

QUEERING COLONIAL NATAL: INDIGENEITY AND THE VIOLENCE OF BELONGING IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

by T.J. TALLIE

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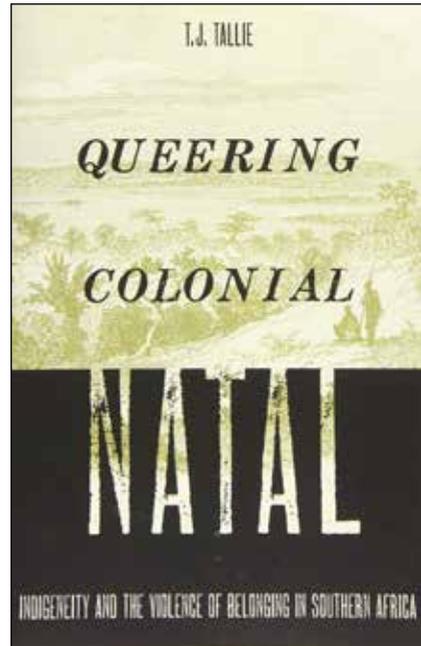
USING an eclectic combination of queer theory and indigenous studies, T.J. Tallie attempts an analysis of social relations in nineteenth century Natal, interpreting both the ‘discursive and the material’ (p. 2).

Analysing how British settlers attempted to entrench and maintain power in a colony where they would always be in the minority, results in Tallie collecting and analysing an array of diverse perceptions of polygamy and *ilobolo*, alcohol consumption, inter-racial friendships, Western and indigenous dress and education, in which particular constructs of bodies, genders, sexualities and ‘civilisation’ were regarded as essential to settler hegemony.

As expected in an historical study, which uses a queer theoretical lens, Tallie concentrates on moments of disruption or resistance, in which indigenous peoples resist and so ‘queer’ the imposition of a normative order.

The author, however, pushes queer theory beyond this binary (normative/transgressive). As he himself says, in a moment of self-conscious cleverness, ‘queer indigenous work allows us to both *queer* settlement and *indigenize* queerness’ (p. 9). Furthermore, this view, argues Tallie, is in keeping with the post-colonial historiography of empire, in which the metropole and periphery are perceived as implicated in each other, rather than as binary opposites (pp. 184–185).

Hence Tallie’s bold attempt to unravel the complex intersections of race, gen-



der and class in colonial Natal. In addition his work, as he contends, ‘connects southern Africa to the larger contemporary world of nineteenth-century settler colonialism, something profoundly missing in work on the colony’ (p. 5).

Be that as it may, the acid test of a study such as this is the question: does it work? Does it contribute to post-colonial studies of the history of the Colony of Natal in ways in which other studies, without the queer/indigenous lens, do not? My immediate answer would be negative. Tallie’s chapter five, subtitled ‘Education and Belonging’ includes, for instance, a striking example of resistance to the colonial government’s

master plan for native education – the dramatic failure of the Zwaartkop Native Industrial School after eight years (1884–1892) initiated by the students and the community without using the words (and thus concepts) of ‘queer’ or ‘queering’, curiously abandoned for this analysis. In short, Tallie seems to acknowledge that another theoretical approach, using Foucault’s cratology, for example, could be as, or more, effectively deployed here (and elsewhere?).

There is, however, much to admire in Tallie’s work. Years of industriousness in various archives and libraries have enabled him to weave together, in a compelling narrative, settler legislation, its discursive contexts, ranging from hair-raising white supremacist speeches and debates in the Legislative Assembly in Pietermaritzburg, to letters to the *Natal Witness*, *amakholwa* (Zulu Christian convert) attempts to construct counter-cultural identities in early Zulu-language newspapers supervised by missionaries; to court cases involving rape and drunkenness, which exemplify, dramatically and painfully, how the colonial government policed its heteronormative and racist order.

Tallie also has a sense of drama and structure, important in constructing any narrative. Chapter three, for instance, uses as a dramatic opening Bishop Colenso’s account (1855) of his attempt to shake a black hand when he first came to the Colony of Natal (p. 91); then examines how inter-racial friendships could disrupt (that is, ‘queer’) the colonialist hierarchies and challenge imperialist propaganda, evident in the discourse of the Legislative Council itself and various missionaries, that the ‘African is our friend’.

Interesting analyses of the deposed Zulu king Cetshwayo’s discourse on

his friendship with Queen Victoria, in contrast to his false friendship with John Dunn, illustrate the multivalence of friendship itself within a settler state, which Tallie undergirds with thoughtful reflections from both Derrida and Mimi Thi Nguyen (pp. 97–100). Same-race friendships, advocated by settler voices such as those of King in 1890 (pp. 107–108), in order to entrench white settler power in the face, for example, of Indian immigration, further illustrate this multivalence. On, for example, Indian articulation of a common Britishness with Natal settlers when Indian migrants attempted to resist alcohol legislation in the 1890s, Tallie lives up to his promise to explore the interactions between the Colony of Natal and the wider empire.

Tallie’s belief that gender, race and sexuality cannot be divorced from wider economic and political structures results in, for example, his careful examination, in chapter one, of both indigenous marital practices and settler attempts to police them: so essential were the practices of *ilobolo* and polygamy to the pastoral-agrarian economies of Zulu *imizi* (homesteads) that a commission of inquiry in 1852 found that they constituted a serious threat to the economic success and survival of white settler farmers, ever in search of reserves of cheap labour.¹

In his final chapter, certainly the queerest and perhaps the most challenging, Tallie ventures into the murky waters of post-colonial KwaZulu-Natal to suggest how some contemporary Zulu voices, on questions of traditional culture and contemporary sexualities, echo the kind of patriarchy and heteronormativity deployed by the nineteenth century settlers.

Denouncing homosexuality as un-African could well be a form of queer resistance to the ‘idea of gay or queer as a universal signifier’ (p. 190) of alternative identities, produced by colonialist discourses and their epistemic violence. As Tallie contends, ‘African rejections of homosexuality, particularly in a Zulu context, while undoubtedly perpetuating reprehensible justifications for violence against people who engage in nonheteronormative sexual activity, also potentially challenge the underlying assumptions of universal sexual subjects produced through colonial violence’ (p. 190).

Reprehensible justifications for violence? Not simply reprehensible, but unconstitutional and criminally immoral, at times resulting in the corrective rape and murder of black lesbian women and gay men. Often post-colonial historiography, wary of binaries such as ‘wicked white settlers/Rousseauian noble savages’ and any grand narratives such as ‘morality’, privileges the ideological over the personal, and perpetuates new binaries:

the discursive and the material, for instance. Tallie must be careful about this tendency in his work.²

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NOTES

- 1 Thus exemplifying Judith Butler’s argument that ‘[T]he regulation of sexuality was systematically tied to *the mode of production* proper to the functioning of political economy’ (cited on p. 187).
- 2 I noted the following misprints and ellipses: ‘by attempting uphold’ (p. 57), ‘Devon’ Stransham (p. 65 with ‘Dawson’ elsewhere), ‘Indians should therefore able’ (p. 75); ‘Natalians attempted to create a whites-only colony psychically and civically if they could not be render one logistically’ (p. 81); ‘the fit (gift?) must be offered but not acknowledged as such’ (p. 98); ‘In his 1852 book, Barter parodied ... local missionaries like John Colenso’ (unlikely as Colenso arrived in Natal in 1854) (p. 104). Some of the jargon is impenetrable, for example: ‘The *Ikwezi* article in effect argues that *ilobolo* works to perpetuate an enslaving/dehumanizing logic of commodification that exists apart from affection, and subsequently elides the externality of this assertion by rendering it in Zulu idiom as an *internal* assessment rather than a form of religious reorientation’ (p. 36). Even Butler, much admired by the author, could not improve on this!