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Women, Religion, and Globalization Summer Grant: Final Project Report

Spending a month in London this summer, my aim for my research trip was to gain a greater understanding of the ways in which photographs can function within as well as shape intersecting networks connecting geographies of empire. The Women, Religion and Globalization Summer Research Grant provided a wonderful opportunity for me to explore these connections in archives in London and as I will explain, I am extremely grateful not just for the financial support – which provided me with the means to create a focused space for questioning and exploring – but for the way the WRG project and its research commitments have facilitated the growth of my project in ways I had not previously expected.

Having compiled a small archive of late Victorian photography from Jamaica in the summer of 2008, spending time in archives where the documentation and recording of the bureaucracy of empire resided would, I hoped, provide material from which to begin constructing a framework – historically based and materially grounded – to contextualize and understand what Appadurai has elsewhere called the “social lives” of these photographs. To begin constructing this framework I narrowed the limits of my research in relation to my own photographic archive and decided to focus on ascertaining as much information as possible regarding a) the photographic “milieu” from which photographs like the ones I had – mainly showing laborers both Afro Jamaican and South Asian at work or in portrait style poses – emerged from and b) more specifically what the eight or nine photographs I had found depicting South Asian women (and in some cases men) might mean within the archive I had compiled and the broader networks of colony-metropole as a whole and c) to develop a sense of familiarity with the archives I will need to use in more depth as my research progresses.

In terms of the photographic milieu, the work of Krista Thompson has already shown how the rise in tourist promotional material was closely tied to the function of photography of Jamaican landscapes and laborers in promoting the island in a tropical picturesque mode. Drawing on this idea of photography – as a technology or apparatus of both colonial administrative and economic power as well as an aestheticized mode of shaping a sense of space – I spent time at the Royal Commonwealth Society archives at the University of Cambridge examining their extensive Caribbean photograph collection. While I was unable to explore the entire collection I began to get a sense of the various forms of photographic practice that were enmeshed within the rubric of colonial administration. In particular the educational possibilities of photography were highlighted as several of the images I worked with – from the Fisher collection – were expressly used as educational tools in schools in order to teach viewers about the geography of empire. This archive proved particularly useful in providing names of photographers who have not previously been known to me: photographers who circulated within the Caribbean as their photographs circulated outside the Caribbean and who clearly saw their work as being both aesthetic and administrative: although most were commercial photographers

(Raphael Tuck, Julio Augusto Sizo, Cooper and Co) some of their images were sent to the Worlds Fairs in the latter decades of the nineteenth century and were awarded medals. As such this suggests I need to spend a little more time considering not simply what was being depicted and for whom, but also how these colonial commissions were incorporated into photographers' desires to further their artistic careers and how this incorporation is embedded in the visual articulation of the photograph itself.

In London, where I spent the bulk of my time, I divided my research between the British Library, The Victorian and Albert Museum and the School of Oriental and Asian Studies. Here I extended what I had begun in Cambridge and sought to begin exploring the religious significance of, in particular, the images of South Asians shown preparing for the Mohurrim festival. At SOAS I found several collections of missionary photographs – including those taken by William Baillie who is probably the same missionary who took some of the photographs I have in my collection – that were sent back to England and published in mission “reports” that circulated throughout the country and circulated to other areas in the British Empire. Again the dual ‘responsibilities’ of the photographer become important here, as documentarian and perhaps something more aesthetic. Furthermore after spending time looking through travel narratives and papers from the India Office, it was clear to me that the introduction of South Asians and their religious customs was an issue that concerned colonial administrators. The potential for violence in these festivals was repeated in the documents I looked through and surprisingly I found a remarkable correlation between a description of the Mohurrim festival in Guyana and a painting of the Muhurrim Festival by a British artist residing in Calcutta during the late 19th century. Within this narrative of exoticism, violence and primitivism, constructions of India are firmly based in a sense of it as an ‘old world’ culture that was still being retained – although perhaps in slightly modified ways. This is intriguing given the fact that the South Asian laborers who were moved to the Caribbean came from a variety of religious, regional and language backgrounds. Within this discourse the body of Indian women became something that stood in for this sense of culture – both in the frequent descriptions of her physicality, her adornment and her labor.

My research provided me with more questions than concrete answers at this stage. However what was clarified and highlighted for me in this process was that these photographs of South Asians seem to point to the need for a methodological approach that works outside the colony-metropole understanding of circulation within empire. Thinking about the material expressions of religion and in this case female cultural expression, and its photographic depiction, suggests perhaps that the women and men depicted in these images were active in (re)constructing the geographical spaces they found themselves in through a strategic recreation of something akin to a usable past. The legacies of this recreation continue as I found out after meeting with Roshini Kempadoo an Indian Guyanese artist whose work deals with diaspora, gender and forced movement: in particular the movement of South Asians into Guyana, a history which she is intimately engaged with. Based in London, her work now deals with the familiarities tying together diasporas, movements for independence and modern subjectivity in the Caribbean and South Africa: like me she is interested in teasing out the connections that are embedded and shape networks between spaces that lie outside the colony-metropole divide. My time in London while not providing me with ‘answers’ has provided me with

something even more useful, it has raised important questions about methodology and in doing so suggests that my research interests might be moving towards challenging the ways we generally understand the construction of imperial geographies.