

Review Article

**RE-WRITING THE TURTLE'S BACK:
GENDERED BODIES IN A GLOBAL AGE**

ADRIAN CARTON¹
Macquarie University

Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2005, xii + 445pp. ISBN: 0-8223-3467-4 (pbk).

Creation myths are themselves universal histories that tell the metaphorical story of the birth of the earth. Perhaps the most popular and the most pertinent is that of the Huron people of North America whose tale of the origin of creation recalls the woman who fell through a crack in the sky and was rescued from a fatal landing by two birds who rescued her and placed her upon the back of a turtle. In order to create some earth by which the woman could live and prosper, several animals went in search of mud from the bottom of the deep waters in order to create land. A toad arose from the expedition with mud in its mouth, which was spread across the turtle's back. When it was spread, it dried and cracked and thus became the beginnings of dry land. When the woman stepped onto the newly created land, she threw dust into the air to create stars and then continued to make the moon and the sun. And thus, the universe was born from the Sky Woman on a Turtle's Back.²

Mythical tales of the creation of the world differ from culture to culture, but a prominent theme among them, echoing the Greek concept of *Gaia* or Mother Earth, is the gendered embodiment of the planet. In many indigenous American creation narratives, it is the earth that is female, as the

¹ Adrian Carton (adrian.carton@hmn.mq.edu.au) is a lecturer in Modern History at Macquarie University where he teaches courses in south Asian and World History.

² Virginia Hamilton, *In the Beginning: Creation Stories From Around the World* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1988), 59-63.

sky is male. Conversely, for the ancient Egyptians, it was the sky that was female and the earth was embodied as a masculine entity. The corporeal metaphor of the world as either man or woman is an enduring and poignant symbol of creation in many cultures partly because of the cult of fertility associated with these manifestations, but also because it evokes the fundamental philosophical modality of gender as the way by which the world is conceived, articulated and evoked. It is a primary way of thinking globally that at once transcends cultural difference as much as it connects different cultures in a web of symbiotic meanings. At its centre is the concept of the gendered body not as a playful metaphor but as an historical landscape in its own right which unites our cultural sense of the ways in which human beings perceive the world around them.

In this timely, engaging and rich collection of essays, Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton re-visit the philosophical pertinence of the position of the body in world history, but from quite a different set of scholarly concerns. Rather than look at the gendered body in the emergence of the making of the world, as it is positioned in many non-Western contexts, the co-editors are interested in historicizing the body in two ways that have become critical concerns for contemporary historiography. First, to address Elizabeth Grosz's point that "the body has remained a conceptual blind spot in both mainstream Western philosophical thought and contemporary feminist theory."³ The ways in which the gendered body has become disengaged from largely patriarchal Western ontological traditions is essential to understanding its radical potential as a tool of feminist critique. Second, to re-locate the body as the localized site upon which colonial and world histories can speak to each other in a methodological fashion. Above all, as the authors maintain, the body is "the most intimate colony" (410) enmeshed in networks of cross-cultural interaction.

For some time now, postcolonial studies and world history have stood as suspicious strangers, eyeing each other up and down at a safe distance while standing on similar epistemological ground. Anchored in a global context that seeks to destabilize Eurocentrism and sharing the same hope for an interdisciplinary future without borders, one would think that these approaches represent a 'micro versus macro' view of how to provincialize the sovereignty of Europe in the re-writing of history.⁴ Dovetailing with this predicament is that of the vexed relationship between gender history and world history where feminist scholars find themselves fighting a familiar historical battle that has a certain and bewildering aura of *déjà-vu* about it.

³ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1994), 3. See also Moira Gatens, *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁴ See Jerry Bentley, "Myths, Wagers, and Some Moral Implications of World History", in *Journal of World History*, vol. 16, no. 1, March 2005, 51-65.

That feminists have viewed the paradigm of the nation as a male construct accounts for the broader international arenas in which women have traditionally sought to frame their political subjection, and the ways in which they have extended their ethical struggles to include other racial and sexual minorities in a global context. The obvious connections between feminist movements in the West and anti-colonial nationalist movements in Asia and Africa have always strengthened the position that the feminist cause had a very different relationship to Western modernity and, indeed, to its twin beneficiaries: the nation-state and the profession of history-making.

The argument that Ballantyne and Burton allude to is that recent advances in world history, despite these very strong frameworks of international feminism,⁵ have not engaged with the historical legacies which see Western modernity, the nation-state and the emergence of professional history-making as inextricably intertwined and implicitly gendered performances.⁶ While women's and gender history have been foregrounded in a global context, with an eminent international legacy, the model of world history that has taken its place in the curriculum, particularly in the American academy, remains anchored to its roots in a masculinist 'Western civilizations' paradigm where gender is often by-passed as a useful category of analysis. This has resulted in something of a dilemma for feminist historians who wish to engage with world history. Faced with an eerie absence that can only be rectified through the restitutive mode of liberal addition, while the tools of their historiographical practice are grounded in a gender-centred global paradigm. For Ballantyne and Burton, this collection provides one possible solution out of this impasse: by considering the cross-cultural encounter in colonial contexts as a way to re-configure this relationship between gender and world history. Not through a tokenistic and additive gesture, but by looking at the gendered body as the landscape upon which imperial webs of interconnectedness were inscribed through the most intimate of cross-cultural interactions. In this sense, world history methodology is made to speak with innovations in feminist critique. This brings the McNeills' classical definition of a web-based landscape of global interaction in conversation with Mary Louise Pratt's notion of a 'contact zone' "to invoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously

⁵ See, for example, Leila J. Rupp, *Worlds of Women: The Making of an International Women's Movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997) and Fiona Paisley, "Cultivating Modernity: Culture and Internationalism in Australian Feminism's Pacific Age", in *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 14, no. 3, Autumn 2002, 105-132.

⁶ A recent and significant exception is by Ann Curthoys and Marilyn Lake (eds), *Connected Worlds: History in Transnational Perspective* (Canberra: ANU Press, 2006).

separated by geographical and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect.”⁷

The collection illustrates this by analyzing the fluidity between categories of race, sexuality and gender in the imperial context where the body is positioned in a variety of different epistemological and ontological constellations. The first section is concerned with the ways in which the body acts as the lens through which cross-cultural encounters are filtered and the syntax by which the language of interaction is articulated. Rosalind O’Hanlon looks at the relationship between rulership, warfare and masculinity in eighteenth-century north India and demonstrates how gender was central to the Mughal integration of local military talent. Juxtapositions were repeatedly made between the social spaces of the soldier and those of women and the court to mark out martial values from the feminized worlds of the harem and refined gentlemen. (28) As a consequence, a wider culture of contested masculinities became a feature of Mughal life where the masculine body was the site of imperial intervention. Likewise, Jennifer Morgan looks at the ways in which the bodies of African women were constructed in early modern European travel narratives as markers between barbarism and civilization. In an era where racial distinctions were yet to find concrete resonance, gender was the modality by which cultural difference found expression. As a consequence, African women emerge as monstrous and inhuman with their naked breasts singled out by commentators as signs of savagery, their bodies conjured up “a gendered and racialized figure who marked the boundaries of English civility even as she naturalized the subjugation of Africans and their descendants in the Americas.” (65)

That the bodies of colonized women should become the terrain for the re-articulation of identities in the New World is a theme also explored by Rebecca Overmyer-Velázquez who employs the tenth book of the *Florentine Codex*, written in the second half of the sixteenth century, to explore the manner in which the perceived sexuality of Nahua women became the objects of sustained interrogation and intervention by Spanish Franciscan missionaries as part of the conversion endeavour. The ‘parallel’ gender system of Nahua culture, where women were valued in a complimentary and spiritual cosmology, was in direct contrast to the hierarchical Christian view of the inferior place of women in society. As a consequence, it was the perceived licentiousness of indigenous women that provided the Christian imaginary with the leverage to associate female sexuality with immorality and, hence, the body of the Nahua woman became the site of colonial conversion and transformation. (67)

⁷ J. R. McNeill and William McNeill, *The Human Web: A Bird’s Eye View of World History* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2003), 3, 8; Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), 7.

During the cross-cultural encounter, moreover, bodies could also be the markers of imperial translation and cultural transmission. In the former sense, African women in the early colonial period were often in positions of social power as intermediaries, collaborators and sexual partners where linguistic skills afforded them the opportunity to mediate between the European trading companies and the local *élite*. Julia Wells charts the ways in which a Khoena woman on the Cape of Good Hope, Krotoa (known as Eve to the Europeans), was able to strategically position herself within the Dutch establishment as a cultural power broker through her knowledge of languages and cross-cultural dialogue. (89) Her ambiguous relationship with a Dutch commander and her marriage to a Danish surgeon are explored as ways in which she became the embodiment of global webs of cross-cultural interaction and capital exchange. While mercantilist expansion encouraged bodily contact of this kind, where sexual exchange acted as a metaphor for capital exchange, the same cannot be said of French ventures in the Caribbean in the eighteenth century, as described by Sean Quinlan. In the context of slavery in the French Antilles, Quinlan describes how popular pseudoscientific theories on the degeneration of the body in mainland France, which were couched in terms of social class, were exported to the colonies to take on racial dimensions. A combination of the “torrid” climate, excessive alcohol consumption and sexual relations with “negresses” was thought to bring degeneration to the white male body and literally turn it black through the miasmatic transmission of bile. “To preserve European health and prevent the degenerative process of ‘creolization’”, argues Quinlan, “physicians posited that colonists should dissociate themselves from another source of pollution: the African slave.” (112)

In the second section, the collection turns from the ways in which cultural contact was couched in terms of racialized and gendered bodies, to the ways in which the dynamics of empire were articulated in ‘localized’ encounters that were marked, above all, by historical specificity. Mary Ann Fay does this by opening up the orientalist stereotypes found in imperial texts on Egypt to further scrutiny, undercutting the figure of the subjugated Muslim woman and the overly sexualized image of the harem to reveal quite a different landscape. She finds that the harem needs to be unhinged from its eighteenth-century imperial trope to reveal the family quarters of an upper-class home where *élite* women wielded considerable informal power as economic players in urban and commercial real estate. In the eighteenth century, Muslim women “did exercise agency through their legal right to own property” (141) and, hence, the bodily separation from men in an exclusively female space allowed them to assert their status and position in the family. In one of the many highlights of this collection, Mrinalini Sinha also writes evocatively of the separation of bodies in exclusive social spaces, but this was aimed at bolstering the prestige and social status of *élite* white men in

India by disempowering other bodies from accessing arenas of symbolic power. In this sense, the “club” in British India became a ruling-class social refuge that underscored the broader political trajectory of imperialism as much as it was a cultural arena for the reproduction of the boundaries of whiteness based on preventing bodily contact with white women and Indian men of all social classes. (183) However, as Patrick McDevitt illustrates, bodies could also be disciplined within the social spaces of sporting associations to resist colonialism. In his study of the significance of the anti-imperialist impulses inherent in the revival of hurling and Gaelic football in Ireland in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, he stresses that the combination of Catholic communalism as well as the image of the Gaelic homeland rooted in a fertile rural landscape provided the context around which Irish masculinity was defined in explicitly anti-British and anti-Protestant terms. The sports acted to “illustrate Irish attitudes toward the male body and to act as propaganda for the Irish-Ireland movement which sought to “de-Anglicize” Ireland.” (207)

While bodies acted as sites for empowerment, exclusion and agency in bringing together imperial webs of power in a broader global context, they were also sites of vulnerability, ambiguity and paradox. The question of *métissage* and the politics of ‘mixed-race’ identity are at the heart of the manner in which the intimate colony of the body can be viewed as a site for cross-cultural interactions on a global scale. Lucy Eldersveld Murphy illustrates this point in her essay on *métis* women in nineteenth-century mid-West America who cast themselves as healers, carers and public mothers in the pursuit to create a gendered solidarity that linked the individual racialized body with the political body politic of native American communities. (175) While conventional histories of hybridity in the British Empire have often focused on the ways in which an intermediary underclass of ‘mixed-race’ subjects acted to destabilize the certainties of colonial identity, Adele Perry reorients our gaze back onto the constitution of the colonial élite in British Columbia in order to argue that the ‘white’ social and cultural body was already hybridized. In a fascinating and highly engaging narrative, Perry charts the lives of James Douglas, who became the governor of the colony, and his wife Amelia Connolly, as biographical trajectories that converge to produce perhaps the commanding centerpiece of this collection. Knighted in 1863, Douglas attained the highest imperial office as representative of the British Crown and the vice-regal couple was, for all intents and purposes, representative of the élite social and political body that acted to legitimate the occupation of indigenous land and the creation of a European social hierarchy in Canada. However, as Perry reveals, Douglas himself was the son of a Scottish sugar merchant and a “free coloured” woman, while his wife was the daughter of a British fur trader and an indigenous woman. The *créole* governor and his *métisse* wife represented a union in which imperial

webs of cross-cultural interaction acted on the localized and intimate site of the body, thus confirming Ballantyne and Burton's prognosis about the gendered and corporeal dimensions of world history with great aplomb. What is most refreshing about Perry's analysis is her rendition of "how such hybridity could persist in the face of the nineteenth century's increasing commitment to racial classification, separation and hierarchy." (149) Indeed, in colonialism's pursuit to separate bodies, those bodies were already in intimate contact, by now cast in a global web of intimate convergence.

Such webs, however, relied on the movement of bodies, capital and labour in order to create the conditions for cross-cultural contact. In this sense, as the co-editors affirm, the 'new imperial history' and world history speak to each other through the paradigm of mobility. The third section of the volume looks at the relationship between mobility and the body in terms of both travel and imperial occupation. A 'two-way traffic' saw colonized bodies report back at the world around them. For example, Carter Vaughn Findley returns the orientalist gaze back upon itself by charting the ways in which an Ottoman traveler, Ahmed Midhat, viewed European modernity through his dialogue with the Russian noblewoman Madame Gülnar in 1889, while Siobhan Lambert Hurley looks at how the travels of an élite Muslim woman from India, the Begum of Bhopal, transformed the public sphere through an emergent transnational feminist consciousness.

But, in important ways, it is the relationship between nationalism and the body that illustrates how bodies became agents of active resistance through movement, change and adaptation. In his essay on the role of the Hindu concept of *brahmacharya* (celibacy) in the self-disciplining of the male body, Joseph Alter points out that sexual restraint was inextricably linked to the search for nationalist truth in India. "As a tangible, corporeal whole," states Alter, "the body is regarded as more fundamental and natural than are ideas and concepts; it is incontrovertible, and therefore moral in a biological rather than an ideological way." (317) Hyun Sook Kim concurs with this but from the standpoint that colonized bodies were also overtly sexualized by imperial powers to the point that they were invaded and assaulted. The role of Korean "comfort women" under Japanese occupation illustrates the urgent need for a revision of national histories in order to acknowledge the ethical and moral issues involved in the construction of historical memory.

However, Alter's point also needs to be cast in a relative light. For instance, Shoshana Keller argues that the body was also an ideological battleground. Her analysis of the ways in which Uzbeki Muslim women became the targets of Soviet campaigns to secularize and control their central Asian colonies demonstrates how ideological concerns put bodies squarely on the frontline of the battle between 'tradition' and 'modernity'. In likewise fashion, as explored by Mire Koikari, 'traditional' Japanese gender relations

were the focus of attempts to ‘civilize’ Japanese society under the American occupation, where women’s bodies became the arena for intense ideological contestation. In both the Soviet and American cases, it was Uzbeki and Japanese men who were cast as the chauvinistic gatekeepers of an oriental despotism from which women’s bodies needed to be rescued. In the Japanese case, however, this was destabilized by the place of Japanese prostitutes who called into question the respectability of the Japanese national project.

That the United States perceived itself as the moral agent in the ‘civilizing project’ in Japan was called into question by the internal dynamics of American society itself, as Melani McAlister asserts, since the politics of African American liberation saw the political ‘Islamicization’ of the black social body through sustained transnational ‘contact zones’ with other Islamic states. The global interconnectedness of bodies-in-contact comes full circle.

In many ways, the sheer multiplicity of the ways in which a bodily ‘contact zone’ is employed in this volume on a global scale is an indication of the strength of the argument that Ballantyne and Burton both make with such incisiveness and elegance. Bodies are physical, geographical, anthropological, biological, philosophical and metaphorical terrains. Bodies are active agents of global hegemony as they are also passive recipients of worldly inscriptions. Heidi Gengenbach’s chapter on the role of tattoos and bodily adornment amongst African women in Mozambique offers such a reading. (259) Bodies are embraced in union as much as they are staked apart by political and economic institutions. Bodies are also national entities that are imbued with unconscious race privilege grounded in sexual metaphor. In the context of France and Australia, the essays of Elisa Camiscioli and Fiona Paisley are haunting reminders of the ways in which the fabric of national identity in those countries is constituted by a deep-seated fear of non-white male sexual penetration and invasion. Paisley’s analysis of what she calls “detribalized Aboriginal masculinity” as a threat to Australia’s sense of national self has an eerie and not irrelevant contemporary resonance. (248)

In other ways, and perhaps because of these examples, this far-reaching and broad sweep of corporeal application means that the theoretical impact of the body’s critical punch is often toned down, which sometimes seems at odds with the other vitally important argument of this volume: that the body does not exist in a vacuum to cover all global bases but that it is incited by historical specificity and the localized practices of place that render its materiality both politically relevant and philosophically tenable.

What is more refreshing about this collection for teacher and student alike, however, is the more potent re-thinking of the relationship between empire, gender and the body where the distinction between the monolithic terms ‘the West’ and ‘the non-West’ is critically evaluated in terms of the

fluid and mobile place of masculinity in world history. In many ways echoing the arguments of Mrinalini Sinha in her path-breaking work, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century*, Ballantyne and Burton push the boundaries further by stretching the feminization of the colonized to a broader world context where empires are not only the privileged historical domain of European hegemony. For instance, the gendered dynamics of the Mughal Empire in India in the eighteenth century are charted by Rosalind O'Hanlon in relation to a pre-European landscape where contested masculinities played a pivotal role in the consolidation of power. Likewise, in a gripping and important essay, Emma Jinhua Teng alerts us to the part played by representations of assertive female roles in Taiwanese society in the Chinese world-view and the fact that the perceived "femininity" of Taiwanese indigenous men justified the subordinate status of the colonized subject. (40)

As far as the relationship between world history and feminist history is concerned, the collection also makes its mark by challenging orthodox renditions of cultural difference. This seems to correlate to Judith Zinsser's suggestion that a women's world history would need to avoid the essentializing tendency to treat all women's experiences on a global scale as universal. (410) It also echoes the plea of postcolonial feminists that issues of cultural difference mediate gender as much as gender distinctions mediate cultural location.⁸ In this sense, feminized and masculinized bodies emerge as categories of analysis that bring to the field a more inclusive rendition of global thinking, where a reconstituted Sky Woman materializes from an interdisciplinary Turtle's Back, to teach a new generation about the importance of evaluating whose 'world' we are referring to under the rubric of 'world history'.

⁸ See Chandra Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses", in *Feminist Review*, no. 30, Autumn 1988, 61-88; Ella Shohat, "Area Studies, Gender Studies, and the Cartographies of Knowledge", in *Social Text*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2002, 67-78; and Sara Suleri, "Woman Skin Deep: Feminism and the Postcolonial Condition", in *Critical Inquiry*, Summer 1992, 756-769.