Troubled Filiations

Twenty-first-century French and Francophone Writers Confronting Familial Pasts



Lynn Nguyen
St. John's College

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Modern Languages
Trinity Term 2025

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Short Abstract

This thesis studies filiation as a problem of literary intervention in lived experience, which constitutes an important preoccupation in twenty-first-century French and Francophone life-writing. Turning away from the predominant vein of scholarship fixated on defining the genre of the "récit de filiation" through sweeping overviews, I offer close readings of several key works to parse the ways that the space of the literary text accommodates writers' confrontations with what I call "troubled filiations": relationships between ascendants and descendants that are unclear or dubious (*troubles,* in French), that have been troubled (disturbed, upended), and/or that writers trouble (interrogate, critically examine). Bringing together a corpus of life-writing works by Sorj Chalandon, Lydie Salvayre, Philippe Rahmy, Camille Laurens, Assia Djebar, Annie Ernaux, Constance Debré, and Camille de Toledo, the thesis analyzes a range of troubled filiations and, accordingly, different (albeit overlapping) narrative responses to each of them. I begin with texts that cautiously adopt the narrative of paying homage to predecessors, before considering other narrative paradigms that progressively resist or enact distance from troubled filiations. The writers studied here question the potential and limits of literary creation to foster the restitution of past lives uprooted by historical upheavals, repair of painful family histories and relationships, defiance of familial transmission of restrictive social norms, and estrangement from inherited family identities. To varying degrees, the authors examined wield autofictional strategies, including both fictive invention and stylistic experimentation, as a tool for investigating their troubled filiations and (re)inventing their identities in relation to their inherited backgrounds. This thesis contributes to the growing field of study of filiation in contemporary literature, and also participates in broader conversations in the domain of life-writing: it explores the uses of autofictional writing in representing the relational and non-unitary self, and highlights the critical force of writing to nuance claims about literature's salutary power.

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Long Abstract

Twenty-first-century literature in French has seen a proliferation of works dealing with problems of family history, memory, and transmission. Literary production in this vein participates in a broader Euro-American cultural interest in understanding personal identity by tracing one's origins. Though intergenerational familial relationships have been a recurring theme throughout French literary history, the current trend is distinct in its responses to literary developments and historical upheavals of the twentieth century. The trend descends from a history of innovation in autobiographical life-writing—that is, texts that take real lives (including that of the author) as their subject—since the end of the Second World War, as writers sought new ways to represent subjectivity beyond a coherent, singular understanding of the self. Contemporary life-writing about family memory and identity also grapples with collective and continuing concerns with the legacy of key twentieth-century historical events: the fallout after wars of decolonization, social movements inaugurated by May 68, and belated negotiation with the legacy of the Holocaust, among others.

Literary critics have primarily studied the contemporary preoccupation with family history and memory through the angle of defining the *récit de filiation* genre. Coined by Dominique Viart in 1999, the *récit de filiation* combines elements of autobiography and biography, in that a

descendant-narrator recounts parents' and/or ancestors' life histories from the vantage point of the present. Metanarrative is often a key component in the *récit de filiation*: the descendant's thoughts, memories, and experiences conducting research into and writing about predecessors' lives are made transparent. The investigation into the familial past doubles as a quest for greater understanding of one's own identity. Viart situates the genre's origins in the 1980s, with the publication of Annie Ernaux's *La Place* (1983) and *Une femme* (1988) and Pierre Michon's *Vies minuscules* (1984). Scholars building on Viart's formative work have contested certain components of his theory of the genre. Notably, Laurent Demanze and Guy Larroux depart from Viart's claim that the *récit de filiation* is principally factual, and instead situate these kinds of texts alongside novelistic fiction. Nevertheless, all these contributions share a common investment in the delineation of a more precise definition of the genre. They offer broad overviews of the literary landscape that overlook what the texts themselves have to say about the complications of family history and intergenerational dynamics. Indeed, among critics, there is a curious lack of reflection on what "filiation" even entails; an understanding of the term is assumed rather than questioned. With this thesis, I seek to rectify these various shortcomings in the current scholarship and advance an understanding of the contemporary literary engagement with filiation that is grounded in close reading of texts. I turn away from the overarching scholarly focus on defining the genre of the *récit de filiation* and instead analyze filiation as a problem of literary representation and intervention in lived experience.

Twenty-first century authors use the textual space of life-writing to pursue critical confrontations with what I call troubled filiations. This formulation is best understood by first breaking it down to its constituent terms. By filiation, I mean in the first place the relationship

between familial ascendants and descendants, which encompasses the parent-child relation but also extends to previous generations. Taking cues from the disciplines of anthropology, social history, and law, I understand filiation as a principally sociocultural rather than biological concept, informed by values of care and responsibility while also containing the potential for friction and conflict. Filiation can also be taken metaphorically: I consider literary, artistic, and/or intellectual lineages, which often intersect with familial ancestry. By troubled, I mean disturbed or disrupted; the "agitation" sense of the word can also carry a political resonance (i.e. "making trouble") and refer to challenges to an established order. Additionally, my use of the English word "troubled" nods at the French definition of "*trouble*": murky, unclear, dubious. Troubled filiations, then, are intergenerational relationships of inheritance and transmission that are upended by various forms of violence; that may be shrouded in secrecy and poorly understood; and that writers critically interrogate and contest.

I analyze various instances of troubled filiations through comparative close readings of a corpus of twenty-first-century life-writing works. The corpus spans 2007 to 2022, extending across canonical and lesser-known or recently established authors. They all share a connection to France but write from diverse national, ethnic, and gender backgrounds. The texts mobilize autofictional strategies and modes of writing in the way understood by Hannie Lawlor and Alexandra Effe: the autofictional is not a genre distinct from autobiography or the novel, but instead describes certain literary characteristics (namely, the combination of real-life and invented elements and stylistic, structural, and/or linguistic construction) that may be present in different forms and to varying extents. Through autofictional experiments with form, voice, and narrative, the selected texts

question the stakes of literary creation in confronting the often painful implications that disrupted intergenerational relations pose for identity and selfhood.

Scholarship on the *récit de filiation* tends to identify an homage-oriented restoration of past lives and stories as the key driving force of writing. Viart identifies an "éthique de la restitution" (in this context, restitution entails paying tribute to predecessors by recovering their stories), and Demanze pinpoints a melancholic strain that propels the reconstruction of otherwise forgotten lives. Both critics subscribe to Alexandre Gefen's notion of the symbolic healing and rehabilitative power of reading and writing literature. While I do not disavow the restorative/rehabilitative angle, overemphasis on this salutary model risks homogenizing what are actually multifaceted narrative aims in literary production about filiation. Though some writers explore the extent to which literature can repair a disruption in transmission, others seek a rupture from their lineage altogether. The texts I study treat filiation with caution, pushing back on the assumption of inherent solidarity among kin. Rather than embracing a neat emancipatory or salutary framework, this thesis finds that for certain twenty-first-century writers, literature is a site for ongoing negotiation of the tension between self-determination and inheritance in the construction of individual identity.

The organization of the four chapters in this thesis reflects the diversity of literary responses to troubled filiations. I begin with texts that adopt but also question the angle of restoration/rehabilitation, then progress towards narrative approaches that testify to an increasing resistance against problematic familial inheritances, culminating in estrangement. Though this conceptual arc might be read as yet another iteration of the salutary, liberatory framework that I

contest, the contradictions and nuances shown in each chapter's central narrative paradigm counters such a straightforward reading.

The first chapter, "Troubled filiations of exile and polyphonic restitution," tackles the homage-based restoration narrative through two different approaches to Viart's model of literary "restitution." I take Lydie Salvayre's *Pas pleurer* (2014) and Philippe Rahmy's *Monarques* (2017) as case studies, which foreground exile as the principal source of troubled filiation. This entails the forced physical and geographical exile of the first generation and the figurative uprootedness of the second generation (that of the narrator). The narrators in both novels take on the responsibility of restituting the first-generation's stories—symbolically giving back these stories to the predecessors through literary creation. The process of restitution, however, does not eclipse the narrators, who carve out a space of their own within those stories; restitution thus attempts to bridge the gap in transmission between generations. The autofictional imagination of past lives is key to Salvayre's and Rahmy's strategies of restitution. Alongside the creative depiction of familial predecessors' experiences, they forge "elective," or chosen, filiations with historical forebears who become characters with stories that parallel those of the familial ancestors. In Salvayre's novel, literary restitution operates along a logic of elucidation: the two filiations illuminate one another and offer greater insight into the history of the Spanish Civil War. In contrast, Rahmy's work adopts a principle of opacity in the pursuit of restitution, as the resonances between elective and familial filiations remain ambiguous, and certain details about the narrator's predecessors seem perpetually shrouded in mystery. Nevertheless, in both cases, the literary restitution of predecessors' voices and stories and the self-fashioning of descendants' fluid, contradictory identities prove to be mutually informative, intertwined processes.

Chapter Two, "Family fictions and the limits of repair," introduces another complication to the homage narrative: what does it mean to reconstruct a family history that is shameful, where predecessors have left a painful legacy for the narrator-descendant? In Camille de Toledo's *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle* (2020) and Sorj Chalandon's *Enfant de salaud* (2021), troubled filiation surfaces as transmitted false narratives of predecessors' experiences that obfuscate a sinister family history. These family fictions also disrupt the narrators' sense of identity as inheritors of the past. Troubled filiation here takes on an interpersonal element that was not as pertinent in the first chapter: fraught and even violent relationships between the narrators and their predecessors hinder the investigation into the past. Chalandon and Toledo pursue alternative autofictional strategies to craft "contre-fictions" contesting the falsehoods that they have inherited and to repair (if only symbolically) the troubled past. For Chalandon, the altered timeline of his lived experience allows him to juxtapose his mythomaniac father's history of entanglements in Nazism with the conscientiously reported witness testimonies at Klaus Barbie's trial for crimes against humanity; journalistic factuality presents a bulwark to the father's fictions. In Toledo's case, the critique of his predecessors' misguided narratives of post-WWII prosperity and French universalism relies not on facts, as with Chalandon, but paradoxically on the construction of a semi-fictional filiation in the literary text. In both works, though, the symbolic reparative potential of the "contre-fiction" is blunted by the elusiveness of healing: thwarted reconciliation with the father in Chalandon's text and unsuccessful treatment of generational illness in Toledo's, the torments of History continuing to plague family dynamics in both. Autofictional writing does not so much foster the repair of problematic family pasts and of difficult intergenerational relations as it facilitates the expression of these painful experiences.

The first half of the thesis studies texts that focus on parents'/ancestors' experiences which predate the narrator's existence. The second half looks instead to texts that take the narrator's own memories (especially of childhood) as the primary axis of reflection on disrupted familial transmission. The investigative modality of life-writing on troubled filiations is not limited to research into a predecessor's life, which is what the current *récit de filiation* model prioritizes; investigations into buried personal memories are also apt material for the revisiting of troubled familial pasts. Additionally, the second half of the thesis turns away from restoration and toward resistance to troubled filiations. In Chapter Three, "Narrating troubled daughterhood and defiance of familial patriarchy," which analyzes Assia Djebar's *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* (2007) and Camille Laurens's *Fille* (2020), troubled filiation manifests as intergenerational relations disrupted by the transmission of patriarchal and misogynistic social norms. The narrators struggle with delegitimation and alienation in their familial positions as daughters, especially in the context of restrictive paternal authority over their erotic relationships during coming-of-age. But they also defy the transmission of patriarchy through their experiences engaging with literature. Furthermore, the writing in the texts themselves is defiant, launching a counter-discourse against inherited patriarchal conventions by playing with linguistic and literary conventions. Autofictional writing is central in the articulation of defiance against the gendered hierarchies that disrupt filial relationships. Unlike in the previous texts, the autofictional in Djebar and Laurens does not lie in the creative reconstruction of predecessors' lives or in the combination of the invented and the autobiographical, but in the stylistic fashioning of narrative voice and perspective. By playing with these literary devices, the writers unpack common language usages to shed light on how restrictive patriarchal norms function in the family and beyond it. The texts are also nuanced in their

attention to the prevalence of complicity in patriarchal behaviors within intergenerational female relationships, especially between mothers and daughters. Female filiation does not necessarily entail solidarity, but it proves stronger than it initially appears in both works. The multitudes of women's identities simply do not fit into a neat, singular conception of filiation, and the texts' attention to this complexity is a point of defiance in itself.

Finally, the fourth chapter, "Authorial self-fashioning and ambivalent estrangement from origins," turns to texts that test the extent to which it is possible to leave behind a burdensome inherited identity altogether. In Annie Ernaux's *L'autre fille* (2011) and Constance Debré's *Nom* (2022), troubled filiation is understood as a nœud of family death and conflicting relationships with inherited socioeconomic class (the working class for Ernaux, and the aristocracy and *grande bourgeoisie* for Debré). The cultivation of hostility toward the deceased family member through spare and uncompromising prose is striking in both writers' configurations of estrangement from their familial and social roots. Ernaux and Debré craft narrative identities as outsiders, at a remove from their families, but this movement of estrangement proves to be equivocal: they contend with distance from their origins but can never break away entirely. For both writers, the self-fashioning of an (autofictional) identity as a reader and writer of literature appears to be part of the configuration of estrangement, but proves to be enmeshed in a web of familial relations and social class distinctions. In the end, Ernaux's loyalty to her working-class roots informs her fraught return to family origins, while Debré paradoxically continues to adhere to her's despite the intention of rupture. Their experiences suggest the contradictory interplay of individual self-fashioning and inherited structures in the construction of identity. The texts also illustrate that troubled filiation is

multifaceted rather than monolithic: one may distance oneself from certain inherited frameworks, values, and practices, while remaining affiliated (whether chosen or inevitably so) with others.

The responses to troubled filiations studied in this thesis are varied in their motivations, successes, and failures, engaging in greater complexity with the ethical stakes of life-writing—the mutual responsibilities between descendants and their forebears, the freedoms and risks that the autofictional crafting of real stories entail—than the homage-based model would suggest. In their own distinctive ways, the texts suggest that the literary construction of identity rests upon critical and continual reconfigurations of the inherited and the individually forged. Ultimately, confrontations with troubled filiations concern the reinvention of identities and stories: looking to the future through the lens of the past.

Table of Contents

Introduction | Troubled filiations and life-writing 1
Filiation: Multidisciplinary approaches 8
Tracing the filiation impulse in life-writing 15
A corpus of "troubled" filiations 27
Chapter overviews 34

Chapter One | Troubled filiations of exile and polyphonic restitution 39
1.1 Two generations of exile: Restitution and the forging of elective filiations 43
1.2 A web of troubling prehistories: Elucidation and opacity 56
1.3 Negotiating plural identities in second-generation exile 73

Chapter Two | Family fictions and the limits to repair 89
2.1 Mythomania and mythology: Descendants of fiction 95
2.2 Facing facts, embracing fiction: Reconfigurations of the past 108
2.3 The elusive ideal of repair 124

Chapter Three | Narrating troubled daughterhood and defiance of familial patriarchy 139
3.1 The making of troubled daughterhood 144
3.1.1 What's in a name? Onomastics and alienated daughters 144
3.1.2 Paternal authority: Desire and defiance 148
3.2 Defiant writing: A counter-discourse to familial patriarchy 159
3.3 Mothers, daughters, and defiance of easy solutions to patriarchy 172

Chapter Four | Authorial self-fashioning and ambivalent estrangement from origins..... 181
4.1 Writing family death and problems of class: The language of estrangement 187
4.2 Self-fashioning, away from class and familial origins 199
4.3 Paradoxes of estrangement 209

Conclusion | Troubled filiations: Life and literature intertwined 221

Acknowledgements 233

Bibliography 234

Introduction. Troubled filiations and life-writing

By the time I was old enough to care about family history, it was already too late to ask my grandparents for their stories. I had learned about French colonialism in southeast Asia and the Vietnam War in university classes and through books. But of my ancestors' lives in and around those events, I knew essentially nothing. Hazy memories of relatives gathered around the dinner table, talking about a past that was remote from my immediate childhood concerns and in a language of which I had a limited vocabulary; vague comments from my father comparing what my brother and I had growing up in California to what his generation had in wartime Vietnam; that is what remains. "Call your aunt," my mother advised. "I was too young then. She'll know better than me what our parents went through during the wars." I heard anecdotes about my grandfather's underground revolutionary activities, about my grandmother's wily tactics that protected her husband from arrest by the authorities, about the sacrifices that my mother and her siblings had to make when civil war broke out. To an extent, the stories bridge the historical distance that separates previous generations from my own. But there are so many questions left unanswered, and so many questions that I don't even know I should ask.

Many in the twenty-first century, writers or otherwise, are also inquiring into ancestral histories and looking back with a critical lens on childhood memories of the family. From whom do I descend? What have I inherited, and what do I want to transmit to my successors? *Filiation* has become a widespread cultural preoccupation. By filiation, I mean in the first place a familial lineage relating a person to their predecessors and descendants. Filiation has been an engine for contemporary cultural production. We can consider, for instance, the popularity of broadcast

documentary television shows exploring individuals' family trees and unveiling family secrets.[1] The desire to uncover familial roots has also driven individual investigations, creating a demand for genealogical research that is evinced by the influx of websites devoted to DNA testing and ancestry tracing.[2] From celebrities to the general public, the quest for origins is in vogue.

Contemporary literary creation also participates in this broader cultural investment in filiation. The twenty-first-century literary scene, and especially life-writing in French, has been rich with works exploring filiation and related questions of inheritance and transmission. French literary prize winners and finalists from the turn of the 2020s have encompassed a sizable number of texts that interrogate family history and memory.[3] Not only are many writers attending to filiation as a *problématique,* publishing houses and literary institutions are valorizing this choice, and in turn, readers are engaging more with it. To be sure, filiation has been a longstanding theme in French-language literature before the twenty-first century. From concerns over heraldry and paternal legacies in medieval Arthurian romances,[4] to the figure of the *enfant naturel* in Enlightenment-era writing,[5] to genealogies and heredity in the nineteenth-century naturalist

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[1] Examples include *Finding your Roots with Henry Louis Gates, Jr.* (2012–present) and *Recherche Héritiers* (2020–present). Both take inspiration from the BBC series *Who Do You Think You Are* (2004–present).
[2] Ancestry.com, 23andme.com, geneanet.org, among others, are such popular sites.
[3] To name just a few: *L'Art de perdre* (Alice Zeniter, Prix Goncourt des Lycéens 2017), *Histoire du fils* (Marie-Hélène Lafon, Prix Renaudot 2020), *La Carte postale* (Anne Berest, Prix Renaudot des Lycéens 2021), Annie Ernaux's Nobel Prize (2022), *Les Enfants endormis* (Anthony Passeron, Prix Fnac 2022), *Les Presque Sœurs* (Cloé Korman, Prix Goncourt shortlist 2022).
[4] Several volumes of the academic journal series *Histoires de famille. La parenté au Moyen Âge* (Antwerp: Brepolis, 2004–present) study filiation and kinship in medieval literature. On Arthurian romances, see the volumes by Martin Aurell and Catalina Girbea, eds., *L'imaginaire de la parenté dans les romans arthuriens (XIIe-XIVe siècles)*, 2010; and Claire Serp, ed., *Identité, filiation et parenté dans les romans du Graal en prose*, 2015.
[5] See Anna Raventós Barangé, "La réactualisation du bâtard par les Lumières naissantes," in *Héritage, filiation, transmission. Configurations littéraires,* ed. Christian Chelebourg, David Martens, and Myriam Watthee-Delmotte (Louvain: Presses Universitaires de Louvain, 2011), 29–38. For a case study of Enlightenment-era interest in filiation and legitimacy, see Guilhem Armand on Denis Diderot in *Le Père, le fils et Diderot. Enquête sur la question de la paternité et de la filiation dans l'œuvre littéraire et philosophique de Denis Diderot* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2023).

novel,[6] literature has long been sensitive to questions of lineage. Nevertheless, the contemporary literary landscape has seen a renewed fascination with filiation, and literary criticism has been keen to interrogate this trend.

Dominique Viart set in motion the predominant line of inquiry in studies of filiation in contemporary literature: delineating the so-called *récit de filiation* genre. Viart first coined the generic marker in 1999, identifying its origins in the 1980s with the publication of Annie Ernaux's *La Place* (1983) and *Une femme* (1988) and Pierre Michon's *Vies minuscules* (1984),[7] although other critics have since identified *récits de filiation* earlier in the twentieth century.[8] Viart proposes that the *récit de filiation* recounts parents' and ancestors' past lives from the present perspective of a descendant, privileging an investigative *démarche* over chronological linearity. He situates the *récit de filiation* as an offshoot of autobiography that incorporates elements of biography: "Le récit de l'autre—le père, la mère ou tel aïeul— est *le détour nécessaire pour parvenir à soi,* pour se comprendre dans cet héritage."[9] Viart's proposed definition of the *récit de filiation*, modelled on Philippe Lejeune's definition of autobiography, emphasizes its factual, referential basis and implies a distancing from novelistic fiction:

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[6] Most notably, see Émile Zola's series of novels, *Les Rougon-Macquart* (1871–1893), in which he explores the workings of heredity and environment on the members of the titular family.

[7] Dominique Viart, "Filiations littéraires," *Écritures contemporaines* 2 (1999): 115–39. He expanded upon his initial work on the *récit de filiation* in Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier, *La Littérature française au présent* (Paris: Bordas, 2008 [2005]). Chapter 3, by Viart, is devoted to "Récits de filiation."

[8] For instance, Guy Larroux includes Colette (*La Naissance du jour,* 1928 and *Sido,* 1930), Raymond Guérin (*Quand vient la fin*, 1941), Albert Cohen (*Le Livre de ma mère*, 1954), Violette Leduc (*La Bâtarde,* 1964), and Marguerite Yourcenar (*Le Labyrinthe du monde,* 1974–1988), among others, in his examination of the *récit de filiation*. See Guy Larroux, *Et moi avec eux. Le récit de filiation contemporain* (Genève: Éditions la Baconnière, 2020), 11. I would also point to Patrick Modiano's *Livret de famille* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977) as a pre-1980s instance of the *récit de filiation,* an account of the author's own adolescence alongside reflection on his parents' pasts.

[9] Viart and Vercier, *La Littérature française au présent*, 77. Italics original.

> ce sont des récits archéologiques en prose, souvent fragmentaires, dans lesquels une personne réelle restitue par l'enquête, l'hypothèse, le recueil d'informations ou de documents, l'existence d'un parent ou d'un aïeul, lorsque, avec une conscience métalittéraire marquée de son entreprise, elle met l'accent sur la vie individuelle de cette personne aux prises avec les contraintes familiales, sociales et historiques.[10]

While on board with Viart's recognition of a new genre of archeological texts in which writers try to understand their origins better by uncovering the stories of their predecessors,[11] Laurent Demanze departs from Viart's idea that "les *récits de filiation* se refusent à romancer leur propos."[12] Demanze argues instead that the *récit de filiation*, in its melancholic efforts to reconstruct lost family figures, often has "recours aux outils de la fiction ou de la rêverie pour exaucer de manière hypothétique ou fabuleuse les désirs irréalisés de l'ascendance": the fact that the ascendant figures are real people does not preclude the use of writerly imagination to bring them to life.[13] Guy Larroux, like Demanze, also contests the distinction between *récit de filiation* and *roman*, situating the former in a longer tradition of the "roman domestique" and the "roman familial" and extending his analysis of the *récit de filiation* to literary texts that are overtly marketed as novels.[14] For Larroux, what distinguishes the genre is not any specific rapport with fiction, but the coexistence of the self and the ancestral other(s), as the title of his work *Et moi avec eux* articulates.[15]

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[10] Viart, "Les récits de filiation. Naissance, raisons et évolutions d'une forme littéraire," *Cahiers ERTA* 9 (2019): 18.

[11] Derived from Michel Foucault's historiographical method of "archeology"; the term is a metaphor for retrieving historical systems of knowledge, which lie beneath the surface of language and must be excavated in order to be understood. See Foucault, *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008 [1969]).

[12] Viart, "Les récits de filiation. Naissance, raisons et évolutions," 19. See also Viart, "Fictions familiales versus récits de filiation. Pour une topographie de la famille en littérature," in *Le Roman contemporain de la famille,* ed. Sylviane Coyaulte, Christine Jérusalem, and Gaspard Turin (Paris: Lettres Moderns Minard, 2016), 17–35.

[13] Laurent Demanze, "Le récit de filiation aujourd'hui," *Écritures contemporaines: Atelier de recherche sur la littérature actuelle.* See also Demanze, *Encres orphelines: Pierre Bergounioux, Gérard Macé, Pierre Michon* (Paris: José Corti, 2008).

[14] Larroux, *Et moi avec eux,* 10–11.

[15] Ibid., 134.

Though they differ in their theoretical takes on the role of fictionality in the *récit de filiation*, the contributions of Viart, Demanze, and Larroux are all united by their principal investment in articulating a more precise conception of the genre and (re)drawing its shifting contours.

The interest in defining the *récit de filiation* also manifests in critics' current focus on expanding the corpus of works that fall within the genre's growing perimeter, beyond authors who have become canonical following Demanze and Viart's analyses.[16] Larroux and Oana Panaïté both survey *récits de filiation* from a range of Francophone writers beyond the Hexagon[17]; a recent volume of critical essays examines how the *récit de filiation* model might be applied to African Francophone literature[18]; Rebecca Raises analyzes lesser-known women's writing in her contribution to the study of the genre.[19] Panaïté, in her analysis of postcolonial writers' inflections of the *récit de filiation*, does begin to tackle how literature might question the principle of filiation and its operation in a literary context, but, as with the other critics I have just mentioned, her study is still primarily directed toward the objective of refining the definition of the genre. A notable departure from this generic focus is Aurélie Barjoret and Doris Eibl's edited volume of essays on the (de)construction of family legends in a broad corpus of *récits* and *romans* that foreground the theme of family history, with a particular emphasis on works concerning the Shoah.[20] The broad

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[16] These canonical authors include Pierre Michon, Annie Ernaux, Claude Simon, Pierre Bergounioux, Patrick Modiano, Leïla Sebbar, among others.

[17] Both Larroux and Panaïté refer to J.M.Z. Le Clézio, Maryse Condé, and Patrick Chamoiseau in their contributions: Larroux, *Et moi avec eux,* and Oana Panaïté, "Filiations postcoloniales," *Cahiers ERTA* 20 (2019): 69–84.

[18] Babou Diène, Modou Fatah Thiam, and Mamadou Hady Ba, eds., *La littérature africaine à l'épreuve des récits de filiation. L'autofiction et le récit transpersonne*l (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2024).

[19] Rebecca Raitses, "Heritage Repair: Revisiting Familial and Collective Histories in Filiation Narratives by Dalila Kerchouche, Colombe Schneck, and Martine Storti," (PhD diss., City University of New York, 2022).

[20] Aurélie Barjoret and Doris Eibl, eds., *Le Légendaire dans les textes de filiation* (Versailles: Septentrion, 2024).

grouping of the works covered in the volume as "textes de filiation" points to a turn away from the question of generic classification and movement toward examining thematic and symbolic issues that arise from filiation.

My own contribution to the scholarship on filiation also seeks to shift the focus away from defining genre. I analyze instead how literary representation configures and even intervenes in the lived experience of filiation. The filiation impulse in contemporary literature is not just an opportunity to determine a new genre, which is an approach that risks overlooking the texts' insights into filiation and its implications. Indeed, the focus on genre classification tends to give rise to sweeping overviews of numerous *récits de filiation* rather than textual analysis of what specific works have to say about filiation (and how they say it). This thesis's methodology prioritizes close readings of a small corpus of texts, in an effort to rectify this critical oversight. I examine works of life-writing (a broad classification that I will unpack later in this Introduction) that question familial history, memory, and transmission. I ask how these kinds of texts thematize filiation, and how they pursue ambitious and nuanced ways of responding to various disruptions of filiation through the art of writing. I read my selected texts without making definitive arguments for their inclusion or not in the genre of the *récit de filiation,* not only because I seek to contest the overarching focus on genre definition, but because the *récit de filiation* is a form in flux, and so such arguments may become dated. The genre's designations have altered since Viart's initial publication in 1999 (as we have seen in the critical debates over the role of fiction) and will likely continue to do so, as writers keep experimenting with ways of writing about their ancestry. In addition, the general critical consensus on the form of the *récit de filiation* as a descendant's recovery of a parent's or ancestor's life provides a useful but not comprehensive model for

contemporary autobiographical life-writing on family history and memory. Texts that may not necessarily conform to this current conception of the genre's structure may do so in a future iteration.

Furthermore, critics' stress on the *récit de filiation*'s restorative narrative motivation—in its attempt to recover a predecessor's story through a rhetoric of homage—attends to a prevailing concern of authors, but also does a disservice to the diversity of narrative responses to family history and relationships. I do not disavow Viart's conception of an "éthique de la restitution" driving contemporary writing on filiation,[21] nor Demanze's idea of the melancholic strain underlying the reconstruction of predecessors' lives otherwise forgotten by History.[22] But I seek to highlight the qualified potential that the act of writing holds for enacting the restorative model, as well as look beyond that model, by also including texts in my analysis that are invested less in the restoration of filial links and more in resistance to them.[23] The literary works in my corpus treat the principle of filiation from a cautious angle rather than assume shared identity or solidarity between descendants and ascendants. Instead of adopting the generic marker of the *récit de filiation*, then, I propose instead my critical concept of "troubled filiations" to examine a corpus of texts that feature a variety of formal and thematic approaches to writing about disrupted intergenerational relationships. The rest of the Introduction considers in greater detail what the concept of "troubled filiations"

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[21] I dive deeper into the idea of the "éthique de la restitution" in the first chapter of this thesis, but for now, I point to Viart's key writings on it: Viart and Vercier, *La Littérature française au présent*, 92–5; Viart, "Les récits de filiation. Naissance, raisons et évolutions," 15–8; Viart, "Le récit de filiation: «éthique de la restitution» contre «devoir de mémoire» dans la littérature contemporaine," in *Héritage, filiation, transmission*, ed. Chelebourg, Martens and Watthee-Delmotte, 199–121.

[22] See Demanze, *Encres orphelines* and "Sang d'encre. Filiation et mélancolie dans la littérature contemporaine," in *Le Roman contemporain de la famille*, ed. Coyaulte, Jérusalem, and Turin, 37–49.

[23] Larroux, *Et moi avec eux*, 17–8 raises the possibility of looking beyond the restitution model as the central ethical driver of the *récit de filiation*, but ultimately does not take a stance: "Est-elle toujours «de la restitution»? Peut-être est-elle plus diverse. Cela, c'est la confrontation avec les textes concrets qui nous le dira."

entail—in its constituent terms and as a whole—and the various literary and historical contexts to which it responds.

Filiation: Multidisciplinary approaches

The first step in unpacking the notion of "troubled filiations" is to consider what filiation itself is. Despite literary studies' attention to filiation, there has been a peculiar lack of consideration on how to define the term. Neither Viart or Demanze (nor any of the scholars working from their proposed definitions of the *récit de filiation*) specify what they mean by "filiation." An understanding of the term is assumed rather than treated critically as the problem that it actually constitutes. Though I look at filiation primarily through a literary lens, it has a multiplicity of meanings and ramifications in different disciplinary contexts that inform my usage of the term in this thesis.

The English word "filiation" is borrowed from the same word in French, which derives from the Latin *filius* (son) and *filiationis* (descent from father). This gendered aspect of filiation is sometimes retained in modern English definitions of the word,[24] but not in French ones, which offer a broader and thus more useful starting point. Per the *Trésor de la langue française*, filiation is the "lien de parenté unissant un être humain à ses ascendants." Filiation, as I use it, does not just refer to the relationship between parent and child, but instead can stretch over multiple generations and in two directions, towards both descendants and ascendants. I privilege the term "filiation" over "family" to emphasize relationality between generations; and over "genealogy" and "kinship,"

[24] For instance, Oxford English Dictionary: "Sonship, 'whose son one is'"; Merriam-Webster: "Filial relationship especially of a son to his father."

both of which are less precise, encompassing other relations (e.g. marriage) in addition to ascendance and descendance.

My multigenerational understanding of filiation is more inclusive than how sociocultural anthropologists working in kinship studies have generally defined the term. Since the 1960s, Anglo-American work in this field has generally maintained a distinction between "descent" (relationship of a person to ascendant kin) and "filiation" (the parent-child relationship specifically).[25] French anthropologists, on the other hand, use *filiation* to refer to what their Anglophone colleagues call "descent."[26] My use of "filiation" is thus closer to the English anthropological term "descent" or the French *filiation*. Employing an elastic meaning of filiation allows for analysis of a wider array of literary works that problematize family history and memory. Defining filiation is just one branch in a longer history of complicated anthropological debates since the early twentieth century surrounding theoretical frameworks of descent and social organization.[27] Even if the basic essence of the terms (filiation as parental, descent as ancestral) are generally agreed upon, the field is far from reaching a consensus on how best to model descent and

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[25] This distinction was proposed by Meyer Fortes to avoid conceptual difficulties that arose from conflating the two notions, in "Descent, filiation and affinity: a rejoinder to Dr. Leach, pt. 2," *Man* 59 (1959): 193–197, and further developed in Chapter 13 "Filiation Reconsidered," in *Kinship and the Social Order: The Legacy of Lewis Henry Morgan* (London: Routledge, 2009 [1969]), 250–75. Descent theory saw its heyday in the 1950s and '60s with the proliferation of ethnographic research after the end of WWII. I point here to other helpful sources from this period (though not exhaustive) that specifically treat distinctions between descent and filiation: Jack Goody, "The Classification of Double Descent Systems," *Current Anthropology* 2, no. 1 (February 1961): 3–25; David Schneider, "Kinship and Culture: Descent and Filiation as Cultural Constructs," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 23, no. 1 (1967): 65–73.

[26] On this language asymmetry, see Louis Dumont, *Introduction à deux théories d'anthropologie sociale: Groupes de filiation et alliance de mariage* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1971), 45–8. Work on filiation and descent in the late twentieth century has mostly been done by British and American anthropologists, whereas French anthropology, heavily influenced by Claude Lévi-Strauss, has historically privileged affinal alliances (e.g. marriage) in the study of kinship.

[27] W. H. R. Rivers is often credited for first distinguishing the study of "descent" from the broader category of "kinship" in *Social Organization* (New York: Knopf, 1924). Other influential texts in descent theory include E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Kinship and Marriage among the Nuer* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (New York: Free Press, 1952).

filiation systems, given the diversity of these systems across different cultural contexts.[28] But anthropology's engagement with descent and filiation as first and foremost principles of social and cultural organization is a throughline across the variance of theoretical models.[29] This thesis finds a point of contact with anthropological work in a shared interest in the constructed dimensions of filiation, looking beyond relations of blood. Meyer Fortes, for instance, describes filiation as "a configuration of affective, moral, jural, and practical relationships and not merely a unit of genealogical reckoning."[30] Rather than being just a fact of birth, filiation is culturally enacted; it both influences and is influenced by the organization of human societies and communities. Furthermore, though anthropology has historically treated kinship relationships (including filiation and descent) in mostly positive terms, emphasizing solidarity, support, and shared identity among kin,[31] more recent scholarship has pushed back against that view. Kin experience conflict and disjuncture, and practices of selection and exclusion of individuals underpin the very formation of kinship networks.[32] While testing the potential for solidarity, my examination of filiation from a literary standpoint takes on board this attention to the friction and strife that familial relationships can engender.

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[28] For an overview of the major anthropological models of descent and filiation, from the 1920s to the 1980s, see Chapters One and Two in H. W. Scheffler, *Filiation and Affiliation* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2001), 19–51.

[29] David Schneider has been especially influential in theorizing how descent and filiation operate as systems of culturally constructed symbols. See the previously cited "Kinship and Culture: Descent and Filiation as Cultural Constructs," *American Kinship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), and *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984).

[30] Fortes, *Kinship and the Social Order,* 255.

[31] For instance, Schneider, *American Kinship,* 1968.

[32] See Janet Carsten, *After Kinship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) and essays from Sandra Bamford, ed., *The Cambridge Handbook of Kinship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), which complicate rosy views of kinship as harmonious and free of conflict.

Historians of the family have also suggested that filiation has long been a fundamentally constructed phenomenon in societies (at least in the West), but evolutions in attitudes toward the importance of biological filiation add more complexity to the picture. Adoption, a way of creating a new relationship of filiation outside the bounds of biology, can be traced all the way back to antiquity. In Ancient Rome, adoption was a common solution to succession concerns for childless couples: a man could select a successor from outside his *patria potestas* (household) and bring the latter under his own paternal authority as the *pater familias*.[33] Though a successor could be chosen from outside the family bloodline, it was more frequent that relatives were selected; in any case, however, the law allowed for the modification of filiation without dependence on a biological parent-child relationship.[34] While blood ties did matter in the construction of the Roman family, the latter was still considered a civil or legal rather than biological group under the control of the *pater familias*.[35] Indeed, Roman law principles like "the father is always uncertain" and "the father is he whom marriage indicates" reflect the primacy of cultural determinants of filiation.[36] Biological filiation became more important, however, moving into late antiquity and the medieval period in Europe. The Church and canon law weakened Roman traditions of adoption and only recognized filiation through "natural" reproduction within an established marriage. Christian notions of the family based on bloodline informed the development of feudal legal systems (including in France) of succession that privileged consanguinity as a key condition governing the inheritance of family

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[33] See Hugh Lindsay, "Adoption and inheritance," in *Adoption in the Roman World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 97–122.
[34] Mireille Corbier, "Constructing Kinship in Rome: Marriage and Divorce, Filiation and Adoption," in David Kertzer and Richard Saller, ed., *The Family in Italy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991), 127–46.
[35] Paul Veyne, *Histoire de la vie privée. De l'Empire romain à l'an mil* (Paris: Seuil, 1985), 23–6.
[36] See "La désignation du père" in *Histoire des pères et de la paternité,* ed. Jean Delumeau and Daniel Roche (Paris: Larousse, 1990), 27–54.

property, thus discouraging adoption as a means of heirship.[37] Legal and cultural valorization of legitimate biological filiation at the expense of adoptive filiation in the medieval period left a deep imprint in most of western Europe into modernity. In France, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century regional customary law codes denied inheritance rights to adopted children, with some codes even prohibiting adoption.[38] On a cultural level, many in early modern France considered adoption to be unnatural, a threat to the sanctity of biological bonds between parent and child.[39] The French Revolution did bring about political interest in adoption, which was seen as a rupture with the *ancien régime*'s doctrine of "natural" filiation and a way to contest class structures embedded in family lineages; ensuing laws in the *Code civil* revived the Roman model of adoption as a solution to heirship for childless couples.[40] But only in the twentieth century would the law fully recognize adoptive filiation as having equal legal status as biological filiation (1939) and liberalize adoption (key laws in 1966 and 1976).[41] Throughout history, then, perspectives on the importance of biology in the recognition of filiation have shifted back and forth, but they have always been shaped by broader cultural systems: domestic structures, religious ideals, legal frameworks, political agendas. My analysis in this thesis privileges filiation's sociocultural dimensions, all the while remaining sensitive to biological considerations that may operate within them.

Current law governing filial relationships (in the legal context, this is between parent and child) also offers critical approaches that are helpful for thinking further about the concept of

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[37] Kristin Gager, *Blood Ties and Fictive Ties: Adoption and Family Life in Early Modern France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016 [1996]), 47–50.
[38] See ibid., 51–68 for an overview of adoption in early modern French customary law.
[39] Ibid., 66. In her case study of early modern Paris, Gager shows that despite the anti-adoption legal and cultural climate of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in popular practice heirship through adoptive filiation still survived.
[40] Bruno Perreau, Deke Dusinberre, and Arthur Caplan, *The Politics of Adoption: Gender and the Making of French Citizenship* (Boston: MIT Press, 2014), 3.
[41] Ibid., 4–8.

filiation as I use it. Ubiquitous in Euro-American law is the idea that a relationship of filiation creates rights and obligations for the parties involved. In the French system, filiation can be established by official documentation (e.g. a birth certificate), but also by proving that the parent(s) provide for the child's education, upkeep, or housing.[42] This stipulation points to a broader idea that the responsibilities of care and nurture for a child's upbringing are essential to the very existence of a relationship of filiation. Being a parental figure has as much (or even more) to do with ethical considerations as biological ones. Moreover, French law's provision of *la réserve héréditaire* (which is absent in American and British law) prevents a parent from disinheriting their child(ren), who have a right to inherit a certain portion of succession property.[43] Children also have a legal duty to provide for parents and predecessors when they require assistance for basic living needs in old age, under what is called an *obligation alimentaire*.[44] I will attend to the mutual principles of care and responsibility between ascendants and descendants that the legal perspective highlights, but also look beyond the law's focus on basic nurturing and material inheritance to more symbolic forms of transmission. A parental figure or predecessor can shape a descendant's development by passing on artistic, moral, intellectual, socioeconomic, and political sensibilities. Additionally, the descendant is often tasked with the duty of preserving their predecessors' stories and experiences—of keeping their memory alive.

Indeed, it is filiation's metaphorical potential that renders it a versatile framework. Both English and French offer figurative definitions that allow for an elastic understanding of the notion of filiation. For instance, Merriam-Webster's definition, "Descent or derivation especially from a culture or language," starts to go beyond the family tree: we can talk of literary lineages, of heritage

[42] *Code civil*, Livre I, Titre VII, Article 310.
[43] Ibid., Livre III, Titre II, Article 912.
[44] Ibid., Livre I, Titre V, Article 205.

and cultural traditions that inform identity. Reception studies scholars have used filiation as a framing metaphor, tracing the influence of an author or tradition on succeeding literary descendants and inheritors.[45] Likewise, Laurent Demanze points to a coexistence of dual literary and familial filiations in the *récit de filiation*: parents and ancestors as well as literary predecessors inform the narrator-descendant's identity.[46] I am interested in how relationships between familial ascendants and descendants intersect with symbolic lineages, whether literary, cultural, or historical. This thesis is invested in how literature draws out the affective, aesthetic, sociocultural, political, and ethical implications of the familial link; and how, in response to these implications, new filiations become forged, sometimes in opposition while other times complementary to the familial lineage.

I use filiation, then, to mean the relationship between ascendants and descendants, including but not limited to the parent-child link. Filiation most directly refers to familial relation, which is primarily a sociocultural more so than biological phenomenon, harboring potential for discord but also for solidarity, such as through principles of care and responsibility. Filiation can also extend beyond the family to the realm of metaphor, to articulate a constructed cultural lineage. With these understandings in mind, let us return now to filiation in the context of twenty-first-century literature.

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[45] For instance, see Rajeshwari S. Vallury, ed., *Theory, Aesthetics, and Politics in the Francophone World: Filiations Past and Present* (London: Lexington Books, 2019), which examines the legacies of twentieth-century French-language philosophy, literature, cinema, and politics in the twenty-first century.

[46] Demanze, *Encres orphelines,* 10: "Le récit de filiation s'élabore alors au confluent de deux héritages, et articule l'un à l'autre le désir de témoigner d'un passé familial, dont le deuil pèse sur la conscience, et la saisie d'un héritage littéraire, à travers lequel l'écriture approfondit son propre questionnement." See also Laurent Demanze and Martine-Emmanuelle Lapointe, eds., *Figures de l'héritier dans le roman contemporain, Études françaises* 45, no. 3 (2009), which features essays that attend to the confluence of familial and literary, intellectual, and/or artistic heritages in the literary figure of the heir.

Tracing the filiation impulse in life-writing

As I have noted, intergenerational family relationships have been a recurring theme throughout French literary history. However, the specificity of the current interest in filiation lies in its inscription in two intersectional contexts: developments in first-person narrated life-writing since 1945, and, inflecting those developments, a persistent cultural concern with the legacies of twentieth-century historical upheavals. Since life-writing constitutes the generic scope of this thesis, I will first take some time to examine the term.

"Life-writing" is a nebulous classification, but it is exactly this indefinite quality that renders it useful. Though "life-writing" has been used since the 18th century, it has only gained traction starting from the 1980s, which suggests a critical response to ever-increasing literary experimentation with writing real lives in the late twentieth century and into the twenty-first.[47] Anglophone scholars of autobiography have privileged the term for its elasticity and inclusivity, noting that it enables analysis of a range of self-referential literary writing across genres.[48] "Life-writing," however, does not translate easily into French: *écriture de soi* is not an established typology, and *récit de vie* is mostly used in the context of the social sciences, not literary studies.[49] Oddly enough, no broad term akin to life-writing has surfaced in French-language literary studies. The scholarly focus instead has been on identifying specific subgenres (including, of course, the *récit de filiation*) to break down the variety of writing on real life narratives in France, especially

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[47] Margaretta Jolly, *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), ix.
[48] James Olney, *Memory and Narrative: The Weave of Life-Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), xv; Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010 [2001]), 4; Lucia Boldrini and Julia Novak, eds., *Experiments in Life-Writing: Intersections of Auto/Biography and Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2017); Natalie Edwards, *Multilingual Life Writing by French and Francophone Women: Translingual Selves* (Milton: Routledge, 2020), 2–3.
[49] Joanny Moulin, "'Life Writing' *n'est pas français*: The year in France," *Biography* 39, no. 4 (Fall 2016): 606.

since the late 1970s.[50] I am aware of the potential discrepancy of using a theoretical term in English for an analysis of French-language works, but the valuable adaptability that the English allows for outweighs the risk. I adopt "life-writing" as a broad formulation for texts that take real lives as a subject but that are often difficult to classify due to their genre-bending formal constructions and varying degrees of intentional fictionality. "Life-writing" allows me to bring together a varied corpus of works while respecting their heterogeneity. Though life-writing can extend to diaries, correspondences, and even social media blogs, my use of the term in the context of filiation writing privileges literary, narrative-based texts with some amount of autobiographical material.[51] By "autobiographical," I mean writing that refers (to some extent) to one's own life or one's own (constructed) subjectivity, but that does not necessarily adhere to the retrospective life narrative of an individual that the established traditional genre of autobiography entails.[52]

The twenty-first-century literary investment in filiation can be traced to increased cultural interest in life-writing, in France but also broadly in the Euro-American sphere, since the end of World War II, and particularly since the "return of the subject" in French literature that began in the late 1970s. Though filiation has been thematized and interrogated in straightforwardly fictional novels, it has a particular rapport with life-writing: writing about family relationships, memories, and histories is a means of exploring the expansiveness of selfhood, subjectivity, and identity. In addition, the rise of ideas about the therapeutic potential of writing has contributed to the increase in literary creation about painful personal pasts, including narratives about disrupted transmission

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[50] See Viart and Vercier, *La Littérature française au présent* and Alexandre Gefen, ed., *Territoires de la non-fiction. Cartographie d'un genre émergent* (Leiden: Brill-Rodopi, 2020).

[51] On diaries, see Philippe Lejeune and Catherine Bogaert, *Le Journal intime. Histoire et anthologie* (Paris: Textuel, 2006). On life-writing through digital media, see Lejeune, *Cher écran. Journal personnel, ordinateur, Internet* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

[52] A choice that is informed particularly by Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography*.

and uneasy intergenerational relationships.[53] The public appeal of writing that details personal experience has informed literary production from a commercial standpoint as well. Pressure on writers and editors to publish works that will get media publicity and be financially viable, combined with their consciousness of the sellability of intimate life-writing, has contributed to the influx of these kinds of texts.[54] Filiation writing participates in the contemporary vogue for deeply personal literary texts: it requires no small degree of vulnerability from the writer's end to unearth uncomfortable or even traumatic memories of the family.

Though I focus on twenty-first-century life-writing in this project, the works I examine participate in a history of mutations, renewals, and diversifications of life-writing since the mid-twentieth century, and respond to political and sociocultural evolutions in and beyond France that influenced those literary changes. From the World Wars to decolonization movements to May 68, the filiation impulse in life-writing is partly a reaction to major historical events of the past century that continue to weigh on the present. This concern with investigating and writing about familial pasts is, for Demanze, an "indice d'un malaise dans la transmission" of historical trauma.[55] Viart likewise pinpoints this problem of transmission as part of the *récit de filiation*'s rise: "lorsque les anciennes générations sont ainsi défaites de ce qui motivait leur foi et leurs actions, que

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[53] On "bibliotherapy" (therapy via reading and writing) and the nexus of medicine and literature since the 1980s, see Alexandre Gefen, "La littérature est-elle une thérapie?" Collège de France seminar, Paris, February 2025, video, 1:01:25, http://www.college-de-france.fr/fr/agenda/seminaire/comment-lire-suite/la-litterature-est-elle-une-therapie. See footnote 97 for references to more of Gefen's scholarship on literature and healing.

[54] See Dominique Viart, "Les menaces de Cassandre et le présent de la littérature," in *Fins de la littérature: Tome I,* ed. Dominique Viart and Laurent Demanze (Paris: Colin, 2011), 9–33 for a discussion of the realities of the contemporary book economy, publishing houses, and media that shape current literary production.

[55] Demanze, "Le récit de filiation aujourd'hui."

pourraient-elles encore transmettre?"[56] Investigating family history and memory enacts a confrontation with large-scale historical upheavals, the public and the personal mutually informing one another. I shall now look more closely at key historical and literary developments that have influenced twenty-first-century life-writing on filiation, starting at the end of the Second World War. This was a period where literary experimentation with life-writing began to take off, and a time of profound transformations of French society.

The postwar period was characterized, as Susan Weiner has articulated, by a "renegotiation of national identities."[57] The *épuration* of collaborators ("légale" through official trials as well as "sauvage" through public humiliations and summary executions) began this renegotiation as the country came to terms with the Vichy government's collaboration with Nazi Germany.[58] The shadow of WWII and the horrors of the Holocaust hung over the country, but amid the rise of a Gaullist myth of large-scale French resistance, the question of France's complicity was suppressed, the taboo only broken later in the 1980s and 1990s with Henry Rousso's landmark publication on the country's collective amnesia.[59] Meanwhile, overseas, France faced a wave of decolonization movements and the end of its empire. The First Indochina War (1945–1956) culminated in the end of a century of French rule in what is now Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.[60] In Algeria, the War of Independence (1954–1962) was one of the longest, most violent wars of decolonization, whose stakes were especially heightened given the long colonial governance of Algeria as a part of

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[56] Viart, "Le récit de filiation: «éthique de la restitution» contre «devoir de mémoire» dans la littérature contemporaine," paragraph 12.
[57] Susan Weiner, *The French Fifties, Yale French Studies* 98 (2008): 1–4.
[58] Julian Jackson, "A New France?" in *France: The Dark Years, 1940–1944* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 570–600.
[59] Henry Rousso, *Le Syndrome de Vichy, 1944–1987* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).
[60] On the history of the First Indochina War, as a decolonial war and a civil war within Vietnam, see Shawn McHale, *The First Vietnam War: Violence, Sovereignty, and the Fracture of the South, 1945–1956* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

metropolitan France and the large French settler presence there.[61] The war engendered a crisis in French nationalism: conflicting views over France's legitimacy in occupying Algeria divided the populace, and revelations of the use of torture by the French army despite the government's tight censorship of "les événements d'Algérie" sparked widespread public outrage.[62] The post-WWII decolonial moment elicited a painful reckoning with French colonial pasts and complicated conceptions of France's changing position on the world stage.

Back in the *métropole*, significant economic growth during what would become known as the "Trente Glorieuses" (1946–1975) transformed conditions for living and working, bringing about revolutions in industrialization, labor productivity, and consumer culture.[63] A grappling with the rapidly shifting social and cultural landscapes during these postwar decades materialized with the mass protests of May–June 1968, the largest general strike in French history. Many movements that gained traction during or post-May 68 had already been brewing in the '50s, but the mass protests provided a vocabulary through which existing social and political changes could be processed and articulated.[64] May 68 touched on a plethora of issues in French society—working-class mobilization against labor exploitation, critiques of mass consumerism and Americanization, calls for women's rights and bodily autonomy, reconsiderations of private life and attitudes toward sexuality, to name only a few—but running across the varied movements was the

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[61] Martin Evans, *Algeria: France's Undeclared War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) chronologically traces the origins of the war from the French invasion of Algeria in 1830, through to the intensification of the "undeclared war" (1945–59) and its dénouement and consequences (1959–62).

[62] See Benjamin Stora, "Les guerres dans la guerre (1960–61)," in *Histoire de la guerre d'Algérie (1954–1962)* (Paris: Découverte, 2004 [1993]). On torture in the war, see Raphaëlle Branche, *La Torture et l'armée pendant la guerre d'Algérie, 1954–1962* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001).

[63] Economist Jean Fourastié coined the phrase in *Les Trente Glorieuses, ou la révolution invisible de 1946 à 1975* (Paris: Fayard, 1979). See also Jean Fourastié and Jacqueline Fourastié, *D'une France à une autre: avant et après les Trente Glorieuses* (Paris: Fayard, 1987).

[64] Julian Jackson, "Rethinking May 68," in *May 68: Rethinking France's Last Revolution*, ed. Julian Jackson, Anna-Louise Milne, and James S. Williams (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 6.

spirit of individuals taking collective action to reclaim autonomy over their lives and resist authority and social inequities.[65]

The broad interrogation of identities on a national level during the postwar decades found an analogue in the debates that literary critics were having about writing selfhood and identity through autobiography, as critical interest in the genre also began in the ’50s. Often noted as an early pivotal text in France is Georges Gusdorf’s essay “Conditions et limites de l’autobiographie.”[66] Though this essay subscribes to the prevailing critical focus at the time on the “lives of great men” canon of autobiographical writing, Gusdorf was important for beginning to shift critical attention toward challenging the notion of a unified self—a shift from the *bios* to the *autos* of autobiography. Problematic selfhood became a more prominent issue as the field expanded through the ’60s and ’70s, influenced by structuralism and poststructuralism in literary theory. These intellectual traditions, which disavowed human agency and saw the individual as emergent from structures or systems, called into question the idea of a fixed, coherent, unitary self that knows itself.[67] In this light, telling one’s story comprehensively is an impossible feat. Psychoanalytic theory also inflected understandings of autobiography, raising the conception of a multiple or divided self that is

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[65] See Michelle Zancarini-Fournel and Philippe Artières, eds., *68, Une histoire collective* (Paris: Éditions La Découverte, 2018), a monumental tome that offers extensive historical analysis of the various movements and experiences of May–June 1968 across France, inscribed within a longer temporal sequence (1962–1980), since many of the movements have chronologies that precede and/or succeed 1968. The memory and legacy of May 68 has been hotly debated by sociologists, journalists, historians, and philosophers since the 1970s. For a critical historical overview of the vast literature on May 68, see Zancarini-Fournel, *Le Moment 68. Une histoire contestée* (Paris: Seuil, 2008). Twenty-first-century scholarship has largely been invested in uncovering the myths of the event: see previously cited volume by Jackson, Milne, and Williams, *May 68: Rethinking France’s Last Revolution;* and Kristin Ross, *May 68 and its Afterlives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

[66] Gusdorf, “Conditions et limites de l’autobiographie,” in *Formen der Selbstdarstellung: Analekten zu einer Geschichte des literarischen Selbstportraits,* ed. Günther Reichenkron and Erich Haase (Berlin: Duncker and Humblot, 1956), 105–23.

[67] As an example of poststructuralist reflections on autobiography, see Paul de Man’s infamous essay “Autobiography and De-Facement,” in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 67–81. The essay was first published in 1979.

influenced by early years of life and upbringing.[68] Indeed, the interest of psychoanalysis in the exploration of the inner world resonated with autobiography as an inquiry into the self: if writing became a tool of psychoanalysis, a way to discover unconscious truths and buried memories, autobiographical endeavors seemed to offer therapeutic potential, a chance for writers to embark on a search for identity and come to terms with difficult experiences.[69]

Partly as a reaction against decades of structuralism and formalist concerns, and bearing the mark of the political and social upheavals of the first three postwar decades, literary prose of the late 1970s and 1980s saw the so-called returns of the subject and of the real—returns that have continued into the twenty-first century.[70] Literature now looked outward, engaging with historical, social, and personal realities, rather than just fixing its gaze on its own form. Amid the return of the real and of the subject during the late '70s and '80s, authors were writing subjectivity in innovative ways that engaged with those realities. This period was a turning point in the history of literary autobiographical writing. The oft-noted publication of important (albeit very formally and thematically different) works by Roland Barthes and Georges Perec in 1975 heralded autobiography's evolution away from conventional ideas of the linear construction of a life, paving the way toward varied forms of life-writing.[71] Writers associated with the *nouveau roman* also

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[68] Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's idea of the split subject (from Freud's *Spaltung*) informs such conceptions of the self. See Jacques Lacan, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* (Paris: Seuil, 2014 [1964]).

[69] For more on the influence of psychoanalysis (theory and practice) on autobiographical writing in the twentieth century, see Laura Marcus, "Autobiography and psychoanalysis," in *On Life-Writing*, ed. Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 257–83.

[70] The return of the subject is also often referred to as a return to "transitivity," with writing taking an external object as its focus, analogous to a transitive verb taking a direct object. See Viart and Vercier, *La Littérature française au présent*, 15–21. See also François Dosse, *Les vérités du roman. Une histoire du temps présent* (Paris: Cerf, 2022) for a historian's take on contemporary literature's engagement with the "real."

[71] *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes* (Paris: Seuil, 1975); Perec, *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

brought formal innovations of that literary movement—the contestation of plot and character as understood in the realist novel—to autobiography, crafting fragmented texts about experiences in early life that featured metanarrative reflections on language, memory, and the self.[72] Critical and theoretical texts on autobiographical writing that would become canonical in the field also surfaced during this period. Perhaps most influential in establishing autobiography studies as a serious field of study has been Philippe Lejeune. His work *Le pacte autobiographique* (1975), in which he proposed a definition of autobiography based on a contract between reader and writer, would be adopted, problematized, and/or re-worked in most studies of autobiographical writing that followed.[73] Issues raised by Lejeune concerning truth and referentiality in autobiography, such as the degree of fictionality and narrative constructedness involved in the writing of a textual self, formed a major preoccupation among scholars.[74] Though the subject may have returned, understandings of its ontological and epistemological limits were still shaped by the legacies of structuralism, poststructuralism, and psychoanalysis.[75] Considerations involved in crafting autobiographical subjectivity were inflected by these traditions of thought: writing the incoherent,

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[72] For instance, see Nathalie Sarraute, *Enfance* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), Marguerite Duras, *L'Amant* (Paris: Minuit, 1984), and Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Le Miroir qui revient* (Paris: Minuit, 1985). Robbe-Grillet proposed the formulation "nouvelle autobiographie," a play on the "nouveau roman," to categorize these texts. See Roger-Michel Allemand and Christian Milat, eds., *Le «Nouveau Roman» en questions 5*: *Une "Nouvelle Autobiographie"?* (Paris: Minard, 2004).

[73] Philippe Lejeune, *Le pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Seuil, 1975). In later work, however, Lejeune himself pushed back on the constraints of generic definitions of autobiography and attended to the elasticity of the autobiographical voice. For instance, see Lejeune, *Je est un autre. L'autobiographie, de la littérature aux médias* (Paris: Seuil, 1980) and his work on diary (cited in footnote 51).

[74] For instance, see Michel Beaujour, *Miroirs d'encre. Rhétorique de l'autoportrait* (Paris: Seuil, 1980) and Paul John Eakin, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self Invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985).

[75] Johnnie Gratton, "Introduction: The Return of the Subject," in *Subject Matters: Subject and Self in French Literature from Descartes to the Present,* ed. Johnnie Gratton and Paul Gifford (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), 1–27.

non-unitary, divided, and even fictional self since the conscious mind can never fully understand who or what the self is.

Given the intellectual climate, it makes sense that new modes of autobiographical inquiry, which also featured new approaches to writing about filiation, arose during the 1980s and gained traction in following decades. Writers had new vocabulary to talk about the complexities of the self and of memory, and to inscribe reality and fictionality into their treatment of those subjects. I will look now at two modes that are pertinent to this thesis. The first is one I have already spoken about at length: the *récit de filiation.* The emergence of the *récit de filiation* gestured toward the start of an interest in filiation as a theme or problem worth pursuing in itself, and not just a prelude to a main autobiographical narrative or an answer to questions of how and where to begin an autobiography. The *récit de filiation* subscribes to the idea of the non-unitary subject, with its approach to writing the self by writing the other: the figure of a predecessor. The rise of the *récit de filiation*, with its investigative *démarche*, also participated in the archival turn. This was another facet of the return of the real, kicking off around the late 1980s and 1990s. More than just a source for historical research, the archive (and experiences conducting research in archives) became a subject that merited writerly (and often autobiographical) treatment in itself.[76] Literary critics and theorists, attending to this upsurge in writing about the archive, advanced conceptual understandings of the archive: a repository of memory that encompasses but is not limited to brick-and-mortar buildings.[77] Archival inquiry goes hand-in-hand with the *récit de filiation*'s

[76] Michael Sheringham situates the fascination with archives in autobiographical texts toward the end of the twentieth century in the context of contemporaneous theoretical meditations on the concept of the archive in "Memory and the archive in contemporary life-writing," *French Studies* 59, no. 1 (2005): 47–53.
[77] For example, Y*ale French Studies'* 1990 issue "Reading the Archive: On Texts and Institutions" features essays that adopt a range of understandings of what an archive is or stands for. Jacques Derrida in *Mal d'archive: Une impression freudienne* (Paris: Galilée, 1995) also identified "archive fever" afflicting contemporary culture: a compulsive desire for a return to some sort of origin.

concern with discovering unknown family history, and archival material, such as photographs and historical documents, often figures in the reconstruction of family pasts.

The second relevant mode of autobiographical inquiry is autofiction. Defining autofiction—what counts as "auto" and what counts as "fiction," and the relationship between the two—has proved to be a thorny subject of theoretical debate since its coinage by Serge Doubrovsky on the back cover of his 1977 book *Fils*.[78] Though some scholars have argued that this origin story for autofiction has been overstated, Doubrovsky's contribution has nevertheless proved significant for the development of theories of autofiction by virtue of the amount of critical scholarship it has elicited.[79] His initial model of autofiction is grounded in factual truthfulness: it is the creative work of writing, or "l'aventure du langage," that produces a "fiction d'événements et de faits strictement réels."[80] Other scholars have placed greater stress on the "fiction" part of the term, looking to the combination of real life and avowed self-fictionalization in their understanding of autofiction.[81] Still other critics point to how autofiction problematizes the conventional separation between the real and the fictive, whether through an oscillation between the autobiographical and novelistic pacts,[82] or through the extension of fiction into the author's lived reality.[83] As autofiction became

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[78] Serge Doubrovksy, *Fils* (Paris: Gallimard, 1977).
[79] As noted in Philippe Gasparini, *Autofiction: une aventure du langage* (Paris: Seuil, 2008), 32, the publication of Doubrovsky's *Fils* passed "presque inaperçu[e]." Gasparini's book analyzes the context of Doubrovsky's initial proposal of "autofiction" and then reviews several major contributions in theory on the genre from both literary critics and writers. See also Gasparini's later work on the genre of autofiction in *Poétiques du je. Du roman autobiographique à l'autofiction* (Lyon: Presses Universitaires de Lyon, 2016).
[80] Doubrovsky, back cover of *Fils.*
[81] For instance, see Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982) and Vincent Colonna, *Autofiction et autres mythomanies littéraires* (Paris: Tristram, 2004).
[82] Frank Zipfel, "Autofiktion: Zwischen den Grenzen von Faktualität, Fiktionalität und Literarität?" in *Grenzen der Literatur: Zu Begriff und Phânomen des Literarischen,* ed. Simone Winko, Fotis Jannidis, and Gerhard Lauer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 284–314.
[83] Chloé Delaume, *La Règle du Je. Autofiction: un essai* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2010).

more well-known and practiced from the 1990s,[84] scholars and writers have interpreted the term according to their own contexts and interests, leading to a proliferation of meanings associated with it.[85] Doubrovsky himself revisited and reworked his ideas on autofiction throughout his career, proposing key elements of autofiction without giving any comprehensive definitions.[86]

As was the case with "life-writing," the utility of autofiction as a descriptor of literary texts seems to be located principally in its adaptability in the face of constant experimentation from writers. Critics Hannie Lawlor and Alexandra Effe take "autofictional" (an adjective rather than a noun) to describe a "mode, moment, and strategy," more so than a genre separate from autobiography or the novel.[87] My analysis of the literary texts in this thesis, which offers a diversity of approaches to writing the self, also takes up this approach to "autofictional" writing for its versatility. Though Lawlor and Effe note several characteristics that theories of autofiction often raise ("a combination of real and invented elements; onomastic correspondence between author and character or narrator; and stylistic and linguistic experimentation") they acknowledge that such elements are neither comprehensive nor defining of a genre.[88] Instead, these autofictional characteristics (among others) are scalable parameters: one or several may be present in different

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[84] Authors including Christine Angot, Camille Laurens, Philippe Vilain, Hervé Guibert, and Philippe Forest turned to forms of autofiction during this time.

[85] Sam Ferguson, "Autofiction: Writing Lives," in *The Cambridge History of the Novel in French*, ed. Adam Watt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 671–87 offers a succinct overview of the development of French autofiction (and critical theories on it) from the 1970s to the 2010s, and was helpful in guiding my research into this formidable body of work.

[86] These elements include a concurrence of the autobiographical and novelistic pacts, the creation of the self through the process of memory, the process of writing having an effect on the real life of the writer, to name just a few. See Doubrovsky, "Textes en main," in *Autofictions et cie*, ed. Serge Doubrovsky, Philippe Lejeune, Jacques Lecarme (Nanterre: Université Paris X-Nanterre, 1993), 207–217.

[87] Hannie Lawlor and Alexandra Effe, "Introduction: From Autofiction to the Autofictional," in *The Autofictional: Approaches, Affordances, Forms,* ed. Lawlor and Effe (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 4.

[88] Ibid., 1.

forms and to varying degrees.[89] In adopting an expansive understanding of fictionality (encompassing both invention and stylistic construction), I do not mean to imply panfictionality, or the claim that everything is fictional, which is reductive in its uncritical conflation of fact and fiction.[90] As Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf argues, "fictional elements shape the perception of the factual": the two can coexist and interact in dynamic ways.[91]

Autofiction and the *récit de filiation* are both fluid categories, with unbounded contours despite literary critics' persistent attempts to define them. Those contours also overlap with each other. As Aurélie Adler has noted, autofiction and the *récit de filiation* share formal and thematic concerns about representing the self at the intersection of fiction and reality.[92] The *récit de filiation* often uses tools of autofiction: imagining and representing lives that the author has not actually lived as part of an investigation into family origins. Whether it manifests in invented elements or in the deliberate constructiveness of the narrative and language (or both of these), an autofictional mode of writing is essential to the project of the *récit de filiation.* On the other side of the coin, autofictional texts may treat concerns about relationships with parents and other predecessors that have shaped the self. In their own ways, both autofiction and the *récit de filiation* are attempts to understand and construct selfhood through a (real, constructed, and/or fictionalized) other or

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[89] See Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf, "Of Strange Loops and Real Effects: Five Theses on Autofiction/the Autofictional," in *The Autofictional,* ed. Lawlor and Effe*,* 21–39 for more on the autofictional as a "conceptual matrix with scalable and interactive dimensions" (23). Wagner-Egelhaaf's contribution expands upon the critical approach to the autofictional that Lawlor and Effe introduce, and that the volume is primarily based on.

[90] Marie-Laure Ryan, "Postmodernism and the Doctrine of Panfictionality," *Narrative* 5, no. 2 (1997): 165–187.

[91] Wagner-Egelhaaf, "Five Theses on Autofiction/the Autofictional," in *The Autofictional,* ed. Lawlor and Effe, 26. See also from the same volume Alison James, "The Fictional in Autofiction," 41–60 who likewise pushes back on the pitfall of panfictionality.

[92] Aurélie Adler, "Autobiographie, autofiction, récit de filiation," in *Éclats des vies muettes* (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2012), 121–25.

others. They are products of a contemporary consciousness of the dilemmas of writing about private, intimate histories. As Michael Sheringham puts it, "When autobiographers do something new it is against the background of existing responses to enduring problems and preoccupations."[93] Twenty-first-century life-writing that deals with filiation is inscribed within a longer lineage of innovations in autobiographical writing, giving new energy to persistent questions of how to write selfhood that is inflected by histories both public and private.

A corpus of "troubled" filiations

I shall now introduce the texts that this thesis takes as case studies in contemporary French life-writing's preoccupation with filiation, before finally bringing all the contextual threads together in the key concept of "troubled filiations" that those texts respond to. I examine narrative life-writing texts from Annie Ernaux (*L'autre fille,* 2011), Camille Laurens (*Fille,* 2020), Constance Debré (*Nom*, 2022), and Sorj Chalandon (*Enfant de salaud,* 2021)—for whom filiation is a consistent or at least recurring concern across their work; and from Assia Djebar (*Nulle part dans la maison de mon père,* 2007), Lydie Salvayre (*Pas pleurer*, 2011), Philippe Rahmy (*Monarques*, 2017), and Camille de Toledo (*Thésée, sa vie nouvelle,* 2020)—whose texts chosen for this thesis demonstrate their investment in exploring familial memory and transmission, even though they are not representative of the authors' œuvres as a whole. This is a grouping of literary works that span 2007 to 2022, combining canonical and lesser-known or up-and-coming contemporary writers, all with ties to France but writing from a range of backgrounds in terms of gender, nationality, and ethnicity. Certain texts have not yet been critically examined through the lens of filiation, while

[93] Sheringham, *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires. Rousseau to Perec* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 330.

others have not had any scholarship devoted to them at all. The texts raise thought-provoking questions about the varied stakes of filiation through experiments with form, voice, and narrative. Some of the texts are closer to the current understanding of the *récit de filiation*, in that they feature a first-person narrator-descendant's search for knowledge about a predecessor's life, while others feature an inquiry into family dynamics using the writer's own upbringing and lived experience as the key focal point. To varying degrees and in different ways, the selected works are autofictional, in the way understood by Lawlor and Effe. All are anchored in real-life narratives but use fictionality, whether through invented elements and/or through stylistic innovation, as a tool for approaching problematic family pasts. Several texts are marketed as novels, while others are simply labelled as *récits*: they all participate in the continued tradition in life-writing of stylistic innovation and resistance to traditional generic norms. Autobiography, biography, testimony, fiction, and poetry become reconfigured in striking ways.

Many authors in my corpus revisit problems arising from historical events of the twentieth century that have plagued the generation(s) that came before them and that have been passed down. Salvayre and Rahmy write on memories of twentieth-century wars, Chalandon on the Holocaust, Toledo and Debré on the fallout after the *Trente Glorieuses* and May 68, Djebar and Laurens on reconsiderations of women's lives and gender roles, to pinpoint only a few issues in the knots of historical upheavals that the texts concern. For some authors, there is also the re-examination of persistent personal or familial concerns on a private level that play out within their own œuvre: Ernaux's grappling with her parents' loss of a daughter before her own birth, Djebar's repeated attempts to write about the suicide attempt in her youth, Chalandon's preoccupation with an ambivalent relationship with his abusive father. The narrator-descendants

of the texts are situated in what Marianne Hirsch calls "postmemory": "the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before."[94] But there is not necessarily a transmission of experiences from the earlier to the later generation that operates, as Hirsch puts it, "so deeply and affectively as to *seem* to constitute memories in their own right."[95] Indeed, it is the disruption of this intergenerational transmission—not only of memories, but also of myths, values, and conventions—that is at the heart of the texts. The works I examine deal intimately with pain and violence in familial pasts, but they do not subscribe to the kind of reductive trauma-dumping that has been commodified by the contemporary book market. These writers' engagements with uncomfortable realities, historic and present, have a critical and even political force.

As I have mentioned before, Demanze and Viart pinpoint melancholia and homage as key characteristics of the *récit de filiation*: writing about predecessors can be a means of mourning, or even symbolically reviving, the departed.[96] Their focus on the *récit de filiation*'s potential to restore past lives from obscurity or oblivion resonates with broader ideas of literature's healing power, promulgated by Alexandre Gefen. Gefen argues that French-language literature since the dawn of the twenty-first century has seen the rise of a "programme réparateur," of "une littérature qui guérit, qui soigne, qui aide, ou, du moins, qui «fait du bien»."[97] Gefen also situates *récits de*

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[94] Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 5.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Additionally, see the section on "Inconsolable (Af)filiations" in Carole Bourne-Taylor and Sara-Louise Cooper, ed., *Variations on the Ethics of Mourning in Modern Literature in French* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2022), 109–204 on the filiation-mourning nexus, with particular attention to mourning and maternal figures.
[97] Alexandre Gefen, *Réparer le monde. La littérature française face au XXIe siècle* (Paris: José Corti, 2017), 11. See also Gefen, "Justice et justesse," *Revue critique de fixxion française contemporaine* 26 (2023), on literature as a force for "une justice réparatrice" through a quest for "la justesse de la représentation."

filiation in this reparative turn, describing them as "récits de restauration, où l'anamnèse doit conduire à un réaménagement vitaliste et non au ressassement."[98] The authors I examine, however, complicate these idealistic notions and test the boundaries of literature's rehabilitative and emancipatory power. Some do indeed seek to heal ruptured family ties, while others actually aim for a rupture from their lineages. But all test the limits of literary creation in carrying out their pursuits.

The texts feature playful, critical, and even acerbic modes of writing about filiation. They look forward to the potential that future generations hold, as well as dwell upon the mistakes of past ones. The narrator-descendants of the texts are not passive in the face of difficult inheritances; they actively configure their various (and sometimes contradictory) filiations in the narrative construction of identity.[99] In what ways and to what extent might literary creation do justice to the experiences of the previous generation, repair the wounds of a painful family legacy, defy the transmission of oppressive familial conventions, or even enact freedom from an inherited lineage? I attend not only to the act of writing, but also to writers' relationships with literature and language(s), and how language shapes their understanding of and response to filiation. My corpus is necessarily idiosyncratic and does not aim for comprehensiveness. In my emphasis on close readings of the texts rather than overviews of a vast multitude of works, I aim to convey a sense of the diverse perspectives that these selected texts bring to difficult and often painful topics about intergenerational relationships.

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[98] Ibid., 65.

[99] The idea of transmission as an active rather than passive process is informed by the main argument of Béatrice Jongy and Annette Keilhauer, eds., *Transmission/Héritage dans l'écriture contemporaine de soi* (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, 2009).

To tackle the issue of disruption in filiation, I bring in the idea of *trouble*, with its additional shades of meaning in French, and propose the framework of "troubled filiations" with which to examine my corpus of texts. We have considered "filiation" at length; let us turn now to *trouble.* Here, etymology provides an entry point into drawing out the two main meanings of the word in French. The first is specific to French, from the Old French *truble*, and is an adjective that refers to a lack of clarity: physically, the opacity of a substance, and figuratively, vagueness or ambiguity.[100] One notable idiomatic expression, "l'eau trouble" (muddy water), refers to being "dans une/des situation(s) à caractère douteux."[101] The second definition, applicable in both French and English, is derived from the Latin *turbulus* or *turbidus,* and refers to a noun: a state of agitation of order and balance that may be physical, mental, or spiritual.[102] My framework of "troubled filiations" takes both of these definitions into account; even though I write in English, I seek to evoke the resonances that the French word brings.

In the first place, my formulation "troubled filiations" refers to intergenerational relationships of inheritance and transmission that have been disturbed in some way, such as by violence, dispossession, deception, inequality, and/or silence, among others. I use the plural because of the diverse ways that different aspects of filiation are troubled across the texts in my corpus. For some of the texts, the disturbance to filiation manifests as a (sometimes foreboding) ambiguity regarding knowledge of the lives of their predecessors: the ancestral past is *trouble,* unclear and dubious. These works, including that of Chalandon, Salvayre, Rahmy, and Toledo, take an investigative *démarche*, with writers (or at least, their constructed subjectivities) embarking on quests for knowledge about the past in order to elucidate what has been shrouded in secrecy. In

[100] Trésor de la langue française, "trouble."
[101] Ibid.
[102] TLF, "trouble"; Larousse, "trouble."

others, like the texts of Ernaux, Djebar, Laurens, and Debré, filiation troubles the writer, who revisits memories with family members that cause emotional, mental, and even pathological disturbance—memories of *trouble dans la famille*.

Sharing an attentiveness to the multiple meanings of "trouble" and its potential as a tool for examining literary approaches to memory, my framework of "troubled filiations" finds some consanguinity with Aline Mura-Brunel's concept of "lieux du trouble," which she uses to frame her study of Patrick Modiano.[103] She examines spaces of memory that are physically shadowy and psychologically or emotionally disturbing for characters; the search for origins serves as one such form of *lieu du trouble,* as characters return to certain haunting sites to face their pasts.[104] Mura-Brunel is also partly interested in Modiano's treatment of his ambivalent relationship with his parents and his origins.[105] For Mura-Brunel, Modiano's literary prowess compensates for his feeling of illegitimacy, as "un chien qui fait semblant d'avoir un pedigree."[106] In the face of filiations that trouble, that are *troubles,* that have been troubled, or all three, writing can indeed be wielded as a tool to construct new forms of filiation that might replace those disturbed links and provide a symbolic corrective for the reinvention of one's sense of self. But while I build upon the idea that literature can be rehabilitative and liberatory for the construction of an identity, I also seek to nuance it by examining works that interrogate the limits to that power. Overemphasis on literature's salutary potential blunts its critical force.

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[103] Aline Mura-Brunel, *Les lieux du trouble. Lecture de trois romans de Modiano* (Paris: Éditions Lavoir Saint-Martin, 2017).
[104] Ibid., 34.
[105] She devotes a chapter to the autobiographical *Un pedigree* (2005), a portrait of his upbringing in postwar Paris, written in an unsentimental, bureaucratic register.
[106] Ibid., 58. See Modiano, *Un pedigree* (Paris: Gallimard), 2005, 13.

There is one final implication in the "agitation" sense of the word "trouble" to dwell on here. Trouble can assume a political resonance, referring to public unrest or disturbance, and synonymous with "émeute, manifestation, révolte."[107] It is this form of the word that Judith Butler foregrounds in *Gender Trouble* (1990) and that Donna Harraway calls attention to in *Staying with the Trouble* (2016). Butler calls on readers to trouble (disrupt, subvert) traditional notions of gender hierarchy and normalized heterosexuality, and to consider new ways of thinking beyond the male-female binary,[108] while Harraway identifies a collective need to "make trouble" politically in order to combat stasis around the response to climate change, and to "stay with the trouble" by remaining attuned to such contemporary crises.[109] To trouble, in the political sense, is thus to launch a critical, questioning challenge to entrenched conventions via an examination of the forms of oppression embedded within them. We can consider, then, *filiations that writers trouble*: inherited silences and false narratives that they interrogate, shady family secrets that they unearth and examine, hierarchies of legitimacy that they expose. The writers of my corpus also trouble the very notion of filiation, in the sense that they question what filiation entails, how it operates, and the contradictions that exist within it.

Troubled filiations constitute a formal as well as thematic problem: autofictional experiments with language, perspective, and structure are key to the problematization of difficult intergenerational family relationships. Many of the texts I examine feature an aesthetics of fragmentation—such as through temporal discontinuity, nonlinear narrative structure, and juxtapositions of image and text—to portray the retrieval of unknown family histories and of

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[107] TLF, "trouble"; Merriam-Webster, "trouble."
[108] Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2010 [1999]). See 1990 preface specifically for a rumination on the dimensions of "trouble."
[109] Donna Harraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). See Harraway's Introduction for her explanation of "trouble."

disquieting memories of family dynamics. Different modes of the *enquête*, whether through an overtly investigative narrative structure or through a more abstract dive into buried personal memories, are used to represent the critical interrogation of familial pasts. Additionally, the authorial "je" is constructed in relation to its troubled filiations, and this often manifests stylistically in plays with point of view. The descendant's first-person perspective is foregrounded in certain texts, especially through the use of metanarrative comments and a self-conscious awareness of the process of writing, while in others, the narration deviates at times from the first-person and turns to the second- and third-person (including the subjectivities of the narrator's predecessors) in the representation of the family past. Literary construction is a tool for troubling (in the sense of critically examining) filiation, in that it grants the writers a certain creative freedom to pursue their confrontations with familial pasts.

Chapter overviews

Each chapter analyzes a different kind of narrative response to (different types of) troubled filiations. I start by considering texts that adopt but also question the narrative of recovery/homage, and afterward I progress toward paradigms that increasingly resist or enact distance from troubled filiations. Though I discuss the texts of my corpus in pairs within individual chapters, there are intersections and overlaps, recurring motifs, consistent concerns across them. The groupings that I have privileged foreground the most significant points of contact among the texts, but they are not intended as comprehensive delineations.

Chapter One, "Troubled filiations of exile and polyphonic restitution," begins the inquiry into troubled filiations with texts that deal with quests for origins in the face of uprootedness and

displacement. I examine Lydie Salvayre's *Pas pleurer* (2014) and Philippe Rahmy's *Monarques* (2017), in which troubled filiation encompasses two related kinds of exile: the physically/geographically exiled first generation, implicated in dark, sinister historical moments, and the symbolically uprooted second generation that is exiled from their ancestral origins and from the space of memory of their predecessors. The novels feature complementary approaches to the second generation's "restitution," a term I adopt from Viart, of first-generation histories of exile. To restitute these histories is to do justice to them and symbolically give them back to those predecessors. In the process of giving back, the second-generation narrators transform the histories through stylistic crafting: one, by the juxtaposition of familial forebears with forged "elective filiations" with other historical figures, and two, by the inscription of the narrators' own voices into the narratives. Rahmy's and Salvayre's narrators parse the merits of elucidation and opacity in restituting their predecessors' stories of forced exile, alongside an attempt to reconcile opposing parts of their own uprooted identities.

Complicating the idea of descendants' responsibility for restituting forgotten family histories, Chapter Two, "Family fictions and the limits of repair," turns to quests for origins where predecessors have left a painful or shameful legacy for their inheritors, and there are uneasy interpersonal relationships between generations. This chapter also zeroes in on the nexus of literature and healing that I have raised in this Introduction, and attends to the use of invented autofictional elements as a literary strategy for healing difficult family pasts and relations. *Enfant de salaud* (2021) by Sorj Chalandon and *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle* (2020) by Camille de Toledo thematize troubled filiation as enduring false narratives of familial pasts that have obscured the protagonists' knowledge about their origins, disrupted their family relationships, and fractured their sense of

belonging to a lineage. The texts offer alternative strategies of mobilizing autofictional invention to critique those false narratives and heal broken family ties: whereas Chalandon's authorial crafting ultimately relies on factuality as a bulwark to his mythomaniac father's deception, Toledo's text paradoxically leans in to fictional invention in order to rewrite predecessors' misguided narratives of success. The texts test the potential of these two forms of "contre-fiction" in advancing the symbolic healing of the wounds of family history.

Uneasy interpersonal relationships and the burdens of inheritance continue to feature in Chapter Three, "Narrating troubled daughterhood and defiance of familial patriarchy," but with an eye toward resistance against rather than repair of the disruption to filiation. Furthermore, this chapter features a shift towards texts that prioritize the narrators' personal histories, instead of the (pre)histories of parents or ancestors, in the critical reassessment of familial memories. I read Assia Djebar's *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* (2007) and Camille Laurens's *Fille* (2020) as texts that defy through narrative and form troubled filiation, which is understood here as restrictive patriarchal norms that are embedded in familial structures and preserved over generations. The two novels problematize this kind of troubled filiation through the first-person narrators' experiences of delegitimation and alienation as daughters. In addition to portraying daughters' defiance of oppressive male authority, the texts are also defiant in themselves: through incisive writing that plays with the conventions of language and perspective, Djebar and Laurens construct counter-discourses to patriarchal models. At the same time, in their attention to the prevalence of complicity with patriarchal practices, the texts also defy easy and prescriptive solutions to transmitted gender hierarchies.

The fourth and final chapter, "Authorial self-fashioning and ambivalent estrangement from familial and class origins," goes beyond defiance and tests the extent to which literary creation might be used as a tool to shed a problematic filiation altogether. Through a comparative reading of Annie Ernaux's *L'autre fille* (2011) and Constance Debré's *Nom* (2022), I look at ways that the construction of an authorial identity is bound up with the writers' searches for freedom from troubled filiation, which is present in both texts as a nœud of family death and tense relationships with inherited social class identities (working-class for Ernaux, aristocratic and *grand bourgeois* for Debré). The narrators fashion themselves as outsiders from their inherited lineages, and their inscription into new literary lineages are paramount to the construction of those identities. But Debré and Ernaux never fully become estranged from their social and familial origins, for disparate reasons: Ernaux's loyalty to the class background of her upbringing fosters her (albeit fraught) return to them, presenting a stark contrast to Debré's efforts at enacting a rupture from her filiation that ultimately falls back on her inherited social and cultural capital. The texts shed light on the paradoxes of identity situated between self-fashioning and participation in inherited filiations.

The Conclusion wraps up the thesis with a nod to a potential afterlife of this project that synthesizes literary analysis and creative autobiographical writing. I propose that translating the knowledge presented in the thesis into this hybrid genre is a means of paying tribute to the spirit of the literary texts and of extending the public reach of my writing on this subject beyond the academy.

This thesis makes an intervention in the study of filiation as a literary problem in contemporary life-writing, but also contributes to broader debates in the field about the role of

autofictional strategies and modes of writing in representations of the relational, non-unitary nature of the self. Furthermore, this thesis participates in current discussions of the *extrême contemporain* about literature's salutary potential in engaging with the real, with politics, and with History. The literary works I study all exhibit a fascination with filiation but also attend to its burdens, frustrations, and pains. In many of the corpus texts, writers belatedly tackle troubling moments in their lives related to filiation that they have skirted around in their previous literary works. The emotional unpacking that is often required in writing about filiation does not necessarily translate to a therapeutic, cathartic, or liberating experience. Inquiring into one's origins never leads to as neat and straightforward an understanding of one's identity as is often purported. But it is a start.

Chapter One. Troubled filiations of exile and polyphonic restitution

If the desire to find one's roots via the family chronicle is a central generator of twenty-first-century life-writing, what better way to begin the exploration of troubled filiation than with texts that deal with uprootedness and displacement? This chapter examines Lydie Salvayre's *Pas pleurer* (2014) and Philippe Rahmy's *Monarques* (2017) as literary responses to filiations upended by forced relocation and exile: where family histories are grounded in foreign lands and cultures that are nevertheless paradoxically familiar, integral to the writers' identities. In each of the novels, the narrator's experience of troubled filiation is understood as a disrupted connection from their cultural and geographic origins due to preceding family histories of migration and exile to escape from political violence. The narrators are also troubled (in the sense of preoccupied) by these family pasts, which are implicated in dark, sinister historical moments.

Recovering memory and paying homage to predecessors' turbulent experiences leading to exile constitute the driving force for Salvayre's and Rahmy's texts. They subscribe to a broader trend in literary production of writers looking to parents' or ancestors' histories of forced displacement in order to confront the poorly understood parts of their own identities and relationships to the past. As Marianne Hirsch and Nancy Miller have observed,"The emotional effects of diasporic dislocation and relocation also have led many of us in the twenty-first century to recapture, in writing, family memories and stories, in order to rescue lost legacies, to restore connections suspended by time, place, and politics."[1] Though several of the texts in my corpus feature quests for the family past, I start with Salvayre's and Rahmy's works because here, the

[1] Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller, "Introduction," in *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*, eds. Hirsch and Miller (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 10.

quests are not complicated by soured or tense relationships between narrator and predecessors, as they will be in the chapters to follow. With Salvayre and Rahmy, I shall address the problems and challenges that stem specifically from the recovery (or more precisely, as I will explain further on, the "restitution") of family memory through literary creation, before introducing interpersonal troubles to filiation in the later chapters.

Though the novels cover very different historico-political topics, they speak to one another through intersecting concerns about and stylistic approaches to writing family histories of exile. Salvayre's text is framed as a conversation between the narrator (Lidia) and her mother (Montse), both characters' voices melding together in the language of "Fragnol," a sort of hybrid of French and Spanish. They recount Montse's transformative summer of 1936, at the beginning of the Spanish Civil War: she experiences a political awakening among a community of left-wing Republicans resisting the nationalist Franco regime, as well as personal liberation through her first romantic experience. The Nationalists' violent suppression of Republicans, however, ultimately forces Montse to flee to southern France. In parallel to Montse's personal history, Lidia follows French writer Georges Bernanos's concurrent experience through his work *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune* (1938). This is a surprising intertext, given that Bernanos has typically been caricatured as a right-wing Catholic establishment figure. Written when he was living in exile in Majorca, the pamphlet denounces the Nationalists' atrocities and the Catholic Church's complicity. *Monarques* follows a multigenerational history from grandparents Ali and Yvonne's short-lived time in Egypt leading up to WWI, until the former's assassination and the latter's escape back to Switzerland with the newborn Adly, the narrator's father. The narrator's own lived experience is more present in *Monarques* than in *Pas pleurer*: interspersing the family chronicle are reflections on his upbringing

in Switzerland and Paris and travel writing in Tel-Aviv as he dissects his own tangled Jewish-Arab heritage. And, like in Salvayre, a historical narrative accompanies the familial one, but this time, the link between the two is not self-evident. Rahmy's narrator investigates the biography of Herschel Grynszpan, a Polish Jew from Germany residing in 1930s Paris, whose assassination of a German diplomat becomes the pretext for Kristallnacht. In both Rahmy and Salvayre, then, private and public history seem to be located on a continuum rather than in opposition to one another.

Since my interest is in life-writing, I have chosen texts from Rahmy's and Salvayre's œuvres that are most directly autobiographical. The writers' own family histories and lived experiences form the key substance of the works. Moreover, the stories of Herschel Grynszpan and of Georges Bernanos constitute other modalities of factual life-writing: the former, a researched biographical narrative, and the latter, a politico-historical pamphlet. That said, the novels are autofictional in their combination of factual research and imaginative creation of characters and scenes, all in the service of the narrators' restitution of their predecessors' histories.[2] The narrators' names suggest identification with the authors: Montse addresses her daughter as "Lidia," and the narrator of *Monarques* has the surname "Rahmy." As tempting as it may be to equate narrator and author, though, *Pas pleurer* is published as a novel rather than a memoir. *Monarques* is left more ambiguous, without any generic indication from the publisher, though Rahmy has referred to his work as a novel and alluded to the presence of fictionalized details and scenes in his personal correspondences.[3] The narrator asserts in *Pas pleurer* that "FUENTE ES MI VIDA EN QUE MIS OBRAS BEBEN" [My life is a fountain from which my works flow]: even if we read Salvayre's

[2] Natalie Edwards identifies *Pas pleurer* as an autofictional work in her chapter "Salvayre: Translanguaging, Testimony and History," in *Multilingual Life Writing by French and Francophone Women: Translingual Selves* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 29.

[3] For examples of these correspondences, see Lou Lepori, "*Monarques:* Il faut vivre davantage," in *Le Voyageur de cristal* (Geneva: Double Ligne, 2023), 125–42.

voice through Lidia's words in this instance, it still remains that the novel takes inspiration from her lived experience rather than claims to replicate it factually.[4] These two generically porous texts wield autofiction as a tool for the vivid reconstruction of predecessors' pasts, of lives not actually lived by the narrators. They are literary spaces for the exploration of troubled filiations through a constructed narrative identity.

While existing critical scholarship on *Pas pleurer* has mainly attended to the novel's idiosyncratic use of Fragnol and the interplay of narrative voices, none has interrogated these formal dimensions in relation to exile as a facet of troubled filiation. Exile, rather than being critically questioned, is often simply mentioned as a plot point.[5] No literary scholarship, for that matter, has been written on Rahmy's text at all. This chapter offers a comparative reading of these works, positing that *Pas pleurer* and *Monarques* respond to troubled filiation—exile from an ancestral homeland as well as implication in sinister historical pasts—with complementary but distinctive approaches to the restitution, or giving back, of predecessors' histories concerning their forced exile. In both works, restitution through literary creation does not engender a straightforward "return" to a single originary place; rather, a new "home" that crosses national and cultural borders comes into being in the literary space. I establish in the first section that troubled filiation in the two texts encompasses two related kinds of exile: the geographically exiled first generation and the symbolically uprooted second generation that is exiled from the space of

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[4] Lydie Salvayre, *Pas pleurer* (Paris: Points, 2015 [2014]), 15. Translation mine. Capitals original.

[5] This is the case in José Luis Arráez, "Les voix/es de la mémoire dans *Pas pleurer* de Lydie Salvayre," *French Cultural Studies* 28, no. 2 (2017): 186–97; Marianne Braux, "Le sujet de l'expression dans *Pas pleurer* de Lydie Salvayre: une mise en question de la notion d''intériorité littéraire,'" *Revue critique de fixxion française contemporaine* 13 (2016); Edwards, "Lydie Salvayre: Translanguaging, Testimony and History," in *Multilingual Life Writing*, 28–51; Dominique Viart, "«Aviver les cendres d'une histoire blessée». *Pas pleurer*, le récit de filiation dans l'énergie de la langue," in *Lydie Salvayre,* ed. Stéphane Bikialo (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2021), 95–119; and in the same volume, Marie-Pascale Huglo, "Sur le vif. Les *Vies* de Lydie Salvayre," 121–38.

memory of their predecessors. I then propose that the second generation's "restitution" of the first generation's stories attempts to bridge the gap in memory between the two groups; the forging of new (and what I will explain to be "elective") filiations is a key part of the strategies of restitution in these texts. The next section compares each novel's restitution of doubled filiations (the familial and the elective), which creates a network of prehistories where the two kinds of lineages speak to each other on the experiences and contexts informing that first-generation exile. While the juxtaposition of familial and elective predecessors' stories in *Pas pleurer* furthers the narrator's understanding of both, the doubling in *Monarques* foregrounds the mysteries of the first-generation forebears. The final section then looks to the second generation's place in the process of restitution: I explore how the narrators inscribe their own voices into their doubled lineages to negotiate fluid, multifaceted identities amid their displaced origins.

1.1 Two generations of exile: Restitution and the forging of elective filiations

The Oxford English Dictionary defines exile as "prolonged absence from one's native country or a place regarded as home, endured by force of circumstances or voluntarily undergone for some purpose." The first generation of exiles that our two texts deal with (Bernanos and Montse, Herschel and Adly) experience displacement in this physical, geographical sense.[6] For the latter three characters, exile is "endured by force of circumstances": their displacement stems from life-threatening political contexts in their home countries. Rising levels of violence perpetrated by Francoist forces, which Montse personally experiences with the death of her anarchist brother,

[6] In regards to *Monarques*, I will discuss Adly as well as his parents Ali and Yvonne as part of this "first generation" of exiles, as all three are directly implicated in that physical/geographic displacement and forced migration.

Josep, compels her to leave for France.[7] As a newborn, Adly is shuttled out of Egypt and back to Switzerland to avoid potential repercussions from Ali's unspecified political involvements that lead to his murder. The Jewish Herschel escapes from rising Nazism in Germany by moving to Paris, though his end goal is to reach Palestine. On the other hand, Bernanos's relocation to Majorca (and then South America) is closer to a "voluntary" exile, but there is still an element of coercion involved: his family's financial difficulties in France compel the first move, and the threat of fascism in Europe motivates the second one. I do not seek to hierarchize these various experiences of exile by any metric of force or violence, but rather, aim to draw connections among them while acknowledging their specificities.[8] To be clear, the texts discuss only briefly the actual, physical event of the first generation's forced migration, and I provide closer analyses of those scenes later in this chapter. But the novels' attention to the circumstances leading up to that migration (and in Rahmy, the aftermath of living in exile for Herschel) provides apt material for the holistic consideration of the first-generation characters' experiences of exile.

In addition to geographical displacement in the first generation, I attend to another form of exile: an inner state of alienation. This is what applies to the two second-generation narrators of the novels. Marianne Hirsch is helpful for thinking about this conceptual form of exile. She identifies in the second generation a "sense of exile from a world we have never seen and never will see . . . This condition of exile from the space of memory, this diasporic experience is characteristic of postmemory."[9] Approaching exile as a broad concept, however, does pose risks of ahistoricism and

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[7] The 2014 edition of *Pas pleurer* uses "José," whereas the 2015 one uses "Josep," the Catalan spelling of the name.

[8] This approach is informed by Kate Averis, *Exile and Nomadism in French and Hispanic Women's Writing* (London: Legenda, 2014).

[9] Marianne Hirsch, "Past Lives: Postmemories in Exile," in *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances,* ed., Susan R. Sulieman (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 421. Hirsch's contribution is grounded in the context of European Jewish children of Holocaust survivors.

homogenization of very disparate experiences of displacement.[10] Thus, I emphasize the distinction in the two novels between the first-generation, politically-motivated forced migration and the second-generation sense of uprootedness that subsequently arises: two different forms of exile that are nevertheless interlinked. Salvayre's and Rahmy's narrators negotiate the contradictions of identity that result from their prehistories of forced migration. They deal with a disrupted connection to a familial originary space, not only on the level of geography, but also culture and language. Lidia is born and raised in France but conceptually accesses Spain through her mother's memory, within a liminal textual space of Fragnol. Rahmy's narrator, who grows up in Switzerland, searches for his father's Egypt, all the while interrogating his complicated Arab-Jewish ancestry.[11] The two texts thus envision exile in the second generation as a generator of fluid, multiplied identities that resist established national/cultural categorizations. Edward Said has argued that exiles (in the sense of those who have physically moved from their country of origin) have a "contrapuntal" awareness of their multiple cultures and homelands.[12] He uses musical counterpoint, the combination of multiple melody lines played at the same time, as a metaphor for the plural and simultaneous identities that emerge from the condition of exile. The second-generation exiles in *Pas pleurer* and *Monarques* also harbor such a contrapuntal awareness of their origins, which is reflected in the novels' polyphony. Their identities are both simultaneous and fluid: if the narrators of Salvayre's and Rahmy's novels do not migrate themselves, their

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[10] As pointed out in key texts by Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) and James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* 9, no. 3 (1994): 302–338. Amy Kaminsky has also rightly drawn attention to the fact that diluting the term "exile" does an injustice to those who went through violent experiences of forced migration. See Amy K. Kaminsky, *After Exile: Writing the Latin American Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).
[11] The locations of the narrators' births/upbringings also apply respectively to the authors.
[12] Edward Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000 [1984]), 186.

identities do so.[13] The literary space allows for the exploration of those symbolic crossings of languages, heritages, and filiations—on which I shall elaborate in the final section in this chapter.

If, as Hirsch says, "the aesthetics of postmemory is a diasporic aesthetics of temporal and spatial exile that needs simultaneously to rebuild and to mourn," the second-generation exiles in our two texts respond to a duty to recover and do justice to their predecessors' histories of displacement.[14] The threat of oblivion driven by illness renders even more pressing the narrators' responsibilities to consecrate their family histories to text. Montse's declining health and memory in the narrative present of Salvayre's text make the recovery of her story of 1936, the only episode of her life that she can still recall with clarity, a race against time.[15] In *Monarques,* the parental figure of Adly has already passed away from illness in 1984; the narrator's search for his father in the narrative present is a form of mourning. But the time pressure on writing stems from the narrator's awareness that his own life will likely be shortened by brittle bone disease.[16] Telling Adly's story and his broader family history assumes a certain urgency (and indeed, *Monarques* was the final text that Rahmy published in his lifetime).

The two narrators deal with their exile-troubled filiations and bridge the gap in memory between the first and second generations through the "restitution" of histories. This term is from Dominique Viart, who identifies an "éthique de la restitution" as a driving force of the *récit de*

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[13] Rosi Braidotti's notion of "nomadic consciousness" informs my reflection on the fluidity of transcultural and transnational identities. Granted, her work uses the language of migration to build a framework in feminist theory rather than to reflect on exile or migration. Nevertheless, "nomadic consciousness" is a useful model in its understanding of subjectivity that is based on movement, going between fixed identities, borders and categories, that reimagines a new form of belonging within the space of displacement. See Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011 [1994]).

[14] Hirsch, "Past Lives," 423.

[15] Salvayre, *Pas pleurer,* 16.

[16] Philippe Rahmy, *Monarques* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 2017), 83. Brittle bone disease afflicts both the narrator and the author.

filiation. For Viart, restitution "ne dit pas simplement l'effort pour figurer ce qui fut, il dit aussi *l'hommage* que les écrivains en font à ceux dont ils parlent . . . Restituer c'est certes reconstruire, rétablir la mémoire oubliée de ce qui fut, mais c'est aussi—peut-être surtout—*rendre* quelque chose à quelqu'un."[17] Following from Viart, restitution, as I use it, is an active, creative process of recovering memory through literature. It is invested in doing justice to predecessors in all their complexities, more so than in producing a strictly factual account of the past. And, most importantly, restitution, as a representational and performative act, presupposes an agent to which something is given, which distinguishes it from mere "reconstruction" or "restoration." So, what is symbolically given back in the process of restitution? Stories and voices. Laurent Demanze's description of the process is insightful here: "*restituer* à leurs auteurs des témoignages suscités, renouer des vies obscures à la mémoire commune, rendre indirectement la possibilité d'une prise de parole."[18] Salvayre's and Rahmy's narrators search for a suitable language to channel their predecessors' voices through the text and give their stories back to them—and thus save them from the threat of forgetting.

In emphasizing fidelity to the first generation, however, Viart and Demanze do not adequately attend to the role of the second generation in transforming the stories with new energy and perspective in the process of giving back. The narrators of Salvayre's and Rahmy's texts renew their family histories by bringing them into conversation with their own "elective filiations," respectively Bernanos and Herschel. I use the word "elective," in the sense of chosen, in contrast to "familial." While familial filiation is also contingent on choice and not just heredity (to a certain

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[17] Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier, *La Littérature française au présent: héritage, modernité, mutations* (Paris: Bordas, 2008 [2005]), 92–3. Italics original.
[18] Laurent Demanze, *Un nouvel âge de l'enquête. Portraits de l'écrivain contemporain en enquêteur* (Paris: Corti, 2019), 178. Italics original.

extent, one can decide whether to embrace or reject a blood lineage), elective filiation stresses the voluntariness involved from the start. The relationships between the narrators and their elective predecessors are not self-evident; rather, they come into existence within the text. What qualifies Bernanos and Herschel as "elective filiations," more than just influences on the narrators (of which there are admittedly many)? In the first place, they are present in the text as characters, the way that familial predecessors are present, and not just as ideas or references.[19] We read their thoughts and speech, whether derived from written records or imagined by the narrators. Moreover, the narrators situate themselves and/or their projects in relation to their elective forebears. First, this relationality operates on a political level. Lidia makes a connection between her motivation to write in response to the rise of right-wing nationalisms in twenty-first-century Europe and Bernanos's imperative to denounce the Franco regime's atrocities and the Church's complicity. Present-day fascist and nationalist movements seem to be the heirs of the Francoist ideals of the 1930s: reading Bernanos "vient raviver mon appréhension de voir quelques salauds renouer aujourd'hui avec ces idées infectes que je pensais, depuis longtemps, dormantes."[20] Not only does the violent history depicted in *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune* resonate with the present, Bernanos himself is a model of a writer speaking out against injustice and abuses of power, an intellectual forebear for the narrator. Lidia situates her literary project as a descendant of Bernanos's when she addresses the germ of both their works: "Au seuil d'écrire son livre et de dénoncer les méfaits de cette Église . . . Bernanos hésite un instant. Qu'a-t-il à gagner à cette entreprise? Et qu'ai-je moi-même, me dis-je, à gagner à la faire revivre?"[21] The use of free indirect discourse in the first question posed here, blurring

[19] This idea is informed by Viart, "«Aviver les cendres d'une histoire blessée»," 100: "[Bernanos] dessille le regard, contribue à l'intellection des événements et des situations. ...Aussi Bernanos est-il véritablement présent *comme tel* dans le livre: un individu et pas seulement une pensée."
[20] Salvayre, *Pas pleurer,* 17.
[21] Ibid., 90.

Bernanos's and the narrator's voices, textually enacts the intertwining of their projects. The reprise of "gagner" from Bernanos's imagined internal reflection in the question that the narrator poses to herself further articulates her position as an inheritor of his work. Her admiration of Bernanos's ethical sensibility (especially given his background as a conservative Catholic) provides an implicit answer to that second question: "Mais il se décide à franchir le pas, non pour convaincre, dit-il, encore moins pour scandaliser, mais pour pouvoir se regarder en face jusqu'à la fin de ses jours et rester fidèle à l'enfant qu'il fut et que l'injustice accablait."[22] If *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune* is first and foremost motivated by the writer's inner confrontation with himself, Lidia's writing might also be seen in this light. Taking Bernanos's text as a model of moral clarity, she contests contemporary injustices by looking into her family origins and parsing her mother's turbulent experience of the Spanish Civil War.

Rahmy's novel also draws links between fascism in western Europe in Herschel's context of the 1930s and nationalism, fanaticism, and populism in the twenty-first century, though much more obliquely than *Pas pleurer*. While en route to Israel, Herschel's unreached destination in his escape from Nazism, the narrator's brief but incisive reflection on the 2016 election of Donald Trump as president of the USA is one such suggestion of the political link between the present and past. Through irony, he implies that Trump's supporters, in particular, working-class Americans who have felt largely sidelined by politicians, have been misled in the belief that he will advance their best interests: "Leur champion sera le président de tous les Américains, mais surtout des petits, des modestes, des sans-grade, de toute cette population qui rêve en grand, plein pot, plein délire, amen, alléluia."[23] The beginning of the sentence critiques the perspective of Trump's

[22] Ibid., 91.
[23] Rahmy, *Monarques*, 31.

partisans by emulating it, with the sentence then turning to highlight their misguided fervor. "Amen" and "alléluia" additionally target the religious-tinted rhetoric invoked in the fanaticism around Trump. The twenty-first-century political contexts in both novels are markedly different from the historical moments of the elective predecessors, but there is a certain continuity of nationalism that inflects the narrators' preoccupations with their troubled prehistories.

In addition to politics, narrative ethics frames the narrators' relationships to their elective predecessors, analogous to what we have seen for the familial ancestors. The narrators' drive to consecrate these historical figures' stories to text is to prevent them from slipping into oblivion as well as to bring them the public recognition that they deserve. On this front, the distinction between narrators and authors is less important, and we can derive insight from what the authors have said about their subjects. Rahmy takes up the responsibility of rehabilitating Herschel's image, presenting him in his nuances beyond the predominant historical narrative of his position as the scapegoat for Kristallnacht: "Héros maudit, contre-héros, personnage passé à la trappe de l'Histoire, Herschel Grynszpan n'a pas eu la réception qu'il mérite, à mon sens."[24] *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune* has been largely neglected in the public sphere, and Bernanos himself as a solitary writer, self-exiled for large parts of his working career, kept to "the fringes of literary life."[25] By inscribing Bernanos's text into her novel and incorporating him as a character, Salvayre repositions the writer in the French canon, paying tribute to his ethical sensibility in his disavowal of his initial affiliations with Franco and the Action française. Moreover, she renews recognition of

[24] Rahmy, "Lettre à Françoise de Maulde, 1 août 2015"; see Lepori, *Le Voyageur de cristal*, 127.
[25] Lydie Salvayre, "A Conversation with Lydie Salvayre," interview by Adrian Nathan West, *Music and Literature: A Humanities Journal,* July 6, 2017.

his text as an important contribution to the historical archive on the Spanish Civil War.[26] The project of restitution undertaken in the two novels applies, then, to elective as well as familial predecessors: attempting to pay homage and "rendre justice," as Rahmy has put it, to Bernanos's and Herschel's contributions to History, and searching for a way to give them back their stories in all their subtleties.[27]

Finally, Bernanos and Herschel are elective predecessors and not just mere influences because their histories, alongside that of the familial predecessors, are treated as serious narrative concerns. This is why I am, in a way, putting the elective and the familial on level ground by qualifying both as "filiations." Both filiations shape the structure of the novels, via the inclusion of multiple narrative and temporal planes. The two novels use the present tense to relate events in the past as well as in the narrative present, in this way forging a connection across temporal boundaries. *Pas pleurer* glides in and out of the narrator's conversation with Montse in the present, the reconstructed story of Montse's summer of 1936, and Bernanos's experiences in Majorca as related in *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune. Monarques* weaves together four main narratives: the narrator's recollections on his childhood and the death of his father; his experience in Israel in the narrative present; the story of Ali, Yvonne, and Adly in the 1910s; and Herschel's experience in the 1930s. The narrators' preoccupations with family history are related to a need to interrogate the troubling resonances between their familial and elective predecessors' experiences. Speaking of Montse's and Bernanos's narratives, Lidia points to her objective "de déchiffrer les raisons du trouble que ces deux récits lèvent en moi"; Rahmy's narrator indicates that "Herschel me hante,

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[26] Gunnthorunn Gudmundsdottir, "Narratives of Forgetting: Memory and Literary Form," in Patrick Crowley and Shirley Jordan, eds., *What Forms Can Do: The Work of Form in 20th- and 21st- Century French Literature and Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 106.
[27] "Lettre à Evan Fallenberg, 5 septembre 2015"; see Lepori, *Le Voyageur de cristal,* 128.

comme me hante mon père, comme l'histoire des juifs et des musulmans ne cesse de s'écrire, mêlant les voix des morts à celles des vivants."[28] The texts forge connections between familial and elective predecessors that would otherwise not have existed. And the restitution of the narrators' twofold prehistories facilitate a deeper reflection on how exile driven by forced migration and political violence have disrupted their relationships to their roots.

The novels' incipits establish the narrative setup of the doubled filiations and provide insight into the nature of the relationship between elective and familial. Both narrators begin by relating their historical predecessors to a parent; but whereas Lidia is clear about the resonances between Montse and Bernanos, Rahmy's narrator leaves the connection between Herschel and Adly ambiguous. Let us look first at *Pas Pleurer*'s opening: "Au nom du Père du Fils et du Saint-Esprit, monseigneur l'évêque-archevêque de Palma désigne aux justiciers, d'une main vénérable où luit l'anneau pastoral, la poitrine des mauvais pauvres. C'est Georges Bernanos qui le dit."[29] The formulation "mauvais pauvre" is what links Bernanos to Montse, as we discover a few sentences later: "La guerre civile est sur le point d'éclater, et ma mère est une mauvaise pauvre. Une mauvaise pauvre est une pauvre qui ouvre sa gueule."[30] Montse's experience both clarifies and adds to Bernanos's meaning of "mauvais pauvres." In the first place, the expression refers to the leftist working-class Republicans who are fighting the Nationalists and thus becoming fatally targeted, with the Catholic Church's blessing. Seeing as she will come to embrace the Republican cause and be forced to seek refuge abroad, Montse is indeed a "mauvaise pauvre" in this sense. But the injustice she contends with as a "mauvaise pauvre" is first understood here in the private, domestic sphere, after a meeting with the bourgeois Don Obregón to arrange her employment as a maid in

[28] Salvayre, *Pas pleurer,* 17; Rahmy, *Monarques*, 106–7.
[29] Salvayre, *Pas pleurer,* 11.
[30] Ibid.

his household. Her refusal to work there following his condescending remark about her ("Elle a l'air bien modeste") is a revolt against the expectation of docility due to her working-class status.[31] Montse's anecdote refracts Bernanos's words to foreground the civil war's class dimension and illustrate how it operates on a smaller-scale, interpersonal level. Their mutually informative inflection of "mauvais pauvre" is emblematic of how Montse and Bernanos bring greater meaning to each other's experience of the civil war. The narrator appears at first to position Bernanos's text as a more comprehensive account of the war, meant to fill in the gaps in Montse's oral history: "Je l'écoute [Montse] me dire ses souvenirs que la lecture parallèle que je fais des *Grands Cimetières sous la lune* de Bernanos assombrit et complète."[32] And indeed the structure of the novel, with critical reflections on quotations of Bernanos operating as short interludes in Montse's story, befits that vision. But ultimately, as we shall soon see in greater depth, neither of the predecessors' stories is complete, and their juxtaposition creates more nuanced perspectives on the civil war.

Narrative voice is the site where these two figures—and the two filiations they represent—meet symbolically. While Lidia's voice had initially receded to foreground Bernanos's voice in the opening lines, it slips shortly afterward into Montse's to convey the latter's furious resistance to her social class determination: "Ça veut dire, je bouillais ma chérie je bouillais, ça veut dire que je serai une bonne bien bête et bien obédissante [sic]!"[33] The switch to a conversational, colloquial tone to capture Montse's speech, in contrast to the austerity of Bernanos's inaugurating words, points to the coexistence of multiple registers and multiple subjects through the porousness of narrative voice. This polyphony is an important element of the novel that I shall consider in more detail in the final part of the chapter. The lack of quotation marks in both instances allows

[31] Ibid., 13.
[32] Ibid., 17.
[33] Ibid.

for each predecessor's voice and Lidia's voice to come together; both predecessors have access to the space of narration. Lidia, as reader and listener, mediates their dialogue to foreground their points of contact more so than their oppositions, as seen here with the attention to the "mauvais pauvre." The restitution of the predecessors' experiences requires active interventions from Lidia.

Rahmy's narrator, on the other hand, is much more reticent than Lidia about the relationship between familial and elective predecessors. The novel's opening paragraph establishes that the elective predecessor's history is intertwined with a pivotal moment in the narrator's familial history, but does not provide any explanation as to why or how: "Vient le jour où l'enfance prend fin. Cela fait longtemps qu'Herschel Grynszpan m'accompagne. Le projet d'écrire son histoire est né à la mort de mon père."[34] The construction of this final sentence raises the question whether Herschel's "birth" into the narrator's literary world is contingent on the death of the latter's father, Adly. Might the elective filiation be a kind of substitute for the disrupted familial filiation, Herschel becoming a figure of guidance and companionship for the narrator who has abdicated childhood with the loss of his father? Muddled temporality in this paragraph adds an additional layer of confusion: the "death" of the narrator's childhood innocence is narrated in the present tense, but the following sentences imply that it is the result of the father's death, which is related in the *passé composé*. The incipit's subsequent turn to a description of the narrator's family home in Switzerland builds on the overarching sense of ambiguity, but begins to hint at the connection between the elective and the familial. "L'extrémité du Grand-Champ disparaît dans la brume," the narrator observes from the house, this impaired visuality evoking the French meaning of the word *trouble* as "unclear."[35] But the narrator's comments on the landscape also seem to point obliquely

[34] Rahmy, *Monarques,* 11.
[35] Ibid.

to the doubled filiations established in the first paragraph: "Le ciel nocturne, la terre enneigée, contraires et complémentaires. Deux plans superposés."[36] The familial and the elective are, like the snow and the sky, distinct but "superposés": it will be up to the reader to parse through the layers of filiation to identify how they are "contraires et complémentaires."

If "mauvais pauvre" was the key phrase relating Montse and Bernanos, the idea of the "terre promise" in *Monarques*'s incipit presents a tentative link between Herschel and Adly. In the narrator's description of the land near the family home, he muses on a "Forêt profonde, impénétrable, terre de personne et terre promise."[37] The incipit goes on to conclude with the narrator leaving home for Tel-Aviv, Herschel's *terre promise*, "la ville dont Herschel a tant rêvé, sans jamais l'atteindre."[38] The *terre promise,* understood in both instances as a land of dreams where one's hopes can come true, takes on a biblical resonance in Herschel's case: the land promised to Abraham and his descendants, and to which the Jews lay claim as an ancestral homeland. The *terre promise* also encompasses both the foreign and the familiar: spaces of mystery and imagination, ultimately unattainable. Given the fact that, as the novel's progression will show, Herschel and Adly are mysterious figures, with histories that resist full elucidation, we might read these lines as a subtle indicator that the narrator's twofold search for his predecessors will be a journey to a *terre promise* of knowledge into his roots. But again, as in the veiled symbolism of the Swiss landscape's "deux plans superposés," the narrator's allusions to a *terre promise* only make an oblique connection between Herschel and Adly, leaving us with a greater interpretive (or, at least, speculative) role in reading the text. In contrast to Salvayre's Lidia, who actively mediates the

[36] Ibid., 12.
[37] Ibid., 11–2.
[38] Ibid., 13.

discourses exchanged between her familial and elective predecessors, Rahmy's narrator plays a much more hands-off role.

Whereas Salvayre turns to Bernanos as a historical source, and Bernanos's and Montse's stories make up for each other's blind spots in telling the history of the beginning of Franco regime, Rahmy's narrator's forged filiation with Herschel contains a greater degree of mystery, and the points of contact between the elective and the familial are blind spots in themselves. Building on the examination of how the incipits of the novels set up the relationship between the two filiations, I will now look at key moments in the texts where the elective and the familial speak to one another, whether explicitly or implicitly, on experiences informing first-generation exile.

1.2 A web of troubling prehistories: Elucidation and opacity

While Salvayre interrogates her prehistories of exile in order to elucidate them, Rahmy writes his while preserving his predecessors' opacity. But in their own ways, Salvayre's and Rahmy's approaches to writing their twofold filiations allow for new insights about both lineages to surface, as their predecessors' histories come out of isolation and enter a larger web of meaning. Let's begin with Salvayre. The significance of the juxtaposition of Bernanos's and Montse's stories mostly relies on their stark differences for most of the novel, but towards the end it turns to their convergences. The most important contrast is between Montse's optimistic pursuit of working-class liberation at this moment of civil war (influenced by Josep and Diego, who will be Montse's first husband) and Bernanos's chilling observations of the Nationalist suppression of Republicans happening concurrently in Majorca. The revolutionary fervor of 1936 is a rebellion against the old guard and a breaking with the past generation, in terms of both politics and family. The collective young

generation's defiance of tradition in the pursuit of their own autonomy is refracted through Diego's and Josep's opposition to their respective parents. Joining the Communist party is, for Diego, part of a process of self-fashioning in his attempt to extricate himself from his bourgeois filiation: "D'ailleurs, il hait tous ces paysans qui le regardent comme un señorito au cul bordé de nouilles, lui qui refuse farouchement d'être un fils à papa, lui qui veut justement oublier son papa, lui qui veut oublier sa naissance, lui qui veut oublier la grande famille des Burgos et se faire un destin qui ne procède que de lui seul."[39] The paratactic syntax here, with the anaphora-led phrases building upon each other, conveys the intensity of Diego's desire for liberation from his lineage. Moreover, the repetition of the singular pronoun "lui" expresses his pursuit of an individual identity independent of his roots. Josep, too, rails against his father after his political awakening to anarchism. In one key scene early in the novel, Josep speaks out against his father's denigration of leftists who call for the redistribution of property "à des feignants et à des incapables": "Je ne vous ai jamais manqué de respect . . . mais aujourd'hui je vous demande d'en avoir pour moi. C'est la première fois de sa vie que Josep tient tête à son père, la première fois qu'il défie son autorité."[40] Josep's respectful language, communicated through the *vouvoiement*, restraining any anger or passion, contrasts with his (drunken) father's aggressive assertions of "aquí mando yo" [I'm in charge here]: the narration renders us sympathetic to the child's resistance against the father, a figure of harsh control.[41] The "joie irrépressible" that Josep's resistance elicits in Montse signals the exhilarating start of her own awakening to resistance against power structures.

The description of Montse's and Josep's experience at the anarchist commune in Barcelona also highlights the overwhelming joy of freedom and optimistic belief in radical change that

[39] Salvayre, *Pas pleurer*, 42.
[40] Ibid., 46.
[41] Ibid. Translation mine.

characterizes 1936 for them. The commune is an exceptional time and space, both in Montse's and Josep's lives and in Spain at that time: "Il y a dans les rues une euphorie, une allégresse et quelque chose d'heureux dans l'air qu'ils n'ont jamais connu et ne connaîtront plus. Les cafés sont bondés, les magasins ouverts, les passants qui déambulent semblent saisis d'une sorte d'ivresse, et tout fonctionne formidablement et comme en temps de paix."[42] In that first sentence, the use of three different synonyms for joy, the last one more of a vague formulation than a specific word, attests to the difficulty of describing the special atmosphere at the commune *avec justesse.* Given the extraordinary functioning of the city in a time of war, the anarchist experiment seems to be a success, an emblem of hope for the future. For Montse, the daily politico-intellectual discussions, discovery of quotidian urban novelties, and first love and sexual experience render life in the commune an almost magical existence: "Montse, qui se sent des ailes, déclare que la vie est un enchantement, un encanto. Il y a dans l'air de la ville un légèreté, une allégresse qui accélèrent le temps et ne laissent nulle part à l'angoisse. Que j'aime vivre! je me disais, me dit ma mère."[43] The language of the fantastic, with the evocation of "des ailes," "un enchantement," and "un encanto" [charm], elevates the experience to an otherworldly level, even hinting at a degree of romanticization in Montse's memory. But the indication of reported speech in that final sentence signals the narrator's insistence that the narrated experience at the commune is not fiction, but life as Montse had experienced it, and indeed, a time when she felt that "la vie devenait véridique."[44]

Montse's story, then, is one of joy, pleasure, discovery, and freedom—at odds with Bernanos's somber account of wartime. Lidia explicitly draws our attention to this contrast when briefly switching from the narrative of Josep's clash with his father to Bernanos's moment of

[42] Ibid., 110.
[43] Ibid., 120.
[44] Ibid., 123.

realization that the Nationalists, with whom his son had volunteered to fight, are undertaking a campaign of *épuration*: "Montse, comme son frère, ignore à ce moment-là les crimes dont Bernanos est à Palma le témoin épouvanté."[45] A gruesome anecdote cited from *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune* further heralds a sobering shift in tone from Montse's and Josep's joyful optimism for revolution: "Quelque jours après le coup d'État, deux cents habitants de la petite ville de Manacor sont jugés suspects, «tirés de leur lit en pleine nuit, conduits par fournées au cimetière, abattus d'une balle dans la tête, et brûlés en tas un peu plus loin»."[46] The suspected resistants here are not active revolutionaries, and the successive use of the passive voice via the past participles in the narration of their brutal murder expresses a sense of helplessness in the face of the Phalange.

Montse's narrative sees a shift towards the ominousness that Bernanos's perspective consistently brings after the end of the glorious summer of 1936, and especially when Josep dies in 1937 during the defense of their village town hall from the Phalange. Josep's death heralds the rise of fear and despair, displacing hope for Republican victory: in the aftermath, the atmosphere of the village catches up with Bernanos's account of terror and violence in Majorca. Whereas the village once had to contend only with "des imputations calomnieuses somme toute banales et quelques polémiques énervées," a new crisis of morale now emerges and the threat of physical violence becomes ubiquitous. Short, straightforward sentences about collective sentiment testify to the austerity of the situation: "Chacun fut sur ses gardes. Chacun regarda l'autre comme un ennemi en puissance . . . Tout le monde eut peur de tout le monde. L'acrimonie et la méfiance furent dans tous les cœurs. Et chez certains, la haine."[47] If the civil war has fractured Spain on a national level, it also manifests in the micro-environment of the village.

[45] Ibid., 50.
[46] Ibid., 51.
[47] Ibid., 266–7.

Though the references to Bernanos are important in bringing attention to the sobering parts of history that Montse's narrative postpones, the latter does also nuance understanding of the civil war in ways that add to the former's account. The first of these nuances concerns the question of political violence. While the Bernanos quotations consistently denounce the violence enacted by the Franco regime and condoned by the Church, the key scene of an uneasy Josep's interaction with anarchists who celebrate the murder of two priests raises the question of whether violence becomes justified when it is mobilized in resistance against the oppressors. A succession of rhetorical questions from Josep in free indirect discourse suggests that neither Nationalists nor Republicans should have a moral monopoly over the use of violence:

> On peut donc tuer des hommes sans que leur mort occasionne le moindre sursaut de conscience, la moindre révolte? On peut donc tuer des hommes comme on le fait des rats? Sans en éprouver le moindre remords? Et s'en flatter? Mais dans quel égarement, dans quel délire faut-il avoir sombré pour qu'une «juste cause» autorise de telles horreurs?"[48]

The killing of priests, then, cannot be legitimized as a form of opposition to the Church's hypocrisy and complicity in Francoist atrocities: using the same lethal tools as the aggressor to fight undermines the resistant cause itself. Josep (and the narrator) imply in these questions that the two anarchists have abdicated their humanity (and indeed, their sanity) in their gleeful participation in wartime violence. Josep's realization that "chaque nuit, des expéditions punitives de miliciens assassinent des prêtres et des suspects prétendument fascistes" is, as the narrator points out, somewhat akin to Bernanos's shock in confronting the truth of the Nationalists' atrocities committed against suspected resistants.[49] They offer perspectives on two sides of the same coin.

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[48] Ibid., 134.
[49] Ibid.

Montse's personal victory raises yet another complication for the broader narrative of the failure of the working-class revolution. 1936 sees Montse breaking the intergenerational transmission of poverty and class consciousness in her family: the revolution, at least in Montse's eyes, managed to "modifier l'ADN familiale."[50] Genetics is used here as a metaphor for the seemingly deterministic nature of filiation when it comes to social class; "l'air modeste" which Don Jaume identifies in Montse back in the novel's incipit is "un air hérité d'une longue lignée de paysans pauvres, et son empreinte inscrite sur sa gueule et dans sa chair."[51] The inheritance of poverty has both a social and bodily manifestation, the latter through learned physical habits that become ingrained. But the hopes of class upheaval symbolically come to fruition within the family through Lidia's half-sister Lunita, born in 1936 without a trace of "cet air de modestie transmis de génération en génération comme un trait dominant du génome et un appel à l'humiliation."[52] Montse's escape to France with Lunita inaugurates the beginning of a lineage uprooted from the family's Spanish origins but free from that transmitted "modestie." The narrator's recovery of her mother's small-scale victory prevents it from otherwise slipping into the subsuming narrative of the failed revolution.

Montse and Bernanos both flee from Spain in 1938; this year brings their hitherto contrasting, parallel stories into full convergence. Whereas the novel zooms in and slows down on the years 1936 and 1937, narrative time speeds up during the episodes of migration. The narrator recounts Bernanos's long process of moving to South America in a single short paragraph: "Après avoir passé avec son épouse une dernière soirée française en compagnie de José Bergamín, Bernanos et sa famille embarquèrent à Marseille le 20 juillet. Escale à Dakar. Cap sur le Brésil. Puis direction

[50] Ibid., 236.
[51] Ibid., 184.
[52] Ibid.

le Paraguay."[53] The fragmented phrases condense the complex, multi-stage process of migration into a rapid-fire, objective listing of landmarks, foregrounding the transitory nature of those places for the itinerant Bernanos. The shortening of the sentences also elicits the feeling that memory of the move has eroded away and survives only in its most reduced form. In this regard, the narrative of Bernanos's migration complements that of Montse's forced move to southern France with newborn Lunita: most of this time has also faded from her memory. For this reason, this episode features Lidia's voice much more heavily than elsewhere in the novel that uses the simultaneous doubled voice with Montse. Lidia, then, is especially tasked here with the proper restitution of Montse's experience. If Bernanos's migration is told mostly through an objective, factual lens, Montse's clearly exhibits Lidia's pride. She adopts an admiring tone in paying homage to her mother's perseverance: "Elle fut, malgré sa jeunesse, dans une fatigue sans nom, mais elle continua chaque jour à mettre un pied devant l'autre, ADELANTE! [forward!] l'esprit uniquement occupé à trouver les moyens de survivre…"[54] There is an emphasis on the lengthy duration of the migration to France: Lidia tells the episode through overflowing sentences with numerous clauses stitched together by commas, and there are two consecutive statements that Montse walked "pendant des jours et des jours."[55] The compressed narrative temporality for Montse's and Bernanos's episodes of migration in the larger context of the novel, despite how drawn-out they were in reality, points to the distortion of time in the liminal space of displacement—the strangeness of being situated nowhere.

Bernanos and Montse, then, provide distinctive perspectives on the beginning of the civil war that, when brought together, elucidate in greater depth the circumstances that led to their

[53] Ibid., 172.
[54] Ibid., 276.
[55] Ibid., 277.

migrations from Spain. Moreover, in constructing an unseemly dialogue between two figures—the bourgeois, conservative, and Catholic but anti-Phalangist Bernanos as intellectual forebear, and the peasant-class, anarchist- and communist-sympathizer Montse—the novel counters simplistic and reductive associations of political identities (as Montse/Lidia lament, "Dans l'Espagne en guerre de 36, les subtilités, à la trappe!")[56] Lidia pays homage to her elective and familial forebears' respective contributions to nuancing the memory of this moment in history.

The elective and the familial in Rahmy's novel also constitute an unseemly combination, but for another reason from Salvayre's: the two narratives concerned encompass different historical moments. Whereas metanarrative comments in *Pas pleurer* serve to draw insights from clearly established links between elective and familial, *Monarques*'s self-reflexive remarks demonstrate the narrator's own lack of knowledge about why their two filiations should come together. In one instance, he acknowledges this limitation through winding prose that reflects that introspective uncertainty: "J'ignore comment ces deux silences se répondent, ces deux royaumes complémentaires, quête biographique et quête littéraire, monde musulman et monde juif, s'ils s'ignorent au fond de moi, ou s'ils ont même conscience l'un de l'autre."[57] The language in this sentence emphasizes the pairing of elective and familial, as tenuous as it may be. The doubling is enacted through writing rather than through any natural, self-evident convergence. "Royaumes" and "quêtes" as metaphors for filiation, words evocative of medieval romances, gesture toward the role of literary creation and imagination as part of the process of the narrator's search for his twofold origins. One might critique the contrived nature of the doubled filiation in *Monarques*. Salvayre deliberately brought Montse and Bernanos into dialogue because they each shed light

[56] Ibid., 36.
[57] Rahmy, *Monarques,* 106.

upon the other's experience; Herschel and Adly, on the other hand, are brought together by *le hasard*. The narrator learns of Herschel for the first time on the same day that he receives word of his father's imminent death, this anecdote delayed until the middle of the novel. Seated outside a café in Paris, he sees the name of a company, "HERSCHEL," on a truck, then stumbles across an article in *Le Parisien* on Herschel Grynszpan. The narrator's preoccupation with this coincidence verges on fanciful overinterpretation: "Le monde s'arrêtait, se remettait en marche. La vie m'envoyait un signe. J'étais incapable de le déchiffrer. Mais je n'ai cessé d'interroger ce nom surgi de nulle part, d'examiner les faits, de les recouper."[58] Why does he put so much pressure on a random encounter? The trouble that the name "Herschel" elicits in the narrator may be inexplicable, but his fixation is perhaps a realistic response: there is a certain degree of arbitrariness in the occurrences that come to influence (or haunt) us and shape our identities.

As he investigates his doubled filiations, Rahmy's narrator accordingly struggles with the difficulty of finding a language that is suitable for writing about Adly's complicated origin story in Egypt and Herschel's mysterious biography. In one metanarrative comment, the insistence on the interrogative mode testifies to the narrator's self-doubt in being able to deliver on the responsibility of restitution: "Pourrai-je éclairer sa [Herschel's] vie, comme je me souviens de ma propre enfance? Produire une forme approximative, mais plus brillante que les images de l'instant présent?"[59] The vocabulary of light here is used to articulate the challenge of understanding and writing about his opaque predecessor. Another self-reflexive remark remains in this lexical field with a reprise of the word "éclairer," this time about his father: "Aujourd'hui plus que jamais, je regrette qu'il [Adly] ne soit plus là pour m'éclairer, m'aider à trouver les mots justes, ces mots que personne ne trouve ou

[58] Ibid., 102–3.
[59] Ibid., 95.

n'ose prononcer."[60] Language (or more precisely, its inaccessibility) stymies restitution of both the family history and Herschel's biography. If the narrator can only ever produce "une forme approximative," the recourse to hinted resonances between elective and familial (rather than explicit connections) is fitting for such an awareness of the limits to knowledge about the past and necessarily flawed representations of it. The subtle, oblique points of contact between the two filiations emerge through interpretation of the text, rather than by Rahmy spelling it out in the way that Salvayre does. Moreover, the fragmented storytelling, with different narrative planes extending across disparate sections, adds to the difficulty of making sense of the resonances between filiations. The reader of *Monarques,* then, must play a more involved role in the production of meaning. The narrator takes us along for the vertiginous journey into the opaque past.

We can trace a thread between Herschel's migration from Hanover to Paris (en route to Palestine) and Yvonne's (pregnant with Adly) and Ali's move from Switzerland to Egypt. In both instances, the search for a homeland motivates the migration, but the claim to that land is bound up in complicated politics. Herschel's gradual consciousness of his Jewishness throughout his youth gives rise to a growing desire to move to Palestine, the *terre promise,* to reprise that key phrase from the incipit. A pivotal moment from his childhood informing this desire comes from a rabbi's counsel: "Tu n'es pas d'ici . . . Ni toi ni notre peuple ne serez jamais allemands ou polonais. Il faut partir. Rentrer en Palestine."[61] "Rentrer" here is counterintuitive, as Herschel has never been to Palestine; the rabbi implies that their life "ici," in Germany, is one of exile, whereas Palestine is the true homeland of the Jews. The young Herschel "croyait entendre chanter ces frères et ces sœurs inconnus, allumant des feux dressant des campements sur les plages de Palestine": the language of

[60] Ibid., 105.
[61] Ibid., 49.

family here points to the ideal of Palestine as an ancestral refuge.[62] But the narrator, speaking from a twenty-first-century perspective, is quick to remind us that the space of Palestine has been long fraught with claims from conflicting interests: "Israel, Palestine, Shoah, Intifada, parallèles hasardeux, passerelles impossibles entre des réalités trop vastes, trop complexes pour oser prendre la parole, pour affirmer quoi que ce soit sans être broyé par une proposition contraire, tout aussi légitime, demandant des réponses tout aussi urgentes et vitales."[63] The four terms at the beginning of this sentence are key in the debate over Israeli and Palestinian national control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip: Israel invokes the Holocaust as justification for establishing a state for Jewish people, while Palestine calls for resistance against Israeli settlement in the territory where Palestinians had once laid claim. But the narrator's reticence, embodied in the mere listing of terms without any deliberation, hints at a bewildered hesitation to speak on this charged military and political conflict. This bewilderment stems from an attention to the nuances of both sides' claims to the territory. The charged atmosphere surrounding the topic of Israel-Palestine seems also to preclude language as a productive avenue for parsing through those nuances.

Herschel's vision of Palestine as a *terre promise* is highly unstable, as is Ali and Yvonne's hope of carving out a life in Egypt, the former's home country. Yvonne envisions Egypt as a space of freedom to direct her life on her own terms, the migration an opportunity to carry out at long last the feminist ideals she had been cultivating: "les femmes doivent prendre leur destinée en main."[64] On the voyage there, the darkness of the sea ahead seems to express a "Promesse sans fin, à hauteur des rêves qu'elle a réfrénés durant son adolescence."[65] Ali, too, harbors an ideal of the Egypt that he

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[62] Ibid.
[63] Ibid., 53–4.
[64] Ibid., 99.
[65] Ibid., 97.

experienced in his youth, telling Yvonne, "Tu verras, mon amour, la vie est douce dans mon pays . . . Nous sommes un pays pauvre, mais un peuple ancien et éclairé."[66] As with Herschel, their dream of making a home in a new space is tinged with a youthful optimism. Cracks in this dream, however, begin to appear with an altercation at the border with customs officers who "lancent des regards courroucés aux voyageurs étrangers" and question Ali vehemently about his connections to "les fanatiques religieux de Minieh."[67] The anecdote makes it evident that Egypt is far from the welcoming space they envision: it has borders, as the setting reminds us, that enforce a suspicion of outsiders. Bringing together the elective and the familial, we see then a shared experience of the quest for a home in a "foreign" land that is disrupted by (albeit different) problems of nationalistic and exclusionary practices.

The narrator' predecessors do not realize their ideals of the *terre promise,* and their sense of belonging to any one national space becomes compromised. Herschel never reaches Palestine, only managing to make it to France. His unproductive dealings with legal documentation reflect the precarity of his national status there. He is granted his initial *autorisation de séjour* in France thanks to "une entorse à la loi," his uncle pulling the right strings, but when this expires, he receives an order of expulsion, which he rips up angrily.[68] His contempt for paperwork demonstrates an exasperation with being in permanent exile, an illegal immigrant in France who does not belong to his country of birth nor to his imagined *terre promise*. In the world of *Monarques,* Herschel has the potential to acquire a Nansen passport, a travel document for stateless refugees, through Ernst Vom Rath. This is the Nazi diplomat that Herschel kills, but also with whom he may have had a secret romantic affair. The scene of assassination ends with an observation that Herschel's Nansen

[66] Ibid., 123.
[67] Ibid., 122.
[68] Ibid., 48, 47.

passport sits among the documents in Vom Rath's office.[69] Whether this is historical fact or novelistic fiction is unclear; but in any case, Herschel's access to legal protection as an exile and refugee remains out of reach.

For Ali and Yvonne, the situation is different: they evidently do make it to Egypt, but their time there is short-lived. Ali is assassinated a year after their arrival, and Yvonne is forced to relocate with the newborn Adly to Switzerland again. Though back in Yvonne's country of origin, they are exiled from their chosen home. The circumstances surrounding their expulsion are murky: we have previously seen accusations of Ali's connections to religious fanatic groups, but the details of this go unspecified. The narrator adopts Yvonne's point of view to narrate the couple's first year in Egypt. This is a limited perspective given the pregnant Yvonne's isolation in their house in order to avoid the outbreak of the Spanish flu, which means that we only have a partial understanding of Ali's dealings from which to draw conclusions. Yvonne learns through hearsay from Ali's sister Sohaya of his charged interaction with an English soldier. Sohaya's observations are terse, unable to go further than the insinuation of a vague ominousness at play: "Elle les a entendus échanger des insultes, puis l'homme est reparti. Ce matin, continue-t-elle, mon frère est allé en ville. Il était convoqué à la mosquée qui réclame nos provisions. Je n'en sais pas davantage."[70] Could this scene be related to Ali's assassination? Yvonne's escape from Egypt after the birth of Adly and after the assassination is recounted twice, but neither time illuminates why exactly the family is at risk. The narrator seems to circle around the troubling events but is never able to get to the center. Secrecy is foregrounded in both instances: in the first, we are told that Yvonne's parents "ne poseront pas de questions," and in the second, Sohaya urges Yvonne, "Ne pose pas de questions."[71] This imperative

[69] Ibid., 163.
[70] Ibid., 148.
[71] Ibid., 129, 151.

for suppressed language is textually mimicked in the abruptness and reticence of the narration: the questions that we might pose as readers will also go unanswered. Notably, there is a compression of time (like with Montse's migration in *Pas pleurer*) in the narration of Yvonne's path back to her parents, which also only offers short facts about her trajectory rather than insight into her subjective experience. Sohaya's last imperative to Yvonne, "Ne revenez jamais en Égypte, ni toi ni ton fils," contains a striking gravity: the family's exile from the *terre promise* is definitive.[72]

Herschel's biography and the narrator's family story are also vaguely connected by the narrative of ambiguous assassination plots. Their juxtaposition highlights the fact that the motives behind the plots are impenetrable. As we have seen, Ali's political involvements in Egypt that presumably inform his death go unspoken. For Herschel, the narrator raises two motives for the assassination, both of which could be concurrently possible. The first is revenge against the Nazis' persecution of the Jews, especially after he receives news of his family's forced migration from their home in Germany. The second is a crime of passion committed against his alleged secret lover after their affair turns sour. But while the scene of Vom Rath's shooting is recounted (or rather, imagined) in novelistic detail, Ali's murder is never narrated. We get only a description of his body after the fact, "étranglé par du barbelé" with the word "traître" "gravé sur sa poitrine à coups de couteau"—an image rendered even more troubling due to the lack of explanation on the context of the assassination.[73] We can surmise that his death was politically motivated, but it is difficult to go further than that. Knowledge of Herschel's story, as murky as it is, seems still more accessible than that of the family history: we might read the narrator's investment in the former as a substitute, at least figuratively and partially, for the latter.

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[72] Ibid., 151.
[73] Ibid., 128.

For Rahmy, then, the restitution of predecessors' histories of exile relies on an ethics and aesthetics of opacity. My reflection on this has been informed by Laurent Demanze's idea of an "éthique de l'opacité" in the literary recovery of memory: leaving the investigation into the past unfinished in order to preserve the historical subject's secrets and open up their story to a multitude of possibilities.[74] But the narrator of *Monarques* preserves his forebears' ambiguities less in the interest of expanding their narrative potential and more as a rejection of the fiction of comprehensiveness. He is unable to recuperate everything due to the violent, sinister histories that implicated his predecessors. The oblique resonances and vague language befit the "silences" that Herschel's story and the family history constitute.[75] A comment about Herschel as *insaisissable,* with reference to "une histoire qu'il est possible d'entrevoir, comme le ventre d'un poisson qui brille dans la rivière," speaks to Adly, too.[76] The image of the fish symbolically captures the experience of reading the fragmented novel: going in and out of glimpses into past lives, attentive to the moments where they resonate, the moments of clarity amid overarching ambiguity.

What should we make of the different approaches to restitution between Salvayre and Rahmy—between elucidation and opacity? *Pas pleurer* more successfully bridges the gap that separates the second generation from the first when it comes to the narrator's knowledge of her origins. But Rahmy's text is perhaps more realistic in choosing to preserve that gap; the investigation into the past may be motivated by the pursuit of clarity, but access to the past is always mediated and obscured to some degree. There is no one method of restitution, no one way to pay homage to one's predecessors, but doing so requires reflection on the narrative ethics of the method

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[74] Demanze, *Un nouvel âge de l'enquête*, 277–83. Demanze takes Patrick Modiano's novel *Dora Bruder* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997) as a case study.
[75] Rahmy, *Monarques*, 106.
[76] Ibid., 166–7.

chosen. I have already argued that the preservation of ambiguity in Rahmy is an ethical choice that attends to the constraints on insight into the past. For *Pas pleurer,* the positioning of Montse's and Bernanos's narratives as mutually illuminating is also in service of a responsibility on the narrator's part to respond to the contributions and limits of each when they stand alone. Bringing them together produces a more nuanced portrait of exile induced by the Spanish Civil War.

Despite their different approaches to restitution, the narrators in both works are invested in capturing the resilience of predecessors in the face of displacement. This investment is reflected in the novels' titles. As Natalie Edwards points out, "pas pleurer," when taken as an isolated formulation, is a literal translation of the Spanish ("No llorar") rather than an idiomatic one into French ("Ne pleure(z) pas").[77] This is an instance of Montse's Fragnol, whose hybridity between French and Spanish is located at the level of grammar and syntax as well as vocabulary; we will come back to Fragnol and its implications in further detail in the next section. The phrase encapsulates Montse's determination to reject the status of victimhood amid the trials of forced migration: "Après maintes péripéties, elle finit par échouer dans un village du Languedoc, où elle dut apprendre une nouvelle langue . . . et de nouvelles façons de vivre et de se comporter, pas pleurer."[78] Here, "pas pleurer" may be an imperative or an infinitive; nevertheless, in the latter case, the "improper" French grammar (since it should be "à ne pas pleurer") constitutes another instance of Montse's unique use of language. Her embrace of Fragnol and her transcultural position as an exile informs her resilience; language is a source of the hardship involved in relocation, but her adaptation through Fragnol represents a way of forging a new home in a foreign land. For Rahmy, itinerant resilience is conveyed symbolically through the motif of "monarques," referring to the

[77] Edwards, *Multilingual Life Writing,* 20.
[78] Salvayre, *Pas pleurer,* 277.

species of butterfly. The narrator tells us that monarch butterflies aspire to "un éden capable d'accueillir leur migration": another evocation of the quest for a *terre promise*.[79] The monarchs are wily, adapting to treacherous environments and predator threats by grouping together "en gigantesques essaims" in their long yearly migrations, "au prix de pertes innombrables.[80] The experience of the monarch butterfly is a metaphor for the refugee narratives of Herschel and of Adly's family. In dwelling on the monarch butterflies, the narrator suggests the vulnerability but also strength of his predecessors, going beyond reductive perspectives on refugees as solely victims.

For Salvayre and Rahmy, the juxtaposition of histories of exile from their elective and familial filiations participates in the project of restitution: the narrators pay homage to their forebears' experiences, symbolically giving their stories back all the while imbuing them with greater meaning by bringing them into a larger interpretive web. Restitution in *Pas pleurer* follows a logic of elucidation, wherein the doubled narratives shed light upon one another and upon the Spanish Civil War more broadly, informing the narrator's understanding of the historical circumstances that have led to her own uprootedness. On the other hand, Rahmy's restitution operates along the idea of opacity: the doubled filiations obliquely inform one another, with vague resonances and hinted overlaps between stories producing more questions than answers. If Salvayre aims to do justice to her predecessors' stories by presenting them in an illuminating and informative manner, Rahmy seeks instead to respect his forebears' mysteries and preserve their secrets, this strategy also reflecting the difficulty that the second-generation narrator faces in gaining insight into his inherited uprootedness. For the final section of this chapter, I turn to the presence of the

[79] Rahmy, *Monarques,* 159.
[80] Ibid., 159, 157.

second generation in the restitution of their predecessors' stories: if the narrators give back to their forebears, they also create something for themselves.

1.3 Negotiating plural identities in second-generation exile

Salvayre's and Rahmy's texts, as we have seen, are invested in contesting historical and contemporary far-right nationalist movements. Edward Said is helpful here for thinking further about the subjective experience of exile in relation to the idea of the nation. He defines nationalism as

> an assertion of belonging in and to a place, a people, a heritage . . . Nationalisms are about groups, but in a very acute sense exile is a solitude experienced outside the group: the deprivations felt at not being with others in the communal habitation. How, then, does one surmount the loneliness of exile without falling into the encompassing and thumping language of national pride, collective sentiments, group passions?[81]

Both of our writers (Rahmy especially) are preoccupied with this final question, but in regards to the conceptual second-generation exile rather than the first-generation geographical exile that Said deals with. What Said calls the "loneliness of exile" I understand as troubled filiation for the narrators of our two novels: an alienation from their national, ethnic, religious, or cultural roots due to their familial forebears' histories of forced migration. Pursuing the restitution of predecessors' stories from their doubled filiations allows the narrators to mitigate the burdens of this form of troubled filiation while remaining critical of the confines of a singular nation: the search for origins operates across borders. The narrators make room for themselves in the histories that they restitute, through the shape-shifting narrative voice of the "je" in *Pas pleurer*, and through the *Monarques* narrator's first-person reflections on his personal experiences with his predecessors

[81] Said, "Reflections on Exile," 176.

and travel writing. By inscribing themselves into their prehistories, the narrators craft transnational and transcultural identities in the space left by their exile-troubled filiations. Both narrators pay homage to the plural identities that they have inherited, but Rahmy's goes further in grappling with the problem of seemingly irreconcilable lineages.

I begin first, then, with Salvayre's work before moving onto the thornier issues that Rahmy raises. Lidia's inherited hybrid French-Spanish identity manifests in Fragnol, which is spoken by Montse but re-inhabited by Lidia. Fragnol, "cette langue mixte et transpyrénéenne," is not only French interspersed with Spanish words, but a new kind of language that extends across French and Spanish: an example of "translanguaging."[82] Coined by linguist Ofelia García, translanguaging produces "one integrated linguistic system" rather than merely bringing together two separate systems.[83] Suresh Canagarajah, another linguist who has worked on translanguaging, specifies that languages "mesh in transformative ways, generating new meanings and grammars."[84] We have seen an instance of this practice earlier with the standalone phrase "pas pleurer": French words articulated in Spanish grammar. Fragnol's playful and transformative qualities are also present in Montse's tendencies for neologisms. Let us look closer at a rich example of Montse's hybrid discourse. She speaks here of the collective rupture between her generation and that of her parents following the outbreak of war:

> L'Histoire ma chérie est faite de ces enfrontements**,** les plus cruels de tous et les plus infelices, et aucun des pères du village n'en est prémunisé, pas plus le père de Diego que

[82] Salvayre, *Pas pleurer,* 16.
[83] Ofelia García, *Bilingual Education in the 21st Century: A Global Perspective* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 120. Pointed out in Edwards, *Multilingual Life Writing*, 16.
[84] Suresh Canagarajah, *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013), 8. Pointed out in Edwards, *Multilingual Life Writing,* 17.

> celui de Josep, la justice immanente n'obédissant pas aux décrets de la justice des hommes (dit ma mère dans un français sophistiqué autant qu'énigmatique).[85]

The various words in Fragnol fuse the two languages in slightly different ways: "enfrontements" (a crossover of the French *affrontement* and Spanish *enfrentamiento*), "infelices" (a kind of Gallicization of the Spanish *infeliz,* meaning unfortunate or unhappy), "n'obédissant" (the French *obéissant* with a touch of the Spanish cognate *obedeciendo*). Montse creates new words, but there are also times when she speaks French with improper grammar: here, "prémunisé" instead of "prémuni" (past participle of *prémunir*), a mistake that points to her status as a second-language learner of French. There are times where the narrator is quick to correct her mother's French, but here she does not, deeming it "un français sophistiqué autant qu'énigmatique" instead. Even if there is a slight hint of tender irony in this last comment, she recognizes her mother's eloquence and takes her insights seriously. Montse's idiosyncratic discourse, in all of its grammatical faults, lends itself to comprehension and not misunderstanding.[86]

If the narrative voice in the novel situates itself between and across different languages, it also operates between and across different characters. Lidia's first-person "je" is porous, bleeding into the voices of her predecessors through free indirect discourse: the voices of the descendant and the ascendants are located on a textual continuum. In the excerpt previously cited, we can deduce from the address to "ma chérie" that Montse is speaking, and the lack of commas around the address point to the orality of the phrase. But the delayed indication of reported speech and temporary suspension of the speaker's identity, both here and consistently throughout the novel, gesture toward a merging of Montse's spoken words and Lidia's writing. Marianne Braux has

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[85] Salvayre, *Pas pleurer,* 43.

[86] For more close readings of instances of translanguaging in the novel, see Edwards, *Multilingual Life Writing,* 41–5.

demonstrated how the use of narrative voice in the novel blurs the boundary between Montse and Lidia.[87] This blurring of characters—their voices, subjectivities, and identities—also contributes to the work of restitution. Lidia textually inhabits her mother's Fragnol, positioning herself as an inheritor and preserver of the heritage of linguistic and cultural hybridity. To do justice to Montse's discourse in all of its energy and inventiveness is also, for Lidia, to tap into this transcultural part of her own identity.

Braux also posits that the slippery narrative voice invites a rethinking of literary interiority, away from the idea of a closed-off subject and towards an openness to exterior perspectives, "au langage des autres."[88] The porousness of Lidia's interiority and voice applies to Montse's language, but also to that of Bernanos, who writes in "proper," literary French. Lidia's voice merges with Bernanos's when she narrates his contributions, which we have already seen in the analysis of the novel's opening lines: free indirect discourse whose credit to Bernanos is postponed, much like how Montse's position as speaker is belatedly revealed in the excerpt previously cited. Through moments like these when she slips into Bernanos's voice and language, the narrator stakes a claim to this literary filiation.

The most extensive example of the blending of Lidia's and Bernanos's voices is the insertion of a section from *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune* entitled "PETITE LEÇON D'ÉPURATION NATIONALE," which adopts the mocking perspective of a Nationalist instructor delivering a schematic for making the *épuration* as efficient as possible.[89] The *leçon*'s attribution to Bernanos is delayed until after its conclusion, though, and so we read the section with the idea that Lidia is the speaker; she thus partakes in the acerbic critique of the Nationalists. The section's sardonic tone is

[87] Braux, "Le sujet de l'expression dans *Pas pleurer* de Lydie Salvayre."
[88] Ibid., paragraph 12.
[89] Salvayre, *Pas pleurer*, 97–104.

already evident from the discrepancy in the title between the unassuming, innocent-sounding "petite leçon" and the horror of "épuration nationale." The section itself offers an ironic critique of the Nationalists' campaign. For instance, Bernanos sarcastically disparages the arbitrariness of their violent practices: "L'épuration nationale exige une organisation et des méthodes rigoureuses. Elle doit éviter de se perdre en subtilités superflues et dédaigner toutes les opérations qui retardent et compliquent son exercice, telle celle qui consisterait par exemple à distinguer les assassins des innocents."[90] Following from this, a long list of groups to be targeted by the *épurateurs* ends with a vague "autres," an implicit comment on how the Nationalist rhetoric of advancing religious devotion and nation-building in Spain is merely a pretext for indiscriminate terror.[91] Repeated references to the *épurateurs* as "sauveurs de la nation" draw attention to the propagandistic, patriotic language that is used to justify violence.

Following the *petite leçon*, the narrator offers her own history lesson tracing the origins and development of the civil war from 1934.[92] This section sees Bernanos's and Lidia's voices coming together, but in a different way from the previous instances of free indirect discourse and delayed attribution. Lidia adopts (and adapts) Bernanos's sharp, politically-informed language to make her own points about the complexities of the civil war. For instance, in the excerpt below she presents nuances within the two main sides of the war in an incisive language that contains a touch of Bernanos's sardonic tone:

> tous ces éléments aboutirent à la division de la République une et indivisible en deux camps (chacun tirant à soi l'Histoire pour la confisquer à son profit): d'un côté un front dit populaire composé des différentes gauches qui bientôt s'entredéchirèrent pour finir par s'entredétruire, et de l'autre un front dit national formé des droites coalisées, des plus

[90] Ibid., 100.
[91] Ibid., 101.
[92] Ibid., 105–10.

> honorables aux plus extrêmes, sourdes à la voix d'un peuple poussé à bout par des décennies de misère, et qui refusaient de s'incliner devant la nouvelle république obtenue par le suffrage universel.[93]

Ironically invoking the state's grand language with "la république une et indivisible," the narrator critiques misled patriotic sentiment in a deeply polarized political environment. Although the novel is primarily invested in the *front populaire,* from the focus on Montse's experience with the leftists and Bernanos' condemnation of the *front national*, Lidia is critical of both sides in her attention to the internal dynamics of each. The parenthetical phrase, drawing attention to how both parties are also engaged in a conceptual war of memory, pinpoints the difficulty of reconstructing an objective history of such a contested war. Though it draws some influence from Bernanos's *petite leçon*, Lidia's history lesson is an outlier in the novel. Neither a recounting of Bernanos's experience, nor a quotation from his work, nor a narration of Montse's story, it is Lidia's contribution to literature on the war on her own terms as a critical writer.

The narrator thus inherits from, and contributes to, two systems: a translingual oral family history and a written French literary tradition. The novel enacts the interrelation of these two systems rather than their opposition. By inhabiting both Montse's idiosyncratic, vernacular Fragnol and Bernanos's established, written French—and thus linking them together—the narrator shows that there is room for her various identities from her two lineages to coexist in literary writing. *Pas pleurer* pays homage to the contributions of Montse and Bernanos by bringing (or in Bernanos's case, reintroducing) them into a literary space, all the while resisting conventional ideas of a national, monolingual French literature. As Natalie Edwards has posited, Salvayre's novel "challenges French literary norms and paradigms of life-writing as she creates a new linguistic

[93] Ibid., 106–7.

marker with which to express her hybrid identity."[94] Salvayre stakes her claim in the contemporary French literary landscape through the transnational and translingual narrative identity of Lidia.

The shape-shifting narrative voice renders the first-generation's spoken testimony and the second-generation's written restitution of it inextricable, which raises the issue of the narrator's potential hijacking of her predecessors' narratives for her own purposes. Edwards has pointed out the mediated nature of the restituted voices, arguing that "[Salvayre] renders [Montse's and other characters'] voices through translanguaging in a way that is clearly not their speech—this is Salvayre's writing, which she is cleverly orchestrating to make it seem like their voices—but the text that this produces restores the stories of the forgotten, the overlooked, the illiterate and the linguistically "weak" to the public domain."[95] While Edwards aptly points out the big-picture significance of the imaginative reconstruction of predecessors' speech, she elides the problems of textual ventriloquism and appropriation.[96] Is the writer projecting language onto her predecessors and thus instrumentalizing their narratives? Hannie Lawlor's analysis of *Pas pleurer* is illuminating on this front. She argues that the coexistence of Lidia and her predecessors on the level of narrative voice actually nuances the usual dichotomy between ventriloquized and ventriloquist: "[Lidia] illustrates her *attempt* to represent the mother's voice faithfully rather than replace it with her own, but also the impossibility of suppressing her influence as writing subject."[97] Indeed, the frequency

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[94] Edwards, *Multilingual Life Writing,* 30.
[95] Ibid., 48.
[96] For theoretical takes on ventriloquism in literary texts that approach testimony from multigenerational perspectives, see Nicolas Abraham and Mária Török, *L'Écorce et le noyau* (Paris: Flammarion, 1987). Their work focuses on the second-generation writer who is ventriloquized, forced to speak from transgenerational haunting. On the other hand, G. Thomas Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004), conceives of the writer as the ventriloquist, forcing language onto their subjects. These references were pointed out to me in Hannie Lawlor, "Balancing Acts? Relational Responses to Trauma in Twenty-First Century French and Spanish Women's Writings" (PhD diss., University of Oxford, 2020), 58–9.
[97] Lawlor, "Balancing Acts," 85. Italics original.

of the phrase "ma mère me dit" (or variations of this phrase) as a framing for otherwise imagined free indirect discourse points to the narrator's effort to recover her predecessor's story *avec justesse* while being transparent about her own position as an interpreter of that story; as such, she avoids narrative takeover by any one voice. It is not a competition between first and second generations for narrative presence. Rather, *Pas pleurer* suggests that the restitution of predecessors' stories and self-fashioning of descendants' identities go hand and hand.

If Salvayre represents the fluidity of identity through the use of a slippery narrative voice, going in and out of the personas of the predecessors and the narrator herself, Rahmy does so through the narrator's fluctuating, self-contradicting reflections on his lineages. *Monarques* also grapples to a greater extent than *Pas pleurer* does with the conundrums that may arise from a contradictory heritage. Rahmy's narrator is more troubled by his Jewish-Arab origins, given the polarizing conflict between Palestinian Jews and Arabs since the mid-twentieth century, than Lidia is by her Spanish-French roots or by the convergence of both left-wing and right-wing political sensibilities respectively incarnated by Montse and Bernanos. And, unlike Lidia, Rahmy's narrator struggles with an uncertain sense of belonging to his various filiations.[98] The *Monarques* narrator's twofold restitution of Herschel's and his father's histories constitutes a broader search for ways to reconcile the two seemingly opposing lineages of his origins—with each other and with himself. Let's look first at his relationship with the paternal Arab-Egyptian side of his identity.

Religion plays an important role in the narrator's ambivalent position as inheritor of his father's Arab heritage. Islam is the most significant influence, with Adly teaching him about the

[98] In his travel writing text *Béton armé* (Paris: Table Ronde, 2013), 127–8, Rahmy also alludes to another troubled aspect of his entangled filiations: his grandfather, a Nazi doctor, injected animal cells into the young Rahmy, rendering him "mi-enfant, mi-animal." This element of animality implicates both his biological identity and literary origins: Rahmy links the traumatic childhood event to the advent of his vocation as a writer.

Quran from a young age, but the narrator grows up surrounded by other religious influences, too: his Christian mother had him baptized, and Adly introduced him to ancient Egyptian gods, "pour que je connaisse mes origines."[99] Adly himself practices "un islam tolérant, inspiré par le soufi égyptien Mohamed Abduh," which values "la fraternité entre les différents courants de l'islam, mais aussi entre les religions": the coexistence of diverse religious backgrounds in the household perhaps reflects that aim of "fraternité."[100] The narrator's engagement with those various religions, though, seems to stem primarily from a fascination with the stories they offer more so than with the faiths themselves, as demonstrated in his comments on the Quran: "Mahomet m'était sympathique. J'admirais les scènes de bataille du Prophète décapitant ses ennemis, identiques à celles de la bataille de Roncevaux, dont ma mère me faisait la lecture pour me ramener vers la foi chrétienne, où Roland et les chevaliers coupaient hommes et chevaux mauresques en deux, dans le sens de la hauteur."[101] He treats Mahomet like a literary character, and in noting the overlap across the violent battle scenes between Christians and Muslims that are told in both the Quran and in medieval romances, he seems more fascinated than perturbed. By approaching religion from a literary standpoint, he reconciles the opposing perspectives instead of privileging one over the other. The narrator as an adult continues to emphasize literature over faith as well, which informs his complicated attitude toward his paternal filiation: "Je l'écoute [Adly] me parler de religion et de miséricorde, je lui réponds politique et poésie, mais je refuse de lui ressembler . . . J'ai beau être son fils, je ne parviens pas à me sentir musulman."[102] Religious and familial heritage are interlinked: the

[99] Rahmy, *Monarques,* 27–8.
[100] Ibid., 17.
[101] Ibid., 27–8.
[102] Ibid., 106.

narrator's lack of identification with Islam accompanies the distance he feels from his father and his Arab heritage.

If religion fails to connect the narrator to his paternal lineage, his academic study of Egyptology, stemming from his early exposure via Adly to knowledge about ancient Egyptian deities, appears to offer another avenue: "Devenir archéologue pour fouiller la terre d'Égypte, retrouver mes lointains ancêtres."[103] Despite the potential of archeological investigation to double as a quest for origins, however, his interest in Egyptology is short-lived. "Avec le deuil de mon père, j'ai fait celui de l'Égypte. La terre pharaonique laissait place à la littérature": once again, reading and writing literature seems to draw the narrator away from his origins.[104] Indeed, the narrator travels to "la terre pharaonique" to sort out his inheritance of Ali's estate following Adly's death, but returns "sans avoir été, en rien, transformé par ce voyage."[105] Not only does he fail to gain any insights into the Egyptian part of his identity, his difficulty in speaking Arabic further emphasizes his foreignness in the land of his forefathers. The "return" voyage for second-generation exiles, so often romanticized as a cathartic means of getting in touch with a subdued heritage, is in this case actually alienating.

Unexpectedly, it is during the trip to Israel, in a key moment at the Tel-Aviv airport, that the narrator becomes most aware of his Arabness. Early on in the novel, the narrator makes a vague passing allusion to "la rudesse" that he encounters at border control but does not elaborate until much later, a delay that implies the troubling memory of this experience.[106] In this second instance, he recounts the altercation with the Israeli customs officer:

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[103] Ibid., 18.
[104] Ibid., 82.
[105] Ibid., 108.
[106] Ibid., 53.

> Mon nom m'a été craché au visage par l'employée des douanes. J'ai cru que cette femme en uniforme voulait chasser un chien derrière moi. Elle a répété son cri. Rahmy! Le hall de l'aéroport Ben Gourion a sonné comme un tambour. C'est alors que je suis devenu Arabe. À cet instant, dans cet aéroport, face à ce poste-frontière, j'incarnais l'ennemi. J'avais un nom de terroriste, une famille et des ancêtres potentiellement tous terroristes. Sous le choc, j'ai bafouillé que je ne connaissais personne en Égypte, que je ne parlais pas l'arabe.[107]

There is a viciousness in the officer's language, made clear with "cracher" and the comparison of her treatment of the narrator to that of a dog. The auditory emphasis on "Rahmy" being called out foregrounds the fact that it is merely the narrator's Arab-sounding family name (the officer knows nothing of his biography at this point) that triggers alarm bells. The narrator has no agency over his own identity: it is the officer who imposes Arabness onto him, constructing from longstanding biases a figure of threatening otherness. The narrator's encounter here is reminiscent of grandparents Ali and Yvonne's (albeit less harrowing) experience with customs when they first enter Egypt. Taking place nearly a century apart, the two stories point to a continuity of protectionist bureaucratic practices that operate through a fear-motivated projection of foreignness onto deemed outsiders. If the narrator has previously felt out of touch with his Arab identity, this moment at the border forces him to contend with the implications of that identity. But this is not a straightforward acceptance of his Arabness. If anything, as the final sentence of the excerpt suggests, the jarring experience of otherness facilitates a greater degree of alienation from this part of his ancestry.

The narrator's Arab-Egyptian filiation is apparent from his surname and from his familial predecessors' stories, and he is upfront about his complicated relationship to this filiation. On the other hand, his Jewish ancestry is left much more ambiguous, only receiving oblique allusions in

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[107] Ibid., 109.

brief moments throughout most of the novel. The narrator's investigation into Herschel, however, leads him to a recognition and acceptance of his own suppressed Jewish identity. It is a belated and (at least initially) reluctant shift in attitude: "Je voulais rester l'Arabe Rahmy qui s'adresse au Juif Grynszpan par-dessus un mur infranchissable. Que les camps soient bien délimités."[108] But the search for Herschel, the process of writing about his story, and the forging of an elective filiation from him bring about the contestation of the narrator's internalized ethnic and cultural boundaries.

The narrator's trip to Israel, initially intended "pour comprendre Herschel comme on se rend sur les lieux d'une lointaine bataille ou d'un sanctuaire antique, pour respirer l'air du passé," proves formative for his acceptance of his identity outside of the conventional Arab-Jewish dichotomy.[109] "Je me sens presque chez moi," he says of Tel-Aviv, a city he has never before visited.[110] It is a different kind of home, a place where he finally feels in touch with his Jewish ancestry: "Me suis-je jamais senti juif avant aujourd'hui, sur ce boulevard qui mène je ne sais où, dans cette ville que je ne connais pas, que j'arpente le cœur battant ? . . . Me suis-je jamais senti juif avant de m'être assis à l'ombre des arbres du boulevard Rothschild, d'avoir senti mes forces me quitter pour une vie plus réelle, car enracinée dans l'histoire collective?"[111] The tangible experience of discovering the city is bound up with the discovery of his Jewishness, which is an affective rather than cerebral process. It becomes clear that the narrator's feeling of fraternity with Herschel ("j'ai reconnu en lui un frère") stems from the recognition and acceptance of his own Jewishness as he dives into Herschel's history.[112] Herschel, then, both parallels Adly and the narrator himself. The

[108] Ibid., 167.
[109] Ibid., 50.
[110] Ibid., 54.
[111] Ibid., 88.
[112] Ibid., 95.

trip to Tel-Aviv also unexpectedly brings the narrator closer to his paternal Arab filiation. Here, he finds "les mots pour raconter mon père" as well as "pour raconter une autre histoire, celle d'une famille juive, celle d'Herschel Grynszpan": in other words, to finally carry out the project of restitution for his doubled filiations.[113] He sees "le visage blanc de mon père" in the city's moonlit sky; he hears "mon grand-père Ali raconter en arabe des histoires que je ne comprends pas" whilst writing.[114] The city, for reasons mysterious to the narrator, is able to inspire insight into—or at least, bring him closer to—his Arab and Jewish ancestry.

Rahmy's narrator thus comes to embrace the diversity of his identities during his time in Tel-Aviv. We see this attitude in a moving reflection on his knot of filiations:

> Je répète le nom d'un jeune homme, Herschel Grynszpan, et celui d'un espace, Israël-Palestine, je suis perdu, je suis heureux, libre devant vous, mes ancêtres, vous, mes terres calcinées de Moyenne-Égypte, vous, mes nombreuses origines, nourries par les départs, les retours, les accueils, mes origines diaphanes et interchangeables, je prolonge votre vagabondage.[115]

The perplexing description of his origins as "diaphanes et interchangeables" invites closer scrutiny. "Diaphanes," generally used to describe sheer, translucent fabrics, perhaps evokes the vague understanding that the narrator has of his origins, with the intimation that there is a certain beauty in that ambiguity. "Interchangeables" suggests that the narrator can slip in and out of his various identities: wearing them, as it were, like diaphanous garments. "Nourries" in the excerpt also implies that the narrator celebrates rather than laments the fact that his identities have been upended by histories of migration and exile. His "nombreuses origines" have given him a felicitous opportunity for exploration, of the self and of the world. The long, winding sentence, folding in on

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[113] Ibid., 106.
[114] Ibid., 107, 119–20.
[115] Ibid., 120.

itself at times with the repetition of "vous" and phrases beginning with "je," grammatically enacts the "vagabondage" that the narrator pursues in his quest for origins, as well as emulates the vertiginous but liberating nature of that quest. This passage demonstrates, all in all, his appreciation of his multiple but interconnected roots.

But the narrator's celebration of his "origines diaphanes et interchangeables" is ultimately more equivocal than he makes it out to be. His hesitation about revealing the specificities of his Jewish lineage evinces a lingering discomfort with his entangled heritage. It is not until the novel's relatively short penultimate section that the narrator directly addresses his familial Jewish lineage through the story of his maternal great-aunt, Charlotte Wolff, changing his mind from an initial decision to leave her out of the novel. The points of contact between Charlotte's and Herschel's forced migrations are striking: both leave their families in Germany in their late teens to escape from rising antisemitism, with Palestine as their destination and *terre promise*.[116] The key difference, though: Charlotte makes it to Palestine and carves out a life there, while Herschel remains in perpetual exile. Given the compelling parallels between Charlotte and Herschel—her story strengthens the rationale for the narrator's elective filiation forged with Herschel—why does the narrator not make Charlotte a more central figure in the novel? One potential reason is that writing Charlotte into the narrative also necessitates a confrontation with the more shameful side of his maternal lineage: Charlotte's sister Gertrud renounces her family and her Jewish roots, marrying a Nazi doctor (the narrator's maternal grandfather), and making a new identity for herself as a German Protestant in Berlin.[117] It would be disingenuous and instrumentalizing to make

[116] For Charlotte's story, see ibid., 168–70.
[117] Ibid., 168–9.

Charlotte the basis of his claim to Jewishness given that Gertrud deeply complicates that claim. The narrator thus avoids hijacking Charlotte's narrative for his own purposes.

Also informing the narrator's ambivalence about treating Charlotte as a key predecessor for his identity is a desire to avoid spinning an overly harmonious vision of a reconciliation of the usual Arab-Jewish dichotomy. He harbors a sincere hope that "un Arabe peut aimer un Juif par-delà la caricature de leur opposition foncière," but is skeptical (or perhaps realistic) about his ability to be the one to bridge the gap: "Mais j'ignore si je suis une telle personne, un être humain, sans plus, capable de ne ressentir aucun écart entre les cultures, ni préférence instinctive, abjecte."[118] The "préférence instinctive" he has between his two filiations, it seems, is the Arab-Egyptian prong, despite the ambivalence of his relationship to it. To be clear, he does not deny his Jewish filiation. We have seen his reflections on his Jewishness during his time in Tel-Aviv, and he chooses, after all, to write about Charlotte rather than exclude her completely from the novel, "pour avouer que malgré mon désir d'objectivité, de neutralité, je n'ai sans doute pas su me défaire entièrement de tout sentiment d'appartenance."[119] If the narrator contradicts himself throughout the novel regarding his attitudes towards his plural identities, what remains consistent is his critical approach to concerns of narrative ethics that his positionality raises.

The projects of restitution in *Monarques* and *Pas pleurer* respond to filiations that have been troubled by exile: histories of forced migration in the first generation that inform the second-generation's sense of uprootedness. These histories are restituted (albeit imperfectly) to predecessors by the second-generation narrators who, in that process, render the histories polyphonic by laying their own claims to them. In pursuing the restitution of predecessors' stories

[118] Ibid., 168.
[119] Ibid.

from their elective and familial lineages, the narrators create a conceptual "home" in the space of the literary text that attempts to connect generations and bridge the borders between different countries and cultures. As such, this "home" is a site for creative approaches to paying homage to predecessors: to restore their stories faithfully, whether by aiming to elucidate their blind spots or to preserve their opacity, but also reinvigorate those stories with new meaning in the process of bringing them together into an interpretive web. Indeed, the comparative reading of the two novels that is presented in this chapter also situates them in a yet another web, extending the process of meaning-making with the same tool of juxtaposition. The "home" of the text also offers room for negotiation with the (sometimes uncomfortable) nuances of the plural identities formed in second-generation exile. These identities are in flux rather than fixed; they come into being through the process of writing itself.

The narrator of *Monarques* brings up a troubling part of his maternal ancestry that is linked to Nazism, but he does not dwell upon it: that filiation is not the central concern of the work. In the next chapter, I attend to novels where familial filiations do carry a shameful burden for the present-generation narrators rather than something to which they seek to pay homage. Moreover, difficult interpersonal relations between ascendants and descendants add another troubling element to the already onerous project of writing the thorny family past.

Chapter Two. Family fictions and the limits to repair

In Camille de Toledo's *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle,* the eponymous character's deceased brother, Jérôme, skeptically asks the former, "Crois-tu que la langue et les livres sont là pour réparer?"[1] Given that the book is founded on Thésée's efforts to heal the physical and emotional wounds of a painful family past, Jérôme's question might be read as a metanarrative commentary on the limited potential of literary creation to facilitate repair—but also on literature's capacity to nuance idealistic notions about repairing the irreparable. Strangely, Jérôme uses the normally transitive verb "réparer" without a direct object, as if there is too much damage, too much deterioration that has occurred to be encapsulated in this single sentence. Language seems to falter in the face of the multigenerational tragedies that have rendered Thésée the only remaining (albeit dying himself) person in his family. Repair here, in its intransitive form, takes on an even more expansive dimension, evoking the wholesale alleviation of Thésée's troubled existence.

How "la langue et les livres" represent or even enact repair is an important question for contemporary writers and critics. In the broad sense of the term, repair involves strengthening the self and relationships to others, improving the state of the world, and making amends for previous wrongs. While the debate over the power of reading and writing to heal one's mental and emotional damage is more aptly treated by the disciplines of psychology and the medical sciences, literary studies have intervened on the formal and symbolic expressions of literature that take repair as a theme or objective. The critical interest in such literature is rooted in care theory, which originated in the field of philosophy in the Anglophone world but has since been taken up by

[1] Camille de Toledo, *Thésée*, *sa vie nouvelle* (Paris: Verdier, 2020), 186.

critics working in other linguistic traditions.[2] Philosophers Joan Tronto and Berenice Fisher's loose definition of care has been a key influence for Alexandre Gefen, whose influential work in French studies on literature and repair I have previously touched upon in the thesis Introduction. Tronto and Fisher conceptualize "care" as "*a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible*. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web."[3] The global scope of this understanding of care inflects Gefen's use of repair (or *réparation,* in French) as a broad paradigm that can refer to the reversal of damage to a former state of unbrokenness, but also extends to a more open-ended idea of making a salutary intervention in "les blessures du monde."[4] Gefen reads literary creation as a symbolic act of repair, focusing on works that narrate or thematize repair in the text itself. The objects of literature's reparative focus are both material and abstract, broken in terms of having suffered some degree of damage, but also in terms of being forgotten or overlooked: "les moi blessés, désinscrits; les communautés manquantes, asservies, aveuglées; l'altérité innommée, abandonnée; l'histoire trouée, occultée, banalisée; les corps souffrants, mourants; les drames et les êtres sans langage ni représentation."[5] Troubled filiation, understood in this chapter as murky ancestral histories that

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[2] The seminal text for care theory was Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982). Patricia Paperman and Sandra Laugier, eds., *Le souci des autres. Éthique et politique du* Care (Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2006) brought Gilligan's and others' work on the concept of care to the French-speaking world.

[3] Italics original. First proposed in Tronto and Fisher, "Toward a Feminist Theory of Caring," in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives,* eds. Emily Abel and Margaret Nelson (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 40. Tronto reprises this definition in her key work on care theory, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 103.

[4] Alexandre Gefen, *Réparer le monde* (Paris: Corti, 2017), 11. On "care" in twentieth- and twenty-first-century French-language literature, see also Gefen and Andrea Oberhuber, eds., *Pour une littérature du care* (Colloques Fabula, 2022).

[5] Gefen, *Réparer le monde*, 12.

disrupt intergenerational family relationships, is one of the objects of contemporary literature's (attempts at) repair. However, the focus on repair as the central propeller of a literary text risks overlooking its critical edge. Furthermore, though Gefen offers observations on "ces discours salvateurs, thérapeutiques ou régulateurs dans toutes leurs modulations, ces *interventions"* from a literary standpoint, he stops short of taking a stand on whether those aims are actually accomplished.[6] While it is difficult for literary study to determine the degree to which the action of literature is healing in itself, as I have acknowledged, it is still important to attend to the extent to which repair is actually realized in the space of the literary text.

Whereas the preceding chapter on Lydie Salvayre and Philippe Rahmy concerned the responsibility of the descendant for carrying out the restitution of forgotten parental and ancestral histories, I look now at literary investigation into familial pasts in instances where predecessors have inflicted painful wounds (both symbolic and physical) on their inheritors, who struggle to repair the harm. Unlike restitution, repair implies brokenness. Stories and voices were being restituted to previous generations in the previous chapter's texts, whereas the objects of repair in this chapter encompass fractured interpersonal relationships and even bodily damage. I focus my analysis here on *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle* (2020) by Camille de Toledo and *Enfant de salaud* (2021) by Sorj Chalandon; both texts have received scant attention in academic scholarship thus far.[7] For the protagonist-narrators of these works, troubled filiation figures as a reckoning with enduring fictions of familial pasts that have obscured their knowledge about their origins, upended their family relationships, and impaired their sense of belonging to a lineage. The narrators belong to what Marianne Hirsch calls the generation of "postmemory," a term I previously mentioned in the

[6] Ibid., 23.
[7] I will refer to Toledo's text as *Thésée* for simplicity hereafter.

Introduction to the thesis. But if Hirsch's analysis of postmemory is premised on the transmission of predecessors' pasts to their descendants through "stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up," Toledo and Chalandon complicate that framework by depicting the disruption to that transmission as a result of misleading and false narratives that have been passed down.[8] Critics Doris Eibl and Aurélie Barjoret have recognized that the search for objective truth about family history in contemporary *textes de filiation* often falls short due to the dimension of constructedness and even fictionality inherent in the transmission of familial history.[9] But the texts by Toledo and Chalandon show that literary fiction might be wielded as the very tool for shedding light on family myths.

Ambivalent relationships with predecessors and preoccupations with intergenerational transmission have haunted both Chalandon's and Toledo's literary œuvres, in distinctive ways. *Enfant de salaud* is situated within a lineage of Chalandon's works interrogating paternal deception and the realities of living with an abusive father figure, namely *La Légende de nos pères* (Grasset, 2009) and *Profession du père* (Grasset, 2015). For Toledo, what it means to live in twenty-first-century Europe with the legacies of a dark twentieth-century history has been a recurring question in his work, beginning with his *Trilogie européenne*.[10] All of these "predecessors" to *Enfant de salaud* and *Thésée* are rich literary reflections on the implications of inheriting painful histories, but I focus my analysis on these two texts because they feature the most compelling and provocative use of autofictional writing in the interrogation of family pasts. The two works recount

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[8] Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 5.
[9] See Aurélie Barjoret and Doris Eibl, eds., *Le Légendaire dans les textes de filiation* (Versailles: Septentrion, 2024).
[10] Consists of *Le Hêtre et le bouleau. Essai sur la tristesse européenne* (Paris: Seuil, 2009), *Vies potentielles* (Paris: Seuil, 2011), and *Oublier, trahir, puis disparaître* (Paris: Seuil, 2014).

factual/historical reality as well as re-imagined or invented personal and familial pasts, and they are narrated by an authorial self that flirts with fiction while deriving from lived experience. And, most importantly, as we will see, the unstable relationship between truth and fiction is intimately linked to the writers' conceptions of troubled filiation itself. The stylistic complexity of the texts also befits their autofictional approach to writing family history. *Enfant de salaud* is Chalandon's most generically ambitious *roman*, bringing together journalistic reporting and novelistic writing.[11] Toledo's text is not even given a generic marker by the publisher: an experimental *récit*, it employs a literary language situated between verse and prose, alongside photography. The works are invested in more than just expressing or exploring an autofictional self: rewriting ancestries (in Toledo) and shared experiences with predecessors (in Chalandon) through literary creation plays a significant role in the effort to heal the wounds of painful familial pasts.

The authors directly tackle distressing familial subjects that they have only skirted around or briefly mentioned in previous works: for Chalandon, his father's complicity with Nazism, and for Toledo, the deaths of his immediate family members. Chalandon's novel depicts his archival investigation into his father's wartime involvement with both the Resistance and the Collaboration, the facts of which have been obscured by his father's penchant for telling his son self-aggrandizing tall tales. His trajectory is reconstructed using legal documents from his 1944–45 trial for collaboration. Chalandon deliberately alters the timeline of his inquiry, which happened in 2020 (six years following the death of his father), to have it set alongside the 1987 trial of Klaus Barbie, which Chalandon had actually attended with his father. The novel alternates between courtroom scenes of the Barbie trial and imagined, speculated scenes from the father's life during

[11] Chalandon's long career as a journalist has been a key influence on the style and content of much of his literary work. From 1973 to 2007, he worked for the French daily newspaper *Libération* as a foreign correspondent and war journalist.

WWII. Toledo's book follows the character (and narrator) Thésée in the wake of his brother Jérôme's suicide and his parents' death. Moving to Berlin from Paris in search of a new beginning, Thésée's body disintegrates from a mysterious, unrelenting illness. In an effort to heal his ailing body, he tears the wounds farther apart, opening "les fenêtres du temps" and embarking on a belated archival investigation into the realities behind the false narratives of his family's success.[12]

Both Chalandon's and Toledo's protagonists struggle with a paradox of transmission: they feel rootless, as if having inherited nothing, yet also shoulder the burden of dubious familial pasts. At the heart of the trouble in their family histories are knots of disturbing or traumatic experiences that have been obscured by different kinds of fictions. This chapter's first section unpacks how these inherited fictions operate in each text: for Chalandon's narrator, a lifetime of his father's grandiose lies, and for Thésée, perpetuated misleading narratives of his family's prosperity. The next section demonstrates how the texts offer alternative strategies of mobilizing tools of literary fiction to elucidate and rewrite harmful family fictions. Whereas the altered temporality of Chalandon's work allows him to counter his mythomaniac father's checkered history with the rigorously reported witness testimonies at Klaus Barbie's trial, Toledo's critical commentary on his predecessors' false narratives of prosperity and assimilation relies not on facts but paradoxically on the construction of a new, semi-fictional filiation. Though the narrators of both texts are able to elucidate family histories (at least partially), their constructions of a "contre-fiction" do not entirely facilitate the desired repair of troubled filiations, as I argue in the final section. Chalandon's narrator undertakes a desperate but ultimately unfulfilled search for love and truth from his father to mend the rupture in their relationship, and Thésée fails to heal his debilitated body, which

[12] Toledo, *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle,* 102.

appears to have inherited the traumas of his ancestral past. Facing a painful past does not necessarily treat its wounds. The critical force of writing may even exacerbate them.

2.1 Mythomania and mythology: Descendants of fiction

In both texts, the transmission of fictions about the narrators' predecessors render their family histories troubling and *troubles*—that is, dubious and murky. But in Chalandon there is another interpersonal dimension to "trouble" regarding the relationship between father and son, precariously situated between anger and longing, which results from that obfuscation of history. The narrator's epithet "enfant de salaud" (and the title of the novel) foregrounds his position as an inheritor of his father's embellished and fabricated tales, which have hitherto precluded any elucidation of the father's real history and represent the betrayal of filial trust.[13] As a child, the narrator is angrily called an "enfant de salaud" by his grandfather; "salaud," as he intends it here, is a charged twofold insult against the father.[14] The derogatory term was generally used in France to refer to Nazis and their French "collaborators," or "les partisan[s] et artisan[s] de la collaboration avec l'ennemi" during the Occupation, and it also carries a heavy insult to the accused's character, as "une personne méprisable, dénuée de toute moralité."[15] As a child, the narrator does not fully

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[13] Even though the text derives from Chalandon's lived experience, I will refer to the son as "the narrator" rather than Chalandon directly, because there is a complex blurring of the authorial voice and the narratorial voice that the altered temporality renders fictional, with ramifications that I shall elaborate on later in this chapter.

[14] Sorj Chalandon, *Enfant de salaud* (Paris: Grasset, 2021), 31–3. This scene between the narrator and his grandfather was first (briefly) covered in *Profession du père* (Paris: Grasset, 2015), 60.

[15] Respective quotations: "Collaborateur" and "Salaud," *Trésor de la langue française.* These resonances of "salaud" were brought to my attention by Marion Duval's study of the literary figure of the "salaud" in twentieth- and twenty-first-century French novels, with particular attention to Céline, Daeninckx, and Littell. See *D'un salaud l'autre: Nazis et collaborateurs dans le roman français* (Tours: Presses Universitaires François-Rabelais, 2015), 12–3.

comprehend the import of his grandfather's words, but later as an adult, whilst deep in archival research, he realizes that his grandfather's outburst was an act of transmission:

> En une phrase ["C'est, un enfant de salaud, et il faut qu'il le sache!"] mon grand-père avouait enfin tout le mal que tu lui avais fait. Et ce qu'il avait été obligé de subir pour te défendre. Après avoir menti aux Allemands, menti aux Français, s'être menti à lui-même, il me passait le relais. Parce que la guerre était finie, parce que tout cela était loin, parce qu'il était temps pour lui de me tendre la pelle noire de charbon.
>
> Le père du salaud venait de dire à son petit-fils que désormais la charge lui revenait.[16]

The "pelle noire de charbon," which had featured as a physical object in the original childhood scene, here becomes a metaphor for the weight of the father's collaborationist involvement, passed from the "père du salaud" to the "enfant de salaud." In the transmission of this painful heritage and with the passage of time, responsibilities shift. While the grandfather's burden had consisted of covering for his son by maintaining his lies, the narrator's is about unveiling them and holding his father accountable—not necessarily for his crimes in wartime, but for his failure to be a candid father to his son. As the narrator clarifies, "Payer, ce n'était pas connaître la prison, mais devoir se regarder en face. Et me dire la vérité," raising the potential for the restoration of the broken bond of confidence between them.[17] Despite generational differences, it is a duty of care that ultimately drives both the grandfather and the son in their respective relationships with the "salaud," a duty that they undertake in spite of his infliction of pain on them and abdication of his own responsibilities in those relationships. It is a duty that stems from an unconditional love.

Unveiling paternal fictions proves to be a formidable task. If truth from the father eluded the narrator in his childhood, it still seems constantly out of reach during his adult years. A regular

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[16] Chalandon, *Enfant de salaud,* 201.
[17] Ibid., 155.

pattern surfaces in the novel: the narrator questions his father about his political and military affiliations during WWII, only to be revealed afterwards through the narrator's research that the father is continuing to tell lies (or half-truths) about his past. Though the narrator believes that as an adult he has "quitté le théâtre sur lequel il [the father] régnait," the first tête-à-tête between the two—the first time that the father promises finally to tell the truth about his wartime actions—sees them falling back into old dynamics, as if the adult narrator is still a wide-eyed child listening to his father's sensationalized storytelling.[18] The narration of the scene in a bare, direct journalistic language, the dialogue punctuated with short, simple sentences, stands in contrast to the thundering, theatrical father's stories. Explaining his involvement with the anti-Bolshevik and pro-Nazi Légion tricolore, the father appears to perform for an audience beyond his son: "Il a regardé autour de lui. Toujours, il cherchait à savoir si on le remarquait, entre la crainte d'être écouté et l'espoir secret d'être entendu."[19] After reenacting his story of crossing a "lac allemand" to flee from English parachutists, the father asks, "Ça a de la gueule, non?" and "C'est héroïque ça, non?": rhetorical questions that testify to his preoccupation with delivering a self-mythologizing narrative.[20] Instead of challenging his father's motivations, the meek narrator plays into his father's storytelling allure here. Indeed, the one-sided dialogue in this scene (among others) textually enacts the father's dominant presence: whereas the father's speech is directly quoted, the narrator tends to relate his own questions and remarks as internal reflections or reported speech. When the narrator does speak, he mostly asks questions that facilitate the progression of the father's story: "Alors qu'est-ce que tu as fait?", "Et donc?", "Et puis?", "Et après?"[21] Like in his childhood, the narrator is

[18] Ibid., 39.
[19] Ibid., 54.
[20] Ibid., 59–60.
[21] Ibid., 58, 59, 61.

once again fascinated by his father's intrepid (if morally ambiguous) feats, lapping up his lies, as it is later revealed that his stories of joining the SS have been fabricated. The son remains an "*enfant*" *de salaud*, responding to his father with a combination of docility, respect, and tenderness.

The enduring unbalanced power dynamics of the father-son relationship add another dimension of difficulty to the narrator's already onerous tasks of holding his father accountable and establishing an open dialogue between the two. The scene of the narrator's first and only episode of violence against his father testifies to those power dynamics. This happens during the first few days of the Barbie trial, when the narrator harbors a poignant but naïve hope that witnessing Barbie's reckoning together with his father will provide the moral inspiration for the latter to come clean about his own past, "comme face à ses juges."[22] In an apostrophe to the father, the narrator conveys his zeal for a connection with his father, but also his built-up frustration at the years of silence and dishonesty he has been dealt: "J'ai besoin de savoir qui tu es pour savoir d'où je viens. Je veux que tu me parles, tu m'entends, je l'exige! Je n'ai plus l'âge de croire mais j'ai l'âge d'entendre et d'accepter. Cette vérité, tu me la dois."[23] Here, the narrator invokes both debt and responsibility through the verb "devoir": the father must rectify the break in transmission, to make amends for the pain he has caused his son and to respond to a broader duty of care between parent and child. "Entendre" and "accepter" point to the narrator's goals of healing and forgiveness, rather than judgment or condemnation. The narrator's internal rumination, "Cette vérité, tu me la dois," becomes translated almost involuntarily into a verbal address to the father, "sorti comme ça" from his overflowing emotional torment.[24] But instead of igniting a productive conversation, the narrator's outburst only triggers a contemptuous, derogatory response that sidesteps the question of truth:

[22] Ibid., 103.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.

"La vérité, c'est que toi et ton procès vous commencez à me faire chier!"[25] Though this leads the narrator to lay hands physically on his father, the seeming reversal of roles is only partial. The father, unflinching and detached, "assist[ant] à cette scène comme un témoin lointain," appears to have the upper hand emotionally, while the narrator seems locked in his position as the frightened son: "J'espérais que la peur change de camp mais c'est moi qui tremblais."[26] The father's chilling indifference throughout the altercation testifies to his position of authority in the relationship: he dissipates any potential that may have existed for bringing him to account for his past.

In light of the seeming inaccessibility of knowledge about his father, the narrator's interpretation of the meaning of "enfant de salaud" evolves from his initial preoccupation with the father's collaborationist activity. The father's judicial records reveal a greater complexity to his father's past than just being "du mauvais côté": sporting five different uniforms in four years, the father fought in the French army, participated in various pro-Nazi military and paramilitary organizations, and joined the French Resistance. This history is more complicated than much of the literature from "les enfants de la collaboration" that deal with an inherited legacy of violence.[27] Adding a layer of uncertainty to the already perplexing paternal history is the fact that the narrator's knowledge relies primarily on the father's own statement given to the police in 1945, a document full of unbelievable double-agent adventures. Whether the father was actually loyal to the Nazis or to the Resistance (or neither) remains unknown. The archival inquiry does not

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[25] Ibid., 104.
[26] Ibid., 105.
[27] This body of literature kicked off in the 1970s and has found momentum going into the twenty-first century. To name a few writers: Pascal Jardin (*La Guerre à neuf ans,* 1971; *Le Nain jaune,* 1997), Marie Chaix (*Les Lauriers du lac de Constance,* 1977), Evelyne Le Garrec (*La Rive allemande de ma mémoire,* 1980), Dominique Fernandez (*Ramon*, 2008), Alexandre Jardin (*Des gens très bien,* 2010). See Katherine Cardin, *From collaboration to creation: Literature by descendants of French WWII collaborators* (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2011).

provide the narrator with a complete picture of his father's motivations and actions, but actually further highlights their uncertainties. The father's collaboration with the Nazis and his selfish motivations in helping the Resistance do indeed make for a heavy legacy for his son to inherit, but the ambiguity around the entire paternal history is the most troubling part for the narrator. In this regard, the narrator reevaluates what kind of crime his father is truly guilty of, giving his own definition of "salaud" that has nothing to do with collaboration: "c'est l'homme qui a jeté son fils dans la vie comme dans la boue . . . Le salaud, c'est le père qui m'a trahi."[28] The son reads his father's secrecy and dishonesty as a form of rejection and abandonment, lamenting, "j'entrais dans la vie sans trace, sans legs, sans aucun héritage."[29] The fact that the son must turn to a legal dossier to learn about his father's past speaks to the broken line of transmission between the two—the crux of the father's treachery, a failure to carry out his duty to his child as a parent.

It is important to note, though, that the narrator, in foregrounding "trahison" on an interpersonal level, is somewhat of an apologist for his father's complicity in wartime violence. At one point, he describes the father as "ni un vainqueur qui posait sous les arbres d'automne, ni un vaincu, mais un peu de tout cela à la fois. Un égaré": the narrator attends to his father's nuances but seems to disregard his disturbing (and enduring) support for and involvement with the Nazis.[30] The implied positioning of "égaré" as something transversing "vainqueur" and "vaincu" situates the father outside of blame. But at other times, the narrator condemns his father's collaboration with the Nazis and grapples with the ethics of telling his story alongside that of Holocaust survivors, as we will examine later in greater depth. Being an "enfant de salaud," then, perhaps also means to struggle with an emotional ambivalence toward the problematic parental figure.

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[28] Chalandon, *Enfant de salaud*, 260.
[29] Ibid., 40.
[30] Ibid., 233.

In Chalandon, mythomania stems from one character. In Toledo, on the other hand, family myths are perpetuated across multiple generations. But for both, these pernicious fictions are a time bomb: predecessors' secrets, after years of being left unaddressed and buried, belatedly explode in the protagonists' lives. The incipit of *Thésée* features an extended apostrophe to the deceased brother Jérôme that foregrounds the role of inherited fictions as a latent factor that informed Jérôme's suicide, laying out a key objective of the text to come: "éclairer les mensonges / dont nous sommes les enfants."[31] Through a critical examination of archival family photographs, Thésée unpacks his descendance from the "fiction française" and rewrites its misleading ideological, politico-economic, and familial narratives of progress and modernization that came with the Trente Glorieuses (1945–1973).[32] As mentioned briefly in my Introduction, this period of significant economic growth saw a turn away from a rural-based economy, with the advent of rapid industrialization and urbanization, combined with France's greater involvement in international markets. The dream of "modernization," especially in the context of rebuilding France after the troubles of WWII, was shaped by the political rhetoric of Charles de Gaulle and Georges Pompidou. But with the end of the Trente Glorieuses inaugurated by the economic fallout from the oil crisis of 1973 (and the challenges to modernization brought up by the protests of May–June 1968), the national narrative of success began to falter, pessimism and skepticism about the future creeping in instead. *Thésée* inflects the hopes and disillusions of the Trente Glorieuses through the prism of family history: the eponymous character's parents incarnate the national narrative of *la*

[31] Toledo, *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle,* 9, 11.

[32] In addition to the previously cited texts by Jean Fourastié and Jacqueline Fourastié (footnote 63 in the Introduction), see also Céline Pessis, Sezin Topçu, Christophe Bonneuil, eds., *Une autre histoire des Trente Glorieuses. Modernisation, contestations et pollutions dans la France d'après-guerre* (Paris: La Découverte, 2013) on the implications of modernization and economic progress.

réussite française, as they carry out the short-lived fictions of a loving marriage, cohesive nuclear family household, and professional success.

Thésée alludes to the breakdown of filiation when he situates himself in what he calls an "orphelignage," a contradictory portmanteau word that implies both alienation from and belonging to a lineage.[33] The fallout from the fictions of *la réussite* engenders a rupture in his family relationships and even inverses filiation, such that Thésée becomes "le père des miens, le père de la mère et le père du père," in the wake of Jérôme's suicide.[34] And indeed, Thésée is ultimately orphaned by the weight of his troubled filiation, since both of his grief-stricken parents die shortly after Jérôme's passing. "Orphelignage" communicates the tragedies that have shaped the family history; his investigation into the family archives reveals a lineage of deaths and suicides of both parents and children, as well as obfuscated family secrets. Thésée describes himself as "le descendant de cette fiction avortée des camouflages, et des vieux héritages sacrés que l'on tait": employing a language of visuality and silence here, he evokes the *trouble,* or murky, nature of his family history.[35] The "vieux héritages sacrés" refers to the repressed Judeo-Spanish identity of the family, obscured by Thésée's predecessors' zeal to integrate into French society; another prong of the "fiction française" is the insistent narrative of the family being first and foremost French. Moreover, Thésée's unclear sense of his filiation is also a product of the family's "onzième commandement," "ne pas rouvrir les fenêtres du temps": the reference to the Decalogue, shared by Judaism and Christianity, is a nod toward their doubled (and troubled) religious heritage.[36] There is a fear of the past embedded in this "commandement," a fear that has been transmitted throughout generations,

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[33] Toledo, *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle,* 22.
[34] Ibid., 18.
[35] Ibid., 126.
[36] Ibid., 102.

that afflicted Jérôme and partially drove him to commit suicide, and that Thésée's investigation into family history aims to elucidate.

As with Chalandon's narrator's reliance on juridical documents to separate fact from fiction in his father's tall tales, Thésée resists the transmitted imperative for secrecy and unveils realities of family history by reading his ancestors' archival writings. But a key difference from Chalandon is that the most critical engagement with the family past is done through visual image and the medium of photography. The polysemy of the word "légende" is key to Toledo's understanding of the link between writing and photography as it relates to mediating understanding of the past.[37] A *légende,* or caption, may be written for a photograph for purposes of identification, but this textual commentary is not necessarily aligned with veracity. The photograph itself is not necessarily truthful, either. As a snapshot of the past, a photo appears to offer insight into a previous time, but it is also a deliberate construction, foregrounding certain narratives while obscuring others within the frame of the shot. Photos, for Toledo, are "fragments d'une légende," this "légende" meaning a fictional tale.[38] Toledo's take on photos resonates with Marianne Hirsch's idea of the "familial gaze": a socially- and culturally-informed image of the ideal family and relationships within it, which is perpetuated in part by family photographs.[39] At the same time, Hirsch is attentive to the fact that a photo does capture what had once taken place and may even depict certain realities that are not apparent until we look back in retrospect. Toledo's interest is in

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[37] As Toledo has noted in "Écrire la légende" (Ciclic Centre-Val de Loire, 2018), 2–3: "le texte, tout en complétant l'image, peut lui aussi inventer, fabuler, amplifier ou déformer la signification." Toledo debuted his reflections on "légende" in his 2018 multimedia project "Écrire la légende," which accompanied his writing of *Thésée.* The project entailed a series of lectures and conversations as well as an eponymous text, all dealing with factuality and fictionality in Toledo's own archival family photos.

[38] Ibid., 4.

[39] Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997).

parsing this relationship between photos and reality, through the act of what he calls "légender la légende": interrogating the longstanding fictions that are embedded in photos while teasing out new insights from them, and accordingly writing new *légendes,* new critical commentaries for the photos that contribute to a broader revisionist familial narrative.[40]

Photography provides Thésée with a language to interpret his family past. When he finally dives into the archives and examines the history that family photos tell (or don't tell), he likens himself to

> un documentariste qui recueille des archives pour saisir ce qui, au moment du tournage, a été mal conçu; dans votre *french fiction,* mes chers parents, je cherche les faux raccords, les fausses coupes, les dialogues manquants; où et quand le scénario parfait de votre vie française s'est mis à dérailler; c'est une relecture, si vous voulez, d'un film trop bien produit et un peu trafiqué; et face aux images sur le tapis de la ville de l'Est, je dois me convaincre que ce film est *réel,* que certains y sont morts; je dois accepter l'élan de votre union et le château de sable de votre vie française.[41]

The photographs that make up the "film" of the parents' past constitute a site for the negotiation of reality. Thésée's task as a kind of documentary-maker is both investigative and creative: he is responsible for separating fact from fiction in the writing of a new critical narrative of his prehistory, one that attends to the ugly and overlooked elements of his parents' pasts. If Thésée's family history is an overproduced, rose-tinted film, we might liken the book, with its fragmented temporality and multimedia construction, to a rough montage that challenges that neatness. *Thésée* vertiginously moves through time, cycling in and out of the 2000s, early 1900s, and late 1900s. The constructed temporality brings disparate parts of the family past into direct comparison, drawing links that have been erased or hidden beyond the closed *fenêtres du temps.* Archival photos, textual

[40] Toledo, "Écrire la légende," 4.
[41] Toledo, *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle,* 110.

documents, paragraphs of prose, and lines of poetry all come together in bits and pieces, reflecting the nature of the work of archival inquiry and of putting together a new "légende."

Though this new "légende" that Thésée creates may be meant for posterity—for transmission to subsequent generations in lieu of the existing misleading fiction—the act of "légender" is also an address to Thésée's deceased family members. Instead of the distant third-person narration that refers to the identities of characters only in their familial contexts ("la père," "la mère," "le frère qui reste"), which is predominant throughout the text, the turn to first-person narration and second-person addresses in the photograph sections allows for (an albeit one-sided) conversation with *les morts*. The apostrophe to "mes chers parents," a recurring one that appears in the excerpt above, is tinged with a kind of resentment, a note of accusation latent in the expression of endearment. The textual space accommodates the familial confrontations that never occurred, which is also the case with Chalandon's text, as we will later explore.

In his textual encounters with his parents, dubbed Esther and Gatsby, Thésée uses photographs as a screen on which to project his own understanding of his family history from the vantage point of the present. He constructs his "contre-fiction" by refracting this retrospective knowledge on what he perceives to be subtle indicators in the photographs of the cracks in their seemingly perfect marriage, as well as on what the photographs leave outside the frame. Thésée's commentary on a photo of his parents on their wedding day, for instance, chips away at the veneer of their relationship. In the blank space between Esther and Gatsby, he "croi[t] voir Nathaniel," Esther's father, who "incarne ce que l'on se figure comme un *avenir*: plus de liberté, des médias affranchis, une augmentation des salaires, une réduction du temps de travail."[42] Oddly, Nathaniel is

[42] Ibid., 109.

absent from photographic representation in the book: he has only a textual presence, brought out of the shadows by Thésée. The photos may tell a story of Esther and Gatsby's loving marriage (at least at the beginning), but Thésée's *légende* complicates that narrative by framing their relationship as a financial arrangement with Nathaniel. The language of transaction, reflecting also the discourse on industrialization and economic modernity that was flourishing during the Trente Glorieuses, is prominent in Thésée's commentary on the marriage: "un contrat d'affaires," "un chef-d'œuvre de l'emprise industrielle sur la vie amoureuse et la reproduction", "deal reproductif."[43] Nathaniel, a factory owner with "le génie industriel," is the glue holding the partnership together, while Jérôme and Thésée are "prototypes" of industrial manufacturing.[44] The fact that the blank space in the photograph stands in for Nathaniel and the promise of economic success hints at the tenuous nature of the arrangement, that "au cœur de votre trio, [il y a] les fragilités que l'on cache."[45]

To the Thésée of the present, the wedding photograph ironically depicts the beginning of a story of "désamour."[46] The onset of the oil crisis and the economic downturn engender the disintegration of the fragile family, with Gatsby abandoning his management role at Nathaniel's factories and leaving Esther: "Le trio glorieux que vous formiez en cet été solaire et désirant se défait, semble-t-il, en écho à la crise qui s'étend, à la fin de la prospérité, à cet effondrement de rêves."[47] But while the economic fiction of the "été solaire" has run its course, another fiction emerges—the fiction of keeping up appearances. "Vous n'êtes plus *ensemble,* mais il y a une chose que la bourgeoisie sait faire mieux que toutes les autres classes, c'est *semblant*": Thésée plays on the

[43] Ibid., 108 (first two quotations), 109 (final one).
[44] Ibid., 111, 108.
[45] Ibid., 113.
[46] Ibid., 123.
[47] Ibid.

shared sonority of "ensemble" and "semblant" to critique the social performativity of his parents' marriage. If Thésée has attended to the economic and ethno-national dimensions of the *fiction française,* as we have already examined, he now foregrounds its manifestation in the familial sphere and its disruption of the relationship between parents and children. Thésée's and Jérôme's childhoods rests upon the instability of *le semblant,* of the "*mensonge qui protège*": a façade of conjugal harmony that is kept up for the children's sake but ultimately proves detrimental in the long run. Thésée's voice recedes to accommodate the tormented voice of Jérôme on their parents' charade:

> "*il nous ont menti, Thésée*, hurlait mon frère dans les derniers jours de sa vie; *la mère qui jouait à la putain de famille idéale; et moi comme un con, qui y ai cru . . . c'est juste ce qu'ils font de mieux, tous, nous vendre leurs histoires pour que ça ait l'air vrai alors que ça fuit, Thésée! tu te souviens du père et ses fiancées qu'il emmène à l'opéra? et la mère avec son amant bien correct qui part en vacances avec nous; merde, à quoi on peut se raccrocher quand l'enfance s'est bâtie sur du sable mouvant?*"[48]

Note here the return of the image of sand, which we saw earlier in Thésée's remark on "le château de sable de votre vie française." Whereas sand was used in that previous line to evoke the romanticized but precarious fiction of Gatsby and Esther's successful life together, it surfaces here as a metaphor for the troubled conditions of childhood that the fiction has engendered. The accusation of "vendre leurs histoires" takes up the language of commerce as Thésée had done earlier as well. If Esther and Gatsby's union is "un contrat d'affaires," they are in the market of fiction: the metaphor of transaction is a critique of the insincerity that has replaced filial love. Pervading Jérôme's speech is a rage that is intensified by his belated realization of the false premises of his family life. The joyous wedding photograph, from which this entire commentary on Esther and

[48] Ibid., 129.

Gatsby's failed partnership and parenting stems, stands in ironic contrast to the explosive anger and resentment that both sons express.

Thésée's commentaries on the photos, while aiming to capture the darker realities of his parents' past, do not reject imaginative language. In fact, speculation pervades his observations on the photos: he imagines the champagne toast that must have happened after the wedding photo, and he conjures up the absent figure of Nathaniel. Chalandon's narrator, too, is prone to speculation upon his father's subjective experience, which the legal archival documents have not preserved. "Excusez Monsieur le juge mon pauvre style, mais je suis un soldat et non un romancier," the father had written in a court letter while imprisoned in France in 1945.[49] The irony of this sentence, given the fact that the father's exploits have been channeled into novel form, makes for a metanarrative comment on the fabrication involved in the creation of the narrative itself. The "enfant de salaud," as a novelist himself, may have inherited his father's aptitude for storytelling, but the distinction between them is the former's transparency in this book about what is fiction and what is historical reality. I turn now to the seemingly paradoxical uses of literary fiction more broadly in *Enfant de salaud* and *Thésée.*

2.2 Facing facts, embracing fiction: Reconfigurations of the past

Both texts feature a transfiguration of the autobiographical into the fictional that allows the writers to derive new insights from their family histories, creatively contest the harmful fictions of their predecessors, and work toward the symbolic repair of the troubled past. Chalandon did indeed attend the Barbie trial with his father in 1987 but only opened his father's judicial dossier in

[49] Chalandon, *Enfant de salaud*, 153.

2020.[50] The timeline for his reckoning with his father's past is deliberately shifted back in the novel to take place amid a period of obsession over *les années noires* during the 1980s and 1990s: after more than forty years of the repression of national memory of WWII, France finally was forced to face the previously taboo subject of complicity in the Holocaust.[51] As I had mentioned in this thesis's Introduction, Henry Rousso's *Le Syndrome de Vichy* (1987, the same year as the Barbie trial) was instrumental in driving this change, by pushing back on the Gaullist narrative of widespread resistance during the war and bringing attention to the collective forgetting of France's collaboration. Wide coverage of the trials of Nazis and collaborators helped bring the war to the forefront of public conversation. Barbie's trial for crimes against humanity, as one of the first major ones in France, was essential in shaping this cultural and societal reckoning with the past. The transplanting of the 2020 investigation into the late 1980s suggests that while France's grappling with the legacy of WWII and the Shoah may have begun almost a half-century ago, it is still very much ongoing and dynamic in the 21st century.

The fictionalized temporality also allows for a deeper engagement with facts: legal witness testimonies at the Barbie trial and juridical documents related to the narrator's father's trial come together, countering the father's mythomania. The narrative structure of *Enfant de salaud* reinforces the parallelism between the trials of Barbie and of the father. The bulk of the novel alternates between scenes in the Lyon courtroom and sections where the narrator reflects on the information he finds on his father's own trial for collaboration. Chalandon also constructs the

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[50] Chalandon, "Sorj Chalandon, mon père ce salaud," interview by Olivia Gesbert, *La Grande Table Culture,* France Culture*,* October 12, 2021, audio, 4:34–5:53, https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/la-grande-table-culture/sorj-chalandon-mon-pere-ce-salaud-9612140.

[51] On the Vichy government's collaboration with Nazi Germany and complicity in the Holocaust, see Michael R. Marrus and Robert O. Paxton, *Vichy France and the Jews* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019 [1981]).

narrative progression in a way that brings the basic development of the two trials together, from witness statements to establishment of facts to verdicts. On top of these two real-life trials is a third one that exists only in the space of the fictional novel: not legal or public, but a personal affair, the son putting his father on trial. In interviews, Chalandon has actually rejected the idea that he is trying his father in this novel: "Je suis pas juge, je suis pas procureur, je suis pas magistrat . . . Mon rôle c'est de comprendre."[52] But the legal vocabulary in this statement implies that his understanding of a "trial" is limited to a criminal context. It is true that the narrator is not trying his father for his crimes during the war, but he is trying him in another sense—for his betrayal of trust and failure to transmit his history. In other words, it is a trial for the father's role in disrupting filiation. The goal of such a trial is not to reach a verdict of innocent or guilty, but to seek truth; indeed, to contest the father's fictions.[53]

The father's legal trial is key to the personal "trial," but knowledge about it can only be approximated through limited archival court files. As we have seen earlier, many unknowns remain after the investigation (and indeed, the inquiry conjures up more questions), and the potential for understanding his father's actions and objectives is never fully achieved since the narrator only has secondhand access to his father's experiences. The interrogative language prevalent in the sections reconstructing the legal trial suggests an unrealized cross-examination of the father by his son. He poses questions to the father that the police never did, and that he himself never will. Being present

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[52] Sorj Chalandon, "In conversation with Sorj Chalandon for his book 'Enfant de salaud' (Grasset)," interview by Catriona Seth, Maison française d'Oxford, February 16, 2022, video, 12:29–12:45, https://www.mfo.ac.uk/event/choix-goncourt-uk-conversation-sorj-chalandon-his-book-enfant-de-salaud-grasset.

[53] My idea of this figurative, textual trial resonates with Gisèle Mathieu-Castellani's analysis of the judicial trial as a discursive and metaphorical tool in French autobiography: confessional writing about the self is likened to testifying before a tribunal. In Chalandon's case, though, it is writing about the father rather than the narratorial self that is informed by the judicial model. See Mathieu-Castellani, *La scène judiciaire de l'autobiographie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1996).

at Barbie's trial and listening to witness testimonies to establish the facts of his crimes makes the father's inaccessible trial even more tantalizing: "Pendant tout le procès Barbie, j'ai rêvé de suivre ton procès. Pas pour te juger, pour t'écouter mieux et t'entendre davantage. Pour que tu m'apprennes et que je comprenne."[54] Using both "écouter" and "entendre" here, the narrator emphasizes his desire for direct, unmediated access to his father; moreover, the interplay of "apprendre" and "comprendre" conveys the (thwarted) ideal of communication between father and son. Attending the Barbie trial may parallel but certainly does not substitute for the father's.

The "je" that narrates these various trials is twofold and intertwining. There is the journalistic "je," used to relate factual observations on the Barbie trial and often receding behind a third-person narration of the witnesses' stories, and the intimate "je," used to express personal thoughts in the sections on Barbie as well as on the father's legal trial. Together with the fact that the personal "je" is partly fictionalized due to the modified temporality, the distinction between narrator and author is further complicated, sometimes maintained but more often blurred. If the first-person narratorial voices are layered and multifaceted, the novel overall features a complex polyphony that stretches across different temporal planes, from the actual statements of witnesses and lawyers in the Barbie trial, to recorded commentary from police and investigators during the father's trial (and the father's own remarks), to the fictional dialogues between the narrator and the father in the novel's present. Through this mosaic-like textual construction, Chalandon invites a reconsideration of what factuality and fictionality comprise, against the backdrop of the narrator's deconstruction of his father's fictions. Documents are not necessarily truthful; literary fiction is not necessarily false.

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[54] Chalandon, *Enfant de salaud,* 306.

The constructed parallelism also allows for critical reflection on the ethical stakes of telling the problematic father's story while doing justice to the stories of Holocaust victims and of witnesses testifying against Barbie. A closer look at the juxtaposition of section 15 in the novel, covering the father's interrogation for his involvement in the Nazi paramilitary group NSKK, and of section 16, relating a key testimony in the Barbie trial from the Resistance fighter Lise Lesèvre, is revealing of the interaction among the different voices (narratorial and otherwise) and the stakes that it has for the novel's questioning of factuality, fictionality, and ethical storytelling. The "je" in section 15 is that of the son, with apostrophes to the father evoking an intimate register. The narrator builds on this sense of intimacy when he draws links between his father's interaction with the police and childhood memories of listening to his war stories:

> Y avait-il une fenêtre, pour laisser s'échapper ton regard? Dans ma chambre d'enfant, c'est par ce rectangle de ciel que tu cueillais tes histoires héroïques . . . Un soir d'orage, les éclairs au-dessus de Lyon te soufflaient le fracas des grenades. Par temps de pluie, tu me parlais du poids de ton uniforme détrempé. Lorsque le ciel s'offrait aux étoiles, tu me chuchotais le bivouac de nuit, juste avant l'assaut. Je me suis demandé si là-bas aussi, dans ce commissariat lillois, tu avais pu appeler un nuage à ton secours.[55]

Imagination inspired by memory partially compensates for the unknowable details of the father's live deposition. The use of the *imparfait* to relate memories with his father implies their frequency: they are at once specific, as demonstrated by details of the stories and the moods that accompanied them, and general, recurring events that testify to the father's storytelling tools and tendencies, which the narrator is extrapolating to the scene with the police. While we might read a critique of his father's dishonesty during his childhood, there is still a tinge of nostalgia here as he reflects back on those fantastic bedtime tales. The phrase "tes histoires héroïques" is ambivalent, reflecting

[55] Ibid., 175.

disapproval from his perspective as an adult but also wonder from when he was a child. There is also something touching in the narrator's idea of a "nuage" coming to his father's rescue.

The narrator moves closer toward a critique of his father in the transition between sections 15 and 16, this time turning to ethical issues that arise from intertwining witness testimonies at Barbie's trial and his father's deposition. Upon reaching an especially tantalizing point in his father's trial where he claims to have been sentenced to death by the Germans for assisting the French Resistance, the narrator consciously decides to close the dossier and "détourner le regard" in order to focus on Lesèvre's testimony happening that afternoon.[56] The language of observation here is significant. Throughout most of the Barbie trial, the narrator has been visually and emotionally distracted by his father, regularly turning in his seat to observe his reactions to the trial rather than focusing on the trial itself. The journalistic narration is often interrupted by the filial voice. The narrator is now rectifying that previous imbalance of attention through a focused coverage of Lesèvre's testimony. It is a matter of narrative ethics: "je ne voulais pas que ta voix recouvre la vérité de cette femme," the narrator asserts.[57] Concerns about who gets heard and seen are prevalent throughout the novel, speaking to a broader preoccupation about what stories are being privileged through the double narrative structure. Though uncovering the father's past is a central motivation of the novel, turning down its volume also carries a certain power: "Pour ne pas être éreinté par le bruit de tes mots. Honorer Lise Lesèvre m'obligeait à faire une pause avec ta propre histoire. Silence dans ma tête pour recueillir son témoignage. Silence dans mon cœur pour l'accueillir."[58] Silence, for once, is an aid rather than an obstacle to the narrator's ethical storytelling of personal and public histories.

[56] Ibid., 185.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.

Whereas section 15 features imaginative language from the narratorial voice of the son, the section on Lise Lesèvre's witness statement sees a return to matter-of-fact reporting. The narrator cites direct testimony, as he did in the previous section quoting his father's deposition, but now there is no speculation, no sentimental reminiscing. To foreground Lesèvre's words, the filial, personal "je" recedes behind the journalistic "je," though the latter is subtle and sparing, as the testimony is mostly related in the third person. The story of Lesèvre, a *résistante* who was tortured by Barbie, and whose son and husband were murdered in an attempt to coerce her into revealing the identity of the Resistance leader in Lyon, progresses uninterrupted. Lesèvre's experience of torture at Barbie's hands back in 1943, when not told through direct quotes from Lesèvre herself, is relayed by the third person narrator in the present tense. This stands in contrast to the past tense narration used to report on the trial proceedings, granting her story a greater sense of immediacy and reflecting the longstanding trauma of the memory. Lesèvre's quoted testimony is spare and straightforward, which conveys the stark horror of the atrocities that she faced and her remarkable courage in refusing to divulge any Resistance secrets. Recounting her near-drowning in a bathtub, for example, Lesèvre is economical but emphatic with the details: "Après chaque question, ils tiraient la chaîne et me replongaient dans l'eau. J'étouffais."[59] The narrator also notes that Lesèvre's delivery throughout is subdued, speaking "gorge serrée, lèvres tremblantes. Ni plainte, ni larme. Seulement, parfois, quelques mots sanglotés," as if controlling the intense emotions just bubbling beneath the surface.[60] The concise simplicity of Lesèvre's testimony on a deeply traumatic experience contrasts with the father's performative, self-aggrandizing, and fantastical storytelling. Whereas the father, as we have seen, is careful to manage the attention of his audience, Lesèvre

[59] Ibid., 190.
[60] Ibid., 188.

captivates the trial attendees by the sheer gravity of her testimony. She transforms her environment: "l'air était irrespirable" and the courtroom is "figé," a solemn silence reigning as Lesèvre speaks.[61] If the narrator had sought a metaphorical silence in his head and heart to fully grasp Lesèvre's testimony, it is now an actual silence that brings her story to the forefront.

The filial "je" returns at the end of Lesèvre's testimony to recommence reflection on the narrative ethics at stake in bringing together the father's and Lesèvre's histories. The narrative juxtaposition of the two figures is physically enacted in the courtroom: "Je les [Lise Lesèvre et son fils] ai regardés. Je t'ai observé. À quelques mètres les uns des autres, deux histoires, deux guerres. La fierté des Lesèvre et ma honte à moi."[62] Two contrasting portraits of filiation emerge. On one hand, the Lesèvres: the son and mother mutually supporting one another through the traumatic legacy of torture and murder, contributing to the reckoning over Nazi violence. On the other hand, the narrator and his father: the latter failing to answer to his son for his collaboration with the Nazi regime as well as his lack of commitment to anything besides his own self-valorization, the son feeling like he has inherited shame, if anything at all, from his father. Though the narrator has hesitated to condemn his father's misdeeds before, he comes closest to doing so now, putting his father on the same level as Barbie: "Toi, Barbie, tous les autres, traîtres français ou fils du Reich millénaire, aviez été camarades de crime contre l'Humanité."[63] Listening to Lesèvre's story forces the narrator to tackle the most disturbing parts of his father's history: he may have had a complicated past, but the fact remains that he was at one point complicit in collaboration, and his motivations for any contribution to the Resistance are dubious. Furthermore, the father's behavior

[61] Ibid., 192.
[62] Ibid., 194.
[63] Ibid., 194–5.

at the Barbie trial, consistently deriding witnesses and defending (plus, at times revering) Barbie, testifies to his continued adherence to the side of violence in this reckoning.

It is a responsibility, perhaps even a symbolic means of making amends for his father's crimes, for the narrator to devote textual space to Lesèvre and other *résistants* and Holocaust survivors. The narrator has explicitly identified the key motivating desire of the *enquête* to understand the father, but perhaps in parallel, the novel is also driven by an ethical imperative to highlight the voices and stories of witnesses at the Barbie trial and victims of Nazi violence. Early in the text, the narrator criticizes the inordinate focus on Barbie in press coverage of and public conversation about the trial: "Barbie, Barbie, Barbie. Tous n'avaient que ce nom à la bouche. Ils n'avaient eu de regards que pour l'accusé, aucun pour les victimes."[64] The narrator attempts to counteract that skewed focus in the novel's testimonial sections, turning the "regard" toward the victims and transcribing their words into the narrative text. It is fitting, too, that the novel commences not by going straight to the Barbie trial or to the investigation into the father, but by telling the history of the Maison d'Izieu, where forty-four Jewish children were abducted on Barbie's orders to be murdered in the concentration camps.[65] Through the attentive recovery of the memory of the Maison d'Izieu, both in the incipit and later in Serge Klarsfeld's reported testimony about the children during the trial, the narrator pays homage to the victims and is able to write about his father's troubled past with a consciousness of the balance of voices included. Where journalism has come short in its myopic focus on the notorious Barbie, the novel form allows

[64] Ibid., 100.
[65] Indeed, Chalandon has stated that strategically balancing his father's history with the story of Izieu is a means of constructing a "barrage aux mensonges de mon père." Chalandon, interview by Olivia Gesbert, 21:49–21:52.

Chalandon to craft a more polyphonic narrative of the trial that captures the emotional force of the otherwise underreported stories of survivors.

Fictional temporality in *Enfant de salaud,* then, allows for the contestation of pernicious fictions—an attempt at the symbolic repair of the troubled paternal past. The altered timeline facilitates greater engagement with historical facts, which serve as a bulwark against the father's mythomania, and makes space for a critical consideration of the narrative ethics at stake in the novel. In Toledo's work, on the other hand, there are no media that function as metaphors for veracity in the face of the "fiction française"; as we have seen, Thésée deconstructs the fictions and obscured realities that archival family photos harbor. Toledo's use of fiction (and of myth, in particular) is also more challenging and counterintuitive than Chalandon's. Instead of using facts to counter fiction, Toledo embraces literary fiction itself as a tool. While *Thésée* is fashioned as a contestation of familial myths, mythology (in its literary sense) provides a language which allows Toledo to construct new textual filiations that make space for parsing through family traumas. Most prominent of the literary intertexts is the ancient Greek myth of Theseus and the Minotaur, at the heart of which lies the problem of filiation disrupted by violence and death. Though varying accounts of the myth have surfaced since its conception in Greek antiquity, there is a generally accepted narrative: King Minos of Crete, in revenge for the death of his son in Athens, required the Athenians to send seven boys and seven girls every nine years to Crete to be sacrificed to the Minotaur, the half-human, half-bull creature who resided in a labyrinth. Theseus, who volunteered as an Athenian tribute, ended the cycle of sacrifice by killing the Minotaur. He successfully escaped

from the labyrinth by following the advice of Ariadne, Minos' daughter: to retrace his steps using a thread that he had cast along the way to the Minotaur.[66]

Toledo renews the myth of Theseus as a loose metaphor for the difficult investigation into troubled family history and for the *récit*'s own structural complexity. Thésée's desire for escape from filiation is often articulated through the language of the myth. For instance, his reluctance to come face-to-face with the past when he first opens the boxes of archival documents is related as such: "Thésée cherche une issue hors du labyrinthe, il voudrait éviter le monstre."[67] The reader, along with Thésée, is lost: the text as a whole is labyrinthine. The very experience of reading is disorienting, as the text moves in and out of different moments across three centuries and switches between prose and verse, italics and plain text, word and image, the voice of Thésée and the voices of his departed relatives. The unconventional typography of the book, with the more poetry-akin sections written in italics and center-aligned on the page (broken off from the main prose body), makes for an aesthetic of irregularity that befits the metaphor of the labyrinth. On a more granular level, the prose sentences are labyrinths in themselves, comprising strings of independent clauses attached to one another by semicolons, seemingly endless as they meander across pages; if ever bounded, it is only by an ellipsis and never a period. The repetitiveness of the text, with certain recurring epithets and phrases (most notably, "je ne comprends rien, je ne vois rien") emulates the sensation of running into the same dead ends while trying to escape from the labyrinth.

If the labyrinth is the maze of genealogical history that bewilders Thésée, the act of killing the Minotaur, perhaps, is the ability to face that history head-on and understand the roots of his

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[66] On the myth of Theseus and Minotaur and the various classical sources informing it, see Jan Stenger, "Theseus," "Minotaurus," and "Minos," in *Brill's New Pauly: Encyclopaedia of the Ancient World. Classical Tradition,* eds. Hubert Cancik, Helmuth Schneider, Manfred Landfester, Christine F. Salazar, Francis G. Gentry (Brill, first published online 2006).

[67] Toledo, *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle,* 67.

family tragedies. Aftershocks of the past on the present, thematized in the Greek myth through the sacrifice of the Athenian children as a form of reparation for past misdeeds, is a major preoccupation of *Thésée*: "le frère qui reste" must contend with the traumas of family history that he has inherited. The recurring image of (Ariadne's) thread in Toledo's text is also linked to the relationship between generations. Thésée manages to navigate his way in the labyrinth of family history by following the thread—the patterns and echoes of trauma—running across generations of stories. The incipit first conjures up the image of pulling "un fil fragile" to reveal "que nous sommes / un continuum de désastres / et d'effondrements."[68] "Fragile" seems an incongruous description for thread, which one would imagine to be supple. Taken in a more figurative sense, the adjective suggests that what cuts across the generations of Thésée's family is a peculiar shared sense of precarity. Their line of descent is characterized by the unknowing transmission of "peur" and "fragilité": two oft-recurring words in the text, as tragedies strike each generation and family ties disintegrate, but knowledge of past generations' troubles is kept locked away. Evoking this disconcerting state of filiation is the thread-adjacent image of the "corde qui lie les âges entre eux," which also brings to mind the cord which Jérôme used to hang himself: the thread thus becomes a symbol for the lineage of death.[69] There is also an embodied dimension to the intergenerational thread: "ce fil qui le relie [Thésée] aux profondeurs des âges" is comprised of "la cohérence des mémoires, des flux de sang, des énergies retenues."[70] If the link across familial generations is manifested through the body, Thésée is invested in "tirant le fil de la blessure": opening the wounds

[68] Ibid., 9–10.
[69] Ibid., 96.
[70] Ibid., 171.

of family tragedies in order to understand them better.[71] We shall return to the embodied aspect of familial transmission in greater detail in the final section of this chapter.

By framing the text as a renewed version of the myth of Theseus, Toledo situates his own autobiographical experience in a longer literary-cultural lineage of narratives that deal with troubled filiation. Thésée may be orphaned and feel alienated from his familial roots, but he also belongs, at least symbolically, to this other literary line of descent. The text itself also assumes the quality of a myth: it tells the origin story of Toledo's/Thésée's family, but uses fictionalized names to construct a new genealogy. Notably, Thésée's father is only known as "Gatsby," which brings an entire cultural imaginary around *The Great Gatsby* into the negotiation of the family past.[72] The character of Jay Gatsby has become an American cultural symbol for the dark side of self-made capitalist success and the elusiveness of social mobility.[73] Toledo juxtaposes the promise of economic prosperity and modernity of the American 1920s, which ends catastrophically with the onset of the Great Depression, alongside the hopes of progress during the Trente Glorieuses in France and subsequent fallout. The flawed "American Dream" of meritocratic achievement and the "promesse déçue" of the *fiction française* come together, embodied in the character of Thésée's father.[74] The use of the Gatsby name is a tool to expose and critique his parents' misled narrative of success.

In Fitzgerald's novel, the name Gatsby is already an alias: the poor James Gatz makes a new name for himself as the millionaire Jay Gatsby. To dub the figure of the father as "Gatsby," then,

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[71] Ibid., 169.
[72] F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner, 1925).
[73] Gatsby, originally from a poor rural family, mysteriously amasses a fortune which is implied to have come from shady dealings in bootlegging and organized crime. Despite his financial success, he is never truly accepted into the upper echelons of New York society.
[74] Toledo, *Thésée*, *sa vie nouvelle,* 113.

implies a layering of identities that masks his origins and keeps the "fenêtres du temps" closed. In calling his father Gatsby, which is itself an act of inverting filiation, with the child naming the parent instead of the usual vice versa, Thésée points to the fact that his father was "*orphelin de père*" since adolescence, but "il cache, il dissimule" this dark part of his biography.[75] He, like Fitzgerald's Gatsby, begins his upward socioeconomic ascent all on his own, a *tabula rasa*. Thésée's father also builds an identity of American prosperity, which Thésée foregrounds in the choice to name him Gatsby. "*The guy, Gatsby, is a success!*": this reported speech, related with irony through free indirect discourse, conveys Gatsby's comfortably thriving persona through the adoption of a colloquial register in English.[76] He finishes his business education in California and resides with Esther there for some time before returning to France, the young couple inflecting the *fiction française* with the American dream: "Vous rêvez de ce que vous avez vu en Amérique; vous croyez tenir de votre court exil une idée de l'avenir."[77] The cynicism implied in Thésée's voice here towards his parents' "American" vision for the future becomes fully fledged in his discussion of his father's proposal for "un capitalisme à visage humain" as a solution to the problems of environmental damage and precarious labor rights that have emerged amid postwar economic growth. Capitalism is at the heart of the *fiction française,* "le nom des fictions avec lesquelles nous gouvernons ce monde, le nom de la ruine."[78] Toledo's Gatsby, as does Fitzgerald's, lives in the futile pursuit of the fiction of capitalist success, only to end in despair and loss. The use of the fictional intertext with *The Great Gatsby* enables a deeper dive into the sociocultural roots of the false narratives of progress and success that permeated Thésée's (and Toledo's) upbringing.

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[75] Ibid., 101.
[76] Ibid., 113.
[77] Ibid., 110.
[78] Ibid., 120–121.

Names, evidently, are imbued with great interpretive significance in *Thésée.*[79] They are central to the process of writing a new family mythology. In addition to Gatsby, Thésée's other relatives are doubles of Toledo's family members who are given fictional names in the text; only Jérôme's real name is preserved. Claire Paulian has problematized this use of fictionalization in her review of the book, pointing out that the "prénoms si exotisants" of members of the maternal lineage in *Thésée* (Esther, Nathaniel, Nissim, Talmaï, and Oved) advance a "motif juif" that is absent in the names of their real-life counterparts.[80] For Paulian, the construction of such a fictive genealogy using a documentary approach is deceptive and casts doubt over the degree of authenticity of the inscribed manuscripts, letters, and documents that are central to the functioning of the text as a search for knowledge about the past.[81] It is this act of creating a semi-fabricated filiation to critique the "fiction française" upon which his actual filiation rests that renders Toledo's mix of autobiography and fiction more troubling than Chalandon's. If the latter is very specific and upfront about the fictional parts of his novel, the former leaves it ambiguous as to what is fact and what is fiction within the text itself.

I do not seek to continue tracing the discrepancies between Toledo's and Thésée's filiations, because it is not a productive approach to reading the text. *Thésée* is ultimately a work of fiction that uses autobiographical material to tell a multilayered story about troubled filiation rather than to provide a factually rigorous account. I am not looking to criticize Toledo for taking liberties with the representation of real lives. Indeed, the delicate integration of autobiography and fiction in the

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[79] Toledo has described names as "des codes, des manières d'encoder la vie." Toledo, "«J'aime quand les livres résistent» (Partie I)," interview by Hassina Mechaï, *Mediapart*, March 23, 2021.
[80] Claire Paulian, "La fabrique d'une légende," review of *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle,* by Camille de Toledo, *En attendant Nadeau*, November 18, 2020.
[81] Note that this doubt is limited to the textual pieces from the archive; the photos are from Toledo's family albums.

text implies there are different kinds of fictional narratives that configure our understanding of the past. Distinct from the pernicious "fiction française" is Toledo's use of literary fiction to shed light on the myths underpinning his filiation, and to construct a new filiation, which has (albeit limited) salutary implications through symbolism. If names are "codes" for Toledo, then renaming his ancestors can be considered a means of re-encoding filiation, of starting anew in the space of the text, of imagining a different ancestry in which Jewish heritage is foregrounded rather than forgotten after generations of embracing ideas of French universalism.[82] The interpretive potential of Toledo's transfiguration of autobiographical material into literary fiction aligns with Leigh Gilmore's idea that life-writing that resists literal self-representation within prescriptive generic boundaries carves out a textual space that offers a way around a trauma: the domain of the literary allows for a coming-to-terms with traumatic experience.[83] Following this line of thought, the imagined and indeed mythic filiation in *Thésée* becomes a figurative barricade against a lineage in which Jewish identity and memory have been repressed and descendants have suffered from "fragilité" and "peurs" without knowing the origins of their troubles. Toledo himself has espoused the significance of the "généalogie fictionnelle [qui] doit venir corriger, secourir, transformer la généalogie réelle qui a produit la mort"—in other words, the reparative potential of literary fiction.[84] But this is a very optimistic reading of the text that requires nuance given the fact that, despite the modified names in the constructed filiation to bring out the suppressed Jewish origins of the family, Thésée's predecessors, as we have seen, do not embrace their Jewish identity. The

[82] Toledo, "«L'écriture est cernée par des impossibilités à dire» (Partie II)," interview by Hassina Mechaï, *Mediapart*, March 23, 2021.
[83] Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2023 [2001]). Gilmore analyzes a corpus of mostly Anglophone texts from the 1990s, but her conceptual interrogation of the relationship between literary life-writing and healing finds a point of contact with my reflection here.
[84] Toledo, "«L'écriture est cernée»," interview by Hassina Mechaï.

"généalogie fictionnelle" is not exempt from tragedy; rather than fixing the problems of the "généalogie réelle," it frames them in a more oblique manner. The idea of healing the wounds of family tragedies through the construction of a fictional filiation works on a symbolic level, but the troubled family history and its aftershocks on each generation nevertheless remain. In this regard, a reading of Thésée's tangle of literary fictions as a *barrage* against the "fiction française" and a mode of figurative repair of a real-life filiation of death and tragedy sits more uncomfortably than an analogous reading of the fact-oriented "contre-fiction" in Chalandon. Nevertheless, in both texts there is a limit to how much weight such interpretations of symbolic repair can carry when we account for the texts' narrativization of the elusiveness of healing.

2.3 The elusive ideal of repair

The objects of repair are different in each of the texts, though both point to the wounds of problematic familial pasts. For Chalandon, repair of the father-son relationship is at stake: in their (fictional) confrontations, in which the narrator tries to force his father to account for the facts from his investigation, empathy and productive communication consistently seem out of reach, even leading to a further breakdown in the language between them. There are moments during the Barbie trial that do appear promising for emotional connection between the narrator and his father, but that potential quickly dissipates each time due to the latter's derisive language. An especially tantalizing moment for that proximity between father and son occurs in the aftermath of Fortunée Chouraki's testimony. When she was deported to Auschwitz, she saw a boy wearing the pullover that she had made for her own son (who had been staying at the Maison d'Izieu), and she spent every day afterwards looking for him at the camp, fueled by the hope that he was still alive.

Both father and son are moved to tears upon hearing this mother's testimony, a rare moment of shared anguish during this trial. The narrator now gets an approximation of the intimacy he has longed for, at least in his head: "ce soir, tu étais mon père qui avait pleuré. Alors je suis allé à ta rencontre, partager avec toi un chagrin et une conviction."[85] The affective experience offers the prospect of a reconciliation between the two despite the narrator's vexation over the realities of his father's past. Given the fact that the father has generally responded to witness testimonies with scorn, his rare display of raw sorrow here is significant. By identifying him as "mon père qui avait pleuré," the narrator turns his focus away from the different costumes (or rather, uniforms) that his father has donned and looks instead to their filiation as the key to their rapprochement. However, any hint of sympathy or emotional sensitivity from the father soon fades. He rejects the opportunity to relate to his son by mocking Chouraki's story: "L'histoire du pull, ça ferait un bon film, non? . . . Ça a vraiment de la gueule, cette histoire de pull!"[86] Implicitly likening the witness to an actor and undermining her pain, the father disguises his earlier distress behind a familiar discourse of trivialization and theatrics. His behavior shatters the narrator's fantasy of togetherness, making communication between them impossible.

The prevalent textual apostrophes to "papa" (the narrator questioning the specificities of the father's history, reacting to discoveries from the investigation, criticizing the father for his secrecy, among other things) almost never translate into verbalized communication. The only time that the narrator manages to vocalize his thoughts to his father is the scene of their physical altercation, which we have already examined: an unproductive turn that does not reveal any of the "vérité" that the narrator was seeking.[87] In a doubly tender and resentful apostrophe to his father,

[85] Chalandon, *Enfant de salaud,* 230.
[86] Ibid.
[87] Ibid., 103–5.

the narrator entertains the fantasy of open communication between the two of them if only the father had chosen candor over deception:

> Te rends-tu compte de la légèreté qui se serait emparée de nous? De la lumière qui serait entrée dans notre maison? De ton soulagement? De ma délivrance? Tu n'aurais eu plus rien à craindre, ni de moi, ni de personne. . . J'aurais tout accepté, tu m'entends? Et personne, jamais, n'aurait eu le droit de te juger une seconde fois. Je m'y serais opposé. Je t'aurais défendu. Parce que cette vie malade, ces histoires folles, ces guerres démentes avaient été celles de mon père. Et qu'il me l'aurait avoué. Et qu'il m'aurait dit vrai. Et que j'aurais été fier de sa confiance. Et que même s'il avait été puni par son pays, il n'aurait jamais été dégradé par son fils.[88]

Truth, at least in the narrator's eyes, is the path to mercy and redemption for the father. The consistent use of the conditional past here evokes the narrator's bittersweet longing for what could have been. But this grammatical tense also conveys a certain naïveté: the narrator relates how he *believes* he would have reacted to his father's honesty in his childhood, this alternative vision of the past tinged with a fair amount of romanticization of their relationship. The narrator imagines himself fulfilling the responsibilities of a loyal and even protective son, having seemingly forgotten his own previous critiques of the father's collaboration with the Nazis after hearing the witness testimonies at the Barbie trial. The narrator presents the father's mythomania as the root of his troubled filiation, but the fact remains that he would have still been compelled to parse through the legacy of his father's wartime involvement with (and continued apologist attitude toward) the Nazis. "J'aurais tout accepté" is optimistic, to say the least. He constructs his own ideal of the father in this excerpt, one that is far from the antagonistic, disdainful character who rejects his son's appeal for connection.

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[88] Ibid., 261.

The narrator continues to harbor an enduring hope of reconciliation, even though the final interactions between father and son ultimately widen the rupture in their relationship. In their penultimate meeting, the son once again attempts to "imposer la vérité" upon his father and find "Des mots à pardonner pour soigner son malheur et guérir le mien."[89] But instead of reparative dialogue, the wound to their filiation tears even further apart. Dodging his son's questions and indignantly deriding the son in response to the facts of his own history being thrown at him, the father metaphorically transforms. First, he re-inhabits his former persona as "le père mauvais"; upon seeing his father lift his cane, the narrator instinctively shields his face in "un geste d'enfance," triggered by a childhood memory of abuse.[90] As the conversation progresses, the father attempts to counter his son's factual discoveries and verbatim readings from the juridical dossier with his own fictions once again. In this battle of words between truth and falsehood, the father becomes a stranger, nonhuman even: as the narrator puts it, "Je n'avais plus personne en face. Ni père, ni homme, ni rien. Une ombre massive, les bras ballants. Deux yeux cernés de noir. Une bouche en mal d'air."[91] The filial relationship unravels as the father's identity disintegrates, enacted here by the reduction of the former to isolated body parts, and the son no longer recognizes him. By the end, the father, having lost the "battle," leaves alone, "Sans fils à éblouir. Sans plus d'enfant à trahir. Jamais."[92] The rupture in filiation seems irrevocable. If their earlier conversations had been textually one-sided, there are no words left between them now, no path to mercy nor healing through language.

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[89] Ibid., 294.
[90] Ibid., 290.
[91] Ibid., 291.
[92] Ibid., 295.

The final confrontation between father and son, taking place at the riverbank of the Saône, features no attempt on the son's part to force his father to open up. Instead, this scene offers a potential restoration of their relationship that is enacted not through language, but through physical contact. The father, imagining that the authorities are hunting him down as if it were still wartime, jumps into the Saône, recreating his story of (allegedly) having crossed the "lac allemand" to escape from the British. The narrator has previously pointed to the foggy, opaque "lac allemand" as a metaphor for his disorientation amid archival discoveries that tell his father's history: "Je me débattais dans l'épais brouillard qui entourait ton lac allemand. Tu restais une question et ta guerre était une folie. Elle ne me permettait ni de te comprendre ni de te pardonner."[93] If compelling the father to face the facts of his past has been unsuccessful in clearing the fog—in crossing the lake to reach forgiveness and understanding on the other side—it is through the experience of physical and emotional proximity in the imagined "lac allemand" that the narrator finds once again the father he loves.

"Fils, père, emmêlés au milieu de l'eau": it is a moment of tense intimacy, the father seeking escape while the son tries to bring him back, both struggling against each other.[94] But being in the water like this also brings back fond childhood memories for the narrator of swimming with his father in the Lac d'Annecy. As he had once climbed on his father's back ("faire petit crabe," his father called it) as part of a game, the narrator now does so again, inhabiting his body as child once more and reprising the language they once shared: "J'ai fait petit crabe en silence . . . Je suis resté comme ça une longue minute, joue écrasée contre sa veste mouillée, doigts cramponnés à ses revers."[95] The Saône here bridges the father's wartime past ("lac allemand") with his familial past

[93] Ibid., 234.
[94] Ibid., 329.
[95] Ibid., 328–9.

(Lac d'Annecy): by joining him in the water, the narrator symbolically reconciles with the father who failed to carry out his duty of transmission and for whom he harbors such an unconditional love. Letting go of his father's body, the narrator metaphorically liberates him: "Je lui rendais son histoire et sa vie."[96] Although the scene had begun with a tumult, it concludes with a tranquility that has been otherwise absent throughout the entire novel. Leaving his father to float off by himself, the narrator reflects, "Je ne me suis pas inquiété. / Je sais que tu as traversé ton lac allemand. / Et que tu m'attends sur l'autre rive."[97] At least in the narrator's mind, they are on the cusp of the reconciliation that had hitherto eluded them. But there is still a certain tenuousness despite the hopeful tone of this conclusion. The reconciliation is not necessarily realized but merely anticipated by the narrator. Bearing in mind his consistent (and often naïve) optimism when it comes to his relationship with his father, this hope of reunion may very well be one-sided. Filiation exerts a certain compelling power over the narrator: it is a force for a perplexingly steadfast and contradictory attachment to his father. All of the confrontations we have examined in this section are, of course, fictional constructions. This suggests that for Chalandon, the negotiation with the painful paternal legacy is unfinished and ongoing: by crafting an autofictional narratorial voice and self, the writer creates a new space for the expression (more so than repair) of his nuanced, pained relationship with the father.

While wounds are figurative in Chalandon, they manifest both literally and metaphorically in Toledo. Repair is thematized through Thésée's difficult journey to heal his physically debilitated body, which is a site of inherited intergenerational traumas. The critical rewriting of family history is an attempt to facilitate that healing, but it proves unfruitful. For Toledo, the body is the subject

[96] Ibid., 329.
[97] Ibid., 330.

of knowledge about the familial past because it is a receptacle for the transmission of trauma. Thésée suspects that his bodily pains are encrypted aftershocks of "les ruines et les chocs des généalogies," but how this exactly works is left unresolved.[98] Medical technology fails to explain the direct causes of the pain, and the doctors even trivialize his suffering: "c*'est dans la tête*, ils disent, *on ne voit rien sur les radios, les échographies, les IRM.*"[99] Indeed, the refrain "ce que la matière sait que nous ne savons pas" articulates the insufficiency of the mind and the primacy of the body as an alternative source of knowledge about filiation, but one which requires a different approach from established medical practices in order to unlock. This knowledge is also called the "corps-mémoire" in *Thésée*: the idea that family memory is somehow built up and embedded in the bodies of members in each generation. There is something about the "corps-mémoire" that defies straightforward understanding: it seems to be grounded in abstraction, and yet it is all about the physical body. The expression of the "corps-mémoire" demands the use of a figurative rather than literal language. The character Anselme, who guides Thésée on a meditation regime to heal his body, most effectively explains the "corps-mémoire" through metaphor:

> *tu n'as qu'à penser à une falaise en haut de laquelle il y a des arbres; imagine que ta vie, c'est la surcouche des arbres au sommet, tandis que ce qui est dans tes os, qui a sédimenté au fil des siècles, ce sont les roches des ancêtres, toutes celles et ceux qui t'ont précédé; c'est ça que le corps veut que tu découvres*.[100]

The use of organic imagery here frames intergenerational transmission through the body as a natural, inexorable process. While the trees on the cliff may die as time goes by, while individuals' lives all have an end date, the rock of filiation will only continue to accumulate material and grow larger. In particular, the use of sedimentary rock as an analogy for ancestral inheritance suggests

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[98] Toledo, *Thésée*, *sa vie nouvelle,* 77.
[99] Ibid., 81.
[100] Ibid., 152.

that layers of history are written on the body and can be interpreted if examined in the correct way. Note that "le corps" is distinct from "tu" (referring to Thésée): the former has a mind of its own, guarding familial memory that has not been integrated into consciousness. Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma is useful for thinking further about the literary expression of the "corps-mémoire." For Caruth, trauma is marked by its "unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance" and belated resurfacing: "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language."[101] Though Caruth understands trauma primarily as a psychological phenomenon on the level of the individual, the mechanism that she describes does find a point of contact with the representation of physical familial trauma in *Thésée.* If memory of the deaths and suicides of Thésée's ancestors has been repressed over the course of generations and remained unassimilated into collective family knowledge, those traumas now belatedly burst onto the scene in the form of Thésée's physical malady, the embodiment of the "wound that cries out." The malady is the expression of the "corps-mémoire," or that unknown knowledge about the past.

The idea of the "corps-mémoire" engages with burgeoning research in epigenetics. This field of study interrogates the effects that environmental factors may have on changes in gene operation, which then become passed down to subsequent generations. Whereas medical examination appears inadequate for diagnosing Thésée's (possibly genealogy-related) pains, the field of biology does offer some insights into transgenerational transmission. Indeed, Toledo adopts

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[101] Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 4.

a scientific register in a short reference to a 2017 study of a stress-induced change in genetic behavior that was transmitted across fourteen generations in "C elegans" (a miniscule "ver," or worm). Using center-aligned text to list the authors, title, and date of the study, as if he were recreating the academic article where these findings were published, Toledo brings the scientific into conversation with the poetic. This intersection, as Alice Laumier notes, is encapsulated by the shared sonority of "ver" (worm) and "vers" (verse).[102] Biological and literary expressions of the "corps-mémoire," then, complement rather than oppose one another. But it is important to underscore the fact that the study is in a worm; it remains unclear the extent to which a similar mechanism might be traced within humans. Moreover, the field of epigenetics in general is limited in its scope: the transmission of trauma can operate within familial and sociocultural frameworks and not merely within the domain of biology, as genes are not fully deterministic.[103] The story of *C elegans* derives most of its power, then, in its metaphorical interpretation. The *ver*(*s*), the physical body and the body of a poetic text, is a material that carries the trace of past traumas. Underscoring this privileged relationship between the textual and the corporeal is Thésée's twice-appearing reflection that "*nous sommes tissés de mots, le corps est une enveloppe / où tout s'emmêle: le verbe et la chimie des eaux, des tissus, / des nerfs, des os…*"[104] The image of the "enveloppe" brings together the human body and the text through a shared materiality. The experimental *Thésée,* with its genre-resisting form and heterogenous makeup, is a textual form of biochemical reactions: distinct but constituent parts of a whole work together to give life to the larger body.

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[102] Alice Laumier, "Ce qui se transmet: fictions et contre-fictions du trauma dans *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle,*" *Itinéraires* 3 (2022–23), 8.
[103] See Marianne Hirsch, "Ce qui touche à la mémoire," *Esprit* 10 (October 2017): 42–61 for a critique of epigenetics.
[104] Toledo, *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle,* 68, 81.

Building on the relationship between the body and writing, literary creation that attends to the painful expression of the unassimilated trauma offers the possibility for narrowing the gap between the "corps-mémoire" and the mind. Paradoxically, opening inherited wounds, "tirer le fil de la blessure," is part of the process of healing them.[105] "*Ces cartons d'archives . . . ont pesé sur mes os*": the way to elucidate the "corps-mémoire," to read the layers of history embedded in the pained body, is through the archival investigation and writing of *légendes* for those archival finds in the body of the text, despite the pain of revisiting these material traces of the past.[106] In this way, Thésée aims to repair the damage that the past has enacted on the present rather than resign himself to those inheritances. He foregrounds the goal of repair in a monologue before opening the family photoarchive: "*Il me faudra ajointer les vies entre les âges pour guérir les morts et me relier à eux à rebours de ma fuite*."[107] "Guérir les morts" is, evidently, a figurative rather than physical form of repair, an expression of the trope of literary mourning: rehabilitating his lost family members through language, writing a "*poème de revivance*" rather than of "survivance," such that he may live with the departed within the space of the text.[108] The objects of this "revivance" encompass the lost family members and Thésée himself. Repairing the broken bonds of filiation is contingent on the rehabilitation of his own almost lifeless body.

References to "*autopoïèse*" (again, a term borrowed from the biological sciences) further emphasize the link between literary writing and the healing of the body.[109] A compound of the

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[105] Ibid., 169.
[106] Ibid., 149.
[107] Ibid., 64.
[108] Ibid., 77. On the idea of "vivre avec les morts" see Camille de Toledo and Delphine Horvilleur, "Les vivants et les morts," Maison de la Poésie Paris, May 26, 2021, video, 1:22:02, https://maisondelapoesieparis.com/scene-numerique/delphine-horvilleur-camille-de-toledo-les-vivants-les-morts/.
[109] Toledo, *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle,* 152.

Greek terms *auto* ("self") and *poiesis* ("creation"), it refers to a self-reliant system (e.g. a living organism), able to generate its own constituent parts in order to maintain itself.[110] The human body, for instance, is capable of *autopoïèse* in that it generates new cells to replace damaged ones, healing its own wounds. The fact that in ancient Greek "poiesis" also referred to poetry (and is related to this modern word) has also been explored in philosophy of aesthetics, most notably by Martin Heidegger. He understands poiesis as a mode of bringing forth into "unconcealment" what has been hidden or inaccessible; art, in the broad sense of the term, is the result of this bringing-forth.[111] To return to *Thésée,* then: *autopoïèse* evokes a compelling symbolic connection between self-healing and literary writing, both enacted through a process of elucidating what has been previously unknown or suppressed, as well as through self-reinvention. This doubled understanding of *autopoïèse* is explored during one of Thésée's meditation sessions, when the "corps-mémoire" becomes perceptible as literary expression: "ce savoir autre, profond . . . lui paraît un étrange poème organique ou une prière sans dogme, sans rituel."[112] We can read this as a metanarrative comment: *Thésée* itself is the "poème organique," a formulation that captures the literary and bodily connotations embedded in *autopoïèse*, and secular "prière," with its chant-like quality. The text itself, which inscribes otherwise obscured knowledge of intergenerational and historical trauma, is a kind of body in healing, as it searches for a fragmented language to depict the piecemeal work of repair. Tuning in to his physical pain through the lens of the "poème organique" allows for the beginning of an "unconcealment" of the "corps-mémoire": "pour l'heure, il prend

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[110] From biologists Humberto Maturana and Francisco Varela, *Autopoeisis and Cognition: The Realization of the Living* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1980).

[111] "Unconcealment," or "unverborgenheit" in German, is Heidegger's translation for the ancient Greek *alêtheia,* which is normally translated as "truth." See Heidegger, *Nietzsche I: The Will to Power as Art,* trans. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991), 165.

[112] Toledo, *Thésée*, *sa vie nouvelle,* 158.

surtout conscience de ce qu'il a caché: des terreurs dont il ne connaît pas la source . . . il plonge dans les eaux du temps en laissant les effrois de la matière, les nœuds de ses nerfs le guider."[113] Note here the deviation from the usual recurring phrase, "pour l'heure, il ne voit/comprend rien": this is a rare moment of clarity about his ailing body that seems to bring Thésée a step closer to healing.

Ultimately, though, the extent to which Thésée does manage to "guérir les morts" and carry out *autopoïèse* is limited. Whereas Chalandon's narrator yearned for love from his father to no avail, Thésée desperately wants to love his parents but often finds himself consumed by "une haine impuissante."[114] If he revives his lost parents in the text, it is to confront them for their mistakes, his critical *légendes* inflected by resentment and anger. Even for long-lost ancestors like Oved, Talmaï, and Nissim, inscribing their voices into a broader story of filiation may constitute a form of narrative restoration but does not go so far as to enact "la guérison." Bringing their traumas out from obscurity does not change the fact that they are *faits accomplis*. Underpinning Thésée's attempts to access the "corps-mémoire" through meditation is a deep skepticism of the potential of self-healing: Thésée consistently reverts back to pessimism after moments of clarity. His definition of *autopoïèse*, "le pari que le corps accomplira les opérations nécessaires," foregrounds the role of chance over intention, fate over agency.[115] Indeed, Thésée even reads a certain fatality in his efforts at "autoguérison," situating himself within the "lignée des hommes qui meurent": "je suis en train de me faire avoir, comme mon père dans les derniers temps, comme mon frère; je suis en train de reproduire les mêmes erreurs qu'eux, qui ont cru qu'ils allaient guérir."[116] It seems, at least in his head, that the semi-determinism of filiation overrides any agency he may try to exercise in freeing

[113] Ibid., 159.
[114] Ibid., 169.
[115] Ibid., 152.
[116] Ibid., 156, 158.

himself from the aftershocks of his family past. His fear that "l'autopoïèse ne soit qu'un conte; un joli conte du souffle et de l'eau; un mythe de la résurrection pour les temps à venir" brings back the central problem of family fictions.[117] The potential for repair could be yet another prong of the falsely romanticized "fiction française" that Thésée critiques and unpacks in that very process of seeking repair.

Thésée's conversation with Jérôme (from beyond the grave) near the end of the text is a key interrogation of the plausibility of "guérir les morts." I return now to the idea with which I began this chapter: Jérôme's contestation of the reparative potential of "la langue et les livres."[118] His incredulity that Thésée thought he could "nettoyer le temps" via "les archives, les images, les lettres, les mots que tu cherches à poser à la place de nos voix, de nos corps" also carries metanarrative interpretive weight.[119] Those four listed nouns weave together to form the body of *Thésée*; Jérôme's comment, then, highlights the limits of symbolic substitution for the deceased through literary means. The "poème de revivance" can never truly revive lost loved ones. Moreover, Jérôme questions Thésée's insistence on the determinism of filiation and obsession with assigning meaning to uncanny (but possibly just coincidental) *synchronies* in their family history, notably recurring instances of parents burying their children and significant dates for family deaths:

> tu crois que mon suicide et celui de l'ancêtre et la mort d'Oved et les pères qui tremblent, les fils qui meurent, les hommes qui tombent, forment une énigme que tu dois déchiffrer? tu crois que ce passé, celui que l'on cache à rebours des légendes de la réussite, dessine pour toi un destin? . . . crois-tu vraiment pouvoir corriger l'histoire en puisant dans les fragilités, les vacillements, la source d'une seconde naissance?[120]

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[117] Ibid., 161.
[118] Ibid., 186.
[119] Ibid.
[120] Ibid., 187.

The voices of the two brothers intermingle, as Jérome inhabits the space of prose that has typically been reserved for Thésée and picks up on frequently used words in Thésée's vocabulary like "trembler," "tomber," and "fragilité." Thésée, perhaps, is also questioning his own preoccupation with family history as the key to understanding Jérôme's suicide and his parents' demise. Indeed, throughout the text, Thésée's interpretative reflections on his predecessors' tragic histories are often imbued with a paranoia that lends itself to interrogation. As an example, we might look back to the first archival inscription: the document written by Talmaï about his son Oved. The narrator, vocalizing the thoughts of an older Thésée, instills the text with such a tremendous potential for "éclarcir l'énigme de ses morts" that one cannot help but question the fixation on the document. If it was naïve for Thésée to believe that he could escape from his family past by hopping on a train, it is also wishful for him to think that this document (or any document) is the key to understanding family tragedies, which retain a certain opacity. While the archival manuscript's treatment of heritage and familial mourning overlaps with Thésée's present situation, it is difficult to draw explanatory rather than just speculative connections between Talmaï's and Thésée's contexts. The repetitiveness of Thésée's convictions imbues the text with an obsessive quality. Perhaps this is the language of desperation to make sense of a painful personal tragedy, to grasp for meaning, however tenuous, in perceived signs.

"Guérir les morts" may not be possible, whilst *guérir les vivants* remains an ideal. Returning to the dialogue between Thésée and Jérôme, the former defends the value of the fabrication that comes from his attention to the *synchronies*: "les *si* sont des recours offerts aux vivants; ils aident à changer l'avenir, à configurer le passé, a reprogrammer une généalogie pour y

faire entrer la lumière et un peu de vérité."[121] "Si" most directly refers to speculation about an alternative chain of events that Thésée entertains: if Jérôme had read the archival documents that Thésée read, perhaps he would not have committed suicide.[122] But more broadly, "si" is also a kind of shorthand for the use of imagination in the *récit*—notably, the fictional lineage constructed in the text that aims to re-encode or "reprogram" a filiation of death. I have already argued at length that this idea of re-encoding filiation is flawed. But it still stands that some comfort may be derived from it by the living, even if healing the wounds is unattainable.

By playing with fiction to write about their deceased predecessors, Chalandon and Toledo complicate (but do not entirely discount) the ideal of repair of their troubled filiations. If the writers explore literary expressions of the enduring wounds of family relationships and pasts, they also leave room for some degree of solace for themselves and for the reader through fiction. As with Thésée's "si," we might read a sense of comfort in Chalandon's narrator's anticipation of reconciliation with the father, despite how unrealistic that may be, in the concluding lines of *Enfant de salaud.* The open-endedness of fiction, as the protagonists employ it, is tied to a sense of hope. The ability to imagine other possibilities, however painful still, for their distressing familial pasts is in itself a choice of creation over destruction, life over death: *revivance,* to use Toledo's word. In this way, Chalandon's and Toledo's protagonists resist the devastation that their filiations have imposed upon them. Turning in the next chapter to texts by Camille Laurens and Assia Djebar, in which uneasy intergenerational relationships will continue to be a key component of troubled filiation, I shall further explore the role that literary creation may play in resistance against oppressive familial inheritances.

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[121] Ibid., 195–6.
[122] Ibid.

Chapter Three. Narrating troubled daughterhood and defiance of familial patriarchy

The etymological origins of the very word "filiation," *filius* (son) and *filiationis* (descent from the father), suggest a certain primacy of the male lineage. Embedded in the linguistic makeup of filiation are the issues of gendered legitimacy and transmission. What places do daughters and mothers occupy in their filiations? This chapter considers troubled filiation as familial relations disrupted by patriarchal and misogynistic social norms, which are passed down from one generation to the next. I take two novels as complementary case studies of this form of troubled filiation: Assia Djebar's *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* (2007) and Camille Laurens's *Fille* (2020).[1] Though situated in very different sociocultural contexts—in Djebar, patriarchal oppression is intermingled with racial, political, and economic inequities in colonial Algeria on the cusp of the War of Independence, whereas Laurens deals with patriarchy and misogyny in France from the 1960s to the dawn of the twenty-first century—the texts both feature narratives that center the perspective of the daughter and that speak to each other about the difficulties of defying the transmission of gender hierarchies. The evolving social, cultural, and political construction of gender identity has been discussed at length by scholars, particularly within feminist philosophy.[2] I consider gender construction in the context of the family, which manifests as normalized familial expectations and practices that uphold male authority and delegitimize women, and ask how my two literary texts challenge such norms.

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[1] For simplicity, I will refer hereafter in the text to Djebar's work as *Nulle part.*

[2] Key texts from feminist thinkers on the construction of gender include Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976 [1949]); Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016 [1970]); Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007 [1990]), among others.

While Salvayre's novel, discussed in the first chapter, and Ernaux's *L'autre fille* and Debré's *Nom*, which will figure in the next chapter, concern gender issues and feature protagonists who are daughters, they do not foreground daughterhood in patriarchal contexts as the central problem of troubled filiation, which the texts by Laurens and Djebar do. This chapter also heralds a shift in focus in this thesis, towards texts that employ a different modality of writing about troubled filiations: the narrators' personal histories, rather than parents' or ancestors' past experiences that predate the narrators (as was the case in the previously analyzed works), form the main material for the critical revisiting of intergenerational relations. Given that current scholarship on the *récit de filiation* mainly prioritizes the latter modality, a comparative reading of Djebar's and Laurens's works also presents an opportunity to broaden our understanding of how investigations into familial roots can take multiple shapes through literary creation, beyond the generic confines of the *récit de filiation*.

The novels I have selected from Djebar's and Laurens's sizable literary corpuses are the ones most directly concerned with the writers' personal experiences in family relations that have been upended by patriarchal power dynamics. Revisiting pivotal memories of her coming-of-age in French colonial Algeria through short narrative sequences, *Nulle part* is Djebar's most openly autobiographical text, though it is marketed as a novel: she plays with conventions of the autobiographical pact in the construction of an autofictional self, as I will unpack. Given its extremely personal dimension, the novel is an outlier in Djebar's œuvre, and it is often read as a follow-up to the more well-known *L'Amour, la fantasia* (1985). Indeed, *Nulle part* picks up on certain themes and episodes of her youth—her education at a French school, her complex feelings toward the French and Arabic languages, her ambivalent relationship with her father—that

featured in *L'Amour, la fantasia*. The suicide attempt, a key scene in *Nulle part,* also features only very briefly in the earlier work.[3] Moreover, *Ombre sultane* (1987) also contains a short scene in which the narrator Isma's father reprimands her for showing her legs while playing on a swing. This is an oblique precursor to *Nulle part*'s bicycle episode, which is another devastating moment in Djebar's childhood.[4] *Nulle part* sees Djebar finally confronting these distressing memories head-on as she unpacks familial relationships that have been doubly inflected by paternal control and colonial tensions. While scholarly readings of *Nulle part* have stressed the importance of the physical body and movement in understanding the narrator's pursuit of autonomy in the patriarchal and colonial contexts, there has been inadequate attention to the role that romantic desire plays, which forms a point of contact with Laurens that I privilege in my analysis.[5] Additionally, I build on Jane Hiddleston's analyses of ambivalent female solidarity in Djebar's œuvre by examining the complexities of female relationships in the context of the multigenerational family.[6]

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[3] The earlier evocation of the suicide scene is in Djebar, *L'Amour, la fantasia* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995 [1985]), 129–30. This has also been pointed out by Mireille Calle-Gruber, "La servante du texte," in *Assia Djebar: littérature et transmission*, ed. Wolfgang Asholt, Mireille Calle-Gruber and Dominique Combe (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2010), 197–210. For an analysis of other recurring autobiographical motifs in Djebar's work, see Mildred Mortimer, "Writing the Personal: The Evolution of Assia Djebar's Autobiographical Project from *L'Amour, la fantasia* to *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*," *Journal of Women's History* 25, no. 2 (2013): 111–29; and Ernstpeter Ruhe, "Enjambements et envols. Assia Djebar échographe," in *Assia Djebar: littérature et transmission*, 37–53.

[4] See Djebar, "La balançoire," in *Ombre sultane* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2006 [1987]), 194–9. Hervé Sanson also notes this previous incarnation of the bicycle incident in "Mon père cet autre. Variations autour de la figure paternelle dans l'œuvre d'Assia Djebar," in *Assia Djebar: littérature et transmission,* 317–30.

[5] On the body and bodily movement in Djebar's book, see Lisa Connell, "Movement, Education, and Empowerment in Assia Djebar's *L'Amour, la fantasia* and *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*," *Contemporary Women's Writing* 7, no. 3 (2013): 291–308; Dominique D. Fisher, "*Nulle part dans la maison de mon père.* Une éthique de dévoi(l)ement," in *Assia Djebar et la transgression des limites linguistiques, littéraires et culturelles*, ed. Wolfgang Asholt and Lise Gauvin (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2017), 89–103; and Ruhe, "Enjambements et envols," 37–53.

[6] Jane Hiddleston, "The mother as other: Intimacy and separation in the maternal memories of Assia Djebar's *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père,*" *Journal of Romance Studies* 11, no. 2 (Summer 2011): 21–33; Hiddleston, ""The Woman Who Said 'No'": Colonialism, Islam, and Feminist Resistance in the

The autofictional *Fille* is grounded in Laurens's personal coming-of-age and experience of motherhood.[7] Laurens has shifted away from writing pure fiction and toward autobiography and autofiction following the traumatic experience of losing her newborn son in 1994, an episode that has haunted much of her literary work.[8] Scholarship pertaining to filiation in Laurens (though not necessarily invoking the word "filiation") has mostly attended to interrupted motherhood and maternal grief.[9] While perinatal loss is also revisited in *Fille*, the recurrence of this event in her works an indicator of its traumatizing effect, it is part of a much broader meditation on gendered disruptions to intergenerational transmission, which is yet to be discussed in the academic literature on Laurens. Following the character Laurence Barraqué (a double for Laurens) from birth to adolescence to motherhood, *Fille* challenges the sociocultural and familial norms that have long upheld male domination in France through a multifaceted exploration of what it means to be female.

Comparatively reading *Fille* and *Nulle part,* this chapter analyzes how Laurens and Djebar problematize troubled filiation in their depictions of experiences of daughterhood amid

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Works of Assia Djebar," in *Literature and the Development of Feminist Theory,* ed. Robin Truth Goodman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 230–42; Hiddleston, "Chapter Three: Feminism and Women's Identity," in *Assia Djebar: Out of Algeria* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), 80–119.

[7] Lauriane Pipoz in "Naître et être fille, selon Camille Laurens," *Le Regard Libre* 74, no. 5 (2021): 23, has also identified *Fille* as autofiction, with characters inspired by figures in Laurens's life.

[8] The loss of the son is the main topic of *Philippe* (Paris: P.O.L., 1995) and *Cet absent-là* (Paris: Léo Scheer, 2004) and surfaces in *Dans ces bras-là* (Paris, P.O.L., 2000).

[9] Several doctoral dissertations have examined Laurens's literary treatment of the loss of her newborn. See Adina Stroia, "Narratives of Loss and Mourning in Contemporary French Women's Writing: Marie Nimier, Camille Laurens and Annie Ernaux" (King's College London, 2018); Kathleen Jezebel Cecil Mansell, "Reckonings with Loss in the Works of Camille Laurens, Agnès Varda and Sophie Calle" (University of Cambridge, 2020); Jordan Owen McCullough, "Care and Connection in Contemporary Parental 'Récits de Deuil'" (Queen's University Belfast, 2023). See also the following articles: Hannah Kilduff, "Troubling Memories: Words and Images of Absence in Camille Laurens, Marie Darrieussecq and Nadine Trintignant," *French Cultural Studies* 20, no. 4 (2009): 369–82; Barbara Havercroft, "The Trauma of Child Death: The Discourse of Mourning in Camille Laurens's and Laure Adler's Autobiographical Writings," *Irish Journal of French Studies* 19 (2019): 53–69.

longstanding norms upholding patriarchal power. I argue that, in addition to narrativizing daughters' defiance of transmitted patriarchy, the texts are defiant in their very language: the autofictional space of the texts is used to construct a counter-discourse to patriarchal conventions. Autofictional writing is mobilized differently in these two texts than in the previously discussed ones. *Fille and Nulle part* do not concern the imaginative reconstruction of predecessors' lives predating the narrator's time, as was the case with the texts examined in Chapters One and Two. Additionally, the extent of the fictionalization of stories, events, and characters depicted is not a relevant problematic (as was the case with Chalandon and Toledo). Instead, the autofictional functions in a more subtle manner: through the writers' stylistic crafting of voice, perspective, and narrative structure, which serve to trouble (in the sense of challenge and destabilize) the gendered social codes that disrupt filiation. I opt for "defiance" rather than "critique," because the former better evokes the temerity of the texts, and is more pertinent for discussing narratives of resistance against patriarchal family structures. In addition, "defiance" accommodates more nuance to that resistance than "subversion": patriarchy and misogyny face opposition, but they are not necessarily overturned, as the latter term would imply.

The first section of this chapter takes a closer look at how troubled filiation in the texts is framed through experiences of delegitimation and alienation in daughterhood given transmitted patriarchal and misogynistic family norms, notably the imposition of restrictive paternal authority over daughters' romantic and/or sexual lives. I analyze the extent to which the daughters defy that authority, before moving on to the second section to consider how Djebar's and Laurens's texts are defiant in their very construction and use of language. Playing with linguistic and literary conventions, their writing defies oppressive familial gender norms by breaking down the granular

ways that those norms operate. At the same time, the texts also defy normalized ideas of easy, prescriptive solutions to the problems of transmitted patriarchy, which the third section examines. But the texts' attention to the prevalence of complicity with patriarchal practices and models is not without a certain optimism for potential evolution.

3.1 The making of troubled daughterhood

3.1.1 What's in a name? Onomastics and alienated daughters

In both texts, the very names of daughters already signal a preoccupation with the ubiquity of patriarchy and the delegitimation of women. The narrator of *Fille* and her older sister (Laurence and Claude, respectively) have names that reflect their parents' anxiety about the gender of the children. Claude, though a *prénom mixte,* is much more commonly given as a male name than a female one. The name Laurence, though female in French, is male in English; it becomes a *prénom mixte* when the contexts of both languages are combined, which is made relevant by the fact that the narrator is named after the English actor Laurence Olivier. Though the naming choices for the two daughters might be seen as a way of pushing back on gender expectations, in reality, they imply an entrenched paternal desire for a son that remains thwarted. The use of free indirect discourse in the father's internal monologue when he decides on Laurence's name pokes fun at his projection of masculinity onto his newborn daughter: "Laurence, du latin *laurus,* «(couvert de) lauriers» . . . Tu seras un athlète grec, un tribun romain, le front ceint d'une couronne. Tu seras Spartacus, tu seras Roméo, tu seras César, Apollon, Napoléon s'il le faut. Tu seras un prince, ma fille."[10] The father's vision of success is exclusively male: he points only to masculine nouns and famous historical

[10] Camille Laurens, *Fille* (Paris: Gallimard, 2020), 24.

and/or literary men as models for his baby daughter. There is tenderness and pride, no doubt, in the father's (imagined) address to Laurence. But the insistence on Laurence's masculine future betrays a certain disappointment in the father at the fact that yet another daughter rather than a son has been born.

The daughters themselves also seem to internalize the parental preference for boys. Referring to Claude's aloofness towards her during their childhood, the narrator reflects, "Je vois bien ce qu'elle voudrait, Claude. Sa vocation à elle, c'est fils unique."[11] Something more than mere sibling rivalry is at stake, as implied by the use of "fils unique" rather than "fille/enfant unique." Receiving their parents' full love and attention seems only possible, at least in Laurence's eyes, as a son. The distress that the parental wish for a boy elicits in Laurence—of failing to fill the space of the "missing son"—resurfaces during a brief sojourn in London during her adolescence. The host family's anticipation of a boy rather than a girl, given the gender convention of her name in English, replicates in a way her birth parents' expectations of having a son. Laurence's pained desire to meet the expectations of being male, especially to be accepted by the host family's daughter Helen, who is disappointed that she will not have the chance to fall in love with a French boy, reflects a renewal of the original parental devaluation of daughters: "Pendant quinze jours, à Londres, en secret j'ai été un garçon . . . Un garçon invisible dans une fille sans lauriers. Un perdant. Laurence, lauréate de rien."[12] The allusion to the Latin meaning of Laurence hearkens back to the father's internal monologue, this time to relate a sense of defeat in falling short of the expectations of her name because of the very fact that she is female.

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[11] Ibid., 43.
[12] Ibid., 123.

A concern with gender amid the pervasive valorization of boys continues in Laurence's adulthood, hinted at with the surname she takes upon marriage, Charpentier. Masculinity seems to infiltrate her full name, as it consists of the father's gendered choice and the husband's grammatically masculine and profession-based surname. It also ironically points to her longstanding anxiety of not being able to fill in for the "missing son": "Le hasard est moqueur: le masculin de ton nom sonne toujours mal à tes oreilles, te laissant comme bancale ou indécise (l'accord de genre impossible en toi, quoique le mot n'ait de toute façon pas de féminin – charpentière, ça n'existe pas)."[13] The instability and unsuitability of her name, on both an auditory and a grammatical basis, imply the unease of being female and of assimilating the values of a family and a society that validates men at the expense of women.

While names in *Fille* derive their significance from gendered language conventions, in *Nulle part,* the narrator's name Fatima points to a gendered crisis of legitimacy more obliquely, through a reference to the story of another daughter: the Prophet Mohammed's youngest child, also called Fatima, who, following her father's death, is denied her rightful material inheritance by Mohammed's successor. The novel takes its title from Fatima's outcry in response to her denied inheritance: «Nulle part, hélas, nulle part dans la maison de mon père!»[14] The symbolic shared name in conjunction with the title foregrounds the concerns of dispossession and alienation on the basis of gender for the daughter-narrator of Djebar's novel, who, as we shall see, contends with patriarchal authority over her autonomy and with the difficulties of intergenerational transmission in the French Algerian colonial context. But the alignment with the historical Fatima also implies the narrator's defiance of gendered inequities. Indeed, as Jane Hiddleston has acutely examined,

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[13] Ibid., 139.
[14] Assia Djebar, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* (Paris: Fayard, 2007), 207, 366.

Fatima is an important figure of feminist resistance to patriarchal practices in Djebar's œuvre, previously represented in *Loin de Médine* (1991) in two scenes: first, her claim to Mohammed's inheritance, and second, her refusal of her husband Ali's wish to take another wife.[15] The parallel that Hiddleston draws between the historical Fatima and Djebar, both of whom are daughters with deep filial devotion who nevertheless resist restrictive patriarchal control, surfaces in the textual space of *Nulle part* through the aptly-named narrator.[16]

The use of the names Laurence and Fatima as narrators of the texts is also an element of the authors' plays on the conventions of the autobiographical pact. Fatima-Zohra Imalayen and Laurence Ruel are the birth names of Djebar and Laurens, respectively; moreover, Laurence is a homophone of the writer's pen name. As readers, we may be tempted to believe that the writers are offering factually true accounts of their lives. But both *Fille* and *Nulle part* are marketed as *romans*, muddling the line between fiction and autobiography. Furthermore, as I have shown, the names of the authors and narrators also bring forth imaginative and critical interpretations that come into being in the space of the text. This space, then, is an autofictional one: material from the authors' personal pasts may feature in the novels, but it does not so much advance a recounting of their lives as participate in the creation of a counter-discourse to the patriarchal norms of their lived experiences. An autofictional mode of writing, which stems from the texts' manipulation of language, narrative structure, and voice, grants the writers the creative freedom to launch that

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[15] See Djebar, "Celle qui dit non à Médine," in *Loin de Médine* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1991), 66–89. On the figure of Fatima (along with Scheherezade) in Djebar's œuvre, see Hiddleston, "The Woman Who Said 'No,'" 230–42.

[16] Hiddleston, "The Woman Who Said 'No,'" 233. Note that previous critics have also pointed out the Fatima-Djebar connection, albeit with less attention to its significance. See Clarisse Zimra, "When the Past Answers Our Present: Assia Djebar Talks about *Loin de Médine*," *Callaloo* 16, no. 1 (1993): 117; and Ruhe, "Enjambements et envols," 41.

counter-discourse. Before examining their challenges to gender hierarchies, we need to look first at how those patriarchal norms manifest in the novels' narrativization of paternal authority.

3.1.2 Paternal authority: Desire and defiance

The symbolic pervasiveness of patriarchy that the onomastics suggest becomes represented more concretely in restrictive paternal authority over daughters' romantic and/or sexual interactions. This authority is exerted on the levels of knowledge and language, which is foregrounded in both texts by the fact that intercepted letters from boys (addressed to Fatima and Claude) trigger the paternal exercise of control over the daughters. In *Nulle part,* the father's destruction of an innocent letter from a male student, Tarik, asking the teenage narrator to exchange correspondences is depicted as a disproportionately severe reaction.[17] Looming over the narrator is "le visage convulsé de mon père," an image that communicates how rage has subsumed the father, as he rips up the letter "en mille morceaux, violemment."[18] In addition to the physical destruction of language with the shredded letter, there is also a breakdown in verbal language between the father and daughter, since they have no meaningful communication about the situation: before storming out, the father merely demands what his daughter was doing on the last day of school, which further disintegrates the trust between the two.[19] The context of gender segregation within the Muslim Algerian society exacerbates the father's reaction. If a French man had written that letter, the narrator surmises, "Simplement, [mon père] ne m'en aurait pas du tout

[17] Djebar, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père,* 252. A brief allusion to the letter-ripping scene also appears in Djebar, *L'Amour, la fantasia*, 12.
[18] Djebar, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père,* 251.
[19] Ibid.

parlé": the fact that it was an Algerian, transgressing the expected gender norms, triggers the particularly censorious paternal response."[20]

The narrator's remark, "C'est une lettre banale qui prouve, en outre, par elle-même, mon innocence," frames the incident as an unfair judgment of her character—as a daughter respecting the unspoken paternal rules governing her interactions with men. The father's latent presumption of her transgression provokes her righteous anger. This, more so than genuine interest in the boy, seems to lead the narrator to defy the paternal interdiction: "Je me suis voulue offensée; je n'étais que tentée."[21] But she refers to her acts of defiance (piecing the letter back together in order to read it and agreeing to the boy's request) as "péchés," which reveals that a sense of guilt from disobeying the father still remains.[22] Moreover, from the perspective of her older self looking back on this episode, the narrator complicates her initial understanding of her transgression, wondering whether "la curiosité" about the boy actually played a larger role than she wanted to admit at the time.[23] This implies that her will to disobey the father because of his injustice might have been overblown. The narrator, then, occupies an uneasy position between the desire to be the loyal daughter and the desire to push back on the father's unfair exercise of authority.

Unlike the innocent letter to Fatima, the intercepted letters to Claude are provocative and sexually explicit. Though letters in Laurens's text do not constitute as important a plot point as they do in Djebar's, they still trigger the father's exercise of authority over his daughters' romantic and sexual lives during "la leçon de choses": the sex talk. Laurence's retelling of this scene derives a critical edge from its humor, in contrast to the seriousness of the letter-ripping scene in Djebar. The

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[20] Ibid., 256
[21] Ibid., 252.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., 255.

use of free indirect discourse to relate some of the father's counsels embeds a subtle and comedic critique of them in the narration. For instance, the narration implicitly points to the father's simplification of sex education in his reliance on abstinence as the only avenue: "Les filles ne vont pas avec les garçons, c'est tout. Point final."[24] Indeed, the father goes as far as to instruct his daughters to avoid all interactions with boys ("de ne même pas les regarder"), an extreme strategy that the free indirect discourse ridicules.[25] The father's "leçon" is thus presented as unrealistic and also unfair in its placement of the burden of responsibility on women rather than men to avoid unintended pregnancy. Moreover, the father's insistence on abstinence exemplifies the harmful patriarchal valorization of women's virginity, another point of critique in this episode. His remark to the daughters, "Pucelle et vierge, c'est synonyme, ça veut dire: pure," implies that women who have sex before marriage (as both Claude and Laurence will do) are contaminated—quite the double standard, given that "l'expérience" in sexual matters is normalized and encouraged for men.[26] The instruction of abstinence is ultimately rooted in an expectation that women will submit to authority; as the father concludes: "il suffit d'être sages et d'obéir à votre père. Les filles ont leurs règles et elles suivent les règles, c'est tout."[27] The play on the polysemy of "règles," referring both to rules and to the menstrual cycle, pinpoints how women's bodies are governed by male authority, wielded by the father and by the broader patriarchal society.

At the same time, the comedic tone of the scene also reflects a degree of endearment, however slight, for the father in the awkward position of educator for "the talk." The use of third-person point of view, merging the voice of older Laurence and that of her younger self,

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[24] Laurens, *Fille,* 92.
[25] Ibid., 93.
[26] Ibid., 93–4.
[27] Ibid., 96.

contributes to the lighthearted humor. Eleven-year-old Laurence's innocent queries (for instance, her question "Mais pourquoi ils cherchent le cowit, les garçons ?" testifies to her ignorance of what "le coït" is) and the father's taciturn answers (or efforts to dodge the questions) make for an amusing exchange, and even suggest a certain fondness from the perspective of older Laurence as she revisits this episode in her childhood. Though the narrator is certainly sharp in her critique of the father and the patriarchal/misogynistic notions that he upholds, she is not exactly looking to condemn him.

As Fatima disobeys the paternal interdiction by exchanging letters with Tarik (and later, entering into a secret romantic relationship with him), Laurence also defies her father's rules when she pursues sexual relationships. But in both cases, the narrators' acts of defiance are tempered by the fact that they have internalized the paternal voice of censure, which permeates their internal monologues and subjectivities. When Laurence's boyfriend asks about having sex for the first time, she thinks, "Mon père veut que je reste vierge jusqu'au mariage et moi je lui obéis. J'aime obéir. J'ai peur de désobéir. Ensuite, moi, ce n'est pas vouloir que je veux. C'est devoir."[28] A sense of filial responsibility does not just supersede personal desires; it becomes one of the very things that she seeks. Laurence's progression away from the paternal rule of abstinence is left opaque: there is a narrative ellipsis over the three months between the scene of the father's (verbally and physically) violent reaction upon learning that Claude has been having sex, and the scene of Laurence's first time having sex. Though the juxtaposition of the two scenes implies that Laurence's actions could be a response to Claude's transgression and/or the father's severe reaction, the ellipsis makes it difficult to ascribe Laurence's disobedience of the paternal rule to any particular motives. This

[28] Ibid., 120.

ambiguity is similar to the uncertainty surrounding the question of what was most important in driving Fatima in *Nulle part* to accept the epistolary request. While later seeking a clandestine abortion, Laurence easily forges her mother's signature of approval, yet cannot bring herself to do so for her father: "J'ai été tentée de mettre les deux signatures mais pour mon père ma main tremblait trop, j'ai eu peur de le trahir."[29] Again, Laurence's actions (or rather, in this case, non-action) are mediated by a fear of subversion, rooted in devotion to the father.

I have already mentioned that Fatima refers to her acts of defiance as "péchés," an instance of how she has internalized paternal rebuke. An earlier episode, the school operetta rehearsal, offers a more detailed example of the presence of the father's voice of reproach in her head. The operetta, "un genre si étranger à nos interdits," is an exceptional moment in that it allows the male and female students to come together, a departure from the usual gender division.[30] The narrator finds herself attracted to a boy for the first time here, and her reflection on this sentiment reveals an internalization of the strict father's disapproval if he had known:

> Mais voici qu'en moi, au même moment, sans doute à cause de mon audace à le formuler à voix haute (j'étais prête à considérer ma franchise comme de l'insolence), voici qu'en moi perce aussi un début d'émotion! Étonnée de ma propre audace (une part de moi, je dirais la part d'austérité paternelle m'en fait aussitôt reproche!), je comprends, dans le même temps, que je me laisse contaminer par le «charme» du garçon—mon regard de côté continuant à découvrir la silhouette, les gestes, le teint si brun du lycéen inconnu.[31]

The language of self-critique evident in "l'insolence," "je me laisse contaminer," "mon audace," and later "ma «légèreté de conduite»" reflects the influence of the father symbolically looming over her at this key scene in her emotional development.[32] The use of "contaminer" in this passage

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[29] Ibid., 129.
[30] Djebar, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père,* 212.
[31] Ibid., 214.
[32] Ibid., 217.

particularly implies a certain idea of female purity rooted in chastity of the mind as well as the body: the narrator is merely observing the boy at this point and has not even personally interacted with him, and yet she already somewhat disapproves of her sentiments. Ana de Medeiros also notes the presence of the father's voice in this scene, calling it the dominant "*surmoi* in the narrator's psychic life," but the narrator's reflections here perhaps communicate a more nuanced picture.[33] Her language reveals that, despite herself, she somewhat relishes this moment of recognition of her attraction to the male student, a first instance of desire. There is a sense of wonder here in her own surprise at herself, subtly present in the repeated phrase "voici qu'en moi," and fondness in the ending details of the "charme" of the young man's physical appearance. The narrator also ends up defying the chastising voice in her head by going for a walk alone with the boy. A burgeoning sense of autonomy contests the internalized paternal perspective of censure. Transgressions of paternal rules and expectations in both *Fille* and *Nulle part*, then, are far from straightforward. The daughters are not just railing against their fathers, since paternal authority is internalized and expressed through their self-restraint and/or self-critique; and yet, as in the case with Djebar's text, the voice of personal desire battles the voice of authority.

While the narrators' subjectivities are still deeply mediated by patriarchal control over their use of language and knowledge, literature, which facilitates the daughters' discovery and exploration of love and desire, offers a route for symbolic defiance. Since the "leçon de choses" leaves the young Laurence without an understanding of where love fits into the picture, she turns to literature in search of insight. As she immerses herself in the works of Racine, Corneille, and Louise Labé, Laurence discovers (or at least, thinks she discovers) love through the beauty of

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[33] Ana de Medeiros, "Writing as wounding and healing in Djebar's *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père,*" *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 15, no. 2 (Dec. 2012): 281.

literary language. Though her understanding of love from the tragedies seems bleak ("l'amour, c'est quand on veut mourir"), the harmony of verse form and content is the saving grace that constitutes the appeal of love to her: "c'est le vers, c'est la rime, c'est la joie du retour, de ce qui revient, de ce qui finit par revenir – le son, le mot, l'espoir."[34] From the works, Laurence speaks aloud "les mots de l'amour" such that "elle s'en pénètre": poetic language is a site where she can inhabit the idea of love.[35] Later, literature also mediates Laurence's discovery of her own capacity for erotic desire. She sees a shirtless teenage boy by the pool and feels a sudden rush of physical attraction that is facilitated by the Arthurian romance that she is reading at that moment:

> Les mots du roman qu'elle lit lui sèchent soudain la gorge, la phrase qui décrit le chevalier Tristan dont la reine est amoureuse: «les épaules larges et les flancs grêles». C'est lui, tout soudain, c'est le Tristan de l'histoire, frais débarqué à la piscine Saint-Saëns. Le contemplant comme la lettrine qui orne la couverture, elle respire mal, elle a chaud et froid à la fois, elle sent une pierre sur sa poitrine, son cœur bat vite, mais dans son ventre.[36]

The literary and the affective become blurred in Laurence's burgeoning feelings of attraction. Whereas she had previously only reiterated literary passages on love, this time, her quote from the text is bound up with the sensation of desire as a visceral, all-consuming experience. If the boy by the pool is Tristan, Laurence inhabits the character of the queen, and she makes the fictional tale of the romance her own. Furthermore, under her gaze, the boy becomes the character in her novel and is likened to the stylized letter on the cover: a merging of content and materiality that echoes the convergence of reading and bodily awareness that the scene stages. Given how formative reading proves for Laurence's processing of love and erotic desire, it is ironic that the father had introduced Laurence to stories and literature as a young child, indirectly providing her with the tools to

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[34] Laurens, *Fille*, 101.
[35] Ibid., 101–2.
[36] Ibid., 110–11.

sidestep his restrictions on her knowledge.[37] This experience at the pool of tuning in to her desire (and other similar moments that follow) also trigger Laurence's self-realization of female identity: "elle n'est pas seulement une chose, elle est une fille."[38] Though this is an important part of her socio-emotional development, the mock grandeur of the literary analogy, conveyed through the third-person narration's *mélange* of younger and older Laurence's perspectives, suggests a humorous take on the teenage girl's line of thought. Moreover, it should be noted that Laurence equates female identity with heterosexuality here. The evolution of her heteronormative approach to femininity will be an important point of discussion toward the end of this chapter.

Laurence's vision of love from literature proves to be a kind of *Bovarysme* in her teenage years, when she experiences the double standards for women when it comes to sexuality. During a séjour at the beach with her friend's young male acquaintances, each of them takes turns flirtatiously (and sometimes suggestively) engaging with Laurence, who reciprocates; but upon realizing that the others have also been interacting with Laurence as such, the young men become hypocritical in their misogyny. Their previous expressions of tenderness toward her morph into combative, insulting language. They label her "une pute," and one denigrates her with a pun on her surname: "Barraqué, c'est un bar à quéquettes! Self service!"[39] The dialogue structure in this scene of confrontation, with Laurence's speech squeezed in with the men's, all in one long paragraph, mirrors her sensation of being trapped. The men operate on the expectation for women to be chaste, reminiscent of the father's counsel to be "pure," while recusing themselves of any responsibility in initiating erotic interest in the first place.

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[37] Ibid., 39–40.
[38] Ibid., 112.
[39] Ibid., 119.

Daniel, the only one of the young men who does not threaten Laurence, assumes instead the paternalistic role of her "protector." The explicit comparison between Daniel and Laurence's father underscores this:

> [Daniel] «Ils voulaient une explication, c'est tout. Je ne pouvais pas leur refuser ça. Mais ils m'avaient promis..., enfin tout va bien, quoi! Je suis là.
> [Laurence] — Tu n'es pas mon père, tu sais» (*quelle idiote: est-ce que mon père aurait le droit, lui?*).[40]

Though he positions himself as Laurence's defender, Daniel is still complicit in the young men's misogyny, as he excuses their behavior and understates the nature of their belligerence. Though Laurence is a victim of patriarchal and misogynistic norms in this episode, it should also be emphasized that her reactions defy the young men's perpetuation of those norms. In the previous quotation, she critically pushes back on internalized ideas of paternalistic "protection" of daughters; furthermore, she calls out the young men for their own damaging actions ("C'est vous qui m'avez mal traitée") and recites a Jacques Prévert poem to assert her freedom to pursue what she wishes.[41] While the confrontation may have shattered her literary notions of romance, literature also offers a rhetorical tool of defense and self-preservation against patriarchy.

In Djebar's text, too, erotic interest intersects with literary fascination in contradictory ways. Fatima's surreptitious relationship with Tarik rests largely on his access to classical Arabic: the literary form of "la langue de ma mère, celle de mes aïeux" which the narrator had previously sought to learn in school but had been rejected by the French educational administrators.[42] As Lisa Connell remarks, the dismissive attitude toward Fatima's wish to learn formal Arabic in school, in a predominantly Arabic-speaking colony, is part of an education system that is designed to reinforce

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[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid., 118.
[42] Djebar, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père,* 104.

French colonial hegemony.[43] The inaccessibility of formal education in her ancestral language given the colonial disruption leaves her feeling "orpheline": the vocabulary of filiation used to talk about classical Arabic signals that the relationship with Tarik, who provides her with the link to that missing education, is intimately tied to a search for origins.[44] The epistolary exchange between Tarik and the narrator is also formative for the latter's discovery of the sensations of love and attraction, in outright defiance of the father's restrictive rules around his daughter's interactions with men.[45] As Laurence had inhabited the language of love through her readings of French verse, Fatima's immersion in Tarik's letters (in which he offers verses copied from various pre-Islamic works of poetry in both classical Arabic and French translation) leads her to understand love through poetic form. The famous odes of the *Mo'Allaquat*s, for instance, "se déployaient, elles, avec un lyrisme que j'imaginais pur ou sensuel et, me disais-je, avec un romantisme qui jaillissait en moi, presque malgré moi, qui parlait d'amour, d'un amour absolu": the narrator experiences the novel sensuality of romance by absorbing the sensuality of the poetry's sound and form.[46] The phrase "presque malgré moi" also points to the uncontrollable nature of the erotic awakening brought on by the poetry.

Furthermore, similar to how the young man by the pool in *Fille* merges with the literary character of Tristan through Laurence's gaze, Tarik also becomes blurred with the pre-Islamic poets when the narrator listens to him recite verses. The memory of one such recitation during a walk

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[43] This colonial restriction on Djebar's education is discussed in Connell, "Movement, Education, and Empowerment," 304.
[44] Djebar, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père,* 278.
[45] Jane Hiddleston has also written on the convergence of erotic desire and the desire for literary knowledge in the relationship between *Nulle part*'s narrator and Tarik in "Chapter 8. The Power of Reading: Living with/through Books," in *Writing after Postcolonialism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 247–52. But her analysis of the narrator's relationship with Tarik through pre-Islamic poetry is part of a broader examination of the power of reading in the narrator's coming-of-age, whereas I invoke the relationship as a comparative point with *Fille* in the two texts' narrativization of daughters' defiance of paternal control.
[46] Djebar, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, 286.

together in Algiers pinpoints her conflation of Tarik's voice and the imagined voice of the poet through sound: "Le poème s'était déployé avec un tel élan que je pouvais en palpiter encore, comme si – fut-ce là que commença à jouer le piège? – la voix d'Imru al-Quays avait porté la même voix et jusqu'à l'inspiration du jeune homme lors de cette escapade dans Alger."[47] Tarik becomes both a romantic interest and a figure of literary fascination. But the interjection between dashes in this sentence—the self-questioning voice of the older narrator looking back on the romance—raises the concern that the dual literary and romantic experience with Tarik is illusory, and alludes to the troubles later in the relationship that ultimately inform her suicide attempt. As Jane Hiddleston notes, the shared engagement with poetry between the narrator and Tarik "works to upset as well as establish intimacy."[48] While the discovery of the pre-Islamic poetry facilitates an awakening of the narrator's desire, it also muddles her understanding of her attraction to Tarik. Only later (and "trop tard" as she notes), after the suicide attempt, does she realize that she is in love not with Tarik, but with "la langue perdue," the rediscovered Arabic language (and heritage) that he incarnated.[49] I will look closer at the narrator's suicide attempt later in the chapter, but for now, I want to emphasize that despite the failings of the relationship, the narrator's secret exploration of desire on her own terms nevertheless subverts the paternal (and internalized) restrictions on her autonomy and knowledge, as it likewise does for Laurence. If the daughters' engagement with literary writing is an important element of their narratives of defiance, the critically incisive writing used in the texts is also defiant in itself against patriarchal discourses.

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[47] Ibid.
[48] Hiddleston, *Writing after Postcolonialism,* 249.
[49] Djebar, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, 369.

3.2 Defiant writing: A counter-discourse to familial patriarchy

From gender-inflected naming choices to representations of daughters' internalized paternal voices, we have already seen instances where Laurens and Djebar break down the operation of patriarchy and misogyny in transmitted socio-familial norms. They also upend social conventions of patriarchy by playing with linguistic and literary conventions, thus producing a counter-discourse. Their writing scrutinizes language to elucidate how restrictive patriarchal control functions on the granular level of words; furthermore, the autofictional fashioning of various narrative voices and perspectives is also mobilized in the articulation of defiance. I will turn first to *Fille,* which adopts a more overtly audacious attitude to patriarchal conventions.

Laurens offers a creative, dissecting critique of the ways that French taxonomy related to family and filiation delegitimizes women, and in particular, daughters. Her close readings of the polysemy of the word "fille" and of the common phrases that employ that word reveal how gender hierarchies are constructed and naturalized through language. The back cover of the Gallimard edition provides succinct definitions of the word "fille," the list of demarcated classifications already suggesting the confines of the imposition of identity onto the "fille": "1. Personne de sexe féminin considérée par rapport à son père, à sa mère. 2. Enfant de sexe féminin. 3. (Vieilli.) Femme non mariée. 4. Prostituée." Though reflection on these last two definitions features much less prominently in the actual text than the first two, they highlight the fact that the word "fille" is not a neutral term: it can be used in a derogatory sense, and it implies societal expectations on what a "respectable" woman should be.

The refrain "c'est une fille," the word "fille" here referring to the first two definitions from the back cover, is of particular significance in the novel. It opens Part I and Part III, which

respectively recount the births of the narrator Laurence in 1959 and of Laurence's daughter Alice in the 1990s. The phrase calls attention to the essential role of language in bringing the newborn child into the category of girl (and daughter): "Ça commence avec un mot, comme la lumière ou comme le noir."[50] The child's existence begins not necessarily at biological birth, but at the point in which language is used to confer a certain identity onto her. Laurens's play on grammar, proposing that the phrase "c'est une fille" includes "un article bien défini" (rather than the indefinite article that "une" actually is), symbolically indicates that the indeterminacy of the newborn's identity is undone by gender: being female comes with established, definite expectations.[51] Moreover, identifying the child as "une fille" creates for her "un rapport au monde, un destin en creux," which suggests the taxonomy carries a certain kind of finality, if not determinism. The phrase "c'est une fille" represents the voices of the adults (the nurse, the mother, the father) around the newborn, who cannot, obviously, describe her own identity. Accordingly, the use of second-person addresses to the newborn Laurence (from an unspecified omniscient narrator—perhaps the older Laurence?) in the first section of Part I reflects this limitation; she can only exist through the mediation of language from another. Daughterhood, then, is troubled from the start by the projection of external gendered language and standards.

Indeed, the fact that the novel is titled *Fille* foregrounds Laurens's critical exploration of the French word's intermingled meanings regarding filiation and gender. The narrator elaborates further on the restrictive nature of the polysemy of "fille":

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[50] Laurens, *Fille*, 13.
[51] Ibid.

> Tu es aussi la fille de ton père. Et la fille de ta mère. Ton sexe et ton lien de parenté ne sont pas distincts. Tu n'as et n'auras jamais que ce mot pour dire ton être et ton ascendance, ta dépendance et ton identité. La fille est l'éternelle affiliée, la fille ne sort jamais de la famille.[52]

Unlike the case with "fils" and "mari," which are separate from "garçon" and "homme," respectively, female gender identity ("femme" as well as "fille") is linguistically inextricable from identity within a family. The narrator evokes the family as a form of linguistic captivity: a metaphorical imprisonment that nevertheless produces real effects. Using "fille" and "femme" to refer to women confines them to established paired identities and the societal expectations that come with them, which they may not fit or wish to adopt. The narrator's reflection on "l'éternelle affiliée" also echoes Simone de Beauvoir's idea that women's identity is relational rather than exists in its own right, which is conveyed in the French language through the implied possessive preposition "de" following "fille" or "femme."[53] By dissecting the intertwined meanings of these commonly used words, Laurens counteracts the gendered biases embedded in them and demonstrates how language can naturalize patriarchal notions.

Laurens also critiques the equivalence of femaleness in the patriarchal environment to nothingness or absence. Her constructed homophone of "naissance," "la née-sans," succinctly encapsulates this idea: girls are born without penises, with "nothing" as it were, and this anatomical fact becomes intertwined with the delegitimation of women.[54] The narrator emulates the belittling patriarchal assessment of girls to mock it: "«Je ne vois rien», comprenez: «C'est une fille» . . . Il n'y a rien à voir, circulez, c'est une fille."[55] The birth of a daughter adds nothing to the "legitimate"

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[52] Ibid., 29.
[53] Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième Sexe*, 15.
[54] Laurens, *Fille*, 23. Laurens intersects again here with Beauvoir's argument in *Le Deuxième Sexe* that maleness is a reference point by default.
[55] Ibid., 16.

filiation line, an idea expressed in Laurence's father's terse response to the query "Vous avez des enfants?": "Non, j'ai deux filles."[56] Devastating in its tongue-in-cheek tone, this renunciation of Claude and Laurence's status as his successors lays bare the misogyny that disrupts the daughters' sense of belonging to a familial filiation. Following into the next generation, Laurence's husband Christian, like her father, also harbors implicit disappointment about the birth of a daughter in his use of "c'est une fille." The father's declaration to family members about the birth of Laurence, "C'est une fille... Oui oui, c'est bien aussi," is echoed in Christian's remark about newborn Alice: "Une fille, c'est bien aussi, enfin je veux dire: c'est aussi bien."[57] Granted, Christian corrects himself, but regardless of where he places the word "aussi" in the phrase, the implicit societal and familial preference for sons, transmitted across the generations, is clear.

The birth of Laurence's son at the beginning of Part II offers an insightful point of comparison to the births of the daughters. Whereas "c'est une fille" conjures up chagrin, "c'est un garçon" produces joy and pride:

> Ce mot [garçon] est ton triomphe . . . C'est ton père qui va être content, tout de suite tu penses à lui, à son espoir que tu réalises enfin, le décalant seulement d'un rang: à défaut d'être le père, il sera le grand-père d'un garçon; tu lui donnes un petit-fils, tu lui offres un baigneur. Tu imagines le jour où il le tiendra dans ses bras.[58]

This passage relays a mother's touching reflection on her future child, and yet her own sense of fulfillment is co-opted by the father's projected reaction. Laurence's gratification seems to stem less from imminent motherhood in its own right and more from the fact that she will finally be capable of providing the "missing son" that the family, and the father in particular, has sought for so long. The verbs "donnes" and "offres" convey the sense that the presumed future son constitutes a gift

[56] Ibid., 50.
[57] Ibid., 20, 167.
[58] Ibid., 137–8.

for the father. The presence of his perspective in her own line of thinking also reflects her internalization of the valorization of sons over daughters. Furthermore, the reprise of second-person narration here reflects the imposition of those socio-familial values onto Laurence's subjectivity. These grand plans for the future never materialize, however, as Laurence's son dies shortly after birth due to medical malpractice: a loss which represents the continued disruption to the male line. The narration of this scene will be an important aspect of the text's defiance against the imposition of silence over women's traumas, as we will see in more detail later in this section.

While Laurens defies language conventions by boiling down common French words and turns of phrases to the patriarchal and/or misogynistic ideas embedded within them, Djebar's interrogation of the intersections of gender with Arabic and French provides insight into the cultural conventions of colonial Algeria. Though her troubled relationship with the two languages is a recurring theme in Djebar's body of work,[59] *Nulle part* specifically inflects it through the lens of strained and gendered familial relations, particularly with the father. While Arabic constitutes a key link for the narrator to her cultural filiation, as we have previously seen, it is also intertwined with complex gender dynamics in the colonial Algeria of her upbringing. Notably, the father's use of Arabic to reprimand his daughter for revealing her legs while riding a bicycle is an essential part of the distress that this key episode in the novel elicits in her. Arabic is invoked as the language of

[59] Notably, see the following texts by Djebar: *L'Amour, la fantasia*, *Ces voix qui m'assiègent: En marge de ma francophonie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), *La Disparition de la langue française* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2003). See also secondary scholarship that analyzes Djebar's problematization of French and Arabic as they relate to identity: Debra Kelly, "Assia Djebar: History, Selfhood and the Possession of Knowledge," in *Autobiography and Independence: Selfhood and Creativity in North African Postcolonial Writing in French* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2003), 248–333, and Jane Hiddleston, "War, Memory and Postcoloniality," in *Assia Djebar: Out of Algeria* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), 53–79.

patriarchal authority here, used to restrict the narrator's liberty of movement.[60] Furthermore, the fact that the father's exclamation of "ses jambes!" has remained clearest in the narrator's memory of this scene testifies to the longstanding troubling nature of his use of language:

> Il y avait surtout ce mot arabe pour «jambes» dans la phrase, et j'étais froissée de sentir qu'il avait ainsi délimité ma personne, retranché de moi quelque chose qui n'était pas à lui; or, c'était moi! Mes jambes, et alors? . . . Les avoir ainsi séparées de ma personne, c'était, je m'en rendais compte, insultant, mais pourquoi?[61]

Not only does the father exert control over his daughter's body: singling out her "jambes" also metaphorically inflicts bodily damage, as expressed by "froissée" and "retranché." Indeed, the narrator refers to the bike episode as "cette blessure," and "ce malaise, cette griffure, cette obscénité verbale," linking metaphors of physical injury to the father's use of language.[62] It should also be emphasized that the father's censure of his daughter's bike-riding activities is communicated not directly to her, but in an angry outburst to the mother which the daughter only just overhears. Similar to the letter-ripping episode, the flawed communication in this scene of paternal rage exacerbates her distress and confusion, which is conveyed in the cited passage through her questioning language. Hervé Sanson also astutely reads a disruption in transmission between father and daughter in the symbolic violence inflicted on the narrator's body: "Tout père transmettant sa langue aura immanquablement à desquamer la fille, arracher des lambeaux de peau de son enfant. Le père de l'écrivain transmet la langue française mais mutile en arabe: ainsi est signifiée l'aporie du legs paternel, *l'héritage sans héritage*."[63] The father's pressure on his daughter is in part the product

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[60] Ernstpeter Ruhe has also remarked the father's interdiction of the narrator's autonomy, but situates it alongside another interdiction of love, based on a reading of the narrator's *complicité* with Maurice, the French boy who was teaching her how to ride the bike—which is perhaps an overstatement. See Ruhe, "Enjambements et envols," 49.
[61] Djebar, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, 52.
[62] Ibid., 52.
[63] Sanson, "Mon père cet autre," 319.

of an Islamic tradition that upholds patriarchal family structures, disrupting linguistic conventions such that the ancestral tongue, Arabic, becomes a language of "mutilation."[64]

In addition, the father's outrage in the bike episode is due to his own projected sexualization of his daughter onto others. Looking back on the bike scene from an older perspective, the narrator now sees the father's outrage as a declaration "que tout garçon, tout adulte, tout vieillard est forcément un voyeur lubrique devant l'image nue de deux jambes de fillette."[65] The father's attitude toward his daughter's body reflects a broader societal norm of the patriarchal shaming of Algerian women's bodies. This shaming is also tied to language conventions. Out in public, the narrator is respected if other Algerian men believe she is European, whereas she faces disdain for being out alone and *dévoilée* if they realize she is actually Algerian.[66] As a result, hiding her ability to speak the mother tongue becomes a condition for bodily autonomy: "Dans la rue, alors que je peux laisser mon corps vagabonder, libre, il me faut me taire ou bien parler français, anglais, et même chinois si je pouvais, mais surtout ne pas exposer cette langue première en public, celle de tant de femmes qui demeurent incarcérées."[67] If Arabic can be wielded as a language of patriarchal control, as in the bike episode, the suppression of the language among women is also a symptom of that male authority. The language of the colonizer, French, is likened to a mask or veil that enforces the narrator's invisibility but also allows her mobility.[68] Djebar writes in a

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[64] For more on gender relations and Islam, see Leïla Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2021 [1992]); Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in a Muslim Society* (London: Saqi, 2011 [1975]); and in the Algerian context specifically, Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (Milton: Routledge, 2018 [1994]).
[65] Djebar, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, 52.
[66] Ibid., 306–7.
[67] Ibid., 308.
[68] Ibid., 305. The French language is also compared to a veil in Djebar, *L'Amour, la fantasia,* 243. See also an important reflection on the complexity of the veil's significance for Algerian women's freedom and oppression in Djebar, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (Paris: Éditions des Femmes, 1980), 150–3, 165.

self-reflexive, self-questioning French; in using the language that authorizes her mobility in public, she sheds light on the conditions that have constrained that mobility in the first place.

In their own ways, then, Djebar and Laurens question conventional uses of language to try to highlight and contest the gendered socio-familial injustices that lie beneath. The textual resistance to these injustices additionally manifests in the breaking of imposed silences on deeply harrowing, if not traumatic, personal experiences with male authority. In *Fille*, this concerns the young Laurence's experience of incestuous sexual assault at the hands of her uncle, and much later, the loss of her firstborn child resulting from collusion between her father and the medical professionals.[69] In *Nulle part*, the narrator's suicide attempt after Tarik tries to exert authority over her is a significant trauma. Autofictional experiments with literary conventions in the narration of these distressing episodes, specifically with respect to point of view and subjectivity, contribute to the texts' rhetorical counter-discourse to patriarchal conventions. I previously pointed out instances in *Fille* where point of view harbored interpretative significance, but the shifts in perspective I address now are specifically related to the narrators' representations of their most disturbing personal moments.

Laurence's and Fatima's distressing experiences, while all informed by patriarchal control, are very different in nature; but in each case, deviations away from the predominant first-person point of view signal a disruption in the narrators' psyches. The incest scene in *Fille* features a shift to third-person narration: a textual reflection of the narrator's dissociation from her own self

[69] In several books published around the same time as *Fille*, notably Camille Kouchner, *La Familia grande* (Paris: Seuil, 2021) and Vanessa Springora, *Le Consentement* (Paris: Grasset, 2020), authors broke their silence over experiences of sexual abuse and/or incest amid the #MeToo movement. Christine Angot's writing on her own experience of sexual abuse perpetrated by her father in *L'Inceste* (Paris: Stock, 1999), *Un amour impossible* (Paris: Flammarion, 2015), and *Le Voyage dans l'Est* (Paris: Flammarion, 2021) depicts incest as an insidious manipulation of a child's desire for filial love from the parent, and ultimately, a repudiation of the bonds of filiation.

during this terrifying moment. Indeed, the third-person distancing is perhaps even necessary for the narrator in order to relate the disturbing scene after the fact, as if the first-person would be too painfully personal to use. In this way, the third-person point of view represents a merging of the perspective of the uncomprehending young girl experiencing the sexual assault and the adult perspective reflecting on the event. The retelling of this episode is both a representation and a critique of male sexual violence. A long run-on sentence relays the moment when the uncle first gropes Laurence's genitals, reflecting her overwhelmed and confused state.[70] Throughout, the young Laurence is also repeatedly described as a "lapin," emphasizing her innocence and docility under the uncle's power. Following the run-on sentence, the uncle orders Laurence to wait for him, and there is a shift to very short and simple sentences: "Elle attend. Il ne faut pas désobéir au tonton. Il serait triste. Il serait en colère. Le mur est haut. Elle attend."[71] The terse language evokes a sense of helpless shock and fear: given the familial power dynamics as well, Laurence is incapable of doing anything other than obeying the abuser. The sexual assault has lasting detrimental effects on Laurence, who develops an obsessive fixation on sexuality, nudity, and penetration, but she is pressured into silence on the incident by the other women in the family, in an instance of complicity with male dominance that will be an important point in the final section of this chapter. But the very act of committing this scene to narration, as well as Laurence's willing participation as an adult in an academic conference on incest, ultimately represent her defiance of the patriarchal norms that demanded her silence.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the story of the loss of Laurence's first child, Tristan, reprises the second-person narration that opened the novel. The narrator appears to be Laurence,

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[70] Laurens, *Fille,* 71–2.
[71] Ibid., 72.

telling herself the narrative: the trauma cannot be related by the "je" of a mother who is struggling to process the event or cannot translate into language such a painful experience.[72] The death of the child represents something worse than loss—nonexistence: "L'enfant est mort. Il n'a pas de nom, il n'a pas de sexe, il n'a pas de parenté. Qui est-ce? C'est l'enfant que tu n'as pas."[73] Not only has the biological birth been botched, but the social birth has not been allowed to take place. The child loses out on the chance to be even included in the line of filiation. Instead, he enters a different, morbid lineage: Laurence's loss echoes her mother's loss of Gaëlle shortly after birth.[74] The narrative of perinatal loss also critically shows how patriarchy and misogyny inform the medical and familial neglect to which Laurence is subjected. From the immediate unexplained separation from her child after giving birth, to the moment she learns that the child is dead, to the serious medical issue with her placenta when she returns home, Laurence is consistently left *toute seule*, without support to deal with the fallout of the harrowing events. Additionally, her lack of knowledge about the circumstances of her own baby's death (whether it happened in the moments after birth, or whether it was a stillbirth to begin with) underscores how much she has been sidelined by the medical professionals. The mother, it seems, does not matter. Laurence's parents uphold patriarchal standards and undermine their own daughter's pain in their disproportionate concern for the implications that the incident poses for the young Dr. Guerry, who mishandled the delivery. The fact that the "je" recedes in this scene, then, also mirrors the subordination of the mother's voice of grief to male subjectivities. The second-person narration, in assuming an omniscience that would not have been possible through Laurence's limited first-person perspective at the time, also

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[72] Note, though, that Laurens's previous works have featured first-person narration of infant loss. See *Philippe* and *Cet absent-là*, referenced earlier.
[73] Laurens, *Fille,* 154.
[74] The loss of a child, who would've been the narrator's younger brother, also features (albeit briefly) in Djebar, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père,* 73–83.

reveals the collusion between Dr. Guerry, *père,* and Laurence's own father to cover up the son's malpractice and responsibility for the disastrous birth in order to salvage his reputation. The fact that Laurence's father is also partially responsible, since he had manipulated her into changing her (female) gynecologist to the young Dr. Guerry, all in the supposed interest of furthering the latter's career, is made clear to the reader but remains unknown to Laurence until many years later, the delay in narrating that revelation reflecting her belated onset of knowledge.[75] The narrative's *dévoilement* of the conspiracy between the father and the doctor blows the whistle on the insidious complicity of the medical profession—which might otherwise be regarded as a legitimate authority advancing health and safety—in detrimental patriarchal practices at the expense of women. Laurence's mother, it should also be said, is aware of the change in doctor and is thus entangled in the patriarchal collusion; I will return to the problem of women's participation in patriarchal practices in the final section of this chapter.

While *Fille* features a narrator breaking her silence on a disturbing and obfuscated incident of gendered medical injustice, it is true that Laurens first gave voice (in writing) to her real experience of perinatal loss in the autobiographical *Philippe.* For Djebar, on the other hand, it was not until *Nulle part* (and near the end of this text, too) that she fully confronted her suicide attempt in her literary work. After being subjected to an angry demand from Tarik, the narrator of *Nulle part* runs away toward the ocean in defiance and ends up throwing herself under an incoming tram. Tarik assumes the voice of patriarchal authority that the father had embodied, and indeed, language similar to the description of the father in the bike episode is used to describe Tarik here. In both cases, the severity of the male figure's rage renders him unrecognizable to the narrator:

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[75] Laurens, *Fille,* 195.

Tarik becomes "un étranger," "un inconnu," like the father had been "un autre" earlier.[76] Not only is Tarik recreating the patriarchal control of the father, but "l'ombre géante du père" seems to loom over the entire episode and in the narrator's consciousness.[77] The refrain running through her head, "Si mon père le sait, je me tue!" gets shortened to "mon père…me tue": not only would the father, in the restrictive male power that he incarnates, be (partially) responsible for the daughter's death, the refrain suggests that the only way she can live is if a certain silence between father and daughter is preserved.[78] And indeed, the suicide attempt after the fact is buried in silence, in literature as in life:

> Ce qui, aujourd'hui, m'étonne et m'attriste, et me trouble, c'est qu'après ce matin d'octobre, même après notre face-à-face quasi romanesque de plusieurs jours, je me suis définitivement tue sur ce délire qui m'avait saisie, emportée, et qui aurait pu m'être fatal; je le constate à présent puisque j'y reviens de front, et non pas allusivement par le biais de quelque personnage. Je n'ai jamais posé, par la suite, sur cet acte fou le moindre mot.[79]

The phonic and orthographic similarities between the phrases "je me suis tue" here and "je me tue" from the refrain hint at her silence as a symbolic kind of suicide. The hitherto ineffability of the distressing episode subjects it to the risk of being reduced to nothingness. The self-reflexive description of Fatima's and Tarik's interaction after the event as "quasi romanesque" contains a delicate irony about the fact that the incident has never been written about until now. But while the narration of the tram scene in *Nulle part* belatedly breaks the silence that had once subsumed it,

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[76] Djebar, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, 344–5, 49.
[77] Ibid., 383.
[78] Hervé Sanson similarly remarks that "une opacité doit demeurer entre le père et sa fille; toute connaissance, tout savoir directs entraînent inéluctablement la mort en terre d'Islam, a priori si cette connaissance concerne la fille et suppose le regard du père sur celle-ci." See Sanson, "Mon père cet autre," 323.
[79] Djebar, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, 362.

there is still a sense that the narrator is skirting around the trauma, that the event remains opaque to herself.

As was the case with the narration of the sexual assault episode in *Fille*, the moment in which Fatima jumps onto the tramway track features a switch from the first person to the third person. The narrator becomes merely "la jeune fille," as if she is looking at herself in this moment from an external perspective. Like in Laurens, the younger and older perspectives merge, and the shift in perspective also testifies to a dissociation from the self during the traumatic moment. There is also a switch to grammatical fragments that mirrors the turmoil: "Cris. Tumulte. Brouhaha mêlé des stridences de la foule."[80] The emphasis on the auditory here, continuing with the voice of the tram conductor "[qui] ulule, obsédant, affolé, au-dessus du corps aux yeux clos," also expresses the disorienting disruption to the other senses that the suicide attempt produces. There is thus a numbing, vague quality to the narration from the external focalization and lack of psychology—as if Fatima, all the while confronting this crucial episode of her life, is also circling around it at the same time. Though the narrator states that she revisits the incident "de front, et non pas allusivement par le biais de quelque personnage," as we saw in the previous block quotation, there is still a layer of separation, the constructed external perspective playing the role of a "personnage." There is yet another layer of separation when we consider that the narrator is a fictional double for Djebar the writer. More so than Laurens, Djebar demonstrates the ongoing difficulty of breaking the silence on such a trauma by playing with the conventions of the autobiographical pact in this way. But the layers of separation also point to the narrator's refusal to be pinned down: as she had slipped away from Tarik's assertion of authority, she textually slips away as the points of view shift.

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[80] Ibid., 359.

Though critics have tended to read the narrator's suicide attempt as an escape, and even a liberation, from the double oppression of patriarchy and colonialism, the episode deserves a more nuanced reading.[81] While the narrator is certainly motivated by a desire for escape from restrictive patriarchal authority, ending her life would not exactly connote freedom, since it would rest upon her literal silencing, in this case through death. The desire to escape via suicide is still steeped in male control, far from combatting it. *Nulle Part* and *Fille,* while transgressive in their interrogation of gendered language norms and in their disclosure of previously hidden ordeals, also defy easy solutions to the problems of socio-familial patriarchy and misogyny.

3.3 Mothers, daughters, and defiance of easy solutions to patriarchy

Complicity with patriarchal discourses, practices, and rituals is tested in intergenerational female relationships, particularly in the mother-daughter relationship. Solidarity within a female filiation, and in the face of shared patriarchal oppression, is often perceived as a natural, inherent phenomenon, but the texts put this idea up for debate. Returning to two key episodes, *Nulle part*'s bike scene and the sexual assault in *Fille*, the mothers of both narrators perpetuate male abuses of power in the family by keeping silent in the wake of their daughters' traumatic experiences. To be clear, the sexual assault of Laurence concerns a very different kind of violence from the bike episode in *Nulle part*: whereas the latter involves the violence of language, as discussed earlier, the former is actually physical violence inflicted on the body. Keeping in mind this distinction, I bring the two scenes together to illustrate how the texts problematize female participation in male domination. Djebar's narrator repeatedly alludes to the fact that her mother is silent regarding the bike incident,

[81] For instance, see Fisher, " Une éthique de dévoi(l)ement," 101–2; Hiddleston, *Writing after Postcolonialism*, 251; Mireille Calle-Gruber, "La servante du texte," 197–210.

which worsens the paternal censure. Her particular incredulity directed at the mother for joining in the father's silence implies that the narrator had expected, if not a defense, at least some elucidating words from her: "Que leur [les parents] arrivait-il: une maladie contagieuse? Puisque ma mère, elle non plus, ne m'expliquait rien!"[82] Furthermore, the narrator calls out the "silence complice de la part de la mère-épouse qui, à sa manière, exprimait qu'elle avait partie liée avec lui [le père]."[83] Referring to her as "la mère-épouse" (as opposed to simply "ma mère," which the narrator had been doing up to that point) underscores her position as a wife under her husband's authority. Moreover, the use of the definite article introduces an element of impersonality, attesting to the emotional distance between mother and daughter in this moment. Indeed, the lack of communication engenders a rupture in understanding between the two and exacerbates the daughter's isolation and confusion: "Ignorante du trouble profond que cela introduisit en moi . . . ma mère n'eut tout simplement pas l'idée, ni le loisir de tenter de m'expliquer."[84] If respectful intimacy previously shaped the mother-daughter relationship—which was established from the start of the novel with the scene of the two walking hand-in-hand, the daughter even acting as her mother's protector—the fallout from the bicycle episode now drives a wedge into that proximity.[85] The mother's silence might stem from a lack of power to oppose her husband, reflective of an adherence to familial and sociocultural tradition upholding the authority of the male head of the

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[82] Djebar, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père,* 51.
[83] Ibid., 51.
[84] Ibid., 56.
[85] See Jane Hiddleston, "The mother as other," 25–7 for an excellent close reading of the opening scene of mother and daughter walking together. Note the contrast between this scene and that of the father and daughter walking together in *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père,* 85–88: the daughter walks a distance away from the father, with no physical contact. This is also a departure from a previous version of the scene in the incipit of *L'Amour, la fantasia*: this earlier scene, featuring the daughter walking "main dans la main du père," had foregrounded the narrator's love of and proximity to the father. See Djebar, *L'Amour, la fantasia,* 11.

Islamic household. Both mother and daughter, and any potential for their solidarity in this moment, are constrained by the father's position of power in the family.

The imposition of silence appears even more egregious in *Fille*: whereas the mother's attitude toward her husband's censure of the daughter ultimately remains ambiguous in *Nulle Part,* the uncle's sexual assault of Laurence is explicitly condoned and swept under the rug by the women in the family. The "conseil de filles," which includes Laurence's mother, an aunt, and both grandmothers, is more concerned with protecting the uncle and preserving the veneer of a pleasant family than with supporting Laurence through her distress. Not only do they make excuses for the uncle's assault as an outlet for his sexual frustration with his wife, they normalize and even downplay his actions: "Les hommes, c'est des pulsions, on n'y peut rien. Il leur faut la bagatelle."[86] The women's obliging attitude toward the uncle is a product of societal male dominance: men often do not face consequences for their misdeeds (which are not even seen as misdeeds in the first place). The very real effects of the assault on Laurence seem to have no place in the discussion. Indeed, other than the command to be silent, Laurence herself is sidelined in the *conseil*'s rhetoric: "On dirait que c'est arrivé à la famille, que c'est un truc embêtant pour la famille, pas à elle, pas pour elle."[87] Moreover, the description of the mother seems to indict her for not taking her daughter's upheaval seriously: "Sa mère lui a juste demandé si elle avait mal, si elle avait saigné, mais sans chercher à s'en assurer. Elle n'a pas l'air inquiète, elle a l'air habituée."[88] This even suggests that sexual violence might be a recurring behavior within the family, to the point of being naturalized. Indeed, Claude reveals to Laurence that she had previously been groped by the uncle as well; perhaps Claude, too, had been ordered to be silent on the matter. But she is unsympathetic to her

[86] Laurens, *Fille,* 75.
[87] Ibid.
[88] Ibid.

younger sister: sharing such an experience, it appears, does not inherently lead to solidarity. She trivializes and mocks Laurence: "Alors, t'as fait ton intéressante? . . . Moi aussi il m'a déjà pelotée, le tonton, et j'en ai pas fait toute une histoire."[89] Although Claude's attitude might be attributed to their sibling relationship, characterized in part by competition over attention, her attitude nevertheless reflects an internalized normalization of male sexual violence.

While the aftermaths of the bike episode and of the scene of sexual violence may illustrate a disheartening complicity of mothers and female kin in patriarchal practices, the texts do harbor a certain cautious optimism for shifting away from male domination. This optimism is conveyed through the evolutions of key mother figures: Fatima's mother and Laurence herself when she becomes a mother to her daughter. In *Nulle part,* Algiers, where the family moves during the narrator's adolescence, proves to be the site of a "mini-révolution," of transgressions in sociocultural norms for members of the whole household, but particularly for the mother.[90] Metaphors of radical change in the mother's very existence point to a promising sense of freedom: "[elle] se métamorphosa en quelques mois en Occidentale d'une élégance discrète," and the narrator likens her mother's transformation to "une seconde naissance," remarking that she seems to return "à une adolescence timide et à une jeunesse curieuse, éblouie."[91] Like her daughter, the mother walks around the city unveiled, which she had never done before back in the village; in this way, "elle conquit son autonomie de citadine."[92] The mother's new lifestyle in Algiers represents a defiance of traditional boundaries between "l'Orient" and "l'Occident" and of barriers to women's freedom of movement. Algiers becomes a space of fluidity and potential, where the mother can

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[89] Ibid., 76.
[90] Djebar, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père,* 298.
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.

embrace evolutions in previously fixed identities and norms and find a new sense of independence in those changes.

Additionally, the relationship between the narrator's mother and father more generally is exceptional in the Algerian Islamic context at the time. Displaying a greater complexity than the typical dynamic of the husband's authority over the wife, their bond represents a movement away from rigid patriarchal structures. The parents' long standing love for one another, "amour constant et pudique," constitutes a "mini-révolution dans cette société à peine sortie d'une séculaire pétrification entre les sexes": the reprise of that term "mini-révolution," previously used to evoke the family's life in Algiers, signals how progressive the parents are in terms of contesting the traditional gender divide.[93] Though the mother's silence over the bike fiasco initially points to a complicity with dominant patriarchal conventions, *Nulle part* ultimately emphasizes her personal growth away from those conventions: "Dans ce récit, la mère se tient là, prête à une progressive transformation qui ne s'arrêtera plus: femme en mouvement grâce à sa force propre, à son intelligence, mais aussi grâce à l'assurance secrète que lui donne l'amour de l'époux."[94] This transformation seems ongoing, even infinite. There is an optimism for the mother's trajectory and, implicitly, for the future of her female filiation, as the daughter herself proves to be a "femme en mouvement," defying restrictive expectations for women as she becomes a scholar and writer.

The evolution of the mother figure is depicted in greater granularity in *Fille,* primarily through the lens of Laurence's relationship with her daughter, Alice. Initially, Laurence's insecurity in her relationship with her own mother informs her paranoia about her future relationship with Alice: "une fille n'aime pas forcément sa mère, me disais-je . . . moi, j'avais toujours adoré ma mère;

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[93] Ibid., 381.
[94] Ibid.

mais elle? Est-ce qu'elle m'aimait, elle? Je n'en savais rien."[95] Female filiation, for Laurence, is fragile: *complicité* between mothers and daughters is not a given thing. Indeed, Laurence's relationship with Alice becomes plagued by the fact that she replicates (perhaps unwittingly at first) heteronormative and patriarchal conventions that she had internalized throughout her upbringing. She reprises the "missing son" problem (in a different way) with Alice, who does not conform to conventional expectations of femininity from a young age: Alice refers to herself as a boy, impulsively cuts her own hair short, and refuses to wear dresses. Given the family's (and Laurence's) consistently thwarted wishes for a son, Laurence's preoccupation with Alice being a "garçon manqué" is rather ironic.[96] A psychiatrist's suggestion that Alice is instead a "garçon manquant," a substitute for the missing Tristan, foregrounds Laurence's own trauma as a source of her anxiety over Alice's seeming masculinity: the memory of the lost child and that rupture to the filiation continue to plague Laurence.[97] But it is the fact that Alice does not fit with Laurence's standard for what femininity should look like—a traditional, socially valorized standard, bound up with patriarchal heteronormativity—that distresses the latter most. This preoccupation is reflected in Laurence's tenacious efforts to mold the adolescent Alice to that standard by pushing her to wear makeup, heels, and dresses/skirts: "Elle a été un garçon manqué, elle va devenir une fille réussie. C'est mon objectif."[98] It should be said, too, that Christian (at this point, Laurence's ex-husband and Alice's father) blames Laurence for Alice's "unfeminine" appearance, participating in a patriarchal evaluation of both his daughter and ex-wife: "'Tu as complètement abandonné ton rôle de mère envers ta fille – *ta* fille, écrit t-il . . . Elle [Alice] ne fait pas attention à sa ligne, elle est trop

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[95] Laurens, *Fille,* 169.
[96] Ibid., 180.
[97] Ibid., 181.
[98] Ibid., 207.

musclée, elle s'habille n'importe comment."[99] The fact that Laurence agrees, however resentfully, with Christian's criticisms of Alice and of herself ("j'ai trop laissé faire, je suis nulle comme mère") implies that, at this point, she has internalized a patriarchal standard for mothers that stresses their responsibility to transmit certain "feminine" practices and aesthetics to their daughters.[100]

In her staunch resistance to impositions on her body and appearance, Alice defies restrictive, clear-cut expectations for women. She ultimately galvanizes Laurence to rethink conventional understandings of gender and sexuality and to nuance her initial notion of what it means to transmit femininity. Alice's coming out compels Laurence to confront her internalized homophobia and heteronormative ideas of femininity. Laurence's initial shock and confusion following Alice's revelation betrays a certain disappointment with the turn of events: "Peut-être est-ce ton orgueil qui te blesse: tu as été inefficace contre le cours des choses, la vie va et se déroule sans toi, tu n'as jamais rien décidé."[101] The return of the second-person perspective reflects Laurence's internal conflict as she processes Alice's coming out. But the second-person narration is short-lived here: the first-person "je" manages to wrest control of the narration again, heralding the start of Laurence's evolution in her ideas about femininity, as mother and daughter engage in an open dialogue. The usual mother-daughter roles switch as Alice acts as a sort of educator figure, broadening Laurence's restrictive notions of gender and sexuality categories. For instance, when Laurence initially blames herself for Alice's lesbianism, the latter gently points out the homophobic underpinnings of this line of thinking, allowing Laurence to see how she herself participates in restrictive societal norms: "Quand tu dis que c'est ta faute, c'est que tu es coupable, c'est qu'il y a un

[99] Ibid., 206.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid., 219–20.

délit, un crime. C'est quoi, la faute, là, maman?"[102] Though the conversation is difficult (and a bit awkward) for mother and daughter, their mutual honesty and receptiveness toward one another strengthens their relationship. Guiding Laurence toward acceptance of her homosexuality, Alice is an idealized figure of social change through compassion and patience: "je vois l'amour s'accomplir en direct et sans condition: ses yeux me pardonnent."[103] Despite Laurence's earlier fears of a tense or loveless relationship with her daughter, their exchange here proves optimistic about the strength of their bond now and going forward.

A variation on "c'est une fille" crops up at the end of the dialogue between Alice and Laurence, forming the crux of Laurence's evolving perspective on motherhood and transmission. Alice reclaims the phrase with her proclamation "c'est merveilleux, une fille": a defiance of the original phrase's misogynistic associations within the patriarchal framework.[104] Though Alice is directly referring to the fact that she is dating a woman, her play on language also has broader implications for a new vision of passing on femininity that speaks to Laurence: "il faut prendre la phrase et la recueillir, la sauver, répéter le mot de passe, le transmettre et ne jamais l'oublier."[105] Encouragement of women's possibilities of being, against prescriptive ideas of what women should be, is at the heart of this ethos, the transmission of which will be essential for progressing beyond inherited patriarchal frameworks.

The emphasis at the end of *Fille* on the transmission of a phrase implies that language is the privileged means of defying patriarchal hegemony, a revelation which both this text and Djebar's as a whole have embraced. The novels offer nuanced explorations of the potentials and limits of

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[102] Ibid., 223.
[103] Ibid.
[104] Ibid., 225.
[105] Ibid.

women's defiance of socio-familial norms of patriarchy, but ultimately find an optimism for changing or upending male domination and deterministic gender expectations through language and literature. Female filiation in both texts is multifaceted and messy, but this does not imply its fragility. The complexities of familial female relationships do not fit into a neat, singular conception of filiation. There is no hegemonic narrative for daughters as there is for sons, and the texts embrace this space for ambiguity as a point of defiance. If this chapter has analyzed resistance against the transmission of restrictive familial norms through the lens of narrative and textual defiance, the next one considers how literature might function as a space to test attempts to leave behind a problematic lineage altogether.

Chapter Four. Authorial self-fashioning and ambivalent estrangement from origins

As the chapters of this thesis have progressed, the literary works under examination have featured narrators who increasingly enact critical distance from their various troubled filiations, all the while harboring, whether implicitly or explicitly, a belief in the strength of family ties. This final chapter turns instead to texts that stretch that belief to its breaking point. Annie Ernaux's *L'autre fille* (2011) and Constance Debré's *Nom* (2022) are origin stories that testify to a shared preoccupation with the complexities of estrangement from entangled familial and social class origins in the self-fashioning of individual identity.

These texts offer contrasting approaches to writing about family conflict and class tensions, as Ernaux and Debré write from very different socioeconomic and generational backgrounds. Born into a working-class family in Normandy, Ernaux (1940–) moved up into the *petite bourgeoisie* through education and marriage. Her vast corpus of writing consistently reflects on her status as a "transfuge de classe," as she calls it: what it means to write into but also against the bourgeois circles she entered.[1] Ernaux began her Nobel Prize speech with a rumination on a sentence she had written in her diary when she was 22 years old: "J'écrirai pour venger ma race."[2] This vision of doing justice to the working-class communities she grew up in through literary creation underlies much of her writing. Debré (1972–), on the other hand, was born in Paris into a politically influential lineage on her father's side (notably, her grandfather, Michel Debré, was one of the founders of the constitution of the Fifth Republic) and an aristocratic pedigree on her mother's

[1] Ernaux's use of the notion "transfuge de classe" takes inspiration from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. See Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Les Héritiers: les étudiants et la culture* (Paris: Minuit, 1964) and Bourdieu and Passeron, *La Reproduction: éléments pour une théorie du système* (Paris: Minuit, 1970).
[2] Annie Ernaux, "Conférence Nobel," December 7, 2022.

side. For much of her adult life, Debré seemed to continue in the vein of her *grand bourgeois* heritage, as a successful criminal defense lawyer and young wife and mother, until, seemingly out of the blue, she quit the legal profession and adopted a completely new life. Debré became a writer, left her husband, began exploring sexual relationships with women, and shed most of her material belongings in pursuit of an ascetic lifestyle.[3] If Ernaux is concerned about writing to avenge the *milieu populaire* as someone who has ascended the social ladder, Debré does not face a shift in social class, but rather, rejects the class system altogether—including all the habits and expectations that come with it. And whereas Ernaux's body of writing stretches over more than five decades and has circled certain key themes (family and class, memory, sexuality and desire, gender hierarchies, among others), Debré is relatively new to the literary world, and it is unclear how she will evolve as a writer.[4]

I have chosen to focus on texts that, out of each author's œuvre, most foreground the writer's position in the line of familial filiation and its intersection with social class background. *L'autre fille* reflects on the issue of class identity through an examination of Ernaux's tricky position as a "replacement" daughter. The text is framed as a letter to her lost sister Ginette, who had died two years before Ernaux's birth.[5] The loss of a sibling/child has figured in previously discussed texts (Toledo, *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle,* Laurens, *Fille*, Djebar, *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père,* albeit very briefly in this final one), but it has not been framed as the key disturbance to

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[3] These pivotal shifts in her life are recounted in her first two autobiographical works, *Play Boy* (Paris: Stock, 2018) and *Love Me Tender* (Paris: Flammarion, 2020).

[4] However, as pointed out by Alice Blackhurst, Debré had previously published two books in 2004 and 2007 that "read more like philosophical reflections than works of narrative fiction." These works met a largely negative reception from critics and have since been excluded from Debré's corpus in the public eye. See Alice Blackhurst, "Et Alors?" *New Left Review,* December 16, 2022.

[5] *L'autre fille* was published as a part of editor Claire Debru's "Les affranchis" series at NiL éditions, in which writers were asked to respond to the following prompt: "Écrivez la lettre que vous n'avez jamais écrite."

familial relationships as much as in *L'autre fille*. Underlying Ernaux's social mobility and discovery of her vocation as a writer is an unstable sense of personal and familial identity that stems partly from her situation as a substitute for this sister. *L'autre fille* is certainly not the only work of Ernaux's that reflects on the cluster of family origins, class, and loss. These issues are especially pertinent in her earlier works, notably *Les Armoires vides* (1974)*, La Honte* (1997), *La Place* (1983), and *Une femme* (1987), these last two often cited as progenitors of the *récit de filiation*, as I have discussed in the introduction to this thesis.[6] But *L'autre fille* is the only text to bring Ernaux's place in the family constellation, as an only child following a tragedy, into conversation with her relationship to her class origins. Furthermore, it is Ernaux's sole work to deal directly with the distressing issue of the lost sister, which is mentioned only briefly in many of her other texts.[7] Filiation is also a recurring theme in Debré's writing thus far. *Love Me Tender,* in particular, deals with her experience of losing custody of her son. But *Nom* is more relevant for my inquiry here, in that it interrogates Debré's prominent ancestry and her place within it. Flipping between bedside scenes with her dying father and sections of critical (and often acerbic) reflections on her family history, encompassing not only political accomplishments but also domestic strife and drug abuse,

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[6] The referenced texts were all published by Gallimard.

[7] The parents' reactions to the death of Ginette briefly feature in *La Place* (Folio, 1997), 41–3 and in *Une femme* (Folio, 1987)*,* 42–3; the elderly mother*,* beset with Alzheimer's, reveals that she had two daughters in *«Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit»* (Paris: Gallimard, Folio, 1997)*,* 16; and there are two references to Ginette's death, also in *«Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit»,* 44, 81. These three texts are alluded to, either by title or by their main subject matter, in *L'autre fille.* Ginette's name appears for the first time in Ernaux's published writing in *Les Années* (Paris: Gallimard, coll. «NRF», 2008), 40–41. The recurrence of Ginette in Ernaux's other works has been documented by Michèle Bacholle-Bošković, "La perte ou l'histoire d'un secret," in *Annie Ernaux: De la perte au corps glorieux* (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2011), 31–5; Fabrice Thumerel, "L'Autre (mémoire): histoires de fille(s)…", in *Cahier de l'Herne: Annie Ernaux,* ed. Pierre-Louis Fort (Paris: L'Herne, 2022), 228–31; Sylvie Boyer, "Legs d'une survivance: l'enfant de remplacement chez Annie Ernaux," in *Annie Ernaux: perspectives critiques*, ed. Sergio Villani (Toronto: Legas, 2009), 81–94; and Françoise Simonet-Tenant, "*L'autre fille*: 'Tu es morte pour que j'écrive…'", in *Annie Ernaux: le temps et la mémoire,* ed. Francine Best, Bruno Blanckeman, Francine Dugast-Portes (Paris: Stock, 2014), 317.

Debré seems to pronounce an unequivocal disavowal of her familial heritage and bourgeois-aristocratic origins in this text. As I will argue, however, this rejection is more complicated than it may appear at the surface.

Other than *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle, Nom* and *L'autre fille* are the only texts in my corpus that are not marketed as a *roman*, or indeed, with any specific generic indication (though some critics do refer to *Nom* as a novel).[8] This choice suggests a desire to be distanced from the classification of fiction: at times, *Nom* reads like an essay or even political pamphlet, while the epistolary structure in Ernaux gives the text the impression of a private document. Also, in both, the separation between author and narrator is less firm than in the previously examined texts, in which that distinction played a key role in the use of fiction.[9] Nevertheless, subtle autofictional devices are still deployed in Debré's and Ernaux's texts in order to explore their relationships with family lineage and class. Artful narrative construction—Debré relies on the juxtaposition of temporal planes to bring the family's past and present into conversation, and Ernaux's use of the epistolary form is an illusion, given that it will never reach its addressee—participates in the broader configuration of nuanced alienation from one's predecessors. And both works concern the crafting of an authorial identity in the space of the text, with emphasis on the two writers' literary filiations.

In *L'autre fille* and *Nom*, troubled filiation stems from a death in the family that configures an ambivalent estrangement from their familial and social lineages in the self-fashioning of identity. Whereas defiance in the previous chapter on Djebar and Laurens dealt with unpacking and pushing back against patriarchal conventions that have been passed down in the family, my

[8] For instance, see Angelique Chrisafis, "'Family is the place for madness': Constance Debré on the book that has shocked France," *The Guardian,* January 14, 2023.
[9] Notably, Salvayre's *Pas pleurer,* Toledo's *Thésée, sa vie nouvelle,* Chalandon's *Enfant de salaud,* Laurens's *Fille*. Because of the distancing from fictional invention in *Nom* and *L'autre fille*, I will refer interchangeably to the narrators and writers throughout this chapter.

examination of ambivalent estrangement in this chapter asks what it means (and the extent to which it is possible) to leave behind or shed an identity that is informed by one's lineage. The death of Debré's father symbolically heralds her attempted breaking of ties from her illustrious ancestry, while the story of the death of Ginette destabilizes Ernaux's relationship with her parents, which then becomes associated with a tense relationship with her working-class heritage. Mobilizing hostile, straightforward prose that refuses conventions of respectability and propriety, the texts negotiate the construction of an identity which may seem to break with entangled family and class origins, but ultimately returns to them (in the case of Ernaux) or is found to have never truly left in the first place (in Debré). My analysis of the texts' representations of ambivalent estrangement will invoke sociological concepts proposed by Pierre Bourdieu, namely the *habitus* and the different forms of capital. While sociological readings of Ernaux's writings abound, they tend to prioritize the early works (pre-twenty-first century) and dwell on the following: the generic fluidity of Ernaux's spare prose encompassing literature, sociology, and history[10]; the narrative of the class migrant[11]; Bourdieu's intellectual influence on Ernaux[12]; and the relationship between Ernaux's

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[10] Fabrice Thumerel, ed., *Annie Ernaux, une œuvre de l'entre-deux* (Arras: Artois Presses Université, 2004); Jérôme Meizoz, "Annie Ernaux: posture de l'auteure en sociologue," in *Annie Ernaux: se mettre en gage pour dire le monde*, ed. Thomas Hunkeler and Marc-Henry Soulet (Genève: Métis Presses, 2012), 27–44; Alison S. Fell and Edward Welch, eds., *Annie Ernaux: Socio-Ethnographer of Contemporary France*, *Nottingham French Studies* 48, no. 2 (2009). Ernaux herself has described her work as positioned somewhere "entre la littérature, la sociologie et l'histoire," in Ernaux, *L'Écriture comme un couteau: entretien avec Frédéric-Yves Jeannet* (Paris: Stock, 2003), 80.

[11] Siobhan McIlvanney, *Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001); Gérard Mauger, "Annie Ernaux, «ethnologue organique» de la migration de classe, in *Annie Ernaux, une œuvre de l'entre-deux*, 177–203. See also the contributions in "Part I – «Venger ma race»" in *Cahier de l'Herne: Annie Ernaux*, 17–52.

[12] Franz Schultheis, "Annie Ernaux – Pierre Bourdieu: les affinités électives entre deux formes d'auto-analyse engagée," in *Annie Ernaux: se mettre en gage pour dire le monde*, 119–130; Christian Baudelot, "«Briser des solitudes…», les dimensions psychologiques, morales et corporelles des rapports de classe chez Pierre Bourdieu et Annie Ernaux," in *Annie Ernaux, une œuvre de l'entre-deux*, 165–176; Isabelle Charpentier, "«La littérature est une arme de combat», une conversation avec Annie Ernaux," *Le Grand Continent,* October 6, 2022.

personal writing and collective reception/resonance.[13] *L'autre fille* and the problematic it raises of being a single child who has replaced another have not been critically approached from a sociological standpoint, as scholarship on the text tends to focus on the writing of absence and mourning through the figure of Ginette.[14] Debré's work has yet to be analyzed using sociological frameworks; reading her in tandem with Ernaux allows for a sharper critique of her privileged socio-familial background.

The first section of the chapter establishes that filiation in the two texts is troubled by the death of a family member and by the conflicting relationships with inherited social class identities that the death brings to the fore. I trace how the use of hostile, raw language to write about family death participates in the narrators' complex configurations of estrangement from their social and familial roots. The next section zeroes in on ambivalent estrangement from troubled filiation through an examination of the writers' processes of self-fashioning of a literary identity that is set apart from their class and family lineages. The third section considers the paradoxes of the writers' estrangement: Ernaux re-affiliates herself with, and Debré does not enact a complete rupture from, the origins from which they had sought distance. I contrast Ernaux's loyalty to her origins that underpins her return with Debré's vehement attempt at a radical break that nevertheless falls back on the social and cultural capital of her lineage.

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[13] Christian Baudelot, "Annie Ernaux, sociologue de son temps," in *Annie Ernaux: le temps et la mémoire*, 246–60; Isabelle Charpentier, "Produire "une littérature d'effraction" pour "faire exploser le refoulé social": projet littéraire, effraction sociale et engagement politique dans l'œuvre autosociobiographique d'Annie Ernaux," in *L'Empreinte du social dans le roman depuis 1980*, ed. Michel Collomb (Montpellier: Publications de l'Université Paul-Valéry, 2005), 111–31.

[14] See Bacholle-Bošković, "La perte ou l'histoire d'un secret," 15–62; Thumerel, "L'Autre (mémoire): histoires de fille(s)...," 228–31; Barbara Havercroft, "Écriture et sépulture dans *L'autre fille* d'Annie Ernaux," *French Forum* 41, no. 1–2 (2016): 5–15; Ruth Lipman, "Seeking the Shadow Sister in Annie Ernaux's *L'autre fille*," *The French Review* 90, no. 3 (2017): 50–62; Barbara Havercroft,"Le tombeau de la sœur: récit et réconciliation dans *L'autre fille*," in *Annie Ernaux: le temps et la mémoire*, 334–47.

4.1 Writing family death and problems of class: The language of estrangement

In both Debré's and Ernaux's texts, troubled filiation manifests as a nœud of family death and problems of social class, which the death highlights. Although the parameters of gender and sexuality as they relate to disrupted family relationships are pertinent in the two writers' corpuses more widely, it is this nœud of death and class that is foregrounded in these two texts specifically. The figure of the deceased family member (Debré's father and Ernaux's sister) sheds light on the narrator's experience of disrupted interpersonal family ties and complicated engagement with inherited socioeconomic class. Knowledge of the existence (and death) of Ginette triggers Ernaux's realization of the pressures that working-class realities exerted on her relationship with her parents during her upbringing. Ernaux's place as the only child within the family is economically conditioned, as reported speech from the parents indicates: "On ne pourrait pas faire pour deux ce qu'on fait pour un."[15] The conditional tense in this phrase cushions the harsh, unsettling implication that Ernaux is filling a spot that has been empty—that, in replacing Ginette, she herself could be replaceable.[16] Indeed, given Ginette's death from diphtheria, the child Ernaux's fear of parental abandonment becomes compounded in the context of her own frequent illnesses, especially the life-threatening bout of tetanus that afflicted her at age five: "Jusqu'à quatorze ou quinze ans, je croyais confusément qu'elle [la mère] me laisserait mourir comme toi."[17] Illness and economics are intertwined in this fear. Ernaux's fragile health strains her parents' modest financial

[15] Annie Ernaux, *L'autre fille* (Paris: NiL, 2011), 61.
[16] The idea of a child replacing a previously deceased sibling was first explored from a psychological perspective by Albert C. Cain and Barbara S. Cain, "On replacing a child," *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry* 3, no. 3 (1964): 443–56. For a psychology-oriented reading of the "enfant de remplacement" figure in Ernaux's context, see Bacholle-Bošković, "La perte ou l'histoire d'un secret," 15–62.
[17] Ernaux, *L'autre fille*, 37.

resources; her recollection of her parents' cutting if hyperbolic remark, "«tu nous coûtes les yeux de la tête»," and her own acknowledgement that "ma survie leur coûtait cher" imply feelings of guilt for placing these perceived burdens on them.[18] The tragedy of Ginette's death brings to the fore these socioeconomic-inflected tensions between Ernaux and her parents.

Furthermore, the figure of Ginette herself also highlights Ernaux's awareness of her working-class familial origins. If, as Ernaux argues, she and Ginette did not really have the same parents given the personal and historical shifts (i.e., the beginning of the Second World War) in their lives in the time that had elapsed between their births, the most significant common denominator between the two daughters is their experience of the acquired customs and manners (or *habitus*, à la Bourdieu) of their milieu: "L'une et l'autre nous avons émergé à la conscience au milieu du même monde . . . tout ce qui existe a été énoncé pour nous avec les mêmes voix, les mêmes gestes et dans le même langage, ce français dont j'apprendrai à l'école qu'il n'est pas le «bon»."[19] This statement, located close to the conclusion of the text, marks the first time that Ernaux refers to herself and Ginette as "nous": the experience of class consciousness (or rather, class unconsciousness) is what bridges the gap between the two figures.[20] The question of language and class, as highlighted at the end of the quote, will be an important point of discussion further on in the chapter.

Converging with Ernaux's "place" in the landscape of social class is another kind of place: in the configuration of the family.[21] Social place and the constraints that come with it, as I have laid

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[18] Ibid., 39.
[19] Ibid., 70. Chapters 3 and 4 of Pierre Bourdieu, *Méditations pascaliennes* (Paris: Seuil, 1997), 111–93 lay out the idea of the *habitus* as a set of dispositions (ways of thinking, acting, and feeling).
[20] This instance of "nous" is also noted by Havercroft, "Le tombeau de la sœur," 344.
[21] This idea of place comes from Ernaux, *La Place*, which is chiefly concerned with the social place of Ernaux's father. Bacholle-Bošković, "La perte ou l'histoire d'un secret," 39–40 also extends the idea of place to that of Ernaux within her family, but does not relate it to her social place.

out, determines familial place. The conversation that Ernaux overhears between her mother and her neighbor revealing Ginette's existence (and death) upends her relationship with her parents and her understanding of her position in the family. Metaphors of physical distance and separation evoke the destabilizing effect of learning that there had been another child whom her parents loved (possibly more than herself): "Entre eux et moi, maintenant il y a toi, invisible, adorée. Je suis écartée, poussée pour te faire de la place. Repoussée dans l'ombre tandis que tu planes tout en haut dans la lumière éternelle. Comparée, moi l'incomparable, l'enfant unique."[22] These sentences also exude jealousy toward the beloved Ginette, testifying to an insecurity about the status of her own relationship with her parents. Additionally, the mother's comment that Ginette was "plus gentille que celle-là," the latter referring to Ernaux, particularly exacerbates this anxiety.[23] Ernaux's ensuing neurotic rumination on the different meanings of "gentille," in terms of personality and "au regard de Dieu," conveys how much she is disturbed by her mother's remark, and the fact that she is led to think that she is entirely the opposite of both understandings of the word implies a feeling of guilt: as if she has failed to be the daughter that her parents had hoped for, failed to occupy the familial place set out for her in a satisfactory way.

Throughout the text, Ginette is rhetorically and symbolically presented in alignment with the parents, especially with the mother, while Ernaux is positioned apart, hinting at her sense of estrangement from the family. As Barbara Havercroft has adeptly shown, the use of religious language in writing about Ginette and its presence in the devout Catholic mother's comments marks these two as separate from Ernaux, who declares "Je ne manifestais pas d'appétence pour les choses de la religion."[24] Additionally, both the beginning and conclusion of the text allude to the

[22] Ernaux, *L'autre fille*, 21.
[23] Ibid., 16.
[24] Havercroft, "Le tombeau de la sœur," 334–47; Ernaux, *L'autre fille*, 20.

fact that the tombs of Ginette and of the parents are located in the same cemetery at Yvetot, whereas Ernaux emphatically proclaims, "Je ne serai pas enterrée en Normandie, près de vous. Je ne l'ai jamais souhaité ni imaginé."[25] The "vous" stands in stark opposition to the "je," a grammatical manifestation of her separation. Indeed, near the end of the text, Ernaux writes, "L'autre fille c'est moi, celle qui s'est enfuie, loin d'eux": a surprising statement given that Ginette, who has been shrouded in silence and of whom discussion is taboo in the family, had been implied to be "l'autre fille" up until then.[26] In identifying herself as "l'autre fille," Ernaux suggests not only the geographical space between herself and her parents, but also the emotional and social distance given the trajectory of her life and career. I will return to the significance of the phrase "l'autre fille" for Ernaux's self-fashioning in the second section of this chapter.

If the portrayal of the deceased sibling in *L'autre fille* points to Ernaux's alienation from her parents and modest milieu of origin, in *Nom*, the death of Debré's father, as the final link to the older generation (since the mother had died in Debré's childhood) and to the political dynasty branch of the family, holds symbolic significance for her own attempt at extricating herself from her bourgeois-aristocratic familial roots. The structure of *Nom,* alternating between the father's end-of-life care and the histories of both maternal and paternal sides of the family, emphasizes the dual framing of the family death and Debré's tense relation with her high-status filiation. Indeed, from a narrative standpoint, the death of the father is the catalyst for the critical revisiting of the family's turbulent past.[27] A description of an old family photo that Debré finds in her late father's room links his death to a reflection on their illustrious lineage:

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[25] Ernaux, *L'autre fille*, 10, 77.
[26] Ibid., 77.
[27] Note that in Ernaux, *La Place,* it is also the death of the father that triggers the writer's examination of his life and milieu and reflections on her own social ascension.

> Dans la chambre du mort, dans un tiroir, une photo de baptême. Photo officielle de ma vie officielle. Devant le château de ma mère au Pays basque, mes parents, mes deux grands-mères, mon grand-père ministre, moi dans les bras de ma mère, je porte une grande robe en dentelle blanche. Il y a eu un article dans le journal local, à la messe les hommes du village ont chanté pour moi, le président de la République a dit à mon grand-père que Constance c'est très beau . . . Je n'emporte pas la photo, je la remets dans ce meuble qui sera vendu, ou récupéré par ma sœur, ou jeté, je referme le tiroir, je sors de la chambre.[28]

The details in the photo, especially the chateau and the clothing, testify to Debré's socially privileged background and seemingly idyllic past. And the allusion to the newspaper article makes clear that the Debré family (at least at the time of Constance's birth) was held in high esteem in their community. The fact that Debré leaves behind this photo of the respected family is indicative of her desire to cut ties with that part of her identity, to excise that part of her past from her own narrative. Additionally, Debré's seeming indifference toward the fate of her father's house further attests to her estrangement from the family. Though she survives her father, she has no interest in dealing with issues of inheritance, material or symbolic. Moreover, the family's façade of stability in the photo becomes broken in *Nom*'s unflinching examination of the dark parts of the family history, much afflicted by death: drug overdoses, suicides, mental illness, fatal accidents.[29] If the photo depicts Debré's "vie officielle," *Nom* offers a counter-narrative that unpacks her "unofficial" life—what has not been recorded, what has been obfuscated behind an exterior of prestige.

Debré goes on to target the class prestige of her family background as it is conveyed through the breadth of qualifications and titles held by her family members over the centuries. She launches an acerbic critique of this heritage and the weight it imposes in a long, cumbersome list of distinguished persons:

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[28] Constance Debré, *Nom* (Paris: J'ai Lu, 2022), 13–4. Debré previously described this photograph in *Play Boy,* 28.

[29] See Chapter 6 in Debré, *Nom,* 27–31.

> Dans la famille, il y a des ministres (de De Gaulle, Pétain, Giscard, Pompidou, Napoléon III, Louis XV, etc.), des députés (de tous les régimes), des comtes, des barons, une duchesse, deux peintres célèbres, un architecte de gares, un Prix de Rome, des rabbins, des pasteurs, des professeurs de médecine, des diplomates, des membres du Jockey Club, des académiciens. Aristocratie incluse, la bourgeoisie est ridicule. Ils se croient importants, ils sont ridicules.[30]

The family has a broad range of cultural and social capital stretching across diverse fields, from the arts, to governmental institutions, to intellectual spheres.[31] Debré repudiates this accumulated capital and the family narrative of high achievement, setting herself apart from her *grand bourgeois* and aristocratic ancestors. Her description of the bourgeoisie (in the broadest sense) as "ridicule" testifies to the scorn she has for distinctions of class. In the final sentence, Debré implies that the bourgeoisie is not only ridiculous for their accomplishments, but even more so because they believe in the gravitas of such accomplishments.

For both Ernaux and Debré, then, family death is not associated with the typical narrative of melancholic mourning (as it had been in the case of Toledo's *Thésée*, for instance), but instead provides a lens for a blunt reflection on estrangement from both the family line and social class origins. The writers further articulate this estrangement in the cultivation of an unsettling sense of hostility toward the deceased (as well as toward other family members). Though Debré's prose is much more sprawling compared to Ernaux's spare and concise sentences, both authors share a certain uncompromising and raw animosity toward the deceased in their writing, which is

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[30] Ibid., 43.

[31] I employ the terms of social and cultural capital from Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education,* ed. John G. Richardson (Westport: Greenwood, 1986), 241–258. See page 243: "...capital can present itself in three fundamental guises: as economic capital, which is immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights; as cultural capital, which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of educational qualifications; and as social capital, made up of social obligations ("connections"), which is convertible, in certain conditions, into economic capital and may be institutionalized in the form of a title of nobility."

indicative of a refusal to adhere to social norms of propriety. And, as I noted earlier, because *Nom* and *L'autre fille* distance themselves from fiction, the "je" of the narration becomes even more incisive in the context of the cultivation of hostility: the texts lay bare the writers' socially taboo affects.[32] The incipit of *Nom*, which recounts Debré's interaction with her father's dead body, exemplifies this kind of taboo writing. The scene is chilling in its impersonal, clinical language: "j'attrape l'épaule froide, je glisse mon bras derrière son dos froid, je mets ma main dans sa main froide, je tire le bras bloqué, je pense à Rigidité Cadavérique…"[33] The writing reduces the father to inert body parts to be handled, which is an unconventional way (to say the least) to portray the loss of a key family member. The focus on verbs of physical motion also renders the scene devoid of sentiment or reflection on the emotional implications of dealing with her father's corpse. Indeed, Debré outright rejects any imposition of sentiment onto her, as her meeting with her father's doctor evinces: "il me prend dans ses bras, c'est gênant, je suis raide, ça ne dure pas, il me donne le certificat, tire-toi, tire-toi t'entends, il se tire."[34] Her speech and body language communicate her aversion to a typical expression of comfort in the wake of a death. Debré shows a similar disgust for shows of emotion and pity in her description of her mother's funeral when she was a child. "Tout était répugnant. Mon père qui pleurait. Le prêtre qui racontait n'importe quoi . . . Les gens qui nous regardaient pour voir si on pleurait si on ne pleurait pas. Leur pitié. Le curé débile. Tais-toi t'entends, tais-toi": using the same free indirect discourse in the second person as in the doctor scene, Debré seems to implicate the reader as a participant in the social norms of propriety around death that she rejects.[35]

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[32] See also Élise Hugueny-Léger, *Annie Ernaux, une poétique de la transgression* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009) on Ernaux's transgression of social and cultural taboos throughout her writing career.
[33] Debré, *Nom,* 9.
[34] Ibid., 11.
[35] Ibid., 92–3.

Not only does Debré exhibit an aversion to shows of sentimentality around death and suffering, she also harbors a cold hostility toward her father as he approaches death, which further points to her sense of estrangement. She rejects the usual cultural narrative of pathos-oriented deathbed interactions: "Dans Huit et demi, il y a ce passage où Mastroianni/Guido parle à son père mort en rêve. Il lui dit qu'ils ont très peu parlé, qu'il a beaucoup de questions à lui poser, et le père répond qu'il ne sait pas s'il pourra répondre. Je n'ai aucune question. Je n'ai besoin d'aucune réponse."[36] The straightforwardness of these last two simple sentences matches her stark aloofness toward the dying father. In addition, she recounts a recurring dream of burning her father's body (and sometimes the mother's as well), using matter-of-fact language that gives no indication of emotional disturbance at the violence of the dream: "et ils brûlent tous les deux, de toute façon leur mort je n'y peux rien, alors que les corps brûlent quelle importance."[37] Debré does not revel in the destruction of her parents' bodies, but in the nonchalance of "quelle importance" she embraces a certain antagonism. She is insistent and unabashed in her writing of these socially taboo attitudes, which comprises a resistance to norms regarding the treatment of family death and the cohesion of family relations.

So, not only are members of the *grande bourgeoisie* and aristocracy the target of Debré's scorn, social conventions of decorum are as well. Debré's conversation with her (mostly estranged) sister about the father's death also evinces her conflation of social expectations of propriety and bourgeois habits. Debré expresses disdain for her sister's adherence to a conventionally bourgeois life—the kind of life that is in keeping with the family tradition, the kind of life that Debré herself had cast off: "elle a mis ses filles dans une école privée, elle a un chien, une maison, un 4 x 4, un mari

[36] Ibid., 116.
[37] Ibid.

qui est avocat, qui a une barbe, une moto, un château."[38] Debré then goes on to show contempt for her sister's overtly sorrowful response to their father's death: "j'ai pensé que c'était bizarre que ma sœur pleure, j'ai pensé qu'elle avait peut-être fait sa vie comme ça, à se raconter que les gens qui comptent c'est son père son mari et ses enfants, sans se poser des questions, parce qu'ils étaient là, parce que c'était comme ça."[39] The sister's tears over the father are, in Debré's interpretation, a mark of her uncritical adherence to the social expectation of devotion to the family, part and parcel of her participation in conventional bourgeois codes. In repudiating the narrative of mourning and the belief in the importance of blood relations, Debré distances herself from the double nœud of interpersonal family ties and bourgeois propriety.

Though Ernaux's language is certainly less virulent than Debré's, *L'autre fille* nevertheless depicts an unsettling antipathy toward the deceased sister, who seems to represent the gulf between Ernaux and her parents. "Mais tu n'es pas ma sœur, tu ne l'as jamais été," Ernaux proclaims in the opening pages of the text: a harsh rejection that undermines the significance of blood relation in the construction of family ties.[40] Ernaux's fear of her replaceability manifests in animus toward Ginette: "JE TE VOIS COUCHEE A MA PLACE ET C'EST MOI QUI MEURS," she writes in response to overhearing her mother's revelatory conversation with the neighbor.[41] The capitals are original, relating the depth of her rancor; Ginette is framed as an enemy, even a parasite. The grammatical subject also dominates this sentence ("je," "ma," "moi"), which hints at an anxiety about the existence of the self given the "threat" of the other sibling. Even at the time of writing the text, Ginette's very name still continues to evoke "un malaise, une vague répugnance" in Ernaux:

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[38] Ibid., 63.
[39] Ibid., 65.
[40] Ernaux, *L'autre fille,* 12.
[41] Ibid., 32.

she is a reminder of the insecurities and distance in her relationship with her parents, as well as of the destabilizing notion of her own existence being predicated on another's death.[42] The confrontational address to the "tu" throughout the whole text adds to the disturbing effect of the hostile prose, as if the animosity is also being directed at the reader.

The parents (and the mother in particular) are also the recipients of Ernaux's hostility, but that hostility is complicated by feelings of admiration and attachment.[43] This ambivalence is evident in Ernaux's reflection on her mother's "plus gentille" comment: "Entre ma mère et moi, deux mots. Je les lui ai fait payer. J'ai écrit contre elle. Pour elle. À sa place, ouvrière fière et humiliée."[44] Here, Ernaux begins with a vindictiveness toward the mother, the emotional weight of the phrase "plus gentille" symbolizing the wedge between them. But she then shifts toward an attitude of respect. Instead of using writing as a tool to combat her mother, she comes to employ it to honor her, to do justice to her working-class experience.[45] The third section of this chapter will reflect more on Ernaux's loyalty to her socio-familial roots and the significance it has for her articulation of estrangement.

Accompanying the configuration of hostility in both *L'autre fille* and *Nom* is a destructive drive that motivates the writing. The space of the text is paradoxically the only place where Ginette can exist—and die again, under Ernaux's pen. The epistolary structure contributes to this process of construction (and destruction): the address to Ginette in the second person creates the semblance of her existence, all the while providing space for repudiating that vision of her. If

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[42] Ibid., 44.

[43] In the semi-autobiographical novel *Les Armoires vides*, the heroine Denise Lesur also expresses hostility toward her parents, in the desire to leave them behind and reject what they represent in terms of social class: for instance, "Je ne suis pas comme eux, je ne leur ressemble pas." Ernaux, *Les Armoires vides* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), 92.

[44] Ernaux, *L'autre fille,* 21.

[45] See, notably, Ernaux, *Une femme* and «*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*».

Ginette is a reminder of the feelings of estrangement from the parents as a substitute child due to working-class constraints, writing the text is a way for Ernaux to come to terms with these complex familial and social relationships, by understanding and then destroying a certain idea of Ginette as a figure to be feared or villainized. But Ernaux's consistent ambivalence about her motives in writing the text—expressed through interrogative framing ("Est-ce que je t'écris pour te ressusciter et te tuer à nouveau?") and rumination ("Peut-être que j'ai voulu m'acquitter d'une dette imaginaire en te donnant à mon tour l'existence que ta mort m'a donnée. Ou bien te faire revivre et remourir pour être quitte de toi, de ton ombre")—undermines the catharsis that may be found through writing.[46] If writing the text was an attempt to understand her objective for writing in the first place, the text ultimately offers no easy answers to that question.

While the object of Ernaux's destruction is deeply personal, centered on a certain image of Ginette, the anarchic force of *Nom* extends from her specific filiation to the whole established social order. This reveals Debré's estrangement not only from her family line, but from society more broadly. Debré's text (and her life, she implies) is driven by the task of "détruire . . . pas réparer comme ils disent toujours, il n'y a rien à réparer."[47] At the heart of *Nom* is the work of breaking ties, with family and other social institutions, which is the opposite of the predominant narrative of repair and recovery when it comes to literature about filiation. If Ernaux writes about Ginette in an attempt to "kill" her symbolically, Debré writes about her lineage in order to destroy it as well, alongside the very concept of lineage and its implications:

> Je suis pour la suppression de l'héritage, de l'obligation alimentaire entre ascendants et descendants, je suis pour la suppression de l'autorité parentale, je suis pour l'abolition du mariage, je suis pour que les enfants soient éloignés de leurs parents au plus jeune âge, je

[46] Ernaux, *L'autre fille,* 24, 77.
[47] Debré, *Nom,* 13.

> suis pour l'abolition de la filiation, je suis pour l'abolition du nom de famille, je suis contre la tutelle, la minorité, je suis contre le patrimoine, je suis contre le domicile, la nationalité, je suis pour la suppression de l'état civil, je suis pour la suppression de la famille, je suis pour la suppression de l'enfance aussi si on peut.[48]

There is a freeing of language here, as the sentence seems to spill out uncontrollably, the phrases snowballing as she goes on a rampage against various legal and cultural aspects of filiation. The use of anaphora ("je suis pour") creates an emphatic, manifesto-like effect, and the foregrounding of the grammatical subject gestures toward the separation of the individual self from all interpersonal and familial links. Some of Debré's proposals appear perplexing: how does one abolish childhood, for instance? Perhaps we can only think of these rejections in a metaphorical more so than literal way: if we understand *enfance* as a kind of prison, a state of confinement to the authority of parents and family, then its suppression would mean a liberation from those confines. Debré's anarchic prose suggests that living unbound by social norms and institutions is her ultimate goal.

Through their use of raw and sometimes shocking language to talk about family death and problematic familial relations, both Ernaux and Debré display an intrepid willingness to expose obfuscated and taboo subjects, countering the obligation of maintaining the veneer of propriety. Writing on Ginette breaks the silence that reigned over the subject between Ernaux and her parents, while Debré unveils a grim history of death and illness in her family that has been overlooked in the public focus on their political prominence. The textual construction of animosity and destructiveness participates in the writers' configurations of their alienation from their predecessors. Throughout this first section, I have also nodded toward Ernaux's and Debré's crafted identities as outsiders, distanced from the rest of their families. The next section will further

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[48] Ibid., 100.

investigate this idea of otherness, of being estranged and a "stranger," in the fashioning of the self amid uneasy relationships with familial and class roots.

4.2 Self-fashioning, away from class and familial origins

If, as we recall from Chapter 1, the narrators of Salvayre's and Rahmy's texts lean in to their mutually informing familial and elective filiations in order to carve out their individual identities, Ernaux and Debré orient their self-reinvention away from their familial heritage and toward chosen literary filiations instead. Changes in these two writers' cultural and economic capital, especially related to education and profession, are key points of consideration for this process of identity construction. For Debré, her legal education and line of work as a criminal defense barrister are indicative of her initial participation in her *grande bourgeoise* filiation of "ceux qui font la loi."[49] She attains the requisite cultural capital for carrying on the family name: "Mais quand je grandis et que je rapporte des mentions, et quand Henri-IV et quand le droit et encore des mentions, et puis le barreau, et puis tous mes petits succès bourgeois de ce genre, bien sûr je commence à leur plaire [la famille]. J'aurais pu être l'héritier parfait."[50] Debré, at that point in her life, exemplifies Bourdieusian social reproduction, wherein children from backgrounds of prominent cultural capital become "les héritiers" (as Bourdieu refers to them, an echo of which might be heard in Debré's formulation of "l'héritier parfait") of that capital with the support of educational institutions.[51] Debré could have been included in that list of distinguished titles in the family that I referenced earlier; indeed, she had been included, before her pivotal life shift. Her phrase "tous mes petits succès bourgeois" reads with a touch of irony, encompassing a certain bitterness about

[49] Ibid., 44.
[50] Ibid., 56.
[51] Bourdieu and Passeron, *Les Héritiers* and *La Reproduction*.

previously subscribing to her inherited social class conventions. The use of the conditional past ("j'aurais pu") is key in distinguishing that she ultimately repudiates her continuation of the family line of prestige: her (attempted) departure from bourgeois success is a question of choice, not competency. "Bien sûr que l'héritier c'est moi, bien sûr que je les déshérite": in abandoning a conventionally bourgeois life as a lawyer, wife, and mother, Debré attempts to reverse the process of social reproduction.[52] To "disinherit" her family is to cast them off as she fashions a new identity as a social outsider, living beyond the bounds of class and family. To be fair, Debré's previous work as a defense barrister does set her apart from (and, to an extent, pit her against) her family: "Ceux de ma famille font la loi, je préfère plaider contre, ceux de ma famille sont dans le camp des vainqueurs, je préfère les vaincus."[53] Though the young Debré participates in the bourgeois professional world, she does so in rebellion against her predecessors. That said, truly "disinheriting" the family entails a step beyond that: shaking off the profession wholesale.

Debré's abandonment of the legal profession accompanies her adoption of a new profession as a writer, but both lines of work testify to her consistent investment in the critical examination of the structures that govern the world. "J'ai fait du droit pour comprendre le monde, pour connaître la loi. Comprendre comment la loi explique le monde. Comment elle l'ordonne," Debré explains; but if her line of work as a lawyer did not provide a meaningful way to make an intervention in the way the world runs, her literary project seems interested in a similar pursuit through a different approach: "mes livres c'est expliquer ce qu'il se passe et comment on doit vivre."[54] Debré constructs herself as a writer on the margins of society, and this is intimately related to the pivotal severing of ties with her origins through an awakened awareness of the bodily: "Mon

[52] Debré, *Nom,* 56.
[53] Ibid., 102.
[54] Ibid., 102, 57.

corps est apparu quand je suis devenue écrivain, quand je suis devenue homosexuelle, quand je me suis débarrassée de beaucoup de choses et que j'ai perdu le reste . . . Ce n'est pas mon nom, c'est mon corps qui m'intéresse."[55] Regular writing and swimming are part of Debré's configuration of a regimented life that focuses on the physical and the present: "C'est comme prendre des trains, la façon dont je vis. Nager, écrire, l'amour, c'est des techniques pour faire exister des choses et faire disparaître le reste."[56] Indeed, writing becomes associated with swimming, as practices of discipline and routine that foreground a consciousness of the body.[57] And, as Claire Paulian has argued, frequenting the democratic space of public pools constitutes yet another way that Debré contests her aristocratic heritage.[58] In adopting a focus on the body (the tangible, the now), Debré rejects the concept of name (the abstract, the historical, the traditional). Her neck tattoo of "plutôt crever" thus harbors symbolic significance in that it is literally writing on the body, bringing together method and motif.[59] The tattoo is part of a longer phrase, "Plutôt crever que le dégoût peut-être": she would rather die than conform to the family's model of success and endure the disgust of living a life she despises.[60] Debré's tattoo articulates the attempted break with her filiation through the privileged medium of the body, presented as the opposite of name. The "peut-être," however, introduces an element of uncertainty: perhaps the rupture with her origins that her self-reinvention aims for is more equivocal than she lays claim to, an idea that I will explore in greater depth in the final section.

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[55] Ibid., 22.
[56] Ibid., 156.
[57] See Debré, *Play Boy,* 48,
[58] Claire Paulian, "La piscine municipal," *En attendant Nadeau,* July 20, 2022.
[59] Debré, *Nom*, 56.
[60] Ibid., 158.

Whereas Debré's construction of an authorial identity rejects the cultural capital of her previous qualifications as a way to break away from her *grand bourgeois* lineage, in Ernaux, the accumulation of that capital through her literary education, teaching, and writing is an avenue (alongside marriage, though this is not discussed in *L'autre fille*) by which she leaves her working-class milieu and enters the *petite bourgeoisie*. But in contrast to Debré, this estrangement from her class origins does not entail an outright repudiation of her original social class, nor of her family. Indeed, her parents are an instigating force for Ernaux's academic achievement, paving the way for her professional successes:

> Lui me voulait d'abord heureuse, elle, *quelqu'un de bien*, l'addition de leurs désirs me faisait, au sein de la famille et de notre quartier ouvrier, une existence enviée de privilégiée qu'on n'envoie jamais au pain, qui répond «je ne sers pas» aux clients sous prétexte qu'elle continue ses études. Tu étais leur chagrin, je savais que j'étais leur espoir, leur complication, leurs événements, de la première communion au bac, leur réussite. J'étais leur avenir.[61]

Ernaux actualizes her parents' pursuit (and especially that of her mother, "elle") of educational and professional advancement in the family.[62] Paradoxically, her estrangement from her working-class familial origins is a form of participation in another filiation of social ambition. Labor for the parents' *café-épicierie* is presented in opposition to academic study: it becomes more important for Ernaux to gain cultural capital through education than to contribute to the acquisition of economic capital through the parents' small business. Through her studies, too, Ernaux learns the language of the educated middle class and becomes aware of the linguistic markers of class. Losing "ce français dont j'apprendrai à l'école qu'il n'est pas le «bon»," the patois spoken in her parents'

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[61] Ernaux, *L'autre fille*, 59–60.

[62] See also Ernaux, *La Femme gelée* (Folio, 1981), 38–40 and *Une femme*, 32–3, 39, on the mother's determination for her daughter's social ascension, stemming from her own deep-rooted desire to not be defined by the family's working-class origins.

milieu, heralds Ernaux's linguistic transition to the educated middle class.[63] Indeed, as she reflects on her university years in *Retour à Yvetot*, "j'avais en effet gommé toute la mémoire de mon enfance et de mon adolescence, m'étant éloignée par la pensée d'abord, puis par la géographie, de ma famille et de la Normandie. Je n'acceptais qu'un seul héritage, celui que m'avaient donné l'école, l'université et la littérature": education offers a chance for Ernaux to forge a new identity in place of her familial one, with a new filiation rooted in literature.[64]

The class implications of language use and the growing estrangement between Ernaux and her parents as she continues in her education constitute a recurring subject in Ernaux's œuvre, with particular relevance in *Les Armoires vides, Ceux qu'ils disent ou rien,* and *La Place.* Indeed, Ernaux's early works, including these three as well as *La Femme gelée, La Honte, Une femme,* and *L'Événement,* reflect at length on the disparities between the *milieu scolaire* and *milieu populaire*, and the shame, disdain, and love that suffuse Ernaux's relationship with her parents as a result of her trajectory as a *transfuge de classe*.[65] What *L'autre fille* adds to this body of work on family and class is the role that Ernaux's position as an "enfant de remplacement" plays in her self-fashioning as a member of the educated middle class. Notwithstanding the feelings of guilt and insecurity that it elicits, being the "enfant de remplacement" is essential to Ernaux's social prowess, as her parents' support for her achievement is made possible by the fact that they have a single-child household: "J'étais consciente de mes avantages d'enfant unique, d'enfant après la mort d'un autre, objet d'une sollicitude inquiète, choyée."[66] Ginette's death enables the intimate bond between Ernaux and her parents to form in their investment in her social advancement, but it also paves the way for her

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[63] Ernaux, *L'autre fille,* 70.
[64] Ernaux, *Retour à Yvetot* (Paris: Mauconduit, 2013), 28.
[65] McIlvanney, *Annie Ernaux: The Return to Origins* offers insightful analyses of the conflicts that arise for Ernaux in moving from the working class to the *petite bourgeoisie* in these early works.
[66] Ernaux, *L'autre fille*, 53.

eventual estrangement from them. The construction of Ernaux's identity on a sort of continuum with Ginette in *L'autre fille* reflects this paradox. In the block passage quoted earlier, she evokes the dichotomy between them: Ginette represents their parents' "chagrin," whereas Ernaux embodies their "espoir," "réussite," and "avenir." Ernaux is prized for her achievement and potential, whereas Ginette is a reminder of their suffering in the past. But in ultimately identifying herself as "l'autre fille, celle qui s'est enfuie, loin d'eux," Ernaux also implicates herself as a source of suffering for her parents, and the positions of the siblings seem to switch.[67] In different ways, both siblings are "l'autre fille": Ginette is the lost daughter who is never spoken about, while Ernaux is the daughter who slips away, at a remove from her parents because of her social ascension. The phrase "l'autre fille" unifies the two siblings, encapsulating the paradox of identity between self and other that is linked to the paradox of estrangement from familial social origins.

Ernaux's distance in social class from her parents, being "loin d'eux," is compounded by her success as a renowned writer, published by prestigious literary presses, with a large audience of bourgeois readers. Indeed, both Debré and Ernaux have uncertain relationships with their identities as literary writers (and readers) that reflect a tension with their respective bourgeois milieus and with their movement away from their families' social standings. Debré associates literature with the *grande bourgeoisie* and with her family's participation in that milieu, but her attitude towards the literary canon proves less decisive than it initially seems. The recurrence of references to Proust in *Nom* testifies to this ambivalence. "La Touraine des Verdurin c'est Montlouis, et à Montlouis il y a mes cousins": here, she relates her family to the bourgeois Verdurin couple of *La Recherche*, communicating her entrenchment in a high brow literary-social world

[67] Ibid., 77.

through her lineage.[68] But she rejects canonical writers like Proust who, to her, incarnate the domain of bourgeois culture and status that her family embraces:

> Bien sûr j'ai lu Proust, puisque j'ai lu tous les livres, avec la famille que j'ai, avec le caractère que j'ai, avec ce que je fais aujourd'hui qui n'est rien d'autre qu'écrire, qui est la seule chose importante, mais Proust c'est bientôt mort, il faut que ça meure, Proust et tous les autres, tous les livres peut-être, peut-être que c'est urgent que la littérature meure, la littérature qui partage le monde, la littérature qui est devenue le contraire d'elle-même, qui est devenue la bourgeoisie même, son rempart, sa décoration, sa justification…[69]

If Debré repudiates literature as a bourgeois symbol, where does that leave her, as a writer of literary fiction published at prominent presses like Stock and Flammarion, embraced by many in the literary landscape?[70] While calling for the death of a certain kind of literature, embodied by the high brow canon, she goes on to argue that true literature belongs underground, "cette activité des cafards, ce langage de rats."[71] In identifying herself as "un cafard, un rat," Debré positions her constructed authorial persona within the filiation of an alternative literature: anti-bourgeois, anti-establishment, interested in gritty reality rather than beauty, produced by those on the outskirts of society. But, despite her insistence on estranging herself from conventional social institutions, it is difficult to place Debré in this category of the marginalized outsider, given the social and political prominence of her family background. And she goes on to qualify the subversiveness of her literary output with a hypothesis: "Peut-être que c'est devenu sale aussi les

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[68] Debré, *Nom*, 50.
[69] Ibid., 49. Ernaux has also spoken on the influence of *La Recherche* on her own writing projects, while noting the social gap between the working-class, rural world of her parents' upbringing and the contemporaneous bourgeois-aristocratic world that Proust depicts. See Ernaux, "Proust est un écrivain total. Il est entièrement dans *La Recherche*," interview by Guillaume Erner, *L'Invité(e) des Matins*, France Culture, November 18, 2022, audio, 42:18, https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/l-invite-e-des-matins/annie-ernaux-proust-est-un-ecrivain-total-il-est-entierement-dans-la-recherche-2789424.
[70] For instance, Debré received the Prix de la Coupole in 2018 and Prix Les Inrockuptibles in 2020.
[71] Debré, *Nom,* 49.

livres."[72] Perhaps there is no way out, and her participation in the book industry is inevitably aligned with the dominant bourgeois structures that she seeks to escape.

Indeed, Debré's seemingly unequivocal and incendiary rhetoric in *Nom* has a tendency to fall back on itself. Despite the denigration of Proust above, for instance, she later backtracks slightly, testifying to a contradictory attitude towards literary tradition. Whereas she sees Roland Barthes as typical of "la bourgeoisie intelligente mais nulle, impuissante, mélancolique, prétentieuse, moribonde, mortifère," Proust is different: "je préfère Proust, Proust au moins c'est le contraire de l'impuissance, Proust était complètement cinglé lui au moins, et ne s'excusait pas de l'être."[73] Granted, she does not gush praise for Proust, but there is nevertheless an expression of respect for his perceived authenticity. Further allusions to Proust arise in the context of Debré's interactions with her dying father: she likens him to "Proust sur son lit de mort mais sans la barbe," and is reminded of "Céleste Albaret dans Monsieur Proust" moving a dying Proust's hands over the bedsheets.[74] The reliance on literary references to write about her father's final days seems to attest to the fact that Debré holds onto the cultural capital that has been transmitted to her from her upbringing, despite her emphatic efforts at casting off all the trappings of her identification with her lineage. As *Nom* is enmeshed in literary tradition, Debré is enmeshed in her class and familial origins.

Ernaux, as a reader and writer, also possesses a nuanced understanding of literature as it relates to social class distinctions. As I have previously noted, in contrast to the spoken French *patois*, literary language—the written, "proper" French acquired through education—is associated

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[72] Ibid., 50.
[73] Ibid., 59.
[74] Ibid., 142, 143.

in Ernaux with the bourgeoisie.[75] But it is a certain "high brow" understanding of literature that is the target of her class critique. Ernaux's love of literature, in its broadest sense, as reading material and not just canonical texts, stems from a love of reading that is shared with her mother, particularly in the novels and popular magazines that they would read together during her childhood.[76] Additionally, though Ernaux is entrenched in the literary world, her much commented-on "écriture plate" seeks to break bourgeois models of literature in capturing the kind of direct, spare language that she would use in her letters to her parents updating them on her studies away from home.[77]

L'autre fille alludes to canonical literary works that were important in Ernaux's formation as a young reader. While these allusions do reflect the acquisition of a certain cultural capital beyond that of her *milieu d'origine*, they are not deployed to make this point. Instead, they are mobilized in the pursuit of a suitable language to make sense of her fraught relationship with her parents and unease towards Ginette, and subsequently, to reduce the distance from her origins. The literary references are also not just limited to the French tradition. Ginette is likened to Bonny from *Gone with the Wind*, the beloved daughter of Rhett and Scarlett whose accidental death drives a

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[75] Articulated clearly in Ernaux, *Retour à Yvetot,* 31: "Depuis le début, j'ai été prise dans une tension, un déchirement même, entre la langue littéraire, celle que j'ai étudiée, aimée, et la langue d'origine, la langue de la maison, de mes parents, la langue des dominés, celle dont j'ai eu honte ensuite, mais qui restera toujours en moi-même."

[76] See Ernaux, *La Femme gelée*, 24–27 and *Une femme,* 58.

[77] See Ernaux, *La Place*, 24, which is the first of Ernaux's texts to articulate this definition of "écriture plate." See also Ernaux, *L'Écriture comme un couteau*, 34: "Par et dans le choix de cette écriture, je crois que j'assume et dépasse la déchirure culturelle: celle d'être une «immigrée de l'intérieur» de la société française. J'importe dans la littérature quelque chose de dur, de lourd, de violent même, lié aux conditions de vie, à la langue du monde qui a été complètement le mien jusqu'à dix-huit ans, un monde ouvrier et paysan." See also Cathy Jellenik, "Annie Ernaux and *L'autre fille*: Writing Absence," *Women in French Studies* 25, no. 1 (2017): 160–71 for an analysis of the use of *écriture plate* in *L'autre fille*.

wedge between the parents[78]; and to Helen from *Jane Eyre*, the eponymous character's childhood friend who dies from tuberculosis.[79] In this second instance, Ernaux obliquely positions herself as Jane, offering a retelling of Helen's deathbed scene that is more tender in its pathos than any of her direct addresses to Ginette in the text. In the re-imagined narrative of *Jane Eyre*, both siblings are accommodated in the picture, suggesting a symbolic form of Ernaux's "reconciliation" with Ginette as a loved one rather than an enemy. Lastly, Ernaux refers to a quote from Kafka's *Letter to His Father*, "je te déchirerai comme un poisson," to capture the tension between herself and her parents in regards to the taboo subject of sibling death.[80] Literature in *L'autre fille*, then, functions as a tool for portraying the nuances of Ernaux's attitude toward Ginette and of the pressures on her relationship with her parents—and, related to these, of her own position as a writer. It is fitting that she uses literary sources to build a picture of Ginette, since *L'autre fille* is an origin story for Ernaux as a writer: "Je n'écris pas parce que tu es morte. Tu es morte pour que j'écrive, ça fait une grande différence."[81] Obviously, Ginette is not the only important figure at the foundation of Ernaux's writing. But in the context of *L'autre fille*, the (re)construction of Ginette through literary characters and in the medium of literature conceptually doubles as Ernaux's own creation of her authorial identity. Ernaux's self-fashioning as a writer, though partly predicated on a movement away from her family and milieu, is ultimately rooted in an origin story of troubled filiation.

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[78] Ernaux, *L'autre fille*, 13. The comparison to Bonny is both a literary and pop culture reference: though Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* is indeed a prize-winning (and controversial) novel, the story of Scarlett O'Hara is also largely known from the 1939 film by the same name. Additionally, Ernaux's childhood love of the novel *Gone with the Wind* is shared with her mother. See Ernaux, *La Femme gelée,* 24, and *Une femme,* 45.

[79] Ernaux, *L'autre fille*, 64–5.

[80] Ibid., 47. Indeed, Kafka's letter, in which he attempts to articulate the reasons why he both fears and admires his father, and *L'autre fille* have a connection: in both cases, the letters never reach their explicit addressees, and the true recipient is actually the reader of the published text.

[81] Ibid., 35.

Both Debré and Ernaux have contradictory class-inflected relationships with literature, all the while producing literature and being celebrated for it. The contradictions inherent in their own identities as writers and readers reflect the ambivalence of their movement away from their respective familial class origins in their self-fashioning. Both writers contend with distance from their socio-familial origins, while never wholly breaking away from them: estrangement is not as clean-cut nor as anomalous as it might seem. The next and final section will turn to the paradoxes of Ernaux's and Debré's experiences of ambivalent estrangement, which encompass a fraught return to her origins for the former, and for the latter, an insinuation that she has never left her family's milieu.

4.3 Paradoxes of estrangement

For Ernaux, a return to socio-familial roots is desired after years of distance, approached as a responsibility; on the other hand, Debré aims but fails to enact a clean rupture from her roots, and so "return" as such does not apply in her case. The two writers' starkly disparate attitudes toward the betrayal of their origins illustrates the distinction between their arcs of estrangement. The question "comment, en écrivant ne pas *trahir* le monde dont je suis issue?" pervades Ernaux's body of work: it is a recognition of the ethical obligation she feels towards the milieu of her upbringing, given how instrumental it is to her life trajectory and writing success.[82] In contrast, for Debré, the betrayal of her roots is a key step in pursuing a life free of social constraints that she idealizes: "Je trahis l'origine par principe, comme point de départ de tout, parce que l'origine doit toujours être trahie, parce qu'accepter l'origine est le premier renoncement qui entraîne tous les autres…"[83] I read

[82] Ernaux, *Retour à Yvetot,* 32.
[83] Debré, *Nom*, 61.

Debré's proclaimed disregard for her social and familial background as a foil to Ernaux's steadfast loyalty to hers.

Let us begin with Ernaux. Her key statement at the end of the text, identifying herself as "l'autre fille" and "celle qui s'est enfuie, loin d'eux," contains a hint of malaise beneath the straightforward, seemingly matter-of-fact language: guilt at having caused her parents to suffer in actively seeking to enact distance between them, and perhaps subsequently, fear at possibly having betrayed them in doing so. But this expression also points to a self-awareness of her own hand in fostering the estrangement from her parents, as well as to a desire to reduce it by revisiting her upbringing through writing. In this "letter" to Ginette, Ernaux returns in literature to the realities of the working-class milieu that conditioned her existence and her relationship with her parents. Moreover, the evolution of the relationship between Ernaux and her mother as portrayed in *L'autre fille* testifies to Ernaux's movement of return. To reflect again on a quote briefly examined earlier, Ernaux's vindictiveness toward her mother shifts into something more complicated, encompassing loyalty and pride in her desire to do justice to her story: "Entre ma mère et moi, deux mots. Je les lui ai fait payer. J'ai écrit contre elle. Pour elle. À sa place, d'ouvrière fière et humiliée."[84] Ernaux goes on to describe the complicated relationship she had with her mother during her childhood and adolescence:

> Naturellement, je l'adorais. On disait qu'elle était une belle femme et que j'étais de son «côté». Je m'enorgueillissais de lui ressembler. Je la détestais parfois et je levais le poing devant la glace de l'armoire en souhaitant qu'elle meure. T'écrire c'est te parler d'elle sans arrêt, elle la détentrice du récit, la proféatrice du jugement, avec qui le combat n'a jamais cessé, sauf à la fin, quand elle était si misérable, si perdue dans sa déraison et que je ne voulais pas qu'elle meure.[85]

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[84] Ernaux, *L'autre fille*, 21.
[85] Ibid., 40.

Though the relationship with the mother is not as prominent in this text as in Ernaux's earlier ones, it is still a significant subject that is inflected through her reflections on Ginette. The young Ernaux's attitude toward her mother swings between the extremes of admiration and gratification versus destructive animosity. *L'autre fille*, in its cultivation of hostile language as I have previously argued, might appear to subscribe more to this latter extreme. Ernaux seems to denounce her mother by labelling her "la détentrice du récit," as it was the mother who inadvertently triggered Ernaux's discovery of Ginette and revelation of her status in the family, and "la proféatrice du jugement," since her "plus gentille" comment had introduced a sense of insecurity in the young Ernaux around her possible moral failings. But the reference at the end of this passage to her mother's end of life, afflicted by Alzheimer's, expresses a softening of that previous animosity, a resurfacing of the previous tenderness for the mother.[86] There is, then, a shift from hostility and estrangement to re-affiliation and even a desire for reconciliation which is reflective of Ernaux's literary return to her family origins.

Whereas Ernaux is invested in revisiting and faithfully representing her background and family in her writing, Debré desires a radical break from her lineage while still capitalizing on her illustrious family name and background. The project of *Nom* is a paradox in itself. The text is an attempt to liberate herself from her family name, to betray the name in part by raking it through the mud: "Quel est ton nom, Personne, c'est rien le nom, c'est comme la famille, c'est comme l'enfance, je n'y crois pas, je n'en veux pas."[87] Debré's reply, "Personne," is reminiscent of Odysseus's famous trick on the Cyclops: "Personne" is both absence and an identity in itself. But unlike Odysseus, who does everything to get back home to his family, whose clever use of "Personne" is

[86] Ernaux's experience of dealing with the difficulties of her mother's Alzheimer's is the subject of «*Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*».
[87] Debré, *Nom,* 13.

done in pursuit of this goal of returning home, Debré wants to reinvent herself as "Personne," unattached to family or any social institutions. But this can never be fully achieved, at least through the medium of the literary text: the name "Debré" is, after all, still on the cover of the book. Given the prominence of the Debré family in France, the name undoubtedly plays a key role in the marketing and sales of her books. In pursuing an ascetic lifestyle with few material possessions, Debré tries to shed her economic capital; her cultural and social capital, on the other hand, cannot be so easily relinquished, and indeed, she converts some of that social capital from her name to literary and economic capital from her books. In short, Debré vehemently wants to betray her class but is unable to do so. Her fate of return likens her more to Odysseus than we might initially suspect.

There are moments in *Nom* that attest to Debré's awareness of the impossibility of a straightforward departure from her origins. As Ernaux had noted the working-class markers of speech and mannerisms that she shared with Ginette, Debré points out (and also ridicules) the *habitus* of the *grande bourgeoisie*:

> On ne dit pas manger, on ne dit pas bon appétit, on ne dit pas bonjour tout court, si j'étais un garçon je saurais exactement quand on fait le baise-main et quand on ne le fait pas, et quand envoyer des fleurs, et on ne commente pas la bouffe, et on n'est lourde sur rien, on va toujours bien, et on est très gentil avec les domestiques, on ne dit pas monsieur au serveur, on laisse des pourboires, on n'est jamais trop habillé, on n'a jamais honte. Toutes ces manières, ces bonnes manières que je connais par cœur, je les déteste. Je les déteste parce qu'elles sont en moi, incrustées bien plus que le sang, elles sont plus qu'une langue, elles sont un corps...[88]

Debré's reinvention as a social being is limited by the immutability of learned markers of class. This passage underscores language as the site of class distinctions for the *grande bourgeoisie*: there is a

[88] Ibid., 96.

focus on what to say, what not to say, and when. But in identifying these ways of speaking as "un corps," Debré suggests that language is embodied, impossible to purge from oneself. We might look back to Debré's assertion, examined earlier, that breaking with her previous life brings about a consciousness of the body; it includes a consciousness of these bodily class traits as well. Debré's "plutôt crever" tattoo takes on a level of irony, then: writing her resistance to her origins on her physical body, as symbolic as it is, cannot eliminate the conventions of her social class that have become inextricable from her bodily engagement with the world. Note also that Debré detests her milieu's manners not just in their own right, but "parce qu'elles sont en moi": there is a degree of self-loathing in her disgust, and she implicates herself in the perpetuation of a social system that she despises.

At other times, though, Debré seems less self-aware of how influential her family background may be on her literary work and identity. She asserts: "Avec n'importe quels parents j'aurais écrit le même livre. Avec n'importe quelle enfance. Avec n'importe quel nom. Je raconterai toujours la même chose. Qu'il faut se barrer. Aller de plus en plus loin . . . Aller vers la solitude."[89] But to what extent is this actually true? She seems to discount the fact that she came from such a powerful family background, and she does not acknowledge that it allows her the means to reject it in the first place. Debré's repudiation of the concept of social class also overlooks the real effects of socioeconomic disparities. On the subject of "les pauvres," positioned as the opposite of the bourgeois, she speaks of "leur vulgarité de pauvres à être obsédés pas les classes, avec leurs goûts de pauvres qui croient au bon goût, avec leurs croyances de pauvres sur les riches."[90] The implication here is that "les pauvres" choose to be preoccupied with class and choose to believe in the societal

[89] Ibid., 145.
[90] Ibid., 97.

construction of class distinctions, rather than being forced to deal with the consequences of wealth inequality and social hierarchies. Though definitions of social class are not solid and are indeed contestable, the implications of class have had tangible effects on people's lived experiences. Debré's rejection of social class from an abstract, ideological standpoint is flawed in its refusal to engage with the concrete manifestations of class, revealing also her position as part of the privileged classes. As Camille Laurens wrote in an indicting review of the book, "Mais qui, en 2022, est encore épaté par le refus des normes et l'envie de «*se barrer*»? Qui, sinon les bourgeois petits et grands? On dirait une ado inculte et sans humour qui clame avoir inventé l'eau chaude dans un océan d'eau tiède."[91]

Given the shortcomings of Debré's repudiation of social class, it is necessary to problematize further her self-imposed "poverty," if it can be called as such. Her ascetic lifestyle sits uncomfortably: the decision to retain few possessions and lack a permanent residence appears to be more of a safe experiment founded on an intellectual basis rather than an actual confrontation with the uncertainty and precarity that poverty brings.[92] To be fair, Debré has known financial instability in her childhood, the result of her parents' heroin addictions. Insecurity of employment and housing strains the parents' ability to support the young Debré and her sister: "Mon père perd son boulot à la télé, il est trop défoncé, on perd l'appartement. Ils vivent à l'hôtel . . . Pendant six mois je vis chez mes grands-parents rue Jacob. Avec ma sœur qui va à la maternelle. Mes parents passent le matin et le soir pour l'école les devoirs le dîner."[93] While there is indeed the lack of a stable home life in the immediate family, the grandparents do offer a financial safety net for the two sisters. Ernaux, by comparison, though her context is very different from Debré's, did not have such

[91] Camille Laurens, "«Nom», de Constance Debré: le feuilleton littéraire de Camille Laurens," *Le Monde*, February 17, 2022.
[92] In *Play Boy,* 66, Debré does concede about herself, "Riche sans rien, mais si riche que je m'en fous d'être pauvre. On n'a pas besoin d'argent quand on est riche."
[93] Debré, *Nom*, 74.

a safety net. As we have seen, the pressures that came with the poverty that Ernaux experienced in her upbringing—the financial strain of illness, the economic conditioning of family size—do not quite map onto Debré's situation as a child. The two experienced disparate forms of poverty and differed in their access to resources.

There is also a certain element of performativity in the way that the adult Debré's life of asceticism is portrayed in *Nom.* Insisting on the fact that she only carries a few specific articles of clothing (tee-shirts and a single pair of jeans) and her laptop computer when she moves from one temporary residence to another, she betrays, ironically, a certain attention to material possessions.[94] On one hand, Debré situates her chosen asceticism within a broader rejection of social institutions and norms in pursuit of freedom. "Je me suis débarrassée de presque tout. De la famille, du mariage, du travail, des appartements, des choses, des êtres": *se débarrasser* operates on both a material and symbolic level.[95] But, at another point, she asserts that her asceticism is not even essential for her philosophy of living outside social norms: "Je pourrais très bien avoir un grand appartement, des meubles, des objets, des vêtements, du fric, ça n'aurait pas d'importance non plus . . . Quand j'en ai assez de vivre où je vis je m'en vais. C'est facile. Je peux très bien vivre sans appartement comme je peux très bien vivre sans maîtresse."[96] The implication that it does not matter whether one has the typical material essentials for living seems only tenable when one has a safety net to fall back on if necessary. The fact that Debré makes a point of being able to have, but nevertheless chooses not to have, these material possessions reads less as a statement of self-awareness and more as an instance of careless dismissiveness of her access to resources.

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[94] Ibid., 107, 120, 124.
[95] Ibid., 14.
[96] Ibid., 40–41

Debré's "break" with family and tradition and pursuit of a nomadic lifestyle also curiously takes place within a Parisian boundary. With the exception of road trips to La Touraine to visit her dying father, she seems in *Nom* to insist on geographical markers of her Parisian residences: yet again another indication that her estrangement is less radical than she wills it to be. Paris is ubiquitous in both her past and present. Her entire childhood is lived within a limited (and fairly fashionable) Parisian perimeter: "Toujours Paris, toujours la rive gauche, un peu plus bas, entre Montparnasse et Saint-Michel, l'époque c'est fin soixante-dix."[97] To underscore the specific markers of Paris, too, there is an attention to individual street names within this perimeter: "Je vais à l'école publique rue Saint-Jacques"; "Le nom des rues c'est Gay-Lussac, Herschel, l'Abbé-de-l'Épée."[98] Even though her parents had opted to live in a "petit bourgeois, moyen bourgeois" neighborhood in order to contest their own *grandes bourgeoises* and aristocratic families, the fact remains that they still occupied well-to-do parts of Paris. Moreover, even when the parents' drug addictions precipitate financial instability for the family, they only end up moving from a flat on the fashionable Rue Bonaparte to the Montparnasse neighborhood, "dans une sorte de HLM": while there is certainly a socioeconomic shift after the move, Montparnasse is still a comfortable area of Paris, and an HLM there would be very different from one in a banlieue.[99]

In Debré's adult life, the emphasis on Parisian urban landmarks continues, expanded beyond the Montparnasse/Saint-Michel bubble but still constrained to the city proper: "...je repars, le canal Saint-Martin, la gare de l'Est, la rue de Maubeuge, l'avenue Trudaine de nouveau..."; "J'habite boulevard de Clichy près du Monoprix où Guy Georges tueur-en-série, de l'Est-parisien a été arrêté, pas loin du métro aérien de Barbès sous lequel Guyotat garait son camping-car pour

[97] Ibid., 23.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Ibid., 81.

écrire et pour baiser."[100] Even though Debré states that the location of her residences do not matter to her, there is ironically an insistence on the geographical specificity of Paris (with the exception of Arles at the end of this quote) that undermines that assertion of indifference: "Par exemple que j'habite dans une chambre de bonne vers Montparnasse – ou bien dans 9 mètres carrés place de la Contrescarpe, ou bien chez un copain rue Chapon, ou bien dans un deux-pièces boulevard de Clichy, ou bien dans un studio en haut d'une vieille tour à Arles . . . ce sont des choses qui sont sans importance."[101] Debré is full of paradoxes, and her treatment of the cityscape is emblematic of this. The Parisian perimeter of her "nomadism" suggests that there is a faux severing of ties: she does not succeed in actualizing the "trahison de l'origine" that she sets out to do. Indeed, her tendency to name-drop Parisian streets, neighborhoods, and landmarks points to the retention of a certain cultural capital of class acquired from her upbringing in Paris, which, unlike her material possessions, cannot be easily shrugged off.

Geographical markers of childhood for Ernaux in *L'autre fille* are also intertwined with familial and class backgrounds. But while the ubiquity of Paris in *Nom* gestures toward Debré's (potentially inadvertent) adherence to the very background from which she tries to extricate herself, Ernaux's attention to Yvetot and Lillebonne represents an earnest revisiting of her youth and upbringing to reconcile two considerations about those parts of her life: that they are shared with Ginette, and that she herself has a place there in her own right.[102] There are two photographs

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[100] Ibid., 124, 154.
[101] Ibid., 40.
[102] On the recurrence of certain pivotal places in Ernaux's writing (including Lillebonne and Yvetot, her childhood bedroom, the room in the Passage Cardinet where she got an illegal abortion) see Élise Hugueny-Léger, "Annie Ernaux: une écriture palimpseste? Inscriptions, effacements et possibilités de réinvention dans son œuvre," in *Annie Ernaux: le temps et la mémoire,* 51–68. Hugueny-Léger examines how Ernaux returns to these places with different perspectives, and re-writes them to try to render the past more legible.

inserted in the text of *L'autre fille*: one near the beginning, of the house in Yvetot where Ernaux learns of Ginette's previous existence, and the other near the end, of the house in Lillebonne where both siblings were born.[103] Françoise Simonet-Tenant has written that these two photographs of the familial house "ne constituent en aucune manière une illustration du livre mais suggèrent seulement dans leur apparente banalité les lieux qui ont compté."[104] But the photos harbor more significance than Simonet-Tenant picks up on. The progression from the photo of the Yvetot house to that of the Lillebonne house conveys a movement toward coming to terms with the family secret of sibling death. This is a movement from opposition against Ginette (symbolized by the Yvetot house's association with Ernaux feeling displaced by Ginette upon learning of her existence) to coexistence with her (symbolized by the Lillebonne photo as a site that both she and Ginette had occupied). The Lillebonne photo also heralds Ernaux's actual return to the town, recounted at the conclusion of the text. In Lillebonne, Ernaux provides details of street names ("J'entends les noms de rues et d'endroits que tu as entendus, où je ne suis jamais retournée depuis 1945, les rues Césarine et Goubert-Moulin, La Frenaye, Le Becquet"), but, unlike in Debré's case, these references to geographical spots testify to a concern with the retrieval of this part of her past.[105] Compared to Debré, too, Ernaux goes further in the specificity of her descriptions of Lillebonne as it exists in her memory, from the arrangement of furniture in the *café-épicerie* to the people who frequented certain places in the town: details which hint at a certain nostalgia as she re-immerses herself in her childhood.[106] Ernaux's physical and literary return to the house in Lillebonne allows for a tentative resolution of the feelings she harbors toward her origin as a replacement child in a

[103] Ernaux, *L'autre fille*, 17, 73.
[104] Simonet-Tenant, "*L'autre fille*: 'Tu es morte pour que j'écrive...,'" 323–4.
[105] Ernaux, *L'autre fille*, 70.
[106] Ibid., 68.

working-class environment: "J'éprouvais une sorte de sensation plénière, faite d'étonnement et de contentement obscur de me trouver là, dans ce lieu précis du monde, entre ces murs, près de cette fenêtre, d'être ce regard qui contemple la chambre où tout a commencé pour l'une et pour l'autre, l'une après l'autre."[107] The feeling of catharsis is not totally understood, as expressed in "une sorte de sensation" and "contentement obscur," but Ernaux nevertheless approaches the conclusion of the text with a renewed sense of groundedness and peace in her return.

In their very pursuits of estrangement, Ernaux and Debré also align themselves with certain components of their class and familial backgrounds while attempting to shed others. As I mentioned earlier, for Ernaux, the desire for social ascension is partly a parental inheritance. As Morgane Cadieu points out, Ernaux's mother and father, who moved up in the social ranks from peasants to factory laborers to small business owners, were themselves *transfuges de classe*.[108] Ernaux, representing "leur réussite" and "leur avenir," carries out the inherited legacy of mobility. Debré also follows in her parents' footsteps in rebelling against the bourgeois-aristocratic lineage. Her father was an outsider to his family: "Il ne s'intéressait pas à sa famille, à ces histoires de famille, à ce discours sur la famille ou sur la France. Il ne leur ressemblait pas. Parfois dans une famille naît un être qui ne ressemble pas. Il avait passé son enfance à lire pour ne pas les voir, pour ne pas les entendre. Ce qu'il voulait c'était se tirer."[109] He rails not only against his own prominent filiation, but also against prevailing narratives about family and other social establishments; this description of the father could be applied to Debré herself. Both of her parents antagonize their relatives with their contrarian practices: "Par son indifférence, sans un mot, mon père est celui qui dénonce leur

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[107] Ibid., 75.
[108] Morgane Cadieu, *On Both Sides of the Tracks: Social Mobility in Contemporary French Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024), 164.
[109] Debré, *Nom*, 35.

système. Ma mère est une provocation, par sa beauté, par son milieu, par sa classe. Elle ne dit rien, elle est polie, mais ça transpire par tous ses pores qu'elle les méprise."[110] Debré, in her provocative rants against her lineage and "leur système," in her constructed hostility throughout *Nom*, is indeed the child of her parents. Given these details about the parents, the death of Debré's father contains an additional interpretive nuance: it symbolically heralds her attempt at a rupture with her illustrious filiation all the while suggesting her inscription in another existing lineage of rebellion against family ties. Estrangement from one's roots is thus never clean-cut. The paradigm of return (or unwitting continued adherence, in Debré's case) to origins, paradoxically embedded in the two writers' representations of estrangement, underscores the contradictory nature of identity between individual self-fashioning and participation in inherited structures. Troubled filiation, then, is not a monolith, but instead a configuration of networks, some of which one may distance oneself from, others with which one may remain affiliated, or become re-affiliated.

[110] Ibid., 51.

Conclusion. Troubled filiations: Life and literature intertwined

Despite Ernaux's and Debré's disparate attitudes toward their familial lineages, the former preoccupied with loyalty while the latter remaining intent on betrayal, both attest to the inextricable nature of inherited and individually forged identities—an insight that all of the texts studied in this thesis have evinced. The contrast between Ernaux and Debré also speaks to the broad range of contemporary literary confrontations with problematic intergenerational transmission, which this thesis more broadly has endeavored to bring forth. The restoration of parents' and ancestors' experiences through an homage-focused narrative is an important (and perhaps dominant) propeller of this vein of contemporary writing, but this is not the only way that literature responds to disruptions in filiation. I have approached filiation as a thematic and stylistic problem of representing and acting upon lived experience, going beyond a straightforward and facile emancipatory framework. My analysis of "troubled filiations" across an eclectic corpus has attempted to convey a diversity of contexts, strategies, and paradoxes of twenty-first-century writing on intergenerational family dynamics. The authors I have examined in this thesis turn to literature as a space to negotiate multifaceted identities and selfhood with regard to their troubled filiations—that is, the transmission across generations of restrictive, painful, and/or irreconcilable family histories, legacies, conventions, and expectations, often amid tense interpersonal relationships between descendants and ascendants.

Through a focus on close readings of writers' literary responses to their respective instances of troubled filiation, I offer a corrective to the often sweeping overviews that most studies of the *récit de filiation* prioritize. The attention accorded to defining the genre of the *récit de filiation*

from Dominique Viart, Laurent Demanze, and other scholars working in the field is essential for advancing theoretical understandings of the changing contours of life-writing, but an overemphasis on this analytical approach risks neglecting the insights that contemporary works provide on the relationship between literary creation and filiation. The texts' blending of genres—across autofiction, journalism, poetry, epistolary writing, and other forms of life-writing—is not simply material for theoretical nomenclature. As we have seen, generic experimentation also serves as a tool for the writers studied here to face the burdens of their troubled filiations and to create new, symbolic filiations.

Troubled filiations within this thesis have encompassed obfuscated family histories of uprootedness, shameful and dubious parental pasts, oppressive patrilineal traditions, and fraught social class inheritances. The multiplicity of troubled filiations makes for different critical modalities of the *enquête* into the past: research into familial and historical archives in Salvayre, Rahmy, Toledo, and Chalandon, and investigations into personal memory in Laurens, Djebar, Ernaux, and Debré. Across these various *enquêtes*, this thesis has identified four paradigms of literary responses to lived experiences of troubled filiations: restitution, repair, defiance, and estrangement. The exploration of the strengths and shortcomings of these major (and shifting) paradigms has further highlighted the nuanced potential of literature for intervening in disrupted familial dynamics.

In *Pas pleurer* and *Monarques*, the literary restitution of predecessors' stories is incumbent on the autofictional imagination of past lives. Running parallel to the creative depiction of parents'/ancestors' experiences of forced exile, the narrators also recreate the stories of historical predecessors, with whom they forge elective filiations. For Salvayre, the dual restitution of familial

and elective forebears' stories follows a logic of elucidation: the two filiations are mutually informative, offering greater insight into the history of the Spanish Civil War when taken together. On the other hand, opacity is at the heart of Rahmy's narrator's process of restitution, since the connections between the familial and the elective are left ambiguous, and predecessors' mysteries are often preserved. Nevertheless, in both novels, the tracing of origins through literary restitution does not lead to a "return" to a singular ancestral place, but instead to the creation of a new multigenerational "home" in the space of the literary text that allows for the negotiation of fluid identities, stretching across political, cultural, and/or religious bounds.

The quest for knowledge about the family past in Chalandon and Toledo is rendered more onerous than in Rahmy and Salvayre by difficult parent-child interpersonal relationships and painful or shameful legacies that the protagonists inherit from their ascendants. Chalandon and Toledo offer alternative modes of autofictional invention as a way to contest deceptive family narratives and pursue repair of the troubled family past, albeit only symbolically. In *Enfant de salaud*, Chalandon alters the timeline of his lived experience as a journalist in order to bring two narratives into parallel development: one, his mythomaniac father's dubious history of involvement with the Nazis during WWII, and two, the reporting of witness testimonies at Klaus Barbie's trial for crimes against humanity. Factuality becomes a barricade against the father's fictions. In *Thésee, sa vie nouvelle,* Toledo's critique of his parents' fictions—misguided narratives of the Trente Glorieuses and French universalism—relies paradoxically on the crafting of a semi-fictional filiation in the space of the text. The "contre-fictions" constructed in each work open up the potential for the symbolic repair of troubled filiations, but that potential is compromised by the narrativization

of the elusiveness of healing. Fictional creation might not repair problematic family pasts and difficult intergenerational relations, but it facilitates the expression of these painful experiences.

For the narrators of Djebar's and Laurens's texts, the creative freedom of narrative fiction allows for the articulation of a counter-discourse to the transmission of restrictive familial patriarchy. In *Fille* and *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, autofictional writing lies not in invented elements, but in the stylistic crafting of narrative voice and perspective, which frames the texts' defiance of a tradition of the delegitimation of daughters (and mothers). The writers dissect conventional language usages to critique the often subtle ways that restrictive patriarchal norms operate in the family and beyond it. Additionally, in both works, narrated experiences of reading literature are sites for symbolic defiance against the transmission of patriarchy. The novels do attend to complicity in patriarchal behaviors within intergenerational female relationships, especially between mothers and daughters. Though they suggest that female filiation does not inherently entail solidarity, the texts ultimately retain a certain optimism for potential movement away from patriarchy. The attention to the complexities of countering the transmission of familial patriarchy is in itself a point of defiance against facile understandings of gendered family dynamics.

Finally, in *Nom* and *L'autre fille*, the crafting of an authorial persona is entangled with a drive beyond defiance: the protagonists look to shed a class identity inherited from their familial predecessors, while also negotiating mechanisms of retaining it. Both Debré and Ernaux use hostile, blunt language and evoke socially taboo affects toward a key deceased family member in their configurations of estrangement from their social and familial roots. The self-fashioning of an autofictional identity as a reader and writer of literature further seems to contribute to the narrators' status as outsiders, set apart from their origins. But this process of self-fashioning

ultimately falls back into a web of familial relations and inherited social class appartenance, though in different ways for the two writers. Whereas Ernaux's loyalty to her working-class roots informs her fraught return to family origins, Debré paradoxically continues to adhere to hers, retaining the social and cultural capital of her familial lineage despite the intention of rupture. Ernaux's and Debré's trajectories suggest that troubled filiation is multifaceted, not monolithic: in the self-fashioning of a narrative identity, one may repudiate certain inherited frameworks, values, and practices, while remaining tied to others—whether chosen or inevitably so.

Stretching across these varied approaches to writing about troubled filiations are two major preoccupations, engaging theme and form in equal measure. The first is with the ethical stakes of writing. We see this in the recurring considerations about the responsibilities and debts that descendants have to their predecessors (and, in some cases, successors) in writing about them; and about the creative freedom, but also risks involved, in revisiting the past through the autofictional crafting of real stories. The second is with the multifaceted yet uncertain constitution of the self, positioned between belonging and alienation, the forged and the inherited, the first-person and the third-person, fact and fiction. Literature itself is a key feature in the writers' intertwined processes of revisiting the past and constructing identity. Narrated encounters with reading, intertextual literary references, and discussion of literary predecessors all inflect the crafting of a complex narrative self.

Every chapter in this thesis has tested the limits of a given narrative paradigm mobilized in response to the instance of troubled filiation at hand. Although I talk about the paradigms in separate chapters, there are overlaps between them; the texts I have examined reflect the nuances and permeability of the paradigms. The bookend chapters of the thesis deal with disparate modes

of constructing individual identity with respect to inherited familial frameworks: either taking them on board or attempting to reject them. But the relevance of return within estrangement, particularly in Ernaux's case, hearkens back to Salvayre and Rahmy, albeit with the additional nuance of the uneasy parent-child interpersonal relationship in Ernaux. Toledo's text, discussed in the second chapter, also features a kind of ambivalent estrangement: the protagonist tries to extricate himself from his family origins before ultimately returning to repair his body and his past. Debré's anarchic, raw writing voice in *Nom* defies her inherited filiation of respectability, bringing that text into conversation with Laurens's *Fille* and Djebar's *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*. The groupings along the paradigms that I chose for this thesis, then, are not meant to be all-encompassing nor self-contained, but rather, highlight the most important concerns and objectives of the texts.

Additionally, the conceptual progression of the thesis, with the paradigms adopting an increasing distance from troubled filiation and culminating in estrangement, might be read as yet another form of the neat, emancipatory narrative that I have sought to contest and nuance. Indeed, this arc might constitute another conception of "une littérature qui fait du bien," to return to Alexandre Gefen's phrase: making a positive intervention, if not in the filial relationships themselves, then at least for the writer's own process of identity formation and self-knowledge. But through my attention to the contradictions and constraints in each of the narrative paradigms, I have taken care to counter a simplistic reading of the thesis's structural progression as liberatory, and thus, to do justice to the texts' (and authors') subtleties. Though I treat the idea of literature's emancipatory or healing potential with caution, I do not wish to insist on a pessimism toward the limits of salutary interventions that literature can provide. Ultimately, literary confrontations with

troubled filiations are characterized not so much by reparation or rupture, but reinvention: giving new energy to old stories, crafting identities through textual experiments, revisiting enduring problems with fresh eyes.

I have sought to bring certain authors and texts that lack scholarship into greater visibility: for example, Rahmy is not a well-known figure, Debré is relatively new to the literary scene, and the selected Ernaux text is seldom discussed in studies of her work. The dialogues established across the selected texts of the corpus cover a significant breadth of ground in regards to familial identities: we have traversed the angles of gender, class, sexuality, politics, ethnicity, nationality, language, religion, and more. This thesis is nevertheless not intended to be comprehensive, and there are other writers and texts that would be promising for an extension of my analyses in the existing paradigms or for new axes of study of troubled filiations. Kaoutar Harchi's memoir *Comme nous existons* (Actes Sud, 2021) evokes the forms of troubled filiation discussed in both my first and final chapters. Harchi touches on her Moroccan parents' experience immigrating to France alongside a reflection on her own upbringing in a Strasbourg banlieue and upward social mobility through the French education system, with attention to experiences with Islamophobia and anti-Arab racism. Filiation is disrupted through migration and two generations (and two forms) of exile, with the additional angles of race, class, and postcoloniality informing the writer's self-fashioning of identity. The prolific Édouard Louis, who like Harchi has been influenced by Ernaux's writing, displays a recurring concern across his corpus with the nœud of family, class, and sexuality—resonating with the kind of troubled filiation that I tackle in my final chapter. *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule* (Seuil, 2014) and *Changer: méthode* (Seuil, 2021) both recount the dual processes of ambivalent estrangement from his working-class (and homophobic) familial background and coming to terms

with his queer identity. *Qui a tué mon père* (Seuil, 2018) and *Combats et métamorphoses d'une femme* (Seuil, 2021) pay homage to his parents' struggles with poverty—and with male domination, too, in the case of his mother in the latter text, overlapping with the texts discussed in my third chapter. Jérôme Garcin's œuvre of autobiographical récits, including *Le Syndrome de Garcin* (Gallimard, 2018) and *Mes fragiles* (Galllimard, 2023), interrogates the junction of the familial and the biological, especially with respect to genetic disease. Along with Toledo, Garcin shares a concern with questions of "revivre les morts" and of repairing a body plagued by generational illness through writing. Most recently, Vanessa Springora's *Patronyme* (Grasset, 2025) actually echoes problematic family pasts and relationships discussed in all four chapters of this thesis. The book details the author's search for origins amid a family history of forced migration (like in Salvayre and Rahmy), a processing of the death of a mythomaniac father and ominous silences over predecessors' complicity with Nazism (reminiscent of Chalandon's text), and patrilineal transmission of name and heritage (we can draw connections to Djebar, Laurens, and Debré). Evidently, the sampling of the contemporary literary landscape presented in this thesis is inscribed in a wider web of writerly engagement with troubled filiations. But every study must have a perimeter, and I have chosen to focus on texts that speak to each other in surprising ways, whose comparison brings out unexpected intersections or subtle contrasts that shed light on each other's workings.

In addition to an expansion of the corpus, there is another way of envisioning the future of this thesis that challenges the conventional method of writing academic literary analysis. I have endeavored in this thesis to understand the ways that contemporary literature participates in a current sociocultural preoccupation with exploring personal identity through family origins. Given

the public interest in this subject, how might the knowledge presented in this thesis be re-imagined in another type of publication that would potentially reach a wider audience of readers, beyond the academic sphere? While formal scholarly contributions are necessary for the development of the research field, academia should not lose touch with the world that it studies. Public engagement is especially important in literary scholarship, given the situation of the authors and literary works themselves in the public eye. "Mais surtout, écrire me permet de partager, de trouver des frères et sœurs de douleur qui, après m'avoir lu, viennent me raconter les coups qu'eux-mêmes ont subis ou la terreur dans laquelle ils ont grandi," Chalandon has said in an interview about *Enfant de salaud*.[1] The texts I have examined here are impactful not only in their stylistic inventiveness, but also in their potential to foster an empathetic connection between readers and writers in these stories about murky family pasts, uneasy intergenerational relationships, and contradictory identities—the potential for "partager," as Chalandon puts it. Reading (and re-reading) my corpus, I, too, have related to certain episodes and preoccupations in each text, and have found insight into my own experiences with my family. If a major goal of the academic study of literature is to highlight the significance of what those texts have to offer (and how they offer it), perhaps the form of academic writing itself can be configured in new ways to pay tribute to the studied works and participate in advancing their public recognition. To this end, one avenue is to incorporate something of the texts' spirit—probing *enquêtes* into family myths, raw reflections on familial relationships, creative dialogues with other writers past and present—into the formal analysis. An afterlife of this thesis, then, could be a work that synthesizes literary criticism, autobiographical writing, and even fiction.

[1] Béatrice Kammerer, "Je veux que mes plaies restent entrouvertes," review of *Enfant de salaud,* by Sorj Chalandon, *L'École des parents* 2, no. 243 (2022): 8.

So I conclude now with the rough formulations of a new project, a first attempt at that synthesis of criticism and creative writing, by considering how the texts I study have accompanied me in the beginning of my own *enquête* into troubled filiation. I started my doctoral degree (and the text of the thesis itself) reflecting on the difficult accessibility of knowledge about my familial predecessors' experiences in Vietnam throughout the French colonial period and the various wars of the mid-twentieth century. During the late stages of thesis writing, I returned to Vietnam—where both of my parents were born and raised until their forced migration to the United States, and where much of my extended family still resides—for the first time in over a decade. Growing up in central California and currently settled in Oxford, I have not lived in places with major Vietnamese communities (or any, in Oxford's case). My brother and I joked about the trope of "finding ourselves in the motherland," but there was some earnest motivation behind the tongue-in-cheek talk. This was my first visit to Vietnam as an adult: I was finally old enough to think critically about the post-Vietnam War diaspora as it played out in our family, about my parents' ambivalent relationships with their country of origin after having lived in the United States for over three decades, about my own insecure sense of belonging to a Vietnamese filiation. I thought about Montse and Lidia in *Pas pleurer,* and how the generational difference between their geographical and symbolic forms of exile resonated in the context of my own family. Getting barked at by a customs official at the Vietnamese border, I related to the airport scene in *Monarques*, when the narrator encounters a disconcerting animosity from border patrol in Tel-Aviv. But unlike Rahmy's narrator, who eventually discovers an intense identification with the Jewish part of his lineage while in Tel-Aviv, I was constantly reminded of my position as an outsider in a foreign country whilst in Vietnam. People would stare at my immediate family (even my

parents) when we were walking on the street: even though all of us speak Vietnamese (albeit with varying degrees of fluency), our strangeness perhaps also manifested in the way we dressed, in the unconscious habits of how we walked and conducted ourselves. On a few occasions, I was the only one in my family who would become inexplicably ill after eating certain foods—as if my body was just not compatible with parts of Vietnamese culture, as my mother suggested.

But there were other moments of fruitful insight into family heritage as well, including the family name. Onomastics has been a recurring point of reflection throughout this thesis, from gender inflections in first names in Laurens's *Fille* and Djebar's *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père*, to the social and political capital of Debré's surname in *Nom*. Unlike Debré's singular, illustrious surname, I have encountered countless others bearing my surname, but with whom I have no blood relation. The Nguyen dynasty was the final monarchy before French conquest in the late nineteenth century, as I learned during a visit to the old imperial city of Hue, the former seat of power for the dynasty and now a Unesco Heritage Site. It was common for descendants of previous ruling dynasties to change their surnames to match that of the current one in order to avoid retribution, and since Nguyen was the last one, the practice ended with them. Fast forward to today, where Nguyen is the most widespread Vietnamese surname: there is an element of impersonality in having this name, but also the sense of a shared prehistory.

The multigenerational apartments where my mother and my father grew up (and where some of their siblings now live with their own families) house the altars of my grandparents, who have passed away. On the days of our arrival and departure, we dropped by both apartments to burn incense at the altars: a tradition to honor past ancestors and ask their spirits to look over us. The altars displayed framed photos of my grandparents before they were senile, a time that I have

never known. It was bizarre to look at those photos, because the people in them were strangers to me, existing in a prehistory that I can only envisage in books. I imagined that the grandparents, who were raised in the Vietnamese countryside, would have also been baffled (as was also the case with most of my extended family) that their granddaughter had somehow ended up studying French at a university in England. But my maternal grandfather, it turns out, had also been a literature schoolteacher; perhaps there was a stronger continuity between us than it seemed. I thought about the descriptions of old family photos in Ernaux's *L'autre fille,* Toledo's *Thésée*, Debré's *Nom*—and the tension between otherness and relation, distance and presence, obscurity and familiarity that they elicit. And indeed, all of my studied texts weave silences into the retrieval of knowledge, through discontinuous narrative structures and fragmented poetics. The temporal, emotional, and interpersonal gaps in a lineage seem to be perpetually in flux, sometimes widening, other times narrowing.

My mother's old family apartment was torn down and rebuilt a few years ago. It still looks brand new (if a bit sterile), with its gleaming white walls and empty spaces where furniture used to be. A *tabula rasa* for a new generation of the family to inscribe with their own needs, to shape to their own liking. For many contemporary writers, the confrontation with troubled filiation is focused on the past, but is ultimately in service of the future—a critical look at what has been inherited in order to discern what remains to be transmitted. And eventually, the blank walls will become archives again.

Acknowledgements

This thesis has morphed and sharpened significantly from my initial nebulous ideas, largely due to the thoughtful guidance of my two supervisors, Ève Morisi and Carole Bourne-Taylor. Their incisive comments have been instrumental at every stage of the project. They have encouraged me to be as discerning as possible in my analyses, to aim for the highest level of precision in my prose. I have grown as a thinker, reader, and writer under their mentorship.

I would also like to thank Ian Maclachlan and Marie-Chantal Killeen, who both examined the proto-versions of my Introduction and first chapter and provided constructive feedback on the project in its nascent stages. Those conversations accompanied me as I framed and re-framed the project, and they have proved to be especially influential on the structure of the thesis.

In literary studies, research funding is regrettably scarce. I am grateful to St. John's College for making this project possible through the Elizabeth Fallaize Scholarship. Travel grants from the College have also allowed me to present several of the ideas in the thesis to the wider academic community at conferences, in the UK and abroad. I am also thankful for Ertegun House, which provided the scholarship for the Master's degree that started me on this journey, and continued to support my doctoral research by granting me access to a reliable office space.

I am lucky to have friends to whom I can entrust my writing and ideas. Gwendoline Choi and Julius Kochan conscientiously proofread the long abstract and final chapter, respectively. Conversations with Olivia Russell about contemporary literature have been invaluable in shaping my thinking on the project since its inception. Frances Dowle helped me work through challenging moments, especially in the early days of the thesis, with patience and empathy. Maikki Aakko and Noel Cheong shared insights into handling the roller coaster of emotions that arise toward the end of a doctorate.

Finally, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my mother and father, for reminding me that even though tomorrow is uncertain, there is always a home to return to; and to Viet, the "moral compass," who has taught me more about our own family than he perhaps realizes.

When I began postgraduate study, I only intended to do a year, as a sort of interlude between university and nine-to-five employment. But I ended up staying for four years, in part because I had the great fortune of meeting some of the kindest and most thought-provoking people I know. The interlude has become a chapter in its own right, one which I will remember fondly as the next begins.

Oxford, May 2025

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