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Abstract

Review of Nicole Simek. *Hunger and Irony in the French Caribbean: Literature, Theory, and Public*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. ix + 201 pp.

Keywords

hunger, irony, French Caribbean

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In her most recent monograph to date, *Hunger and Irony in the French Caribbean*, Nicole Simek examines the connections between hunger and irony to think through texts from the Antillean islands of Guadeloupe and Martinique and situate them within particular social, political, and ethical considerations. Critical works on irony in Postcolonial Studies, such as Gloria Nne Onyeoziri's *Shaken Wisdom: Irony and Meaning in Postcolonial African Fiction* (2011), have considered its potential to undermine authority and power in the early post-independence period and disrupt hierarchies of meaning in the interpretation of colonial and postcolonial experiences. Simek's perspective intersects with Nne Onyeoziri and other postcolonial critics' attempts to unravel forms of oppression in the circulation, distribution, and recognition of knowledge and systems of meaning in contemporary cultural productions. In *Hunger and Irony*, Simek writes from the Francophone perspective referencing authors such as Maryse Condé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Gisèle Pineau.

Simek understands hunger beyond a simple biological need for nourishment. Instead, the trope of irony reveals hunger's aesthetic appeal and its simultaneous resistance to predominant images of the colonized subject having too little to eat or eating gluttonously. For Simek, there is irony in subverting the primary basic need for food and notions of lack or excess thereof. The trope of irony displaces controlling colonial narratives of hunger and starvation in the context of French Caribbean literature and offers a critical lens that sustains multiple meanings and interpretations of hunger.

Furthermore, the ways Simek reads irony in texts of her corpus have ethical implications with regard to our habits of reading and writing more generally, and in literary and theoretical modes of discourse more specifically. Simek already develops the metaphor of "eating" in *Eating Well, Reading Well: Maryse Condé and the Ethics of Interpretation* (Rodopi, 2007), where she focuses on the possibility for reading and writing to be ethical "eating" practices that inspire openness to difference. *Hunger and Irony* reads as additional chapters to this previous work, suggesting that there is irony in eating, which generates an insatiable hunger for new meanings and interpretations, but which always leaves room for ambiguity and the constant making and unmaking of certainty. By highlighting this irony, Simek proposes new ways of understanding writing and reading habits.

Chapter 1, "Living on the Edge," serves as an introduction to comment on the association between hunger and irony—two terms which can at first seem incompatible given that, as Simek notes, "hunger's urgency appears material, self-evident, even non-discursive, and thus beyond irony" (2). Yet, through the lens of

irony, alternate understandings of hunger provide a reflection on ways form and style can engage productively with particular historical conditions and political realities of repression and oppression in the postcolonial context. Simek's analyses of contemporary French Caribbean texts in all five remaining chapters of *Hunger and Irony* feast on their ethical, political, and theoretical subtexts by putting the interrelation between irony and hunger to work.

In chapter 2, "Theory or Over-Eating," Simek aims to blur the boundaries between literature and theory in her readings of Patrick Chamoiseau's 1988 *Solibo Magnifique* (*Solibo Magnificent*) and Maryse Condé's 2003 *Histoire de la femme cannibale* (*The Story of the Cannibal Woman*). She applies Edouard Glissant's notion of "opacity" to outline zones of contact between literary and theoretical discourses, which challenges the so-called partition between theory and literature. In fact, discerning an opacity between the two suggests relying on the potential of irony to destabilize established frameworks of knowledge by way of always signaling the persistent proliferation of additional and yet unknown meanings, and therefore resist assimilation within broader theoretical frameworks.

Building on the initial critical impetus for sustaining uncertainty by way of hungry ironies and their creative potential, chapter 3, "Ironic Intent," elaborates on ways irony contributes to the meaning-making process in Patrick Chamoiseau's 1997 *Écrire en pays dominé* (*Writing in a Dominated Land*), Gisèle Pineau's 2010 *Folie, aller simple: Journée ordinaire d'une infirmière* ('Madness, One-way Ticket: An Ordinary Day in the Life of a Nurse'), and Maryse Condé's 2012 *La vie sans fards* ('Life without Makeup'). Looking specifically at texts with autobiographical or self-fiction elements, Simek reveals how deciphering irony in a text challenges authorial control and notions of intentionality and interpretation, which allows room for non-meaning, or meaning unknown to self and others. As a result, the very notion of authorial control is treated ironically and becomes more or less obsolete. In light of the dissolution of authorial control, Simek contends, interpreting the text becomes a collective meaning-making endeavor dependent upon a relationship between the author and the reader.

The notions of opacity and visibility come into tension with each other in chapter 4, "In the Belly of the Beast: Irony, Opacity, Politics." In particular, irony, Simek argues, shields against absolute truths and certainty resulting from a requirement for transparency that thinkers like Edouard Glissant highlight in Western thought. In her discussion of Simone Schwartz-Bart's 1979 *Ti Jean L'horizon* (*Between Two Worlds*) and 2009 *Manifeste pour les "produits" de haute nécessité* (*Manifesto for the "Products" of High Necessity*), Simek welds together irony's presumed negativity and poetic language to counter, in particular, presumably self-evident truths about the absolute and unchanging reality of capitalism and consumerist cultures. In doing so, both irony and poetic language

find themselves revived as they appear as a crucial vehicle for creative meaning-making and the expression of ever-changing multiplicities.

In chapter 5, “Hunger Pangs: Irony, Tragedy, Constraint,” Simek examines further the capacity of poetics to preserve dialogue and interpretive diversity. The two works considered in this chapter, Patrick Chamoiseau’s 2007 *Un dimanche au cachot* (‘A Sunday in the Dungeon’) and Maryse Condé’s 2001 *La Belle Créole*, serve to flesh out the creative, or even emancipatory flight, enabled by literature more broadly and the poetic language more specifically. Simek contends here that authors strategically use irony to guard against the notions of limit, constraint, or impasse on literary creation. Resorting to irony, Simek argues, aims conversely to expand the creative possibilities of fiction and sustain critical engagement, by way, for example, of contradictory narrative voices and self-mocking irony.

Moving away from a discussion of irony as opacity, mutability, and multiplicity, chapter 6, “Thirsty Ruins, Ironic Futures,” considers texts that assume more mimetic representations of reality incorporating nonetheless elements of playfulness, in particular Patrick Chamoiseau’s 1998 *Elmire des sept bonheurs: confidences d’un vieux travailleur de la distillerie Saint-Etienne* (*Seven Dreams of Elvira: A Tale of Martinique*) and Maryse Condé’s 2006 *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* (*Victoire, My Mother’s Mother*). By displacing boundaries between the real and imagined, those texts are, according to Simek, of use in developing further irony’s capacity for unsettlement. This ironic way of narrating the present and past complicates the reception and authentication of documents relating to personal and collective histories.

Simek’s *Hunger and Irony in the French Caribbean* chimes in, overall, with ethical considerations expressed in her previous exploration of habits of reading, writing, and interpreting that could best attend to what it means to address the multiplicity of experienced realities in a postcolonial world. Developing what Simek calls “hungry ironies” is one way to liberate creative interpretation and meaning-making. While Simek admits to the limited scope of her work, justifying her case-study approach, “hungry ironies” can nonetheless be applied to other literary genres and disciplines, promoting openness and facilitating historical, literary, social, and political dialogues. *Hunger and Irony* is an excellent resource for scholars whose teaching and research specialize in the fields of Postcolonial Theory and Francophone Literary Studies, history, and the cultures of the Francophone world.

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