BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Nicholas Thomas, ***Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel, and Government.*** Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994. Pp. xi, 238, illust., bib., index. US$17.95 paperback.

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Women, Gender, Sexuality, and Colonialism's Culture

IN ***COLONIALISM'S CULTURE,*** Nicholas Thomas has made an outstanding contribution to the increasingly significant and complex area of colonial and postcolonial studies. His entry into key debates is innovative and nuanced, drawing upon an extremely impressive range of research and reading. The book places this already widely respected historian firmly in the front ranks of scholars of colonialism and its aftermath, and incidentally thereby promotes the theater of Thomas's central concerns, the Pacific, onto the broader stage of Western discussion and analysis. ***Colonialism's Culture*** has immediately found an interested readership internationally, and deservedly so. Thomas writes with admirable clarity, economy, and accessibility. Nicholas Thomas should be congratulated for this very considerable achievement.

One reason for my sense of the importance of this book is that it opens pathways for feminist scholarship to flourish. Thomas did not himself pursue issues of women, gender, and sexuality to any depth. Readers could well argue, given the relative brevity of the book--fewer than two hundred pages --and the breadth of its concerns, that if what Thomas accomplished was considerable, one could scarcely ask for more. Nevertheless, the issues raised

by feminist scholars, whether at the theoretical level or through the implications of specific focused studies, have decided implications for the transformation of the debates. This is an appropriate time, given the considerable body of feminist scholarship that now exists, to address the state of play, and how Thomas's work assists its impact.

Thomas shows here an undoubted appreciation of the significance of the current literature on gender and colonialism. But what is more, his constuctive attempt to turn around the current direction of colonial discourse theory will in the future allow feminist revisions to take their place more centrally in the area. Thomas's is by no means a study that politely gestures in the direction of feminist insights only to proceed unheeded on its way. On the contrary, his allusions to feminist scholarship recognize the nature of their challenge and are integral to his narrative. Thomas's revisionist position will prove a breakthrough for scholars who wish to bring women and gender into the mainstream. His central thesis is thus an enabling one for new feminist scholarship, both via his examination of colonial discourse theory and his pursuit of alternative models of historical analysis.

Thomas initially mounts a sharp critique of the work of such major scholars in the field of colonial discourse theory as Johannes Fabian, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakrovorty Spivak, and Abdul JanMohamed for contributing to a totalizing and homogenizing depiction of imperialism and colonialism. These scholars, Thomas claims, have taken the key ideas of Edward Saïd's seminal work, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), which should be read as a study of a particular time and place, and extended "orientalism" to serve as a conceptual framework applicable to enormously different sites of colonialism. While these practitioners have repeatedly called for recognition of plurality, disjuncture, and difference, they have in effect produced a globalizing metanarrative. In the process, what is more, they have ignored indigenous peoples' own resistances to and evasions of colonial hegemony: the voice of the "colonized" has been all but silenced. Failing to ground their observations in the specificities of historical situations, with all their particular contestations and ambiguities, Thomas continues, colonial theorists have colluded in the creation of a story that disguises much that it purports to explain. A recent critic of postmodernism has suggested that "hermeneutics without history can scarcely escape either banality or reductionism." [1] It is a notion with which Thomas, clearly, would have some sympathy.

Thomas's assertion that colonialism was fractured, that its course took different directions according to time and place, that neither nations nor national actors can be collapsed into simplistic categories of behavior, and that the "colonized," while universally confronted with massive challenges, themselves responded in diverse ways to colonial penetration, might not seem

startling news to many historians. Yet it is not only within theoretical debate that these ideas are not as widely anticipated as one might expect. I am reminded of the response of one fine American historian, in a similar *Pacific Studies* book review forum in 1992, to my study of American missionary wives in Hawai‘i in the nineteenth century. *Paths of Duty* had described a group of Protestant women whose worldview was so bounded by the cultural expectations of the early American national period that years of exile, and multiple novel experiences, dented their sense of confident superiority not one jot. Their rigidity was stunning, and its description the main point of the book." This critic sought, quite properly, an interactive history, but more surprisingly, expressed the desire to know more of the ways in which Native Hawaiian women had influenced the missionaries, including the Americans' metaphysical beliefs and religious practices. [3] She had recently read Ramon Gutierrez's marvelous study of the seventeenth-century Franciscan mission to Pueblos in New Mexico--a mission of Spanish, male, Roman Catholic priests proselytizing among a Native American people--and had been impressed by the Franciscans' adaptation of some indigenous practices. [4] By analogy, the critic assumed a similar, overlooked parallel in Hawai‘i. Nothing could have been further from the case: the Spanish actors' intentions and cosmology in a far earlier period contrasted radically with the Hawaiian situation. Although I certainly wished subsequently that I had included more material, speculative though it would have been, on Native Hawaiians, it would have been a very different story from Gutierrez's. Nicholas Thomas demolishes such expectations of sameness in colonial histories, stressing fractures even within missions, as among other colonizing groups.

He does more. The great strength of Thomas's study is that he does not rest his case with his telling critique of colonial discourse theory, but illustrates a fresh approach through empirical analysis. Thomas is too theoretically engaged himself to suggest that endless empirical studies of colonial encounters, lacking the context of colonialism on a wider canvas or innocent of authorial self-reflexivity, can be an answer to the problems of metatheory. Drawing on Pierre Bordieu's delineation of the "project," with its emphasis on agency and practice, and influenced too by Michel Foucault's notion of the discursive nature of power, Thomas formulates a conceptual framework for examining colonialism that enables diversity to be acknowledged. Colonialism, he argues, must be historicized, and historicization implies more than just bringing the present to the past: on the contrary, the past must also be brought to the present, in a world where indigenous peoples are increasingly politicized. He proceeds to demonstrate the force of his ideas through a reconsideration of a number of colonial interchanges. Many of these focus on Thomas's main- research concerns in the Pacific, particularly Fiji. From

the margins of empire as the Pacific undoubtedly was, Thomas expresses the not unreasonable hope that the issues that emerge may throw into clearer relief tendencies that can be obscured on the denser canvases of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

What Thomas's revisionist ideas offer is the possibility for bringing women, gender, and sexuality to center stage to integrate feminist insights into colonial studies. If this is so, it is heartening to acknowledge the rapidly expanding nature of this area. There has been an exciting explosion of publication in the area of gender history, with a good deal of scholarship appearing even since he completed his manuscript. (In the introduction Thomas notes that he was able to refer to few studies published after 1991: at some stage any writer has to concentrate on the material at hand if he or she is ever to finish a project; books, also, have a lengthy lead time in the process of publication.) I was reminded of the burgeoning of this field when I noted Thomas J. Prasch's review article, "Orientalism's Other, Other Orientalisms: Women in the Scheme of Empire," in the Winter 1995 edition of the *Journal of Women's History.* Prasch addressed the ideas presented in no fewer than ten monographs and scholarly collections, most published around 1992 to 1994, the work of literary critics, anthropologists, cultural theorists, and historians. At least three subsequent, important interventions in the debate come to mind: Ann Laura Stoler's *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things,* Anne McLintock's *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context,* and Robert Young's *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race.* [5] Prasch notes in his article that the traditional literary representation of European imperialism has been overwhelmingly a masculine story, as have tales of indigenous resistance; "in such accounts European women were an absence, indigenous women a cipher; neither had status as autonomous subjects, neither had agency." Saïd's seminal work, he claims, while alluding "to the gendered vision of empire, did little to change the representation of women." [6] And, we might add, nor did most of the scholars whom Saïd inspired, apart from one important strand of Gayatri Spivak's work.

Much of the recent writing on women has focused on the very real presence of white women in sites of colonialism, and the part they played as agents of empire. In the Pacific area Margaret Jolly's and Martha Macintyre's edited collection *Family and Gender in the Pacific: Domestic Contradictions and the Colonial Impact,* along with studies by Claudia Knapman and Diane Langmore, constituted pathbreaking work, which joined a host of such studies elsewhere from the mid-eighties. [7] Some of this scholarship has discovered white women to be more sympathetic than men to injuries to colonized women and children, less harmful in interracial encounters because

less powerful, and more perceptive in their recordings of empire because more marginalized themselves. Other scholars have resisted what they consider an attempt to resurrect white women, only to exonerate them from a racism in which they were in reality deeply implicated. [8] Whichever view, many studies across the globe testify to white women's involvement in imperialism and colonialism, a shift in the area paralleled by a recovery of white men as gendered agents of colonialism. "Real Men Hunt Buffalo" runs the beginning of the title of an article in the latest edition of *Gender and History,* representative of the current rethinking of men, masculinity, and frontiers, particularly in the British Empire. To a far greater extent than previously, in addition, white men's sexual relations with indigenous women (more rarely, with indigenous men) have surfaced also in this revision of colonialism. If Prasch is correct in stating that the story of empire as "sexual opportunity" for men has a long genealogy, recent studies have given these relationships a fresh critical evaluation. [9]

It is perhaps in the area of white men's representations of indigenous women and gender relations that revisionists have demonstrated the capacity to engage centrally with critiques of colonialism at the theoretical level. Gayatri Spivak's original work on British colonial observations of Hindu women has been significant here,. followed by the writings of other Indian scholars such as Chandra Mohanty and Lata Mani. [10] In *Colonialism's Culture* Thomas pursues such insights in an important passage where he notes the ways in which, in the Pacific, "perceptions of women and women's 'status' encoded other forms of geographic and racial difference. The degradation of women was a measure for the degradation of a society." Further, "responses to the body were less important than the work of a gendered vision upon women and upon the relations of debasement or sexual equality that women's bodies exhibited" (p. 102). It is in such passages that Thomas points the way to an inclusive history for concerns of gender.

My own readings, with colleagues, of colonial writings about Maori women and southeastern Aboriginal women certainly affirm the centrality of observations of gender to constructions of the colonized. Explorers, travelers, colonial officials, and settlers in the early stages of white incursion first noted individual Maori or Aboriginal women's behavior and appearance, then were repeatedly drawn into rhetorical generalization on the "position of women." They commonly placed indigenous women's perceived social lives against a grid of European cultural expectations and often found the women--or Maori or Aboriginal men's treatment of women--sadly wanting. That these negative constructions echoed uneasily through discussions on public policies through the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and have played a part in shaping indigenous activist men's and women's responses within political

movements today, serve to reinforce Thomas's sense of the part the past continues to play in the present.[11]

Colonialism's Culture is a landmark work. It offers a paradigm for colonial studies grounded in specific historical circumstance and detail, reinforced by a context responsive but not subservient to colonial discourse analysis. Thomas recognizes and embraces plurality, dissonance, and difference. He sketches a framework energizing for all scholars anxious to restore the voices of many figures not previously the stuff of the stories of empires. We are in his debt.

NOTES

1. M. Bernstein, "An Eerie Absence," *Times Literary Supplement,* 23 February 1996, 13.

2. P. Grimshaw, *Paths of Duty: American Missionary Wives in Nineteenth-Century Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1989).

3. N. Cott, "Book Review Forum," *Pacific Studies* 15, no. 3 (September 1992): 149-152.

4. R. Gutierrez, *When Jesus Came, the Corn Mothers Went Away: Marriage, Sexuality, and Power in New Mexico, 1500-1846* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

5. A. L. Staler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995); A. McLintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995); R. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

6. T. J. Prasch, "Orientalism's Other, Other Orientalisms: Women in the Scheme of Empire," *Journal of Women's History* 7, no. 4 (Winter 1995): 174-188.

7. M. Jolly and M. Macintyre, eds., *Family and Gender in the Pacific: Domestic Contradictions and the Colonial Impact* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); C. Knapman, *White Women in Fiji, 1835-1930: The Ruin of Empire?* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1986); D. Langmore, *Missionary Lives: Papua 1884-1914* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1989).

8. See J. Haggis, "Gendering Colonialism or Colonising Gender: Recent Women's Studies Approaches to White Women and the History of British Colonialism," *Women's Studies International Forum,* no. 13 (1989): 105-115; Von Ware, *Beyond the Pale: White Women, Racism, and History* (London: Verso, 1992); N. Chaudhuri and M. Strobel, eds., *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); M. di Leonardo, ed., *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in a Postmodern Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).

9. E. Vibert, "Real Men Hunt Buffalo: Masculinity, Race, and Class in British Fur Traders' Narratives," *Gender and History* 8, no. 1 (April 1996): 4-21; see relevant chapters in

M. Roper and J. Tosh, eds., *Manful Assertions: Masculinities in Britain since 1800* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); C. Hall, *White, Male, and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (London and New York: Polity and Routledge, 1992); J. A. Mangan and J. Walvin, eds., *Manliness and Morality: Middle-Class Masculinity in Britain and America, 1800-1940* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987).

10. G. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxisms and the Interpretation of Culture,* ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); C. Mohanty, "'Under Western Eyes': Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review,* no. 30 (Autumn 1988): 61-88; L. Mani, "Multiple Mediations: Feminist Scholarship in the Age of Multinational Reception," *Feminist Review,* no. 35 (1991): 24-41.

11. P. Grimshaw and H. Morton, "Paradoxes of the Colonial Male Gaze: European Men and Maori Women," in *Work in Flux,* ed. E. Greenwood, K. Neumann, and A. Sartori (Melbourne: History Department, University of Melbourne, 1995), 144-158; P. Grimshaw and A. May, " 'Inducements to Strong to Be Cruel to the Weak': Authoritative White Colonial Male Voices and the Construction of Gender in Koori Society," in *Australian Women: Contemporary Feminist Thought,* ed. N. Grieve and A. Bums (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1994), 92-107.