

Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest

Anne McClintock

Routledge: London, 1995

ISBN 0 415 90890 6, £13.99 Pbk, ISBN 0 415 90889 2, £37.50 Hbk

This is a huge and delightful book which I enjoyed immensely. McClintock's project, which is to trace the constitutive intersections of gender, nation, class and race whilst arguing for the importance of the cultural, is brave and will offer much to readers in its various fields. The ways in which categories of racial difference are implicitly and explicitly gendered and in which gender difference is always racialized are skillfully dissected in the diverse realms of nationalism, commodity fetishism, literature and political activity. McClintock takes the European cult of domesticity as her theme, and uses it to discuss the essential but marginalized female labour (waged and unwaged) that materially and symbolically underpinned the development of imperial and capital relations as we recognize them today.

Her commitment to recognizing women's agency in power relations where other commentators often simply don't see it is also to be welcomed. That she does this without needing to present women as pure heroines untainted by any complicity in social power relations, even as they may be oppressed to varying extents in terms of gender, is excellent: whether she is discussing white working-class women servants in nineteenth-century Britain, black women servants in South Africa or black or white women's autobiography, McClintock attends to the specific ways in which different women are themselves implicated in the constituent terms of those differentiations. Thus, she can write about Hannah Cullwick's cross class relationship with Arthur Munby without shirking the imperialism and racism that structures their fantasy life and talk about the different but equally complex racializing of gender relations and gendering of race relations in post-Boer War Afrikaner society and the 1990s ANC. By turning her attention to formations of all political hues and different historical moments, McClintock is able to suggest the infinitely variable balance of payments that can lead to the sorts of sexual and colonial ambivalences that have been so discussed of late. It is one of McClintock's best contributions that she combines an insistence on women's agency with an overarching understanding of the motivational force of sexualized pleasures. Her inscription of a female libidinal economy into a field that often regards women as only the hapless victims of male lusts produces both a new reading of familiar material and a differently constituted archive. Few readers will be equally familiar with every area she discusses: indeed, to some extent the actual range of examples must be fairly

random, everyone could nominate other equally fertile texts or moments. But McClintock knows her material and weaves it together well.

In addition to several case studies in the literary field (Haggard, Schreiner, Black South African poets in the 1950s and 1970s) McClintock also includes the production and consumption of material culture. She investigates soap manufacture and advertising in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to demonstrate how imperial culture touched every area of daily life. In a welcome addition to existing work in the field of imperial spectacle and popular imperialism, McClintock shows how the visuals of advertising brought imperial iconographies into casual contact with the whole British population, illustrating how imperial cultures reached well beyond the elite.

McClintock has produced some of the most intelligent writing on sado-masochism of recent years and her analysis of the multi-faceted impact of fetishism (sexual, commodity and racial) in colonial and postcolonial lives is invaluable. Although I am not entirely persuaded by her analysis of the Cullwick/Munby archive, I am wholly persuaded by her insistence that women's social agency can also be sexualized. In all her examples, McClintock demonstrates a willingness to go out on a limb in both her grouping of material and her conclusions on it. That this originality is combined with a thoroughly scholarly protocol makes this a particularly valuable book. Her research is extensive and the footnotes and references will in themselves be helpful to many readers, as will her overview of current work in each field.

If the book has a weakness, it is that in her desire to include everything, McClintock covers too much and leaves hostages to fortune with some of the less extensive case studies. It is a fault that I can easily forgive (not just because I am prone to it myself) but because none of her inclusions detract from her overall argument; they merely threaten to distract the reader away from their original purpose and into other equally provocative areas. If you are not reading this book from cover to cover for review purposes, then don't let its size put you off: feel free to dip in. You won't be bored. The book is clearly written in a lively accessible style with a clear commitment to political change that brings home the 'real life' implications of each example. Her engagement with political and cultural theorists from Freud to Fanon and from Kristeva to Sheila Jeffries provides a neat synthesis of many of cultural studies' preoccupations for the past decade. This, along with her own insights and a demonstrable desire to harness cultural analysis to social change, should be one in the eye for those who have recently panned cultural studies as an other-worldly, ivory-tower indulgence.

Reina Lewis