

Introduction

Colonialism, Race, and Power in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Daniel Steinbach
History



The 19th and 20th centuries were transformative periods of expansion, consolidation, and eventual unravelling of colonial empires across the globe. These centuries saw the proliferation of imperial ideologies, practices, and cultural codes that permeated everyday life, while also shaping and reshaping social systems and structures. Colonial cultures emerged as dynamic spaces where differences were encountered, power asserted, identities constructed, and resistance negotiated. This special issue explores the multifaceted nature of colonial cultures from the mid-19th century to the mid-20th century, drawing attention to their manifestation in diverse regions and contexts, from the settler colonies of Australia and Kenya to the imperial ‘peripheries’ of Greenland and Indochina. The breadth of geographical scope across the ten articles contained in the special issue reflects the extensive reach of high imperialism. Across contexts, the articles examine complex intersections among material culture, ideology, and social hierarchy. By analysing distinct practices – from dining to photography, hunting, conservation, and governance – the articles illuminate how colonial cultures functioned as instruments of control as well as sites of conflict, and in so doing reveal the enduring legacies of imperialism.

These contributions all emerged from students of the MA History course ‘Colonialism, Race, and Power in the 19th and 20th Centuries’, taught at the University of Copenhagen during the academic years 2022/23 and 2023/24. These classes brought together individuals from diverse academic backgrounds, both in terms of nationality and discipline, united by a shared interest in critically engaging with themes of colonialism, power, and globalisation across various temporal, spatial, and cultural contexts. Each article is grounded in the students’ original research, drawing often on primary source material that has not previously been the focus of scholarly attention. These sources themselves speak to the technological advancements of this period, spanning mass-printed books and newspapers to photographs, radio broadcasts, and early television programmes. Such materials illustrate the ways in which the colonial era facilitated a ‘shrinking’ of the world, brought about through the dense networks of social connections and cultural exchanges that accompanied European imperial expansion.

The articles also engage with the evolution of mindsets, knowledge systems, and ideological constructs that shaped how Europeans perceive the ‘others’ they encountered through imperial expansion, but also how they came to understand themselves in response. Central to these discussions are notions of racial difference, constructions of sex and gender, and attitudes towards nature and the environment. All these categories and concepts were profoundly influenced by Europe’s encounters with the colonised world – but such ideas were also inextricably linked to ‘praxis’ and in combination with colonial power shaped social norms and behaviours in ways distinct from metropolitan contexts. For example, in the colonies, forms of violence that were long outlawed in Europe persisted or were reintroduced, sexual relationships were rigidly regulated by intersections of race and gender, and family structures were adapted to serve the logics of empire. Efforts to control colonised spaces and the bodies of colonised peoples were deeply intertwined, reflecting the totalising ambitions of colonial governance. The articles within this collection collectively illustrate how colonial societies operated as complex, all-encompassing systems, where ideologies and material conditions reinforced one another to sustain imperial rule.

In the first article, *Wild Food: Culinary Colonialism and the Construction of Australian Cuisine*, Micheala Petruso opens the discussion by exploring how the culinary landscape of colonial Australia

was shaped through the encounter between Indigenous foodways and settler ideologies. The article highlights how food served as a site of cultural negotiation, reinforcing settler dominance while also exposing underlying anxieties about belonging and identity in an unfamiliar land. Dining practices and their symbolic importance to colonial identity are further analysed by Emilie Bolding Ørum in *A Performance for Dinner: Dining Culture and Colonial Identity in the Dutch East Indies, 1880–1910*. Through the lens of colonial photography, the article reveals how dining rituals were employed to reinforce European cultural superiority and maintain strict social and racial boundaries. The medium of photography, a recurring theme in this issue, emerges as a powerful tool for both perpetuating and challenging colonial authority.

This duality of photography is particularly evident in *Behind the Mask: Counternarratives in John Møller's Photographs from Greenland, 1889–1922*, where Nanna V. H. Emtoft examines the work of Greenland's first Indigenous photographer. Through a close analysis of Møller's images, the article uncovers subtle critiques of Danish colonial rule embedded within the photographer's compositions, which challenged conventional representations of colonial hierarchies. Similarly, Elizabeth Megan Kiemel Clewett in *Frames of Domination: Connecting the Chaining of Aboriginal 'Prisoners' and Settler Emotions, 1900–1950* analyses how colonial photography in Australia was used to assert settler control over Aboriginal bodies. At the same time, this piece interrogates the ways in which these images were framed to appeal to humanitarian sensibilities, revealing the conditional nature of settler empathy and its inability to confront the broader violence of the colonial system.

Moving from visual culture to bodily violence, *Atrocities in the 'Heart of Darkness': Sexual Violence as a Weapon of Colonial Control in the Congo Free State, 1885–1908* by Daniel Fabricius provides a harrowing account of sexual violence as a systematic tool of colonial oppression. The article examines how practices such as rape, abduction, and forced incest were employed to subjugate the Congolese population, simultaneously enforcing racial hierarchies and consolidating economic and military control. This deeply gendered and racialised violence exposes the brutal underpinnings of colonial authority and its devastating impact on Indigenous communities.

The relationship between colonial power and the environment is explored in two articles focusing on East Africa. In *'Managing' Wildlife: Hunting and Conservation in the 'White Highlands' of Early*

Colonial Kenya Susann Heidecke examines the contradictions of settler conservation practices, highlighting how European settlers in Kenya sought to preserve ‘pristine’ nature while engaging in hunting and agricultural activities that decimated local wildlife populations. The article argues that these practices reinforced settler dominance by delegitimising Indigenous ecological knowledge and dispossessing precolonial landholders. Similarly, in *Colonial Nature: Hunting in Karen Blixen’s ‘Out of Africa’* Laura Soland Wang Larsen investigates the symbolic significance of hunting in colonial British East Africa, using Blixen’s experiences as a lens to explore gendered and racial dimensions of colonial life. The article reveals how hunting rituals and narratives upheld imperial ideologies, shaping perceptions of masculinity, femininity, and power in the colonial context.

The economic and social transformations wrought by colonial rule are addressed by Zoe Robakiewicz in *Shifting the Centre: The Transformation of Greenlandic Society from Subsistence to Market Economy in the Nineteenth Century*. This article traces the mechanisms through which Danish colonial administrators integrated Greenland into a capitalist market system, dismantling subsistence economies, and reshaping Indigenous governance through reforms such as the establishment of local representative councils. These societal transformations are echoed by Ida Kaae Antonisen in *Métis Child Removal in French Indochina: Change and Continuity from the Second World War to Decolonisation*, which examines the persistent colonial practice of removing ‘mixed-race’ children from their Indigenous mothers. Despite shifts in rhetoric and priorities during and after the Second World War, the article reveals how these practices were rooted in enduring colonial anxieties about race, memory, and the preservation of French influence.

The final article, *Portuguese Africa through Danish Eyes and Ears: Danmarks Radio’s Portrayal of the Portuguese Colonial State, 1961–1974*, Alex Alexandre provides a unique perspective on colonial cultures through the lens of media representation. By analysing Danish radio broadcasts and television news, the article traces the evolution of public discourse on Portuguese colonial wars in Angola and Mozambique, from early uncritical reporting to a later, more pronounced anti-colonial stance. This shift reflects broader global trends in anti-colonial activism and the changing dynamics of public opinion during the second half of the 20th century.

Together, these articles present a wide-ranging exploration of colonial cultures and practices, uncovering their role in shaping identities, governing societies, and reinforcing hierarchies. By focusing on diverse geographies and themes, this special issue contributes to a nuanced understanding of the cultural dimensions of colonial power and resistance. It invites readers to reflect on the legacies of colonialism that continue to shape our world and to consider the ways in which historical narratives can be re-examined to illuminate hidden stories of resilience and transformation.

