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Sonja Stojanovic. Mind the Ghost. Thinking Memory and the Untimely through Contemporary Fiction in French. Liverpool UP, 2023.

Catherine Nesci
University of California, Santa Barbara, catherine.nesci@ucsb.edu

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Abstract

Review of Sonja Stojanovic. *Mind the Ghost. Thinking Memory and the Untimely through Contemporary Fiction in French*. Liverpool UP, 2023. xi + 307 pp.

Keywords

Memory, ghost, spectrality, contemporary French fiction

Sonja Stojanovic. *Mind the Ghost. Thinking Memory and the Untimely through Contemporary Fiction in French*. Liverpool UP, 2023. xi + 307 pp.

This book offers fascinating insights into the return of ghosts and memorial passages across generations in contemporary French-speaking narratives about the Shoah, the Algerian War of Independence, the genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda in 1994, and mass crimes during the Balkan Wars of the early 1990s. Starting with an expected and yet fresh discussion on haunting and spectrality in Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, and continuing with a most innovative review of recent texts by Hélène Cixous, whose writing opens and weaves lines of communication with the disappeared, Sonja Stojanovic highlights the key notion of double suffering (*double souffrance* or *double douleur* in Cixous), which allows empathy and listening to the cry of others, without appropriating the latter's suffering. Literature thus offers the *plaisir de simultanéité*—"the pleasure to *simultane*," in the author's translation of a neologism from Cixous's *Défiions l'augure* ('Let's Defy the Omen'). *Mind the Ghost* focuses on this mode of being together differently and a vision of literature as "architelephony," according to Cixous's coining. With beautiful, attentive close readings, Stojanovic sheds light on vectors of spectrality and untimeliness such as names, lists, objects, boxes, sites, photographs, and stains, which form a structuring thematic network the mesh of which she unravels in each work and from one work to another.

If the texts by Cixous, Georges Perec, Patrick Modiano, Leïla Sebbar, and Lydie Salvayre form a familiar corpus inhabited by multiple hauntings and memorial wounds, the inquiry also focuses on the works of authors who have inherited historical ruptures and hybrid identities, such as Cécile Wajsbrot (born in 1954), Jérôme Ferrari (born in 1968), Jakuta Alikavazovic (born in 1979), Kaouthar Adimi (born in 1980) and Gaël Faye (born in 1982), all writers whose characters experience the weight of historical and collective violence: anti-Semitic oppression, the breakdown of ethnic and religious identities in the Balkans, colonization and the Algerian War, the genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda. Those characters who have disappeared, or have been erased, murdered, or tortured, re-appear through their concrete or mental traces. As beings and lives stumble upon events that break them, the present and the past collide; temporal palimpsests are molded and oppose each other. All the fictions that Stojanovic admirably analyzes thus raise ethical questions about the recovery or return of memory. The author does not avoid the difficult or divisive questions that the texts in her corpus raise, particularly concerning memorial dynamics, the problems of restitution and reparation, or the narrative reactivation of traumatic scenes. Through her fine reflections, which are always excellently theorized, on the writing of postmemory, the appearance of ghosts, the untimely, and the traumatic, Stojanovic shows how fiction allows us to think about historical violence, but with a concern for nuance and the choice to

complicate the binaries between absence and presence, the visible and the invisible, life and death. Her novelistic corpus thus includes characters in search of transmission, who test the forms and paths such transmission may take, whether they are attracted to life and the revelation of stigmatizing secrets (in Wajsbrot, Sebbar, and Adimi) or whether they articulate a cycle of retributions and an endless repetition of violence (in Alikavazovic and Faye).

Thanks to a well-balanced and most elegant theoretical work and an exhaustive critical bibliography, *Mind the Ghost* renews the literary use of the disparate tools of memory studies forged by clinicians or intellectuals such as Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (the cryptonymy of secrets and the function of phantoms), Aleida Assmann (modern time regimes), Marianne Hirsch (the concept of postmemory), Alison Landsberg (the concept of prosthetic memory), and Michael Rothberg (multidirectional memory, the implicated subject), to name just a few scholars and key concepts. The organization of the proliferating materials is judicious in that the well-known works of Modiano, Cixous, and Perec receive unexpected insights through cross-readings of their texts with those of Wajsbrot, Salvayre, and younger writers—and many more writers whose works appear in the footnotes, such as Marguerite Duras, Annie Ernaux, Jean-Philippe Toussaint, or Ananda Devi. For example, Stojanovic analyzes the work on the “spectral trace” in Modiano’s texts and the transfer of haunting to readers through a study of uncontrollable containers and ghost traces in Alikavazovic’s texts, which are haunted by the Balkan Wars and their multiple crimes against humanity. In short, *Mind the Ghost* is both a demanding and necessary work that invites us to meditate, ultimately, not only on sites of memory, but on even more contemporary sites and places of haunting that the French Calais or the Italian Lampedusa have become, “ghostly sites of past-present-future hauntings [...] [and] sites of an encounter with our ethical responsibility, that is never a given, but always something to work towards” (261), Stojanovic writes, before returning, aptly, to Cixous’s powerful temporal and spatial echoes. Scholars interested in psychoanalysis and continental philosophy, literature and ethics, historical and memory studies, feminist and gender theory, migrant studies, or more generally, narrative theory and contemporary French-speaking fiction will appreciate reading *Mind the Ghost*.

Catherine Nesci
University of California, Santa Barbara