

Book Reviews

Sites of Desire, Economies of Pleasure: Sexualities in Asia and the Pacific. Edited by Leonore Manderson and Margaret Jolly. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. Pp. 367.

The French post-structuralist philosopher Michel Foucault, as many of the essays in this collection remind us, saw sexuality as primarily a Western invention, a discourse which arose in the nineteenth century simultaneously with the birth of the sovereign individual. *Sites of Desire, Economies of Pleasure* seeks to discover how much relevance the concept has for the description and analysis of non-Western cultures in Asia and the Pacific, in particular the hybrid cultural practices which have emerged after the end of “flag” colonialism.

As might be expected of a collection selected from papers given in two separate conferences, the scope of inquiry is broad and the methodological approaches varied. Jolly and Manderson’s introduction covers a great deal of ground in considering contemporary American and European feminist and post-structuralist approaches to gender, successfully integrating the topics of the various essays. Irritatingly, the introduction ends with the caveat that authors and readers “need to credit the diversity and resilience of . . . non-Western theories of sexuality, although we have barely started a consideration of them here” (p. 26). If the theories are so important, one wonders, why are they neglected, especially since the authors “query both an easy universalism and an easy relativism by focusing on cross-cultural *exchanges*” (p. 1)?

The collection commences with an excellent, path-breaking essay by Ann Laura Stoler which has already been published as a chapter of her *Race and the Education of Desire*. Stoler critiques the supposition by much analysis of colonial discourse that “colonial power relations can be accounted for and explained as a sublimated expression of repressed

desires in the West". Using Foucault's notion that sexuality is not, fundamentally, repressive, but rather an incitement to the individual to define him or herself in a particular way, Stoler demonstrates how colonial communities in Java constituted themselves and drew racial and class boundary lines through discourses of sexuality. She illustrates this point through an incisive reading of C.H. Stratz's *Women on Java* (1897), which she sees as constructing a "pornographic racial taxonomy" (p. 39).

Two essays by the editors of the volume are similar to each other in structure, and share similar strengths and weaknesses. Both read three representative "texts" produced in the West which sexualize an Asian or Pacific location, and use them as markers to plot evolving Western constructions of an exotic Other. Jolly looks at Polynesia, moving from representations of Polynesian women by early European explorers, through Beatrice Grimshaw's early twentieth-century travel writing, to the 1958 Joshua Logan movie *South Pacific*. While the individual analyses are interesting, the genealogical connection between them needs more discussion, and the kind of careful scholarship seen, for example, in *Sickness and the State*, her co-editor's account of public health in colonial Malaya. The most interesting aspect of these representations in terms of "exchanges", the way in which Islanders react to them, mimic, and reutilize them, is again raised only briefly at the conclusion of the essay. Manderson's account of three "orientalist" films which sexualize Thailand — *The King and I* (1956), *Emmanuelle* (1974), and *The Good Woman of Bangkok* (1991) — is less ambitious in chronological terms than Jolly's essay, but like Jolly's, it is more concerned with the projection of "myths of race and sexuality" than with exchanges as such.

Adam Reed's "Contested Images" and John Kelly's "Gaze and Grasp" are both more centrally concerned with a process of negotiation and exchange in colonial societies, a process here reconstituted through the close reading of colonial texts. Reed examines missionary discourses regarding indigenous sexuality in the Massim region of New Guinea and their contestation by other members of the colonizing community. Kelly, in the best-written essay in the collection, looks at accounts in

magistrates' records of violent attacks by Indian men on Indian women in Fiji, accounts which invariably ascribe the motive for the crime to the perceived Indian racial trait of "sexual jealousy", and how the colonial texts' imbrication of race and sexuality is challenged by a later account written by one of the men's grandchildren.

Most of the other essays in the collection are less text-based and more traditionally anthropological, incorporating elements of field-work. Annette Hamilton's "Primal Dream" is an exception: it examines the "libinization" of Thailand in the West, and in particular the representation of the *farang*/bar girl relationship in novels published within the European community in Bangkok. In these fictionalized liaisons, Hamilton observes, the "money-love relationship becomes particularly problematic", since they are based upon a misapprehension of the Thai sex worker's construction of the relationship. Peter A. Jackson's essay also examines Thailand, and the new phenomenon of an aggressively masculinist Thai gay male identity. Such an identity, Jackson argues, should not merely be seen as a "Western borrowing" but emerges from contestations in the structure of Thai masculinity, interacting with, but not replacing the polar constructs of normative man and *kathoey*, a traditional transgender role. Jackson's work in the field is already well known, and this essay is a useful supplement.

A cluster of essays at the end of the volume address, again from a variety of perspectives, the inter-relationships between constructions of sexuality and the human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) pandemic. Jeffrey Clark's "States of Desire", examines transformations of sexuality among the Huli people of Papua New Guinea. Increased contact with the *nambis* (the seaboard, centring on Port Moresby) has led to a "transcultural" sexuality as "an indigenous sexuality became caught up in the discourse of the West" (p. 210). The contours of this sexuality, Clark suggests, must be carefully plotted in order to successfully implement intervention programmes against sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and HIV/AIDS. Doug Porter analyses the assumptions behind NGO (non-governmental organization) requests for funding from the Australian Government of

HIV/AIDS projects in the Myanmar/Thai/China border region, supplemented by his own research in the area. His conclusion is that, in targeting certain groups of people for intervention, the projects solidify and assign identities which may, in fact, be fluid: a “commercial sex worker” may not identify him or herself as such, and may participate in a number of different economic and social activities. One difficulty in Porter’s interesting essay is that it is unclear to what extent these project proposals are constrained by the rhetorical requirements of the application process; he does not discuss their implementation

Lisa Law, in contrast, looks at the implementation of HIV/AIDS education programmes in Cebu City, the Philippines. After introducing public discourses on prostitution, and presenting brief life-stories of three Filipina bar workers, Law discusses the assumptions behind three Australian-funded, but locally run projects. The programmes have met with some success, but Law notes some of their difficulties in implementation arise from Western constructions of sexuality. AIDS education projects in Australia usually begin as or are modelled on work in the gay community. They thus stress a “peer education” model which transplants uneasily to the Philippine context. From Law’s interviews, it is clear that many women who work in the bars of Cebu City do not identify themselves as part of a community.

Sandra Buckley’s essay on HIV/AIDS discourse in Japan concludes the collection. While Buckley examines and critiques Japan’s representation of HIV as a foreign virus, she is also sensitive to the complexity of the cultural context. Her explanation of the *manga* comic-style graphics in government-funded educational material is particularly incisive. Such representations, she argues, are not in themselves trivializing, given the broad range of topics *manga* deal with, nor, given the conventions of the genre, would a Japanese reader necessarily identify the characters portrayed as foreign, despite their apparently European appearance. Buckley manages a successful reading of the “cracks of the statistics and categories of the official story” (p. 291).

Few readers will find themselves in complete agreement with all the essays in *Sites of Desire: Economies of Pleasure*. There is, indeed, produc-

tive disagreement between the essays themselves. Nonetheless, the collection remains stimulating and thought-provoking to researchers and students with an interest in the sociology, history, anthropology, and human geography of Asia and the Pacific.

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