

Dirty secrets

by Indira Karamcheti

Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest, by Anne McClintock. New York: Routledge, 1995, 439 pp., \$55.00 hardcover, \$18.95 paper.

IMPERIAL LEATHER IS a wonderful book, as much of a pleasure to review as it is to read. Anne McClintock considers a group of problems that have challenged feminists and critics in postcolonial studies in provocative, stimulating twists and turns, making the reader's mind effervesce in response. The book is filled with good stories, sauced with lovely turns of phrase, spiced with passion. Unfortunately, this is all too rare in academic books. *Imperial Leather* is what academic writing ought to be: intelligent, informed, socially committed, engaged and engaging.

The intellectual challenge that McClintock takes up is what might be called the problem of categorical thinking. Categorical thinking—identifying various categories and exploring their ramifications as if those categories had no connection with anything outside themselves—is the academic stock in trade par excellence: classifications, taxonomies, types, classes, the segregation of the pure from the impure sciences, the social sciences from the humanities.

But what happens when, defying neat, academic separations of one thing from another, we attempt to think about something which does not stay put in just one category but confounds those boundaries, as human beings and their behaviors do? For feminism, the question has been how to think and talk simultaneously about the mutual implications of gender, class and race. In post-colonial studies, the challenge has been to investigate the interpenetration of the colonies and the imperial center.

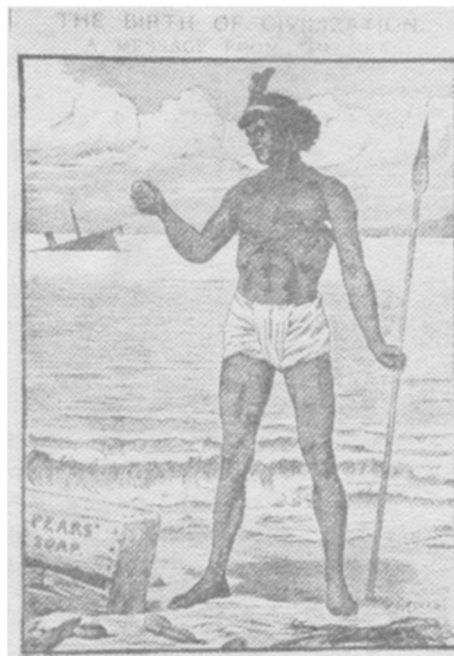
Categorical thinking has also provided the primary methodology of academia, reflected in its organization into disciplinary depart-

ments—History, Psychology, Political Science, English. How do we combine the intellectual forces of history and psychology, of literature and politics, into a more powerful prism with which to illuminate the object of our study?

McClintock answers this question by doing: she combines an impressive knowledge of material history and psychoanalytic, Marxist and feminist theory. *Imperial Leather* has a similarly impressive range of subjects, moving from Victorian England through the colonialist voices of authors such as H. Rider Haggard and Olive Schreiner to the writings of white and black South Africans.

McClintock begins with the heart of the heart of empire, the private, domestic spaces of "home" in Victorian England. Here she shows that British lower-class laboring women, such as mineworkers and household domestics, were socially constructed in a complex, parallel relationship with the black natives of the colonies. The hidden love affair and marriage of Arthur J. Munby and his housemaid, Hannah Cullwick, serves to focus McClintock's argument and at the same time becomes a kind of guiding metaphor for the complicated interactions between imperial ideologies of race and national ideologies of class and gender.

For Munby, Hannah Cullwick embodies a fascinated horror and obsession with questions of dirt, power and many-sided resistance to her own social marginalization. As McClintock demonstrates, that same fascination reappears on a larger scale in the merchandising of English goods within the empire. The selling of soap and other cleaning



The Myth of First Contact: advertisement for Pears' Soap. From *Imperial Leather*.

products is an especially intriguing example. McClintock analyzes popular magazine advertisements for these products to disclose the intricate interplay between the reflection of an assumed British superiority over the natives and its simultaneous creation. The writings of Haggard and Schreiner show a similar interplay between the self-conscious fashioning of racial superiority and its unconscious assumption.

Imperial Leather then moves away from the rulers and toward the ruled. The uneasy literary and cultural collaboration between Poppie Nongena, a black South African woman, and Elsa Joubert, the white Afrikaner who wrote her life story, in some ways mirrors the relationship between Munby and Cullwick, especially in the relations of power and domination. McClintock balances this example with an analysis of black South African writing, from the early Sophiatown writers of the 1950s to the explosion of writing that marked the aftermath of the Soweto riots of the 1970s, ending with a consideration of the complicity between race, gender and class in South Africa.

MCCLINTOCK HAS AN EASY SKILL. with textual analysis, whether of literature, diaries, illustrations from popular magazines like *Punch* and *McClure's*, or advertisements for soap or stove blacking, all the way to the text of social relations. For those of us who believe that the newer analytical methods of cultural, feminist and postcolonial studies, which emphasize historical and social contexts, are in fact based on the skills of close reading, McClintock's ability to bring textual and cultural analysis together is like seeing an old friend in a new and dazzling form.

Her topic is what some might now call the "iron mantra" of gender, race and class, as these categories have operated within the British empire. But McClintock's subject is really the relationships among and between these categories, mutually revealing and disguising each other inside England and in the colonies. As she puts it,

race, gender and class are not distinct realms of experience, existing in splendid isolation from each other; nor can they be simply yoked together retrospectively like armatures of Lego. Rather, they come into existence *in and through* relation to each other—if in contradictory and conflictual ways. In this sense, gender, race and class can be called articulated categories. (p.5)

McClintock's trip through extended periods of time and physical space is—a real trip, as people used to say in the sixties. The unexpected juxtapositions have almost the effect of surrealism: unanticipated, but somehow emancipating a reality that had not yet been perceived. The map Rider Haggard drew for *King Solomon's Mines* becomes, if

turned upside-down, a sketch of a woman's nude torso. Christopher Columbus traveled not on a round orb, but on a woman's breast, towards whose nipple he sailed. The physical territories of the colonies are likened to a woman's body, in what McClintock calls, in a lovely turn of phrase, the "porno-tropics."

Black men, resented by white colonizers for their unavailability as cheap, exploitable labor, are figured as women, graced with the loosely voluptuous bellies of females. White laboring women, bulky, darkened and brutalized by physical work, wearing the trousers and carrying the tools of hard labor in the mines, are drawn as black men. White middle-class Victorian woman labored hard at leisure behind the scenes in order to be able to perform the role of genteel and elaborately useless decoration in the parlor. And lower-class white women, working as domestics, became obscure objects of desire *because* of their association with dirt and labor and their consequent vacillating gender and racial roles.

THE MOST INTRIGUING of the stories McClintock invokes is that of the long-enduring love affair and marriage between Arthur Munby and Hannah Cullwick. He was a respected Victorian barrister whose avocation it was to encounter, converse with, sketch and write about the working women of England, domestics and mining women. She was a domestic whose physical strength seems to have been her joy; she writes in her journal repeatedly about the number of boots she has been able to clean in any given day. (Evidently, this was a matter of great interest to Munby as well.) The two met on a street when quite young, and married after nineteen years.

But they did not reveal their marriage, and Cullwick did not live as Munby's wife. Instead, she continued to labor as a domestic, and, except for four years that she spent as a housemaid in his house, she lived elsewhere. During the years of their relationship, she posed for Munby to photograph in any number of costumes, including a farm worker, a man, an angel, a male slave and a drudge; she addressed him as "Massa," and wore a leather slave-band on her wrist and a chain and locked padlock around her neck to signify her willing bondage to him.

McClintock summarizes those critics who equate this relationship with that between colonizer and native, but points out that not only was Hannah a willing participant, she exercised her own power. Her slave-band, which Cullwick would not remove even when her other employers fired her for her disobedience, becomes the icon of that power. Although she cannot overturn the class rules that bind her, she can, by flaunting the "imperial leather" of the title, refuse to acquiesce in making those rules invisible.

McClintock argues that her slave-band instead makes visible the parallel lives of slavery in the imperial territories, and wage labor and domestic labor at home:

The cross-cultural experiences marked by the fetish fuse in the slave-band: in the triangular relations among slavery as the basis of mercantile capitalism; wage labor as the basis of industrial capitalism; and domestic labor as the basis of patriarchy. By flagrantly wearing on her body the fetish leather of bonded labor Cullwick threw into question the liberal separation of private and public, insisting on exhibiting her work, her dirt, her *value* in the home: that space putatively beyond both slave labor and wage labor. Exhibiting her filth as value, she gave the lie to the disavowal of women's work and the rational, middle-class control of dirt and disorder. (pp.151-152)

Munby's and Cullwick's lives were filled with theatrical sadomasochism, but McClintock warns against our interpreting this as a Pygmalion/Galatea, a Svengali/Tribby relationship. Instead, like the "imperial leather," sadomasochism denaturalizes what



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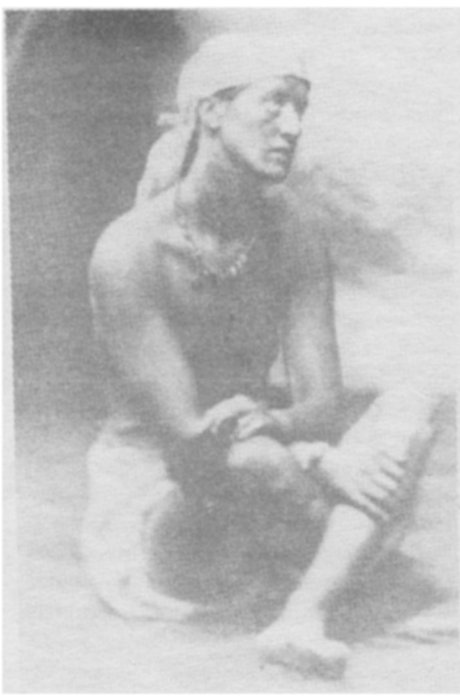
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Hannah Cullwick as a male slave, photographed by Arthur Munby. From *Imperial Leather*.

seems to be the ordinary way of the world: "with its exaggerated emphasis on costumery, script and scene, S/M reveals that social order is unnatural, scripted and invented."

McClintock argues for denaturalization as resistance, as power; it is what you do when you have "nothing to use but your chains." Certainly, McClintock acknowledges that denaturalization is not losing your chains, but I must confess to not being wholly convinced by her argument. Using your chains, in Cullwick's defiant fashion, can also seem to be no more than rattling your cage.

Cullwick, however, as the figure of defiant and self-valuing dirt that points out the underside of empire, serves McClintock as a defining and organizing trope for her book. She is the link to the march of progress in the imperial territories. A chapter on soap, titled "Soft-Soaping Empire: Commodity Racism and Imperial Advertising," demonstrates the spread of this humble product throughout the empire. As the advertisements McClintock uses show, the symbolic presence of soap recapitulates the idea of imperialism as moral and material progress through technology, and hides the exploitative reality of imperialism behind the reassuring parables of the domestic spaces of the home and the comforting hierarchical order of the white, patriarchal family of man.

CULLWICK AND MUNBY RETURN in another, complex incarnation in the relation between Poppie Nongena and Elsa Joubert. Based on oral interviews, with a business agreement to split the proceeds, Joubert and Nongena produced a book about Nongena's life. Published first in 1978 in Afrikaans, it appeared in a translation by Joubert into English as *The Long Journey of Poppie Nongena* in 1980.

McClintock teases out the varied and complex questions raised by the project. White South Africans claimed the book was non- or apolitical because it had, supposedly, no literary pretensions, or because (by eras-

ing all the particular, determining circumstances of a Black woman's life in South Africa) it was (again supposedly) "universal." Is it fiction when oral interviews with a Black woman are transcribed by someone else, especially by someone who belongs to the dominant, oppressive white group? To whom does that life and the right to speak that life belong? What justifies the simultaneous claims that *Poppie Nongena* is both "truthful" autobiography and that it is a "novel," solely authored by Elsa Joubert? Who's in control here? Who speaks and who is spoken for?

As with Cullwick, McClintock asserts that in fact Nongena's authority is not completely erased. Instead, she claims, one of the interesting events of the book is watching the "shifting imbalances of power" between the two women. Again, I am not completely convinced by the destination, but found the journey itself well worth making.

I am assured that I will not have proved my credentials or done my duty as a reviewer if I do not have a final quibble or reservation of some kind. Well, I have neither, but I do have a regret. Although it is occasioned by this book, it is certainly not restricted to it. This is it. Out of ten chapters of a very fine, passionately written, deeply knowledgeable work, two are devoted to Black writers: Chapter Eight, about Poppie Nongena, and Chapter Nine, about the Black Soweto Poets. I am not calling for some kind of numerical, statistically determined equal time between the white and the black writers, the powerful and the powerless. Nor, God forbid, am I chastising Anne McClintock with supposedly having done something wrong. I hope I have made my admiration for her book clear.

Indeed, I think it is that very admiration that makes my regret and its nature visible to me. Arthur Munby, Hannah Cullwick, H. Rider Haggard and Olive Schreiner come alive for me in this book: the personal vicissitudes of the lives that underwrite their works and cultures, as they embody and make an impact upon their worlds, are vibrant. But Poppie Nongena and the Soweto poets never have a literary or biographical half-life in the same way. In some way, they seem yet another example of the Sven-gali/Tribby syndrome, spoken for and created by someone not themselves.

Now why this should be so I am not sure. Devoting a whole book to them may not necessarily resolve this puzzle. Perhaps this is no more than a reflection of the fact that we—by which I suppose I mean readers like me (which may after all be a category of one), well-meaning and Western—are all so well-trained to recognize and perceive individualism and the human in the Western mold, but not in its other varieties. But the fact remains that the imperial center of England has a powerful, vivid life here, made even more complex and more fascinating by all that we learn in *Imperial Leather* about the competing, cooperating and colluding discourses that tied together the colony, the home and the marketplace. The empire casts a powerful shadow. And standing in that shadow are the still half-observed figures of Poppie Nongena and the Soweto poets, quivering with a life I cannot yet see.

Feeding on grace

by Mary Zeiss Stange

Neither Man Nor Beast: Feminism and the Defense of Animals, by Carol Adams. New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1994, 239 pp., \$24.95 hardcover.

NEITHER MAN NOR BEAST is a collection of mostly previously published essays—covering such diverse topics as animal experimentation, abortion rights, domestic violence, environmentalism, patriarchal theology—patched together to suggest something like a philosophical inquiry. Carol Adams continues the critique begun in her first book, *The Sexual Politics of Meat* (1990), in which she argued that speciesism and sexism are "interlocked" forms of oppression; hence, vegetarianism is the necessary counterpart of any true feminism, and "corpse eating," the consumption of meat, is the most egregious of all forms of animal exploitation.

Adams presses her point farther in this book. Veganism, the eschewing of all animal-derived products, is a direct action against the "animal industrial complex" of Western "malestream culture," a protest against "government coercion" for the sake

of all "terminal animals." Women and animals, culturally objectified as bodies, are in this thing together. Only by freeing all animals (though the precise logistics of this are never adequately addressed) will we free ourselves.

Typical of Adams' critical method is the following excerpt from her essay "The Feminist Traffic in Animals." Here she explains why all feminist events should serve strictly vegetarian refreshments:

"Meat" is thus an *idea* that is experienced as an *object*, a *relationship* between humans and the other animals that is rendered instead as a *material reality* involving "food choices," a social construction that is seen as natural and normative. When the concept of species is seen as a social construction, an alternative social construction that recognizes animals as a subordinated

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