

New Perspectives on the History of Colonialism and Sexuality

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Abstract:

The Routledge Companion to Sexuality and Colonialism, edited by Dagmar Herzog and Chelsea Shields, convinces with its various contributions about the history and the entanglements of sexuality and colonialism. The contributions cover a broad range, both in terms of the time and spaces investigated as well as in terms of the methodological approaches and the analyzed sources.

Neue Perspektiven auf die Geschichte von Kolonialismus und Sexualität

German Abstract:

Das *Routledge Companion to Sexuality and Colonialism*, herausgegeben von Dagmar Herzog und Chelsea Shields, bietet eine umfassende Zusammenschau zur Geschichte und den Verflechtungen von Sexualität und Kolonialismus. Die Beiträge decken ein breites Spektrum ab, sowohl in Bezug auf die untersuchten Zeiten und Räume als auch in Bezug auf die methodischen Ansätze und die analysierten Quellen.

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The Routledge Companion to Sexuality and Colonialism, edited by Dagmar Herzog and Chelsea Shields and published in 2021, is an impressive collection of historical research on interconnections between colonialism, sexuality, and intimacy. The essays offer a broad spectrum on spaces and places investigated: the contributions within the volume range from the 16th century to the present and extend from the Spanish Empire to colonies in Africa and the Ottoman Empire; from the Japanese Empire to the Caribbean and the English colonies in North America, Australia, and New Zealand. What frames the various contributions is the well-founded introduction by the two editors. Intended to move “beyond Foucault-inspired efforts” (p. 3), the compendium follows a methodologically open approach: On the one hand, it refers to Anjali Arondekar’s works on archives as representations (p. 6) and Ann Laura Stoler’s claim to read the sources “along the archival grain” (p. 2). On the other hand, it encourages readers to “think both comparatively and relationally” (p. 3). The terminology of the handbook is open: Colonialism for instance does not have a fixed meaning. Instead, the contributions are meant to reveal how differently the meanings of colonialism are negotiated in each case (p. 10).

Building on these introductory considerations, five thematic sections follow. The first section, “Directions in the study of sexuality and colonialism” consists of seven contributions, which are arranged geographically and discuss the research landscape regarding sexuality and colonialism. The section provides a comprehensive overview about developments and trends in research in different parts of the world and an insightful introduction to the more thematically oriented subsequent sections.

The contributions in the second section are dedicated to questions about the construction of race and the control of reproduction. Of particular interest in this section are the essays written by Laura C. L. Landertinger and Françoise Vergès, because they show how robustly colonial logics hold up and persist to this day: Laura C. L. Landertinger analyzes how children were treated in the child welfare system in Canada in the 19th century and demonstrates how the system has evolved into today's system of childcare (Chapter 11). Françoise Vergès analyzes the French feminist movements and the politicization of black women's wombs within the movement (Chapter 13). Further, she uses a speech by Emmanuel Macrons to show how the bodies of black women are still politicized and instrumentalized today (p. 165).

The third section is dedicated to the relationship between sexuality and law. In addition to investigations in the Foucauldian sense — i.e., how law tried to control the sexual lives of the actors (Chapter 14, Chad Thomas Black; Chapter 15, Christina Firpo; Chapter 19, Susanne M. Klausen) — Liat Kozma's article explores international law and the question of how the League of Nations dealt with colonial prostitution (Chapter 16). Particularly interesting is Sara Pursley's perspective on Iraq's colonial history and the negotiations between secular and spiritual law. One study goes beyond the analysis in the Foucauldian sense: Rachel Jean-Baptiste's essay shows how Adama, a woman from the Ivory Coast, tried to get French law on her side by fighting to get back her child, who was taken from her by the French father (Chapter 18).

The fourth section focuses on "Subjects, souls, and selfhood." In the first part, the focus mainly lies on women as historical actors. In her contribution, Brianna Leavitt-Alcántara describes in an original way how fruitful an analysis of wills can be. She analyzes the wills of single women in Guatemala in the early 18th century, showing how pious communities provided a space for poor, single women to build and consolidate a pious persona and create networks (Chapter 20). Particularly interesting and unaccustomed are the studies on queer history and their interlocking with colonialism by Howard Chiang on transgender people in Taiwan in the 20th century (Chapter 23), the contribution by Wigbertson Julian Iseania on the concept of sexual citizenship, a concept which refers to the "demands of sexual minorities and transgender persons as political subjects to institutional right" (p. 274), and its

entanglements with the cultural practices of the Curacao-born theatre-maker Fridi Martina (Chapter 24). The article by Katherine Schweighofer on colonial structures within the “lesbian land” movements in the 1970s (Chapter 25) convinces with its new perspectives as well.

The last section “Pleasure and violence” deals with the legal prosecution of actors who had the potential to wrench the colonial system through their actions. For example, Martin Nesvig analyzes how a Spanish man in 16th century Mexico was legally persecuted for his numerous sexual contacts with Indigenous women, but also for his participation in their practices (Chapter 26). The role of sexual violence during genocide is impressively described by Elisa von Joeden-Forgey. She points to the gendered logic and the ever-present sexualized violence during the Herero genocide (Chapter 28). In the final contribution to the compendium, Esther Captain addresses sexual restraint, substitution, transgression, and violence in 20th century Indonesia (Chapter 31). Captain analyzes different types of colonialism — first under Dutch then under Japanese occupation and lastly during the Indonesian war of independence. According to her, the systems each require involvement of the local population to function (p. 361).

The compendium covers an impressive range of methodological approaches and sources. Sources such as letters and wills come to light in which the traces of marginalized actors become visible (i.e., chapter 18, Rachel Jean-Baptiste and chapter 20, Brianna Leavitt-Alcántara). Visual sources also find their way into the compendium: Diana Garvin, for example, uses her essay to analyze illustrations of black women who practiced “wet-nursing,” breastfeeding of children, in Italian-occupied East Africa and earned money with it (chapter 12). What seems particularly strong to me is that most of the contributions focus on individual stories of historical agents without romanticizing agency or relationships. Connections between violence, war, passion, and sexuality run through all the contributions.

However, the various definitions of intimacy and sexuality could have been better reflected in the contributions: What is sexuality? What is intimacy? The only contribution that makes this quite explicit is the one by Katherine Schweighofer. Her contribution on the lesbian land movement shows what intimacy meant in these contexts. She reveals that it was not only about sexuality, but also about non-sexual relationships. Intimacy in these contexts also

meant “a change of interactions” (p. 283–284). As mentioned in the beginning, the comparative nature of the compendium is emphasized by the two editors (p. 3). The compendium offers material which certainly can be used for comparisons and further research, but the relational character and the comparison remains only implicit and is thus only half fulfilled. Additionally, it is a pity that Oceania and smaller Pacific Islands are underrepresented, even though the research landscape in New Zealand and Australia is briefly outlined from a comparative perspective in the first section with the contribution by Gregory Smithers.

That said, the compendium convinces with its versatility in terms of time, space, and the selection of sources and offers an impressive overview of current research on sexuality and colonialism. Moreover, it demonstrates (post-)colonial continuities that still influence our lives today, hence it can be considered an important work for future research and the teaching of the history of colonialism and sexuality.