

Women, Gender and National Identities

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Extra-territorial threats and Colonial fantasy: The Black Lesbian in Argis's *Gomorrhe*

Scholars have argued that the result of the intertwined and interdependent discourses regarding sexuality and race was a demonization of non-heteronormative sexuality that made, as George Mosse claims, "unconventional sex a national threat, and thus put a premium on managed sexuality for the health of a state." Deviant sexuality was not only an object of medico-scientific discourse, but it was a powerful tool of political incitement of patriotic and nationalist sentiments. The proliferation of lesbian-themed novels during the *Fin de siècle* is illustrative of the confluence of race, sexuality and empire. Through an analysis of a Henri d'Argis's novel, *Gomorrhe*, I illustrate how the representation of a lesbian relationship between a black woman and her white French mistress is used to not only transgress and destabilize patriarchal values but to use race and sexuality to comment on ideas of nationhood and French political anxieties. It is once again the "foreigner" who threatens to seduce and infect French womanhood. In this novel the black lesbian, Marie-Antoinette, is a double signifier for the Otherness of lesbianism who recalls both German/Austrian political threats and French colonial fantasies regarding Africa. However, it is through the French lover that we see Foucault's assertion that the true culprit in the production of racist discourse and ideas of sexual virtue, which were created to protect the biopolitical state from the corruption of the Other, was always the consequence of an "internal enemy who had betrayed values of the State."

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Exploring the New World:
Marie Dugard's Observations on American Women, Education, and Culture

During the last quarter of the nineteenth-century, numerous French women travelers visited the United States and subsequently published their impressions of American society. These travel narratives reveal the distinctive aspects of American life that captured the attention of French women of this generation. One of the most well-informed observers was Marie Dugard whose account of her six month stay in America, *La société américaine*, was published in 1896. A thirty year old Parisian school teacher, Dugard crisscrossed the country from New York to San Francisco, visiting schools and universities, meeting with educational professionals, and gathering statistics. One of Dugard's primary goals was to evaluate American education by comparing it to the French system, which had undergone major changes in the 1880's with the establishment of the Ferry laws. In her school visits, she also looked for evidence to explain what she perceived as contradictory aspects of American life, specifically in terms of gender relations and social and racial tensions. Dugard's real education however, took place outside of schools and classrooms. In train cars, hotels, women's clubs, restaurants, and dining rooms, she observed young ladies, housewives, mothers, and working women in social and domestic roles. Dugard commented on their dress, gestures, manner of speaking, and most notably, their energy and

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independence. Her perceptive descriptions of the American women she encountered constitute a rich resource regarding late nineteenth-century debates in France on women's rights and education and also point to the difference between women's freedom in the European "old world" and the American "new world."

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A New Twist on an Old Story:
Catherine Breillat Rewrites Barbey d'Aurevilly's *Une Vieille Maîtresse*

Si j'avais vécu au dix-neuvième siècle, Barbey d'Aurevilly, ça aurait été moi.
--Catherine Breillat in a 2007 interview

Nearly two hundred years after Barbey d'Aurevilly's birth, his *Une Vieille Maîtresse* (1851) has experienced a revival thanks to an unlikely *âme soeur* -- Catherine Breillat. Indeed, in 2007, the taboo-busting filmmaker whose frank portrayals of female sexuality have been labeled both vanguard and pornographic, filmed his novel according to her "*fantaisie*." Even as her filmic adaptation of Barbey's tale of the exotic femme fatale Vellini and the passionate sway she fatally holds over lover and dandy Ryno de Marigny, respects the overall structure and plotline of the work, in shifting the center of the story toward Vellini, she not only reinterprets Barbey's misogynistic story with a feminist twist, but also establishes herself as an *auteur* (the film earned her a spot at Cannes) without shying away from her signature sexual candor. Barbey's novel centers itself on Ryno's suffering at the hands of the cruel and mysteriously seductive Vellini, who, despite her ugliness, lazy voluptuousness, and superstitious blood sucking, overpowers Ryno's love for the virginal Hermangarde. In contrast, Breillat's work humanizes Ryno's mistress. While Barbey portrays Vellini as exotic and incomprehensible, Breillat depicts her as proud and intelligent, yet vulnerable enough to feel distraught every time Ryno leaves her. Breillat emphasizes Vellini's importance by placing her in nearly every scene of the movie, features her dominating Ryno in the very explicit sex scenes, and even makes her the central focus in all the publicity for the film. In this paper I argue that despite her kinship with Barbey, Breillat through the character of Vellini, rewrites Barbey's novel of male passion, thereby privileging her own 21st-century views on female sexuality and ardor.

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Local Exoticism, Mimesis and Legal Reform: André Léo, Switzerland and the Second Empire

The Second Empire reaffirmed conservative family values, suppressing the issue of divorce first introduced in France in 1792, forbidden from 1816, but reconsidered at each revolutionary moment until its reinstatement in 1884. Censorship meant that novelists could best attack the Empire through code, analogy and inference rather than polemic. The best example of women's exploration of the divorce question during these decades was *Un divorce* (1866) by André Léo (pseudonym of Léodile Bera, aka Mme de Champseix, 1829-1900). Many novels had addressed

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the problems of modern marriage by dramatizing the impossibility of divorce; Léo's novel is significant as the only major divorce novel by a Frenchwoman to coincide with the institutional organization of French feminism in the 1860s. Between 1816 and 1884 the mimetic principle forbade the depiction of divorce in contemporary France. Rather than focussing on this impossibility, Léo explores the marriage (and divorce) of a couple in Lausanne. Léo employs French-speaking Switzerland as a trope to depict a form of Frenchness which is not French. Reworking the mimetic problem of assimilating events which are possible but implausible, Léo's representation of this proximate Francophone society shows divorce to be legally impossible in France, and yet plausible (or certainly imaginable). The mimetic possibilities in this local exoticism suggested that divorce law, however desirable, would provide insufficient solace to the cause of women in the face of unbowed patriarchy, and Léo argues that divorce must be tethered to other forms of liberation (not least equality across classes and the redefinition of masculinity).