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Shirley Jordan, *Marie NDiaye, Inhospitable Fictions*. Research Monographs in French Studies 38. Cambridge: Legenda. 2017. 142 pp. \$115.70 (US). (hb). ISBN 978-1-907975-85-1.

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Shirley Jordan's *Marie NDiaye Inhospitable fictions* is an excellent addition to the growing corpus of NDiaye scholarship. Rigorous and wide-ranging, it casts a wide net through both fictional and theatrical works and its focus on hospitality—or rather “inhospitality”—is an apt invitation into NDiaye's often unwelcoming worlds.

The trope of hospitality has recently become a staple in French thought and post-colonial scholarship and may already be a somewhat clichéd metonym of today's fraught immigration policies. In Jordan's study of Marie NDiaye, however, this figure takes a singular pertinence and originality. Like Andrew Asibong's “blankness,” which afforded readers entry into important representational and affective modalities of NDiaye's world, inhospitality is a key that unlocks an impressive number of themes, plots and forms across a wide range of theatrical and fictional works. It provides theoretical as well as mythical intertexts to NDiaye's stories of “outsiderness,” illuminates alienation in today's French post-colonial context, and helps translate the cultural and psychic damage resulting from the exclusion across race and class. It also helps identify the strange rituals and signs of NDiaye's elaborate “fantastic anthropology” and allows us to better read the unrelenting infringements of welcome and reciprocity at the heart of NDiaye's fictional universe.

What we discover first through Jordan's critique is the astonishingly broad scope of NDiaye's probing of inhospitality. Most of the author's fictional texts, including her textual-visual experiments and much of her theater, are resonant with hospitality's promises and betrayals. They explore its paradoxical and fraught practices in such personal, national and supranational contexts as strangers and thresholds, species and bodily boundaries, commensality, motherhood and the relationship between writer and reader. Jordan judiciously uses these themes to structure the chapters of her study and this focus on embodied forms of hosting keeps her critique true to NDiaye's material fiction. The strength of Jordan's study lies indeed in its ability to frame NDiaye's explorations of hospitality within contemporary philosophical and anthropological discourses while attentively reading the author's textual plays with its rules, myths, and figures. This attention to textual embodiment rather than overarching contextualization gives Jordan's study its depth and richness.

Jordan's critical introduction sets out how hospitality is conceptualized in the writings of Levinas, Derrida and Irigaray. It also suggests that Marie NDiaye is far more aware of these theories than has been recognized and that many of her fictions can be read as writerly experiments on the conceptual puzzles of hospitality. Jordan shows, for example, that the *aporia* and paradoxes implied in Derrida's absolute understanding of the "Law of hospitality" are at the heart of NDiaye's complicated handling of welcome and thresholds. Derrida's unconditional ethics, which requires fully opening one's own home or nation to the Other, is indeed potentially dangerous and marked by an unresolvable tension. It implies a reversal of hospitality's roles since it forces the host to forgo mastery to his guest, and its extreme surrender cannot but create apprehension for the stranger's destructive potential. NDiaye, as Jordan makes clear, is fascinated by the implications of this dilemma. What makes her receptive to this labile and reversible construct is her own ambivalence towards encounters, the tensions of the French post-colonial and socio-cultural contexts and the damaging ambiguities of its immigration model. Her characters are unusually sensitive to these personal and national fluctuations of welcome. They also face the brunt of these inhospitable behaviors through familial relations and this basic interactive context is an ideal testing ground for the paradoxes of Derridean "hostipitality," Derrida's portmanteau combination of hostility and hosting. Family, of course, is as much a metaphor as hospitality is and NDiaye is interested in a wide range of relationships across personal, social, and racial divides. But, as Jordan shows it in her readings, the focus on family—particularly on motherhood as a paradigm of hosting—allows NDiaye to heighten the stakes of hospitality, flesh out its practices (gift-giving, gestures and touch, etc.), and experiment with a vast array of inhospitable deeds and behaviors.

Jordan's theoretical sources are not limited to Derrida's heightened ethics. She also shows how Irigaray's more generous philosophy of hospitality may be at play in NDiaye's later fiction such as *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, *Trois femmes puissantes* and *Ladivine*. Her gendered "hospitality of difference," based on the cultivation of "self-affection" and the possibility of building a common third-space is indeed recognizable in the reconciliations and mutual relationships that emerge in these novels, often in relations with animals.

What I find most interesting in Jordan's critical introduction are the connections she makes between Marie NDiaye's fictional inhospitality, her awareness of cultural anthropology, and the fantastic. Adopting NDiaye's definition of the fantastic as a "réalisme exagéré," she shows how the spaces and customs of hospitality are used by the author to create an unsettling yet strangely familiar other world in which codified group interactions remain ambiguously recognizable. This fantasy field-work, which is often obsessively faithful to anthropology's scrutiny of social structure, kin, beliefs and rituals, invites us to share in this ethnographic fascination. But it also challenges our reading by doubling apparently empirical and recognizable actions and rules with eerily distorted behaviors and interpretations. This double elaboration, which juxtaposes recognizable social behavior with a systematic and disorienting non-observance of its codes, is what Jordan identifies as NDiaye's "fantastic anthropology" (p. 13). It beckons us into the structured space of anthropological fieldwork, with its familiar rules, but the universe it describes is one of unreadable rites, distorted signs, and strange behaviors. Marie NDiaye's uncanny ethnography is thus designed to construct an intolerable version of our already questionable social and moral worlds. She keeps us there: on the threshold of meaning and ethics where boundaries are tested and slippages between normal and intolerable, rules and violations are always possible. Jordan recognizes the importance of that undecidable space of the threshold in NDiaye's fiction. She makes much of its anthropological, philosophical, and narrative importance

and describes it as a “mythical contemporary space which foregrounds the tenuousness of hospitality while making its urgency felt” (p. 15). Showing that the threshold’s fluidity may be used as a kind of master trope for many of NDiaye’s constructions of the inhospitable (or intolerable), she uses its dissociative power to investigate the author’s readings of the body-boundaries, the human-animal border, maternal (in)hospitality, or gender, racial and national border-thresholds. Each of her chapters offers a study of these various borders and, together, they build a rich and detailed picture of the way NDiaye’s ambiguous threshold discussions contribute to the fraught elaboration of identity and the difficult hosting of otherness.

In order to give a less schematic and perhaps richer summary of Jordan’s chapters, I will focus on a few readings that best exemplify their thematic handling of NDiaye’s (in)hospitable threshold encounters. Jordan’s perceptive and detailed glosses are, I believe, her book’s best feature. They give tangible insights into the complicated narrative strategies of NDiaye’s physical, psychological, cultural, and national tales of inhospitality and they unlock some of the author’s strangest fictions. The first chapter, “Configuring the stranger,” offers excellent interpretations of two of NDiaye’s least analyzed texts: *Rien d’humain* and *Un Temps de Saison*. The latter novel, NDiaye’s fifth, is also one of her haziest tales (literally as well as figuratively). Jordan’s enlightening suggestion is to read the story as the pastiche of an anthropological field study. The main character (Herman), she shows, is written by NDiaye as an accidental ethnographer trying to understand the culture and mores (values and beliefs, etiquette, exchanges and politics) of the town where his wife and son have disappeared. The town itself is a provincial and blindingly white counterpart to an African village. It is both the foreign and primitive locale typically targeted by ethnographic fieldwork and an ordinary French town such as could be found on the Normandy coast. Marie NDiaye uses this amalgamation of the familiar and the exotic to disorient her protagonist and study the ways his encounter with a foreign culture is beholden to the clichés and prejudice of western anthropological science. Herman, Jordan shows, is the prototypical post-colonial scientific explorer, masking his inhospitable curiosity and judgmental dislikes with a studious curiosity for the social structures and customs of the foreign land. His internal battle between seduction and disgust, affect and observation as well as his assimilation and rejection of the new cultural norms paint a damning portrait of anthropology. It shows how this purported “science of the other,” harbors much of the prejudices of post-colonial exploration. And Jordan does an excellent job of underlining how NDiaye’s satire of ethnographic accounts helps us better understand the dynamics of encounters and the ambiguities of intercultural hospitality.

Jordan’s other readings share similar hermeneutic smarts. The second chapter, which focuses on NDiaye’s use of animals in the construction of otherness, analyzes their frequent and often ambivalent presence in the author’s fiction. Animals, Jordan shows, are often vectors of affects that unsettle boundaries and bring about a renewed consciousness of relationships and hosting. Figures of animal abjection, becoming, and hybridity are used less to think about animals themselves than to destabilize human encounters and bring into their interaction the shock of inhumanity. This shock is cognitive and emotional—as well as ontological. It highlights the ethical failures of human encounters and ushers in a feeling of vulnerability and of the unsettled nature of self. Jordan examines both the problematic and positive impact of these animal interventions in NDiaye’s novels and notes that their recourse to animal abjection as a traditional trope of ostracism tends to be replaced, in her later fiction, by a more capacious attribution. If *En Famille*, *La Sorcière* or *La naufragée*, for example, still rely on an instrumental vision of animals as disturbingly other, *Mon cœur à l’étroit* as well as *Trois femmes puissantes* and *Ladivine* suggest a

shift in the power and hierarchy of human-animal relations. In these stories, animals are agents of compassion and change. They open a third space: a place of hosting which offers a welcoming if ambiguous alternative to the aporias of domestic hospitality. Shirley Jordan is not the first critic, of course, to highlight Marie NDiaye's ambiguous treatment of animals. Michael Sheringham's excellent article, "Ambivalences de l'animalité chez Marie NDiaye," already charted this particular course.^[1] But Jordan's approach and her dialogue with contemporary discourses on hospitality allows her to give inspired readings of *Ladivine* as well as the first short-story of *Trois femmes puissantes*. In the case of the latter text, Jordan combines Irigaray's silent space of welcome with Bentham's emphasis on creaturely suffering to shed light on another one of NDiaye's cannily opaque endings. According to the critic, the entire story reads as a tale of failed hospitality between a father and a daughter, seemingly unable to welcome each other at the threshold. It is also a slippery fable offering a redemptory hybrid version of the failed human encounter. The entire story—as well as the others in the collection of three—is enlivened by a fluid bird motif. The inhospitable father, whom his daughter Nora visits, is isolated and cut off from the rights and duties of familial hospitality. He is also, as Jordan puts it, "no longer at home" in his own self and expresses his alienation through several periods of roosting in a nearby flame tree (p. 49). I, like most casual readers perhaps, read this avian metamorphosis as an expression of the father's obtuse and vaguely menacing presence. Jordan, however, offers a more generous gloss. She interprets the father's hybridity, as well as his choice of an a-human nesting place, as the opening of a third and neutral space: a space of silence and creaturely suffering where Nora, his daughter, may join him. Jordan's reading, which sees the flame tree's roost as a new dwelling for tolerance and compassion, is the only interpretation that elucidates the enigmatic last scene. By seeing the flame tree as a hosting place where Nora and her father can experience, side by side, new forms of being together, Jordan sheds light on the last image of the story. She also points the way to a transformation in Marie NDiaye's more recent fiction which seems to be in search of new forms of hospitality. In *Trois femmes puissantes*, but also *Ladivine*, liminal spaces such as the flame tree or a forest's clearing host different kinds of encounters where co-habitation is possible and hospitality, no longer bound to the absolute laws of reciprocal hospitality, offers an uncertain but open co-existence.

Jordan's next two chapters focus on what has been and still is a favorite theme of NDiaye's critics: embodied experiences, their cohort of invasive practices (eating, wounding, penetration, pregnancy), and attendant affects (disgust, fear, rejection etc.). Jordan gives a new twist to this approach by insisting upon bodies as sites where "economies of hospitality and inhospitality receive personal expression" (p. 59). Here again, Jordan gives some excellent readings of eating in *Papa doit manger* and *Mon cœur à l'étroit*, killing and body wounds in *Ladivine*, *Trois Femmes puissantes*, and maternity in *Rosie Carpe*. I found these readings of inhospitable mothering particularly interesting in that they shift the gendered paradigm of philosophical discourses on hospitality and raise the obvious question of maternal hospitality. Jordan, NDiaye and feminist thinkers such as Antoinette Fouque and Luce Irigaray are well aware of the limits of the dominant philosophical paradigm, which borrows from an exclusively male sociological apparatus and does not consider such embodied and affective models as the pregnant body and the child-mother relationship. Jordan, following NDiaye's lead, is not offering an idealized and uncomplicated model of maternal hospitality. She shows, on the contrary, how NDiaye's fiction brings us into the inhospitable and ambiguous world of mother and child to flesh out a more complicated understanding of hospitality. Her reading of *Rosie Carpe* is exemplary in this regard as it presents what is perhaps the darkest and most unwelcoming figure of NDiaye's work. *Rosie Carpe*, Jordan shows, is a searing, profoundly affective and affecting portrait of the relationship

between Rosie, a single destitute mother, and Titi, her unloved son. More specifically, since this relationship is almost obsessively filtered through the biological dimension of mothering, it offers a tableau of “inhospitalité charnelle” that helps us negotiate better both the normative discourse on maternity and hospitality. What the bodily dimension brings here is a more intimate and fertile experimentation with affects and relationships. These difficult narrative and embodied experiments allow us, in turn, to understand and perhaps also respond better to the complication of ethics.

I will conclude on the last question raised by Jordan’s study: are NDiaye’s writerly texts hospitable to their readerships and are they, in turn, hospitably handled by their critics? These questions are important as they bring us to reflect on the issues of reader’s and writer’s reception and response. They are also quite germane to an author who invites us to read hospitably and yet confronts us with affectively and ethically challenging stories. As Jordan and other critics have shown, NDiaye does indeed fill her texts with aversive matter, racist characters, murderous mothers, and a general lack of hospitable care. It is quite apt, therefore, to call her fiction, as Jordan does, “inhospitable.” Yet, as Jordan also convincingly highlights throughout her study, NDiaye’s work is profoundly ethical, never cynical. Her inhospitable universe challenges us to look for our own ethical compass—not a ready-made hospitality manual. And the merit of Jordan’s study is to help us chart a course. Her readings create, in our encounter with NDiaye’s text, a welcoming critical third space, a hospitable space where writer, critic, and reader read and orient themselves together.

NOTES

[1] Michael Sheringham, “Ambivalences de l’animalité chez Marie NDiaye,” in Daniel Bengsch and Cornelia Ruhe, eds., *Une femme puissante : l’œuvre de Marie NDiaye* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brill. Francopolyphonies 13 [2013]): pp. 51-70.

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