

# *Bulletin of Francophone Postcolonial Studies*

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films that belong to different genres, movements and styles, but for the most part does not focus on explicitly 'historical' films — like Gillo Pontecorvo's *La Bataille d'Alger* (1966), for instance. She is more interested in uncovering what cannot be explicitly stated, or what can be revealed if a film is read against the grain. To this end, Flood is able to show 'how films that are not explicitly "historical" treat the question of history, and how films that purport to represent history can become vehicles for a particular ideology' (p. 4).

Upon receiving my review copy of this book, I tweeted about my eagerness to start reading it, and one follower expressed some dismay that France was prioritised in the book's title. After having read the book, I can say with certainty that the text does not privilege France or adopt a Franco-centric perspective. Instead, Flood engages critically with France's past and de-centres the country's hegemonic position in historical and cultural investigations of the Franco-Algerian context by showing the profound interdependency of both countries and cultures. The book offers cogent and informed readings of the works investigated, which will be of interest to scholars and students working across the intersecting fields of French and Francophone studies, film, postcolonial and gender studies. Flood makes an original contribution to knowledge in these fields by offering novel analyses of well- and lesser-known films, and by showing that their images can become a sort of 'historical event, generating aesthetic, political, and cultural meaning for different groups at diverse temporal moments' (p. 6).

In our contemporary political climate, books like this one, which interrogate the relationship between colonial and political history, violence and moving image culture, are invaluable in helping us to understand the legacies of colonial and political violence in the present day, and the importance of film as a socio-political and cultural product. Flood's beautifully written and meticulously researched book (which will be released as a paperback in September) adds valuable new perspectives to research on the Franco-Algerian audio-visual context specifically, and to the relationship between film, aesthetics and history more broadly.

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***From Surviving to Living: Voice, Trauma and Witness in Rwandan Women's Writing.*** By CATHERINE GILBERT. Montpellier: Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2018. 295 pp. Pb. 27€. ISBN: 9782367812687.

This book opens by reminding us of the 'trauma turn' in literary criticism at the beginning of the twenty-first century, in which a newly-established culture of testimony led to what Leigh Gilmore describes as 'trauma's centrality to contemporary self-representation' (qtd. on p. 21). Nevertheless, some traumatic events have received significantly more coverage than others. A 2014 report by the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust found that more than half of British over-16s and eight out of ten 16- to 24-year-olds could not name a single act of genocide since the Second World War.<sup>1</sup> Among these 'forgotten' events are those that took place in Rwanda between April and July 1994, in which around 800,000 people were killed, most of whom belonged to the Tutsi 'ethnicity' (the questionable nature and colonial legacy of which is usefully outlined by Gilbert). The reluctance of the French government, whose troops were involved in these events, to discuss the contested past surrounding them has been outlined by critics such as Tony Chafer and Catherine Coquio. In 1998, ten African authors (only two of whom were Rwandan) visited Rwanda and subsequently produced works about the genocide. However, as Gilbert notes, few more than twenty people who could be described as survivors of this genocide have published testimonies to date, and very

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. John Bingham, 'Towie Generation have never heard of Rwandan Genocide – Holocaust Memorial Day Study', 24 January 2014, *The Telegraph*, <<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationnews/10592347/Towie-generation-have-never-heard-of-Rwandan-genocide-Holocaust-Memorial-Day-study.html>> [accessed 24 February 2019].

few have received academic attention. This work makes an admirable effort to draw attention to what the author rightly calls 'a growing corpus' (p. 29).

Gilbert's arguments are as well-signposted as they are compelling. Each chapter (there are seven in total besides the introduction and conclusion) is broken down into sub-sections of varying length but never more than ten pages, which makes this book very accessible. Unfortunately, this work does not contain an index, which is inconvenient for readers seeking to find the many references Gilbert mentions.

The impressive introductory chapter situates the representation of the Rwandan genocide and the consequent tales of those bearing witness to it as a delicate business fraught with doubt. Gilbert notes that while trauma theory is now a well-established academic field, it can be problematic to apply such theory universally. Thus, her work, like the works it analyses, draws comparisons with other genocidal experiences, such as the Shoah and *testimonios* of South-American genocide experiences, whilst insisting on the individuality of the experiences of these specific writer-witnesses (the problematic nature of calling all of these women 'writers' is also discussed in depth). Similarly, the many different ways of witnessing, a variety of which is discussed in the works analysed here, are outlined in this work's first chapter, which examines the many categories of what we call 'witness'. Here Gilbert clarifies ideas over levels of witnessing, the activity of gathering the stories of others by the writers analysed, notions of hierarchies of suffering and the specific mental condition of 'survivor guilt'. The second chapter outlines the difficult position of the individual in expressing her suffering (all writers analysed here are women, as are most Rwandan genocide survivor authors) whilst also undertaking the duty to tell a story for a collective.

Gilbert's impressive list of critical references mixes the classic and the contemporary, with Shoshana Felman and Paul Ricœur's ideas juxtaposed with those of José Kagabo and Phil Clark. Although she mentions the work of Boubacar Boris Diop and his involvement in the 'FestAfrica' project, his fictionalization of the problem of mediating the Rwandan genocide, particularly his emphasis on the figure of the 'passeur' in his novel *Le Cavalier et son ombre* (1997) and the politics of collective remembering in *Les Tambours de la mémoire* (1987) is curiously absent, although these are two key recurring themes throughout this study.

Chapter Three tackles important issues of editorial involvement and the nature and extent of collaborations with figures from the West on the part of Rwandan testimonial writers. Similarly, the book discusses the problematic nature of testimony and issues of authorial credibility, which can be linked to Majok Tulba, whose story is based on an account of 'what might have happened to him'. The tendency of Rwandan writers to seek publication in the West leads to many amendments to works, both by witnesses and collaborators, who seek to 'translate' this culturally specific trauma. Here Gilbert's work recalls that of Madeleine Hron, whose *Translating Pain* (2009) takes a wider range of works as its object of study, but to which Gilbert acknowledges a debt. The collaboration experience is generally described as felicitous, although Gilbert is careful to state that many testimonies 'fall at varying points' along the continuum of ethical literary collaboration established by Thomas Couser (p. 140). The endorsement provided by prominent intellectual figures in the West to these already well-educated Rwandan women is, Gilbert argues, a vital component in helping propagate as well as come to terms with their own stories through telling them to 'the empathetic listener she needs' (p. 160).

The stakes of the works examined here are outlined especially in the final two chapters, where Gilbert examines the many modes of silence and silencing adopted in the narration of the genocide. Few authors choose to recount their experiences of sexual violence, for example, while others worry about being received as 'unbelievable' (p. 199). As Gilbert also points out, the Hutu majority, as well as many Tutsi survivors, regard witnesses as a 'disturbing presence' whilst the wider international community are uncomfortable at hearing their stories of atrocity (pp. 177–178),

even after the rekindling of *gacaca*, 'community courts', which gave them a forum in which to tell them.

The book finishes on a salutary note, however, discussing the work of ‘living’ as opposed to just ‘surviving’, which gives this book its title. Having ensured that readers hear Rwandan witnesses’ voices through her extensive citations of their works (more than is usual in works of literary analysis), Gilbert turns to an examination of the careers of these women as writers, academics and public figures following the publication of their testimonies. Although many continue to rely on sponsorship and live outside of Rwanda, Gilbert argues for the development of a ‘Community of Testimony’ (p. 252) which will force us to reassess our understanding of the commemoration, repercussions and survival of the 1994 genocide.

This is the latest in a series entitled PoCo pages, published by Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée, at the University of Montpellier. Gilbert’s work is a welcome, fresh change to their list and something of a coup for this press.

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***Memory Across Borders: Nabokov, Perec, Chamoiseau.*** By SARA-LOUISE COOPER. Oxford: Legenda, 2016. 174 pp. Hb £75. ISBN: 9781910887080.

Sara-Louise Cooper’s eloquent monograph offers an illuminating study of autobiographical works by Vladimir Nabokov, Georges Perec and Patrick Chamoiseau. The author traces a comparative reading of these three apparently disparate texts, bringing them into productive and meaningful dialogue in an analysis ‘based on the belief that modes of comparison are possible where respect is retained for irreducible difference’ (p. 10). Cooper investigates the complex and incommensurable historical and personal trauma at the heart of each text while insisting on the complex and irreducible differences between them. For Nabokov, the trauma stems from his family’s flight from Russia following the October Revolution, and, two decades later, his escape to America with his Jewish wife following the outbreak of World War II, while for Perec, it is the loss of both parents during the same period, his experiences of displacement, and the legacy of (his survival of) the Holocaust. Central to Chamoiseau’s work is the more temporally distant yet enduring intergenerational trauma of imperialism and enslavement, manifested, for instance, in the Martinican child’s alienating encounter with the French language and the colonial school system. Cooper relies on a comparative approach and draws on an eclectic range of theoretical frameworks, including memory studies, trauma theory, translation theory, mobility and migration theory, theories of childhood consciousness, as well as studies of autobiography and the domestic space, and Russian formalist literary theory, in combination with incisive close readings of the texts themselves. Drawing connections among writers with diverse histories, linguistic backgrounds and life experiences, she aims to ‘bring out the various ways in which voices and histories lived outside France and French might be spoken through an engagement with the French literary tradition’ (p. 13). Cooper explores how, by inflecting their work with their own histories of mobility, migration and multilingualism beyond the borders of the Hexagon, the three authors challenge fixed notions of national borders, call into question the linguistic, geographical and cultural boundaries of the French literary canon, and draw attention to the complex histories that have shaped the French nation.

The first half of the monograph examines elements of the three autobiographies which explore the link between the French language and literary community, while the second half deals with the ‘risks and rewards’ of a comparative approach to these authors and texts (p.13). Across four chapters, Cooper addresses four key areas of enquiry: in Chapter One, she analyses the portrayals of childhood homes in the texts, how these are affected by the multiple border crossings that have shaped the lives of the authors and how these depictions of home encompass multiple languages, histories, and cultures. In the second chapter, she studies the ways in which multilingualism and language conflict are explored in each text, and the extent to which these are