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Sara-Louise Cooper, *Memory Across Borders: Nabokov, Perec, Chamoiseau*. Oxford: Legenda, 2016. 161pp. bibliography and index. £75.00 (hb). ISBN 978-1-910887-08-0

Review by Maeve McCusker, Queen's University Belfast.

This monograph, the sixth to appear in Legenda's exciting new "Transcript" series, is an ambitious and searching work, which fully realises the imprint's commitment to intercultural and trans-linguistic analysis. In seeking to tease out the nodes of intersection, solidarities and resonances between the autobiographies of Vladimir Nabokov, Georges Perec and Patrick Chamoiseau, Cooper systematically uncovers the "multiple, imbricated memories of mobility which criss-cross French-language literature and reverberate beyond it" (p. 7). "What does it mean," Cooper asks in her introduction, "to come to a language through violent histories in the colonial centre (Perec), on its peripheries (Chamoiseau) and outside its national territories (Nabokov)?" (p. 7). In seeking to answer this question she brings us back, again and again, to the imbrication of racial, colonial and anti-Semitic violence, which frequently can be considered as prisms through which other prejudices can be understood. In this respect her work stands alongside that of critics and theorists such as Max Silverman and Michael Rothberg, who have drawn out the profound interconnections between these often compartmentalized histories. Cooper is too shrewd a critic to allow the comparative to bleed into the competitive, notably in her treatment of slavery and the Holocaust. And yet, as she argues of the Holocaust, "refusals of comparison can be implicated in the minimization of historical violence just as much as commitments to comparison" (p. 10). Similarly, she is vigilant in her use of trauma theory, acknowledging, along with such theorists as Dominick La Capra and Richard McNally, that the use of the term has become worryingly loose, subject to what the latter describes as a "conceptual bracket creep" (p. 99), meaning that it risks being associated with universal rather than extreme events. But by showing how each author attends to the resonances of colonialism and the Holocaust in their autobiographical writing, Cooper identifies and discusses a remarkable set of connections at the textual level, without suggesting any too easy equivalence, and without flattening out the key differences between the writers.

Cooper's first chapter foregrounds the uncomfortable positionality of each writer, located "at an angle" (p. 13) to the French literary tradition. Here she specifically interrogates the space of the home as a locus in which memory is constructed, housed and destroyed. For Nabokov and Chamoiseau, the house, even when demolished or redeployed, is an animate space, a maternal space, a repository of memory—and, in the case of the latter writer, of Creole culture generally, therefore of both collective and individual memory. For Perec, on the other hand, it is an anonymous and desolate space, whose final destruction "unsettles any faith in the physical world as a reliable record of the past" (p. 25). Chapter two looks at each writer's ambivalent relationship with the French language, and analyses the presence of multiple languages in the home (Creole, Russian and Yiddish, as well as French). This means that the writers discussed inscribe themselves within a literary tradition while simultaneously asserting their distance from it. The third chapter discusses the presentation of trauma in the writings of the three authors, registered in such textual tropes as blank spaces, silence, dissociation, and fragmentation, as well as in the image of the wound. Here Cooper acknowledges the very different tenor of the experience for all three: if for Perec, for example, the raw first-hand experience of genocide triggers "a complex

shattering of the self" (p. 97), Chamoiseau's life in an ex-slave colony turned *département d'outre-mer* is much less immediately and personally traumatic, but is profoundly marked by the painful intergenerational legacies of slavery. She writes compellingly about reader responses to Perec; her discussion of Lejeune and other critics' quoting rather than analysing key lines from *W* is especially perceptive (p. 93). Chapter four challenges, via Freud and Proust, the trauma model, showing how traumatic memory can be intertwined with conscious, active and productive modes of relating to the past. Here Cooper reflects on the role of the ludic (puzzles, miniatures, fractals, chess), and through a revealing discussion of displacement, argues that the reader is required by all three authors to embark on a series of complex journeys made possible by the text. The conclusion offers a reflection on the association of the French language with civilisation. Whether this association emanates from the Russian nobility (Nabokov), or from the classroom of a newly formed *département* in the Caribbean (Chamoiseau), or indeed as a result of the transition from the ghetto into "the light" of Paris (Perec), Cooper shows how intimately connected language, literature, and French national identity are, and the range and complexity of autobiographical responses to this.

This is a beautifully written and elegantly produced monograph, in which stimulating and sensitive close readings are enriched by a deftly handled theoretical apparatus. It is also an important book that opens out onto discussion of much broader themes of urgent contemporary significance: national identity, migration, universalism, francophonie. Too often the writings of the French Caribbean (and of the postcolonial world more generally) are seen as inherently distinct from high modernist or postmodern "canonical" writing. What Cooper proves is that all three writers are motivated by a common concern with (and distance from) the French language and from many of the ideologies underpinning the French nation. The tension in their writings, between love of the language and its literary tradition on the one hand, and a chaffing sense of discomfort in relation to this tradition on the other, proves to be one of the key drivers of each writer's literary project. As someone who has for many years been teaching Chamoiseau and Perec together in an undergraduate course (alongside Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance*, a text that would have been an interesting inclusion), I was unsurprised by the comparative premise of the project and yet delighted, on every page, by the unexpected connections uncovered. The book, essential reading for scholars of the three main authors studied, has a broader appeal beyond this constituency too. It represents a significant intervention for those working in memory studies, autobiography, comparative literature and transnational French Studies.

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