

“The Horror”: The Subject of Desire in Postcolonial Studies

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Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest. Anne McClintock. New York: Routledge, 1995. 449 pp.

Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things. Ann Laura Stoler. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995. 238 pp.

Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race. Robert J. C. Young. London: Routledge, 1995. 236 pp.

These books are dense, demanding, and useful investigations of colonialism that return to the scene of the crime: 19th-century Europe and its “possessions.”

They are situated within “postcolonial theory,” a hybrid field emerging from the interstices of anthropology, literary criticism, political economy, and psychoanalysis, vigorous enough to have recently spawned two weighty readers. McClintock’s encyclopedic *Imperial Leather* is the most psychoanalytic and is anecdotally marvelous, tracing the imbrications of race, class, gender, domesticity, and empire in producing 19th-century Britain and current-day South Africa. Stoler, an anthropologist, draws on ethnography and archival research on the Dutch East Indies to bring colonial history and race issues into productive dialogue with the work of Michel Foucault on sexuality. Young’s *Colonial Desire* is the most metadiscursive and offers an invaluable genealogy of anthropology’s

most generative term, *culture*. All three take desire as their object, a thread leading into the heart of darkness of colonial subject-formation. Theoretically, McClintock and Stoler divide along the faultline between the psychoanalytic repressive hypothesis and Foucault's description of desire produced by the law, while Young deploys Deleuze and Guattari to try to bridge this gap.

It may be asked why something as psychological as desire is useful for understanding colonialism. These books make clear that, beyond economic exploitation and political dominance, the colonial encounter produced a range of new subject positions. Engaged as we are with the multiple effects of colonialism, anthropologists will find these books repay the careful reading they demand. They provide critical insights into identity formation and engaged critiques of colonial discourse studies, while they highlight the embeddedness of colonialism in our tools of analysis.

The books are also symptomatic of the contemporary moment in postcolonial theory production, much of which is summed up in the dying words of Joseph Conrad's Kurtz: "The horror! The horror!" Drawing parallels between film horror and postcolonial theory (using Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws*, Princeton University Press, 1992), I will explore the political stakes in the compulsive return to the 19th century and the horrors of colonialism's material and discursive violence. Horror and colonial studies share a similar development, with early horror presenting one monster and one victim (as in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*), just as groundbreaking theorists of decolonization described the manichean relation between colonizer and colonized. Later, slasher films produced multiple victims, and similarly, claims of women, ethnic minorities, and others fragmented the unitary identity of the colonized. Studies appeared of the differential effects of colonialism, independence, and nation building (subaltern studies). Two years before Said's *Orientalism* (Routledge, 1978) focused attention on the colonizer, the horror film *Carrie* unified victim, monster, and hero in the same person, unsettling clear-cut identifications. Clover argues that modern horror is distinguished by its problematization of identity. Gender and audience identification constantly mutate and slide. The audience sees through the camera eye of the killer, first cheering his dastardly deeds, then slipping into screaming for the victim, and later urging on the final girl's heroics. Similarly, McClintock, Stoler, and Young are concerned with problematizing the colonizer, describing multiplicity, constitutive cracks, and unstable identification.

Film theory suggests that in narrative cinema audiences undergo a condensed reenactment of subject formation. We relive the movement from traumas

of childlike incapacity and fear to an adultlike control of our worlds. Feminist film criticism lays bare the Hollywood dichotomy between the male as subject and female as object of his gaze, a similar reading to manichean analyses of the colonizer's unitary and sadistic desire for mastery. Clover suggests that, unlike standard cinema, horror allows for multiple gender identifications, inducing masochistic identification, not sadistic control. Similarly, McClintock, Stoler, and Young are all concerned with the instability of colonizer identity and the anxieties surrounding its reproduction. As Young suggests through reading Greenwich's longitude zero, the division between Occident and Orient in a London suburb, "the sameness of the West will always be riven by difference" (p. 1).

This instability may explain the repetition compulsion in horror and colonial theory. For Clover, horror hinges on the attraction of the terrible place, home of the "terrible family," where murder, incest, and cannibalism prevail. Horror audiences, fascinated with blood, willingly return to the same story told over and over. Similarly, the morbid return in postcolonial studies to the 19th century marks it as a terrible place full of bloody colonial domination and peopled with the "terrible family" of vampiric capitalists, oversexed women, ghostly hidden labor, revolting natives, and desecrated burial grounds.

Clover suggests that, while looking on such horrors is painful, it is also pleasurable. Because identity is never stable, it must be constantly reiterated, and pleasure is produced when the wound is sutured in the denouement as the heroine overcomes the monster. We emerge from the darkness enjoying a certain plentitude; narrative loose ends are tied up and the mysteries of extreme violence explained. The painful tendency of identities to mutate and slide marks the otherwise elusive "postmodern" in which white feminists are critiqued by women of color, well-meaning liberals find ourselves called racists and homophobes, and marxists are questioned by identity claims more complicated than class. Colonial theory's painful return to the terrible place of the 19th century promises the pleasures of both explaining the mysterious vehemence of today's monsters (all three books attempt a unified theory of race and gender) and a momentary suture of identification. The masochism of the horror-film audience—identifying almost simultaneously with monster, victim, and hero—may be similar to the current crisis in the academy, especially for white middle-class women.

Another generic component in horror applicable to these texts on colonialism is that the preferred weapons—knives, chainsaws, whips, teeth—demand closeness and tactility. McClintock, Stoler, and Young are all concerned with the intimacies of colonialism,

its “corpo-reality,” which brings me to the multiply signifying title of McClintock’s book. “Imperial leather” refers to soap, to the lash (an instrument of control exercised on slaves, peons, wives, children, and animals), and to the collar worn by slaves including, McClintock argues, the fantasy slaves of fetishistic sadomasochistic practices. In returning to the 19th century, McClintock’s book makes the broadest promises of plenitude, attempting to address every aspect of colonial desire. The promise is exhilarating and cannot help but fail. This is really a volume of collected essays, and some cohere while others seem unrelated and dated. Most intriguing are the essays on soap and the remarkable “No Longer in a Future Heaven,” on nationalism, gender, and race. Most disappointing are the rather tired critiques of Lacan as a chauvinist and the essay on 1950s black South African poetry, which posits an authentic “oral culture” as the saving grace of mimic-men intellectuals. Given the book’s total reliance on secondary sources and the enormous range of the citations, I was also irritated by the lack of a bibliography.

For McClintock, Stoler, and Young, the terrible place of colonialism is the bourgeois domestic space. McClintock argues that the scientifically racist progress narrative enshrined in the “family of man” naturalizes both the emerging bourgeois home and the paternal colonial order, placing the white father above women, children, domestic servants, and the various “races.” McClintock examines diaries, novels, advertisements, and photographs, while Young explores the same narrative in the works of Matthew Arnold, Edward Tylor, Joseph Gobineau, Franz Boas, and others (relying heavily on George Stocking). McClintock argues that contradictions between paid and unpaid labor (wife versus servant in the home, slave versus wage earner in the colonies) are made bearable through commodity spectacle and the fetish, used to mean both Marx’s concealed labor and Freud’s disavowed developmental experiences. McClintock argues that *fetish* as a term was coined to describe “primitive” practices but that *fetishism* actually organizes imperial identity. This resonates with Stoler’s contention that the bourgeois order of Foucault’s genealogy was first tested in the colonies (“laboratories of modernity”) and later deployed in Europe, and with Young’s account of the imbrications of colonial categories in the imperial halls of science. Empire is not “elsewhere”; like the kids in a horror film, all three emphasize that the monster is in the house!

As bodies mutate in horror films, for McClintock the race fetish allows slippage, mediating contradictions between liberal personhood and the class system. The European working class “becomes” black, childlike, and in Arthur Munby’s ethnographic

sketches, gender freaks. In turn, race and class purity depends on regulating (particularly white) women’s sexuality, a theme central to Stoler and Young. Both Stoler and McClintock address the contradictory reliance of bourgeois identity (hygiene, the “idle wife”) on the working-class woman, who bears race, class, and gender alterity into the sanctity of the bourgeois home. This anomalous presence gives rise to horror stories of depraved nursemaids, baby snatching, and class mutation, as children imbibe bad blood through lower-class and/or black breasts. McClintock reinscribes this domestic servant into Freud’s oedipal theory, convincingly arguing that he disavows her centrality to subject formation. For Stoler, she becomes a central but unacknowledged figure in Foucault’s “strategic unities” of bourgeois sexuality, especially in the overseas colonizer’s home, rife with anxiety that white children will form the wrong identifications. Young in turn describes how theories of race and cultural identities revolve around sex: both gendered sexual acts and various forms of reproduction. (Unfortunately, he has little to say about women per se.) Thus, like horror, colonialism is fascinated by blood: good blood that must be safeguarded in white women’s bodies, bad blood that will lead to the degeneration of the race and the nation. Stoler deploys Foucault’s insight that sex (the exchange of fluids, the bloodline) forms the interface between the life of the individual and the life of the species and is thus a privileged site for state intervention. Young explores the complex theories of hybridity, the fertility of “race mixing,” and their imbrications in the wars over polygenesis and monogenesis (which he finds recapitulated in current struggles over identity politics).

One limit of McClintock’s analysis is the lack of a theory of mediation. While struggling to find resistance in the lives of the women she studies, McClintock basically finds the same structures operating in both colony and imperial capital. There is no difference. Additionally, while her use of psychoanalysis is evocative and historically grounded with a marxist sensibility, she tends to overinvest in the fetish metaphor with its problematic suggestion of a “real” that is both repressed and available, given the proper analysis.

In contrast, Stoler draws on Foucault to critique the “repressive hypothesis” and its effects on colonial discourse studies. In a work of “reflective insolence” she explores the various and historically specific techniques of *producing* the desiring colonial self. Drawing on Foucault to study the different regimes of sexuality enacted in the Dutch colonies—state policy sometimes supporting white men sleeping with native women and at others importing white women to save the colonizer from “degeneration”—she wonders at

the lack of engagement between Foucault and colonial discourse studies. Attempting this engagement began as a chapter in her forthcoming *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* and became this full-blown archaeology of Foucault's theory of race, providing us with both an invaluable reading of *History of Sexuality* and a critical review of his 1976 College de France lectures, which are not widely available in English.

Stoler suggests that Foucault is useful in understanding why racism, like the indestructible psycho-killer of horror, seems always both renewed *and* new. Rather than charting race, class, and sexuality, or colony and core, as isomorphic, or viewing racism as a "cover" for class interest, she reads race as a grammar and as productive. Foucault's genealogy shows race first deployed as a counternarrative to sovereign power at a time of societal redefinition, from a pyramid structure to one divided into two groups (redeployed through Hegel and Marx). This suggests that race discourse is mobile because it professes the common good (saving the race or nation from a biologized internal foe) and is permeated with resurrected subjugated knowledges (*Race and the Education of Desire*,

p. 69). Similarly, Young insists that race is encoded so deeply in the grammar of anthropology that it cannot be extirpated through the move to "culture" or "ethnicity." Just as feminists are realizing that the sex/gender distinction does not free us from "biology," Young insists that race and ethnicity are mutually constituted and that postcolonial lingo (like "hybridity") has not broken with the racialized formations of the past. (Like *Halloween V*, it's back!!)

McClintock, Stoler, and Young are writing about colonialism *and* colonial discourse studies, thinking race, gender, class, *and* empire together. This allows them to explain, like the shrink at the end of *Psycho*, that mutating identities are at stake. Like the monster, who is confounded by gender and erotics but is not really operating in an economy of sex, these books help us better understand that colonial desire is about sex but is not reducible to that. Colonial domination relies on race but is always much more. The subject of colonial desire and of colonial discourse studies may be the pleasure and pain of our own unstable identities: monster, victim, and heroine all at once. ■