Liban. Mémoires fragmentées d’une guerre obsédante: 
L’anamnèse dans la production Culturelle francophone 
(2000–2015) by Carla Calargé (review)

Ghenwa Hayek

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Anamnesis, the first word in the subtitle of Carla Calargé’s study of the Francophone cultural production of the second and third decades of Lebanon’s post-civil war (1975-1990) period, is a keyword that bears further scrutiny for the light that it sheds on Calargé’s approach to her subject matter. From the Greek word for remembrance, anamnesis in Platonic philosophy is the act of recalling – and relearning – that which one once knew, but forgot; it is the retrieval of a past, now-erased knowledge. In Christian thought, anamnesis is the ritualistic act of recalling the memory of Christ, and performing a memory ritual that is central to communal identity-formation and self-understanding. In modern times, anamnesis has been absorbed into the medical lexicon and is used to refer to a patient’s recounting of their own medical history to their physician. All three dimensions of the word converge in this slim volume, a concise analysis of memory work in Lebanese Francophone literature.

Calargé organizes this study around the different kinds of memory that the texts she analyzes produce: traumatic memory, palimpsestic memory, the memory work of what she calls “Génération 1.5” (individuals who were teenagers or young adults when the war ended in 1990), and contestatory memory. Her work draws on an eclectic body of wide-ranging materials, including novels, films, illustrated texts, illustrations, photo-essays, and public art. Calargé reads closely and skillfully across an impressive array of genres. Collapsing generic differences allows her to reinforce arguments made here and elsewhere about the ubiquity and interplay of memory discourses across numerous genres of Lebanese cultural production.1 In focusing on a selection of texts written in French in the turbulent first decades of the millenium, Calargé creates an idiosyncratic periodization of what some, including Craig Larkin, have begun to call Lebanon’s post-postwar period; at the same time, she shows how these texts participate in commemorating the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) and
in producing counter-discourses to the political culture of “hypermnesia”\(^2\) that took shape in its aftermath. As such, Calargé contributes to and further advances an already-robust discussion of Lebanese literature devoted to the civil war and its after effects by considering contemporary Franco-phone literature devoted to the topic. By looking at texts that emerged after the turn of the millenium, *Liban. Mémoires Fragmentées* provides a useful overview of the work of Francophone Lebanese artists from the past few decades.

Calargé begins her book with a daunting task: succinctly summarizing key moments in Lebanon’s civil war. In the introduction, she also presents an overview of her main argument, positing that the Lebanese political establishment has invested in a politics of forgetting while, paradoxically, cultural production in Lebanon since the war has been committed to memory work and, specifically, to a project of remembrance, the latter being an umbrella term the author will unpack in the discussion that follows. This approach resonates with existing studies of Lebanese art, cultural production, cinema, and the politics of Arabic-language literary cultural production.\(^3\) Calargé’s contribution is to show how this cultural anamnesis has manifested itself in a variety of ways in Francophone Lebanese writing, although, as I point out later in my discussion, even that linguistic restriction eventually poses some challenges for the author.

In her first chapter, Calargé discusses traumatic memory as it appears in three novels: Ramy Zein’s *La Levée des couleurs*, Yasmine Char’s *La Main de Dieu*, and Darina al-Joundi’s *Le jour où Nina Simone a cessé de chanter*. Here, Calargé introduces a topic to which she will return in the final chapter of the book concerning the manner in which the texts under study link the traumatic violence of the war with pervasive misogyny and the different kinds of violence perpetrated both against women and the city of Beirut, which come to be closely identified in these texts. Yet, Calargé notes, the forms of oppression they suffer do not exculpate women from the crimes and violence committed during the war; rather, the novels discussed in the first chapter show how women are co-opted by the violence around them.

Chapter II recalls life in the city of Beirut before the war through the study of a category of texts that in my own work I call “commemorative counter-memories.” Here, Calargé examines two texts: Charif Majdalani’s *La grande maison*, and father-daughter duo Gabriel Rayes and Tania Rayes-Ingea’s mixed-media book *Beyrouth: Le centre-ville de mon père*. She shows how the past haunts the present in the palimpsestic ways these texts represent Beirut’s postwar reconstruction. In *La grande maison*, this approach has the potential to slip into nostalgia but it nonetheless performs a particular kind of memory-work that resists the erasure of Beirut’s past
that has been threatened by the physical destruction which the private developer Solidere undertook in its controversial reconstruction of the city’s urban center. Calargé’s final two chapters deal with the difficulties younger generations have had coming to grips with memories of the war and its legacies. The penultimate chapter looks at works by Lamia Ziadé (Bye Bye Babylone), Mazen Kerbaj (Une enfance heureuse), and Alexandre Najjar (L’école de la guerre) that evoke childhood memories of everyday life during the war. The final chapter focuses on Hyam Yared’s novel La Malédiction and George Hachem’s film Rṣāṣa Ṭāysha (which Calargé refers to by its French title, Balle Perdue), both of which use war memories as a vehicle for critiquing the enduring legacies of violence, and especially patriarchal violence, in Lebanese society. This is the chapter in which Calargé invokes and deploys the most conceptually interesting definition of anamnesis, the one in which a patient describes their symptoms to a medical professional. The ramifications of this analogy, though, remain unpacked in this chapter. While readers understand that Calargé is claiming contemporary Lebanese society is suffering lasting ills from the war, it is unclear who is assigned the role of the patient and the doctor in this scenario. Yet Calargé’s notion that a society can treat social maladies through its cultural production is nevertheless a compelling one. The strengths of this argument might have been bolstered by parsing the different kinds of memory work that undergird Francophone Lebanese literature and by showing what sets it apart from the vast body of memory work produced in other national languages.

As noted above, Calargé performs granular close readings of the texts in her study and she is sensitive to the literary language and sensibilities expressed in her corpus of films, comics, historical novels, hybrid texts, and art installations. Yet, little attention is paid to the ways in which these texts’ distinct formal and generic qualities add to the critical debate. Take, for example, Calargé’s reading of Lamia Ziadé’s Bye Bye Babylon. The text brings into play the visual and verbal languages of comics, which borrow from, but also modify, the conventions of illustrated texts. In focusing primarily on the written texts, the importance of the interplay of the visual and the textual is attenuated. In contrast, Calargé’s reading of Mazen Kerbaj’s Lettre à la Mère in that same chapter is a nuanced, panel-by-panel reading of both visual and verbal elements of Kerbaj’s intense and complicated love-hate letter to Beirut. Similarly, the discussion of George Hachem’s film Balle Perdue does not attend to the generic qualities that distinguish the film from the novels that are the central focus of Calargé’s study. Here were missed opportunities to add formalistic complexity to the understanding of the plethora of (mostly) French-language texts produced during the period she examines.
The author’s choice of limiting herself primarily to Francophone texts is also worth questioning. In her introduction, and in a footnote in the final chapter, Calargé acknowledges the difficulty of focusing on works written in only one of Lebanon’s three commonly spoken languages. This is striking given Lebanon’s famously heteroglossic cultural production and considering that the book’s final chapter analyzes a film produced and performed in dialectical Arabic, a move that suggests it is worth thinking through what is at stake when the French language is used in some forms of Lebanese cultural production. This is a thorny political issue with which the book does not, for the most part, grapple. As Michelle Hartman demonstrates in *Native Tongue, Stranger Talk* (Syracuse University Press, 2015), an excellent study of Francophone Lebanese women’s writing, closer readings of works written in French by Lebanese authors undermines local stereotypes about what the use of French means in Lebanese culture and about the ways these Francophone authors bring local flavor to French-language texts as they capture the Lebanese Arab experience in French. Hartman draws this argument out by attending carefully to how French is deployed and manipulated in the texts that she selects. A similar attention to language and language-use could have set Calargé’s book apart from the myriad works on memory culture in postwar Lebanon by bringing to light how and why her chosen authors’ use of French is significant. Conversely, she might also have been more attentive to the moments in which the authors she cites introduce Arabic words in the French and the meaning of this choice. One minor example that comes to mind is the way Majdalani uses the word *simsār* (middleman or broker) in his work without translating or explaining what it means (Calargé 106). What does this deliberate retention of the Arabic do for Majdalani’s text, and for Francophone Lebanese writing? These are intriguing questions that remain unasked and unanswered in *Liban. Mémoires fragmentées*.

Calargé’s uneasy dance with the politics of Francophone writing in Lebanon also leads her to avoid or ignore questions of audience and reading publics that could have lent additional context and complexity to her work. She avoids mentioning the publication sites for the texts she studies, yet it is worth noting that the majority of these novels were produced in France by publishing houses such as Actes Sud, Gallimard, L’Association and Seuil. Readers unfamiliar with this publication context would benefit from more substantive discussion of the politics of the French-language book market and the role it plays in producing works of Francophone Lebanese literature that are obsessed with reproducing the civil war and its memory as a lived experience, something Calargé calls “the traumatic real” (137). This obsession sets contemporary or near-contemporary French writing about Lebanon apart from its Arabic...
counterpart. More recently, as I have shown elsewhere, Arabic language novels published in Beirut – especially those written by authors from the group Calargé designates “Generation 1.5” – have actively turned away from representing civil war trauma. The question of publication sites and the market it serves would bring scholars of Lebanese Francophone writing into dialogue not only with those who study contemporaneous Anglophone Lebanese literature, such as Syrine Hout (Postwar Anglophone Lebanese Fiction [Edinburgh UP, 2012]) and Jumana Bayeh (The Literature of the Lebanese Diaspora [IB Tauris, 2015]), but would also promote discussion of the links Francophone Lebanese writing has with the memory work of Francophone maghrebi writers. They, too, are still haunted by a politics of memory/remembrance and are faced with a similar choice: to remain in an Arab milieu or to seek the dissemination and reception of their work in a French publishing context.

In conclusion, Carla Calargé’s Liban. Mémoires Fragmentées d’une guerre obsédante is a work that will provide readers with an overview of recent Francophone literature on the Lebanese civil war and its enduring cultural haunts. In focusing on a Francophone context, this study rounds out work on Lebanese memory culture written in English and Arabic, and broadens the contours of extant academic work on this topic by refining its definitions. And yet, it ultimately – and inadvertently – also makes the case for discarding such linguistic boundaries in favor of a critical scholarship on Lebanon and Lebanese cultural production that is not entrenched in mono-linguistic territorial boundaries, an academic border that has proven far more rigid than the everyday lives of Lebanon’s cultural producers. For example, imagine the possibilities in recognizing and interrogating the way that Yasmine Char’s La Main de Dieu dialogues with (and essentially rewrites) Hanan al-Shaykh’s seminal 1980 novel Hikāyat Zahra (The Story of Zahra), a work in which a young Lebanese woman has an affair with the neighborhood (enemy) sniper, and is eventually murdered by her lover when she reveals her pregnancy to him. Char’s version, as Calargé points out, reframes gendered questions of wartime culpability and complicity. Yet, what Calargé’s focus on Francophone literature misses is this other dimension in which Char’s novel is actively re-writing and re-working an earlier literary trope that produced and framed a generation of writing about Lebanese women, especially in Western academia. Ultimately, without making room for comparative work that straddles multiple literary languages, critical studies of Lebanon’s literary and cultural production will continue to be written in parallel, and not in conversation, with one other.

Ghenwa Hayek
University of Chicago
Notes


5. This leads to a rather clumsy attempt to justify the inclusion of Hachem’s film by arguing that the actors and director also speak French, so technically the film could be considered Francophone (fn. 15, 200).

6. For more on recent Arabic language fiction that attempts to move past the memory of the civil war without denying the impact of the war on society, see Ghenwa Hayek “Making Ordinary: Recuperating the Everyday in Post-2005 Beirut Novels,” *Arab Studies Journal*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2017, pp. 8-28; and “Everyday Writing in an Extraordinary City,” in *The City in Arabic Literature*, edited by Gretchen Head and Nizar Hermes, Edinburgh University Press, 2018. pp. 287-305. Indeed, as Felix Lang shows in his sociological study of the field of Lebanese Arabic language literary production, it is the case that the war looms large as a prestige topic of literary work in Lebanon, but cultural gatekeeping has led younger writers to seek other topics and other entryways into the field. See *The Lebanese Post-Civil War Novel: Memory, Trauma and Capital* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

7. See Miriam Cooke’s *War’s Other Voices* (Syracuse UP, 1996) and Evelyn Accad’s *Sexuality and War* (NYU Press, 1990); see also recent critiques of this writing such as Elizabeth Holt’s “The Story of Zahra and its Critics,” in Musawi, editor, *Arabic Literature for the Classroom* (Routledge, 2017).