

Open Roses, Closed Gardens, Queering the Tropical Garden in

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Cet article explore la vie et la poésie de Ida Solomon Faubert, une aristocrate haïtienne qui a voyagé à Paris au début

for bals nègres where women danced together, or imagine a Lesbos also inhabited by femmes de couleur?

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du vingtième siècle et qui a écrit des poèmes érotiques sur et pour les femmes. On connaît peu de choses de cette auteure, et c'est à travers une analyse de deux photos d'époque qui sexualisaient les sujets noirs de façon singulière que Tinsley se demande si ce ne serait pas une des raisons de l'anonymat délibéré de Faubert. L'article examine l'image personnelle véhiculée par Faubert dans sa poésie et l'analyse littéraire tente de situer son travail dans les contextes homosexuels et caribbéens, desquels elle a été depuis marginalisée.

It was the era of Paris Noir. Rue Blomet and Boulevard de Clinchy, *Bals Nègres* and *La revue nègre* marked the opening of Caribbean and black spaces in the City of Lights during the first quarter of the twentieth century. And it was the era of Paris Lesbos. In the salons of Natalie Barney, Colette, and Gertrude Stein, an elite coterie of white women-loving women gathered to pioneer intellectual and social community on the Left Bank. But where on this map can contemporary Caribbean and gender scholars look for the spaces of women of colour who love women? Where in these concrete, intellectual, and social geographies could we search

These were questions I began asking when I discovered the poetry of Ida Faubert, a Haitian aristocrat who lived in Paris from 1914 until her death in 1969 and, in the 1920s and '30s, wrote and published erotic poems to women. Though Faubert was a well-known figure in Haitian letters in her day, these poems have never been analyzed by either Caribbean or queer scholars. Her name is rarely mentioned in accounts of early twentieth-century Haitian intellectuals, and never in those of early twentieth-century lesbians. In my attempt to re-situate her work in geographies of Caribbean and lesbian cosmopolitanism, my first question was: why does this writer remain blacked out—invisible—in both Haitian and queer literary genealogies? To what extent does her invisibility reflect scholarly refusals to see, and to what extent does it reflect the poet's own resistance to being easily seen? Faubert's disappearance from critical view begs reflection on how sight is socially constructed in scholarship: that is, on how it is that the early twentieth century Caribbean woman who loves women looks like a non-entity, when in fact real bodies lived this experi-

ence. But Faubert's critical disappearance also prompts reflection on the complexity of dynamics between seer and seen. I want to resist a unilateral consideration of power that supposes that the obscured subject remains invisible only because *we* cannot see. Instead, I want to return limited agency to Faubert by considering that she may also be historically difficult to see because she *chose* ambiguous self- and poetic representations that are *purposefully* difficult to recuperate. Writing from Paris (not Lesbos), Salomon Faubert moves between French and West Indian, real and unreal landscapes to find metaphors for her relationships with women, transculturating Caribbean *and* European images of women's sexuality to imagine gynoeotericism as at once a return to her native land and the creation of a new topos she calls a "jardin merveilleux [marvelous garden]" (39). In a flower-insulated space between public and private, open and closed, Faubert's gardened bodies find possibilities of expression that the hypervisibility of outness could not afford the already-marked bodies of women of colour.

I want to say a few words about how I came to this poetry, and how my constant *re-vision* of Faubert shapes the direction of my paper. When I picked up a volume of Faubert's poems from interlibrary loan, opened the cover to find erotic poems dedicated to women, and came face to face with the *opacity* of her representation of eroticism, I was both moved and puzzled. I first tried to flesh out the half-visibility of her erotic geographies by grounding her work in a context, looking for her life

and Invisible Women

the Poetry of Ida Salomon Faubert

story. I searched indexes of books on 1920s Paris for her name and almost never found it; I started searching photographs of women of colour, of Caribbean intellectuals, of lesbian clubs to find an image of her. I never did. But what I found along the way was a series of troubling racialized and sexualized landscapes that allowed me to see why Faubert would not want to be represented in those scenes, and why she might avoid visual representations, and instead write eroticized bodies in a literary text: where the opacity of the written word opened new possibilities for imagining Caribbean geographies of sexuality. This paper retraces my own trajectory in coming to see Faubert's garden.

Before I offer a close reading of Faubert's poetry, I want to discuss two other images of women-loving women of colour circulating in Paris when she lived there: one taken at the Exposition Universelle of 1889, and one at the Parisian lesbian club, *le Monocle*, in the 1930s. I then conclude with a reading of the counter geographies of Faubert's poems, and discuss how her tactics refuse a space of hypervisibility that functioned as a *trap* in early twentieth-century Paris. I will start my visual journey to Faubert with an image of racial and sexual savagery invented in the French imaginary around the time Faubert arrived in France: one I call the *tropical tribade*.

Tropical Tribades: The *Exposition Universelle* and Displays of Racial and Sexual Otherness

Ida Faubert was born Ida Salomon in Port au Prince in 1882, during her

father Lysius' term as president of Haiti. But in 1888 Lysius was driven from office and the family went into exile in Paris. Ida was coming to Paris, and coming to racial consciousness, at a period when images of Africans and Caribbeans were first making themselves into daily view in France. They were coming into homes as the smiling natives on coffee labels, and before audiences on the stage of the Folies Bergère. The spectacle of race was also being played out in a new entertainment sweeping Europe: the colonial exhibition. The spring following Ida's arrival, the Exposition Universelle brought 32 million people to the French capital. As its title suggests, this event aimed to *render all things visible* to French consumers: electronic apparatuses, weaponry, food products, and horticulture from distant nations and colo-

part of the exhibit. This photo shows three women posed together in front of an island of potted banana and coconut trees, ferns, bamboo, and other foliage.¹ The two women on the sides stand with their arms draped over the shoulder of the woman in the middle, while the woman on the far right lays her head on the middle figure's shoulder and holds her hand close to her pubis. As the garden itself was constructed from exotic colonial species to imagine savagery fenced off from Parisian civilization, the women's (homo)-sexualized bodies, lined up in pseudo-erotic poses at an opening in the shrubbery, appear as borders and orifices marking entry into savage space.

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nies were accumulated and catalogued on European soil for inspection and judgment by French eyes. The black body became one of the objects made visible here, as people of African descent were hired to pose nude to authenticate colonial representations.

In the Jardin Zoologique d'Acclimatation, where lush flora imported from the colonies "tropicalized" a section of Paris, Prince Roland Bonaparte photographed black female nudes planted there as

phy and sexology that has yet to come into focus in Caribbean studies. The poses of the women in Bonaparte's photo evoke the three classic poses (frontal, side, and rear view) of ethnographic photography. At the same time, not just their nakedness but the prominence of their hips and buttocks—which attract more light than their faces—recall ethnography's reliance on black women's sexualized bodies to define race as visible property. This Jardin Zoologique

d'Acclimatation series evokes one particularly notorious ethnographic subject: Saartje Baartman, renamed the "Hottentot Venus." This South African woman, displayed as a curiosity for French and English audiences who paid to see her steatopygia (fatty deposits on buttocks and hips) and extended labia minora ("Hottentot apron") became one of the nineteenth century's most visible images of sexualized Africa. Her visibility reached its height when after

lesbian love" (qtd. in Gilman 89). Similarly, in the findings of American scholar Perry Lichtenstein, an "abnormally prominent clitoris" designated female homosexuality "particularly ... in colored women" (qtd. in Somerville 27).² The attention drawn to the prominent buttocks and well-defined pubes which occupy the exact center of Bonaparte's photograph, coupled with their association with the infamous "Hottentot apron," have a striking effect. The

gins of modern France, but on the margins of the human species. It was a trap that Faubert would refuse.

The Apparitional Woman of Colour: Ghosts of Race in Paris Lesbos

I now want to move on to another image of the woman-loving woman of colour circulating in Paris during Faubert's time there. This is an image generated not by official culture, but by an emerging lesbian counterculture; and which, in dialogue with Terry Castle's concept of the apparitional lesbian, I call the *apparitional lesbian of colour*.

After completing her schooling, Ida returned to Port-au-Prince in 1905. There she married, published her first poetry, and became a prominent society figure at lavish parties and literary gatherings. But, unhappy with the narrowness of the elite social scene and its constrictions on women's behaviour, she returned to Paris in 1914, where she divorced her husband and moved to her own apartment. Faubert was returning to Paris, and redefining herself as a newly independent woman, at a time when relationships between women were emerging as an increasingly visible option to compulsory heterosexuality: when, as French historian Christine Bard notes, "le lesbianisme conquiert une visibilité qui lui donne une certaine légitimité—on parle alors de mode saphique [lesbianism wins a visibility that gives it a certain legitimacy—people talked of a saphic fashion]" (7). Literary circles, bars, and dances marked the opening of what Bard describes as *dazzlingly visible* lesbian space in interwar Paris. Faubert did move in these circles, to an extent that remains uncertain. Haitian critics concur on the important personal and literary influence of well-known lesbian writers on Faubert's life and work, including Renée Vivien, Colette, and Anna de Noailles (a poetess nicknamed the *French Sappho*, both for her poetry and her relationships with women

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her death, her genitals were dissected, preserved, and referenced in scientific journals that wanted to "document" racial difference by studying the excesses—the large buttocks and labia minora—of the sexualized black woman's body. The surfeit present in (scientists' drawing of) Africanized reproductive organs was, French researchers argued, proof of stunted evolution on the dark continent. . The case studies performed on Baartman, including paintings that Etienne Saint Hilaire and Frédéric Cuvier featured in their *Histoire Naturelle des Mammifères*, publicly envisioned the sexualized black woman's body as test site for the limits of human and simian, civilization and barbarism.

But these images were not only the property of ethnography: they quickly crossed over into sexology. If this photograph in some way looks like ethnographic photography of the time, it also looks like the illustrations of sexually deviant bodies in contemporary "scientific" studies of sexual pathology. Drawing on French scientists' studies of Baartman's labia minora, German gynecologist H. Hildebrandt posited that the Hottentot apron lead to those "excesses ... called

pose of these hips materializes an imaginary contiguity not only between woman and nature, but also between ethnography and sexology. Both rhetorics in fact *created* anatomical and ontological difference by "excessorizing" the reproductive body of the raced and sexualized subjects they claim to represent. The savage state of the landscape here—looming over their shoulders, larger than their human presence—also visualizes sexologists' and ethnographers' overlapping views of sexual inversion and racial inferiority as conditions which, like non-western landscapes, they considered primitive, regressive, yet exotically seductive.

But seeing the meeting of savage race and savage sexuality here also suggests why visible same-sex loving identity might be problematic for Ida Faubert in the era of the colonial exposition. For women of colour in turn of the century France, histories of race intersect the invention of homosexuality: overlapping *dangers* projected onto their raced, gendered, and sexualized bodies visibly complicate attempts to read their presence. The tropical tribade's garden was a trap, fabricated to keep the woman of African descent not only on the mar-

whom Faubert frequented loyally). Biographer Madeleine Gardiner also writes that Faubert conducted a number of affairs with Parisian acquaintances, but remains purposely vague about the gender (or other) identity of these lovers.

Certainly many of the women in her milieu were familiar with one of the most well known yet “discreet” lesbian clubs in interwar Paris: *le Monocle*. The photograph was taken in this club in the 1930s shortly before Faubert published her erotic poems to women (Bard 6). Where Bonaparte’s photo at the Exposition Universelle shows tropical tribades in a falsely natural habitat constructed for them, this photograph shows women-loving women in a space shaped by them, a semi-private, self-consciously artificial habitat designed—like the unobtrusive trellis of flowers behind the clubgoers—to be a backdrop against which these *garçonnes* choose their own poses. A kind of performance different from the posed savagery of the *Jardin d’Acclimatation* takes place in this scene. Instead of nakedness, women’s *clothing* signifies sexuality here: the gender transgression involved in being *seen in* aristocratic male dress and military uniforms, metonymically and metaphorically signifies the sexual transgression of being *seen as* sapphists, performing a “third sex” alternative to hegemonic performances of European femininity and/as compulsory heterosexuality. Where the studied immobility of the women in Bonaparte’s photo positions them as passive recipients of the French public’s gaze, the monocles which look back at the camera’s lens and the *garçonnes*’ direct gaze back at the camera and the viewing public, suggest these women’s movement to challenge who controls visions of female sexuality.

Only one figure looks away from the camera here: and that is the lone woman of colour in the picture. She neither looks at the camera, nor has her body fully in the shot (as many of her counterparts do); both in face

and body, she is the least visible figure. Most of the chief signifier of her racial difference—the expanse of her dark skin—remains unseeable. Cloaked in a spectacularly feminine outfit that fits conventional depictions of neither *la femme de couleur* nor *la garçonne*, she is literally as well as figuratively marginal to the scene. The cross dressing she’s empowered to perform here seems not to be dressing like a man, but dressing like modern European woman. Her belonging to this lesbian scene—her access to even limited visibility—appears contingent on her looking *like* a European, and looking *at* a European: that is, on her gazing up at a white partner in a faux military uniform. Their gazes remain unequal, as her partner looks past her; and their spatial positioning remains unequal, as the *saphiste de couleur* sits a full head lower than her lover, risking becoming a pet at her mistress’ feet as her fingers grasp at the metal chair as if she is holding on to her right to be here. If the viewer turns her or his gaze to these off center figures, we see a woman of colour—someone who looks like a colonial subject—remaining literally beneath a partner in a military uniform—someone who

we’ll see in the next section, Faubert’s poetry will chart a space between hypervisibility and invisibility, between the tropical flora of the *Jardin* and the barely visible trellis of the *Monocle*, to trace the complex vision of racialized and sexualized bodies that I believe can benefit both Caribbean and gender/sexuality studies.

Looking Under Flower Cover: Reading the Poetry of Ida Salomon Faubert

Up to this point, I have looked at how woman-loving woman has been seen in both Paris of Faubert’s time, and in the scholarship of our own. In the remainder of this article, I want to turn of the woman-loving woman of colour’s strategies for *self* representation, as they emerge in Faubert’s poetry: looking at a complex play between the seen and the unseen as she reimagines a “natural habitat” flora outside both the too-visible space of the *Jardin d’Acclimatation* and the too-ghostly space of *le Monocle*, in a topos she calls a “marvellous garden.”

In 1939, the poems that Salomon Faubert had been writing and publishing since 1912 were collected in a monograph entitled *Coeur des îles*

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looks like the colonizer. Marginally visible as a lesbian, she remains unseeable as a racial equal.

The apparitional lesbian of colour also suggests why a model of Caribbean “lesbianism” might not be a geography Faubert would choose to situate herself in. If in the *Jardin d’Acclimatation*, to be seen as a woman-loving woman of colour is to be dehumanized; in *le Monocle*, to be visible as a black lesbian means backgrounding racial difference. As

[*Island Heart*],³ dedicated to “Madame Amy NICOLET, l’incomparable interprète ‘sans qui mes vers ne seraient que ce qu’ils sont’, avec toute mon affection [Amy Nicolet, the incomparable interpreter, without whom my poems would only be what they are].” The collection contains three types of poems dedicated to female addressees: poems for her daughter; erotic poems explicitly dedicated to women; and gender “unmarked” erotic poems in which the

interlocutor can, I will argue, credibly be interpreted as a woman. I will take as a case study here one of the poems from the third category, in which the problems of visibility seem most acute: and specifically, in the extended metaphor of the garden in her sonnet “Je voudrais demeurer...”

Je voudrais demeurer une heure
auprès de vous,
Au jardin merveilleux que mon
esprit suppose...
Le soleil s'éteindrait, là-bas, au
couchant rose,
Et les jasmins s'effeuilleraient
sur nos genoux.

Vous me diriez alors, en ce moment
si doux,
Le secret le plus cher de votre
âme morose;
Et qu'ils seraient divins, par-
dessus toute chose,
Les mots qui m'apprendraient
vos espoirs les plus fous!

Les roses dans l'air pur
ouvriraient leurs pétales,
Et votre voix, mêlée au chant
clair des cigales,
Ferait plus doux encore le soir
mystérieux.

Mon coeur serait à vous en cet
instant de rêve,
Et vous verriez mes yeux, dans le
jour qui s'achève,
Se mourir lentement dans
l'ombre de vos yeux.

[I would like to remain an hour
beside you
In the marvelous garden that my
spirit imagines...
The sun would extinguish itself,
there, in a pink sunset
And the jasmines would shed
their petals on our knees.

You would tell me then, in that
so sweet moment,
The most dear secret of your
morose soul,
And how divine they would be,
above all other things,

The words that would tell me
your maddest desires!

The roses would open their petals
in the pure air,
And your voice, mixed with the
clear song of the cicadas,
Would make the mysterious
evening even more sweet.

My heart would be yours in that
dream moment,
And you would see my eyes, in
the day that draws to a close,
Slowly die in the shadow of your
eyes.] (39)

While the tropical tribade and the apparitional lesbian of colour appeared in very concrete, visually recognizable “habitats,” Faubert’s gynoerotic topos refuses this kind of location. This poem takes place *nowhere*: “Au jardin merveilleux que mon esprit suppose/ In the marvelous garden my spirit imagines.” The concrete details Faubert provides of the garden—the presence of jasmine, roses, and cicadas—remain sparse, limited to small, disparate objects that resist filling this marvelous garden in sufficiently for it to approach the savage, excessive density of flora in the Jardin d’Acclimatation. The nowhere that Salomon Faubert describes is claimed by the woman of colour as speaking, as the creation of *her own esprit*, *her* powers of reasoning and imagination, and the presence of the woman of colour as poet rather than image marks a move to visualize possibilities of an other’s space, one in which nationality and race, gender and sexuality could be configured *differently* than in the Jardin d’Acclimatation or le Monocle. This geography is signaled on the page by the undefined space of the ellipses, which follow (but do not conclude) the phrase the “jardin merveilleux que mon esprit suppose...”

Yet this marvelous topos resembles “somewhere” described in an earlier poem. “Soir Tropicale,” chosen to open the volume, is the only explicit evocation of Haiti in the

ironically titled *Coeur des îles*. Its depiction of sunset and the transition from day to a “tendre,” “douce” night, and the description of jasmine and roses as flowers whose sight and perfume dominate the scene are echoed in the garden described in “Je voudrais demeurer...” The details of Faubert’s floral description suggest that there is a metonymic background to the “marvelous garden,” a remembered topos that Faubert experienced of a woman *in* a garden that is the basis of this extended metaphor of women(?)’s love *as* a garden. But this second garden is immediately marked as an *unreal* space, a Haiti of the imagination. While providing traces that gesture toward the poet’s Haitian memories the poem remains in “mon esprit,” artfully outlining a marvelous garden too insistently hazy for others to appropriate it into their over- or underexposed images of women loving women of colour. The complex evocation of this Haiti of the imagination speaks to the complexity necessary to imagine race and national origin in a Caribbean cosmopolitan context: as a factor which does not define or imprison the racialized subject, yet which remains one with which she is in constant dialogue.

This poem also has *no body* in it. The first line begins with “je” and ends with “vous,” but no information is given to identify or embody speaker or addressee. The sexualized woman of colour’s body—as codified by dominant imaginations’ markers of excess—refuses to enter the picture; the body parts referred to, particularly *genoux*, are gender- and racially unmarked ones symbolically (though not physically) distant from the buttocks and pubis on which Bonaparte’s photography overfocused. Yet without grammatically or physically gendering her poetic subjects nor identifying them in a dedication, Faubert nonetheless obliquely feminizes “I” and “you” via stylistic markers that echo other gynoerotic poems in the collection. These include the use of the formal second person pronoun “vous,” which

Faubert exclusively reserves for female interlocutors; and the evocation of the interlocutor's gaze, a theme common to all her poems dedicated to women.⁴ Taken together, these elements suggest the addressee may be a woman, while *refusing* to gender this person. The problematic dis/location of both setting and addressee come together in the stanza's final line, "Et les jasmins s'effeuilleraient sur nos genoux [And the jasmines shed their petals on our knees]." Beginning with a copula but obscuring the coupling that occurs here, this line writes a disappearing act: both flowers and body appear only to disperse (as the jasmine lose their petals) or be covered over (as those petals blanket the laps of speaker and addressee). The addressee's body is outlined, unlike the apparitional lesbian of colour in *le Monocle*, but its outline never filled in enough for this body to become excess. The first quatrain seems to be a portrait of Haiti, and seems to be a portrait of a woman of colour loving another woman. Yet those marks that dominant imaginations had invented as visible signifiers of real places, genders, races, and sexualities refuse to appear here.

However, this is a disappearing act that, as if protesting the woman-loving woman of colour's need to mask herself, leaves traces of her sexualized body. The erotic valences of her description both of the bursting jasmine stripping its petals into speaker and addressee's laps in the first stanza, and the open roses linked to the open mouth of the addressee in the third stanza, recall the floral-vaginal imagery common in the poetry of Paris Lesbos, including the roses, violets, and lilies that Renée Vivien likens to the "fleur secrète où j'ai mis mon baiser [secret flower where I placed my kiss]." In Faubert's poem, "les jasmins qui s'effeuillent sur nos genoux" become markers directing the reader's imagination to the knees under the flowers: to the bodies that cannot be systematically represented without entering another's imaginary landscape, but nonetheless exist and

express their eroticism. Salomon Faubert's floral imagery gestures toward a *femme de couleur's* gynoeeroticism possible under flower cover, one that remains somewhere between the too visible and the too easily erased. If her garden speaks to the complexity needed to imagine racialized bodies, it also speaks to that necessary in imagining sexualized bodies between metropole and (post)colony.

But Faubert's flower cover retains its own limitations. Discussing women's relationships in Lesotho, Kendall finds the interpretive strategies of queer theory ill fit to African women's situation not only because they assume that same gender desire is necessarily liberated by visibility, but because they assume that this desire is necessarily "eccentric" or marginal to communities where it is expressed. In fact, multiple and interlocked interpellations of class, colour, and gender contribute (at least) as much as sexuality to determining same-gender loving subjects' relationships to performances and centers of power. This caveat could also be considered in the context of Faubert's work. A woman of colour from an elite family, Faubert shares with the writers of Paris Lesbos a class privilege that she does not problematize. A dream of liberation for the savage-partitional woman-loving woman of colour, Faubert's rose-filled, isolated "instant de rêve" is nonetheless the dream of privilege where non-elite constructions of sexuality, whether those of working class women in Paris or those of the Haitian peasantry, remain ghosted.

Faubert's play between visibility and invisibility does not erase all the blindnesses in which women-loving women of colour can be enclosed and enclose themselves, and her "jardin merveilleux" hides its own "black outs." Flower cover may provide an alternative to the tropical tribade and the apparitional lesbian, but I in no way interpret this as meaning that it does not present a culturally specific set of problems; and in fact, examining these problems also becomes part

of reading "queerly" in a Caribbean context.

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¹Roland Bonaparte, [Three Unidentified women in the Jardin Zoologique d'Acclimatation at the Exposition Universelle], reprinted in Willis and Williams 68.

² See Hildebrandt; Lichtenstein.

³All page numbers cited for Faubert's poetry refer to this volume.

⁴See, for example, her focus on Mme R. G.'s "yeux ensorceleurs [bewitching eyes]," Mme A. N.'s "grands yeux [large eyes]," which "éclairent ... la pièce obscure [light the dark room]."

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