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Fiona Barclay. Writing Postcolonial France. Haunting, Literature, and the Maghreb. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2011. xliv + 152 pp.

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Abstract

Review of Fiona Barclay. *Writing Postcolonial France. Haunting, Literature, and the Maghreb*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2011. xliv + 152 pp.

Keywords

haunting, postcolonial, French literature

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The recent proliferation of narratives of memory and collective identity, endorsed by the academic research in the fields of Poststructuralist and Postcolonial studies, has led to a significant increase in the emphasis on and the demonstration of the limits of official national historiographies. As a result, standard dichotomous configurations, i.e. present vs. past, center vs. margins and presence vs. absence, have been challenged. Particularly the trope of haunting, which has become prevalent in contemporary narratives and theorizations, underscores the significance of voids in normative historical reports. The representation of the ghostly quality of the past in its persistently returning nature and the recurrence of haunting accounts have encouraged a shift in perception. The focus has moved beyond the mere acknowledgement of these historical gaps and toward questions of how they should be interpreted collectively, processed, and perhaps even utilized.

It is within this frame that we should read Fiona Barclay's first monograph: *Writing Postcolonial France. Haunting, Literature, and the Maghreb*. In the light of Derrida's work *Specters of Marx*, which advocates for an attentive engagement with ghostly otherness, the spectral trope provides Barclay with an organizing principle for her work and a starting point from which one can envision re-imaginings of the past: "in ways which do not result in the production of sterile, opposing and irreconcilable narratives of individual groups" (xxxv). Barclay's scholarship is distinct from that of her predecessors, which focuses on spectrality within narratives produced by former colonized groups, in that she investigates the encrypted spectral traces that are pervasive in the Hexagon's literary works. While Barclay emphasizes that literature is the ideal art form for capturing the essence of hauntings by allowing a space for the manifestations of and encounter with ghosts, she also stresses the crucial ties between history and literature. For example, in calling attention to the double failure of the French republican model in both its presupposed mission to civilize the colonies and its policies of integration within the metropole, she boldly identifies specific moments in contemporary French history and explains how they were linked to, and in some cases were the direct cause of, detrimental political, legal and ethical repercussions. According to Barclay, the Evian Accords in the aftermath of Algeria's independence in 1962, the riots of 2005, Sarkozy's speech in Dakar in 2007 and the neocolonial policies of *Francafrique* are all interconnected in that they are a reflection of republican French rhetoric's unwillingness to deal with traumatic memories or to include French citizens of North African descent and extra-Hexagonal territories in the formation of France's modern identity. This

argument may not be new, but it is certainly timely, considering Francois Hollande's recent promise to reshape ties with Francophone Africa. Furthermore, the variety of contemporary literature that the author analyzes encourages further exploration, not only of the terms in which the ghostly remnants reveal themselves in these narratives, but most importantly, of whether there is a place for them and of how they can be welcomed, the latter being a question that calls for the readers' reflection on ethics.

Writing Postcolonial France is divided into four chapters, each respectively dealing with a different theme. The first chapter analyzes the colonial lingering of the specter of the exotic in Le Clézio's *Desert*, Dominique Bona's *Malika* and Leïla Sebbar's *Sherazade*. The authors' intentions notwithstanding, Barclay maintains that all of the novels still carry a quality of the Western fascination with exoticism and that Sebbar's fiction is the one that better engages with Derrida's concern with acknowledging and meeting the ghostly alterity. Chapter two deals with one of the darkest episodes in modern French history, the Paris massacre of unarmed Algerian protesters on October 17, 1961. Following the slaughter, at least 100 mutilated bodies were discarded in the river Seine; more than ten thousand demonstrators were herded into the Vél d'Hiv stadium; many of them were later deported and moved to detention camps in Algeria. This horrific and tragic massacre, which French authorities hesitated to investigate or even recognize until 2001, is retraced in Kettane's *Le Sourire de Brahim*, Sebbar's *The Seine Was Read*, Maspero's *Le Figuier* and Daeninckx's *Murder in Memoriam*. Chapter three is devoted to the analysis of Cixous's and Cardinal's personal recollections from childhoods spent in Algeria, respectively in *Les Rêveries de la femme sauvage* and *Au Pays de mes racines*. Having had to leave Algeria in early adulthood, both authors deal with the spectrality of the country by alternating feelings of loss and desire and conflicting perceptions of alterity. Ultimately, Barclay suggests that by inviting the reader to engage with otherness, Cixous successfully creates a welcoming space for it. The final chapter explores Prévost's *Le Passé sous silence* and Bouraoui's *Garçon Manqué* through the lens of Kristeva's notion of abjection and of Guattari and Deleuze's concepts of becomings. Dealing with identity issues and feelings of alienation, Franco-Algerian narrators of both novels operate as the embodiment of postcolonial ghosts, each in their own way posing a threat to the historically constructed French Republican identity. Ultimately, it is the act of writing and expressing these sentiments that seems to create a space in which the narrators are able to articulate the intricacies of the Franco-Algerian identity dichotomy.

In conclusion, by casting a light on new perspectives, *Writing Postcolonial France* is a very convincing analysis that engages the reader and encourages a better understanding of the trope of spectrality as also an individual ethical call

for introspection and more acute self-awareness. *Writing Postcolonial France* is a relevant resource and a valuable tool for specialists in the fields of Postcolonial Studies and Theory and Cultural Studies, as well as for those with general interests in literature and ethics.

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