

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

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

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 bio-power, 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 long-standing 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

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,”²⁴ 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.”²⁵ 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*,

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

“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

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

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.

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