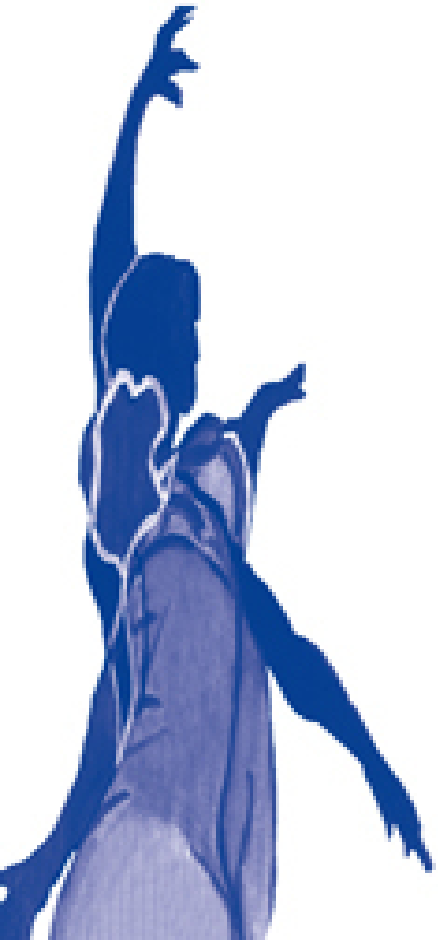
Modern French Identities
81

Margaret-Anne Hutton (ed.)

Redefining the Real

The Fantastic in Contemporary French and Francophone Women's Writing



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Introduction

MARGARET-ANNE HUTTON

This volume and the majority of the fifteen chapters within it started life at a conference held in London in September 2007 at the Institute of Germanic and Romance Studies, under the aegis of the *Contemporary Women's Writing in French* group.[1] The conference topic arose from my impression that although a significant proportion of contemporary female-authored writing in French seemed to be veering away from 'realism' to 'the fantastic' (and the scare quotes can be taken as read from now on), the latter had been neglected as an area of critical inquiry for some time, with the focus falling instead on certain high-profile (media-fuelled) trends such as 'new pornographies', or the various modalities of 'autofiction' or *écriture intime*. As Lise Pelletier points out, the fantastic in France has in the past been 'un bastion masculin autant du point de vue de la théorie que de la fiction'.[2] Think French fantastic and theory and you will very likely come up with names such as Baronian, Caillois, Castex, Nodier, Todorov and Vax; fantastic fiction, and the usual suspects may well include Aymé, Balzac, Gautier, Gracq, Leroux, Maupassant, Nerval, Nodier and Verne. Whilst this is, admittedly, a simplification, there seems little doubt that there has been a gender imbalance in the criticism, theorising and production of the French fantastic. This tendency seems set to change, and it is to be hoped that the present volume not only bears witness to a shift in patterns of production, but encourages a re-engagement with both the criticism and theorising of the fantastic, ideally as extended to a variety of

1 *Contemporary Women's Writing in French* homepage: http://igrs.sas.ac.uk/research/CWWF/Index.htm

2 Lise Pelletier (dir.), 'Le Récit fantastique féminin', *Les Cahiers de recherche du GREMF*, Cahier 39, Université Laval, Québec, 1990, p. 1.

genres. Although this volume concentrates largely on the novel (albeit in various guises), other genres are represented in the form of collected short stories (Vonarburg), theatre (Cixous) and poetry (Khoury-Ghata).

As the title to the collection suggests, the fantastic manifests itself (materialises in, vampirises or otherwise haunts) recent works by both *French* and *francophone* writers, although as we will see, this categorisation may fail to function when examined through the prism of the fantastic. Marie Darrieussecq, Sylvie Germain, Hélène Cixous, Marie NDiaye and Elisabeth Vonarburg are all 'French writers' if we take this to mean born in France or of French nationality (Cixous was born in Algeria at a time when it was officially a part of France). Such labels, however, make nothing of the fact that, for instance, Vonarburg has lived in Quebec since 1973 and is regarded as a 'Québécoise d'adoption' (her official website describes her as 'francophone'), or that NDiaye's works repeatedly stage quests for (the meaning of) French identity. So-called francophone writers, whose work is discussed in the chapters grouped together at the centre of this volume, include Amélie Nothomb, a Belgian who in several of her autofictional works represents the author-narrator's nostalgia for her birthplace – Japan; Ying Chen, a Chinese-born Québecoise; Linda Lê, born in Vietnam but resident in France since 1977; the Lebanese Vénus Khoury-Ghata, who has lived in Paris since 1972; and the Canadian Acadian Antonine Maillet. As the following discussion will suggest, the fantastic is mobilised to explore concepts of identity and origins in both the francophone *and* the French writers' texts. The contemporary globalised era in which increasingly complex identities are constructed, precipitates, it would seem, a (fantastic) literature of post-national anxiety.

Two of the terms in the title to this volume are even less easily circumscribed than 'francophone', and those are 'the fantastic' and 'contemporary'. Starting with the latter, it is worth noting that there has been a marked increase in critical writing on recent fiction in French academic circles, as witnessed by a growing list of publications in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries. To select a typical sample of these: *Roman français contemporain* (1997); *Écritures contemporaines* vols 1 and 2 (1998 & 1999); *Les fictions singulières: étude sur le roman français contemporain* (2002); *Le Roman français au tournant du XXI siècle* (2004);

Le Roman français aujourd'hui: transformations, perceptions, mythologies (2004); *Itinéraires du roman contemporain* (2006).[3] Three observations can be made at this point: first, these volumes make no attempt to single out 'women writers' as a distinct category.[4] Second, although they discuss trends and / or provide thematic overviews, there is no specific focus on the fantastic as an emergent strand in contemporary fiction. Finally, there is a broad consensus that 'le contemporain' in the French literary context signifies the period starting in 1980. Even a work like Blanckeman's *Le roman français au tournant du XXIe siècle*, whose title suggests a different periodisation, in fact opens with a prefatory 'Vers une cartographie du roman français depuis 1980', and indeed sets this date as the start-point of the contemporary.[5] It should also be noted that the late 1980s saw the emergence in the French academic arena of another critical term which has rapidly gained ground: 'l'extrême contemporain'.[6] As imprecise as the unqualified version (can the deictic 'contemporain' even *be* qualified?), the phrase has come to mean little more than 'very recent', in the sense of 'closer to the present day than the word "contemporain" now suggests'.[7]

3 J.-P. Salgas, A. Nadaud & J. Schmidt, *Roman français contemporain*, Ministère des affaires étrangères, 1997; J. Baetens & D. Viart, *Écritures contemporaines* vols 1 and 2, Paris: lettres modernes minard, 1998 & 1999; B. Blanckeman, *Les fictions singulières: étude sur le roman français contemporain*, Paris: Prétexte, 2002; B. Blanckeman, A. Mura-Brunel & M. Dambre, *Le Roman français au tournant du XXI siècle*, Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2004; B. Blanckeman & J-C Millois, *Le Roman français aujourd'hui: transformations, perceptions, mythologies*, Paris: Prétexte, 2004; R. Godard, *Itinéraires du roman contemporain*, Paris: Armand Colin, 2006.

4 Colette Sarrey-Strack's 2002 *Fictions contemporaines au féminin*, Paris: L'Harmattan focuses on the writing of Darrieussecq, NDiaye, Redonnet and Nimier, with a 'contemporary' start-date of 1980 ('Dans le courant des années 80, de nouvelles orientations s'amorcent en littérature' is the work's opening line, p. 7).

5 B. Blanckeman, A. Mura-Brunel, M. Dambre, *Le roman français au tournant du XXIe siècle*, pp. 7–8.

6 See Marinella Termite's 'Métamorphose des objets', Chapter 4, footnote 1 in this volume for a brief exposition of the 'extrême contemporain'.

7 The term is for instance used with no explanatory gloss in Godard's *Itinéraires du roman contemporain* (2006), p. 7. All but one of the texts discussed by Godard are, as he himself notes, published after 2000.

With respect to academic research in the UK and the US, the term 'contemporary' has tended to be associated with the period(isation) between 'post-war' (that is post-1945) and 'now', although a shift in patterns of usage can be identified. Atack's and Powrie's 1990 *Contemporary French Fiction by Women: Feminist Perspectives*, for example, includes chapters on writers such as Beauvoir, Rochefort, Etcherelli, and Chawaf, with the 'younger generation' represented by Ernaux and Lachmet,[8] and this is typical of most pre- or early-1990s publications, in which a titular 'contemporary' tends to signal a span of some twenty to thirty years. William Thompson, producing his own *The Contemporary Novel in France* only a little later in 1995, states that 'most recent studies of "contemporary" French literature hesitate to discuss any writers whose careers began after the nouveau roman'.[9] Judging by current patterns, the post-millennium cut-off date for the term 'contemporary' in the UK and US is about 10 years ahead of the French academic system. In other words, anglophone critical works written around the turn of the century classify French fiction published from the 1990s onwards as 'contemporary'. Writing in 2004 Jordan refers – in marked contrast to Thompson's observation of a decade or so earlier – to a 'recent keenness' for scholars outside France to look beyond the 1970s and 1980s to the 1990s.[10] Motte's 2003 study targets the same period (*Fables of the Novel. French Fiction Since 1990*),[11] and indeed his most recent publication – *French Fiction Now. The French*

8 M. Atack and P. Powrie, *Contemporary French Fiction by Women: Feminist Perspectives*, Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990. (Atack and Powrie's choice is, of course, at least partly dependent upon the specificity of their approach). E. Fallaize's *French Women's Writing: Recent Fiction*, Basingstoke, London: MacMillan Press, 1993, includes works by Cardinal, Chawaf, Ernaux, Etcherelli, Hyvrard, Leclerc and Redonnet.

9 W. Thompson (ed.), *The Contemporary Novel in France*, University Press of Florida, 1995, pp. viii–ix.

10 S. Jordan, *Contemporary French Women's Writing*, London & New York: Peter Lang, 2004, p. 11.

11 W. Motte, *Fables of the Novel. French Fiction Since 1990*, Normal, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003.

Novel in the Twentieth-First Century (2008)[12] – narrows the periodisation yet further. This is not the place to carry out a comparative study of terminology ('contemporary', 'recent', 'now', 'today'), although such a project is tempting. Given ever-faster publication-response cycles and the ever-increasing pace of technological and thus societal change, it seems not unlikely that by 2010 and the new decade, 'contemporary', if it is still being used at all as a term, will indicate post-2000. Where this will end up is hard to predict. Here, I merely point out that the cut-off date for this volume was set at 1990, although in fact, the majority of the texts analysed were published in the mid- to late-1990s, with a substantial proportion coming out post-2000.

'[The] contemporary', as a deictic, is inevitably a slippery term, and so is '[the] fantastic', and not just because there are almost as many definitions of 'the fantastic' as there are theorists. If I have so far given over what may seem like a disproportionate amount of space to one key term ('contemporary'), it is partly because it is closely bound to the other ('fantastic'). Much fantastic literature *is* contemporary in the sense of 'of its time'. A fairy tale written and read in 1900 may still be 'fantastic' when read in 2000, but what of other aspects of non-realist literature? Is the uncanny timeless? Do ghosts age? Is today's double comparable to its nineteenth-century predecessor? The 1920 sci-fi motif of a moon-landing is no longer 'fantastic' several decades later; the cloning of human beings or use of holograms lies on the threshold of the fantastic in 2009. At the same time, however, the 1920 text of course *remains* fantastic in terms of genre: we, the existing readers, in our guise as time-travellers, need do no more than cast ourselves back to the horizon of expectations of the original readership in order to witness the moon-landing as still to be (whilst also having already been). All this may seem obvious, but it perhaps bears repeating to the extent that both criticism and theorising of the fantastic might benefit from a closer analysis of (theories of) time and temporality. And if up to a point the fantastic is contemporary

12 W. Motte, *French Fiction Now. The French Novel in the Twentieth-First Century*, Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2008.

(it is defined in and by [its] time), then I also want to suggest that the contemporary contemporary [*sic*] – that is, what we today, in 2009, call the contemporary – is in a way fantastic.

Contemporary French fiction is usually described in nebular and nebulous terms: it proliferates, it has strands (shooting stars) rather than schools, it resists categorisation, being characterised instead – if it can even be characterised – in terms of plurality and diversity. There do, however, appear to be certain common denominators upon which most critics agree: this is a fiction which is never innocent, but always written *au second degré*; it is a literature which has staged various 'returns': of the subject, of ethics, of history, of story-telling etc. It is, in other words, a literature of revenants, a spectral literature, so it is no coincidence that the vocabulary of the fantastic should arise when critics seek to describe it and its practitioners: 'ils [les romanciers contemporains] cherchent leur voix dans le mince interstice laissé vacant par *les fantômes* de la tradition (académique ou avant-gardiste) et la surenchère des publications' (my emphasis).[13] Lionel Ruffel in his 'Le Temps des spectres', argues that spectrality typifies the contemporary era: 'On ne compte plus en effet dans les œuvres du temps présent les fantômes, les revenants, les spectres, en compagnie desquels on vit, avec lesquels on négocie'.[14] Extending Ruffel's observation, I would suggest that this volume attests to the complexity and multiplicity of the *trope* of the spectral (rather than the mere presence of diegetic ghosts): see, for instance, my own spectral reading of Germain's *Magnus* and Dobson's interpretation of Cixous's recent theatre, or Silvester's work on reincarnation (a spectral notion *par excellence*) in Ying Chen's novels. Silvester, strikingly, quotes the words of the protagonist in Ying Chen's *Immobile*: 'je n'ai pas fini d'être un avenir, [...] je porte en moi un passé qui ne m'a pas encore délivrée'. Change the first-person to a third-person, and the same could be said of both 'the fantastic' and 'the contemporary'.

13 *Le roman français aujourd'hui*, p. 6.

14 L. Ruffel, 'Le Temps des spectres', in *Le roman français aujourd'hui*, pp. 95–117 [109–110].

If contemporary fiction is always haunted, the fantastic and the contemporary are also always already entwined to the extent that what is 'fantastic' is necessarily defined in relation to concepts of both 'the real' and 'realism'. But how are we to identify a 'real world' that has been problematised by hyperreality, by virtual reality, by 'the dematerialisation of "real life" itself, its reversal into a spectral show'?[15] Like the vocabulary of the fantastic which haunts the criticism of contemporary French fiction, expressions of uncertainty with respect to just what constitutes both 'reality' and 'realism' proliferate. The contemporary novel may, for instance, engage with socio-political issues (another 'return', this time to a form of 'committed literature'), but

> ces marqueurs du réel contemporain apparaissent davantage comme de simples 'signes du réalisme', traités de façon tout à fait subversive: il ne s'agit pas en effet de se limiter à un simple effet de réel, mais plutôt de souligner, par des procédés de déformation ou d'amplification, le non-sens, l'aberration ou 'l'insupportabilité' du monde ainsi représenté [...].[16]

In his discussion of 'the Real' and its vicissitudes, Žižek uses very similar terminology to analyse the events known as 9/11; the collapsed Twin Towers as an 'effect of the Real':

> This 'effect of the Real' is not the same as what Roland Barthes, way back in the 1960s, called *l'effet du réel*: it is, rather, its exact opposite: *l'effet de l'irréel*. That is to say: in contrast to the Barthesian *l'effet du réel*, in which the text makes us accept its fictional product as 'real', here, the Real itself, in order to be sustained, has to be perceived as a nightmarish unreal spectre.[17]

15 S. Žižek, *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, London & New York: Verso, 2002, p. 14.

16 A. Cousseau, 'Postmodernité: du retour au récit à la tentation romanesque', in *Le Roman français au tournant du XXIe* siècle, p. 365. Cousseau cites Michel Besnier's reflection: 'L'état actuel de la France et du monde est pour les romanciers un défi par sa nouveauté, sa complexité, son insupportabilité', *Europe*, 'Questions du roman / Romans en question', supplément au no. 820–821, 1997, p. 23.

17 Žižek, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

Cousseau, in not dissimilar vein, comments on the breakdown, the influxitude of concepts of real(/ism) in contemporary French fiction:

> On aboutit ainsi, contre toute attente, à des pratiques d'écriture proprement déréalisantes, qui peuvent aller jusqu'à la confusion absolue de la réalité et de l'illusion, et qui illustrent par ailleurs très précisément l'un des aspects souvent considéré comme caractéristique de la postmodernité littéraire, à savoir la déconstruction des oppositions binaires, des dichotomies qui fondaient la modernité, notamment réalité / fiction et sujet / objet.[18]

What is 'fantastic' if we no longer know what 'real' means? What is the genre of the fantastic when we no longer know what realism means? Such questions are posed, directly or indirectly, in many of the chapters in this collection. Barnet, for instance, concludes her analysis with NDiaye's apparently counter-intuitive pronouncement (given the profusion of extraordinary events in her works): 'il me semble que c'est plutôt réaliste que fantastique ce que j'ai tâché de faire', whilst Caine cites Darrieussecq's own pronouncement that 'le réel est fou'. A loss of base-line 'reality' in Germain's *Magnus* prompts me to refer to 'textures of the fantastic', whilst Ridon's analysis of time-travel and parallel worlds in Vonarburg concludes with a discussion of exactly the same problematic, albeit in a different context: 'où situer la différence lorsqu'on ne sait plus quel est l'univers de référence?'. 'Real/ism' and 'fantastic' can no longer function as co-defining terms; neither exists in a steady state. And 'contemporary' fares little better. The *Petit Robert* gives the following two definitions for 'contemporain': (1) 'qui est du *même* temps que'; (2) 'de *notre* temps'. But the contemporary era is precisely the era which has deconstructed the concepts of sameness ('*même* temps') and ownership ('*notre* temps'), so it is perhaps unsurprising that these terms should come under scrutiny in various contexts in this collection. To cite just some examples: Dobson's analysis of Cixous's use of uncanny puppet-actors to point towards the possibility of 'new constructions of subjectivity which are not founded on singularity and ownership'; or Ridon's reading of Vonarburg's repre-

18 Cousseau, *op. cit.*, pp. 365–366.

sentation of time-travel to suggest that subjects can and should define themselves 'en dehors du principe d'appartenance'; finally, Conon's reading of doubles in NDiaye and the impossible coincidence of the subject with her-(own)-self.

This is, as should by now be clear, a volume which calls into question, and places in dialogue, pairs of terms: 'contemporary' and 'fantastic'; 'fantastic' and 'real', 'contemporary' and 'real'. But what of the specifically *female* contemporary fantastic? Can we even discuss such a thing without lapsing into essentialism and binary thinking (woman = irrational = fantastic; man = rational = mimesis)? Whilst a single volume such as this can only provide a starting-point for critical inquiry, and always bearing in mind that patterns detected say nothing about a 'female nature' or 'psyche' – though they may speak volumes about women's socio-political situation and aesthetic inheritance – certain potentially gendered topoi can be singled out. Several contributors, for instance, analyse representations of pregnancy and childbirth (especially Rye, but also Rodgers, Kerszberg and Barnet) in terms of the uncanny, of utopic and of threshold worlds, and the figure of the mother appears in several contexts (in largely negative guise in Caine and Barnet; in terms of a healing maternal function working alongside natural and cosmic forces in Braswell). Loss and trauma, both individual and national (from the death of family members to exile and the Shoah) feature in a high proportion of the contributions, as aspects of the fantastic are mobilised in an attempt to articulate experiences which seem to be unrepresentable, a grief beyond the parameters of the 'real' (Termite, Rodgers, Rye, Caine, Dobson, Hutton, Loucif, Kerszberg *inter alia*). Finally, several chapters (including Termite, Braswell, Caine and Conon) discuss the manner in which domestic spaces (still arguably associated with the female function) may be rendered uncanny.

Whilst these are all potentially gender-specific issues, of equal interest are the other resonances which sound from chapter to chapter, delivering a highly productive process of cross-fertilisation. The following, for example, all merit further discussion and development: the representation of *space* (from parallel worlds to spaces of the *entre-deux*; atopic settings emptied of geographical or national content; threshold worlds

and interior spaces made strange); and *time* (time-travel, or reincarnation and the implications of both for representations of the subject; atemporality; the representation of history). *Narrative strategies* (voice, point of view, multiple narrators) are key across the corpus, from Rye's analysis of Darrieussecq's use of a double narrative with a temporal *décalage* (time again) to Rodgers's narrating ghosts; Ridon's self-addressing first-person narrator to Gaensbauer's analysis of narrative voice as an expression of dissociative subjective states.

These are all aspects of the collection of essays which merit further exploration elsewhere, but two additional elements are particularly worthy of attention: the creation of a 'new' fantastic; and complex explorations of the constructions of identity. Although many of the contributors draw on existing theories of the fantastic (Todorov, Freud and Jackson, especially, haunt the volume), an overview of all fifteen chapters reveals quite clearly that these women writers have created a slightly different fantastic; one which escapes the categorisation espoused by most theorists of the fantastic. Theirs is a hybridised, often ludic fantastic which engages in parody and pastiche; which tends towards the meta-fantastic (or perhaps a 'fantastic fantastic', just as I talked of a 'contemporary contemporary'). As well as combining aspects of the fantastic traditionally regarded as discrete (ghosts and sci-fi tropes coming together in Darrieussecq; metamorphoses, doubles, fairy-tales and ghosts in NDiaye; or uncanny bodies, witches and mythology in Lê), these writers reappropriate well-known motifs or themes the fantastic. Today's ghosts, for instance, may be used to explore concepts of female corpo-reality (Caine); reworked fairy-tales may contribute to an over-turning of both an orientalising discourse and the binary on which it is based (Topping); returns of the dead can gesture towards new forms of subjectivity (Dobson) as can the trope of the haunted house. These reworked motifs of the fantastic are used not just thematically (re-formulating the ghost to express female corpo-reality, for instance); they are also used as a means to reflect upon the writing act and the written product: Germain's textured world of multiple realities ultimately calls all discourses (fictional, historical) into question (Hutton); NDiaye's haunted house can serve as a means to theorise the genre of autofiction (Conon), a process which is also at work

in Kerszberg's analysis of the double in Maillet. And why stop there? Again, there is scope for cross-fertilisation. Why not, for instance, use the tropes of multiple universes or the double to theorise Orientalism?; time-travel to further explore constructions of the self? There is, in other words, scope for a more extensive creative dialogue between fantastic fiction and theory.

If these are texts which construct a new fantastic, in the face of a new reality, then it is perhaps unsurprising that they are also works which reveal a need to revisit and reconsider identities and identifications; the construction of the subject. The following elements can be located, in various configurations, in the majority of chapters in the volume: the desire for an impossible return home (*chez soi*); the importance of the proper name and / or the mother tongue. The following is merely a sample of such resonances. Darrieussecq's modern ghost-story, *White*, stages a failed expedition to a mysterious lake ('une eau des origines'). One of the protagonists is sent away from his homeland aged six and given a new name and language. The narrator of Darrieussecq's *Le Pays* also returns to her birthplace, paradoxically experiencing the home-coming as a new form of exile (tracing thereby the opposite journey to Lê's exiled protagonists, caught between France and Vietnam) and, again, struggling with the language. In both texts, the womb serves as a symbol of the original uncanny site of origins and the impossible return. Maillet's Radegonde, meanwhile, searches through time for the utopic 'cocon originel', accompanied by a (renamed) version of her self during her travels. The stateless protagonist in Germain's *Magnus* is given several names, and speaks several languages, none his own (none his mother-tongue). When his true name *is* revealed, for one fleeting moment, it is a name 'qui lui est totalement étranger.' Vonarburg's time-travelling protagonist discovers that she cannnot return 'à son univers d'origine', learning also the lesson of radical alterity from a fellow-traveller 'qui est devenu lui-même totalement autre'. For NDiaye, returns home are equally un-homely, whether experienced by the renamed revenant Fanny (*En Famille*), or by the protagonist of *Autoportrait en vert* and her doubles, suffering, but ultimately learning from, the dis-location of the self.

Homelands, returns to utopic (mythically pure) origins, problematised names and mother-tongues: these are all motifs common to post-colonial studies, but in the texts in this volume they perhaps function differently. In his 'Diasporic Subjectivities', Colin Davis suggests that diaspora 'must be distinguished from exile, if exile is understood as entailing the possibility or fantasy of return to a lost homeland'.[19] The diasporic is, furthermore, a trope for the self which can never coincide with itself ('The *pour-soi* has nowhere else to be other than not-at-home');[20] the lesson of the diasporic is that 'there is no truth, no self, no object of desire, no homeland which were once possessed and to which one can hope to return'; that '[h]aving a language is also having a home, but language cannot be possessed'.[21] The texts analysed in this volume can thus, I would suggest in conclusion, be described as *diasporic* texts. Via the many permutations and motifs of the fantastic (the double, the time-traveller or the reincarnated subject meeting her-selves) they display a *desire* for that which – the mode of the fantastic tacitly acknowledges – cannot be: the 'ownership' of self, home or language; a nostalgia for nostalgia, in this era of the inevitable *second degré*. These are, ultimately, texts inhabited by wanderers as much as revenants; texts which have renounced the possibility of there being a 'home', a 'site of origin', or, correlatively, a true state of 'exile'. Traditionally, many theorists of the fantastic have based their work on such steady-state concepts: literature(s) of the fantastic are deemed to be transgressive of boundaries, paraxical, *entre deux*, decentered. Perhaps we now entering an era of a new fantastic marked (haunted) by absence; where there is no centre, no axis of reality, no fixed boundary between two fixed entities. Like the contemporary, the fantastic is radically dislocated.

19 C. Davis, 'Diasporic Subjectivities', *French Cultural Studies*, 17 (3), 2006, pp. 335–348 [338].

20 *Ibid.*

21 p. 339 and p. 340.