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Special Issue On Contemporary Feminist Writing in French: A Multicultural Perspective

Guest Editor

Laurie Edson

Introduction

Laurie Edson

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Mariama Bâ and the Politics of the Family

Laurie Edson

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Abstract. The Senegalese woman writer, Mariama Bâ, chronicles a changing society in postcolonial Senegal, caught between the attraction of modernization and the resistance of traditional beliefs. Her award-winning novel, *Une si longue lettre*, is examined as an example of the kind of subversive “journalism-vérité” proposed by Paulin Hountondji: an anecdotal reconstruction of facts combined with organization and interpretation that leads readers to an awareness of the real conditions of daily life and exposes the structures that make them possible. Bâ’s novel exemplifies this “return to the real” not only because Bâ speaks about and exposes the all-too-common reality of abandonment in the details of everyday reality. This essay reads the novel against the background of social, cultural, and political events in Senegal in the 1970s, including the passage of the Family Code into law and the resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism. It addresses the modern perversion of the system of polygamy and the economic and social ramifications of abandonment for women, children, and the country. It also addresses issues of class, caste prejudices, education, forced marriage, and the figure of the progressive mother. (LE)

Feminism and Islamic Tradition

Winifred Woodhull

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Abstract. “Feminism and Islamic Tradition” explores the territory mapped by Fatima Mernissi in *Sultanes oubliées* (1990) and *Le Harem politique: Le Prophète et les femmes* (1987) in relation to that charted by Assia Djebar in her latest novel *Loin de Médine* (1991). The aim is to see why Maghrebian feminists as different as Mernissi and Djebar—a liberal democratic sociologist and a postmodern writer—have begun to move into Arab-Islamic cultural-political spaces which, until recently, have been occupied mainly by various Islamic fundamentalist positions and other right-wing groups such as conservative nationalists

in the Maghreb. The essay delineates the change between these writers' recent work and their earlier writing. It then considers their revaluations of Islamic tradition in light of the work of feminists and other progressives in Muslim countries who are resisting the growing power of Islamic fundamentalisms in various geopolitical contexts while at the same time contesting western orientalist views of Islam and Muslim culture. (WW)

The Mother Tongue of Leila Sebbar

Danielle Marx-Scouras

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Abstract. Leila Sebbar grew up in French colonial Algeria where her parents taught French to the indigenous children. The daughter of a metropolitan French woman and an Algerian, Sebbar is a *croisée*. At the height of the Algerian War, Sebbar left her homeland to pursue her university studies in France. She became a French teacher and made France her home. Sebbar writes in her mother tongue, but she treats it like a foreign language. Although she never learned Arabic and left Algeria, her paternal identity haunts all of her writings. Anchored by the notion of exile, Sebbar drifts between two shores as she seeks to personally come to terms with both a *pied-noir* and Algerian identity bequeathed by her parents. This dual and contradictory identity allows Sebbar to explore the colonial legacy inherent to immigration in France. Continually on the move or on the run, Sebbar's eccentric protagonists follow a geographical itinerary which acknowledges the common history and cultural heritage of Europe and the Arab world. In forging a new identity for the France of tomorrow, this *génération métisse* attempts to work through the torturous relationship between France and its former colonies that continues to mark cultural manifestations and political events in France. (DM-S)

Reading/Writing Women in Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane*

Bella Brodzki

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Abstract. Voicelessness, alienation, confinement, deracination, rupture, exclusion, madness and exile: the thematic preoccupations of Myriam Warner-Vieyra's *Juletane* are familiar to readers of francophone Caribbean women's writing. The legacy of slavery and 20th century departmentalization have produced a complex politics of identity, whose points of reference and sites of longing—though privileged in a variety of ways in the psyches of Caribbean subjects—are Africa and France. The orphaned protagonist Juletane seeks love in Africa in the heady days before Independence. Warner-Vieyra uses the device of the fictional first-person journal mode to examine Juletane's disillu-

sionment as well as the interplay of colonially-produced cultural differences among Caribbean and West African women in a traditional West African community. One of the effects of this devastating narrative is that Western feminist criticism's universalizing theories about reading and writing appear hopelessly reductive from a contemporary francophone African perspective. (BB)

Inventing Antillean Narrative: Maryse Condé and Literary Tradition
Leah D. Hewitt 79

Abstract. As a Guadeloupean black woman novelist, Maryse Condé highlights the tensions in Caribbean culture between traditional and modern values, among ethnic groups, and between the sexes. She combines a representative view of an Antillean writer's specific concerns with a postmodern view of literature as multicultural, polymorphous intersection. The opening portion of this essay argues that Condé's personal literary trajectory embodies a general process of identity formation in postcolonial literature, one that passes from the alienation of the individual, to the affirmation of collective movements and positive models, and finally, to a critical, playful outlook in which identities are continually posited, criticized and complicated. In the last section, a reading of Condé's recent novel, *Traversée de la mangrove*, analyzes how the author self-consciously plays on the properties of the novel, much in the way French New Novelists have done. But Condé's work also underscores the importance of references to a given culture, a historical moment. Typical of her generation, Condé's relaxes the barriers between the New Novel's self-consciousness and a social referentiality that stresses the interaction between literature and culture. Concurrently, her reading of gender refuses absolute difference, while nevertheless tracing social inequalities that cause a black woman's plight to exceed her brother's. (LDH)

What's in a Name: Elective Genealogy in Schwarz-Bart's Early Novels
Clarisse Zimra 97

Abstract. This essay considers the question of the textual inscription of history in *Solitude*, *Plat de porc* and *Téluée*, by focusing on a narrative feature present in all three: the naming scene, wherein characters claim elective descent from a real historical figure, the pregnant mulatto woman, Solitude, captured and executed after the battle of Matouba in 1802 on Guadeloupe. Every Schwarz-Bart novel to date contains at least one scene, often several, staging this retelling of specifically Guadeloupean origins: the resistance to the reinstatement of slavery, and the ensuing tragedy of Matouba. In *Un Plat de porc aux bananes*

vertes (1967), the child Mariotte, refusing the white values of her household, claims Solitude as model and ancestor. Later in *Pluie et vent sur Têlummée Miracle* (1972), Têlummée regains her rightful place, through the connecting links of the oral chain, within a whole genealogy that is both biological and elective. Schwarz-Bart's corpus should be read as a gradual expansion of storytelling as a naming moment that makes sense of history in the retelling of it. This dramatized primal scene serves as matrix for the fictional discourse: it is the moment of revelation that simultaneously structures the narrator's individual consciousness and the narrative unfolding of a once-repressed collective memory. In the text's matricial moment, the daughter refuses the name—and the law—of the patriarchal Father (upending Lacan's "nom/non du père," so to speak) to reclaim the name, and, in Solitude's own pregnancy, the body of the Mother. It is a political act in that its coming into existence demands a radical shift in power relations as well as in consciousness. For a Schwarz-Bart heroine, this represents the first necessary step towards grounding herself in a tradition and an oral chain of her own choosing, with Negritude as its implied counter-text. What is remarkable is that Schwarz-Bart eventually rejects the binary, essentialist trap of male-oriented poetics, in order to arrive at a textual self-birthing fully aware of its polyvalent gender inflections. In claiming, and inscribing, Solitude as the Mother-Father of origins, Schwarz-Bart may well have snatched both Caliban and Caliban's sister away from Prospero's shadow. (CZ)

Private Life and Collective Experience in Quebec: The Autobiographical Project of France Théoret

Mary Jean Green

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Abstract. In her study of women's autobiographical writing, Carolyn Heilbrun contends that women's authorship has been most hindered by the lack of narrative structures adequate to the telling of women's experience. She further suggests that female narrative will be found as women talk together, exchange stories, and move toward a collective understanding of self. In recent years, the interplay of women's voices has assumed new importance in women's writing, and specifically in women's life/writing in French. Perhaps beginning with Simone de Beauvoir's feminist classic, *The Second Sex*, where the words of hundreds of other women are woven into the text to form an understanding of the shape of a woman's life, this new form of women's narrative is apparent in the autobiographical project of the Quebec Francophone writer France Théoret. In her novel *Nous parlerons comme on écrit*, the interplay of different voices and the interlocking and mirroring of disparate narratives enable Théoret to construct a female autobiographical subject that encompasses the reality of several generations of

Quebec women. Théoret's work is thus, like that of the Algerian Francophone writer Assia Djébar, an example of a new narrative form that has emerged from women's collective efforts to construct a new female self, a sort of feminist collective autobiography. (MJG)

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