



Claiming History: Colonialism, Ethnography, and the Novel

Eleni Coundouriotis

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Although postcolonial studies has explored the historical influences and connections among literatures throughout the world, it has considered African writing unique. By looking at African novels?written in both French and English?of the colonial and postcolonial periods, *Claiming History* places African literature in its proper context within this field. Eleni Coundouriotis shows how historical narration not only "answers back" to Europe's colonialist legacy, but also serves as a complex form of dissent among Africans themselves. Exploring subjects such as human sacrifice as portrayed in the historical novels of René Maran, Chinua Achebe, Paul Hazoumé, Yambo Ouolguem, and Ben Okri, Coundouriotis argues that these authors are part of a tradition of dissent, shattering the myth of national unity. Rather than focusing on resistance to Europe?the outsider?these works reflect a variety of voices among Africans. Through their historical narratives, African novelists seek to break down and re-create their communities. Novels such as *Things Fall Apart* and *The Famine Road* have traditionally been read as ethnographies, authentically depicting the everyday life of Africans. But the emphasis on "authenticity" decontextualizes these books and neglects the ways they grapple with history. Since literature of dissent resists any single or absolute authority, it is in both colonialist and ultranationalist interests to silence it. By exploring the dialogue between literature and history, this book gives voice to African novelists' defiance of colonialism and nationalist ideology, and adds significantly to our understanding of a body of work that has long been ignored or misunderstood.

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