

## WOMEN'S IDENTITIES AND BODIES IN COLONIAL AND POSTCOLONIAL HISTORY AND LITERATURE

María Isabel Romero Ruiz, ed.

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*Women's Identities and Bodies in Colonial and Postcolonial History and Literature* adds to the growing list of volumes of women's studies edited by María Isabel Romero Ruiz, Lecturer at the Universidad de Malaga, and arrives after *Identidad, Migración y Cuerpo Femenino como Fuente de Conocimiento y Transgresión* (2009) and *Cultural Migrations and Gendered Subjects: Colonial and Postcolonial Representations of the Female Body* (2011), both the result of her fruitful collaboration with another Universidad de Malaga scholar, Silvia Castro Borrego. Like those preceding volumes, *Women's Identities and Bodies* brings together eight essays by international scholars laying a strong emphasis on body politics and (post)colonial and transnational frameworks in their reading of contemporary women's writing. In the preface by David Walton—current President of IBACS, the Iberian Association of Cultural Studies—the collection is hailed as a sign of the growing tradition of cultural studies in Spain since 1995, and is further described as engaging with the politics of identity and representation from a broad Foucauldian focus. This general statement is further supported by the editor's own introduction emphasizing how the book addresses the analysis of the female body variously as “repositories of history and memory, as performative of gender, as the object of regulation and control, as victims of sexual exploitation and murder, but simultaneously as healing bodies, as migrant and hybrid bodies, and as maternal bodies, creating new identities for women that defy traditional essentialist ones” (2012: 1).

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Taking its cue from these guidelines, the first essay by Valerie Baisnée tackles autobiographical discourse in 1980s texts by two New Zealand authors, Janet Frame and Lauris Edmond. Drawing from Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, Baisnée reads the textualized bodies as interpellating the social order, particularly in its most conservative, repressive aspects, insofar as they attempt to impose middle-class values and *mores* on the female working-class (and therefore doubly deviant) self. Accepting such impositions, as Edmond does, results in alienation, but resisting them like Frame places her beyond the pale. Likewise, class also plays a relevant role in the approach used in other chapters in the volume, like Romero Ruiz's own study of the late nineteenth-century social purity movement in the United Kingdom, which came to redefine public spaces for the sake of middle-class values, thus either displacing the working class from enjoying these spaces or else compelling them to submit to the new models of appropriate, 'decent' behavior. Women, particularly prostitutes, were targeted by the new discourse of power that unfolded both in the form of legislation (e.g. the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885) as well as groups for moral improvement such as the National Vigilance Association, whose impact went beyond national borders. Similarly, class and (im)morality feature prominently in Beatriz Domínguez García's analysis of the representation of prostitution in fiction by Pat Barker and Kate Atkinson. Domínguez uses here the Kristevan concept of abjection in order to critique the process by which the 'public body' of the prostitute becomes a 'public corpse'. While the novels analysed might fall broadly under the label of detective fiction, the essay's running argument propounds that such objectification of the female body is part and parcel of the writers' aim of exposing the social stigmatization and exclusion these women suffer, whether they are English prostitutes or East European sex slaves.

Several chapters are devoted to gender in connection with race. Two strong essays by Wang Lei and Silvia Castro Borrego engage African American texts. Castro Borrego's analysis deals with the tragic mulatto stereotype, following its development throughout three landmarks of nineteenth-century black women's writing: Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* (1859), Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and Frances W. E. Harper's *Iola Leroy* (1892). Castro Borrego addresses the issue of mixed-racedness in the protagonists as well as in two of the authors, unpacking the unsolved tensions between two opposite worlds, pointing out the strong temptation of passing for white, and suggesting the many omissions in texts that were meant for a white readership. Wang's own essay departs from insights from Jacques Lacan and Elizabeth Grosz in setting out to explore how the black female body, often scarred and tortured by the experience and legacy of slavery, may become the site of healing in Toni Morrison's *Sula* and *Beloved*. For Wang, Morrison's project entails remembering

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the body in its original, unsullied state in order to achieve a return to wholeness, a project that, of itself, challenges the pervasive commodification of black bodies in African American history.

Gendering memory in the Caribbean diaspora is the goal of Manuela Coppola's chapter, which addresses the female body as "travelling concept" in Caribbean women's poetry, reformulating at the same time Ian Chambers's notion of the liquid archive. The result is an enlightening examination of how poets such as Marlene NourbeSe Philip, Grace Nichols, Jean Binta Breeze and Lorna Goodison foreground the material woman's body in their poems so as to construct a kind of fluid bodily archive that allows them to traverse the many transatlantic routes of the historical Caribbean diaspora and so to critically relocate issues of memory by creating a 'bodymemory'. Another celebrated Caribbean writer, Jean Rhys, becomes the subject of Mariacristina Natalia Bertoli's chapter, which reconsiders her masterpiece *Wide Sargasso Sea* in intertextual connection not only with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* but also with William Shakespeare's *Othello*. According to Bertoli, the representation of the relationship between Antoinette and Rochester must be seen in the context of the imposition of a colonial frame of mind whereby the colonizer tames the "dark continent of female desire", ultimately turning their sexual encounter into the site of oppression, inequality, and violence. The remaining chapter in the collection takes a more positive angle in tackling another diasporan writer, Bharati Mukherjee. For stefanovici, Smaranda Mukherjee's texts acknowledge the racialization of South Asian subjects in western contexts, yet they also succeed in suggesting that there can be a fruitful dialogue in the meeting of cultures without entailing either mixing or merging. Instead, as Smaranda's reading of *A Wife's Story* proves, Mukherjee portrays a process of adaptation and transformation from outsider (racialized) to insider (bicultural), replacing a cultural collision with the cultural creation that results in a truly bicultural, and thus superior, body. On the whole, this is an exciting collection of essays and an outstanding addition to a growing corpus of feminist literary and cultural studies emerging from Spain, of which it is hoped we will see more, since all the essays provide much food for thought concerning the central role of the body in the construction of women's writing and in the process of women's/queer identity built with the help of a strong historical focus and supported by a suitable feminist methodology.

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