

*The Geography of Perversion: Male-to-Male Sexual Behavior outside the West and the Ethnographic Imagination, 1750-1918*, by Rudi C. Bleys. New York: New York University Press, 1996. 320 pp. \$37.50.

As Rudi Bleys makes clear, speculation about same-sex sexual practices—their own and others’—has been a preoccupation of European observers for hundreds of years. In *The Geography of Perversion*, a synoptic account of the discourses of male-to-male sexual behavior outside the West from 1750 to 1918, Bleys attempts to trace the intellectual history of changing conceptions of sexual identity and identification. Noting that “if homosexuality was redefined substantially from the eighteenth century onward, then such cognitive changes ought to be reflected in European ethnographic discourse about male-to-male sexual behaviour outside the West as well” (p. 9), Bleys seeks both to articulate and to analyze the meanings for Europeans of male homoerotic activity among ethnographic others.

In chronicling the changing discourses of sexual difference, Bleys reveals much about the patterns of thought that have informed European inquiry. He demonstrates, for example, that commentators on the mores of non-Western peoples were consumed with discovering “natural” explanations for sexual variation. Initially seeking rationalizations for presumed differences in sexual behavior in climatology (cool climates allegedly suppressed sexual ardor; warm ones inflamed it), they later evinced conclusions from the supposed physical nature of each race.

It is clear that this is a work of extraordinary erudition; the author has read deeply in the primary literature of half a dozen languages or more and is as conversant with contemporary queer theory as with the antique sources. Yet, the book itself is a disappointment. Bleys is unable to advance a clear and cogent argument about the etiology or impact of conceptual shifts from the eighteenth through the early-twentieth century. Furthermore, many of his summaries of ethnographic writing read like laundry lists. In successive chapters, Bleys serially characterizes scholarship on each region of the world in painstaking detail. Specialists in each subfield may enjoy the scope of his references, but readers of the book as a whole will find his larger points elusive. Furthermore, Bleys fails to account in a convincing way for the changes in paradigmatic notions of the sexual other. For example, he explains the declining association between a race’s bodily constitution and sexual deviance by noting that “whereas male/female difference was compared to racial difference in a way that convinced contemporary scientists, the analogy between the racially different and the sexually deviant seemed less easily verifiable empirically and was almost doomed to fail” (p. 111). This observation, however, follows on a powerful discussion of analogous thinking in which Bleys admits that the interpretation of evidence about non-Western

sexuality betrayed a subjection of “logical consistence . . . to the imperatives of ideology” (p. 96). It is difficult to understand, then, why some claims proved convincing to European scholars while others did not. Why did the ascription of “uncivilized masculinity” to sub-Saharan Africans and Arabs persuade contemporary observers, while the claim that sodomites were less well endowed than other men did not (pp. 90, 133)? Unfortunately, these are questions that Bleys neither answers nor explores.

Scholars will not find this work an easy read. The prose is muddy, the text is riddled with grammatical errors (I found four gratuitous commas on p. 82 alone), and names of important figures are confused (Magnus Hirschfeld is mistakenly referred to as Karl Heinz Ulrichs on p. 210). More important, Bleys conflates critical semantic distinctions, such as the difference between disapproval of same-sex acts based on moral and physical criteria. A careful editing would have improved this book substantially.

Students of masculinity, however, will take particular interest in Bleys’s attention to the conflation of homoerotic activity with cross-gender roles. Bleys suggests two reasons that cross-gender behavior received sustained attention in sexological discourses. First, ethnographic evidence from America and Asia, whose native peoples were considered “feminine,” was accorded greater weight in Europe. Second, constraints on the freedom of the male libertine after the emergence of companionate marriage in Europe coded effeminacy as deviant. This link between cross-gender behavior and sexual deviance generally stigmatized only the passive participant in male same-sex relationships. While it is not clear just why the role of the active (i.e., penetrating) partner was elided in theories of sexual variance, sexologists’ attempts in the late-nineteenth century to map same-sex acts onto a matrix of congenital or acquired pathology had something to do with it. Bleys notes that observers understood only socially visible sexual variants to be congenitally pathological; the homoerotic activities of the socially invisible—those who conformed to normative gender roles—were perceived to be circumstantial or acquired. Bleys remarks that this coding, by universalizing homosexual identity, served the purposes of advocates of homosexual rights, but “the price of the ticket to homosexual affirmation” was the “reification of desire” (p. 254).

*The Geography of Perversion* suggests that the project of reification has a long history. Despite new assumptions about the character and valence of male same-sex sexual activity, the attempt to create comprehensive, static categories of identity has persisted. The lyrics have changed, so to speak, but the song remains largely the same.

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