

Introduction: Reassessing French Studies in the Context of Postmodern Geopolitics

Dominique D. Fisher
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

This volume was compiled following the 16th International colloquium in Twentieth-Century French Studies that Martine Antle and I organized at UNC-Chapel Hill in 1999. This colloquium, like many of its predecessors, gave rise to discussions on the rapid changes the field of French Studies has undergone during the last two decades. Branching out from the study of literature, film, and the arts, many French departments have incorporated Francophone Studies and Cultural Studies into their curricula. These changes go beyond new trends in French Studies and the fluctuations of the global market; in fact, the postmodern world has had a deep impact on the role French culture plays on the national and international scene and, indeed, on the understanding of Frenchness.

The last two decades have brought a series of rapid and radical geopolitical changes on an international scale, which have altered our perception of the world, our systems of knowledge and beliefs, and our collective and individual identities. The fall of the Berlin wall, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the subsequent balkanization of Europe have put an end to the West/East bipolar vision of history, which had dominated the Western world since the end of World War II. These reorganizations of territories and frontiers, combined with the expansion of supra-national processes (the European Union and NAFTA), globalization, and cyberspace, have contributed to the deterritorialization of the

nation-state and thus have put an end to its sovereignty as conceived by the Westphalian system of territoriality.¹

Deterritorialization has revealed the very precarious nature of the nation-state and the arbitrariness of territorial boundaries. However, deterritorialization has not eradicated all boundaries in postmodern geopolitics. The global economy, global communications, constant fluxes of capital, goods, and people may have modified the political map at both global and local levels, but these changes have, by the same token, erected new territorial boundaries between national and ethnic groups. Conflicts between the global, the national, and the regional have awakened old antagonisms and led to political violence, civil war, and ethnic cleansing.

In Europe, the Schengen agreements have set new boundaries for migrants and refugees.² While they facilitate exchanges within Western European states, they limit immigration and the right to asylum for non-European populations. Diasporic populations are often seen as the ultimate threat to the nation-state's claim to hegemony. Generally associated with instability and social disease, migrants are further left in the margins. The Schengen agreements are a salient example of a contradictory move of expansion and constriction of borders in postmodern geopolitics. They contribute to a greater inequality in the distribution of wealth and the reinforcement of oppositions between North and South, center and periphery, First World and Third World.

In France, postmodern geopolitics has brought a deep crisis to French identity and has awakened the old Maurassian nationalist tradition and motto "*La France aux Français*" 'France for the French.'³ The myth of the *Français de souche* 'French by *jus sanguinis*' has resurfaced, when in fact many French genealogies reveal foreign origins and most French are now in favor of the European Union. What is at stake, though, is not so much the foreign element, but the threshold of tolerance for ethnic and religious differences, especially when it comes to immigrants from the Maghreb and sub-Saharan Africa.⁴ Recent laws on immigration (1986, 1988, 1993) suggest that nationalism and racism have become the ideology of a majority that draws on both the Right

and the Left. In 1989, the Muslim headscarf affair pointed to the endurance of a colonial assimilationist regime (the French *mission civilisatrice*) in post-colonial France. The banning of the *hijab* in public schools also cast doubt upon political integrity with respect to the French constitution, which defines France as secular, but guarantees freedom of religion. More recently, during the European elections of 1999, the Extreme Right's profession of a Catholic France (Touati 77)—a claim that was also loudly asserted in opposition to the PACS (which granted civil unions for gays and lesbians)—further threatened democracy.

The reality of a multiracial and multicultural France (black, white, *beur*), and a multi-religious France (Islamic, Jewish, Christian, secular) has not yet been entirely acknowledged in postmodern and postcolonial France. Moreover, Frenchness has also been challenged by globalization.

The global market economy and global media have also met with strong resistance in the Hexagon. Anti-globalization and anti- (U.S.) economic neoliberalism polemics abound. One only has to read *Le Monde* and *Le Monde diplomatique* on a regular basis to encounter articles denouncing American hegemony and the threat it poses to the French social system as well as to French culture, literature, art, and cinema. In *Contre-feux*, Pierre Bourdieu has also denounced the hold of globalization over French social welfare and trade-union traditions. For Bourdieu, globalization is merely a myth, a euphemism for capitalism and the return of the oldest nobility of state, the *patronat*. It relies on a new social Darwinism (in the global market economy, the strongest are the winners), which now even regulates the development of social sciences, literary and artistic production, and criticism according to the laws of profits.⁵

Despite such resistances, the very debates provoked by unavoidable global change and entrenchment on the Right have taken their toll on some of France's most sacred cows. French culture today is necessarily decentered, and has lost the *grandeur* of monarchist and Gaullist ideologies.⁶ Indeed, even the politics of the Ministry of Culture (the only such Ministry in Western governments, whose aim is narrowly tied to creating and project-

ing a “French Identity”), beginning with Jack Lang, has abandoned such Franco-centrism for an alternate ideology of “the right to difference,” which ventures outside of Europe and includes the promotion of Francophone cultures. More recently, Catherine Trautmann, the Minister of Culture and Communication, reiterated the need to assert the importance of cultural diversity in face of the growing influence of globalization in the cultural sphere. She emphasized the primary role that the Francophone world plays in resisting cultural homogenization and maintaining cultural diversity. She called for a policy to preserve cultural and audiovisual difference (*exception culturelle*) within the European Union and the rest of the world.⁷ Despite continued resistance, the loss of French *grandeur* and of French as a *lingua franca* has shaken French identity. French identity is now inexorably changed, multi-faceted, and poly-cultured.

This volume aims to reevaluate the importance of French Studies today by pointing to various trends in literature, cinema, and the arts, as well as investigating how postmodern geopolitics can open new areas of critical inquiry.

The volume is divided into three parts. The first, entitled “Cultural Practice and Resistance in French Literature and Film,” focuses on national identity constructions from World War II to the present. Its contributors consider a variety of cultural productions—film, poetry, essay, fiction—and in so doing uncover both their complicity with and their opposition to France’s sense of civil selfhood. The second part, “The Politics of Identity in a Multicultural Frame,” studies a diverse Francophone world—ranging from turn-of-the-century Guyana to the contemporary Cameroonian novel, from expatriate Ireland to filmic images from the French *banlieue*—through the work of its authors and filmmakers. These chapters tackle a number of aesthetic and political issues, including post-colonial relations and immigration policy in contemporary France. Finally, in the third part, “Literature and the Arts,” we include works by and about contemporary French and Francophone artists and writers. Committed to a borderless vision of French Studies, one that makes room for *praxis* as well as criticism, we end this volume with some pieces

we hope will inspire continued reflection and contribute to a richer, more complex understanding of art and identity in the Francophone world of the twenty-first century.

Cultural Practice and Resistance in French Literature and Film

We begin with Mary Jean Green's article, "Marketing Strategies for a New Academic Economy," which examines from a dual perspective, that of faculty member and that of administrator, the conditions that have forced the field of French Studies to reevaluate itself and to embark upon its own reinvention. Since losing its status as *lingua franca*, French has suffered gradually declining enrollments in U.S. institutions to the benefit of more "pragmatic" language studies, such as Spanish. While, as Green points out, the situation seems to have steadied in recent years with stabilizing enrollments, still a sense of crisis remains, provoking Green to ask, "What's wrong, then, with French Studies?" Can it survive? If so, should we even think to "sell it, without selling it out," to paraphrase her subtitle? Green's article explores key issues at stake for the future of our discipline and for the humanities in general, such as the risks involved in the new politics of corporate education and, at the same time, resistance to disciplinary change from various administrations and French departments in this country. Given the impact of postmodernism on French culture and its changing role on the global stage of the twenty-first century, Green demonstrates the need to refocus French Studies beyond its universalistic tradition and to broaden university curricula so as to include new multicultural dimensions of an increasingly complex French nation.

"Cathodisms," Stéphane Spoiden's analysis of Pierre Bourdieu's *On Television*, points to distinctive pitfalls in contemporary French media criticism. As such, Spoiden provides a striking example for Green's argument that the field of French Studies in the U.S. is uniquely poised to question traditional French intellectualism. With the exception of mediologists like Régis Debray, who studies mediations between technical support and the transmission of messages, most French intellectuals equate media with television (hence Spoiden's title "Cathodisms"). Un-

like in Anglo-Saxon countries, in France communications and media studies are not yet incorporated into the university curriculum, and research on the media is fairly recent. Indeed, most French intellectuals fail to acknowledge media studies as a viable field. As Spoiden demonstrates, Bourdieu's critique of television, which reduces the small screen to a tool for cultural homogenization and political manipulation, is symptomatic of these tendencies. In effect, Bourdieu places himself within a long European tradition that keeps the *epistémè* separate from the *tekhné*. Spoiden also points to the deceptive title of Bourdieu's essay, which is not quite about television, but rather about the "journalistic field." Having diminished the import of television to the diffusion of news, magazine shows, and cheap debate, it is easy for Bourdieu to assert that the medium is unable to compete with intellectual newspapers like *Le Monde* or *Le Monde diplomatique*. Spoiden also argues that the limits of Bourdieu's analysis reside in his belief in binary oppositions between high and low culture and between the dominant and the dominated.

In "Poetry of the Resistance, Resistance of the Poet," Yasmine Getz examines the extent to which writing poetry in occupied France during World War II was in itself an act of resistance. At that time, *poïesis* and *praxis* were not mutually exclusive. Poetry took on an historical role by giving voice to the dead and by "reviving" the glory of the French nation and its civilization. However, in her analysis of Louis Aragon's poetry, Getz demonstrates that not all poetry of the period worked to unite French people. Indeed, Aragon's poetry bears the stamp of historical myth-making. His promotion of French patriotism under the umbrella of Stalinism, as Benjamin Péret put it, is no different in principle from religious exaltation or Pétain's nationalism. If Getz defends the notion of a poetry of resistance, she does not do so along the lines of nationalistic and patriotic themes; rather, she calls for a "disengaged poetry." By this she means poetry that does not serve a specific political cause or a party, but rather poetry that fights propaganda and calls on dissident voices silenced during history. She proposes the poetry of Henri Michaux and Paul Celan as examples of a "disengaged poetry." Their poems cry out the resistance of a voice, a subject, against official historical discourses.

Similarly focusing on the relationship between resistance and forms of art, in “From War Films to Films on War,” Leah D. Hewitt analyzes François Truffaut’s *The Last Metro* in terms of its ambiguous political standpoint on collaboration. In this film, the main character Marion (played by Catherine Deneuve) gives over her lover, a Jew and a resister, to the Nazis in order to save her husband, a Jewish stage director, whom she hides inside their theater. Hewitt demonstrates that *The Last Metro* cleanses all French resisters of the suggestion of complicity with collaboration at the very time that François Mitterrand, himself a resister shrouded in doubts of collaboration, came to power. Nevertheless, she argues that Truffaut—like other postwar French filmmakers such as Louis Malle, Claude Chabrol, and Claude Berri—stages a “family scenario,” which invites us to rethink World War II history beyond traditional binarisms: left/right, communists/fascists, and other ideological oppositions. In doing so, she addresses such crucial issues as women’s strategies of resistance against the Nazis (how women fought the war on a daily basis) and French national identity both during the war and at the end of the twentieth century.

Carol Murphy’s “Reassessing Marguerite Duras” addresses several issues central to the interconnected relationship between the author’s work and career, in particular her complex personal history and her status as a woman writer. Murphy stresses the difficulties that Duras confronted in establishing herself as a writer. Duras’s work was not noticed until the late sixties, when intellectuals from the Left and the Women’s Movement started to recognize its importance. Only in 1984 did she attract the attention of the general public and the press with the publication of *L’Amant*, for which she won the Prix Goncourt. Duras’s work ambiguously encompasses multiple historical periods in a way that reflects the gray areas in her political career and her “ever-changing self.” Pro-colonialist but pro-Algerian, a resister but a possible collaborator, Duras cannot be recuperated in any definitive manner. Neither her many provocative media apparitions in the 1980s and 90s nor her work allows critics to resolve any of the contradictions that constitute the famous “Duras phenomenon.” Duras’s

work mixes voices and genres, physical and textual bodies, the personal with the political, imagination and historical realities, geopolitics with fiction, authenticity with mask. Murphy concludes that Duras's work sends us back to the very question haunting her entire oeuvre: what can we expect from literature if not a modernist "quest for truth in and through the practice of art"—but we should anticipate the persistence of literary production in the twenty-first century.

The Politics of Identity in a Multicultural Frame

In this section we look beyond the borders of the Hexagon to artistic production and political questions emanating from a broad variety of Francophone cultures and writers. In "Crossing Francophone Boundaries," Beryl Schlossman addresses a rather unusual "Francophone" writer, the Irishman Samuel Beckett. She demonstrates that motifs of otherness and exile in Beckett, as well as his treatment of language, are symptomatic not only of the writings of modernity but also of what we now identify as postcolonial, transnational, and Francophone writings of diaspora. And yet Beckett has not been classified as a Francophone writer; indeed, his work belongs neither to a French nor to an English literary tradition. It constantly crosses traditional linguistic, cultural, and national borders. In fact, Beckett's characters bear names that, though typically Irish, connote abstract identities. Their names often start with an "M," which may stand for the generic "man," but do not represent anybody in particular. These characters are not much more than dispossessed figures thrown to the margins of society and victimized by power structures. In the same vein, his work invents a deterritorialized voice—"a voice that has lost its voice"—whose accent calls into question the very notion of identity. Beckett even goes so far as to compare the equation between national origin and identity to a descent into the abyss.

Boniface Mongo-Mboussa's article, "Unveiling French-African Memory," focuses on how amnesia has shaped historical memory in Sub-Saharan Africa. He identifies several aspects contributing to this amnesia including the French forgetfulness of

bloody colonial conflict, the bad conscience of Third World theorists, and revisionist colonial history. From an African perspective, Mongo-Mboussa argues that postcolonial writers have adopted the task of rewriting colonial history by reassessing the function of power structures, reevaluating traditional racial dichotomies, and reconsidering the role nationalist movements played in the fight for independence. Mongo-Mboussa focuses here on three Sub-Saharan African writers: Mongo Beti, Tchicaya U Tam'si, and Ahmadou Kourouma. Beti's *Remember Ruben* trilogy demystifies Um Nyobe (the Cameroonian equivalent of Che Guevara). U Tam'si denounces dictatorial regimes and advocates a quest for the lost colonial history of Congo in *Les Cancrelats*, *Les Méduses*, and *Les Phalènes*. Kourouma's *Monné, outrages et défis* shows how power structures and cultural differences in communication rituals interact in colonial contexts.

In "Remembrance of the Lost Guyanese Novel," Marc Lony offers a reading of *Atipa*, the first novel ever written in Creole. Signed by Alfred Parépou, a writer whose identity and national origin remain uncertain, this text addresses the issue of creoleness in anticipation of Edouard Glissant's work. Written more than a century ago, Parépou's text was not translated into French until the 1980s. *Atipa* has subsequently attracted the interest of critics for its transcultural dimensions and evocation of *guyanité*. Lony argues that *Atipa* exhibits many generic and linguistic transgressions that reflect the complex multilingual and multiethnic reality of Guyana. This novel claims a space in the interstices of Creole and French identities and sheds new light on the similarities and differences existing between Caribbean and Guyanese creoleness.

In "Maghrebi-French Directors Behind the Camera," Dina Sherzer focuses on the work of Malik Chibane, Karim Didri, and Thomas Gilou, directors of the second generation ("la seconde G") who are now commonly associated with the New New Wave. She examines how their films reverse negative representations that stigmatize Maghrebi immigrants and their French-born children. She argues that these directors circumscribe new geopolitical spaces within France, which connote at once a sense of be-

longing to the history and the culture of the Hexagon and of being excluded from it. By the same token, these directors question the French politics of immigration during the colonial and postcolonial eras, and dispute the French universalistic myth of one culture and one national identity. Sherzer also explores the complex impact of gender issues that arise when Western and Maghrebi traditions collide. She demonstrates that these film directors give more weight to a gender gap than to a generational gap, since they are more likely to challenge the orders of patriarchy and fratricide than the relation between parents and children *per se*. Women of all generations are indeed presented in a very positive light. These second G films are another attempt to demystify official French and Maghrebi history.

In "European Hospitality Without a Home," Mireille Rosello examines the passage from the European Economic Community to the European Union, from a commercial to a supranational territory. She demonstrates that since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the numerous changes in both the delineation and the suppression of European frontiers have modified the notion of hospitality. The Schengen agreements, the Maastricht and the Amsterdam treaties have affected the politics of immigration in a way that contradicts the European tradition of hospitality and its ethics. These treaties brought to the forefront political and commercial considerations that establish double standards for European and non-European immigrants. While frontiers within Europe are opening, continental ones are closing. Paradoxically the term "hospitality" increasingly replaces more and more that of "immigration," and the "land of welcome" is fading behind the specter of "guest workers." These unskilled workers, who bring their "gift of servitude," work and live in conditions much worse than those in their homeland and have lost their social status. Rosello turns to the example of Didier Van Cauwelaert's *Un aller simple*, which reveals the many insidious facets of contemporary French hospitality. The story takes place in a gypsy community, a setting that brings out the complex dynamics between immigration and hospitality as well as the many conflicts involved in collective and private hospitality. Rosello explores how this novel moves

alliances beyond traditional oppositions of dominant and dominated, and shows the complex roles that nationality, ethnicity, and gender play in the politics of hospitality.

Literature and the Arts

In this section we have included literary and artistic pieces and criticism from the end of the twentieth century. These works all assert the fact that art and literature are not only alive and well, but that experiments in the realm of artistic language are far from being exhausted in the new century. These pieces negotiate between the artistic and the political. On one hand, the creative act, whether poetry, the novel, or painting, does not rely on signs and structures alone; it is not just “l’art pour l’art.” Indeed, the act of writing or painting, by transforming normative standards of communication, constitutes in itself an act of resistance against the homogenization of languages and cultures. On the other hand, we cannot always claim that art and literature serve a specific political cause or party line: they are not always “committed,” neither are they devoid of cultural referents. Indeed, the pieces of work presented below are also reflections of rapid changes in boundaries and territories in postmodernity.

In *Frise du métro parisien*, Jacques Jouet and Pierre Rosenstiehl explore a series of oulipian rules associated with the act of writing a poem in the subway (time, length, structure . . .). This collective production is divided into two parts, which may or may not coincide with one another: a recipe on how to write a “subway poem” (Rosenstiehl) and its application (Jouet). This poem aims to reflect the abstract nature of the Parisian subway and the random occurrences of the poet’s writing trajectory as he composes the poem while riding the subway. In the background of this writing game appears the skeletal postmodern Parisian landscape, which is subject to rapid structural and cultural changes.

Warren Motte’s article on Christian Oster explores the many facets of the French postmodern novel at the turn of the century. He demonstrates how Oster exploits the pitfalls and advantages of “being lost” in the forest, a metaphor for today’s life. While

Oster's protagonist may not be a wanderer by choice, and may not be able to come up with a clear standpoint on his wandering condition, and while the reader may also get lost in the forest of writing, the novel reveals the purpose of the ludic principle that governs its writing. It also reevaluates the subversive role *poïesis* plays in contemporary aesthetics. The novel appears here to be a genre that defies categorization and constantly calls itself into question.

Marie-Claire Bancquart explores the place of women in poetry from a political standpoint. She studies the representation of war and violence against women and children in the Francophone Middle Eastern poetry of Andrée Chedid and Vénus Khoury-Ghata. She also examines the European poetry of Martine Broda, which distinguishes itself by questioning the Western tradition of subjectivity and lyricism in the contemporary period. We include as well one of Bancquart's latest poems, entitled "To the Ancient House," written in gratitude to Michael Bishop, the translator of her article.

Ghada Amer, an Egyptian-born French-speaking woman artist, does not claim a specific identity, whether Middle Eastern or Western. On the contrary, she emphasizes the need to acknowledge the plurality of languages and cultures. The main theme of her paintings—the repression of women's sexuality, a highly taboo topic in the Islamic tradition—raises crucial issues. What allows us to set boundaries between art, politics, and culture? Should an art that denounces female oppression be labeled pornographic? What does it amount to, when a woman artist expresses her indignation against violence (of a sexual nature or not) directed against women? Ghada Amer does not pretend to answer all these questions. However, she has opted for a dissenting and original path by incorporating the art of sewing and writing into her painting. In the Muslim tradition, writing for women is *awra* (an act of obscenity).⁸ By recovering images of female sexuality and pain with threads, Ghada Amer makes of sewing, a traditionally feminine activity, a weapon against patriarchy. By the same token, in her work, sewing, writing, and painting become privileged forms of artistic expression and freedom for women.

Notes

1. Although the “fuzziness of local, regional, and global politics” was also an important issue in the sovereignty of the state as established by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1647, the present political map is far more complex than in the mid-seventeenth century. It involves new actors (webs of communication, electronic commerce . . .), new states, and new economic, commercial, and monetary territories that intervene in the politics of the nation-state at both the international and regional levels. (See Brunn 106-09).
2. The Schengen agreements (1996) regulate the free circulation of people within EU borders. Seven countries are members of the Schengen convention (Germany, France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Luxembourg, Spain, and Portugal). See Mireille Rosello, “European Hospitality Without a Home,” in this volume.
3. Armand Touati reminds us that French nationalism has a long history and that the claim for a pure “French race” comes back periodically in times of crisis, when the authority of the nation-state is weakened. Already in 1936 the *Croix de Feu* shouted “La France aux Français” (77). In the same vein, Benjamin Stora explains that the Lepenist ideology, which has infiltrated large sections of French politics since the eighties, belongs to a national tradition that has existed since the French Revolution. He cites the example of the Boulanger and Dreyfus affairs, that of l’Action Française, the Leagues in between the World War I and World War II, the Vichy Regime, and the putsch in April 1961 by the OAS (The Organization of the Secret Army). See *Le transfert d’une mémoire* 6-9.
4. Behind this stands the status of French historical memory. France has not yet been able to exorcise the colonial wars from its memory. The case of Algeria is most striking. Present immigration issues are relevant to this. In fact, the term *Maghrebi* concerns mostly the Algerian in the French Imaginary. See Benjamin Stora, *La Gangrène et l’oubli* 288-92 and *Le Transfert d’une mémoire*.
5. See Bourdieu 34-50.
6. See, for example, Lawrence D. Kritzman’s excellent “France, Culture, and the Idea of the Nation.”
7. See <<http://www.culture.gouv.fr>>.
8. See Badran and Cooke, xix.

Works Cited

- Badran, Margot and Miriam Cooke. Introduction. *Opening the Gates*. Eds. Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1990. xiv-xxxvi.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. *Contre-feux*. Paris: Liber Raisons D'Agir, 1990.
- Brunn, Stanley D. "A Treaty of Silicon for the Treaty of Wesphalia? New Territorial Dimensions of Modern Statehood." *Boundaries, Territory and Postmodernity*. Ed. David Newman. London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1999. 106-31.
- Kritzman, Lawrence D. "France, Culture, and the Idea of the Nation." *French Cultural Studies: Criticism at the Crossroads*. Eds. Marie-Pierre Le Hir and Dana Strand. Albany: SUNY, 2000. 11-27.
- Stora, Benjamin. *La Gangrène et l'oubli*. Paris: La Découverte, 1991.
- . *Le Transfert d'une mémoire: De l'Algérie française au racisme anti-arabe*. Paris: La Découverte, 1999.
- Touati, Armand. *La Nation, la fin d'une illusion?* Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 2000.