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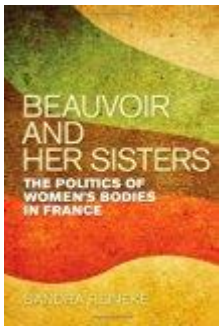
Sandra Reineke. *Beauvoir and Her Sisters: The Politics of Women's Bodies in France.* Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011. xxii + 102 pp. $45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-252-03619-4.



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Promoting Communities of Women: Sisterhood and French Publications

While the Western stereotype of the women's movement ranges from saloon deconstruction to women marching shoulder to shoulder down city streets, ***Beauvoir and Her Sisters*** takes the reader down an alternate route: a community of women, an imagined sisterhood, developing around the printed word. Author Sandra Reineke, assistant professor of political science, public affairs research, and women's studies at the University of Idaho, seeks to develop a work that demonstrates how French women used reading and writing about their sexuality and reproductive rights as a vehicle to create a collective identity with common political interests. She calls that collective identity "an imagined sisterhood."

Reineke borrows from Pnina Werbner's concept of a feminist collective imagination to apply its development during three separate time periods in France.[1] She addresses how the fall of the empire in the late 1700s formed the pattern by which women's roles (read women's bodies) were defined and discussed. From that period, she moves into the work developed by Simone de Beauvoir as a centerpiece for a women's collective imagination that began to flourish when French women were allowed to vote in 1944. While certainly the issue of procreation was the core of this social discussion (perhaps latent in some periods), abortion became the issue that galvanized the discourse about women who sought some form of social equality in the mid-twentieth century. Much of Reineke's work, then, focuses on the social and feminist conversation about the issue of abortion.

Through political discourse analysis, she searches three sets of writing to demonstrate the creation of an imagined sisterhood that created a collective female identity and ultimately political agency. These three sets of writing are high feminist literature (Beauvoir and others); mass-produced popular women's magazines (with considerable focus on *Elle*); and feminist newspapers and reviews. She asserts that "putting political

thought into its social and cultural context amplifies our understanding of politics" (p. xv).

The inclusion of France's history concerning women's rights is worthwhile, even though it comprises nearly half of the text. The history brings clarity to the long disenfranchisement of French women, making the subsequent analysis of the women's publications in the twentieth century better framed. Reineke notes that following the French Revolution the new leaders ensured that women were excluded from public life, even making it a crime for women to assemble in groups. Women's responsibilities were to create happy homes and to carefully rear the next generation of leaders. By the mid-nineteenth century, women did have an opportunity, albeit only wealthy women in their salons, to debate and decry how women were treated. Such voices as Madame de Stael still's emerged, keeping those who could afford books and magazines engaged in the debate. Reineke notes that during this time the physical aspect of female bodies became the centerpiece of both the state's and the feminists' positions. While French men were given the legal right to control their own bodies in 1804, women have yet to achieve full control over their bodies.

By the 1848 revolution, feminist voices began to be more organized and forceful, adding to the discourse that women must be educated in order to properly rear a young man for leadership. But this small burgeoning sisterhood collapsed when conservatives won the '48 election and all print media and activism focused on women's issues were suppressed. As women tried to bring focus to their need to be full citizens, the French government headed off these attempts by isolating women in whatever ways were available. Thus there was never a substantive collective until the twentieth century. So how did women's writing create an imagined sisterhood, a community of women with the potential for real political change? And how did this imagined sisterhood discuss women's issues as well as create an image of the female body that became an object of consumer desire?

Reineke notes that even though women were given the right to vote in 1944 "they still continued to experience grave social and political inequalities" (p. xiii). By the late 1960s, women had formed the Mouvement de liberation des femmes (MLF), which connected the female bodily experience with the struggle against political marginalization. Reineke finds that the high feminist literature of Beauvoir, particularly ***The Second Sex*** (1949), provided the collective idea that the female body is the site of political debate rather than a real biological entity. As women read this book and shared its contents through reviews and interpretations, a collective understanding of the patriarchal oppression began to take form (or an imagined sisterhood). At the same time, the consumer magazine industry began to create its own female space discussing sexuality and women's identity. These popular magazines provided women a place to participate in the "real or imagined sisterhood," and in some way help to counter hegemonic practices (p. xv). With the work of Beauvior and the MLF, Reineke asserts that women could better understand the power of working together to change the patriarchy. Thus they could speak collectively and more forcefully, helping to create a shared feminist identity.

Women's consumer magazines, for Reineke fashion magazines, such as ***Elle***, brought to women an opportunity to talk about their bodies, their lives, and their needs. While Reineke points out that these magazines created consumer-based goals if not objectification for women--certain body types, clothing, jobs, and mates were promoted and encouraged--the magazines still provided a shared space for women to begin to identify and create for themselves a sense of their own identity. This type of shared conversation can ultimately transform women's lives and social attitudes.

Feminist reviews, militant and focused on women's liberation, also created a shared space but beyond consumer culture and traditional roles for women. Growing out of Beauvoir's work that focused on women's reproductive issues as the nexus for social control, these militant feminists wrote about the issues of reproduction as a pathway to their own liberation--providing women the right to abortion. These feminists took upon themselves projects or goals to bring governmental attention and action to such issues as abortion and gender violence.

Reineke shows that these three types of writing helped to categorize and articulate feminism ideologically via Beauvoir, consumer-related and stereotypical images and writing through consumer magazines, and the force and power of feminist groups who pushed women's liberation from patriarchal norms into the forefront. Each of these three types of publications helped to form an imagined sisterhood. Yet these three types of writing left women with unclear and contradictory images of women's identity, Reineke asserts. While Beauvoir's work gave meaning to the co-opting of women's bodies, which was used as a springboard for feminist reviews and later political activity, consumer magazines, such as ***Elle***, illustrated how women should use their bodies to better serve men. Although the consumer magazines supported the patriarchal lens, these magazines did provide a space for women to begin the discussion about their bodies as a collective, as an imagined sisterhood. .

Reineke's book could have used some extended editing; it appears that the book was made up of three papers attached to the summation of French women's history. At times, the flow from one section to the next gets a bit bogged down. Despite that flaw, Reineke has brought to the table an interesting concept--the creation of imagined sisterhoods born out of a variety of women's writing.

Note

[1]. Pnina Werbner, "Political Motherhood and the Feminization of Citizenship: Women's Activism and the Transformation of the Public Sphere," in ***Women, Citizenship and Difference***, ed. Nira Yuval-David and Pnina Werbner (London: Zed Books, 1999), 221-245.

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