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Race, Gender, and Visuality: Regulating Indian Women Subjects in the Colonial Caribbean

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Abstract

As scholars in Caribbean Studies struggle to deconstruct the complicated cultural history of colonialism, visual representations — such as painted imagery, sketches, photographs and lithographs, often accompanied by “word imagery”ⁱ (i.e. elaborate word descriptions that are meant to stand in for the image) — are increasingly recognised as valid and unique sites that challenge the story of Western modernity in its ontological relationship to the Caribbean. Recent works by Patricia Mohammed, Krista Thompson, Mimi Sheller, and Beth Fowkes-Tobinⁱⁱ have illuminated the construction of colonial regimes of visibility that aimed to discursively construct, position, and regulate colonized subjects and to produce a seemingly coherent, intimate and consensual code of social relationsⁱⁱⁱ. They have also thought about the multiple gestures of resistance, accommodation, assimilation, mimicry, ambivalence and transculturation that trouble the visual contract between colonial subjects and their landscapes, producing counter histories that complicate the ways in which contemporary post-colonial subjects are imagined. Aside from Mohammed’s recent work, very few studies in this emergent strand of Caribbean cultural studies address the issue of gender and its intersection with other sites of constructed difference such as race, ethnicity and sexuality. In addition, visual studies on

the colonial Caribbean, remaining very much an Afro-centric discourse, are yet to take seriously the iconography of East Indians in the region as a relational and constitutive category of consciousness as it glimpses into and questions the historical construction of identity, social structure and power relations.
