

Diasporas of Modernity:

Centres and Peripheries in Transnational
Feminist Studies of Australian Colonial
Modernity, 1999-2012

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In 1999 Antoinette Burton, an American historian of the British Empire, edited a book entitled *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities*.¹ In her introduction to this anthology, Burton drew attention to the inextricable relationship between the colonial project and European notions of modernity. Arguing that, to understand colonial modernity, one must take ‘Englishness as diasporic’, Burton displayed the corresponding relationship between modernity and the construction and regulation of women’s sexuality, bodies and identity, heralding the work of historian Catherine Hall.² In this introduction, Burton highlighted the ‘remarkable’ scarcity of ‘scholarship which takes the inseparability of modernity from colonialism as a point of departure’ – a lacuna remedied in the wake of her collection.³ Against anecdotal precedent, Australia arrived neither ‘too early’ nor ‘too late’ to this particular debate, with Australian historians Angela Woollacott and Fiona Paisley contributing thought-provoking essays to the anthology.⁴ Taking this work as its point of departure, this article focuses on the way in which feminist studies and critiques of Australian colonial modernity since 1999 have constituted a space in which broader questions regarding Australia’s past, present and future identities are historically located and explored. Locating the work of Woollacott, Paisley, and – since 2006 – Penelope Edmonds within an intersecting space in which contemporary history in Australia is studied and written also

1 Antoinette Burton, ed., *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities*, (London: Routledge, 1999).

2 Burton, ‘Introduction: The Unfinished Business of Colonial Modernities,’ in *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities*, ed. Antoinette Burton, (London: Routledge, 1999), 3; Catherine Hall, *Civilising Subjects: Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830-1867*, (Oxford: Polity, 2002).

3 Burton, ‘Introduction: The Unfinished Business of Colonial Modernities’, 4.

4 This Australian habit is alluded to by Neil Levi – referencing Meaghan Morris – in his introduction to *Antipodean Modern*: Neil Levi, ‘Time, Culture, Nation: Australian Perspectives on Modernism, Modernity and Modernisation,’ in *Antipodean Modern*, ed. Tim Dolin and Neil Levi, (Perth: Network Books, 2006), 2; Meaghan Morris, *Too Soon Too Late: History in Popular Culture*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998).

elucidates broader questions regarding the impact of contemporary trends and concerns on the object of historical research.

Taking from E.H. Carr the understanding that the production of historical scholarship – as with the production of all knowledge – is constrained by the assumptions and biases of the society which produces it, the histories of Woollacott, Paisley and Edmonds can be viewed as products of their time.⁵ In 1978, Edward Said laid the foundations for contemporary postcolonial and subaltern studies with the publication of *Orientalism*.⁶ Said provided a theoretical and evidential basis from which scholars such as Gurminder K. Bhambra and Dipesh Chakrabarty questioned assumptions concerning the ‘natural’ existence of structures perpetuating ethnic, political, economic and cultural dominance.⁷ Also following Said, in the 1980s American feminist academics such as Judith Butler and Joan Scott questioned assumed and naturalised categories of gender and used gender as a means by which to reevaluate the past and its impact on the present.⁸ In this academic climate the International Federation for Research in Women’s History was created in 1987.⁹ Intersecting with the methods of cognate disciplines, such as sociology and gender studies, Australian feminist histories of colonial modernity are inherently interdisciplinary and, with their focus on the processes of empire, comprise part of a transnational body of literature on women’s studies. Locating their studies amidst international debates regarding ‘whiteness’ as an ethnic, cultural, and political category synonymous with hegemony, Woollacott, Paisley, and Edmonds have each drawn upon a framework of centres and peripheries – between Britain and Australia, between the city and the country, and between white and Indigenous Australia – in order to construct the modern Australian colonial woman and the tensions (gendered, class-based, and ethnic) which she embodied.¹⁰ As an historiographical enquiry into the impetus for and the results of the work of these historians, this article identifies two spaces; the historical Australia which these historians researched and wrote on, and these historians’ contemporary Australia which is academically placed within a transnational and interdisciplinary context in which these histories were studied, written and received.

In analysing these two spaces and what they can tell us about Australian history and historiography, this article will employ an interpretive framework built around the theories of geographer Doreen Massey. Massey states that places – such as Australia – are unbounded and characterised by ‘internal conflicts’, constantly changing, created and recreated from interactions with other spaces which are characterised by unequal flows and exchanges.¹¹ Massey also

5 E.H. Carr, *What Is History?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1964).

6 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (London: Penguin, 1995).

7 See, for instance: Gurminder K. Bhambra, ‘Historical Sociology, Modernity and Postcolonial Critique’, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 116, No. 3, (2011), 653–662; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008).

8 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1999); Joan W. Scott, ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis’, in *Gender and the Politics of History*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 28–49.

9 ‘International Federation for Research in Women’s History (IFRWH),’ Women’s History Network (2012), accessed 26 October 2012, <http://www.womenshistorynetwork.org/ifrwh.html>.

10 Such themes are explored in: Penelope Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th-century Pacific Rim Cities*, (Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia Press, 2010); Angela Woollacott, ‘White Colonialism and Sexual Modernity: Australian Women in the Early Twentieth Century Metropolis’, in *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities*, ed. Antoinette Burton, (London: Routledge, 1999), 49–62; Fiona Paisley, ‘“Unnecessary Crimes and Tragedies”: Race, Gender and Sexuality in Australian Policies of Aboriginal Child Removal’, in *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities*, ed. Antoinette Burton, (London: Routledge, 1999), 135–148.

11 Doreen Massey, ‘A Global Sense of Place’, in *Space, Place and Gender*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 1–9.

characterises spaces – such as the space created by Australia’s experience of colonial modernity, and the space in which historians attempt to study it – as comprising ‘interrelations’, meaning space is comprised of (at times transnational connections of) people.¹² Space is also heterogeneous, and constantly under construction.¹³ These historians are studying a colonial modern (gendered, racialised, class-based, peripheral/central) space which was created by transnational and diasporic connections of people. In so doing, these historians created their own historical (academic, interdisciplinary, transnational) space through the production of historical fact and knowledge. Because the understanding of this historical colonial modern space is inextricably tied to the academic space which has produced it, the use of spatial analysis becomes necessary to highlight the multifarious and overlapping connections, ideas, and exchanges which this article wishes to pursue. An analysis of these historians’ objects of study reveals the fluctuating and anxious nature of the contemporary Australian identity. The importance of this link between contemporary catalyst and historical interest is then clarified through an examination of the histories themselves; their methods, sources, and conclusions. Finally, a consideration of the academic reception of these texts prompts questions regarding the perception and purpose of the discipline of history in contemporary Australia.



With the colonial project bound up with European conceptualisations of progress and modernity, the Australian perception of colonial modernity was tied to Britain.¹⁴ This created a precarious identity for a ‘nation’ which considered itself part of the (central) modern metropole – England, specifically London – and simultaneously a (peripheral) provincial outpost. Robert Hughes has suggested that such contradiction is imprinted on the Australian identity and culture in the form of a ‘cultural cringe’.¹⁵ Whether or not the cultural cringe is the legacy of Australia’s experience of colonial modernity, the precariousness of Australia’s colonial and modern identity provided a means by which Australian colonial women had both more and less agency and freedom compared with their British counterparts. Angela Woollacott’s work is fundamentally concerned with the examination of these transnational entanglements.¹⁶ Yet these entanglements of modernity which created perceived centres and peripheries also operated within the boundaries of Australia itself. Highlighting the disparity between white cities and Indigenous rural populations, Fiona Paisley draws attention to a white Australian identity constructed through cities and, by Australian

12 Doreen Massey, *For Space*, (London: SAGE, 2005).

13 Ben Anderson, ‘For Space (2005): Doreen Massey’, in *Key Texts in Human Geography*, ed. Phil Hubbard, Rob Kitchin, and Gill Valentine, (London: SAGE, 2008), 228.

14 Several Australian academics have explored this relationship between colonial modernity and notions of Britishness. See, for instance: Kate Darian-Smith, Patricia Grimshaw, and Stuart Macintyre, eds., *Britishness Abroad: Transnational Movements and Imperial Cultures*, (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Publishing, 2007); James Curran and Stuart Ward, *The Unknown Nation: Australia After Empire*, (Carlton, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2010).

15 Robert Hughes, *The Fatal Shore: a History of the Transportation of Convicts to Australia, 1787-1868*, (London: Harvill, 1996); Robert Hughes, *Australia: Beyond the Fatal Shore*, (Oxford, New York, Sydney: Oxford Film and Television with NCV Arts and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2000).

16 Angela Woollacott, ‘White Colonialism and Sexual Modernity: Australian Women in Early Twentieth Century Metropolis,’ in *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities*, ed. Antoinette Burton, (London: Routledge, 1999), 49–62; Angela Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism, and Modernity*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Angela Woollacott, *Gender and Empire*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Angela Woollacott, ‘Whiteness and “the Imperial Turn”’, in *Re-Orienting Whiteness*, ed. Leigh Boucher, Jane Carey, and Katherine Ellinghaus, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 17–30; Angela Woollacott, *Race and the Modern Exotic: Three ‘Australian’ Women on Global Display*, (Clayton, Victoria: Monash University Publishing, 2011).

feminists, specifically through their definition of themselves and their own femininity against Aboriginal women.¹⁷ Finally, with her urban histories, Penelope Edmonds shows that such central and peripheral overlaps were far more intimate than has hitherto been explored.¹⁸ Employing the notion of an urban frontier, showing how white centres of modernity and Indigenous peripheries of perceived primitivism operated within the same boundaries of the city, Edmonds reveals how anxieties around the white Australian identity were embodied by the interaction of white bodies with Indigenous ones.¹⁹ What each of these studies shows is how the connections between centre and periphery created by European notions of modernity and whiteness revealed the fluctuating nature of Australian identity.

Angela Woollacott first explored the interaction of colonial modernity, women's bodies and sexualities, and Australian identity in relation to Britain in her contribution to Antoinette Burton's 1999 anthology, 'White Colonialism and Sexual Modernity'. Woollacott revisited the topic in her books *To Try Her Fortune in London* (2001) and *Race and the Modern Exotic* (2011), as well as in articles such as 'Whiteness and "the Imperial Turn"' (2009).²⁰ Her work considers two main centres of modernity and identity, one geographical (London), the other corporeal (whiteness and gender). Speaking of Australian women in London, Woollacott shows how they were 'Subaltern because they were women and colonials, but privileged because they were white.'²¹ In constructing these centres and locating Australian colonial women in relation to them, Woollacott shows how the space between London and Australia, between 'white' and 'not white', and between genders reveals a modern Australian identity characterised by hierarchies of race, class, and gender.²² In *To Try Her Fortune in London*, Woollacott shows that even into the early twentieth century, when white Australians spoke of 'Home' they referred to London.²³ Although such a perceived connection caused disappointment to numerous Australian women who arrived in London 'in search of fame, experience, or mere frivolous adventure' only to find that they were perceived by Londoners as 'less than quite civilised', the understanding of London as Home provided many Australian colonial women with a freedom of movement and independence which surpassed their British counterparts.²⁴ Because an Australian woman's pilgrimage to London was 'culturally intelligible' to the society she left behind, women could undertake the journey alone without fear of being subjected to rumours or slander – an access to freedom of individual and unsupervised movement which English women were denied.²⁵ As Woollacott argues;

17 Fiona Paisley, *Loving Protection? Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Rights 1919-39*, (Carlton South, Victoria: Melbourne University Press, 2000); Fiona Paisley, "'For a Brighter Day": Constance Ternent Cooke.' in *Uncommon Ground: White Women in Aboriginal History*, ed. Anna Cole, Victoria Haskins, and Fiona Paisley, (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2005), 172–196.

18 Penelope Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th-Century Pacific Rim Cities*, (Vancouver, Canada: University of British Columbia Press, 2010).

19 Ibid; Penelope Edmonds, 'The Intimate, Urbanising Frontier: Native Camps and Settler Colonialism's Violent Array of Spaces Around Early Melbourne,' in *Making Settler Colonial Space: Perspectives on Race, Place and Identity*, ed. Tracey Banivanua-Mar and Penelope Edmonds, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 129–154.

20 Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism, and Modernity*; Woollacott, *Race and the Modern Exotic: Three 'Australian' Women on Global Display*; Woollacott, 'Whiteness and "the Imperial Turn"'.

21 Woollacott, 'White Colonialism and Sexual Modernity: Australian Women in Early Twentieth Century Metropolis,' 49.

22 In her introduction and conclusion to *Gender and Empire*, Woollacott reveals that the relational dimensions of class, gender, and race to colonial modernity are a useful lens through which to reanalyse colonial modernity: Woollacott, *Gender and Empire*.

23 Woollacott, *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism, and Modernity*, 4.

24 Ibid, 5, 14.

25 Ibid, 6.

In the racialised and gendered cultural logic of the empire, white women's desire for London was evidence of refinement and feminine respectability.²⁶

The three celebrity women under study in *Race and the Modern Exotic* occupied a liminal space between the designated hierarchies of race, class, and ethnicity (neither white nor not white, neither civilised nor primitive, and both adhering to and transgressing respectable codes of feminine conduct). Because of this, these Australian colonial women's experiences in London showed that the 'category of white Australianness was negotiable'. In displaying the contradictions between a colonial Australian conception of modern, white self and a London perception of Australian (non-) whiteness, Woollacott reinforces her appropriation of Alan Lester in saying that 'British colonial discourses [of hierarchies of race]...were made and remade, rather than simply transferred or imposed'.²⁷ Between the metropole and the colonies, the altering conceptions of modernity and whiteness were evidence of a shifting colonial identity which, through its diasporic reimagining, confused the locations of centre and periphery; a confusion which is explored in more detail below.

Whilst Woollacott's focus is explicitly transnational, the focus of Paisley and Edmonds is more intimate in nature, exploring the impact of empire and modernity within the boundaries of the continent (Paisley) and the city (Edmonds). A critical concern for Paisley, as expressed in 'Unnecessary Crimes and Tragedies' (1999), *Loving Protection?* (2000) and 'For a Brighter Day' (2005) is the way in which Australian colonial and early twentieth century feminists constructed a white, female identity in contrast to the Indigenous women they often sought to help.²⁸ In exploring the maternal campaigns of these feminists, Paisley shows how they constructed a new modern Australian identity, one which, in fact, constituted a centre. In contrast to Woollacott's pilgrims, Paisley's feminists defined themselves against the peripheries of the barbaric 'Old World' and the 'primitive' Australian Indigenous population to construct their own version of modern, progressive, and distinguishably, even uniquely, Australian femininity.²⁹ Encouraging a 'moral future for relations between men and women, between the social classes, and between the races', Australian feminists such as those aligned to the Australian Federation of Women Voters (formed in 1921) used their peripheral position to determine the boundaries for a new centre.³⁰

Yet, as Paisley's study of Constance Ternent Cooke shows, this progressive modern centre of Australian femininity still encapsulated its own hierarchies of race.³¹ In a seemingly uncharacteristic statement from the fierce Indigenous rights activist and feminist, Paisley cites Cooke's argument that 'a women's organisation should be concerned with equality with men rather than equality between the races, the latter detracting from their cause.'³² Cooke's example

26 Ibid, 71.

27 Woollacott, *Race and the Modern Exotic: Three 'Australian' Women on Global Display*, 132; Woollacott, 'Whiteness and "the Imperial Turn"', 27.

28 Fiona Paisley, "Unnecessary Crimes and Tragedies": Race, Gender and Sexuality in Australian Policies of Aboriginal Child Removal,' in *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities*, ed. Antoinette Burton, (New York: Routledge, 1999), 135–148; Paisley, *Loving Protection? Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Rights 1919-39*; Paisley, "For a Brighter Day": Constance Ternent Cooke'.

29 Paisley, *Loving Protection? Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Rights 1919-39*, 154.

30 Ibid, 5.

31 Paisley, "For a Brighter Day": Constance Ternent Cooke'.

32 Ibid, 192.

suggests that even for white Australian women sympathetic to Indigenous causes, anxieties regarding race and 'whiteness' were never far from the surface. Such a stance also shows the limit of the 'negotiability' of white Australian-ness which Woollacott identified. The category of 'white' could not be traversed by Indigenous women, even in the minds of white women who considered themselves radical and progressive. Relations between white and Indigenous women would always be of the mother-daughter, master-servant variety, with the former expressing their anxieties around race, class and gender through their construction of self through the Indigenous Other. The colonial feminine Australian identity could only be constructed in relation to Britain and against Aboriginality, demonstrating the anxieties present in the construction of a white Australian identity.

For Penelope Edmonds, these anxieties and the construction of an Australian identity manifested in the interaction of white and Indigenous, male and female bodies on the streets of Melbourne in the nineteenth century.³³ Edmonds characterises the Western city as a 'gendered, racialised, and heterosexual space.'³⁴ In Edmonds' Melbourne, men mediated women's interaction with Aboriginal people, the bodies of Aboriginal women became synonymous with prostitution, and white men who co-habited with Indigenous women ceased to be considered as white.³⁵ Drawing from Michel Foucault, Edmonds labels Aboriginal camps as heterotopias; 'other spaces that transgressed and undermined the imaginary coherence of the British settler-colonial city.'³⁶ Yet she also argues that white Australians both perceived and constructed camps as spectacularised sites of 'entertainment, drunkenness, gunfire, violence, and interracial sex.'³⁷ That the interactions between white and Indigenous bodies were often characterised in terms of sex or violence (in the treatment of Indigenous women's bodies by white men the two were often synonymous) reveals an attempt to maintain the racial hierarchy even in the face of heterotopic sites of transgression. In demonstrating how the tensions of gender, race, and class which characterised Australian colonial modernity were embodied in the Melbourne streets, Edmonds reveals a fluctuating Australian identity constructed by those anxious to constantly preserve its whiteness and perceived civilisation.

In identifying this fluctuating Australian identity in which the structures, centres and peripheries of empire and colonial modernity are challenged, destabilised and at times even transcended, Woollacott, Paisley and Edmonds show the continued importance of such notions of race, class, and gender in contemporary conceptions of modern Australia and the Australian identity. For each of these historians – as for the colonial subjects whom they studied – 'Australia' and modernity are defined in relation to an 'Other'. Such a relational definition inherently implies constant change, highlighting entanglements of identification and revealing Australian identity and modernity as processes rather than static definitional categories. That Australian colonial modernity has

33 Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th-Century Pacific Rim Cities*. Much of Edmond's work in *Urbanizing Frontiers* has also appeared in her articles. See, for instance: Penelope Edmonds, 'The Intimate, Urbanising Frontier: Native Camps and Settler Colonialism's Violent Array of Spaces Around Early Melbourne,' in *Making Settler Colonial Space: Perspectives on Race, Place and Identity*, ed. Tracey Banivanua-Mar and Penelope Edmonds, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 129–154.

34 Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th-Century Pacific Rim Cities*, 7.

35 Ibid, 131–166.

36 Ibid, 143. Foucault describes heterotopias as sites of difference which provide an ambiguous space for resistance of the social order: Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1, (1986): 22–27.

37 Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th-Century Pacific Rim Cities*, 142.

become such an important avenue of historical inquiry only since 1999, and largely as the preserve of these women historians, suggests a contemporary context as catalyst. Paisley admits as much when she presents Catherine Hall's 'assertion that imperial and colonial history is very much a matter for the present' as 'encapsulat[ing] the spirit of critical analyses of gender and empire in the 1990s'.³⁸ Just as the women and societies under study grapple with fluid concepts of modernity and Australian national identity, so too does contemporary Australia. With contemporary Australia continuing to define itself in relation to geographical and corporeal centres (historically British, contemporarily western, geographically Asian-Pacific), these feminist studies of colonial modernity imply a contemporary anxiety and confusion about Australia's status as 'modern', 'western', and 'Australian'.



That Australia's colonial identity has been an object of study for feminist historians only since 1999 is as intriguing for what it says about contemporary Australian society and its identity as for what it says about the practice of academic history in Australia. Since the postmodern, cultural and linguistic turns of the 1980s and 1990s, academic historians have become aware of their subject position in their work, creating a more self-reflexive discipline, aware of its own limitations, and borrowing from the theories and methods of other disciplines in order to surmount those obstacles. Each of the histories explored above demonstrates such interdisciplinary interaction, revealing, in their method and their reception, the importance of contemporary trends to the process of researching, writing, and creating history.

The question of modernity and its relationship to Australia's national identity has been of growing interest to many academic disciplines in the last decade.³⁹ In 2006, Neil Levi and Tim Dolin published *Antipodean Modern*, an interdisciplinary examination of Australian modernity featuring essays from historians, sociologists, art historians, and literary theorists.⁴⁰ Two years later, Robert Dixon and Veronica Kelly published *Impact of the Modern*, a collection of papers from the University of Queensland's 2006 'Australian Vernacular Modernities' conference which brought together academics from such seemingly disparate disciplines as urban history, architecture, Aboriginal studies, fine arts, and music in order to examine the impact of the modern on Australian society since the 1870s.⁴¹ These anthologies demonstrate that 'modernity' and its ongoing effect on society cannot be grasped through one particular avenue of inquiry. Rather, an examination which attempts to take as its breadth the entirety of human experience is the only means by which one can come close.

Woollacott, Paisley and Edmonds do just this, drawing explicitly on the theories and methods of gender studies, postcolonial and subaltern studies, and sociology in order to examine the ways in which colonial modernity directly affected the lives of the women and societies they study. In

38 Anna Cole, Victoria Haskins and Fiona Paisley, 'Preface', in *Uncommon Ground: White Women in Aboriginal History*, ed. Anna Cole, Victoria Haskins, and Fiona Paisley, (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2005), xvii.

39 See, for instance, Helen Ennis' examination of the role of photography in responding to and generating concepts of modernity in Australia, and how such concepts relate to an Australian self-conception: Helen Ennis, *Photography and Australia*, (London: Reaktion Books, 2007).

40 Tim Dolin and Neil Levi, eds., *Antipodean Modern*, (Perth: Network Books, 2006).

41 Robert Dixon and Veronica Kelly, eds., *Impact of the Modern: Vernacular Modernities in Australia 1870s-1960s*, (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2008).

the introduction to *Race and the Modern Exotic*, Woollacott explains the intersection between her transnational, Australian history and other disciplines:

Like much current transnational history, my analysis is formed by the insights of post-colonial studies...I also bring to bear a feminist analysis that insists on the connections between cultural understandings of the body and sexuality, gender categories, and the public importance of the supposedly private.⁴²

In her examination of Indigenous culture and white Australians' perceptions of it, Paisley draws on sociological methods which pose questions about culture, societal relations, and knowledge.⁴³ Similarly, Edmonds' exploration of the 'racialised politics of these two [Vancouver and Melbourne] settler-colonial landscapes at the spatial, imaginative, social and legal levels and in a comparative context' suggests the utilisation of sociology and even cultural geography.⁴⁴

The usefulness of these historians' interdisciplinary approach is demonstrated in the positive reception their histories have received from the academic community. Fiona Paisley's review of Woollacott's *To Try Her Fortune in London* in the *Australian Historical Studies* journal highlights the lack of other historical work in the area, as well as praising the awareness of an interesting and vital topic that Woollacott's well-researched history brings.⁴⁵ Although Paisley's praise could be seen as self-aggrandising, other reviews of Woollacott's work have been similarly positive. Raelene Frances, in *The American Historical Review*, characterised it as 'an important contribution to a growing literature on the international dimensions of the Australian women's movement, as well as the recent interest in relationships within the British Empire/Commonwealth.'⁴⁶ Frances' review not only highlights the widespread perception of the purpose of history as providing context for current debates and fields of interest, it also draws attention to contemporary transnational connections which spark interest in the historical topics of historians such as Woollacott.⁴⁷

Reviewers for Paisley's work have spoken along similar lines. Her *Glamour in the Pacific* was said to offer 'a fascinating insight into racial dynamics and the relationship between the intersections of national and international politics' and *Loving Protection?* was characterised as 'a timely contribution that disrupts comfortable imaginings of assimilation as a seamless unifying principle and process.'⁴⁸ Reviews of Edmonds' *Urbanizing Frontiers* were equally approving, and drew attention to the text's interdisciplinary nature: 'Racialised and gendered ideas of who belonged in settler-colonial polities were...reflected in and shaped by urban geographies of exclusion on local streetscapes.'⁴⁹

42 Woollacott, *Race and the Modern Exotic: Three 'Australian' Women on Global Display*, xix.

43 Such a method is alluded to in Paisley's introduction to Paisley, *Loving Protection? Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Rights 1919-39*.

44 Edmonds, *Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th-Century Pacific Rim Cities*, 5.

45 Fiona Paisley, 'To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism, and Modernity. By Angela Woollacott', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 120, (2002), 404-405.

46 Raelene Frances, 'Angela Woollacott. *To Try Her Fortune in London: Australian Women, Colonialism, and Modernity*', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 108, No. 4, (2003), 1133.

47 The perception of History's purpose of providing context and 'enriching' contemporary debate is echoed in Prue Ahren's review of Woollacott's *Race and the Modern Exotic*: Prue Ahrens, 'Race and the Modern Exotic: Three "Australian" Women on Global Display, by Angela Woollacott', *Journal of Australian Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 2, (2012), 253-254.

48 Helen Laville, 'Glamour in the Pacific: Cultural Internationalism and Race Politics in the Women's Pan-Pacific by Fiona Paisley', *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 116, No. 3, (2011), 786; Anna Haebich, 'Loving Protection? Australian Feminism and Aboriginal Women's Rights 1919-1939 by Fiona Paisley', *Australian Historical Studies*, Vol. 33, No. 119, (2002), 218.

49 Laura Ishiguro, 'Urbanizing Frontiers: Indigenous Peoples and Settlers in 19th Century Pacific Rim Cities', *The Journal of*

The reception of these texts demonstrates how contemporary academic trends and practice influence both methodological approach and object for study. As a discipline which is often used to give context to the present, the feminist study of colonial modernity demonstrates how the present can also give context to the research trends of academic history.



As histories which highlight contemporary anxieties around Australia's national identity and the historical contingencies which have created such anxieties, feminist critiques of colonial modernity are evidence of the ways in which topical changes in historiography often reflect contemporary concerns and debates. In this way, the rise in the study of colonial modernity since 1999 by feminist historians in Australia is a reflection of a contemporary shift in Australia's national identity and perceived geographic and ideological place in the world, and of continued anxieties and confusion over the question of white-Indigenous relations and integration. Looking to the past for an explanation of the present, these feminist historians also locate themselves as members of a contemporary Australian society which remains patriarchal, predominantly white, and characterised by 'fundamentally unequal relationships' between white and Indigenous Australians.⁵⁰ Bringing an innovative and interdisciplinary approach to the past to their histories, these women also raise questions regarding the impact of contemporary trends on the production of historical research and knowledge. Currently occupying a peripheral space within the discipline – as feminist historians of colonial modernity – their attempts to define for themselves a new centre within the discipline is reminiscent of the self-described feminists and other Australian women who constitute their focus of study. An examination of the interaction of the centres and peripheries which define spaces of historical study and the spaces in which they are studied reveals contemporary confusion around Australia's national and international identity and the reasons and means by which to understand it through the study of its historical origins.

Imperial and Commonwealth History, Vol. 39, No. 3, (2011), 521.

⁵⁰ Neumann, 'But Is It History?' 26.
