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Hélène Sicard-Cowan, *Vivre ensemble: Éthique de l'imitation dans la littérature et le cinéma de l'immigration en France* (1986-2005). Oxford and Bern: Peter Lang, 2016. 139 pp. Bibliography and index. \$64.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-3-0343-1944-7.

Review by Kathryn Kleppinger, The George Washington University.

Within the field of Francophone literary studies, many fiction writers and scholars have come to question the pertinence and utility of labels that identify creators based on their geographic, racial, or ethnic heritage. One need only consult such high-profile works as the “Pour une littérature-monde” manifesto and accompanying essays[1] or the “Qui fait la France” manifesto and short stories[2] to find cogent critiques of labels such as “*francophone*” and “*banlieue*” that are often used in literary criticism and even on bookstore shelves to divide artists into categories denoting an “outsider” status that does little to indicate a shared linguistic tradition. As many authors argue, discussions of their work frequently reduce the stakes of their writing to the representative and the sociopolitical, as though writers from a minority social position must necessarily serve as eye-witnesses to the social conditions in which their supposed community lives. They deplore the lack of critical attention accorded to the aesthetics of their works and call for broader, more artistically sensitive analyses of their writing.

Hélène Sicard-Cowan’s *Vivre ensemble: Éthique de l'imitation dans la littérature et le cinéma de l'immigration en France* fits squarely within this intellectual framework. In a series of chapters focused on French authors of various colonial heritages (including Azouz Begag (Algeria), Ziad Doueiri (Lebanon), Abdellatif Kechiche (Tunisia), Lam Lê (Vietnam), and Calixthe Beyala (Cameroon)), Sicard-Cowan considers the phenomenon of cultural borrowing from majority-ethnic (Franco-French) literary predecessors. As she argues, the stakes of such a study are particularly high for authors of colonial immigrant heritage, whose borrowings “ont pour enjeu la vie collective ou ‘vie en partage’ en dépit de, à cause de et grâce au colonialisme” (p. 8). In the case of the authors chosen for study in this book, “ils font signe, à travers la mise en scène de relations intersubjectives, à des façons de se relier les uns aux autres qui ne soient basées ni sur la violence, l’ignorance ou le mépris, mais plutôt sur la civilité, l’amitié ou encore l’amour non seulement dans le contenu, mais aussi dans la forme de leurs œuvres, en pratiquant l’imitation” (p. 6). In these instances, imitation or borrowing is used as a gesture of appreciation and acknowledgement of classic French literary predecessors as French authors of a new generation assert their own literary creativity (and, in the process, Frenchness). Unfortunately, as Sicard-Cowan rightly notes, these acts of borrowing are often underappreciated by critics. Her introduction features several criticisms of the authors she studies, including comments calling Begag’s creation “sterile” and Lê’s recent film a poor imitation of *Hiroshima mon amour* (p. 2). In perhaps the most salient example of an unwillingness to read imitation as a literary homage, Sicard-Cowan underlines the debates over Calixthe Beyala’s supposed plagiarism of the author Paule Constant, the subject of her final chapter.

In addition to addressing the colonial and postcolonial literary stakes of Sicard-Cowan’s central premise, the introduction also presents the theoretical underpinnings of the book itself. Gérard Genette provides a useful vocabulary for conceptualizing imitation as a creative act,[3] while Marilyn Randall

contributes a distinction between “copies” (which are “devoid of aesthetic value” (p. 5)) and “imitations” (which “solicit comparisons with their models” (p. 5)).<sup>[4]</sup> The third major theoretical influence stems from Édouard Glissant’s theory of relation, in which he calls for recognition of the fundamental interconnectedness of individual and group identities.<sup>[5]</sup> These theories provide relevant foundations for the analyses that follow, but one also wonders if there might be more to say regarding literary reception and canonization for authors whose status as literary writers is often seen as socio-politically determined. I found myself thinking that the work of sociologists of literature such as Pascale Casanova and Gisèle Sapiro, or even Pierre Bourdieu’s work on literature could provide a compelling counterpoint to the literary theories presented here, but the book’s author could also argue that her work aims to situate the works under study specifically in the field of literature rather than in the domain of the social sciences.<sup>[6]</sup>

While the introduction presents a series of useful theoretical references, it could nevertheless use a broader overarching framework to situate and tie together the specific works under study. Although a relatively minor point, it is not clear why the author chose to delineate the period of study from 1986-2005, beyond the simple fact that the works studied were released during those years. Much more could be said about the pertinence of this time period, situated between the Marche des Beurs of 1983 and the November 2005 urban uprisings. I also wondered about the similarities and differences related to genre and media, as the book moves among fiction writing, autobiographical narrative, and cinema. Sicard-Cowan delves into these questions at the level of the individual source, but the theoretical stakes dictating these choices for the book as a whole deserve more attention.

The first chapter, “De la ‘cruauté du témoignage’ à l’éthique de la mise en relation: *Le Gone du Chaâba* d’Azouz Begag,” considers several forms of imitation in Azouz Begag’s 1986 breakout autobiographical novel *Le Gone du Chaâba*.<sup>[7]</sup> On a macro level, Sicard-Cowan considers how the novel itself engages with but also subverts the conventions of autobiographical writing, as developed in Philippe Lejeune’s landmark study of the genre.<sup>[8]</sup> Although typically read as a relatively traditional autobiography due to the use of an eponymous main character, the novel does not in fact establish an autobiographical pact with the reader. As Sicard-Cowan notes, several scene narratives in the novel also underscore the narrator’s confusion or naïveté regarding the social interactions around him and therefore refuse to provide meaning to the events the young narrator witnessed. In a reading based on the use of realism as defined by Philippe Hamon, Sicard-Cowan argues that “le réalisme begagien met...en relief l’hésitation de son narrateur face à la réalité observée” (p. 35).<sup>[9]</sup> On a micro level, Sicard-Cowan also considers specific moments of literary borrowing within the book, such as when the young Azouz is accused of plagiarism for an in-class writing assignment in which he drew inspiration from a short story by Guy de Maupassant. In these micro- and macro-level analyses, Sicard-Cowan demonstrates how Begag subverts discourses of autobiographical accuracy and minority representativity and therefore asserts his right to be seen as a literary creator with his own aesthetics and style.

The second chapter, “À l’école du sentiment: le cinéma de Ziad Doueiri et d’Abdellatif Kechiche” considers two cinematic adaptations of novels: Chimo’s *Lila dit ça*<sup>[12]</sup> in the case of Doueiri and Marivaux’s *Le jeu de l’amour et du hasard* for Kechiche.<sup>[10]</sup> These films share artistic techniques such as close-ups on young men’s faces, which, according to Sicard-Cowan, allow viewers “d’oublier un moment le milieu stigmatisé qui est celui des protagonistes” (p. 38). Rather than portraying these men as dangerous predators, viewers see love-sick adolescents dealing with the torments of teenage crushes. In the case of *Lila dit ça*, the film portrays a young man’s obsession with an unpredictable, independent young woman.<sup>[11]</sup> While he never “gets the girl,” he successfully uses the material to write a successful novel that propels him out of his impoverished housing in Marseille’s oldest neighborhood, *Le Panier*. In *L’Esquive*, on the other hand, a shy high school student named Krimo struggles with a role in a school play (Marivaux’s *Le jeu de l’amour et du hasard*) in order to be closer to his crush Lydia, who plays one of the lead roles.<sup>[12]</sup> Krimo eventually relinquishes the role, and viewers never learn whether Lydia finally accepts a date with him. In these instances, according to Sicard-Cowan, “Kechiche et Doueiri

découplent la culture canonique d'un usage officiel qui réduit l'identité aux origines sociales et ethniques, tout en lui opposant leur propre usage artistique par des jeunes d'origine maghrébine présentés comme des personnes, des subjectivités à part entière, douées de sensibilité" (p. 62).

Chapter three, "Mémoire, corps et transformation des subjectivités immigrantes dans *Vingt nuits et un jour de pluie* de Lam Lê," interprets Lam Lê's 2006 film as a thematic and stylistic response to the representation of war and colonial trauma in Alain Resnais and Marguerite Duras's classic film *Hiroshima mon amour*.<sup>[13]</sup> In Lê's film, a Vietnamese man living in Paris meets a German woman who was raised in the south of France. Over the course of their three-week encounter the two unnamed protagonists relate stories of their traumatic pasts experienced while living in countries torn by war and political rivalries. The film's response to *Hiroshima mon amour* becomes apparent, according to Sicard-Cowan, in its treatment of native populations. Whereas the Resnais and Duras film "se caractérise par des représentations sociologisantes et ethniciantes du peuple japonais filmé de manière réaliste et privé de toute profondeur psychologique" (p. 67), Lê's film focuses on the individual suffering of Vietnamese characters living first through French colonialism and subsequently in Ho Chi Minh's communist regime. In her analysis of the film itself, Sicard-Cowan focuses on how Lê underscores the fundamental inadequacy of vision and fixed visual representation (such as photography) to address historical traumas. Instead, she argues, Lê's cinema can be seen as "valorisant la vision intuitive, le mouvement, le son, le sens du toucher et la participation active d'un spectateur interpellé plus dans son ressenti corporel et émotionnel que dans sa raison" (p. 65).

Chapter four, "De 'plagiée' à 'plagiaire' et vice-versa: Paule Constant et Calixthe Beyala," takes an innovative approach in studying the plagiarism scandals surrounding Calixthe Beyala's work. Sicard-Cowan places in dialogue Beyala's *Assèze l'Africaine* with Paule Constant's *White Spirit* (of which *Assèze l'Africaine* was criticized as a copy) and the subsequent novels written by the two writers in response to the plagiarism accusation, *Amours sauvages* (Beyala) and *Confidence pour confiance* (Constant).<sup>[14]</sup> Sicard-Cowan conducts close readings of each of the novels to demonstrate how the characters, relationships, and themes enter into a dialogue and argues that Beyala's imitation of Constant's work "instrumentalise l'emprunt littéraire pour rapprocher activement des êtres et des mémoires par-delà le fossé de l'Histoire et de l'appartenance raciale et sexuelle" (p. 96). She establishes her reading in counterpoint to literary discourse in the popular media, and particularly that of Pierre Assouline, novelist and former director of the literary magazine *Lire*, who was initially responsible for the plagiarism charges against Beyala (p. 90). As Sicard-Cowan and Beyala herself underline, charges of plagiarism frequently involve extratextual factors such as the racial and/or sexual identity of the author. The scandal surrounding Beyala's work therefore involves many questions that move far beyond the works themselves, such as the role of colonial history and the place of Francophone authors in the French literary field.

Finally, in a brief conclusion, Sicard-Cowan situates her work alongside that of Rey Chow's reading of minority agency and the right to mimesis by ethnic minority artists.<sup>[15]</sup> She underscores how relationships are the heart of all of the works she studies, and in particular how the authors and filmmakers presented in the book "mettent le dialogue au premier plan non seulement dans leurs pratiques intertextuelles et intermédiaires, mais aussi dans les interactions représentées dans les œuvres" (p. 128).

The book is strongest when it engages in close readings of the materials under study. Sicard-Cowan presents nuanced readings of the novels and films, and her insights would be particularly useful to professors teaching any of the works considered here. While I occasionally disagreed with some of the specificities of the analyses, the conclusions are sufficiently compelling to merit serious attention and engagement. Unfortunately, the work also frequently comes across as a collection of previously published essays with a theoretical logic only subsequently developed for publication as a book. Indeed, much of the material on Begag, Kechiche, Beyala, and Lê has appeared in essays by Sicard-Cowan in a

wide range of journals (cited in the acknowledgements section). This final point brings me to my primary concern with the work, which is that the connections among the works studied and the chapters themselves are tenuous at best. The only justification presented in the introduction to explain the selection of works under study is that “le corpus d’œuvres retenues pour analyse dans cette étude met en présence des écrivains et cinéastes d’origines très diverses afin de suggérer que l’emprunt et les enjeux qu’il véhicule sont au cœur de la production littéraire contemporaine par des immigrants issus des anciennes colonies françaises (ou de leurs descendants), quelle que soit l’origine géographique ou culturelle de ceux-ci” (p. 1). While the point can be taken that these artists cover a wide range of thematic and geographic territory, it is curious that in a work specifically denouncing the frame of representativity, the primary explanation for the selection of works studied relies upon such a notion to tie together the various studies. The book also falters in its over-arching conception of imitation/borrowing, in the sense that the types of imitation and borrowing that occur in each work vary dramatically but are not addressed at a broader theoretical level. This variety can be seen as a form of richness, by showing how authors from a diversity of backgrounds employ a wide range of strategies to situate themselves with regard to dominant French culture. Indeed, this richness is implicit in the study itself but could use a more thorough analysis rather than a glossed set of definitions. In short, then, I highly recommend the use of individual chapters in appropriate university classrooms, but it can be difficult to engage with the work as a whole due to the fragmented nature of its various approaches and conclusions.

## NOTES

[1] Michel Le Bris and Jean Rouaud, eds., *Pour une littérature-monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

[2] Collectif Qui fait la France?, *Chroniques d’une société annoncée* (Paris: Stock, 2007).

[3] Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes. La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982).

[4] Marilyn Randall, *Pragmatic Plagiarism: Authorship, Profit, and Power* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

[5] Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

[6] Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des lettres* (Paris: Points, 2008); Gisèle Sapiro, *La responsabilité de l’écrivain. Littérature, droit et morale en France (XIXe-XXIe siècle)* (Paris: Seuil, 2011); Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l’art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Points, 2015).

[7] Azouz Begag, *Le gone du Chaâba* (Paris: Seuil, 1986).

[8] Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975).

[9] Philippe Hamon, “Un discours contraint,” in Roland Barthes, Leo Bersani, Philippe Hamon, Michael Riffaterre, and Ian Watt, eds., *Littérature et Réalité* (Paris: Seuil, 1982).

[10] Chimo, *Lila dit ça* (Paris: Plon, 1997); Pierre de Marivaux, *Le Jeu de l’amour et du hasard* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).

[11] Ziad Doueiri, *Lila dit ça* (Huit et Demi Productions, 2004).

[12] Abdellatif Kechiche, *L’Esquive* (Pathé Renn Productions, 2007).

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[13] Lam Lê, *Vingt nuits et un jour de pluie* (Rezo Films, 2006); Alain Resnais, *Hiroshima mon amour* (Pathé Entertainment, 1959).

[14] Calixthe Beyala, *Assèze l'Africaine* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994); Paule Constant, *White Spirit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989); Calixthe Beyala, *Amours Sauvages* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999); Paule Constant, *Confidence pour confiance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998).

[15] Rey Chow, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

Kathryn Kleppinger  
The George Washington University  
kleppinger@gwu.edu

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