

## INTRODUCTION

We are proud to present the first issue, volume XXIV, of our free-access electronic journal, *Excavatio*. The AIZEN, the sponsor of this review, is an international association, so it is important that the articles we include in *Excavatio* be disseminated to a wide audience. Our mandate involves making available the latest research from our members, not only on Zola and naturalism, but also on naturalism in areas where our conferences are held. This goal can be accomplished most effectively by electronic means. Volume XXIV of *Excavatio*, titled “Naturalism and Neo-Naturalism in the United States, the South, and Louisiana,” focuses on the location of our most recent conference, held at the University of New Orleans in March 2014.

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The articles in this issue cover three major areas: Studies on women in naturalist and neo-naturalist fiction, naturalism on the screen, and the reception of Zola. This volume opens up new areas of exploration in naturalist studies, with its emphasis on female naturalist authors and filmmakers. Traditional naturalist literary forms are examined, such as the novel and the theatre. But a number of these papers move us well into the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries with their discussion of film, television series, and reality shows, examining the connections of these works to naturalist representation. The articles in this volume are of great interest since they promote, through interdisciplinary approaches, a new sense of naturalism in progress, aesthetic principles which work their way into the porous boundaries of the text, and are then transformed and absorbed into new texts and contexts.

This critical concern is especially significant, since the mandate of *Excavatio* has always been to discover material about Zola and naturalism that remains hidden or unexamined. The authors have investigated the situation of little-known female naturalist writers, many of them repressed and shut out of literary circles during their lives. Louisiana, significantly, produced two rare nineteenth-century creole naturalist writers using the French language in North America, Alfred Mercier, who is represented in the present volume of *Excavatio*, and Georges Dessommes.<sup>1</sup> These articles make it possible for readers to discover the way information about Zola, naturalism, and the Dreyfus Affair was disseminated in the US through literary journals and the mass press. The newest angle on naturalism is the way its representational techniques have insinuated themselves into the American media, not only in film, but on television and in reality shows, the latter particularly in Louisiana. *Excavatio* makes this material of regional interest easily accessible to researchers all over the world.

The section on female naturalist writers provides a gendered perspective, revealing that these groundbreaking writers were not initially considered full-fledged naturalists nor accepted into the circles of the new literary current. They were considered “regionalists,” “novelists of manners,” or “local colorists” – in essence, “women writers.” And still today, in the context of traditional literary history, their names are rarely mentioned along with the names of generally accepted naturalist writers: Theodore Dreiser, Frank Norris, Jack London and Stephen Crane.

However, a number of these women have since received the recognition they deserve: Edith Wharton, Willa Cather and Kate Chopin, to name a few. Beyond their status as female authors, some are further marginalized as Afro-American writers. Zora Neale Hurston, for example, has more recently come to the attention of literary scholars examining her

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<sup>1</sup> There is an article on this latter writer in *Excavatio*, vol. 11 (1998): “Émile Zola en Louisiane: Georges Dessommes, naturaliste créole,” by Ida Eve Heckenbach (188-94).

fiction from the angle of eco-criticism, and now naturalism. These female writers, many from the South, offer a different perspective, with themes related to women's issues surfacing in their writing. The traditionally circumscribed situation of women in American culture and beyond – in Spain, for example –, not only for them personally as gendered voices, but also in their creation of fictional accounts, requires the use of alternate modes of expression to enter a male-dominated discourse.

The section focused specifically on Louisiana features naturalist representation in various media, but brings us first to the nineteenth century in the regional literary context of Louisiana through an examination of Alfred Mercier's works. Surprisingly, there was a rich literary life in French-speaking Louisiana from the late eighteenth century, through the nineteenth, with the arrival of French settlers and the deportation of Acadians from Nova Scotia, Canada. French-speaking populations later came from the Caribbean, particularly from Haiti. At the end of the nineteenth century and the turn of the twentieth, naturalist writers using the French language, as the first generation born to French settlers (called "Créoles"), would have been as marginalized as American female naturalist writers. The issues that concerned a writer like Alfred Mercier were specific to this milieu, such as racism and the way of life of the Créoles in a region quickly becoming Americanized and Anglicized. Mercier, in fact, had first-hand experience with issues related to plantation life along the Mississippi in the vicinity of New Orleans. Other themes extended the interests of Zolian naturalism, such as the struggle for social justice.

The link between Zola and Louisiana is again forged in the study of his little-known work *L'Inondation*, which focuses on the naturalist theme of disaster in comparison with a selection of recent Southern films about floods. Emphasis is placed on Hurricane Katrina which devastated the suburbs of New Orleans. In these films, the importance and meaning surfaces of yet another medium embraced by Zola: the photograph. The consideration of naturalist representation in these media leads to a discussion of naturalism in contemporary television series and reality shows, with Louisiana as their setting. One examines naturalist techniques and themes, such as survival of the fittest, the eaters and the eaten, in the swamps and bayous; the other deals with disarray and conflict reigning in New Orleans in the aftermath of its hurricane. The originality of this section lies in its revelation of Zola as a precursor of the most current forms of representation in the twenty-first century, proposing a theoretical basis for naturalism in film and the media.

The last section in this volume has to do with the reception of Zola and naturalism in the United States – in English-language newspapers and literary magazines, which were an important part of everyday life at the turn of the twentieth century, parallel to the role played by French-language newspapers and literary journals, including Mercier's *L'Athénée*, in Louisiana. This was the age of the mass press, when most citizens received their information in print. It is apparent that the Dreyfus Affair, as it was reported in this part of the South, was understood entirely through the prism of newspaper journalism. Before and following Zola's publication of his open letter *J'accuse...!* in the Parisian *L'Aurore* in 1898, there was a difference in reaction in Louisiana in various sectors of society; criticism differed, for instance, between an English-language newspaper, such as *The Daily Picayune*, and the Francophone paper *L'Abeille de la Nouvelle Orléans*. The press further played a major role in the reception and dissemination of Zola's fictional writing in the United States during the turn of the twentieth century. The little-known importance of Samuel S. McClure in this process is brought to light, who, alongside William Dean Howells, the Dean of American Letters, published Zola and other European and American authors, in their respective literary journals, *McClure's Magazine* and *The Atlantic Monthly*.

Even earlier than these efforts to acquaint the American public with Zola's fictional work in literary journals came an adaptation in English of Zola's theatrical version of *L'Assommoir* for the New York stage, a few months after its premiere in Paris at the Théâtre de l'Ambigu in 1879. Americans became familiar with Zola's name, the new direction of French cultural production, and the basic principles of naturalism. The process of adapting

*L'Assommoir* for the Olympic Theatre revealed aesthetic affinities and discrepancies between French and American culture. Naturally, the New York theatrical event was advertised and immediately reported in newspapers all over North America.

Interestingly, Willa Cather, a female author considered in Donna Campbell's study, worked for Samuel McClure, who brought her into contact with Zola's work and naturalism. American women naturalists, such as Edith Wharton, Kate Chopin, Willa Cather, and Ellen Glasgow, and a larger group of lesser-known female naturalists, could be classified as either "classical" or "unruly" in their depiction of female characters. They had recourse to a range of cultural forms, from journalism to fiction and even film. In the works of these writers, naturalist themes broaden to include nationalism and issues related to the female body, such as childbirth and abortion, in addition to the classic themes of determinism. These women writers use naturalist principals to forge an identity for themselves, at a time when it is difficult for them to find a credible authorial voice.

Indeed, it becomes clear that the search for a female identity, one that is not imposed from the outside, finds expression in the work of women naturalists. In the Southern US and in regions of Spain, Brittany Powell Kennedy identifies the desire to transgress norms that define woman as exemplar of culture in her geographic region. For example, Kate Chopin and Emilia Pardo Bazán (Galicia) both wish to defy the implicit connection between woman and nature to destabilize ideas of female and regional exceptionality in the South and in Spain, respectively. These female naturalist authors, and more recent writers such as Carme Riera (Catalonia) and Gloria Naylor (Southern US), forge a transgressive femininity, a rejection that destabilizes not only the feminine, but the regional.

Elizabeth Miller Lewis introduces us to another unexplored theme present in the work of American women naturalist writers: the role of social dance in the development of identity from a feminine perspective. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, regional social dances were central to the evolution and definition of race, ethnicity and nationality. In this study, it becomes apparent that dance signified both social cohesion and transformations in class status. Kate Chopin and Willa Cather pay special attention in their fiction to the social power of dance, as it serves as a catalyst for a degree of female autonomy. Dance can be understood within the paradigm of naturalist determinism, since it forms spaces where strictures placed on characters' lives can be overcome through the sense of agency they acquire in the dance.

Andrea Panzeca deals with a Southern female writer of color, Zora Neale Hurston, whose novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, could be considered Eco-naturalist, with its emphasis on the female main character's return to and near-spiritual connection with central Florida. It is a region associated with freedom, bordering on the violent former slave states and the Florida panhandle, with their Jim Crow laws, while the events and people of her life pass by in succession. The various natural features – a pear tree, for instance, where she had an early dream showing her the way through her life and the rivers leading to new stages along the route – figure prominently in this novel and carry significance for a life otherwise determined by others. The narrator opens the novel by declaring that men follow horizons and that women do what they must to realize their dreams.

Like Kate Chopin, Alfred Mercier wrote from the Francophone cultural milieu of Louisiana in the late nineteenth century. However, he studied medicine in France and, on the side, kept up a keen interest in cultural events on the Continent. He became acquainted with Zola and his naturalist school, as well as with the issues raised by the Dreyfus Affair. Guri Ellen Barstad discusses two of Mercier's novels that explore themes found in Zola's fiction: the questionable practice of celibacy for priests in *La Fille du Prêtre* (1877) and social justice in the wake of the Civil War in *L'Habitation Saint-Ybars* (1881). The latter deals with the slave-master relationship and the transition in the South from a traditional to a modern, more egalitarian order. From the angle of Kierkegaard's concept of a "life lived in truth," Mercier's characters seem torn between the objective truth of the society in which they live and the Enlightenment "truth" that resulted in the Bill of Rights.

Juliana Starr brings us to contemporary Louisiana, but through Zola to recent films made about the natural catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina, which flooded huge swaths of New Orleans, and from which the city is still recovering: the documentary *Trouble the Water* (2008), in which an aspiring rap artist turns a camcorder on herself and her neighbors trapped in their attic; and *Low and Behold* (2006), which echoes an important plot element of both of the other stories – the recovery of a photograph that functions as a balm in the face of tremendous loss. What surfaces in both films and in Zola’s flood stories are issues of trauma, loss and memory. Zola was one of the first writers to grasp the psychological potential and pathos stemming from the aftermath of natural disaster.

While Zola’s *Germinal* is seen as a model for stories of natural disaster, it is also exemplary for showing lower-class families influenced by their milieu, according to the principle of naturalist determinism. This is the basic situation of two contemporary reality shows set in Louisiana: *Duck Dynasty* and *Swamp People*. Elizabeth Emery explores the naturalist aesthetics of representation that informs these shows. They follow the classic “reality TV” formula of *Survivor* or *Big Brother* – based on competition and elimination – but are presented as “anthropological” case studies of families. While reality television producers do not claim the extreme scientific inspiration evident in Zola’s naturalist manifestoes, they exhibit a number of resemblances with naturalistic principles and techniques, and are further underwritten by the commercial imperative of entertaining a mostly middle-class public.

Ronald Geerts examines yet another TV series filmed in Louisiana, this one in New Orleans: a pseudo-reality show depicting the lives of people affected by Hurricane Katrina in the Faubourg Tremé. Created by David Simon of *The Wire*, the series has become associated with the word “naturalism.” The characterization and narrative seem impressionistic on some level, providing space for reflection on the term “naturalism” itself in a situation where not everything is true to historical reality, nor is it purely fictional. The characters actually represent different voices (of a political view or class) that go beyond their individuality. The recourse to “excess” and other naturalist or melodramatic strategies enable the narrative to maintain a delicate balance between telling a story about a devastating reality and telling a story about despair and resilience. The series shows what could – and maybe should – have happened after the disastrous hurricane, instead of what did happen.

In a further exploration of the influence of Zola and naturalism in Louisiana, and New Orleans in particular, Mark D. Kuss consulted reports on the various stages of the Dreyfus Affair in leading newspapers in Louisiana, mainly in New Orleans, and in both French and English: from the beginning of the Affair, in 1894; just after the publication of Zola’s *J’accuse...*! in France, in 1898, noting that Zola was already known as a scandalous novelist on an international scale and an outspoken journalist; and, finally, through the detention of Alfred Dreyfus on Devil’s Island, his rehabilitation, and after. The question of Anti-Semitism vs. nativism, which was inflaming France in the wake of the Affair, did not have the same immediate effect in New Orleans, since the Jewish and French communities there had chosen assimilation rather than indignation, once Louisiana became part of the United States (1804) and following the Civil War (1861). Former slaves and other people of color were not as easily integrated. While foreigners who arrived in New Orleans opted for allegiance to America rather than their native country, the price to be paid for silence would be high.

In a broader arena, Robert April examines the specific roles played by William Dean Howells and Samuel S. McClure in the reception of Zola in the US during the turn of the twentieth century. As editor of *The Atlantic Monthly*, William Dean Howells published Zola’s fiction, evaluating it critically from the perspective of its moral value, with regard to indecency of language and the action of the characters. But, as founder of a literary syndicate, Samuel S. McClure is now recognized for having disseminated Zola’s serialized fiction widely to a reading public and that of other foreign and American authors. April illuminates the point that this was a first step in the acceptance of Zola’s work by first-rate literary critics such as

William Dean Howells.

Geneviève de Viveiros reports on the American adaptation of Zola's play *L'Assommoir*, created originally with the collaboration of William Busnach and Octave Gastineau and premiered in January of 1879 in Paris, and staged in New York City just four months later at the Olympic Theatre. Augustin Daly, who brought the play to America, insisted that the audience experience the actual lives of working-class Parisians and their misery, making those scenes more lively, more emotional and more violent than the French version. While definitely naturalistic, the New York version verges on the melodramatic in its vindication of temperance. In Paris, the critics reacted against the play's lack of dramatic artistry, calling it a "circus spectacle" and an "exhibition of debauchery"; in New York, the complaints focused on the exaltation of the body and the physical aspect of the performance. In turn, the transgressive and scandalous components of naturalism contributed to the widespread dissemination of Zola's works not only in France, but in the US.

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