

Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest, by Anne McClintock; pp. xi + 449. New York and London: Routledge, 1995, \$55.00, \$18.95 paper, £40.00, £13.99 paper.

Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest defies summarization; not because Anne McClintock fails to present a sustained argument in this engaging and frequently brilliant text but because her argument grounds itself in a disavowal of homogenizing gestures. Postcolonial critics, McClintock argues, have proven themselves too willing to read “the” postcolonial. Sacrificing specificity and nuance in pursuit of a totalizing will to theory, too many of her fellows, she suggests, have reproduced in their globalizing hermeneutics the imperial epistemology they claim to be interrogating. As the subtitle of *Imperial Leather* indicates, McClintock is not entirely successful in evading the ironies of this predicament. Nor, by definition, is this review. If this suggests that totalization is easier to refuse in theory than in practice, or, indeed, that totalization is now that which critical discourse simultaneously disavows and fetishizes, then, paradoxically, it is McClintock’s book which makes such observations possible. For at the heart of McClintock’s reading of “the” colonial encounter is a highly original analysis of fetishism and the abject.

Imperial Leather is formally divided into three linked sections: "Empire of the Home," which includes a lengthy introduction to postcolonial discourse theory, two chapters on the mid-Victorian flaneurism/voyeurism/fetishism of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Culwick, and a chapter on female fetishism; "Double Crossing," which comprises essays on imperial advertising and the writings of Rider Haggard and Olive Schreiner; and "Dismantling the Master's House," which consists of readings of post-1976 South African literature and an analysis of the gendered economies of nationalism. In a certain sense, *Imperial Leather* gathers three semi-autonomous texts (a primer on postcolonial theory, an analysis of Victorian fetishism, and a study of South African literature and culture) around McClintock's elaboration of a "situated psychoanalysis." McClintock grounds her "culturally contextualized psychoanalysis that is simultaneously a psychoanalytically informed history" (72), in an examination of the gendered economies of the upper-middle-class Victorian home. Reading Freud's relationship with his nanny against the text of his Oedipal theory, she uncovers a version of the family romance whose primal scenes dramatize the male child's relation with a female domestic laborer. While Freud, in his October 1897 letters to Wilhelm Fleiss, could admit that his nanny was his "prime originator," he banishes the nurse from his official theory and thereby disavows the gender and "class divisions that structured the middle and upper-middle-class household" (88). But, as the correspondence with Fleiss indicates, while Freud could disavow his nanny, he could not utterly repudiate her, and she thus returns as the "expelled abject from which he could not part" (89). This reading of Freudian abjection then enables McClintock's reappraisal of fetishism, allowing her to suggest that the fetish, rather than being that which covers and reveals a structuring lack, is "the displacement onto an object (or person) of contradictions that the individual cannot resolve at a personal level" (184). For Freud the contradiction involves the mythic family's historic implication in Victorian economies of gender and class. For an imperializing Britain, McClintock argues, the contradiction involves the racial engenderings of "modernity." Much of the remainder of *Imperial Leather* then proceeds to read the ways in which metropolitan and imperial discourses fetishistically disavow the nannies, nursemaids, female miners, and ayahs who are the abject messengers of "the colonial encounter's" myriad contradictions.

These readings, on the whole, are excellent. Coordinated by McClintock's subtle theoretical framework, *Imperial Leather's* analyses of the forms of agency available to Hannah Culwick in the S-M rituals she enacted with Arthur Munby, the *Masque of Blackness* logic of imperial advertising, the banishing of "the political" in South African readings of *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* (1980), and the flag fetishism of Afrikaner cultural politics, manage to be locally insightful without feeling excessively disparate. Throughout the text, McClintock is careful to historicize her readings and to refuse to essentialize. Her reading of oral history, which is simultaneously attentive to the "reciprocal, relational and unstable" (319), forms of identity resident in oral memory and to the propensity of academic oral historians to convert orality into a "poetics of nostalgia" (311), is salutary. Along the way, McClintock is also able to supplement her fundamental argument with fine discussions of allegory, photography, autobiography, and even the politics of quotation marks.

There are one or two troubling moments in the book. While the chapter on *Poppie Nongena* concludes by noting that "no simple unanimity of readership is remotely imaginable" (327) for this text, earlier insistences that "in South Africa very little is known

about how ordinary women like Nongena lived out the ruptures and changes in apartheid" (313), and that in reading this text "one is invited to abandon the liberal nostalgia for a centered, sovereign perspective and a single, presiding consciousness" (317), seem to indicate that the "ones" who know and the "ones" who read are probably liberal intellectuals. The text's hinted suggestion that the Sophiatown generation of black South African writers are somehow less authentically African than writers from the 1970s and onwards who have drawn on a tradition of Black Consciousness sounds troublingly similar to the imperial tradition of deprecating "deracinated" hybrids. It is only fair to say, however, that this is not an argument to which McClintock explicitly commits herself. It is one of the few points on which the text could profitably be clearer.

Imperial Leather is most crucially haunted, however, by a ghost which it provides the ability to theorize, if not to banish. McClintock valuably complicates the emerging mini-discourse on cartography by suggesting that imperial maps are, in her sense of the word, fetish objects—that is, that they embody a disavowed contradiction. The book opens, in fact, with a reading of the contradictions of "money and sexuality; violence and desire; labor and resistance" (4) that structure the map in Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1885). But McClintock not only reads maps, she makes one. The long first chapter on imperial discourse is entitled "The Lay of the Land," and is precisely what it describes itself to be: a general cartography of a discourse. This is an odd introduction to a text that so carefully eschews totalizing hermeneutics. Or perhaps not. If McClintock's theory of the abject holds for the texts that she reads, then it would only make sense that it would hold for the text she has written. And the contradictory reappearance of a map in a work whose significant value lies in its repudiation of global models of critical mapmaking, perhaps only indicates that in a time of local knowledges the abject spectre of totalizing theory will continue to reappear as the (un)desired object which criticism at once disavows and fetishizes.

IAN BAUCOM
Duke University