

# On Women and their Wombs: Capitalism, Racialization, Feminism

**Françoise Vergès**

Collège d'études mondiales, Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme

This article draws from Françoise Vergès's book, *Le ventre des femmes: Capitalisme, racialization, féminisme*,\* which traces the history of the colonization of the wombs of Black women by the French state in the 1960s and 1970s through forced abortions and the forced sterilization of women in French foreign territories. The book begins with an incident that took place in June 1970, on the island of Réunion, and led to the discovery that, since the mid-1960s, between seven and eight thousand poor women of color per year had been aborted and sterilized without their consent in a local clinic, and that the white French doctors who had performed the surgeries had embezzled millions of francs in the process. The inquiry furthermore showed that, at a time when access to contraception was heavily hindered in France and abortion still a crime, the pill and other invasive forms of contraception were imposed on poor women of color in Réunion. From here, Vergès retraces the long history of colonial state intervention in Black women's wombs during the slave trade and post-slavery imperialism, and after World War II, when international institutions and Western states blamed the poverty and underdevelopment of the Third World on women of color. Vergès looks at the feminist and Women's Liberation movements in France in the 1960s and 1970s and asks why, at a time of French consciousness about colonialism brought about by Algerian independence in 1962 and the social transformations of 1968, these movements chose to ignore the history of the racialization of women's wombs in state politics. In making the liberalization of contraception and abortion their primary aim, she argues, French feminists inevitably ended up defending the rights of white women at the expense of women of color. Vergès analyzes how the shift from *women's liberation* to *women's rights* was instrumentalized by “corporate feminists” and the imperialist state—in what Sara Farris has called “femonationalism”—which reframed women's struggles as struggles for civilizational values. She offers a reminder that *women's liberation* movements were not struggles to gain equality with men in a system of racial capitalism, but rather struggles against racism, capitalism, and imperialism and for social justice. She urges feminists today to radically recommit to these struggles, particularly in light of increasing inequalities, new murderous capitalist policies, and new politics of dispossession, apartheid, and colonization.

---

\* Françoise Vergès, *Le ventre des femmes: Capitalisme, racialization, féminisme* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2017). An English translation by Kaiama Glover, *Women and their Wombs: Capitalism, Racialization, Feminism*, is forthcoming from Duke University Press as part of the series *Theory in Forms*, 2018.

\* \* \*

In June 1970, in a small city on the island of Réunion, a doctor was called to check on a seventeen-year-old girl who was bleeding profusely. He understood that she had been the victim of a botched abortion. The gendarmes were summoned, and, since the doctor's complaint could not be ignored (he was the president of the local Red Cross and a Catholic from a well-known family), a French judge was put in charge of the inquiry. In July, something that the Catholic and communist dailies had hinted at the preceding year was confirmed: that thousands of abortions had been performed since the mid-1960s in a clinic that belonged to a leader of the local conservatives. *Témoignages*, the communist paper, reported daily on the inquiry, providing information, linking the forced abortions with the political situation and with racism, and raising questions about the misappropriation of public funds, as the doctors in question declared that their abortions were "surgeries" and thus received reimbursements from social security in the order of millions of francs. National media organizations sent their journalists, and soon the crimes of "The Island of Doctor Moreau" were on their front pages. The state was embarrassed since it could not ignore the scandal, but neither could it allow white men to be condemned, nor let the inquiry reach David Moreau, the owner of the clinic, a strong supporter of colonial repression and an ally of Michel Debré. Debré, the former Prime Minister who had been a partisan of French Algeria, a fierce opponent of decolonization, and an opponent of the liberalization of contraception and abortion, had in 1962 become a representative of Réunion in the National Assembly. His mission was to crush the Communist Party and establish a new hegemonic order: new forms of economic and cultural dependency and a racial, postcolonial republicanism. Local and national pressure demanded that guilty parties be found, and two "perfect" ones were identified: a doctor of Moroccan origin, and the first male of Indian descent to become a head nurse in Réunion. Three other doctors, all white and French, were also indicted.

Thirty women who had been aborted and sterilized and had agreed to have their testimonies published in *Témoignages* came forward as plaintiffs. It was the first time in the history of Réunion's colonial courts that poor women of color had constituted themselves as a group against powerful white men. The judges in the final trial in February 1971 gave light sentences to the French doctors, while the Moroccan doctor and the nurse from Réunion were fined and forbidden to practice their jobs for a while. Altogether, it was not much. Neither the mutilations suffered by the women nor the abuse of power by the clinic were acknowledged, and the embezzlement charges were never brought to court.

This story is my point of entry into an analysis of the racial management of Black women's wombs by the state, racial capital, imperialism, and racial patriarchy. This analysis is also an exploration of the indifference of French feminist movements. Hence my title, *The Woman's Womb: Race, Capitalism and Feminism*. I first look at the *invisible* work of reproduction performed by African women during the slave trade. I start with the simple fact that each Black African man or woman who was deported had a mother, and that an African woman had carried a baby whom she had helped to make a speaking and thinking person before she or he was snatched by slave traders and sent to a plantation in North or South America, the Caribbean, or the Indian Ocean. For centuries, European powers exploited the "production" of Black women's wombs, transforming

the individuals they had borne into merchandise, objects of commerce, money, or, in the terms used by the French Code Noir to define a slave legally, “pieces of furniture.” The slave trade depended on the fact that African women would bear children who then would be thrown in the maelstrom of the Black Atlantic. Yet the role that African women’s wombs played in the organization of the slave trade was never fully acknowledged as such. Nor has it appeared in any counter-history of the slave trade. The exploitation of the African woman’s womb has been made invisible in the literature and history of the traffic in human beings. On the plantation, Black women saw their children taken from them and the fact that they were pregnant never stopped white men and women from flogging them, punishing them, and making them work to the end. This predation on the wombs of women of color continued after the abolition of the slave trade and of slavery, with the forced migration of millions of indentured workers for European imperialist powers. Both in this context and in the context of the slave trade, the number of men thrown into the global market for forced labor largely exceeded that of women. In French colonies, except during specific instances such as when slave trade routes were hindered by wars or blockaded by English armies, the owners of large plantations rejected the creation of a local “slave-breeding industry” and instead chose continually to import enslaved Africans. This led to an increased imbalance between the sexes and a very low birth rate in French slave colonies. It was thus even more surprising when, after World War II, in 1947, the French state declared that the problem in the new overseas departments—the former slave colonies—was their high birth rates, and that the state should launch two policies: one instituting birth control and another arranging for the migration of youth. These suggestions quickly became a reality, supported by experts, doctors, and demographers. They were in keeping with an ideology regarding birth control, widely diffused by the United States and international organizations, that held that Third World women were producing too many children, that they were the cause of poverty and underdevelopment, that their children would threaten world peace and world security, since they would want to migrate, and that they would resent the wealth of the West and seek to destroy it. This discourse on birth control was deployed in the context and era of decolonization, the Cold War, the reorganization of global capitalism, and the rise of the American empire. Imperialism no longer required the transport of large amounts of labor from one colony to another. Migrant workers were now needed to reconstruct Europe and work in its factories, or to work in agro-business in the United States. The exploitation of the wombs of women of color for the global labor market could now be slowed down. Yet anti-natalist policies in the Global South did not strictly emanate from capitalist concerns. Rather, they were at the crossroads of diverse elements: sexism and racism, the growing power of pharmaceutical companies, the fear of a Black planet, a Western feminist ideology of progress, eugenics, and the reorganization on a global level of a mobile, gendered, and racialized workforce.

On April 5, 1971, two months after the trial in Réunion, 343 French women published a manifesto in which they publicly declared that they had had abortions, breaking the silence around the one million women who had abortions every year, performed under terrible, life-threatening conditions. Organizations had already circumvented the law either by proposing trips to Holland or England, where abortion was legal, or by performing abortions themselves. The thousands of abortions and sterilizations that had been performed without consent, and the wide

state-supported public campaign that encouraged Réunion women to abort or to be sterilized and to accept contraception were entirely ignored despite the fact that the scandal had been largely covered by newspapers in which members of Women's Liberation published, newspapers that these French women read. The indifference and choice of ignorance were not surprising. The state had communicated that French colonialism had ended with Algerian independence, that that historical chapter was closed, and that it was time to concentrate on France. Leftists and feminists, who had been radicalized by the war against Algeria, continued to denounce imperialism and racism but mostly outside of France. Overseas territories, though still extant, slowly disappeared from view: Mayotte, Réunion, New Caledonia, the islands of the Pacific, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Guiana vanished from the struggles for emancipation, though their continued existence was a symptom of how impossible it was for French society and the French state to renounce the privileges of racial power. The left never confronted its complicity with racism and colonial history. Its "fraternalism" and its incapacity to grasp the colonial/racial question, which Aimé Césaire had denounced as early as 1956 in his letter of resignation from the Communist Party, were totally ignored. Frantz Fanon had concurred in this assessment of the French left's attitude during the war in Algeria. Yet critics such as Césaire and Fanon barely made a dent in the French left's conviction that it was a *natural* guide for colonized peoples. If the Communist Party and leftist groups continued to more or less denounce French imperialist policies, the racial dimensions of these policies remained unaddressed, with populations under colonial rule seen as uneducated, "alienated," burdened with "false consciousness," and still unable to join the "class struggle." The belief that the racism suffered by people was the result of a lack of education rather than being structural to the ways in which the French state and its institutions had been shaped was deeply entrenched. People of color were blamed for not understanding the republican ethos of "integration," the process whereby someone became "French." What was essentially a new process of the whitening of French society, bolstered by the dissemination of racist images, representations, and discourses, was not recognized as such by the French left. It is unclear, furthermore, if, when they read Césaire or Fanon, French leftists worked through the parts where these authors cited the racist declarations of the heroes of French republicanism.

Historically, French feminism has been particularly blind to the colonial/racial question. Its narrative from the start was French-centered, disregarding the struggles of female slaves and colonized women for freedom and equality. Its heroines were always white women. In other words, the spatiality and temporality of French feminism has been narrowly focused on the history of European enlightenment. Feminism was thus supposedly the creation of white progressive and republican women. What was especially troubling in the 1970s was that, among the groups that constituted the Women's Liberation Movement, many were in fact very political when it came to matters of race and imperialism elsewhere. They translated texts by Black feminists in the United States and in the Global South, supported Vietnamese women fighting US imperialism, created routes of solidarity with women victims of Franco's fascism in Spain and of fascism in Italy and Germany, and signed petitions of support for women in Egypt, El Salvador, and Guatemala as well as for women workers in France. "Femonationalism" did not yet exist, and feminism was still seen as a radical and revolutionary movement and theory. Its institutionalization in the 1980s and the counter-

offensive against the few victories won by minorities, women of color, and LGTBI and indigenous peoples contributed to its apolitical turn, its de-politicization. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, Islamophobia became the axis around which French femonationalism revolved.

In recent years, a revision of the French feminist narrative, a critical reading of its whiteness, its ignorance of colonial and racial questions, and its complicity with imperialism yesterday and today has led to the publication of new essays and to the creation of non-white French groups and encounters that take place beyond the white gaze. The decolonization of French society has become a topic of intense debate, and the struggle against racism has become political. Police violence and the unpunished murders by police of young Black and Arab men, Islamophobic attacks against men and women (the latter too often marginalized by a focus on attacks against men), and research on movements of women of color in the 1970s all indicate that white French feminism can no longer pretend to be “universal.” However, my book concludes by noting the need to revise the space and temporality of even these struggles for liberation, by including the struggles of Kanaks, islanders of the Pacific, Mahorais, Maroon communities, and Amerindians of Guiana, Blacks, and all “non-whites” in Réunion, Martinique, and Guadeloupe, and especially of women in these spaces.

### **About the Author**

Françoise Vergès, from Réunion Island, is a feminist and antiracist activist. She holds the Global South(s) Chair at the Collège d'études mondiales, Fondation Maison des sciences de l'homme in Paris. Vergès has served as president of the Committee for the Memory of Slavery in France. She has curated exhibitions and workshops with artists, and organizes visits in French museums around colonial history. She has directed two films on Caribbean authors. She is a member of Humanities Across Borders: Asia and Africa in the World, a research program of the International Institute for Asian Studies funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.