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Book Review Julia Frengs Corporel Archipelagos .docx

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While originated from Julia L. Freng’s doctoral thesis and several sections first presented in other publications, Corporeal Archipelagos. Writing the Body in Francophone Oceanian Women’s Literature goes beyond being just a sum of its respective parts; it is an impressively extensive study of Francophone women’s writings from French Polynesia and New Caledonia, a region that has not received enough critical attention in academic studies. The title of this critical work evokes a spontaneous trajectory of signification; eliciting the image of intimate and important relationship between the French Polynesian women’s bodies and the (is)land itself; a relationship that is plural in its origins, emanating from trauma, violence, and forceful possession. The metaphoric and metonymic relationship between the centrality of the female body and the land is masterfully analyzed in this timely and scholarly manuscript. Using a strong theoretic framework and comparative approach, Frengs explores responses to the way the woman’s body functions as a trope in the works of four prolific contemporary Oceanian women writers of French expression: Déwé Gorodé, Claudine Jaques, Chantal Spitz and Ari’irau.

The book begins with a contextualizing chapter, The Instigation and Perpetuation of the Mythical Oceanian Body, that explores the representation of the Oceanian body in the French literature throughout the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Frengs skillfully steps the reader through various texts of French male writers to unveil and expose the mythicized, idyllic image of French Polynesia and New Caledonia that existed in the Western imaginary.
Through the analysis of various French texts and the European gaze, Frengs demonstrates the parallels of the Oceanian fetishized land and the objectification of the female body. As the author mentions herself, this chapter is important to situate the following analysis within a larger framework. Furthermore, this contextualizing chapter serves as a reminder that the following chapters have an important purpose to shed light on the Oceanian women writing their own body and history.

Despite the explicitly geographically narrow context of the analysis, the value of Frings’ book extends beyond the study of the Francophone Literature of Polynesian origin to comprise noteworthy framework of feminist scholarship, through postcolonial, ecocritical and philosophical lens. Her thorough analysis of trauma, rape, violence and silenced bodies of predominantly female characters of the studied texts culminates with a consideration of an important question: based on the relationship of the body and the writing, can one consider those texts as a cixousian understanding of écriture féminine? The following chapters are organized thematically, rather than by authors; Frengs explores different textual representations of Oceanian female (and, in some instances, male) bodies as they appear in their texts. Chapter 2, entitled “Sexual Violence. Trauma, and the Damaged Oceanian Body” explores the representation of rape and other forms of sexual and domestic violence and traces parallels between the colonial abuse of the islands and the domestic abuse. Frengs uses a strong theoretic framework to examine each author’s narratives of rape as figurative representation and portrayal of colonial power and past. As she demonstrates with ample examples of narratives of abuse, “sexual violence, almost always reveals more about power dynamics surrounding sex in French Polynesian society than it does about sex itself” (85). The trope of the “damaged body” reveals
to be central in all of the studied texts and representative of an undeniable rapport of power and complicated gender relations. Frengs concludes that the narratives of damaged Oceanian body are rather a political commentary of women writers, a testimony of the political climate of their respective countries.

The intimate link between the Oceanian women’s body and the land is further explored in Chapter 3, entitled Ecological Bodies. An Ecocritical Lens explores the relationship between the exploitation and the abuse of the land and the abuse of the body. The examples of the abuse of the mother land by the author in the narratives of different genres, provide us with an extensive understanding of the undeniable tie between the land and the women’s body. Additionally, Frengs insists that to the severity of the damage done to the land through the environmental threats, such as nuclear testing and nickel mining, the four authors add the long-term damage done to the human body due to the environmental abuse. Through a more detailed emphasis of Claudine Jacques texts, the author highlights the need to consider issues of ecological violence and environmental injustices alongside with social injustice that continue to be central threats in Oceania.

Chapters 4 and 5 address essential aspects of postcolonial francophone literature: the school system, the choice of language and ultimately the silencing of the postcolonial bodies. In chapter 4, “Writing Institutionalized Bodies: Breaking out of Confinement”, the author explores the topic of subjected bodies and the confining spaces of colonial institution, using the Foucauldian theory in *Discipline and Punish*. The colonial school system and its criticism in the narratives of the Oceanian women authors serve as a basis to build her argument on the overture of the authors
toward the Other and the appropriation of the confined spaces. Frengs insists on the important value of intertextual dialogues found in the narratives and argues that these dialogues are to be considered as “emergence” of the new Francophone literature that breaks the stereotypes and boundaries and reaches out to a wider audience, rejecting the symbolic “confinement.” This breaking out of confinement is analyzed in Chapter 5, entitled “To Speak or Not to Speak”; silencing of women being a symbolic, yet essential element of their confinement. The author concludes that the narratives of these women authors, by breaking the silence and the patriarchal, phallocentric canon, give voice to the silenced.

In summary, Frengs offers a solidly scholarly text that employs feminist, ecocritical and literary theory and contains a wealth of evidence. It brings a number of valuable additions to the field, representing an exceptionally valuable scholarly source and essential reading for scholars of Francophone Women’s Literature from French Polynesia and New Caledonia.

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