ABSTRACT

EXPLORING THE SCATTERED TRACES OF A FLEMISH LADY WHO WENT TRAVELLING THROUGH 19TH CENTURY BRAZIL

Sara Geets, Centre for Women’s Studies, University of Antwerp

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In 1857 at age 59, a Flemish woman called Marie Van Langendonck packed her bags and left for Brazil in the company of her two eldest sons. Up until that moment she had been what one would consider a typically 19th century bourgeois: she doted on romantic writers, mingled with artists and politicians, addressed the authorities on political issues, even had several albums of poetry published.

In Brazil, straight out of her comfortable European ‘salon’, she suddenly found herself living in the jungle, surrounded by snakes and jaguars, with a colony of deported criminals from ‘the old continent’ as her nearest neighbours. She solicited an audience with the Emperor Don Pedro II and begged him to promote the founding of a Belgian colony in the south of the country. A number of projects she undertook left her ruined, her sons became entangled in scandals on land speculation, and after 1874 we lose all trace of her.

In this paper I will bring together the results of two years of intensive research that lead me through many different fields, locations, perspectives and disciplines. I will pay attention to both the difficulties in historically reconstructing the life of Marie Van Langendonck, and the numerous epistemological and other questions that rose along the way.

For a number of different reasons this is not a classical biography. To this day Marie Van Langendonck is virtually unknown as a historical figure in Belgium. I started from a strong narrativist perspective in putting the pieces of her puzzle together, inspired by the works of feminist scholars such as Sidonie Smith and Mineke Bosch. Apart from the actual result of that project, this paper will also tell the story of a young scholar trying to maintain that fragile balance between distance and commitment to her subject.