



Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest.
By ANNE McCLINTOCK. New York: Routledge, 1994. Pp. xii+449.
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Imperial Leather—the title is suggestive not just of soap but the sado-masochistic rituals of colonial sexuality. In this large and often brilliant work Anne McClintock aspires to connect race to gender, and sexuality, class, and psychoanalysis to material history. It moves through three distinct moments, from the height of British imperialism at home and abroad to the contemporary hopes of “dismantling the master’s house” in South Africa. Although focused on British colonialism, and on Africa especially, the book will prove a rich source of insights for anyone working on colonialism and its lingering traces in our allegedly “postcolonial” present. In a compelling introit McClintock interrogates that very concept—its seeming challenge to the notion of linear time or progress, often paradoxically reinscribes epochal rhetoric through the singularity of postcolonial space and time. She perceives postcolonial not just as “pre-

maturely celebratory" (p. 13), given neocolonial and nostalgic persistences, but as eliding the complexities of global power not readily marshaled into the binary of colonizer and colonized. Race, gender, and class are not just separate structures "yoked together . . . like armatures of Lego" (p. 5) but articulated categories, conflictual and complicit.

In graphic illustration she reads Sir Henry Rider Haggard's map in *King Solomon's Mines* (1885), and finds there not just a route to the riches of Africa's diamond mines but, when inverted, the sexualized "lay of the land," the mountain peaks of Sheba's Breasts and, lower down, "The Three Witches," mounds covered in dark heather, marking and covering the entrance to the treasure cave. Her reading is not just a reiteration of the Orientalist cliché of the phallic male penetrating the passive feminized interior of another country. The unknown, the female body, is also the space of threat and terror. Similarly, Theodore Galle's engravings of America as a naked, inviting woman (c. 1600) are seen not just as signs of male imperial power feminizing terra incognita, for lurking behind her are cannibals, indigenous women spitroasting a human leg. The psychoanalytic potential of such primal scenes is abundant, and McClintock exploits them to the full; male fears of dismemberment and emasculation shadow imperial exploration.

Such gendered exploratory tropes circulated back home, the "back home" not just of the imperial office and men's clubs but of Victorian domesticity. Commodity spectacles traversed the allegedly separate spheres of private life and imperial market. In superb vignettes of "soft-soaping empire" in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, McClintock decodes advertisements for Globe Polish and Pear's Soap ("The first step towards lightening The White Man's Burden"). They vaunt not just whiteness and cleanliness but imperial presumptions of anachronistic space and panoptical time. Women, colonized, and workers were rendered regressive, that is, anachronistic "before" history. In the panopticon of the Crystal Palace (1851) the globe was envisioned as one time. Human races were represented as "trees," or as a "family of man," thus naturalizing and masculinizing racial hierarchy. Such presumptions are found not just in popular advertisements, cartoons, and postcards but in the grand narratives of scientists like Sir Francis Galton, Paul Broca, and even Friedrich Engels and Georg W. F. Hegel.

The Irish were depicted with dark, simian contours as "white Negroes," sunk in torpor and domestic degeneracy. Workers were portrayed as darkened and degenerate; even working-class women were seen as akin to black men. McClintock explores such complicities of race, sex, and class through the history of a protracted clandestine liaison between Hannah Cullwick, maidservant and later secret wife, and Arthur Munby, barrister, poet, and photographer of Victorian Britain. His infatuation

with “inspecting” (drawing and photographing) working women—domestic servants, milkmaids, sack makers, fisherwomen, and the mining women of Wigan Pit—was, McClintock claims, an obsession born of his infantile experience with his powerful nurse. It culminated in forty-five years of erotic play with Cullwick—he photographed her dressed up as a drudge, a lady, an angel, and a male slave, often displaying her own “slave band” on beefy forearms. In her cross-dressing, racial, gender, and class mimesis merge and the fetishism of dirt, boots, and bondage is patent. But McClintock refuses to see Cullwick as mere slave to Munby’s sexual fantasies and erotic choreography. She reveled in the sensuality of dirty labor and scripted games wherein she played powerful nursemaid to Munby’s bourgeois baby boy. She long refused him marriage and children, preferring paid to unpaid domestic work and the pleasures and freedoms of life “downstairs.” This “doubling” of Victorian women’s lives, McClintock argues, was pervasive—images of upper- and middle-class women as frail madonnas were complicit with those of working-class women as manly and lascivious, unsexed and oversexed.

Metropolis and colony were connected by the “double crossings” of commodities, as goods and as signs. Imperial progress became a commodity spectacle—in images of black children becoming “almost white” with Pears soap, or Monkey-Brand soap crossing the threshold from the jungles of Africa to the British doorstep. In this “domestication,” women’s dirty work and that of the colonized are alike effaced. McClintock connects colonial and metropolitan cultural contexts in the biographies of Rider Haggard and Olive Schreiner. Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* is not just novelistic recreation of the discovery of diamonds in South Africa but a way of redressing his abject position as a younger son of a declining landed class. The character Gagool, the black witch mother, recalls the black, woolly-haired rag doll with which his nurse menaced him. In the novel, matrilineal succession and the terror of black women’s power is averted and paternal authority reestablished in the disordered royal family of the Kukuana, thus allowing the white fathers to carry away the diamonds, as they did in reality. The profits from the book enabled Haggard to buy back his own patrimony.

Olive Schreiner rather “consecrated herself to an impassioned refusal of empire and God” (p. 258) and, more falteringly, male power. But her antiracist politics were compromised by the use of racial stereotypes in her stories. Her books, most notably, *The Story of an African Farm* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1920), evoked a sense of exile, transcended by a mystical union with feminized nature. McClintock suggests that her metaphysical mystery of the ground occluded the real bloody history of the plunder and dispossession of Africans. In her private religion two maternal figures recur, the white angel of nature and the punitive figure

of old Ayyah, the black nurse. The power of black women is again the dread colonial secret.

The final section of the book poses similar questions about the politics of colonial and contemporary South Africa. Here, McClintock reproduces but theoretically elaborates some of her earlier essays on the iconography of the mother in both Afrikaner and African nationalism. She also discusses the book *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* (1980), a scandal in South Africa both because of the story of one African woman's violent struggle to survive apartheid, and because of its uncertain authorship. A pseudonym elides the author's identity. Her white female interlocutor, credited as creator of a fiction, eclipses her. According to McClintock, dialogics resurface in the awkward shifts of tense, of person, and of voice in the telling, and ultimately the "we" of Poppie's community of women is the voice that prevails. This collective first person, oft imputed to the life histories of women, working-class men, and people of color, is read as a challenge to Eurocentric literary norms.

Such cultural contests about style are related to the broader politics of social transformation in South Africa. Resistance poetry and African performance works were often dismissed by white critics as unliterary, drawing as they did on indigenous orality as much as English literature. She plots a movement from the styles of Sophiatown and the journal *Drum* (responsive to both local rhythms and those of Keats) to rural and urban shebeens where Sotho praise poetry was refashioned in performances. Both proved a threat to the white state. Sophiatown was destroyed and its inhabitants evicted to Soweto in 1955. But the "croaking curses" of resistance were never silenced, and Soweto poetry emerged in the context of the movement for Black Consciousness, inflected by jazz and jive and Black American registers—its proponents proclaiming that urgent political concerns were more crucial than the timeless universal values of literature.

Imperial Leather is often brilliant but also copious, not quite connected, and a bit uneven, especially in effecting the aspired mutual engagement between psychoanalysis and material history. McClintock suggests that "psychoanalysis cannot be imposed ahistorically on the colonial contest, if only because psychoanalysis emerged in historical relation to imperialism in the first place" (pp. 73–74). But although psychoanalysis is deployed in analyzing Freud's banishing of his nurse/nanny from his oedipal family romances (pp. 87–95), the fetishism and cross-dressing of Cullwick and Munby (pp. 75–84, 98–180), and to a lesser extent the biography and books of Haggard and Schreiner, it virtually disappears in discussing contemporary South Africa. Perhaps adducing it would be an ahistorical imposition. Still she offers compelling critiques of those who see sexual difference as originary and race and

class as sequentially derivative. She uses Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray, Frantz Fanon, and Homi Bhabha but is never captive to their theories. Lacan's theoretical abstractions of the Law of the Father are seen ultimately to recuperate the power of men. Even if the phallus is a pretender, women are thus denied agency to subvert this transcendent order. She applauds Bhabha's use of aesthetic categories in his psychoanalytics of empire, but suggests that for him "masculinity becomes the invisible norm of postcolonial discourse" (p. 65). In a scintillating section on Fanon, she argues contra Bhabha that Fanon's notion of "man" is not generic, that his colonized native is markedly male, and that Bhabha excludes colonized women from his texts, consigning the problem of women of color to a footnote, "the limbo of a male afterthought" (p. 363).

The book traverses different epochs and sites, and addresses many genres—diaries and novels, cartoons and photos, ethnographies and performance poetry. It disavows closure both theoretically and stylistically. It delights in detail and idiosyncrasy. It is a riveting read—the playful provocation of the pun in the title heralds a book of great theoretical panache and rhetorical flamboyance. The pictures are not just illustrative of the text but a joy to read in themselves—Haggard's map, the soap advertisements, Munby's photographs of Cullwick, and the iconography of both Afrikaner and African woman as mothers of the nation. The author and Routledge are to be congratulated on a big, beautiful book that many students of the history of sexuality will find alluring.

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