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Lia Brozgal and Sara Kippur. *Being Contemporary: French Literature, Culture, and Politics Today*. Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 2016. 288 pp. £75.00. (hb). ISBN 9781781382639.

Review by David Pettersen, University of Pittsburgh.

The collection of essays, *Being Contemporary: French Literature, Culture, and Politics Today*, grew out of a one-day conference held in May 2015 to celebrate the retirement of Susan Rubin Suleiman from Harvard University. Lia Brozgal and Sara Kippur, two of Suleiman's former students, edited the volume. As they explain in the introduction, the idea to interrogate the notion of "being contemporary" comes from Suleiman's 1994 book, *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art*, which was originally titled *Being Contemporary*. Suleiman's book sought to invite scholars to reflect on their own relationship to what they study and how they study it. In that work, Brozgal and Kippur explain, Suleiman articulated the notion of a "contemporary triad" that examined contemporaneity from three interrelated angles: one's the relationship to the past, place in the present moment, and picture(s) of a future extending beyond the present. [1] Suleiman termed these three angles "historical awareness," "self-recognition," and "collective action," highlighting the extent to which she saw analysis and praxis as linked (p.2).

Some twenty years have passed since the appearance of Suleiman's edited volume and the one under review here, and Brozgal and Kippur make the case that a reassessment of what it means to be contemporary is in order for two reasons. First, they argue that the humanities in general, and foreign-language-based disciplines in particular, are being asked to justify their relevance by universities, students, and the public at large. Reflecting on the contemporary offers a way to examine a discipline's relationship to the current moment and to the people it addresses. Second, the discipline's primary object, the country of France, along with its history and cultural production, is undergoing something of an identity crisis in an age of migratory flows, increasing cultural diversity, economic and political crisis, and globalization. To consider possible meanings of contemporaneity, they argue, is to ask about what kind of relationship a discipline can have with its object of study. Brozgal and Kippur resist conclusively defining contemporaneity and advocate instead for a strategic fluidity in their conceptualization of the term. On the one hand, they argue that this "suppleness" is a feature of the term itself and its relationship to other proximate terms such as present, modern, and *actuel* (p. 6). On the other, the looseness of their conceptualization allows the volume to sketch out an inclusive and varied set of approaches to the present moment of the discipline.

Brozgal and Kippur selected contributors based on literal *confrères* (friends and acquaintances of Suleiman's) and scholars at a remove whose work nevertheless intersects with or builds on Suleiman's. The risk of structuring an edited volume around a single scholar's body of work, even one as influential as Suleiman's, is that it might provide only a partial assessment of the current state of the field of French Studies in a book that purports to be expansive. Brozgal and Kippur seem aware of this risk and, although several of the contributors come from Suleiman's retirement conference, it is clear that the editors invited additional eminent scholars in the field to contribute as well. For example, a central preoccupation in Suleiman's work is the legacy of Vichy, the Second World War, and the Shoah on the ethics and politics of French literature. Several of the commissioned essays seek to connect this focus with other French

historical traumas, such as the wars of decolonization and the twentieth century's several waves of human migration to the Hexagon. Emily Apter, Régine Robin, Maurice Samuel, Alice Kaplan, and Marianne Hirsch's essays are particularly successful in this regard.

Part one, "Conceptualizing the Contemporary," offers a trio of essays that set up some of the theoretical terrain for the rest of the book. Henri Russo explores possible start dates for the contemporary moment and offers a useful synthesis of how different schools or groups of historians have understood their relationship to contemporaneity. His essay also offers a helpful meditation on the relationship between historians and living witnesses of contemporary events. Emily Apter's meditation on literary historiography calls into question the Eurocentric and capitalist assumptions behind the will to periodize, arguing instead for different senses of chronology that are decentered and elastic. Finally, Carrie Noland characterizes contemporaneity as a non-coincidence with one's self. Through an analysis of post-conceptualist dance choreography, she shows that this non-coincidence takes place through encounters with otherness, both one's own otherness, and the otherness outside.

In part two, "Contemporary Politics and French Thought," the edited volume brings the lens of the contemporary to a series of moments in French intellectual history and asks how it can help us rethink what politics might mean. Régine Robin's essay offers an account of all the ways in which migration, decolonization, and the traumas of the twentieth century have eroded any sense of stable French identity. She concludes that contemporary France remains largely ignorant of the extent to which it has become a multicultural nation. Lawrence Kritzman turns to the work of Jacques Derrida to articulate an aporetic notion of contemporaneity. His case study is racial justice and the right to cultural difference in the French and American contexts. He characterizes contemporaneity as an uncompromising openness and a willingness to call into question what one thinks one knows. Jeffrey Mehlman's piece analyzes the importance of Sade in twentieth-century French thought, especially Blanchot, and tracks the gradual farewell Blanchot makes to Sade as a theorist of negation. Maurice Samuels carries out a focused critique of Alain Badiou's understanding of universalism, arguing that it depends on a paradoxical suppression of difference that, in some of Badiou's writings, takes on an explicit anti-Semitic cast.

Part three, "The Second World War and Vichy: Present Perspectives" investigates how contemporary France and contemporary scholars relate to the legacy of the Second World War. Richard Goslan's chapter traces how the word Vichy functions in contemporary public discourse after the painful memory work of the 1990s. In particular, he shows how the word has come to be conflated with other French traumatic pasts, such as the War of Algerian Independence, and how it is sometimes used as a polemical term for national decline. Gisèle Sapiro reconstructs the networks of solidarity, rivalry, and exclusion at work among writers in official and unofficial literary institutions during the Occupation period in order to show that moments of historical crisis can radically change how writers relate to each other and to the public at large. In his essay, Jakob Lothe argues that humanity has a collective responsibility not to forget the Holocaust, and he shows how artistic representations can contribute to realizing this ethical imperative. He juxtaposes two survivor testimonies that he himself recorded with W. G. Sebald's novel, *Austerlitz*, in order to show how crucial fiction is to the preservation and transmission of testimony.

Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi's chapter attempts to account for her own ambivalent response to Jonathan Littell's *Les Bienveillantes*, a novel about the Shoah that is narrated from the perspective of an SS officer. She likens its publication to an event that has further extended the limits of representation around the Shoah, and she argues that it is an important, even necessary, text because of the urgent questions it raises about the ethics of witnessing and complicity. Irene Kacandes's essay brings together the intellectual concerns of part three. Her point of departure is that many contemporary human beings have lost the moral capital of the mid-twentieth century world's reaction against Nazi genocide because they countenance forms of ethnic cleansing and genocide taking place in hot spots throughout the world today without intervening in them. She argues that post-memorial literature can serve an important ethical function in helping contemporary readers co-witness violent and traumatic events while reflecting on the post-memory gap

that separates them from direct experience of these events. Kacandes hopes that knowledge about the past gleaned from fiction can lead contemporary people to "summon our courage to act in our present world where it is easy to despair about our inability to prevent ethnic cleansing and genocide" (p. 209).

Annette Wieviorka's essay, the first of part four, which is entitled "Writing the Contemporary Self," offers a pivot from the concerns of the previous section about Vichy and the Shoah to the concerns of this section about the many genres and modes of writing the self: autobiography, memoir, autofiction, and even academic scholarship. Wieviorka sets out to write the history of her own family on her mother's side, namely their experience of exclusion and deportation as Jews during the Occupation period. Tom Conley focuses on two of Marc Augé's recent writings in which Augé turns his ethnographic eye on himself to produce texts that mix autobiography, autoethnography, and literary self-reflection. Conley connects Augé's self-reflection to Suleiman's work by showing that to put oneself into one's writing is to risk one's existence in the hope of glimpsing something of one's relationship to the contemporary world. Alice Jardine tells readers that her chapter is just as much a meditation about her own self as it is about writing Julia Kristeva's intellectual biography. She speaks about her desire to read the work of others "autobiographically" (p. 246), that is, as a way of understanding one's own self and relationship to the world. While Jardine is aware of the solipsistic risks of such an approach, she ultimately argues that it is an important way of being contemporary and acting as an engaged intellectual. Michael Sheringham's chapter is a meditation on the various ways that the story and experience of Annie Ernaux's abortion surface across several of her writings. The unconscious and conscious ways in which this past event returns and asks to be written in the present calls into question, for Sheringham, the extent to which a writer can ever be fully contemporary.

Part five, "Novel Rereadings," continues to explore the personal intersections between a writer and other writers that have come before. Adaptation and rewriting are crucial ways that past writers can again become contemporary. Mieke Bal defends anachronisms as the means through which the past comes to act on the present. She then traces at length her own project to adapt Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* into a video installation as a way of making that work matter for contemporary viewers and readers. Janet Beizer analyzes Colette's relationship with the many volumes of Honoré de Balzac's *Divine Comedy* at two points in her life. She highlights how Colette understands reading and writing as a process of bodily incorporation and assimilation, one that cannot be definitively pinned down as either material or spiritual sustenance. Christie McDonald reads Samuel Beckett's rereading of Marcel Proust at different points in his life. Through three of Beckett's writings, McDonald tracks how Beckett takes up similar questions to Proust about the nature of choice and the redemptive power of art. Alice Kaplan's essay analyzes how Kamel Daoud's *Meursault, contre-enquête* effects a crucial change in perspective in its rewriting of Albert Camus's *L'Étranger*. For Kaplan, Daoud's rewriting of the story from the perspective of the murdered nameless Arab victim allows Daoud and Camus's text to speak to contemporary issues of France's memory of colonialism and to possible futures for post-civil war Algeria.

The final part, "Memory: Past and Future," examines the relationship of memory to contemporaneity. Emmanuel Bouju's chapter offers a suggestive metaphor for thinking about the post-memory generation of contemporary writers revisiting the historical traumas of the twentieth century. Rather than focusing on the unspoken absence of what was lost, Bouju's essay and his reading of Philippe Forest's work suggest an approach that treats historical traumas like a phantom limb that one can feel and manipulate through the imaginative resources of fiction, even though what has been lost in reality can never be restored. Deborah Jenson rereads the role of memory in Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, not through its habitual Bergsonian intertext, but rather through the theories of neurasthenic memory that Marcel's father, Adrien, developed. Jenson goes on to reinterpret the *Recherche*, not as a theory or monument of memory, but as a kind of therapeutic text that works through the memory dysfunctions that Adrien saw as characteristic of neurasthenia to a hyperfunctioning, virtuosic kind of memory. Marianne Hirsch's essay ends the edited volume, tying together several threads that extend throughout the collection. Hirsch offers an account of how art that deals with catastrophic histories can foster vulnerability in those that

encounter it, rather than identification or empathy—a vulnerability which she understands as a mixture of proximity and distance that heightens, rather than forecloses individual’s ability to respond to historical traumas.

Lia Brozgal and Sara Kippur’s edited volume is impressive in its scope and in the intellectual level of its essays. While one could quibble about the inclusion or exclusion of particular topics in a volume that is already capacious, the collection succeeds marvelously well in doing something that was so central to Suleiman’s work: providing useful theoretical concepts and models of thought that other scholars can productively apply to their own areas and objects of study. In this, it is a most fitting tribute to Suleiman’s work and an important contribution to the field.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Part One "Conceptualizing the Contemporary"

Henri Russo, “Coping with Contemporariness”

Emily Apter, “Rethinking Periodization for the ‘Now-Time’”

Carrie Noland, “(After) Conceptualism: Contemporaneity in Choreography”

Part Two "Contemporary Politics and French Thought"

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Lawrence D. Kritzman, “The Paradoxes of Being Contemporary: Derrida and the Political”

Jeffrey Mehlman, “Of Sade, Blanchot, and the French Twentieth Century”

Maurice Samuels, “Alain Badiou and Antisemitism”

Part Three "The Second World War and Vichy: Present Perspectives"

Richard J. Goslan, “What Does ‘Vichy’ Mean Now?”

Gisèle Sapiro, “Forces of Solidarity and Logics of Exclusion: The Role of Literary Institutions in Times of Crisis”

Jakob Lothe, “Narrative, Testimony, Fiction: The Challenge of Not Forgetting the Holocaust”

Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, “‘Moral Witnessing’?: An Israeli Perspective on Jonathan Littell’s *Les Bienveillantes*.”

Irene Kacandes, “From ‘Never Forgetting’ to ‘Post-Remembering’ and ‘Co-Witnessing’: Memory Work for the Twenty-First Century”

Part Four "Writing the Contemporary Self"

Annette Wieviorka, “I in the Plural: A New Writing of History”

Tom Conley, "Selves at Risk: Reading Susan Suleiman with Marc Augé, *La vie en double*"

Alice Jardine, "Risking Who One Is, at the Risk of Thinking: On Writing an Intellectual Biography of Julia Kristeva"

Michael Sheringham, "'La Connaissance par corps': Writing and Self-Exposure in Annie Ernaux"

Part Five "Novel Rereadings"

Mieke Bal, "Long Live Anachronism"

Janet Beizer, "Colette's *Côtelettes*, or the World Made Flesh"

Christie McDonald, "Choices: Beckett's Way"

Alice Kaplan, "Making *L'Étranger* Contemporary: Kamel Daoud's *Meursault, contre-enquête*"

Part Six "Memory: Past and Future"

Emmanuel Bouju, "A Nest in the Air: Phantom Pain and Contemporary Narrative"

Deborah Jenson, "Adrien and Marcel Proust: Fathering Neurasthenic Memory"

Marianne Hirsch, "Vulnerable Times"

NOTE

[1] Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Risking Who One Is: Encounters with Contemporary Art and Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 10.

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