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Oana Panaïté, *Necrofiction and the Politics of Literary Memory*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022. x + 200 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$143.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781802077179.

Review by Alison Rice, University of Notre Dame.

Oana Panaïté begins her book with a striking assertion that pulls in the reader from the outset: “If philosophy is learning how to die, fiction is imagining death itself” (p. 1). According to this understanding, death permeates textual creation: “Regardless of its subject matter, literary narrative as a creative activity reimagines loss, reacts to the looming threat of death and experiences of bereavement, or tries to anticipate scenarios for coping with the grief brought about by an individual or collective disappearance” (p. 1). The author draws from “the *tombeau littéraire* genre established during the French Renaissance as an artistic homage to a departed historical personage” to underscore the immense potential of fictional publications to accomplish important work within their pages in the present: “Erecting narrative tombs is a gesture through which contemporary literature collects in a single commemorative place the remains of h/History and its own story” (p. 8). Filling in what is missing from so many accounts of historical events is one of the major possibilities of literary creation today: “In the manner of its Renaissance avatar, the genre covers lapses in history and corrects historical injustices all while asserting its own generative force” (p. 8).

Taking inspiration from Achille Mbembe’s concept of “necropolitics,” Panaïté contends that “necrofiction” at once “reflects and resists” this significant theoretical framework, simultaneously taking account of “singular models of literary remembrance and the ‘scripting’ power of dominant (political, historical, mediatic) narrative forms” (p. 8). This book is decidedly positive in its implications, for “certain literary configurations” that are “assembled under the generic name of ‘necrofiction’ (ancient Greek, *nekros*, ‘corpse, dead’)” possess the potential to “make possible the narrative recovery and non-traumatic understanding of an event that strengthens as much as it severs the ties between the living and the dead, past and present, remembrance and forgetting” (p. 7). Panaïté is especially influenced in her analyses by the thought of Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, and Jacques Rancière.

The book is organized around five literary works in French, “a series of texts in which death and the dead not only serve as the narrative’s source of inspiration but, and more importantly, provide and shape the book’s aesthetic agenda” (p. 8). Dedicating each chapter to the examination of a particular publication, Panaïté is quick to acknowledge the “distinct generational, cultural, and aesthetic trends” that their authors embody, all while highlighting a crucial commonality among

them: “all five writers devote a significant part of their work to questioning the ways in which literature as a practice of remembering can inscribe and make sense of death and the dead” (p. 15). In their focus on composing “narratives of the aftermath,” these authors are involved in an undertaking with deep, vibrant resonances: “Rejecting both the vividly macabre and the paralyzingly melancholy, they write mourning as reviving” (p. 15).

The first chapter is devoted to a text by Vietnamese-born writer Linda Lê wherein the novelist struggles, as she does in many of the publications that make up her extensive oeuvre, with “issues of guilt stemming from the loss of her father after an extended process of estrangement and disavowal” (p. 18). The literary work in question, *Lettre morte* (1999), “unfolds in an uninterrupted vocal and textual flux, and in a nebulous spatiotemporal setting” (31), and it features “events and phenomena that make it ontologically and psychologically impossible to distinguish between what is and what is no more” (p. 35). Indeed, Lê employs “the language of imbrication and the fusion of two separate things into a heterogeneous entity—the revenant” (p. 35). Panaïté argues that “Lê’s narrative offers a powerful critique of memorialization as an attempt to domesticate and tame the dead by negating their radically different condition” (p. 35). In a compelling textual maneuver, the “recurrent and recursive evocation of the dead instills them with a vivid and persistent presence” that is so great that “it renders them more alive than the living” (p. 36). When it becomes clear that the daughter’s story is “inseparable from that of the father,” this revelation leads Panaïté to the convincing conclusion that “*Lettre morte* is as much the daughter’s necrologue as it is the father’s” (p. 43). This interpretation notes that Lê’s text is particularly rich in its composition, which “draws on the vocabulary of medicine, science, technology, and warfare, but also religion, the natural sciences, myth, fairy tale, and literature, blending all in a symbiotic style meant for symbiotic narrative” (p. 50). Rather than offer “a symbolic closure,” this literary creation denounces “the illusory partition between the living and the non-living through a necrofiction of mutual dependency” (p. 52).

The second chapter focuses on a particular publication by Patrick Modiano, the Nobel prize-winning French author for whom “writing represents...simultaneously a contestation of the dead’s erasure from collective memory and a ceremonial act honoring the possibilities of their existence” (p. 54). In *Dora Bruder* (1997), Modiano is caught up in a quest to explore a “documentary reality” inextricable from the eponymous figure’s life (p. 53). In this text, the author is interested not only in what happened to Dora, a Jewish teenage girl who disappeared from the French capital city where she was living during the Nazi Occupation, but also in “her family and others” (p. 55) who lived in this period and might have shared Dora’s fate. From the opening of this text, the narrator “relies on a precisely defined series of chronotopes” that leave little doubt as to the “temporality of the narration” (p. 55). This work nevertheless taps into “the fictional potential of a historical account” (p. 62), creating an “imaginary space” that “allows considerable room for wandering in and out of the referential framework” (p. 63). Information culled from documents coexists with “the gaps, silences, and interstices of the narrative itself,” and *Dora Bruder* therefore “instills in the reader a sense of frustrated certainty not unlike the one experienced by the narrator” (p. 63). According to this analysis, “Modiano writes simultaneously with and against the archive, recounting the inquiry into the factual traces of the past only to stress its *lacunae*” (p. 79). The individual story that is implied by the proper name that serves as the work’s title gives way in this literary creation to an investigation into similar fates suffered by many others, including members of the author’s own family, in a gesture of “narrative amplification” (p. 55) that allows the text to become a location with multiple meanings and mournings: “the writer for Modiano is the one who, while digging for the same kind of

exculpatory or reparative evidence, widens the gap and turns a singular quest into an open and collective tomb” (p. 56).

Algerian-born author Assia Djébar’s *Loin de Médine: Filles d’Ismaël* (1991) is the focus of a chapter that appreciates the complex makeup of this text that “lays bare the process of storytelling as a work of interpretation not only of sacred or historiographic sources, but also of the author-narrator’s own opinions, assumptions, and fantasies” (p. 88). Panaïté underscores how this evocative novel by Djébar has inspired the writing of other creative works “that engage with the human and historical foundations of Islam,” subsequent publications that undoubtedly owe a great deal to “the seminal nature of the novel that made possible the exploration of this topic not only thematically but also poetically” (p. 89). Part of this desire by other authors to engage in continuing this narrative work is found in the suggestive nature of Djébar’s text: “It is perhaps because *Loin de Médine* is epistemically incomplete, because it summons up the ghosts of the past without assigning them a fixed place in a sacred fictional pantheon, it opens up a venerated tomb without replacing it with a mausoleum, and because, in keeping with the Muslim tradition, it refuses to place a unique tomb on a memorial site, privileging instead a plurality of narrative markers, that other writers have taken up the task of revisiting it” (p. 90). Panaïté highlights the ways in which Djébar’s choice to depict “women’s inner lives” participates in a “quest for a new writing model” (p. 111) that “revives the dead” by depicting them “in vivid *tableaux* that reenact their actions and unveil their thoughts, thus making us adhere to the plausible truth of a reality that could have been, according to certain parameters of historical possibility, or that should have been, if the course of events had followed a hypothetical yet more ethical path” (p. 95).

The fourth chapter turns to a much more recent text, a literary work written in the aftermath of the passing of the mother of Martinican writer and theorist Patrick Chamoiseau. The death of this family member carries profound implications for him: “the loss of the mother means both a personal coming of age and a maturing in relation to a past for which she represented a living archive” (p. 119). *La Matière de l’absence* (2016) is, like many of the texts that make up Panaïté’s corpus in this study, wonderfully multifaceted and difficult to pin down when it comes to generic categorization. Indeed, this text “assembles fictional projection, personal recollection, collective practices, and historical narratives, together with literary and artistic commentary that reaches on occasion the level of self-exegesis to create a literary tomb” (pp. 117-118). It “mixes together autobiography, essay, and fiction without clearly delineating them” and it “also serves as an overview of the author-narrator’s own intellectual genealogy” wherein Aimé Césaire and Édouard Glissant “occupy a central place” (p. 140). This necrofiction constitutes “an act of mourning and revival” (p. 119) that “draws on both the traditional forms of posthumous evocation of a beloved family member or friend” and “the postcolonial genre of the return to the native land” (p. 118). There is no linear progression toward “overcoming trauma” in this work, but instead a deep sense of the recurrence of historical movements, taking into account slavery and migration with a “keen awareness of life’s eternal rhythms” and an approach that “alternates between emptiness and plenitude” (p. 139). The deceased maternal figure occupies a particular position in a society that is marked by the figure of the zombie: “The mother’s zombification, both feared and desired, appears to be inevitable in a culture where the dead populate every corner of the invisible and constitute the fabric of an absence that ties together generations and epochs on a continuum of life and death” (p. 122). Panaïté elucidates the “spiral movement” through which “the text works its way outward” (p. 140), a characteristic that stands out in contrast to the circularity of Linda Lê’s work. *La Matière de l’absence* ultimately finds “plenitude” in “the

energy of what remains and continues to connect mother and children, past and present, individual and collective existence” (p. 139).

The focus of chapter five is Maylis de Kerangal’s *À ce stade de la nuit* (2014), a literary work that takes as its starting point “a shipwreck that killed more than 300 migrants on October 3, 2013 off the coast of Lampedusa” (p. 143). This publication participates in a “plethora of texts” that have recently been written about “*la crise migratoire*,” taking part in a movement of works often published by “Hexagonal writers” who express in their texts “postcolonial identitarian, or humanitarian concerns” (p. 146). Panaïté carefully formulates well-conceived questions in light of this phenomenon, beginning with the following: “Can one establish a morally sound relation between on the one hand a Western individual’s desire to regain an illusory primal happiness by purifying oneself through the chosen ordeal of an arduous trip (as is the case with experiential or limit-testing tourism) and, on the other, the life-threatening urgency (war, state-sponsored or anarchic violence, various forms of dispossession) which deprives migrants of any form of agency other than the quest for safety and security?” (pp. 146-147). Kerangal’s novel remains distinctly indefinable, constituting “a conceptually intermedial object which remains within in the confines of verbal expression but draws on a whole host of auditory and visual figures and relies on a rhetoric of ellipsis and accumulation to summon a seemingly inexhaustible and fluctuating wellspring of personal memories and cultural references (mass media, books, movies, worldwide traditions)” (p. 150).

What this written text is situated to accomplish, like other creative works, is a crucial response to overwhelmingly reductive means of representation in the media today: “Against the media’s mutually cancelling techniques of relentless refocalization and parceling up of the world, literature and film offer not a unifying narrative, which Kerangal’s poetics rejects, but ways...of making the world readable and intelligible by recording everydayness or revealing the transformative power of memory” (p. 156). In Panaïté’s estimation, the novel’s “free and seemingly irresponsible association of facts and memories” and the concomitant risk of “wandering into the wrong ideological territory” point toward “a moment of crisis” that “forces us” to contemplate the “life-and-death potentiality” (p. 172) of events like the one that prompted this prose. Kerangal’s work exemplifies the possibility of necrofiction to engage in “exploring the forms of personal reflection *on* and public resistance *to* the root causes and existing conditions of necropolitics: memory ways, identitarian conflicts, large-scale migration, and economic and military globalization” (pp. 13-14) and to join in “a meditation on the historical and biopolitical present and its own work of memory and writing within such a present” (p. 30). This text by Kerangal, like the other profound and complex works examined in Panaïté’s rigorous and nuanced study, are not afraid to “inhabit” “duality” (p. 178), making up literary creations that are caught up in a movement “from the dead letters of trauma to the projective energy of the literary tomb.” (p. 184).

Oana Panaïté’s writing in this study is inspired, and it is inspiring. I have sought not to paraphrase these chapters or provide some sort of summary, but instead to enter into their language as respectfully as possible. I have hoped thereby to take up the multiple insights this beautifully crafted book contains *in their own terms*, allowing the text *to speak* through an analysis that breathes, that takes in and does not attempt to discern too decisively what the inevitable influences are of the traumatic, irrecoverable aspects of death that compelling contemporary literary constructions can convey. I have instead tried to allow myself and this review to be carried along by the rhythm of the intense prose that makes up Panaïté’s carefully composed

contemplation. I have been buoyed by the positive potential of allowing oneself as a reader to become caught up in narratives that emerge from loss to point toward the possibility. I have wished to provide a glimpse into the deep engagement that this book embodies, in its reiterations and elaborations of the complexities of the conception of the eponymous genre of *necrofiction* and its dealings with death in literary creations for our time, and I have striven simply to accompany this pensive work, and be accompanied by it, in an effort to reveal how profoundly impactful it is, in the very best of ways.

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