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Eric T. Jennings, *Imperial Heights: Dalat and the Making and Undoing of French Indochina*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2011. 352 pp, 37 ill. Notes, bibliography, index. \$60.00/£41.95 (pb). ISBN 978-0-520-266599

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What sets Dalat, the space at the heart of Eric Jennings' *Imperial Heights: Dalat and the Making and Undoing of French Indochina*, apart from other modern colonial cities, and modern cities more generally, is the manner in which the French created it in what was previously, from an urban perspective, a pristine space. Thus here the question facing the French was not so much how to tame, curb, shape, enhance, or appropriate a longstanding city, for example by adding a European quarter or architecture.<sup>[1]</sup> Nor, at least early on, was it about controlling race and class through the codification of space.<sup>[2]</sup> Although some of these questions eventually surfaced, the one the French tackled first through Dalat was finding an urban setting that was perfect precisely because of its naturally bucolic situation and then molding it into a French spa town and, eventually, city à la Roche-Posay or à l'Aix-les-Bains. Climate, altitude, proximity, accessibility, alpine features, pastoral esthetics, and salubrious environment were Dalat's *raison d'être*.

In the hunt for Dalat's story, *Imperial Heights* rests upon an extremely wide range of sometimes previously unused archives, augmented by novels, memoirs, references to well-known films such as *L'Amant* and *Indochine*, and newspaper articles. Jennings studies not just the creation of Dalat but also its maintenance first by the French and later by the Vietnamese over the *longue durée* and almost to the present. He tackles this urban space from a variety of perspectives, including but not limiting himself to its military, social, cultural, economic, racial, domestic, political, and human dimensions. Jennings argues that Dalat is enigmatic because it "encapsulates the colonial era, and its contested legacy and memories" (p. 2). The colonial administration needed a place to send sailors and soldiers, and later administrators and other settlers, so as to prevent the lengthy and expensive repatriation to France that has left archives peppered with acrimonious letters exchanged with men and women at all ends of Empire: those whose poor health left them in dire straits and those who were abandoned or derelict. The latter were a complex category with which the administration constantly struggled, but the former could be dealt with relatively easily, if only they could be sent somewhere within the colony rather than back to France. French Indochina found a solution to the conundrum in Dalat. And through Dalat, Jennings has found a way to scrutinize not just how a city is built, but also how it is lived.

In a brief introduction, Jennings focuses upon the many problems the memory and study of colonialism have faced when it comes to Indochina. In the United States, he reminds us, Indochina is always marked by the Vietnam War, whereas in France "contrition" over colonialism grapples with "glorification" of the good it did (p. 3). In both cases, he tells his readers somewhat more about how his book departs from public debates than how it fits into the current depth and intricacy of colonial studies not just on French Indochina, but also on the French Empire. Yet given the rich breadth of Jennings' bibliography and footnotes, what might be read as a surface treatment of a field replete with innovative scholars, actually reveals more about the audience Jennings' hopes to reach with this book, namely, not just a scholarly one. Everything from the manageably concise chapters to multiple situational comments (briefly reintroducing certain characters or events and providing the necessary background for non-specialists) to his light touch in citing other scholars in the body of the text suggests that a broader audience than even the undergraduate one is at stake here.

Nonetheless, Jennings places himself at the nexus of current French and European colonial historiography by considering how its themes and questions inform one city and its development over time. He is particularly concerned with epistemologies and mentalities, which he argues are “the keys to understanding colonialism in all of its complexity” and which he traces via “practices, accommodations, and compromises” (p. 4). Complexity leads Jennings to balance the perspectives of the French, the Vietnamese, and local highland minorities, even while interjecting considerations of race, class and gender into each of these broader categories.

One theme will suffice to reveal this book’s attention to nuance. Gender has gained considerable traction in colonial studies but still leaves vast swaths of unexplored territory.[3] Jennings uses chapter ten on “Some Colonial Categories: Children, European Women, and Métis” to show how Dalat functioned as a repository for wives and children, emerging as “one of the colony’s main sites for European domesticity” and by World War II, he argues, becoming a white female space (p. 179). Yet he also amplifies these statements by showing how in practice class eventually outshone race in this city, overturning to some extent the hierarchies that were standard in much of the French Empire. For example, establishing schools in a new city could have allowed the French to bypass the constraints of working with and through indigenous elites to build an educational system, as they were forced to do elsewhere.[4] Yet Dalat’s prestigious Lycée Yersin and the Couvent des Oiseaux, for example, were schools open to the indigenous elite. Thus whether by the hearth or in school, Dalat was a site much like the Ecole normale pour jeunes filles de Rufisque in French West Africa, which trained young Africans to be teachers, French civil servants, and French women.[5] In Dalat, the white *bourgeoise* was touted both to French settlers and to indigenous elites as an ideal of femininity.

Yet what strikes an essential chord in this work is its movement away from merely showing that white domesticity became a defining component of Dalat’s identity as a city. Instead, gendered norms were repeatedly challenged at this site. Men and women broke with tropes as easily as they bolstered them. For example, a city created for pampering allowed Gabrielle Vassal to hunt (in her opinion quite successfully) alongside men, an intimation that there were many variations in the “domestic” practices of European women overseas. We are reminded through her example that no matter how hard and fast colonial hierarchies and categories were in theory, they are also useful to scholars because they allow us to think through their stretching, undoing or overturning.

Masculinity is less overtly discussed, but a fascinating example surfaces in a story in chapter two of “Murder on the Race for Altitude.” This chapter is explicitly about violence and empire. Victor Debay, a captain sent on one of the missions to find an ideal site (his site became a hill station, but not Dalat), went on a rampage of beatings and death against the locals unfortunate enough to cross paths with him as hosts or guides. When he was eventually tried, although a thick dossier detailed crimes that extended to “forced recruitment, pillage, terror” along with beatings and killings, his punishment was ludicrously benevolent (p. 25). Placed on the army’s “inactive” list, he was rehabilitated two years later and sent back to Indochina, this time in charge of Indochinese *tirailleurs*, who fared only somewhat better than their civilian counterparts. Jennings uses the story of highland horrors to tackle current scholarly debates regarding whether colonialism begets genocide. He warns against easy conflation of the two categories and in particular thinks his readers through the difference between modernized and institutional violence and the low-tech individual agency of someone like Debay. Along with the Voulet-Chanoine episode discussed in this chapter, other cases for better understanding the confluence and tensions between Empire, genocide, violence, and exploration might include those of Carl Peters in German East Africa (Tanzania) and William Cody (Buffalo Bill) in the American West.[6]

Yet another and somewhat unacknowledged theme hovers in this chapter: that of masculinity and its undoing. After all, Debay’s murderous rampage took place in the pursuit of the highly masculinized colonial past-time of the exploration and demarcation of purportedly virgin territory. Until he started

to indulge his darkest rages, Debay's fighting nature might have coated him in the glory of manly exploration, much like Sir Henry Morton Stanley.[7] So it is curious that when the time came for Debay to defend himself, in a self-diagnosis penned in 1902, he focused on neurasthenia. Jennings mentions the illness was associated with the colonies, but it was also a very upper class, urban illness, and one that in the metropole was usually associated with women and Jews.[8] The added convolution of the stereotypes regarding neurasthenia aside, Debay's self-diagnosis of such an illness (even temporary) is complicated by recent work on madness in the colonies. In North Africa psychiatrists' theories were used to control, contain and otherwise police the native population.[9] Moreover, the popular diffusion of their school of thought linking criminality and madness contributed to and reinforced the settlers' desire to repress indigenous populations. So on several levels, Debay's self-diagnosis presents a stark contrast with his otherwise hyper-masculine attitudes and activities. He gives himself an illness that in the metropole was gendered and racialized and, by acknowledging any sort of psychiatric troubles whatsoever, puts himself in a criminal category that at least in some parts of the Empire was racialized native.

Jennings does not overtly prioritize masculinity in this chapter, since violence is its focus, but he does touch upon it elsewhere. After all, the difficulty when exploring so many themes in this thick description is that they cannot all always be pursued in depth, which is likely why Jennings redirects his readers towards authors who have done so. Moreover, the rapid and occasionally cursory transitions necessitated by so many topics, for example from the violence in "Murder on the Race for Altitude" to the clinical in chapter three, "Health, Altitude, and Climate," keep the reader alert but also occasionally wondering how these pieces fit together. Still, the advantage of this variety is not just the layered visions of Dalat that emerge from it, but also the opportunity Jennings grants readers to establish their own links. He provokes them to seek better questions, answers, and associations in their own fields of enquiry by concurrently pursuing so many directions and paths. *Imperial Heights* allows a chapter about violence to also be read as one about gender. Jennings not only provokes a consideration of how questions of space and practice endure, but also of how various themes, even if necessarily forced into the background at times so as to produce clear and cohesive individual chapters, can still be present throughout the text. In some ways, then, the greatest strength of *Imperial Heights* is not its revelation of one possible approach to pursuing overlapping considerations of epistemologies and practices. Nor is it that topics as diverse as health, gender, race, culture, education, war, the military, government, politics, urban planning, and postcolonialism should all be able to find their way into a single, impeccably researched monograph. Rather, it is Jennings' ability to encourage the reader to pursue his or her own strands of thought throughout and beyond the book.

## NOTES

[1] Timothy Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Paul Rabinow, *French Modern: Norms and Forms of the Social Environment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); and Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[2] Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997); and Michael G. Vann, "The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: Variation and Difference in French Racism in Colonial *Indochine*," in *The Color of Liberty: Histories of Race in France*, ed. Sue Peabody and Tyler Stovall (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), 187-205.

[3] Among others, on gender see Julia Ann Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, *Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender, and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism* (Charlottesville, Va.: University Press of Virginia, 1998); Patricia M. E. Lorcin, *Historicizing Colonial Nostalgia: European Women's Narratives of*

*Algeria and Kenya 1900-Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Ghislaine Lydon, "Women, Children and the Popular Front's Missions of Inquiry in French West Africa," in *French Colonial Empire and the Popular Front: Hope and Disillusion*, ed. Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 170-187; Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and Christelle Taraud, *La prostitution coloniale: Algérie, Tunisie, Maroc (1830-1962)* (Paris: Payot, 2003).

[4] Pascale Bezançon. *Une Colonisation éducatrice? L'expérience Indochinoise, 1860-1945* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2002); and Julia Clancy-Smith, "L'Ecole Rue du Pacha, Tunis: l'enseignement de la femme arabe et "la Plus Grande France" (1900-1914)," *Clio* 12 (2000): 33-55.

[5] Pascale Barthélémy, *Africaines et diplômées à l'époque coloniale (1918-1957)* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2010).

[6] On Carl Peters see Jens-Uwe Guettel, "From the Frontier to German South-West Africa: German Colonialism, Indians, and American Westward Expansion," *Modern Intellectual History* 7, no. 3 (2010): 523-52; and Arne Perras, *Carl Peters and German Imperialism, 1856-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004). On Buffalo Bill see Richard Slotkin, "Buffalo Bill's 'Wild West' and the Mythologization of the American Empire," in *Cultures of United States Imperialism*, ed. Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 164-181.

[7] See for example Edward Berenson, *Heroes of Empire: Five Charismatic Men and the Conquest of Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

[8] Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985).

[9] Richard C. Keller, *Colonial Madness: Psychiatry in French North Africa* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007).

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