
H-France Review Vol. 21 (June 2021), No. 95

Françoise Vergès, *The Wombs of Women: Race, Capital, Feminism*. Translation and with an introduction by Kaiama L. Glover. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2020. xviii + 162 pp. \$89.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4780-0852-1; \$23.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-4780-0941-2.

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“Now we hear that it is the task of women of Color to educate white women—in the face of tremendous resistance—as to our existence, our differences, our relative roles in our joint survival. This is a diversion of energies and a tragic repetition of racist patriarchal thought.” Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”[1]

As someone who spent part of her schooling studying, and then several years teaching, women’s and gender studies and U.S. Black feminist thought more specifically, I could not help but think of Audre Lorde’s 1984 groundbreaking essay, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” while reading French scholar and activist Françoise Vergès’s important book, *The Wombs of Women: Race, Capital, Feminism*: first, for the similarities of women of color and lesbians battling racist, classist, homophobic, and patriarchal sentiments from white Western feminists, and second, because examining race, gender, colonialism, capitalism, and feminism perpetrated by white French feminists requires wading into ideologies that are often controversial in a modern France that continues to insist upon its color-blindness. Vergès’s ability to make us focus specifically on colonial and post-colonial France is a feat worthy unto itself and makes this an important contribution to French feminist theory and post-colonial historiography. Using the French scandal of women of color on Reunion Island (a former French colony and now a department) unknowingly being sterilized (with their wanted fetuses aborted) by white French doctors, it gives white French critics—who incorrectly admonish scholars of race and gender for applying their own nation’s racial and gender frameworks to speak of France—nowhere to turn when unpacking their own deeply embedded racism and sexism. The book begins with an important and beautifully written introduction by Kaiama L. Glover. Glover, a professor of French, sets the tone for what comes next: an introduction to both translating Vergès and her positioning, and providing a strong overview of France’s colonial history.

I am a fan of historical scandals in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century France: reading about them, teaching them, and using them as a lens to understand France more broadly.[2] This one is horrifying, to put it mildly. White doctors in the 1960s, with the full blessings of the white French state (judicial authorities, bureaucrats, the Church, and other state custodians), terminated pregnancies of poor woman of color on Reunion Island and then sterilized them. The scandal itself, which was publicized in the 1970s, remarkably met with little outrage by white

French feminists, who were at the same time fighting in France for their own bodily autonomy, including access to birth control and abortions. How white French women could care so little about other women experiencing such terrifying fates, while at the same time speaking with an incredible cluelessness of their own subjugation, is at the deeply troubling heart of this book.

Why was it considered imperative for non-white women in the former territory to prevent pregnancies (and for the state to decide to terminate existing pregnancies without consent) while at the same time forbidding white French women from making their own decisions about their own reproductive rights in France proper? The answer lies in one of the main, and most important claims of Vergès's book: Via this scandal invested in the politics of reproductive rights, what emerged was a type of "Francocentric feminism," (p. 2) made possible by a "republican form of coloniality" (p. 3), This "coloniality of power," which developed after Algerian Independence in 1962, merely replaced the language of colonialism and imperialism with one that was more palatable (but no less deadly) in post-colonial and now republican France. France may now be a republic, but it was a republic profoundly invested in maintaining racialized state patriarchy. As Vergès reminds us, "Coloniality of power depends on paradoxes" (p. 95). *Plus ça change*.

The French state maintains its colonial power without the pesky language that highlights its paternalism and racism. What was necessary, however, was to make sure that no matter what policies were enacted, that France proper would be privileged, even if that meant the type of contradictions that allowed France to outlaw so-called immoral practices where its inhabitants were majority white, while encouraging the opposite in places still under its control. Moreover, it framed modernity for territorial subjects such as Reunion Island to coincide with leaving their homeland and assimilating "Frenchness," while it told white French citizens that their futures depended upon immigration. [3]

Chapter one of the book lays out the entirety of the scandal and speaks of the testimony of the thirty women complainants who unsuccessfully attempted redress. Perfectly titled "The Island of Doctor Moreau," it moves the moral hubris in H.G. Wells's 1896 novel to Reunion, where white doctors thought little of using their scientific and medical knowledge, and highlighting government officials who embezzled funds in order to sanction these barbaric procedures. [4] Chapter two provides the framework for the post-colonial shift of emerging language for France's former colonies, steeped in rhetoric of overpopulation, remedial, and decidedly unmodern spaces. French belief systems both maintained their own intellectual and racial superiority and reflected an othered status on their newly created departments, territories, and associated states (DOM-TOM).

Chapter three illustrates the politics concerning the management of sexuality and birth rates of Black women under slavery, reminding readers of the long-standing importance of "managing Black women's wombs." Forcing Black women to have children under slavery (when those children became financial capital for slaveholders) was replaced in the aftermath by overpopulation discourse for non-white women, while it remained an avenue to control the reproduction of white women and encourage white births. Chapter four returns to the ongoing denial of structural racism in France, and shows how this fallacy has become invisible by a universalism that denies difference. It also turns to notions of modernity so important to French self-perception. "Natives" of color must leave Reunion if they have any chance to become modern (that is, becoming French). Remaining and having children would mean that Reunion is a financially compromised department, overburdened by children. Vergès rightly argues that their

non-white Reunionese had no chance of becoming truly French, and would be relegated to undesirable jobs and substandard living conditions. At the same time, the government invited the establishment of settler colonies in the territories for white French men and women, who, it was believed, would be bearers of progressive idealism. All of this, ironically, has been helped by an emerging non-white middle class, who have attempted to reinvent themselves as their French counterparts.

Finally, chapter five turns to the liberation movements of white French women (the MLF) who remained unmoved by either the women of Reunion, the scandal, or their own post-colonial racial positionality, one born in concert with their previous location in Algerian activism (Algeria became independent in 1962). Here the “cartography of republican coloniality” (p. 91) becomes apparent.

The Wombs of Women is an important book for any nation unpacking the not quite extinguished remnants of colonial paternalism. Former and current colonists throughout the world would be wise to interrogate their own “colonialities of power” disguised as ongoing forms of assistance. Moreover, the use of the writing of Aimé Césaire, who directly spoke of the dangers of this type of benevolent paternalism, is a welcome inclusion.[5] And I can only hope that scholars of France and the DOM-TOM incorporate many of her decolonial feminist theoretical frameworks into their own scholarship.[6] Vergès’s work on the “coloniality of power” makes her a lightning rod for those who continue to insist on French republicanism and universalist ideology. This cannot be a comfortable position in which Vergès may find herself, but in many ways, her work will represent a welcome addition to French postcolonial studies.

For many of us and for me as a Black woman scholar, U.S. Black feminist theorists provided the beginnings of language to speak about racism, classism, homophobia, and transphobia in our work.[7] While well aware of how these theories play out differently across time and space, nevertheless, these scholars helped bring about cogent definitions and theoretical frameworks for subsequent scholars. And I accept Glover’s admonition toward U.S. scholars in providing “an opportunity to think more expansively about the challenges facing women of color across the boundaries of nation and language” (p. xviii). Vergès clearly states that she originally wrote the book “for a French audience, hence, the presence of certain explanations...might seem superfluous to an English-speaking public” (p. ix). In that way, I have little to criticize. I cannot help but wonder, however, why there is not a greater acknowledgement (even in the footnotes) of the Black women in Third Wave American feminism/womanism, who regularly spoke about anti-imperial practices in their own work in the 1960s and 1970s alongside their criticism of white Western feminists who, in the words of Lorde, used the same practices of exclusion of non-white women in their advancement of a specific type of racist feminism. Even a mention in a bibliography, which this volume does not contain, would have been very useful. I am uncertain whether Vergès felt this scholarship was irrelevant, or if including it might have caused additional pushback from French audiences? Making that connection would have solidified her point that women of color *globally* were engaged in anti-colonial activism, even if white Western feminists were not.[8] Scholars who teach this book would be well served to connect these overlapping conversations.

The Wombs of Women is a welcome addition for those of us who teach French history, for scholars of race and gender, medicine and of politics, and for those who teach colonialism and post-colonialism. In fact, it should be read alongside more so-called traditional histories of France, to

act as a corrective to ongoing narratives of French self-identity. I hope it finds the wide readership it so richly deserves.

NOTES

[1] Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, Calif., 1984; Crossing Press, 2007), 110-114.

[2] Briefly, some of the French scandals from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries include Marie Antoinette and the Diamond Necklace Affair, Sarah Baartmann, Marie Lafarge, Henriette Caillaux, and Alfred Dreyfus.

[3] The introduction of this book is especially useful in explaining France’s historical colonial history, as well as how that morphs into the “coloniality of power.” It is also important for highlighting how much of this theoretical framework of imperialism and its racist practices underscores the tensions and challenges which with white French audiences will need to grapple.

[4] H.G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau: A Critical Text of the London 1896 First Edition, with an Introduction and Appendices* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1996).

[5] Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); and Aimé Césaire and Maurice Thorez, *Letter to Maurice Thorez* (Paris: Présence africaine, 1957).

[6] See Nathan Dize’s review of Vergès’ subsequent book, *Un féminisme décolonial* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2019) (forthcoming in English with Pluto Press in 2021): <https://nursingclio.org/2020/07/28/writing-black-womens-stories-in-french-a-review-of-a-decolonial-feminism-and-reimagining-liberation-how-black-women-transformed-citizenship-in-the-french-empire/> (accessed April 20th, 2020).

[7] Black feminist/womanists include Sojourner Truth, Anna Julia Cooper, bell hooks, Audre Lorde, Barbara Smith, and many others. See also Benita Roth, “Second Wave Black Feminism in the African Diaspora: News from New Scholarship,” *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 58 (2003): 46-58 (<http://www.jstor.org/stable/4548095>, accessed April 26th, 2021). Although I would argue that many of these women belong to third-wave feminism precisely because they speak truth to power against white women of the second wave as well as to white men.

[8] Other important scholars among women of color such as Cherríe Moraga, Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Norma Alarcón, and so many others were also criticizing white women feminists during the same time period. See Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, 4th ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2015).

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ISSN 1553-9172