

“Chromatics and Vice”: Male Students, Race and Queerness at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, 1890s to 1930s

Dominic Janes, Keele University, d.janes@keele.ac.uk

## Biography

Dominic Janes is Professor of Modern History at Keele University. Before this he taught in the History of Art department at Birkbeck, University of London. He is a cultural historian who studies texts and visual images relating to Britain in its local and international contexts since the eighteenth century. Within this sphere he focuses on the histories of gender, sexuality and religion. His last two books are *Freak to Chic: “Gay” Men in and out of Fashion after Oscar Wilde* (2021) and *British Dandies: Engendering Scandal and Fashioning a Nation* (2022). He is completing a book on queer student masculinities and co-editing the Oxford Handbook of LGBTQ History.

## Keywords

Britain, Homosexual, Queer, Students, Universities

## Abstract

This article explores some of the ways in which colour came to be associated with racial and sexual minorities in European modernity. It does this through examination of a case-study of material produced by students at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge in imperial Britain from the late nineteenth century to the mid-1930s. They were the oldest and most prestigious universities in England and they mattered because they educated a considerable proportion of the administrative, political and military elite of the British Empire. Their students’ writings, therefore, reveal the attitudes toward men and colour of the British ruling elite in the process of its on-going formation. The concepts of orientalism and ornamentalism are used to explain the process by which queer men were understood as “colourful” aesthetic characters and as being associated with non-white men of colour. This process involved assimilating students into stereotypical types, two of the most important of which were the sport-loving “hearty” student and the culture-loving “aesthete” (to employ terms in use at the time). This had the effect of implying that these rival groups of young men were, in effect, teams in a competition in which it was widely assumed that the majority white and sexually orthodox group would triumph.

Maps of the world were habitually coloured in ways that were shaped by national and imperial projects from the blue of Prussia to the red—although more often printed as a shade of pink—of Britain, its Dominions and colonies. Those tones were, in turn, derived from the traditional colour of those countries’ military uniforms and, since women were not admitted

to front-line roles, the colours were also gendered. The uniformity of British red, which was in due course applied to telephone boxes and buses, was that of its army regiments.<sup>1</sup> Uniforms disguised the diversity of those wearing them by making it more difficult for men to express aspects of their individuality such as sexual preferences. They could not, however, conceal diverse skin tones. It is, therefore, fascinating to discover that coloured uniformity was deployed, not just in dress, but also in relation to race, in the construction of normative and alternative masculinities and sexualities. Understanding this involves encountering the ways in which cis-heterosexual whiteness was thought of as existing in a binary relation to the colourfulness of other—assumed to be lesser—subject positions. This, it will be seen, provided an important mode of support for traditional patriarchal power-structures during a period when they were being challenged by the nascent women's rights and non-western independence movements.

These issues are explored here through a case-study of evidence for student life in two elite British universities from the 1890s to the 1930s. I shall focus first on race and then on sexuality before exploring the ways in which these two categories intersected. It will be seen that as the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge became more diverse in their student composition so increasing attempts were made to link sexual and racial minorities. The vast majority of "Oxbridge" (Oxford and Cambridge) students were white men from upper- and middle-class social backgrounds who were taught and housed in same-sex residential colleges. Their relative privilege continues to be a matter of concern today even though those colleges are now almost entirely co-educational and their social mix has broadened somewhat. The connection between academic excellence and social elitism was, and is, contentious, particularly in relation to racial diversity. Students themselves have played a prominent role in recent attempts to raise awareness of the role of these institutions in the former imperial project.<sup>2</sup> Academic approaches have included challenging a prevalent "fantasy in which [racial] Whiteness is invisible."<sup>3</sup> The result of this is that the histories of these institutions are increasingly judged as being racialised.

Seen from this perspective the multi-volume "official" histories of these universities, which admittedly were published three decades ago, are decidedly not decolonised. Thus, in the volume on the history of Cambridge from 1870 to 1990 there is a chapter on women, but only thirteen pages of discussion of student life and no specific exploration of race and sexuality beyond sporadic mention of individuals and of the setting up of a Centre for African Studies.<sup>4</sup> The equivalent volume for Oxford, by contrast, benefits from a chapter on the "world university".<sup>5</sup> This features extensive discussion of the setting up the Indian Institute in 1884 and of the trust established by the prominent imperialist Cecil Rhodes who died in 1902. The first Indian Rhodes scholarships were not awarded until 1947 and, as the volume makes

---

<sup>1</sup> Richard Holmes, *Redcoat: the British Soldier in the Age of Horse and Musket*, London 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Anuradha Henriques and Lina Abushouk, *Decolonising Oxford: the student movement from Stuart Hall to "Skin Deep"*, in: Jason Arday/Heidi Safia Mirza (ed.), *Dismantling Race in Higher Education. Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy*, Basingstoke 2018, pp. 297-309.

<sup>3</sup> Diane Reay, *Race and Elite Universities in the UK*, in: Arday/Mirza, *Dismantling Race*, pp. 47-66, here p. 56.

<sup>4</sup> Christopher N. L. Brooke, *A History of the University of Cambridge*, vol. 4, 1870-1990, Cambridge 1993, pp. 207-208, 287-330.

<sup>5</sup> J. G. Darwin, *A World University*, in: Brian Harrison (ed.), *The History of the University of Oxford*, vol. 8, *The Twentieth Century*, Oxford 1994, pp. 607-636.

clear, the numbers of south Asian students were relatively small; they peaked at 149 in 1922 out of a total student body that rose from 2000 in the later nineteenth century to over twice that number between the wars. Many colleges operated a de facto quota system of one or two admissions from India per year. For obvious reasons it is impossible to say how many (in modern terms) LGBTQ students attended the two universities. The Oxford volume does, however, briefly discuss the issue in relation to two aforementioned stereotypes of student types: the athletic “hearty” and the culture-loving “aesthete”.

The normative gendering of Oxbridge students has been explored in detail by Paul Deslandes in his book *Oxbridge Men: British Masculinity and the Undergraduate Experience, 1850-1920* (2005).<sup>6</sup> He explains that aristocratic privilege was on the decline during this period and it was increasingly supplemented, or even displaced, by a set of essentially middle-class values centred on hard work (which might, however, focus on team sports rather than intellectual pursuits), moral probity (with Anglican Protestantism taken as the norm), and gender conformity. This combination had emerged relatively recently from the public (ie. fee-paying) schools. A pioneer of this was Hely Hutchinson Almond at Loretto School near Edinburgh in the 1860s. His belief was that a curriculum centred on sport would produce the moral and manly leaders that the Empire, in his view, required. This he combined with the inculcation of a sense of superiority over foreigners in general, with those who were both white and Protestant given some benefit of the doubt.<sup>7</sup> So successful was the cult of games that it spread not only through British public schools but also out across their equivalent across the Empire. It was intended, furthermore, to act as a field in which men outshone women because sport was seen as inherently masculine and masculinising. The result was that most Oxbridge male undergraduates were expected to play sports of some kind. As Deslandes concludes, these young men “defined themselves as white Britons, Protestant Christians, imperial leaders, and gentlemen whose existence at the universities was ideologically and physically separate from the feminine”.<sup>8</sup> Aestheticism was, in some ways, a counter-cultural response to this dominant culture and was often interpreted as effeminate. Many students combined interests in sport and the arts but this did not impede the development of this pair of stereotypes.

It is important to stress that these self-definitions were developing in response to the abolition of religious tests from the 1850s to the 1870s which meant that non-Anglicans could be admitted to study. Self-conscious muscular masculinity only became more strident with the admission of women and international students. By 1920, for example, almost one third of those matriculating (ie. entering) Oxford were non-British.<sup>9</sup> Indian students, although few in total, were some of the most visible “outsiders” and prejudice against them grew with their numbers, particularly in relation to those who were not of high social rank in

---

<sup>6</sup> Paul R. Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men. British Masculinity and the Undergraduate Experience, 1850-1920*, Bloomington 2005, pp. 209-228, is an edited and condensed version of Deslandes, “The foreign element”. newcomers and the rhetoric of race, nation, and empire in “Oxbridge” undergraduate culture, 1850–1920, in: *Journal of British Studies* 37 (1988) 1, pp. 54-90.

<sup>7</sup> J. A. Mangan, *The Games Ethic and Imperialism. Aspects of the Diffusion of an Ideal*, London 1986, pp. 24-28; Patrick F. McDevitt, *May the Best Man Win. Sport, Masculinity, and Nationalism in Great Britain and the Empire, 1880-1935*, London 2004, p. 10.

<sup>8</sup> Deslandes, “The foreign element”, p. 58.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

their homeland.<sup>10</sup> While those Indians who excelled at sports were admired, others who attempted to assert themselves culturally, intellectually, or in political debate, were often mocked for their accents and alleged pretensions along the lines of the stereotypical “funny” Indians Baboo Hurry Bungsho Jabberjee (a London law student) and Chunder Bindabun Bhosh (a Cambridge social climber) invented by T. A. Guthrie and popularised in the pages of *Punch*.<sup>11</sup> Many groups of South Asians, such as Bengalis, were also popularly regarded as effeminate.<sup>12</sup> In 1916 the University Intercollegiate Indian Students’ Committee was established at Cambridge and a Delegacy for Oriental Students at Oxford. But, in Deslandes’s opinion, such administrative measures on the part of the two universities were “intended to control hostility rather than encourage acceptance.”<sup>13</sup>

The will of the British imperialist Cecil Rhodes, who died on March 26, 1902, did a great deal to bring international students to Oxford starting with six South Africans and five Germans who arrived in October 1903. Rhodes intended these individuals not only to bring their talents to Britain but also to leave having been inculcated with British imperial values. He expressed his desire in his will

“that the students who shall be elected to the Scholarships shall not be merely bookworms. I direct that in the election of a student to a Scholarship regard shall be had to (i) his literary and scholastic achievements (ii) his fondness of and success in manly outdoor sports such as cricket football and the like (iii) his qualities of manhood, truth, courage, devotion to duty, sympathy for and protection of the weak, kindness, unselfishness and fellowship and (iv) his exhibition during his school days of moral force of character and of instincts to lead and take an interest in his schoolmates.”<sup>14</sup>

The journalist, W. T. Stead, who was a close friend, said that when “Rhodes mentioned athletics he meant to imply something like a religious test” which it, in effect, replaced.<sup>15</sup> The selection of scholars was, therefore, to be based, in the words of George Robert Parkin, organising secretary of the Rhodes Trust, as much on “qualities of character, virility, and leadership” as on intellectual abilities.<sup>16</sup> The aim was not to train businessmen but rather those who would contribute to the “higher purposes” of public and social service.<sup>17</sup> The scholarships were, to start with, weighted against the Empire and toward the USA in a ratio

---

<sup>10</sup> Shompa Lahiri, *Indians in Britain. Anglo-Indian Encounters, Race and Identity, 1880-1930, the Colonial Legacy in Britain 1*, London 2000, pp. 52-53.

<sup>11</sup> Lahiri, *Indians in Britain*, pp. 93-94, 160.

<sup>12</sup> Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity. The “Manly Englishman” and the “Effeminate Bengali” in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Manchester 1995.

<sup>13</sup> Deslandes, “The foreign element”, p. 75.

<sup>14</sup> Cecil Rhodes, Will, paragraph 23, quoted in: Philip Ziegler, *Legacy. Cecil Rhodes, the Rhodes Trust and Rhodes Scholarships*, New Haven 2008, p. 341.

<sup>15</sup> George Robert Parkin, Congress of Presidents of State Universities, Washington, November 19<sup>th</sup>, 1912 (January 1913), Rhodes Trust/1460(1), p. 35; reproduced by kind permission of Rhodes Trust Archive.

<sup>16</sup> George R. Parkin, Rhodes Scholarships and American Scholars, in: *Atlantic Monthly* (September 1919), pp. 365-375, here p. 372.

<sup>17</sup> Parkin, Congress of Presidents, p. 40.

of 2:3.<sup>18</sup> Those selected, who were typically chosen by racist committees in their own countries, were overwhelmingly white. As Frances Wylie, Rhodes Trust agent in Oxford in 1916, stated: “we must expect an occasional coloured man from Barbados or Trinidad... but that can’t be helped.”<sup>19</sup> However, racial conformity to white British norms did not spare Rhodes scholars considerable condescension on the part of English undergraduates. Americans, in particular, had an ambivalent relationship with their hosts, and formed their own community club.<sup>20</sup> It did not help that many of these men already had an undergraduate degree from their home country and were, therefore, older and more experienced than their local peers.

All this notwithstanding, it is important to note that Rhodes himself had said that no one was to be disqualified by race from a scholarship and, in 1907, an African-American was elected by the Pennsylvania Selection Committee.<sup>21</sup> This was Alain LeRoy Locke who was to become one of the key figures in the Harlem Renaissance. As the first African-American Rhodes scholar (there was not to be another for sixty years) he was greeted as something of a celebrity in Oxford which, like the rest of Britain, was not in a formal sense racially segregated. Small men were typically at a disadvantage in college sports but he took part in the one role, that of cox in a rowing team, that made a virtue out of necessity. He was excluded from an annual dinner at the aforementioned American Club by members from the southern states of the US, but he became a leading figure in the Cosmopolitan Society. This was a place for students to hear papers on progressive topics and mingle on an interracial basis.<sup>22</sup> Academically, however, Locke’s Oxford experience was not a success. Despite being a Harvard graduate he left without an Oxford degree after three years. It has been suggested that it was the system that was to blame for not adequately supporting his needs as a non-traditional student (being foreign, of colour, and also queer).<sup>23</sup> His initial impression of Britain was positive since it lacked the obvious forms of segregation that were widespread in the United States but by the time he left he had become increasingly critical of the complex ways in which racialist thinking was embedded into British attitudes to class and culture.

Enthusiastic imperialism was an important element in right-wing politics in Britain while sympathy with disempowered groups was a characteristic of the left. It is for this reason that a spurious heraldic “arms for the Fabian Society” (a socialist organisation founded in 1884) that appeared in a student magazine combined misogynist representation of women suffragists with racist images of people of colour.<sup>24</sup> Political issues of the day were engaged by debating societies at meetings during which students could contest motions in the manner of the Houses of Parliament. These clubs were widespread in public schools

---

<sup>18</sup> Carleton Allen, *The Rhodes Scholars and Oxford, 1931-52*, in: Godfrey Elton (ed.), *The First Fifty Years of the Rhodes Trust, and the Rhodes Scholarships*, Oxford 1955, pp. 129-182, here p. 131.

<sup>19</sup> Darwin, *A World University*, p. 610.

<sup>20</sup> Francis Wylie, *The Rhodes Scholars and Oxford, 1902-31*, in: Elton, *The First Fifty Years*, pp. 59-127, here pp. 88-90; Philip Ziegler, *Legacy*, pp. 69-75.

<sup>21</sup> Wylie, *The Rhodes Scholars and Oxford*, here p. 99.

<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey C. Stewart, *The New Negro. The Life of Alain Locke*, Oxford 2018, pp. 122, 128; the title refers to Locke’s important collection of black cultural material, *The New Negro. An Interpretation*, New York 1925.

<sup>23</sup> Ziegler, *Legacy*, pp. 64-66; Stewart, *The New Negro*, pp. 132-133.

<sup>24</sup> *The arms of the Fabian Society*, in: *Granta* (February 23, 1907), p. 213.

and across the colleges of the two universities. It took until 1934 for the Oxford Union to elect its first coloured Indian President. This was Dosobhai Framji Karaka who, for his part, wrote in a pamphlet published a year earlier about the colourless uniformity that characterised much of the University—"that drab grey splashed all over—from buildings to bags [i.e. trousers]."<sup>25</sup> For many of his predecessors, however, particularly before World War One, it was another colour, black, that was the problem. It was perfectly possible in 1911 for a student debating society such as the Decemviri (Ten Men) at Trinity College, Cambridge, to consider both sides of the argument for whether slavery should be revived; or indeed for another society at the same College, The Dabblers, to debate in 1913 the motion "that race hatred is a blessing in disguise" (albeit that the proposition was lost by 4 to 5).<sup>26</sup> And when coloured members (all non-White students were often so described) began to make their presence felt at the Cambridge Union, which was the main debating society in the University, the result was an extraordinary tirade in 1901 on the subject of the "black peril". The phrase was derived from the contemporary term "yellow peril" which referred to east Asians. This appeared in the leading student magazine, *The Granta*, and was accompanied by "diagrams representing the growth of melanthropy [ie. blackness] in Union audiences" from 1891 to 1911.<sup>27</sup> Although the editors of the journal seemed unabashed at their inclusion of this piece they did print a number of refutations of it, notably one written by a Punjabi undergraduate who was then President of the Majlis Society in Cambridge (there was also one at Oxford) which provided an ideological and social focus for those of South Asian ethnicity.<sup>28</sup>

The racist author of the "black peril" article had also jestingly alleged that non-Christian religious services were taking place at the Union. This suggestion was parodied later the same year. Perhaps these were queer aesthetic rites, this other author suggested, that featured "nature made *unnatural* [my emphasis]... where the chanting priests, tie-vestured in the least hint of heliotrope, hair-curled, hymn Venus, Flora, Minerva, or any seeming deity who graces the pantheon of modern paganism."<sup>29</sup> As Deslandes has concluded, "depictions of possible and mostly improbable scenarios, caricatures, and stereotypes... highlighted the reluctance of British-born undergraduates to... fully accept difference."<sup>30</sup> That this applied to sexuality as well as to race and gender is made clear by a 1906 Dabblers debate on "the life of the average undergraduate" from which one speaker expressly "excluded all Blacks[,]

---

<sup>25</sup> D. F. Karaka, *The Pulse of Oxford*, London 1933, p. 44; Rozina Visram, Karaka, Dosabhoy Framji [Doso] (1911–1974), journalist and writer, in: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. from <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-101328> (retrieved January 10, 2023).

<sup>26</sup> The Decemviri (Debating Society) Minute Book 1902-1913, February 22, 1911, Trinity College, Cambridge, Archives, REC. 13.4; Dabblers Society Minute Book 1912-14, January 23, 1913, Trinity College, Cambridge, Archives, REC. 4.7; reproduced courtesy of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge.

<sup>27</sup> Jehu Pryde, *The black peril*, in: *Granta* (February 4, 1901), pp. 174-75; Paul Deslandes, "The foreign element," p. 80.

<sup>28</sup> Fazl-I-Husain, *Correspondence*. *The black peril*, in: *Granta* (February 9, 1901), pp. 201-02; see also I. G. B., *An answer to Jehu Pryde*, in: *Granta* (February 16, 1901), p. 218; Shompa Lahiri, *Indians in Britain*, p. 207.

<sup>29</sup> H. L. H., *Man aesthetic*, in: *Granta* (November 16, 1901), pp. 92-93, here p. 93.

<sup>30</sup> Deslandes, 'The foreign element', p. 77.

pub crawlers, green carnations and ultra aesthetes.”<sup>31</sup> The latter two terms were, as we shall now see, references to the sodomitical circles of men like Oscar Wilde.

### Colourful Men

It would be easy to assume that the athletic imperialism advanced by Cecil Rhodes was linked to the heterosexual logic of reproducing the race. However, those ideals were also inspired by admiration for the bodies of fit young men. This might imply the presence of closeted homoeroticism not least in the case of Rhodes himself who was a man, according to one recent biographer, whose “sexual proclivities are difficult to establish and mercifully beyond the scope of this book.”<sup>32</sup> The bodies of colonised men could stir up abjected desire that acted, in turn, as a spur to racism and self-repression.<sup>33</sup> Overt homosexuality, by contrast, came to be associated with such self-proclaimed aesthetes as Oscar Wilde who, when a student at Oxford, flaunted his disdain for team games and advanced literature and the arts as the premier place for self-development. This helped to establish a conceptual distinction that became very prominent in materials produced by students between “hearty” sports-lovers and “aesthetic” worshipers of culture.

In January 1909, Marsh Roberts, a graduate student at St John’s College, Oxford, proposed reading a paper on “Oscar Wilde’s place in literature” at the Cosmopolitan Club when Locke was a member and, for part of the year, its secretary. This was agreed only after it had been made clear to the speaker that he had to be careful about what he said on this controversial topic.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless, according to Locke’s recent biographer, the university “possessed a rich, diverse, and thriving homosexual community that controlled Oxford social life.”<sup>35</sup> My reading of the evidence is that this is something of an exaggeration, but that is not to deny that there were networks of discreet, same-sex attracted men which Locke, who was clear about his sexuality and an extrovert dandy, was able to join despite his racial origins.

Non-white students, although few in number, are easily discernible not only in the sources but because their ethnicity was often the topic of public debate. The comparative invisibility of sexual preference combined with public reticence in discussing this topic makes researching queer students quite challenging. In *Picturing the Closet* (2015) I attempted to explore the ways in which we could engage with the secret of coded evidence for those who did not fit the expected pattern of cross-sex attraction.<sup>36</sup> Materials produced by students including periodicals (such as *Cherwell* and *Isis* at Oxford, and *Granta* at Cambridge), cartoons and student society records make sporadic but increasing reference to homosexuality over the period I have been studying. One particular challenge lies in disentangling close but respectable homosocial friendship, which could still be intensely

---

<sup>31</sup> Dabblers Society Minute Book 1904-07, undated c. late February 1906, Trinity College, Cambridge, Archives, REC. 4.4; reproduced courtesy of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge.

<sup>32</sup> Ziegler, *Legacy*, p. 63.

<sup>33</sup> Craig Smith, Every man must kill the thing he loves: Empire, homoerotics, and nationalism in John Buchan’s “Prester John”, in: *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 28 (1995) 2, pp. 173-200, here p. 187.

<sup>34</sup> Stewart, *The New Negro*, p. 171.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>36</sup> Dominic Janes, *Picturing the Closet: Male Secrecy and Homosexual Visibility in Britain*, Oxford 2015.

emotional, from homoerotic desire. Thus in a photograph of the students and fellows of Jesus College, Oxford, taken in 1921 it is only a small set of young men who are touching (albeit that there is a couple to their left who are positioned facing each other) (fig. 1).<sup>37</sup> The one clearly non-white student, by contrast, is standing to the left-hand side slightly hidden behind one of his fellows.

Fig. 1.

Detail, group photograph, Jesus College, Oxford (1921); Jesus College, Oxford, Archives, JC:02/P1/1/, folio 1 recto; reproduced courtesy of the Master and Fellows of Jesus College, Oxford.

In contemporary western society it is widely held that certain colours are gendered. Perhaps the most prominent example is the use of blue to refer to boys and pink to refer to girls. Elite university athletes, elected by committees of representatives of the leading sports, were referred to as blues (or, for lesser achievement, half-blues). They were entitled to wear a distinctive dark blue (Oxford) or light blue (Cambridge) blazer and associated regalia. These were also the colours primarily associated with the respective universities. College and university sports teams often had their own distinctive blazers and accessories as did a wide range of other clubs with political, cultural or purely social purposes. Since it was important to be distinctive this created something of a riot of colours. This is particularly interesting because the general nature of men's clothing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was rather drab. By this time a gendered distinction had emerged between men and women in relation to dress: the former wore plain, dark or drab colours on most occasions while the use of bright colours and elaborate patterns was seen as characteristic of the latter. This had by no means been the case in previous centuries when it had been rank and income rather than gender that had tended to determine the colours that were worn. Dark costume had indicated the spiritual seriousness of Roman Catholic monks and various other clergy. Many Protestants were to make a similar use of plain colouration. Radicals, such as those of the French revolution, also asserted virtue through simplicity of dress. The widely influential opinion of J. C. Flügel, expressed in his *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930), was that what had taken place by the nineteenth century was a widespread "renunciation" by men of bright colours.<sup>38</sup> In western modernity, therefore, flamboyance in clothing often came to be seen as feminine.

Those associations of colourfulness were one of the reasons why many aesthetes and decadents, seeking to challenge the gendered status quo of the *fin-de-siècle*, made great use of colour imagery in their writings. They also drew attention to the distinction between natural tones and artificial dyes. Aniline dyes, such as mauveine, which were often produced in Germany, began to replace the previous trade in French madder and Indian indigo. These new pigments encountered hostility in Britain, not just on nationalist grounds, but because of the toxic chemicals that were involved in their production such as vivid arsenical green.<sup>39</sup> It was

---

<sup>37</sup> Compare analysis of an "integrated [i.e. mixed race] school class in Pennsylvania in 1912" in Eric Margolis, "Class pictures": Representations of race, gender and ability in a century of school photography, in: *Visual Sociology* 14 (1999), pp. 7-36, here p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> J. C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes*, London 1930.

<sup>39</sup> Alison David, *Fashion Victims: The Dangers of Dress Past and Present*, London 2015, pp. 74-101.



for this reason that the hue of the green carnation worn in Oscar Wilde's buttonhole could indicate dangerous and unnatural sexuality; it was believed to have been achieved by the artificial means of placing a white carnation in a vase of green ink.<sup>40</sup> There was intense press interest when Oscar Wilde appeared wearing such a flower in 1892 and when men of his circle started copying the practice. Wearing the bloom was, after all, quite a neat way to say "sodomite" without spelling out the word and it duly became firmly associated with Wilde through the popular success of Robert Hichens's novel *The Green Carnation* (1894) which sensationalized and parodied the homosexual relationship between Wilde and Lord Alfred Douglas.<sup>41</sup> It has been suggested that Wilde was inspired by dyed flowers that he had seen in Paris. The idea may also have appealed to him because of the associations between green and Irishness. The implications of queer sex accompanying the unnatural flower were fairly obvious at the time and became unmistakable with Wilde's conviction for gross indecency the following year. Wilde's disgrace meant that the green carnation vanished with his departure from the world of fashion in 1895. There is, however, some evidence that green clothing could bear a certain queer Wildean frisson in the Edwardian era. For example, an editorial in a student periodical *Varsity Vices: The Oxford Truth* (1908) declared that "the green hat and coloured sock are only worn by the worst men."<sup>42</sup>

Colour was one of the markers by which dominant hegemonic forms of masculinity labelled and denigrated other forms of gendered behaviour.<sup>43</sup> In this masculinist thought of the time women, homosexuals (understood as feminine men), children and non-white people were believed to be peculiarly fascinated by colour.<sup>44</sup> This was an important trope of orientalism. A student publication presented a prophecy in 1870 that Cambridge would become so orientalised by immigrants that by 1890 a procession from a sermon held at the University church would be like an Indian durbar complete with elephants.<sup>45</sup> Similar imagery was applied in 1894 to a humorous account of a "royal visit to Cambridge" which the writer pretended to confuse with a visit to a circus complete with elephants and lions.<sup>46</sup> This event was orchestrated by a socially prominent—and queer—tutor at King's College, Oscar Browning.<sup>47</sup> Orientalism has often been thought of as being the product, above all, of the gaze of heterosexual men upon women.<sup>48</sup> But when the orientalist looked at "eastern" men his thoughts often turned to androgyny and the perverse. This was not entirely a western fantasy since many non-European cultures, such as that of the Ottoman Turks, did have rich

---

<sup>40</sup> Anon., The Man about Town, in: Country Gentleman (5 March 1892), p. 334.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Hichens, *The Green Carnation*, London 1894; Dominic Janes, *Oscar Wilde Prefigured: Queer Fashioning and British Caricature*, Chicago, 2016, pp. 202-205.

<sup>42</sup> A. C. P. Mackworth/C. H. Davies [likely attribution], Editorial, in: *Varsity Vices or the Oxford Truth* (1908), p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> R. W. Connell, James W. Messerschmidt, Hegemonic Masculinity. Rethinking the Concept, in: *Gender and Society* 19 (2005) 6, pp. 829-859.

<sup>44</sup> Lynda Nead, *Victorian Babylon. People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century*, London 2000, p. 188.

<sup>45</sup> The return from the university sermon, 1890, in: *Moslem in Cambridge* 2 (November 1870), discussed in Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men*, pp. 214-225.

<sup>46</sup> The royal visit to Cambridge, in: *Granta* (October 27, 1894), pp. 21f.

<sup>47</sup> Dominic Janes, The "curious effects" of acting. Homosexuality, theatre and female impersonation at the University of Cambridge, 1900-1939', in: *Twentieth Century British History* 33 (2022) 2, pp. 169-202, here pp. 176-179; Jane Marcus, Reviewed Work: *Oscar Browning: A Biography* by Ian Anstruther, in: *Victorian Studies* 28 (1985), p. 556-558.

<sup>48</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London 1978.

homoerotic traditions.<sup>49</sup> Western stereotypes that queered a range of non-western cultures were, therefore, partly inspired by the fact that many of these were more open to gender and sexual diversity than those of contemporary Europeans.

A scurrilous piece describing a visit to Browning in his college rooms was published in a rapidly suppressed student publication, *The Gadfly*, in 1888: “A slim page, dressed in the style of the seventeenth century, opens the door, his long wavy brown hair falls in thick clusters over this sloping shoulders.” Browning himself lolls on a divan, while “two Arab boys severally support on each side an ash tray and a gold cigarette box.” It was further alleged that he held regular Sunday soirées at which “all the [male] Undergraduates who are clever or handsome, or have any qualities at all, are sure to be met.”<sup>50</sup> The anonymous author of this piece was the newly arrived undergraduate Robert Ross who, it is thought, had become Oscar Wilde’s lover two years earlier. Therefore we can assume that he knew what he was talking about and should interpret this not so much as the result of homophobia but as kind of queer outing. That Browning did show an interest in students of colour was suggested by a parody of the comic poem “How Pleasant to Know Mr. [Edward] Lear!” published in 1894: “He befriends the collegiate negro / And other exaqueous fish” (ie. fish out of water).<sup>51</sup> This does, of course, leave open the question as to whether Browning befriended students of colour because he was not racist or because he sexually fetishized them. Yet even that was better than the alternative which was mocked in *Varsity* in 1912—“Dons I dislike. V. The humorous dog”; this was the academic who tries to make himself popular by, amongst other things, laughing at coloured students.<sup>52</sup> There is no doubt, by contrast, about the attitudes behind the disgusting parody of a Muslim student, Mahamed Saladin Ben Punka, as a “type of the times” in Oxford’s *Isis* magazine in 1903. The article depicts this invented figure as a bizarre and colourful man who dressed like a sultana (ie. like a woman). This text was accompanied by a drawing that drew on deeply rooted stereotypes of the appearance of “semitic” peoples.<sup>53</sup> The bright robes worn by many non-western men, including those from China, were read at this time as evidence of gender inversion, transvestism or drag.<sup>54</sup> These were practices with which students were familiar because most college theatre was performed single sex. This meant that men necessarily played women’s parts which was a custom that had developed its own set of queer connotations.<sup>55</sup>

A clear distinction was made between blacks and whites in sub-Saharan Africa, but Asia, the Middle East and the Mediterranean were regions understood as being largely populated by “coloured people” of a variety of hues. Even in Britain itself class distinctions suggested the prevalence of swarthinness among men of the British lower classes in distinction to aristocratic pallor. It is, therefore, doubly interesting that parodic Orientalism influenced satirical depictions by students of Oscar and his circle as colourful gentlemen. It was thus that Reggie found Browning—evoking both Oscar Wilde and the tutor with the same first

---

<sup>49</sup> Joseph A. Boone, *The Homoerotics of Orientalism*, New York 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Anonymous, [Robert Ross], O-C-R B---NG at home, in: *Gadfly* (November 15, 1888). pp. 1f.

<sup>51</sup> How pleasant to know the O.B., in *Granta* (October 27, 1894), p. 21.

<sup>52</sup> Alceste, Dons I dislike. V. The humorous dog, in *Varsity* (February 22, 1912), p. 177.

<sup>53</sup> M.C., Types of the times. 2. Mahamed Saladin Ben Punka, in *Isis* (November 7, 1903), pp. 35f.

<sup>54</sup> George Cooper, The popular craze for Chinese plays, in: *Granta* (November 16, 1901), p. 87.

<sup>55</sup> Dominic Janes, The varsity drag. Gender, sexuality and cross-dressing at the University of Cambridge, 1850-1950, in: *Journal of Social History* 55 (2022) 3, pp. 695-723.

name—“sprawling elegantly on the sofa” in “The blue pink”. This was a skit on *The Green Carnation* published in *Granta* in 1894. Reggie was a young athlete, ready to play football for the University: “He was exquisitely beautiful and exquisitely aware of it... He assumed several different poses, such as a Greek god playing half-back might assume.”<sup>56</sup> That notwithstanding the overall effect was spoiled because his blue sports blazer clashed with the blue pink in this buttonhole (a “pink” was another name for a carnation). This piece, therefore, mocked the combination of a colourful sports blazer and a symbol of aesthetic decadence. Another example of this satirical trope came from an Oxford magazine published in 1899 which published a (fictional) letter from Algernon to his cousin Augustus:

“I saw a very delicate *toilette* this afternoon, a salmon pink ground with broad green chartreuse stripes, a pair of white, high-heeled boots with purple laces, with tie and ribband displaying the tasteful colours of the Lorummies [a fictional club], which, as you know, combine scarlet, navy blue and saffron yellow.”<sup>57</sup>

Aesthetic colours and sporting colours had to be kept conceptually distinct.

The issue here was the potentially controversial nature of wearing colourful clothes as well as the question of which precise tones were being worn. In the case of civilian clothing the male renunciation of bright colour, other than— as we have seen—in uniforms, led to colourfully dressed men being equated with women. Theories of sexual inversion which were influential around 1900 suggested that male homosexuals possessed a woman’s mind or spirit and it followed that they might be expected to dress like them too. Homosexual men became increasingly recognised in interwar popular culture and they were often assumed to be “effeminate” colourfully-dressed beings. Quentin Crisp, the English wit and sometime male prostitute, who as the author of *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968) was a pioneer of queer visibility in Britain, employed this form of flamboyant self-presentation during and since the interwar period.<sup>58</sup> This begs the question of whether he believed himself to have been so like a woman that he could only express something like a (proto-)trans identity through colourful clothes or whether this was the dress that was expected by society of a homosexual in this period. Or perhaps he simply liked bright colours and did not care about convention? Leaving those issues to one side it was certainly *not* the case that all men who identified as homosexual presented themselves in clothing that stood out because it was unusually colourful.

Because fashion has long been associated with women those men who worked in that field have often been associated with queerly effeminate tastes. Attempts on the part of clothing shops to make male attire attractive were parodied in satirical cartoons such as Lewis Baumer’s “The Neglected Sex” (1922) which showed a tableau of manikins in a shop window as if they are batting flirtatious glances at each other.<sup>59</sup> Despite this the 1920s saw an increasing interest in more colourful clothing on the part of younger men. “Young” was a fashionable buzz word in the 1920s, as was “bright”; hence the nickname of the “bright

---

<sup>56</sup> The blue pink, in *Granta* (December 1 1894), pp. 99f.

<sup>57</sup> Anon., Men’s letter, in: *Bump* 2 (May 20, 1899) 2, pp. 8f, here p. 8.

<sup>58</sup> Quentin Crisp, *The Naked Civil Servant*, London 1968.

<sup>59</sup> Lewis Baumer, The neglected sex, in: *Punch* 163 (1922), p. 439.

young things” for a group of high society swingers and celebrities (many of whom were queer).<sup>60</sup> The key thing was that hitherto men, when not in uniform, had had a very restricted colour palette and any expansion of this could be attacked as effeminate (or used to signal deviancy). This may have been particularly important in the case of imperial Britain whose officials needed to distinguish themselves from their colonial subjects. Anxieties over such matters energized the gender reversal in the caption of J. H. Dowd’s cartoon “The New River ‘Belle’” (1920): “I saw the Honourable Pamela Puntah, attended by a gorgeous creation in tangerine orange and cornflower blue, with hat and handkerchief to match’ [It was remarked that at Henley the men’s river attire quite outshone the ladies.].”<sup>61</sup> In normative terms it should have been the male punter who was accompanied by a colourfully dressed woman.

As awareness of homosexuality spread through the interwar period innuendo increasingly hinted at sexual perversity and not just gender travesty. This is the point of a cartoon in *Men Only* in 1936 in which a bluff, middle-aged military man blushes on being told by a camp shop assistant that “‘sir, I think *we’re* the type who can wear a tie such as this!”<sup>62</sup> By this point feminine homosexuals were being popularly stereotyped as “pansies”. This was an everyday flower which gave the appearance of a face covered in make-up. Urban queens, such as Quentin Crisp, did, in reality, use cosmetics at this point. One such figure appeared in a gender confusion story that was published in an Oxford student magazine in 1925. At this date short, cropped hair for women was intensely fashionable. An enchanting such figure with a “pansy-face” appeared at a college window and accepted an assignation. On being revealed as a man he is then sworn as being nothing more than a “‘damned Æsthete””.<sup>63</sup>

Fig. 2

Walters, advert, *Varsity types*, no. 2—the aesthete, in: *Isis* (October 28, 1925), p. xix; reproduced by kind permission of Walters and Co. and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library: P985.b.20.29.

Student aestheticism was fashionable in the 1920s but it can be traced back to the mid-Victorian period when Oscar Wilde had been a student at Oxford. Interestingly aesthetes, not only as figures of fun, but also as stylish models for emulation, were considerably more widespread in interwar Oxford than in Cambridge. The firm of Walters regularly placed adverts in student magazines for “aesthetic dress” such as one illustrating “*Varsity types*, no. 2—the aesthete” (1925) (fig. 2). This can be contrasted with another promotion from the same company, ‘*Varsity Types,—the athlete (adorned)*’ (1925) (fig. 3). The adverts are in black and white, but it is only the former that makes reference—“brilliant”, “vivid”—to colour. The magazines themselves were starting at this time to include some colour printing.

---

<sup>60</sup> Dominic Janes, *Freak to Chic. ‘Gay’ Men in and Out of Fashion after Oscar Wilde*, London 2021, pp. 79-116.

<sup>61</sup> James Henry Dowd, *The new river “belle”*, in: *Punch* 159 (1920), p. 28.

<sup>62</sup> “Well, Sir, I think *we’re* the type who can wear a tie such as this!”, in: *Men Only* 3 (October 1936) 11, p. 77, emphasis in original. Arthur Wallis Mills, *The girl. “But, darling, you’ve chosen a reddish tie”*, in *Punch* 177 (1929), p. 341; Anne Herrmann, *Queering the Moderns. Poses/Portraits/Performances*, Basingstoke 2000, p. 158. Robert Tobin, *Peripheral Desires. The German Discovery of Sex*, Philadelphia 2015, p. 197, notes that red ties were associated with homosexuality in Germany in the early twentieth century.

<sup>63</sup> T.W. Coghlin, *She wore a camellia*, in: *Cherwell* 17, no. 1 (new series) (April 29, 1925) 1, pp. 9, 11.

It was thus with the use of green, which retained its earlier queer valences, that *Varsity Life* in 1929 depicted the dress of “aesthetes and pansies”.<sup>64</sup> This cover illustrated a scandalous exposé of the cult of the Oxford aesthete as being, the magazine alleged, all about homosexuality. The editorial claimed that there were only about twenty real cultural critics in the university. All, it contended, would shrink from being labelled an aesthete. Those who embraced the term were people who were after easy notoriety, meritless poseurs who dressed in a peculiar fashion and write bad poetry. All this, it should be added, repeats things that were said about Wilde. His present-day equivalents’ idea of excellence is “to mince affectedly round some other college’s quad... [and] to usurp the tricks that usually belong to the other (and, to my mind, hardly preferable) sex.” However, “pansies must wither; it is one of the few thoughts that cheer me, the thought of your premature death.”<sup>65</sup>

Fig. 3.

Walters, advert, *Varsity* types,—the athlete (adorned), in: *Isis* (November 4, 1925), p. xix; reproduced by kind permission of Walters and Co. and the Syndics of Cambridge University Library: P985.b.20.29.

This homophobic rant did bear some relation to reality if we are to believe the account of a queer writer, Terence Greenidge, who published a refutation of such criticism in the form of *Degenerate Oxford? A Critical Study of Modern University Life* in 1930. This book devoted separate chapters to “Athletes” and “Æsthetes” but denied that they were exclusive. He claimed to be both, if a bit more of an aesthete. Athletes, he argued, tended politically to be conservative; they were “in general very blue” (ie. sporting) and prone to attack “reds” (ie. communists and socialists which were categories that then overlapped with aesthetes).<sup>66</sup> Individual self-expression was an aesthetic forté, as was progressive politics such that the Oxford Union was now led by members of that group. The athletic ideal of rugged imperial endurance was for him outdated and unfashionable. Aesthetes tended to be interested in art and other intellectual pursuits and regarded games as being a bit immature (all right for school but not for university). He claimed that most athletes were heterosexual but there were some surprising evidences of tenderness from them when they were drunk. He mentioned “becoming fond” of an athlete in his own college and celebrated the idea of friendships with them:

“I love to bring for renewed contemplation memories of the Æsthete and the Athlete sitting together over the fire late at night, the latter at last realising the virility, the thoroughly manly spirit that lies behind the hacking out of some fiery, tremendous

---

<sup>64</sup> Count Ivor Telmarckle [sic], Pale green velvet, in: *New Cambridge* (February 17, 1923), p. 117; Rufus, cover, in: *Varsity Life* (March 2, 1929).

<sup>65</sup> Editorial, The blushing pansy, in: *Varsity Life* (March 2, 1929), p. 131.

<sup>66</sup> Terence Greenidge, *Degenerate Oxford? A Critical Study of Modern University Life*, London, 1930, p. 56; see also Ross Brooks, *Beyond Brideshead. The Male Homoerotics of 1930s Oxford*, in: *Journal of British Studies* 59 (2020) 4, pp. 821-856.

ode, the former thoroughly appreciating competent youth hitting a six on a golden day, before a bright green back-cloth, with the wicket just perfect.”<sup>67</sup>

As this makes clear he was keen to make a clear distinction between homosexuality and effeminacy and was just as critical as *Varsity Life* of pansies in bright, cut-tight jackets who “speak with artificial voices of a somewhat high timbre... [and] walk with a mincing gait.”<sup>68</sup> He also attempted to displace the term homosexual with “romantic”, claiming furthermore that “I am no Romanticist nowadays. Women occupy only too large a part of my thoughts.”<sup>69</sup> This was because “we become normal when we go down” [ie. graduate].<sup>70</sup>

Similar associations, if couched in less explicit tones, had previously surfaced in Cambridge in 1925 where *The Granta* republished an extract from a story that had recently run in the national press under the headline “Girl-men of Cambridge”.<sup>71</sup> The editorial in this case mocked the attempt to arouse popular contempt through allegations of undergraduate degeneracy, although tellingly it did so through a racist comparison. In “Let us be cave-men” the magazine asked “what if it is true that Cambridge is a reeking cess in which the cosmetic manufacturers have driven the brewers out of business... Away with our purple, high-necked jumpers, cerise bags and green-gold shoes. Let us replace the silk of effeminacy with the lion-skin of savagery.”<sup>72</sup> This played on the popular trope that homosexuality was a symptom of over-refinement. However, the under-refined primitive was also associated by students with colour and adornment. An example of this was the article “Sheik mad” (1928) which described the figure of the Sheik as being the archetype of the all-masculine strong, silent, “Cave Man” whilst, in the same breath, decrying popular films and tales of love and adventure in Arabia as “coloured monstrosities”.<sup>73</sup> This piece needs to be understood in the context of successful but also controversial movies such as *The Sheik* (1921) and *The Son of the Sheik* (1926) which starred Rudolph[o] Valentino.<sup>74</sup>

One way to explain these patterns of thought derives from combining two approaches to the historical study of western racialised constructions of the east. Michael Keevak’s *Becoming Yellow: A Short History of Racial Thinking* (2011) is all about how a “western fantasy” of sameness was invented for the so-called “Mongolian races”.<sup>75</sup> It was occasionally noted at the time that there was something a little peculiar about this. In an editorial from 1911 about the future of China in *Varsity* magazine it was noted that a Chinese student had given his opinion that his people were not yellow but “man-colour”. The white writer was of the opinion that they looked yellow-ish and, like the then Chinese economy, jaundiced and sickly.<sup>76</sup> The effect of racialist colour-labelling, however, was to furnish a sort of coloured

---

<sup>67</sup> Greenidge, *Degenerate Oxford?*, p. 99 and 100.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 114.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 91.

<sup>71</sup> Janes, *The “curious effects” of acting*, p. 190.

<sup>72</sup> W. S. M., *Let us be cave-men*, in: *Isis* (October 21, 1925), p. 1.

<sup>73</sup> G. Thomas, *Sheik mad*, in: *Cambridge Gownsmen* (May 12, 1928), p. 1.

<sup>74</sup> Elisabetta Girelli, *In defense of the perverse. Reflections on The Sheik (George Melford, 1921)*, in: *Journal of Popular Romance Studies* 9 (2020), pp. 1-5: <https://www.jprstudies.org/2020/12/in-defense-of-the-perverse-reflections-on-the-sheik-george-melford-1921/> (retrieved January 10, 2023).

<sup>75</sup> Michael Keevak, *Becoming Yellow. A Short History of Racial Thinking*, Princeton 2011.

<sup>76</sup> Editorial, *Thoughts that occur. The Chin of to-morrow*, in: *Varsity* (November 9, 1911), pp. 45f, here p. 45.

uniform for diverse groups of peoples so as to form them into something like a team. This could then be understood to stand in clear distinction to rival black, brown, red and white squads.

Anne Anlin Cheng's *Ornamentalism* (2019) takes a different approach to western images of eastern bodies by focussing on the issue of ornamentation. She contrasts the concepts of the biological, organized and unornamented masculine body and the synthetic, feminine, ornamented Asian body.<sup>77</sup> Ornamentalism could create eroticised images of Asian women for heterosexual western men. It could also be used to denigrate Asian men as effeminate and also, potentially as sexually fluid. Such ornamentalist anti-coloured prejudice could be deployed not just against "Orientals" but against black people too. A particularly unpleasant example of this was the skit, "A black brother of the Metropolis". This was a highly racist purported account of a black missionary in Britain, the Rev. Bula Bula. He attempts, at one point, to pay in a "gaily-coloured note". This may indicate an attempt to use an exotic foreign bill and/or be a satirical reference to the first appearance of the coloured pound note the year before, but tellingly he subsequently attempts to pay a tip with "strings of coloured beads".<sup>78</sup>

Homosexuality was often fantasised as a feature of "eastern" locales as in Richard Burton's Victorian invention of the Sotadic Zone.<sup>79</sup> Burton named this region after Sotades, an ancient Greek writer of (homo)erotic verse. It encompassed the Americas and a band of territory that ran from the Mediterranean in the west to China and Japan in the east. Therefore, aesthetes and homosexuals, understood as a feminine, artificial and ornamented became conceptually aligned with "Orientals" into a motley and supposedly inferior "coloured" group. In this way the diversity of global cultures was reorganised into two rival teams, as if on a football field, with the inferior sexually and racially colourful men on the losing side and the superior white men on the other.

## Conclusions

Two interrelated ways of thinking about colour appear in the student materials that I have been studying. The first applies specific colours to label different groups such as rival sports teams. Individual choice in bright colours was gendered feminine which meant that strong hues only bolstered embodied white masculinity when they could be seen as functionally labelling, as in their use in sports and military uniforms. The second makes a distinction between plainness and ornament. Idiosyncratic ornamental, as opposed to functional, deployment of colour could be used by queer "colourful" men as a counter-cultural statement. It was in this vein that Terence Greenidge asserted that queer aesthetes, unlike sports players, were individualist, and not into forming "cliques" (ie. teams).<sup>80</sup> Such radicalism became fashionable during the interwar period when the aesthetic rejection of sports could be

---

<sup>77</sup> Anne Anlin Cheng, *Ornamentalism*, Oxford 2019, p. 30.

<sup>78</sup> A black brother of the metropolis, in: *Varsity Life* (March 2, 1929), p. 138.

<sup>79</sup> Dane Kennedy, 'Captain Burton's Oriental Muck Heap'. *The Book of the Thousand Nights and the Uses of Orientalism*, in: *Journal of British Studies* 39 (2000) 3, pp. 317-339.

<sup>80</sup> Greenidge, *Degenerate Oxford?* p. 117.

considered as a political stance as in a debate in 1931 on whether “this House prefers the Reds to the Blues” (ie. prefers communists/socialists to sportsmen).<sup>81</sup> The African-American Alain Locke, like many others, was both a popular sportsman and a dandified homosexual but this did not stop the dominant mode of thinking from conceptualising aesthetes as those with puny bodies who wore a sort of contemptible motley uniform. Normative opinion, thereby, attempted to manage threatening diversity by assimilating sexual non-conformists and aesthetes into a rival team of allegedly similar ornamental men in much the same way that uniform racial colour terms were used to obscure the variety of non-whites.

It is important to remember that there were distinct traditions of anti-imperial and anti-racist thinking at the two universities including from amongst those who celebrated sporting manliness.<sup>82</sup> Yet it is fact that some hearty men who focussed on team sports were indeed homophobic and racist. Such views fed directly into enthusiasm for service in the British imperial project. Military practice was carried out as another form of student hobby and was regarded as equally entertaining for participants and onlookers. It was in this context that the end of the academic year was marked not just by rowing races but also, particularly in the run up to World War One, by military tournaments. In one such, held in 1912, students staged an “attack on Afghan [sic] or Reeka Bad”: “The garrison were rigged up in fine style as natives, and quite a thrill went through the spectators when a wounded telegraphist was captured and hanged from the top of the fort.”<sup>83</sup> The members of the University Officer Training Corps were supposed to maintain appropriate decorum on parade and in private life; in practice they were often the self-same members of sports teams who were associated with drunkenness and violent attacks on aesthetes and other coloured and colourful students that they disliked. This world was celebrated in a wide range of publications such as *Red Paint at Oxford* (1904)—the title of the novel refers not to politics but to the phrase “painting the town red”, meaning to engage in riotous fun. Racism in this novel, and others like it, is not obvious because most of the time everyone involved is white. However, it is telling that it surfaces in moments of casual “humorous” detail: “Toward the end [of the meal] Freddy expressed a violent antipathy to the colour of the Turkish gentleman who served us with coffee.”<sup>84</sup>

It would be nice to think that there was some kind of rainbow alliance against racial prejudice but the reality was much more complex. An example of this was the future celebrity photographer, Cecil Beaton, who was open to his circle of friends about his homosexuality when a student at Cambridge. He relished playing cross-dressed roles in theatre productions and even wore face make-up on a daily basis.<sup>85</sup> Yet a review in which he cross-dressed in 1925 also included a troupe of dancing “cannibals” entitled “Ava-banana isle” (ie. “have a banana”).<sup>86</sup>

---

<sup>81</sup> Magpie and Stump Debating Society Minute Book (1930-33), January 30, 1931, Trinity College, Cambridge, Archives, REC 8.13; reproduced courtesy of the Master and Fellows of Trinity College, Cambridge.

<sup>82</sup> Richard Symonds, *Oxford and Empire. The Last Lost Cause?* Oxford 1991, pp. 80-98.

<sup>83</sup> An Onlooker, The military tournament at Cambridge, in: *Varsity* (June 13, 1912), pp. 299f, here p. 300.

<sup>84</sup> Pish and Tush, *Red Paint at Oxford: Sketches*, London 1904, p. 9.

<sup>85</sup> Janes, The “curious effects” of acting, p. 180-190.

<sup>86</sup> W. C. N., All the vogue, in: *New Cambridge* (June 13, 1925), p. 186.



To be aesthetic may have been more fashionable than to be hearty by the 1920s but fashionable views often tended to bring irony, as opposed to equality, to the contemplation of racial and sexual difference. Thus it was very much in this modern “amusing” mode that an editorial on “Sun-Baths” published in *The New Cambridge* in 1925 suggested that “they might solve the great race question. If we all became black, or a muddy yellow, surely the racial problem would equate itself. The blacks can hardly become permanently white. But we can, by means of Sun-Baths, become black.” If the fascists had yet to call for compulsory sun bathing it was because they were “already totally black!”<sup>87</sup>

Two years earlier a poem, “In Rome”, had been published in *Isis*:

If they wear black shirts,  
    And they lead black lives...  
If they drink no beer  
    And eat no meat,  
And kiss one another,  
    Whenever they meet...  
And sometimes use words  
    That are not very nice...  
And cherish a taste  
    For chromatics and vice,  
In Rome you must do as the Romans do.<sup>88</sup>

This poem displaced the Italian fascists from Oxford’s masculine normativity by mocking their outfits, their diet and their alleged (homo)sexual tastes. They became, in effect, a rival, queer team of not-quite-white Mediterranean men in black uniforms.

Orientalism remained in fashion through the interwar period when stylish students would sit smoking Abdulla cigarettes in Oxford’s Moorish Tea Lounge.<sup>89</sup> The Abdulla brand consciously marketed itself by using references to colour to indicate its sophisticated modernity in adverts placed in student periodicals. In one such promotion a young lady in search of a marriage proposal— “the schemer”—changed the colour of the walls of her drawing room from “black and grey” to “scarlet, puce and blue” and then to the fully orientalist “purple, gold and jade”. However, at this point the “sight of Delia’s Turkish trows” (ie. trousers, a very daring fashion for a woman at this date) scared off the object of her affections and she ended up by whitewashing everything—which was, in fact, an even more modern, and indeed modernist, statement.<sup>90</sup> In ways such as this the binary pairs of white versus coloured, normative versus queer, and British versus foreign were deployed in changing cultural and political conditions from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries as paternalistic imperialism lost momentum and fascist forms of white modernism strove to revitalise and surpass it.

---

<sup>87</sup> Sun-baths, in: *New Cambridge* (May 23, 1925), p. 97.

<sup>88</sup> A.W.I.F., In Rome, in: *Isis* (January 24, 1923), p. 2.

<sup>89</sup> Moorish Tea Lounge, advert, in *Oxford Outlook* 6 (1924), before p. 1.

<sup>90</sup> Abdulla Cigarettes, advert, The schemer, in: *Isis* (October 26, 1921), p. xxiv.

