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Marjorie Attignol Salvodon, *Fictions of Childhood: The Roots of Identity in Contemporary French Narratives*. Lanham, Maryland and Plymouth, United Kingdom: Lexington Books, 2008. xi + 95 pp. Notes, bibliography and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-7391-1829-3.

Review by Rosemary Lloyd, Indiana University.

Ever since Philippe Ariès published his influential study, *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* in 1960, scholars, both historians and specialists of literature, have increasingly focused on the experience and the representation of childhood in France and in her former colonies.[1] Earlier scholars had indeed focused on the question, most notably perhaps C. S. Parker in 1925 as well as others in the 1930s.[2] In the wake of Ariès's widely-read and often contested survey, scholars such as Elisabeth Badinter and Colin Heywood established the groundwork for further studies in a multidisciplinary field that has brought together history, psychology, sociology, literature and the fine arts.[3] Marjorie Attignol Salvodon's contribution to this growing body of research focuses on contemporary French and francophone novels and (briefly) films in an attempt to give the topic a new twist, by revealing what she terms "the usually unexplored connections between the history of French colonialism, the debates on French universalism, and the notion of difference in contemporary France" (p. xi). Childhood certainly offers an illuminating realm for doing so, with its intensified mirroring of prejudice and alienation, and its often naively insightful comments on a barely-understood adult world whose rationales may be unknown but whose workings and effects are perhaps felt more keenly in childhood than in later life when they become dulled by habit. While Salvodon's study broadens the field by its range of examples and by its focus on postcolonial questioning of the French concept of universalism (the suggestion that all who embrace French culture are equal, regardless of race and gender), it is weakened by certain limitations, caused above all by attempting to achieve its ambitious program in an unnecessarily-restricted space. In particular, that interesting nexus of universalism, colonialism, difference and childhood is too seldom made the principal focus of the analysis of the texts explored.

Salvodon's two opening chapters set the ground lines for her study, especially her concentration on immigrants and outsiders, while justifying her focus on childhood narratives. Her argument that "at times overlooked or dismissed, the experience of childhood in school and in the family [...] shows the stark truths behind the issues of difference, inequality, and diversity" (p. xi) is well taken, although one might feel there is no longer any need to present this experience as neglected, since so much attention has been brought to bear on it over at least the last four decades, not just by such critics as those cited above but also by writers of fiction and autobiography, and through the cinema. Salvodon's references to such influential films as Régis Wargnier's *Indochine*, Claire Denis's *Chocolat* and Euzhan Palcy's *La Rue Cases-Nègres* allow for some essential arguments to be introduced, especially in regard to the question of gaze or focus, while her brief description of Rousseau's *Emile* prepares the way for contrasts between idealized and realistic evocations of childhood experience. Salvodon moves quickly through her main points here, but given its ambitious program the book could well have benefited from a more expansive introduction, taking more time to explore the development, devices, and tactics of childhood narratives and elucidating the complexities associated with the child's gaze by drawing on more of the iconic films that offer child-centered narratives, such as *Shane*, *Fallen Idol*, *Les Quatre cents coups*, *Jeux*

interdits and *Ponette*.^[4] By establishing more clearly the possibilities, restrictions, and techniques involved in using the child-centered narrative in these films, Salvodon could more profitably then have turned to those in which the child's vision is more clearly determined by ethnicity, race, or gender. The immigrant child, moreover, is of course especially vulnerable in the rough world of the playground, which has its own rules, language and power structures, as for instance Amélie Nothomb has so forcefully revealed in such novels as *Le Sabotage amoureux*.^[5] Here one feels that at least a few of the increasing number of fictional and autobiographical texts narrating immigrant experience in the U.S., Canada, and Australia could have been helpful in setting and more sharply defining the particular nature of the French context.

This is not to deny the value of the works Salvodon has chosen for close analysis, just to suggest that they could have been set both in a more revealing context and a more thorough theoretical framework. The writers who provide the fictional and autobiographical texts for this study do indeed offer a variety of experiences all linked by the themes of childhood and alienation. In *Un papillon dans la cité* Gisèle Pineau, born in Paris to Guadeloupean parents, explores the racism and alienation inflicted on her as a child, while *L'Espérance-macadam* allows her to interweave the violence of nature with the violence a self-styled civilizing race inflicts on a subject population; Linda Lê uses her novel *Fuir* to analyze the sense of displacement that resulted from being moved as a child from Vietnam to France, while both her *Lettre morte* and Algerian-born Nina Bouraoui's *Garçon manqué* (a novel Salvodon has translated into English), offer, in different ways, a remarkable interweaving of the borders between genders and those between races to suggest the fragility and motility of identity; and Bouraoui's *Le Jour du séisme* transforms a real, and powerfully evoked, earthquake into a metaphor for the destructive role of colonialism and the fragmented nature of personal identity. While these are the main texts studied, Simone Schwartz-Bart's *Ti Jean L'horizon* and Calixte Beyala's *Lettre d'une Afro-française à ses compatriots* also provide insights into the complex questions of identity within the French-speaking universe, the first from the joint perspective of the Caribbean and metropolitan France, the second from a viewpoint that joins France with Cameroon.^[6] This is a potent and complex body of texts, sufficiently well-known for her readers not to need plot summaries. Each of these works thoroughly merits close analysis in the context Salvodon proposes, that of the formation of identity during childhood within and against French ideas of universalism. She brings to her study both her own personal experience within the three cultures of Haiti, France, and the United States, and a strong intellectual commitment to the topic. She has clearly read widely in the critical literature associated with identity and universalism, and is familiar with at least some of the studies relating to migration and displacement. The insights she offers concerning these texts are illuminating and raise pertinent points about the question of what it means to belong in France, especially perhaps to belong linguistically but to feel alienated for ethnic reasons.

There is a problem with this study, though, and it lies above all in the length of what the author herself describes as a "modest contribution" (p. 80). This monograph is a mere 83 pages long, excluding the index and bibliography, and is simply too short to do justice either specifically to the texts or more broadly to the topic, especially given that so much space is devoted to what other critics and theoreticians have said, even when what they say borders on the banal (for example the comment on adult versus childhood memory on p. 51). There is not enough room for Salvodon to provide an adequate exploration of such intricate questions as how the fact that these are tales of childhood makes them different *as narratives* from those of adults, or to tease out the many implications of the themes on which she touches. Moreover, the technique of exploring pairs of texts in parallel, although in theory imaginative, leads to a sense of fragmentation, a feeling that just as a point concerning one book is about to be clarified, the author moves on to look at the parallel text. To give just one example: on p. 63 we find the intriguing claim that "the borders of gender in [*Garçon manqué*] are articulated around a number of disparate elements using pastiche (or imitation) to affirm the narrator's plural identities." Yet nowhere is this claim substantiated by a detailed study of such pastiches. This failure to expand on the suggestions put forward is unfortunate, for there are points in the work that hint that Salvodon has

much more to offer, and certainly the intertwining of identity, universalism, and childhood experience offers a highly fruitful area of research. For example, one might pursue more closely narratives exploring the link between language and identity in child-centered French or francophone novels.

A further problem is associated with this monograph's publisher, Lexington Books, which describes itself as an "imprint with a longstanding tradition of publishing excellence, [which] publishes high-quality scholarly work that may not have a wide audience but makes a significant contribution to scholarship." Given that emphasis on excellence, borne out moreover by the admirable list of works published in the series to which *Fictions of Childhood* belongs, it is unfortunate that insufficient editorial assistance appears to have been provided. The work is marred by grammatical errors, especially in subject-verb agreements (for instance, "scholars like Nelly Schmidt has argued" (p. xv), stylistic infelicities (e.g., "peer through the 'leaks' of French civilization" (p. xvii)—how could one see through a leak? chinks or gaps would be better) and structural weaknesses, particularly in the constant overt signposting to the reader. "The plan of this chapter is three-fold", "In this chapter I do x y z": helpful in a spoken communication, in a written work this device can and should be replaced by more imaginative, interesting, and composite indications which further the argument by their subtlety and complexity instead of undermining it by a suggestion of simplification.

Fictions of Childhood does nevertheless make its modest contribution to the question of identity in contemporary France, particularly in the many questions it raises and in bringing together such a provocative group of writers.

NOTES

[1] Philippe Ariès, *L'Enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* (Paris: Plon, 1960), translated as *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life* (New York; Vintage, 1962), trans., Robert Baldick.

[2] C. S. Parker, *The Defense of the Child by French Novelists* (New York: G. Banta, 1925); Jean Calvet, *L'Enfant dans la littérature française*, 2 volumes (Paris: Lanore, 1930); Aimé Dupuy, *Un personnage nouveau du roman français: L'Enfant* (Paris: Hachette, 1931); Justin O'Brien, *The Novel of Adolescence in France: The Study of a Literary Theme* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937).

[3] Elisabeth Badinter, *L'Amour en plus* (Paris: Flammarion, 1980); Lloyd de Mause (ed.) *The History of Childhood* (New York: Psychohistory Press, 1974); David Hunt, *Parents and Children in History: The Psychology of Family Life in Early Modern Life* (New York; Basic Books, 1975); Linda Pollock, *Forgotten Children* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); Colin Heywood, *Childhood in Nineteenth-Century France* (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1988). For a fuller bibliography see my *The Land of Lost Content: Children and Childhood in Nineteenth-Century French Literature* (Oxford; Clarendon Press, 1992).

[4] *Shane* (George Stevens, 1953), *Fallen Idol* (Carol Reed, 1948), *Les Quatre cents coups* (François Truffaut, 1959), *Jeux interdits* (René Clément, 1953) and *Ponette* (Jacques Doillon, 1996). Among other films that would have been useful to explore in this context are *Zéro de conduite* (Jean Vigo, 1933), *Au revoir les enfants* (Louis Malle, 1988), *Le Fils du requin* (Agnès Merlet, 1994) and *Le Cercle parfait* (Ademir Kenovic, 1996).

[5] Amélie Nothomb, *Le Sabotage amoureux* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1993). Although Salvodon mentions Nothomb only once and even then only in passing, *Le Sabotage* offers a complex and original, as well as ironic, perspective on the questions of race and gender, and would certainly have repaid inclusion in *Fictions of Childhood*.

[6] Gisèle Pineau, *Un papillon dans la cité* (Paris: Editions Sépia, 1992) and *L'Espérance-macadam* (Paris: Stock, 1995) translated by C. Dickson as *Macadam Dreams* (Lincoln: University of Nebraskak Press, 2003); Linda Lê, *Fuir* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 1998) and *Lettre morte* (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1999); Nina Bouraoui, *Le Jour du séisme* (Paris: Stock, 1999) and *Garçon manqué* (Paris: Stock, 2000), translated by Marjorie Attignol Salvodon and Jehanne-Marie Gavarni as *Tomboy* (Lincoln; University of Nebraska Press, 2007); Simone Schwartz-Bart's *Ti Jean L'horizon* (Paris: Seuil, 1979); Calixte Beyala's *Lettre d'une Afro-française à ses compatriots* (Paris: Editions Mango, 2000).

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