*Crossing the Color Line: Race, Sex and the Contested Politics of Colonialism in Ghana*. By Carina E. Ray. Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2015. pp.333. $64 (cloth). $26.36 (paper).

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The regulation of sexuality in European colonies is a popular topic, but rarely has it been examined in such a nuanced way. This well-sourced book covers the sixteenth century to the present day, although primarily focuses on African-European ‘concubinage’ and ‘marriage’ in the Gold Coast during British colonisation, between the 1890s and the 1950s. The strength of this book is Ray’s close study of the thousands of pages of material covering the small number of ‘inter-racial’ relationships investigated by the Colonial Office, which make up the bulk of Part I, and the few cases of inter-marriage in Britain and the repercussions there and in the Gold Coast from 1919 to the present day, as detailed in the shorter Part II. Her analysis of available records shocks and moves readers, offering delicately nuanced interpretations of the lives and relationships (not just sexual) of the men and women caught up in scandal. Indeed, few historians can match her skill in demonstrating the interplay between race, sexuality, and class.

This is exemplified in chapter 2, which discusses Marcus Clarke, the first colonial officer investigated for violating a 1907 ban on concubinage. Accused of attempting to procure young African girls for sex, Ray reveals how the case was less about illicit sex than it was about the racial and class implications of Clarke’s position as a ‘West Indian of partial African descent’ (58), imported into the Gold Coast as a ‘European’ official with European wages. This episode demonstrates how cases of sexual misconduct were only ever partly about sex. Indeed, Clarke’s case publicised how difficult it was for colonial administrators to actually distinguish between coloniser and colonised, as well as the dangers of investigating such cases. While the ‘litmus test for deciding whether disciplinary action had to be taken’ was whether sexual behaviour would create ‘a public scandal’ in the colony (119), officials soon realised that almost every investigation itself caused a scandal. When attempts were made to cement hierarchies of power through sexual regulation, colonial officials actually created ‘powerful tools of coercion and sabotage used by both Africans and Europeans to achieve a range of different goals, chief among them extorting money, redressing workplace grievances, and ruining rival officers’ careers’, which ‘undermined British authority and credibility’ (18). In the process, Ray depicts a less moralistic, more pragmatic colonial administration than is usually supposed, and with Africans as central agents in sexual encounters.

She also attempts to invert the gaze, focusing partly on Ghanaian attitudes to ‘mixed race’ relationships, offering an essential counterpoint of the more commonly studied ‘black peril’ panics in the US and Africa. Indeed, chapter 7 is an illuminating study of how Ghanaian men articulated a ‘white peril’ panic, concerned with ‘immoral’ relationships between European men and local women. Here, Ray makes an unusual but compelling argument that the first Ghanaian calls for independence were reactions to the 1919 Liverpool riots, directed against British working class women marrying West Africans, not after World War II as is more commonly supposed. Women’s bodies became sites of male power contestation, and such relationships were used ‘as proof of the demoralizing influences of European men, and by extension colonial rule’ itself (200).

Throughout, Ray deals with archival omissions thoughtfully, especially in more recent cases where she has been able to interview the actual participants of such relationships or their offspring. The focus on the working-class Ghanaian-German Jewish-British Annan family in chapter 6 is a striking example of where government archives have been matched with oral history, to provide a complex and moving story of global migration and marriage ‘across the color line’. There are also attempts to balance out much of the male-dominated discourse, with insights into the reasons for female participation in such relationships, although the records often make this problematic. Indeed, despite her skills, it is difficult not to be aware of the very unusualness of the cases examined, and the sorts of sexual encounters not included. The reliance on British colonial records means that most cases focus on colonial officials, even though the majority of Europeans in the Gold Coast were privately employed. Colonial officials were most concerned with long-term heterosexual relationships between Africans and Europeans, so there is little on homosexuality, rape or more casual sexual relationships. The fascinating cover photograph of (probably) French colonial officials with their ‘native wives’ and children illustrates how challenging it has been for Ray to find substantial information in many cases.

Still, her focus on the long-term relationships which evolved ‘across the color line’ in Ghana allows her to reach some surprising and important conclusions. For instance, colonial administrators in the Gold Coast were never particularly interested in the progeny of these relationships, who remained classified as ‘African’ throughout the colonial period. This counters much of the existing general literature on sex and empire, which has assumed that fears of miscegenation were central in driving policy (15,48-53).

Perhaps most importantly, these chapters offer an excellent critique of Ronald Hyam’s interpretation of the 1909 Crewe Circular (the specific focus of Ray’s chapter 4). Hyam concluded that the ban was driven by a puritanical metropolis, ‘concubinage itself never produced any confrontations with African peoples’, nor affected ‘African perceptions of white man’s rule’, before being ‘generally eliminated in African colonies by the mid-1920s’.[[1]](#footnote-1) Ray challenges all of these points. Indeed, the very importance of the Circular as a key moment in the history of imperial rule is called into question, given the reluctance to actually enforce the legislation.

Overall, this book is full of stories well told, and offers the reader a more nuanced understanding of the inter-relationship between sex, race and class in colonial Africa. It is, in short, a pleasure to read.

1. Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1991) 178,169-70. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)