
Recent Work on Gender and Empire

Janice Boddy. *Civilizing Women: British Crusades in Colonial Sudan*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. xxx + 402 pp. ISBN 0-691-12305-5.

Antoinette Burton. *The Postcolonial Careers of Santha Rama Rau*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007. xii + 214 pp. ISBN 0-8223-4071-2.

Lisa Chilton. *Agents of Empire: British Female Migration to Canada and Australia, 1860s–1930*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007. xii + 240 pp. ISBN 0-8020-9474-0.

Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose., eds. *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. ix + 338 pp. ISBN 0-521-67002-0.

Nancy L. Stockdale. *Colonial Encounters among English and Palestinian Women, 1800–1948*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007. xii + 246 pp. ISBN 0-813-03163-X.

Angela Woollacott. *Gender and Empire*. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. viii + 164 pp. ISBN 0-333-92645-5.

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All of these books take up in some manner the theme of gender relations in the British empire, but they do so in divergent ways and create correspondingly divergent accounts of what that theme can tell us. Lisa Chilton and Nancy Stockdale take women as their subject: British women and to a limited extent Palestinian women in Stockdale's case. By contrast, Angela Woollacott's focus is on gender, and she makes a point of applying it to a wide range of women as well as to men and boys, all as actors as well as subjects. Antoinette Burton focuses on an individual woman, Santha Rama Rau, but her subject's femaleness is just one of many factors that make Rama Rau an exemplar of "Cold War cosmopolitanism" (4). In the volume of essays edited by Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose, as with Burton, women and gender are two of many issues on the table; in half of the essays, they are not issues at all. Finally, Janice Boddy has written a history of colonial Sudan from which stories of gender emerge.

Let me turn first to the monographs on women's history by Chilton and Stockdale. Each has written a carefully argued monograph on a well-defined subject. Chilton seeks to reveal the identities and motivations of "emigrators" (their own term), that is, clubwomen who organized mostly working-class women's emigration as servants from Britain to Canada and Australia from the 1860s into the interwar period. She shows that these emigrators strove to increase female emigration, exclude women they saw as less-than-respectable from the pool of emigrants, and make emigration more safe (9). Chilton stresses that these emigrators believed that only women could successfully implement these changes, and concludes that the emigrators were successful in their aims and in fact did exert "authority and power" (11). As was typical of so much of Euro-American middle-class women's social activism, these emigrators gained prestige by establishing themselves as the arbiters over other women's lives. They moreover promoted a conception of Canadian and Australian societies as white and British, by ignoring in their publicity work the indigenous and settler women and men of various non-British origins who populated Canada and Australia. Chilton contextualizes the emigrators' activism in labor-market and political controversies at the emigrants' destinations. In chapter 5 she examines the controversies surrounding local clubwomen's attempts to use their insider knowledge to secure newly-arrived domestic servants for themselves before the latter could enter the general labor market. Chapter 6 explores the role of imported British servants in establishing the new Australian capital of Canberra that was to be a showcase for local Australian labor. Chilton follows the emigrators' work over about seventy years, and so can show changes over time; above all, the clubwomen's success had the ironic outcome that after the First World War the state took over the emigrators' now well-recognized work.

Nancy Stockdale surveys an even longer period of time in her book on "colonial encounters" between British and Palestinian women between 1800 and 1948. Unlike Chilton's book, this book gives the reader little sense of any change over time, and that seems to be borne out by Stockdale's sources. These are British women's writings, both published and private, about their visits of varying lengths to Palestine and especially their perceptions of Jewish, Muslim, and Christian Palestinian women. British women seem to have perceived and responded to Palestinian women in very similar ways, whether they encountered them in the early nineteenth century or after the First World War. They frequently situated their Palestinian coevals in Biblical times. Each chapter takes up a theme in the British women's writings (such as accounts of holidays, clothing, or visits to private homes) and examines the contradictory, dismissive, and even dehumanizing renditions of Palestinian women to be found there.

Stockdale argues that these writings show British women's "complicity in replicating popular and Orientalist stereotypes about Palestine" and their participation in "activities to further British imperial control over the country and its population" (9). She takes issue particularly with historian Billie Melman's argument that British women travelers to Palestine offered "a counternarrative to patriarchal Orientalism" (5). Those sources allow her to suggest, but not demonstrate, harmful effects of British female travelers' beliefs, and to investigate the latter she includes two chapters of a different nature. Chapter 5 documents with British sources an episode revealing British women's coercion of Palestinian girls in a Protestant orphanage, as the women sought to realize their obsessive hopes for changing the girls and their families without questioning their own cruel actions. Chapter 6 is a discussion of interviews Stockdale carried out with some Palestinian women who attended British-run schools in their youth. As girls, they had each run up against the limits of British willingness to include them on an equal basis, and Stockdale points to these women's narrations of their sense of shock on those occasions and to their reported lifelong cultural dislocation (e.g. 185) as a Palestinian response to the British women she has documented.

Chilton and Stockdale are knowledgeable historians, fully in control of their carefully articulated arguments and judgments. They offer differentiated answers to the questions they have posed. Chilton joins a well-established historiography on female emigration to the Commonwealth; Stockdale situates her study in the literature on Orientalism and women's travel to "contact zones" (9). Neither Chilton's nor Stockdale's book justifies the importance of looking at women in terms of, for example, how that will transform the reader's understanding of some other issue (such as settlement patterns or the British state's decisions about Palestine). That is not these authors' goal. These books are specialist monographs (accessibly written) for readers who have already decided to focus on women as historical subjects.

Angela Woollacott's *Gender and Empire* frames its subject quite differently. It does seek to transform the reader's understanding of empire, and it does so by skating through the last couple of decades of scholarly literature on gender in the British Empire (in spite of the title, it discusses the British Empire only—no other colonial empires are mentioned). Women figure prominently as historical subjects, but Woollacott makes clear that gender cannot be reduced to women. The book succeeds in impressing the reader with the divergent kinds of questions that have been posed under the rubric of gender, ranging through literature on the "martial races," enslaved women, boys' adventure fiction, and convict women in Australia. *Gender and Empire* probably is not comprehensive of every concept and research topic

associated with gender, but it must come pretty close. Indeed, the reader almost begins to question the coherence of "gender" if it can encompass such disparate projects.

The other reason why Woollacott's book leaves such a different impression than Chilton's or Stockdale's is that it belongs, of course, to a different genre. More than a book review essay and less than a full historiographical study, it is a kind of handbook. It is a dense and compact account of this research, made quite readable by Woollacott's clear voice offering her own very sound judgments and priorities. It skims the most exciting and provocative theses from the literature and has something new for virtually everyone, no matter how well read in the field. By its very nature, however, it does not let the reader see how those exciting arguments arise out of the material. The reader does not think through the material along with the various authors surveyed; there is no time for that. It is hard to imagine undergraduates new to the field getting through it; if the goal is to introduce them to the power of a gender analysis in the colonial setting, they would probably be better off reading an especially good monograph from among those Woollacott discusses. However, Woollacott's book would be good for advanced undergraduates who are working on original research projects in the general area, and is perfect for graduate students preparing for general examinations and for scholars at any point who are seeking the big picture for their teaching or research.

Hall and Rose's edited collection of essays and Burton's free-standing essay on Santha Rama Rau both apply the concept of gender differently than do Chilton, Stockdale, or Woollacott. For them, it is one factor among others to be considered as they examine the central issue they have posed. For Hall and Rose, that issue is "the impact of the British Empire on the metropole between the late eighteenth century and the present" (1). Hall and Rose have brought together well-established scholars to offer thirteen essays on aspects of "the empire at home," concentrating mostly on the nineteenth century. While these scholars are known for their published work in the area, these essays are new and vivid, having been written especially for this volume. They range from "Britain's internal 'others'" (colonial subjects and foreigners living in Britain, by Laura Tabili) to the metropolitan consumption of colonial products (Joanna de Groot). The contributors' common conclusion is that "The importance of the Empire for the British 'at home' did not depend on whether or not Britons were consciously 'imperialist' or if they applauded or denounced imperialism . . . [I]t was simply part of life" (30). Hall and Rose's essay collection does for its topic more or less what Woollacott does for hers of gender and empire: taken collectively, the essays provide a historiographical account. However, given the greater space available for each aspect in this volume, the reader can participate more in

each author's process of analysis. And while some of the essays themselves read like historiographical accounts (Philippa Levine on "Sexuality and Empire," a literature to which she herself has centrally contributed), others read like freestanding original contributions (even though they do rest on extensive earlier research). These include Catherine Hall on "Macaulay and the *History of England*"; Christine Kinealy on Ireland as a colony; and Susan Thorne on "Religion and Empire at Home."

Some of the essays have nothing at all to say about gender, but they may well provoke new ideas in the minds of readers focused on gender. The essays that do deal directly with gender include the one by Levine mentioned above, the editors' introduction, and four others. Jane Rendall analyzes British women's nonfiction writing on empire in the long nineteenth century as an effort to claim a "gendered sense of responsibility" (121) and authority for and in the empire. Cora Kaplan considers imaginative literature at two moments: the years around abolition in 1834 and the postcolonial years starting in the 1950s. She applies the editors' approach cited above, arguing that the drive to establish authorial verity, or to categorize writers' politics, "often obscures the wider historical significance of imaginative literature" (200–201) for the cultural impact of empire. She notes, for instance, that debates about Mary Prince's autobiography and similar texts have overlooked the importance of the emergence of "the invasive and disturbing presence of a woman of African or partly African descent on English soil" (208) in imaginative literature in that earlier period. For the postcolonial period, she finds that gender is a "primary part of the post-imperial imaginary, working overtime . . . to embody the hopes, disillusion and feeling tone of the period of decolonisation and its aftermath" (208). Clare Midgley surveys the historiography on women as activists critical and supportive of empire between 1790s and 1930s, to which she, like Levine in her own subfield, has made major contributions. The concluding essay in the volume, by Keith McClelland and Sonya Rose, examines suffrage and understandings of "the nature of citizenship" between 1867 and the late 1920s. Suffrage and citizenship require a focus on women; McClelland and Rose combine that with an analysis of how empire figures in speakers' statements. They conclude that, "Far from the expansion of citizenship being a more or less unproblematic widening of rights within Britain, the shaping of the meanings of citizenship was always . . . entwined with questions of empire" (297).

For Burton, as for the Hall and Rose volume, gender is one factor among others to be examined as she analyzes her central issue: the emergence of "postcolonial experts on India and 'the East'" (2) and the elaboration of the Cold War cosmopolitanism that underpins their authority. How do people in postcolonial, neocolonial metropolises learn about postcolonial, newly

independent states? Specifically, how and what did Americans learn about India in the era of the Cold War? This is a fascinating field of inquiry that could not be more timely. And precisely scholars from colonial studies are well qualified to delineate the “colonial genealogies” of the “cosmopolitan self” (20)—especially one like Burton, who has researched extensively the circulation of people and ideas through networks and institutions of the British Empire. Burton outlines how “the drama of Santha Rama Rau’s career is to be found in the ways she was positioned, and tried to position herself, as an expert on a former Anglophone empire in order to be understood and appreciated by an emergent one” (14). Rama Rau, the daughter of an ambassador from India to the United States and an international birth control expert and activist, graduated from Wellesley and soon gained notice in the United States with her well-received memoir *Home to India* (1945). Rama Rau became a journalist. In the 1960s, she became even more well known for her adaptation of E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* to a highly successful stage production, and her volume in the Time-Life series, *The Cooking of India*. Burton is interested in the conditions both for Rama Rau’s rise to prominence as an expert and interpreter of India to U.S. audiences and for her decline in authority, discussing instances where Rama Rau had to argue repeatedly and sometimes vainly with editors and critics (often as she was seeking to counter the Orientalism expected of her). Rama Rau’s story, in Burton’s sophisticated treatment, makes the reader very conscious of the precarious and arbitrary nature of our sources of knowledge, as Americans, about other places in the world.

I could not shake the impression that Burton’s book should have been either bigger (Burton could have discussed other cosmopolitan experts on India whom she briefly mentions, such as Ved Mehta, in addition to Rama Rau, and thereby offered a more definitive account) or smaller (she could have presented a more compact account of an aspect of Rama Rau’s career, such as the *Passage to India* episode, as a sampling of what this kind of research can reveal). As it is, the book makes fairly light use of Rama Rau’s life as it makes repeated and quite fine-grained interventions into a theoretical discussion of postcolonial cosmopolitanism. I was plunged into the finer points of that discussion before being able to gain an empirical footing in it. In the introduction, for instance, Burton describes her project on Rama Rau as follows: “I historicize her as an example of the complex incarnation of the pressures that empire has the capacity to exercise on apprehensions of the relationship between nationalism, cosmopolitanism, and American identity among historically ‘minor’ subjects” (25). I for one need to be able to associate a concrete example with each of those terms before I can really see for myself how all those pieces fit together, as opposed to taking Burton’s word for it. The conclusion re-posed to me the question of the proportions of this

long essay. Burton sums up her argument as follows: "I have endeavored to illustrate wherever possible the ways in which Santha Rama Rau's careers were not self-fashioned but were interpolated and shaped by the various economies both symbolic and real in which her work and her careers (were) circulated. As I hope I have been able to demonstrate, this is less a question of Santha Rama Rau's agency per se than it is of her capacity to negotiate the machinery of critical reception in Cold War America—its historically specific forms of recognition, its particular patterns of consumption, its strategies for publicity and containment" (148–149). It is hard for Burton to tick off in any simple way what this story has to tell us—she intends it to be and remain complicated, and it is in fact complicated. Burton is moreover wise to refuse to get sucked into presenting ever more biographical facts as the ultimate source of truth in a complex story. I think, however, that the vagueness of this conclusion is also due to Burton's commitment to the theoretical manifesto that is her introductory chapter. While it is problematic to put a great deal of interpretive weight on specific data from Rama Rau's life, as opposed to large patterns in U.S. economic and cultural life, ultimately this interpretive choice leads to a problem of matching sources to argument. It reminds the reader that actually a different book is needed to drive these big arguments home—one that focuses directly on the "varied economies," the "machinery of recognition," the "forms of recognition" and "patterns of consumption." Burton does, however, give us a framework for analyzing the voices of intercultural authority that surround us in the media, and after one reads this book, those voices will never sound the same.

The contrast between the way Chilton and Stockdale, on the one hand, and Hall, Rose, and Burton, on the other, frame their work with respect to women and gender emerges most sharply when one reads the introductions to Hall and Rose's and to Burton's books. Hall and Rose mention feminist historians' work only some dozen pages into their introductory essay, and their list of topics affected by feminist work (e.g. circulation of "representations of the imperial world," the British state's "management of colonial sexuality," and "the presence of colonised subjects in the metropole" [14–15]) does not include the documentation and analysis of women's presence and perspectives in the empire—which is exactly what Chilton and Stockdale have undertaken. In the same essay, Hall and Rose seem to hasten to relativize the importance of feminism for the last couple of decades of work in colonial studies: "Transnational feminism . . . was critical to this work, but so was Fanon . . . , Said . . . , Foucault . . . , and many others" (18). Burton likewise raises gender as a dimension of the analysis of Rama Rau's career only several pages into her introduction. I assume that Hall, Rose, and Burton, prominent and prolific historians of women and gender that they are, seek to counter readers' assumptions

about the bounds of their current research; they want, after many years of fruitful research on women, to strike out in new directions. I also read these introductions as exemplifying a rhetorical strategy of claiming the "center," the "mainstream" as *of course* informed by work on feminism and gender, precisely by refusing to claim it explicitly in the name of feminist scholarship. Yes, that rhetoric does make these books appear "newer," whatever that means, than Chilton's and Stockdale's. But it isn't that simple. The Hall and Rose volume offers one instance of involuntary humor in this respect: James Epstein's essay "Taking Class Notes on Empire" ignores gender in an otherwise thoughtful and timely reminder of the importance of class. Even where he cites work on women and gender in his footnotes, it in no way affects his own discussion. But isn't a feminist critique of the concept of (male-defined) class how, for many of readers of this journal, it all began? Is his essay old, new, or really old?

In *Civilizing Women*, the anthropologist Janice Boddy has created a history of British men's and women's and Sudanese men's efforts to civilize women and a history of British and Sudanese women seeing themselves as civilizers. The instantiation of civilization (or not) here is genital cutting and infibulation. Those histories are in turn folded into a political history of the colonial Sudan, and the whole is interspersed with ethnographic accounts of spirit possession in which Sudanese women assume roles as British colonizers (*zâr*, which Boddy presents as Sudanese women's indigenous anthropology of the British), the Sudanese cultural geography of the purified and enclosed female body, and a birthing scene, the focus of the anxieties and hopes of Britons and Sudanese alike. This is not a history of women (like Chilton's and Stockdale's books), nor is it a study of Sudan in which gender is one factor among others (like Hall and Rose's and Burton's books). Rather, Boddy's book is a masterful rereading of large slices of Sudanese and British colonial history in light of gender. She explains why a proliferation of stories is necessary to understand British and Sudanese concerns with genital cutting: "When indigenous gender constructs clashed with colonial imperatives and ideals, dilemmas at once moral, political, and practical arose" (102).

Boddy begins, in Part One, with what she has chosen as the most important story: the cult of Gordon. "What, you will ask, does a book about efforts to stop female circumcision in Sudan have to do with General Gordon's death? Surprisingly, a great deal. Studies of women are never only about women. This book is at least as much, perhaps more, about men. It asks . . . why certain colonial projects were begun and how they were framed. . . . Empires exert dominion not only from above, but, by engaging and seeking to mold subjects' sensibilities, they also rule by colonizing consciousness, to the extent they are able, from within" (14). For the British male colonial

officials, as well as the British public more generally, the Gordon myth informed their whole encounter with Sudan after 1885—with regard to rule over Muslim subjects, to their own masculinity, to political economy. Part One narrates British understandings of Sudan as apprehended and expressed through politics, war, imaginative literature, and science. Part Two takes up British efforts to secure rule both politically, through the promotion of fundamentalist Islam against secular dissent, and economically, through the promotion of cotton cultivation with its attendant concerns about labor discipline, birth rates, and public health. Part Three takes up the story of the British “crusade” against genital cutting and infibulation. But the multiple threads Boddy asks the reader to follow have already come together, including gender. The payoff for waiting to take up the subject of female circumcision “proper” is that the reader is now equipped to think through the material alongside Boddy as she turns to British women’s mobilizations on the topic of female circumcision and the conflicts among British teachers of midwifery, Sudanese midwives, and British men. Both the Sudanese and the British were focused on “reproductive success” (123), but came to have different ways of defining it. British women were horrified by cutting and infibulation, a horror Boddy historicizes up through the second wave of the Western feminist movement. Among Sudanese women, Boddy observes, probably “no one who has undergone the procedure is unaware of the suffering it can cause; this does not mean, however, they consider it dispensable” (205).

There is no way to recount here all the constituencies in Boddy’s book, but I must emphasize that their perceptions, expectations, and preoccupations have a depth and complexity in historical time in Boddy’s account that is unmatched in the existing literature on genital cutting in the colonial and postcolonial eras. As Boddy sums up, “In Sudan, differences between colonizer and colonized over female genital cutting were always about more than genital cutting alone. They were about how to be civilized, modern, rightly oriented in the world” (310). It is in how Boddy assembles the many pieces of her huge story that we can see her actually reinventing gender history. Quite apart from the empirical material she covers, the very structure of the book offers a new account of the relationship of gender history to the rest of history. Those in her field of Sudanese and East African anthropology and history will already know her work. As for everyone else, if one is to read just a single book completely outside one’s own field this year, it should be this one.