

Colette Colligan, *The Traffic in Obscenity from Byron to Beardsley: Sexuality and Exoticism in Nineteenth-Century Print Culture*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006  
256 pages; ISBN: 978-0-230-00343-9

One of the main themes of the Romantic period was that of the *ailleurs*.<sup>1</sup> Best described by this French term meaning “elsewhere,” *ailleurs* refers to the romantic ideal of transplanting oneself and finding new horizons in the unexplored, infinite world. Colette Colligan’s book, which is centered on nineteenth-century Britain, epitomizes the idea of the Romantic *ailleurs* not only through the study of the influence on mainstream culture by exotic (foreign) cultures—the Oriental Harlem and Lord Byron’s *Don Juan* (1819-24); Sir Robert Burton’s translation of *Arabian Nights* (1885-6); Caribbean and Transatlantic visual trope of the flogged slave woman; Japanese influence in Oscar Wilde’s play *Salome* (1894)—but also through her focus on the underground subcultures that developed congruently and subsequently. Colligan’s *ailleurs*, incidentally, is also the subject of her book: obscenity, sexuality and exoticism.

Obscenity, as Colligan argues, is not easy term to define. In fact, the author takes a deconstructionist approach to the idea of obscenity, highlighting the multiple possibilities in defining obscenity. Obscenity, then, in nineteenth-century that Colligan represents--and which she cleverly brackets with Lord Byron (1788 –1824) and Aubrey Beardsley (1872 – 1898)--is not, strictly defined by the appearance of historical law, but, as Colligan states, is a study that follows Michael Foucault’s ideals of history being a rupture or interruption of time. It is therefore the appearances of mainstream literature and the reappearance of the influenced underground prints that forms the history of Colligan’s history of obscenity. The Britain she is describing was known for its high levels of immigrants, coming from various parts of Europe, especially Italy, as well as the Empire, tangible effects of it being a hub for movement and trade. Colligan’s use of the word “traffic” hints not only at the idea of trade, travel, exchange and economy, but also at the illicit underground culture of sex trade and drug smuggling. The book, therefore, casts printed obscenity in nineteenth-century Britain against the friction of multicultural relations.

Inspired in part by Lord Byron’s *Don Juan*, Colligan continues to develop the idea of trafficking by examining the intrigue surrounding harems in London’s underground print culture towards the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. The intrigue surrounded the oriental harem as an enclosed physical space where various sexual encounters were encouraged, and from the lingering romanticist idea of travel, particularly to far-flung and exotic places. The harem embodied this desire, being an exotic, underground locus into which one could escape. Perhaps it is wise to mention here that one of Colligan’s main suppositions is that tendencies in mainstream culture did not extinguish themselves, but went underground. Recalling the now fading ideals of the romantic era, Colligan’s work would seem to show, on the contrary, a thriving undercurrent of romantic ideals in underground print culture.

Moving from the Turkish harems and Moslem eroticism, Colligan goes elsewhere to introduce Richard Burton (1821-1890) and his translations of Indian and Arabian text and sex manuals. Colligan argues that Burton’s translations sparked the first literary debates about pornography and discussions about homosexuality. Making reference to works such as *The Perfumed Garden* (1886), Colligan reveals the issues of homoeroticism and the plurality of sexuality represented in print culture influenced by Arabia. Her reference to Foucault at the beginning of her book, then, is recalled here as the basis of queer studies could be found in the Arabian text as it refers to sexuality among men.

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<sup>1</sup> Gengembre, Gérard. *Le Romantisme en France et en Europe*. France : Pocket, 2003 ; 97

The most impressive point of Colligan's book, however, is her reference to the transformation of the image of the flogged slave woman from that of abolitionist symbol to that of erotically sado-masochistic figure. Colligan argues that the image of slave woman being beaten, which became an anti-slavery symbol, developed underground, as an image of erotic, sadistic sex slavery and torture. Slave literature shows the branching of the two ideas of pleasure and pain, showing flagellation as sexual in nature, the sight of blood from a torn body as sensual. The emergences of the enslaved woman in underground print culture show varying representations of skin color of slaves, and the idea of skin color seems to be a hint at the change from abolitionist movement to obscenity. Continuing in this vein, William Lazenby's erotic novels *The Pearl* and *The Cremorne*, reveal the idea of sexual relations between the slave man and the planter's daughter as a trope that fantasizes the size of the black male and also hints at homoerotic voyeurism on the part of the white planter. It is important to note here Colligan's idea about historical accuracy being compromised by the entrance of desire. In that, historical accounts of slavery which appear in obscenity are not fully trustworthy seeing that the narrator may distort facts to feed his/her own passions. Narratologically, Colligan hints at a sort of discourse (slavery in obscenity) that would be best read through the guise of gender studies, queer studies and, also, psychoanalysis.

The end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which saw the abolition of slavery in parts of the transatlantic world, was characterized by a shift in English interests towards Japan. Similar to others' interest in the image of the slave woman, British artist Aubrey Beardsley was therefore influenced by famous Japanese prints, and Colligan reveals the direct influence on Beardsley's work, calling it *Japonisme* and *art nouveau*. His illustrations of Oscar Wilde's *Salome* reveal a sort of intellectualized artistic obscenity. Later on, the interest in Japanese forms and symbols was transferred to an interest and at the same time, a heightened interest in Japanese prostitution.

This book is worthy not only because it uses an unorthodox method to paint a picture of nineteenth-century Britain, but also because the book itself embodies some of the globalizing and exoticizing ideals of the nineteenth-century. As such, the book serves well for discussions surrounding censorship, *être* and *paraître*, symbolism, gender studies, queer studies, historical and cultural studies, printing press, among others. From the search for new horizons, to the search for beauty to the rise of the Decadence, Colligan shows the underbelly of the century. She reveals that mainstream culture and subculture, though seen and unseen, share commonalities in their origins. Through a thorough, well-informed and intellectualized study of nineteenth-century print culture, Colligan blows smoke on the *ailleurs* that was hidden from view.

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