Public Abstract

First Name:Angela

Middle Name:Mae

Last Name:Rehbein

Adviser's First Name:Devoney

Adviser's Last Name:Looser

Co-Adviser's First Name:

Co-Adviser's Last Name:

Graduation Term:SS 2011

Department:English

Degree:PhD

Title:Domesticating the Empire: Women Writers and Colonial Discourse in Late Eighteenth-Century British Literature

This dissertation examines five late eighteenth-century British women writers to demonstrate the ways that domestic fiction negotiates the racial and sexual tensions of the colonial contact zone. Previous scholarship has shown that the novel was a highly politicized genre in the 1780s and 1790s; women writers in particular used it as a vehicle for entering domestic debates, including responding to the French Revolution. What has gone largely unexplored is the role that this fiction played in imagining the British Empire and its impact at home, and in troubling over its evolving moral character. Moreover, we have not yet considered the correspondence between imperialism and the variety of political affiliations women assumed at this time. Examining the fiction and poetry of Anna Seward, Jane West, Elizabeth Inchbald, Elizabeth Hamilton, and Maria Edgeworth, I argue that these texts helped to domesticate the Empire, to make it part of the everyday vision of British life in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England. Not all of the texts I examine consider territories directly colonized by Great Britain. However, in each case Great Britain is rendered in a position of superiority over a colonial other such as the West Indies, India, the Far East, and Africa. This hierarchical relationship underwrites the social and political issues each text portrays. I therefore argue that what we have called conservative or progressive in this literature ought to be revisited, as such labels obscure a complex set of ideas about what it meant to be a British citizen in a global, imperialist age.