



The Spectacular History of Dutch Feminism

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The last half of the nineteenth century was not just “the age of exhibitions”; it was the high noon of imperial spectacle as well.¹ From London to Paris to Amsterdam to Brussels to Chicago to Adelaide to Calcutta, governments cooperated with entrepreneurs and exhibition organizers to deliver a variety of goods (agricultural, mechanical, industrial, aesthetic, and narrative) to an increasingly sophisticated consuming public, training them at once in national and global ways of seeing and belonging. Exhibitions created both real and imagined spaces in which imperial spectators and colonial “objects” came together in circuits of capitalist production and, of course, asymmetrical power. They were, in other words, one particularly spectacular manifestation of what Mary Louise Pratt has called “contact zones”: terrains as material as they were symbolic, through which all manner of historical subjects might glean knowledge about the world and from which new, hybridized cultural forms often emerged. If exhibitions were predominantly metropolitan affairs, offering what Pratt calls a “promontory” perspective on Euro-American empires and their peoples, they were also decidedly multidimensional and interactive.² They generated new modes of knowing and a variety of unintended consequences, including performances of subaltern agency and resistance by colonial people for consumption by “native” inhabitants of the West.³ To be sure, the triumphal ethnocentrism and orientalism that, together, undergirded the majority of these spectacles, attributed a “whiggish inevitability” to Europe’s diverse—and at times competitive—civilizing missions.⁴ But as feminist scholars like Annie Coombes have reminded us, the modern exhibition, like the modern museum, was a “repository for contradictory desires and identities,” as well as one means by which a variety of publics were im-

plicated in “the narratives of exclusion and belonging” produced by would-be hegemonic imperialisms, whether high or low, official or popular.⁵

Despite the veritable explosion of historical work on exhibitionary culture in the last decade, relatively little attention has been paid to the role of women in organizing the transnational spectacles that dominated the culturescapes of imperial modernity—or, for that matter, to the gendered meanings attached to, and entailed by, the dichotomies of production and consumption, respectability and decadence, civilization and savagery, and “home” and “away,” which were among the governing categories mobilized in exhibition venues across the whole of the nineteenth century.⁶ Maria Grever and Berteke Waaldijk’s *Transforming the Public Sphere*, published in Dutch in 1998 and translated into English for the first time in this volume, offers an important corrective to this oversight by bringing to our attention the National Exhibition of Women’s Labor, which was staged at The Hague in 1898, drew 1,400 contributors, and attracted 90,000 visitors. Arguing that the exhibition was “the first large-scale manifestation of modern feminism in the Netherlands,” they situate it in the context of emergent (and convergent) Dutch feminist, nationalist, and imperialist ideologies. Through a combination of rich empirical detail and compelling social and cultural analysis, they demonstrate how and why fin de siècle Dutch feminism was embedded in contemporary debates about national/imperial achievement and status. In this respect, Grever and Waaldijk echo and complicate many of the concerns of Euro-American women’s, gender, and feminist history of the past decade. In the first instance, they insist on Dutch women’s complicity in framing national/imperial discourses for public consumption, thereby challenging the false binary of metropole and colony, which scholars such as Mrinalini Sinha, Catherine Hall, Ann Stoler, and others and have been trying to dismantle as part of a larger anti-imperialist historiographic project.⁷ By demonstrating that Dutch women actively sought to connect consumerism and citizenship through an exhibition directed expressly, though by no means exclusively, toward women, Grever and Waaldijk illustrate linkages between a Habermasian public sphere and those so-called counterpublics created and maintained by a profoundly (if not univocally) bourgeois imperial feminism.⁸ And last but certainly not least, by foregrounding the controversies over labor management, class difference, and the racialized politics of the exhibition’s organization and execution, the authors of *Transforming the Public Sphere* write the history of work and of a variety of laboring bodies—from Dutch fac-

tory girls to carpet weavers—into a historiography of imperial spectacle that has largely failed to come to terms with the conditions of production behind the scenes of the modern exhibitionary impulse.⁹

The year 1898 constitutes a watershed date in American history because it marks the beginning of a new phase of American imperial-military power.¹⁰ It proves equally significant for Dutch national-imperial history: that year saw the passage of a mixed-marriage law for the Dutch East Indies, reflecting anxieties about Dutch national purity and stability characteristic of the turn of the century more generally.¹¹ But if readers expect to find here a reprise of the festival-of-nations approach that characterized much exhibition organization down to the late twentieth century—one that celebrates national exceptionalism or distinctiveness by excavating a particular national narrative—they will be disappointed, and instructively so. From the beginning of their story, Grever and Waaldijk are at pains to show how saturated the project of 1898 in the Netherlands was with international influences, beginning with the walkabout that Cecile Goekoop, one of the chief forces behind the exhibition in The Hague, did at the Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. Like Goekoop, many of the principals involved in the making of the “National” Exhibition of Women’s Labor either had read about other contemporary displays or had themselves visited the international exhibitions in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Though they were keenly aware of the event’s stakes for Dutch politics at both the national and regional levels, they were equally cognizant of the global marketplace of spectacle in which they strove to participate and on which they aspired to leave their distinctive mark. Indeed, their efforts to marshal the best of Dutch culture, as embodied both literally and figuratively in the respectable Dutch working girl (pressed into national and imperial service by well-meaning, if patronizing, bourgeois Dutch women), speak eloquently to the contradictions of “cosmopolitan domesticity” that middle- and upper-class white women across the world tried to articulate as their signature contribution to dominant regimes of global culture and modern civilization.¹² This is not to say that there was nothing distinctively Dutch about the exhibition, or that Grever and Waaldijk privilege an international frame of analysis over a national one. Like any number of feminist scholars trying to historicize the grip that imperial geopolitics had on regional and national experiences of self, nation, and empire in the modern period, they are determined to identify the “specificity of national formation” in a complex of international and global contexts.¹³ No less signifi-

cantly, their work on the Dutch exhibition underscores the reciprocal influence of the colonies (Indonesia, Surinam, and the Dutch Antilles) on the metropole, as well as the constitutive role that women and gender ideologies played in shaping the “civilization” process of a variety of subjects—with Dutch visitors themselves serving as the primary pedagogical objects of this nationally specific imperial spectacle.¹⁴

Those well acquainted with recent research produced under the rubric of “gender and imperialism” will find the story told below familiar, both in terms of the themes Grever and Waaldijk focus on and their historical methodology. Among the former are the competing and overlapping discourses of race and class which nineteenth- and early twentieth-century elite white women used, both intentionally and unintentionally, to display their allegiance as well as their indispensability to the imperial nation; their appropriation of a variety of others as spectacle to shore up their claims to legitimacy and authority as public political subjects; and their anxieties and ambivalences about those spectacles when the bodies subjected to scrutiny acted out, rebelled, and otherwise refused to fulfill the cultural roles and historical destinies assigned them in the several counterpublics achieved through a space like the exhibition hall. Equally recognizable is the combination of attention to space, geographies of culture, and the mapping of social order which have been characteristic of much imperial history, feminist and otherwise, since the late 1980s and 1990s. In *Transforming the Public Sphere*, readers will find thoughtful analyses of the intersections of national and imperial discourses with those of gender and feminism, as well as a sensitivity to the differences between agency and resistance per se, especially, though not exclusively, where white women are concerned. Such interpretive approaches have become the hallmarks of feminist studies of imperialism, as work in the last decade on subjects as diverse as British feminists, German imperial women, Australian female travelers, and Indian women reformers, to name just a few, has shown.¹⁵

While it is true that the highest density of historiographical work on imperial cultures so far has focused on Britain and France, with feminist critics leading the way, scholars have long been at work on the subject of women, gender, and Dutch colonialism—beginning with the 1959–60 dissertation on Indonesian women by Cora Vreede-de Stuers.¹⁶ Far from being derivative, Grever and Waaldijk face the same methodological challenges and impasses bequeathed to us all by imperial systems of knowledge, classification, and archival logic—systems within which and

against which we try to write narratives that have the capacity to counter the dominant, colonizing accounts of traditional imperial histories. Like many scholars interested in the recovery and historicization of the subaltern, for example, the authors come up against the limits of the exhibitionary archive, as well as of the complementary world of print culture on which they draw to recreate the polyphonic cultural universe surrounding the 1898 exhibition, its supporters, critics, visitors, and employees. The strike over wages, and subsequent walkout, by the Amersfoort young women workers in the middle of the exhibition—followed later by the Javanese mock-village workers—offers a case in point. Though there is much we can read from the extant sources about the contexts of these spectacular labor actions, especially in terms of the embarrassment they posed to the Dutch women organizers already divided politically about the value of exhibiting live women workers for display, we learn more about the limits of the bourgeois imperial humanitarian narrative than we do about the subjectivities of any of the strikers.¹⁷ Their historical experiences remain beyond the realm of full recovery and, ultimately, opaque. If such opacity is unavoidable, it remains a representative feature of even the most politically nuanced and engaged feminist scholarship in the context of postcoloniality. And it behooves us to remember that although we as historians are subject to the continued distortions and depredations of the colonial archive, we are also obliged to continue to struggle to imagine new ways of bringing obscure and obscured subjects into history—even as we recognize the dream of total knowledge as one of the legacies of modern Western imperialism to the discipline of history itself.¹⁸

Although the stories of the vast majority of colonial peoples brought to The Hague and staged as live exhibits were not audible then or now, the colonized at work were literally everywhere to be seen at the 1898 exhibition. The purpose-built Kampong Insulinde (literally, “village of the island empire”) was the ideological heart of the spectacle, featuring batik workers, musicians, and Javanese waiters in its *rijsttafel*-serving restaurant.¹⁹ As Grever and Waaldijk point out, there were rare instances of consensual participation by “native” women: the celebrated Indonesian feminist Raden Adjeng Kartini, for example, supported the exhibition, helping organizers gather handicrafts for display and even raising funds for the event. As European feminists elsewhere did with respect to “other” women subject to colonial rule, however, Dutch feminists would not and likely could not conceive of her as an equal, despite and, of course, be-

cause of their commitment to bringing “the woman question” into public view through the bodies of colonial females (and males) at work. This refusal relied equally on their determination to see colonized bodies as evidence of primitive time as posited against the relentless modernity of the European present, an expression of what Anne McClintock calls “anachronistic space,” whereby the distance separating metropole and colony is expressed in temporal terms and, typically, through gendered bodies as well.²⁰ Simply by their presence, “real” colonized women like Kartini and Louisa Yda (daughter of an ex-slave woman from Paramaribo who appeared in “native dress” at the exhibition) disrupt the fiction that Dutch feminists could speak, and otherwise dictate terms, for their brown “sisters”—for us, if not for their contemporaries. If this is one of the most recognizable scripts in the story of comparative colonialisms, it is also an example of what Stoler calls the many “intersecting plots” of a modern global imperial history that exceeds national boundaries, even as it depends on them for the nuance and the cultural specificity they provide.²¹

In both the long and short run, the exhibition opened up new spaces in the public sphere for Dutch women which involved participation in debates about women’s education, domestic service, the arts, vocational training, Dutch social/sexual purity, and, of course, the relationship between gender, labor, and the nation. In each case, Dutch feminists’ increased (though still limited) authority on public political matters can be traced back to the forms of colonial knowledge they gathered, represented, and turned into objects of consumption. These practices, which were intended to display their capacity for citizenship, depended on the subordination of working bodies both black and white, as well as on the violences—real and symbolic—on which such subordination was predicated. In the process, Dutch women and, arguably, much of the Dutch reading public had the opportunity to see just how intimately nation and empire, class and race, gender and work were connected on the threshold of the new century. That these relationships were articulated and understood through an orientalist aesthetic both ornamentalizing and monumentalizing, tells us much about how culture was produced in the crucible of imperial modernity, not to mention how central women and gender were to its racialized manifestations. Domesticity, though an important register for normalizing imperial values, was clearly not the only one where Dutch women were concerned. At the very least, domesticity as a material reality and as a discourse was subject to refraction through a variety of lenses, women’s work

in a colonial context chief among them. Recognizing labor as a crucial category of analysis in histories of imperial culture proves as pressing a project as reconfiguring the field to take account of women and gender, however much it may fragment narratives of empire, whether inherited or new.²² As significantly, the exhibition should not be understood merely as a spectacle of empire, for it was nothing less than an actor in the historical drama of Dutch colonialism and its intersection with Dutch feminism, in all their interdependent complexities. How and why the exhibition acted in the service of many contradictory desires—for nation, for empire, for emancipation, and ultimately for power in the public sphere—is one aspect of the heretofore undocumented story of 1898 that this book begins to tell.

