

FREN 402: Traces of Modernity in French Crime Fiction Genres

-- "The print in blood of a naked foot to be traced through the street of a town."
Nathaniel Hawthorne

Professor: E. HILL
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Tues / Thurs, 11-12:20
WPH 603

The sciences and technologies of modernity brought new awareness of the unseen material traces of ourselves that we leave behind us--and the material traces of the other that we carry with us--wherever we go. From fingerprints, miniscule drops of blood, and minute debris collected under a fingernail or on the bottom of a shoe, to cellular signals, IP addresses, and credit card transactions, it seems that signature traces of our presence remain in our absence no matter what we do. In addition, the rise of psychoanalysis in the 20th century brought to light the complex and unsounded psychological traces left behind by histories of world war and anti/colonial violence as well as the stress and isolation that can accompany modern urban life. These "traces" of modernity require, and constitute themselves, the production of new ways of reading, writing, and understanding our presence in the world.

This course locates French crime fiction as genres working through the traces of modernity and post-modernity, and the social tensions and psychological anxieties these traces produce. Reading short stories, novels, and critical texts, we will investigate how writers and thinkers explore the literary, philosophical, political, and ethical stakes of the trace, tracing, and tracking--as well as erasure and fugitivity--as they manifest themselves in the sociopolitical and cultural contexts of the late 20th and early 21st centuries.

Together, we will dare follow the bloody trail of *L'empreinte sanglante* (Fleuve éditions, 2009), where a collection of French writers all take up Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 challenge to begin a short story with the following sentence: "The print in blood of a naked foot to be traced through the street of a town." Then, we will put our fears aside in order to follow the intellectual moves of three historian investigators (one medievalist, one pre-historian, one modernist) as they dig up the roots of their neighbor's mysterious disappearance in Fred Vargas's *Debout les morts* (Editions Viviane Hamy, 1995). Finally, we must have the courage to revisit the traces of mass murder and the Rwandan genocide in the post/colonial thriller, *Kigali-sur-Seine* (Editions L'Harmattan, 2016) by Jean Bernard Gervais. To steady ourselves through this dark trajectory, we will critically lean on Carlo Ginzburg's *Threads and Traces: True False Fictive*, Holly Tucker's *Blood Work: A Tale of Medicine and Murder in the Scientific Revolution*, and Mahmood Mamdani's *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda*.