Exploring their Boundaries: Gender and Citizenship in Women's Travel Writing, 1880–1914

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Camille du Gast was perhaps best known during her lifetime as the first female race-car driver. However, she was also a feminist pioneer, a frequent traveler, and a devoted Republican.\(^1\) Du Gast was commissioned twice to travel to Morocco, first by the Museum of Natural History and again a few years later by the Minister of Agriculture. She published several narratives outlining her travel experiences in the popular women's journal *Femina*.\(^2\) In these narratives Du Gast positioned herself not as a traveler, but as an *exploratrice*. The persona of the explorer was not often adopted by women in their travel narratives; instead, most women self-identified as tourists or *excursionnistes*.\(^3\)

During the period 1880 to 1914, women's journals frequently published travel narratives written by women. This study examines a unique group of twenty narratives published in a

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\(^1\) Du Gast became vice-president of the *Ligue Française du Droit des Femmes* (The French League for the Rights of Women) after World War I.


wide variety of women's journals. These narratives were written by women who were described both by themselves and others as explorers rather than as travelers, tourists, or excursionists. They were also distinctive in several other ways: They traveled frequently and for long stretches of time, they generally traveled alone and "un-chaperoned" in what were often seen as dangerous areas, and they preferred to travel dressed in either men's clothing or in the local costume. Though many of them, like Du Gast or the well-known authors Mme Lucie Delarue-Mardrus and Mme Myriam Harry, were known for accomplishments outside the world of travel, this discussion concentrates on their contributions in that arena.

The act of traveling took these women far beyond the private realm they were expected to inhabit as part of their contribution to the stability and fecundity of the bourgeois family unit. The way in which they traveled alongside their status as published authors (a profession deemed more suitable for men) further cemented their "outsider" status. Yet these women were able to find acceptance—and even positive reinforcement—in what were often quite conventional women's magazines. They also managed to parlay their travel into professional success and formal recognition by the Republican state, publishing numerous books of fiction and non-fiction, contributing to various governmental or scholarly bodies, and earning prizes and awards for both their exploration and writing.

The goal of this article is twofold: to draw attention to these unusual narratives as untapped sources in the study of gender and empire; and to argue that these women deliberately invoked the persona of an explorer, someone who traveled with purpose and intention, to justify their eccentric and unusual lifestyles. By reframing their travel as a deliberate contribution to the strength and unity of the French colonial empire, they were able to

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4 Overall, I found roughly one hundred and fifty travel narratives written by women in the eighteen different women's periodicals I examined. These included *Femina, La Mode Illustrée, La Vie Heureuse, Le Féminisme Chrétien, La Femme, Le Magasin des Demoiselles, La Citoyenne,* and *La Fronde.*
portray it as an act of citizenship and a part of their social duty as Republicans. This was an alternative service performed in lieu of the duties demanded by "republican motherhood."5

While more women traveled in this period and with greater ease due to developments spurred by the burgeoning tourist industry, the respectability of this activity was in question. Women also still experienced travel differently than men, encountering difficulties finding suitable lodgings and often being subject to harassment.6 Moreover, white women traveling in the colonies were subject to intense scrutiny. Many studies have established that their conduct was believed to be of great importance to colonial projects, particularly the foundation of permanent colonial settlements and the successful assimilation of the colonial population. French women living or traveling in the empire were expected to help showcase French superiority through their behavior. This meant that great attention was paid to how white women dressed and spoke, with whom they socialized, and how they occupied their time in the colonies.7

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7 For more on the role and symbolic importance of white women in the colonies see Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, eds., Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992); Julia Clancy-Smith and Frances Gouda, eds., Domesticating the Empire: Race, Gender and Family Life in French and Dutch Colonialism (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998); Nikki Cooper "(En)Gendering Indochina: Feminisation and Female Figurings in French Colonial Discourses," Women’s Studies International Forum 23, no. 6 (2000):
With these factors in mind, the majority of travel narratives published in the women's press during this period were quite conventional. In these traditional narratives, a great deal of time and space was spent establishing the propriety of the author's behavior and appearance.

Danger and adventure were particularly gendered subjects in the realm of travel writing, and women who admitted to feeling threatened physically or sexually were potentially opening themselves up to charges of impropriety. In light of this, the authors of the more conventional narratives did not admit to any feeling of physical or sexual danger and made sure to stress that they traveled with proper chaperones and avoided placing themselves in harm's way. They also highlighted the fact that they dressed becomingly in Western-style, feminine clothing while traveling, and they were praised in the women's press for doing so. Dress was not only a powerful way of underlining one's femininity, it helped to maintain proper boundaries between the traveler and the people and places she encountered. The connection between race, nationality, and clothing was underlined repeatedly in these magazines.


8 On the conventions governing women's travel narratives see, for example, Bassnett's article in Hulme and Youngs, 225-41, or the following sections in Foster and Mills, 13-23, 88-97, 172-80, 252-60.

9 See, for example, the following narratives: Mme Marthe Paul-Adam "Une parisienne en Égypte," *Femina* (1 March 1908): 107-08; Claude Anet "Deux européennes à Ispahan," *Femina* (15 August 1905): 391-92; "Mme D'Attanoux," *Femina* (1 November 1901): 354-55.

10 See, for example, "Mme D'Attanoux," or "Deux françaises chez les sauvages de l'Annam," *La Vie Heureuse* (November 1907).

11 See, for example, the November 1911 edition of *Femina* where readers were asked to identify women's nationalities from photos of their shoes (or lack thereof). "Le jeu du pied et du hasard," *Femina* (15 September 1911): 496. Also see the February 1905 issue of *Femina* in which readers were asked to guess women's ethnicities based on small portraits. [No title], *Femina* (1 February 1905): 54. Other articles making similar connections include: "Les modes d'Outre Mer," *Femina* (15 August 1906): 373-74; "L'Universelle beauté," *La Vie Heureuse* (October 1902): 2.
The narratives written by women like Mme Du Gast (those labeled explorers) followed none of these conventions. Instead, these women wrote proudly of their unconventional modes of travel. They spoke openly about the fact that they traveled alone and through dangerous areas. Mme Isabelle Massieu, a frequent world traveler and the author of several travel narratives, emphasized the fact that she journeyed "absolutely alone,"\(^{12}\) if equipped with a revolver, while an article on Du Gast declared that she "adventured alone to Morocco, that country infested with brigands, [and] full of dangers for Europeans and especially for the French."\(^{13}\) One particularly harrowing tale was that of Mlle Alexine Tinné, who traveled to Africa several times and always dressed in African costume both abroad and at home. She was eventually murdered (in one account by her own guides, in another by an Arab chieftain), and the women's press published several accounts of her travels and death.\(^{14}\)

These explorer-types also traveled garbed in local costume and were photographed repeatedly in both posed and casual shots wearing these clothes as well as male dress.\(^{15}\) Mme Lucie Delarue-Mardrus's travels across Morocco were the subject of two articles in the women's journal *La Vie Heureuse*. In one, she was praised for her adventurous spirit, but gently mocked for

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12 Mme Isabelle Massieu, "Mme Massieu," *Femina* (15 February 1906): 82.


wearing "the dress of a young boy." Similarly, Du Gast, Harry, and Massieu all had attention drawn in their narratives to their unconventional traveling costumes. If attire was an important signifier of race and ethnicity in these magazines, then dressing regularly as a "local" while traveling was controversial.

Despite their unconventional behaviors and appearances, these women managed to gain acceptance in many different venues. The magazines in which they were published, such as *Femina, La Vie Heureuse, La Femme*, and *Le Magasin des Demoiselles*, were not primarily feminist publications and yet they solicited and ran stories like the ones described above quite frequently. *La Vie Heureuse* wrote of Massieu that she "made real . . . those qualities that are most ingrained in our race. They very clearly defined it—and in this case the definition is moving—when they said she was a 'Francaise.'" Myriam Harry, much admired by Marguerite Durand, the editor and founder of the feminist daily *La Fronde*, was also the subject of several profiles and the author of many travel narratives published in other, less overtly feminist, journals.

These female explorers were also co-opted by various governmental or scholarly bodies to report on their travels, and they earned several awards and honors for their work. Mme Massieu belonged to the Society of Commercial Geography and regularly reported on her voyages in its bulletin. She also helped to organize the Congress of the Geographical Societies of Marseille, was well enough known as an explorer to merit a column in the *Annales de Géographie*, and was asked by the Minister of Public Education to detail her trip across Indo-China in a book for the general public. In 1906 she was honored as a

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17 Ibid.
19 For example, "Madame Myriam Harry en Tunisie," *Femina* (15 February 1910): 100.
Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur.\textsuperscript{20} Meanwhile, Du Gast had a street named for her in Ménilmontant, the Rue Crespin-du-Gast. Harry won the Premier Prix Femina in 1904, an annual prize of one thousand francs given to a female author of a work of fiction; in 1909, she made the list of the forty most influential female writers compiled by the readers of Femina.\textsuperscript{21} Like Massieu, she was later named a Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur. Mme Jean Pomerol, another explorer-type, and the author of many travel narratives, published several books, including scholarly theses on the religious sects of the Sahara.\textsuperscript{22} She also expressed an interest in economic and political matters, writing to the Society of Commercial Geography to discuss ways to make French goods more readily available to the colonies.\textsuperscript{23} Other women identified as explorers also published books based on their experiences, including Mme Marie de Ujfalvy-Bourdon's Voyage d'une parisienne dans l'Himalaya occidental (The Travels of a 'Parisienne' across the Western Himalayas) and Massieu's Comment j'ai parcouru l'Indo-Chine (How I Crossed Indo-China).\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{20} For information on Massieu see, Marie-Victoire Louis, "La femme explorateur" La Fronde (February 5,6,7 1899): 2, "Mme. Massieu," Femina (15 February 1906): 82-83, and "Indo-Chine française. Voyages de Mme Massieu et de M. Debay," Annales de géographie 6, no. 28 (1897): 378.


\textsuperscript{23} Neron, "Souvenirs," 1.

\textsuperscript{24} The publication of these books are noted in P. Verrier, "Une voyageuse," 4, and in "Mme Massieu," Femina (15 February 1906): 82-83. Bibliographic Information: Marie de Ujfalvy-Bourdon, Voyage d'une parisienne dans l'Himalaya occidental (Paris, 1887); Isabelle Massieu, Comment j'ai parcouru l'Indo-Chine: Birmanie, États Shans, Siam, Tonkin, Laos, préface de M. F. Brunetière, (Paris, 1901),
These women undoubtedly benefited from their privileged class position, as eccentricities of this sort were more acceptable for a woman of the bourgeoisie or upper bourgeoisie than for the local shop-girl. Having money also made many of their eccentricities possible; it allowed them to travel frequently and in style while also maintaining comfortable and independent living situations back in Paris. For example, an article on Mme Pomerol described her apartment on the Rue de Babylone as full of souvenirs from her many trips around the world, including "Algerian wall hangings, prayer carpets and their many accompaniments, crude pottery, finely woven mats, [and] braided baskets made by the women of the deserts."  

Pomerol also brought back a young Arab servant, who served her and Marie Louise Neron (the author of the article) tea while they talked of her travels overseas. Descriptions of unusual and bohemian apartments were fairly common in these narratives. Mme Massieu's Parisian abode was described as "littered with souvenirs, object's d'art, and rare and unusual trinkets." 

These women spoke of their travel as a contribution to the French empire and were recognized for that work. Their published works helped to educate the public about the empire and fostered an interest in the colonies. They also helped to promote colonial travel and tourism and served as influential members of a variety of organizations centered around geographical exploration and colonialism.

These female explorers also frequently wrote of their efforts to educate the indigenous residents of the colonies about the benefits of French rule. In particular, they claimed to be able to connect meaningfully with indigenous women and children in ways that men could not. Mme Pomerol was very interested in the status of women and children and spent a number of years in close contact with several groups of African women. Like many other authors, she proclaimed that, despite their

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25 Neron, "Une exploratrice," 1.
26 Ibid.
27 "Mme Massieu," 82.
differences, all of the women she met on her travels embraced her, saying: "You are our sister." . . . Great ladies and desert princesses proclaimed it with the same innocence as the dancers or the camel herders' daughters." Mme Du Gast also described her work with local women, handing out medicines and candy in the tiniest hamlets.

The oft-proclaimed "sisterly bonds" between these female explorers and native women did not always foster an increase in cultural sensitivity. Most of the former seemed to accept unquestioningly the underlying assumptions upon which the "civilizing mission" and imperialism more generally were based—that is, that the local populations of the French Empire had previously possessed a culture and society that were backwards, irrational, and pre-modern, and that they would benefit from the forceful imposition of French rule. In fact, the French women wrote with great pride of their efforts to cement that rule. Mme Massieu noted that, after completing a trip through Morocco, she experienced "a childlike joy and a spark of pride knowing that the tricolor floats once again in these regions." Mme Du Gast was also eager to help the French government gain influence in the same region. After describing the ambivalence felt by most residents about the benefits of French rule, she wrote that, after eleven months of travel in the countryside, she felt she had improved the image of France, the key to this task being: "a nice horse, a calm demeanor, authority and generosity." Speaking of her imminent return to the Moroccan countryside, she stated that she would try "to the best of my ability, to continue this useful enterprise and to succeed finally in spreading across Morocco the influence of our

29 Ibid.
31 Many of these narratives were littered with racist stereotypes and derogatory comments regarding indigenous people. For examples, see Neron, "Souvenirs d'une voyageuse,," 1, and Pomerol, "Femmes du désert," 288
32 Massieu, "Mme Massieu," 83.
33 Du Gast, "Pourquoi je suis … " 384.
Du Gast also attended the Algeciras Conference, where one admirer writing in *Femina* claimed that, "It is not useless to hope that there, where the diplomats have not been able to succeed, the diplomacy of a woman might be able to."35

These explorers distinguished themselves from the majority of female authors of travel narratives by flouting the rules governing a white woman's conduct and appearance when abroad. Despite this, they were praised in many circles: within the pages of the women's press, in the literary world, in the world of travel and exploration, and among supporters of the colonial cause.

Support for the Third Republic was high throughout the women's press in this period. Even explicitly feminist publications such as *La Fronde* made sure to proclaim their desire to serve the needs of the state. This was particularly important in a period where women were working to gain more social and legal rights. Showcasing their devotion to the goals of the Third Republic, in this case colonial expansion, may have helped to lessen the backlash against the new models of female behavior becoming popular at this time and their perceived contribution to the breakdown of bourgeois family values, the declining birth rate, and the degeneration of the French race.36

By embracing the colonial cause whole-heartedly and explicitly framing their travel as a service to the state, these explorers were able to push the boundaries of acceptable behavior for women. By portraying their travel as a contribution to something greater than themselves, by helping to educate the female reading public about the empire, and by trumpeting the importance of women's work in empire building, they were able not only to highlight the role that women could play in the state, they made their own rejection of bourgeois domesticity more palatable. When they became explorers rather than travelers, they created new opportunities for themselves—and yet, as they

34 Ibid.
loosened the bonds of their own social roles, they strengthened those of imperial rule.