

Subjects of History: Identity and Memory in the First Person Narratives of Patrick Modiano, Assia Djebar, and Hervé Guibert

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of
Romance Studies in the Graduate School
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

In the wake of a twentieth century marked by the Occupation, the Algerian War, the AIDS crisis, and the aftermath of these events, the debates surrounding French identity have acquired particular urgency. French novelists, meanwhile, have increasingly turned to first person narratives; autobiographies and especially autofictions continue to dominate current publication lists. Equally concerned with identity questions, these same texts have often been accused of solipsism, and their authors described as narcissists of little talent. In this dissertation, I argue that the debates surrounding national identity and the problematic construction of a written personal identity are, in fact, intimately related. I analyze a variety of first person narrative works by three major contemporary authors (Patrick Modiano, Assia Djebar, and Hervé Guibert) in order to resituate these purportedly personal critiques of “Frenchness” within an evolving historical and historiographical trajectory that informs national, community, and personal identity. In so doing, I suggest the ways in which both subjects and identities are constructed (and critiqued) textually with respect to a history of traumatic events, as well as the collective memories that those events inspire. I argue that Modiano’s contemporary evocations of Occupation-era France, Djebar’s complex and shifting assessment of the Algerian War and the legacies of French colonization in Algeria, and the dominant position occupied by Hervé Guibert’s AIDS writings in relationship to the rest of his prolific production all merit reexamination. I therefore seek to analyze the fraught construction of identity in a French society marked by its shifting relationship to history as memorialization, while complicating the generalizations that often result from identity-based scholarship. The novel juxtaposition of Modiano, Djebar, and Guibert within the dissertation enacts my desire

to challenge the limits posed by reading authors solely in the light of narrowly-defined identity politics.

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These pages are for him.

Introduction

By its very nature, first person narrative raises questions of identity: who is the “I” that is being written? Does it correspond more or less exactly to the writing subject, whose biographical details then become important critical clues? To what extent might we consider the text autobiographical? Authentic? Or, perhaps most vexingly, representative? These questions are central to “Subjects of History: Identity and Memory in the First Person Narratives of Patrick Modiano, Assia Djebar, and Hervé Guibert,” in which I confront three contemporary authors (Patrick Modiano, Assia Djebar, and Hervé Guibert) with notions of identity, memory, and representation. Not only are these writers’ textual representations of the self at stake; larger issues of French national identity come into play. Generally speaking, authors and narrators overlap in these first person narratives, but it is still possible to identify discrepancies between a biographical and a textual identity, even in their most autobiographical texts. In my work on these three authors, I argue that this gap at the individual level is mirrored by a discrepancy bearing broader societal implications. In other words, these authors write from a problematic position, both as subjects attempting to reconcile writing and written identities, and as citizens struggling in relationship to a notion of national identity, or “Frenchness,” that is constructed in the text and influenced by history.

All three authors have been assessed by both popular and academic critics not only in terms of their public persona as an author (Modiano’s excessive shyness has been evoked to the point of cliché; Guibert’s name still inspires emotional allusion to his extreme beauty, even 20 years after his death), but also as a representative of, or for, something else. Although this phenomenon plays out differently for each author, we can trace its outlines along the lines of a community identity (Modiano’s Jewish father,

Djebar's Algerian childhood, Guibert's love-hate relationship with the gay community) and a collective legacy (the Occupation, the Algerian War, the AIDS crisis) that enter into constant collision with the universalist vision of "Frenchness." In the following chapters, I analyze the ways in which these authors have been understood as often extremely problematic representatives of otherness, drawing on French popular and academic criticism as well as an Anglophone tradition of identity-based criticism that tends to conceive of these issues very differently. I combine this historiographical approach with extended textual analyses in order to examine the fraught relationship between textually constructed "Frenchness" and the self.

French Identity, in Continuity and Crisis

What does it mean to be French today? At the dawn of the twenty-first century, this question has acquired both symbolic and political urgency in a France that has in recent years weathered riots, debates about the veil and the burqa, the reemergence of the extreme right as a political threat, and a purported decline in cultural identity.¹ Underlying all of these issues is the tension between "Frenchness" and otherness represented by continued immigration from France's former colonies, and the aftermath of that immigration as ensuing generations reinterpret what it means to be part of a country that has long promoted its own brand of universalism, integration, and the

¹ Vincent Martigny argues that, while questions surrounding "the national" seem to return every decade, the issue has acquired new political urgency with the 2007 presidential campaign and subsequent election of Nicolas Sarkozy, "whose campaign on this theme was the more politically aggressive." See Martigny, "Le Débat autour de l'identité nationale dans la campagne présidentielle de 2007: quelle rupture?" *French Politics, Culture and Society* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 23-42 (my translation). While he acknowledges the instrumentalization of national identity by Sarkozy for political purposes, Martigny also views concerns over national identity as part of a longer trajectory, and Sarkozy's rhetoric as "extremely typical of an authoritarian civic republicanism inscribed in French tradition," 24. See also Anne-Marie Thiesse, *Faire les Français: Quelle identité nationale?* (Paris: Stock, 2010), and Marcel Detienne, *L'Identité nationale, une énigme* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010) for analyses of the current debates that locate them within a much longer trajectory.

erasure of public difference in favor of a harmonious and homogenous national body.²

On November 2, 2009, the French government launched a massive public debate surrounding the question. The fact that the directive to discuss the issue came from the Ministry for Immigration and National Identity, created under Nicolas Sarkozy, only further emphasizes the concerns that motivate it.³ Can France retain its national identity following decades of immigration from countries that represent racial, cultural, and religious otherness? Or, to rephrase the problem according to cultural preoccupations, can we still place a value on Frenchness?⁴ Has it somehow been diluted, rendered insignificant? Or has the meaning of national identity simply, fundamentally changed? These are questions that can be approached fruitfully through the analysis of first person

² For a critique of universalism and the exclusions that found it, see Naomi Schor, "The Crisis of French Universalism," *Yale French Studies* 100, "France/USA: the Cultural Wars" (2001): 43-64. For a history of immigration written in light of the challenges it is said to pose to integration, see Gérard Noiriel, *Le Creuset français: Histoire de l'immigration XIXe-XXe siècles* (Paris: Seuil, 1988). For more on the contemporary debates surrounding immigration and national identity, see Alec C. Hargreaves, *Multi-Ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society* (New York: Routledge, 2007). The question of immigration and its real and purported effects on national identity is discussed at length in chapter four, "National Identity, Nationality and Citizenship," 140-164.

³ Eric Besson, Minister of Immigration, Integration, National Identity and United Development, formally launched this debate, during which a series of local meetings were held throughout the country and a government-sponsored website was opened for public commentary. Although Besson insisted on the success of the "great debate on national identity," national newspapers such as *Le Monde* and *Libération* painted a different story. On February 2, 2010, *Le Monde* asked whether the debate was misguided, citing the following figures: 53% of those polled believed that the debate served electoral purposes, 63% stated that it was not constructive, and 61% opined that it did not lead to a definition of what it meant to "be French." See "Identité nationale, un débat qui fait fausse route?," available online at http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2010/02/04/identite-nationale-un-debat-qui-fait-fausse-route_1301270_823448.html. The conference that was meant to synthesize the debate was eventually canceled, the governmental web page devoted to the project has been deactivated, and few delegates attended the auxiliary discussions held at the Assemblée nationale. Meanwhile, in *Libération*, "the cream of the French university" called for the suppression of the Ministry of National Identity, while intellectuals, cultural figures, and politicians including Benjamin Stora, Patrice Chéreau, and Dominique de Villepin signed a petition entitled "Nous ne débattons pas" [We won't debate]. See Catherine Coroller, "Ces chercheurs qui refusent les termes du débat." *Libération*, December 4, 2009, available online at <http://www.liberation.fr/societe/0101606560-ces-chercheurs-qui-refusent-les-termes-du-debat>.

⁴ Donald Morrison's provocative article on the devaluation of contemporary French culture, "In Search of Lost Time," published in *Time* on November 21, 2007, although far more popular than erudite, ignited a polemic involving French intellectuals and cultural figures such as Olivier Poivre d'Arvor, Bernard-Henri Lévy, Frédéric Martel, Pierre Assouline, and Antoine Compagnon. The article was later expanded and published as a book in both French and English. See Donald Morrison and Antoine Compagnon, *The Death of French Culture* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2010).

literary texts that are deeply concerned with individual identity as well as its construction with respect to history, memory, and collective identity.

In the late nineteenth century, when Jules Ferry's educational reforms were instituted, when French schoolchildren were first obliged to attend school and uniformly supplement their native dialect with standardized French, when school began to consistently serve the needs of the state by forming citizens,⁵ new theories of French nationality emerged. Ernest Renan described a French nation in which ties to the land trumped blood ties, and common goals trumped common ancestry, despite his insistence on a shared past.⁶ In other words, to be French was to grow up in France and share its values, including a certain understanding of its history.⁷ "Frenchness" could be adopted, acquired, assimilated. "Frenchness" was not necessarily a birthright, but rather a belief system, a state of mind. The tenets of French universalism, including the notion that France represents the ideals of liberty and human rights before an international audience, continue to be transmitted by French politicians and received favorably by many outside France even to this day, although the borders and international standing of today's France are markedly different. After all, Renan's France still constituted an

⁵ Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976) discusses a process of becoming French that spanned the nineteenth century and newly included a common language and a shared educational system. See especially his chapter "Civilizing in Earnest: Schools and Schooling," 303-333.

⁶ See Ernest Renan, *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation? et autres écrits politiques* (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, n.d). Marcel Detienne argues, meanwhile, that Renan's famous "plébiscite de tous les jours" applied only to people with the same roots. However, in his speech Renan clearly privileges the will of the individual, as well as universalist ideals. See Marcel Detienne, *L'Identité nationale, une énigme*, 47.

⁷ Renan's approach to history and memory is particularly fascinating in the context of a contemporary French literature that remains haunted by the traumatic legacies of the twentieth century. Renan advocates for selective memory; in other words, a nation remains cohesive to the extent that it is able to forget the painful or unsavory elements of its history. In Renan's words, "L'oubli, et je dirai même l'erreur historique, sont un facteur essentiel de la création d'une nation, et c'est ainsi que le progrès des études historiques est souvent pour la nationalité un danger," 227. We see this approach to the tension between history and memory play out again and again in twentieth-century French politics, as leaders have sought to stifle or enflame the memory of specific events in order to promote a politically viable reading of French history.

intact empire: swaths of Africa, Asia, the Pacific, and the Caribbean were still governed with some form of French oversight. French was the language of diplomacy and carried greater practical as well as cultural weight than it does today. While France was not literally everywhere, its flag still flew from capitals all over the world, and the official use of its language was widespread.

The disjunction between French citizens and colonial subjects was stark, however. The latter's practical attachment to the French nation was undeniable, a reality of life in the colonies. Yet even as Renan described the lofty possibilities of French citizenship and its universal values, restrictive citizenship laws prevented many of those born in French territory from attaining political and social parity with their European neighbors. In Algeria, a veritable magnet for struggling immigrants from Spain, Italy, Malta, and of course France, citizenship was progressively granted to "foreigners" in a series of laws that first promoted Christian Europeans, then Jews. Only the most exceptional Arabs were even allowed to apply for citizenship, and in order to be considered they had to provide evidence of equally exceptional service to the French nation. The process was long and arduous, and few claims were approved.⁸

While understanding France's colonial past and its once-extensive empire allows us insight into the questions surrounding "Frenchness," threats to individual and national identity, whether perceived or real, did not solely emerge outside the borders of metropolitan France. Post-Revolutionary France was marked by incidents of Franco-French violence which targeted various identities perceived to be outside the norm of

⁸ For a comprehensive discussion of the requirements for French citizenship and its availability in Algeria during the colonial period, see Patrick Weil, *Qu'est-ce qu'un Français? Histoire de la nationalité française depuis la Révolution* (Paris: Grasset, 2002), 225-244. For a discussion of French citizenship and Algerian identity, see Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2006), especially chapter 1: "Muslim French Citizens from Algeria: A Short History," 19-54.

“Frenchness,” especially Jewish identity.⁹ Emphatically marking the turn of the twentieth century, the Dreyfus Affair posed a challenge to the educational reforms that sought to create a uniform national body of citizens. When Captain Alfred Dreyfus was accused of espionage in the service of France’s recent and future enemy, Germany, his trial, punishment, and exoneration outstripped the destiny of one man; in the person of Dreyfus, France’s Jews were brought to trial and their “Frenchness” judged. That this series of events occurred under France’s Third Republic, retrospectively notable for its endurance if not its ministerial stability, suggests that the identity question has always been present below the surface of French social and political life, ready to tear apart the social fabric of the nation given enough stress. Following France’s humiliating defeat by the Germans in 1940, this is precisely what happened. Vichy, a government that claimed to ensure a certain measure of freedom for France even in the face of the country’s geographical division and partial occupation, in fact used its power to recreate the nation according to anti-Republican ideals. Once commonly described as a “parenthesis” in French history, Vichy has more recently been understood as the culmination of years of anti-Semitism and anti-Republicanism.¹⁰ Patrick Modiano’s writing has played a crucial role in this historical reassessment, beginning with his first novel, *La Place de l’étoile*, which roughly coincided with the events of May 1968 as well as Marcel Ophüls’s seminal film, *Le Chagrin et la pitié*.

⁹ For an introduction to French Jewish history, see Paula E. Hyman, *The Jews of Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) and Esther Benbassa, *The Jews of France: A History from Antiquity to the Present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

¹⁰ In the wake of 1968 and its generalized critique of gaullist society, a number of authors, filmmakers, and historians began to question De Gaulle’s carefully-constructed myth of a unified, resisting France. The seminal works in each category were Patrick Modiano’s *La Place de l’Étoile* (1968), Marcel Ophüls’ *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (1969), and Robert Paxton’s *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order* (1970). These initial, controversial texts were followed by a wave of texts about Vichy and the Occupation, varying widely in their level of nostalgia and sympathy for both occupier and occupied. See Henry Rousso, *Le Syndrome de Vichy* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), 141-146 for a description of this “mode rétro.”

The “events” in Algeria, as the war was long described, followed on the heels of World War II. Indeed, the memories of these wars have been closely intertwined since Algeria achieved independence in 1962, with the memory of one event often serving to ward off the other.¹¹ This has been especially true in the political arena.¹² Although the Algerian War was part of a wave of mid-century conflicts that marked a new era of decolonization and resulted in independence for the majority of France’s former colonial holdings, it was exceptional in terms of the identity questions that it raised. In fact, if the “events” in Algeria constituted the “war that dare not speak its name,” it was because Algerian identity was so problematically entangled with “Frenchness” that the act of naming itself was rendered nearly impossible, as Benjamin Stora has observed.¹³ Significantly, Algeria was considered to be a geographical extension of France,

¹¹ The act of strategically forgetting or repressing one event (primarily the Algerian War) in favor of the other was not always successful, however. For example, Maurice Papon’s 1997 trial for Occupation-era war crimes was partially eclipsed by discussion of his activities during the Algerian War, including his role as Head of Police in Paris during the 1961 massacre of Algerian protesters. A series of amnesties surrounding the Algerian War made it impossible to prosecute Papon for what we might now consider war crimes. Still, the fact that his participation in those events formed part of the testimony in his seemingly unrelated 1997 trial shows the extent to which the events were linked in the French national psyche. See Jo McCormack, “Social Memories in (Post)Colonial France: Remembering the Franco-Algerian War,” *Journal of Social History* 44, no. 4 (Summer 2011): 1131-1132. Raphaëlle Branche, meanwhile, describes a spike in interest surrounding the Algerian War that occurred at roughly the same time as renewed interest in Vichy, in the immediate wake of May 68 in France and the Vietnam War protests in the United States. See Branche, *La Guerre d’Algérie: une histoire apaisée?*, (Paris: Seuil, 2005), 21.

¹² See Rousso’s discussion of “invented honor” in *Le Syndrome de Vichy*, 95-110. In this section, Rousso analyzes the transfer of Resistance leader Jean Moulin’s remains to the Panthéon, arguing that the accompanying ceremony did more to consolidate De Gaulle’s power than perpetuate the memory of Moulin. According to Rousso, such references to the glorious past of a unanimously resisting France served to ward off questions surrounding torture and the statute of limitations on war crimes in Algeria. See also Georges Pompidou on his partial pardon of Paul Touvier in 1972, available online at <http://www.ina.fr/economie-et-societe/justice-et-faits-divers/video/I00017021/pompidou-sur-la-grace-a-touvier.fr.html>. His response is an extraordinary collapsing of the major traumatic events of the French twentieth century, particularly the Occupation and the Algerian War, ending with his exhortation to “draw a veil” over these events. For a discussion of Pompidou’s pardon of Touvier in a broader historical context of shifting perceptions of the Occupation, see Richard Golsan, “The Legacy of World War II in France” in *The Politics of Memory in Postwar Europe*, edited by Richard Ned Lebow et. al. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 73-101.

¹³ Stora, *La Gangrène et l’oubli: La mémoire de la guerre d’Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1998), 20-23. Indeed, the term “Algerian War” would not officially enter the legal discourse of France until 1999.

providing three departments to supplement the métropole. Its French citizens described themselves as *Algériens (français)*, and while they may have displayed exaggerated levels of patriotism in comparison to their metropolitan cohort,¹⁴ their deep attachment to the literal land of their birth found both political and artistic expression.¹⁵ From a French perspective, the Algerian conflict could be properly described as another Franco-French struggle, pitting French citizens against unnamable adversaries who, despite their subordinate status, belonged to the Republic in a way that other colonized subjects did not. In this sense, the conflict in Algeria mimicked the conflicts of the Occupation: French fought against French in a struggle that was far from evenly matched, and in some senses never truly ended.¹⁶ Assia Djebar's work, with its portrayal of multiple allegiances and linguistic affiliations, is key to understanding the complexity of contemporary Franco-Algerian identity.

At the center of Hervé Guibert's work is the AIDS crisis, which constituted a different kind of event than the Occupation and the Algerian War. At least two aspects of the crisis give it a different historical and memorial resonance: first, the "enemy" in the crisis was not, strictly speaking, a human actor but rather a medical syndrome. Similarly, while the virus wreaked disproportionately heavy losses on gay men, the act

¹⁴ See Stora, *Histoire de l'Algérie coloniale (1830-1954)* (Paris: La Découverte, 2004), 93-94.

¹⁵ See Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody, trans. Ellen Conroy Kennedy (New York: Vintage, 1970). For a discussion of Camus's opposition to Algerian independence and his stance on French Algeria, see James LeSueur, "The Unbearable Solitude of Being: The Question of Albert Camus," in *Uncivil War: Intellectuals and Identity Politics During the Decolonization of Algeria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 87-127.

¹⁶ There are several examples of colonial questions returning in the form of contemporary debates. As Benjamin Stora notes, "Derrière le 'problème de l'immigration,' resurgissent des questions que l'on se posait déjà durant la période coloniale: la religion musulmane est-elle compatible avec les principes de la République française? Faut-il mettre en œuvre un processus d'assimilation par abandon du statut personnel des 'indigènes' ou admettre la citoyenneté, en reconnaissant un particularisme communautaire?" See Stora, *La Guerre des mémoires: La France face à son passé colonial: Entretiens avec Thierry Leclère* (La Tour d'Aigues: Éditions de l'aube, 2007), 51. The veil is another notable contemporary trigger with colonial antecedents.

of claiming victimhood as a community was both incompatible with Republican principles¹⁷ and fraught with peril.¹⁸ Second, the virus' tendency to leave even fewer direct survivors than the previous calamities meant that those who remember the crisis do so from some remove. While the Occupation directly touched the lives of everyone living in France during the war years, and the Algerian War has had undeniable short-term and long-term repercussions in the form of returning soldiers, new waves of immigration, and the continued redeployment of old debates surrounding the assimilation of Muslims into the French national body, the memory of the AIDS crisis operates more subtly.¹⁹ Ross Chambers has offered a useful and moving characterization of the "haunting" that visits those open to remembering the tragedies of the French twentieth century. This is a haunting that reaches readers through writing, producing both pain and memory that are passed down textually rather than biologically or politically, through "messages concerning pain that try to get through to

¹⁷ Scott Gunther has described the flexibility of the Republican model to at once accommodate and contain gay identity. See Gunther, *The Elastic Closet: A History of Homosexuality in France, 1942-Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁸ See, for example, Frédéric Martel, *Le Rose et le noir: Les homosexuels en France depuis 1968* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), 268-275. For more on the French gay community in general and its experience of the AIDS crisis in particular, see also Enda McCaffrey, *The Gay Republic: Sexuality, Citizenship, and Subversion in France* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Julian Jackson, *Living in Arcadia: Homosexuality, Politics, and Morality in France from the Liberation to AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009); David Caron, *AIDS in French Culture: Social Ills, Literary Cures* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001) and *My Father and I: The Marais and the Queerness of Community* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

¹⁹ Indeed, there is a relative dearth of French sources treating representations of the AIDS crisis, particularly in relation to the history of the gay community in France. Meanwhile, a significant body of theoretical scholarship surrounding representations of the AIDS crisis and their meanings developed in the United States. While acknowledging the fundamental differences between American multiculturalism and French *communautarisme*, I rely on these sources to help inform my understanding of the arguments surrounding representations of AIDS in France. The polemic surrounding Hervé Guibert's film *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur* (BHQ, 2009) shows that the concern over propriety and usefulness in the representation of AIDS was a concern on both sides of the Atlantic. See especially Susan Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphors* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988); Cindy Patton, *Sex and Germs: The Politics of AIDS* (Boston: South End Press, 1985) and *Inventing AIDS* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Douglas Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), particularly "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," 43-81 and "Portraits of People with AIDS," 83-107; and Paula Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic: Cultural Chronicles of AIDS* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

us through the fog of our cultural Dalmane.”²⁰ From this perspective, first person literary texts have a special power to awaken us, given the privileged relationship between the “I” of the narrator and the “you” of the reader.

Painful Pasts

Chambers’ work on haunting and AIDS writing allows us a means of connecting the multiple and seemingly disparate discourses surrounding the Occupation, the Algerian War, and the AIDS crisis. While the title of his book *Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting* purports to focus on the AIDS crisis, Chambers quickly establishes the inability of analyzing testimonial writing from that crisis in a historical vacuum. His book therefore also draws on and refers to events as sweepingly varied as the first and second world wars, September 11, Oklahoma City, Waco, Columbine, Vietnam, Pearl Harbor, the Great Depression, the American Civil War, and the displacement and exploitation of Aborigines in Australia. “The kind of society in which innocence is lost and regained regularly (I’m not sure there is any other) is what I call an aftermath society, one regulated by a culture in which collectively traumatic events are denied, and if necessary denied again,” Chambers writes.²¹ In this perspective, society’s denial of the AIDS crisis (and its subsequent, untimely resurfacing) echoes the way other traumas have been buried, only to erupt painfully in the national

²⁰ See Ross Chambers, *Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), vii. I find Ross Chambers’ conceptualization of “haunting” to be most helpful in understanding all three of the authors I study here, given the relationship it establishes between the text capable of haunting, and the reader capable of being haunted. I believe that this relationship between text and reader is precisely what defines the “successful” representation of a traumatic experience, allowing the concept of “haunting” to bypass the endless debates surrounding “proper” or acceptable representations of trauma. “Haunting,” of course, has its own critical genealogy, arising from postcolonial studies and the work of Homi Bhabha, Gyatri Spivak, and Ian Chambers.

²¹ *Ibid.*, xxi.

consciousness at a later time. In *Le Syndrome de Vichy*, Henry Rousso characterized France's inability to move beyond the effects of the Occupation as a sort of mental illness, a "syndrome" that he evaluates in psychoanalytical terms.²² Benjamin Stora, meanwhile, adopts a similar medical terminology to describe France's complicated relationship to the Algerian War, referring to its partial and unwilling memory of the events as "gangrene."²³ Thus, in all three cases, we find ourselves confronted with an event that left a mark on the Republican national body, a body made enduringly ill (whether mentally, physically, or both) by the traumas that it had sustained.

As with Chambers' discussion of haunting, the critical discourses surrounding trauma, memory, and history have proposed a flexible terminology that accounts for vastly differing forms of crisis.²⁴ Marianne Hirsch notably coined the concept of "postmemory" to account for the feelings of a generation whose parents directly

²² See Rousso, *Le Syndrome de Vichy*. For a critical reassessment of Rousso's classifications of the syndrome, see Golsan, "The Legacy of World War II in France," as well as Rousso's own introduction to *Vichy: l'événement, la mémoire, l'histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

²³ See Stora, *La Gangrène et l'oubli*. Rousso and Stora both insist on the historical and memorial connections between the Occupation and the Algerian War, noting the many ways in which De Gaulle's myth of a unified, resisting France was used to quell the debates that might otherwise have surrounded France's intervention in Algeria, notably with respect to amnesty for war crimes, and the use of torture by French troops. See *Le Syndrome de Vichy*, 112 and *La Gangrène et l'oubli*, 220-223. Florent Emilio Siri's 2007 film, *L'Ennemi intime* (Contender Entertainment, 2008), dramatizes the ways in which the heritage of the Resistance could be deployed by French troops, harkis, and revolutionaries alike, with contradictory and often tragic results.

²⁴ Despite commonalities in the concerns and corpus of various memory-related fields, trauma studies constitute a distinct field that has been largely defined by the work of Cathy Caruth. See especially Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). For a detailed genealogy of trauma as a concept, see Roger Luckhurst, "The genealogy of a concept," in *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008), 19-76. Because the word "trauma" intervenes rather promiscuously in a number of contexts, many of them extraliterary, it is used both broadly and with precise theoretical intent. For this reason, the relationship between trauma studies and other forms of memory is debatable. Some critics consider trauma studies to encompass related concepts such as postmemory, while others view their relationships as one of productive tension. See Judith Greenberg, "Trauma and Transmission: Echoes of the Missing Past in *Dora Bruder*," *Studies in 20th and 21st Century French Literature* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 351-377, for an example of the former approach, and Sven-Erik Rose, "Remembering *Dora Bruder*: Patrick Modiano's Surrealist Encounter with the Postmemorial Archive." *Postmodern Culture* 18, no. 2 (January 2008) for an example of the latter.

experienced the Holocaust. For Hirsch, it is possible for a second generation to feel as though they, too, are survivors. In her words,

postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation [...] Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated.²⁵

In Hirsch's wake, the term has been redeployed in other contexts, to describe a more or less tenuous relationship to any significant traumatic event.²⁶

If Patrick Modiano's narrators offer an excellent, while problematic, example of postmemory – the paternal figure of the collaborationist Jew looms large in his work – the concept can also be extended, with some caveats, to the work of Djébar and Guibert, whose autobiographical writings are equally marked by events that preceded their own birth.²⁷ In Djébar's case, writing her "official" autobiography meant recounting the story of France's Algerian conquest in 1830; for Guibert, it meant alluding to the Occupation as a means of underscoring his (fictional?) parents' bourgeois hypocrisy. In the following chapters, my focus on representations that are temporally and often geographically mediated mean that I privilege concepts such as postmemory and

²⁵ See Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1997), 22.

²⁶ Indeed, Hirsch's initial definition of postmemory, while inspired by a photographically-mediated experience of the Holocaust, allows for the possibility of broader interpretations: "I have developed this notion in relation to children of Holocaust survivors, but I believe it may usefully describe other second-generation memories of cultural or collective traumatic events and experiences," *idem*.

²⁷ Johnnie Gratton's article, "Postmemory, Prememory, Paramemory: the Writing of Patrick Modiano," *French Studies* LIX, no. 1: 39-45 expands on the concept of postmemory in relation to Modiano's work. Max Silverman, meanwhile, evokes the concept of postmemory in his very perceptive article exploring the latent relationship between the Occupation and the Algerian War in Modiano's novels. See Silverman, "Interconnected Histories: Holocaust and Empire in the Cultural Imaginary," *French Studies* 62, no. 4 (October 2008): 417-428.

haunting that are related to trauma studies,²⁸ yet clearly account for the contingencies of fiction.²⁹

The crises of the twentieth century targeted, and ultimately affected, individuals at a community level. It is common knowledge that Jews, gypsies, homosexuals, Communists, foreigners, and other purported “undesirables” suffered disproportionate losses under the Occupation. The Algerian War recast France’s former subjects, and supposed fellow countrymen, as enemies, making Muslim cultural practices such as veiling into symbols of terrorism.³⁰ The AIDS crisis, meanwhile, was initially understood and theorized as a gay disease, or a “gay cancer” in the words that Hervé Guibert attributed to Michel Foucault; as it slowly became clear that the disease could also affect heterosexuals, HIV-positive gay men were represented in some quarters as everything from unwitting contaminants to potential murderers.³¹ These crises cast

²⁸ Sven-Erik Rose argues that postmemory accomplishes the same critique as trauma theory without falling victim to its limitations, including the “level[ing] of historical and subjective specificity.” See Rose, “Remembering *Dora Bruder*: Patrick Modiano’s Surrealist Encounter with the Postmemorial Archive.”

²⁹ Although Chambers categorizes Guibert’s *A l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie* as a testimonial, I argue that the deliberate literariness of the text, starting with (but not limited to) the purposefully incomplete overlapping of biological and textual subject, highlights its fictionality. In other words, Guibert’s work is meant to be taken “literarily” rather than literally.

³⁰ See Frantz Fanon, “L’Algérie se dévoile,” in *L’An cinq de la Révolution algérienne* (Paris: F. Maspero, 1968). Fanon argues that colonial France’s interest in unveiling Muslim women during the Algerian War, while couched in terms of empathy and liberation, actually symbolized its desire to reconquer the territory. In resistance to French pressures to unveil, Fanon advocated maintaining the veil as a revolutionary symbol, or abandoning it strategically as a guerrilla tactic (for an example of the latter, see the sequence in Gillo Pontecorvo’s film, *La Bataille d’Alger* (Criterion Collection, 2004) that depicts women adopting European dress, makeup, and hairstyles in order to easily pass through checkpoints and detonate bombs.) Although Fanon’s equation of women with land and his tendency to instrumentalize them are problematic, his argument remains relevant to the current debates surrounding the veil. Once again, the veil is conflated with religious and/or gender oppression and terrorism, and the women wearing it are reduced in public discourse to the role of prisoners.

³¹ The filmmaker and writer Cyril Collard, once lauded for his impassioned representation of a bisexual man dying of AIDS, abruptly (and posthumously) fell out of favor in the mid-90s when it was alleged that he may have contaminated others (most notably the granddaughter of author Suzanne Prou) with the AIDS virus. For a discussion of the polemic, see “Le cinéaste Cyril Collard, décédé en 1993, au centre d’une polémique sur la transmission du sida,” press release, Agence France Presse, April 15, 1994. The following week, *Le Monde* hosted a discussion of the polemic. See Thomas Sotinel, “Cyril Collard et les Exorcistes: La

entire groups of victims in the role of public enemies to be either contained or eliminated, through efforts that were at best tolerated, and at worst clearly supported and encouraged, by the French State. It should come as no surprise, then, that a sense of collective identity has coalesced around such groups, including but certainly not limited to a shared memory of past persecutions.

And yet the very concept of collective identity at a community level conflicts with the basic tenets of universalism, which strives to ensure the basic equality and privacy of each individual with respect to the State. In fact, the French term to describe this sense of community, *communautarisme*, has distinctly negative connotations, as opposed to the American concept of multiculturalism. While *communautarisme* emphasizes the potential for communities to act in their own special interest, perhaps without consideration for the greater national good, “multiculturalism” implies a larger sociopolitical framework in which many separate cultural communities are recognized as such. It is important to keep the imperfect overlap between *communautarisme* and multiculturalism in mind when reading the scholarship on contemporary French authors, since the different underlying assumptions about “identity” color critical perspectives on either side of the Atlantic. The popularity of Modiano, Djébar, and Guibert among Anglo-American critics means that their work has inspired distinct schools of criticism among literary scholars. In general, given the ongoing influence of poetics and rhetorical criticism, French academics tend to adopt a more formalist approach than their cultural-studies-inspired colleagues in the English-speaking world.

polémique posthume que suscite l'auteur des *Nuits fauves* est l'effet de la dramatisation organisée autour du sida,” *Le Monde*, April 18, 1994; Franck Nouchi, “Hystérie,” *ibid.*, and Josyane Savigneau, “Une bien médiocre affaire,” *ibid.*

It is by acknowledging the respective advantages of these approaches to criticism that I hope to avoid the potential pitfalls associated with each one. Working between critical approaches that are themselves at least partially influenced by national identity seems apt, given my authors' concern with the fragmentary, the constructed, and the problematic aspects of individual and collective identity.

The Scandalous Singularity of the Autobiographical Subject

In order to understand how Modiano, Djébar, and Guibert's works reinterpret autobiographical conventions in order to engage collective as well as individual identity questions, it is necessary to situate contemporary first person narrative in terms of its reception as well as its literary antecedents. Autobiographical writing occupies a paradoxical position in contemporary French literature. On the one hand, it has been extremely common for the best-known, most-consecrated French writers of the twentieth century to write their autobiography, memoirs, or other autobiographical fragments. Proust, Colette, Sartre, Beauvoir, Camus, Sarraute, Duras, Mauriac, and Leiris are all well-canonized examples that predate the current popularity of autobiographical writing in France.³² On the other hand, autobiography is frequently disparaged as a form that writers turn to when they have nothing else to write about; the turn to the self is understood as a form of narcissism not unrelated to a lack of literary genius.³³ The conception that autobiographical writings are the self-important

³² See Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*; Colette, *Sido*; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mots*; Simone de Beauvoir, *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée*, *Une mort très douce*, *La Force de l'âge*, and *La Force des choses*; Camus, *Le Premier homme*; Sarraute, *Enfance*; Duras, *L'Amant* and *La Douleur*; Mauriac, *Mémoires intérieurs*, *Nouveaux mémoires intérieurs*, *Commencements d'une vie*; Leiris, *L'Âge d'homme*. For a more comprehensive list of authors and autobiographical writings from the 12th to the mid-20th century, see Lejeune's "répertoire" in *L'Autobiographie en France* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1971), 106-137.

³³ According to Philippe Vilain, "le discours implicite [de la "confusion ambiante"] consiste à discuter la littérarité du texte autobiographique, sa capacité réelle à s'écarter du récit psychanalytique et, donc, à

ramblings of untalented writers has become increasingly widespread as the autobiographical form itself has become more commonplace in the literary market. Autofiction, undoubtedly one of the dominant modes of writing at the turn of the twenty-first century, is generally regarded with skepticism, if not outright suspicion. Blending autobiography with a fictionalized conception of the self, this “genre,” at once major because it is pervasive, and minor because it is maligned, resists coherent definition. In critical discourse, its reception echoes that of Romanticism, leading one to believe that the autofictional subject is self-focused, even self-centered, precisely because he has the privilege of disengaging from society and the march of history.³⁴ Some critics, meanwhile, have argued that autofiction represents the most prurient aspects of a Naturalism that has been pushed to its natural (if extreme) conclusions. Philippe Forest, for example, refers to a “nouveau naturalisme de l’intime” that mistakenly attempts to locate an elusive authenticity in lived experience.³⁵ Definitions, ranging from the formally precise to the practically expansive, have proliferated since the term was coined by Serge Doubrovsky on the back cover of his novel *Fils* in 1977.³⁶ All three of the

représenter la littérature. En attribuant à l’écriture autobiographique les fonctions pragmatiques (communication et instrumentalisme de la langue) d’une écriture scientifique, cette comparaison exprime, en effet, très clairement la disqualification de l’autobiographique du champ de la création et de la fiction, si abondamment décrit et questionné, à la suite d’Aristote, par les poéticiens et, notamment, par Gérard Genette qui assigne à ce genre, et à la prose non fictionnelle, un statut littéraire conditionnel.” See Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse* (Paris: Grasset, 2005), 80.

³⁴ For a defense of autofiction that acknowledges and even embraces the charges laid against it, see Vilain, *Défense de Narcisse*.

³⁵ Philippe Forest, *Le Roman, le je* (Paris: Pleins Feux, 2001), 13. Forest’s assessment of autofiction is distinctly negative; in its place, he suggests a Bataille-influenced form of self-writing best exemplified by the novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Philip Roth, and Kenzaburô Ôé.

³⁶ The matter of defining “autofiction” is complicated by the fact that several of its principal theorists are also practitioners of first person narrative with a wide range of attitudes toward the term (see, for example, Vilain and Forest, cited above). Notably, Serge Doubrovsky, considered the “father” of autofiction as a

authors whose works I address here have been variously accused, or defended, as practitioners of this suspect contemporary form. What is essential, then, is to acknowledge the purposefully obscure relationship between the “I” of the text and the “real world” of the writer as biological subject. For this reason, I prefer to refer broadly to first person narratives, with the understanding that they have an autobiographical component, but that the implied relationship between author and text remains resolutely problematic.

Even more than the history of autobiography, the history of the field of autobiographical studies has a great deal to tell us about how and why recent works written in this vein have received mixed reviews due to their very form. In fact, the origins of modern autobiography are varied and contestable. If Saint Augustine is widely considered to have written the first autobiography, his influence on the field of autobiographical criticism in France has been limited. The fact that his writing preceded the formation of a French national space is not what ultimately disqualifies him from sustained discussion as the founder of autobiography;³⁷ rather, his position as a Christian autobiographer implies, for many critics, that what he recounts is less the development of his personality than the development of his spirituality. His narrative of

concept, maintains a real, if limited proprietary influence over how the term is used by critics; his definition includes the notion that author and narrator must imperatively share the same name. See Doubrovsky, *Parcours critique* (Paris: Galilée, 1980) for an analysis of his own production. Furthermore, among those who write critically about autofiction without producing related literary works, there are at least two significantly different schools of thought. The first, elaborated by Vincent Colonna in *Autofictions et autres mythomanies littéraires* (Auch: Tristram, 2004), takes a broad view of the genre, extending it temporally and geographically and allowing for a loose interpretation of the relationship between author and narrator. Philippe Gasparini, meanwhile, emphasizes the Doubrovskian model in his analysis of the autofictional phenomenon. See *Autofiction: Une aventure du langage* (Paris: Seuil, 2008).

³⁷ That said, Assia Djebar claims Saint Augustine as an Algerian writer; he founds her theoretical and practical discussion of autobiography at the end of *L'amour, la fantasia* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 241-242.

spiritual awakening and service thus serves to de-emphasize his individuality, considered a major characteristic of classical French autobiography.

Philippe Lejeune, while the most prominent and active theorist of French autobiography, is not the only one to have located its classical “archetype”³⁸ in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s infamous *Confessions*.³⁹ This turn to the *Confessions* as an autobiographical Ur-text posits a set of assumptions about autobiography that since have become generalized. While Rousseau’s *Confessions* echo religious confessions, including Saint Augustine’s early autobiography, they also displace the act of confessing from the religious realm to emphasize its secular value. The reader is Rousseau’s judge, and nature is his maker. The numbered points of Rousseau’s preamble to the definitive text make this clear:

1. Je forme une entreprise qui n’eut jamais d’exemple, et dont l’exécution n’aura point d’imitateur. Je veux montrer à mes semblables un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature; et cet homme, ce sera moi.
2. Moi seul. Je sens mon cœur et je connois les hommes. Je ne suis fait comme aucun de ceux que j’ai vus; j’ose croire n’être fait comme aucun de ceux qui existent. Si ne vaux pas mieux, au moins je suis autre. Si la nature a bien ou mal fait de briser le moule dans lequel elle m’a jeté, c’est ce dont on ne peut juger qu’après m’avoir lu.
3. Que la trompette du jugement dernier sonne quand elle voudra; je viendrai ce livre à la main me présenter devant le souverain juge. Je dirai hautement: voilà ce que j’ai fait, ce que j’ai pensé, ce que je fus. J’ai dit le bien et le mal avec la même franchise. Je n’ai rien tu de mauvais, rien ajouté de bon, et s’il m’est arrivé d’employer quelque ornement indifférent, ce n’a jamais été que pour remplir un vide occasionné par mon défaut de mémoire; j’ai pu supposer vrai ce que je savois avoir pu l’être, jamais ce que je savois être faux. Je me suis montré tel que je fus, méprisable et vil quand je l’ai été, bon, généreux, sublime, quand je l’ai été: j’ai dévoilé mon intérieur tel que tu l’as

³⁸ Lejeune, *L’Autobiographie en France*, 5.

³⁹ Lejeune is careful not to declare Rousseau the father or inventor of autobiography, while acknowledging his essential contribution to the development of the genre: “Rousseau [...] en a réalisé d’un seul coup presque toutes les virtualités.” See *L’Autobiographie en France*, 63-66 (65 for the quotation). In his later masterwork on the autobiographical pact, Lejeune warned against an “illusion de perspective” that would tempt scholars to see autobiography as either eternal, or born with a specific text. Still, Rousseau remains a central focus of his work. See *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975), 313-326.

vu toi-même. Être éternel, rassemble autour de moi l'innombrable foule de mes semblables: qu'ils écoutent mes confessions, qu'ils gémissent de mes indignités, qu'ils rougissent de mes misères. Que chacun d'eux découvre à son tour son cœur aux pieds de ton trône avec la même sincérité; et puis qu'un seul te dise, s'il l'ose: *je fus meilleur que cet homme-là.*⁴⁰

If Rousseau insists on the singularity of his project, it is because he simultaneously insists that he is himself a singular object and, as such, worthy of study. Although Doubrovsky would later coin the term "autofiction" in reaction to autobiography's status as a genre for "the great men of this world,"⁴¹ its origins are in fact much more humble. Banished from his beloved Geneva, Rousseau's exile and legitimate social and legal troubles were compounded by what can only be described as a persecution complex.⁴² The founding text of autobiographical writing, then, casts itself as a justification of the author's behavior that also serves as a means of correcting others' ill-informed opinions. While Rousseau paints a striking picture of himself waving his autobiography in the very face of God on Judgment Day, the true judges here are men. They are his intended readers, and their "conversion" is equated to a shift in public opinion. Although Rousseau calls for each of his fellow men to "reveal his heart at the foot of your throne," God's judgment is quickly replaced by the court of public opinion

⁴⁰ Quoted in Philippe Lejeune, *L'Autobiographie en France*, 156-157.

⁴¹ See the preliminary definition of, and justification for, autofiction that first appeared on the back cover of Doubrovsky's novel, *Fils* (Paris: Galilée, 1977).

⁴² Rousseau's *Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* were written in response to his sense of total isolation from, and persecution by, society: "Eh comment aurais-je pu prévoir le destin qui m'attendait? Comment le puis-je concevoir encore aujourd'hui que j'y suis livré? Pouvais-je dans mon bon sens supposer qu'un jour, moi le même homme que j'étais, le même que je suis encore, je passerais, je serais tenu sans le moindre doute pour un monster, un empoisonneur, un assassin, que je deviendrais l'horreur de la race humaine, le jouet de la canaille, que toute la salutation que me feraient les passants serait de cracher sur moi, qu'une génération toute entière s'amuserait d'un accord unanime à m'enterrer tout vivant?" *Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2010), 34.

("and then may just one say to you, if he dares: I was better than that man"). If there is sin to be atoned for here, it is a sin against Rousseau.

The defining characteristics of classical French autobiography, or put differently the underlying assumptions of its theorization, all emerge from this short text. For contemporary writers engaged in a struggle over self that is both personal and political, Rousseau offers an unavoidable model to imitate and resist. Significantly, Rousseau begins by underlining his singularity: as an author, first and foremost, but then, in point two, as a person. The relationship between the project of writing the self ("my undertaking here") and the self that is being written are joined here ("I want to show [...] a man in all the truth of nature; and that man will be me"). We might well see the origins of Lejeune's oft-cited autobiographical pact⁴³ in these short lines openly equating the author with his project and containing a promise of sincerity, if not absolute honesty. Indeed, despite initially equating himself with his text ("that man will be me"), Rousseau's preamble ultimately contains a kernel of doubt, if not dishonesty, that continues to color critical assessments of the genre and its representatives. Rousseau's preoccupation with narrative (his attempt to "fill a void," as he writes) leads him to privilege art over the bare facts of his life. It also points to the problematic role of memory in the reconstruction of both an individual identity and a past. Rousseau's secular *Confessions* describe the development of a personality, an individual, along with the unavoidable measure of fiction, delusion, bad faith, or lapses in memory that accompany any effort to apply the logic of narrative to one's own life. It is necessary to acknowledge the conventions of classical French autobiography and how they have

⁴³ In addition to the essential reading on the subject, Lejeune's *Pacte autobiographique*, his earlier *L'Autobiographie en France* contains a very useful grouping of sample autobiographical pacts, from Rousseau to François Nourissier. See *L'Autobiographie en France*, 148-214.

influenced contemporary assumptions about the genre in order to appreciate the ways in which Patrick Modiano, Assia Djebar, and Hervé Guibert subvert the genre. Still recognizable, its constitutive frailties are exploited; its authority is questioned; its purpose and meaning are altered. If indeed their works can be described as autobiographies, they are autobiographies that already contain their own critique.

About the Authors

It is nonetheless difficult to assign a genre to the first person narratives I discuss in this study. Do Patrick Modiano, Assia Djebar, and Hervé Guibert write autobiography? The critical assessment has been mixed. While Modiano's *Un Pedigree* is universally accepted as Modiano's "real" autobiography, it seemingly confirms many of the biographical details of earlier narrators, and echoes earlier scenes. Does this mean that Modiano's entire body of work is autobiographical? As Akane Kawakami has pointed out, indecision over the proper classification for Modiano's work has led to the de facto creation of a new subgenre bearing the author's name.⁴⁴ Djebar, meanwhile, announced in the early 1980s that she was writing her autobiography; the long-awaited *L'amour, la fantasia* that followed has been described variously as an "autoheterobiothanatohistoriography," a "collective autobiography," and a "plural autobiography," with the critical consensus pointing in the direction of a non-standard work.⁴⁵ Guibert, meanwhile, never wrote an avowed autobiography, but instead placed

⁴⁴ See Kawakami, *A Self-Conscious Art: Patrick Modiano's Postmodern Fictions* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), chapter 6 for a discussion of the "Modiano novel" and its particularities. Speaking of the commonalities that link Modiano's novels into an identifiable group, Kawakami writes: "The combination of these conventions and the supporting detail create an effect comparable to that of a popular subgenre, eliciting from the reader the chain response of recognition, anticipation and subsequent fulfillment or disappointment," 110.

⁴⁵ See Ching Selao, "(Im)possible autobiographie: Vers une lecture derridienne de *L'amour, la fantasia* d'Assia Djebar," *Etudes françaises* 40, no. 3: 129-150. She describes the novel as "un récit

his narrator, consistently named Hervé, in a variety of situations that ranged from the autobiographical (Hervé's AIDS diagnosis) to the wildly implausible (Hervé as a suspect in the death of his girlfriend Jayne) to the questionable (Hervé's miserable childhood). Critics who were sympathetic to Guibert in the decade following his death, when reaction to his work was still largely negative, also coined their own generic phraseology to account for an *œuvre* in need of rehabilitation. Thus we have Jean-Pierre Boulé's "roman faux," Bruno Blanckeman's "récits indécidables," and, more broadly, Ralph Sarkonak's "écriture sidérante," not a generic classification per se, but perhaps an attempt to reconcile Guibert's art-for-art's-sake attitude with the historical crisis that influenced reception of his work.⁴⁶

We might ask then, somewhat differently, whether their vision of autobiographical writing confirms or disputes received notions of what it means to write as a singular subject in France today? Are their works a symptom of literary and cultural erosion, of a retreat into the confines of individual experience, or even an open expression of self-involvement? Although Modiano, Djébar, and Guibert have each produced an *œuvre* that defies easy definition, and indeed even defies comparison, I suggest that their works are united in their engagement with a problematic and unfinished writing of the self, as well as the ways in which the self is formed by, and

autohétérobiothanatohistoriographique," 136. See also Valérie Orlando, *Nomadic Voices of Exile: Feminine Identity in Francophone Literature of the Maghreb* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1999); and Hafid Gafaïti, "L'autobiographie plurielle: Assia Djébar, les femmes, et l'histoire," in *Postcolonialisme et autobiographie*, edited by Alfred Hornung and Ernstpeter Ruhe (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998): 149-160.

⁴⁶ See Boulé, *Hervé Guibert: Voices of the Self* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999); Blanckeman, "Hervé Guibert: Postures et impostures du récit," in *Les Récits indécidables: Jean Echenoz, Hervé Guibert, Pascal Quignard* (Villeneuve d'Ascq: Presses universitaires du Septentrion, 2000), 89-146; and Sarkonak, *Angelic Echoes: Hervé Guibert and Company* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 192 for descriptions of these different classifications.

informs, history, memory, and national identity. They go about this, of course, in vastly different ways, adopting styles that trend from the precise and the Proustian (Modiano), to self-aware historical analysis (Djebar), to the fragmentary, the experimental, and the obscene (Guibert). Their work runs the gamut from socially acceptable and highly-decorated (Modiano and Djebar) to scandalous, albeit rehabilitated (Guibert). Finally, the author-figures behind the works enjoy their own particular legend, each influencing and influenced by the works themselves: Modiano is seen as intensely private, hesitant in his speech, and haunted by memories that precede his birth; Djebar is a multilingual feminist who represents Algerian otherness, specifically womanhood; and a whiff of scandal follows Guibert, whose angelic face supposedly belied the dark confessions of his prose. In what follows, I strive to respect the singularity of each author's *oeuvre*, all the while insisting that they are bound by a common preoccupation with individual and collective identity, as well as a problematized (and often problematic) relationship to history. Reading these three authors together allows us an at once sweeping and intimate look at the major problematics of the French twentieth century and its inscription within literature, ranging from the historical events that marked the century, to the social dynamics that engendered and were forever altered by those events. In this sense, the relationship between trauma and literature mirrors that of these contemporary first person narrators with respect to a "classical" autobiographer such as Rousseau: the rewriting of the recent past is marked, at both the collective and individual level, by its enduring presence. The works by Modiano, Djebar, and Guibert that I study here find themselves imbricated in the knot of subjectivity, memory, and

history that has come to define the past four decades of French literature and historiography.⁴⁷

In Chapter One, I focus on Patrick Modiano's novels of the late 1970s. After sparking a collective reexamination of France's role in the Occupation with his incendiary first novel, Modiano abandoned the cacophonous descriptions of collaboration and resistance that characterized his early works. His turn toward a limpid, spare, precise, nostalgic style, commonly characterized as "Proustian," seemed to mark a turn away from questions of collective identity and responsibility. Yet even as he composed the "petite musique" of his quieter, less controversial novels, Modiano continued to ask what identities were possible in the wake of Vichy; indeed, whether any identity, personal or national, could be sustained. His novels *Livret de famille* (1977) and *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* (1978) thus offer critiques of individual and collective identity that are all the more powerful because they appear masked by literary convention.

Chapter Two examines the critical legacy of Assia Djébar, a writer who has long been assigned the role of representing "l'Algérienne," or Algerian womanhood. As I argue in this chapter, not enough attention has been paid to her exceptionality – as a student, a writer, and a woman of privilege whose work borrows from multiple linguistic and cultural traditions. I focus on two works that straddle a moment of significant change in Djébar's work, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (1980) and *L'amour, la fantasia* (1985), in order to counter this view of Djébar as "l'Algérienne" by showing how her texts self-consciously construct and critique their own historical and

⁴⁷ Raphaëlle Branche eloquently describes the current tension between historical work and the "social demand" for recognition, that is to say, the tension between history and memory. See Branche, *La Guerre d'Algérie: une histoire apaisée?*, 13-14. Pierre Laborie alludes rather more cynically to these sometimes competing claims, describing the relationship between the French and their history as profoundly narcissistic. See Laborie, *Le Chagrin et le venin* (Montrouge: Bayard, 2011), 9.

autobiographical subjects. Djébar's first person heroine is an open and evolving subject who maintains fluid and ambiguous relationships with those (notably French and masculine) identities excluded by the notion of "L'Algérienne."

In Chapter Three I reassess the writings and legacy of Hervé Guibert 20 years after his AIDS-related death. Before the crisis, Guibert had been a prolific writer of experimental texts that blurred the boundaries between fiction and autobiography. Through his texts, he had created a self-contained world peopled with extraordinary characters that challenged convention and good taste. Guibert's AIDS novel, *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* (1990) made him an overnight celebrity, but also inspired harsh criticism of an author who openly privileged art over activism. *A l'ami* may well have appeared scandalous, scurrilous, and self-serving at a time when "proper" representation of the AIDS crisis was considered a moral imperative by both activists and fear mongers. By reading *A l'ami* in conjunction with Guibert's earlier novel, *Mes Parents* (1988), however, I return the later work to its proper place as part of an entire *œuvre* deeply concerned with individual and literary freedom.

The present study focuses on three seemingly disparate authors, from vastly different social and cultural backgrounds and with markedly divergent literary projects. Yet each of these contemporary authors has fully participated in both asking and attempting to answer the question of what it means to be French today. Each author also emphasizes the difficulty, the impossibility, but also ultimately the necessity of assuming a French identity that is neither whole, nor complete, nor stable, nor inviolable. Their characters live with the knowledge that, while other identities may be adopted, and while their own French identity may be stripped from them, a painful and productive kernel of "Frenchness" remains. It is not coincidental, then, that all three of

these writers write predominantly in a first person voice, and that the vast majority of their works blur the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction. Are they autobiographers? Not strictly speaking, but their works as a whole tell the intimate story of identity within the bounds of a conflicted nation.

1. A Subject in Search of an Identity: Patrick Modiano's Postwar Narratives of Loss

Patrick Modiano is a contradictory figure, having been read as a provocative Jewish writer¹ as well as a contributor to the nostalgic *mode rétro*.² It is perhaps difficult not to rely on the author's widely-known and –recited biography in order to explain such contradictions: Modiano is the child of a Flemish Belgian mother and a Jewish Parisian father, born in 1945 and thus literally the offspring of the Occupation. As he writes in his avowedly autobiographical *Un pedigree*, “Drôles de gens. Drôle d'époque entre chien et loup. Et mes parents se rencontrent à cette époque-là, parmi ces gens qui leur ressemblent [...] Mais je n'y peux rien, c'est le terreau – ou le fumier – d'où je suis issu.”³ The fact that his father was a collaborationist Jew, arrested in 1943 only to be freed, mysteriously, by “someone,”⁴ and that he would face arrest during the Occupation as a Jew and afterwards as a collaborator further demonstrates the gray

¹ See Ora Avni, *D'un passé l'autre: aux portes de l'Histoire avec Patrick Modiano* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997).

² The *mode rétro* was a commercial and artistic phenomenon born of renewed interest in France's role in the Occupation. A number of landmark texts, including Marcel Ophüls's film *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (1969) and Robert Paxton's *Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order* (1970), as well as Charles De Gaulle's retirement from public life and his subsequent death, paved the way for a massive reinterpretation of the war years in the early 1970s. The often morally ambiguous texts of the *mode rétro*, from Louis Malle's *Lacombe Lucien* to Jacques Bonny's *Mon père, l'inspecteur Bonny*, run the gamut from critique to apologia. See Henry Rousso, *Le Syndrome de Vichy*, and Alan Morris, *Collaboration and Resistance Reviewed: Writers and the "Mode Rétro" in Post-Gaullist France* (New York: Berg, 1992), for assessments of Modiano's participation in this phenomenon.

³ Modiano, *Un pedigree* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), 19. While Modiano has acknowledged the autobiographical nature of this work (see, for example, Maryline Heck's interview with the author, “Seule l'écriture est tangible,” *Le Magazine littéraire* 490 (October 2009): 63-68), it is important to note the features that distinguish it from a “classical” autobiography from the first page: notably, an opening that privileges the story of the narrator's parents and vividly describes events and acquaintances that preceded his own birth. Of course, knowledge of the parents' relationship is key to understanding Modiano's perspective on his life, and especially his childhood.

⁴ As Denis Cosnard suggests, this mysterious “savior” was likely Eddy Pagnon, a recurring figure in Modiano's novels. Historically, Pagnon was a member of Bonny and Lafont's Gestapist “bande de la rue Lauriston” which engaged in black market activities as well as the purported torture of Resistance agents. Like Bonny and Lafont, Pagnon was condemned to death and executed by firing squad at Montrouge in December 1944. For more on Eddy Pagnon's presence in Modiano's work, see Denis Cosnard, “Un certain Eddy Pagnon,” in *Dans la peau de Patrick Modiano* (Paris: Fayard, 2010), 67-89.

areas of identity and allegiance during the Dark Years. Modiano recounts his father's efforts to evade the authorities of liberated Paris in 1944, "craignant que la police ne lui demande à nouveau des comptes mais cette fois-ci à cause de ses activités de hors-la-loi dans le marché noir."⁵ The idea of being an "hors-la-loi," an outlaw, is particularly apt, given that the historical conjuncture did not favor the coupling of legal status with survival in Albert Modiano's case. Meanwhile, Modiano's mother, an actress, represents another degree of collaboration and potential victimhood; this "jolie fille au coeur sec" would find herself alternately working in a German-funded production studio⁶ and navigating the literal and figurative landmines of war-torn Europe.

The latter situation is evoked at length in the fourth chapter of *Livret de famille* (1977), in which the narrator's young actress mother awakens on the morning she is to begin shooting her first big movie role only to find that the Germans are bombing her hometown of Antwerp. Making her way rather numbly out of the city to begin work, she does not react to the terror around her. Throughout the chapter, in fact, the young actress who will become the narrator's mother is addressed as though her national status renders her untouchable, for example when the Jewish film producers Openfeld and Openfeld Sr. "la regardaient tous deux avec un vague sourire [...] Ils ont pensé, sans doute, qu'elle ne risquait rien, elle."⁷ After all, according to Openfeld Sr., she has a

⁵ *Un pedigree*, 29.

⁶ "Les Allemands ont l'intention de l'expédier dans une école de cinéma à Berlin mais un jeune officier de la Propaganda-Staffel qu'elle a connu à l'hôtel Canterbury la tire de ce mauvais pas en l'envoyant à Paris, à la maison de production Continental, dirigée par Alfred Greven." *Un pedigree*, 9-10. See also Cosnard, *Dans la peau de Patrick Modiano*, 18, for a brief description of Continental and Louisa Colpijn's work there.

⁷ Modiano, *Livret de famille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977), 55. Modiano would revisit the illusion that specific categories of citizens were safe from occupying authorities and even their own government almost verbatim in *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*. I will return to this notion in my later discussion of that novel.

passport.⁸ Yet, as the chapter makes clear, no one is truly safe in this climate; indeed, its drama revolves around the violation of Belgium's neutrality by the Germans. Or, as Openfeld Sr. himself says, "Je n'aurais jamais pu penser qu'ils ne respecteraient pas la neutralité belge...", a lost illusion followed by the narrator's commentary, "Il avait appuyé sur les syllabes de: neu-tra-li-té belge. Certainement, ces deux mots avaient représenté pour lui jusqu'à ce jour une vague espérance, et il avait dû souvent les répéter, sans y croire, mais avec beaucoup de bonne volonté. Maintenant, ils étaient balayés avec le reste. Neutralité belge."⁹ And perhaps the narrator's future mother herself believed in her own inherent safety; we have no sense of her inner thoughts throughout the narrative, even as we follow her navigations across the invaded country.

These paradoxical figures of the Occupation would form an odd couple; or, as Modiano writes, "Les périodes de haute turbulence provoquent souvent des rencontres hasardeuses, si bien que je ne me suis jamais senti un fils légitime et encore moins un héritier."¹⁰ In any case, Modiano writes at length of their parental absenteeism, drawing a comparison between his mother's dog and himself: "Son fiancé lui avait offert un chow-chow mais elle ne s'occupait pas de lui et le confiait à différentes personnes, comme elle le fera plus tard avec moi. Le chow-chow s'était suicidé en se jetant par la fenêtre. Ce chien figure sur deux ou trois photos et je dois avouer qu'il me touche infiniment et que je me sens très proche de lui."¹¹ Young Patrick and his brother Rudy (who would die in childhood from leukemia) were thus shuttled between various

⁸ *Livret de famille*, 54.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 53. This sense of disillusionment with the false promise of neutrality likewise recurs in Modiano's novels, notably in *Villa triste* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975): "Je ne savais pas encore que la Suisse n'existe pas," 22.

¹⁰ *Un pedigree*, 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 9.

unsavory characters throughout childhood, from town to town and (in Patrick's case) from boarding school to boarding school. Such biographical detail goes a long way toward explaining the feelings of abandonment and even terror that run through Modiano's twenty-plus novels, his characters' fascination with suicide, the stories of childhood spent among a motley crew of women in Jouy-en-Josas. The relationship between Modiano's parents could explain his narrators' belief in fateful chance encounters, and the ambiguous reality of "collaborating" or "resisting" during the Occupation.¹² Yet as the above examples from *Un pedigree* and *Livret de famille* demonstrate, the odd and difficult thing about relying on this well-rehearsed and likely accurate biography is that support for its various bullet points comes from the novels themselves, with *Un pedigree* (considered Modiano's autobiography) constituting the final confirmation of perceived fact. This does not necessarily mean that critics reach inaccurate conclusions when they read the novels biographically,¹³ but rather that their work depends on a tautology in which the novels create a biography that is then used to explain the novels.¹⁴

¹² In *Un pedigree*, Modiano writes of his father, "sans existence légale, il vit du marché noir," 20, begging the question: what would have constituted resistance for this marginalized young man without any legal means of survival? Hence Modiano's sympathetic, if unflattering, portrait of his father in *Un pedigree* and (arguably) throughout his body of work. For more on the ambiguous definitions of collaboration and resistance during the Occupation, see Alice Kaplan, *The Collaborator* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹³ Thierry Laurent's 1997 study, *L'Œuvre de Patrick Modiano: une autofiction* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1997) is the prime example of a reading that draws biographical conclusions based on the novels and then rereads the novels through their lens. The published volume includes a warm letter from Modiano himself, as though to confirm the accuracy of Laurent's conclusions.

¹⁴ Some critics avoid this problem by adopting a formalist approach. Dervila Cooke, for example, has used the concept of the "yardstick reader" to measure the autobiographical content of Modiano's works (preceding *Un pedigree*) without having recourse to paratextual indicators, such as the "roman" notation on the cover of a book. Her approach is innovative in that it breaks with the tradition established by Philippe Lejeune and Serge Doubrovsky, who each rely on notations like "roman" to draw a line between autobiographical and novelistic works. I find the concept of the "yardstick reader" problematic, however, due to the fact that it assumes the critic is working with less knowledge than she possesses, forcing her to

Patrick Modiano published his first novel, *La Place de l'Étoile*, in 1968 when he was only 22 years old. Along with his two subsequent novels, *La Ronde de nuit* (1969) and *Les Boulevards de ceinture* (1972), it is said to constitute Modiano's "Occupation Trilogy," a series of books that grappled with the legacy of the Occupation, dedramatized and critiqued its actors, and prominently featured an elusive father figure. Critics agree that his next novel, *Villa triste* (1974), constitutes a stylistic break, a turn toward Proust that Modiano has maintained throughout the following decades, which encompass the publication of more than 20 novels. Almost all of them have featured a first person narrator (usually male), with the exception of *Une jeunesse* (1981). Critics typically acknowledge that his body of work begins by examining the seedy underbelly of the Collaboration, and that this focus on the often unthinking perpetrators of great horror eventually shifted to a preoccupation with their victims in the 1990s. Modiano's later work is also noteworthy for a new interest in women, whether narrating subjects (*Les Inconnues*, 1999; *La Petite Bijou*, 2001), main characters (*Voyage de nocces*, 1990; *Dora Bruder*, 1997; *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue*, 2007), or his own mother. In between these two poles of literary activity that inspire much critical interest and many attempts at

adopt an imagined position of unknowing. In the specific case of Modiano, a true "yardstick reader" may be difficult to find in France. Modiano's ubiquitous and mainstream presence, across a wide swath of fields in French popular culture today, and his frequent (if reluctant) media appearances make him unusually recognizable. Simply listening to popular music, for example, one might be introduced to Modiano through Vincent Delerm's haunting "Le Baiser Modiano," which offers its own interpretation of *Voyage de nocces*, both lyrically ("Vous soulignerez la terreur / dans le regard du narrateur" is cited by the singer as part of a Baccalauréat preparation question; the lyrics also describe a chance encounter with the mysterious author), and musically (the repetitive piano notes, Delerm's raw voice and careful phrasing, and the periodic intrusion of melancholic strings effectively recreate the tone and atmosphere of a Modiano novel). See Dervila Cooke, *Present Past: Patrick Modiano's (Auto)Biographical Fictions* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), and Vincent Delerm, *Kensington Square* (Tôt ou Tard, 2004).

definition and analysis,¹⁵ we find the apparently amorphous mass of Modiano's first person novels spanning the mid-1970s to the late-1980s. These are precisely the unassuming and seemingly unremarkable novels that interest me here.

Singular Subject, Collective Memory

While historically- and culturally-grounded studies of Modiano arguably constitute the greater part of the critical works devoted to him,¹⁶ the temptation to turn to biography for an explanation of his literary texts still recurs in a (French) literary climate marked by narratives of the self, notably autofiction. I will undoubtedly have recourse to this life story myself, even unconsciously, as it has reached almost mythical proportions for even the most critical of Modiano's readers. And I certainly acknowledge the interest of questions related to genre and authenticity, as well as the ease with which the critic morphs into the very detective whose perspective s/he must adopt for the duration of a typical Modiano novel.¹⁷ After all, the "I" of the first person narrative assumes a "you," and solicits a reaction from the reader perhaps more explicitly than a traditional third person novel. But rather than focus on the question of "Modiano's (personal) identity" as revealed through his writings and interviews, in order to better "situate" him and determine the position from which he speaks, I would like to suggest that Modiano's literary "I" becomes more interesting to the extent that it becomes less singular, less linked to the biography of a specific individual and more to

¹⁵ For a comprehensive overview of the current "state of the field" in French scholarship on Modiano, see Roger-Yves Roche's 2009 edited volume, *Lectures de Modiano* (Nantes: Éditions Cécile Defaut, 2009).

¹⁶ As a formalist, Akane Kawakami indeed considers what she calls "thematic" approaches to Modiano's work to dominate the critical field. See *A Self-Conscious Art*, 4.

¹⁷ For an example of the Modiano critic as detective, see Bruno Blanckeman, *Lire Patrick Modiano* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2009).

the current debates surrounding French national identity. Modiano is said to have abandoned the painful identity questions that characterized his first three novels, the so-called "Occupation Trilogy," after publishing *Les Boulevards de ceinture* in 1972.¹⁸ Although I will trace connections between a variety of early and later Modiano novels in this chapter, I will analyze *Livret de famille* (1977) and *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* (1978) in considerable depth. These two novels, uncontroversial and apparently inoffensive installments in the author's later "Proustian" period, offer a sustained critique of French identity that is all the more powerful because of its subtlety.¹⁹ I do not intend to suggest that Modiano represents a specifically "French" or other identitarian point of view; rather, I wish to examine the weight given to the idea of "Frenchness" within his novels, the ways in which the term and its purported attributes are deployed. How do Modiano's novels in general, and these two novels specifically, represent the inheritance of the Occupation in contemporary French society? In what way does the legacy of the Occupation mean instability, ambivalence, and ultimately the arbitrariness of (national) identity? I will suggest that these questions are addressed through the very language of the novels, a language that hints at its own instability and inability to accurately name.

In the Name of the Father

One of the hallmarks of autobiographical or autofictional writing, despite much debate, is the equivalence of the author's and narrator's name within a text.²⁰ Following

¹⁸ See especially Ora Avni, "Patrick Modiano, a French Jew?" *Yale French Studies* 85 (1994): 227-247 and *D'un passé l'autre*.

¹⁹ Here I break with the majority of Modiano scholarship, which tends to conceive of *Livret de famille* and *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* as relatively minor works in Modiano's historical canon. Indeed, Avni singles out these two novels as examples of Modiano's *disengagement* with history. See *D'un passé l'autre*, 152-153.

²⁰ See Serge Doubrovsky, *Parcours critique*, and Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* for definitions of autobiographical writing that require equivalence between the names of the author and narrator.

this critical tradition, it would be correct to identify several of Modiano's texts as either autobiographical or autofictional; "Patrick" and "Patoche" are present in *Livret de famille*, *Remise de peine*, *Chien de printemps*, and *Un pedigree*; meanwhile, Colin Nettelbeck and Penelope Hueston have suggested that "Jean" may also constitute a code name for the author, identifying him as Jean Patrick Modiano.²¹ If we accept Nettelbeck and Hueston's reasoning, we can add *Quartier perdu*, *Dimanches d'août*, *Vestiaire d'enfance*, and *Voyage de noces* to the list of autobiographical or semi-autobiographical texts. Modiano himself does not dispute the autobiographical aspect of his work, although he referred to the use of his own name as "une facilité" in a 2009 interview.²² In my view, Modiano's use of his own first name is both obvious and misleading.²³ The value of a name (or more generally, a noun) and its ability to accurately represent a person (or thing) in Modiano's novels is never a given. Aristocratic names, for example, are assumed and discarded at will; like the elegant façades of the sixteenth *arrondissement*, such assumed names can mask a grim reality.²⁴ Even a "true" aristocratic name such as Fougeire-Jusquiamès confers only a veneer of respectability, much like the family

²¹ See Colin Nettelbeck and Penelope Hueston, *Patrick Modiano, pièces d'identité. Écrire l'entretemps* (Paris: Lettres modernes, 1986).

²² See Maryline Heck, "Seule l'écriture est tangible."

²³ Kawakami rightly observes that the "proliferation of Patricks" at the end of *Livret de famille* deeply shakes the reader's belief that this work is autobiographical; indeed, that any of his works are truly autobiographical, use of the author's name notwithstanding. See *A Self-Conscious Art*, 14.

²⁴ I refer here to the use Modiano makes of the sixteenth *arrondissement* as a wealthy and elegant backdrop for criminal activity. The torture of a resistance operative amid collaborationist festivities in *La Ronde de nuit* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969) constitutes the most stunning example. This depiction of the sixteenth *arrondissement* was certainly inspired by the location and history of Bonny and Lafont's Gestapo office in Paris.

château that serves as a front for a luxury brothel. The Occupation, of course, is the privileged sight for these unflattering juxtapositions.²⁵

Foreign-sounding names are plentiful in Modiano, with a predominance of foreign-sounding family names. For every Jacquet, Coudreuse, and Rigaud, there is a Chmara, a McEvoy, a Teyrsen, and so on. And of course, the Chmaras and the McEvoy's of the Modianosphere trade in fake family names as though they were counterfeit currency. For example, McEvoy, also known as Stern, may or may not be the "true" identity of *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*'s narrator, Guy Roland. This French-sounding pseudonym is notable in that, like Serge Alexandre, Guy Vincent,²⁶ and the Roland of *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue*, each part of his name is interchangeable; the entire name could also be read as a double first name. The latter Roland apparently chose his name for precisely that reason: "Je l'avais choisi pour simplifier les choses, un prénom passe-partout, qui pouvait servir aussi de nom de famille. C'était pratique, Roland. Et si français, surtout. Mon vrai nom était trop exotique. En ce temps-là, j'évitais d'attirer l'attention sur moi."²⁷ The interchangeability of the chosen pseudonym, and especially the juxtaposition of two classic French first names, could be interpreted in several different ways. First, as a matter of practicality, the double first name offers flexibility and a kind of anonymity; asked for his name, Guy Roland could answer Guy or Roland, without explicitly differentiating between given and family name. Next, for a narrator or

²⁵ *La Place de l'étoile* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), 130. See also Tiphaine Samoyault's short article, "Mélancolie blanche," for a discussion of the uncertainty of proper names in Modiano. Samoyault notes that "Au fondement de cette instabilité du nom, il y a bien sûr le traumatisme de l'Occupation, où changer de nom pouvait être la situation – précaire – de la survie." In *Le Magazine littéraire* 490 (October 2009): 82-83 (82 for the quotation).

²⁶ Serge Alexandre is the narrator of *Les Boulevards de ceinture* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972); Guy Vincent appears in *Des inconnues* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

²⁷ *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), 116.

character who doesn't quite conform to the prevailing model of "Frenchness," this doubling of French names could serve to emphasize the assumed identity; i.e., Serge Alexandre (the son of a Jewish collaborator in *Les Boulevards de ceinture*) is trying a bit too hard. Third, the doubling of first names serves to evacuate the family name, as though the character in question, while insisting on his Frenchness, is also (unconsciously or implicitly) acknowledging that his ancestors were not the Gauls. Finally, by evacuating the specificity of the last (family) name, the role of the father and his name are called into question; certainly, this turn to the problematic figure of the father should not surprise even the most casual Modiano reader.

Yet when a character such as *Villa triste*'s Victor Chmara rejects his father's name and assumes a title of presumptive foreign nobility, his attempt to distance himself from that father is only partially successful. Such an attempt, for Victor, is grounded in a desire to reinvent – or, more properly, reimagine – himself. Discussing his name and background with Yvonne, his love interest, Victor begins dreaming:

Je lui ai déclaré que 'ma famille' (et je ressentais une grande volupté à dire 'ma famille') tenait à ce que je prenne un repos de plusieurs mois, en raison de ma santé 'précaire.' A mesure que je lui fournissais ces explications, je voyais une dizaine de personnes très graves, assises autour d'une table, dans une pièce lambrissée: le 'conseil de famille' qui allait prendre des décisions à mon sujet."²⁸

Thus "Chmara" is the conduit through which he can imagine a different family life, different roots; Chmara is a pseudonym that allows him to adopt false roots based on others' (perhaps erroneous) knowledge; he is the Russian count Chmara, or a member of "cette ancienne bourgeoisie juive qui s'était fixée vers 1890 dans la plaine Monceau."²⁹ The name allows him to replace the absentee father and his unsavory connections with

²⁸ *Villa triste*, 68.

²⁹ *Idem*.

something else. Little does Victor realize that even this name attaches him to his own past, his own father, until finally “j’ai compris pourquoi j’avais choisi ce nom, que je croyais sorti de mon imagination: il appartenait à une famille d’Alexandrie, dont mon père me parlait souvent.”³⁰ Thus this pseudonym is, in a sense, itself a family name, tracing a lineage back through the father. Even the personal choice of a fake name reflects family and social attachments, then, rather than the simple desire to recreate an identity. Still, twenty years after the end of the Occupation, Victor Chmara’s choice to change his name does, at first glance, seem to hinge on a personal choice. Accepting the personal nature of the name change, we might be tempted to agree with the critics who read Modiano as pure autofiction, a constant rewriting of the self under different circumstances. Yet other passages from Modiano’s novels hint at the fact that a name change, even twenty years after the fact, could be motivated by continued fallout from the war years.

In the admittedly autobiographical *Un pedigree*, the narrator recounts a conversation with his father’s brother, Uncle Ralph, concerning the family name and a related business. “Je lui avais demandé [...] pourquoi ces établissements s’appelaient ‘Gérin’ et non pas ‘Modiano,’ de son nom à lui. Il m’avait répondu avec son accent parisien: ‘Tu comprends, mon vieux, les noms à consonnance italienne étaient mal vus après la guerre...’³¹ Although Uncle Ralph refers to the postwar period, one imagines that it was considerably more “mal vu,” if not more dangerous, to display such “foreignness” during the Occupation, when naturalized French citizens, including the large Italian immigrant community, were the targets of significant denaturalization

³⁰ *Villa triste*, 102.

³¹ *Un pedigree*, 67.

efforts.³² Of course, the prime target of such efforts was the Jewish population of France. Because these proposed denaturalizations were the products of Vichy rather than German regulations, the criteria used to identify potential candidates for denaturalization were different. The commission studying the question established a repertoire of Jews versus non-Jews; as Patrick Weil writes, this classification was based largely on “des ‘indices’ – comme les noms de famille, les prénoms ou les documents provenant directement des dossiers de naturalisation, ou encore à des actes de naissance qui peuvent avoir été émis par des autorités religieuses dans certains des pays d’où sont originaires les juifs naturalisés.”³³ Weil’s work on French nationality suggests a climate of identity-related fear and uncertainty during the Occupation, a time when one’s Frenchness, one’s belonging to the national body, could be revoked at will and “sans motif.” Whether or not this actually occurred in individual cases might potentially hinge on something as subjective as a third party’s perception of a name’s “foreignness.”³⁴ And this outside, subjective assessment of identity, this ability to determine belonging or lack thereof, and ultimately the unquestioned authority to cast out and reject a naturalized citizen of France, parallels deportations from Paris, which targeted entire families while sparing others, seemingly without rhyme or reason. Thus Vichy France, and more specifically occupied Paris, represent a disquieting arbitrariness of identity that was nonetheless firmly grounded in the desire to target a specific group of people.

³² See Patrick Weil, *Qu’est-ce qu’un Français*, 117-124. It is important to note, as Weil does, that denaturalization was “exceptional” for non-Jews, and only applied to those who were considered “mauvais éléments” due to their actions or expressed opinions.

³³ *Ibid.*, 120-121.

³⁴ A real-life example of the anxiety surrounding naming and foreignness can be found in Marcel Ophüls’ film *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (Outerbridge & Lazard, 1972). Marius Klein, a shopkeeper in Clermont-Ferrand, recalls announcing his Catholicism in a local paper during the Occupation. This move was intended to forestall any potentially negative consequences stemming from his apparently Jewish surname.

Being “Like”

The ease with which one could find oneself stripped of an identity, or assigned another, under these circumstances does not imply an equal ability to assume another persona. Modiano’s postwar narrators and characters try to do so, but their success is always dubious at best, resulting in an awkward state of being “like” rather than being. In her formal analysis of Modiano’s works, Akane Kawakami has noted “the imbalance of sign and referent, the signs proliferating beyond all reasonable referential bounds.”³⁵ While the inability of language to fully account for reality is a commonly accepted precondition of any written text in the wake of semiotics, Modiano highlights this linguistic disjunction. He extends it from a proliferation of proper names that mask uncertain identities, names that “do not always suffice to name,”³⁶ to a commentary on the ultimate instability of language. I suggest that it is possible to build on Kawakami’s observation in order to link her formalist analysis to the questions of history and identity that concern us here. A specific textual example from *Les Boulevards de ceinture* can help us make this connection: “Ça n’est pas cela,” the narrator opines in a metaliterary comment.³⁷ And indeed, linguistically speaking, “ça” is *not* “cela.” They are differently marked, of course, as colloquial versus standard; but objectively speaking, they mean the same thing. Their pairing here thus seems odd: wouldn’t the proper phrase be “ce n’est pas cela?” “Ce” and “cela” are clearly different parts of speech. By juxtaposing two common words whose contrast is jarring exactly because it is so minimal, Modiano highlights the problem of being “like”: the misguided idea that a substitute word (or an

³⁵ Kawakami, *A Self-Conscious Art*, 53.

³⁶ Samoyault, “Mélancolie blanche,” 82.

³⁷ *Les Boulevards de ceinture*, 148.

object, or an institution, or an identity) is “as good as” the standard, the norm (i.e., what his marginalized narrators perceive to be the ideal). In so doing, he implicitly links the arbitrariness of the signifier-signified relationship identified by Saussure to the arbitrariness of identity under Vichy.

For Modiano’s narrators and characters, this instability often plays out in the question of what it means to be (authentically) “French.” In chapter 11 of *Livret de famille*, it is a highly romanticized vision of “Frenchness” that leads the narrator’s Uncle Alex to seek out a windmill in the French countryside for his new home. Such a property, represented as a ‘Moulin de tout confort et de caractère. Magnifique jardin clos de murs. Rivière et verger. Sortie ravissant petit village’³⁸ points to a recurrent cliché in Modiano’s works, that of a comfortable, provincial, bourgeois family life, rooted through generations of rural peasants and gentries, and pure young ladies. This “cliché français”³⁹ represents the unattainable ideal for those like Uncle Alex and the narrator’s father who are “des hommes de nulle part,” people whose greatest and potentially most dangerous failing is to be unlike everyone else. “Est-ce que tu sais que nous n’avons même pas un acte de naissance...une fiche d’état civil...comme tout le monde...hein?” Uncle Alex asks the narrator before “une ombre d’inquiétude” crosses his face and he worries, “Tu crois que j’ai l’air assez Français?”⁴⁰ The narrator’s response, “Qu’est-ce que c’est, l’air français?” could be interpreted in several different ways. First, it suggests a

³⁸ *Livret de famille*, 154.

³⁹ I borrow this term from Dominique Rabaté. See “Le temps indéfiniment perdu,” *Le Magazine littéraire* 490 (October 2009): 80-81 and “Revisitant *Villa triste*,” in *Lectures de Modiano*, 221-241. According to Rabaté, “l’utilisation du cliché tient au désir ou à la volonté irrationnelle qu’il se réalise, qu’il puisse enfin être vrai,” 236.

⁴⁰ *Livret de famille*, 157.

questioning of what “Frenchness” is, a reference to the ever-shifting markers of identity. However, this seemingly confident response is belied elsewhere in *Livret de famille* by a very similar anxiety in relation to the “fiche d’état civil.”⁴¹ Thus, another way of interpreting the narrator’s retort, “Qu’est-ce que c’est, l’air français” would be as a real question. How can he define this “Frenchness” so as to finally adopt (or reject) it? How does he know whether or not he is French, so as to relax in the comfort of a stable identity? If a father is identified as non-French by virtue of both Jewishness and collaboration, what about his son? “Sommes-nous vraiment responsables des comparses que nous n’avons pas choisis et que nous croisons au début de notre vie? Suis-je responsable de mon père [...]?”⁴² asks a later Modiano narrator. His question echoes the way an entire generation of sons reinterpreted their French fathers’ involvement in the Occupation, starting roughly in the wake of May 1968. Indeed, some consider Modiano to be one of the first instigators of this critical reassessment of French history.⁴³

The question of Frenchness, and specifically of how to be (or, failing that, appear) French runs through the novels like a thread, with *La Place de l’étoile*’s Raphaël Schlemilovitch identifying a certain idea of stereotypical Frenchness that will be confirmed, combated, and questioned repeatedly by later protagonists. This Frenchness

⁴¹ In the first chapter, for example, the narrator describes a chaotic attempt to register his daughter’s birth, rendered difficult because of her chosen name: Zénaïde. As the bureaucrat responsible for recording the birth informs the narrator, Zénaïde is an unacceptable given name because it does not figure on the saints’ calendar, underscoring the ways in which religious and ethnic discrimination remained inscribed in the cultural site of the name long after the end of the war. Following the Revolution, in fact, French parents were legally restricted to giving their children names from the saints’ calendar or from Antiquity. French parents were not granted the legal right to choose their child’s name without restriction until 1993, with Article 57 of the Civil Code. Modiano concludes this chapter with the following reflection: “Cette petite fille serait un peu notre déléguée dans l’avenir. Et elle avait obtenu du premier coup le bien mystérieux qui s’était toujours dérobé devant nous: un état civil,” 27.

⁴² *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue*, 126.

⁴³ See Heck, “Seule l’écriture est tangible.”

is hereditary (see the immediate opposition between the Jewish narrator and “les fils de France”⁴⁴), militaristic (“Je vous promets que votre petit-fils sera maréchal de France”⁴⁵), and provincial (“J’avais hâte de connaître le terroir, les lampes à pétrole, la chanson des bocages et des forêts”⁴⁶). Becoming French according to this model means becoming “sage et circonspect,”⁴⁷ adopting a sort of modesty that conflicts with what Schlemilovitch sarcastically calls the “côté m’as-tu-vu des juifs.”⁴⁸ It means recourse to values that we might associate with Pétain’s Révolution nationale, the values of work, family, and fatherland that cause Schlemilovitch to reimagine himself and his father: “Je ne m’appelais plus Raphaël Schlemilovitch. J’étais le fils aîné d’un notaire de Libourne et nous revenions dans notre foyer provincial.”⁴⁹ Insofar as critics continue to mention the timeless aspect of Modiano’s work – whether that timelessness means the old-fashioned nostalgia of the *mode rétro* or the lack of discernable chronology when various narrative instances are layered as though occurring simultaneously – the “cliché français” or French stereotype developed and explored in *La Place de l’étoile* helps explain this common feeling of temporal ambiguity. The stereotype of Frenchness that Modiano deploys throughout his novels is one that remains relatively constant throughout time,

⁴⁴ *La Place de l’étoile*, 13.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁷ *Idem.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

even if, as Bruno Blanckeman argues, the “grandes institutions” (Army, Church, School) that vehicle it have since come under attack in French society.⁵⁰

Possessing few of the attributes of a proper “fils de France” (“Je ne connaissais la province française que par l’entremise du guide Michelin et de certains auteurs comme François Mauriac”⁵¹), Schlemilovitch’s journey through culture and memory hinges on his complex reaction to the stereotypical Frenchness he both desires and rejects. His stay at the Fougeire-Jusquiammes castle in the French countryside exemplifies this interplay of desire and rejection. Having arrived at the castle with the goal of seducing the marquise de Fougeire-Jusquiammes and selling her into slavery, Schlemilovitch’s plan goes awry when he discovers that he cannot exact revenge by corrupting her; she is already corrupt. And, instead of respecting the timeline for handing the marquise over in Paris, Schlemilovitch discovers a new game that causes him to forget his other duties: the marquise disguises herself as various queens and legendary figures of France (including Joan of Arc, heroine of the Right) and suggests that he “rape” her.⁵² The “semaine [...]

⁵⁰ See Blanckeman, *Lire Patrick Modiano*, 97. I am not convinced, as Blanckeman states, that these institutions also progressively disappear from Modiano’s novels; I might explain our different perceptions of their presence as culturally motivated. At times Blanckeman refers to “culture” and “society” in broad terms that reinforce the fact that this book, part of the “Lire et comprendre” series, is oriented toward a French audience.

⁵¹ *La Place de l’étoile*, 54.

⁵² This scene in Modiano’s novel bears a striking resemblance to one of Hervé Guibert’s self-portraits. Taken at the Musée Grévin, it shows him hovering over a wax model with blatantly sexual intent. The fact that this model was used as the basis for both the Joan of Arc and Louis XVII wax figures only heightens the ambiguity of the scene. Guibert’s juxtaposition with these two deeply conservative symbols highlights not only gender ambiguity, as Ralph Sarkonak has observed, but also political ambiguity: indeed, what is his message? Is he making passionate love to “France” as represented by this ambiguous model, or is he effectively desecrating a symbol of the Right? Surely the answer lies somewhere in middle, between desire and shame, as it does for Modiano’s Schlemilovitch. See Guibert, “La Tête de Jeanne d’Arc,” in *Mauve le vierge* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988) 83-100, and *Herve Guibert: Photographe* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), 31. See also Sarkonak, *Angelic Echoes: Hervé Guibert and Company* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 12-13.

vraiment idyllique”⁵³ that follows is interrupted only by the arrival of Schlemilovitch’s boss, Charles Lévy-Vendôme, and the marquise’s subsequent removal from the castle, a removal marked by a mere “velléité de résistance.”⁵⁴ To the extent that Schlemilovitch’s interaction with “Frenchness” in its most legendary and idealized figures is characterized by desire, violence, and the marquise’s non-stop Célinian invectives, it represents the in-between space of a narrator who is always at least partially excluded from the cultural discourse that he masters. It is worth noting that here, again, all of the characters are wearing masks, being “like” something: the Marquise disguises herself as the dead queens of France, while Schlemilovitch is speaking as, or through, the notorious literary and intellectual figures of the Occupation and postwar France.

Returning to Uncle Alex, his desire to appear French devolves into a scene that is both comical and poignant. Reveling in his dinner at “une auberge de style anglo-normand, très cossue,”⁵⁵ Alex is suddenly and rudely awakened from his rustic fantasy by the sommelier’s request for his autograph. Mistaken for the Russian actor Gregory Ratoff and literally chased around the restaurant, Alex cannot “pass” and thus finds himself pursued. His protest of “Je suis français et je m’appelle François Aubert,” prioritizing national identity and belonging over the fake French-sounding name, falls on deaf ears. It is as though Alex has carefully studied the textbook definition of “Frenchness” in order to mimic it, only to discover that his best imitation is not sufficient. Gerald Prince’s assessment of Raphaël Schlemilovitch, the narrator of *La Place*

⁵³ *La Place de l’étoile*, 131.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁵⁵ *Livret de famille*, 155. This inn is reminiscent of the one featured in *Les Boulevards de ceinture* as a gathering place for collaborators, thus offering another example of the connections that link the later novels to the “Occupation Trilogy.”

de l'étoile, applies here as well: Uncle Alex's "problem is that he is unalterably and radically other. Even with the proper name, the proper look, the proper conduct, the proper accent [...]"⁵⁶ Of course, to be fair, Uncle Alex's conduct is decidedly improper when he attempts his cultural imitation; his first encounter with the *sommelier*, in which he describes the wine as "pas assez soyeux,"⁵⁷ is likely an impetus for the *sommelier* to recognize him as "foreign." And ultimately, his search for roots in the French countryside will end badly as the "Moulin de tout confort" turns out to be an Asian-inspired bungalow. For Alex, the windmill's advertised "comfort" corresponds to a feeling of belonging, of stability, of rootedness that he has never been able to achieve. Thus the misunderstanding between Alex and the notary who is showing the house: "Je croyais que c'était un vrai moulin, vous comprenez..." Alex begins to explain. But the notary does not understand: "C'est aussi bien qu'un vrai moulin, non?" Alex's diplomatic response, "Ça dépend des points de vue... Je veux quelque chose de reposant, vous comprenez..." doesn't work because the notary doesn't grasp the chasm between his viewpoint and his interlocutor's, nor the gap between the authentic (advertised) windmill and reality. In fact, his response implies a shared viewpoint and shared values: "Mais le Moulin Yang-Tsé est tout à fait reposant [...] On se croirait en dehors de tout, à des milliers de kilomètres. C'est un dépaysement." And Alex can scarcely manage to reply, "Je ne cherche pas à être dépayisé, monsieur [...] Dépayisé de quoi, d'ailleurs?"⁵⁸ It is interesting to note that this series of miscommunications is marked linguistically by

⁵⁶ Gerald Prince, "Re-Membering Modiano, or Something Happened," *SubStance* 15, no. 1, issue 49 (1986): 36.

⁵⁷ *Lioret de famille*, 155.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

the opposition between Alex's consistent use of "I" and "you" and the notary's recourse to impersonal constructions, notably *on*, the voice of nameless authority.

Discomfort, rather than "tout confort," is very often the result of "dépaysement," defined here as those moments when Alex perceives his exclusion from the national body. Often this psychological discomfort manifests physically, as when Uncle Alex sleeps poorly after being chased by the starstruck sommelier and lulls himself to sleep by repeating "Je m'appelle François Aubert...François Aubert...Aubert..."⁵⁹ Reduced to the last name with its "authentically" French syllables and all the inaccessible heritage they represent, Alex's murmurs resemble a password that simply doesn't work, not even in his dreams. The body becomes the site of this battle between inclusion and exclusion, as Alex's physical symptoms of discomfort increase with every newly lost illusion. At first sight of the Moulin Yang-Tsé, Uncle Alex is "très pâle"; as he progresses through the house, his discomfort becomes more and more visible: "Il était de plus en plus pâle et je craignais qu'il n'êut un malaise."⁶⁰ This "malaise" indeed comes to pass, with Uncle Alex needing a breath of fresh air;⁶¹ prostrate with disappointment, he wipes his brow – whether from the heat or his own distress is unclear, although the weather's abrupt shift to monsoon-like rain and heat ties into his sense of "dépaysement."

Curiously enough, although the French notary lauds the Moulin Yang-Tsé's ability to "dépayser" its resident, this was not its original purpose. As Uncle Alex learns, the Moulin's builder and owner, Abott, tore down the original French-style mill upon

⁵⁹ *Livret de famille*, 160.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 167.

his 1954 return from Indochina “pour ne pas être trop dépaysé.”⁶² Thus the returning colonizer’s sense of displacement suggests a whole other colonial world of displacement and marginal belonging; his effort to reconstruct the conditions of his life in Indochina even include the employment of a “jeune Annamite” to serve him. Such a reference to French colonialism is not an isolated incident in Modiano; many of the novels contain seemingly offhand mentions of France’s defeated empire. *Les Boulevards de ceinture*’s Guy Marcheret, for example, juxtaposes his black market activities with nostalgia for life in the colonies, “Des endroits infects [...] Mais si on me proposait d’y retourner, je rempilerais.”⁶³ In *Villa triste*, Meinthe’s Resistance-hero father is also said to have worked in the colonies, his office still marked by the obligatory relics: a map of French West Africa, an aerial photo of Dakar.⁶⁴ Max Silverman argues that Modiano’s *Dora Bruder* “contain[s] an overlapping vocabulary, imagery and, ultimately, history of racism, dehumanization and apocalyptic violence which embraces the Holocaust and Empire,”⁶⁵ a statement that could apply to Modiano’s work as a whole. Even the “traite des blanches” described by Raphaël Schlemilovitch in *La Place de l’étoile* evokes France’s participation in the slave trade; significantly, Schlemilovitch is enlisted as a trader in Bordeaux, with exhortations to exact (unspecified) revenge.⁶⁶ The juxtapositions of empire and occupation are multiple and often bold. Victor Chmara’s statement, “je

⁶² *Lioret de famille*, 165.

⁶³ *Les Boulevards de ceinture*, 55.

⁶⁴ *Villa triste*, 174.

⁶⁵ Max Silverman, “Interconnected Histories: Holocaust and Empire in the Cultural Imaginary,” 417.

⁶⁶ *La Place de l’étoile*, 88-94.

pensais à ces personnages que l'on rencontrait jadis aux colonies et qui avaient un 'passé'"⁶⁷ hints quite openly at the link between collaborators and colonizers.

At the end of his story about the Moulin Yang-Tsé and his uncle's failed attempt to buy a piece of stereotypical Frenchness, the narrator ("Patrick") poses a question – not to the reader, but to his uncle. Like his first question ("Qu'est-ce que c'est, l'air français?"), his final one seems disingenuous: "Mais à quoi, mon oncle, avaient servi tant d'efforts?"⁶⁸ Obviously, in a sense, the uncle's efforts produced only misadventures, "tristesse et deception." It seems as though the narrator is wisely counseling his uncle to accept himself as he is and abandon an unattainable and possibly non-existent ideal. Still, this chapter does belong to a collection of short narratives entitled "livret de famille," suggesting an overarching concern with documenting one's roots, justifying one's belonging to a social network. If the uncle's efforts were fruitless, they were born of the same desires; furthermore, they were born of the desire to seek refuge in isolation, in the middle of the countryside and at a significant remove from Paris. Just as Uncle Alex tried to hide behind a French-sounding name, it seems he is attempting to hide behind his stereotypically French mill. More than an ideal, then (although it is certainly that too), the Moulin represents a hiding place, a place that will display "l'air français" that the uncle fears he lacks. Viewed from this perspective, the story of the Moulin Yang-Tsé is one of a man who is attempting to hide in plain sight: by drawing as little attention to himself as possible, by adopting the correct behavior, the correct tone, the correct appearance, and the correct lifestyle.

⁶⁷ *Villa triste*, 42.

⁶⁸ *Livret de famille*, 169.

In this respect he resembles countless other Modiano narrators and characters who, postwar, still obsess over their potential to hide themselves away. *Villa triste's* Victor Chmara, for example, will go to great lengths to transport his crushingly heavy luggage, although he barely unpacks it "car il faut être prêt à partir d'un instant à l'autre et considérer chaque chambre où l'on échoue comme un refuge provisoire,"⁶⁹ and when the time comes to leave this "refuge," the parallel is obvious:

Quand avais-je déjà vécu pareil moment? Je voyais les meublés du seizième ou du dix-septième arrondissement [...] où les murs étaient tendus du même papier peint que celui des chambres de l'Hermitage, où les chaises et les lits jetaient la même désolation au cœur. Lieux ternes, haltes précaires qu'il faut toujours évacuer avant l'arrivée des Allemands et qui ne gardent aucune trace de vous.⁷⁰

Considering the age (18) of the narrator during his initial stay in this refuge and the general time period (the Algerian war) when he stayed there, we might wonder to what extent this memory of a "pareil moment" is figurative. Many critics have drawn on Marianne Hirsch's concept of "postmemory" to explain this phenomenon of mediated memory in Modiano's works.⁷¹ To the extent that memory links past and present, postmemory could indeed describe what is happening in the *Villa triste* passage and elsewhere in his novels; but it is important to emphasize the *presence* of the remembered past, the infamous "passé qui ne passe pas."⁷² Modiano's use of tense is an essential marker here; the past of Chmara's youth is narrated in the *imparfait*, following the *plus-que-parfait* question which leads the reader to expect an even more remote past to be

⁶⁹ *Villa triste*, 64.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 200.

⁷¹ See especially Silverman, "Interconnected Histories"; Johnnie Gratton, "Postmemory, Prememory, Paramemory," and Sven-Erik Rose, "Remembering Dora Bruder."

⁷² See Éric Conan and Henry Rousso, *Vichy: un passé qui ne passe pas* (Paris: Fayard, 1994).

accessed. And indeed, the Occupation may be more chronologically remote than the narrated past of the narrator's youth; but in fact, this past is presented as pointedly present – "il faut" – and that present tense is marked even more emphatically by "toujours," which not only signifies *always* but, of course, *still*. Thus the legacy of the Occupation is confirmed as ever-present, although logically it should belong to the fully archived and remote past of the *plus-que-parfait*.

At first glance, it would seem that Modiano's novels create few "safe places" for his characters to hide, either literally or figuratively. The name, as we have seen, is merely a false front that offers little real cover; the names themselves never correspond exactly to what they are naming. Hiding in plain sight – among "ces 'tastevin' congestionnés, ces coureurs cyclistes et ces gastronomes gâteux qui savaient faire la différence entre plusieurs espèces de poires"⁷³ only works as long as one makes no mistakes, betrays no accent, applies the right adjective to the wine. "Nous ne pouvions pas rester une minute de plus dans ce pays où l'on chassait à courre," Victor Chmara decides, and all of Modiano's characters are caught up in this hunt; furthermore, they all know it, and despite the hunters' elegant appearance and impeccable manners, they realize that they are the hunted.⁷⁴ Without refuge or cover, then, they find themselves locked in a seemingly endless cycle of transitional spaces: train stations, seedy *meublés*, hotel lobbies. These spaces might be ascribed a certain value, as *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue*'s Roland implies in his treatise on *Les Zones neutres*: "les zones neutres ont au moins cet avantage: elles ne sont qu'un point de départ et on les quitte, un jour ou

⁷³ *Villa triste*, 198-199.

⁷⁴ In *Livret de famille*, chapter 5, the narrator accompanies his father to a country house for a hunt, only to realize – unlike his naïve father – that "Les choses étaient beaucoup plus graves et plus tragiques qu'il ne le croyait [...] et bien qu'on se trouvât au cœur de la France, en Sologne, ce serait comme à Varsovie," 85.

l'autre."⁷⁵ There are entire neighborhoods like that, Roland notices, neighborhoods like his own where "les immeubles voisins de mon hôtel portaient tous l'inscription 'appartements meublés.' Des lieux de passage où l'on ne demandait l'identité de personne et où l'on pouvait se cacher."⁷⁶ This is the kind of urban space associated with Paris, a suspiciously cosmopolitan or even "foreign" place. Paris, for Modiano's narrators, is home;⁷⁷ at the same time, Paris, for Modiano, is pointedly *not* France. The apotheosis of cosmopolitanism in this most cosmopolitan of French spaces is the Cité universitaire, "comme suspendu de toute géographie nationale,"⁷⁸ a place frequented by Modiano's non-student characters, brandishing their fake credentials. But this desire for a cosmopolitan space, an "other" space bearing no mark of national geography, is as much an illusion as the desire for a neutral Belgium or Switzerland. If the provincial refuge is deceptive, the urban refuge is fleeting.

To the extent that in all of Modiano's novels naming, and the instability of the name, plays out again and again, Uncle Alex's windmill odyssey is emblematic. This short chapter of *Livret de famille* has barely been analyzed by critics who focus more readily on the *oeuvre* as a totality or, alternately, on its most famous representatives (e.g. *Dora Bruder*, *Villa triste*, *La Place de l'étoile*). Yet it perfectly encapsulates one of the defining problematics of Modiano's entire corpus: Uncle Alex is searching for an imagined ideal of Frenchness that has not only been handed down but taught in French schools for generations – thus giving the (false?) impression that it can be learned. We

⁷⁵ *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue*, 120.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁷⁷ See Bruno Blanckeman's masterful article on Modiano's Paris, "Droit de cité," in *Lectures de Modiano*, 163-177.

⁷⁸ Blanckeman, *Lire Patrick Modiano*, 43.

might even say that, like Don Quixote, he is tilting at windmills in this story of the Moulin Yang-Tsé; like Don Quixote, certainly, he will be rudely awakened from his idealistic dreams. Confronted with colonial history in the form of this misplaced Asian-inspired bungalow, confronted with violence and derision in the form of the village's hostile "masse des fidèles," confronted, finally, with the statement "c'est aussi bien qu'un vrai moulin," Alex finds himself swiftly and painfully disillusioned. This pain is physical as well as emotional; it is the pain of separation from this most desired unnamable, a sense of belonging to the national body – which, if he must articulate it, he clearly does not possess. We could take the implications of Alex's story quite far: following the trauma of the Occupation, the Moulin Yang-Tsé is as good as a real windmill, like Vichy is as good as a real (autonomous, democratic, Republican) government.

Vichy was once described as a parenthesis between two Republics;⁷⁹ now it is more aptly characterized as a definitive break, a rupture between two worlds. Vichy follows on the heels of the longest Republic in French history, the one that marked an initially temporary, but ultimately enduring end to the political turmoil of the nineteenth century. This Third Republic ushered in Jules Ferry's educational reforms, mandating free secular education for the children of France, with the purpose of molding them into proper citizens of the Republic. France's Republican government promotes integration of its citizens according to a universalist model; individuals are integrated into the nation *as* individuals, not as members of a community. The Third

⁷⁹ Rousso gives De Gaulle much of the credit for what he has called the "mise entre parenthèses de Vichy." Notably, he quotes De Gaulle's response to Georges Bidault's suggestion that he proclaim the existence of the Republic following the Liberation: "La République n'a jamais cessé d'être [...] Vichy fut toujours et demeure nul et non avvenu." See *Le Syndrome de Vichy*, 31.

Republic implies that this integration can be achieved through education; that is to say, Frenchness can be taught.⁸⁰ As part of the Vichy regime's purported efforts to rebuild a defeated France, Pétain and his government sought to "revolutionize" French society through a return to the conservative values of Work, Family, and Fatherland. Vichy's active attempts to identify nationalized French citizens *as* members of a community in order to strip them of their nationality belie the idealism of Republican education.⁸¹ The longevity of the Third Republic, as well as the quick return to Republican government after the fall of Vichy, suggests the permanency and stability of that model, the very endurance of its values. Vichy in turn suggests the possibility of a rapid and devastating disintegration of those very values. In other words, Vichy's historical existence means that instability and contingency with potentially lethal results can be envisaged even in today's Republican France; Modiano's novels imply that they *must*. His characters live in a permanently altered world, one that still uses the social currency of the past – names and titles – while doubting its inherent value. This is a world of multiple passwords – from "moulin tout confort" to "neutralité belge" – that have lost their reliability. In short, it is a world of linguistic counterfeiters, self-consciously exchanging words of uncertain value.

Instability and uncertainty – at the level of language, culture, politics, and especially identity – are one of the lasting legacies of the war, for Modiano's uneasy narrators. This is one way that the memory of those years continues to haunt the author's work, long past the "Occupation trilogy." Such instability may, however, go

⁸⁰ See Eugen Weber, *Peasants into Frenchmen*, and Anne-Marie Thiesse, *Faire les Français*.

⁸¹ Indeed, many on the Right blamed increased access to education and the subsequent rise of new elites for the fall of France in 1940. See Gisèle Sapiro, *La Guerre des écrivains* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), Chapter 2, "The Responsibility of the Writer," 103-207.

unnoticed by a reader who is not similarly “haunted” and therefore receptive to Modiano’s allusions to a painful collective history.⁸² It is therefore unsurprising that so many readers took Modiano at his word when he promised to have written his last book on his “other life,” turning the page, so to speak, on the Occupation with the end of *Les Boulevards de ceinture* (1972).⁸³ The fact that *Voyage de noces* (1990) and *Dora Bruder* (1997) marked a clear reengagement with the period, from a more victim-centered angle, seems only to confirm the comparative marginality of the intervening novels. Or does it? I have already argued that Uncle Alex’s story in *Livret de famille* offers a perspective on the persistence of the Occupation that is essential for understanding Modiano’s engagement with that era. Now I will turn to Modiano’s portrayal of a French society that remains willfully unconscious of his historical allusions and the imperatives of memory. To do so, I will examine the longest, most structured, and arguably most traditional detective story in his roster. *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* (1978) was also his most consecrated work; the novel won the Prix Goncourt. I will suggest that this work, ostensibly one of the least subversive in the Modiano catalogue, actually offers a stinging social commentary muted only by the author’s celebrated melancholy.

Collective Amnesia

Starting with his fourth novel, *Villa triste*, Patrick Modiano describes a world in which the Occupation is forgotten, buried. We might be forgiven for wondering if he is describing a parallel universe; after all, Modiano was writing in the wake of the *mode rétro*, as well as a serious reinterpretation of the historical record with regard to the

⁸² See Kawakami, *A Self-Conscious Art*, 83, and Ross Chambers, *Untimely Interventions*, vii-xxx, for a discussion of how texts haunt readers who are susceptible to haunting.

⁸³ “Je vous répète que je resterai avec vous jusqu’à la fin de ce livre, le dernier concernant mon autre vie.” *Les Boulevards de ceinture*, 149.

Occupation. He was also writing in the wake of his own first three novels, considered harbingers of the historical reevaluation to follow. At first glance, then, we might consider Modiano's postwar narrators, deeply concerned with individual and collective memory as well as stymied by society's apparent amnesia, to be out of step with the historical reality of the 1970s. Indeed, as Pierre Laborie has observed, popular wisdom divides the collective memory of those years into two periods: decades of politically expeditious lies mediated, notably, by De Gaulle, and an awakening to the "truth" that roughly coincided with May 1968. And yet, as Laborie convincingly argues, it is reductive to define our understanding of the complex events of the Occupation according to what he calls the "vulgate."⁸⁴ Despite an influx of new historical, literary, and cultural texts addressing the war years, the memory of that era continued to be negotiated throughout the 1970s, a negotiation that continues to the present day. Throughout Modiano's long career, political leaders have taken markedly different approaches to the memory of the Occupation, and popular memorialization has assumed a variety of forms. Periods of amnesty have been followed by the redefinition of war crimes and the accompanying trials and convictions. Presidents have memorialized Jean Moulin (De Gaulle),⁸⁵ partially pardoned Paul Touvier (Pompidou), denied responsibility for Nazi crimes (Mitterand),⁸⁶ and accepted responsibility for

⁸⁴ See Laborie, *Le Chagrin et le vnin*, 51-79.

⁸⁵ For an analysis of the ways in which De Gaulle created and harnessed the myth of French Resistance operative Jean Moulin for political purposes, see Rousso, *Le Syndrome de Vichy*, 100-117.

⁸⁶ When the extent of Mitterand's participation in the collaboration was revealed in 1994, scandal ensued. He responded by granting an interview to French television, in which his efforts to contain the scandal backfired: declaring his support of René Bousquet, the man behind the Rafle du Vel d'Hiv, Mitterand also clumsily attempted to justify anti-Semitic statutes. See Golsan, "The Legacy of World War II in France," 84.

Vichy's role in the deportation of French Jews (Chirac).⁸⁷ A controversial directive formulated by Nicolas Sarkozy more recently asked French schoolchildren to figuratively "adopt" a Jewish child who died as a result of deportation. (This plan was ultimately scuttled due to concerns over the harmful psychological effects it might have on the children involved.) Movies have been made, apologies have been written, and the focus of cultural production has shifted from the perpetrators of Occupation horrors to their victims. Given this context, it seems appropriate to talk about "collective amnesia" to the extent that the collective memory of the Occupation necessarily remains variable, partial, and subjective. Modiano's later novels openly contend with a world in which the narrator's memory, or consciousness of history, is out of step with his fictional contemporaries. As Akane Kawakami notes, "varying degrees of voluntary or involuntary amnesia" are present in several of Modiano's novels,⁸⁸ but none presents a more irrecoverable loss of memory and identity than *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*. In what follows, I will discuss the trope of amnesia in the novel in terms of how it appears to structure the narrator's quest, but ultimately offers us a lens through which to read postwar French society.

Rue des Boutiques Obscures features a private detective narrator, Guy Roland, who one day decides to embark on a quest for his past identity. This search is complicated by his own amnesia, which befell him under mysterious circumstances ten years earlier. As is typical in a Modiano novel, the narrator's search will never be fully successful: he learns that he may be a certain Pedro McEvoy / Jimmy Stern, but has no way of proving it. He learns that he was likely married to a woman named Denise, but she is apparently

⁸⁷ For a general overview of presidential intervention in the memorialization of World War II following De Gaulle, see Golsan, "The Legacy of World War II in France," 80-99.

⁸⁸ Kawakami, *A Self-Conscious Art*, 102.

dead. In fact, all of the people from his distant past seem to have inconveniently died, or disappeared, in the intervening time. The novel ends with the narrator's decision to go to Rome, where he apparently used to live on the titular street. There, he will presumably pursue another portion of his past, the series of years following Denise's death and his own escape from France. The structure of the novel therefore immediately belies its reputation as the most orthodox of Modiano's works: its title refers to an extradiegetic quest that the narrator will only decide to pursue on the last page of the text. Furthermore, the question of how he became an amnesiac, typically central to a text that addresses the recovery of a lost memory, is never resolved or even explicitly confronted. On the contrary, Guy Roland's memory returns to him as precipitously as it apparently departed, and with as little explanation. Suddenly and without comment or explanation, Guy begins to narrate as though he does, in fact, remember the past, although we are never able to determine with certainty whether the past he "remembers" is actually his own.

The narrator's quest begins with the support of his former boss, Hutte, who is retiring to Nice. We soon learn that for the previous ten years, Hutte had discouraged the narrator from trying to unearth his past, saying, "Mon cher 'Guy Roland,' à partir de maintenant, ne regardez plus en arrière et pensez au présent et à l'avenir."⁸⁹ The present that Hutte offers the narrator is, indeed, firmly located in the postwar period; his private detective agency was launched in 1947, after the successive shocks of the Occupation, Liberation, and Purge were at least momentarily laid to rest. This is a detective agency, in other words, with no apparent link to the private police agencies of

⁸⁹ *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*, 16. This exhortation to look toward the future echoes the closing line of Modiano's last installment in the "Occupation trilogy": "Mais je suis jeune, dit-il, et je ferais mieux de penser à l'avenir." *Les Boulevards de ceinture*, 184.

the war years, the Gestapist “bande de la rue Lauriston.” It is involved, rather, in the innocent and mundane matter of trailing cheating spouses, wives who replace one “petit homme brun au visage bouffi” with another.⁹⁰ It is important to note that Hutte has been responsible for giving the narrator his new identity, “Guy Roland,” that doubly French juxtaposition of traditional first names that effectively evacuates the father’s legacy.⁹¹ Indeed, Hutte will serve as a surrogate father figure to the narrator, so it makes sense that the beginning of Guy’s search for his own past and original identity coincides with Hutte’s departure from the novel’s stage.

Despite the apparent innocence of the detective agency, and what can only be characterized as Hutte’s benevolence in helping the narrator start over from scratch, the reader soon realizes that “Guy Roland” is a mask, or a shadow, and that Hutte’s efforts to remake his protégé have been unsuccessful. “Je ne suis rien. Rien qu’une silhouette claire,” is the line that opens the novel, although the narrator quickly qualifies that he is nothing “ce soir-là, à la terrasse d’un café.”⁹² Later, when Hutte asks him what he is thinking, Guy likewise responds, “A rien.”⁹³ Thus, despite the promise of a new postwar detective agency charged with innocuous tasks, despite his work, despite Hutte’s admonition to look toward the future, the narrator is fundamentally blank even ten years after adopting a new identity. He will, in fact, remain a blank slate, a “nothing,” for much of the novel. But why can’t the narrator manage to start over, when his own

⁹⁰ *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*, 11.

⁹¹ The family name “Roland,” of course, is hardly an insignificant choice. Rather, it is strongly marked as “French” due to the status of *La Chanson de Roland* (written in approximately 1090) as the foundational text of French literature.

⁹² *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*, 11.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

boss was able to remake himself entirely after having lost “toute une partie de sa vie [...] d’un seul coup”?⁹⁴

The reason for the narrator’s inability to begin again becomes apparent from the next chapter, when he starts his quest in earnest. The link between the past that he is trying to unearth, and the buried past of the Occupation, becomes clear in a conversation with two barmen who claim they recognize him from long ago, “une éternité,”⁹⁵ another era entirely, populated by wonderful people. “C’était une époque beaucoup plus belle que la nôtre,” one of the men remembers, “et surtout les gens étaient de meilleure qualité qu’aujourd’hui...” When Guy asks him for precise dates, he resorts to euphemism: “cela remonte au déluge.”⁹⁶ Like “les années troubles” and “l’époque trouble où nous nous retrouvons,” “le déluge” refers to a period of history that cannot or should not be named directly. Like the other euphemisms that some of Modiano’s less savory characters use to speak of the Occupation, “le déluge” puts a significant amount of distance between historical events and their actors, whitewashing their deeds by removing their agency. “The flood,” of course, refers to the future as predicted by Louis XV; it also points to a disaster of biblical proportions. Both references leave little room for the resistance of the masses. The flood sweeps the little people up and deposits them where it will. Not coincidentally, of course, in the Bible it leaves an entirely new and unambiguously better world in its wake. This is part of why it serves as such an appealing euphemism for those who, fictional or not, have reason to downplay (or even

⁹⁴ *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*, 16.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

delight in) the events of the Occupation. “Il faut vivre au présent,” these former club owners tell the narrator, echoing Hutte’s sentiments.⁹⁷

Guy’s first interview with a probable former friend confirms the idea that the Occupation, although clearly an intrinsic part of his personal narrative, must not be named. Rather than approaching the man, Stioppa de Djagoriew, directly, he tails him at a funeral, picks him out of the crowd, engages in a slow-speed taxi pursuit, and finally follows him on foot into a grocery store, where he confronts him. But instead of simply explaining his predicament and attempting to renew their earlier connection, Guy frames his investigation as a study of the (Russian) Emigration, effectively removing himself from the past once again, and displacing the question of the Occupation onto another painful historical event. It is as though Guy senses that, while he cannot remember the Occupation, others do not want to. Furthermore, the efforts he does make to elicit direct comments on the era, to make others speak its name, come to nothing. Even the sympathetic H  l  ne, who hid the narrator and Denise in her apartment before they escaped to the Alps, avoids naming the traumatic event that haunts Guy and French society alike. “C’  tait vraiment une dr  le d’  poque...” she tells him. “Quelle   poque?” Guy asks, only to be met with silence.⁹⁸ Does he really not know? Or do the involuntary lacunae in his memory correspond to a generalized, voluntary amnesia that allows the rest of society to live as though Vichy and the German Occupation were truly a “parenthesis”? Here the gaps in Guy’s memory mirror the blind spots that Modiano has created for the reader. He tells us, for example, that the novel is about the *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*. Guy will eventually identify this address as a location where he lived

⁹⁷ *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*, 27.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

at some point after the war. This is a place, however, that exists outside of the frame of the novel, and in fact, the book ends just as the narrator decides he will return there. The subject matter of the novel, then, does not correspond to the title. In another sleight of hand, Modiano has purportedly written a detective novel, but omitted to give his detective narrator a crime to solve. Or is the reader simply unwilling to recognize the crime as such, because it cannot be solved? Despite its title, the novel is clearly centered on an apparently “unsayable” thing, the haunting event that everyone is capable of remembering (even the narrator), but no one is willing to directly confront: the Occupation. This is a world peopled with characters who, if they think, think of “nothing,” mimicking the no-one-and-nothingness of the narrator, Guy. “Il ne pensait à rien, j’en étais sûr [...] Avais-je le droit de le tirer brusquement de cette torpeur, et de réveiller chez lui quelque chose de douloureux?” the narrator wonders, before approaching one of the shadowy figures from his past.⁹⁹ The novel is thus pervaded by the sense that the people surrounding the narrator simply don’t think, especially about the past, unless they are specifically awakened to its pain. This helps explain the strangeness of Guy’s interactions, even with the few who do remember him: his old friend André Wildmer, for example, has an emotional conversation with him after a chance meeting, but returns to his usual state of oblivion moments later, and indeed no longer even recognizes him.

In this sense, Guy is not alone in his “amnesia”; he is only alone in wanting to remember, wanting to recover what other characters try to bury in the past. Guy’s search for his past actually begins with a literal burial: the death of a Russian matriarch that brings him into contact with Stioppa. The woman’s obituary gives him his first lead, and

⁹⁹ *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*, 19.

her funeral provides him with an opportunity to identify Stioppa, who mournfully observes how unfortunate it is that Guy never met her. Similarly, the reluctant food critic Claude Howard de Luz will lament his father's death because it blocks off another avenue for Guy's inquiry. Indeed, it is always too late in this novel, as the narrator often narrowly misses his opportunity to make connections that would allow him to be "recognized." While his former friend Gay Orlow has been dead for years, Guy barely misses finding her one-time companion, Freddie, in Polynesia. Can it be coincidental that Freddie disappeared into the ocean mere days before Guy traveled there to meet him? Guy's belief that Freddie has simply escaped to another island and a greater solitude offer a strange counterpoint to his lack of commentary on Denise's disappearance during their ill-fated border crossing years earlier. If Freddie could still be alive somewhere in spite of all appearances, what about Denise?

As the narrator learns, Denise Coudreuse was the woman he once loved, apparently married, and lived with in Paris before they were compelled to flee the capital during the Occupation. It seems that Denise had a special status among the group of friends who escaped Paris during this time, for two reasons: she was the only unambiguously "French" citizen among them, and it seems she was the only one who did not survive the war. The relationship between these two elements of her biography is one of paradox, for, as the narrator says, "Seule, Denise ne risquait rien. Elle était une authentique Française."¹⁰⁰ Of the five friends who escaped Paris together, Pedro McEvoy (now apparently Guy Roland) was Greek, André Wildmer was British, Freddie Howard de Luz had double citizenship (British and American), and Gay Orlow was Russian-born but had American citizenship. As such, all four ran a considerable risk by

¹⁰⁰ *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*, 214.

remaining in Paris with their foreign documents, even the doctored passports that Pedro McEvoy procured through his work for the consular services of the Dominican Republic. Denise, the Parisian daughter of Belgian immigrants, was born a French citizen, not newly-naturalized and thus in danger of losing her status. She was not affiliated with any targeted groups, and indeed could have remained in the capital in relative security. As the daughter of Flemish-speaking immigrants, she seems to represent the promise of unproblematic integration into French society. She even has a “real” French-sounding name, one that represents a straightforward identity; “Coudreuse” contains “coudre,” to sew, which suits this young model and seamstress perfectly. In other words, Denise’s last name represents a sort of linguistic equivalency, the possibility that the name might correspond exactly to what is named. But it is Denise who disappears into the blinding snow of the Alps during her border crossing, and, we are led to believe, dies as a result. In any case, she is lost to the narrator and lost to her own past. In this novel, it is the one character who seems the least personally concerned by the Occupation who becomes its most direct casualty. There is a sense, then, that something purportedly safe and untouchable was lost in this historical trauma, something that cannot be recovered. Perhaps it was the very idea of a stable identity, or even of “Frenchness” itself, now posed as an open question rather than an assumption. Indeed, in this respect Guy’s search for his lost identity, which effectively structures the book, serves as yet another red herring. The real loss is Denise Coudreuse, or the ability to correspond exactly to your own identity, and to “risk nothing.”

Postwar Proust

As I remarked earlier, Modiano’s critics agree that the author adopted a distinctly Proustian aesthetic beginning with his fourth novel, *Villa triste*. They do not,

however, agree on what this turn signifies, nor on its validity. For the critic Ora Avni, whose analyses of Modiano center on the construction and critique of French Jewish identity within his works, this turn toward Proust constitutes a betrayal, a way of abandoning the thorny yet productive question of how to be Jewish *and* French given the weight of history.¹⁰¹ Proust is present in his Occupation trilogy, she argues, in the form of a nemesis, an author *against* whom Modiano is writing.¹⁰² Her study of Modiano's first novel, *La Place de l'étoile*, bears out the notion that Modiano is engaged in an ironic and critical rewriting of Proust. However, as she and others have rightly observed, *La Place de l'étoile* responds – sarcastically, poignantly, parodically, chaotically – to a number of prewar authors whose work helped shape Jewish literary and cultural identity in France. Among them, we also find figures such as Céline, Freud, Sartre, and Mauriac. Yet of these authors, only Proust is retained as a major interlocutor past the Occupation Trilogy. Must this constitute a failure, as Avni suggests? Or can we instead read Proust's presence in Modiano's later texts as a way of signposting issues related to French Jewish identity? Doesn't Modiano's return to Proust in a novel such as *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* actually highlight a failure to write like Proust, or more precisely, the failure of a certain means of expressing subjectivity in the wake of the Occupation?

Rereading *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* through a Proustian lens, we discover a text full of negative allusions to *La Recherche*. One of the most striking, recurring images is

¹⁰¹ In her words, "Là où Proust évacuait le temps, la fragmentation et la mortalité, là où les premiers romans de Modiano se révoltaient contre l'histoire avec toute la force et le déséquilibre de la jeunesse, les romans suivants se résignent à vivre au creux d'un manque. Certes, l'individu reste Français et même souvent juif. La période reste l'Occupation. Mais la dimension historique manque au rendez-vous. C'est ce refoulement du rôle de l'histoire dans la constitution du sujet qui démarque le plus clairement les premiers romans du reste de l'oeuvre de Modiano." See "Retour à Proust," in *D'un passé l'autre*, 149-154 (153-154 for the quotation). See also her article on French Jewish identity in Modiano's works, "Patrick Modiano: A French Jew?"

¹⁰² See Avni, "Contre Proust," in *D'un passé l'autre*, 23-45.

that of the cookie (or sometimes candy) tins that Guy Roland acquires throughout his search. Stioppa de Djiagorew inaugurates this form of memory transmission by giving Guy a cookie tin as a remembrance of things past. Importantly, the tin is full of photos relating to the Russian Emigration (and, tangentially, to the people Guy's alter ego purportedly knew during the Occupation). In other words, it is devoid of cookies. In *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*, this most "novelistic" of all of Modiano's novels, there will be no magical taste of the madeleine, no rush of involuntary memory mediated through one of the great markers of French cultural identity, the country's culinary traditions. Rather, memory is a strange, willful affair, recovered through a combination of effort and luck, or perhaps reconstructed textually through imagination. Indeed, we cannot say with certainty that Guy remembers anything of being Pedro McEvoy at the end of the novel, or even that he ever *was* Pedro McEvoy. Just as the cookie tins have been emptied of their original contents and replaced with the tangible signs of a traumatic legacy (photos related to the Emigration, photos related to the Occupation), the narrator, "rien qu'une silhouette," has been purged of his prewar and Occupation-era identity in order to become Guy Roland, a new man for a new society.

The image of the cookie tin is perhaps the most striking Proustian reference in *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*, but Modiano also clearly evokes Proust at the level of narration itself. Gérard Genette and Michael Lucey have both discussed the ways in which Proust's narrator seems to exceed his own capacities as a subjective, partial observer.¹⁰³ Lucey offers the example of the narrator's arrival at the Princesse de Guermante's party in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* as a moment when, without any explanation,

¹⁰³ See Lucey's Genette-inspired reading of Proust in "Sodom and Gomorrah: Proust's Narrator's First Person," in *Never Say I*, 215-249.

he can suddenly access the most intimate thoughts and emotions of the doorman, and describe the man's recent same-sex sexual encounter in knowing detail. And yet, Lucey observes, there are aspects of the narrator's own thoughts and feelings that remain curiously opaque, even to himself.¹⁰⁴ These unexplained expansions and contractions in narrative ability are mirrored by the moment when Guy Roland purportedly regains his memory in *Rue des Boutiques Obscures*. This at once partial and expansive return of memory is, in fact, as oblique and inexplicable as the moment of his extradiegetic memory loss. However, once Guy's memory returns, it returns with a vengeance: not only is he able to access his own past as though it were passing before his very eyes, but he (as the narrator of the novel) is apparently able to conjure the memories of other participants in his past, now strangers. Various third person narrative subjects – a man who sees a book with the word “Castille” in the title, a woman riding the tram in Chile, a woman who hears the name Pedro – all provide the reader with insight into Guy's past, without any transition between the omniscient third person narration of these chapters and Guy's own first person account. In a way, then, we are again confronted with one of the most fascinating narrative problems posed by Proust's masterwork: how does the narrator seem to know so much about others, at times, and so little about himself? As in Proust's *Recherche*, these questions are never fully explained. What, then, does their presence indicate? Does Guy's awakening to the past through narrative spark a sort of ripple effect among his contemporaries? Are they also “awakened to pain,” to again borrow Ross Chambers' expression? Perhaps Guy serves as a kind of emissary for the traumatic past of the Occupation, in the same way that Modiano's work helped launch a literary and historical reassessment of the period. Or does the inclusion of these

¹⁰⁴ See Lucey, *Never Say I*, 223-224 and 241-249.

chapters simply confirm the partiality of memory, an allusion to the Proustian project that records its impossibility even in its imitation?¹⁰⁵

Dominique Rabaté reminds us that we must read Modiano's Proustian turn, not as a failure or an act of cowardice, but rather as a critique.¹⁰⁶ Modiano writes "like" Proust in order to show us the impossibility of writing "like" Proust today, when his "optimisme [...] n'est plus de mise."¹⁰⁷ Therefore, Modiano's Proustian turn is not a move toward a stable, self-contained subject who is able to locate his memory, preserved deep within himself, despite initial obstacles. Devoid of cookies, Modiano's archival tins contain only the tangible fragments of a past that cannot be tasted, smelled, or sensed, but must be pieced together through the methods of historical research, deduction, and imagination. It could be argued that the proliferation of documents we find in Modiano is countered by the books, paintings, and music that the Proustian narrator knowingly cites throughout the *Recherche*. However, these forms of documentation are inherently different, as one is a marker of marginality (see, for example, the narrator's hopeless attempts to access archival records in *Dora Bruder*), while the other helps situate the Proustian narrator within an upper-class network of cultural objects that serve to render him more visible and more legible in the eyes of his peers. In this sense, Modiano's

¹⁰⁵ This corresponds to Akane Kawakami's argument that "Modiano still seems to be attempting the same [Proustian] project, *although he knows that it is doomed* [...]" See Kawakami, *A Self-Conscious Art*, 105; emphasis in the original.

¹⁰⁶ See two articles by Rabaté, "Le temps indéfiniment perdu" and "Après Proust: les écritures de la mémoire aujourd'hui." While the former article focuses specifically on Modiano's turn to Proust in *Villa triste*, the latter elaborates a larger theory on contemporary first person narrative written in Proust's wake. According to Rabaté, the Proustian model is at once unavoidable and inimitable; he links the breakdown of the Proustian project to the effects of a violent and traumatic twentieth century. Notably, he suggests that Modiano's writing is part of a contemporary first person narrative strategy that emphasizes "the memory of others." I believe that his reading could be expanded usefully in Modiano's case to include the memory of the self as other, or as a (cultural) Other.

¹⁰⁷ See Rabaté, "Le temps indéfiniment perdu," 80.

project is the antithesis of everything Proustian memory represents: instead of an individualistic, pure, and desirable memory that spills forth whole and unchallenged, we find a collective, tainted, and traumatic memory that is cobbled together piecemeal through limited eyewitness accounts and scarce documents. And we are faced with a narrator who is not in search of lost time, but in search of *a* lost time, a specific historical moment that his interlocutors seem less unable than unwilling to access. Ultimately, the idea of Time itself is reexamined, as Modiano emphasizes its contingencies. Some ruptures, he seems to say, are permanent.

In this sense, we might read Modiano's continued dialogue with Proust not as a turn *toward* him, but rather as a continuation of the dialogue that he inaugurated with *La Place de l'étoile*. Despite the shift in tone and style that marks his later novels, Modiano is clearly still writing *against* Proust, or perhaps more accurately, showing that it is no longer possible to write *with* him. While Proust formulated an astounding theory of homosexuality (or, more specifically, "inversion") in *Sodome et Gomorrhe* and vividly depicted the fractious debates surrounding the Dreyfus Affair throughout the *Recherche*, he did so at some remove from his narrator, this "I" that is actually an "abstraction of the first person [...] a figure, a procedure, a technique, more than a subjectivity."¹⁰⁸ Guy Roland, meanwhile, does not know who he is; he only knows that he is other, a misfit, literally a shadow of his former self. Rather than give an account of himself, he is only able to measure his difference and distance from others. While Proust's narrator is able to maintain a "pretense of being separate from the social world in which the text of the

¹⁰⁸ See Lucey's analysis of Genette's *Narrative Discourse* in *Never Say I*, 199.

novel nonetheless insists on embedding him,"¹⁰⁹ for Modiano's Guy, even this pretense is no longer possible. For him, the act of casually observing a society in which one does not truly participate is not a conceit, but an unavoidable burden.

In *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* as in *Livret de famille*, Modiano's work suggests that the questions of identity and thus subjectivity have been permanently altered by the events of the Occupation, the Holocaust, and the Vichy regime. His narrators have lost the ability to assume a stable, permanent identity; rather, personal as well as collective identity must be understood in their instability, their contingency, and indeed in their subjectivity. "Frenchness" is a dream, or perhaps an illusion, that has been dispelled by the legacy of the Dark Years. Yet it is still ardently desired, in the same way that, for Modiano, Proust is at once unavoidable and inimitable. In this sense, Modiano's work is deeply engaged with – and, indeed, preconditioned by – history. In the following chapter, I will turn to Assia Djébar's body of work in order to reveal another facet of first person narrative and its engagement with history. Like Modiano, Djébar suggests that the subject is historical in nature. In her dual role of trained historian and acclaimed writer, she interweaves first person narratives and historical accounts in order to also emphasize the subjectivity of history.

¹⁰⁹ Lucey, *Never Say I*, 217.

2. Writing Between the Lines: Assia Djébar's Subjective History

Assia Djébar's 1995 novel, *Vaste est la prison*, opens with a quotation that seems to explain its title: "Vaste est la prison qui m'écrase / D'où me viendras-tu, délivrance?"¹ In the context of Djébar's "Quatuor algérien," the autobiographico-historical Algerian quartet of books that remains unfinished to this day, *Vaste est la prison* holds the perhaps permanently temporary position of final word, an effect that leaves us with the expectation of more to come. In the context of the Algerian quartet, its opening epigraph also carries subliminal meaning for readers of the two previous installments, *L'amour, la fantasia* (1985) and *Ombre sultane* (1987). The "chanson berbère" that the author cites as the source of her title evokes a tradition of orality that Djébar has long associated with the transmission of women's memories. The French words of the Berber song also point to a key point of tension in Djébar's writing: translation, whether explicit or implicit; that is, the losses and riches incurred by moving between multiple languages; and above all, the figure in the middle, the intermediary who negotiates linguistic passage, what Mireille Calle-Gruber has called "[l']écrivain en passeur – en traducteur."² The two lines of the epigraph, then, set us up to expect the kind of feminist docu-novel for which Djébar is known, in which she unearths and preserves the hidden and nearly-lost treasures of an unwritten past. This is a novel whose source will be tradition, the local colors of Algeria, and most of all, a sense of Algerian womanhood in the grips of both a colonial legacy and a violent, nationalist present day. This, I suggest, is how Assia Djébar has been not only received but deployed within the American academy over the

¹ *Vaste est la prison* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995), 9. The source for this quotation is given by the author as "chanson berbère."

² Calle-Gruber, *Assia Djébar, ou la Résistance de l'écriture: Regards d'un écrivain d'Algérie* (Paris: Mouton-Roulet, 2001), 25.

past three decades: as a representation of the Algerian woman, or a representative for Algerian women.

Yet the ways in which the epigraph is reused within the body of the novel belie the notion that Djébar and her works can be used to straightforwardly represent anything. The cry, “*Vaste est la prison*” reappears in two separate episodes within the text itself, in the novel’s third part. In the first recurrence, the narrator’s mother, Bahia, silently mourns the loss of her sister Chérifa to a typhus epidemic. The group of women mourners that surround her are unable to comfort her or even catch her attention. A woman newly-married into one of the invited families, who is first described as “*étrangère*” or foreign because of her different dialect, and then as an “*inconnue*” despite belonging to the family, bursts into “*une langue savante,*” reciting verses in an “*arabe ancien.*”³ Her poetry sparks a sort of linguistic chain reaction in which Chérifa and Bahia’s cousin, who also speaks a “*langue étrange*” (in this case Berber), proclaims the two lines of the novel’s epigraph. Bahia’s surviving sister, Malika, then translates for the assembled women, described as “*les citadines qui ne voulaient comprendre que le dialecte de la ville.*”⁴ Her translation of Berber into Arabic will be rendered, without comment, by the author’s translation of it into French; here, French serves as the default language, the language spoken by those who “*don’t want to understand*” anything other than their own dialect. The reader, then, is placed squarely – but again, without comment – in the position of the uncomprehending women, and Malika addresses them (us) directly: “*Pour celles qui ne comprennent pas la langue des ancêtres, voici ce qu’a dit la fille de mon oncle.*”⁵ The complaint returns, under much different circumstances,

³ *Vaste est la prison*, 235-236.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

⁵ *Idem.*

at the end of the novel. The fallen king Jugurtha, dying of starvation in his Roman cell, “émet [...] un dernier râle d’une ardeur toute gratuite: ‘Vaste est la prison,’ murmure-t-il dans l’avant-dernier souffle [...].”⁶ This re-translation of the novel’s title in different circumstances enacts the reversibility that is at the very center of Djébar’s writing: the conqueror conquered, and (in the same chapter, with its bloody evocation of Algeria’s turn toward nationalist violence at the end of the 20th century), the conquered conquering.

We should thus not be surprised to find ourselves constantly destabilized, asked to travel through the “passages” that Djébar claims as her favorite spaces rather than putting our faith in competing claims, binaries that offer convenient theoretical solutions to a messy historical account – and a complicated autobiography. Perhaps the most telling aspect of Djébar’s epigraph is its insistence, not on the collectivity that Djébar’s novels are so often made to represent, but rather on the narrator who insists on naming herself, not once but twice: “Vaste est la prison qui *m’écrase* / D’où *me* viendras-tu, deliverance?” (my emphasis).

Critics are right to insist on the feminist aspect of Djébar’s writing, which the author herself has openly endorsed.⁷ However, in so doing, they risk overlooking its equally fundamental (if ultimately more complex and troubling) embrace of French models. Exceptionally among the authors of this study, Assia Djébar stands as a writer whose (specifically Algerian) “difference” has been emphasized by French critics as well as their Anglo-American counterparts. This emphasis is undoubtedly due to the ambiguous position of the “Algerian case” in relation to the French universalist model; unlike Patrick Modiano and Hervé Guibert, who are more likely to “represent” specific

⁶ *Vaste est la prison*, 334.

⁷ See Djébar, “Écriture francophone au féminin,” in *Ces voix qui m’assiègent: en marge de ma francophonie* (Montreal: Presses de l’Université de Montréal, 1999), 59-94.

communities for an American audience than for a French one, Assia Djébar has been tasked with – and taken to task for – writing her difference from both French and Arab models. Neither fully integrated nor fully separate during the colonial era, Algeria continues to haunt both the memory and political present of France, as Benjamin Stora and Raphaëlle Branche have shown.⁸

By describing Djébar as an oppositional writer, critics imply the enactment of a series of binary relationships within her works, relationships that could be neatly summarized as Algeria versus France, man versus woman, oral versus written, voice versus body, et cetera, with the former term valorized against the latter in each case.⁹ These relationships are in reality more complex; each of these terms, for Djébar, also contains its opposite. To understand the complex circulation of power within Djébar's novels, we must rely on a circular rather than binary conception of power relationships. Drawing on Michel Foucault's conceptual framework, we might describe power in the Franco-Algerian colonial relationship as flowing through an unbreakable circuit in which there are no sides to be overthrown or dismantled; it can, however, be reversed, interrupted, and redirected.¹⁰ In Djébar's case, this means writing critically within a historical tradition of eyewitness accounts produced by French actors in the 1830 conquest of Algeria; the keyword to describe such potentially disruptive writing would

⁸ See Stora, *La Gangrène et l'oubli*, and Branche, *La Guerre d'Algérie : une histoire apaisée?*

⁹ According to Hafid Gafaiti, "If the male writer is confronted with what he has to say, the female writer faces, above and beyond that, the fundamental transgression consisting in the very act of writing, of speaking up. For her, writing is doing something, against others, against men in particular." See Gafaiti, "L'autobiographie plurielle," 151. It is the *against* that I find unsuited to Assia Djébar's body of work; as we shall see, she writes with and through, notably using her predecessors' vocabulary to different ends. Valérie Orlando casts Djébar's project in terms of liberation, saying that "Assia Djébar frees herself and the women of Algeria by writing her collective autobiography." See Orlando, "Women, War, Autobiography, and the Historiographic Metafictional Text: Unveiling the Veiled in Assia Djébar's *L'amour, la fantasia*," in *Spoils of War*, ed. T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting and Renée T. White (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 107.

¹⁰ See Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1990), 92-93.

be “resistance” rather than “opposition.”¹¹ Still, we might well ask ourselves: what is being resisted?¹² In this chapter, I will suggest that Djébar’s writing resists the inscription of the self as a stable identity, as a (physically, linguistically, culturally) immobile presence, an “authentic” example of Algerian womanhood. To the extent that her novels are used as an exemplar of Algerian femininity, to the extent that Assia Djébar herself becomes a representative for countless Algerian women,¹³ her work is, ironically, itself as immobilized, or cloistered, as the three young cousins she evokes in *L’amour, la fantasia*.¹⁴ Those cousins – the “trois jeunes filles cloîtrées” who give their name to a chapter – are themselves writers, sending dozens of forbidden missives to correspondents throughout the Arab world. And for them, it is the act of writing itself – not the content of their letters, nor the replies they receive – that allows them a measure of freedom from the restrictions of their daily life. We might understand Djébar’s work, and specifically *L’amour, la fantasia*, as an enactment of the same principle on a larger

¹¹ For an incisive and critical use of the term “resistance,” see Mireille Calle-Gruber, *Assia Djébar, ou la Résistance de l’écriture*. Many other critics have insisted on Djébar’s “resistance” as well as the plural and intersubjective nature of the voices in her work. In these same works, though, they have recourse to binaries as well as monolithic descriptions of identity such as “the female subject,” “subaltern feminine identity,” and “the female subaltern voice.” See, for example, Orlando, “Women, War, Autobiography, and the Historiographic Metafictional Text” for a reading that emphasizes the conflict between men and women in *L’amour, la fantasia*, and H. Adlai Murdoch, “Woman, Postcoloniality, and Otherness: Djébar’s Discourses of Histoire and Algérianité,” *L’Esprit Créateur* 48, no. 4 (Winter 2008): 15-33, for the terminology cited above. See also Clarisse Zimra’s article, “Writing Woman: The Novels of Assia Djébar,” *SubStance* 21, no. 3 (1992): 68-84, which reproduces the Woman/Man division in order to describe Djébar’s resistance to it.

¹² Mireille Calle-Gruber underscores the reversibility of resistance itself, a reversibility born of love: “Un amour qui, non pas faiblesse mais exigence supplémentaire, fait résistance à la résistance.” See Calle-Gruber, *Assia Djébar, ou la Résistance de l’écriture*, 17.

¹³ By describing Djébar’s work as “oppositional” and understanding it in terms of the binaries it puts forth, critics run the risk of advocating and enshrining a certain notion of “authentic” Algerian identity. As Phillip C. Naylor notes in *France and Algeria: A History of Decolonization and Transformation*, the FLN attempted to forge such an identity out of necessity, as a means of uniting Algeria for the purposes of revolution. As Naylor explains, “[I]t was impossible for the FLN to embrace a common ideology save for the eradication of French colonialism, the restoration of an authentic identity, and the inauguration of an independent nation. [...] It meant that the dominating group’s exercise of power would have to produce truth or myth and its own legitimacy,” further noting that this constituted “an exclusive rather than inclusive imagination of nation” (10-11?).

¹⁴ In her more recent work, Valérie Orlando has suggested that the concept of nomadism provides a fruitful, non-essentialist way of understanding subjectivity in Djébar’s writing. She also identifies recourse to the Third Space, with its “absence of binarisms, dualities, and dialectical poles,” as characteristic of contemporary Francophone Maghrebian texts. See Orlando, *Nomadic Voices of Exile*, 66.

scale. Composed of equal parts historical and autobiographical narrative, *L'amour, la fantasia*'s importance lies less in its representation of Algerian women, including the specific portrait of the author, than in the act of writing that Djébar continuously strives to reveal.

The Art of Representing Exception

There is a certain amount of danger in making Assia Djébar, explicitly or implicitly, into the ordained representative of Algerian women; aside from attributing a role to Djébar that she herself clearly refuses,¹⁵ we risk slipping from “representative” to “representation” and equating Djébar with a fixed notion of “l'Algérienne,” or the Algerian woman. The question of translators, interpreters, and other intermediaries occupies an important place in Djébar's writing; she consistently acknowledges and often emphasizes their presence in the narrative.¹⁶ Suffice it to say that the role of intermediary is never innocent in *L'amour, la fantasia*; French army negotiators, war-wounded soldiers interpret with varying degrees of empathy for the opposing party, and the first Arab intermediary to approach the French camp during the Conquest will be killed by members of his own camp as a potential spy: “Toute écriture de l'Autre, transportée, devient fatale, puisque signe de compromission,” Djébar comments.¹⁷ By highlighting the real or perceived biases of various linguistic intermediaries in the war effort and beyond, Djébar, by extension, opens her own interpretation (of words, of events) to criticism. Thus it seems somewhat incongruous to imply that she gives a singular voice – unmediated by her own – to anyone.

¹⁵ See her preface to *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (Paris : Albin Michel, 2002), 7-11.

¹⁶ See Calle-Gruber, *Assia Djébar ou la Résistance de l'écriture*, 26, for her description of the author as a *passeur* within the text, as well as her insistence on the non-representative quality of Djébar's writing.

¹⁷ *L'amour, la fantasia*, 44.

This voice, furthermore, does not conform to any kind of norm: Djébar's intellectual biography can only be described as exceptional. Born Fatima Zohra Imalhayène in Cherchell, Algeria, the girl who would become Assia Djébar was educated in the French curriculum thanks to the early influence of her instructor father. Tahar Imalhayène taught "indigenous" Algerian boys; breaking with social norms, he included his young daughter in their class photograph, a gesture that she has lovingly described.¹⁸ Thus an early photograph enshrines young Fatima Zohra as the lone girl amidst a crowd of Arab-Algerian boys, in a position that emphasizes her uniqueness. Her father has placed her in the middle of the photograph, serving as its focal point, a placement that highlights both the privilege of her position and its rarity. As a young girl, Fatima Zohra was educated in both the colonial French system and a private Koranic school. Here again she found herself in a gendered minority, one of two girls in a group of boys. Eventually abandoning her Koranic studies, she would enter the Collège Blida, where she was the only Muslim woman in the classical section. She completed the first part of her preparatory studies at the Lycée Bugeaud in Algiers, before finishing them in Paris. In 1955, less than a year after the start of the Algerian War, she was the first Algerian woman admitted to the ENS de Sèvres.¹⁹ In H. Adlai Murdoch's words, she thus "became part of a select, elite cadre of colonial intelligentsia."²⁰ The story of her education at the ENS was one of protest that ultimately ended in her dismissal from the school: beginning in the late spring of 1956, Algerian students marked their opposition to French colonial policy and violence in Algeria by

¹⁸ See Calle-Gruber, *Assia Djébar ou la Résistance de l'écriture*, 15-16. Calle-Gruber quotes Djébar's description of the scene, before describing the image as "prémonitoire" and "primordiale," "[une] photographie du déplacement le plus inouï." This striking photograph is reprinted at the end of Calle-Gruber's volume.

¹⁹ In other words, she was the first Algerian woman admitted to the ENS. The students of the Sèvres branch, which educated women, were finally – if belatedly – integrated into the Rue d'Ulm location in 1985.

²⁰ See Murdoch, "Woman, Postcoloniality, Otherness," 16.

going on strike. While still enrolled in the school, Fatima Zohra published *La Soif*, an “insolently sensual”²¹ piece of light literature that was quickly translated as *The Mischief* for an American audience. The novel garnered scandal due to its plot: a half-French, half-Algerian woman sets out to seduce her friend’s husband, leading to the latter woman’s death following an abortion. *La Soif* drew easy comparisons to Françoise Sagan’s *Bonjour tristesse*, which had been published two years earlier, also by the Parisian press Julliard. Already crossing international borders with the publication of her first novel, it seems that Fatima Zohra Imalhayène also crossed personal boundaries with this somewhat scandalous publication. It was at this point that she adopted her *nom de plume*, Assia Djébar, out of respect for her family.²² *La Soif*, one of two *oeuvres de jeunesse* that Djébar published in the 1950s, today occupies a marginal position in relation to her later work. At the time of its publication, it was poorly received among Algerian sympathizers, as Clarisse Zimra writes: “[T]o the revolution, these self-indulgent ‘bourgeois’ stories that did nothing to advance the cause of national liberation proved an embarrassment. Their author was criticized in vitriolic attacks *ad hominem*.”²³

The late 1950s and early 1960s would find Djébar in Tunisia and then Morocco. It was during this time that she worked as a pro-FLN journalist in Tunis with Frantz Fanon²⁴ and completed her doctoral studies in history, before beginning a teaching

²¹ Clarisse Zimra, “Writing Woman,” 68.

²² The most common explanation for Djébar’s name change comes from Clarisse Zimra’s afterword to the English translation of *Femmes d’Alger*, and relates this change to her concern for her own and her family’s privacy. See Alison Rice, “The Improper Name,” for an analysis of the role of this pseudonym in Djébar’s work, as well as a meditation on its origins. Boussad Berrichi also attributes her name change to the ENS administration, although he does not elaborate. See Berrichi, *Assia Djébar: Une femme, une œuvre, des langues* (Biarritz: Séguier, 2009), 12.

²³ Zimra, “Writing Woman,” 68.

²⁴ For a narrative of Fanon’s life and, more specifically, his engagement in the Algerian revolution, see Alice Cherki, *Frantz Fanon: Portrait* (Paris: Seuil, 2000). Like many historians and writers who have assessed this period in Franco-Algerian history, Cherki was personally involved in the events described and knew Fanon well.

career in Morocco. As we will see, the Fanon connection is particularly important, both biographically and textually. Fanon was a passionate FLN sympathizer and Marxist, an influential anti-colonialist thinker, a French-trained psychiatrist who worked with the victims of the Algerian events. Born in Martinique, he experienced French colonial rule firsthand and devoted much of his life to combating it, before succumbing to leukemia in 1961 at the age of 36. While he would not live to see the revolution come to fruition, he died a staunch supporter of the Algerian cause;²⁵ indeed, his wish to be buried in his adopted land was fulfilled. Djébar shared Fanon's enthusiasm for the revolutionary struggle at this point in her life, before its seeming promise of an egalitarian society gave way to the extremism of the 1970s and beyond. Her literary production during the 1960s is characterized, accordingly, by two novels "that even the most intransigent revolutionary could consider 'ideologically correct,'" *Les Enfants du nouveau monde* (1962) and *Les Alouettes naïves* (1967).²⁶ These novels close out her first period of writing, a series of four novels that engage variously with subjectivity, historical events, and ideological pressures without engaging in the highly reflective and reversible techniques that would come to characterize her later novels. Textually, Fanon's early influence is key to understanding Djébar's later writings, the subjective histories that she constructed at the end of *Femmes d'Alger*, in *L'Amour, la fantasia*, and beyond. His short essay, "L'Algérie se dévoile," written in the midst of the revolution and published in 1959, provided a vocabulary for discussing the relations between men and women in Algerian

²⁵ As Zimra writes, "[G]ood Marxist Fanon, who subsumed the gender issue under the race issue, did not live to see himself proved wrong." See "Writing Woman," 69. The notion that Fanon would have objected vehemently to the political extremism that ultimately followed the revolution is also taken up by Djébar in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995): "Fanon nous a manqué, pour protester sémantiquement: lui, plus que tout autre, prêt à sortir le scalpel de sa lucidité!", 112-113.

²⁶ Zimra, "Writing Woman," 68.

society that Djébar would later recycle, reinterpret, and implicitly critique.²⁷ More generally, her later work echoes Fanon's *Les Damnés de la terre* in its turn toward first person narrative to describe the traumatic history of a revolutionary struggle as well as a painful colonization.²⁸

In conjunction with her literary career, Djébar has held a series of teaching appointments, in history, French literature, and cinema at the University of Algiers or in French and francophone literature at the University of Louisiana and New York University. Just as the Algerian War largely informed the terms of her voluntary exile in Tunisia and Morocco during the 1950s and 1960s, the return of state-sanctioned Islam in 1976 and the subsequent rise of extremism inspired her self-imposed exile in France and North America.²⁹ After a decade of deliberate silence during which she turned to film as a medium to capture women's memories of the war, Djébar returned to literature in 1980 with the publication of *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, a collection of short stories that examined the role of women in a new (and not necessarily improved) Algeria. Since 1980, her literary work has been characterized by an explicit turn toward the imbrications of the autobiographical and the historical. More recently, she has turned her attention to the violence of the Algerian Civil War. Notably, in the final chapters of *Vaste est la prison* (1995) and in the entirety of *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* (1995), Djébar

²⁷ Rita Faulkner has identified some of the connections between "L'Algérie se dévoile" and *Femmes d'Alger*, although she arrives at different conclusions about Djébar's reappropriation of sexualized language, emphasizing Djébar's positive recuperation of Fanon's terms. See "Assia Djébar, Frantz Fanon, Women, Veils, and Land," *World Literature Today* 70 (1996). Touria Khannous has analyzed the relationship between "L'Algérie se dévoile" and *L'amour, la fantasia*, observing that the collective nature of Djébar's novel prevents it from reinscribing the monolithic vision of "Algerian Woman" that emerges in Fanon's text. See "Reading Fantasia: Assia Djébar, Frantz Fanon, and the Politics of Representation," in *North-South Linkages and Connections in Continental and Diaspora African Literatures*, ed. Edris Makward, Mark Lilleleht, and Ahmed Saber (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 2005), 174-196.

²⁸ See Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2002).

²⁹ Djébar vividly evokes the dangers faced by intellectuals and cultural figures during the Algerian Civil War (1991-2002) in her 1995 essay, *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*.

addressed the violence of 1990s Algeria, which has suffered from the erasure of regional difference into one political party and one language. In *La Disparition de la langue française* (2003), meanwhile, she paints the sympathetic portrait of an Algerian man, a former FLN supporter, who returns to his homeland after a long exile in France only to discover that he is a stranger to the new cultural and political order. In 2006, her academic and literary consecration³⁰ culminated in her formal reception at the Académie française as its first member from the Maghreb.³¹ Thus the figurehead writer for Algerian resistance would find herself associated with the best-known conservative bastion of French intellectual culture currently in existence.³² Her writing, meanwhile, testifies to the influence of Berber, Arab, and Andalusian traditions on her life and works.

The autobiographical chapters of *L'Amour, la fantasia* bear these contradictions out while also partially explaining them; the first person narrator's world is filled with complex and conflicting allegiances. Her father, an "indigenous" schoolteacher, found a measure of financial and social power by not only learning, but mastering, the French language; by working as an instructor in the French educational system of Algeria, he effectively became a civil servant of France. I use "indigenous" here between quotation marks, as Djébar does, to denote a fidelity to the (French) historical record that is also tinged with irony. Interestingly enough, the distinction between an "indigenous" teacher with an "indigenous" class is not made in *L'Amour, la fantasia*, while it is emphasized in *Vaste est la prison*. For the purposes of the preceding novel, the father-as-

³⁰ Djébar has received a number of prizes for her work, beginning with *La Soif*. They include (significantly) "L'Algérienne," the Prix de la culture française, and the Prix France culture.

³¹ The details of Djébar's intellectual biography are derived primarily from Boussad Berrichi, *Assia Djébar: une femme, une œuvre, des langues*, 11-15.

³² H. Adlai Murdoch has pointed out the historical echoes and ironies of Djébar's election to the Académie française. See "Women, Postcoloniality, Otherness," 15.

schoolteacher represents an unequivocally “French” education. More generally, Djébar’s use of “indigène” points to the fundamental difficulty of naming the native population of Algeria, a difficulty that made it even more impossible for the French to declare war in Algeria. Who, exactly, were they fighting?³³

Meanwhile, Djébar’s mother’s background, heavily steeped in an Arabo-Andalusian oral tradition transmitted primarily through generations of women, conjures up images of a lost (because unwritten) past as well as the threat of illiteracy.³⁴ Meanwhile, the narrator finds herself paradoxically preserved from the cloister and the veil because of her enrollment in a French school. Yet the narrator’s story, like Djébar’s, is not simply the tale of a young girl who found herself freed, however ironically, by the language of her country’s conqueror. From the end of the 19th century, education in France served an increasingly tactical purpose; the successful maintenance of France’s most enduring political regime, the Third Republic, depended on a unified country of citizens. Yet the country was clearly divided along regional lines. The Jules Ferry educational reforms of 1882 not only guaranteed a free, secular education to French children but also made it an obligation, a civic duty for the youth of the new French Republic. Furthermore, the Ferry reforms standardized the French educational system, meaning that a child in Brittany would receive the same education as a child in Provence, regardless of regional language or customs. The Ferry reforms constituted an attempt to form those students into a more consistent civic product. In principle, the new laws applied not only to the Hexagon, but also to the colonial *départements* of

³³ For examples of Djébar’s use of “indigenous,” see *Vaste est la prison*, 232, 242, 254, 266, and 293. See also Stora, *La Gâgrène et l’oubli*, 20-24.

³⁴ In *Vaste est la prison*, the narrator’s mother expresses her enduring sadness over the loss of the most important part of her dowry: her handwritten notebooks of traditional songs, which she remembers but no longer feels able to transcribe. Her adoption of European practices – her literal embodiment as a European woman, with the accompanying clothes and accessories – leads, the narrator hypothesizes, to a loss of her other, first body: the one that could write Arabic.

Algeria: Constantine, Oran, and Algiers;³⁵ still, very few Arab and Berber children enrolled in French schools. In *The Politics of Frenchness*, Jonathan Gosnell explains that indigenous attitudes to colonial education did not change until after World War I; even then, he cites very low enrollment figures: 10.6% in 1949 and 15.4% in 1954.³⁶ Assia Djebar, like her autobiographical narrator, clearly stood out as a student.

If we consider that French educational laws were extended to Algerian *départements* for the purpose of citizen-formation, the low numbers of enrolled Arab and Berber students might come as less of a surprise. For the Third Republic was not only a time of far-reaching educational reform; it also ushered in changes in citizenship law that had a significant impact on life in colonial Algeria. In addition to the Arab and Berber populations of Algeria – the “indigenous” people of the territory – another sizeable and influential population considered itself “native” to the colony; in fact, a heavily Mediterranean population of European settlers claimed the “Algérien” label for themselves during the colonial period.³⁷ The Third Republic concretized the link between these Algerian settlers and the Empire by granting them automatic French citizenship: the 1870 décret Crémieux naturalized Algerian Jews, while the law of June 26, 1889 imposed French citizenship on all Algerian-born (European) foreigners unless they explicitly claimed their father’s citizenship. The “indigenous” population of Algeria, meanwhile, could not – barring a few exceptional cases³⁸ – aspire to citizenship. They were considered subjects of the French empire, and while the standardized

³⁵ See Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization*, 34-35.

³⁶ See Gosnell, *The Politics of Frenchness in Colonial Algeria*, 48.

³⁷ See Stora, *Histoire de l’Algérie coloniale*, 92, for his discussion of “littérature algérienne.”

³⁸ The Blum-Viollette bill, proposed in December 1936 and rejected in 1938, proposed that citizenship be granted exceptionally to Algerian subjects who had demonstrated high levels of military or academic achievement. For more on French nationality in Algeria, see Patrick Weil, *Qu’est-ce qu’un Français*, 225-244.

educational system of the *métropole* sought to homogenize a disparate population, in the context of colonial Algeria, the difference between Europeans and Muslims was continually reaffirmed – economically, politically, and socially. As resistance to French colonial rule intensified, attempts to forestall revolutionary action took the guise of citizenship reforms. Following the Liberation, for example, French nationality was formally extended to encompass indigenous Algerians.³⁹ Still, the legacy of social and political inequality in Algeria remained pervasive.⁴⁰ The discrepancy between a standardized French education and lived reality in Algeria was stark, then, for Djébar's autobiographical narrator, as she reports:

J'écris et je parle français au-dehors: mes mots ne se chargent pas de réalité charnelle. J'apprends des noms d'oiseaux que je n'ai jamais vus, des noms d'arbres que je mettrai dix ans ou davantage à identifier ensuite, des glossaires de fleurs et de plantes que je ne humerai jamais avant de voyager au nord de la Méditerranée. En ce sens, tout vocabulaire me devient absence, exotisme sans mystère, avec comme une mortification de l'œil qu'il ne sied pas d'avouer... Les scènes des livres d'enfant, leurs situations me sont purs scénarios; dans la famille française, la mère vient chercher sa fille ou son fils à l'école; dans la rue française, les parents marchent tout naturellement côte à côte... Ainsi, le monde de l'école est expurgé du quotidien de ma ville natale tout comme de celui de ma famille. A ce dernier est dénié tout rôle référentiel.⁴¹

Although the contrast between education and home life was most pronounced for “indigenous” students attending French schools, the native European, or “Algérien” population experienced an analogous disparity.⁴² Benjamin Stora describes the mythic

³⁹ See Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization*, 19-54 for a detailed discussion of French citizenship in Algeria.

⁴⁰ See Stora, *La Gangrène et l'oubli*, 19 for a discussion of the political disparity between Europeans and Algerian Muslims (“une voix d'Européen vaut huit voix d'Algériens”).

⁴¹ *L'amour, la fantasia*, 208.

⁴² See Camus's account of the Algerian school and its deeply foreign lessons in *The First Man*, trans. David Hapgood (New York: Vintage, 1996). According to him, “The texts were always those used in France. And these children, who knew only the sirocco, the dust, the short torrential cloudbursts, the sand of the beaches, and the sea in flames under the sun, would assiduously read – accenting the commas and periods – stories that to them were mythical, where children in hoods and mufflers, their feet in wooden shoes, would come home dragging bundles of sticks along snowy paths until they saw the snow-covered roof of the house where the smoking chimney told them the pea soup was cooking in the hearth. For Jacques, these stories

nature of their attachment to the *métropole*, and intense nationalism as a means of compensating for their general lack of first-hand knowledge of France.⁴³ So while Algeria was structurally a part of France, including departments that had been incorporated into the national body, we might conclude that its citizen-subjects had been less successfully integrated on a cultural level. In other words, if the purpose of French education following the Ferry Laws was the erasure of regional difference into a harmonious, increasingly homogenous national whole, the Algerian case presented considerable difficulties, and would ultimately end (from the French standpoint) in failure. In Michel Winock's words, "C'est une situation bloquée. L'Algérie est trop française pour être séparée, d'une manière ou d'une autre, de la métropole; l'Algérie n'est pas assez française pour annihiler un mouvement d'indépendance nationale [...]"⁴⁴

Even during a period of rapid decolonization that had already affected former French holdings in Indochina, Morocco, and Tunisia, the Algerian case held special significance: the projected end of French Algeria in the 1950s led to the downfall of the Fourth Republic; in fact, Algeria's separation from the national body threatened the very foundations of Republican France. Historians point to the sizeable European population, longevity of the colonial presence, proximity of the colony and its political integration into the French Republic as reasons for its exceptional status among France's colonial holdings.⁴⁵ While at first glance Algeria's economic role as a supplier of raw materials to

were as exotic as they could possibly be," 144-145. See also his short story, "L'Hôte," in *L'Exil et le royaume* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), for a European teacher's perspective on school in Algeria.

⁴³ See Stora, *Histoire de l'Algérie coloniale*, 94.

⁴⁴ Winock, *La Fièvre hexagonale: Les grandes crises politiques 1871-1968* (Paris: Seuil, 2009), 289. Winock's chapter on May 1958 in the same book provides a useful summary of the events surrounding the putsch and the subsequent collapse of the Fourth Republic.

⁴⁵ See, for example, Stora, *Histoire de l'Algérie coloniale*.

the *métropole* seems unremarkable in the context of a colonial relationship, we must not discount the symbolic weight of imported “Frenchness.” For example, in the wake of the late-19th century phylloxera epidemic that destroyed much of France’s wine crop, compensatory vineyards were planted in Algeria, making it a new wine-growing region of France.⁴⁶ Importing wine production in this context has obvious economic implications, but also, I suggest, symbolizes an extension of French national identity into a still-foreign space. That space, as Jonathan Gosnell argues, would remain ambiguously “French” well into the mid-twentieth century, during the period that Assia Djébar was growing up and attending school.⁴⁷ She preserves this ambiguous space – neither clearly French nor clearly Algerian – within the novels of her second period.

After a decade of writing plot-driven novels whose characters personified the various “types” of both colonial Algeria and the independence movement,⁴⁸ Assia Djébar took a ten-year leave of absence from publication. During that time, she became a filmmaker, mixing a fictional story with recordings of the testimonials of rural women in *La Nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua*. The impressions that she recorded in this film, the practice of listening and transcription that she employed as (in her words) a “semi-documentary” filmmaker, prefigured a turning point in her literary production. If *La Nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua* marks a major shift in medium – from novel to film – it also marks an entirely new approach to writing. Based on listening and transcribing first-person accounts of tradition, colonization, war and its aftermath, *La Nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua* (1978) constitutes a turn to raw source material as a source of narrative. Research-oriented, the resulting new writing methodology relied on the

⁴⁶ See Stora, *Histoire de l’Algérie coloniale*, 29.

⁴⁷ See Gosnell, *The Politics of Frenchness in Colonial Algeria*.

⁴⁸ See, for example, *Les Alouettes naïves*, which tells the story of the revolution through a typology of male and female, Muslim and European characters with varying attitudes toward the war.

explicit insertion of secondary sources (mainly first person testimonials), which Djébar then contextualized and commented. The result: a voluntarily transparent work of rewriting history on the basis of eyewitness accounts, which Mireille Calle-Gruber has usefully described as an “échafaudage” or scaffolding.⁴⁹ This historical construction zone of writing, once organized into chapters, is balanced by apparently autobiographical writing of a similar nature. While *L’amour, la fantasia* constitutes the most striking example of this process (and the focus, in Djébar’s second period of writing, is indeed on writing-as-process rather than writing-as-written), the same basic principles apply to the other novels of the three-part Algerian Quartet.

If Djébar’s brief turn to semi-documentary film prefigures the shift in her writing, the transition between the plot-driven novels of her first period and the scaffold-narratives of her second period can also be located within one collection of texts. Published in 1980, *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement* unites a series of texts written during Djébar’s decade of self-imposed silence, as well as before. The collection is bookended by two texts that belong firmly to the second period; “La Nuit du récit de Fatma” opens this selection of rather conventional short stories with a theatrical twist: this is a “récit” in the form of a deferred dialogue, one half “spoken” (and presumably transcribed); one half written. By entwining a gamut of personal pronouns (*je, tu, nous*) and incorporating a sense of orality (interjections such as “eh bien,” “ma fille,” “ma chérie”) even as the processes of writing and reading (becoming literate) are evoked, “La Nuit du récit de Fatma” creates a space in which language(s) and subject(s) collide. This story’s belated addition to the collection, in time for the 2002 edition of *Femmes d’Alger*, implicitly reframes the remaining stories as attempts to “oser se raconter,”⁵⁰ attempts

⁴⁹ See Calle-Gruber, *Assia Djébar ou la résistance de l’écriture*, 46-47.

⁵⁰ *Femmes d’Alger*, 30.

that succeed or fail to varying degrees as the author experiments with first, second, and third person narrative. Meanwhile, a 1979 “Postface,” titled “Regard interdit, son coupé,” belies the attribution of titular status to the volume’s earlier story. Accompanied by an unprecedented set of scholarly trappings in the form of endnotes, “Regard interdit, son coupé” seems to announce the project of the following year’s masterwork, *L’amour, la fantasia*. Due to its compact size and essay format, examining “Regard interdit, son coupé” at some length will allow us to succinctly identify the major characteristics of Djébar’s new historical writing.

“Regard interdit; son coupé”: The Foundations of a Situated Historical Narrative

In contrast to her earlier works, Djébar’s “Regard interdit, son coupé” derives its narrative drive from a pre-existing text rather than plot development or character typology. In this case, the text is a painting (Eugène Delacroix’s *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*) rather than a written account, although we might well still consider it a first person testimonial; in fact, the visual nature of the text emphasizes its “eyewitness” value. Djébar draws on the history of Delacroix’s painting, from its creation to its reinterpretation by Picasso, and in so doing analyzes the conditions for creating any first person or eyewitness text. Thus her analysis of Delacroix can be said to prefigure and reinforce her own joint exploration of Algerian history and autobiography.⁵¹

Overall, the style of “Regard interdit, son coupé” might be described as scholarly and historical, with the objectivity of this history being called into question, implicitly,

⁵¹ See Ranjana Khanna, “Women of Algiers in their Apartment: Trauma, Melancholia, and Nationalism” for a reading of Delacroix’s painting(s) and Djébar’s text that analyzes them in terms of the founding trauma at the heart of the French nation-state.

but consistently.⁵² Its scholarly historical tone is immediately established through the inclusion of a date (Le 25 juin 1832); the historical present tense is also deployed from the start (“Delacroix débarque à Alger”). Djébar quickly sets up the link between Delacroix and the visual (“un univers d’une extrême richesse visuelle”; “lieu d’une révolution visuelle”). The parenthetical images that follow (“splendeur des costumes;” etc.) serve as preliminary “sketches” (“croquis”) such as those Delacroix himself will later make. The essay is also marked by the use of the passive voice, specifically in terms of describing a colonized Algeria. Thus, the tone of essay could be described as “objective” in the sense that it describes the historical event of Delacroix’s travels in seeming real time (through use of the historical present); the use of passive language allows us to read the events as “just happening” without any sense of agency, specifically colonial agency (Algiers, for example, is merely “récemment conquise”). Morocco and Algeria as components of Delacroix’s Orient are also contrasted through use of the passive and active voice: while the Moroccan Orient is said to reveal itself (“se révèle”) and offer itself (“s’offre”) to Delacroix, ascribing to him the passive position of being immersed (“immergé”) and having remained foreign (“demeuré étranger”), as soon as he lands in Algeria he becomes an active colonial agent who “penetrates” the universe of Algerian women.⁵³ Djébar notes that it is this portion of his “voyage en Orient” that will become part of the historical record (“ce que la posterité retiendra”),

⁵² All of the quotations in the following close reading are taken from “Regard interdit, son coupé,” in *Femmes d’Alger*, 237-263.

⁵³ As Clarisse Zimra has observed, “Delacroix’s painting, “Femmes d’Alger,” fixes forever in Western consciousness the “singular” vision of the conquered land as Woman; a semantic shift facilitated by the fact that, in the French language, Morocco is masculine and Algeria, feminine.” See Zimra, “Disorienting the Subject in Djébar’s *L’amour, la fantasia*,” *Yale French Studies* 87 (1995): 149-170 (162-163 for the quotation). This may help explain, to a certain extent, the ways in which the two territories are differently gendered within texts written in French. Djébar does, however, seem to maintain an active/passive distinction between these differently-gendered words that exceeds mere grammatical necessity.

and it is his stay in Algeria that will cause the entire journey to be reconsidered in terms of the European trope of discovery (“Le monde, qu’il a découvert au Maroc...”).

The use of highly sexualized language complements the use of passive versus active voice; it corresponds with Djébar’s description of the Orient, both personified (“Cet Orient,” “un Orient”) and feminized (it offers itself up to Delacroix “lavé de toute idée de péché”; that is to say, pure and virginal). Delacroix is described as being *oriented* to the Orient, collapsing the distinction between self and other, through his penetration of the universe of Algerian women. As Djébar notes, Delacroix “franchit en même temps une subtile frontière,” reinforcing the image of penetration, a colonial penetration that in some sense deflowers the pure and virginal Orient of the text’s second paragraph. The use of sexualized language is reminiscent of both exoticized (colonial) images of the Orient and also the revolutionary and psychoanalytic writings of Frantz Fanon, making the essay resonate as a critique of historical record, colonial power, and, ultimately, male power. Thus, while the first part of the essay imitates an “objective” historical record of Delacroix’s travels, its language recalls various (male) records of Algeria, implying an underlying criticism.

As Delacroix’s tour of Algeria brings him into contact with the harem he will portray in his own *Femmes d’Alger*, Djébar’s essay further develops the underlying references to Fanon’s psychoanalysis of colonial Algeria as it describes Delacroix’s penetration of the harem. It also introduces the notion of intermediaries (including translators, native guides, and, implicitly, historians, writers...). While Djébar states that “l’aventure est connue,” she also outlines its convoluted transmission, calling into question the authenticity of this common historical knowledge. In fact, the participation of several intermediaries appears to threaten the historical record: “Delacroix, rapporte Poirel” (who was “sans doute” present, Djébar notes ironically, the “sans doute”

introducing the very doubt it was meant to forestall) “à Cournault qui nous l’écrit, ‘était comme enivré du spectacle qu’il avait sous ses yeux.’” In addition to the problem of distance from our original source (Djebar rewrites what Cournault writes about what Poirel said about what Delacroix was supposedly thinking and feeling), Djebar raises the question of translation. Not only does Cournault attempt to transcribe spoken word into written language, but Poirel is attempting to put another’s thought and feeling into words, with the assumption that all of these processes are transparent and the resulting text is somehow equivalent to what it describes. Djebar’s own juxtaposition of the word “chaouch” and the phrase “ancient patron de barque de course” highlights this problem. We might assume one word is a direct translation of the other, although this is not the case, just as we might assume that a historical report rendered by an intermediary is objective and that its language is equivalent to the events it describes (particularly if it involves the authoritative use of quotes, as it does here). However, Djebar seems to be saying that this assumption would be doubtful at best. Even within the text of the event itself, we find another intermediary: “Entré en conversation par l’intermédiaire du mari improvisé interprète, il veut tout savoir...” In this case, the intermediary links France to Algeria, male to female, in a literally superficial way captured by Delacroix’s sketches: “Sur les multiples croquis qu’il entreprend – attitudes diverses de femmes assises – il inscrit ce qui lui paraît le plus important à ne pas oublier: la précision des couleurs [...] avec le détail des costumes, rapport multiple et étrange qui dérouté ses yeux.” Through the intermediary of translation (and considering Djebar’s knowledge of English), we might understand this “dérouté” as a possible, but superficial *disorienting* performed by the presence of female bodies.

As an intermediary in her own right, Djebar also brings Delacroix and Fanon into unstated conversation, as I have already suggested. Djebar’s use of sexualized language

to describe the experience of entering the harem (“pénétrer dans sa propre maison,” the image of Delacroix crossing “‘un couloir obscur’ au bout duquel s’ouvre [...] le harem proprement dit,” “la vision, complètement nouvelle, a été perçue image pure,” a “compulsion fétichiste”) continues, although the explicit image of penetration is ultimately moderated by language that evokes a dream-state (“la vision,” “inattendu et baignant dans une lumière presque irréelle,” “cette mouvante frontière où se côtoient rêve et réalité,” “traces oniriques”). While the reference remains unstated, Djébar’s language here clearly echoes Fanon’s “L’Algérie se dévoile,” in which he describes the European’s literal and figurative dream of penetrating the harem, rending the veil. Delacroix’s living dream, meanwhile, will return in the form of memory, although its relationship to that memory remains complex: “Ce cœur de harem entrouvert, est-il vraiment tel qu’il le voit?” In other words, is the source of the memory itself pure? Djébar’s use of questions at this point in the text once again serves to undermine the reliability of the historical record, although she has now begun to insist on the visual form of this record: “Il a besoin de toucher son rêve, d’en prolonger la vie au-delà du souvenir, de compléter ce que ses carnets enferment de croquis et dessins.” Having already established the unreliability of text and image, as well as (dream-like) memory, Djébar has prepared the reader for an analysis of the paintings themselves, adding that Delacroix’s “incertitude” has produced “un chef-d’oeuvre qui nous fait toujours nous interroger,” again linking the historical record with the concerns of the present-day reader.

The following paragraph begins with the name of the painting, *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement* and the descriptive phrase, “trois femmes dont deux sont assises devant un narguilé,” linked by a colon that functions as a kind of grammatical equal sign; “Femmes d’Alger” means these three women, in this setting and pose. Those who

have seen the painting immediately recognize that this equivalency leaves out much of the information: the third woman's presence is alluded to, but not developed; more strikingly, there are actually four women in the picture, one of whom is a servant. By describing the three upper-class women before addressing the presence of the servant, Djébar makes a comment on Delacroix's movement to exoticize and silence ("son coupé") the women of Algiers. The portrait that freezes them in time and confines them to silence is, in fact, only challenged by Djébar's reading of the servant, "[qui] lève un bras comme si elle écartait la lourde tenture qui masque cet univers clos; personnage presque accessoire, elle ne fait que longer ce chatoiement de couleurs qui aureole les trois autres femmes," the three truly *other* women of the portrait. Djébar moves, then, from a basic description of the painting to a judgment of its meaning, stating that "tout le sens du tableau se joue dans le rapport qu'entretiennent celles-ci [les femmes d'Alger] avec leur corps, ainsi qu'avec le lieu de leur enfermement." This statement appears to straightforwardly ascribe a meaning to the painting, but Djébar immediately modifies her initial evaluation, first declaring the women "prisonnières résignées" and then acknowledging that they are, in fact, entirely unreadable: "le génie de Delacroix nous les rend à la fois présentes et lointaines, énigmatiques au plus haut point." It is fitting, then, that this paragraph in which Djébar offers her assessment of Delacroix's first version of the painting is itself enigmatic, as the tone of the passage shifts between seeming objectivity, commiseration, evaluation, and the lack of a satisfying conclusion.

It ultimately becomes clear that Djébar is far more interested in the second version of Delacroix's painting than the first. Rather than presenting the second version as a reworking of the first, Djébar uses the pronoun *y* without any clear referent, implying that what Delacroix is really reworking is his memory: "Quinze ans après ces journées d'Alger, Delacroix se ressouvient, *y* retravaille et donne au salon de 1849 une

seconde version des *Femmes d'Alger*." Perhaps Djébar is using *y* in reference to the painting, but her positioning of its title after the pronoun allows for some ambiguity. In her next short paragraph, she notes that, rather than the composition, the biggest change in the second version has been to bring out "le sens latent" of the painting. This expression seems to support the idea that what Delacroix is reworking is his memory, the "incertitude" he is still grappling with in the years following his dream-like visit to the harem. There is once again a strong psychoanalytic undercurrent to Djébar's use of the term "sens latent," as though Delacroix were experiencing a gradual, but still disturbing return of the repressed – in which, paradoxically, the women begin to disappear beyond his grasp.

If "Regard interdit, son coupé" marks a break from the preceding works of the Djébar canon, if it prefigures the personal historiography that will characterize *L'amour, la fantasia*, we might also extend Djébar's Delacroix discussion and describe her essay as the sketch version of a later, more developed painting. However, just as Delacroix's finished painting, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, leaves room not only for the painter's own, later reinterpretation but also for Picasso's entire series of reimaginings, the raw material of *L'amour, la fantasia* will itself be revisited, revised, and remolded in Djébar's later novels. Still, *L'amour, la fantasia* addresses autobiographical writing in ways that the following novels do not. For example, Djébar directly addresses autobiography as a genre with its own history in a chapter, "La Tunique de Nessus," that traces its debuts from "un Algérien, nommé Augustin" to Ibn Khaldoun's "Identité" to her own "autobiographie pratiquée dans la langue adverse."⁵⁴ In the absence of even

⁵⁴ *L'amour, la fantasia*, 239-243. It is important to note that Djébar's attitude toward writing in French changed dramatically during the 1970s, a time when she ceased to publish and when the possibility of writing as a woman in Arabic must have seemed increasingly fraught, given Algeria's turn toward extremism (and away from gender equality). Clarisse Zimra describes Djébar's return to literary publication in 1980 within the context of "a nationalistic Moslem state predicated on the practice of female silence." See "Writing Woman,"

this most minimal version of the autobiographical pact, we can identify Djébar's later works as autobiographical only by proxy; like Modiano's novels, they combine first person narration with recurring characters (such as the simultaneously awe-inspiring and harsh maternal grandmother) and situations (the end of the narrator's first marriage). Meanwhile, her historical work proves less complicated, at least superficially, if only because it requires no pact other than a referentiality that is consistently supported by a turn to source material; where accuracy is not explicitly guaranteed, myth takes over. Generally speaking, a "typical" post-1980 Djébar novel includes historical writing – chiefly commentary on eyewitness texts – which alternates (or balances out) with chapters of a more personal nature. Certain key questions return frequently: the process of writing, the choice or imposition of language, the act of translation, the clash of cultures, genders, traditions. But *L'amour, la fantasia* marks a privileged moment in this continuum, as a literary space that acknowledges the struggle to say "I" while it preserves a kind of limbo between competing claims on the subject. Whereas *je* emerges with apparent ease in *Vaste est la prison*, and "Regard interdit, son coupé" still privileges *nous*, *L'amour, la fantasia* enacts – repeatedly – a series of negotiations between third and first person.⁵⁵ These first negotiations, which open the novel, set the tone for what follows: another set of negotiations between seemingly contradictory or conflicting elements.

68. See also Rachel Gabara, *From Split to Screened Selves: French and Francophone Autobiography in the Third Person* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 97-98 for more on Djébar's relationship to both French and Arabic during the 1970s, as well as Djébar's own essay collection, *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*.

⁵⁵ Murdoch argues that this hesitation between the first and third person suggests the narrator's struggle to define her own identity in the face of biculturalism and patriarchy, alienation and displacement. See "Rewriting Writing: Identity, Exile, and Renewal in Assia Djébar's *L'amour, la fantasia*," *Yale French Studies* 83 (1992): 85-87.

L'Amour, la fantasia: *Toward a Subjective History*⁵⁶

Before the publication of *L'amour, la fantasia*, Djébar had announced that she was working on an autobiography, which she eventually published with the generic subheading *roman*. The chapter "Fillette arabe allant pour la première fois à l'école" opens the novel, then, in seeming conflict with the previously-announced autobiographical nature of the project: "Fillette arabe allant pour la première fois à l'école, un matin d'automne, main dans la main du père. Celui-ci, un fez sur la tête, la silhouette haute et droite dans son costume européen, porte un cartable, il est instituteur à l'école française. Fillette arabe dans un village du Sahel algérien."⁵⁷ Whereas a "classic" autobiography might begin, à la Rousseau, by evoking childhood and its role in the development of the autobiographer's personality, Djébar's autobiography begins, oddly enough, by mentioning the "fillette" who must surely be her, only to immediately turn away from her to focus on the figure beside her. Thus we are given the details of the father's contradictory attire – a fez combined with a European suit, both of which he wears with a pride that can be easily surmised from his perfectly erect posture. He is bringing his daughter to the French school where he teaches; not only does he teach there, but in Djébar's prose, he clearly identifies as a schoolteacher in the French educational system ("il est instituteur à l'école française"). Although not a word is written on the attitude or appearance of the young girl whose life story presumably interests us, we immediately grasp the importance of this first, primal scene (a linguistic

⁵⁶ The notion of a subjective history is particularly pertinent in the case of the Algerian War; several of its historians and analysts (Mohamed Harbi, Frantz Fanon, Assia Djébar, Alice Cherki) were themselves active participants in the struggle. We might compare this relatively high number of actor-historians with the historiography surrounding the Occupation and the AIDS crisis. In the former case, the most prominent historical works emerge from temporally or geographically distant sources (the 1970s, the United States). In the latter case, there is a relative absence of historical texts, perhaps because the crisis killed most of those who were directly implicated, and did not affect those indirectly implicated in the same way as a literal war.

⁵⁷ *L'amour, la fantasia*, 11.

and cultural initiation) as well as its strangeness. Does the intertwined history of Algeria and one of the most important Algerian authors of our time really begin with a trip to French school under her father's auspices?

This *fillette*, this *elle* who enters the text hand-in-hand with her father, will be quickly, but inconsistently supplanted by a first person: "À dix-sept ans, j'entre dans l'histoire d'amour à cause d'une lettre" she writes on the second page, before vacillating between narrative distance ("L'adolescente") and proximity ("il m'a vue monter sur l'estrade").⁵⁸ Although the following autobiographical chapters largely maintain the first person, the third person (designating the narrator) will still "intrude" at key moments in the text, as though to express a difficulty in recounting the self.⁵⁹ The first moment, the entry into the French educational system and thus the father's language, will be followed notably by the entry into marriage. "La future épousee," "la mariée," and "la jeune fille" all stand in for the narrator who reveals the relationship to herself gradually. After four pages of displacement of the first person onto the third, the first person returns, not with *je*, but through the possessive pronouns *ma* and *mon*, affirming less a sense of self than a sense of the narrator's place within a series of family relationships ("ma mère, elle, se trouvait dans un Paris d'hiver et elle n'avait pas à pleurer") and cultural traditions ("mon père n'aurait emprunté aucun burnous de pure laine, tissé par les femmes de la tribu, pour m'enlacer et me faire franchir le seuil").⁶⁰ It is as though the narrator first establishes a distance between herself and the young woman about to be married ("la future épousee," "la mariée"), between herself and the daughter who

⁵⁸ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁹ Touria Khannous writes, "it is only in the last pages of the novel that she is able to finally take on her subjectivity fully by returning to the first person." See Khannous, "Reading Fantasia," 184.

⁶⁰ *L'amour, la fantasia*, 121.

misses her father (“La jeune fille s’aperçut qu’elle souffrait de l’absence du père”⁶¹ implies youth, of course, but also insists on a family relationship – the unmarried daughter – that the perhaps more logical “jeune femme” would not capture). A simple white space within the text itself marks a point of rupture in this miniaturized pronominal journey, from third person, to a sort of mediated first person, to the recurrence of *je* in the text, after the break: “Dans un Paris où les franges de l’insoumission frôlaient ce logis provisoire des noces, je me laissais envahir par le souvenir du père [...]”⁶²

I identify the marriage chapter cited above as a miniature in the sense that it enacts a larger struggle within the text, one that consists in making the transition from third to first person. As noted above, the novel opens with an image of the “fillette arabe” on her first day of school; as the work draws to a close, Djébar will return to this primal scene:

Le père, silhouette droite et le fez sur la tête, marche dans la rue du village; sa main me tire et moi qui longtemps me croyais si fière – moi, la première de la famille à laquelle on achetait des poupées françaises, moi qui, devant le voile-suaire n’avait nul besoin de trépigner ou de baisser l’échine comme telle ou telle cousine, moi qui, suprême coquetterie, puisque, définitivement, j’avais échappé à l’enfermement – je marche, fillette, au-dehors, main dans la main du père.⁶³

Whereas the father retains his importance in the passage, just as he retains his proud stature and his fez, the focus has shifted to the narrator, to the thrice-repeated “moi” who emphasizes her presence in the scene, literally interrupting the sentence that

⁶¹ *L’amour, la fantasia*, 121.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 121-122. The novel enacts the transition between third and first person in Djébar’s writing most vividly, following as it does on the heels of the more discreetly subjective “Regard interdit, son coupé.” To an extent, the novel seems to resolve the very pronominal problem it has posed; Djébar consistently employs *je* throughout the autobiographical chapters of *Vaste est la prison*, with one notable exception: the moments leading up to the narrator’s choice of an adopted child are conveyed in third person and using the name “Isma” (meaning “the name”). Thus the entry into maternity, like marriage, requires a certain amount of literary distance. See *Vaste est la prison*, 313-319.

⁶³ *L’amour, la fantasia*, 239.

describes her first walk to school as though her interruption could alter the course of grammar itself. This recasting of the first paragraph is important because in a sense, it signifies that autobiography has in fact finally occurred; as its generic subtitle *roman* indicates, *L'amour, la fantasia* is less a finished autobiography than an autobiographical process, a kind of writing that enacts a different set of theories about autobiographical writing without ever "achieving" them. The scene's return is also significant because the autobiographer's interruption, her eruption as it were into the grammar of the sentence mirrors her entry into the historical record throughout the intervening pages of the novel.

Those historical chapters contain the same major characteristics of "Regard interdit, son coupé," analyzed above, which were brought into relief thanks to the compact format of the essay. The initial apparent objectivity of the historical narrator which is consistently undercut, the sense of immediacy created by use of the historical present, the reliance on first person eyewitness testimonies in the recreation of historical events all continue to define the style of these chapters. The major difference in narrative style is actually a question of perspective; whereas the first person plural clearly dominates the earlier text ("qui nous l'écrit," "qui nous fait toujours nous interroger," "N'entretenant avec nous, spectateurs, aucun rapport," "Devrions-nous pleurer," "ne cessent de nous dire," etc.), the first person singular makes an appearance that is notable only for its rarity ("je me dis," "me paraît," "je ne vois," "je n'espère"). Meanwhile, the earlier text closes with the combined image of "la porte ouverte en plein soleil,"⁶⁴ that is to say a literal and figurative opening, and a final shift to the first person that will be maintained throughout the historical chapters of *L'amour, la fantasia*.

⁶⁴ *Femmes d'Alger*, 263.

The historical chapters alternate with the autobiographical chapters in a kind of partnership, or coupling. Although we might reasonably assume that the autobiographical chapters rely on a subjective form of knowledge whereas the historical chapters are influenced by a tradition of objective, almost scientific discourse, Djébar constantly works to emphasize the permeability of these artificial narrative barriers. As Rachel Gabara writes, "Djébar has added to personal narrative, normally in the first person, a third-person historical voice, and to historical narrative, normally in the third person, a first-person personal voice [...] [h]istoricizing the personal and and personalizing the historical[...]." ⁶⁵ She again insists on the areas of passage or translation between the two, exemplified in *L'amour, la fantasia* by the foregrounding of *genre*. Translating the French word into English, we find a double meaning that lies at the heart of Djébar's subjective history. *Genre*, in French, does not only refer to the genre of a narrative (in this case, a possible opposition between subjective literary non-fiction versus objective historical non-fiction, or a possible affinity between different forms of witnessing or testimonial). It also suggests the English word *gender*, thus hinting at the interconnectedness of the form of the narrative and, in a sense, the form of the narrator (here we might refer to the difference between women's and men's writing, a difference that Djébar constantly complicates without ever allowing it to collapse). In other words, Djébar presents historical narratives that are situated, in terms of the witnesses that are called to attest to the facts (i.e., the sources cited), and the witness who records and interprets them (i.e., the historian-narrator). In this way, the Algerian history that she offers us is a self-conscious narrative of the past that remains resolutely open to the

⁶⁵ For further discussion of the interpenetration of historical and autobiographical voices in *L'amour, la fantasia*, see Gabara's chapter on Djébar, "(Un)Veiling herself? Assia Djébar in *Love, an Algerian Cavalcade*," in *From Split to Screened Selves*, 95-126 (page 104 for the quotation).

reinterpretations of the present and the future. Notably, hers is a historical narrative that implicates the reader in the process of interpreting history.

In her historical chapters, Djébar is explicitly concerned with the viewpoints of her witnesses, repeatedly situating them in their social and historical context. More specifically, she almost always mentions the witness's social position, the position of his testimony with respect to those events that he relates, and, often, what his future will hold in the years following the events and, indeed, following his testimony. These three indicators have the effect not only of destabilizing the historical value attributed to each witness account, but also of critiquing traditional historical chronology and the temporal limits it imposes. In other words, Djébar resituates each text in its context before insisting that the context can always change, and that it is therefore necessary to constantly rewrite (or reread, or rethink) History. An example of this technique can be found in an excerpt from the chapter, "La razzia du capitaine Bosquet, à partir d'Oran." Since it provides one of the most extensive examples of Djébar's historical methodology, I will cite it at length:

Deux hommes écriront le récit de cette expédition : le capitaine Bosquet, que Lamoricière a fait venir d'Alger pour en faire son aide de camp, et le capitaine Montagnac. Le régiment de celui-ci vient d'arriver de Cherchell par mer, le 14 de ce mois.

Les deux officiers, chacun ignorant tout de l'autre, entretiennent une correspondance familiale, grâce à laquelle nous les suivons en témoins-acteurs de cette opération. Avec eux, nous revivons toutes les marches guerrières de cet automne 1840 : lettres que reçoit la mère du futur maréchal Bosquet (il sera un héros de la guerre de Crimée, vingt ans plus tard), épîtres à l'oncle ou à la sœur de Montagnac (lui que la défaite de Sidi Brahim transformera, cinq ans après, en martyr). La publication posthume de ces écrits entretient le prestige de ces auteurs, alors qu'ils décrivent le ballet de la conquête sur notre territoire.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ *L'amour, la fantasia*, 62-63.

In this passage, Djébar insists on the historical role played by both men during the events and the time of their writing. Further, she mentions their future “prestige” as well as the posthumous publication of their writing, two elements that might affect the way we read them today. By situating these witnesses that she takes up in her text, Djébar simultaneously reminds us of our situation as readers of their accounts. Her comments on their accounts, the questions that she asks herself further serve to implicate her in the production of History. In this way, she emphasizes the subjectivity of History such as it is written and read; she renders it “literary” by exposing the scaffolding of historical production. Succinctly stated, she shows us the author and the reader at work. Just as Djébar situates herself as a reader in the “historical” chapters of *L’amour, la fantasia*, she situates herself as a writer of her “personal” history in the autobiographical chapters. While she does not bring the same level of criticism to her own account, she is nonetheless careful to contextualize her memories, and by critiquing the historical witnesses, she opens her own witness account to the critical eye of her readers.

Literary and historical genres thus find themselves mixed here in a series of mutually-supporting, alternating chapters. This confusion of genre, with its common base of eyewitness account or first person narrative, is accompanied by another confusion of *genre*, or gender. While Djébar’s critics generally insist on the openly feminist quality of her project, it is important to recall the entanglement (*enchevêtrement* or *enlacement*) of bodies that recurs frequently in her text. At a structural level, the first two parts of the book consist in an alternation between autobiographical and historical chapters, as I have already noted. In the autobiographical chapters, it is primarily a question of cloistered women who interpellate each other within a closed space. In the historical chapters, meanwhile, we find historical witness accounts, most of which were recorded by French men. By alternating these predominantly feminine and masculine

parts, Djébar juxtaposes them in a sort of literary caress. At the level of content, she insists from the beginning of the autobiographical sections on writing as a means of linking men and women (she attaches special importance to love letters that have been sent and received): "A dix-sept ans, j'entre dans l'histoire d'amour à cause d'une lettre," the narrator explains. And, a bit later, "Dans cette amorce d'éducation sentimentale, la correspondance secrète se fait en français: ainsi, cette langue que m'a donnée le père me devient entremetteuse et mon initiation, dès lors, se place sous un signe double, contradictoire."⁶⁷ Desire is thus expressed in French, which becomes problematic in the chapters on the conquest, in which Djébar describes the military confrontation in a way that evokes the sexual act. In the beginning, there is a flirtation: "Ce 13 juin 1830, le face à face dure deux, trois heures et davantage, jusqu'aux éclats de l'avant-midi. Comme si les envahisseurs allaient être les amants!" The two sides would find themselves "dans l'aveuglement d'un coup de foudre mutuel."⁶⁸ Djébar describes the ensuing struggle in passionate terms: it is a "premier baiser de la mort," a "corps à corps," an "étreinte figée."⁶⁹ This is not simply the story of conquerors and conquered; the relationship between the two sides remains rather fluid: "Est-ce le viol, est-ce l'amour non-avoué, vaguement perçu en pulsion coupable, qui laissent errer leurs fantômes dans l'un et l'autre des camps, par-dessus l'enchevêtrement des corps, tout cet été 1830?"⁷⁰ Having already established a link between desire and the French language with regard to her adolescent love letters, Djébar does not break this connection in the historical chapters. Desire, for her narrator, is expressed in French, so the conquest remains imbued with desire in her description of it. She paints a picture of forbidden love, a prohibition to

⁶⁷ *L'amour, la fantasia*, 12.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 16-17.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

write about that love (whether she is referring to a young man with his love letters or to an enemy soldier), which results in an even fiercer desire to write about it. In these first sections of *L'amour, la fantasia*, then, we find the figure of "L'Algérienne," the representation of Algerian womanhood, constantly undercut and destabilized as the voice of the narrator mixes and modifies French and/or masculine voices. In the third section, she continues to engage critically, if implicitly, with this monolithic conception of Algerian womanhood by responding artistically to Frantz Fanon's famous depiction of Algerian women's role in the liberation movement.

A Dialogue with Fanon

In the third section of *L'amour, la fantasia*, Djébar begins recounting the life stories of various women who participated in the Algerian independence movement; she will continue to reflect on her role as a transmitter of these gendered war biographies, just as she often paused to consider her role as an interpreter of history in those chapters dedicated to the country's colonization. Directly addressing one of the women, Chérifa, she writes, "Les mots que j'ai cru te donner s'enveloppent de la même serge de deuil que ceux de Bosquet ou de Saint-Arnaud. En vérité, ils s'écrivent à travers ma main, puisque je consens à cette bâtardise, au seul métissage que la foi ancestrale ne condamne pas: celui de la langue et non celui du sang."⁷¹ At a grammatical level, this short paragraph contains an irresolvable ambiguity, one that is key to understanding the tensions in Djébar's work. At first glance, "ils s'écrivent à travers ma main" seems to refer to "Les mots que j'ai cru te donner," which reads as a simple description of writing as a physical act; in other words, "the words are written through my hand." Such a reading implies a certain lack of agency on the part of the author; we might imagine her sitting, pen in hand, listening attentively to Chérifa's story and carefully transcribing it, word for word.

⁷¹ *L'amour, la fantasia*, 161.

Given Djébar's careful attention to the nuances of language, however, and her insistence on the acts of translating, interpreting, and mediating; given her frequent commentary on the losses and gains sustained in the process of transporting a written or oral text across languages and cultures, such a statement seems almost disingenuous. A secondary meaning emerges: rather than referring to the subject of the first sentence, "les mots que j'ai cru te donner," "ils" could in fact refer to the other words, "ceux de Bosquet ou de Saint-Arnaud." Such an interpretation conjures up an entirely different image: that of a ghostly Bosquet or Saint-Arnaud writing through Djébar's narrator, taking hold of her hand as she records their words, almost against her will. Furthermore, this reading of the sentence explicitly links the use of Bosquet and Saint-Arnaud's words to the use, more generally, of their language. From this angle, writing in French means writing certain words, words that are almost predetermined due to the finite nature of language and the prescriptions of culture. It means, perhaps, writing as a man, or, more vexingly, writing as a conqueror. But for all that, the image is not necessarily an exclusively negative one: the voices of the past are whispering through Djébar's narrator, who finds herself the receptor of a masculine language which, through her pen, epitomizes the act of crossing over or through: could we not understand this translation of the historical record and its source material as a sort of transgendered writing?

As I argued earlier in my discussion of "Regard interdit, son coupé," Djébar's turn to historico-autobiographical writing included, in conjunction with abundant citation of primary source material, an underlying and sustained reference to Frantz Fanon's writings on Algeria. The incorporation of first person witness texts echoes Fanon's turn to the accounts of his traumatized patients in *Les Damnés de la terre*. Although women are present in this text, their stories are primarily mediated through the male patients who are attempting to come to terms with the violence perpetrated

against their loved ones, notably the rape of wives.⁷² Meanwhile, Fanon's short text written in the midst of the revolution, "L'Algérie se dévoile," theorizes the role of the veil in Algerian culture and in the liberation movement, and by extension the role of women as potential participants in that culture and in that movement. Given critics' tendency to frame Djébar's work in terms of its attention to women's experience, thereby granting her exemplary status as a female Algerian writer, I believe it is fruitful to examine the implicit dialogue⁷³ her text establishes with Fanon's earlier analysis. In crafting the historical chapters based on eyewitness accounts, Djébar recycles the vocabulary of her male witnesses, in a sense allowing them to "write through" her hand. In the case of Fanon, that recycling leads to Djébar's engagement with Fanon's construction of "l'Algérienne" and "l'Algérien," and his conception of Algeria as feminine and highly sexualized. In fact, the act of recycling vocabulary in this manner might best be understood as another form of translation, one in which the words gain another, added meaning by virtue of being repeated in a different context.

The majority of such recycled language bears either sexual or theatrical connotations (e.g., Algeria is a woman that was raped, the Conquest is a ballet or a "spectacle"), and thus we might interpret its reuse by a female, Algerian author-narrator as ironic. But as stated above, the integration of these words and expressions cannot be merely ironic, because they set the tone for Djébar's historical chapters *before* she cites her sources. Thus on page 14, a description of the city of Algiers, barely pre-attack:

"Devant l'impossible flotte qui déchire l'horizon, la Ville Imprenable se dévoile,

⁷² See *Les Damnés de la terre*, 244-268. Only two of the psychiatric cases described directly involve women (Algerian refugees and a French woman). The French woman relates part of her story in the first person, and is quoted; the Algerian refugees, however, are described by Fanon using the third person plural. While cultural considerations surely informed Fanon's access to these women, the absence of first person narrative voices among Algerian women in his work serves to highlight the novelty of Djébar's project.

⁷³ Touria Khannous has also described the relationship between Fanon and Djébar's texts as a dialogue: "Djébar's novel [*L'amour, la fantasia*] is in a constant dialogue with Fanon." See "Reading Fantasia," 183.

blancheur fantomatique, à travers un poudroïement de bleus et de gris mêlés. Triangle incliné dans le lointain et qui, après le scintillement de la dernière brume nocturne, se fixe adouci, tel un corps à l'abandon, sur un tapis de verdure assombrie." Further down the same page, Djébar cites the witness Amable Matterer, writing, "Il regarde et il écrit, le jour même: 'J'ai été le premier à voir la ville d'Alger comme un petit triangle blanc couché sur le penchant d'une montagne.'" On the following page, she invokes "le désordre des hamacs suspendus en vrac, entre les pièces d'artillerie et les batteries sur le qui-vive, telle des bêtes de cirque prêtes à la cérémonie derrière un halo de projecteurs, la foule des futurs envahisseurs regarde [...] Des milliers de spectateurs, là-bas, dénombrent sans doute les vaisseaux"⁷⁴ before citing, chapters later, the Baron Barchou and his "cirque immense, peuplé à milliers de spectateurs."⁷⁵ "Qui dès lors constitue le spectacle, de quel côté se trouve vraiment le public?"⁷⁶ is followed by the words of an anonymous Spanish witness who will describe a particularly brutal French military action as an "'Horrible spectacle!'"⁷⁷ If the same words, and related vocabulary, reappear frequently in the novel, both before and after they are cited, their initial appearance in Chapter I, the novel's first historical chapter, emphasizes their importance. Certainly, the idea that the French responded to colonial otherness through artwork and its metaphors recurs frequently throughout Djébar's *oeuvre*, whether materially (the *poche* editions of *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, *L'amour, la fantasia*, and *Vaste est la prison* feature paintings by artists such as Delacroix and Tissier on their covers) or metaphorically (the Conquest is a ballet, an opera, a circus, a painting, a scene, a spectacle, a symphony, and

⁷⁴ *L'amour, la fantasia*, 15.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

so on). Thus we find the vocabulary of creation in the midst of destruction, as Djébar seems to ask herself what can be salvaged.

Fanon's article on veiled Algeria provides an important subtext to the first historical chapter and continues to mark the subsequent chapters with its highly sexualized and/or gendered vocabulary. In the excerpt cited above, which comes at the beginning of Chapter I, "la Ville Imprenable se dévoile" evokes Fanon's "L'Algérie se dévoile," in which the feminized, sexualized Algeria (or its synecdochical stand-in, Algiers) unveils itself and opens itself up ("tel un corps à l'abandon") for an encounter ("affrontement," "confrontation," "coup de foudre mutuel") that will vacillate between love ("comme si les envahisseurs allaient être des amants!") and rape ("la proie n'est même pas approchée"). Djébar will continue to develop this alternation, or confusion, between desire and violence throughout the novel, characterizing the Conquest as a "corps à corps," an "embrassement," an "étreinte figée," a "possession véritable," and a "copulation obscène" within the space of Chapter II's five pages. "Est-ce le viol, est-ce l'amour non avoué, vaguement perçu en pulsion coupable, qui laissent errer leurs fantômes dans l'un et l'autre des camps, par-dessus l'enchevêtrement des corps, tout cet été 1830?" the narrator asks; the question will remain unanswered, although it seems reasonable to respond, *both*, as later expressions serve to further personify an Algeria that is at once conquered and seduced: "la gloire du séducteur, le vertige du violeur"⁷⁸ coexist, such that "la pénétration étrangère ne peut plus être évitée, sinon par une résistance désespérée."⁷⁹

In his essay, meanwhile, Fanon deploys a similar vocabulary and personification to different ends; his goal, of course, is to explain the Algerian independence movement

⁷⁸ *L'amour, la fantasia*, 56.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

in his capacity of ardent supporter, and encourage the resistance of Algerian men – and women – through the resumed or continued wearing of the veil by women. For practical, militant purposes, his text requires the use of certain fixed concepts in order to function. Opening with a similar image of veiled Algeria, he writes, “La femme prise dans son voile blanc, unifie la perception que l’on a de la société algérienne.”⁸⁰ Just as the whiteness of the veil evokes innocence and purity, the veil itself is emptied of any repressive significance; it becomes a symbol of resistance to the colonizer even as its meaning within Algerian society is occulted or denied: “Having refused the colonial’s desire to invest the veil with an essentialist meaning (the sign of women’s servitude), [Fanon] bends over backward to insist on the veil’s semiotic innocence in Algerian society,” writes Anne McClintock.⁸¹ In other words, according to Fanon, the veil did not signify a potential tool of repression prior to the invention of a French colonial discourse that condemned it, calling for a calculated “liberation” of Algerian women. Fanon locates the origin of this attitude in contemporary French sociological studies that emphasized the need, in a time of armed conflict, to use women’s influence as a means to control Algerian men. According to Fanon,

Dans le programme colonialiste, c’est à la femme que revient la mission historique de bousculer l’homme algérien. Convertir la femme, la gagner aux valeurs étrangères, l’arracher à son statut, c’est à la fois conquérir un pouvoir réel sur l’homme et posséder les moyens pratiques, efficaces, de déstructurer la culture algérienne.⁸²

Here, Fanon seems to be ascribing “the Algerian woman” a very limited and limiting role, one with very little agency. Furthermore, he explicitly valorizes the “culte du

⁸⁰ “L’Algérie se dévoile,” 17.

⁸¹ McClintock, “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Gender, Race, and Nationalism,” in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 97.

⁸² “L’Algérie se dévoile,” 20.

voile”⁸³ as a means of resisting the “liberating” efforts of colonial authorities, and as a way of preserving a specifically Algerian cultural identity. Implicit in Fanon’s argument is the idea that a woman who unveils herself in the context of an armed struggle for independence necessarily declares her allegiance to the French (unless of course her unveiling serves a strictly revolutionary purpose, allowing her to “infiltrate” European society). According to T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting, the Algerian woman “is instantaneously objectified, degraded, in the European male psyche at the moment of her unveiling, her liberation, her entering into ‘subjectivity.’”⁸⁴ “L’Algérienne” as constructed in Fanon’s text is thus made into a sort of prize, subject to competing claims from two masculine cultural systems: traditional Algerian society, and European colonial society. In “L’Algérie se dévoile,” these two systems fight each other for control of “L’Algérienne.” She becomes a territory to possess, much like the literal land of Algeria.⁸⁵ As Sharpley-Whiting observes, Fanon does ascribe a certain importance to women’s contributions, praising their revolutionary action. Yet, as Anne McClintock eloquently reminds us, “Theirs is a *designated* agency – an agency by invitation only [...] Female militancy, in short, is simply a passive offspring of male agency and the structural necessity of the war.”⁸⁶ Whenever the veil is concerned, it is “le colonisé” who resists the colonizers’ attempts to unveil Algerian women. Furthermore, when Fanon alludes to the role played by women in the revolution, he always presents their actions as the result of a decision made (in French “prise,” or taken) by men. For example,

⁸³ “L’Algérie se dévoile,” 29.

⁸⁴ Sharpley-Whiting, *Frantz Fanon: Conflicts and Feminisms* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 68.

⁸⁵ Touria Khannous ascribes the conflation of nation/land and woman to Fanon’s revolutionary enthusiasm: “Fanon is so thrilled about women’s revolutionary agency that he risks replicating in his analysis the nationalist fetishistic rhetoric that often links the decolonized nation to the figure of the woman.” See Khannous, “Rereading Fantasia,” 178-180 (178 for the quotation).

⁸⁶ See McClintock, “No Longer in a Future Heaven,” 98.

Les caractéristiques révolutionnaires de ce combat, la nécessité d'une clandestinité absolue obligent le militant à tenir sa femme dans une ignorance absolue [...] La décision d'engager les femmes comme éléments actifs dans la Révolution algérienne ne fut pas prise à la légère [...] La femme doit répondre avec autant d'esprit de sacrifice que les hommes.⁸⁷

The decision is *prise* (taken), just as the veiled woman was "taken" in the phrase I quoted earlier. Significantly, Fanon avoids openly stating *who* "takes" this decision, or, by extension, this woman, this land.

By insisting on the "attitude totalement révolutionnaire"⁸⁸ of women's integration into the Algerian revolution, Fanon ultimately reinscribes the same pure oppositions, the same monolithic entities. There is no place for complex relationships between men and women in his vision of the revolution, as described in "L'Algérie se dévoile." As he writes, "Plus précisément, les phénomènes de contre-acculturation doivent être compris comme l'impossibilité organique dans laquelle se trouve une culture, de modifier l'un quelconque de ses types d'exister, sans en même temps repenser ses valeurs les plus profondes, les modèles les plus stables."⁸⁹ In other words, the revolution is not the right time to call existing values and models into question, even if "la volonté de mettre [la femme algérienne] à portée de soi, d'en faire un éventuel objet de possession"⁹⁰ is, in the end, a preoccupation not solely limited to the French colonizers.

From this perspective, even if Fanon refuses to maintain a certain ambiguity in his analysis, we might conclude that his efforts to simplify the terminology, perhaps out of a pragmatic desire for clarity, are surely an effect of his revolutionary engagement.

⁸⁷ "L'Algérie se dévoile," 30-31.

⁸⁸ "Ibid.," 31.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 23.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 26.

That said, it seems pertinent to return to *L'amour, la fantasia* in order to assess the ways in which Djébar complicates the notion of "l'Algérienne" as a territory to conquer, a victim to violate. The literal and symbolic violation, or rape (*viol*) of Algerian women is accompanied, in Djébar's text, by a symbolic rape of the countryside and its people. Here again, we are not far from Fanon's vocabulary, as he imagines forced unveiling in similar terms:

Les responsables du pouvoir, après chaque succès enregistré, renforcent leur conviction dans la femme algérienne conçue comme support de la *pénétration* occidentale dans la société autochtone. Chaque voile rejeté découvre aux colonialistes *des horizons jusqu'alors interdits*, et leur montre, *morceau par morceau, la chair algérienne mise à nu* [...] Chaque nouvelle femme algérienne dévoilée annonce à l'occupant une société algérienne aux systèmes de défense en voie de dislocation, *ouverte et défoncée*. Chaque voile qui tombe, chaque corps qui se libère de l'étreinte traditionnelle du haïk, chaque visage qui s'offre au regard hardi et impatient de l'occupant, exprime en négatif que *l'Algérie commence à se renier et accepte le viol du colonisateur*.⁹¹

For Djébar, however, the idea of "accepting" one's own rape is extremely complicated. For example, when she unearths the horrifying episode of the El-Kantara caves, during which hundreds of men, women, children, and animals who had taken refuge in the caves were smoked to death by the French army as part of its efforts to colonize the interior in June 1845, she writes that "ces grottes, pendant trois siècles de domination turque, n'avaient jamais réussi à être violées!"⁹² It is almost as though the caves themselves sought out the violent encounter, or as though in their passivity (expressed through the use of passive language), they could have been awaiting their own rape. (Such a statement strikes me as a direct, ironic translation of Fanon's thought, but could be read in multiple – conflicting – ways.) A very different, but just as perplexing example involves the French soldier Bernard and his sexual encounter (love affair?) with

⁹¹ "L'Algérie se dévoile," 24. My emphasis.

⁹² *L'amour, la fantasia*, 88.

a young villager. Succinctly stated, the story goes that Bernard, out in the village, sees a pretty girl who smiles at him when he looks at her. This serves as sufficient pretext for the soldier to make his way to her home at night, hand out provisions to the women who surround her, and then

Le couple se dirige au fond de l'immense pièce, là où l'ombre est de suie. Le cercle des vieilles n'a pas bougé, compagnes accroupies, sœurs du silence, aux pupilles obscurcies fixant le présent préservé: le lac du bonheur existerait-il? [...] Soudain, deux bras frêles lui entourent le cou, une voix commence un discours de mots haletants, de mots chevauchés, de mots inconnus mais tendres, mais chauds, mais chuchotés. Ils coulent droit au fond de son oreille, ces mots, arabes ou berbères, de l'inconnue ardente.⁹³

The ambiguity of the scene is maintained, its meaning held in permanent suspense. Why does this young Algerian woman give her body to the colonizer? Is this a romantic scene, as Bernard claims, or rather a kind of rape? The provisions that serve as payment against the old women's silence might indicate that the young woman cannot freely choose. Elsewhere in the passage, Bernard emphasizes this ambiguity by first wondering whether one of the old women will stab him while he is distracted by the "inconnue," then by reveling, amazed, in her unexpected kisses. At the end of the story, Djébar writes, "Vingt ans après, je vous rapporte la scène, à vous les veuves, pour qu'à votre tour vous regardiez, pour qu'à votre tour, vous vous taisiez. Et les vieilles immobilisées écoutent la villageoise inconnue qui se donne."⁹⁴ Some critics have interpreted this silence, and Djébar's rewriting of the story, as a feminist critique of colonialism and the silence in which it imprisons women. Valérie Orlando, for example, insists that

This brief scene stands as a testament, inscribed in the present, to all female identity. It is a eulogy for all women forgotten, maimed, beaten, raped, and mutilated by war; a reminder to women that they must take charge for their own

⁹³ *L'amour, la fantasia*, 237.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 237.

discourse, never forgetting their sisters, mothers, and grandmothers who are crouched, silenced by fear, in an obscure corner. Assia Djébar does not forget, and she reminds her audience that the scene is, and will be, repeated, until women find the strength to emerge from silence.⁹⁵

While Djébar (and her narrators) profess sympathy for, and involvement in, a feminist project, I hesitate to ascribe a rigid tone of condemnation to this passage. In fact, Orlando's reading of the passage does not account for a key factor: the female protagonist of this vignette is *not* silent. If Bernard, and by extension the reader, does not understand what she is saying, it is indeed a problem, not of silence, but of language. Lacking the presence of a nineteenth-century interpreter to translate, or at least record, the original scene, we cannot determine with certainty whether we are confronted with a degrading scene of colonial violence, or an act of love, or something else entirely. My sense, however, is that the tone of the passage excludes the possibility that we are being asked to witness a "eulogy for all women forgotten, maimed, beaten, raped, and mutilated by war." Rather, from the perspective of a masculine French witness, we are asked to interpret the unknown words, "mais tendres, mais chuchotés, mais chauds" that the "inconnue ardente" offers him. We are offered the image of her arms thrown around the French soldier's neck, her kisses offered, apparently spontaneously and certainly unexpectedly. There is a sense, furthermore, that the scene is somehow private, despite the presence of the "voyeuses" and the reader. They find themselves in the darkest depths of the room, "là où l'ombre est de suite," cloaked in an absolute silence broken only by the words of the "inconnue qui se donne." And while Orlando reads Djébar's version of the scene as a feminist call to her readers, the narrative voice that closes the chapter does not simply condemn the silent old women and their modern counterparts. Rather, she again insists on the warmth and passion of the encounter:

⁹⁵ Orlando, "Women, War, Autobiography, and the Historiographical Metafictional Text," 107. Orlando rereads this scene in *Nomadic Voices of Exile*, 117-119, again insisting on the women, silenced by fear, who crouch in the corners of the room, although she does note the subversive nature of the "inconnue"'s kiss.

“Silence chevauchant les nuits de passion et les mots refroidis, silence des voyeuses qui accompagne, au coeur d’un hameau ruiné, le frémissement des baisers.”⁹⁶ Perhaps, then, this brief scene marks a moment of possibility for the “inconnue ardente” and the French soldier passing through town. “Je me serais cru chez moi,”⁹⁷ the soldier tells his friend later, but in fact this sense of comfort and belonging is illusory; upon waking the next morning, he receives orders to leave the village forever. In this sense, the passage is marked by a deep sense of loss: the loss of the “inconnue”’s words, and a loss best described as the impossibility of any lasting relationship between these two enemies of necessity. In this brief textual moment where one man, or rather one couple, achieves the weight of History itself, we must resist any temptation to simplify along gender or cultural lines in the name of an independent Algeria.

The Oxford English Dictionary lists several accepted definitions for the word “exemplar” that could be, and have been, applied to Assia Djébar and her body of work. She is exemplary, obviously, in the sense that her writing has earned her commendations from a vast array of literary arbiters, and notably that most rarefied of academic worlds, the Académie française. Her work has also been read – wrongly, I believe – as an exemplar of Algerian womanhood. Echoing her penchant for first person narration to the point of autobiography, her own person has been similarly deployed; for many readers faced with a mysterious cultural other, Assia Djébar is, on some level, “the Algerian woman” described so many years ago by Fanon. Reading Fanon with Djébar, however, we realize the extent to which this exemplarity falls flat; based on “L’Algérie se dévoile,” should we understand the unveiled author-narrator of *L’amour, la fantasia* and *Vaste est la prison* as an ally of France versus Algeria? Are we to believe

⁹⁶ *L’amour, la fantasia*, 237.

⁹⁷ *Idem*.

that she has been fooled by a propaganda campaign targeting her only for her influence on others? Are we then to ignore her patient excavations into forgotten histories, her detailed and nuanced reconstructions which, by blending autobiography and historiography, allow questions to remain open and thus create, in her work, the small space of “air libre” that she describes as her goal?⁹⁸ Assia Djébar’s entry into autobiography cannot be reduced to an act of “parler pour” or “parler sur,” both actions which she explicitly rejects in her preface to *Femmes d’Alger dans leur appartement*.⁹⁹ Indeed, it seems clear that her choice to write in the first person, between languages, cultures, genders, and allegiances of all kinds constitutes an expression of profound singularity. In the context of an Algeria that is still haunted by the legacy of different forms of extremism (colonialist and nationalist), perhaps this is the only way to write without further imposing a false unity, or further erasing (however unintentionally) the various cultural notes that compose the author’s own identity. In the next chapter, I will examine a literary identity that was also forcefully confronted with historical demands, with very different consequences. At the end of his career and life, Hervé Guibert was called to account for his representation of the AIDS crisis in his work; this art-for-art’s-sake author suddenly found himself navigating the imperatives of social and political positioning in a time of crisis. Unlike Djébar, his obligatory engagement with history involved a certain amount of dehistoricization in his work, as he sought to position himself for posterity amongst a cohort of literary peers.

⁹⁸ See *Vaste est la prison*, 320: “La liberté est un mot bien trop vaste! Soyons plus modestes, et désireuses seulement d’une respiration à l’air libre.”

⁹⁹ *Femmes d’Alger*, 9. Mireille Calle-Gruber has also noted Djébar’s efforts to avoid becoming a spokeswoman. See also Calle-Gruber, *Assia Djébar, ou la Résistance de l’écriture*, 26.

3. How to Have Literature in an Epidemic: Hervé Guibert and the Imperatives of AIDS Representation

What does it mean to tell the story of your own death? How do you narrate a crisis that you know you won't survive? These were questions that the French writer Hervé Guibert faced as he sought to reconcile two roles: that of a prolific, unflinching writer of semi-autobiographical narratives, and that of a patient dying at the height of the AIDS crisis in France.¹ In his landmark bestseller, *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* (1990), Guibert revealed his own diagnosis, as well as the AIDS-related death of his friend and mentor, Michel Foucault. As a writer, Guibert found himself caught between the moralizing discourses of a predominantly heterosexual, bourgeois society, and the equally prescriptive activist discourses surrounding the "appropriate" way to represent AIDS. Criticized by professional and amateur readers for his decision to "out" Foucault's cause of death, as well as his highly individualistic (some said narcissistic, others said needlessly horrific) portrayal of his own physical decline, Guibert nonetheless succeeded in writing a bestseller that united thousands of readers in their compassion for the author and rage at his death. In this chapter, I will address Guibert's reception as well as his legacy, his writings as well as their effects, in order to resituate his AIDS writings within a larger historical and more particularly literary context. Guibert's AIDS novels, long the driving force behind critical studies of his work, make the most sense when they are understood as part of a larger *oeuvre*, one that is deeply intertextual and openly resistant to the labels that were applied to its author.² Described

¹ For the purposes of this chapter, I define the "AIDS crisis" essentially in terms of its first wave, from the early 1980s to the early 1990s. This period roughly coincides with Guibert's writing about AIDS as well as the AIDS-inflected events that he narrates in his novels.

² For rich and perceptive studies of Guibert's entire *oeuvre*, see Jean-Pierre Boulé, *Hervé Guibert: Voices of the Self*, trans. J. Fletcher (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999); Ralph Sarkonak, *Angelic Echoes: Hervé Guibert and Company* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); and Arnaud Genon, *Hervé Guibert: vers*

often negatively in terms of his activism (or lack thereof) and relationship to the real-life people who reappeared as fictional characters within his text, Guibert's temporary role as the French face of AIDS was overdetermined by the historical conjuncture in which he found himself. Critics have rightly insisted on the centrality of the AIDS novels to Guibert's work, a centrality that is all the more clear since *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* and its two sequels, *Le Protocole compassionnel* (1991) and *L'Homme au chapeau rouge* (1992) brought widespread renown to the controversial author and at least partially assured his lasting fame (or infamy). I will argue, however, that the AIDS works, and especially the bestselling *A l'ami*, need to be read in dialogue with Guibert's earlier novels in order to be understood as part of a very deliberate and evolving literary project. Ultimately, I will suggest that these once-topical AIDS writings can only now, with the benefit of hindsight, be appreciated as fully literary works. Such a shift in perception marks one of the ways in which the discourses surrounding crises are dependent on historical context, on what can be said (or heard), and at what time.

The title of this chapter claims a specific lineage of popular and critical works that, through their own titles, propose to reconcile the AIDS epidemic with a given object that initially seems incongruous. Texts called "How to Have Sex in an Epidemic," "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," and *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic* all suggest that sex, promiscuity, and theory initially seemed impossible in a moment of crisis that imperiled lives.³ In the end, however, each proves essential. For Paula

une esthétique postmoderne (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007). These essential contributions to the Guibert canon emphasize Guibert's development of a first person narrative voice over time, the deep intertextuality of his body of work, and its postmodernity, respectively.

³ "How to Have Sex in an Epidemic" was a practical pamphlet produced by and for gay men in the early years of the crisis. It is discussed at length in Douglas Crimp's 1987 article, "How to Have Promiscuity in an Epidemic," which suggests that promiscuity, equated with adaptability and a diversity of safer pleasures, might literally be the saving grace of gay men confronted with the AIDS crisis. *How to Have Theory in an*

Treichler, “theory” in this context is something more than an abstract conceptual framework; indeed, she describes it as “another word for intelligence, that is, for a thoughtful and engaged dialectic between the brain, the body, and the world that the brain and the body inhabit.” Her “theory,” then, is both practical and embodied, unlike “the creature disdained by [...] anti-intellectual traditions, including U.S. medicine, for whom theory is defined as that which is devoid of relevance for ‘practice’ and real-life experience.”⁴ Her move to link theory with practice is emblematic of an entire corpus of American AIDS scholarship that privileges an embodied and activist approach to the epidemic and its many cultural representations.⁵ As Douglas Crimp has written, “Anything said or done about AIDS that does not give precedence to the knowledge, the needs, and the demands of people living with AIDS must be condemned.”⁶ His position refers not only to the social and medical realities faced by People with AIDS (PWAs),⁷ but also extends to artistic representations of the AIDS crisis, as his keen criticism of Randy Shilts’ *And the Band Played On* forcefully demonstrates. For critics like Crimp, then,

Epidemic, Paula Treichler’s 1999 collection of essays written throughout the crisis, tracks her evolving theoretical approach to the crisis and its representations.

⁴ *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic*, 2.

⁵ I agree with David Caron’s decision to read Guibert’s work in the light of American theoretical work on AIDS, which he justifies as follows: “Although the representations of AIDS and people living with HIV or AIDS are culturally and historically determined, and have changed over the years, many of the basic observations made by early American and British AIDS critics, the first to deal with the epidemic by critiquing its representations, remain operative today [...] I find it analytically appropriate to read Hervé Guibert [...] with and through the critical concepts that were elaborated around the time his novels were written and published, insofar as such criticism precisely addresses the types of AIDS representations that were predominant then, and which Guibert worked to undermine.” See *AIDS in French Culture*, 96-97.

⁶ Crimp, *Melancholia and Moralism* 240. Emphasis in the original.

⁷ A fundamental difference in approach to the AIDS crisis can be identified in the very terminology assigned to the people living with the syndrome. In the United States, PWA (Person With AIDS) is the favored term among activists, suggesting the primacy of the human being over the disease. The term’s political correctness contrasts sharply with the French equivalent, *sidéen(ne)*, which conflates the person with his or her illness.

literature is part and parcel of what is “said or done about AIDS.” As such, it wields extraordinary power: the power to inform, support, raise awareness, incite hatred, or perhaps even provide a cure.⁸ A literary portrayal of AIDS can either benefit or be used against the very people it aims to represent. How, then, do we have literature in an epidemic? Can we?

A respected photographer and longtime photography critic for *Le Monde*, Guibert was also the author of over twenty novels that usually featured a first-person narrator, also known as “Hervé.” He moved in social circles that included Foucault, Isabelle Adjani, and Roland Barthes, all of whom made appearances in his fictional or nonfictional work, under assumed names or, in the case of Barthes, as the exposed subject of a romantic rejection.⁹ Guibert was known for an intensely personal and subjective writing style, typically assimilated with the autofictional genre, that blurred the boundaries between biographical fact and fiction; clearly an author who took both artistic license and liberties seriously, Guibert wrote novels and collections that were fantastical (*Les Lubies d’Arthur*), pornographic (*Les Chiens*), or almost painfully self-aware (*La Mort propagande*). Even *Des aveugles*, which sparked a debate about the institutional conditions in which blind people were housed and educated and was described as his most “achevé,” or (artistically) successful novel, bears a certain unreal quality, culminating in an ending worthy of a psychological thriller. Guibert’s literary and artistic production of the 1970s and 1980s, meanwhile, was never touted for its engagement with history; and while Guibert’s seemingly obsessive preoccupation with the construction of his own self and the exploration of his own body may have contributed to the limited readership of his literary output during this period, it seems

⁸ I refer here to the title of David Caron’s monograph, *AIDS in French Culture: Social Ills, Literary Cures*.

⁹ I refer here to Guibert’s publication of “Fragments pour H.,” a letter written to him by Barthes. See Sarkonak, *Angelic Echoes*, 28-65, for a discussion of Guibert and Barthes’s personal and textual relationships.

that it did not otherwise damage his career. His books continued to be published by prestigious houses, first the Editions de Minuit, then Gallimard, and he continued to publish his photography critiques in *Le Monde*, take his own photographs, and write, notably as a *pensionnaire* at the Villa Médicis in Rome.

In the mid-1980s, events in Guibert's personal life collided with a historical moment that would ultimately change the direction of his literary and artistic career, as well as its reception. In 1984, Michel Foucault died of AIDS-related illness. By the end of the decade, both Guibert and his longtime lover and best friend, Thierry, would test positive for HIV. It is impossible to know how Guibert's career would have played out had he lived a normal lifespan. Would he have continued to produce highly subjective art for a limited audience, or would he have become famous? It would later be said that Hervé Guibert was "celui par qui le scandale arrive."¹⁰ Would the minor scandals revealed by his writing – his sharing of Foucault's guilty secrets in "Les Secrets d'un homme," or his indictment of his parents as con artists and swindlers in *Mes parents* – have escalated; would he have achieved fame through sheer force of shock value? As it happened, Guibert's personal trajectory and the historical conjuncture of the AIDS crisis in France collided to create a bestselling author and media phenomenon called, like the main characters in his novels, Hervé Guibert. Also like the main characters in his novels, however, this Hervé Guibert cannot be said to entirely correspond to the man, Hervé Guibert (1955-1991), who helped create him.

¹⁰ Quoted in Boulé, "'Tout ange est terrible': À propos des articles nécrologiques sur Hervé Guibert." *L'Esprit Créateur* 37, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 64.

Mes parents, or Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

Given the urgency of the crisis situation in which this art-for-art's-sake author found himself at the end of the 1980s, I propose to begin my discussion of Guibert's works by examining the ways in which Hervé Guibert, author, narrator, and biographical subject, has entered and continues to enter into contact with history, and how his identity was formed both within and against the prevailing culture that he describes in his novels. How does Guibert's narrator relate his past, notably in the highly autobiographical, pre-AIDS novel *Mes parents*? The intertextuality of Guibert's works means that the AIDS novels cannot be read in a vacuum, and *Mes parents* has much to tell us about the author's perception of his place in French society. I will discuss how "Hervé"'s identity is formed in relation to two factors that exerted painful control over his body: first his parents, then the AIDS virus. These issues bear all the more significance and poignancy given the tribute paid to Guibert for over a year, in the months leading up to the twenty-year anniversary of his death in 2011. New accounts from those who knew him, as well as the mainstream release of his first and final film, *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*, a newly-published collection of his photographs honoring the retrospective of his work at the Maison européenne de la photographie, and new critical assessments of his creative output mark a rapidly-expanding and ever-shifting critical terrain. Such a notable return, both the sign of death and a symbol of its defeat, seems particularly fitting in homage to a man who attempted to conquer his own mortality through his writing, and whose posthumous production (particularly the publication of his journal, *Le Mausolée des amants*, in 2001), has reasserted a public presence that remains strong despite the author's disappearance.

As a writer typically associated with the commercially successful yet oft-maligned genre of autofictional writing, Guibert has been accused of a self-interest that

seems all the more blatant given his role as the (fictionalized) main character in the vast majority of his novels. *Mes parents*, the most overtly autobiographical of his works preceding the “AIDS trilogy,” describes the uncomfortably petty-bourgeois childhood and adolescence of a young man known as Hervé or, in one of his happier moments, Hervalino. The work is not a classical autobiography in the sense that it does not establish a pact with the reader, according to Philippe Lejeune’s definition¹¹ and a tradition of French writers starting with Rousseau. There is no promise to speak the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.¹² In fact, *Mes parents* begins with a story so entirely unbelievable that it at first seems indistinguishable from Guibert’s other autofictional or novelistic works, which typically include a fantastical element, a plotline or character element that so exceeds the bounds of possibility as to attain the sublime.¹³

Mes parents opens breathlessly: we find ourselves in the midst of a scene reminiscent of a spy novel, in situ with the recurring characters that populated many of Guibert’s novels, including his elderly aunts, Suzanne and Louise.¹⁴ We begin, then, with Aunt Louise’s desperate quest to destroy scandalous family papers; feeling a premonition of death, she steals the papers from her sister Suzanne’s hiding place in order to erase the shameful past of her niece, Hervé’s mother. She succeeds in her

¹¹ See Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*.

¹² Indeed, the irony of locating classical autobiography’s origins in Rousseau’s *Confessions* is that his promise to speak the truth is undercut by the version of the facts that he relays. Recall that in his preamble to the *Confessions*, Rousseau notes that he filled the gaps in his memory by including only what could have been true, and never what he knew to be false.

¹³ On the relationship of *Mes parents* to the other works in Guibert’s *œuvre*, see Jean-Pierre Boulé, *Hervé Guibert: Voices of the Self*, 145-157. Boulé reads the novel as a sort of precursor to the later first person narratives, or what he calls “romans faux.” He notes that the first person is not consistently maintained in *Mes parents*, especially in those scenes involving the narrator’s sexuality. He further observes that the story is hijacked by the mother’s illness and, by extension, her body. In this sense, *Mes parents* stages the resistance of a body that is ultimately recuperated by the narrator’s petty bourgeois family.

¹⁴ Suzanne and Louise featured prominently in many of Guibert’s photographs as well as his literary and cinematic works. See especially *Les Gangsters*, *Hervé Guibert, photographe*, *Hervé Guibert: Photographies*, and *Suzanne et Louise: roman-photo*. Guibert famously asked Suzanne and Louise for their opinions on suicide in his film, *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur* (they were both vehemently opposed).

attempt and in fact does not die, living to face her sister's wrath upon Suzanne's discovery of what has happened. After some hesitation, Suzanne relates the entire story to Hervé, painting his mother and father as swindlers, con artists who married to legitimize the unborn daughter of a priest, all while enriching themselves thanks to the mother's parents' desire to maintain a façade of social respectability. This lie – the secret paternity of Hervé's sister, the marriage of convenience that founded the supposed respectability of the family unit – proves in turn to be based on a lie, or a secret. Thus Hervé's mother, trying to convince his father to marry her, promises him her parents' money: "Je les ferai chanter, rétorque ma mère, ils détiennent de l'or qu'ils ont acquis de façon illicite, ils nous le laisseront, ou bien nous les dénoncerons!" The tone of her declaration, its enthusiasm or hysteria, is matched by other exclamations in this paragraph, with the mother's unhappy parents shouting, "Vous n'êtes qu'un vaurien, un escroc, filez!" and the mother hissing, "Tu auras cet argent, je te le jure!"¹⁵ The overall feeling of the passage is one of excess, of barely controlled melodrama.

Guibert's narrator presents the story as factual, recording it in the historical present ("le voilà de nouveau à Paris, sans chaussettes de rechange" [...] "les deux complices font le guet tandis que ma mère échange les quelques billets qu'elle a réussi à chouraver contre les étreintes du prêtre"¹⁶) before revealing that it was actually told to him by Suzanne ("A mon retour du Mexique, Suzanne me déballe toute l'histoire"¹⁷). Yet the trustworthiness of Suzanne as a source is immediately called into question.¹⁸ Having

¹⁵ *Mes parents*, 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 14-15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁸ What I have called excess and melodrama is what Marie Darrieussecq describes as the novel's "romanesque," its fraught relationship to verisimilitude that is especially remarkable in the passages that have been "parasité[s]" by Suzanne: "la tante Suzanne hante toute cette introduction par sa version des faits [...] Suzanne, maîtresse du suspens et de l'imaginaire, est ici la voix du romanesque." See "De

presented the basic story and dialogue as though they were factually correct, Hervé gives Suzanne credit (and responsibility) for her further commentary, saying, “Elle me dit que mon père est un gangster, un aventurier, et que c’est la raison pour laquelle il a dû fuir Nice comme un malpropre [...] Je devrais donc avoir à Nice un demi-frère [...] De plus ma soeur n’est pas ma soeur, mais ma demi-soeur, l’enfant du curé. Mes parents se sont mariés sans s’aimer.” The enumeration of facts that Hervé attributes to Suzanne here differs markedly from his own understanding of his family history: listed without transition, liaison, or his commentary, they resist incorporation into the narrative. And Suzanne, perhaps sensing Hervé’s skepticism, begins to offer proof, in an attempt to demonstrate her superior knowledge of the family in its most intimate details: “Parce que tu es juif, tu le sais, vous [the narrator’s nuclear family] êtes des Juifs.” Hervé’s incredulous reaction (“Je tombe de haut”) leads to another round of evidence, increasingly unconvincing, and culminating in Suzanne’s declaration: “une autre preuve que vous êtes juifs: il t’a fait circoncire.” Aunt Louise intervenes: “Tu es circoncis, je m’en souviens, quand tu étais petit, un jour je suis venue chez vous, et tu m’as dit que tu avais un petit bobo, et tu as voulu me le montrer...”¹⁹ The verb “vouloir” used in this tense, the *passé composé*, often suggests an unfulfilled intention or desire, implies that the grammatical subject tried and failed to do something (I tried to reach you, but I couldn’t get through; he meant to see her again, but she had moved away). We are to understand, then, that Hervé’s desire to show Louise his “bobo” was unsuccessful. Still, despite evidence to the contrary, rumor has the power of truth here, recalling Louise’s disposal

l’autobiographie à l’autofiction: *Mes parents*, roman?” in *Le Corps textuel d’Hervé Guibert*, 116-117. See also Bruno Blanckeman, “Hervé Guibert,” 112.

¹⁹ *Mes parents*, 16-17.

of the family papers: “elle ne prend pas la peine de savoir le contenu exact, le souvenir de leur rumeur est déjà trop honteux.”²⁰

We learn later that Suzanne and Louise’s account of the family drama was apparently inaccurate in many respects; at the end of the novel, when it has assumed the form of short, undated journal entries, Hervé’s father will tell him another version of events. But the tension created, first by the theatricality of the passage, then by the increasingly strange and ridiculous forms of proof offered by Hervé’s elderly aunts, points to the central concern of the novel: how to know and express the truth of one’s own body in the face of familial violence in various forms. In this respect, we might say that *Mes parents* is not, strictly speaking, the story of the narrator’s parents, but rather of the gradual, physical separation of his body from the control of his parents.²¹ This story is complicated by the fact that Hervé is gay, but his personal journey does not culminate in the adoption of a substitute family within the Parisian gay community. Rather, Hervé’s journey to adulthood is solitary, marked by the intrusion of hostile figures, or the intervention of friendly ones. It is often hard to distinguish between the two.

Critics working on Hervé Guibert have noted the centrality of the body to his work,²² a centrality that would become all the more apparent with the advent of the AIDS trilogy, but which was apparent as early as *La Mort propagande*, with its lengthy

²⁰ *Mes parents*, 12.

²¹ Ralph Sarkonak, Arnaud Genon, Alex Hughes, and Murray Pratt, among others, have discussed the relationship between Guibert’s literary work and Foucault’s theoretical work on power and resistance at length, with a special focus on the AIDS novels. See Sarkonak, *Angelic Echoes*; Genon, *Hervé Guibert: Vers une esthétique postmoderne*; Hughes, “Configuring the Clinic: Medical Geographies in Guibert and Beauvoir” in *Heterographies: Sexual Difference in French Autobiography* (Oxford: Berg, 1999), 105-136; and Pratt, “A Walk along the side of the Motorway’: AIDS and the Spectacular Body of Hervé Guibert,” in *Gay Signatures: Gay and Lesbian Theory, Fiction and Film in France, 1945-1995*, ed. Owen Heathcote, Alex Hughes, and James S. Williams (Berg: Oxford, 1998), 151-172.

²² See, for example, Sarkonak (ed.), *Le Corps textuel d’Hervé Guibert* (Paris: Lettres Modernes, 1997). In his introduction to the volume, Sarkonak quotes Guibert’s analysis of his work as an “histoire de ce CORPS,” adding, “On se souviendra toujours de Guibert comme d’un corps malade, d’un corps sidéen, ou d’un corps mourant [...] “l’histoire de ce corps” est aussi l’histoire d’un corps écrivant et d’un corpus,” 6.

descriptions of the narrator's attempt to make his every bodily function into an artistic statement. In Guibert's work, it would seem, body and art are intimately related, and both are markers of identity. Yet this identity is clearly contested, not only by the multiplicity of autofictional narrators named Hervé who people Guibert's novels, but also by his awkward role in the family described in *Mes parents*. The previously-cited passage, in which Suzanne and Louise insist that Hervé was both Jewish and circumcised, supports this assessment, along with its conclusion: "Je suis bien forcé à ce moment de me pencher mentalement sur ma verge et de constater que mon gland est plus que recouvert par son prépuce."²³ As Marie Darrieussecq has asserted, this moment plays a crucial role in the elaboration of the narrator's identity: "C'est à partir de ce sexe affirmé comme preuve ultime que tout le livre va se construire comme une lutte pour la parole, une lutte pour l'autonomie face au parental en général [...] et une lutte pour la sexualité adulte et différente."²⁴ The body serves here as a kind of evidence: of difference, of similarity, of complementarity. For the aunts, it proves religious or ethnic difference; for the young Hervé, it proves difference from his peers (his concave chest perceived as a fatal flaw) or similarity to his father (they share a similar skin variation on their back). His concave chest complements the protruding chest of a rival. And his discovery of the difference between his father's naked body and his own foreshadows the narrator's anxiety about his identity as the gay son of straight parents who seem primarily concerned with a superficial image of petty bourgeois respectability. This scene follows the narrator's recounting of a medical problem that required his father to clean young Hervé's penis regularly, or risk infection:

Mon père a tant et tant de fois vu et touché ma fontaine que je demande à voir la sienne. Il rechigne. J'insiste. Il se soumet. J'ai les yeux fixés sur son pantalon, il

²³ *Mes parents*, 16.

²⁴ Darrieussecq, "De l'autobiographie à l'autofiction," 118.

ouvre sa braguette, et à ce moment-là je vois quelque chose que je n'ai plus jamais revu de ma vie: une sorte de bête annelée et bondissante, sanguine, tire-bouchonnée et crue, un boudin rose terminé par une massue en forme de cône [...] Je vois une pièce d'anatomie. Je vois comme en superposition et en modèle réduit ce nerf de bœuf vernissé qu'il a rapporté des abattoirs et qu'il posera étrangement sur sa table de chevet.²⁵

The idea that the narrator sees something that he will never see again underscores the fundamental difference between his father's anatomy and his own, his father's sexual organ and his own, his father's sexuality and his own, his father's desire and his own. Whereas the narrator's father sees potential for change in the differences between his body (and its desires) and those of his son, Hervé remains unconvinced. Any attempt at minimizing the difference between father and son, as inscribed in their very bodies, is dismissed as a lie, as we see in the case of the narrator's chest deformity. "Mon père me ment," he writes, "il me dit que ce creux dans la poitrine, il l'a eu aussi, mais qu'il s'est comblé avec l'âge, et surtout avec l'exercice."²⁶ In other words, the narrator's father believes that his son's difference could be erased with effort, with exertion. The father pushes him to develop his chest, as he will later push him to develop his sexuality. "Tu dois passer maintenant à autre chose," he informs his son, who has just come out of the closet, "il est certes plus difficile de séduire que de se laisser séduire, mais c'est à toi maintenant d'accomplir noblement ton rôle de garçon auprès d'une jeune fille."²⁷ The difficulty of the enterprise is thus itself presented as part of its value; from the father's perspective, his son is simply lazy, underdeveloped. "Les garçons c'est bien, mais les filles c'est encore mieux," he will observe later,²⁸ as though

²⁵ *Mes parents*, 59.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 119

the imagined transition from homosexuality to heterosexuality corresponds to the self-betterment that is one of his own chief concerns as an *arriviste*.

Indeed, the narrator's father, like his mother, is concerned throughout the novel with how to better his situation through any means. His personal struggle includes acquiring the proper HLM apartment (with the desired southern exposure), the proper job, the right material objects, all of which the narrator finds repulsive. Part of "arriving," in this sense, means controlling or constricting consumption of every kind. For the father, this means adopting a sometimes extreme frugality; the narrator's childhood activities are often explained in relation to their cost. His parents take him to the theater, sparking a lifelong passion, because his sister received reduced-fare tickets at school;²⁹ his father demands that the entire family wake and prepare to leave on vacation at three-thirty in the morning because he secretly wants to avoid paying for an extra night of lodging;³⁰ they wind up staying in a reception hall for five francs because the father pleads desperation to a night watchman.³¹

The father's obsession with money is moreover expressed in his monetary gifts to his son and his reference to those gifts. "Dans la correspondance au père on ne trouverait que des histoires d'argent," Hervé writes, "de brefs remerciements, ainsi: 'Je te remercie de ton chèque de cinq cents francs qui m'a permis d'acheter trois caleçons américains bigarrés, une eau de toilette et un billet de train pour l'île d'Elbe...'"³² His interactions with his young adult son are punctuated by an exchange of money. Hervé's consumption of goods is in this way brokered by his father, who wants him to buy

²⁹ *Mes parents*, 40.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

³² *Ibid.*, 129.

decent shoes in order to present a more suitable image. It is a form of accounting³³: a monetary gift followed by a description of how the money has been used, as cited above. “[Je] pense, perfidement, que cet argent donné par mon père me servira à acheter un corps, un sexe,”³⁴ Hervé writes; it is a line subject to potentially contradictory readings. The first interpretation, that Hervé intends to pay for a prostitute, serves as a clear rejection of the father’s financial accounting and “moralisme de l’argent” as Hervé calls it elsewhere.³⁵ But it also refers back to the father’s own project: with this money, Hervé will buy those objects that will allow him to appear as his father desires; by buying new shoes, for example, he will be buying a certain image, and by extension a new body, a new sex for himself. This reading of Hervé’s phrase allows us to better grasp the stakes of the question, “Quel est ce biscornu et inutile besoin de leur dire que je les déshérite, moi qui ne possède rien?”³⁶ that he asks himself after delivering a letter of disinheritance to his parents, to be opened only in the case of his death. This disinheritance, although symbolic, will require no explanation for his parents, who speak a language of financial consumption that differs markedly from that of their son.

Similarly, control over the narrator’s body operates through control of his consumption. The difference between what the narrator wants to consume, that is to say quite literally ingurgitate, and what his parents choose to impose on his body, is striking. In a memorable episode at the beginning of the novel, the father, home from his job as a slaughterhouse veterinarian, forces his unwilling children to eat fresh calf

³³ Bruno Blanckeman compares their relationship to an accounting ledger, writing, “Lorsqu’il évoque le livre de comptes que le père oblige la mère à tenir, il semble designer son propre récit. Guibert répertorie les souvenirs selon un système d’acquets – les influences parentales – et de dépenses – la décision de sa propre personnalité: il tient ses comptes.” See Blanckeman, “Hervé Guibert,” 92.

³⁴ *Mes parents*, 121.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 147.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 109.

sweetbreads. “Il faut les manger,” Hervé explains. “Une fois ma sœur et moi nous devons ingurgiter des ris de veau, mon père pose sa montre sur la table et nous donne cinq minutes pour finir nos assiettes: les gifles pleuvent, nous vomissons la moelle blanche et nous la remastiquons avec nos larmes et nos morves.”³⁷ The children are thus forced to ingest what their very bodies have rejected, to the point of confusing it with their own secretions. In other words, this disgusting food imposed by the father is to become a part of themselves, indistinguishable from themselves. And indeed, Hervé sympathizes with the slaughtered animal as though he were that animal; this becomes clear when he visits the slaughterhouse with his father: “mon père se saisit d’un piston en acier et m’explique que c’est comme ça qu’on les tue, en appuyant le pistolet sur leur crâne [...] et aussitôt je sens le piston froid sur mon front, et cette barre d’acier hérissée de limaille traverse ma cervelle.”³⁸ This sensation of being the slaughtered animal sheds new light on the earlier scene: it is as though the narrator’s father is forcing Hervé to cannibalize himself; in a word, to self-annihilate. “Il n’en finit pas de digérer la nourriture maternelle,”³⁹ Hervé says of himself as a young adult, dissociating from the person that visits his parents, sleeps under their roof, eats their food, as seen by his temporary abandonment of the first person. “Chaque fois que je vois ma mère, je sais qu’elle va parler de nourriture, et cela me désespère,” he adds.⁴⁰ It is clear that his body is fueled and fed by an entirely different form of sustenance.

Young Hervé, meanwhile, wishes to literally consume inedible objects, items that his parents do not recognize as food. Of his prized marble collection, he says, “Les billes,

³⁷ *Mes parents*, 23.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

je les aime tant et j'en ai tant gagné que je pourrais m'en emplir la bouche et tout le cordon intestinal, n'être plus qu'un bonhomme de billes."⁴¹ He similarly describes the early memory of a favorite bunting that he wore as a baby:

[...] c'est mon burnous, avec mes gencives j'ai défait ses coutures, il me ceint, je m'en enveloppe, je m'en nettoie, je m'y écoule, je le lèche, je le suce, je m'y frotte, je disparaissais sous lui, j'aime y étouffer dans son odeur de pelote et de bouillie, je le dévore, il part en charpie, plus il s'abîme plus je l'aime, plus je m'y accroche, je hurle quand on veut me le retirer en me présentant un burnous neuf puant de propreté, je passe sans le savoir avec ce burnous mes dernières nuits d'amour fou, c'est dans mon ventre qu'il faudrait le cacher et le sauver puisqu'il m'a si bien servi de ventre, c'est mon petit jumeau plat de laine, nous nous embrassons collés l'un à l'autre, je lui pisse dessus et il en rit, un matin je m'éveille affreusement nu, la peau retournée opérée de sa peau [...]

In the language of this passage, the bunting serves multiple roles: second skin, double, romantic partner, all of which will be proscribed and destroyed by the narrator's parents, "passé au vide-ordures"⁴² like the bunting itself and the rest of the household waste.

Underlying this drama of radically different desires and incompatible consumptions is the idea that someone else is responsible for the disjunction between Hervé's parents and their children. In his sister's case, it was purportedly her classmate Laurence who led her astray, inspiring her to wear copious makeup and revealing clothes: "Ma mère va nettoyer le visage de ma sœur sous un robinet, écharpille ses bas et menace l'innomable Laurence, qui est bien sûr responsable de telles perversions."⁴³ Later, the adolescent sister will return from Germany, pregnant, with a bearded boyfriend in tow. Her father's response mirrors the Laurence episode and her mother's reaction, as his words are prefaced with the same verb, "menace": "'Monsieur [...] je

⁴¹ *Mes parents*, 37.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 30.

vous ferai poursuivre pour détournement de mineure!”⁴⁴ The idea that the danger to the children is always external to the family, that they have been “perverted” or “led astray” from a path of proper behavior, remains dear to the parents but will ultimately be rejected by Hervé, who bitterly concludes: “Toujours le même drame: la congénitalité (origine de la souffrance).”⁴⁵ While these comments bear most directly on what he perceives to be his physical shortcomings (the concave chest, a deformed kidney), his body’s health is closely linked to what we might call his moral health, certainly for his parents and also for him insofar as he has apparently internalized their rhetoric, to an extent. After recounting an apparently innocuous and superficially humorous interaction with his father about a banana tree and a record player, Hervé is filled with sadness: “Bien sûr que c’est moi, l’arbre stérile, qui ne peut pas porter de fruits. Et là est la quête profonde de la récupération de l’engin usé [the record player]: reprendre au fils infécond ce qui n’aurait pas dû lui être donné, puisqu’il n’a donné rien en contrepartie, puisqu’il a court-circuité la chaîne vitale. Une tristesse pathétique.”⁴⁶

In keeping with their generation, the parents turn to the events of the Occupation to explain any deformity, whether physical or moral, that might otherwise be blamed on them. The mother blames the “privations de la guerre” for Hervé and his sister’s malformed chests. As a child, Hervé suffers from recurring penile infections, which could likely be solved surgically, but his parents object: “d’ailleurs est-ce que l’oncle Georges n’est pas circoncis? Et est-ce que ça ne lui a pas fait des problèmes pendant la guerre? Il ne faudrait pas qu’il y ait une nouvelle guerre...”⁴⁷ Here we find further

⁴⁴ *Mes parents*, 72.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 154.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 58.

evidence of the anxiety surrounding circumcision, i.e. “otherness” expressed through the body, in *Mes parents*. As is common in Guibert, true “scandal” (in this case, his homosexuality) is displaced by a manufactured scandal, just as the real scandal of the AIDS crisis would be displaced by Guibert’s revelation of Foucault’s cause of death.⁴⁸ As readers, we might feel sympathy for these parents, fearing potential danger for their child given the circumstances of the past fifteen years, were it not for a story revealed at the end of the novel. Hervé, having described a childhood and adolescence marked by physical ailments that are at least embarrassing to him, and at worst painful and worrisome, hears his mother’s own account of his gestation:

Ma mère me raconte alors, pour la première fois, que les neuf mois pendant lesquels elle m’a attendu ont été les plus horribles de sa vie: c’est mon père qui l’avait forcé à cet enfantement, après la naissance douloureuse de ma sœur, et pendant ces neuf mois son désir hystérique était de m’expulser, elle se faisait tomber dans des escaliers pour me perdre. Lorsqu’enfin on m’a extrait de son ventre, elle suppliait: “Pourvu qu’il soit mort! Pourvu qu’il soit mort-né!”⁴⁹

In his imagined continuation of this conversation that actually ended quite differently, Hervé observes that his mother’s prenatal behavior likely caused his physical defects. “J’étais nu et misérable, posé sur cette table” he says, quoting his mother’s description of his birth, “mais dis-moi, avais-je déjà ce torse-là? Ne seraient-ce pas tes contractions, tes tentatives d’expulsion, tes jeûnes prolongés, tes ivresses qui m’ont ainsi cassé, déformé, enfoncé?”⁵⁰ It becomes obvious that he perceives his mother’s historically-based excuses – war-time rationing and fear – as hypocritical alibis. It is thus crucial that the narrator generally avoids historicizing the story of his life; like

⁴⁸ According to David Caron, “For Guibert, the unacceptable scandal is not in his gossipy novels but in the dominant representations of people with AIDS.” *AIDS in French Culture*, 145. See also Ralph Sarkonak, who notes in *Angelic Echoes* that “the real scandal is not the identities of the models of characters but the illness that has killed Foucault, Guibert, and so many others,” 217.

⁴⁹ *Mes parents*, 124.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 125-126.

all of Guibert's novels (but unlike most classical autobiographies), this one is written in the present tense, one that does not read like the historical present of textbooks, but rather like an eternal present outside of time. Even potential historical markers are voided of their specificity: for example, François Mitterrand's election to the presidency in 1981 is occulted by the use of initials; thus this politician who so offends the narrator's mother becomes "M."⁵¹

While on the surface, then, this autobiographical novel reads like a petty bourgeois drama, it is actually the drama of a resisting body. Resisting a new bunting and new shoes like he resists the narratives of his own formation⁵² and constraint, Hervé's struggle to separate from his parents, especially physically, goes further than the garden-variety coming-of-age story because it is inflected by the narrator's sexual difference. Thus his efforts to separate himself from his parents express not only a desire for independence, but a lingering shame. "[M]on corps m'appartient totalement, jusqu'aux limites où je veux le pousser, et ce n'est pas ton droit de t'identifier à mon système nerveux; si ce corps je veux le laisser tomber demain, mais d'une fenêtre, tu n'auras rien à dire..."⁵³ the young adult Hervé states as a declaration of independence that will find itself countered pages later when a vacation subjects him physically to his parents yet again. This time, their control (however unconscious, at this point) over his body comes in the form of a stubborn erection, which he describes, significantly, as

⁵¹ *Mes parents*, 131-132.

⁵² The mother's story of Hervé's birth is one example of this that we have already seen; another is his description of arriving home to find evidence that his parents were having sex. The profound disgust that it inspires in him, particularly for his father, can be better understood if consider that this act represents the origin of his parents' domination of his body. See *Mes parents*, 68-70.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 125.

“honteuse,” a word that means “shameful” in French and also refers to the state of being closeted; and which he struggles to conceal.⁵⁴

The struggle for physical independence waged between Hervé and his parents in *Mes parents* gives all its significance to the otherwise opaque closing vignette. “Le père partit en mer et se livra à la tempête, son chapelet autour du cou. Il se décharna. Un squelette barrait son bateau, un chapelet en écharpe.”⁵⁵ This enigmatic scene could initially be interpreted as a desire for the father’s death and the narrator’s consequent freedom, an interpretation that might be supported by the distancing use of “le père,” which becomes an increasingly frequent replacement for “mon père” as the novel progresses. However, as Hervé has noted in the immediately-preceding vignette, “La haine de la dédicace, bien sûr, était fictive,” referring to his dedication of the book to nobody, “à personne.” In this sense, the novel’s founding undecidability is confirmed here: Suzanne’s fictitious recounting of the parents’ dubious escapades, which opened the novel, is mirrored by the assertion that the “hate” which marks the first pages of the book was equally fictitious.⁵⁶ The story of the parents’ evil machinations that opened the novel, their fundamental dishonesty, might have justified such a hate, but since one doesn’t exist, neither does the other. It is as though Hervé has attempted to dramatize the story of his childhood in narrative form in order to give it meaning; this is borne out by the author’s choice to minimize the presence of the narrator in the first scenes of the novel, literally removing him from the scene (the events unfold while he is vacationing on Elba), in order to give a highly-dramatized, third person account of his Aunt Louise’s

⁵⁴ *Mes parents*, 152.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁵⁶ For a counterportrait of Guibert’s relationship with his parents, see Hans Georg Berger’s testimonial in *Hervé*, ed. Brigitte Ollier (Trézélan: Filigranes, 2010), 47-48; and Mathieu Lindon’s account in *Ce qu’aimer veut dire* (Paris: P.O.L., 2011), 200-202. Lindon describes his vision of Guibert’s parents not as real people, but as fictional creations, his “créatures.”

actions. This opening sequence constitutes the novel's closest approach to third person omniscience, as we cannot strictly speaking know Aunt Louise's feelings or logic. We only know Hervé's account of the events, which he in turn heard second-hand from Suzanne. The opening pages also provide the most notable action sequence in the novel, as Aunt Louise hurries through the city on her way to conduct a surreptitious search and, like a spy, destroy what she has found. But this initial foray into novelistic conventions steadily disintegrates, until we are left with increasingly short and subjective journal entries. It is as though Hervé began the novel by seeking out an evil agent with a dark past, a secret that would explain everything about his own unhappy childhood, and in the end found only a skeleton. There is no meaning here, he seems to say, no consistency to this figure. There is no hate because there is nothing to hate. And the very emptiness of this father figure is perhaps what determines the ultimate melancholy of the novel, as it ends.

This reading of the novel does not attempt to locate a sense of community identity where none exists; it acknowledges the individualism of the narrator (and, by extension, the author). It thus resembles later readings of Guibert's AIDS works that would underscore his individualism, his lack of interest in community activism. Young Hervé survives his childhood alone, despite the presence of an equally rebellious (but textually nearly-absent) sister. He awakens to his sexuality essentially alone, as well, recounting a series of relationships with absent partners (starting with his stuffed lamb, Agneaudoux, and proceeding through a series of men whose main source of attractiveness seems to be their unavailability). *Mes parents* is thus, on the surface, a fairly standard autobiographical narrative in which the grown narrator reflects disdainfully on the bourgeois roots that he has now rejected. Guibert's text differs from this model precisely because the complaints that it registers are written directly on the

narrator's body. His is a body that enters into conflict with other bodies – those of his parents, most notably – and what those bodies represent. The narrator is an individual body, part of a family body, which is in turn (by extension) part of a state body that shares certain traditions and beliefs. The father's state-sponsored slaughterhouse job causes him no discomfort, but his son sees himself as its intended victim. The Occupation was someone else's doing; the parents, and thousands of others like them, bear no responsibility. And yet they have produced children whom they view as diseased, and who run the risk of viewing themselves as defective. In short, we might describe *Mes parents* as a novel in which nothing appears to be wrong at home, and so nothing is – for the half of its occupants who wield all of the power. In this context, we might describe Guibert as an advocate, however unlikely, struggling for the right to desire freely, and to write that desire. This reading of *Mes parents* is important because it allows us to better understand the stakes of the later AIDS novels. They, too, are about the freedom to desire and to write without constraint.

Image Makers: Hervé Guibert and Cyril Collard

Hervé Guibert's AIDS novels have long been the victims of their own success. Although Guibert had been publishing novels and short story collections with regularity since the 1970s, his work was read and appreciated by a small and select audience until he published *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* in 1990. This first novel about the AIDS crisis, timely as it was, quickly became a bestseller and introduced Guibert's work to a much broader and more diverse audience, as he would describe in his follow-up, *Le Protocole compassionnel*. All told, Guibert published a trilogy of AIDS novels as well as the journal of his hospitalization. He appeared in highly visible television interviews on *Apostrophes* and *Ex Libris*, skeletal and, in the latter case, wearing his trademark red hat. He also directed and starred in a film, *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*, whose French television

debut was delayed until after his death due to the polemics surrounding its representation of AIDS.⁵⁷ In his role as the most visible French face of AIDS in the early 1990s, Guibert conjured up a certain image: gaunt and weak, he displayed his illness openly. We might say, in fact, that during those televised appearances he looked profoundly and disconcertingly *other*. He drew a measure of critical and popular wrath for numerous reasons that depended, to an extent, on the nature of his audience. Writing his sociology of the gay community in France and its activism with respect to the AIDS crisis, Frédéric Martel, for example, portrays Guibert as an artist glorying in his own suffering to the benefit of no one but himself.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, the well-known and highly-regarded host of the popular literary show *Apostrophes*, Bernard Pivot, visibly recoiled at Guibert's justification for representing the AIDS-related death of Michel Foucault.⁵⁹ Indeed, Guibert's representation of Foucault's death provoked the biggest public scandal related to his writing. For those with a serious activist engagement on both sides of the Atlantic, however, the author was guilty of another, graver error: apolitical writing in a time of crisis. As recounted in his AIDS novels and interviews, Guibert's

⁵⁷ For an analysis of the drama surrounding the delayed release of *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*, see Jean-Pierre Boulé, "The Postponing of *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*: Modesty or Hypocrisy on the Part of French Television?" *French Cultural Studies* 3, no. 9 (October 1992): 299-304, as well as the Guibert dossier de presse housed at the IMEC, Caen, France.

⁵⁸ See Frédéric Martel, *Le Rose et le noir*, for a relatively unsympathetic portrayal of Guibert.

⁵⁹ Interview with Hervé Guibert, *Apostrophes*, March 16, 1990. Available as a bonus feature on the DVD release of *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*. Although the Foucault character was granted a pseudonym, "Muzil," in *A l'ami*, Guibert and Pivot both dropped this pretense of anonymity during their *Apostrophes* interview.

It is worth noting here that Guibert's first "revelation" of Michel Foucault's cause of death preceded the publication of *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*: in 1988, he published a volume of short stories entitled *Mauve le vierge*. (Paris: Gallimard, 1988). Critics generally acknowledged that "Les Secrets d'un homme" is about Foucault; here, Guibert eloquently evokes the true scandal of his friend's death, its secrecy: "On lui vola sa mort, lui qui avait voulu en être le maître, et on lui vola jusqu'à la vérité de sa mort, lui qui avait été le maître de la vérité. Il ne fallait surtout pas prononcer le nom de la lèpre, on en déguiserait le nom sur les registres de décès, on fournirait à la presse de faux communiqués," 108. However, perhaps because *Mauve le vierge* was neither a bestseller nor an autobiographical novel, its treatment of Foucault's illness inspired neither the scandal, nor the press attention, of *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*. Jean-Pierre Boulé perceptively observes that Foucault's cause of death is the true secret at the heart of "Les Secrets d'un homme." *Hervé Guibert: Voices of the Self*, 161-162.

interest in AIDS activism was largely limited to organizational scheming,⁶⁰ and his spirit of collective engagement with the gay community was shaky at best; indeed, he once declared that he did not exactly consider himself part of that community: “Profondément, je ne me sens pas homosexuel. Plutôt un homosexuel complètement hétérosexuel. Je rêve de conquérir la partie manquante de moi-même.”⁶¹

While Guibert constituted one of the earliest and most visible faces of AIDS offered up to the French public, he was not the only model for readers and spectators who were seeking to make sense of the crisis. Cyril Collard, another (in)famous filmmaker and writer who documented his life as a *sidéen* in the film *Les Nuits fauves* (1992) and its eponymous novel (1989), offers a fascinating counterexample to Guibert precisely because he claims to be doing something very different with a project that is superficially quite similar.⁶² Comparing, and especially contrasting, Guibert and Collard at this point in their careers offers us an essential perspective on the ways in which their literary projects and reputations have been continually redefined by the historical contingencies of the AIDS crisis, as well as highly mediatized images that far exceeded their control. The press-propelled rivalry between Guibert and Collard was fueled by comparisons that seem almost inevitable, in retrospect. Not only were both men multitalented and infamous HIV-positive cultural figures whose final works were

⁶⁰ See *A l'ami*, 139-141 for Guibert's literary interpretation of events, and Martel's corrective assessment in *Le Rose et le noir*, 278-279.

⁶¹ Quoted by Frédéric Martel, *Le Rose et le noir*, 320. It is, of course, difficult to reconcile collectively determined terminology across languages. I use the word “gay” to denote a sense of community identity, specific to the end of the twentieth century in the United States and those communities that were influenced by its multiculturalist model of collective activism. At that time, in France, the equivalent “gai” was not in widespread usage. See Michael Lucey, *Never Say I*, 1-27 for a wonderfully nuanced discussion of the issues he faced when “naming” homosexuality in the works of Proust, Gide, and Colette.

⁶² For another, brief comparison of Guibert and Collard that takes seriously the differences in their artistic projects, see Brigitte Rollet and James S. Williams, “Visions of Excess: Filming/Writing the Gay Self in Collard's *Savage Nights*,” in *Gay Signatures: Gay and Lesbian Theory, Fiction and Film in France, 1945-1995*, ed. Owen Heathcote, Alex Hughes, and James S. Williams (Berg: Oxford, 1998), 193-208 (197-198 for the comparison).

resoundingly embraced by a massive popular audience, but they adopted a similar style of expression, each playing a version of himself in both novel and film. As professional image makers (Collard the filmmaker, Guibert the photographer), they worked to craft representations of their personal crisis that came to define it publicly; ultimately, each of them became the temporary face of AIDS in France. To the degree that their physical and textual bodies became conflated with their representations of AIDS, it would be fair to say that Collard and Guibert each served as a kind of authority on “what AIDS looks like” or “what AIDS does.” If Guibert was described by Martel as a “porte-parole” and ultimately a “porte-drapeau,”⁶³ Collard was “son propre héros et un modèle ‘français,’ ou un français modèle, dans l’inconscient collectif,” in the words of Fabienne Worth.⁶⁴ Both inveterate travelers based out of Paris, Guibert and Collard each expressed their sexuality through highly subjective works.

Yet there are clear and important differences between the two authors, rendered all the more defining due to their apparent likeness. The first is their reception by posterity. In the two years leading up to the twentieth anniversary of Guibert’s death, the number of critical and popular works devoted to his entire body of production (cinematic, literary, photographic) have multiplied, supplementing a slowly-accruing and now steady stream of academic scholarship devoted to the author. Comparatively few works of criticism, meanwhile, have been devoted to Collard. This discrepancy in their respective critical afterlives might be explained, and summarily dismissed, in several ways: Collard, far less prolific than Guibert, was known primarily for his two iterations of *Les Nuits fauves*, and he died after Guibert, albeit barely more than a year. On a less superficial level, however, we might consider the differences between the two

⁶³ See Martel, *Le Rose et le noir*, 319-320.

⁶⁴ See Worth, “Le Sacré et le sida: les représentations de la sexualité et leurs contradictions en France, 1971-1996,” *Les Temps Modernes* 592 (February-March 1997): 93.

authors as fundamental, predating their deaths and the vagaries of posterity. Even as the mainstream French press sought to pit them against each other in interviews marking the release of *Les Nuits fauves* (after Guibert's death had already intervened to silence him), the wildly different release and reception of each man's final film hints at the distinctness of their AIDS representations. *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur*, like *Les Nuits fauves*, was the companion piece to a previously-published AIDS novel (Guibert's *Le Protocole compassionnel*). While the release of *La Pudeur ou l'impudeur* was constantly thwarted and finally occurred in the most discouraging possible conditions for attracting a viewership, Collard's film was a massive success, described as the "portrait of a generation" and lauded critically as the rebirth of French cinema. How can we account for this difference? Although there are various possible explanations, I believe that one of the most crucial involved the representation of the individual within society, and especially French society, in the their last film and corresponding written work.

While critics such as Martel have assimilated both Collard and Guibert to an individualistic, idealized, and ultimately problematic period in AIDS writing, and journalists readily juxtaposed their names, Collard clearly understood their projects and motivations as distinct. In an October 1992 interview with *Elle*, Collard was asked whether he knew Hervé Guibert. His response, "Très peu. Je l'avais croisé, je ne le connaissais pas," clearly referred to Guibert the man, whom he did not personally know. The rest of his response, however, shows that he is familiar enough with Guibert the author to take a definitive position on his work:

Nous ne parlions pas de la même chose. Moi, j'ai choisi d'évoquer la vie. Je sais que ce n'est pas un point de vue tout à fait réaliste. A priori, le sida est une maladie dont on ne guérit pas. Mais j'ai envie de forcer le destin. Hervé Guibert avait la capacité de se regarder mourir et de se décrire ainsi. C'est également héroïque. Chacun sa passion, son chemin de croix.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Patricia Gandin, "Moi, Cyril Collard, 33 ans, bisexuel et séropositif," *Elle*, October 19, 1992, 57.

In an article idealistically entitled “L’amour tue la mort,” meanwhile, Collard again invoked Guibert’s approach in recording his struggle with AIDS, openly contrasting it with his own: “Plus on en parle d’une manière normale, plus la maladie est intégrée à la vie, plus les mentalités et la recherche peuvent avancer. Ma position est opposée à celle d’Hervé Guibert. C’est un grand écrivain qui s’est regardé mourir, avec toute la beauté inhérente à cet extrémisme.”⁶⁶ With these comments, Collard created an either/or contrast between his representation of AIDS and those created by Guibert, assigning himself and the late writer their own specific position, in opposition to each other. By contrasting the “grand écrivain,” the great artist, with himself, the pragmatist seeking to integrate illness into everyday life in order to normalize it, banalize it even, Collard sets up an opposition that we might inscribe in the long tradition of art-for-art’s-sake versus socially-engaged art. But if Collard viewed his own art as somehow engaged, what did that mean? What message was Collard sending, or meant to have sent?

Collard’s greatest and most enduring success came with the release of his 1992 film, *Les Nuits fauves*, based on his novel of the same name. Collard portrayed the main character, a bisexual, HIV-positive man named Jean who fights against his probable death sentence through a combination of sex and love, the former as a means to keep living, and the latter as a sort of purification. These two aspects of his self-treatment fuse in his relationship with Laura, a young, passionate, emotionally fragile woman who convinces him that making love without a condom will cure them both of their literal and figurative diseases, rather than cause her to become infected with HIV. Their relationship is a rocky one, coinciding with Jean’s continued pursuit of the young, athletic, masculine Samy, also bisexual and also involved in a serious relationship with a

⁶⁶ Samra Bonvoisin, “L’amour tue la mort,” *Première*, November 1992, 87.

woman. The film traces Jean's failed relationship with each, reaching its fever pitch when a hysterical Laura begins repeatedly leaving threatening messages on his answering machine, and Samy takes a violent turn with a group of fascist skinheads. As Fabienne Worth has noted, Jean's HIV-tainted bodily fluids function differently in (heterosexual) scenes with Laura and (homosexual) scenes with Samy. According to Worth, "alors que le sida ne pouvait contaminer dans la scène hétérosexuelle, il devient une arme rédemptrice dans la scène homosexuelle [...]." ⁶⁷ In an earlier scene, Jean had informed Samy that they would use protection during sex, while he accepted that Laura could not possibly become contaminated, and indeed did not initially inform her of his status. Within the logic of the film, we might then understand HIV as a virus that infects only certain (non-heterosexual) people, perhaps even that this unthinking virus somehow works to uphold the traditional, heteronormative, bourgeois social values of France (indeed, the homophobic and self-aggrandizing content of Laura's hysterical phone messages supports this interpretation). This reading of the film as a potential endorsement of the status quo in the midst of crisis is borne out by its resolution. At the end of the film, we flash forward from the chaos of Jean, Laura, and Samy's entanglements in Paris to find a visibly relaxed and renewed Jean abroad. Now separated from Laura, who has suffered a psychiatric breakdown, he communicates with her via voiceover, reaffirming their love and his belief in life. Before the credits roll, the camera pans from Jean's face to a blinding shot of the sun. He has finally listened to Laura, learned how to love, chosen a woman, and chosen life; or, in Worth's apt characterization, "le film finit par fondre le corps de Jean dans le grand tout dans lequel nous finirons tous." ⁶⁸ While she is referring to death, we might equally think of this

⁶⁷ Worth, "Le Sacré et le sida," 94.

⁶⁸ Idem.

“grand tout” as the “universal,” or the French national body with all its assumptions about individual and collective identity.

If Carolyn Durham understands *Les Nuits fauves* quite differently, interpreting the final statement of love as ambivalent and insisting on the film’s “moral ambiguity,” it must be due, at least in part, to her reading of the earlier, novelistic version of the work. Notably, the novel ended with Laura’s reiteration that she will return to Jean if he tells her he loves her; he replies that he doesn’t know how to love, and the book closes with the enduring image of his *nuits fauves*, those nights of homosexual pleasure that he seeks on the quays of Paris. Indeed, as Durham points out, the differences between the novel and the film are significant.⁶⁹ Whether they are attributed to Collard’s need to procure financial backing for the film, or the fact that he had recently fallen in love, my sense is that the changes from novel to film serve to make the latter more palatable to its various audiences.⁷⁰ Interestingly enough, these changes are visible both in the form and the content of the film. The novelistic version of *Les Nuits fauves* includes dialogue that reads as a direct transcription of informal spoken language, with the requisite dropped vowels and phonetic phrasings, and the narration is straightforward. In the novel, things happen and are narrated with seeming transparency. The narrator’s name is never stated, allowing the reader to make the leap of associating narrator and author, who seemingly share the same personal and professional background. Upon release of the film, meanwhile, Collard was asked about his role as Jean; he forcefully denied any connection between the character and himself, pointing to the disparity in their first

⁶⁹ See Durham, “Portrait of a Generation: Cyril Collard’s *Les Nuits fauves*,” *The French Review* 75, no. 3 (February 2002): 512-525.

⁷⁰ Rachel Gabara notes that “Collard needed a woman, or a figure of a woman, to accomplish his final autobiography, to achieve a certain societal image of maturity – monogamous heterosexuality or heteronormativity [...] Collard’s self-heterosexualization within the autobiographical film was mirrored by his self-representation outside of the film and his representation by the media.” See Gabara, “Cyril Collard’s *Savage Nights*, in *From Split to Screened Selves*, 72-91 (81-82 for the quotation).

names.⁷¹ In the novel, however, we find the narrator playing a fictionalized version of himself in a friend's film; that fictional character's name is Jean. Thus, for those who have read the novel, Collard's later denial may well seem sly, almost like a *clin d'oeil*. Meanwhile, if the novel is not formally audacious, its subject matter could be considered more so: bisexuality, sadomasochism, the French colonial legacy, and anti-Arab racism are not only openly evoked, but analyzed in some depth. The narrator, deeply perturbed by the various combinations of these issues, openly states his desire to confront them through activism: "Je voulais m'offrir à une grande cause, sans savoir laquelle choisir ni comment le faire. Quelque chose m'empêchait, me taraudait. J'étais enchaîné, esclave des nuits ignobles. Dans quelle vie serais-je mercenaire ou poseur de bombes?"⁷² As the last sentence implies, however, the narrator's imagined activism is solitary, violent, and directed at an obscure goal: "Mais je me dis par contre que [...] il faudrait qu'un jour je me mette à agir. Mettre à feu un détonateur, dégoupiller une grenade, presser la gâchette d'un fusil-mitrailleur."⁷³ While he aspires to activism, it has no clear relationship to the AIDS crisis; in fact, even as it disputes racism, the novel maintains many of the heteronormative assumptions of French society. In this respect Guibert, so often compared to Collard, is paradoxically his polar opposite; while the former rejects activism entirely, his entire body of work consistently calls the heteronormative assumptions of French society into question even as his later novels rage against his personal experience of the AIDS crisis.

In March 1993, *Les Nuits fauves* was awarded multiple Césars (notably for best picture and best first picture), mere days after its director and star died of AIDS; this

⁷¹ Gérard Lefort, "Me concentrer sur le désordre qui consiste à faire un film," *Libération*, October 21, 1992, 38.

⁷² Collard, *Les Nuits fauves* (Paris: Flammarion, 1989), 35.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 60.

event cast a visible pall over the ceremony. Romane Bohringer, who won a César for her portrayal of Laura, tearfully addressed Collard in her acceptance speech; the pre-Césars telecasts somberly alluded to the director-star's absence. Collard's influence, meanwhile, was quickly sanctioned by the state: following the filmmaker's death, President François Mitterrand declared him an example for French youth.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, the *Nouvel Observateur* devoted an article to the effect of Collard's life and death on a whole generation of youth. This highly-visible, mainstream elegy constitutes a remarkable example of minimal contrast when placed next to the obituaries that marked the end of Guibert's life.

As Jean-Pierre Boulé has argued in his insightful study of the obituaries that honored Guibert within metropolitan France,⁷⁵ the texts written in the wake of his December 27, 1991 death in a suburban Paris hospital insisted on the contradictory nature of Guibert's public persona. In these biting tributes, the author is simultaneously portrayed as angelic and devilish in both his physique (angelic beauty coexisting with a deadly virus) and writing (his fame and talent accompanied by his scandalous cruelty). "Hervé Guibert avait un physique d'archange et des mœurs de hors-la-loi. Il avait la cruauté naturelle et la haine pour compagne. Il sentait la fin du siècle, il restera comme un enfant de la dérive, qui ne croyait qu'à une chose, la littérature," wrote one eulogist.⁷⁶ Guibert, then, was portrayed as a walking contradiction, an ethereal and seductive bad boy who was clearly the product of his historical moment. As such, he was a figure to be praised – according to one journalist, his death had done more to help his contemporaries understand AIDS than any number of activist ad campaigns – and also

⁷⁴ See Gabara, *From Split to Screened Selves*, 86.

⁷⁵ See Boulé, "Tout ange est terrible."

⁷⁶ Bertrand de Saint-Vincent, *Le Quotidien de Paris*, December 28, 1991. Consulted at the IMEC.

feared. Wrote another eulogist, “Guibert s’attache dans toute son œuvre à livrer une vérité clinique, même si elle est obscène, morbide ou destructrice. C’est avec la même brutalité, taxée par certains de complaisance, qu’il a évoqué [le Sida].”⁷⁷ Angel of destruction, Guibert was remembered as a deeply paradoxical figure. “[S]i la figure de Guibert oscille tellement entre celle d’ange et de diable, c’est parce que ce qu’il représente est ‘dangereux’ et parce qu’il a des pouvoirs de séduction très efficaces, dont il faut se protéger, sinon on risque d’être contaminé par ses mœurs,” Boulé claims.⁷⁸ In other words, the AIDS author’s words could infiltrate his readers’ world, “infecting” their minds, if not their bodies. While we might literally assimilate the risk of “contamination” that Boulé describes to HIV / AIDS, the disease that he evokes hints at something more ominous, more subversive, and potentially more socially dangerous: the threat of homosexuality or other forms of non-normativity.⁷⁹ Otherwise, how can we explain the widespread attempt to simultaneously acknowledge and contain Guibert in the sum of his obituaries?

It is clear from the regional and Parisian obituaries housed at the IMEC in France that Guibert’s public image at the time of his death was defined by his role as a writer who addressed the AIDS crisis directly. He is portrayed as existing for the sole purpose of writing; one obituary is titled, “Hervé Guibert a cessé d’écrire,” as though his life and his work formed a single entity. Given the fact that he described writing as a means of avoiding the temptation of suicide throughout his struggle with AIDS, this characterization seems fairly apt, although it does lead to a problematic conflation of

⁷⁷ “Hervé Guibert a cessé d’écrire,” *Les dernières nouvelles d’Alsace*, December 28, 1991. Consulted at the IMEC.

⁷⁸ Boulé, “Tout ange est terrible,” 69.

⁷⁹ See Caron, *AIDS in French Culture*, 126 and 139 for further discussion of the ways in which Guibert’s writing has the potential to contaminate “healthy and heterosexual readers” through his choice of literary allusion and theme.

“Guibert = Œuvre = Sida.”⁸⁰ Yet this insistence on Guibert’s devotion to his craft also allowed for the possibility that he would one day be remembered differently. Indeed, some journalists already sought to place him within a web of literary connections that included the likes of Arthur Rimbaud: “Son œuvre est là, qui parlera pour lui. Son personnage n’a pas fini de s’agiter. Il est mort, la légende va s’emparer de lui. Rimbaud à sa manière, diront ses admirateurs, ange noir, les turbulences de sa vie en feront un héros fin de siècle, impudique et fragile.”⁸¹

Boulé’s analysis establishes a certain last, iconic image of Guibert within the Parisian press, yet this final and supposedly definitive word that French journalists wrote on their subject would find itself constantly revised, due both to the posthumous interventions of the late author and a series of recalibrations within the press itself. As the AIDS crisis intensified in France, as more scandals broke and were reported in the literary and artistic milieus, and as more writers and artists died of AIDS, their own obituaries and retrospective articles retroactively modified the myth of Guibert. The eulogization of Cyril Collard by a number of French journalists contributed to this continual reassessment. Significantly, Claude Weill’s tribute to Collard evokes his predecessor along with several other major players in the history of the French AIDS crisis of the 1980s and early 1990s. Weill creates a more subtle connection between the two in this tribute, however: referring to Collard as “ange et démon,” the article captures a hint of the irreconcilable duality of the man’s public image, which he shared, to a certain extent, with Guibert. We of course have to wonder how much this dual image, this irresolvable contradiction, serves as a marker for non-normative sexuality in general in the French press of this period. The following quotation expresses both the similarities

⁸⁰ Boulé, “Tout ange est terrible,” 65.

⁸¹ Bertrand de Saint-Vincent, *Le Quotidien de Paris*, December 28, 1991. Consulted at the IMEC.

between Collard and “tant d’autres”; in addition to the angel/devil binary, youth and beauty are also frequently evoked in Guibert’s obituaries, while the rather banal announcement of the utility of the author’s work, its ability to do more than a public health campaign, was also applied to Guibert. Still, Weill clearly attempts to differentiate Collard from “tant d’autres,” insisting on his singularity (“il était lui”):

Le 5 mars 1993, un garçon est mort, un mythe est né. Cyril Collard n’est pas la première victime célèbre du sida. Avant lui, il y a eu Michel Foucault et Jean-Paul Aron, Hervé Guibert et Dominique Bagouet, et tant d’autres. Cyril Collard n’est pourtant pas un mort de plus, un nom de plus dans l’insoutenable nécrologe dressé ici même, il y a quelques semaines, par Jean-Paul Dubois. Parce qu’il était jeune et beau, parce qu’il était lui, ambigu et sincère, ange et démon, gai et désespéré, et par-dessus tout prodigieusement vivant, il a donné un visage au destin. En lui, des centaines de milliers de jeunes, pas forcément bisexuels, ont reconnu un grand frère, un copain, un petit ami. Une partie d’eux-mêmes. Un million de spectateurs ont vu *Les Nuits fauves*. Et le paradoxe veut que ce film si peu sermonneur ait fait plus que toutes les campagnes pour alerter les jeunes sur le danger qui les menace.⁸²

It is not immediately clear from this passage why Collard is not “un mort de plus, un nom de plus” aside from the fact that “il était lui,” given the similar language used to describe Guibert in earlier articles. Weill, however, specifies: “A l’échelle de la France, la mort de Cyril Collard pourrait être un choc comparable à ce qu’a été pour les Etats-Unis la révélation de la séropositivité de Magic Johnson pour les plus jeunes, le décès d’Arthur Ashe pour leurs parents: le moment où chacun réalise que ça n’arrive pas qu’aux autres.”⁸³ Suddenly, the underlying assumption becomes clear: Collard is in fact different from those who are marked as different; he is not one of the “others.” By naming Magic Johnson and Arthur Ashe as an alternate list to Foucault, Aron, Guibert, and Bagouet, Weill is clearly drawing a line between gay men who have died of AIDS, and heterosexual or bisexual men who have contracted HIV. In the logic of this article,

⁸² Weill, “SIDA: une génération accuse,” *Le Nouvel Observateur*, March 18-24, 1993: 88.

⁸³ Idem.

then, the “others” are gay men, unassimilable into the mass of “les plus jeunes,” “les parents,” and the general but apparently also exclusively heterosexual “chacun.”

After death, Collard’s reputation suffered the same fate that initially befell Guibert, whose AIDS work was liberally reinterpreted to suit the purposes of later creators, journalists, and an evolving public. In 1994, a year after he was lauded by the president and eulogized at the Césars ceremony, Collard was recast in a new role: that of the AIDS patient as murderer. Ironically, it was his very bisexuality, or heterosexual activity, that contributed to a minor scandal among his formerly adoring public. Urban legend has it that Collard infected Erika, the granddaughter of French writer Suzanne Prou, with HIV in the course of a sexual encounter. However, the purported infection occurred in the early 1980s, well before reliable knowledge about HIV and its transmission were available, and in any case, it is difficult to state with certainty that Collard was the person “responsible,” if responsibility can even be assigned in a situation such as this one.⁸⁴ The polemic quickly died down, but Collard’s reputation apparently never recovered. Today his novel, so much more ambiguous, ambivalent, and provocative than his film, is out of print. Meanwhile, Guibert continues to publish from beyond the grave: his journal, *Le Mausolée des amants*, appeared in 2000, and his film, *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur*, was finally released on DVD in 2010. In the wake of Guibert’s death, Collard’s reputation soared, arguably at his predecessor’s expense. Twenty years later, their reputations have once again followed opposing trajectories, with Collard’s work consigned to near-obscurity, while Guibert’s has garnered increased critical as well as popular recognition. In the remainder of this chapter, I will offer one explanation for Guibert’s newfound status as a writer and cultural figure. Simply stated, he was writing for posterity and with deep reverence for a kind of history that was

⁸⁴ Worth observes that the purported contamination occurred before HIV testing was even available. See “Le Sacré et le sida,” 93.

purely literary. From this perspective, the difference between Guibert and Collard's long-term reception lies precisely in their respective literariness. Indeed, Ralph Sarkonak has suggested that the very textuality of Guibert's first AIDS novel provides one of the keys to understanding its lasting impact.⁸⁵ While, as we will see, Guibert carefully constructed a place for himself within a broader web of literary connections, mindful to situate his work within a longer literary history, Collard's *Nuits fauves* refer back to themselves in an endless loop (the book informs the film, which informs the book, and so on). Guibert, as it turns out, was not writing for his own time, for his own abbreviated lifespan and its contemporaries, but for the audience he might have had someday, the one that he has now.⁸⁶

An art-for-art's-sake author a full decade before the crisis first became a matter of public record, Guibert initially courted scandal and his literary reputation was affected by a historical conjuncture that made exceptional political demands on its artists.⁸⁷ His particular brand of individualism, largely informed by French universalist ideals, apparently rendered him incapable of conforming to an activist ideal that was at least partially derived from American models. From this perspective, Guibert can be understood (reductively) as an art-for-art's-sake author who managed to locate his social identity (albeit with some difficulty) within the larger framework of French society. As such, he seems at first glance oddly conservative for an author who was described as

⁸⁵ See Sarkonak, *Angelic Echoes*, 193-217 for his interpretation of various forms of textuality within the novel. In some ways, this 2000 work foreshadows later developments in Guibert's reception, as his novels garnered increased critical recognition and respect over time. Throughout *Hervé Guibert: Vers une esthétique postmoderne*, Arnaud Genon also insists on the intertextuality of Guibert's novels. He nonetheless proposes that Guibert's long-tepid critical reception in France was due to the fact that he "n'eut pas le temps d'inscrire son travail dans une perspective littéraire plus large en sortant d'une écriture du moi conçue dans l'urgence [...]" 20.

⁸⁶ See Bruno Blanckeman on the *Récit-monument*, "Hervé Guibert," 131-140.

⁸⁷ Gisèle Sapiro has described the incredible demand placed on artists in a time of extreme crisis, albeit in a different historical climate. As she observes in the context of the Occupation, writers' political and social stances during this time strongly influenced their reception by posterity. See *La Guerre des écrivains en France*.

“celui par qui le scandale arrive.” Turning to Guibert’s first AIDS novel, however, I will continue to argue that his body of work, while not politically motivated, was deeply rooted in social critique.⁸⁸

A l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie, or Portrait of the Artist as a Dying Man

In the logic of Hervé Guibert’s work and its deep intertextuality, the parents of young Hervalino would return in his most (in)famous work, *A l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie*. Briefly evoking his mother’s narcissism, the narrator would not consecrate further reference to his parents outside of a pointed allusion to their absence from this novel. Having learned of his HIV-positive diagnosis, he states twice that his parents are not to be involved. Their first, early mention in the novel is categorical: “L’avouer à mes parents, ce serait m’exposer à ce que le monde entier me chie au même moment sur la gueule, ce serait me faire chier sur la gueule par tous les minables de la terre, laisser ma gueule concasser par leur merde infecte. Mon souci principal, dans cette histoire, est de mourir à l’abri du regard de mes parents.”⁸⁹ Part of the strangeness of the statement lies in the fact that the novel as a whole serves to “avouer,” or admit (actually, to announce) the narrator’s illness, and there can be no question that the link between this narrator and the author is consciously very tight. While the narrator of *Mes parents* identified himself as Hervé or Hervalino and alluded to his last name via his father’s initials, FG, the narrator of *A l’ami* repeats not only his first name (again Hervé or Hervalino), but

⁸⁸ Here I agree with David Caron, who has offered a fascinating reading of Guibert’s subversive potential. Drawing specifically on the AIDS novels and their portrayal of the doctor-patient relationship, he argues against their reception as pro-AIDS works of self-glorification. See “AIDS and the Unraveling of Modernity: The Example of Hervé Guibert” in *AIDS in French Culture*, 112-148. As Caron observes, “[A]lthough Guibert’s strategy was not one of explicit political *engagement* or confrontational activism, his novels nonetheless propose a radical destabilization of the traditional health/disease rhetoric and the power structure that rests on it,” 113. See also Murray Pratt, “‘A Walk along the side of the Motorway,’” for a discussion of the ways in which Guibert’s “spectacular” visibility as an AIDS patient “contribute[d] to a strategy of counter-representation that work[ed] against homophobic identifications,” 162.

⁸⁹ *A l’ami qui ne m’a pas sauvé la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 16.

repeatedly states his last. How are we to reconcile the idea that Hervé wants to “mourir à l’abri du regard de mes parents” and his decision to expose his diagnosis in a book that would become a massmarket bestseller? The answer, completely inscribed within the logic of Guibert’s work as a whole, is that the novelistic space is a space apart from the real world, removed from life, outside the chain of what we might call history. It is as though the novel that Guibert is writing as Hervé Guibert does not exist in the real world, and the parents whose gaze he seeks to avoid do not exist in his novelistic world. In fact, he makes this so by pointedly excluding them from the novel. If they do not see him dying within the pages of *A l’ami*, they quite simply do not see him die at all. For Guibert, literary space, however mimetic it may appear, does not operate by the rules of “real life.” The third novel in Guibert’s so-called “AIDS trilogy,” *L’Homme au chapeau rouge*, does not address the narrator’s illness at all. In his last (posthumous) novel, *Le Paradis*, the narrator is heterosexual. The world created by and in Guibert’s novels could in some cases be described as therapeutic, eliminating certain difficulties created by identity and circumstance.

The ability to ban living people from a text that is apparently about living people may at first seem completely fantastical, but it makes sense in the context of Guibert’s work. His references are either personal, experienced directly through his body and its contact with the world, or part of a long artistic tradition. For Guibert, in other words, life imitates art, and art circulates within art. It has little to no “outside” other than the artist and his entourage, in fact. We already have an initial sense of the importance of artistic references in *Mes parents*, when young Hervé mentions actors, plays, musicals, and books that he has appreciated or that were somehow formative in his childhood. When Guibert writes about his adulthood, and particularly in *A l’ami*, those references become reference points, important keys to understanding the narrator and his

narrative. “J’étais le *Cri de Munch*,” Hervé says after learning that Muzil’s illness will be fatal;⁹⁰ learning of his friend’s death, meanwhile, he will run through the streets of Paris singing a Françoise Hardy song.⁹¹ The references are used for the purposes of analogy: “The Poet,” one of Hervé’s young lovers, is unconsciously posed as the subject of a 19th-century painting;⁹² the HIV virus is like Thomas Bernhard’s writing.⁹³ Even when Hervé refers to an historical event such as the Holocaust, he couches it in artistic terms (“Le souci n’est plus tant de conserver un regard humain que d’acquérir un regard trop humain, comme celui des prisonniers de *Nuit et brouillard*, le documentaire sur les camps de concentration”). In this way, representations dominate their referents. Books, of course, proliferate: Turgenyev, Gogol, Bernhard, Dante, Foucault (in the guise of Muzil), and the narrator’s own. In this context, the narrator’s complaint with regard to Thomas Bernhard and his own legacy as a writer is important: “je n’ai pas baissé les bras devant la compréhension du génie, au contraire je me suis rebellé devant la virtuosité de Thomas Bernhard, et moi, pauvre Guibert, je jouais de plus belle, je fourbissais mes armes pour égaler le maître contemporain, moi pauvre petit Guibert, ex-maître du monde qui avait trouvé plus fort que lui et avec le sida et avec Thomas Bernhard.”⁹⁴ “Guibert,” by contrast to Hervé or Hervalino, is less the eruption of the author’s biography into the text than the eruption of the author himself, as author, making this passage a meta-literary comment that inscribes itself within a literary and artistic tradition rather than a world of biographical facts and historical realities. More succinctly, Guibert’s position is one of art-for-art’s sake: the text is an end unto itself, a

⁹⁰ *A l’ami*, 108.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 113-114.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 148.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 233.

reality unto itself. Awareness of this position allows us to better understand why his work was met with criticism at the height of a crisis that affected not only individuals, but also communities.

Although Hervé Guibert, the person, could not be said to inhabit the stereotypical ivory tower at this point in his life, I suggest that the hermetically sealed world he created for his protagonist offered a comparable sense of isolation. This was, perhaps, one of the elements of his work that troubled his contemporary critics the most. How can it possibly be true that Guibert created such an impenetrable world in his works, given the controversy surrounding his loose masking of cultural figures like Michel Foucault and Isabelle Adjani, which were shocking to many of his readers? I believe that they appear as characters in *A l'ami* rather than biographical figures. Had they been included as cultural references, they would have been named. As characters, they embody the idea that the text is a space apart, almost a private space, in which it is not only possible but legitimate to reveal both the truth and ambiguities of the characters. It is worth noting, in this respect, how much the purported "manuscript" of Guibert's journals, *Le Mausolée des amants*, appears almost identical to the final version.⁹⁵ The division between public and private collapses, not just in the sense that what is private becomes public, but that what is public ultimately remains private.

From the beginning, *A l'ami* presents HIV and AIDS as an attack on the individual. Hervé is the object of an external attack, represented here by misfortune ("le

⁹⁵ I consulted the manuscript at the IMEC in June 2010. Expecting to find Guibert's original journals in his collection of manuscripts and press articles, I was surprised to discover a typed manuscript that corresponded almost exactly to the published version. The very partiality of the archives, along with the fact that their contents were chosen to represent the author's work for posterity, supports the notion that Guibert was deeply conscious of his image as a writer. Jean-Pierre Boulé has also testified to the almost unreal experience of handling Guibert's nearly flawless "manuscripts." See his testimony in Ollier, *Hervé*, 60-61. It is worth mentioning that at least one "true" manuscript is available for researchers to consult: Guibert's original notebooks for *Cytomégaloïvirus: Journal d'hospitalisation*. The extreme conditions of their writing are obvious from Guibert's handwriting as well as their very presence in his collected (typed) manuscripts, otherwise so pristine.

malheur"). As an HIV-positive man, he has lost agency over his body. This is reflected from the first page by passive language, the past participles disguised as adjectives which he uses to describe his situation: "condamné" appears twice, along with "atteint," and "assuré de ma condamnation." His illness, like his belief in his own salvation, are externally motivated, the product of fate or chance; thus, it is "un hasard extraordinaire" that allows him to believe he will be spared. Fittingly, AIDS is described as a "maladie de sorciers, d'envoûteurs"⁹⁶ and "les jeux étaient déjà faits."⁹⁷ Given the circumstances, the idea that Guibert (associated with Hervé) conceived of AIDS as an inevitable accident of individual fate would not be warmly welcomed by those who sought to combat the disorder collectively. Although both the real-life Guibert and his narrative equivalent in *A l'ami* were members of the activist organization Aides, Hervé reserves much of his commentary on the organization to reflections on the rivalry between its various potential leaders, delighting in his ability to serve as a spy in multiple camps.⁹⁸ Frédéric Martel has characterized this description as "highly novelistic" – not so much in terms of Hervé's involvement, but rather the level of infighting that he describes.⁹⁹ And indeed, Hervé's approach to the illness does not conform to the community-based response imported from the United States. While he does, in fact, include other individuals in his own mini-community of suffering ("le malheur était tombé sur nous"; my emphasis), his model for this community is actually the family. Le Club des 5, that is to say Hervé; his lover, Jules; Jules' companion and Hervé's future wife, Berthe; and their two children, Loulou and Titi, are the family that Hervé creates for himself. It serves as the counterpart to the two-parent family that he criticized, scathingly, in *Mes*

⁹⁶ *A l'ami*, 17.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 139-141.

⁹⁹ See *Le Rose et le noir*, 277-279.

parents and quickly expelled from *A l'ami*. Its configuration is, of course, deeply different, with shifting and sometimes ambiguous relationships between its members.

But, like his relationship with his parents, this family is also defined by blood:

J'aimais ces enfants, plus que ma chair, comme la chair de ma chair bien qu'elle ne le soit pas, et sans doute plus que si elle l'avait été vraiment, peut-être sinistrement parce que le virus HIV m'avait permis de prendre une place dans leur sang, de partager avec eux cette destinée commune du sang, bien que je priasse chaque jour qu'elle ne le soit à aucun prix, bien que mes conjurations s'exerçassent continuellement à séparer mon sang du leur pour qu'il n'y ait jamais eu par aucun intermédiaire aucun point de contact entre eux, mon amour pour eux était pourtant un bain de sang virtuel dans lequel je les plongeais avec effroi.¹⁰⁰

The defect in his kidney, which he interpreted as congenital in *Mes parents*, returns here (“une malformation rénale, sans doute congénitale,”¹⁰¹), but serves as a smokescreen for the real “malheur.” Meanwhile, the relationship between blood and family is reversed: whereas in *Mes parents*, the blood relationships determined the disorder, here, the disorder determines the blood relationships. In one sense, Hervé has created a new kind of family, one of his own election; in another, he has repeated the cycle of his parents, making it clear that if the children are infected, he is as responsible as Jules, just as surely as if he had infected Berthe.

This family, as described by Hervé in the novel, differs radically from the community-based approach that was either endorsed or resisted by activist groups that sought to halt the spread of AIDS in France.¹⁰² The notion of individuality reappears

¹⁰⁰ *A l'ami*, 227. See also Ralph Sarkonak's description of “Le Club des 5” based on the photo of the same name in *Angelic Echoes*, 23-27. Sarkonak also insists on the commonality of what he calls “the blood link” in both families: “The blood link and all that goes with it, so essential to the bourgeois family tree [...] have become the terrible tale of whose body's fluids have been directly exposed to whose other body fluids,” 25.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁰² Note, in this regard, the tensions surrounding Guibert's direct engagement with – and disengagement from – activist work. At the time that Guibert joined the group Aides, founded in the wake of Foucault's death by his partner Daniel Defert, it sought to combat AIDS as a broader social problem while simultaneously critiquing gay activism. See Martel, *Le Rose et le noir*, 247-280. Guibert would later be

through Hervé's discussion of the group in the form of its exceptionality. Thus when Hervé attempts to enlist his titular "friend" Bill in an effort to obtain an AIDS vaccine and/or a cutting-edge treatment, he does so with the understanding that they will receive certain advantages over other patients: "Je demandai à Bill s'il pourrait toujours, comme il l'avait proposé, nous faire entrer, Jules, Berthe et moi dans ce groupe de recherche et si nous devrions nous soumettre au principe du double aveugle." Bill's reply, "Non, bien sûr pas vous," is received as a justifiable exception in the case of three individuals, although Hervé will be incensed to learn that Bill fulfilled this promise to a mere acquaintance. "En tout cas j'ai pris des risques énormes pour Eduardo [his new lover's brother]," is Bill's hypocritical, self-congratulatory response to Hervé's dismay, and lest we judge the narrator too harshly for his own sense of self-preservation, as others (equating the novel's Hervé Guibert with his biographical double) have done, the line that ends his paragraph about their conversation serves as a reminder of the stakes: "Eduardo a plus de 1000 T4, il vient d'être infecté: s'il y avait une urgence à définir dans l'entourage de Bill, ce n'était certainement pas celle-là."¹⁰³ It bears restating that when Hervé Guibert wrote *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie*, he had been aware of his HIV-positive status for less than two years. He would have less than two left to live.

Frédéric Martel asserts that in 1989, "les nouveaux militants, contre Guibert mais surtout contre les complices de l'épidémie – le sujet biologique ne cherchant plus

criticized by the activist group ACT UP Paris, which was a partner organization to its New York City-based homonym. In the eyes of this more pointedly militant group, Guibert "did not offer a genuine challenge to dominant representations of PWAs [...] presenting AIDS as the motor of a personal narrative rather than the result of a specific social and political context. Such depictions [...] can only worsen the AIDS crisis." See Caron, *AIDS in French Culture*, 114-115.

¹⁰³ *A l'ami*, 280.

l'héroïsation et l'aboutissement littéraire, mais la survie –, retrouvent le chemin de la politique."¹⁰⁴ This characterization of Guibert's work as somehow fatalistically pro-AIDS, although common, although justifiable to a certain extent, seems flawed to me in three respects. First, in its assumption that this fatalism can be linked to "homosexuality" or "the homosexual" in general, if we acknowledge the deep individualism of Guibert's work, as I have proposed earlier. Second, as Martel himself explains, although Guibert practiced homosexuality, he rejected labels such as "homosexual" and "gay." Third, *A l'ami qui ne m'a pas sauvé la vie* is quite simply the story of a will to survive, and a scathing attack on the "accomplices of the epidemic." In fact, it is possible to read *A l'ami* as an attack between two opposing pronouns: *je*, the subjective narrative voice for which Guibert is famous, and *on*, the resolutely impersonal viewpoint of the unidentifiable other, everyone and no one all at once. The treasonous friend Bill becomes the novel's spokesman for *on* as a voice of authority, a voice of scientific objectivity and absolute medical knowledge. Indeed, Bill is never responsible for anything; "they" [*on*] are delaying the vaccine trials, "they" won't admit Hervé into their protocol; "they" are the ones who prevent him from saving his friend's life, or at the very least from speaking frankly with him about his prognosis. We can sense Guibert's resulting sense of powerlessness in the last lines of the novel: "Pends-toi, Bill! Mes muscles ont fondu. J'ai enfin retrouvé mes jambes et mes bras d'enfant."¹⁰⁵ Here we can clearly see the conflation of the all-powerful friend, Bill, and Hervé's parents. He has

¹⁰⁴ *Le Rose et le noir*, 322.

¹⁰⁵ *A l'ami*, 284.

been reduced to a nightmarish child-like state in which his body no longer belongs to him, reversing the painful trajectory of *Mes parents* that I analyzed earlier.¹⁰⁶

One of the most astonishing aspects of Guibert's work, as well as one of the most crucial, is the extent to which the author worked to carefully inscribe his work within a recognizable literary landscape. This effort meant not only situating his writing within a broader constellation of authors that he respected or admired, but also attempting to control the reception of his *oeuvre*. Before he died, Guibert set about revising his first collection of stories, *La Mort propagande*, for republication in a new edition. He would preface this new edition with an untitled, undated text that might well strike the uninitiated reader as eerily prescient.¹⁰⁷ In the first lines, he announces an artistic project that he could have hardly envisaged at the age of 21, when he first published the collection: "Mon corps, soit sous l'effet de la jouissance, soit sous l'effet de la douleur, est mis dans un état de théâtralité, de paroxysme, qu'il me plairait de reproduire, de quelque façon que ce soit: photo, film, bande-son."¹⁰⁸ He closes the new text with a description of the public's reaction:

Le public sera pris de convulsions, contractions, répulsions, érections, vibrations, jouissances, dégueulis de toutes sortes. Son corps général, à son tour, se mettra à parler [...] Qui voudra bien produire mon suicide, ce best-seller? Filmer la piqûre qui donne la mort la plus lente, le poison qui pénètre avec le baiser en coulant d'une bouche à l'autre (mon nom est Fatalité)?

¹⁰⁶ Frédéric Martel misquotes Guibert, writing "grâce à la maladie, j'ai enfin retrouvé mes bras d'enfant" to bolster his argument against Guibert's AIDS novels. This misreading of the author's words ascribe a salvatory function to childhood that is clearly absent from Guibert's larger body of work. See *Le Rose et le noir*, 322. Arnaud Genon, meanwhile, reads these lines as the sign of an "effacement du sujet, qui se trouve aussi être un processus de retour vers l'enfance [...]" *Hervé Guibert: Vers une esthétique postmoderne*, 204

¹⁰⁷ The publisher's postface to the 2009 edition describes the changes Guibert made to his 1991 edition, noting: "De ces changements, l'édition de 1991 n'avertit pas le lecteur. Aucune mention traditionnelle du type: 'édition revue et corrigée par l'auteur.' Aucune référence non plus à l'édition originale de 1977. La quatrième de couverture, un extrait du *Protocole compassionnel*, invite le lecteur à penser que *La Mort propagande* est un texte 'retrouvé.' Le relevé des corrections et changements opérés par Hervé Guibert en 1991 révèle a contrario qu'il a voulu, discrètement, insuffler à son texte une portée et une signification nouvelles." See *La Mort propagande* (Paris: Gallimard, 2009).

¹⁰⁸ *La Mort propagande*, 7.

The wholeness of the artistic project, its comprehensibility, its comprehensiveness even, thus remained paramount for this otherwise rebellious author. By focusing on the literariness of Guibert's novels as part of his larger *oeuvre*, we are reminded of the essential ambiguities of literature. In other words, Hervé Guibert was not in the business of writing pamphlets or propaganda. His various representations – most notably of AIDS and homosexuality – can hardly be described as “proper” or “appropriate” and they do not exactly correspond to the norms of any community. Herein lies their power as literature. More than a literary representation of crisis that is to be condemned or applauded according to the standards of the day, more than a social document to be read with a careful eye to its historical context, Guibert's AIDS novels survived the epidemic that destroyed his body precisely because they are part of a larger textual body that continues to tell the story of its own resistance.

Conclusions

In the closing lines of his most famous novel, *Dora Bruder*, Patrick Modiano paints a tragic portrait of the relationship between the subject and History. Having followed each trace of this rebellious teenager's Occupation-era existence as far as it would go, the author is still confronted with the great secret of Dora's life: where she went when she ran away from school. Although she would later die at Auschwitz, Dora's secret, and its inability to be appropriated by anyone else, provide her with a sort of final dignity in the face of merciless entities such as history and time. Modiano writes,

J'ignorerai toujours à quoi elle passait ses journées, où elle se cachait, en compagnie de qui elle se trouvait pendant les mois d'hiver de sa première fugue et au cours des quelques semaines de printemps où elle s'est échappée à nouveau. C'est là son secret. Un pauvre et précieux secret que les bourreaux, les ordonnances, les autorités dites d'occupation, le Dépôt, les casernes, les camps, l'Histoire, le temps – tout ce qui vous souille et vous détruit – n'auront pas pu lui voler.¹

This characterization of History as a malignant force that itself stains, steals, and destroys the individuals in its path resonates within Modiano's larger body of work. Survivors of the war, his narrators nonetheless remain inexplicably altered by the events of the Occupation. Here again we encounter "L'Histoire avec sa grande hache," to borrow Perec's famous phrase,² which was itself inspired by this historical period. And yet, despite the traumas they have experienced, his postwar narrators *do* survive. They cannot rescue Dora nor can they fully reconstitute the narrative of her life, but they can make a kind of narrative sense of the Occupation and its aftermath from an individual perspective. In this respect, they defy an impersonal History in the favor of their own small histories, the "pauvre[s] petit[s] secret[s]" that are inevitably lost with the passage of time. People's names, street names, pseudonyms, landmarks, and innocuous objects

¹ *Dora Bruder* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 144-145.

² See Perec, *W ou le souvenir de l'enfance* (Paris: Denoël, 1975), 13.

are imbued with shape and form, and ultimately some semblance of meaning. These are the counter-narratives to the Great Narrative of History, small and insignificant in their way, repetitive in their way, but also resolutely personal.

In the three preceding chapters, I have insisted on the ways in which writing subjects (“I”) and history interact, in order to argue that contemporary first person narrative is not merely the self-serving enterprise of self-satisfied writers striving for commercial success. Patrick Modiano, Assia Djébar, and Hervé Guibert’s works and lives have all been heavily influenced by historical events and the narratives of those events. To loosely paraphrase Shakespeare, we might say that these three authors were respectively born to history, achieved history, or had history thrust upon them. Modiano locates his fatalistic literary approach to history in the year of his birth, 1945. Djébar worked diligently to master and ultimately manipulate the historical narratives that informed her life, becoming a professional historian as well as a professor of literature. Guibert, meanwhile, largely avoided the eruption of history into his work, or treated it as a symptom of larger personal and social issues. Yet his work and reputation were inescapably linked to the historical events of the AIDS crisis, as well as the shifting scientific, cultural, and literary representations that it inspired.

These three authors’ books about the self extend well beyond the story of an individual and his or her intimate preoccupations. Rather, they grapple with some of the most difficult questions facing French writers (and readers) today: how do we understand and respond to a traumatic legacy? How do we define ourselves as members of a community, up to and including the national community? What right do we have to speak for another person, or serve as a representative for a collectivity, or explain the past “as it really happened”? As Jo McCormack has observed, “French collective memory in general [...] appears to have become more fragmented” since the

1970s.³ The literary turn to the first person, then, must be understood in conjunction with a corresponding historiographical turn toward memory and the many problems it poses. Viewed from this angle, we find that first person narrative is inseparably intertwined with questions of authenticity, objectivity, and authority. Modiano, Djébar, and Guibert, notably, do not propose definitive answers to these questions. Rather, they highlight the ways in which the questions are posed. They problematize them, starting from the very textual construction of the self. Guibert, for example, acknowledged the multiplicity of his personas in a published interview, highlighting the ways in which the different versions of “Hervé Guibert” might erupt metaleptically:

Il y a l’expérience de l’écriture, et c’est le moment où je redeviens Hervé Guibert comme personnage de mes livres. J’ai souvent l’impression de mener une double vie. Quand des gens me demandent dans la rue: “*Vous êtes Hervé Guibert?*,” j’ai envie de répondre: “Non, je ne le suis pas en ce moment. Parce qu’à ce moment-là je ne suis pas dans une vague d’impudeur, dans cet étrange rapport qu’il y a entre l’expérience et l’écriture.”⁴

In addition to the questions posed above, which touch individuals as well as groups, pleasure readers as well as academics, and everyday citizens as well as theorists, Modiano, Djébar, and Guibert’s work finds itself at the crossroads of another set of theoretical and generic debates. Are their novels part of a wave of postmodernism whose time has now essentially passed? Each author has been read as an exemplar of postmodern practice due to the care with which s/he constructs (and deconstructs) the writing subject, the elusive “I” of the text.⁵ Is the very self-consciousness of their writing a sign and symptom of postmodernism, or an individual authorial stance? Given the wide span of their combined literary careers (1954-2012, at the time of this writing), it

³ Jo McCormack, “Social Memories in Postcolonial France,” 1130.

⁴ Quoted in Lucey, *Never Say I*, 3.

⁵ See, for example, Genon, *Hervé Guibert: vers une esthétique postmoderne*; Kawakami, *A Self-Conscious Art: Patrick Modiano’s Postmodern Fictions*; and John Erickson, “Women’s Voices and Women’s Space in Assia Djébar’s *L’amour, la fantasia*,” in *Islam and Postcolonial Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 37-65.

initially seems reductive to assimilate their work to a specific, late-twentieth-century theoretical practice in this way, and yet the last decades of the twentieth century clearly caused them to reevaluate, resituate, and reinvent the premises of their own work. Modiano adopted a new voice in the mid-1970s, Djébar withdrew from publication for an entire decade before unveiling a drastically different literary project, and Guibert recontextualized his *oeuvre* in order to create a sense of cohesiveness and purpose from his first text to his last. In addition to or in place of a postmodern project, are these authors participating in an ongoing autofictional practice that may or may not be taken seriously due to its propensity for commercial success?⁶ A proliferation of definitions and fraught debates surrounding the topic makes it difficult to ascertain their level of involvement in this expansive literary sub-genre. If, however, as Arnaud Genon has argued, autofiction consists in the plurality and the fracture of the autobiographical subject, perhaps its “monstrous” form is sufficient to encompass the wide range of origins, literary practices, allegiances, and styles exhibited by these three writers, who are rarely, if ever, read together.⁷

We might ask, indeed, how these narratives exist at all, let alone how they have achieved critical and popular success given the climate in which they were written. After

⁶ Doubrovsky’s creation of the term “autofiction” was at least partly a commercial strategy that allowed him to evoke his life without enjoying the renown of “les grands de ce monde.” See the back cover of *Fils*.

⁷ Genon’s definition is fascinating in that, unlike his predecessors, he focuses primarily on the effects of autofiction rather than its formal properties, and ties it into a literary tradition inaugurated by Rousseau. He writes:

“Alors que Rousseau revendiquait l’originalité de son projet et le caractère unique de sa personne, le sujet de l’autofiction se façonne dans la parole de l’Autre et s’inscrit dans le sillage de ses prédécesseurs. Le sujet, en plus d’être virtuel, se fait textuel. Il est à l’image du genre qui l’expose: monstrueux et hybride. Il n’est jamais un, il dit la pluralité de ce qui est en nous, il multiplie les strates, se dévoile dans l’écriture et s’annihile dans la forme fragmentée qu’elle prend.

L’autofiction, plus qu’un nouveau genre littéraire, est en fait le moyen qu’a trouvé le sujet pour se mettre lui-même en question, pour refuser l’idée d’une vérité univoque et revendiquer sa fracture.” See Genon, “Note sur l’autofiction et la question du sujet,” available online at <http://www.autofiction.org/index.php?category/sur-le-genre>.

all, Roland Barthes announced the death of the author in a 1967 essay,⁸ one year before Modiano published his first novel. And yet, despite their varied readings, critics agree that these are three *oeuvres* in which the question of the author carries considerable weight.⁹ It is perhaps a strange coincidence that first person narrative became increasingly widespread, popular, and influential in the literary market following Barthes's proclamation. The wake of his essay was, after all, marked not only by the publication of *La Place de l'étoile* but also the explosion of student riots in May 1968, sparking a climate of individual and collective contestation that, to me, does not seem so very far removed from the individual and collective contestation exhibited in the first person narrative works I have examined here. Today, however, reinterpretations of the past, including manifestations of collective memory, risk being perceived as part of a culture of victimization.¹⁰ Indeed, new appropriations of the historical record risk being taxed with a familiar label: narcissism.¹¹ Perhaps the increasingly prevalent imbrication of history, memory, and first person narrative in French society has played its role in this critique. The aftermath of a violent and traumatic twentieth century, the disintegration of the French Empire, and a new wave of immigration brought new voices and new identity claims into contact with French society, allowing for the formation of new subjectivities in literature. Can their voices be heard, acknowledged, legitimated, or have they already been buried?

⁸ See Barthes, "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142-147. The essay was originally published in English; the French version would not appear in print until 1968.

⁹ Jean-Pierre Boulé goes so far as to state that "Guibert's work heralded the resurrection of the author" in the wake of Barthes. See *Voices of the Self*, 7.

¹⁰ See Raphaëlle Branche, *La Guerre d'Algérie: une histoire apaisée?*, 13.

¹¹ See Pierre Laborie, *Le Chagrin ou le vénéin*, 9.

Throughout this study, I have insisted on the fraught construction of “Frenchness,” and of the self in relation to that “Frenchness,” within works by Modiano, Djébar, and Guibert. One of the concerns foregrounded by their works might therefore be succinctly stated as follows: “how to be French.”¹² And yet, another aspect of the identity question has emerged here in tandem with that essential query: how to be a French writer, received and respected by French academics and other professional critics. Whether desired, assumed, rejected, or problematized, the relationship between these authors’ identities as specifically French and as writers informs our reading of their work, even subconsciously. Patrick Modiano, for example, has enjoyed decades of popularity among readers, won prestigious prizes from the literary establishment, served on the Cannes jury, been immortalized in popular music, and published novels that have helped inspire new ways of thinking about the legacy of the Occupation. His work has had a far-reaching cultural impact. And yet his novels were largely ignored by French academics before 2008, when a new series of conferences, dossiers, monographs, and edited collections heralded his entry into the “pantheon” of French literature, as represented by the university.¹³ Assia Djébar has also struggled to define the terms of her recognition as a writer. While Modiano has been accused of gradually abandoning Jewish identity questions over the course of his career, Djébar has found it virtually impossible to escape the application of identity labels, with their accompanying assumptions and even ideological stances, to her work. Described variously as an Arab writer, an Algerian writer, a Franco-Algerian writer, a feminist writer, a woman writer,

¹² I refer here to the title of the English translation to Patrick Weil’s history and analysis of French citizenship, *Qu’est-ce qu’un Français*, which was published as *How to Be French* by Duke University Press in 2008.

¹³ Heck, “Seule l’écriture est tangible,” 63. Among the texts published during this new wave of academic interest in Modiano’s work, see especially Roche, *Lectures de Modiano*; Blanckeman, *Lire Patrick Modiano*; and the dossier coordinated by Maryline Heck in which “Seule l’écriture est tangible” appears (*Le Magazine littéraire* 490 [October 2009]).

and so on, Djébar has expressed her ambivalence toward the term “francophone writer,” along with her desire to simply be a writer, without qualification.¹⁴ Guibert, meanwhile, was long dismissed as a serious writer, even after his death. His literary reputation subsumed by the political exigencies of the AIDS crisis, his status as an author worth reading was only established with the passage of time (not to mention a strategic posthumous publishing plan). For almost two decades, Guibert was a French writer who died of AIDS, remembered primarily as the physical manifestation of his disease.¹⁵ His works are still largely ascribed importance to the extent that they responded to the crisis. And yet, the plethora of new testimonials and retrospectives that have emerged in conjunction with the twentieth anniversary of his death¹⁶ allow us to hope that his literary reputation will continue to be reassessed and widened, to encompass the sheer scope of his multimedia artistic project.

Identity politics can be dangerous to the extent that they create new ghettos in which to contain communities and, by extension, the literary voices that are said to represent them. By insisting on the tension between “Frenchness” and questions of Jewish, Algerian, and gay history and identity, I have sought to avoid some of these pitfalls, and complicate the seemingly straightforward, binary relationships between different identities as much as possible. Above all, my choice to read Modiano, Djébar,

¹⁴ “Je suis, sans nul doute, une femme d’éducation française, de par ma formation, en langue française, du temps de l’Algérie colonisée, et si j’ajoute aussitôt ‘d’éducation française’ et de sensibilité algérienne, ou arabo-berbère, ou même musulmane lorsque l’islam est vécu comme une culture, plus encore que comme une foi et une pratique, alors je suis bien une ‘femme francophone’ dans mon activité intellectuelle et critique [...] En m’interrogeant ainsi, sur la littérature et le cinéma dit francophones, je serais donc une ‘voix francophone,’ décidément...Mais comme écrivain? Ne suis-je pas un écrivain tout court?” *Ces voix qui m’assiègent*, 27.

¹⁵ In 2004, Arnaud Genon tracked the state of the field in Guibert studies, describing the “suspicion, voire ce quasi-mépris de la critique littéraire française face à Guibert.” His cautiously optimistic conclusions on the future of Guibert studies would nonetheless prove to be well-founded. See Genon, “Hervé Guibert: état des lieux des études guibertiennes,” available online at <http://www.fabula.org/revue/document232.php>.

¹⁶ See especially Ollier, *Hervé*; Lindon, *Ce qu’aimer veut dire*; *Hervé Guibert: photographe*; and the release of *La Pudeur ou l’impudeur* on DVD.

and Guibert together has constituted an attempt to form unexpected connections. The prism through which I have been able to explain this choice is that of their shared interest in the thorny questions of history, memory, and identity that collide within contemporary first person texts. And yet, the true justification lies elsewhere. Within and beyond the bounds of identity, within and beyond the bounds of genre, Modiano, Djébar, and Guibert can speak to each other, and to us, through their texts simply because they have written literature. True literary creation defies the very labels we invent to define and contain it.

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Biography

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