H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Angela Woollacott. *Gender and Empire (Gender and History).* Houndmills and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006. viii + 164 pp. $90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-92644-4; $31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-333-92645-1.

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Published on H-Women (October, 2008)
Commissioned by Holly S. Hurlburt

Challenging the "Risk of Exaggerating the Importance of Gender"

Angela Woollacott has produced a succinct yet wide-ranging and accessible study that synthesizes much important recent work arguing for the centrality of gender to understanding modern imperial history, while using specific and explicit examples to help that broad preparation make sense. Woollacott's enigmatic prose and the details of her narrative seduce the reader; however, in her introduction, she splashes the reader with the cold water of a recent denunciation of the inclusion of women in the historical analysis of empire. "The problem which arises is that in trying to write in a role for women, there is a risk of exaggerating their importance."[1] If our goal is to fully understand the British imperial world, Woollacott's study emphasizes that, in various geographic locations across the globe, and from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, gender contributes a formative dynamic. In fact, I cannot be the only reader flummoxed by the fact that the same publisher produced both Woollacott's study and the one that contained the quote above. In any case, Woollacott argues her point persuasively, in chapters that analyze a historically gendered modern British Empire through an examination of unfree labor systems, sexualized violence, the construction of masculinity in modern empire systems, the formal and informal administrative apparatus of empire, and anticolonial movements and nationalism. What could have been a whirlwind of detail is a clearly and carefully constructed monograph that should be accessible to any senior undergraduate, and is a good jumping-off point for anyone interested in engaging in the study of the modern British Empire.

Woollacott's first chapter on women and unfree labor offers a powerful first argument in support of her central thesis, that gender needs to be understood as a "foundational dynamic that shaped all aspects of empire" (p. 3). In it, she offers a persuasive discussion that underlines foundational arguments regarding historical gender. She examines evidence of unfree labor systems in Australia, South Africa, and the Caribbean, and, in so doing, she indicates how gender not only adds to previous scholarship but, in fact, can also be read as central to the labor and economic dynamics that have been used to examine slavery and indenture systems in imperial contexts. She illustrates connections across what was a very broad empire, and argues ways in which gender, ameliorated by issues of race and ethnicity, is central to understanding labor relations, both in the metropole and in various colonies, and both for men and women.

This is followed by an equally wide-ranging and thought-provoking chapter on "Narratives of Interracial Sexual Assault." Here, she convincingly argues that the number of such narratives, their sexualized content, and their popularity are about much more than their salacious subject matter. They offer evidence of ways in which a racialized "other" was configured in the British world, and worked to justify the ways in which the colonized "other"–dangerous and bestial–was controlled in the modern British Empire. She provides an overview of captivity narratives, drawing and building on the work of such scholars as Linda Colley through a closer read of antipodean narratives of Aboriginal-captive women, such as Eliza Fraser, and the mythical "white woman of Gippsland," pushing her readers to examine authorship, audience, and context. Early narratives, popular reading in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, described the experience of mostly men held for ransom by Barbary pirates in north Africa. Woollacott argues that such narratives must be understood in a variety of ways: they offered a "good read" and were well received by a growing British public, and part of their attraction in the genre lay in the recounting of fear of/and (sexual) abuse, as well as in the high rate of return of captives to Europe. She argues that the freeing of captives suggested more than a happy ending; rather, the narratives come to stand

for a Europe itself, "united" as Christendom, and poised for ascendancy in a changing world system. The narratives were also sexualized in a particular manner. For an early modern Britain "becoming" an empire, it was men who were depicted as facing the fear of castration and sodomy; by the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, it was women who were threatened with rape–and in fictionalized accounts to a degree that in no way correlates with reality. Why was it that the anxieties of confident modern Britons began to be espoused quite differently? Woollacott argues that as Britain became modern and its colonial world expanded, middle-class ideals of confidence and self-control were at odds with the expression of fear of sexual violence. Examining North American captivity narratives, the fear of sexualized violence that fills literature about the Indian "Mutiny" of 1857, the Morant Bay uprising in 1860s Jamaica, and the Sherwood Affair in 1919 Punjab, the author argues convincingly that narratives of racialized sexual violence do not reflect a reality. Instead, their magnification and popularity, and the mixed response to the violent reprisals ordered by officials, represent a dialogue about British manhood and Britain's place in the world. While they purport to be about race and ethnicity of the "other," it is instructive to read them as being about place and self. This is not simply a theoretical argument, however. Woollacott ends this chapter by pointing to examples of how legislative changes in early twentieth-century Rhodesia and New Guinea evince the language of women's sexual vulnerability to ensure white colonial control.

The third chapter addresses explicitly a theme that the author's introduction highlights as deserving of attention: the gendering of boys and men. It is once again wide ranging geographically although it is focused chronologically on the latter half of the nineteenth century. In examining the manner in which British boys were shaped as imperial men, Woollacott draws on the significant recent body of research on imperial popular culture. The literature of G. A. Henty and others produced for young readers "put imperial wars and territorial annexations at the heart of domestic and empire-wide culture. These stories imparted to the rising generations of soldiers, colonial administrators, and citizens of both colonies and metropole a visceral sense of the excitement and importance of empire"(p. 60). To this boys' literature she adds explorers, hunters, and scientists as contributing the construction of a specifically martial, and racially and sexually hierarchical, masculinity. The excitement of reading *With Clive in India* (1884) or any of Henty's other myriad of stories under covers at night is tangible, and her conclusion that cultural imperatives are central to understanding the way that Britons welcomed the institutionalized violence of World War One is powerful. While I accept that the collection and analysis of data to create racial and sexual hierarchies resulted in a milieu that shaped British manhood, I find this chapter less successful than the others in integrating this imperial world with other aspects of metropolitan society. In particular, Woollacott notes that such literature "assumes" Protestant adherence without dwelling on it–an argument I would like to see further developed (p. 63).

Chapter 4 develops further the discussion of gender in everyday life. Once again, the coverage is wide ranging, from a discussion of sport, engineering people and the environment, and the colonial civil service, to prostitution in empire (the colonial uncivil service), missionaries (prostitutes for God?), and gender and households. The broadly drawn evidence for this chapter boldly underlines the author's argument that empire was not made by wars and political and legislative policy alone–that it is the minutiae of everyday work and life that shaped and reshaped the "overarching histories of British colonialism" (p. 81). This chapter clearly and carefully delineates another of the author's central theses: that gender and racial hierarchies cannot be understood as dichotomies, and are, instead, "messy and blurred liminal areas in which gender relations were shaped in the most intimate and telling ways–across racial boundaries as well as within and across class divisions" (p. 81). We see racial inequality inscribed not only in sporting authorities, but also in the rules of cricket itself, and in colonial service where it both is and is not possible for the manliness of professional ability to erase racial difference. In Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*(1939*)*, both the title character and his English superior Rudbeck are either fools or/and shrewd manipulators: yet only one of them wields the manly English position in what remains a colonial hierarchy. As other scholars have successfully argued, colonial hierarchies are also clearly delineated away from the professional world–in homes and bedrooms, and where the two worlds collide–for prostitutes, mistresses, and those "country-married." The bedroom was the place for professional practice. It is in this section that Woollacott most convincingly pulls together evidence that underlines how we must understand all human sexuality as being historically constructed alongside and intertwined with the other imperial identities. Here we are presented with men and women engaged in heterosexual and homosexual liaisons–both freely entered into and of a coercive nature. Europeans take and discard partners, at times gaining not only access to their bodies but also to local knowledge and power systems, and we

see evidence of indigenous agency as well. The author points out the continued need for historians to hear various sides of this story, yet the reader hears little from an indigenous point of view; more would have been nice and certainly references are provided for following up on that argument. Most impressively, once again Woollacott does not allow these arguments to be sidelined; as in the work of Phillippa Levine and Douglass Peers, she presents evidence that the regulation of sexuality played a key role alongside and linked to other forms of colonial control.

The final two chapters build on the excellent earlier work in the collection. In the first, Woollacott elucidates the ways in which the construction of national identities is in general a gendered process, and presents specific evidence from nationalist struggles in south Asia, from Kenyan independence and the Mau Mau movement in particular, from the recent scholarly output on this subject regarding modern Ireland, and from Palestine and Canada to prove her point. As an instructor, I cannot help but think there are, in this section alone, research ideas for an entire class section. While any reader might appreciate more detail, the author offers inducement to further reading through copious references to recent scholarship. The final chapter genders the gaze turned back on the metropole itself, in a manner that was both determined by and resisted the categories of race, class, and gender: empire was "sold" as spectacle, and such imperial subjects as Saartjie Baartman were both displayed and studied because of their difference. But imperial "subjects" also observed and critiqued metropolitan society itself. Canada's Pauline Johnson used her poetry to query her place as an ethnically Mohawk woman in empire, and Australian women, such as Mary Gaunt, critiqued Victorian notions of femininity as evinced as white metropolitan womanhood, arguing instead for "practical, intelligent, secular brave, enterprising, hardy and likeable" womanhood of the colonies (p. 131). This chapter focuses on a previously identified important field of inquiry–the impact of imperial connectedness on Britain itself. In it, Woollacott once again emphasizes the important ways in which "ideas and practices of gender and sexuality have taken place in the colonies and the metropole at the same time in an interlinked fashion" (p. 143).

Woollacott's study is well written, succinct, and wide ranging; moreover, it is provocative, pointing to directions in which profitable research might follow, making good use of interdisciplinarity. It also challenges the reader with one important (if challenged) tenant of feminist thinking–that gendered ways of thinking and acting matter historically, because of real, practical outcomes, and not merely as a theoretical measuring stick. If a reader is not convinced that buying a young boy a Henty book for Christmas has roots and consequences that demand examination and is not at all an innocent act, then flip back and begin the book again.

Note

[1]. Robert Johnson, *British Imperialism* (Houndmills and Baskingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 127.

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Citation: Rhonda Semple. Review of Woollacott, Angela, *Gender and Empire (Gender and History).* H-Women, H-Net Reviews. October, 2008.
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