbol of the sexual desire to enter the black body.

Conclusion

In this viewpoint piece, I have explored the hidden symbolic meanings in the original frontispiece of Burton's *The Lake Regions of Central Africa (1860), Volume I*. Inspired in psychoanalysis and by historically contextualizing the book, I have advanced the argument that this frontispiece reveals a variety of ideas and desires present in the white imaginary. More precisely, in the frontispiece are represented sexual and settling white desires and civilizing mission goals. Further research should focus on looking at Burton's pictorial representation of non-whites across his various works and analyse how these may be a projection of whiteness.

CORDEIRO-RODRIGUES, L. The Mirror of the Black Body: Colonial Desires and Civilizing Missions. **Revista de Letras**, São Paulo, v.60, n.2, p.87-95, jul./dez. 2020.

- **RESUMO:** *Richard Burton na sua obra The Lake Regions of Central Africa (1860), Volume I é um autor bastante estudado para entender os valores do Imperialismo Britânico no século XIX. A maior parte do trabalho de análise do seu trabalho foca-se no seu texto e não nas imagens do texto. Neste artigo, eu analiso a imagem da capa do livro The Lake Regions of Central Africa (1860), Volume I e argumento que a capa reflete desejos sexuais e fantasias de missão civilizadora no imaginário branco em relação aos corpos negros.*
- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *Psicanálise do Colonialismo. Corpos Negros. Fantasias da Branquitude. Colonialismo. Missão Civilizadora. Richard Burton.*

References

BETHENCOURT, F. **Racisms:** from the Crusades to the Twentieth Century. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015.

BIRMINGHAM, D. **A Short History of Modern Angola.** Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

BRODY, J. D. **Impossible Purities:** Blackness, Femininity, and Victorian Culture. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1998.

BURTON, R. F. **The lake regions of Central Africa:** a picture of exploration. London : Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts, 1860. Available: <<http://archive.org/details/lakeregionsofcen11860burt>>. Access: 20 May 2020.

BUTTS, D. The Adventure Story. In: BUTT, D. (Ed.). **Stories and Society:** children's Literature in Its Social Context. Insights. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1992. p.65–83. Available: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-22111-0_5>. Access: 20 May 2020.

CHABAL, P.; BIRMINGHAM, D.; FORREST, J. **A History of Postcolonial Lusophone Africa**. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.

CHEW, C. The ant as metaphor: Orientalism, imperialism and myrmecology [W. T. Stearn Student Essay]. **Archives of Natural History**, v.46, n.2, p.347–61, 2019. Available : <<https://doi.org/10.3366/anh.2019.0595>>. Access: 20 May 2020.

DAVIS, L. **Mammon and the pursuit of empire**: the political economy of British Imperialism, 1860-1912. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

DAWSON, G. **Soldier Heroes**: British adventure, empire and the imagining of masculinities. London: Routledge, 1994.

DECKHA, M. Welfarist and imperial: the contributions of anticruelty laws to civilizational discourse. **American Quarterly**, v.65, n.3, p.515-548, 2013. Available : <<https://dspace.library.uvic.ca//handle/1828/5990>>. Access: 20 May 2020.

DUNAE, P. A. Boys' Literature and the Idea of Empire, 1870-1914. **Victorian Studies**, v.24, n.1, p.105–121, 1980.

ELIAS, N. **The civilizing process**. 2nd edition. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000.

ELIAS, N. **The History of Manners**. New York: Random House, 1988.

FANON, F. **Black Skin, White Masks**. London: Penguin Classics, 2012.

FREDRICKSON, G. M. **Racism**: a short history. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

FREUD, S. **The Unconscious**. London: Penguin Classics, 2005.

FREUD, S. **The Psychopathology of Everyday Life**. Translated by Anthea Bell. London: Penguin Classics, 2002.

GILMAN, S. **The Jew's Body**. New York: Routledge, 1992.

HOOKS, B. **Ain't I a Woman**: Black Women and Feminism. London: Pluto Press, 1987.

HYAM, R. **Empire and Sexuality**: British Experience. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991.

JACKSON, A. **The British Empire**: a very short introduction. Oxford: OUP Oxford, 2013.

JOHNSON, L. **Race Matters, Animal Matters**: Fugitive Humanism in African America, 1840-1930. London:: Routledge, 2019.

KILOMBA, G. **Plantation memories**: episodes of everyday racism. Münster: Unrast Verlag, 2018.

- MANNONI, O.; BLOCH, M. **Prospero and Caliban**: the psychology of colonization. 2nd Revised edition edition. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990.
- MBEMBE, A. **Necropolitics**. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2019.
- MBEMBE, A.; DUBOIS, L. **Critique of Black Reason**. Durham: Duke University Press Books, 2017.
- MEMMI, A. **The colonizer and the colonized**. Main edition. London: Souvenir Press, 2016.
- NANDY, A. **The intimate enemy**: loss and recovery of self under colonialism. 2.ed. New Delhi: OUP India, 2009.
- NEWMAN, J. L. **Paths without Glory**: Richard Francis Burton in Africa. Washington: Potomac Books Inc, 2010.
- SWEET, M. **Inventing the Victorians**. Main edition. London: Faber & Faber, 2002.
- TSRI, K. **Africans are not Black**: the case for conceptual liberation. Abingdon: Routledge, 2016.