
H-France Review Vol. 14 (May 2014), No. 82

Françoise Lionnet, *Écritures féminines et dialogues critiques: Subjectivité, genre et ironie*. Trou d'Eau Douce: L'Atelier d'écriture, 2012. 315 pp. Notes and works cited. \$37.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 99903-36-68-7.

Review by Amaleena Damlé, Girton College, Cambridge University.

This fascinating and elegantly composed volume charts the intellectual trajectories and reflects the personal and cultural itinerary of one of the most influential of contemporary scholars in francophone studies. Françoise Lionnet's critical commitment to untangling the complex mesh of signs—language, gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity—that constitute twentieth- and twenty-first-century conceptions of subjectivity has provided a rich set of resources for students and scholars in the field of literary studies. *Écritures féminines et dialogues critiques: Subjectivité, genre et ironie* draws together a series of articles written over the course of her academic career, tracing the interdisciplinary and intertextual travels of an author whose own geographical movements between Mauritius and the United States, La Réunion, France, England and Germany bear their imprint on an analytical cartography in which the Glissantian notion of *métissage* is consistently revisited and endlessly revitalized.

Written in French and English, with occasional untranslated citations in Creole, the volume pays stylistic homage to the plurilingual universe of Mauritius, whose long history has seen the influx of different nations, communities and cultures, from Arabic and Portuguese settlers, to Dutch, French and British colonials, to slaves, plantation owners, and indentured labourers from India, China and Malaya. The particular focus on compelling literary texts by authors of this Indian Ocean island marks a point of distinction in Lionnet's work, with previous monographs *Autobiographical Voices* and *Postcolonial Representations*, as well as edited volumes *Minor Transnationalism* and *The Creolization of Theory*, encompassing a somewhat broader geographical scope in their consideration of questions of identity in Mauritian, but also wider francophone postcolonial and global contexts.[1]

This narrower lens on Mauritius, whose literary and cultural outputs are attracting increasing critical attention but remain as yet relatively understudied compared to other francophone regions [2], is particularly welcome, and with its publication comes a companion volume, *Le su et l'incertain: Cosmopolitiques créoles de l'Océan Indien*, as well as two recent journals edited by Lionnet that showcase Mauritian culture.[3] Despite the seeming specificity of the work's geographical focus, however, Lionnet's analysis here, as elsewhere, bears witness to the importance of creating dialogue and exchange between multiple cultural climates and of acknowledging their mutual imbrication in our increasingly globalized, hybridized and cosmopolitan world. Reading contemporary women's writing from Mauritius in conversation with male- and female-authored representations of femininity from metropolitan France, from broader francophone and anglophone contexts, and from different historical periods, the volume's methodology thus lends fertility to its analytical aims, in slipping between tendencies either to universalize or to mark out particular identities as inalienably "other," and in opening out instead "les dynamiques particulières d'une région éloignée et d'un ailleurs qui entrent pourtant facilement en dialogue avec l'ici de notre métropole cosmopolite et multilingue" (p. 12).

The volume is divided into two parts which are chronologically and thematically structured. Part one spans the period 1991-2001 and consists of four chapters written during this time that have since been

redrafted and nuanced to cohere to the overarching aims of the present work. Formulated around the idea of “writing women” evoked in the volume’s title, these chapters concentrate on representations of femininity in twentieth-century French and francophone male-authored poetry, and on responses to cultural ideologies of the feminine in the works of three recent Mauritian female authors. Chapter one decrypts the “la misogynie ordinaire” (p. 19) of poetic works by André Breton, Léopold Sédar Senghor, Aimé Césaire, Malcolm de Chazal and Édouard Maunick, exploring the enduring persistence in the twentieth century of images of the eternal feminine across cultures. If the analysis of the feminine in terms of passivity, otherness, difference, lack, silence and mystery, as cipher and as muse, covers familiar feminist ground, Lionnet pays particular attention to the relations between literature and ideology in the mythification of gendered relations. Art, she argues, can never exist solely for its own sake. Revealing instead our deeply sedimented beliefs and constructing cultural phenomena anew, art is thus “both imbricated in and implicated by the larger cultural universe that determines its conditions of possibility” (p. 37), and Lionnet is endlessly fascinated then by what literature might *do*, otherwise and differently, and by the future openings that it might offer.

In the three following chapters, then, Lionnet analyses the deconstruction, demythification and transformation of female subjectivity in works by Marie-Thérèse Humbert, Ananda Devi and Lindsey Collen. Chapter two analyses Humbert’s experiment with colonial mythologies of the relationship between femininity and exoticism in *À l’autre bout de moi* through an attentive exploration of the text in dialogue with traditions of autoportraiture, psychoanalysis and philosophy. Here Lionnet argues that while Humbert’s text reveals the impact and interiorisation of stereotypes upon subjectivity, it also offers an alternative utopian (Nietzschean) vision of reality that topples clichés in its play with gaps, slippages, dissimulation and in its resistance to decipherment. In the chapter that follows, Lionnet shows how Devi too deconstructs relations between femininity and place, in this case the city as a modernist emblem and site of deviant femininity. In its consideration of the metaphorical association between woman and city in *Rue la Poudrière*, the chapter demonstrates the ways in which modernist myths and fixed subjectivities are dismantled by this author’s depiction of “the most marginalized postcolonial subject, the urban female underclass” (p. 93), as well as the destabilizing relationship to knowledge itself that both city and female subject hold as sites of seduction and transformation.

The final chapter in this section picks up on similar themes of marginalization, abjection and social ills, framing these within the context of the female worker during the economic transformations of 1980s Mauritius. Intervening in socio-political debates in its reading of Collen’s *There is a Tide*, the chapter reveals the intriguing shifts incurred by an increasingly global labour market and new consumerism in Mauritian women’s relation to food, shopping, work, language and sexuality, and the subsequent construction of “new pathologies of identification” (p. 116), somatic disorders which are implicated in the globalization of the economy. Lionnet analyses the implications of hunger strike and anorexia in this text in terms of a resistance to consumption and to globalization, as well as a search for new subjective, collective and national identities in response to these transforming socio-economic and political realities. Though they may be embedded in differing social and linguistic contexts, these three chapters thus draw together in a fascinating combination the responses of a generation of women writers in Mauritius to the cultural mythification of the feminine, revealing the interiorization of dominant ideologies, the new meanings these ideologies take on in changing socio-political contexts, as well as their ironic sites of resistance.

The second part of the volume contains articles written between 2002 and 2012. Here Lionnet turns her attention to the ways in which questions of subjectivity, gender and irony are inflected by transnational and transcolonial resonances. Emphasising the importance of thinking through postcolonial culture in terms of what she calls “postcontact,” she is concerned with the extent to which colonial entanglements, rather than relating to one specific moment of contact and opposition, might be thought of as multidirectional, “with a range of power dynamics, including aesthetic and editorial ones, that shifted over time and space, and influenced the course of literary and cultural history on a global scale” (p. 308).

Lionnet makes some helpful interventions into recent debates around the idea of a *littérature-monde en français*, a notion that she considers to have sprung from good intentions but that ultimately plays into a homogenising, assimilative recuperation of francophone margins.[4] The essays in this section showcase further the interweaving of different historical, linguistic and cultural threads in their analysis of literary texts, recasting the identitarian notion of *métissage* (*mé-tissage*) as entwining folds of textual traditions. *Métissage* becomes, as she has explained in the introduction, “la métaphore idéale des procédés d’écriture et de textualité (du latin *textus*, *tissue*) servant à mettre en valeur le tissu ou le tissage de mots qui caractérise le travail de l’écrivain dans son corps à corps avec la langue” (p. 15).

In its analysis of Marie-Thérèse Humbert’s *La Montagne des Signaux* and Maryse Condé’s *La Migration des cœurs*, the first chapter in this section explores the ways in which these authors take on themes tackled by writers from a different island and another century as a means of drawing out the entangled resonances in women’s lives across cultures. Lionnet argues that these authors’ recasting of, respectively, Emily Brönte’s *Wuthering Heights* and Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, invites a pluralized intertextual reading, one that is at once imbricated in the feminine and the transnational as well as in the creole and the transcolonial, and that lays bare to the reader the multiple worlds that cross through the French language. The following chapter casts a view into the relationship between *littérature-monde en français*, *francophonie*, heteroglossia and the resources of irony. Using Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s *Paul et Virginie* and Ananda Devi’s *Le Sari vert* as examples, Lionnet reveals the resistance that writers have shown towards hierarchical cultural models based around the centre and the periphery, their invention in response of linguistic and literary dissonances and heterogeneity, and their ironic relationship to dominant traditions, including, and above all, that of the French literary canon.

Chapter seven opens out a particularly intriguing and illuminating view into the complex history of Mauritius in its exploration of Natacha Appannah’s *Le Dernier Frère*, which recounts the experience of Jewish detainees from Central Europe during the Second World War. As Lionnet demonstrates, this Jewish presence, charged as it is with “the intersecting histories of British imperial interests, resistance to Nazism and wartime survival in the Middle East and the Indian Ocean region” (p. 206), provides a further perspective for local histories of conflict, as well as fresh insight into the specificity of Jewish victimization and what it might share with other forms of domination and marginalization. The careful analysis here gives rise to important questions around the impossibility of representation, the complicated fabric of memory and the ethics of remembrance in thinking through collective suffering and trauma in terms of “the relational and entangled experiences of seemingly discrete individuals or communities” (p. 232).

Chapter eight is entirely dedicated to an author whose presence has made itself felt throughout the book: Ananda Devi. In its bid to formulate a poetics of an *œuvre*, the chapter draws into relief the Eastern, feminine motif of the sari and places it in dialogue with the Western story of Ariadne’s thread as a means of illustrating Devi’s narrative of unfurling. Lionnet’s fluid and inventive reading of the polysemous and polyphonic function of the sari across Devi’s texts shows the multiple folds of her narrative art, its inflections in various traditions from the Greeks to Modernism, from Indian mythology to its reimaging in the West and in postcolonial world literature. Enfolding the intersections and imbrications of such traditions, Lionnet suggests that Devi refigures narrative theory in terms of flow, undoing the violence of a host of binary hierarchies from masculine/feminine to East/West, even collapsing the boundaries between flesh and text. As she beautifully evokes, “[r]epresentation is achieved by means of a poetic style that aestheticizes this violence and literally ‘wraps’ it up in the ultimate form of softness: ethereal silky fabrics that entwine and co-constitute fragile flesh the way beautiful threads of words can distil, shape, and bring forth the darkest recesses and most secret motivations of the human soul” (p. 274).

These sparkling points of intersection that run through the volume are drawn to a close in the final chapter’s consideration of the poetry of three authors from completely differing geographical locations

and historical periods. Devi features once more in her capacity as Mauritian author, as well as contemporary postmodern writer Susan Howe from New England and the eighteenth-century Bourbon poet, Évariste Parry. This unusual combination of authors allows Lionnet to round off the volume by exploring the similarities between writers who would seem to share “a similar postcolonial poetic sensibility articulated in terms of resistance to conventional models of either aesthetics or politics,” but also to open out intriguing points of difference in terms of “a general poetics of postcolonial engagement with questions of power and discourse, experimentation and subversion” (pp. 286-287). This is a fitting conclusion to a volume concerned with lateral resonances, with the transnational and transcolonial formulation of subjectivity and gender, with modes of contact and engagement across cultures, but also with forms of difference and specificity, with the points of friction that are entangled in the fabric of experience, and with the resistance and irony—indeed, the renewal—that literary works may distil.

Lionnet’s work is inspiring in its capacity to flow with seamless insight between texts, continents, generations, unearthing startling and intimate connections while remaining sensitive to the particularity of the authors and texts that she brilliantly celebrates. The volume also exists as an important reflection on a discipline, and on contemporary relations between “French,” “francophone,” “postcolonial,” and “world” literature studies. Engaging, eminently readable and endlessly illuminating, this volume is an essential resource for students and scholars interested in the questions of subjectivity, gender and irony that pervade literary studies.

NOTES

[1] Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989); *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1995); Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih, eds., *Minor Transnationalism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005); Lionnet and Shih, eds., *The Creolization of Theory* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011).

[2] Key references in this area include: Véronique Bragard, *Transoceanic Dialogues: Coolitude in Caribbean and Indian Ocean Literatures* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008); Véronique Bragard and Srilata Ravi, eds., *Écritures mauriciennes au féminin: Penser l’altérité* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2011); Peter Hawkins, *The Other Hybrid Archipelago: Introduction to the Literature and Cultures of the Francophone Indian Ocean* (New York: Lexington, 2007); Srilata Ravi, *Rainbow Colors: Literary Ethno-Topographies of Mauritius* (New York: Lexington, 2007); Ravi, *Rethinking Global Mauritius: Rethinking Mauritian Literature and Cultures* (Mauritius: L’Atelier d’écriture, 2011).

[3] Françoise Lionnet, ed., *Between Words and Images: The Culture of Mauritius, International Journal of Francophone Studies* 13:3&4 (February 2011); Lionnet, ed., *Writing from the Indian Ocean, Words without Borders* (May 2012).

[4] See Michel Le Bris and Jean Rouaud, eds., *Pour une littérature-monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

Amaleena Damlé
Girton College, Cambridge University
ad256@cam.ac.uk

Copyright © 2014 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical

Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172