

---

H-France Review Vol. 18 (April 2018), No. 90

Nicole Simek, *Hunger and Irony in the French Caribbean. Literature, Theory and Public Life*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. 201 pp. Bibliography, and index. \$99.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-137-55991-3.

Review by Véronique Maisier, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

In *Hunger and Irony in the French Caribbean. Literature, Theory and Public Life*, published in Palgrave MacMillan's New Caribbean Studies series, Nicole Simek offers an insightful study of the presence and multiple uses of irony in French Caribbean works that cross generic boundaries, and range from fiction, autobiography, essay, manifesto, and photography. The corpus examined in Simek's study includes several works by Guadeloupean author Maryse Condé, and Martinican Patrick Chamoiseau, as well as one autobiographical essay by Gisèle Pineau, and Simone Schwarz-Bart's novel *Ti Jean L'horizon* (1979). Simek's analyses of these works convincingly demonstrate the ways in which irony places French Caribbean writers in a position to constantly negotiate and question, rather than bluntly confront, notions of exotic difference, claims to transparency, political and ethical urgencies, authorial agency, and public reception. Paired readings of these French Caribbean texts, combined with theoretical discussions of irony, parallax and opacity, show how nimble and productive a tool irony can be thanks to its "meaning-making" capacities, and the alternative vantage points it affords the authors. Shifting perspectives through irony and irony's creative edge, Simek argues, allows the authors to write texts that are complex, rich, playful and serious, and that require hermeneutics located in the sociopolitical context of postcolonial communities. Simek looks for the "productive frictions" (p. 3) generated by the juxtaposition of hunger and irony in order to ask "what modes of irony might best attend to a hunger for a justly 'post'-colonial society?"—a question she asks in her introductory chapter (p. 11) and conclusively returns to in her final chapter (p. 150).

The book's six chapters offer a dialogical approach as they present contrapuntal examinations of two works, typically one written by Patrick Chamoiseau and one by Maryse Condé, although texts by Pineau and Schwarz-Bart are also considered in chapters three and four respectively. Simek effectively goes back and forth between the two works she selected in each chapter to add nuance to her arguments, and further illustrate her reading of irony's purpose in these works.

The first chapter, which is also the book's introduction, gives a general presentation of the paradoxical yet productive connections between something as material and urgent as hunger and the more abstract concept of irony. While hunger appears as a straightforward, material and pragmatic concern that leaves little room for ambiguity or theory, Simek argues that the use of irony adds multiple meanings to texts whose scopes go beyond materiality and anticolonial

critique to embrace ethical cravings, existential paradoxes, and aesthetic desires. Simek engages with Linda Hutcheon's work in *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (1994) to emphasize the relevance of ironic discourses in specific sociohistorical contexts when it comes to representations of relations of real or symbolic power.

Simek's second chapter, titled "Theory or Over-Eating," looks at the relationship and hierarchy that prevail between literature and theory. Simek introduces her reflection through a reading of Maryse Condé's intertextual references to Joseph Zobel and Frantz Fanon in *Le cœur à rire et à pleurer: Contes vrais de mon enfance* (1999), and highlights the ways in which Condé seems to initially resort to literature for discovery before turning to theory for a more abstract confirmation of her identity and history. Simek then analyzes Condé's *Histoire de la femme cannibale* (2003) alongside Chamoiseau's *Solibo Magnifique* (1988) to discuss the limitations of literature, and the parasitic nature of both authors and critics in regard to literature and language. She concludes with a distinction between literature defined as a "discourse that manifests its ironies, insists on singularity, and questions the validity of its truth claims" (p. 47) and theory that is "a discourse that forgets its ironies in an aim to stabilize meaning and ensure the repeatability of concepts and categories" (p. 47) but also insists on the converging nature of these discourses, underscoring their "permeability" as "discourses that rely on generalization, iterability, and categorical thinking" (p. 47).

Her third chapter, "Ironic Intent," takes on the issue of the reception of French Caribbean texts, and further engages with the metaphor of hunger to comment on the consumption and digestion of literary texts as well as the commodification of a French Caribbean literature that balances between appealing through its exotic difference and reassuring with its familiar considerations. Simek sees irony as an efficient means to avoid cooptation through a questioning of the rigid boundaries between center and periphery. To support her arguments about consumption and public reception, Simek looks at self-writing in this chapter, and analyzes Chamoiseau's *Écrire en pays dominé* (1997) and Condé's *La vie sans fards* (2012) as these texts ironically play or at least engage with the notions of authorial control and intentionality. Starting with the remark that French Caribbean authors often turn to autobiography after writing fiction as a means to explain the coming to writing itself, Simek proceeds to study self-representation and self-writing in these two works in order to discuss authorial responsibility, as well as the writers' ethical, political or material urgency in writing, and the limits of the writers' agency. She makes an interesting argument about the seemingly contradictory traits of these autographies that, on the one hand, reclaim an individual's right to self-representation and, on the other hand, seek self-effacement in an attempt to represent the community or to release control to the readers. Irony in these ambivalent conditions allows the writers to navigate between self and other, whether this other is the reader or, more subtly, the literary representation of the author.

Chapter four, "In the Belly of the Beast: Irony, Opacity, Politics," examines the ways in which literary forms—narrative genres, text and paratext, fiction and autobiography—play an essential part in the readers' reception and the critics' interpretation and theoretical constructs. Starting with a reference to Martinican author and theorist Édouard Glissant's resistance and use of opacity to challenge easy, transparent interpretations, Simek looks at the ways in which irony brings "[h]unger's shadows" to the light by challenging assumptions brought forth by reductionist readings. More specifically, Simek looks at Breleur's collaborative manifesto titled *Manifeste des "produits" de haute nécessité* (2009)—a short, politically engaged text of twelve pages signed by nine writers including Chamoiseau—and at Schwart-Bart's novel *Ti Jean L'horizon* to

reflect on the tense relationship between, on one hand, the necessity to address the material, everyday hunger for food and drink, and on the other, a poetics of opacity that makes room for new possibilities, “new vistas” and the “promise of new worlds” (p. 115).

The following chapter, “Hunger Pangs: Irony, Tragedy, Constraint,” explores French Caribbean writers’ tendency to work across multiple literary genres, and comments on their readiness to engage in a variety of discourses. Simek analyzes the presence of Caribbean political and historical realities in a perceptive discussion centered on the themes of imprisonment, escape and impasse in Chamoiseau’s *Un dimanche au cachot* (2007) and Condé’s *La Belle Créole* (2001). Once again interested in “the question of storytelling’s power” (p. 133), an important thread throughout her book, Simek looks into the “material changes [that] literature, or storytelling, can effect in the world” (p. 129).

Simek’s last chapter, titled “Thirsty Ruins, Ironic Futures,” expands on the ways in which irony can be used for positive outcomes, not simply as a means to handle or circumvent difficult circumstances but more positively as a way to bring forth a feeling of “wonder and desire” (p. 149). Underlining the playful tactics deployed by the authors in their treatment of authenticity and fiction in works that take root in archives, photographs and bona fide documentation, Simek turns to Condé’s text about her grandmother *Victoire, les saveurs et les mots* (2006), and to Chamoiseau’s work produced in collaboration with Jean-Luc de Laguarigue titled *Elmire des sept bonheurs: Confidences d’un vieux travailleur de la distillerie Saint-Étienne* (1998). Simek highlights the contrast in this latter work between the somber quality of the photographs and the playfulness of the text that accompanies the photos. She interprets the authors’ back and forth between documentation and imagination as ironic shifts that relativize history, thus opening the door to imagination and juxtapositions of truths, and ultimately raising questions about documentation and cultural productions.

Patrick Chamoiseau and Maryse Condé are two of the most prolific and most studied French Caribbean authors today. Yet, Nicole Simek’s study of their writing through the lens of irony brings new and nuanced perspectives that fruitfully add to ongoing conversations on the place of literature and theory in our postcolonial world. Her selection of works such as Breleur et al.’s *Manifeste des “produits” de haute nécessité*, Chamoiseau’s collaborative work *Elmire des Sept Bonheurs*, and Gisèle Pineau’s *Folie, aller simple: Journée ordinaire d’une infirmière* (2010) also provides many valuable insights into texts that have thus far received limited attention from critics. Chamoiseau and Condé are also two writers of “divergent styles and critical orientations” (p. 8) who have publicly taken different stances on a number of issues, such as the question of the Creole language in Caribbean literature, or the role and place of the author in his/her community. The originality of Simek’s study, then, lies in the paired readings that successfully bring out and articulate the convergences of their works through her examination of irony in these works. In the introduction of her book, Simek announces three objectives for her study: firstly to participate in the ongoing discussion about the tropes of hunger, eating and cannibalism in the Caribbean context; secondly to analyze the relationship between literature and theory; and finally to look at the “political efficacy of literature and critique in a neoliberal era” (p. 3). *Hunger and Irony in the French Caribbean* delivers beautifully on all three counts, effectively balancing theoretical discussions and close readings to offer insightful analyses of important works. Simek’s study will be an excellent resource for students and scholars interested in Caribbean cultural productions.

---

Véronique Maisier  
Southern Illinois University at Carbondale  
[profmaisier@gmail.com](mailto:profmaisier@gmail.com)

Copyright © 2018 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172