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Abstract

Review of Amy L. Hubbell. *Remembering French Algeria: Pieds-Noirs, Identity, and Exile*. Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 2015.

Keywords

Pieds-Noirs, Memory, Trauma, Collective Amnesia, Algeria/France.

Amy L. Hubbell. *Remembering French Algeria: Pieds-Noirs, Identity, and Exile*. Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 2015. xiii + 277 pp.

In *Remembering French Algeria: Pieds-Noirs, Identity, and Exile*, Amy Hubbell explores the varied historical and psychological forces at work in Pied-Noir narratives of post-revolutionary Algeria. Indeed, between 1954 and 1963, thousands of French settlers were driven out of Algeria. After suffering this violent expulsion, they were subjected to harsh discrimination upon their arrival in France. From these incidents, fraught with anxiety and ambiguity, derive accounts that aim to preserve memories and represent French Algeria as experienced by the Pied-Noir population. Their discourse, Hubbell suggests, exemplifies the controversial and deeply divisive nature of Algerian independence, as well as a collective historical amnesia regarding the French-Algerian war that, to varying degrees, concerns and continues to affect both countries. According to Hubbell, an early historical misrepresentation of this community is rooted in the pejorative conception of the term ‘Pied-Noir.’ Coined by the metropolitan French who wanted to distinguish themselves from the new arrivals, the term was initially intended to designate French settlers at the time of their forced return to France. However, this appellation has been widely used retroactively, even by historians, as a general term referring to any and all French settlers, even those living in Algeria long before the War of Independence. This historical slippage, Hubbell sustains, adds to the confusion between the present and the past and to the Pied-Noir’s experience of an often split identity. Furthermore, Hubbell remarks, the denomination of ‘Pied-Noir’ conveniently erases both the word ‘French’ and ‘Algeria’ from the collective memory. The omission of the first word advantageously disencumbers France entirely of its responsibility and shifts the blame onto the Pieds-Noirs themselves. The omission of the second word similarly reinforces the collective amnesia regarding the French-Algerian war and erases the French settlers’ affiliation with Algeria. Hubbell deduces: “In short, the Pieds-Noirs are no longer considered French, the French are no longer related to Algeria, and this separation aids in the willful forgetting of the lost war” (18). Entrapped by the conditions of their forced exodus, the inhospitable climate in France upon their arrival, and the impossibility of returning to Algeria, the Pieds-Noirs commit to remembering and preserving their identity and community, and to fighting both France’s refusal to acknowledge the realities of the past and their own tendencies to forget it.

Hubbell interprets their autobiographical writings and films, characterized by loss and nostalgia, according to two different principles of organization: returning and repetition. The urgency to look backward or to return to Algeria is deeply rooted in the articulation of their collective identity. In fact, it is in the common longing for a shared lost homeland that the Pieds-Noirs start to perceive themselves as a community. Repetition and perpetuity also characterize their return, which

Hubbell exemplifies through the myth of Sisyphus, “as a metaphor for the Pied-Noir who continually struggles to bring the past Algeria back to the present in France, all while confronting the futility of this task” (40). Seeking to articulate the trauma associated with their expulsion and unwelcome arrival, the Pieds-Noirs manipulate and fictionalize their memories instead of offering historically accurate accounts. As a result, Hubbell maintains that the return, whether imaginary or factual, can never be fully accomplished, since what is reimagined no longer exists nor corresponds with the realities of present-day Algeria. By creating an imaginary and stable space, the Pied-Noir eventually averts the present to circumvent pain and discomfort. From the very first page, however, Hubbell demonstrates the inadequacies and disadvantages of this approach and indicates that younger generations of Pieds-Noirs resent the consequences of the older generations’ amnesic perspectives. They urge their elders to work through the past in order to find reconciliation, the primary step toward the survivors’ healing as well as an important foundation on which to rebuild the relationship between France and Algeria. In the same vein, Hubbell proposes the alternative viewpoints of authors such as Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Leïla Sebbar, Albert Camus, and Marie Cardinal to demonstrate how the interpretation of French-Algerian relations can be articulated in ways that vary greatly from “the predominant nostalgic re-creation of colonial Algeria” (8).

Remembering French Algeria comprises two parts, entitled “Repeat” and “Return,” each containing three chapters. In part one, Hubbell stresses how repetition, along with nostalgia, are used to recast memories rather than to confront or to integrate trauma into the present. Chapter two evaluates the Pied-Noir’s strategy of repetition as a self-justificatory technique that reorganizes and restores memory in order to heal feelings of guilt. Further developing the notion, chapters three and four explore the various modes of practicing repetition as found in texts by Cardinal and Cixous. In chapters five and six of part two, Hubbell examines a variety of the Pieds-Noirs’ imagined and real returns to Algeria. In order to demonstrate the tautological aspects of their practice, Hubbell shows how these returns, presented as means of relieving feelings of longing for the homeland, also intensify the anxiety of loss. To those narratives, the author juxtaposes Camus, Cardinal, Derrida, and Cixous’ reflections upon and confrontations with the ruins of Algeria that, in different ways, problematize the very concept of returning. Finally, in chapter seven, using the metaphor of an amputated limb that still causes pain even if it is no longer there, Hubbell points to the Pied-Noir community’s failure to “lay the phantom homeland to rest” (228).

In conclusion, this stimulating study very much succeeds in casting a light on the detrimental consequences that historical amnesia and collective and individual denial can potentially have on present and future generations. Hubbell’s sensitive analysis opens new possibilities for a better understanding of collective trauma that engages the reader and encourages further reflection upon the complexity of

the subject matter. *Remembering French Algeria* is a relevant resource and a valuable tool for both specialists in the field of Postcolonial Studies and those with general interests in literature, history, and ethics.

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