

Harper on Goellner (2018)

Goellner, Sage. *French Orientalist Literature in Algeria, 1845–1882: Colonial Hauntings*. Lexington Books, 2018, pp. x +135, ISBN 978-1-4985-3872-5

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Sage Goellner's *French Orientalist Literature in Algeria, 1845–1882: Colonial Hauntings* brings together four canonical nineteenth-century French writers on the "Orient"—Théophile Gautier, Eugène Fromentin, Gustave Flaubert, Pierre Loti—to cast new light on literary texts written during the early period of France's colonial contact with Algeria, and on the "troubling disturbances" that inform and unsettle them. Goellner forges an alternative path through the extensive secondary literature on these classic works by reading them with the insights of "hauntology," a field of analysis she illustrates from the psychoanalytical studies of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok (1978), Jacques Derrida's spectral readings of Karl Marx (1993), and Colin Davis's elaborations on the return of the dead (2007), among others.

In her introduction to the discursive landscape of early nineteenth-century French colonialism, Goellner calls attention to the tensions that fracture, or "haunt," the triumphalist, hegemonic affirmations of colonial ideology. Through the conceptual metaphor and analytical frame of "haunting," Goellner highlights each writer's response, implicit or explicit, to the colonial encounter. While other scholars have adopted similar approaches to Francophone literature written after Algerian independence, Goellner brings new focus to texts published while the colonizing of Algeria was taking place. Reading against the grain of earlier studies of exoticism and Orientalism, Goellner builds on the substantial body of critical work in postcolonial studies by scholars who have underscored the ambivalent, troubled nature of Orientalist texts.

Organizing the four chapters chronologically, Goellner begins with a reading of Gautier's travelogue *Voyage pittoresque en Algérie* (1845, 1865) under the rubric "Subjectivity Undone." Gautier's earliest travels in Algeria (1845), alongside Governor-General Bugeaud's troops, received a government commission for an illustrated, definitive "récit de voyage" of the new colony, but this work remained unfinished. Goellner suggests that Gautier's failure to complete it could represent "the troubled nature of the French possession of the colony" (26). In her close reading of key scenes of colonialist encounter and Orientalist imagery, Goellner examines Gautier's deeply personal, visceral, cultural sense of disorientation and instability in Algeria, the traveler's inability to decipher the country's strangeness, and the narrator's loss of control over his own narrative. These disjunctions, argues Goellner, implicitly "threaten the invulnerable quality of colonial identity" and French order (38).

Chapter two focuses on the epistolary travel narrative *Un été dans le Sahara* (1857, 1858) of Eugène Fromentin, written after his third visit to Algeria in 1852–53, under military escort, as the French advanced south to complete their conquest. Goellner's double reading juxtaposes the narrator's ethnographic, apolitical detachment in the published text with Fromentin's more explicit and personal commentary on French brutality in unpublished variants and correspondence, underscoring the ambivalent, "unsettled" character of the author's writing about colonial Algeria. The analytical and ethical crux of the chapter is the narrator's witnessing of the horrific aftermath of the siege of Laghouat, a savage attack by the French even after the city's surrender. In his published work Fromentin removes the word "massacre" that appears in manuscript variants to generalize his account and distance himself from the atrocities. But the lingering trauma of the events haunts the narrator, Goellner argues, surfacing in stories, corpses, and body parts of victims who refuse to remain buried, interrupting the narrative with the unforgettable scars of colonial violence and resistance of the colonized.

Flaubert's *Salammô* (1862) in chapter three offers a much more oblique literary response to the colonization of Algeria, Goellner argues, though one that is equally troubled. Expanding on readings by other critics and those of Flaubert's contemporaries, Goellner explores the ways that Flaubert's narrativizing of the war between Carthage and the mercenaries in the third century BC suggests parallels with nineteenth-century France's colonial project in Algeria and its "failing 'mission civilisatrice'" (67). Rather than a "direct allegory," Goellner reads the novel as haunted by the sociopolitical context in which Flaubert writes: the narrative implicitly evokes the brutality of the Algerian conquest, the savage treatment of the colonized, and the decadence of moral decay. Setting the novel in the context of public debates in mid nineteenth-century France about the "barbarization" of the military through colonial conquest and the declining state of French "civilization," Goellner suggests that *Salammô* offers a latent critique of the Algerian colonial project.

The final chapter on Loti's "Les Trois Dames de la Kasbah: conte oriental" (1882) offers the most explicit and overtly critical example of the haunting of a text by the violence of colonialism. Goellner's approach expands on other studies of Loti's anti-colonialism by calling attention to his early publications on Algeria and the darker undercurrents of colonial encounter. But

Loti's narrative, like those of Gautier and Fromentin, is informed by the contradictions of his shifting attitudes to French colonialism as both its agent and its critic. Goellner identifies in the rhetoric of Loti's tale a different form of haunting—colonialism as pathology, a fatal disease that contaminates both agent and victim. Bringing new critical focus to formal aspects of the tale, Goellner suggests that it is in the epistolary frame of the collection, titled *Fleurs d'ennui*, that the “haunted spaces and bodies” are first embedded, foreshadowing the phantasmal Casbah of Loti's Algiers as the place of colonial crimes that will return insistently in a legacy of disease and death bequeathed to Algerian prostitutes and their French sailor clients alike. The frame thematizes the problem of hermeneutics the tale will enact: a confusion of cross-contamination, troubled agency, and, in Goellner's reading, “a persistent interrogation of French colonialism” (109).

In her close readings of four authors writing during the period of Algeria's colonization, Goellner brings new focus to both the absence and the insistent presence of colonial violence in texts of this period. With the insights of both postcolonial and formal studies, Goellner's “hauntological” readings are most compelling when the metaphor of “haunting” (and its synonyms) sharpens into a critical analysis of the conflicting registers of these literary texts—political, aesthetic, and ethical—and foregrounds distinctions in their ambivalence toward the colonial project. In a provocative “Afterword,” Goellner points to the persistent legacy of colonialism's “sickness” that haunts contemporary France and Algeria, one with which France continues to reckon.

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