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Helen Vassallo and Paul Cooke, eds., *Alienation and Alterity: Otherness in Modern and Contemporary Francophone Contexts*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009. xxx + 337 pp. Notes. \$77.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-3-03911-547-1.

Review by Michael Syrotinski, University of Glasgow.

This collection of essays is essentially a publication of proceedings from a conference held at the University of Exeter in 2007, on the eponymous broad theme of the title of the volume. The collection is organised into three main sub-sections: Sexuality and Gender, Spaces of Conflict, and (De)construction of Personal Identities, with an appendix that is a glossary of terms and definitions produced especially for this volume by Jeanne Hyvrard, which are in some cases typically neologistic, and all relate in some way or another to the themes of alienation and alterity. As becomes quickly apparent, these two terms can encompass a vast range of different forms of “othering,” whether socio-political, cultural, racial, sexual, philosophical, linguistic, psychological, corporeal, and so on, and in each case involve a necessarily conflictual relationship to the more privileged identitarian term against which they are measured.

The fact that this conference and ensuing volume did indeed generate a representatively broad sample of modes of alienation and alterity testifies to the dominant place the question occupies socially and culturally within the contemporary francophone world. The introduction does a good job of highlighting some of what will be key conceptual points of reference throughout the volume, although it reads more like a series of abstracts of the essays to come, and does not fully take up the challenge of reflecting on what we might think of as its historical necessity, or of setting the various looser themes within a more rigorous philosophical context, which might have included, for example, Bataille and the French Hegelians more generally, Blanchot, Levinas, Lacan, Deleuze (even though Deleuzian difference is very usefully put to work by Kate Roy in her essay), Badiou, or Derrida. The fact that the question of alterity seems in most cases to be absorbed within a more thematic cultural or socio-political concern with alienation is an interesting phenomenon to which I will return at the end of this review.

The first section begins with Owen Heathcote’s lively discussion of the “queering” of the French Republic, taking up both the political institution itself as homoerotically structured, and the ways in which its own essential and inherent ambivalence (its universalism is supposedly all-embracing, yet it explicitly excludes cultural differences) reflects a similar ambivalence at the heart of queer theory and culture (with its competing demands of sexual sameness and social difference). Heathcote’s essay dramatises this homology through a series of insightful but somewhat rushed analyses of Balzac’s *La Fille aux Yeux d’or* (1834-35), Rachilde’s *Monsieur Venus* (1884), Genet’s *Querelle de Brest* (1947), and Eric Jourdans’s *Le Garçon de Joie* (2007). The reading of Genet, in which “Lysiane’s foregrounding of homosexuality confuses homosexuality and heterosexuality, with homosexuality finally queering, alienating and displacing heterosexuality” (p. 48), is typical of the kinds of gender displacements and reversals Heathcote finds elsewhere. For him, in historical terms, France’s neglected “queer women” are the most interesting manifestations of this productively ambivalent tension. Oliver Davis stays with the theme of the queering of French culture by looking at the contemporary writer Guillaume Dustan’s portrayal of Parisian gay subculture in his trilogy of novels from the 1990s. Using Judith Halberstam’s

study of subcultural theory, *In a Queer Time and Place*, Davis notes a tendency in Dustan to subsume (and thereby elide) the specificity of gay culture within the subculture of the time more generally. This will become another version of the unresolved tension between difference and sameness. Dustan's novels are read as a celebration of Paris's queer clubland, which become quite consciously part of its historical archive, but at the same time they are not averse to shedding light on its more troubling underside of drugs and dangerous sexual practices; for Davis they thus become a challenge to those readers who would wish to "put out the queer trash once and for all" (p. 74). Brigitte Rollet's essay concludes the sequence of essays on gay French culture, and discusses the depiction of homosexuality in mainstream popular (as opposed to more "serious," art house) French cinema. Perhaps not surprisingly, she discovers a tendency to reinforce normative heterosexuality, and the prevailing masculine and feminine gender models. The two films she looks at in more detail—Gabriel Aghion's *Pédale douce* (1996), and Mezrak Allouache's *Chouchou* (2002)—do offer more intriguing and transgressive characters, though, whose fluid identities both challenge expected stereotypes, and even suggest a move beyond the very notion of alterity, which the author terms "deconstructive," without further elaboration. In the final essay of the section, Andrew Asibong takes as his point of reference and departure the abject outcast woman par excellence, Carrie, to discuss the figure of what he terms the "viral women" in *Hiroshima mon amour*, *Les Yeux sans visage* and *Trouble Every Day*. Although rich and well-informed, the essay tries to pack perhaps too much into this term (including, for example, Agamben's *Homo Sacer*, Deleuze, HIV/AIDS discourse theory, and Haitian zombie culture) for it to become a singular and durable conceptual tool of analysis.

The second section shifts to a number of essays which explore the general theme of geographical alienation, both between France and other nations, and within France itself. Martin Hurcombe looks at four novels of the Spanish civil war, all written not coincidentally at a time when France was engaged in its own civil war, the Algerian conflict. In different ways, these novels narrate the disillusionment with radical political ideals, but a re-engagement in an alternative form of commitment, one more closely aligned with Camus's humanist ethics of non-violence. Love (including Christian love) comes to fill in the vacuum left behind, and offers at least the possibility of rising above ideological conflicts. Given that Hurcombe does acknowledge the importance of Camus's writings here, and what is effectively an Algerian palimpsest, it would have been instructive to have pursued this line of thinking, and joined up the dots by reflecting on Camus's own complex relationship to Algeria, as well as the broader context of the other French writers, intellectuals, and political thinkers with autobiographical links to Algeria. The following essay, on Marie-Claire Blais's novel of the working class community of Québec and their dialect, the *Joualonnais*, presents us with an opportunity to reflect on questions of cultural and linguistic alienation. It shows us Québec as a fractured, heterolinguistic and class-ridden society, in contrast to the unified image it often projects. The narrative thus takes the form of an attempted recovery of identity on the far side of this community's marginalisation and dislocation. Picking up on this idea of difference within, Sanaker and Wagner's contribution shifts the focus to the language of French *banlieue* films, or "filmic heterolinguism," though it is really not much more than a rather wide-ranging historical and sociological survey, from the Second World War up to *La Haine*, and more contemporary *banlieue* films. It is not comprehensive by any means (impossible given the limitations of word length), but it is still too vast to allow for any meaningful analysis of any of the films mentioned. It does, however, make the interesting point that there is a gradual move towards accepting linguistic alterity, and opacity, and that dubbing has a general "dampening" effect on heterolinguism. Fayard's contribution, on the same milieu in many ways, but with the focus on sexual violence and alienation in *maghrébine* novels, also skims the surface rather than providing any strong insights. These all seem to be narratives of rebellion, aiming to escape the normalising structures of the *quartiers*, and of family traditions. Thankfully, Fiona Handside's essay on Eric Rohmer's *banlieue* films, which are more attuned, as she puts it, to the "historical heterogeneity" of the *banlieues*, moves us away from the sociological, towards a more interesting aesthetic engagement with space, and specificity of place.

The final section begins with what in my opinion is the strongest essay of the collection, Benjamin Andréo's finely tuned exposition of Antonin Artaud's poetic exercises in "self-exorcism," a practice of "becoming phantom," and of "enlightened delirium" (*dé-lire éclairé*, p. 230), which is the magical operation he assigns to hieroglyphic writing in *Le théâtre et son double*. Andréo takes us to the heart of Artaud's unique creative efforts to write himself out of the confines of his identity, in a way that fully engaged his physical being, through all sorts of linguistic, theatrical, artistic and poetic experiments. In Artaud's case it was a remarkable and incessant performance of radical alterity, what Derrida terms "glossopoeisis" (p. 239). The collection limps home after this high point, with a rather expository reading of Condé's emotional and racial alienation in *Le Coeur à rire et à pleurer*, that makes good use of Fanon, and Celia Britton's excellent book on *Race and the Unconscious*. Kate Roy's essay on Leïla Sebbar then applies Deleuzian notion of difference quite usefully to conceptualise this Algerian-French writer's sense that she is other to both Algerian and French, though by this point in the book, most readers will probably have had enough of attempts to "read difference differently" (p. 169). That said, the engaging commentary on the photographs of *Mes Algéries en France* is welcome, and Deleuzian deterritorialization is invoked to good effect, taking us on to new ground, theoretically speaking, but it unfortunately does not go much beyond the assertion that "difference is a productive principle" (p. 285).

The Appendix, in the form of a brief lexicon by Jeanne Hyvrard of terms associated with alienation, seems oddly disconnected from the rest of the volume, apart from its obvious thematic relevance. It seems that either the editors, or one of the contributors, should have at least taken it upon themselves to write a companion piece to this lexicon, especially since there are a number of intriguing philosophical flights of thought that are never explicitly echoed in the essays in the volume. Although, as the editors say, Hyvrard's work is intensely personal, its rather isolated status in the context of the volume does exacerbate the sense of a writer becoming increasingly self-absorbed, with a constant reference back to her publications, some almost thirty years old now (most notably her "hypertext" book, *La Pensée Corps* [1982]), on which this lexicon is modelled. The irony of such self-absorption in an attempt to think otherness might not be apparent to Hyvrard, just as the slightly haphazard heterogeneity and uneven quality of the contributions in the volume is no doubt not a structurally intentional effect of producing a book about alterity.

It does seem, though, that this volume as a whole has more to say about social and cultural alienation, whether figured as exclusion or as internal difference, and about the literature and cinema that simply reflects this very contemporary obsession, in more or less interesting ways. It does not seem coincidental that most of the case studies of this obsession presented here are rather passive testimonies to various forms of socio-political alienation, with the exception of Andréo's piece on Artaud's high octane performances of alterity. This essay aside, the contributors seem by and large content to lay before us texts and films which themselves bear witness to a certain disintegration of the political, without suggesting politically effective responses to this contemporary malaise.

This is not to naïvely invite a return to the kind of political idealism and ideological battlegrounds which many of the essays quite rightly critique, but to wonder why more attention had not been paid to the historical conditions of the emergence of this phenomenon, or why the more urgent attempts to overcome alienation, particularly in postcolonial contexts, did not feature more prominently. My sense is that this is allied to the rather tame *philosophical* engagement with the question of alterity, which has been a central and powerful feature of French thought in the twentieth century, whether in Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, Bataille's inner experience, Levinas's ethics of the other, Blanchot's reflections on literature, Lacan's reworking of the Freudian unconscious, Césaire and Senghor's poetic imagining of other worlds, Ricoeur's hermeneutics (mentioned in passing), or Derrida's grammatological opening of the entire Western metaphysical tradition. To my mind it is the evasion of this tradition that often accounts for the consistent recasting of alterity as socio-political alienation, and produces a perhaps unconscious theoretical circularity that is always in danger of closing down the possibility of ever approaching the truly other.

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Owen Heathcote, "Queer Alienation? Avatars of *Monsieur Vénus*"

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Jeanne Hyvrard, "Penser l'aliénation et l'altérité"

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