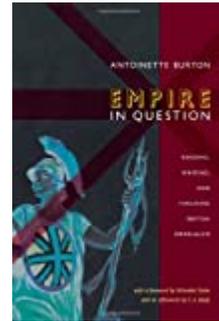




Antoinette M. Burton. *Empire in Question: Reading, Writing, and Teaching British Imperialism.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. 392 S. \$94.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-4880-1; \$25.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-4902-0.



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A. Burton: Empire in Question

Scholars of transnational history would do well to read Antoinette Burton's *Empire in Question: Reading, Writing and Teaching British Imperialism*. The volume reprints fourteen essays first published between 1994 and 2011 and a new essay that considers the relationship of imperial history to world history. These essays are a reminder of the stakes involved in denaturalizing the nation, particularly in imperial and post-colonial contexts. They also reveal a mode of historical inquiry that does not take the categories of the past for granted, but is intent on working through tensions and contradictions to bring to the surface the ways the categories of the past continue to shape our experience.

Here I'd like to think through Burton's essays with three points in mind: 1) How do we account for an empire that was constituted in multiple locations? 2) What is at stake in troubling the categories of history writing? and 3) How is the work historians perform implicated in contemporary politics?

In the historiography of British Imperialism, the investment in mapping what Mrinalini Sinha has called the imperial social formation Mrinalini Sinha, Mapping the

Imperial Social Formation: A Modest Proposal for Feminist History, in: *Signs* 25 (2000) 4, pp. 1077-1082. , a field of action shaped by the dialectical relationship between the metropole and colonies, emerged from two interconnected agendas. One was to displace a Whiggish narrative of history that made the nation-state the locus of historical activity, and the second, to insist that domestic history was impacted, if not constituted, by imperial entanglements. That is not to say necessarily that empire was *everywhere* at home, but more importantly that it shaped the categories through which Britons understood themselves and their nation. As Burton, a key scholar in this intervention, argued, the formulation of "home" and "empire" as distinct spheres was itself a technology of imperial rule (p. 28).

Burton's essays demonstrate the falsity of this division by tracing individual lives, political scandals, and social movements across imperial space. In "Tongues Untied," she examines the controversy ignited by the Conservative Prime Minister Lord Salisbury's dismissal of Dadabhai Naoroji as a "black man." The story of Naoroji, who was born in India and stood as the Liberal party can-

didate for Parliament from Finsbury, North London, is not simply one of an imperial life lived across borders. Salisbury's language mobilized publics across the empire, who in responding revealed multiple and overlapping investments. Through this scandal, Burton reveals the imperial contexts of metropolitan political rights in the nineteenth century and the ways language structured categories of race, gender and belonging.

Burton's efforts to unsettle the perceived insolubility of the nation is deeply entwined with her project to demonstrate the mutability of categories of race and gender in imperial contexts. In "Contesting the Zenana," Burton complicates the campaigns of British female doctors to provide allopathic medical care to Indian women. Burton connects the exclusions British women experienced in the medical profession at home with their discursive construction of the status of Indian women. Their campaign brought them professional standing but through refiguring the Indian woman as a victim of barbaric native practices. The complicated relationships between British and Indian women is further explored in "From Child Bride to Hindoo Lady." Burton traces British and Indian reactions to Rukhmabai, a young woman who used the legal system to win her freedom from an arranged marriage. By examining the "facts" of the case as reported in papers throughout the empire, Burton excavates the myriad responses to Rukhmabai and argues that various audiences interpreted her case according to their own investments. In these essays Burton presents a way of researching and writing history that follows stories across borders and demonstrates the importance of a multi-cited research program to interpret imperial phenomenon.

In addition to presenting essays that map the imperial social formation, Burton also reflects on the politics of historical method, theory, and pedagogy. From our vantage point in 2014, it is easy perhaps for young historians to take the insights of cultural history for granted, but "Who Needs the Nation? Interrogating British History," reminds us of the battles in the 1980s and 1990s between social and cultural history, particularly over issues of whose methods were more "historical." In "Thinking Beyond the Boundaries" and "Gender, Colonialism, and Feminist Collaboration," Burton engages with feminist theory to reflect on historical practice. She argues that historians can and should contribute to theoretical debates on the construction of categories and domains of knowledge. In another essay, Burton looks to the insights of literary scholars reading texts like *Jane Eyre*, and asks how historians might incorporate their approaches in the

classroom. Throughout, Burton calls readers to trouble categories and to query boundaries between disciplinary agendas.

Burton also turns her critical gaze on historians and their modes of inquiry. In "Archive Stories," she argues for the importance of acknowledging that human endeavor and interest shapes the material traces of the past, and she urges historians to attend to the organization and silences of the archive. Indeed, the successful attempt by Kenyans to receive acknowledgement and redress from the British government for the torture they experienced during decolonization revealed that the British government hoarded and destroyed countless records. Caroline Elkins, "Listening to the Voices from Kenya's colonial past," in: *The Guardian*, 21 October 2013, URL: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/oct/21/kenya-british-empire-myths-historians> (last access 2 May 2014); Ian Cobain, "Academics consider legal action to force Foreign Office to release public records," in: *The Guardian*, 13 January 2014, URL: <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/jan/13/foreign-office-secret-files-national-archive-historians-legal-action> (last access 2 May 2014). Some 1.2 million files are known to have been withheld and are making their way from the secret cache in Hanslope Park to the National Archives, and it is not known how many more files are still hidden. As Burton suggests in her essay and this specific instance demonstrates, historians have been and should be at the forefront of questioning archival traces of the past, not merely referencing them in pursuit of objective truth.

In addition to the historian's archival practice, Burton also raises the issue of the race, class, and gender positioning of the researcher, and the ways these categories of experience can privilege or constrain archival experiences. Along with the position of the historian, attention to the work of history in popular and political narratives is another consistent theme of the essays. In "All over Again," and "India Inc.?" Burton takes David Cannadine and Tom Stoppard to task for their works, which present nostalgic visions of the imperial history, erasing the present, and its racialized strife, in favor of an ordered and aristocratic past. She finds this interpretation of imperial history gaining favor in the American academy. She critiques the 1999 report of the North American Conference on British Studies, which encouraged British historians to emphasize empire to gain student enrollment and ensure their place in university

departments.

This relationship between contemporary politics and the ways historians frame the past receive Burton's attention in "Getting outside of the Global," the only essay Burton wrote particularly for this volume. In considering how scholars can historicize "empires in a worldly way" (p. 288), Burton examines the production of British Imperial history to meet demand for histories of our global present. Burton reviews recent work to rethink how Britain can be provincialized in global histories to account for the agency of other empires and also the asymmetries of power between them. She praises connective and comparative histories in service of critically resisting the inward looking tendencies of the field that reproduce conceptions of the global formed in the Victorian era through imperial frameworks. She argues that this

perception of the global continues to shape ideas of international order. It is only by critically thinking about spatial categories such as the local, the national, the regional, and the transnational, that it might even be possible to get beyond the imperial shaping of the contemporary international order. Here again, she connects the construction of epistemological categories to contemporary politics.

Throughout, Burton calls our attention to the question of why we write the histories we write and to whom we offer them. Burton's essays remind us that there are political questions at stake in denaturalizing the nation, and that scholars thinking in transnational and imperial terms have much to contribute to contemporary discussions of race, gender, political belonging and globalization.

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