



Review article

Gender, culture and imperialism

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REINA LEWIS. *Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity and Representation* (London: Routledge, 1996. Pp. xiv + 267. £14.99 paperback); ANNE McCLINTOCK, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London: Routledge, 1995. Pp. xi + 449. £13.99 paperback)

Recent years have witnessed a small avalanche of critical historical work on British imperial culture across the social sciences and not least within geography. The inspiration behind the critical interest in empire, knowledge and power was undoubtedly Edward Said's groundbreaking and provocative *Orientalism*.^[1] Waves of debate have permeated throughout the social sciences and humanities in response to Said's exposé of the imperialist discourse of Orientalism. One of the major bodies of criticism has been written by feminist scholars, who argue that the critics of Orientalism and ethnocentric scholarship continue to write out gender. In particular, criticism has been levelled at the lack of recognition of the imperial context as being implicitly and explicitly gendered, and of the varying roles of European women as agents of imperialism. In addition, many of these interventions are informed by, and constitutive of, feminist debates within what is now broadly referred to as postcolonialism.^[2] Much of this work has produced more nuanced readings of imperial culture, which explore the interweavings of race and class as well as gender within European imperialism. Several of these texts also account for strategies of resistance to hegemonic imperial power, both within the colonies and the imperial powers themselves. It is within this context of a continuing engagement by feminist scholars with the production of imperialist knowledges and, more specifically, with more nuanced readings of imperial culture that these two books are situated.

Both *Imperial Leather* and *Gendering Orientalism* focus upon the production and consumption of aspects of imperial culture; however, the scope and approach of the two books is rather different. The latter is probably more closely related to Said's original project, but rather than focusing exclusively on women as the *subjects* of Orientalism, Lewis intervenes in debates about the female gaze and explores the ways in which European women were also the *producers* of Orientalism. *Gendering Orientalism* focuses on the role of white women as cultural agents using two specific case studies; firstly, it explores women's contribution to visual Orientalism using the work of French artist Henriette Browne; secondly, it resituates the work of George Eliot in relation to imperial discourse by focusing on Orientalist depictions of Jews as other in *Daniel Deronda*. The focus is not merely upon the production of Orientalist images, but also on their reception by the British and French critical press (closely related, therefore, to the Foucauldian approach adopted by Sara Mills^[3]) and it provides some extremely

interesting analysis. The book is both a critique of imperial culture, in that it attempts to deconstruct the totalizing fantasies of Western imperialism, and a response to Said in its efforts to destabilize the homogenizing tendencies of twentieth-century critiques of Orientalism. However, whilst Lewis deconstructs the categories of race and femininity in order to argue persuasively that gender, race and subjectivity are complex, plural and contingent, there is not enough detailed analysis of the role of class in this matrix of power relations which informed representations of the Orient. There is a reference in the introduction to Vron Ware's contention that "Applying a perspective of race, class *and* gender to historical inquiry should effectively transform interpretations based on race and class or class and gender" (p. 15) but, apart from brief mentions of class and work in Chapter 2 and a discussion of class, status and distance in the chapter on George Eliot, subsequent analysis rarely explores the dynamics through which class intersected with other relations of power in both the production and reception of Orientalism. Given the wealth of recent literature on such intersections,^[4] the ambivalent class positions occupied by her chosen subjects (Henriette Browne's transgression as an upper-class woman with a profession; the modest class origins of George Eliot, who relied on her profession for social status), and the obvious scope for exploring how class, in conjunction with race, gender, and sexuality, helped structure their representations of the Orientalized 'Other', it is perhaps surprising that this potentially rich vein is left relatively untapped. In contrast, McClintock's *Imperial Leather* explores the complex relations between gender, race and class with great aplomb. The interweavings between these various relationships of power are kept to the fore throughout. Ideologies about class were extremely important during the nineteenth century and ideologies of gender and race cannot be viewed in isolation from these. While Lewis does not completely neglect these ideologies, they are not as prominent in her arguments as those surrounding race and gender.

Theoretically, *Gendering Orientalism* does not depart a great deal from other recent critical analyses of imperial culture by feminists. Rather, it is the approach of exploring Orientalist representation *by* women which gives the book its originality. In this sense it is a welcome addition to a field which has generally been restricted to the analysis of narratives produced by European women located for a time *within* the empire,^[5] rather than by cultural agents in Britain or France. The book as a whole is neatly organized, with five substantial chapters sandwiched between rather shorter introductory and afterword sections. Chapters 1 and 2 deal with largely theoretical concerns and introduce in some depth the conceptual strands that flow throughout the two subsequent case studies. Chapter 1 begins with the premise that Orientalist discourses of gender were racialized and discourses of race were gendered (this contention is also explored in detail in a variety of scenarios in *Imperial Leather*) and suggests that the interaction of the relational terms of race and gender could produce positions from which alternative representations of the Orient could be enunciated. The chapter deals largely with Said's *Orientalism* and feminist critiques of this. Lewis's position is that women produced rather different gazes upon the Orient which were mediated through their racialized and gendered subjectivities. However, she is careful to deconstruct the binary of good feminists and bad imperialists which often characterized earlier attempts to posit a gendered genre of imperial representation^[6] and, using discourse theory, she suggests a way in which we might avoid creating essentialist 'feminist'/'feminine' versions of Orientalism. With regard to the latter, Lewis draws on the work of Foucault and Barthes and calls for a theory of subjectivity and agency that can accept the 'death of the author' (and, consequently, the role of the critic in ascribing meaning to the text) but which does not re-write women out of cultural production by denying their historical agency. On the whole, the book is quite successful in achieving this objective. Lewis demonstrates how female writing subjects must have been influenced by contemporary ideas about gender and creativity in addition to ideas about nation, race and empire, and she also presents a detailed analysis of the role of the critic in ascribing meaning

not only to the texts but also to the authorial identities which produced the texts. Chapter 2 explores the material and ideological constraints on women's cultural production, including the ideology of separate spheres and prevailing attitudes towards women and work. Here, there are clear overlaps with McClintock's very detailed analysis of the nature of women's work, the ways in which ideologies of gender, sexuality, race and class intersected with ideologies of women's work, and how these ideologies were constituted and mediated within a broader imperial culture. The subsequent chapters go on to explore these ideas through the aforementioned case studies; Chapter 3 focuses on the Orientalist paintings of Henriette Browne, Chapter 4 on French and British responses to her Orientalist subjects, and Chapter 5 on Orientalist representations in George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. Ultimately, *Gendering Orientalism* succeeds in its aims. It reveals women's involvement in Orientalist culture, thus challenging masculine assumptions about women and imperialism. In challenging Said's rendering of Orientalism, Lewis presents not just a counter-discourse, but she reveals alternative orientalisms which are themselves fragmented, fluid and contestable. The book sets out to disaggregate the category 'women' and still allow a gendered analysis of Orientalism. Whilst these aims may not be wholly original, given the recent outpouring of work by feminists in this area during the 1990s, *Gendering Orientalism* is a useful addition to the growing body of literature on gender and imperial culture in Europe.

The scope of *Imperial Leather* is altogether broader, and the approach adopted is generally much more complex and more strikingly original than that found in *Gendering Orientalism*. The power nexus of gender, race, class and sexuality provides the central theme and, as with Lewis's exploration of the relationships between race and gender (with the occasional reference to class and sexuality), McClintock explores how these categories come into existence in and through relationship to each other, often in conflicting and contradictory ways. The book is, perhaps, more clearly situated within postcolonialism than *Gendering Orientalism*. It deals explicitly with the demands of Black and Third World feminists for an interrogation of whiteness, whilst simultaneously dismantling the concept of the singular category of *the* postcolonial. In a similar vein to Lewis, McClintock recognizes the importance of Said's contribution while remaining critical of his lack of engagement with the dynamics of gender, and sets out to break down the binaries sanctioned in accounting for imperialism by recognizing the "myriad forms of both imperial and anti-imperial agency" (p. 15). The possibilities for resistance to various forms of imperial power, which McClintock articulates throughout *Imperial Leather*, make this an important addition to postcolonial explorations of imperial culture.

The book is divided into three parts. The first explores how metropolitan space within Victorian Britain was re-organized as a space for exhibiting the imperial spectacle and new ideas about race. It explores a number of circulating themes: commodity racism, sexuality and fetishism, the emergence of photography, the cult of domesticity, the notion of the idle woman and the disavowal of women's work, cross-dressing, and ideas surrounding degeneration, panoptical time and anachronistic space. The second part of the book focuses upon the empire itself (primarily the African continent), exploring how imperial space became the setting for exhibiting ideologies such as the cult of domesticity and the reinvention of patriarchy. It weaves a complex analysis of the themes of colonialist discourse—the feminizing and discursive emptying of imperial and colonial lands, the emergence of commodity fetishism and, in particular, the discourses surrounding soap as commodity, the reordering of land and labour, and the invention of the idea of racial idleness. McClintock is successful in challenging the false binary of public and private space; she argues powerfully that the mass-marketing of empire as a global system was fundamentally connected to the notion of domesticity: "imperialism cannot be understood without a theory of domestic space and its relation to the market" (p. 17). As suggested above, she is also successful in exploring, in much

greater depth than Lewis, the multiple strategies of resistance to imperial culture and enterprise, both within the empire and the imperial powers themselves. The final chapter in this section explores the writings and politics of Olive Schreiner, the South African-born activist for gender and racial equality. McClintock deals with the complexities and contradictions in Schreiner's position as a white woman whose views were shaped as much by imperialism as by radical politics. Thus, Schreiner is presented as a political visionary in her prescriptions for South Africa, but simultaneously as a woman whose writings and politics were riddled with condescension and patronizing pity. However, in some respects this chapter is problematic. Although the focus is shifted to the colonial context, the analysis itself is centred on a white woman of enormous privilege. Although McClintock's analysis of Schreiner's attitudes and writings is critical, there is no mention of the reception of her work by black Africans, and the ways in which Schreiner's attitudes may have been influenced by black political activism, particularly at the beginning of the twentieth century. An exploration of these issues would have connected clearly with the final section of the book. This focuses on the events in South Africa from the 1940s to the present-day struggle for national power. The three chapters focus upon the construction of the narrative of South African domestic worker 'Poppie Nongena', black cultural politics since the Soweto uprising, and the varied and conflicting voices of Afrikaner and African nationalists in South Africa. Although the pace of events in South Africa have produced huge changes since the writing of the final chapter, many of the uncertainties that McClintock outlines still remain, and will endure as the focus of close attention for many years to come.

What is most impressive about *Imperial Leather* is the range of examples and scenarios explored and the depth of the analysis. The genres addressed are diverse, including photography, diaries (such as those of Hannah Cullwick, which detailed her fetishistic and voyeuristic relationship with Arthur Munby), colonial literature (such as the novels of Rider Haggard), oral histories (in the context of black women's resistance in apartheid South Africa), and advertising campaigns (such as those for Pear's soap), and the analysis is woven together with an inventive use of a diverse range of theories. Again, there are similarities here with *Gendering Orientalism*. Lewis draws predominantly on feminist and postcolonial theories, with brief mentions of psychoanalytic approaches to imperialism. However, McClintock uses a broader range of approaches in her analysis, combining effectively feminist, postcolonial, psychoanalytic and socialist theories. The final product is a work of enormous breadth and original scholarship, clear in its structure and written with a lucidity that ensures the circulation of the many interrelated themes throughout the whole book.

Although the two books are very different both in approach and scope, there are a number of themes which are common to both and which demonstrate the possibilities of producing much more nuanced readings of imperial culture than have often been formulated to date. As already suggested, both books focus primarily on difference, on the intersections of various relationships of power, and on the breaking down of binary oppositions frequently articulated in histories of imperial culture. Both books explore the notion of femininity as a complex and contested arena, a fractured and disputed state in which women had an important and even formative role to play. Both deal also with the possibilities of resistance. By regarding Orientalist discourse as multivocal and heterogeneous, Lewis is able to find evidence of different voices which may, in fact, contest the power relations of hegemonic discourse (here, she is in accordance with the ideas of Lisa Lowe). She is careful to point out that women's gender-specific representations did not have counter-hegemonic potential because these women were all automatically anti-racist. Rather, "it is the very contradictions thrown up by the assumption (then and now) that women made no contribution to, or had no active role in, imperial expansion that allowed women the positionality from which a counter-hegemonic discourse could be enunciated" (p. 20).

Imperial Leather is more successful in exploring subaltern resistance in a range of

scenarios. For example, McClintock's reading of the relationship between manual labourer Hannah Cullwick and her upper-class employer, lover and later husband, challenges previous depictions of this relationship as exploitative of women's labour and sexuality. McClintock points out Cullwick's desire for recognition of her efforts at a time when women's labour was fast being erased from view, the active part that she played in Munby's voyeuristic fantasies, the ambiguous power that Cullwick derived from being gazed upon both by Munby and her female employers (who often marvelled at her physical prowess), and the ways in which the rituals and relationships with Munby were a means of negotiating her lack of social status. Cullwick is transformed by McClintock from a passive victim to a woman of considerable power who controlled her body, her labour, her own money and reproductive freedom, despite enormous social disempowerment. McClintock argues that Cullwick had the kind of freedoms that Victorian feminists fought for for the rest of the nineteenth century. However, one should not ignore the fact (and I do not believe that McClintock does) that Cullwick's life was constrained to an enormous extent by the class and gender ideologies which permeated British society at this time. Her pride in her work and her physique were no doubt coping strategies for a life of alienation, exhausting manual labour and drudgery. It is difficult to gauge the extent to which control at one level (for example, in her relationship with Munby) compensated for her lack of power at other levels, in particular her inability to escape the constraints that her gender and social class placed upon the overall direction of her life.^[7] McClintock also details the strategies of resistance in other scenarios. For example, she explores the resistance of Africans to attempts to undermine and undervalue their economies through mimicry, appropriation and revaluation of commodities, and through violence. Subsequent chapters explore the cultural resistance of South African poets during the Soweto uprisings, and the part that women played in the anti-apartheid movement. By opening up these discursive spaces to account for resistance, *Imperial Leather* is perhaps the more pertinent of the two narratives to the politics of postcolonialism and the ways in which this postcolonial theory ought to inform and shape histories of imperial culture.

Both *Imperial Leather* and *Gendering Orientalism* are historically situated, but the former is ultimately more powerful and provocative in that it forces the reader to think about the past in relation to the present and the future. McClintock argues that the collapse of both communist and capitalist teleologies of progress have produced a crisis in imagining the future. She suggests that in the U.S. context, with the vanishing of international communism, new enemies are being found (drugs barons, terrorists, Japan, feminists, lesbians and gay men, radical academics, international ethnic groups), and, in light of this, there is an urgent need for innovative theories of history and popular memory. The call for a proliferation of historically nuanced theories and strategies to enable a more effective engagement with the politics and "calamitous dispensation of power" (p. 396) in the present day is surely a pertinent one. McClintock's caution as to the danger of "gazing back spellbound at the epoch behind us, in a perpetual present marked only as 'post'" (p. 396) is a timely reminder that any rewriting of history is only of value if it relates to the contemporary context.^[8] Both *Gendering Colonialism* and *Imperial Leather* are valuable and enjoyable additions to what is now a well-established genre, but McClintock's work is outstanding in that it is more politicized, of greater contemporary relevance, and is probably one of the finest critiques of British imperial culture currently in circulation.

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Notes

[1] E. Said, *Orientalism* (London 1978).

[2] See, for example, L. Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca 1991);

B. Melman, *Women's Orient: English Women and the Middle East 1718–1918. Sexuality, Religion and Work* (London 1992); S. Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Writing and Colonialism* (London 1991); N. Chaudhuri and M. Strobel (Eds), *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington 1992); V. Ware, *Beyond the Pale White Women, Racism and History* (London 1992).

- [3] Mills, *Discourses of Difference*.
- [4] In addition to the above, see also S. Gilman, Black bodies, white bodies: towards an iconography of female sexuality in late nineteenth-century art, medicine and literature, *Critical Inquiry* **12** (1985) 204–242; S. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Race, Sexuality and Madness* (Ithaca, 1995); C. Hall, *White, Male and Middle Class: Explorations in Feminism and History* (Cambridge 1992).
- [5] This literature has dealt almost exclusively with the narratives of women travellers in the empire; see, for example, A. Blunt, *Travel, Gender and Imperialism* (New York 1994). However, like Lewis, Edward Said and Patrick Brantlinger have also explored imperialist representations by women novelists, specifically Jane Austen (E. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London 1993)) and George Eliot (P. Brantlinger, Nations and novels: Disraeli, George Eliot and Orientalism, *Victorian Studies* **35** (1992) 255–275).
- [6] For a critique of this approach, see J. Haggis, Gendering colonialism or colonising gender? Recent Women's Studies approaches to white women and the history of British colonialism, *Women's Studies International Forum* **13** (1990) 105–115.
- [7] There are obvious parallels here with current debates amongst feminists about prostitution, and especially sex tourism in the 'Third World'.
- [8] Clive Barnett has recently made a similar point in relation to the writing of historiographies of geography. C. Barnett, Awakening the dead: who needs the history of geography? *Transactions of the Institute of British Geography* **20** (1995) 417–419.