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Abstract

Review of Aoife Connolly. *Performing the Pied-Noir Family: Constructing Narratives of Settler Memory and Identity in Literature and On-Screen*. Lexington Books, 2020. ix, 223 pp.

Keywords

Pied-noir, screen media, colonialism, gender, identity

Aoife Connolly. *Performing the Pied-Noir Family: Constructing Narratives of Settler Memory and Identity in Literature and On-Screen*. Lexington Books, 2020. ix, 223 pp.

Considering the tensions between French Republican values and the nation's colonial past in literary and cinematic works by former French settlers in Algeria known as *pieds-noirs*, Aoife Connolly's monograph demonstrates how *pied-noir* authors have shaped their collective identity. Recent studies on representations of *pieds-noirs* remain limited and rarely take into consideration films and television series, with the exception of Anne Donadey's 2020 *The Algerian War in Film Fifty Years Later, 2004-2012*. Viewing narratives as sites of memory, Connolly sets out to show how *pied-noir* authors actively create a collective memory through affective and ideological attachments to the family unit. This non-visible yet stigmatized community, Connolly argues, benefitted from writing about personal experiences to solidify their identity.

In much twentieth-century *pied-noir* fiction, family loyalties, like colonialism, depend on a model of inclusion and exclusion to construct imagined communities based on shared identities and performed collective memory. The family unit serves not only as a narrative frame but also as a metaphor for *pied-noir* ties to Algeria by reducing the war to a family tragedy and comparing decolonization to a divorce or the death of a mother. France, in contrast, often appears as an unloving stepmother. Connolly turns to postcolonial and feminist thought to grapple with the social and political stakes of the repeated metaphor of Algeria as an idealized mother to *pieds-noirs* authors expressing limited concern for Arab-Berber Algerians' attachment to their nation.

Semifictional works, memoirs, and myth-making fiction unveiling a slippage between the author and the narrator make up this study's large corpus. These personal stories glean from colonial and anti-colonial discourses to construct diverse yet united *pied-noir* identities. Private memories, Connolly underscores, bolster colonial nostalgia and contribute to identity narratives establishing imagined communities.

The first chapter examines the works and life of Albert Camus to show how he oriented commemorative discourses and fiction about *pied-noir* life. Throughout *Performing the Pied-noir Family*, Camus reappears as a reference for *pied-noir* writers describing settler experiences in Algeria and the melancholy of leaving the country. Like Camus, his contemporaries and the following generation of *pied-noir* writers present family attachments as a response to decolonization and emphasize settlers' hypermasculinity. In particular, associations between mothers, the sea, and Algeria, prominent in Camus's fiction, reappear in numerous *pied-noir* memoirs and fictional works. According to Connolly, these texts allowed the former settlers to survive as a cultural community through cathartic narratives minimizing remorse for the atrocities committed during the Algerian War.

Drawing on theoretical frameworks developed by Judith Butler and Nancy Wood, Connolly uses the concept of performativity to analyze gendered settler identities. The second and third chapters look at the stakes of repeated representations of hyperfemininity and hypermasculinity in *pied-noir* narratives. Memoirs and semi-fictional novels written by *pied-noir* women, namely Francine Dessaigne, Anne Loesch, Marie Elbe, Micheline Susini, Marie Cardinal, Brigitte Roüan, and Hélène Cixous, center on personal stories of losing an idealized home after the war. In works by male *pieds-noirs*, such as Jules Roy, Emmanuel Roblès, and Jean Pélégri, Connolly identifies a recurring obsession with legitimizing masculinity to deal with stigmatization and loss. Such preoccupations with honor and revenge transform *pied-noir* male protagonists into picaresque heroes. Excessive performances of gender roles or extreme transgressions add to the myth of a pioneering spirit among settlers. Whereas few scholars have analyzed representations of *pied-noir* homosexuality, Connolly studies works by Jean Sénac and Lucien Legrand to consider how their protagonists diverge from dominant images of the male settler.

Built on a French literary tradition associating youth with recollection, novels with child narrators abound in *pied-noir* books and films. The fourth chapter explores how youthful characters allow writers to minimize, or even efface, the political elements of imperialism and war. Such sentimental stories frame settlers as victims of a situation out of their control. For Connolly, these representations of childhood fantasy offer *pied-noir* adults a means for knowing themselves and their history.

The focus on gender performativity accentuates the ways in which *pied-noir* authors exclude, silence, or denigrate non-French characters. Both women and men writers, as Connolly points out, represent Arab and Berber populations as submissive women to be conquered and hypermasculine, violent men. Connolly shows how generalizations about indigenous Algerian gender performances influence *pied-noir* conceptions of their own hyperfemininity or hypermasculinity as tied to Algeria. With a few exceptions, such as Emanuel Roblès's 1947 novel *Les Hauteurs de la ville* ('City Heights'), *pied-noir* authors rarely develop indigenous Algerian characters' voices. Even texts espousing decolonial rhetoric, such as Hélène Cixous's 2000 *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage* (*Reveries of the Wild Woman*), tend to present Arab-Berber characters as troublemakers.

The announced objective of digging deeper into the role of screen media in *pied-noir* representations comes up short. Though films and television series adapted from texts receive attention, the book fails to explain adequately how filmed media differ from texts in contributing to *pied-noir* narratives. Connolly briefly touches on the influence of the *décennie noire* 'black decade'—the civil war between the Algerian government and Islamists groups between 1991 and 2002—on *pied-noir* narratives. The monograph would however benefit from a more detailed analysis of how these texts, written between the 1960s and the

2000s, evolved in relation to changing political climates, such as the French government's 1999 recognition of the Algerian War.

Shedding light on gender representations in settler narratives, *Performing the Pied-Noir Family* will interest historians, feminist scholars, and literary scholars working on decolonialism and twentieth-century France. This book could also be integrated into an undergraduate or graduate course including works by Camus. In short, this monograph brings attention to a field of research and a corpus of texts that merit more scholarly attention regarding the relationships between settler narratives and contemporary attitudes about migration and France's colonial past.

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