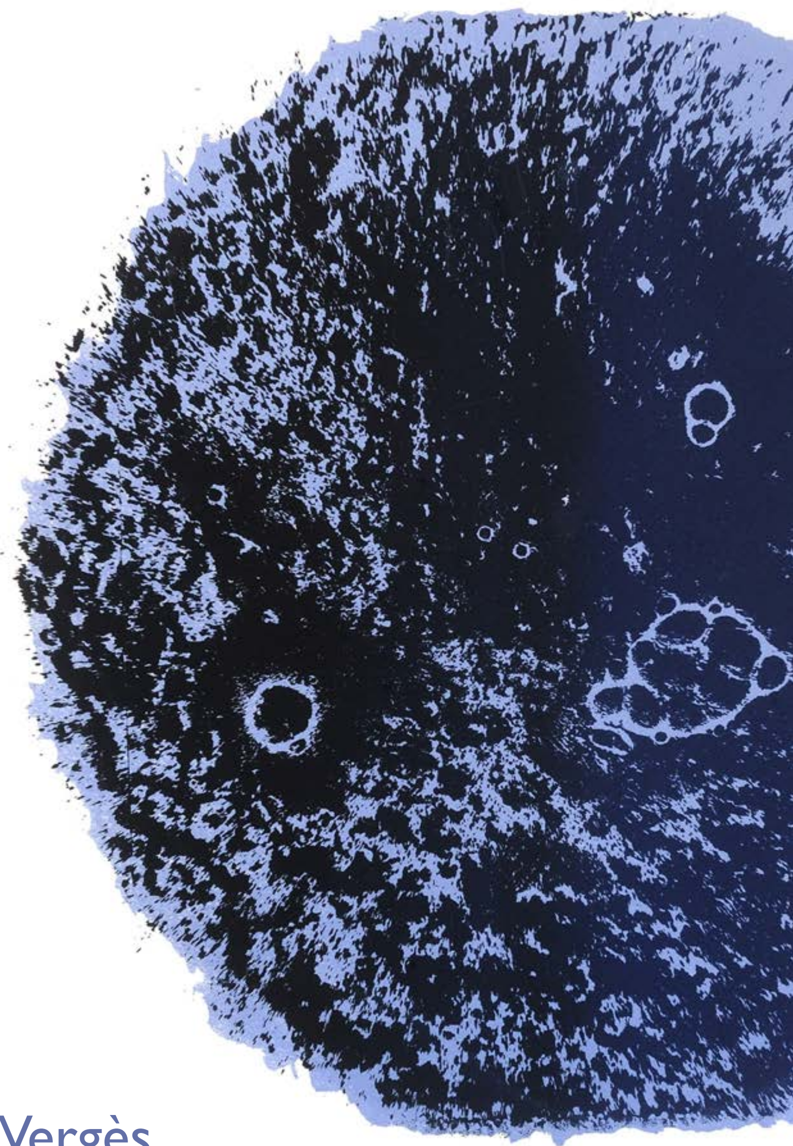
# The Wombs of Women / *Race, Capital, Feminism*



Françoise Vergès

TRANSLATED AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY KAIAMA L. GLOVER

The Wombs of Women

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FRANÇOISE VERGÈS

Translated and with an Introduction by Kaiama L. Glover

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Decolonization is a historical process.
—Frantz Fanon, "On Violence," in *The Wretched of the Earth*

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# *Preface*

I originally wrote *The Wombs of Women* for a French audience, hence the presence of certain explanations (of "race," "racial," "racialized," "black," "white") that might seem superfluous to an English-speaking public. The "veritable Copernican revolution" called for by Aimé Césaire in 1956 has yet to happen, "so ingrained in Europe (from the extreme Right to the extreme Left) is the habit of doing for us, arranging for us." And just as mobilization against structural racism, or what has been called "political racism," has been expanding consistently in France, so the refusal to consider the ways in which racism has affected social movements and the Left has grown as well.

I needed also to provide my French readership with some basic information on neocolonial politics in the post-1962 French Republic, so strong is the perception in France that the French empire ended in 1962 with the independence of Algeria. Peoples of the Pacific Ocean, the Indian Ocean, the Caribbean, and South America, who currently live in territories that once belonged to the world of French slavery or to the postslavery colonial empire, remain under French rule. Their presence belies the legitimacy of a contemporary cartography and

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history of racism and republican coloniality that can be limited to the European French space. Ignorance about and indifference to France's persistent "neocolonial" relation to so many societies have long been symptomatic of France's blindness to the colonial/racial.

It was also my aim in this book to counter a totally fictional narrative about the women's liberation movement of the 1970s—the idea that women of color were not present, that feminism was a struggle for secularism, or that parity was the goal of all feminists. I thought it important that I contribute to the debate about "femonationalism," as Sara Farris calls it—about new forms of femo-imperialism and femo-colonialism wherein women's rights increasingly serve imperialist and capitalist objectives. The French women's liberation movement, despite the radical anticapitalist and antipatriarchal stance of some of its advocates, was subject to the boomerang effect described by Césaire in *Discourse on Colonialism*. These women's liberation groups did not heed his warning that racism would inevitably contaminate European progressive politics, and thus they continued to ignore how and why women had been made "whites," how and why so many feminists had supported colonization, and how and why the state enacted racialized politics concerning abortion and contraception in the 1970s—in other words, how and why the conception of women's rights has remained profoundly Eurocentric.

This book was written as a contribution to the ongoing conversation about a feminism that criticizes and critiques white feminism, Islamophobia, racial capitalism, and imperialism in France.

Finally, I should note that I myself was active in different groups of the women's liberation movement when I arrived in France in the 1970s but that I never called myself a feminist back then. For me, coming from Reunion Island and Algeria, nourished intellectually by the struggles for anti-imperialist liberation and against racism worldwide, that form of feminism spoke too much of and to whiteness and the West. That brand of feminism was not close enough to the struggles of the Third World—struggles that themselves, however, too easily dismissed the insights of psychoanalysis that had inspired Frantz Fanon and the theories developed by women of color against sexism and patriarchy in the ranks of revolutionary movements. Nowadays, I call myself a feminist because of the global movement for the rights of women in all their multidimensionality, because of the amazing feminists in the Global South, and because of the renewed strength of Afro-feminism, Islamic feminism, and queer and trans theories. I now call myself a feminist thanks to the movement's consistent effort to recover the buried history of women of color activism and theories and to develop new forms



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of radical and political feminisms. All of this suggests that a Copernican revolution is in the making

I want to thank my editor, Ken Wissoker, and Kaiama L. Glover for her translation; all my friends and comrades in the antiracist, anticapitalist, and anti-imperialist movements worldwide; and decolonial feminists in the Global South and North who are showing the way.

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*Translator's Introduction / Kaiama L. Glover*

When it comes to race and gender, it can seem a fairly straightforward affair to identify those whose bigotry has established and long maintained hierarchies that disadvantage the many to shore up the privilege of the few. The twin scourges of white supremacy and patriarchy have unquestionably been principal sources of wrongdoing when it comes to matters of justice on a global scale. From the slave forts of the West African coastline, to the colonial outposts of the Global South, to the plantations of the American hemisphere, the capitalist desires of white men and consequent subjugation of black and brown women have explicitly determined the contours of a world order rooted in profound inequality.

Such overt forms of domination continue to function, though perhaps more slyly, in colonialism and slavery's long wake. They in many ways undergird the policies and practices of even the most ostensibly progressive social actors. Whether unwittingly or callously, liberal agents of change have often contributed to rendering certain peoples and places marginal to the modern. To come to terms with and undo these tendencies requires both passionate and exacting engagement with the "small" stories that complicate grand narratives of history.

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In *The Wombs of Women: Race, Capital, Feminism*, Françoise Vergès takes up this precise endeavor. How, Vergès asks, do we grapple with the failures of liberal discourse and the lacunae of progressive "First World" activism—and to what end? Bringing to light a dramatic instance of racial and gendered violence in one of France's putatively former colonies, Vergès denounces the specific mechanisms via which the French Republic in general and French feminism in particular have refused to grapple with race in their conceptions of postcolonial modernity. Her argument is as compelling as it is clear: the brutalization of nonwhite women in Reunion Island by state-sanctioned medical professionals—and the failure of French feminists to in any way address this injustice, much less condemn it—illuminates a long history of French violence against women of color and shows plainly the fundamental entanglement and execrable compatibility of republicanism, modernity, and racism.

Vergès is unequivocal: race is the matter. Race is central to the past and the present of contemporary global reality. In the Anglophone world, this claim amounts to a simple assertion. Race and racism are topics of public discourse, understood as integral to both subjectivity and citizenship. In the French context, however, the concept of race is perceived as incommensurable with progressive discourse. Race per se does not exist in France. Part and parcel of a postwar renunciation of its collaboration with Adolf Hitler's genocidal project, refusing race as an identifying category has become a cornerstone of French national identity. The French republican idea(l)—as discursively and politically ingrained among liberals as among conservatives—reposes, that is, on the notion that racial identification stands in opposition to civic integration. As such, to acknowledge race and to attend to phenomena of racialization, as Vergès does, is a de facto provocation. If race has been scientifically proven to be a fallacy/fantasy, the reasoning goes, then it must be refused as a political reality.

Vergès will have none of this logic. Her work categorically contests the claim that refusing to acknowledge race in public discourse marks an end to racism, or the corresponding notion that to identify racially is to invite divisiveness and sectarianism into a unified polis. Spoken or unspoken, Vergès insists, racialization remains a powerful force in French society. Racial capitalism is at once its fuel and its toxic effect. To deny these truths is to deny persistent inequalities of the present day and recent past that are founded in racial exploitation; to deny them is to deny the lived experience of those whom Western capitalism has deemed both commodifiable and expendable.

To refuse to acknowledge race, moreover, is to disregard the "boomerang-effect of colonialism, already analyzed by [Aimé] Césaire—that is, the inevitable contamination of democracy by slavery and colonization" (44). France's



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postwar narrative of progress—that of its radical transformation from well-meaning but ultimately misguided colonial empire to progressive, modern republic—has required this disregard, Vergès argues. Showing precisely how and where the question of race has been elided from France's postcolonial self-fashioning, Vergès contests the nation's linear narrative of transformation. If the French Republic officially became *post*-colonial following Algerian independence in 1962, she argues, it by no means renounced the foundational racialized inequalities of empire.

These inequalities have persisted via the neat substitution of both geography and culture for race—what Vergès eloquently describes as the "mutilated cartography that legitimates a postcolonial republican space contained within the borders of the Hexagon" (5). It is a cartography according to which justice functions differently in different parts of the French Republic. Steeped in hypocrisy, it evinces a "republican form of coloniality" (4) that draws a neat distinction between the population of metropolitan France and peoples of France's overseas departments (DOM) and overseas territories (TOM). Whereas the former live as full citizens—entitled to human rights, social privileges, and political protection—the latter face dramatically different conditions of civil existence. The same rules simply do not apply.

Although geopolitically contained within the French republican state, the overseas territories remain socioculturally "other." The othering of these spaces hinges, of course, on long-standing theories of race designed to support convenient, predetermined notions of inferiority and superiority, backwardness and modernity, according to which the second terms of the binary are contingent on the first. "The modernization of French society after 1962 was based on a forgetting of colonialism and on the emergence of a 'neo-racist consensus'" (101) at once specious and absolute. Native populations were relegated definitively to a pre- if not antimodern geocultural space, to literal and metaphorical places presumed to be "inhabited by not entirely civilized beings" (36).

The "racist patterns of the republican space" (110) are decidedly contiguous with France's history of racial capitalism, Vergès contends, and just as "women's bodies were a crucial element of colonial cultural hegemony" (97) under slavery and colonialism, they continue to be "used as so many tools to serve the interests of the state" (2). Building on this premise, Vergès situates the struggles of women of color at the core of her investigation. She convincingly identifies the specific, everyday atrocities visited on enslaved and colonized women under the auspices of the French empire as direct antecedents to the continued violation of nonwhite women within the present-day French Republic. The forcible abortions and sterilizations performed on poor Reunionese



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women in the 1970s present a particular instance of racist postcolonial state violence. The fact of this specific scandal as well as its deliberate "disremembering" (101) in the Hexagon are the points of departure for Vergès's deep dive into France's colonial past. Her broad, in-depth research presents stark evidence of the undeniable link between that past and France's racialized postcolonial present.

The past is present, Vergès insists. As such, it must be interrogated in conjunction with any reflections on contemporary political reality. Just as "slavery made violence against women a banal quotidian reality" (57), she argues, so have the exigencies of postcolonialism confirmed white patriarchal impunity where black and brown women's bodies are concerned. Verges thus traces a straight line from European slavers' designation of African women's wombs as generators of human capital to the contemporary human rights abuses perpetrated against the Reunionese mothers at the center of her analysis. At every point along this sociohistorical continuum, a "management of women's wombs that illuminates the coloniality of power" (3) is plainly in evidence. Whether openly exploited or tacitly criminalized, Vergès shows us, colonized women's reproductive function has long been co-opted to serve French state interests.

The unthinkable violence inflicted on the thousands of Reunionese women abused by powerful white men—at once the doctors who performed surgeries without consent and the political and judicial figures who protected and exonerated them—was implicitly authorized and even endorsed by a false narrative, one that emerged in parallel to France's transformation from empire to republic. Although France was obliged in the wake of the Second World War "to let go of the overtly racialist discourse that had dominated its relationship with the colonies" (31), it nonetheless continued to reap the "benefits of racial supremacy" (31). This is evident, Vergès explains, in the rise of Malthusian rhetoric and virulent antinatalism in French republican attitudes toward its colonies-turned-territories. Faced with the extreme poverty and organizational dysfunction of the freshly designated "Third World" nations of its precarious empire, the postcolonial French state determined that overpopulation presented the single greatest hindrance to progress: if the people of the DOM-TOM were backward and poor, it was simply because they were making too many babies. Overpopulation had thus effectively "been transformed into a 'problem' as a way of refusing to confront political and social issues" (74) that were a direct product of racialization.

Grounded in the "racist presumption that nonwhite peoples are incapable of reason or of understanding the consequences of their actions" (26), this rhetoric not only elided the persistence of structural racism—dynamic legacy of slavery



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and colonialism—as true cause of postcolonial underdevelopment; it also handily justified paternalist control over black women's bodies. It characterized "Third World" women as fundamentally irresponsible and hypersexualized, deeming them in need of supervision for the good of the modern republic and its territories. Black women's "fertility was practically equated with a terrorist threat" (60), while "the network of inequality in play and the triple oppression suffered by these Reunionese women, as females, nonwhites, and working class" (22) were ignored. The situating of these disorderly women of color both geographically and culturally outside the liberal, republican space of the Hexagon made them scapegoats for the glitches in the "linear narrative of progress bestowed by the republic" (74). The racialized reasoning of the postcolonial republic thus set the stage for the Reunionese women's abuse, for the silencing of their story, and, most egregiously in Vergès's view, for French feminist indifference.

Examining this indifference is the beating heart of Vergès's study. The failure of French feminists of the 1970s and 1980s to recognize or attend meaningfully to "the existence of a racialized state patriarchy *within* the republic" (8) accords, Vergès argues, with the broader failure of the French Left to imagine the political or even social consciousness of racialized peoples. Vergès convincingly draws a parallel between metropolitan French feminists' willful blindness to race and racism and that of the French Communist Party, whose inattention to matters of race Césaire famously denounced in his 1956 "Open Letter to Maurice Thorez." Indeed, Césaire is a crucial interlocutor throughout *The Wombs of Women*. Vergès's biting critique of the Mouvement de libération des femmes (MLF; Movement for the Liberation of Women) leans heavily on Césaire's condemnation of the color-blindness and overt racism inherent in midcentury progressive French politics. Vergès submits that the MLF's too-easy embrace of a Francocentric "ideology of 'catch-up'" (121) cast the Reunionese victims of gendered state violence as developmentally lagging and rendered their plight illegible within the space of French feminism. Despite the robust public record at their disposal—the very newspapers and court documents Vergès has so thoroughly probed—Hexagonal white French feminists remained oblivious to the ways in which "their own struggle was being fueled by a vocabulary and representations that could serve state patriarchy" (99). They ultimately failed to interrogate the perverse partitioning of the republic, Vergès insists, and thus avoided "any confrontation with the postcolonial reconfigurations of racism and exploitation" (105) that have long rendered nonwhite women vulnerable to the entanglements of capitalism and patriarchy.

*The Wombs of Women* points to that failure, excavates its foundations, and demands a reckoning. This book is Vergès's call to identify and to refuse the



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epistemologies of empire that naturalize, through pseudo-science and unchallenged forms of coloniality, the exploitation and degradation of women of color. It is a call to acknowledge "the connections between colonialism, racialization, misogyny, class disdain, and personal profit" (20–21)—a call to query the largely unexamined and uncomfortable truths concerning French feminist complicity with a colonialist agenda as well as to fully apprehend race as critical dimension of any progressive political agenda. It is, above all, a call for accountability.

Vergès's purpose is explicit: she means for her book "to serve as an act of historical reparation for the raced, despised, and exploited women of France's overseas departments" (3). Beyond provocation or lamentation, Vergès demands that what happened to the women of Reunion Island become visible, audible, and legible within the archive of modernity. She urgently poses both questions and problems throughout her study, and she proposes solutions that are just as direct. The first step, Vergès affirms, is to expose the "network of complicity, corruption, and silence" (21) that facilitated the abuse of these women in Reunion Island; the second is to recognize such abuse as an iteration of a centuries-old colonial project. Calling out the violent forms of coloniality ever present within the postcolonial French Republic "is a matter not of complaint," Vergès insists, "but of justice" (116).

In translating *The Wombs of Women* from French into English—in shepherding its inquiry from a francophone context into the Anglosphere—I hope to have amplified, however modestly, Vergès's demands for reparative justice. I have sought to participate in the project of enhancing her subjects' visibility, audibility, and legibility—to facilitate the inclusion of their stories in broader geocultural conversations. The specifics of their ordeal notwithstanding, the racially and materially marginalized women of Reunion Island experienced phenomena quite familiar to women of color in the United States and beyond. As such, rendering the suffering of these women readable, very literally speaking, beyond a local context presents something of a challenge to the mutilated cartographies of empire Vergès lays bare in her work, including the hegemonizing tendencies of US-centric conceptions of blackness. For just as Vergès makes a point to acknowledge and integrate what "other movements and positions, primarily from Africa and the United States, brought to considerations of the liberation of women" (111), so, too, does her work offer English-speaking readers an opportunity to think more expansively about the challenges facing women of color across the boundaries of nation and language. Understood in this light, translating Vergès's extraordinary labor of contestation proposes, in and of itself, an aspirational countergeography of alternative postcolonial futures.



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# Introduction

In June 1970, a scandal broke out on Reunion Island: under the guise of performing minor interventions, doctors had done thousands of abortions without consent and collected Social Security reimbursements for them. Not satisfied merely with racking up vast sums of money, the doctors also broke two laws: one forbidding abortion and criminalizing those who practice it, and the other concerning reimbursement for medical procedures. Several women pressed charges, but they were largely ignored. During the trial, the accused claimed to have been encouraged, indirectly, by the general birth control policies that had been put into place by the state in the overseas departments and, directly, by the state's local representatives—despite the facts that contraception and abortion were criminalized and harshly penalized in metropolitan France and that, because of this criminalization, thousands of women were risking death every year from abortions performed in deplorable conditions.[1]

The contradiction is only superficial. Regulating women's bodies was the objective in both France and the overseas departments (DOM), but it was not practiced in the same way in the two spaces. In France, the state wanted women

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to bear children; in the DOM, it launched aggressive birth control campaigns and systematically hampered the establishment of social legislation that would protect pregnant women. Indeed, one might argue that in both cases, women's bodies were used as so many tools to serve the interests of the state. That said, it is no less true that the difference between the two contexts is crucial. In the colonies–cum–overseas departments, reproduction was integrated into the logic of racial capitalism. To put it otherwise, the politics of reproduction were adapted to the exigencies of the color line in the organization of labor: women's wombs were racialized.

The policies of the 1960s–1970s resulted from a political choice that harks back to 1945, with the decision that was made at that time not to develop or diversify local industries. As a consequence, there was no longer a need for local labor. Successive reports, speeches, and studies began to invoke the notion of overpopulation, and that concept began to take root. Moreover, fearing an uprising, given the global context of decolonization, experts charged with the task of developing a plan proposed two policies: birth control and state-controlled emigration. Two measures put these policies into place during the 1960s, and an ideological opinion thus gradually became cemented as truth: nonwhite women were having too many babies and were thus the cause of underdevelopment and poverty. Birth control policies in Reunion Island were then inscribed not only in state policy as the nation reconfigured its borders during the postwar moment, but also in the international politics of birth control launched throughout the Third World by the major world powers. It is, therefore, unsurprising that in Reunion Island (and the Antilles) doctors, social workers, and nurses felt encouraged, legitimated, and fully supported in their abortionist activities. The "overpopulation" of the DOM having become a national concern, it created zealous adherents.

This emblematic incident allows for an analysis of the political and economic choices made by the state with respect to its "overseas" departments, the repressive policies and cultural hegemony in place in the postcolony, the new forms of femininity and masculinity proposed in the DOM, the adoption—including by "Francocentric" feminisms—of a mutilated cartography produced by the discursive system historian Todd Shepard has named "the invention of decolonization."[2] In effect, the Fifth Republic reorganized its postcolonial territories during the war in Algeria and, some years after Algerian independence, introduced adjustments to its economic, political, cultural, and social operations in the overseas departments. A new map of the territories appeared, distinguishing those who counted from those who did not. This explained the existence of two contradictory policies: on the one hand, prohibition of



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contraception and abortion in France; and on the other, encouragement of these practices in the DOM.

A close study of the politics of reproduction during the long colonial period reveals a management of women's wombs that illuminates the coloniality of power, such as it was developed and promulgated during the second half of the twentieth century. Such a study allows for an analysis of the politics of biopower, deployed in the overseas departments by the successive governments of the Fifth Republic, whatever their political leanings, and with the active support of local institutions and agents. This study seeks not to add forgotten chapters to the history of France, but to question the very structure of the narrative.[3] The story of the management of women's wombs in the Global South makes apparent not only the extent to which women were defined by their reproductive capacity, but also the racialized dimension of such designations.

This study seeks to introduce dissonant voices into the narrative of French feminism. Women from the overseas departments—whether enslaved, indentured, or colonized—scarcely appear in feminist analyses, wherein they are treated at best as witnesses to various forms of oppression but never as individuals whose singular perspectives would put into question a universalism that ultimately masks particularism. Here, too, it is a question not of adding "missing chapters" to the narrative of feminism but, rather, of practicing a form of analysis that, pulling several threads at once, looks at what is at work in the processes of gender, class, and racial inequality in the territories that emerged from France's slave-based colonial empire.

This book means to serve as an act of historical reparation for the raced, despised, and exploited women of France's overseas departments. It is a response to an entire generation of researchers' calls to "de-Westernize" the world and to develop an "interconnected," global, and transnational history that might counter the "national" history of the French colonies–cum–overseas departments—places that are systematically cast as part of a marginal chapter of French history, integrated into official or governmental discourse only as the "wealth of the French nation" and as "asset," via their designation as spaces of "exceptional biodiversity" or as cultures that confirm the happy and harmonious "diversity" of the French Republic. It is an analysis, more broadly, of the mechanisms of political forgetting—its shifts, its strategies, and its logics.

Reunion Island is the primary focus in these pages, as this is the principal theater of the emblematic "case" chosen for my analytical purposes. The longstanding existence of a robust legitimist and conservative tradition makes it an ideal case study. I unravel the threads of a system of domination that follows on what many French people perceived as the end of colonial domination—that



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is, Algerian independence. In the face of a dominant narrative of periodization that posits 1962 as a veritable rupture, I illustrate the existence of multiple temporalities and spatialities of republican postcoloniality and analyze how the end of empire opened the way to a proliferation of forms and policies that maintained a coloniality of power. To date the postcolonial era to the end of the Algerian War or to the onset of postcolonial migrations masks a politics of reconfiguration in the republican space that straddles several periods, as well as a politics of experimentation that mixes cultural hegemony, censure, repression, and seduction. The republic is "one and indivisible" because it authorizes adjustments to this indivisibility that produce an asymmetry among territories and among the inhabitants of these territories. In effect, in making its choices about development, the republic "forgets" certain territories and racializes their inhabitants, all the while co-opting formerly hostile elements of their populations to its assimilationist policies. Abortions and forced sterilizations in Reunion Island do not amount, then, to a regrettable and marginal incident, and they cannot be explained merely by the fact that a few white men, certain of their impunity, abused their power. Rather, these incidents are profoundly revealing of a republican form of coloniality. What happened in the overseas departments from the 1960s to the 1980s makes visible a new configuration of so-called postcolonial French society—in its spatial contours as well as in the content of both "national identity" and its "national" narrative.

There exist social and ethnic divisions as well as internally divergent interests within the societies of the overseas territories. To be Reunionese, Martinican, or Maori does not necessarily mean to be automatically critical of French postcoloniality and its racialized expression. Colonial and postcolonial power is always exercised with the agreement and support of some portion of the colonized society. It is crucial to continue studying by what means active or passive consent to policies of dependency are obtained. Citizens of the overseas territories are never passive actors, whether they support coloniality or combat it. It is necessary to understand the mechanisms of fragmentation among subaltern groups, whose history, writes Antonio Gramsci, is characterized by the fact that they "are always subject to the initiative of dominant groups, even in their rebellion and opposition"—that "only 'definitive' victory disrupts subordination,"[4] albeit not immediately. "Any hint [on the part of the dominated] of their getting out of this state of fragmentation is repressed by the dominant."[5] It is essential to analyze the politics of fragmentation and hegemony via which the oppressed adopt and defend the very conditions of their oppression, in order to understand the regressions and the defeats of radical movements in the overseas territories. Otherwise put, the postcolonial condition is a *coproduction*,



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inasmuch as subalterns play a role, even as they remain dominated by powers such as the state or global capital. To forge some kind of unity, societies "traversed by historically conflicting, segmented, and fragmented interests" must invent practices of solidarity and renew them constantly; for unity is "necessarily complex and must be produced, constructed, created—as the result of specific economic, political, and ideological practices."[6]

The reconfigurations undertaken by the state to preserve its own interests along with those of capital inevitably have produced a *mutilated history* and a *mutilated cartography*: in other words, a history that does not take into account the interactions and crossings that erase or ignore entire periods and that posits spaces in which time seems to flow in an immutable fashion; where tradition reigns and communities live closed in on themselves, their inhabitants awaiting modernity. This story is extracted from the lives of thousands of women and men, and it is this mutilated cartography that legitimates a postcolonial republican space contained within the borders of the Hexagon.

One of the propositions of the present study is to take up the invitation to provincialize Europe by *denationalizing* feminism—that is, by interrogating the very constitution of "French feminism." In 2000, the historian Dipesh Chakrabarty proposed the "provincializing of Europe" and—like W. E. B. Du Bois, Aimé Césaire, Cheikh Anta Diop, Frantz Fanon, and the Bandung signatories of 1955 before him—suggested moving beyond nativist or atavistic narratives, not rejecting what came from Europe but deconstructing a method wherein "Europe works as a silent referent,"[7] by integrating other cartographies, South–South circulation, and other schools of thought, so as to better understand strategies (ruse, diversion, fabrication, dissimulation) enacted by the colonized. Through this optic, "provincializing feminism" means denationalizing existing narratives of feminism and, perhaps, envisioning new processes of decolonization.

A word on certain terms and notions:

*Outre-mer* (overseas territory): This designation harks back to colonial administration and today comprises a wide range of distinct situations.[8] As such, it is inadequate. Nevertheless, I see no other way to describe the situation of these lands that, according to the republican system, are united by the fact that they are products of the reconfigurations of the French slave empire (the overseas departments, or DOM: Martinique, Guadeloupe, Guyana, Reunion Island) and post–slave empire (Kanaky, Pacific islands, Mayotte).[9]

Raced, racialized, racialization: In French, the word "race" is so loaded that using it inevitably leads to accusations of racism. For some time now, the terms



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"raced," "racialized," and "racialization" have been suggested to describe the processes whereby groups and individuals are the objects of "racialization," that is, a discriminatory social construction, negatively cast throughout history. The process of racialization consists of the different systems—juridical, cultural, social, political—via which people and groups are labeled and stigmatized. "Raced" is not, then, a descriptive notion, but an analytic one. Racialization, coupled with gender and class, produces specific forms of exclusion. Colonial slavery plays a crucial role in the processes of racialization, to the extent to which it was necessary to justify the fact that all slaves were black Africans and all slave owners whites.[10]

White/nonwhite: I use these terms insofar as they indicate situations within a racially structured society. The creation of the "white man" and the "white woman" is the product of processes of racialization that emerge with the slave trade and slavery. Thus color becomes a social and cultural marker, naturalized and associated with social privileges and inalienable rights: belonging to the white group means having access to certain privileges.[11] The notions of "hybridity" and "diversity" have recently expanded the frontiers of these privileges without, however, deconstructing them. To be "white" always confers cultural, social, and symbolic capital. To be white is to possess these rights *inherently*.[12]

Racial capitalism: "Racial capitalism" denotes the possibility of extracting value from the exploitation of one who has been raced, which gives economic value to "whites" in the capitalist economy.[13] Only whites can own raced human beings (blacks), and only bodies racialized as black are enslaved (whites cannot own whites, and free people of color who possess black slaves never acquire the same rights as whites). In defining property, the debates around the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen distinguish between property in one's person (personal freedom); collective property (the common good); and "nonuniversal property in one's person, the right of property and material goods."[14] These distinctions allow for an understanding of why the political modernity that follows the French Revolution does not provoke an ethical crisis around the process of racialization: recognizing the right to ownership of material goods leaves the door open to maintain property rights over a human being transformed into a piece of furniture. Let us remember that the peak of the transatlantic slave trade (the number of deported Africans) rose from 20,000–30,000 per year in the seventeenth century to 70,000–90,000 per year at the turn of the nineteenth century. Once the "ownership of material goods is conceived as the space within which man exercises his natural freedom," that ownership "becomes the natural territory of man,"[15] the property owners can



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be the sole designated citizens, which is contrary to the principle of equality but comes about at the urging of slave owners.[16] In other words, there is a chain linking the racialization of servile labor, the right to property, whiteness, and citizenship.

Zorey: The term *zorey* is used in Reunion Island to designate those holding a certain social and cultural status—often functionaries from France who benefit from the privileges associated with the colonial and postcolonial regime. There is no consensus around the origins of the term. According to certain scholars, it dates to the time of slavery: the slave hunters were supposed to bring back the ears of runaway slaves to prove they had been captured. Others claim that it refers to the fact that French colonists understood Creole poorly and thus cocked their ears and made their interlocutors repeat themselves. Still others believe the term was invented in Madagascar during the First World War: the ears of the white soldiers would become red in the sun. I adopt Carpanin Marimoutou's interpretation, according to which the term derives from the Tamoul word *dorey* (phonetic spelling), which denotes a foreigner, a white person, or a colonist.[17]

Republican postcoloniality: This references the choices and policies of governments of the French Republic that, since 1945, has worked to reconfigure its territory in the face of increasing calls for decolonization, the universal condemnation of racism, new forms of capitalism, the onset of the Cold War, and American hegemony. The stakes are contradictory: there is the desire to preserve France's economic and political interests, which requires maintaining dependency and neocolonialism, yet also to remain the "nation of the rights of man." Successive governments have attempted to get around this contradiction, all the while conducting bloody and murderous colonial wars and reinforcing the dependency of the overseas territories. "Postcoloniality" has been deployed throughout all spaces of the republic.

Postcolonial: The term "postcolonial" designates a period that began at the moment when France presented itself as emancipated from its colonial empire. It indicates not a temporality, but a politics. Postcoloniality refers to practices and policies that divvy up the republic into those spaces that count and those that do not, into territories to be developed and territories to be kept in reserve.

Coloniality of power: I borrow the definition here from Anibal Quijano:

> The coloniality of power is, of course, a wider and more complex category than the racism/ethnocentrism complex. It generally includes

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> the seigneurial relations between dominant and dominated; sexism and patriarchy; "family-ism" (axes of influence based on familial networks), patronage, *compadrazgo* (cronyism), and patrimonialism in the relations between the public and the private sectors and, above all, between civil society and political institutions. Authoritarianism, in both society and the state, articulates and governs all of this. The racist/ethnocentrist complex is part of the very foundations of this power structure. Although this complex today must face certain ideologies and formal legislation, and although it is often obliged to take refuge in the private sphere; although it is often veiled or at times explicitly denies its own existence, since the sixteenth century it has not ceased to impact all relations of power where, furthermore, it marks, pervades, conditions, and modulates all other elements.[18]

Coloniality of power also refers to the "boomerang-effect" analyzed by Aimé Césaire in his *Discourse on Colonialism*: "No one colonizes innocently, . . . no one colonizes with impunity either. . . . Colonization, I repeat, dehumanizes even the most civilized man; . . . colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; . . . the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, . . . tends objectively to transform himself into an animal. It is this result, this *boomerang-effect of colonization* that must be pointed out."[19]

Decolonial: The term "decolonial" designates the struggle for the deconstruction of the coloniality of power. The latter constituted itself through the naturalization of racial difference and the division of the world into North and South. A decolonial politics questions a republic that accumulates inequalities, discriminations, and policies of abandonment.

In this book, I am not proposing a description of the "condition of women" in the postcolony; my subject is, rather, to understand why the scandal of forced abortions in the overseas territories has not been at the center of the struggles of the Movement for the Liberation of Women (MLF; Mouvement de libération des femmes) concerning contraception and abortion; why such a radical movement, which has led antiracist, anticapitalist, and anti-imperialist struggles, failed to notice that this scandal revealed the existence of a racialized state patriarchy *within* the republic; why it was unable to analyze the forced abortions in the DOM as racialized management of the wombs of women.

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As for methodology, this study is deliberately hybrid in that it claims no discipline and does not inscribe itself within the frame of any university research project. This hybridity stems from the ignorance surrounding the history of the DOM in France as well as within the DOM themselves; it also implicates a great deal of back-and-forth between eras and a certain profusion of overlapping information. I have done no fieldwork, nor have I collected oral testimonies; I have chosen to rely on articles and public records because I wish to signal that many abuses of power or state crimes are not *hidden*. They are present in the archives of the state, the judiciary, the police, the media, and political movements. I also turned to literary and cinematographic sources, as I have always been interested in the role and the place of literature, the visual arts, and artistic and cultural expressions in the realm of politics.

My objective has been not to write "a comparative history seeking to juxtapose national narratives, or a history of international relations analyzing the coexistence and conflicts among sovereign nations,"[20] but to identify interactions, transversal movements, and the role played by migrations, exiles, ideas, the world of labor, and diaspora. I also made the decision to give the names of victims of state oppression in the overseas territories—the list is far from exhaustive—for the following reason: they must not remain anonymous. Finally, I used words and expressions in Reunionese Creole, as this is a living language, spoken by the majority of Reunionese people and used every day in this territory of the republic. As such, it has as legitimate a place here as the French or English language.

Above all, this study means to pay homage to the thirty Reunionese women who, in 1970, lodged a complaint and testified against white men in power.[21]

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# *Notes*

INTRODUCTION

1 The overseas departments (DOM) are former slave colonies—Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyana, Reunion Island—refashioned as departments by the law of March 19, 1946. The DOM-TOM comprises the overseas departments and those territories ruled by other administrative forms: French territories of the Pacific, New Caledonia, and Mayotte.

2 Todd Shepard, *1962, Comment l'indépendance algérienne a transformée la France* (Paris: Payot, 2008). The English title, *The Invention of Decolonization*, more aptly describes what the author means to analyze: "During the Algerian Revolution, the French embraced the idea that the decolonization movement itself had a prescriptive nature. At the end of the war, its 'invention' turned decolonization into a historic category"; put otherwise, "any discussion of racism and other forms of discrimination or exclusion that the Algerian revolution had brought to light were thereby foreclosed" (443).

3 See Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, after Man, Its Overrepresentation—an Argument," *New Centennial Review* 3.3 (2003): 257–337; Katherine McKittrick and Sylvia Wynter, *On Being Human as Praxis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

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4 Antonio Gramsci, *Cahiers de prison: Cahier 25* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978), 309. On Gramsci's use in the fields of postcolonial, cultural, and subaltern studies, see Francesco Fistetti, *Théories de multiculturalisme: Un parcours entre philosophie et sciences sociales* (Paris: La Découverte, 2009).

5 Gramsci, *Cahiers de prison*, 309.

6 See Stuart Hall, *Identités et cultures: Politiques des* Cultural Studies, ed. Maxime Cerville, trans. Christophe Jaquet (Paris: Éditions Amsterdam, 2008).

7 Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?," *Representations* 37 (1992): 2.

8 Independence came belatedly to the majority of French colonies due to the French state's refusal of the principle of self-determination, which it nonetheless adopted as part of the constitutional declaration of the United Nations (with which it collaborated). Independence came about between 1946 and 1977. In 1946, the French left Syria and Lebanon. 1953: Laos and Cambodia became independent. September 2, 1945, independence was proclaimed in Vietnam but refused by the French state. The Vietnamese War began. Vietnam won its independence from France through the 1954 Geneva Conference, but the country was provisionally divided into two states. In 1953, Morocco and Tunisia became independent, and certain territories were returned to India. 1958: Guinea became independent; 1960: independence of remaining West African colonies; 1962: Algerian independence; 1975: independence of the Comoros Islands (excluding Mayotte); 1977: independence of Djibouti.

9 I do not place Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon in this configuration. Although it is among the overseas territories, this nation experienced neither slavery nor colonialism.

10 The small number of slave-owning "people of color" does not affect this color line in any tangible way.

11 In the slave colonies, one of the first legal measures taken was to prohibit sexual relations between blacks and whites. The children born of these relations did not have the status of "white." See Françoise Vergès, *Monsters and Revolutionaries: Colonial Family Romance and Métissage* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999).

12 These privileges still exist: see the reports of the Observatoire des Inégalités and the Défenseur des Droits on color-based discrimination, https://www.inegalites.fr/spip.php?page=recherche&id and http://www.defenseurdesdroits.fr/fr/actus/actualites/discrimination-lembauche-resultats-de-lappel-temoignage.

13 See Nancy Leong, "Racial Capitalism," *Harvard Law Review* 126.8 (June 2013): 2153–226; Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Unequal Freedom: How Race and Gender Shaped American Citizenship and Labor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2009); Jodi Melamed, "Racial Capitalism," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1.1 (2015): 76–85; Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of a Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983). Robinson's study remains a point of reference in the school of racial capitalism.



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These references are primarily North American, French critics of capitalism barely having considered the question of race.

14 Florence Gauthier, *1789, 1795, 1802: Triomphe et mort de la révolution des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* (Paris: Éditions Syllepse, 2014), 62.

15 Gauthier, *1789, 1795, 1802*, 60.

16 Let us not forget that Napoléon Bonaparte reestablished slavery in 1802, thereby violating the Declaration of the Rights of Man.

17 Personal conversation with Carpanin Marimoutou, a professor at the University of Réunion.

18 Anibal Quijano, "Colonialité du pouvoir et démocratie en Amérique latine," *Multitudes*, June 1994, http://www.multitudes.net/colonialite-du-pouvoir-et/.

19 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 39, 41 (emphasis mine).

20 Enzo Traverso, *L'Histoire comme champ de bataille: Interpréter les violences du XXè siècle* (Paris: La Découverte, 2012), 9.

21 I want to thank Pauline Colonna D'Istria for her rereadings and her suggestions, which have made this work stronger.

## 1. THE ISLAND OF DOCTOR MOREAU

1 Information about this scandal can be found in *Gazette de l'île de La Réunion*, August 11, 1970; *Journal de l'Île de La Réunion*, August 13, 1970; *Hebdo Bourbon*, August 14, 1970, and April 5, 1971; *Jeune Afrique*, November 1970, no. 412; *L'Humanité*, November 4, 1970; *France-Soir*, December 7, 1970; *La Croix*, March 19, 1970, and December 6–7, 1970; *Politique Hebdo*, January 7, 1971, and February 18, 1971; *Le Canard enchaîné*, February 3, 1971; *Le Nouvel Observateur*, November 30, 1970; *Minute*, September 10–16, 1970; *Action*, September 1970; *L'Express*, December 7–13, 1970; *Justice*, November 19, 1970; *Le Monde*, October 16, 1970, and February 2, 1971; *Droit et Liberté* (MRAP), April 1971; *L'Intrépide*, December 18, 1970, and May 5, 1971; *Syndicalisme* (CFDT), September 17, 1970; *L'Action réunionnaise*, May 1971; *Le Monde diplomatique*, October 1971; *Le Sudiste*, January 16, 1970; *Le Créole*, August 26, 1970, and October 27, 1970; *Le Cri du Peuple*, August 27, 1970, and November 20, 1970; *Croix-Sud*, July 20, 1970, September 13, 1970, October 25, 1970, and December 6, 1970; *Le Progrès*, October 4, 1970; *Témoignages*, all the issues from this daily paper from December 1969 through December 1971. This communist newspaper led a sustained daily inquiry into the Saint-Benoît clinic, published victim testimony, and revealed the extent of the embezzlement of funds. See also François Blanchard, "Étude sur les connaissances et opinions à propos des moyens contraceptifs chez 305 femmes au centre d'orthogène de Saint-Paul de La Réunion en 2013" (MD-PhD diss., University of Bordeaux-II, 2013).

2 The Law of July 15, 1892, created the free medical assistance program (AMG), allowing France's poorest sick persons (sick, elderly, and infirm individuals without resources) to benefit from free access to medical care. It was only applied in the overseas territories following the Law of March 19, 1946. Demanded



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