

# H-Net Reviews

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**Anjali R. Arondekar.** *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India.* Durham: Duke University Press, 2009. xii + 215 pp. 74.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-4515-2; 21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-4533-6.

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## Ghosh on Arondekar

The central themes of Anjali Arondekar's *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India*—archives, desire, secrets, sexuality, texts—enable her to pose a provocative set of questions. As she asks, why do we desire to fill in the blanks in our histories? How does the secret—in this case, the secret of sexuality—generate a desire to know something of the archives that is perhaps ultimately unknowable? As she asks, “Can an empty archive also be full?” (p. 1).

In the process of exploring these questions, *For the Record* examines the problem of plenitude (i.e., there are a lot of documents in the archives) against the problem of absence (accounts of certain behaviors and moments are elusive). Neither condition, of presence or absence, is sufficient to account for the richness of our desire for knowledge, and yet we (anthropologists, historians, literary critics, political scientists, and other scholars) demand that archives provide us with answers about the past, answers that we take to be “real,” providing us with various truths. Historians are perhaps most guilty of being uncritical of our methods; Arondekar demands that we explain ourselves and in doing so, she revisits important themes in postcolonial scholarship, building from the work of Gayatri Spivak, Anne McClintock, Ann Stoler, Parama Roy, Antoinette Burton, Mrinalini Sinha, and the contributions of younger scholars such as Gautam Chakravarty and Elizabeth Kolisky, among others.

The architecture of the book is compelling, beginning with a chapter on a missing report in Richard Burton's archives and ending with a discussion about Rudyard Kipling's unusual silence on the topic of the 1857 mutiny. The fame and stature of these two imperial figures are worth considering in part because

of the discussions that surround them: there is constantly gossip circulating of missing manuscripts, expurgated accounts, texts written anonymously, and the need or desire for forensic literary experts to uncover which texts are the “real” Kipling or Burton. Arondekar resists the temptations to be such a literary expert. Instead, in the chapter on Richard Burton, she questions our collective desire to know the contents of the missing Karachi report and argues that it was the missing report that generated the force of Burton's later prose. The report was the result of Burton's investigation into a male brothel in Karachi, reportedly written at the behest of Sir Charles Napier. When it was lost in the official archives, it was imagined as a treasure trove of secrets because it offered the possibility of offering anthropological knowledge of native pederasty. Instead, in Arondekar's reading, the missing report resurfaces as a spectral presence in Burton's later writings on Sindh, thus complicating the distinctions between anthropological fact and literary fiction, the “real” and an imitation, something she takes up in later chapters as she works through Jacques Derrida's logic of the supplement (pp. 123-24).

The chapter on Kipling begins with the observation that Kipling produced a massive literary archive: one that spanned four decades and included poetry, novels, reportage, and many kinds of satire. Given this, Arondekar asks why he wrote so little about the 1857 mutiny, a historical event that has been seemingly endlessly archived. Through a close reading of several short stories and piece of reporting, she argues that the failure and horror of the 1857 mutiny are worked through Kipling's narratives as a kind of homosocial connection. As she writes, “Kipling's archive becomes a harbinger of a new model of colo-

nial masculinity in which attachments between men are detoured through narrative forms (fiction, historical records, biographies) rather than through bodies” (p. 135). In the traffic between a missing past that calls out for recuperation and a precarious colonial present and future, the success and profusion of Burton’s and Kipling’s literary output in their various forms are generated by archival absences and failures.

The two chapters in the center of the book examine a late nineteenth-century case in which a young man was prosecuted for sodomy and the evidence for his crime was on his body, thus making the body of a native sodomite proof of native depravity. The third chapter examines nineteenth-century Victorian pornography and its obsession with the “India-rubber” dildo, an instrument that was advertised as the “real” thing and yet a thing apart, one that generated claims that it modernized late nineteenth-century sexual practices, both transforming lesbianism and anal sex in the process. Here, Arondekar draws on less well-known documents and texts, al-

lowing her to reach beyond a literary archive that is single-authored to legal codes and practices, pornography, and the mechanics of rubber production and how it drew from British colonial and capital exploitation of Indian goods. In rereading Victorian pornography, a subject about which there has been much scholarship, and bringing it into a matrix that is an intersection between colonialism, sexuality, and race, Arondekar insists, “Such an emphasis does not vulgarly add race and colonialism to the analytic mix. Rather, it insists that race and colonialism can only be read through sexuality read otherwise” (p. 106).

This is a book of enormous importance to scholars of sexuality studies and colonial studies, particularly those of us who work with textual archives. It is a diagnosis and a provocation, particularly to anthropologists, historians, legal thinkers, and those working in archives, official or otherwise. But it self-consciously resists becoming a manual of how one might approach archival work. This may leave some readers wanting (desiring?) more, and that may be the point of Arondekar’s intervention.

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