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Antonia Wimbush, *Autofiction: A Female Francophone Aesthetic of Exile*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021. 272 pp. Notes, references, and index. £95.00. (hb). ISBN 9781800858015.

Review by Valérie K. Orlando, University of Maryland.

Autofiction: A Female Francophone Aesthetic of Exile explores different modes of francophone women's exile as expressed through the literary-theoretical framework of autofiction. Antonia Wimbush makes the claim that her work advances scholarly inquiry and discussion of francophone exilic literature "in a unique manner by bringing *genre* in both its forms--gender and literary genre--to bear on expressions and articulations of exile, arguing that the reconceptualization of categories of mobility occurs specifically in women's autofictional writing" (pp. 2-3). Wimbush asserts that scholarship thus far has mainly focused on "exile as geographic displacement," which has "produce[d] an overtly masculine reading that risks reinforcing phallogocentric understandings of exile" (p. 2). Therefore, for Wimbush, there are "gender 'blind spots' where existing writing on migration and displacement neglects to consider women's experiences adequately" (p. 2). The author notes that exile is a "mode of migration" that allows for "knowledge that shifts" in terms of "geographical position, social status, gender, age, and ethnicity" (p. 3).

Wimbush makes the bold claim that "current models" and "definitions of exile" which are binary in their structure, positioning women between home and exile, fall short of adequately explaining the nuances of the experiences articulated in the works of the six writers on whom she focuses (p. 2). For Wimbush, the six authors she examines from various countries and regions across the francophone world experience their "hybridity as both a literal exile" and, also, a "metaphorical exile" which, in turn, are sources of "creativity and trauma" (p. 4). Drawing on the established form of autofiction as defined in the French context by, primarily, Philippe Lejeune and Serge Doubrovsky, Wimbush notes that the genre of autofiction allows (in terms of Doubrovsky's articulation of the framework) "a more suitable methodology...to analyze representations of exile and displacement" (p. 27). Specifically, Doubrovsky's definition of autofiction focuses on the "agency of the writer" and a "particular time period" that allow for the reader to understand "a chronological account of one's life" (p. 27). Equally important, Doubrovsky's definition of autofiction makes space for the author to psychoanalytically examine the self.

Wimbush's analytical chapters span a wide range of women authors from the francophone world. These include Kim Lefèvre (Vietnam), Gisèle Pineau (Guadeloupe), Nina Bouraoui (Algeria/France), Michèle Rakotoson (Madagascar), Véronique Tadjo (Côte d'Ivoire), and Abla

Farhoud (Lebanon/Canada). The novels considered span an almost thirty-year time frame from Lefèvre's 1989 *Métisse blanche* to Farhoud's *Au grand soleil cachez vos filles*, published in 2017. These novels are used to prove one of the key overarching arguments of Wimbush's thesis, that "exile is not only a territorial displacement but also a state of mind" (p. 171).

Errance, or wandering, is also a quality of exile that is highlighted in the work. With respect to Rakotoson's novels, Wimbush notes that this wandering "can be interpreted as a specific form of exile, one that positions [the protagonist] as a social, linguistic and cultural outsider, but simultaneously enables her to document [her] country's forgotten (post)colonial history and bear witness to contemporary suffering" (p. 157). The wandering quality of exile haunts the narratives in all six novels considered in the study and, as a point of comparison, would have been interesting to pursue more thoroughly throughout.

Following the introductory chapter, which explains Wimbush's theoretical framework, chapters two through seven are devoted to these women authors, with each focusing on a particular characterization of exile and/or displacement as they bear on what I suggest is the narrator's *being-in-the-world*, to use Martin Heidegger's term.^[1] Each chapter considers this *being* as expressed in each individual author's autofictional narrative. For example, Kim Lefèvre's *Métisse blanche* (1989) is considered through *métissage* (mixing) and the double-identity the author experiences as a mixed race (French/Vietnamese) woman growing up in Vietnam from 1930 to 1960. In Gisèle Pineau's novel *L'exil selon Julia* (1996), the exile experienced by the narrator is shaped by war and migration, specifically during the First and Second World Wars. Véronique Tadjo's *Loin de mon père* (2010) focuses on the life of a heroine who is caught between her exiled life in France and her *pays d'origine*, Côte d'Ivoire, both of which are imprisoned in memories of her father and the failures of the country to provide a safe space in which to thrive. For the heroine, returning to Africa after a long absence brings only culture shock and disorientation.

Chapters one and five are particularly compelling for the diverse outcomes Wimbush reveals in narratives of displacement. The author studies in these two chapters how biraciality and/or displacement/*errance* create states of being that influence how the protagonists engage with their intertwined personal and national histories. These engagements, or in Glissantian terms, "relations"^[2], for Wimbush, lead to both positive and negative outcomes. Vietnamese and Malagasy anticolonial, revolutionary, and independence histories are explored as they impact in different stages the relationship of the protagonist to her later experiences of exile and of returning to her homeland.

Kim Lefèvre's monumental work, *Métisse blanche* (1989), is an exemplary narrative for articulating "the experiences of exile that occur within the very family of the narrator Kim, Lefèvre's own textual self" as they relate to the historic upheaval in Vietnam post-WWII through the 1960s (p. 55). As Wimbush notes, referring to Roger Toumson's work, "*métissage* in the colonial period symbolized 'animalité, hybridité, stérilité,' and other images" associated with degenerate physiology both on intellectual and moral levels (p. 63-64). These stereotypes associated with biraciality during the colonial era are constant hurdles for Kim's life as she wrestles with the upheaval of the country's impending civil war. Yet Lefèvre's protagonist, despite persecution and alienation because of her biraciality, in later life becomes empowered and enriched by her *double appartenance*. Through exile and understanding of her intersectional positioning to her homeland, she is able to "reconcile" her relationship with her family, their history, as well as with the violent history of Vietnam.

In a different context, Michèle Rakotoson's *Juillet au pays: chroniques d'un retour à Madagascar* (2007) contextualizes *errance* and, thus, wandering through time and space, as forcing the protagonist to constantly live in an "in-between space" without reconciliation (p. 143). *Errance*, while liberating the author and her protagonist from a postcolonial nation that is hostile to her due to her political leanings and activism, does not result in positive "identity construction" in exile, only to a sort of "transcendence" which helps the protagonist (and author) cope with constant feelings of displacement in France (p. 167).

Wimbush's study often reads like a who's who of francophone literary scholars and their publications. The overabundance of references to, and citing of, leading francophone academics who have contributed to shaping the discipline's field for the last thirty years, are often tedious. These abundant references, although useful for compiling bibliographies on the trajectory of francophone scholarship during this expansive timeframe, also lead the informed reader to wonder why some leading academics in the field didn't make the cut. For example, when reading the chapter on Nina Bouraoui, what is noticeable is the absence of references to certain essays by important scholars of her work, which would have been useful for exploring the particular nuances of the well-known novel *Garçon manqué* and, more broadly, the Algerian-French author's oeuvre.[3]

The constant quoting of secondary analytical sources tends to overshadow Wimbush's own voice and, by extension, her goal of advancing scholarly study and inquiry of francophone women's novels in a "unique manner" (p. 3). For example, one question that arises in the introduction is how Wimbush situates her study in the context of current ideas, concepts, and debates on and/or about francophone literature. These debates include how contemporary literature of French expression is engaging with a *littérature-monde* view that expresses the overarching commonalities inherent in authors writing from multiple regions outside France. Other examples could entail investigating concepts for their usefulness to Wimbush's thesis, such as *la francophonie* and *francophonisme*, or the larger context of post-post-colonial studies as explored in many critical volumes written in the last decades.[4] It would have been interesting to understand how autofiction as a literary framework fits into these debates and concepts as a way to advance the field of Francophone Studies.

Despite these minor criticisms, as a pedagogical tool for an introduction to francophone literature by women from a variety of regions/countries, Wimbush's study is very useful. It offers students and academics a framework through which to explore exile as a comparative trope across a wide variety of novels by women authors from a plethora of regions and countries of origin. *Autofiction: A Female Francophone Aesthetic of Exile* reveals the vast complexity of the francophone world and, particularly, the challenges women (protagonists and authors) face as they try to navigate their own displacement as it influences how they conceptualize their identity and relationship to and with their homelands.

NOTES

[1] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: SUNY Press, 1996).

[2] See Edouard Glissant's *Poétique de la relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990) and *Philosophie de la relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).

[3] For example, scholarship by Mildred Mortimer and Anne Donadey.

[4] Claire Riffard, "Francophonie littéraire: Quelques réflexions autour des discours critiques," *Lianes Association 2* (2006): 1-10. Nadège Veldwachter, *Littérature francophone et mondialisation* (Paris: Karthala, 2012). Alec G. Hargreaves, Charles Forsdick, and David Murphy, eds., *Transnational French Studies: Postcolonialism and Littérature-monde* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

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