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## BOOK REVIEW

**White Queen: May French-Sheldon and the Imperial Origins of American Feminist Identity.**  
Tracey Jean Boisseau. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004. 258 pp.

The little-known career of May French-Sheldon brought her to East, Central, and West Africa, launched an enduring stereotype of the sassy, unflappable female adventurer, and spawned a legion of American admirers for over three decades. French-Sheldon's unique strength was her uncanny ability to re-package and re-convey her message to the dominant trends of times at the turn of the last century. In her insightful, interdisciplinary text that is part biography, part social history, part feminist theory, Tracy Jean Boisseau illuminates how supposedly philanthropic language and goals may cover a multitude of selfish interests, and how insidiously these interests can intersect with contested meanings about race and gender. The text is a welcome blend of rich historical texture and theoretical exposition that moves the narrative beyond the social location of one privileged woman and her interactions with a marginalized, colonialized world to broader issues of feminist and post-colonial theory.

The book is divided into three chronological periods, each corresponding with an era of French-Sheldon's diverse and influential career. Part I focuses on French-Sheldon's 1891 expedition to Kilimanjaro and her "discovery" of Lake Chala. Taking very seriously her not-entirely-accurate title as "the first woman explorer of Africa," French-Sheldon relied upon an elaborate costume modeled on European royalty to craft a version of American femininity as "White Queen" in order to open doors to the hierarchical world of East African colonial society. Her courtship of local officials, including those from the Middle East, drew upon a savvy construction of gendered identity that relied upon neo-bourgeois notions of "respectability," including her status as a married woman and a Fellow of the London Royal Geographic Society. "French-Sheldon claimed to have made a significant contribution to the civilizing of Africans merely by being a perfect lady in front of them" (72), but Boisseau also mines French-Sheldon's journals and published accounts to illustrate horrifically uncomfortable encounters where the intrepid explorer bullied, extorted, and amputated Africans in order to gain access to the "gifts" she felt she deserved. Chapter 4 and 5 provide an extremely penetrating and useful analysis of the strategic rhetoric used by French-Sheldon to simultaneously amplify eroticism of Africans while emasculating African men and rendering African women to an inhuman category of pitiable victims.

French-Sheldon capitalized on her image as an intrepid and respected explorer in the second phase of her international career, chronicled in Part II. Boisseau argues that French-Sheldon worked as a double-agent for both the British press and King Leopold II of Belgium based on French-Sheldon's lack of corroboration with Protestant missionary reports of atrocities in the Congo. Despite ample evidence of French-Sheldon's cold appraisal and detached paternalistic perceptions of East Africans in the first section of the text, "this eagle-eyed overseer of the colonial condition found no atrocities to report and only a praiseworthy system of colonial overlordship in place" (116). In 1904, she parlayed her knowledge of the *concessionaire* system gained in rubber-producing central Africa to buy 12,000 square miles of rainforest in Liberia for a shadily-funded endeavor she called Americo-Liberian Industrial Company. Intent on relocating black Americans to work the land, French-Sheldon's plans were eventually shut down by the Liberian legislature due to her underestimation of the Liberian elite and her frank insensitivity to the issue of indentured servitude among recently freed slaves. In 1921, her devotion to the Belgian court was finally rewarded when she was awarded *la Croix de Chevalier de l'Order de la Couronne*, the equivalent of a knighthood for her legacy as an explorer and humanitarian, an honor she would bank on heavily in the next phase of her career as an emerging American feminist.

Part III contextualizes the most enduring legacy of French-Sheldon's career: her impact on the shaping of American feminism and the imperialist images that surrounded and constructed French-Sheldon as a feminist heroine. While Chapters 9 and 10's specific focus on "drag," female fetishism, and the development of twentieth-century American feminist subjectivity might not be entirely appealing to all scholars of African Studies, Chapter 8 and the Conclusion effectively contextualize a story of racial

privilege, imperial power, and colonial nostalgia for a pacified Africa that endures to this day. Boisseau concentrates on how French-Sheldon herself became a “desiring subject” (205), and how this innovation of identity re-framed the emerging “lifestyle” (144) for new or modern American womanhood in the 1910s and 1920s. Adored by young women seeking adventurous American heroines during the “flapper” era, French-Sheldon forged the latter years of her career through new forms of mass media. Her deliberately crafted public persona combined a “woman’s point of view” and the exoticism of her African experiences to draw huge audiences to hear her speak on the Modern American Woman. Despite her avoidance of feminist politics in any specific sense, French-Sheldon’s used her trademark “overblown self-presentation” (148) to invent herself anew. Boisseau highlights journalist reports from this period that exaggerate the numbers of African porters under French-Sheldon’s hire for the 1891 expedition from one hundred and fifty to five hundred. According to Boisseau’s analysis, “French-Sheldon’s fantasy of herself in Africa . . . reaffirmed race and national distinctions as a way of compensating for violations of gender hierarchy” (180). Even in America, the experience of empire played a distinct role in providing a structure and language for the middle-class. An oversight of an otherwise amazing section on the emergence of a specifically American identity, within the text Boisseau only very briefly contextualizes the impacts of perpetuating these paternalistic and white-supremacist views for African-Americans living at this time and later (59, 150).

*White Queen* provides a fascinating study of a largely overlooked American figure that would be a useful text for graduate seminars examining the complicated nature(s) of post-colonial power dynamics. The text would also be suitable for graduate level seminars on the history of feminist thought in the United States.

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