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Masha Belenky, Kathryn Kleppinger, and Anne O'Neil-Henry, eds., *French Cultural Studies for the Twenty-First Century*. Newark, Del.: University of Delaware Press; Lanham Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017. xx + 226 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-6114-9637-6.

Review by Amanda Shoaf Vincent, Wake Forest University.

This edited volume of essays arose from a symposium titled, “Beyond Tradition: French Studies and Popular Culture, 1800-2014,” held at George Washington University in April 2014. According to the volume’s introduction, these essays participate in the discipline of “French Cultural Studies as it is practiced today in the American academy,” and are presented as an effort to “evaluate the state of this complex and constantly evolving field and its current methodological practices” (p. xiii).

This introduction argues that this volume of essays differs from similar previous publications in that these prior works “focused primarily on asserting the relevance of Cultural Studies as a discipline and on defining the stakes of using an interdisciplinary approach to analyze cultural objects from France and Francophone regions” (p. xiii). French Cultural Studies no longer needs to justify its very existence, so these essays are presented as exempla of best research practices within an established field, “reflect[ing] relevant and paradigmatic approaches to scholarship central to French Cultural Studies today” (p. xiv). They are also presented as exercises in self-reflection for the authors and trips behind the scholarly curtain, “laying bare the methodological underpinnings as well as the larger stakes of [their] project[s]” (p. xiv). The essays succeed at this stated goal, reflecting in many cases their authors’ extensive prior research in the field.

The introduction defines the field of French Cultural Studies by its engagement with “non-traditional sources” (p. xiii) and by its theoretical articulations. Recalling key moments for French Cultural Studies in the United States, including special issues of *Contemporary French Civilization* and previous edited volumes of essays, the introduction cites the role played by British theorists such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, and by the British academy, as models for American cultural studies scholars (p. xiv). Since the essays included in this volume cite French theorists, including Barthes, Foucault, Lyotard, and Derrida, far more frequently than English-language theorists, and extensively draw upon French-language cultural history scholarship, this genealogy of the field is puzzling. Other scholars have argued that “the cultural turn in French studies” is “a development substantially autochthonous to the field of French studies—an outgrowth of twentieth-century French thought.”[1] A view of the field that accounted for the ongoing cross-pollination across national borders and among English- and French-language theory and scholarship would seem to be a better fit for the state of the field observed in this volume and more generally.

The book is divided into four parts that create topical coherence while common methodological and theoretical themes weave together essays across several sections. Part one, “Press and Literary Culture,” opens with Elizabeth Emery’s study of “Methods and Challenges in Deciphering Representations of Authorial Intimacy in Late Nineteenth-Century French *Photoreportages*.” Emery’s analysis demonstrates

how authors carefully constructed their public images, and even influenced canon formation, using the new genre of the *photoreportage*. This essay deftly weaves together histories of print culture, photographic technology, and Belle Époque society with careful research on the dynamic social milieu of writers and journalists.

A footnote to Chelsea Stieber's essay, "The Haitian Literary Magazine in Francophone Postcolonial Literary and Cultural Production," reveals that the basis for her analysis, a complete paper run of *La Revue indigène*, was conserved not in Haiti, but in Valéry Larbaud's archives in Vichy (p. 37). What sleuthing or serendipity was necessary to track down this key object! Stieber argues for the value of Francophone literary magazines as windows into processes by which citizens of former colonies "negotiated their relationship to the former metropole" (p. 35). In the case of *La Revue indigène*, Stieber concludes that its contributors were able to construct a cultural identity that, while marginal in relation to Paris, was oriented toward the emerging international literary field.

Part two, "Race and Identity in Popular Performance," opens with an essay by Lise Schreier, "Reading Race in Nineteenth-Century French Vaudeville." Key to Schreier's analysis are the multiple versions of plays, both published print matter and drafts submitted to the French Ministry of the Interior's censors (p. 59). Schreier considers various facets of plays and their production, including characters, plots, music and "intermusicality," censors' comments and amendments, and the relationship between current events and plays. She finds that characters of color were "no more stereotyped than any other vaudeville characters" (p. 52). Black characters, nevertheless, often spoke pidgin French, hailed from interchangeable or vague times and places, and inevitably became caught up in cross-racial desire. Although Schreier's research reveals that playwrights and censors occasionally wrote or modified plays in response to current political events, it is not clear that vaudeville audiences noticed these nuances.

The following essay, "Diversity, Exploitation, and Immigration Politics in French 'Ethnic' Pornography," by Mehammed Mack, takes up contemporary pornographic films produced by the *Citébeur* studio that depict gay, ethnically Arab-appearing men in *banlieue* settings. Mack teases out how these films simultaneously cater to a demand among French gay pornography consumers for fantasies of a racialized, sexualized, and criminalized *banlieue*, while also subverting dominant norms and making space for actors' autonomy. Comparisons of these films with heterosexual "ethnic" pornography and analysis of their audience and critical reception contribute to Mack's argument. Mack discusses the challenge of studying an object that is both marginal to traditional academic inquiry and also problematic due to "real elements of exploitation" (p. 75). He nevertheless argues that pornographic representations can be an avenue toward productive engagement with thorny social questions.

The third part, "Repurposed Images," includes two essays that fit particularly well together. Michael Garval's essay, "Rediscovering Third Republic Illustrated Menus," serves as an introduction to "menu studies," providing a short history of the illustrated restaurant menu and an overview of key points of "menu logic," the visual and verbal rhetoric that ties together the functions of the menu as bill of fare and as decorative object (p. 96). Garval convincingly argues for the value of menus as ephemeral everyday objects that reveal the nuances of weighty, longstanding matters such as French national identity formation.

Susan Hiner's study, "Picturing the *Catherinette*: Reinventing Tradition for the Postcard Age," subtly articulates the "liminal" nature of the postcards (p. 146), both materially and semantically, as objects representing the evolution of the rural folk tradition of the *Catherinette*, an unwed young woman dedicated to Saint Catherine. At first, the *Catherinette* images seem to reinforce traditional social norms in the face of expanding women's work opportunities in the urban hat-making, fashion, and seamstress trades in the early twentieth century. Hiner shows how these cards could also potentially represent subversion of such norms, since the ambiguous iconography of certain cards suggests a range of potential interpretations as well as the celebration of choice itself.

Part four, "Media Storms," includes three essays that each take up a media scandal, mobilizing varied texts, voices, and scales of impact. Kealhofer-Kemp's analysis of the blockbuster *Les Intouchables* (2011) takes up the differences in popular and critical reception of this film in the United States and in France, one of the few essays that examines the international reception of French or Francophone cultural production. Kealhofer-Kemp argues that the film's popular success results from its effective use of "ethnic comedy" and "interracial buddy" movie genre conventions (pp. 157-58). For some critics, particularly Americans, the film's adherence to these conventions shaded into stereotyping and racist representations. French reviewers and the filmmakers' own public comments focused on the social class differences represented in the film, but, as Kealhofer-Kemp points out, the film's popularity came at the price of avoiding engagement with "the root causes of the very obvious social differences" between the film's main characters, that is, the intersection of race and class in contemporary French society (p. 165).

Anne Brancky's essay, "Writing Transgressions: Marguerite Duras, the Affaire Villemin, and Public Literature," investigates the scandal around an article written by Marguerite Duras for *Libération* in 1985. Duras's article transformed the accused mother of a murdered child into a literary character; exposed her imagined psychology, motives, and guilt; then pardoned the mother by painting her as a victim of society's misogyny. In a media context that exploited the sensational aspects of the *fait divers* that inspired her text, Duras positioned herself as having an empathic identification with the accused mother, but her celebrity soured popular and critical opinion on the role she had adopted in the scandal. Brancky deftly analyzes the interplay between Duras's literary practice of testing the boundaries between truth and fiction, "mass" and literary writing, and the consequences of this boundary-testing, combined with the power inherent in her position as a famous author, both in Duras's own elite cultural milieu and French society more broadly.

The final essay of the volume, Rachel Mesch's "Understanding the Tinayre Affair: New Media, New Methods for the Belle Époque," examines a literary scandal that erupted in 1908 over writer Marcelle Tinayre's comments upon learning the news that she would be nominated for a literary prize. Why, exactly, Tinayre's comments unleashed such a tempest is ultimately less important for Mesch's argument than the way the event "brings into dramatic relief the ways that the fate of a nascent media culture was intertwined with the fate of a certain form of modern femininity, also in its early stages, during this time" (p. 198). Mesch goes on to consider the work of feminine magazines such as *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* to construct a particular image of the *femme de lettres*. This final essay serves as an excellent complement to Emery's essay that begins the volume. Further, Mesch's conclusion astutely formulates the common methodological approach that implicitly unites the essays in this volume. Mesch first cites Barthes's essay, "Novels and Children," in *Mythologies* and nods to the debt that American culture owes to French theory, then argues that the "mythology" style of cultural critique "falls short without the work of cultural history" (p. 205). Combining cultural studies' close reading technique with historiographical situation of objects forms a "methodological bridge" (p. 205) that leads to the nuanced and contextualized analyses that the discipline aims to produce.

To conclude, the essays in this volume are densely and effectively argued glimpses into some of the main objects and methods of French Cultural Studies today. The volume is well produced, with a clear layout, readable formatting, and practically no typographical or copyediting errors. It is unfortunate that there are no color plates, especially to accompany Garval's and Hiner's essays. Finally, given the volume's mission to "evaluate" the field, a conclusion or afterword that gave the authors' and editors' perspectives on trends or areas of the field that weren't represented, future research directions, or emerging methodologies or theoretical frameworks would have been welcome.

## LIST OF ESSAYS

Masha Belenky, Kathryn Kleppinger, and Anne O'Neil-Henry, "French Cultural Studies for the Twenty-First Century"

Elizabeth Emery, "Methods and Challenges in Deciphering Representations of Authorial Intimacy in Late Nineteenth-Century French *Photoreportages*"

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Rachel Mesch, "Understanding the Tinayre Affair: New Media, New Methods for the Belle Époque"

## NOTES

[1] Monique Yaari, "Toward a Cultural Curriculum for Graduate Studies: The Case of French," *ADFL Bulletin* 33.2 (2002): 33-49.

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