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Jennifer Howell, *The Algerian War in French-Language Comics: Postcolonial Memory, History, and Subjectivity*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2015. xv + 223 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$90.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4985-1606-8.

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In this well-researched and carefully composed study of representations of the Algerian War in comics written in French, Jennifer Howell pays close attention to the many virtues of this particular genre when it comes to remembering and communicating about critical moments from the past. The Algerian War is a deeply important event, not only for the two entities whose identities were inextricably tied to its outcome, but also for “world history,” as Howell argues convincingly in the introduction: “The war marks the end of France’s colonial empire, the birth of the Algerian republic, and the appearance of the Third World and pan-Arabism” (p. xviii). Despite its significance, this conflict has proven difficult to relate (to) because of the complex divisions that marked both sides; the French were split between those who favored an independent Algeria and those who wanted to see French Algeria endure, while “Algerian nationalists were also split between two dominant factions: the Algerian National Movement (MNA) under Messali Hadj who supported a more peaceful revolution, and the National Liberation Front (FLN) who believed in the necessity of armed struggle and would later suffer from internal divisions” (p. xix).

In addition, the eight years of war that led to Algerian independence from French colonial rule were characterized by tremendous violence that has made revisiting this period especially painful for many, and a reticence to address it can be found on many levels. As Howell aptly reminds us, “France refused to recognize the war as such in official discourse” until the very late date of 1999, preferring vague euphemisms to a clear designation. In like manner, it is only in relatively recent years that the Algerian War has made its way into the curriculum in French secondary schools. Even then, the textbooks in use have opted to portray the conflict in starkly republican terms that serve to uphold “founding mythologies and national metanarratives” (p. xx). The priority of these nationalist perspectives in the educational system in France has had unfortunate consequences for many of the country’s inhabitants: “Communities who already had a tenuous position in French society became further marginalized by the construction of these memory narratives” (p. xx).

The Algerian War in French-Language Comics sheds light on the positive potential of comics to serve as a corrective to the marginalization that “certain memory communities” have experienced in France (p. xx). Howell elucidates the unique capacity of these creative works to valorize alternative narratives that effectively redress the one-sided, biased perceptions that official versions of this contentious and defining moment of the French Algerian past have communicated, most notably in the French pedagogical setting. Howell draws from Marianne Hirsch’s conception of “postmemory,” referring to the ways later generations bear the trauma of their parents and grandparents, to identify the specific contributions that comic books are making to further understandings of the Algerian War at present.[1] Many of these works that evoke the Algerian War do so with an attentiveness to the conflict’s ongoing effects on French society: “Frequently authored by subsequent generation ‘survivors,’ these comics are rooted in France’s

current memory wars related to Algeria and thus reflect contemporary politics and issues including immigration, multiculturalism, Islam, unemployment, and racial discrimination” (p. xxiii). The implications for the present are clear throughout Howell’s thorough study.

Chapter one, titled “‘De case en classe’: Teaching the Algerian War,” explores the contents of high school textbooks in France published between 2007 and 2012. Howell focuses on the books that are taught in the final two years of the French *lycée* curriculum and indicates that this “important component” of her book project “developed from conversations with a French secondary school teacher” (p. 3). Her consultation with this instructor and her analysis of the selected textbooks led to the significant observation that “[n]otwithstanding the importance of textual documents, textbook publishers clearly privilege iconic images of war” (p. 5). One of the major shortcomings that Howell identifies in this portion of her study is that these textbooks are “not successful at encouraging a global and continuous understanding of national history, meaning one that is positioned within the larger continuum of world history.” The reason for this failure “is that they put forward hagiographic depictions of historical figures” that lead to simplifications of otherwise complex events of transnational importance, resulting in representations that are more mythological than historical: “subjects exit historical narrative and enter the realm of national mythology” (p. 7).

Given these simplistic representations of the past that dominate in the textbooks used in the French educational system, it is important that the “cartoonists studied” in Howell’s book “belong to or identify with marginalized memory communities” (p. 21). In chapter two, “Historical Narrative, French Colonial Culture, and Comics,” it is clear that these inventive texts can be categorized in more than one way: “readers” can “simultaneously classify these albums as historical documents situating the history of marginalized communities within French metanarratives and as documents of history reflecting the colonial past” that includes the stories of those who experienced the Algerian War from various perspectives, whether “Pied-Noir, soldier, [or] immigrant” (p. 21). It is important to note that cartoonists “recycle mainstream historical documents so as to insert their marginalized memories and histories into national history and collective memory,” thereby creating hybrid works that include novel materials and unheard stories alongside documented events and well-known incidents. Howell draws from the work of historians Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, and Sandrine Lemaire to support her argument that “French colonial culture” continues to make itself felt today in various ways, including “contemporary racial tensions and the unpopularity of American postcolonial studies in France” (p. 21).^[2]

As its alluring title promises, Chapter 3 illuminates the ways comic books about the Algerian War serve as effective means of “Packaging History for Mass Consumption.” Rather than focusing on the potential of comic books to reach a wide public that isn’t accustomed to reading works of literature, Howell concentrates in this chapter on the importance of presenting works that might not readily be accepted by discerning readers as legitimate publications of intellectual merit. The packaging of these works is therefore the result of careful planning, in order to elude a quick dismissal among those who would appreciate their thoughtful content: “Due to the medium’s paraliterary and commodity status when compared to the novel and auteur cinema, cartoonists wishing to validate their representation of history and see their albums classified as historical comics rely on promotional and commercial strategies in the packaging of their product” (p. 39).

Howell argues that since these texts are “considered ‘foreign’ in the realm of French literature,” they “require mediation” (p. 40) in the form of “authenticating paratextual elements” that ensure that they “enjoy greater visibility on the book and comic book market leading to more library acquisitions and critical readings of these texts” (p. 41). Comic book author Jacques Ferrandez, born in Algiers in 1955, has sought to validate his work through the inclusion of forewords by renowned scholars or writers, ranging from professors like Gilles Kepel, to Bruno Étienne, to French historian Michel Pierre, to Algerian writers Mohammed Fellag and Maïssa Bey. Ferrandez assured Howell during a personal interview that the forewords were intended “to authenticate his historical vision” (p. 43). One of the

authors of a foreword, Kepel, believes that the “‘inferior’ literary status of comics” is in fact a positive attribute of the genre, since these texts serve therefore as “an excellent medium through which historical taboos like the Algerian War can be broached and transmitted to future generations” (p. 44).^[3]

Chapter four, “Atrocity Photographs and Reporting War,” turns to fascinating questions about the reproduction of disturbing images that emerge from violent conflict. Howell looks closely at press clippings and news photographs that are integrated into comics and ascertains that they elicit an outcome specific to this genre: “In comics where text and image constitute key aspects of a multimodal narration, the imagetext can transcend the threshold of paratext and the narrative’s time-space continuum, better known as diegesis” (p. 73). The inclusion of photography and print material, along with any additional audiovisual documents, ultimately contributes to “authenticate an album’s historical vision and to contextualize fictional narratives within French national history” (p. 84). What is important to note is that “atrocity images” work differently in comics than they do in the press. According to Howell’s vision: “[they] engage with the reader’s imagination and empathy through their contextualization, narration, and personalization of events” (p. 87).

In this chapter, Howell not only tackles difficult questions about images from war, but she also contemplates in compelling terms the genre that is the topic of this book-length study “as a self-reflexive or meta-cognitive medium, one that is aware of its liminal status with respect to literary and cultural hierarchies” (p. 91). It is because of this location on the periphery that it can help us to remember what is often occluded from official discourse: “As a unique form of cultural production, comics can use the media to disrupt official memory making and the politics of forgetting” (p. 91). In response to the deplorable approaches adopted by the textbooks examined in chapter one, Howell makes a bold claim here that comics can enhance and enrich the pedagogical experience: “The reliance of several cartoonists on other forms of archival documentation, including press clippings, photographs, television stills, and radio broadcasts, establishes clear relationships between history, collective memory, and cultural production, one that history teachers could potentially exploit in their classrooms, or one that could benefit individuals not easily reached by other vectors of cultural/historical transmission” (p. 91).

The final three chapters examine crucial aspects of comics, beginning with the attention to “Self, Other, and Self-Othering” in chapter five, wherein Howell focuses on the presence of “historically significant *frontalier* personalities” (p. 116) such as Abd-el-Kader, Isabelle Eberhardt, Albert Camus. She borrows this italicized term from critic Jean-Robert Henry to refer to important figures who are “historically significant,” “personalities who are revered and even romanticized in the French imaginary” even if they might be situated at the edges, on the borders, of French and Algerian history. Howell ascertains that, despite the presence of these individuals, “representations of the colonial Other most frequently come from ethnographic iconography” (p. 116).^[4] Chapter six, “Mapping Colonial Landscapes,” contains gripping images, some containing striking superpositions of Algerian and French geographies. Finally, chapter seven elaborates on “French Comics as Postmemory” and contemplates the ways in which comics facilitate healing, not only on personal and familial planes, but also on national levels. Howell praises the “therapeutic nature of artistic creation” in a powerful analysis that is attentive to the dissolution of hierarchies that goes hand-in-hand with new textual temporalities: “Here readers are presented with a nonlinear concept of time in which dominant memories no longer replace minority memories. All memories become part of a national narrative mosaic that is constantly evolving and growing. Here memories no longer compete with each other; alternatively, they interact and negotiate meaning” (p. 192).

In a conclusion titled “The Postcolonial Turn in Teaching, Remembering, and Cartooning,” Howell comes back once again to the positive potential that comics contain for the educational setting, citing Jo McCormack’s argument that “[w]hat is taught in schools is perhaps one of the last widely shared cultures in what is an increasingly fragmented society” in order to support her well-founded conviction that “comics as an example of popular culture intimately linked to mass culture, canonical literature, and scholarship provides an opportunity for readers to explore questions of representation as well as the

limitations and possibilities of Franco-Algerian postcolonial relations” (p. 195).^[5] Indeed, these works that combine image and text so convincingly can reach a vast public, ranging from historians, to literary critics, to members of the public seeking informative reading, to survivors seeking to find an expression of their stories, to teenagers who are simply looking for entertainment.

What is so special about the impressive number of comics who revisit the tremendously meaningful conflict that was the Algerian War is that they possess the possibility of bringing out new perspectives that encompass the experiences of those who have heretofore been excluded from serious forms of contemplation and representation. While they certainly won't efface the pain of the past and its ongoing significance for the present, they provide a place for nuanced understanding and informed discussion that should be embraced within the classroom, and beyond. “Comics succeed where major vectors of memory transmission (education, mass media, and the family) fail, particularly when it comes to marginalized communities within French society looking to constitute and better articulate their identity, subjectivity, and social responsibility” (201). This incisive book adds to a growing list of solid scholarly studies highlighting the importance of French-language comics as complex literary and visual texts containing unique insights into the colonial past and postcolonial present.

NOTES

[1] Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

[2] Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, and Sandrine Lemaire, eds., *Fracture coloniale: La société française au prisme de l'héritage colonial* (Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 2005).

[3] Jacques Ferrandez, *Carnets d'Orient, tome 6: La guerre fantôme* (Paris and Brussels: Casterman, 2002).

[4] Jean-Robert Henry, “Les ‘frontaliers’ de l'espace franco-maghrébin,” *Annuaire de l'Afrique du Nord* 30(1991): 301-311.

[5] Jo McCormack, *Collective Memory: France and the Algerian War (1954-1962)* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2007).

[6] Mark McKinney, *The Colonial Heritage of French Comics* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2011) and *Redrawing French Empire in Comics* (Columbus: The Ohio University Press, 2013); Ann Miller, *Reading Bande Dessinée: Critical Approaches to French-language Comic Strip* (Bristol: Intellect Books, 2007).

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