

British Colonial Realism in Africa: Inalienable Objects, Contested Domains

Deborah Shapple Spillman. Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. 264pp.
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Since the publication of Edward W. Said's *Culture and Imperialism* in 1994, postcolonial literary critics have usually treated nineteenth-century European fiction as ideologically and imaginatively complicit with the major powers' attempts to occupy, control, and reorganise distant territories. Deborah Shapple Spillman's *British Colonial Realism in Africa* adds weight and nuance to this argument. She demonstrates how late nineteenth-century colonial realist texts—both literary and ethnographic—drew upon structures of thought that allowed unfamiliar peoples to be subsumed within Eurocentric world views. Spillman suggests that just as capitalism integrates disparate material realms by transforming all objects into manifestations of exchange value, so literary realism likewise substitutes for the specificity of unknown objects—such as the artefacts of African societies—their metaphorical “exchange value” as transparent signifiers of cultural difference. In so doing, the realist text produces images of a world reducible to the interests of European capitalism. While this argument aligns with the standard postcolonial equation of realism and colonialism, the primary value of Spillman's book emerges from the complexity she discovers in the conjunction. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's understanding of the fetish-structure of colonial discourse, Spillman focuses on the moments of ambivalence in colonial realism—points at which the process of subsuming Africa into the European literary imagination is interrupted by ways of thinking, of valuing, and of making meaning irreducible to imperial ideology. This attention to what colonial realism *fails* to assimilate makes Spillman's book original and important. A major contribution to our understanding of the links between nineteenth-century literature and the colonial project, *British Colonial Realism in Africa* complicates our knowledge of the political unconscious of literary realism.

Spillman's four chapters and introduction focus on a set of canonical and extra-canonical Anglophone novels and ethnographic texts concerned with representing Africa to non-African readers. These range from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Olive Schreiner's *The Story of an African Farm* (1883), and various South African “farm novels” by Mary Ann Carey-Hobson and Anna Howarth, to the non-fictional texts of the precursors of West African anthropology, Mary Kingsley and Edward Blyden. Clustered in roughly a decade at the end of the century, these texts allow Spillman to advance a sophisticated account of how literary realism was inflected by the pressures of representing colonial spaces. She identifies this ambivalence by examining the movement of *objects* across the boundaries between colonial and indigenous societies. Arguing in her theoretical introduction that realism's desire to render cultural and economic systems transparent is conceptually analogous to commoditisation—insofar as markets and narratives both function as metaphoric structures in which *things* circulate as *signs*—Spillman uncovers moments at which these processes encounter “inalienable objects” and cease to function smoothly. Elements of indigenous economic and cultural systems that resist inscription into the metaphorical order of the realist text, inalienable objects marks points of “opacity,” or representational non-transparency through which alternative, not-yet destroyed worldviews can be glimpsed. In other words, Spillman's book reveals how tracing the narrative effects of inalienable objects allows us to uncover histories buried, but not fully effaced, by the colonial ideologies of realism.

Spillman's contribution to our understanding of nineteenth-century colonial literature is thus to complicate the straightforward equation of realism and imperialism found in much

postcolonial theory. Just as Bhabha's essays reveal how colonial discourse repeatedly fails to achieve conceptual hegemony, so Spillman depicts a literary realism striving to assimilate objects at the edge of its purview, and eternally falling short. The result of her approach is to open each text to histories seemingly peripheral to its original narrative—but which Spillman reveals to be essential to grasping its meanings. For example, in tracing a material context for the famous piece of white cloth spied by Conrad's Marlowe around the neck of a dying African labourer, Chapter one unwinds a history of local trade in the Congo River basin. This history, unknown to Conrad's narrator, undermines the fetishisation of cultural "authenticity" he shares with the ethnographers who followed him. Moreover, it reveals evidence of African agency and creative cultural adaptation elided by traditional accounts of the colony's past (45-65). While Spillman's theoretical framework thus owes more to Bhabha than to Said, this example shows how her approach achieves something similar to the latter's method of "contrapuntal reading." Her analyses serve to open each colonial text to its historical context, keeping her book grounded in the specificity of the archive, while lending each chapter a refreshingly distinctive focus.

Indeed, Spillman's interdisciplinary purview means *British Colonial Realism in Africa* will appeal beyond its immediate audience of scholars of nineteenth-century literary history and Anglophone writing about Africa. Her analyses reveal literary and ethnographic varieties of realism to be linked by their common dependence on colonial fetishism. This means her arguments about the ambivalence of colonial realist fiction apply also to much anthropological discourse. Perhaps more importantly, however, by revealing how realist narratives from the high-water of empire are furrowed by diverging perspectives—the "competing domains" of the book's subtitle—*British Colonial Realism in Africa* helps to contextualise later, postcolonial African writing. The concern of subsequent authors to foreground the disjunction between indigenous and imported interpretations of colonial reality appears all the more striking when juxtaposed to colonial realism's ambivalent incorporation of the material world of the colonised. As such, this book should be read by those interested in the colonial precursors of postcolonial African literature.

The only significant weakness of Spillman's book lies in her attempt to trace a historical narrative of aesthetic and interpretive change. In the "coda" she suggests that her texts reveal a "general movement" in colonial realism "towards an increasing skepticism by the end of the century regarding the ability to know and to control others by rendering their objects transparent and exchangeable" (220). Neither the structure of this book – which adopts a reverse-chronological approach that emphasises theoretical continuities over temporal changes – nor its corpus of texts, which is too small to sustain broad literary-historical claims, can support this assertion of a "general movement". Nevertheless, as a snapshot of colonial realism at a particular moment in time, Spillman's book is a substantial and engaging addition to our knowledge of nineteenth-century literature and its contribution to empire-building. *British Colonial Realism in Africa* will appeal greatly to readers interested in the complexity and significance of that relationship.

Hamish Dalley