Dirty secrets
by Indira Karamcheti

Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context, 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, seasoned with lively 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, engrossing 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, blocking the academic system in trade par excellence: classifications, taxonomies, types, classes, the segregation of the pure from the impure sciences, the social sciences from the humanities.

But when happens when, defining 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 and their feminism, the question has been how to think and talk simultaneously about the mutual implications of gender, race and class. In postcolonial studies, the challenge has been to investigate the intersection of the colonial and the center.

Categorical thinking has also provided the primary methodology of academia, reflected in its organization into disciplinary departments—History, Psychology, Political Science, English. How do we combine the intellectual forces of history and psychology, of social and political, of natural and powerful prism with which to illuminate the object of our study?

McClintock answers this question by doing: she combines an impressive knowl-
dedge of material history and psychoanalytic, Marxist and feminist theory. Imperial Leather has a similarly impressive range of subjects, moving from Victorian England through the colonial 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 empire, the private, domestic spaces of “home” in Victorian England. Here she shows that British lower-class laboring women, such as miners and apprentice housekeeping domestics, were socially constructed in a complex, parallel relationship with the black natives of the colonies. The hidden love af-
fair and marriage of Arthur J. Munby and his wife, the missionary, Hannah Cullwick, serves to focus McClintock’s argument and at the same time becomes a kind of guiding metaphor for the complicated interactions McClintock sees to have been at work in the native, black, and white women’s relationships in colonial South Africa.

For Munby, Hannah Cullwick embodies a fascinated horror and obsession with ques-
tions of dirt, power and many-sided resis-
tance to her own social marginalization. As a scholar, McClintock demonstrates, that same fascina-
tion reappears on a larger scale in the mer-
chanting of English goods within the em-
pire. The selling of soap and other cleaning

products is an especially intriguing example. McClintock analyzes popular magazine ad-
vertising for these products to describe the intimate 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 uncon-
scious assumption.

Imperial Leather then moves away from the rural ladies and the missionaries to the literary and cultural collaboration between Poppie Nongena, a black South African woman, and Elsa Joubert, the white Afri-

kaner who wrote her life story, in some ways mirrors the relationship between Munby and Cullwick, especially in the relations of power and knowledge, but, except for the example with an analysis of black South African writing, from the early Sophaworn writers of the 1950s to the explosion of writ-
ing that marked the aftermath of the Soweto riots of the 1970s, ending with a considera-
tion 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 soaps or flour 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 and feminist postcolonial studies, which emph-

asize historical and social contexts, are in fact based on the skills of close reading, McClintock’s ability to bring textual and cul-

tural 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 dis-

amplifying each other, in India and England, and in the colonies. As she puts it, race, gender and class are not distinct realms of reality, existing in splen-
did isolation from each other; nor can they be simply yoked together retroactively like armatures of Lego. Rather, they come into existence in and through relation to each other—if in contradictory and conflicting 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 some-
how 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 trip, but on a one-way, at least one trip towards whose navel he sailed. The physical territories of the colonies are likened to a woman’s body in a way that McClintock’s, in a lovely turn of phrase, the “pomo-tropics.”

Black men, resented by white colonizers for their inability to produce clear, hard labor like their white counterparts, are figured as women, graced with the loosely voluptuous bellies of females. While laboring women, because they were also worked on by British and other imperial forces, were also kept at a distance in order to be able to perform the role of genial and elaborately useless decorative domestic. And so class white women, working as domestics, became obscure objects of desire because of their association with the black women’s subsequent vacillating gender and racial roles.

The most intriguing of the stories McClintock invokes is that of the long-end-
during love affair and marriage between Arthur J. Munby and his wife, the missionary, Hannah Cullwick. He was a respected Victorian barrister whose avocation it was to encounter, converse with, and befriend British colonials in the colonies of England, domestics and mining women. She was a domestic whose physical strength seemed to have been used, and in her journal repeatedly about the number of boots she has been able to clean in any given day. (He identified, then dismissed, this 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. In-

 stead, she continued to labor as a domestic, and built up a fortune. She lived in a house that had been a ramshackle house in the colonies, became a housekeeper for a farmer, 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 sig-

Nify 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 Munby not exercising her own power. Her slave-band, which Cullwick would not remove even when she was a wealthy woman, gave her husband 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 sig-

Nify her willing bondage to him.

McClintock argues that her slave-band in-

stead 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 feisty fief 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 wear-
ning on her body the feisty fief, the black woman’s slave, for her disobedience, becomes the icon of that power. Although she cannot overturn the structural dominance of the power over her, she can turn the slave-band into a symbol of the “imperial leader” of the title, refuse to acquiesce in making these rules invisible.

McClintock argues that her slave-band in-

stead 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 feisty fief 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 wear-
ning on her body the feisty fief, the black woman’s slave, for her disobedience, becomes the icon of that power. Although she cannot overturn the structural dominance of the power over her, she can turn the slave-band into a symbol of the “imperial leader” of the title, refuse to acquiesce in making these rules invisible.

McClintock argues that her slave-band in-

stead 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 feisty fief 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 wear-
ning on her body the feisty fief, the black woman’s slave, for her disobedience, becomes the icon of that power. Although she cannot overturn the structural dominance of the power over her, she can turn the slave-band into a symbol of the “imperial leader” of the title, refuse to acquiesce in making these rules invisible.

McClintock argues that her slave-band in-

stead 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 feisty fief 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 wear-
ning on her body the feisty fief, the black woman’s slave, for her disobedience, becomes the icon of that power. Although she cannot overturn the structural dominance of the power over her, she can turn the slave-band into a symbol of the “imperial leader” of the title, refuse to acquiesce in making these rules invisible.
Feeding on grace
by Mary Zeiss Stange


If you take the time to read an article or a book or even a magazine story on animal defense, you quickly begin to notice the presence of that odd form of sentence that most of us have had to train ourselves to avoid: the passive. For example: “Mary Karr has been ‘soft-soaping’...” Well, that’s just a different angle for saying “Mary Karr is soft-soaping...” or “Mary Karr soft-soaps...” or “...soft-soaps Mary Karr.” The truth is that there is simply nothing wrong with soft-soaping, nor is there anything wrong with the other verbs that get used in the same way. Sometimes the passive voice is used because the writer feels it expresses the subject better, or provides greater emphasis, or has a greater bearing on the important parts of the piece. But then there are times when it is used simply because the writer is too lazy (or too lazy to think) to take the time to find the right word or phrase to express an idea.

A recent example is Wallace Stegner’s article, “The Animal Reader,” published in the March 1995 issue of Harper’s Magazine. Stegner is a writer of some repute, and has written a number of excellent books. But he is also a man of many words, and he uses these words so frequently and so poorly that his writing is often difficult to read. In this article, for example, he uses the passive voice to say things like “The animal reader is being read by the reader...” or “The reader is being read to by the reader...” or “The reader is being read for by the reader...” and on and on.

One of the reasons that passive voice is used so often is that it is often used to express an idea that is not important. For example, Stegner says that “The animal reader is being read by the reader...” and then proceeds to tell us that the reader is being read to by the reader...” and then proceeds to tell us that the reader is being read for by the reader...” and on and on. This is not important, but it is used to express an idea that is important: that the reader is being read. The passive voice allows Stegner to use this idea without having to think about it.

Another reason that passive voice is used so often is that it is used to express an idea that is difficult to express. For example, Stegner says that “The animal reader is being read by the reader...” and then proceeds to tell us that the reader is being read to by the reader...” and then proceeds to tell us that the reader is being read for by the reader...” and on and on. This is difficult to express, but it is used to express an idea that is difficult to express: that the reader is being read.

The passive voice is used so often because it is easy to use, and it is used to express ideas that are important, but that are difficult to express. The passive voice is a perfect example of how we can use words to express ideas that are difficult to express, but that are important. The passive voice is a perfect example of how we can use words to express ideas that are difficult to express, but that are important.