

Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities

Edited by
Antoinette Burton

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GENDER, SEXUALITY AND COLONIAL MODERNITIES

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GENDER, SEXUALITY AND COLONIAL MODERNITIES

This interesting collection of articles is firmly in the vanguard of recent important reconceptualisations of the colonial epoch . . . The editor has a well-earned reputation for pioneering research into gender and imperialism and this volume carries this research one step further into the domain of sexuality.

Dr Barbara Bush, Staffordshire University

Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities considers the ways in which modernity was constructed, in all its incompleteness, through colonialism. Using a variety of archival resources and approaches, the authors trace modernity's unstable foundations in the slippages and ruptures of colonial gender and sexual politics. As a whole, the essays illustrate that modern colonial regimes are never self-evidently hegemonic, but are always in process – subject to disruption and contest – and never finally accomplished; they are therefore 'unfinished business'.

This book is divided into four sections: mapping new terrains; representation and colonial spectacle; domestic contingencies; and new identities. The essays cover a wide geographical range: from India to Indonesia; Canada to Calcutta; Paris to London; Australia to the Straits Settlements; Hong Kong to Niagara Falls. Equally broadly, they deal with travel writing, women's political and social reform activities, urban ethnography, immigration, the regulation of prostitution, military discourse, the picture postcard and theosophy. What all these articles share is an interest in working through the ways in which gender and sexuality underwrote the projects of colonial modernity, and a commitment to understanding how apparently dominant regimes are unstable, porous and eminently contestable as well.

Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities presents exciting new perspectives on modern colonial regimes to researchers and students in gender studies, history and cultural studies.

Antoinette Burton is Associate Professor in Modern European History at the University of Illinois, Urbana. She has written extensively on feminism, race and empire, and is the author of *At the Heart of Empire: Indians and the Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain*, and *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915*.

ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN
GENDER AND HISTORY

1 THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND WOMEN'S
EMPLOYMENT IN NINETEENTH CENTURY BRITAIN

Ellen Jordan

2 GENDER, SEXUALITY AND COLONIAL
MODERNITIES

Edited by Antoinette Burton

**FOR NICHOLAS
MIRACULOUSLY IN-THE-MAKING**

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INTRODUCTION

The unfinished business of colonial modernities

Antoinette Burton

This collection of essays operates from the assumption that modern colonial regimes are never self-evidently hegemonic, but are always in process, subject to disruption and contest, and therefore never fully or finally accomplished, to such an extent that they must be conceived of as 'unfinished business'. It also presumes that the gendered and sexualized social orders produced by such regimes are equally precarious, and hence offer us unique opportunities to see the incompleteness of colonial modernities at work. Each of the essays included here engages the limited capacity of the state and other instruments of social, political and cultural power to fully contain or successfully control the domain of sexuality, especially as evidenced by the mobility and recalcitrance of women's bodies (and some men's as well). In this sense the book is not simply about gender and sexuality as self-evident categories, but about their capacity, as contingent and highly unstable systems of power, to interrupt, if not to thwart, modernizing regimes. This is in part because they are not simply dimensions of the socio-political domain, but represent its productive and uneven effects.¹

Here a number of contributors follow feminist practices by insisting on the relationship of representations of gender and sexuality to cultural practices and to a range of acts of power.² Above all, the essays in this collection ask us to consider that if modernity, in all its incompleteness and instability, was made through colonialism, its unstable foundations must be traced to the slippages and ruptures of colonial *gender and sexual* politics as well as to those of political economy or national policy. This argument is crucial because it was often through reference to sexuality and with an eye to maintaining a certain heterosexual cultural order that the experiments of colonial modernity were attempted.

Contemporary theories about the basic incompleteness of all hegemonies may be traced to the writings of Antonio Gramsci who, of course, echoed Marx's arguments about the unfinished project of bourgeois culture and, with it, modernity in its heterogeneous incarnations.³ For as Stuart Hall has noted,

hegemony is best conceptualized as 'a state of play' which has to be 'continually worked on and reconstructed in order to be maintained, and which remains a contradictory conjuncture'.⁴ The implications of this argument for the status of gender and sexuality as eruptive forces under colonialism have been suggested in the recent work of Ann Stoler.⁵ As of yet, however, scholarship which tracks the precariousness of colonial modernity as an historical phenomenon across specific national/colonial cultures has been rare enough. Among the sites represented here are Canada, Australia, Hong Kong, India, Sri Lanka, metropolitan France, Indonesia, and the United States as well.

As many of the essays suggest, however, contests over the nature and direction of social and cultural transformation were rarely conducted in discrete places, but most often in a series of interconnected spaces, both formal territories and imagined communities.⁶ Thus the 'precarious vulnerability' of colonial modernities, in all their various historical incarnations and cultural forms, was due as much to the permeability of national/colonial borders as it was to the instability of political regimes grounded in a normative heterosexual social order.⁷ Indeed, it is precisely the determination of the colonial state and its cultural agencies to produce colonial modernities through the regulation of cultural difference as read onto the bodies of men and women – through technologies of science, the law, ethnography, spirituality, motherhood, marriage, travel-writing and the postcard – which the authors in this collection are at pains to reveal in a variety of local, regional, 'national' and transnational settings.

In this respect, *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities* is not merely a congeries of discrete research projects which have ended up in the same book because they represent geographical diversity or even a general intellectual commitment to critical feminist and/or historical work. Each author is interested in examining two particular themes. The first is the way that ideologies of gender and sexuality were foundational to the projects of colonial modernity. Second is how attention to the rifts and fissures which normalizing regimes themselves created opens new analytical possibilities for understanding how power can operate, can founder, and can sometimes be reconsolidated in new historical forms.

I hasten to add that by emphasizing the porousness of colonialism – its characteristically unfinished condition – I do not intend to suggest that its operations are not also violent, repressive, and even 'successful' in some domains. Nor is it my intention to glorify any simplistic, utopian notion of 'agency' or resistance, the meanings of which, as Terence MacDonald has argued, must emerge in any case from the reconstruction of their historical possibilities, not from 'deductions based on a putative map of social structures and accompanying subject positions'.⁸ Rather, these essays work to challenge one of the enduring fictions of colonial modernity itself, namely that imperial power acted like the proverbial juggernaut, razing opposition and, more to the point, fixing with absolute authority the social and cultur-

al conditions out of which citizens and subjects could make and remake their relationships to the state and civil society.⁹ The persistent mobility of bodies which is tracked in this collection – in and through Chinatown, Calcutta, the Straits Settlements, Marseilles, Toronto, Sydney, Adyar and London, to name a few of the cultural terrains made visible here – testifies to the regulatory challenges they posed to colonial states and reveals with remarkable clarity the constant struggle of modern regimes to keep the subject ‘in place’.¹⁰

Those ‘places’ have been historically various, representing both recognizably national and less famously local landscapes. This is a diversity of colonial modernities we have sought to capture here, without claiming to represent the phenomenon in its totality. Although this collection has an arguably Anglo-oriented emphasis, it complicates even that frame by suggesting that the ‘Englishness’ of modernity must be understood as diasporic rather than fixed or internally coherent, as attention to Canada, Australia and especially the United States as colonial contexts attests. Our consideration of the United States as a colonial terrain and Canada as an imperial nation follows on recent historiography which highlights the cultures of American imperialism and pursues the implications of imperial geopolitics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for understanding ‘North American’ history.¹¹ To lead with a piece on San Francisco’s Chinatown in a volume otherwise about European or British culture signifies, I hope, a political commitment to re-imagining the content and context of colonial modernity in the wake of global capital and post-colonial criticism. At the very least, addressing the United States in this context reminds us of the racial modernities at the heart of the ‘American’ experience, and its persistently gendered modalities as well.¹² In keeping with this, we are committed to demonstrating the instability of a variety of ‘national’ and even nationalist projects, both historically and historiographically, in order to dislodge the coherence and self-evidence of all apparently originary narratives of the nation.¹³

A word is necessary here on the concept of ‘colonial modernity’, which is a defining structural analytic of this volume. Although as Tani Barlow has recently noted, ‘the modernity of non-European colonies is as indisputable as the colonial core of European modernity’, it is worth emphasizing how very recent these convictions are, as well as how unselfconsciously Eurocentric narratives of modernity have tended to be.¹⁴ Indeed, while historians of colonialism have felt compelled to grapple with the dialectic of modernity and tradition precisely because modernity was thought to have preceded the colonial encounter, even recent theorists and critics of modernity have produced astonishingly insular genealogies of their subject. These typically begin with the Renaissance and almost always presume Europe to be the ‘initial geographical location’ from which the modern ‘radiated’ outward to the rest of the world.¹⁵ Fewer still recognize modernity and tradition themselves as colonial constructs.¹⁶ As Stoler’s work on both Foucault and the case of nineteenth century Dutch metropolitan culture shows, there was

nothing either singular or originary about modernity's appearance in the west.¹⁷ What is more, the fiction of the belatedness of non-western cultures in the march toward modernity has been an enabling colonial strategy since the eighteenth century (if not before), helping to obscure the fact that the 'Enlightenment promise' was historically as unrealizable for women citizens as for colonial subjects of all persuasions and allegiances.¹⁸

Scholarship which takes the inseparability of modernity from colonialism as a point of departure remains a relatively scarce commodity. Such a scarcity is all the more remarkable given the ready commodification of post-colonial studies and the apparent marketability of global approaches to history, culture and literature.¹⁹ This paucity can, however, be attributed to the entrenchment of the very modernist historical narratives through which Euro-American history still, for the most part, comprehends itself. These narratives have not disappeared in the wake of the post-colonial 'boom' but have, rather, been reconsolidated in new generic forms. For this reason, Barlow's thoughtful and innovative argument about the value of colonial modernity as an explanatory framework is worth quoting at length:

'Colonial modernity' can be grasped as a *speculative frame* for investigating the infinitely pervasive discursive powers that increasingly connect at key points to the globalising impulses of capitalism . . . [it] can also suggest that historical context is not a matter of positively defined, elemental, or discrete units – nation states, stages of development, or civilizations, for instance – but rather a complex field of relationships or threads of material that connect multiply in space–time and can be surveyed from specific sites. (emphasis added)²⁰

Clearly the commitment to a frame of analysis which does not privilege one territorial site but insists on re-envisioning the historical landscape as a set of interdependent sites is one the contributors to this volume share, not least because we read the imposition of 'discrete units' as one of the technologies of colonial politics which has left its mark on traditional historiographies, whether of metropole or colony. In this sense, European colonialism not only produced the concept of culture itself, but helped to secure the fiction of separate and discrete cultures as well. It thereby offers a particular kind of challenge (both representational and epistemological) to feminist criticism which aims to produce historical accounts that do more than business as usual.²¹

The regulation of sexuality, in both its public and private practices, was crucial to creating and maintaining this myth about the integrity of cultures, as the essays in Part I ('Colonial modernity, sexuality and space: mapping new terrains') illustrate. Nayan Shah's research on the imposition of norms of white, middle-class domesticity on late-Victorian San Francisco's Chinatown makes clear the investment that the first generation of white women physi-