

REVIEW ESSAY

Reading *Haunted by Empire* in Winnipeg: The Politics of Transnational Histories

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Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham and London, Duke Universities Press, 2006).

It is hard for a historian of northern North America and Canada to know what to make of Ann Laura Stoler's 2006 edited collection, *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History*.² Here, Stoler and her able contributors call on historians to rethink what they term North American history through the double optics of intimacy and imperialism. To historians of women or Indigenous peoples in Canada, this argument is at once inspiring and disconcertingly familiar. What Stoler has so influentially dubbed intimacies of empire have, in one form or another, been central to both women's and Native histories in Canada since the 1980 publication of Jennifer S.H. Brown's *Strangers in Blood* and Sylvia Van Kirk's *Many Tender Ties*.³ Brown's analysis placed family and kinship at the centre of fur-trade life, and Van Kirk's argued for the centrality of women—both Indigenous and European—to the work and politics of the nineteenth-century western Canadian fur-trade.

In different ways, Brown and Van Kirk's works were both early examples of women's history as well as feminist interventions into the new social history of the fur-trade that was taking shape in the 1970s and 80s.⁴ Read in wider terms, these books also reflected the shifting politics of Aboriginal womanhood in twentieth-century Canada. Indigenous women's insistence that they were legitimate subjects of history and that the history of the West needed to be understood as both gendered and colonized was increasingly visible.⁵ Just as *Many Tender Ties* and *Strangers in Blood* were finding their readership, Indigenous women were launching an ultimately successful federal court challenge to the constituent sexism of Canada's massive, panoptic instrument of racial classification and exhaustive social regulation, the *Indian Act*.⁶ That Van Kirk and Brown were putting the questions of marriage, women and family into the historiography of colonialism in the history of eighteenth and nineteenth-century North America as Sandra Lovelace and the women of Tobique were laying bare the entanglements of race, gender, and political membership in modern Canada were surely related.

The scholarship on marriage, gender, and women in the fur trade of the

North American west that developed in the 1970s and 80s did not, of course, go unchallenged or uncritiqued. In the early 1990s Van Kirk's work particularly garnered some sharp post-colonial, anti-racist, and post-structuralist critiques, ones that made clear how wedded *'Many Tender Ties'* was to a Eurocentric, celebratory sort of liberal feminism.⁷ For all this, Van Kirk's and Brown's symbiotic arguments about the centrality of women and family to the Canadian fur-trade has never been cast into serious doubt. It has inspired some remarkable film-making, including Christine Welsh's investigation of her own family history.⁸ Brown and Van Kirk's initial forays have given shape to a second generation of studies of family, gender, and the fur-trade.⁹ Van Kirk's work in particular has the relatively rare distinction of having garnered a fairly extensive readership outside Canada, even being reprinted in an influential volume on multicultural "American" women's history.¹⁰ North of the border critical aspects of Van Kirk and Brown's historical vocabulary have been integrated into mainstream Canadian history and public programming. Visitors to state-funded historic sites and first-year students are more than likely to know something about *marriage a la façon du pays* and 'women in between,' if only in a predictably celebratory and selective manner.

Van Kirk and Brown helped to give historians key tools for constructing a history of intimate relations between men and women, children and parents across presumed racial lines and one forever imbricated with imperial politics and colonial economies. That this history was not simply a local or national one was clear from the outset, and became clearer as a subsequent generation of feminist historians provided new interpretations of the relationship between gender, contact, and colonialism in Canada and more particularly its Western parts.¹¹ This literature, within which my own work has squarely been located, found its analytic feet in part from development of a vibrant international literature on gender and colonialism that has flourished since the late 1980s, and continues to do so. The special impact of anthropologist Ann Stoler's work on this new historiography of gender and colonialism in Canada can be easily gleaned from a perusal of its footnotes.

I remember the intellectual excitement I felt when first encountering Stoler's essays on the Dutch East Indies as a graduate student in the early 1990s. These articles placed sexuality and identity at the centre of the colonial enterprise and prompted readers to think in radically new ways about how colonies managed themselves through making bodies, children, and citizens. They wedded the best of postcolonial studies to history from below and trenchant feminist insight.¹² Stoler went on to argue for a rethinking of Foucault's ideas of sexuality through the optics of empire, the need to put colony and metropole into a single analytic field, and the significance of intimacy to colonial relations in general and South East Asia in particular.¹³ This powerful analysis was first extended to North America in substantial essay entitled "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies," published in the *Journal of American History* in 2001. It generated enough historiographical

traction in the scholarly review process that the editors of the journal published it banked by five responses.¹⁴

Reprinted in full, “Tense and Tender Ties” and more particularly its double call to comparisons between North America and the colonial world and greater attention to how intimacy “figure[s] in the making of racial categories and in the management of imperial rule” (23) provides the analytic focal point for *Haunted By Empire*. It is joined by a preface and introductory essay by Stoler and fourteen essays of varying length. Each of these is written by a US based scholar, most of them relatively junior historians. Three “refractions” by more senior academics cap the volume.

The result is a provocative, challenging, and wide-ranging five-hundred plus pages. As Stoler notes, the contributors do not share a common definition of intimacy. Most share her tendency to register it most acutely and often in the overlapping realms of sexuality, marriage, family, and the body. Nayan Shah uses two legal cases from the early twentieth-century United States to show how definitions of intimacy “calibrate liberal societies’ legal definitions of the capacity of self-possession and for the ownership of property”(116). Kathleen Brown analyses the politics of bodies and boundaries in the writing of a nineteenth-century free African-American male servant. Laura Briggs’ discussion of transnational adoption and United States’ foreign policy brings the centrality of familial intimacies to the making of race and nation squarely into the present day.

The essays in *Haunted by Empire* are at their best when they are the most unexpectedly comparative and far-reaching. Damon Salsea’s insightful analysis of “half-castes” in nineteenth-century Samoa both provincializes the United States’ experience and speaks to the enormous influence of its empire in this part of the Pacific. Lisa Lowe’s thoughtful treatment of the links between colonial labour regimes and modern humanism treats intimacy as “spacial proximity or adjacent connection”(193). Warwick Anderson probes the body politics that were shared by Australian institutions for “half-castes” and Filipino leper colonies. Martha Hodes uses the story of a mixed-race family in the British West Indies to cast new light on the making of race in the United States Census of 1890. In a discipline where national and super-national “fields” continue to define much of how expertise is acknowledged and managed, having a scholar whose work has been focused on Asia turn her head to the United States is a brave and, I think, rewarding choice.

In many ways *Haunted by Empire* meets its goal of recasting the history of the United States. The literature on contact, colonialism, and mixed-race social formations is much stronger in some American regions—the Southwest, the Pacific Northwest, and the northern Plains—than in others. Only Shah’s essay and Linda Gordon’s ‘refraction’ cover these better-known terrains. Instead, contributors here write on Russian Alaska, urban St. Louis, and African-American missionaries in Cherokee country. The essays that are the least compelling were those

aimed primarily at demonstrating the utility of analyzing American history as colonial or otherwise unexceptional history. It is not that these essays fail to convince: it is that they could hardly do otherwise, especially in the wake of a solid decade of scholarship arguing for transnational history.

This collection represents a new kind of American history, one that can only be welcomed by those of us who are looking for new ways to think about the settler world in general and North America in particular. The richness of the comparisons made, the frequency of the borders crossed and the analyses attenuated to the highly localized and variant politics of imperialism make this volume's slippage about "North America" in *Haunted by Empire* especially perplexing. The book's sub-title refers to "North American history" but it is unclear what this means for the editor or the contributors. In her introduction, Stoler refers to "United States history" and "American history" seemingly interchangeably. For her, as for most of the contributors, the term North American seems to function largely as a cognate for the present-day United States projected backwards in time. The bulk of North America that lies north of the 49th parallel and south of the *Rio Grande*—present-day Mexico and Canada—quietly slide out of focus. Mexico receives scarce attention beyond Alexandra Minna Stern's discussion of the movement of psychometric testing between the United States and Mexico and Gordon's use of Mexican-Americans as an illustration of internal colonialism. Canada hovers around the edges of *Haunted by Empire*, never entirely in view but never entirely absent. Stoler acknowledges that "Tense and Tender Ties" owes its title to Van Kirk's germinal work, but her engagement with the rich and comparatively long-standing scholarship on marriage, women, and colonialism in Canada goes no further.

The irony of Canada and Mexico's place—or rather lack thereof—in a volume dedicated to exploring "the shadowy pull of U.S. empire over those of my generation who have studied the colonial and found U.S. intrusions to subjacenty shape their intellectual choices and academic lives"(xi) would go entirely unnoted if not for Catherine Hall's astute reflection. I am not the first to draw attention to the awkwardness of the particular erasure of the work and spaces most commonly associated with "Canadian" history here. In very different ways, Dirk Hoerder's thoughtful response to the original publication of "Tense and Tender Ties" and a letter to the editors of the *Journal of American History* that followed it both spoke to the oddness of Stoler's treatment of the Canadian scholarship.¹⁵ Hall's concluding reflection in *Haunted by Empire* does not belabour this point, but does draw attention to the troubling equation of North America with the present-day United States with particular care and, I think, to special effect. As the only contributor "writing from outside U.S. studies and the U.S. context"(452), Hall acknowledges the complexity and significance of Van Kirk's work and uses the example of western Canada to suggest how the analytics of intimacy might be cast in wider and more critical lights.

Haunted by Empire sets out to question the politics of nation and empire

and how they shape the writing of history, but in critical ways it ends up reinforcing the hegemony of the United States as a subject of history and Americans as authors of it. My point here is not to take up the mantle of the wounded national subject or, in this case, historian. I have elsewhere argued that historians of northern North America have been ill-served by a framework of nation that essentializes an ahistorical and state-centric notion of present-day Canada.¹⁶ I very much welcome Stoler's vision of a wide-ranging historical scholarship that "refuses the comfort of discrete cases, highlighting instead those uneven circuits in which knowledge was produced and in which people were compelled to move" (6). Nor is my point to suggest that Stoler has a burden of representation that she or her contributors have failed. *Haunted by Empire* makes no claims to representativeness of any sort, and there is no reason that it should do so.

My point here is that in invoking North America but defining it in practice as the present-day United States this collection fails itself and reinscribes the very problem it sets out to write against. It is worth noting that *Haunted by Empire* is not alone in this. Another recent volume shares the stated purpose of using postcolonial scholarship to query the constitution of "America" and the same result of shoring it up in revealing ways.¹⁷ The particular and never total elision of Canada and Mexico in critical scholarship on North America is, of course, only one example of how shiny new historical rubrics can be applied in alarmingly shopworn ways. As Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra has pointed out, histories written in the name of "Atlantic" history too often look a lot like those written in the name of the "North Atlantic Triangle" that was fashionable earlier in the twentieth-century.¹⁸

Yet *Haunted by Empire's* failure to push its critique of the constitution of American history to its logical conclusion seems especially unexpected and unfortunate. Stoler's collection, and her scholarship more generally, have and will likely continue to offer so much to those of us who work on the margins or outside the borders of *Haunted by Empire's* ultimate purview. As a feminist historian of colonialism in nineteenth-century northern North America I was inspired and disappointed in turns by this collection. I imagine that historians of Mexico and perhaps even scholars working in the vein of the 'new Western history' might have read the book with a not dissimilar mixture of recognition and abjection.¹⁹ Do we rejoice that some of the issues that have been so central to our scholarship are being taken seriously by historians of the United States, or despair that this work has been ignored, glossed, or selectively used?

Winnipeg is a complicated place in which to read new transnational histories like Stoler's. As Australian historian Ann Curthoys has astutely argued, those of us who work within the parameters of marginal historiographies have a necessarily ambivalent relationship to calls to think outside the nation.²⁰ Her colleague Marilyn Lake is surely right to point out that the histories of colonies and former colonies are most readily included in comparative and transnational analyses when they serve to illuminate the experience and politics of one metropole or another.²¹

But clinging to the nation does not solve these problems. What sociologist Nandita Sharma calls the “artificial homeyness”²² of the Canadian nation masks complicated and oppressive alignments of race, class and gender in both the present and in the past. English-speaking settler colonies located in the Global North like Australia or Canada cannot claim a space of special historical exclusion or vulnerability. While marginal in comparison to the super-power historiographies of America and Britain, they command meaningful institutional support and recognition within their current borders if rarely beyond them. For these reasons and more, there is enormous potential in the wider, more provocative and more rigorous terrains offered by transnational histories to shift and enrich the histories written from places like Winnipeg. Surely it is time that historians of the parts of northern North America that were later territorialized as Canada seize the opportunities of a genuinely transnational and far-reaching scholarship. Likewise we might also reasonably ask that prominent proponents of transnational histories like Stoler do the same.

NOTES

- 1 I would like to acknowledge Karen Dubinsky for pushing me on the arguments made here. This would be a very different piece if it wasn't for her intervention and conversation. Discussions with Mary Jane McCallum have been critical to the development of my thinking on some of these points, and I appreciate Antoinette Burton's feedback. I should also say that while I began reading *Haunted by Empire* in Winnipeg, I wrote this essay at Clare Hall, Cambridge, England—a very different place from which to ponder transnational histories. I also thank the Canada Research Chairs programme for their ongoing support of my work.
- 2 Ann Laura Stoler, ed., *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham and London, Duke Universities Press, 2006).
- 3 Sylvia Van Kirk, *Many Tender Ties: Women and Fur Trade Society, 1670-1870* (Winnipeg, Watson and Dwyer, 1980); Jennifer S.H. Brown, *Strangers in Blood: Fur Trade Company Families in Indian Country* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 1980). Van Kirk and Brown's more recent reflections are also worth considering. See Sylvia Van Kirk, “From “Marrying-In” to “Marrying-Out”: Changing Patterns of Aboriginal/Non-Aboriginal Marriage in Colonial Canada,” *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 23:3 (2002) 1-11; Jennifer S.H. Brown, “A Partial Truth: A Closer Look at Fur-Trade Marriage,” in Ted Binnema, Gerhard Ens and R.C. McLeod, eds., *From Rupert's Land to Canada: Essays in Honour of John E. Foster* (Edmonton, University of Alberta Press, 2002).
- 4 Of course, they were not entirely alone in this. See also the work of Olive Dickason, Jacqueline Peterson, John Foster, and Irene M. Spry. Some of their critical work was printed and reprinted in Jennifer S.H. Brown and Jaqueline Peterson, eds., *New Peoples: Being and Becoming Métis in North America* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba, 1985). Michael Payne discusses this context in “Fur Trade Historiography: Past Conditions, Future Circumstances, and a Hint of Future Prospects,” in Binnema, Ens, and McLeod, eds.

- 5 See, especially, Maria Campbell, *Halfbreed* (Toronto: McClelland and Steward, 1973).
- 6 On the court challenge, see Janet Silman, *Enough is Enough: Aboriginal Women Speak Out* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1988). On the outcome and its more complicated ramifications, especially for Indigenous women, see Audrey Huntley, *Bill C-31: Its Impact, Implications and Recommendations for Change - Final Report* (Vancouver: Aboriginal Women's Action Network, 1999); Lynn Gehl, "The Queen and I: Discrimination Against Women in the Indian Act Continues," *Canadian Women Studies*, 20:2 (2000): 64-69; Bonita Lawrence, "Gender, Race, and the Regulation of Native Identity in Canada and the United States: An Overview," *Hypatia*, 18:2 (Spring 2003): 3-31. Joyce Green's analysis of the politics of citizenship and self-determination for Indigenous women is also salutary here. See her "Canaries in the Mines of Citizenship: Indian Women in Canada," *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, 34:4 (December 2001): 715-738.
- 7 See, for instance, Ruth Roach Pierson, "Colonization and Canadian women's history," *Journal of Women's History* 4:2 (Fall 1992): 134-156 Julia V. Emberley, "'A Gift for Languages': Native Women and the Textual Economy of the Colonial Archives," *Cultural Critique* 17 (1990-1): 21-50.
- 8 Christine Welsh, *Women in the Shadows* (National Film Board of Canada, 1992).
- 9 See, for instance, Heather Devine, *The People Who Own Themselves: Aboriginal Ethnogenesis in a Canadian Family, 1660-1900* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005).
- 10 Vicki L. Ruiz and Ellen Carol Du Bois, eds., *Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History* (New York: Routledge, 1994).
- 11 See, here, Sarah Carter, *Capturing Women: The Manipulation of Cultural Imagery on the Prairie West* (Montreal: McGill-Queens, 1997); Elizabeth Vibert, *Trader's Tales: Narratives of Cultural Encounter on the Columbia Plateau, 1807-1846* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Nebraska Press, 1997); Adele Perry, *On the Edge of Empire: Gender, Race, and the Making of British Columbia, 1849-1971* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); Myra Rutherdale, *Women and the White Man's God: Gender and Race in the Canadian Mission Field* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2003); Myra Rutherdale and Katie Pickles, ed., *Contact Zones: Aboriginal and Settler Women in Canada's Past* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005).
- 12 Ann Laura Stoler, "Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures," *American Ethnologist*, 16:3 (1989): 634-660; Ann Laura Stoler, "Rethinking Colonial Categories: European Communities and the Boundaries of Rule," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 31:1 (January 1989): 134-161; Ann Laura Stoler, "Sexual Affronts and Racial Frontiers: European Identities and Cultural Politics of Exclusion in Colonial Southeast Asia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 34: 3 (July 1992): 514-551; Ann Laura Stoler, "Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender, Race, and Morality in Colonial Asia," in Micaela di Leonardo, ed., *Gender at the Crossroads of Knowledge: Feminist Anthropology in the Postmodern Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 51-101.
- 13 Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a*

- Bourgeois World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal knowledge and Imperial Power. Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).
- 14 Ann Laura Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies," *Journal of American Studies*, 88:3 (December 2001), with responses by Ramón A. Gutiérrez, Lori D. Ginzberg, Dirk Hoerder, Mary A. Renda, and Robert J. McMahon.
- 15 Dirk Hoerder, "How the Intimate Lives of Subaltern Men, Women, and Children Confound the Nation's Master Narratives," *Journal of American History*, 88:3 (December 2001): 874-881; Joan Sangster and Bryan D. Palmer, letter to the editor, *Journal of American History*, 89:3 (December 2002): 1185-6.
- 16 See Adele Perry, "Nation, Empire, and the Writing of History in Canada in English," paper submitted to Chris Dummitt and Mike Dawson, eds., "Contesting Canadian History", manuscript in progress.
- 17 Also see Maline Johar Shuller and Edward Watts, eds., *Messy Beginnings: Postcoloniality and Early American Studies* (Rutgers, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 2003) for a work which aims to rethink "Early America" but ends up defining it as the present-day United States while including unexplained material on New France.
- 18 Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, "Some Caveats about the Atlantic Paradigm," *History Compass*, 1:1 (August 2003) online at <http://www.blackwell-compass.com/subject/history>.
- 19 See, for instance, the connection between Stoler's arguments and Patricia Limerick's earlier extortions for historians of the American West to "go global." Patricia Nelson Limerick, "Going West and Ending Up Global," *The Western Historical Quarterly* 32:1 (Spring 2001): 5-24.
- 20 Ann Curthoys, "We've Just Started Making National Histories, and You Want Us to Stop Already?" in Antoinette Burton, ed., *After the Imperial turn: Thinking with and through the Nation* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2003), 80.
- 21 Marilyn Lake, "White Man's Country: The Trans-National History of a National Project," *Australian Historical Studies* 34:122 (October 2003): 346-63.
- 22 Nandita Sharma, *Home Economics: Nationalism and the Making of 'Migrant Workers' in Canada* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2006), 30.