

# Nineteenth-Century French Studies

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Schlick, Yaël. *Feminism and the Politics of Travel After the Enlightenment*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2012. Pp. x + 223. ISBN: 978-1-61148-428-1

Hope Christiansen, University of Arkansas

Schlick aims to explore “the coincidence of feminist vindication and travel” in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, demonstrating that travel’s utopian dimension and feminism’s utopian ideals “have intermittently fed off each other in instructive and productive ways” (6). Rather than dwell on the notion of travel as a mode of gender repression, she focuses on how women writers used it in a wide range of texts to make a case for granting women more freedom and a more prominent role in society, especially in politics (6). Without travel, she argues, feminism “would not have been able to achieve many of its central aims or to forge new pathways” (180).

Schlick’s point of departure in the first part, “Travel and Domesticity,” is Rousseau’s *Émile*, a seminal text for its focus on women’s role and its exclusion of women from travel (13). She then examines Mary Wollstonecraft’s critique of Rousseau’s concept of gender and her promotion of travel as part of a feminist agenda. Reading *Émile* and Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Women* together reveals that Rousseau “genders travel to [women’s] exclusion” (21) while Wollstonecraft “simply assumes [their] inclusion in the intellectual activity that travel represents” (22). Wollstonecraft’s novels present a less optimistic view, with female characters undertaking travel for health reasons or to escape from a husband, and not as part of an emancipatory project (49).

Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis, Germaine de Staël, and Frances Burney were just as concerned about women’s mobility and role in society, not to mention keenly interested in women as publishing authors and performers, “functions that transgress the private, domestic sphere” (52). Schlick shows Genlis and Staël to be in stark opposition, with Staël’s *Corinne* attempting to “forge a new world for a woman of talent,” on the one hand, and Genlis’s moral tales “warn[ing] against the pitfalls of female renown and advis[ing] against woman’s public presence” (53), on the other. But if *Corinne* is more successful in attaining freedom of movement and self-expression, it is because she is a woman of talent; Staël’s is not, explains Schlick, “a democratic or populist feminism” (52). Burney articulates a similarly mixed message in *The Wanderer*, advocating a revolutionary feminism akin to that espoused by Wollstonecraft, but “echo[ing] Genlis in her concern for female decorum, expressed in the need to circumscribe and confine a women’s [sic] sphere” (82).

In the book’s second part, “Travel and New Communities,” Schlick scrutinizes the writings of Flora Tristan and Suzanne Voilquin, who, after traveling for enlightenment, worked to create new communities founded on equitable gender and class roles. Travel, for Tristan, represented more than an opportunity to gain knowledge; it was also “a means to disseminating it, of putting it to work” (118). Unlike Wollstonecraft, who argued for women’s equality, Tristan believed in their inherent superiority, their status as parias making them uniquely qualified to “serve as society’s social conscience” (113). Voilquin shared Tristan’s “messianic tendency” and a “socialist-utopian-feminist vision of emancipation,” among other traits, but did not see herself as a “lone messianic savior” (120). Schlick’s incisive analysis of the intricacies of Saint-Simonism, whose “overly abstract and quite obtruse doctrine” (122) often objectified and excluded women even while centering on them, is particularly noteworthy.

The third part, “Travel and History,” looks back at the late eighteenth century from the perspective of the 1870s, when women’s education and suffrage were the subjects of heated debate. Schlick juxtaposes two female “map

readers,” Flaubert’s *Félicité*, the spatially illiterate heroine of “*Un Coeur simple*,” and the eponymous heroine of Sand’s *Nanon* to show how two completely different aesthetic strategies contributed to the debates “about sexual difference, geography and education in which they are embedded and to which they responded” (152). In contrast to *Félicité*, *Nanon* is a good map reader and traveler, even if engaging in the latter obligates her to cross dress; her spatial literacy and freedom go hand in hand with “her awareness of the limitations placed on her sex [. . .]” (166).

Any doubts one might have about the timeliness of this excellent study are dispelled by Schlick’s discussion, in her brief epilogue, of recent accounts by Robyn Davidson (*Tracks*, 1980) and Sara Wheeler (*Terra Incognita*, 1999) of their travels in the Australian desert and Antarctica, respectively. By providing evidence that female travelers still struggle, even today, “to make a space for their narrative or selves within the dominant conceptions of travel and within male dominated spaces” (15), Schlick drives home her book’s point in an unexpected and meaningful way.