

Negotiating Public and Private Genders: The Representation of Woman Writers and Artists in Modern French and Francophone Works

A Dissertation Defense by Noëlle Brown

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was considered unwomanly to create art or literature for an audience. For the men in these texts, a woman exercising a masculine craft and creative power in the public sphere cannot also be a paragon of femininity. This dissertation explores different manifestations of binary thinking—masculine or feminine, public or private—which limit these women characters. By putting nineteenth-century texts into a dynamic engagement with twentieth- and twenty-first-century works, I show that these nineteenth-century women open the way for writers in the twentieth century as they break down even further distinctions, including literary and gendered norms.

These women struggle to negotiate a space between the extremes of the demands of femininity and their desire to contribute productively to society. For some, representing this tension in their works is a stand against it, as shown in the novellas *La femme auteur* and *La nouvelle Poétique* by Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis from the early nineteenth century and the play *La Triomphatrice* by Marie Lenéru from the early twentieth century. The eponymous characters in George Sand's *Gabriel* (1839) and André Léo's *Aline-Ali* (1869) attempt, but ultimately fail to triumph over this binary dichotomization of gender. Finally, a third group of works, including the art and diary of Marie Bashkirtseff, Agnès Varda's pseudo-documentary *Jane B. par Agnès V.*, and Calixthe Beyala's novel *Comment cuisiner son mari à l'africaine* depict possibilities beyond a linear and binary conception of femininity. Combining perspectives and analysis from feminist criticism, psychoanalysis, ecocriticism, and postcolonialism with close reading, this dissertation explores the variety of tools women use to find, develop and raise their unique voices, while at the same time challenging binary conceptions of self and society.

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IMU, Persimmon Room



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