

TEMPLE OF THE UNFAMILIAR: CHILDHOOD MEMORIES IN NINA BOURAOUI,
YING CHEN, AND GISÈLE PINEAU

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This dissertation is an analysis of the ways in which the remembered past of childhood is inscribed in four francophone novels written at the turn of the twenty-first century: Nina Bouraoui's *L'âge blessé* and *Garçon manqué*, Ying Chen's *Le champ dans la mer*, and Gisèle Pineau's *L'espérance-macadam*. These texts belong to a substantial corpus of contemporary narratives in which the remembering of childhood experiences plays a central role. Within that corpus we find a new approach to childhood emerging, one in which an unfamiliar past returns through the remembered voice of a wounded child. This voice overwhelms the text, fracturing the narrative through the irruption of images that it cannot contain. This dissertation is a study of the characteristics of this new "aesthetics of rupture."

Memories of childhood in these texts are overshadowed by shattering past events that went unrecognized and unacknowledged. As a result of the wounds inflicted upon

the child, the adult narrator remembers the past through physical symptoms of pain. Far from suturing the wounds of the past, remembering childhood becomes an incessant confrontational engagement with past traumas. The reader is then able to hear the scream of the wide-eyed child through a process of empathetic identification with the narrator's visceral memories.

My introductory chapters provide a historical context to the development of representations of childhood in French and Francophone literature. Chapter III studies the ways in which childhood memories can actualize the past as a set of interruptive and destabilizing images. Theories of the non-representational revelation of the past serve as a starting point to my reading of Bouraoui's *L'âge blessé*. Chapter IV concentrates on the affective quality of memories so as to understand the narrator's ambivalent affective relationship to the past of childhood in Chen's *Le champ dans la mer*. Chapter V attempts to capture the ways in which the memory of a child's voice can be heard as a literary scream in Bouraoui's *Garçon manqué*. Chapter VI is a reading of Pineau's *L'esprérance-macadam* in which I take into account the unseen gaze of the child to consider the role of hope in this text.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Mon enfance serre mes tempes, écarte mes pupilles, affine mon grand âge, je prie à voix haute et dépliée, je sillonne un autre pays fichue d'une autre peau, ouverte au cou, aux poignets, aux chevilles, les rivets des esclaves ; mon enfance est une broche, une attelle, une force, un pouls ajouté, elle fragmente ma solitude, [. . .] elle sucre l'amer et dilue le poison des ennuis, elle frappe à ma porte, tambourine, traque, c'est un chant, un serment, une possession, une mèche de feu. (18-19)

This passage from Nina Bouraoui's *L'âge blessé* evokes the call of childhood memories. Childhood in these jarring memories inhabits the body of the narrator, forcing her to face and relive painful realities. These confrontational and haunting memories also seem to take her on a journey away from the solitude of mundane life, a journey accompanied by an incantatory song resembling a pagan prayer, an expression of fear and horror that nevertheless seems to point to an ephemeral hope. This is a harsh and ambivalent call whose images cannot be simply incorporated within established roles traditionally assigned to childhood memories. Indeed, the predominant approaches to writing or remembering childhood in literature are not easily capable of accounting for the disruptive nature of these memories. Nostalgia, for example, an important approach to remembering childhood seems absent from this call from an utterly alien past. Furthermore, the suggested lack of continuity between childhood and adulthood prevents

the archetypal literary representation of the individual forged by the experience of his or her own childhood. Such unsettling recollections also prevent prevalent modes of representation such as the poetic celebration of childhood's difference, as well as a depiction of childhood as a locus of victimization.

This dissertation is an analysis of the ways in which the remembered past of childhood is inscribed in four francophone novels written at the turn of the twenty-first century: Nina Bouraoui's *L'âge blessé* (1998) and *Garçon manqué* (2000), Ying Chen's *Le champ dans la mer* (2002), and Gisèle Pineau's *L'espérance-macadam* (1996). These texts belong to a substantial corpus of contemporary narratives in which the remembering of childhood experiences plays a central role. Within that corpus we find a new approach to childhood emerging, one in which an unfamiliar past returns through the remembered voice of a wounded child. This voice is shaped by a memory that reveals the past not through a representation of events but rather through the narrator's visceral actualization of an unfamiliar past that overwhelms the text, fracturing the narrative through the irruption of images that it cannot contain. This dissertation is a study of the workings of that return.

Depictions of childhood in literature have long been disruptive of accepted models of textual and ideological representation.¹ If the construction of childhood as a separate realm of innocence called for a romantic celebration of its purity, it also allowed some authors to claim a personal history in tension with social realities whose legitimacy was questioned. Similarly, other writers used childhood's perceived irreverence and

¹ See Chapter II for a historical overview of disruptive representations of childhood.

creative playfulness to criticize rigid ideological inclinations. Through the lenses of an innocent or poetic childhood, writers have inexorably inscribed the child in the political arena by deforming what appears normal and by giving voice to the marginalized, to what is invisible to sensible adult perspective. Another important change occurs in this process of politicization of childhood; no longer the traceable origin of a stable identity, as the twentieth century unfolds childhood is often depicted for its moments of rupture that become characteristic of an increasingly fragmented sense of identity. In a climate of suspicion toward all truth in which memories are unreliable and the illusion of singular identity is shattered, writing the past of childhood has generated a wealth of original narrative techniques. It is within this history of disruption that I inscribe contemporary representations of childhood, in particular the four works I am reading in the following chapters. Their disruption constitutes a new approach to childhood memories, a new “aesthetics of rupture” whose characteristics are the object of my study.

In the four texts studied in this dissertation, childhood is remembered for its marking experiences, often fundamental ruptures. A point of approach to these texts that would distinguish them from previous works is to understand the nature of those ruptures. We could conceive of these shattering moments as banishment from the safety of home, the universe of the child. These would then be memories tainted by an experience of exile, an experience not coincidentally lived by all three authors. What these four texts share, however, is that the childhood experiences of exclusion from home are not remembered as a cultural or diasporic exile but rather as an inward exile, a metaphorical exile often expressed with images of physical or psychosomatic pain.

Nina Bouraoui's texts exemplify this focus on the physicality of memories of loss. Indeed, at the heart of her texts are fundamental ruptures that are evoked through raw sensations and feelings in an effervescent language full of harsh images and contradictions. Becoming increasingly autobiographical, her writings express the fundamental tensions that underline her identity as a woman of mixed French and Algerian origins. Writing for Nina Bouraoui becomes a tool to explore the pains and wounds of a conflicted identity, but also the instrument of those wounds. There is indeed a sense in which writing becomes a visceral expression of suffering, entering the innermost reality of a life lived on the edge of incompatible cultural identities, thereby forcing the reader to navigate the turbulent waters of unmediated emotions of suffering. *L'âge blessé* (1998) is a juxtaposition of fictional and autobiographical accounts whose echoing first-person narrative voices belong to the same person; the autobiographical voice is the child's voice of the adult fictional character. In this text, memories of childhood incessantly interrupt the progression of the fictional narrative with incongruous images tinted with violence and fear. The warmth of a safe childhood that the adult narrator seeks in her memories is transformed into a frantic search for the shattering experiences at the root of the narrator's exiled condition. *Garçon manqué* (2000) is an autobiographical work without fictional masks. The text is composed of memories of a childhood torn between Algerian and French identities – two irreconcilable identities that the narrator cannot claim. The narrative voice consists of an interior monologue that unfolds breathlessly without a clear sense of linearity or referentiality, relentlessly revisiting key episodes that were lived in silence during childhood. This unremitting

pursuit of memories focuses on the personal violence and incessant rejections that the narrator and her family underwent in Algeria and France due to their Franco-Algerian métissage.

A student of French in her native China, Ying Chen started to write in French after moving to Canada at the age of 28. Although her works explore the inner pains of exile, references to autobiographical realities and spatiotemporal landmarks are increasingly blurred and become unidentifiable in her later texts. Indeed, her characters often escape the weight of their sociocultural heritage by overcoming the laws of chronological and spatial continuity. By using dead characters who remember events in a past life, Ying Chen operates a larger reflection on the relativity of time and history. If change is an inexorable force that propels itself through time, Ying Chen's characters, whose memories transcend the limits imposed by death, show that "the smell of water is the same everywhere." Chen's writings can then be seen as metaphorical reflections on the experience of exile. In what constitutes a central paradox at the heart of many of her works, the experience of exile is the strongest illustration of how the shattering ruptures it causes serve only to confirm that in reality nothing actually changes. Once exiled, we are thrown into endless cycles of ruptures whose only certitude is that the familiarity of home will keep eluding us. *Le champ dans la mer* (2002) is the interior monologue of an enigmatic woman who remembers her childhood from a past life. The text contains no references to known spatiotemporal landmarks, focusing instead on the complex and contradictory feelings of the narrator. As an outcast both in the present of remembering and the remembered past, the narrator navigates between conflicting desires to belong to

a community and to be free from the weight of an oppressive heritage. Her memories of an intense and exclusive childhood friendship dominate the narration and serve to nostalgically establish an unreachable sense of belonging. These memories of enthrallment, however, are also reduced to a fictive presence that does not seem capable of freeing the narrator from the fatalistic gloom that overcomes her.

Gisèle Pineau is a French writer of Guadelupian origins. Although she was born and raised in France she grew up acutely aware of her difference, of the inability of the French to accept a Caribbean child as one of theirs. She was also deeply affected by her grandmother's stories from Guadeloupe and by her frequent returns to the Caribbean islands, experiences that mark her writings. Exile, migration, and the longing for a sense of home are omnipresent in her works. Contrary to Ying Chen, however, her forays into the world of exile are rooted in the specific material realities of Caribbean women. Each of her novels presents different portraits of women, real women whose commonalities are found in their struggles for survival as victims of abandonment, abuse, rape – a violence that gives the impression of a hopeless destiny. The violence endured by the female body and spirit also reflects the agonizing history of the Caribbean people as a whole. It is then through the abused body of women that Gisèle Pineau retraces the collective sufferings of a larger community. Indeed, in spite of their desolation, Pineau's women are determined to overcome the weight of their individual history and to liberate themselves from a hopeless destiny through a retracing of personal memories that are inseparable from a larger collective history. In *L'espérance-macadam* (1995), Gisèle Pineau tackles the subject of incest. The devastation in the aftermath of two hurricanes'

passage over Guadeloupe in 1928 and 1989 anchors the principal narrator's mnemonic recounting of the past of a small impoverished village. When the scenes of violence shift to the domestic realm, they gradually uncover the incestuous truths hidden behind the metaphorized hurricane winds, winds that inevitably will return to destroy a hope that is nevertheless central in the text.

The sense of exile that emerges from memories of childhood in these four texts is not due to banishment from a large political entity but rather from an inner experience of belonging shattered by abuse, rejection, and fear. Furthermore, the feelings of exile are lived by the child in silence, his or her ordeal being invisible to the larger community that tends to be portrayed as oblivious or hostile. This antagonistic relationship between the child and the larger social body partly explains the absence of nostalgic reminiscences in these texts. Indeed, the desire to remember the past of childhood tends to be ambivalent and often involuntarily triggered by an unrelated event. The memories that surface are then the antithesis of a nostalgic celebration of a time before the rupture; they rather focus on the irreversible painful breaks rooted in childhood experiences. Remembering childhood in these texts is then the remembering of an absence, of events that were never acknowledged, of painful feelings that were suffered in silence, never expressed. What are the textual modalities of this return of a silent and invisible experience? Is there a particular affective link to this absent past? How can the gaze or the voice of the child be read through the silencing filters imposed on him or her? These are some of the questions that the following chapters answer.

In this process we will see that this return of an absent experience nevertheless saturates the text, not as a reconstitution of the past but rather as an interruption of chronological flow, an irruption of the real that will be compared to the flash of photography or to the deafening scream of pain that has been held in silence for too long. Indeed, my reading of the ways in which the silenced voice of the child is expressed in these texts relies on frequent superpositions of visual and auditory metaphors. This synesthetic reading is similar to the viewer's response to *The Scream*, Munch's visual depiction of a silent scream. What that painting captures is an expression that is as much visual, in its representation of a face and its anguished eyes, as it is auditory, in its rendition of a scream that is intensely loud to the viewer and yet silent to the two bystanders in the painting. Similarly, I read the silenced voice of the child in my texts as a scream best captured in the flashing gaze of the frightened child.

In effect, these memories of childhood appear to actualize the past through a ripping of physical reality from the narratives that have claimed and silenced that reality. This ripping breaks through the filters of culture and convention, and their chronological and causal coordinates. Moreover, this visceral expression of the past of childhood operates a destabilization of all certainty as well as a confrontation of past and present. Indeed, the images from an absent or silent past refuse calls for suturing the wounds of the past, a demand for healing which would imply a letting go of an unbearable history. Remembering childhood in these texts is then a confrontational act that incessantly engages traumatic pasts thereby seemingly hindering the healing power of story-making. We will see, however, that far from being opposed to healing impulses, the scream of the

silent child is symbiotically linked to the stories stemming from memory, to the narratives that ease us into the unfamiliar realms of broken childhoods.

The four texts I am reading are written by women. My choice of these texts might appear to establish that the contemporary visceral memories of childhood I am examining are strongly inflected by gender. It would indeed be interesting to find evidences in feminist studies that would elucidate the development of a specific gender-based relationship to the past of childhood in contemporary literature. Indeed, the generalized violence inflicted upon girls in the domestic sphere, the politics of feminine beauty in the public sphere, the marginalization of the many who do not fit the mold, the consequences of such marginalization on women's relationship to and construction of the past are but a few of the factors that would justify the birth of memories of childhood such as the ones I am examining. This is, however, not the line of research I chose for this project. I selected these texts for what I considered to be their interesting and novel treatment of memories of childhood. The awareness that they were written by women came only later. While it is true that the vast majority of the texts I considered including in this dissertation are by women authors, gender is not necessarily of central importance to the perspective I give to the project. Indeed, while marginalization of the child is central to all the texts I could have included, the modalities of that marginalization vary greatly and are probably not strictly gender-specific. My choice then might be driven as much by the specificities of being a girl and a woman in our world as it is by my own attraction to and comfort with certain texts, and also by the lack of critical attention given to the marginalization of sensitive boys in our society, for example.

If I am not looking at the role of gender in my analysis of memories, my critical and theoretical sources nevertheless greatly rely on feminist scholarship. Indeed, my seeking the gaze of a marginalized and silenced child screaming through painful memories is an inherently politically laden project that shares affinities with a feminist perspective. The insights of feminist criticism have helped me discern and formulate a relationship to the past of childhood based on a defamiliarization with received notions of childhood, in particular its relationship to memory and the body. These studies have also enabled my understanding of the role of childhood memories as textually and ideologically disruptive. In my quest to identify an “aesthetics of rupture” in memories of childhood in contemporary literary texts I have also used a multitude of studies from different critical schools. My primary motivation was to understand the role that remembering childhood in particular played in each text. My approach then was first to find the child, to see her and feel her pain so that I could formulate the importance, the character, and the role of the adult narrator’s act of remembering that child. Each text hides and reveals the gaze of the child in unique ways – these different literary approaches to the past of childhood have forced me to look for critical and theoretical texts that best resonate with the style of each work. Moreover, in my effort to hear the child’s voice as it is expressed differently in each text, I have treated the relationship between theory and primary texts differently in each chapter. Chapter III, for example, is a reading of Nina Bouraoui’s *L’âge blessé* that is guided by my work on Benjamin, Proust, and Barthes’s notions of an interruptive return of the past. Chapter VI, on the other hand, is not anchored in any theory; in this chapter I offer two complementary

readings of Gisèle Pineau's *L'espérance-macadam* in order to reveal the ways in which a focus on the child's gaze affects the understanding of the text. However, this shifting relationship between theory and primary texts is not only a reflection of each text's particular embodiment of childhood memories. Indeed, the evolution from the first to the last chapters parallels my own process and development of a technique best capable of highlighting the importance of remembering childhood in these texts, an original project without preset methodological guidelines. This dissertation is then as much a process as it is a product, a humbling process based less on a planned progression than on a haphazard flow of feelings born of my readings of the four primary texts.

This study deals with a set of questions that have not been asked in previous studies on childhood in literature, or that have been obliquely addressed outside of the context of childhood. The representation of childhood in European and North American literatures has been the subject of an increasing number of studies since the 1970s. An outline of what has been done in this field will allow me to differentiate my study from previous ones and to acknowledge my debt to this large critical corpus which has given complete legitimacy to the subject of childhood in literature and in the new field of Childhood Studies. The first important works on childhood in literature were thematic studies of its portrayal.² These analyses established the contexts in which the child had been represented and contributed to the definition of "mythologies" of childhood. Not

² See the following seminal studies: Marina Bethlenfalvay's *Les Visages de l'enfant dans la littérature française du XIXe siècle: esquisse d'une typologie* (1979); Marie-Jose Chombart de Lauwe's *Un Monde Autre : L'enfance, de ses représentations à son mythe* (1971). In English: Peter Coveney's *Poor Monkey: The Child in Literature* (1957), a classic survey of childhood characters in post-1800 English literature; Reinhard Clifford Kuhn's *Corruption in paradise: the child in Western literature* (1982), an intertextual survey of the different facets of children in literature.

only was childhood in literature confined to primary spheres (school, family, social revolt, reverie) but it also became apparent that a limited number of distinct types of children were represented (the child was characterized as lost, angelic, natural, innocent, victimized, subversive, prophetic, a figure of hope and future). This typology has been useful in discerning the evolutions of and shifts in representations of childhood through time. These surveys, however, posit a mythical unreachable child that literature can only approximate with the limited means conferred to the adult writer, as expressed by Reinhard Kuhn in his classic *Corruption in Paradise*: “The question remains as to whether a poet can plunge into the depths to retrieve this treasure [the inestimable wonders of the early years]. The intellectual structure of adult cognitive functions does not contain categories within which the childhood world can be subsumed or experienced” (11). Later variants of these early surveys avoided such essentialization of the child figure and focused on the role of literary childhood types in the constitution of larger cultural identities, national ones in particular.³ These studies increased the scope and the importance of the child in literature but they still confined the child to his or her depicted contexts and did not explore the role of memory in the textual shaping of the child.

Richard Coe’s important *When the Grass was Taller: Autobiography and the Experience of Childhood*, an intertextual study of childhood in autobiographies, follows

³ See, for example, Ala Alryyes’s *Original Subjects: The Child, the Novel, and the Nation* (2001); Dufault’s *Metaphors of Identity: The Treatment of Childhood in Selected Québécois Novels* (1991); Andrew Wachtel’s *The Battle for Childhood: Creation of a Russian Myth* (1990); multiple articles in Fabienne Bercegol and Gérard Peylet’s “Enfances Romantiques : Actes du second colloque...organisé...les 13, 14 et 15 juin 2002. » *Eidolon* 64.

the work of Philippe Lejeune by establishing the common structural and thematic characteristics of childhood in autobiography in order to define its modes of representation as a genre (the Childhood). The attempts at defining what constitutes a Childhood in literature not only had the merit of giving childhood a legitimacy it had had difficulty gaining, even within the already marginalized genre of autobiography, but they also shifted attention to the specificities of childhood memory, of the unique difficulties that a writer encountered while trying to write the truth of childhood. In France, Philippe Lejeune and Jacques Lecarme have pursued the question of the truth inherent in the construction of the self in autobiography, in particular of the possibility of sincerity in writing one's childhood.⁴ These studies, however, by virtue of their focus on genre and truth, assume a coherence to the construction of identity that is at odds with trends in contemporary literature. They also confine their corpus of texts to such limited autobiographical parameters that they exclude a multitude of other texts in which different aspects of childhood memory are present.

Pursuing the specificities of writing the past of childhood without confining it to the structural confines of a specific genre, Rosemary Lloyd's *The Land of Lost Content*, a study of childhood in nineteenth-century French literature goes beyond the purely thematic to explore the image of childhood in literature by also paying attention to stylistics and narratological aspects. While she confirms the increasingly dominant role that the figure of the child plays in the individual and national search for identity in the

⁴ See Philippe Lejeune's *Le récit d'enfance en question*. Cahiers de Semiotique Textuelle 12 (1988).

nineteenth century, she also considers the writing of childhood within the larger literary context of the period:

Flaubert's experiments with *style indirect libre*, the attempts by [...] Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé, among others, to create prose poetry, the wider use of colloquialisms and slang in literary language, the provocative clashes of register, are all part of a general mood of discovery, a testing of muscles and sinews, in which the challenge to convey the experience, the thought, and the images of childhood play a role that is far from unimportant. (241)

The wider parameters of study that she allocates to the analysis of childhood in literature allow her to see beyond its *lieux communs* by uncovering images of childhood with a wider range of characteristics than what had been presented in other studies. What also emerges in her study is that behind the child figures can be found real human children whose experience can be depicted only through memory and that it is that "deep horizon of remembrance" that needs to be explored (22). In spite of that opening toward a recognition of the importance of the role of memory in the writing of childhood, Rosemary Lloyd's study is predominantly an analysis, albeit a complex and sophisticated one, of how certain socio-cultural factors have impacted the narrative re-creation of the child's space and time. The problem of representation of the mnemonic return of the child's experience stays unaddressed.

The challenge of rendering the ineffable experience of childhood in literary language has been approached from different perspectives, all with a similar lack of attention to the role of memory. The child's otherness constitutes a formidable challenge

to literary representation and numerous studies have looked at the different strategies used by writers to depict an always evanescent childhood.⁵ Studies of the linguistic features of children's language as it is expressed in literary writings have raised awareness of the linguistic and narrative complexity of the child's voice and its literary rendition. With their focus on the literary recreation of the child's use of language, these works find themselves at the intersection of linguistic and literary studies. This focus on the language of the child, however, assumes a static past whose deformations in representations are of a linguistic and narrative nature. Memory is akin to an invisible agent of figuration that is acknowledged but left alone in its neutrality, paling in comparison to the pervasive light of a child, once again characterized in mythical terms: "Qu'est-ce au juste que l'enfance [...]? C'est d'abord une certaine pratique de sentir : une acuité particulière exercée dans la saisie de toutes les petites différences dont le mélange, la suite, la synthèse mobile constituent le vif d'une présence au monde. Écrire, ce serait alors recommencer l'enfance" (Richard 145). Writing is to relive childhood; remembering it is only accessory to that recreation, it cannot play an active role when its function is to be as benign as possible so as to preserve the enchantment of childhood.

If writing the linguistic complexity of the voice of childhood has been shown to generate a wealth of narrative techniques, it has also been studied for its ability to uncover larger cultural assumptions, as Alicia Otano observes in her study of the child perspective in contemporary Asian-American literature: "In all instances, the child's

⁵ See Mary Jane Hurst, *The Voice of the Child in American Literature: Linguistic Approaches to Fictional Child Language*; Roni Natov, *The Poetics of Childhood*; Laurie Ricou's *Everyday Magic: Child Languages in Canadian Literature*; Alicia Otano, *Speaking the Past: Child Perspective in the Asian American Bildungsroman*.

disarming vision and voice serve to successfully unmask ambivalent aspects of an idealized society hitherto unquestioned” (9). Even if Otano’s study still focuses on the recreation of the lost past of an idealized childhood, thus forfeiting questions on the role of memory, it establishes an important link between the voice of innocence of childhood and a larger sociocultural context. Naomi Sokoloff’s *Imagining the Child in Modern Jewish Fiction*, a Bakhtinian study of children’s narrative voice and consciousness also establishes the representation of children’s voice within the context of larger outside forces but with an important distinction – it is not so much the voice of childhood that Sokoloff studies as it is the representations of imagined, and thus remembered, voices. Although some hints of essentialized childhood subsist in her study, what we find in her chapters are different ways in which childhood can be imagined in different historical contexts, without imposing an overarching model of what constitutes childhood.

Sokoloff’s focus on Jewish literature is of crucial importance. Firstly, she places the literary construction of childhood within a much larger cultural context of exile and the “wider phenomenon in modern Jewish literature of restless seeking for self-definition” (xi), which tends to hinder the formulation of a unified childhood. Secondly, the sheer range of historical experiences, from the Shtetl to the Holocaust, imposes a model of interpretation in which an assumed nature of childhood is secondary or irrelevant in the face of the extremely varied ways it is represented through imagination and memory. The chapter on the representation of the narrative voice of children directly or indirectly affected by the Holocaust is especially interesting and relevant to my own study. Two of the texts she studies feature children characterized as marginalized

outsiders who, as Alicia Otano also notes in her study, “expose the blindness and cultural bias of the older generation” (192). However, what is especially noteworthy is that these children are almost absent from the narrative, their voices almost silent: “Neither [text] attempts to inhabit the unusual perspective of the child, to illuminate a young character’s world from within. However, these texts provide for interesting comparison, as both feature a child, silenced, whose absence of voice itself comes to speak volumes” (191-2). Similarly to what is at play in the texts of my study, the “absent presence” of the child’s voice, an unfamiliar voice devoid of idealization, is able to disrupt previous assumptions: “Eventually, erupting into the adult discourse, [the child’s] spectral presence directly unsettles the assumptions and frameworks of understanding that previously obtained, and it throws the adults’ interpretations of the world into question” (192). For Sokoloff, this disruptive ability of the child’s voice in literature rests on its marginalization in the very narrative voicing, thus illustrating Bakhtin’s premise that the most marginalized discourses can most efficiently topple the univocity of dominant discourse through an interweaving of different voices on different narrative levels of literary representation:

The child characters [...] represent what Bakhtin describes as the “muted discourse that usually rages beyond the boundaries of the dominant cultural universe and defines the range of that universe.” These are peculiarly refined examples, stripped to the bare essentials, of the alien word that makes for a rejoinder to the prevailing wisdom and that shapes it or redefines it through dialogic interaction. (205)

Sokoloff's book is primarily a study of the impact of the voicing of children's consciousness on the narratological structure. Although it does not specifically address the roles and characteristics of memories of childhood in the constitution of the childhood voices she studies, her focus on imagined childhood being shaped by and affecting narration and larger cultural factors constitutes a shift toward another trend in the study of children's representation in literature – studies which are no longer primarily concerned with the ways in which childhood resists representation (because of its essential ineffability, its intrinsic otherness, its ability to shed a critical light on normalcy), but rather with the ways childhood is imagined, remembered, represented, and thus constructed to in turn play different literary, social and cultural roles that are for the most part imperceptible, and that criticism is engaged to uncover.

The study of the representation of childhood entered a sociological phase more than four decades ago.⁶ Conventional wisdom, which shaped and for the most part still shapes our perceptions of what childhood is, then began to be exposed as socially, historically, and discursively constructed. Various cultural narratives, among which literary texts figured prominently, were analyzed as a privileged site of the sociocultural construction of childhood. Childhood Studies has emerged in the last decade as an interdisciplinary field of study focusing on age as a crucial factor of socialized difference:

⁶ Philippe Ariès' *Centuries of Childhood* (1962) is considered one of the first comprehensive studies of childhood as a socially constructed phenomenon. Among the numerous contemporary studies on the construction of childhood are: Marylyn Brown, ed., *Picturing Children: Constructions of childhood between Rousseau and Freud*; Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood*; Susan Honeyman, *Elusive Childhood: Impossible Representations in Modern Fiction*; Allison James, Chris Jenks, and Alan Prout, *Theorizing Childhood*; Jacqueline Rose, *The Case of Peter Pan, or, the Impossibility of Children's Fiction*; Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Caroly Sargent, *Small Wars: The Cultural Politics of Childhood*; Carolyn Steedman's *Language, Gender and Childhood*, and *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority, 1780-1930*.

With the imperative move away from essentializing subjects, in this case children, comes the need to dismantle the discourse we have built around them. This is the primary aim of childhood studies. Along with constructivist sociology and postcolonial studies, childhood studies results from the increasing awareness of culturally relative identities that compelled the new methodologies of cultural studies. (Honeyman 11)

This research has generally been critical of previous studies that have attempted “to plumb the ‘enigma’ of the child’s ‘essential nature’ and its ‘transformative power’” (Pifer 6), thus partaking in the unquestioned construction of idealized or stereotypical child figures. In order to fight the general tendency to essentialize childhood, contemporary studies of childhood in literature aim at deconstructing established truths about childhood. In this process, hidden patterns of adult nostalgia and desire have emerged as the constructed child has been shown to be essential to the adult’s sense of self. Analyses of childhood in literature have shown how childhood comes to encapsulate what has been lost in general, a loss caught in a complex web of nostalgic or utopian desires. The literary child has been shown to be immensely seductive by virtue of his/her infinite resistance to representation – as in the romantic tradition, the child is the perpetual outsider whose wisdom we seek to emulate in order to criticize and escape an adult world always too limited by an inescapably linear mind.

Moving beyond the analysis of the representation of childhood, these studies vastly expand the scope of investigation around the constructed figure of the child. Literary representations are then analyzed as one of many media through which

conceptions of childhood are produced, remade, and transformed as a result of complex socio-historical factors. The child figure is inherently politicized in these studies as its construction becomes symptomatic of and accessory to the constitution of a larger discourse on truth and identity; it therefore also embodies a subversive potential:

[This study] demands that we understand the possibilities for change by examining how forms of speaking and forms of truth have been produced, and how these regulate or circumscribe what can be said about what, when and where. In this process, we are also forced to re-analyze what constitutes subversion and resistance, and how the subjective and the political intersect. (Steedman 2)

Part of the politicization of the literary child figure rests on its figuration as an object of adult desire.⁷ No longer seen as the representation of a “real” elusive child, the child figure constructed in texts is a product of an adult imagination in need of images of purity, innocence, and seduction to fill varied linguistic and conceptual voids. James Kincaid’s *Child-Loving: The Erotic Child and Victorian Culture* goes even further by claiming that the child figure has been thoroughly erotized in the process of its construction as a pure object that we desire in opposition to a repressed sexual perversion. Kincaid’s study on literary childhood attempts to undo the “hefty engines of denial and self-deception” that have kept the freakish separate from the desirable, thus unlocking a whole series of naturalized discourses on adult identity.

⁷ See Jacqueline Rose’s classic *The Case of Peter Pan, or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*, a study on the constructed child in children’s fiction as an object of adult fantasizing.

Literary texts and other textual “makers” of childhood, such as psychoanalysis, emerge as “mythmakers” that under the guise of a story of childhood talk about adults’ motivations and desires. A central point of these constructivist studies is that literary, psychoanalytical, and critical accounts centering on childhood have systematically suppressed the actual child in favor of varied adult imperatives. The child figure thus becomes a “go-between,” to use Virginia Blum’s expression,⁸ who not only carries the weight of a whole set of personal and cultural fantasies but who also plays the bonding role of the originator, in which process it is denied existence and reduced to the etymological voicelessness of the *in-fant*, the one incapable of speech: “The go-between child must helplessly expose its own self-negating function. Consequently, the child is fated to be expelled from the narrative resolutions it produces, not unlike [a] sacrificial victim” whose sacrifice ensures social unity (Blum 7). Another consequence of this sacrifice is that the construction of childhood must be implemented within a nostalgic paradigm; as an object of adult desire the child figure constitutes an intrinsically and hopelessly lost realm which can only be approached nostalgically.⁹ By recognizing our nostalgic investment in childhood, not only can we hope to raise awareness to our complicity in the constitution of this silencing model, but we can also expose unseen subversive potentials present underneath our own silences.

⁸ See Virginia Blum’s *Hide and Seek: The Child between Psychoanalysis and Fiction*, a study on the emergence of the child figure in literary and psychoanalytic accounts.

⁹ See Susan Honeyman’s introduction to *Elusive Childhood: Impossible Representations in Modern Fiction* and her evocative description of the systematic silencing of the child in modern fiction: “I seek to demonstrate the great but underestimated extent to which we impose childhood on those we define as children according to biased standards of adult nostalgia and desire” (2).

The insights gained from these constructivist studies are invaluable and form a starting point to my own implicit discourse on childhood. What constitutes a radical shift in the representation of childhood in my corpus is that the child tends to be an absent figure, and that it is that very absence that enables it to constitute an overwhelming presence in the text, one that is not based on a nostalgic rapport to the past but rather on a visceral return of the past through traumatic(-like) memories. From the constructivist perspective of the studies just mentioned, this return would probably be seen as another step in the construction of childhood, but one that, hopefully, opens a new window from which previous constructions blatantly emerge and can be undone. However, even if I do try throughout this work to avoid generalizations about the experience of childhood, my focus on childhood as a site of rupture already constitutes a loaded assumption, which I recognize but do not attempt to justify or deconstruct. My work, then, is not to reveal and undo previous or even contemporary models of construction of childhood. While constructivist studies have contributed to a denaturalization of childhood and an understanding of the cultural forces that have molded the figure of the child, there has been a corresponding lack of critical attention paid to the work of remembering the real pains of the constructed child. However much childhood is invested with an array of conflicting desires, the remembering of that past needs to be analyzed not just so as to reveal its construction but also so as to understand the ways it lives in the present, invisible even to the discerning eyes of our most sophisticated theories. My treatment of childhood is then not centered on what the child is and how s/he is molded but rather on the shape, meaning, and role of the process of remembering key childhood experiences.

While studies of childhood in literature have not sufficiently tackled the problem of childhood memory and its importance in the representation of the past, the huge corpus of critical work on memory has been only marginally concerned with the role of childhood memories. It will therefore be my task to make use of the research on memory and its effects on the literary representation of the past to apply it to the particularities of literary childhood memory. The burgeoning field of memory studies has pointed out the far-reaching implications of the use of memory in the retrieval of the historical past.¹⁰ The analysis of traumatic memories has been especially fruitful, both as an expansion of the scope of memory, its workings and effects, and as a radical reconsideration of what is entailed in the representation of certain past events.¹¹ The inscription of childhood memories as a visceral and disruptive voicing of an unfamiliar past have important points of resonance with studies on traumatic memories and their impact on the field of historical representation. The written childhood memories I am reading are in many respects remarkably similar to trauma narrative, which “does not simply serve as record

¹⁰ See, for example, the semiannual publication *History and Memory*, a journal that publishes studies of representations of the past in which memory plays a role; for a collection of essays on the implications of memory and larger cultural representations of the past, see Mieke Bal, et al, *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*; see also Michael S. Roth and Charles G. Salas, *Disturbing Remains: Memory, History, and Crisis in the Twentieth Century*.

¹¹ For studies on trauma and the limits of memory see, for example, Linda Delau and Petar Ramadanovic's *Topologies of Trauma: Essays on the Limit of Knowledge and Memory*; Saul Friedlander's "Trauma, Memory, and Transference" in *Holocaust Remembrance: The Shapes of Memory*. The legacy of the Holocaust has generated a wealth of studies on the impact of memory and its consequences on the representation of "unrepresentable" events. See, for example, Ernst van Alphen, *Caught by History: Holocaust Effects in Contemporary Art, Literature, and Theory*; Shelley Hornstein and Florence Jacobowitz's *Image and Remembrance: Representation and the Holocaust*; Dominick LaCapra's *History and Memory After Auschwitz* and *Writing History, Writing Trauma*; Michael Rothberg's *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation*. For a seminal study on the impact of trauma theory on narrative see Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*; see also Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Volger's *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma*; see Leigh Gilmore's *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* for a study on the impact of trauma on Autobiography.

of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned” (Caruth 151). As has been shown by theorists of trauma, the stretching of the notion of experience that trauma engenders, an experience that was not made conscious at the moment of the remembered event, the inclusion of unconscious elements in what constitutes the truth of the past, has had a great impact on the way lived experiences are represented. Remembering childhood, in the texts I am analyzing, results in an absence of evidence, a surging of images where the event itself is superseded by the emotions surrounding it; the (absent) remembered events no longer make up a story but it is the remembering itself that constitutes the expression of the non-representable experience.

Writing the remembering of traumatic events also plays an important therapeutic role that has been crucial to the survival of silenced voices. Writing the wounds of the past can become a “scriptotherapy” whose purpose is to gather the fragmented images of the past into a coherent whole that enables one to gain control over traumatic memories so as to integrate them into the rest of life.¹² While I acknowledge a therapeutic role in the act of remembering childhood in my primary texts, I nevertheless claim that their engagement with the past does not necessarily yearn for healing. Indeed, as intimated above, instead of contributing to a taming of disturbing images, these memories often seem to engage obsessively and sometimes destructively with the past. The following chapters of this dissertation trace the incessant return to the confrontation of present and

¹² See, for example, Susan Brison’s *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of the Self*; Suzette Henke’s *Shattered Subjects: Trauma and Testimony in Women’s Life-writing*; Judith Herman’s *Trauma and Recovery: the Aftermath of Violence*.

past that is central to memories of childhood in my four primary texts and that has been overlooked in previous studies.

Chapter II provides a historical context to the development of representations of childhood in French and Francophone literature. I pay particular attention to the disruptive aspects of these representations – disruptions that operate on textual, social, as well as ideological levels. With the help of previous studies on childhood in literature I outline different disruptive aspects of childhood representations since Rousseau which I then contrast to the treatment of childhood in the contemporary texts studied in the subsequent chapters. This contextualization does not position contemporary depictions of childhood memories strictly within a history of representations but rather within a history of literary turning points centered on the figure of the child. This positioning allows an appreciation of the unique configuration of disruptive elements in the four primary texts read in this dissertation. I am thus able to claim that a different model for the voicing of childhood is emerging in contemporary literature. Indeed, the disruptions in these texts no longer operate primarily through an appropriation of an idea or myth of childhood, an appropriation that I trace in virtually all previous works. Instead, I show that their disruptive nature is located partly in the particular return of an unfamiliar past which I presented earlier in this introduction. Different characteristics of this return as a visceral appropriation of the text by a silent child are studied in the following chapters.

Chapter III is a study of the ways in which childhood memories can actualize the past not as a narration but rather as a set of interruptive and destabilizing images. In Part A I use Walter Benjamin's idiosyncratic critique of historicism and the central role he

gave to remembrances of childhood as the basis for an understanding of childhood memories as a non-representational revelation of the past, an understanding which is relevant to the workings of childhood memories in the contemporary texts I am studying. Indeed, Benjamin's historian, a digger of memories, reads the past as a flash of images that, like Proust's *mémoire involontaire* and like the childhood memories of my corpus, must be forgotten in order to emerge in a new historical context to reveal the past and shatter the stability of the present. I will draw parallels between Benjamin's Proustian unsettling flashing of the past and Barthes's photographic *punctum* to establish the manner in which memories of childhood can, in an anticipatory move, instantaneously cut across the past to connect to our future gaze as the indelible mark of a wound. This theory of the past screaming through the veils of culture serves as a starting point to my reading of the role of childhood memories in Nina Bouraoui's *L'âge blessé* in Part B. In this reading I show how the irruption of childhood memories is capable of piercing through the tyranny of normalcy. As images of ruptures, childhood memories in this text shatter the rules of chronology and conventions to enable the birth of illegitimate desires. Furthermore, the remembered experience of childhood as a marking wound functions in Nina Bouraoui's text as an anticipation of future conflicts and in particular as the potential for future rereadings and reinterpretations beyond the scope of conventions.

Chapter IV is a reading of Ying Chen's *Le champ dans la mer* in which I shift attention away from the disruptive roles of childhood memories to concentrate on their affective quality. My reading thus identifies the play of emotions present in the narrator's memories. In order to understand the narrator's ambivalent affective

relationship to the past of childhood I use studies on nostalgia and melancholia. I find, however, that while these studies shed much light on the complexity of the play of affect in the narrator's relation to the past, they do not adequately account for the role played by memories, unsatisfactorily leaving the narrator on the verge of despair. By positing the mourning of a loss at the root of an affective link to the past, these theories posit a lost origin whose pathological remembrance can never be overcome in the case of the narrator of *Le champ dans la mer*. I thus attempt in the rest of the chapter to read the affective relationship to the past of childhood in Ying Chen's text beyond loss by looking at affect away from its possible cause or origin. In this singular reading I then recast the role of memory. Remembering in *Le champ dans la mer* is no longer a record of what is lost but rather becomes a mark of the very experience of loss and exile, a ceaseless, contradictory, but also humbling emotional experience of defamiliarization to which the experience of childhood holds a distinct relationship.

Chapter V is a reading of Nina Bouraoui's *Garçon manqué*. Long before writing this chapter I had read this text, which at the time had given me the impression of a literary scream – an impression that has never left me. I thus attempt in this chapter to capture that visceral scream, to explore the ways in which the memory of a child's screaming voice can be heard in a literary text. In my reading of the text I determine that the scream of the narrator of *Garçon manqué* is a physical response of the child's wounded body incapable of uttering words but also incapable of forgetting the depth of a wound only waiting for a scream to express the pain. I thus needed to find the voice of the scream, a testimony in excess of the story of the narrator, a voice that cannot be

contained in what words represent. My reading is then supported by an analysis of a variety of theoretical texts that explore the ways in which the body's voice can be heard in oral and written testimony. Using insights from disability studies and theories of testimony of traumatic events I am able to conceive of a literary voicing of the body, of stories told not *about* but *through* the body. I also note that in spite of its chaotic and destructive tendencies the scream is not antagonistic to but rather in symbiosis with the development of a narrative that tends toward healing and resolution.

In Chapter VI I read Gisèle Pineau's *L'espérance-macadam* without the support of theories. In order to compensate for the absence of anchoring effect conferred by theoretical texts, and also so as not to lose myself in the specificities of the text, I offer two distinct readings. When read complementarily, these readings reveal the ways in which a focus on childhood memories affects the understanding of the text. The first reading is a study of the place of hope in a text where the horror of incest and the burden of a collective history of abuse dominate. As in all previous critical studies of Pineau's text, no reference is made to childhood in this reading. In the second reading, however, I revisit the text by taking into account the unseen gaze of the child. Seeking that silent child I find evidences of her discreet presence, a presence dominated by fear and pain. With that focus, the gaze of that silent child is found to permeate and affect the role of key episodes of the narrative. Through the gaze of the remembered child the narrator is forced to confront an unbearable past. This confrontation at the heart of the novel leads me to recast the role of hope – a hope that has no future without a sustained engagement with the past of a wounded child.

In the concluding chapter I reflect on the reasons for the relatively minor role played by theories of traumatic memory in this dissertation. Indeed, these theories seem remarkably similar to my literary childhood memories and could have found a strategic place in the development of my arguments. I then show how my study skirts the contours of theories of trauma but also exposes the limitations of an overly theoretical approach that too easily undermines or even erases the presence and role of the child's gaze in my studied literary works.

CHAPTER II

CHILDHOOD MEMORIES IN CONTEXT

Contrary to a generalized notion of literary childhood memories as a benign reflection of a happy bygone past, childhood memories have played a disruptive role ever since the alleged birth of the child as a primary character in literary texts. Indeed, Rousseau's lengthy descriptions of his childhood were, at the time they were written, controversial in many respects. The extensive depictions of childish but nevertheless private and taboo desires were not only considered irreverent of a lofty literary tradition but were also considered in their portrayals of childhood as a symbol of a primitive outlook, radically counter to the spirit of the enlightenment. In order to understand the particular nature of the disruptiveness present in the childhood memories analyzed in this dissertation, it seems important to provide a larger historical context. However, instead of charting representations of childhood since Rousseau, which has been done on numerous occasions,¹³ I will attempt to highlight important points of tension where childhood becomes disruptive throughout literary history. This approach should help contextualize the articulation of contemporary childhood memories, not within a history

¹³ For articles and studies on the evolution of representations of childhood in French and francophone literature since Rousseau, see the following texts: Fabienne Bercegol and Gérard Peylet, eds. "Enfances Romantiques : Actes de second colloque...organisé...les 13, 14 et 15 juin 2002." *Eidolon* 64; Marina Bethlenfalvay's *Les Visages de l'enfant dans la littérature française du XIXe siècle : esquisse d'une typologie*; Anne Chevalier and Carole Dornier, eds. *Le récit d'enfance et ses modèles*. Colloque de Cerisy-la Salle (27 sept – 1^{er} oct 2001); Marie-Jose Chombart de Lauwe's *Un Monde Autre : l'enfance, de ses représentations à son mythe*; Denise Escarpit and Bernadette Poulou, eds. *Le récit d'enfance: Enfance et écriture*. Actes du colloque de NVL/CRALEJ, Bordeaux, octobre 1992; Denise Lemieux's *Une culture de la nostalgie : l'enfant dans le roman québécois de ses origines à nos jours*; Alain Schaffner, ed. *L'ère du récit d'enfance : (en France depuis 1870)*.

of representations, but as part of a larger literary corpus in which the inscription of such memories constitutes a literary break or a turning point. These moments of tension will allow us to appreciate the unique configuration of factors contributing to the disruptive force of childhood memories in the context of contemporary works.

The idealized child of the early Romantics, a child figure invested with Adamic qualities of goodness, innocence and purity, such a seemingly complete obliteration of actual childhood, nevertheless became enormously important in the construction of childhood in the following two centuries. The association of the child with a golden age of humanity, a spiritual and sacred origin endowed with the ability to see freely outside the realm of tradition offered a drastic and liberating contrast to the earlier classical lack of interest in the child who had been seen as a mere empty vessel to be educated in order to overcome the obstacles of primal temptation. Furthermore, nostalgic and stylized constructions of childhood continued playing a subversive role long after the early Romantics ceased to be enthralled with the angelic figure of the child. Indeed, many female writers in the second half of the nineteenth century continued to represent childhood as a golden age while their male peers were focusing on the painful side of childhood.¹⁴ As Brigitte Diaz has shown, the context of that idealization of childhood for these women writers was radically different from that of the early Romantics.¹⁵ Instead of a universalizing melancholia for a lost but nevertheless inspiring realm of purity, the

¹⁴ See, for example, Jules Vallès's *L'enfant* (1879); Stendhal's *Vie de Henry Brulard* (1890, posthumous).

¹⁵ See Brigitte Diaz's "'L'enfance au féminin' : Le récit d'enfance et ses modèles dans des autobiographies de femmes au XIXe siècle."

idealization of childhood by these authors arose in direct and bitter contrast to the lack of opportunities for emancipation available to women:

Au petit garçon, donc, l'éducation et les jeux spécifiques qui développeront ses talents et feront de lui un « homme important », à la petite fille, le patient apprentissage de sa nullité sociale à venir. Pour l'un, l'enfance est une promesse d'être, pour l'autre, elle n'est que le prélude à « une existence où l'on ne peut prévoir d'autre vertu que la docilité au maître, la résignation au sort, quel qu'il soit », comme l'écrit Marie D'Agoult. (Diaz 163)

The constructions of sweet memories of childhood in these texts are not outmoded representations of an ideal utterly separated from experience. On the contrary, they serve as a tool to anticipate the very real limited space available to women by capitalizing on the creativity and freedom that were seemingly promised to them in childhood.

Representations of idealized childhoods become subversive by allowing these writers to claim a personal history as a form of resistance to the oppressive realities that confine their gender.

This politization of personal memories within the larger context of the condition of women in society has another facet that will prove rich in consequences for later representations of childhood memories. Indeed, even as these authors idealized childhood for its otherness, they also contributed to a valorization of the lived experience of the child in literature. In parallel to these late representations of idealized childhoods, new aspects of childhood were portrayed that would establish a tradition of social and cultural critique associated with literary depictions of childhood. The child of the realist

novel, who had lost his or her Adamic purity, became a victim *par excellence*; still seen as innocent, the battered child was portrayed in the darkest light so as to emphasize the injustice and indifference of provincial society, as in Balzac's *Pierrette*, "sorte de sinistre conte de fée à rebours qui décrit l'immolation d'une enfant innocente aux plus bas intérêts de ses tuteurs indignes" (Bury 151). The educational system in particular became a *terre maudite*, a breeding ground for injustice that turned childhood into a prolonged agony from which few emerged unscathed. Images of childhood were even darker in the naturalist novel where children were portrayed as victims of exploitation, abuse, misery, or inherited defects: "Les personnages d'enfants sont anémiés [...], de santé fragile [...], difformes [...], dégénérés [...], vicieux [...], violents [...]. C'est d'ailleurs un des rares personnages de Zola dont on perd la trace : après son forfait, il disparaît littérairement, comme si l'écrivain avait voulu signifier que l'ombre du crime n'en finit pas de peser sur le monde" (Meyrat-Vol 175-6). While the child continued to be portrayed as victim, another shift was taking place. This period heralded the end of the *paradis perdu* of childhood. Children's sexual innocence, the centerpiece of the otherness of an essentially passive childhood, became seriously compromised, as Rosemary Lloyd writes in the context of Zola's portrayal of childhood: "the sexual experimentation of Marjolin and Cadine, and Jeanlin's exploitation of Lydie, are all part of a general world-view in which childhood sexual innocence has been swept out of existence" (115). The importance of this change is not to be found in the extreme shift from the innocence to the wickedness of childhood that is present in some texts,¹⁶ but rather in a new sense of agency given to a

¹⁶ For examples of the extreme cruelty children can inflict on each other, see Maupassant's *La Maison*

child no longer tethered to an impossible innocence. Without being necessarily tied to an impossible ideal state, childhood could then be written about in more and more personal or autobiographical ways, freeing itself from bondage to mythology, the nation, or larger social questions such as justice.

A vital aspect of this valorization of childhood experience is the exploration of its playful side, which had been previously wholly separated from adult concerns.

Children's games became a point of entry into their world that was contrastively used to point to the "strangeness" of social normalcy. These games were at times "invested with a gravity" that served as a mirror to society's horrors,¹⁷ in other contexts, their games were valued in contrast to the narrowness of the adult world and its meaningless exchanges. By highlighting the unconstrained playfulness of childhood, authors gave a new subversive role to the child in literature,¹⁸ one that emphasized the randomness of social constructs. Perhaps the central component of this playful, but nonetheless serious, subversiveness is the child's creativity contrasted to the adult's stubborn Cartesian inclinations. The child then becomes an *enfant poète* who, on the one hand, is free from society's foolish rules but, on the other, in a retroactive move, is also a child anticipating and revolting against the murder of creativity at the hands of a senseless society. In *Les*

Tellier; Zola's portrayal of Jeanlin in *Germinal*.

¹⁷ Rosemary Lloyd has pointed out Zola's dark depiction of children's games: "Children's games also provide the opportunity for exploring the nature of childhood, and especially, in Zola's case, for revealing the gravity with which these games can be invested" (114). See also René Clément's *Les Jeux interdits*, the classic cinematographic portrayal of children's world of play in the context of the Second World War.

¹⁸ See the following varied examples of subversive representations of the playful side of childhood: Alain-Fournier's *Le Grand Meaulnes* (1913); Aragon's *Le Mentir-Vrai* (1980); Cocteau's *Les enfants terribles* (1929); Colette's *Claudine* series; André Dhôtel's *Le pays où l'on arrive jamais* (1955); Amélie Nothomb's *La métaphysique des tubes* (2000); Raymond Queneau's *Zazie dans le Métro* (1959); Monique Wittig's *L'Opoponax* (1964).

poètes de sept ans, Rimbaud incessantly contrasts the restraining limitations of adult society with the enchantment the child longs to find, the compliance to adults' needs with the child's impossible inner revolt. Instead of describing the child's universe, Rimbaud's rendering of the intensity of an experience of childhood serves not only to emphasize society's deadly dullness but also to anticipate and evoke the nature of poetic expression in the hands of a necessarily rebellious artist.

The child as the prefiguration of the poet, a new myth of childhood, a child as distant from real childhood as its innocent Romantic counterpart nonetheless continued to play a crucially disruptive role in later literary depictions. The surrealist deformation of the real will be utterly dependant on the poetic fecundity of this mythical child figure.¹⁹ Writing becomes a tool to recapture the "drunkenness" of childhood, a "*vert paradis*" that no longer calls for lyrical evocations of the "*paysages d'âme*" of childhood but rather for the ability that the child has of disfiguring language itself. This transcription of the particular light that the child sheds on the world became a formidable impetus behind the creation of new literary languages in which the real and the imaginary are not separable, in which spatial and temporal coordinates are relentlessly reduced to the child's rapture in the instantaneity of the present moment.

Moreover, what this poetics of childhood inevitably leads to is the impossibility of a linguistic rendition of that silent gaze. This Mallarmean call to the weakness of language reminds us of the experience of loss and dispossession that is an integral part of the otherness of language, and thus of all that is most familiar to us: "L'expérience

¹⁹ See, for example, Jule Supervielle's *Le voleur d'enfants* (1926) and Cocteau's *Les enfants terribles* (1929).

littéraire se doit d'être d'abord celle de la séparation du langage, de ce qui échappe au langage, expérience de *l'infantia*, et c'est alors que la réalité familière nous redevient étrangère" (Cousseau 261). This poetics of childhood is then not without a politics; indeed, not only is it making strange the familiar but it is also giving voice to the marginalized, to the absent, to what is silenced by familiarity. If the myth of the child poet does not render the actual voice of the child, it does nevertheless provide a platform where the failings of language highlight the faint voice of a silenced child. Pierre Bergounioux is a contemporary writer who incessantly returns to essential silences of his childhood. Seemingly unable to capture a buried language of childhood, he nevertheless, through the pain that this inability is causing, is able to give childhood a disruptive presence:

C'est toute une parole opprimée qu'il faut faire entendre sous les mots des adultes. À la ligne narrative [. . .] s'ajoute une interrogation de la langue [. . .] qui « creuse et s'enfonce au lieu de glisser », pour fouiller les strates de langage qui recouvrent l'être enfantin, à la manière du spéléologue désireux de trouver sous les sédimentation adultes, la source inaltérée d'une enfance perturbatrice.

(Demanze 220)

Childhood in these texts appears as a foreign trace, no longer representable as the source of a biographical evolution but instead as a point of rupture between childhood and adulthood. In a paradoxical move, by approaching the inner experience of childhood these texts that emphasize the child's creativity and oblivious playfulness have created an unbridgeable distance between the child and the adult's universe. Far from being

childish, childhood in literature becomes a dark zone that is as foreign as it is important to the constitution of our identity. Writing childhood is then often the mourning of its death, of the inevitable sacrificial rite of passage into adulthood. Already in Chateaubriand's *Mémoires d'outre-tombe* we see childhood irremediably associated with death: "cette enfance, censée représenter le temps de la construction du moi, est bien souvent reliée chez Chateaubriand à un temps de la perte, de la destruction et de la mort" (Tabet 23).

Writing a type of experience that can no longer be experienced also has had an impact on the formal aspects of life-writing. The dark zone of childhood is often written obliquely, forcing the narrator to stretch notions of identity, truth, and representation. Writing the past of childhood has generated a wealth of autobiographical narrative techniques, in particular in the later half of the twentieth century when childhood increasingly became central to writings of the self: "Se reconnaître dans l'enfant que l'on a été est une démarche qui ne va plus de soi, et la question de l'identité, corrigée, selon la formule de Ricoeur, de *idem en ipse* (on est soi-même et non le même), conduit l'autobiographe à transformer la remémoration de son enfance en pratique archéologique et fictionnelle" (Chevalier 11). Remembering and writing childhood inevitably blurs the borders separating autobiography from fiction and compromises the illusion of permanence and singularity of the self. Pierre Loti's *Le Roman d'un enfant* anticipates later twentieth-century texts by illustrating the difficulty of writing a story of childhood experiences and by focusing instead on striking disconnected, almost photographic episodes: "Ce qui devient dominant dans le récit d'enfance n'est plus la suite des grandes

étapes formant le fil d'une histoire, mais le choix de souvenirs fugitifs, presque effacés, et par là même chargés de révéler une autre personne que celle de l'état civil. Ce type de récit tourne le dos à la chronologie et s'appuie de préférence sur des repères spatiaux" (Chevalier 196). Chronological causality in the writing of childhood tends to be replaced by an obscure network of affective contiguity that should not necessarily be untangled to uncover a discursive coherence contributing to the establishment of an identity, but that could also be seen as disruptive of established patterns of self-construction.

Probably one of the most successful attempts at rendering childhood in a literary text is Monique Wittig's *L'Opoponax*, an extraordinary stream of consciousness narration from the perspective of the child that shatters the wall that has been erected between autobiography and the novel through a reconsideration of what it means to write the truth. When writing the ineffability of childhood, truth cannot be contained by the constraints of a name and an autobiographical pact. Using Wittig's text as her prime example, Marcelle Marini has criticized a study of childhood in literature that limits its analyses to discussions of genre and truth and is completely blind to childhood's disruptive role:²⁰

Il est dommage que des critiques aussi avertis que Philippe Lejeune et Jacques Lecarme, n'aient pas pris ce texte en considération, lorsqu'ils voulaient remettre « le récit d'enfance en question ». Ils y auraient gagné de ne pas enfermer le récit d'enfance dans « le pacte autobiographique » [...] Ils auraient aussi évité l'opposition classique entre autobiographie et roman : réservant à la première le

²⁰ Marcelle Marini is critical of Philippe Lejeune and Jacques Lecarme's seminal collection of essays on the topic of childhood in literature, *Le récit d'enfance en question*, seeing their lack of attention to such texts as *L'Opoponax* as proof of their inability to see beyond issues of truth and genre as confined in the notion of the autobiographical pact.

souci de la vérité et au second le désir et le plaisir du masque, ils passent à côté des nouvelles écritures de l'individualisation dont *L'Opoponax*, entre autres, témoigne. (146)

The sheer randomness of remembered childhood scenes, the lack of continuity in childhood memories and between childhood experiences and adult preoccupations have inspired many writers to bypass a synthesizing plot or the reconstruction of an event to replace it with an unsystematic unfolding of inner processes, the suggestion of a feeling, the emotions surrounding the event. The four works studied in the following chapters naturally inscribe themselves within these “nouvelles écritures de l'individuation.”

Memory in many literary texts where childhood is evoked tends to counter strategies developed for the consolidation of collective identities. Memory as collective memory, first articulated by Maurice Halbwachs in *La Mémoire collective*, is handed down from one generation to the next and is wholly dependent on stable social institutions such as family, education, and religion. The analysis of such memory is crucial to a deeper understanding of the construction of the “imagined communities” on which nations were based starting in the nineteenth century (Landsberg 6). Such study, however, does not account for the fuzzy and unreliable memories of childhood that often seem to take root outside of a collectively shared set of beliefs. Indeed, the unreliability if not the fictionality of memory characteristic of the Nouveau Roman had long been a feature of literary childhood memory. Remembering childhood is firstly a product of forgetting as Anne Cousseau writes: “L'oubli détermine par ailleurs la construction du récit en imposant une logique fragmentaire : la suspension du souvenir, les troubles et les

silences de la mémoire font de l'espace blanc une dimension narrative essentielle" (254). Proust made this clear by making childhood memories not so much a tool for the representation of events but rather a modality of approach to forgetfulness, thus enabling the literary text to recreate the past outside established and worn social molds. By focusing on the forgotten and invisible interstices of social interactions, childhood memories tend to be inscribed on the margins of collective memory.

Ultimately, such memories often end up as a reflection on memory itself, on how we remember and what the function of memory is. Nathalie Sarraute's *Enfance* focuses on a few seemingly insignificant but nevertheless deeply marking episodes from her childhood. The significance of these memories, however, is constantly subjected to a questioning of the privileged positioning of childhood memories:

Le choix de la structure dialoguée dans *Enfance* de Sarraute, permet [. . .] d'inscrire en contrepoint du récit un discours critique qui ne cesse d'exhiber les incertitudes et les manques de la mémoire, et suspend systématiquement tout élan évocatoire, en troublant ce que pourraient avoir de trop net les contours du souvenir. La mémoire défaillante devient donc un objet du récit à part entière, et le matériau narratif se voit alors étroitement associé à un discours métatextuel.

(Cousseau 254)

This questioning of childhood memories that we see from Stendhal's *Vie de Henry Brulard* to Sarraute's *Enfance* also contributes to a seldom acknowledged aspect of literary childhood memory, one particularly present in contemporary literature – its anti-nostalgic character. If nostalgia is central to childhood reminiscences inscribed within a

larger national or institutional discourse, exploring and writing childhood for its own sake or as part of a more personal quest does not tend to rely on a nostalgic stance. The progressive disintegration of the singularity of the self that has caused childhood to be increasingly represented as unfamiliar has made difficult the nostalgic reconstruction of a glorious past.

The sense of rupture that we have noted as an important element of many literary childhoods impedes nostalgic representation and points to other more literally traumatic ruptures. With the delayed return of traumatic memories of the catastrophic events of the 20th century, many texts in the later part of the century have tackled the alleged impossibility of representation of traumatic events. Writing childhood in these texts is often a way to cope with the aftermath of traumatic events.²¹ Through the retrospective gaze of the adult narrator, the hazy past of the child has been used to uncover unacknowledged truths that could not otherwise have been represented. Indeed, the fragmented nature of the broken childhood memories in numerous contemporary texts shares many features with traumatic recall and has become fundamental to an autobiographical consciousness that critically engages with the past. Dominick LaCapra's description of the ability of narrative to navigate between past and future after trauma is relevant, it seems to me, to the role played by childhood memories in the contemporary life-writing that tends to be "performed" at the end of the twentieth century:

²¹ For examples of novels and autobiographies that use the child's marginal gaze to uncover past secrets of a traumatic past, see: Evelyne Le Garrec's *La Rive allemande de ma mémoire* (1980); many of Patrick Modiano's novels; Jean Rouaud's *Les Champs d'honneur* (1990) and *Des Hommes illustres* (1993); Charles Juliet's *Lambeaux* (1995).

Narrative at best helps one not to change the past through a dubious rewriting of history but to work through posttraumatic symptoms in the present in a manner that opens possible futures. It also enables one to recount events and perhaps to evoke experience, typically through nonlinear movements that allow trauma to register in language and its hesitations, in directions, pauses, and silences. And, particularly by bearing witness and giving testimony, narrative may help performatively to create openings in existence that did not exist before. (122)

By focusing on ominous and mysterious depths of experiences that have not been part of dominant discourses, contemporary literary memories of childhood play a role in the active and disruptive recontextualization of the past.

The texts studied in this dissertation are written at the turn of the twenty-first century and are inscribed within a set of historically-defined parameters. The following pages provide an analysis of the central characteristics of these representations of memories from childhood, which will be contrasted with the ones just outlined. Anne Cousseau has suggested that what differentiates the writing of childhood at the end of the 20th century from that of previous eras is a modification in the balance between evocation and invocation of childhood experience (252-3). The evocation of childhood, the dominant method of writing childhood until the 1960s, is characterized by a representation, a recreation of a *pays perdu*, whereas its invocation, typical of much contemporary literature, is characterized by the impossibility of such a recreation, by a desperate hollow call that only brings about an absence:

Évoquer, c'est-à-dire encore rendre à la présence l'objet perdu, mais aussi [. . .]
invoquer, c'est-à-dire donner à percevoir cette fois l'absence, au travers de la voix
 qui s'efforce à l'évocation, qui appelle et cherche. Or c'est, me semble-t-il, dans
 la modification de cet équilibre entre l'évocation et l'invocation que se marque la
 différence entre l'écriture de l'enfance au XIX^e siècle et au début du XX^e siècle,
 et les récits plus contemporains, depuis les années 60 environ. (252-3)

According to Anne Cousseau, writing childhood in the “era of suspicion”²² can no longer
 give it presence but instead brings forth a void and a loss that the text embodies:

“L'enfance devient proprement le lieu de l'informulé, faisant ainsi retour à ses origines
 étymologiques : quelque chose, comme le désigne Nathalie Sarraute dans l'incipit
 d'*Enfance*, « qui tremblote quelque part et dans les limbes », qui « fluctue, se transforme,
 s'échappe », « hors des mots »”(257). Writing childhood at the end of the 20th century,
 according to Cousseau's analysis, is the expression of a silence emanating from essential
 but indescribable experiences; it becomes a “poétique de l'oubli” that in the very
 structure of the text establishes the impossibility of remembering (254).

Cousseau's work on the evolution of representations of childhood in French
 literature is important and confirms many of my observations. Her analysis of
 contemporary writings of childhood experience rightly highlights a “crisis” of
 representation. Unfortunately, she does not go beyond the conclusion that writing
 childhood at the end of the century corresponds to a new writing of the unspeakable,

²² The expression is borrowed from Lejeune's adaptation of Sarraute's *L'ère du soupçon*, an analysis of the
 psychological and linguistic shifts that have compromised the ability to truthfully and accurately represent
 experience, a paradigm that found its clearest expression in the Nouveau Roman.

leading to the limits of a mute language in the face of the ineffable experience of childhood. In order not to fall into an account of aphasia, she ultimately redeems language by sublimating the contemporary representation of childhood to a supreme poetic act capable of making us and our language foreign to ourselves:

L'expérience littéraire se doit d'être d'abord celle de la séparation du langage, de ce qui échappe au langage, expérience de l'*infantia*, et c'est alors que la réalité familière nous redevient étrangère : « quand les mots manquent, c'est qu'à son insu, on s'apprête à toucher un autre sol ». Et c'est alors aussi que l'acte de nommer retrouve sa dimension créatrice, la toute-puissance de la *poïesis*. (261)

These Mallarmean conclusions are certainly appropriate to an analysis of some contemporary French texts in which the past of childhood fails to surface in an ever-present intellectual cogitation on the nature of a language that can only fail us in the face of the utter otherness of childhood.²³ Her contrastive analysis, however, is confined to a few canonical French literary works without addressing other francophone texts in which a different approach to the past of childhood exists.

In accordance with Anne Cousseau's observations, the contemporary texts I am considering tend to avoid or minimize evocations of childhood; there are very few renderings of what it was to be a child; the *topos* of literary childhoods (family life, home, school) are barely sketched or wholly absent. However, this paucity of evocation does not lead to a paralysis of memory, an invocation only able to self-consciously assert

²³ See, for example, Pascal Quignard's *Le Nom sur le bout de la langue* and Charles Juliet's *Lambeaux*. Pierre Bergounioux's desperate and unsuccessful attempts to capture the silences of his childhood in most of his autobiographical texts come to mind as a prime embodiment of Anne Cousseau's theory of the "poétique de l'enfance."

absences, loss and a generalized failure of language. To the contrary, as suggested by Nina Bouraoui's quote at the beginning of the introduction, far from focusing on "les blancs de la mémoire," or constituting "une énonciation trouée qui marque les fêlures de l'invocation" (254), these writings of childhood establish an overwhelming presence without a self-conscious assertion of the impossibility to represent and yet without "naïve" evocations of childhood experiences. Different tools and critical perspectives are needed to explain this strong presence of the past in a literature where evocation is absent or secondary.

The contemporary shift in autobiography studies away from linguistic and genre issues and toward an articulation of what it means to "touch the world" in writing has emphasized important factors that had previously been ignored. One of those factors is the increasing space taken up by marginal voices in autobiography and literature in general. Life-writing for individuals who had not traditionally been visible does not necessarily stem from a nostalgic need to rescue some kind of stable identity from the shadowy landscape of late modernity, but can be seen as a counterdiscourse to the dominant culture's incessant production of personal and historical mythologies.

Numerous autobiographical texts that have been written since the 1980s display many of the formal characteristics of the Nouveau Roman;²⁴ however, they are rooted in the need for a stronger sense of political agency. Indeed, as it becomes increasingly clear that "[a]

²⁴ Many of the characteristics of the traditional novel became highly questionable during the "age of suspicion" characteristic of the second half of the twentieth century. The Nouveau Roman destroyed many of the reassuring aspects of traditional narrations: the hero and his self-assurance were dead; the presence of the narrator was problematized; the teleological properties of narrative were circumvented; the text was increasingly self-referential, thus thwarting any illusion of narrative continuity; traditional plot was seen as an artificial infringement upon the free play of textual operations and the finer explorations of memory and inner voices; veracity became impossible as the boundaries between fiction and fact were erased.

dominant group, at least insofar as its position is not subjected to basic challenge, need be less concerned about its often unmarked identity, and it typically assumes that its experience is normative (even “normal”), setting the standard of authenticity for others” (LaCapra 6), it becomes essential to expose hidden structures of domination in order to reveal the “colonized other [who has] disappear[ed] into an anonymous, opaque collective of undifferentiated bodies” (Smith xvii).

With the revelation of previously invisible networks of obfuscation of experience, the focus of representation has shifted; the refusal of mimetic representation that we see in many contemporary autobiographical narratives and in my corpus does not emanate from formal and theoretical considerations but rather from the forbidding experiences of silenced realities. Delving deeper into the experience of not belonging, of being exiled from home, life-writings explore emotional dimensions of experience that become an organizing principle of these narratives. Instead of succumbing to the devastating structuralist and deconstructionist critique of subjectivity, contemporary autobiographical narratives seem to be turning that critique on its head. From the perspective of the margins, “however compelling and sophisticated this critique of the subject may be, it is a central instance of the universalizing agenda of Western theorizing that erases the subject’s heterogeneity as well as its agency” (Smith xiv). Writing the self from the margins, in a present-tense crisis, implies that the personal is inherently political, enmeshed within a Foucauldian web of discursive practices but also forced to assume agency. Agency is, of course, no longer that of a Cartesian disembodied, atomized, and autonomous self. As Leigh Gilmore writes, “to interpret objectification as something less

than simply subjectivity itself marks a place of agency” (183); it is in this act of interpretation that the subject stakes a discursive claim outside the dominant ideology as a subject inherently conflicted, fragmented, and dialogically interconnected to context and circumstances. In line with Gilmore’s call for a counter practice of autobiographics as a site of representation of multiple and contradictory identities (183-4), life-writing now becomes a textual inscription as an act of resistance. Writing childhood experience within a de-centered perspective tends to reject a mimetic representational style steeped in a tradition that is oblivious to the margins. However, these fragmented “invocations” of childhood go beyond a fatalistic musing on the void of a language incapable of translating the unrepresentable traumas of childhood. Indeed, not only are such texts “touched by the world” but they also displace the normalcy of identity and cultural construction by highlighting the conflicts that emerge from marginalization, thus identifying cultural myths and the plot structures of master narratives.

A starting point to an understanding of what distinguishes the texts of my corpus from previous ones could be to attribute their lack of evocation of the past in part to the rupture, the separation and exile characteristic of these particular memories of childhood. It is probably not a coincidence that in the four texts I have chosen the link between childhood and adulthood is literally or metaphorically marked by exile. In his study of “*récits d’enfance*” in the literature of the Maghreb, Jacques Noiray has noted that the tensions born of the ruptures of colonization have politicized autobiographical writing. Even if those texts seek to find in childhood the origin, the foundations of a lost home,

that quest is doomed, for the reality of the colonized self prevents continuity between a before and an after:

Le moi divisé qui se cherche à travers le temps et l'écriture ne pourra pas se reconstruire, car l'histoire l'a privé des possibilités de cette reconstruction. Le déchirement linguistique et culturel qui est à la base de cette littérature ne se laisse pas aisément réduire. La marque, le « tatouage », la « blessure », la « cicatrice » qu'il impose [...] est une trace indélébile. C'est le drame du récit d'enfance dans les œuvres maghrébines, que de tendre toujours vers l'unité et l'intégrité du moi [...], et de découvrir en même temps que cette intégrité est illusoire. (112)

The tension between a desire to capture a unity and integrity of the self and its impossibility that Jacques Noiray identifies in childhood memories of Maghrebin literature complicates the nature of the relationship to the past. Even if the desire for an ideal past calls for a nostalgic representation, that representation is systematically blocked by the irrevocable break of colonization. Indeed, however much one wants to return to an ideal past, the estrangement from that past is irreversible and prevents such a return.

The texts analyzed by Jacques Noiray, however, need to be contrasted to the ones studied in the following chapters. An important difference between these two groups of texts is that the contemporary childhood memories I study do not express a desire for a return to an ideal home or homeland. Not only is the exilic state of childhood in these texts not associated with a loss of cultural or national identity but, moreover, the socio-cultural environment of the child tends to be harshly condemned and could not be the object of an idealization. There is thus no diasporic identification with a larger collective

identity that could provide a counter-weight to these broken memories of childhood. The lack of complete identification with a larger community also prevents the enriching and creative celebration of métissage as exemplified by the Caribbean créolité movement. These creoliste authors were able to turn away from the emphasis of the Négritude authors on a primordial rupture from African identity and its nostalgic impulse. Indeed, their celebration is of the very cultural fragmentation of Caribbean identity and is no longer expressed in primarily nostalgic terms but as the possibility of a rich, complex, and creative multiculturalism.²⁵ From the perspective of the texts studied in this dissertation, this celebrated hybridity is not denied but remains an abstraction in the face of the wounds and the solitude remembered from childhood. Indeed, the emphasis in these childhood memories is less on a shared hybrid, but nevertheless collective, identity than on experiences that are made invisible by that collectivity.²⁶

The role of exile in the childhood memories I study is then not to be found in a search for shared experience of home, whether it be nostalgic or celebratory. I would tentatively see the diasporic exile present intra- or extra-textually in my corpus as a form of trigger for the development of a more personal exile of marginalization. This individual exile does not identify with larger cultural or national entities; it is not expressed with nostalgia, does not claim the safety of a home, does not constitute a

²⁵ For an analysis of the changing perceptions of exile in the Caribbean, see Marin Munro's "Nostalgia isn't what it used to be: Changing Approaches to Exile in the Caribbean." *Uncertain Relations: Some Configurations of the 'Third Space' in Francophone Writings of the Americas and of Europe*.

²⁶ It is interesting to note that in Patrick Chamoiseau's childhood memories *Enfance créole* (Chamoiseau is a central figure of the créolité movement) not only are childhood experiences richly evoked but the creole identity of the child is also threatened by the larger unifying and yet excluding French colonial presence in schooling. On the contrary, in the texts of my corpus this contrast between larger cultural entities would be minimized or absent in order to voice experiences that neither cultural entity recognizes.

reflection and tends to resist metanarratives on the condition of exile itself. I see it, rather than a linguistic, cultural, or diasporic exile, as an inward, bodily exile or alienation from an impersonal majority, a metaphorical exile often expressed with images of physical or psychosomatic pain. Childhood is then not remembered with nostalgia for a time before the fall into sexuality and the shame imposed by cultural constructions of the adult body; it is rather portrayed as a privileged site of cultural or familial marking. Violence, abuse, silence, and neglect are found with disturbing vividness in the memory of a sensitive and vulnerable childhood – images that are often inscribed in bodily memories. My recontextualization of exile from a socio-cultural concept to an awareness rooted in the pain of somatic realities follows Gabriele Griffin's contention that the female body as a denaturalized site (as happens in memories of childhood abuse, for example) becomes a contentious place of exile: "For me exile is about pain, about physical and psychical pain, about a somatically enacted process whereby subjugated subjectivities are fashioned and sustained" (112). The female body, according to Griffin, is "evacuated" in order to reach an impossible approximation to dominant ideals of femininity (117-118); as a paradigmatic site of exile, the body, through memory, is then capable of engaging and confronting an ideological context. Bodily childhood memories, as I adapt the concept from Griffin's model, cannot be a nostalgic exploration of an idealized childhood but rather serve as witness to an irreversible painful break rooted in childhood experiences. Furthermore, by virtue of this exile being remembered "somatically," these memories are intrinsically engaged in a struggle against the constructions of identity from childhood into adulthood, an evolution whose growing pains are normally obliterated.

The return of the real in the childhood memories I am studying cannot be established without an understanding of this language of the body. As Françoise Lionnet has noted, expressions of corporeal exile represent personal experience as an inscription of the body which eliminates the distance between life and art.²⁷ If childhood memories can “touch the world” they do so as photographic snapshots through which the marks of physical reality jump through time, not as an evocation of the past but rather as a fragmented shattering irruption of a past that, true or not, and in the absence of distance between art and life, can be neither described nor doubted. Remembering the past of childhood in my studied texts does not faithfully reconstitute events, nor are the recalled images causally linked to other subsequent events in order to justify some line of progress; instead, remembering childhood actualizes unfamiliar past experiences as happens with traumatic memories in which the survivor of traumatic events experiences a blurring of temporal coordinates, a radical sense of disconnect between past and present.

This corporal language also accounts for the presence of numerous negative and confrontational images that seem contrary to a healing process. By speaking the very language of the wounds opened by trauma, these texts also bring about a revengeful defense against the forgetting of an unbearable history that will only be redeemed through the constant reopening of the scars of a painful past. Writing becomes an expression of trauma similar to the drawings of children of wars – burning fathers, decapitated mothers lying in front of the house – images that might have potential healing

²⁷ Françoise Lionnet uses the following quote from Susan Gubar to illustrate her point: “... women have had to experience cultural scripts in their lives by suffering them in their bodies... For the artist, this sense that she is herself the text means that there is little distance between her life and her art” (94). She then notes that “the personal experience of exile is translated by a representation of the female body which eliminates the distance between life and art, the lived and the imagined” (94).

power but also that directly speak the language of wounds, a fearful, angry, frustrated and violent language that does not inherently seek resolution. The narratives that we are studying do not only act as potential healing tools, but also and perhaps centrally as a literary scream, where the wounds themselves scream. This cry is not only a pre-narrative to a working through of trauma oriented toward a longed for better future but also an anti-narrative stack of images expressing horror towards an unbearable past, similar to Klee's *Angelus Novus* interpreted by Walter Benjamin: "This is how the angel of history must look. His face is turned toward the past. Where a chain of events appears before *us*, *he* sees one single catastrophe, which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it at his feet" (Concept 392; Thesis X). That is where, it seems to me, trauma studies, autobiography studies, and contemporary childhood memories meet – in the defense against the forgetting of an unrepresentable but latent past that, as a stack of visceral images, irrupts into and disrupts the status quo.

What emerges from this analysis is that previous representations of childhood have capitalized on a certain idea of childhood in order to achieve a particular effect. The child has been constructed as pure, innocent, creative, poetic, or victimized. These myths of childhood have been used to play a multitude of disruptive roles. A different model for the voicing of childhood is emerging in contemporary literature. The disruptive aspect of childhood in these contemporary texts operates not predominantly through an appropriation of a certain functional idea or myth of childhood, but more importantly, as we have seen, through a visceral appropriation of the text by a still barely audible voice

of a child – the text is a tool to express the utter unfamiliarity of scarcely sketched childhood, of its invisible wounds and marks.

CHAPTER III

LOOKING BACK TO THE FUTURE: THE PIERCING GAZE OF CHILDHOOD REMEMBERED

Georges Perec's autobiographical narrative *W, ou le souvenir d'enfance* (1974) starts with this provocative sentence: "Je n'ai pas de souvenirs d'enfance" ("I don't have childhood memories"). Starting with their enigmatic role in the title and continuing in the autobiographical narrative, childhood memories in Perec's text are blocked, unable to yield any truth about the past. The truth, the events surrounding the death of his mother in Auschwitz when Perec was six, is impersonal; History covers the events, obfuscating and silencing an orphaned memory:

"Je n'ai pas de souvenir d'enfance": je posais cette affirmation avec assurance avec presque une sorte de défi. L'on n'avait pas à m'interroger sur cette question. Elle n'était pas inscrite à mon programme. J'en étais dispensé: une autre histoire, la Grande, L'Histoire avec sa grande hache, avait déjà répondu à ma place: la guerre, les camps. (17)

Only the "W" of the title, itself the title of a fictional dystopian tale inspired by a childhood fantasy, in its juxtaposition with empty memories is able to give meaning to the past. The fiction of *W*, which functions as an allegory of the Nazi concentration camps, does not fill the absence of Perec's childhood memory but gives meaning to what can only be expressed in the autobiography by an ellipsis, his mother's last train ride.

The original wound, never really understood by the child, is the silence surrounding the disappearance of his mother, an absence which was only able to bloom in the birth of an artistic imagination responsible for the creation of a murderous society such as the one that murdered his mother. There is no successful attempt in *W* to render elusive memories; the fictional text takes the place of memories, it constitutes memories.

Similarly to *W*, the narrative structure in Nina Bouraoui's *L'âge blessé* (1998) is based on the juxtaposition of fictional and autobiographical accounts. In *L'âge blessé*, however, childhood memories abound, they feed and give energy to the dying narrator of the fictional account. History, no longer a silencing force, is now annihilated by the overwhelming presence of memories that shatter cultural illusions of clarity and continuity. The central role given to childhood memories in *L'âge blessé* is emblematic of all the primary texts studied in this dissertation, which share an inherent trust in their productive power – childhood memories in these contemporary autobiographical narratives are intensely active. Instead of leading to another absence, or confirming the stability of cultural, historical, or personal narratives, they seem to overcome them with incongruous images.

This chapter is divided in two parts. Part A looks at different literary and theoretical texts which are particularly apt at attributing such productive role to childhood memories. I use Walter Benjamin's critique of historicism and his Proustian theories of memory as the basis for a conception of childhood memories as a non-representational revelation of the past capable of shattering the stability of the present. Drawing parallels between this flashing of the forgotten past and Barthes's photographic *punctum* I

establish the manner in which images from childhood memories can instantly cut across the past to connect to our future gaze. A faith in the unique relevance of remembered childhood experience, a constitutive and transforming role given to memories that are able to surpass the all-encompassing arms of culture, and a strong ability to transcend chronological time are present in all these texts as well as in the primary texts studied in subsequent chapters. Part B is a close reading of Nina Bouraoui's *L'âge blessé*. The texts analyzed in Part A provide useful tools for the analysis of the role of childhood memory in the relationship between past and present in *L'âge blessé*. Nevertheless, different points of emphasis naturally emerge during the reading of a text by a French woman raised in Algeria who is writing at the turn of the twenty-first century. I also take advantage of the virtual absence of critical commentaries on this particular text to let it speak, using Nina Bouraoui's powerful prose as a guide to the development of my argument. Part A is then not just a theoretical backbone underlying the analysis of Nina Bouraoui's text but the start of a dialogue between theory and literature in regard to the role of childhood memories in the remembrance of the past.

Part A: The Irruption of Childhood Memories

As we saw in Chapter II, a cursory reading of many contemporary literary childhood memories will reveal that if there is a renewed faith in the ability of childhood memories to access and convey past experience, it does not necessarily follow a mimetic model of representation. Childhood memories tend to be represented with opaque, fragmented, and often contradictory images. Similarly to screen memories, the literary childhood memories studied in this dissertation do not necessarily correspond to the real

in any direct, unmediated way since, according to Freud, what we remember are memories already shaped by the distortions engendered by successive waves of remembering imbued with fantasy and desire.²⁸ One of the tasks of psychoanalysis is to uncover these patterns of association and to bring them to consciousness in order to stop pathologically repeating them. My task in this chapter, however, is not to analyze patterns of obfuscation, however important they may be, but rather to capitalize on the unsettling potential present in these mnemonic patterns of deformation thereby focusing on how childhood memories confront past and present. Indeed, in my reading of the texts of my corpus, the role of childhood memories is not to cover the significance of hidden events but interrupt the production of truths with images that do not necessarily call for interpretation but that instead can be seen for their ability to unsettle the stability of conventional narrative frames.

What for Freud rendered childhood memories particularly malleable and thus capable of creative superimpositions was their visual character: “[My early childhood memories] are mostly short scenes, but they are very well preserved and furnished with every detail of sense-perception, in complete contrast to my memories of adult years, which are entirely lacking in the visual element” (Freud, “Screen” 118). Following this observation, I will show that the visual and photographic character of the literary childhood memories of my corpus constitute an important factor that enables them to play a disruptive role. This picturing of the past constructed in flashed images

²⁸ This is the role given to childhood memories by Freud in “Screen Memories,” an article written after the important conceptual turn taken in 1897 in which the abandonment of the seduction theory led him to deny the central role of the parent as seducer to instead emphasize the unconscious desires of the child.

contributes to the fragmented nature of many contemporary self-narratives but also to a return to a faith in the referential power of language.²⁹ Linda Rugg has noted that “both Roland Barthes and Paul de Man who profess disbelief in the referential power of language, seem to become remarkably gullible when it comes to photographs” (11). This gullibility, an almost naïve belief in the magical power of photography to mirror past reality, is, as I will claim, not only present but a crucial component of the written childhood memories of my corpus. Indeed, the fragmented images from the childhood memories that we will study seem to be intrinsically linked to marking experiences. Barthes’s mythological dimension is thus turned upside down; if narrative in *Mythologies* was a mere tool that culture possessed to transform reality into images, photography in *La chambre claire*, and by extension the photographic frames of literary childhood memory, can produce images that are nothing less than reality screaming through the veil of culture.

Childhood memories as a specific type of memory capable of a particular illumination of the past take a decisive turn with Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*. For the first time, childhood memories are not used to capture the past as the representation of more or less significant events but as a particular approach to the passage of time.³⁰ As much as the Proustian novel can be read as an optical instrument capable of refining and expanding one’s perception of reality, it should come as no surprise that many of the childhood scenes in *À la recherche* describe the fascination of

²⁹ See Linda Rugg’s *Picturing Ourselves: Photography and Autobiography* for the impact of photography on self-narratives.

³⁰ See Valérie Dupuy’s « *Noter sans suite ni transition* » for an analysis of the novel treatment of childhood memories in Proust in relation to Anatole France and Pierre Loti.

the child for various objects or techniques used to amplify perception through optical means.³¹ The apprehension of immediate reality always ends up disappointing the narrator, falling below the expectations raised by the infinite variety of rich and contradictory images flowing from the imagination, dreams and memory: “On cherche à retrouver dans les choses, devenues par là précieuses, le reflet que notre âme a projeté sur elles, on est déçu en constatant qu’elles semblent dépourvues dans la nature, du charme, qu’elles devaient, dans notre pensée, au voisinage de certaines idées” (86). What is significant in Proust are the strategies he deploys to remedy the opacity of the real ruled by perceptions of a present moment mediated by habit and the dictates of conventions. A way out of these limitations is found in the work of memory: “We know that in his work Proust described not a life as it actually was but a life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it [...]. The important thing to the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory” (Benjamin, “Image” 237-38).

To overcome the weight of habit on perception, Proust’s narrator develops a strategy of superimposition of images from the past. Memory, the crucial creative link between past and present, is able to infinitely enrich the stale images of the present with fresher imaginary scenes from an out-of-context past. The positivistic model of perception is here turned upside down as the forgotten past is intrinsically more valuable than an observable present now seen as ruled by conventions. Memory is a screen, a subjective prism that transforms and overcomes the limitations of immediate observation.

³¹ See Alessia Ricciardi’s “Cinema Regained: Godard Between Proust and Benjamin” in *Modernism/Modernity*. 8.4, 2001 (especially p. 645-651), for an analysis of Proust’s literary strategies based on the superimposition of images from the past.

Like Freudian screen memories, memories are not valued for the accuracy of their representation as they are imbued with subjective fantasy and desire. Unlike Freudian screen memories, however, the goal is not to uncover what they conceal and symbolize but rather to enhance the appreciation of the present moment. Memory as a screen is not a memory that is voluntarily recalled, which would only reproduce recognizable patterns of association: “Mais comme ce que je me serais rappelé [de Combray] 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” (43). In contrast to this dead reality, Proust’s *mémoire involontaire* originates in forgetfulness – insulated from the gaze of convention, it can become productive. The past of childhood is a rich source of such memories, so much so that it is, for Proust, a prime source of enrichment of the real. But even more importantly, childhood memories are for Proust the main anguished motivation behind his literary quest, as Valérie Dupuy has shown in her analysis of the treatment of childhood memories in *La Recherche*: “Si l’enfance y a sa place, elle n’y est qu’un moment, et n’a de sens et d’existence que par rapport à une suite, et un projet largement plus ambitieux: montrer la naissance d’une vocation, ses errements, la sédimentation qui fait l’être et qui lui permet finalement d’écrire” (93).

If childhood memory as a particularly rich and playful field of images inspired writers throughout the twentieth century,³² what has not been sufficiently highlighted is the temporal tension inherent in these memories, the potential they have of disturbing the

³² See Chapter II for examples of different approaches to childhood memories in the twentieth century.

stability of the present through the influx of essentially forgotten autobiographical images. For Proust, and in a similar fashion in the texts of my corpus, the remembered past of childhood allows the past to be seen through the prism of subjectivity of an autobiographical imagination that calls into question the stability of accepted discourses. Proust's dream of total revelation from a single image from memory is admittedly no longer believable in contemporary literature; we will see, however, that the unsettling power of revelation that Proust ascribed to childhood memories in particular is central in all the texts of my corpus.

As we will see in subsequent chapters, childhood memories in contemporary literature are often enmeshed in a larger historical context. Autobiographical and historical representations of the past merge as neither one seems to exist independently of the other. This merging should come as no surprise as modern autobiography and historiography have similar origins and have developed following similar patterns:

Autobiography as a genre helps us to see the connection between memory and history in modern historiography because it is life history written from the perspective of recollection with a view to recapturing the sources of inspiration in earlier stages of our lives. Reconceived in the late eighteenth century [...] as the adult's reflections of the process of his self-fashioning, it became an art form that drew history and memory together. It lured the adult back toward his beginnings by giving conscious expression to the imperatives for self-analysis to which the culture of the eighteenth century had in so many ways become attuned. (Hutton 155)

However, and given that such a relationship exists between these two forms of representation of the past, contemporary childhood memories as interruptive images must not only imply an atypical relationship to the larger historical past but also a different model of historical representation. The figure of Walter Benjamin clearly emerges here – his idiosyncratic critique of historicism and the central role he gave to remembrance of childhood experience will be highly relevant to an understanding of the workings of childhood memories in the contemporary texts I am studying. Proust's *Recherche*, furthermore, played an important role in the development of Benjamin's ideas on history, memory and childhood. In this context, Proustian memory is not historical because of its reference to the outside socio-historical world (although this is an interesting area of research)³³ but rather for its form of remembrance that can serve as the basis for another form of historical representation – a form of imaging of the past intrinsically linked to “interruptive” modes of autobiographical representation.

History in my corpus of childhood memories is generally not represented as a succession of events causally linked. Instead, it permeates the images of memory in the manner of a background. Benjaminian historiography starts with a staunch critique of History as an objective science of the past as a succession of important events causally linked in order to create the illusion of continuity and progress – what Benjamin call *historicism*. History, for him, does not follow a chronological course but relies instead on the survival of traces of the past as images: “The true image of the past flits by. The past

³³ See, for example: Michael Sprinker's *History and Ideology in Proust: A la recherche du temps perdu and the Third French Republic*, 1994; Yolande Jansen's “The red shoes: Walter Benjamin's reading of memory in Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*, in the light of the Dreyfus Affair” in *Journal of Romance Studies* 3.1, 2003: 29-43.

can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again” (“Concept” 390). These images are not immutably available to us, but need to be recognized retrospectively, under a set of different spatiotemporal configurations that enable their irruption: “The possibility of history is bound to the survival of the traces of what is past and to our ability to read these traces as traces. That these traces are marked historically does not mean that they belong to a specific time [...]. Rather, as he says of images in general, they only come to legibility at a specific time” (Cadava 102). History is then read as a flash of images that, like Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*, must be forgotten in order to emerge and reveal the past. Childhood memories do not register the events of the past as part of History but as an often-invisible background without any causal link to other events. This background of childhood memories is uniquely capable of reawakening later in adulthood as a set of unsettling flashing images. Similarly, in the childhood memories studied in this dissertation, history is represented as images that do not reconstitute the past but that instead tend to overwhelm or destabilize the moment of remembrance as a break in the continuity of the narrative. The relation between past and present is one of actualization – it is in part this process of actualization of the past that gives remembrance of childhood an interruptive potential.

The remembered past of childhood, then, is not “as it once was” but rather contemporaneous. With this model of historical remembrance as disruptive of the flow of time, the scope of historical investigation is greatly widened; the historian is no longer an archivist of printed data but now akin to an archeologist of memories digging the earth

in search of the finding that will put into question established historical truths. Benjamin describes his quest for childhood memories in *A Berlin Chronicle* in similar terms:

“Fruitless searching is as much a part of this as succeeding, and consequently remembrance must not proceed in the manner of a narrative or still less that of a report, but must, in the strictest epic and rhapsodic manner, assay its spade into ever-new places, and in the old ones delve to ever-deeper layers” (611). That memories of childhood have the potential of reaching ever-deeper layers of the past is due not to the events of childhood per se but to the particular quality of the images of childhood memory. As with Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*, it is not the great events of the past that bear historical remembrance – these are too subject to the annihilating gaze of convention – but the smallest, most insignificant details.

If “historical objects are rescued by being ripped out of their developmental histories, out of the fictional and falsifying narratives into which they have been inserted through the process of transmission” (Andersson 207), then memories from childhood play a determinant role in unsettling the immutable past of history books. Indeed, the gaze of childhood is akin to what the Benjaminian historiographer is after – in trying to make sense of the myriad images that are not seen through adult eyes, the child deforms social constructs, imposing hieroglyphic and magical traits on them. The practical and rational world of the adult is only partially understood; the everyday objects that constitute that world are part of a great puzzle. By necessity, the signification of the dreamlike images of childhood remains enigmatic until the adult wakes up remembering “the images, severed from all earlier associations, that stand – like precious fragments or

torsos in a collector's gallery – in the sober rooms of our later insights" (Benjamin, *Berlin Chronicle* 611). Remembering the past of childhood thus establishes a natural tension between past and present, which for Benjamin is a precondition to the recognizing and irruption of past images in the present: "Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad" ("Concept" 396). The remembered forgotten images of childhood "crystalize" and converge into an immediately present moment of recognition that constitutes what Benjamin calls a monad. Remembering these images from childhood can then establish a tension between the image itself and its transformation through time, a precondition for grasping "the constellation into which [one's] own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one" ("Concept" 397).

By virtue of that tension, childhood memories seem endowed with a prophetic gaze, an aspect of memory that also seems recurrent in my corpus. Each trace of the past is thus a potential "dialectical image," an image capable of a sudden flash-like illumination of a future present. By virtue of their idiosyncratic perspective, childhood memories are of a past inherently directed toward a future of potential recognition, they contain the traces of transformations yet to come:

Typical of *Berlin Childhood* is the child's awareness (however dim) of the future, as if he had some insight into his fate. But because the autobiographical self narrates from the present looking back to the past, it is as if the future were remembered back into the child, implanted there by the act of narration. In this

way, the fragments of the past find reactivation in the act of prophecy; the child's experience contains the germ of premonition that pulls it into the future and brings the child's perception into unity with the narrator's. (Rugg 149-50)

Remembering childhood, then, is future-oriented; the future is remembered by virtue of the child's constantly projecting him/herself into an unknown to come. The productive role of childhood in Benjamin's text, and in numerous other contemporary texts, does not rest on its innocence but rather on its apprehensive and bewildered groping along the hallways of time, always potentially capable, through memory, of reactualizations of the past: "I believe it possible that a fate expressly theirs [the images of childhood memories] is held in reserve for such images [...] ; the images of my metropolitan childhood perhaps are capable, at their core, of performing later historical experience" ("Berlin Childhood" 344). Like an old photograph of a child which one cannot help but project onto the future, childhood memories are intensely engaged in a constant confrontation of past, present, and future.

Childhood memories, as they have been developed in Proust and Benjamin, put past and present into a "dialectical" relationship – not as a development, a continuous temporal relationship, but as flashes of images. Memories cutting across the past at the speed of a flash of light to connect umbilically to our future gaze remind us, not coincidentally, of Barthes's great defater of Time, his photographic *punctum*. In *La chambre claire (Camera Lucida)*, a book written in memory of his recently passed mother, Barthes attempts to grasp the intensely personal cutting power of photographs. He makes an early distinction between beautiful or interesting pictures and photographs

that touch us as deeply as a wound. The first category, the *studium*, is made up of photos that can be studied, that can tell us about the context and the times of the photograph; they communicate, teach, inform – they are part of the cultural heritage: “Reconnaître le *studium*, c’est fatalement rencontrer les intentions du photographe, entrer en harmonie avec elles, les approuver, les désapprouver, mais toujours les comprendre, les discuter en moi-même, car la culture (dont relève le *studium*) est un contrat passé entre les créateurs et les consommateurs” (51). This studied, academic approach to photography cannot capture the jabbing power of certain photographs. The second approach to photographic images represents an interruption of the *studium*: “il me semblait constater que le *studium*, pour autant qu’il n’est pas traversé, fouetté, zébré par un détail (*punctum*) qui m’attire ou me blesse, engendrait un type de photo très répandu [...] qu’on pourrait appeler la *photographie unaire*” (69). Contrary to this *unary photograph*, these images that protect the viewer from “dangerous” photography, Barthes’s *punctum* cannot be analyzed but instead is characterized by its instantaneous wounding interruption: “Le second élément vient casser (ou scander) le *studium*. Cette fois, ce n’est pas moi qui vais le chercher (comme j’investis de ma conscience souveraine le champ du *studium*), c’est lui qui part de la scène, comme une flèche, et vient me percer” (49).

The parallels between the *punctum* and childhood memories as we have analyzed them in Proust and Benjamin are striking. Childhood memory’s actualization of the past, its ability to bring the past to the present, not as a narration but as a flashing image is similar to the piercing power of the photograph: “the photographic moment erases the distinction between past and present by interrupting time, taking a frame of time out of its

context for perusal in the future” (Rugg 149). Neither the wounding photograph nor the piercing childhood memories reconstitute the past; instead, they establish the existence of a past capable of striking the present: “L’effet [que la photographie] produit sur moi n’est pas de restituer ce qui est aboli (par le temps, la distance), mais d’attester que cela que je vois, a bien été” (129). Photography as a *punctum* and the “interruptive” childhood memories I am studying thus constitute a radical form of realism. The skepticism of post-structuralism, and of the younger Barthes, is now turned into a quasi-mystical belief in the emanation of the real: “Les réalistes, dont je suis [...] ne prennent pas du tout la photo pour une « copie » du réel – mais pour une émanation du *réel passé* : une *magie*, non un art” (138). Just as Barthes naively claims that “dans la photographie, je ne puis jamais nier que *la chose a été là*” (120), in the childhood memories that we will be reading in subsequent chapters there will be no doubt about the existence of childhood experience in the past and its persistent emanation in the present. This presence is nevertheless not established through reconstitution but, as we have seen, through flashing interruptions.

Barthes claims, with Sartre, that literary images are notoriously incapable of overcoming the codified weight of language:

Tous les auteurs sont d’accord, dit Sartre, pour remarquer la pauvreté des images qui accompagnent la lecture d’un roman : si je suis bien pris par ce roman, pas d’image mentale. Au *Peu-d’image* de la lecture, répond le *Tout-image* de la photo ; non seulement parce qu’elle est déjà en soi une image, mais parce que cette image très spéciale se donne pour complète – *intègre*, dira-t-on en jouant sur

le mot. L'image photographique est pleine, bondée : pas de place, on ne peut rien y ajouter. (139)

It is my contention, however, that literature, through childhood memories, is capable of lifting the veil of culture and the opacity of language precisely by virtue of their photographic traits. Just as photography establishes the wounding presence of a lost past, literary childhood memories can cry out the silent past of childhood. Barthes wrote that photography is unique in its ability to give unmediated access to history: "Peut-être avons-nous une résistance invincible à croire au passé, à l'histoire, sinon sous forme de mythe. La photographie, pour la première fois, fait cesser cette résistance : le passé est désormais aussi sûr que le présent, ce qu'on voit sur le papier est aussi sûr que ce qu'on touche" (136). As we have seen with Benjamin, childhood memories are uniquely able to overcome the resistance of history by establishing that the past is as real as the present (by interrupting the flow of chronology) but also by reaching beyond the boundaries of the established narratives that constitute history and identity. The image of the child's uncontrolled cry is powerful for it conveys its inability to be made into an account – crying, whether tearful or as a scream, falls beyond narration; it cannot be told as a story.

The *punctum* of photography and the piercing images of childhood memories aim at the annihilation of chronological time, of its constitutive and causal role in historical and autobiographical identity. By delegitimizing the link between the passage of time, chronology, and events, these representations then appear to be intrinsically antithetical to the constitution of historical and autobiographical depictions of the past. However, Barthes's *punctum* is intrinsically autobiographical: "Très souvent, le *punctum* est un

« détail », c'est-à-dire un objet partiel. Aussi, donner des exemples de *punctum*, c'est, d'une certaine façon, me livrer" (73). Similarly, interruptive childhood memories are autobiographical not because of their content but by virtue of the interruption – an interruption which can only be read as such by recognizing the instantaneous release of temporal tension, by giving oneself over (“se livrer”), by being wounded by it. There can be no universally determined and identifiable *punctum* as “it shifts between one viewer and another; because it can even shift within one viewer’s response over time; because it is not necessarily what the photographer has seen or “given” to the print; and because it is not a thing but rather a condition that arises from the *noeme* of the unique medium of photography: *Ça a été*” (Shawcross 85). The contemporary childhood memories I am studying are highly personal, often corporally marked, and arresting of a larger historical discourse. It is precisely this arrest, frequently originating in pain, that constitutes their historicity, their certification of historical reality, as Benjamin sees it. By interrupting the historical and autobiographical narrative flow, these childhood memories establish a tension between past and present that through jarring images explodes a continuum to establish the past in the present.

This faith in the ability of the past to permeate the present implies a stance before or beyond culture and history. For Perce, as we saw, there was no way to access childhood memories overwhelmed by the weight of History: “For writers and artists born in WWII France, and especially for Jewish artists like Perce and Boltanski, the Proustian or Barthesian *souvenir d'enfance* seems to have become a kind of empty signifier, a site for assumed identities and invented sensations” (Perloff 47). Boltanski, an artist who has

made use of photography to represent his childhood and the Holocaust has repeatedly denied the purported truth-telling power of that medium. By dislocating images from the past from their original context, he has challenged their authenticity and association with the real: “I have utilized the property of the proof one accords to photography to expose it or to try to show that photography lies, that it doesn’t speak the truth but rather the cultural code” (Quoted in Perloff 42). In Boltanski, history’s narrative is being disputed too; however, contrary to the Benjaminian fleeting picture of the past, there cannot be any flashing of the past into the present which, for Boltanski, would only constitute another lie perpetrated by commonplace belief in photography as the emanation of the real. Boltanski and Perec undermine History by denying its institutional claims, but they are unable to establish an alternative cutting truth capable of surpassing the weight of History: “While Boltanski subverts the filter of culture that orchestrates the public response to photography, Barthes simply surpasses it” (Rabaté 9). In Barthesian terms, no *punctum* is possible for Boltanski and Perec, everything is inscribed in a cultural encoding that must be challenged for its truth-making claims but that, correspondingly, cannot be overcome. In what is reminiscent of Perec’s continually being faced with screen memories of his childhood, Boltanski writes: “I have invented so many false memories, which were collective memories, that my true childhood has disappeared” (Quoted in Perloff 47). Still looking for a true childhood, Boltanski and Perec’s memories can only lie and reveal nothing but absences that are incapable of breaking through the silence of History. Nina Bouraoui’s piercing childhood memories that we will read in Part B, like Barthes’s *punctum* and the irruptive images of Proust and

Benjamin, constitute a wound that when remembered can pierce through the opaque film that keeps the past safely separate from the present.

This arrest of history, which I claim is at work in the childhood memories of my corpus, places us beyond cultural mediation, straddling a boundary beyond which words resemble the raw cries of scared or wounded child. Barthes wrote that photography can be mad or tame and that it was a mad photography alone that, beyond empirical or aesthetic normalization, was capable of bringing the metaphysicality of Time down to the contingency of love and grief:

Folle ou sage ? La photographie peut être l'un ou l'autre : sage si son réalisme reste relatif, tempéré par des habitudes esthétiques ou empiriques [...] ; folle, si ce réalisme est absolu, et, si l'on peut dire, originel, faisant revenir à la conscience amoureuse et effrayée la lettre même du Temps : mouvement proprement révoltif, qui retourne le cours de la chose, et que j'appellerai pour finir l'extase photographique. (183)

The childhood memories that I am reading in this dissertation are, I would argue, extraordinarily mad; operating a deep fissure in the wall of Time, they imbue it with the incongruity of blood, tears, and fears – raw materials that can only bring down the border that it purportedly constitutes.

Part B: Savage Memories of a Buried Childhood in Nina Bouraoui's *L'âge blessé*

The narrative structure of Georges Perec's *W, ou le souvenir d'enfance* is based on a juxtaposition of a first-person autobiographical account and a fictional account narrated heterodiegetically. As we saw, the childhood memories of the autobiographical

narrative do not achieve a satisfactory resolution; they are sterile and unable to provide solace to a skeptical narrator constantly faced with doubt. Furthermore, the narrative voices of the autobiographical and fictional accounts are utterly foreign to each other; they cannot feed each other, thus preventing autobiographical memory from operating beyond the confines of the first-person narrator's limitations. Memory in this text is orphaned, it cannot construct a reality out of the void it creates. Only the writing of the fiction can constitute an anchoring (*encrage/ancrage*) of the past.

In contrast to Perec's text, Nina Bouraoui's two narrative voices in *L'âge blessé* are intrinsically linked to each other. In fact, these two echoing homodiegetic narrative voices belong to the same person; the autobiographical voice is the child's voice, or rather the voice of the memory of the fictional narrator's childhood. Both accounts, narrated in the present tense, are located in an indefinite time and space, contributing to the symbiosis between childhood memory and the narrator's meditations in the narrative time of the fiction. This harmony between the two voices contributes to a successful irruption of childhood memories capable of piercing a veil of normalcy.

L'âge blessé starts with a self-description of the narrator's old and withered body merged with the untamed nature of a mythical forest. Alone, childless, exiled, and rebellious, this 100-year old woman is in symbiosis with the natural elements: "Je rampe, me vautre, m'essouffle, la forêt est bonne, elle disculpe, protège du regard, atténue la faute, l'enserme, elle gaine la honte, rassemble les branches pour me cacher. Je suis son enfant, adoptée, un rejeton contracté sur le tard, une pitié intégrée, une dernière volonté des bois. J'ai cent ans. Je suis libre" (10). The safety conferred by nature protects her

from a hostile social environment in which she is an outcast: “J’effraie. Ils me voient sans m’envelopper, mon visage est percé [...]. Ils craignent la forêt, ses plis, ses surplis, ils préfèrent la ligne droite des champs, le clair de la plaine [...]. Ils m’appellent la vieille, la folle, la sorcière, je suis une orpheline de cent ans” (13). Her relationship with the elements, however, involves more than protection from others. Indeed, she is incessantly digging, prodding, burrowing into the earth. What she is looking for under the earth is her memory: “J’assainis, je débarrasse, j’ouvre le sol pour un autre sol, le canton de ma mémoire” (16), a memory that she can access only outside of the village and its horde of people on the outer reaches of the forest: “Ma quête est restreinte et pourtant infinie, je vais à ma recherche [...] à l’écart des grilles du village, d’un contexte déjà social, établi, structuré. Je suis libre, hors d’eux, mon souci est une unité” (58). It is the voice of childhood memories that will provide her with the tool she needs to seek this unity, or union: “Je m’enfonce vers des boyaux sombres, à tâtons, après les ronces, après la boue, après l’argile et les cailloux, je cherche un plan nu, la première écorce, la note, le ton des bruissements, ma petite enfance” (16).

Childhood memories emerge from the past as a lifeline, the only link that, in exile, will yield a find: “Le regard [des autres] scelle ma différence, je suis enfermée, astreinte au retrait et à la fuite du temps, le passé me tend une corde, je saisis mon enfance” (55). Like Walter Benjamin’s historian as an archeologist of memories digging the earth in search of the finding that will put into question established historical truths, the narrator in *L’âge blessé* looks for and finds memories that will inevitably be jarring

and destabilize established truths. Indeed, as she first searches for the reassuring images of a sheltered childhood, what she finds are violent and sexually-tainted images:

Je cherche la lumière et le coton, je cherche mon cheval de bois, je cherche la poitrine de ma mère, je cherche des voix, des rubans soyeux, je cherche l'odeur des crêpes et du chocolat brûlé, je cherche l'escalier en spirale, ma course ronde. Je cherche des yeux mon père qui fume. Un os de seiche flotte entre mes cuisses. Je suis virile. Je suis une grossièreté, animale, à quatre pattes, indomptable. Je ressemble aux singes de mon enfance. Je suis une guenon des gorges de Lassara, accrochée à la falaise, en attente sur son tréteau d'appui, sale, excitée, prête à mordre, à tuer. (22)

It is at this point, as the past of childhood makes its first discordant intrusion, that the first echo from the child's narrative voice appears.

What emerge are incongruous images of a trip the child took to the gorges of Lassara,³⁴ an area where tourists can approach monkeys who live in the wild. What memory preserved of that trip were images of violence and sexuality emanating from the monkeys: "Ils ont des visages d'assassins. Ils savent ôter les boutons du corsage, de la robe, du chemisier. Ils doublent leurs cris d'un jet de pierre, ils s'affrontent et rient comme des hommes" (27). But what is most unexpected is the child's complete identification with the monkeys, in opposition to the humans who in this scene are remembered as the outsiders: "[Les singes] me caressent, m'incluent dans leur camp, ils me dévalisent. Je suis guenon, sale, vulgaire, simiesque. Je suis unique. Je les nourris,

³⁴ The "gorges de Lassara" correspond to the "gorges de la Chiffa" in Algeria, an area which Nina Bouraoui probably visited as a child.

ils frappent le sol, ils crient, ils déchirent ma robe, ils griffent ma peau fine. On m'arrache de justesse. Je perds mon enfance" (27). The momentous loss of childhood, an event marked in numerous literary childhood memories, is here characterized not by the violating trauma induced by the monkeys but by her being torn away from the monkeys by people, by an anonymous third person "on": "J'ai perdu mon âge aux gorges de Lassara, destituée, offerte aux singes puis arrachée. J'ai vieilli d'un coup, d'un geste de la main, un adieu, le temps du trajet, un aller simple, de la montagne à la ville" (31). The archetypal opposition between the forest and the village in the fictional narrative is echoed in the first autobiographical childhood memory in which incorporation into culture is synonymous with a loss of identification with a violent but attractive and inclusive nature. The importance of that opposition, however, will emerge not in the hierarchization of nature and culture but rather in the possibility of a disruption in the flow of cultural construction.

Indeed, the forest itself soon emerges as a deeply contradictory presence, at once protective and destructive. While it confers safety from humans, it is also the site of emergence of a wounded and wounding past, by virtue of being outside cultural norms: "La forêt est le lieu de l'exil et du ravage, elle recueille et meurtrit, elle protège et abîme, je préfère ses ronces à l'humain, je choisis son froid contre les braises des mauvaises femmes, [...] elle est le lieu du temps arrêté, réfléchi décortiqué, [...] elle est le terrain des pensées égrenées, des liens reconstruits, du pays rapporté" (55). The link with the past of childhood, which she chooses to explore, is painful and unsettling. These images from the past are harsh but nevertheless all-encompassing; they completely overwhelm

the narrator whose quest turns more violent as it becomes even more essential: “J’ai mal. Je porte une enfant. Elle m’exige. Je la nourris, l’entretiens [...]. Elle est mon éternité. Je me fouille, je traque la disparue, la déportée, c’est une chasse au corps, aux cris, à la lampe torche, au chien-loup. C’est une chasse à l’enfant. Sa présence est mon devoir d’être” (37). The “eternity” of childhood and the need for a frenetic “hunt” for the child not only emerge from cultural marginalization, here represented by the forest, but also from the temporal tension inherent in childhood memories, as we observed in Proust and Benjamin. The irruption of jarring images from the past operates a canceling of chronological time, overcoming limits imposed by conventions on our perception of past and present reality.

This irruption of destabilizing images from childhood memories that was central for Benjamin as a moment of historical revelation represents in *L’âge blessé* a similarly important bridge to the past: “Ma mémoire déterre mon enfance, [...] mon passé est actualisé, mon corps ne souffre plus, je plane au-dessus de mes cendres, tout se délite sans moi, je ne peux plus vieillir, j’ai atteint l’indice 100, le temps est inutile, ma mémoire a fendu sa ligne de trot, son incidence, il tourne en rond. Je suis dans la lumière de l’enfance” (49). The exiled narrator, rejected by and rejecting the larger culture’s norms, is now able to perceive traces of a forgotten and invisible past that will, in turn, illuminate past and present with a new light. The narrator’s mythical age of one hundred years old no longer appears as chronologically measured but as a caesura, a moment of arrest of a time now turning in a circle, feeding the present with actualized childhood scenes. As the narrator becomes more engrossed in her past the gap between herself and

others increases: “L’homme m’encombre. Il m’est ajouté et non naturel [...]. Il juge, cingle, il condamne, accentue ma différence, mon étrangeté. Il entraîne ses petits à la guerre et rompt ma ligne d’équilibre [...]. Son rire est une pluie de verre. Son regard est un rasoir. Sa main à la taille d’une arme de poing. Ses mots viennent de la nuit. Son encre est un venin déchargé” (58). Man appears as a foreign danger – the words used to describe him are revealing of what childhood memories will uncover: a condemnation and annihilation of difference, a sarcastic and mocking laughter, a malicious gaze, and malevolent spoken or written words.

The stage is now set for childhood memories to operate as a *punctum*, as a Benjaminian vertical interruption that originates in and constitutes a wound. We saw in Part A that the irruption of images from childhood memory as a moment of destabilization do not tend to represent important events (events which are too subject to the annihilating gaze of conventions), but rather small unseen details. The second set of childhood memories in *L’âge blessé* presents short fragmented scenes that focus on the gaze of men and on the sexualization of the girl’s body:

J’ai six ans, leur envie est en rupture avec mes jeux de sable, mes constructions.
Ils me sexualisent. Je suis un corps et une bouchée. Mes hanches sont déjà rondes, féminines. Ils tracent la forme de mes seins, tournés vers les aisselles, prêts à surgir de mon torse tendu. Ils repèrent leurs prises, connaissent la place de mon sexe, sa fente haute, un appât libre. (39-40)

This remembered impression from a six year-old child is centered on a non-event, the flashing image of the fleeting gaze of men, on the perception of a hidden and invisible

desire. While in her first memory the child felt attracted by the sexual violence of the monkeys, in this memory the men's contained sexual violence appears to her as unnatural; it robs her of her free body and starts the process of self-hatred: "C'est par [les hommes de la plage] que je le sais. Je déteste mon corps, coupé au bas-ventre. Mon sexe est une petite lèpre" (40). What arises from these memories is a primary feeling of exclusion and rejection based on difference, of the impossibility of love without humiliation.

With her own body now felt as a burden, the object of the gaze then shifts from the girl's body to the men's:

Je vise la tranche entre le ventre et les jambes, le maillot enflé, le fourreau qui muselle une rigidité, mon absence, le comble de mes cuisses. La vie est là, au point dangereux. Il n'est pas question de mort, d'arrachement, de césure, mais de liaison, de fusion, d'absorption, [...]. La vie est là, dans l'échange brutal, l'accélération, l'offre, la demande, la cible, le tir, la soif et le lait. Je me déteste. Je les excite. Je suis une traînée de six ans. (42)

Male sexuality does not represent sexual violation but rejection. The desire of men for sexual love devastates the child not because of its violence (a violence which attracted the child to the monkeys), but because it implies her self-abnegation. What is important at this juncture is not only the uncovering of well-known and studied patterns of female sexual abnegation in patriarchy³⁵ but also what memories of childhood recover from the

³⁵ For studies on the objectification of the female body, see, for example, Paula Weideger's *History's Mistress*; Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*; and Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth*.

past. What these first two sets of scenes from childhood memory are performing is a rapid and radical recontextualisation of the adult narrator's quest. A desire for the reassuring warmth of childhood is quickly transformed into hunt for a wounded and scared child – a hunt that itself repeatedly and abruptly establishes rejection as the root of the narrator's exiled condition.

The feeling of rejection caused by the objectification of her body rapidly gives way to an existential anxiety; the fear of losing herself in the arms of sexual love is now transposed to a primordial fear of having lost herself at the moment of her own birth. The memory of waiting for her mother at the end of the school day triggers a feeling of the most fundamental rejection:

Le temps de l'attente est bouleversant, l'enfant, la soie gît à l'envers, déchirée en morceaux, je suis perdue, mon corps est en danger, exclu du ventre, soudain étranger au jour de la naissance [...] ; je quitte la chair de la chair, privée de mes deux lumières, un drap tombe, me recouvre, l'absence est un accident, le manque est une attaque, une morsure, une avalanche, ma peur est un sentiment-réflexe, j'invente au pire, je trame sur du noir. (62)

Feeling the rejection of her unencumbered body, feeling the impossibility of an all-encompassing and eternal maternal love, the remembered child now lives in anticipation of disaster, “je suis une enfant en tort, angoissée, mon imagination devance la tragédie, l'impose, la provoque. Ma peur est criminelle” (62). The figurative death of her child's body anticipates the literal death of the human body: “J'ai l'angoisse du corps sacrifié, de sa perte obligatoire, une fragilité programmée. Je patine sur la mort” (67). Childhood

now appears as an inherently tragic state, inevitably oriented toward death. The only passage in the text that is not narrated in the first person is solely constituted by meditation on the meaning of a childhood portrayed as the apprentice of death:

On joue, au parc, à l'école, sur les plages, en forêt. Chacun porte le poids de son cadavre, chaque outil est un instrument de confection. La pelle, le seau, le râteau arment le geste. C'est une poignée de terre en moins, une planche scellée, un nœud de corde. C'est une concordance, un complot aux points serrés, un crime parfait. (72)

The innocent play of childhood becomes a macabre dance in which the abandoned child, deprived of love and the safety of her unencumbered body, anticipates his or her own death. Childhood memories seem to lead to utter paralysis, to an incapacity to act upon the revealing insights they generate.

To confirm this impression of morbidity, the narrator's memories now focus on the image of the fall, a fall as an intentional self-mutilation intended to protect herself from the gaze of others and constitute her shame: "L'homme est un carnassier, je tombais pour détruire son festin, la peau fine, les cheveux d'ange, les courbes pleines, liées entre elles, rattachées, la bouche, les seins, les cuisses, je ruinais le corps voué au destin charnel, rapide, en une seule prise, une mort subite, des images, du désir, juste consommé par le regard, un salut sans respect" (79-80). The whole of childhood then becomes a fall, a loss: "Tomber. L'enfance est une chute en avant, un désistement de soi, une progression vers le bas. L'éternité se démet de l'être vif, s'en excuse, le relègue. L'enfant est l'élève de la mort, son apprentie martyre" (71). This fall, however, does not

imply a romantic sublimation of nature or a pre-cultural realm. However grim and fatalistic it may appear, this obsession with death that is crippling the child in the narrator's memories is actually a productive force. What is productive and potentially interruptive in the fall from grace is the intense feelings of groundlessness of the child whose fragile freedom can so easily be shattered. Childhood is universally "accused" of falling, "L'enfance est accusée, prise en défaut d'éternité. C'est la rupture des joies, des paix, de l'inconséquence du temps" (72); but it is these very moments of rupture that provide childhood memories with their transformative power. If for Proust the images of childhood were capable of transforming and enriching perception, it was by virtue of the idyllic moments of childhood rapture, outside of the walls of convention. These idyllic moments in *L'âge blessé* do not play a significant role; instead, what constitutes the unsettling and transformative flashes from the past is the loss of the possibility of savagely being, of being loved without negation; it is also the fear of losing the body in death or in love.

Fear, then, becomes the dominant filter in the next set of memories. It is a universal and yet wholly bodily-inscribed fear that grips the child: "Ma peur est liée au destin de l'humain, une tragédie entretenue, rappelée, qui tranche l'obscurité. Sa couleur est rouge vermillon. Sa fréquence est quotidienne. Sa violence perce la nuit" (88). Parental love, the only remaining source of warmth, cannot protect the child from insomnia, from the awareness of death. Far from being innocent, the child's fear is grounded in an attuned understanding of an intolerable emptiness and loneliness: "Je sais l'immense vide de l'être, désarmé. Je cherche le sens de mon enfance. J'apprends à être

de plus en plus seule. Je m'évade des miens" (100). These hopeless memories, however, coincide with a radical shift in the narrator's perspective. Indeed, the narrator's memory then incessantly brings back images of her body's intolerable negation, a negation at the source of her fear. The actualization of the wounded body frees it from the laws of chronological aging and allows her to free herself from corporal shame – the fall, initiated in childhood, can for the first time be ended: "Je ne tombe plus, soudée à la terre, le centre du monde, démise de mon corps d'origine doué d'une incroyable propension à s'écraser, du portique, des terrasses, de l'escalier. La honte m'a quittée. Seule ma mémoire est en chair, rouge et vive, une forcenée bouleverse les temps, rapporte la sensation" (77). The shameful body has been freed by the remembered images of a child wholly consumed by fear of being taken by the lustful arms of another.

This embodied memory is then able to cut through time, bringing past and present together in a cluster of images that originates in the savage memories of a wild childhood about to be broken by the violating gaze of men: "J'occupe la coïncidence, le présent se relie au passé par emboîtement. Ma mémoire est cubique. Elle jumelle, renvoie, remplit les manques. C'est un jeu d'adresse entre le mensonge, l'oubli, le net et le vrai. En fuite des pays, des peuples, des misères, je possède un trésor, l'indifférence ingrate de l'enfant" (81). The indifference of the child is indeed a treasure, not because it refers to the experience of an idealized childhood, but rather because as a flashing image it has the ability to expose the hidden torments of the past. If for Proust the images that childhood memories uncovered were able to open up the whole past beyond the limitations of lowly conventions, in *L'âge blessé* the images from childhood memories are capable of a

similar opening. Indeed, the narrator is not only able to recapture her body from the tyranny of beauty but the whole weight of society's rules shifts to open up the possibility of new unsuspected pleasures:

Je ramène Dieu en forêt, je l'accapare, le dérobe, je dépouille le village, le temple, les femmes pieuses, je me venge, pauvre, exilée, je trouve un Père, des épaules, le feu d'une présence. Il vient. Je l'invoque avec mes chairs serrées, denses, encore vivantes, je le réclame, fille capricieuse, avec mes côtes, blottie à la terre-mère, nourricière [...]. Je perds la beauté mais j'étreins la grâce. (102)

What this embrace of grace brings is a rediscovery of desire – a desire already sensed in the childhood memory of the encounter with the monkeys, a desire beyond shame and fear, a desire without men, an illicit desire that she can now claim and legitimize: “Je me frotte aux arbres, le crin naturel, enduite de résine, en feu, en nage, sensuelle, je me sèche avec des feuilles, enroulée, sur la mousse et le terreau, motivée par l'envie, une traînée de cent ans découvre une nouvelle piste : sentir, la peau, l'odeur, le produit, le sexe de l'autre, être renversée” (107).

The disconcerting images in *L'âge blessé* are from a remembered childhood acutely aware of the groundlessness of being, of the finitude of the body, of the annihilation of difference, and the impossibility of unconditional love. These images of rupture break the tyranny of chronology and veils of convention to enable the birth of an illegitimate desire. There is, however, another important aspect of childhood memories that is crucial to the development of the interruptive, disruptive role I am claiming – their anticipatory quality. After the discovery of an emerging desire, the text makes a sudden

and puzzling return to images from childhood memory, images that return to the fear that the child had of being abducted by a man. The penultimate memory set focuses on images of a childhood fever dream. The narrator's dream is presented as pure fantasy, "je pénètre une réalité invalide, fabriquée, cousue, une fantasmagorie" (113). A man notices her beauty, tells her how beautiful she is, stares at her, contemplates her, "il suggère, valorise, certifie. Je tourne autour de lui. Il arrête ma course rapide, le défi du chemin de terre, le gage qu'exige la confiance. Je traîne. Je prends mon temps. Ma sœur m'arrache. Avec ses ongles, avec ses bras, avec ses épaules, avec ses cris" (113). The monkey scene from the first memory set is echoed here, with a man taking the place of the monkeys. The girl is seduced, plays with the man, and is forcibly taken by her frantically screaming sister. What actually happened to the girl is not what matters in this analysis,³⁶ the interpretation of the dream, its relation to the monkey scene or other subsequent episodes would tend to de-emphasize the productive role of this memory.

Instead of analyzing the childhood dream as a screen that potentially hides an unavowable truth, I see it as being given an interruptive role, bringing past, present, and future into a single constellation. Let us then return to the fever dream after looking at the segment that follows, the last one of the fictional account. The last entry of the adult narrator describes an enigmatic run through the forest. The narrator is exuberantly running; elated by her newly-born desire she seems to forget her memory of childhood: "Je cours avec endurance et déraison, mes muscles soudain gonflés, serrés, renversent le temps, l'assassin, l'homme des charpies. J'ai vingt ans. Je perds la tête. Je perds

³⁶ The scene where her sister tears her away from an attempted sexual assault is described at more length in Nina Bouraoui's autobiographical *Garçon Manqué*, which I analyze in Chapter V.

l'enfant" (115). She is no longer one hundred years old, the age that marks the irruption of memories, but a woman with the heedlessness of a twenty-year old. The forest suddenly changes its role, seeming to stop her run short: "Le ciel s'abaisse à moi. Je contre son poids, une suffocation, je rampe [...]. La forêt se complique; noire, en réseau, de pins et de bouleaux résineux, ses arbres fouillent le ciel, l'aveuglent. La neige est une vengeance. La terre, meuble, s'oppose à moi, se ligue" (116). The narrator is stopped, she cannot run free, the voice of a singing child is heard, and memory comes back in the shape of a dozen fragmented insignificant snapshots from childhood. The narrator cannot start on a new course without her remembered child, her only support, her only source of contestation. Slowly she starts walking again, with the help of memory: "Je reprends ma course ronde, aidée. Ma mémoire intervient. Elle m'instruit" (117).

Her regained confidence is then shattered when a man penetrates the forest, the same man that seduced her in her childhood dream. This wild man, with a rope around the neck, speaking a foreign tongue, runs, following and preceding her at the same time: "Je l'entends avant mes pas. Il crie sans râle. Je l'entends avant le bruit. Il anticipe. Il possède, agit, modifie avant la réalité. Il précède l'acte, l'idée de l'acte. Il est nu avant même l'idée de nudité. Son temps est en dessous de zéro. Il est moins l'Infini. Je tombe, par vertige. Je me noie en forêt" (122). Defying the passage of time, the man from her childhood memories appears still ready to subjugate, terrify, and possess her. But the man has been transformed in this return of the past and his hold on the narrator's destiny is no longer the same. He is now a presence that does not obey the laws of chronology. Moreover, he seems to anticipate future transformations. I see him as the

incarnation of a childhood memory that anticipates the inconceivable reconfigurations of the past in a future present. Indeed, the narrator no longer falls to disfigure herself, to escape the treacherous arms of lust. Instead, she drowns in the forest, she returns to the sea, the element of her childhood, where she used to hide from the gaze of men, as in this early passage:

Un monstre marin me tend la main. Je nage pour m'enfuir du regard, des désirs, de l'appétence des hommes, la mer est une cape, une cachette, [...]. Je nage pour m'enfuir de mon corps, de sa contrainte, de ma nudité incluse dans le paysage, [...] je nage pour brimer ma femelle de greffe, je la muscle sous les flots, je la veux robuste, masculine, estropiée de sa douceur. (46-47)

This time, however, the sea is in the forest, a sea of memory; she merges with her savage memories gripped by a dream that anticipates the birth of a far-reaching transgression.

Childhood memories only appear in adulthood, their essential ruptures are constituted in retrospect, and when these ruptures are allowed to break through the logic of temporality and causality, their images and fantasies are then endowed with an anticipatory power that can only shatter that logic. In Benjaminian terms, in order to constitute a dialectical image, the past of childhood should not be remembered so as to restore its historical remnants, but rather so as to capture its “after-effect” in the present. Correspondingly, the meaning of the dream of the seductive dance with the man should not only be found in a potential truth it covers; as such it would constitute another frustrated memory as we saw in Perec’s text. Instead, as a childhood memory associated with a moment of rupture, it uniquely anticipates the conflicts of sexual desire and in

particular the potential for future rereadings and reinterpretations beyond the scope of conventions. The experiences of childhood are remembered as images of loss and rejection; they become marks that call for later disruptive revisitings, thus overcoming the weight of cultural normalization through the piercing representation of experience as a wound.

CHAPTER IV

THE TEMPLE OF THE UNFAMILIAR IN YING CHEN'S

LE CHAMP DANS LA MER

C'est parce que je croyais [dans mon enfance] aux choses, aux êtres, tandis que je les parcourais, que les choses, les êtres qu'ils m'ont fait connaître, sont les seuls que je prenne encore au sérieux et qui me donnent encore de la joie. Soit que la foi qui crée soit tarie en moi, soit que la réalité ne se forme que dans la mémoire, les fleurs qu'on me montre aujourd'hui pour la première fois ne me semblent pas de vraies fleurs.

—Marcel Proust, *Combray*

It is very hard not to remember the flowers of our childhood with fondness.

Childhood emerges in countless literary texts as a lost realm that triggers varied feelings of mourning. Even in the darkest, most cynical memories of our times, an affective link to the past of childhood surfaces. We have noticed in previous chapters a multitude of disruptive roles that childhood memories have played, but we have not paid much attention to their affective quality. In this chapter, in my reading of Ying Chen's *Le champ dans la mer*, I shift the emphasis to the emotional aspects of remembering the past. The deep ambivalence and ambiguity present in the process of remembering the past in this text attest to a complex affective relationship to that past. My reading will thus start as an attempt to identify the play of affect in these memories of childhood. Reading this text through the lenses of affect will lead to a reconsideration of what is at stake in remembering the past by shifting attention away from the causes of memories and their effect on the present and future to the role of an emotional context; I will thus

shift my study of memory from the outside to the inside, from what memories do with the past to what emotions do to memory.

Le champ dans la mer is an interior monologue of an unnamed woman who remembers her childhood from one of her past lives. The text is bare of referential content, lacking in descriptions and spatiotemporal landmarks, concentrating instead on the complex and intense inner world of the narrator. The two temporal coordinates are the present of narration and the remembered past. The narrator's telling of her experiences in a previous life takes place in a contemporary opulent consumer society by a beach, probably a vacation resort. The remembered past takes place in a moribund agrarian society – a small deserted village surrounded by corn fields.³⁷ The narrator, an enigmatic woman wandering about in a world that seems to completely escape her, finds herself traveling between those two universes; as the title indicates, the sea and the corn fields often merge, thus erasing borders traditionally erected between cultures, times, and places. While the transition between sea and field appears seamless, the present is shrouded in an opaque fog; objects are evanescent and people appear as out-of-reach phantoms. Only memories emerge with clarity thus giving to the remembered past of childhood a much more direct presence while keeping the immediate present at an unreachable distance.

The other characters are only known through the narrator's reflections. Only one character inhabits the present, her husband A..., an anthropologist for whom life can be

³⁷ These two spatiotemporal coordinates have a strong autobiographical component; Ying Chen was born and raised in China and emigrated to Canada in early adulthood. I will, nevertheless, not pursue these autobiographical and cultural leads, but will focus instead on the affective aspects of memory that are developed in this text.

reduced to a simple compiling of evidence. The past, for A..., has little weight and when scientifically reconstituted fits neatly into the order of things: “l’histoire n’est jamais pure invention, dit-il, mais un tableau fiable aux lignes bien nettes, scientifiquement mesurables” (83). This systematized certitude completely mystifies the narrator for whom no truth could ever be deduced from collected data: “Face à cet optimisme intelligent, ma perplexité est complète” (69). In her past life, the main characters are a boy childhood friend V..., her mother and deceased father, and the inhabitants of the village who speak as one voice. Indeed, the villagers are a dwindling number of farmers who are united in their hatred for the narrator’s parents, her mother for being from the city and her father for being a bricklayer and thus not a farmer. The father’s textual *raison d’être* is to have died from falling from a roof he was fixing, thereby precipitating an awareness of finitude in the child protagonist: “Ce qui avait été pour moi clair comme le jour a cessé de l’être à partir du moment où, dans le noir, mon père est tombé lourdement sur la terrasse de ciment, en passant sans doute devant la fenêtre de V...” (42). V... is the narrator’s first and only childhood love, an obsessive love that through the world of play distracts her from the reality surrounding her, including the gaping hole left after her father’s death:

Le plaisir de jouer avec V... devait être bien grand et fortifiant puisque, pendant toutes ces années dans cet endroit poussiéreux, je n’avais songé qu’à nos jeux. Même si mon père avait emporté avec lui le plus cher trésor qui soit pour un enfant, la confiance momentanée en un univers solide, même si de ses histoires

interrompues je ne savais inventer la suite, il me semblait que j'étais dans un palais de cristal où toute catastrophe me serait épargnée. (63)

Her mother, a controlling presence who was convinced that V...’s family was guilty of her husband’s murder (the narrator’s father accidentally fell from the roof of V...’s family house), was the only force capable of pulling the narrator from the world of play back to the awful reality of their existence, to the deep-rooted strength of heredity and tradition: “Je sentais en elle une puissance irrésistible, une forte odeur de racine dont j'étais dépourvue” (62). However, it is the child narrator’s own death, struck by a tile from V...’s roof, that takes her away from that reality out of which she emerges in a different time and space still wondering how to grow up: “Mon père ne m'avait pas raconté toutes les histoires promises. V... et moi n'avions pas épuisé tous les jeux. Comment grandir, alors ?” (33).

The narrator’s desire to remember, to return to the past is deeply ambivalent. She does not actively seek the past; it comes to her, involuntarily triggered by a blow to her head. It is the pain from that blow that brings back the reality of her childhood in another life – a heavy Madeleine, indeed! As we know from Proust, involuntary memories are not without desire and have a complex affective dimension. In *Le champ* the remembered past seems to be providing the narrator with much needed energy as she otherwise seems incapable of the simplest tasks of daily life; wholly disengaged from her emotions in the present, she finds in the past reasons to long for something. On the other hand, the past seems to be weighing her down, making it impossible for her to enjoy the society of leisure she has fallen into: “Ne suis-je pas tombée pourtant dans une époque de

loisirs ? Je suis venue dans le monde de A... uniquement pour me divertir. A... ne serait que trop content si je consentais à m'amuser" (32). It is also the incessant return of complicated events from past lives³⁸ that prevent her from being able to communicate with her peers, least of all with her husband for whom, according to the narrator, she is an ever-absent presence absorbed with a ghostly past: "Il aura de nouveau le sentiment que je suis avec lui mais sans lui, qu'il n'est pour moi qu'un stimulant de la mémoire, une hallucination, que je ne vois en lui qu'une des incarnations possibles de tant d'individus différents" (46). The immediate presence of an infinitely distant and otherwise inaccessible past makes the act of remembering deeply ambiguous, an ambiguity that impacts her relation with every aspect of life in the present. Thus, for example, the contradictory distance and presence of the same past is reflected in the narrator's profoundly ambivalent relationship to origins and heredity. An anonymous woman of unknown origins, the narrator yearns to belong, to find her roots, a yearning that can never be fulfilled. In her remembered past life, on the other hand, she has origins but they separate her from the surrounding peasant community – a heredity which she only wants to relinquish to be able to completely merge with the world of her childhood friend V...

Similar parallels can be found in her relation to corporeality. On the one hand she seeks to transcend the limits of corporeality by traveling to another lifetime. She feels

³⁸ Not only do we learn in the text that she has had multiple such returns of the past, but we can also look intertextually at the two texts written before and after *Le champ (Immobile - 1998* and *Querelle d'un squelette avec son double - 2003*) in which the same narrator "travels" to other past lives.

weighed down by her body that prevents her from being free from association with a particular culture, place and time:

Je me sens emprisonnée et même supprimée par ma forme [...]. Je deviens représentation. J'étouffe à l'ombre de ce que je représente. Trop de choses écrites au hasard sur mon front, qui évoquent la singularité de ma langue, reliée d'ailleurs à mon sexe, et la singularité de mes poils hérités de je ne sais quel ancêtre, et un chiffre, un seul, pour indiquer la durée de mes va-et-vient dans le temps. De tout cela, je tâche en vain de me débarrasser. (98-9)

If her body is what prevents her from transcending an imposed and limiting identity, it is also the only medium she has to connect to the past, to other lives. It is a blow to her head that made her remember V... 's garden, her stomach hurts when she remembers the episode of her first menstruation, her past death is felt on a visceral level through her cold, emaciated body and the smell of the dirt that buried her: "Et mon corps nouveau, avec une apparence de jeunesse, est à jamais imprégné de l'odeur moite de la terre, porte la poussière d'outre-tombe" (59). Far from being disincarnated then, her memories of the past can only surface through her body, in spite of the fact that they constantly force her into a normalcy that she persistently rejects. The temptation of transcendence and the need to be rid of the weight of tradition are then countered by an earthy and bodily need for safety and company: "À ce besoin de se propulser dans le vide, vient s'opposer une force qui pousse la narratrice à sortir du néant, à ne plus flotter pour finalement s'immobiliser dans un lieu et un temps définis, dans un présent qui deviendra lui aussi absolu, libéré du passé et de l'avenir" (Bernier 126). Remembering the past in *Le champ*

is caught in a complex web of desires centered on the conflicting needs and demands of human relationships from which no truth or meaning seem to emerge.

The need to transcend present and past limitations and the narrator's ambivalence in regard to the role of the past seem to indicate that childhood memories in *Le champ* are beyond a nostalgic reconstruction of an idealized bygone past. But then, what is the nature of the narrator's affective link to her childhood? Is there a particular affective relationship to the past that embodies the ambivalent desires we have just noted? And can such an affect be linked to the many disruptive elements found in this text, be they textual, narrative, ideological or pertaining to identity construction?³⁹ In spite of the ambivalence present in her remembrance of the past, the narrator repeatedly refers to her childhood as a lost realm that could never be repeated: "notre brusque séparation [...] signifierait la perte d'un bonheur inconditionnel [...]. Elle laisserait sur mes lèvres le goût d'un échec qu'aucun baiser ultérieur ne viendrait effacer" (59). Remembering childhood as an adult is remembering a part of the past that is irremediably lost.

Psychoanalytical theory has placed loss as the central experience in the growth and development of people thereby establishing mourning as a primary affective relation to the past, as Peggy Phelan writes: "Prior to recognizing the specific content of an affective

³⁹ Some critics have linked a particular affective relationship to the past to a certain political agenda. For a feminist critique of nostalgia as a force opposed to change, see Gayle Greene's "Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory"; Donna Bassin's "Maternal Subjectivity in the Culture of Nostalgia and Memory"; Lynne Huffer's *Maternal Pasts, Feminist Futures*; Mary Jacobus' "Freud's Mnemonic: Screen Memories and Feminist Nostalgia." For reevaluations of nostalgia as politically enabling, see Sinead McDermott's "Future-Perfect: Gender, Nostalgia, and the not yet Presented in Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping*"; Elspeth Probyn's "Suspended Beginnings: of Childhood and Nostalgia"; Svetlana Boym's *The future of Nostalgia*. For complex reassessments of the multiple roles assigned to melancholia, see David Eng and David Kazanjian's *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*; Angelika Rauch's *The Hieroglyph of Tradition: Freud, Benjamin, Gadamer, Novalis, Kant*; Juliana Schiesari's *The Gendering of Melancholia*. See also Charity Scribner's *Requiem for Communism* for a more general study on the links between affect in remembrance and its role in the construction of the past.

grief, perhaps the human subject is born ready to mourn. Perhaps a psychic syntax of mourning is in place before the subject learns specific vocabularies of grief. Without such a syntax, the subject might be overwhelmed and find life-as-loss unbearable” (5). We should then perhaps not dismiss nostalgia outright as a possible affective relation to the past in *Le champ* as it constitutes an important practice of mourning a lost past.

Nostalgia, from the greek *nostos* (return to home) and *algia* (painful feeling), is understood as a painful, sometimes bittersweet longing to return to a source, an origin, a home. This longing has long been associated with childhood, not only as the embodiment of a physical home but also as an origin, a time that will never be recaptured, as expressed by Kant at the end of the eighteenth century: “what the nostalgic desires is not the place of his youth, but youth itself, his childhood. His desire is not directed at a thing that could be recovered but towards a time that is irretrievable” (Quoted in Probyn 457). As Michael Roth has shown, by the nineteenth century nostalgia became a pathological longing to return to a place in one’s past, a disease whose origins were thought to be found in the first affective experiences in childhood (27). Although no longer pathological, the longing for the past of childhood in the twentieth century has continued to be associated with feelings of loss and nostalgia.⁴⁰ Nostalgic longing for the past of our childhood is still deeply connected to our need to understand our identity and sense of belonging. Ying Chen’s text does not escape this affective link, neither is it absent from the other texts I am reading.

⁴⁰ See Carolyn Steedman’s *Strange Dislocations: Childhood and the Idea of Human Interiority* in which she argues that the construction of child figures starting at the end of the nineteenth century increasingly came to represent an adult interiority and historicity intricately linked to feelings of loss and nostalgia of a bygone past.

Nostalgia has not, however, typically been associated with disruption or a need to transcend tradition. Rather, it tends to be characterized as a passive sentimental relationship to the past. As a form of arrested mourning nostalgia fixates on a past that becomes idealized thus exiling us from a present that is perceived as inherently difficult or insignificant. This process of alienation from the present is clearly expressed by the narrator in Chen's novel: "J'avais transformé un désir confus en une amitié absolue, en une exaltation presque mystique. Ce bonheur que j'ai connu alors, même impossible, voire meurtrier selon ma mère, m'a nourrie pendant longtemps, a rendu insignifiants les plaisirs connus dans d'autres vies" (70). The narrator's inability to participate in the present could be seen as a result of this sublimation of the past. Furthermore, this idealization also creates complacency toward the past and closes off hope for future change as can be seen in this retrospective passage in which the narrator's premonition of a closed-off future seems to be premised on the impossibility of repeating the elation of childhood love: "Je sentais qu'entre V... et moi ce serait bientôt la fin avant même le commencement. Je n'avais plus d'avenir puisque, selon les expériences que j'avais accumulées dans d'autres vies, je savais que les premiers instants de bonheur, les vrais, ne se renouvelleraient pas" (37). With true happiness only to be found in the past, there is not only no possibility of repeating it in the future but also no hope of change as the nostalgic idealization of a past "home" impedes desire for transformations.

If it seems that the narrator's remembered past is idealized, thereby blocking off present and future action, there is nevertheless an important point at which her remembrance departs sharply from the nostalgic stance. Indeed, as Lynn Huffer has

written, nostalgic memory idealizes the past in order to be sheltered from a lack of certainty in the present and the future: “in a nostalgic structure, an immutable lost past functions as a blueprint for the future, cutting off any possibility for uncertainty, difference, or fundamental change” (19). The past of childhood in *Le champ*, in spite of being seemingly transparent and at times idealized, is far from being a stable construct capable of providing shelter from contingency. Firstly, the glorious past is incessantly dampened by the painful reality of her father’s death, a constant reminder that the idyllic world of childhood play is but one short happy episode in an otherwise painful existence: “il nous hanterait jusqu’à la fin de nos jours, rendant impossible notre simple bonheur” (23). Furthermore, the nostalgic stance is disrupted by frequent allusions to the fictive nature of her childhood memories, thereby impeding the construction of a stable remembered past that could serve as a blueprint for a future free from change and transformation. In the following episode where the narrator is anticipating a future quest for her past shared with her husband A..., she gives equal weight to V... and A.... This surprising overvaluation of a rather dull and unsatisfying relationship with A... establishes that her quests for the past are not based on a nostalgic reconstruction of a reassuring past. Instead, her need to return to the past seems to be based on emotional needs in the present, regardless of the reality of the past: “Là-bas, avec une douce peine mais sans véritable regret, je parlerais de A..., comme d’un personnage fictif, grâce au délicieux recul, de la même manière dont je pense maintenant à V... Je ferais autant d’efforts pour retrouver mon mari d’aujourd’hui que j’en ai fait pour retrouver mon ami d’hier, à travers les instants” (99). The affective ambivalence toward the past is clearly

shown here: the nostalgic “douce peine” and “délicieux recul” alternate with a lack of regrets and the fictive nature of memories. The “à travers les instants” also indicates that this search has been and will always be repeated, thus impeding the erection of a mythologized truth based on a glorified past.

The fact that the narrator’s memories reach into past lives contributes to the shattering of temporal coordinates that are necessary to establish continuity. Drawing her randomly into different and unknown periods and cultures, the narrator’s remembered past impedes her inclusion within a particular community; she cannot settle down and is constantly forced to face unknown incarnations. Contrary to her husband A... who can scientifically prove his origins and belonging, the narrator seems hopelessly lost in a cosmic space-time matrix: “[les] « origines claires et [la] mémoire courte » [de A...] lui permettent ainsi de demeurer « solidement fixé dans sa ville natale, planté dans un présent permanent » [...] sans autre souci que l’habitation du quotidien. Plutôt que de fréquenter les spectres – à l’instar de sa femme qui tous les jours appelle son amant disparu – A... ressent le besoin d’appartenir à un lieu et à un réseau social” (Lapointe 137). The narrator’s inability to conceive of a reliably constructed past leads her to question not only A...’s sense of security in a knowable past but also the larger society’s erection of explanatory systems: “Cette ferme connaissance de ce qui se passe, avant ou après, ici ou ailleurs, peut susciter, dans nos cerveaux depuis longtemps habitués à la méthode pratiquée par A..., une croyance en la causalité des choses” (83). Such strong lack of confidence in the stability of the past indicates that the nostalgic moments where she seems to privilege the experience of childhood at the cost of active participation in

life need to be placed in the larger context of a radical destabilization of all certainty, past, present and future.

The confidence of the nostalgic for whom “the past self mastered through memory grounds the proof of truth in the present” (Probyn 454) is then entirely absent in this text. In fact, it would seem that if there were a past self mastered through memory it would only annihilate the very possibility of truth in the present. Indeed, mastery of the past as practiced by A... depends on a secured heritage, a known genealogy that erases all doubt about the validity of continuity and causality. For the narrator, however, no lineage can be found; “Notre famille est désormais éteinte. Ultime branche de je ne sais quel arbre” (12). By virtue of not being traceable, genealogy is left without a purpose, with no more meaning than a molecule of water in the vastness of the ocean: “Mes parents, les parents de mes parents et moi-même, nous aurons tous vécu en vain. Lignée à jamais interrompue. Courant disparu dans le vaste océan” (12). This complete absence of origins in the narrator’s genealogy is not replaced by another meaningful presence but rather becomes a sort of negative presence, an identity that feeds on its continuous renewal through an emptying of all familiarity:

Ce tempérament lucide, ce sang-froid de même que bon nombre de mes particularités physiques et mentales sont sans doute héréditaires, me dit-on. Or ce n’est pas certain, compte tenu du nombre de parents que j’ai eus, vie après vie, et des éducations si variées que j’ai reçues. Tout comme un parfum comportant trop d’essences différentes finit par se libérer de ses composantes pour devenir un élément neuf, unique en son genre et digne d’avoir son propre nom. (77)

She does not attribute her identity to an identifiable point of origins in the past but rather to a past that in its very multiplicity is reduced to a vanished trace that can no longer be incorporated into a particular space-time frame. The resulting new being (“un élément neuf”) is orphaned at birth, without a social and family structure that could recognize her uniqueness and give her a fitting name. There is then room for nostalgic memories in *Le champ*, for an arrested mourning of the many lost childhoods, lovers, and parents that tenuously populate the remembered past. However, these remnants of the past are too ethereal and persistently unrecognizable to constitute the basis for a nostalgic reconstitution based on the comforting illusion of secure origins. In fact the narrator seems to support a strong critique of nostalgia that argues “that memory itself can only be understood as a retrospective construction of that which never existed” (Huffer 18).⁴¹ This does not imply that past experience did not exist but rather that the remembering of the past is based on a construction that builds on the void that invariable emerges from the disappearance of the past.

The impossibility of constituting idealized origins prevents the nostalgic moments that populate *Le champ* from taking part in a larger nostalgic reconstruction of a lost home, a process that Svetlana Boym calls *restorative nostalgia*. According to Boym, however, there is another type of nostalgia that has been used as a strategy to cope with the impossibility of homecoming; she calls it *reflective nostalgia*, a nostalgia that stresses

⁴¹ This phrase is taken within the context of a critique of a type of feminist nostalgia. Specifically, Lynne Huffer agrees with Mary Jacobus’ exposition of the limitations of a feminist nostalgia for a pre-oedipal oneness with the mother – a type of nostalgia which is absent in Chen’s *Le champ dans la mer*.

the *algia*, the painful longing while deemphasizing the *nostos*, the reconstruction of home stressed in restorative nostalgia:⁴²

Restorative nostalgia does not think of itself as nostalgia, but rather as truth and tradition. Reflective nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity.

Restorative nostalgia protects the absolute truth, while reflective nostalgia calls it into doubt. (xviii)

With such nostalgic remembering, the remembering of childhood would not find meaning from childhood's status as an origin. Instead, and by virtue of its constantly unsatisfied longing, nostalgia becomes a Nietzschean genealogy that "rather than re-placing us in direct connection with a comforting, familiar past [...] 'confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference'. Instead of pristine referents, what we have is the visible and chaotic void beneath us" (Probyn 455). This descent into the void of the past resonates clearly with the narrator's own quest.

Nostalgia then profoundly unsettles the present by disrupting the familiarity conferred by the seamless chronology linking past and present. For Probyn this ability of nostalgia to shatter notions of safe origins or the possibility of retrieval in representation implies not only a deconstruction of the figure of the child but also of the naturalness of myriad elements of social ordering, such as heterosexuality (455). As we have seen, the remembered child's lack of origins in *Le champ* compromises the stability of a normalized present. As Ying Chen eloquently writes of her own relationship to origins:

⁴² The concept of restorative nostalgia has been used by Sinead McDermott and Elspeth Probyn to recuperate nostalgia in texts written by women as a politically valid strategy.

Je ne sais plus trop où est mon vrai sol et quelle est ma vraie langue. Le passé et l'avenir se confondent. Mes origines me semblent de ce fait multipliées, refaites et introuvables. Tout est devenu ailleurs. Mon étoile ressemble à une racine qui pourrait être la mienne mais que, du bout des doigts, je n'arrive pas à atteindre. Je flotte ainsi sur une mer où de nul côté je ne vois la rive. (*Quatre mille*, 37)

Like Chen, the narrator's out-of-reach roots leave her floating on a sea with no firm ground on which a familiar present could be anchored.

The past according to this recuperation of nostalgic memory takes on a new role that has important political implications: "rather than viewing it simply as the forerunner to the present, or as a place of stasis, the past is seen as a source of unrealized possibilities" (McDermott 265). This mnemonic descent into the void of the past corresponds to what Probyn calls the "fervor of the possible" (458), a yearning for the unrealized past rather than for what was, a suspension of the past that can repeatedly be reconfigured in the present thereby opening up the future to transformations. It is here, however, that the narrator's emotional plunge into the unknown void of the past resists incorporation into a model of critical or reflective nostalgia. Indeed, remembering the past does not seem to lead to any fulfillment of unrealized possibilities; it is as if losing reference were done for its own sake, involuntarily, without any consideration of what might come of it: "Aujourd'hui, j'imagine que, morte très jeune, je n'ai pas eu le temps de grandir. Mon enfance s'est prolongée infiniment. Je reste une enfant, comme je l'étais au moment de mon écroulement, vite enterrée dans le magnifique jardin de V..." (59). Instead of accomplishing unrealized dreams, the narrator stays stuck in V...'s

beautiful garden. Indeed, the loss of her friendship with V... is presented as the fateful event that ended the possibility of hope for change: "C'est ici que j'ai raté la chance de ma vie, je crois, et peut-être de mes vies" (12). There is no indication in the text of any opening toward a revelation of unrealized possibilities in regard to the loss of her friendship. This lack of opening to the future is disconcerting to the reader and certainly does not fit within a nostalgic approach, whether it be restorative or reflective. The emptying of any purpose, meaning and potential to be found in the past and recuperated in the present as well as an elimination of all distance between past and present prevent a dominant nostalgia from taking hold of the text. This lack of opening toward a new beginning, the absence of a present moment sublimated by an idealized or reconfigured past all point to another affect, perhaps a more depressed one, an affect in which the lost past cannot be recaptured. Let us now turn to melancholia as a particular emotional relationship to the past that perhaps more adequately accounts for the narrator's affective link to the past of her childhood.

According to psychoanalytical theory, mourning a past loss consists in using recollections to get rid of the affective charge linked to the lost object, thus eliminating or reconfiguring the object's hold on the ego. In nostalgia, as we have seen, the mourning process is arrested; the lost or longed for object is idealized and cannot be reconfigured. In spite of this perpetual postponement of successful mourning, nostalgic memories comprise a system of causality in which a sense of separation between past and present, self and other is well established. Melancholia, on the other hand, does not separate and distinguish these central dualities:

Melancholia [...] differs from nostalgia in that it does not aspire to go where the other was. It does not regress to an imaginary place libidinally invested as home or maternal ground. If nostalgia signifies the pain of such a longing for another place and another time, the distance and separation between self and other is nonetheless keenly observed. In contrast, melancholy actively transports this other into the present and relocates it in the symbolic status this object or place may have in the here and now. (Rauch 210)

This affective relationship to a past that lives in the present without a clear sense of differentiation appears to be an apt description of the narrator's lack of clear spatiotemporal boundaries in *Le champ dans la mer*. The melancholic's lack of awareness of the lost object is replaced by an absorption in the condition of loss, as Juliana Schiesari writes: "the reason the loss in the melancholic is not clear [...] is that it is the condition of loss as loss that is privileged and not the loss of any particular object" (43). This privileging of loss itself to the detriment of any particular object also seems present in *Le champ*, a text which could be read as a manifestation of loss without clear identification of the object of loss. Indeed, each potential object of loss seems to resist incorporation into a system where the object can be identified as a determinant loss. Childhood, for example, could be interpreted as being the lost object but there is in fact nothing specific about childhood that differentiates it from other past objects as they all seem to be reduced to a fictive presence, a filler for the void that emerges when all appearances have been demystified.

Focusing on the loss rather than on the object of loss implies a shift of attention toward the ego itself. In psychoanalytic terms, the lack of identification with the lost object is overcome through a narcissistic identification, making the lost object part of the mourner's self. The melancholic subject is thus without memory of an experience of loss but lives under the dominion of that loss, s/he is an embodied loss or simply the lost object itself, as intimated by Freud in *Mourning and Melancholia*:

The free libido was not displaced on to another object; it was withdrawn into the ego. There, however, it was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object. Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object. (586)

The melancholic subject as a forsaken object is thus, like the narrator in *Le champ*, in an essentially ambivalent position. Indeed, and still following Freud, melancholia can be seen as a failed separation from a state of symbiosis in infancy (with the mother), a separation that normally occurs through imagination and symbolization in language so as to displace the libido on to another object.⁴³ Without this displacement, "Kristeva argues, mourning may evolve into a melancholy no longer reduced to yearning for the Freudian mother, but for the "Thing," an object of desire and loss that escapes signification" (Albada 35). According to this theory, the melancholic is thus affected by an

⁴³ Kristeva's description of the child's painful recuperation of the mother in language is particularly evocative: "L'enfant roi devient irrémédiablement triste avant de proférer ses premiers mots : c'est d'être séparé sans retour désespérément de sa mère qui le décide à essayer de la retrouver, ainsi que les autres objets d'amour, dans son imagination d'abord, dans les mots ensuite" (15)

unidentifiable loss, s/he is wounded but cannot be hostile for there is no possible object of hostility.

Incapable of naming the Thing, the unrepresentable loss at the source of the wound, the melancholic loses interest in any objects. Such a reaction is obvious in the narrator's complete indifference to the vicissitudes of life: "Je ne choisis pas. Aucune préférence. Je n'ai pas la volonté des vivants. Dès qu'un obstacle se présente, je change de direction. Sinon, je me laisse traîner" (69). Indeed, not only does she not have the will to trace her path but she is also incapable of expressive demonstrations, as is suggested in the narrator's projection of how A... perceives her: "Ma tête est un cimetière, pensera-t-il encore, où s'entassent des émotions mortes, où se font humilier et étouffer les moindres aspirations à quelque bonheur simple, aux plaisirs instantanés" (46). Moreover, as Kristeva points out, in melancholia the inability to identify with immediate objects that can trigger an affective response results from the transformation of object loss into ego loss: "Ma dépression me signale que je ne sais pas perdre : peut-être n'ai-je pas su trouver une contrepartie valable à la perte ? Il s'ensuit que toute perte entraîne la perte de mon être – et de l'Être lui-même" (Kristeva 14-5). This incorporation of the lost object into the self causes the ambivalence alluded to earlier as the ambivalent feelings toward the lost object are now projected onto the self. Indeed, the lost object is really not lost so much as it is introjected into the self, thus empowering an ego that correspondingly feels hatred toward itself, toward that other within itself (Haigh 235). This self-accusation and self-hatred, which Freud described as a central characteristic of melancholia, is omnipresent in *Le champ*.

Indeed, the narrator's self-hatred is particularly strong in regard to her body which she perceives as an impediment to her self-affirmation, preventing the revelation of her nature: "Avec ce corps, je n'arrive jamais à me faire connaître de façon satisfaisante. Mon corps se transforme avec une telle lenteur qu'on se met, non sans raison, à le mesurer. Je dois sans arrêt m'affranchir de ma forme" (98). Her body keeps a trace of the origins that she no longer possesses; it is a constant reminder of an unidentifiable loss, a sense of belonging to a community of mortals who have their place in the world: "Et comment, à ses côtés, dans son jardin si vivant, pouvais-je ne pas me détester, éprouver du dégoût envers mon corps sans fraîcheur qui, à peine née, était déjà vieux ?" (30). The child carries an old body that betrays a loss with no clear origin. Even if the "à peine née" ambiguously indicates a shattering event in early infancy, it could also indicate that the loss predates her own birth, a primal origin that is indicated by her multiple references to an anticipatory gaze that she possesses, always knowing that the end is coming: "Aujourd'hui, avec l'aisance que donne le recul, je puis dire, sans crainte de me tromper, que je connaissais ma fin" (30). Her body has already seen what is coming, she was born with the experience of having already been born and having died. It is this knowledge that contributes to the disgust she feels toward her body, this contradictory and inescapable mark. Self-hatred can also lead to the desire to cease to exist, a desire that the narrator expresses often as in this passage where suicidal tendencies are accompanied by a strong wish to be invisible, to finally be rid of her body:

J'aurais dû m'étendre au milieu du chemin, m'approcher davantage de la mer qui semblait vouloir tout emporter. Ainsi, j'aurais été invisible, comme une plante

sauvage au regard d'un conducteur somnambule ou pressé. Et je me serais déjà
fixée dans ce lieu pour de bon, collée au ciment, inconsciente et sans forme. (98)

The ambiguity of her desires surfaces again as she wants to become without shape, to be free of association with a limiting heritage and yet she also wants to be finally permanently attached to a place.

With no clear object of loss, no ability to express an affective charge that would enable expression of pain, no interest in her surrounding world, a tendency to devalue her self-worth, the narrator in *Le champ* appears to be afflicted by a strong melancholic outlook toward the past. But where does that lead us, what is this text doing, how far down into the empty void will these melancholic memories bring us and how will the narrator safely emerge from the void? If, with Kristeva, we view art “less as an object, and more as a process, or practice, which ‘creates’ the subject” (Lechte 24), can we see the narrator’s belabored remembrances as embodying a healing potential? The narrator’s poetic recollections would then constitute a figuration of affect, a channeling of her sadness and sorrow into a symbolic object that has the potential of being shared by a community of listening and speaking others, thus initiating the process of separation from the elusive Thing: “La création littéraire est cette aventure du corps et des signes qui porte témoignage de l’affect : de la tristesse, comme marque de la séparation et comme amorce de la dimension du symbole” (Kristeva 32-3). The narrator would then reach the realm of signs in order to name the Thing that she is not able to properly mourn. Her entry into the world of signs would be initiated through the semiotic, through the rhythmic aspects of a non-linear prosody, as Kristeva describes it: “La création d’une

prosodie et d'une polyphonie indécidables des symboles autour du « point noir » ou du « soleil noir » de la mélancolie est ainsi l'antidote de la dépression, un salut provisoire" (181). This rhythmic murkiness would account for the absence of continuity and causality in the narrative of *Le champ*. We could certainly find ample evidence of a semiotic prefiguration of attachment to the symbolic at work in the text. One could, for instance, highlight the poetic language of the narrative such as the constant ambiguity, the omnipresent inversions, the instability of the symbolism, and a frequent assonance that functions as an important filter of affective expression in language as attested by Ying Chen's evaluation of her work: "À mes yeux, *Le Champ dans la mer* est un poème sous forme de monologue. Presque chaque phrase a été testée pour une lecture à haute voix" (*Quatre mille*, 114).

But, and without doing justice to the extraordinary complexity and sensitivity of Kristeva's study of melancholia in literary texts, it seems to me that we have already gone too far, that we are headed in an unsatisfactory direction. Indeed, is it possible to talk about the healing potential of this melancholic writing without moving the analysis from the narrator to Ying Chen, the author? We do not know the author, and her central presence in the text is so diffuse that we have no access to the biographical information that Kristeva uses in her study of Nerval, for example. Returning to the narrator's monologue, there is no evidence in the text of her writing any of her "visions" nor of initiating any process of communication of an affective reality. On the contrary, there does not seem to be any "protection contre l'effondrement dans l'asymbolie" (Kristeva 175) in the narrator's melancholic remembrance as we see the non-symbolized object of

loss incessantly thrown back to meaningless existences. Should we then see the narrator's desperation as an ultimate fall toward death, the failure in the face of the dilemma of the melancholic as Kristeva writes with Nerval's suicide in mind: "Le dilemme désormais sera le suivant : les traces de cette Chose perdue emporteront-elles celui qui parle, ou bien réussira-t-il à les emporter : à les intégrer, à les incorporer dans son discours devenu chant à force reprendre la Chose ?" (157). Remembering childhood in this text would be a very bleak enterprise indeed, caught between a hopeless healing that would dispose of the past by incorporating it into the symbolic and an assured fall into the void of a black hole from which there is no return.

The narrator's evident melancholic tendencies might be seen in a different light if we were to depathologize the melancholic attachment to loss⁴⁴ and emphasize the unresolved and unfinished presence of a past incessantly bringing its lost ghosts into the present, thus revealing the unsuspected unleashing its disruptive potential. Walter Benjamin's reappropriation of melancholia is useful as it turns a pathological mourning of lost objects into a disruptive but productive disposition toward the past: "Benjamin offers one of his most important insights: the gaze we cast back onto horrors and failures is not part of a debilitating fixation on the past but rather a source of redemptive hope" (Scribner 308).⁴⁵ Instead of seeing melancholia as a paralyzing hold of a lost past onto

⁴⁴ This depathologizing of melancholia, initiated by Benjamin at the beginning of the 20th century, has been at work in some important recent critical works. See, for example, David Eng and David Kazanjian's collection of essays *Loss: The Politics of Mourning*; Angelika Rauch's *The Hieroglyph of Tradition: Freud, Benjamin, Gadamer, Novalis, Kant*; Max Pensky's *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning*.

⁴⁵ This active, redemptive melancholia needs to be opposed to the conservative, paralyzing melancholia Benjamin called "Left Melancholia," a particular historical manifestation of melancholia characterized by

the present, it can be seen as a type of mourning, a psychological disposition that confronts the remains of the lost past, thereby rescuing that past in order to establish an active and open relationship between past, present, and future. As Martin Jay writes in unmistakably Benjaminian terms, remembering then “blasts open the continuum of history, reconstellating the debris in patterns that would somehow provide flashes of insight into the redemptive potential hidden behind the official narrative” (193). This explosive melancholic relationship to the past goes farther than a reflective nostalgia that also confronts the past but without shattering causality and temporal continuity. It is also opposed to a psychoanalytic practice that “attempts to neutralize the pain of loss and separation from a state of nature, but only after the affect has been transferred from the lost or dead object to a new linguistic representation of that painful, unconscious memory” (Rauch 209). Instead, Benjamin capitalizes on melancholia’s constant hold on an unrepresentable past to envision a disposition that entails a refusal to heal the scars of the past, to “work through” the grief. Sadness is not to be reconfigured through a transfer to symbolic representations but should rather be harnessed to keep plodding in the rich fields of past sufferings:

Scornfully rejecting the ways in which culture can function to cushion the blows of trauma, [Benjamin] wanted to compel his readers to face squarely what had happened and confront its deepest sources rather than let the wounds scar over. Rather than rebuilding the psychological ‘protective shield’ that Freud saw as

“a backward-looking attachment to a feeling, analysis, or relationship that has been rendered thing-like and frozen in the heart of the putative Leftist” (Brown, *Resisting Melancholia* 460).

penetrated by trauma, he labored to keep it lowered so that the pain would not be numbed. (Jay 190)

In this light, the narrator's perpetual return to forgotten or unknown pasts and her refusal to integrate the past might carry an unsuspected potential for a shattering encounter between past and present.

Michel Biron has written of Ying Chen's treatment of her characters that "elle invite à une sorte de va-et-vient permanent entre hier et aujourd'hui, entre les morts qu'on voudrait oublier et les vivants qui font semblant d'exister" (570). Indeed, we could say that in *Le champ dans la mer* the narrator's return to the past constitutes a critical look at the construction of the past, at a dead past that the living are not seeing, being absorbed in their ceaseless task of making history. The narrator is critical of history, of its ability to annihilate the past in order to present it as a flowing story, not unlike Benjamin's historicism and its "Once upon a time," a narrative of progress, a charting of conquests and victories in which historical events unfold chronologically toward an inevitably better future. The narrator's memory of her experience in history class is revealing: "J'avais toujours de mauvaises notes en histoire. Pendant quelques instants, mon esprit était envahi par le vague souvenir d'une longue et pénible marche, d'une fatigue rappelant d'innombrables et pourtant identiques désirs jamais assouvis et inassouvissables, projets de bonheur sans cesse avortés" (28). The long and tedious march places us in an immemorial past, an event of collective abuse repeated throughout the ages, but also in the personal and yet universal experience of having our most cherished hopes shattered. History for the narrator erases the past, our past, the living

past of people: “selon la règle généralement admise, ici comme ailleurs, aujourd’hui comme hier, tout progresse, rien ne régresse, rien ne meurt, sauf nous. Là-bas, les querelles pourraient être oubliées, les cadavres proprement enterrés” (46). Over there, in the past of history, the unacceptable is smoothed over and the dead are buried without a chance to resurface to scream out their shattered hopes, as Benjamin wrote about the script of history that participates “in the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate” (*Concept* 391).

Moreover, according to Benjamin, by virtue of their incessant emphasis on the unresolved past, melancholic memories are capable of establishing a tension between the images of the past and their transformation through time, thereby enabling a “moment of recognizability” in which the ruins of the past are redeemed, thus creating the potential for a future shattering of the “symbolic order”: “Melancholy performs a cognitive act with respect to the past; it exhumes the past’s potential for a symbolic sense in the future and for the very concept of a future” (Rauch 210). Through the Proustian mnemonic reawakening of the past that I analyzed in Chapter III, melancholic memories are then able to reveal the randomness of social constructs, the absurdity of being. As Kristeva writes: “Absente du sens des autres, étrangère, accidentelle au bonheur naïf, je tiens de ma déprime une lucidité suprême, métaphysique. Aux frontières de la vie et de la mort, j’ai parfois le sentiment orgueilleux d’être le témoin du non-sens de l’être, de révéler l’absurdité des liens et des êtres” (14). However, while the narrator uproots the buried past and reveals the absurdity of the present, it is hard to find any sign of redemption of the past in *Le champ*. Indeed, we have already seen that the future for the narrator is

nothing but a repetition of the past, a past which therefore does not seem capable of carrying a secret meaning to be decoded: “Je suis morte pour rien, c’est évident” (13). Death is only a point of transition; there is no tragic end to sublimate for there is no end in sight: “une fois morte, je ne peux plus me fixer. Impossible désormais de m’arrêter sur une ligne parmi tant d’autres. Il n’y a plus de point final dans le temps” (47). This multitude of deaths does not obey any order, there is no evolution, no known destiny: “Vivre, mourir, peut-être cela dépend-il simplement de la position du corps dans un espace précis, à tel ou tel instant banal où règne la loi de la gravité, bien sûr, mais aussi d’autres lois inconnues” (84). Such fatalism cannot include the future as a moment of hope; flowers in *Le champ* do not bloom for they have been caught in the whirlwind of a storm, with no apparent origin: “Je meurs et je repousse avec lassitude, sans donner de fleurs bien sûr, avec de plus en plus de racines. Je regarde des générations d’hommes et de bêtes passer à côté de moi, sens dessus dessous” (19). Benjamin’s “secret agreement between past generations and the present one” (“Concept” 390) is wholly absent here; the remains of the past, the pile of debris facing the angel of history are there, steeped in ambiguity; they are always there, and they are not going to be redeemed.

For the narrator, the inability to properly die, to die once and for all, is central to her melancholic link to the past. The end of a person, of a culture or civilization is a turning point that plays a radically different role in *Le champ* than the potential for future redemptive constellation that we see in Benjamin. In the following passage, the narrator remembers what she calls “une première leçon d’éternité,” after watching her friend V...

kill butterflies in order to, according to V..., 'freely' and 'respectfully' contemplate them so that "ils vivront à tout jamais" (24):

J'ai pensé alors à mon père sous la terre, dont je voyais tous les jours la photo, aux peuples primitifs qui se sont éteints d'eux-mêmes ou qui ont été systématiquement éliminés, aux magnifiques musées en ville que la maîtresse de l'école nous avait fait visiter pour que nous en tirions quelque consolation. Si les papillons ou mon père avaient voulu mourir en paix, comme meurent des peuples condamnés, il leur aurait suffi d'être capables d'ambition, de postérité, de désirer une existence future dans le regard des autres. (24)

To rest in peace, according to the narrator, is not a redemptive act conferred in retrospect in a particular explosive constellation, it does not rely on a particular reading of the past, it does not rest in others' power to give rest to the dead ones. Rather, for the narrator's father to have died in peace, he himself would have had to believe, to participate, to include himself in a community, to take a stand within the limits conferred to the norm. Dying in peace, then, closes off the future by perpetuating an ossified image in the gaze of others, an image that can be glorified and respected for posterity. Not to rest in peace, the narrator's predicament, is to be incapable of participating, of claiming one's spot in a clan, thereby forever floating from one situation to another without hope for future redemption, as there is no sense in believing that anyone in the future will be able to decode a text that resembles the repetition of a well-rehearsed script: "Le début et la fin sont déjà clairs avant le jour, avant le lever du rideau. Après, tout n'est que théâtre" (32).

Life, then, appears as a stage; being invested in the struggles of life will only bring, at best, notoriety, not change. Being distanced from the scene, seeing it as a play, will only bring the misery of not belonging and the knowledge that transformations are only illusions. Is this what is at play in the unfolding of the narrator's memories? Do memories of childhood capture a unique moment of enthrallment with life in which life is as if it were reality, thus offering a stark contrast with the utter disengagement of the adult narrator who is on the verge of falling into a hopelessly predetermined universe? It seems to me that my emphasis on the affective relationship that the narrator has toward her past is too limited to what we are conditioned to see as a legitimate relationship to the past. Indeed, although the nostalgic and melancholic dispositions that I have explored do relate to the past in important ways and are present in the narrator's memories, they all assume a loss that triggers a mourning stance. Whether the loss is recognized, disavowed, or substituted, it is still a loss that dictates affect. Loss, in fact, whatever the type of loss – loss of the mother, origin, meaning, innocence, nature, or life force – is an inevitable developmental milestone in psychology and a central component of dominant philosophical systems by virtue of being a dialectical concept *par excellence*. As noted by Max Pensky in the context of psychoanalysis: "In [loss] is compacted the dim claim that such originary meaning was once, if not 'possessed' by the ego, then once in a state of immediacy predating the painful separation of subjectivity from its objects" (27). By positing loss as the source of the narrator's affective link to the past I have been led to the conclusion that it will never be overcome, that in fact loss is at the origin of an unknown destiny with no hope of change. Would it then be possible to claim a relationship to the

past of childhood beyond loss? What would it mean to remember a lost childhood where mourning is not the dominant factor, where something outside of, beyond or within loss could account for a particular affect in different ways? While I do not propose to come up with a new model of interpretation in which loss is absent, it seems worthwhile to attempt reading the affective link to the past in *Le champ dans la mer* by looking at affect away from its possible cause or origin.

Remembering without mourning losses implies a different sense of temporality. Home, origins, beginnings and ends lose their foundational status as a circularity takes hold, thereby disabling the power of loss in memory and loosening the grip of chronology. As Ying Chen said in an interview:

Le fait que je me serve d'une narratrice qui est déjà morte me permet de sortir des frontières du temps linéaire, de confondre à loisir le passé, le présent et le futur. De ce point de vue, la mémoire et le souvenir personnels sont peut-être moins importants [...]. La réflexion sur L'Histoire, le sentiment que tout semble changer, tout avancer, alors qu'en réalité rien ne change vraiment, est au cœur [du *champ dans la mer*]. (Le Bras)

It is indeed the role of memory that is recast in this a-temporal universe. Memory is generally seen as enabling a charting of change through time and thus of opening up the future for transformations. As Gayle Greene writes in the context of feminist fiction and its uses of memory: "The most revolutionary feminist fiction is so by virtue of textual practice as well as content, and is unsettling not only formally and structurally but in unsettling our relation to the past, in revealing the past as changing in response to the

present and as capable of transforming present and future as well” (292). It is the impossibility of change in *Le champ* that is so disconcerting for it seems to lead to a conservative view of the past and its role in the making of the future. We thus need to recast memory, to remove the link to loss so we can begin to understand the role given to change and transformation in this text.

“Women especially need to remember because forgetting is a major obstacle to change” (Greene 298). This statement appears contradictory in the context of the narrator’s quest for memories in *Le champ*. Indeed, it is the narrator’s memories that seem to constitute an obstacle to change, constantly reinforcing the circularity of temporality. However, while her memories confirm a certain lack of change in history they are also deeply disruptive of the beliefs, stories and illusions that underlie the continuity in the story of history: “Tout souvenir nouveau me fait douter de mes croyances, du sérieux de mes histoires, m’oblige à lâcher toute prétention à la consistance, à la coherence” (84). Memories then, do not reveal the past as changing and capable of transforming the present but rather they expose the fragility of the systems on which change depends in order to be effective – a fragility that is reflective of the ambivalence present in affect. The striking contrast between the clarity of the memories in *Le champ* and the opaque fog that shrouds the familiar world illustrates the ability that memories have of defamiliarizing normalcy and shattering illusions of continuity. What, then, is at work in the defamiliarization present in memories in *Le champ*? If memories do not reveal changes in time, a process which relies on the familiarity of home and its loss, could we not say that the shattering of familiarity that they engender is a major

constituent of the very experience of change, that it is part of the complex affective response within change? The deeply unsettling and ambiguous structure of the text would then function as an embodiment of the conflicting emotional responses unfolding in the very experience of change.

The lack of familiar spatiotemporal landmarks in the midst of change elicits a multitude of contradictory emotions. When the narrator hears the call of memories, it is at times with great desire that she wants to believe in the stories that make up our lives and history: “Chaque fois, je cours vers cette musique, avec la ténacité du croyant, en pèlerinage vers un bonheur impossible. C’est ainsi qu’on donne suite à l’histoire d’une vie, qu’on remplit le creux des nuits sans rêve, qu’on récupère ce qui est perdu dans la poussière du chemin” (35). The song of the past is seductive; it brings contentment and soothes the pain from all the losses we have suffered on the path of life. Sometimes, though, we are thrown into an experience that shatters our ability to maintain the illusion of continuity, as when the narrator’s father died: “Quand mon père était tombé, j’avais perdu l’équilibre. Le monde s’était renversé. Les limites que mon père avait érigées pour moi s’étaient écroulées en même temps que son corps. La mesure de toute chose était alors effacée” (89). Even if the loss of her father constitutes an important turning point for the narrator, it is not the loss of the father and the process of mourning that is developed but the very experience of being lost, of suddenly living the fragility of human relationships. This experience of loss, in *Le champ*, is irreversible; once the narrator has plunged into the waters of the unknown, there is no going back to normalcy, to a belief in the possibility of change, “Je ne peux pas recommencer, faire comme si je ne devais vivre

qu'une fois" (67). This contradiction, the impossibility of change within the experience of change, is similarly present in the inner experience of exile: once exiled, there is no possibility of going back home as home will never be seen with the same eyes.

Furthermore, once exiled there is no possibility of building a new home, as the very experience of home or origin cannot be recreated – childhood cannot be lived again. But even further than that, and beyond the loss of home, the experience of exile can become the start of an endless self-fulfilling cycle of transformations. Such a cycle never ceases, as origins and losses are no longer central – home and its loss is forever reduced to a dwindling trace. This process of dissociation from origins and losses also impedes a return of normalcy and engenders the hopelessness displayed in the narrator's disconcerting determinism.

This is the fatalism in *le champ*: the opening up to or the falling into nothingness that is captured in the experience of transformation is an emotional complex that is perplexing, painful, unavoidable and ceaseless. When the narrator says: "On ne m'a jamais enterrée comme il le faut, voilà le problème. Je suis chaque fois jetée au hasard dans des sols auxquels je n'appartiens pas" (20), she complains about her inability to be anything but an outsider. She is stuck in the inner exile from which she is destined never to escape, condemned to refuse the call of familiarity: "Et cet après-midi-là en particulier... je me disais qu'il était temps que je m'éveille. La récréation terminée, je serais rejetée vers les besognes des autres vies" (107). Playing with V... represented a dream of belonging from which she had to wake up, from which she was to be forever uprooted. However, being without heritage also enables the narrator to accept the vast

emptiness she faces in an always unfamiliar world. The opening up to nothingness in the experience of transformation is for the narrator a humbling experience that Ying Chen herself links to the experience of exile : “[Mon exil] m’a enseigné entre autres choses l’humilité, m’a fait comprendre qu’avec ou sans origines je ne suis rien du tout” (*Quatre mille*, 36). “Being nothing at all” is at the heart of the experience of transformation in which all familiarity evaporates, in which the only certainty is that the process will persist *ad aeternum*, in which most recognizable details become alien: “Quand on perd un amour ou qu’on subit un coup dur, on se tourne vers une vie quasi religieuse. L’univers entier devient un temple. Autour de nous, les champs comme la mer, les maisons ou leurs vestiges, toute chose sans exception devient objet de contemplation” (111).

Transformation, change, loss become a spiritual experience that in their unsettling of all familiarity require absolute reverence, a letting go of all attachments to how things should be because of how they have been. The narrator’s disregard of origins, her disengagement from the present and the future, her wounded stance that refuses healing or integration can now all be reconfigured. Such fatalism should not be seen as preventing change but rather as a mark of the inevitability of change as a complex and contradictory emotional experience of defamiliarization.

The all-pervading ambivalence in this text is a reflection of the deeply ambiguous affective world present in the experience of change; memories of the past entail a ceaseless annihilation of the familiar and a yearning for a home, a sense of belonging that the experience of childhood comes closest to embodying. What then is the role of memories of childhood, as a particular type of remembrance, in this context?

Unsurprisingly, the role childhood plays in this text is ambiguous, if not contradictory. On the one hand childhood represents the desire to be normal, to be incorporated into a community, to perpetuate continuity. We see this clearly in the following passage in which children eagerly absorb the truths of the adult world: “Je m’asseyais au dernier rang, derrière la troupe des élèves que dirigeait la maîtresse d’école, qui avaient soif de faits, de contours nets, qui passaient leur temps à répéter et à copier, se précipitant au tableau noir pour donner les réponses, pour énoncer les vérités” (38). The narrator’s distance from the group is evident here as she sits behind them, observing from the vantage point of the outsider. Memories of childhood thus serve to represent the complete compliance to the familiar on the part of her peers and to contrast this with her own exiled condition. We recognize this common use of childhood memories as a contrasting tool.

Other memories convey the complete rapture of play, the ability of childhood play to fill the hole that has been opened in her and to enable her to temporarily forget her condition: “Mon bonheur était en papier. Le monde pesait peu entre mes mains. C’est ainsi que je commençais à entrevoir le sens premier du jeu, que j’apprenais à meubler mon néant” (93). In the same classroom in which she feels rejected by conforming children, she plays alone with pieces of paper – playing allows her to forget the pain of being the other, the one who will not be properly buried. Even at the moment of her accidental death, which she already knew was coming, she was still under the spell of childhood oblivion: “Même au dernier moment, devant la fenêtre de V... je confondais encore la réalité avec le jeu” (105-6). This is what makes children’s play so powerful in

this text; it is as real as reality, and it thus gives the narrator the memory of normalcy, even if pretense is destined to be exposed. Childhood then exacerbates the narrator's painful feeling of being an outsider unable to join the others, and it reminds her of the inescapable inner exile which not even the blissful oblivion of childhood could eliminate.

But it is perhaps this elusive peek into normalcy enabled by childhood play that gives memories of childhood a sense of hope that would otherwise be missing from this text. Childhood then stands for what is completely absent from the text, bringing us back to a sense of belonging, a presence that the fall into the void of transformation has obliterated, a presence that is captured in the laughter of children, this most human trait that is as fake as it is genuine, as deep as it is shallow, but that in the end, anchors us and prevents us from incessantly fleeing from the familiar:

Les enfants rient sans arrêt autour de moi [...]. Je les connais. J'ai été comme eux [...]. J'ai l'impression que ces rires proviennent de moi. Comme j'ai depuis longtemps perdu l'habitude de m'amuser, mes rires doivent sortir de la gorge des enfants. Voilà d'ailleurs l'utilité de l'enfance. Il faut continuer à rire, d'une façon ou d'une autre. (33)

So caught up is the narrator in the whirlwind of change and exile that she is no longer capable of laughing; however, she is not as invulnerable to the call of familiarity as it might appear. At the very end of the novel, the narrator anticipates a moment of playfulness with A..., a momentary lapse into believing that she can play the game, or just play *tout court*. This moment of pretense of symbolic return to the world of childhood also enables the unsuspected possibility of a new beginning, beyond the void

of transformation: “Ces jeux sur la plage, aussi faux et lucides qu’ils soient, auront la vertu de me faire oublier momentanément mon patrimoine” (114). Her “patrimoine” is a small box containing the ashes of her father. Forgetting her heritage means that she also recognizes it and claims it, thus for the first time opening up to a different future, as hinted in the last paragraph of the novel: “Le jour où je le retrouverai, je monterai seule sur ce coffre qui, même disloqué par les flots, saura m’emporter vers le large, loin de A..., loin de ce lieu étrange où l’on a envie de frapper, où je ne cesse de revenir” (113). Where does the deep sea lead? Far from A..., from the world of pretense in which origins have to be hidden or cannot be recognized, far from the need to constantly escape, toward a death that brings the hope of renewal. But this hope is ephemeral, it is perhaps only a pretend game. The bliss of childhood play, the only aspect of childhood that the narrator remembers, is above all else a reminder of the force of the experience of being constantly thrown into unfamiliar settings from which only pretend games can give us enough arrogance to think that we can escape. Remembering childhood in *Le champ dans la mer* is a humbling plunge into the deep waters of affect; a plunge in which the only certitude is that the future will keep being eluded by a past steeped in emotions that defy categorization.

CHAPTER V

THE SCREAM OF SILENCE IN NINA BOURAOUÏ'S *GARÇON MANQUÉ*

Nina Bouraoui's autobiographical *Garçon manqué* is a harsh text. It is composed of memories of a childhood torn between the Algerian and French identities – two identities that the author/narrator cannot claim and that, in the 1970s, were utterly irreconcilable. The narrative voice consists of an interior monologue that unfolds breathlessly without a clear sense of linearity or referentiality. The writing is disjointed, the syntax is broken, the multitude of repeated scenes is obsessive and at times verges on the schizophrenic, the images are at times violent and vindictive. For me, this text screams. More than that, it is a scream. The many emotions capable of triggering a scream are magnified to such an extent that the text cries out for a reader to feel the pain from the wounds inflicted upon the narrator as a child. This chapter attempts to capture that visceral scream, to find out how loud written words can be. I start this analysis with a lengthy interpretative summary of the text; the aims of this synopsis are firstly to convey my understanding of the text and secondly to give the reader ample opportunities to perceive the scream within the numerous citations through which I strive to let the text speak. This summary is followed by a reading of contemporary theoretical texts that explore the ways in which the body's voice can be heard in oral and written testimony. These texts will not only give legitimacy to my 'gut feeling' that Nina Bouraoui's text

screams, but they will also provide an opportunity for the establishment of a theoretical understanding of literary screams.

Garçon manqué can be read as a denunciation of the personal violence and incessant rejections that the narrator and her family underwent in Algeria and France due to their Franco-Algerian métissage – her father is Algerian and her mother is French. Her mixed nationality and ambiguous gender identification provide a context for the larger community's lack of acceptance of difference and serve to emphasize feelings of not belonging. The text is composed of two main parts named after the geographical loci of the memories (Alger and Rennes) followed by two very short sections to which I will turn later. What emerge immediately from the first pages of the text are the powerful forces of nature in Algeria – the sea, the wind, the sand, the sun – that keep France at an unbridgeable distance: “Je suis au sable, au ciel et au vent. Je suis en Algérie. La France est loin derrière les vagues amples et dangereuses. Elle est invisible et supposée” (7). Nature comes forward as capable of transcending the many divisions created by people: “Ma vie algérienne bat hors de la ville. Elle est à la mer, au désert, sous les montagnes de l’Atlas. Là, je m’efface enfin. Je deviens un corps sans type, sans langue, sans nationalité. Cette vie est sauvage” (9). It is a force that in its blind indifference to the arbitrary fences erected by humans is attractive to a narrator whom those fences cannot contain: “Je n’ai que la mer. Je n’ai que le sable. Je n’ai que la vision des récifs lointains. Je n’ai que le mouvement des nuages. Je n’ai que le ciel pour moi, un vertige. Je n’ai que la nature. Par elle je deviens adulte. Par elle je sais le désir. Par elle je suis attirée” (27). Nature is also a violent and destructive force and as such it prefigures the

larger violence at work in the text: “[Le soleil] dit le danger imminent de ce pays. Le soleil est violent. Il brûle le sel. Il embrase. [...] Le soleil est une folie. Le soleil est un homme qui dévore l’Algérie” (28).

Together with nature, men appear in the first pages. At first, they seem to be at one with nature: “Ils parlent en arabe. Leurs voix traversent la plage. Elles sont avec les vagues. Elles sont avec le vent. C’est une emprise” (8). They speak Arabic, thus not French; they seem to speak the indifferent voice of nature as opposed to a more civilized but prejudiced voice. This indifference, this freedom is violent and is also attractive to the narrator: “Ils prennent la mer. Par leurs cris. Par leurs gestes. Par leurs corps massés et nombreux. Ils sont violents. Ils sont en vie” (15). She yearns for this freedom that she can only contemplate from the distance that is conferred on her by virtue of her gender and mother tongue: “Je regarde les garçons des rues après l’école. [...] Ils ont ma rage. [...] Ils n’ont peur de rien. Ma main sur la vitre supplie. Mon regard sera toujours celui de l’envie. Ils ont mon âge. Ils ont ma peau. Ils ont mes cheveux” (17). As nothing seems to differentiate the narrator from boys and their thirst for life, she seeks to rebel against the arbitrariness of gender roles by changing her identity so as to join the world of boys and men: “ Je prends un autre prénom, Ahmed. Je jette mes robes. Je coupe mes cheveux. Je me fais disparaître. J’intègre le pays des hommes. Je suis effrontée. Je soutiens leur regard” (15). In those moments she is free to merge with nature, to fearlessly flow with the wind: “Je joue vite. Je suis précise. Je garde le ballon longtemps, avec ma tête, mon torse et mes pieds nus, avec mon corps sans peur. Je cours avec le bruit de la mer. Les vagues sont des voix” (16). Keeping her head straight under

the gaze of men enables her to identify with their desires and understand their violence as a masked vulnerability: “Leur regard est une arme. Leur main est une braise. Leur désir est un conflit. Ils se blessent, seuls. Ils sont fragiles. Je les aime pour ça. Ils ne savent pas” (38). Her identification with men and their indifferent freedom is not reciprocal, however. For them, she is visible only in a few illusory moments under the cover of a subterfuge that cannot be maintained.

The narrator’s identification with the world of men is fleeting. Indeed, that world is ripped away from her in one shattering event. It takes only one man for her to understand that the violence with which she identified could be turned against her, only by virtue of being a girl: “Je ne sais pas son nom. C’est un inconnu. Je sais son visage, une lame de couteau. Je sais sa barbe fine autour de ses lèvres rouges. Ses yeux sont noirs. Sa peau est très blanche. Ses cheveux sont très foncés. [...] Cet homme est beau” (43). The child’s gaze dominates in this physical description of a man who attempted to abduct her – the fascinating and threatening intensity of the man’s features conveys the naïve combination of fear and awe that the child feels in front of a stranger seducing her. The relating of the event itself again renders the perspective of the terrified child: “Ce n’est rien et c’est déjà tout. Ses mains sur mon visage. Ses mots sur mes yeux. Sa voix contre mes lèvres fermées. Son attention. Son désir. Sa douceur, une immense brutalité. Sa violence, algérienne” (44). The broken sentences, the profusion of synesthesia, and the many contradictory images convey the wide open gaze of the beset child who feels the gentleness of the man as a vicious violation of her integrity. As the event progresses the images imprinted in memory are less and less precise – the description is now

dreamlike, she has vacated her body, her wondering gaze is now utterly overwhelmed by fear: “Est-ce la mer qui vient ou le cri de ma soeur? Est-ce la pluie qui s’abat ou la vitesse de notre course ? Est-ce une fuite ou un autre jeu ? Je ne sais pas. Je ne sais plus. Je ne veux pas savoir” (44-45). It is only in retrospect that the adult narrator can measure the importance of that event: “Ce n’est rien. Sa proposition. Sa tentative. Et c’est déjà tout. Sa voix se répète encore. Cet homme est dans ma vie. Il décide. Il finit l’enfance. Cet homme est ma défaite. Jamais je ne donnerai ma main. Jamais je ne céderai mon visage. Cet homme fonde ma peur. Cet homme est la peur” (45). What the man did is not what matters here (“ce n’est rien”); what matters is the shattering of a childhood dream, of the possibility of being included, of being accepted, of living with trust and without fear (“et c’est déjà tout”).

Her relationship to the world of men after the attempted abduction is radically transformed. First, she loses all access to the street, the universe of men and their forbidden desires: “Je n’ai pas le droit de sortir seule. Depuis l’évènement. La rue est mon ennemie. La rue est un vrai corps. C’est le lieu des hommes. Mon exclusion. C’est une densité. C’est un non-lieu. C’est une concentration. C’est une chair ramassée” (41). Furthermore, even away from the street, she now lives under the spell of fear, a fear that never goes away and that reduces the consciousness of her body to that of an object: “Cet homme est la mort des autres hommes. Leurs mains. Leurs voix. Des ombres armées dans mon dos. Longtemps je marche la tête baissée. Longtemps je longe les murs des grandes villes. Longtemps je plie mon corps. Longtemps je fuis les hommes. Mon feu sur leur visage. Ma haine contre leur désir” (38). The awe that the child felt for men and

their freedom to run with the wind is now turned into hatred for men and their annihilating desire. Nevertheless, instead of retreating to the restricted places allowed for girls and women, the narrator pursues and deepens her identification with masculinity. Taking on a masculine identity allows her not to become victimized, to deny the outrageous reality that her body imposes on her: “Je me déguise souvent. Je dénature mon corps féminin. Ainsi j’oublie la voix de l’homme. Ainsi j’efface ses mains douces sur mon visage. Ainsi je nie son intention” (49). But, beyond this need to forget the reality of a traumatic event, her desire to become a man stems from her appetite for revenge: “Je deviendrai un homme pour venger mon corps fragile” (46). The persistent rejections that the narrator will undergo in the following pages of the text will feed this desire for vengeance; a desire which, as we will see, is at the heart of this text.

This budding desire to be a man, however, is doomed to failure: “Ma force n’est pas dans mon corps fragile. Elle est dans la volonté d’être une autre, intégrée au pays des hommes. Je joue contre moi” (17). Her desire to take revenge for her fragile body is based on a self-denial, a self-inflicted ‘punition’: “Je romps mon identité. Je change ma vie. Sentir mon ventre dur. Ma poitrine musclée. Mes épaules fortes. Se nier. Voir un autre visage dans le miroir. Se parler. Se penser virile. C’est une faute. Je me punis” (52). She is lying to herself, a lie from which it will take years to recuperate and regain an identity as a woman: “Ici je suis la seule fille qui joue au football. Ici je suis l’enfant qui ment. Toute ma vie consistera à restituer ce mensonge. À le remettre. À l’effacer. À me faire pardonner. À être une femme. À le devenir enfin.” (16). This search for her

identity as a woman, however, is part of a quest that is only touched upon in this text.⁴⁶ Her lie, then, is here the awkward beginning of the development of a defiant stance that will function as a mirror reflecting the insult at the heart of people's 'innocent' assumptions: "[je suis] contre la femme qui dit: Quelle jolie petite fille. Tu t'appelles comment ? Ahmed. Sa surprise. Mon défi. Sa gêne. Ma victoire. Je fais honte au monde entier [...]. Non, je ne veux pas me marier. Non, je ne laisserai pas mes cheveux longs. Non, je ne marcherai pas comme une fille. Non, je ne suis pas française. Je deviens algérien" (51). The choice of the name Ahmed is judicious as it not only exposes constructions of identity based on gender but also on ethnicity – the impenetrable barrier between the French and Algerian identities. The narrator's lack of unified national identity and the negative reactions this generates progressively becomes the main focus of the text. This shift to the rejections based on ethnicity, however, utilizes the hatred born of her exclusion from the world of Algerian men as a catalyst for the way she will react to insults and rejections in Algeria and France; this hatred, as it develops further, will also contribute to the very dynamic of the text.

Although the narrator spends her childhood in Algeria and identifies with the intensity of its nature, she is not Algerian: "Je vais à l'école française. Je vais au lycée français. Je vais à l'Alliance française. Je vais au Centre culturel français. La France est encore là, rapportée et réduite, en minorité" (18). Born in France, the narrator has a French passport, speaks French and lives amongst the remnants of a colonial reality, a

⁴⁶ As we will see later in this chapter, the idea of a quest is somewhat in tension with the development of the scream that, as I claim, drives this text. Nina Bouraoui's quest for her identity as a lesbian woman is explored in *La vie heureuse* (2002) and *Poupée Bella* (2004).

threatened minority. But she does not belong to that world either, that community that she loathes for their reactionary and exclusionary ways: “Je refuse les invitations des familles françaises. Leur regard. Leurs mots. Leur jugement. Leur Algérie française” (19). The discerning gaze, the conceited and devious words of those French families instantly categorize the narrator and exclude her from their limited circle. The Algerian communities are no more within her reach as she does not share their ways: “Je ne sais pas les familles algériennes” (19). The ungrammatical use of ‘savoir’ indicates that she not only does not know Algerian families but that she does not share their ways, their laughter, their intimacy, and their language. Arabic is a language that she learns in school but that remains painfully foreign, incapable of expression, “je reste à l’extérieur du sens, abandonnée. [...] Cette langue qui s’échappe comme du sable est une douleur.” (11). In spite of her desire to be included within their families she knows that she does not belong and that she means nothing to them: “On devient fragiles et perdus dans le costume traditionnel qui révèle l’impuissance à être vraiment une partie de soi. On hésitera toujours. On ne sera jamais de vrais Algériens. Malgré l’envie et la volonté. Malgré le vêtement. Malgré la terre qui entoure” (10). The ‘on’ pronoun is used here in the first person plural to include the narrator’s childhood friend Amine who serves as her double – an effeminate boy of mixed Algerian and French origin. She will often write in the second person ‘tu’ to refer to both Amine and herself as in this passage where national identity can only be claimed as a lie: “Tu ne sais pas l’Algérie. Tu ne sauras pas la France, Amine. Tu seras encore à l’extérieur de ta terre. Tu regarderas la mer, de l’autre côté. Et tu mentiras. L’Algérie ne se souviendra plus de toi” (39). Choosing a

cultural identity is an impossible lie that not only asserts an absent belonging but that also denies her very origins: “Être française, c’est être sans mon père, sans sa force, sans ses yeux, sans sa main qui conduit. Être algérienne, c’est être sans ma mère, sans son visage, sans sa voix, sans ses mains qui protègent” (20). Although a coherent national identity appears as an impossible denial of her roots, we have seen that the experience of growing up in Algeria provided her with a strong identification with its violent effervescence – a feeling of identification that is lacking in relation to France whose culture appears at first as superfluous: “Tu n’es pas vraiment algérien. Tu en as juste l’air, empêché par cet alcool français qui te ronge.” (15). Her French side is seen as a contamination of the treacherous purity of the Algerian sun, which is not only a reversal of the colonial rhetoric but also a personal refutation of her French side: “Je deviens une étrangère par ma mère” (12).

We will see that the modalities of the identification with Algeria and its violence that we perceived earlier are of crucial importance for the development of the literary scream yet to be analyzed. As the place where her childhood unfolded, Algeria is felt as the hand that molded her, that constituted her traits: “Je reste, ici, différente et française. Mais je suis algérienne. Par mon visage. Par mes yeux. Par ma peau. Par mon corps traversé du corps de mes grands-parents. Je porte l’odeur de leur maison” (12). Even stronger than the genetic imprint of her Algerian ancestors is what the body remembers, the indelible marks that the earth and wind left on her body: “La terre algérienne. Cette terre est un homme. Cette terre est une femme. Elle nourrit mon corps” (35). Similarly, the violence of Algeria is viscerally marking – its violence becomes the primary mode of

relating to memories, as in this passage in which memories of specific events of the Algerian war come to possess the narrator: “Se laver dans leur sang. Être dans leur fièvre. Vivre avec l’image de ces femmes égorgées. Avec leurs cris. Avec ces gestes. En pleurer. La nuit. Prendre la violence malgré moi et devenir violente” (61). If the child is a product of the violent forces of nature, she also carries the violence of history, of an illicit union between two countries that can only be remembered for the massacres they committed. The memory of her uncle who was killed by the French during the war is a particularly strong reminder of that fundamental fracture in her identity: “Ma mère blanche contre l’homme du maquis. Mon père. Sa femme après son frère. Je suis dans la guerre d’Algérie. Je porte le conflit. Je porte la disparition de l’aîné de la famille, sa référence” (31). As an experience felt in the body, Algeria is a “terre sanguine” (73) that words cannot contain, that can only be expressed physically:

L’Algérie n’est pas dans ma langue. Elle est dans mon corps. L’Algérie n’est pas dans mes mots. Elle est à l’intérieur de moi. L’Algérie n’est pas dans ce qui sort. Elle est dans ce qui dévore. Elle est physique. Dans ce que je ne contrôle pas. Dans mes excès. Dans mes exigences. Dans ma volonté. Dans ma force. L’Algérie est dans mon désir fou d’être aimée. (167)

The shattering of the child’s fundamental need to be loved and accepted constitutes a physically felt blow that corresponds to the visceral inscription of Algeria in her memory – remembering childhood takes on the quality of the grunts of physical pain.

The second part of the text focuses on memories of the narrator’s return to France and her interactions with French people. It is violence again that dominates in her

perception of France. France is doubly guilty of severing the umbilical cord that could have provided her with the hope of belonging to a community. On the one hand France is perceived by the child as a foreign force that rips her apart from her bond with Algeria: “Je sais l’Algérie, ses cycles. La France est une violence. Elle m’arrachera d’Alger” (22). France is also seen as an intrinsically rejecting entity – rejecting of a mixed identity that could not be absorbed within the French republican mold. The narrator identifies with her mother’s petrifying fear of having to announce to her parents, as the Algerian war was raging, that she was going marry an Algerian man: “C’est si difficile. De savoir avant l’autre. De deviner sa réaction. C’est une peur effrayante. Ça donne mal au ventre. Cette mauvaise nouvelle. En pleine guerre. Embrasser l’ennemi. Le désirer. Faire la paix avant les autres. Par le corps. Se mélanger. Faire des enfants. Je la sens, cette peur” (110). The racism of French society, the inability to accept the other as other, is then of a sexual nature; it is the fear of contamination that is encapsulated in the sexual act, the most private and yet the closely guarded fortress of national identity. The condemnation of an illegitimate sexual act is at the core of the insults thrown at the narrator’s mother, the sexual partner of an Algerian man:

Radidja la mouquère chantent les étudiants. La Française, la vicieuse. Comme celles qui fréquentent des Noirs. Ces visages. Ces couteaux. Oui, ce rejet est sexuel. [...] Le racisme est un fantasme. C’est imaginer l’odeur de sa peau, la tension de son corps, la force de son sexe. Le racisme est une maladie. Une lèpre. Une nécrose. C’est le corps de ma mère avec le corps de mon père qui

dérangera. Ces deux chairs-là. Ce rapport-là. Cette union-là. Ce frottement-là.
Ce rouge-là. Cette mécanique-là. (149-150)

The narrator's mother is perceived as a traitor who betrays the colonial rules of sexual conduct. This fundamental rejection of mixity is also felt by the narrator a generation later.

The colonial attitude toward formerly colonized people is no longer outwardly displayed in contemporary France; public places are not labeled "Français uniquement. Interdits aux chiens et aux Arabes" (153) as they were in colonized Algeria.

Nevertheless, the assumptions of the past endure and resurface; the fears of the past are kept alive in the collective imagination: "on te croira violent, capable de tout. Un couteau dans le dos, diront-ils. Un air faux. Une méchanceté. Tu porteras leur Algérie. Celle des massacres. Celle de la hache. Celle du sang et de la haine" (76). The fear-based assumption of the Arab-as-terrorist legitimates the resurfacing of words of hatred: "Il y a trop d'Arabes en France. Beaucoup trop. Et en plus ils prennent nos bus [...]. Il faut s'en débarrasser. Les renvoyer dans leur pays. Les exterminer" (130-1). More subtle but no less injurious are the slips of the tongue that again hurt and separate :

Ces gens. Qui disent. Sans penser. Sans le faire exprès, soi-disant. Raton, youpin, négro, pédé, melon. Ça part tout seul. C'est une mécanique de mots. Intégrée au langage. Ces gens que je ne connais pas et qui disent toujours, après : Ce n'est pas de toi dont il s'agit. Et qui disent encore : C'est à cause du vin. Du vin rouge qui excite. Leur obscénité. (122)

In response to these insults integrated within social language, the narrator will try to fabricate a less contentious identity, a version of the past that will not raise the specters of a war-torn history. These attempts, however, will only be lies: “Tu mentiras Amine. Tu effaceras ta mère. Tu effaceras ta vie d’Alger, les absences de ton père, ta peur algérienne. Tu deviendras un Kabyle en France. Et tu seras accepté. Ce sera encore une violence et une séparation” (58). The narrator is inescapably caught in the violence of the past, a violence that perpetuates itself and from which there seems to be no escape.

The narrator’s mixed origins quickly turn into a feeling of total absence of origin as she is evidently not Arab – the insults aimed at the Arabs are not ‘really’ intended for her: “En France tu entendras bicot, melon, ratonnade. Tu te défendras. Et ils diront : « mais ce n’est pas toi ». Ce sera une douleur. Toi tu voudras bien être un bicot. Mais tu n’es rien, Amine. [...] Tu ne seras même plus un homme arraché à la forêt d’Alger” (39). Even the repudiation of racist slurs will be painful. What is worst, being the object of racist affronts or being denied an identity that could be defended and fought over? She actually cannot even choose one option as both the insults and their refutation are felt with as much pain. Both point to the union between her father and mother, both point to the impossible marriage of two antagonistic parts, both lead the narrator into a fruitless search for a singular union:

Je reste avec ma mère. Je reste avec mon père. Je prends des deux. Je perds des deux. Chaque partie se fond à l’autre puis s’en détache. Elles s’embrassent et se disputent. C’est une guerre. C’est une union. C’est un rejet. C’est une

séduction. Je ne choisis pas. Je vais et je reviens. Mon corps se compose de deux exils. Je voyage à l'intérieur de moi. Je cours, immobile. (20)

Without denigrating either side of her heritage she loses the ability to name a heritage as both sides are caught in the bellicose winds of history, rejecting and canceling each one out. Neither can she identify with francophones who stayed in Algeria which would allow the possibility for a nostalgic longing; those people will have lived other battles and will belittle the importance of her own experiences: "Ils diront que tu ne sais pas. Que tu ne vis plus là-bas depuis longtemps. Que ta douleur n'est rien. Qu'elle est indécente. Voilà ce qu'ils diront de toi" (88). The French landscape thus becomes desolate, thwarting even the possibility of any meaningful interaction, and giving voice to her past only through the clichés passed on through outdated stereotypes: "Le désert est en France. Il est immense et permanent. Il est en ville. Il est à Paris même. Je n'existerai pas là-bas. Seule l'immigration dira l'Algérie" (34). In another reversal, France becomes a desert incapable of giving meaning to the narrator's visceral memories of her childhood in Algeria.

The dominant feeling toward France becomes hatred; hatred for some people's inability to accept the unfamiliar, for the automatic exclusion of the foreigner in the comfort of a distrustful tradition: "Cette France très française. Ce mouchoir de poche. Ce folklore que je déteste. [...] Ce folklore dangereux. Cette petite identité culturelle. Ce lopin de terre à protéger. À défendre. Du fil de fer barbelé. Autour de leur folklore. Contre l'étranger. Contre la vie" (117-8). This closed-minded attitude, this inability to love what is not one's own is associated with death as life for the narrator can only be

conceived as a form of fusion to an other, as it is for a child: “L’idée de la mort s’insinue avec la sensation du rejet. [...] L’idée de la mort vient avec l’idée d’être toujours différente. De ne pas être à sa place. De ne pas marcher droit. D’être à côté. Hors contexte. Dans son seul sujet. Sur soi. De ne pas appartenir, enfin, à l’unité du monde” (121). Death will then be superimposed on the most innocent images of a quiet French provincial life: “Je pars avec ma sœur. Nous allons « respirer » ensemble. Respirer l’air de la France, l’odeur du gazon, de la terre mouillée, de la Manche, du goémon. Respirer l’air de la mort. Des cimetières bretons” (95). The rusticity of the French countryside becomes imbued with death, with the weight of a long exclusionary tradition. The narrator also repeatedly superimposes images of atrocities of the Algerian war onto scenes of French vacationers lying on the beach, as in this passage:

Ces corps immobiles. Figés dans leur dernier geste. Qu’on pourrait croire morts, vus de loin. Morts et nus. Comme tous ces corps découverts après le massacre du village de B. Des corps d’enfants. Coupés en deux. Des corps de femmes taillés sur la longueur. Comme une fermeture Éclair. Des corps d’hommes sans tête. Et des têtes sans corps. (154)

These images not only reinforce the association of France with death but also emphasize the radical disconnect of the French population from the horrors lived by people whom they fought and continue to harm through their insults and mistreatments. That disconnect, the innocent denial of bullies enjoying the privilege of their status causes the narrator further feelings of rage that will indirectly fuel the desire for revenge expressed in the text.

What precipitates the rage is silence, silence over the horrors of war, silence over hidden insults and injustices:

Mais le silence prendra tout. Silence sur les massacres en Algérie. Sur la douleur. Sur notre nouvelle vie. Un silence qui court. Qui se transmet par contagion. Une vraie maladie. Une peste. Une épidémie. Silence sur toutes les lèvres. Silence de la France. Du monde entier. Silence sur l'Algérie. Sur les corps brûlés. Sur les corps dépecés. Sur les corps éventrés. Sur cet incroyable puzzle de chairs séparées. Sur ce désordre humain. Sur l'avenir de l'homme. Sur sa véritable nature. (115)

Not only does silence bury the unacceptable past, but it is also imposed on the narrator who as a child had to endure insults without being able to respond, to scream her tears of pain:

Un jour, j'entendrai [...] une femme dire en regardant mon père : Il y a trop d'Arabes en France. Beaucoup trop. Et en plus ils prennent nos bus. Ses mots et mon silence. Cette incapacité à répondre. À hurler. [...] Il faut s'en débarrasser. Les renvoyer dans leur pays. Les exterminer. [...] Encore cette incapacité à répondre. Ma peau qui rougit. Les battements de mon cœur. Mon ventre serré. Comme étourdie après un coup de poing. Muette. Mais avec ce désir si violent. Et ces mots qui ne viennent pas. Non, je n'ai pas peur. Non je ne suis pas lâche. Mon silence confirme juste l'expression: *être terrassé par la douleur*. (130-1)

Even more than a force that erases the past, silence here becomes the trigger for a physical response, an overwhelming of the body struck by the punch of hatred, an injured

body incapable of uttering words but also incapable of forgetting the depth of a wound only waiting for a scream to express the pain. By being silent, she can hear the insults, “Les laisser me traverser. Me noyer. [Ces mots] me donnent toujours de la force. La force de la haine. La force du combat. La force d’être moi” (170). Not only will the silence of the child in the face of rejections feed hatred and a desire for revenge but it also calls for a later written expression. “Ne rien dire. Regarder. Tenir ses larmes. Entendre. Ne pas répondre. Ne pas raconter. Et d’où viendra la force de parler ? Et d’écrire ?” (172). The strength to write comes from the need of the body whose wounds have been festering in silence: “Noyée, écartée, en dessous. Une femme étouffe. Il faut dire. Pour plus tard. Préparer. Anticiper. Mon silence construit mon avenir.” (63). Silence and writing become intricately linked, silence calling for writing, and writing serving as an expression of silence. It is within this relationship between silence and writing that a scream surfaces. Writing becomes the means of expression of a rage, of a desire for vengeance, it is destructive and physical, as expressed in this passage in which the narrator likens her literary enterprise to the violent acts of some ‘beur’ communities in France:

Oui, je l’aurais mon esprit de vengeance. Le même esprit que ceux qu’ils appelleront, un jour, beurs. [...] Beur, c’est ludique. Ça rabaisse bien, aussi. Cette génération, ni vraiment française ni vraiment algérienne. Ce peuple errant. Ces nomades. Ces enfants fantômes. Ces prisonniers. Qui portent la mémoire comme un feu. Qui portent l’histoire comme une pierre. Qui portent la haine comme une voix unique. Qui brûlent du désir de vengeance. Moi aussi j’aurais

cette force. Cette envie. De détruire. De sauter à la gorge. De dénoncer.

D'ouvrir les murs. Ce sera une force vive mais rentrée. Un démon. Qui sortira avec l'écriture. (129)

As it is for the beurs, it is the incessant rejections, the feelings of not belonging, of not being loved that will feed rage and desires for vengeance. Her ammunition, however, will be a literary voice, the expression of bodily inscribed memories through and beyond words.

Writing as I conceive it in this text is an act of revenge, a physical response to rejection and hatred – it is a performance. As such, narrative “is particularized, embodied, and material – a story of the body told through the body which makes cultural conflict concrete” (Langelier 151). It is indeed the narrator’s physical response to culture’s institutionalized networks of power relations, in this case the construction of gender and national identities, that writing attempts to express. As has been made clear in disability studies, “the disruption of disability to an individual’s life can be (but not need to be) physically and psychically painful, but is most likely painful in its encounter with the social” (Kuppers 90-1). In the case of the narrator of *Garçon manqué*, the expression of physical pain clearly originates in non-physical realms of social interaction, most of the ‘attacks’ on the narrator being verbal in nature. From an anthropological perspective, Arthur and Joan Kleinman have analyzed the complex interweaving of social and physical bodies and have shown that in the act of remembering bodily symptoms one could find an infolding of cultural traumas into the physical body, thus establishing that “the societal disorientation caused by a crisis of cultural delegitimization become[s] a

bodily experience” (711). What is interesting in this interplay between culture and the body is that the body’s memory does not function as a representation of social realities but rather as a representation of its own symptoms: “The memory of bodily complaints evoked social complaints which were not so much represented as lived and relived (remembered) in the body” (715). It is then as a performance of its symptoms that the body relates social suffering, a performance which, as we will see, does not rule out the development of a representation of events or even of a plot.

This performance of bodily symptoms is of interest to this study because the literary scream I am claiming, by virtue of being a scream, cannot be contained in what words represent; it has to be in excess of the story of the narrator. But, if the Kleinmans assert that bodies affected by social events do not so much represent these events as “they *experience* them as the lived memory of transformed worlds” (717), they do not claim that this experience has any textual reality. In other words, identifying a clear link between the remembrance and experience of bodily symptoms and cultural processes does not automatically imply that such symptoms can be manifested in a text. That link, however, has been suggested by scholars in the field of disability studies, an area of research in which the relation between the body and the text has been explored from a new perspective. Indeed, studies of the body as discursively constructed have been essential in the task of countering traditional notions of the body as a material bedrock immune to cultural influences. However, the radical questioning of the ontological status of the body has also made it harder to differentiate it from other textual productions and to claim its very physical presence.

While emphasizing the importance of the discursive construction of bodies, thereby establishing the myth of ‘normalcy’ in opposition to ‘disability,’ theorists in disability theory have also had to “wrestle with the relationship between constructed and material identities” (Mitchell 3). David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder have coined the term ‘narrative prosthesis’ to express the reliance of narrative on disabled bodies as a meaning-making force. As such, bodies are textually constructed but they also play a constitutive role in the construction of narrative: “The body’s weighty materiality functions as a textual and cultural other – an object with its own undisciplined language that exceeds the text’s ability to control it” (Mitchell 49). Mitchell and Snyder’s study shows that an excess of materiality of bodies creates an unstable alliance between a body and the language used to describe it. Indeed, if narrating disability constitutes an attempt at normalizing the body, often through negative portrayals, it also forces the reader to confront his or her body as biologically typical or atypical. This identification in the act of reading gives unintended meanings to narratives by forcing the physicality of bodies onto an immaterial text. The presence of the open wound of disability then plays a transgressive role, “often leav[ing] the disabled body as a troubled and troubling position within culture” (8). While focusing on the representation of bodies and their cultural and textual disruptions, the authors do not address the possibility of bodies having their own voice in a text – a possibility that does not seem far-fetched, given the “weighty materiality” of bodies and their active role in the making of narrative.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ From a narratological perspective, David Punday’s *Narrative Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Narratology*, also examines the central role of the body within narrative but stays confined to the uses of the body in traditional narrative elements such as plot, character, or setting without addressing the possibility of the body as having its own form of narrative voice.

We have established the interplay of bodies and cultural forces in the process of remembering bodily symptoms, an interaction central to the narrator's childhood memories in *Garçon manqué*. While we also know that the materiality of bodies plays a significant role in the making and development of narrative, we have yet to determine the possibility of bodies having their own literary voice, screaming or otherwise. It seems that for bodies to scream in literature we have to reverse the assumption of the body as text and posit the text as body. Gail Weiss explores this possibility in "The Body as a Narrative Horizon." Coming to terms with the embodied dimension of texts, she proposes "that the body is itself a semantic impertinence, that the body [...] serves as the site for the production of semantic fields and, accordingly, of the inevitable tensions that arise among them" (32). The body then becomes a "narrative horizon" for all texts, a presence capable of grounding meaning. This presence is "impertinent" because it is outside of its prescribed role; it is neither an inert biological mass nor a discursively constructed entity. But while the narrative horizon gives the body a central role in the constitution of meaning, it does not address the possibility of hearing the body itself, beyond semantic considerations. Arthur Frank's *The Wounded Storyteller: Body, Illness, and Ethics*, a study of illness stories, has opened up the possibility of conceiving of a literary voicing of the body. His study has been very helpful in the development of the theoretical outlining of my literary scream. Indeed, Frank's study looks at illness stories not for what they tell *about* the body or for how the body constitutes a horizon for narrative; instead, he is interested in these stories as stories *of* and *through* the body (140), thus opening up the possibility of hearing the body in the ill person's accounts:

“The content that illness stories offer is valuable for a variety of purposes: for the teller’s reordering of her life story, as guidance to others who will follow, and to provide caregivers with an understanding of what the ill experience. But the body testifies in excess of all these contents” (140). It is this testimony in excess of what the story says that I am trying to capture in Nina Bouraoui’s scream, noting in the previous quote that the voice of the body does not overwhelm the text and is not necessarily opposed to the presence of a “healing narrative.” We will then have to navigate carefully between these two imperatives that appear to be taking shape: the need to scream as a destructive vengeful act and the need to resolve, to heal, to reflect on the scream, in other words to give the narrative room to be a readable literary piece.

By trying to capture the voice of the body I am looking beyond the “alien alliance,” the unstable relation between a body and the language used to describe it (Mitchell 7). Description is the means we have to speak for the body whose voice, its pains and other symptoms, are inarticulate. The words we use to speak for the body frustrate due to their limited capacity to convey the feeling of symptoms. Elaine Scarry has shown, in her seminal *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, that due to the utter distance between the certainty of the reality of pain and its elusive rendition in language, pain is unsharable. This unsharability of pain is ensured through its absolute resistance to language (4). This resistance of pain to objectification in language necessitates another level of attention on the part of the reader trying to hear the body’s wounds – a level of attention which I am attempting to define and foster in order

to make sense of *Garçon manqué* as a text being told through the narrator's wounded body.

Among the different types of illness stories that Arthur Frank examines, one is of particular relevance to my reading of *Garçon manqué* – the chaos story.⁴⁸ What characterizes chaos stories is “their absence of narrative order. Events are told as the storyteller experiences life: without sequence or discernable causality” (97). Chaos stories reveal the utter vulnerability and impotence of a narrator crushed by the overwhelming demands of physical pain; these demands lead to what Frank calls a narrative wreckage (69) – the incessant interruptions of a narrative flow that functions as a reflection of the body's constant disruption of daily experience. The “poetics of violence”⁴⁹ in *Garçon manqué* follows Frank's model of the chaos story in many respects. The broken syntactic structure composed of brief nominal or verbal phrases, what Nina Bouraoui calls “des phrases d'un seul mot” (Darner), confers to the style a cutting shape that prevents a clear narrative progression and resembles the chaos story's “staccato pacing of words [that] pecks away at the reader” (Frank 99). Moreover many of the phrases contradict each other without a clear sense of what they refer to, as in this

⁴⁸ My intention is not to conflate Nina Bouraoui's text with illness stories – writing memories of one's childhood is clearly not equivalent to what patients with chronic pain or terminal illness deal with in their stories. It does seem reasonable, however, to claim that the body in pain ‘speaks’ in similar ways regardless of the origin of the pain – illness, abuse, wars, or simply the blows inflicted upon a child by an cultural environment that cannot recognize his or her intrinsic beauty. Arthur Frank himself seems to agree with this claim: “Illness narratives as one form of self-story overlap with and are bounded by at least three other forms. These are spiritual autobiographies, stories of becoming a man or a woman and what that gender identity involved, and finally survivor stories of inflicted traumas such as war, captivity, incest, and abuse” (69). It is probably not coincidental that the four texts studied in this dissertation could be classified within one or more of these three categories.

⁴⁹ The expression is borrowed from Martine Fernandes who writes that Bouraoui's “poétique de la violence [est] à l'image de la violence intérieure qui secoue le personnage mixte” (76).

passage: “De mère française. De père algérien. Je sais les odeurs, les sons, les couleurs. C’est une richesse. C’est une pauvreté. Ne pas choisir c’est être dans l’errance” (33).

What do the smells, sounds and colors refer to? What is rich and poor at the same time?

The reader, unable to easily choose one meaning over another, is as lost as the narrator.

Another characteristic of the chaos story is the use of an incessant present that overwhelms the construction of a chronological flow from past to future. Most phrases in *Garçon manqué* are “au temps présent même pour parler du passé, ce qui oblige à des recouplements pour savoir de quelle(s) strate(s) temporelle(s) parle la narratrice” (Jacomard 44). Moreover, some key scenes are continuously repeated, in what Hélène Jacomard calls the paradox of Bouraoui’s style, “ce style lapidaire qui tente de contrôler le ressassement, comme si la précipitation s’y disputait à la logorrhée” (47). This tension between scenes that are broken and fragmented and yet obsessively repeated accentuates the impression of a jagged narrative line constantly interrupted and never achieving a sense of resolution, thus impeding the establishment of a clear sense of purpose in the narrative.

The wreckage caused by memories of physical pain impedes the smooth progression of the narrative. Moreover, it also prevents a narrative of progress in which the psychosomatic wounds could follow a healing course. As Arthur and Joan Kleinman have shown, with the body’s memory as the very experience of the wound being inflicted, the larger context, including the possibility of healing, is not part of that memory: “The survivor’s ruins of memory are the experience of ruins. Events are relived, yet ‘remain permanently unredeemed and unredeemable.’ They are unhealed

(and unhealable) wounds. The experience of ruins ruins lives” (717). The experiences of rejections suffered during the childhood of the narrator of *Garçon manqué* were imprinted on a bodily memory that could only be expressed as a form of chaos narrative. What is not healable are those experiences and in particular the way they are being remembered. A story can be constituted to contribute to a reordering of emotions and a recontextualization of a traumatic past, but the scream is lurking behind that façade and can never be incorporated into that ordered narrative. This image of memories lurking ready to cry out is reminiscent of what Lawrence Langer calls a hole in the narrative that cannot be filled in, a hole that cannot be evaded in the stories told by Holocaust witnesses:

If I have discovered anything in my investigation, it is that oral Holocaust testimonies are doomed on one level to remain disrupted narratives. [...] Instead of leading to further chapters in the autobiography of the witnesses, they exhaust themselves in the telling. They do not function in time like other narratives, since the losses they record raise few expectations of renewal or hopes of reconciliation. (xi)

The losses endured by Holocaust witnesses are clearly immeasurably larger than the insults and rejections suffered by our narrator. The parallel, however, is not to be found in the intensity of the experience but in the way certain memories resist incorporation within a structure of hope for healing or redemption,⁵⁰ as expressed by Langer: “Moral

⁵⁰ The parallel must stop here, however, as the role of the scream in Nina Bouraoui’s memories must be very different from the hole in the deep memories of Holocaust survivors for whom the return of horror much exceeds aesthetic considerations.

formulas about learning from experience and growing through suffering rapidly disintegrate into meaningless fragments of rhetorical consolation as the testimony of these interviews proceeds” (xi).

This resistance to redemption stems in part from the impossibility of witnessing or narrating the traumatic events of the past, as observed by scholars in the field of trauma studies.⁵¹ Ching Selao’s study of *Garçon manqué* follows that approach by claiming that Nina Bouraoui’s text poses the question of “comment parler de l’Algérie?” (75) as the memory of events that transcend the ability of language to witness the past:

Davantage que porter témoignage sur l’Algérie, Bouraoui porte finalement l’Algérie, meilleur moyen, peut-être, de garder en elle le secret, ce qui, de toute façon, ne peut être transmis. En effet, l’Algérie qu’elle porte porte en elle quelque chose qui échappe, impossible à saisir par les mots, impossible à transmettre par la langue. (83)

Bouraoui, according to this reading, bears witness to the impossibility of bearing witness to the traumatic past, and in this sense prevents those events from falling into the abyss of silence, thus paradoxically elevating them to a level of mystical inaccessibility. I would put forward that the scream that I am trying to capture is what brings the past down from its ethereal heights to the very real level of the suffering body, as suggested by David Morris: “suffering encompasses an irreducible nonverbal dimension that we cannot know – not at least in any normal mode of knowing – because it happens in a realm beyond

⁵¹ The bibliography on the impact of traumatic memory on the representation of the past is vast. A few of the most often quoted works on this subject include: Cathy Caruth’s *Trauma: Explorations in Memory and Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*; Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*; Dominick LaCapra’s *Writing History, Writing Trauma*; Ruth Leys’s *Trauma: a Genealogy*.

language. The quality of such suffering remains as blank to thought as the void opened up by a scream” (27). The scream is here not a metanarrative act of witnessing but rather an expression of the silence present in suffering: “Paradoxically, the scream might serve as a potent image for the metaphorical silence at the heart of suffering. A scream is not speech but the most intense possible negation of language: sound and terror approaching the limits of absolute muteness” (27). The narrator’s silence in *Garçon manqué* can now be reframed as the voicelessness of suffering to be expressed later as a literary scream.

A literary scream is the expression of a visceral memory of suffering. This scream has an antagonistic relationship to words, the former incessantly compromising the order given to the latter, which is another way of saying that words fail the wounds, by necessity, as Arthur Frank writes: “The story traces the edges of a wound that can only be told around. Words suggest its rawness, but that wound is so much of the body, its insults, agonies, and losses, that words necessarily fail” (98). This friction between narrative and painful memories explains in part the resistance to healing or resolution that I noticed previously at work in Bouraoui’s text and in chaos stories. David Morris argues that the ‘voicing’ of the silence of suffering in literature, skirting the dark side of chaos, has a positive role to play: “Indeed, one function of literature is to give this deeper silence a voice. Literary works [...] labor to make such silences “speak” by extending our awareness of an irreducible, nonverbal dimension of suffering that can never be put into words” (27). Literature is then, according to Morris, capable of reversing “the inherent pressure within affliction toward isolation and silence” (31) by giving an example of how the voice of the sufferings can be empowered and amplified: “Many who today suffer

silently and in confusion might be helped if we learned how to tap the resources of literature in restoring significance to an individual human voice” (32). I would argue, however, that the voicing of silence that I am analyzing in Bouraoui’s text is not only difficult to read and relate to, but also that by itself it runs the risk of drowning one further in the pit of suffering – chaos stories are hard to read for that reason; they do not inspire one to emerge from depression but tend to force one into its depths. We thus have to look beyond the scream to understand its role in *Garçon manqué*.

The irreconcilable gap between language and suffering explains why “pain should sometimes be brought into being by those who are not themselves in pain but who speak *on behalf of* those who are” (Scarry 9). Writing from outside of pain, one can give it referential content and inscribe it within a structure of healing (a necessity in medical practice, for example), a structure that has its own limitations – one of them being the progressive separation of language from the body, as Elaine Scarry observes:

In order to express pain one must *both* objectify its felt-characteristics *and* hold steadily visible the referent for those characteristics. [...] The deeply problematic character of this language, its inherent instability, arises precisely because it permits a break in the identification of the referent and thus a misidentification of the things to which the attributes belong. While the advantage of the sign is its proximity to the body, its disadvantage is the ease with which it can then be spatially separated from the body. (17)

This objectifying language is the antithesis of the literary scream – in one, language possesses the body while in the other the body possesses language, at the risk of losing

the possibility of meaning. Indeed, as Arthur Frank notes, pure chaos narratives do not exist as such: “Thus just as the chaos narrative is an anti-narrative, so it is a non-self-story. Where life can be given narrative order, chaos is already at bay. In stories told out of the deepest chaos, no sense of sequence redeems suffering as orderly, and no self finds purpose in suffering” (105). Writing a story of chaos is to have some grasp of it, it is already given some order and inscribed within a narrative structure. The narrative voice in *Garçon manqué* similarly imposes a grid that contains the excesses of a scream that alone cannot be contained. The scream must then be understood in the ways it interacts with that structure as one does not annihilate the development of the other: “if the chaotic story cannot be told, the voice of chaos can be identified and a story reconstructed” (Frank 98-9).

In order to identify the scream, I had to recreate the conditions at work in reading – shape fragments into a story, and withhold the ending. Indeed, I have not yet taken into account the two short parts that conclude Bouraoui’s text. In these six pages a radical change occurs; instead of the agony that dominates the first two parts, the narrator is now describing with elation her self-discovery during a vacation in Italy: “Ne plus avoir peur. De rien. Parmi ces hommes. Parmi ces femmes. Je n’étais plus française. Je n’étais plus algérienne. Je n’étais même plus la fille de ma mère. J’étais moi. Avec mon corps” (184). It is indeed through the liberation of her body that she can free herself from the weight of her past; it is only through a reconceptualization of her body that she could let go of her memories of rejection:

Je suis devenue heureuse à Rome. Mon corps portait autre chose. Une évidence. Une nouvelle personnalité. Un don, peut-être. Je venais de moi et de moi seule. Je me retrouvais. Je venais de mes yeux, de ma voix, de mes envies. Je sortais de moi. Et je me possédais. Mon corps se détachait de tout. Il n'avait plus rien de la France. Plus rien de l'Algérie. Il avait cette joie simple d'être en vie. (185)

Her liberation from the past could only occur in a neutral place where she could be seen outside of roles assigned to her in France and Algeria. This coming out gives the text a sense of resolution that was not apparent up to then. There had been short, sporadic, almost out-of-context indications throughout the first two parts of a coming resolution, as in this earlier passage in which she alludes to an eventual letting go of the memories of her separation from Algeria: "Longtemps après j'effacerai la séparation. Par mes voyages. Sur les traces de mon père. A Boston. A Cape Cod. A Provincetown. Longtemps après je me sentirai enfin chez moi. Loin d'Alger. Loin de Rennes" (51). One could also interpret the recurrent addresses to Amine as a narrative strategy that gives breathing space from the fixation on the first person 'je' in a harrowing present tense: "Tu te laisseras en Algérie. Tu ne te trouveras pas en France, Amine" (73-4). The recurrent use of the future tense in these sentences gives the text a sense of temporal projection thus conferring a sense of teleology to the text. The second person pronoun also enables an externalization of the pain endured by the narrator thereby allowing for a necessary perspective on the immediacy of suffering. Amine also symbolizes the innocence and purity of a childhood bond whose rupture is a driving force of the text:

Chacun cherche Amine. Toute sa vie. Par tension. Chacun cherche ce visage. Ce paradis. Chacun cherche ce regard. Cette folie. De se reconnaître. De se contempler. De se doubler. Amine est le rêve du lien perdu. De l'innocence. Du bonheur. Algérien. Amine est la part manquante. Amine est la tristesse qui finit l'été. Amine est le prénom de ma vraie vie. (166)

This reference to an original bliss before the fall, however uncharacteristic and tangential it is, is yet another element that frees the narrative from the unbearable fall into the pit of chaos.

These narrative cushions that soften the impact of the blows given to the child have led some critics to interpret the text as a liberation story, one in which the narrator describes at length her grueling years as an object of desire to better highlight her coming into herself as a desiring subject: "Le roman constitue [...] une libération des définitions identitaires liées à la guerre d'Algérie et une affirmation individuelle. Cette libération s'inscrit dans un analyse de soi qui passe par une libération du corps et de son désir" (Fernandes 69). According to this reading, the ending of the text is its culminating point, bringing to evidence the sense of agency that was missing in the narrator's past. While such a reading rightly assesses the pressures placed on the body by sexual and cultural overdeterminations, it also overshadows the role of the chaos narrative. Instead of a chaos story *Garçon manqué* becomes what Arthur Frank calls a quest story, a type of narrative in which suffering is met head on not so as to penetrate its forbidding depths but rather so as to use it and transform it into a fruitful journey (115). Contrary to the chaos story where the suffering body overwhelms the progression of the narrative, quest stories

capitalize on the suffering in order to create a sense of purpose on which the ideas of quest, progress or change rest – such a purpose demands the construction of a plot which the ending of *Garçon manqué* seems to provide.

The act of storytelling imposes a distance from the immediacy of chaos, a reflective grasp on one's sufferings, a fact that has been observed by Lawrence Langer in written testimonial accounts of Holocaust survivors: "In fashioning a consecutive chronicle survivors who record their accounts unavoidably introduce some kind of teleology, investing the incidents with a meaning, be it nothing more than the value of regaining one's freedom" (40). The mere fact of having survived the Holocaust, thus gaining "perspective" on the horror of the experience, introduces a well-known and predictable narrative structure in written accounts – a narrative structure that makes the world of the witnesses readable, "easing us into their unfamiliar world through familiar (and hence comforting?) literary devices" (19), but a structure that is nevertheless foreign to the nature of suffering, to "the private encounter with a kind of death beyond analogy, shorn of redeeming hopes or mythic associations" (12). These observations have led Langer to sharply differentiate written from oral testimony, giving to the latter the ability to convey more fully the depth of suffering: "in addition to language [oral testimony] includes gesture, a periodic silence whose effect cannot be duplicated on the printed page, and above all a freedom from the legacy of literary form and precedent" (41). What is fascinating here is that the main element that differentiates written from oral testimony is the language of the body, its unbearable silence that profoundly unsettles the listener suddenly incapable of responding, of relating to the utter unfamiliarity of pain –

the very language that I claim is at work in *Garçon manqué*, a written text. I thus again assign to literature a role that has been refused to it⁵² by virtue of its lack of oral presence, a point made clear by Langer who acknowledges the vividness of a written testimonial representation that is nevertheless “transparently literary, alien to the speech rhythms of the oral narrative” (18). I hope to have shown the force of speech rhythms in *Garçon manqué*, a defining trait of the text.

Langer has shown the doubling at work in oral testimony, the presence of the unfamiliar in the silences and rhythms of orality, expressive of a “deep memory,” in tension with an “external memory” responsible for conveying the experience in an understandable fashion. Deep memory, the memory that cannot be written into an account, is of the body, of the senses and is contrasted to an intellectual and reflective memory as Langer writes, quoting Charlotte Delbo:

“When I speak to you of Auschwitz, my words don’t come from deep memory; they come, so to speak, from external memory [*mémoire externe*], intellectual memory, reflective memory.” Refining the opposition between deep and common memory, she develops a parallel distinction between what we might call “thinking memory” and what she labels “sense memory” (“*mémoire des sens*”). (7)

In sense memory the suffering of the witness is “literal, not metaphorical; physical, not intellectual; personal, not public” (82). It is then this physicality that impedes the continuity and chronology present in the narrative structure – a physicality that, due to its

⁵² In chapter III I showed how in Nina Bouraoui’s *L’âge blessé* the “return of the real” was similar to the way reality bursts forth in photographic representation – an ability that Barthes, among others, refused to assign to literary representation.

discomforting presence, is particularly vulnerable to the presence and receptiveness of the listener: “the subtle urging of an interviewer, who after all is no more than an emissary of the outsider’s point of view, can lead a witness to shift from one form of memory to another, and indeed control and shape the content of each” (9). This delicate balance between two types of memories and its relation to the reception of a listener/reader is useful in understanding the workings of the scream in Nina Bouraoui’s text. We have seen that *Garçon manqué* is not and could not be a pure chaos story, that the language of the suffering body needs a reflective grasp in order to be readable. Neither do I read the text as a quest story, a reading which would muffle and maybe silence the rhythms of deep memory, of the body’s screaming memories. If the ending of *Garçon manqué* gives a certain orientation to the text, I do not read it as the end result of a quest but as part of the play between two kinds of memories (sense and intellectual) – a play which is, similarly to what happens in oral testimony, vulnerable to the reader’s willingness or ability to flow within the dark waters of suffering. Narrative strategies can then be understood as capable of easing us into unfamiliar and uncomfortable waters – this is achieved in *Garçon manqué* through emplotment, characterization, and other literary conventions. The scream, however, is also part of a textual strategy but instead of softening the blow of painful realities it shocks us into the unfamiliar and uncomfortable through the immediacy of a bodily expression – a scream that, like the silence of the oral witness, becomes loud only when heard by a receptive other.

The silence of the witness is then unbearable only *after* an account has been created and a listener is capable of following her into its darkness – without the narrative

and the empathic listener the silence is probably what is called hell. Similarly, Nina Bouraoui's scream is only audible *after* the creation of stories that another has had to hear empathically. The role of this loving other is captured in the following passage in which the narrator sketches the crucial steps she has undertaken to regain a sense of identity. Interestingly and not coincidentally, she uses Amine to project her own path, thus creating the distance from suffering mentioned earlier. I quote at length in order to capture the pain of the empathic other who listens to the sufferer's story:

Tu seras incomplet, Amine. Tu ne seras pas ton toi en entier. Il te manquera toujours quelque chose. Un secret. Un visage. Un fragment introuvable. Tu chercheras comme un fou. Comme un chien. Comme un fils perdu. Ta mémoire ne suffira plus. Qui saura ta douleur ? Tu voudras l'écrire. Ton livre vivant. Ton livre fermé. Ton livre poétique. Ton livre incomplet. Tu n'arriveras pas à l'écrire vraiment. Tu te cacheras. Tu resteras étranger à toi-même sans l'Algérie. À force, tu trouveras. Quelqu'un. [...] Tu lui diras ta peur. Tu lui diras ta différence. Tu auras mal de le dire. Mais tu lui diras. [...] Tu trouveras son silence, son recueillement. Tu trouveras sa patience. [...] Elle saura te protéger. Te calmer. T'endormir. Te réveiller. Elle chassera tes ennemis. Elle donnera la force. Elle rapportera, par sa voix, l'Algérie. Elle transmettra aux autres ton histoire. Notre passé. Par toi, elle deviendra algérienne. Ça ne sera pas moi mais tu me retrouveras, Amine. Ça sera ton nouveau monde. Ça sera votre solitude.

(77-78)

There is a moving pronominal dance taking place in this passage; the “tu” that is really a “je” is lovingly taken by a “quelqu’un” which becomes “elle.” This empathic other then merges with the “tu” to become a unified “vous” which is really a “nous.” Moreover, toward the end of the passage, the narrator’s repressed “je” reappears briefly, as if to reestablish the childhood bond with Amine (“notre passé”) to finally accept the restorative silence of a newly-found solitude. The eyes and ears of another are needed for a scream to emerge. A story has to be told and shared in order to feel the pain – the quest then precedes the scream of chaos. Indeed, the primary need is to convey the pain, to find someone who can “know” (*savoir*) the pain. Writing it will not be sufficient – the text will attempt to reflect the suffering (“Ton livre vivant”) but without the reflection of a listening other it will stay hermetically closed (“Ton livre fermé”). It is only when someone will be able to listen in silence, without judgment, that the strength needed to scream in silence will grow. That someone will help create a story which only the sufferer and the listener will know as a fiction (“Ça sera votre solitude”) – an essential fiction that not only enables the rebirth of desire and love but also the possibility of screaming and having it be heard by others, by future readers.

The challenge to the reader of chaos stories is to *hear* and *feel* the language of the body, which in a sense implies a conception of reading as involving all the senses. The scream in *Garçon manqué* is not easy to hear in part due to its broken syntax, its lack of sequence, its incessant present, or its obsessive repetitions. But, as Arthur Frank observed of chaos stories, it is the body that is testifying “and ultimately the body can only be apprehended through all the senses of another body” (142). In order to feel the

immediacy of pain a sensory reading requires one to let go of the desire to seek a liberating outcome; as Langer observed during his interviews of Holocaust survivors, the witnesses instantly shifted to an external or intellectual memory and let go of their deep or embodied memory as soon as the interviewers steered them toward the topic of liberation. It is probably this persistent need of the interviewer to steer the questions away from the unbearable silences of deep memory and toward the comforting knowledge of a certain teleology that caused a lack of trust in the ability of the listener to truly understand the nature of suffering: “Witnesses’ chronic frustration and skepticism about the audiences’ ability to understand their testimony is almost a premise of these encounters. Written texts, on the other hand, whether memories, fiction, or poetry, are *designed* to avert this possibility – otherwise, one assumes, they would not be published” (Langer 21). My point of course is that written texts can in fact display a similar frustration and skepticism about the reader’s ability to feel the suffering, to hear the scream reaching out of the pages. This frustration is particularly obvious in *Garçon manqué* where the narrator regularly lashes out at hypothetical readers incapable of stepping out of their mold.

“Qui saura de quoi je suis faite ?”, “Qui saura ta douleur ?”, “Qui saura la violence de ce secret ?”, “Qui regardera vraiment le corps de cet enfant décapité ? Qui ?” These insistent questions indicate the narrator’s lack of trust in the ability of her interlocutor to read and feel her pain. Her hypothetical readership includes critics who will focus exclusively on the issue of identity without being able to feel the physical nature of cultural exile: “Écrire rapportera cette séparation. Auteur français ? Auteur

maghrébin ? Certains choisiront pour moi. Contre moi. Ce sera encore une violence”

(34). Her wounded screaming text will be read as a manifestation of a cultural clash, thus avoiding the terrorized gaze of the child. She also evokes the voice of a readership too scared or wounded to face pain, as in this passage in which she simulates the voice of family and its unwillingness to break through the secrets of the past:

Mais attention à la dernière. Celle qui raconte des histoires à dormir debout. Des histoires qui font peur. Un vrai talent. Celle qui écrira plus tard. Des livres effrayants. C'est dangereux, un écrivain. C'est obsédé par la vérité. Par sa vérité. C'est enfantin, un écrivain. Ça rapporte. Ça répète. Ça ne peut rien garder pour soi. C'est infréquentable, un écrivain. Ça oblige à mentir, à dissimuler et à se défendre ensuite. (136-7)

This reader is unable to see beyond the threat of uncomfortable truths to feel the pain emanating from the text. There is, however, one exception to the narrator's lack of trust in the reader's ability to feel the pain through the written words. That hypothetical reader that the narrator trusts to feel the pain of her wounds is the perpetrator, the object of the terrorized child's gaze, the child kidnapper, the racist woman who in her banal insults calls for the extermination of Arabs in France:

Et mon silence toujours. Parce que ma voix n'est rien. Elle s'échappe comme du vent. Bien sûr qu'il ne fallait pas répondre. Je trouverai mieux. Je l'écrirai. C'est mieux, ça, la haine de l'autre écrite et révélée dans un livre. J'écris. Et quelqu'un se reconnaîtra. Se trouvera minable. Restera sans voix. Se noiera dans le silence. Terrassé par la douleur. (132)

The intended readership appears here to be the recipient of the narrator's hatred and feelings of vengeance. But it seems to me that this reader is more likely to be a façade, the projection of the contradictory feelings that configure the dynamics of the narrative. This reader is indeed the most unlikely one to hear the narrator's scream. As we have seen, empathy is essential for deep memory to emerge and be conveyed – the interlocutor needs to be willing and capable of feeling the narrator's pain. The hypothetical reader-perpetrator would surely see the anger and the desire for revenge at the heart of the text, but would probably not see the silence in the child's eyes. The scream, then, is perhaps not, as I intimated earlier, a destructive vengeful act, a violent force of hatred – a force only too obvious and easy to feel, a force that does not demand empathy. As a deep memory, a shattering memory imprinted in and expressed through the body, it seeks neither healing nor retribution; those needs and desires are ingredients of a story of a broken childhood – a story that, as we just saw, enables the birth of a scream but that is also fed by the emotions contained in the scream. The scream and the story are then utterly interdependent, feeding each other in a constellation of contradictory feelings which constitute a text that is, as Nina Bouraoui said, “plus proche des larmes aux yeux que de la haine” (Darner). It is also through tears that the reader hears the scream in *Garçon manqué*, or any literary scream for that matter. These screams of silence will then emerge from different texts in which visceral memories of suffering disrupt and feed the accounts of the shattered childhoods that we see in contemporary literature.

CHAPTER VI

HOPE THROUGH THE EYES OF A BROKEN CHILD: GISÈLE PINEAU'S *L'ESPÉRANCE-MACADAM*

Gisèle Pineau's *L'espérance-macadam* tackles the subject of incest, one of the most shattering experiences that a child can suffer. In previous chapters I have examined different aspects of memories of a broken childhood at work in my selected texts – facets of what we could call an “aesthetics of rupture.” I have made use of a variety of theoretical texts from different fields to explore different characteristics of this aesthetics. In this chapter I propose to read Gisèle Pineau's text on its own, without the support of theories intended to orient or solidify my reading. In order to compensate for the absence of a specific theoretical anchor, and also so as not to lose myself in the specificities of *L'espérance-macadam*, I offer two readings of the text. When read complementarily, these readings will reveal the ways in which a focus on childhood memories affects the understanding of the text. The first reading is an exploration of hope, a concept at the heart of a novel in which the horror of incest and the burden of a collective and personal history of abuse calls for a counter-weight which hope provides. This first reading is characterized by a lack of reference to childhood, as is also the case in virtually all previous critical articles on Pineau's text. This absence is understandable as the text contains very few descriptions of the experience of the main protagonist as a child. As we have seen in previous chapters, however, this lack of presence of the child by no

means implies that the remembrance of childhood plays no role. The second reading, then, revisits the text but this time taking into account the ever-present gaze of the (absent) child. We will see that through the eyes of the broken child, hope will need to be reconfigured.

L'espérance-macadam starts with a prolepsis, a scene of devastation in the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo's passage over Savane, a small Guadeloupean village whose history is remembered in the rest of the novel. The narration then moves back one week to a fateful Sunday, to an event that will trigger a flow of memories in the main protagonist and principal narrator, an old woman named Éliette. On that Sunday Éliette sees her neighbor Rosan handcuffed in a police car. The shock of witnessing the arrest of Rosan, the father of three children who had always been considered a hard-working and honest man, leads Éliette to revisit her life and with it the turbulent past of Savane. The past is narrated through a combination of an omniscient third-person narrative voice, Éliette's own first-person narrative, and an occasional first-person narrative of Rosette, Rosan's wife. The incessant sliding of the narrative voice contributes to the circularity that critics have found to be central to the novel.⁵³ Indeed, the different voices reiterate the same events throughout the narration each time enriching and complicating the narrative with the addition of a new layer of awareness, slowly spiraling down into the horror of abuse and yet managing to circle back to the possibility of a new beginning. The narrative structure is also circular as the text opens with the scene of devastation that also ends the novel. While the action takes place in a period of less than one week,

⁵³ See Nina Hellerstein's "Violence, Mythe et Destin dans l'Univers Antillais de Gisèle Pineau" and Joëlle Vitiello's "Le corps de l'île dans les écrits de Gisèle Pineau."

Éliette's memories span some sixty years, from the 1928 hurricane that decimated Guadeloupe to Hurricane Hugo in 1989 – another element of circular return. In what Joëlle Vitiello calls “une fresque” (259), memories of a distant past are so tightly imbricated with the events following the fateful Sunday that neither one could develop without the other – this imbrication also gives the text a certain level of narrative complexity that requires multiple readings to separate the tightly woven textual strands and understand their causal relations.

“Ce dimanche-là avait tout mis sens dessus dessous, maté ses certitudes” (8).

Before that Sunday, Éliette's life was under the spell of memories of the 1928 Hurricane that allegedly almost killed her as an eight year-old girl: “Sans montrer leurs visages, des souvenirs fous dans le temps jadis remontaient au fur et à mesure, m'assaillaient rageusement. Feuilles de tôle sifflantes traçaient dans la noirceur d'un cyclone. Voiles, linges en pagaille tournoyaient. Vents-tourbillons montés. Raz de maré. Pieds-coco tombés. Cris et pluies empilés...” (10). As much as those memories obsess and paralyze her, they are also untrustworthy and lacking. Indeed, what always looms behind them is the voice of Séraphine, her mother, her maddening fixation on what she called “The Passage of the Beast”:

Non, en vérité, Éliette ne se souvenait de rien. C'était sa manman qui lui racontait toujours la nuit où le Cyclone avait chaviré et pillé la Guadeloupe. Elle criait ce cauchemar : « Le Passage de La Bête. » Et, pour mieux embobiner l'histoire dans la mémoire d'Éliette, elle ne cessait de faire défiler le souvenir de la blessure à la

tête et au ventre, le sang dans les draps, la grosse poutre tombée qui avait manqué fendre Éliette en deux parts, le vent entrant méchant, bourrant, calottant. (93)

Even if Éliette had had repeated feelings that there was more to the story of the passage of the hurricane, her mother always refused her more than these same allusions to the hurricane's fury until, progressively, "le temps avait tiré ses tentures et la voix de sa manman défunte s'élevait seule, couvrant tous les autres sons ténus que sa mémoire tentait de haler au grand jour" (94). Even the dramatic story of Savane and its horde of miseries great and small did not disturb the incantation of the hurricane's destructive winds: "La mémoire s'en venait pas agiter la crécelle des babils inutiles. Et ceux qui étaient morts et que j'avais connus dans la gloire ou la misère ne s'entendaient plus pour me surprendre. Je voyais plus non plus les vivants d'alentour, peuple de Savane" (16).

As a result of this fixation on the events of 1928 Éliette is incapable of facing other realities, not wanting the sufferings of others to unsettle her tentative inner peace: "Éliette cherchait rien d'autre sur cette terre que la paix de sa case. Pas mêler son existence au désordre de Savane. Pas laisser son esprit donner couleurs aux sons, bâtir des cathédrales de douleur en son cœur. Yeux et oreilles bouchés, elle luttait pour repousser au loin la peine des autres" (8). After 60 years of seclusion, the seemingly insignificant witnessing of Rosan in the police car caused a floodgate of memories to burst open against Éliette's wish to be deaf and blind to others' sufferings:

Rosan dans la voiture de police. J'ai senti un ébranlement dans tout mon corps. Rosan... Alors un lot de pensées a déboulé de la rue et y en a même qui se sont mises à me poursuivre. [...] Si j'avais été jeune, j'aurais couru jusqu'à Savane

pour fuir cette rue de Ravine-Guinée où les pensées sortaient comme des crabes de leurs trous et me montaient dessus, moi, Eliette Florentine. (18)

The flow of thoughts that overwhelms Éliette brings back the past of Savane and its people but also starts a process of remembering 1928 with new eyes that for the first time are capable of seeing through her mother's story: "Un tremblement montait et descendait dans mon corps et le souvenir ombreux du Cyclone de 1928 m'a gagnée tout entière" (64). The reasons for this sudden transformation due to such a minor event are not clear and remain obscure in the rest of the novel. What is it in that event that triggers a revolution in Éliette's relation to the past? Critics have generally not addressed this hasty encounter between Rosan and Éliette, preferring to skip it and address the slow revelation of his crime, the rape of his daughter Angela over a period of more than five years. According to that reading, which I adopt here, the shock of realizing that Rosan might have committed a crime functions only as a trigger. The reality of his crime is what will truly liberate Éliette from the grip of false memories. In spite of not fully accounting for the apparent importance of the often-repeated "Rosan dans la voiture," this is a sensible interpretation.

Indeed, although Éliette had always refused to mingle and interfere with Savane's populace, we find out that she in fact holds the memory of the whole village and that Rosan's yet unknown crime caps a long history of abuses which had never distracted her from the grip that 1928 held on her:

Voilà comment ma case a laissé entrer sans permission tous les bruits du voisinage. Les paroles se sont mises à voltiger dans mon salon. Querelles, cris,

peurs, rires, tambours me tenaient éveillée dans la couche jusque tard dans la nuit. Ma case, au cœur de Savane Mulet, était devenue comme un grand bénitier plein des vies démontées des nations assemblées... Une trouée de paix artificieuse au mitan de la guerre. (26)

Éliette's apparent retreat behind the thin walls of her *case* does not confer on her a sense of inner tranquility; rather, she lives a most duplicitous disengagement ("une trouée de paix artificieuse") from a collective suffering of which she knows every detail. As Éliette's memories uncover the story of Savane, it is a descent into the miserable pits of forced poverty and exile. Savane started as the idyllic dream of Éliette's step-father Joab, "un homme doux-sirop-miel" who lived with and for the then-unspoiled natural beauty of the Guadeloupean wilderness. For her mother Séraphine, however, Savane was the resting place of all the demons and spirits that populated the underworld of human existence: "Elle n'aimait pas l'endroit, et racontait que les diablasses venaient de loin pour dormir et froter leurs corps dans les hautes branches des arbres de Savane qui embaumaient la nuit tout entière d'une fragrance diabolique" (22). It quickly becomes clear, however, that this "demonic fragrance" emanated from Séraphine's own past and her obsession with the events of 1928: "Séraphine se croyait en l'enfer. Partout où son regard échouait, La Bête avait fait des petits qui se multipliaient. Le grand-vent Cyclone ne cessait de souffler" (23). Similarly, when flocks of destitute souls started to set foot in Savane, it was the demons of History, of their own histories of injustice and abuse that came to populate Joab's paradise:

Gens jetés de tous les côtés de Guadeloupe. Familles débarquées sans parole qui serraient jusqu'à leurs noms. Négresses borgnes, la figure couturée, mal rapiécée, une marmaille qu'on peut pas compter dans les jupes, une pièce-case déchargée d'un char pour couvrir la tête de la postérité. Une multitude, oui, tombée sur Savane Mulet comme les sauterelles sur toute l'étendue du pays de Pharaon.

Zombis des temps nouveaux... (24)

Here it is then, the beginning of Savane, the beginning of a story of crimes that with each new offense would generate new evil spirits, thus irremediably preventing the birth of another destiny: “[ceux et celles] emportés par le sabre, le poison, la corde, les coups, le plomb, l'eau et le feu restaient toujours aux abords, à guetter les vivants, manœuvrer les esprits, corrompre la destinée” (36). Rosan is then the last to have been victim of a hopeless collective fate, author of a crime that no one could bear to admit.

The victims of this violence are overwhelmingly female in Gisèle Pineau's texts. Women in Savane live in constant fear of being raped, abused, beaten, or abandoned. Motherhood then becomes an inevitable dead-end; caught in the storm of domestic violence women can only hold on to their girls for so long knowing that “alentour se trouvaient des animaux à figure d'homme, que ces bêtes-là cachaient leurs dents longues dans des sourires sucrés et masquaient leur convoitise derrière l'air de pas vouloir manier ni dieu ni diable” (58). For inevitably, girls will fall into the same trap, perpetuating a cycle of violence in which hope for change is always short-lived:

Jeunes Négresses à demi bourgeonnées qui avaient longtemps marché droit, la crainte des coups les tenant amarrées dans les rêves et les peurs de leurs manmans

blessées. [...] Au bout d'un petit moment, égarées, tournées-virées par le roulis de la vie, elles étaient brisées sans le savoir. [...] Des hommes les prenaient, de la même façon qu'ils avalaient le rhum, grignant dans le plaisir brûlant. Et puis les jetaient, pleines. Et la ronde des ventres-calebasses commençait. Avec l'espoir au bout de chaque portée. [...] Quand elles cherchaient la paix, qu'elles voulaient plus voir le portrait d'un homme, y avait déjà quatre-cinq enfants dans leurs pieds. Ventres et cartables vides. Patience des misérables et mâchoires contractées au guichet des Allocations familiales. (14-15)

This transmission of fate from mother to daughter is another circularity central to the text. Françoise Naudillon writes of women's relationship to their bodies in *L'espérance-macadam*: "Ces corps tourmentés, déjantés, incontrôlés, aliénés, voire détestés par celles qui les habitent sont répertoriés et classifiés à travers une sorte d'incantation mortifère" (82). Indeed, women live confined to bodies which will be assailed only to produce other bodies that will perpetuate a literally vicious cycle from which only death represents an escape.

In this fatalistic context, the community's unresponsive attitude toward the abuses it has witnessed is normalized. Éliette's mantra, "J'entendais et je voyais, mais je ne mêlais pas" (15), is justified and explains how Rosan's crime was never suspected, how the demonic sounds she heard every night could only have been the work of the bad spirits that circulate at night:

Au mitan de la nuit, y avait des souffles qui passaient dessous sa porte fermée, des souffles qui empesaient le silence. Elle pouvait guère donner leur provenance. Ils

semblaient venir de tout près et en même temps de très loin, comme une peur ancienne qui ressuscitait à l'heure des soucougnans. Certains soirs, elle aurait juré qu'une bête égarée se tenait debout derrière sa porte, balançant entre deux idées : rentrer pour l'égorger ou bien attendre que son cœur déraile et s'arrête. Des moments, elle entendait, clairs, deux souffles qui luttaient et s'opposaient sans paroles. (27)

So strong was the imperative not to mingle and change the course of a known destiny that never did she suspect that these two antagonistic breaths belonged to Rosan raping his daughter Angela a few feet and two thin walls from Éliette's own bed.

There is, nevertheless, of all the stories of Savane, one episode that marked Éliette so profoundly that it will eventually cause her to finally act, changing the course of her and Angela's life, thereby opening up the possibility of hope. Glawdys, abandoned as a new-born baby by her mother Hermancia, was the product of repeated collective rapes by seven men of different racial identities (a fact that emphasizes that violence against women is not the property of one race or class). Éliette, who was unable to carry children, supposedly due to the beam that in the hurricane's fury fell on her, had only one remaining hope in life – that of having a child. When Éliette saw the abandoned baby, however, her tendency not to intervene took a hold of her and prevented her from acting: “Éliette aurait pu s'avancer et l'adopter au même instant, mais elle retourna dans sa case pour s'interroger indéfiniment et se tirer des pattes de la raison – à savoir [...] si cette enfant était bien celle-là que le destin lui envoyait. [...] Éliette n'eut que le temps de voir disparaître le vert des grands yeux de l'enfant d'Hermancia” (45). The rest of Glawdys's

sad story only serves to increase Éliette's sense of guilt at never having been able to save that child from an ill-fated destiny.

It is at this point, Éliette steeped in thoughts, in regrets, in her sense of culpability for her cowardice, that the events following Rosan's arrest intersect again with the train of memories it had put into motion: "Je me souviens, j'ai sursauté, secoué la tête pour dépendre le souvenir [...], le repousser au loin de mes pensées. Un cri perçait la nuit. Ça se passait tout près cette fois. C'était Angela" (76). Wanting to stop the incessant flow of images from the past, Éliette is interrupted by the screams of Angela being beaten by her mother for having denounced Rosan. As she sees Angela thrown out of her home, Éliette's instinct not to interfere is countered by the flash of an indelible image from the past, that of Glawdys's betrayed gray eyes: "Elle allait remettre la bâcle et vite crocheter la fenêtre mais un éclair de lune lui projeta la scène où, sur le même chemin, on halait la fille aux yeux gris" (77). She then does the inconceivable; she opens her door to save Angela from abandonment. At this point, however, her action is still governed by her sense of guilt, as a payment of a debt she owes to the abandoned souls of the past: "Je voulais pas me mêler de tout ça. Juste ouvrir ma porte à Angela, pauvre petite. Juste racheter ma faute par rapport à Glawdys. Seulement faire taire le souvenir qui ramenait toujours dans mes pensées les malheureux que j'avais beau chasser, femmes et hommes de Savane assassinés" (167). Éliette is not yet in control of her actions, she is treading a new path, following an new instinct that had been suppressed long ago and replaced by the need to keep horrors hidden from view. It is the re-awakened painful past that forces her to open her home to Angela. She is not yet capable of hearing Angela's story,

however, asking her instead to forget the past, just as her mother Séraphine had done:

“Éliette ne voulait pas entendre sa vérité. Elle voulait seulement qu’Angela emplisse sa bouche pour ensevelir les paroles qui remontaient comme une vomissure, mettre du pain, du beurre et du chocolat sur toutes ses blessures, sur sa mémoire qui ramenait toujours la hantise des nuits où son papa Rosan devenait un autre” (152). But the course of events was now irremediably changed; through Angela, another’s life had now entered her home and transformed her own memories – Éliette could no longer maintain her “paix artificieuse.” Indeed, a new beast appears with Angela’s story, the same beast that had shattered Angela’s childhood. This beast with the face of a man will give a face to Éliette’s own beast, changing the metaphor, sliding the comparison from the hurricane to a human body: Éliette’s own father who savagely raped her when she was eight years old, as the winds of the Hurricane that had spared her life were receding into the distance. As Éliette could no longer prevent Angela from spewing out her memories of incest, Éliette’s own memories of the 1928 hurricane irremediably disengaged themselves from Séraphine’s grip.

As Éliette’s beast takes on a human face, the cycle of violence characterized by the periodic return of devastating hurricanes is transferred onto human history and its perpetuation of ancestral violence:

L’un des thèmes les plus importants de l’œuvre de Pineau est celui de la violence, qui matérialise la “malédiction” ou [...] la “maudition” ancestrale, les fardeaux du racisme et l’esclavage anciens. [...] Ses œuvres sont hantées par les effets violents du passé douloureux des Antilles, qui se manifestent à la fois par de nombreux

crimes de violence, et par une peur obsessionnelle de la part de victimes.

(Hellerstein 48)

The collective dimension of ancestral violence is then in turn manifested in the home, in the intimate space of family in the form of domestic violence. The ancestral malediction manifests itself on the level of heredity, each generation reproducing the abuses of the previous one with no room left for hope: “Pineau représente ainsi la fatalité héréditaire comme un obstacle parmi tous ceux dressés par l’histoire pour entraver la libération des membres de la société antillaise” (Hellerstein 54). This hereditary fatalism is exemplified in the novel by another circular turn: the revelation at the end of the text that Éliette’s father is Rosan’s own father, thus establishing a “tel père, tel fils” dynamics in which the passing on of abusive traits appears inevitable. The circular structure of the novel thus appears to reflect the absence of opening characteristic of the circle: “Ainsi le cyclone de 1988 sur lequel s’ouvre et se ferme le roman transporte-t-il avec lui le souvenir de celui de 1928 et symbolise-t-il la violence à l’état pur, quasiment bestiale, dont le viol constitue le paroxysme” (Bonnet 99). How can there be hope when the horrors of incest are attributed to a dark fatality that has followed Éliette’s ancestors throughout history, and that will keep infiltrating the most private spheres of life as predictably as the return of the hurricane season?

Starting with the title, hope is nevertheless omnipresent in *L’espérance-macadam*, a presence that Gisèle Pineau has underlined in her interviews: “Je voulais absolument que le mot « espérance » soit dans le titre. Les histoires étaient terribles même si, au bout, les personnages percevaient un espoir, un meilleur lendemain” (Anglade). Hope,

however, seems caught in the same closed circle as is violence. It stubbornly returns even as it is clear that the situation is hopeless, as it is, for example, for women caught in the cycle of being forced into an institution of mothering that only feeds the cycle of violence: “Malédiction! Scélératesse! Revenaient sans cesse dans la bouche des femmes qui ne comprenaient pas pourquoi elles enfantaient et portaient encore la vie, et trouvaient la force de rire et espérer, sur une terre où seule la mort traçait son chemin” (54). The strength to laugh and hope seems to be self-perpetuating. Instead of hope for change, hope is only hope for more hope, another empty cycle. The “*espérance-macadam*” of the title that Gisèle Pineau describes as “*l’espérance des laissés-pour-compte, des gens qui n’ont pas le ventre plein*” (Makward, “Entretien” 1207) seems to participate in this same logic of hopeless hope. The flock of impoverished people who came to populate Savane all came with hope that they were going to find happiness: “Ils avaient suivi le doigt et la parole qui leur avaient dit qu’il y avait cet endroit d’espérance pour les malheureux, là-bas, Savane Mulet” (192). But their demons caught up with them to shatter all hope of a different future. Rosette’s escapist hope is treated with the same harshness. She did not like Savane, she did not maintain any illusions of a different material reality. Instead, she lived “avec tous ses rêves et les contes qu’elle disait pour adoucir la vie” (15). Her utopic dreams of a beautiful world, however, were perhaps what allowed her to live for years without seeing what was happening in her daughter’s bedroom; “rien vu, rien entendu” she repeats ad nauseum as she understands that “elle avait sacrifié Angela pour cette espérance de pacotille” (180).

Having lived her whole life in the hope of escaping the miseries of the every day routine, Rosette cannot survive the reality of her daughter's incest: "Rosette perdra la raison et la vie plutôt que faire face à la vérité : détruite de l'intérieur, elle se laisse mourir dans sa maisonnette qu'anéantit le cyclone Hugo en septembre 1989. L'amante-mère cède ainsi la place à une mère maternante : voisine Eliette s'épanouit à soixante-six ans" (Makward, "Presque" 46). Is it then in the relationship between Éliette and Angela that hope can be found? It is indeed Éliette who sets a hopeful tone at the beginning of the text, taking hold of the devastation in the aftermath of Hurricane Hugo: "Fallait désamarrer la peine, éteindre les cris qui résonnaient dans le silence qu'avaient déposé les grands vents du Cyclone. Pas désespérer, se répéta Éliette" (8). Éliette seems to be coming into her new role as a mother, which she takes on with zeal: "Éliette tenait Angela par la main, comme si elle marchait avec une enfant de deux ans qu'elle craignait de voir s'échapper sous les roues d'une auto. Par la main. Tellement fière d'être avec sa fille Angela" (202). But is it really in motherhood that hope resides? Based on the rest of the novel that clearly shows the traps of motherhood, the established "reproduction of mothering" could hardly be the basis for the hope for a new beginning that Éliette represents.

Critics have noted that while the hurricane is an apt metaphor to represent the fatalistic nature of abuse and violence, it also constitutes an important force of renewal, sweeping aside the demons of the past: "En balayant ce passé, le cyclone permettra aux habitants de surmonter leurs peurs pour combattre le fléau par la solidarité, à l'instar des habitants d'Oran dans *La Peste*. Le cyclone est l'occasion d'une victoire sur eux-mêmes

qui convertit le désastre en triomphe” (Hellerstein 54). Indeed, the threat of the hurricane affects all members of the community, thereby creating a solidarity that erases the borders between victim and perpetrator suddenly awkwardly seeing one another on a par: “Et ils s’essayaient à renaître frères et soeurs dans une solidarité nouvelle qui les étonnait, les bouleversait, oui. Dans le malheur qui les unissait, ils se découvraient nus et désarmés face aux chiens lâchés du cyclone” (192). It is also solidarity that characterize the liberating bond between Éliette and Angela. Here, however, solidarity is based not on the universality of the human condition under the threat of death but rather on the protagonists’ status as victims of rape who are together being forced to face the past. These two women are then speaking out, breaking through the silence surrounding the practice of incest, giving a name and a face to the villain. This is perhaps what Gisèle Pineau meant when she characterized *L’espérance-macadam* as “un roman de colère par rapport aux femmes qui se taisent, parce que pour moi elles infantilisent l’homme, ne lui donnent pas ses responsabilités : elles le cachent, le protègent” (Makward, “Entretien” 1206). Angela’s denunciation of her father and Éliette stepping out of her home to rescue her are key moments in the narrative that refuse to participate in this infantilization of men and their annihilating sexual desire. The climax is then found in the coming together of Angela and Éliette’s stories and the way in which this encounter gives a face to the beast. Éliette’s adoption of Angela and the merging of their stories provide an impetus to name the unnamable past thus enabling hope beyond the fruitless ‘macadam hopes’, as Christiane Makward writes: “Angela se fait symboliquement mère de sa sœur et fille d’Éliette dans un processus de restructuration affective où tient l’espérance du titre : il

faut sortir de la tourbière du déni, on peut rompre le silence, échapper au ‘macadam’, au leurre du bonheur, au rêve sans substance” (“Presque” 49). Hope, then, resides in the ability of female victims to listen to each other so as to free themselves from the hold of the past.

This solidarity among victims is essential to the birth of Éliette’s hope, a hope that, placed at the beginning and end of the novel, determines the tone of the whole text. Éliette’s own healing process had also been enabled by the courage of her mother and Éthéna, the midwife-healer who sutured her physical and psychological wounds: “Séraphine entreprend alors le raccommodage psychique de son enfant : elle nie la catastrophe de l’inceste et conditionne Éliette à oublier tout souvenir hors les méfaits du cyclone. Trois figures tutélaire, la mère, la guérisseuse et enfin le compagnon asexué de sa mère, Joab, restaurent chez Eliette un minimum de santé mentale” (Makward, “Presque” 47-8). This instinct of solidarity appears to entail a compulsion to forget the traumatic past events, a process similar to Éliette’s requesting Angela to forget her past even if it is the revelation of that very past that enabled Éliette’s rediscovery of her own beast. This silence imposed by a loving other, this urge to let go of the past appear to be essential to regaining mental health, as confirmed by Angela’s own wish to return to the innocence of her childhood before its rupture: “Le Cyclone ne terrifiait pas Angela. Elle l’espérait même, se figurant qu’il était un déchaînement envoyé par les cieux pour la débarrasser de son papa Rosan. [...] Angela fit un vœu et demanda au cyclone de nettoyer son corps au plus profond, de la remettre tout entière comme avant, au temps de

l'innocence" (207). Hope would then be predicated upon the need to erase the insufferable past.

We know from studies on nostalgia reviewed in Chapter IV, however, that this nostalgic desire to return to a pure innocence not only obliterates the unbearable past but also generates a form of hope that is based on the repetition of the same patterns. Angela's lack of fear of the hurricane is based on an identification with its power to violently cleanse all traces of the past. This cleansing power, however, is dangerous as it inevitably comes back with a vengeance, its eyes anticipating the next scene of devastation, forcing all to look to the future only. This is the one-way hope that Marraine Anoncia envisions as she refuses to answer Éliette's request to give a face to the hurricane, but instead compels her to forget its destructive winds:

-Marraine, raconte-moi ce qu[e mon père] a fait cette nuit-là d'avant cyclone !
 -Éliette, ma fille, tu connais déjà toute l'histoire. Laisse aller ce cyclone et comprends que la vie n'est pas une rumination éternelle. Il y aura d'autres cyclones, quantités. Et personne peut rien contre ça, même les grands savants de France. Personne pourra les barrer. Seulement les annoncer. Et il faudra bien rester par en bas et puis se relever, rebâtir, panser les plaies, regarder pour demain l'espérance et replanter toujours, l'estomac accoré par la faim. (217)

Marraine Anoncia's hope is yet another 'macadam dream' that enables healing and reconstruction but forces one to perpetually rely on the next coming of the disaster. To return to the analogy of the hurricane, once the hurricane's winds subside, the solidarity vanishes and the old patterns return, until the next hurricane. In other words, hope based

solely on solidarity among victims seems to constitute a call for other disasters; it implies a forgetting of the traumatic past and an unwitting anticipation of coming rapes.

The work of solidarity is crucially important, of course, and Gisèle Pineau offers a compelling model of its role in the healing process: “l’amour hétérosexuel se transforme en relation ‘homogénéique’ non sexuelle : des femmes aident, protègent et aiment des femmes en devenir, des filles prennent la parole, offrent des rôles maternels à des femmes qui ont survécu grâce à d’autres femmes” (Makward, “Presque” 50). This model, however, and the hope that is central to this way of reading Pineau’s text needs to be supplemented so as to avoid a reductive suppression of the past. Such suppression is, after all, a repression of the past, of its horrors, of the reality of what the child lived facing her abuser. It is to that unsustainable gaze of the child being raped that I want to turn in my second reading so as to reconsider how hope functions in this text.

Incest is at the heart of *L’espérance-macadam* and yet the description of the moment of incest occupies very few pages in the case of Angela, and is bypassed altogether for Éliette. This apparent incongruity confirms what we have seen in previous chapters – the child can scream through the text not primarily through descriptions of his or her experience but rather through a form of interruptive actualization of his or her flashing gaze. Moreover, as we saw with the screaming child in *Garçon manqué*, the interruptive ability of these memories of a traumatized childhood is not found in an ethereal zone in which representation inevitably fails, which would bear witness to the impossibility of communicating past traumas. Instead, memories of childhood actualize the past through a symbiotic interaction between the flow of the plot and flashes of a

wide-eyed terrified child, thereby constituting a visceral expression of suffering. I will thus, in this second reading of *L'espérance-macadam* try to seek out the eyes of the child gazing throughout the story of Éliette and Angela. I will then relate this gaze to the hope central to Pineau's text, a novel in which the horror of rape must be countered with hope, as aptly described by Christiane Makward: "L'espérance-macadam c'est une enfance violée, brisée mais peut-être une femme pourra quand même sortir de ça, elle pourra vivre" ("Entretien" 1213).

The narrative tension in *L'espérance-macadam* is built around Éliette's slow reappropriation of her mother's story of the "passage de la bête." If Séraphine's story hid the event behind the metaphor of the hurricane's destructive power, Marraine Anoncia, who her whole life tried to tell the truth to Éliette, was equally incapable of naming the beast: "Direct confession and revelation is still too difficult. In fact Marraine Anoncia relies once again on biblical allusions to explain her brother's actions, he remains metamorphosed as a devil, a demon, a diabolical figure, 'un homme maudit'" (Walcott 119). This failure to give a face to the monster also constitutes an inability to face the suffering of the child, to bring back the unbearable image of a child being savagely attacked by her father. In order to find that child in the text, we have to penetrate her world and find hidden evidence of her presence, a presence that everyone, including the child, would rather forget. Gisèle Pineau said in an interview that in her books the reader always finds family secrets and wounded women (Anglade). In *L'espérance-macadam* the family secrets in effect silence the voice of the child by hiding or not seeing the cause of the women's wounds. It is thus our task, as readers, not to fall prey to these patterns.

We have to look in the *locus terribilis* of the family, the child's universe that becomes a jail when abuse strikes: "As a catastrophic behavior, incest is directly reflective of men's violence against women and of patriarchal domination on women's bodies. It exemplifies aggression and savagery at the most sensitive and most intimate location – at home" (Githire 87). Home then becomes for the child a place of unending terror lived in silence. Like the protagonist of *Garçon manqué* who lived in silence under the spell of fear, Angela lived under the weight of her own silence: "Je sais plus quand Angela a perdu son rire comme on perd la parole. Enfermée dans un silence. Rien à dire. Jamais rien à raconter. Toujours..." (180). The final ellipsis indicates Rosette's inability to go on, to imagine what her daughter lived for so many years, always suffering alone behind closed eyes. Unable to speak for three years after the "passage de la bête," Éliette also lived in fear for many years: "Seize ans! [...]. Parler à personne. Avait peur de tout et de chacun. Peur des hommes et des cyclones, de leurs yeux mauvais" (160). In fact, even if, contrary to Angela, she could not give a face to the cause of her fear, her childhood anxiety never left her: "Éliette avait beau se répéter qu'elle était maintenant une vieille femme qui en avait vu des milles et cents, il y avait toutes ces peurs accumulées en elle qui la serraient dans la noirceur des couloirs de son enfance." (170). We could argue that this primordial fear contributed to her paralysis in the face of all the crimes that littered the history of Savane.

In Chapter V I showed how the violent forces of nature and men and the fear they generate were inscribed in the memory of the protagonist of *Garçon manqué* as a physically-felt blow to her child body. Similarly, if in general "les héroïnes de Gisèle

Pineau sont confrontées aux douleurs de la chair” (Naudillon 81), in *L'espérance-macadam* physical pain is concentrated in the child's body. Angela's pain is described with a vividness that in its raw physicality is unbearable:

La bête avait déjà forcé l'entrée, saccagé, embouti. Était déjà en elle. Au plus profond de ses entrailles. Serpentait dans son ventre. Remontait dans sa gorge. La bête fouaillait en elle, brûlante. Du feu, oui. Il y avait du feu entre ses cuisses. Ne pas bouger pour pas tomber en cendres. Du feu ! Se mordre les lèvres. Du feu, Seigneur, partout du feu! Dans sa petite coucoune violentée, dans son ventre, dans toutes les veines de son corps, jusqu'à sa tête qu'elle sentait brûler tout entière. (158)

The metaphor of the Hurricane is here quickly surpassed by the utterly destructive power of fire, a power that not only devastates the body but annihilates it in terror and excruciating pain. Eliette's deficient memories, while not as vivid, also focus on sheer terror and physical pain: “Elle n'avait conservé, traces troubles à demi effacées, que l'effroi terrifique, le vague sentiment de mort imminente, la réminiscence de sa mâchoire raidie de douleur, la parole perdue, et ses doigts tordus dans la brûlure de son bas-ventre” (94). Gisèle Pineau's corpus is characterized by the physicality of her writing through a language of orality that seems to emanate directly from the body, an impression she confirms in her interviews: “j'écris réellement avec mon corps, avec mon ventre, avec cette langue créole mêlée à la langue française, avec mon histoire, avec ma vie [...]”. L'écriture est physique, charnelle. Je la vis à fleur de peau, dans ma chair, au milieu de mon ventre” (Anglade). In *L'espérance-macadam*, a novel which she has called “un

cri,”⁵⁴ the physicality of the writing process becomes particularly violent: “Une expérience d’écriture très violente [...]. J’avais toujours très mal au ventre quand je me mettais à ma table de travail. J’étais confrontée à la violence des éléments naturels, aux vents du cyclone, à la violence des êtres humains. Je fouillais cette violence. Je ressentais tout dans ma chair” (Anglade). The viciousness of the violence in this text seems to be almost entirely concentrated on bodies of children,⁵⁵ which only amplifies its horror.

With the focus on the child’s fear and pain, we can now look at the subtle ways in which the gaze of the child permeates some key episodes, which will lead us to reconsider their importance and role in the development of the narrative. The first crucial scene is the witnessing of Rosan in the police car. In my first reading I was not able to explain why this scene obsessed Éliette so much – the obsession could only be attributed retrospectively to the knowledge of the reasons for the arrest. What is striking in the interaction between Éliette and Rosan is that it takes place over a fraction of a second, the time it takes for two pairs of eyes to meet. As will become apparent shortly, what Éliette sees in the eyes of Rosan is a flash from her repressed past: “J’aurais pas rappelé ce temps – Glawdys, avec ses belles couleurs accordées – si j’avais pas vu *les yeux* de Rosan ce dimanche-là, j’aurais continué à *me mirer* dans ces visions pendues en dedans de mon

⁵⁴ “*L’espérance-macadam* qui arrive deux ans après [*La Grande Drive des esprits*], c’est le cri, le roman nécessaire, toujours dans mon souci d’honnêteté, de vérité, je ne me suis jamais censurée” (Makward, *Entretien* 1212).

⁵⁵ Looking at all the crimes that make up Éliette’s history of Savane, their horror is often attenuated by the use of magical realism (as in the case of Hortense being cut up in pieces, and Marius being hanged while sleeping. Even the awfulness of Hermancia’s collective rape is lessened by the extravagance of the situation, including her ingenuous willingness to partake in the rape). Only the stories of Éliette, Angela, and Glawdys as children speak the horrific truth of torture.

âme, casseroles mal récurées, fesses noires de fumée, mémoire égarée” (53, emphasis mine). There is something in the eyes of Rosan that not only triggered the flow of memories but that also made her stop looking at herself with the same eyes. In another description of the same scene, we distinguish a glimpse of the nature of what struck her in Rosan’s eyes: “Voilà comment, sans le vouloir, j’ai rencontré le fond des yeux de Rosan. Ça m’a fait pis qu’un tison ardent. Je me suis détournée sur le coup, tout échaudée, pour pas laisser à cette vision le temps de me brûler davantage, de marquer mon esprit” (17-8). In the depth of Rosan’s eyes is a fire which Éliette has seen before; even if she does not yet know what this fire is, she can feel its marking power. There is another version of the often redescended scene that reveals an important aspect of what Rosan’s eyes project: “Rosan dans la voiture de police. Ses yeux ne disaient rien, non” (22). How could Rosan’s eyes have nothing to say when the fire that they contain shatters Éliette’s sense of stability?

Rosan’s eyes that did not say anything were the same eyes that Rosette saw during her visit to jail: “Tout le temps de la visite, Rosan avait fui son regard, baissé la tête et gardé les mains jointes entre les cuisses” (132). Rosan was keeping his eyes closed to Rosette, undoubtedly for complex psychological reasons. Those closed eyes, furthermore, were the same eyes which for years had ceased to look at Angela: “La journée [...] il regardait [Angela] à peine, ou bien lui jetait des regards comme si elle représentait un monde maléfique et puissant” (156). Even if Rosette had seen his eyes, she could not have seen the fire that burned Éliette. Indeed, that fire was the fire that Angela saw every night, as the madness of his incestuous desire opened his possessed

eyes that were shamefully kept shut, saying nothing, during the day: “Chaque soir. Ses doigts rêches raidis par le ciment. Chaque soir cherchant dans la culotte, fouillant, blessant, tétant. Les yeux fous, le doigt sur les lèvres, chut ! Le cœur battant. La peur” (156). The “mad eyes” and the finger on the lips – a truth that cannot be said, a language of desire that has no words, only a flame that licks its victims leaving an invisible and yet indelible scar that both Éliette and Angela share.

It is indeed in the dramatic scene in which Éliette comes to rescue Angela that their eyes meet and that the fire in Rosan’s eyes takes on the contours of the child that the rapist madly stares at. But Éliette could not have recognized herself and her own father in Angela’s eyes without the gaze of another child. Indeed, out of the flow of memories triggered by the Rosan episode, the memory of the abandoned child Glawdys haunts her: “Alors, quand [le] regard [d’Éliette] croisa les yeux gris de la petite créature, la vision de l’enfant jappant au bout de sa corde s’agrippa en elle pour ne plus la quitter” (49). Éliette’s cowardice is reflected in the gray eyes of the abused child – a gaze that will be projected onto Angela and will allow Éliette to redeem herself: “Elle allait remettre la bâcle et vite crocheter la fenêtre mais un éclair de lune lui projeta la scène où, sur le même chemin, on halait la fille aux yeux gris” (77). Running after the memory of Glawdys’s betrayed eyes, Éliette is now able to see in Angela’s eyes what will shatter the last ramparts that kept her from understanding the fire in Rosan’s eyes: “Quand Angela leva sur elle son visage bouleversé, ses yeux bouffis de larmes, Éliette sentit tomber toutes les barricades de tôles et planches qu’elle avait élevées entre elle-même et le monde” (92). Seeing herself in Angela’s eyes, Éliette was now able to cease being prey

to the winds of the 1928 hurricane and the story of Séraphine and finally to give a face to the beast: “Angela avait allumé des torches qui voulaient animer la poutre assassine d’un visage terrifique” (170).

Éliette’s memories of being raped by her father come back to her progressively, the fury of the hurricane slowly taking on human traits: “Elle se revit enfant, dans sa couche, haletante. De la gueule de La Bête sortait un souffle puissant et assassin. Elle revit la poutre. Le sang. Et puis sa manman qui pleurait, la portant dans ses bras” (113). Here she sees herself, overcome with fear under the shadow of a breathing beast still hiding behind the wind-swept beam. Her mother then comes to the scene, rescuing and protecting her from the unbearable memory. The next memory completely personifies the beam and is not recuperated by the presence of her mother: “Alors, Éliette vit la poutre qui venait droit sur elle pour la pilonner. Une poutre vivante qui avait un visage, des yeux, des dents longues, des narines toutes frémissantes de rage” (161). The beast is now alive, it has a face, but the assailant is still impersonal. It is not until the last memory, however, a few pages before the end of the novel, that the Beast comes alive in all its horror: “C’est ainsi qu’apparut le visage de La Bête, bossuant d’abord la poutre de bois mol, et puis s’en détachant. Il chantait d’une voix rude, mal accordée aux éclats de rire qui sortaient dedans sa gorge. Tisons de désir, pépites de pacotille, ses yeux, tout lézardés aux remous de son âme, fouillaient déjà Eliette, la violentaient en songe” (216). The scene of the rape is never described. What emerges, instead, is the desire of her father, a vicious desire expressed in eerie song and laughter. But it is in his eyes that desire is strongest, his eyes already raping her before the forever-forgotten actual rape.

These eyes “tout lézardés aux remous de son âme” were the same “yeux fous” of Rosan – eyes which could not hide their foul lust, eyes in which Éliette had recognized the imprinted image of a child captive of their incestuous desire.

With newly opened eyes, Éliette could now face her own past free from the stories that had healed her but kept her blind to the reality surrounding her. It is then not only her own past that Éliette could confront but, by being able to look into others’ eyes, the rest of the community as well: “Elle se promet de regarder Rosette droit dans les yeux, juste pour voir si elles étaient de même race, lâches, peureuses et aveugles. Juste pour lire au plus fond de son cœur si la femme savait ou non ce que Rosan faisait, si elle était complice” (170). Looking for the cowardice that she knew only too well, looking for a mute reflection of Angela’s tormented body in Rosette’s duplicitous eyes, what Éliette found instead were the disillusioned dreams and stories that had fed Rosette’s illusory hope for a better future:

Éliette avait insisté, répétant à Angela qu’elle devait avant tout regarder au fond des yeux de sa manman qu’était rien d’autre qu’une femme qu’avait pas fini de rêver. C’était pas sa faute si tous ces malheurs avaient déboulé. Il y avait des gens, comme ça, qui voyaient grand et loin : rien à faire, n’arrivaient pas à ouvrir les yeux sur les petites vies pleines de douleurs qui battaient alentour. (196)

Not being able to face the unbearable reality of the past, Rosette could not keep dreaming. Her stories could no longer hold the monumental weight of a reality that penetrated the four walls of what she had thought was her sanctuary, her home.

This reading of *L'espérance-macadam*, which concentrates on the play of gazes that mark the text, reveals the discreet but nevertheless essential presence of the suffering child. Although the radical rupture that incest imposes on childhood is felt throughout the text, it is easy to overlook it, the ordeal of the child being 'visible' only obliquely. The approach that I used in my first reading was to focus exclusively on the process of recuperation of and healing from a traumatic past, an approach that risked leaving that past of childhood behind. Indeed, what in that reading was seen as the culminating point of a story of survival, what was essential to the burgeoning of hope in the narrative was the development of solidarity among women. That solidarity, I argued, is necessary but needs to be complemented with a forceful confrontation with the past, what I would now, in this second reading, call a sustained gaze into the eyes of a child other. Failing to keep engaged with this silent presence, healing the wounds runs the risk of keeping wounding agents safe to act behind closed walls.

Joëlle Vitiello argues that the triumph of hope in the text is based on a certain relationship to the past of Éliette's newly-found memory: "Si à la fin du récit, l'espérance vainc malgré tout, c'est véritablement parce qu'Éliette a fait la paix avec sa mémoire retrouvée, provoquée par la violence énoncée par Angela, et qu'elle a enfin accepté de participer à la vie des autres, d'ouvrir ses yeux et ses oreilles sur le monde extérieur" (261). Although I agree that Éliette's memories were in part provoked by Angela's story and that they enabled her to open up to the reality of the outside world, I am not sure that hope is a consequence of making peace with them. Although 'making peace' can be interpreted as an active engagement with the past, it is here more likely to mean a letting

go of it, which would imply that Éliette followed Marraine Anoncia's advice. This is in line with other interpretations of the relationship of Éliette's rediscovered past to her hope: "La victoire d'Éliette est à la fois personnelle et collective: en refusant les lâchetés et les démissions de son village, elle le libère de son passé" (Hellerstein 55). The confrontation with the reality of the child that I see at the heart of the text forces me to reconsider the genesis of Éliette's fundamental hope and disagree that her victory is linked to a forgetting of her past. For Éliette is far from letting go of the unfamiliarity of childhood, of the horror of its ruptures, a past that she consciously chose to explore, choosing her fledging inner voice over her mother's established voice – a conflict shown in this interior monologue between the imagined voice of her mother and her own newly-found inner voice:

- À quoi bon haler tout ça au jour ? Soixante ans de cela ! lui souffla sa manman défunte. Oublie ce temps ! Oublie, ma fille !
- Au contraire, fais parler la mémoire soutireuse! Lui lança une autre voix. Déterre le passé ! Redescends dans ton âge ! Déchire les voiles enfin...
- Non ! Éliette, retire ton corps de cette attrape! Supplia Séraphine.
- Il n'est plus temps de reculer. Allez, ouvre les yeux! Lui intima l'autre voix sans visage. (171)

Éliette does indeed follow her own voice to rip the veils of the past and penetrate the depths of her young age; this unearthing of the past could not be abandoned as soon as it was born and is, I argue, an integral constituent of hope in *L'espérance-macadam*. Letting go of the barely uncovered past would put Éliette's hope at the level of the many

‘macadam dreams’ that keep Savane’s people hanging on to a hopeless hope. In order to be sustainable, hope for another future must rely on the remembering of the abuses of the past; as we have seen, *L’espérance-macadam* is solidly anchored in the painful realities of the past of childhood.

This anchoring of hope in the painful past at work in the text and in Éliette’s own self-discovery is clearly revealed when contrasted to the workings of hope in Rosette, the only other character who is given a first-person narrative voice. Rosette was a dreamer, writing stories of a wonderland completely disengaged from the reality surrounding her: “Paradis, fleurs, fruits, chichis, le monde des dictées décrivait un pays béni, traçait des acrs-en-ciel d’espérance. Mon Dieu, que le monde était beau dans ses rêves !” (176). Critics have argued that this tendency to dream and make up stories is what Pineau condemns in a text where being engaged with the present sufferings of others is key: “L’obstacle le plus grave à cet effort [pour vaincre sa lâcheté] semble être, dans l’univers de Pineau, la tendance au rêve et à la fantaisie, qui représente un leurre ou un moyen par lequel les personnages féminins cherchent à fuir une réalité encombrante.” (Hellerstein 51). However, I would argue that Rosette’s dreams and fantasies are not intrinsically contrary to such engagement with painful realities. Gisèle Pineau herself has testified to the importance of writing conceived as dreaming and storytelling as a way to face the real world: “L’écriture m’a permis de survivre. Je crois que j’ai pu affronter le monde réel parce que je savais que je pouvais me réfugier dans des mondes rêvés ou inventés. Écrire m’a consolée et consolidée. J’ai trouvé des repères grâce aux mots écrits, couchés sur le papier, invités un à un” (Anglade). If Rosette was deaf and blind to what was happening

in Angela's bedroom, it does not necessarily stem from her taking refuge in dreams and stories that could actually have helped her face the harshness of life. Instead, what differentiates Rosette's *fantaisies* from Éliette's hope may be found in their relationship to the past.

Rosette's flights into the world of fantasy were not, as it might appear, based on a denial of the sad realities of the past. To the contrary, she was well aware of the tragic legacy of her people, which partly explains her affinity with Beloved, her doomed Rasta friend:

Tous les jours, pensait Rosette, la honte et les blessures remontaient des profondeurs du temps d'autant pour salir l'aujourd'hui, ses mirages, ses promesses de fabuleux demains. Non rien n'avait changé depuis qu'on avait transbordé les premiers Nègres d'Afrique dans ce pays qui ne savait qu'enfanter des cyclones, cette terre violente ou tant de malédiction pesait sur les hommes et femmes de toutes nations. Rien n'avait changé. (177)

Not only is she acutely aware of the wounds passed on since time immemorial but also of the futility of hope, of the "promesses de fabuleux demains." What then is the difference between this awareness of the unbearable weight of history and Éliette newly found memories of her abusive past? Why does Rosette give up and let herself die while Éliette believes that "Y avait sûrement moyen de remettre debout le paradis qui marchait dans les rêves de Joab" (8)? Rosette's past is static and impersonal – a story of history that feeds upon itself, a story in which the voice of the child can play no role, a story that cannot be actualized, as we saw in Chapter III. Rosette's hope is then a simple escape

from that static past, a hope without a past, a hope shattered by a reality of incest that cannot be placed within the flow of history. Éliette's past, in contrast, is personal, steeped in the fears of her own childhood. It is also the past of memories, a dynamic past that calls for more stories, stories that, unlike Rosette's, utterly engage the unfamiliarity of the past in the present and into the future. Éliette's memories of her broken childhood are uniquely able to break through the circular return of the same by projecting images that resist incorporation within stories and histories. Éliette's hope is then not only for a better future but also for a better past to come, for as long as rape and incest will destroy children's lives it will be necessary to remember their terrorized gaze.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

The structure of this dissertation is drastically different from the shape it took in my first outlines. What is now Chapter VI, my reading of Gisèle Pineau's *L'espérance-macadam*, was supposed to be the first chapter. This initial chapter was supposed to be heavily guided by "trauma theory." Indeed, my plan for the dissertation was to show the importance of theories of traumatic memory for understanding what is at work in remembering childhood in contemporary literature. The following chapters were then going to surf the wave of trauma studies by scrutinizing the problems of representation of broken childhood memories. Although my aim was in part to show the limitations of theories of traumatic memory, these theories were going to thoroughly infuse my entire project. Needless to say, things did not go according to this plan. Instead of setting the tone for the whole dissertation, trauma studies have barely been mentioned. As I started each new chapter, forever postponing the writing of the first one, each text I was reading pulled me into directions that I had not anticipated. The dissertation was writing itself, led by the gaze of remembered children at the heart of my primary texts and without the crutch of theories which, as I only now understand, would have weighed too heavily on my ability to be captivated by the texts. This absence of reference to trauma studies should not obscure the fact that many aspects of the "aesthetics of rupture" I have analyzed in the previous chapters have important points of contact with what has been

written on the problem of representing the traumatized past. It thus seems appropriate to conclude this study with an account of these similarities and the reasons why I did not pursue that lead.

The traumatic past is an unfamiliar past *par excellence* whose “return” through memory has significantly impacted the way we conceive of memory and the representation of the historical and autobiographical past. The characteristics of the literary childhood memories studied in this dissertation could certainly be understood as an offshoot of trauma studies. Indeed, certain aspects of the return of irreversible painful breaks rooted in childhood analyzed in previous chapters bear a striking resemblance to trauma narratives. For example, the inherent period of latency characteristic in the onset of repressed traumatic memories is a fitting model for ambivalent childhood memories whose return in adulthood tends to be involuntarily triggered. Indeed, as with traumatic experiences that are too overwhelming to settle into full cognition, in each one of the studied texts the child is confronted by events that cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge, events that are often superseded by the emotions surrounding them. The photographic flashing of fragmented images that I studied in Chapter III is also similar to the literal but nevertheless unrepresentable reenactments or flashbacks of the traumatized. Nina Bouraoui’s *staccato*, her obsessive repetitions of the same episodes is akin to the unresolved traumatic past repeatedly relived in a “wordless and static” memory that is “initially iconic or visual” (Vickroy 99). Moreover, the blurring of temporal coordinates that occurs in all my primary texts is a central feature of traumatic

memories in which the survivor of traumatic events experiences a radical sense of disconnect between past and present.

As a result of this shattering of temporality and continuity, the traumatic events of the remembered past are obscured to the point of unspeakability thus leading to what has been called a crisis of witnessing. The representation of the past thus becomes the impossible representation of an absence: “The victim’s narrative – the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma – does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence” (Felman 57). I have also characterized the child in my primary texts as an absent figure whose experience is invisible and cannot be represented strictly as a narrative. However, rather than leading to a crisis in witnessing, this absence is essential to the development of new techniques of representation and interpretation. Far from symptoms of a crisis, Nina Bouraoui’s scream, Ying Chen’s humble fatalism, or Gisèle Pineau’s confrontational hope are all ways to give presence to this absence. These writers have thus found empowering ways to testify to an absence by reaching the unfamiliar voice and gaze of a silenced but open-eyed child.

By refusing to confine these shattering experiences within the language of a crisis of representation, I implicitly agree with Kalí Tal’s critique of the discourses that appropriate and codify the representation of traumatic experience.⁵⁶ She claims that the speech of survivors of traumatic events can be threatening to the status quo and that the

⁵⁶ See Kalí Tal’s *Worlds of Hurt: Reading the Literatures of Trauma* (1996).

language of traumatic experience has been appropriated by different networks of social, cultural and historical forces. As a result of this codification, the witnesses' voices "are drowned out because they cannot be incorporated into the process that critic Michael Clark defines as the transformation of 'individual experience into communal redemption'" (Tal 15). She then embraces a writing of trauma that gives voice to experience through a recreation of events: "Literature of trauma is written from the need to tell and retell the story of the traumatic experience, to make it "real" both to the victim and to the community" (21). While Tal does not spell out in detail the modalities of such a return of the real through a recreation of events, she clearly establishes a need for more effective representations of the traumatic past. Continuing in the footsteps of Tal's work, Deborah Horvitz's study of literary representations of psychic trauma provoked by sexual violence⁵⁷ introduces the idea of a "poststructural realism" (22) emerging in contemporary literature, a form of realism capable of making the traumatic experience "real." According to Horvitz, the cultural appropriation of the personal experience of trauma that Tal examined is transcended by these authors who "assume responsibility for 'witnessing' and testifying to traumatic events that are pervasively cultural and, at the same time, experienced and interpreted as personal" (1). According to Horvitz, this personal reappropriation of the cultural voicing of trauma is achieved in her studied literary works using a combination of literal and figurative language capable of dramatizing the relatedness between culturally determined experiences and individual responses to these experiences (5). Even if my study does not specifically focus on the

⁵⁷ See Deborah Horvitz's *Literary Trauma: Sadism, Memory, and Sexual Violence in American Women's Fiction* (1998).

cultural conceptualization of traumatic experiences and the ways they can be personally recaptured, it follows Tal and Horvitz's work through a continued exploration of the possibility of making the silenced past "real" again.

Although I have chosen to focus on each text's unique approach to the past of childhood memories, I have nevertheless in my introductory chapters presented important characteristics shared by all these works. One of these shared features is the essential role of the body in the shaping of memories. Indeed, I have shown that the actualization of the past is often mediated by visceral memories of a wounded body. The body is thus shown to be thoroughly shaped by cultural forces and yet uniquely able to infuse personal memories with images that defy cultural appropriation. Following Susan Brison's observation that "[traumatic memories] are more tied to the body than are narrative memories," (42) Laura Di Prete's recent study on trauma and corporeality⁵⁸ proposes a new direction within trauma studies by examining the notion of corporeal traumatic memories. She argues that for a number of contemporary writers "bearing witness to traumatic experience means to articulate the complicated processes from traumatic memory to conscious memory by attending not only to verbal signs but also to that nonverbal, sensorial, and perceptual experience that remains locked within the body" (10). The body is thus shown to hold a privileged position as a witness of events that force the subject into a silence to which language alone cannot give voice. A central figure within contemporary narratives of trauma, the body gives access to a forgotten past

⁵⁸ See Laura Di Prete's *Foreign Bodies: Trauma, Corporeality, and Textuality in Contemporary American Culture* (2006).

through various techniques of corporeal textualization, some of which are studied in this work.

With the textualization of the body, “the negative trope of the ‘Unrepresentable’ and therefore ‘Unreadable’ can be turned upside down once we acknowledge that the referential reality to which signs of trauma point is precisely an imminent, physically tangible dimension of loss” (Di Prete 12). My analysis of this recovery of the suffering body in my study of the literary scream in *Garçon manqué* concurs with Laura Di Prete’s observations. Writing *through* the body thus not only enables the return of what was erased from history but it also does so without betraying the shocking truth of traumatic events. This visceral return of the past constitutes a powerful answer to the dilemma of the writing of trauma – the alleged impossibility of conveying the truth of the traumatic past without erasing or assimilating it. Moreover, by forcefully pulling the reader into uncomfortable spaces, these representations demand an engaged response – an ethical dimension of the writing of the “unrepresentable” that has been addressed by scholars of the Holocaust in particular,⁵⁹ and that I also addressed in Chapter V.

I have just drawn important points of contact between trauma studies and my own study of childhood memories. These parallels beg the question: Why did I not capitalize on the rich insights from these works, as I had initially intended? The answer is of course not straightforward as my methodological choices have been dictated in part by instinct, an unacknowledged and perhaps inadmissible component of academic work. It seems

⁵⁹ See, for example, Saul Friedlander’s *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the “Final Solution”* (1992), Dominick LaCapra’s *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (2001), or James Young’s “Between History and Memory: The Voice of the Eyewitness.” *Witness and Memory: The Discourse of Trauma* (2003).

clear to me, however, that what frequently pulled me away from engaging certain theoretical texts was my desire to follow the voice or gaze of the child rather than to find points of correspondence with theory. This desire grew as my work progressed, as can be seen in the evolution of the relationship between theory and textual analysis from the first to the last chapters. Laura Di Petre, whose work in many ways legitimizes important elements of my work, writes in her introductory chapter that “this study measures the [works of her corpus] against the theoretical considerations I outlined in the present chapter” (20). My undermining of the role of this measurement of a literary corpus against theoretical considerations stems in part from a need to humanize victims whose experiences can easily be represented as indistinguishable under the mark of trauma. My study then continually skirts the contours of traumatic memories as they have been outlined by theory but it also pierces through the limits imposed by the need to theorize, as my reading of Ying Chen’s *Le champ dans la mer* demonstrates. Indeed, in order to make sense of that difficult text I had to challenge an implicit paradigm central to all the critical and theoretical texts I considered. My task, then, was not to topple theory but to incorporate it up to a certain point beyond which I tentatively treaded on new ground following the arduous paths of literary memories without the support of theoretical certitudes.

One of the limits that I had to overcome and that is omnipresent in studies focusing on trauma theory is found in the central role given to the “healing paradigm.” Indeed, virtually all of these studies inevitably conceive of the remembering of the traumatic past as a cathartic experience. From a psychoanalytically derived impulse to

incorporate disrupting imagery within stable cognitive and linguistic structures to a politically progressive need to validate experience and ascertain the potential for positive change, this powerful need to impose a healing model on a basically confrontational relationship between past and present seems to be diverting attention away from the gaze of the victim, the child in the case of my study. Indeed, in these studies the healing forces found in trauma narratives are often projected onto the author or a narrator who can then be presented as an agent of change capable of overcoming past obstacles. The process of remembering itself is often associated with a form of textual working through, thereby performing a function similar to psychoanalysis through the reconfiguration of unassimilated memories. In its focus on the process of telling the past, this emphasis on textual healing can also easily overlook the often subtle presence of the victim, as I showed in my reading of Gisèle Pineau's *L'espérance-macadam*. Laura Di Prete, for example, sees her corporeal narratives as "enabl[ing] textual working through by performing the return of the absent material body" (19). For Di Prete "the return [of] this foreign body to the experience that has turned it foreign in the first place" (16), a return strikingly similar to what I call the return of the unfamiliar, becomes a primarily therapeutic process. Her analysis thus moves to the future effects of the textual return of the material body, toward a better future necessarily freed from the horrors of the past.

This vision of the future, however, is not the one I read in the texts studied in this dissertation. My impulse at the early stages of my research was to claim that these texts embodied an anti-healing paradigm engaged in a ceaseless confrontation with the horrors of the past. I thus refused to see the importance of therapeutic elements that often anchor

the narration of these stories. As I started to work on my first chapters, however, I came to understand that the strong urge to never let go of the painful past in these texts is engaged in a complex relationship with these myriad therapeutic components present in the act of narrating memories. Indeed, we saw in *Garçon manqué* that the scream was only enabled by the possibility of telling one's story, of being loved and deeply heard by an empathic other. Similarly, the hope for a better past, the confrontational hope that I found at the heart of the remembered child's gaze in *L'espérance-macadam*, could not have been born without Éliette's maternal soothing of Angela's deep wounds, a compassion which would not have been possible without the remembering and retelling of the past of Savane. Hope for a better future is thus not undermined in my readings. Rather, I see these literary childhood memories as a humbling dive into troubled waters out of which one emerges into a world made unfamiliar. The childhood memories I have analyzed force us to face the unfamiliarity of the past. In turn, it is the present, whose familiarity is built on a known past, which becomes unfamiliar. In this temple of the unfamiliar, a better future cannot be based on a complacent fall into a forgetful bliss. Hope, in these texts, is fed by the terrorized eyes of the victimized child seen by a loving other. It is my contention that the critic can also be that other.

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