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An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie, and Sexuality

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SECTION 1
SEXUALITY AND EMOTION

An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie, and Sexuality. By Jill Fields (Berkeley, University of California University Press, 2007. xvi plus 375 pp. $21.95paperback).

In her remarkable book, *An Intimate Affair: Women, Lingerie, and Sexuality*, Jill Fields has written an impressively wide-ranging history. She sets herself the daunting task of exploring "the history of undergarments in modern America both as manufactured objects and cultural icons, intertwining their fabrication and distribution as mass-produced goods and objects of material culture with their construction and circulation as representations of the female body and producers of meaning"(5). And she succeeds. While most historians of fashion, sexuality and the body focus on either consumption or production, Fields studies them in tandem and in a way that never wanders far from critical issues of power. In fact, she argues, in the early twentieth century, a new transnational "fashion-*industrial complex*" took hold as a result of the second industrial revolution. Just as garment workers stitched undergarments, piece by piece, Fields stitches together a complex, inter-disciplinary secondary literature with disparate and copious pieces of documentary evidence including oral histories, popular movies, fashion magazines, novels, trade journals, advertisements and material artifacts. Amply and beautifully illustrated, it opens with four histories of specific undergarments: drawers, corsets, bras, and black lingerie, then shifts to thematic analyses of advertising, the garment industry, and Christian Dior's New Look, with a closing overview of "feminist intimate apparel art." At times, the breadth of Fields' research and ideas make for difficult going and the overall narrative is a bit choppy, but taking one's time with this book is well worth the effort.

Though Fields presents a chronological narrative, each chapter puts forward a complex, self-contained thesis that merits close reading. In the first chapter, "Drawers," Fields explains that in the nineteenth century, when women first began wearing divided garments, open drawers demarcated gender difference (men wore closed drawers) as well as both modesty (open drawers presented no scandal to "passionless" women) and eroticism (once married, sexual accessibility). But by the 1920s, closed drawers became pro forma. Why the shift? Fields, surveying everything from extant undergarments to *silent films*, argues that modern notions of female sexuality and the New Woman made open drawers risqué. Similarly, in her analyses of "Corset and Girdles," she argues that as twentieth century social changes decreased the "need" for women to wear corsets, manufacturers quickly developed new rationales rooted in science, race and gender in order to protect and advance their profits. Using niche marketing, standardized sizing and corset saleswomen, manufacturers campaigned against the "corsetless evil." Where corsets once stood guard against "moral turpitude," they now offered protection against aging, ill-health, figure flaws and confusion with the uncivilized, "thick" bodies of the racially impure.

"Brassiers," which Fields states are "a twentieth century garment," details the evolution of the garment from corset covers and camisoles to the introduction

of cup sizing in the 1930s and the Maidenform padded bras of the 1940s (81). Highlighting the relationship between "pin-up girls," Hollywood glamour and young GIs overseas, Fields argues that brassieres fetishized large, firm, separated, uplifted breasts but with the right bra any woman could wield the "illusionist's power to captivate." In doing so, women won not only male attention but also since eroticism had shifted from "breasts to sweater to glamour," they now had "a method to enhance their power as a force to be reckoned with in themselves" (112).

Fields' treatment of black lingerie ranges from a discussion of the historically contingent relationship between nineteenth century mourning clothes, death and sex to a detailed exploration of twentieth century "cultural constructions of blackness, black female sexuality, and black clothing" all to show its specific historical meanings and changes in them over time (133). Several mini-histories could stand alone within this chapter including sections on Saartjie Baartman (the Hottentot Venus), the history of black lingerie in popular film, and the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan, Freud and Bataille, but standing at the center of it all is a provocative discussion of black lingerie's racialized content both in its production and consumption

In the final three chapters and Epilogue, Fields focuses more exclusively on issues of representation. "Invisible Women" highlights the way undergarment advertisers excised the female body from their copy (via cutouts, silhouettes, partial bodies, etc.) which shifted "the sign away from the body," so that "lingerie then becomes anthropomorphized" (216). As a result, women, whether the missing body in the ads, the "female spectator" (and her potential lesbian desire) or the garment worker and her harsh work conditions, were replaced by the increasingly "fetishized" lingerie (216). "The Production of Glamour" explicates the key role of garment workers in both the literal production of lingerie and also their delight as well as political uses of their own fashions. Fields points out that "intimate apparel workers who made public claims to glamour and fashion blurred . . . distinctions [between the fashion and garment industries] and disrupted naturalizing ideologies that limited workers' ability to shape the cultural meaning of the garments they made" (255).

Fields titles her final chapter "Return of the Repressed (Waist), 1947–1952" to demonstrate the limiting, conservative nature of Christian Dior's New Look (even as women mediated this design in ways that also offered them much pleasure), a particularly sad turn from the more embodied, robust World War II fashions. She contends, "the New Look succeeded because of a number of French and American postwar economic and labor concerns; reformulating gender distinctions and relying on conventions of the female bodily display became a means of resolving the difficult transition to a peacetime economy and culture" (258). The Epilogue builds on this political angle with an insightful, lively overview of "feminist intimate apparel art." Even with the tremendous efforts of the feminist movement over the last forty years, Fields suggests that "the contradictions persist as feminists seek greater joys and pleasures by striving to understand, contest, and transcend the appeal of feminized material culture and its power to bind women in many ways" (288).

In addition to its many strengths, Fields' study does have weaknesses. First, she sometimes makes direct, causal links between specific alterations in inti-

mate apparel and American women's social or political status that require more explanation. For example, in regard to drawers, she suggests that "when women publically asserted their own claims to sexual pleasure, power, and economic independence, an open crotch was no longer respectable."(42) While it might make intuitive sense, the explicit interconnections lack explication. My second concern is that though Fields aimed to "show how women's efforts to shape their lives and their bodies according to their own desires and designs," we actually find out little about women's actual feelings or perceptions about intimate apparel or their bodies (14). Thus, women's subjectivity remains an area ripe for further study. In the meantime, best to enjoy this wonderful volume.

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European Sexualities, 1400–1800. By Katherine Crawford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. ix plus 246 pp.).

This book is part of the Cambridge New Approaches to European History series, which aims to survey the scholarship on various topics and themes in the region's history, and to contextualize them in relation to wider international debates. The intended audience is both undergraduates and newcomers to the field at higher levels (for example, myself, as an Africanist, who often has to rely upon second or third hand accounts of aspects of European history for the background for my research on the colonial encounter in Africa). This book offers a succinct, clearly written short-cut directly into the wealth of research and the wide array of debates around sexuality in a period of great transformations.

The book will also be of value to those trained in traditional approaches to historical research and who may not appreciate the ways that sexuality (and gender relations) affected, and were affected by, other big social constructions like class, politics, and religion. The introductory chapter provides a compelling justification of the need to incorporate questions about sexuality into historical research of all kinds, with due cautions about the methodological difficulties that such questioning entails. Each chapter ends with a bibliographic essay that not only recommends key texts but reveals the great range of sources needed to tease out meaning from very subtle and often hidden discourses about specific sexual practices and sexualized spaces.

The pioneers in the field, notably Michel Foucault, are acknowledged with both praise and criticism of their contributions mostly in the 1970s and 80s. Author Katherine Crawford (an Associate Professor at Vanderbilt University and a specialist in early modern France) then quickly moves on to discuss the more rigorous and sophisticated scholarship that has arisen since the 1990s. Chapters are organized thematically: marriage and family, religion, science, crime, and deviancy. This does create for considerable overlap, if not repetition. It is also immediately apparent to me as an Africanist that there is an entire chapter (theme) missing. Not unlike Foucault, Crawford has neglected to consider scholarship that explores the ways that sexuality is implicated in the construction of racial and ethnic difference.