

GENERATING GEOGRAPHIES AND GENEALOGIES: JEWISH WOMEN
WRITING THE TWENTIETH CENTURY IN FRENCH

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Title: *Generating Geographies and Genealogies: Jewish Women Writing the Twentieth Century in French*

This dissertation offers an alternative account of Jewish history and experience from within the post-Holocaust and postcolonial Francophone world through the study of six autobiographically-inclined texts written by three generations of Francophone Jewish women of diverse geographical origins. While France was the first European nation-state to grant citizenship to Jews in 1791 and the French Republic has since branded itself as a beacon of tolerance, this tolerance has been contingent upon a strict politics of assimilation and has been challenged by French colonization and participation in the Holocaust. Simultaneously, the evolution of French memory politics and official historical narratives throughout the second half of the twentieth century has reflected a slow coming to terms with and official recognition of French participation in the Holocaust at the expense of acknowledging the traumas of de/colonization also inflicted by the French State. As a result, Jews and postcolonial populations – all marginalized groups affected by these traumatic episodes of modern French history – have been placed in separate categories. This separation has on the one hand reinforced identity politics and narratives of competing victimhood, occluding the interconnections between antisemitism, racism and Islamophobia, and on the other hand excluded Jews from debates concerning multiculturalism and inclusive citizenship.

This dissertation demonstrates that these histories of assimilation, exclusion and marginalization are interconnected rather than separate. With an intentional focus on Jewish women and their writing as a means of demonstrating these false separations, I posit and trace the development of “*écriture juive féminine*” (“Jewish feminine writing”) across the three generations of writers, a textuality characterized and driven by five principles: an ethics of openness to the true, untheorizable and irreducible alterity of others achieved through listening, extreme and perpetual liminality that calls readers into the discomfort of uncertainty, an imperative to mourn and remember losses, an endlessly regenerative writing that resists singular interpretation and opens into further questions, and writing with the body against phallogocentrism. This writing addresses politics of assimilation and exclusion, proposing instead a radical universalism that includes the particular without reducing it to essentialist categories.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: METHODOLOGIES OF WEAVING THREADS AND READING IN REVERSE

“We are not “the woman question” asked by somebody else; we are the women who ask the questions.”
– Adrienne Rich, “Notes Toward a Politics of Location”

“Nous, les précoces, nous les refoulées de la culture, les belles bouches barrées de bâillons, pollen, haleines coupées, nous les labyrinthes, les échelles, les espaces foulés ; les volées – nous sommes « noires » et nous sommes belles.”
– Hélène Cixous, “Sorties”

“Faire parler les silences de l’Histoire [...] n’est peut-être tout à fait possible que dans la fiction.”
– Régine Robin, *Le Naufrage du siècle*

“Je (ne) suis (pas) arabe” (“I am (not) Arab”), writes Hélène Cixous in “Sorties,” her 1975 essay that has become one of the seminal texts of Second Wave French feminism (87). With its parenthetical ambiguity, this short description encapsulates the historical and geopolitical complexities at stake in this dissertation. What does Cixous mean by this statement, and can we even call it a “statement” given its parentheses that negate certainty? Cixous, a Jewish woman who was born in French colonial Algeria in 1937, has reason for her ambiguity. The parenthetical line appears in the following excerpt of “Sorties”:

Et à moi aussi, on me fait le coup de « nos ancêtres les Gaulois ». Mais je suis née en Algérie, et mes ancêtres ont vécu en Espagne, au Maroc, en Autriche, Hongrie, Tchécoslovaquie, Allemagne, mes frères de naissance sont arabes ; alors, dans l’histoire, où sommes-nous ? Je suis du parti des offensés, des colonisés. Je (ne) suis (pas) arabe. Qui suis-je? Je « fais » de l’histoire de France. Je suis juive. Pendant vos guerres et vos révolutions, dans quel ghetto suis-je parquée? (87)¹

¹ Betsy Wing’s English translation appears here; all subsequent translations of cited excerpts from “Sorties” will be Wing’s:

Me too. The routine “our ancestors, the Gauls” was pulled on me. But I was born in Algeria, and my ancestors lived in Spain, Morocco, Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Germany; my brothers

As this short excerpt illuminates, being a “Jewish woman” is complex. Histories, geographies, and politics collide at the nexus of Cixous’ identity. Subjected to the French colonial “routine” in school, Cixous aligns herself with the colonized but cannot locate herself within history as it has been written, since she “is (not) Arab.” If she “‘does’ French history”, it is from the liminal space drawn by her Ashkenazic and Sephardic roots spanning from Western-Central Europe to the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa; Cixous’ Jewishness sets her into an unnamed and unlocatable “ghetto” of geopolitical histories.

This short excerpt of Cixous’ essay opens a window into the questions and preoccupations from which this dissertation grew: a need to tell a different Jewish story in post-Holocaust and post-colonial France. French political and historical discourse regarding Jews of the “post-” era has tended on the one hand to exclude Jews from multicultural debates, since the assumption has been that Jews have assimilated and “become French” compared to other minority groups coming from former colonies, and on the other hand to privilege Holocaust memory – albeit very belatedly – in public and official acts of commemoration at the expense of acknowledging other groups’ past sufferings perpetrated by the French State. This disparity of public memory has contributed to division between Jews and other minority groups, which in turn has reinforced the fracturing effects of identity politics. At the same time, this French discourse on Jews and Jewishness has tended to narrowly define and overly simplify

by birth are Arab. So where are we in history? I side with those who are injured, trespassed upon, colonized. I am (not) Arab. Who am I? I am “doing” French history. I am a Jewish woman. In which ghetto was I penned up during your wars and your revolutions? (*Newly* 71)

An additional note on translations: I include full translations of cited excerpts only when the original is especially theoretical, or when the translation itself is part of my discussion. Otherwise, I provide enough scaffolding for the salient features of the excerpt discussed to be understood by Anglophone readers.

these categories by privileging Ashkenazic over Sephardic and Mizrahi cultural-historical experiences and perspectives. Furthermore, post-Holocaust and post-colonial France has the largest Jewish and Muslim Arab populations in Europe, and as such has become a stage upon which the Israeli-Palestinian conflict reverberates and plays out. Within this sociopolitical landscape, we can see how these discourses have had divisive effects and created perceptions that Jews are a privileged minority population apart for whom multicultural debates around citizenship and inclusion are irrelevant, and whose status in the present as a minority group is informed solely by the Holocaust. Finally, in these discussions around Jews, Jewishness, multiculturalism and memory politics, male voices have dominated.² In this dissertation, the “different story” I seek to tell is that of Jewish women, “Juives” like Cixous.

As its title – “Generating Geographies and Genealogies: Jewish Women Writing the Twentieth Century in French” – suggests, this project is one with many thematic and theoretical threads that weave together. This weaving together is intentional and serves its own critical-theoretical purpose: it highlights the arbitrary artificiality of privileging one approach, discipline, or lens over another. Indeed, one of the most central theoretical contributions this project makes to the field of French and Francophone literary studies is its emphasis on “synthetic” reading: a kind of critical engagement with literary texts that focuses on the interconnected rather than the myopic. With this “synthetic” reading, it becomes impossible not to take an interdisciplinary approach, and this project draws from Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Judaic Studies, Mediterranean Studies, as well as French and Francophone Studies and some of the

² Some of the most prominent male voices in these debates of Jews and Jewishness in post-war and post-colonial France have been Emmanuel Levinas, Alain Finkielkraut, Shmuel Trigano, Albert Memmi, Jean-François Lyotard, and Jean-Paul Sartre.

modes of theoretical-critical analysis developed within each of these disciplines. The interdisciplinarity of this project is evidence of the inherent interdisciplinarity and liminality of Jews and Jewishness in the French-speaking world, and of the texts and authors studied.

Thus, each word of the title is significant and contains within it the foundations upon which the project rests. I begin therefore by unraveling the strands of each thread to expose the stakes and scope of the pages that follow, in which we will study autobiographically-oriented fictions and life-writing by three generations of French-speaking Jewish women. In Chapter II, we will study *Géographie des origines* (2007), a text published without any specific genre marker beyond “récit,”³ written by Annie Cohen, born in Sidi-bel-Abbès, Algeria in 1944, and *Un été à Jérusalem* (1986), a novel by Chochana Boukhobza, born in Sfax, Tunisia in 1959. In this chapter we will see how Cohen and Boukhobza produce a disorienting “queering” of what we might imagine Jewish women’s writing in the post-Holocaust and post-colonial era to be from within and without the construct of “the Orient” as each writer engages with her transnational post-colonial diasporic experiences of the Maghreb, France, and Israel. In Chapter III, we will turn our attention to *Osnabrück* (1998), an unlabeled text in terms of genre written by Hélène Cixous, born in Oran, Algeria in 1937, and *La Québécoise* (1983)⁴, a novel by Régine Robin, born Rivka Ajzerstejn in Paris, France in 1939. In this chapter, we will see how Cixous and Robin utilize metanarrative techniques to act out the crisis of representation and the impossibility of wholeness and continuity after the Holocaust and

³ This is the French word for “story,” “account,” or “tale.” Using it as a marker of genre thus leaves readers with very little concrete means of classification.

⁴ This is the date of original publication. Throughout this dissertation, I will cite from the 1993 edition. All dates are those of both the original publication and those of the cited edition, unless otherwise noted.

decolonization, and in so doing make readers into witnesses of these crises. Finally, in Chapter IV we will consider *Enfance* (1983), another unclassified text by Nathalie Sarraute, born Natacha Tcherniak in Ivanovo, Russia in 1900, and *Le Vin de solitude* (1935),⁵ a novel referred to by Irène Némirovsky, its author, as “a badly disguised autobiography.”⁶ Némirovsky was born Irina Némirovsky in Kiev, Ukraine (then part of the Russian Empire) in 1903. In this chapter, we will see how these two authors and texts appear entirely opposite to each other until we read between the lines to reveal early traces of what I call “écriture juive féminine,” a kind of writing transmitted and produced within this selected corpus of six texts that develops into one of the “genealogies” referenced in the title of this project. We will return to “écriture juive féminine” later in this introductory chapter.

A Title of Many Threads:

As the first word of the title and the organizing structure of the project as outlined above indicate, the concepts of “generations” and “generating” are central to my reading of these texts. Etymologically, the verb and the noun share roots in the Latin prefix “generat-” meaning “created”, the Latin verb “generare” (“to create”), and in the Latin words “genus” and “gener-” meaning “stock, race.” This etymology emphasizes the process and act of creation, demonstrating that these are active texts that make and are made, but also the sharing of common stock. The generative qualities of these texts make them examples of Jacques Derrida’s concept of “écriture” (“writing” and/or “scripture”),

⁵ Although the novel was originally published in 1935 by Éditions Albin Michel, I will cite from the 2011 Livre de Poche (Librairie Générale Française) edition of Némirovsky’s *Complete Works* (*Œuvres complètes*), vol. 1.

⁶ “Une biographie mal déguisée”; cited in Olivier Philipponnat’s introduction to the novel in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 1, p. 1171.

a Judaic mode of writing that contains within it traces of other writing and that thus generates an infinite cycle of textuality. For Derrida, who was heavily influenced by the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, “écriture” is specifically Judaic (as opposed to Greek) since according to Judaic tradition, there is no difference between words (signs) and the things they signify. This is why the rabbis famously wrote that “Words make worlds,” and that the Torah is word and life; there is no separation between representation and reality. As such, texts are not mimetic as in the Greek tradition, but rather, are generative of life and reality.⁷

By considering this group of writers as belonging to three generations, we focus our attention on the relationship between subjects and historical time, between subjectivity and loss, mourning, and memory. The generational structure also makes central questions of transmission and of knowledge production; how do we learn from past generations, and what do we inherit? What is the common “stock” we share, as the etymology of “generation” suggests? Discoveries in neurobiology and epigenetics tell us that previous generations impact us at the cellular level, demonstrating that there is a mode of transmission across generations that extends beyond the realm of the visible, of the tangible, and of the conscious mind. While the six writers I study are not biologically related, this project posits a literary genealogy of intertextual resonance in which these three generations of writers imprint upon and speak to and through each other.

The “geographies” of the title refers to the diasporic, exilic spaces from which these Jewish writers create new geographies that are “reoriented”⁸ and disorienting, palimpsestic, fragmented, and suspended in transnational spaces of the in-between. These

⁷ I paraphrase Elizabeth Grosz and summarize from her essay “Judaism and Exile: The Ethics of Otherness” here, especially pp. 65-66.

⁸ I borrow this term from Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology*, a key theoretical text in Chapter II.

liminal, suspended geographies are often expressed either through ambivalence or exoticization and are filtered through memory – whether one’s own or inherited – that has itself been altered by trauma. A striking visual example of such a geography as those produced within these six texts is a map of the United States drawn from memory by Sara Berman, a Jewish woman born in Belarus in 1920 who emigrated to Palestine and eventually the United States.⁹ Berman’s map was produced as part of a creative representation of United States history conceived by her daughter, the artist and *New Yorker* contributor Maira Kalman, in which Kalman asked various people to draw maps from memory. In Berman’s map, the United States is an egg-shaped mass; New York State is a narrow strip running north and south, Nevada, Texas, California, and Vermont line the Canadian border, while Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Lenin, Berman’s hometown in Belarus, are bunched together in the southeast “corner” of the oval. In the middle of the oval, Berman has written “Sorry, the rest unknown Thank you.” While the map is humorous and playful, it is also an illustration of transnational experience. It illustrates the ways in which transnationality can inspire inventiveness and new geographies and epistemologies on the one hand, and on the other, the ways in which transnationality can impact memory as traumatic pasts resurface and imprint upon the present.

With “genealogies” in its title, this project is conceived on the one hand as a literary genealogy that reveals the resonances and traces these texts carry within and between each other. But, as queer and feminist theories illustrate, “genealogies” have functioned in Western contexts to reproduce and reify heteropatriarchal normativity. Women are erased from or disappear into patriarchal genealogies, and queer structures of kinship have been excluded from traditional conceptions of genealogies. This dissertation

⁹ An online search for “Sara Berman’s Map of the United States” will call up the image.

creates an alternative, queer genealogy in which women are made visible and central, recuperating the matriarchal tradition of Judaism. Indeed, all of these writers write about mothers, whether their own (filtered through autobiographical fiction) or those of their protagonists. In so doing, these texts, particularly those of the youngest generation, propose patriarchy's displacement from its central location as they expose its failures. At the same time, considering these writers and their works along generational lines implicitly posits alternative modes of transmission and connection beyond traditional definitions and structures (i.e. the familial/biological and the national).

The "Jewish" of the title makes explicit that this is a project about Jewish questions. Yet "Jewish" is a term not easily defined; we use it to refer to ethnic (Sephardic, Ashkenazic, Mizrahi), religious (Judaism in its varying degrees of practice), and linguistic (Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino, Judeo-Arabic) identities and traditions, but these are all very different things and open into vastly heterogeneous geographies, histories, politics and ideologies. "Jewish" has been further complicated by the Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel; these two twentieth century watersheds have become synonymous with Jewish identities and histories, subsuming all the heterogeneity of these identities and histories into those of genocide victims on the one hand and perpetrators of violence in the name of national Zionism on the other. Additionally, "Jewish" is a term not easily defined in part due to long histories of persecution, exodus, and assimilation. Jews have functioned as the other since Biblical times, suffering persecution and forced displacement, and yet Jews have also functioned as the model other in terms of assimilability. This mixed function of "other yet assimilable" has engendered a position of perpetual liminality for Jews and Jewishness. Diasporic geographies and histories of assimilation – geographies and histories unique to Jews –

thus challenge binaries (us and them, self and other, same and different) and boundaries of nation (Jews are granted citizenship contingent upon assimilation, and, for white supremacists, are considered a nation apart) and language (Jewish languages such as Yiddish, Ladino, and Judeo-Arabic are the effects of diasporic liminality and porous boundaries). From a literary studies perspective, “Jewish literature” is equally slippery; is a Jewish literature one produced in Jewish languages? Is a Jewish literature defined in terms of the content and themes it addresses? How might a Jewish literature be defined if “Jewish writers” encompass the spectrum of religiosity between Orthodox and secular/atheist? When secular, assimilated Jews such as Kafka or Proust write in German or French but are nonetheless known to be Jewish, does this constitute “Jewish literature”?

If “Jewish” is a difficult term to define, so too is “Jewish women.” As the short excerpt from Cixous’ essay has already shown us, this intersection of identities marked by subjugation, marginalization, and defined in terms of difference, is unlocatable within official histories. In fact, the intersection of “Jewish” and “women” might be better described as a missing or invisible intersection. Within traditional religious Jewish communities, women are excluded and sexism prevails. But within feminist movements, Jewish women are largely invisible and unrecognized in terms of ethnic and racialized particularities that can come with being Jewish. As Julie Greenberg writes in her essay “Seeking a Feminist Judaism,” “In the life of a Jewish woman, there is not a Jewish self separate from a female self. Being a Jewish woman or a female Jew is a totality and all experience is filtered through that integrated reality” (194). This total, integrated reality is precisely what falls through the cracks of feminism and Jewishness alike.

To make matters more complicated, the troublesome question of “women writers” and whether to name such a group is to fall into an essentialist trap has haunted this project from its inception. Is the choice to include only women in the scope of this study essentializing and reductive, or is it a feminist gesture of privileging marginalized voices and subverting patriarchal norms? On the one hand, women authors are a historically underrepresented and marginalized group within the history of literary production and textual traditions, particularly that of autobiography. Studying autobiographically-inclined texts written by women is in this sense a feminist gesture; by giving space to a historically marginalized group, a certain amount of equity is restored and patriarchal norms are subverted. On the other hand, how might the choice to exclude men writers (known simply as “writers”) from the scope of this study imply an essentializing logic that “women writers” share common qualities and produce certain kinds of texts that differ from those written by men? To study “women writers” and “women’s writing” is to be caught in a double-bind between feminist and potentially reductive gestures. As we will see in the chapters that follow, the writers and texts considered in this project are heterogeneous in terms of form, style, content, strategies, attitudes, politics, background, and literary agenda, offering evidence that this is not an essentializing project. At the same time, there *are* certain shared preoccupations, lived experiences, inheritances, and historical legacies that bring these writers and texts together into the literary genealogy I propose. Furthermore, as we will see, all of the texts studied within this genealogy prominently feature women who are writers: in Cohen’s *Géographie des origines* and Cixous’ *Osnabrück*, the explicitly female narrators are writers; in Robin’s *La Québécoise*, the female protagonist is a writer, as is the first-person female narrator; in Sarraute’s *Enfance*, the narrator is a writer who recounts her childhood self’s aspirations to become

one in part because her mother was a writer; in Némirovsky's *Le Vin de solitude*, the young female protagonist is an aspiring writer whose first scenes of writing are turning points in the narrative. In the case of Boukhobza's *Un été à Jérusalem*, the young female narrator-protagonist is not a writer in the literal sense, but she wields her body in the same way the others wield their pen. It is therefore safe to say that these women who write see value and subversion in women's writing; by staging women's writing within their fictional works, they make it visible and inscribe themselves into the literary landscape.

The final "thread" of this project's multi-threaded title is "Writing the Twentieth Century." By this I mean several things: first, that history is written, and that historiography is political. Second, I mean that there are other methodologies and epistemologies beyond the historiographical of "writing the century"; memory and its production in the collective, public sphere also shapes the ways in which we understand the past, and it is also political. Who writes these narratives, whether historiographical or memorial, and for whom? In this project, I argue that these "Jewish women writers" are not only actively and consciously inscribing themselves into the literary landscape, but that they are also actively and consciously writing alternative histories and memories that offer new insights into the twentieth century and destabilize official narratives constructed along nationalist lines. It is this thread of the project that draws its theoretical frame from the growing field of Memory Studies, and from three models of memory in particular: Marianne Hirsch's "postmemory," Michael Rothberg's "multidirectional memory," and Max Silverman's "palimpsestic memory." These three models advocate for a view of memory that highlights interconnection while arguing against fracturing, limited views of memory as bound within official national frames. Finally, with its

counter-chronological structure, this project enters into historiographical and memorial debates. By “reading in reverse” and ending with the oldest generation, we will see that what appears to be the more distant past of that generation is in fact not so far removed.

As these opening pages demonstrate, “Generating Geographies and Genealogies: Jewish Women Writing the Twentieth Century in French” responds to a need to weave its many threads into a fabric that tells a different Jewish story in French. Applying any one critical and/or theoretical lens is insufficient when it comes to studying these texts and their authors. Indeed, if “Being a Jewish woman is a totality” as Julie Greenberg asserts, then how is it possible to engage these texts in any other way but through a multidisciplinary approach?

Language, Identity, and Power: Jewomen

In her memoir *French Lessons* (1998), Alice Kaplan – a member of the French faculty at Yale who is known for her research on fascist and antisemitic literature and who grew up in an Ashkenazic Jewish family in Minnesota in the 1950s – recalls the linguistic manifestations of her grandmother’s decline into dementia. Suddenly, the languages of her grandmother’s traumatic past came bursting through in fitful spurts:

A fuse had blown in her head, making it impossible for her to control which language she was speaking. The languages from her past—Russian from the school she had attended in Lithuania, Yiddish from home, Hebrew from the synagogue—came up like bile. [...]. The mode of each language was in place: her Hebrew sounded incantatory, ritualistic; Yiddish was conversational, emotional. The change from one language to another, from ritual to conversation, was all the communication she could produce. [...]. I had never heard my grandmother speak more than a sentence or two in a foreign language until she lost her mind. She had kept those past lives tight inside her, until they came out all jumbled up in the end. I would give anything to have heard her when she was ten or twenty or thirty-five, when her other languages worked. I imagine my Nanny in the czar’s school. She’s an ace at Russian in my fantasy. Even though it’s the language of evil men, she picks it up right away. It protects her from them. (12-13)

Kaplan's heartbreaking description of her declining grandmother illustrates the Jewish experience of language, and indeed, cuts to the core of the questions that inflect Jewish identities. The fields of sociolinguistics and language acquisition teach us that language and identity are inextricably linked and in constant evolution; students in a language classroom develop new aspects of their ever-evolving identities in and through the new language they are learning. But as Kaplan's memories of her grandmother illustrate, the contexts in which language informs and shapes our identities are critical (as are the affects produced by those contexts), and can make or break our ability to speak a certain language. When that ability is broken or repressed, so are parts of ourselves. As Kaplan eloquently puts it, "Language is not a machine you can break and fix with the right technique, it is a function of the whole person, an expression of culture, desire, need. [...]. Inside our language is our history, personal and political" (98). Although Kaplan's grandmother was Ashkenazic and grew up in "Russian Lithuania," similar experiences and histories of trauma, separation, and oppression have determined the languages spoken (and/or repressed) by Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews as well. Ladino (or Judeo-Spanish) and Judeo-Arabic have become clandestine, private languages not spoken in public spaces that are facing extinction just as Yiddish has. This has continued into the present for Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews living in Israel in particular, where Hebrew is the national language, and nation-building is an ongoing – and militantly so – project with its roots in Ashkenazic-centric Zionism. While the geographies differ, the complexity of "Jewish language" remains consistent; switching in and out of – or learning and repressing – certain languages in certain times, places, and contexts has been a matter of survival.

Kaplan's succinct definition of language as "a function of the whole person" thus makes poignantly clear that "language problems," such as her grandmother's repressed speech, are reflections of violence and traumas endured by the whole person. And if language contains our personal and political history, it is also shaped by those histories, which in turn are shaped by ideologies and power. Thus, language is at once personal, emotional, political, social, and cultural, and through all of these vectors, embodied. In the pages that follow and make up this project, we will see language – mostly French, which carries its own ideology, politics, traumas, and affective responses – that Jewish women writers use within the creative space of fiction to write themselves into histories that have largely repressed them.

Feminist philosopher and theorist Elizabeth Grosz echoes Kaplan in her article "Judaism and Exile: The Ethics of Otherness" (1993), reminding us that history and language are neither separate from each other nor neutral and both carry power within them, whether used ethically or not. To be a historical subject is to be able to speak. As Grosz demonstrates, the notion of an "autonomous Jewish history," one that can be written and understood on its own terms, as its own unit, and in its own language is complicated and full of dilemmas:

We should note in passing the dilemma of producing an autonomous history of the Jew: Jewish history cannot be seen as self-contained and autonomous for, even in its own terms, this is a history of oppression, suffering, persecution, a history imposed on the Jew by others; nor can this history simply form a coherent narrative of perpetual oppressions – for this effaces any notion of Jewish activity or agency. Any Jewish history would have to be, in some sense, a counter-history, a subordinated history, a history produced by yet subversive of received Hellenic/Christian histories. This dilemma is the same as that facing the Third World intellectual: such a person cannot afford politically to accept the 'truths' provided by colonial history, for this is a history written by oppressors from the First World; nor is there any longer an indigenous, native discourse and intellectual position, given the history and impact of colonialism on the colonized, and given that the Third World is now a resistant and resisting effect or projection of the First World. The problem is how to speak a language of the colonizer,

which nevertheless represents the interests, and positions of the colonized? If the subaltern can speak, what language is able to articulate, to speak or adequately represent the subaltern's position? (58)

While Grosz's use of the "First World/Third World" dichotomy might be considered a way of further reinscribing Eurocentric colonial and imperial hierarchies and binaries and therefore elicits a wince, her discussion nonetheless brilliantly exposes the complicated interconnection between language and history when each simultaneously contains within it colonial violence and oppression *and* agency and identity of the oppressed. Grosz's discussion also identifies this dynamic as something shared by Jews and colonized peoples of Europe's former empires, a rare argument to make in the 1990s at the height of identity politics and multiculturalism, debates which tended to separate Jewish populations from other historically oppressed and marginalized groups. Grosz draws on Jacques Derrida's thinking throughout her essay, and her question about language echoes Derrida's own questioning of what – if any – language is really "his" in *Le monolinguisme de l'autre, ou la prothèse de l'origine* (1996). In that autobiographical-philosophical essay, written in the form of a dialogue, Derrida states "Je n'ai qu'une langue, et ce n'est pas la mienne" ("I only have one language, and it is not mine"; my trans.; 13). The language to which Derrida refers is French; as a Jew who grew up in French colonial Algeria like Cixous, French indeed *was* "his" language, but it also carried the oppressive violence that made him a colonial subject at the same time as an assimilated French citizen. We will return to Derrida's essay in Chapter III, but I briefly refer to it here as a means of illustrating Grosz's question.

Just as language holds oppression *and* agency and identity for Jews, the same questions about how to navigate this double-bind (and double consciousness¹⁰) in terms

¹⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois used this term in *The Soul of Black Folk* (1903) to describe the experience of African Americans whose awareness of how they are perceived as Other influences their own self-perception.

of “producing an autonomous history” have applied to women in male-dominated societies and politics. These questions arose in the women’s movements of the 1970s when neologisms such as “herstory” or “hystery” in English were invented as gestures towards bringing women into history, and therefore into language. But the need to invent new words says much about the insufficient – and exclusionary, male-centered – nature of what language was (and is) available to begin with. In 1975, in the midst of what we now call the Second Wave feminist movements of the 1970s, Hélène Cixous wrote and published “Le Rire de la Méduse” (“The Laugh of the Medusa”) and “Sorties” (“Ways Out”), her now famous essays or ‘manifestos’ as some – though not including Cixous herself – have called them.

“Le Rire de la Méduse” appeared in an English translation that same year in the then new American feminist journal *Signs*, while “Sorties” (“Exits” or “Ways Out”), which was published in French as part of a collaboration between Cixous and Catherine Clément as *La Jeune née* (*The Newly Born Woman* in its eventual English translation by Betsy Wing) is a much longer piece in which Cixous expands the work of “Le Rire.” These essays have had very different receptions and “afterlives” in French and English. The English translation of “Medusa” in particular has become a seminal text for Women’s and Gender Studies and features in many anthologies of feminist texts. *The Newly Born Woman* also received more attention by feminist scholars in the United States than in France, where the essays went out of print in the early 1980s. They

African Americans have “split vision” of themselves as a result of oppression and subjugation within dominant white culture. Grosz articulates an analogous doubling that occurs for Jews in the position of exile: “The position of the exile automatically has access to (at least) two different kinds of discourse and history, one defined by exclusion from a social mainstream; and one provided autonomously, from its own history and self-chosen representations” (69-70).

reappeared in a new edition published by Éditions Galilée in 2010¹¹, featuring a preface by Frédéric Regard, one of Cixous' graduate students, and a foreword by Cixous herself. In this foreword, she writes: "Et puis je ne suis pas *auteur de manifestes*. Vous m'entendez ? J'écris. Je suis quelqu'un de silencieux, de retiré" ("And I am not *author of manifestos*. Do you hear me? I write. I am a quiet person, withdrawn"; my trans.; 30). Cixous sees herself as a writer, which is not a role synonymous with someone who authors manifestos.

Her resistance to the characterization of the essays as "manifestos" has to do with her "theory" of "écriture féminine." In these seminal essays, Cixous calls for women – although men were not excluded from the call – to engage in an undefinable practice of "feminine writing" ("écriture féminine") as a means of unlocking the subversive political power and potential of language itself, thus undermining the hierarchical modes of phallogentrism and the false binaries and divisions it makes, all of which are embedded within language:

Impossible à présent de *définir* une pratique féminine de l'écriture, d'une impossibilité qui se maintiendra car on ne pourra jamais *théoriser* cette pratique, l'enfermer, la coder, ce qui ne signifie pas qu'elle n'existe pas. Mais elle excédera toujours le discours qui régit le système phallogentrique ; elle a et aura lieu ailleurs que dans les territoires subordonnés à la domination philosophico-théorique. Elle ne se laissera penser que par les sujets casseurs des automatismes, les coureurs de bords qu'aucune autorité ne subjugue jamais. Mais on peut commencer à parler. À désigner quelques effets, quelques composantes pulsionnelles, quelques rapports de l'imaginaire féminin au réel, à l'écriture. (126)¹²

¹¹ *Le Rire de la Méduse et d'autres ironies*. All subsequent citations in French from the essays will be taken from this edition.

¹² Keith and Paula Cohen's English translation appears here:

It is impossible to *define* a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized, enclosed, coded—which does not mean that it does not exist. But it will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogentric system; it does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatism, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate. ("Laugh" 883)

While she insists that “feminine writing” is by definition indefinable – and herein lies her resistance to calling them “manifestos” –, since to define it (or theorize it) would be to reduce it to the divisions and hierarchies produced by phallogentrism itself, Cixous nonetheless provides sufficient descriptions and examples to give readers a sense of what she might mean. It is this very dance with meaning that is the ultimate goal of feminine writing, performed within the essays themselves, which are thus simultaneously theoretical, practical, didactic, and performative. In the opening lines of “Le Rire de la Méduse,” she writes:

Je parlerai de l’écriture féminine : *de ce qu’elle fera*. Il faut que la femme s’écrive : que la femme écrive de la femme et fasse venir les femmes à l’écriture, dont elles ont été éloignées aussi violemment qu’elles l’ont été de leurs corps ; pour les mêmes raisons, par la même loi, dans le même but mortel. Il faut que la femme se mette au texte – comme au monde, et à l’histoire –, de son propre mouvement. (37)¹³

The “movement” Cixous alludes to here is at once the movement of writing itself – that is to say, the movement inherent to “writing with the body,” which as we will see is a key feature of “écriture féminine,” the movement within the writing – which as we will see is intentionally polysemic and syntactically surprising, and therefore it is a mobile writing, and that of the political and social movement that can be produced by and through the writing.

Indeed, “écriture féminine” is a decidedly subversive writing with an investment in creating an opening into a future that will signal a break with old forms. As Cixous writes in the next paragraph, “Il ne faut plus que le passé fasse l’avenir. Je ne nie pas que

¹³ In English: “I shall speak about women’s writing: about *what it will do*. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into history—by her own movement” (“Laugh” 875).

les effets du passé sont encore là. Mais je me refuse à les consolider en les répétant ; à leur prêter une inamovibilité équivalente à un destin ; à confondre le biologique et le culturel. Il est urgent d'anticiper" (37) ("The future must no longer be determined by the past. I do not deny that the effects of the past are still with us. But I refuse to strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny, to confuse the biological and the cultural. Anticipation is imperative" 875). Cixous exhorts women to break with the past by refusing to treat it as an "irremovable destiny" without denying that its effects are still present. Indeed, she suggests that History (the past) is not natural, but rather a cultural construct that has been made in such a way as to *appear* natural, precisely because of its continued effects in the present. In order to achieve a future no longer made by the past, women must see that the past itself was made by "confusing the biological and the cultural." But while here Cixous writes specifically about the unnatural constructedness of the past, we could just as easily make the same exhortation vis-à-vis the conflation of sex (the biological) and gender (the cultural), and of genes and phenotype (the biological) and race (the cultural). In these early moments of her essay, she foretells later arguments she will make.

For Cixous, the movement of writing with the body is akin to "jouissance," a frequently recurring word in the essays and throughout all of her work, which in French can mean "enjoyment," "pleasure," "delight," "orgasm," or "the right to use." Homophonically, it connects with "jouer" (to play) and "ouïr" (to hear). The word in its polysemic and homophonic variety thus draws connections between aliveness (what are greater signs of life and vitality than to enjoy and delight?), sexuality, sensuality (the sense of hearing), and the political (having the right to use something). Indeed, Cixous "delights" in the word itself for its polysemy and fluidity between meanings; if

“jouissance” is a sign of aliveness, it is so also because it is the source of creativity. For Cixous, creativity can only come from such an aliveness which expresses itself through pleasure, enjoyment, and delight; early in “Le Rire” she links women’s creativity (in the form of writing especially, but also art, music, dance) with free expression of sexuality (desire, pleasure). Thus, jouissance is what links writing and the body and is a key quality of feminine writing. The lack of women’s creative production in culture is a direct consequence of their repressed desires and pleasures as well as of their denied rights to use – in this case, to use language, the raw material of creativity.

This reclaiming of jouissance is in part a response to Lacan, and therefore to Freud as well. Indeed, in these essays (and especially in “Sorties”), Cixous confronts and deconstructs Freud and Lacan’s psychoanalytical theories about women as well as foundational myths in the Western literary canon that fuel and reinforce – and provide the basis for – the phallogentrism of Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. For Lacan, jouissance is an “excess of life” or “superabundant vitality”¹⁴ and this “excess” points to an enjoyment beyond Freud’s pleasure principle. In this way, Lacan makes jouissance – and women’s sexuality – unknowable in that it is beyond the scope of regulated pleasure and drives, and sinful in its excess. This unknowability and sinfulness point to a darkness, and indeed, Freud’s infamous description of female sexuality as “the dark continent.”¹⁵ For Cixous, associating jouissance with writing, and urging women to bring themselves to writing (and therefore to jouissance) is a radical act of seeing through the “darkness” that women have been made to believe about themselves. Cixous’ engagement with the

¹⁴ Lacan made this remark in his Seminar VII.

¹⁵ Freud made this infamous comparison between Africa as colonial explorer Henry Morton Stanley described it (“the dark continent”) in his essay “The Question of Lay Analysis” in which he defended psychoanalysis as a treatment modality better practiced by non-medically trained doctors.

trope of darkness recurs frequently throughout the essays, and is as important and subversive as it is potentially problematic. We will return to it later in this discussion after further exploration of what feminine writing does, and how it does what it does according to Cixous.

Cixous explains that women have been made to believe two damning – and false – myths about themselves: what she calls “the abyss” (that is to say, death, lack, absence) and “the Medusa” (the monstrous and abject, the fallen from grace). These two myths thus further accentuate women’s supposed “darkness”:

Le « Continent noir » n’est ni noir ni inexplorable. Il n’est encore inexploré que parce qu’on nous a fait croire qu’il était trop noir pour être explorable. Et parce qu’on veut nous faire croire que ce qui nous intéresse c’est le continent blanc, avec ses monuments au Manque. Et nous avons cru. On nous a figées entre deux mythes horribles : entre la Méduse et l’abîme. Il y aurait de quoi faire éclater de rire la moitié du monde, si ça ne continuait pas. Car la relève phallogocentrique est là, et militante, reproductrice des vieux schémas, ancrée dans le dogme de la castration. Ils n’ont rien changé : ils ont théorisé leur désir pour de la réalité ! Qu’ils tremblent, les prêtres, on va leur montrer nos sextes ! (54)¹⁶

Here again, Cixous confronts Freud. By first of all putting “the dark continent” in quotation marks, she highlights its falsehood and constructedness. To further underscore the fallacy of this image, she then describes what would be its opposite: “the white continent, with its monuments to Lack,” designating Freud’s theory of castration anxiety and desire based on lack; women incite anxiety in men once men realize that women lack penises, and women envy men because of their own lack of penises. So if the “dark

¹⁶ In English:

The “Dark Continent” is neither dark nor unexplorable. It is still unexplored only because we’ve been made to believe that it was too dark to be explorable. And because they want to make us believe that what interests us is the white continent, with its monuments to Lack. And we believed. They riveted us between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. That would be enough to set half the world laughing, except that it’s still going on. For the phallogocentric sublation is with us, and it’s militant, regenerating the old patterns, anchored in the dogma of castration. They haven’t changed a thing: they’ve theorized their desire for reality! Let the priests tremble, we’re going to show them our sexts! (“Laugh” 884-885)

continent” is “dark” only because it has been made to contrast the “white continent” as its opposite, then it would follow that the dark continent is also a site which “lacks” the phallogocentric economy of anxiety and envy. “White” signals the absence (or lack) of dark, but dark also signals the lack of white. All of this semiotic deconstruction helps Cixous connect phallogocentrism with phallogocentrism¹⁷; if the “dark continent” is dark only as a function of its contrast with “white,” this is a result of language used to reinforce the myth. Cixous thus offers a simple way out of phallogocentrism: as she writes, women must make the dark continent knowable first to themselves by exploring it, then to “the priests” of phallogocentrism by “showing them their sexts.” The “sexts” is significant as it illustrates that there is no distinction between *jouissance* (sexuality, corporeality) and writing. The way out (“*sortie*”) is opened up by *jouissance*, in the body and in writing.

In turn, *jouissance* is also the key to reclaiming – and moving beyond – the myths of the Medusa and the abyss. In the original Greek myth of the Medusa, she was born an exceptionally beautiful mortal woman among a family of monsters, and, after a tryst with Poseidon (initiated by Poseidon) in the temple of Athena, was cursed by Athena and turned into an exceptionally hideous monster with snakes for hair whose gaze turned men to stone if they looked into her eyes. Eventually, she was decapitated by Perseus, who offered her head to Athena as a trophy. Freud later took up this myth as yet another illustration of his castration theory. But rather than the classical Greek myth of the Medusa as monstrous, condemned, and dangerous, Cixous asserts, “*Il suffit qu’on regarde la Méduse en face pour la voir : et elle n’est pas mortelle. Elle est belle et elle rit*”

¹⁷ Here Cixous builds upon Derrida’s concept of “logocentrism” – which forms the basis (and justification) for deconstruction – that privileges the Hellenic mode of language (one of oppositionality and definitive meanings) at the expense of the Judaic (one of interpretive flux and uncertainty), so that “phallogocentrism” exists within the linguistic space of “logocentrism.”

(54) (“You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing” 885). As with the “dark continent” that only need be explored to discover that it is explorable, Medusa only need be seen from the front to see that she is not deadly, but beautiful and laughing. The image of the laughing Medusa is especially important in the second chapter of this project, as she is for Cixous’ essay and serves as its title for a reason: all at once, she symbolizes *jouissance* in its redemptive and subversive qualities (redemptive when laughter is a sign of pleasure and delight, subversive when laughter is a means of exposing and ridiculing the absurdity of phallogentric myth), and she destroys the image of women as abject. As we will see in the second chapter of this project, Cixous’ Medusa delights in breaking and mixing things up, which is a sign of feminine writing:

Telle est la puissance féminine, qu’emportant la syntaxe, rompant ce fameux fil (juste un tout petit fil, disent-ils) qui sert aux hommes de substitut de cordon pour s’assurer, sans quoi ils ne jouissent pas, que la vieille mère est bien toujours derrière eux, à la regarder faire phallus, elles iront à l’impossible. [...] *Voler*, c’est le geste de la femme, voler dans la langue, la faire voler. Du vol, nous avons toutes appris l’art aux maintes techniques, depuis des siècles que nous n’avons accès à l’avoir qu’en *volant* ; que nous avons vécu dans un vol, de voler, trouvant au désir des passages étroits, dérobés, traversants. Ce n’est pas un hasard si « voler » se joue entre deux vols, jouissant de l’un et l’autre et déroutant les agents du sens. (56-58)¹⁸

Indeed, Cixous suggests here that rather than the power of castration, what women (and the Medusa) actually possess and perform is a power to disorient “the agents of meaning” from within the realm of language. This feminine power to “take away” syntax means also breaking the thread used by men as a surrogate umbilical cord; the implication is that

¹⁸ In English:

Flying is woman’s gesture—flying in language and making it fly. We have all learned the art of flying and its numerous techniques; for centuries we’ve been able to possess anything only by flying; we’ve lived in flight, stealing away, finding, when desired, narrow passageways, hidden crossovers. It’s no accident that *voler* has a double meaning, that it plays on each of them and thus throws off the agents of sense. (“Laugh” 887)

men have benefited from women's nurturing and submission in order to position themselves as the only art and language makers – a phallogentric art and language. “Taking away” syntax involves the verb “voler,” which as Cixous points out has two meanings in French: “to fly” and “to steal.” These two meanings imply a subversive act of transcendence (flying above) and reclaiming. *Jouissance* comes from this movement (flight) between meanings.

The Medusa thus becomes a symbol of women who write, who reject the myth of the monstrosity that comes as a curse for acting on desire, *and* of feminine writing itself, which men can also produce. Through the imagery of the Medusa and the umbilical cord (not included in the English version), Cixous hints again at the regenerative quality of *écriture féminine*. This relates to her mother (and sea) metaphors, metaphors that run throughout much of Cixous' fiction as well as the essays under discussion here. Cixous plays on the homophonic words “mère” (mother) and “mer” (sea) to on the one hand expand the scope of what “mother” might mean, and on the other hand, to emphasize the aspect of “mother” as a source – whether of human life or of water flowing through rivers. To symbolize this life-giving regenerative quality of *écriture féminine*, Cixous writes that “feminine texts” are written in the white ink of mother's milk; these texts give and nourish just as they are also the product of giving and nourishment. The metaphorical “mother” of *écriture féminine* is thus a symbol of giving and receiving, and of exchange. Cixous coins yet another portmanteau word in the following excerpt that highlights this emphasis on exchange: “l'équivoix” (“equivoice”).

Texte, mon corps : traversée de coulées chantantes ; entends-moi, ce n'est pas une « mère » collante, attachante ; c'est, te touchant, l'équivoix qui t'affecte, te pousse depuis ton sein à venir au langage, qui lance *ta* force ; c'est le rythme qui te rit ; l'intime destinataire qui rend possibles et désirables toutes les métaphores, corps (le ? les ?), pas plus descriptible que dieu, l'âme ou l'Autre ; la partie de toi qui entre en toi t'espace et te pousse à inscrire dans la langue ton style de femme.

Dans la femme il y a toujours plus ou moins de la mère qui répare et alimente, et résiste à la séparation, une force qui ne se laisse pas couper, mais qui essouffle les codes. Nous re-penserons la femme depuis toutes les formes et tous les temps de son corps. « *We are all lesbians* », nous rappellent les Américaines, c'est-à-dire, n'abaisse pas la femme, ne lui fais pas ce qu'ils t'ont fait. (48-49)¹⁹

It is the “équivoix”²⁰ that is the true “mother” and brings feminine writing into being. I interpret this as a call for exchange and for community, especially among women (“do not bring other women down, do not do to them what patriarchy has done to you”), which must start with women entering into exchange first of all with themselves (through writing). The emphatic, directive language used here sounds like that of a manifesto, even if Cixous rejects that label.

In part, her rejection of this label has to do with her relationship with Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis, which she does not entirely dismiss even if she confronts the myths and theories derived from them. In her preface to Galilée's 2010 reprinted edition of the essays, she reflects back on the process of writing them and situates their genesis within the context of the nascent second wave feminist movement in France in 1975 and her equally nascent awareness of it. Rather than “manifestos,” she describes the essays as “a cry, a call” that are very much a product of the time:

Le Rire, et autres sorties, est un appel. Un coup de téléphone au monde. On a dit : un manifeste. Un Appel ? C'est que je devais penser que je serais entendue ? [...].Je crois que je croyais que je serais entendue.

¹⁹ In English:

Text: my body—shot through with streams of song; I don't mean the overbearing, clutchy “mother” but, rather, what touches you, the equivoice that affects you, fills your breast with an urge to come to language and launches your force; the rhythm that laughs you; the intimate recipient who makes all metaphors possible and desirable; body (body? bodies?), no more describable than god, the soul, or the Other; that part of you that leaves a space between yourself and urges you to inscribe in language your woman's style. In women there is always more or less of the mother who makes everything all right, who nourishes, and who stands up against separation; a force that will not be cut off but will knock the wind out of the codes. We will rethink womankind beginning with every form and every period of her body. The Americans remind us, “We are all Lesbians”; that is, don't denigrate woman, don't make of her what men have made of you. (“Laugh” 882)

²⁰ “Equity,” “equivocal,” “voice,” and “team” (“équipe”) are all embedded within Cixous' invented word.

L'époque était belle, aussi. Tout près, Jacques Derrida œuvrait à la déconstruction, minait patiemment, implacablement les clôtures. Ça bougeait. Je n'avais pas encore connaissance du mouvement des femmes d'Antoinette Fouque, mais la scène existait et les effets de souffle et de respiration se faisaient sentir. En ces années 1970, 71, 72, etc. j'allais beaucoup aux USA et au Canada, où les levers de femmes étaient massifs. J'y enseignais le vivant révolutionnaire de la philosophie derridienne, les concepts de mon ami Jacques Lacan, et je défendais la psychanalyse freudienne contre les rejets des féministes du continent nord-américain dont l'idéologie procédait, dans les années 1970, par oppositions et exclusions – si bien que Freud, ayant été homme, était à bannir. Moi j'étais du côté de Tirésias, pour l'être à plus d'une sexualité. Mais l'agitation était bonne. Le sentiment qu'on ne peut avancer seule, ni jouir seule – appelons-le *Responsabilité* – me hantait. Besoin de témoigner et d'avoir des témoins, c'est le besoin même : appeler c'est déjà être exaucée. (28-29 ; emphasis in original)

Cixous' reflection here highlights the very divergent receptions of psychoanalysis within the feminist movements of France and the United States. Indeed, "French feminism" (of which Cixous is considered a central figure) is perceived in the United States as primarily concerned with theories of language and less with the material realities of women's lives in patriarchy. These different approaches to feminism have contributed to Cixous' mixed reception within feminist circles as well as to the difficulty of "understanding" her "theory" of the untheorizable. As she explains it here, her willingness to engage with Freud and Lacan without dismissing them completely comes in part from her belief in the necessity of Derridian deconstruction and her resistance to binary oppositionality; Freud and Lacan are not all bad because they are men, and women should not reject them solely on this basis. Ultimately, her work calls for an ethics, which we can see in the last lines of the above passage, of "responsibility" in which moving forward and jouissance are not solitary processes but require call and response. As she writes, "the need to testify (or to tell one's story) and to have witnesses is the very need itself: to call is to already be granted." Thus, for Cixous feminine writing is, in a way, less about gender and more about the deep need for ethical contact that is implied and instantly enacted within a feminine text.

As we can see from the above passages and surrounding discussion, the essays are subversive and difficult texts – they do what they “describe” as they describe it. But the other desired effect of feminine writing is feminine reading – Cixous calls for readers to give themselves to the text by being open to it, just as the text is open to them by virtue of the way it was written/given. In these essays, she also names herself a “Jewoman” (“Juifemme”) and thus “comes out” as a Jewish woman from Algeria with a German Jewish mother and a North African Jewish father. In the “Juifemme” section of “Sorties,” Cixous cites Kafka’s short story “Before the Law” as an illustration of the similar (parallel) histories of marginalization of both groups (Jews and women) and the absurd means through which that marginalization is created. In Kafka’s story, a “man from the country” (whose Jewishness is implied) wishes to enter through a door that leads into “the Law.” A gatekeeper guards the door and repeatedly denies the man entry past it. The gatekeeper also tells the man that if he so desperately wants access to the Law, he could simply veto his decision and walk past him through the door, although he (the gatekeeper) is very powerful. The man from the country decides against such a rash move and instead opts to wait, hoping that he will one day be granted permission to enter. The days of waiting turn into months and years, and the man from the country begins to lose his sense of reality: “have things become darker than they once were?”, he asks himself. When the man reaches the end of his life, he finally asks the gatekeeper why everyone wants to reach the Law, yet nobody but him has begged for permission to enter. The gatekeeper replies that the gate he guards was made only for the man from the country, and then closes the gate, thus denying the man the opportunity to enter now that he has understood that he could have all along without consequence.²¹ Cixous inserts an excerpt

²¹ Paraphrased and cited from Kafka pp. 3-4.

of this story under the heading “Juifemme” with no explanation, no follow-up discussion, no critical framing of any kind, thus leaving readers to make their own meaning. The “Juif” in Kafka’s tragic tale of disempowerment, whose fear of disobeying the rule of order outweighs his desire and sense of agency to enter the Law, reveals, on the one hand, the degree of oppression and persecution endured if not by the man himself, then by others like him, and on the other hand, the arbitrary, absurd, and meaningless nature of such “Laws” to begin with. The “femme” of Cixous’ essays has similarly been told that her “dark continent” is dark only because someone else with power said it was. To believe these myths is to perpetuate their power at the expense of self-agency.

Ahead of her time, the futurity of which is marked by the invented portmanteau word²² (“Juifemme”) itself, Cixous describes her experience of what we now speak of as intersectionality; intersecting identities and social positionings that determine our particular subjectivities and how we are perceived to “fit” in the world. But “Juifemme” goes beyond intersectionality, which still operates within the framework of fixed categories and identities. For Cixous, “écriture féminine” must be subversive, shape-shifting, polyvocal, and must transcend (undercut) all false oppositions, fabricated and projected precisely by “the Law” and its gatekeepers. As Elaine Marks writes of “Juifemme” in *Marrano as Metaphor: The Jewish Presence in French Literature*,

I understand the word *Juifemme* as used by Hélène Cixous to be a conscious attempt to write against the fixed ethnic and gender meanings of fundamentalist or identity politics, to undercut the many dogmas and pieties that inform being Jewish or being woman, and to propose other ways of figuring identity. For my purposes, *Juifemme* displaces being Jewish from the domain of religious questions to the domain of philosophical or political, or literary or linguistic questions. (143; emphasis in original)

²² Tellingly, the French expression for “portmanteau” is “mot-valise” (“suitcase word”), thus conveying and marking the mobility inherent to the inventive, creative language Cixous – and Derrida – so frequently use.

“Juifemme” is thus in part a response to the post-Shoah and postcolonial identity and memory politics that were beginning to very slowly take shape from within the feminist movement itself. We can see Cixous’ negotiation (and explosion) of these questions of intersecting identities and histories in the following excerpt – the continuation of the “Je (ne) suis (pas) arabe” passage that opened this discussion – from “Sorties,” which appears just before the “Juifemme” section of the essay and in a sense foreshadows it:

Je veux me battre. Quel est mon nom ? Je veux changer la vie. Qui « je » ? Où est ma place ? Je cherche. Je fouille partout. Je lis, j’interroge. Je commence à parler, quelle langue est la mienne ? le français ? l’allemand ? l’arabe ? Qui a parlé pour moi à travers les générations ? J’ai ma chance. Quel accident ! Être née en Algérie, non en France, non en Allemagne ; un peu plus et comme tels membres de ma famille, je n’écrirais pas aujourd’hui, je m’anonymiserais pour l’éternité du côté d’Auschwitz. Chance : si j’étais née cent ans plus tôt, me disais-je, j’aurais fait la Commune. Comment ? – toi ? Où sont mes batailles ? mes compagnons d’armes ? Que dis-je, mes *compagnes* d’armes ? (87)²³

From this excerpt, beginning with “Je (ne) suis (pas) arabe,” we can see that Cixous’ subjectivities emerge from a series of literal crossroads, a convergence of different selves and others in which east meets west meets south meets north, in which Jewish woman meets Arab brothers, and in which “Jewish” in and of itself is a category and a name that becomes very complicated. With a Sephardic father and an Ashkenazic mother, the geographies of Cixous’ genealogies cross many borders and make it impossible to locate any singular “essence” of what “Jewish” might mean, besides that it is a plurality of languages, exiles, and exclusions.

²³ In English:

I want to fight. What is my name? I want to change life. Who is this “I”? Where is my place? I am looking. I search everywhere. I read, I ask. I begin to speak. Which language is mine? French? German? Arabic? Who spoke for me throughout the generations? It’s my luck. What an accident! Being born in Algeria, not in France, not in Germany; a little earlier and, like some members of my family, I would not be writing today. I would anonymiserate eternally from Auschwitz. Luck: if I had been born a hundred years earlier, I told myself, I would have been part of the Commune. How? – you? Where are my battles? My fellow soldiers? What am I saying... the comrades, women, my companions in arms? (*Newly* 71)

Cixous is thus aware of her triple exclusion (and confusion): a colonial subject who went through the colonial education system (and yet not entirely; Jews in Algeria had French citizenship with the exception of the Vichy period – thus, “Je (ne) suis (pas) arabe”), a Jew (whose status as such marked her as different and yet not), a woman (whose exclusion from History and literature made her aware of her own exclusion). Through the text of the essay itself, she makes these exclusions visible and demonstrates the dualities and pluralities that exist simultaneously and within each perceived category, language, history. Yet through her own story of triple exclusion, she deconstructs the notion of exclusion itself: “Le paradoxe de l’altérité, c’est bien sûr qu’à aucun moment dans l’Histoire elle n’est tolérée, possible, comme telle. L’autre n’est là que pour être réapproprié, repris, détruit en tant qu’autre. Même l’exclusion n’est pas une exclusion. L’Algérie n’était pas la France, mais elle était ‘française’” (86-87) (“The paradox of otherness is that, of course, at no moment in History is it tolerated or possible as such. The other is there only to be reappropriated, recaptured, and destroyed as other. Even the exclusion is not an exclusion. Algeria was not France, but it was ‘French’”⁷¹). If exclusion exists as a means of constructing otherness, that otherness, within colonial and patriarchal logic, exists to then be reappropriated, subsumed, and made to fit within the system of hierarchy. Thus, “Algeria was not France, but it was ‘French’.” Within this system, true alterity cannot exist, and it is this supposed (constructed) “impossibility” of a real, irreducible other that inspires and forms the basis of Cixous’ writing, whether “theoretical,” fictional, or theatrical.

It is also as a response to this supposed “impossibility” of irreducible alterity that “Juifemme” emerges as much more than the sum of its two most obvious linguistic parts (“Jew” and “woman”). Here again, Elaine Marks’ analysis of the word is illuminating:

Juifemme is more than, different from, Jew and woman, or Jewoman. It is a rich poetic word in which the sounds of *Je*, *I*, and *jouir*, to have pleasure, and *ouir*, to hear (*Je suis femme* and *je jouis* and “*j’ouïs*”) as well as the visual juxtaposition of *juif*, a Jewish man, and *femme*, woman, prevent any one-way meaning of sex, gender, subjectivity, or religious belonging – any coincidence of hearing and seeing. (149-150)

From Marks’ deconstruction of “*Juifemme*,” we can see that while “*Juif*” and “*femme*” – words that carry long histories of exclusion and oppression in French – are the most obvious components, there is a poetic resonance between Jews, women, being, *jouissance*, and hearing, suggesting meanings beyond markers of identity and exclusion. Rather, as we have seen, *jouissance* is the irreplaceable source of the creative *and* the subversive qualities of *écriture féminine*. “*Juifemme*” is thus born of a particularity that at the same time wishes to be included in the universal, and represents an etching out of a new universal that does include – and make room for – the particular. “*Juifemme*” is a way beyond essentialism *and* beyond identity politics. This “beyond” signals an opening into other ways of knowing that are non-reductive and non-essentialist, as well as an opening into acceptance that to theorize the other in an attempt to understand is to ultimately reappropriate and reduce.

Interestingly though, this aspect of her essays has been almost entirely overlooked in scholarly considerations. Received primarily as feminist manifestos, a label Cixous herself has resisted, preferring, as we saw, to instead situate those texts within the context of the burgeoning revival of the feminist movement in France, Cixous’ identities as a “*Juifemme*” are entirely absent from much scholarly engagement with her vast body of work, or are viewed as an entirely separate mode of reading her work. It is as though scholarship cannot address the multiple threads intertwined within the essays all at once. In other words, critical engagement with Cixous’ work in some ways has, ironically, subjected it to the divided, hierarchical and categorized thinking of phallogentrism that

she seeks to undermine and that is challenged precisely by the very identities – emphasis on the plural, which are products of histories and geographies – that she embodies all at once.

The Ethics of *écriture juive féminine* as methodology and theoretical frame:

In this project, I trace the textual enactments of what I call “*écriture juive féminine*,” my own variation on Cixous’ conceptualization of “*écriture féminine*” that attempts to recover the “*Juifemme*” part of the arguments advanced in the essays. At the same time, my variation on Cixous’ “theory” seeks to bring aspects of Levinas’ philosophies of Judaic ethics and Derrida’s theories of Judaic textuality into the fold of “*écriture féminine*,” and thus to bridge the ethical with the subversive and the endlessly regenerative, the “Jewish” with the “feminine.” While I hope that this variation is also in some ways indefinable for the same reasons Cixous describes, I nonetheless will provide some markers as a map for moving through the “corpus”²⁴ of texts studied here. If its subversive qualities and (r)evolutionary potential in the face of hierarchized “difference” are the most salient features of “*écriture féminine*” as Cixous describes it, the concept of the “mother” as source is also critical. This vision of writing “from the source” conveys the regenerative qualities of “*écriture féminine*,” and this is where the “juive” comes in, as well as where the “j’ouis” (“I hear”) that Marks identifies within “*Juifemme*” becomes of central importance.

That it requires speaking the word “*Juifemme*” out loud in order to hear its homophonic and polysemic possibilities is telling. As Elizabeth Grosz explains in her aforementioned essay on Judaism and exile, Jewish history is caught in the bind of its

²⁴ This is Cixous’ term to describe her work, blurring the boundary between text and body.

inside-outside position vis-à-vis dominant (Hellenic and Christian) culture and epistemology, and this accounts for its being perceived as a source of subversive counter-history. It also reveals the complicated relationship between Jews and alterity; in Europe and the West especially, Jews have functioned as the externally defined primordial other for millennia, which has served as justification for their exclusion (and which, as Cixous demonstrates, ultimately leads to reappropriation), but assertion of that alterity as ‘the Chosen people’ has also been central to Judaic theology and ethics. Grosz illustrates these two definitions of Jewish alterity (externally imposed and internally claimed) by contrasting Sartre’s famous claim in his *Réflexions sur la question juive* that “[...] c’est l’antisémite qui *fait* le Juif” (84) (“it is the anti-Semite who makes the Jew”; my trans.) with Levinas’ philosophy of ethics that stems not from being ‘Chosen’ as a sign of Jewish alterity but as a sign of Jewish responsibility to the call of the other, or to the call of alterity (62-64).

In Grosz’s words to summarize Levinas’ ethics, “Alterity [...] solicits and commands, appeals and contests; it extracts responsibility from the subject. The subject is *exposed* to, and opened up by alterity, the origin of the subject’s openness to the world. [...] Alterity entails that *another* meaning, use or value is always an open possibility for all things” (64-65). In this short summary, two aspects stand out: alterity elicits responsibility and thus involves an exchange of call and response, and alterity calls for an openness to multiple meanings and ways of knowing. These two aspects are in fact salient features of Derrida’s work on distinguishing Judaic textuality (“écriture”) from Hellenic textuality (“logos”), which essentially forms the basis of deconstruction. On the one hand, the “responsibility” of alterity emphasizes precisely the need for hearing (the “j’ouis” within “Juifemme” and *jouissance*); there can be no ethics without hearing, as we

cannot respond (there can be no response-ibility) if we do not hear the call. On the other hand, the openness to a multiplicity of meanings that alterity elicits involves a relationship with textuality that is focused on interpretation rather than on unequivocal development of ideas and modes of representation. For Derrida, both of these aspects of “écriture” are underpinned by the ultimate difference between Judaic and Hellenic modes of textuality (and therefore, thought): while the Hellenic mode makes a distinction between representation (whether through text or image) and reality so that representation can only be mimetic and the goal of writing (and naming) is to seek the origin of terms, the Judaic does not make this distinction. In the Judaic tradition of textuality, there is no separation between the word (the sign) and the thing (the signified), and thus text does not re-present. Instead, it “presents,” generates and creates. Because there is no separation between a name and what it names, Judaic textuality involves “a continual undoing and displacement of ‘an original’” (67) as Grosz puts it, and in so doing it calls for endless interpretation and reinterpretation. Thus, the Judaic mode of textuality, which comes out of an ethics of response elicited by alterity, is regenerative and built upon equivocation and interpretation. If Cixous and Derrida both use homophones as a means of bursting open the infinite possibility contained within language that is veiled by the illusion of fixed meanings, there is an ethical component that comes from these combined Judaic traditions embedded within their writing.

Thus, I conceive of “écriture juive féminine” as the combination of this Judaic mode of textuality (Derrida’s “écriture” built upon Levinas’ ethics of alterity) with Cixous’ “écriture féminine” and “Juifemme,” all of which articulate an ethics and textuality beyond identity politics, and even beyond feminism. Écriture juive féminine as I see it works against not only phallogentrism in language (and therefore in reality), but

also against the added layer of constructed cultural and nation-based norms, hierarchies, and false dualities embedded within what Levinas and Derrida called Hellenistic language. It is an ethical call to readers to think and read beyond “phallogocentrism,” and thus, a call to examine history not as a coherent and monolithic narrative of European self-creation, but rather, as one that is “uneven, scattered, a series of interruptions, interruptions, outbreaks and containments – an intellectual history of skirmishes in an undeclared conceptual war” (Grosz 59).

As Grosz illustrates, there is something very subversive about Jewish thought, and Cixous writes that a feminine text is inherently subversive. For Grosz, this subversion has specifically to do with self-crafting and the very concept of the self in relationship to everything and everyone else. The very possibility of other ways of thinking and knowing beyond the Hellenic (“logocentric”) model that are in fact embedded *within* (H/h)stories produced by this model is in itself subversive and therefore it has been repressed. The conceptualization of this subversion as something that makes uneven, scattered, interrupted history is precisely what this project is about. These women writers *do* produce such histories – that are also stories – that bear witness to the scattered, fragmented, interrupted experiences that have shaped their subjectivities.

As Cixous’ reference to her triple exclusion from History as colonial subject (yet not), Jewish (yet what does that mean?), and woman makes clear, her experience is very much shaped by questions of how “Jewish” is read: as race, as other, as diasporic. That she emphasizes her solidarity with her “Arab birth brothers” and asserts women’s “darkness” (or even “blackness”) as a positive, life-giving (and life-affirming) and subversive force (“nous sommes noires *et* nous sommes belles”) opens up a particularly important debate of postcolonial multiculturalism that also informs the scope of this

project. Referencing Freud but also immediately calling to mind colonialist discourse in “Sorties,” Cixous refers to women as “the dark continent,” controlled by “the harem.” By making these very clear colonial allusions, she attempts to bring together these threads perceived as perhaps parallel, but certainly separate. But from the perspective of identity politics, Cixous is not exactly an example of a clueless European white woman making claims on behalf of women of color, suggesting the possibility of a universal women’s experience untouched by questions of race, sexuality, class, etc. If anyone can claim experiential knowledge of intersectionality, it is Cixous; her transnational and transcontinental heritage makes this clear. At the same time, her position certainly is one of relative privilege; Cixous’ is a very Jewish story in this sense. She belongs nowhere and everywhere, knows exclusion and discrimination, but also received special treatment in the positive sense which has caused resentment and accusations of elitism.

So, does Cixous have the right to make these claims and to position herself within these postcolonial frames? If we read Frantz Fanon’s comparison between the way his blackness makes him entirely externally-determined and the way ‘the Jew,’ by virtue of his ‘whiteness,’ is shaped by the idea others may have of him in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, the answer appears to be “no”: “Le Juif n’est pas aimé à partir du moment où il est dépisté. Mais avec moi tout prend un visage *nouveau*. Aucune chance ne m’est permise. Je suis sur-déterminé de l’extérieur. Je ne suis pas l’esclave de « l’idée » que les autres ont de moi, mais de mon apparaître” (129) (“The Jew is not liked as soon as he has been detected. But with me things take on a *new* face. I’m not given a second chance. I am overdetermined from the outside. I am a slave not to the ‘idea’ others have of me, but to my appearance” 95). Yet even here, it is not so simple in that once again, Jewish ‘whiteness’ and assimilability are not a guarantee in the way ‘the Jew’ might be read. For

antisemites and white nationalists, Jews are a separate race and are not white.²⁵ At the same time as racially-focused antisemitism attributes unique physical characteristics to Jewish bodies, the most insidious antisemitic trope of all is “the Jewish mind.” According to this strain of antisemitism, Jews do not even have bodies. As Bryan Cheyette writes in *Diasporas of the Mind: Jewish and Postcolonial Writing and the Nightmare of History*, “the story of ‘the Jewish mind’ [...] and the ‘black body,’ [...] is, even today, an all too frequent racial opposition” (5).

There has been a tendency in twentieth century French multiculturalist discourse to overlook France’s Jewish population as affected by or even remotely related to debates of multiculturalism and citizenship. Simultaneously, Jews have been used in French social-political rhetoric as a success story of the assimilationist Republican universalist model that has – with notable collapses and revolutionary (re)turns in the nineteenth century – largely shaped and determined French political culture since the 1789 Revolution. But then how can we account for episodes of clear failure and collapse of that supposed Jewish “success”? The Dreyfus Affair, the Vichy period, and the postcolonial era with its repeated incidents of antisemitic violence, particularly post-1967 for the shift that year saw in Franco-Israeli political relations, have all revealed the fault lines upon which the Republican discourse of universalism, assimilation, and “laïcité” (secularism) was – and continues to be – constructed. As Max Silverman puts it in his article “The French Republic Unveiled,” “The problem with contemporary debates in republican France, even after decades of postcolonial and postmodern questioning of western universalism, is that the pillars of this fantasy are still firmly in place” (631).

²⁵ Eric K. Ward explains this in his excellent 2017 article “Skin in the Game: How Antisemitism Animates White Nationalism.”

French memory politics also reveal these fault lines. What might be considered a “surfeit” of Jewish memory as a belated response to taking responsibility for French collaboration in and perpetration of the Holocaust has pitted Jews against other marginalized and historically oppressed groups living out postcolonial legacies in France. It has also made “Jews” into a monolithic category of European and victim. Where does a Jew like Cixous fit within this limited definition of “Jews”? As Susan Slyomovics and Sarah Stein state in “Jews and French Colonialism in Algeria: An Introduction,” “[...] it is only in recent decades that the emigration of Jews from Algeria in the aftermath of the War of Independence has been reinterpreted as an exile and, indeed, a form of tragedy” (752). And, as Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller explains in her introduction to *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in the Francophone World*,

[...] in the 1980s but especially since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the enmity between Jews, blacks and Arab Muslims has initiated a new phase with renewed focus on the atrocities of slavery and colonization, and the demands that they be inscribed in the collective French memory on the same level as the “duty of memory” for the Shoah. We are then only a step away from scandalous extremes in the rivalry of memory and victimhood where blacks, Arab Muslims and Jews seek recognition for their status as victims, and uphold themselves as the standard bearers of victimization. This provokes against Jews—specifically since the Barbie trial in 1987—odious judgments that accuse Jewish grief—based perhaps on the effects of the uniqueness of the Shoah—of obstructing the memory of the world’s suffering. (14)

This public memorial (and political) atmosphere of competing victimhoods and recognition might be counterproductive and “scandalous” as Debrauwere-Miller describes it, yet it also demonstrates a legitimate concern and inequity between antisemitic violence and colonial violence that has yet to be addressed. It was not until 2018 that French President Emmanuel Macron formally and publicly apologized for French crimes and torture of Algerians during the Algerian War. Yet this symbolic step can only be the beginning of the process of acknowledging and remembering French

perpetration of colonial violence. We can especially see the high stakes of these memory politics when we note that contemporary postcolonial France has both the largest Jewish and Arab populations in Europe. Simultaneously, widespread anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia within the postcolonial “multicultural” French social-political sphere ignites antisemitic violence perpetrated by Arab Muslims, which is also fueled by the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as it reverberates in France.²⁶

This project grew out of a need to tell a different Jewish story in French. It grew out of several questions: how to move beyond the shadow of the Holocaust, without denying it, but with a clear forward movement? How to consider the current climate of Islamophobia *and* antisemitism in a way that does not propose competing victimizations but rather as the playing out of interlocking historical legacies? How to speak of these questions without falling into the traps of universalizing on the one hand and identity politics on the other? “Juifemme” and “écriture juive féminine” are at the heart of this different story.

Regarding the problem of memory politics and competing victimhoods within the debates over the “surfeit” of Holocaust memory and in relation to the above questions, we can move into something more helpful and productive. Theories of memory developed by Marianne Hirsch (“postmemory”), Michael Rothberg (“multidirectional memory”), and Max Silverman (“palimpsestic memory”) offer very (re)generative and compelling models of memory that reveal “connected and affective histories,” as Hirsch puts it in *The Generation of Postmemory* (21-22). As Rothberg writes in *Multidirectional Memory*,

²⁶ For a very concise overview of these violent tensions, see Keith Reader’s “France and the Middle East: The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in Contemporary France.”

Against the alternatives to comparison – an intense investment in the particularity of every case or the promulgation of absolutely neutral and universal principles – I offer the multidirectional option: an ethical vision based on commitment to uncovering historical relatedness and working through the partial overlaps and conflicting claims that constitute the archives of memory and the terrain of politics. (29)

All of these theories and models of memory are attempts to draw connections rather than separations and hierarchizations between histories, geographies, and identities, thus joining in Cixous' earlier project of feminine writing. To varying degrees and through different literary strategies, all of the texts and writers included within this study enact and illustrate these alternative figurings of memory.

To the question of essentialism regarding my decision to only consider texts written by women in this project, I offer some reflection here. As the project will reveal, this is a group of very heterogeneous texts produced by a very heterogeneous group of writers. As we have seen, Cixous' "theories" of feminine writing and "Juilfemme" make heterogeneity, fluidity, and plurality/multiplicity explicit. While Cixous calls women to writing with her essays, she also cites male writers (James Joyce and Jean Genet) as producers of "feminine texts." If men can practice feminine writing, then Cixous' "theory" of gender cannot be one of essentialist and fixed binaries. It is this more fluid idea of gender as it relates to writing that interests me here. At the same time, the phallogentrism embedded and carried within language that Cixous deconstructs in her essays, and that she names a central objective of feminine writing, also exists, just as sexism and patriarchy exist. So, while there can be no such thing as a monolithic "woman writer" or "feminine text," a woman (however defined) who writes nonetheless does so from within a linguistic semiotic system that places her at the margins if she is allowed to enter it at all. And historically, there have been more published and known men writers than women writers just as there has been more literary production featuring male

protagonists than female protagonists. Cixous references this in “Sorties” as she describes her early experiences of reading stories about resistance and uprising, and of looking for herself represented within such stories: “Et moi, insurrection, colères, où me mettre? Si je suis une femme, quelle est ma place? Je me cherche à travers les siècles et je ne me vois nulle part” (94) (“I, revolt, rages, where am I to stand? What is my place if I am a woman? I look for myself throughout the centuries and don’t see myself anywhere” *Newly* 75).

In the case of autobiographical writing, which has a very male Eurocentric literary history (i.e., St. Augustine’s and Rousseau’s *Confessions*) and is a loose category under which all of the texts studied here fall to varying degrees, women writing is a particularly subversive act. As Leah D. Hewitt writes in *Autobiographical Tightropes*, referencing Paul de Man,

In the literary history of the West, autobiography has alternately been read as a mainstream literary genre [...] and as a marginal or inferior form that always seems to look, as Paul de Man says, ‘slightly disreputable and self-indulgent’ compared to other literary genres. For women writers, both of these evaluations have rendered the genre particularly difficult to tackle, despite its strong attraction as a mode of writing/exploring themselves.²⁷ (2)

And, as Nancy K. Miller writes in *Subject to Change*, “[...] while for all autobiographers already figures of public fiction there is a strong sense of responsibility about speaking out, because being known, they expect their words to have an impact within a clearly defined reader’s circle, the female autobiographers know that they are being read as *women* [...]” (50). The heightened self-consciousness of women’s autobiography as Miller describes it has, in part, to do with Freud’s claim that women are more naturally inclined to narcissism than men. What would appear more “narcissistic” than to write

²⁷ Hewitt cites de Man’s essay “Autobiography as Defacement,” *MLN* 94:5 (1979), p. 920.

about oneself? As Hewitt summarizes, “[...] the cultural discourses shaping men’s and women’s gendered social roles have certainly inflected [women’s autobiographical] writings, as well as the ways they are read” (3).

I thus arrive at “écriture juive féminine” as one proposed pathway that avoids – or at least tries to avoid – those traps. As we will see in the chapters that follow, all of the writers studied here are “Juifemmes,” but that is where the categorization must end – at Cixous’ own “anti-category.” These writers have produced a very heterogeneous body of texts, over an expansive period of time and from within a geography that is, as Annie Cohen puts it, “une géographie en devenir” (“a geography in the making”, my trans., 13). This is a geography that, like feminine writing itself, is in constant evolution and movement, becoming into the future. These texts generate that geography just as much as the geographies generate the texts. All of these generated and generative geographies in some way relate to France and Frenchness; arguably, this project tells stories of the double (or triple) binds of becoming French. At the same time, these geographies are linked to distinct but similar and/or parallel histories of discriminatory violence (i.e., pogroms, the Holocaust, colonization), exile, and diaspora.

In the three chapters that follow, we will trace the emergence of the possibility of “écriture juive féminine” and of the simultaneous processes of “coming out” and of complicating notions of identity and intersectionality that it engenders in favor of creating an ethical openness to an untheorizable alterity. In the second chapter, we will see how the aftermath and memory of decolonization in Algeria and Tunisia interplays and collides with the aftermath and memory of Vichy and the Holocaust in France and the unfolding of Israeli Zionist politics. Within this “post” landscape, we will see how Annie Cohen in *Géographie des origines* and Chochana Boukhobza in *Un été à Jérusalem* are

able to mobilize, enact, and make their writing embody Cixous' "écriture féminine" and "Juifemme" in ways that Cixous herself has not been able to do. Careful close readings of Biblical intertexts further illuminate Cohen and Boukhobza's literary projects. In the third chapter, we will see how the "crisis of witnessing" typically associated with the Holocaust is expanded and textualized as a crisis of representation and of language itself within Régine Robin's *La Québécoise* and Cixous' *Osnabrück*. Furthermore, we will see that this crisis underpins what Robin has called "the impossible work of mourning." Paradoxically, Cixous' own earlier essays are unable to gain traction in this work, and thus represent a "precocious testimony."²⁸ Close intertextual analysis plays a central role in this chapter as well; echoes of Proust and Mallarmé in *La Québécoise* and *Osnabrück* shed light on Robin and Cixous' literary strategies of staging and poeticizing crises. Finally, in the fourth chapter, we will see that through studying literary strategies of evasion in Nathalie Sarraute's autobiographical fiction *Enfance* and Irène Némirovsky's autobiographical novel *Le Vin de solitude*, there are already glimpses into the fault lines and fissures of the very assimilationist French Republicanism that these two earliest writers so fiercely embraced (Sarraute) and sought as well as questioned (Némirovsky). These moments of breakdown and breakthrough signal the beginnings of "Juifemme" and écriture juive féminine's precursor, a writing I call "écriture juiféminine." While écriture juive féminine comes out of a later post-Holocaust, post-colonial consciousness in which identity enters the public sphere as a place from which literature and politics emerge, "écriture juiféminine" comes out of a wider space, before and beyond identity.

The counter-chronological organization of chapters is crucial to the development of my argument, and the structure itself mirrors this development. Studying these writers

²⁸ I borrow this phrase from Shoshana Felman in her discussion of Mallarmé's "crisis of verse," which figures into the discussion of Chapter III.

and their texts in reverse-chronological order allows us to see that the past is not so past, and exposes the fallacy of teleological thinking. By beginning in the more recent past and working our way back, peeling back layers, we identify threads that have always been part of the fabric that forms the backdrop of our contemporary moment. Through this “chronotopic”²⁹ approach, we can see that the debates within postcolonial contemporary society and the literature produced by the youngest generation of writers studied here reveal what has always been a source of the anxious relationships at work behind the scenes of French public life. By reading backwards, we see that Jewish exclusion and marginalization prefigure the current postcolonial crisis of multicultural integration. We can also better see and understand the traces and reverberations of past traumas and losses in the present by taking this counter-chronological approach.

Like the imagery offered by the palimpsestic layers of an onion – which as we will see is an important metaphor in Chapter III – or of an archaeological dig, the top layer has the most surface area and the most material to sift through in order to get to the second layer. The second layer, in turn, has more surface area to peel back and “dirt” to dig before we can get to the third layer. In much the same way, the second chapter is the longest, and the fourth chapter is shorter by comparison. Cixous’ Medusa, just as she describes her in “Le Rire de la Méduse,” flies throughout, so that this project is a recuperation and new reading of that seminal essay and the “theory” it creates. As this introduction has demonstrated, there is a methodology of weaving at work in this project; different critical strands – from feminist Judaic theological perspectives to postcolonial theory to Holocaust memory studies, to name a few such strands – and ways of reading are woven throughout the chapters, highlighting the impossibility of reading these texts

²⁹ This is Hayden White’s term for counter-chronological reading (and writing) of history.

(and their contexts) through any one limited lens. Indeed, these texts resist such readings and call us into their more nuanced, complicated, ambivalent and sometimes contradictory worlds.

CHAPTER II

MIDRASH FOR THE FUTURE: RE-ORIENTING AND QUEERING MAGHREBI JEWISH ROOTS IN *GÉOGRAPHIE DES ORIGINES* AND *UN ÉTÉ À JÉRUSALEM*

“The question of orientation becomes, then, a question not only about how we ‘find our way’ but how we come to ‘feel at home.’”
– Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*

“Le voyage emporte l’origine avec lui.” – Jacques Derrida

“Dans le Talmud, il existe au moins une quarantaine de termes pour le mot question.”
– Adin Steinsaltz

“I’ve been thinking a lot about the obsession with origins. It seems a way of stopping time in its tracks. [...]. Don’t we have to start here, where we are, forty years after the Holocaust, in the churn of Middle East violence, in the midst of decisive ferment in South Africa—not in some debate over origins and precedents, but in the recognition of simultaneous oppressions?”
– Adrienne Rich, *“Notes Toward a Politics of Location”*

*“Qu’ils tremblent, les prêtres, on va leur **montrer** nos sextes!”* – Héléne Cixous, *“Sorties”*

Perhaps mirroring the overwhelming experience that both Annie Cohen and Chochana Boukhobza had of childhood, adolescence, and their continuous becoming amidst the aftermath of great chaos and upheaval and then having to apprehend the world in the process of its reordering, this chapter plunges in and begins in the middle. When the unnamed first-person narrator in Annie Cohen’s *Géographie des origines* describes the unsettling confusion that taunted and haunted her as a child trying to understand the defining features – and meaning – of her and her family’s “Jewishness” in post-Holocaust Algeria, she exposes the very questions that have shaped the trajectory of Jewish thought and identity formation “after Auschwitz”³⁰, and the questions that inform and underpin the two texts and writers studied in this chapter:

³⁰ This is Elaine Marks’ terminology used in *Marrano as Metaphor* to describe the shift in preoccupations driving Jewish cultural production in French that resulted from the Holocaust and its aftermath.

[...] je me cassais la tête sur notre judaïté. Par quelle porte entrer dans la question ? Étions-nous des Juifs oublieux de nous-même ? Quel contenu donner à ce qui me renvoyait parfois à une coquille creuse, vide, à remplir, par qui, par quoi, le territorial, le religieux, la tradition, la Loi, la Lettre, l'étude ? Dans tous les cas, l'ignorance était à bannir, je le savais, mais par quel bout commencer, comment, avec qui ? Étions-nous ceux pour qui l'étoile jaune avait été inventée, les brassards, les chambres à gaz ? Étions-nous vivants puis morts dans le seul regard des autres ? Ce désir de définition se heurtait à des questionnements sans fin. Ni le ventre de la mère, ni le religieux, ni le sionisme, ni la Shoah ne pouvaient combler le vide devant cette interrogation. Être juive devant un trou, dans la quête d'une définition possible, historique, linguistique, culturelle, familiale... [...]. Je portais sur le dos les cinq lettres de mon nom, chaque pas me faisait trébucher. Je ruminais toute la sainte journée depuis que j'avais entrevu que je n'étais pas comme les autres. (38-39)

Here, paradoxically, perhaps the one unequivocally clear defining characteristic of 'being Jewish' is that the narrator's search for answers only gives way to more questions. Every possible angle that could lead to an answer as to what makes her Jewish ultimately collapses and fails as soon as she realizes that there are infinite other possibilities, and that none of them quite fully match her experience, nor that of her parents and family. Is being Jewish a matter of territory, language, Law, religion, tradition, heritage, ideology, or study? How does the Holocaust impact one's Jewishness even if the person in question did not have any direct contact with the traumatizing machinery of the genocide itself? Indeed, for French-speaking North African Jews such as Cohen and Boukhobza, this question is a particularly compelling source of inner-conflict and ambivalence. As the narrator implies, defining her Jewishness depends in part on the perceptions of others projected onto her, until she herself perceives her "difference" and then associates it with her Jewishness. From the infinite cycle of questions that arise in "response" to her search, and from the realization that perhaps the only clear "answer" is that her Jewishness is what makes others see her as different, she ultimately describes her experience of being Jewish as that of existing in the face of a void, which then precludes her from finding any clear answers.

I chose this passage from Cohen's *Géographie des origines* as a point of entry into this chapter for the groundwork it lays through the questions it raises. As Cohen's narrator has already made clear, there are no answers to these questions. But although they are unanswerable, they are worth exploring for where they might lead, the doors they might open up, and what can be deduced along the way. If the "way" is unclear and undecidable at the outset of the journey, it reveals itself one step – or page, door, or question – at a time.

Annie Cohen and Chochana Boukhobza represent the youngest generation of Jewish women whose stories make up the geographies of this project. Cohen, born in Sidi-bel-Abbès, Algeria in 1944 to Sephardic parents whose families migrated to Algeria after the Spanish Reconquista of 1492, writes and lives in Paris. She has a doctorate in geography and has written several autobiographical texts ranging in the extent of their fictionality. She also does mixed media art and has produced what she calls "des rouleaux d'écriture" ("writing scrolls"); references to the scrolls recur in her literary texts, lending a postmodern self-referentiality to her work. Boukhobza, born in Sfax, Tunisia in 1959 to Mizrahi parents, also writes and lives in Paris. She pursued a university degree in mathematics in Israel before eventually moving permanently to Paris, and has nonetheless retained dual French-Israeli citizenship. She has written several novels and directed and produced two documentary films, all of which engage twentieth and twenty-first century Jewish questions of (post) Holocaust and (post) colonial trauma, memory, and relationship with Israel. Both authors write from this simultaneously marginal and central position, and their work reflects the transnational (and multidirectional) paths their lives have taken while articulating a feminist and postcolonial critique of patriarchal nation-states and traditional Sephardic and Mizrahi rituals and mores.

In *Géographie des origines*, Cohen brings readers into a universe of grief and mourning. The text begins with its anonymous first-person narrator standing at her mother and grandmother's grave in a Parisian cemetery on All Saint's Day, a national day of mourning in France. We soon learn that the narrator's grandfather and other relatives are buried in what was their hometown of Sidi-bel-Abbès, Algeria, the narrator's place of birth. What follows is a winding, stream-of-consciousness style text in which we slowly learn more about the narrator's current life in Paris and what was lost and gained when Jews such as she and her family were forced to leave Algeria after colonial independence. In *Un été à Jérusalem*, a novel written in the first-person, we arrive in Israel with the narrator, a young Tunisian Jewish woman who has traveled to Jerusalem from Paris where she now lives to visit her parents for the summer amidst the backdrop of the Lebanon War. The narrator in her Westernized modernity clashes with her family in Israel, who cling to their Tunisian Mizrahi traditions and culture, yet upon her arrival, she learns that her grandmother is dying, and with her, a part of her own identity and heritage. The novel stages layers of grief and mourning alongside scenes of the narrator's sexual revolution that then maps onto a new articulation of a divine feminine.

To explain the logic that led me to pair Cohen and Boukhobza and consider *Géographie des origines* and *Un été à Jérusalem* in comparison and relation to/with each other, I will lay out the organizational elements of this chapter that make the similarities and coherence between the two texts stand out. For one, both texts feature a first-person narration and a clearly identified Jewish female narrator, however that identity is figured. Second, both narrators grapple with an ambivalent relationship to/with their roots. This ambivalence is engendered by the colonial history of the Maghrebi countries in which they spent the youngest years of their lives, by the colonial presence of France and the

early experiences of being “Other” in settings which are already “Othered” in the empire-colony (or Occident-Orient) paradigm that made the atmosphere of their formative years, and by the complicated histories of exile and exclusion that form the backdrop of their family histories. Added to these already myriad sources of ambivalent tension surrounding these women’s “roots” are – as highlighted in the previously cited passage from *Géographies* – the aftermath of the Shoah, the implications of colonial fights for independence and the pan-Arab movement, and the nascent Israeli state and its nationalist politics.

This ambivalence towards their Sephardic and Mizrahi origins is conveyed in part through both narrators’ relationships with their parents. Embedded within these descriptions of parent-daughter relationships are critiques of patriarchal social structures at the national and familial levels; both daughters struggle to accept their mothers’ docile submissiveness and domesticity while simultaneously appreciating and valuing the role their mothers – and grandmothers – play in the family structure as matriarchs and guardians of memory and tradition. Their ambivalence is also emblemized in the arrivals, departures, and returns of the narrators; the tension between rootedness and being in motion and transit – whether enacted physically with the body or in the mind with memory – indeed shapes and drives the narrative in each text. In a sense, this tension posits a reconceptualization of rites of passage and rites of return by forcing us readers to ponder the very possibility of home and clear directionality. Both texts ask the foundational question of “home”: where is it and how is it defined? As each narrator moves through the various comings and goings, departures, arrivals, and returns, she struggles to make a place for herself, to make herself at home. This is true not only in

terms of geopolitical spaces defined by national borders, but also in terms of temporal and spiritual/religious spaces, as well as of the space of the body itself.

Central to the exploration of the idea of “home” in these texts is the question of orientation as it operates at the geographical and corporeal levels. As Sara Ahmed writes in her introduction to *Queer Phenomenology*, “The starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds: the ‘here’ of the body and the ‘where’ of its dwelling” (8). Indeed, for this aspect of my analysis, Sara Ahmed’s insightful and original work on the concept of orientation and its relationships with queerness, bodies, and Orientalism – and by extension, “Otherness” – in *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) is especially useful. As Ahmed posits in her chapter titled “The Orient and Other Others”:

To orientate oneself by facing a direction is to participate in a longer history in which certain ‘directions’ are ‘given to’ certain places: they become *the East, the West*, and so on. [...] the making of ‘the Orient’ is an exercise of power: the Orient is made oriental as a submission to the authority of the Occident. To become oriental is both to be given an orientation and to be shaped by the orientation of that gift. (113-114)

A key question for Cohen and Boukhobza as their narrator-protagonists move through their search for home is how to orient(ate) oneself when one comes from “the Orient” but is simultaneously excluded from it while also perceived as inside of it. At play in this phenomenon of being both inside and outside is the relationship between Frenchness, France, and becoming French while being Jewish of Sephardic or Mizrahi descent, coming from former colonies of the Maghreb, and having to also “orientate” oneself vis-à-vis Israel. From this paradoxical “location” within the center-periphery (or included-excluded) paradigm (i.e., that they are both and neither), Cohen’s and Boukhobza’s narrators articulate a resistance against what Ahmed calls “straightening devices” and perceptions of “orientation” as something that is natural and given. In this sense, both texts studied here perform a “queering” of the concepts of roots, origins, and “the

Orient,” in that they deviate from the tropes and narratives that might naturalize these very concepts by exposing and illustrating their ambivalence towards them.

For these women, their Jewish identity, however defined and perhaps most strongly in the form of their memory, is in fact like their proverbial “north,” as that direction has come to mean a guiding point. Their Jewish identity, especially as it manifests through their memory, is a guiding point of orientation within themselves at the same time as they struggle with whether and how to (re)define it. Boukhboza’s narrator encapsulates this formulation of her memory as the one constant touchstone of her identity as a Jewish woman and therefore as an orientation point: “‘Marie-toi et ensuite fais ce que tu veux.’ J’ai longtemps ramé à contre-courant de mon éducation. Fuir. J’ai simplement omis, révoltée par ces préjugés, de m’accorder auparavant avec ma plus solide alliée : ma mémoire” (“‘Get married and then do what you want.’ For a long time, I rowed against the current of my upbringing. To run away. I simply neglected, outraged by these prejudices, to align myself from then on with my most solid ally: my memory”; my trans.; 26). The narrator describes her reaction to her traditional Tunisian Mizrahi upbringing as “rowing” (and/or “struggling” since the verb “ramer” can mean either of these in English) against the current, which led her to run away from it. Although she describes directionality in her actions (rowing *against*, running *away from*), the thing that seems to offer a productive orientation *toward* is her memory. By naming her memory “her most solid ally,” she effectively names it as her one constant point of orientation.

But while her memory serves as an orientation point, it can also at times wander: “Je me perds dans Jérusalem comme je dérive dans les méandres de ma mémoire” (“I get lost in Jerusalem as I drift off course in the twists and turns of my memory”; my trans.; 135). Even if her memory meanders and takes twists and turns that mirror her winding,

circuitous transit throughout Jerusalem, which in turn mirrors her ambivalence towards the city and what it represents, it nonetheless remains her constant companion and “ally.” Indeed, her memory’s “deviations” participate, in Ahmed’s terms, in the very “queering” of orientations and directionality at the heart of the two texts studied in this section. For Ahmed, “queering” is broadly defined as that which deviates from the straight lines we have been trained to perceive as given – and as “straight” in the first place.³¹

If Boukhobza’s narrator describes her memory’s movement at times as “drifting off course” (“dériver”), Cohen’s narrator describes her own “attachment” (“je suis rivée”) to the north, which she refers to as the “alpha and omega of all rooting.” The north in this context has a literal, geographical sense of her north-north-west facing apartment in Paris and a more ironic sense vis-à-vis colonialism and Orientalism:

Paysage écran, paysage alibi qui me cloue le bec, au sol. L’orientation nord-nord-ouest de l’appartement offre une lumière stable, intemporelle qui rassasie mes soifs. Le nord me met à l’abri des rayons du soleil, des vicissitudes diurnes de la couleur. Il apporte l’alpha et l’oméga à tout enracinement. Tout est en place, au loin, indirect. Fascination pour une cité virtuelle. Je ne me lasse pas de regarder le nord, il est inscrit dans mes veines, je suis rivée à lui par nécessité intérieure [...] Je mesure l’importance d’un choix qui me détourne du midi, du levant, de l’orient. Aucune terre ne m’attend, la verticalité rayonne aux Reculettes. L’astre du jour offre sa face cachée. L’éclairage sur la ville, du huitième étage, projeté sur les bâtiments compacts de la montagne Sainte-Geneviève, donne l’illusion d’un point de vue sur une médina ou la ville de Rome. (110-111)

³¹ Ahmed relies on the etymology of ‘queer’ for her working definition of the term throughout the arguments she advances in *Queer Phenomenology*: “We can turn to the etymology of the word ‘queer,’ which comes from the Indo-European word ‘twist.’ Queer is, after all, a spatial term, which then gets translated into a sexual term, a term for a twisted sexuality that does not follow a ‘straight line,’ a sexuality that is bent and crooked” (67). Summarizing her use of the term in her conclusion, Ahmed further notes, “[...] I have used ‘queer’ as a way of describing what is ‘oblique’ or ‘off line.’ [...] I have [also] used queer to describe specific sexual practices. [...] In a way, if we return to the root of the word ‘queer’ (from the Greek for cross, oblique, adverse) we can see that the word itself ‘twists,’ with a twist that allows us to move between sexual and social registers, without flattening them or reducing them to a single line. Although this approach risks losing the specificity of queer as a commitment to a life of sexual deviation, it also sustains the significance of ‘deviation’ in what makes queer lives queer. To make things queer is certainly to disturb the order of things. (161)

In Ahmed's terms, Cohen's narrator effectively "disorients" and "queers" the "Orient" by reversing the Orientalist and European imperialist divides between North and South, West and East. One characteristic feature of Orientalism according to Edward Said's original definition, echoed in the above passage by Cohen's "paysage écran" ("screen landscape"), is that according to Orientalist logic, the Orient is among other things a timeless expanse and a screen upon which European fantasies – largely having more to do with Europe than with "the Orient" – are projected.³² Cohen unsettles this Orientalist logic by "reorientating" her narrator and her readers so that it is in fact the north-north-west orientation of her apartment that "offers a stable and timeless light that quenches her thirst" and feeds her "fascination for a virtual city which never gets old." Furthermore, I interpret Cohen's formulation that "the 'north' brings the alpha and omega to all rooting," as first of all perhaps an ode to her narrator's north-facing apartment, where, readers later learn, she has lived for more than thirty years. In this sense, the "north" of her apartment has – paradoxically – been the location of her own "rooting" despite the rather violent uprooting that brought her there.

In a way then, Cohen "queers" the concept of home in that it is not the place where she started and from which she departed, but rather where she eventually ended up. In addition, the "north-north-west" orientation of the narrator's apartment in Paris mirrors

³² As Said explains, "In a sense the limitations of Orientalism are [...] the limitations that follow upon disregarding, essentializing, denuding the humanity of another culture, people, or geographical region. But Orientalism has taken a step further than that: it views the Orient as something whose existence is not only displayed but has remained fixed in time and place for the West" (108). In "Sorties," Cixous uses similar language to describe women's "eternity" – and constant accessibility to men – as an effect of their exclusion from the public "scene": "Et tandis qu'il prend (tant bien que mal) le risque et la responsabilité d'être une parcelle, un agent, d'une scène publique, où se jouent les transformations, elle représente l'indifférence ou la résistance à ce temps actif, elle est le principe de constance, toujours d'une certaine manière la même, quotidienne et éternelle" (78). ("And, whereas he takes (after a fashion) the risk and responsibility of being an agent, a bit of the public scene where transformations are played out, she represents indifference or resistance to this active tempo; she is the principle of consistency, always somehow the same, everyday, and eternal" (*Newly* 66-67).

the orientation of the Maghreb itself, which makes up the northwest region of Africa. In Arabic, the word “Maghreb” means “west” but is a region that was the object of the French Orientalist gaze and therefore considered part of the “Orient.” This colonial reversal demonstrates what Cohen exposes as quite arbitrary perceptions associated with particular geographical directions:

En Algérie déjà, on regardait au nord. Nous étions bien en Afrique du Nord, et l’Afrique était dans notre dos. Puis, à l’indépendance, nos corps ont bougé de place, ils ont changé d’orientation, et nous nous sommes retrouvés en face de nous-mêmes, de l’autre côté de la mer, en France. En face. Mais moi, j’ai conservé cette posture du corps orienté au nord-ouest pour être précise, devant la rivière de Bièvre, affluent de la Seine, aujourd’hui canalisée, morte et enterrée sous la terre de l’Île-de-France et du square de la rue Croulebarbe dans le XIII^e arrondissement de Paris. (56)

In other words, “north-north-west” can be anywhere, depending on where we stand and which way we face, and this knowledge in and of itself allows room for queering to occur.

Keeping in mind Ahmed’s conceptualization of “queer” and processes of “queering,” we could say that Cohen and Boukhobza are “out of the closet” as Jewish women when compared to the earlier women whose work and lives form the basis of the next two chapters of this project. While attaining Frenchness and becoming French were the crucial projects underpinning the lives and works of Némirovsky and Sarraute who therefore sit at the opposite end of this identity spectrum, Cixous and Robin represent something of a halfway point between these two poles in that their work enacts a kind of gradual “coming out” as Jewish women. As we will see in the next chapter, the highly academic, intellectualized and overstuffed³³ nature of their work illustrates and emblemizes their arduous process of self-identification.

³³ By “overstuffed,” I mean here that their works appear to burst at the seams; they are dense as they are vast, prolific, and overwhelming.

That Cohen and Boukhobza thus write from a position of being “out” as Jewish women in some ways (and paradoxically) incites a different kind of disorientation than that experienced by the earlier generations studied in this project. Rather than “disappearing” into other identities and therefore in some senses becoming disoriented as the earliest generation of writers do (for Némirovsky and Sarraute, these identities were first and foremost “French” and “writer”), or “disappearing” – through writing – into a futile search for the lost worlds they can no longer attain (as is the case for Cixous and Robin), Cohen and Boukhobza write from within the aftermath of twentieth century nationalisms gone awry and the nascent possibilities of feminist and postcolonial critique. As Thomas Nolden puts it in his introduction to *In Lieu of Memory: Contemporary Jewish Writing in France*,

The new generations of Jewish writers differ from their predecessors in several significant aspects. First and foremost, while the latter were preoccupied with the Shoah and the problem of its representation, the former are engaged in elaborating strategies for the narration of Jewish life in the aftermath of both the Vichy experience and the Jewish exodus from the Maghreb. (xi)

Paradoxically, then, the late twentieth-century awareness that the Western Enlightenment social-political model of the patriarchal nation-state is a construct, and a flawed one, is in fact what opens up space for identity-based social models and forms of critique to emerge. As such, for Cohen and Boukhobza, these identities (“Jewish” and “woman” and “postcolonial/Maghrebi”) become the ground from which they write, even if this ground is in fact nebulous and shaky. In this way, these texts mark a return to an “out” Jewish identity, a return that is characterized and catalyzed by a redefinition and reconceptualization – a queering – of the terms of that identity. As we will see in the fourth section of this chapter, the most explicit expression (or indication) of this “out” position in *Géographie des origines* and *Un Été à Jérusalem* emerges in the performance

of “*écriture juive féminine*” as embodied writing that articulates Cixous’ “*Juifemme*” as an “identity” and a set of attitudes.

In the second section of this chapter, another illustration of the ambiguous tension surrounding the concepts of home and identity at play in both texts appears in the form of each narrator’s attitudes towards and critiques of Israel as it aligns with patriarchy and manifests in contexts of war, military involvement, nationalisms, and Sephardic and Mizrahi social mores. Indeed, each narrator asks in her own way: “How can I make a home for myself here, as a transnational Jewish woman?” Boukhobza’s clear critique of militaristic Israeli nationalism as an expression of violent masculinity mirrors Cohen’s critique of militaristic postcolonial nationalism in independent Algeria. This resistance towards traditional (patriarchal) masculinity also arises in the narrators’ romantic involvements with men, in their relationships with their fathers, and in their observations of the gender roles performed by each of their parents. Embedded within these critiques of masculinist nationalisms are allusions to and articulations of complex attitudes towards “Arabs” (Palestinians and Algerians), thus deviating from the expectations of Zionist Israeli politics and ideologies. The socioeconomic marginalization of these members of postcolonial French and Israeli society is clearly marked in both texts; each features scenes with disenfranchised Arabic-speaking Maghrebi and/or Palestinian gardeners who tend the landscaping and pick up garbage around each narrator’s place of residence in Paris and Jerusalem. Each narrator expresses sympathy for the gardeners and develops a friendly familiarity with them as a means of resisting – and deviating from – the multiculturalist-republican and/or nationalist-Zionist rhetoric surrounding them.

Also enfolded within the ambivalence surrounding the concept of “home” in these texts are representations of loss and mourning, particularly of what psychologist Pauline

Boss has described as “ambiguous loss,” defined as loss without closure or the possibility for closure, and/or grief provoked and incited by what might be characterized as “non-traditional” losses (i.e., loss beyond that of a beloved person, such as loss of home, loss of sense of self, perhaps even ‘losing your way’). Each narrator withstands multiple layers of grief and loss of all varieties, articulating a palimpsestic and multidirectional grief that generates – and is generated by – memory.

If all of these aspects provoke tensions in how to define “home” in *Géographie des origines* and *Un été à Jérusalem*, another source of orientation – and deviation – occurs in Cohen’s and Boukhobza’s formulations and textualizations of what I call a “postcolonial Jewish women’s midrash.” In the third section of this chapter, I analyze the specific ways in which each text can be read as midrash through close reading of selected passages, but for the purposes of this brief introductory section, I highlight the midrashic aspect of the texts as a point of entry into discussion of the “how” and “why” of this chapter. Broadly defined in “What is Midrash?” by the writers at *My Jewish Learning*, an educational non-profit in contemporary Judaism as “an interpretive act, [that] seek[s] the answers to religious questions (both practical and theological) by plumbing the meaning of the words of the Torah [...] [and that] responds to contemporary problems and crafts new stories, making connections between new Jewish realities and the unchanging Biblical text,” midrash offers a (re)generative model of textuality and story-telling that is adaptive and open. By allowing for reinterpretation and even (re)invention and expansion of stories already written, midrash also allows for a constant (re)negotiation and (re)appropriation of our relationship to the past. The ethical and restorative potential of midrash in reframing and expanding the foundational narratives of heteropatriarchal (and

Western) normativity and domination is great. As Rabbi Debra Orenstein writes in her introduction to her edited volume *Lifecycles*,

Biblical laws about women reflect the social structure of their day, prescribing women's status and behavior in terms of their effect on men and regulating women's protection until male authority. Likewise, in the *peshat* (simple, contextual meaning) of Biblical *narrative*, women are often presented as little more than vehicles or obstructions in men's stories. *Midrash* lends itself to feminist interpretation, exactly because it raises questions, bridges gaps, infers or introduces new elements, and helps readers find multiple stories—including their own—in the Bible. The Bible was canonized and closed, [...] leaving too many women out of the story, or at its margins. *Midrash*, however, was never closed; by design, there is no end and no completion to midrashic stories. Thus, *midrash* can continue to answer questions that the Bible leaves unanswered. (xxi)

Thus, Orenstein sees one facet and function of midrash to be a response to the omission and/or marginalization of women in the Bible. Comparing the “closed” text of the Bible to the “open” text of midrash, Orenstein explains that midrashic stories are by nature never-ending. In this way, we can read Cohen's and Boukhobza's texts as two iterations of midrash, two re-tellings that open into future (and past) re-tellings in part by virtue of the new questions they raise, just as they offer their own answers to older, other questions. In so doing, these texts contribute to and exemplify Levinas' and Derrida's infinitely regenerative Judaic textuality that we saw earlier in the introduction. As will be discussed in the third section of this chapter, the midrashic qualities of *Géographie des origines* and *Un été à Jérusalem* also participate in and intersect with their authors' enactments of *écriture juive féminine*. In its ethical and restorative potential, contemporary midrash also aligns with the practices and questions of feminist critique.

I. Roots (?)

Where do roots lead and what do they mean after you have been uprooted? How far down or back (in time) can roots reach, and how do they serve us? Cohen and

Boukhobza both wrestle with these questions throughout their work; in a way, the question of roots is what grounds their writing.

The concept of roots or the potential lack thereof brings to mind its supposed binary opposite: diaspora. While Cohen and Boukhobza (and the narrators they create) are diasporic subjects, we will see that they do not necessarily embrace this identity wholeheartedly. Nor do they fully embrace a longing for roots and belonging in nationalistic terms. Instead, they oscillate between these two supposed poles – rooted and diasporic – of the spectrum of “being at home” and belonging. But as Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller explain in their introduction to their co-edited volume of essays titled *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*, these “poles” share more similarities than we might initially think:

In his landmark essay on the meanings of diaspora, James Clifford added the now familiar homonym *routes* to *roots* so as to emphasize the ways in which every form of rootedness and dwelling already presupposes travel, cultural exchange—routes. Opposed to colonialism and war, moreover, diaspora came to appear, in Clifford’s terms, as a ‘positive transnationalism,’ a fruitful paradigm capable of disrupting identity-based conflicts. In the language of diaspora, originary homelands are not simply there to be recovered: already multiply interconnected with other places, they are further transformed by the ravages of time, transfigured through the lenses of loss and nostalgia, constructed in the process of the search.³⁴ (3)

Hirsch, Miller, and Clifford’s theorizations and meditations on the interplay between roots and diaspora emphasize the false dichotomy between the two, delineating instead a process of being and belonging characterized by movement and flux that undoes – or at least destabilizes – reified notions of national identity by also destabilizing the belief in immutable origins.

³⁴ The essay to which Hirsch and Miller refer is James Clifford’s “Diasporas,” (*Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 9, no. 3, 1994, pp. 302-338). They cite p. 321 where the term ‘positive transnationalism’ appears in Clifford’s essay.

The alternative paradigms for diaspora and rootedness offered by Clifford, Hirsch, and Miller articulate productive ways of thinking beyond false dichotomies and notions of fixed identities, but it is also necessary to consider a potential pitfall to such thinking when it comes to consideration of Jewish contexts. As Max Silverman has pointed out in *Facing Postmodernity: Contemporary French Thought on Culture and Society*, it is tempting but inaccurate – and for the unintended re-objectification and re-reification of Jews as “Other” that it allows, ultimately unjust, even dangerous³⁵ – to think about Jewish cultural production as ‘rooted’ in a perpetual state of exile, diaspora, wandering and uprootedness: “The “Jew”, then, simply becomes the figure (or trope) employed to define a new universalism, the reified marker of all resistance to rootedness, fixity, and closure – the postmodern nomad par excellence. The problem of defining collectivities between this infinite dispersal of identity and its rootedness within a specific history is characteristic of the postmodern dilemma” (24). Silverman concludes his discussion of postmodern philosophical treatment of Jews with the following cautionary statement:

It would [...] be premature and foolhardy to celebrate unequivocally the post-Holocaust and postmodern era as a new dawn. If we are all (allegorical) “Jews” today – all non-rooted, diasporic, nomadic and cosmopolitan – it does not necessarily follow that we have entered a realm of new freedoms and new ethics for all beyond the constraints of modern concepts of self and other. If the particular state of the Jew under modern conditions has become the general state of us all under postmodern conditions (with the sole difference that stigmatization of difference has now given way to celebration of it), then this might be a cause for concern as much as rejoicing. [...] the consequences of this process of democratization of marginality [...] include] the commodification of difference, hybridity and cosmopolitanism. (38)

Arriving at such a conclusion (i.e. that Jews are emblematic of diasporic postmodernity due to whatever ‘uprooted’ and ‘nomadic’ traits they and their work exude) and

³⁵ The potential danger of this comes from the antisemitic trope of the “luftmensch” as symbolic of Jews. For a brief overview of this term, see Bryan Cheyette’s introduction in *Diasporas of the Mind*, pp. 22-23.

participating in the phenomenon Silverman describes is far from my aim in starting with the question of roots. Rather, it seems fitting to begin this project, which is organized in reverse chronological order, with an equally “reversed” image of roots. This reversal could be imagined in terms of roots that reach up rather than down – such as the upside-down Tree of Life in the Kabbalist text the Zohar –, or that reach forward into the future rather than back into the past, or, as Clifford sees it, as influenced by the movement of routes, the directionality of which is not predetermined.

This “reversal” might also be considered within the very frame of the interplay between roots and routes. As Hirsch and Miller describe it at play in a set of memoirs written by a group of young transnational Korean-American women that is the subject of one of the essays in *Rites of Return*, “As home becomes a textual effect of the journey and a figure of writing, the memoirists reverse the traditional sequence between roots and routes, thus complicating or, in Jarrod Hayes’s terms, queering, the conception of origin itself” (9). Indeed, the process and project of “queering” origins underpins *Géographie des origines* and *Un été à Jérusalem*, although each author approaches the process differently.

Another useful way to conceptualize the queering of origins that takes place in each text is through Sara Ahmed’s work on genealogies in *Queer Phenomenology*. Ahmed describes genealogies as an example of what she calls “straightening devices;” social constructs that appear to us as given, innate features of our collective experience but that in fact serve to prescribe certain “routes” over others, or to set us on certain (socially accepted) paths over others. Ahmed bases her argument that genealogies are straightening devices in the biological-essentialist logic of the construction of race: “We can return [...] to the question of straight lines. In one model, race would follow the

vertical line of the conventional family tree. Genealogy itself could be understood as a straightening device, which creates the illusion of descent as a line” (121-122). As Ahmed goes on to explain, the experiences of people of “mixed racial backgrounds” (such as herself; her father is Pakistani, and her mother is English) can help to further illuminate the illusory nature of “straight genealogies”: “[...] describing the experiential world that unfolds for those whose parents have different racial ‘backgrounds’ [...] might help us to show how genealogy itself is mixed. When genealogy straightens up, when it establishes its line, we have simply lost sight of this mix” (143). When we “lose sight” of something, it is because we are focused on, or oriented towards, something else.

As we have seen, the concept of “orientation” is key for Ahmed, and these “straightening devices” – such as genealogies in their traditional sense of family trees and lineage – maintain their power in large part because they serve as the points around which we “orientate” ourselves, so that they are not even within our frame of perspective (that is to say, they *are* the frame of our perspective, and therefore we cannot see them). This is relevant here in that Cohen and Boukhobza both reveal the artificiality and constructedness of these supposedly natural and innate orientation points. At the same time, their narrators – and narratives – attempt to refigure and reorientate, thus constructing their own orientation points and in so doing, making explicit to readers that they are constructions. For example, in the following short passage from *Géographie des origines*, the narrator highlights the mobility of “origins” as a means of exposing the illusion of their fixedness:

L’origine bouge, elle n’est pas un patrimoine immuable, une affaire fixe, elle est toujours en devenir, comme la terre, comme le sol sur lesquels nous nous tenons, le corps que nous habitons et qui se transforme et qui vieillit. Du coup, on ne parlera que des failles qui ont marqué le paysage et qui vont s’inscrire en nous. Sans un gramme de nostalgie, puisque nous revendiquons le mouvement, les départs, les valises, les contrées du monde. (57)

Cohen's narrator emphasizes the ever-evolving becoming of origins by comparing them to the earth, to the ground, and to the human body, all of which continue to move, evolve, and become over time. She also names the body as a home, and in so doing already offers a different point of orientation from that of a national home. As the earth and ground shift, fault lines are created as an effect of the shifting, and according to the narrator, those same lines "inscribe themselves into us." This, she seems to suggest, is the closest we will come to the mark of a traceable, identifiable "origin," but rather than mourning what might be considered a loss, she instead asserts that by claiming "movement, departures, suitcases, and the lands of the world," there is no need for nostalgia. In other words, our "routes" become "roots."

As we will see in Chapter III, the concept of roots figures into Cixous' and Robin's work as well. But while these writers of a slightly older generation tend to thematize their Jewish – especially Ashkenazic – roots precisely in terms of mourning, Cohen and Boukhobza articulate possible new directions that point clearly into the future even as they are ambivalent and do paradoxically look back as a means of then looking forward. This is not to say that grief and mourning are not present for this youngest generation; it is quite the opposite, and the final section of this chapter will offer ample evidence. The grief that both Cohen's and Boukhobza's narrators experience and express in both texts in part originates in this lack / loss of roots, and the mourning rituals for grandparents and parents that shape both narratives are a concrete manifestation of this grief. We might even interpret the grandparents and parents themselves as the lost roots, and the disorientation that results is thus as much geographic as it is emotional, psychological, and spiritual. As each narrator-protagonist to some degree participates in

Jewish mourning rituals for her deceased family members, she also struggles to reconcile her rejection of and cynicism towards the beliefs and rituals of North African Judaism.

At the same time, there is an understanding that with the death of their relatives comes the complete disappearance of whatever traces remain of their “home” culture. Boukhobza’s narrator has a brief exchange with an Israeli kiosk owner in her grandparents’ neighborhood in Beersheba, who has heard the news that the narrator’s grandmother is declining. As the kiosk owner succinctly puts it, “On m’a dit que ta grand-mère est au plus mal... Un à un, nos vieux meurent, et avec eux, la Tunisie, le Maroc, le Yémen...” (“I’ve heard your grandmother is in a bad way... One by one, our elderly are dying, and with them, Tunisia, Morocco, Yemen...”; my trans.; 55). While Cohen’s narrator begins and ends her narrative by performing a Jewish ritual at her mother and grandmother’s grave on the French national day of mourning, Boukhobza’s narrator takes us through several scenes of mourning, all of which are sites of an extreme clash between ancient and contemporary sensibilities, or between the grounding effect that Mizrahi rituals offer her older family members and her ambivalence vis-à-vis those very rituals.

While it is true that the “action” of Cohen’s text is to some extent a stream of consciousness process of mourning, memory, and associations of the unconscious and therefore that it might be read as a day in the life of a grieving woman, it is also a text of impressive erudition that weaves together her knowledge of geography, Algerian colonial history, Sephardic Jewish traditions, astrology and tarot, French and Francophone literature, and the intimate (hi)story of her family and her self. In other words, there is fine literary acuity and craftsmanship in this text, and it would be wrong to perceive it as “only” a stream-of-consciousness memoir; it is in the weaving together of these varying

threads of knowledge – and of ways of knowing – that Cohen’s text works against monolithic epistemologies and politics. The text offers a symmetrical or cyclical narrative form, in that the “narrative” it weaves begins and ends in the same moment, at the same location. It is clear from this structure that Cohen’s definition of movement as represented, performed, and defined within the text is as much an internal, psychological, and psychic one as it is geographical.

As we will see, Cohen shares some of the preoccupations that give life to Cixous’ writing as well, for quite obvious reasons; both lived their formative years of childhood in French colonial Algeria, and both lived through the “events”³⁶ of the Algerian War for independence. Both relocated to Paris in the immediate aftermath of that war, where they both pursued advanced degrees and were involved in the intellectual movements of the 1960s and 1970s; that is to say, both women are well-acquainted and familiar with psychoanalysis, poststructuralism and deconstruction. These similarities aside however, I consider Cixous and Cohen as representative of two different generations, in large part due to their differing experiences of the Second World War and the implications of those differences throughout the duration of their lives. While Cixous was born early enough to have her own early memories of wartime, albeit filtered through life in a French colony as the war unfolded, Cohen was not.

Cohen and Boukhobza are also distinguishable from Cixous and Robin along generational lines in part due to the explicit nature of their engagement with the politics of bodies and identities.³⁷ As we will see in the fourth section of this chapter especially,

³⁶ Until at least the 1980s, the Algerian War was euphemistically referred to in French public political discourse as “les événements.”

³⁷ Cixous has been criticized by some feminists precisely for this reason; in the spirit of the ‘feminine writing’ she calls for, she is more interested in generating new meanings and disturbing ‘set’ ones through polysemy and neologism. Cixous has also never subscribed to ‘feminism’ per se, nor has she identified as a

Cohen and Boukhobza make their female Jewish bodies and identities a central part of their writing, and in this way perform Cixous' *écriture féminine* in more explicit applications than Cixous herself, and *écriture juive féminine* in its clearest and most obvious expression. This explicit engagement is visible in the content of their writing also maps onto the literary form Boukhobza and Cohen use. Compared to Cixous and Robin, Cohen and Boukhobza reclaim more 'linear' narratives both in terms of form and content as a means of in fact drawing new lines, rejecting old ones, and redefining familiar forms. *Géographie des origines*, while largely unclassifiable in terms of genre (labeled simply a "récit" – a narrative, story – in the original French edition), nonetheless features some landmarks and anchors that allow readers to at least get their bearings within the text, and there is a single, uniform narrative voice and style that runs throughout. *Un été à Jérusalem* features elements of a conventional novel with a clear plot, character development, and a single first-person narrator. The simple fact of these two texts' clear univocality signals a shift away from the blurry polyvocality of Cixous's and Robin's work, and a return towards an "I," albeit a multifaceted and self-contradictory one.

The following passage from *Géographie des origines* is a good example of this self-contradictory yet clear "I" as the narrator describes one aspect of her attitude towards roots that very much elides into the movement of routes:

Je fuis encore devant ces histoires de racines ! Ce qui importe, c'est la plante qu'on devient ! Oui, j'ai tiré un trait sur une histoire somme toute banale pour la Juive que je suis. Je renoue avec un passé ancestral. Ce n'était pas le premier exode, ni peut-être le dernier. Nous arrivions en France, en 1962 comme de nombreux Français d'Algérie. Je me souviens avec force des escaliers mécaniques

'feminist,' even if she created the first university program for Women's and Gender Studies in France. Nonetheless, I would argue that her work is implicitly feminist in that it forces readers to detach from and abandon preconceived notions of identity, knowledge, language and power. Ian Blyth and Susan Sellers provide an excellent overview of Cixous' interactions with feminist and gender theory in *Hélène Cixous: Live Theory*, especially pp. 18-34.

d'Orly. Paris allait bercer mon cœur, rassasier mon corps troué. J'allais apprendre à oublier l'exubérance, opter corps et âme pour les couleurs d'ombre, sans excès, stables, qui, unifiant le paysage, pansaient toutes les blessures, les accidents. Marcher dans des allées bien dessinées, se conformer au décor mis en place de longue date, épouser les monuments. Le paysage nous clouait le bec. (69)

Within the very first exclamatory sentence, the tension and interconnection between roots and routes is made clear; the narrator's impulse to flee from "stories of roots" signals her desire to focus on the process of becoming into the future. This passage in fact tells the story of her arrival in Paris from Algeria, of an "exodus," but she seems to want to flee from that very story, and so a double exodus ensues – one externally imposed and the other internally chosen. The tension of self-contradictory "I's" also plays out in this passage as a reorientation; first the narrator indicates a letting go and shedding of the past for the sake of the present when she declares that she "turned the page on an entirely banal (hi)story for the Jewish woman that she is." But immediately following this declaration, she states that she "is reconnecting with an ancestral past." The letting go and reconnecting ultimately suggest that her postcolonial exodus from independent Algeria to France is supplanted by the Jewish exodus of Biblical times. So, while she claims to flee from stories of roots, she also claims a sense of filiation to the ancestral past of routes, which become in a sense the 'roots' she claims for herself in the present. There is a sense of tension between movement and blockage, which is reiterated towards the end of the passage where while walking through the new Parisian landscape seems to offer respite, it also transfixes her, making her speechless.

The Biblical reference to earlier exoduses in the above passage points to another key distinction that separates this generation from their predecessors in terms of their engagement with the idea of roots; Cohen and Boukhobza are the only writers considered in this project who bring Israel into their work, thus further complicating their

conceptualizations of and attitudes towards roots (and routes). Laurel Plapp's introductory comments in her chapter on Boukhobza in *Zionism and Revolution in European Jewish Literature* offer a helpful way into another aspect of this youngest generation's response to roots. Before moving on to problematize it, Plapp first describes Deleuze and Guattari's theory of "nomad thought" which is mobilized through what they call "rhizomes" as it applies to Jewish thought and cultural memory:

[...] Jewish tradition has created a 'cultural memory' of Israel as a unified nation, whether religious or secular [...]. The creation of the state of Israel in 1948 disrupted this cultural memory, and hence, the Jewish diaspora itself, by claiming an end to 'nomadic' existence. Zionism and the foundation of Israel also represented an end of nomadism in Deleuze and Guattari's theoretical sense. Their 'nomad thought,' represented by the rhizome, has the potential to infiltrate the hierarchical structures of Western thought, which includes orientalism. [...] Thus rhizomes do not simply negate the trees and roots of Western philosophy; rather, each model contains offshoots of the other. (162-163)

Plapp's use of tree and root metaphors versus offshoots is apt. For Plapp, what is productive about Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome, even with its flaws which we will see in a moment, is its subversive, disruptive potential which can then serve not to negate the "trees and roots" of the Western philosophies it seeks to disrupt, but rather to create "offshoots." An "offshoot" designates a new growth on a plant that does not exactly align with the upward growth of the plant itself; it is thus a bit of a "deviation" or a "twist," to echo Ahmed. In this sense, Plapp (via Deleuze and Guattari) implies a queering of what we might call a genealogy of thought. Cohen and Boukhobza certainly represent "rhizomatic," or "offshooting," thought in their writing, and in so doing, they queer this genealogy by combining references, traditions, and languages, even altering them. They simultaneously reject the supposed "end" to such rhizomatic thinking that the creation of the state of Israel meant for Deleuze and Guattari.

Plapp then goes on to explain the critiques of Deleuze and Guattari's theory, made by Françoise Lionnet and other postcolonial transnational theorists, for its Eurocentrism and limited-to-non-existent understanding of transnational frameworks and lived experiences. These critiques focus especially on the linguistic aspect of Deleuze and Guattari's theory, which posits that a "reterritorialization" of language is central to the enactment of "nomad thought." Deleuze and Guattari cite Kafka's use of German while writing in Prague as an example of this "reterritorialization." Lionnet's critique posits instead a métissage of language as indicative of the undoing of (Eurocentric) national frameworks. Plapp manages to salvage the workable parts from the concept of "nomad thought" and reconcile them with postcolonial and transnational critiques in order to bring both to bear on Boukhobza's work:

[Chochana Boukhobza's] real-life situation facilitates a 'nomadic' resistance to imperialism and oppression that goes beyond merely redefining Jewish identity within a particular national context. [...] Boukhobza [...] [is a] transnational, multilingual author whose texts explore not only [her] diasporic positioning but also [her] relationships to Judaism and to Israel. As a result of [her] multiple nationalities and languages, [her] nomadic tendencies are not merely expressed through 'stretching' a major language for [her] own purposes, as in Deleuze and Guattari's model. Rather, [she] reveal[s] the diversity of [her] Jewish identit[y] through simultaneous, sometimes self-contradictory, multiplication of nations, languages, characters, and perspectives. (165)

In other words, the subversive qualities of "nomadism" as Deleuze and Guattari originally envisioned it emerge in Boukhobza's work through the multiplication of perspectives that are sometimes self-contradictory. I would argue that this is also true in Cohen's work. Both writers' ambivalence towards their roots, which at times leads to self-contradiction, is indeed central to the anti-hierarchical critiques they both make of Israel, postcolonial Algeria and Tunisia, and the patriarchy of traditional Sephardic and Mizrahi Judaism. In part expressed through the linguistic choices each author makes in enacting the salvageable aspects of rhizomatic/nomad thought, the ambiguity of roots and

their (im)possibility underpins the movements made by the narrators within *Géographie des origines* and *Un été à Jérusalem* and by the texts themselves; ambivalent redefinition and reclaiming are at the “root” of these texts.

An example of this ambivalence and “nomad thought” occurs in Boukhobza’s novel through the character of Henry, an Algerian Jew who also lived in France before coming to Jerusalem as a journalist assigned to cover the Lebanon War, and with whom the narrator develops an intense romantic, intimate attachment in large part due to their shared ambivalence towards their “roots” as they clash with the geopolitical backdrop of 1983 Jerusalem. With the congruent/parallel histories and attitudes he shares with the narrator, Henry functions within the narrative as the only person capable of providing relief and comfort for her by truly understanding and seeing her in all her complexity and contradiction. In turn, the narrator sees herself reflected in him. The passage below conveys one such instance of recognition and mutual self-identification in a dialogue between Henry and the narrator:

“Toi aussi, tu es de ma race, une nomade.” Il expose avec une ironie caustique les symptômes de l’exil, le désordre de la pensée, la nostalgie des images englouties. Sirupeuses, ajoute-t-il. “C’est fragile, un homme qui n’a pas son assise. Un homme qui ne peut montrer un coin de rue, un coin de terre et dire avec simplicité : c’est ici que j’ai grandi.” Dès son arrivée en Israël, le Juif en lui avait cherché l’Arabe. Il s’était introduit dans quelques cercles palestiniens, étudiait la langue, déchiffrait le Coran.

“Je marche à reculons. Je piste des sons, des odeurs, des gestes familiers. Je tente de remonter l’échelle d’une tradition. Faire du nouveau l’ancien quand l’ancien est nouveau. C’est le paradoxe le plus affligeant pour des déracinés. Une existence en ellipse...

- Nous sommes la génération du folklore ?
- Oui... du folklore. Du ramasse-miettes. Il existe un tel clivage entre notre connaissance de l’Occident et notre penchant pour l’Orient ! Moi, chaque fois que j’entends parler arabe, je sursaute...” (175-176)

The narrator explicitly names the ironic tone with which Henry describes their

“symptoms” as “nomads,” and in so doing, she reinforces the ambivalence that

characterizes their relationships to their transnationalism.³⁸ The irony with which Henry describes the “disordered thinking” and “nostalgia for engulfed, syrupy images” that are the supposed symptoms of their nomadic “race” points to a desire to break away from such clichés and stereotypes. Instead, what Henry’s initial musings and the dialogue that ensues between them propose is a reorientation towards the “paradoxes of an existence in ellipsis” such as their own. The imagery of an ellipsis is itself paradoxical and contradictory; on the one hand, an ellipsis might signal an omission, something intentionally left out, but on the other hand, it might rather imply a potential future becoming and unfolding that has not yet taken place, of which the ellipsis is the marker and temporary placeholder.³⁹

Part of the reorientation proposed here also has to do with the “mixedness” of their Maghrebi Jewish backgrounds as they play out in Israel. The fact that Henry’s “inner Jew” (“le Juif en lui”) looked for “the Arab” upon his arrival in Jerusalem and that he and the narrator are both “split between their knowledge of the Occident and their penchant for the Orient” etch out a more nuanced and ambivalent portrayal of Maghrebi Jewish attitudes towards their origins. In so doing, Boukhobza highlights the mixed genealogy of these different parts that more accurately reflects the nomadic, elliptical, and paradoxical qualities of the postcolonial transnational experience of “walking in reverse” in Israel. The refiguring of the “Occident” as a place they know well and the

³⁸ The use of this language of “symptoms” also implies that such “nomadic” existence (and thought) is an illness. This calls to mind Derrida’s term “belonging sickness” he eventually used to describe his own transnational, postcolonial, Jewish journey.

³⁹ The use of ellipses is a central aspect of my analysis of Némirovsky and Sarraute’s “autobiographical” writings in the fourth chapter. Boukhobza’s formulation of an “existence in ellipsis” foreshadows the omission and potential unfolding at play in these earlier works.

“Orient” as a place towards which they “have a penchant” also ironizes and exposes the fallacy of the Orientalism that contributed to French colonization in the Maghreb.

This subtle allusion to the role of French colonial history in Algeria and Tunisia as it plays out for Boukhobza’s characters in *Un été à Jérusalem* points to one of the most salient sources of the narrator’s ambivalence towards roots in *Géographie des origines*, and this has to do with the coincidental nature of that colonial history and its consequences marked by language. As she explains,

L’Algérie a été colonisée par la France. Une autre puissance coloniale aurait pu le faire. Les Juifs d’Algérie, bien présents avant la conquête française, auraient parlé portugais, anglais ou hollandais. C’est troublant, ce statut qui aurait pu être autre, avec d’autres lois, et *surtout* une autre langue ! Je n’oublie jamais que je suis française par l’Histoire, par la loi et non par la géographie. Je ne suis pas un écrivain de l’exil, même si mon enfance fut ailleurs. Je suis du pays de ma mère, du pays de son corps, de sa voix, *Bésame mucho*, du pays de son Espagne perdue, de sa Séville ancestrale. Je suis du pays d’un père au combat, soldat en armes, marqué par une jeunesse en guerre, je suis du côté de ses décorations militaires, de ses blessures corporelles et psychiques. Je suis ses yeux qui parcourent les livres sans que sa bouche puisse transmettre le fruit de sa lecture. Oui, je ressens une sorte de détachement par rapport à la terre de naissance, *une répugnance à tout enracinement* (Jabès). On ne fait que passer. Mourir à son propre pays. Je n’ai d’existence qu’en dehors de toute appartenance. (57-58 ; emphasis in original)

This passage illuminates the sheer coincidence of the fact that France colonized Algeria rather than another European colonial power, and of the fact that Algerian Jews, whose presence in Algeria predates the French colonists’ arrival by centuries, ended up speaking French as a result of this coincidence.⁴⁰ While the fact of her “Frenchness” is therefore entirely based in what she later calls “the vagaries of History” (“les aléas de l’Histoire”), she also rejects the identity of “exilic writer” and thereby reinforces the fact of her Frenchness. She seems to imply that rather than Algeria, which was an entirely

⁴⁰ Cohen’s narrator echoes the similar feelings of coincidence and contingency that Cixous and Derrida both describe in *Mon Algérie* and *Le Monolinguisme de l’autre* respectively. We will see this theme resurface in the next chapter.

coincidental backdrop and location of her childhood, she is really from the “places” embodied by her parents, which are more affective than geographical. The narrator thus refigures the concept of roots and of geography by evoking the affective landscapes of her childhood. She emphasizes the impossibility of any true rooting to a geographical location, because “we only pass through” any particular place. At the end of this excerpt, the self-contradiction comes to a head. While the narrator first claims that “we only pass through,” foreshadowing therefore the last sentence that “I only exist outside of all belonging,” these are punctuated by the contradictory “To die in one’s own country.” I would argue that the “country” referred to here is simply one’s own body, since the narrator’s earlier denial of roots in Algeria gives way to her reformulation of her parents as her “native country.”

The contrast between the geographical setting of the Maghreb and the affective setting embodied and provided by her parents is also present in *Un été à Jérusalem*. Shortly after her arrival to her parents’ apartment in Jerusalem, Boukhobza’s narrator takes in the scenery of the living room and decorations:

Au-dessus du buffet, des gravures en papier journal, jaunies et rongées, protégées par des plaques de verre, représentent des scènes de Moïse traversant la mer Rouge. Des tableaux de rabbins aussi, barbes respectables et œil spirituel. Dominant la télévision, un portrait noir et blanc de Saba, coiffé du kabouch, drapé dans sa gandoura. Suspendus à des simples clous, des lampes à huile en bronze et en mauvais argent, vestiges d’une Tunisie perdue. (14)

First, there is the reference to the Biblical exodus contained within the etchings of scenes of Moses crossing the Red Sea that her parents have placed above the buffet. Near the etchings are paintings of rabbis. Finally, a portrait of the narrator’s grandfather (“Saba,” which means “Grandfather” in Hebrew, a fact that readers unfamiliar with Hebrew learn through a footnote included in the text) “dominates” the television, giving readers a sense of Saba’s formidable influence and presence, even posthumously, in the narrator’s

family. In his portrait, Saba wears his gandoura, a traditional Tunisian tunic, and a traditional Tunisian cap – a chechia – sits atop his head. Finally, oil lamps in bronze and “bad silver” hang suspended from “simple nails.” The narrator calls these lamps “vestiges of a lost Tunisia,” but it is arguable that the photograph of Saba is also such a vestige. The “lost” Tunisia to which she refers is lost at two levels; first, there is the loss of pre-independent Tunisia, in which Jews and Arabs coexisted peacefully for centuries.⁴¹ But there is also the loss of her family’s Tunisia, the loss of Tunisia as a dwelling. Her use of the word “vestiges” makes clear that these objects, especially the portrait of Saba, are only traces or imprints of roots that once were.

The question mark in parentheses of this section’s heading conveys the ambivalent status of these countries as ever having been “home” and the replacement of roots with routes, so that all that is left are traces of the routes traveled. But, these routes do not include those that would allow a return. As Henry points out in *Un été*, North African Jews of the postcolonial era cannot return and show others where they grew up. As we will see in the next section, the state of Israel complicates this further.

II. Israel: Zionism, Colonialism, Patriarchy

In this section, I will briefly compare responses to and attitudes about Israel as represented in the two texts, particularly those having to do with the idealism of the kibbutzes and Zionism of the 1960s on the one hand, and the militaristic nationalism that

⁴¹ In their critical considerations of *Un été à Jérusalem*, Nathan P. Devir, Nancy Arenberg, and Laurel Plapp characterize Boukhobza’s narrator’s allusions to this pre-independent Tunisia as nostalgic and full of longing. I am not sure that I fully agree, in large part due to the narrator’s criticism and rejection of the traditional Tunisian Mizrahi values, mores, and structures that her family members enact, which is framed in the novel in part as a difference between generations. At the same time, these allusions certainly do serve as points of sharp contrast with the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, of which the narrator is critical and sees Israel as responsible. Through this lens, reading that contrast as nostalgia does make some sense.

has characterized Israel since the 1980s (or even the Six-Day War of 1967) on the other hand. This is important within the scope of this chapter for several reasons. First, by briefly dipping into this aspect of Cohen's and Boukhobza's work, we can see that indeed, and for quite obvious reasons given the historical backdrop of their generation compared to earlier ones, these are the only authors within the genealogy I propose who bring Israel explicitly into the text. Simultaneously, these are also the only two authors who have explicitly self-identified as feminists and participated in the political manifestations of feminism. The intersection of their politicized feminism and their evolving political views on Israel is pivotal in conceptualizing *écriture juive féminine* as it manifests in the work of this generation of writers. Furthermore, exploring representations of Israel in these texts helps elucidate the complicated relationship between the legacies of French colonialism in North Africa, its reverberations in the form of Israeli colonialism vis-à-vis Palestine, the Franco-Israeli connection, and the politics that underpin either the mobilization or avoidance of memory of the Holocaust. Lastly, studying Israel here serves to illustrate the heterogeneity of Jews, which is one of the overarching objectives of this project. This heterogeneity illustrated through the lens of Israel is made visible in part by Jews' differing responses to Zionism and the State, in part by the varying range of religious practice and secularism, and in part by the different receptions each group of Jewish exiles and refugees were met with upon arrival in Israel.

The field of research devoted to Israel is vast, multidisciplinary, and continuously growing. My goal is not so much to explain and consider every aspect of the complicated relationships, challenging dynamics, and contentious debates that Israel elicits, but rather to demonstrate how representations of Israel and articulations of the narrators' attitudes towards it ultimately underscore the gendered (feminist) critiques they make of Sephardic

and Mizrahi patriarchal social mores, as well as of the patriarchal, colonial violence that the Israeli State itself does to men and women alike, Jewish and Palestinian.⁴²

At the same time that Cohen and (especially) Boukhobza do employ gendered, feminist critiques in their work of the traditional Sephardic and Mizrahi patriarchies in which they were raised, we have already seen that their work also features an ambivalent oscillation between rejection of and nostalgia for those very “roots.” For Boukhobza especially, her choice of setting her novel in Jerusalem during the summer of 1983 and the First Lebanon War demonstrates the conflict and irresolution that Israel provokes in the narrator, which stems in part from her unresolved and contradictory feelings towards her Tunisian Jewish heritage. Due to the centrality of Israel and Jerusalem in Boukhobza’s novel, this section draws more heavily on passages from *Un été à Jérusalem* than it does from *Géographie des origines*, in which Israel only appears sporadically and functions more as a counterpoint to the (post)colonial dynamics between France and Algeria.

Although Israel is omnipresent in Boukhobza’s novel, I will start with a passage from *Géographie des origines*, in which the narrator describes the one and only time she returned to independent Algeria after her family’s departure. What interests me in this passage is the historical backdrop of the Six-Day War, which coincides with the Sephardic narrator’s return to what has become a completely disorienting and unfamiliar place. She thus experiences the unfolding of that war in newly independent Algeria:

La musique militaire diffusée dans les rues d’Alger durant la guerre des Six-Jours, ajoutée à une crainte sans nom, allait creuser un vrai fossé. J’ai compris que ma place n’était plus en Algérie, que leur indépendance ne me concernait pas. Il

⁴² There are different senses of “patriarchal” used in this sentence; first there is the very literal sense: traditional Sephardic and Mizrahi culture is patriarchal in that men are considered the authority within families, and men are also able to participate in religious community as rabbis, etc. Then there is the more ideological sense that aligns with the logic of colonialism, which is predicated upon hierarchical notions of superiority and inferiority, domination and subjugation.

fallait choisir son camp. Cette musique suscitait chez moi des prières nocturnes, clandestines, secrètes, en faveur des Israéliens. Ardente comme je l'étais, j'aurais pu m'engager pour Tsahal. J'étais revenue en Algérie de mon plein gré, à peine majeure, sans l'assentiment de mon père. J'avais bravé un interdit, mais je voulais connaître aussi la terre des Algériens, la Casbah, le désert, leur langue, leur vie. (89)

The narrator expresses her “clandestine, nocturnal” support for Israel⁴³ in the form of secret prayers. Crystallized through the sound of the music and her experience of the Six-Day War filtered through the Algerian (Arab) side of it, the fact of her support and self-placement on the ideological-political spectrum of positions seems to have surprised her. It is in this moment of return to Algeria that the narrator understands her own positioning, largely as an effect of the acute sense of non-belonging (i.e., exclusion) she feels in the altered geopolitical landscape of 1967 North Africa, going so far as to muse that she could have enlisted in the Israeli Armed Forces. At the same time, we sense a certain amount of inner-conflict as she recognizes the truth of her position, which is implied by the very fact of her voluntary return to Algeria and what seems to be a genuine curiosity in understanding Algerian geography and ways of life. Yet this very curiosity and desire to return further reinforces her clear separation from Algeria, illustrating in unequivocal terms her status as an observer and an outsider. When she recalls that the military music played in the streets of Algiers, combined with “an unnamed fear,” dug a “real gulf” for her, what she implies is twofold. First, the gulf represents the impassable affective gulf within her – her ties to Algeria are over, and her support for Israel is solidified. Second, she implies here that the “real gulf” would be the result of the collective, incendiary political polarization engendered by the war. Indeed, that gulf was made very real and more deeply entrenched as a result of the Six-Day War, which is generally understood

⁴³ This makes an interesting parallel/juxtaposition with Boukhobza's narrator, who also engages in secret, clandestine, nocturnal behavior that she attempts to hide from her parents.

historically as a major turning point in the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, not only in terms of the development of that conflict, but also in terms of the evolution of Jewish responses and attitudes towards Israel, exemplified here by Cohen's narrator.⁴⁴

One last aspect of this passage worth mentioning is that Cohen's narrator seems to go out of her way to mention that she returned to Algeria without her father's consent. Including this detail is significant, as it appears as a bit of a non sequitur. I read its inclusion in the narrative as an indication of a connection between, on the one hand, patriarchal order at the private-familial and collective-political levels, and on the other hand, possible means of revolt or subversion to counter it. Her unapproved, unsanctioned return to Algeria mirrors in some senses what she experiences as an illicit support for Israel, which, it should be mentioned, remains an abstract ideal and an unexperienced imaginary for her. That she describes her actions (her return, and her support) here in these terms (unapproved, and clandestine) is indicative of the conflicting experience of Israel for Jews from the Maghreb, and all the more so for young women coming into their own as transnational, postcolonial subjects such as the narrator in this instance.

Boukhobza's narrator expresses similar conflicting opinions, attitudes, and feelings towards Israel, which are often mediated through her disparaging portrayals of her father and other Israeli men. For example, in one of the earliest scenes in the novel which depicts her arrival in Israel at the beginning of the eponymous summer in question, she describes her interactions with the taxi driver who takes her from the Lod airport to Jerusalem. After he assumes that she is a European tourist and does not speak Hebrew, he tries speaking broken English to which she responds in fluent Hebrew. He is surprised:

⁴⁴ Lucille Cairns and Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller corroborate this in their works on Israel (*Francophone Jewish Writers Imagining Israel* and *The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in the Francophone World*, respectively).

“Israélienne? Tiens? J’aurais juré que tu étais française! Excuse-moi!” (“Israeli? Well! I would have sworn that you were French! Excuse me!”; my trans.; 11). When the narrator somewhat playfully replies that she “has nothing to pardon,” she notices the driver’s unease and describes his facial features that bely his affective state: “Les yeux noirs injectés de sang, surmontés de sourcils broussailleux, ne rient pas. Une flamme inquiète demeure tapie au fond de la prunelle” (“Black bloodshot eyes, topped with bushy eyebrows, unlaughing. A worried flame lurks deep within his gaze⁴⁵”; my trans.; 11). Before moving on to the culmination of this exchange between the narrator and the taxi driver, I want to pause here and examine the dynamics already at play. First, there is the assumption that because she has arrived on an incoming flight from Europe, the narrator is therefore European; the taxi driver has no awareness of the possibilities of transnational frameworks, and this underscores the Israeli focus on nation-building. Second, that the narrator describes the driver’s physical appearance in terms that accentuate his affect as it mirrors his stereotypically Jewish features (black eyes and bushy eyebrows) tells us much about her perceptions of Israel. His bloodshot eyes imbued with a “worried flame” seem to bely the destructive effects of life in Israel which is evidently an anxiety-inducing place of unrest. This sense of unrest and unease is further emphasized by the driver’s response to the narrator’s playful comment in that it illustrates a mistrust and defensiveness, even perhaps a latent response to trauma, towards Europe.

As the exchange continues and becomes more complex, the taxi driver asks the narrator if she had a good vacation, now assuming that she is in fact Israeli and had been in Europe as a tourist, thus once again illustrating his lack of awareness (or denial) of

⁴⁵ “Prunelle” could also be translated as “pupil.”

transnationalism. When she responds that she is not returning to Israel from vacation, but rather has arrived there on vacation now, the driver “accelerates furiously” and initiates the following exchange:

“Tu ne te plaisais pas ici ? La guerre te fait peur peut-être ?

- Peut-être.
- Toutes les mêmes, s’emporte-t-il avec amertume. Vous nous laissez tomber tandis que nous... Qu’est-ce qu’il y a de plus en Europe hein ? Quand on mettra tous les Juifs dans un ghetto, alors...” (12)

This short dialogue reveals much about the complicated web of attitudes and affects surrounding Israeli nationalism and the dynamics between Zionist politics, within which there is a great spectrum of beliefs and positionings, and Jews who choose not to commit to living in Israel. The driver’s tone shifts from accusatory to bitter; by assuming the narrator left Israel because she did not like it and was afraid of the war, he demonstrates first a misogynist belief that women are afraid of war and run away from it in fear.

Yet, his bitterness also signals a sense of abandonment, which may be a reference to France’s shifting stance towards and support of Israel. In the years between the end of the Second World War and the creation of the State of Israel, France was Israel’s strongest ally, aiding Jewish refugees by transporting them from French docks to Palestine in 1947. Eventually, the Franco-Israeli alliance dissipated and eroded, beginning in 1967 with the Six-Day War and then-French president De Gaulle’s insults to Israel, and continuing with subsequent French presidents of the Fifth Republic who, in Lucille Cairns’ words, “were more interested in courting the Arab world than in preserving friendship with Israel” (4). Boukhobza’s allusion towards these shifting political relations through the biting words of the taxi driver illustrates the complicated and conflicting attitudes that shaped Israel at the time and situates the Lebanon War within its historical context. Finally, the driver’s embittered tone serves as a warning and

reminder that Europe is not a safe place for Jews, either. Echoing the sociopolitical discourse of Holocaust memory in Israel since the Eichmann Trial, the driver legitimizes Israel's existence through his bitter remarks.⁴⁶ Ultimately, his bitterness and anger signal the unsettling and incendiary debates surrounding Israel since its foundation, but they seemingly do nothing to change the narrator's own views, nor do they change her transnationality.

A bit further in the narrative, once the narrator has parted ways with the taxi driver and reunited with her mother at her parents' apartment, she takes advantage of her father's absence to ask her mother, "Et papa, il soutient encore Begin ? Il estime toujours que nous avons eu raison de faire le Liban ?" ("And Dad, does he still support Begin? Does he still think we were right to invade Lebanon?" ; my trans.; 18). Here, Israeli nationalism is embodied by the father figure, both the narrator's own father and Menachem Begin, the Prime Minister who authorized the invasion of Lebanon in 1982, thus beginning the First Lebanon War which forms the political backdrop of Boukhobza's novel. By placing her father and Begin within the frame of the same sentence and the same question, the narrator implicitly and explicitly links militarized Israeli nationalism with masculine patriarchy, while her use of the adverb "encore" implies that her father's political stance is outdated and has already been proven wrong and catastrophic.

⁴⁶ Annette Wieviorka and Esther Benbassa, both French historians specializing in Jewish history, identify the 1961 Eichmann Trial as a turning point in Israel's political discourse of Holocaust memory. Wieviorka and Benbassa both explain that prior to the Trial, the many survivors who became early citizens were largely perceived as weak and therefore counterproductive to the Israeli nation-building project, which was predicated upon narratives of the strength and heroism of its early Zionist founders. The Eichmann Trial shifted this perception due to its emphasis on survivor testimonies, at which point the Holocaust and its legacies became deeply woven into Israel's self-legitimizing discourse as justification and proof for the necessity of a Jewish-sovereign State. See Benbassa, *Suffering as Identity*, pp. 124-149, and Wieviorka, *L'Ère du témoin*, pp. 81-126 for more on the shifting dynamics and politics of Holocaust memory in Israel. See also Lucille Cairns, *Imagining Israel*, pp. 38-55.

The militaristic, masculine nationalism embodied in the figures of Begin and the narrator's father is further emblemized in a photograph the narrator finds in her parents' living room of her brothers in their military garb. As she contemplates the photograph, she wonders where her brothers are and is overcome with a feeling of solitude, thematizing the fracturing and isolation brought about by war and the disillusionment and alienation the narrator experiences towards the real Israel – that of war and violence – rather than the idyllic one she had imagined:

Je remarque, enfin, dans un cadre en plastique doré, une photo de mes frères en habit militaire. Où sont-ils ? Dans les montagnes du Chouf ? À Beyrouth ? Plus je les détaille, plus j'éprouve un sentiment de solitude, comme un voyageur qui réalise soudain qu'il s'est trompé de destination, qui s'était cru arrivé dans une station balnéaire pour jouir du soleil, de la mer, et comprend qu'il a débarqué dans un paysage lunaire où des crevasses, démultipliées à l'infini, lui indiquent son chemin de pèlerin. (18-19)

Through its narration, this passage mirrors the evolution of attitudes surrounding Israel and Zionism from their early days to the narrator's present moment. The idyllic representation of Israel as a seaside resort, which turns out to be false, echoes the early days of Israeli Statehood, when there was a need for such marketing in order to attract diasporic Jews, particularly Sephardic and Mizrahi, and thereby justify the State's existence. The reality of Israel in the early 1980s turns out to be, at least for the narrator, more akin to an alienating and infinitely cracked, crevasse-laden moonscape that is supposed to guide the "pilgrim" on his path.⁴⁷ Boukhobza's choice of vocabulary in the

⁴⁷ In "Maghrebian Feminism Meets the Bride of God," Nathan P. Devir explains that this sense of alienation, disorientation, and deception was especially true for the first waves of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews arriving in Israel:

It was not until the final stages of the Second World War, amid the realization that European Jewry was being systematically wiped out, that members of the Yishuv (the pre-state Zionist settlement dating from the 1880s) began to look toward Jews from Islamic countries to further populate the future Jewish state and to thereby assist in the crucial war of demography. The Jews from these countries who subsequently arrived in Israel were often put against their will into makeshift *ma'abarot* (transit camps) and thrust into a vastly different (European) cultural milieu. These changes led to the breakdown of their communities, and also created profound divisions in the nascent Israeli society. (55)

analogies the narrator makes to describe her disorienting experience of return to Israel, first as a “traveler,” then as a “pilgrim” is also telling of the contradictory attitudes and rhetoric surrounding Israel. On the one hand, “traveler” designates a varying degree of direction and intentionality, and is even sometimes used euphemistically to describe nomads, while “pilgrim” connotes an intentional journey with a higher, and perhaps ritualistic, purpose. In other words, the two terms represent the tropes of wandering Jews (diaspora) and of Jews returning to holy ground (Zionism).

The narrator’s disillusionment and disenchantment with Israel, illustrated in part by the above-mentioned juxtaposition between the figure of the nomad/traveler and that of the pilgrim, is echoed and shared by a group of other Maghrebi Jews of her parents’ generation whom she encounters while waiting for a bus in Jerusalem:

Ils sont arrivés à Jérusalem la même année que mes parents. Comme eux, ils se sont exaltés, puis, déçus, ont menacé de tout plaquer, envisageant un retour immédiat en France. Mais le temps a passé. Ils sont toujours là, ronchonnants et grincheux, calculant sur tout, la viande et les loisirs, envieux des touristes ‘qui claquent le fric’, prompts à vous avouer qu’ils ont eu, eux aussi, par le passé, une situation plus aisée. Devant votre silence, ils finissent par se taire, un peu confus de s’exhiber. Car au fond, ils sont las de lutter. Le chemin a été long, une trajectoire en accent circonflexe. Premier éveil : l’Afrique du Nord. L’exil ensuite vers Paris, Marseille, Lyon, avec des étournements de nostalgie, des picotements du sinus, des tête-à-tête empoisonnés avec le ‘paradis’. Devant la boussole qui s’affole, ils ont à nouveau refait leurs valises, une fantaisie. Jérusalem. Un caprice qui coûte cher. [Ils] restent des transfuges, maniant maladroitement la langue, tétant la Bible comme dernier recours. (32)

Here again we sense the narrator’s ambivalent oscillations vis-à-vis the traditional North African Jewish social mores of her parents’ generation; while she expresses a certain amount of empathy and compassion for this group of Maghrebi immigrants, remarking that “they are tired of fighting” and “their road was long,” she also calls them “defectors” and their decision to relocate in Jerusalem “a costly whim.” Like the narrator and her parents, these people have endured multiple exiles in a “trajectory the shape of a

circumflex accent,” an experience symbolized in the image of the “panic-stricken compass” that loses its head (“la boussole qui s’affole”), indicating the feeling of senseless disorientation, of having no “North.” The narrator’s shifting attitudes, ranging from empathy for their disorienting exiles to judgment of their choice to relocate in Israel, encapsulates the conflicted ambivalence towards Israel and its politics with which many Jews grapple, particularly Jewish women engaged with feminism.⁴⁸

One of the sources of this ambivalence towards Israel, particularly for Jewish women who also identify as feminists, is the idealism of the original vision of the kibbutzim as egalitarian, socialist cooperative communities.⁴⁹ For Cohen’s narrator, this “idea of Israel” serves as a point of contrast with France, which she says was very “real” for her in her formative years, more so than Algeria where she lived. In the passage below, her dreamed, imagined, idealized Israel serves as a means of underscoring the Frenchness of her early life. This in turn illustrates the effectiveness of the French colonial presence in Algeria, but also the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion experienced by Algerian Jews in the colonial period.⁵⁰ Algeria’s lack of “reality” for Algerian Jews of the narrator’s generation due to their separation and isolation from it thus provides a fascinating counterpoint to the desire sparked by the ideal image of Israel:

Nous avons les oreilles pleines des tubes français. Ni Sidi-bel-Abbès, ni Guelma, ni la Casbah, ni la Kabylie, ni le désert n’avaient une réalité pour notre

⁴⁸ Chapters 7 and 8 of Nelly Las’ *Jewish Voices in Feminism: Transnational Perspectives* (2015) provide a quite extensive panorama of this range of ambivalence.

⁴⁹ Nelly Las sees the enthusiasm of Jewish French feminists for the original socialist Zionist vision of Israel’s early founders as especially strong compared to British and American Jewish feminists, and attributes this exceptional support to the Marxist and leftist origins of French feminism of the 1970s and 1980s. See pp. 218-221 especially.

⁵⁰ I discuss this “special status” of Algerian Jews in French colonial Algeria in the next chapter. To briefly summarize here, Jews were the only part of the colonized Algerian population to be given French citizenship through the Crémieux Decree of 1870. This special treatment caused lasting resentment of Jews among non-Jewish Algerians.

génération. On ne dépassait guère les abords immédiats des grandes villes, les plages de l'Ouest ou de l'Est, brûlées à blanc. Nous vivions confinés entre nous, loin des familles respectives, loin des grands-parents encore vivants ou de leurs tombes. Il aurait fallu du manque, du désir pour nous représenter la France. Sentiment que j'éprouvais plutôt pour la terre d'Israël, aspiration mêlée au souhait d'en fouler le sol, sentiment unique pour ce seul pays, imagerie idéale, rêvée, alimentée par un appel au communautarisme, à une éducation collective dans les kibboutzim. (68-69)

This contrast between the unreality of Algeria – due to her exclusion from within it – and the idealism of Israel is reinforced in a later passage in which the gender equality and egalitarian values of the kibbutzim are violently shattered when Cohen's narrator returns to independent Algeria with a militant Algerian rebel whom she met in Paris:

Il fallait retourner en Algérie après l'indépendance avec ce fellagha,⁵¹ cet Algérien qui avait eu deux noms, celui de son état civil et son nom de guerre. Tout être est nécessaire. Il m'ouvrait les yeux à la politique, à la lutte des peuples du tiers-monde, il portait en lui des secrets auxquels je n'aurais jamais accès, et qui concernaient sa guerre, son pays. Un intellectuel, un moudjahid⁵² qui ne pouvait rien me dire, mais je ne voulais rien savoir. C'était son combat, sa force, son histoire, et ses mots étaient chargés d'un sens qui dépassait le sens. Il avait une autorité auprès des siens, de ses compagnons, il était l'Algérie nouvelle. Il me conduisait dans les rues interdites de la Casbah, dans le désert tout aussi inconnu. Il m'introduisait dans la maison de son village. Il me faisait manger par terre dans la cour, assise au milieu des femmes voilées, devant ses frères qui baissaient les yeux sans jamais me regarder. Mes cheveux longs lui appartenaient en propre et toutes les femmes étaient des promesses. Il était possessif et violent... je n'en dirai pas plus. (88-89)

Because she returns to independent, postcolonial Algeria with an Algerian rebel fighter, the narrator finally experiences the reality of Algeria. But, this “new” Algeria does not resemble the one she lived in before, and so the reality she is finally able to experience has been altered by the passage of time and the political changes brought about by hard-won Algerian national independence. As a result, the country ultimately remains unknowable for her; as she puts it, “there were secrets to which I would never have

⁵¹ An Arabic word meaning militant rebel fighter; in the Algerian context, this means an anticolonial nationalist.

⁵² The Arabic word for fighter, someone engaged in Jihad (“struggle.”)

access.” Although she seems to respect the fact of her separation from that history and new reality, she also unequivocally articulates a critique of the behaviors and attitudes towards women that seem to be sanctioned in part by that very history. The passage makes clear that her entry into otherwise forbidden parts of the country was only granted her by the authority of the Algerian man, who “was the new Algeria.” The “new Algeria” is therefore characterized by the man himself, who was “possessive and violent.” Thus, Cohen’s narrator exposes the patriarchal violence against women as a manifestation or symptom of militant nationalism in Algeria, which mirrors the same brand of nationalism in Israel as seen by Boukhobza’s narrator.

And yet, Boukhobza’s novel makes clear that the militaristic Israeli nation-building project is violent not only to women, but also to men. This point of suffering inflicted on members of both sexes recurs throughout the novel, particularly in the character of the narrator’s friend Roger. Roger is a Moroccan Jew who has lived in Jerusalem for most of his life, is now serving in the Israeli army, and who eventually introduces the narrator to her aforementioned lover Henry. Roger’s disillusionment with the reality of Israeli politics largely comes from the three wars he lived through in his thirty years in Jerusalem, and his military experiences during the Lebanon War have sharpened his disappointment. The narrator senses this heightened disillusionment in Roger’s attitude towards Israel during their first reunion since her arrival in Jerusalem for the summer: “L’armée l’avait rendu sauvage. Il traînait avec lui une amertume féroce contre Israël” (“The army had made him wild. He dragged around a fierce bitterness against Israel”; my trans.; 74). Nevertheless, when she suggests that he could leave Jerusalem and move to a peaceful city in Europe, Roger’s response highlights the attachment to Jerusalem he feels despite his disillusionment with the war: “Après trente

ans de cette ville ? Recommencer ? Faire quoi ? Il y a du Maroc dans Jérusalem, ne l'oublie pas... Et quand j'étais gosse, j'ai grandi au Maroc avec Jérusalem" ("After thirty years of this city? Start over? Do what? There is some Morocco in Jerusalem, don't forget... And when I was a kid, I grew up in Morocco with Jerusalem"; my trans.; 78).

The ultimate expression of what the narrator sees as the senseless and indiscriminate violence instigated by the militarized Israeli state comes in the form of Henry's death on the front, where he traveled with Roger in order to render his journalistic coverage of the war as authentic as possible.

Roger, Henry, and the narrator belong to the younger generations who are most directly impacted by – and most outwardly critical of – the war, but as the following passage illustrates, if the violence does not discriminate between men and women for the suffering it incurs, neither does it discriminate across lines of generational difference, nor according to the degree of religiosity. Everyone suffers from the Lebanon War:

Jérusalem ne mène à rien. Les pierres ne disent mot. Le ciel se tait, splendidement. Les hommes s'agitent dans la poussière âcre, mangent goulûment, oublient de rire, s'évertuent à blasphémer contre la mort, mais leurs paroles naissent mutilées. Et la mort passe, royale, et la mort fauche les jeunes gens. On les porte en terre dans la révolte des mères qui sombrent lentement dans une folie extatique. Elles mettent des foulards sur leur crâne ou renient Dieu, mais le résultat est le même au fond. J'en ai vu qui se jettent éperdument sous les roues des voitures, sauvées par un coup de frein brutal, se relevant distraitemment pour recommencer ailleurs, provoquant le destin et maudissant le jour de leur naissance. Certaines se contentent de gravir une marche d'escalier, et là, grotesques et émouvantes, battent longuement des bras, prêtes à s'envoler. Les pères endeuillés laissent simplement leurs cheveux blanchir et leurs épaules se voûter, vieux d'avoir dû lire le Kaddich sur la sépulture de leur fils. (136-137)

The personification of Jerusalem as "leading to nothing and saying nothing" accentuates the narrator's vision of Israeli nationalism as impervious, indifferent, and impassive to the suffering it causes. And as the above passage shows, while the men are joyless and the fathers are bereaved as they surrender to their premature aging caused by the grief of

their sons' deaths, the women, especially mothers, descend into madness. This portrayal of the different manifestations of suffering between men and women in some ways mirrors the narrator's parents' very different expressions of grief; the father is depressed while the mother is repressed and at times suppressed. It also foreshadows Henry's death at the end of the novel and the different responses it elicits from the narrator and Roger.

The narrator's descent into "madness" following Henry's death mirrors the mothers in the above passage, but also has biblical resonance as we will see in the next section. The portrayals of the indiscriminate violence of militarized Israeli nationalism examined here provide helpful context and framing for the next section of this chapter, in which we will examine the biblical resonances of the scene of Henry's death and another earlier scene that foretells it. My aim in this section has in part been to demonstrate how the different representations of Israel, the attitudes towards it, and what it has come to mean in the imaginary (and/or reality) of this generation of writers lays the groundwork for better understanding the "why" of the midrash explored in the next section.

III. Genesis and/of Midrash: Retelling/framing biblical stories

In this section, I examine the various moments in each text that contain biblical references, or at least resonance. I hope to demonstrate the creative and generative potential of midrash as a way of conceptualizing one facet of what Cohen and Boukhobza do in these texts. In other words, I hope to mobilize midrash metaphorically as a way of describing some of the literary strategies these two writers employ. I argue that these instances of biblical intertextuality function as midrashic variations on biblical themes which serve to simultaneously call into question the original biblical stories and etch out a new kind of Judaic text. In turn, this new kind of text contributes to Cohen's and

Boukhobza's expressions of *écriture juive féminine*, which we will study in greater detail in the next section of this chapter.

While these midrashic elements of the texts aim to subvert some of the foundational narratives and stories that form the bedrock of Judaism and religious Jewish culture, the variations and adaptations they offer nonetheless retain a sense of Jewishness, in part by their very existence. This is to say, midrash is a very "Jewish" mode of textuality and storytelling, so the midrashic elements of *Géographie des origines* and *Un été à Jérusalem* reinscribe Jewish traditions into the text even as they are subversive. Rather than rejecting altogether the textual-cultural tradition of Jewish religious identity, Cohen and Boukhobza effectively create a new ethos of story by redefining the interpretive scope of these foundational narratives. The importance of *story* in the context of this project cannot be overstated. In her contribution to *Judaism Since Gender*, an edited volume of essays, Rebecca Alpert, one of the first women rabbis in the United States and a professor of American Jewish Studies, emphasizes the importance of stories in shaping collective feminist consciousness:

Midrash succeeds in presenting an alternative to historical research, and to the real "dominant discourse" in Judaism, halakhah. The creation of feminist midrash has been an amazing process of re-creating our people's history and questioning Jewish "norms." Jewish life is based much more on a collective memory and perception, on stories of how we came to be [...]. These stories have done more to shape a feminist consciousness than a hundred archaeological digs. This is true because these stories rely on imaginative reconstruction. They can be written by anyone [...]. Again, accessibility is a crucial component for creating change. (111-112)

Echoing Alpert in her introduction to *Lifecycles*, Rabbi Debra Orenstein emphasizes the centrality of storytelling in Jewish and feminist approaches to community and identity formation:

Stories are particularly important in both the feminist and Jewish communities. Feminists draw on and honor women's experience, often using storytelling as a

tactic to ‘hear each other into’ being. Formats range from consciousness-raising groups to the literature of women ‘writing their lives.’ [...]. Jewish tradition [...] thrives on retelling sacred stories: Interpreting ancient texts anew in each generation, reciting the story of Passover again and differently at *this year’s seder* (ordered readings and meal), cycling through the five books of Moses each week and each year. Jews, too, are defined largely by the stories we tell, and, especially, by the book we brought to the world. (xiv-xv)

Rabbis Alpert and Orenstein’s descriptions of the function of storytelling in feminist and Jewish contexts emphasize the roles of transmission (telling – or writing, and listening – or reading) and interpretation (retelling and ritual as enactment of interpretation).

Cohen’s and Boukhobza’s works give a sense that there is a need to tell, and in so doing, to elicit (re)interpretation. There is a provocative quality to these texts that partially comes from the midrashic variations, subversions, and inversals they effect.

One of the most salient examples of the midrashic facet of *Géographie des origines* appears in the excerpt below. As the narrator reflects on the trajectory of Algeria’s colonial history and its impact on her family’s eventual “exile,”⁵³ she eventually refers to her country of childhood as “Mosaic Algeria.” Naming it so sparks her memory of a verse from the Bible:

Rien n’est définitif dans ce que nous sommes. On aurait pu réussir une terre multiple. C’est aujourd’hui une terre brûlante. Algérie mosaïque, autrefois lumineuse et plurielle. Et je reviens à cette phrase de la Bible : *Je te donnerai la terre que tu auras arpentée*. Celle que tu auras sillonnée, celle que tu auras édifiée phrase à phrase, mot à mot, celle que tu auras fabriquée de tes mains. Se libérer des origines pour élaborer sa loi. Tracer un univers, constituer un monde, inventer un espace, disons-le ! Le trou de l’origine s’agrandit à mesure que l’écriture se fait, prend corps. Comment échapper au territoire des origines ? (59)

There are several midrashic elements in this passage. First, there is the fact that the verse seems to enter associatively into the narrator’s consciousness which suggests an

⁵³ This appears in quotations because Cohen’s narrator oscillates repeatedly between on the one hand (ex)claiming that hers is not a story of exile since she feels that Algeria was never really her home, and on the other hand clearly articulating a sense of displacement and uprootedness, which she attempts to redefine and reclaim throughout the text.

interpretive interplay between the ancient text and the contemporary twenty-first century world of the narrator, thus echoing Orenstein's claim that "[a]ll reading is marked by the interplay between text and context, but midrashic reading is especially so, since it presupposes that the Bible is relevant to every age. In fact, *midrash* is created by the interaction between a fixed scripture and the evolving considerations of its readers" (xix). Second, there is the verse itself, whose exact origin is a bit questionable in that it appears to be an amalgam of verses from the books of Deuteronomy and Joshua.⁵⁴ Translated roughly into English as "I will give you the land that you will have surveyed," it obviously references the promise made to Moses that his exiled people would eventually have a land to call their own home. This line is one of the most foundational narratives to Jewish life through the ages, from the biblical era to the present⁵⁵, in that the biblical promise of a homeland is part of what fueled the Zionist movement and the eventual creation of the State of Israel.

The third midrashic element at play in this passage is the sequencing of what follows immediately after the biblical verse. The narrator inserts her own voice and adapts the original ancient line with vocabulary that makes a gradual semantic shift from the original "arpentée" ("walked across" or "surveyed") to "sillonnée" to "édifiée"⁵⁶, to describe first the act of walking and then that of writing through/across the promised

⁵⁴ Joshua 1:3 is a variation/repetition of God's promise made to Moses in Deuteronomy 31:3-8; Cohen's 'citation' is thus an approximation and an ambiguous mixture of these.

⁵⁵ Indeed, it still features in religious Jews' daily practices when reiterated three times throughout the day as a reminder of this promise.

⁵⁶ The Larousse dictionary offers the following definitions for the verbs at the root of these three adjectives: "arpenter": mesurer la superficie d'une terre; parcourir à grands pas. "sillonner": parcourir un lieu, le traverser en tous sens. "édifier": construire, bâtir; créer, élaborer par étapes un ensemble complexe; porter à la piété, à la vertu, par la parole ou l'exemple; renseigner sur ce qui était dissimulé, dissiper toute illusion.

land. She is thus *writing* the world she wants to be given and in so doing rewrites the covenant. Rather than being promised an actual land (Canaan), Cohen's narrator promises herself a textual, literary landscape that has potential for constant evolution by virtue of the fact that it is textual and a product of creation. The promise seems to be that a territory can become the writer's home if she does the work of surveying (writing) that territory, thereby coming to know it. At the same time, she cannot escape 'the territory of origins,' which only seems to expand the more she writes. The promise of writing is that it generates new homelands and models of belonging, but whether that promise is ever fully fulfilled remains in question.

With these three midrashic elements of this passage in mind, it is fascinating to briefly consider the Book of Joshua, which tells the story of the fulfillment of the earlier promise made to Moses in Deuteronomy. The consummation of that promise comes as a result of the Israelites' conquest and occupation of the land of Canaan, and thus essentially legitimizes and validates colonization. Given this biblical context, Cohen's description of colonial Algeria as "Algérie mosaïque" takes on new meanings. There is first the image of Algeria as a pluralistic, luminous ideal, a multicolored mosaic of cultures, peoples and languages. This pluralistic Algeria "of times gone by" ("d'autrefois") might refer to the early phase of French colonial presence in Algeria before the Crémieux Decree when both groups received equal treatment by the colonizer. In that period, the tension and separation were largely absent that would later characterize the relationship between Algerian Jews and Muslims once Jews – and not their Muslim neighbors – were granted French citizenship under the Crémieux Law (passed in 1870 and repealed in 1940, then reinstated by De Gaulle in 1943).⁵⁷

⁵⁷ See Chapters 3 and 7 of Benjamin Stora's *Histoire de l'Algérie coloniale, 1830-1954* for an overview of these shifts. There is also an excellent in-depth tracing of these developments in a doctoral dissertation by

The second potential interpretation that arises from “Algérie mosaïque” is biblical; a “Mosaic Algeria” in this sense could have various implications. First, it could imply that Algeria is recast as the proverbial promised land. Or, that Algeria is the site of the alleged exchanges between Moses and God (i.e., the revelation of the Ten Commandments, and the covenant of return to the promised land). Lastly, it might imply rather that Algeria is the site of exile and subjugation (i.e., the biblical Egypt) from which Jews had to flee. This resonates with the mass departures of Algerian Jews from Algeria to France in 1962, which is sometimes referred to as an exodus. Analogous to the biblical exodus facilitated by Moses’ parting of the Red Sea, the 1962 exodus of Algerian Jews to France meant a crossing of the Mediterranean. But, as we saw in the previous section of this chapter, unlike the biblical exodus that engendered a return from exile as well as a liberation from enslavement, the Algerian Jewish exodus signified an entry into a strange kind of exile in that for Cohen’s narrator, Algeria was never ‘really’ home. The ambiguity of the epithet (“(M/m)osaic”) allows room for interpretation, and in this way too contributes to the midrashic style (and agenda) of Cohen’s text.

In any case, what is clear is that the (post)colonial experience of Algerian Jews such as Cohen’s narrator and her family is mixed, and the invocation of the biblical stories of exile, conquest and occupation underpins the equivocal status of that experience and the metahistorical as well as personal, national, and political narratives that surround it. While the French colonial empire grew out of the Enlightenment rhetoric of the “mission civilisatrice,” it could be (and has been) argued that the eventual founding of the State of Israel in part rested its justification on the stories related in these very biblical stories that Cohen’s narrator invokes. There is thus an analogical interplay here

Sophie Rogers titled *Jews, Citizenship, and Antisemitism in French Colonial Algeria, 1870-1943*.
https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/33871/6/Roberts_Sophie_B_201103_PhD_thesis.pdf

between the biblical stories, Israel, and French colonialism, and Cohen's narrator, like many Jews coming from former colonies, is stuck between these narratives in perpetual ambivalence. Cohen's narrator is as forsaken by Algerian nationalism as Boukhobza's narrator is by Israeli and Tunisian nationalisms, thus discrediting the Book of Joshua by demonstrating the impossibility of "belonging" along national lines, which can be interpreted in the Israeli context as the fulfillment of the promise made in Joshua.

The context (or intertext) of Joshua also foregrounds the critiques Boukhobza's narrator makes in *Un été*. As discussed earlier in this chapter, it is clear throughout Boukhobza's novel that the time the narrator spent living in Israel disabused her of her earlier Zionist ideals that brought her there from France in the first place. Indeed, her return to Jerusalem for the summer of the novel's setting only sharpens her critique and denunciation of Israel's participation in territorial geopolitical violence and its repetition of colonial self-legitimizing narratives and logic. This critique as it connects to biblical narratives of conquest is perhaps most explicitly expressed in her description of Begin's televised appearances throughout the summer: "Begin paraissait malade dans ses passages à la télévision. Son visage, barré de lunettes épaisses, exprimait le doute et la fatigue. Le ton avait perdu de sa morgue et de *cette emphase biblique* qui lui avait conquis les cœurs. Pourtant, dans les rues, on continue d'acclamer son nom" ("Begin looked ill in his appearances on television. His face, crossed with thick glasses, expressed doubt and fatigue. His tone had lost its arrogance and *biblical grandiloquence* that had won him peoples' hearts. Yet, in the streets, people continue to cheer his name"; emphasis added; my trans., 98). At the same time, this description of Begin conveys the sense that it pains her to be so critical and condemnatory of Israel. On Begin's face, she can see the toll taken by the choices he has made, thus reinforcing that the Lebanon War,

first presented to Israelis as a biblically justified initiative, has not served anyone well – not even the Prime Minister.

This sense that it pains her to be so harshly critical also stems from what we saw in the previous section, when she expresses compassion as well as disdain for the North African immigrants of her parents' generation who arrived in Israel via the "trajectory of a circumflex accent." Lastly, this sense arises in part from the melancholy she expresses for the era of peaceful coexistence between Jews and Arabs in the Tunisia of her grandparents and relatives of that same generation: "Ils viennent d'un pays où durant des siècles, le juif a vécu en paix avec le musulman. [...] c'est en Tunisie qu'ils ont vécu leurs plus beaux jours. Israël ne représente que ce sol trop sacré où ils sont venus mourir et qui rabattra sur eux la dalle d'une tombe" ("They come from a country where for centuries, the Jew lived in peace with the Muslim. [...] it was in Tunisia that they lived their best days. Israel represents nothing but this too sacred ground where they came to die and that will close a tombstone over them"; my trans.; 192). This melancholy effectively creates a juxtaposition between what Israel could have been (a recreation of pre-1956 Tunisia and a society built upon the values of the kibbutzim), and what it is for the narrator (a reenactment of colonialism, sanctified in part by the biblical stories of Joshua that foretell the "too sacred ground" where the narrator's relatives have come to die). The narrator's empathy towards Palestinians in Jerusalem further exemplifies her disdain for Israeli nationalist politics built upon the sustained occupation of the very land reacquired by Jews in the book of Joshua.

The geopolitical reverberations of the book of Joshua as they manifest in the colonial dynamics of Israel/Palestine and the knotty relationships between France, the Maghreb, and Israel are further highlighted through a textual retracing and remapping of

the geographical spaces in the book of Genesis. Both narrators trace and draw these new maps, but in *Un été*, this occurs in a very literal sense since the novel takes place in Israel. As Israeli biblical scholar Nathan P. Devir points out in his article “Midrashic Bodies: Prostitution as Revolt in Chochana Boukhobza’s *Un Été à Jérusalem*,” “The trip that the narrator undertakes from Jerusalem to Beersheba is [...] significant in that she traverses, almost from end to end, the length of the biblical Kingdom of Judah [...]” (“Midrashic” 132). Devir then goes on to explain that according to his analysis of the novel, this geographical mapping foretells the prophecies alluded to in the novel, which echo the prophecies of Jeremiah that because of the broken covenant from Deuteronomy, the inhabitants of Judah would face disaster (“Midrashic” 132). For Devir, this biblical prophecy is echoed by Boukhobza’s novel which warns against the Lebanon War.

If the geographies and geopolitics (re)mapped in *Un été à Jérusalem* have obvious biblical resonance, this is less the case in *Géographie des origines*. In the following passages, a memory from a summer spent in the mountains of the French Haute-Savoie region gives way to mixed metaphors and mythologies to draw a new map. As Cohen’s narrator recalls time spent in the mountains, looking for gold, she draws on biblical as well as Spanish colonial legends to eventually make a prophecy of her own:

Le pays rêvé est vierge de toutes les histoires humaines et familiales. La tête penchée sur des trésors invisibles, je redeviens fille de la terre, femme d’un monde sans père, pays ignoble et merveilleux. Eldorado sans foi ni loi. Comment redevenir des enfants de la terre ? Bonheur que d’avoir déserté les chemins de l’enfance ! S’extraire du borbier des origines. Eldorado de mes pieds qui foulent une terre purifiée des humeurs primales de la naissance. Qui sont-ils, ces légionnaires aux mains sales, ces têtes brûlées d’un pays sans nom, fils de pute ? Légionnaires de Sidi-bel-Abbès. Qu’ont-ils fui, ces aventuriers poilus et membrés, prêts à en découdre avec Dieu lui-même ? [...]. Sur le territoire des questions, je déplie ma carte intérieure. Les filiations nous étouffent, elles s’enroulent sur nos gorges fatiguées. Eldorado, Jérusalem, résurrection, toujours vaincre en nous l’attrance du néant. « Il faut être voyant. » Voilà l’ange Gabriel annonçant un Eldorado de larmes et de gloire : « Je vous salue, Marie pleine de grâce, le Seigneur est avec vous. » [...]. Je gambade, la tête à l’envers, sur des chemins

inconnus, sur les pentes verdoyantes et humides de la Grande Chartreuse, à des années-lumière de mes oueds asséchés et de mes terres craquelées. Des paysages magnifiques s'offrent à mes yeux ahuris. Je ne connais rien des territoires que je parcours, je marche, je marche, décidée à inventer un nouveau chemin, à casser les habitudes, à ne plus être conforme au programme des lettres de mon nom. Aucune terre ne nous est promise, aucun métal précieux ne nous attend ! (65-67)

The mixed imagery in this passage is striking, and (re)generative even as its tone is ironic and unequivocally condemns colonialism and the myths that support its ideologies and practices. Proving consistent with the characteristic ambivalence of the entire text, here the contrasting, conflicting positions that the narrator articulates vis-à-vis her origins and childhood (on the one hand wanting to reject them while also calling for once again becoming “children of the earth”), her connection to France (the setting of this scene), and the French colonial presence in Algeria (the intrusive and unwelcome presence of legionnaires from Sidi-bel-Abbès) are interwoven with allusions to and echoes of the foundational mythology of Spanish colonialism (El Dorado), Catholic imagery (Mary and the angel Gabriel), and nineteenth century French poetry (Rimbaud, whose May 15, 1871 letter to another poet – Paul Demeny – in which he famously and enigmatically claimed “Il faut être voyant” is clearly cited here). Finally, within the complex web of all these references – all of which have a prophetic element and have been understood as foundational in some way – is a refigured creation story in which the narrator imagines – and ultimately walks (and writes) her way towards – her own “Eden.” This Eden seems to be devoid of men and fathers, is at once “awful” and “marvelous,” and is only mappable in terms of questions which only have potential to be answered with the guidance of an “internal map.” Paradoxically, this primordial setting from which the narrator seems to wish to embark is also free of the concept of origins and their imposed constraints.

By providing evidence of its truth, these allusions and echoes made in their ironic tone – including the one of Eden – contribute to the emphatic “prophecy” she makes at

the end that “no land is promised to us” and “no precious metal awaits us.” This in turn serves her articulation of a new kind of geography and human relationship to it which is predicated not upon claims to ownership or (re)possession, but rather upon an openness to embark into the unknown, ready to forge a different path by taking a different approach, literally “not conforming to the program marked by the letters of her (our) name.” In a sense, by negating the “promised land” narrative, she reclaims a nomadic existence. Thus, like Boukhobza’s narrator, she critiques the colonial aspects of Israeli State geopolitics and offers examples of the same ideologies gone awry (El Dorado, French-occupied Sidi-bel-Abbès). But she seems to go a step further by means of implying that no group of people should assume that they have the right to inhabit, occupy, and/or mine any land at all. In other words, she makes clear that we as a species are owed nothing by the land upon which we live. Furthermore, the mythologies and narratives (symbolized by El Dorado, Jerusalem, and Jesus’ resurrection) that have led us to believe that we can expect such promises to be made and kept are, according to this passage, merely techniques we have invented in order to resist our “attraction to the void” that underpins our existence. So, another way to read this passage would be as a call to confront our own vulnerability rather than to tell ourselves stories that serve to exaggerate our (illusory) sense of control.

The break with foundational narratives is symbolized in the above passage through the narrator’s refusal to conform to the program marked by the letters of her name and her commitment to instead walk into the unknown and create a new path. Through the combination of these two actions (rejection and commitment), Cohen effectively links the movement of walking with textuality. In so doing, she highlights the corporeality of writing while also reinscribing a certain kind of Jewish textuality that is a

product of “walking,”⁵⁸ in that it entails setting out into the unknown and rearranging (or reinterpreting, assigning new meaning to) the letters of her name.

As the above passage makes clear, there is a connection between textuality and corporeality as reflected through Cohen’s narrator’s rewriting of the story of Eden and rejection of the program of the letters of her name. There is also a clear rejection and subversion of the foundational narratives of colonialism. We will turn now to the other midrashic aspects of both texts that participate in a subversion of patriarchal gender norms. These subversions are a means of not only asserting female agency but also of further exposing the violent colonial patriarchal logic that each narrator witnesses around her. These other biblical subversions stem from the book of Genesis and the Kabbalah, particularly with the figure of Sarah, the story of the Binding of Isaac, and the Kabbalist vision of the Shekhina, a divine feminine presence.

In *Un été à Jérusalem*, the narrator eventually introduces readers to a woman named Mavrika, a prostitute the narrator says she knew when she first lived in Jerusalem and whom she cannot find anywhere since her return to the city. The narrator conducts her search for the elusive Mavrika by walking the streets at night, thus in fact imitating her. Mavrika serves several subversive purposes through the lens of reading the novel as midrash. First, there is the retelling of the Binding of Isaac which appears in the Book of Genesis. According to the original biblical story (which has become another foundational

⁵⁸ In *A Short History of the Jews*, German historian Michael Brenner reminds us that the Torah itself is a product of exile, and of walking. Produced in exile, the stories it relates reinscribe the movement that led to its production:

[The] success story [of the Hebrew Bible] is all the more astonishing when one considers that this document was not composed by one of the powerful nations of antiquity, such as the Egyptians, Assyrians, the Persians or Babylonians, the Greeks or Romans, but by a tiny nation that at various times in the course of its history was dominated by all of the above-mentioned peoples. [...]. Biblical history depicts a wandering people. These two terms – “people” and “wandering” – denote central elements of the Biblical conception of history that have shaped the Jewish self-image all the way through to modern times. (1-6)

narrative for Jews in how they interpret their unfolding history), God wants to test Abraham's monotheistic devotion and orders him to offer his son Isaac in sacrifice. When Abraham is on the verge of sacrificing his son, a messenger appears and Abraham understands that he passed the test. Then, he sees a ram which is sacrificed instead and Isaac lives. This story, according to Devir, is recast in Boukhobza's novel through the character of Mavrika.⁵⁹ As the narrator takes her nightly strolls through the city, allowing herself respite from the constrictive atmosphere of her parents' apartment, she looks for Mavrika. In the moments of her search, she conveys more and more information about her lost acquaintance until readers eventually learn that Mavrika had a lover named Isaac who had served in the Israeli Army and who became traumatized from the events of his military service. Whenever Mavrika had to leave their home, "elle l'attachait à une chaise, bâillonnait sa bouche pour étouffer ses cris" ("she would tie him to a chair and gagged his mouth to muffle his cries" 150). In this literal restaging of the Binding of Isaac in which Mavrika would bind him to a chair and gag his mouth to muffle his cries, it becomes clear that the trope of sacrifice is reframed not in relationship with God, but in relationship with the State. Isaac's sacrifice comes in the form of his military service, which has traumatized him so severely that Mavrika must bind him, which in turn traumatizes her. This time, there is no ram to take Isaac's place as the damage has already been done, and the closest thing to a "messenger" comes in the form of State mental health workers, who eventually take Isaac away to a psychiatric hospital in Talbia. It is upon his forced committal that Mavrika becomes a prostitute: "Mavrika n'avait aimé qu'un homme. [...]. Elle se donnait aux hommes en pensant au fou, persuadée qu'un jour il guérirait et qu'il lui reviendrait avec son sourire d'autrefois et ses doigts qui savaient

⁵⁹ See Devir's "Midrashic," pp. 131-133, and "Maghrebien," pp. 66-68.

aimer” (“Mavrika had loved only one man. [...]. She would give herself to men in thinking of the mad one, convinced that one day he would get better and come back to her with his old smile and fingers that knew how to love” 150). The critique of the Israeli State and the impact of its military policies – framed as forced sacrifice – on its people is clear in this retelling. Furthermore, the fact that it is Mavrika, a woman and a prostitute, who performs the binding rather than Abraham, the original biblical patriarch, is highly subversive in disrupting the traditional interpretation of this story as it restores power to a figure representing two marginalized parts of Israeli society.

As Devir illustrates in “Maghrebian Feminism Meets the Bride of God,” the subversive qualities of this retelling go even further when we finally learn at the very end of the novel that the narrator’s name is Sarah just as she learns of Henry’s death in a moment that mirrors Mavrika’s traumatic loss of Isaac. When Roger addresses her by her name in an attempt to console her, she rejects it violently, uttering the final line of the novel: “Non, à présent je m’appelle Mavrika!” (“No, now my name is Mavrika!”; 255). That we only learn her name at the very end of the novel is significant and reinforces the narrator’s rejection of it. For Devir, this revelatory moment confirms that Mavrika and Sarah are in fact the same person, and that Mavrika’s earlier trauma of losing Isaac is re-triggered by her loss of Henry. While I think Mavrika serves a symbolic function in the novel and becomes an almost mythical figure for the narrator who searches for her as a model to follow, I do not share Devir’s interpretation that Sarah and Mavrika are two sides of the same character. Even so, his explanation of the significance of Sarah’s rejection of her biblical name is compelling and reveals fascinating midrashic elements:

Sarah [...] has rejected her biblical namesake in part as a reaction against the legacy of the *‘akedah* (The Binding of Isaac) [...]. The long-barren Sarah, who gave birth to Isaac at age ninety, is notably absent from [the original biblical] tale. Archetypally, though, Boukhobza’s text highlights an association between Sarah’s

(the protagonist's) downfall over the loss of her lover, Isaac, and a Kabbalistic midrash, or hermeneutic/exegetical interpretation of the text (Leviticus Rabbah on Gen 23:1-2), that expands the events of the account from Genesis, according to which Sarah is informed that Isaac was in fact sacrificed by his father. In the midrash, Sarah dies of grief over her loss. ("Maghrebian" 66)

Boukhobza's reclaiming of the Kabbalistic midrash that Devir references first of all makes a place for Sarah in the narrative, and furthermore implies that Sarah's grief over her loss – whether of her son or of her lover – is as much the sacrifice made and tragedy of the story as the losses themselves. But although these losses are tragic, as is the grief they cause, there is also a reclaiming of Sarah's agency that comes as one result of the loss; this is enacted through the narrator's rebellious self-refashioning in the last scenes of the novel which is crystallized in her rejection of her given name.

Rejecting the name of the first biblical matriarch in favor instead of "Mavrika," the name of a woman who, in trauma-induced "madness," turned to prostitution in the wake of suffering her own loss, is symbolic at many levels. First, the narrator rejects the biblical Sarah's role of mother as well as all the foundational narratives associated with that name.⁶⁰ The narrator's symbolic "death" – or descent into "madness" – following Henry's real death is in fact just as much a rebirth as it is a death. Not only does she reject her biblical name and declare herself "Mavrika" in response to Roger's attempt to console her, she also, in the scene prior to her arrival at Roger's apartment, shaves her head, tears her clothes, "paints" her face in heavy makeup, and runs out of her parents' apartment barefoot. Although Devir, Plapp, and Arenberg⁶¹ view this reaction to the news

⁶⁰ See Devir's "Maghrebian Feminism Meets the Bride of God" for further references and an overview of these other narratives. In particular, Devir notes the relevance of the story of Sarah's demand that Abraham force his mistress Hagar and the son he had with her – Ishmael – to leave. According to this story in the Book of Genesis, "the Tribe of Ishmael" would eventually arrive in what is now North Africa and begin Islam. Thus, the narrator's rejection of the name of Sarah is also a rejection of this story, which places responsibility on the biblical Sarah for the seeds of what eventually became the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

⁶¹ I refer here to Nancy Arenberg's recent article titled "Profaning Jewish Mores in Chochana Boukhobza's *Un Été à Jérusalem*."

of Henry's death as a form of madness, I argue that if it is madness, it is in fact a redemptive kind that liberates the narrator (and Mavrika) from the constraints of Judaic laws and customs, as well as from the despair of the current Israeli political scene. Boukhobza foreshadows this earlier in the novel when Joseph, one of the narrator's brothers, asks the narrator while home on a brief military leave, "Tu sais que le verbe 'chercher' a la même racine en hébreu que le mot 'liberté'? Mais sais-tu qu'il a aussi la même racine que le verbe 'déguiser' ? Réfléchis à ça..." ("Do you know that the verb "to search" has the same root in Hebrew as the word "freedom"? But do you know that it also has the same root as the verb "to disguise"? 124). In other words, the narrator's "disguise" and transmutation into Mavrika at the end of the novel – which might also be interpreted as the end of her search for the other Mavrika – are what grant her freedom. Thus, in Boukhobza's midrashic retellings of the Binding of Isaac, redemption (freedom) comes not from sacrifice but from transmuting the pain of loss that comes out of that sacrifice into a new kind of female subjectivity. This transmutation of Sarah into Mavrika and the new subjectivity it (re)births involve destabilizing the perceived dichotomies between righteous and abject female figures, and between the sacred/spiritual and the profane/corporeal.

Boukhobza accomplishes this destabilization through earlier images of Mavrika, some of which seem to contradict the others, before the narrator takes the name for herself. For example, in the passage below, the narrator has left her parents' apartment on one of her many walks through Jerusalem and, in an effort to distract herself from the desire to call Henry, she goes to the Old City and sits in the gardens of the mosque there. She says this ambiance reminds her of Henry, who shares her empathy and interest

toward their Muslim co-inhabitants of the Maghreb and Israel. Sitting in that location also reminds her of Mavrika:

Ici, quelquefois, Mavrika venait rêver. [...] Isaac était déjà à Talbia. Elle disait qu'elle aurait aimé ne penser à rien, devenir ce banc, ce massif, un élément qui fasse partie intégrante du paysage, qu'on ne saurait enlever sans donner l'idée d'un manque. D'une voix amère, elle constatait : « L'absence d'Isaac a fait de moi une femme hébétée. Des jours entiers, je n'ai pas su aller plus loin que mon tapis. S'ils n'étaient pas venus le chercher, j'aurais su le rendre à lui-même... et m'épargner. » Elle apportait la note du Diable dans ces jardins. Le visage de Mavrika était mouvant. Tantôt il n'était plus que des yeux, tantôt une bouche énorme. Elle était le témoin ou le prophète. Parfois les deux. Là où elle marchait se levait l'émeute. Dans le sexe des hommes. Dans le cœur des femmes. Car elle était une putain d'abondance. (184)

The various images of Mavrika here as first a “stupefied woman” nearly desperate enough to take the situation into her own hands and “save herself,” then “diabolical,” then “the witness,” then “the prophet,” and finally a “whore of abundance” exemplify the transmutation of the pain of loss into a simultaneously “dark” (or low, deviant) and “light” (or elevated, respected) character. The meaning of “the Devil’s note” that she would bring to the same gardens where the narrator now sits symbolizes the dark thoughts she admits to having had (that in order to save herself, she would have killed Isaac if he had not been taken to the asylum in Talbia), thus portraying her as dark, nefarious. But in this imagined “diabolical” scenario, Boukhobza offers yet another variation of the Binding of Isaac in which Sarah/Mavrika saves herself by asserting her agency. There is still a sacrifice, both of Isaac and of Sarah/Mavrika’s virtue, but instead of dying from grief (as in the Kabbalist midrash *Devir* mentions), she becomes the Devil’s messenger – thus a prophet, though not in the typically revered sense – and a “whore of abundance” who takes rather than gives (sacrifices). These “dark,” “bad,” “low,” “deviant” qualities and images are immediately contrasted with the figures of “the witness” (symbolized by the eyes) and “the prophet” (symbolized by the mouth), both of

which are recast here as subversive agitators who incite riots. The boundaries between dark and light, bad and good, low and high, deviant and virtuous are thus blurred, and the perceived moral order – reinforced through the original story of the binding of Isaac – is upended.

The ambiguity of the epithet “a whore of abundance” is especially effective in creating a new female subjectivity as it lends a somewhat spiritual quality to what is otherwise cast as the very opposite of “the spiritual”: the figure of the prostitute as that which is bodily, deviant, marginal, indigent sordid, “devilish,” “immoral.”⁶² Boukhobza thus “queers” not only the biblical trope of sacrifice, but also the figures of the prostitute, witness, and prophet by associatively connecting them and collapsing the dualities between divine and profane, good and evil, spiritual and corporeal.

Mavrika’s corporeality (and “deviance”) through her sexual labor, which as we just saw is a manifestation of her grief and a response to trauma, has a disembodied, spiritual counterpart who is as elusive and evasive in Judaic mysticism as Mavrika is to the narrator. While her embodied, corporeal form takes the shape of a “whore of abundance,” her disembodied, spiritual form is “impenetrable”:

Mavrika ressemble à cette femme impénétrable que traquent depuis vingt siècles les cabalistes et les talmudistes. Drapée de noir, le visage dissimulé, elle s’introduit dans les fortins les plus défendus, grelotte devant les sépharim, s’oublie devant les disciples qui gémissent leurs prières, se donne sur les chemins de ronde aux soldats barbus. En hébreu, on l’appelle la Shehina. La Présence. (150-151)

⁶² I use the term “immoral” very intentionally as a reference to Baudelaire. Resonant with this passage from Boukhobza’s novel, much of his poetic project in *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857), reflected in his title for the collection, involved the crossing between “good” (“flowers”) and “bad” (“evil”), thus undoing and upending the dominant “moral order” of his time. After publishing *Les Fleurs du mal*, in which women appear as both abject and sensual/sexual figures, Baudelaire was censored and put on trial for his “offense against public morality.” While Boukhobza may not intentionally echo Baudelaire in this passage, the resonance is nonetheless striking. It is also noteworthy that the subversive and “revolting” (in the sense of both the act of revolt and that which is offensive) qualities of Baudelaire’s poetry inspired Rimbaud in his own later poetic project, which figures intertextually not only into Cohen’s work as we saw previously, but also into this same passage of *Un Été* with its references to the witness and the prophet.

Here, the ambiguous language used to describe Mavrika as the Shekhina further contributes to the collapse of supposed binaries and boundaries, while also reclaiming female (and feminine) agency by reinscribing this figure into Judaic religious spaces. The reversal of roles and power relations between men and women is clear; it is Mavrika/the Shekhina who, herself impenetrable, “penetrates” male-dominated spaces of worship. In so doing, she reclaims not only spirituality but also textuality as she “shivers” before the holy texts (“sépharim”, which is glossed with a footnote in the novel as “Livres”⁶³). Furthermore, Boukhobza juxtaposes this reclaimed spiritual-textual space, in which Mavrika “forgets herself” with the surrounding exterior space, described with the militaristic, defensive imagery of “ramparts and wall walks” on which she “gives herself” to the bearded soldiers. In this juxtaposition of the interior and exterior, and of Mavrika’s character and behaviors in each setting, the moral order is further collapsed, making evident her “double-sided” nature.

It also offers yet another twist on the story of the binding of Isaac. Here, Mavrika “gives herself,” though on her own terms and not in the biblically sanctioned form of sacrifice. More significantly though, the contrast between the interior space of worship, emphasizing the spiritual side of Mavrika/Shekhinah, and the exterior ramparts, emphasizing the corporeal side of her, suggests a blurring or “crossing” of these two

⁶³ There are several footnotes scattered throughout the novel, and all of them serve the same function; to gloss words and phrases that appear in transliterated Hebrew and/or Arabic. This glossing tells us something about the implied readership of the novel; namely, that the novel was intended for a French readership with no knowledge of Tunisian nor Israeli cultures, languages, cuisine, etc. This footnote stands out from the others though for its simplicity. Unlike in other footnotes, Boukhobza does not tell us the linguistic origins of the word “sépharim,” nor does she specify which kind of “Books” she refers to here. It is also assumed that readers will understand “cabalistes” and “talmudistes,” which is inconsistent with earlier notes, including one that glosses the word “Torah” for readers. This relative lack of glossing here accentuates the hermetic qualities of the Shekhina (and the Kabbalah), and reemphasizes her impenetrability.

sides. But as Devir explains, these two supposedly opposite sides are not in fact so opposed in the Kabbalist interpretations of the Shekhinah:

According to the Kabbalistic work of the Zohar, which figures prominently in much of Boukhobza's literary work, the Shekhinah is "the dwelling," otherwise known as the composite of the feminine attributes of the Divine Presence, or, in later writings, as the Bride of God. In the Kabbalah, the Shekhinah is closely identified with the tenth *sefirah*, or sphere, of *malkhut* (kingdom) in the Tree of Life, and is therefore associated with the earth and physicality. Outside of that context, however, the Shekhinah has also been identified with an introspective feminine quality tied to the unconscious. ("Maghrebian" 69)

As Devir explains it here, the contrasting dualities that Boukhobza sets up and then conflates and destabilizes by associating Mavrika with the Shekhinah precisely blur the boundaries between the corporeal and the spiritual. The corporeal and the spiritual – accessed in part through the subconscious – are thus entwined in the figure of the Shekhinah, and these two "parts" are embodied in Boukhobza's Mavrika/Shekhinah, who in turn guides the narrator (Sarah/Mavrika) in (re)claiming her wholeness by integrating the light/spiritual/disembodied with the dark/earthly/corporeal. As Nancy Arenberg succinctly puts it, "[...] Boukhobza dramatically reconfigures this medieval Kabbalist representation of the Shekhinah as a luminous figure by replacing it with darkness to create female agency" (89).

While I agree with Arenberg that there is certainly a reclaiming of "darkness" that is particularly subversive in the figure of the Shekhinah who evokes light and is disembodied, I disagree that this darkness ultimately replaces lightness. This is evident in the narrator's description of the meaning of Mavrika's name: "À Jérusalem il y a quelques années, j'ai connu une prostituée. Elle se faisait appeler Mavrika, « étincelante. » Elle avait simplement orthographié en hébreu les consonnes de son ancien prénom arabe qui signifiait bénie et a changé les voyelles pour offrir un nouveau titre à sa condition de femme" ("Several years ago in Jerusalem, I met a prostitute. She

named herself Mavrika, “shining.” She had simply spelled in Hebrew the consonants of her former Arabic name, which meant “blessed,” and changed the vowels to offer a new title to her status as a woman”; my trans.; 131). By rearranging (and Hebraicizing) the letters of her original Arabic name which meant “blessed,” Mavrika named herself “brilliant” or “shining,” both of which very much evoke lightness rather than darkness. At the same time, through this renaming, she sheds the religious sense of the word “blessed,” which carries with it a certain amount of responsibility to therefore “be good,”⁶⁴ and in this way claims her own lightness as a way of creating female agency. Furthermore, as Devir points out, there is a midrash about the light that shone on the biblical Sarah as she gave birth to Isaac,⁶⁵ thus blurring the boundaries between the figures of Mavrika, the Shekhinah, and Sarah and the stories and qualities associated with each.

Ultimately, the contrasting images of lightness and darkness associated with these figures are embodied in the narrator herself, who as we have seen is guided and influenced by all three of them. In the next section of this chapter, we will see the ways that these articulations of contrasting and ambiguous qualities associated with the female figures (and “Presences”) studied in this section participate in each narrator’s movement towards the kind of indefinable, subversive, and “in-flight” model of Jewish women’s

⁶⁴ This is analogous to the covenant between Jews and God that they are the chosen people, and therefore have additional responsibility to behave ethically. This connection between ethics and being chosen is, as Elisabeth Grosz succinctly summarizes it in “Judaism and Exile: The Ethics of Otherness,” key to Levinas’ philosophy:

Where the Christian-Hellenic tradition derives its ethics and politics (the ‘ought’) from ontology and epistemology (the ‘is’), Levinas posits the ethical as primary and derives an onto-epistemology from it. Time, space and objects, as well as knowledge, find their possibility only in the encounter with alterity. Alterity is always a *prior* condition and ethics is the necessity of a response to the other’s call. The other is prior to any identity, even to the distinction between subject and object. Levinas seeks to problematize Hellenic/Christocentric philosophies by devising an ethics from the Judaic image of ‘the Chosen’, the ones called upon, burdened, by the needs of the other. (65)

⁶⁵ See Devir’s “Maghrebian,” p. 137.

“Juifemme” subjectivity – carried out through “écriture féminine” – that Cixous articulated in her famous 1975 essays. Indeed, in “Le Rire de la Méduse,” Cixous implores women to explore (and “penetrate”) the supposed “darkness” – in the shape of the Freudian “dark continent” – of their sexuality and subjectivity:

*Le « Continent noir » n'est ni noir ni inexplorable. Il n'est encore inexploré que parce qu'on nous a fait croire qu'il était trop noir pour être explorable. Et parce qu'on veut nous faire croire que ce qui nous intéresse c'est le continent blanc, avec ses monuments au Manque. Et nous avons cru. On nous a figées entre deux mythes horribles : entre la Méduse et l'abîme. [...]. Qu'ils tremblent, les prêtres, on va leur *montrer* nos sextes ! [...]. Hâtons-nous : le continent n'est pas d'un noir impénétrable. J'y suis souvent allée. (54)*

In this passage of “Le Rire,” Cixous paves the way for women to explore the uncharted geography of “the dark continent,” reassuring them that she has already been there, and that it is not “impenetrable.” While Boukhobza’s Mavrika/Shekhina reclaims darkness and her own impenetrability as a means of asserting agency, Cixous also calls for a reclaiming of darkness, arguing that women are not impenetrable to themselves, even if they are “double” in much the same way Boukhobza’s Mavrika/Shekhina/Sarah are. And such dualities, as we have seen, are the result of imposed myths and archetypes. For Cixous, women have been “fixed” (“figées”) between two “horrible myths”: that of Medusa, and of the abyss (death), and have come to believe in the power and truth of these myths. We will turn now to a deeper exploration of this “dark” and “horrible” terrain, with Cixous as our guide.

IV. Juifemme / Reclaiming Madness: Writing with the Body and Against Death

I return to previously discussed aspects of Cixous’ “Le Rire de la Méduse” and “Sorties” at this point as I will ground my analysis here in several specific ideas developed within those seminal essays. Within the organizational and conceptual scope

of this project, it is also fitting and logical that at this point we go deeper into Cixous' earlier "theoretical" offerings in order to better understand the youngest generation studied in this chapter, whose writings and identities were – and are – most shaped by the feminist and gender-focused critiques that gained momentum and traction in the 1970s and beyond. Therefore, although we saw this already in the introduction, I want to begin this section by revisiting the opening lines of "Le Rire de la Méduse" to have them fresh and readily available, since Cohen and Boukhobza both follow the instructions Cixous outlines here:

Je parlerai de l'écriture féminine : *de ce qu'elle fera*. Il faut que la femme s'écrive : que la femme écrive de la femme et fasse venir les femmes à l'écriture, dont elles ont été éloignées aussi violemment qu'elles l'ont été de leurs corps ; pour les mêmes raisons, par la même loi, dans le même but mortel. Il faut que la femme se mette au texte – comme au monde, et à l'histoire –, de son propre mouvement. Il ne faut plus que le passé fasse l'avenir. (37)

Indeed, I argue that through their narrators, Cohen and Boukhobza precisely "put themselves into the text by their own movement," and in so doing, they also put themselves into the world and into history. As we have seen already, they also share Cixous' view that "the past must no longer determine the future." Entwined with this desire for the future to be free and independent of the past is, once again, the images of roots and home, which become quite "queer" images in Cohen's and Boukhobza's writing. We have seen how each narrator struggles to locate a sense of "home," whether in terms of geopolitical spaces (the Maghreb, France, Israel) or in terms of Jewish culture as it appears in their lives in religious, secular, public/communal and private/familial contexts. At the same time, we have seen how *writing* is the medium through which this struggle takes place and shape, and how this writing is also characterized by ambiguous equivocations that ultimately prove crucial in ensuring the forward-moving "queering" that allows for new "homes" to emerge.

In this section, we will explore whether and/or how each narrator comes to feel “at home” in her self. For this exploration, I will consider several textual representations and articulations of each narrator’s self-identification and self-fashioning as Jewish women. Sometimes these representations and articulations take the form of descriptions of their mothers and grandmothers as points of contrast with how the narrators themselves choose to live differently. Sometimes, they take the form of interior monologues. Together, the various forms these representations and articulations take make the basis of a postcolonial, post-Israel⁶⁶, post-Shoah, postwar Jewish feminist consciousness, and contribute to the sense that Cohen and Boukhobza enact a process of “coming out” as “Juifemmes” – through their writing, which in turn enacts Cixous’ “écriture féminine.”

In her essays, Cixous describes the contours of feminine writing, which she states is ultimately indefinable:

Impossible à présent de *définir* une pratique féminine de l’écriture, d’une impossibilité qui se maintiendra car on ne pourra jamais *théoriser* cette pratique, l’enfermer, la coder, ce qui ne signifie pas qu’elle n’existe pas. Mais elle excèdera toujours le discours qui régit le système phallogentrique ; elle a et aura lieu ailleurs que dans les territoires subordonnés à la domination philosophique-théorique. Elle ne se laissera penser que par les sujets casseurs des automatismes, les coureurs de bords qu’aucune autorité ne subjugue jamais. Mais on peut commencer à parler. À désigner quelques effets, quelques composantes pulsionnelles, quelques rapports de l’imaginaire féminin au réel, à l’écriture. (169-170)

It is worth noting here that neither Cohen nor Boukhobza has received much critical (or “philosophical-theoretical”) attention thus far, and this relative lack may well – in part – bespeak the fact that these writers qualify as “breakers of automatisms” and “peripheral figures.” Their literary work certainly falls into the “non-category” of writing that Cixous

⁶⁶ By “post-Israel,” I mean that which occurs after the creation of the State of Israel. In other words, I mean to suggest that the “Jewish feminist consciousness” that Boukhobza and Cohen articulate is in part shaped by the existence of the State of Israel; both writers address Israel in ways none of the earlier authors do.

describes; it is subversive and does not submit to any particular philosophical or theoretical treatment. Rather, each writer offers decidedly ambivalent and oppositional representations of the worlds, bodies, and memories she inhabits. As we have seen in the previous sections and will continue to see, the articulation of this Jewish feminine writing emerges in quite different ways in each text. In *Géographie des origines* it aligns with the narrator's writing practice and her expansive definition of geography, while in *Un été à Jérusalem*, it comes through the narrator's actions, her sharp critique of traditional Tunisian Jewish gender roles, her treatment of her own body, and the destabilized dualities of Mavrika/Shekhina.

Indeed, one of the projects that Cohen and Boukhobza both undertake and work through their writing is what Cixous describes as writing "from and towards woman," thereby affirming women's place beyond the realm of the symbolic: *C'est en écrivant, depuis et vers la femme, et en relevant le défi du discours gouverné par le phallus, que la femme affirmera la femme autrement qu'à la place à elle réservée dans et par le symbole, c'est-à-dire le silence. Qu'elle sorte du silence piégé. Qu'elle ne se laisse pas refiler pour domaine la marge ou le harem*" (46-47). Cixous' emphatic counsel to women that they must write in order to rise to the challenge of phallogocentric discourse and make a place for themselves beyond the realm of silence takes an interesting direction when she illustrates this realm of silence as akin to the spaces of the margin or the harem. By citing these two locations of women's silencing that readily and quickly call to mind images of the Maghreb, she draws attention to the notion that the Maghreb *is* a marginalized space, but that it is also a space that contributes to women's trapped silence. Cohen and Boukhobza share this ambivalent tension around the Maghreb; while for them it is a site – and object – of colonialism, it is also a site of its own brand of patriarchy. The complex

relationship between the alterity of the Maghreb as it is perceived by “the West” in the discourse of Orientalism and the Maghreb’s own production of phallogocentric discourse sets the stage for the ambivalence expressed by each narrator towards her Maghrebi “roots”, and as we have seen, this ambivalence extends towards Israel as well. Each narrator vacillates between longing to return, or at least to retain the memory of her family’s former home, and rejecting what she sees as repressive, oppressive traditions.

This is all the more complicated by the fact that the critiques articulated by Cohen’s and Boukhobza’s narrators illustrate their own modernity and transnationalism and could even be perceived as a Eurocentric imposition of Western feminist views. I want to make clear that it is not my goal to participate in this dynamic that has caused division within feminist movements over the years; rather, I aim to simply expose the complexities that inform the writing and reading of these texts, which I believe make them all the more examples of “feminine writing” as Cixous describes it. Cohen and Boukhobza have spent the majority of their lives in France and have participated in feminist movements there, so it makes sense that their critiques would be informed by this transnational European context. I acknowledge that this presents a complication in that to some degree these texts participate in a continued Eurocentric Orientalization of North African Sephardim and Mizrahim, even as these writers approach this knotted intersection from within it as much as from outside of it. As Joëlle Bahloul explains it in her contribution to the edited volume *Judaism Since Gender*:

Ultimately, the paradigm of female inferiority as evidence of the *gemeinschaft* nature of Sephardic culture serves to deny the latter a place in modern Jewish history. Sephardic identity is generally viewed as “traditional” by nature, as a “people without history.” Its alleged discriminative treatment of women is analyzed as pertaining to an outdated premodern history in which the former Arab neighbors of most Sephardic communities are believed to have remained. Gender inequality in Sephardic culture is conceived of as a handicap to modernization, emancipation, and Westernization. Thus Sephardic women are ideologically “left

behind,” in the Levantine world, at the margins of the geo-historical Jewish modernity located in northern Europe. Even when it is presented as a feminist argument, the emphasis on the discrimination against women in Sephardic culture and society is nothing less than *ethnocentrism*. [...]. For North African Jewish women in the first half of the twentieth century, to be a “modern” woman was a personal “vocation,” a contribution to their community’s modernization and emancipation. Becoming “modern” meant gaining a greater degree of dignity and independence. It also meant that one would be distinguished from Moslem women, whose emancipation is still contested. (83-84; emphasis in original)

Bahloul illustrates the Eurocentric tendency of (Western) scholarship to view Sephardic women as “left behind” by Western modernity (of which Western feminism is a sign) on the one hand, and on the other hand, Sephardic women’s success in that very process of modernization with the result of separating and distancing themselves from Muslim women. But Bahloul does not address the complexities that Israel and colonial independence add to this already complicated dynamic. Thus, Cohen and Boukhobza, and their narrators, are caught in this tangled web of inferred meanings and political implications of the critiques they make.

Whatever the implications of her critique of Maghrebi Jewish patriarchy, one of the key ways in which each narrator engages in it is through repeated commentary and observations about the gender roles performed by their parents. For example, Cohen’s narrator describes the recurring image she has of her father: “Où qu’il soit, je me le représente assis dans un fauteuil, lisant le journal, pendant que ma mère s’activait, le servait, desservait, rangeait, nettoyait, cuisinait” (60). This scene conveys the typical gender roles of her parents’ generation and of Jewish Algerian social mores; the father sits reading the newspaper while the mother rushes and bustles around him, making sure everything is in place to serve her husband and her family. This scene also emblemizes Jewish women’s separation from textuality, which is precisely what Cixous confronts and denounces in her essays. While the father sits and reads, thus performing a very

traditional Jewish male (and paternal, rabbinical) role of interpretation and interaction with texts, the mother tends to more “bodily” (physical, material) matters. A little further in the text, the narrator paints a similar portrayal of her parents as she reflects on her father’s situation in the nursing home where he eventually moved once his wife – her mother – passed away. She observes that neither he nor the nurses seem to notice or be bothered by his unmade bed and the disarray of his room: “Et je pensais à ma mère, aux femmes moins aveugles, plus soucieuses de ces détails. Lui qui a vécu dans une maison si bien tenue!” (64). Here, she laments the invisibility of women’s work, and particularly that of her mother which went unnoticed by her father.

Cohen’s descriptions of the narrator’s parents and their performance of traditional heteropatriarchal gender roles echo those of Boukhobza’s narrator. In *Un été à Jérusalem*, the narrator oscillates between frustration and sadness, compassion and sympathy for her mother whom she describes as submissive, repressed, and silenced in the domestic sphere of home, family and religious customs. Yet, the narrator also admires her mother’s strength and beauty, and sees her as an embodiment of the traditions that offer a sense of connection to their Tunisian Jewish heritage. For example, when the narrator manages to convince her mother to travel to Beersheba together to see Safta and attend her cousin Michaël’s wedding, she sees that her mother’s silence bursts open once she leaves the repressive atmosphere of the family apartment:

Ma mère peu à peu se défait de ses dernières réserves. Il y a tant de silences contenus en elle qu’elle en explose de rires et de mots. Dès qu’elle quitte son mari, commence sa liberté. Et dans ce désir fou qu’elle a de la vie, je reconnais Jérusalem et son attente, je retrouve l’espérance que cette ville irradie et qui devient pour tous les pèlerins la clef de l’infini. (45)

The mother’s liberation that comes from the act of leaving her apartment and husband unleashes and ignites in her an explosion of desire, emotion, and expression; freedom and

self-expression become synonymous. This equation clearly echoes Cixous' admonition that women must write themselves into being and out of silence through their own movement; here Boukhobza stages the mother's liberation from silence as aligned and synchronistic with her movement through the city. Boukhobza thus creates a conceptual link between liberation and movement, between the city space (external geography) and desire (internal geography), all of which converge through self-expression (writing). Jerusalem becomes a locus of desire, imbued with "expectations" and "hopes" ("attentes") to which the mother awakens, and the mother's awakening in turn reinvigorates the narrator's sense of hope for the future. Thus, the textualization of movement and self-expression as liberation serves as a means of reorientation.

Boukhobza's association between freedom and movement, and the characterization of the narrator's mother as a "container of silence" whose moment of freedom – achieved through movement – brings an explosion of words and laughter enacts and performs precisely what for Cixous is an essential characteristic of "écriture féminine":

Un texte féminin ne peut pas ne pas être plus que subversif : s'il s'écrit, c'est en soulevant, volcanique, la vieille croûte immobilière. En incessant déplacement. Il faut qu'elle s'écrive parce que c'est l'invention d'une écriture *neuve, insurgée* qui, dans le moment venu de sa libération, lui permettra d'effectuer les ruptures et les transformations indispensables dans son histoire [...] : en s'écrivant, la Femme fera retour à ce corps qu'on lui a plus que confisqué, dont on a fait l'inquiétant étranger dans la place, le malade ou le mort, et qui si souvent est le mauvais compagnon, cause et lieu des inhibitions. À censurer le corps on censure du même coup le souffle, la parole. (179)

Cixous imagines a "feminine text" as one that can be written only by means of a volcanic uprising that removes the "immobilizing old crust" and is in constant movement. This geological imagery evoking volcanic eruptions from below the Earth's crust as metaphor for the liberation necessary to the subversive quality of feminine writing resonates

powerfully and most clearly with Cohen's formulations in *Géographie des origines*. For Cixous, this writing is what will allow women to effect essential ruptures and transformations in their (hi)story, and to reclaim their body that otherwise was made into the "bad object" (or "dark continent") of phallogentrism. As she pointedly remarks at the end of this passage, "by censoring the body, we/they also censor the breath and the word (speech)." This portrayal of feminine writing as analogous to a volcanic eruption for self-liberation in speech and body highlights the contrast between liberated movement (enacted through/with the body, breath, and speech) and its opposite: censored immobility in which women have agency neither over their body nor over their speech and are constricted, silent, beneath the Earth's surface.

The constricted silence from which Cixous urges women to free themselves through writing typifies the narrator's mother in *Un été à Jérusalem*. If she did achieve a momentary liberation upon leaving the apartment to travel to Beersheba with her daughter, their return to the apartment signals a simultaneous return to constricted silence. In the scene reproduced below, the narrator describes the interactions between her mother ("elle") and her father ("il"/"lui") after he comes home for Shabbat. Just before his arrival, the narrator and her mother had enjoyed a moment of genuine, uncensored conversation about Bernard, the narrator's French Ashkenazic lover about whom she feels conflicted after having left him behind in Paris.⁶⁷ The father's arrival immediately results in the premature end to their conversation, as he sets his hat down,

⁶⁷ Bernard, an assimilated French Jew with Ashkenazic origins, represents a conflict of desires for the Tunisian Mizrahi narrator; on the one hand, Bernard offers the dream of assimilation, but on the other hand, he also censors her and wants her to assimilate, to become like him. This is encapsulated in an offhand remark the narrator makes about him: "Avec Bernard, à Paris, la jeunesse agressive s'était peu à peu calmée. Il s'était moqué gentiment de mes spartiates de cuir pour m'enfiler aux pieds des escarpins de daim noir à talons hauts. Mes jeans, mes chemisettes, mon style 'kibboutz' lui déplaisaient. Impeccable dans ses costumes, il souhaitait une femme élégante" (27-28).

announces he is hungry and asks if the meal is ready. The mother jumps to her feet and busies herself with Shabbat preparations:

Elle va et vient devant lui, silencieux. Elle le frôle, splendide dans son peignoir qui la moule, les seins libres et gonflés, la taille fine malgré le ventre et les fesses rebondis. Mais il ne la regarde pas. Il ne la regarde jamais. Jamais il n'étend sa main vers elle pour la caresser. Il ne sait que donner des ordres : "Viens, prends, donne" ; "Donne, apporte, fais." Avec le temps, elle a pris la voix aigre des femmes déçues. La voix de la rancune. [...]. Quelquefois, très rarement, elle reste assise sans bouger, les ongles enfoncés dans ses paumes, et son visage tremble. Pour pleurer aussi, elle a de la pudeur. (94-95)

In this passage, the gender roles performed by each parent are crystallized. Boukhobza portrays the father as incapable of truly seeing his wife and expressing tenderness, able only to give orders. The father has thus also lost his voice in a sense; he is limited in his means of communicating.⁶⁸ Meanwhile, as the narrator describes her mother's corporeality – which is invisible to her father – with clear emphasis on her sensuality, she implies that her mother is censored not only in terms of her voice, but also in terms of how she carries herself in her body. Her voice is one of resentment as a result of being constricted, and she is so constricted and censored that she cannot even cry.

Boukhobza's use of the word "pudeur" ("modesty" or "reserve") implies a subtle critique of traditional Mizrahi social mores as well; viewed within conservative Mizrahi culture, the ideal woman covers herself and demonstrates modesty.⁶⁹ While the narrator

⁶⁸ It is worth mentioning here that aside from the social-cultural mores of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews in the Maghreb that determine gender role performance, in both *Géographie des origines* and *Un Été à Jérusalem*, the narrators intimate that their fathers also endured trauma, which influences their behavior within the space of their marriage and family. Indeed, the fathers are also limited and constricted in their speech and often fall silent. Often though, the fathers choose silence over speaking, and this choice causes pain for the mothers and daughters. In *Géographie des origines*, the narrator's father fought for De Gaulle's French Resistance army (*les Forces de la France Libre*) during the Second World War; his military memorabilia and the medals he won become symbols of the trauma he silently carries. In *Un Été à Jérusalem*, the father's trauma comes from the double exile he lived, first when the family left Tunisia for France, and then again when he decided they should follow his daughter, the narrator, to Jerusalem where she had gone to pursue her studies three years prior to the beginning of the novel.

⁶⁹ See Esther Schely-Newman, *Our Lives Are But Stories: Narratives of Tunisian-Israeli Women*, especially Chapters 2 and 3.

boldly and unapologetically rejects this expectation by wearing shorts or short skirts, tank tops, sandals, and letting her hair be wild (until she shaves her head and “becomes” Mavrika in the final scenes of the novel), the mother to some degree chooses to cover herself in modesty, having recently adopted the religious practice of wearing a headscarf over the bedraggled remnants of what according to the narrator used to be voluminous and sensual hair, and does not reject these cultural-social values.⁷⁰ She even admonishes her daughter for wearing such skimpy clothes. But the narrator intimates that this is an internalized subjugation, a form of self-censorship and repression, and a source of sadness; the light of desire and hope she senses in her mother on their trip to Beersheba demonstrates this. In “Le Rire de la Méduse,” Cixous describes a “pudeur” that functions at the symbolic and embodied levels to limit women’s expression:

Nous nous sommes détournées de nos corps, qu’on nous a honteusement appris à ignorer, à frapper de la bête pudeur ; on nous a fait le coup du marché de dupes : chacun aimera l’autre sexe. Je te donnerai ton corps et toi tu me donneras le mien. Mais quels sont les hommes qui donnent aux femmes le corps qu’elles leur remettent aveuglément ? Pourquoi si peu de textes ? Parce que si peu de femmes encore regagnent leur corps. (55)

In this excerpt from Cixous’ essay, the connection between women’s relegation from textuality (or writing) and from their own corporeality is clear. Censorship, whether “self”-imposed or externally sanctioned, takes away expression through the body in the form of “modesty,” and through writing. As Cixous makes clear, there are very few texts written by women because women have been taught to “turn away from” themselves, thus underscoring once more Sara Ahmed’s argument that our “orientation” towards or

⁷⁰ This part of the novel is reproduced here:

Mais je m’étonne surtout de cette irritation qui me brûle les yeux. *Que m’importait au fond, cette ferveur nouvelle de ma mère ?* Et pourquoi la tourner en dérision ? Je n’ignorais pas cette tradition séculaire qui dissimule sous flanelle, nylon, coton, perruque, le plus mince cheveu de la jeune épousée. *Mais j’avais connu ma mère avec une chevelure de reine, épaisse et noire.* [...] ‘C’est ton mari qui t’a demandé de le faire ?’ Elle riposte avec dignité. ‘Mon mari, c’est d’abord ton père. Comme tu le hais ma fille ! Tu te trompes sur lui. Il n’a rien exigé. J’ai pris seule cette décision.’ Je ricane. ‘Évidemment ! Au fait, il est encore jaloux ?’ (14-16 ; emphasis added)

away from others – though in this case women are orientated away from themselves – shapes our view in ways we cannot even see because that very orientation is the frame of our lens.

Similar to Boukhobza’s narrator in the passage above, Cohen’s narrator also portrays her mother as a vivacious woman full of life, dreams, and longing for her ancestral Andalusia. But, like the magma that stays beneath the Earth’s surface until a volcano finally erupts, her vivaciousness and longing are contained and constricted within unspoken sadness and silence, only coming through music. For example, as the narrator “remembers” (via the few traces and scraps of knowledge she has gleaned from her parents’ stories, letters, and photographs), her mother’s solitary pregnancy in the months preceding her birth when her father was fighting in De Gaulle’s *Forces de la France Libre*:

Il serait un héros, que la guerre l’épargne ou pas. Elle savait que je ne connaîtrais peut-être jamais mon père. De quelle manière l’attendait-elle ? Elle jouait du piano... d’accord... des journées entières... d’accord... Elle chantait en espagnol des airs à vous arracher les boyaux avec sa voix sensuelle de chanteuse réaliste, mais à quoi rêvait-elle ? Jamais de son vivant, nous n’avons parlé de ces choses. (33)

Just as Boukhobza’s narrator senses the glimmer of desire in her mother, which comes out in the form of an explosion of words and laughter during her brief foray into freedom, Cohen’s narrator senses the desire beneath the surface of her mother’s voice. When she would sing in Spanish, raw emotion would pour out, but once the singing was over, the contents and source of that emotion would retreat and remain unnamed, undiscussed. Like the mother in *Un été* when she leaves the apartment, the mother in *Géographie* is temporarily liberated from the confines of her domestic life through the escape offered by music and Spanish, her native language.

In fact, reading this through the lens of Cixous' Medusa, it is no coincidence that her momentary "breakthroughs" come when she sings in Spanish. In "Le Rire de la Méduse," Cixous describes song as "the first music," which is that of "the first voice of love," which all women keep alive deep within them. She calls this women's "privileged relationship with the voice":

Dans la parole féminine comme dans l'écriture ne cesse jamais de résonner ce qui, de nous avoir jadis traversé, touché imperceptiblement, profondément, garde le pouvoir de nous affecter, le *chant*, la première musique, celle de la première voix d'amour, que toute femme préserve vivante. Comment ce rapport privilégié à la voix ? Parce qu'aucune femme n'empile autant de défense antipulsionnelles qu'un homme. Tu ne t'étayes pas, tu ne maçonnes pas comme lui, tu ne t'éloignes pas aussi « prudemment » du plaisir. Même si la mystification phallique a contaminé généralement les bons rapports, la femme n'est jamais loin de la « mère » (que j'entends hors rôle, la « mère » comme non-nom, et comme source des biens). Toujours en elle subsiste au moins un peu du bon lait-de-mère. Elle écrit à l'encre blanche. (47-48)

In this passage, Cixous suggests that no amount of external censoring and constraint can separate women from the source of their self-expression, in part because this source runs deep, in part because "no woman stockpiles so many defenses against her drives⁷¹ as a man does against his." In other words, she describes here precisely the moments of "breakthrough" and song into and out of which the narrator's mother slips in *Géographie des origines*. Although when read in the twenty-first century Cixous runs the risk of making "outdated" essentializing generalizations with this characterization of women's "privileged relationship with the voice," it is also important to contextualize her claims within the feminist theory of the 1970s that was concerned with subverting the Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalytic theories of human development which were predicated upon women's (and especially mothers') exclusion from language, defined as the realm

⁷¹ Here Cixous refers to Freud's theory of libidinal and sexual drives.

of the Symbolic – and of the Father.⁷² From this context, Cixous makes radical claims by insisting that women reclaim their indelible relationship with language, which comes in the form of song and with “white ink” from the source.

For Cixous, this “source” is the “mother,” but as she makes clear, this “mother” is a metaphorical, symbolic one, and she resides within women whether they themselves are mothers in the biological or adoptive sense or not. This invisible but indelible source of women’s self-expression is brilliantly symbolized through the paradoxical image of “white ink”; representing at once “mother’s milk” (the regenerative nourishment that comes from the source) and the medium of textuality, white ink cannot be seen on the page (which is generally white). But it is nonetheless “present,” echoing the elusive “Presence” of the Shekhinah while also giving body to that presence and emphasizing its power to work against death by affirming life. The “white ink” Cixous describes effectively melds body and text, so that the text is an effect of the body. At the same time, text cannot emerge without language itself, which is an effect of the “équivoix,” a play on words combining “equivoque” (“equivocal”) and “voix” (“voice”). This portmanteau word conveys precisely the ambivalence that characterizes each narrator’s voice in *Géographie des origines* and *Un Été à Jérusalem*. In Cixous’ words, this “équivoix” is another way of describing the metaphorical, textual “mother” as source of writing:

Texte, mon corps : traversée de coulées chantantes ; entends-moi, ce n’est pas une « mère » collante, attachante ; c’est, te touchant, l’équivoix qui t’affecte, te pousse depuis ton sein à venir au langage, qui lance *ta* force ; c’est le rythme qui te rit ; l’intime destinataire qui rend possibles et désirables toutes les métaphores, corps (le ? les ?), pas plus descriptible que dieu, l’âme ou l’Autre ; la partie de toi qui entre en toi t’espace et te pousse à inscrire dans la langue ton style de femme. (48-49)

⁷² This reclaiming of the Symbolic (and of language) is marked in Cixous’ essay by her association of the “mother” with the “non-nom” (no-name), since “le nom” for Lacan was the realm of the father.

In other words, the “source” that brings women into language – and into writing – is the “mother” within each woman. This “mother” expresses herself through the “équivoix” and is “no more describable than god, the soul, or the Other.”⁷³ She is unknowable, but paradoxically, she is also the means by which women can inscribe themselves into language, and thus know themselves more fully.

As previously mentioned, these claims are radical subversions of the Freudian/Lacanian view of the phase of human development that involves coming into language, which according to this view can only happen via the father. For Cixous, reclaiming the mother involves not only language but also women’s sexuality, and women can only return to their uncensored wholeness (“entirety”) in body and language through textuality. She illustrates this in part by reclaiming the “guilty” figure of Eve:

Écrire, acte qui non seulement « réalisera » le rapport dé-censuré de la femme à sa sexualité, à son être-femme, lui rendant accès à ses propres forces ; qui lui rendra ses biens, ses plaisirs, ses organes, ses immenses territoires corporels tenus sous scellés ; qui l’arrachera à la structure surmoïsée dans laquelle on lui réservait toujours la même place de coupable (coupable de tout, à tous les coups : d’avoir des désirs, de ne pas en avoir ; d’être frigide, d’être trop « chaude » ; de ne pas être les deux à la fois ; d’être trop mère et pas assez ; d’avoir des enfants et de ne pas en avoir ; de nourrir et de ne pas nourrir...) par ce travail de recherche, d’analyse, d’illumination, cet affranchissement du texte merveilleux d’elle-même qu’il lui faut d’urgence apprendre à parler. Une femme sans corps, une muette, une aveugle, ne peut pas être une bonne combattante. Elle est réduite à être la servante du militant, son ombre. Il faut tuer la fausse femme qui empêche la vivante de respirer. Inscire le souffle de la femme entière [...]. (45-46)

Only by returning to writing and reading (that is, to textuality, but also corporeality since here the body is also a text and the text a body) can women remove themselves from the “structure surmoïsée” – another portmanteau word that combines the “surmoi” (superego) and “Moïse” (Moses) to allude to the laws of phallogocentrism – that always makes women

⁷³ Cixous makes a clear distinction throughout *Le Rire* and “Sorties” between the “other” of the self-other dyad and what she calls the “true Other” that is unknowable and untheorizable.

“guilty.” The “guilty,” “shadowy,” “body-less,” “mute” and “blind” woman who has not returned to her textuality/corporeality “prevents the living woman from breathing,” and therefore must be killed so that the “breath of the entire woman” (“la vivante”) can be inscribed instead.

The very subtle reference to Eve here, which can only be inferred by Cixous’ description of the “guilty woman” as one who desires, appears in Boukhobza’s novel as “la Juive.” In Boukhobza’s iteration, Eve/la Juive pays a price for desiring – and eating – “the harsh fruit of freedom” but ultimately does not submit or recede into passivity:

Ici, à dix-sept ans, j’ai goûté au fruit âpre de la liberté. Sa chair avait la violence d’un sexe. La Juive prise de vertige, cédait, se ratatinait, se décharnait. J’ai failli croire que j’avais eu sa peau. Cette peau molle des prépuces. Mais la Juive était increvable. Elle guettait dans l’ombre le moment propice. [...]. Oui, elle avait eu sa revanche, la Juive. Quand j’eus découvert que la peur de mourir engendrait une voracité à vivre. (27)

With the characteristic irony and subversive ambiguity of Boukhobza’s narrator, this version of Eve as the narrator’s seventeen-year-old self defies her own “law of the father⁷⁴” and eats a metaphorical fruit whose “flesh had the violence of a male sex organ.” Although she initially paid a price for this transgression – overcome with vertigo, she gave in/conceded (“céder”), shrank (“se ratatiner”), and became emaciated (“se décharner”) – she was ultimately indefatigable and puncture-proof (“increvable”). As the narrator explains, the reason for her vertigo and initial concession was that she thought she had bitten into foreskin (“prépuces”), creating a strange reenactment of Freud’s castration theory that is foundational to Cixous’ argument in “Sorties” and “Le Rire de la Méduse.” According to Freud, women have phallus envy and men have castration anxiety, thus explaining the “Oedipus and Electra complexes.” Throughout “Sorties” in

⁷⁴ Just before this passage, the narrator recalls her father’s frequent warnings that she should on the one hand “watch out for men, keep her eyes open, and be reserved” because “every smile could lead to rape,” and on the other hand “get married and then do whatever you want” (26).

particular, Cixous exposes the fallacies of Freud's theory and urges women (and men) to no longer believe in these "laws," which are based on nothing more than myths.

Arguably, Boukhobza's narrator heeds Cixous' call. While she "almost believed" that she had castrated the man in question in this passage, this iteration of Eve/"la Juive" is resilient and perspicacious. She waits in the shadow – which according to Freudian "laws" is indeed where she belongs – and then "gets her revenge." This revenge precisely echoes what Cixous prescribes in "Le Rire":

Si la femme a toujours fonctionné « dans » le discours de l'homme, signifiant toujours renvoyé à l'adverse signifiant qui en annihile l'énergie spécifique, en rabat ou étouffe les sons si différents, il est temps qu'elle disloque ce « dans », qu'elle l'explose, le retourne et s'en saisisse, qu'elle le fasse sien, le comprenant, le prenant dans sa bouche à elle, que de ses dents à elle elle lui morde la langue, qu'elle s'invente une langue pour lui rentrer dedans. Et avec quelle aisance, tu verras, elle peut, depuis ce « dans » où elle était tapie somnolente, sourdre aux lèvres qu'elle va déborder de ses écumes. (57-58)

While Cixous' version of revenge takes place first in and through language, there is an intentional slippage between body and language which is made all the more explicit by the polysemy of the word "langue" in French: here, tongue (body) and language are interchangeable tools of revenge. What begins as revenge at the symbolic level becomes a physical act of biting – a "castration" of the male tongue. Returning now to Boukhobza's "la Juive," the key to her self-liberation (that is to say, her revenge) is her discovery that "the fear of death would engender a voracity for life." In other words, her true freedom comes from the moment when she understands that she only needs to affirm and choose life over death, and thus reject her entrapment between the "horrifying myths of the Medusa and the abyss" that Cixous argues have made women believe themselves to be the "dark continent."

Similarly for Cohen's narrator, freedom comes from an intentional rapprochement with the "vertiginous" and the unknown:

Être juive jusqu'au bout des ongles ! Oser ! Oser s'abandonner ! Aller vers la fracture, le vertigineux, l'imprévu ! Souplesse, plasticité d'une écriture dénouée qui danse, danse ! Ne pas se répéter ! Suivre son chemin ! Sortir des pistes ! Evoluer dans le mystère ! Ouvrir les portes ! Puissance des flots. Euphorie de la vraie vie. Appel de l'invisible, de l'infini, de l'inconnu, jusqu'à la médiumnité. Les fatmas sont belles mais bruyantes. Depuis le début, j'entends ces phrases insensées. Se laisser guider vers d'autres réalités, visites et présences imaginaires. Somnolence. Demi-sommeil. Léthargie. Qu'est-ce que j'entends ? Comment dégager une trame ? De quelles origines est-il question ? Vision terrible du père. Tissage de la mémoire. Jamais je n'aurais pu épouser un Juif. Encore moins enfanter. Il fallait casser la transmission, la filiation, fuir la tribu, les alliances préhistoriques. Il fallait tourner le dos, tout en étant de face. Ne rien renier, ne pas s'engager, stopper là un tricot ancestral et corporel pour découvrir des contrées inconnues. (72)

Like Cixous and Boukhobza's narrator, Cohen's narrator here intimates that liberation, or "being Jewish to the tip of the fingernails" – characterized in this passage by breaking and turning away from the past and the father's "terrible vision" – is the result of daring to be and move differently, towards the new and unknown. This daring is a self-determined act and comes through writing; like Cixous' "Juifemme", rejecting the law of the father is only possible when that "law" is understood as a social construct. For Cohen's narrator, daring to be this forward-moving and law-dismantling Jewish woman is tantamount to refusing to be a mother who (re)generates the lines that then serve as constraints. In this paradoxical way, she too rejects the myth of the abyss; by refusing to be a mother who (re)generates life but in so doing falls into symbolic death in the realm of language, Cohen's narrator thus chooses to affirm her own life by turning away from the abyss and towards the "unknown countries" of the dark continent.

If Boukhobza's "la Juive" and Cohen's "daring" narrator represent a rejection of the abyss myth, we will turn now to that of the Medusa. Cixous very simply and succinctly dismantles the myth of Medusa as monstrous: "Il suffit qu'on regarde la Méduse en face pour la voir: et elle n'est pas mortelle. Elle est belle et elle rit" (82). Here Cixous suggests that all it takes to debunk the myth is to look at directly at the Medusa

and see that she is not deadly, but beautiful and laughing. As with Eve, Cixous' image of the laughing Medusa works against phallogentric characterizations of women as having "fallen from grace" into the abject, sinful, guilty, and monstrous. Related to these "dark" traits that phallogentrism associates with women are madness and hysteria. In her essays, as well as in her play titled *Portrait de Dora*, Cixous draws on Freud's accounts of hysteria as examples of the ways in which the silencing of women (in both language and body) led to these extreme misrepresentations and imposed pathologizations, which then reinforced the myths of the Medusa and the abyss. Cixous describes the hysterical women as speaking through and with their bodies, and thus reclaims them as subversive heroines in the fight against phallogentrism:

Et avec quelle force dans leur fragilité : « fragilité », vulnérabilité, à la mesure de leur incomparable intensité. Elles n'ont pas sublimé. Heureusement : elles ont sauvé leur peau, leur énergie. Elles n'ont pas travaillé à aménager l'impasse des vies sans avenir. Elles ont habité furieusement ces corps somptueux : admirables hystériques qui ont fait subir à Freud tant de voluptueux et inavouables moments, bombardant sa statue mosaïque de leurs charnels et passionnés mots-de-corps, le hantant de leurs inaudibles et foudroyantes dénonciations, plus que nues sous les sept voiles des pudeurs, éblouissantes. Celles qui en un seul mot du corps ont inscrit l'immense vertige d'une histoire détachée comme une flèche de toute l'histoire des hommes, de la société biblico-capitaliste, ce sont elles, les suppliciées d'hier, qui devancent les nouvelles femmes, celles après lesquelles plus aucune relation intersubjective ne pourra être la même. (56-57).

Here too, there is an emphasis on moving and looking toward the future as the so-called "hystériques" chose not to "set up the impasse of lives with no future," instead living "furiously" in their "sumptuous" bodies and bombarding Freud's "Mosaic statue" with their "words-of-body," and inscribing the vertigo of a history detached from that of men and biblical-capitalist society. For Cixous, these "hystériques suppliciées" ("tortured hysterical women") changed the entire trajectory of intersubjective relationships and paved the way for "the new women" of the 1970s feminist movement. It is significant that Cixous recognizes and validates the torture these women underwent; in so doing, she

makes clear that the “hysteria” or “madness” was not inexplicable, but rather could be traced back to unacknowledged trauma that Freud refused to see. Like the “hystériques,” Medusa was also subjected to torture, which makes her laughter subversive, self- (and life-)affirming, and rebellious. The laughing Medusa is thus a symbol of the language of jouissance, and as such, of uncontained self-expression and movement, all of which are against death.

The laughing Medusa as a subversive counterimage to the “fallen woman” who is subjected to torture reverberates especially clearly in *Un été à Jérusalem*. As we saw in the previous section on midrash, Boukhobza’s “Mavrika” undergoes similarly traumatic suffering when Isaac returns traumatized from the army and is eventually taken away to a psychiatric hospital. After Isaac is taken away, Mavrika becomes a prostitute, thus in some senses “living furiously” in her own “sumptuous body,” like Cixous’ “hystériques.” In the following passage taken from the last two pages of the novel, the narrator has just learned of her lover Henry’s sudden and senseless death while visiting the front between Israel and Lebanon as a journalist. In shock, she “becomes” Mavrika:

Mavrika. Elle chante, elle frappe le tambourin en peau de chèvre. De ses ongles polis, affûtés, elle racle la membrane. Ça crisse sous la corne. Elle rit. Elle enfonce davantage les ongles qui se brisent, mais ne pénètrent pas. Alors, elle recommence de l’autre main, sauvagement, provoque enfin la déchirure dans la peau qui ne chantera plus. Ses ongles sont sanglants. Elle rit. Elle court au miroir, tond ses cheveux au ciseau, rase ses sourcils, coupe ses cils à ras. Elle rit. La pointe acérée du métal frôle la pupille, mais elle renonce, non, elle a encore besoin de voir la laideur qui l’entoure pour hurler de joie. Elle lacère ses vêtements, dévale l’escalier, s’élanche dans la rue, nu-pieds, se déchire aux cailloux. Une femme, qui revient du marché, en l’apercevant hurle : “Ma fille, ma chérie !” puis s’évanouit. Elle rit encore devant la chair qui craque, qui s’ouvre, qui pisse le sang. Elle tourne dans le quartier, tourne sans un cri, habillée de son seul rire, et ses grandes dents blanches sont féroces, elle va mordre dans le sexe des hommes, les châtrer de ses grandes dents et ils n’iront plus à la guerre, ils ressembleront aux femmes, soumis. Et sur sa tête, en pluie, elle jette de la terre et du gravier, elle frotte ses seins de sable, de ce sable de Jérusalem qui râpe car il contient des bris de verre. Elle crie : “On dit que Dieu t’habite, Jérusalem ! Je

crois qu'il t'a maudite ! Laisse donc mourir tous tes fils ! Un jour, tu reviendras à tes ruines !" (254-255)

The repetition of the simple phrase “Elle rit” (“she laughs”) underscores the parallels between Mavrika and Cixous’ Medusa, as does the act of shaving her head and making herself ugly. According to Greek mythology, Medusa was once beautiful but after angering Athena, was cursed to become a monster with snakes for hair who allegedly turned anyone who looked at her into stone. Yet, true to the ambiguous dualities and contradictions that shape Boukhobza’s novel, especially the amorphous figure of Mavrika, some aspects of this passage seem to echo the Greek Medusa myth that Cixous repudiates. While the narrator’s actions as Mavrika of shaving her hair and laughing imply a rejection of the Medusa myth, the scene of the woman who sees her in the street and faints at the sight imitates the mythical Medusa’s fatal, transfixing powers. At the same time, the narrator’s self-destructive actions – destroying her clothing, breaking her nails until they bleed from scraping the goatskin drum, shaving her hair and her eyebrows, cropping her eyelashes, lacerating her clothes, running barefoot into the street, destroying her feet on pebbles, throwing dirt and gravel on her head, and rubbing her bare breasts with sand which “grates” since it contains broken glass – are more than signs of madness and monstrosity. They are a subversion of the Medusa myth; while she considers stabbing her pupil with the metal point of the scissors she uses to shave her head, she ultimately decides not to because she “needs to see the ugliness surrounding her in order to howl with joy.” So while the mythical Medusa turned men to stone if they looked at her – that is, if she saw them see her –, Boukhobza’s narrator chooses to see herself, let herself be seen, and see others seeing her. This in turn inspires joy, however perverse and ironic a joy it may be, and is a short step from Cixous’ “jouissance.”

Echoing her earlier figure of “la Juive” as a recast Eve who waits for – and finally attains – her revenge, here Boukhobza’s narrator tells us that Mavrika “will bite men’s sex organs and castrate them with her ferocious, big white teeth,” so that men “will no longer go to war; they will look like women, submissive.” Thus, she assumes the Freudian role of women as threats of castration but subverts and transmutes it into a means of restoring peace and ending the war. In one last instance of subversive revolt, she curses Jerusalem, or more precisely foretells the outcome of the war. In this way, the figure of Mavrika embodies a madness that has prophetic qualities and, returning to the Medusa myth, blurs the boundaries between Medusa, the cursed, and Athena, the God who curses. At the conclusion of this passage and in this distraught state, the narrator waits until nightfall and then goes to her friend Roger’s⁷⁵ apartment, with the intention of “sinking her nails into his thick neck” (255) while he sleeps. Her plan is thwarted when Roger wakes up at the sound of her approach and attempts to console her. At this moment, readers finally learn that the narrator’s name is Sarah, and as we saw in the previous section, she ultimately – and violently – rejects this biblical patriarchal name and declares herself Mavrika with all the contrasting, contradictory, and ambiguous qualities of lightness and darkness associated with that name. In its stunning conclusion, *Un été à Jérusalem* explodes myths of Mizrahi Jewish femininity by reclaiming “madness,” refusing the role of mother, and asserting power and agency through language and self-naming.

For Cixous, this very “uncontained,” explosive self-expression that resists fixed identities and categorizations is the source of the fear inspired by Medusa and the “hystériques,” which then leads to their pathologizations as “mad”:

⁷⁵ Roger is the one who had told her about Henry’s death, and who had introduced her to Henry.

Elle ne tient pas en place, elle déborde. Épanchement qui peut être angoissant, puisque, déliée, elle peut craindre – et faire craindre à l’autre – un égarement sans terme, une folie. Mais qui peut, dans le vertige, être – si l’on ne fétichise pas le personnel, la permanence de l’identité – un « où suis-je », un « qui jouit là » enivrant, questions qui affolent la raison, le principe d’unité, et qui ne se posent pas, qui ne demandent pas une réponse, qui ouvrent l’espace où erre la femme – vague vole. (125)

In this passage, Cixous’ associations between madness (“folie”), distraction, confusion, turmoil, debauchery, amorality (“égarement”), and wandering (“errance”) give way to the plural, unfixed “identities” of Juifemme (and Medusa) that cannot be contained nor precisely located and that overflow, “sending reason into a panic / making reason lose its head” (“qui affolent la raison”). If left unfetishized as identities, these uncontained, overflowing ways of being that ask questions without answers open up a space in which woman “wanders” (“erre”). With the polysemy characteristic of Cixous’ “écriture féminine,” the final two words of this passage further perform and exemplify precisely the unfixed, overflowing, wandering qualities of language and being that “madden.” Grammatically and syntactically, these final two words, “vague vole,” seem to function as descriptors that point to “la femme” who precedes them in the sentence. But “vague” can mean “wave” (as in the ocean), “vague” (unclear), or “to wander” in its verbal form (“vagner”). “Vole” is the conjugated form of the verb “voler,” which can mean “to steal” or “to fly.” Cixous’ women who produce feminine writing – like her Medusa, “hystériques,” and “Juifemme” – do both. They subvert the phallogentric patriarchal order of “reason” by “stealing” the language it claims to own, and they soar above the abyss, unfixable in their constant motion.

This subversive and unfixable “flying and stealing” way of being and writing as women works to thus reclaim “madness” as an objective, when “madness” is defined as that which does not fit within the defined parameters of patriarchal logic. This

nonconformity and “deviation” from phallocentrism’s normalized parameters bring us back to Ahmed’s definition of “queer” as that which deviates from a “straight line.” This is not coincidental: in her foreword to the 2010 reedition of “Le Rire de la Méduse,” Cixous tells us that she did not invent the title of *La Jeune Née*, the original publication in which her essay “Sorties” first appeared in 1975. Rather, it was Medusa, whom she calls “la Muse de la littérature. Une *queer*. D’autres disent la *queen des queers*. La littérature comme telle est *queer*. Dis-je” (32-33). In the following short excerpt from “Le Rire,” Cixous articulates exactly how this “queerness” takes shape through the polysemy of the verb “voler”:

Voler, c’est le geste de la femme, voler dans la langue, la faire voler. Du vol, nous avons toutes appris l’art aux maintes techniques, depuis des siècles que nous n’avons accès à l’avoir qu’en volant ; que nous avons vécu dans un vol, de voler, trouvant au désir des passages étroits, dérobés, traversants. Ce n’est pas un hasard si « voler » se joue entre deux vols, jouissant de l’un et l’autre et déroutant les agents du sens. Ce n’est pas un hasard : la femme tient de l’oiseau et du voleur comme le voleur tient de la femme et de l’oiseau : illes passent, illes filent, illes jouissent de brouiller l’ordre de l’espace, de le désorienter, de changer de place les meubles, les choses, les valeurs, de faire des casses, de vider les structures, de chambouler le propre. (58)

Indeed, the intercrossing, intermixing meanings of “to fly” and “to steal” allow Cixous to associate women, birds, and thieves, inventing a bi-gender pronoun (“illes”) that contains both the feminine and masculine pronouns associated with women (elle), birds and thieves (ils). Marked by the “illes,” this flying, darting, thieving, plural, and playful new subject serves precisely the opposite role and purpose of Ahmed’s “straightening devices.” As Cixous explains, the “illes” is/are intentionally subversive and derive joy and pleasure from interfering with and scrambling “the order of space,” and therefore “disorienting” that very order.

Keeping this image of the subversive, polyvalent, mobile, disorienting, and “queer” “illes” in mind, I turn now to Michael Rothberg’s theory of multidirectional

memory as an analogously subversive, mobile, and “queer” way to figure memory that we will see enacted in *Un été à Jérusalem* in a moment. In his introduction to *Multidirectional Memory*, Rothberg states that he rejects two assumptions about the relationship between memory and identity:

[...] [first,] that *a straight line* runs from memory to identity and [second,] that the only kinds of memories and identities that are therefore possible are ones that exclude elements of alterity and forms of commonality with others. Our relationship to the past does partially determine who we are in the present, but *never straightforwardly and directly*, and never without unexpected or even unwanted consequences that bind us to those whom we consider other. When the productive, intercultural dynamic of multidirectional memory is explicitly claimed, [...], it has the potential to create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice. (4-5; emphasis added)

Rothberg’s emphasis on the productive – and ethical – potential of refiguring (and “queering”) memory and its relationship with identity as multidirectional rather than “straight” maps onto Cixous’ emphasis on that same potential for a productive refiguring of ethics through “écriture féminine,” encapsulated in the queered pronoun “illes” in which (id)entities meet and transform each other. As we have seen, the process of reclaiming “madness” also has to do with this uncontainable disorienting plurality and participates in the confrontation with true alterity – that which for Cixous “cannot be theorized” and for Rothberg may be the “unexpected or even unwanted consequences” of a relationship with the past that is not contingent upon – or traceable from – identity in the present.

In the passage below from Boukhobza’s novel, the narrator weaves a multidirectional web of identities that illustrates the potential collaboration between Rothberg’s and Cixous’ alternative models of writing, memory, and alterity (madness):

Et moi, de quelle folie serais-je frappée ? Quelle malédiction biblique allait fondre sur moi ? Oui, pour être juive, je l’étais. Les yeux trop noirs, la paupière bistre, la joue cuivrée – olivâtre aurait dit ma mère – et la bouche trop grande, vorace, avec la lèvre inférieure qui ressemble à un plateau. Comment allais-je me peindre, me

dépeindre, en putain de basse-cour, en statue pharaonique, en guidon de vélo, en négresse ou en rescapée de Dachau, visage rayé blanc et noir et numéro gravé sur le front ? Tatouée pour tatouée, j'essayerai l'arabesque fine des berbères qui s'incisent le menton au bleu indélébile. (166)

In this passage, Boukhobza's narrator draws a self-portrait that aligns with Cixous' "Juifemme" and Medusa. The trope of women's "curse" of alterity, abjection, madness, and queerness returns here, and not only does the narrator assume it; she also associates this "curse" with her Jewishness. As she describes her physical facial features – eyes that are "too black," brown-pigmented (bister) eyelids, copper-colored cheeks that her mother would call "olive greenish" or sallow, and a mouth that is "too big" and voracious with a bottom lip that "looks like a tray" – she phenotypically marks herself and assumes her Jewishness by using the very "Othering," racializing discourse of Orientalism and antisemitism. But just as quickly as she assumes these "Other," "dark," even "abject" facial features of "Jewishness," she undercuts this very discourse by exploring various other ways she could "paint and depict" herself, thus clearly highlighting the constructed artificiality and performative aspects of all such portraits – and identities –, whether of oneself or of others. These other depictions – a "barnyard or outer courtyard prostitute," a "Pharaonic statue," a "bicycle handlebar," a "negress," or a "Dachau survivor with a white and black striped face and number engraved on her forehead" whose tattoo is transcribed and transfigured into the traditional Berber style drawn on the chin with permanent blue ink – exemplify precisely the multidirectionality that Rothberg calls for and the "flying, stealing" uncontained, plural, and subversive subjectivity that Cixous describes. Furthermore, these potential other "self-portraits" tell a Jewish women's story that relates the Holocaust with colonialism, Orientalism, and the Jewish exile in Egypt. Here then, the narrator as "Juifemme" is a locus of multidirectional memories, histories, and identities that blur and scramble the perceived boundaries between Self and Other

and gesture towards a plural “We”: “Nous, les précoces, nous les refoulées de la culture, les belles bouches barrées de bâillons, pollen, haleines coupées, nous les labyrinthes, les échelles, les espaces foulés ; les volées – nous sommes « noires » *et* nous sommes belles” (83).

Thus, the ethical dimension of multidirectional memory and “écriture féminine” is carried out precisely by redefining and “disorienting” the “We.” This involves seeing that each “I” is really part of a “We” that moves beyond and across lines of identity to include the real, untheorizable Other and not only the “Other” who merely serves as counterpart to ourselves. Thus, the “abject” is not abject, but different, and this difference is not separate from us, but rather a constitutive part of our intersubjectivity. If, as we just explored, Cixous’ myth of the Medusa as “mad” and “abject” is reclaimed through the processes of queering and disorientation which are analogous in some ways with the process of multidirectional remembering as Rothberg explains it, Cixous’ reclaiming of the abyss myth also happens from within what we could describe as multidirectional frameworks where identities, histories, and geographies meet and interact. As Cixous suggests, it is only the “queer,” joyous figure of the laughing Medusa/Juifemme who can fly above the abyss and write against death.

In the following excerpt of “Sorties,” Cixous states that the work of writing – which involves not only the labor of the woman who writes but also of her *being worked* by the writing itself – occurs in the intersubjective space in between, which is also where life happens. Without this intersubjective space, which is accessed through an ethical opening and extending of the self towards the real other, there can be no writing nor can there be life. Thus, writing from within this space – which is for Cixous the only possible location of writing – serves as a means of “undoing the work of death.” This opening and

extending toward the in-between space of writing involves not submission or passivity, but trust, confidence, and comprehension. It involves embarking on a journey of multiplying transformations, and is not without expense or loss:

Quant à la passivité, elle a, dans l'excès, partie liée avec la mort. Mais il y a une non-fermeture qui n'est pas une soumission, qui est une confiance, et une compréhension ; qui n'est pas l'occasion d'une destruction mais d'une merveilleuse extension. Par la même ouverture, qui est son risque, elle sort d'elle-même pour aller à l'autre, voyageuse de l'inexploré, elle ne dénie pas, elle approche, non pour annuler l'écart, mais pour le voir, pour faire l'expérience de ce qu'elle n'est pas, qu'elle est, qu'elle peut être. Or écrire c'est travailler ; être travaillé ; (dans) l'entre, interroger (se laisser interroger), le procès du même *et de* l'autre sans lequel nul n'est vivant ; défaire le travail de la mort, en voulant l'ensemble de l'un-avec-l'autre, dynamisé à l'infini par un incessant échange de l'un entre l'autre ne se connaissant et se recommençant qu'à partir du plus lointain – de soi, de l'autre, de l'autre en moi. Parcours multiplicateur à milliers de transformations. Et cela ne se fait pas sans risque, sans douleur, sans perte de moments de soi, de conscience, de personnes que l'on a été, que l'on dépasse, que l'on quitte. Cela ne se fait pas sans une dépense – de sens, de temps, d'orientation. (115-116)

The loss that comes with the process of ethical writing is disorienting; by opening and extending towards the other, the writer loses her sense of time, orientation, and meaning. But for Cixous, there is no alternative. Writing against death does not mean writing against loss, as loss is an inevitable part of the process of life – and of writing.

But what happens when “the other” toward whom we move in this in-between space has already left their physical body? What is the relationship between writing and grieving such losses? Can grief become its own intersubjective space of exchange and openness towards the other? Can grief-work be characterized as its own form of multidirectional memory? If feminine writing happens from, through, and with the body, what are the effects on the body of the losses inherent to the process of writing? What is the relationship between memory, grief, and “undoing the work of death”?

These questions point to yet another source of tension and ambivalence for Boukhobza's and Cohen's narrators; they are caught between the simultaneous need and

desire to remember and to orient themselves towards the future. These questions and tensions are illustrated in the following section of *Un été*, in which the narrator is dancing at her cousin Michaël's wedding in Beersheba after having she seen her grandmother, Safta, in sharp decline earlier that same day. In a long thread of thoughts and speculations about Safta's physical and psychospiritual state at this moment of her nearness to death, the narrator links her dancing with her grief. Eventually, the thoughts and speculations become an internal dialogue between the narrator and Safta in which she defends her corporeality and sexuality against her grandmother's imagined reactions:

Je danse sur son corps écartelé par la maladie, pour lui dédier les derniers feux de fête. Elle aurait apprécié les chants arabes qui s'attardent sur les variations du violon, je danse pour ces hommes contre lesquels dès l'enfance elle m'a prévenue, je danse pour ces amants que j'ai collectionnés, et ma mémoire ressemble à ces armoires à balais trop bondées, il suffirait vois-tu que j'ouvre la porte pour qu'ils se fracassent sur le sol, les Élie, Philippe, Jacques et Jacob, les Armand, Michel, Bernard, les Juifs et les goys, les circoncis et les autres, non, tais-toi, laisse-moi parler, pour une fois, ne plonge pas ta tête entre tes mains pour maudire le sort. Ce soir est sacré, Michaël a prêté serment sous la houpa et les Cheva Berahot ont retenti, entonnées par sept rabbins différents, mais je connais avec certitude le sort qui m'est réservé, je n'aurai pas ce mariage que tu as idéalisé dans une débauche de détails [...] ; vois-tu, les Élie, Philippe, Bernard ont choisi de m'enseigner l'art de la jouissance et m'ont entraînée loin de tes pudeurs et de tes réticences, [...] ; admire-moi, vois comme je sais arrondir les bras et tenir l'écharpe en avançant à petits coups de reins, [...], ne juge pas, je ne suis pas une fille facile, j'ai désappris le sens de la promesse, tout est éphémère, illusoire, je suis dans une impasse ; j'ai beau fouiller dans les images que tu as plantées dans ma mémoire, aucune ne correspond à mon présent, tu n'évoquais jamais le sexe, il me fascine, les corps sont mes délits, mes délicieux péchés ; je ne t'apprends pas ça pour accroître ta peine, mais je ne veux pas mourir envieuse, mourir acculée par la monotonie et le désarroi, oui, ce soir j'ai mal de toute cette jeunesse qui vibre dans mes jambes [...]. Ne tords pas ta bouche, tu as vécu un siècle, nous, nos minutes sont comptées avec parcimonie, aussi nous tournoyons comme des lucioles, égarées dans la confusion de nos pensées. (67-69)

This long passage, which is in fact one very long run-on sentence formed by all the free-flowing thoughts that fly through the narrator's mind as she dances, is rich in the many threads of this chapter that it brings together as it moves us towards the next – and last – section. First, the intersubjective, in-between space of writing takes place and is made

accessible through the imagined exchange between Safta and the narrator as she dances. The narrator's openness and extension towards Safta is what gives way to their imagined dialogue, while the movement of her body is analogous to the textual form of this passage as it turns, twists, and flows, without punctuation, thus performing feminine writing as Cixous describes it.

Opening and moving towards Safta as the real other also means opening towards Safta's generation of Tunisian Jewish women; the internal dialogue is thus also a meeting between the two generations and brings back the thread of intergenerational conflict and tension that Boukhobza's narrator acutely experiences. By describing herself – and peers of her own generation – as fireflies (“lucioles”) wandering and lost (“égarées”) in the confusion of their thoughts, she brings together several elements of Cixous' “Juifemme” that work against the myths of the Medusa and the abyss. The metaphor of fireflies is especially resonant for their ability to fly and the light they generate through movement. Further illustrating the intergenerational gap that underscores the narrator's sense of precarity towards the future and simultaneous need to let go of the restraints of the past, she asks Safta to suspend judgment about her behavior, particularly in terms of her sexuality.

The tension this creates is illustrated by the narrator's attempts to defend her sexual interactions with men against her grandmother's views of marriage. She uses the backdrop of her cousin Michaël's traditional Jewish wedding to her advantage in this effort, arguing that now is not the time for Safta to express her disdain and disapproval of the narrator's romantic and sexual adventures, because Michaël has done everything “by the book” and the family is in the midst of celebrating that rite of passage. In other words, Michaël's adherence to tradition exonerates the narrator from judgment, sublimates her

transnational modernity, and justifies her rejection of her own future traditional wedding and marriage the way she imagines that her grandmother imagines it. Similarly, at the same time that she rejects the image of her future self dressed in Safta's Tunisian wedding clothes, she reclaims a different aspect of her Tunisian heritage when she demands that Safta admire her as she moves her body through the forms of a Tunisian dance. This intergenerational tension is also expressed in the narrator's desire to reverse the order that Safta's life took and that it is assumed her own life will take – that she will die “envious, distressed, and cornered into monotony”; in other words, that she will be trapped between the Medusa and the abyss.

For the narrator, the only way out of this entrapment is through her body, the site of both her sexuality and her memory. In the passage, she describes her memory like an overstuffed broom closet, the contents of which will spill onto the floor if opened. This memory is created by her experiences, particularly her sexual encounters; the men “who taught her about jouissance” – and all of whom are either assimilated French Jews or non-Jews – are the brooms and mops in the metaphorical overstuffed closet. There is a sense of excess here, echoing Cixous' portrayal of the uncontained, overflowing nature of women's being. But there is also a tension between the memories that Safta “planted” for the narrator and the memories arising from the narrator's own lived experiences, thus hinting at the malleability and multidirectionality of memory as an effect of relationships and intergenerational transmission. This malleable, multidirectional memory is exemplified through the narrator's dancing body, which mirrors the flitting and moving memories that travel through her and connect temporalities with geographies, from the here and now of the wedding to the men of Paris, to the imminence of Safta's deathbed, back to their family's past in Gabès, and into the uncertain future of Israeli youth.

As she dedicates her dancing to her dying grandmother, the narrator creates her own mourning ritual, a variation on Judaic custom which in part contributes to her self-fashioning as “Juifemme.” While she dances in honor of Safta’s memory, she also dances in honor of the memory of the men who taught her about *jouissance* – thereby conjoining mourning, rituals, and sexuality within the locus of her body. Thus, corporeality, memory, and grief are entwined in the opening into the in-between space that separates the narrator from her grandmother.

In the next section, we will explore Cohen’s and Boukhobza’s own textualizations of grief, mourning, memory, and loss as very much corporeal experiences felt in the body, written through the body, and in so doing, affirming life through language. While both acknowledge the abyss, they look forward. At the same time, the embodiment and articulation of “Juifemme” as a way of being in these texts is what allows each narrator to move beyond any fixed categories and identities, but also beyond a fixed temporality and geography. As we will see in the next section, the geographies proposed in *Géographie des origines* especially, but also in *Un été à Jérusalem* draw an alternative map that suggests a redefinition of many of the ‘givens’ that would seem to organize each narrator’s life path. The “queer” roots of the first section take new depths of meaning through the imbrication of corporeality, memory, and geography that is key in drawing this new map.

Section V: Multidirectional Mourning and Palimpsestic Geographies

If Cixous urges women to come to writing and to their bodies, it is in part to finally sever the influence of the past on women’s present and future. When she writes “Il ne faut plus que le passé fasse l’avenir” (37), she gestures again towards a transcendence,

or subversion, or transmutation of grief and death that, with the alchemy of feminine writing, can become oriented towards the future and open into new beginnings. In this section, we explore Cohen's and Boukhobza's own textual-corporeal transmutations and alchemies of grief, mourning, memory and loss as gestures toward the future.

Géographie des origines begins and ends with the writer-narrator at the Parisian cemetery where her mother and maternal grandmother are buried. At the end of the text, we learn that three days have passed in the course of the book's writing: at the beginning, the narrator writes "Demain, j'irai au cimetière déposer trois cailloux..." (9) and at the end, she states "Hier, je suis allée au cimetière déposer trois cailloux..." (123). The "demain" ("tomorrow") and "hier" ("yesterday") refer to "le jour de la Toussaint" (All Saints' Day), a national holiday in France now generally recognized as a day of mourning but which originally designated a Catholic celebration of the saints and martyrs. The Catholic origins of this holiday are significant; the incipit of Cohen's narrative combines Jewish and Catholic rituals of mourning, and as the narrator places three stones atop her mother's and grandmother's tombstones, she creates a superimposition of temporalities, geographies, and ethnocultural practices. By opening her book with the narrator's talk of visiting the cemetery on All Saints' Day and adapting this Catholic holiday to the modalities of Jewish grieving rituals, Cohen immediately sets up a central theme and preoccupation that runs throughout the text; the narrator imagines, fashions, and understands herself as a "transplant" in France through repeated imagery of the *Welwitschia mirabilis*, a centuries-old desert plant native to Namibia and Angola. Because the text is bookended by the superimposition of Catholic and Jewish mourning rituals and traditions, readers understand immediately that adaptation and grafting of identities, practices, and spaces will be central to the movement of the text.

The mourning ritual that begins and ends the text not only symbolizes a cultural palimpsest of French Catholic and Judaic religious traditions, but also a palimpsest that links the familial and the intimate with the collective and the historical. Collective because she participates in a national holiday meant for mourning, and historical because French-Algerian colonial history is in fact embedded within this simple scene. The grave at the Parisian cemetery is in fact imbued with and haunted by the family's past in Algeria. As Cohen's narrator later explains, her mother and grandmother never imagined they would be buried in Paris rather than Algeria, and their final resting place is far from the plot in Sidi-bel-Abbès that her grandmother had long ago purchased for the entire family. The narrator's grandfather is the only member of the family who is buried in Algeria, and as we will see, the memory of his early death catapults the narrator away from the Parisian cemetery on the eve of All Saints Day and into the colonial Algeria of her youth, thus creating a multidirectional framework of memory and mourning.

In the opening paragraph of the text, Cohen sets up a series of contrasts:

Demain, j'irai au cimetière déposer trois cailloux pour les miens ensevelis sous la terre de l'Île-de-France, trois cailloux sur une pierre exposée nuit et jour à l'immensité céleste. Pour moi, la terre de la mort ne peut être celle de la naissance. *Madre mía* et mamie aussi, sans le grand-père Prosper enterré sous une dalle de granit gris dans le cimetière de ma ville de naissance, même si tout est cassé, détruit, méconnaissable, dans le cimetière oranais à l'ouest de la terre algérienne. (9)

First, her dead buried beneath the earth contrasts with the stones above ground that endure constant exposure to "the celestial immensity" of weather and changing seasons, and thus human mortality is contrasted with the immutable and permanent stones of commemoration. Second, death and birth are set in opposition with each other and localized within two separate "countries" so that the separation between birth and death takes geographical meaning. Third, "terre" and "immensité céleste" create a contrast

between the earthly and the heavenly. Finally, the two cemeteries – one in Île-de-France and the other in western Algeria – contrast each other not only in terms of geographical location (north and south, here and there) but also in terms of history; the narrator alludes to the violence and destruction of the Algerian War for independence. While the Algerian cemetery is “broken, destroyed, and unrecognizable,” the Parisian cemetery is vast and intact. These contrasts draw attention to what the narrator perceives as an irreparability that characterizes the ruptures of her life – death, loss, and postcolonial relocation – all of which have brought her to the particular “here and now” where she finds herself at the text’s beginning – and where she will again find herself at the end.⁷⁶

As the narrator continues to anticipate the mourning that will occur tomorrow on All Saints Day, she brings a very corporeal dimension to the anticipated scene: “Demain, j’irai sur la terre de mes défunts embrasser la pierre de leurs corps. Je me brûlerai les yeux à force de fixer les dates insensées” (9). The bodies of “her dead” become the stone itself, and she will kiss them. There is also an implied violence having to do with the narrator’s own body; she anticipates that her eyes will burn – from the bitter cold to which she eventually alludes – but also from trying to “fixer les dates insensées,” an expression that allows several possibilities in translation. “Fixer” can mean “to set,” “to settle,” “to contain,” and “to establish.” Followed by the direct object – “senseless dates,” which refers to the dates marking the births and deaths of her family members – the verb “fixer” could have any of these various meanings. That the narrator’s eyes will burn as a

⁷⁶ The text ends ostensibly two days after it begins; while it begins with her plans for tomorrow (“Demain”), it finishes with a summary of what she did yesterday: “Hier, je suis allée au cimetière déposer trois cailloux pour les miens ensevelis sous la terre de l’Île-de-France, trois cailloux sur une pierre exposée nuit et jour à l’immensité céleste. La terre de la mort n’est pas celle de la naissance” (123). This ending statement reads like a thesis; while at the beginning, she states her hypothesis (« Pour moi, la terre de la mort *ne peut être* celle de la naissance ») at the end, she states it as a definitive conclusion based on her explorations throughout the text (« La terre... *n’est pas* la terre... »)

result of trying to make sense of something senseless conveys the violent ruptures of loss and death; loss forces us to confront our lack of control, which is bound up in our inability to represent or recover what was lost. In *Lost Beyond Telling: Representations of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry*, Richard Stamelman writes: “To be human is to know loss and to struggle with it. Yet we do more than confront and wrestle with loss. We also struggle to undo it, to reverse its actions, to find ways around it. We fill the hole that it opens in our lives with something meaningful, as if this tear in the fabric of human existence could ever be completely repaired” (3-4). This struggle to “undo loss” is ultimately futile because loss is permanent, and this is precisely what Cohen’s narrator confronts. The verb “fixer” is especially apt here as a way of echoing the fixedness of the stones; the narrator thus affirms the permanence of the “senseless dates” that will not change, nor will the stone into which they are engraved.

While the stone will remain static and fixed, the temporality expressed in the lines of the first page contrasts the image of the stone; the anticipation of the future (“Demain j’irai au cimetière”) is immediately followed by a recollection of the past (“On a pensé à lui, Prosper, quand mamie s’est cachée sous terre”). This is a very mobile, “multidirectional” temporality, in which the present moment is inflected with both the future and the past. The monolithic gravestone serves as the physical meeting point between these temporalities, which paradoxically seems to exist outside of time. And yet, it is the marker of time with dates inscribed into its surface, thus representing a convergence of temporalities. As it bears witness to the passage of time, it shows no signs of time’s impact on its physical materiality.

Her grandmother’s death and burial sparks memories of that of her grandfather, Prosper, and this in turn rekindles memories of Sidi-bel-Abbès in July 1952. As the

narrator recalls the atmosphere – both interior and exterior – surrounding her grandfather’s decline, readers are slowly walked away from this intimate family scene and into the surrounding neighborhood of colonial Sidi-bel-Abbès, and eventually back to the Parisian cemetery, which we learn does in fact bear a trace of Prosper’s memory. His name, dates, and a Star of David are engraved on the mother’s and grandmother’s headstone:

On a pensé à lui, Prosper, quand mamie s’est cachée sous terre. On a pensé qu’il était resté tout seul, sans personne, sans visite, sans caillou, sans bruyère, sans rien. On a pensé à ce 19 juillet 1952 à Sidi-bel-Abbès, cette ville à crever la bouche ouverte d’une chaleur sans nom. Je n’avais pas dix ans. Il faisait frais, frais dans la chambre aux chandelles, aux veilleuses, où Pépère avait reposé puis donné son dernier souffle. La chambre était au bout d’un long couloir, dans cet immense appartement du 14, rue Prudon (on l’écrivait comme ça, sans *h*), en face du cinéma *Le Versailles*. C’était pour moi Versailles, pour ma mère aussi qui ne parlait jamais de ses émois de jeune fille, mais moi je sais, je ne sais pas ce que je sais, mais je sais. Plus personne ne me dira. Prosper figure désormais sur la stèle parisienne, son nom, son prénom, des dates, une étoile de David, en dehors du carré juif, au milieu des autres, en cette terre de France et de là-bas. (9-10)

The last sentence of this passage is particularly significant as it introduces us to a conceptualization of geography as palimpsestic; the commemoration of her grandfather in the Parisian cemetery is described in hybrid, liminal terms. He is thus included in the postcolonial life/trajectory/story of his family, but this also entails an exclusion from Jewish community and an uprooting. “Cette terre de la France et de là-bas” (“this land of France and over there”) implies her grandfather’s very liminal “location,” but also the palimpsestic nature of (post)colonial history for Algerian Jews in particular. Indeed, Cohen’s narrator suggests here – and emblemizes through the image of her grandfather’s Parisian headstone – that French and Algerian (hi)stories and geographies remain inextricably linked beyond the end of French colonial control of Algeria. There is a clearly delineated separation between “cette terre de France” and “[celle] de là-bas”, but

a joining or meeting of the two is emblemized and inscribed by the grandfather's name on the headstone.

The narrator thus creates a multilayered and multidirectional mode of mourning and memory; the geographies of "here" (Paris) and "there" (Sidi-bel-Abbès) are superimposed and inflect one another, while the temporalities of the narrator's "now" and "then" equally influence each other. The cold November northern geography of the "here and now" seems to ground the narrator in the immediate physicality of the act of mourning at her family's grave in the Parisian cemetery while that very same act sends her on an inward journey across time and space to the hot July day in Sidi-bel-Abbès when her grandfather died, and then to the day of their arrival in Paris after uprooting from Sidi-bel-Abbès and leaving Algeria behind forever:

Demain, je serai couverte de la tête aux pieds dans ce pays de France où novembre est déjà froid. Pas de tenue de demi-saison, des bonnets, des écharpes, des gants, bientôt décembre, sans plus pouvoir desserrer les dents, les mains, griffes d'un climat à ne vouloir ni vivre ni mourir. Sur la pierre tombale sont déjà gravées tant d'indications. Ma mère nous a laissés un 22 décembre dans la V^e division d'un cimetière parisien, Dieu qu'il faisait froid, si froid dans nos os ! Abêtis saisis glacés interloqués. Tant de froid à vivre, à venir, comme l'année du retour, 1962, malgré les escaliers magnifiques et mécaniques de l'aéroport d'Orly. Descendre, monter, encore et encore.
Demain j'irai au cimetière. Elle a préféré partir un jour de grand froid. Je préfère, mille fois je préfère. Ce que ce pays nous aura appris ! (11)

By associating Paris (and France) with death, when the narrator exclaims "Ce que ce pays nous aura appris!", she affirms the educative prowess of grief and mourning, and of human mortality. The cold itself seems to be instructive in this regard; for her, the Parisian winter climate makes her want to neither live nor die, thus suspending her in a perpetual liminality. The cold works as a metaphor for grief; a grief that does not let you live fully but nonetheless makes clear that you are still alive, a grief that ties you to the present moment. Through the narrator's bodily experience of the cold cemetery and the

memories it provokes, French-Algerian colonial history is not only superimposed atop and embedded within the act of mourning; it is inscribed in the tombstone itself. Indeed, Cohen's narrator suggests that we can read the tombstone as a map: "sur la pierre tombale sont déjà gravées tant d'indications" (11).

A few paragraphs later, the palimpsestic mourning described in the opening pages (and indeed throughout the entirety of the text) goes one layer deeper: the narrator eventually asks if she also has a responsibility to go to Auschwitz on the day of mourning:

Puis-je dire que j'aurais pu tout aussi bien me rendre à Auschwitz, en ce jour des morts ? Mais non, mais non, elle ne l'aurait pas souhaité, jamais elle n'aurait souhaité que j'y aille, ni demain ni jamais. Ne t'inquiète pas, ne t'inquiète pas ! Il le faudrait pourtant. Pas possible de finir sans s'y rendre. Je veux sa bénédiction, je demande sa bénédiction pour tous les choix de ma vie, je guette son apparition, je l'attends. J'entends une voix, ce n'est pas la sienne qui me répond : fais ce que tu veux, mais ne laisse jamais la paresse envahir le fond de ta pensée, même si le désert ronge ta substance vitale, même si les branches auxquelles tu tiens sont sur le point de fléchir. C'est pour l'entendre que je viens poser mon front sur la dalle de marbre noir et luisant. Ce n'est pas elle qui vient de parler, mais un homme, un homme pieux. Que me dit-il ? Que pense-t-il ? Est-ce un devoir de s'y rendre ?
(12)

Here, Auschwitz takes on a symbolic meaning as a historical and memorial dilemma. The narrator first wonders if she has a duty to go to the site itself, thus bringing her personal, familial mourning into the collective, public responsibility to remember. She finds reassurance as she reminds herself that her mother would not have wanted her to – at least not as an extension of the mourning she is already doing for her family. But despite her mother's imagined reassurances and urging her "not to worry," the narrator states that "it would be necessary, eventually, and it is impossible to not end up going there" ("Il le faudrait pourtant. Pas possible de finir sans s'y rendre"). For the narrator, "Auschwitz" – as metonymy for the Holocaust and the memory surrounding it – is portrayed as an inevitability that must eventually be confronted. The difference between her mother's

imagined response and her own felt sense of responsibility exemplifies the shifting Jewish attitudes between generations towards the Holocaust; while the mother does not want to dwell on it, or worry about it, the daughter recognizes that she must.

Even if she understands the inevitable necessity of mourning the collective loss and trauma of the Holocaust, she waits for her mother's blessing as she negotiates her sense of both duty and dread. After waiting attentively for her mother to "appear," she finally hears a voice, but it is not her mother's. A man's voice gives her his blessing to "do what you want, but do not let laziness invade your thinking, even when the desert eats at you and the branches you hold onto are about to bend." To better hear this male voice, the narrator rests her forehead on her mother's gravestone as she contemplates the mystery of his apparition and message; in this mysterious, almost folkloric moment, we (and she) learn that the voice belongs to "a pious man." As she wonders what he is telling her, what he thinks, and whether it is indeed a duty to go to Auschwitz, readers are also left wondering who this man is, although the question of his identity does not seem to perplex the narrator as much as the meaning and implications of his message.

Who is this "pious man"? He could be a Hassid, an Ashkenazic sect of Judaism known for extreme piety, most of whom perished in the Shoah, or a rabbi, or a Moses-like figure. All of these archetypal figures, none of whom would be strangers to suffering and mourning, are possible and lend a multidirectional and palimpsestic quality to the narrator's work of remembering. The first part of his message – "do not let laziness invade your thinking" – resonates with Hannah Arendt's controversial thesis that the Nazi takeover and genocide was precisely the result of an "absence of thinking."⁷⁷ Thus, the

⁷⁷ In "Eichmann in Jerusalem," her report on the Eichmann Trial first published in the *New Yorker*, Arendt famously wrote that Eichmann exemplified "the banality of evil." By this, she meant that for every accusation and testimony used as evidence of his guilt, Eichmann unashamedly admitted to everything, and from his perspective seemed to believe he had done nothing wrong. With his repeated use of clichés and the

man's message serves as a warning, a reminder to the narrator – and reader – that laziness in thought has dangerous implications. The second part of his message – an encouragement to remain strong and keep moving (and thinking) even when the desert eats away at her and the branches she uses for support begin to bend – acknowledges the difficulty of the task at hand. This pious man is also wise and experienced; though the archetypes of the Hassid, the rabbi, and Moses he carries traits of the figures of the prophet and witness we saw earlier in Boukhobza's novel. The two parts of his message – warning and encouragement – encapsulate the dilemmas surrounding Holocaust memory for many Jews of Annie Cohen's generation. Thus, the inevitability of "Auschwitz" is not so much the act of traveling there as a response to the call of duty to remember, but rather it is the dilemmas – characterized by active thinking and perseverance to keep moving forward – surrounding the question of remembering Auschwitz as a duty that are inevitable. For Cohen's narrator as well as for Boukhobza's, it is this tension between remembering the past and moving forward into the future that shapes their narratives as well as their generation.

Eventually, Cohen's narrator attempts to find a way around this inevitability: "La terre, on le sait bien !... La géographie plus que l'histoire !... Ne plus dire : il était une fois, mais : il était là-bas !... La terre, la ville, les marches, le désert, les pays de nos corps perdus, les pays perdus de nos corps présents, les pérégrinations depuis la nuit des temps, les errances, les histoires" (28). In this passage, which foretells what becomes a refrain throughout the text, the narrator professes her preference for geography over history when it comes to telling and narrating stories – "once upon a time" versus "it was over

stock response that he was just following orders, Eichmann's "stupidity" was crystallized for Arendt. For her, "just following orders" was the equivalent of an absence of thinking. See key excerpts in Peter Baehr's edited volume of Arendt's work, *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, pp. 313-388.

there” – and “knowing” (interpreting) the past.⁷⁸ But, rather than eschew history altogether, the narrator in fact grafts history and geography – both familial and official – together in the site of her family members’ bodies as well as her own body. After listing a series of locations (“la terre” / the land/earth, “la ville” / the city, “les marches” / the stairs, “le desert” / the desert), the narrator seems to continue her list: “les pays de nos corps perdus, les pays perdus de nos corps présents” (“the countries of our lost bodies, lost countries of our present bodies”). The peregrinations and errances are themselves stories, but they are also histories, and by blurring the distinction between story and history, she articulates here a kind of “palimpsestic geography” with the body as the site of confluence and superimposition of the geographical layers that create the palimpsest.

In the following short passage, Cohen’s narrator confronts her place of birth, moving us away in time and space from the scene of the Parisian cemetery: “Je suis née le jour de la Saint-Jean-de-Dieu à Sidi-bel-Abbès. Je n’y suis pour rien. *Sèbba-leb-idis*, ma ville lue à l’envers, je veux dire de droite à gauche : *eirégla* déréglée. *Algérie* pour toujours déréglée. On répète. On le répète. On le chante, à l’endroit, à l’envers” (13). Here, Cohen echoes Cixous, first by alluding to the accidental happenstance of the place of her birth: “je n’y suis pour rien” (it has nothing to do with me), implying that she did not choose this birthplace, and that like Cixous, it could have just as easily been

⁷⁸ She echoes this same predilection for geography here:

S’échapper. Regarder la fougère qui naît en nous. On naît ici, on meurt ailleurs. Devenir sans cesse une autre plante. Écrire pour parcourir un itinéraire ou dessiner une géographie qui rejoint parfois celle de la jeunesse et du corps. Géographie à venir sur une feuille de papier blanc, dessin à l’encre de Chine qui propose de nouvelles cartographies. Oui, ne plus écrire : ‘il était une fois’, mais ‘il était là-bas’, à Blida, à Guelma, à Sidi-bel-Abbès. Les histoires s’emmêlent, se brouillent, se mélange, se confondent. Le fil se casse quand des personnages se répendent. Aucune fiction, que du songe, de la réminiscence ! *L’écriture est une exploration du néant à travers le vocable* (Jabès). Géographie des origines pour toujours en revenant aux paysages mouvants qui se transforment à peine sous l’effet des forces internes, géologiques, déformant les reliefs, les terrains, les apparences. (56-57)

somewhere else. Her play with words also echoes Cixous' poststructuralist approach to language – by deconstructing these place names, Cohen conveys what for her is the senselessness of (post)colonial Algeria. Indeed, she implies that, just as reading “Sidi-bel-Abbès” backwards evokes the entirely arbitrary coincidence of her birth having taken place there rather than somewhere else, reading “Algérie” backwards (from right to left) evokes the chaotic disordering of Algeria engendered by the war for colonial independence and its aftermath. Embedded within the experiment of reading these place names “backwards” is in fact a sharp critique of postcolonial Algeria; the narrator suggests that the damage is permanent (“Algérie pour toujours dérégulée”). And yet, her attitude towards Algeria and Sidi-bel-Abbès is more ambivalent than overtly and solely critical; she claims some possessive ownership and affiliation – perhaps even mild affection – for Sidi-bel-Abbès by naming it “her city” (“ma ville”), and a city that furthermore can be “read.” By portraying her city as a text, the narrator appropriates it and takes control of it precisely through reading it backwards and revealing the violence and chaos of which it has become a site. Although Algeria is for her permanently disordered, the irreversibility of this fact is mirrored and performed in language through infinite repetition which eventually becomes the language of song. The formulation “on le chante, à l’endroit, à l’envers” (“one sings it, right side up, upside down/backwards”) does nothing to disambiguate; is the song referred to here a joyful or a mournful one? Perhaps, true to the nature of grief and elegy as Cixous conceives it, it is both.⁷⁹ Ultimately, the playful means of conveying ambivalence towards Sidi-bel-Abbès and Algeria through the image of reading backwards that Cohen’s narrator begins in this

⁷⁹ Cixous’ emphasis on “singing the abyss” (chanter l’abîme) is especially resonant here.

passage opens into a larger reflection on the very questions of origins and orientations as we explored earlier. I pick up these threads again here to bring them to new light.

The section that immediately follows the above passage in the text elaborates these themes of questionable origins and orientations, and as we will see, begins to develop an alternative approach to geography that is anchored and sourced in language:

On cherche à dire qu'il ne se cache rien sous la ville de naissance, sous la terre de naissance, mais si, mais si, mais quoi ! On dit tout de travers pour retomber sur ses pattes, on empoigne les appellations, on les tord dans le bon sens, Alger devient *regla*, c'est comme ça, c'est réglé ! D'où vient cette manière de tout chambouler, de lire la langue des noms propres comme on lit celle des langues de là-bas, de droite à gauche, d'où ça vient ? Ça vient d'un soleil trop blanc, astre puissant, totalitaire, sanguinaire, qui autorise l'ombre avec parcimonie. Ça vient du désert qui gagne chaque jour du terrain vers le nord. Ça vient des cailloux qui envahissent mon corps dans un souci d'adéquation avec la terre qui me constitue.
(13)

Here, the narrator conceptualizes her city and country of birth as archaeological sites that conceal something hidden beneath them,⁸⁰ and gives physical form to the concept of palimpsestic geographies. As she wonders what exactly is hidden below the surface of her native region, she returns to language as an archaeological tool for unearthing the hidden mystery. She acknowledges the manipulative function of language that allows us to “say everything wrong” (“dire tout de travers”) so that we may “land on our feet” (“pour retomber sur ses pattes”) by “seizing names and twisting them in the right direction” (“on empoigne les appellations, on les tord dans le bon sens”); in other words, we use language to make narratives that suit us. These narratives can be contained within a simple “appellation” (“name/designation”) so that “Alger” when read backwards suddenly undoes and reverses the permanent disorder and chaos of “Algérie – eirégla – déréglée”: “Alger” becomes “régla” (“ordered”; “resolved”) and thus restores order.

⁸⁰ As we will see in the following chapter, Hélène Cixous also imagines and figures Algeria, and Oran more specifically, not only as an accidental place of birth, but also as a place underneath which is concealed “a heart.”

Cohen's narrator then enacts her theory; by reversing the letters in a name and the re-reading and re-signification that this act inspires, history is refigured and order restored.

And yet, she demonstrates uncertainty towards her own theory when she asks, "d'où vient cette manière de tout chambouler, de lire la langue des noms propres comme on lit celle des langues de là-bas, de droite à gauche, d'où ça vient?" ("Where does it come from, this way of mixing it all up, of reading the language of proper nouns as one reads that of the languages from over there, from right to left, where does it come from?"; my trans.). She answers her own question with a description of what for her is a harsh desert landscape and distances herself from the Maghreb, the very region of her birth, by referring to the Semitic languages "from over there" that are read from right to left. She plays with the concept of origins by asking "d'où ça vient?" so that the question takes on geographical dimensions as well as more philosophical and epistemological ones. Indeed, she seems to be asking from where within herself this idea of re-reading/re-writing/re-orienting comes as much as from which geographical region this practice emerges.

At the same time, by figuring cities as (rewritten) texts, she emphasizes the etymological origins of "geography" – writing and earth, writing the earth. If geography is the practice of "writing the earth," then the earth is a text that bears the marks of human creation and destruction. By personifying and politicizing the desert landscape and topography of her native Algeria with epithets such as "a bloodthirsty/bloody and totalitarian sun" and "a desert that gains territory towards the north," Cohen's narrator generates a new geography (and history) of her native region. This new geography and history allude to a kind of violence; there is something forceful and penetrative about "the pebbles that invade her body to ensure harmony with the earth of which she is made" ("des cailloux qui envahissent mon corps dans un souci d'adéquation avec la terre qui me

constitue”). In this stunning phrase, the narrator makes the relationship between geography and human beings (and bodies, particularly her own) an explicitly mutually constitutive one. There are echoes of this mutual “shared body” relationship in Cixous’ “Sorties”:

S’il y a un « propre » de la femme, c’est paradoxalement sa capacité de se dé-proprier sans calcul : corps sans fin, sans « bout », sans « parties » principales, si elle est un tout, c’est un tout composé de parties qui sont des toutes, non pas simples objets partiels, mais ensemble mouvant et changeant, illimité cosmos qu’Éros parcourt sans repos, immense espace astral. Elle ne tourne pas autour d’un soleil plus astre que les astres. (118)

Cixous’ image of women’s endless bodies that are a totality composed of totalities, all of which are constantly moving and changing, indeed echoes Cohen’s formulation of the narrator’s shared body with the earth. Cixous’ emphasis on the plurality of the cosmos, which mirrors women’s “self” (“propre”) that is in fact defined by the capacity to remain open, fluid, permeable, conveys some of the vulnerability that exposes women to the violence that Cixous and Cohen describe.

To return now to Cohen’s long passage as it continues, the new kind of geography first articulated in the above excerpt becomes interconnected with a new kind of history and memory. Here the narrator emphasizes pluralities and mixing, conveying the sense of porosity and permeability that Cixous associates with women’s bodies, desire, and being. As the passage below demonstrates, the violence of the past is transcended through the plurality and porosity:

Sous les lettres du nom de famille, une ville, des villes, un ciel, des ciels, nous en avons plusieurs. Sous la semelle de nos souliers crottés, la trace des pérégrinations, l’histoire de nos voyages, de nos départs, de nos exils, de nos marches, et sans jamais craindre les expatriations, les expulsions. Tout est mélangé, empilé, recouvert, conforme à une géographie en devenir, une histoire en marche. On peut aller de gauche à droite et de droite à gauche, ajouter des feuilles aux mille feuilles, ne jamais cesser d’apporter de l’eau à ce qui va pousser demain, à ce qui va advenir, survenir, échoir, toujours demain. (13)

The narrator acknowledges the violence of the desert and of the past here; she alludes to the journeys, exiles, departures, travels, and walks through the landscapes of her family history that she and her family members have taken, supposedly “without fearing expatriations and expulsions.” The narrator advocates for (and in fact performs) a reading of the past that is anchored in the present with an orientation towards the future; the palimpsestic and archaeological – that is to say multilayered – nature of the present moment is made explicit here. The narrator’s emphasis on history and geography that are in the process of becoming and being made (“une histoire en marche” – “a history in motion” and “une géographie en devenir” – “a geography in the making”) signals the great (re)generative and creative potential/capacity of this new kind of history and geography. When she states “tout est mélangé, empilé, recouvert, conforme à une géographie en devenir, une histoire en marche,” (“everything is mixed up, piled up, covered, in compliance with a geography in the making, a history in motion”⁸¹) the narrator affirms the multidirectional and palimpsestic qualities of the past that in fact provide the necessary conditions for the generative geography and history that she describes. What she suggests here is powerful; thinking of the past as a multidirectional palimpsest of layered, mixed, covered over elements allows for new relationships with that past to form, and this in turn informs and shapes the present and future. The way these new relationships are formed and nurtured comes in part from a reorientation; going from left to right and then from right to left, always bringing water to that which will grow (“pousser”), occur (“advenir”), come to pass (“survenir”) and fall due (“échoir”)

⁸¹ Other possible interpretations of “une histoire en marche” might be a history that moves forward and is in development, or more literally “a history that walks” (potentially referring to exiles/exodus) and/or “a history that marches on” (conveying the political use of History as destroyer of individual agency). A “history that marches on” also carries potential references to the Holocaust (death marches) and/or Israel (militaristic language).

tomorrow. Just as the metaphor of the earth – and therefore the body – as text allows her to redefine her perception of her orientation (which also serves as metaphor for the practice of reading and writing), the metaphor of the desert plant that requires water to grow allows for a reorientation in terms of temporality and a redefinition of the relationship with the past by shifting the focus to that which will occur in the future.

As this very long section which spans the first few pages of the text continues, the metaphors are solidified and crystallized. This leads to an unequivocal *reordering* as response to the narrator's perception of the *disordering* of Algeria after its colonial independence:

Alimenter la plante du désert. Celle dont les larges feuilles grasses s'étalent à la surface d'un sol mouvant, et qui va chercher loin la goutte d'eau, la source, la vie, à cent mètres de profondeur, la Welwichia Mirabilis à la porte du désert, dans la nuit noire des origines. Sous terre, à l'ombre des siècles, les longues racines de la mémoire, celles qui soutiennent l'univers. Ineffable mystère ! Ne pas craindre d'oublier, ne pas craindre, pour mieux se rappeler l'autre mémoire, hors du champ de la mémoire et de l'enfance ! Ne pas craindre de dérouler la bobine d'une histoire à inventer, à élaborer, à édifier pour se soumettre enfin à une géographie nouvelle, inimaginable. La topographie du monde se constitue sous nos yeux, les racines se déplacent avec les aléas de l'Histoire. (14)

The metaphor of the desert plant that needs watering and symbolizes the potential of the future is (literally) extended here so that its roots, with an impressive depth of reach below the earth's layers in order to find water, become the "long roots of memory" which "support the universe." The image of memory as the long roots of a plant seeking water so that it may continue to live into the present and future fits into the reoriented geography and history alluded to in the earlier section of this passage; memory is our connection to the past which in fact nourishes and sustains our capacity to grow into the future.

But, as this section continues, the narrator articulates an entirely new theory of memory that contrasts and contradicts the psychoanalytic understanding of memory as

that which comes from personally lived experience in the past: “Sous terre, à l’ombre des siècles, les longues racines de la mémoire, celles qui soutiennent l’univers. Ineffable mystère ! Ne pas craindre d’oublier, ne pas craindre, pour mieux se rappeler l’autre mémoire, hors du champ de la mémoire et de l’enfance !” (“Underground, in the shade/shadow of the centuries, the long roots of memory, those which support the universe. Ineffable mystery! Do not be afraid to forget, not to fear, in order to better recall/remember the other memory, outside of the field of memory and childhood!”). What is this “other memory”? As the narrator tells us, the only way to access it is by apparently forgetting the memory of childhood; this implies a kind of liberation from one’s past, suggesting that in fact the “long roots of memory” bring sustenance to the desert plant through a process of forgetting that then allows for a new kind of remembering, and this new remembering in turn brings about a different kind of memory.

In the context of post-Holocaust Jewish memory, this is a powerful statement and redefinition of the terms of memory. As we will see in Chapter III, the act of remembering for Cixous’ and Robin’s generation is one of impossible reconciliation. By contrast, Cohen’s articulation here of a potential letting go of memory as duty and responsibility is a powerful moment of self-liberation from the memory of an oppressive traumatic past, whether directly lived or inherited by ‘the generation of post-memory’ to which she belongs. “Post-memory” as Marianne Hirsch defines it in *The Generation of Postmemory*

[...] describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—to experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory’s connection to the past is thus actually mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation. (5)

The imaginative and creative mediation of the past that occurs out of necessity for moving through and forward into the present and future is precisely what Cohen's narrator advocates for here. Just as geography and history are reoriented towards the future in this passage, so too is memory. And yet, the question remains: does Cohen really carry out and perform the theory she proposes in this text? Arguably, her narrator is preoccupied and haunted by Auschwitz, by the colonial past, and by her own childhood. Indeed, as the narrator stands in the Parisian cemetery, she states "En ce jour de Toussaint, je pense à la Shoah" (30). While she advocates for the possibility of a future-oriented memory that serves the purpose of growth and sustenance, the text is imbued with grief and traumatic memories. There is thus a tension produced by the desire to forget or move beyond the memory of childhood and the haunting presence of that very memory, suggesting the impossibility of forgetting no matter how strong the desire to do so.

Yet, this section continues with the following few sentences: "Ne pas craindre de dérouler la bobine d'une histoire à inventer, à élaborer, à édifier pour se soumettre enfin à une géographie nouvelle, inimaginable. La topographie du monde se constitue sous nos yeux, les racines se déplacent avec les aléas de l'Histoire" ("To not be afraid of unraveling/unrolling the reel of a (hi)story to invent, to elaborate, to build in order to finally submit to a new, unimaginable geography. The topography of the world is constituted before our eyes, the roots move with the vagaries of History"; my trans.). The narrator directs us (and herself) to not be afraid of unraveling/unrolling the reel/spool that (it is implied) holds the threads that make up the past. The unraveling/unrolling that the narrator recommends is what allows for and opens up the regenerative and creative possibilities of inventing, elaborating, and building new stories and geographies. The

earlier image of History and Geography in the making returns here; that “the world’s topography constitutes itself before our eyes” signifies that everything is in process and nothing is permanently made. Cohen’s narrator argues against the concept of a monolithic and immutable Historical past, as well as a fixed geography, suggesting instead that the world is far from “set”; it is in constant motion and process. Once again, the analogy with the act of writing clearly accentuates the argument that nothing is fixed and that there is only motion and process; “the topography of the world” refers to the arrangement of various geographic elements and the representation of these elements on a map, which is written.⁸² The second clause of the last sentence (“les racines se déplacent avec les aléas de l’Histoire” / ‘the roots move with the vagaries of History’) connects back to the metaphor of roots as memory. In this clause, it is implied that the moving, mobile roots trace the unpredictable movements of History, and therefore, the constant mobility of that which constitutes the “here and now” is fed and sustained by the unpredictability of History itself. At the same time as these roots bring sustenance and nourishment, there is a certain violence implied as well. The roots are forced to adapt to the hazards and risks engendered by History, and this implies that memory is irrevocably changed by these unpredictable whims of History.

The very long excerpt of Cohen’s text under discussion here concludes with the following passage:

Parle-moi encore des couches géologiques du pays accidentel de ma petite naissance ! Juste pour apprendre, juste pour savoir, pour ranger le tout dans un coin du tiroir de famille, pour ne pas se complaire dans l’ignorance, ne jamais oublier qu’on est fabriqués des mêmes couches animées, changeantes et préhistoriques. On n’en restera pas là, c’est sûr. On ne fermera pas les portes sur l’inconnu des scènes cachées derrière les apparences. On tentera de suivre la trace d’une géographie qui ne s’accommode que de l’avenir. Nous adopterons cette ligne, car elle s’accorde avec une histoire millénaire inscrite sous nos ongles.

⁸² The etymological roots of ‘topography’ extend back to the Greek words for *place(s)* (‘topos’) and *writing* (‘graphy’).

Nous saurons reconnaître les paysages du monde déjà écrits en nous-même, la reculée d'une vallée jurassienne, le reste d'une rivière ensevelie, la butte témoin sur un plateau déchiqueté ou la combe de Lourmarin, Lourmarin où est enterré Camus. Nous saurons que le lien entre hier et aujourd'hui est toujours à faire et que le repos tellurique n'est pas pour demain. (14-15)

This passage begins with word play which weaves a common thread throughout. The use of the word “couches” takes on double meaning here: in its scientific sense, the noun refers to geological layers/strata, but in a more literary (and old-fashioned) sense, it can refer to childbirth. That the narrator demands of her interlocutor, whoever that may be, to “speak to her of the geological layers of the accidental country of her ‘little’ (insignificant) birth” connects the geological matter that forms the Earth to the labor and process of childbirth. The geological palimpsest upon/from which earthly life forms provides the backdrop and foundation of the accidental location of her birth. As we will see in Chapter III, Cixous and Robin also allude to the “accidental” nature of the geographical and temporal locations of their birth. While Cohen’s narrator articulates a clear, deep sense of belonging and connection to the earth itself earlier in the excerpt under discussion (“la terre qui me constitue”), here she distances herself by highlighting the accidental, arbitrary location of her birth that is also the very same “land of which she is made.” There are two important implications that come from this: first, if the country of her birth is accidental, does this then also mean that her birth itself is accidental? Second, the layers that constitute the land which in turn constitutes the narrator herself thus make of the narrator an embodied palimpsest. She carries those layers within her body, as her body itself is constituted by those very layers. The double meaning of “couches” comes into play here as well; her body carries not only the geological layers, but also the experience of childbirth through both the corporeal memory of her own birth and the capacity for her body to give birth. Thus, the double meaning of *couches*

contributes to the reorientation for which this excerpt calls; the geological layers point towards the past as they bear witness to the mark of time's passage on the earth, while the childbirth imagery points towards the future and the possibility of new generations.

The sentence that immediately follows (“Juste pour apprendre, juste pour savoir, pour ranger le tout dans un coin du tiroir de famille, pour ne pas se complaire dans l’ignorance, ne jamais oublier qu’on est fabriqués des mêmes couches animées, changeantes et préhistoriques.”) reinforces and reiterates the connection between the earth and human beings as the narrator implores us to “never forget that we are made of the same animated layers, changing and prehistoric.” Here too, the tension between past, present, and future is highlighted; the prehistoric layers which have obviously endured the passage of time are nonetheless dynamic, mutable, and mobile. As she reiterates the fact of our constitutional make-up as one with the earth, and therefore with the past, the narrator also explains the rationale for this reiteration: “so as to not indulge in ignorance, to never forget that out of which we are made.” At the same time, she does not advocate for an indulgence in this knowledge of the past; it can be tucked away “in a corner of the family drawer.” In other words, knowing where we come from is important, but this knowledge need not take an active part in the process of carrying out our lives in the present and future. The narrator finalizes this attitude towards the past when she unequivocally states “On n’en restera pas là, c’est sûr. On ne fermera pas les portes sur l’inconnu des scènes cachées derrière les apparences” (“We will not stay there, that is for sure. We will not close the doors on what is unknown of scenes hidden behind appearances”; my trans.). So, while “we will not stay there” (in the past), we will also not “close the doors” on that which is hidden and unknown about that past. The “hidden scenes” resonate with the palimpsestic language of “layers” and lend a more

psychoanalytically-oriented lens to this passage. Might these “hidden scenes” refer to Freud’s early psychoanalytic theories of repressed memories?⁸³

While the narrator expresses an openness and curiosity towards that which is “hidden behind appearances,” (i.e., the unknown pieces of the past that are concealed but occasionally manifest themselves within the present, albeit in undecipherable ways), she also makes clear that the goal (and necessity) is to “try to follow the trace of a geography that makes do with only the future” (“on tentera de suivre la trace d’une géographie qui ne s’accommode que de l’avenir”). In other words, there is no choice but to try to orient towards the future. As the passage continues, it becomes clear that this future-oriented geography is in fact another layer in the geographical palimpsest being developed in this passage, and it gives birth to something new. The narrator states, “Nous adopterons cette ligne, car elle s’accorde avec une histoire millénaire inscrite sous nos ongles” (“We will adopt this line, because it agrees/corresponds with a millennial history inscribed beneath our fingernails” ; my trans.). There is a temporal conjugation happening here; the millennial history literally inscribed into the fibers of the body moves into the future alongside the geographical line being drawn. The narrator suggests that because the geographical vector that moves into the future aligns with the past – which is inscribed and embroidered into the body – , it is natural to follow that vector.

The stunning conclusion of this passage of the text takes on an elegiac quality as it moves us from the language of birth to that of loss and death, from the language of the past to that of the present and the future. The steadfast and inextricable relationship

⁸³ It is worth noting here that ‘scènes’ can also be translated into English as ‘stages,’ thus lending a theatricality to the concept/image of the psyche and memory. As we will see in the following chapter, Cixous’ early work was heavily influenced by Freud, Lacan, and psychoanalytic theory, and Cohen’s language of ‘hidden scenes/stages’ clearly resonates and echoes Cixous, particularly her collection of essays titled ‘*De la scène de l’Inconscient à la scène de l’Histoire.*’

between human beings (bodies), the landscapes in which they live, and textuality that is woven throughout this passage is crystallized here. The narrator affirms: “Nous saurons reconnaître les paysages du monde déjà écrits en nous-même, la reculée d’une vallée jurassienne, le reste d’une rivière ensevelie, la butte témoin sur un plateau déchiqueté ou la combe de Lourmarin, Lourmarin où est enterré Camus. Nous saurons que le lien entre hier et aujourd’hui est toujours à faire et que le repos tellurique n’est pas pour demain” (14-15). First, the text makes very literal and explicit the metaphor of earth as text, and of human beings (and bodies) as the sites (or “pages”) of that text. They are the surface on which the text is inscribed. The connection between human beings (bodies) and the earth is made so strong and mutually constitutive here that they become interchangeable. The language used to describe landscapes and their geographical features personify and humanize those very geographies; the parallel and symmetry drawn between Camus (“enterré” / “buried”) and “the remains of a buried river” (“le reste d’une rivière ensevelie”) is the most striking example of the interchangeability between humans and the earth performed by the text in this passage. But, “la butte témoin” (“the witness butte”) and “un plateau déchiqueté” (“a jagged plateau”/ “a plateau torn to shreds”) convey a subtle interchangeability through references to violence and trauma filtered through geographical terminology for topographical features.

Indeed, “la butte témoin” (“witness butte” or “outlier” in English) is in fact a geological and topographical term to describe a hill – composed of horizontal layers of sediment – that once belonged to a plateau until it became separated and isolated due to erosion. The “jagged plateau” named in the text could very well be the same plateau from which the witness butte was separated. The interpretive potential of the analogy between the geological stories of isolation and separation that the witness butte tells and the

human equivalent of such stories is great. As human beings (bodies) endure/are subjected to violence and trauma, so too is the land and its features. The image of the witness butte lends a very literal meaning to the concept of “human geography,” the study of interaction between human beings and the earth’s surface upon which they live. It invites speculation as to what the witness butte might say if hills and rock could speak. The witness butte or “outlier” is a geological palimpsest, composed of layers; the outermost surface protects what remains of the layered sediments beneath it. The outlier is also a survivor; it bears the trace of its past and the erosion it has survived. There is an interesting generational aspect of this palimpsestic topography as well; an outlier is defined in geological terms as an area of younger rock that is completely surrounded by older rocks, but that has been isolated from those older rocks due to erosion. Thus, if we imagine Cohen’s narrator as the “outlier”, her sense of irreparable separation and isolation from generations past can be mapped onto the topography she describes.

A very interesting biblical intertextuality emerges from the “witness butte” as well. Section 35:52 of the book of Genesis tells the story of the rupture between Jacob and Laban that ends in an agreement to respect each other’s territory and possessions. They achieve this agreement precisely through a demarcation of territory marked by a pillar and mound of stones, both of which are to serve as “witness” to the agreement between the two men. The pillar and mound of stones of this section of Genesis mirror the gravestone and pebbles which form the foundation of the Cohen’s narrator’s mourning ritual. Indeed, the “elegiac” quality of this passage derives in part from the language of loss and death (“buried,” “torn to shreds,” “remains,” “witness”) that characterizes (and personifies) the landscape, and in part from the echoes and resonances it makes with the opening scene of Cohen’s text. Just as the narrator contemplates going

to the cemetery to mourn her family members who are buried (“ensevelis”) below the earth and the trace of whose time above the earth’s surface is marked by stone, the remains of the buried river (“ensevelie”) in the conclusion to this excerpt also mark the trace of that river’s time on the earth’s surface.⁸⁴ The trace of the past in the present is felt in the psyche, experienced in the body, and visibly etched into the landscape.

As the narrator concludes this long passage, the multidirectional, palimpsestic qualities of the temporalities she ascribes to the work of mourning are brought to bear on the earth itself: “Nous saurons que le lien entre hier et aujourd’hui est toujours à faire et que le repos tellurique n’est pas pour demain” (“We will know that the link between yesterday and today is still to be done and that telluric rest is not for tomorrow”; my trans.; 14-15). While the trace of the past in the present forms the “link” to which she refers here, she also makes clear that this link is still in progress and remains to be made. But since “yesterday” and “today” are relative terms whose referents shift with the passage of time, the implication is that the link between the two will *always* remain to be made. The work will never be done, neither for us humans (the “nous” here), nor for the earth itself, whose rest is “not for tomorrow.” Indeed, she seems to suggest that we know how to move forward because a millennium of time on earth is written beneath our fingernails, and evolution is embroidered within us. But, at the same time, movement towards the future is the only option because while the traces of the past can be seen and felt, it is buried and closed off. Once again, Cixous’ “écriture féminine” as “undefined” in “Sorties” resonates: “*Voix ! c’est aussi ce lancer, cet épanchement, dont il ne revient rien.*”

⁸⁴ It is worth briefly mentioning here that much of Cohen’s other works in literature and visual art are inspired by the now dried up Bièvre river, which used to provide water circulation to the tanneries and industrial manufactures that once occupied the neighborhood in Paris where Cohen has lived for decades. When the tanneries and industrial manufactures were closed down for sanitary and environmental reasons, the city drained the river of its water and built Cohen’s residential neighborhood above it. The concepts of palimpsestic geography and memory are thus centrally woven into the very fabric of Cohen’s daily life.

Exclamation, cri, essoufflement, hurlement, toux, vomissement, musique. Elle part. Elle perd. Et c'est ainsi qu'elle écrit, comme on lance la voix, en avant, dans le vide. Elle s'éloigne, elle avance, ne se retourne pas sur ses traces pour les examiner. Ne se regarde pas" (129).

The connections between writing, the earth, and human corporeality that form the basis of the opening pages of Cohen's *Géographie* are filtered throughout the rest of her text as a means of processing memory, grief work, and mourning. These connections map out a reimagined geography in which the palimpsestic layering of sediments and topographical arrangements mirror the layers of human memory that are contained as much within the body as the psyche, and which extend through and across generations. As we will see in the passage reproduced below, this is not an easy kind of writing, and it inspires trepidation and meta-reflection for the narrator who eventually reveals herself to be a writer as well:

Je tremble d'écrire comme toujours, comme jamais. Saisie d'inquiétude, perdue dans une nuit où la quête d'une descendance se confond avec l'arbre extirpé de mon rêve. Je ne quitterai pas le trottoir du boulevard du Temple, puisque j'ai appris à préparer mes os à se fondre avec la terre de France. Mieux que quiconque, par la force de l'Histoire, nous avons aimé les terres, nous avons su les incorporer à la plante de nos pieds, nous avons su les assimiler par la bouche, par la langue. Sans résister, j'irai vers l'oasis, vers la source, à la recherche de la *Welwichia Mirabilis* qui va puiser l'eau à plus de cent mètres de profondeur. Je contournerai les sillons creusés par l'hiver. Je suis au cœur de l'origine mystérieuse de la mort. Pour ma mère, tout était au-dessus de ses forces, elle a fini par rendre son tablier, elle appelait la mort de ses vœux, elle n'en pouvait plus, elle n'en pouvait plus des serpents imaginaires. (52-53)

The "extracted tree from my dream" she alludes to as a contrast with the quest for her lineage refers to a dream she claims to have had and describes earlier in the text. In this dream, a tree is removed from the street in the Jewish Marais district of Paris – le boulevard du Temple – where her family lived after their departure from Algeria and to which her mother grew very attached, insisting that she would live the rest of her life in

that apartment. In the dream, a futuristic plastic sculpture emerges from under the ground in the place of the uprooted tree, symbolizing the artificiality of such replacements, and the literal supplanting of natural life with a lifeless plastic form. Thus, the dream points to a certain kind of death, even if it offers imaginative new art forms that point towards the future.

The act of writing “shakes” her (“je tremble d’écrire”) and fills her with trepidation, in part because she gets lost trying to differentiate between her quest for roots (“une descendance”) and the extracted tree of her dream whose roots now lead nowhere. But the trembling also arises from the confrontation with death and loss that writing engenders and that the uprooted tree of her dream – and its artificial replacement – also symbolize. Most significantly, writing causes trembling because it requires a confrontation with the unknowable and the impossibility of making unequivocal sense of the displacements, uprootings, deaths, and losses that have marked the narrator’s life and entered her dreams.

Yet, writing is also the space of negotiating and experimenting with different political, social, and historical models that contain – and cause – the painful losses themselves. The narrator asserts what might be described as an exilic territoriality when she unequivocally states “Je ne quitterai pas le trottoir du boulevard du Temple, puisque j’ai appris à préparer mes os à se fondre avec la terre de France” (“I will not leave the sidewalk of boulevard du Temple, since I have learned to prepare my bones to merge/mingle with the land/soil of France”; my trans.). The choice of words is important; the verb “fondre” means “to melt,” but with the addition of the reflexive pronoun (“se”) and the preposition “avec,” the meaning changes slightly from melting to merging or mingling. This play with language creates a subtle ambiguity in terms of the social model

it suggests, and the kinds of memory and mourning work that come as a result. On the one hand, the grammatical structure signals a shift away from the “melting pot” model and towards a more integrationist one, but on the other hand, the subtle differences between merging and mingling, both possible meanings of “se fondre,” make unclear whether it is in fact integration or assimilation under question. What the narrator conceives as the indisputable and inextricable connection, both physical and affective, between human beings and the land appears again here.

That she has “learned to prepare her bones to mingle/merge with the earth of France” carries several layers of meaning. First, there is the imagery of death. Bones and earth do indeed literally merge over time when bodies are buried. The second layer of meaning comes from the plant and tree metaphors that permeate and shape the text. If the bones of this particular part of the text mirror the roots of the surrounding passages, – or to put it differently, if we read the bones as roots – then we see that these roots are those of a transplanted tree or plant. These roots have to be “taught” to merge into and mingle with new soil. This second layer opens into the third, which is that of the social-political aspect. The implication of this third layer of meaning is that the responsibility is put upon the “transplant” (the uprooted, displaced, exilic subject) to teach itself how to assimilate and/or integrate (to merge and/or mingle) into the soil of its new location, and furthermore, that this merging and mingling is unidirectional. As Françoise Lionnet explains in *Postcolonial Representations*, “[the] quarrel [...] with terms such as ‘assimilation’ and ‘acculturation’ when used in the (post)colonial context is a quarrel with history: the terms have acquired through use a negative connotation because they underscore the relation of subjugation that exists between the colonized culture and the hegemonic system” (10).

Finally, this third layer of meaning opens into the fourth and last one. There is a tension between the natural and the artificial at play throughout this passage; the organic tree uprooted from its home on the boulevard du Temple is replaced with a plastic sculpture – an artificial substitution. Through this lens, the plastic sculpture symbolizes the artificiality and forcedness of assimilation as something that must be taught and learned while the original (and uprooted) tree represents the natural and organic social-cultural-political relationship that cannot survive. The original tree (an unrealizable utopian social-cultural-political model of coexistence and true “integration”) is replaced by the artificial prosthesis of assimilation. Cohen’s narrator thus articulates a very subtle but clear understanding of the politics and stakes of assimilation from the perspective of the uprooted and relocated “transplant;” the losses inherent to this process form another layer in her palimpsest of mourning and grief.

As the text continues, the metaphors become ever-more intricately interconnected and mixed, mutually influencing each other and the images they evoke – in a way, imitating the process of transculturation and “métissage” for which Françoise Lionnet advocates in terms of postcolonial representations and subjectivities: “Mieux que quiconque, par la force de l’Histoire, nous avons aimé les terres, nous avons su les incorporer à la plante de nos pieds, nous avons su les assimiler par la bouche, par la langue” (“Better than anyone else, by the force of History, we have loved [many] lands/soils, we found out [how] to incorporate them into the soles of our feet, we found out how to assimilate them by mouth, by language/tongue”; my trans.). The process of translation reveals some of these interconnected and transcultural vectors and layers of meaning; here we see “plante” most logically translated as the sole of the feet in this context, but it echoes the earlier plant metaphors and thus extends and changes them,

deepening the articulation of the interconnectedness between feet and earth, bones and soil, roots and soil. The polysemic possibilities for translating the word “langue” into English enriches and confuses the reading; is “language” or “tongue” a more fitting translation in this case? As in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” the polysemy sets the tone for blurred lines and blurred meanings that are multidirectional, but clearly convey that language, body, and politics are not separate. While the politics of assimilation tend to assume a unilateral and unidirectional process in which immigrants move towards the culture of their new location while that very same culture makes no such movement towards its newcomers, here the polysemic possibilities as well as the syntax suggest a different kind of relationship.

The fact that the “we” of this short excerpt knows how to “incorporate” the many different lands it has loved evokes a sense of consumption and embodiment. The etymological roots of the word “incorporate” come from the Latin “corporare,” meaning “to form into a body”; its use in today’s contemporary language has evolved to signify the process of “taking in,” “absorption,” “inclusion,” and/or “assimilation.” Yet, these various processes are subtly different from each other and convey varying degrees of dominance and deference, or of the dynamics between subsuming and being subsumed. The syntax of the sentence in question here exposes the fallacy of assimilationist thinking from the perspective of the dominant/“host” culture. That the “we” – an unnamed collective of frequently exiled subjects to which the narrator seemingly belongs – “incorporates” those lands in some ways reinforces the assimilationist model that has always placed the responsibility on the immigrant to assimilate (or incorporate) the culture of their new country into their identity rather than the other way around.

And yet, paradoxically, this very same assimilationist logic also presumes that the immigrant will be consumed by their new culture, disappearing into it and fitting in. So, while it is the exiled subject's responsibility to bring the culture of their new location into their being, into their body, it is also assumed that that very body will become absorbed into the larger surrounding body of the new culture. The unifying belief embedded within this paradox is that the individual or group – the “nous” of this passage – who is immigrating and/or in exile is a passive consumer in the process of assimilation. As Lionnet describes,

In this [dominant Western] view, the ‘assimilated’ are seen as existing passively, not as creative agents capable of transforming the practices that they come to adopt. The message proclaimed by contemporary art and literature from Africa and the Caribbean, however, is quite different. It is not assimilation that appears inevitable when Western technology and education are adopted by the colonized, or when migration to the metropole severs some of the migrants’ ties to a particular birthplace. Rather, the move forces individuals to stand in relation to the past and the present at the same time, to look for creative means of incorporating useful ‘Western’ tools, techniques, or strategies into their own cosmology. (11)

While this is a slightly different scenario/context than Cohen's, it nonetheless illustrates some of the power dynamics and structures embedded deep within the terms of assimilation as expected and enacted within ‘Western’ contexts. In a footnote to the above passage, Lionnet cites the example of the sculpture *Man with a Bicycle* – a sculpture of a Black African man with a bicycle, a Western invention and symbol of modern innovation and technology – as an illustration of the alternative discourse and dynamics it produces that are possible when thinking beyond the Western-centric assimilation model. For Lionnet, the sculpture symbolizes an up-ending of the unidirectional concept of assimilation in that the man has incorporated and assimilated Western technology for his own use; the bicycle runs on a two-way street, so to speak.

In much the same way, Cohen's narrator articulates some of those alternative possibilities by creating a hybrid, plural, and multilayered identity in which places become part of her – “incorporated into the soles of her feet” – and connect her, like roots, to the past and the future via the routes her feet make. Once again, the plant metaphor holds; just as roots are anchored in and associated with the past, they also allow for life to continue into the present and future. An important aspect of this passage is the play with directionality (past – future, roots growing down and getting pulled up, migration across different lands, calling into question the viability of origins) and orientation. Here again, Ahmed's work on the concept of orientation as it relates to diaspora, race, gender, and sexuality may help shed some light on this passage and the questions it poses of assimilation, integration, “incorporation,” and extension (like roots). Indeed, Ahmed calls into question what we perceive as the “given” nature of points of origin and takes the body as the locus of all the “lines” that “orientate.” Within this larger argument, Ahmed meditates on the meanings and possibilities of “being at home” and what such an experience allows for some bodies but not others.

While Ahmed's focus starts with the individual, there is much to extrapolate from her thinking about “orientations” at the collective level as well. Her discussion of the process of incorporation fits within the third chapter of *Queer Phenomenology*, titled “The Orient and Other Others,” in which she argues for a denaturalization of what have become perceived as “given” orientations. Building on Said's *Orientalism* and Fanon's *Peaux noires masques blancs*, Ahmed brilliantly illustrates the ways in which “Western” (and “white”) cultural, social and political practices and views have come to form the

point(s) around which our collective global culture and politics are orientated, so that anything outside of or beyond those points are perceived as “other” and as deviations.⁸⁵

As Ahmed explains, “The process of incorporation is certainly about what is familiar, but it is also a relationship to the familiar. The familiar is that which is ‘at home,’ but also how the body feels at home in the world [...]. When bodies are orientated toward objects, those objects may cease to be apprehended as objects, and instead become extensions of bodily skin” (132). Cohen’s narrator describes precisely this process of extension, but paradoxically, the objects which become extensions of her “bodily skin” (or more precisely, that of the ‘nous’ named in the passage) are the land(s) and soil(s) across which she (/they) have traveled. She/they have “incorporated” that which cannot (because of “the force of History”) ever allow for complete and permanent familiarity or the feeling of “being at home.” This paradox is what reveals the reversal of assimilationist models here; because she/they *do(es)* incorporate and assimilate the places in which they live and from or to which History forces them to leave or arrive, the subjectivity of the “nous” is underscored, eliminating the possibility of assimilationist objectification. In Ahmed’s terms, the collective body of the “nous” here extends its reach and expands, taking in (incorporating, assimilating) the places through which it passes. Ahmed argues that for a body to be able to extend and expand, it must come into contact with objects that allow for this extension and expansion to happen, and this

⁸⁵ As we saw earlier, one of the definitions of ‘queer’ at work throughout Ahmed’s argument is anything that does not “align” with the lines that are perceived as standard or given (these are conceived in terms of nuclear family and reproduction (and therefore heterosexuality), but also in terms of genealogies (family ‘lines’) and race. Thinking about temporality as well as geography with this definition of ‘queer’ in mind opens up some interesting new ways of conceptualizing Jewish experiences as non-normative (i.e., diasporic movements lead away from the ‘straight’ lines of ‘home’ and ‘nation,’ and the work of mourning and memory leads away from the future-oriented concept of time as an only forward-moving line).

contact is not casual or coincidental but rather the result of an intentional organization of bodies designed to revolve around whiteness:

White bodies do not have to face their whiteness; they are not orientated ‘toward’ it, and this ‘not’ is what allows whiteness to cohere, as that which bodies are orientated around. By not having to encounter being white as an obstacle, given that whiteness is ‘in line’ with what is already given, bodies that pass as white move easily, and this motility is extended by what they move toward. The white body in this way expands; objects, tools, instruments, and even ‘others’ allow that body to inhabit space by extending that body and what it can reach. Whiteness becomes habitual in the sense that white bodies extend their reach by incorporating objects that are within reach. To make this point simply: what is ‘within reach’ also ‘extends the reach’ of such bodies. (132)

In other words, Cohen’s “nous” is clearly not part of the habitual whiteness that Ahmed describes, nor is its body a white one; if it were, then there would be no mention of “the force of History.” And yet, it *does* make itself at home, thus reversing (post)colonial dynamics and performing the very denaturalization of perceived ‘givens’ (including – perhaps especially – those constructed by the making of the “History” referenced here) for which Ahmed argues.⁸⁶

To return to the passage of *Géographie des origines* under discussion in the past several pages, the other key aspect worth exploring before moving on are the references to the mouth and tongue/language as they relate to the assimilation and incorporation alluded to within the same sentence. Cohen’s narrator states, “Mieux que quiconque, par la force de l’Histoire, nous avons aimé les terres, nous avons su les incorporer à la plante de nos pieds, nous avons su les assimiler par la bouche, par la langue” (52). Here, the body (represented synecdochically by the mouth and – possibly – by the tongue) is the medium by which assimilation is achieved. Of course, the other possible meaning

⁸⁶ Ahmed uses the language of “straightening device” to describe the norm-producing structures and discourses that shape the perceived “givens” of our social, cultural, and political worlds. It is interesting to think about History as one such “straightening device,” and to think about Jewish histories as deviations from that straight line; do Jewish histories ‘queer’ History?

afforded (and yet withheld) by the ambiguity of translation is that language (rather than the tongue) is the medium of assimilation. Either way, the emphasis on the oral/buccal as means of “incorporation” is clear and leads back once again to Cixous’ Medusa who symbolizes women’s coming into language (and tongue – body) as well as to part of Ahmed’s work in *Queer Phenomenology*. As Ahmed describes the lines and structures that support and allow for “whiteness” (i.e. that which has come to be understood in our social-political-cultural world as “straight,” normative, and dominant) to sit unperceived – and unchanged – at the center around which everything else orientates, she draws on feminist critic bell hooks’ work to illustrate what happens when white bodies desire bodies of “others”:

In her work, bell hooks (1992) examines how the white body’s desire for racial others is a technology for the reproduction of whiteness, which she describes as ‘eating the other.’ If the white body ‘eats’ such others, or takes them in, then it does not lose itself: the white body acquires color through such acts of incorporation; it gets reproduced by becoming other than itself. (128)

According to hooks (and Ahmed), racial “others” as objects of white desire become resources for extending the reach of the white body. But as is evident from colonial histories of oppression and subjugation that underpin the postcolonial and postmodern realities in which Ahmed, hooks, and other thinkers within critical race studies live and write, even when racial “others” are not objects of white desire and are objects of white rage and/or fear, they still function as resources for extending the reach of white bodies. This “economy” of consumption mirrors precisely the process of women’s oppression – and symbolic death – enacted through phallogentric language which serves men’s desire that Cixous lays out in “Sorties.”

This process of “eating the other” is a mirror image (and therefore a reversal/inversion) of assimilation in the republican, universalist, and colonial/imperial

sense. We have already explored the etymological roots of and connections between the words “assimilation” and “incorporation,” and what is the act of eating if not an act of incorporation at its most literal level of meaning? The process described by hooks via Ahmed is a mirror image of the Eurocentric republican universalist (and colonialist) model of assimilation in which it is the ‘other’ who must allow him/herself to be “eaten by” the dominant culture in order to “fit in” and adjust. This, of course, is in fact an unachievable venture because the “other” will forever remain so as long as there is such a thing as a “dominant culture” (i.e., whiteness) in the first place.

What I am after here is the question of whether we can apply hooks’ and Ahmed’s theory (of the paradoxical extension of white bodies due to their desire of “other” bodies) to the politics of assimilation and the collective “incorporation” of multiculturalism. There is no sexual desire driving the ‘eating’ at this collective (and social-political-cultural) level, and the reasons for incorporation may be different (i.e. bodies of color move into “white spaces” to seek asylum, because they have no other options due to neocolonial realities, etc.), but the end result is the same: whiteness remains dominant and is reproduced even as it “acquires some color” (Ahmed 128) due to multiculturalism and immigration. To return, finally, to the passage of Cohen’s text that got us here, it is possible to read the “nous” as the ones eating the other, extending themselves – like roots of a desert plant towards an oasis – for mere survival. And, as the narrator suggests, this is a skill that is learned (“nous avons su...”). This is important, as it implies a complete reversal of the colonial/republican dynamic; while white bodies (and whiteness) are able to eat the other by virtue of the “given” power dynamic that says white bodies are

dominant and “natural,” here Cohen’s narrator denaturalizes that very dynamic by demonstrating that it is learned rather than innate.⁸⁷

The polysemic possibilities opened up by the ambiguous translation into English of “langue” so that it might mean “language” or “tongue” offer a glimpse into the connection between incorporation/assimilation as a bodily matter and as a matter of language. Language too is learned and has the power of “extension” through expression. In writing, language becomes text, and as we have seen, for Cohen’s narrator, text, language, and the body – human and earth – are mutually constitutive. Textuality then is also a means of incorporation and assimilation, of extending into the outer world and of bringing the outer world inside, thus opening Cixous’ “in-between” space of negotiation, mediation, and exchange. This in-between space creates multidirectional pathways and points of connection.

The following excerpt from *Un été* illustrates much the same phenomenon of multidirectional mourning. Situated fairly early in the novel, on the second day of the narrator’s return to Israel, the scene takes place at her aunt Aliza’s house, where her rapidly declining grandmother, Safta, is resting in bed. The narrator and her mother have come to Aliza’s – the mother’s sister-in law – home in Beersheba as her son Michaël is getting married there, and this marks the first time since the narrator’s departure from

⁸⁷ At the same time, it is necessary to reflect on what might allow for Cohen (and/or her narrator) to articulate this reversal; might this have something to do with the knotty places that emerge around the intersections and relationship between Jewish and race-based questions in the context of postcolonial studies? What are the implications and ramifications of the fact that sometimes Jews are considered ‘white,’ while other times they are ‘other’? Jews sometimes have the option of extending themselves, of incorporating and assimilating more easily than other ‘others,’ but this is based on relativism and is contingent upon the surrounding political and social climate. Compared to most other ‘others,’ Jews do indeed appear more white than not, and in the case of French colonial Algeria, as we have already seen, Jews received favorable treatment compared to their Muslim and Berber Algerian neighbors. Examples of this abound in contemporary French society, politics, and culture as well. As we saw in the introduction to this dissertation, the aftermath of these tensions continues to play out and reverberate.

Israel and return to France that she sees her aunt and her grandmother. As they step into the bedroom, seeing for herself Safta's sharp decline into a near-comatose state sends the narrator into shock, while Aliza and the narrator's mother are used to this new status quo and carry on with their visiting:

Quelquefois, Safta geint. Aliza et ma mère se taisent et tendent l'oreille. Mais dans le silence qui s'installe la plainte ne se prolonge pas. Alors d'une voix plus feutrée, elles reprennent le fil de leur conversation et à nouveau leurs mains s'agitent, inlassables, avec le cliquetis des bracelets. Leur mélodie m'enchaîne, m'entraîne vers les terrains mouvants de la rue du Chemin-Vert. À qui offrira-t-on les bijoux de Safta ? Les emporterai-je à Paris pour éclairer devant Bernard les masques de l'aïeule, ses sourires, ses élans, son bavardage, le frôlement de sa paume sur mes cheveux qui s'accompagnait toujours d'un tintement faible ? *Les souvenirs ne vont jamais au cimetière avec les corps. Et je veux oublier. Être enfin heureuse.* (53 ; emphasis added)

The temporality and spatiality of this passage are of particular interest and relevance in the framework of multidirectional grief and memory. The present moment being narrated is held between Safta's moans and groans, which suspend the aunt and mother's conversation as they check to see what Safta might need. The precarity of Safta's mortality is in sharp relief and precludes any clear action; the mother and aunt understand that there is little they can do but wait. The sound of their voices and the jingling of their bracelets transport the narrator back to the family's earlier days in their first home on the rue du Chemin-Vert in Paris upon emigrating from Gabès, Tunisia. This sudden flash of memory carries the narrator into an imagined future in which Safta has passed away and the question arises of who should receive her jewelry; this projected question directs the narrator's (and therefore, the reader's) attention back to Paris, where she imagines she might show the jewelry to Bernard. But showing the jewelry to Bernard does not really seem to be about the jewelry; rather, it is an opportunity for the narrator to share stories of her grandmother – especially of her mannerisms, – and to bear witness to her being. Unexpectedly, this foray into her memories of the past and her imagined future acts of

remembering inspires a disdainful attitude in the narrator, who bluntly laments that “memories never go to the cemetery with the corpses,” and that she “wants to forget. To finally be happy.”

This ultimate rejection of and disdain towards the very memory that has temporarily transported her out of Beersheba and Safta’s bedroom portrays memory and acts of remembering as burdensome obstacles. Indeed, the multidirectionality of the memory at work in this passage demonstrates the power of memory – like language itself, as Cixous conceives it – to transcend death and to haunt the living, to force open previously closed off spaces and to “work” whether we like it to or not. At the same time, a literal return is impossible; as the next chapter demonstrates, writing (and memory) are an active process of opening into the unknown. As Cixous writes in “Sorties,” this is especially true for women: “Pas l’origine : elle n’y revient pas. Trajet du garçon : retour au pays natal, *Heimweh*⁸⁸ dont parle Freud ; nostalgie qui fait de l’homme un être qui a tendance à revenir au point de départ, afin de se l’appropriier et d’y mourir. Trajet de la fille : plus loin, à l’inconnu, à inventer” (129).

⁸⁸ The German word for “homesickness.”

CHAPTER III

“CHANTER L’ABÎME” / “ÉCRIRE LE RIEN”: WRITING AS RE-MEMBERING IN *OSNABRÜCK* AND *LA QUÉBÉCOITE*

Don't hope in a memoir to preserve your memories. If you prize your memories as they are, by all means avoid – eschew – writing a memoir. Because it is a certain way to lose them... The work battens on your memories. And it replaces them... After you've written, you can no longer remember anything but the writing... After I've written about any experience, my memories – those elusive, fragmentary patches of color and feeling are gone; they've been replaced by the work.

– Annie Dillard, “To Fashion a Text”

It is only by putting it into words that I make it whole; this wholeness means that it has lost its power to hurt me; it gives me, perhaps because by doing so I take away the pain, a great delight to put the severed parts together. Perhaps this is the strongest pleasure known to me.
– Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past”

La fiction ne saurait être qu'une diversion pour nous détourner de notre noir chagrin. Aussi n'y a-t-il plus de fiction, plus de récit possible. Aucune autre aventure que celle qui puise, à la source d'une parole souterraine et cachée, la substance unique, tellurique d'un infini qui impose sa loi au monde.

– Annie Cohen, *Les sabliers du bord de mer*

In the previous chapter, we saw how the disorientation of displacement, relocation and loss in the postcolonial generation led to a reorientation towards the future – however uncertain – and a transmutation of grief and mourning into a writing practice that creates multidirectional memories and new geographies to take shape through narrative. This new chapter bears witness to lost worlds, lost family members, lost faith in History – as narrative and as teacher – , and the slippages of memory through reading Héléne Cixous’ auto/bio-fictional quasi-memoir *Osnabrück* (1998) and Régine Robin’s semi-autobiographical “novel” *La Québécoise* (1983) as what Nicola King has termed “texts of memory.” In her study on the necessary interconnectedness of narrative and memory titled *Memory, Narrative, Identity: Remembering the Self* (2000), King writes: “Reading

the texts of memory shows that ‘remembering the self’ is not a case of restoring an original identity, but a continuous process of ‘re-membering’, of putting together moment by moment, of provisional and partial reconstruction” (175). With King’s conception of the mutually (re)constructive processes of memory and narrative as a point of entry into Cixous’s and Robin’s literary production, I will demonstrate that Cixous and Robin both textually attempt this process of “provisional and partial reconstruction” of their past and present selves, and of the lost worlds of their family members.

While each writer engages actively with the process of re-membering by writing *Osnabrück* and *La Québécoise* (and indeed, through many of the other texts Cixous and Robin have written), they also struggle with – and “stage” in their writing – memory’s failures and shortcomings throughout the process. As we will see, these “stagings” of memory’s failures to recall and put back together perform a kind of “dis-membering” that runs against the process of re-membering to which Cixous and Robin aspire. Ultimately, the simultaneous re-membering and dis-membering that play out in each text contribute to frustration and longing on the part of the reader and (I think) that of the writers as well, bringing us back to the original place of nostalgia and mourning from where the texts begin. This circuitous movement and interplay between re-membering and dis-membering form and direct each text, infusing the many scenes in both texts of literal ambulatory and circuitous journeys with a metaphorical and metanarrative reflection on what these scenes might really be about.

Osnabrück and *La Québécoise* speak to historical, cultural, and geopolitical specificities through and in which Cixous and Robin have lived, all of which are marked by uncertainty and diasporic mobility. Each author has written meta-reflectively on her own writing, and this seems a good way to begin this chapter and frame my own close

readings of the texts at hand. These meta-reflective essays shed light on what brought Cixous and Robin into writing in the first place and how their writing works through them, taking on a life and performative function of its own. In a meta-reflective essay on writing titled *De la scène de l'Inconscient à la scène de l'Histoire* (1990), Hélène Cixous writes:

Mon écriture est née en Algérie, d'un pays perdu, de père mort et de mère étrangère. Chacun de ces traits qui peuvent sembler de chance ou de malchance sont devenus causes et chances de mon écriture. [...] **J'ai eu la chance d'avoir pour temps et lieu de naissance l'étrangeté, l'exil, la guerre, le souvenir fantôme de la paix, la douleur, le deuil.** À trois ans j'ai su, parmi les fleurs et les parfums, qu'on pouvait tuer pour un nom ou une différence. Et j'ai su qu'existait le **déracinement**. Mais aussi le bon **enracinement**. Je devrais vous dire aussi une date, par exemple 1940. J'ai vu que les racines humaines ne connaissent pas les frontières et que derrière la terre, tout en bas de l'escalier du monde, il y avait le coeur. (16, emphasis added)

In a similarly meta-reflective essay about her own writing, titled *Vous! Vous êtes quoi vous au juste?: Méditations autobiographiques autour de la judéité* (2001), Régine Robin writes:

Mon écriture ressasse et bégaie. **Elle inscrit la récurrence, le traumatisme, l'obsession; elle tourne autour des signifiants errants: guerre, Juif, Auschwitz,** signifiants-maîtres qui gouvernent une destinée. **Mon écriture cherche aussi des lieux d'ancrage à la place de ces non-lieux de mémoire** que sont la Pologne, l'Europe centrale et orientale, non-lieux où il n'y a plus rien. En 1945, pour nous, il n'y avait plus rien. **Comment écrire le rien?** (120, emphasis added)

Using the above passages as a point of entry into this chapter, we can see themes of roots and origins at odds with uprootedness and exile, of loss and love, of difference and exclusion at odds with inclusion and community. Underpinning all of these themes is the connection between *place* and *memory*, alluding to the ongoing interplay between remembering and dis-remembering that shapes and informs the texts. One of the many striking aspects of these two small excerpts from the longer essays is the way in which each writer responds to similar historical backdrops of exclusion, upheaval, grief, and

shifting geopolitics with seemingly opposite approaches and epithets. I use the word “seemingly” because, ultimately, Cixous and Robin address problems of representation and the shaky ground of testimony through literary mechanisms that are different but not opposite.

This chapter tells a story about loss and exile from the particular perspectives of two Jewish women born in the late 1930s, members of what Marianne Hirsch has termed “the 1.5 generation”: those who experienced the Second World War and Holocaust as very young children, but whose parents and families either fell victim or emerged as survivors. Against the historical backdrop of the unfolding second half of the twentieth century, Hélène Cixous, born in Oran, French Algeria in July 1937, and Régine Robin, born in Paris in December 1939, write about loss and recuperation, death and regeneration, endings and displacements. For the sake of framing the texts themselves with as much context as possible before delving deeper – with the hope of shining a light into the deeper, more obscure parts of the texts – it is worth briefly noting here some of the striking similarities between these two writers. Additional context will also clarify what this chapter *does* within the scope of this dissertation. Furthermore, while Cixous is already a familiar voice from the introduction and first chapter, the Cixous of this chapter takes on questions that are in some ways very different from those raised in “Le Rire de la Méduse” and “Sorties.” Both Cixous and Robin are prestigious and accomplished academics; Cixous earned her doctorate in English literature while Robin has a doctorate in history. Cixous has taught at many universities in France and the United States and co-founded the first Women’s Studies program in France at the Université de Paris VIII. Robin has taught at universities in France and Québec and is now a professor emerita in the sociology department of the Université du Québec à Montréal. Both writers are

extremely prolific, and their breadth of knowledge is as sprawling as the texts they continue to produce.

Cixous and Robin expand and complicate the concepts of origins, difference, and belonging, and what it means to grieve and re(-)member. They both engage theoretically and performatively in conceiving of a literature that is born of absence and loss. At the same time, Cixous and Robin consistently question (in and throughout their writing) the viability – indeed, possibility – of writing about these things at all. As Régine Robin puts it in the aforementioned essay: “Pour moi, il s’agit avant tout d’un problème formel, de mise en forme. Quelques remarques à ce propos: je sais qu’il m’est impossible de rendre compte de ce vécu, d’essayer même de m’en approcher. Quelque chose est à la fois impossible à dire et se manifeste cependant dans toute son absolue nécessité” (“Vous” 120). For Robin, then, the crisis or questionable viability of writing is rooted in a “formal problem”: how to put lived – and traumatic – experience into the form of writing. As we will see later in *La Québécoise*, Robin works with this double bind using postmodern aesthetics of patchwork, effectively “dis-membering” a traditionally linear narrative form.

In the excerpt from Cixous’ essay, we can see that she sets up a series of contrasts and oppositions: “naître / perdre,” “causes / chances,” “fleurs et parfums / guerre,” “douleur, deuil,” “déracinement / enracinement.” In so doing, Cixous points readers towards a space between the two poles. This in-between space is, I think, where Cixous locates the fertile source of her writing, inasmuch as writing is even possible. Cixous also directs readers to a space *below* and *behind* (“derrière la terre, tout en bas de l’escalier du monde”), where the hidden heart that contains the connective, affective ties holding humanity together resides. The subterranean, tucked away location of this heart signals

the necessity of finding it, of peeling back the layers of human-made oppression and discrimination – this is (one) ethical dimension of Cixous’ writing.

The hidden heart itself is a metaphor, I think, for the practice of feminine writing as Cixous had earlier defined it. It alludes to the agency of literature and language to perform a moving beyond categories, hierarchies, and limited ways of knowing that (western patriarchal) society cannot. As Eilene Hoft-March puts it in her article titled “For-Giving Death: Cixous’s *Osnabrück* and *Le Jour où je n’étais pas là*,” “[Cixous] returns to the vexing questions: how does one acknowledge otherness and accept it as the rich, diverse gift it can be without appropriating and diminishing the other, without inadvertently causing the other’s death? Can there possibly be an exchange that respects otherness? Or is the other’s death—or one’s own—always implied in the gift?” (430). Although Hoft-March is referring especially to the two texts she analyzes in her article, these “vexing questions” recur and permeate throughout Cixous’s body of work, both literary and theoretical. Hoft-March’s analysis gives more shape to the “hidden heart” to which Cixous alludes in her essay and provides a guiding question of the ethics that underpin Cixous’s literary production: how to acknowledge and accept otherness as a gift without diminishing and appropriating it?

By naming her origins in terms of foreignness (or strangeness/otherness), exile, war, phantom memories of peace, pain, and grief, and then proclaiming that these origins made her lucky, Cixous “outs herself” in a sense by owning and self-narrating her birth story as one of otherness. In doing so, she opens up a space for alternative attitudes towards the historical backdrop of her childhood – a “counter-narrative” to historiographical representations of wartime colonial French Algeria. She achieves this in part by painting an exoticizing image of the setting of her primordial early childhood

memories, alluding to her three-year-old self amidst the “flowers and fragrances,” the place where her young self also learned about the realities of war. At the same time, the exoticization she constructs serves partially to mark the absence of belonging she feels in relationship to Algeria. As she describes her emotional landscape as a child in “Mon algériance,” a much-studied and often-cited autobiographical narrative about her childhood originally published in 1997 in the French magazine *Les Inrockuptibles*⁸⁹, “another feeling in the shadows: the unshakable certainty that ‘the Arabs’ were the true offspring of this dusty and perfumed soil” (*Algériance* 259). There is no ambiguity here that Cixous’s childhood in Algeria was imbued with a sense of exile and estrangement at the same time as it ‘made her lucky.’ The ambivalent tension between luck and estrangement characterizes Cixous’s relationship with Algeria.

In “De la scène de l’Inconscient à la scène de l’Histoire,” as in all of her metareflective writings about writing, she frames the act of writing as a recuperative, regenerative one that grows out of loss. She associatively connects collective and personal lived experience by evoking socially constructed and natural psycho-biological phenomena (namely, geopolitical dispossession, discrimination across lines of difference, and personal family loss), critiquing and calling into question the limits of human morality while also evoking the redemptive potential of the human heart and psyche to heal and rebuild. The fact that such geopolitical borders and discriminatory acts are the product of discursively constructed attitudes seems to be a given for Cixous in the passage of “De la scène” cited above; she understands the arbitrary, contingent nature of these borders and acts on the other side of the same coin that holds the human capacity

⁸⁹ I have searched – obsessively, and in vain – for this original French version. I have found the English translation, and scholarship devoted to this text all draws from the English translation as well. For these reasons, I will cite the English translation here.

for connection and moving towards the other. It is striking in the passage from “De la scène” that while Cixous describes intensely personal aspects of her life story, the historical specificities of the fertile ground of her writing are largely left unnamed.

The one historical referent she gives us here is of course 1940, the year in which France became officially divided into two zones between the German Occupation and the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy state, and the year in which Jews in French Algeria – such as Cixous and her family – found themselves suddenly subjected to state-sanctioned antisemitism (as opposed to previous forms of “unofficial” sociopolitical tension between Jews and the rest of the Algerian population). As a French colony, Algeria was governed by the Vichy State throughout the Second World War, and in 1940 the State repealed the 1870 Crémieux law that had granted French citizenship to Jews in Algeria. While this earlier law was designed in part to draw between Jews and Muslims precisely the kind of discriminatory lines of difference that Cixous describes in her essay – valorizing the ones while ensuring the racialized-colonial subjection of the others – it also provided congruent legal status for Jews in the French metropole with those in its largest colonial territory⁹⁰. For Jews in French Algeria under the new Vichy state, the 1940 repeal of the Crémieux law came as a traumatic and terrifying shock; after seventy years of full legal citizenship, Jews in Algeria suddenly found themselves subjected to anti-Jewish policies enforced by the Vichy state⁹¹ and clearly separated from the dominant Arab population,

⁹⁰ As historian Joshua Schreier explains in his book titled *Arabs of the Jewish Faith: The Civilizing Mission in Colonial Algeria*, “In their effort to secure full citizenship for Algerian Jews, colonial officials helped develop a mythology holding Algerian Jews to be more intelligent, faithful, and redeemable than Muslims, their supposedly less-gifted former oppressors” (2).

⁹¹ Similar to the Nuremberg Laws of early Nazi Germany, these included expulsion from schools (Cixous and Derrida have both written about the painful experience of being removed from their public schools and segregated with other Jewish children into makeshift, impromptu schools) and termination of state-appointed professional positions (as a result of Vichy laws, Cixous’ father was no longer allowed to practice medicine and was ‘demoted’ to working as a podiatrist during the Vichy period).

an isolation that, as described in *Mon Algérie*, contributed to Cixous's life-long struggle to have a sense of belonging to/in Algeria.

In *Mon Algérie*, Cixous expands upon her earlier portrayal of her birth as “lucky” into “accidental.” She writes:

My way of thinking was born with the thought that I could have been born elsewhere, in one of the twenty countries where a living fragment of my maternal family had landed after it blew up on the Nazi minefield. With the thought of the chanciness, of the accident, of the fall. Lucretius's rain of atoms, in raining, the atom of my mother had met the atom of my father. The strange molecule detached from the black skies of the north had landed in Africa. In the smiling and happy little girl I was, I hid (from others and from myself) a secret, restless, clandestine little girl, who knew well that in truth she had been born elsewhere. The obscure feeling of having appeared there by chance, of not belonging to any here by inheritance or descent, the physical feeling of being a frail mushroom who only holds to the earth with hasty and frail roots. (259)

In this later iteration of her birth story, Cixous emphasizes the key role of “chance” – a word that in French can mean both “luck” and “random chance” – in determining the geopolitical location of her birth. She describes the precarity and fragility of her existence in Algeria by comparing herself to a mushroom with “hasty and frail roots.” She reconstructs her childhood here in purely atheistic, scientific terms that replace the more anthropocentric ways of locating oneself and making sense of one's existence in relationship with the surrounding geography: “inheritance and descent.” She makes clear here as well that the “Nazi minefield” is what contributed to the “accident” of her “landing” in Algeria; the ambivalent tension expressed between the “luck” of being born there despite near annihilation of her mother's family and the “random chance” of being born there that robbed her of deeper, stronger roots is emblematic of the ambivalent relational geographies that shape and underpin Cixous's writing.

Indeed, we can read the majority of Cixous' life work as a means of grappling with this important historical year (1940) from various angles. As Nathalie Debrauwere-

Miller has written in her article “Hélène Cixous: A Sojourn Without Place,” “Marked by World War II as much as the Algerian War, [Cixous] says she belongs to the history of Ashkenazi Jews, and feels that her historical and political conscience was affected by the Shoah” (254). In publishing *Osnabrück* (1998), Cixous initiated the beginning of what has become an entire cycle of writing centered around her mother that is still ongoing. In writing about her mother, Cixous is also writing about the events – personal, political, historical, and familial – signified by the year 1940. *Osnabrück* is equal parts auto/biographical narrative about herself, her mother, and her mother’s family, and meta-reflexive meditation on the feasibility of writing it. As we will see, the writer-narrator struggles to write the book from beginning to end. She struggles with the fault lines of memory, the ellipses of History, and the impossibility of representation.

Ultimately, these particular struggles all fold into the larger ethical questions to which Cixous always returns in and through her writing, particularly in her latest cycle which began with *Osnabrück*. In these more recent writings about her mother, Cixous – and her narrators – struggle(s) precisely with how to do justice to her mother and offer her a true gift, one which implies no debt or responsibility to reciprocate. As Hoft-March puts it in her previously cited article, “Writing in a way that recognizes the other, recognizes the other’s differences, recognizes the other’s fragile presence is a conscious gift to the other – and like all conscious gifts presented to the other, some cost is inevitably involved, some form of death inevitably implied”⁹² (434). These questions about whether it is possible to achieve an ethical, just, and respectful relationship with

⁹² Here Hoft-March refers to Cixous’s dialogue with Jacques Derrida’s thinking on the concepts of generosity and hospitality, particularly as developed in his essay titled “Le temps du roi,” published in 1991 as part of his larger exploration of the topic titled *Donner le temps*. In this essay, Derrida argues that the only ‘true gift’ is one which does not elicit or require reciprocity or return, and therefore cannot be a conscious gift.

other(s) through the process and practice of writing (a representational mode) are in some ways parallel or analogous to the ongoing debates about representation in the aftermath of the Shoah. Artists, writers, scholars, teachers, and governments have continuously struggled with these questions; how can we represent such an atrocity without somehow reducing or diminishing it? How can we properly bear witness to this unbearable tragedy in a way that does justice to all the “others” who suffered? As the above passage from Hoft-March’s article suggests, Cixous theorizes writing (and representation) in its ideal form as a kind of gift.

Through this concept of the ideal forms of writing and representation, we can read *Osnabrück* as an attempted gift to Cixous’s mother; throughout the entirety of the text, Cixous’s writer-narrator narrates (or narrates her attempts to *give narrative to*) the later part of her mother’s life as she (her mother) contemplates her aging and mortality and tries to remember (and re-member) her past. In part because her mother is in the liminal space of aging – that is to say, drawing closer to her mortality but still alive and living – and in part because her mother straddles multiple geographies and histories – Algeria, France, Germany – the writer-narrator of the text cannot find an authentic way to represent her. We see this struggle and crisis of representation unfold throughout the entirety of the text, but this unfolding engenders an evolution of the relationship between the writer-narrator and the text, and between the writer-narrator and her mother. This evolution is important as it points back to the ethical dilemma for the writer. As Hoft-March phrases the dilemma, “The question for the writer must be how excluding death or its histories can ever entirely acknowledge (that is, maintain an appropriate relation with) others. *Osnabrück* poses the question inversely as well. Can there be a generous writing,

a writing that recognizes and celebrates the other and gives her sacred space without incurring some debt, indeed, without incurring some death?” (434).

An “autobiographical” book?

The opening sentence of the main body of the text in *Osnabrück* (i.e. after the preface and prologue) tells the reader that this will be a book about the process of its own writing (an “autobiography” if the life of the book is what forms the basis and substance of the text) as much as it will be a book about Eve Cixous, Hélène’s mother:

Ce livre devrait commencer dans la cuisine et pas sous la terre pensai-je ce matin à sept heures ici même pendant les préparatifs orangeux du petit déjeuner, l’orage de l’aube dans la cuisine devant les placards et dehors la tempête du siècle les hurlements des temps passés présents et passés des rafales des guerres qui ne troublent pas la pure concentration de ma mère sur les objets obéissants. (15)

Already in this incipit, we sense a rising tension between the writer and the book, between the book and itself⁹³: the use of the French conditional “devrait” (“should”) signals a dissatisfaction or sense of shortcoming from the writer-narrator. The otherwise present-tense narration here brings us into the immediate, intimate space of the narrator’s current “here and now”: “ce matin à sept heures” and “dans la cuisine,” but this immediate intimacy is contrasted with the book’s alternative starting location – “sous la terre” – evoking the realm of death, of the ancestral, but also of the subterranean heart we saw earlier, representing a realm in which difference and alterity do not create division. Through the optic of “la cuisine” versus “sous la terre,” we sense a tension between the mundane and the spiritual, the intimate and the communal, the present and the past.

⁹³ Drawing on one of Cixous’ earlier works, *La Venue à l’écriture* (1977) in which Cixous likens her lungs to the scrolls of the Torah and therefore herself to the book, we could reasonably deduce that in *Osnabrück* this tension exists between the writer and herself as well.

But what present and past are really evoked? “Les hurlements des temps passés et presents” (screaming from past and present times) and “rafales de guerres” (torrents of wars⁹⁴) evoke images of war and destruction, violence, chaos, pain. Within the intimate, interior space of the kitchen, the narrator and her mother, Eve, are closed off from the “stormy weather” – whether figurative or literal – that rages outside. But while the narrator is nonetheless sensitive to what might be happening out there, Eve is completely absorbed in concentration, able to ignore everything in the past. With this first sentence, Cixous’ narrator elicits images of a traumatic past, whether personal or collective, and describes her mother as unable or unwilling to confront (or even acknowledge) that past. Instead, Eve seems to exist here outside of time and space, in the suspended present of the kitchen, a traditionally female space, surrounded by “des objets obéissants” – obeying household objects.

In the next section of the opening passage, the narrator goes on to describe the “objets obéissants” that fall within her mother’s reign as “objects without yesterdays,” a seemingly counter-example of what Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer have called “testimonial objects” – objects that contain pieces of information about an otherwise inaccessible past:

Boîtes casseroles pots de confitures cuillers objets sans hiers. Or je pensais hier que ce livre devrait commencer au contraire en extérieur et en hauteur, avec les cris d’énervement de l’ange de l’Apocalypse empruntant, comme toujours dans les cas d’urgence, la voix de ma mère pour m’ordonner avec timidité “monte ici que je te montre tout ce qui est arrivé”, et perchée sur le clocher parmi les cigognes, j’apercevais les carrefours des continents. (15)

⁹⁴ The noun “rafale” can also be translated as “gust,” burst,” “succession,” or “fire” (as in from a machine gun), and closely resembles another noun that would also fit within this context: “rafle” (“roundup”). The word “rafle” instantly calls to mind the Nazis’ notorious 1942 roundup of Parisian Jews at the Vélodrome d’Hiver. Cixous’ choice of words here is surely intentional; the “rafales” carry echoes of the Nazi roundups.

Here again, the narrator evokes the past, and her mother's seeming negation of the past, by describing "objects without yesterdays," leading her into an imaginative space of the book's beginning beyond the domestic confines of the kitchen, in which time – and her mother – gain new – and arguably Jewish – dimensions. This passage takes on a somewhat biblical, theological scale, with reference to "the angel of the Apocalypse" and "the intersections of continents." Here, the mother orders (timidly) her daughter-narrator to join her at the top of a bell tower so that she (the mother) may show her daughter "all that has happened" ("tout ce qui est arrivé"). This seems to directly contradict the previous scene, when Eve actively ignores, denies, and disavows the past by imagining her here instead possessing and wanting to share knowledge of the past, knowledge which seems to be imbued with dire urgency.

The above passage gives distinctly Jewish dimensions to Eve, time, and space for two reasons. First, it (subtly) conveys the felt contrast between domestic and public spaces for assimilated Jews living as "others" within a dominant culture (such as Cixous and her family on both sides); domestic spaces such as the kitchen described here are safe, happy, and Jewish, while outside public spaces are always threatening with potential antisemitic violence, even in times of peace. Second, Eve's seemingly contradictory impulses and desires in relationship to the past – namely, the impulse and urge to tell stories and the simultaneous desire to repress the traumatic past – are congruent with patterns articulated among Holocaust survivors as literary critic Shoshana Felman and psychoanalyst Dori Laub describe in *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, their seminal interdisciplinary work published in 1991:

The survivors did not only need to survive so that they could tell their story; they also needed to tell their story in order to survive. There is, in each survivor, an imperative need to *tell* and thus to come to *know* one's story, unimpeded by ghosts from the past against which one has to protect oneself. One has to know

one's buried truth in order to be able to live one's life. This imperative to tell and to be heard can become itself an all-consuming life task. Yet no amount of telling seems ever to do justice to this inner compulsion. There are never enough words or the right words, there is never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory, and speech*. (78, emphasis in original)

While it is problematic in some regards to draw on patterns demonstrated by Holocaust survivors in an effort to help illuminate the tensions at play for Cixous's mother, whose family members perished in the Shoah with few exceptions but who is not herself a survivor, it is nevertheless striking to notice the congruencies and parallels. What Felman and Laub describe also resonates with Cixous's narrator-writer's crisis of representation, which is inextricably connected to another crisis: that of transmission. If it is impossible to find sufficient words that are the right words in order to tell the story, it is also impossible to fully transmit the story. To return briefly to Eilene Hoft-March's analysis of *Osnabrück* as an attempt towards Derrida's formulation of the "true gift" (one which is not conscious and does not require or expect reciprocity, nor incur debt of any kind), we can think of the impulse (and need or desire) to tell (that is, to represent and transmit) the story of the past as one that moves towards the desire for Derrida's model of true generosity but that can never reach it.

In part, this impossibility stems from the fact that we cannot consciously (re)produce (or (re)present) something that can only be the result of an unconscious accident. The writer-narrator wants to give her mother the gift of representation and transmission but is caught in the very impossibility to do so adequately and justly. There is a transposition of the figure of the witness into the writer *and* reader; the writer-narrator attempts to narrate or bear witness to her mother, and the reader bears witness to the writer-narrator's attempts; there is therefore a kind of collapse of transmission. The only thing that is transmittable (and representable) is the very impossibility of these acts,

which we could interpret as the implied cost or, to quote Hoft-March, the incurred “form of death.”

The heart of the book

As the previously cited passage from *Osnabrück* continues with what follows below, we see a thematic and technical shift in focus, away from the conflicts within the writer-book and mother-daughter relationships, and towards a deeper glimpse into the heart of the book itself, not unlike the aforementioned “subterranean, tucked away heart” from Cixous’s earlier meta-reflexive essay:

Il est déjà parti depuis longtemps ce livre, des mois, des rues longues comme des nuits aux pays étrangers et sans trains, des villes de toutes les tailles depuis un an ou deux il parcourt le mystère des temps sur les quatre continents qui supportent l’histoire de ma mère et l’intéressent également, au départ il devait remonter ma mère en tous les sens depuis les sources des sources jusqu’à l’embouchure de la rue Saint-Gothard, en respectant son cours multiple et renversant, car c’est bien elle de sembler finir par commencer ou pour commencer ne pas finir jamais, mais très tôt dans l’aventure, il y a un an ou deux déjà, j’ai découvert que ce serait un combat ce livre contre lui-même et plus précisément ce qui s’annonçait, à ma surprise, c’est un combat de ma mère contre ma mère, je précise: de *maman* contre *ma mère*, et plus précisément encore *un combat mené dans ma mère* même et sur toute l’étendue de la terre – la terre qui est elle – entre *maman*, ma mère, Ève, notre mère, Eva Klein la fiancée de mon père, et Ève Cixous sage-femme, combat aussi incessant et vital que le battement du cœur et de la respiration, il y va de la vie de ma mère en vérité de vivre de sa survie et même plutôt de ses survies à elle-même et au Temps. (15-16)

In this long passage, which is in fact one very long, Proustian sentence, the book becomes a character in the story of its own genesis, a traveler in time (History) and space (geography). The temporalities (“des mois,” “des nuits,” “depuis un an ou deux”) and the spaces (“pays étrangers,” “des villes de toutes les tailles,” “les quatre continents,” “ma mère,” “la source des sources,” “l’embouchure de la rue Saint-Gothard,” “toute l’étendue de la terre”) that figure in the sentence elicit a sensation of travel, from the smallest, most intimate scale to the widest, most epic proportions. This passage is indeed emblematic of

the new geographies articulated in the corpus of transgenerational, transnational texts that form the foundation of this project. By stripping away known boundaries and borders and seamlessly crossing into and out of geophysical and psychospiritual spaces, the text here exemplifies some qualities of what has been described as “écriture migrante”: a writing that is migratory not only because of its author’s movements, but also because of the movement it performs within its own contours. At the same time, the above ambulatory sentence also links the new geographies it articulates with the different iterations of Eve necessitated by the vicissitudes of history through which these Eves have lived and survived. In this sense, the passage articulates the function of the book as (impossible) testimony to the intersections of histories and geographies embodied by the mother.

I highlight these opening passages of *Osnabrück* because they set the stage for the narrative conflict that provides the backdrop for everything else the text encompasses and does: the narrator’s anxiety caused by the seeming impossibility of representation of her mother frames and feeds into her mother’s crises of memory (and testimony) that then feed into and fuel their often-fraught mother-daughter relationship. In turn, these crises and conflicts lead the narrator-writer – and by extension, the reader – into new spaces of textual (im)possibility, which brings us back to the ethical possibilities and limitations of writing. These openings into new spaces are in part achieved by what Felman and Laub describe in their Foreword to *Testimony* as “textualization of the context”:

[...] our readings, [...] [are an] attempt to see [...] how issues of biography and history are neither simply represented nor simply reflected, but are reinscribed, translated, radically rethought and fundamentally worked over by the text. In order to gain insight into the significance and impact of the context on the text, the empirical context needs not just to be *known*, but to be *read* [...]. We thus propose to show how the basic and legitimate critical demand for *contextualization of the text* itself needs to be complemented, simultaneously, by the less familiar and yet necessary work of *textualization of the context* [...]. (xiv-xv; emphasis in original)

As the opening passages of *Osnabrück* demonstrate, the crises of representation and transmission are in part created by the very geographies and histories (contexts of survival) embodied in the figure of Eve. In this way, Felman and Laub's call for "textualization of the context" is precisely what "happens" in Cixous's writing. At the risk of belaboring this point, there is one even earlier passage in *Osnabrück* that merits attention here as a way of illustrating this kind of "textualization of the context" through the figure of the mother:

À l'âge de trois ans et demi je perdis ma mère. C'était la première fois, elle fut remplacée par néant et cela fut si orageux et si spectaculaire que je me vois encore avec toutes les précisions la pleurer au-delà de toute mesure de toute raison, sans pouvoir cesser de verser tout ce que j'avais dans le corps un lundi une journée entière, c'était le premier octobre 1941 rue d'Arzew à Oran, j'étais debout immobilisée par la foudre sur la petite terrasse d'une maison où on m'avait menée pour y être abandonnée, et sans que j'aie pu alors comprendre l'ampleur et la subtilité des circonstances, toute l'histoire contemporaine de la France. (9, sic)

In fact, it would be more accurate to observe that the context is textualized here through the *absence* of the mother. The historical context reinscribed and transmuted in this passage is that of Jewish schoolchildren after the abrogation of the Crémieux Decree, who were expelled from public schools under the Vichy State. The "small house" where the four-year-old child (the young writer-narrator) finds herself "abandoned" by her mother is in fact one of the makeshift schools where Jewish children spent their days throughout the school year until French citizenship was restored to Jews in Algeria in October 1943. The geographical context is textualized here as well; readers are given the exact address of the makeshift Jewish school in Oran, and we can even more precisely situate the small child on the porch of the house located at this address. At the same time as we are given this close-up view into the context of the hyper-present and hyper-local of the moment described, this micro-context is subsumed into the much larger one of

France's entire contemporary history. This larger context is textualized through the written memory (or testimony) of the adult writer-narrator as she re-members the day she "lost" her mother, and in this testimony, the adult acknowledges that her earlier, younger self did not fully grasp the scale and scope of the context which she now textualizes in her book. In acknowledging these earlier blind spots, she makes explicit the role of memory in shaping the ways in which this textualization happens retrospectively; in other words, she testifies to the necessity of memory in making sense of the contexts that shape our worlds – and our writing.

Memory works

It is precisely the question of the role(s) and function(s) of memory that makes the text move or get stuck in *Osnabrück*; memory is the undercurrent that feeds and drives the aforementioned crises of representation and transmission, as well. Oscillating between anxiety caused by her inability to remember certain details and a kind of willful amnesia about her past (and that of her family), the narrator's mother engenders an ambivalent relationship with memory. As we can see in the passage below, the imbrication of geographical space and memory plays a role in how memory works, at least in this case:

D'une terre à l'autre terre nous nous hélons.
– La mémoire, dit ma mère, c'est rien. Et c'est tout.
Dans le salon hier. Soudain arrive un flot de femmes et d'hommes, ce sont les ancêtres côté Omi la femme aux yeux bleus-bleus de lin ma grand-mère [...].
(125)

It is unclear from the text who exactly is "hailing each other from one land to another" – is it Eve and her daughter, or Eve, her daughter, and their deceased ancestors? If we choose to interpret the passage as the former, then geography and memory affect each

other in an embodied way; Eve and her daughter are alive, in their bodies, calling to each other from different geographical spaces and convoking Eve's ancestors through memory, felt in their bodies. If we interpret the passage as the latter, then geography and memory imbricate each other in a more symbolic way; Eve and her daughter are in one land – the land of the living, and Eve's ancestors are in the other – the land of the dead. They “hail each other” by way of memory, in the familial space of the living room.

Eve's fraught relationship with memory is contrasted and complemented by that of her daughter throughout the text. One telling instance of this complementary representation of memory appears at the end of a long passage that recounts, with a very fluid temporality, the period in the family's life immediately following the death of the narrator's father. In this somewhat confusing passage, timelines and subjectivities are unclear. We as readers do not definitively know who is speaking or when, but the few clear markers we have tell us that the narrator is describing her experience of the aftermath of her father's death (Cixous's father, Georges, died in 1948 when Cixous was eleven years old) as a time of “exile”: “Une fois mon père mort il fallut devenir orphelins. [...] Puis l'on est envoyé en exil” (75-6). With her reference to the village of Bérard – “On ne peut pas imaginer plus mort qu[e ce] village mort” (79) – we can understand this new era of the family's life to coincide with new phases of colonial Algerian history: the path toward decolonization.

Through the superimposition of these two “events” we can see a particular formulation of Max Silverman's concept of “palimpsestic memory” wherein the death of the father is superjacent to the early stages of what would become the Algerian War for independence. Arguably, we could read more palimpsestic layers (or perhaps more accurately, more “directions” of memory, to draw on Rothberg's theory of

“multidirectional memory”) here if we think about the year 1948 and what it meant for Jews: that year saw the founding of the State of Israel, but it also saw chaos as Europe tried to reorganize and rebuild in the aftermath of the Second World War. Geographically and politically, Algeria bridges these realities and locations. I see this as a potentially feminist formulation of Silverman’s palimpsestic memory (and Rothberg’s multidirectional memory) because Cixous brings intimate family experience and the collective (“official”) history of her country of origin into relationship with each other.⁹⁵ Once again, Cixous “textualizes the context” here with the result that history is transcribed into and superimposed onto the domestic (Jewish) space of family. There is therefore something very political about this textualization: in the same way that two decades prior to writing *Osnabrück*, Cixous called for women to write themselves into being with the practice of “écriture féminine,” here she writes post-war colonial Algerian Jewish history into being.

A bit farther on the same page, Cixous’s writer-narrator advances another theory of memory that brings the personal (intimate) and collective (“official”) into interconnecting layers when she states “J’ai perdu le départ de maman. C’est sûrement que je n’étais pas en vie pour le subir” (79). This line calls to mind Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory,” which as we saw in the previous chapter is a kind of affiliative

⁹⁵ This particular conceptualization of feminism is inspired by Marianne Hirsch’s formulations of feminist analysis and practice as that which is concerned with the intimate. In *The Generation of Postmemory*, Hirsch articulates a clear connection between memory and feminism as critical approaches:

I turned to the study of memory out of the conviction that, like feminist art, writing, and scholarship, it offered a means to uncover and to restore experiences and life stories that might otherwise remain absent from the historical archive. As a form of counter-history, “memory” offered a means to account for the power structures animating forgetting, oblivion, and erasure and thus to engage in acts of repair and redress. [... Feminism and other movements for social change] open a space for the consideration of affect, embodiment, privacy, and intimacy as concerns of history, and they shift our attention to the minute events of daily life. They are sensitive to the particular vulnerabilities of lives caught up in historical catastrophe, and the differential effects trauma can have on different historical subjects. (15-16)

memory that connects members of a younger generation to the lived experiences of older generations without having actually lived through and/or witnessed those experiences themselves. In Hirsch's own words from her introduction to *The Generation of*

Postmemory:

To grow up with overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own life stories displaced, even evacuated, by our ancestors. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic fragments of events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. This is [...] the structure of postmemory and the process of its generation. (5)

The particular conundrum (or loss) of the generation of postmemory as Hirsch describes it is encapsulated here in the daughter's having "lost" her mother's leaving – what she imagines as a challenging experience that she "was not alive to endure." It is difficult to ascertain whether the narrator wishes more that she indeed had had to go through the pain of her mother leaving, or whether it is more difficult for her to suffer the loss of the experience itself. For the daughter, then, there is no actual memory of her own, only the shell of one for an experience she did not herself have.

This "postmemory" of the second generation exemplified in the daughter-narrator's imagined recollections and shells of memories is contrasted with Eve's own first-generation memory. There are many moments throughout the text in which Eve struggles to describe (or even recall) the exact details of her memories of the lost world (and its inhabitants) of her childhood and adolescence. For example:

Depuis dix ans et plus Eve dit que ce peuple lui paraît un rêve. Elle veut attraper l'*Onkel* – oh – le nom fond les tantes dansent à la lampe de novembre, leurs visages papillonnent, elle les voit très précis colorés comme hier, mais qu'elle remue les lèvres, et voici les tantes évaporées. Eve se voit peu à peu privée de ses sujets, ils s'en vont, ils s'en vont, elle veut crier, mais au souffle déjà ils se sauvent entraînant la moitié de la mémoire allemande dans leur effacement. (127)

The above passage is heartbreaking in its portrayal of Eve's desperate attempts to "grasp" her now deceased ancestors – whom she calls "ce peuple" to designate not only her own family members, but also the demographic group to which they belonged – who have become the ephemeral stuff of dreams, attempts which eventually acquiesce to the ultimate deprivation of their memory. Eve's eventual acquiescence to what she ultimately comes to understand as the futility of her conscious attempts to remember (or re-member) "the people" who populated her early life in Germany resonates with Marcel Proust's theories of involuntary and voluntary memory in *Du côté de chez Swann*. Through the famous "madeleine episode," Proust's narrator gradually comes to understand that memory can only truly be activated and animated by the unconscious, which responds *by chance* to past experiences stored in objects and the stuff of daily life in the present:

Il en est ainsi de notre passé. C'est peine perdue que nous cherchions à l'évoquer, tous les efforts de notre intelligence sont inutiles. Il est caché hors de son domaine et de sa portée, en quelque objet matériel (en la sensation que nous donnerait cet objet matériel), que nous ne soupçonnons pas. Cet objet, il dépend du hasard que nous le rencontrions avant de mourir, ou que nous ne le rencontrions pas. (100)

As Proust explains, the more conscious, "intelligent efforts" we make in order to evoke and recall the past, the more that past will evade us. The past is "hidden" beyond the reach of our intelligence (our conscious mind), and whether we are able to eventually access that past again depends entirely upon our chance encounters (or lack thereof) with objects that spontaneously and unexpectedly elicit sensations that in turn awaken our memories and allow the past to return to us. The potential for profound loss and heartbreak is thus great; there is no guarantee that Eve will happen upon the stimulus her unconscious mind needs in order to bring back the memories of her murdered family members (and "their people") and of her bygone childhood home.

What I have tried to illustrate in these sections is that Cixous is in fact writing her way into her own theory of memory. The aforementioned theories of memory (King, Silverman, Rothberg, Hirsch, Proust) offer helpful guideposts, especially in collaboration and conversation with each other, but what Cixous does in *Osnabrück* as in many of her other works, is textualize a writing practice that is animated by the unconscious and via the body as it bears witness to the simultaneous fissures and fluidities of memory, memory that opens out into the vast geographies, histories, and genealogies that make up the fabric of Cixous's heritage (that is to say, the overlay of and interplay between past and present). By "textualizing the context," Cixous manages precisely to simultaneously bring imprints – or traces – of the past into the present and bear witness to the impossibilities of representation within the limited confines of our conscious memory and language.

La Québécoite: writing silence

As Peter Noble shares in a footnote within his entry on *La Québécoite* featured in Coral Ann Howells's edited collection of critical essays titled *Where Are the Voices Coming From? Canadian Culture and the Legacies of History* (2004), "The word *québécoite* is a coinage by [Régine Robin] of *québécoise* and *coi(te)*, here in the feminine, to express the silence expected of the female immigrant" (96). Robin's portmanteau word echoes Cixous' earlier "Jui femme" in that, as Elissa Gelfand puts it in her entry on Cixous in Sartori and Cottenet-Hage's anthology *Daughters of Sarah*, "the invented word 'Jewoman' melds the two incomplete labels, 'Jew' and 'woman,' suggesting the damage done historically to both groups; it also evokes Cixous's refusal of stable identity categories" (148). Both portmanteau words and critical explanations

highlight precisely the limited confines of language and the creative, (re)generative work that Cixous and Robin take on in their writing.

Much like Cixous in *Osnabrück*, Robin begins *La Québécoise* by alluding to the impossibility of writing it with an epigraph from Franz Kafka:

Il vivaient entre trois impossibilités (que je nomme impossibilités linguistiques à tout hasard, parce que c'est plus simple – on pourrait aussi les appeler tout autrement), l'impossibilité de ne pas écrire, l'impossibilité d'écrire en allemand, l'impossibilité d'écrire autrement, à quoi l'on serait tenté d'ajouter une quatrième impossibilité, l'impossibilité d'écrire (car ce désespoir, ce n'est pas l'écriture qui aurait pu l'apaiser.) (13)

The precise bibliographical information about the source text of this epigraph is missing; readers only know that these are Kafka's words, translated in French. We do not know to whom the "Ils" refers, though we can infer that Kafka is writing about Jewish writers in German. Contrary to much of what trauma scholars suggest about the healing powers of telling one's story, Kafka (and Robin) imply here that the impossible task of writing, if ever achieved, will do little to no good in soothing one's (Jewish) despair. And yet, Kafka and Robin both communicate in writing, undercutting their own texts which seek to undercut the possibility of producing texts that convey the full weight and meaning of (Jewish) despair.

The opening pages of *La Québécoise* following Kafka's epigraph develop this double- (or triple, even quadruple) bind that Kafka describes, linking it to the failures of narrative – and especially grand Historical narratives – to convey the experiences of exile and diaspora. The breakdown of all known and previously understood "orders" sets the tone for Robin's novel, and indeed punctuates it throughout in what becomes a familiar refrain:

Pas d'ordre. Ni chronologique, ni logique, ni logis. Rien qu'un désir d'écriture et cette prolifération d'existence. Fixer cette porosité du probable, cette micromémoire de l'étrangeté. Étaler tous les signes de la différence: bulles de

souvenirs, pans de réminiscences mal situées arrivant en masse sans texture, un peu gris. Sans ordre, c'étaient des enchaînements lâches, des couleurs sans contours, des lumières sans clarté, des lignes sans objets. Fugaces. La nuit noire de l'exil. L'Histoire en morceaux. (15)

The poetic progression – “chronologique, logique, logis” (“chronological, logical, lodging”) – works semantically to convey meaning and rhythmically to reveal connections between the three words, effectively linking time, (Western) logic, and one’s dwelling space as ways of ordering things that no longer apply in this new context of exile, broken and dispersed pieces, and impossible narratives.

Indeed, *La Québécoise* is in many ways an impossible narrative for the reader to follow. Its pages are filled with dates, names, and places that only a well-versed scholar of Central-Eastern European and Russian Jewish history would recognize without referring to an encyclopedia or other more specialized source. It is disorienting to the reader who has not walked the streets of Paris, Montréal, and New York. It is enigmatic and opaque to the reader who does not know how to read Yiddish written with the Hebrew alphabet, and the one who does not have a basic German vocabulary nor the skills to move between languages and decipher meaning of unknown words from context. Told in the third person, the “story” of the novel’s protagonist, an anonymous woman referred to as “Elle” (“She” or “Her”), forms the faint thread of the novel’s main “narrative.” Her peregrinations wind the reader through the streets of Paris, Montréal, and the Shtetls of an Eastern Europe that is no more. And yet, this is not a straightforward travel narrative. It is not simply an account of “Her” experiences in various places and the journey from place to place. It is an interwoven and textured tapestry, or “patchwork” as Régine Robin has called it, of stories, temporalities, geographies, languages, and textualities. The narrative is frequently interrupted, or punctuated, by free-form poems whose visual arrangements on the page reveal as much about the meaning as the words

themselves. The narrative is also punctuated by reproductions of local television guides, phone books, and real estate listings. It is disorienting, perhaps (re)producing the disorientation and dislocation that “Elle” experiences in post-war Québec as she/the narrative twists and winds her/its way through the streets of Montréal and Paris.

Fully conscious of the risks of mythologizing and “folklorizing,”⁹⁶ *La Québécoise* tries in vain to reconstruct (or re-member) the lost world of the Shtetl, and it moves seamlessly between languages and temporalities. It tells a story about the impossibility of telling a story, and thereby calls into question the undertaking of historiography, and the possibility of belief in History. Like *Osnabrück*, *La Québécoise* features a frequent blurring of voices, temporalities, and geographic places, disorienting the reader and pulling her into the destabilizing world(s) of the text.

Disoriented readers

Just as the writer-narrators in *Osnabrück* and *La Québécoise* struggle constantly to find an authentic way to “tell their story” (or seemingly lack of story), so have I struggled constantly to find an authentic way to write about these texts. I have tried to enter into my own writing about this work so many times, and always with the same result: I am unsatisfied and convinced that there must be some more elegant and coherent, unified way to do these complex texts justice. I look through my plethora of notes, again, and wonder if there is some perfect passage that I have missed that would encapsulate everything I see in these texts in a neat and tidy package. In a sense, every passage fits this description, and yet there is not one I can pick out among the others as they flow into

⁹⁶ Robin uses this term frequently in her critical works, notably *Le Naufrage du siècle* and *Le roman mémoriel* to describe what she views as the dangerous possibility that memory (and the work of memory) will lead to a romanticized, idealized, and falsely coherent image of the past.

and out of each other. In a way, every passage is a reiteration of itself and of the others and will lead me to the same (in)conclusions as any other passage I could choose. The spiraling, circuitous process of reading and writing I repeatedly move through mirrors Robin's (and Cixous's) memory works.

Indeed, every passage is messy, ambivalent, ambiguous, tentacular, and circuitous. When each passage contains enough to never be able to fully unpack, it begins to seem like an impossible undertaking to write about how I read and what we can glean from these texts. This is, perhaps, one of the most significant aspects of what these texts do: they generate empathy in their reader for the writer-narrators who grapple through the text, and whose grappling makes it impossible for the reader not to also grapple. The cycle repeats itself; as the reader deepens her empathy for the writer-narrators, she begins to see their world from their perspective, and cannot convey what she has understood in any way but the same tentacular, ambiguous, messy and circuitous fashion that the writer-narrators do. All of this grappling at a conscious, intellectual level is made all the more challenging by what happens with the unconscious memories and affects that are summoned in the reader through the process of reading, further interrupting and rippling into the struggle to apprehend. At the same time, the elusive, slippery nature of these memory-texts conveys something about the source of the agony that fuels these desperate attempts to re-member: to fully remember and represent – in other words, to grasp – the lost past is to flatten, dull, or even annihilate the memories themselves. Hence, the sinuous writing winds around its circuitous path in an effort to evade the annihilation of that which animates it.

Perhaps this is part of why I have found nearly every scholarly article written about these two texts to fall a bit short and err on the side of the overly simplistic;⁹⁷ at some point, the authors of these articles must have had to pick one thread out of the many interwoven and messy ones contained in these texts in order to be able to produce something feasible and within the scope of scholarly conventions. I certainly understand the need to make those choices, and with respect for the scholars who produced these articles, the limitations I find in their approach might also be reflective of the scholarly debates and discussions of their time. Still, their approach leaves so much to be desired for audiences who have also read the literary texts; so much complexity and ambiguity is omitted, and tentacles are amputated for the sake of making a cogent and coherent argument. It is a double bind for the reader-critic, and this is another aspect of what these texts do: in addition to generating empathy between the writer-narrators and the reader, they also, like other “difficult” literary texts, challenge and defy the constraints of literary criticism. These texts *want* their readers to become lost and disoriented. They do *not want* to give their readers the (illusory) satisfaction of arriving, free of doubt, at any particular conclusions or understanding.

⁹⁷ For example, see Yuko Yamade’s article titled “Auto/Bio/Fiction in Migrant Women’s Writings in Quebec: Régine Robin’s *La Québécoise* and *L’immense fatigue des pierres* (Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2006). The themes of hybridity and the ‘in-between’ space occupied by migrant writers are explored, thus situating Robin and her literary contributions within the literary milieu of ‘migrant literature,’ but Yamade’s analysis does not offer a deeper reading beyond this. Similarly, Christl Verduyn’s article titled “L’éth(n)ique, *La Québécoise* et l’écriture migrante québécoise” (Tessera, 2000) focuses on the theme of cultural pluralism as represented in the novel. To be fair to these critics and their interventions on Robin’s work, Robin herself has tended to highlight the migrant experience in a disorienting pluralistic and multicultural Montréal as the main focus of her novel; see her afterword in Phyllis Aronoff’s English translation for an example of this. Robin’s choice to emphasize and highlight only this aspect of a very complicated text is curious to me; perhaps it is her way of generously offering her readers (and critics) a way in?

And so, knowing that this endeavor entails a double bind (at least), and for the sake of starting somewhere, here is a passage from the beginning of the third and final section (or “chapter”) of *La Québécoite*:

J’avais essayé. Encore. Mais je le savais. Cela devait mal se terminer. Autant la rendre aux ethniques, aux métèques avec lesquels elle est si bien. Ni à Outremont, ni à Westmount. Le Côté des Swann aussi fermé que celui des Guermantes. Allons bon ! J’avais essayé pourtant. Impossible de faire le tour de cette ville, de l’assimiler, de se l’incorporer. Impossible simplement de s’arrêter quelque part, de poser son balluchon, de dire ouf ! [...] La ville pèse, pèse. [...] Marcher, errer, ou plutôt ne pas bouger. [...] Tu as perdu ton âge et ton nom. [...] Tu n’es plus que la rumeur douce de cette ville sans cohérence, sans unité. Encore une fois essayer, prendre à bras-le-corps cette ville impossible, affronter les hivers glacés, les étés chauds et humides, encore une fois, errer. (173)

In this passage, as elsewhere in the text, writing becomes analogous to the protagonist’s movements throughout the “impossible” city. As the writing happens, the protagonist moves. The writer-narrator makes the protagonist move through the text elsewhere referred to as “cette ville-livre” (144). And while there seems to be some longing to finally “set her baggage down” (“poser son balluchon”), the city (or the book) will not let her do so. In this relationship, she is transformed by the city-book, as if robbed of her own agency and compelled to keep wandering no matter what she may really want. If the protagonist is in constant movement because of the city-book, the writer-narrator is as well. The reoccurrence of the polysemic word “essayer” in this passage highlights the writer-narrator’s own lack of agency; whether translated as “to try” or “to (write an) essay,” “essayer” thus links effort with writing, all of which is futile as again and again, the writer-narrator “essays” to craft a narrative and cannot.

This passage echoes earlier ones that depict the protagonist as perpetually “suspended in the in-between.” The perpetual liminality of Robin’s “elle” is certainly a way to mark her otherness, her immigrant status in a country that is not her own, but it could also symbolize the city itself that is not her own. As Alain Médam has written

about Montréal, “l’urbanité montréalaise implique la mise en scène d’une sociologie de l’entre-deux. Ville métropole dont la trame complexe est composée de multiples quartiers, Montréal, par son intégration malaisée dans l’ensemble québécois, remet en question l’élaboration d’une identité unitaire” (Médam in Jones 78). And Ralph Sarkonak has written: “inbetweenness is anchored in the fabric of the urban space of Montréal, as though it were some giant, concrete metaphor of otherness” (Sarkonak in Jones 78).

At the risk of essentializing and oversimplifying the city of Montréal, these suggested particularities of the city by Canadian scholars can help illuminate some of what *La Québécoise*’s protagonist experiences. As Elizabeth Jones explains in her article (in which she cites Médam and Sarkonak) titled “Home Space, Language, and Non-Lieux in the Late 20th Century: Inscribing Loss, Plurality, and Exile in the Work of Régine Robin,” the search for a “home space” is at the center of Robin’s work, not only in *La Québécoise* but in subsequent works as well: “Throughout [Robin’s] narratives, a nostalgic desire for stasis is repeatedly uttered in terms of the search for a sturdy, enduring house” (79). If we read “sturdy, enduring house” more broadly to encompass the more amorphous and harder to define idea of “home,” we could also apply Jones’ analysis to *Osnabrück*.

The (Jewish) search for “home”, and the Proustian search for lost time:

One crucial aspect to which Jones’ analysis does not give much attention, however, is the relevance and symbolic value of the protagonist’s Jewish identity in her search for “home.” The undercurrent of all of the texts in Robin’s oeuvre is the destruction of the Shtetl – always spelled in the text with a capital “S” to designate its place in language as a proper noun – which marks the hard impossibility of a true return

home. The Shtetl is in many ways the ghost that haunts the text and bespeaks trauma, pointing to the empty spaces between the wor(l)ds. Montréal becomes a site of palimpsestic searching; the multicultural space of the city contains the (false) hope of finding the Shtetl within its many cultures. In the passage below, from the first “chapter” of Robin’s novel, we can see this search for “home” and the superimposition of the Shtetl and the city of Montréal:

Le sabbat passe. Guedali, le fondateur d’une Internationale chimérique s’en est allé prier à la synagogue.” [sic] Le Shtetl s’en est passé. Guedali et toi aussi et Babel et bien d’autres. Guedali, Guedali, même ici à Montréal dans cette Amérique de Delicatessen, de pain noir, de cornichons, de harengs salés, même ici, Guedali, je cherche le Shtetl sans le trouver. Perdue sur la Main, sur Saint-Urbain ou sur la rue Roy, elle s’obstinait encore à demander la rue Novolipie, la rue Gésia, la rue Leszno, la rue Franciskana. Elle confondait les lieux, les époques, les langues et les gens. Elle n’arrivait pas à comprendre, à admettre que tout était fini. Fini, Juddenrein, fini. Même ici à Montréal, le Shtetl s’en est passé Guedali et passés nos rêves aussi: Guedali, Guedali, le sabbat passe. (68)

In this passage, the “je” wistfully addresses Guedali, apparently the founder of an imaginary and utopic international workers’ movement, bemoaning the absence of the Shtetl and her vain attempts at finding it in the most Jewish places and objects within Montréal. These vain attempts echo Eve’s own futile efforts to consciously recall the details of her deceased relatives from Osnabrück; in *La Québécoise*, the protagonist searches for the madeleine (or dark rye bread, smoked herring, and pickles) that, dipped in the fragrant cup of tea (or discovered in a Montréal deli), will bring Combray (the Shtetl) back into full conscious reach.

Space and time become equally confusing and disorienting terrains as the “je” becomes lost in the Canadian city and ultimately forgets that she is no longer in Europe as she searches for familiar streets of the Old World that do not exist in her New one. We also see a blurring of temporalities and the tricks memory can play on us in this passage: the passing of time, and more specifically the passing of the Sabbath, confuses and

disorients the “je” and the “elle,” who are adamantly caught in the past, refusing to admit that “tout était fini.” Language and people are also disorienting for the multilingual and migratory subject who has lived through and in many languages and places.

Not only are spaces and temporalities blurred in this passage; so are subjects and voices. The “je” at some point becomes “elle”; as the “je” bemoans the fact that she cannot find the Shtetl even in Montréal, the “elle” gets lost in the city streets, looking for places that are not there. Finally, “Guedali” is brought back into the text in a direct address, but readers no longer know who is addressing him, especially with the sudden allusion to a “we” (“nos rêves”). Although the blurred subjects and voices⁹⁸ make it unclear as to who is addressing Guedali, whoever he is, what does seem fairly certain here is that Guedali serves as an interlocutor who anchors the “je” and the “elle” to the present moment of the Sabbath passing, and this present moment triggers the mournful look back to the past. But it is also important to note that in Jewish tradition, the Sabbath is designed precisely to create space in time; it is the sacred zone in which there is space to let temporalities blur in the work of memory and mourning.

If we return to the first cited passage from the third “chapter,” recopied here to facilitate a less arduous task of reading, we can see a similar blurring of subjects and voices that augments as the passage continues:

J’avais essayé. Encore. Mais je le savais. Cela devait mal se terminer. Autant la rendre aux ethniques, aux métèques avec lesquels elle est si bien. Ni à Outremont, ni à Westmount. **Le Côté des Swann aussi fermé que celui des Guermantes.** Allons bon ! J’avais essayé pourtant. Impossible de faire le tour de cette ville, de l’assimiler, de se l’incorporer. Impossible simplement de s’arrêter quelque part, de poser son balluchon, de dire ouf ! [...] La ville pèse, pèse. [...] Marcher, errer, ou plutôt ne pas bouger. [...] Tu as perdu ton âge et ton nom. [...] Tu n’es plus que la rumeur douce de cette ville sans cohérence, sans unité. Encore une fois

⁹⁸ From a psychoanalytical approach to literary theory (Lacan), this blurring happens in part through the triangulations that Robin sets up between her narrator, “Elle,” and Guedali that then map onto the triangulation between reader, writer, and narrator/character that take place at an unconscious level and thus instantaneously and unknowably shape our reading.

essayer, prendre à bras-le-corps cette ville impossible, affronter les hivers glacés, les étés chauds et humides, encore une fois, errer. (173, emphasis added)

At the beginning, it seems clear enough that the “je” is the writer-narrator expressing her exasperation with the writing process after having attempted in the previous two “chapters” to find a place for “Elle,” her protagonist, referred to here with the personal pronoun “elle” and the direct object pronoun “la.” In this third and final “chapter” of Robin’s “novel,” the writer-narrator enters the text increasingly frequently, drawing readers’ attention back to the underlying metanarrative of the novel: questioning the writer’s task of creating “readable” texts – in other words, of creating narrative(s). But as soon as readers orient themselves around this understanding of the “je”, a “tu” enters the text. Who is this “tu”? Some critics have called this “tu” the “je’s” inner interlocutor, a sounding board for her internal thoughts, a double of herself. But could the “tu” also be the narrator’s protagonist? In this case, the writer-narrator “je” would address her protagonist directly within the text, laying bare what we already know about autobiography: the writer-narrator “je” is also a character within the text.

The Proustian references to Swann and Guermantes in this passage call to mind Proust’s earlier writer-narrator in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, who also struggled to translate and transpose his remembered past into a readable text. And not unlike Robin’s writer-narrator, Proust’s walked readers through different places and spaces as he searched for his “true” memories lost in time. But in the above passage, Robin’s writer-narrator tells us that both of Proust’s possible directions and pathways (Swann and Guermantes) are now closed. The writer-narrator in *La Québécoise* is at an impasse. In the previous two “chapters,” Robin’s writer-narrator has experimented with different geographic and social settings for her protagonist’s story, and neither one has been satisfactory. At the end of both chapters, the protagonist returns to Paris, which does not

prove satisfactory, either. Like Robin herself, the protagonist is a Jewish woman born in Paris to Polish Ashkenazi immigrant parents, who self-identifies as French, but living in Québec has made her recognize the ways in which France, and Paris more exactly, holds too many painful memories and has changed too much in her absence to feel like home.

To take possible interpretations of Robin's reference here to Proust's two "ways" a step further beyond the literal geographic impasse that keeps the protagonist suspended in a liminal no man's land and prevented from finding her home in either the Old or New worlds, (post)memory of the Shtetl and desire for Montréal to fill the void left by the Shtetl could also echo Proust's two ways. Neither the protagonist's memory nor her desire can be sated.⁹⁹ As Proust himself writes in *Du côté de chez Swann*, "Aussi le côté de Méséglise et le côté de Guermantes restent-ils pour moi liés à bien des petits événements de celle de toutes les diverses vies que nous menons parallèlement, qui est la plus pleine de péripéties, la plus riche en épisodes, je veux dire la vie intellectuelle" (273). This short excerpt makes clear that the "côtés" for Proust refer as much to geographies of mind and sentiment (internal experience) as to external spaces and places, and that moving through these internal and external worlds involves "péripéties" (twists and turns, surprises, adventures). For Robin's narrator-writer to declare that "the two ways are closed" refers as much to the intellectual obstacles she encounters in her mind as to those external ones that prevent either physical space/place – and their representations in writing – to fulfill her memory and desire.

Shortly before his reflections on the Guermantes and Méséglise "ways" in the short excerpt included above, Proust makes the following observations about the

⁹⁹ I take these terms (memory and desire) from the publisher's promotional description of Phyllis Aronoff's English translation of the novel (1997).

Guermantes way in particular that shed light on another important aspect of what contributes to Robin's impasse:

Et de la sorte c'est du côté de Guermantes que j'ai appris à distinguer ces états qui se succèdent en moi, pendant certaines périodes, et vont jusqu'à se partager chaque journée, l'un revenant chasser l'autre, avec la ponctualité de la fièvre ; contigus, mais si extérieurs l'un à l'autre, si dépourvus de moyens de communication entre eux, que je ne puis plus comprendre, plus même me représenter dans l'un, ce que j'ai désiré, ou redouté, ou accompli dans l'autre. (272-273)

As Proust explains, it is from the Guermantes way that he finally learned how to distinguish between the multiple states of mind that would pass through him, "chasing each other" one after the next in such a rapid ("feverish") and contiguous yet disarticulated manner that he would be left unable to understand. Proust's description of the confusion engendered by his passing thoughts and emotions echoes the disorienting effects of reading *La Québécoise*: the contiguous yet disjointed pieces chase and return to each other, and yet, they do not have the means to communicate with each other. They leave us unable to make sense of a comprehensible whole, because there is no such thing, nor was there ever. This is another contributing factor to the impasse expressed by Robin's narrator; she cannot connect the pieces, and knowing that this is true, she is left with no clear "way" forward or out.

Robin's nod or "wink" to Proust is another point of connection with *Osnabrück*, in which Cixous also nods to Proust, even more explicitly in the passage below than the aforementioned scene of Eve's crisis of conscious memory:

[...] les années déchainées dévorent en rugissant les frêles bords de notre continent chaque saison engloutit de gros morceaux du corps, déjà il reste d'Osnabrück ce qui de Combray subsistait aux dernières nouvelles : deux étages reliés par une vis d'escalier juste assez pour laisser passer les derniers fantômes prêts pour la scène de l'adieu, comme pour moi tout Londres et les années cinquante se résument dans la rue appelée Golders Gardens que je montais et descendais en ne répandant pas mes dernières jonchées de sanglots consacrés à l'éloignement immense de maman, elle au rivage d'Alger moi dans l'Angleterre

déserte, décor hostile et juste pour ma désolation, encore si à l'heure de mon départ maman avait eu une crise de larmes, quelque chose d'atroce, si elle s'était cramponnée à moi pour partir avec moi, si elle avait fait semblant de m'accompagner sur le bateau pour rester avec moi, si, se ravisant au dernier moment, elle ne m'avait pas laissé prendre le bateau, mais par un dessein profond elle s'ôta elle-même de ma vue aveugle, au bastingage je la perdis dans la minute, non sans n'avoir montré aucune trace d'angoisse car elle comptait bien faire de moi ce que sans doute elle parvint à faire, moi j'allai dans Londres pleurant sans larmes l'absence de larmes de ma mère, d'un pas surélevé, tendant, afin de ne pas glisser dans l'inférieur désir, à m'accrocher aux premiers rudiments de la langue anglaise, la rue de ma douleur exhalait la puissante odeur tubéreuse du troène anglais que je ne puis humer depuis et désormais sans me sentir mourir et embaumée, terrible et capiteuse odeur de l'Angleterre, l'essence de la séparation et de l'amour blessé. (127-128 sic)

This lengthy passage is a nod to Proust in its stylistic qualities as well as its thematic ones: Cixous manages to stretch one very descriptive and winding, spiraling sentence over the space of two pages, making sure to spare the reader no detail of the narrator's inner adolescent world. As Cixous' narrator describes her separation from her mother when she goes to England to study, she likens Osnabrück to Proust's Combray: a place that now only exists in memory and that has been slowly eroded, diminished to a spiral staircase connecting two floors; enough space to let ghosts come through and say their final goodbyes. In the following passage from Proust's *Du côté de chez Swann*, Proust's description of the staircase to which Combray has been reduced reveals the confines of what he calls his "voluntary memory":

C'est ainsi que, pendant longtemps, quand, réveillé la nuit, je me ressouvenais de Combray, je n'en revis jamais que cette sorte de pan lumineux, découpé au milieu d'indistinctes ténèbres, pareil à ceux que l'embrasement d'un feu de Bengale ou quelque projection électrique éclairent et sectionnent dans un édifice dont les autres parties restent plongées dans la nuit : à la base assez large, le petit salon, la salle à manger, l'amorce de l'allée obscure par où arriverait M. Swann, l'auteur inconscient de mes tristesses, le vestibule où je m'acheminai vers la première marche de l'escalier, si cruel à monter, qui constituait à lui seul le tronc fort étroit de cette pyramide irrégulière ; et, au faite, ma chambre à coucher avec le petit couloir à porte vitrée pour l'entrée de maman ; en un mot, toujours vu à la même heure, isolé de tout ce qu'il pouvait y avoir autour, se détachant seul sur l'obscurité, le décor strictement nécessaire (comme celui qu'on voit indiqué en tête des vieilles pièces pour les représentations en province), au drame de mon

déshabillage ; comme si Combray n'avait consisté qu'en deux étages reliés par un mince escalier, et comme s'il n'y avait jamais été que sept heures du soir. À vrai dire, j'aurais pu répondre à qui m'eût interrogé que Combray comprenait encore autre chose et existait à d'autres heures. Mais comme ce que je m'en serais rappelé m'eût été fourni seulement par la mémoire volontaire, la mémoire de l'intelligence, et comme les renseignements qu'elle donne sur le passé ne conservent rien de lui, je n'aurais jamais eu envie de songer à ce reste de Combray. Tout cela était en réalité mort pour moi. Mort à jamais ? C'était possible. (99-100)

In this passage, Proust further develops his theory of memory. Contrasting “voluntary memory” (summoned by the conscious mind) with “involuntary memory” (activated in the unconscious mind by external stimuli), he insinuates here that, as Eve comes to realize in *Osnabrück*, to engage our voluntary memory is not only futile, it does violence to – or dis-members – the past we so desperately want to preserve. Knowing that his voluntary memory will never bring Combray back in its full integrity, Proust accepts the potential consequence: the “death” of all the parts of Combray that elude his voluntary memory. His choice of words is telling; he acknowledges that there is great and irretrievable loss involved.

These references to Proust are neither coincidental nor insignificant. Proust's constant nostalgia and sense of loss of time and of the past shaped his entire multi-volume novel, but it also permanently transformed the way we understand memory and our relationship to the past. Cixous and Robin are well-versed and steeped in French literature and are acutely aware of Proust's influence on our understanding of time and memory. At the same time, these references may also reveal something about Cixous's and Robin's relationships with their own Frenchness and Jewishness in the same way that Proust's own relationship with his Frenchness and Jewishness filters through his work. As Elaine Marks notes in *Marrano as Metaphor* in her discussion of the intertextuality between Racine's dramatic rewriting of the biblical story of Esther and Proust's own

mobilizations of the story and figure of Esther throughout *À la recherche du temps perdu*,¹⁰⁰ particularly with the character of Charlus in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, a French (non-Jewish) aristocrat who, like the biblical figure of Esther, lives a false identity in that he is secretly homosexual:

[...] unlike Esther, there is nothing Jewish about Charlus, and he exists neither in the pages of Jewish Holy Scriptures nor in the pages of a play by Jean Racine. But the fact that he is there with all the Esthers in Proust's novel demonstrates the inevitability in literary texts of intertextuality and assimilation. From the moment that the language is French and not Hebrew, from the moment that there are literary references from a variety of periods in time and places in space, there can be no Jewish literature in French literature that is not contaminated by Christian culture and the French language. But this contamination is not a negative condition. There can be no pure Esther, no Esther who is not already a combination of Hebrew text, Greek text, the Vulgate, and all the translations and editions in so many languages of the world. (40-41)

The idea that intertextuality between Racine, Proust, and the original Hebrew Bible indicates a kind of *assimilation* highlights some of the dynamics at play and at stake for Jewish writers (and readers) – such as Cixous, Robin, and Proust – producing (and reading) literature in French. Marks' emphasis on the inevitability of cross-cultural and intertextual mixing (“contamination”) between French Christian culture and “Jewish literature” written in French echoes our earlier exploration of “assimilation and incorporation” in Annie Cohen's work and further demonstrates the fallacy of “pure” literary production in terms of nationalized cultural and linguistic categories. As Marks states, “there can be no pure Esther,” and therefore there is no straightforward or singular line to trace. Like Proust's Combray, Cixous' Osnabrück, and Robin's Shtetl, there is no clear way back because even in the present reality of what eventually become memories, there is no way to master it, untangle it, or apprehend it in its entirety.

¹⁰⁰ These mobilizations or re-stagings occur throughout the novel with various characters named Esther – including a lesbian Jewish Esther Lévy and Esther-themed imagery that appears in descriptions of church décor.

Testimony and the politics of perception: the power of naming

As previously noted, few critical works engaged with *La Québécoite* have confronted the daunting complexity of the novel. One exception is Sandrina Joseph's article, "Désormais le temps de l'entre-deux: l'éclatement identitaire dans *La Québécoite* de Régine Robin," published in 2001.¹⁰¹ Joseph articulates well the exilic experience that is (re)created by the text-narrator-author for the reader and experienced by the reader, implying that perhaps critical readers are not immune to this manipulation. We too become wanderers, lost in the text, separated from our familiar frameworks and plunged into a disorienting kaleidoscope:

Les trois vies du personnage appellent le déplacement de celui-ci dans la ville, mais elles forcent également le déplacement du lecteur dans le récit. Ce dernier, à l'image du personnage, est constamment déraciné du lieu dans lequel la narratrice l'a placé. Il expérimente en quelque sorte – encore une fois à la manière du personnage – la perte, l'errance ici discursive. (32)

Joseph's analysis fittingly describes the experience of reading *La Québécoite*. With each new "chapter," all narrated in the conditional mode, readers must get their bearings and adjust to a new setting and neighborhood. But since everything takes place in the conditional, Robin intentionally takes away anything that would anchor the reader in some kind of concrete representation of reality. She takes away this possibility, I think, as a means of sensitizing the reader to the chaotic, unsettling, troubling inner reality of a Jewish (im)migrant looking for a place for herself in a new country after the Holocaust.

¹⁰¹ Joseph's article gets deep into the threads of the novel to present a more holistic understanding of what the narrative does through its form and content. Joseph's argument is convincing and ends with an eloquent flourish to bring the whole piece together. But I believe that what makes any critical engagement with this text so challenging if not actually impossible, aside from the intricacy of the many threads which itself is complicated by the constant disruption of narrative, is that this is a text that actively seeks to elude and evade any one critical argument. This is true no matter how nuanced and multilayered the argument may be, no matter how eloquent or convincing the conclusion. In other words, *La Québécoite* is a text that is actively and intentionally messy, chaotic, and opaque. In its need for readers to confront the incomprehensibility of Jewish diasporic experience after the Holocaust, it refuses to be pinned down, boxed in, or apprehended in any one way.

Interpreted this way, the novel could fall somewhere within the realm of testimony, albeit a very fragmented, indirect, and fictionalized one. Indeed, the distinction between testimony and literature (fiction) is blurred with *La Québécoise*. At the same time, because it is built upon trauma, memory, and subjectivity, testimony has always stood on shaky ground and struggles to legitimize itself as a source and a genre. Testimony's struggle to be believed and received as legitimate renders *La Québécoise* even less stable, but also helps to illuminate the "why" of the novel, or what is at stake. As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub describe in their Foreword to *Testimony*:

In moving in between the questions of the text and the questions of the context, the overriding effort of [this book] is to offer new articulations of *perspective*: we underscore the question of the witness, and of witnessing, as **nonhabitual, estranged conceptual prisms** through which we attempt to apprehend—and to make tangible to the imagination—**the ways in which our cultural frames of reference and our preexisting categories which delimit and determine our perception of reality have failed**, essentially, both to contain, and to account for, the scale of what has happened in contemporary history. (xv, emphasis added, italics in original)

Felman and Laub illuminate the failures in cultural-social modes of perception (or ways of knowing and understanding) that testimony challenges. Because of the "nonhabitual, estranged conceptual prisms," that testimony brings forth, we are confronted with the disturbing and uncomfortable task of trying to apprehend new categories and new ways of knowing, and with the disquieting truth that our existing modes are not up to the task. Not only does testimony challenge our modes of perception; it also catapults us into a new kind of encounter with the other; it turns us into witnesses and plunges us into experiences completely unlike our own and otherwise unknown (and unknowable) to us. *La Québécoise* certainly operates in a similar fashion, and I believe that this is ultimately the ethics at stake and at play within the novel: experiencing the disturbing estrangement of the other, and therefore also of the self.

In her 1997 Afterword to Phyllis Aronoff's English translation of *La Québécoise* (*The Wanderer*), provocatively titled "The Writing of an Allophone from France,"¹⁰² Robin reflects precisely on what she views as 'at stake' in her novel: giving place and voice to the singular experiences of (im)migrant and/or exilic (diasporic) identities. For Robin in 1997, her 1983 novel was about identity. She writes: "Literature is often a debate with one's multiple identities" (178). She takes up the construct of national identity as that through which she had to write her way in *La Québécoise* to carve out a space for herself within that construct as it operated and manifested itself in Québec in the early 1980s. She alludes to the British-Indian writer Salman Rushdie and his collection of essays titled *Imaginary Homelands* (1991) as she makes her way through her 1997 understanding of what she had explored in her novel. Salman Rushdie grounds his own work in *Imaginary Homelands* in the struggle of now well-known African American writers such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison to represent *their* perception of reality, since representation and perception were (and still are, to some extent) "owned" by the majority and by those with the most power. Robin's evocation of Rushdie's work on the politics of perception resonates with Felman and Laub's work on illuminating what is so challenging about the nature of testimony.

Within this framework, Cixous' and Robin's writing takes on a new level of agency – and urgency – and the stakes are made higher. The narrator-writers in both *La Québécoise* and *Osnabrück* struggle with representation from within the text, and their reader struggles with comprehension from outside the text, but what happens in that

¹⁰² It is provocative in that the term 'Allophone' is a specifically Québécois term used to describe people in Québec whose first language is neither French nor English – the two official languages of the Canadian province. By using this term, Robin effectively 'outs herself' as an ethnic 'other' and lets her Yiddish-speaking Jewish identity supersede her French identity. In this way, her afterword can be interpreted as an act of resistance to French republican universalism and of advocacy for alterity, particularism, and pluralism.

cerebral, unconscious interaction between the narrator-writers and the reader is a struggle to transmit and a struggle to perceive (/receive/apprehend/understand) a post-Holocaust and post-colonial (Eastern) European-North African Jewish reality that is all the more unseen and unknown because it is that of women.¹⁰³ Women's stories and women's histories, all of which shape women's realities, have been and still are relegated to the margins of dominant discourse, official Histories, and grand narratives. The same is true of Jewish stories and histories¹⁰⁴, and the same is true for previously colonized populations. Whether they explicitly acknowledge this in their literary work or not, Robin and Cixous are part of all of these marginalized groups relative to the crafting of official Histories, dominant discourse, and grand narratives. At stake in their writing, then, are their voice, their agency, and their fight to be seen and heard.

One technique or strategy that Robin (or her narrator) uses in *La Québécoise* to the end of making her perception of reality known, seen, and heard, is the frequent incorporation of lists. The lists enumerate anything from restaurant menu items to newspaper headlines to television programming to directional highway and street signs. The lists disrupt and destabilize the narrative and add a postmodern "patchwork" aesthetic to the novel. But Sandrina Joseph offers another reading of the lists:

De fait, comment occuper cette ville mouvante ? En prouvant qu'elle existe bel et bien, qu'elle ne s'efface pas totalement dans son morcellement. Que les pièces qui la constituent, si elles ne s'imbriquent pas les unes dans les autres, sont tout de même possibles à désigner. L'énumération se pose dès lors comme un moyen d'appréhender le monde étranger qui entoure l'autre. (34)

¹⁰³ Albert Memmi, Edmond Jabès, Mohamed Dib, Georges Perec, André Schwarz-Bart and many other men have written about these historical realities from their identitary perspectives based in similar geographies and have been crucial in carving out a space within French/Francophone literature for these realities to be discussed.

¹⁰⁴ Especially those of Sephardic Jews compared to Ashkenazic Jews, due in large part to the attention given to restoring as many Ashkenazic stories as possible after the near total annihilation of Ashkenazic populations and cultures in the Shoah.

As does Proust in *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Joseph's reading of *La Québécoise* highlights the power of naming things in the process of apprehending a strange new place. But, we could take this a step further and read Robin's lists not only as a strategy to make sense of the world around her protagonist, but also as a means of shaping that same world. In the struggle to represent one's own perceptions of reality that Rushdie describes, Robin's enumeration technique is effective.

Beyond the empowerment that comes with articulating and shaping one's own reality, achieved (or at least attempted) in *La Québécoise* through the incorporation of lists, the lists serve another purpose that becomes clear relatively early in the novel. The following excerpt taken from towards the beginning of the first "chapter" begins with one such list and is immediately followed by an important and revealing meta-reflexive passage that cuts to the heart of what this novel is "about."

Centre-ville,
ring ancien,
nouveau ring,
boulevards extérieurs,
boulevards de ceinture,
périphériques,
bretelles,
highways,
freeways,
turnpikes,
parkways,
thruways,
Stadtmitte,
Centrum,
midtown,
downtown,

— ce désir d'écriture. C'était pourtant si simple de commencer par le commencement, de suivre une intrigue, de la dénouer, de parler d'un hors-lieu, d'un non-lieu¹⁰⁵, d'une absence de lieu. Essayer de fixer, de retenir, d'arracher quelques signes au vide. Rien qu'une marque, une toute petite marque. Il fallait

¹⁰⁵ Elizabeth Jones cites Canadian scholar Marc Augé and his theoretical work on the concept of "non-lieux" in her aforementioned article. Régine Robin has cited Augé's theory of "non-lieux" in critical/theoretical pieces written in the late 1990s.

fixer tous les signes de la différence : la différence des odeurs, de la couleur du ciel, la différence de paysage. Il fallait faire un inventaire, un catalogue, une nomenclature. Tout consigner pour donner plus de corps à cette existence. (17-18)

Robin's writer-narrator's reflections set up a dichotomy between "écriture" as she desires it and the preceding list, which does not fall within the range of her desire. The writing she desires is simple, with a beginning, middle, and end, with a plot. But she immediately complicates this and collapses the dichotomy she had previously set up by evoking "non-places" which are nonetheless signified by words to mark their absence. This false dichotomy is the bind or the impossibility that paradoxically drives the novel forward. Indeed, this is a novel about the impossibility of representation, about the impossibility of comprehension, about the human-made constructs of order and meaning in which we are all stuck, and about the binding force and nature of signs that we use as tools to prop ourselves up against the void ("le vide") from which they (and we) arise and against which we live our lives.

"Giving body to this existence": words in the mother tongue

The phrase "donner corps à cette existence" is particularly evocative in its implication that the protagonist's existence is otherwise disembodied or without a body. There is a connection here between naming things through language and embodiment. This evokes Cixous' conceptualization of "écriture féminine" and suggests that Robin's use of lists aligns with the practice of feminine writing as Cixous had articulated it. There is also something specifically Jewish about Robin's narrator's need to "give body to this existence" that is reminiscent of Irena Klepfisz's bilingual Yiddish-English poem "Etlekhe verter oyf mame-loshn / A few words in the mother tongue," in which shapes (bodies) are given to Jewish women through the corporeality of the language used, and in

which these women's world of the Shtetl flickers in and out of existence in Yiddish. Not only then are women given bodies, their world is given one too by virtue of the Judaic understanding of textuality (as discussed in Chapter I) that Klepfisz performs. By virtue of this Jewish ethos of infinitely (re)generative textuality that does not re-present (and that clearly resonates with Cixous's "écriture feminine"), and that is in fact in mutually constitutive relationship with physical reality (embodiment), writing ("écriture / scripture") – in the Jewish, feminine form – possesses a great deal of powerful force.

Although Klepfisz writes in Yiddish and English and represents a slight "deviation" from my main arguments here in that she does not figure into my primary corpus of texts and writers and is not at all part of the French-speaking world, I want to spend some time studying her poem for what it illuminates about Robin's and Cixous' writing. Klepfisz was born in the Warsaw Ghetto in 1941, where her father was violently killed two years later in the uprising. After surviving the war in hiding with her mother and spending years in displaced persons camps, she eventually immigrated to the United States where she earned a doctorate in English and has had a successful academic career. In "Etlekhe verter oyf mame-loshn / A few words in the mother tongue," the connection between Jewish women's bodies and language is especially clearly articulated, and the Judaic model of textuality we have discussed is clearly modeled:

lemoshl: for example

di kurve the whore
a woman who acknowledges her passions

di yidene the Jewess the Jewish woman
ignorant overbearing
let's face it: every woman is one

di yente the gossip the busybody
who knows what's what
and is never caught off guard

di lezbianke the one with
a roommate though we never used
the word

dos vaybl the wife
or the little woman

in der heyml at home
where she does everything to keep
yidishkayt alive

yidishkayt a way of being
Jewish always arguable

in mark where she buys
di kartofl un khalah
(yes, potatoes and challah)

di kartofl the material counter-
part of *yidishkayt*

mit tsibeles with onions
that bring *trern tsu di oygn*
tears to her eyes when she sees
how little it all is
veyniker un veyniker
less and less

di khalah braided
vi ir hor far der khasene
like her hair before the wedding
when she was *aza sheyn meyd*
such a pretty girl

di lange shvartse hor
the long black hair
di lange shvartse hor

a froy kholmt a woman
dreams *ir ort oyf der velt*
her place in this world
un zi hot moyre and she is afraid
so afraid of the words

kurve
yidene
yente
lesbianke
vaybl

zi kholmt she dreams
un zi hot moyre and she is afraid
ir ort
di velt
di heym
der mark

a meyd kholmt
a kurve kholmt
a yidene kholmt
a yente kholmt
a lesbianke kholmt

a vaybl kholmt
di kartofl
di khalah
yidishkayt

zi kholmt
di hor
di lange shvartse hor

zi kholmt
zi kholmt
zi kholmt

There are many threads at work in Klepfisz’s poem that are worthy of analysis, but I will focus on only those that are most relevant to the discussion of Robin’s strategy of list-making as an example of “giving body” to her narrator’s existence and thus enacting “écriture féminine” and Judaic textuality. The poem is remarkable first in its didactic qualities; it slowly immerses its Anglophone readers in Yiddish, training us to read bilingually until, through skillful pedagogic repetition and recycling, the English disappears and we are reading (and able to comprehend) only Yiddish. The poem is performative in this way by preserving the language, bringing it to readers and doing

what the poem describes as women's work of "doing everything to keep *yidishkayt* alive." In the process of its teaching, the poem also (re)generates itself; as the English disappears, the Yiddish words repeat but take new patterns and rhythms, creating a text that builds on and ultimately reinvents (or regenerates) itself.

With its clear emphasis on food, cooking, and women's bodies, the poem also connects language with corporeality, "giving body to this existence" via not only the textualization of it, but in the intentional use of Yiddish itself. The potatoes, onions, and challah offer glimpses into women's work of sustaining life in Yiddish(kayt), and the Yiddish nouns signifying different "types" of women in the first stanza of the poem set up a series of portraits that explodes the cliché image of "the" Jewish woman as wife and mother. Klepfisz offers here instead a diversity of Jewish womanhoods, thus echoing Cixous' "Juifemme" and Boukhobza's Mavrika / Sarah / Shekhinah as we saw in the first chapter.

In the body it gives, the poem also evokes the formidable power of language to "make (or dream) a place" for oneself in the world. But while Cixous urges women to "bring themselves into writing (language)" – via their bodies – in "Le Rire de la Méduse," and while Robin's narrator makes lists as a way of linguistically apprehending her new world, Klepfisz exposes the vulnerability that comes with the act of writing (or naming) one's place in the world. The woman who "dreams her place in this world" is "afraid of the words" that have been used to name her; while Yiddish is restored by the end of the poem, the woman is left with dreams, but no new words to describe herself. Like the onions that bring tears to her eyes as she "sees how little it all is," there is a realization that, like Robin's narrator, she cannot fully "give body to this existence." Once again, the polysemy of the word "tongue" is important; containing body and

language within the same signifier, the link between them is made. But the imagery of the woman's hair which was once long and black before, as the poem implies, it was lost along with Yiddishkayt, illustrates that even if body and language are linked, there will always be something missing. Language, however powerful it may be – indeed, her fear of it is testament to this power – , cannot fully restore what has been lost.

This tension contained within language itself between its restorative, regenerative potential and its limitations surfaces in *Osnabrück* when, as we have already seen, the narrator's mother undergoes repeated crises of memory as she attempts to re-member names and details of the people of her childhood and adolescence, who are now all gone. Eve's crises of memory extend to words that she has forgotten how to say in German, her own "mother tongue."¹⁰⁶ Her crises come to a head in one of the many scenes set in the kitchen involving food, in which she is chopping onions and cannot remember the German word for them. The disappearance of this word from her vocabulary incites panic as a reminder of all the other things she has lost and that have disappeared from her memory, her only remaining point of connection with the world of her early life. In the last two pages of the book, the German word for "onions" finally, magically comes back into Eve's conscious memory, and the following dialogue between the narrator and her mother ensues:

– *Zwiebeln* ! Voilà !

– Maman !

Je poussai un cri léger et doux dans la cuisine je le retins un peu et puis je l'exclamai doucement pour ne pas nous effaroucher elle et moi, étant l'aînée quand même.

– Maman ! S'exclama-t-elle en se surprenant.

– Si on allait à Osnabrück ? Dis-je précipitamment.

[...]

– Mafille ! Recula-t-elle le visage un peu ravi. À Osnabrück ? Nous irons ?

¹⁰⁶ Like the mother in *Osnabrück*, Cixous herself refers to German as her "mother tongue" because she grew up speaking it at home with her mother and grandmother; thus it is not only her first language, it is also the language of her mother.

– Oui, dis-je. Nous irons. Nous irons à Osnabrück où je n’avais jamais voulu aller. Il est temps.

Je ne dis pas : « encore ». Nous y serons dans le prochain livre, pensai-je.

Osnabrück où il n’y a plus de juifs.

– On prend le train *à la gare de l’Est* et on voyage toute la nuit, dit ma mère, les mots revenaient, ses morts s’apprêtaient à venir à notre rencontre, ses yeux brillaient.

J’aurais dû être heureuse.

Je ne peux pas écrire ce livre. Ni commencer ni finir. Pas encore.

Nous voilà toutes les deux dans la cuisine avec Omi notre mère dans le récit, Eve épluche les oignons et je verse un torrent de larmes. (229-230 ; sic)

The return of the word in the mother tongue marks a moment of surprise and precipitates the narrator’s idea to offer her mother a return to Osnabrück. The return of language sparks the possibility of return to the original context of that language, which in turn sparks even more words to return to Eve, along with her deceased family members. But the narrator knows and understands that such returns are not actually possible, not in reality and not even in writing – at least not in this book, which she “cannot write, nor begin, nor finish” even as we reach the last page of it. As she chose to – hypothetically – begin the book in the kitchen, it also ends in the kitchen. The narrator, Eve, and Omi – Eve’s now deceased mother who makes spectral appearances throughout the text – represent thus three generations of women from a world – and tongue / language – that only exists in unconscious memory. As Proust put it though, this kind of unconscious memory, when it resurfaces, is a sensory and therefore also a bodily experience:

Mais, quand d’un passé ancien rien ne subsiste, après la mort des êtres, après la destruction des choses, seules, plus frêles mais plus vivaces, plus immatérielles, plus persistantes, plus fidèles, l’odeur et la saveur restent encore longtemps, comme des âmes, à se rappeler, à attendre, à espérer, sur la ruine de tout le reste, à porter sans fléchir, sur leur gouttelette presque impalpable, l’édifice immense du souvenir. (104)

As Eve peels onions, thus releasing their strong odor, the narrator “pours out a torrent of tears.” Here we see a complete congruency between language – the German word for

“onion,” – the onion itself, and the emotional and corporeal reactions both elicit. At the same time, the image of peeling onions also reflects the palimpsestic layers of memory. Thus, Proust’s belief that odors and flavors can bring back memory and thus, something of the lost past, is precisely performed and embodied through Eve’s peeling the onion.

The parallels between this final scene of *Osnabrück* and Klepfisz’s poem are striking. Via onions that bring tears in the mother tongue while also summoning the embodied experience of lost worlds, these textual scenes echo Robin’s narrator in her desire to “give body to this existence.” Even if this desire is unable to be satisfied, it participates in and contributes to the regenerative aspect of Judaic textuality; as Cixous’ narrator says, her journey to Osnabrück with her mother will be “in the next book.”

The language(s) of place(s)

To return then to the above passage of *La Québécoise*¹⁰⁷, the juxtaposition between the list of places and the subsequent reference to “non-places” and the “absence

¹⁰⁷ The passage is reproduced here:

Centre-ville,
ring ancien,
nouveau ring,
boulevards extérieurs,
boulevards de ceinture,
périphériques,
bretelles,
highways,
freeways,
turnpikes,
parkways,
thruways,
Stadtmitte,
Centrum,
midtown,
downtown,

— ce désir d’écriture. C’était pourtant si simple de commencer par le commencement, de suivre une intrigue, de la dénouer, de parler d’un hors-lieu, d’un non-lieu¹⁰⁷, d’une absence de lieu. Essayer de fixer, de retenir, d’arracher quelques signes au vide. Rien qu’une marque, une toute petite marque. Il fallait fixer tous les signes de la différence : la différence des odeurs, de la couleur du ciel, la différence de paysage. Il

of places” is striking. Firstly, the list establishes a theme of transit, movement, and mobility, not only through the words themselves but also through its multilingual aspect; the list moves between and across languages in the same way that the words describe movement – or potential unnamed pathways – through and around the geographical space of the city. Like Klepfisz’s and Cixous’ “words in the mother tongue,” Robin’s choice of languages used for each word is significant as well. Those in German refer to the idea of centrality within a city, while those in French evoke periphery and marginality, and those in English elicit the fast-paced, racing and sweeping movements through vast spaces that so overwhelm the protagonist in North America. The choice of languages and oscillation between them suggests something about Robin’s own complicated relationships to these languages. German, the language of the perpetrator and of trauma, is also the language that shares roots with Yiddish, the language of primordial belonging, spoken at home with family, that also carries – and is the sign of – irreconcilable grief.

It makes sense, then, that words associated with the center (of a city or of Robin’s psyche) would be in German. Meanwhile, French is a fraught language for Robin and her protagonist for other reasons. First, although it is their (Robin’s and her protagonist’s) native language, it is so only by virtue of their parents’ emigration and displacement from Eastern Europe, and only so in the context of public life in France. Second, the protagonist experiences intense and unexpected linguistic alienation upon her arrival in Montréal. Even if Montréal is a predominantly Francophone city, regional, lexical, and pronunciation differences constantly surprise and “out” the protagonist as the outsider that she feels herself to be, even from within the context of one of her native languages.

fallait faire un inventaire, un catalogue, une nomenclature. Tout consigner pour donner plus de corps à cette existence. (17-18)

For these reasons, it is also unsurprising that French would be used to elicit the peripheral and marginal spaces within and around the city. Finally, as already briefly described, the English words evoke the fast-paced highways that cut across the wide, vast spaces of Québec (and North America), and that the protagonist finds simultaneously disorienting, exciting, and anxiety-producing.

This multilingual list of places of transit and mobility also summons a sense of chaos and disorder. But the ironic paradox produced by this list (and by the other lists scattered throughout the novel) is that it is the only seemingly static thing within the text, even as it destabilizes and interrupts the surrounding narrative. This is to say, the list does not destabilize itself, nor does the surrounding narrative destabilize it. It is a list of places, and by virtue of its relative temporal staticity, it is the only thing that will have taken place in a narrative written almost entirely in the conditional mode.

The unfinishable, “unfixable” Book: Mallarmé and Jabès as interlocutors

That “nothing will have taken place” besides the list of places echoes Mallarmé’s famous verse – “rien n’aura eu lieu que le lieu” (“nothing will have taken place but the place”) – from *Un Coup de dés*, and the epic poem takes on a very literal meaning as an intertext with *La Québécoise*. Since the entire novel is written in the conditional mode, nothing definitive ever happens except at the end when we learn that the writer-narrator has finally entirely given up trying to make a plausible, livable life for “Elle,” her protagonist, in Montréal. “Elle” returns to Paris at the end of the novel, seemingly to stay indefinitely. We could argue that the only thing that has taken place at the end is the idea of the place of Montréal, with the descriptions of neighborhoods and districts, television schedules, restaurant menus, street names, and bits of Québécois history sprinkled

throughout the text. These elements are not in the conditional; they are fragments of “realia” inserted into the narrative, and like the list of transit places cited above, these fragments are static and outside of the temporality/-ies of the surrounding text. That they lend a postmodern aesthetic and poetics to *La Québécoise* is only one aspect of the purpose they serve within the text; they also give shape and structure to the city, the “lieu” (or “non-lieu”) that at various points becomes synonymous with the text itself (“cette ville-livre”).

When “Elle” returns to Paris at the end of the novel, we know that the city she left behind – Montréal – still exists. It is still “taking place,” and Mallarmé’s famous verse takes on another very literal layer of meaning in the last sentence of Robin’s novel when the writer-narrator states “[...] il paraît que la place du Québec est à Saint-Germain-des-Près” (206). Here, Québec is what literally takes place in the heart of Paris; it takes up space in the official commemorative place dedicated to it in 1980, seemingly during “Elle’s” time away from Paris, and it once again takes place in the novel. It eclipses whatever expressions of agency “Elle” – mediated by the writer-narrator of course – manages to put forth, albeit only in the conditional. It also represents a complete collapse of “Elle’s” two worlds and temporalities – Montréal and Paris – into one. It is a superimposition of two conflicting impossibilities – a present in Montréal (where “elle” cannot fit – or settle – in, where the writer-narrator cannot help her settle in, where there is only the conditional) and a future in Paris (which is in fact a place between past and present where the source of “elle’s” trauma happened, where everything is so imbued with memory and hauntings of the past that there is no room for the future). This final line and the two impossibilities it makes fold into one another do not follow standard literary conventions for the end of a novel. If anything, this last line seems more like the

beginning than the end, and perhaps this was exactly Robin's intention. There is legitimacy to this hypothesis when we turn (back) to the beginning of *La Québécoise*.

Before Robin's novel even really "begins," she indirectly alludes to Mallarmé by way of the first epigraph, a passage from Franco-Egyptian Jewish poet Edmond Jabès' *Le Livre d'Aely*:

C'est pourquoi j'ai rêvé d'une œuvre qui n'entrerait dans aucune catégorie, qui n'appartiendrait à aucun genre, mais qui les contiendrait tous; une œuvre que l'on aurait du mal à définir mais qui se définirait précisément par cette absence de définition; une œuvre qui ne répondrait à aucun Nom, qui les aurait endossés tous; une œuvre d'aucun bord, d'aucune rive; une œuvre de la terre dans le ciel et du ciel dans la terre; une œuvre qui serait le point de ralliement de tous les vocables disséminés dans l'espace dont on ne soupçonne pas la solitude et le désarroi, le lieu au-delà du lieu, d'une hantise de Dieu, désir inassouvi d'un insensé désir; un livre enfin qui ne se livrerait que par fragments dont chacun serait le commencement d'un livre. (11)

The above epigraph is the first thing the reader encounters upon opening the book and starting the first section, "Snowdon." Robin makes her intentions, aspirations, and inspirations clear in incorporating the excerpt from Jabès at the very beginning of her novel, before the reader even encounters her own writing; she sets up a parallel between her writer-narrator and Jabès' writerly "je" in the above excerpt. What Jabès' "je" desires and imagines his work to be, Robin's writer-narrator "je" also desires and imagines for her own work. As evidenced by the previously discussed final sentence of *La Québécoise*, Robin achieves Jabès' vision of a book which only opens itself up by fragments, each of which would be the beginning of a book. The end, in its fragmentary quality of a passing thought, could be the beginning of this book (*La Québécoise*), or of an entirely new one.

We can also read the ending sentence as a hyper-condensed miniature of the novel: the "place du Québec" in Paris symbolizes the complicated relationship in historic time and geographic space between "Elle's" past and impossible present/future. Robin's novel asks "what if?" over and over again, to no avail, with no answers. The

superimposition of present upon past, of past upon past, of past upon present, symbolized in the “place du Québec” at the end of the novel, is an example of Rothberg’s “multidirectional memory” and Silverman’s “palimpsestic memory.” These theories of memory point to hidden knots of interconnection between seemingly disparate events, memories, and histories that in fact inform each other, to open up more nuanced ways of reading the past and the present. In this case, the palimpsestic or multidirectional effect could be as much spatial as temporal, but the fact that the “place du Québec” serves a commemorative function implies that it operates on the temporal level as well. The circularity (or multidirectionality) encapsulated in the last sentence and the beginning epigraph tells us that Robin held Jabès’ writer-narrator’s vision.

But Jabès’ “je” has an earlier role model in his conception of the ideal literary work; Mallarmé also dreamed of creating such a category-, definition-, and genre-defying work that would convey meaning as much by the absences it would represent as by what it would include, that would include everything in its limitless, boundaryless textual universe, and that would open up infinite possibilities of meaning at the same time as it would deny the reader any comfort of familiarity and certainty. Jabès’ “je” alludes to the most metaphysical questions of literature as an undertaking; as a rallying space in which words come together and are disseminated in such a way that their underlying solitude and disarray (or confusion) is hidden. This is the illusion of traditional narrative and literary representation; that there is structure and meaning beyond what we – human subjects, readers, writers – create for ourselves. Mallarmé’s “Livre,” *the Book*, haunted and taunted him as an ever-impossible project throughout his literary career, although some might imagine *Un coup de dés* as one iteration of it. He conceptualized his “Book” as the ultimate ideal work of art, revealing the interconnectedness of everything, a

poetic/textual form analogous to Wagner's opera in its seemingly limitless power to unlock imaginations through associations and abstractions.

Although Mallarmé never quite finished "le Livre," he did leave notebooks filled with ideas, notes, and preliminary "sketches." French scholar Jacques Scherer published an annotated critical edition of "le Livre," and his words (along with some of Mallarmé's own words embedded within) resonate here in dialogue with Jabès and Robin:

Il ne sera donc pas étonnant de trouver dans le Livre total une condamnation de la forme traditionnelle du livre. En une formule frappante, qui ramasse et oriente vers un avenir qu'il entrevoyait les critiques sévères qu'il a formulées sur son œuvre publiée, Mallarmé écrit : « un livre ne commence ni ne finit : tout au plus fait-il semblant. » Esclavage, routine et mensonge, que de lire d'abord la page 1 d'un livre, puis la page 2, et ainsi de suite. L'ordre de la réalité n'est pas un ordre de succession, et le Livre auquel doit aboutir le monde ne saurait être ainsi disposé. C'est pourquoi la métaphysique du livre entraîne nécessairement une physique du livre qui l'exprime. (24)

Scherer and Mallarmé both evoke the fallacy of logical sequential order, arguing instead that the true "order" of reality is multidirectional, fragmented (or "éclatée"¹⁰⁸) but interconnected. In this case, as Mallarmé put it, "a book does not begin nor end; it only pretends to do so." Although this theorization of literary representation diverges slightly from Jabès' in *Le livre d'Aely*, both Jabès and Mallarmé call into question the possibility of only one beginning of a book, if not of all beginnings.¹⁰⁹

Within this theoretical framework of what literary texts are and do, Robin's "novel" fits perfectly. Each "chapter" or section is a new beginning, since the narrator-writer starts her book project – and her life project – over with each new section. But

¹⁰⁸ As Jean-Pierre Richard has highlighted in the "Phénoménologie de la lumière" section of *L'univers imaginaire de Mallarmé*, his sprawling work on Mallarmé's poetic oeuvre, "éclatement" is a recurring image and poetic goal for Mallarmé, who was fascinating with the scattering/bursting effects of light and fireworks. See pp. 477-485.

¹⁰⁹ To call attention once more to the Judaic tradition of textuality, there is a parallel here with the idea of G-d writing Jewish lives and fate in a book.

beyond the three mini-novels within *La Québécoise*, there are the lists, representations of realia, and fragmentary poetic inserts, each of which is its own text to be read and considered separately and in relationship with the surrounding narrative. It is Robin's fragmentary poetic inserts that most clearly resonate with (and perform) Mallarmé's theory that it is the spaces between words on the page that create the movement between thoughts (or "fiction") that in turn eschews narrative. In his prefatory note (titled "Observation relative au poème" published in *Cosmopolis*, May 4, 1897) to *Un Coup de dés*, Mallarmé articulates his theory: "La fiction affleurera et se dissipera, vite, d'après la mobilité de l'écrit, autour des arrêts fragmentaires d'une phrase capitale dès le titre introduite et continue. Tout se passe, par raccourci, en hypothèse ; on évite le récit" (91).¹¹⁰

Robin's poetic fragments not only perform Mallarmé's theory, but also echo and resonate with his own textual enactment of his theory in *Un Coup de dés*. This is in some ways a strange and difficult intertextual connection and parallel to make, and even more strange and difficult to try to articulate, especially within the bigger theoretical and methodological framework of this dissertation. How can Mallarmé, a 19th century French male poet, shed light on Robin's (con)text which is being framed in my work within a postcolonial, post-Holocaust, "Jui femme" perspective? The intertextual connections between *La Québécoise* and Jabès, Kafka, and Blanchot – all of whose works are excerpted and included as epigraphs in Robin's novel – are more obvious and easier to

¹¹⁰ From the Livre de Poche (Librairie Générale française) edition titled *Mallarmé: Poésies et autres textes*. It is worth noting here that Cixous engages Mallarmé's theory as well, albeit differently. This brief excerpt from *Osnabrück* resonates: "Les temps, c'est comme si mon amour le poète me disait d'écrire ce qui m'échappe, d'attraper ce qui me passe sous la pensée. Mais depuis deux ans j'y pense tout le temps. Je suis traversée par le galop d'une pensée que je cherche à apprivoiser. Je l'appelle la Réserve. Cette pensée de la Réserve des temps dits passés, je lui cours après" (17).

articulate. Nevertheless, reading *La Québécoise* with some knowledge of Mallarmé and *Un Coup de dés* makes the intertextuality irrefutable. With Jean-Paul Sartre, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida – and to a lesser extent R. Howard Bloch – as guides into Mallarmé and his epic, ground-breaking poem, I will attempt to base my close readings of Robin’s poetic fragments in these critics’ contextualizations and framings of *Un coup de dés*.

Fragmentation and the “Matter” of Language

To start, I have found R. Howard Bloch’s recent study of *Un coup de dés* to be an especially accessible point of entry into Mallarmé’s poem and helpful in thinking analogically across and between Mallarmé and Robin in terms of the similar effects their work elicits within the reader. In his introduction to *One Toss of the Dice: The Incredible Story of How a Poem Made Us Modern*, Bloch writes:

The balky syntax of “One Toss of the Dice” is unsettling, its logical leaps a form of grammatical dissonance that assails the reader [...]. Print gives pattern to space, and scatters, becomes mobile, aggressive even. Intelligibility is constantly under threat. The task of the reader is to disentangle main from subordinate material in order to make the lines of a sentence, to make meaning, to distinguish subjects from predicates, order from chaos, arguments, explanations, chronologies, causes and effects, narrative structures. [...]. [This] is a disaster poem, and the experience of reading it is akin to being tossed overboard in a shipwreck. We grasp at bits of linguistic debris or meaning as if words and phrases were the flotsam and jetsam of the scattered pieces of a foundering ship. The lines on the page sink to threaten us, or remain aligned to keep us afloat. (23-24)

Bloch’s language to describe the experience and endeavor of reading Mallarmé’s epic shipwreck poem could just as easily be written about reading *La Québécoise*. It is a deeply unsettling experience that threatens to submerge and inundate the reader in the water of the text to the point of no return to the surface. Both Mallarmé and Robin stretch and manipulate syntax, play with the spatial layout of words on the page, and

occasionally throw the reader a life vest in the form of a recognizable (if fleeting) pattern, form, or image. The thematic imagery of shipwreck within Mallarmé’s poem is not inapplicable to *La Québécoise*, either¹¹¹, although shipwrecks were a frequent metaphor and trope in the literature of Mallarmé’s time due in part to their frequent occurrence; they operated in the social imaginary of the time as an archetype of tragedy. As evidenced by the title of one of Robin’s earlier semi-fictional works, *Le Cheval blanc de Lénine, ou le naufrage du siècle* (1979),¹¹² she has engaged directly with the imagery of shipwreck in her literary endeavors.

Although *La Québécoise* is not explicitly “about” shipwreck, it is “about” the shattering of worlds and the trauma that such shattering engenders. One fragmented poetic insert, reproduced below, is particularly evocative of shipwreck and resonant with *Un coup de dés*:

On serait bien
 chez nous?
 loin des discours domptés
 la trace
 la coupure
 ce qu’on ne trouverait pas au bout de l’attente
 Hors-lieu
 découd—page
 Ici partout Ailleurs
 Aucun récit n’aura lieu Elle va
 Elle ne sait pas où. sans repères
 sans repaire

 Elle ne dit rien
 Elle dit le rien

 en suspens
 séparée d’elle-même.
 Les articulations sont foutues

¹¹¹ In part, I support this claim with the Jungian association of water (a recurring theme in *Un Coup de dés*) with the unconscious. Mallarmé and Robin are both writing towards the unconscious and summoning it.

¹¹² This title is in fact two works in one: *Le Cheval blanc de Lénine* is a biofictional rendering of Robin’s father’s life as a Jew engaged with the Communist Party in the early days of the Soviet Union while *Le Naufrage du siècle* is a sociological-historical essay whose ‘shipwreck’ refers to the collapse of the Soviet Union and failure of communism.

Il n'y aura pas de récit.
 Il n'y aura pas de messie.
 Ce qu'on ne trouverait pas au bout de l'Attente.
 La nuit—le gel—le silence
 le livre inachevé—les mots défaits.
 les mots nomades mad
 made in Pitchipoï (31)

First, the two clearest references to *Un coup de dés* are the fragments “hors lieu / aucun récit / n'aura lieu” and the unusual spacing. Also similar to Mallarmé's epic poem is the mirroring between the spatial-visual form of the signifiers spread across the page and the meaning these signifiers convey. We can see these similarities in the following excerpt of *Un Coup de dés*,¹¹³ reproduced with as faithfully accurate typography as possible:

CE SERAIT
 pire
 non
 davantage ni moins
 indifféremment mais autant **LE HASARD**

Choit
 la plume
 rythmique suspens du sinistre
 s'ensevelir
 aux écumes originelles
 naguères d'où sursauta son délire jusqu'à une cime
 flétrie
 par la neutralité identique du gouffre

As this section of Mallarmé's poem about the falling “plume” imitates the movement of a falling feather through space until it eventually reaches the “gouffre” (the depths/abyss/chasm) at the very bottom of the page, Robin's “mots nomades” wander across the page and end in Pitchipoï, a Yiddish word designating an unknown place, used

¹¹³ The poem in its entirety appears in the “Livres de Poche” edition of Mallarmé's *Poésies et autres textes* that is included in the Works Referenced list. It spans the space of pp. 393-415 in the edited collection, and the excerpt I have reproduced here appears on pp. 410-411.

by Jews in France who had been sent to the transit camp at Drancy to refer to the next destination for deportees (i.e. Auschwitz). The link between “Pitchipoï” and “hors lieu” becomes obvious when we read the preceding line (“au bout de l’attente / hors lieu”). “Pitchipoï” was a code word for the final destination, at the end of the waiting period, outside of (all known) places. We also see this textual mirroring between signifier and signified in the spatial positioning of the words “en suspens,” which are suspended between two lines and at a unique indentation of their own. The suspension of the words “en suspens” – just as Mallarmé’s “plume” is suspended before dropping into the abyss (“la gouffre”) – elicits palpable suspense in the reader and contributes to the unsettling experience of reading, not dissimilar to what Felman and Laub describe regarding the ways that testimony as mode of transmission challenges us as readers and makes us into witnesses.

Robin, like Mallarmé, chose her words carefully here to work on multiple levels and to convey multiple, mobile meanings. For example, “Découd-page” is a homophonic play on words, between “découpage” – the artistic technique of cutting and pasting from various sources in order to make something new (patchwork¹¹⁴), and “découdre” – to rip the seam from the page, or to unstitch it. This poeticizes the tension between remembering and dismembering that runs throughout this chapter. It is as though Robin’s narrator takes remnants and pieces of rubble (akin to Mallarmé’s ship captain in *Un coup de dés*) left over from all the trauma, destruction, upheaval, and existing literary models, and pieces them together in the hopes of making something new out of them (découpage), only for those pieces to unstitch the page, to rip the seam from the narrative. And this, in turn, is exactly what the poetic inserts and “interruptions” do within the

¹¹⁴ It is interesting to note that Mallarmé scholars have referred to his *Crise de vers* – and to *Un coup de dés* – as patchwork texts with no fixed pieces, such as Leo Bersani in *The Death of Stéphane Mallarmé* (1982).

novel – they simultaneously unstitch (or disarticulate, as the line “les articulations sont foutues” suggests) by disrupting, destabilizing, and drawing our attention away from the surrounding “narrative,” and they re-stitch by making their own meaning and creating other meanings, enriching the novel in which otherwise nothing happens. They are, in a sense, the substance of the novel even though they seem to be mere distractions and/or disruptions. Indeed, these poetic inserts or “découpages/découd-pages” call to mind earlier book publishing formats for which a letter opener was required to literally cut apart the folded, bound outside edges of the pages. Like the poetic inserts in *La Québécoite*, the folded, bound pages of earlier editions of printed books require extra work on the part of the reader, momentarily disrupt the interpretive process of reading, and literally (physically) form the substance of the book. The violence of the letter opener on the body of the book echoes the conditional kitchen scene in *Osnabrück* with the kitchen, site of corporeal and violent acts, symbolizing the theoretical book itself.

“Discours dompté” is another ambiguous expression in terms of its referent; there is no clear indication of whose/which discourse it refers to, but in any case, there is a clear distinction and separation drawn between the “nous” which includes the poetic “I” and the surrounding culture. The epithet evokes a politicized critique of norms, power dynamics, and otherwise hegemonic structures – but could also be used to describe the (sometimes) oppressive strictures of politically correct discourse, a discourse that, despite its good intentions, can serve to obfuscate truths and disempower subjects from expressing themselves. It could also be referring to language (in literal linguistic terms rather than rhetorical; although of course the two are inextricable...) and the domestication of language and disappearance of Yiddish.

Similarly, the expression “les articulations sont foutues” reinforces the same imagery with a comparable technique of wordplay and double meanings ; “articulation” can refer to a joint or hinge (in other words, something that has a connective function between two or more parts), but it of course can also refer to the act of speech, making an argument, stating one’s thoughts in language, putting ideas into language. It can also refer specifically to the structure and/or sequencing of a text. The use of the plural here hints at the possibility of these different meanings all being simultaneously applicable – the joints/connectors, the language, and the structure/sequence are all “foutues” – “hopeless” would be an inoffensive way to translate this adjective. Lastly, “la nuit—le gel—le silence” is a powerful metonymic chain that leads us from darkness into silence, via a freeze.¹¹⁵ It is as though this is what the writer-narrator experiences when trying to write her book; she is brought back to her “night” (the trauma of World War II), which freezes (or paralyzes) her, and she is reduced to silence like the ship captain in *Un Coup de dés* who cannot get his bearings amidst the destruction.

The title of Sandrina Joseph’s aforementioned article (“L’ éclatement identitaire...”) highlights another link between Mallarmé’s *Un coup de dés* and *La Québécoise*: the concept/image of “l’ éclatement” or “bursting / breaking apart.”¹¹⁶ Like

¹¹⁵ In *L’univers imaginaire de Mallarmé*, Jean-Pierre Richard highlights precisely the “gel” imagery in his analysis of part of Mallarmé’s poem *Igitur*, reproduced below and followed by Richard’s analysis:

Tout son col secouera cette blanche agonie
Par l’espace infligée à l’oiseau qui le nie,
Mais non l’horreur du sol où le plumage est pris.
Fantôme qu’à ce lieu son pur éclat assigne,
Il s’immobilise au songe froid du mépris
Que vêt parmi l’exil inutile le Cygne.

“[Le cygne] nous signale un être attaché à *sa propre* masse, pris dans une blancheur qui est encore lui-même. Et oilà bien son originalité: il illustre une vie glacée, mais cette glace c’est *en lui*, dans l’épaisseur de son plumage qu’elle s’est d’abord formée et amassé. Originellement ouverte et tendrement frissonnante aux caresses de l’extérieur, la chasteté du cygnet s’est peu à peu engourdie, paralysée, puis refermée [...]. (254-255).

¹¹⁶ For Jean-Pierre Richard, “Ce que réalise ici le *Coup de dés* c’est le développement, éclaté et embrasé, d’une matière en un esprit” (483).

Bloch's argument that *Un coup de dés* was really about particles and the true nature of matter and being, all of which shook the foundations of western epistemology and ontology of the time, this "éclatement identitaire" performs the same violence on existing foundations upon which identities are formed. Aside from the epistemological and identitary ruptures represented in and through *Un Coup de dés* and *La Québécoise*, there is the added element of grief and traumatic upheaval that contributes (perhaps most acutely) to the "éclatement" that Joseph describes in her article.¹¹⁷ While grief and upheaval were not entirely unknown to Mallarmé, who in the midst of great political transitions and chaos suffered the loss of his mother and sister by the age of 16 and later, the loss of his son Anatole, *Un coup de dés* and all of his poetry has not been considered critically through this lens.¹¹⁸ As Jean-Paul Sartre's work on Mallarmé illustrates and as we will see in greater detail later in this chapter, Mallarmé was nonetheless acutely aware of what he perceived as a social-cultural (and therefore poetic, artistic) crisis born of the shift he witnessed and experienced from a society and culture organized around a belief in God to a society and culture whose scientific discoveries fed into growing philosophical movements based on the death of God. However, Mallarmé's poem as an intertextual resonance helps us see that the "éclatement" that Joseph brings into focus in

¹¹⁷ Cixous echoes the theme/phenomenon of 'éclatement' and scattering/dispersal of fragments as well in the opening paragraph of *Mon Algérie*: "My way of thinking was born with the thought that I could have been born elsewhere, in one of the twenty countries where a living fragment of my maternal family had landed after it blew up on the Nazi minefield. With the thought of the chanciness, of the accident, of the fall Lucretius's rain of atoms, in raining, the atom of my mother had met the atom of my father." (*Algérie* 1)

¹¹⁸ However, Cixous references Mallarmé in "Sorties" along precisely these terms: "Il y a ce rêve tragique, de Mallarmé, cette lamentation du père sur le mystère de la paternité, qu'arrache au poète le deuil, le deuil des deuils, la mort du fils chéri [...]" (74). The "rêve tragique" is Mallarmé's *Pour un tombeau d'Anatole*.

terms of identity in *La Québécoise* is equally applicable in terms of narrative, form, verse, language, time, and meaning.

Meaning Suspended / Textualizing the Void / The Era(s) of the Witness¹¹⁹

If “*éclatement*” is a useful interpretive thread for reading *La Québécoise* and “understanding” some of its resonances with Mallarmé’s writings, so too are the concepts of suspension and emptiness. In Derrida’s short essay on Mallarmé’s work that was originally included in the 1974 Gallimard edited volume *Tableau de la littérature française de Madame de Stäel à Rimbaud*, the English translation of which appears in the edited collection of essays titled *Acts of Literature*, Derrida develops a framework for reading Mallarmé that draws upon these concepts. Towards the beginning of the essay, Derrida writes:

We can no longer even talk here of an *event*, of the event of such a text; we can no longer question its *meaning* except by falling short of it, within the network of values which it has *in practice* put into question; the value of event on the one hand (presence, singularity without possible repetition, temporality, historicity), [...] and, on the other hand, the value of meaning: Mallarmé never stopped tracking down signification wherever loss of meaning arose, in particular within the two alchemies of aesthetics and political economy. (112)

Already, we can sense the presence of emptiness and suspension as concepts that underpin the phenomenon Derrida describes in this early section of his essay. Since there is no “event” in Mallarmé’s texts (“rien n’aura eu lieu que le lieu”), readers are left with no choice but to fall short of grasping the texts’ “meaning” as the only means of engaging

¹¹⁹ My subheading here alludes to French historian Annette Wieviorka’s *The Era of the Witness*, originally published in French as *L’Ère du témoin* (1998). In it, Wieviorka traces and historicizes the evolving attitudes towards, responses to, portrayals of and discourses surrounding witnesses (survivors) in the United States, France, and Israel from the immediate post-war years to the late 1990s. I allude to Wieviorka here in part because Régine Robin, also trained as a historian in France specializing in European Jewish history, has spent much – if not all – of her career studying this same evolving set of attitudes and responses. Her scholarly and literary works all explore questions of Jewish memory, and implicitly embedded within this larger field is the figure of the witness.

them at all. This “falling short” associates easily with the images of emptiness and suspension; when we “fall short,” we are the opposite of fulfilled (empty), and we are held back (stuck, suspended) from our goal. What Derrida may be suggesting here is that Mallarmé was well aware of the slippery quality of “meaning” in the narrative sense, and therefore he attempted to communicate through his poetry by choosing *signifiers* that would (very indirectly) inspire transformative thought processes in readers (i.e. the “alchemies”¹²⁰ Derrida mentions).

As Derrida steers readers away from looking for “meaning” in Mallarmé’s texts, he also instructs us to expect these texts to be sites of omissions and disappearances:

A text is made to do without references; either to the thing itself, as we shall see, or to the author who consigns it to nothing except its disappearance. This disappearance is actively inscribed, it is not an accident of the text, it is rather its nature; it marks the signature of an unceasing omission. The book is often described as a tomb. (113)

The image of the book as a tomb is a particularly compelling way to think about *La Québécoise* – and all of Robin’s literary oeuvre to some extent – as its central preoccupation is to search for (but never find) satisfactorily appropriate ways of commemorating and grieving the irrecoverable (Ashkenazic) Jewish past. Robin’s other main literary preoccupation relates to the image of the tomb as well: reconciling herself (and her characters) to the impossibility of representable, comprehensible meaning in narrative. By producing work that textualizes this impossibility, she effectively produces

¹²⁰ With “alchemies,” Derrida refers to a late nineteenth century fascination in French poetry, evidenced in Rimbaud’s “Les alchimies du verbe,” and in Mallarmé’s “Crise de vers” in which he uses gold (alchemy) as a metaphor to describe poetry, versus narrative (prose) which is purely transactional.

a tomb of meaning, a marker of its absence. This is true of much of Cixous' writing as well; Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller's work on Cixous has focused on this aspect.¹²¹

By contrast for Derrida, locating and making meaning in Mallarmé's works is not so much impossible as it is difficult and indirect:

All of Mallarmé's text, however, is organized in such a way that at its strongest points, the meaning remains *undecidable*; from then on, the signifier no longer lets itself be traversed, it remains, resists, exists and draws attention to itself. The labor of writing is no longer a transparent ether. It catches our attention and forces us, since we are unable to go beyond it with a simple gesture in the direction of what it "means," to stop short in front of it or to work with it. (114)

Derrida's characterization of meaning in Mallarmé's texts as "undecidable" is useful as a lens through which to read *La Québécoise* and *Osnabrück* as well. In making a shift from "impossible" to "undecidable," readers, critics, and writers alike of these two texts have reason to continue to engage with them. At the same time, Derrida characterizes Mallarmé's signifiers as active rather than passive: they demand readers' full attention and resist (indeed, refuse) facile comprehension. In their undecidability, these texts require readers to embrace the discomfort of uncertainty and spend some time there, with no guarantee of emerging with clear interpretive "answers." Ultimately, the "undecidable" quality of Mallarmé's poems generates questions, offers no answers, and in this way, imitates the very nature of the "undecidable" and inscrutable mystery of human existence. In their perpetual undecidability they also perform the kind of infinitely regenerative (Judaic) textuality that we have seen earlier.

Derrida continues his essay by elaborating his argument of "undecidability" in which he deconstructs the concept of 'words' themselves in order to illustrate the

¹²¹ See Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller's article titled *Crypts of Hélène Cixous's Past*, which begins with the following general description of Cixous' work: "The work of Hélène Cixous might be compared to a long 'missive to the dead' that shelters the unforgotten in a secret crypt [...] (28)."

interrelation between undecidability and the suspension of meaning and of possibility for comprehension within established categories and frameworks:

It remains, therefore, that the “word,” the particles of its decomposition or of its reinscription, without ever being identifiable in their singular presence, finally refer only to their own game, and never really move toward anything else. The *thing* is included, as *the effect of the thing* in this long *citation* of the language.¹²² (121)

Once again, Derrida’s point seems to be that within Mallarmé’s poetics, there is a clear break from previous literary modes of representation. The very simple phenomenon known as ‘the word’ is finally broken down into particles (as the physical science of Mallarmé’s time discovered) that are unknowable and unidentifiable by themselves; in other words, these particles can only be collaborative. Yet, within the potential of this collaboration between the particles of words for communication to occur, the only possibility of the *content* of such potential communication is self-referential. For Derrida, Mallarmé’s poetry confronts readers with the limitations of language to move beyond its representational function. The most it can do is call attention to this feature so that readers become more aware and trained to distrust any supposedly transparent modes of representation.

Finally, Derrida illustrates Mallarmé’s suspension of representation as a means of interpretation and knowing through Mallarmé’s repeated use of the word “*or*” throughout much of his poetry, bringing us back to the ultimate undecidability of the Mallarméan universe and exposing the crises to which this undecidability bears witness:

The act of naming, the direct relationship to the thing, is then suspended.¹²³ [...]. From then on [*Dès lors*] the crisis erupts, in the analogous fields of political

¹²² Here Derrida echoes Mallarmé himself, who famously wrote “Peindre non la chose, mais l’effet qu’elle produit.”

¹²³ Here Derrida refers to Mallarmé’s fascination with and development of *l’or* (gold) as a metaphor for alchemy and transfiguration. Because the word “*or*” can also be a conjunction and an adverb in French,

economy and of language or of literary writing: ‘phantasmagorical sunsets.’ All Mallarméan sunsets are moments of crisis [...]. [...]. About the void itself, nothing is decided. (122; emphasis added)¹²⁴

The idea of “the void” evoked here echoes Jean-Paul Sartre’s earlier (unfinished) work on Mallarmé,¹²⁵ although it is unlikely that Derrida was aware of this work when he wrote his own essay, since Sartre’s work was yet unpublished at that point. Sartre’s existentialist and Heideggerian approach accentuates the role of the Void (*le Néant*) and Absence (drawing on Blanchot) in Mallarmé’s poetics. Sartre’s premise and foundation for his interpretation of Mallarmé is that the scientific discoveries of the late(r) nineteenth century that coincided and aligned with the growing philosophical arguments suggesting the death of God ignited a sense of existential and vocational crisis for French poets of the time.¹²⁶ As we have seen, one way that Mallarmé thematized and textualized this sense of crisis was an aesthetics (and poetics) of scattering.

Sartre and Derrida both use this language (“scattering”) to describe some of what they see at play in Mallarmé’s poetry. Derrida writes: “*But* [sic] there is no noun: the thing itself is (that which is) absent, nothing is simply named, the noun is also a

Derrida writes that the act of naming (as is done with nouns) must be suspended when Mallarmé uses this word.

¹²⁴ Here Derrida refers to Mallarmé’s essay “Or”, in which this sunset occurs.

¹²⁵ Published six years after Sartre’s death, this work is – another! – patchwork of fragments (an unfinished essay which Sartre began in 1952 and was eventually published in its incomplete form in a 1979 issue of *Obliques*, and a very short biography that Raymond Queneau had invited Sartre to write in 1953 for Mazenod’s third volume of *Écrivains célèbres*) stitched together in an annotated edition by Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre and published with Gallimard in 1986. Sartre, Jean-Paul, and Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre. *Mallarmé: La lucidité et sa face d'ombre*. Gallimard, 1986.

¹²⁶ Especially impactful among these was the growing body of irrefutable scientific evidence that everything in the material world – of which human beings are a part – is made of matter. This, in turn, formed the basis for a new philosophical school of thought that God was dead. For late nineteenth-century poets whose most immediate poetic predecessors were versed in Romanticism, the notion that even the poets themselves were made of matter and that there *was* no God to be their source of inspiration was a radical departure from all previous ways they had conceived of themselves and their work.

conjunction or an adverb.¹²⁷ *No more word: the efficacy often comes from one syllable which scatters the word.* There is, therefore, neither homonymy nor synonymy” (125, emphasis added). For Derrida, then, Mallarmé’s poetry breaks language down into its smallest particulate matter (or places it under a microscope until we see it at its cellular level); syllables scatter words, abandoning words altogether as poetic units of meaning (signs). While Derrida uses the imagery of “scattering” to describe Mallarmé’s poetic project, Sartre uses it in *Mallarmé: La lucidité et sa face d'ombre* at an existential level to describe the crisis at work in Mallarmé’s world before scattered words even hit the page:

Tout est mensonge, l’être humain n’a ni réalité ni unité, ni identité ni autonomie. *La pensée n’est qu’un rêve de pensée : qu’elle cherche à s’exercer, la voilà matière, éparpillement de mots.* Bref, seule existe la Matière, dans son absurde et perpétuel présent. [...]. Le temps, pour nous, n’est pas : c’est le rythme qui scande notre déception toujours recommencée. L’homme se temporalise pour se perdre et en se perdant. [...]. *L’homme, par qui le hasard vient au monde, se retourne vainement contre lui : chacune de ses actions naît des fatalités qu’elle veut détruire. Cette torsion vaine, ce retournement sur soi, voilà l’effort humain. L’inutile spirale des générations : voilà le mouvement de l’Histoire.* (138-139, emphasis added)

Sartre’s existentialist interpretation of Mallarmé’s scattering of words runs in tandem with Derrida’s deconstructionist interpretation of language at its “cellular” level in Mallarmé’s poetry; both point to the illusory, human-made nature of meaning. While Derrida is primarily concerned with the matter of language, Sartre makes the leap from language to temporality, revealing both as human constructions. By making this leap, Sartre thereby demonstrates a skepticism not only towards any teleological view of History and associated beliefs in grand narratives, but towards the possibility of having any relationship with temporalities outside of the present (i.e., the past and future) that

¹²⁷ Here Derrida refers again to Mallarmé’s frequent use of the word “(l’)or” and its homophone “lors”.

are not based on illusions and abstractions that serve to make us lose ourselves, all in an effort to resist our own mortality.

This same skepticism is a central preoccupation that runs throughout Robin's literary work and critical/theoretical work as a historian and sociologist.¹²⁸ In the introduction to her critical work *Le roman mémoriel* (1989), Robin problematizes the historian's and literary critic's theoretical tools and methods used for engaging with the past:

Au bout de cet itinéraire, il nous faut trouver de nouvelles formes de récit, de nouvelles façons **pour nous approprier le passé**, pour laisser affleurer la mémoire, ses jeux de langage et ses mirages, **il nous faut revisiter les lieux**, nous approprier autrement les signes. À d'autres de réinventer le politique, la place publique, de répartir depuis ces textes-ruines de nos grands récits d'autrefois. Hybridation du temps, hybridation des lieux (ai-je mentionné que je vis à Montréal désormais ?), hybridation du discours. Et si l'histoire, ça n'était jamais que cette éternelle litanie. Ce n'est jamais ce qu'on a cru, ce qu'on a pensé. **L'histoire nous surprend encore. Bonne nouvelle ! Le réel résiste à toute interprétation. L'aléa prend le dessus. Restent alors nos micro-récits, nos fictions, ce travail de tissage théorique et de dé-tissage de nos certitudes qui est toujours à reprendre.** (*Le roman* 16, italics in original, emphasis added)

This short excerpt from *Le roman mémoriel* underscores Sartre's argument that the past (and all that is not simply matter existing in the present) is a human construction and abstraction; with the admission that "we need new ways of appropriating the past," Robin implies a process of commodification of the past in which we turn it into a consumable good by telling ourselves the stories we need to hear. When she writes "the real resists all interpretation," Robin implies that it (the real) must also resist representation and therefore, that Derrida's reading of Mallarmé's poetic project is accurate. At its most cellular (or atomic, material) level, language bursts open, explodes meanings, and

¹²⁸ This is present in *La Québécoise* as well as in *Osnabrück* to some extent; there is the sense of futility in trying to recover/remember, and yet there is the tension produced by continuous turning back towards the past despite knowing its futility. In *La Québécoise*, the protagonist is a historian, and the narrator in *Osnabrück* wants to go back to the town with the history we learn of in the prelude to the main text.

whatever aspect of “the real” we attempt to represent and interpret resists our attempts by revealing the instability of the foundation upon which we imagine our ability to make sense of reality. In the stunning conclusion to this short excerpt, Robin seems to directly invoke Mallarmé when she writes “L’aléa prend le dessus;” echoing the Latin “Alea Jacta est” (“the die is cast”); Robin concludes that chance takes the upper hand in our interpretive meaning-making efforts. Once “the die is cast,” the only reasonable, logical option is a fragmented, patchwork, and “micro” mode of representation whose ultimate purpose is precisely to undo (or dis-member) any remaining illusions of certainty. In this excerpt, then, Robin weaves together threads from Sartre’s and Derrida’s work on Mallarmé and creates yet another postmodern hybrid theory, effectively performing the exact phenomenon it describes. In doing so, it illuminates a constellation that connects *Un coup de dés* with *La Québécoise*.

The poetics of absence:

If Sartre, Derrida, and Robin herself highlight the constructed illusion of meaning, Maurice Blanchot’s earlier – and seminal – essays on Mallarmé inform those later thinkers. To begin a brief exploration of Blanchot’s insights into Mallarmé as they relate back to Robin, a line from Sartre’s short, unfinished 1953 essay simply titled “Mallarmé” highlights Blanchot’s emphasis on absence as the source of poetry’s force: “Considérée du point de vue de la mort, la Poésie sera, comme le dit fort bien Blanchot, ‘ce langage dont toute la force est de n’être pas, toute la gloire d’évoquer, en sa propre absence, l’absence de tout’” (157).¹²⁹ For Sartre and Blanchot, the particular strength of the language of Mallarmé’s poetry is that it evokes the absence of everything through its

¹²⁹ Sartre’s citation taken from Blanchot, *Faux Pas* (Paris: Gallimard, 1943).

own absence; as signifiers, it calls attention to what is not present and cannot be expressed (signifieds). This textual performance of absence mirrors Robin's poetics; the erratic spaces between the words call attention to what is not there, making clear that the poems in *La Québécoise* are "about" what is missing. They are testaments to what is not. In Blanchot's own eloquent and provocative words from his essay titled "Mallarmé et l'art du roman," published in *Faux Pas*, "[Mallarmé] a vu et formé la page destinée, par un ensemble de relations réfléchies et par des mots en somme significatifs, à créer pour l'homme l'équivalent d'une énigme mortelle et d'un silence désespérant. L'obscur Mallarmé a fait briller, comme quelque chose de sensible et de clair, ce qui ne pouvait être exprimé que dans une absence totale d'expression" (192).

Strangely, Blanchot's reading of Mallarmé's poeticization of absence, silence, and mystery resonates with Dori Laub's reflections drawn from working with Holocaust survivors both in his psychoanalytic practice and with the Yale Testimony Archive project, as he explains in *Testimony*, his co-authored work with Shoshana Felman:

The listener to trauma [...] needs to know that the trauma survivor who is bearing witness has no prior knowledge, no comprehension and no memory of what happened. [...]. [The listener to trauma] needs to know that such knowledge dissolves all barriers, breaks all boundaries of time and place, of self and subjectivity. That the speakers about trauma on some level prefer silence so as to protect themselves from the fear of being listened to—and of listening to themselves. That while silence is defeat, it serves them both as a sanctuary and as a place of bondage. Silence is for them a fated exile, yet also a home, a destination, and a binding oath. To *not* return from this silence is rule rather than exception. (58)

Blanchot's description of what Mallarmé's poetry evokes and awakens in readers ("une énigme mortelle" or "a mortal, fatal enigma" and "un silence désespérant" or "a desperate, hopeless, despairing silence") echoes Laub's description of the enigmatic, unknowable quality of trauma for those who have experienced it and of silence as a "defeat" and "fated exile." Laub's account of sitting with Holocaust survivors and

listening to them highlights the uncharted, boundary-less, and disorienting space into which trauma catapults us, not completely unlike Mallarmé's poetry that took language into unbound and uncharted space to evoke the unrepresentable.

Perhaps the way Blanchot's reading of absence and silence in Mallarmé's poetry resonates with Laub's experiences working with survivors' testimonies is not so strange after all. In Shoshana Felman's chapter of *Testimony*, titled "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching," she cites a passage from a lecture Mallarmé gave at Cambridge and Oxford, which was published in 1895: "J'apporte en effet des nouvelles. Les plus surprenantes. Même cas ne se vit encore. Ils ont touché au vers. Il convient d'en parler déjà, ainsi qu'un invité voyageur tout de suite se décharge par traits haletants du témoignage d'un accident su et le poursuivant"¹³⁰ (18). As Felman explains, the "accident" to which Mallarmé refers and positions himself as a witness is the "crisis of verse" ("crise de vers"), or the shift away from the traditional alexandrine and towards the unknown of free verse. Felman goes on:

In opposition to the forms of traditional verse, poetry with Mallarmé becomes an *art of accident* in that it is an art of rhythmical surprises, an art, precisely, of unsettling rhythmical, syntactic and semantic expectations. What is crucially important is, however, Mallarmé's acute and singular perception of the celebration of free verse as the violent experience of linguistic rupture, as the historical advent of a linguistic fragmentation in which the verse is violently and deliberately 'broken' [...]. (19)

As Felman continues her analysis of Mallarmé's lecture at Cambridge and Oxford, she illustrates the ways in which the crisis of verse, the "accident" to which Mallarmé testifies in his lecture, mirrors the governmental changes and instabilities of post-Revolution nineteenth-century France. In other words, Felman characterizes Mallarmé as a witness to turbulent, unsettled times. After comparing himself to a witness who

¹³⁰ Felman cites from Mallarmé, *Oeuvres complètes*, Éditions Gallimard, Pléiade, 1945, pp. 643-644.

discharges troubling testimony, Mallarmé goes on in his lecture: “Faut-il s’arrêter là et d’où ai-je le sentiment que je suis venu relativement à un sujet plus vaste peut-être à moi-même inconnu, que telle rénovation de rites et de rimes; pour y atteindre, sinon le traiter... Le conscient manque chez nous de ce qui là-haut éclate” (21).¹³¹ As Felman puts it in her analysis of this short excerpt, “[Mallarmé] thus speaks in advance of the control of consciousness; his testimony is delivered ‘in breathless gasps’ [*par traits haletants*]: in essence, it is a *precocious testimony*” (21; emphasis in original). The concept of “precocious testimony” as Felman explains it once again echoes Blanchot’s earlier view that Mallarmé understood that the only way to “express” (or testify to) that which could not be expressed was through a textualized absence of expression. For Felman, Mallarmé’s precocious testimony is

[...] the very principle of poetic insight and the very core of the event of poetry, which makes [...] language—through its breathless gasps—speak ahead of knowledge and awareness and break through the limits of its own conscious understanding. By its very innovative definition, poetry will henceforth speak *beyond its means*, to testify—precociously—to the ill-understood effects and to the impact of an accident whose origin cannot precisely be located but whose repercussions, in their very uncontrollable and unanticipated nature, still continue to evolve even in the very process of the testimony. [...] The accident is therefore ‘known,’ paradoxically enough, at once precociously but only through its aftermath, through its effects.” (21-22; emphasis in original)

Felman’s argument here echoes Mallarmé’s famous line “Peindre non la chose, mais l’effet qu’elle produit.” Mallarmé’s emphasis on the project of “painting” the effects produced by the “thing” rather than the thing itself that is not representable mirrors Felman’s reading of “the event” described in his testimony as only knowable through its effects.

¹³¹ Felman cites again from pp. 646-647 of the Pléiade edition of *Oeuvres complètes* (see note 42).

Indeed, if we return to Blanchot in another iteration of his reading of Mallarmé, we see echoes of the theme of (un)knowability as Felman describes above: “L’histoire du silence de Mallarmé, si elle était faite, aurait, à défaut de sens exemplaire, l’intérêt d’un regard porté sur une absence, sur une réalité très profonde qui ne se livrerait à la connaissance que dans ce fait qu’elle ne saurait être connue” (122). For Blanchot, if critics are to study Mallarmé, the only way to do so is to look at the absences, which in fact open into “a very profound/deep reality” that can only make itself known by calling attention to its unknowability – which is precisely the *effect* of that deep reality. For Derrida in *Acts of Literature*, one of Mallarmé’s key strategies and innovations for making the unknowable “known” for its unknowability – for its absence – is through the white spaces between the words on the page. The white spaces – or “blanks” (“blancs” in French) make the transition from undecidability rooted in polysemy to undecidability that comes from whether there is any “semy” at all:

Here the undecidability is no longer attached to a multiplicity of meanings, to a metaphorical richness, to a system of correspondences. [...] For example the sign *blanc* (“white,” “blank,” “space”), with all that is associated with it from one thing to the next, is a huge reservoir of meaning [...]. And yet, the white also marks, through the intermediary of the white page, the place of the writing of these ‘whites’; and first of all the spacing between the different significations (that of white among others), *the spacing of reading*. [...] The white of the spacing has no determinate meaning [...]. More than or less than the polysemic series, a loss or an excess of meaning, it folds up the text toward itself, and at each moment points out the place (where ‘nothing will have taken place except the place’), the condition, the labor, the rhythm. As the page *folds in* upon itself, one will never be able to decide if *white* signifies something, or signifies only, or in addition, the space of writing itself. (115-116)

Here Derrida cites Mallarmé himself, who famously wrote in his preface to *Un coup de dés* “le tout sans nouveauté qu’un espacement de la lecture” (391). According to Mallarmé, the only difference between this poem and others was “the spacing of reading.” Thus, the “blancs” open up an entirely new dimension of undecidability; by

making the text “fold up toward itself,” the white spaces put the “place” of the text into relief and leave readers wondering if it can refer to (“signify”) anything beyond the place itself.

Another poetic insert in *La Québécoite* that fits within this theoretical-interpretive framework of Derrida’s, Blanchot’s, and Sartre’s readings of Mallarmé is reproduced below. This excerpt not only highlights, but also performs, the suspension of meaning and “undecidability” that Derrida identifies in Mallarmé’s work through the “spacing of reading”:

Watcher la game ?

Se mettre en dehors
entre parenthèses
entre.

Elle sentirait qu’elle ne pourrait jamais tout à fait habiter ce pays, qu’elle ne pourrait jamais tout à fait habiter aucun pays.

Pas de lieu, pas d’ordre.
Mémoire divisée à la jointure des
mots
Les couches muettes du langage,
Brisées
La parole immigrante en suspens
entre
deux HISTOIRES.

Passer de l’autre côté,
de passage.
Ceux de par-delà.
Le passé débandé.
Guedali la nostalgie ne doit pas être un retour. (152)

Before a close analysis of the vocabulary and imagery in this passage, the visual layout of the words on the page is what is most striking and immediately resonates with *Un coup de dés*. The position of each word in the space of the page illustrates as much – if not more – about its “meaning” as the word itself. The suspension of the word “entre” (“in between”) is the most remarkable example of this technique: it occupies a unique

indentation and is the only word in a line that is between two lines. It joins together two parts of a fragment disguised as a complete sentence: “La parole immigrante en suspens entre deux HISTOIRES.” The positioning of the “en suspens” is also striking: as it juts out and hangs over the two subsequent lines of the “stanza”, it is literally suspended on the page. Derrida’s interpretation of the “blancs” in Mallarmé’s poetry is relevant here, and deepened by Robin’s imagery of the “mute layers of language,” which also operate in similar fashion. Just as the white spaces between convey as much as (or more than) the words themselves, so too do the layers of the unsaid beneath everything that has been said. And, as Blanchot tells us, the only way to point toward the unknowable is to highlight its absence.

The first line – “Watcher la game?” – is perhaps also a playful nod to Mallarmé, who, as an English teacher interested in the performativity of words in English peppered his poems with English words. It also already sets the stage for the “suspended in-between immigrant voice” in its Gallicized English and its Anglicized French. That it is a question rather than a declarative statement signals to readers that we are in the realm of doubt and uncertainty, that there are more questions than answers. To further establish that we are in the realm of doubt, the “poem” is full of paradoxes and oxymorons: “divisée” or “divided” in the same line as “jointure” or “joint / juncture,” “couches muettes du langage” or “silent layers of language,” “la nostalgie ne doit pas être un retour” or “nostalgia must not be a return,” and “en dehors” or “in outside.”¹³² These paradoxes and oxymorons call readers’ attention to the seeming impossibility of making any sense of the words on the page. Her use of homonyms – “passer,” “passé,” and “passage” – further disorients readers by blurring the edges between multiple possible

¹³² Typically, in French, “en dehors de” is an adverbial phrase meaning “outside of” or “apart from.” The absence of the preposition “de” here is what makes Robin’s usage oxymoronic.

meanings. The verb “passer” can mean to come, to go, to pass by, to become, to be admitted, among many possibilities. “Passé” can be an adjective (“past” or “outdated” or “gone/absent”) or a noun (“the past”), and “passage” can refer to a passing (i.e. a transition) or a pathway (i.e. a physical geographic space). All three homonyms make the question become which kinds of movement – geographic, temporal, or metaphysical – the poem really describes. This question gives way to other ones: to whom does the “Ceux de par-delà” (“those from beyond”) refer, if there is a referent at all? And where is the other side (“l’autre côté”)? Once again, the potential “answers” could fall within the realm of metaphysics, of geography, or of time, and point to absence.

Another blurry spot in the poem is the line “la nostalgie ne doit pas être un retour” since by its very etymological origins, the word “nostalgia” means “the pain of return.” In other words, “return” is central to the concept of nostalgia. And yet, seemingly at odds with the rest of the novel that surrounds this fragment, the poetic “voice” here wants nothing to do with this return, perhaps for the pain it engenders.

One final element worth noting about this particular poetic insert is the ambiguous expression “le passé débandé”; which may translate loosely as either “the relaxed past,” “the unbandaged past,” or “the dispersed, disordered past.” The first possibility evokes an image of the past as an arc that is no longer curved, since the curvature of an arc comes from tension, and the “débandé” indicates an absence of tension. The image of the past (and therefore chronological historical time) as an arc calls to mind on the one hand Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,”¹³³ and on the other hand Martin Luther King, Jr.’s often-quoted precept that “The arc of the moral universe is

¹³³ Specifically, Benjamin’s famous line that it is the task of a historical materialist to “brush history against the grain” (Benjamin 257) is relevant here. If an arc represents the notion of historical progress – against the possibility of which Benjamin famously argued with his reading of Paul Klee’s “Angel of History” – then “brushing history against the grain” means precisely to slacken or relax (“débander”) that arc.

long, but it bends toward justice.” If interpreted using this first possible translation of “débandé,” this line of Robin’s poetic fragment could imply an absence of justice and morality, and/or, echoing Benjamin, the impossibility of progress. The second possibility, “the unbandaged past,” or more precisely, “the past whose bandage has been removed,” calls to mind the image of a wound. That the bandage has been removed could indicate that the wound has healed sufficiently, or it could mean that the past is an open wound. Within “débandé” there is also the noun “bande”, which can mean strip, or band. The prefix “dé-” indicates removal, so with this added possible layer of meaning, “le passé débandé” could also allude to an unbound past which is unraveling and falling apart, thus resonating with the third possible translation of “dispersed or disordered.” In the context of the post-Holocaust, post-colonial, post-Israel 1980s of the Cold War, such images of the past (wounded, unraveling, dispersed, disordered) seems apt for a French Jewish woman of Polish origins living in Québec with “no place, no order.” Ultimately, in Mallarméan fashion this poetic fragment resists any singular interpretation. Particular meanings unravel and collapse in the face of others, and the parts do not add up to a “comprehensible” whole. We readers are left suspended in the in-between, which is, as Cixous reminds us in “Le Rire de la Méduse” and “Sorties,” precisely where writing takes place.

Muteness as Emptiness, or Trauma in the Text:

In the previous section, we explored the image of a wounded, unraveling past. This image evokes trauma; the etymology of the word “trauma” originates in the ancient Greek word for “wound.” Although originally used to refer to a physical wound, trauma eventually became associated with psychological-emotional wounds. In *La Québécoise*,

the poetic inserts disrupt the “narrative” of the surrounding text – sometimes forcefully with all capital letters. In this section, we will explore the question of whether these inserts (re)produce trauma in the text by “wounding” it with their spatial and symbolic force. Indeed, they are violent in the way they assault our senses and our experience of reading. As we wade through the dense prose, grasping for whatever meaning we can make, the poetic interludes make us lose our already shaky footing and pull us under. Suddenly, there is not even the illusion of narrative. The “poems” burst into the prose, bringing yet another kind of “éclatement” to the text.

The intense disorientation provoked by these poetic “bursts” imitates what Cathy Caruth has called the “unclaimed experience” of trauma.¹³⁴ Caruth’s work on trauma in literature builds upon Freud’s earlier work in which he suggested that traumatic experience disallows the mind from “making sense” of it because it cannot be mastered and therefore the repetition of the “unknowable event” that often occurs in the form of nightmares or acting out can be explained as the mind’s attempts to finally make sense of – or “master” – the incident. If the “poems” in *La Québécoise* do indeed represent unclaimed experience of trauma as Caruth, and Freud, define it, then disruptions of the prose (the transactional, conscious kind of language) by the poetry (the alchemical, unknowable stuff of the unconscious;) also reinforce Blanchot, Sartre, Derrida, and Mallarmé’s theories of poetry as a means of gesturing – through absence itself – towards the existence of the unknowable. In other words, poetry in this sense precociously testifies to – or acts out – that which cannot be “mastered” or known.

In *It Didn’t Start With You: How Inherited Family Trauma Shapes Who We Are and How to End the Cycle*, psychologist and trauma specialist Mark Wolynn writes about

¹³⁴ See Introduction and Chapter 1 in Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*.

the relationship between language and trauma. Although Wolynn's research focuses on the process of psychological and emotional healing from trauma with the aim of coaching readers through the process and therefore represents a clear departure from the realm of literature, his approach illuminates an interesting way to read the Mallarméan poetic passages in *La Québécoise* that is a bit of a counterpoint to Derrida, Blanchot, and Sartre's interpretations, and indeed to the questions Mallarmé posed in his poetry.

Wolynn writes:

In many ways, healing from trauma is akin to creating a poem. Both require the right timing, the right words, and the right image. When these elements align, something meaningful is set into motion that can be felt in the body. To heal, our pacing must be in tune. If we arrive too quickly at an image, it might not take root. If the words that comfort us arrive too early, we might not be ready to take them in. If the words aren't precise, we might not hear them or resonate with them at all. (11)

What Wolynn suggests here is that the language used to create poetry (which by his analogy is akin to healing from trauma) is not at all random. Wolynn's outlook is decidedly optimistic, suggesting that there are ways to repair the wounds of the past, but his research and argument that language is the key to healing trauma implicitly conveys that language and self are intertwined and mutually constitutive. If arriving at the "perfect" combination of words can help restore a sense of wholeness in the process of working through trauma, then it logically follows that out of this wholeness will emerge a new (or restored) self.

Although Wolynn's optimistic outlook – that a return to wholeness is possible – appears to run counter to the readings of Mallarmé's work we have just explored, his connection between self and language does in fact resonate with some aspects of Blanchot's reflections on language in his essays on Mallarmé included in *Faux Pas*:

[D]ans l'acte poétique, le langage cesse d'être un instrument [de communication] et il se montre dans son essence qui est de fonder un monde, de rendre possible le

dialogue authentique que nous sommes nous-mêmes [...]. En d'autres termes, le langage n'est pas seulement un moyen accidentel de l'expression, une ombre qui laisse voir le corps invisible, il est aussi ce qui existe en soi-même comme ensemble de sons, de cadences, de nombres et, à ce titre, par l'enchaînement des forces qu'il figure, il se révèle comme fondement des choses et de la réalité humaine. (128-9, emphasis added)

Surprisingly, Blanchot's comparison between the everyday, transactional language of communication that functions as an instrument for our use and the language of poetry that "makes possible the authentic dialogue that we ourselves are" shores up Wolynn's comparison between healing from trauma and composing a poem. Blanchot too articulates the relationship between (poetic) language and self. As Cathy Caruth (and Freud) posits, one effect of trauma is that Blanchot's "human reality" created by, through, and upon this "language of essence" becomes unknown, disorganized, disorienting, disintegrated and seemingly irretrievable. In turn, this lapse – or rupture – in this language of essence contributes to some of the difficulty inherent to testimony. But paradoxically, Mallarmé's "precocious testimony" as Felman describes it is only knowable through its telling, and for Felman, this is the basis of poetry – it testifies to something it does not grasp. So while the language of poetry is "the language of essence" capable of bringing ourselves into the "authentic dialogue of our being," it is also the language that bears witness to what is unknowable. The particular paradox of trauma is that it occludes passageways into the language needed for bringing ourselves into the "authentic dialogue that is our being," as Blanchot puts it, but for Wolynn, language itself is what can clear those very passageways.

As Blanchot continues his meditation on poetic language as Mallarmé (re)fashioned it, the connection between poetry and self is brought into even sharper relief:

On croit instinctivement que le langage révèle dans la poésie sa véritable essence, qui est toute dans le pouvoir d'évoquer, d'appeler les mystères qu'il ne peut exprimer, de faire ce qu'il ne peut dire, de créer des émotions ou des états qui ne peuvent se figurer, en un mot d'être en rapport avec l'existence profonde plutôt par le faire que par le dire. Et l'on comprend un poème, non pas lorsqu'on en saisit les pensées ni même lorsqu'on s'en représente les relations complexes, mais lorsqu'on est amené par lui au mode d'existence qu'il signifie, provoqué à une certaine tension, exaltation ou destruction de soi-même, conduit dans un monde dont le contenu mental n'est qu'un élément. On pourrait dire que la signification poétique se rapporte à l'existence, qu'elle est compréhension de la situation de l'homme, qu'elle met en cause ce qu'il est. (129)

In the above passage, which might be considered an ode to the supreme agency of poetic language itself, animated with its own life force, Blanchot makes clear the performative power of poetry. Again, he draws the distinction between language which “says” something and language which “does” something. At the same time, whatever meaning (‘signification’) we come to attach to this language is testament to our human existence. In other words, for Blanchot, poetic language proves the case for our humanity; the language of poetry opens us to the deepest layers of our existence more by what it does than by what it says. These “deepest layers” bring us into a world of more than “mental content” and thus “understanding” a poem is not achieved by grasping its meaning, but by allowing it to transport us into that world beyond. Blanchot reveals the essential and fundamental relationship between language (in its alchemical poetic form) and the (un)making of human subjectivity.

To return now to Wolynn and the question of trauma in the text, we see from Blanchot that by virtue of its capacity to bring us into the authentic dialogue that is ourselves, the language of poetry is as strong in its constructive power as in its destructive power. As Blanchot writes, this language can bring us to confront the tension that resides deep within us when we let down our defenses,¹³⁵ and therein lies its

¹³⁵ Blanchot's existentialist view of poetic language resonates with contemporary Anglo-American poet David Whyte's statement that 'poetry is the language against which we have no defenses.'

potentially destructive power. Although the existential precarity that can be provoked by poetry as Blanchot (and Sartre) explain it is a distinctly separate experience with distinctly separate effects than that of trauma – indeed, making such a leap would be erroneous at best – there is no question that language in the poetic sense is a powerful agent for connection to (and disconnection from) the essence of our being and our selves. For Wolynn, this powerful agency can be harnessed, and language used as a vehicle for rebuilding in the wake of destruction and disconnection:

The vehicle for this journey [i.e. trauma healing] is language, the buried language of our worries and fears. It's likely that this language has lived inside us our whole lives. It may have originated with our parents, or even generations ago with our great-grandparents. Our core language insists on being heard. When we follow where it leads and hear its story, it has the power to defuse our deepest fears. (11)

Wolynn makes physical and literal Blanchot's portrayal of poetic language as the essence of our existence by describing language as a living entity that resides deep within us, in the physical matter of our bodies and the metaphysical 'matter' of our psyches. The implication here is that our 'core language' has its own story, but as meaning-makers, it is our responsibility to listen and 'make sense' of the story. Once again, Wolynn echoes Blanchot's much earlier claim that language exists not as a human invention, but as its own entity that positions us within the world. Although Wolynn uses the gentle phrase 'when we follow where it leads,' there is an implied confrontation required for trauma healing to occur; not unlike Blanchot's idea that the language of poetry brings us to confront the (sometimes terrifying) essence of our being, so here our 'core language' brings us to confront our worries and fears.

Wolynn's focus on the (inter-/trans-)generational qualities and origins of this 'core language' connects with the ongoing studies done on the relationship between trauma and epigenetics that began to emerge in the late 1990s. This research, conducted

most famously by Rachel Yehuda, a professor of psychiatry and neuroscience and director of Traumatic Stress Studies Division at the Mount Sinai School of Medicine, suggests that trauma modifies the genes of those who directly experience it, and that these genetic modifications are transmitted to subsequent generations.¹³⁶ In other words, there are biological and physiological components of trauma as well as psychological ones, and studying these other manifestations or signals of trauma has allowed researchers to shed light on the mechanisms of the transmission that occurs across generations and makes it possible to respond to trauma as inherited neurobiology. As this transmission occurs genetically within the body and outside the realm of conscious thought, manifestations of inherited intergenerational trauma occur in and through the body as well. Wolynn and Bessel Van Der Kolk describe this phenomenon based on their clinical work with trauma survivors, whether direct or inherited. But this is also true of directly experienced trauma; the limbic brain takes over in an effort to protect the survivor, and thus many survivors cannot recall the traumatic event itself. This is why testimony as a mode of knowing and as a historical source has struggled to legitimize itself. It is also why the effects of trauma so often manifest themselves through the unconscious (such as in nightmares), the limbic system (such as panic attacks), or the body (such as migraines) in response to an external situation or stimulus.¹³⁷

These new ways of understanding the intergenerational dimensions of trauma and the various ways transmitted traumas express themselves in subsequent generations shed light on both *La Québécoise* and *Osnabrück*. As the following fragment from *La*

¹³⁶ For more detailed description of Yehuda's research, see Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, pp. 118-119 and Mark Wolynn, *It Didn't Start With You*, pp. 17, 19-20.

¹³⁷ See Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, Chapter 12 ("The Unbearable Heaviness of Remembering") for more on the neurobiological studies that have illuminated these aspects trauma.

Québécoise demonstrates, the Grenelle metro stop in Paris is precisely one such external stimulus that catapults the narrator into a crisis of memory:

APRÈS GRENELLE—JE NE SAIS PLUS
LA LIGNE SE PERD
DANS MA MÉMOIRE
Les Juifs
doivent
prendre
le
dernier
wagon.
Il faisait beau ce 16 juillet 1942
Autour de la rue du DR FINLAY
de la rue NOCARD
de la rue NELATON
AUTOUR DE GRENELLE. XV^e arrondissement.
WURDEN VERGAST
L'opération s'appelait
VENT PRINTANIER
SA MÈRE—JAMAIS REVENUE
ELLE PLUS TARD EN AMÉRIQUE
WURDEN VERGAST
Du côté de GRENELLE
GUEDALI QUI S'EN SOUVIENT? (73-74)

As we have seen, the unconscious repetition of a traumatic event in the form of unintegrated material (images, beliefs, dreams, behaviors, physical symptoms) is a well-known manifestation of the experience of trauma. In the above 'poem,' the repetition of the word "Grenelle" stands out, and the first refrain, "après Grenelle la ligne se perd dans ma mémoire" recurs throughout the novel. The peculiar spacing of letters and words is revealing here as well; as Blanchot and Derrida tell us about Mallarmé's spacing, it calls attention to absence. But in this case, it is an absence of conscious memory; the arrangement of words and the spaces between reproduces the pauses and gaps created by the struggle to remember. The position of the word "mémoire" is telling as it juts out beyond the rest of the words on the page, farther to the right, imitating the unreachable and irretrievable memory of what lies "après Grenelle." But this extra spacing around

“mémoire” also highlights the separation between the unintegrated material represented by “Grenelle” and her accessible memory.

Indeed, Robin plays with the metaphor of the metro here; Grenelle is a station in the Paris metro system, so she likens the lapse in memory with an incomplete mental map of the metro which becomes blurry after Grenelle. The repetition of “Grenelle” and the list of other surrounding street names (Nelaton, Dr. Finlay, Nocard) near the Grenelle metro station in Paris’ 15th arrondissement links Parisian geography with the haunting memory of what happened on July 16, 1942 near the Grenelle station: the notorious roundup at the Vélodrome d’Hiver that led to the largest and most accelerated deportations of Jews from France to Auschwitz in the period of Vichy and the German Occupation. Although Robin and her parents were not themselves rounded up and deported, this date and location *are* traumatic for Robin. As Robin has over the years disclosed details of her experiences during the war,¹³⁸ her father, an unassimilated Polish Communist Jew who arrived in Paris in 1932 with his family, had enlisted in the French army using a false identity and was captured and sent to a prisoner of war camp in Germany. Robin, her mother and brother stayed in Paris, and like many other Jews living in the Occupied zone, spent the duration of the war frequently and clandestinely changing their residence to avoid the roundups. Because of the Nazi laws, children under the age of six were not required to wear the yellow star, and thus Robin was able to “pass” and accompany her French nursemaid, Juliette, on outings in the city – a foretelling of the narrator’s own outings in *La Québécoise*. The particular haunting associated with the

¹³⁸ Robin has shared some of these details in interviews (Vincent Casanova et al., “L’écriture à la trace; entretien avec Régine Robin,” *Vacarme* 54 (February 19, 2011; <https://vacarme.org/article1967.html>) and in her aforementioned metareflexive autobiographical essay “Vous! Vous êtes quoi au juste?.” She also relates some of her biographical details in *Le Cheval blanc de Lénine / Le Naufrage du siècle* and in her autofictional “Manhattan Bistro” that appears in *L’immense fatigue des pierres*.

Vélodrome d'Hiver and July 16, 1942 originates for Robin in a very close call she witnessed when, on that day, a guard directed her mother to board a bus that would have taken her to the Vélodrome and from there, to Drancy and then Auschwitz. Her mother told the guard that her husband had fought in the French army and was now a French prisoner of war. She supplied papers to document her status, and the guard miraculously waved her away and thus allowed her to escape.¹³⁹ In this poetic fragment, then, Robin turns this Parisian neighborhood, identifiable by its corresponding metro stops, into a textualized memorial and a manifestation of repetitive traumatic haunting.

The trope of the metro runs throughout the novel and becomes a leitmotif. With each “chapter” delineated by a Montréal neighborhood and its corresponding metro stop, the “novel” can be read as a journey through the city on the Montréal metro. Of course, this structure is complicated by the use of the conditional, which, as we have already seen, implies that the journey never actually takes place, only the places themselves. This “never taking place” or “rien n’aura eu lieu que le lieu” points back to trauma and the disintegration of the narrative; thus the very thing (movement throughout the city) that seems to move the narrative forward is in fact a sign of its disintegration. The metro stops and names become monuments to that which “took place” but cannot be integrated or understood, to that which took place but then disappeared without a trace (as in the Vélodrome d’Hiver, which in fact is now only marked by an inconspicuous plaque on the building that stands on the site of the roundup) and to that which cannot take place as a result of the conditional mode itself, which only offers hypotheticals. In “A Kaddish for the Father: Régine Robin and the ‘Impossible Work of Mourning,’” Kathleen Kellett discusses Robin’s frequent use of the conditional mode in the majority of her biofictional

¹³⁹ This succinct summary and synthesis of details comes from Kathleen Kellett in her excellent article “A Kaddish for the Father: Régine Robin and the ‘Impossible Work of Mourning.’”

work, although not *La Québécoise*: “To express what might have been but was not, [Robin] systematically favors the conditional mode in her biofiction. [...]. This constant questioning of what might have been, of how fate decided who would survive and who would die in the Holocaust, is part of the leitmotif of mourning” (207). Indeed, in the poem, “her mother” never returned, while “she” eventually goes to America. Kellett’s perceptive reading of Robin’s conditional as a marker of mourning points back to “the accident” of her mother’s survival; by asking what would have happened, all the traumatic possibilities are summoned and in this way, the conditional is symptomatic of mourning *and* of trauma.

The words of the short, matter of fact phrase “Les Juifs doivent prendre le dernier wagon,” spread across six lines and stacked neatly on top of each other is as visually arresting as it is linguistically evocative. Here too, the use of the present indicative tense displaces us in time, but also reproduces the effects of trauma by repeating a past experience in the present. I say it is visually arresting because of the words stacked and sequenced like a train, with ‘wagon’ in the position of the thing it signifies (the last wagon containing Jews, and, poignantly, the last wagon the Jews in it would take), and because of the words stacked just like arrested Jews were crammed into the wagons, stacked on top of each other. At the same time, the visual layout of these words on the page reflects the Nazis’ (and their French collaborators’) violence: they are perfectly ordered, not chaotic or messy. The stacked spacing also creates a rhythm that is punctuated, perhaps imitating the way a German official might give orders in French.

In the poem, it is unclear who is speaking; Robin’s use of all capital letters for some words but not others creates the impression of polyvocality. It is unclear who the “elle” is, as this poetic interlude is a clear break from the surrounding prose, therefore

implying that the writer-narrator has been interrupted. The unusual spacing and syntax augments the lack of clarity around who the speaker might be, and the multilingual aspect adds yet more complexity, disorienting readers in time and space. The inclusion of German makes a stark contrast with its previously discussed appearances in *Osnabrück*. In this poetic interlude it reproduces the violence of the Nazis in their language. The adjectives WURDEN (“became”) and VERGAST (“gassed”) literally signify and perform the violence of Nazi genocide in the language in which these actions were ordered and executed. But they bear witness to absence as well; those who “became gassed” were effectively made to disappear without a trace, while the words on the page mark their absence. At the same time, the Nazi code name of the operation for mass deportation of Jews from Western Europe, which included the Vél d’Hiv roundup, is marked here in French. Perhaps this is to remind readers that French collaborators (i.e. the government and police) were equally responsible for the trauma performed by this passage.

In a way, the poem begins at its end, as the last line—“Guedali qui s’en souvient?”—asks a question that is answered by the first three lines in which the “I” states that “je ne sais plus...la ligne se perd dans ma mémoire.” Already, with this reversed chronology, the poem performs the lost and confused sense of order that it mourns. The fact that the question is posed in the present tense also reveals something about the reversed, confused chronology. The poetic “I” asks “who remembers?” in the present, rather than in the future. The implication here is that the past in question has already been forgotten by the time of the poem; already there is no one left who remembers, never mind who will remember in the future. This implies an absence of witnesses. Indeed, it also reflects the perpetual cycle of mourning itself; while the

resounding question at the end of the poem (“Who remembers?”) underscores the desperate need for witnesses and for memory to be preserved as the only remaining bastion against complete disappearance, the trauma invoked by the Grenelle station freezes the speaker’s memory.

Another clue in the critical discussion engaged with *La Québécoise* that points to the trauma represented in the text is the complete omission of these poetic interludes from scholarly and critical considerations. Even Robin herself, in her later reflections included in the afterword of the 1993 edition of the novel, never evokes these passages, focusing instead on questions of multiculturalism and intersecting identities in the context of 1980s Québec society and politics. These omissions point directly to what, as we have seen, psychologists have known about trauma since Freud and Jung’s early psychoanalytic contributions: that trauma is essentially unintegrated experience that the conscious mind cannot ‘master’ or understand. The impossibility of mastering and integrating traumatic experience into the narratives we consciously and unconsciously create to make sense of our lives and our selves means that those experiences remain in the unconscious – and the body – and repeatedly resurface in fragmented, unorganized, and often unrecognizable forms and behaviors.¹⁴⁰ Robin’s poetic fragments in *La Québécoise* reproduce the effects of this unintegrated experience, so much so that they have deterred scholarly considerations because they appear entirely incomprehensible (i.e. impossible to ‘master’ and therefore integrate) within the larger process of making sense of the novel. In other words, these poetic interludes exist outside the ‘story’ of the novel, both the one that Robin’s narrator attempts to tell within it and the one being told about it in the context of

¹⁴⁰ See Cathy Caruth, *Literature in the Ashes of History* (Chapter 1) for a detailed analysis of Freud’s early writings on and insights into this aspect of trauma. See also Bessel Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score* (Chapter 1) for his account of working with Vietnam veterans and their unconscious embodied behaviors.

literary criticism. In this way too, the absence of witnesses – and the desperate need for them – is made all the more acute.

Once again, Mark Wolynn provides a decidedly optimistic view of the possibilities of healing trauma: “[In/after trauma], all is not silent: words, images, and impulses that fragment following a traumatic event reemerge to form a secret language of our suffering we carry with us. Nothing is lost. The pieces have just been rerouted” (16). What he suggests here is that unintegrated traumatic experiences are not irretrievable, nor are they permanently fragmented. Instead, they form a puzzle that is possible to “solve” by rearranging the fragments. Another way to think about the rearrangement of the fragments is through the concepts of memory developed by Rothberg, Silverman, and Hirsch. What are all of these attempts to conceptualize memory if not an active process of rearrangement? Nicola King’s theory of self-rearrangement via the operatives of memory performed in writing also resonates here. Indeed, in her Afterword to *The Wanderer*, the 1997 English translation of *La Québécoise*, Robin writes: “It seems to me that when I wrote this book it was a kind of therapy for me” (173). For Cixous too, in her reflections on her own writing practice and career, writing is a “kind of therapy” and a way of working through.

Making witnesses; writing within loss

As we have seen, part of this “writing therapy” comes in the form of bringing readers into these disorienting worlds of shifting geographies and traumatic memories (and histories), thus creating witnesses that are otherwise painfully absent to their accidental survival in these worlds. It is precisely for this reason that, as Kellett has observed about Robin’s work, both continue to write towards the “impossible task of

mourning,” impossible because it is never finished, and never finished in part because such a finishing would also bring an end to the witnessing that the work invokes. In *Le Deuil de l'origine: Une langue en trop, la langue de moins*, her study of language (and the loss of it) represented in literature produced by Jewish writers, Robin writes in response to Marina Tsvetaeva's famous line that “Tous les poètes sont Juifs”:

Au sens où l'écriture désinstalle, dématernise, déterritorialise, arrache à l'enracinement, creuse un écart, rend visible la perte, la castration symbolique, le manque. L'écriture serait trajet, parcours, cette objectivation qui viendrait à tout instant rappeler qu'il y a de la perte, qu'on n'écrit jamais que dans cette perte, que rien ne viendra combler le manque, mais que l'acte d'écrire, l'impossibilité d'écrire dans l'écriture même est la tentative toujours déçue et toujours recommencée de déjouer la perte, l'appriivoiser, la mettre à distance ; la tentative de suturer tout en sachant que l'on ne peut y arriver. (10)

For Robin, writing makes loss visible by the “uprooting and deterritorializing” it necessarily involves. It is a constant reminder that there is loss, that writing only ever happens from within that loss, and that nothing will fill that loss. In other words, writing and loss are inextricably linked, and to finish writing is to deny the inevitability of infinitely recurring loss. Thus, the “impossible work of mourning” is bound up in the impossible work of writing beyond loss. This is the paradox at the heart of both Robin's and Cixous' texts; loss is the fertile ground of writing, which can thus never be finished even as the writing seeks to move beyond death (or “sing the abyss”). If, as Robin writes above, loss cannot be thwarted, tamed, or distanced, it *does* nonetheless inspire continuous attempts to do so, calling attention to its presence and therefore generating witnesses.

The “uprooting and deterritorializing” Robin refers to in the above passage from *Le Deuil* has to do with what she sees as the inevitable displacement involved in the process of writing, which further underscores the loss inherent to that process. This inevitable displacement comes from the impossibilities of language, identity, and

memory that Jewish writers – such as Kafka – experience particularly acutely, but from within the process of writing itself, a further displacement or disorientation occurs:

Qu'on n'imagine pas, lorsque j'évoque ces impossibles, celui de la langue, celui de l'identité ou celui de la mémoire, que je touche à un terrain pathologique qui voisinerait avec la psychose. [...] Il n'est question que d'écriture. Je considère ces blancs, ces écarts, ces décentrement, ces entours et détours comme le paradigme de toute position d'écriture. À le dire autrement, on écrit toujours autre chose que ce qu'on écrit, autre chose que ce qu'on croit avoir eu à dire, d'une position autre que celle qu'on croit occuper. (10)

For Robin, the “blanks/white spaces, gaps, decenterings, surroundings, and detours” are innately bound up in the position of writing, in which a displacement occurs within the language of writing itself. This implies that language has its own life force and will displace the writer, who will always write something different than what they thought they were writing, but what they write will call attention to what is unknowable. Derrida echoes this view of writing and language in his *Le monolinguisme de l'autre, ou la prothèse de l'origine* when he explains that language contains difference within itself, and is therefore always an approximation which will always cause a gap between language and meaning:

Chaque fois que j'ouvre la bouche, chaque fois que je parle ou écris, je *promets*. Que je la veuille ou non : la fatale précipitation de la promesse, il faut ici la dissocier des valeurs de volonté, d'intention ou de vouloir-dire qui lui sont raisonnablement attachées. [...] cette promesse annonce l'unicité d'une langue à venir. [...] Cet appel à venir rassemble d'avance la langue. Il l'accueille, il la recueille, non pas dans son identité, mais dans son unité, pas même dans son ipséité, mais dans l'unicité de la singularité d'un rassemblement de sa différence à soi : dans la différence *avec soi* [...]. (126-127)

For Derrida, as for Robin, what we might “mean to say or write” has nothing to do with what we do end up saying or writing. The promise we make when we speak or write is beyond our control, as is the ability to keep that promise because language contains difference within itself. Thus, yet again, the loss carried in the gap between the promise and what is delivered is infinite.

“Knotted intersections”:

The absence of witnesses and infinite cycle of loss comes in part from the “knotted intersections”¹⁴¹ that Cixous and Robin (and their protagonists) occupy, which further complicate the (im)possibility of telling and underscore the “unknowability” of what their writing gestures toward. Both writers have described the experience of “belonging nowhere” as a result of these knots between geographies and memories of pre-Nazi Germany, a Shtetl in Poland, colonial Algeria, France, and Québec. Once again, language itself is a significant marker and barometer of this experience. Once again, I turn to Derrida’s *Le monolinguisme de l’autre* as a way of illustrating this:

La cruauté coloniale, certains, dont je suis, en ont fait l'expérience des deux côtés, si on peut dire. Mais toujours elle révèle exemplairement, là encore, la structure coloniale de toute culture. Elle en témoigne en martyr, et « à vif ». Le monolinguisme de l'autre, ce serait *d'abord* cette souveraineté, cette loi venue d'ailleurs, sans doute, mais aussi et d'abord la langue même de la Loi. [...]. C'est en faisant fond sur ce fond qu'opère le monolinguisme imposé par l'autre, ici par une souveraineté d'essence toujours coloniale et qui tend, irrépressiblement et irrépressiblement, à réduire les langues à l'Un, c'est-à-dire à l'hégémonie de l'homogène. On le vérifie partout, par-tout où dans la culture cette homogénéité reste à l'œuvre, effaçant les plis et mettant le texte à plat. La puissance colonisatrice elle-même, au fond de son fond, n'a pas besoin pour cela d'organiser de spectaculaires initiatives : missions religieuses, bonnes œuvres philanthropiques ou humanitaires, conquêtes de marché, expéditions militaires ou génocides. (69-70)

As Derrida puts it, he has had the experience of colonial cruelty from both sides; as an Algerian Jew, he had French citizenship until it was suspended and then eventually restored, and as an Algerian Jew, like Cixous and Cohen he eventually left Algeria. The same is true for Robin; she experienced first-hand the colonial cruelty of the German Occupation in Paris, quickly learning how to speak French like a native Parisian and hiding all linguistic traces of her true mother tongue – Yiddish. But once she arrived in

¹⁴¹ I borrow this phrase from Max Silverman in his article on Cixous’ short story *Pieds nus*, titled “Knotted Intersections: Cixous and Derrida” (Wasafiri, vol. 24, no. 1, 2009).

Québec, she suddenly occupied a very different position and found herself on the other side; her efforts to fully “become French” were so successful that nobody in Québec could understand why she had left France, thus illustrating their own internalized colonial notions of inferiority. And, as Robin has pointed out in interviews and other writings, France did initially colonize Québec. This fact of history appears scattered throughout *La Québécoise* as well, with what appear to be citations from history textbooks recounting the story of Cartier and Champlain’s early journeys and “discoveries.” Thus, language has colonial violence and death enfolded within it, and French in particular carries traces and imprints of this violence for these writers, even as it is also the language in which they choose to write. In this sense, these knotted intersections, carried within language itself, further exacerbate the acuteness of Cixous’ and Robin’s need for witnesses.

Seeing language and hearing silence:

All of this opens up a new way of “seeing” language. In *Osnabrück*, the narrator remembers hearing her mother’s stories about a “magical” door in Osnabrück that, like the French theatrical apparatuses of the “féerie” genre that gave dreamlike qualities to stage performances and allowed audiences to be completely transported into a fairy tale-like world of illusion and enchantment, would perhaps allow her to finally “show” her mother in the text if she could make one of her own:

Pour bien [...] montrer ma mère sous toutes ses apparitions encore rayonnantes, il faudrait que je fabrique un de ces dispositifs à féeries dont nous eûmes l’usage prodigieux toutes les deux jadis elle dans son enfance et moi dans la sienne et dans la mienne. C’est une porte à travers laquelle on regarde passer et aller à leur vie de tous les jours les personnes dont l’existence est presque incroyable. *On doit regarder par le trou de la serrure et ne rien dire. Pendant que l’on regarde, une voix, la voix du livre, raconte ce qui est en train de se passer de l’autre côté. Ainsi les temps, les terres, les mondes sont séparés et vierges tout en étant voisins. Alors on voit. Ce que petite fille ma mère vit par le trou de sa porte : une gare. Des dizaines de nains s’affairaient chargeant des marchandises et déchargeant. Le*

train partait. Un train arrivait. Des centaines de nains montaient. D'autres descendaient. Cela s'est passé il y a quatre-vingts ans à Osnabrück. Ça, elle l'a vu. C'est tout. J'aurais bien voulu voir ça. [...] J'ai une passion pour les portes. [...] ce qui m'attire dans la porte c'est le trou de la serrure : *un détournement de la serrure au profit de la vision. La fermeture donne l'Ouvert. On ne voit jamais si bien que par ce trou.* Il faut donc pour commencer une porte bien fermée et un trou. J'ai toujours su songeai-je, derrière la porte fermée de la cuisine dans laquelle j'étais encore la première et la seule à cette heure, que *c'est le SANS-RETOUR qui sauve le présent éternisé.* Plutôt que de me rendre au passé je devrais l'appeler au présent. (19-20, emphasis added)

Here Cixous' narrator calls our attention to the theatricality of representation and to the surrender of her – and our – own voice in order to let the book speak as we watch scenes through the limited and mediated view of the “féerie apparatus.” This is how we see (“Alors on voit”). The technology mediating our view eventually becomes a keyhole in a door, which as the narrator tells us is a closing that gives way to an opening (“La fermeture donne l'Ouvert”). For Cixous' narrator, then, we will never see anything as well as through that keyhole, precisely because the closing (the door and lock) that frames the opening (the keyhole) blocks further loss – as she puts it, it is the “without return that saves the eternalized present.” This for her is the only way to possibly capture her mother, by limiting her – and our – view in such a way that we see exactly how it is mediated. While the “féerie apparatus” signals the dreamlike nature of what “Osnabrück” has come to mean and the artifice necessary to evoke it, the image of the keyhole signals not only what we can see through it, but also that which we cannot see hidden behind the door.

As I have attempted to illustrate in this chapter, Cixous and Robin use different literary strategies to immerse their readers in an experience of exile and loss. For different reasons, *Osnabrück* and *La Québécoise* are extremely dense and difficult to navigate without becoming disoriented and losing sight of the forest for the trees. Like their chosen literary interlocutors (Proust, Joyce, Kafka, Mallarmé, Jabès, et. al.) these

texts demand readers' undivided attention, and will necessarily alienate and discourage their readers along the way. In writing this chapter, I have repeatedly come up against an unquellable desire to present a cohesive and all-encompassing critical reading of these texts. Each thread intersects with all the others in both delightfully and maddeningly complex ways. These texts effectively generate empathy; through the textual displacements and silences that pierce through the "narrative," readers experience the writer-narrators' frustrations, losses and traumas. Through writing, Cixous and Robin continuously work through and around the same fundamental questions at the heart of their knotted, haunted memories and identities. Each text is a continuation, a reiteration, a variation, and a reverberation of the others. As we have seen, these are writing projects that want readers – as witnesses – to never be finished, and in this way they have an ethical dimension as well. By inciting readers to bear witness to loss, marked by absences and silences, these writings effectively become their own "noeuds de mémoire" in that they memorialize that which is lost while also exposing the knotty intersections that underpin those losses.

In an essay titled "Beyond Egalitarianism," published in 2000, American Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow writes of the necessity of "hearing silence" as a step towards moving beyond egalitarianism within Jewish religious contexts. While the purpose of Plaskow's essay is very pragmatically directed at Jewish religious communities and thus is a bit "displaced" within the scope of this chapter, her words nonetheless resonate powerfully as we think about the ways we have seen Cixous and Robin call attention to absence and silence that are "knowable" only by recognizing their unknowability: "Silence is difficult to hear. When a silence is sufficiently vast, it fades into the order of things. We take it for granted as the nature of reality. [...]. Women have

a long history of reading ourselves into silence. From childhood bedtime stories to the biblical narratives, from male teachers to male books on male Judaism, women learn to people silences with our own shadowy forms” (129). In the next chapter, we will see precisely how Robin and Cixous, as well as Cohen and Boukhobza help and prepare us to “hear the silence” of the previous generation of women by reading between the lines.

CHAPTER IV

FROM ÉCRITURE JUIVE FÉMININE TO ÉCRITURE JUIFÉMININE: ANXIOUS ELLIPTICAL OPENINGS AND EVASIONS IN *ENFANCE* AND *LE VIN DE SOLITUDE*

Écrire ? – Oui. C’est le moyen d’investigation le plus intime, le plus puissant, le plus économique, le supplément le plus magique, le plus démocratique. Du papier, de l’imagination, et en vol. J’avais découvert le plus sûr et le plus universel des moyens d’évasion quand j’étais captive de l’Histoire, derrière les grilles à Oran, à l’âge de trois ans.
– Cixous, “Le Rire de la Méduse”

Azoi vi got in Frankraych (As [happy as] God in France). – Yiddish saying

Assez paradoxalement, je dirai volontiers que c’est moins parce que je suis Juif que j’ai écrit ces pages que l’inverse : c’est en écrivant ce livre, et quelques autres travaux, que je suis devenu Juif, Juif de volonté si l’on veut, ou Juif de réflexion.
– Pierre Vidal-Naquet, *Les Juifs, la mémoire et le présent*

Marranos were former Jews in Spain and Portugal who had forcibly converted to Christianity. For generations, however, many of them maintained a crypto-Jewish life in secret, an experience that produced many dualities—an opposition between the inner and outer life and a mixture of the two religions that, in certain cases, led to the breakdown of both Christian and Jewish beliefs. It also made disguises, including the linguistic masks of equivocation and dual language, necessary for survival.
– Yirmiyahu Yovel, “The Marrano of Reason”

As we saw in the last chapter, Cixous and Robin use complex literary strategies to generate empathy – that is to say, to bring readers into the completely disorienting experience of their narrators who are also writers – as a way of creating witnesses. This need for witnesses comes from the fragmentation and tangled knots of the Holocaust and decolonization, of exile and relocation. Their work is caught up in the necessity of seeing differently, of calling attention towards that which cannot be seen in its fullness. This impossibility stems in part from (post)modern literary awareness of the limits of representation and of the illusory nature of “fullness” to begin with, and in part from the violent ruptures and fragmentation caused by trauma. The process of writing as remembering is constantly undone by the dis-membering that simultaneously makes the

texts move. If re-membering and dis-membering mediate the possibility of witnessing (seeing), they also mediate that of hearing – and of hearing silence. In this chapter, we turn to the earliest generation and explore the silence that predates even the ruptures and fragmentation endured by Cixous’ and Robin’s generation (and that of their narrators). This earlier silence is textualized in subtle, surprising ways, and “speaks” volumes.

Indeed, subtlety and surprise are organizing elements of this chapter; Nathalie Sarraute and Irène Némirovsky appear antithetical both to each other and to *écriture juive* féminine, and generally form an unlikely pair in many ways. Nevertheless, these two writers share enough similarities – each of which is met with at least as many contrasting differences – to make for a dynamic comparison that ultimately illuminates a series of missed (and mis-) readings. These missed/mis-readings make Sarraute and Némirovsky (as well as Sarraute and Cixous) appear more at odds with each other than may in fact be the case, and as they unravel in the pages that follow, will serve to demonstrate the subtle traces of “*écriture juive féminine*” that emerge in their work. As the title of this chapter conveys, I want to suggest a difference between “*écriture juive féminine*” and “*écriture juiféminine*” that highlights the shifting theories and attitudes about the relationship between identity and literature/writing with which Cixous engaged in her 1975 essays, that Sarraute adamantly avoided and rejected, and that Némirovsky deftly navigated for reasons we will soon see.

While *écriture juive féminine* comes out of a later post-Holocaust, post-colonial consciousness in which identity enters the public sphere as a site from which literature and politics emerge, “*écriture juiféminine*” comes out of a wider space, before and beyond identity. Elaine Marks’ reading of “*Juifemme*,” with its androgynous pairing of “*Juif*” (male Jew) and “*femme*” (woman), and its ethical/ontological pairing of “*Jui*”

("j'ouis / je suis"; "I hear / I am") and "âme" (soul)¹⁴² helps to illustrate this wider space before and beyond identity contained within "Juifemme." If Cixous' aim is to undercut identity politics and move beyond them with "Juifemme," there is a way in which this oldest generation of writers foreshadows that undercutting by the elliptical, anxious, evasive dance they have with their status as Jews and as women. While Cohen and Boukhobza clearly write from "out of the closet" as Jewish women, Sarraute and Némirovsky write from inside the closet, and in the case of Sarraute, she denies that there is a closet in the first place. Thus, by suggesting a shift from *écriture juive féminine* to *écriture juiféminine* in this chapter, I mean two things: this progression of movement from inside to out of the closet that we can trace across the three generations, and the foreshadowing of Cixous' undercutting agenda that is illuminated through Marks' close reading of "Juifemme" in its androgynous and ontological dimensions. "Écriture juiféminine" is the "mother" of *écriture juive féminine* in this sense; it comes first and transmits traces of itself to future generations.

In their novels and theories of the novel as in their life stories, Sarraute and Némirovsky converge with and diverge from each other in equal measure. Sarraute became known as a pioneering member of the literary avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s in France with her theories of the novel that became known as the *Nouveau roman* (New Novel), although she did not always agree with her association with that school of writers. She was concerned with stripping away what for her was the "traditional" novel's outmoded façades of smooth and seamless realism (such as characters with specific and identifiable features both in terms of personality and physique, plot with a linear narrative arc, and recognizable geographic and historic locations), while Némirovsky wrote

¹⁴² See Chapter I, p. 31 of this dissertation for the passage from Marks' *Marrano as Metaphor* that I refer to here.

precisely what Sarraute called “traditional” novels and devoted great attention to character development. For Némirovsky, the characters she created were the life-force of her novels and of her writing; she called her process of character development the “vie antérieure” (pre-life) of her novels and this was the part of writing she most enjoyed. While Sarraute’s most profound literary influences included Dostoyevsky, Kafka, Proust, Joyce, and Woolf, Némirovsky was especially taken with Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Flaubert.

In this chapter, we will study Sarraute’s *Enfance (Childhood)* (1983), written and published when Sarraute was eighty-three years old and Némirovsky’s *Le Vin de solitude (The Wine of Solitude)* (1935)¹⁴³, written when Némirovsky was thirty-two years old. In the brief overview of each I will provide here, we can already see these authors’ very divergent approaches to fiction, mirrored in part by these texts’ very divergent dates of publication. In *Le Vin de solitude* and *Enfance*, we read fictionalized representations – based on memories – of both writers’ bicultural (or even tricultural) and transnational childhoods. Both tell narratives of exile and displacement, of difficult relationships between the young female protagonists and their mothers, and of becoming French – or at least of aspiring to do so – while also coming of age and coming to writing. Némirovsky referred to *Le Vin de solitude* as her “autobiographie mal déguisée” (“poorly disguised autobiography”) in an interview and in her writing notes and journals – her method of pre-writing – most of which are kept in the IMEC (l’Institut Mémoires d’édition contemporaine) archive¹⁴⁴, while Sarraute’s text has no marked genre in its published

¹⁴³ Published translations of both of these texts exist in English, so I will provide English translations taken from Sandra Smith’s translation of Némirovsky’s novel, and Barbara Wright’s of Sarraute’s.

¹⁴⁴ I had the wonderful privilege of traveling to these archives, located in an Abbey just outside of Caen in Normandy. I was only able to stay for a day and could not interact with the documents – there are many! – as long as would have been necessary to be able to directly incorporate my findings into this work, but the Némirovsky scholars (a small group) whose work I cite in this chapter have all drawn heavily from these archival materials.

edition, not even the vague “récit” (“narrative,” “story,” “text”). Instead, we see a photograph of a young girl dressed in early twentieth-century fashion, the author’s name and the title on the book’s cover; nothing more. These paratextual aspects already foretell the many differences in form and approach.

The two texts have very different structures. In *Le Vin de solitude*, which Némirovsky conceived as inspired by César Franck’s Symphony in D Minor, we trace the childhood and adolescence of Némirovsky’s protagonist, Hélène Karol, marked by four distinct geographical locations and displacements and narrated by an anonymous omniscient narrator with focalization on Hélène, so that we identify most with her and have the impression that we know her most intimate thoughts. The first part of the novel, depicting Hélène’s early childhood, takes place in Kiev; there she lives in a house of decaying wealth – all the once opulent furniture and wall fabrics are worn and frayed – with her parents, Boris Karol (“a little Jew” from a poor family who at this point works in a textile company) and Bella (originally from the wealthy Safranov family, her branch of which squandered their fortune and are now living off Boris’ income), her maternal grandparents, and her French governess, Mademoiselle Rose, who is Hélène’s only source of happiness, security, and comfort. The second part marks Hélène’s early adolescence, from eleven to fifteen years old, during which time she lives in St. Petersburg with her family who moved there after her father Boris lost his job. In this section of the novel, Hélène’s mother, Bella, begins an affair with Hélène’s wealthy cousin Max who becomes an ever-larger part of the family’s home life. Boris has become a successful financier at this point in the novel, and the narrator tells us that in these years of Hélène’s life, she heard the constant sound of whispers: “Millions... Millions...” Social climbing and accumulation of wealth are the parents’ ethos. In the St. Petersburg

section, Mademoiselle Rose has a nervous breakdown and dies; H el ene is devastated and her hatred towards her mother comes to a head, but she resolves to be independent and rely only on herself from that point on. They remain in St. Petersburg until the onset of the Bolshevik Revolution.

The third part of N emirovsky's novel recounts the Karol family's exile in Finland, living among other Russian refugees until the Finnish civil war breaks out, at which point they leave in the middle of the night, eventually arriving in Helsinki where they stay for a year. In Finland, H el ene experiences some of the most invigorating, exciting moments of her life, in no small part due to her first romantic foray – a fling with another refugee boarding in the same house. Finally, the fourth part takes place in France, where they finally arrive and settle; Boris has made a fortune and they live in an apartment in an upper-middle class Parisian neighborhood. In this final section of the novel, Bella becomes increasingly fragile and insecure about her age, and H el ene decides she will finally take revenge for the unhappy childhood her mother caused her. She begins seducing Max, but once she has successfully done so and he becomes desperately attached to her, she realizes that this will not fulfill her as she also begins to see her mother with more pity than scorn. The novel ends with Boris' death, at which point H el ene takes responsibility for her own happiness, discreetly packs a suitcase and slips out of the apartment, with no plan as to where she will go next.

In the final scene, the narrator tells us that H el ene walks out the door, turns a corner, and sits on a bench on the Champs  lys ees near the Arc de Triomphe. There, mediated to readers through the narrator, she (re)assures herself that she is equipped enough with "courage and pride" to handle whatever may come next on her own: " 'Je n'ai pas peur de la vie,' elle pensa. 'Ce ne sont que les ann es d'apprentissage. Elles ont

été exceptionnellement dures, mais elles ont trempé mon courage et mon orgueil. Cela, c'est à moi, ma richesse inaliénable. Je suis seule, mais ma solitude est âpre et enivrante' ” (1363). As this final scene of solitary self-affirmation draws to a close, Némirovsky's vision of the novel as a symphony comes to light:

Elle écouta le bruit du vent, et il lui sembla sentir dans ce souffle furieux un rythme profond, solennel et joyeux, comme celui de la mer. Les sons, d'abord aigus, rauques et criards, se fondaient en une sorte d'harmonie puissante. Elle y percevait une ordonnance confuse encore, comme au début d'une symphonie, lorsque l'oreille étonnée entend le dessin d'un thème, mais le perd aussitôt, déçue, le cherche et, soudain, le retrouve, et cette fois-ci comprend qu'il ne lui échappera plus, qu'il fait partie d'un ordre différent, plus puissant et plus beau, et écoute, rassurée et confiante, la tempête bienfaisante des sons s'abattre sur elle. Elle se leva, et, à ce moment, les nuages s'écartèrent ; entre les piliers de l'Arc de triomphe le ciel bleu parut et éclaira son chemin. (1363-64)

Hélène thus decides to embark on a life of independence, relying on the courage and pride that her difficult years of early life cultivated in her. *Le Vin de solitude's* structure – its four symphonic “movements” – draws a map of Hélène's exile that takes her progressively ever further from her home. With its closing emphasis on her “années d'apprentissage” (“years of apprenticeship/learning,” translated by Sandra Smith as “my first experiences of the world” (247), reading the novel as a female bildungsroman, the French term for which is a “roman d'apprentissage” is plausible. Angela Kershaw and Susan Rubin Suleiman, the two scholars from whose work on Némirovsky I most heavily draw, have suggested this interpretation.¹⁴⁵ We will return to this interpretation later, but if this scene is the dénouement of the bildungsroman, it is so in part because it posits the integration of all the pieces of her life through the metaphor of listening to a symphony. In this way, Némirovsky metaphorically stages reading *and* writing as interpretive, creative, and empowering acts; Hélène “reads” (listens to) the scene around her, and with

¹⁴⁵ See Kershaw, *Before Auschwitz: Irène Némirovsky and the Cultural Landscape of Interwar France*, pp. 93-94 and Suleiman, *The Némirovsky Question: The Life, Death, and Legacy of a French Writer*, pp. 174-177.

time understands its coherence. The “writing” is the life ahead of her that she commits to in this final scene.

By contrast to Némirovsky’s full narrative (and symphonic) arc, Sarraute’s *Enfance* is structured as a series of fragments and vignettes. The text begins with a dialogue between two unnamed voices, an “I” and a “You,” who debate whether writing about childhood memories – the premise of the text – is a good idea. We will unpack this dialogue in greater detail later but knowing that this is how Sarraute’s text begins already marks a complete departure from Némirovsky’s symphonic novel. The opening dialogue fades out, and we are brought immediately into a childhood memory with the “I” of the opening dialogue narrating between the present and the past. In this first fragment of memory, we learn that the narrating “I” was five or six years old in the scene of this first memory, and that she was in Switzerland – Interlaken or Battenberg – for vacation with her father. We learn that her nickname was “Tachok,” and that she was learning German at the time. We learn these details through the narrating “I” as she remembers and recounts, but the “you” occasionally interjects and probes the “I’s” memory with questions like “are you sure it was really like that?” or, “do you think you really thought that at the time?” This structure remains constant throughout the entire text, which is divided into seventy fragments, and in which we glean glimpses into Tachok’s childhood that was split – fragmented, like the text – between her divorced parents in Ivanovo, St. Petersburg, and Paris. Throughout the vignettes and the intercutting narrators, we learn that Tachok’s full Russian name was Natacha Tcherniak, that her parents divorced when she was very young, that they both remarried (her mother to a writer-historian named Kolia, her father to a Russian émigrée he met in Paris named Véra) and that after painful separations (and rejections) from her mother, she eventually chose to stay with her father

and stepmother in Paris. French public education – in the early years of the secular republic (“laïcité” became law in France in 1905, separating church and state and keeping religion outside of the classroom) – becomes a haven for Natacha, who becomes Nathalie in school as she masters the French language through “dictées” (dictation exercises) and written compositions.

Enfance ends rather abruptly with a more independent Nathalie alone in the streetcar, where Véra has dropped her off, that will take her to her new high school in a new and unknown part of Paris for the first day of class. The questioning voice of “Tu” echoes the reader’s experience of an abrupt ending and asks the narrating “I,” “Pourquoi maintenant tout à coup, quand tu n’as pas craint de venir jusqu’ici?” (“Why now, all of a sudden, when you haven’t been afraid to come this far?”). “Je” responds:

Je ne sais pas très bien... je n’ai plus envie... je voudrais aller ailleurs...
C’est peut-être qu’il me semble que là s’arrête pour moi l’enfance... Quand je regarde ce qui s’offre à moi maintenant, je vois un énorme espace très encombré, bien éclairé...
Je ne pourrais plus m’efforcer de faire surgir quelques moments, quelques mouvements qui me semblent encore intacts, assez forts pour se dégager de cette couche protectrice qui les conserve, de ces épaisseurs blanchâtres, molles, ouatées qui se défont, qui disparaissent avec l’enfance... (277)

“Je” posits that the text ends where childhood seems to end, and for her, childhood ended in that moment on the streetcar.

Through these overview sketches of the texts, with particular focus on each text’s ending, we can thus see that Némirovsky’s sweeping symphony, with four clear movements, conducted and articulated through an anonymous, omniscient narrator is a stark contrast to Sarraute’s fragmented vignettes, punctuated by narrating voices in the present who question and stage the process of memory recall in action. If *Enfance* ends abruptly, it is because that process of recall no longer applies past the moment of beginning high school, when things start to become clear. Sarraute’s ending points to the

foundational goal and guiding principle of her writing: bringing up from beneath the surface (in this case, the “protective cover” of “soft, whitish, cloudy layers” beneath which her childhood memories remain intact) the truest and deepest aspects of human existence. As we will soon see in greater depth, she calls these aspects “tropisms,” which, very briefly defined, are indefinable movements that are barely (if at all) perceptible within our consciousness but that nonetheless lie at the heart of everything we do and say. If childhood ends at high school, it is because the “Je” feels that she would not be capable of conjuring up these “true” memories from that point on – after high school, memory remains above the surface. Yet despite these formal and methodological differences, we can identify some thematic similarities; both texts end at a moment of transition into greater independence for their young female protagonists. Both texts relate stories of dislocation and relocation, of relationship with language and with the self. We will return to the texts themselves in more in-depth detail later.

I. Biographies:

Before turning our attention more deeply to these two writers’ novels and to their very different approaches to writing, I want to begin with a comparative overview of their lives, as the similarities are striking as well as the differences. Starting with a biographical comparison is also important given that the majority of my textual analysis in this chapter will be based in their two most autobiographical fictions. Both novelists were only children, born in Russia at the turn of the twentieth century to assimilated, bourgeois, and very Francophile Jewish families. Sarraute, born Natacha Tcherniak in Ivanovo in 1900, lived in a constantly shifting geographical, linguistic, and affective landscape that began with her parents’ divorce when she was two years old. Following

that early familial rupture, Sarraute spent different periods of her early life split between Paris, Ivanovo, and St. Petersburg. Her father was a chemist with political leanings towards the anti-czarist revolutionary movement that was beginning to take shape, while her mother was a writer who published children's stories under a male pseudonym. Both parents eventually remarried; her mother to a historian based in St. Petersburg, her father to a Russian émigré in Paris, and Sarraute spent the majority of her youth living with her father and stepmother, and eventually her half-sister Hélène. For Sarraute's parents, assimilation took the form of intellectual secularism. Némirovsky, born Irina Nemirovsky in Kiev (then a part of the Russian empire) in 1903, spent her formative years in Kiev and eventually St. Petersburg in a fairly wealthy family. Her father Léonid was not born into wealth but became one of the most successful financiers in Russia, and her mother Anna, who went by Fanny, was a Francophile socialite who had grown up in a wealthy family that had squandered their wealth by the time she married Léonid Némirovsky. Irina had an especially difficult relationship with her mother, and monstrous mother figures frequently recur throughout her novels and short stories. For the Némirovsky family, assimilation also took the form of secularism, and most importantly, upward socioeconomic mobility by emulating and frequenting as much as possible the Russian social elite of St. Petersburg.

Both Sarraute and Némirovsky thus experienced a transnational cultural milieu at an early age; Sarraute spent her childhood from the age of two until her adolescence traveling between her father in Paris and her mother in St. Petersburg, and for a time, between her mother in Paris and her father in Switzerland for summer vacation months. Némirovsky, for her part, spent summers in Nice and had a French nanny throughout the entirety of her childhood and adolescence, making French a language of her childhood as

much as, if not more than, Russian. She spoke French with her mother and called French her “*langue maternelle*” (native language, mother tongue). Being Jewish was not a formative aspect of their family lives, but their early years marked by such immersive contact with French and their strained, difficult relationships with their mothers played decisive roles in each writer’s life. Both would eventually leave St. Petersburg and Russia completely behind, for political reasons related to their associations on both ends of the spectrum (Czarist Empire and Bolshevik Revolution) of early twentieth century Russian politics. While Sarraute’s father – and thus Sarraute as well – eventually left Russia behind forever and settled permanently in Paris due to his brother’s involvement with anti-czarist revolutionary groups, Némirovsky’s father feared persecution from the incumbent Bolshevik Revolution and, in 1917, the family left Russia and lived in transitory exile in Finland and Sweden before eventually arriving and settling in Paris in 1919. These stories of exile and relocation form the backdrop of *Enfance* and *Le Vin de solitude*.

Their biographical trajectories continue to converge and diverge from each other beyond these early experiences of exile; both Sarraute and Némirovsky went on to earn university degrees in literature – Sarraute in English, Némirovsky in Russian and Comparative Literature – from the Sorbonne. Sarraute also pursued (and earned) a law degree and in law school met Raymond Sarraute, a Frenchman, whom she married in 1925. She practiced law while also starting and raising a family, and began working on *Tropismes*, the piece that would become the foundation of her entire literary career, in 1932 while working as a lawyer and as a young mother of three. Némirovsky, for her part, met and married Michel Epstein, an assimilated Russian Jewish banker whose family had also emigrated to Paris in the immediate wake of the Russian revolution. In

1929, the same year as their first child was born, Némirovsky published her first novel, *David Golder* which became an instant popular success and was adapted into a film. Némirovsky went on to publish many more novels, novellas, and short stories throughout the 1930s first through Éditions Grasset, a printing house known for its commercial approach to publishing, then through Albin Michel, also known for its more commercial approach, and various weekly newspapers and reviews such as *Les Oeuvres libres*, a monthly review featuring short stories and serialized novels, the *Revue des deux mondes*, a respected and well-established review of the political center, and eventually, *Gringoire*, a journal that became increasingly antisemitic as the interwar period drew towards its close.¹⁴⁶ Meanwhile, Sarraute did not finish writing *Tropismes* until 1937, and struggled to find a willing publisher for two years – it was an unusually short text and unlike anything else any publisher had seen – until finally Denoël accepted. Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were among the unpublished text’s first readers, and both lauded it as a completely original literary in(ter)vention. In these years of their careers in the 1930s, Sarraute and Némirovsky thus were positioned at completely opposite ends of the literary production continuum, from avant-garde to popular and commercial.

Before taking a closer look at each author’s critical reception as informed by these early texts, we should note that the year of *Tropismes*’ publication (1939) marks a decisive and tragically permanent divergence in Sarraute’s and Némirovsky’s life trajectories as in their critical reception and literary careers. With the onset of the Second World War, Némirovsky and Sarraute began to read signs of danger, though each interpreted them differently. In 1939, Sarraute’s husband was drafted into the French

¹⁴⁶ Angela Kershaw’s work in *Before Auschwitz: Irène Némirovsky and the Cultural Landscape of Inter-war France* provides an excellent overview of the publishing scene in Paris of the 1930s and Némirovsky’s positioning within it. See especially pp. 10-16.

army, leaving Sarraute to find childcare solutions so she could continue working to support her family. After the French defeat and beginning of the Nazi Occupation in June 1940, Sarraute, who had French citizenship thanks to her marriage, spent the summer in Normandy with her daughters, father, step-mother, mother, and friends who all believed it was a good idea to distance themselves from Paris while power was transferred to the Nazi Occupiers. When they returned to Paris at the end of the summer, Sarraute and her father followed Nazi protocol and registered as Jews. In an interview, Sarraute later said that registering was a “question d’honneur” (a question of honor) for her father,¹⁴⁷ and she followed his lead by also registering. But shortly after doing so, her father left France with Sarraute’s stepmother (Vera) for Lausanne, Switzerland, using a false passport he bought from a member of the Gestapo. He apparently tried to convince Sarraute to leave with them, but she refused and stayed in Paris. At the end of 1940 as a result of the various Nazi and Vichy decrees that went into effect throughout that year, Sarraute was disbarred and forced to stop working as a lawyer. Worried that her husband Raymond, who had returned from military service and was also a lawyer, would also eventually be disbarred due to their marriage, she divorced him as a protective measure. Sarraute stayed in the Parisian region and survived the German Occupation by living clandestinely, changing addresses often, and not wearing the yellow star that had been issued to her. She would not publish anything else until a series of essays and short pieces (including additional pieces that would be added to a later edition of *Tropismes*) in 1947, and her first novel, *Portrait d’un inconnu*, in 1948, which she began writing while in hiding.

¹⁴⁷ This comment appears in Sarraute’s interview with Marc Saporta, titled “Portrait d’une inconnue” (p. 16) that was published in the 1984 issue of the literary magazine *L’Arc* dedicated exclusively to Sarraute, and that was inspired by the recent publication of *Enfance*.

Némirovsky, who was stateless after having lost her Russian citizenship once Russia became the Soviet Union and having been denied French naturalization, had herself and her daughters baptized in the Catholic Church and along with her husband Michel, also converted to Catholicism in 1938. Her conversion and the baptisms have inspired many questions as to her motives; was it desperation as she began to anticipate increased antisemitic hostility, or was it a genuinely spiritual move?¹⁴⁸ Whatever her motives may have been, cutting off ties with Judaism (ties she did not really have in the first place, since she was not a practicing Jew) did nothing to help her and her family once Nazi and Vichy surveillance and persecution went into full effect, since their definition of who was Jewish was based entirely upon race. When France declared war on Germany in September 1939, Némirovsky and her husband arranged for their daughters to be relocated to Issy-l'Évêque, a small village in Burgundy, where their French nanny's parents lived. Although there was no imminent danger at that point, in the period now known as the "drôle de guerre" (phony / funny war), Némirovsky and Epstein nonetheless decided their daughters should not be in Paris. Unlike Sarraute, by the time the Nazis marched through Paris in June 1940 and the French government was turned over to Marshal Pétain, thus initiating the period of German Occupation in the northern half of France and of the Vichy government in the southern half, Némirovsky had already left Paris and joined her daughters in Issy-l'Évêque (about 50 miles north of the border

¹⁴⁸ In her new (2016) book, *The Némirovsky Question: The Life, Death, and Legacy of a Jewish Writer in Twentieth-Century France*, Susan Rubin Suleiman discusses the question of Némirovsky's conversion at length, and provides two excerpts of Némirovsky's writing journal from around the same time (June 1938) that may indicate a new interest in Christian spirituality; in one she meditates on the humanity of Jesus, and in another she references having seen "C," which Suleiman deduces can only refer to Christ, along with a variation of a Bible verse from the Gospel of Mark in which she inserts a reference to Voltaire's *Zaïre*, whose protagonist has a crisis of faith between the religion she was raised in and that of her origins. Suleiman reads this as possible indication that Némirovsky was possibly exploring the idea of her own conversion, and ultimately uses the journal entries, along with the date – 1938 – as evidence that the conversion was not done as a desperate measure to save herself and her family. See Suleiman pp. 81-92.

between the Occupied and Vichy zones) in May. Her husband joined them in June, and the family lived in the village hotel – where German officers also stayed – until November 1941, at which point they found a house to rent in the village and moved there.

From Issy-l'Évêque, Némirovsky continued to write prolifically, and felt increasing financial pressure to do so as Michel had lost his job. But she also was faced with increasing difficulty to have her work published as publishers and newspapers became increasingly antisemitic and/or under pressure (and threat) not to publish Jewish authors. She was able to use a pseudonym for a while, but by 1942, the year in which she also followed orders and wore the yellow star, no publisher was willing to take the risk of supporting her work, and none of her former connections were able (or willing) to help her. Faced with these new losses and discriminations, Némirovsky nonetheless continued writing until she was arrested by the French police on July 13 of that same year. She was taken first to the transit camp at Pithiviers, then finally to Auschwitz where she died of typhus on August 17 of that same summer. Her daughters witnessed her arrest, and her husband Michel tried desperately to get her released. He too was eventually deported to Auschwitz two months later and was immediately killed in a gas chamber. Their daughters lived the remainder of the war in hiding and spent the rest of their lives trying to comprehend what had happened while also carrying on with careers and families. Both daughters published their own writings about their mother – Denise Epstein's *Survivre et vivre: la fille d'Irène Némirovsky témoigne* appeared in 2008 and is a transcription of interviews, thus taking the form of a testimony, while Elisabeth Gille's *Le Mirador: mémoires rêvées* was published in 1992 and takes the form of Némirovsky's imagined memories, interspersed with fragments of Gille's own very vague memories of her early childhood. Gille's *Mirador* poignantly demonstrates some of the phenomena in creating

“connective histories” and artistic mediations of a past that is otherwise gone and inaccessible that Marianne Hirsch describes in her *Generation of Postmemory*.¹⁴⁹

I am well aware of the pitfalls in starting this chapter with a biographical overview, and one that ends on such a tragic note. In doing so, I am in some senses falling into the same traps and therefore reproducing the same tendencies and misreadings that I see playing out in critical engagement with both Sarraute and Némirovsky. By beginning with their life stories, I am first of all drawing an assumed connection between their lives and their literary work, thus mirroring critical work on Némirovsky, especially in French, which has tended to focus on the biographical and especially her fate as a victim, at the expense of deeper literary analysis and close reading. I am also foregrounding my reading of Némirovsky in a “backshadowing”¹⁵⁰ that focuses on her life’s tragic ending, and thereby emphasizing her victimization at the expense of her agency and her literary talent that preceded and existed completely independently of her life’s ending. Furthermore, I am drawing attention to their Jewishness and, in Némirovsky’s case, to her foreignness, and therefore already implying that this has bearing on their work and on the ways in which it should be read.

Emphasizing these aspects seems to diminish or suggest a limitation to Némirovsky’s literary skill and knowledge, so that her work becomes circumscribed and determined by

¹⁴⁹ Susan Rubin Suleiman devotes the last two chapters of *The Némirovsky Question* to Némirovsky’s daughters and their families, and includes a detailed discussion of *Le Mirador* (pp. 260-275).

¹⁵⁰ This is a term coined by Michael André Bernstein in his 1994 book *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History*. He defines it as: “Backshadowing is a kind of retroactive foreshadowing in which the shared knowledge of the outcome of a series of events by narrator and listener is used to judge the participants in those events *as though they too should have known what was to come*” (16; emphasis in original). As an alternative to backshadowing, Bernstein proposed “sideshadowing,” an attempt to perceive alternative options and possibilities from a historical vantage point that individuals living in the historical period under scrutiny could have had, while suspending judgment as to the choices they actually made and not assigning meaning to those choices based on knowledge that those who made them could not have had at the time. In other words, sideshadowing as an interpretive and narrative mode allows us in the present to look back at events in the past and those who lived (or died) through them with an expanded awareness of the complexity of the period and of the full humanity and agency of people and their choices.

her life, and once more reinforces and highlights the tragic ending of her story. In the case of Sarraute, drawing attention to her biography appears to run completely against her own vision of her literary project, and as evidenced in the many interviews she gave over the course of her career, her unwavering rejection and denial of any bearing that the particularities of her life – and her identity – may have had on her work was a source of continuous dialogue and debate between Sarraute and her critically-minded readers.

Nevertheless, I think it is important to begin with the biographical for several reasons: first, and paradoxically, it *does* help to contextualize and shed light on their strategies of constructing their authorial personae and positioning themselves within the literary landscape of their times, which in turn help us to better understand their work. Second, by enacting the very critical approaches I seek to avoid, it can help to illuminate the effects of such approaches. Most importantly, knowing these biographical details will help to illuminate, contextualize, and understand the strategies of evasion, disappearance, denial, ambiguity and distancing that both Sarraute and Némirovsky put into practice in their writing, even if these practices do not always entirely grant them immunity from the visible influence of their lives in their work. This is, I believe, an ethical way to read their work and understand their choices.

II. Critical Reception and Biographical Obsession:

If beginning with the biographical has its purposes, it must be done carefully and with self-awareness to accommodate the double-binds and pitfalls rather than circumnavigate them, which is futile in any case since they are impossible to circumnavigate. Suleiman and Kershaw have both demonstrated this careful self-awareness that is otherwise largely lacking in the very biographical studies devoted to

Némirovsky that create a backshadowing effect by reading her life through the lines of her work as a preamble to the tragedy of her death. The most salient example of this occurs in Olivier Philipponnat's work whose archival research on Némirovsky is the most extensive and who wrote the critical introduction to the anthologized collection of all of her work in *Œuvres complètes* (2011). In his biographically-focused study *La Vie d'Irène Némirovsky* (2007), Philipponnat weaves archival material, mostly Némirovsky's writing notes as well as correspondence, and excerpts from her fiction into his account of her life, thereby substituting the words of her fiction for the words of her life story that he seeks to tell – with her help. Like most critical work on Némirovsky, and as I too have done here, Philipponnat begins at the end. The prologue in his biography is titled “I Think We Are Leaving Today...” which are in fact Némirovsky's own words, the last her family would receive from her, in the note she wrote to them from Pithiviers detention camp. Némirovsky's own words thus frame Philipponnat's narration of the story of her arrest and deportation, which in turn frames the chronological organization of the rest of the biography that fills in and gives life to what was then destroyed.

Nonetheless, Philipponnat is forthcoming and honest about his approach, lending a self-awareness to his role as biographer. Suleiman, Kershaw, and Margaret Scanlan, who recently published (in 2018) a new survey of Némirovsky's life and work (*Understanding Irène Némirovsky*) all state their indebtedness to Philipponnat's meticulous attention to detail in his work on Némirovsky, and I must do the same. Philipponnat also worked closely with Némirovsky's daughter Denise, who, according to Suleiman, considered Philipponnat a great friend and ally. Therefore, while I notice an especially strong tendency to backshadow and to inflect his scholarly accounts with the French discourse of “le devoir de la mémoire” (“the duty to remember, the work of

memory”) in his approach, I do not want to negate the importance of his contributions. There is also a double-bind that Philipponnat cannot escape, nor can I, nor can anyone who wishes to consider the work and life of a victim of the Shoah: to not begin with the tragic and senselessly violent ending may appear irreverent or ignorant, but to begin with it is to imbue a life with tragedy and melodrama that may not match the lived experience of that life until the moment of tragedy.

Huguette Bouchardeau makes her own self-aware attempt at a biographical approach to understanding Sarraute, when in the preface to her “unauthorized biography”¹⁵¹ (*Nathalie Sarraute*, 2003), she writes “Comment écrire la biographie d’un individu – Nathalie Sarraute – qui s’est acharnée, dans toute son œuvre, à nier l’existence même de cette réalité individuelle? [...] Appliqué à n’importe qui le genre biographique est pour le moins hasardeux, comme l’est toute interprétation, toute tentative historique” (10). Bouchardeau makes an interesting and revealing slippage between the biographical and the historiographical, both of which are interpretive, suggesting that they are hazardous endeavors, and all the more so in the case of interpreting and making into a biographical text the life and work of Sarraute, who spent her entire literary career denying the possibility of an individual reality in the first place – insisting that her life and experiences were no different than anyone else’s – let alone one that would enter into the realm of fiction and art. But, as Bouchardeau continues in her prefatory reflections, she writes of herself: “Mais ici l’auteur imprudent se sent tiré par l’oreille: aurait-il peu

¹⁵¹ Bouchardeau labels her work unauthorized due to Sarraute’s daughters’ unwillingness to assist her with additional documents and materials that only the family has:

J’ai vivement regretté de ne pouvoir discuter avec les filles de Nathalie Sarraute: toutes trois ont estimé que le temps n’était pas venu de livrer une biographie de leur mère, et donc de communiquer des documents dont elles seules doivent disposer. À défaut de “biographie autorisée”, comme on dit, ce livre représentera au moins le genre qui me paraît le plus approprié lorsqu’il est question de rappeler ce que furent de grands écrivains: un “portrait d’auteur.” (236)

ou mal lu celle dont il prétend tirer le portrait?” (10). Bouchardeau’s image of herself as the reckless author who, knowing the risks involved, feels compelled to attempt a biographical reading anyway highlights the tendency, no matter how much we as readers and cultural consumers try to avoid it, to want to make additional meaning of literary and other artistic production by learning about the person who created it.

Bouchardeau is not alone in her desire to read Sarraute’s works in conjunction with her life, to situate them within a context that seems natural. As she writes,

Nul écrivain n’a été « qu’un » écrivain. Il ou elle était d’un temps, d’un pays, fils ou fille de telle ou telle ; il ou elle eut des amours, connut la solitude ou le compagnonnage, fut père ou mère ; il ou elle vécut des deniers fournis par telle métier ou telle rente... Quelquefois, ces événements intimes, plus ou moins importants, plus ou moins menus, retentissent vivement dans la création elle-même : il est alors passionnant de faire correspondre, dans une reconstitution biographique, la vie et l’œuvre. Quelquefois, et ce sera singulièrement le cas en ce qui concerne l’auteur dont nous parlons, l’écrivain tient comme à distance toutes ces circonstances, tous ces événements personnels. En ce cas, le biographe s’efforcera de dessiner un portrait. Il lui importera moins d’explorer « les notes de blanchisseuse » que les étapes intellectuelles franchies tour à tour par le personnage choisi. Il lira avec attention tous les textes de l’auteur. (14-15)

Bouchardeau’s belief in biography’s contextualizing value as a supplement to reading literary works aligns with my own, and I agree that biographical details can only be secondary to the work itself. Her distinction between writers who allow some of the “intimate events” of their lives to enter their work and those who do not (such as Sarraute) makes for an interesting distinction between the kinds of biographies that can be produced as a function of these two types. If a writer includes details of their life in their fiction (and we could make the case that Némirovsky did this, via and in addition to sociological types and clichés à la Balzac), Bouchardeau suggests that the biographer’s task becomes one of “corresponding” the work and the life, weaving them into a coherent new text – the biography. But if a writer withholds all identifiable personally lived events from their work and keeps it at a great distance (as Sarraute did), then the biographer’s

task is to read all of their work, explore all of their intellectual phases, and then create a portrait, in which the writer becomes the protagonist, and the biographer the narrator. We can see her theory played out in Philipponnat's biography of Némirovsky, in which lines from the writer's fiction serve to illustrate each step of the story of her life. And in Bouchardeau's biography of Sarraute, we can see the portrait approach; with the exception of the early years of Sarraute's life that could match those included in the narrative of *Enfance*, it is more speculative and tentative when folding in excerpts of Sarraute's fiction to suggest a possible connection between text and context.

But what – if anything – is it about Sarraute and Némirovsky in particular that has contributed to their work having elicited such a strongly biographically-oriented critical response? Although critical attention devoted to Sarraute has also focused heavily on her innovations to the novel and the experimental qualities of her work, there is nevertheless the inevitable return to questions of her personal life in interviews. Why have their critics and interviewers been so invested in parsing out the connections between these writers' lives and their work itself? In part, I think an answer to this question lies in the historical period in which they began writing and in what they did share about their lives at the time. Another answer may lie in the (hi)stories of their entries (and re-entries) into the French literary scene.

Throughout Némirovsky's successful interwar career, which unfolded amidst heightening antisemitism, the reverberating "Jewish Question," and a steady influx of Jewish immigrants and refugees from Eastern Europe and Germany, she gave frequent interviews in which, when asked, she affirmed both her Jewishness and her foreignness. Jewish and Russian (sometimes both at once) characters populate nearly all of her fiction. At the same time, none of these fictional characters convey a clear stance vis-à-vis Jews,

Russians, and/or Russian Jews; some of them appear to align with antisemitic tropes and stereotypes, while others offer more sympathetic and probing, nuanced views. Writing only in French but in “the Russian and Jewish modes,”¹⁵² Némirovsky thus oscillated between affirmation of her own otherness and strategies for distinguishing herself from the others she knew were less desirable in some strands of French sociopolitical discourse. Suleiman argues that these contradictions and/or “strange” choices indicate Némirovsky’s anxiety and ambivalence towards Jewishness rather than an internalized antisemitism and/or self-hatred.¹⁵³ That she was ultimately deported to Auschwitz makes Némirovsky’s fictionalized portrayals of these “others” (groups to which she herself belonged) and the attitudes and ideologies they seem to convey (antisemitism, self-hatred) all the more confounding and troubling, and this in turn makes backshadowing all the more difficult to avoid. As Suleiman argues, it is on some level understandable to question her motives and her choices when we know the outcome of the story, but to do so is unfair to Némirovsky: “Ascribing responsibility to her for her choices is unavoidable if we want to recognize her as a human subject, but that does not mean we can fully account for them” (77). In any case, the biographical turn towards Némirovsky as a literary object of study is undoubtedly linked to the conflicting, puzzling messages her work and her interviews send.

¹⁵² Angela Kershaw uses this terminology in *Before Auschwitz: Irène Némirovsky and the Cultural Landscape of Interwar France* to describe the Russian and Jewish characters, themes, and settings that tend to reproduce stereotypes of exotic (or repulsive) otherness that recur throughout Némirovsky’s novels. Kershaw ultimately demonstrates that these imaginaries precede Némirovsky, and that Némirovsky was in fact participating in older traditions by mobilizing these “modes” in her fiction. See Kershaw pp. 68-77 and 103-111.

¹⁵³ Suleiman cites Sander Gilman’s pioneering work on the question of Jewish self-hatred, which Gilman defined in *Jewish Self Hatred* (1986) as a process in which members of minority and marginalized groups’ internalize negative stereotypes and tropes about them from the surrounding dominant culture, and then seek to distinguish themselves as an exception to those stereotypes. In Gilman’s words, “Jews see the dominant society seeing them and [...] project their anxiety about this manner of being seen onto other Jews as a means of externalizing their own status anxiety” (Gilman 11). See Suleiman pp. 20-28 for her detailed discussion of the question of self-hatred as it pertains to Némirovsky.

But Némirovsky's tragic ending has its own twist that initiated the most recent wave of interest in her story. The day their father was arrested, Némirovsky's daughters also could have been were it not for the officer's spontaneous decision to spare them. As he was being arrested, their father entrusted them with a suitcase containing what eventually was discovered to be the manuscript for *Suite française*, their mother's epic wartime novel – inspired by Tolstoy's *War and Peace* – that she had been writing while in Issy-l'Évêque as the events she narrated unfolded before her eyes. Denise Epstein carried that suitcase with her for decades but could not bear to read the contents of what she thought was her mother's personal diary written during her most tumultuous and tragic years. When she finally mustered the courage to read the pages, she discovered that this was not a diary, but a novel in progress. She worked fastidiously to transcribe it and had it published posthumously in its unfinished form in 2004. *Suite française* became an instant – and eventually international – bestseller whose extreme critical success made Némirovsky the only writer in French history to posthumously receive the prestigious Renaudot prize. As a result, Némirovsky made a comeback of monumental proportions in the French literary scene, and her previously forgotten works returned to bookstores' shelves only to fly off them again as sales soared. Readers and critics were as captivated and impressed by the story of *Suite française*'s production, discovery and release as they were by the craft and mastery of its author. Considered Némirovsky's masterpiece and her most sophisticated, literarily complex novel, *Suite française* makes Némirovsky's story all the more tragic in a way, and certainly adds to the backshadowing phenomenon; if she had lived longer, her writing and approach to the novel would have continued to evolve. Némirovsky's dramatic re-entry into the French literary landscape highlights and

reaffirms historian Henry Rousso's characterization of the Vichy period as "the past that does not pass" in the French collective psyche.¹⁵⁴

If Némirovsky's "comeback" illustrates the endurance of the legacy of the Vichy period in France into the twenty-first century, the chronological span of Sarraute's career correlates with the development and evolution of how that period has been apprehended and remembered. Throughout Sarraute's postwar career, France (in society, politics, and culture) went through many stages of negotiating and working out its relationship to its Vichy past and participation in the Holocaust. Until the early 1970s, French complicity with the Nazi regime was not a consideration, and official political discourse of memory was focused on the binary of German Occupation and French Resistance. While the immediate post-war years of the late 1940s were marked especially by the existentialist and absurdist turn in the realm of literature and philosophy, politically and socially, the years of the war were considered a hardship for all French civilians under German occupation and the emphasis was placed on the French Resistance as well as on rebuilding for the future. As Annette Wieviorka writes in *L'Ère du témoin*, the late 1940s also witnessed an initial proliferation of survivor testimonies, which she calls "livres du souvenir" (books of memory). But by the 1950s, these early, immediate post-war testimonies were forgotten and ignored, not only by the general reading public, but by descendants of their authors as well: "Les livres du souvenir sont restés ignorés, y compris par les descendants de leurs auteurs. Ils n'ont pas été transmis, alors que la transmission était l'objectif initial que leurs auteurs leur assignaient. Le regard posé par

¹⁵⁴ This now often-cited phrase comes from Rousso's ground-breaking study on precisely the development and evolution of France's collective/public memory of the Vichy era, *Le syndrome de Vichy* (1987) and its English translation *The Vichy Syndrome* (1991).

les générations nées après la destruction, après la Shoah, sur le monde de leurs grands-parents était un regard aveugle” (48).

This break in transmission contributed to the silence that later generations would describe, and to the impossible work of re-membling that we have seen Robin and Cixous undertake in their writing. But in the early post-war years of the 1950s, this silence concerning survivors and the genocide itself marked a simultaneous turn towards what Hannah Arendt and David Rousset called “the concentrationary universe” which as Silverman and Rothberg argue in their studies on memory, was a less rigid and particularist paradigm. In the “concentrationary universe,” colonial violence and that of the concentration camp were not isolated from each other as they later came to be once what we call the “Holocaust” was considered an historically exceptional and unknowable event. For Arendt, Rousset, and other early post-war thinkers, including Martinican anti-colonial poet and politician Aimé Césaire and his fellow Martinican anti-colonial thinker, Frantz Fanon, the concentrationary universe had its roots in totalitarianism, which had earlier political and social iterations (the race-based system of colonization) that predated Hitler.¹⁵⁵

In 1955 Alain Resnais’ documentary film *Nuit et brouillard* (*Night and Fog*) was released, signaling what is generally viewed by cultural memory scholars as the first shift in French public memory of the Holocaust, but also as an artifact emblematic of its era. As Nelly Furman writes in her article “Viewing Memory Through ‘Night and Fog,’ ‘The Sorrow and the Pity’ and ‘Shoah’” (2005),

In 1954, as Resnais was starting to work on his film, the French government instituted a day of remembrance of the deportations. No distinction was then made between political deportees and racial deportees, and in Resnais’ film the concentration camps are presented as undifferentiated in their structures, functions

¹⁵⁵ See Silverman’s *Palimpsestic Memory*, pp. 11-18 for a clear synthesis of these early thinkers and a compelling argument for reconsidering their contributions.

and populations. And yet, although all deportees were subjected to indescribable atrocities, unimaginable pain and suffering, the differences between concentration camps and death camps, between the treatment of political deportees and racial deportees, followed markedly divergent patterns. (173)

The phenomenon Furman describes thus illustrates the early years of France's memory of its "années noires" (dark years). There were gestures towards memorialization, but no capacity to take in and contend with the enormous complexity of what we now call the Holocaust. Resnais' documentary presented viewers with on-site footage – filmed in color – from what remained of the camps ten years after their liberation juxtaposed with horrifying montages – in black and white – of wartime photos, newsreels, and other archival materials, highlighting the connection as well as the contrast between past and present. The documentary only references Jews twice. While this lack of acknowledgement of the particular policies and treatment of Jews is symptomatic of the absence of acknowledgement of French participation in the war as perpetrators, the film is also emblematic of what Max Silverman calls "concentrationary memory" and a prototype of palimpsestic memory. For Silverman, Resnais' montage and editing demonstrate another characteristic of sociocultural memory of the 1950s: that of a certain willingness to see the possibility of connections between the recent events in Europe and other violent pasts elsewhere. As he puts it,

Concentrationary memory does not simply bring back the memory of one specific event (in fact, it counters the very idea of the singularity of the event); instead, it puts each event into contact with a complex history [...]. Concentrationary memory is therefore not the same as what we normally understand today as 'Holocaust memory', which specifies the event as the genocide of the Jews. By its very definition (or rather its refusal of any conventional definition), concentrationary memory escapes any such ethno-cultural or religious particularization. (48)

We can see this type of memory in its most explicit expression at end of the film when the narrator probes viewers to consider the possibility that this not-so-distant past could

easily repeat itself at any moment, thus demonstrating the notion of responsibility as it was understood at that point in time: “The crematorium is no longer in use. The devices of the Nazis are out of date. Nine million dead haunt this landscape. Who is on the lookout from this strange tower to warn us of the coming of new executioners?” This early call to action through a model of memory that emphasized the interconnections rather than particularizations between past violence and those who suffered at the hands of it – and therefore the non-singularity of the Holocaust as an “event” – would eventually shift to what we now call Holocaust memory, in part due to the Eichmann Trial in 1961 in which survivors played a central role as key witnesses.

While the Eichmann Trial did mark the beginning of Wieviorka’s “era of the witness,” and of Holocaust memory itself, both Marcel Ophuls’ documentary *Le Chagrin et la pitié* (*The Sorrow and the Pity*, 1969) and Robert Paxton and Michael Marrus’s now seminal historical study, *Vichy France and the Jews* (1972) which was translated into French a year later, signaled the beginning of a shift away from the Occupation-Resistance binary in French memory politics. Using interviews as his main source, Ophuls’ film aimed to portray the contradictions of everyday life in wartime Clermont-Ferrand, a small city just south of Vichy, as well as French complicity with German Nazi occupiers. Ophuls’ film was televised in Switzerland (which had financed its production) and in the United States upon its release in 1969, but French nationalized television would not air it until 1981. Throughout the 1970s, *Le Chagrin et la pitié* was screened by small cinemas in Paris, and attracted waves of viewers. This divided response between the national and the individual speaks to the grappling with memory (and complicity) of the Vichy era during the 1970s. Meanwhile, Paxton and Marrus’s study offered carefully documented proof that the Vichy government actively – and independently – participated

in antisemitic genocide without coercion. Pétain could no longer be seen as a benign and easily manipulated elderly war hero; his antisemitism was virulent and lethal. Nor could Vichy be considered a puppet government of the Nazi Third Reich. If the 1970s thus signaled the beginning of a shift in Holocaust memory in France, it was not until the 1980s that real substantive shifts in public and political discourse were made; the *Mémorial de la Shoah* opened its doors in Paris in that decade, president François Mitterrand declared a national day of mourning and memory dedicated to Holocaust victims and survivors who were deported by the French government.¹⁵⁶ At the same time, the 1980s saw an upsurge in Holocaust denial, in part due to the American series *Holocaust*, which portrayed a rather sensationalized representation.¹⁵⁷ Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah* (1985) is generally considered the greatest catalyst in those shifts.¹⁵⁸

Thus, if Philipponnat's work on Némirovsky underscores reading her writing as a *devoir de mémoire* ("duty of memory"), there is a reason. The tumultuous and troubled road towards taking responsibility has led to a point of placing Jewish victimhood and persecution at the center of attention, and this too has had its consequences. Among these, the ideas of competing victimhoods, of a Jewish surfeit of memory, and of identity politics. In turn, the emphasis on the particular case of Jewish victimization and suffering places a great deal of pressure on survivors to share their stories and to "explain" why and how the Holocaust happened. Primo Levi eventually declined invitations to speak in

¹⁵⁶ Thomas Nolden provides a succinct overview of these post-1970 shifts in French attitudes and memory politics; see pp. 10-15.

¹⁵⁷ See Wiewiorka, pp. 129-140.

¹⁵⁸ Nelly Furman's article "Viewing Memory through 'Night and Fog', The 'Sorrow and the Pity' and 'Shoah'" (2005) provides an excellent overview of these shifts in public memory through the three films included in the title.

schools precisely because he could not answer these questions of “how” and “why.”¹⁵⁹ What I hope this overview of memory politics in France illuminates is that the Holocaust, and the evolution of France’s gradually expanding awareness and apprehension of it, has opened up an unfinishable process that continues to reverberate through social, cultural, and political life. There is a belated desire to understand the period of 1940-1945 with more complexity, to take responsibility, and to hear the silence by learning as much as possible about how Jews experienced those years. Hence, the intensely biographical focus on Némirovsky and the repeated questions Sarraute dismissed in interviews about her personal life and its impact in her fiction. Yet despite her denial of any impact of such sociohistorical and biographical particularities in her fiction, the fact that Sarraute’s literary career unfolded in synchrony with this evolution of postwar memory politics is significant, especially in the case of *Enfance*, the 1983 publication of which coincided with Alain Finkielkraut’s *Le Juif imaginaire (The Imaginary Jew)*¹⁶⁰ and only slightly predated Lanzmann’s *Shoah*. It is as though Sarraute finally was comfortable enough to let small fragments of her life enter her fiction, and as though she navigated this tumultuous postwar terrain from the position of a marrano, as Elaine Marks defined it.¹⁶¹ As her “unauthorized biographer” states, writers do not live in vacuums cut off from the

¹⁵⁹ See Wiewiorka, pp. 168-170.

¹⁶⁰ In this essay, which is equal parts autobiographical and philosophical, Finkielkraut (who was born after the war) presents an alternative story of Jewishness against the clichés of marginalization, difference, and victimization that had come to dominate perceptions of Jews and Jewishness at the time.

¹⁶¹ As Marks’ title (*Marrano as Metaphor*) suggests, the figure of the marrano – originally a Spanish word meaning “pig” that was used derogatorily to designate Jews who converted (under force) to Christianity but continued to covertly practice Judaism – is a central one in her study. For Marks, “marrano” works as a metaphor to describe the Jewish presence in French literature – beneath the surface, covert, and subtle. Marks uses “marrano” interchangeably with “crypto-Jews.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, Marks considers Sarraute in the chapter that shares its title with the book.

outside world, and thus there is more porosity between fiction and life than perhaps Sarraute cared to admit.

In *Enfance*, readers quickly learn that Natacha's childhood was split between Russia and France, thus marking an instance of Sarraute's particular life story entering her fiction. While her Russian origins are not kept out of the text, this is not the case regarding Natacha's Jewish heritage, which appears only subtly and concludes one of the last several fragments of the text. It is that instance in *Enfance* that Marks discusses in the "Marrano as Metaphor" chapter of her study. In that fragment, the narrating voice ("je" / "I") recalls going to the Russian Orthodox church on the rue Daru in Paris with her step-grandmother who has come from Russia to stay with her daughter – Natacha's step-mother Véra – and her family. Natacha ("je") forms a deep bond with Véra's mother, who insists that Natacha call her "Babouchka" ("Grandmother" – no "step"). "Je" remembers how she would prostrate herself and make the sign of the cross in the Russian Orthodox style rather than the Catholic style (which she has also done while attending Catholic mass with her French nanny, Adèle). She questions Babouchka's religious faith, suspecting that perhaps their visits to the Russian church were more for cultural connection with Russia, which she and Babouchka both missed (*Enfance* 235). At this point, the critical narrating voice "tu" interjects, and we read the following exchange between "je" and "tu":

– C'est étrange qu'à cet âge-là jamais ne te venait l'idée que ces religions n'étaient pas celles de tes ancêtres... que jamais personne ne t'en avait parlé...

– Ma mère ne voulait pas le savoir... je crois qu'elle n'y pensait jamais. Quant à mon père, il considérait toutes les pratiques religieuses comme des survivances... des vieilles croyances dépassées... il était 'libre penseur' et pour lui comme pour tous ses amis le fait même de mentionner que quelqu'un est juif ou ne l'est pas, ou qu'il est slave, était le signe de la plus noire réaction, une véritable indécence... (*Enfance* 235-236)

At this point, we learn that neither of Natacha’s encounters with religious tradition matched that of her ancestors. And we can infer that, based on her father’s strong rejection as a “free thinker” (“libre penseur”) of any mention of ethnoreligious identity markers (the two most incendiary of which are “Jew” and “Slav”), perhaps the religion of her ancestors is Judaism. But there is a blurring here between religion and ethnicity; by emphasizing only the religious aspect of Jewishness while also considering it within the same frame as “Slav,” an ethnolinguistic marker, readers are left wondering how the narrator and her father may have conceptualized “being Jewish.” We can also see a glimpse into Sarraute’s own staunch rejection of attaching significance to identity markers; her mother did not want to know, and for her father, mentioning such differences was tantamount to indecency. As Suleiman succinctly puts it, “[...] in the decades before the Second World War, [...] *difference* was a negative word” (21).¹⁶²

“Je” continues narrating after this exchange in *Enfance*, and from her narration we learn that whenever friends (presumably her father’s) came over to their home, she never heard any mention of heritage or origins beyond nationality: “Je n’ai jamais entendu dire d’un ami qui venait à la maison qu’il était autre chose que russe ou bien français” (237).

At school, in the early years of “laïcité” and the Republican education system, even “russe” (“Russian”) – a nationality marker – disappeared, because all students were

¹⁶² Interestingly, a church scene appears in *Le Vin de solitude* as well, in which Héléne accompanies Mademoiselle Rose (her French governess) to a French church in St. Petersburg (Notre-Dame-de-France). In the early years of the First World War, Némirovsky portrays her young protagonist’s experience of French Catholicism as a space of refuge and comfort, yet highlights – for her French readers – the foreignness of Russia. Thus, French Catholic mass serves as a comfort and sanctuary for French expatriates living in Russia (such as Mademoiselle Rose) and for Héléne:

During those deadly years Héléne did not once breathe freely; there wasn’t a single night when she went to bed feeling calm and confident. During the day, Mademoiselle Rose took Héléne to mass at the church of Notre-Dame-de-France. A French priest spoke to a small congregation of people born in this foreign land; he spoke of France, of the war, and prayed for ‘those who suffer, those who must travel, and the soldiers who have fallen on the battlefields.’ “We’re fine,” thought Héléne in between responses; she looked at the two low candles burning beneath the image of the Virgin Mary [...]. In church Héléne feared nothing, thought about nothing, allowed herself to be cradled by a soothing dream [...]. (Smith’s trans. 98)

considered “good little French children” (“comme de bons petits Français”). “Je” does not recall ever being asked questions about her ethnoreligious origins at school: “Je ne me souviens pas qu’on m’ait posé aucune question, visiblement les idées de différence de race ou de religion n’entraient dans l’esprit de personne” (237).¹⁶³ This is French Republican secular assimilationist universalism in action; supposedly, “ideas of difference” (“race and religion”) do not even come to mind as an afterthought. “Je” continues, recounting that her father also never objected to her going inside churches with others who brought her there (such as Babouchka and Adèle, the family’s nanny and housekeeper), nor did he try to guide her away from God, Christ, the saints, the Holy Virgin any more than he kept her from praying to Father Christmas. For Natacha’s father then, the trappings and deities of Catholicism and Russian Orthodox Christianity are no different from Father Christmas: legends, myths, and cultural phenomena. “Je” echoes his view when she later explains her childhood forays into religion (prostrating herself, making the signs of the cross) as imitative superstition.

And yet, in the passage that brings this fragment to a close and that Marks discusses in *Marrano as Metaphor*, something has shifted:

Mais plus tard, chaque fois qu’était soulevée cette question, j’ai toujours vu mon père déclarer aussitôt, crier sur les toits qu’il était juif. Il pensait que c’était vil, que c’était stupide d’en être honteux et il disait : Combien d’horreurs, d’ignominies, combien de mensonges et de bassesses a-t-il fallu pour arriver à ce résultat, que des gens ont honte devant eux-mêmes de leurs ancêtres et se sentent valorisés à leurs propres yeux, s’ils arrivent à s’en attribuer d’autres, n’importe lesquels, pourvu que ce ne soient pas ceux-là... Tu ne trouves pas, me disait-il parfois, beaucoup plus tard, que tout de même, quand on y pense... – Oui, je le trouvais... (236-237)

¹⁶³ Barbara Wright’s translation: “I don’t remember anyone ever asking me any questions... obviously, ideas of any difference of race or religion never entered anyone’s head” (209).

The “later” (“plus tard”) indicates a lapse in time, and with it, a radical change in her father’s relationship to his Jewishness. If saying that someone was Jewish was morally insulting and obscene to him in the days of Natacha’s childhood, “later,” it is the inverse; to *not* openly and proudly proclaim one’s Jewishness is “vile and stupid.” Marks, whose interpretation I share, interprets the “later” as after the Holocaust, in part basing her interpretation on the fact that we know Sarraute’s father lived until 1949:

History thus intervenes discreetly in the narrative, propelling her father, and herself in imitation of her father, to declare through an utterance, even though they do not perform it with gestures, their Jewishness. [...] This particular speech act on the part of assimilated Jewish nonbelievers in the face of hostility during and after the outbreaks of fierce antisemitism in Europe during the late 1930s and the 1940s was not uncommon. (141)

Marks contrasts Natacha’s Christian/Catholic gestures with this one instance of a Jewish speech act, and as she explains, the change in Sarraute’s father’s attitudes represented by this speech act was not an uncommon response in the face (or aftermath) of heightened antisemitic violence. In this passage from *Enfance*, written when Sarraute was over eighty years old and during the *Shoah* phase of Holocaust memory in France, we can see a representation of the evolution of non-religious and assimilated Jewish responses to and attitudes towards Jewishness in the immediate post-war years. The elliptical trailing off of her father’s question (“Don’t you agree? That all the same, when you come to think of it...”) is answered with Nathalie’s “Yes,” indicating her implicit understanding of his question that readers are left to imagine. This elliptical trailing off emblemizes the immediate postwar tension that eventually gave way to the silence of the 1950s and early 1960s, disrupted by the Eichmann Trial, between the need to speak of “it,” the need to ask the question, and the inability to do so because “it” is beyond words. Readers are confronted with the incomplete question, mirroring the absences and silences left by the Holocaust.

At the same time, Sarraute's repeated dismissals and denials of any particularities of her life and of their entry into her work contradict small, subtle affirmations and indications of those very specificities that appear especially in the paratextual and non-fictional aspects of it. For example, in her critical-theoretical essays which we will later explore, she very indirectly gave a window into some of the influence of her personal experience on her thinking (and writing). Sarraute also provided all the biographical details that appear in the prestigious Pléiade edition of her complete works, which, unlike most cases, was published within her lifetime. And as Ann Jefferson notes in *Nathalie Sarraute, Fiction and Theory: Questions of Difference*, all of the information she provided for the biographical chronology in the Pléiade "makes issues of inclusion and exclusion a recurrent motif" (10). Another example of such paratextual insertions is the cover of the paperback Folio edition of *Enfance*, which features a photograph of a young girl who is unmistakably Sarraute as a child and thus immediately frames our reading of the text as autobiographical. In interviews, she would occasionally offer tidbits, and then negate them. For example, when asked about the autobiographical aspects of her work in a 1978 interview about her theater, she responded "Je reconnais volontiers le caractère autobiographique de mon œuvre, à condition qu'on veuille bien ôter à 'autobiographie' son contenu anecdotique ; à condition, aussi, que vous me permettiez d'ajouter que nous nous ressemblons tous comme deux gouttes d'eau" ["I willingly recognize the autobiographical quality of my work, as long as we take anecdotal content away from 'autobiography', and as long as you let me add that we all resemble each other like two drops of water"].¹⁶⁴ She stages and metanarrates this teasing way of offering tidbits in

¹⁶⁴ Cited by Huguette Bouchardeau, *Nathalie Sarraute*, p. 9. From an interview published in *La Quinzaine littéraire*, December 16-31, 1978, titled "Mon théâtre continue mes romans" and interviewed by Lucette Finas.

Enfance, as the two narrating voices reflect on young Natacha's first attempt at writing which, upon her mother's urging, she shows to her mother's publisher/editor who completely rejects it. The publisher tells her she should learn how to spell before trying to write novels, and the two narrating voices decide, mockingly, that this is one of her "childhood traumas," put in quotation marks to signify the cliché. In their brief exchange reproduced below, we can see a congruence between Sarraute the writer and "Je" the writer in the text:

--C'est un des rares moments de ton enfance dont il t'est arrivé parfois, bien plus tard, de parler...
--Oui, pour répondre, pour donner des raisons à ceux qui me demandaient pourquoi j'ai tant attendu avant de commencer à 'écrire'... C'était si commode, on pouvait difficilement trouver quelque chose de plus probant : un de ces magnifiques "traumatismes de l'enfance"... (84-5)

While she admits to responding to interviewers' questions about why she waited so long to begin to write (Sarraute was a careful, meticulous writer rather than a prolific one, and did not complete *Tropismes* until 1937, then did not publish anything else until *Portrait d'un inconnu* in 1948), she ironically implies that because this story of her first attempt at sharing her writing with a publisher – "one of those magnificent 'childhood traumas'" – was such a logical and cliché response, it was also a way of not actually answering the question.

These indirect and subtle moments of self-disclosure, or of stepping out of her "marrano cloak" resemble in some ways the "tropism," which is the underlying principle of Sarraute's entire literary oeuvre that began with *Tropismes*, her first published work. To return now to that text, which is a collection of fragments she wrote from 1932-1937 and which was eventually published in 1939 with praise from Sartre and de Beauvoir most famously, we can begin to connect some dots that become important for *Enfance*. Sarraute borrowed the title for *Tropismes* itself from the field of biology, in which it is a

term used to describe an organism's (most often a plant's) responses to external, environmental stimuli, such as growing (or "turning," as the word's roots come from the Greek "tropos") towards light. The choice of words is telling; if tropisms in their original discipline refer to an organism's adaptive functions to adjust to their surroundings, tropisms in Sarraute's redefinition also may somehow speak to such adaptive functions in human social-political realms – means of fitting in, of assimilating. In her preface to *L'ère du soupçon* (*The Age of Suspicion*), Sarraute's collection of essays on her theories of the novel published in 1956, most of which were originally written beginning in 1947 for *Les Temps modernes*, Sartre and de Beauvoir's new postwar review, she defines "tropismes" ("tropisms") as the guiding principle, goal, and foundational theory of her work: "Ce sont des mouvements indéfinissables, qui glissent très rapidement aux limites de notre conscience ; ils sont à l'origine de nos gestes, de nos paroles, des sentiments que nous manifestons, que nous croyons éprouver et qu'il est possible de définir. Ils me paraissaient et me paraissent encore constituer la source secrète de notre existence" (8). Thus, not only do these "indefinable movements that slip quickly to the limits of our consciousness" form the foundation of her literary work, they also "constitute the secret source of our existence." For Sarraute, tropisms are the subterranean undercurrent of our daily lives; they inform our speech, our gestures, our feelings, and everything that we believe possible to define. And, they seem to unite us by their subterranean and barely conscious qualities; the "nous" ("us") referred to is a clearly universal one. We all experience tropisms, and Sarraute's literary mission has been to textualize that experience.

In *L'ère du soupçon*, she describes her first published work and the ways the very phenomenon she sought to reproduce in the text was what generated its creation:

J'ai commencé à écrire *Tropismes* en 1932. Les textes qui composaient ce premier ouvrage étaient l'expression spontanée d'impressions très vives, et leur forme était aussi spontanée et naturelle que les impressions auxquelles elle donnait vie. Je me suis aperçue en travaillant que ces impressions étaient produites par certains mouvements, certaines actions intérieures sur lesquelles mon attention s'était fixée depuis longtemps. En fait, me semble-t-il, depuis mon enfance. (8)

Sarraute's 1956 description of *Tropismes* thus clearly articulates what animated and inspired that early text, but it also illustrates the performativity of her theory, and of her writing. As she describes it, *Tropismes* revealed itself to her through the process of writing it, which was a process of "spontaneous expression of vivid impressions" that were produced by "certain movements, certain interior actions on which her attention had been fixed for a long time." Indeed, that "for a long time" foretells the similarly structured (fragmented) autobiographical fiction – *Enfance* – that she would eventually write in 1983 by highlighting her lasting awareness of and captivation by these subtle interior movements since childhood. And as we already saw, the tropism figures clearly into *Enfance*, as evidenced at the text's ending. But this fascination with the tropism is also, in part, a useful strategy of evasion; by directing her attention (and that of readers) to the subterranean, ubiquitous, and universal experience of the tropism, social identities and particularities become irrelevant and do not merit discussion. These are precisely the questions and debates that gained momentum throughout Sarraute's postwar career, against the backdrop of shifting memory and identity politics that we have just seen.

At the same time, paradoxically, it is also the tropism as it appears in *Enfance* in particular that allows for certain slippages that ultimately reveal the very particularities and differences it supposedly transcends. It is these paradoxical qualities and phenomena of the tropism as Sarraute defines it that, within the sociopolitical and cultural context of the postwar twentieth century, gives way to a series of misreadings to which we will now turn.

III. Misreadings: on essentialism and universalism, Jews and Gender

In Sarraute's words in *L'ère du soupçon*, "Mes premiers livres: *Tropismes*, paru en 1939, *Portrait d'un inconnu*, paru en 1948, n'ont éveillé à peu près aucun intérêt. Ils semblaient aller à contre-courant" (10). That her early work seemed to go "against the current" of the time – the first year marking the beginning of the Second World War, the second marking the early years of repair, helps contextualize some of the accusations of political disengagement made against Sarraute's work as well as that of other writers of the New Novel. In the span of just under a decade marked by *Tropismes* and *Portrait d'un inconnu*, French literature became very concerned with its sociopolitical potential and ethical responsibilities. Sartre and de Beauvoir's existentialist "littérature engagée," as well as Camus' and Beckett's absurdist allegories were the current against which Sarraute's early work ran. While Sartre and de Beauvoir were early readers and admirers of Sarraute and *Tropismes*, the eventual split between their respective approaches to literature, based on the one hand in revealing and staging sociopolitical injustices that then call the reader to action (existentialist "littérature engagée") and on the other hand, Sarraute's project of exposing and staging the tropism, which exists beyond the realm of sociopolitics, as the driving force and principle of her literary agenda caused a permanent rupture and contributed to reading the New Novel as apolitical.¹⁶⁵ Sarraute herself fueled this perception to some extent by insisting that the sociopolitical concerned her as a citizen, but not as a writer.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶⁵ Leah D. Hewitt opens her chapter on Sarraute in *Autobiographical Tightropes* with a thorough but concise overview of these eventual divisions between the Existentialists and the New Novelists, and between de Beauvoir and Sarraute in particular. See Hewitt, pp. 55-63.

¹⁶⁶ For example, in a 1994 interview with Isabelle Huppert, Sarraute stated "J'ai un engagement politique en tant que citoyenne, pas en tant qu'écrivain."

This (mis)reading of Sarraute's New Novel as apolitical has puzzled critics and figured into many interviews over the course of Sarraute's career. Critics could not reconcile Sarraute's political action in life (for example, she was involved in Resistance efforts to the limited extent that she could be during the Vichy period, participated in the fight for women's right to vote in 1935, and signed the petition in favor of Algerian independence known as the "Manifeste des 101") with the lack of politically and socially-driven themes in her writing. But for Sarraute, as she explains in *L'ère du soupçon*, all of these actions, however important they may be in shaping a more just daily sociopolitical reality, are no different than other distractions from the tropism in the novelistic universe, and are no more impermeable, immune to or separate from the tropism in daily life than anything else. In the novel as in life, how we (or characters) appear within the confines of social and political roles is a way for us to remain at the surface of our existence and of organizing our lives into a conventional (and inauthentic) grid (or plot):

Mon premier livre contenait en germe tout ce que, dans mes ouvrages suivants, je n'ai cessé de développer. Les tropismes ont continué à être la substance vivante de tous mes livres. Seulement ils se sont déployés davantage : l'action dramatique qu'ils constituent s'est allongée, et aussi s'est compliqué ce jeu constant entre eux et ces apparences, ces lieux communs sur lesquels ils débouchent au-dehors : nos conversations, le caractère que nous paraissions avoir, ces personnages que nous sommes les uns aux yeux des autres, les sentiments convenus que nous croyons éprouver et ceux que nous décelons chez autrui, de cette action dramatique superficielle, constituée par l'intrigue, qui n'est qu'une grille conventionnelle que nous appliquons sur la vie. (10)

Sarraute's description of her work with the tropism is, I believe, far from apolitical. Rather, she articulates her interest in working at the micro level of the internal rather than the macro level of the external and the collective, and from within that space of the internal, her commitment to moving beyond conformity and convention ("les sentiments convenus"), beyond the constraints of socialized norms, and into the deeper realm of

what truly moves us to act. Indeed, all of Sarraute's fictional works operate at this deeper internal level; characters are nameless and Sarraute offers no description of physical or personality traits. Even pronouns are problematic as they have been socially encoded to carry more assumed meaning and identification than she wants readers to have. For Sarraute, it was impossible for women (and therefore feminine pronouns to refer to characters) to be considered as gender neutral human beings. Therefore, the best option for her novelistic agenda is the "unmarked" third person masculine pronoun ("il), which compared to the marked "elle" carries the most possibility to convey gender neutrality and emphasize that which is simply human.¹⁶⁷

Ultimately, all of this stripping down and moving away from the constructs of the social world within the space of the novel initiates a rather radical new mode of reading. Without the cues and codes that readers are trained to look for in the socialized world (represented in the realist novel), readers are forced to make an entirely different kind of contact with the text, with the "characters" within the text, and ultimately, with themselves. Assumptions based on social constructs are forced open in Sarraute's novels, and through the tropism, the foundation of who and what we think we ourselves are is unsettled and revealed as far less stable and static. If sex and gender are social codes designed to guide us and others towards making assumptions about how we should behave in accordance with those codes, then Sarraute's view of gender is not so far off from Judith Butler's theory of gender as performance. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler uses the example of dressing in drag to illustrate her theory that not only is gender performative – an effect of behavior and interpretation of that behavior –, it is an imitation of a supposed "original" (a sexed body), that in and of

¹⁶⁷ The pervasiveness of the masculine universal in Sarraute's work is evident in the title of a 1984 interview with Michèle Gazier: "Nathalie Sarraute et son 'il.'" (*Télérama*, July 11, 1984, pp. 38-39).

itself is already inscribed within social coding that tell us how to “read” the body. For Butler, the example of drag illustrates that there is no original in the first place: “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency” (175).¹⁶⁸ For Sarraute then, without the categories and codes that help us to interpret and categorize gender performance (as well as the body in and of itself), we are forced to see (and meet) others (and ourselves) simply as (unsexed) human beings, in the subterranean space of the tropism.

In this way, Sarraute’s literary project is not so far from Cixous’ *écriture féminine*, though Sarraute was adamantly opposed to the possibility of “feminine writing” as she understood it. For Sarraute – and for all of the critics focused on gender questions in Sarraute’s work – *écriture féminine* is a theory of sexual difference embedded and carried within language, and of the possibility of a writing (and language) marked by the feminine.¹⁶⁹ In this reading, sexual difference errs on the side of essentialism; women’s writing is different from men’s writing. To this, Sarraute adamantly and repeatedly insisted that “C’est une grave erreur, surtout pour les femmes, que de parler d’écriture féminine ou masculine. Il n’y a que des écritures tout court.”¹⁷⁰ It follows that if there is no masculine or feminine writing, only writing (in the neutral

¹⁶⁸ In *Enfance*, one vignette narrates the first time Natacha meets Véra, before she and Natacha’s father are married. Véra makes a lasting impression because she is dressed like a man: “comme elle est drôle, vêtue ainsi, comme ça lui va...” (64) (“isn’t she funny, dressed up like that, doesn’t it suit her...”). While in her “costume,” Véra plays and dances with Natacha in a very joyous and uninhibited scene – both shriek with laughter and delight. In a later vignette which recounts the next time Natacha sees Véra, who is now her married to her father, after time spent with her mother in St. Petersburg. Véra seems to have lost all of her androgynous charm, levity, and playfulness, and has become a grim, gender conforming woman with perfectly smooth hair whose mouth is set in an expression that makes it look like she is pretending to smile: “[...] elle ne ressemblait pas à cette dame aux cheveux disposés en rouleaux de chaque côté de la tête, sagement lissés, pas une mèche ne dépasse, son visage allongé est très pâle, ses lèvres minces et droits, les dents du bas avançant et recouvrant celles du haut, s’étirent comme pour faire semblant de sourire et il y a dans ses yeux très clairs, très transparents, quelque chose...” (112).

¹⁶⁹ For example, Hewitt, Barbour, Jefferson, and Van Slyke.

¹⁷⁰ This line comes from her interview in *Télérama* with Michèle Grazier, p. 38.

universal, or the androgynous), it is also fallacious to speak of “women writers” rather than simply “writers.” Sarraute was adamant that she was not a “woman writer” since her sex/gender had no bearing on her writing. In *Qui êtes-vous?*, Simone Benmussa’s collection of recorded interviews with Sarraute, Sarraute explains:

Je travaille à partir uniquement de ce que je ressens moi-même. Je ne me place pas à l’extérieur, je ne cherche pas à analyser du dehors. À l’intérieur, où je suis, le sexe n’existe pas. [...]. Je suis, à un tel point, dans ce que je fais que je n’existe pas. Je ne pense pas que c’est une femme qui écrit. Cette chose-là, ce que je travaille, est en train de se passer quelque part où le sexe féminin ou masculin n’intervient pas. (140-141)

She writes from within a space where sex and gender are irrelevant, in part because *she* herself as the Sarraute of the sociopolitical world does not exist from within that space.

But this essentialist interpretation of Cixous’ *écriture féminine* is limited. While certain aspects of her essays and theory certainly err on the side of a certain amount of essential sexual difference (women’s bodies are sexually different from men’s bodies, and this is reinforced through women’s writing with white ink and repeated birth metaphors, another bodily function unique to women), Cixous also cites Jean Genet and James Joyce – men – as writers who have written “feminine” texts. Furthermore, as we have seen, Cixous’ Medusa and Juifemme are rather queer figures in their nonconformity. While this definition of queer is not exactly the same as Sarraute’s androgynous writer, they are not completely dissimilar, either. While Cixous’ Medusa and Juifemme are queer in their subversive qualities, Sarraute’s androgyny disrupts conformist gender performance. And, if urging women to write is one political thrust of Cixous’ 1975 essays, she too calls for a break with old modes of reading (and inscribing) social roles. Cixous’ “theory” of feminine writing as a space of openness to the “real other,” who is not theorizable, in fact resonates with Sarraute’s own tropistic project. Cixous and Sarraute are thus not so opposite but are in fact guided by a similar ethics despite their

different ways of theorizing writing and literature and of conceptualizing their own role – and subjectivities – within textuality. I thus propose a recuperative reading of Cixous *and* Sarraute in relation to each other and their theories of writing and gender.

Sarraute’s rejection of the particular (the social) in favor of the universal (the internal experience of the tropism) relates not only to gender, but also to race. If Sarraute wrote from the position of Marks’ metaphorical marrano, and I believe she did, the “Jewish Question” arises in her work in very subtle and indirect ways. In the first essay included in *L’ère du soupçon*, titled “De Dostoïevski à Kafka,” Sarraute argues against what she sees as another misreading: the perceived opposition between Dostoyevsky (a Russian writer) and Kafka (a Jewish writer), and in defense of the psychological in the novel that she reads as a common thread between both authors’ works. In this essay, we can see Sarraute reading the roots of the tropism in these earlier writers’ works, and we can also see her reading gestures towards the radical openness and contact with the other that she aims to establish and facilitate in her own work. At the same time, we see her subtly and indirectly grappling with her own ethnic origins. In her description of Dostoyevsky’s characters, she writes:

C’est ce besoin continuel et presque maniaque de contact, d’une impossible et apaisante étreinte, qui tire tous ces personnages comme un vertige, les incite à tout moment à essayer par n’importe quel moyen de se frayer un chemin jusqu’à autrui, de pénétrer en lui le plus loin possible, de lui faire perdre son inquiétante, son insupportable opacité, et les pousse à s’ouvrir à lui à leur tour, à lui révéler leurs plus secrets replis. (43)

This brief description is telling; her reading of Dostoyevsky’s characters as “pulled by their continuous, almost obsessive need for contact to try by any and all means to find a way to get to others,” to know others and make them lose their unbearable opacity, while simultaneously opening themselves to others in the process. This space of exchange and desperate need for contact with others is precisely the novelistic universe Sarraute creates

with her anonymous and unidentifiable human “characters.” As she continues her essay, we begin to see that Sarraute is in fact positioning herself as a novelist who, after Kafka, continues the work that Dostoyevsky began. In the following excerpt, she describes Dostoyevsky’s characters as already signaling the move away from “types” (as in the realist novel à la Balzac) and towards “carriers of [psychological] states sometimes yet unexplored that we find within ourselves,” what characters of the novel are becoming in her time:

On a souvent noté l’impression irréaliste – on dirait qu’ils sont tous vus par transparence – que nous font les héros de Dostoïevski, malgré les descriptions minutieuses auxquelles, pour satisfaire aux exigences de son époque, il se croyait obligé. C’est que ses personnages tendent déjà à devenir ce que les personnages de roman seront de plus en plus, non point tant des « types » humains en chair et en os, comme ceux que nous croyons apercevoir autour de nous et dont le dénombrement infini semblait être le but essentiel du romancier, que de simples supports, des porteurs d’états parfois encore inexplorés que nous retrouvons en nous-mêmes. (51)

As the essay continues, Sarraute’s language becomes increasingly clear, and her alignment and identification with Dostoyevsky – and Kafka – as her literary and ethical progenitors is crystallized:

Mais tandis que la quête des personnages de Dostoïevski les conduit, au sein du monde le plus fraternel qui soit, à rechercher une sorte d’interpénétration, de fusion totale et toujours possible des âmes, c’est vers un but à la fois plus modeste et plus lointain que tendent tous les efforts des héros de Kafka. Il s’agit pour eux de devenir seulement, « aux yeux de ces gens qui les regardent avec tant de méfiance... non pas peut-être leur ami, mais enfin leur concitoyen »... ou de pouvoir comparaître et se justifier devant des accusateurs inconnus et inaccessibles, ou de chercher à sauvegarder, malgré tous les obstacles, avec ceux mêmes qui leur sont le plus proches, quelques pauvres semblants de rapports. (54-55)

For Sarraute, Dostoevsky’s characters, in their search for an “interpenetration and total fusion,” demonstrate the ineradicable connections between people, no matter what external differences may make them seem separate and disconnected. Her language of “total fusion and interpenetration” resonates with her staging of the tropism in her fiction,

which tends to take place within the intersubjective space of dialogue, whether internal (with oneself, which always somehow includes the influence of others) or external (with others, which always includes the self). Sarraute's characters, within these dialogues, experience the tropism – it moves through them in a flash and makes them question everything. But through this destabilizing process – this staging of intersubjectivity –, Sarraute's version of “interpenetration and fusion” emerges. Once again, Cixous' “subterranean heart” where differences are transcended and the in-between space of writing that creates openness to the real and untheorizable other resonates.

By including Kafka in her discussion and situating him as Dostoyevsky's literary (and ethical) successor, and therefore her progenitor as well, Sarraute reveals even more about the ethics and politics that do in fact drive her writing. If Dostoyevsky's characters search indefatigably and on an epic scale for the ineradicable bonds that connect them, Kafka's characters seek something both more “modest and distant” (*modeste et lointain*): social and political acceptance in the eyes of distrusting and suspicious (“*méfiants*”) others. This acceptance does not necessarily need to be based in friendship; rather, Kafka's version of Dostoyevsky's “fusion” lies in his characters' search for basic recognition as “*concitoyens*” (fellow citizens) who are treated fairly before the law, and who are able to keep intact whatever meager (“*pauvres semblants*”) social-affective bonds they do have. This search for very basic social and political recognition and equality as human beings points towards Sarraute's adamant universalism; equality erases difference. Yet, Kafka's repeated staging of this search implies that there have been exclusions and injustices based on lines of difference, and that literature has agency in its staging of those injustices and exclusions. This is a socio-political model of citizenship stripped down to its most basic, elemental, and crucial parts. It is a model of inclusion

and tolerance, of belonging to and interconnection with each other despite disagreements and differences.

Thus, we can see through these brief excerpts from her essay that Sarraute was not an apolitical novelist. Rather, through her readings of Kafka and Dostoyevsky, she was able to articulate the political potential of literature in a way that is not immediately obvious in her novels where ethics and politics happen within the fleeting microexperiences of the tropism. In the eponymous essay included in *L'Ère du soupçon*, Sarraute writes that both writers and readers have grown suspicious of each other (hence, the title), and that the writer must therefore try to disappear so that readers really are left with nothing but the encounter between the text and themselves. This view of her role as writer gives her an invisibility cloak; most of her narrators take the perspective of the third person masculine pronoun “il,” but it also gives her a “Marrano cloak.” She kept all aspects of her own identity – whose relevance in writing as in life she insisted was inexistent – separate from her fiction. In her conclusion to the essay on Dostoyevsky and Kafka, her Marrano cloak functions in much the same way, yet as in her fiction (and especially in *Enfance*), it betrays her:

Avec cette divination propre à certains génies, celle qui avait fait pressentir à Dostoïevski l'immense élan fraternel du peuple russe et sa singulière destinée, Kafka qui était juif et vivant dans l'ombre de la nation allemande a préfiguré le sort prochain de son peuple et pénétré ces traits qui furent ceux de l'Allemagne hitlérienne et qui devaient amener les Nazis à concevoir et à réaliser une expérience unique : celle des étoiles en satinette jaune distribuées après remise de deux points découpés dans la carte de textile ; celle des fours crématoires sur lesquels de grands panneaux-réclame indiquaient le nom et l'adresse de la firme d'appareils sanitaires qui en avait construit le modèle, et des chambres à gaz où deux mille corps nus (les vêtements avaient été au préalable, comme dans *le Procès*, « soigneusement mis de côté et pliés ») se tordaient sous l'œil de Messieurs bien sanglés, bottés et décorés, venus en mission d'inspection, qui les observaient par un orifice vitré dont ils s'approchaient tour à tour en respectant les préséances et en échangeant des politesses. Là, derrière ces limites extrêmes où Kafka les a non pas suivis, mais où il a eu le courage surhumain de les précéder, tout sentiment disparaît, même le mépris et la haine, il ne reste qu'une immense

stupeur vide, un ne-pas-comprendre définitif et total. On ne peut ni demeurer à ses côtés, ni essayer d'aller plus loin. Ceux qui vivent sur la terre des hommes ne peuvent que rebrousser chemin. (64-66)

This stunning conclusion to her essay, originally published in Sartre's *Les Temps modernes* in October 1947, illustrates yet again the apparent disconnect between Sarraute's political views and her theories of the new novel. It is only by critical engagement with and analysis of Dostoyevsky and Kafka – whose heritage match her own – that she is able to very indirectly address the possible connections between identity, origins, politics and literature. As Leah D. Hewitt remarks in a footnote to her lucid and convincingly argued chapter on gendered voices in *Enfance* in *Autobiographical Tightropes*:

Even Sarraute's strategic comparison of Dostoevsky and Kafka in *The Age of Suspicion* plays out her autobiographical economy. Sarraute sees in both writers (her own emphasis on) the violent, relentless need for contact with others. Interestingly enough, whereas she avoids establishing links between her heritage and her writing, she makes nationality and race important factors in her literary analysis of Kafka and Dostoevsky. She turns the latter's need for contact with others into a distinctive Russian trait, and Kafka's German Jewish origins into factors that allow him to prefigure the horror of the Holocaust. It would seem as if she had eloquently displaced the ties between her own heritage (Russian, Jewish) and her writing onto those she admires. (215)

In this very indirect way, by first positioning herself as the youngest member of a literary lineage that began with Dostoevsky and continued with Kafka and then by emphasizing the effects and impact of their Russian and Jewish heritage in their writing, Sarraute guides us to connect the dots. Her very precise description of the yellow star in particular – the fabric, and the system of deducting points from ration cards to account for the material – is revealing. According to her own rare narration of this event in her life as she told the story in an interview, she did not wear the star precisely because she was insulted

by the ration card deduction.¹⁷¹ Her essay on Dostoevsky and Kafka therefore reveals more about her Russian Jewish heritage than we would expect, given the way she describes the universalist tropism and the foundational role it plays in her writing.

Yet Sarraute's indirect engagement with social identities and their political implications within literary texts has its own politics that are not dissimilar from Cixous' vision of *écriture féminine* as one that resists facile categorizations and hierarchies embedded within phallogentric language. While *écriture féminine* seeks to destabilize and dismantle false binaries and hierarchies in part by disorienting readers through its subversive, polysemic, non-linear and generally difficult, undecidable texts, Sarraute's vision of the tropism within her brand of the New Novel is similarly invested in moving beyond categories, hierarchies, and assumptions, and the experience of reading her work is similarly disorienting. As we have also seen, Cixous' vision of *écriture féminine* is ultimately focused on the ethical opening towards the real ("true") and therefore untheorizable other. This opening aligns with Sarraute's vision of "fusion with others" and the "desperate need for contact" that she identifies within Dostoyevsky and Kafka's works. In interviews, Sarraute described her jubilation when she would hear stories of readers who, not having any identifiable character traits to associate with the "characters" in her novels, would be able to "fuse" with those characters through the tropistic experience of reading the prose. Sarraute cites the example of a young man "identifying with" a character who turns out to be an elderly woman as precisely the crown achievement of her literary vision.¹⁷² Therefore, we can see that although Cixous and

¹⁷¹ See p. 16 in the fourth section of her interview with Marc Saporta in *L'Arc* with the subheading "À la recherche du temps de guerre perdu(e)".

¹⁷² In her 1994 interview with Isabelle Huppert, Sarraute cites this example of making gender (and other social identities) irrelevant: "Quand *Le Planétarium* est sorti, j'ai été interviewée par un jeune homme qui

Sarraute articulate their theories of writing differently and therefore produce very different kinds of texts, their goals are not so dissimilar. If Sarraute and critics engaged in her work from a feminist/gender theory perspective read Cixous as ultimately essentialist, then their view is limited and ultimately misses the deeper ethics at stake in Cixous' "theory." Cixous, just like Sarraute, is suspicious of labels and fixed categories, and this is true for theoretical labels (labels of theory) as well; Cixous gets cast as a French feminist, but that label itself is shifty and shifting.

Ultimately, where Cixous and Sarraute most align is in the kind of reader they seek to cultivate. As Sarah Barbour succinctly puts it in *Nathalie Sarraute and the Feminist Reader*, "If [Sarraute's] novels reveal nothing else to any reader with an 'agenda,' however, psychoanalytic, existentialist, feminist or otherwise, they reveal, in their irony, the deadening 'carapace'¹⁷³ of critical grids" (22). I titled this section "Misreadings" as a way of highlighting the critical role of the reader in how we come to perceive writers and their work, with the ultimate goal of demonstrating that there are indeed points of connection between Sarraute, Némirovsky and Cixous, and these points of connection will serve to frame my reading of *Enfance* and *Le Vin de solitude* within the scope of this project on Jewish women writers. I return now to Némirovsky and the ways she too has been misread.

As we saw earlier, Némirovsky's posthumous *Suite française* brought her back to the center of the French literary scene, which led to the return of all of her earlier works to bookstore shelves after having been forgotten and left behind for over sixty years. With her comeback and its heavy emphasis on her personal story, twenty-first century

m'a dit: 'Ah! Mais la Tante Berthe c'est moi, je viens de me marier, je me relève la nuit pour regarder les poignées de porte...' Ça m'a fait un Plaisir!" (10).

¹⁷³ Barbour borrows this term from Sarraute herself, who used it in *Le Planétarium*.

readers encountering her pre-Holocaust works from a post-Holocaust perspective were shocked by what appeared to be (and what may indeed have been) antisemitic tropes and stereotypes in her fiction; for example, twenty-first century readers were especially horrified by Némirovsky's depiction of the Jewish part of a port town in the East, probably based on Odessa, as "crawling with vermin," a notoriously antisemitic epithet that Némirovsky used here to describe the Jews themselves.¹⁷⁴ After the Holocaust, it is very difficult not to immediately associate this description with Nazi antisemitic rhetoric. From there, accusations of Némirovsky's internalized antisemitism and self-hatred abounded. Combined with her often scathing depictions of mothers as despicable and monstrous, of old women as helpless, pathetic, and overly emotional, it also becomes possible to see Némirovsky as a woman who had internalized misogyny.

While questions of internalized misogyny did not arise among her readers of the 1930s, some of her French Jewish readers of that period, noticing the rising antisemitism around them, did express concern at the potentially antisemitic overtones. When asked about her attitudes towards her own Jewish identity in an interview in July 1935 with Janine Auscher, who was sent by *l'Univers israélite* (the journal of the Consistoire which had been the institutionalized body of France's official Jewish religious community since Napoleon), Némirovsky stated "Je suis beaucoup trop fière de l'être [juive] pour avoir jamais songé à le renier."¹⁷⁵ Némirovsky goes on in that interview to explain that her intention with her portrayal of David Golder was not to depict an assimilated French Jew,

¹⁷⁴ This description appears in *Un Enfant génial*, one of Némirovsky's earliest (and shortest) novels, first published in serialized form in 1927 and later reprinted (and redacted) by Némirovsky's daughter Elisabeth Gille under the title *L'Enfant prodige* in 1992. Gille's redactions of antisemitic tropes such as the "vermin" in the opening passage of the original demonstrate the troubling impression Némirovsky's inter-war navigation of the Jewish Question makes upon post-Holocaust readers of the late twentieth century. See Suleiman, pp. 165-166 for discussion of the vermin trope in this short, early work, and its reception.

¹⁷⁵ This roughly translates in English as "I am much too proud to be Jewish to have ever dreamed of denying it." (*L'Univers israélite*, July 5 1935, cited by Philipponnat in *Œuvres complètes* 1620)

as members of the Consistoire and readers of *l'Univers israélite* were, but rather a cosmopolitan foreign Jew whose main concern was money, more akin to the kinds of Jews she knew about from her own social-cultural milieu. As Philipponnat writes in his preface to one of Némirovsky's short stories ("Fraternité") included in *Œuvres complètes* to which we will return to in a moment,

Lorsque Irène Némirovsky entreprend *Fraternité*, le 8 octobre 1936, sept années se sont écoulées depuis la sortie de *David Golder*, au cours desquelles elle s'est abstenue de créer des personnages d'immigrés explicitement juifs. Le contexte politique a changé, la réception houleuse de *David Golder* l'a échaudée et elle craint plus que jamais d'être lue de travers, mais c'est plus fort qu'elle : "Je vais certainement me faire engueuler encore en parlant des Juifs, en ce moment, mais bah !... " (1620)

According to Philipponnat's account, which is based on her notes that are now archival materials, Némirovsky was well aware of the changes in the political climate that had taken place between 1929 and 1936, and therefore she understood the risks of being misunderstood that were involved in portraying characters of explicitly Jewish (and immigrant) origins. Yet, as Philipponnat's citation from her notes indicates, she decided to approach the topic anyway, as if compelled to do so despite better judgment. The risk that she would be misread proved true, both within her lifetime and well beyond it.

But Némirovsky tended to portray all of her characters, whether Jews, women, Russian, or otherwise, with a certain degree of irony and cynicism. She unflinchingly exposed and explored the darker sides of human nature as well as the "darker" experiences of emotion (melancholy, anger, bitterness, anxiety, fear, etc.). When asked to comment on her use of "types" especially in her negative representations of Jews in an interview with Nina Gourfinkel, Némirovsky responded, "Pourtant, c'est ainsi que je les

ai vos...”.¹⁷⁶ Through her fiction, but not through rose-colored lenses, Némirovsky wrote and represented what she saw in other people and in the world around her.

Suleiman’s article, “Némirovsky’s Jewish Protagonists,” which eventually became a chapter in her book retitled “Foreigners and Strangers,” offers a rich and in-depth counter-argument to these contemporary twenty-first century as well as interwar accusations based in a contextualized and close reading of Némirovsky’s fiction. As Suleiman demonstrates, Némirovsky’s inside-outside position vis-à-vis her French readers was foundational to her approach to writing, which also provides evidence that rather than being antisemitic, Némirovsky was conflicted about the “Jewish Question” and explored it from various perspectives embodied by her Jewish characters using free indirect discourse as her main narrative technique. Suleiman makes a compelling, nuanced, and thorough argument against reading Némirovsky’s Jewish characters and responses to/perceptions of them by other characters as antisemitic.¹⁷⁷

In the interwar period, aside from accusations of antisemitism by assimilated French Jews, Némirovsky’s novels and short stories were met with enthusiasm in the French literary scene in part, as Kershaw demonstrates,¹⁷⁸ due to her skillful and strategic navigation of that scene from a commercial standpoint. She used French readers’ fascination with the possibility of a Russian writer who wrote only in French – and who frequently reminded her interviewers that French was her first language, not Russian – to

¹⁷⁶ This excerpt of Gourfinkel’s interview, published in *L’Univers Israélite* on February 28, 1930 and titled “L’expérience juive d’Irène Némirovsky,” is cited in Philipponnat’s introduction in *Oeuvres complètes*, p. 37.

¹⁷⁷ See especially pp. 154-165.

¹⁷⁸ Kershaw bases her reading of Némirovsky in Bourdieu’s sociology of the literary field and argues that Némirovsky was primarily concerned with establishing herself as a popular, commercial writer, which is another possible critical approach to navigating the accusations of Némirovsky’s internalized antisemitism. See Kershaw, *Before Auschwitz*, pp. 7-40.

her advantage, and we can see this in the exoticizing language she used to describe Russia and the landscapes of her life before France. Sometimes these portrayals included Jews, sometimes they did not. At the same time, as Suleiman argues, Némirovsky was also successful due to her uniquely “in-between” self-positioning. Not quite French and openly so, not an assimilated “Israélite”¹⁷⁹ but certainly not an unassimilated Yiddish-speaking and lower-working class Jew from “the East,”¹⁸⁰ either, she offered French readers unique views of themselves and of their others. She engaged with the ever-present “Jewish Question” from this uniquely in-between position, which is, in part, exactly what allowed for her to be misread. At the same time, if this in-between position caused certain misreadings, it also caused ambivalence for Némirovsky.

This ambivalence and split positioning takes its most explicit expression in her short story “Fraternité,” in which a well-off and well-established Israélite, Christian Rabinovitch, is met with his double while waiting for a train that will take him to his aristocratic friends’ vacation home for a weekend of hunting.¹⁸¹ When it is revealed that they share the same last name, his “double,” who is a visibly poor and unassimilated “Jew from the East,” insists that their shared name must also imply a shared family tree. Christian the Israélite is forced to confront this possibility, and his entire inner world is turned upside down. The story ends with the image of Christian experiencing what

¹⁷⁹ The French word used to describe highly assimilated French Jews, as opposed to the “Juif,” which by the time Némirovsky arrived in France was used to designate unassimilated Jews from the Pale of Settlement.

¹⁸⁰ These Jews were referred to by assimilated western European Jews as “Ostjuden,” and sometimes as “Pollaks.” In “We Refugees,” Hannah Arendt recounts her experiences as a stateless person in France, and includes reflections on these politics of names.

¹⁸¹ As Suleiman explains, hunting has historically been a line of separation between Jews and non-Jews. That Christian Rabinovitch is on his way to spending a weekend in the countryside hunting with his aristocratic friends highlights the sign of his (supposedly) successful and complete assimilation. (Suleiman 37-38)

Sarraute might consider a tropism: as he grapples with the inner turmoil produced by his encounter with the other and the possibility of his own otherness within, his body, beyond the limits of his conscious mind, rocks and sways like his potential unassimilated Jewish ancestors would do in prayer, or possibly in distress and despair.¹⁸² Through this encounter, Némirovsky stages not only an identity crisis, but also puts into question the prospect of assimilation as an achievable possible outcome for Jews. In his preface to the story, which originally appeared in *Gringoire*, a review that became increasingly antisemitic throughout the 1930s, in *Œuvres complètes*, Philipponnat writes “Une fois encore, c’est par un effort d’objectivité qu’elle tente de masquer ce qui, chez Christian Rabinovitch, relève de sa propre anxiété” (1621).

Philipponnat’s reading of Némirovsky’s use of narrative objectivity as an attempt to mask her anxiety is well-founded. In her writing journal from around the same time she was drafting “Fraternité,” we can see her thought process in action as she grappled with the question of assimilation and whether it is really possible. In those entries, she writes,

Le riche est (se croit) délivré de sa religion, mais le pauvre aussi. La fraternité ne réside pas dans la religion, mais dans la race, oh Hitler, tu n’as pas tort. J’ai des scrupules. Et pourtant, il y a, avant tout, au-dessus de tout, le droit imprescriptible de la vérité. Recommencer, et encore recommencer, plier le dos, et recommencer. Mais celui qui n’a pas eu besoin de ça, le riche, il lui reste *sickening fear*, cet héritage. En somme, je démontre l’inassimilabilité, quel mot, Seigneur... Je sais que c’est vrai.¹⁸³

¹⁸² Suleiman offers a more in-depth and detailed analysis of this short story in her first chapter of *The Némirovsky Question* (pp. 33-42) as an illustration of the signifying power attached to Israélites vs. Juifs in interwar France.

¹⁸³ Cited in Suleiman pp. 38-39, from the IMEC archive, ALM 2999.13.

Suleiman’s English translation:

The rich one is (thinks he is) totally free of his religion, but the poor one is too. Their brotherhood does not reside in religion, but in race, oh Hitler, you’re not wrong.
What have I just said? Maybe I’m wrong.
And yet, there is before and above all the inalienable right to truth.

If Christian Rabinovitch's successful assimilation story is marked by his weekend plans to go hunting with aristocratic friends, his body's unconscious response to what may be an inescapable ancestral truth (and bond) demonstrates Némirovsky's own struggle with the limits of assimilation, which she saw playing out in everyday life. Léon Blum, the first Jewish Prime Minister who was elected in 1936 with the Popular Front government, was the consummate Israélite. He was born in France, was highly educated in French schools, had served in the French Army during the First World War, and was entirely secular. Yet even he was not exempt from antisemitic portrayals and slander. Suleiman cites other examples of similar encounters with Jewish doubles to that of Christian Rabinovitch that Némirovsky staged in various other works,¹⁸⁴ arguing that these stagings reveal not only an anxiety, but one born of something akin to W.E.B. DuBois' theory of double consciousness that Némirovsky herself experienced and that we can see by reading between the lines of her fiction.

Compared to Sarraute, Némirovsky grappled with these questions more explicitly and openly by including Jews and Jewishness as recurring themes in her fiction, but she too was fairly indirect. As Philipponnat suggests, she created distance through a façade of objectivity in her fiction, all of which featured omniscient, anonymous narrators and free indirect discourse. As Suleiman demonstrates, this narrative technique was highly effective as it allowed for slippages in narrative point of view so that readers would see through the eyes of certain characters without entirely realizing it. These narrative

The meaning of all these experiences is that things always end badly, in failure... to start over, and then over again, to bend your back and start over. But the one who didn't have to do that, the rich one, still has *sickening fear*, that heritage.
In sum, what I demonstrate is inassimilability, what a word, oh Lord... I know that it's true. (38-39)

¹⁸⁴ These include *L'Enfant genial* (1927), *David Golder* (1929), *Le Bal* (1929), *Le Vin de solitude*, *Le maître des âmes* (1939), and *Les Chiens et les loups* (1940). See Suleiman pp. 154-160.

techniques are part of what has allowed for (mis)readings of Némirovsky's antisemitism. But they also prove wrong a different misreading: if Némirovsky wrote popular novels, she was not a "pop" novelist and her work was not simple. Although she appears to be situated – and did largely publish from – the opposite end of the literary spectrum from Sarraute's avant-garde experimentalism, Némirovsky also read Proust, and was well aware of his narrative innovations. In her writing notes for *Le Vin de solitude*, she wrote "Pour les dialogues, relire Proust. On n'inventera jamais rien de mieux."¹⁸⁵ For Suleiman, one of the most salient examples of misreading that has occurred without closely reading Némirovsky's narrative technique at work occurs in *David Golder*. In the novel, the eponymous protagonist is a Jewish social climber who left his former life of poverty in the East and has made a small fortune as a financier now living in France. At a party, one of Golder's business associates arrives and is described in language we could easily read as antisemitic: weak, potbellied, with squinting eyes, calculating. But as Suleiman points out, Némirovsky's narration has actually shifted its focalization on Golder, so that we are seeing his acquaintance through his eyes. Golder does not care for his associate and cannot exactly articulate why. A clear example of this same technique occurs in *Le Vin de solitude*, in one of the few instances within the novel when Jews and Jewishness appear in the text; the narrator tells us Hélène's inner-thoughts about her family members, who, it is implied from an earlier reference to her father as "un petit Juif" (1187), are Jewish:

Il lui semblait entendre déjà les voix fausses et pitoyables. Elle regardait autour d'elle avec haine. Rien, le silence, la morne paix et la peur qui laboure et torture savamment le cœur étaient ses seuls compagnons. Elle devait garder dans son sang cette angoisse et s'en accommoder comme d'un mal héréditaire ; elle sentait

¹⁸⁵ This note appears in Catherine Viollet's article (2014), "*Le Vin de solitude* d'Irène Némirovsky: journal de genèse" (174). Viollet does not leave a precise citation for this note, but she worked with the archival documents at IMEC where all of Némirovsky's remaining notebooks and other documents are kept. (NMR 13.9?). In English translation, her note reads: "For dialogues, re-read Proust. No one will ever invent anything better."

peser sur ses faibles os tout le poids de l'inquiète terreur qui avait courbé les épaules, pâli le front de tant d'êtres de sa race. (1206)

Here, we have a contradictory portrayal; Hélène clearly neither likes nor pities her family members, and after reading the novel it is easy to understand why. These are not warm and affectionate parents (instead, they have “hypocritical, pitying voices”), and none of them seem capable of behavior that is ethically oriented towards others rather than selfishly focused on wealth accumulation, status, and appearances. While these preoccupations might be stereotypically Jewish (Arendt’s “parvenu” as alternative to “pariah”), we can also understand these behaviors and preoccupations as survival strategies of fitting in using available means. From the “anguish,” “hereditary evil,” and “anxious terror” referenced in the text, we can infer that Hélène’s experience of being Jewish has not been a happy or easy one, nor is it an escapable one, even at the age of ten as she is at this point in the novel.¹⁸⁶ Like Christian Rabinovitch, trauma, anxiety and fear run deep within her veins and bones. If she looks around her with hatred, perhaps it is not an antisemitic and self-loathing kind, but rather a painfully realistic one. From this perspective, we can see the inter- (and inner-) Jewish divisions that were very much present in Némirovsky’s world of the late 1920s and 1930s, all of which were caused by anxiety amid heightened threat of persecution.

This conveys another theme and overall goal of Némirovsky’s work: to portray Jews and other groups as individuals in their full humanity, which inevitably must include imperfection and darkness. Furthermore, by presenting contradictory and ambivalent Jewish characters who confront each other in her fictions, Némirovsky also

¹⁸⁶ In *Understanding Irène Némirovsky*, Margaret Scanlan emphasizes the significance of the many (657) pogroms in Russia between 1905-1906, and especially the one that took place in Kiev in October 1905, when Irène was two and a half years old. The family’s Christian Orthodox cook hid Irène behind a bed, with a cross around her neck. Deeply ingrained trauma was a part of Némirovsky’s life from a very early age. (xv and 2-3)

makes clear that there is no such thing as a monolithic category of “Jews.” “Jews” and “Jewish” carry very different meanings between generations, between/across geographies, between/across languages, and depending on socioeconomic class. The way she described her choice in characters in an interview for a radio broadcast in 1934 speaks to this heterogeneous view of Jews and others: “Je continue à peindre la société que je connais le mieux et qui se compose de gens désaxés, sortis du milieu, du pays où ils eussent normalement vécu, et qui ne s’adaptent pas sans choc ni sans souffrances à une vie nouvelle”¹⁸⁷ (“I continue to depict the society that I know best and that is made up of dislocated people who have left their original milieu, the country where they would have normally lived, and who do not adapt to their new life without shock and suffering”). Once again, this interview excerpt is revealing; if these “dislocated people” were Jews, we would not necessarily know based on her description here. At the same time, their world is one she says she knows well, and we are left to infer something about her own experience of dislocation in France as a result. Thus, Némirovsky was clear in her own social positioning, even if the socio-political situation around her was far from clear in terms of the Jewish question.

Yet this self-positioning had its own consequences as well. According to a review of *La Proie*, a novel in which neither Jews nor Russians feature, the reviewer, J. Delpech, wrote in *Les Nouvelles littéraires* that one can sense in the novel “une clarté et un sens de la composition bien français et un tempérament, une appréhension du monde et des êtres très slaves”¹⁸⁸ (“a very French clarity and sense of composition and a very Slavic

¹⁸⁷ Once again, this reference comes from Philipponnat’s introduction in *Oeuvres complètes*. (Philipponnat 15; note 2 – radio broadcast interview with M.-J. Viel titled “Comment travaille une romancière”).

¹⁸⁸ Philipponnat cites this review in his introduction in *Oeuvres complètes*. (p. 12; note 2 – June 4, 1938 issue of *Les Nouvelles littéraires*, “Chez Irène Némirovsky ou la Russie boulevard des Invalides.”)

temperament and apprehension of the world and others”). This review demonstrates another (French) lens through which Némirovsky was perceived. Némirovsky was thus “étrangère” in both senses (“stranger” and “foreigner”) and could not escape that status whether she may have wanted to at times or not. That she was a woman novelist who did not use a male pseudonym and who was successful in an almost entirely male literary scene made her all the more susceptible to standing out. As Suleiman puts it,

[...] complications and ambivalences [...] defined [Némirovsky’s] being in the world. A foreigner in France at a time when foreigners were looked on with suspicion, a woman in a literary field where men set the rules and standards, Némirovsky succeeded, for a short time, in creating a life and a career that others might envy. She had talent, ambition, and a desire to fit in. But she was a Jew in a time and a place where, increasingly, Jewishness was perceived as a death sentence. Did one have to cease being Jewish in order to survive and thrive? Could one cease being Jewish, even if one tried? (15)

This is precisely what Sarraute so adamantly resisted when it came to the relationship between her biography and her authorial persona (to not have one!), as well as in her approach to characters in her novels. But nonetheless, scenes of strangeness, otherness, and difference repeat themselves throughout her work as well. As Ann Jefferson writes in *Nathalie Sarraute, Fiction and Theory: Questions of Difference*,

Nathalie Sarraute is tireless in her appeal to a common experience: the inner world which she represents in her writing is, she insists, a world that we share, a world in which differences as they may appear on the surface simply do not count. [...] And yet at the same time, she presents this shared experience within a frame that is equally assertive about its novelty, in other words, about its difference. This creates a curious paradox which is one of the factors that give Sarraute’s writing its characteristic and uneasy vigor, and the energies produced by this tension seem inseparable from the anxiety that is palpable everywhere in her work. One senses in Sarraute a constant worry about the ways in which sameness and difference will be construed by those to whom her appeal to shared experience is addressed. There is a fear that sameness will be traduced as an assimilation into something alien, and an equal dread that difference will take the form of rejection and exclusion. Questions of sameness and difference are inextricably associated with anxiety in Sarraute. (1)

In this sense, Sarraute's work betrays her, precisely through the tropism, of which anxiety can certainly be a function and an effect. Anxiety runs throughout (and behind, or perhaps beneath, like Sarraute's tropistic undercurrent) both Sarraute and Némirovsky's work, even if it manifests in different ways as a result of their very different approaches to writing. This anxiety appears, paradoxically, through the strategies used to defuse (and avoid) it. Sarraute and Némirovsky both could only indirectly and obliquely address the questions that stirred their anxieties, and those questions had to do with the double-binds of essentialism and universalism. While Sarraute refused essentialism and argued for the possibility of universalism through the tropism, Némirovsky wrote closer to the edge of essentialism with her realist novelistic style and her use of clichés and stereotypes (the very things Sarraute sought to explode). But as Némirovsky's two Rabinovitches in "Fraternité" demonstrate, nothing about these clichés was static or entirely true for her, either. While Sarraute refused to acknowledge any possible relevance of her gender and ethnicity to her fiction, Némirovsky to some extent encouraged readers to connect the dots between her life – including her gender and ethnicity – and her fiction.

IV. Autobiographical Anxieties: Strategies of Evasion

As we just saw, Sarraute and Némirovsky's works are infused with and driven (at least in part) by a subtle anxiety. It makes sense then that textual strategies of evasion, self-distanciation, invisibility, and disappearance would also run throughout their work. As we will see, this creates an especially strong tension in their autobiographical fictions. Their construction of authorial identities and self-positioning (or effacing, in Sarraute's case) figures into their approaches to writing *Le Vin de solitude* and *Enfance*, for obvious reasons: when there is already so much at risk and at stake in representing completely

fictional characters, there is so much more when representing a character that is understood to resemble the writer herself. To borrow Hewitt's phrase, the "autobiographical tightropes" that Sarraute and Némirovsky walk are, as Hewitt and others have argued and as we saw in the introduction, risky and hazardous for all women writers, but especially so in the case of these writers. For Sarraute, the stakes of autobiography are high because writing a text with autobiographical tones towards the end of a successful career built upon the tropism and the denial of any possible relevant or otherwise meaningful, significant connection between identity or "character" (gender, ethnic, political, or otherwise) and writing appears to completely contradict and undermine an entire lifetime of work. How can she write about her life without some of these social identities of her lived experience – of her experience of difference – entering the text in some way?

For Némirovsky, the stakes are high because, as a stateless woman whose main source of income was writing and who was also seeking French citizenship in a climate of rising antisemitism, explicitly autobiographical fiction solidifies and intensifies readers' view of her as a foreigner, thus also solidifying the inassimilability and vulnerability that caused her anxiety. We can see this anxiety in some of Némirovsky's interviews from the period of writing and completing *Le Vin de solitude*, and in the "notice" she included in the original 1935 publication, which Philipponnat includes in his introduction to the novel in *Oeuvres complètes*:

Je pense que ceux qui ont eu une enfance heureuse entourée de soins et de tendresse n'éprouveront aucune sympathie pour Hélène Karol [...]. On m'a souvent reproché d'être pessimiste. Je voudrais, dans ce livre-ci, me défendre contre cette accusation, car la seule forme d'optimisme digne de l'homme est de voir la dureté et l'incohérence de l'existence et pourtant d'aimer la vie, non pas malgré cette dureté et cette incohérence, mais à cause d'elles, et d'y reconnaître une beauté qui nous dépasse. Des personnages de ce roman paraîtront, je le crains, déconcertants et, pour tout dire d'un mot, trop « étrangers ». [...] Peut-être les

comprendrait-on davantage si on connaissait leur passé, leur famille et leur pays [...]. (1173-74)

In this “avertissement” (notice, warning), Némirovsky makes a case for herself – against accusations of pessimism, implying that if she is “pessimistic,” it is because, like her protagonist Hélène Karol, she has learned to see optimism as an effect of the “harsh and incoherent” experiences of human existence, not despite these things but because of them. Her fear that the characters will appear “disconcerting and, to say it all in a word, strange/foreign” and her hope that “maybe readers would understand them [the characters] better if they knew their past, their family, their country” are particularly revealing of the tightrope – between fear and hope – she walked in publishing this “badly disguised autobiography.”

As we will see, each writer navigates these hazardous tightropes with textual strategies that allow her to at once offer readers a glimpse into her childhood world while also questioning the feasibility of doing so, thereby distancing and protecting herself against the high stakes just described. But, these strategies also break down at times, and demonstrate precisely the “desperate/violent need for contact/fusion” that Sarraute describes in Dostoyevsky’s and Kafka’s fictions.

If Némirovsky’s autobiographical anxiety is most clearly expressed in her interviews, in the above-cited “notice,” and in her writing journal (which we will soon see) – in other words, outside of the fictional text itself – Sarraute stages hers in the opening dialogue. So while Némirovsky’s autobiographical anxieties are hidden behind (or around) the “objective” façade of her fictional novel, Sarraute’s serve as a frame for the entire endeavor, imbuing the entire work with anxiety and doubt. Comparing the opening passages of each text allows us a window into the very different approaches each writer takes to navigate her autobiographical anxieties.

As briefly highlighted at the beginning of this chapter, Sarraute's *Enfance* begins with a dialogue between two anonymous voices,¹⁸⁹ an "I" ("je") who quite quickly becomes recognizable as a writer, and who just as quickly becomes associated with the photo on the book's cover of a young girl dressed in clothing typical of middle-upper class European fashion of the early twentieth-century, and a "you" ("tu"), who probes the writer about what the writer wants to do for their¹⁹⁰ next project. The "you" asks the "I":

—Alors, tu vas vraiment faire ça ? « Évoquer tes souvenirs d'enfance »... Comme ces mots te gênent, tu ne les aimes pas. Mais reconnais que ce sont les seuls mots qui conviennent. Tu veux « évoquer tes souvenirs »... il n'y a pas à tortiller, c'est bien ça.

—Oui, je n'y peux rien, ça me tente, je ne sais pas pourquoi...

—C'est peut-être... est-ce que ce ne serait pas... on ne s'en rend parfois pas compte... c'est peut-être que tes forces déclinent...

—Non, je ne crois pas... du moins je ne le sens pas...

—Et pourtant ce que tu veux faire... « évoquer tes souvenirs »... est-ce que ce ne serait pas...

—Oh, je t'en prie...

—Si, il faut se le demander : est-ce que ce ne serait pas prendre ta retraite ? te ranger ? quitter ton élément, où jusqu'ici, tant bien que mal...

—Oui, comme tu dis, tant bien que mal...

—Peut-être, mais c'est le seul où tu aies jamais pu vivre... celui...

—Oh, à quoi bon ? je le connais.

—Est-ce vrai ? Tu n'as vraiment pas oublié comment c'était là-bas ? comme là-bas tout fluctue, se transforme, s'échappe... tu avances à tâtons, toujours cherchant, te tendant... vers quoi ? qu'est-ce que c'est ? ça ne ressemble à rien... personne n'en parle... ça se dérobe, tu l'agrippes comme tu peux, tu le pousses... où ? n'importe où, pourvu que ça trouve un milieu propice où ça se développe, où ça parvienne peut-être à vivre... Tiens, rien que d'y penser... (7-8)

There have been various interpretations of the voices in this opening dialogue: are they Sarraute and her double? Sarraute and her husband Raymond, to whom she read all of her work out loud as she wrote it? The writer and her critic? Or, as in the theatrical adaptation of the text, Sarraute the adult and her child self? However we interpret them, the dialogic

¹⁸⁹ Following French printing convention, I have reproduced the dialogue as it appears in the original French, with a dash signaling the change of speakers.

¹⁹⁰ In Sarrautien fashion, I will maintain gender neutrality for this anonymous writer – for now.

structure itself exposes the author's ambivalence and anxiety and sets the tone for the entire text to come.

Paradoxically, given Sarraute's general avoidance of allowing readers any easy identification between herself and her work, she reveals herself here quite openly through the "Je's" ambivalences towards undertaking an autobiographically-oriented writing project. As the "Tu" probes the "Je's" authenticity of intention ("Are you sure you want to do this?"), the implication is that the "this" – evoking childhood memories – falls squarely within the limits of cliché. Evoking childhood memories might mean that "Je" is abandoning her "element" and "retiring, losing her forces" – in other words, that "Je" is losing her literary edge and may be moving away from the avant-garde experimentalism that has previously characterized her work. As Sarraute's essays in *L'Ère du soupçon* make abundantly clear, experimentalism and innovation within the novel are the only ways forward, and moving forward is the only way to circumvent death of the novel itself, which must be in constant evolution. As we saw, to rely on fixed "grids" – of plot, character details, description of setting – is to fix a deadening carapace onto the indefinable, nebulous and fleeting qualities of the tropism, of what really shapes life itself. And according to Sarraute's definition of tropisms, they occur beneath the surface of clichés. If her life's work has been to expose and explode that surface, then writing in clichés would be the equivalent of her own authorial death. Knowing this about the author of *Enfance*, it is not a far leap then to associate the fears expressed within this dialogue with Sarraute herself. Paradoxically, Sarraute seems the most unlikely author to take such a close step towards what Philippe Lejeune calls the "pacte autobiographique" ("autobiographical pact"). According to Lejeune's theory of autobiography, we can say that a text is autobiographical if the "I" in the text clearly and unequivocally matches the

author: “Pourqu’il y ait autobiographie il doit y avoir une identité entre l’auteur, le narrateur, le personnage” (26). True to form, however, Sarraute never officially seals this pact; she only indirectly hints at its possibility.

As “Tu” provokes “Je” to further examine and evaluate their motivations for the next writing project, the realm of the tropism is evoked. “Tu” stokes “Je’s” anxiety about losing their edge and leaving their element, and as if to reinforce and emphasize the stark contrast between that “element” and the new proposed textual terrain (childhood memories), “Tu” wonders if “Je” really remembers what it is like to be in “her element” in the first place (“Is that true? Have you really not forgotten what it was like there?”). I read the “it” and the “there” as the tropism and the process of writing (about) it. “There,” everything is in constant flux, nothing is stable or fixed, and there is no risk of falling into clichés, because clichés cannot be formed from something in constant movement and evolution. “Tu” sees “Je’s” writing process as one of constant grasping and reaching for something amorphous that evades her, something that is like nothing else, and that, in its evasiveness, makes her push it towards a place where it can grow. In this “it” and “there,” I see certain qualities they may share with Cixous’ écriture féminine: both are impossible to define, slippery, in constant movement, evasive. And “tu” sees “je’s” writing as one of nurturing, of encouraging the “it” to grow wherever and however it can, not entirely unlike feminine writing written in white ink, writing that gives rather than takes. And, not unlike Cixous, it is this evasive object (and subject) of writing that gives way to its author’s own evasion into that deeper and more elusive space where the “it” can grow. In other words, “je,” through writing, grasps for the evasive “it” and the “there” and creates their own evasion by following the tropism. In this sense, writing *is* evasion.

“Evasion” itself is a slippery word, and one that is especially fitting and fruitful for describing the strategies that allow Sarraute and Némirovsky to write autobiographical fictions, and, in turn, that allow us to consider these older, earlier writers in conversation with Cixous. In English, “evasion” can describe avoidance (and indirection, as in avoiding a direct response to a question), escape, elusiveness, or acting contrary to the intention of a law, even while obeying its letter. In French, “évasion” has similar though slightly fewer meanings; it is most frequently used to mean “escape,” whether literal (physical) or more metaphorical (escaping into daydreams, thoughts, books, etc.). In all of these meanings, there is a sense not quite of subversion, but of something closely related to it. To evade is to deftly navigate a system that is designed to hold us in place and to free ourselves of that system. And if Cixous’ most important criteria for “feminine texts” is that they are subversive, then these “first generation” texts we consider in this chapter are not so far removed from Cixous’ vision. Furthermore, if one of Cixous’ strategies of subversion is through the “vol” (flight, or theft), then once again, “evasion” is not far off course. If we take another look at the first epigraph for this chapter taken from Cixous’ “Le Rire de la Méduse,” reproduced here, we see that Cixous also sees writing as evasion: “Écrire ? – Oui. C’est le moyen d’investigation le plus intime, le plus puissant, le plus économique, le supplément le plus magique, le plus démocratique. Du papier, de l’imagination, et en vol. J’avais découvert le plus sûr et le plus universel des moyens **d’évasion** quand j’étais captive de l’Histoire, derrière les grilles à Oran, à l’âge de trois ans” (25 ; emphasis added).

To return now to the opening dialogue in *Enfance* as it continues, “je” responds to “tu’s” description of the evasive tropistic space of “là-bas” (“there”) with another view of the anxiety simmering just below the surface of this potential new writing project:

—Oui, ça te rend grandiloquent. Je dirai même outreucidant. Je me demande si ce n'est pas toujours cette même crainte... Souviens-toi comme elle revient chaque fois que quelque chose d'encore informe se propose... Ce qui nous est resté des anciennes tentatives nous paraît toujours avoir l'avantage sur ce qui tremblote quelque part dans les limbes...

—Mais justement, ce que je crains, cette fois, c'est que ça ne tremble pas... pas assez... que ce soit fixé une fois pour toutes, du « tout cuit », donné d'avance...

—Rassure-toi pour ce qui est d'être donné... c'est encore tout vacillant, aucun mot écrit, aucune parole ne l'ont encore touché, il me semble que ça palpite faiblement... hors des mots... comme toujours... des petits bouts de quelque chose d'encore vivant... je voudrais, avant qu'ils disparaissent... laisse-moi...

—Bon. Je me tais... d'ailleurs nous savons bien que lorsque quelque chose se met à te hanter...

—Oui, et cette fois, on ne le croirait pas, mais c'est de toi que me vient l'impulsion, depuis un moment déjà tu me pousses...

—Moi ?

—Oui, toi par tes objurgations, tes mises en garde... tu le fais surgir... tu m'y plonges... (8-10)

In this second (and final) phase of the opening dialogue, we see the tables turn, and the metanarrative cast by the dialogue about “je’s” writing comes to its own breaking point. First of all, there is a subtle reference to gender here; a discerning reader notices that “je” calls “tu” “outreucidant” (presumptuous), the masculine form of the adjective.¹⁹¹ After “tu’s” reminder of what “je’s” writing process has been like, “Je” accuses “tu” of “grandiloquence,” something akin to “extravagance” or “ostentation,” as if to say that nobody knows her writing better than she does. But there is another tropism burgeoning here; “je” sees “tu’s” description of her writing as indicative of a fear of trying something new. In other words, beneath the surface of “tu’s” earlier words was a tropism, a subtle movement of fear that is barely perceptible to “tu” himself. “Je” assuages “tu’s” worry that the idea of evoking (and writing about) childhood memories will not be nebulous and reminds him that every new work undertaken in the past has caused fear in its earliest

¹⁹¹ I must admit that I was not such a discerning reader and initially missed this subtle moment of gender difference entering the text, until I read Hewitt’s analysis of *Enfance* in her *Autobiographical Tightropes*. Hewitt ultimately suggests – and very convincingly – that this subtle reference to gender difference is pivotal in how we read *Enfance*. We will see Hewitt’s discussion in more detail later in this chapter.

stages of conception when it was shapeless (“informe”) and “trembling in limbo.” “Tu” responds that this is precisely his worry; what if this newest idea – to write about childhood memories – is already set, established, and will not “tremble” in its unformed state of limbo? Here Sarraute’s dialogic voices appear to misunderstand each other and get lost in the process of their exchange, so that the evasive nature of writing (and the somewhat violent, jarring nature of the tropism) becomes even more pronounced; now the voices have followed the “it” so deep into its other, subterranean domain, that they are far from where they started. And yet, we can see that where they have been led may very well be that fertile ground of “over there,” where “it” just might be able to grow into something else. There is thus something innately hazardous and yet compelling about writing. When “je” replies to “tu’s” worry and tells him that this newest idea is still vacillating, nebulous, outside of words, she effectively confirms that they are heading “over there,” where the writing of her element can happen.

In this opening dialogue, Sarraute also sets the stage for (and foreshadows) the many crises of memory that permeate nearly every fragment of *Enfance*, as “je” – entering the child’s experience of the memory unfolding in the present – recounts each episode, “tu” interjects, wondering if “je’s” retelling really is fair and accurate. Objectivity is put into constant question, and as the entire text is an enactment of memory, it becomes increasingly clear that memory is not objective. But objectivity aside, in this early stage-setting phase, we can see that if part of “tu’s” concern is that evoking childhood memories is the stuff of cliché and therefore is already fully formed, prefabricated and mass-produced, there is another potential source for his worry. Evoking childhood memories involves recalling memories, and for him, those are already formed. In this case, writing becomes a simple task of recalling and transcribing or recording. If

memories are already made, then where is the work (and the art) in writing them? “Je” has a different, contrasting understanding of memory – one that is in process, and thus in limbo. This understanding of memory also sees it as beyond the realm of language. This is one of the paradoxes and tensions that resurfaces repeatedly in *Enfance*; language is powerful, and mastering it becomes a central theme for the young protagonist, Natacha/Nathalie Tcherniak, throughout all of her childhood. Yet it can only grasp at and reach towards the most essential aspects of our being; memory, feeling (whether consciously or unconsciously felt, viscerally or emotionally), and all of the other non-verbal (and unconscious) aspects of human experience remain largely beyond words. As Alice Kaplan puts it in her foreword to the 2012 reprint of Barbara Wright’s English translation of *Enfance*, summarizing Sarraute’s dance with evasion through language: “From 1939 to 1999, through novels, plays, and critical essays, Nathalie Sarraute never stopped asking the same question: when you write, how do you capture in language, through language, what language doesn’t want to tell you?” (Kaplan vi). Kaplan’s formulation of “capturing what language doesn’t want to tell you” is particularly apt. This is the tropism in action, beneath the surface of autobiography, at the borders of language and of consciousness. “Je’s” version of memory has its own process of (re)construction, and there is a sense of urgency when “je” pleads, “I would like... before they disappear... let me...”. In this version, memory is malleable, only barely reachable with words, and a process of reconstruction in the present. But this process does not seem to stretch into an eternal, infinite present, either; time is of the essence to do this work. The urgency of moving towards these memories before their own potential evasion into the fully unreachable space of what is forgotten, is thus yet another source of the anxiety running throughout *Enfance*.

Compared to Sarraute's opening dialogue, the first paragraph of *Le Vin de solitude* offers a striking contrast. Sarraute's two voices question, in the present, the text's validity before it even begins and confirm that we are still in "the era of suspicion" by throwing the entire thing into doubt and creating suspicion within the reader, while Némirovsky's omniscient narrator offers a veneer of objectivity, narrated in the past, in what appears to be a seamless rendering of her protagonist's childhood hometown:

Dans la partie du monde où Hélène Karol était née, le soir s'annonçait par une poussière épaisse qui volait lentement dans l'air et retombait avec la nuit humide. Une trouble et rouge lumière errait au bas du ciel ; le vent ramenait vers la ville l'odeur des plaines ukrainiennes, une faible et âcre senteur de fumée et la fraîcheur de l'eau et des joncs qui poussaient sur les rives. Le vent soufflait d'Asie ; il avait pénétré entre les monts Oural et la mer Caspienne ; il avait roulé devant lui des flots de poussière jaune qui craquait sous les dents ; il était aride et cinglant ; il emplissait l'air d'un grondement sourd qui s'éloignait et se perdait vers l'ouest. Tout s'apaisait alors. Le soleil couchant pâle, et sans forces, voilé d'un nuage livide, plongeait dans le fleuve. Du balcon des Karol on voyait la ville entière étendue, depuis le Dniepr jusqu'aux collines lointaines ; sa forme était tracée par les petites flammes vacillantes des becs de gaz qui bordaient les rues tortueuses, tandis que sur la rive opposée brillaient les premiers feux de printemps, allumés dans l'herbe.¹⁹² (1176)

In this very different opening, we see another kind of evasion: that of the reader.

Némirovsky's narrator takes us to an exoticized East, a different part of the world. In this very sensuous description, we can smell the bitter, mild smoke of the Ukrainian plains ("une faible et âcre senteur de fumée, l'odeur des plaines ukrainiennes") and the humidity

¹⁹² Because I compare the original French and Sandra Smith's English translation of this passage, I include Smith's translation here for reference:

In the part of the world where Hélène Karol was born, dusk began with a thick cloud of dust that swirled slowly in the air before drifting to the ground, bringing the damp night with it. A hazy, reddish light lingered low in the sky; the wind brought the smell of the Ukrainian plains to the city, a mild yet bitter scent of smoke, cold water and rushes that grew along the riverbanks. The wind blew in from Asia; it had pushed its way between the Ural Mountains and the Caspian Sea; it brought with it whirls of yellow dust that cracked between the teeth; it was dry and biting; it filled the air with a howl that faded as it disappeared towards the west. Then all was calm. The setting sun, pale and dull, veiled behind whitish clouds, sank deep into the river. From the Karols' balcony you could see the whole town, from the Dnieper River to the hills in the distance; its outline was marked out by the gaslights that lined the winding streets with their fluttering little flames, while on the opposite bank the first fires of spring smoldered in the grass. (3)

of the riverbanks (la fraîcheur de l'eau et des joncs sur les rives"), we hear and feel the "dry, biting" wind as it pushes and howls, we feel the yellow dust cracking between our teeth ("poussière jaune qui craquait sous les dents), and we can imagine seeing the view of the city from the Karols' balcony. As Angela Kershaw puts it, "The 'Russian soul' in the literary field of 1930s France was a Frenchman's artefact, as was the 'Jewish soul' [...]" (68),¹⁹³ and here we can see Némirovsky putting that artefact on display. Yet if the text (narrator) beckons the reader into escapism, we also know that the narrator is not on site, instead narrating from a distance because it is narrated in the past tense. The swirling dust and hazy light of dusk ("une poussière épaisse qui volait", "une trouble et rouge lumière") announce our arrival in a distant place, and perhaps subtly serve as a metaphor for memory. The distance of this place is not only geographic, but temporal as well, and to describe it is to access old memories within the hazy light and the swirling dust. It is also telling that the word "trouble," when used as an adjective in French, means "blurred, vague, murky" or as Sandra Smith translated it, "hazy." But it is a homophone and homonym with the noun, "trouble," which can mean "confusion," "distress," "discord," and, in more rare literary usage, "infatuation." The "trouble lumière rouge" (for Smith, "hazy reddish light") thus carries within it a wide range of meaning, linking exoticism ("infatuation") with what is unclear, and in turn, what might be distressing. Equally "troubling" is the use of the pronoun "on" in the original French ("Du balcon des Karol on voyait..."), which can mean a collective first-person "we/us," or the neutral third-person "one" (used as a means of making universalizing generalization or impersonal statements). Smith's choice of translating the "on" as "you" in English

¹⁹³ Kershaw echoes Frantz Fanon's statement in *Black Skin, White Masks* that 'souvent ce qu'on appelle l'âme noire est une construction du Blanc.' ('what is often called the black soul is a white man's artefact.') (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, p. 11 of the Paris: Seuil 1952 edition)

(“From the Karols’ balcony you could see...”) is interesting. While the French leaves room for ambiguity – is the narrator omniscient, or more intimately related to the family, or Hélène herself? Who could be the “we/us”? –, the English version brings the reader into the text, but separates the narrator from the Karols. In Némirovsky’s original French, however, there is already a potential breakdown of the façade of objectivity, and of Lejeune’s autobiographical pact. Another sense of evasion emerges here: the author evades easy identification with her autobiographical subject through the narrator who makes clear that this is fiction, but the “troubling” pronoun evades clear interpretation and adds to the hazy, swirling dust that pushes us into the text.

While Sarraute’s memory crisis, which is connected to her anxiety, plays out in the opening dialogue of *Enfance* and continues throughout the rest of the text, Némirovsky’s occurs behind the scenes in her writing journal for *Le Vin de solitude*. In her journal, which, as Catherine Viollet demonstrates in her article “*Le Vin de solitude* d’Irène Némirovsky: journal de genèse” (2014), is in fact its own hybrid text in which Némirovsky mixed what appear to be diary entries with free-writing, pre-writing notes about her vision for the novel, meta-reflexive meditations on her writing process – which for this particular novel was dependent upon evoking her childhood memories – and, most tellingly in terms of her memory crisis, notes that appear in their most tropistic form; multilingual flashes and fragments of memory.¹⁹⁴ Viollet’s in-depth work with this journal, which then led to her published article, allows behind the scenes insight into Némirovsky’s process of writing her “badly disguised autobiography.” Part of her anxiety came simply from the impossible task of voluntary memory; if she wanted to base her novel on her own memories, then she first needed to recall those memories, and as Proust

¹⁹⁴ In Némirovsky’s notes, especially her efforts at capturing memories that could then be “transposed” (a word she frequently used) into her novel, words in Russian and English punctuate the French.

tells us, the more conscious effort we make to remember something in the past, the more that something recedes. At one point in the manuscript of an early draft, Némirovsky wrote: “Si étrange que cela paraisse, j’ai oublié les paroles, et c’est bien cela, la lutte du réel et de l’imagination, les paroles volent au-dessus de la tête d’un enfant” (“As strange as it may seem, I have forgotten words, and it really is that, the struggle between what is real and what is the imagination, words fly over a child’s head”; my trans.; Viollet 172; note 8). Unable to distinguish what really happened from how she imagined it, Némirovsky was caught in the inevitable bind between autobiography and fiction, which as Viollet puts it, creates “l’ambivalence d’une écriture tendue entre deux pôles considérés comme antagonistes: autobiographie et fiction” (175). But Némirovsky’s reflection here demonstrates another obstacle for her novelistic task: aside from recalling the past experiences kept in memory, there is the problem of how to turn those experiences – not necessarily verbal ones, as “words fly over a child’s head” – into words. This obstacle points directly to the tropism, to the task of putting into language that which evades it and expresses itself at the limits of consciousness in images and sensations, and demonstrates further that although Némirovsky’s novel and Sarraute’s text take very different forms, they respond to similar dilemmas.

While Sarraute’s narrating voices express anxiety about entering into the domain of cliché, we might also glean from the ending of *Enfance* that, even if “childhood memories” border on the cliché (which the text explodes and dismantles in any case), the obstacles produced by the difficulties of memory recall – especially the tropistic memories of feeling, sensation and image – are in fact part of what provide the protective layers underneath which the author can hide. As we saw, the text ends as Natacha sits in the streetcar on her way to the first day of “lycée” (high school), and the “Je” does not

wish to go any further into what from that point becomes a crowded and well-lit space. Writing about her adolescent and adult life is too exposing without the protective cover of the “whitish cloudy layers,” the obstacles produced by the difficulties of memory recall and the challenge of representing tropisms in language. This aligns with Némirovsky’s ambivalence towards writing about herself, as evidenced in her writing notes from summer 1933 when *Le Vin de solitude* was only the beginning of an idea: “2 propositions: Finlande, sanatorium, endormi sous la neige [...]. Histoires comiques, touchantes etc. À voir. Peut-être un lieu. Moi. Ma jeunesse (je commence à peine à pouvoir parler de moi sous un vocable quelconque, discret. On en avait abusé, maintenant on pourrait risquer” (Viollet 173). Here we can see the very early stages of the blending of self and fiction in the autobiographical novel (“funny, touching stories” involving “Finland, spas, snow”) and of the precarious vulnerability involved in speaking (writing) about oneself (“Je commence à peine à pouvoir parler de moi”). Sarraute’s tropisms become a protective cover under which to hide, just as Némirovsky’s fictional “transpositions” do.

Thus, writing a fiction that stages memory, and therefore the self – whether in process within the fiction or behind the scenes – is precarious and nebulous. While staging evasion is one narrative strategy that Sarraute and Némirovsky use – albeit in completely divergent ways – to walk the anxious autobiographical tightrope, there are other strategies they use to create distance between their authorial personae and the text, or to disappear altogether into the text. These include an extensive use of ellipses as a means of “evading” the ending of thoughts, sentences, and statements, or, in the case of the “Marrano” passage of *Enfance* that we saw earlier, ellipses are sometimes used as a means of drawing attention to an absence or void that is unfillable by language. Still other

strategies of distancing, disappearance, and evasion employed in these autobiographical texts include depicting scenes of assimilation and becoming French (or aspiring to do so), and religious scenes in Christian and Catholic settings.

Authorial dissimulation and distancing are also staged within the texts through representations of both young girls' first interactions with textuality and attempts at coming to writing. But these stagings ultimately reveal an awareness of the subversive potential of writing, and particularly of autobiographical writing. In another vignette in *Enfance*, towards the end of the text which corresponds to the end of Natacha's childhood, Natacha (who by now, thanks to her French Republican education, has become Nathalie) writes a perfectly "smooth" and fictionalized composition for her French class, which the teacher has asked students to write with the prompt "Mon premier chagrin" ("My first sorrow"). Rather than writing about the many sorrows she has endured in her short life (her "separation" from her mother, as her mother liked to call it, her difficult family life with Véra and her half-sister Hélène (Lili) in which she feels like a perpetual outsider, etc), Natacha decides to write a completely fictional account of her dog's death – a dog she never had. Ironically, Natacha's writing career began in the realm of cliché, as a means of fitting in, of smoothing over the roughness of her real lived experience. Although "je" tells us that her early experience of composition was done with her childhood self's understanding of the power of words (she describes the moment of trepidation before putting the first words on the page, consulting the dictionary constantly to make sure she chose exactly the right word, etc.), she chose the safer route of fiction, and even more safe, that of the cliché. When the composition was finally finished, she tells us (within the frame of her conversation in the present with "tu"):

En relisant une dernière fois « Mon premier chagrin »... j'en connaissais par cœur des passages... je l'ai trouvé parfait, tout lisse et net et rond...

—Tu avais besoin de cette netteté, de cette rondeur lisse, il te fallait que rien ne dépasse...

—J'aimais ce qui était fixe, cernable, immuable... C'est cela qui m'a plus tard charmée dans la géométrie plane, dans la chimie inorganique, dans les premiers éléments de physique... [...] aucun risque de voir quoi que ce soit se mettre à fluctuer, devenir instable, incertain... (214-215)

The tropism (“aucun risque de voir quoi que ce soit se mettre à fluctuer, devenir instable, incertain”) scares her at this point; she seeks her father's approval and then awaits a perfect (or at least near perfect) grade from her teacher on her “smooth, clear, and well-rounded” composition. But “Je's” adult perspective implies a distance between her adult writer self and this early foray into writing, which served as a means of making nothing stand out. As Barbara Havercroft explains in her analysis of this passage in her article “L'autobiographie comme reprise: l'exemple d'*Enfance* de Sarraute”, “Reprenant les problèmes de l'écriture, ce fragment autobiographique porte donc sur l'écriture antérieure d'un texte autobiographique – un bel enchâssement qui fait ressortir le contraste entre ces deux expériences scripturales” (142). In other words, this passage offers a metanarrative about autobiographical writing through the adult writer's narration of her earlier fictional text. As “je” continues her narration of the vignette and what she desired in her father's reaction to her writing, she tells us:

Pas une seconde entre nous [mon père et moi] il ne s'agit d'une appréciation d'un autre ordre que celle qu'il ferait sur n'importe lequel de mes devoirs. Jamais n'est même de loin suggérée, jamais ne vient nous frôler l'idée de « dons d'écrivain »... rien n'est aussi éloigné...

—Es-tu sûre ?

—Absolument. Je n'ai fait qu'un très bon devoir. Je ne me suis rien permis, je n'en ai d'ailleurs aucune envie, je ne cherche jamais à dépasser les limites qui me sont assignées, pour aller vagabonder Dieu sait où, là où je n'ai rien à faire, chercher je ne sais quoi... ou plutôt ce que mon père déteste par-dessus tout, ce qu'il n'évoque qu'en plissant d'un air méprisant ses lèvres, ses paupières, et qu'il appelle « la gloriole »... certes non, je ne la cherche pas. L'idée ne me vient jamais de devenir un écrivain. [...]. Non, ce que j'aimerais, c'est d'être institutrice. (216)

Without overly psychologizing, we can see here that, narrated through the adult perspective of “Je” who has since become a writer, there is an ambivalent oscillation for young Nathalie towards writing; she seeks approval and validation and knows she has produced high quality work, yet this does not mean she wants to become a writer. Her father’s approval comes with a double-bind; while he will praise her academic performance, he does not condone indulging in “vainglory” (Wright’s translation of “la gloriole”). I interpret this as a subtle slur against Natacha’s mother, who was a writer, primarily of children’s books (scenes of her writing appear in earlier vignettes), which aligns with Simone de Beauvoir’s conception of women’s writing as narcissistic.¹⁹⁵ This negative view of women writers thus accentuates the tension between Natacha’s literary talent and her desire to please her father. The ellipses in this passage are especially striking, drawing our attention to the unsaid, to the felt and the implied, all of which create tension between the truth she tells us (“The idea of becoming a writer never occurs to me. [...] I would like to be a schoolteacher.”) whose solidity and certainty is marked by periods at the end of the statements.

A similar scene of coming to writing, marked by ambivalence, hesitation, elliptical gestures and “smoothing over” occurs in *Le Vin de solitude* when the family lives in St. Petersburg. The narrator tells us that H el ene and her parents (and her mother’s lover) are in the living room after lunch on a dreary Sunday filled with banality except for the wreckage of recent revolutionary violence surrounding them: “La r evolution de F evrier survint, passa, puis celle d’Octobre. La ville  tait hagarde, tapie dans la neige”

¹⁹⁵ According to de Beauvoir in a section of *Le Deuxi me sexe* on women (especially artists and writers) and work, “C’est ainsi que, sur la l gion de femmes qui s’essaient   taquiner les lettres et les arts, il en est bien peu qui pers v rent; celles m mes qui franchissent ce premier obstacle demeurent bien souvent partag es entre leur narcissisme et un complexe d’inf riorit . Ne pas savoir s’oublier est un d faut qui p sera sur elles plus lourdement que dans aucune autre carri re” (de Beauvoir 469, vol. II).

(1252). While the adults talk about where they should move to escape the violence (and, it is implied, persecution), Hélène is doing her German lesson which portrays a happy bourgeois family with descriptive sentences to illustrate each scene and teach vocabulary and grammar. The contrasts between the bleak aftermath of revolutionary violence beyond the living room walls, the very unhappy scene of Hélène's family within those walls, and the picture-perfect happy German family in her textbook are stark, and Hélène, an ever-perceptive and sharp observer, notices the disparities immediately. The lie of the textbook provokes her to pick up a pencil and inscribe the harsh reality of her own family into the myth of the German one, thereby beginning to dismantle it:

« Quel mensonge ! » songea Hélène. Elle regarda les êtres qui l'entouraient. Ils ne la voyaient pas, mais pour elle aussi, ils étaient irréels, lointains, à demi dissous dans la brume, des ombres vaines, inconsistantes, privées de sang et de substance ; elle vivait loin d'eux à l'écart, dans un monde imaginaire où elle était maîtresse et reine. Elle prit un bout de crayon qui traînait toujours au fond de sa poche, hésita, l'approcha du livre, doucement, doucement, comme une arme chargée. Elle écrivit :

Le père pense à une femme qu'il a rencontrée dans la rue, et la mère vient seulement de quitter un amant. Ils ne comprennent pas leurs enfants, et leurs enfants ne les aiment pas ; la jeune fille pense à son amoureux, et le garçon aux vilains mots qu'il a appris au lycée. Les petits enfants grandiront et seront pareils à eux. Les livres mentent. Il n'y a pas de vertu, ni d'amour dans le monde. Toutes les maisons sont pareilles. Dans chaque famille il y a le lucre seulement, le mensonge et l'incompréhension mutuelle. (1253, sic)

In this scene of tentative (re)writing, writing is at once an act of evasion into an imaginary world, a world whose boundaries are porous to the young reader/writer who already seems to exist on a separate plane from her "unreal" family members, and an act of powerful inscription of personal truth. The analogy between pencil and weapon is telling, as is the soft, tentative approach towards using the force of that weapon ("Elle prit un bout de crayon [...], hésita, l'approcha du livre, doucement [...] comme une arme chargée"). While Sarraute's dialogic narrative voices from the perspective of the adult

looking back are absent in Némirovsky's novel, we are left wondering how Hélène might have so much insight and cynicism as to be able to write that "every household is the same" ("Toutes les maisons sont pareilles"); this tentative first foray into writing thus also demonstrates a slippage between the boundaries of autobiography and fiction. While Natacha's essay ("My First Sorrow"), a school assignment meant to elicit an autobiographical account of something from students' real lived experience, demonstrates the capacity for fiction to "pass" as autobiography and the slippery, porous boundaries between the two, Hélène's inscription of her lived experience into a text of fiction – the fictitious German family – stages these porous boundaries from the opposite direction.

If young Natacha derives comfort and reassurance from the fixed solidity, clarity, and well-roundedness of her first fiction, Hélène also experiences a sensation of relief and comfort from writing. Némirovsky's narrator continues:

Elle s'arrêta, tourna le crayon dans sa main, et un petit sourire cruel et timide toucha ses lèvres. Cela la soulageait d'écrire ces choses. Personne ne se souciait d'elle. Elle pouvait bien se distraire à sa guise ; elle continua, appuyant à peine le crayon, mais avec une rapidité étrange, une légèreté, qu'elle n'avait jamais éprouvée jusque-là, une agilité de toute sa pensée, songeant à la fois à ce qu'elle écrivait et à ce qui se formait dans son esprit, se solidifiait brusquement. Elle jouait à ce jeu nouveau, comme elle eût regardé couler ses larmes sur ses joues et ses mains, un soir d'hiver, quand le gel les transforme en fleurs glacées.

C'est partout pareil. Et chez nous aussi, c'est pareil. Le mari, la femme et...

Elle hésita et écrivit :

L'amant...

Elle effaça le dernier mot, puis l'écrivit encore, jouissant de le voir sous ses yeux, puis de nouveau, l'effaça, ratura chaque lettre, la hérissa de fléchettes, de boucles, jusqu'à ce que le mot eût perdu son apparence première et fût devenu semblable à une bête bardée d'antennes, à une plante ornée de piquants. Ainsi, il avait un aspect maléfique bizarre, secret et rude qui lui plaisait. (1253-54, sic)

In this scene, we can see that while writing her personal truth and finally externalizing it brings catharsis for Hélène ("cela la soulageait d'écrire ces choses"), it also brings panic

and an impulse to retract, to cover it back up (“elle effaça le dernier mot”). But retracting it – erasing the pencil marks – elicits an urge to write it again (“puis l’écrivit encore, jouissant de le voir sous ses yeux”). Finally, her creative solution to visually disguise the letters of the word and turn it into a strange cryptic image (“jusqu’à ce que le mot eût perdu son apparence première et fût devenu semblable à une bête bardée d’antennes, à une plante ornée de piquants”) rather than erase it (which nonetheless would leave a trace – erasure is impossible) allows a compromise between subversion (which risks exposure) and protection (she can be assured that the word is recognizable only to her). These tentative and conflicting gestures and impulses illuminate the anxious need to write and the subversive power of language, words, and textuality. But there is more than a need, and the act brings more than catharsis; it also brings pleasure. Smith’s translation of “jouissant” as “enthralled” highlights Hélène’s captivation of the near-hypnotic and wonderous experience of writing, but it omits the sense of delight and pleasure it also gives her. Hélène’s disguise of her subversive word – “amant” (“lover”) – which is subversive for the reality it names (her mother’s adultery) and the undoing of the bourgeois family myth that naming it performs, also gives her pleasure in the strangeness it produces, though not as strong a pleasure (“plaire” vs. “jouir”) as the act of writing it in the first place. These tentative textual gestures towards subversion, and towards the pleasure-giving effect of writing, are not so unlike Cixous’ *écriture féminine*.

V. Writing with the Body, the Body Remembers: Navigating Difference towards Juifemme

As we just saw, Hélène Karol’s first foray into writing is a scene of “coming to writing” as Cixous urges women to do in her essays on *écriture féminine*. For Cixous as for Hélène Karol, this “coming to writing” is a subversive act that brings and creates

delight (“jouir; jouissance”). The jouissance H el ene Karol experiences from putting pencil to paper, naming her reality, and inscribing truth into what is otherwise an adult world of deception and hypocrisy while also playing with language by literally transforming the marks on the page thus demonstrates an example of the “jouissance” Cixous describes that comes from and with  criture f eminine.

If jouissance is at the heart of Cixous’ “theory” of  criture f eminine, so is writing with the body. In this section, we will see how writing with the body appears in *Enfance* and *Le Vin de solitude*, and how this particular kind of writing with the body reveals experiences of difference and trauma. In her analysis of *Enfance* in *Autobiographical Tightropes*, Leah D. Hewitt offers an insightful and compelling argument for reading gender within Sarraute’s two narrating voices. As we saw earlier, it is possible with a careful eye to notice that the masculine form of the adjectives “je” uses to describe “tu” allow us to interpret “tu” as a male/masculine voice, while we quickly understand that “je” corresponds to the adult perspective of Natacha, whose sex and gender as a girl are marked in the text (feminine form of the adjectives, etc.). With the help of Nancy Chodorow’s rethinking of Freud’s theory of pre-Oedipal attachment,¹⁹⁶ Hewitt argues that it is possible to read these gendered attachment patterns into the narrative voices in *Enfance*, and that such a reading allows us to see a return of the repressed feminine in Sarraute. As Hewitt writes, “[...] Nathalie’s development adheres to the dual needs of

¹⁹⁶ In *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (1978) Chodorow reframes Freud’s theory that pre-Oedipal bonding with the mother is ruptured by a child’s coming to language, which then signals a shift in identification with the father for boys, and for girls, the beginning of the Electra complex. Instead, Chodorow suggests that boys form a masculine identity through successful separation and individuation from the mother (to be a boy is to not be female like the mother) and therefore, boys’ sense of self grows from autonomy and independence. Contrastingly, Chodorow argues that girls never fully differentiate from the mother (because there is no sexed/gendered difference between them), and therefore, girls’ sense of self is rooted more in fusion and interconnection than in differentiated autonomy. (I base this brief summary on Hewitt’s own critical review in her chapter on Sarraute, Hewitt 68-69).

fusion with the other on the one hand, and self-individuation on the other” (81). While this argument may be a bit of a stretch, it nonetheless helps explain some of the autobiographical tensions we saw earlier, in which Natacha is bound between wanting to please (fuse with) her father and wanting to write (to self-individuate). In *Enfance*, as Hewitt demonstrates, we can see these gendered relational patterns in the way “je” remembers and relates to her childhood self, whose early experiences of self are very much mediated by her fusion (or painful rupture of it) with others, while “tu” consistently questions the accuracy and facticity of what “je” remembers, and how she remembers it. Hewitt illustrates this point with the following exchange between “je” and “tu” over whether “je’s” memory of an image from a book, *Max et Moritz*, in fact comes from that book. “Tu” asks: “Est-il certain que cette image se trouve dans *Max et Moritz*? Ne vaudrait-il pas mieux le vérifier?” (“Is it certain that this image is in *Max et Moritz*? Wouldn’t it be better to verify?”). “Je” responds: “Non, à quoi bon? Ce qui est certain, c’est que cette image est restée liée à ce livre et qu’est resté intact le sentiment qu’elle me donnait d’une appréhension, d’une peur qui n’était pas de la peur pour de bon, mais juste une peur drôle, pour s’amuser.” (“No, what’s the point? What *is* certain is that that picture is still associated with this book and that the feeling it gave me has remained intact: a feeling of apprehension, of a kind of fear which wasn’t real fear, but just a funny sort of fear that you could enjoy” *Enfance* 48; *Childhood* 38). In other words, for the feminine narrating voice, what matters is the lasting, *felt* impression of a past memory in the present, not the facticity and accuracy of the experience. In this simple example, we can see that for feminine “je,” memory (and experience of life itself) is a corporeal process of feeling, while for masculine “tu,” it is a cerebral intellectual process of accurate recall and cross-verification.

Nonetheless, Hewitt develops her argument largely through the mother-daughter relationship and the painful tensions this produces in Natacha/Nathalie's own relationship to language, self-affirmation and differentiation. While the mother-daughter relationship (which is complicated and made all the more fascinating by the fact that Sarraute's mother was a writer) is a very fruitful means of approaching the question of gender in *Enfance*, good work has already been done on this.¹⁹⁷ Similarly, the mother-daughter relationship represented within Némirovsky's fiction has been studied as a means of reading gender within her work.¹⁹⁸ Rather than focus on the mother-daughter relationships in *Enfance* and *Le Vin de solitude*, I will base my analysis here of reading gender – and of signs of Juifemme – in the instances of corporeal writing, which is really a corporeal remembering – often of experiences of feeling different.

Two striking examples of this kind of corporeal memory, translated into writing, are scenes involving eating and food. In one of the earlier fragments in *Enfance*, corresponding to an earlier childhood memory, “Je” brings us into the scene of being fed spoonfuls of food – first, delicious semolina pudding, and then, strawberry jam that smells and looks different than it should. Natacha is suspicious and will not eat the jam, until finally her father tells her the truth: the jam was laced with calomel in an attempt to mask the taste of the medicine that she needed to take. “Je” tells us the lasting impression this made:

L'impression un peu inquiétante de quelque chose de répugnant sournoisement introduit, caché sous l'apparence de ce qui est exquis, ne s'est pas effacée, et

¹⁹⁷ Hewitt's chapter in *Autobiographical Tightropes* (“Family Scenarios: Transcriptions of Gender and Transgressions of Genre: Nathalie Sarraute's *Childhood*” pp. 55-91) is especially incisive and instructive. Gretchen Van Slyke's article “Autobiographical Matrices and Mother Tongues in Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance*” also offers a good analysis through this lens.

¹⁹⁸ For example, Maya Semaan's article “En eaux troubles: la relation mère-fille dans l'oeuvre d'Irène Némirovsky,” in which Semaan argues that Némirovsky's monstrous mother figures – in addition to their autobiographical referent to the author's difficult (at best) relationship with her real mother – serve as a means of allowing for a symbolic matricide, which in turn allows for entry into writing.

parfois même aujourd’hui elle me revient quand je mets dans ma bouche une cuiller de confiture de fraises. (46)

This scene demonstrates that the body remembers (sometimes more powerfully and intensely than the mind) and does not repress (“même aujourd’hui [l’impression] me revient”). The scene works metaphorically as well; what is hidden beneath the surface in fact makes a stronger impression than that which hides it. Hiding, disguise, and deceit do not work when it comes to corporeal knowledge – the body knows and remembers more than the mind can. In this sense, it is possible to think about the effect of this corporeal knowledge in the process of writing memories as bodily experience. How could this *not* involve a kind of writing with the body?

A similar scene occurs early in the first section (Kiev) of *Le Vin de solitude*. The narrator tells us that Boris Karol has been away on business, leaving Hélène to eat lunch with her mother. These lunches are always fraught and leave Hélène in distress:

Comme Hélène haïssait ces déjeuners !... Combien de repas achevés dans les larmes... Lorsque, plus tard, elle revoyait dans sa mémoire cette salle à manger poussiéreuse et sombre, elle sentait aussitôt la saveur salée des larmes qui lui brouillaient la vue, coulaient le long du visage jusque dans son assiette, se mêlaient au goût des aliments. Pendant longtemps la viande avait eu pour elle un arrière-goût de sel et le pain était trempé d’amertume. (1196)

In this scene, bodily sensation literally fuses with and flows into (or out of) affective experience and emotional expression (“la saveur salée des larmes [...] se mêla[it] au goût des aliments”). And this in turn creates a corporeal memory so that meat and bread are imbued with the taste of old, yet present, bitter emotions (“Pendant longtemps la viande avait eu pour elle un arrière-goût de sel et le pain était trempé d’amertume”). There is also an autobiographical slippage here; the narrator and author seem to have become merged with the “Much later, when she remembered” (“Lorsque, plus tard, elle revoyait dans sa mémoire”). As we saw, the novel begins when the narrator tells us Hélène is eight

years old, we know that she is fifteen when in Finland, and ends with H el ene embarking on a new life of independence when we can guess she is eighteen. Thus, the narrative spans approximately ten years, but the “Much later” in this passage implies more than ten years, at which point the narrative frame has already been broken. I therefore read this as a subtle moment of N emirovsky herself entering the frame of the fiction. In both of these examples, the literary craft of bringing these lasting embodied impressions into writing demonstrates a very different kind of writing with the body than Cixous’ version of it, but we can nonetheless see that for Sarraute and N emirovsky, the body does influence writing, particularly in that of autobiographical fiction.

With these glimpses into the corporeality of memory, it becomes possible to read experiences of difference and instances of trauma embedded within the evasive narrative and textual strategies each author uses. Strikingly, these instances give way to something akin to *jouissance*, and thus echo Cixous’ call for women to “sing the abyss” and write against death. These instances of *jouissance* are affirmations of self that, as N emirovsky’s H el ene puts it, come not despite the harshness of life but because of it. We will now look at an example of these types of corporeal memory (difference, trauma, and *jouissance*) as they appear in each text.

In *Le Vin de solitude*, H el ene’s experience of difference often relates to her love of reading, which Mademoiselle Rose discourages, and which sets H el ene completely apart from the rest of her family and other children. For example, as she leaves the home of another family in Kiev with whom she and her governess had spent the afternoon, and whose family life seems happier than her own, she anticipates the evening ahead. First she imagines a happy scene of reading by lamplight at her desk. But then, she has the following inner dialogue:

« Non, je ne lirai pas... Tous ces livres, cela me rend inquiète et mécontente... Il faut être contente, il faut être comme les autres... Ce soir, le verre de lait, la tartine, la dernière barre de chocolat avant de me brosser les dents... Quand on ne me verra pas, je cacherai le *Mémorial* sous mon oreiller... Non, non. Ce soir, je découperai des images, je dessinerai... Je suis heureuse, je veux être une petite fille heureuse », songeait-elle [...]. (1203)

In this example, her unhappiness compared to the perceived happiness of other children (and especially other girls, as indicated by her tenuous idea to replace reading with doing crafts, a traditionally “feminine” pastime) is what creates her difference (“Non, je ne lirai pas... [...] Ce soir, je découperai des images, je dessinerai”). And, here again, eating and bodily routines (brushing teeth, drinking milk, etc.) are represented, in this case as a contrast to the cerebral activity of reading which, as evidenced by her thought of hiding a book (the *Mémorial de la Sainte Hélène*) beneath her pillow, is what she really desires. Reading, it would seem, is not considered an appropriate activity for girls, hinting at Hélène’s subversive relationship to textuality. At the same time, we might read the imagined act of eating and drinking as a way of substituting the pleasure she derives from that relationship with textuality; corporeality replaces textuality, which ultimately implies their interconnection in that both can provide pleasure.

Similarly in *Enfance*, Natacha’s experience of difference also arises from the perceived happiness of other children compared to her own (implied) unhappiness. In the following vignette, her father has taken her to some sort of carousel or carnival ride which involves a game of catching rings with a long rod as they move past. Natacha is unable to catch any rings, and this causes her to compare herself to other children:

Mais qu’est-ce que c’est, quand d’autres enfants aussi petits que moi, et même plus petits, savent si bien les décrocher... à la fin du parcours les anneaux qu’ils ont réussi à enfiler sur la tige la couvrent parfois presque entièrement... Je prends le sucre d’orge que quand même on me donne, j’écoute les consolations, les conseils des grandes personnes... « Tu vois, tu te crispes trop, il ne faut pas, tu as vu comme font les autres enfants... ils le font en s’amusant... » Oui, je voudrais

tant pouvoir comme eux, avec cette facilité, cette légèreté qu'ils ont, cette insouciance... Pourquoi est-ce que je ne peux pas ? (61)

Other children's "lighthearted insouciance" ("cette légèreté, cette insouciance qu'ils ont") eludes Natacha. The more she compares herself to the other children, the more tense she becomes, and we can infer that what other children do for fun, she finds stressful and anxiety-producing. Scenes of her reading and interacting with texts (cutting the pages of new books her mother received, the lasting impressions of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *The Prince and the Pauper*, of *Max and Moritz*, etc.) are frequent throughout the vignettes of *Enfance*, and while these scenes do not explicitly contrast her affinity for reading with more "appropriate" activities for young girls (as in the above excerpt from *Le Vin de solitude*), these many scenes of reading and textuality and their profound impact on Natacha do contrast tellingly with this scene of the carousel game. Here too, eating barley sugar serves as a means of substituting for the pleasure she otherwise so easily experiences from reading and working with words. As these two excerpts demonstrate, there is thus a connection established between corporeality and textuality in which textuality for these two young girls is experienced as a sign of difference.

Thus, the above scenes illustrate bodily experiences (and memory) of difference, measured in terms of what gives pleasure and happiness. We can also see evidence that what and how the body holds trauma, which also signifies a "difference" that Natacha and Hélène perceive about themselves, subtly appears in these texts as well. In *Enfance*, several vignettes offer fragmented glimmers of the traumatic reason for her father's exile from Russia. The first time this memory appears in the text, Natacha's father calls her into his study and takes a postcard out of his desk drawer that was addressed to her from her uncle, his brother. He tells her: "On a trouvé cette carte postale sur lui..." (154). She immediately understands what is contained within the ellipses that follow her father's

words: her uncle died while on his way to France from Sweden, where he had fled to escape from the Okhrana, the Czar's secret police. "Je" recalls learning the meaning of the word "Okhrana" for the first time that day: "un nom terrifiant que j'ai appris ici, que mon père a dû quitter pour toujours la Russie..." (154). The ellipses are significant in this scene, and point to the trauma that remains unspeakable, beyond words.

The trauma provoked by the word "Okhrana" returns in a later fragment. In this later instance, Natacha's father has invited a group of Russian political exiles over for dinner. She describes his irreverent humor towards some such exiles who he says suffer from "espionnisme" ("espionitis") – a paranoia that they are being watched by members of their own group who are only passing as revolutionaries and are really part of the Okhrana. At this point, "Tu" interjects:

—Quand quelques années plus tard a éclaté la révolution et se sont ouverts les dossiers de l'Okhrana, on a pu constater que parfois ces soupçons étaient fondés. (197)

To this, "Je" responds with more narration:

—Mon père qui se moque de cette maladie, ne peut s'empêcher, quand quelqu'un lui déplaît, de s'emparer de lui et d'en faire un personnage si inquiétant, si compliqué et si comique que tous l'écoutent comme fascinés, enchantés de son humour, de ses trouvailles, de ses saillies... ses yeux sombres pétillent, ses dents blanches luisent, sa verve, son esprit sont une lame étincelante qui tranche... parfois dans le vif... parfois il me semble que c'est en moi aussi qu'elle atteint... c'est pourtant dans quelqu'un d'autre, que je connais à peine ou pas du tout qu'elle s'enfonçe... mais je sens en moi son glissement froid... j'ai un peu mal, un peu peur... les autres sentent-ils cela comme moi ? (197)

I read this scene as one of a subtle and indirect moment of trauma cutting through. With such a reading, her father's use of humor ("mon père se moque de cette maladie") to deflect and twist the terror of the Okhrana is a strategy for indirectly processing (or perhaps for further repressing) the trauma of his brother's death, which is in fact is connected to the people he makes fun of. Thus, the use of humor attempts to subvert (or

perhaps circumvent) the truth that the Okhrana is terrifying and has caused unspeakable trauma, but is in fact a repetition that marks the trauma's return. The effect of this on young Natacha is a *felt*, corporeal experience (“je sense en moi son gissement froid”), and once again serves to highlight her potential difference from others (“les autres sentent-ils cela comme moi?”). At the same time, it is a moment of violent fusion with the person her father mocks, and really, therefore it is a fusion with her dead uncle (“parfois il me semble que c’est en moi aussi qu’elle atteint...c’est pourtant dans quelqu’un d’autre, que je connais à peine ou pas du tout qu’elle s’enfonce...”); her tropistic reaction to her father’s dark humor demonstrates her capacity for empathy and openness to others, as well as the trauma she has indirectly inherited. Familial trauma and collective violent history merge and become superimposed here, which Natacha feels – and remembers – within her body.

A similar scene of trauma as a marker of difference, as an embodied memory, and as a palimpsest of individual and collective occurs at the end of the St. Petersburg section of *Le Vin de solitude*. Mademoiselle Rose has just died in the hospital after her nervous breakdown (itself a manifestation of her own trauma), and the Karols are preparing to leave St. Petersburg for Finland as revolutionary violence is heightening again. Hélène looks out the window and, via the narrator, we learn her inner thoughts:

Qu’importait la santé, la vie d’un être humain maintenant ? Que l’un meure, que l’autre vive, qu’est-ce que cela pouvait bien faire ? Dans les rues de la ville, des hommes portaient au cimetière des enfants morts, cousus dans des sacs, car il y en avait trop pour faire à chacun la dépense d’un cercueil. **Dans son souvenir** elle se revoyait quelques jours auparavant, entre deux leçons, collée à la fenêtre, petite fille en tablier, de grosses boucles dans le cou, les doigts tachés d’encre et regardant avidement, sans baisser les yeux, sans crier, sans autre signe d’émotion visible qu’une pâleur livide l’envahissant jusqu’aux lèvres, l’exécution d’un homme. (1267, emphasis added)

In this scene, we see Mademoiselle Rose's death inserted into the larger atmosphere of violence unfolding outside H el ene's window. Smith's translation of this scene into English omits the role of memory that makes the connection between Mademoiselle Rose's death and the violence H el ene witnesses in the original French.¹⁹⁹ In N emirovsky's original French, H el ene's internal process of grieving Mademoiselle Rose triggers her memory of the execution she had in fact witnessed a few days earlier ("Dans son souvenir, elle se revoyait quelques jours auparavant"). Here we see the traumatic impact of the violent atmosphere of the historical period narrated through the very acute personal experience of a childhood loss. The banality of everyday life – doing schoolwork – contrasts with the ubiquity of violence, death and sorrow. The physical description of H el ene as a little girl (her clothes for doing schoolwork, her curls, her fingers stained with ink) contrasts even more sharply with the violence swirling around her. But while she appears numb to it, her body tells a different story. Her face and lips lose their color as she watches the execution ("sans autre signe d' emotion visible qu'une p aleur livide l'envahissant jusqu'aux l evres").

As the narrative continues and the St. Petersburg chapter draws to its close, we see this corporeal mode of remembering and holding trauma enfolded within and merging into the larger historical backdrop. The description of revolutionary violence becomes even more graphic at the same time as it becomes, strangely, more banal:

Cinq soldats en rang ; devant le mur, debout, un homme d ej a bless e,   la t ete band ee, ensanglant ee, branlante comme celle d'un homme ivre. Il  tait tomb e, on

¹⁹⁹ Smith's translation:

What was the health and life of a human being worth these days? What did it matter whether one person lived and the other died? All over the city people carried dead children to the cemetery tied up in sacks, for there were simply too many to afford a coffin. A few days before, during a break between lessons, she herself had watched a man being executed; and she was just a little girl in a smock, with fat curls round her neck and fingers stained with ink; she stood glued to the window, staring out, without looking away, without crying out, with no outward sign of emotion except for a gradual draining of color in her face until her lips turned white. (121-122)

l'avait emporté, comme on avait emporté, un autre jour, sur un brancard, une femme inconnue, morte, roulée dans son châle noir, comme un chien affamé était venu mourir sous cette même fenêtre, son maigre flanc ouvert et saignant. Et l'enfant était retournée à sa table de travail et avait recommencé à annoncer à la petite flamme pâle de la bougie :

« Racine peint les hommes tels qu'ils sont, et Corneille tels qu'ils devraient être... »

Ou, car les manuels d'histoire n'avaient pas changé encore :

« Le père de notre bien-aimé empereur actuel, Nicolas II, s'appelait Alexandre III et était monté sur le trône en... »

La vie, la mort, c'est si peu de chose... (1267)

The sequence of interchanging images of violence that Héléne had witnessed (from the execution to the bloody man carried off by soldiers, to the anonymous dead woman to the starving dog) underscores not only the ubiquity of violence, but also what has become banal about it as a result of its omnipresence. All of this contrasts so sharply with the image of a child returning to her schoolwork after taking a break to look out the window. Némirovsky exposes here, from the perspective of a young girl, the fallacy of what we read in history books and the disparity between an ideal morality (Corneille) and the tragic reality of human nature (Racine). Héléne becomes witness to history and observer of senseless violence, all of which is filtered through the fresh experience of her own deeply personal traumatic loss of Mademoiselle Rose. As the narrative continues, nightfall comes and Héléne dreads falling asleep in the room she shared with Mademoiselle Rose, whose absence is painfully and hauntingly felt through her empty bed in the room. We see Héléne's trauma express itself in the most corporeal mode:

Sa tête pesante retombait sur sa poitrine, mais ce qu'elle redoutait surtout, c'était le sommeil... Ne pas s'endormir, ne pas oublier, ne pas chercher au réveil, lorsque la conscience du malheur est vague et embrumée encore, sur ce lit vide, le visage familier... Elle serrait les dents, se tournait vers l'ombre, mais l'ombre était effrayante [...]. Le brouillard collait aux vitres ses blêmes vapeurs éclairées par la lune. L'odeur de l'eau semblait passer à travers les fenêtres fermées, monter du plancher, ramper vers elle. Et quand, pleine d'horreur, elle se détournait, elle voyait de nouveau le lit vide. [...]. Le lendemain, ce fut elle qui rangea les tiroirs, enferma dans une malle les pauvres effets de Mlle Rose [...], puis elle ferma le

couvercle, tourna la clé, et jamais plus ne prononça devant aucun des siens le nom de Mlle Rose. (1267-68)

Hélène's clenched teeth and the very sensorial experience of fear and trauma in the dark bedroom (obscured vision, the dank smell of water, the monstrous, snakelike movement of the water) indicate a corporeal memory. The endlessly repeating cycle of looking away from the bed out of fear and then looking back towards it to escape the other fear-inducing sensations thematizes the way trauma works as we saw in the previous chapter. The act of closing the trunk containing Mademoiselle Rose's belongings and turning the key mirrors Hélène's subsequent silence; both the trunk and Hélène's capacity to speak of what she has witnessed and lost are closed and sealed. This is the language of trauma before there was any language to describe it.

But if Némirovsky and Sarraute subtly evoke trauma through equally subtle forms of corporeal writing, they also textualize remembered experiences of intense fusion with the world, felt through and with the body. These experiences signal *jouissance*, and fittingly, they appear towards the end of each text as a form of climax. In *Enfance*, this climactic scene of joyous fusion happens while Natacha, now Nathalie, is on summer vacation in the mountains near the Isère river, just before starting high school, at which point, according to "Je," her childhood (and the text) ends:

Je dévale en courant, en me roulant dans l'herbe rase et drue parsemée de petites fleurs des montagnes jusqu'à l'Isère qui scintille au bas des prairies, entre les grands arbres... je m'agenouille sur son bord, je trempe mes mains dans son eau transparente, j'en humecte mon visage, je m'étends sur le dos et je l'écoute couler, je respire l'odeur de bois mouillé des énormes troncs de sapins écorcés portés par son courant et qui ont échoué près de moi dans les hautes herbes... je colle mon dos, mes bras en croix le plus fort que je peux contre la terre couverte de mousse pour que toutes les sèves me pénètrent, qu'elles se répandent dans tout mon corps, je regarde le ciel comme je ne l'ai jamais regardé... je me fonds en lui, je n'ai pas de limites, pas de fin. (275)

This passage is strikingly descriptive, and seems completely at odds with Sarraute's philosophies of writing in which nothing but the tropism matters – setting, scenery, and descriptive passages are irrelevant according to her essays in *L'Ère du soupçon*. And yet, what appears to be pure description of scenery (“l'herbe rase,” “petites fleurs de montagnes,” “l'Isère qui scintille au bas des prairies”) quickly becomes much more upon a closer reading. With the very sensorial, corporeal language of movement (“je dévale” – hurtling, “en me roulant” – rolling, “je m'agenouille” – kneeling, “je trempe” – dipping, “je m'étends” – lying down, “je respire” – breathing, “je colle” – pressing, “je regarde” – looking) and feeling/sensing (the eyes see the sparkling water, the mountain scenery, the stripped pines and the expansive sky; the skin feels the moisture of the water, the luxuriant grass, the saps of the moss-covered earth; the nose smells the wet wood; the ear hears the water flowing), readers are brought into the experience it reproduces, thus adding yet another layer of fusion between Nathalie, readers, and the world she (and we) melt into, with no limits.

Paradoxically, then, this is the tropism in its climax – its most powerful, potent form –, disguised as mere description. This sensorial, corporeal experience of joyous and uninhibited fusion (and interpenetration) with the world also signals a moment of self-affirmation and individuation. She is completely alone in this experience, yet her openness and receptivity to the world beyond the limits of her body allow the intense fusion that occurs. It is in this sense that the tropism “betrays” her; we see her very clearly – at the end of an autobiographical fiction – and fuse with her *as herself*. And, as we have seen, it is the feminine narrating voice who views memory as a lasting impression of a felt sense. In other words, the tropism is ultimately what makes her – as herself – the most accessible and visible, but it does so in a way that does not give in to

essentialism. In this sense, Sarraute walks her autobiographical tightrope with great integrity.

In *Le Vin de solitude*, we already saw the climactic ending of H el ene Karol's symphony, in which she sits alone on the Champs  lys ees and recognizes the beauty and joy of her freedom and independence through a similar sensation of fusion with the wind and surrounding scenery. But there is also a slightly earlier scene that echoes and builds towards its final climactic ending; H el ene is on vacation in Biarritz with her parents, but slips away to the beach by herself in the early morning:

C' tait l'automne ; la plage  tait vide ; les vagues d' quinoxe montaient si haut que l'air   travers elles paraissait humide, iris ,  tincelant de mille feux. H el ene entra dans la mer, et il lui semblait que l'eau sal e ruisselant sur son corps effa ait la fatigue des veilles et la souillure de sa vie. Elle se couchait dans l'eau, regardait en riant le ciel au-dessus de sa t te, songeait avec reconnaissance : « On ne peut pas  tre malheureuse lorsqu'on a ceci : l'odeur de la mer, le sable sous les doigts... l'air, le vent... » Elle rentra tard, heureuse de sentir sous sa robe son corps frais et humide encore du bain ; elle avait tordu   la h te ses cheveux mouill s ; elle  tait, cependant, un peu honteuse d'elle-m me ; elle n' tait pas  loign e de se croire niaise pour pouvoir prendre un plaisir aussi parfait d'une mani re aussi innocente. (1351)

This scene of solitude and sensuous corporeal communion with the natural world is rich in symbolism. Unlike Sarraute's tropistic climax, this scene signifies an important moment of transition and turning point in the novel, which is best emblemized by H el ene's ambivalent reaction to the innocence of the simple pleasure she experienced in the ocean. Her slight feeling of shame signals the shift between the end of childhood and the beginning of her adult womanhood; she is ashamed of the simplicity and innocence of the "perfect pleasure" ("un plaisir aussi parfait") she found, indicating perhaps that she has moved beyond the innocence of childhood. And yet, her experience, the memory / imprint of which remains palpably within (and on the surface of) her body, was undeniably pleasurable. The shame she feels is thus also derived from the fact that she

felt pleasure in the first place, and all the more so since this was a pleasure she gave herself – the ultimate radical act of self-assertion and affirmation in a society in which women’s sexuality was a “dark continent” and defined only in subordinate relationship to men. Her transition from girlhood to womanhood, marked in this ritualistic scene of cleansing and ushering in the new, is followed in the novel by her father’s decline and death, which then signals her departure from the family apartment and the final scene on the bench near the Arc de Triomphe. That final scene of new life in the wake of her father’s death is reminiscent not only of Cixous’ own story of coming to writing, which she says grew out of her father’s death, but also of the power of feminine writing to “sing the abyss” and write beyond death.

We might therefore read this cleansing ocean scene as an affirmation of life. Suicide was a recurring theme in Némirovsky’s work,²⁰⁰ and in *Le Vin de solitude*, Hélène contemplates throwing herself into the river in St. Petersburg the night Mademoiselle Rose has her breakdown and is taken away to the hospital. In that earlier setting, she decides against it, resolving instead to no longer rely on her parents – or anyone else – for help. Her nascent independence acts as a balm and prefigures the ocean scene as well as the final scene at the Arc de Triomphe. This ocean scene is thus a “reprise”²⁰¹ of that earlier moment, and her choice to laugh and take pleasure in the water signifies the ultimate subversion of tragedy (and death). While the earlier St. Petersburg scene in which she decides against suicide signals the beginning of her assertion of

²⁰⁰ Némirovsky’s various biographers explain this recurring theme by her French governess’ suicide when she was in her early teens.

²⁰¹ In her article on Sarraute, Barbara Havercroft reads *Enfance* through the lens of Kierkegaard’s concept of “reprise” – a process of revisiting and reworking something from the past by “taking up again.” Havercroft illustrates her argument in part through Sarraute’s use of verbs with the prefix “re-“, signaling the process of rethinking, revisiting, remembering, return, revision. We might thus read this scene through a similar lens.

independence and resilience, it is not until this ocean scene that those assertions happen simultaneously with – and perhaps because of – her sense of oneness (or fusion) with the outer world felt with/in the body.²⁰²

Despite the sensuous fusion in this scene, however, there is no mention of the sense of hearing. Hélène feels the sand running through her fingers, the wind and the air against her face, and smells the ocean. While there is no sound made explicit in this passage, it is implied: the big waves, the wind, and her laugh would all make sound. This is significant because it connects the various poetic resonances of *Juifemme*, especially as Elaine Marks reads the term. Marks' emphasis on the "j'ouis" ("I hear") contained within the sounds of the word "Juifemme" conveys, on the one hand, the relationship between sensing and being (to sense is to be alive, audible in French with the assonance between "j'ouis" – "I hear," and "je suis" – "I am"), and on the other hand, the ethical aspect of hearing (we can only open to the other and respond to their call if we can hear the call). But it is also possible to hear silence, and in Némirovsky's ocean scene, Hélène's laugh breaks it. At the same time, "j'ouis" and "je jouis" ("I enjoy, I have pleasure, I delight") create an assonance as well. Hearing, enjoying, and being are interrelated, and in this scene, these three parts come together and demonstrate Hélène as a young *Juifemme*.

These scenes of trauma as well as of fusion and pleasure in *Enfance* and *Le Vin de solitude* thus portray and enact the "écriture juiféminine" of this chapter's title. While these scenes occur from within the "Juifemme closet," they nonetheless carry traces and echoes of the later generations' writing beyond death, writing with the body, and writing as Jewish women in all the complexities of those identities. At the same time, these

²⁰² If we read *Le Vin de solitude* as a female bildungsroman, as Kershaw and Suleiman do, then we can see this scene as one of the most significant steps in Hélène's path to self-actualization.

scenes of trauma and fusion demonstrate an opening to otherness, and convey the deeper, ethical and ontological dimensions of “Juifemme.”

VI. The Ethics and politics of remembering

We have seen throughout this chapter that memory – as a process and as an act – presents pitfalls and stirs anxieties both within these texts and beyond them. The ethical responsibility of remembering Némirovsky and her story, brought back to the surface with *Suite française*, has shaped the way her work is now read, for better or for worse. Her status as Holocaust victim has to a large extent become the lens through which her fiction is now marketed and read, and plays into the perception of a surfeit of Jewish memory at the expense of recognition of other groups’ suffering. Her story, both of her life in France in the interwar years and of her posthumous return to the French cultural landscape, encapsulates the evolution of how Jews have been perceived in France throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first: from the (fantasized) symbol of the most successful assimilation into the Republic to the perception of Jews as victims par excellence. As Henry Rousso has argued since the 1980s, French public memory politics demonstrate an obsessive need to memorialize Jewish victims of totalitarian genocide at the expense of confronting other troubling pasts (that of (de)colonization in particular), which ultimately further unsettle any possibility of the Republican universal assimilationist model.

Sarraute, for her part, did not allow herself to speak of her own wartime experiences of living in clandestine precarity as suffering or hardship. In her interview with Marc Saporta for the issue of *L’Arc* dedicated to her, she gives a very factual and unemotional account of her life during that period when Saporta asks her about it. In an

interview with Jacques Doillon, a filmmaker who directed the cinematic rendition of her play *Pour un oui ou pour un non* (1988), Sarraute implies that there is a comparative measure of suffering that denies her the right to talk about what she went through in the years of Nazi occupation: “Je n’ai pas le droit, étant donné ce qu’ont subi les autres, de commencer à parler de mes malheurs à cette époque-là.”²⁰³ (“I don’t have the right, considering what others suffered, to begin to speak of my misfortunes during that period”). While I have not been able to determine the exact date of this interview, Sarraute began working with Doillon in the late 1980s, and it was presumably within that time that he interviewed her. The late 1980s was marked in France by the Klaus Barbie trial, the beginning of identity politics and multiculturalism, and the beginning of debates on the “surfeit” of Jewish memory. Sarraute’s responses to Saporta and Doillon are telling; if, in the early 1980s she was willing to answer Saporta’s questions about the facts of what happened to her, albeit with very limited detail, by the late 1980s and early 1990s, when she likely was interviewed by Doillon, she was unwilling to talk about it at all.²⁰⁴ As we have seen, Sarraute was skeptical of “identity” and its relevance in the experience of an individual in the world in general. In the era of identity politics and multicultural debates, and of the beginning of the solidification of French Holocaust memory, it makes sense that Sarraute would especially minimize (if not completely avoid) her own participation in these debates.

²⁰³ Cited as an epigraph in Bouchardeau, p. 101. This is the only bibliographical information I have, as Bouchardeau does not list her source.

²⁰⁴ For example, she matter of factly told Saporta that she hosted Samuel Beckett (and was later irritated that he had intimated that he had been uncomfortable while staying with the Sarrautes) she was betrayed by one of her neighbors in the village where she hosted Beckett, she had to move, she did not follow her father to Switzerland nor wear the star.

In a way, Sarraute's eschewal of questions of her own victimhood – which demonstrates both her recognition that she was lucky and her respect for those who were not – and Némirovsky's treatment as victim before all else represent two extreme ends of the spectrum of Holocaust memory and open up the questions of what constitutes victimhood and suffering and how to ethically respond. In *Aversion and Erasure: The Fate of the Victim After the Holocaust*, historian Carolyn Dean examines the historical and theoretical treatment of Holocaust survivors in public political discourse in France and the United States and analyzes the development of victimization, competing victimhoods, and the idea of suffering as identity. In her conclusion, Dean writes: "In the end victims cease to have identities and experiences and become projections of others' own anxieties – about injury, about vulnerability, about democracy. The historical experience of victims is erased in favor of figuring victimization as a form of too much memory. The surfeit of memory stands in for the erasure of real identity in favor of illusions about the singularity of one's own suffering" (182). If Némirovsky is remembered above all as a victim, and Sarraute was asked repeatedly about the impact of her real life experiences in her writing, might these critical considerations – the obsession with identity and biography – of these writers be an example of such projections of French anxiety? That Sarraute and Némirovsky both wrote autobiographical fictions that end at the onset of adulthood is significant; while we can read *Le Vin de solitude* in particular as a female bildungsroman, a radical appropriation of a traditionally male form (as is/was autobiography), we can also read it as a skillful navigation of such projections. By ending these texts at the end of childhood, Sarraute and Némirovsky are able to (re)present themselves beyond the trappings of identity politics and foreshadow Cixous'

later agenda of undercutting and subverting those very politics as encapsulated by “Juifemme.”

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED?

“On nous a figées entre deux mythes horribles : entre la Méduse et l’abîme. Il y aurait de quoi faire éclater de rire la moitié du monde, si ça ne continuait pas.” – Cixous, “Sorties” (p. 81)

“You only are free when you realize that you belong no place – you belong every place – no place at all.” – Maya Angelou

Reading the three generations of writers studied in this project counter-chronologically from within our contemporary era of the first two decades of the twenty-first century, we can see that what we witness now of the social-political world – heightened white nationalist rhetoric and power, increased xenophobia and anti-immigrant political movements, heads of state bordering on the fascistic, intensified race-based and antisemitic violence, ongoing gender inequality and sexual violence, increased immigration as refugees seek asylum and a chance for survival, young generations struggling under financial strain to make a life for themselves and the desire for solidarity even as it is difficult to create it – is indeed not so different from what formed the backdrop of Némirovsky and Sarraute’s early adulthoods of the 1930s. While we have more vocabulary now with which to name and speak of these experiences, including trauma, violence, discrimination, oppression and exclusion, they continue to play out across lines of difference and perhaps nowhere more acutely and paradoxically than in Israel. As we navigate these same questions of how to create a more just and inclusive social-political model, we see the splintering of society into separate like-minded and/or like-identified groups and the damaging, divisive and counter-productive effects of such social behavior; limiting our contact with others to include only those who are like us eliminates the possibility of meaningful change by also eliminating opportunity for

dialogue. At the same time, if at the individual level we now face an ethical crisis in our inability and/or unwillingness to engage with anyone who differs from us ideologically, we also face an ethical crisis at the collective level as the exclusionary (hateful) political rhetoric of (white) nationalism increasingly aligns with the state itself. What have we learned?

That this project began with Boukhobza's novel and ends with Némirovsky's highlights the need for skepticism towards any notion of historical progress or teleological views. As we saw, Némirovsky eventually suspected the impossibility of assimilation of European Jews, while Sarraute refused to engage publicly in any sociopolitical debate related to social markers of difference. If European Jews were inassimilable in this earlier generation, Boukhobza's postcolonial generation has grappled with the impossibility of assimilation for Mizrahi and Sephardi Jews from former colonies. Not included within the Beur movement of the 1980s to demand recognition of anti-Maghrebi (Arab) racism in France, postcolonial Jews such as Boukhobza experience ambivalence and confusion in terms of belonging and citizenship. This is heightened by Israel, which promises more than it delivers, and which perpetuates its own version of Ashkenazic dominance so that, as we saw in *Un Été à Jérusalem*, "Arab Jews" such as Boukhobza's Mavrika/Sarah are marginalized and silenced within Israel. At the same time, Israeli militarized nationalism and colonization of Palestinians further fuels and ignites the divide between Arabs and Jews in France, and accounts in part for the rise in antisemitic violence in France since the beginning of the twenty-first century.

By beginning with Boukhobza's more contemporary novel written after the Holocaust, after decolonization, and after the creation of the State of Israel and ending with Némirovsky's pre-Holocaust, pre-Israel, and pre-decolonization novel of fifty years

before, we can see that Némirovsky's anxious Russian Jewish world of interwar France with its burgeoning antisemitism, fueled by immigration and a struggling economy is not so different from Boukhobza's anxious postcolonial Tunisian Jewish world of 1980s France with its rise in identity politics, heightened attention towards Jews as Holocaust victims – with a clear emphasis on European Jews implied – , the French political turn away from Israel, and the failures of the insufficient republican model for addressing and absorbing these debates. In both cases, the kinds of Jews Némirovsky and Boukhobza write about (whether from Eastern Europe or from former North African colonies) are still insider-outsiders and markers of difference, of not fitting in any one box. Both Némirovsky and Boukhobza were stateless – Némirovsky for the entirety of her life in France after fleeing Russia, and Boukhobza for thirteen years after Tunisian independence and arriving in France. Thus, both Héléne Karol and Sarah/Mavrika must create their own path forward, beyond the inherited structures of family and culture, and find “ways out” (“sorties”) for themselves because they reject those limitations.

Némirovsky and Boukhobza make interesting bookends in terms of their positioning as writers and in terms of the form and content of their writing, and they mark a historical shift in the way questions of Jewishness and models of inclusion have been conceived in France. As Thomas Nolden writes in *In Lieu of Memory*,

The process of re-Judaization²⁰⁵ has reversed the trend Judaism had been experiencing since the French Revolution when the French Jews were granted emancipation and when a transformation began that turned the *Juifs* [Jews] to *Israélites* [Israelites], to highly emancipated citizens. According to the historian Annette Wieviorka, the renewed interest in Judaism and Jewish life and culture has taken hold with incredible speed during the last fifteen years, bidding farewell to the notion of Jewish invisibility embodied by the “Israelite” that prompted Wieviorka to state in 2000: “Qu'on le veuille ou non, le modèle républicain

²⁰⁵ By “re-Judaization,” Nolden refers to the signs of a recovering, flourishing Jewish cultural life in France, such as days dedicated to public memorialization, the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme in the Marais neighborhood of Paris, which opened in 1998, public television programs, Jewish film festivals, etc. Nolden sees writers of Boukhobza's generation as active participants in this process of re-Judaization.

traditionnel est derrière nous. Il n'y a plus, dans notre pays, de Français de confession mosaïque" (2000, 26) [Whether one likes it or not, the traditional republican model is behind us. There are no longer, in our country, any French of the faith of Moses]. (3)

The republican model to which Sarraute clung so dearly and to which Némirovsky aspired (at least partially) to belong, has proven insufficient for Boukhobza's generation in the aftermath of the Shoah and decolonization. Yet Boukhobza, the youngest writer included in this project, also marks a return to the "traditional" novel which was Némirovsky's form of choice. They also both reject aspects of Jewishness that mark their geographies and their time. As we have seen, Némirovsky looked, at least to some extent, to make herself an Israélite and distanced herself from unassimilated Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews who escaped pogroms and immigrated to France in droves in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Throughout her work, she portrayed these unassimilated Jews in France with such repugnance that her linguistic depictions border on the antisemitic, while her portrayal of assimilated Jews such as the eponymous protagonist of *David Golder* reproduces antisemitic clichés of the Jew as parvenu, social climber, and financial manipulator. But while this was a literary strategy of distancing herself from that group, and of drawing a clear line of separation between them, there is a certain contradictory ambivalence that characterizes her depictions as well, and is put into relief when reading excerpts of interviews. As Hannah Arendt wrote in *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewess*, "In a society on the whole hostile to the Jews [...] it is possible to assimilate only by assimilating to anti-Semitism also."²⁰⁶

Similarly, as we saw in the first chapter of this project, Boukhobza's narrator in *Un Été à Jérusalem* simultaneously scorns and distances herself from Israeli Zionist

²⁰⁶ Cited in Suleiman, *The Némirovsky Question* (p. 19) and in Marks, *Marrano as Metaphor* (p. 147).

politics as well as what for her have become outmoded patriarchal forms within traditional Tunisian Judaism that have silenced her mother. While she is not “Israélite” enough for her Parisian lover Bernard, she cannot fully condone and accept Israeli, nor Tunisian Mizrahi society either. Nonetheless, Boukhobza marks a return to the “Juif” – she does not position herself as a writer on the edges of Jewish questions, but squarely in the midst of them. While in *Un Été à Jérusalem*, Boukhobza finds (and forges) a “way out” through processes of queering and reclaiming aspects of the abject Jewish feminine that very much align with Cixous’ vision of the laughing Medusa, Némirovsky’s “way out” was through fiction that transmuted her social proximities to Eastern European Jewishness into portrayals of otherness that play into exoticism for French readers and that – she thought – an “assimilated” Israelite would make, even as she began to doubt the possibility of assimilation in the first place.

In this way then, we can see that the shape of this project – and the stories it traces – is more circular than linear; we end in a similar place as where we began, although certain cataclysmic changes and developments have emerged, and attitudes about Jewishness and what makes someone Jewish have shifted. Israel, the Holocaust and decolonization shape Boukhobza’s (post)modern novelistic universe, while Némirovsky’s modern one was shaped by aspirations of assimilation and secularism against the backdrop of burgeoning antisemitism.

Ultimately, this “full circle” demonstrates that neither political model – assimilationist universalism on the one hand and multiculturalist identity-based politics on the other – completely “works.” Rather, Cixous’ “Juifemme” signals one potential way out; a universalism that includes the particular and the heterogeneous, that truly opens itself to the other without theorizing it. The “I hear,” (j’ouïs”), “I am” (“je suis”)

and “the soul” (“âme”) must include the “Juif” and the “femme” without turning them into characters, into types, into categories, into the objects of theory.

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