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Introduction

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Introduction

Abstract

Introduction to the special issue

Keywords

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Introduction: Contemporary Feminist Writing in French: A Multicultural Perspective

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This issue of *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* brings together a collection of original essays that re-evaluate contemporary feminist writing in French from a multicultural perspective. The writers discussed here come from French-speaking places throughout the world: Sub-Saharan Africa (Mariama Bâ), the Maghreb (Assia Djebar and Fatima Mernissi), the Caribbean (Maryse Condé, Simone Schwarz-Bart, Myriam Warner-Vieyra), Canada (France Théoret), and France (Leïla Sebbar). Although the novels of these women exhibit a wide range of concerns, styles, and formal techniques, as these collected essays make abundantly clear, they are remarkably similar in one respect: they all reflect the conviction that issues of gender are inextricably connected with issues of class, race, and cultural context.

The necessity for grounding discussions of gender in economic, racial, and cultural contexts represents a radical departure from the theories of the "New French Feminists" popularized in the 1970s in France. The pioneering theories of Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, and Hélène Cixous, for instance, were influenced to a very large extent by the work of male theoreticians based in France, particularly the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, and the philosophers Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. As a result, their work in feminism was intertwined with the linguistic, psychoanalytic, and philosophical issues they encountered in their white, educated, upper middle-class context. While proposing an essentialist notion of "the feminine" based on sexuality (the female body) and the unconscious (the acquisition of language and identity), they inadvertently ignored important issues of class and race, failing to recognize, for instance, the extent to which sexuality is itself a product of social interaction that varies from class to class and race to race.

While the work of Kristeva, Irigaray, Cixous, and other feminists such as Marguerite Duras and Simone de Beauvoir has received a great deal of attention in recent years, the work of many other contemporary feminists writing in French is somewhat less well-known in this country. The present volume was conceived as an effort to help make some of that work more visible and as an attempt to expand the way we think about feminist writing in French. The shift in focus from feminist writing in

France to feminist writing in French within a multicultural context enables an exploration of the wider range of intersecting issues that have preoccupied women, while permitting specific, detailed analyses of factors that shape women's daily lives.

Many of the essays in this volume address complex issues of identity in various ways. The problem of cultural identity, for instance, informs the essays dealing with authors from the Maghreb and Senegal, where the contradictions between modern values and traditional ones have become even more acute with the recent rise of Islamic fundamentalisms. My own essay analyzes Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* as a kind of sociological document that chronicles life in postcolonial Senegal. Reading Bâ in the context of Paulin Hountondji's call for a subversive "journalism-vérité" that exposes the real conditions of everyday life, I look at Bâ's exploration of abandonment, the modern perversion of the institution of polygamy in Senegal, where instead of following the precepts of Islam in treating his wives and families equally, a husband simply leaves his first family. Issues of gender, caste, class, marriage, and motherhood are all contained in Bâ's social critique. In "Feminism and Islamic Tradition," Winifred Woodhull traces the shift in Assia Djebar's and Fatima Memissi's positions from their earlier to their later work with respect to the nature and foundations of Islamic traditions. For Memissi, a knowledge of the Muslim heritage is indispensable to feminism and other progressive movements if they are to counter effectively the history promulgated by conservative groups, while Djebar is interested in contesting all fundamentalist reconstructions of the past.

Issues of identity are of particular concern in the essays on Caribbean writers and on Leïla Sebbar. Sebbar, the daughter of an Algerian father and a metropolitan French mother, grew up in French colonial Algeria and left for France during the Algerian War. Danielle Marx-Scouras writes about Sebbar's double-edged relation to her mother-tongue and the issues confronting first and second generation Arab immigrants in France, caught between the Arab world and the West. Victims of racism in France, a return to Algeria poses other kinds of problems for Arab women and girls. Bella Brodzki explores exile and alienation in Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane*, where the Caribbean heroine meets her African husband in France and then leaves with him for a life in Africa, completely unaware, as Brodzki eloquently puts it, that "her Caribbean female body is the overdetermined site of contradictory projections, not only of racial oppression and exoticism by Europeans, but more problematically, of French acculturation by Africans." Leah Hewitt traces the double identity quest of Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé—that of a black woman and of an Antillean literature—as she follows Condé's

literary trajectory from a concern with the alienation of the individual to formal novelistic experimentation, culminating in a “postcolonial investigation staging the connections between the past of the Antilles and the ever-changing faces of its modernity.” Condé’s *Traversée de la mangrove*, performing its own formal gymnastics and informed by the experience of colonialism, investigates how evolving gender and race relations, in addition to technology and the trappings of a modern society, interface with Antillean tradition. Clarisse Zimra’s study of three of Simone Schwarz-Bart’s early novels revolves around the self-naming scene common to all three, in which characters claim identity and descent (and ideology) from the pregnant mulatto woman, Solitude, a real historical figure who stands for resistance to the reinstatement of slavery in the Caribbean.

Investigating a new form of autobiographical writing that she calls “collective autobiography,” Mary Jean Green explores the multi-voiced texts of France Théoret. Théoret’s feminist autobiographical project makes room for women’s experience in the collective reality of Quebec, a breakthrough in the Quebec literary tradition that had been largely dominated by the Catholic Church and surrounded by taboos. Théoret’s project is innovative because it redefines the boundaries between public and private experience in Quebec, where women’s experience has usually been associated with the private.

As this collection of essays makes clear, feminist writing in French is richly diverse in its preoccupations, strategies, and techniques. Grounded in historical reality and rooted firmly to time, place, and culture, this feminist writing examines “women” not as an essentialist category of analysis, but as a product of socio-economic forces, discourses of power, and history.