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## Review of Eleni Coundouriotis, *Claiming History: Colonialism, Ethnography and the Novel.*

Simona Sawhney  
*University of Illinois, Urbana*

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**Eleni Coundouriotis, *Claiming History: Colonialism, Ethnography and the Novel*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1999. 256 pp. ISBN 023111351X.**

**Reviewed by Simona Sawhney, University of Illinois, Urbana**

*Claiming History* is a refreshing and impressive addition to the field of postcolonial studies. The virtues of the book become particularly striking when one considers the difficulties postcolonial discourse usually has in carving a space for itself between the overpowering narratives of Marxist and poststructuralist thought. Coundouriotis's project is as ambitious as it is necessary: it sets out to read literature historically without ignoring the complex distinctions between historical and literary work. At the end of the book, Coundouriotis notes that history and literature share a common drive towards memorialization; however, she remains attentive to both "the history in literature" (169) *as well as* the agency of literature itself. It is this latter emphasis which makes the book so stimulating, and which allows the writer to develop carefully nuanced readings of several African works, both anglophone and francophone.

In part, the book argues that it is literature, rather than anthropology, which provides us with a stronger--indeed, a more truthful--version of ethnography. As anthropological method and textual practice, ethnography has often been unable to overcome a certain lack of historicity. Born, as it were, of the colonial encounter, ethnography was shaped by the peculiar myopia of power: constantly fascinated by its own discoveries, it could not read them as historical events, subject to time and place. Discussing the classic study on Dahomey published in 1938 by the American anthropologist Melville Herskovits, Coundouriotis notes that Herskovits's "'ancient West African kingdom' belonged to both past and present" (74). Although the human sacrifices for which Dahomey had become notorious in the nineteenth century were no longer performed, Herskovits's narrative suggested that they remained part of the culture. Herskovits's project, Coundouriotis argues, crucially depended on the idea of cultural continuity, since its larger aim was to provide a lineage and a history, not only for contemporary African culture, but more improbably, for African-American culture. What is most significant here is the general critique of ethnography which reaches beyond the particularities of Herskovits's project. Implicit in several sections of the book is the idea that ethnography's--and by extension anthropology's--conception of culture as a totalized and *legible* object of knowledge renders it recurrently and perhaps structurally susceptible to being seduced away from historical thinking. It is this larger claim that Coundouriotis makes, for example, when she says in her Introduction that the Dahomean writer Paul Hazoumé was acclaimed more as an ethnographer than as an historian "because to a European audience Africa did not have a history" (11). She draws upon the work of Johannes Fabian to argue that ethnography creates "an allochronic discourse according to which the other never occupies the same historical time as the Western observer" (11).

In her own readings of several African novels, Coundouriotis demonstrates how fiction attempts to "claim" and explain the history that has been repressed by other narratives: by European historiography and ethnography, as well as by African nationalism and nativism. Thus, in her account, literature is granted a particularly privileged position in relation to history. Literary writing, even more so than historical writing, becomes the place where history might reveal itself--not necessarily as a narrative of progress, or continuity, or even intelligibility, but more often as one of confusion, misreading, and flawed judgment. While Coundouriotis supports this

claim with her persuasive readings of several works, including Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* and Yambo Ouologuem's *Le Devoir de violence*, one wonders about the premises or implications of such a claim. For students of the Western humanist tradition, this conception of literature as the space of a sort of secular revelation itself seems to be related to certain myths, most notably evident, for instance, in the Romantic ideal of literature. One wonders whether similar conceptions of the literary (or the poetic) might be found in African traditions, and how influential such conceptions might have been for the works Coundouriotis discusses. Perhaps such questions seem odd, or even unfair, given that Coundouriotis reads these texts as complex responses to the colonial encounter, and given, in particular, her compelling critique of the search for "authenticity" in African fiction. She writes quite clearly that she would "argue strongly against the kind of segregation that leads us to read African literature as a literature apart, when it has from its very inception in the languages of the colonial powers been a literature of response: importing and subverting conventions, mixing styles and expressions, and, above all, narrating and enacting a history of transcultural contact" (169). One could agree with this, I think, and still ask why African literary history, or more specifically, the history of precolonial African thought about literature, does not play a more active role in this discussion. An exploration of that nature would appear, in fact, to be particularly appropriate for Coundouriotis's project, which is interested in relocating the study of the African novel by focusing on the "internal dynamics of a community" (20). Indeed, the book seems to be engaged precisely in *questioning* the oppositional model which maintains the relationship between the West and the non-West as "one between critics of culture and producers of culture" (20).

Coundouriotis proposes dissidence, rather than resistance, as a more useful paradigm for thinking about the particular movement and force of the works she studies. She rightly points out that dissidence, which "subverts from within" (20), is also more susceptible to being co-opted, or simply misunderstood. The first chapter of the book develops this idea by showing how the works of Rene Maran and Chinua Achebe, which appear to romanticize traditional African cultures, also engage in a critique of traditionalism. When Maran uses ethnographic description, he does so with a heightened historical consciousness; his gaze is not one that objectifies and essentializes, but rather one that observes the degradation of traditional life under the impact of colonialism. Reading *Batouala* (1921) as a modern novel about the loss of familiar values, Coundouriotis finds that for Maran, "the predicament of the native is in essence the predicament of modernity; alienation from nature and belief, increased social atomization, despair, homelessness" (34). Maran's achievement is thus to present us with a native who, far from being "primitive," becomes instead emblematic of modernity. Similarly, or even more conspicuously, Achebe's *Arrow of God* (1964) shows how tradition is constructed and how it crumbles, in response to both Western influence and various pressures within the Ibo community. Although Coundouriotis does not mention Wole Soyinka in this discussion, her reading of Achebe's work reminds one of Soyinka's writings, and in particular of the play *Death and the King's Horseman* (1975). Here, Soyinka similarly locates the dissolution of tradition in the conflicts and failures of the Yoruba community, portraying British colonialism as a mere "catalytic incident" in the process of change, to use Soyinka's own words ("Author's Note," *Death and the King's Horseman*).

Chapters 2, 3, and 4, the Dahomey chapters, are in many ways the heart of the work. In this section, Coundouriotis develops many of the themes that have been introduced in the first

chapter: the sensationalizing of African practices in colonialist discourse; the complicity between the colonizing powers and the native elite, particularly in their investment in certain ideas of “tradition”; the tensions and rivalries *within* African communities which aided the task of colonialism; and, most significantly, the potential for dissent in African writing when it records change and ambivalence in its own narrative of local history.

In Chapter 2, Coundouriotis examines Victorian texts about Dahomey, drawing attention to the peculiar mix of pleasure and repulsion in British responses to human sacrifice. The British preoccupation with Dahomey as a place of spectacular violence becomes, in this reading, a mask that hides the history of cultural rapprochement between Britain and Dahomey in the 18th century. European colonial powers, which had been thoroughly complicit in the slave trade in the 18th century, began, in the following century, the process of “othering” slavery--recasting it as an exclusive and horrifying part of African tribal history. Coundouriotis’s reading of several Victorian travelogues convincingly shows how ethical considerations were repeatedly manipulated to serve economic interests, and how Victorian witnesses accommodated their perceptions of sacrifice to suit their political concerns.

The theoretical discussion of sacrifice in this section is also richly evocative, though perhaps not as fully developed as it might have been. By the end of the second chapter, Coundouriotis has proposed two distinct models of sacrifice, without really working out the relationship between them. The first follows George Bataille’s reading of sacrifice as a kind of expenditure that is fundamentally at odds with capitalist economies and their vigilance regarding “waste.” The second model, however, implicitly questions this one by showing that certain “ancestral customs,” including some involving human sacrifice, in fact took shape under colonial influence. It turns out that for the Dahomean king, the practice of sacrifice served a material, rather than a religious end; it was predicated on a pernicious choice between either killing or selling his prisoners of war. If we follow the second model, then the idea that sacrifice is somehow an integral part of a non-capitalist or “primitive” economy can no longer be sustained. No doubt we are meant to note this discrepancy, but Coundouriotis herself does not explore its implications, nor does she propose a clearly articulated critique of Bataille’s theory. In this context, she might also have explained more carefully her choice of the word “sacrifice” to describe the Dahomean ritual--I found myself wanting to know what the Dahomean word was, and what specific implications it carried.

Coundouriotis is interested in the work of the Dahomean writer Paul Hazoumé because he is able to present Dahomean rituals in their native context and trace their historical evolution in different periods. In his ethnographic study of the blood oath, *Le Pacte de Sang au Dahomey* (1937), he demonstrates not only that the blood oath degenerated into a criminal practice under the impact of colonialism, but also, and more importantly, that colonialism itself became possible as a consequence of the breach of that oath. Dahomey fell to the French in 1894 because a collaborator--a Dahomean traitor, in effect--broke his oath and betrayed his king. Hazoumé’s account does not merely reiterate a familiar colonial tale of “divide and rule.” Instead, assigning more agency and responsibility to the Africans, it explicitly figures treachery to the past, to custom and community, as the crime that paves the way for colonialism. Just as *Le Pacte de Sang* provides a political reading of the blood oath, Hazoumé’s novel, *Doguicimi* (1938), considers the politics of sacrifice. The heroine, Doguicimi, challenges King Guezo because she

believes that the sacrifices have become politically expedient--they are no longer religious rituals, but military rituals, “intended to recuperate the lost honor of the Dahomeans in battle and to humiliate the enemy” (101). Countering the idea that Doguicimi becomes an apologist for colonialism because of her strong critique of the Dahomean kingdom, Coundouriotis suggests instead that we read Doguicimi’s prison speech as a retrospective indictment of French rule, since it invokes principles that the French also betrayed. Thus, according to Coundouriotis, through Doguicimi’s words, Hazoumé implicitly questions whether the French lived up to their own stated ideals.

Comparing Doguicimi with Jules Michelet’s *Joan of Arc*, Coundouriotis writes, “Doguicimi presents an alternative narrative of sacrifice, that of self-sacrifice. Spurned by her king...she buries herself alive at her husband’s funeral... Doguicimi’s self-sacrifice revises the narrative of sacrifice presented by the novel. It changes the historical import of sacrifice by widening its resonance” (112). Earlier, Coundouriotis notes that Doguicimi opposes “both the greedy materialism of the Dahomean monarchy and her husband’s ‘male’ nationalism that denigrates the family,” and that for her, “the nation should be modeled after the family” (108). While this reading of Doguicimi as a Joan of Arc figure is provocative on many levels, I wondered why Coundouriotis did not develop more strongly the relation between Doguicimi’s heroism and deeply embedded patriarchal structures. On the one hand, of course, given this particular terrain, self-sacrifice and loyalty may be “alternative” values, but on the other, they also seem to be the most familiar and recognizable of feminine virtues. One might ask, in other words, why it is that in such narratives (and I am reminded here of several from another colonial context, that of South Asia) a woman may only challenge her king (or death, or the invader, or whoever the enemy might be), *in the name of her devotion to her husband*. It is perhaps all too evident that sexual fidelity still remains the primary model of feminine allegiance, but had Coundouriotis seriously taken this into account, I’m not sure that her reading of Doguicimi would have been as celebratory as it now seems to be.

Chapters 5 and 6 turn to more recent works, Yambo Ouologuem’s *Le Devoir de violence* and Ben Okri’s *The Famished Road*. Here, the author claims that these writers “are at pains to invent a new historical paradigm that will articulate the continuities between the colonial and postcolonial eras” (117). She finds transgression, rather than resistance, to be a more apt term for describing their relation to colonial discourse and its ethnographic ventures. Ouologuem, for instance, rejects the “native” point of view, instead critiquing both the realistic (socio-historical) aesthetic, and the mythologizing nativist impulse. Coundouriotis’s reading of *Le Devoir* is impressive, and her discussion of Ouologuem’s representation of violence is particularly astute. By reminding us of George Poulet’s wonderful essay on the experience of interiority, Coundouriotis establishes a distinction between witnessing and voyeurism as two antagonistic modes of reading. She argues that although the eroticism of *Le Devoir* appears to invite the former kind of reading, such a reading in fact misses the most powerful aspect of Ouologuem’s work. The book reveals its “transgressive energies” (124) only to the reader who allows herself to fall prey to the work without, however, surrendering entirely the boundary between it and her own consciousness.

In the last chapter, Coundouriotis reads Okri’s *The Famished Road* in terms of the history of Nigerian literature, and highlights Okri’s intervention in both the literary and the theoretical

discourses of postcoloniality. Okri responds to the betrayal of nationalism by “confronting the repression of history in nationalist discourse” (148). Paying close attention to the movement of the narrative, Coundouriotis attempts to understand why space is constantly foregrounded in the work, and why spatial determinants seem to take precedence over temporal ones. She suggests that Okri represents experience synchronically so as to avoid the risk of forgetting, which always threatens a linear temporality. By doing so, he is able to show most vividly how “overburdened” (150) the postcolonial present is. This is a compelling reading of a rather difficult novel, and Coundouriotis skillfully demonstrates how we may approach the book as a sophisticated response to both Mikhail Bakhtin and Homi Bhabha.

As the book progresses, it becomes clear that what literature claims--or reclaims--from history are lost perspectives and buried points of view; indeed, the book suggests that such perspectives may not be available at all to historical accounts. The citation from Geoffrey Hartman at the end of the book leads one to believe that literature’s privilege partly lies in its ability to be “less monologic than the memorializing fables common to ethnic or nationalist affirmations” (169). Coundouriotis herself also suggests, however, that some of literature’s power comes from its performative nature: it reclaims the past not only for the present or for the future, but *for the past itself*. Although she acknowledges the inescapably reactionary element in African writing, she is also continually attentive to the potential within such writing for transforming the very terrain of representation. Thus, while she says of Africans writing historical novels that their “historicism as subjects of history has always been to some degree prefigured by the historiographical enterprises of the European colonizers” (166), she also shows how Paul Hazoumé, for instance, is able to “write himself out of French imperial ideology” (167) by skillfully manipulating the narrative limits that constrain him.

Coundouriotis’s approach is clearly a most fruitful one for postcolonial studies; her work is original, persuasive, and extensively researched. I learned a great deal from reading the book, and I strongly recommend it to everyone interested in the African novel, and in postcolonial literature in general.