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 **Teaching Women and Gender in France d'Outre-Mer:  
Problems and Strategies**

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

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Teaching Women and Gender in France d'Outre-Mer:  
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Now that the French empire has been placed back into French history in the measure it merits, courses on France and its empire, or aspects of it, should be de rigueur in departments with an interest, or a developing interest, in postcolonial or cultural studies as well as in departments with programs in world or comparative history.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, if gender is central to understanding modern France, as Elinor Accampo stresses in her contribution to this forum, it is no less so for France d'Outre-mer. Although teaching nineteenth- and twentieth-century French imperialism or colonialism per se poses few problems, an approach focusing exclusively on women and gender in the French imperial or colonial context is more of a challenge for a number of reasons, the most problematic of which, for undergraduate courses at least, is the relative paucity of literature on the subject in English. Trying to organize a course of this nature around a reading list of works in English is an exercise in frustration. A better plan is to create a structural framework first and then think of ways to circumvent the present lack in literature. With this in mind, I will set out the basic questions to address in creating such a structure and then develop ways to turn this framework into a working syllabus. **[End Page 293]**

The first question that arises when one thinks about teaching a course on gender and women in the French colonies is what approach to take. Should it be discourse that is prioritized, or experience? Emphasizing gender discourse is especially useful in understanding hegemonic relationships and unraveling the dialectic between metropole and colony; emphasizing women's experience ensures that the larger framework of ideological forces does not dwarf women's individual or collective role. Ideally, therefore, one should try to combine both. At this point, it is useful to remember that personal and collective identities are intimately linked and that examining women's individual experiences within the larger framework can help illustrate, in a manner appealing to students, the hegemonic and social ambiguities of the colonial enterprise. Ambiguities that encompassed gender, race, and class played themselves out in the ways women interacted with each other and in their responses to colonization and the imperial mission.

The second question is from which standpoint to proceed. Should the focus be French women or the women France colonized? The two are, of course, interrelated, but more often than not they are considered separately: the former are seen as integral to French history and the latter as part of the national history of the ex-colony in question. In the British context the development of subaltern studies facilitated the integration of the history of colonizing and colonized women and encouraged the emergence of a third postcolonial category, the hybrid. Subaltern studies have no French equivalent. Negritude and Francophonie do, of course, encompass colonized woman, but both are problematic. Negritude is closely associated with a specific time period. The movement's heyday lasted from its inception in the late twenties and early thirties to the years immediately following decolonization. It is not, therefore, as relevant to postcolonial methodology and interests as Francophonie, which, like subaltern studies, was spearheaded by intellectuals from the colonies—namely, Léopold Sédar Senghor (who was also an instigator of negritude) and Habib Bourguiba—in the postcolonial period. Unlike subaltern studies, whose main aim was to write the "subaltern" back into national history, Francophonie was originally conceived to emphasize the importance of French as a means of access to universal values and as a channel for promoting cooperation between French-speaking countries.<sup>2</sup> The original aims have shaped the way the movement has evolved and, until recently, deflected its focus from the type of historical preoccupations that were developed in subaltern **[End Page 294]** studies. Even though the importance of Francophonie is increasing steadily in this domain, the majority of the work...

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*Patricia Lorcin*

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Patricia Lorcin teaches European and French history at Texas Tech University. Her published works include *Imperial Identities: Newsprint, Prejudice, and Race in Colonial Algeria* (London, 1995) and articles and book chapters on different aspects of French imperialism; she also has edited *Algeria and France, 1800-2000: Identity, Memory, and Nostalgia* (Syracuse, NY, forthcoming).

Earlier versions of this article were presented at a seminar, "Research and Teaching Gender History," on March 6, 1998, at Florida International University and at a pedagogical panel at the Society for French Historical Studies conference held March 8-10, 2001, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The author would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their suggestions.

<sup>1</sup> For an approach to integrating colonialism into the teaching of French history, see Alice Conklin, "Boundaries Unbound: Teaching French History as Colonial History and Colonial History as French History," *French Historical Studies* 23 (2000): 215-38.

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