

**Movements between Languages and Histories in the Autobiographies of Vladimir
Nabokov, Georges Perec and Patrick Chamoiseau**

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D.Phil. SHORT ABSTRACT

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What does it mean to link one's own history to that of another person or group of people? In what sense can a given history be 'one's own' or 'another's'? This thesis investigates movements between histories in three autobiographical texts which confront intergenerational shifts in language, triggered by the legacies of violent histories. Nabokov charts his movement from the Russian to the English language against the backdrop of the October Revolution, the Second World War and the Cold War. Perec's text confronts the silences in his family history produced by the death of his father in the Second World War and his mother's deportation to Auschwitz. His autobiography engages with a family history of displacement and movement between religious affiliations, countries, alphabets and languages, triggered by multiple waves of anti-Semitism, culminating with his mother's death in the Holocaust. Chamoiseau explores the ambivalent cultural and linguistic affiliations produced by a post- or neo-colonial childhood in Martinique. The thesis argues that in such contexts the links between the author's life and the lives of previous generations take on a central importance. Further, it demonstrates that each author goes beyond his own collective history to forge links between his life and those of other people who have lived through or are still suffering the legacies of different histories of violence and oppression. Though these movements have sometimes been noted, the original contribution of this thesis is that it argues such movements are central to the autobiographical texts under discussion. It looks at why and how inter-generational shifts in language inflect these authors' approach to the connections between their own histories and those of other people, and tests what is to be gained when the critic takes up the comparative interpretive framework these texts establish. By opening up a dialogue between these texts and a range of current theories of traumatic

memory, inter-generational transmission of memory and 'multidirectional' memory, it finds that a comparative approach has the potential to enrich and nuance current debates in these areas.

Sara-Louise Cooper, Oriel College, Michaelmas Term, 2014

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What does it mean to link one's own history to that of another person or group of people? In what sense can a given history be 'one's own' or 'another's'? This thesis investigates movements between histories in three autobiographical texts which confront intergenerational shifts in language, triggered by the legacies of violent histories. Nabokov charts his movement from the Russian to the English language against the backdrop of the October Revolution, the Second World War and the Cold War. Perec's text confronts the silences in his family history produced by the death of his father in the Second World War and his mother's deportation to Auschwitz. His autobiography engages with a family history of displacement and movement between religious affiliations, countries, alphabets and languages, triggered by multiple waves of anti-Semitism, culminating with his mother's death in the Holocaust. Chamoiseau explores the ambivalent cultural and linguistic affiliations produced by a post- or neo-colonial childhood in Martinique. The thesis argues that in such contexts the links between the author's life and the lives of previous generations take on a central importance. Further, it demonstrates that each author goes beyond his own collective history to forge links between his life and those of other people who have lived through or are still suffering the legacies of different histories of violence and oppression. Though these movements have sometimes been noted, the original contribution of this thesis is that it argues such movements are central to the autobiographical texts under discussion. It looks at why and how inter-generational shifts in language inflect these authors' approach to the connections between their own histories and those of other people, and tests what is to be gained when the critic takes up the comparative interpretive framework these texts establish.

By opening up a dialogue between these texts and a range of current theories of traumatic memory, inter-generational transmission of memory and ‘multidirectional’ memory, it finds that a comparative approach has the potential to enrich and nuance current debates in these areas.

Attention to the ways in which the legacies of traumatic histories make themselves felt in these texts connects the linguistic shifts in the author’s family history with painful episodes in French history, when concepts of the borders of the French nation and language were violently reshaped. Nabokov leaves Europe for America and becomes an English-language, American author in part because of the Nazi invasion of France. Perec’s father dies fighting in the early stages of the Second World War and his mother is deported to Auschwitz with the active collaboration of the French state. Chamoiseau writes in French and publishes in Paris as a result of the long aftermath of French colonialism in the Caribbean. The intersection of the author’s life with these aspects of French history stimulates an ambivalent engagement with French literary culture, which this study investigates. French literary models of childhood become a particular focus for the author’s exploration of his relationship to the French language. The Introduction draws out the role of references to French children’s literature in allowing these authors to indicate simultaneously their absorption of and distance from French models of childhood. Strikingly, both Nabokov and Chamoiseau make reference to the *comtesse de Ségur* as an authors of a classic French evocation of childhood. Where Chamoiseau situates her work as a product of metropolitan French culture, Nabokov draws attention to the way the novels of this daughter of a Russian exile can be read as an intercultural fusion of French and Russian elements. Explorations of these authors’ differing relationships to globally circulating images of French childhood thus draw attention both to

the range of possible relationships to this concept and to the way it can be seen as the product of transcultural movements even before it is exported from metropolitan France.

The first chapter builds on this analysis of the interpenetration of the transnational and the national in these texts by looking at the ways in which each author's depiction of domestic spaces relates to his experience of the legacies of violent international histories. It uses Bachelard's concept of the home as a place where the boundaries of the self are both established and crossed to analyse the ways in which the portrayal of home calls up questions about the relationship between the self, the previous generation and the surrounding world. Each author's depiction of his childhood home is embedded within a reflection on the possibility or impossibility of re-entry into the childhood world. This chapter explores this to draw out the specificities of each author's view of the relationship between memory, writing and physical traces of the past. It uses Jean Piaget's concept of childhood animism to bring out the way Nabokov and Chamoiseau associate their first languages with a more vivid relationship to the surrounding world, and analyses the implications of the absence of animism in Perec's recollection of his childhood perception of the home. While drawing out divergences in each text's depiction of the relationship between memory, writing and physical place, this chapter also points toward these authors' common suspicion of official records of the past, born of the context of state-sponsored violence and oppression in which all three authors situate their lives.

The second chapter moves on to explore in more detail ways of reading these authors' diverse approaches to histories of state-sponsored violence alongside each other. It tests the value of trauma as a concept which allows comparison between the narration of a range of painful histories. It finds that trauma studies' emphasis on the form of an experience rather than its

content is helpful in bringing together a wide range of histories. Bringing together authors at different generational positions from traumas which trigger inter-generational shifts of language offers a fruitful way into issues around the definition of trauma and its sources which have been the subject of much debate in recent years. This chapter argues that the at times controversial inclusion of both everyday and extreme experiences within the category of trauma can be better understood when everyday sources of trauma are located in a diachronic context of movement of traumatic memory between generations. As part of this argument, the chapter charts the way traumatic memory is passed down from generation to generation in the texts of Perec and Chamoiseau. It draws on a wide range of analyses of inter-generational transmission of traumatic memory, including those carried out by Marianne Hirsch, Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, Nadine Fresco, Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, Henri Raczymow, and Louise Hardwick. This comparison of modes of transmission of traumatic memory demonstrates the value of opening up a dialogue between the relatively well-developed body of theory on second-generation memory of the Holocaust and ideas about the transmission of the memory of slavery and colonial violence.

The third chapter looks at the ways in which these texts attempt to move beyond traumatic modes of relation to the past. It argues that the presence of traces of trauma in these texts should not blind the reader to the strategies employed by these authors to move towards a more conscious, active relationship with the past. It contends that both conscious and traumatic modes of memory are intertwined in these texts and uses the work of Johannes Fabian on temporality in anthropology to bring out the ways in which some of the temporal structures employed indicate a degree of mastery over the relationship to the past. It argues that this intertwining of traumatic and conscious memory is at the heart of these authors' artistic practice, which can be read as motivated by a will to arrive at a more conscious

awareness of the links between memory and perception. This emerges most clearly in their evocations of ludic activity and its relationship to writing. Ludic activity is associated with learning to know one's own mind better through interaction with another mind. Each author uses metaphors of displacement and return to express this dynamic. These metaphors of displacement are connected to the historical experiences of migration which have introduced linguistic and cultural discontinuities into the author's life and family history. The mental displacements achieved through ludic activity are thus ambivalent, connected both to traumatic losses brought about by physical displacements and to more conscious modes of memory and perception. Though conscious and traumatic modes of memory and perception are not easily disentangled in these texts, this chapter argues that neither mode should not be ignored, because doing so can obscure the ethical and political ramifications of these texts' oblique approaches to painful histories.

The fourth chapter explores further the place of the ludic in the construction of an ethically and politically conscious approach to histories of violence. It argues that the ludic is a trope which allows movement between familiar and strange contexts and between different collective histories. It looks at connections between these authors' comparative approaches to violent histories and the tradition of 'multidirectional' or 'palimpsestic' memory identified by Michael Rothberg and Max Silverman. It argues that Nabokov's work can be read within a body of post-war attempts to make sense of the catastrophe of the Second World War and Holocaust through comparative approaches which move between the Holocaust, colonial histories and other histories of state-sponsored oppression. Perec, through his relationship to writers such as Robert Antelme and David Rousset, and Chamoiseau, through his connection to Frantz Fanon and Aimé Césaire, are both heirs to this tradition. This chapter argues that the use of 'blank slate' figures like the child or the virgin island signals these authors' decision to

think through the circumstances which give rise to violence and oppression without rooting their exploration in a particular time. The use of such devices allows these authors to explore a range of painful histories and to create disquieting connections between past violence and everyday scenes from the present. These connections unsettle the idea that the legacies of past catastrophes can be confined to any one time, place or culture. By exploring ways of reading these texts together, this study is faithful to the connections each author draws between a diverse range of national and international histories. It integrates reflection on the relationship of autobiography to collective history with an exploration of possible approaches to histories that are seemingly unconnected to the author's life. In doing so, it seeks to offer a significant and timely contribution to current critical reflections on memory, trauma and history in the autobiographical genre.

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
The Portrayal of Home	15
Traces of Trauma	73
The Intertwining of Traumatic and Conscious Memory	122
Approaching Histories of Violence through Explorations of Children’s Play and Narratives of Human Origin	165
Conclusion	239
Bibliography	245

List of Abbreviations

- DB:* Nabokov, V., *Drugie berega*.
Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1978.
- SM:* Nabokov, V., *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography
Revisited*. London: David Campbell, 1999.
- W:* Perec, G., *W, ou le souvenir d'enfance*.
Paris: Editions Denoël, 1975.
- Antan:* Chamoiseau, P., *Antan d'enfance*.
Paris: Gallimard, 1990.
- Chemin:* Chamoiseau, P., *Chemin-d'école*.
Paris: Gallimard, 1996.
- A Bout:* Chamoiseau, P., *A Bout d'enfance*.
Paris: Gallimard, 2005.

Introduction

This study investigates three autobiographical works: *Speak, Memory* by Vladimir Nabokov; *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* by Georges Perec and an autobiographical trilogy by Patrick Chamoiseau, *Une Enfance créole*, which comprises *Antan d'enfance*, *Chemin-d'école* and *A Bout d'enfance*. It seeks to uncover the ways in which inter-generational linguistic shifts shape the autobiographical project. In these works, each author situates his own life in relation to a family history that involves changes in language, culture or geographical location. Such shifts are not neutral but emerge out of the experience and legacy of histories of violence. Nabokov charts his movement from the Russian to the English language (via French), and his moves from Russia to Western Europe to the United States and back to Western Europe against the backdrop of the October Revolution, the Second World War and the Cold War. Perec's text confronts the silences in his family history produced by the death of his father in the Second World War and his mother's deportation to Auschwitz. His autobiography engages with a family history of displacement and movement between religious affiliations, countries, alphabets and languages, triggered by multiple waves of anti-Semitism, culminating with his mother's death in the Holocaust. Chamoiseau explores the ambivalent cultural and linguistic affiliations produced by a post- or neo-colonial childhood in Martinique. His trilogy, and especially its second volume which describes his entry into the public world of the school, deals with the painful repression of Creole, his mother tongue in several senses, and the imposition of French as the language of education and self-betterment.

In each case, then, the author is writing in a different language to the everyday language of at least one of his parents. Nabokov published the first and then the final full-length versions of his autobiography in English in 1951 as *Conclusive Evidence* and in 1967 as *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, though he began it with a sketch in French in 1936 and published a Russian translation in 1954. These movements through various languages echo the multilingual environment of Nabokov's late imperial childhood in a wealthy St Petersburg home, where he spoke English, French and Russian. Publishing the final version in English nonetheless represents, as Nabokov is at pains to point out, a move away from the literary language he had forged for himself in Russian, and a certain tension between the medium and the past it seeks to evoke; Nabokov speaks of 'an English re-telling of Russian memories'.¹ Perec writes in French, a language which marks the distance of his own life, which is spent in France, from that of his parents, who were born in Eastern Europe and spoke French as a second language. His text begins life as an adventure story serial in a literary magazine. He writes segments of a fictional tale about an island devoted to sport, based on drawings and stories he has remembered from his childhood. As the story goes on, it becomes increasingly sinister, with resonances of the Nazi camps where his mother is likely to have died. The serial itself petered out without an ending, but is incorporated into the 1975 autobiography, where fictional chapters alternate with chapters making halting explorations of the few memories Perec has from his childhood. To a lesser but still significant extent, Chamoiseau's text marks distance between his own life and that of his parents. He writes in French, albeit a French that is interwoven with elements of Creole, and this marks a contrast between his narrative and his mother's voice in the text, as she is always quoted as speaking Creole. The trilogy is published over a period of fifteen years, with the first volume, *Antan d'enfance*, appearing in 1990, acting as a kind of fulfilment for the call for an interior vision of Creole culture put forward in the

¹ *SM*, 6.

1989 *Eloge de la créolité*.² The second volume, *Chemin-d'école*, continues this project as it charts the child's movement from the home to the school. The third volume, *A Bout d'enfance*, narrates the shading of childhood into adolescence from the point of view of an adult narrator who has now lost both his parents.

By bringing these authors together, I wish to draw attention to the very different ways in which the concept of a 'French childhood' arises and is contested within autobiographies produced in a wide range of contexts. This idea of the 'French childhood' having a global, if variegated, presence is illustrated by the circulation of French children's literature and the role it plays in each of these texts. Each text engages with images of childhood drawn from French children's writing, marking French culture as part of the author's initiation into the literary world while simultaneously drawing attention to points of divergence between the author's childhood and models of childhood found in French texts. Nabokov remembers his uncle lifting *Les Malheurs de Sophie* from one of the children's rooms and being overcome with memories of his own childhood.³ There are multiple kinds of transnational movements at play in this episode. Nabokov, from America and then Switzerland, remembers his uncle in Russia remembering a Russian childhood by reading a French book. As Nabokov points out, the book itself, written by Mme de Ségur, née Rostopchine, itself engages in these kinds of transnational movements. Because Mme de Ségur was born and brought up in Russia, her stories of French childhood are in fact a transposition of Russian experience into French literary space.⁴

² Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant, *Eloge de la créolité/In Praise of Creoleness* (bilingual edition), trans. by M.B. Taleb-Khyar (Paris: Gallimard, 1989; repr. 1993).

³ *SM*, 56.

⁴ *SM*, 56.

The global, multigenerational reach of such models of French childhood can be seen in the fact that the Comtesse de Ségur is also evoked in the *récit d'enfance* by Raphaël Confiant, Chamoiseau's co-author on the *Eloge de la créolité* and also on an alternative literary history of the Caribbean, *Lettres Créoles*.⁵ Confiant, addressing himself in the second person, recalls his time spent in the garret 'parmi les livres abandonnés par tes tantes au sortir de leur adolescence: ceux de la comtesse de Ségur, *Les Trois Mousquetaires*, *La Porteuse de pain* et une collection complète de Zola annotée par une main fiévreuse'.⁶ These French texts initiate the author into the literary world, leading to his vow to become a writer if he can, narrated a few lines after this passage.⁷ Yet they also connect the literary with experiences quite different to those of a child in 1950s and 1960s Martinique, and he reads them 'sans trop comprendre le pourquoi de leur comment'.⁸ Both sides of this engagement with French children's writing are present in Chamoiseau's autobiographical text. He finds old books in the attic by Jules Verne, Alexandre Dumas and the comtesse de Ségur.⁹ Before he can read, he opens them and follows the lines of text as he invents his own stories. The text suggests that this imaginative process is at the origin of the author's fascination with reading and writing.¹⁰ However, French children's texts are also implicated in the cultural loss brought about by the child's education. Chamoiseau uses the figure of Petit-Pierre to make this point. This French character, whom the children encounter in the reading they are given at school, at first seems exotic to them, but as time goes on he comes to seem normal and their own lives seem strange, signalling the alienating effect of their education.¹¹

⁵ *Lettres créoles: tracées antillaises et continentales de la littérature: Haiti, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyane 1635-1975* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

⁶ *Ravines du devant-jour* (Paris: Gallimard, 1993), p. 173.

⁷ *Ravines du devant-jour*, p. 173.

⁸ *Ravines du devant-jour*, p. 173.

⁹ *Chemin*, 197.

¹⁰ *Chemin*, 200-201.

¹¹ *Chemin*, 166.

Perec also foregrounds the difference between the lives he encounters in his schoolbooks and his own experience. The closing lines of the first chapter of the second part of the autobiography evoke his aunt's longing for the stability of an ancestral home:

Ma tante se souvient qu'elle regardait les montagnes; elle se demandait pourquoi la petite ferme qu'elle apercevait à la lisière de la forêt n'était pas celle de son grand-père: c'est là qu'elle serait née; elle y aurait joué pendant toute son enfance.

Moi, j'aurais aimé aider ma mère à débarrasser la table de la cuisine après le dîner. Sur la table, il y aurait eu une toile cirée à petits carreaux bleux [...] c'est comme ça que ça se passait dans mes livres de classe.¹²

Perec's aunt, like many in his extended family, emigrated from Eastern Europe to France in the inter-war period hoping to leave behind poverty and anti-Semitism. After the outbreak of war, her family moved from Paris to the Alps. The wish for geographical rootedness here is then connected with a desire for freedom from danger and persecution. Perec's evocation of domestic stability and time with his mother is equally shadowed by the converse reality of his movement between different living situations during the war and the death of his mother. The image of childhood drawn from the schoolbook is then used to indicate the distance between Perec's early years and the external models of childhood he meets at school. By connecting the image from the schoolbook with his aunt's wish that her grandfather had been French, Perec draws attention to the influence of his family's recent history of migration on his insecure childhood and bereavement.

The contrast between the images in the schoolbook and Perec's own domestic life draws attention to the painful consequences of migration and its aftermath, but children's literature is also associated with movement in a more positive sense. Like Chamoiseau and Confiant, Perec reads Jules Verne and Alexandre Dumas as a child, amongst other authors, and shares

¹² W, 95.

in the fascinated absorption expressed by the two Martinican writers. Perec's early reading, and especially his reading of Dumas, is one of the few positive encounters between the child and the world narrated in the text.¹³ Whereas much of the rest of the text dwells on images of erosion and of details of the past slipping away, the child delights in being able to return to the same details each time he reads a fictional text.¹⁴ Paradoxically, the stability of the texts is associated with rapid, enjoyable movement. Whereas elsewhere in the text, physical movement is often slow, painful or confused, Perec absorbs his cousin's reading of Dumas while being spun around the streets of Villard-de-Lans in a wheelbarrow.¹⁵ Reading also leads to a sense of 'parenté enfin retrouvée', in contrast to the references to distant or damaged filial relationships found elsewhere in the text.¹⁶

All three authors thus draw on French children's writing as a way of evoking the pleasures of reading while also using images of childhood found in such texts as a counterpoint to their own childhood. This dual portrayal of French children's writing indicates the ambivalent role played by French language and culture in the author's history. The tensions drawn between these images and the author's own experience in different ways associate French language and literature with transpositions of identity and movements between languages. By looking at the ways in which these ambivalent attitudes to movements between identities influence the author's negotiation of his links to the previous generation, this thesis seeks to extend the concept of a 'Francophone' author, usually employed to refer to authors, such as Chamoiseau, who write in French outside of metropolitan France. This thesis sets out to explore the way a text written in French in France, such as Perec's autobiography, might also

¹³ W, 191-196.

¹⁴ W, 192.

¹⁵ W, 195.

¹⁶ W, 193.

situate itself in relation to experiences lived across and beyond the borders of France and its national language. The comparison with *Speak, Memory*, begun in French but finished in English and translated into Russian along the way, opens up questions of what it means to pass through the French language on the way to a career in another foreign language, and of the way texts written in another language might gesture back toward experiences lived in France and through French culture.

Such a study calls up questions about the relationship of the literary to linguistic change and displacement, as well as the differences between the various modes of displacement and linguistic change at work in these texts. These questions have often been explored through the concept of exile. In a 1957 essay, the Polish exile Joseph Wittlin suggests that the condition of the exiled author is both a heightened version of the condition of the ordinary person, and a state radically different from it. He notes the Christian tradition of seeing all human beings as exiles from Eden and speaks of the ‘unconscious nostalgia for something that is not Hell or horror or exile, and not even our native soil’ and refers to this as part of ‘the longings and presentiments of man’.¹⁷ This comment creates an overlap between the specific nostalgia of the political exile and a more general nostalgia supposedly experienced by all individuals. Barbara Straumann points out how common this equation of dislocation with the human condition is, drawing attention to its recurrence across classical culture, Christianity, Romanticism and psychoanalysis.¹⁸

This trope of displacement as experienced in some way by all is in tension with the idea that it affords the artist a particular vision not available to most people. Straumann notes the

¹⁷ ‘The Sorrow and Grandeur of Exile’, *Polish Review*, 2 (1957), 99-112 (p. 111).

¹⁸ *Figurations of Exile in Hitchcock and Nabokov* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 14.

presence of this concept in Salman Rushdie's meditations in *Imaginary Homelands*, where he writes of the 'stereoscopic vision' or 'double perspective' afforded to the exiled writer.¹⁹

Wittlin makes a version of this point when he writes that any artist is a kind of exile because he or she has a different view of the world to most people.²⁰ Wittlin thinks of exile as creating an even greater distance from the surrounding world than that usually felt by the artist, and he suggests that this distance is aesthetically fruitful: 'A perfect distance or perspective is created for [political exiles] by their lost country.'²¹ Exile is 'a privilege' as well as 'a misfortune' because it allows writers who live through it to offer their readers a view of the world that could only arise from the peculiar inter-weaving of knowledge and distance that characterises the exile's relationship to a new country.²²

George Steiner constructs a slightly different relationship between the displaced writer and other people. He writes: 'A great writer driven from language to language by social upheaval and war is an apt symbol for the age of the refugee.'²³ Here, he places emphasis not so much on exile as a kind of privileged condition, distinct from that of most ordinary people, but rather sees it as symptomatic of the political upheaval of modernity. He uses Nabokov as a prime example of this relationship between the fate of the exiled artist and the times:

It seems proper that those who create art in a civilization of quasi-barbarism which has made so many homeless, which has torn up tongues and peoples by the root, should themselves be poets unhoused and wanderers across language. Eccentric, aloof, nostalgic, deliberately untimely as he aspires to be and so often is, Nabokov

¹⁹ Ibid. quoting Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 19.

²⁰ Wittlin, p. 102.

²¹ Wittlin, p. 102.

²² Wittlin, p. 102.

²³ *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution* (Faber: London, 1972), p. 11.

remains, by virtue of his extraterritoriality, profoundly of our time, and one of its spokesmen.²⁴

Setting aside the fact that Nabokov is likely to have vigorously resented the idea that he could be a spokesman for any time, it is worth bringing out Steiner's idea that Nabokov's work, and the work of displaced artists in general, proceeds from and in some way holds within it violence that has affected lives beyond his own. Edward Said takes issue with Steiner's idea that the work of a writer like Nabokov can represent those who have experienced the mass displacements of modernity:

To understand exile as a contemporary political punishment it is necessary to map territories of experience beyond those mapped by literature. It is necessary to set aside Nabokov and Joyce and even Conrad who wrote of exile with such pathos, but of exile without cause or rationale. Think instead of the uncountable masses for whom UN agencies have been created, of refugees without urbanity, with only ration cards and agency numbers.²⁵

Said's point about the difference in privilege and access to writing between an author like Nabokov and most refugees is important and fits within a broader critical engagement with the trope of exile as aesthetically fruitful. Caren Kaplan cautions against the collapse of distinctions between different forms of displacement. She argues that in modernist writing, displacement is approached as an individual experience of aesthetic and psychological enrichment, whereas many people live it as a collective experience of material loss.²⁶ Eva Hoffman, who emigrated from Poland to America with her family as a young adolescent, echoes Kaplan's distinction between the individual experience of modernist exile and the

²⁴ Steiner, p. 11.

²⁵ Edward Said, 'The Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile', *Harper's Magazine*, September 1984, 49-55 (p. 50).

²⁶ *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (London: Duke University Press, 1996), pp. 3-4.

collective experience of mass migrations, and writes longingly of Nabokov's apparent 'Olympian freedom' from the material consequences of history, wishing that she too could define herself by idiosyncratic details such as 'a preference for mints over lozenges', rather than by the painful collective experience of growing up in the shadow of the Second World War and Holocaust.²⁷

The choice Nabokov makes to devote relatively little attention to the historical causes of his displacement is not, indeed, available to many people driven from their homes by political upheaval, so Said is right to question the uncomplicated relationship of representation that Steiner posits between Nabokov and those the century has made homeless. Yet Said's opposition between the experiences of displaced modernist authors, which fall within 'territories [...] mapped by literature' and those of the 'uncountable masses' which lie beyond those territories, is also not without its problems. Kaplan points out that by suggesting that the experiences of mass displacement or migration are 'irrecoverable', Said actually participates in the silencing he identifies.²⁸

This thesis takes both Said's point that the experiences of migration without privilege are, by definition, beyond the territories mapped by literature, and Kaplan's point that the critic should not be content with this silence. It aims to explore the points where these three literary narrations, which situate the author's life in the context of histories of displacement and linguistic change, gesture beyond the author's own experiences toward more anonymous migrations. It seeks to uncover points of convergence and divergence between *Speak*, *Memory*, often held up as a paradigmatic account of literary exile, and two texts which trace

²⁷ *Lost in Translation* (London: Vintage, 1998), p. 197.

²⁸ Kaplan, pp. 120-121.

links between the author's life and histories much closer to the anonymous, irrecoverable kind of displacement which Said refers to. *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* places the author's life in the context of his parents' migration from Eastern Europe to Paris, and his mother's subsequent deportation to Auschwitz, and *Une Enfance créole* traces links between the author's life and the transportation of Africans to Martinique, as well as later, twentieth-century movements of Martinicans from rural to urban contexts and from local to more homogenised ways of life. This study deliberately draws into dialogue Nabokov's first-person account of his own voluntary migrations and the autobiographies of Perec and Chamoiseau, who spend most of their lives in one place. In doing so, it acknowledges Said's argument that the most painful experiences of displacement are unlikely to be narrated in the first-person literary texts. By looking at the ways such histories echo within contemporary literary autobiography, it seeks to uncover those points at which resonances of untold histories of displacement enter into the literary text and to compare such resonances to Nabokov's first-person account of his own exile.

Throughout this study, I refer to the three works under discussion as autobiographies or autobiographical narrations. Critical discussion of these texts has not always situated them within the autobiographical genre, as each text contains elements which the reader is likely to see as fictional or imagined. This is most obviously the case in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, where autobiographical chapters alternate with fictional chapters, which has led to it being referred to as a 'semi-autobiographical novel'.²⁹ John Burt Foster notes the generic indeterminacy of parts of *Speak, Memory*, created by the fact that some of its chapters were

²⁹ Eleanor Kaufman, 'Falling from the Sky: Trauma in Perec's *W* and Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience*', *Diacritics*, 28 (1998), 44-53 (p. 44).

also published as short stories.³⁰ Louise Hardwick, in her study of the contemporary Caribbean *récit d'enfance*, discourages the identification of Chamoiseau's trilogy as autobiographical, arguing that it (along with other texts on childhood from the same period) cannot be read 'as faithful mimetic presentations of childhood' but rather 'operate[s] in a ludic mode'.³¹ Similarly, Wendy Knepper refers to the three texts as 'fictional texts on childhood'.³² By looking at these works as autobiographies, I do not intend to ignore or dismiss their imagined elements. Rather, I argue that the ludic aspects of these texts are a way of reshaping the autobiographical genre to allow it to move beyond the history of the self.

This study explores ways of thinking about autobiographical approaches which privilege the overlapping of the self with others in two senses. As we saw in the brief outline of the place of French children's literature in these texts, each author is working within one language while also looking toward experiences lived within a different culture. This attention to experiences lived in a different language or culture is accomplished through particular weight being given to the lives of the author's parents, especially the mother. This attention to other lives and histories also extends beyond an ancestral culture to embrace histories from other times and places. These authors establish connections between the self, the parents (proximate others), previous generations (more distant others) and people who have lived through separate histories of violent oppression and cultural change, which the author has not

³⁰ *Nabokov's Art of Memory and European Modernism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 110-111.

³¹ *Childhood, Autobiography and the Francophone Caribbean* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), p. 203.

³² *Patrick Chamoiseau: A Critical Introduction* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), p. 130.

known (distant others).³³ Attention to the ways in which these texts move between the history of the self and that of proximate and distant others has the potential to make visible the presence of more anonymous experiences of displacement, violence and oppression within these literary explorations of selfhood.

Because the home is often the place where connections between the self, the proximate other and the surrounding world are first forged, the first chapter investigates the portrayal of domestic spaces. The relationship with the proximate other (or its absence) is tied to questions of geographical, historical, linguistic and family points of origin. The chapter examines the ways in which the approach to physical space is related to other possible means of contact with these points of origin, including writing and the imagination. If the first chapter looks at possible modes of contact with points of origin, the second chapter examines the ways the effects of the distance from putative origins are depicted in each text. It tests whether trauma theory proves fruitful in reading the way each text approaches the legacies of histories of violence and the linguistic and cultural changes they trigger. By looking at the way these authors move between the loss of a parent and collective, cultural loss, it seeks to open up a mutually illuminating dialogue between the texts in question and theories of trauma. It argues that comparative readings have the potential to enrich and nuance current debates in trauma studies on the movement of trauma between generations and from extreme to everyday contexts in a way that is not possible through readings which focus on one period or geographical area. The third chapter examines those points where these authors' work enters into tension with the idea of traumatic memory. It investigates the significance of these

³³ John Paul Eakin uses the term 'proximate other' to refer to a close friend or family member, usually a parent, who plays a decisive role in the autobiographical text in *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. 86.

authors' reception of Proustian models of involuntary memory in relation to concepts of trauma and asks how the traces of trauma in these texts might be read in the light of each author's privileging of conscious, active memory. It argues for the centrality of ludic approaches in each author's attempt to come to terms with and record the legacy of violent histories. The conceptions of the ludic put forward by each author place emphasis on the value of moving beyond the self and seeing the world through another person's eyes so as to come to a more conscious awareness of the connections between memory and perception. The fourth chapter investigates the implications of the connections between the ludic and heightened consciousness for each author's approach to history. It brings out the ways in which each text moves beyond the author's own personal or collective history to engage with instances of violence or oppression outside the scope of his own life. Though these authors' movements between different histories are usually only noted in passing in analyses of their work, this chapter argues that such transnational movements are central to the autobiographical project of these authors and that they call for the kinds of international, comparative readings undertaken here.

Chapter One: The Portrayal of Home

This chapter examines the portrayal of childhood homes in Vladimir Nabokov's *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, Georges Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* and Patrick Chamoiseau's *Une Enfance créole*. The particular ways in which childhood homes are portrayed are revealing of the author's relationship to linguistic, cultural and geographical points of origin. The childhood home acts, or at least has the potential to act, as a visible trace of the author's past. The author's exploration of the role of the home as a trace of the past opens up questions about the relationship between writing, memory and the physical world in each text. This relationship, in turn, inscribes the author's work within a broader, generational literary tradition of writing which explores the legacy of violent histories. This chapter uses the portrayal of home as a way to explore the nuances of Nabokov's location within the Russian émigré tradition, Perec's place in the 1.5 generation and Chamoiseau's position within contemporary Caribbean writing¹ Though these authors belong to very different local traditions, looking at the ways childhood homes are portrayed brings out a range of concerns common to all three writers which include inter-generational shifts in language and their implications for the author's relationship to his parents and to a collective past, and anxiety about access to the past in the aftermath of histories of state-sponsored violence or oppression. If the portrayal of home gestures toward this common set of concerns, then the particular ways in which damage to the home is portrayed indicates the specificities of each author's engagement with this common set of issues. This chapter seeks, then, to bring out

¹ The '1.5 generation' is a term for people who were children during the Second World War and Holocaust, and who are therefore in between the first and second generation of those affected. It first appears in Susan Rubin Suleiman, 'The 1.5 Generation: Thinking About Child Survivors and the Holocaust', *American Imago*, 59 (2002), 277-95 (p. 277).

points of convergence and divergence in each author's relationship to traces of the past, in the light of painful histories.

Gaston Bachelard speaks of the home as 'notre premier univers'.² For each of these authors, the first world represented by the childhood home(s) is associated with languages different to the one each author is writing in; Russian for Nabokov; Polish and Yiddish for Perec, Creole for Chamoiseau. The departure from the childhood home is, to a certain extent, associated with a move away from the languages spoken in early childhood. Nabokov's departure from his Northern Russian homes marks the first of multiple journeys which will lead him to write in English rather than Russian. Perec's departure from Paris and his mother marks the deepening of his loss of connection to an ancestral language and culture that begins with his parents' emigration from Eastern Europe.³ When Chamoiseau leaves the intimate world of the home and enters into contact with the French state through the public education system, he discovers that Creole and French are separate languages, and that Creole is his first language, though he must speak French in school.⁴

Because the author's earliest homes are associated with the language of the previous generation, returning to, or re-imagining, early homes leads to a reflection on the possibility or impossibility of return to the languages of childhood and the cultural context associated with them. As the child does not absorb a language in a vacuum, but rather learns to speak through relationships with the people around him, questions of linguistic change are also tied up with issues of inter-generational communication. If the language each author writes in is different from the language he spoke as a child, it is also different to the language(s) he spoke

² *La Poétique de l'espace* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1957), p. 24.

³ Georges Perec, *Ellis Island* (Paris: P.O.L., 1995), p. 56.

⁴ *Chemin*, 69.

with his parents. The portrayal of home involves addressing the connections between linguistic change, geographical movement and changing ways of life from one generation to the next.

Broadly speaking, the figure of home is approached in two ways in these texts. Either it is evoked as seen from the outside by the adult narrator, or as experienced from within by the childhood self. The house seen from without sometimes functions as a repository of memory. Where this is the case, relationships of analogy or contrast can be drawn between the author's mind and the house as two sources of memory in the text. Images of homes as repositories of memory also call up metaphors of entry, exclusion and the crossing of boundaries. The presence of the author on the threshold of childhood dwelling-places, unwilling or unable to enter, occurs in some way in all three authors' work. Such images dramatise tensions present in the autobiographical enterprise, where the author seeks imaginative re-entry into spaces inhabited by the child-self, a quest complicated in these cases by linguistic and spatial change. As well as acting as a vessel which contains traces of the past, the childhood home itself is sometimes portrayed as a trace. In this case, its depiction sparks reflection on the interaction between interior, psychological traces of the past and its exterior, material remnants. The particular relationship constructed between interior and exterior traces of the past inscribes each author's work within a generational literary tradition.

Nabokov's text can be read alongside other autobiographical writing by authors born at the turn of the century whose work records the upheaval of the Revolution and the subsequent development of Russian literary life outside of Russia. The trope of turning away from external traces of the past and relying on the internal traces preserved by the mind recurs across this body of texts. Reliance on the portable traces preserved by the mind becomes a

matter of necessity in the context of the rapid change in post-revolutionary Russia and of the difficulties of returning after emigration. Nabokov's turn inwards has been read as part of a modernist focus on the psychological and aesthetic effects of displacement and a retreat from a consideration of its historical causes and consequences.⁵ Yet a close reading of the portrayal of homes in these texts calls into question this interpretation, situating the boundaries of the home as a filter which allows the absorption of both beauty and violence into the self.

Perec has been identified as part of the 1.5 generation, the generation who were children during the Second World War and Holocaust, but little extended work has been done on how his work fits within this generation.⁶ This chapter explores his place within this body of texts, beginning from his portrayal of home. Perec's narrative of his childhood, like that of other writers of the 1.5 generation, involves multiple moves between different dwelling-places, in an attempt to avoid deportation. These physical moves are often accompanied by changes of name and assumed identities. The place of deceptive narrations at the heart of family identity is reflected in the portrayal of domestic spaces. These become places where the child moves between different identities, rather than stable signifiers of a unitary identity and past.⁷ The return to pre-war homes, like the movements between different dwelling-places during the war, is also associated with the painful grafting on of identity. Where one or both parents have been killed during the war, going back home involves the realisation that the parent will not return. The return to the domestic space is thus associated with the period when the

⁵ Said, p. 50.

⁶ Suleiman, p. 292.

⁷ See, for example, Claudine Vegh, *Je ne lui ai pas dit au revoir: Des enfants de déportés parlent* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), pp. 26-27, Sarah Kofman, *Rue Ordener, rue Labat* (Paris: Galilée, 1994), p. 57 and Lore Segal, *Other People's Houses* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1965), p. 165.

temporary absence of the parent or parents begins to take on a permanent quality.⁸ This also leads to a recomposition of family dynamics through adoption or remarriage by the surviving parent, so that the child takes on a new role within the family.⁹ In this way, the portrayal of home locates loss and shifting identity at the origins of the self. It draws attention to the unreliability of internal traces of the past as it brings out the child's confusion over the different places he lived during the war. Material traces of the past are no more promising than mental record; former homes tend to be figured as mute or unreliable witnesses to the past, in this way mirroring the often absent or distorted record of the parent's deportation.

Maeve McCusker and Louise Hardwick have convincingly argued for the place of Chamoiseau's autobiographical trilogy within a late twentieth-century 'boom' of life-writing in the French-speaking Caribbean.¹⁰ They write that the recent coincidence of several historical anniversaries, such as the 'discovery' of the Caribbean and the abolition of slavery, led to a reflection on questions of individual and historical memory amongst contemporary authors.¹¹ The autobiographical trilogy is also a contribution to the *créolité* project elaborated by Chamoiseau along with Raphaël Confiant and Jean Bernabé in 1989.¹² The three writers advocate the rediscovery of an interior view of Antillean culture and an appreciation of its interwoven African, Asian and European strands. Chamoiseau's depiction of his childhood

⁸ There is a depiction of such a moment in a fictional text by one of the members of the 1.5 generation: Elisabeth Gille, *Un paysage de cendres* (Paris: Seuil, 1996), pp. 88-89.

⁹ Vegh, p. 113.

¹⁰ Maeve McCusker, *Patrick Chamoiseau: Recovering Memory* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007), p. 47; Hardwick, *Childhood, Autobiography and the Francophone Caribbean*, pp. 2-4.

¹¹ Maeve McCusker, "'Troubler l'ordre de l'oubli": Memory and Forgetting in French Caribbean Autobiography of the 1990s', *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, 40 (2004), 438-50 (pp. 440-441).

¹² Bernabé, Chamoiseau and Confiant, *Eloge de la créolité/In Praise of Creoleness*; Hardwick, *Childhood, Autobiography and the Francophone Caribbean*, p. 56; McCusker, *Recovering Memory*, p. 73.

home, acts, then, as a way of exploring the specificities of Creole modes of dwelling in the world. The home's porous boundaries come to stand for the passages between self and world, interior and the exterior that Chamoiseau suggests are characteristic of Creole culture. There is a twilight quality about Chamoiseau's evocation of the old house as an artefact of Creole culture. A parallel is drawn between the growing rarity of houses like the one the author grew up in and the child's diminishing imaginative relationship with the world and his increasing assimilation to French culture. The text thus suggests that the disappearance of external traces of the past goes hand in hand with the diminishing presence of Creole culture in the inner world of Martinique's inhabitants. Its lament over the destruction of external traces of the past also functions as a way of pointing toward cultural and economic changes that have taken place in Martinique in the last fifty years.

Though the portrayal of houses where the author lived as a child does allow an exploration of contrasts between material traces of the past (or their absence) and interior, psychic traces, the figure of the home is valuable precisely because it complicates the boundaries between the material and the psychological, interior and exterior, self and world. Bachelard speaks of the home as 'le non-moi qui protège le moi', drawing out the role of the home as a place where the boundaries of the self are both established and crossed.¹³ Because the home is often the scene of the first contact between self and other, portrayals of the child-self within the home act as ways of exploring the early relationship established between the child and the surrounding world. Though not the case in Perec's text, in Nabokov and Chamoiseau's work, the interior space of the home is figured as secure to a certain extent. Here, the walls of the home exclude the more threatening aspects of the outside world and with these aspects excluded, the walls of the self soften to allow it to fuse with others and the world. The

¹³ Bachelard, p. 24.

interior space of the home becomes the scene of fusion between the self and the mother, the natural world, and beauty in various forms. Portraying the home then becomes a way of evoking the open-ended boundaries of the self.

It is the protective walls of the home which create the possibility of the self's fusion with the proximate other, if it does occur. Because of this, any threat or damage to the walls of the home, and the accompanying loss of protection from the dangers of the outside world, carries much weight. The significance of breached boundaries varies depending on the meaning given to the domestic interior. The inner space of the home can be mapped on to a range of different spaces; it can act as a kind of extended version of the child's inner world or of the artist's mind; a larger version of the maternal body or a smaller version of the nation. These images can be read as representations of the place of histories of violence within the 'premier univers', the intimate world of the family, the self and the first language(s). Looking at the particular kinds of incursion into the protective space of the home, or at the absence of protection within the home, offers a way of distinguishing between the different places given to the legacy of violent histories in each author's narration of his life.

The Adult Narrator on the Threshold of the Childhood Home(s)

The Nabokov family homes, one on Morskaya Street in St Petersburg, and three family estates just south of St Petersburg, Vyra, Batovo and Rozhestveno, play an important role in *Speak, Memory*. While working to create a full-length autobiographical work from a series of short sketches, Nabokov thought about entitling the work 'The House Was Here', and wrote a foreword which begins with these words. The Vladimir Nabokov Papers in the Library of Congress preserve this discarded foreword, which I will study here as it concentrates aspects

of the relationship between physical place, memory and history that run throughout the text. This brief piece of prose features an imagined return to what used to be Morskaya Street, renamed Herzen Street during the Soviet period. There, Nabokov and his companion, Hopkinson, look briefly at the author's former home before turning and fleeing the suspicious look of a passer-by. Although Nabokov chose not to use the foreword, the image of the house seen from without recurs in the last version of the autobiography, which features a photograph of 47 Morskaya Street taken in 1955 by Andrew Field.¹⁴ The photograph is accompanied by a long caption which revives and reshapes elements of the discarded foreword. Looking at the relationship between the two pieces of text allows an exploration of the role Nabokov gives to material traces of the past compared to images of the past which are generated by the mind. This is the discarded foreword, published here for the first time:

The house was here. Right here. I never imagined the place would have changed so completely since nineteen seventeen. How dreadful, I don't recognise a thing. No use walking any farther. Sorry, Hopkinson, to have made you come such a long way. I had been looking forward to a perfect orgy of nostalgia and recognition! That man over there seems to be growing suspicious. Talk to him. Turisti Amerikantsi. You surely know the Russian for ghost. *Mechta* [Dream]. *Prizrak* [Ghost]. *Metafizicheŭky kapitalist* [Metaphysical capitalist]. Run, Hopkinson!¹⁵

The foreword draws attention to the narrator's position outside the place where he lived as a child and, by implication, outside the past the text seeks to evoke. The two men, are, of course, physically outside the house, but the use of the emphatically non-Russian name, 'Hopkinson', the mention of ghosts and Nabokov's new American nationality, and the fear of the local passer-by all mark the description of the scene as conducted from the point of view of someone who is now, perforce, a foreigner.

¹⁴ *SM*, 17.

¹⁵ Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov Papers, Box 9.

The references to ghosts and dreams also suggest subjective modes of vision and the presence of the mind without the body. The foreword serves, then, to remind the reader that Nabokov's return to Russia can only be accomplished through memory or imagination. By situating this passage on the threshold of the text as a whole, Nabokov would have been gesturing towards a point he makes in other ways in the body of the autobiography, which is that a blend of memory and imagination are more valuable than physical presence for revisiting the past. The retreat from the house signals a dismissal of the value of external traces of the past and a privileging of the traces it leaves on the mind. The foreword also serves another, political, purpose. It marks the author's presence outside of the past, outside of Russia and the Russian language, but it also marks the speaker's distance from the values of the Soviet state. The two men's fear of the suspicious passer-by evokes the pervasive sense of danger that comes with being in a place where ordinary-looking people could be informers. The preface's ending could be seen as a kind of re-enactment of the author's original flight from St Petersburg and then Russia in the period after the October Revolution, and an affirmation of the necessity of that choice. In the foreword, precisely what the two men fear is left unarticulated, but it suggests that contemporary Leningrad is not very much safer than the St Petersburg Nabokov and his family left behind.

In particular, the portrayal of the street is deployed as part of a mini-polemic against the Soviet state in the caption to a photograph of the St Petersburg house in the final, revised edition of the English text. The re-naming of the street from Morskaya to Herzen provides a focus for this contestation. In the Russian version of the autobiography, Nabokov only refers briefly to this name-change, writing of another street, 'куда вливается удивлённый Герцен'.¹⁶ Presumably he trusts the Russian-speaking reader to understand the reason for

¹⁶ *DB* 30, 'into which runs a surprised Herzen Street'.

Herzen's surprise. He leaves nothing to chance with the English-speaking reader, however. In the caption to the 1955 photograph of his house he writes that it is taken in 'St Petersburg, now Leningrad, 47, Morskaya, now Herten street'. He then gives a brief biography of Herzen: 'Aleksander Ivanovich Herten (1812-1870) was a famous liberal (whom this commemoration by a police state would hardly have gratified).'¹⁷ He goes on to say that Herzen's memoir was one of his father's favourite books. Laurence Petit has written of the 'power struggle' that takes place between the photographs and their captions in *Speak, Memory*, as the two compete for the role of authoritative guide to the past.¹⁸ What is being contested in the relationship set up between the image of Nabokov's house and the caption which describes it is the inheritance of the legacy of Russian liberalism. Nabokov here wrests this legacy from the Soviet state, drawing attention to the gap between Herzen's liberalism and the repressive tactics of the contemporary Russian state. His mention of his father's admiration for Herzen's memoir also suggests that Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov is a more fitting heir to the Russian liberal tradition.

In *La Chambre claire*, Roland Barthes famously speaks of photography as an indexical trace of the past, comparable to a fingerprint or footprint. According to this view, the photograph acts as a record of the impression of light rays from a given object or person on chemical substances.¹⁹ The photograph, then, acts as a material trace of the presence of an object or a person in the world. Nabokov's caption to the photograph of his house suggests that such material traces are less valuable than the internal traces of the past the author carries within his own mind. Nabokov uses the caption to correct elements of the photograph, nudging the

¹⁷ *SM*, 17.

¹⁸ 'Speak, Photographs?: Visual Transparency and Verbal Opacity in Nabokov's *Speak, Memory*' *NOJ/HOЖ: Nabokov Online Journal*, 3 (2009).

¹⁹ *La Chambre claire: note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard 1980), pp. 23-24.

reader to picture instead the image he holds in his mind: ‘The lindens lining the street did not exist. Those green upstarts now hide the second-floor east-corner window of the room where I was born.’²⁰ The way Nabokov brings the photograph into line with his own internal image of the house could be seen as part of the turn away from the material and toward the individual and psychological that is argued to be characteristic of modernist writing on displacement.²¹ Put together with the comments on the re-naming of the street, however, it begins to appear in a different light. Nabokov’s critical use of the material trace of the photograph as a way into the past reflects the fact that material traces can obscure as much as they reveal, just as the trees hide the room where he was born and the naming of the street for a famous Russian liberal hides the state’s eviction of another representative of the liberal tradition from the house on Morskaya Street. Nabokov’s privileging of the internal and the psychological thus appears not as a turn away from the political or the historical, but is itself a political gesture, which draws attention to the deceptive quality of material traces of the past, especially when manipulated by the state.

Perec

There is also a political edge to Perec’s portrayal of the relationship between his own memories and the house where he lived with his parents in early childhood, but in most other ways, Perec’s text constructs a very different relationship between external and internal traces of the past from that found in *Speak, Memory*. Unlike Nabokov and Chamoiseau, Perec’s autobiographical text does not portray his childhood home as a repository of memory. It is not connected with a specific family history; rather its depiction evokes the anonymity of his

²⁰ *SM*, 17.

²¹ Kaplan, pp. 3-4.

family history, its absence, or very faint presence, in the external world. Whereas Nabokov constructs a relationship of contrast between deceptive material traces of the past and the more accurate record of it preserved through imagination and memory, Perec establishes a relationship of analogy between external and internal remnants of the past, both of which are presented as potentially unreliable and subject to gradual erosion as well as wilful destruction.

The tenth chapter of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* opens with a description of la rue Vilin where Perec lived with his parents, grandparents and aunt before he was evacuated to Villard-de-Lans in 1942. La rue Vilin was a place of work as well as his family's home, as his grandparents ran a grocery store nearby and his mother had a hair-dressing business on the street.²² Perec's description of the street brings it into dialogue with other sites of memory, both topographical and textual. The interaction between different sites of memory is an abiding concern in Perec's wider work. In *Espèces d'espaces*, a collection of essays on space, Perec writes that part of the reason for his interest in space is the lack of geographical continuity in his family history.²³ The essay evokes the absence of containing spaces of memory brought about by his family's moves from Eastern Europe to France, and his subsequent moves within France during the war. In *Ellis Island*, the text of a script Perec wrote to accompany a film about the immigration centre, he writes that the island is 'le lieu d'une autobiographie probable', further developing the theme of aleatory family geography.²⁴ *Ellis Island* dwells on the nature of 'le non-lieu, le nulle part', analysing the nature of the space between departure from one's former home and arrival in a new country.²⁵

²² W, 68-69.

²³ *Espèces d'espaces* (Paris: Galilée, 1974), pp. 122-123.

²⁴ *Ellis Island* (Paris: P.O.L., 1995), p. 56.

²⁵ Perec, *Ellis Island*, p. 57.

This interstitial position can be mapped on to the experience of the 1.5 generation, whose childhood coincides with the space between pre- and post-war periods. Because growing up during the war often involved multiple moves, a questioning, unsettled approach to space is often expressed by members of this generation. Anne Whitehead quotes Geoffrey Hartman, who was sent from Germany to England on one of the children's transports, and who went on to live in America, as saying, 'An organic relation to place is what I lacked and would never recover.'²⁶ Dan Bar-On, who was born in Haifa to parents who had emigrated from Germany, also speaks of 'a sense of being uprooted', shared by his generation of Israeli children of European parents.²⁷ It is worth noting that Perec does express a sense of familiarity with Paris in *Espèces d'espaces*, writing that he would have trouble getting lost there even if he tried because he knows its neighbourhoods and the routes between them so well.²⁸ Though this indicates intricate knowledge of the city, it nonetheless suggests a connection to place through movement rather than fixity. The way this unsettled relationship to place is expressed by both Hartman, who moved between countries during the war and afterwards, and Bar-On and Perec, who spent most of their lives in one country, reflects the shaping influence of parental displacements on the next generation.

Perec's interest in the spaces his parents inhabited with him is apparent in the unfinished *Lieux* project, parts of which are incorporated into *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*.²⁹ This project involved him visiting places which had some kind of significance in his life over the course

²⁶ Geoffrey Hartman, *The Longest Shadow: In the Aftermath of the Holocaust* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), p. 19, quoted in Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 10.

²⁷ *Fear and Hope: Three Generations of the Holocaust* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 1.

²⁸ Perec, *Espèces d'espaces*, p. 86.

²⁹ Perec, *Espèces d'espaces*, pp. 76-77.

of twelve years and jotting down what he saw. One of the places was la rue Vilin. Because the houses on la rue Vilin were demolished over the years that Perec pursued the *Lieux* project, his notes record its gradual destruction. The autobiography devotes most space to an image of the street where most of the houses have been demolished. Like Nabokov, then, Perec presents a contemporary image of his former home where it has greatly changed. Whereas Nabokov is able to dismiss the newer version of his childhood home, impressing upon the reader that his memory of it is the more important image, there is no sense of connection between Perec and la rue Vilin. Recalling a visit there in the early sixties, he writes: ‘La rue n’ évoqua en moi aucun souvenir précis, à peine la sensation d’une familiarité possible.’³⁰ He mixes up the buildings, not recognising the one where he lived, in strong contrast with Nabokov who still recalls the exact room of the house where he was born.³¹ There is a desolate quality to Perec’s description of the street, which is in the process of being demolished by the time he is writing the autobiography:

La rue Vilin est aujourd’hui aux trois quarts détruite. Plus de la moitié des maisons ont été abattues, laissant place à des terrains vagues où s’entassent des débris, de vieilles cuisinières et des carcasses de voitures; la plupart des maisons encore debout n’offrent plus que des façades aveugles.³²

Bachelard writes that a lighted window evokes a benevolent human presence; here the boarded-up windows suggest the solitude of Perec’s quest to make sense of his past, and the failure of the buildings to speak of the past.³³ The ‘terrains vagues’ created by the crumbling walls of the home give the reader a sense of the destruction of the protective qualities of a sealed domestic space, which have been swept away by a history of violence which abolishes distinctions between public and private.

³⁰ W, 68.

³¹ SM, 17. I am grateful to Muireann Maguire for drawing my attention to this point.

³² W, 67.

³³ Bachelard, p. 48.

There is another way to read the desolation of this scene. Paul Schwartz argues that Perec's evocation of the W island is a way for the son to accompany his mother to the camps through his imagination.³⁴ It is also possible to read his account of his return to la rue Vilin as a kind of attempted replacement for the impossible visit to her grave, whose absence has been described in the previous autobiographical chapter.³⁵ The reference to the inscription 'Coiffure Dames' above the door where his mother used to work provides support for this reading.³⁶ It is one of the few physical traces in the text of his mother's life, and the only one of her working life. It can be read as a kind of headstone, which marks the fact that she lived and died in the absence of a more ordinary grave. There is further evidence for this reading in the notes from the *Lieux* project which form the basis of this passage in the autobiography. They record Perec's sighting of a piece of graffiti which reads 'Travail=Torture', an inversion of the infamous motto above the gates of Auschwitz. In them, Perec writes that the road takes the shape of a stretched-out S, like that found in the SS sign.³⁷ This observation is preserved in the autobiography, though it is made less explicit.³⁸ Read in this way, traces of the violent history which leads to the murder of Perec's mother are written into the street, and Perec's return to it is a return to a site which can be mapped on to the sites of the Nazi genocide and the likely location of his mother's remains.

If we read la rue Vilin as a kind of prosthetic final resting place for Perec's mother, then the way it is destroyed has implications for attitudes toward the various sources and traces of memory in Perec's text. Nabokov's house remains standing but is adapted for new uses by the Bolshevik state; Perec's childhood home is simply demolished as part of a routine project

³⁴ *Georges Perec: Traces of his Passage* (Birmingham, AL: Summa, 1988), p. 55.

³⁵ *W*, 57.

³⁶ *W*, 68.

³⁷ *L'Infra-ordinaire* (Paris: Seuil, 1989), pp. 20-21.

³⁸ *W*, 67.

of urban development. It is a gradual process whose progress is recorded over the years Perec continues with the *Lieux* project and it is integrated into the everyday life of the street.

Perec's portrayal of the destruction of his childhood home thus suggests that the erasure of traces of the past is part of the quotidian, and that the interaction between humans and the world routinely produces and reinforces a diminished awareness of the past and its traces in the present. The text then unsettles any faith in the physical world as a reliable record of the past, or as a trigger for the reactivation of internal traces of the past. There is a hint, too, that the state is implicated in this everyday erasure. The demolition of the buildings is planned and carried out by local authorities, and can be read as a further step in the process of obscuring traces of Perec's mother's life and death that begins with the belated and inaccurate record of her death.³⁹

Perec's fictional work also explores the interaction between changes in urban landscapes during his lifetime and individual and collective memory. In particular, his 1978 novel, *La Vie mode d'emploi*, where each chapter deals with one room in a Parisian apartment block, brings out the connection between projects of urban renewal and the erasure of traces of the past. The building which gives the novel its structure is 11, rue Simon-Crubellier, and it is to be demolished and replaced by a hotel and leisure complex. As Lisa Villeneuve notes, this aspect of the novel's plot reflects the state-led drive for modernisation of French cities from the 1960s onwards, which led to widespread demolition of older buildings in Paris and other cities.⁴⁰ We can see the autobiography as depicting the aftermath of one such project of demolition, while the novel deals with the run-up to a similar project. Though *La Vie mode d'emploi* is fictional, Perec links it with contemporary building policy and practice through

³⁹ W, 57-58.

⁴⁰ 'Dwelling Space in Post-war French Fiction: Camus, Sollers, Perec' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2008), p. 8.

an allusion to Pompidou's 'Sixième Plan' for urban renewal.⁴¹ The anticipation of the building's destruction, which Villeneuve cites as an example of the novel's exploration of urban modernisation, strongly echoes the autobiographical description of la rue Vilin:

Un à un les magasins fermeront et ne seront pas remplacés, une à une les fenêtres des appartements devenus vacants seront murées et les planchers défoncés pour décourager les squatters et les clochards. La rue ne sera plus qu'une suite de façades aveugles.⁴²

The phrase 'façades aveugles' is also used in the description of la rue Vilin quoted earlier.

The lack of human sympathy such images suggest is made more explicit here through the references to the exclusion of squatters and tramps. *La Vie mode d'emploi* makes more explicit the idea implicit in the autobiography that the destruction of older Parisian buildings erases the histories of ordinary people and is driven by utilitarian and commercial concerns.

Villeneuve cites Perec's use of advertising copy in the following passage as an example of the way the demolition of the building is associated with an impersonal, commercial view of human living spaces. The room in question belongs to a character in the novel who is a master puzzle-maker and who shares the name of the protagonist of the fictional W story. Since Winckler spends his days creating intricate puzzle pieces, each one unique, it is ironic that his own living space will be reduced to a homogenous, commercial model: 'bientôt, le vieil appartement deviendra un coquet logement, double liv. + ch., cft., vue, calme.'⁴³

In both the novel and the autobiography, the buildings which maintain a record of lives absent from official history do not last. There is some suggestion that writing or other forms of art might become counterweights to such destruction, but both texts undermine any unquestioning faith in such a substitution of the textual for the topographical. In one of the

⁴¹ Villeneuve, p. 213.

⁴² *La Vie mode d'emploi: romans* (Paris: Poche, 2002), p. 818; cited in Villeneuve, p. 218.

⁴³ *La Vie mode d'emploi*, p. 660, cited in Villeneuve, p. 196.

novel's many uses of *mise-en-abîme*, the author's narration of these stories echoes that of another artist-figure within the text. The painter Valène, who informs the reader that the building will be destroyed, plans to paint it and all its inhabitants, but he dies leaving an empty canvas.⁴⁴ This episode discourages optimism about the ability of art to preserve traces of the past when they disappear from the material world. A similar circumspection emerges from the incorporation of Perec's notes on la rue Vilin for the *Lieux* project into *W ou la souvenir d'enfance*. Though the notes record times when the street still had working houses and businesses on it, Perec chooses to focus on the image of the street almost entirely demolished in the autobiography, as if to suggest that textual evocations of places associated with the past is no substitute for their presence. Writing could even contribute to the loss of memory created by demolition projects, as the *Lieux* notes suggest when a resident mistakes Perec's jottings in his notebook for the work of a building official and asks, 'Alors, vous êtes venu nous détruire?'⁴⁵

Perec then, like Nabokov, engages with the afterlife of his childhood home as a way of illustrating problems involved in using material remnants of the past as a trigger for memory. For both authors, the current situation of the childhood home serves to illustrate the author's distance from his past rather than fostering any sense of renewed connection to it, and both authors hint at the role of the state in distorting or removing elements of the physical world which could testify to the past. Unlike Nabokov, however, Perec does not have a tenacious inner image of the past with which to counteract its deceptive external traces. Though there are parallels between internal and external landscapes of memory as both are riddled with gaps, the relationship between the two is distanced. Where there is a sense of connection

⁴⁴ Villeneuve, p. 214.

⁴⁵ *L'Infa-ordinaire*, pp. 20-21.

between Nabokov's memories of his home and the 1955 photograph, even if it is one of hostility, in Perec's text the encounter with the current state of the home simply serves to confirm the difficulty of recovering the childhood world, gesturing toward the erasure of its remnants in his own mind, in the material world and in official records of the past. The text hovers between portraying such erasure as anonymous and routine and suggesting that it is part of a willed and violent attempt to suppress the past. In Chamoiseau's portrayal of his home, there is a similar ambivalence about the question of agency in the destruction of traces of the past, and comparable parallels are drawn between the destruction of internal and external traces of the past, but in contrast to Perec, these internal and external traces are bound into relationship. Their destruction is portrayed as an ambivalent process which heightens awareness of connections between self and world, rather than solely emphasising the author's sense of alienation from his childhood.

Chamoiseau

Une Enfance créole contains a pivotal image of the author's childhood home destroyed. As in Perec's text, the destruction of this outer remnant of the past is linked with the difficulty of re-entering the childhood world, but in contrast to the house on la rue Vilin, the destruction of Chamoiseau's old home is not a routine, anonymous process. Rather, it paradoxically confirms the value of the distinctive rituals of Chamoiseau's childhood that were designed to prevent fires in the wooden house.⁴⁶ It also acts as evidence of his mother's strength at a time when she is nearing death. The house only goes up in flames when she leaves, suggesting the force of her protective presence over the years.⁴⁷ Chamoiseau also suggests that the house

⁴⁶ *Antan*, 10-11.

⁴⁷ *Antan*, 11.

embraces its own destruction, so the fire acts as evidence of the home as an animate space, one of the qualities the author most values about it.⁴⁸ This process of destruction is, then, portrayed in ambivalent terms. The depiction of the former home laments the loss of a material remnant of another period, deepening the rift between the author and the world of his childhood. Yet in doing so, it also offers a miniature portrait of the intertwining of internal and external worlds that will be central to the autobiography.

The trilogy opens with a preface appended in 1996 (the first volume of the trilogy was first published in 1990) which describes the recent destruction of the home in a fire. Chamoiseau hears the house is burning and rushes to the scene, but the building cannot be saved. The description of the destruction of the house in the preface undermines the body of the text, which will go on to evoke in loving detail a space the reader knows to have been destroyed. Though we might expect the loss of the house to be portrayed in uniquely negative terms, there is a kind of creativity about the fire, whose strange beauty is spoken of in terms of flowers and bees, lending paradoxical connotations of fertility to this scene of destruction.⁴⁹ The preface then suggests that the destruction of the house leads both to a diminished sense of connection with the past and to its potential renewal.

The trajectory the preface presents of the author's life suggests reasons for the adult narrator's simultaneous sense of nearness and distance to the world of his childhood. It locates Chamoiseau's childhood home in Martinique's principal city, Fort-de-France. The dated signature to *Antan d'enfance* and the fact that the author is able to come to the scene when he hears his house is burning gestures towards Chamoiseau's adult life as a writer and

⁴⁸ *Antan*, 11.

⁴⁹ *Antan*, 9.

social worker in the area where he grew up. Though this indicates a degree of continuity between past and present, in other ways, the preface suggests elements of distance in the narrator's relationship to the past. In particular, three elements suggest the difficulties of re-entering childhood through a literary text: the linguistic move from Creole to French; the problematic status of writing as a means of portraying the past; and the economic and cultural changes that have taken place in Martinique since the 1960s and 1970s.

The preface makes clear that there is a linguistic gap between the language of at least part of the author's lived experience and the language of its narration. The words which tell Chamoiseau of the fire, 'Difé, difé', are in Creole, unlike the surrounding text, which is in French.⁵⁰ This brings to the fore the difference between the language commonly spoken in Fort-de-France and the language of Chamoiseau's text. There is also a suggestion here that Creole is better at evoking the lived reality of Fort-de-France. The Creole words do the urgent communicative work of pointing out that there is a fire, while the surrounding French text could be seen as mere elaboration on this central fact. Doubts about the value of written language are reinforced by other elements of this preface. Only one fireman is able to come to the scene, because the other firemen have had to attend a funeral outside of Fort-de-France. The narrator tells us that 'ils avaient sans doute publié un décret interdisant les feux et autres désagréments.'⁵¹ This episode can be seen as a satire of written, public language used to dominate other people or the natural world. It is a miniature version of the wider critique of official uses of written language which Chamoiseau undertakes in more theoretically oriented works. The lone fireman left to fight the fire, who is something of a pathetic figure, can be seen as representative of the relationship of the contemporary Caribbean autobiographer to

⁵⁰ *Antan*, 9.

⁵¹ *Antan*, 10.

the past. He attempts to put out the fire with his hose, but it is full of holes and twists in his hands ‘comme un ver en souffrance’, a possible symbol of the difficulties of preserving the past using the faulty tools of language and writing.⁵²

The linguistic gap between the lived experience and its narration makes recovery of the past difficult, as does the history of written records in the Caribbean and the nature of writing itself. But the way in which the author sees his old house also suggests more prosaic reasons for the separation between childhood and adulthood. The narrator tells us that he had occasionally passed the house since his mother moved out and that he had glimpsed it through its reflection in car windscreens.⁵³ This suggests something of the economic changes that have occurred in Martinique since he was growing up in the wooden house. Over the course of Chamoiseau’s childhood, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1970s, Martinique moved from being a producer economy to being a service economy dependent on the French welfare state.⁵⁴ Because of these economic changes, the Martinique in which Chamoiseau lives as an adult is very different from the country he grew up in. Richard Price notes that the economic changes of the 1960s and 1970s were seen as bringing about the end of a period which had stretched from the abolition of slavery to the mid-twentieth-century.⁵⁵ Raphaël Confiant argues this sense of transformation gives members of his generation a particular relationship to their own childhood, which comes to represent a lost world just before the contemporary Martinique came into being.⁵⁶ For this generation, recalling the passage from childhood to youth to adulthood also involves portraying Martinique’s movement to new economic

⁵² *Antan*, 9.

⁵³ *Antan*, 11.

⁵⁴ Richard Price, *The Convict and the Colonel: A Story of Colonialism and Resistance in the Caribbean* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. xiii.

⁵⁵ Price, p. xi.

⁵⁶ *Childhood, Autobiography and the Francophone Caribbean*, p. 13.

structures and the changes in everyday life these bring. Chamoiseau uses the changes in the way homes are built and lived in in Martinique as a way of conveying such changes. The disappearance of external traces of an older culture is recorded as a way of gesturing towards a concrete manifestation of more intangible change in modes of relationship between self and world in Martinique.

Each of these authors then uses an image of himself outside a childhood home as a way of exploring his position in relation to the early period of his life. In each case, his location outside the past is emphasised and the means of bridging the distance between past and present are called into question, but this takes different forms in each text. Nabokov's unpublished preface and its echoes in the caption to Andrew Field's photograph draw attention to the impossibility of physical return to the house where he was born because of Russia's regime change and Nabokov's own change of nationality. Yet this physical distance from Russia does not prevent re-entry through memory and imagination, a mode of entry which is figured as more valuable than physical return in any case. Perec, by contrast, is able to return to the street where he began his life, but in spite of this has a more distanced relationship with it. His failure to recognise his childhood home indicates his alienation from this period in his life. Chamoiseau, like Perec, still lives in the same city where he grew up. Though in a more attenuated sense than is the case with Perec, his ability to return physically to the house only draws attention to the changes in his mind which have introduced distance between his childhood and current life. These changes are in part a result of the move from childhood to adulthood, but are intertwined with economic and cultural changes in Martinique which leave ever-diminishing space for the Creole culture the house represents.

Though the reasons for each author's sense of distance from the past are different, each sets up tensions between images of their former homes as they were in the past and their changed or destroyed forms in the present. These images of destruction or change suggest a certain level of suspicion around the role of the state in relation to the memory of the past.

Nabokov's text brings out his disapproval of the Soviet state's co-opting of Herzen as a predecessor; Perec's image of the routine destruction of the last traces of his mother's life recalls the complicit role of the French state in her death; Chamoiseau's depiction of the fire which ruins the old house gestures toward the personal and cultural losses involved in the disappearance of older ways of life hastened by increasing dependence on the French state. These images of damage inflicted in the contemporary period and the hints at the indifferent and even falsifying role of the state in relation to traces of the past call up questions about what it means to live in the aftermath of state-sponsored histories of oppression and violence, questions which recur insistently throughout these texts. This suggests that the focus of their autobiographical enterprise extends beyond recording the distance opened up between childhood and adulthood through contact with violent histories. Rather, the scope of their project includes reflection on the ways in which the legacies of those histories continue to influence internal and external traces of the past in the present. These texts then focus on the specificities of the aftermath of such histories as well as their immediate effects. In order to construct the idea of an aftermath, some sense of 'before' is necessary, and evocations of the child's experience of the domestic interior are central to the portrayal of such a period, where it exists.

The Child's Perception of the House

Nabokov and Chamoiseau mobilise elements of the child's perception of the domestic interior as a way of building a portrait of the child's world as animate and benevolent. The child's experience of the world is interwoven with a particular linguistic and cultural milieu in each text, and this contributes to Chamoiseau's portrayal of the Creole language and culture as favourable to a nourishing relationship between self and world, and to the idyllic qualities in Nabokov's depiction of his childhood in the last days of Imperial Russia. The connections established between a given historical period and the child's imaginative relationship with a living, benevolent world work to create a sense of a protected time before the experience of violence or oppression, though in other ways the texts undermine clear oppositions between the periods before and after experience of violent histories. Perec, unlike the other two authors, does not portray his childhood world as animate, and this element of his autobiography contributes to the reader's sense that there is no 'before' which precedes his contact with history; rather, the early incursion of violence into his family life precludes the early, protected relationship between self and world which undergirds the other two authors' nostalgic depiction of a living childhood world.

The home is the place where the child comes to consciousness. Jean Piaget argued in 1929 that the child ascribes life to inanimate objects as his mind is developing and that in the very early years, the child even perceives a continuity between his own conscious life and the life of other objects and beings.⁵⁷ Piaget called this aspect of child development 'animism', though he did not intend by this any overlap with the use of the term in anthropology.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ *The Child's Conception of the World*, trans. by Joan and Andrew Tomlinson (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971), p. 169.

⁵⁸ Piaget, p. 170.

Though Piaget's argument has been the subject of much debate in developmental psychology, it finds striking anticipations and echoes in literary portrayals of childhood perception. Walter Pater's *The Child in the House* articulates the way the child's animism makes his first domestic surroundings come to seem alive, interwoven with the child's own inner life. The subject of Pater's story, Florian, has a dream where he sees the house where he grew up. Pater connects Florian's gaze on the house with an inward examination of his own soul as it has developed over time:

In that half-spiritualised house he could watch the better, over again, the gradual expansion of the soul which had come to be, there – of which indeed, through the law which makes the material objects about them so large an element in children's lives, it had actually become a part; inward and outward being woven through and through each other into one inextricable texture⁵⁹

Pater's lines evoke the softening of boundaries between the child and the material world that takes place within the home and suggest that remembering the home can act as an avenue into the exploration of the formation of the child's mind. Piaget and Pater's insights into the interaction of the child's mind with the world around him are helpful in interpreting the ways in which the domestic interior functions in the autobiographies of each of the three authors under discussion. In *Speak, Memory* and *Une Enfance créole*, the portrayal of the home from the child's point of view allows an exploration of his developing mind.

In both texts, the space of the home is portrayed as animate. There are continuities between the inner life of the child and the life of the home and the portrayal of the child's experience of domestic space functions as a way of evoking the open boundaries of early selfhood.

These open boundaries are important in two ways: they make possible a very close relationship between the child and his mother and they allow the child to have a rich, imaginative relationship with the physical world. These two aspects of the child's openness

⁵⁹ *The Child in the House: An Imaginary Portrait* (Boston: Everett, 1895), p. 5.

to the surrounding world are linked because the relationship with the mother acts as a kind of filter which allows the child to absorb the world around him. The child's experience of the home is inflected by his mother's perception and memory of it and this enriches his experience of the home and nourishes his imagination. The porous boundaries between child and world within the home are thus associated with the transmission of ways of thinking from the previous generation and with the beginnings of the child's imaginative life.

Though Piaget and Pater's observations on childhood animism might seem distant from the concerns of twentieth-century autobiographies confronting violent histories, Edward Said uses a comparable passage from George Eliot as an epigraph to an essay on the specificities of twentieth-century experiences of political and economic exile:

There is no sense of ease like the ease we felt in those scenes where we were born, where objects become dear to us before we had known the labour of choice, and where the outer world seemed only an extension of our personality.⁶⁰

The effortless continuity between the child and the surrounding world is here contrasted with the greater degree of exteriority in the individual's later relationship to the world. The quotation offers a counterpoint to the essay's evocation of the distanced relationship between the exiled individual and the world that arises from the break with the place of birth and childhood. The position of this quotation on the threshold of Said's essay and its role as a point of contrast point toward the significance of conceptions of the childhood home as animate in these narratives. The idea of childhood as a time where the world is animate takes on greater significance in the light of changes of location, language or culture which make return to the spaces associated with early childhood difficult. Where adult life differs from childhood in language, culture or physical surroundings, the early relationship to the surrounding world characteristic of childhood becomes associated with the older language

⁶⁰ *The Mill on the Floss* (London: Vintage, 2010), pp. 169-170, quoted in Said, p. 49.

and place. The textual association of an early language or space with animism grants these places considerable power; such portrayals suggest the world is more alive when experienced through the first language and close contact with the previous generation.

Linking childhood animism with an early language and culture, a particular physical space and close contact with the previous generation thus works to create a striking contrast between past and present relationships between self and world. Portrayals of the childhood home take on this function in Nabokov and Chamoiseau's work, but what of the absence of animate domestic spaces in *Wou le souvenir d'enfance*? One obvious reason for their absence is that, unlike Nabokov and Chamoiseau, Perec does not have any memories from his early life at home before the war. His first clear memories are of his time in school, after his first displacement from his family home in 1940.⁶¹ This difference between Perec and the other two authors also throws light on the generational literary traditions to which each belongs. Suleiman identifies the primary characteristic of the 1.5 generation as the experience of trauma 'before the formation of stable identity that we associate with adulthood, and in some cases before any conscious sense of self'.⁶² The lack of childhood animism in Perec's text can be seen as a result of the disruption to his developing sense of self by war-time upheaval and his early bereavement. In *Speak, Memory* and *Une Enfance créole*, the portrayal of the child's experience of home acts as a way for the author to evoke the living connection with the world forged through a language and culture he has left behind to a certain extent. Perec's memories of his child-self's experience of different dwelling places evoke the experiences which hampered any such immersion in an ancestral language, culture

⁶¹ *SM*, 72.

⁶² Suleiman, p. 277.

or physical place. Each author's portrayal of his child-self's experience of domestic spaces then offers a way into the text's location in relation to cultural, family and literary pasts.

The Home as an Animate Space

The home is portrayed as animate in *Speak, Memory* and *Une Enfance créole*. Home as a living space is valued because it allows the child to pass beyond the bounds of his own mind in various ways. One of the most striking ways in which the child goes beyond the boundaries of his mind is through his relationship with his mother. The child's experience of domestic space is strongly inflected by his mother's perception of it. He experiences it for himself, but he also absorbs her memories of it so that it becomes a 'temporally layered' space, holding several different periods within it.⁶³ Each author links the child's ability to enter into the mental worlds of his loved ones with an enriched memory that expands his experience of the home.

For Nabokov, the world of his childhood home is living and responsive. Everything on his family's estates is infused with spirit – furniture, plants, air and light seem to have moods and opinions and they participate in his life, swaying it this way or that. Though Piaget argues that animistic beliefs are characteristic of early childhood, and will gradually taper off as the child becomes an adolescent, in Nabokov's autobiography, home retains its animate qualities throughout his youth. Indeed, these become particularly striking during his early adolescence. When he looks up erotic words in his family's eighty-volume encyclopaedia on rainy days, he writes of the 'poor light that did all it could to discourage my furtive inquiry'.⁶⁴ Light is

⁶³ Laci Mattison uses the term 'temporally layered' in 'Nabokov's Aesthetic Bergsonism: An Intuitive, Reperceptualized Time', *Mosaic*, 46 (2013), 37-52 (p. 40).

⁶⁴ *SM*, 182.

attributed agency, and so is darkness. When Nabokov describes cycling home from nightly trysts with Tamara, one of his first loves, he remembers his ‘slow, laboriously pedaling feet trying to press down the monstrously strong and resilient darkness that refused to stay under’.⁶⁵ The darkness seems to absorb and throw back to him his sense of foreboding about the coming collapse of the relationship. The surrounding world participates in his love affair, absorbing Nabokov’s feeling that it cannot last long, but the natural world also shares in his happier moments. When he manages to free himself from all responsibilities and sets off to hunt butterflies, he writes that ‘the animation and luster of the day seemed like a tremor of sympathy around me’.⁶⁶ Images of trembling, rippling and glowing recur throughout Nabokov’s descriptions of his home, contributing to an impression of pre-revolutionary Russia as bursting with febrile energy.

For Nabokov, home is a place where connections are readily established between self and world. The mental life of the young Nabokov melts into his parents’ world, the natural world, and the world of books. Each of these is so vivid to him that it absorbs him completely. Figures in the natural world have a life similar to his. He speaks of a boulder where ‘a little mountain ash and a still smaller aspen had climbed, holding hands, like two clumsy, shy children’, establishing a parallel between the trees and his encounters with seaside playmates.⁶⁷ Adventures he reads about in Mayne Reid novels are re-enacted in play with his cousin, creating a continuity between the worlds he enters through reading and his own world.⁶⁸ The self at home becomes part of beings and worlds larger than itself, and home is seen as capable of holding many different domains.

⁶⁵ *SM*, 187.

⁶⁶ *SM*, 100.

⁶⁷ *SM*, 104.

⁶⁸ *SM*, 152.

In particular, it is portrayed as a link between earthly and heavenly worlds. In the tradition of many aristocratic memoirs and fictional memoirs from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, Nabokov's home is spoken of in terms of an earthly paradise. The richness, variety and beauty of his home make it a 'veritable Eden'.⁶⁹ By speaking of home as a paradise, Nabokov connects his autobiography with Tolstoy's *Детство*, where the evocation of an edenic domestic world also acts as a way into a nostalgic portrayal of a lost world.⁷⁰ The depiction of the author's childhood as idyllic acts as an implicit criticism of the present world. Nabokov's portrait of the heavenly world of his childhood, as well as being a personal recollection of happiness, establishes itself in opposition to the Bolshevik idea that the pre-Revolutionary world was wholly bad. Nabokov describes a harmonious world of abundance where servants are well-treated, bonds between parents and children are strong, and there is ample intellectual and sensual stimulation for the sensitive mind of the child. These qualities are all characteristic of childhood narratives written by members of the Russian gentry from the middle of the nineteenth century.⁷¹ By echoing these tropes, Nabokov aligns himself with the pre-Revolutionary literary tradition and goes some way toward continuing its life.

Chamoiseau's depiction of his childhood home as a living space also acts as an implicit (and at times explicit) criticism of the way life is lived in contemporary Martinique. He depicts the house he grows up in as an animate space. The way it lives and shelters many other kinds of life offers a point of contrast with more recent ways of life in Martinique, where cement buildings come to represent the inert relationship between contemporary Martinicans and the

⁶⁹ *SM*, 13.

⁷⁰ Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *The Battle for Childhood* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 54.

⁷¹ Wachtel, pp. 83-131.

surrounding world. The wooden walls of the old house are figured as a living membrane. The permeable wooden walls of the house quiver and crackle with heat, and when a breeze blows, they begin to sing.⁷² The house's walls shift in response to changes in the outside world, taking on a different colour when it rains, and shedding a skin like a snake in long dry spells.⁷³ The roof and walls of the house are also quite literally porous, as every time it rains, water comes flooding in through leaks. Chamoiseau's mother hangs up an oilskin sheet to catch the water that leaks from the ceiling of one of the bedrooms. The child watches as the sheet gradually curves as it collects more water. His fascination with the sheet and the way it is referred to as a chalice lend this scene connotations of the mysterious and the sacred.⁷⁴ Though we might question this romanticisation of what is, after all, a dangerous and unpleasant effect of poverty, this scene encapsulates the way the porous boundaries of the house allow the child contact with extended transitional spaces between inside and outside.

The way the house makes possible this contact with the transitional space between inside and outside is depicted as a specific attribute of Creole culture. Chamoiseau draws the reader's attention to the connections between Creole culture and the physical form of the house. The house's form is figured as an expression of a Creole practice of architecture and construction which has now been lost.⁷⁵ The way it creates transitional spaces between inside and outside can be connected to the value the créolistes place on the interstitial nature of Caribbean culture, which draws upon and exists in between European, American and African influences.⁷⁶ The balconies where plants are grown are one kind of transitional space

⁷² *Antan*, 46.

⁷³ *Antan*, 42; 47.

⁷⁴ *Antan*, 38.

⁷⁵ *Antan*, 43-44.

⁷⁶ *Eloge de la créolité/In Praise of Creoleness*, p. 13.

associated with the Creole house and the remnants of outdoor kitchens are another.⁷⁷ The kitchens are no longer used by the time Chamoiseau is a child but they still speak of porosity between different kinds of spaces because the child's mother uses them as chicken coops, so that the yard is somewhere in between an urban and a rural space. There are recurrent references to the increasing rarity of such houses, which are replaced by more European buildings as the child enters adolescence. The autobiographical text then becomes a way of recording the collective past of Fort-de-France as Chamoiseau moves from remarks on his own house to general comments about homes in Fort-de-France, using his home as a synecdoche for collective approaches to and experiences of dwelling-places. Chamoiseau's evocation of his childhood experience of domestic space thus functions as a way of recording aspects of a collective past.

The positive aspects of Nabokov and Chamoiseau's portrayals of the child's experience of the domestic interior are in strong contrast with those found in *Wou le souvenir d'enfance*, where there are very few evocations of the child within the house. Perec's childhood differs from that of Nabokov and Chamoiseau in that it is not spent in any one house, nor in a set of family houses; rather, after the move from la rue Vilin, he moves between different schools, *pensions* and relatives' houses in Villard-de-Lans. As with other members of the 1.5 generation, living with another family leads to a level of confusion and falseness about the child's position within it, as we see when Perec begins the chapter about his time living with relatives in Villard-de-Lans with a convoluted sentence pointing out the inaccuracy of some of his habitual ways of referring to members of his extended family: 'Henri, le fils de la sœur du mari de la sœur de mon père, que j'ai, depuis, pris l'habitude d'appeler mon cousin bien

⁷⁷ *Chemin*, 77; *Antan*, 51-52.

qu'il ne le soit pas...'⁷⁸ Henri's family live in Villard-de-Lans because of his asthma, and it was because of this that Perec's aunt took refuge there during the war.⁷⁹ The house where he lives with her is called Les Frimas, and the house where Henri lives with his family is called the Igloo.⁸⁰ Already these names suggest cold rather than domestic warmth, and the fact that 'Frimas' means freezing fog sets up an echo with the Nazi policy 'Nacht und Nebel' of suppressing all information about their treatment of camp inmates, which gives its name to Alain Resnais's 1955 film on the camps, present obliquely throughout Perec's text. This association of the family home with the actions that would lead to Perec's mother's death continues with a reference to his aunt making soap with baking soda, beef fat and ashes.⁸¹ There is an echo between this mention of soap and the final line of the W story, which signals its connection to the camps by referring to 'des stocks de savon de mauvaise qualité'.⁸² These hints at the presence of violent history in the domestic space are echoed by the absence of any image which would suggest that the home protects the child from the outside world. Rather, his memories are of it are based on photographs which recall its exterior.⁸³

Perec does not spend long in Les Frimas and will move on to various schools and 'homes d'enfants'.⁸⁴ These are homes in the French rather than the English sense, public institutions rather than protected, private spaces. Like Les Frimas, they have echoes with aspects of the fictional strand of the autobiography and with elements of war-time history. The collège Turenne, where Perec spends most time, is described in terms which echo the camps as 'un lieu terriblement éloigné, où nul ne venait jamais, où les nouvelles n'arrivaient pas, où celui

⁷⁸ W, 103.

⁷⁹ W, 103.

⁸⁰ W, 103-104.

⁸¹ W, 108.

⁸² W, 218.

⁸³ W, 104-108.

⁸⁴ W, 103.

qui en avait passé le seuil ne le repassait plus.⁸⁵ This school is the scene of one of the very few memories in the text of the child in an interior space. He is the only child left in the school on Christmas Eve and he gets out of bed to see if he has received any presents. The cold physical contact between the child and the building is in striking contrast with the evocations of continuity between child and world found in *Speak*, *Memory* and *Une Enfance créole*:

Je crois que la scène tout entière s'est fixée, s'est figée dans mon esprit: image pétrifiée, immuable, dont je garde le souvenir physique, jusqu'à la sensation de mes mains agrippant les barreaux, jusqu'à l'impression du métal froid contre mon front quand il se posa sur la barre d'appui de la balustrade. J'ai regardé en bas: il n'y avait pas beaucoup de lumière mais au bout d'un instant je suis arrivé à voir le grand arbre décoré, l'amoncellement de chaussures tout autour et, débordant d'une des miennes, une grande boîte rectangulaire.

C'était un cadeau que m'envoyait ma tante Esther: deux chemises à carreaux, genre cowboy. Elles piquaient. Je ne les aimais pas.⁸⁶

Here, the discontinuity between child and world evoked by the physical sensation of the cold metal on his forehead is mirrored by the disappointment of the unwanted gift, which itself suggests an uncomfortable bristling between the child's body and the material that surrounds it. All these elements of uncomfortable insertion in the world gesture towards the absence of his parents and perhaps especially of his mother, whom Esther cannot replace.

Relationships of Symbiosis between Mother and Child

As this exploration of childhood animism has begun to make clear, the child's ability to soak in the surrounding world within the home is dependent to a large extent on his relationship with his mother. He absorbs her memories so that he experiences the home both as it is during his childhood and as she remembers it in previous times. His relationship with his

⁸⁵ W, 125.

⁸⁶ W, 154.

mother thus shapes his experience of time, and the interaction between separate eras, as well as introducing him to sensory and aesthetic pleasure. Nabokov's interaction with his parents within the home is associated with a striking softening of his ego boundaries. Communication between parent and child continues within the home even when the two individuals are not physically present in the same place.⁸⁷ The text also hints that the shared mental world established within the home is connected to other kinds of dissolution of the self achieved through creativity, love and immortality. The loss of home is significant, then, not because it is a stable place, but rather because it is an unstable place, where borders between various selves and worlds are fluid. What T. I. Radomskaya writes of the way home works in Pushkin's poetry is also true of its role in Nabokov's autobiography: 'Дом - это такая граница земного пространства, через которую уже "просвечивают" черты небесного мира. Дом - это не застывшая статика, а переход, преобразование временного Вечным.'⁸⁸ The idea that home might be a place where the wall between the phenomenal and the noumenal starts to crumble fits in with the blurring of boundaries that occurs between past and present, self and other, human world and natural world, physical reality and imagined realities in the text. This blurring of boundaries between self and other, and between the phenomenal and noumenal realms, is particularly evident in the portrayal of his relationship to with his parents.

In scenes such as Nabokov's walks with his mother around their country estates, where she points out details of the natural world, and instructs him to remember them clearly, and when

⁸⁷ *DB*, 171.

⁸⁸ T. I. Radomskaya, *Дом и отечество в русской классической литературе первой трети XIX в.* (Moscow: Sovpadenie, 2006), p. 235, italics in the original. 'Home is a kind of border of earthly space, through which glow aspects of the heavenly world. Home is neither static nor frozen, but is a kind of crossing, a place where the transfiguration of the temporal into the eternal takes place.'

his father ritually goes over the story of how he caught a certain butterfly at a certain spot, we see Nabokov absorbing memories of scenes he himself never witnessed.⁸⁹ Such interactions also involve the transmission of a certain practice of memory. From such moments, Nabokov learns, and subsequently conveys to the reader, that good practice of memory is dialogic, involves some element of performance, and a level of awareness that one is creating or renewing a memory. Equally as importantly, through the young Nabokov's absorption of his parents' memories, people and events he never knew or experienced become real to him.

This is particularly the case with Nabokov's mother's memories. His mother's relationship to her past prefigures his adult relationship to the world of his childhood and youth. As in Nabokov's life, there is a painful split between the world of her childhood and youth, and the world of her early adulthood. Six of her seven siblings had died by the time she was married and her parents died shortly afterwards.⁹⁰ Nabokov's mother shares her memories of her lost family with her son, so that certain places within the family estates become connected with these dead relatives for him, like the room his maternal grandmother had used as a chemical laboratory, or the old tennis court where his maternal grandfather would play.⁹¹ The child absorbs his mother's memories and her attitudes toward them.⁹²

The extent to which his mother's family life was real to Nabokov becomes clear in his embarrassment over the magic lantern afternoons his tutor hosts.⁹³ The tutor, Lenski, invites classmates and friends of his charges to the Nabokov home to listen to works of literature accompanied by magic lantern slides. It bores many of the children who are only there out of

⁸⁹ *SM*, 25.

⁹⁰ *SM*, 47.

⁹¹ *SM*, 25-26.

⁹² *SM*, 26.

⁹³ *SM*, 124-128.

politeness. This reminds Nabokov of his maternal grandfather, who decided to set up his own school for his sons, and asked his acquaintances to send their sons there too, even paying the parents of poorer children, so that his sons would have some classmates.⁹⁴ Nabokov's embarrassment over Lenski's enterprise is heightened by his absorption of his mother's memory of an event that happened long before he was born.

The author's connection to his mother's mind is strongly associated with his initiation into aesthetic pleasure. There are many images from his depiction of his childhood which suggest that the absorption of beauty was its defining feature. This absorption is almost literal sometimes, as when he wraps a ruby-coloured ornamental egg up in a sheet and then sucks on the sheet until the red glow of the gem shines through it. This softening of the boundary between the ruby egg and the child is strongly associated with the way the child's mind and that of his mother come to overlap. This scene is connected with the jewels that Nabokov's mother would take out for her son to play with. Her jewels remind him of the coloured lights which decorate the city.⁹⁵ They offer him a smaller version of the world's beauties, miniatures which he can play with and so come to know in an intimate, tactile way. This play readies him for the beauty of the outside world, making it knowable. As well as the child licking the ruby egg, other images of oral absorption of beauty are associated with Nabokov's relationship with his mother, as when he would put his lips to her bedroom window through a gauze curtain, which recalls his description of 'the reticulated tenderness' of kissing his mother's cheek through her veil.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ *SM*, 127-128.

⁹⁵ *SM*, 91.

⁹⁶ *SM*, 65; 24.

Nabokov's playful interaction with his mother stimulates his sense for visual beauty. She also nurtures this sense by painting pictures for him: 'My mother did everything to encourage the general sensitiveness I had to visual stimulation. How many were the aquarelles she painted for me; what a revelation it was when she showed me the lilac tree that grows out of mixed blue and red!'⁹⁷ Nabokov's mother's paintings reveal to him the joys of colour and form. As well as a shared pleasure in visual beauty, mother and son also have in common several quirks of perception. They are both synaesthetes, and both suffer from mild hallucinations.⁹⁸ On one occasion narrated in the text, Nabokov has a vivid hallucination where he sees his mother shopping for a present for him on the streets of St Petersburg while he is ill in bed.⁹⁹ This vision later turns out to have been accurate. It provides a striking illustration of the degree of communication possible between the two minds.

Chamoiseau's mother also plays an important role in mediating her son's experience of domestic space. The way she moves through the home conveys something of her view of it, and she passes this on to the young Chamoiseau. An example of this is her refusal to allow cold air to enter the house when she is doing the ironing. She shuts up doors and windows to prevent draughts as she completes the task out of the Creole belief that experiencing heat and cold at the same time will lead to illness. The child-self in the text might not have a verbal understanding of this belief but because he likes to be in his mother's presence at all times, he also participates in her refusal to move from the hot room. This fits in with Paul Connerton's concept of memory being transmitted from generation to generation via bodily actions, learned and practiced through habit.¹⁰⁰ Chamoiseau also absorbs a sense of the changing

⁹⁷ *SM*, 22.

⁹⁸ *SM*, 20-22.

⁹⁹ *SM*, 23-24.

¹⁰⁰ *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 72-105.

seasons in Martinique through observing and absorbing aspects of his mother's interaction with the natural world. Her daily routine and mood change depending on the kinds of fish, fruit and vegetables in season. These changes in mood and routine become connected with the tastes of the seasonal food for Chamoiseau, and so he has a connection to the passage of time through his relationship with his mother and his sense of taste. Chamoiseau compares his mother's sensitivity to seasonal changes to that of a jelly-fish who moves with the slightest lapping of the tide and writes that his mother's body was 'branché aux saisons de la lune'.¹⁰¹ The child absorbs his sense of the passage of time in the outside world through his mother's life, which functions as a kind of umbilical cord tying his own life to wider kinds of immersion, fluid movement, and cycles of ebb and flow.

As we have seen, a parallel is established between the space of the house and the space of Creole culture. The child is initiated into Creole culture through his experience of the house. However, a further parallel is set up between the space of the maternal body and the domestic space. The house possesses certain womb-like qualities; it is protective, it is associated with shadowy, sheltered spaces, it nurtures an abundance of life and its walls are porous.

Conversely, the mother's body is spoken of in terms of a containing space. It is repeatedly characterised as possessing vast capacities and is once referred to as the child's 'racine-case'.¹⁰² This mapping of the internal space of his mother's body on to wider dwelling places recurs when Chamoiseau speaks of family illnesses. He writes that his mother would use conventional medicine to treat her children when they were sick, but would only take Creole, herbal medicine for herself. Chamoiseau writes: 'Pour son corps n'avait droit de cité que les médicaments créoles.'¹⁰³ Here the mother's body is figured as a Creole civic space. The

¹⁰¹ *Antan*, 180.

¹⁰² *A Bout*, 47.

¹⁰³ *Antan*, 104.

children's bodies, by contrast, are not mapped on to the space of Creole culture. They are depicted as containing new kinds of spaces and are treated with Western medicines. Writing of this generational change of approach to illness and healing, Chamoiseau relates it to a broader distancing from the Creole past: 'La médecine créole perdait ainsi ses voies de transmission.'¹⁰⁴ The collective move away from Creole culture is thus associated with the child's body being thought of and treated differently to the mother's body. This different treatment can be seen as a kind of move away from the child's previous fusional relationship with his mother and with the domestic interior. It is associated with cultural loss and distance from the child's early experience of the world, throwing into relief the role of the relationship with the mother in integrating the child's life within temporal and cultural continuities.

As touched on in the previous section, a distanced, uncomfortable relationship between child and world, arising in part from an absence of a mediating maternal presence, is present throughout the evocation of the child's perception of the world in *Wou le souvenir d'enfance*. Other female relatives are referred to anonymously and interchangeably as 'une tante', 'une cousine', 'une grand-mère' and their contact with the child is transitory and unpredictable.¹⁰⁵ Rather than filtering the world for him, their comings and goings give a concrete form to the unstable, distrustful relationship between child and world.¹⁰⁶ The presence of the mother within the domestic space is not remembered and has to be imagined, based on representation of such experiences in the children's literature mentioned in the Introduction: 'Moi, j'aurais aimé aider ma mère à débarrasser la table de la cuisine après le dîner. Sur la table, il y aurait eu une toile cirée à petits carreaux bleus [...] C'est comme ça que ça se passait dans mes

¹⁰⁴ *Antan*, 105.

¹⁰⁵ *W*, 94-95.

¹⁰⁶ *W*, 136-137.

livres de classe.¹⁰⁷ The reader can see that such images exerted a powerful pull on Perec because the blue squares of this passage also appear in a description of a kitchen in his first published novel, *Les Choses*, which came out in 1965, a full decade before his autobiography.¹⁰⁸ The focus on the detail of this imagined kitchen, and its source in books the child reads at school, only emphasises his distance from the experience of inhabiting a home made safe by a mother's protective presence.

The distance suggested by these devices also evokes a kind of crumbling in the processes of finding and creating meaning in the experience of space. Modes of making space meaningful are called into question throughout Perec's work. One system for ordering space which recurs repeatedly across Perec's non-fictional essays is latitude and longitude. In 'Quelques-unes des choses qu'il faudrait tout de même que je fasse avant de mourir', Perec lists travelling through the 0.0 point where the equator meets the Greenwich Meridian. In *Espèces d'espaces*, he devotes one of the essays to such points of origin, like sea-level, or the point which marks the very centre of France, and writes of his fascination with 'les points zéro, ces axes et ces points de référence à partir desquels peuvent être déterminés les positions et les distances de n'importe quel objet de l'univers'.¹⁰⁹ In 'De quelques emplois du verbe habiter', Perec notes the strangeness of the system of latitude and longitude to everyday life, remarking that he would not be understood if he gave his flat's latitude and longitude in reply to a question about where he lives.¹¹⁰ Similarly, *Espèces d'espaces* contains an anecdote about the British Postmaster-General forbidding the use of poetry, riddles or references to

¹⁰⁷ W, 95.

¹⁰⁸ *Les Choses: une histoire des années soixante* (Paris: Julliard, 1965; repr. Paris: Poche, 2002), p. 54.

¹⁰⁹ Perec, *Espèces d'espaces*, p. 111.

¹¹⁰ *Penser/Classer* (Paris: Hachette, 1985), p. 14.

latitude and longitude in addresses.¹¹¹ Here, the geographical system, like poetry and riddles, becomes a means of estranging an individual (in this case, the postman) from his or her usual perception. Situating a place through latitude and longitude is then associated both with utter mastery of the spatial world and with a degree of exteriority to everyday human experience, where space is made sense of in different ways.

These references to geographical techniques might seem irrelevant to Perec's autobiographical work, but in fact the image of an origin appears very early in the autobiography, when he refers to childhood as a pair of 'coordonnées à partir desquelles les axes de ma vie pourront trouver leur sens'.¹¹² Childhood is here situated as a point of origin in a personal and mathematical sense, which would allow Perec to make sense of the rest of his life. The pun on 'sens' (direction and meaning) indicates the importance of spatial orientation in this attempt to understand the past. This image foregrounds the central role of childhood and spatial orientation in self-understanding, but it also associates them with absence, most obviously by connecting childhood with the 0.0 point, but also because the image of axes forms an X, which Perec connects elsewhere in the text with the imbrication of his own history with the history of Nazism.¹¹³ This image of spinning axes also suggests a need to resort to external, theoretical systems to make sense of the connection between childhood and adulthood, which gestures toward the problematised, questioning relationship the author has with his past and with the question of space.

The tension between control over space and distance from the everyday, embodied relationship to it suggested by the exploration of longitude and latitude in *Espèces d'espaces*

¹¹¹ Perec, *Espèces d'espaces*, p. 112.

¹¹² W, 21.

¹¹³ W, 105-106.

and elsewhere is also apparent in the autobiography. The images of precise grid-like structures alongside references to disordered, or overwhelming space evoke two extremes of a relationship to the surrounding world, one characterised by a high level of human control over the world, the other by utter disorientation. This is apparent in the quotation above in the image of the very orderly kitchen, with its checked blue table cloth and elaborately balanced lamp, which contrasts sharply with the upheaval that characterised Perec's actual childhood experience of domestic space. Another instance of such contrast is the juxtaposition of the demolished houses on la rue Vilin and the domestic appliances strewn across the street with the author's vague memory of playing as a child with paving stones on the street. The stones are described as 'joliment cubiques'.¹¹⁴ These movements between descriptions of space where there are no bearings and grids which divide it up neatly point to the effect of his mother's absence. Without a maternal figure filtering and making sense of the surrounding world, it is experienced as simultaneously distant and overwhelming.

As we saw in the examination of *Speak, Memory* and *Une Enfance créole*, the mother influences the child's apprehension of time and memory, as well as filtering the spatial world. The domestic space then becomes the scene of a transmission of a practice of memory which goes on to inform the autobiographical text. The handing on of practices of memory that occurs in domestic spaces in the work of Chamoiseau and Nabokov is notably absent in Perec's text. If Perec's text suggests the difficulties of entering into a generational continuity in the absence of a stable domestic space, it is largely because the boundaries of the places he lives are not secure. As Lisa Villeneuve notes, 'the idea of dwelling implies a form of privacy or separateness', both of which are absent in Perec's experience of home.¹¹⁵ As we saw in

¹¹⁴ W, 68.

¹¹⁵ Villeneuve, p. v.

both the description of la rue Vilin as seen by the adult and the evocation of the child's experience of the interior of the school, marks of the history which would disrupt Perec's family life are not confined to the exterior world, but are present in the very shape of the street where he was born and within the school where he is seeking refuge from Nazi violence. The walls of the various places Perec lives do not then function to create a barrier between the life of the self and the family and a broader history of violence. Rather the evocation of dwelling-places brings out the imbrication of the two.

Stephen Kern, writing of Frank Lloyd Wright's architectural practice, highlights the importance of the walls of the home. Kern describes how Wright sought to build homes where all elements of the building organically blended into the whole, which in turn flowed into the landscape around it. This was designed to allow its inhabitants' lives to blend harmoniously with their surroundings, both interior and exterior. Yet, as Kern notes, this sense of fusion between the individual and his or her surroundings paradoxically depends on a degree of separation from them. Kern writes that although Wright sought to build walls which created a continuity between inside and outside, these porous boundaries were themselves encased within thick stone walls.¹¹⁶ These ensured the degree of privacy necessary for the individual to integrate his or her own life with that of the environment while still feeling safe. Kern's insights into Wright's architectural practice can be applied to the ways in which domestic spaces function in the texts under discussion. While they do indeed enable fusion between the child and the mother, and between the child and the world in the case of Chamoiseau and Nabokov, it is the walls of the home which create the conditions for this fusion.

¹¹⁶ *The Culture of Time and Space* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), p. 187.

As the domestic space is also the place where the child is initiated into a given language, culture, history, and practice of memory, its walls can also be seen to bear on the boundaries of that language, culture and history and on the conditions which enable contact with previous generations. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, there are parallels between the way the author depicts the childhood home(s) and the portrait of his own mind that emerges from the text. Damage to the walls of the home, or a breakdown in their role as a filter or protective barrier, thus takes on much weight within the text. It becomes a way into the depiction of wounds to the self, to parental relationships and to a given cultural milieu. Looking at the kinds of damage the walls of the childhood home suffer in each of these texts thus brings out the specificities of the historical violence which places distance between the author's present life and his childhood.

Damaged or Destroyed Boundaries of the Childhood Home

Though the walls of the home do have the function of creating a safe space and so allowing the child to absorb beauty and enchantment in *Une Enfance créole* and *Speak, Memory*, there are more ambivalent sides to their role within the text. As we have seen, in Perec's text, there are very few narrations of the child's experience of the home from within. Rather, depictions of the damaged or destroyed walls of the former childhood home make present the difficulty of maintaining a protected world for the family and the self in the face of historical violence of a vast scale. Though less obvious, the borders of the home in Nabokov and Chamoiseau's text also play this role. Damage to the walls' protective function allows the passage of historical violence into the protected world of the self, the family and the first language. Though Nabokov and Chamoiseau do use depictions of the child's perception of the world as animate to build an image of early experiences of the world as benevolent, in contrast to an

adulthood shadowed by a legacy of historical violence, they simultaneously complicate this opposition, pointing toward the permeable boundaries between the periods before and after contact with violent histories.

In an essay on the significance of damage to a home's walls, Beatriz Colomina draws out the subtleties in the relationship between public and private spaces and areas of safety and danger. She refers to an aphorism which says that you make a cannon by taking an empty hole and twisting some steel wire around it and draws a parallel between public space and the empty space at the centre of the cannon. Colomina compares the steel wire to private spaces which make public space visible and possible, destabilising the concept of the interior as a safe, protected space and the exterior world as threatening.¹¹⁷ Colomina's insights are relevant to the other side of the portrayal of the home's boundaries in *Speak, Memory* and *Une Enfance créole*. As well as creating a safer world which the child can absorb into himself, the walls of the home also make visible the violence and oppression that shape the exterior world.

The dual nature of the boundaries of the home is particularly evident in *Speak, Memory*. As we have seen, the idea of the home as a place of softened boundaries between different temporal periods, self and other and the earthly and the supernatural or heavenly is central to the idyllic qualities Nabokov lends his early life. The home is the place where the child's mind is enriched by its easy absorption of elements of the surrounding world. Yet, this porosity between the mind and physical world can become double-edged. The windows of

¹¹⁷ Beatriz Colomina, 'Battle Lines', in *Rethinking Borders*, ed. by John C. Welchman (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 51-64 (p. 53).

the home at times act as a charged barrier, which excludes violence on the street while allowing images of it to enter into the home. Because of the parallel drawn between the interior of the home and the inner world of the child, this crossing of the boundary of the home also suggests the entry of violence into the self. The use of windows to portray the entry of violent images into the child's mind becomes particularly significant in the light of Nabokov's depiction of glass, crystal and other reflective surfaces as images for artistic consciousness, which makes possible creativity, imaginative movement between different periods and loving relationships. As mentioned before, the child's absorption of beauty is strongly connected with his play with jewels and coloured glass. Imagery of windows as the means of transmission of scenes of violence thus interweaves the aesthetic with the historical.

Richard Terdiman identifies such interweavings recurring across a range of French modernist texts through the imagery of windows. He finds examples of protagonists contemplating a menacing social reality beyond a window-pane in Gautier's preface to *Albertus ou L'Ame et le péché*, whose protagonist is devoted to art and indifferent to politics. He confines himself to a room to write, but his haven is disturbed when bullets shatter the windows during revolutions.¹¹⁸ In Baudelaire's 'Les Yeux des pauvres', the speaker and his mistress are disturbed by a family of beggars peering through the windows of the café where they are sitting.¹¹⁹ There is an echo of this, whether intentional or not, in *A L'Ombre des jeunes filles en fleur*, where the narrator writes that the upper classes dining in a room with large windows are like exotic fish to the working people who observe them from the outside, and run the risk

¹¹⁸ *Poésies complètes*, ed. by René Jasinski, 3 vols (Paris: Nizet, 1970), I, 81, quoted in Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), pp. 159-160.

¹¹⁹ *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Claude Pichois, 2 vols (Paris: Gallimard-Pléiade, 1976), I, 317-319, quoted in Terdiman, p. 164.

of one day being eaten by them.¹²⁰ Mallarmé's 'Le Conflit', a prose poem which is in part a meditation on similar themes, opens with an image of a window.¹²¹ Terdiman argues that such images are a way of lending a concrete form to the tensions inherent in the modernist project of sealing off the aesthetic from the historical and the social. Images of violence or the threat of violence crossing over or smashing these windows embody an uneasy awareness of the potential return of the historical into the realm of the aesthetic, or even a sense that the two can never be fully separated. Terdiman writes of the window that 'its very brittleness is an acute reminder of the sort of menace it frames and simultaneously seeks to forestall'.¹²² Such crossings are also present in Nabokov's text, and they nuance the depiction of the home and the world of early childhood as an idyllic time of emotional and aesthetic enrichment. This interweaving of the historical and the aesthetic occurs in a particularly striking way when Nabokov describes looking through a window in his mother's bedroom while waiting for his English teacher. This is the same window which Nabokov kisses through a gauze curtain, and just after he mentions this, he says that it was through this window that he saw a murdered man for the first time. He writes that as the corpse was being carried away, another man was trying to rip its boot off, even though the men carrying the body were punching him and pushing him away.¹²³ Nabokov does not dwell on this image but moves on smoothly to write that when he sat looking through this window before his art lessons, there was nothing to see on the quiet street. The early memories of putting his lips to his mother's window, the much later one of seeing the corpse, and the intermediate one of waiting on his English teacher are all contained within one passage. The later and more violent memory cannot be separated

¹²⁰ *A la recherche du temps perdu*, ed. by Jean-Ives Tadié, 4 vols (Paris: Gallimard-Pléiade, 1987-89), II (1988), 41-42, quoted in Terdiman, pp. 161.

¹²¹ *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. by Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Gallimard-Pléiade, 1945), pp. 355-360, quoted in Terdiman, p. 164.

¹²² Terdiman, p. 165.

¹²³ *SM*, 65.

from the earlier, more peaceful recollections. This effect is repeated later in the autobiography when Nabokov remembers the trees lining the streets near his house, and writes that the ear and finger of a terrorist who had been blown up by his own bomb had been found once in one of them.¹²⁴ He also says that during the revolution of 1905, children had climbed into the trees to escape the violence, but had been shot down at random by mounted police.¹²⁵ As before, the trees are connected both with violence and beauty. Nabokov writes of how they create ‘a pattern of silver filigree in a mother-of-pearl mist’ before relating the violence that took place in and around them.¹²⁶ The connection between artistic consciousness and violence is reinforced when Nabokov refers to one of their servants leading Bolshevik soldiers through the house to the room where he was born and where his mother kept the jewels Nabokov would play with as a child.¹²⁷ The image of Bolshevik soldiers in the room where Nabokov was born and where the jewels are kept speaks of an interweaving of the safety, love and beauty of the domestic sphere and the violence of public history.

This connection between domestic spaces and violent histories is also made in Nina Berberova’s *Курсив мой*. Berberova mentions that she was born on the same street as Nabokov, two years and four months after him.¹²⁸ She shares Nabokov’s clear visual memories of the house where she was born, though she dwells much less on its description.¹²⁹ She also moves between descriptions of the domestic space which emphasise its safety to references to the violence which took place within it after the October Revolution

¹²⁴ *SM*, 142.

¹²⁵ *SM*, 142.

¹²⁶ *SM*, 142.

¹²⁷ *SM*, 145.

¹²⁸ Nina Berberova, *Курсив мой* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1972), p. 36.

¹²⁹ *Курсив мой*, p. 36.

and during the Civil War.¹³⁰ In one particularly striking episode, the young Berberova stands looking at the full moon through a window of her house. Her father approaches and says that soon the elephants and tortoises will be coming to reclaim their ivory and combs. Here, objects associated with the bourgeois interior are resituated as the bodily exterior of exotic animals. Berberova's father's comments play with ideas about inside and outside, suggesting the presence of an untamed exterior presence within the home that will soon overwhelm its boundaries both from within and without. Both *Курсив мой* and *Speak, Memory* complicate the idea of the domestic sphere as protected from a hostile exterior world, calling attention to the permeability of the boundaries of the home. Because there is a continuity between the domestic interior and Nabokov's inner world, the permeability of the boundaries of the house also suggests the passage of images of violence into the artist's mind. A close reading of Nabokov's portrayal of domestic spaces then brings out the presence of traces of violence within the intimate world of the self and the family, and the interpenetration of the child's absorption of beauty and the pain of others.

In Nabokov's text it is the permeable boundary between the world of the self and the exterior world which is portrayed as the sign of the self's vulnerability to historical violence. In Chamoiseau's text, it is the closing up of the borders between self and world that suggests the encroachment of the legacies of violent histories on the protected world of the self. The author draws a parallel between his own transition from childhood to adulthood and Martinique's transition to new economic structures which lead to greater dependence on France. He conveys both kinds of transition through metaphors of hardening boundaries. The author's move from the creative perception of childhood to the more conventional perception of adulthood is suggested through images of husks or crusts forming around labile

¹³⁰ *Курсив мой*, pp. 38-39.

material.¹³¹ Similarly, Martinique's economic transformation is encapsulated by the move from wooden to concrete houses. Both kinds of transition are figured as a kind of loss and are associated with blindness to the outside world and diminished life. Rigid boundaries as a metaphor for impoverished perception appear especially prominently in this passage, where Chamoiseau meditates on the difference between childhood and adult perception, and their relationship to reality:

On ne quitte pas l'enfance, on la serre au fond de soi. On ne s'en détache pas, on la refoule. Ce n'est pas un processus d'amélioration qui achemine vers l'adulte, mais la lente sédimentation d'une croûte autour d'un état sensible qui posera toujours le principe de ce que l'on est. On ne quitte pas l'enfance, on se met à croire à la réalité, à ce que l'on dit être le réel. La réalité est ferme, stable, tracée bien souvent à l'équerre – et confortable. Le réel (que l'enfant perçoit en ample proximité) est une déflagration complexe, inconfortable, de possibles et d'impossibles. Grandir, c'est ne plus avoir la force d'en assumer la perception. Ou alors c'est dresser entre cette perception et soi le bouclier d'une enveloppe mentale. Le poète – c'est pourquoi – ne grandit jamais ou si peu.¹³²

Here, rigid boundaries around the self prevent true perception, which is replaced by a simplified, conventional view of the world. The attributes of 'la réalité' – 'ferme, stable, tracée bien souvent à l'équerre' – echo those of concrete homes, while the reference to the set square suggests the uniformity and univocal meaning of technical drawings as opposed to the coexistence of opposite states found in the poetic 'réel' experienced by the child. This coexistence of opposite states is reminiscent of the old wooden house where 'les lumières et les ombres, les mystères et les évidences' intermingle.¹³³ Given the repeated association of the wooden houses with fire, 'déflagration' also connects perception of 'le réel' with older modes of dwelling.

¹³¹ *Antan*, 21.

¹³² *Antan*, 93-94.

¹³³ *Antan*, 185.

The parallel between the loss of childhood perception and the movement from wooden to concrete houses becomes more significant when one recalls the mapping of the domestic interior on to the maternal body, and the intertwined roles of mother and house as transmitters of Creole culture and filters of the world. Movement away from childhood perception also entails greater distance from the mother and the culture she represents. There is a parallel between this process and the way the concrete walls exclude the life which used to flourish in the transitional space between the house and the outside world. The Creole plants which would bloom on balconies during the author's childhood disappear with the coming of air-conditioning, which creates a sharp contrast between indoors and outdoors.¹³⁴ Transitional spaces are further dismantled by the narrowing of the yard which used to contain the kitchens and Man Ninotte's chicken coops.¹³⁵ The reduction of such in-between areas where private life and public life blend is echoed by a more general retreat to the indoors, as for example in the move from public water fountains to a supply piped to individual homes.¹³⁶

Like a cell membrane or the passable boundary of an eye, the wooden walls filter the child's experience of the world. This idea is made explicit in its closing passages, where Chamoiseau contrasts the shabby look of the house with its powerful role in his life and the collective life of his family and generation: 'Elle signifiait la misère grise du bois dans un Fort-de-France qui commençait à se bétonner les paupières.' This metaphor situates the house as a kind of organ of perception. According to this image, the walls of the house are not just an ordinary boundary, but a sense-making boundary. The movement to concrete walls thus blocks perception of the outside world just as the child's acquisition of adult perception prevents

¹³⁴ *A Bout*, 186.

¹³⁵ *Antan*, 186.

¹³⁶ *Antan*, 94.

him from seeing 'le réel'. These metaphors of rigidification and loss of perception have implications for the relationship the text suggests between the life of the self and the legacy of colonialism. The painful image of concrete eyelids and the idea of an opaque and rigid boundary preventing vision conveys Chamoiseau's conception of neo-colonial 'domination insidieuse'.¹³⁷ Under this dispensation, the very sense-making capacities of the individual are damaged, so that it becomes difficult or impossible to see beyond the self or to perceive one's own alienation. The metaphor suggests that neo-colonial economic structures both define the limits of the self and prevent perception of the way it defines those limits.

Though it might seem that this rigidification is a process only imposed from without, elements of the text suggest complicity in it on the part of the child, the house and the town. The opening page of the main body of the trilogy connects the child's growth in rational knowledge with a more distanced relationship to the world around him. The author speaks of childhood as a kind of lost knowledge, and questions his ability to recover it:

Peux-tu dire de l'enfance ce que l'on n'en sait plus? Peux-tu, non la décrire, mais l'arpenter dans états magiques, retrouver son arcane d'argile et de nuages, d'ombres d'escalier et de vent fol, et témoigner de cette enveloppe construite à mesure qu'effeuillant le rêve et le mystère, tu inventoriais le monde?¹³⁸

This passage suggests childhood is a gradual process where growing knowledge of the world is intertwined with a less imaginative relationship to it. It situates childhood as a process whose natural unfolding will lead to its own destruction. This suggestion that destruction is embedded within the qualities that make a certain state most valuable is also present in the description of childhood perception more broadly and in the evocations of the wooden house and the town. As noted earlier, childhood perception is spoken of as a 'déflagration' which links it with the wooden houses and Creole culture. This image suggests the explosive energy

¹³⁷ *Ecrire en pays dominé* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), pp. 17-18.

¹³⁸ *Antan*, 21.

of childhood and the way it creates the conditions for opposite states to spark off each other. Yet it also hints that it will inevitably burn itself out. This implication of a self-consuming element embedded within the energy of childhood perception and the Creole culture associated with the wooden houses is also present in the author's speculation in the preface that his house might have willingly abandoned itself to the flames which destroy it.¹³⁹ On a broader level, the town which is built of such houses also possesses this ambivalent quality of openness to change which includes an openness to its own destruction. Chamoiseau draws out the dual nature of its openness in this passage, which comes shortly after a lament over the replacement of wood by cement:

*... Cette ville n'a jamais été lourde, ni monumentale, ni en pierre éternelle, juste en bois offert à la dent des cyclones et des embrasements... maintenant, elle vit l'aventure de ce monde, en fluidité extrême, l'urbain se développe sans faire ville, effaçant des souvenirs, n'accordant qu'une écaille mémorielle dénuée des forces pérennes qu'élevaient les villes de pierre...*¹⁴⁰

Here the familiar imagery of a surface layer associated with diminished engagement with the world is complicated by the idea that impermanence and vulnerability to destruction are some of the qualities which make the Creole modes of dwelling valuable to the author. The idea that the hardening or complete disappearance of such permeable boundaries is in some way a natural process, like the end of an explosion or the washing away of fragile buildings, stands in tension with the idea that such loss is caused by contact between the child, house or town with the neo-colonial economic structures and modes of thought. This tension between damage to the self occurring as part of a natural process and being imposed by contact with history will be further explored in the next chapter, but for now I will note that the boundaries of the home in Chamoiseau's work, as in that of Nabokov, both create a world where the child is sheltered, and hold within them the outside forces which make this world vulnerable to destruction.

¹³⁹ *Antan*, 111.

¹⁴⁰ *A Bout*, 186-187, italics in original.

These nuances in the portrayal of the home's boundaries bring out the different points at which painful histories make themselves felt in the author's life. Perec, unlike Nabokov and Chamoiseau, does not suggest there was a time in his life 'before' contact with 'l'histoire avec sa grande hache'.¹⁴¹ Indeed his image of history as an axe is evocative of its power to curtail the temporal continuities which would make concepts of before and after meaningful. His text suggests that his experiences of the domestic interior and of the other places he lived were always inflected by traces and anticipatory signs of the violence which would fracture his family life. Nabokov and Chamoiseau take a more ambivalent approach to this question of the time before contact with history. On the one hand, each connects his own most vivid experience of violent histories with places that are quite distinct from the home. As the next chapter will explore, school is the most prominent place where the young Chamoiseau will come into contact with the painful legacy of colonialism and Nabokov's vulnerability to historical violence begins in earnest once he has left St Petersburg for the Crimea, then Cambridge, Berlin and Paris. The child's experience of the domestic interior is largely opposed to later, painful events which take place in the outside world. Yet even as the two authors construct such an opposition between a benevolent, domestic world and a dangerous public sphere, they work to undermine it, drawing attention to the ways in which the boundaries of the home both exclude the violence without and make it present within the intimate world of the family, the self and the first language. Their portrait of the domestic interior is an ambivalent one, then, which suggests that safety and danger, the intimate and the strange are intertwined at the roots of the self.

¹⁴¹ W, 13.

Conclusion

An examination of these authors' portrayals of childhood dwelling-places brings out their engagement with a set of concerns common to all three. Each author seeks to narrate the interaction between an individual life and a larger history which has triggered intergenerational changes in language, greater distance from the previous generation and a problematised relationship to the spaces inhabited by the child-self. The portrayal of home in these texts brings out the challenges involved in depicting damage done to the self by historical events, when those events have also been instrumental in forming the self. This becomes visible in particular in the image of the author on the threshold of his former home. In these texts, such images lend a political edge to the sense of exclusion from the past common to many autobiographies, as each author draws attention to the role of the state in widening the gap between past and present. The portrayal of the child's experience of the home emphasises the importance of close contact with the previous generation and the first language and culture in allowing the child to grow into an imaginative, nourishing relationship with the surrounding world, an importance which is thrown into relief by Perec's text, where their absence is associated with difficulty in establishing a positive relationship with others and the world. Though Perec's portrayal of the presence of traces and anticipatory signs of historical violence within the domestic space at first seems quite distant from the more celebratory accounts of early childhood found in *Speak, Memory* and *Une Enfance créole*, closer examination reveals that these texts, too, locate elements of violent histories even within the space of the home.

These common concerns are approached differently in each text because of each author's position within very different literary and generational traditions. Nabokov's largely idyllic

depiction of the houses where he grew up inscribes him within a tradition of accounts of Russian gentry childhoods. Perec's depiction of his multiple temporary homes during the war and his desolate portrayal of la rue Vilin suggest the early upheaval and impossibility of recovering the past or establishing a positive relationship with the surrounding world characteristic of narrations of childhood by the 1.5 generation. Chamoiseau's portrayal of his old wooden home as an artefact of Creole culture which dies away as he grows up is in line with other evocations of childhood by his fellow créolistes and members of his generation of Caribbean writers. Differences in social class and privilege between these authors are made visible by the childhood homes they recall, from the Nabokov family's regal townhouse and several estates, to Perec's depiction of an overcrowded flat in the working-class immigrant neighbourhood of Belleville to the leaking wooden house where Chamoiseau lives as a child. The particular way in which each author comes into contact with violent histories also varies greatly, from Perec's loss of his parents, to Nabokov's youthful flight from post-revolutionary Russia and time in inter-war Berlin and war-time Paris, to Chamoiseau's much less direct contact with historical violence, which echoes down to his generation though not experienced by them. How can such different experiences of historical violence be read side-by-side? The concept of trauma has the potential to allow such comparative readings, as well as opening up a closer examination of the links between personal bereavement and cultural loss, questions which are explored in the next chapter.

Chapter Two: Traces of Trauma

This chapter tests the value of reading these texts' responses to violence and bereavement through the paradigm of trauma. By examining what is lost and gained by bringing together the wide range of historical and personal experiences explored in these texts, this chapter engages with recent debates on the widening use of the term and the literary and ethical implications of this. These texts have been read as expressions of traumatic memory before,¹ but I want to test here what is to be gained by looking at these works as narrations of trauma in a specifically comparative perspective. There are two ways in which a comparison of these texts as narrations of trauma offers new insights: it suggests that different models of inter-generational transmission of memory can be usefully brought into dialogue, and it offers new ways of thinking about the relationship of the experience of trauma to the everyday.

Each of these texts addresses both the personal pain of losing a parent and grief over a move away from insertion within a language and culture that form a collective identity. To various degrees, the loss of the parent comes to stand for distance from the language and culture of the family past. In the interwoven memorials to the parent and the culture they come to represent, these texts offer fruitful points of entry to questions about the connections or absence of connections between personal and collective experience of loss. Because each of these authors has a different generational relationship to the historical trauma he addresses in his autobiography, a comparison of the texts is one way towards an answer to questions about the transmission of trauma between generations. Looking at these texts side-by-side suggests

¹ Lawrence D. Kritzman, 'Remembrance of Things Past: Trauma and Mourning in Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*', *Journal of European Studies*, 35 (2005), 187-200; Kaufman, pp. 44-49; Straumann, pp. 33-86.

there are points of convergence between the conscious experience of scenes of violence (Nabokov), living in the direct aftermath of genocide (Perec) and living in the long aftermath of histories of colonial violence (Chamoiseau) and that each author's mode of relation to the personal and collective past is strongly inflected by his parents' experience.

Key Concepts in Trauma Theory

Cathy Caruth was one of the first theorists to bring the concept of trauma to the attention of literary scholars in her 1996 book *Unclaimed Experience: Memory, Trauma and History*. Caruth defines trauma as an event which is so overwhelming that it is not understood as it happens and can only be processed belatedly 'in connection with another time and in another place'.² Because the event is not understood as it happens, it returns to haunt the individual in the form of flashbacks, nightmares, or unwitting re-enactments of the painful event. Drawing on Freud's description of the latency of traumatic memories, which lie dormant in the individual's mind, only to return at unpredictable moments, Caruth's conceptualisation of trauma places disrupted temporal experience at the heart of trauma. This obsessive return of the past is often spoken of in terms of possession or haunting.³ Though less often remarked upon, trauma also has an impact on an individual's experience of space. Because it is processed after the fact, if at all, places very distant from the scene of the trauma can become the scene of its return. Caruth's definition of trauma depends then, not on the content of the traumatic event, but rather on the way it is received by the mind. The event bypasses the individual's usual perceptual filters and as a result, cannot be fully processed by the traumatised individual.

² *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), p. 17.

³ Whitehead, p. 6.

Both the memory of a traumatic event, and its narration, are therefore impossible, strictly speaking. What textual approaches to trauma can do is to illustrate or stage the impossibility of narrating the trauma. They bear witness to the damage the event has done to the individual's usual powers of perception and narration, rather than to the event itself. This emphasis on the mind's reception of the event, rather than its content, means a wide range of experiences can be defined as traumatic. Nevertheless, there is an implicit understanding that in order to trigger such a response, an event must shock the sufferer in some way. Trauma, then, hovers somewhere between form and content.⁴ According to Dori Laub and Shoshana Felman, it also lies somewhere between the speaker or writer and listener or reader. Because traumatic events are too painful and overwhelming for those who experience them to comprehend or articulate, it is the listener who witnesses to trauma by piecing together the pain alluded to in oblique ways by the traumatised individual.⁵

Caruth's theory of trauma, with its emphasis on non-linear narrative forms, and its concept of painful events being processed in a different place than their origin offers a helpful theoretical model for understanding the significance of the silences in each of these texts, and the links found in each between different times and places. Because it can describe such a wide range of experiences, it also offers a way of accounting for echoes in each author's approach to personal and collective loss, though the particular mode of his loss varies so greatly. It thus offers a way of bringing together authors who are using their autobiographical

⁴ Whitehead, p. 162.

⁵ *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 57.

work in part to address the troubling of personal and collective identity produced by the state-sponsored violence and mass migrations of modernity.

Textual Tropes of Trauma

Though each author's position in relation to the histories which have brought about linguistic and cultural change in his family history is different, there are some striking points of convergence in the way they articulate this position. In each text, to varying degrees, the reader finds silence where she might expect an articulation of personal or collective loss. This absence of articulation is paired with multiple, oblique references to the silenced subject-matter. At times the text will come close to articulation of a painful episode of the past, only to veer off on to another subject. This interweaving of silence and multiple, repetitive returns to a moment of loss that cannot be articulated echoes the dynamic described in trauma theory. Silences and the development of a fragmentary narrative are both part of what Roger Luckhurst has called the 'trauma aesthetic'.⁶ This is characterised by a degree of tension between narrative form and the experience to be recounted, leading to gaps in the narrative structure and a turning away from description of the traumatic event. Rather than describing the traumatic scene, the author arranges a collection of fragmentary memories related to it. The reader must then deduce the origin of the trauma by reflecting on the links between the fragments and paying close attention to narrative gaps.⁷ Meaning is not encoded in the text alone, but also in its blank spaces, which are signs of events so painful that they cannot be narrated.

⁶ *The Trauma Question* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 88.

⁷ Luckhurst, p. 81.

In Nabokov's text, meaning is encoded in the blank spaces of the text, most clearly in the narration of his father's death. Though I refer to a narration, it is really more an assembly of scattered fragments of the text which point to this central loss. Brian Boyd articulates this dynamic using the metaphor of the wound. He writes: 'Again and again throughout his autobiography Nabokov returns obliquely to his father's murder as if it were a wound he cannot leave alone but can hardly bear to touch.'⁸ This is also the case to a lesser extent for other painful episodes in Nabokov's past, including grief over the loss of his mother and brother, and worry over his wife and son in 1930s Berlin and war-time Paris. The text also takes a laconic approach to the societal turmoil that must have accompanied Nabokov's time in late imperial Russia, inter-war Berlin and war-time Paris. As with more personal episodes of violence or loss, Nabokov's text evokes such scenes momentarily, only to pass on rapidly to an entirely different time or place.

The communicative role of silence in gesturing toward Nabokov's father's death becomes most marked in the final version of the autobiography. In this version, Nabokov for the first time narrates his memory of the telephone call which brings news of his father's fatal wound, received as he tried to protect a friend and colleague from two assassins.⁹ Crucially, Nabokov does not tell the reader about the news the telephone call brings. Instead, he breaks off the sentence mid-phrase, and then moves to another paragraph where his father's death is implicitly acknowledged. The reader then has to deduce the reason for the broken-off sentence by bringing together two separate parts of the text, which locate this phone call on the same night as Nabokov's father's death. The very active role the reader has to take on to draw meaning from this silence resonates with Felman and Laub's argument that in the case

⁸ Brian Boyd, *Vladimir Nabokov: The Russian Years* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 8.

⁹ *SM*, 33.

of trauma both listener and speaker share the responsibility of witness. It is significant that the reader can only understand this passage if she has been reading attentively enough to remember its details; Nabokov here rewards memory and a willingness to cast one's mind retrospectively over the text. He thus encourages the reader to become, to a limited extent, a collaborator in the enterprise of mentally preserving the details of his past.

Though language seems to fail Nabokov when it comes to the details of his father's death, these details surface in other, seemingly unrelated, parts of the text, leading Michael Wood to write that '*Speak, Memory* is strongly organized around the father's death'.¹⁰ When Nabokov is still in secondary school, he hears that his father has been challenged to a duel. This belatedly makes sense of the extra boxing lessons his father had had recently and of the changed atmosphere in his house.¹¹ On the journey home from school, he worries about his father's fate and his mind drifts to the choice of weapons. The text refers to various weapons but when it comes to pistols, Nabokov's train of thought suddenly swerves away.¹² Because Nabokov's father did eventually die from a gunshot wound, we can read this swerving away from the idea of the pistols as a result of the same inability to articulate the details of his father's death that causes him to break off the sentence about the telephone call. In both cases, it is the text's sudden silence and movement away from the subject under discussion that suggest the presence of remembered pain.

As Brian Boyd brings out in his reading of the end of Chapter One, similarly oblique hints at Nabokov's father's eventual death are present when he describes his memory of the way the

¹⁰ *The Magician's Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994), p. 91.

¹¹ *SM*, 146-147.

¹² *SM*, 147.

peasants on the estates would throw his father up into the air.¹³ Sitting in a first-floor dining room, Nabokov and his family would see his father appear at intervals on the level of the window. Nabokov compares his father's body floating in the air to the figures painted on ceilings in churches, which one sees at funerals, where the deceased's face is always hidden by candles and flowers.¹⁴ Boyd convincingly reads this as a reference to Nabokov's father's funeral, which is never described directly in the text. The masking of the face in the coffin can be read as the result of an inability to articulate the fact of his father's death, while simultaneously wishing to present it to the reader. As before, the reader can identify the deceased's face as belonging to Nabokov's father if she brings two separate parts of the text together by mapping the image of his horizontal body in the air on to the horizontal body in the coffin.

As Barbara Straumann notes, a comparable silence surrounds Nabokov's relationship to his younger brother, Sergey. Like the father's death, Sergey's life and death appear to be too troubling to be addressed directly.¹⁵ As in the case of the father, Nabokov does not write of his grief over his brother's death, but rather draws the reader's attention to his inability to voice it, writing that he finds it 'inordinately hard' to write about Sergey.¹⁶ This difficulty is perhaps at the source of the pared-down language of his narration of his brother's death: 'He was arrested, accused of being "a British spy", was sent to a Hamburg concentration camp, where he died of inanition, on 10 January 1945.'¹⁷ Will Norman speaks of 'the strange precision of the date of death' and we might add that the high level of precision about this one detail finds its counterpart in the general paucity of detail around Sergey Nabokov's life

¹³ Boyd, pp. 7-8; *SM*, 19.

¹⁴ *SM*, 19.

¹⁵ Straumann, p. 59.

¹⁶ *SM*, 200.

¹⁷ *SM*, 201.

and Nabokov's reaction to his death.¹⁸ The avoidance of detail along with the striking level of detail about the date and the use of the technical term 'inanition' can be read as the combination of obsessive focus and avoidance characteristic of a traumatic response. Further evidence of an oblique approach to Sergey's life is the link Nabokov makes between his Uncle Ruka and Sergey. Nabokov joins the two when he speaks of his uncle's stammer and then refers to Sergey, 'who also stammered, and who is also now dead'.¹⁹ As Wood notes, 'Many people stammer and even more are dead.'²⁰ Wood sees the link which remains unspoken here as the two men's homosexuality, but we might also add that both were neglected younger sons of parents who favoured their eldest. There is a complex interweaving of different traumas here. The link Nabokov establishes between the two men deepens the gravity of his portrait of Sergey's relative neglect, as elsewhere the text says that Uncle Ruka was beaten savagely by his father.²¹ Nabokov's guilt over Uncle Ruka's experience of neglect and mockery within the family, as well as his lonely death, are complicated by the suggestion that his uncle might have abused him as a child.²² Here, Nabokov's guilt over Sergey's unhappy life and tragic death calls up a series of intergenerational patterns of trauma where the categories of perpetrator and victim are blurred.

The presence of traces of trauma in such narrations of personal loss has been noted by Straumann, Boyd and Wood, amongst others. What has less often been noted is that similar devices are used to evoke the deaths or misfortunes of people outside of Nabokov's family.

¹⁸ Will Norman, *Nabokov, History and the Texture of Time* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 67.

¹⁹ *SM*, 54.

²⁰ Wood, p. 97.

²¹ *SM*, 52.

²² *SM*, 49.

References to such deaths evoke the historical conditions which led to the Nabokovs' loss of a home, first in Russia, then in Europe. Thus, after a lengthy and affectionate description of his village schoolmaster, the author notes briefly that he was sentenced to hard labour by the Bolsheviks for belonging to a party on the radical left.²³ Nabokov does not dwell on this fact, and the reader has to surmise from the affectionate tone of the previous description that this would have caused him some pain. Similarly brief comments are made about the killings of other members of the household, as in the case of the usher who is shot for keeping the Nabokov family bicycles rather than turning them over to the state.²⁴ At times the destruction of his childhood world is evoked, not through the deaths of his family servants, but through a change in their way of life. An example of this occurs when Nabokov remembers girls weeding his family's gardens and then says that later they would dig state canals, connecting the regime change in Russia with a generic move from the pastoral to the political dystopia.²⁵ Occasionally, the reflections on the eventual fate of people he knew as a child become slightly more explicit. Thus, in recounting the fate of his Jewish tutor Lenski, Nabokov writes that he set up an amusement park in the Crimea, before 'the Bolsheviks came along and turned the lights out'.²⁶ Lenski moves to France, and Nabokov comments: 'I do not know – and would rather not imagine – what happened to him during the Nazi invasion of France.'²⁷ In the gap between 'I do not know' and 'I would rather not imagine', the reader must imagine for herself the deportation to the camps that Nabokov likely has in mind.

It could be argued that Nabokov's laconic comments on the violent deaths of various people he knew as a child reflect, not a traumatic response, but rather an aesthetic decision to focus

²³ *SM*, 17.

²⁴ *SM*, 107-108.

²⁵ *SM*, 58.

²⁶ *SM*, 131.

²⁷ *SM*, 131.

on the development of his individual mind, leaving aside political and historical questions. Alternatively, the brevity of these notes might be seen as a sign that the people involved were simply not very close to Nabokov, and that their deaths therefore do not merit extensive space in the autobiography. Comparisons of the different versions of the text, published and unpublished, Russian and English, suggest, however, that this brevity does elide a degree of pain. When Nabokov speaks of his father's friend, General Kuropatkin, at the beginning of the work, he writes simply, 'I hope old Kuropatkin, in his rustic disguise, managed to evade Soviet imprisonment, but that is not the point.'²⁸ He then goes on to elaborate on an aesthetic lesson he learned from the old man. The English text, then, does not dwell on the general's later fate and could even be said to pass over it in a somewhat careless fashion. The Russian text nuances this impression slightly with an interpolated comment: 'Дело не в том, удалось ли или нет опростившемуся Куропаткину избежать советского конца (энциклопедия молчит, как будто набрав кровь в рот).'²⁹ This suggestion of an unacknowledged act of violence by the state suggests rather more anxiety than is explicitly present in the English text, as well as an emphasis on the problematic nature of written records of the post-Revolutionary period.

Changes in Nabokov's narrations of his personal losses also suggest that brevity does not indicate a lack of feeling or pain. In the drafts of the manuscript, the text's single sentence on his mother's death is edited to remove any trace of pathos. Referring to the long periods he went without seeing his mother when she lived in Prague and he in Berlin, and his eventual absence at her death, Nabokov changes, 'I was too hard up to visit her,' to 'I could not visit

²⁸ *SM*, 16.

²⁹ *DB*, 18. 'It is not important whether the disguised Kuropatkin managed to avoid a Soviet end (the encyclopedia is silent, as if it has swallowed blood).' The last phrase literally means 'as if it has taken blood into its mouth', and plays on a saying, 'to take water into one's mouth', which means to swear an oath of silence.

her' (in the final version it becomes 'was unable to visit her').³⁰ This small change eliminates any hint of self-pity, leaving the reader to imagine for herself the pain Nabokov must have felt at not being present for his mother's death or funeral. In the case of his brother, the laconic references to a certain sense of guilt in earlier versions are magnified in the final text, suggesting that the initially brief references to him were a result of complex feeling, rather than its absence. Nabokov goes so far as to criticise his previous inability to narrate his brother's life, writing of it as a task which he had 'balked'.³¹ Together, such variations in the different versions of the text contribute to a sense of elided pain even in brief and apparently neutral references to loss. The idea of an undercurrent of pain piercing through the surface of the text at certain points fits with Wood's description of the text as 'full of cracks in apparently smooth surfaces'.³² This image picks up on the idea of the duality inherent in the text's approach to loss, the way it is 'awkwardly caught between time's brilliant but momentary abolition and its imminent and inevitable return', as the author, '[r]ather than possessing the past [...] himself comes to be possessed by the relentless return of reminiscences'.³³

Such readings go against the grain of the interpretive paradigm the text itself sets up. The concept of trauma draws on Freudian ideas about the repression of painful knowledge and situates the author as unconscious of his own motivations. Nabokov makes very clear in the text that he does not wish it to be read through any kind of Freudian framework.³⁴ More generally, he privileges a conscious, active approach to remembering and recording the past.

³⁰ Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov Papers, Box 9; *SM*, 33.

³¹ *SM*, 200.

³² Wood, p. 101.

³³ Wood, p. 84; Straumann, p. 67.

³⁴ *SM*, 10.

Reading the text as an expression of traumatic memory is in tension with the author's professed commitment to a quite different mode of memory. This objection to reading the text as a narration of trauma is worth considering and I will do so when I treat the limits of the trauma paradigm, but for now I wish to note that although Nabokov's tone in the autobiography is largely positive, if not triumphant, attention to the text's moments of silence and its swift moves away from more painful topics suggests that these episodes can be read as not fully assimilated into *Speak, Memory*'s broader celebration of the mind's mobility and power to preserve modes of access to an idyllic past world.

In contrast to this approach to *Speak, Memory*, reading Perec's text as a narration of trauma does not involve reading against the grain of the text's own rhetoric quite so clearly. Indeed, *Wou le souvenir d'enfance* has been referred to as a 'too perfect a counterpart to Caruth'.³⁵ It is connected with two courses of psychoanalysis which Perec underwent and it can be read as a conscious engagement with psychoanalytic discourse on trauma and mourning. Reading Perec's text through the trauma paradigm thus involves going over some old ground, but it is valuable in that it helps chart the changing role of trauma in narrations of displacement across the twentieth century, from its troubling, but peripheral place in modernist texts on migration, to its central, generative role in engagements with childhoods lived during and after the Second World War and its later pervasive presence in contemporary postcolonial evocations of childhood.

Eleanor Kaufman points to three aspects of Perec's text which situate it as a narrative of trauma. The first is Perec's belated knowledge of the significance of his departure from the

³⁵ Kaufman, p. 46

Gare de Lyon.³⁶ Though he could not know it at the time, this would be the last time he would see his mother. The fact that this moment of leave-taking can only be understood in retrospect connects it with Caruth's argument that trauma, by definition, is never understood as it happens, but only after the fact. Kaufman further argues that the way Perec narrates this moment three times in three different ways reflects the haunting quality of traumatic memories, which keep returning in different forms. This repeated return to the moment of departure could be compared with Nabokov's scattering of references to his father's demise. Caruth argues that memory of the traumatic event returns repeatedly, not only so that the individual can come to terms with the trauma or death that has occurred, but also so that he or she can come to grasp the fact of his or her own survival in the face of the deaths or suffering of other people. Kaufman finds an echo of this simultaneous attempt to come to terms with the death of others and one's own survival in Perec's statement that writing is the sign of his life and of his parents' death.³⁷

Lawrence D. Kritzman turns his attention to an aspect of Perec's text that Kaufman passes over, namely the role of silence and the interweaving of the autobiographical and fictional narratives. He draws attention to the way the text 'recognizes the mourning process as an engagement with the aporia created by the inability to bear witness', emphasising the ways in which Perec's memories of his childhood remain 'cognitively somewhat inaccessible'.³⁸ This sense of the past as inaccessible is reflected in the opening statement of the first autobiographical chapter, stating that the author has no memories of childhood, a statement which is echoed in the fictional strands of the text, where the child Gaspard Winckler is mute and deaf, and where the adult Gaspard Winckler bears a false name, suggesting a break

³⁶ Kaufman, p. 46.

³⁷ W, 59; Kaufman, p. 48.

³⁸ Kritzman, p. 187; p. 188.

between his childhood and adult identity in several different ways. This doubling of the figure of Gaspard Winckler is evocative of another trope of narrations of trauma, dissociation, or the splitting of the self.

Splitting of the self can be seen as an extreme version of the way trauma fractures communication between the conscious mind and the past self who experienced the traumatising event. The way there are literally two Gaspard Wincklers in the text lends this idea an embodied reality. The adult Gaspard Winckler's failed attempt to save the deaf and mute child from dying at sea can be read as a fictionalisation of the impossible task facing the traumatised individual of coming to understand a past which is defined by the fact that it resists comprehension according to the ordinary categories of meaning. Kritzman notes that because Perec's memories are out of reach, he has to imagine how things could have been.³⁹ The fictional strands of the text and the speculative character of some of the autobiographical statements thus become signs of the traumatic destruction of the usual avenues into the past. Like Nabokov, Perec breaks off his text as a way of signifying the loss of his parent, in this case his mother. Where Nabokov simply breaks off one sentence, Perec places a blank page with an ellipsis in brackets at the centre of his text.⁴⁰ The greater space given over to blankness reflects the greater difficulty in processing the loss of a parent whose death was orchestrated by state machinery which consciously prevented any record of the time and place of death surviving. The movement of textual blankness from the middle of one sentence to the centre of the text can be read as symptomatic of the migration of trauma from the periphery to the centre in post-Holocaust narratives of the 1.5 generation and others. The central blankness which signifies his mother's disappearance is mirrored by multiple smaller

³⁹ Kritzman, p. 189.

⁴⁰ *W*, 84-85.

blanknesses which draw the reader's attention to the difficulty of writing a personal lifehistory against the background of collective loss. These range from textual gaps, when place names are given with a first letter followed by a dash, to imagery of blankness, such as the gaps in the ship's log, to narrative gaps, like the unexplained disappearance of the adult Gaspard Winckler.

One kind of blankness especially disruptive to the reader's absorption in the text is the way each chapter ends. In the Denoël edition, at least, there are blank pages between each of the chapters, thus opening up a physical gap between the autobiographical and fictional strands of the narrative. Because the fictional chapters construct an engaging story-world, the physical act of turning the page on to blankness creates a sense of surprise, as if the absorbing fictional world has just disappeared. This is particularly the case at the end of chapters three, five, nine, and eleven, all of which end with an unanswered question or unresolved tension.⁴¹ A comparison is possible here with Nabokov's use of a similar technique. Elizabeth Bruss has written of how Nabokov creates absorbing worlds in each of the chapters of his autobiography, then dissolves each world, or exposes its fragility, at the chapter's end.⁴² In this way, both authors thus lead the reader to contemplate the constructed nature of a textual world she has just experienced vividly.

What differs about the way Nabokov and Perec use this technique is that each of Nabokov's chapters could be read as a stand-alone piece and indeed were published as separate pieces before he assembled them into a full-length work. Because of the stand-alone quality of Nabokov's chapters, when the world each chapter creates disappears, the reader can

⁴¹ W, 19; W, 29; W, 65; W, 83.

⁴² Elizabeth Bruss, *Autobiographical Acts: The Changing Situation of a Literary Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 149.

sometimes feel disoriented, but this sense of disorientation is confined to the moment of dissolution. Once the reader starts a new chapter, she enters into a new, and separate, setting. In contrast to this, once Perec's reader finishes a chapter, she does not begin engaging with material completely new to her. Rather, she re-enters a world she has seen created and erased many times. Whereas Nabokov all but tells the reader in the first chapter that there is a hidden thematic coherence to his work, in Perec's text the reader must keep struggling to make connections through material whose thematic coherence is not obvious on a first (or indeed a subsequent) reading. His reader then shares to a certain extent in the constant return of the traumatised mind to material which resists understanding.

The question of the reader's response to the text leads on to the issue of traces of secondary, attenuated trauma in critical writing on *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. There are elements of the writing on Perec's autobiography which suggest that his narration of his own trauma triggers a kind of muted echo of a traumatic response in his readers. Philippe Lejeune has spoken of readers skipping over the autobiographical chapters, whose painful subject matter and halting pace makes them difficult to absorb.⁴³ The reader's difficulty in absorbing the text's meaning can be linked to its memorial function. We see this when Perec explains his reluctance to give information about his parents' lives, because only the blankness of his writing can communicate their absence and its effects on him. Using a restricted lexical range, he articulates this point, and then goes on to emphasise the role of the materiality of writing in manifesting this blankness:

C'est cela que je dis, c'est cela que j'écris et c'est cela seulement qui se trouve dans les mots que je trace, et dans les lignes que ces mots dessinent, et dans les blancs que laisse apparaître l'intervalle entre ces lignes.⁴⁴

⁴³ Philippe Lejeune, *La Mémoire et l'oblique: Georges Perec autobiographe* (Paris: P.O.L., 1991), p. 43.

⁴⁴ *W*, 59.

Here the physical position of the words on the page is presented as constituting as much a part of the text's memorial project as their verbal meaning. Perec's success in communicating this aspect of his text can be seen in the way that critics often quote excerpts from this chapter with little elaboration, even in otherwise detailed analysis.⁴⁵ The critical practice of repeated quotation can be seen as deferring to Perec's statement that the material form of the words on the page communicates as much about his parents as he could with more elaborate statements about their lives. If the meaning of the lines is held as much in the physical gaps they leave on the page, then the practice of re-presenting these lines to the reader makes as much or more sense as a response to the text as drawing out the nuances of the lines' verbal meaning.

An essay by George Steiner in *Language and Silence* provides some insight into the rationale behind this silent transcription of Perec's words in a number of critical texts. Steiner begins the essay by quoting passages from two books on the Holocaust, a diary written by Chaim Kaplan during his time in the Warsaw Ghetto⁴⁶ and Jean-François Steiner's study of Treblinka,⁴⁷ but it ends by a kind of retreat from engagement with them: 'These books and the documents which have survived are not for "review". Not unless "review" signifies, as perhaps it should in these instances, a "seeing-again", over and over.'⁴⁸ The essay goes on to fulfil its own call for repeated return to painful historical facts:

In the Warsaw ghetto a child wrote in its diary: 'I am hungry, I am cold; when I grow up I want to be a German and then I shall no longer be hungry and no longer cold.'

⁴⁵ See Lejeune, p. 1, Schwartz, p. 55 and Manet van Montfrans, *Georges Perec: la contrainte du réel* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), p. 151. Each of these authors quotes the finale of this chapter with very little commentary, in contrast to their practice elsewhere in these works.

⁴⁶ *Scroll of Agony: The Warsaw Diary of Chaim A. Kaplan*, trans. and ed. by Abraham Isaac Katsh (London: H. Hamilton, 1966).

⁴⁷ *Treblinka*, trans. by Helen Weaver (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1967).

⁴⁸ *Language and Silence: Essays 1958-1966* (London: Faber, 1967) p. 193.

And now I want to write that sentence again: 'I am hungry, I am cold; when I grow up I want to be a German, and then I shall no longer be hungry and no longer cold.'⁴⁹

The repetition Steiner calls for resonates with the responses to overwhelming events analysed in trauma theory and it finds a very faint echo in the rewriting of a few key quotations in analyses of *Wou le souvenir d'enfance*.

Perec's text then, in its use of the devices of blankness, repetition, dissociation, and interweaving of the factual and the fictional can be seen as an expression of its author's trauma at the loss of his parents, especially his mother, and more broadly at the painful task of constructing a sense of identity in a context of collective loss. It preserves the fixed quality of his relationship to the past to such an extent that it informs critical responses to the text. A comparison of *Wou le souvenir d'enfance* and *Speak, Memory* as narrations of trauma is suggestive of the changing place of trauma in accounts of twentieth-century childhoods. Attention to the silences of *Speak, Memory* suggests that even a text like this, which has been read as an archetypal celebration of the mind's freedom from the effects of history, contains traces of a traumatic response to the violence of twentieth-century history. In *Wou le souvenir d'enfance*, the silences have moved from a marginal, if troubling position, to become a founding condition of the text. The text is no longer interrupted by moments of inarticulate pain but takes as its central purpose the delineation of the absences left by violent histories.

The position of trauma in Chamoiseau's text differs from its place in *Speak, Memory* and *Wou le souvenir d'enfance*. Trauma is neither a troubling presence undermining an idyllic portrait of his childhood, nor a moment of irreparable rupture from which the text springs. Rather, the sources of trauma in his text are found in everyday life. Looking at the

⁴⁹ Steiner, *Language and Silence*, p. 193.

implications of this location of trauma in the everyday, and the way it relates to the other two authors' approach to historical trauma, offers a way of nuancing recent debates on the widening use of the term 'trauma' and the differences between different kinds of trauma. Though Chamoiseau is writing in a very different context, his text also offers examples of dissociation, silence around painful scenes coupled with repeated oblique returns to them, and the articulation of painful autobiographical facts through the medium of fiction. There are marks of trauma in his narration of his parents' deaths, especially that of his mother, and in his record of the psychological pain brought about by his entry into the public education system.

Dominick LaCapra's distinction between 'structural' and 'historical' trauma is useful in distinguishing between these two different kinds of pain. LaCapra uses the term 'structural' or 'transhistorical' trauma to refer to pain which everyone experiences, while historical trauma arises from specific events of extreme violence which most people do not experience. He argues that the idea of structural trauma is present in various philosophical and everyday modes of thought which see human life as imperfect, distanced in some way from a sense of 'at-homeness, unity or community', which might have been experienced in the past, either in the womb, in the very early years of life, or in a mythical, paradisiacal time before imperfection entered the world (though LaCapra finds problematic this conversion of absence into loss, that is, the move from noticing an absence of at-homeness in human life and therefore assuming that there is a home which must have been lost). Notably, many of the ideas which LaCapra cites as examples of structural trauma, including 'the separation from the (m)other', 'the passage from nature to culture', and 'the entry into language', can be connected to growing up.⁵⁰ Structural trauma is then construed as part of the process of

⁵⁰ *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001), p. 77.

forming a separate, independent identity which involves some degree of pain on the part of all who pass through it. Historical trauma, by contrast, is an extreme experience of violence which is not usually part of human life. LaCapra gives the experience of the Holocaust or of the atom bomb in Japan as examples.⁵¹

Such a distinction is valuable in distinguishing between the different kinds of trauma experienced by Nabokov, Perec and Chamoiseau. Chamoiseau's increasing distance from his mother as he grows up, and his eventual loss of his parents in adulthood can be seen as structural traumas, different in quality to the historical violence which shapes Perec's life and to some extent Nabokov's. Though LaCapra's distinction is useful in bringing out these points of divergence, Chamoiseau's narration of childhood also unsettles its oppositions, which LaCapra acknowledges to be problematic.⁵² The child's increasing distance from his mother is indeed partially a result of him growing up, but it is sharpened by the way the school forces him to speak French and not Creole, his 'langue-manman'.⁵³ Chamoiseau's mother's death from old age can be seen as part of structural trauma, but it also deepens her son's distance from his childhood Creole self, which is part of the legacy of the historical trauma of colonialism and slavery. An examination of the ways in which traces of trauma appear in *Une Enfance créole* suggests, then, that the division between structural and historical traumas, while helpful for establishing clarity in the broad use of the term, needs to be nuanced for application in postcolonial contexts.

The third volume of Chamoiseau's trilogy, published after the death of the author's parents, deals most directly with the structural trauma of their loss. As the title indicates, the volume

⁵¹ LaCapra pp. 76-85.

⁵² LaCapra, p. 176.

⁵³ *Chemin*, 69. *Manman* is Creole for 'mother'.

is also a consideration of the question of endings more generally, and of the nature of childhood's end. It charts the young Chamoiseau's move from the world of childhood into the realm of adolescence. There are strong marks of trauma in Chamoiseau's narration of his parents' death. As in the case of Perec and Nabokov, it possesses an elliptical quality. Their deaths are not recounted in a straightforward manner; they are evoked by insistent return to a few key metaphors. Nor is the narration of the parents' deaths integrated into the main body of the narrative, which recounts the child's increasing bonds to his friends and the beginning of his interest in the opposite sex. Rather it is presented in brief paragraphs in italic font interspersed throughout the text.

The interaction between the paragraphs in italics and the main body of the text in Roman font sets up tension between a story of development and one of decline. The use of this device suggests the traumatic quality of his parents' death in several ways. The contrast between the tone of the two narrative strands and their apparent lack of cohesion suggests the difficulty of assimilating traumatic memory into narrative sequence. The metaphorical language of the passages in italics and their frequent evocation of the bodily sensations of shock and fear further reinforces the idea that these memories exceed the mind's grasp. These fragments often approach the subject of parental death only to break off or to switch to another topic through anacoluthon. These swerves away from painful topics and the use of interrupted sentences to indicate grief echo devices used in other narrations of trauma, including Nabokov's depiction of his father's death.

This is the first mention of the day when Chamoiseau, in France at the time, receives news of his father's death from his sister, 'la Baronne':

Et je me souviens du télégramme de la Baronne alors que je me trouvais en terre d'exil, auprès de l'Orge, et qui m'informe de ce lit devenu silencieux dans la grande

*salle commune, du plateau intouché, et des deux pruneaux dont nul n'héritera ce jour-là ... Basile! Basile!...*⁵⁴

Basile, or Basile la Mort, is a character from Creole culture associated with death, whom Chamoiseau will reference throughout this volume when the subject of death arises. Here the interruption of the sentence with his name, the ellipses, and the euphemisms such as 'lit devenu silencieux' suggest the difficulty of articulating the fact of the father's death directly. This difficulty is further evoked by the breaking off of this passage and the return of its subject matter later in the text. Forty pages after the passage quoted above, the reader encounters another passage in italics which takes up the imagery first introduced here:

*... chère Baronne ... [...] tâche démesurée que ce simple télégramme qui doit porter Basile ... et moi, pétrifié devant cet ivoire froid, ce petit blanc immense, ces lettres majuscules, laconiques, qui dansent encore ... Moi, en vertige au dessus comme au bord du pire...*⁵⁵

The return to this moment suggests the ruminative quality of the speaker's grief. The relative lack of verbs in this passage, the use of the present tense, and the movements from one thought to another through ellipsis reinforce the reader's sense of this moment as resistant to containment within linear narrative structure. The interplay here between fixity ('pétrifié', 'ivoire froid') and dizzying turbulence ('qui dansent encore', 'en vertige') is concentrated in the oxymoron 'petit blanc immense', suggesting both the slip of paper in the speaker's hand and a vast absence which could engulf him. This co-existence of opposite states is characteristic of the way traumatic events disrupt the usual categories of experience and expression. Further evidence of this disruption is the inability to relate what the telegram contains, while oblique hints to it surface in the language, as in the metaphor of the sheet of ivory which suggests the coolness and hardness of the tomb.

⁵⁴ *A Bout*, 80, italics in original.

⁵⁵ *A Bout*, 116-117, italics in original.

As in the texts of Nabokov and Perec, then, ellipses, blank spaces and silences take on communicative roles, gesturing both toward the absence of the parent and the difficulty in articulating that absence. Such silences are also present in Chamoiseau's narration of the death of his mother. The communicative role of silence is heightened in this case by thematic convergences and tensions set up between the passages in italics where Chamoiseau dwells on his mother's final years and the surrounding passages where he depicts his initiation into the erotic. In particular, it is possible to draw a parallel between Chamoiseau's mother, Man Ninotte, and a young girl with whom he becomes fascinated, referred to in the text as Gabine la Lune. She lives near the building site where the young Chamoiseau goes to play with his friends. He waits outside her home in the hope of seeing her when she comes out on to the balcony. He never knows when she will appear and when she does, they do not speak, he simply stares at her, aware of a seemingly unbridgeable distance between them. As indicated by the name 'Gabine la Lune' her beauty and inaccessibility lend her a certain unreal quality. Toward the end of *A Bout d'enfance*, they do communicate via a letter through a mutual friend, but they never meet.

The way the young girl takes on increasing importance in the life of the child creates a shift in the centre of gravity of the text, which moves from Man Ninotte within the domestic space to Gabine la Lune, seen from the street. The interaction between the main body of the text and the passages in italics suggest that depictions of the girl are in part an indirect approach to the subject of distance from a beloved female figure. This passage is a particularly striking example of this. The sentences in italics evoke his mother's increasing mental confusion during her last years. It refers to those moments when his mother's memory would suddenly return, leaving her struggling to make sense of her illness and of changes that had occurred while she had been mentally absent. The passage in Roman font ostensibly concerns the

young adolescent's vigils outside the home of Gabine la Lune, but it also seems to evoke something of his grief over his mother:

... *Qui ne dit rien, qui l'a vue émerger, revenue sans comprendre?...*

Le rituel s'était installé. Mémoire, cette scène immobile constitue toute l'époque. Un arrêt sur image. Un repeat incessant. Il faudrait l'écrire mille fois à l'identique, avec de subtiles variations pour en sortir l'ampleur. Lui, accoudé à son escalier, et elle en face, dans une distance d'environ huit mètres. Les deux se regardant.⁵⁶

The photographic imagery of stills and repeats is often used as a way of evoking the fixed images which return to the mind during grief. Similarly, the reference to repeated rewriting suggests fixation on this one moment. Though this passage is supposed to be about the young boy watching Gabine la Lune, the absence of her name and the use of the pronoun 'elle' when its previous appearance has been a reference to the child's mother, encourage the reader to interpret this scene as connected both to the figure of Gabine la Lune and to Man Ninotte. This indirect approach suggests the difficulty of articulating the response to the mother's death.

The transition from Man Ninotte to Gabrielle as the text's centre goes hand in hand with the child's move from speech to writing. Because the child is too overwhelmed to speak to Gabine, he composes a letter which he asks one of her friends to pass on to her. The text underlines the way the absence of the beloved and the child's inability to approach her drives him to take up the pen, in what is perhaps a playful invocation of Derridean theory on the Western association of writing with absence.⁵⁷ The move from an immediate form of communication to a mediated one reflects the child's move from the womb-like domestic space to the street and from the Creole to the French language. Whereas in the previous two volumes, especially the first, the child is immersed in the female domestic space where the

⁵⁶ *A Bout*, 260.

⁵⁷ *A Bout*, 273-277.

mother's voice shapes his experience, in this volume, most of his time is spent outside of the house and his mother's words have a much smaller role in the text. Increasing distance from the mother is then associated with a move from oral to written culture and hence with a more distanced relationship with language and the surrounding world, in a way that is reminiscent of LaCapra's characterisation of structural trauma.

In a move which reinforces the portrayal of the child-self and the mother as bound into a symbiotic relationship, the narration of the increasing distance between mother and child and the mother's eventual death is accompanied by a growing sense of concern, even desperation, about the child-self's disappearance. The third volume of the trilogy is peppered with questions and laments such as '*Mon négriillon, où donc t'es-tu serré?*' and '*Où défaille l'enfance?*'⁵⁸ The device of addressing a child-self who will not reply, and the quest to locate the absent child-self in physical space echoes Perec's use of the two Gaspard Wincklers. Both authors' use of the device indicates a degree of splitting of the self which could be caused by trauma, but the ways in which it is used bring out the differences between each author's experience. In Perec's text, the separation between the two Wincklers is definitive, whereas in Chamoiseau's text a kind of underground relationship does continue between 'le négriillon' and 'l'homme d'aujourd'hui'. The distinction between the almost total alienation of child and adult selves in Perec's work and the gradual accretion of a more attenuated split between the two in Chamoiseau's work reflects each author's different position in relation to histories of violence, and can be read through the distinction between structural and historical trauma.

Perec's life in the immediate aftermath of genocide triggers a complex shattering of the self; Chamoiseau's life in the long aftermath of colonial violence is much less destructive of the

⁵⁸ *A Bout*, 21; 31.

self, but the unresolved traces of the colonial past nonetheless make themselves felt, installing a rift between the early childhood self and the identity forged upon contact with the French state.

School is the environment where the child first comes into sustained contact with the French state. *Chemin-d'école* portrays the child's entry into the public education system as the beginning of a process which will alienate the child from his first language, the enchantment he finds in the world around him, and his mother. The experience of school is depicted as deeply painful, triggering a destruction of the child's inner world.⁵⁹ The first sign of the destructive impact school has on the child is the physical response it triggers. On the child's first day he is so frightened that 'ses genoux tremblaient. Ses jambes s'étaient muées en fines herbes grasses incapables de le soutenir'.⁶⁰ He has to stand up when his name is called on the register, which triggers the following response: 'Le négrillon à moitié mort dut se lever et se coincer le ventre contre le banc pour demeurer debout, tête pendante, épaules caves, et le souffle abîmé.'⁶¹ This weakening of the body evokes the child's inability to cope with the frightening environment of the school, and the hollowness and ruin suggested by 'caves' and 'abîmé' are proleptic of the way the school will empty the imaginative and cultural world the child inhabits by creating a rift between his mental universe and the physical world he inhabits.

One of the main ways in which school damages the child's ability to interact in a fruitful way with the surrounding world is by depriving him of his autonomy. In school, only the teacher

⁵⁹ *Chemin*, 187.

⁶⁰ *Chemin*, 52.

⁶¹ *Chemin*, 53-54.

can direct the child's physical movements. Chamoiseau uses the children's point of view to illustrate the shock they feel upon learning this:

Ils apprirent dans la sidération que, capitaine à bord de droit divin, le Maître était la seule à régenter les actes. Se mettre debout, c'était lui-même. S'asseoir, c'était lui-même. Ouvrir sa bouche, c'était lui-même. Quand il parlait, les regards et les oreilles devaient se nouer sur lui-même.⁶²

The nautical imagery combined with references to the teacher's total control over the children's bodies evoke the history of slavery. The schoolroom is here implicitly compared to the hold of a ship where the children first learn what it means to be controlled by another person. The idea of the schoolroom as a kind of echo of the hold on a slaveship fits in with Chamoiseau's approach to this charged space elsewhere in his work. Lorna Milne notes that the hold functions as a kind of point of origin of Creole literature for Chamoiseau, as it is the place of 'le cri originel' of transported Africans.⁶³ The idea of the hold as the source of a sound that denotes both pain as well as self-expression and the beginnings of a collective identity founded in displacement and oppression resonates with *Chemin-d'école*'s portrayal of school as both the place where the child's cultural identity is damaged, and the place where he will acquire the ability to write. The suggestions of the stirrings of a collective identity founded in common pain are certainly present in the passage above in the use of 'ils' and the children's shared horror, and later passages in *Chemin-d'école* will develop the idea of the classroom as an originary space for the author's writing, but first the volume establishes it as a place where linguistic and cultural identity are stripped away.

This stripping away of the children's identity is most apparent when it comes to questions of language. In school, the child learns that there are two languages, Creole and French, and that

⁶² *Chemin*, 59.

⁶³ *Patrick Chamoiseau: espaces d'une écriture antillaise* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 69-72.

French must be spoken in school. Chamoiseau once more employs the child's point of view to illustrate the distress this discovery provokes: 'Le négrillon, dérouté, comprit qu'il ignorait cette langue. La tite-voix babilleuse de sa tête maniait une autre langue, sa languemaison, sa langue-manman, sa langue non-apprise intégrée sans contraintes au fil de ses désirs du monde.'⁶⁴ School, by imposing French at all times, evicts the child from his 'langue-maison, langue-manman'. Chamoiseau writes of his child-self: 'le Maître l'avait rendu muet.'⁶⁵ This silence can be read, like the child's physical weakness triggered by the frightening experience of the classroom, as a response to an environment which overwhelms him. This linguistic shift introduces distance between the child and his mother, who looks at him impressed, but uncomprehending, when he begins to use formal French words in the home.⁶⁶

The idea of linguistic change introducing distance into the child's relationship with his mother offers a fitting way into the question of the interweaving of historical and transhistorical trauma in Chamoiseau's text. LaCapra formulated these useful terms as a response to what he felt was worrying loose use of the term trauma. He argues that it is ethically problematic to use one term for experiences of extreme violence and difficulties which most people experience, as well as to conflate the categories of victim, perpetrator and bystander. Richard McNally, though writing somewhat later than LaCapra, shares his concern about this 'conceptual bracket creep', arguing that trauma stops being a useful category when it can be applied to events as different as military combat and giving birth to a healthy baby.⁶⁷ Wulf Kansteiner echoes this critique when he points out the problems involved in applying psychoanalytic language, developed to name supposedly universal

⁶⁴ *Chemin*, 69.

⁶⁵ *Chemin*, 91.

⁶⁶ *Chemin*, 201.

⁶⁷ 'Progress and Controversy in the Study of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder', *Annual Review of Psychology*, 54 (2003), 229-52 (p. 231).

internal struggles, to contexts where specific historical harm is at stake.⁶⁸ Kansteiner and McNally argue for a return to earlier definitions of trauma which located its source in extreme events.

LaCapra's distinction between transhistorical and historical trauma is, then, part of an attempt to parse the different meanings the word trauma has accrued since it first entered literary and cultural studies, an attempt perceived as necessary by many in the field. Texts like Chamoiseau's, which present the entry into school as traumatic, are arguably part of the motivation for such distinctions. There does indeed seem to be an ethical issue about situating a frightening first day at school in the same category of experience as the loss of one's mother in the Holocaust. Distinguishing between structural or transhistorical and historical trauma offers one way out of this problem. According to this distinction, Chamoiseau's experience of school, the distance it opens between him and his mother, and his eventual bereavement would all be structural traumas, simply part of the move from childhood to adulthood.

The text does support this reading to a certain extent. As explored at the end of the last chapter, the opening pages of *Antan d'enfance* present childhood as a state whose natural unfolding will lead to its own destruction. It is in the nature of the child to grow away from the mother and to gradually enter into a more distanced, rational, and less imaginative relationship with the surrounding world.⁶⁹ Yet, these natural moves toward greater independence and a more conventional perception of the physical world are accompanied by

⁶⁸ 'Genealogy of a Category Mistake: A Critical Intellectual History of the Cultural Trauma Metaphor', *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, 8 (2004), 193-221 (p. 206).

⁶⁹ *Antan*, 21.

repeated references to fracture within the self and by strong echoes of the oppression experienced by slaves. Situating the text's narration of growing up as the narration of a transhistorical trauma elides the way the unresolved legacy of Martinique's past deepens the impact of the child's growing pains. Though the move from childhood to adulthood, from home to school, from the private world to the public world could well be seen as inevitably involving transhistorical traumas, such as the realisation that one can be punished for breaking rules, or the loss of the especially close, infant relationship with the mother, in Chamoiseau's text, these experiences are inextricably interwoven with the historical traumas involved in his encounter with the French state. Chamoiseau's text suggests that rather than distinguishing between historical and transhistorical traumas, attention to their overlapping impacts on one individual can help make sense of the conceptual migration of trauma from extreme to everyday contexts. Comparisons between trauma triggered by extreme experiences and that caused by everyday experiences do indeed have to be undertaken with circumspection and should not seek to establish equivalency between the experiences of people at different generational distances from traumatic events. However, they become less jarring when the historical context of the development of everyday experiences is taken into account and when trauma is seen as a concept which can refer to a range of relationships between structural and historical trauma.

Comparison of these texts as narrations of trauma allows such nuancing of concepts outlined in trauma theory but also calls up questions about the means of transmission of traumatic experience between generations. The question of inter-generational transmission of memory (or its failure) is present in some way in all three texts. As we saw in the previous chapter, Nabokov's relationship with his mother involves him absorbing memories of events he never experienced. This transmission is connected with the expansion of consciousness, but has a

darker side in its origins in his mother's loss of her parents and most of her siblings.⁷⁰

Barbara Straumann suggests that Nabokov's mother passes on to him a practice of memory which has a painful absence at its centre.⁷¹ As we saw in this chapter, Nabokov's absorption of the memory of his grandfather's cruelty to his uncle (cruelty he never witnessed himself) complicates his response to his brother's life and death. Such afterlives of violence and loss present in Nabokov's family history perhaps suggest that transmission of memories, painful and otherwise, always plays a role in the formulation of an approach to history and the self.

In *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* and *Une Enfance créole*, however, the process of intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory takes on a central role, because these authors did not themselves experience the violence whose after-effects shape their lives.

Whereas Nabokov lives through the rise to power of the Bolshevik and Nazi regimes as an adult, Percey grows up in the direct aftermath of the Second World War and Holocaust, and Chamoiseau comes of age in the long aftermath of the French colonisation of Martinique.

Because of the intangible, unspoken quality of the interaction between these authors' lives and the legacy of historical violence, images of the wounded body become a way of making present to the reader the reality of the pain it inflicts.

The Wounded Body and the Transmission of Trauma

In *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* and *Une Enfance créole*, imagery of scars evokes the simultaneous fixity and mobility of historical trauma. Scar tissue suggests the interplay of death and survival which Caruth writes is central to the experience and narration of trauma. It testifies to damage done to the body which cannot be fully healed, and so speaks of the

⁷⁰ *SM*, 47.

⁷¹ Straumann, pp. 55-58.

body's fragility. Yet once created, scar tissue itself is difficult to destroy and so can act as a form of witness to past pain which is not easily forgotten or ignored. Marks on the skin are not so internal to the self that they are subject to the flux that afflicts the mind, nor are they so external to the self that they are subject to the erosion that wears away at the physical world or projects of demolition initiated by the state. For both Chamoiseau and Perec, scars are traces which inhabit an intermediate space at the borders of the self. Visible because of the interplay of living and dead tissue, they offer a miniature picture of the structure of these texts, where narration of the author's life is interwoven with fragmentary biographies of deceased parents to make visible something of a larger history and its resonances in the author's life and the contemporary world. The scars' position at the borders of the self connects them with the question of transmission of painful memories. They come to act as traces of histories which are experienced neither from the inside nor from the outside, but which fundamentally mark the boundaries of possibility of the self.

The scar which receives most attention in *Wou le souvenir d'enfance* is the one on Perec's upper lip which has the form of a short diagonal line, pointing from right to left. Perec writes: 'Pour des raisons mal élucidées, cette cicatrice semble avoir eu pour moi une importance capitale: elle est devenue une marque personnelle, un signe distinctif...' ⁷² Already this connection of the scar with a sense of secure, unique identity is striking in a text where such concepts are so systematically undermined. Such a level of engagement with this small scar suggests that it offers a way into another memory. Warren Motte argues that this scar, which Perec received when one of his classmates hit him with a ski in a fit of anger, is the visible sign of an invisible, but equally unjust, wound – that is, the loss of his parents, and,

⁷² W, 141.

especially, the loss of his mother.⁷³ The long passage devoted to the scar will go on to evoke in greater detail the level of Perec's attachment to it. It shapes the way he shaves and his liking for an Antonello de Messine portrait, it features in his first novel and in an important passage in another novel, *Un Homme qui dort*, and it influences his choice of actor for the film version of this last work.⁷⁴ This short diagonal line is thus present in a variety of contexts: autobiography, fiction, film and visual art.

This migration between different contexts is significant because it is associated with intergenerational transmission of memory and its failure in several ways. The scar goes from right to left and top to bottom, the same movement that Hebrew writing follows, as Bernard Magné points out, and so is associated with the breakdown in linguistic, religious and literary continuities between Perec and the previous generation.⁷⁵ It is also connected with the transmission of corporeal traits, as Perec mentions twice that his mother leans her head to the side in photographs he has of her, a trait he also shares. When describing the photographs, Perec draws attention to the reversibility created by the camera's gaze, with three references in three pages to the way right and left are swapped on the photographs described.⁷⁶ This reversibility is also connected to the duality of transmission between generations. The scar on Perec's lip has the form of a *bande*, a figure from heraldry that is mentioned several times in the text. The *bande* is the reverse of the *barre* and indicates bastardy. The same kind of reversibility applies in heraldry as causes the confusion when Perec looks at the photograph, because left and right are taken from the point of view of the wearer of a coat-of-arms, and so

⁷³ 'The Work of Mourning', *Yale French Studies*, 105 (2004), 56-71 (p. 64).

⁷⁴ *W*, 142-143.

⁷⁵ Mireille Ribière, 'L'Autobiographie comme fiction' *Cahiers Georges Perec*, 2 (1986-1987), 25-37 (p. 29); Bernard Magné, *Georges Perec* (Paris: Editions Nathan, 1999), p. 92.

⁷⁶ *W*, 71-73.

are reversed for an observer. Both the photograph and the coat-of-arms thus call up ideas about things becoming their own opposites when seen from the point of view of an outside observer, suggesting Perec's painful position outside or beyond his parents' history while he remains marked by it. The reversibility of the scar connects it both to transmission of various kinds of memory (Hebrew writing, bodily gestures, heraldry) and to the historical events which trigger failures in transmission. The question of the author's relationship to the previous generation thus fuses transmission and non-transmission of memory. The way the scar moves between different contexts (fiction, film, visual art, autobiography) while retaining the same form, and its presence just above the author's mouth, indicates the presence of the marks of the previous generation's trauma in the artistic work created and absorbed by the author.

Physical injury in Chamoiseau is not connected with bereavement, but it is connected with painful contact with history. In *Une Enfance créole*, scars also serve to make invisible pain visible. Here the marks left by corporal punishment make present the unseen destruction of the children's confidence and autonomy which occurs at school. The author dwells on the specific kinds of marks left on the children's bodies by the different whips used by the teacher.⁷⁷ One whip is known as the 'liane-bois-volcan' by the children and as the 'liane-allemand' by the teacher, 'car elle envahissait'.⁷⁸ Both images suggest the breaking of the barrier of the children's skin, a physical manifestation of the damage done to their minds. The reference to the 'liane-allemand' also contributes the way the whips make manifest the presence of echoes of historical violence of a much broader scale in the classroom. The meditation on corporal punishment experienced at school culminates with 'le négriillon' being

⁷⁷ *Chemin*, 95-96.

⁷⁸ *Chemin*, 96.

beaten by the principal. This episode serves to distill all the humiliation the child experiences in school: ‘Il se sentait brisé définitif, banni du monde des vivants et voué à traîner ses stupeurs dans un labyrinthe d’escaliers vides.’⁷⁹ The pain stays with him: ‘Rencontrer Monsieur le Directeur, c’était ressentir encore les brûlures du fouet, précises, exactes.’⁸⁰ This sense of abiding pain recurs in a reference to the ‘registres de cicatrices’ created by the marks of whippings on skin. Because these words figure in a piece of verse which is not part of the main narrative, this image of a wounded body is not rooted in any one context and it could refer to the skin of the schoolchildren or to the skin of slaves.⁸¹ As in Perec’s text, the bodily marks are a kind of floating signifier which can appear in various contexts and on different bodies. Here the piece of verse directs the reader’s mind simultaneously to the children’s bodies in mid-century Martinique and to the bodies of slaves in previous centuries. The marks on the children’s bodies then make present to the reader the physical and mental damage the children experience in school, and also the place of this suffering in a long history of painful contact between the French state and people living in Martinique.

If bodily injury is present as a mark of psychic pain and its survival in the work of Chamoiseau and Perec, but not that of Nabokov, it is perhaps because the first two authors are at a greater distance from the cause of trauma than Nabokov is. Bodily markers of trauma become necessary in their texts as a way of lending substance to psychic pain because it would not be immediately apparent otherwise. The mobility of the scars depicted in each of their texts evokes the way traces of traumas experienced by previous generations can move between different contexts, taking on a persistent presence within the lives of later generations. Such comparisons inevitably call up fraught questions of the equivalency of

⁷⁹ *Chemin*, 103.

⁸⁰ *Chemin*, 105.

⁸¹ *Recovering Memory*, p. 68.

different experiences of pain. Noting that Perec and Chamoiseau are at a greater distance from the source of trauma in their texts than Nabokov is not to say that they face lesser challenges in confronting it; as theorists of second-generation memory have shown, distance from an event does not necessarily make it any easier to understand or portray. Nor is it to argue for any equivalency between Chamoiseau's struggle with the legacy of colonialism and Perec's early loss of both parents. As outlined previously, Perec's life is immediately and directly changed by the Nazi persecution of the Jews through the loss of his mother and other members of his extended family. Chamoiseau, on the other hand, is much more distant from the beginnings of colonial violence and slavery in Martinique. His life is influenced by its consequences in a much less direct way; they shape the conditions of his life rather than intervening to alter its course. Despite these important differences, both Perec and Chamoiseau are working to portray the after-effects of historical violence that they themselves did not witness, though their lives can only be understood in its context. Their autobiographies thus focus on the ways in which they come to apprehend events that occurred beyond the bounds of their conscious memory. In doing this, they offer models of transmission of traumatic memory, in particular inter-generational movements of the memory of violence.

The Transmission of Trauma between Generations

There has been increasing interest in the means of transmission of traumatic memory between generations in recent years, in particular in the field of Holocaust Studies, perhaps as the result of the fact that survivors are passing away, and their children, or those born shortly after the war, are reflecting on the issues involved in taking on the role of preserving the

memory of the experiences of the previous generation.⁸² Marianne Hirsch has been an influential theorist in this field, coining the term ‘postmemory’ to describe the way memories of the Second World War and of other historical traumas are transmitted in a particularly vivid way from one generation to the next. Perhaps in part because Hirsch formulates the concept of ‘postmemory’ in a specifically comparative perspective, applying it to traumas other than the Holocaust, it has been used in recent years in postcolonial studies.⁸³ However, there are other theorists who have also done stimulating work on the transmission of traumatic historical memory, and I want now to open up a dialogue between these different models of transmission, which overlap in striking ways.

In the 1970s, psychoanalysts Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok developed the concept of ‘the phantom’, their term for a painful memory that is passed from generation to generation. They write: ‘what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others’.⁸⁴ When someone dies having experienced something unspeakable, the memory of this unarticulated experience passes from parent to child, though Abraham and Torok acknowledge that the means of this transmission are difficult to understand. Its effects, however, can be discerned in the way the child seems to be inhabited by experiences they never knew, which he or she might unconsciously re-enact.⁸⁵ The model they develop is intended to be a general one, not specific to any one history, but it resonates with many of the

⁸² Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), p. 18.

⁸³ For example in *Recovering Memory*, pp. 4-6; Claudia Marquis, ‘Crossing Over: Postmemory and Postcolonial Imaginary in Andrea Levy’s *Small Island* and *The Fruit of the Lemon*’, *EnterText*, 9 (2012), 31-52; Fiona Barclay, *Writing Postcolonial France: Haunting, Literature, and the Maghreb* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), pp. 45-46.

⁸⁴ *The Shell and the Kernel: Renewals of Psychoanalysis*, trans. and ed. by Nicholas T. Rand (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 171.

⁸⁵ Abraham and Torok, p. 175.

concepts developed by theorists of the transmission of Holocaust memory specifically. These lay emphasis on the charged relationship between parent and child, and the way painful histories are transmitted silently and not through straightforward narration. Ilse Grubrich-Simitis sums up this altered relationship between parent and child when she remarks that the trauma of the Holocaust is so great that it cannot be held within one mind but spills over, making the boundaries of the self permeable, so that the interaction with children becomes part of the way parents articulate or avoid articulating their past.⁸⁶ Their relationship with their children is then deeply implicated in their own process of coming to terms with the past. Because of this, their past experiences come to have a shaping power over their children's lives.

There are strong echoes between both Abraham and Torok's concept of the phantom, theories of transmission of Holocaust memory and Louise Hardwick's concept of 'the scene of recognition' in the Francophone Caribbean *récit d'enfance*, which builds on Maeve McCusker's work on the 'primal scene' in Francophone Caribbean *récits d'enfance*, where the child first discovers the history of slavery and their parents' unwillingness to speak of it.⁸⁷ Though these bodies of theory are developed in very different contexts, each lays emphasis on the role of silence and the charged relationship with parents in the transmission of memory of violence. Hardwick uses this term to refer to the moment when the child asks his parents about some aspect of the legacy of slavery. She draws attention to the way the child's questions are often rebuffed or answered in a fragmentary fashion, so that what is passed on

⁸⁶ Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, 'From Concretism to Metaphor: Thoughts on some Theoretical and Technical Aspects of Work with the Children of Holocaust Survivors', *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 39 (1984), 301-29 (p. 308).

⁸⁷ Hardwick, *Childhood, Autobiography and the Francophone Caribbean*, pp. 16-22; McCusker, "'Troubler l'ordre de l'oubli'", pp. 441-443.

from parent to child is an inability to articulate the violence of the past, and hence make sense of its relationship to the present.

At the end of the essay where Abraham and Torok first outline the concept of the phantom, they write that ‘it is reasonable to maintain that the “phantom effect” progressively fades during its transmission from one generation to the next and that, finally, it disappears’.⁸⁸ But, as they note with surprise, ‘this is not at all the case when shared or complementary phantoms find a way of being established as social practices’. Rather than tapering off, the shaping power of unconscious memories retains its strength through the generations and can even migrate from an interpersonal context to a broader social context. I want to argue here that a comparative reading of *Une Enfance créole* and *Wou le souvenir d’enfance* alongside these bodies of theory suggests that the memory of colonial violence, particularly the violence of slavery, retains its strength as a traumatic memory passing through the generations. This can be seen in three aspects signalled by each text: the child learns about the facts of the violent past indirectly, through silence rather than speech; the adult has a sense of exclusion from the historical events which shape his life, and there is a sense that the links between different modes of memory have been damaged.

Hirsch draws out the tensions embedded within the concept, ‘postmemory’, writing:

‘Postmemory is not identical to memory: it is “post”; but, at the same time, I argue, it approximates memory in its affective force and its psychic effects.’⁸⁹ Hirsch draws on Jan and Aleida Assmann’s work on the links between individual, family and collective social memory to draw attention to the fact that individual memory is always formulated in relation

⁸⁸ Abraham and Torok, p. 176.

⁸⁹ Hirsch, p. 31.

to inter-generational memory, which in turn shapes and is informed by collective and historical memory. Because an individual's memory always extends beyond the boundaries of his or her own life, postmemory is not an exceptional state, but rather an awareness that the links connecting these different kinds of memory have become problematic. It necessitates a conscious attempt 'to *reactivate* and *re-embody* more distant political and memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression'.⁹⁰

This attempt to set up a dialogue, or re-forge links between, individual, family and official memory is visible in both texts. One example of it in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* is the way Perec dwells on the historical and political events that took place on the day he was born. This speaks of an effort to integrate his individual life within family history and official history. Perec writes that he had long thought, mistakenly, that the day he was born was the day of the Nazi invasion of Poland.⁹¹ This is not true, but the underlying idea of his own family history being threatened by a larger history from the beginning of his life still holds: 'Ce qui était sûr, c'est qu'avait déjà commencé une histoire qui, pour moi et tous les miens, allait bientôt devenir vitale, c'est-à-dire, le plus souvent, mortelle.'⁹² This comment explicitly draws out the connections between a destructive international history and suffering in Perec's family and his own life, and a footnote to it continues this process in a more subtle way.

The footnote gives the newspaper headlines on the day he was born, and so acts as a corrective to the mistaken assumption referred to in the main body of the text. The headlines record a range of events relevant to Perec's family history, including Germany's violation of

⁹⁰ Hirsch, p. 33, italics in text.

⁹¹ W, 31.

⁹² W, 32.

the Locarno pact and Nazi attacks in Austria.⁹³ Perec's writing brings his own life into dialogue with an event which is not quite as obviously related to his own history, however. He notes that one of the news stories from those two days was the attempted assassination of the Prime Minister of Yugoslavia. Perec's text gives the spelling as 'Stojadinovitch' but the newspaper has the fourth letter as a 'y' rather than a 'j'. By mistranscribing the newspaper headline, Perec introduces an element of individual agency into his interaction with this record of an apparently impersonal history. His misspelling also recalls his mistakes with his mother's name and names in his extended family.⁹⁴ This linguistic incompetence with names of Eastern European origin is in part a result of the breakdown in linguistic continuities between Perec's generation and that of his parents, a breakdown triggered or exacerbated by the turbulent international histories which the newspaper headlines describe. This passage of text can thus be seen as an example of the process Hirsch describes of reactivation of links between personal, family and collective histories.

This process is also at work in *Une Enfance créole*. As explored previously, the body plays a key role in making present the intangible suffering the children experience in school. It is also possible to read images of the wounded body layered with other kinds of record of the past as intended to activate connections between the life of the individual and the 'more distant political and memorial structures' Hirsch refers to. A more extended look at the short piece of verse where the image of the 'registres de cicatrices' appears illustrates this point:

Les Maîtres armés
 gravaient État civil en
 stigmates sur les jambes
 mémoire-peau
 registres de cicatrices
 ho douleurs fossiles

⁹³ W, 32-34.

⁹⁴ W, 45; W, 57-58.

les tibias osent des songes.⁹⁵

The layering of the slave registers with images of scars has the effect of setting up a relationship between a living individual body, and the somewhat inert historical document of the slave register. The reference to ‘stigmates’ reinforces this and introduces the idea of a wound which moves from body to body, indicates belonging and refuses to heal. These facets of stigmata resonate with Chamoiseau’s conception of the legacy of slavery and colonial violence. Maeve McCusker reads the ‘douleurs fossiles’ as a reference to ‘the painful but deeply embedded or petrified memory’ of slavery. ‘Douleurs fossiles’ could also evoke the pre-colonial indigenous inhabitants of Martinique, almost all of whom were killed early in the colonial era. Fossils are strongly associated with these people in Chamoiseau’s work, because remnants in the archaeological record are one of the few ways of reconstructing their history.⁹⁶ Here the phrase ‘douleurs fossiles’ transforms these fossils from an object of geological history to an inner ache within the body. The presence of ‘os’ within ‘fossiles’ identified by McCusker, replicates on the formal level the discovery of a bodily structure within what appears to be mineral or stone.⁹⁷ As in the ‘registres de cicatrices’ it introduces the presence of the living body into what is otherwise a mute remnant of the past. This poem then re-embodies elements of the histories of both Africans and indigenous Caribbeans. The reason these processes of re-embodiment and reactivation of impersonal traces of the past are necessary is because the usual processes of mediation between individual history and family or collective history have come under threat. The situations which create a need for postmemory, the Holocaust and colonialism in the case of the two authors under discussion, disrupt the usual links between parent and child, individual life and historical archive, through death, migration, inter-generational shifts of language and the destruction or

⁹⁵ *Chemin*, 98.

⁹⁶ *Ecrire en pays dominé*, p. 118.

⁹⁷ *Recovering Memory*, p. 68.

falsification of the historical record.⁹⁸ In Perec's text, the deaths of his parents in the war break the immediate link between his own life and broader family life. Hirsch's point about the way the historical archive often does not accurately record the details of violent histories is relevant in Perec's case, as his mother's date and place of death are incorrectly recorded.⁹⁹ Historical archives are also a problematic mode of access to knowledge about slavery and the colonial past for Chamoiseau, as they were largely produced by the same people and institutions responsible for the violence. More immediately, the family and the education system, two places where memory of the past might be handed on, are hampered in this task by a reluctance to speak of the painful aspects of Martinique's history.

This reluctance to speak of the past and its enduring influence on the present is a key characteristic of the transmission of traumatic memory. Ilse Grubrich-Simitis speaks of a 'pact of silence' maintained by the first generation on their experiences in the camps.¹⁰⁰ Nicholas T. Rand, summing up Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's concept of second-generation traumatic memory, writes: 'The phantom represents the interpersonal and transgenerational consequences of silence.'¹⁰¹ Henri Raczymow, born to Eastern European parents in Paris in 1945, writes that his family's past 'was handed down to me precisely as something *not* handed down to me'.¹⁰² Nadine Fresco argues that rather than learning about the Holocaust from what their parents tell them, members of the second generation struggle to make sense of their parents' silence about large swathes of their past. As a result, their knowledge of their family's past is belated; they can only put together its pieces once they

⁹⁸ Hirsch, p. 33.

⁹⁹ *W*, 57-58.

¹⁰⁰ Grubrich-Simitis, p. 308.

¹⁰¹ *The Shell and the Kernel*, p. 168.

¹⁰² 'Memory Shot Through with Holes', trans. by Alan Astro, *Yale French Studies*, 85 (1994), 98-105 (p. 103).

have reached an age where they can seek out information without asking their parents. This knowledge then retroactively transforms their understanding of the family past, without, however, coming as a complete surprise, as the parents' very silence around the past intimates pain.¹⁰³ Louise Hardwick brings out a similar dynamic in the Francophone Caribbean *récit d'enfance*, where the child asks a question about some aspect of the legacy of slavery only to be met with an embarrassed silence which only heightens their curiosity. They will only understand the reasons for this reluctance to speak of the past by piecing together various puzzling and painful experiences they have of the contemporary traces of the colonial past. Hardwick argues that this process leaves 'fundamental psychic traces'.¹⁰⁴

This sense of coming to knowledge of a painful history through silences rather than speech is present in both texts. The mute tension around the events of the war is evoked in Perec's description of the anxiety of a woman who was looking after him when the German soldiers who were staying nearby took to playing with the child regularly: 'Elle avait très peur, disaitelle à ma tante qui me le raconta par la suite, que je ne dise quelque chose qu'il ne fallait pas que je dise et elle ne savait comment me signifier ce secret que je devais garder.'¹⁰⁵ Here, it is possible to imagine the child picking up on the woman's fear through non-verbal cues and associating it with the presence of the soldiers without being able to articulate why. This sense of the child-self knowing something is wrong but not being sure what is present elsewhere in the text. When writing about his imagined memory of breaking his collar-bone, Perec tells the reader: 'ces thérapeutiques imaginaires, moins contraignantes que tutoriales, ces *points de suspension*, désignaient des douleurs nommables et venaient à point justifier des

¹⁰³ 'Remembering the Unknown', *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 11 (1984), 417-427.

¹⁰⁴ Hardwick, *Childhood, Autobiography and the Francophone Caribbean*, p. 20.

¹⁰⁵ *W*, 73.

cajoleries dont les raisons réelles n'étaient données qu'à voix basse.¹⁰⁶ The imagined injury is thus figured as a way for the child to make sense of his shadowy knowledge that something has been damaged about his life. The unexplained cossetting and hushed voices noticed by the child act as signs that something is wrong, though it is going unspoken.

Silence around the violence of the past has a much less central place in *Une Enfance créole*, but it is still present. Though the history of slavery and colonial power structures shape the child's world, there is no scene where his discovery of this history is narrated. Instead, it is present as 'an oblique undertow'.¹⁰⁷ Its unspoken presence chimes with Chamoiseau's comment in a theoretical essay on memory that '[r]ien de ce que j'en sais ne m'a été transmis de manière directe ou volontaire.'¹⁰⁸ Louise Hardwick notes Chamoiseau's comment in an interview that Creole folk-tales transmit to the child the knowledge that the world is a dangerous place, where the vulnerable must have their wits about them, and even then have no guarantee of safety.¹⁰⁹ In *Une Enfance créole*, the child receives knowledge of the island's violent past through the folk-tales of Jeanne-Yvette, a story-teller.¹¹⁰ Knowledge about Martinique's colonial history and its continuing ramifications in the present is thus passed on indirectly, through silences and fictional stories.

Both authors inherit a memory of violence through silences rather than speech and both engage in an active enterprise of reconnecting individual, family and official history. The third point of convergence is a somewhat painful knowledge of their own belated position in

¹⁰⁶ W, 110, italics in original.

¹⁰⁷ *Recovering Memory*, p. 66.

¹⁰⁸ *De la mémoire obscure à la mémoire consciente* (Paris: Gallimard, 2010), p. 7.

¹⁰⁹ Hardwick, *Childhood, Autobiography and the Francophone Caribbean*, p. 5, quoting Patrick Chamoiseau, *Au Temps de l'Antan* (Paris: Hatier, 1988), p. 10.

¹¹⁰ *Antan*, 126-127.

relation to the events whose memory they inherit. Theorists of second-generation memory of the Holocaust draw attention to this counter-intuitive facet of transmitted memory. Members of subsequent generations occupy an uncertain position in relation to the histories of their parents and ancestors, because they do not fit into the categories of victim or survivor and lack a language for articulating their relationship to the historical events which shape their lives. Fresco quotes one member of the second generation as speaking of ‘an almost incommunicable feeling, made up for the most part of jealousy’ about those who lived through the genocide.¹¹¹ Raczymow speaks of ‘the feeling all of us have, deep down, of having missed a train’.¹¹² There are echoes of this sense of exclusion from the events of history in the adult Gaspard Winckler’s comment, ‘je fus témoin et non acteur’, an idea which recurs when Perec realises it was his classmate, not he, who broke his collar-bone, and writes, ‘L’événement eut lieu, un peu plus tard ou un peu plus tôt, et je n’en fus pas la victime héroïque mais un simple témoin’.¹¹³

There is also an echo of the paradoxical jealousy described by Fresco’s interviewee in Chamoiseau’s distinction between ‘la domination insidieuse’ and ‘la domination brutale’.¹¹⁴ These are his terms for distinguishing between the violent colonial oppression of the past and the more subtle psychological oppression of the contemporary period. When he sketches the differences between these two modes, his comment that violent oppression is easier to perceive and to oppose is almost wistful about the clearer role occupied by anti-colonial activists of a previous era. This sense of occupying a belated position in relation to colonial violence could also account in part for the sense of the author as a slightly pathetic figure,

¹¹¹ Fresco, p. 421.

¹¹² Raczymow, p. 105.

¹¹³ *W*, 10; 109.

¹¹⁴ Chamoiseau, *Ecrire en pays dominé*, pp. 17-18.

present in his brother's remarks about his reluctance to wean from his mother and in the ineffectual alter egos to whom the author is implicitly compared, such as the 'petit pompier' in the preface.¹¹⁵ The opposition Chamoiseau draws between those who experienced and opposed colonial violence and later figures who merely record its lingering effects echoes Perec's contrast between actors in, and witnesses of, histories of violence.

Reading these two texts comparatively through theories of transmission of traumatic memory thus suggests that the relatively well-developed work on transmission of Holocaust memory can be fruitfully cross-pollinated with scholarship on the inherited memory of slavery and colonial violence. Such a comparative approach brings out the enduring impact on a child of coming into contact with a history of violence through the silences and oblique approaches of adults who have not yet come to terms with it. Hirsch's concept that subsequent generations must re-weave the links between bodily, textual, family and national histories helps make sense of otherwise obscure practices, such as Perec's transcription of a whole set of headlines from the day he was born and Chamoiseau's interweaving of references to slavery and recollections of his experience of school in the 1950s. This comparative reading then bears out each author's suggestion that there are resonances between the history of the Holocaust and colonial histories. It illustrates Abraham and Torok's disconcerted observation that memories of trauma do not necessarily fade with the passing of generations, but can instead migrate from the interpersonal, familial context to the social realm. This move is notable in the texts in the way that Perec's narration of the hampered transmission of knowledge of the camps takes place in domestic settings with members of his extended family or people who have taken the place of his parents, whereas in Chamoiseau's text, the schoolroom, where the children form a collective mass, and the teacher is a condensed portrait of many different

¹¹⁵ *Antan*, 24; 9-10.

teachers, is the arena where the memory of slavery and colonial violence makes itself felt.

Although each author's portrayal of their reception of the memory of violence differs in this respect and in others, looking at them together suggests the value of further comparisons of autobiographical writing which confronts the legacies of the Holocaust, colonialism, and other histories of violence.

Conclusion

Reading these texts for marks of trauma shows the power of trauma as a conceptual category in bringing out overlaps between texts recounting a broad range of modes of contact with the violent histories of modernity. Reading for textual tropes of trauma, such as dissociation, silence around painful subject-matter and fragmentary, non-linear narrative structures reveals points of convergence in these authors' approach to the narration of personal and collective pain, though the source of trauma moves from direct experience of violence (Nabokov) to family bereavement through war and genocide (Perec) to the everyday events in a society whose origins lie in colonial violence (Chamoiseau). Such movements of the source of trauma from the extreme to the everyday have been at the source of some anxiety in recent debate on the subject. This reading suggests that where sources of trauma seem to be so everyday as to threaten the use of the term in extreme situations, it is worth taking a diachronic approach to the experience in question. Crossovers between the bodies of theory on the transmission of Holocaust memory and memory of slavery suggest that movement of traumatic experience across generations is possible and that as long as the painful history remains unprocessed it will embed itself within social structures, continuing to damage individuals' development. Theories of trauma and its transmission thus stand to benefit from comparative approaches to texts recounting a range of different histories, as well as providing an illuminating way into

the issues of history and memory opened up by these texts. Yet the portrayal of the transmission of memory of painful historical events in Perec and Chamoiseau's text also suggests a certain tension between their projects and traumatic modes of relationship to the past. The depiction of the previous generation's silences around violent histories implies a degree of criticism of the ways in which these silences create or perpetuate problematic relationships to the past, while the active processes of re-embodiment of connections between personal, family and historical traces of the past speaks of a will to move beyond such problematic relationships, even where such an enterprise can never be entirely successful. Reading *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* and *Une Enfance créole* as expressions of a traumatic relationship to the past thus involves reading against the grain of the text to a certain extent. As noted earlier, this is also the case with *Speak, Memory*. The next chapter will consider in greater detail the the aspects of each text which register a tension with traumatic modes of relationship to the past, and will argue that the expression of trauma in these texts is interwoven with attempts to achieve a conscious, active relationship with the past.

Chapter Three: The Intertwining of Traumatic and Conscious Memory

We saw in the previous chapter that trauma theory provides a powerful interpretive framework for making sense of the silences in these texts, and in particular of their nonlinear temporal constructions and images of the wounded body. While the textual devices analysed in the last chapter do seem to fit the patterns of a traumatic response, the idea of the author as an individual who is not fully conscious of his past sits slightly uneasily with the way each text places value on a conscious, active approach to memory. This privileging of conscious memory is present in explicit statements in each text, in metatextual comments which draw the reader's attention to nuances of memory's workings, in the author's wider work and in the way each situates himself in relation to previous writers on memory, most notably Marcel Proust. This chapter seeks to bring out the concept of conscious memory that each author puts forward and to bring it into dialogue with the value each places on establishing indirect, ludic textual pathways to engage the reader. It explores ways of making sense of non-linear temporal structures and indirect approaches to painful subject matter in the light of each author's avowed commitment to conscious memory.

Conscious Memory

Each author places emphasis on the value of conscious approaches to memory of the past in the autobiography and in his wider fictional and theoretical or critical work. The question of the proper mode of relation to the past recurs insistently across Chamoiseau's oeuvre. As we have seen, his autobiographical texts can certainly be read as expressive of the shaping

presence of historical trauma in the life of the child-self. Yet, Chamoiseau's critical writing, along with elements of the texts themselves and his wider work, encourages the reader to go beyond this reading. In particular, an essay entitled 'De la mémoire obscure à la mémoire consciente' suggests that the relationship he sets up between traumatic and conscious memory is slightly different than that found in contemporary trauma theory. The essay is published as a 'postface' to two novels, *L'Esclave vieil homme et le molosse* and *Un Dimanche au Cachot*, originally published separately but repackaged in this instance as two volumes which together make up a set Chamoiseau names *Le Déshumain grandiose*.¹ The essay takes as its subject the relationship of contemporary Martinicans to slavery.

Chamoiseau's 'mémoire obscure' has strong echoes with concepts of traumatic memory explored in the previous chapter; it is a form of non-memory, an 'exacerbation silencieuse de la blessure', a 'crispation du psychisme'.² The essay, as its title suggests, argues for a conscious and deliberate process of recognising and moving beyond this form of memory. This process does not constitute a rejection of traumatic memory but rather an imaginative engagement with it: '[La mémoire consciente] imagine cette mémoire obscure dans ses mystères et l'envisage en ses croyances, mais la soumet toujours aux nécessités de la clairvoyance et de l'élucidation qui ne craignent pas l'inconnaissable.'³ There is a kind of respect here for the otherness of traumatic memory, but this respect is curiously accompanied by an insistence that its otherness be brought into dialogue with another form of relationship to the past, whose association with light and knowledge suggests it is quite distinct from trauma. The use of the verb 'soumettre' is unlikely to be used lightly by Chamoiseau, who is usually at pains to dismantle or destabilise hierarchical relationships. It firmly situates

¹ Patrick Chamoiseau and Edouard Glissant, *L'Esclave vieil homme et le molosse: roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997); Patrick Chamoiseau, *Un dimanche au cachot* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007).

² *De la mémoire obscure à la mémoire consciente*, p. 20.

³ *De la mémoire obscure à la mémoire consciente*, p. 20.

traumatic memory as a bridge toward the more valuable conscious memory. This emphasis on traumatic memory as a tool, and the specific use of the vocabulary of mastery in ‘soumettre’, is at odds with Caruth’s definition of trauma, which defines it by the fact that it takes away the individual’s ability to master their own experience. It also sounds a dissonant note with the emphasis placed on the importance of not resolving the disruptive presence of trauma in the mind and the text. Though some argue that to undo trauma’s status as an unknowable event would be an unethical smoothing over of the challenge it poses to understanding, Chamoiseau seems here to argue the opposite by calling for the transformation of inarticulate historical pain into knowledge and understanding in the service of social renewal.

The essay suggests that the imagination is crucial in this enterprise, an argument which is supported by its accompaniment by two novels. Chamoiseau uses these works as examples of attempts to move from traumatic to conscious memory. Originally published ten years apart, each is an extended meditation on one aspect of slavery. *L’Esclave vieil homme et le molosse* deals with the capture of a runaway slave by a dog and *Un dimanche au cachot* interweaves the experiences of a contemporary young girl with the practice of imprisoning slaves in dungeons. Chamoiseau writes that both of these novels constitute attempts to ‘transformer, au plus profond de moi, le crime en expérience’.⁴ There are hints of this attempt to transform sites of inarticulate pain into knowledge at the opening of his autobiography too, where the speaker petitions memory: ‘Mémoire, passons un pacte le temps d’un crayonné, baisse palissades et apaise les farouches.’⁵ These lines suggest an attempt to enter into those parts of the collective past which previous generations fenced off from speech and thought as

⁴ *De la mémoire obscure à la mémoire consciente*, p. 22.

⁵ *Antan*, 22.

part of an effort of self-preservation.⁶ They also evoke a reversal of the move away from the plantation undertaken by the escaping slave in *L'Esclave vieil homme et le molosse*. If the old man needs to cross those forbidding barriers to escape from the oppression of slavery, contemporary Martinicans need to undertake a reverse journey, crossing the barriers from the outside in, re-entering the experience of slavery in order to gain a measure of understanding of it. Chamoiseau's theoretical reflections on traumatic memory as a stepping-stone to a more conscious, articulate relationship to the past, his extended imaginative recreations of life under slavery and these opening images of crossing the forbidding mental boundaries all encourage the reader of his autobiographical text to be attentive to the silences which suggest a traumatic relationship to the past, but also to read for the ways in which the text transforms this traumatic legacy into something knowable.

In a comparable way, Perec's work situates the concentrationary universe as knowable. Like Chamoiseau he uses imagery of physical boundaries to both raise and contest the idea that the world of the camps is definitively sealed off from knowledge and understanding. In his review of *L'Espèce humaine*, Robert Antelme's memoir of his time in a Nazi camp, Perec praises how Antelme's writing allows the reality of the camps to emerge slowly, and he expresses disapproval of the way other writers who describe the camps give the impression that it is 'un monde total, refermé sur lui-même, et que l'on restitue en bloc'.⁷ He criticises the idea that the world of the camps is in some sense fundamentally different to the everyday world: 'Il n'y a pas deux mondes,' he writes, 'mais seulement des hommes qui tentent désespérément de nier les autres'.⁸ Though silence is deployed to indicate the difficulty of articulating his grief over his mother, these comments on Antelme's article suggest that while

⁶ *De la mémoire obscure à la mémoire consciente*, p. 7.

⁷ Georges Perec, *L.G.: une aventure des années soixante* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 95.

⁸ Perec, *L.G.: une aventure des années soixante*, p. 107.

his personal grief might be traumatic, he does not believe that the historical circumstances which caused it lie beyond knowledge or comprehension. Rather, he emphasises the importance of seeing the concentrationary universe as available to understanding and even familiar in some of its aspects, and of striving to transmit such a view when writing on the subject.

This effort of overcoming what appears to lie beyond the mind's capacity for memory is present elsewhere in Perec's work. His concept of memory, like that of Nabokov and Chamoiseau, involves a measure of self-criticism and questioning of his own ready-made images of the past. This is expressed in all three texts in metatextual comments on the process of recording the past in writing, but occurs in its most striking form in Perec's text, where he takes a narration of his parents' lives written fifteen years previously and systematically points out its flaws and inaccuracies in a set of footnotes.⁹ The notes are longer than the text itself, indicating the value the author places on the process of criticising the blank spots and omissions in one's own memory. The effort of filling in the blank spaces in one's memory of the past perhaps helps make sense of some of Perec's more puzzling excursions into memory, such as the list of apparently banal memories in *Je me souviens*.¹⁰ Here, although the memories recovered do not always seem of any immediate value, the process of retrieving them nonetheless demonstrates the possibility of extending the boundaries of memory through conscious effort. This emphasis on memory as a conscious effort recurs across his literary criticism and wider work, then, as well as in the autobiography itself.

⁹ W, 42-58.

¹⁰ Georges Perec, *Je me souviens* (Paris: Hachette, 1978).

The focus on details of the past, an emphasis on memory as effort and an unwillingness to situate historical violence as beyond the bounds of understanding are also found in Nabokov's work. The development of the conscious mind's ability to perceive the past and present accurately is a major theme across Nabokov's work, and it goes hand in hand with a turning away from the activity of the unconscious mind. Nabokov's privileging of conscious memory emerges in three ways across the different iterations of *Speak, Memory*: in the important role he gives to the accurate record of details of the past; in his satire of the propensity to recreate new versions of the past according to one's current mood and interests, and in the models of memory he inherits from his parents. The importance of accuracy with regard to the details of the past can be seen in the triumph associated with minor corrections and additions between the various versions of the text, from the change of 'spectacles' to 'cigarette case' to the matching of a certain shade with 'Rose Quartz' in a dictionary of colours.¹¹ Evidence of the preparatory notes for the writing of the first full-length version of the autobiography also testify to the importance of detail. Here Nabokov drafts a letter to a scientific colleague, inquiring about the species and genus of monkeys used by organ grinders at the turn of the century in Russia for an episode described in a sentence or two in his text.¹² The attention given to these minor changes suggests the value attached to accurately recording the details of the past, and of testing one's own memory against external sources.

In the episodes where Nabokov describes his parents it becomes clear that this detail-oriented approach to memory is inherited from them.¹³ The autobiography thus presents the author's

¹¹ *SM*, 5; 21-22

¹² Washington, D.C., Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Vladimir Vladimirovich Nabokov Papers, Box 9.

¹³ *SM*, 25-26.

parents as models of good memory, but it also mocks those who fail to take this attentive approach to recalling the past. Mademoiselle O is the main focus for this satire in the autobiography. When Nabokov goes to visit her as an adult she has forgotten how miserable her time in Russia was, and happily narrates moments of tenderness between herself and her charges which Nabokov suggests never happened.¹⁴ What is mocked here is a slightly solipsistic approach to the past, where the mind generates images which reflect the self and its current concerns rather than attending to the past as it was. The author himself comes in for similar mockery in the final revision of Chapter Three, which opens with an image of an unseeing relationship to the past: ‘An inexperienced heraldist resembles a medieval traveler who brings back from the East the faunal fantasies influenced by the domestic bestiary he possessed all along rather than by the results of direct zoological exploration.’¹⁵ Nabokov is referring to his inaccurate memory of the family crest, which he recalled as two bears holding up a chessboard, but which he found was quite different when he managed to consult an external source. There is a suspicion here of the mind’s power to shape one’s image of the past, and value is placed on attention to the mind’s ruses and blind spots.

We can see that this questioning approach to the activity of one’s own mind is important to Nabokov through the way he excoriates models of memory which argue that the mind cannot be fully understood. His disapproval of the idea of unconscious memories becomes most clear in his notorious dislike of Freud’s work. Toward the end of *Speak, Memory* he acerbically remarks, ‘incidentally, what a great mistake on the part of dictators to ignore psychoanalysis – a whole generation might be so easily corrupted that way!’¹⁶ Here he draws attention to the ethical problems associated with the idea that one can carry out actions while

¹⁴ *SM*, 80.

¹⁵ *SM*, 35.

¹⁶ *SM*, 235.

remaining unaware of, or helpless to change, one's reasons for doing so. Will Norman points out the connection made between psychoanalysis and cruelty to the vulnerable in *Bend Sinister*, where the murder of the protagonist's child takes place as part of psychoanalytic research, and in *Lolita*, where Humbert argues his treatment of Dolores is determined by the untimely ending of a youthful love affair.¹⁷ Nabokov's satire of the implications of unconscious memory draws attention to its potential influence on ethics and even politics, as well as on individual attempts to recover the past. Freud is a very conspicuous target for his critique of the idea of unconscious memory, but this critique is also present in his approach to Marcel Proust, whose ideas are taken up and nuanced in each of the texts under discussion.

Rewritings of Proust

The value placed on conscious memory in each author's metatextual comments and wider work is echoed by rewritings of famous Proustian scenes. Proust is present in each autobiography as a stimulating and at times contested presence. In each case, the author takes aspects of Proust's work and re-shapes it so that voluntary, conscious memory takes ascendance over involuntary memory. Nabokov's autobiography draws on Proust's novel through attention to the role of the senses in recollection of the past, evocations of synaesthesia and magic lantern pictures, the use of Bergsonian vocabulary of immersion in pure time, and an episode where a book from childhood brings back memories of the past, to name a few salient points of convergence between the two authors. However, while engaging closely with Proust's work, Nabokov departs from the model of involuntary memory. Will Norman points out that the end of Chapter Two, where Nabokov dismisses the visions of the dead which come to him in dreams, celebrating instead those achieved through high levels of

¹⁷ Norman, pp. 106-107.

concentration, is a movement away from Proust's valuing of involuntary memory.¹⁸ More generally, we can see the horror of sleep expressed in *Speak, Memory* as symptomatic of the text's turning away from unconscious and involuntary modes of being.

Nabokov's narration of falling asleep as a child can be read as a rewriting of the famous opening of Proust's novel. Like the invalid referred to at the beginning of the novel, he enjoys the time when he can still see a line of light beneath the door of his bedroom while Mademoiselle O is awake and is dismayed when she puts out her lights and it disappears.¹⁹ Whereas Proust's invalid is unsure about the provenance of the light, thinking perhaps it is morning, Nabokov's child-self knows every detail of Mademoiselle O's night-time routine. This contrast between Proust's invalid's sleepy confusion about when his servants will come to help him and the child's detailed knowledge of his governess's every movement concentrates in miniature the difference between Proust's attentiveness to states of semiawareness and Nabokov's devotion to detailed, conscious awareness.

The opening of *Combray* and the image of a sleeping man is also used by Perec to mark his distance from Proust, though in a novel rather than the autobiography. He writes a novel entitled *Un Homme qui dort* in what seems to be a nod to the lines near the beginning of the *Recherche*:

Un homme qui dort tient en cercle autour de lui le fil des heures, l'ordre des années et des mondes. Il les consulte d'instinct en s'éveillant et y lit en une seconde le point de la terre qu'il occupe, le temps qui s'est écoulé jusqu'à son réveil ; mais leurs rangs peuvent se mêler, se rompre.²⁰

¹⁸ Norman, pp. 67-68.

¹⁹ *SM*, 81-82; Marcel Proust, *A la recherche du temps perdu*, 16 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1914-1927) I, (1919), p. 12.

²⁰ Proust, p. 14.

The novel, which describes the lost wanderings of a young man in Paris, can be seen as an exploration of the unspooling of ‘le fil des heures, l’ordre des années et des mondes’. This ambivalent engagement with the opening of *Du côté de chez Swann* continues in a piece of writing Perec thought about doing but never completed, where he would record all the different bedrooms he had slept in ‘une sorte d’autobiographie vespérale’. There are obvious echoes between this idea and the beginning of Proust’s work, and Perec states that it is intended to be a development of the sixth and seventh paragraphs of the novel, but the fragments of writing Perec undertook for the project, like Nabokov’s narration of falling asleep, abandon Proust’s exploration of states of half-awareness in favour of detailed, dispassionate knowledge, with the use of technical vocabulary, such as ‘recenser’, to describe the project, and musings about whether to list the bedrooms according to location or theme.²¹

Because of this evidence of engagement with Proust elsewhere in Perec’s work, it is possible to read the two mentions of Venice in *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* as further echoes of *La Recherche*. These are placed in prominent positions in the text, one in the first fictional chapter and the other in the first autobiographical chapter. In both instances, Venice is associated with an element of the past returning or seeming to return. In the fictional chapter, the narrator, who has been searching for evidence that his experience in W really happened, is sitting in a restaurant in Venice when he thinks he sees a man he recognises: ‘Je me suis précipité sur lui, mais déjà balbutiant deux ou trois mots d’excuse. Il ne pouvait pas y avoir de survivant.’²² Venice is then the scene of an abortive moment of memory, where the narrator’s sudden hope that the destruction he witnessed in W has not been total is dashed. The second mention of Venice occurs in the next chapter, where the author writes that he had

²¹ Perec, *Espèces d’espaces*, pp. 31-35.

²² W, 10.

invented the W story at the age of thirteen and had forgotten about it until he remembered it suddenly in Venice one evening.²³ This kind of memory is quite distinct from Proustian memory. It is a verbal recollection and is fragmentary; the author remembers the title of the story but very little else, in contrast to the sense of wholeness and sensory engagement associated with Proustian involuntary memory. The previous narration of the fictional narrator's mistaken identification of the man in the restaurant also resonates with this episode, preparing the reader to see it as another moment of abortive memory. These two references to Venice then mark the autobiography's distance from a model of memory which allows re-immersion in the past.

Chamoiseau also engages closely with imagery and concepts from Proust's exploration with memory while working to nuance them for his particular context, though Proust's presence in his text is more attenuated than it is in *Speak, Memory* or *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. Wendy Knepper identifies the child's delight in tasting the sweets his mother make as a rewriting of the madeleine episode, drawing attention to the way the child's sensory delight also functions as an initiation into language, as the child eats the words his sister writes in icing on the cakes. Language, associated with voluntary memory in Proust's work, is here fused with the sensory pleasure of the sweet taste. Knepper points out that recalling this taste brings back a different period to the author's mind in a way that connects his own memory with that of his generation, so that sensory memories become a way into a collective as well as an individual past.²⁴

²³ W, 14.

²⁴ Knepper, pp. 132-136.

We might also see the imagery of magma hardening that follows shortly after this episode as an echo of Proust's geological imagery. Like Proust, Chamoiseau uses geological imagery of magma, crusts and caves to suggest the landscape of memory and the self. There are echoes between this imagery and Proust's metaphor of the different periods of a life as flows of magma which fuse together, but the distinctions between the two authors' use of such imagery are telling. Chamoiseau's emphasis on a crust forming over a more labile state draws attention to the distinction between the surface level of adult selfhood and the older and more vital mode of childhood perception which it masks, in contrast to the more fluid interaction proposed between different layers of self in Proust's novel. Chamoiseau's emphasis on the difference between the crust and the lava beneath could be read as an adaptation of Proust's metaphor to the neo-colonial context, where the distinction between different layers of selfhood is imposed from without to a greater degree than is the case in Proust's work. In Chamoiseau's emphasis on the enduring value of childhood modes of perception, and his denial that attainment of adulthood marks progress, this metaphor also gestures toward the need to actively peel back the crust of adult perception. Along with the lines which follow this excerpt, which criticise the complacency and inaccuracy of adult perception, there is a suggestion that childhood ways of thinking should be actively preserved and recovered, which is absent from Proust's evocation of blending between different layers of selfhood and his emphasis on the unpredictable nature of the return of previous modes of perception.

Each author then reshapes and reworks elements of Proustian conceptions of memory in order to privilege conscious, deliberate approaches to recovery of the past, and to call into question the value of memories which return unbidden. The connection between Proust's conception of memory and models of traumatic memory explored in the previous chapter might seem obscure, but Proust's involuntary memory can, and has, been read as a form of

traumatic memory. Richard Terdiman argues that the traumatic qualities of Proustian involuntary memory become more apparent if one focuses on the way they are experienced and disregards the way the narrator describes them after the fact. Though these moments of recall are described as pleasurable, the experience of them is unsettling because of its power. Terdiman draws these moments into dialogue with the models of traumatic memory that were emerging at the beginning of the twentieth century, noting echoes between involuntary memory and emerging Freudian concepts of traumatic recall.²⁵ Traumatic memory and involuntary memory both suggest that the individual is not fully in possession of his past. At any moment, an apparently everyday scene or sensation can bring a moment of the past flooding past. In each case the memory of the past moment is not lived as a memory but rather as a re-experiencing of that moment in all of its vividness. Moments of involuntary memory disrupt the wholeness of identity, producing ‘a feeling of inexplicable and irresistible surrender, of a fantastic penetration by the irrational’.²⁶ In rewriting scenes from Proust’s novel, these authors are working against a model of the self that can be overcome by ‘a fantastic penetration of the irrational’.

All three of these authors are at pains to demonstrate their allegiance to a model of memory which argues that the past can be known through the activity of the conscious mind, and detracts from the value of unconscious modes of relationship to it. This is a major concern across each writer’s oeuvre, and is worked out through relatively unconventional approaches to the recovery of the past, such as Nabokov’s almost maniacal focus on detail, the trouble Perec takes to come up with what seem to be insignificant memories, and Chamoiseau’s reworking of the trauma paradigm so that conscious memory masters traumatic recall. In

²⁵ Terdiman, pp. 208-219.

²⁶ Terdiman, p. 213.

each author, models of the past which neglect or reject a conscious approach to memory are criticised with some vehemence and carry political connotations, as we see in Chamoiseau's emphasis on the necessity of moving beyond unconscious memory of the colonial past, in Perec's criticism of modes of narration of the Nazi camps which depict them as unknowable, and in Nabokov's linking of psychoanalysis with totalitarianism. The rejection of involuntary memory also leads these authors to engage critically with Proust, whose work is otherwise presented as stimulating and enabling of their literary enterprise, especially in the case of Nabokov and Perec.

Each author then gives the reader many reasons to read his autobiographical work as motivated by an approach to memory which values conscious and deliberate recollection. Yet, as explored in the previous chapter, there are significant elements in each text which suggest that memories which cannot be fully known, understood or expressed are at work within it and are even a determining element in its structure. In the light of this gap between declared allegiances and textual practice, how is the reader to understand marks of trauma in the text? One way of reading this contradiction is to argue that these authors place such emphasis on conscious memory precisely because unconscious, involuntary recollections drive their autobiographical enterprise and wider approach to the past. I want to look now at the ways in which traumatic modes of relationship to the past are intertwined with attempts to move beyond them. Such duality is present in the temporal structures of *Speak, Memory* and *Une Enfance créole* and in the portrayals of the wounded body by Perec and Chamoiseau.

The work of Johannes Fabian on the temporality of anthropological writing is helpful in understanding the rationale for the use of non-linear temporal structures as part of a conscious practice of memorial writing. Fabian points out that there is a gap between the time

during which the anthropologist experiences the culture he is studying, and the time when he writes up his experiences. Fabian argues that this leads to what he calls 'a denial of co-evalness', where the culture under study is consigned to the past. This becomes even more problematic when it is replicated at the level of national discourse, where the cultures studied by anthropologists are spoken of as occupying an earlier stage in human history than the countries which colonised them. According to Fabian, the way the anthropologist occupies the first person and the present, while the people described are spoken of in the third person and the past, contributes to a suppression of their voices.²⁷

Fabian was not writing about autobiography, but many of the issues he examines are relevant to autobiographical writing which seeks to record and preserve a cultural and linguistic inheritance and memorialise a lost parent. Autobiographical discourse is also characterised by a temporal gap between the present of writing and the experiences described. Memorial writing runs the risk of suppressing the voices of the loved ones mourned, and of making them mere characters within the author's repertoire. In addition to this, the depiction of a lost linguistic and cultural community for an audience who does not share this heritage creates a risk of reifying it. In the unpredictable relationships Nabokov and Chamoiseau create between past and present within the autobiographical text, each author displays a commitment to allowing his past, his ancestral language and culture, and his loved ones, their strangeness. Though this might seem close to trauma theory's conception of the traumatic event as something that cannot be assimilated into the mind or a conventionally linear narrative, there are important distinctions between the two models. Whereas in trauma theory the individual cannot assimilate the painful event, whether they wish to or not, reading these

²⁷ *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

temporal structures through Fabian's work suggests that even if the past could be assimilated to the present, maintaining its isolation serves a purpose. Where trauma theory sees fragmentation as a sign that the individual cannot make coherent sense of their past, this reading sees distinctions between past and present as a sign of a clear understanding of the nuances of their separation.

Separation between Different Temporal Periods

As we have seen, in theories of trauma, experiencing an overwhelming event will lead to disrupted temporality because the moment of trauma will return over and over, preventing the individual from experiencing it as 'past'. This will continue unless the individual is able to find a way to process the overwhelming experience and leave it behind. Literary theories of trauma emphasise the great difficulties involved in this process. If nothing is done, the traumatic moment will always remain unassimilated. In Fabian's model, the process is the opposite. He argues that the conventions of anthropological work lead writers to elide the strangeness of the past and of other people to the present and the self, and that a conscious effort must be made to preserve distinctions between the two. In addition to this, in Fabian's model the past is not formed of a single moment or experience but rather a whole period. Trauma theory often uses the metaphor of the overwhelming experience as a small, hard object, embedded in the amorphous material of the mind, like a bullet or a piece of shrapnel. These metaphors suggest the way one traumatic event can puncture the mind. Fabian's analysis, on the other hand, sees past and present as swathes of time, rather than focusing on single moments in the past. As noted in the first chapter, in Perec's text there is no real sense of a time 'before' his contact with violent history and loss of his parents. As a result, his text does not set up an interaction between different periods of his life in this way, but the sense

of the past as a swathe of time rather than a condensed moment is present in Nabokov's use of miniatures and Chamoiseau's use of fractals as devices which draw different temporal periods into dialogue while preserving their separateness.

The Use of Miniatures

Nabokov deploys miniature, cameo portraits to embed one temporal period within another without dissolving the borders between them. This is particularly the case in references to America during Nabokov's evocation of his Russian childhood. One example of this is when Nabokov relates how as children his mother and her siblings called one particular bog 'America' because of its inaccessibility and mystery.²⁸ This comment is embedded in a description of the country estates where Nabokov spent his childhood. The reference to America orients the reader's perspective away from pre-revolutionary Russia to the America of the 1950s and 1960s, where we know Nabokov now resides. However, this leap into the future is done through an initial move into the past (his mother's childhood). The association of America with inaccessibility and mystery has the effect of making the present of writing strange by allowing the Russian past to shimmer through it. Layers of time are superimposed here, as Nabokov's mother's past influences his child-self's present, which turns out to foreshadow his adult-self's present. This is also one of many instances of a cameo image from one time taking on vast proportions in another. A comparatively tiny America was part of Nabokov's childhood home, while part of his adulthood was spent in an America of much larger dimensions.

²⁸ *SM*, 58.

A similar effect is achieved when Nabokov writes about fairground toys called ‘американские жители’ (American inhabitants) or Cartesian devils in English.²⁹ Again the adjective ‘American’ is only used by the Russian children to mean strange, outlandish, mysterious, but Nabokov allows this prophetic reference to his eventual *terre d’asile* both to create a link between past and present and to bring the two into an estranging relationship with each other. He says that although the children only used the word ‘American’ to mean strange, the figures inside the coloured bottles resemble contemporary American citizens going up and down a skyscraper’s elevators at evening light. Americans in elevators in the 1950s and 1960s, whom Nabokov presumably sees in the present of writing, are thus shrunk to be held within coloured bottles bought at a fairground in St Petersburg in the first decade of the century, while this seemingly trivial toy from the Russian past is expanded to take on the dimensions of a skyscraper in the American present. Here, present, past and future are bound into unpredictable relationships with each other, where a pinpoint moment from the past can expand into a constellation of moments in the present or future, or the huge, looming realities of the present can be shrunk into a patch of wetland or a toy figure in a bottle in the past. Though these images suggest a degree of interpenetration between the different periods of the author’s life, the idea of boundaries between different times is preserved through the depiction of the ‘America’ bog as one area of the park, or the coloured glass which forms a boundary between the Cartesian devils and the children. Nabokov’s use of miniatures then contributes to his project of maintaining the strangenesses of different temporal periods, even as he embeds one within another.

²⁹ *SM*, 186.

Fractals

A fractal is a mathematical term for a shape or structure that is self-similar when observed at different levels. An example of a fractal in nature is the way a floret of broccoli has the same form as a head of broccoli, or the way a single segment of a fern has the same shape as a whole fern. Chamoiseau entitles one of the sections of *A Bout d'enfance* 'Fractales et impossibles' and Louise Hardwick writes that this may be a way of connecting the autobiography with African culture.³⁰ Fractals, like the imagery of spirals and sedimentation used elsewhere in the text, allow Chamoiseau to create recurrence that incorporates renewal within the text. We see this in the way the first sentence of *A Bout d'enfance* works as a description of a single moment, but also describes the structure of the text as a whole. The sentence reads: 'Un jour, bien des années avant l'épreuve du mabouya, le négriillon s'aperçut que les êtres-humains n'étaient pas seuls au monde: il existait aussi des petites-filles.'³¹ 'Etres-humains' is the child's word for other male children. Although we do not find this out until much later in the text, 'l'épreuve du mabouya' refers to the touch of the feet of a certain kind of lizard on Chamoiseau's chest. The touch of the *mabouya*, which was associated with death in Martinican pre-Colombian culture, is supposed to be eventually fatal to whoever receives it.³² Chamoiseau undergoes this ordeal as a punishment for spending too much time gazing at Gabine la Lune. This sentence then directs the reader's attention to the time between the discovery of love and contact with death, the liminal period of adolescence which is the subject of the volume as a whole. This specular relationship between the fragment and the whole, where the fragment echoes the larger structure of which it is part, yet

³⁰ 'Telling Tales: Childhood and Autobiography in the Francophone Caribbean' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2009), p. 56.

³¹ *A Bout*, 13.

³² *A Bout*, 258-259.

remains distinct and complete in itself, provides a model of integration which takes account of the relationship between the part and the whole without blurring the distinctions between them or placing more value on one than another. This is apt, considering that the autobiography seeks to record the contribution childhood makes to adult life, while preserving the distinct nature of childhood experience. It leaves the reader with the impression that Chamoiseau's autobiographical writing aims to explore how singular events or periods can be expanded or condensed, mapped or mirrored from past to present. Rather than integrating life's changes into a smooth continuum, it examines the kinds of structures and perspectives which allow for fruitful relationships between distinct temporal realities.

As we saw in the previous chapter, *Speak, Memory* and *Une Enfance créole* are both structured to a significant extent by the obsessive return of moments of loss which remain unassimilated into the larger body of the autobiographical narrative. In the use of miniatures and fractals, however, a different model of the relationship between past and present emerges. In this model, the interaction between different temporal periods is figured as productive rather than ruminative. Nabokov's miniature images of America within his Russian childhood embed very different periods within one another without collapsing distinctions between them. Chamoiseau's fractals gesture towards relationships between the whole and the part where the autonomy of both is preserved. Read through Fabian's analysis of time in anthropological writing, such devices can be seen as part of an attempt to preserve the strangeness of the past without depicting it as beyond the bounds of expression or memory. They thus indicate greater mastery over past experience than the structures of haunting analysed in the previous chapter. These two models of interaction between past and present – one indicating mastery over the portrayal of the past, the other helplessness before it – do not cancel each other out but rather gesture toward the variegated response of these

authors to the past, and the partial success of commitments professed elsewhere to conscious approaches to memory.

The Wounded Body

Fabian's work helps make sense of the somewhat jarring temporal structures in each text, but what of the images of the wounded body in the work of Chamoiseau and Perec? As explored previously, these play an important role in making the intangible psychic pain of personal and collective traumas visible to the reader. They certainly do play this role, yet read closely, bodily marks also connect the author's literary work with the lives of previous generations. In this way they go some way toward working against the linguistic and cultural discontinuities that otherwise distance these authors from the family and collective past.

Chamoiseau uses textual images of bodily marks to open up a dialogue between the written word and the landscape of Martinique. As noted previously, the schoolroom, like the plantation in créoliste thought, is a concentrated space where cultural loss and rebirth go hand in hand. This link between destruction and survival is made clear in the last words of *Chemin-d'école*. Chamoiseau writes about himself from the point of view of Gros-Lombric, a composite character who represents Creole culture:

Il lui aurait fallu [à Gros-Lombric] un vieux don de voyance pour deviner que – dans ce saccage de leur univers natal, dans cette ruine intérieure tellement invalidante – le négriillon, penché sur son cahier, encait sans trop savoir une tracée de survie.

Répondeurs:

Conteurs, contez...!

Oh, la place est belle!³³

³³ *Chemin*, 202-203.

Here, the wounds inflicted by the republican school-system and the healing that occurred afterward are fused. The French characters which Chamoiseau writes on his exercise book are foreign to him, and cut him off from the world of his childhood, but once his writing career begins, they will provide a way out of foreign consciousness into a creative space where childhood and adulthood can intermingle. The response of the ‘répondeurs’ affirms the continued links between the writing project and the oral tradition in which it claims its roots. Maeve McCusker points out that we can read ‘encrait’ as ‘ancrait’ here, and it is worth examining in more detail the connection between the cerebral act of writing, rootedness in the physical world and the body.³⁴

Chamoiseau links the outline of letters on the page with the *tracées*, the paths used by the dominated people of Martinique, whose significance he and Raphaël Confiant explore in *Lettres créoles: tracées antillaises et continentales de la littérature, 1635-1975*. They see the *tracées* as preserving those parts of the history of Martinique which have remained unwritten. The communicative power of the *tracées* is emphasised, and they function as a kind of alternative writing, one that does not carry with it submission to the values of the coloniser:

La chose est frappante: à côté des routes coloniales dont l’intention se projette tout droit, à quelque utilité prédatrice, se déploient d’infinies petites sentes que l’on appelle tracées. Élaborées par les Nègres marrons, les esclaves, les créoles, à travers les bois et les mornes du pays, ces tracées disent autre chose. Elles témoignent d’une spirale collective que le plan colonial n’avait pas prévue.³⁵

By describing his childhood writing as ‘une tracée de survie’, Chamoiseau opens up a channel between the marks he makes on the page and the marks made by previous generations on the soil. The child’s writing becomes a sign of integration within a larger tradition of memory, rather than a sign of his alienation from his original language and

³⁴ McCusker, *Recovering Memory*, p. 73.

³⁵ Chamoiseau and Confiant, p. 13.

culture. This continuum is extended to include marks on the body of the author. We see an echo of the image of the ‘infinies petites sentes’ in his description of his writing hands:

L’homme d’à-présent regarde ses mains. Elles écrivent. Stationnent sages sur un clavier. Elles se souviennent en cicatrices. Elles n’ont plus mémoire des douleurs d’un yo-yo qui écorche ou qui racle un os. [...] Elles se sont amollies, presque devenues précieuses. Seules de minuscules traînées blanchâtres ou de rose coquillage, de fines rayures, témoignent d’un temps d’intense humanité où elles se voyaient expédiées audevant d’un yo-yo...³⁶

The mention of ‘cicatrices’ suggests a connection with the *tracées* because they are both formed by cutting into something, either the soil or skin. ‘Minuscules traînées’ and ‘fines rayures’ echo ‘petites sentes’. Both the marks on Chamoiseau’s skin and the *tracées* are figured as fragile, with the delicacy of the paths thrown into relief by the ‘utilité prédatrice’ of the colonial roads. The use of the verb ‘témoigner’ echoes the description of the *tracées* quoted from *Lettres créoles* above in that it ascribes communicative power to non-verbal phenomena. Finally, the reference to ‘coquillage’ is significant, given that a shell is also something left over once the living form that caused it to be created has died. A shell, like the paths, is a non-linguistic trace of life. The mention of the author’s hands pausing on the keyboard collapses the distinction between narrating and narrated self, and so overcomes the splitting of the self normally required by the written form.

In this way, Chamoiseau interweaves his writing, his body and Martinique’s landscape and makes it clear that his autobiographical project does not set out to trace a straight line between past and present, nor to circle around an irrecoverable, traumatic past, but rather aims to reflect on the ways in which his present constantly echoes and renews aspects of his past and the wider history of Martinique. The identification of his first steps into the literate world as the ‘encl[age]’ of ‘une trace de survie’, inscribes his writing as part of a continuum

³⁶ *A Bout*, 95.

of resistance that is rooted in the earth, yet open to transformation and movement. As well as making psychic pain visible then, bodily marks also make visible the incompleteness of severance from the personal and collective past.

Blasco Ibañez, Maffeo Barberini and Michel Leiris: Scars, *Bandes* and Inheritance

Perec connects literary activity, bodily marks and the lives of previous generations, especially his parents, through the inter- and intra-textual networks he weaves with the word *bande*. The *bande* indicates bereavement and rupture with an ancestral culture, but it also gestures towards tenuous links between Perec's life and that of his parents. As we saw in the previous chapter, the scar on Perec's upper lip has the form of a *bande*, and this word is also used to describe the puttees, or lengths of material, which Perec's father wears around his calves as part of his military uniform. *Bandes* are also connected with Perec's mother, because lengths of material are associated with her absent grave. The *bandes* are connected with the fine balance between display and concealment of pain in Perec's writing, and represent the dangers and potential of integration within a literary or professional community.

They link Perec's life to his father's through an association between *bandes* and military uniform. Perec writes that although the diagonal scar on his lip is important to him, 'elle n'est pourtant pas considérée comme un "signe particulier" sur ma carte d'identité, mais seulement sur mon livret militaire, et je crois bien que c'est parce que j'avais moi-même pris soin de le signaler.'³⁷ The puttees link Perec's professional life as a writer and his father's short time as a soldier through two connections made between woven *bandes* and the act of writing. The first occurs when Perec recalls a memory he has of making paper doilies in school:

³⁷ W, 141-142.

on disposait parallèlement des bandes étroites de carton léger colorées de diverses couleurs et on les croisait avec des bandes identiques en passant une fois au-dessus, une fois au-dessous. Je me souviens que ce jeu m'enchanta, que j'en compris très vite le principe et que j'y excellais.³⁸

Bernard Magné points out that this is a very precise description of the structure of *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, whose various narrative strands also overlap at certain defined points.³⁹ This reference is situated in such a way that it is both half-hidden and displayed prominently, in a footnote to the main text at the end of the chapter. Because it is the last piece of writing the reader encounters before moving on to the section where Perec recounts his final parting from his mother, it is set apart from the text that surrounds it on either side.

This tension between display and concealment also arises in the second link made between the image of the *bandes molletières* and literary life, as it dwells on images of lengths of material which display a certain professional identity by concealing the body. This link is made when Perec records his fascination with a technique used by professional or semiprofessional skiers to attach their skis to their feet. This passage comes directly before Perec recalls receiving the injury which left him with a scar in the shape of a *bande*. This is his description of the skier's technique:

ce système extraordinairement complexe de laçage, utilisant une lanière unique mais démesurément longue, passée et repassée autour de la chaussure un nombre incalculable de fois selon un protocole apparemment immuable dont le déroulement me faisait l'effet d'une cérémonie capitale (aussi capitale, aussi décisive que put m'apparaître, plus tard, le laçage de la ceinture dans *les Arènes sanglantes*, de Blasco Ibañez, ou la métamorphose vestimentaire du cardinal Barberini en Urbain VIII dans *le Galilée* du Berliner Ensemble) et qui assurait au skieur l'indissoluble union de ses skis et de ses chaussures, multipliant autant les risques de fracture grave que les chances de performances exceptionnelles...⁴⁰

³⁸ W, 76.

³⁹ 'Les sutures dans *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*', *Cahiers Georges Perec*, 2 (1986 -1987), 39-57 (p. 53).

⁴⁰ W, 141.

The skier's use of a constraint to attain improved performance echoes the use of strict compositional rules to stimulate innovative literary works by members of the *Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*, a literary group to which Perec belonged.⁴¹ The opposition of the risk of serious injury to the potential for high achievement resonates with tensions present in the use of Oulipian constraints. Perec gestures to such tensions when, in an interview, he speaks of how the construction of an Oulipian text can at first seem impossible, and connects it with the risk of physical injury.⁴²

We can also see this reference to the risk of injury as uniting a connection to Perec's father with an allusion to a literary forefather, Michel Leiris. Later in the autobiography, Perec writes that Leiris was one of the authors who allowed him to experience 'la jouissance [...] d'une parenté enfin retrouvée'.⁴³ When Perec mentions the 'laçage de la ceinture' in Blasco Ibañez's bull-fighting novel, he is referring to the moment when the torero's servant wraps an extended length of material around his waist. This is supposed to afford him some measure of protection from any potential injury from a bull's horn, and Ibañez writes that it would not be unwrapped until the bullfighter had won the fight or been killed in the attempt.⁴⁴ This resonates with the preface to *L'Age d'homme*, where Leiris writes that he would like autobiographical writing to be like bull-fighting, where the danger of death confers 'une réalité humaine' to the torero's art, and prevents it from being mere show.⁴⁵ For Leiris, the

⁴¹ Association Oulipo, *La Littérature potentielle: Créations, re-crétions, récrétions* (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), pp. 20-21.

⁴² *Entretiens et conférences*, ed. by Dominique Bertelli and Mireille Ribière (Nantes: Joseph K., 2003), p. 223.

⁴³ W, 193.

⁴⁴ Blasco Ibañez, *Les Arènes sanglantes* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1923), pp. 36-37.

⁴⁵ Michel Leiris, *L'Age d'homme, précédé de de la littérature considérée comme tauromachie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1946), p. 10.

image of the torero in the ‘terrain de vérité’ of the bull-fighting arena, acts as a symbol of self and world bound into a relationship where neither dominates completely.⁴⁶

In the connection between Leiris’s autobiographical work, Perec’s writing and his father’s military life, Perec creates an overlap between his literary and family connections. These intersecting networks are extended to include the life and death of Perec’s mother through the reference to Urban VIII. Perec elsewhere in the text displays an interest in Cecilia’s hagiography, writing that because his mother was known as Cécile in France, he has always known that St Cecilia is the patron saint of music and that the cathedral in Albi is dedicated to her.⁴⁷ Because of this comment, and, of course, the similarity in names, the fictional figure of Caecilia Winckler can be read as a kind of imagined version of Perec’s mother. In a typically indirect move, Perec draws attention to the parallel between St Cecilia’s association with music and the opera career of Caecilia Winckler, but leaves unspoken the more painful link. Like Caecilia Winckler, St Cecilia did not die instantaneously but experienced a long, slow death.⁴⁸ She was first condemned to be boiled to death, and when this had no effect, she was to be beheaded in the bath of hot water. The executioner struck three times without managing to behead her, and then he fled. Cecilia lived for three days before dying.⁴⁹ With this information, Perec’s statement that Caecilia Winckler ‘ne mourut pas sur le coup’ comes to seem a veiled reference to the executioner’s blows.⁵⁰ The reference to a pope named Urban in the parentheses above could be read as another oblique hint at this painful history. Urban I,

⁴⁶ *L’Age d’homme*, p. 75; p. 219.

⁴⁷ *W*, 55.

⁴⁸ *W*, 80.

⁴⁹ *Ælfric’s Lives of the Virgin Spouses, with Modern English Parallel-Text Translations*, ed. by Robert Upchurch (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007), pp. 73-85 (p. 85).

⁵⁰ *W*, 80.

according to some accounts, buried St Cecilia in defiance of the Roman authorities who forbade the burial of those sentenced to execution.⁵¹

The reference to Urban VIII could then be an attempt to include Perec's mother in the network which holds his father, Leiris and his own writing. The otherwise gratuitous reference to the Berliner Ensemble strengthens this impression. In an interview, Perec remarked that he scattered German words and references to Germany throughout *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* as a way of gesturing towards the role Germany played in his parents' lives.⁵² Perec's reference to Urban VIII can be seen as one of the very indirect ways in which his text attempts to remedy the fact that his mother does not have a final resting-place. Display and concealment once more enter into tension here. On the one hand, Perec's oblique allusion to the burial of a woman who shares his mother's name works against the erasure of all traces of her life, and so is connected with display. But the triple temporal displacement, where Perec's mother is hidden behind St Cecilia, who lived in the twelfth century, and St Cecilia is hidden behind Urban VIII, who was pope in the seventeenth century and in this context is a character in a Brecht play, works very effectively as concealment.

If the tension between display and concealment crops up again and again in Perec's treatment of the *bande*, it is because artful concealment is part of Perec's display of his literary identity. Just as, in the text, soldier, bull-fighter, pope and skier all don lengths of material which hide the body in order to display a committed professional identity, so Perec's ability to mask the most painful parts of his history and his methods of dealing with them speaks of his skill as a writer. The semi-hidden nature of the textual networks reinforces the literary nature of the

⁵¹ *Lives of the Virgin Spouses*, p. 79; p. 85.

⁵² *Entretiens et conférences*, pp. 194-195.

text in a second way: it means the reader can only understand certain aspects of the text if she approaches it as a specifically literary document, paying close attention to any recurrence of specific words and images. The example of the *bande* demonstrates how one word and the images it denotes reach outwards to include the lives of other people (Perc's parents), separate literary voices (Ibañez, Leiris, Brecht), and a range of different kinds of writing (Hebrew writing, Oulipian writing, theatre, popular fiction). These different kinds of writing and the various allegiances they express are all condensed into the single diagonal scar on Perc's upper lip, a mark which comes to gesture toward the connections between the author and his parents which remain to a limited extent, as well as to the literary networks which allow the author to re-negotiate a relationship between self and world in the aftermath of bereavement.

The bodily marks Perc and Chamoiseau depict in their text do act as fixed marks of traumas which cannot entirely be erased or redeemed, then. Their prominent role within each text gestures toward a turning away from the verbal articulation of the pain of severance from a personal, family and collective past. However, as 'figures en quelque sorte doubles', these marks are polysemic.⁵³ As well as acting as a record of ineradicable pain, they also go some way toward linking the author's creative practice with the lives of previous generations. Though these links remain problematic and tenuous, the corporeal writing of the scars acts as a kind of alternative language which is capable of holding lives separated by linguistic and historical discontinuities. The tenuous qualities of such links emerge in the faintness of the marks on the author's body and in the way their links with previous generations are semihidden in marginal locations within the text. The scars then hold within one mark the legacy of trauma and the muted possibility of moving beyond it.

⁵³ W, 15.

Connections between the Oblique and the Ludic

Throughout this chapter we have seen the intertwining of traumatic, ruminative memory and conscious, productive modes of relation to the past. This intertwining is present in the coexistence of a haunted present and fruitful connections to the past in *Speak*, *Memory* and *Une Enfance créole*, and in the polysemy of the bodily marks in *Une Enfance créole* and *Wou le souvenir d'enfance*. The traumatic and the productive are even more tightly interwoven when it comes to these authors' approaches to the place of the oblique in artistic activity. Comparisons between different kinds of games and literary activity suggest that the process of becoming conscious of the interaction between memory and perception is not simply relevant to these authors' approach to historical questions, but is at the very heart of literary endeavour. Further, these depictions of games suggest that one becomes conscious of the workings of one's own mind, not through reflection on it, but rather through journeys outwards through other minds and modes of perception. Such outward journeys lead the individual back to their starting-point with a deepened awareness of the way he or she apprehends the world. The connection between roundabout pathways and a more conscious awareness of the workings of one's own mind perhaps suggests another way of reading the oblique approaches to painful topics explored in the previous chapter. Yet though these ludic, indirect routes are associated with conscious forms of memory and thought, they are also paradoxically connected with imagery of the traumatic historical displacements which make conscious approaches to the past difficult. There is a tension between displacement as a painful historical experience and its presence as a metaphor for productive reading and writing in these texts. The reader faces here what Barbara Straumann calls the 'murky

interface' between lived experiences of exile or displacement and their recurrent use as a trope for aesthetic production, an interface which is connected in these texts with the intertwining of traumatic and conscious modes of relationship to the past.⁵⁴

Each author uses a depiction of games to explore in miniature the dynamic between creator and interpreter of texts. They conceive of reading and playing as activities where perception is transformed, using metaphors of displacement to evoke such transformations, and emphasising the value of deception in bringing them about. The last section of the penultimate chapter of *Speak, Memory* concerns Nabokov's lifelong fascination with chess puzzles. He emphasises the difference between the chess puzzle and the chess game, and the proximity of the chess puzzle to art: 'Inspiration of a quasi-musical, quasi-poetical, or to be quite exact, poetico-mathematical type, attends the process of thinking up a chess composition.'⁵⁵ He emphasises the way the manipulation of the pieces of the puzzle gives concrete form to mental activity, speaking of the 'manipulation of carved figures, or of their mental counterparts'.⁵⁶ There is an analogy here between the chess figures and words on the page, both of which are physical traces whose position acts as a trace or expression of mental activity. Nabokov goes on to describe the composition of one puzzle that gave him particular delight. It was designed to fool someone experienced with chess puzzles into thinking that it had a complicated solution. Having pursued this avenue fruitlessly, the solver would look again at the problem and realise it had a very simple solution. Nabokov emphasises that creating and solving a chess puzzle are inherently relational activities, although they are usually accomplished alone. In this way it echoes the relational dimension of the (usually)

⁵⁴ Straumann, p. 11.

⁵⁵ *SM*, 226.

⁵⁶ *SM*, 226.

solitary activities of reading and writing, a comparison Nabokov makes explicitly slightly later:

It should be understood that competition in chess puzzles is not really between White and Black but between the composer and the hypothetical solver (just as in a first-rate work of fiction the real clash is not between the characters but between the author and the world) so that a great part of a problem's value is due to the number of 'tries' - delusive opening moves, false scents, specious lines of play, astutely and lovingly prepared to lead the would-be solver astray.⁵⁷

Here the relationship between composer and solver contains an ambivalent mix of hostility and pedagogy. The composer sets out to deceive the solver not simply by placing false clues in his way, but by playing on habits of perception the solver is likely to have. Thus, Nabokov says that his favourite puzzle would not be interesting to a beginner solver because they would immediately see the simple solution, not knowing of more elaborate possibilities. Nabokov's puzzle only becomes delightful when played by a more advanced player who is likely to try a very elaborate solution, only to return to the beginning when it does not lead to the solution. Doing the chess puzzle leads the solver to become more aware of the movements of his own mind, the filters which influence his apprehension of the world. By the end of the puzzle, the solver will also have gained a deeper appreciation of the composer's cunning. He or she will see the way the composer has integrated the likely movements of the solver's mind into the very structure of the puzzle, producing a sense of simultaneous closeness and distance between the two minds. The relationship between the two is an ambivalent one, as we see in this quotation, where Nabokov compares the movements of the deceived solver's mind to those of

somebody on a wild goose chase [who] might go from Albany to New York by way of Vancouver, Eurasia and the Azores. The pleasant experience of the roundabout route (strange landscapes, gongs, tigers, exotic customs, the thrice-repeated circuit of a newly-married couple around the sacred fire of an earthen brazier) would amply reward him for the misery of the deceit.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ *SM*, 227-228.

⁵⁸ *SM*, 229.

Here, the solver's elaborate mental efforts are suggested through a metaphor of displacement which evokes both the trouble of pursuing the false solution and the enriched experience of the puzzle it brings. The earlier coupling of chess puzzles and literary art suggests that in both, pleasure arises from deceit and revelation of deceit because of the heightened degree of consciousness such movements from states of confusion to clarity create. This process of seeing through the artist or composer's tricks can be connected with the effort to achieve conscious modes of memory, especially when one considers that it is the solver's faulty mapping of previous problems on to this one that causes the confusion, and when one recalls Nabokov's comments about autobiography as a process of becoming conscious of unnoticed patterns scattered throughout one's life. Such roundabout mental journeys are then figured as part of the process of becoming conscious of the workings of one's own mind. As we have seen, conscious memory offers a way of mastering a traumatic past. Yet exile is a significant part of what has made the past traumatic, so to use displacement as a metaphor for conscious memory interweaves the source and the cure for traumatic memory.

Nabokov would seem to be aware of this duality, because he links his creation of the chess puzzle with his frantic search for a *visa de sortie* from war-time France. This was an anxious time for the family, as Nabokov could have been called up to serve as a soldier at any time, which would have left his wife and son vulnerable as foreign Jews. That the connection between the solution to the chess problem and the obtaining of a passage out of Europe is intentional can be seen in the way Nabokov has the chapter close on the dual image of the completed chess problem and the *visa de sortie*. The intention to combine the two is also present in Nabokov's mis-dating of the composition of the problem to May, 1940, the month of his departure from Europe, when Boyd writes that it was actually composed in November,

1939.⁵⁹ Janet Gezari points out that this mis-dating evidently held some significance for Nabokov because he preserved it in his 1970 book, *Poems and Problems*, where the two chess problems mentioned in *Speak, Memory* appear at the beginning and the end of the book.⁶⁰ Boyd picks up on this conflation of chess and life when he refers to America as ‘the solution to the problem of exile’ and there is evidence in Nabokov’s notes for the autobiographical project that he intended the work to point towards the chess solution as a coming together of strands developed over its course.⁶¹ Because Nabokov interweaves the composition of the chess problem with his account of his desperate attempts to leave France, the metaphorical movements of the chess-solver’s mind become charged with the weight of historical displacements triggered by war.

Though impossible to prove, it is possible Perec’s model of the relationship between puzzlemaker and puzzle-solver in his 1978 novel *La Vie mode d’emploi* is influenced by aspects of Nabokov’s work and perhaps even by a reading of *Speak, Memory*. Perec embeds hidden quotations from Nabokov’s work in *La Vie mode d’emploi*,⁶² and David Bellos suggests that the way the author moves from room to room of the apartment block using the knight’s tour might have been influenced by Perec’s reading of Nabokov’s first English-language novel, *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight*.⁶³ Bellos also tells us that in the 1960s Perec was reading *The Defense*, Nabokov’s novel concerning an obsessive chess player.⁶⁴ In ‘Quelques-unes des choses qu’il faudrait tout de même que je fasse avant de mourir’, Perec

⁵⁹ Boyd, pp. 514-515.

⁶⁰ ‘Chess and Chess Problems’, in *The Garland Companion to Vladimir Nabokov*, ed. by Vladimir Alexandrov (New York: Garland, 1995), pp. 44-54 (pp. 46-47).

⁶¹ Boyd, p. 514.

⁶² *La Vie mode d’emploi*, p. 1364.

⁶³ *Georges Perec: A Life in Words* (Boston: David R. Godine, 1993), pp. 508-509.

⁶⁴ Bellos, p. 344.

lists 'Faire la connaissance de Vladimir Nabokov'.⁶⁵ This wish is the last one of the list, and is numbered thirty-seven. Thirty-seven was a significant number for Perec for several reasons: it is connected with palindromes because it is the reverse of his date of birth, 7th March. Another connection with palindromes is that he was 37 in 1973, the year he started his autobiography. In *Les Enfants du capitaine Grant*, the children search for their shipwrecked father by following the 37th parallel south around the world. The ship from this novel, the *Sylvandre*, figures in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, and sends a distress signal from the 37th parallel south.⁶⁶ Nabokov would have been thirty-seven in the year that Perec was born. Perec's reading of and admiration for Nabokov's work suggests he might have been influenced by his explorations of the connections between ludic activity and literature. In any case, the echoes between the description of the relationship between puzzle-maker and puzzle-solver in *La Vie mode d'emploi* and Nabokov's exploration of chess puzzles in *Speak, Memory* are striking.

One of the main relationships in Perec's novel is that between Bartlebooth, an eccentric millionaire, and Gaspard Winckler, a master craftsman whom he employs to make jigsaw puzzles of watercolours he has painted in locations around the world over a period of twenty years. Bartlebooth spends a further two decades completing the puzzles in the order in which he did the paintings. Once completed, the images are removed from the puzzle by a special chemical process, and then bleached white. Winckler's craft is a deceptive one, where he cuts the puzzle pieces to trick Bartlebooth into seeing them incorrectly. This deception culminates in the last scene of the novel, where Bartlebooth dies in front of a puzzle with only one piece unfilled. The gap is in the shape of an X but the only remaining piece is in the shape of a W,

⁶⁵ *Je suis né* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), p. 109.

⁶⁶ van Montfrans, p. 149; p. 162.

reflecting the power of the creator to frustrate the puzzle-solver's quest for totality and completion.⁶⁷

The novel opens with a preamble where the author meditates on the relationship between those who create jigsaw puzzles and those who solve them. He makes clear that he has in mind the artful crafting of individual puzzle pieces one at a time, rather than machine-cutting. Where puzzles are made piece by piece, the craftsman can anticipate the solver's view of them and take advantage of this to nudge him to see them in a certain way.⁶⁸ In the novel, Winckler takes advantage of this, playing on the likelihood of Bartlebooth missing slight variations between familiar shapes and the actual pieces he has in front of him. To solve the puzzles, Bartlebooth has to learn to perceive the pieces in a new way:

Bartlebooth devait, pour trouver cet angle à vrai dire presque mais pas vraiment tout à fait droit, cesser de le considérer comme la pointe d'un triangle, c'est à dire faire basculer sa perception, voir autrement ce que fallacieusement l'autre lui donnait à voir.⁶⁹

Here, Bartlebooth has to stop mapping familiar, ready-made mental images (such as that of the right angle or the triangle) on to what he sees before him. This process of perceiving the slight divergence between what he expects to see and the actual shapes of the puzzle-pieces entails becoming aware of that which filters his vision of the surrounding world. Because the tricks in the puzzles have been carefully placed there by Gaspard Winckler, he also learns about the other man's expectations of his habits of perception. As in Nabokov's description of the chess puzzles, then, doing the jigsaw puzzle is a relational activity with an ambivalent mix of pedagogy and hostility. Like the chess puzzle, it is an apparently solitary activity which actually leads to a charged interaction between two minds. Like words on the page and

⁶⁷ *La Vie mode d'emploi*, p. 1279.

⁶⁸ *La Vie mode d'emploi*, pp. 655-656.

⁶⁹ *La Vie mode d'emploi*, p. 1078.

positioned chess pieces, puzzle pieces are physical traces of the activity of the creator's mind, and the ambivalent mix of freedom and constraint with which the reader approaches a text echoes that portrayed in the relationship between Winckler and Bartlebooth. As we have seen, the deceptive quality of Winckler's art is depicted as both the product of a degree of hostility toward the millionaire and as something which leads Bartlebooth into an enriched awareness of the workings of his own mind and that of Winckler. The portrayal of this relationship thus opens up the dual role of misdirection and oblique pathways in written texts, which have the potential both to entrap the reader and to enrich her.

Perec's evocation of the interaction between Bartlebooth and Gaspard Winckler is also suggestive of concrete historical displacements and the threat of violence, though in his case these displacements are not quite as obviously autobiographical as they are in *Speak, Memory*. He writes about Bartlebooth struggling to fit a piece into a gap, because the gap seems to him to have the shape of 'une sorte d'Inde noire à laquelle Ceylan serait restée attachée'.⁷⁰ In fact, the piece which fits in the gap is pale grey and not black, and, if tilted by ninety degrees, is in the shape of England and not India. These references to incorrect perception of space, seeing India instead of England, call up colonial histories and their connections with competing modes of perception of national spaces. Such connotations could be seen as coincidental or unimportant were it not for another allusion embedded in this passage. The puzzle Bartlebooth is doing when he runs into the India/England confusion is of a New Zealand port on the Coromandel coast. Though Perec does not mention it, the Coromandel peninsula borders the Firth of Thames. The picture then portrays a real-life example of the reverse of Bartlebooth's misperception; instead of looking at England and seeing India, the place name suggests a history of someone looking at New Zealand and

⁷⁰ *La Vie mode d'emploi*, p. 1077.

seeing England. Together the evocation of these different national spaces suggests the concrete, political issues involved in the perception and naming of space. Although Perec's description of the interaction between Winckler and Bartlebooth seems to emphasise a process internal to the mind, he simultaneously suggests the external, collective implications of movements between different ways of seeing. In this way, the jigsaw puzzle is depicted as an interaction between two minds which has echoes of interactions between different nations and peoples.

These allusions to English colonial history begin to take on autobiographical import when one recalls the history of the imagined island in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. All of the stories offered as potential histories of W emphasise that it was colonised by Westerners and one of the origin stories says that it was founded by White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, or Wasps, a group to which Bartlebooth is also said to belong.⁷¹ Manet van Montfrans points out the connection between the category of Wasps and the Nazi concept of an Aryan race. He argues that the conflation of class and ethnicity associated with the concept of Wasps is present in a much more extreme form in the Nazi system, where 'lower races' are deprived of all social power.⁷² This conflation of race and class finds an echo in the oppression of the Athletes by the authorities in the W story, which has echoes of both Nazi and colonial histories. Because of the way Perec intertwines these separate histories elsewhere in his work, the references to English colonial practices in the Coromandel scene carry with them connotations of the racial discrimination which introduced upheaval into his family history and led to the death of his mother.

⁷¹ W, 91-92.

⁷² van Montfrans, p. 217.

Nabokov suggests the ludic qualities of the interaction between reader and author through an exploration of chess puzzles; Perec does the same in his portrayal of the dynamics at work when a jigsaw puzzle is solved; Chamoiseau looks at deception and play in his evocation of childhood games of marbles. Marbles offer a way of exploring the concept of the 'détour', developed in more theoretically-oriented work by Edouard Glissant.⁷³ Celia Britton, in her reading of Glissant, describes the detour as 'tactical and ambiguous', 'essentially an indirect mode of resistance that "gets around" obstacles rather than confronting them head on, and [which] arises in response to a situation of disguised rather than overt oppression and struggle'.⁷⁴ It is then appropriate as a response to the insidious influence of Martinique's colonial legacy on the developing mind of the child.

The child finds an old playground where other children play marbles after school when he begins to try new routes on the walk home from school. These wanderings are a way for him to explore the surrounding area as he becomes more independent, and, as in the case of Nabokov and Perec, confronting new experiences in the outside world leads the child to a greater knowledge of the workings of his own mind:

Le détour s'effectue en silence, retiré en toi-même, vigilant en toi-même, à l'écoute de toi-même. Opérer un détour c'est comme rentrer en soi: dans l'étrangeté plus ou moins inquiétante de l'entour, on ne dispose plus que du rempart de soi.⁷⁵

Here, physical movement outwards into unfamiliar surroundings is coupled with a corresponding movement inwards and a deepened awareness of the way the self filters the relationship with the outside world. The value placed on indirect routes here is echoed in the depiction of the children playing marbles in the old schoolyard. The game of marbles acts as

⁷³ Edouard Glissant, *Le Discours antillais* (Paris: Seuil, 1980), pp. 27-38.

⁷⁴ *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), p. 25.

⁷⁵ *Chemin*, 135.

a miniature version of a world where the child has to be on his guard against hostile forces and use knowledge of the local environment to resist them. He learns that the way to win is not to aim directly at the target, but rather to feign nonchalance and to aim as if one is only testing one's opponents.⁷⁶ He also learns that such indirect paths become more sure through imaginative appreciation of the possibilities of apparently useless material:

Ainsi donc: le plus court chemin n'était pas le plus clair, et le plus long ne valait pas mieux. Il te fallait transformer en alliés les roches, les graviers, les trous-fourmis, les cacas-rats, les graines-job et la poussière.⁷⁷

In another fractal structure, the ruts in the ground made by the marbles form twisting paths which echo both the child's wanderings in the town and those of the *tracées*, whose significance was explored in the previous section. They are thus connected to the strategy of resisting colonial oppression, not by fighting against it directly, but by working around it in indirect ways. There is a fusion of form and content here as Chamoiseau's entry into theoretical issues through a childhood memory of playing marbles is itself an example of an oblique approach.

Chamoiseau's description of the tracks of the children's marbles also opens up a dialogue between mental and physical movements. Louise Hardwick brings this out in her exploration of the significance of *la drive* in contemporary Francophone *récits d'enfance*. Hardwick notes that the kind of wanderings suggested by the verb *driver* are connected to the metropolitan French term *dérive*, or drifting, which was used by the *Internationale situationniste* in the 1950s and 1960s to describe a free, imaginative, non-utilitarian approach to moving through the modern city.⁷⁸ Incidentally, Bellos suggests that Perec's privileging of sideways approaches in *La Vie mode d'emploi* might also have been influenced by the *Internationale*

⁷⁶ *Chemin*, 140.

⁷⁷ *Chemin*, 139.

⁷⁸ 'Telling Tales', p. 261.

situationniste.⁷⁹ There are differences between Perec's model of puzzlesolving and Chamoiseau's exploration of *la drive*, but both modes place value on roundabout, gratuitous journeys. Hardwick brings out the conjunction of aesthetic explorations and movement through physical space in *la drive* when she writes that it is 'a metaphorical act of poetry to wander through the streets, alert to a world of endless possibilities, which childhood opens up and adulthood closes down'.⁸⁰ The evocation of such wanderings is 'crucial to the consolidation of an indigenous literature' because it portrays both internal exploration of the child's own imagination and growth in knowledge of the physical surroundings of the Caribbean. The child's roundabout routes through the town then connect to the project of working against the alienation produced by living in a place where colonial history has shaped the kinds of physical, mental and literary moves available.

Yet like the indirect approaches evoked in the work of Perec and Nabokov, the detour is not unequivocally positive. As already noted, it arises in a situation of insidious oppression and is a kind of last-ditch alternative when direct opposition to oppression is not possible. Rather than seeking to achieve a positive result, it aims more to maintain an element of doubt or instability within an oppressive system. It 'is itself marked with the alienation it is trying to combat'.⁸¹ Because it takes place within straitened circumstances, it is not always obvious when or how a detour has been successful. Celia Britton gives the example of the way apparently illogical speech or writing could either be a sign of resistance to colonial rationality or evidence of a failure to maintain a coherent sense of self in oppressive circumstances.⁸² This uncertainty is present on a miniature level in the child's doubt about

⁷⁹ Bellos, pp. 280-281.

⁸⁰ 'Telling Tales', p. 261.

⁸¹ Britton, p. 26.

⁸² Britton, p. 27.

whether he will hit the target, and his need always to be on his guard against unexpected interruptions of his game. The echo between the marbles' twisting paths and the *tracées*, and the way the games take place on an abandoned school playground, link the detour with marginal practices of resistance which might afford alternative paths through or around the colonial system, but which do not truly threaten its centre.

Britton's comment about the detour being 'marked by the alienation it is trying to combat' could also be applied to the explorations of ludic activity conducted by Nabokov and Perec. Their models of the interaction between puzzle-makers and puzzle-solvers suggest a degree of alienation from one's own mind as a preliminary step to attaining a more conscious awareness of the interaction between perception and memory. The solver must see his or her mind through someone else's eyes by falling into the composer's traps, a deception which eventually leads to a deepened awareness of one's habits of perception. This process of seeing one's mind from another point of view can be connected to the autobiographical enterprise, where the writer looks at his life from another person's point of view (his imagined reader's) in the hope of reaching a new vision or understanding of it. The reader of these autobiographies also goes on a roundabout journey through engaging with these texts, which construct elaborate pathways between the author's life and its relationship to other histories, which play on the reader's sense of the distinctions between fact and fiction, the personal and the literary, past and present, self and other. As we saw in the previous chapter, there are good reasons for seeing these texts' oblique approaches to the past as products of trauma. Yet these explorations of the ludic also suggest that oblique approaches are valued by these authors as a mode which enhances conscious perception. As in Glissant's detour, the traumatic qualities of oblique approaches and their relationship to conscious memory are not easily disentangled. Their interpenetration can be seen in the links forged between salutary

mental movements and painful historical displacements. Readings of these texts are enriched when both aspects of oblique approaches are held in tension. Seeing such approaches as solely the products of trauma can obscure the ethical and political ramifications of the conscious construction of roundabout pathways towards painful historical episodes, an issue which is explored in the next chapter.

Conclusion

All three of these authors privilege conscious modes of relationship to the past through comments within their autobiography, their wider work and through rewritings of the Proustian model of involuntary memory. An examination of non-linear temporal structures and images of the wounded body in these texts reveals their connection both to trauma and to conscious modes of relationship to the past. This imbrication of trauma and conscious memory is perhaps tightest in the explorations of ludic activity which emphasise the value of deception and sideways approaches in the relationship between reader and writer. Above all, portrayals of the ludic suggest the value of proceeding through other minds and other places in order to return to one's own mind. The next chapter examines the ways in which such a model is present in these authors' approaches to history.

Chapter Four: 'Old Books Are Wrong': Approaching Histories of Violence through

Explorations of Children's Play and Narratives of Human Origin

This chapter examines the ways in which these authors approach their own history through histories of other times and places. These texts move between the project of remembering a particular historical trauma and that of calling the reader's attention to the inter-related nature of instances of mass political violence. Each author traces the effects of a cataclysmic historical event, or series of events, on his own life: imperialism and its afterlife for Chamoiseau; the Second World War and Holocaust for Perec; the Bolshevik Revolution and Second World War for Nabokov. The force of historical memory in each of these texts is centrifugal rather than centripetal. It does not concentrate a sense of belonging to any one group, but rather stimulates a reflection on the common features of state-sponsored violence. These authors do not see the historical traumas which have touched their lives as rooted in a unique set of circumstances; they create the impression that instances of political violence are extreme manifestations of tendencies which are also found in everyday life.

These authors portray the Holocaust, imperialism and totalitarianism as sharing, to a certain extent, common roots. In this sense these texts can be seen as examples of what Michael Rothberg terms 'multidirectional memory' and what Max Silverman refers to as 'palimpsestic memory'. The writers and thinkers belonging to the tradition of multidirectional memory, Rothberg argues, responded to the genocide brought about by imperial and totalitarian nations with a re-evaluation of human nature as a whole, and not

solely with an examination of the particular circumstances of a given instance of violence or oppression.¹ Silverman draws on the work of Hannah Arendt, David Rousset and other intellectuals prominent in the immediate post-war period to develop models of memory which draw different sites of historical violence into dialogue and to set up productive tensions between the extreme and the everyday.² Rothberg and Silverman argue that the intellectuals belonging to this tradition do not situate the roots of state violence and genocide in circumstances peculiar to one time or place, nor do they see the Holocaust as a unique event. Rather, they examine the complex inter-meshing of the historical roots and legacies of imperialism and totalitarianism. Both Silverman and Rothberg draw attention to the way in which the interweaving of memories and narrations of different historical traumas, and the attendant suggestion that the reality of historical trauma cannot be relegated to the past or to any one place, produces an uncanny effect, where the familiar and the strange, the harmless and the deadly, become intertwined. Nabokov, Perec and Chamoiseau also interweave the familiar and the startling in their portrayals of the roots and echoes of violent historical episodes. This interweaving foregrounds the links between the author's experience of history and the present moment, and encourages the reader to observe connections between her own time and place and that of other people.

Perec and Chamoiseau are direct heirs to the tradition of multidirectional or palimpsestic memory identified by Rothberg and Silverman. Aimé Césaire, cited by Rothberg as a proponent of multidirectional memory, is a literary forefather to the younger Martinican author and to a generation of French-speaking Caribbean authors: Chamoiseau writes with

¹ *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 11.

² Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), p. 13.

his co-authors in *Eloge de la créolité*, ‘Nous sommes à jamais fils d’Aimé Césaire.’³ He appears as a character in much of Chamoiseau’s fictional work, and it is possible that Chamoiseau’s use of ‘le négriillon’ in *Une enfance créole* is intended as an echo of Césaire’s use of the term in *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*.⁴ Chamoiseau’s first contact with poetry comes when he sees his brother recite lines from one of Césaire’s poems and such is the older writer’s influence that Chamoiseau refers to him elsewhere in the autobiography simply as ‘[le] Poète’.⁵ There is an echo of the parallels Césaire draws in *Discours sur le colonialisme* between the tactics of colonisers and those of the Nazis and the way Chamoiseau speaks of the Middle Passage as a kind of forgotten genocide.⁶ Chamoiseau is also influenced by Frantz Fanon, whose generative analysis of colonial racism in *Peau noire, masques blancs* draws on Sartre’s conception of anti-Semitism.⁷ Multidirectional approaches are also in evidence in other Francophone Caribbean *révélations d’enfance*, as for example when Maryse Condé opens *Le Cœur à rire et à pleurer* with a reference to the Second World War and Holocaust, or when Gisèle Pineau’s protagonist in *L’Exil selon Julia* makes sense of the racism she is experiencing in school partly through her reading of Anne Frank.⁸

Silverman examines Perec’s *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* as an example of palimpsestic memory by virtue of the layering of references to different societies and different instances of state-sponsored violence in the depiction of the island of W. He writes:

The poetics of Perec’s text, consisting of constant substitutions and displacements of meaning, stages catastrophe in terms of an endless deferral of meaning from one site

³ *Eloge de la Créolité/In Praise of Creoleness*, p. 18.

⁴ Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (Ibadan: New Horn Press, 1994).

⁵ *A Bout*, 209; *Chemin*, 148.

⁶ Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1955); Patrick Chamoiseau, *Ecrire en pays dominé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997).

⁷ Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1992); Silverman p. 14.

⁸ Maryse Condé, *Le Cœur à rire et à pleurer* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1999), p. 11; Gisèle Pineau, *L’Exil selon Julia: récit* (Paris: Stock, 1996), p. 153.

to another. Perec's use of Rousset's *L'Univers concentrationnaire* at the end of the text not only refers to the concentration camps of the Second World War but to a broader 'concentrationary' mentality in our cultural and political imaginary.⁹

Silverman also speaks of Robert Antelme, Jean Cayrol and Alain Resnais as belonging to the tradition of palimpsestic memory, and Perec owes significant creative debts to these figures. He expresses his admiration for Robert Antelme in his article 'Robert Antelme ou la vérité et la littérature' and pays tribute to Antelme's memoir of his time as a political prisoner in Nazi camps in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*. The autobiography's layering of separate time periods and many of its images are drawn from the film *Nuit et brouillard*, upon which Alain Resnais and Jean Cayrol collaborated, and which Silverman sees as an early manifestation of palimpsestic memory.

Nabokov, who famously disliked the very concept of influence, does not place himself within an intellectual tradition quite so directly. However, Anna Brodsky, John Burt Foster and Susan Mizruchi, among others, have linked him with a group of intellectuals who immigrated to America as a result of the Second World War, including Hannah Arendt and Theodor Adorno.¹⁰ Although these writers and thinkers varied greatly in their political beliefs, they had shared the experience of watching a totalitarian regime come to power in Germany, and were aware that the seeds of violence on a vast scale could be contained within a familiar and seemingly safe time and place. Arendt and Adorno saw the casual racism and deference for authority of 1940s and 1950s American culture as worryingly similar to the conditions which they believed had prepared the ground for the development of a totalitarian state in Germany.

⁹ Silverman, p. 6.

¹⁰ Anna Brodsky, 'Nabokov's *Lolita* and the Postwar Emigré Consciousness', in *Realms of Exile: Nomadism, Diasporas and Eastern European Voices*, ed. by Dominica Radulescu (London: Lexington Books, 2002), pp. 49-67; John Burt Foster Jr., 'Posh lust, Culture Criticism, Adorno and Malraux', in *Nabokov and his Fiction: New Perspectives*, ed. by Julian Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 216-235; Susan Mizruchi, 'Lolita in History', *American Literature*, 75 (2003), 629-652.

Anna Brodsky and John Burt Foster Jr draw parallels between Nabokov's disdain for *poshlost*, his depiction of the anti-Semitism, racism and conformism present in American everyday life in the 1940s and 1950s and Arendt's and Adorno's critique of American culture in the same period. They argue that Nabokov, Adorno and Arendt each had the comparable aim of investigating the fault-lines of the apparently robust nature of American liberty.

These three authors can then be seen as heirs to different branches of a common post-war tradition that sought to understand the vast state-sponsored violence of imperialism and totalitarianism through an exploration of the inter-twined nature of those phenomena, and their relationship to modern life. Nabokov, Perec and Chamoiseau approach the influence of history on their own lives in a way that reaches outward from their own personal experience. The parts of their writing which deal with the effects of historical trauma on their own lives also reflect on the nature of the forces which allow violence to flourish in other times and places. They share a refusal to consign the potential for mass violence to a distant place or time and emphasise instead the ever present nature of the individual's and society's vulnerability to oppression. They use *tabula rasa* figures to explore the place of violence in human life, and the factors which contribute to its suppression or growth. Nabokov and Chamoiseau use the child as a springboard for exploring the early life of the human species, while Perec uses the blank slate of the newly-inhabited island of W to explore the implications of the human search for dominance over the body, other people, and the natural world. All three authors use these *tabula rasa* figures to undermine the concept that violent strife is a good and natural state. They criticise the idea that strife always leads to beneficial change, and instead propose play as a model for fruitful relationships between self and other and self and world.

Play is shown to take the natural human inclination towards competition and channel it into collaboration rather than strife. Play leads to a growth in knowledge of oneself and the world, whereas strife cuts one off from the other and hence from knowledge of oneself. However, the lines between play and strife are not clear. Just as the destructive energies which drive humans to violent strife can be re-directed into collaborative, creative play, so the positive relationships established through play can quickly deteriorate once more into violence. In their portrayal of the potential of playful relationships to become damaging and vice versa, these authors demonstrate the need to be attentive to the seeds of violence in everyday and seemingly innocuous activities. This fits in with the multidirectional nature of their approach to memory. In the portrayal of children's play taking on cruel, oppressive characteristics, although one might expect it to lie beyond the reach of the forces which lead to totalitarian and imperial violence, each author conveys the idea that no time, place or individual is exempt from vulnerability and propensity to violence.

Miniatures and *Tabula Rasa* Figures

These authors use miniatures and *tabula rasa* figures such as the child or the recently colonised island to look at the place of the instincts for play and violence in human life. The way these *tabula rasa* figures are to a certain extent free from cultural influences allows the author to engage with ideas about 'the nature of human nature' and its relationship to political systems. Michael Sheringham has written of the way autobiographers use miniature figures to represent the self. Sheringham connects autobiographers' predilection for miniature versions of the self with a desire for defined boundaries and control:

The fetishist fixes on and overvalues something small and graspable which can be dominated and possessed, as a substitute for the elusive and intangible object of desire. By analogy, the autobiographer, in redressing a sense of amorphousness, and in response to a desire for shape and definition, may fix on particular manifestations

of selfhood and, by a kind of synecdoche, make them stand for an abeyant totality. Autobiographers often convey the impression that their textual effigies have the attraction of miniature or scale models, an appeal which may be associated with the mind's disposition to classify and order. The autobiographical manikin or homunculus (which may be linked with an image 'in the mind's eye') is amenable, portable, available to scrutiny, a 'transitional object' to be cherished in the context of an otherwise unpromising environment.¹¹

These observations can be fruitfully applied to the use Nabokov, Perec and Chamoiseau make of miniatures. Rather than using miniature figures as a synecdoche for the self, these authors use reduced spaces to represent the world inhabited by the self. In these autobiographies, we find spatial concentration, where the cosmos takes on the dimensions of an island, a park, or a building site, and temporal concentration, where centuries or millennia are condensed into a few years or a few months. Each author uses synecdoche so that one child or an island of a few thousand inhabitants comes to stand for the whole human race. By using miniature figures to represent whole societies or worlds, and by exploring these worlds through the eyes of the child, these authors can examine questions of wide scope without abandoning the commitment to explore a particular childhood. The technique allows these authors to hold political discourse at arm's length on the one hand, while engaging with it very closely on the other.

The portrayal of the child's view of the world allows the author to imagine a range of relationships between the individual and the surrounding world. Because the child's mind has, in theory, not been entirely shaped by adult culture, it stands to reason that his vision of the world would be different from the reader's. The idea of a child's life as exemplifying what human life would be or could be if freed from the influence of culture, and the use of the child's gaze to produce estranging views of reality, are not, of course, confined to these

¹¹ *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 6-7.

texts.¹² The engagement with questions of what is natural for human beings outside of society acts as a more or less veiled critique of certain ways of thinking about history and politics. There are several advantages to exploring these questions through the use of reduced spaces and condensed time-frames. Part of the project of these autobiographies is to make these familiar traumas strange to the reader, and the use of miniature figures aids this project. The increased control wielded over miniature figures allows these authors to make particular political points efficiently. Recourse to history would mean its complexity would have to be taken into account and addressed, but the use of ahistorical or partially ahistorical microcosms means these authors are free to shape the initial conditions and their interpretation. The reduced size of these figures calls the reader to enlarge them, and she is free to map them on to a range of different historical situations. The reader's participation in this process of expansion and translation is a key feature of these authors' project of drawing out echoes and similarities between different instances of historical and political trauma.

The use of miniature, *tabula rasa* figures offers a further advantage. Because the ideologies of Bolshevism, Nazism and French imperialism, which brought upheaval into the lives of Nabokov, Perec and Chamoiseau respectively, are concentrated into these miniature figures, they undergo a certain degree of satire, distortion or ridicule in the process. We see this when Chamoiseau situates the colonising impulse as an early, primitive one in human history, or when Nabokov defiantly situates play, and not work, as the most productive and beneficial kind of activity. These authors' use of microcosms makes a mockery of these systems' claims of infinite reach, reducing them to the dimensions of one island, the cupboard under the stairs, or a single city park. The worlds they create become objects which can be manipulated, inspected and abandoned by a child. The ideological basis of these systems of

¹² Hardwick, *Childhood, Autobiography and the Francophone Caribbean*, p. 1.

oppression is undermined as the cultural nature of behaviour they would claim as natural is exposed.

Nabokov sets out to show that strife, competition, war and utilitarian work are not engines of beneficial change, but rather reverse human achievement and narrow human horizons. In place of work, he situates play, leisure and abundance as productive of fruitful change.

Although there are political implications to Nabokov's argument, he does not choose to frame it in political terms. Rather, he employs the language of evolutionary biology and the figure of the child to make his points. He invokes the theory of recapitulation to make the portrait of himself as a child, and that of his son, stand for the early stages of humanity's history. The theory of recapitulation states that as an organism grows from infant to adult, it repeats the stages passed through by the species as a whole in the course of its evolution. This device allows Nabokov to put forward his vision of human nature without abandoning his commitment to an exploration of the particular nature of his own life. Framing political points in the language of evolutionary biology allows Nabokov to avoid engaging with any one political system or ideology and to condemn views of human nature which manifest themselves in a number of systems of thought.

Nabokov intertwines his own development as a child, and that of his son, with elements of human evolutionary history a number of times. When he recalls his first moment of self-awareness, which occurred as he walked along a sun-flecked path between his parents, he writes: 'from my present ridge of remote, isolated, almost uninhabited time, I see my diminutive self as celebrating, on that August day 1903, the birth of sentient life'.¹³ He notes his memory of the sun glinting off his father's uniform, and conjectures that his father must

¹³ *SM*, 11.

have put military dress on for fun, as there was no other reason to do so. He then comments: ‘To a joke, then, I owe my first gleam of complete consciousness – which again has recapitulatory implications, since the first creatures on earth to become aware of time were also the first creatures to smile.’¹⁴ He layers the games he played as a child with the landscape of early human history, writing: ‘It was the primordial cave (and not what Freudian mystics might suppose) that lay behind the games I played when I was four.’ The crisscrossing of prehistoric time and childhood time through imagery of caves and rocks recurs at the beginning of Chapter Fifteen, when Nabokov addresses his wife with a lament over the passing of the years and says, ‘perhaps it is time we examined ancient snapshots, cave drawings of trains and planes, strata of toys in the lumbered closet’.¹⁵ ‘Strata’ suggests geology and ‘cave drawings’ evokes the life of prehistoric man, but the mention of photography, trains, planes and toys evokes Dmitri Nabokov’s twentieth-century childhood. ‘Ancient snapshots’ has the two temporal frames intersect. When Nabokov describes his newborn son’s eyes, he refers to ‘that swimming, sloping, elusive something about the dark-bluish tint of the iris which seemed still to retain the shadows it had absorbed of ancient, fabulous forests where there were more birds than tigers and more fruit than thorns, and where, in some dappled depth, man’s mind had been born’.¹⁶

The narration of the early life of Dmitri Nabokov is full of references to human evolution. Nabokov remembers the various prams his son rode in, and notes that as the baby grew, he made a gradual transition to more upright positions. The child’s transition from horizontal to vertical stances echoes the evolutionary transition from slithering to crawling to walking. The association between evolution and different forms of movement continues as Nabokov writes

¹⁴ *SM*, 12.

¹⁵ *SM*, 231.

¹⁶ *SM*, 233.

of his child's transition from stroller to toy-car, when he speaks of a 'new wave of evolution' 'gradually lifting him again from the ground'.¹⁷ Nabokov connects children's delight in toys on wheels with the natural forces which create and sustain life, writing that 'all forms of vitality are forms of velocity'.¹⁸ He also links the fun children have playing with earth, sand or mud with the 'the essentially human urge to reshape the earth, to act upon a friable environment'.¹⁹ Nabokov speaks of his baby son as a scientist and a philosopher. He displays an interest in the interaction of his son's mind with the surrounding world, speaking of the child casting 'a suspicious glance at my face to see if the teasing trees and sky did not belong, perhaps, to the same order of things as did rattles and parental humor'.²⁰ In this image of the child learning to distinguish animate from inanimate phenomena, we find an echo of 'the stab of wonder that accompanies the precise moment when, gazing at a tangle of twigs and leaves, one suddenly realizes that what had seemed a natural component of that tangle is a marvellously disguised insect or bird' which Nabokov describes as 'the closest reproduction of the mind's birth obtainable'.²¹

The circumstances in which Nabokov imagines the birth of human consciousness suggest that leisure and abundance, rather than scarcity or strife, are natural and fruitful. The flecks of sunlight which surround Nabokov as he walks between his parents and begins his conscious life recur in the 'dappled depth' which Nabokov imagines upon looking into his newborn son's eyes. Dapples are a kind of filtered light, which is associated for Nabokov with artistic consciousness and the absorption of beauty. In the image of light filtering through leaves to create a pattern on the ground, there is a balance between the enclosure created by the trees,

¹⁷ *SM*, 234-235.

¹⁸ *SM*, 236.

¹⁹ *SM*, 237.

²⁰ *SM*, 235.

²¹ *SM*, 233.

and the openness to light from without. This, along with the reference to ‘more birds than tigers and more fruit than thorns’ locates plenty and shelter as the necessary circumstances for evolutionary leaps. The connection established between the Nabokov family home and the landscape of early human life in the reference to the ‘cave-games’ he played in the Vyra drawing room contributes to Nabokov’s creation of an image of prehistory as a time of beauty and abundance. In the image of the primordial cave as a place of play, Nabokov illustrates the idea that play is not something that developed after human beings had found ways of coping with the necessity of meeting material needs, but is rather a fundamental part of human life. In the reference to prehistoric man puzzling out the presence of the bird in the ‘tangle of twigs’ and in the connection forged between ‘the essentially human urge to reshape the earth’ and the tactile pleasure of making mud-pies, Nabokov situates knowledge of and interaction with the world as an essentially ludic enterprise. Having stated that ‘all forms of vitality are forms of velocity’ he goes on to characterise velocity as a ludic mode, speaking of the ‘miraculous paradox of smooth round objects conquering space by simply tumbling over and over, instead of laboriously lifting heavy limbs in order to progress’.²² In this way, the forms of velocity he names, ‘the quantum-quick thought, the roller coaster of the circulatory system’, the forces which create and sustain life, are spoken of as playful forces.²³

If Nabokov speaks of play as a fruitful, generative activity, his view of work is correspondingly negative. While play enriches consciousness and is connected with evolutionary leaps, utilitarian work is connected with reversals in evolution and a return to animal nature. After positing ‘a lolling and loafing which allowed first of all the formation of

²² *SM*, 234-235.

²³ *SM*, 235-236.

Homo poeticus – without which *sapiens* could not have been evolved’, Nabokov goes on to give his views on more conventional views of evolutionary history:

‘Struggle for life’ indeed! The curse of battle and toil leads man back to the boar, to the grunting beast’s crazy obsession with the search for food. You and I have frequently remarked upon that maniacal glint in a housewife’s scheming eye as it roves over food in a grocery or about the morgue of a butcher’s shop. Toilers of the world, disband! Old books are wrong. The world was made on a Sunday.²⁴

Here, a focus on the search for food to the exclusion of all else is associated with violence, death and a narrowing of the horizons of thought. The parallel Nabokov draws between the wild boar and the ‘scheming housewife’ show how the necessity of focusing all one’s energy on physical survival limits higher kinds of consciousness. Although the phrase ‘struggle for existence’ had been used previously, Charles Darwin was the first to use ‘struggle for life’ in his 1859 *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*.²⁵ By invoking this phrase, Nabokov engages in a clear polemic with this aspect of Darwin’s work, and with the popularised version which holds that competition is to be encouraged in human life because it is an engine of beneficial social change. The disapproving references to obsessive searches for food extend this polemic. Darwin’s conception of human evolution depended on the idea that populations increase until they put pressure on food resources, and that this pressure on food resources creates the need for competition, and so leads to natural selection. Here Nabokov situates an abundance of food as a necessary condition for human evolution, and speaks of food scarcity as reversing the course of evolution. In doing so, he associates leisure with human progress and working to stay alive with a lack of progress.

²⁴ *SM*, 233.

²⁵ <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/191910?redirectedFrom=%22struggle+for+life%22#eid20202714>, consulted 28/10/2013.

It may be objected that Nabokov's vision of the birth of human life bears a remarkable resemblance to the conditions of his own birth and childhood. The tree-lined, sun-flecked path of his own childhood is echoed by the 'dappled depth' in which he imagines human life first appearing. His elevation of leisure as the motor of human evolution perhaps constitutes a projection of his own comfortable background on to early human history. But the personal nature of Nabokov's vision is not an oversight on his part, but rather an illustration of the idea that there is no such thing as an objective view of human evolution. It is part of what Susan Stewart refers to as 'the essential *theatricality* of all miniatures'.²⁶ By using his own childhood and that of his son as a way to explore the origins of humanity as a whole, and by presenting a vision of evolutionary history which is inflected by his own scientific and artistic practice, Nabokov gestures knowingly towards the fact that there is no vision of evolution which exists independently of its creator. Nabokov also hints at the way an individual's understanding of evolution depends on his or her mind when he writes: 'The summer of 1905 in Vyra had not yet evolved lepidoptera.'²⁷ Because his interest in butterflies and moths only began later, in 1905 he simply did not notice their presence. He notes elsewhere that people who do not share his interest in butterflies and moths do not notice their presence, even when there are lots of them around.²⁸

If Nabokov wishes to underline the idiosyncratic, personal nature of his vision of human history, it is because he believes that contemporary science is not adequate to answer metaphysical questions about the nature and purpose of human beings and the world they

²⁶ *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 54, italics in original.

²⁷ *SM*, 71.

²⁸ *SM*, 98-99.

inhabit. Reflecting on the kinds of events and experiences which might have shaped early human nature, he writes:

The bonfire into which the dreamy little savage peered as he squatted on naked haunches, or the unswerving advance of a forest fire – these have also affected, I suppose, a chromosome or two behind Lamarck's back, in the mysterious way which Western geneticists are as disinclined to elucidate as are professional physicists to discuss the outside of the inside, the whereabouts of the curvature; for every dimension presupposes a medium within which it can act, and if, in the spiral unwinding of things, space warps into something akin to time, and time, in its turn, warps into something akin to thoughts then, surely, another dimension follows – a special Space maybe, not the old one, we trust, unless spirals become vicious circles again.²⁹

Here Nabokov indicts the inability of contemporary science to make sense of the origin of human life and the nature of the cosmos. He uses the figure of the spiral to imagine what currently lies beyond the reach of scientific knowledge. The spiral is connected with play in the autobiography, because Nabokov uses it to describe the experience of the solver of his chess-puzzle.³⁰ The little girl Nabokov meets on the beach in Biarritz, Colette, creates a kind of spiral by twirling around holding out a ribbon attached to a stick.³¹ Nabokov says he pictures his life as a rainbow spiral held within a glass marble, another object associated with children's play.³² In this way, a figure associated with art and play allows Nabokov to imagine a response to questions science cannot answer. This is consistent with the association Nabokov establishes between science and mystery and art and precision in the autobiography and throughout his work. Here, he invokes the incompleteness of scientific knowledge to contest the idea that there is a definitive explanation of human life, and then goes on to use art to imagine possible explanations. Given his portrayal of the inadequacy of science to answer metaphysical questions, the personal nature of his own view of evolution begins to make sense. As all views of early human life are imagined, it makes sense to acknowledge

²⁹ *SM*, 236.

³⁰ *SM*, 228-229.

³¹ *SM*, 116.

³² *SM*, 215.

and display their imagined nature. By maintaining a connection between evolution, the life of the cosmos, and the mysterious, and by refusing to accept definitive explanations of the nature of human life and its place in the world, Nabokov leaves space for the unknown in his imagined account of human nature.

There is another reason for Nabokov's interleaving of scientific accounts with imagined elements and space for the unknown. Nabokov must have been well aware that accounts of human nature could easily be pressed into service as props for political ideologies of all kinds. The unexpected elements of Nabokov's narrative of human origin, such as the leisured nature of his prehistoric world, have an estranging effect, while his criticism of the reluctance of contemporary scientists to acknowledge the gaps in their knowledge, encourage the reader to take critical distance from any system of thought that claims legitimacy from a given view of human nature. Nabokov's own account of pre-history has political implications; it contests the value placed by Bolshevism and Nazism on work and strife as engines of beneficial change. Nabokov's privileging of play and leisure and his disapproval of 'battle and toil' implicitly undermines the value Hitler, Lenin, and their respective parties placed on these aspects of human life. Nabokov also criticises these regimes in more explicit terms. Having associated movement through space with play by pointing out the ludic nature of wheels tumbling over themselves, Nabokov associates systems of thought that constrain individual liberty with slower movement. As he describes the increasing pace of his son's movements in 1930s Berlin, he speaks of 'the multiplied roar of a dictator still pounding his chest in the Neander valley we had left far behind'.³³ In the paragraph following this, he turns his critical gaze on Freudian psychology, and speaks of Freud and his followers travelling 'in their

³³ *SM*, 235.

thirdclass carriage of thought'.³⁴ The enclosure suggested by Hitler's position within a valley and the Freudians' position in a carriage reinforces the connection between these two figures and the idea of constraint. For Nabokov, Hitler's ideology, and, to a lesser extent, that of Freud, constrains each man spatially and temporally. In the image of Dmitri Nabokov speeding away from these two figures, Nabokov suggests that this constraint is neither natural nor immutable, but can be shed if one has the right kind of relationship to the world.

Although Nabokov's portrayal of human origin is certainly designed to create a link between dictators such as Lenin and Hitler and lower forms of human life, the critique is not solely aimed at any one individual or system of thought. In Nabokov's dismissal of the Genesis creation story, he extends the range of his critique. Nor, in this case, is it the murderous nature of the regimes of Hitler and Lenin that Nabokov takes aim at. Rather than focusing on extreme manifestations of barbarity in totalitarian systems operating at their limit, Nabokov looks at the everyday figure of the housewife in a butcher's. He also makes provocative links between systems of thought that are not normally associated with each other, as in the link he makes between Marxism and Genesis or in the link between Freudian psychology and totalitarian government.³⁵ Establishing these kinds of links between different figures and writings has the effect of locating the source of political violence in activities and systems of thought which seem otherwise benign.

This is also the case in Chamoiseau's autobiography, where the child's play, which one might expect to be harmless, is connected with violence. Chamoiseau, like Nabokov, uses the narration of childhood experiences as a springboard into an exploration of human life and

³⁴ *SM*, 235.

³⁵ *SM*, 235.

pre-history with political implications. The different stages of the child's development, and his interaction with the world and with other creatures, are spoken of in terms of the stages of human evolution. When the child begins to play with his father's discarded razor blades, this time is spoken of as 'l'âge de l'outil' or 'l'âge de la lame', and when, in an echo of Prometheus' crime, he steals matches from his mother and lights them in the cupboard under the stairs, this time is referred to as 'l'âge du feu'.³⁶ He calls himself a 'préhominien' during the narration of his first attempts at writing, and the scribbles he makes on the walls of the home are 'pétroglyphes'.³⁷ When speaking of his transition from childhood to adolescence Chamoiseau articulates the process as a change from being '*erectus*' to '*sapiens*'.³⁸ He also uses the terms 'sapiens sapiens', and 'australopithèque', a term for the earliest known type of hominid, to refer to other children. Together, the children form 'hordes primates'.³⁹ When he describes a new building site at the edge of town, he, like Nabokov, invokes a theory of recapitulation, writing, 'La cité en construction devint hélas un lieu de recapitulation des vices de la macroévolution.'⁴⁰ The wooded area near the building site is 'la sylvie originelle'.⁴¹ The child's early explorations of his surroundings are not only mapped on to pre-history, but also on to later periods of history. He is spoken of as an 'obscur conquistador'⁴² and as 'l'Attila des blattes rouges'.⁴³ These metaphors and others are employed to convey the way in which the child seeks knowledge of the world through mastery over it. He tries to understand the creatures he finds under the stairs through destruction and violence. His first weapon is fire. He sets spider-webs on fire, and watches

³⁶ *Antan*, 31-35.

³⁷ *Chemin*, 27-28.

³⁸ *A Bout*, 30, italics in original.

³⁹ *A Bout*, 244.

⁴⁰ *A Bout*, 228-229.

⁴¹ *A Bout*, 248.

⁴² *Chemin*, 17.

⁴³ *Antan*, 25.

the spiders burn.⁴⁴ Once he discovers razor blades, he cuts up the various insects which live under the stairs. This violence is spoken of in terms of experimental surgery.⁴⁵ We read: ‘Il opérait les ravets (crucifiées par des aiguilles) d’une maladie grave dont il ne savait rien mais qui justifiait d’une dissection en règle.’⁴⁶ This idea of the competing influence of a desire to achieve a certain purpose and a desire to destroy purely for its own sake recurs here: ‘Il aurait pu faire avancer la science si l’envie de comprendre ne fut pas trop souvent supplantée par le goût très obscur de couper.’⁴⁷ Although Chamoiseau acknowledges here that his wish to learn was not the main motivation in his cutting sprees, to a certain extent he does grow in understanding during ‘l’âge du feu’ and ‘l’âge de l’outil’. There is a certain intoxicating pleasure associated with his use of fire: ‘Soûlerie de tout détruire. Soûlerie de savourer l’énigme d’une araignée rescapée du charbonnage des toiles.’⁴⁸ His killing-sprees initiate him into the mystery of the survival and reproduction of life amongst hostile forces.

Ultimately, however, this mode of learning destroys the object of knowledge:

Impossible de savoir le nombre d’allumettes consumées pour que les araignées se fassent rares, que les ravets émigrent vers les cuisines et que les fourmis s’enterrent sans disparaître. Le négrillon demeura seul avec son arme dévastatrice devenue dérisoire. Alors, il enflamma des bouchons de liège, des étiquettes de bouteilles, du plastique qu’il aimait voir se tordre. Un jour, il alluma une flamme pour elle-même, pénétrant alors, tout douce oui, dans la sérénité de l’âge magique du feu.⁴⁹

Acquiring knowledge through exercising violent control over other creatures proves to be of limited worth. Mastery over the world is of little value if one inhabits it alone. Chamoiseau draws attention to the dependence of the master on the creatures he controls in the alliterative phrase ‘arme dévastatrice devenue dérisoire’. Paradoxically, the importance the child attaches

⁴⁴ *Antan*, 32-33.

⁴⁵ *Antan*, 34-35.

⁴⁶ *Antan*, 35.

⁴⁷ *Antan*, 35.

⁴⁸ *Antan*, 32-33.

⁴⁹ *Antan*, 34.

to control over other creatures means that once they are absent, his actions lose some of their meaning. Faced with the meagre results of his killing campaign, the child moves away from the search for mastery over the world and towards wonder at its marvels.

Sarah L. Lincoln has drawn on the work of Joseph W. Meeker to argue that the characters of Chamoiseau's 1992 novel, *Texaco*, operate in a comic mode rather than a tragic mode.⁵⁰ We can also see Chamoiseau's rejection of fire as a weapon as an example of a transition from the tragic mode to the comic mode. For Meeker, the tragic mode is based on specific metaphysical beliefs, and is peculiar to societies where those beliefs hold sway, whereas comedy is based on the biological facts of life, and so is universal. Meeker argues that tragedy is concerned with man transcending his limits, while comedy encourages laughter at the spectacle of man trying to be more than he is.⁵¹ The tragic hero will face death rather than defeat in his struggle for transcendence, while the comic hero will compromise and find a way to sustain life. Meeker points out that the Greek god Comos was associated with the biological processes that sustain life and fertility, as well as with dramatic comedy.

We can see the child's move from conqueror of the world to person who simply enjoys his presence in it as an example of the move from the tragic mode to the comic mode. At first the child is described as a heroic, powerful figure. He is the central intelligence in his world and he seeks ever greater control over the other creatures which inhabit it. This quest is associated with heights of sensation and emotion. Ultimately, though, it leaves him lonely and prevents him from reaching any true understanding of the creatures he tries to control. In the comic

⁵⁰ 'Conquering the City: The Poetics of Possibility in *Texaco*', *Small Axe*, 15 (2011), 1-21.

⁵¹ Joseph W. Meeker, 'The Comic Mode', in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, ed. by Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1996), pp. 155-170 (pp. 157-159).

mode, on the other hand, the child abandons illusions that he is the only, or even the central intelligence, and he gives up his ambitions of total control over other creatures. We see this in the transformation that takes place in his relationship with the old rat that frequents the area behind the house. The child observes the rats that emerge in this area when everyone else is having a nap. He comes up with elaborate projects to kill them, but they do not succeed. The child realises that the rats are intelligent. Undaunted, he continues devising various traps, and especially enjoys laying them for one rat in particular, who is older and even more wily than the others. At some point, however, he begins setting the traps merely for the pleasure of seeing the old rat outwit him. As the rat gets older he becomes less alert and one day, as Chamoiseau is poised with a stone which he plans to drop on the rat's head, the rat stumbles into the child's trap. Chamoiseau is so moved by the animal's decline that pity outweighs the drive to destroy and he writes that the killing-stone he holds aloft becomes the cornerstone of a cathedral of pity.⁵² This moment encapsulates the transition from a quest for domination through violence towards a way of being that places greater value on interdependence and co-existence.

This transition is one of the major themes of Chamoiseau's work, and his autobiographical writing suggests that it is not rooted in a single moment of conversion, but is rather a process which an individual must begin many times over the course of a lifetime. The move from a search for control towards a willing interdependence occurs again when Chamoiseau describes his early thoughts and feelings on the opposite sex in *A Bout d'enfance*.

Chamoiseau is not sure where to place little girls on the evolutionary ladder, but he hesitantly allocates them a place beneath 'les êtres-humains', or little boys.⁵³ Seeing the energy and

⁵² *Antan*, 56-62.

⁵³ *A Bout*, 113.

skill with which girls play with skipping ropes causes him to doubt his initial classification, but, '[m]algré tout il continua de se dire que sauter à la corde devait être un dérivé d'occupation pour mollusques sans cortex cérébral'.⁵⁴ This is another possible echo of recapitulation theory, as in the nineteenth century some scientists believed that human embryos took the form of a mollusc as the human organism passed through the evolutionary stages that eventually lead to *homo sapiens*.⁵⁵

Much of *A Bout d'enfance* is taken up with the child's quest to understand the nature of, and reason for, the different anatomy of female children. As with the explorations in the cupboard under the stairs, this quest for knowledge is pursued while maintaining distance from the object of knowledge. The child seeks to understand girls by watching films, reading his sisters' fotonovelas (similar to comic books but illustrated with photographs or film stills instead of pictures), asking other male children or simply staring at little girls from a distance.⁵⁶ There is a disused door between the boys' school and the girls' school, and the young Chamoiseau watches girls playing through it during break time.⁵⁷ As with the rats and insects, he begins with the assumption that the little girls are deficient in some way, lacking in strength and intelligence, and then looks for the reason for this difference between himself and them. Eventually he comes to the realisation that female children's difference from him and the other little boys does not mean they are lacking in anything, but simply that they are different.⁵⁸ He writes of his discovery that male and female are not separate species, and that they are designed to come together and produce life, but this belief seems only imperfectly

⁵⁴ *A Bout*, 125-126.

⁵⁵ Percy E. Davidson, *The Recapitulation Theory and Human Infancy* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1914), p. 5.

⁵⁶ *A Bout*, 189;192;196.

⁵⁷ *A Bout*, 110.

⁵⁸ *A Bout*, 180.

lived out in his actual life, as he continues to stare at the young girl who fascinates him from a distance and he hesitates to speak to her directly. This reinforces the idea that the transition from learning at a distance, to learning through interaction is one which must be constantly undertaken in Chamoiseau's world-view.

As in the case of Nabokov, the connections Chamoiseau establishes between his early childhood and the childhood of humanity as a whole have political implications. Nabokov presents the instinct to play as fundamental to evolution of the human mind, and in doing so, condemns ideologies which see play as superfluous and situate work and strife as engines of beneficial change. Chamoiseau takes a different attitude towards the relative dominance of the instincts for play and violence. Unlike Nabokov, he does see the drive to destroy as natural for early humans and for young children. However, he sees it as an early, instinctual stage which can and must be overcome for humanity to reach a deeper understanding of its place in the surrounding world. What gives Chamoiseau's portrayal of the connections between early childhood and early human history its political import is the way he connects the child's violent impulses with Enlightenment modes of knowledge acquisition and with the Western imperial project. The reference to the child as a coloniser and a conquistador, along with the mention of named figures such as Attila, go some way towards connecting his desire for violent control with European history and culture. The parody of dissection and experimental surgery in the child's dismemberment of various insects, and his assumption that he is the central figure of the world he inhabits, evoke the value placed on objective distance, experiment, and human mastery of the world during the periods of Enlightenment and conquest. The connection formed by Chamoiseau between the childhood impulse to destroy and Enlightenment modes of knowledge acquisition upends the assumptions of colonial history, which sees the desire and ability to conquer as a mark of civilisation.

Contrary to this, Chamoiseau's link between early childhood and colonialism locates the drive to conquer as a primitive urge. In this way, Chamoiseau takes the colonial trope of associating childhood with primitive drives, and conquered people with the childhood of mankind, and re-appropriates it for his own purposes.

There are just enough references to European figures and practices to make this reading of Chamoiseau's portrayal of early childhood as a critique of imperial epistemology possible. However, as in the case of Nabokov, the nature of recapitulatory figures means that while they can be read as designed to criticise a certain political system, it would be odd to limit their meaning solely to this. By choosing to employ the figure of a child, who has been deindividualised through the use of the third person and the term 'le négriillon', and by connecting the child with the even more generalised figures of 'le préhominien', 'sapiens sapiens' and 'erectus', Chamoiseau signals that he is concerned with impulses that have the potential to arise in any place or time. He does not see the will to dominate as belonging only to the period of high imperialism, or to humanity's primitive past. Rather, his layering of references to various European imperial projects and to the early days of the human species in the context of an exploration of his own childhood suggest that he sees the seeds of domination as present in many, if not all, places and times.

This concern with the origin and nature of humanity's urge to dominate the surrounding world and other people is also central to Perec's *W ou le souvenir d'enfance*, and, in particular, to his description of the W island. Like Nabokov and Chamoiseau, Perec uses a *tabula rasa* figure to criticise the idea that violent strife amongst individuals is natural and good. Perec does not use the child as a blank slate figure, but rather the recently colonised island of W. Just as Nabokov and Chamoiseau suggest that the reader can learn something

about the human mind from observing the workings of an individual child's mind, so the description of W can show the reader something about the workings of human society as a whole. Perec underlines W's exemplary status as a condensed version of early human society by referring to it as 'une micromésopotamie'.⁵⁹ Claude Burgelin points out that the W narrative is in a literary tradition of stories of utopian experiments which includes Rabelais, Fourier and Jules Verne, amongst others.⁶⁰ The island of W functions as a virgin space because it has yet to be mapped; it lies outside the written word, beyond the scientific knowledge of geographers and explorers and beyond the experiential knowledge of the nearest local population.⁶¹ Perec describes the island as a lone area of human civilisation in a largely indomitable world:

La nature profondément hostile du monde alentour, le relief tourmenté, le sol aride, le paysage constamment glacial et brumeux, rendent encore plus merveilleuse la campagne fraîche et joyeuse qui s'offre alors à la vue : non plus la lande désertique balayée par les vents sauvages de l'Antarctique, non plus les escarpements déchiquetés, non plus les maigres algues que survolent sans cesse des millions d'oiseaux marins, mais des vallonnements doux couronnés de boqueteaux de chênes et de platanes, des chemins poudreux bordés d'entassements de pierres sèches ou de hautes haies de mûres, de grands champs de myrtilles, de navets, de maïs, de patates douces.⁶²

The use of 'vallonnements' creates a vision of a world which is triply enclosed, surrounded by hills, then swamps, then the sea. Susan Stewart, in her study of miniature forms, writes that because miniatures are only miniatures in relation to the human body, and because they are often re-imaginings of scenes or objects which already exist, they are associated with the cultural. The gigantic, however, is associated with the natural, because of its connection with spaces and beings so large they exceed human control.⁶³ The miniature space of W, surrounded by the gigantic natural features of the mountains and the sea, appears as an area

⁵⁹ W, 90.

⁶⁰ *Georges Perec* (Paris: Seuil, 1988), p. 154.

⁶¹ W, 90.

⁶² W, 90.

⁶³ Stewart, p. 70.

that is hyper-cultural, where natural limits are defied. This is in keeping with the nature of island spaces, which, in contrast to the less controlled and less controllable life of larger land masses, appear to lend themselves more readily to human domination and to radical social experiments. This aspect of island spaces means that they have often been the scene of the most extreme colonial enterprises, such as those conducted in the islands of the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean.⁶⁴ The association between island spaces and imperial projects fits in with the way W was colonised by '*des Blancs, des Occidentaux, et même presque exclusivement des Anglo-Saxons: des Hollandais, des Allemands, des Scandinaves, des représentants de cette classe orgueilleuse qu'aux Etats-Unis on nomme les Wasp*'.⁶⁵ While the W society is connected with human mastery of the natural world, the body, and other people, the beginning and end of Perec's autobiography see the natural world overwhelm man-made structures of control as vegetation, sand and birds invade what remains of W.⁶⁶

This question of the scope and limits of human control over other people and the surrounding world is central to Perec's portrayal of W, which, like Nabokov and Chamoiseau's depiction of the child, constantly engages with the question of the boundaries between the natural and the cultural, the ludic and the violent, mastery and surrender. Like Nabokov and Chamoiseau, Perec seeks to demonstrate that strife is neither inevitable nor productive of beneficial change. Where Nabokov portrays leisure and abundance as leading to evolutionary leaps, and Chamoiseau shows the child overcoming his initial instinct to destroy to find a more fruitful mode of interaction with the world, Perec draws attention to the way the structures of W society create and maintain the conditions which cause strife. His portrayal of the engineered

⁶⁴ Maeve McCusker and Anthony Soares, eds, *Islanded Identities: Constructions of Postcolonial Cultural Insularity* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), pp. xi-xii.

⁶⁵ W, 91, italics in original.

⁶⁶ W, 10.

nature of the constant competition on W encourages the reader to reject the idea that individuals are predisposed to struggle against each other. Rather, he suggests that strife between individuals arises because it is beneficial to those in control of society, and that if individuals reject competition to form co-operative relationships, they could reclaim control over their lives. Where Nabokov suggests that the drive to compete arises out of a lack of material resources, and Chamoiseau shows that the desire for mastery is a thoughtless impulse which can be overcome through interaction with other creatures, Perec locates the origin of competition in external forces placed upon the individual by societal structures.

Perec uses the duplicity of the narrator's voice in the fictional chapters to put forward the idea that W is run according to the natural law of competition for scarce resources, while showing elsewhere that its laws are not natural, and in fact are created and implemented with a great deal of effort. The island's dedication to sport, combined with references to Darwin, raise the question of the place of competition in human life. Perec invokes Darwin's work and its application to human life both directly and indirectly. The *Sylvandre* is shipwrecked in Darwin Strait, near the islands of O'Brien and Londonderry (though Perec spells it Londonberry), which were mapped and named during the voyage of the Beagle.⁶⁷ The narrator also writes:

*Le struggle for life est ici la loi; encore la lutte n'est-elle rien, ce n'est pas l'amour du Sport pour le Sport, de l'exploit pour l'exploit, qui anime les hommes W, mais la soif de la victoire, de la victoire à tout prix.*⁶⁸

Several aspects of life on W appear to confirm this statement and to mimic Darwinian conditions. This emerges most clearly in connection with food and reproduction. Food is central to the way the W society works. Only when Athletes win a race do they have the

⁶⁷ W, 79.

⁶⁸ W, 119, italics in original.

chance to eat a full meal. Otherwise they are kept in a state of semi-starvation.⁶⁹ In this way the system of rewards on W heightens the incentives of winning to produce a kind of artificial ‘law of the jungle’, where failure to win decreases one’s chance of survival by diminishing one’s access to nourishment. These conditions do not arise of themselves; they are administered with a great deal of thought and bureaucracy, and with a specific purpose in mind. By raising the stakes of losing, the authorities unleash ever-greater amounts of competition. This becomes clear in this quotation, where the narrator discusses the effect of this system on the Athletes’ approach to sport:

...à l’instant crucial, au moment où l’homme doit donner le meilleur de lui-même, où il doit aller au-delà de ses forces et puiser dans un ultime détachement l’énergie qui lui permettra d’arracher la victoire, il n’est pas inutile que ce qui est alors en jeu relève d’un mécanisme presque élémentaire de survie, d’un réflexe de défense devenu quasi instinctif : ce que l’Athlète tient au bout de sa victoire, c’est beaucoup plus que le prestige, nécessairement fugace, d’avoir été le plus fort, c’est, par la seule obtention de ce repas supplémentaire, la garantie d’une meilleure condition physique, la certitude d’un meilleur équilibre alimentaire et, par conséquent, d’une meilleure force.⁷⁰

The use of ‘presque’ and ‘quasi’ before ‘instinctif’ and ‘élémentaire’ is significant; these conditions mimic ‘natural’ conditions, but it remains mimicry, rather than an organic reality. Although the authorities go some way towards creating Darwinian conditions, they do not want one individual or one group to emerge as the strongest, so they make sure that the meal, on which the winners earn the right, will make them sicker and weaker, rather than healthier and stronger.⁷¹ It becomes clear here that the system of competition on W is not about fostering strength, but about maintaining closed borders between the powerful and the powerless.

⁶⁹ W, 122-123.

⁷⁰ W, 121-122, italics in original.

⁷¹ W, 123.

The exclusion of people with older, weaker, younger or female bodies from full participation in W society, further detracts from the idea that life on W in some way mimics the natural state of humanity. Perec draws attention to the fact that while W purports to be a society entirely devoted to competition, it is only a certain number of healthy young men who actually compete. The rest of the population spend their time maintaining the infrastructure and political system which obliges the young men to compete against each other, or, in the case of the women and supervisors of W's children, ensuring the supply of healthy male bodies needed to sustain the system. Men of an age to compete live separately from women, who live separately from all but the youngest of children. The extent of the fortifications needed to keep children separate from adults and women separate from men and children also acts as an indication of the policed nature of this division.⁷²

The reader can see the extent of the control needed to sustain this system in the accumulation of titles of those who oversee and direct the competitions, which range from 'Officiels', 'Administration', 'Pouvoir central', 'Juges' and 'Arbitres'.⁷³ Perec takes the picture of life as constant, unfettered strife, and then paints in the structures of a modern bureaucracy around it. Rather than arising of its own accord, this society requires a whole other society to support its ethos of battle. Just as the separation of the Athletes from the women and children of the island is not natural and must be maintained with elaborate barriers, so the separation between Athletes and Organisers does not arise of its own accord, but is preserved intentionally through strict rules against the blurring of the boundary between those who compete and those who run the competitions. Athletes are forbidden from taking on any kind of administrative role or any role in the government of W.⁷⁴ Although it is very difficult to

⁷² W, 165; 186.

⁷³ W, 98; 99; 179; 204.

⁷⁴ W, 99.

move to a more powerful position in W, it is all too easy to move from a powerful to a less powerful position, and the fear of this possibility fuels the desperation of the more lowlyranked officials, and their unwillingness to challenge authority.

An Athlete's fate is decided by the decisions of those in power, rather than through the application of rules or laws, because the authorities constantly change the laws according to which W is governed and the rules which regulate individual competitions. By doing this, they undermine the basic principle of any game, which requires that players abide by one set of rules which remains fixed for the duration of a game. This embrace of lawlessness creates a parallel between W and totalitarian societies. This is what the narrator has to say about the function of the authorities' decisions to change the rules of a competition on a whim:

Les transgressions sont là pour rappeler aux Athlètes que la Victoire est une grâce, et non un droit: la certitude n'est pas une vertu sportive; il ne suffit pas d'être le meilleur pour gagner, ce serait trop simple. Il faut savoir que le hasard fait aussi partie de la règle, Am Stram Gram ou Pimpanicaille, n'importe quelle autre comptine, décideront parfois du résultat d'une épreuve. Il est plus important d'avoir de la chance que du mérite.⁷⁵

Note that at the beginning of the W chapters, the language of evolutionary biology was called upon to describe how the power structures were natural and could not be changed. Here, however, the Darwinian language of strongest and fittest has been quietly replaced by the religious language of 'grace' and by the invocation of simple chance. Significantly, although mutually exclusive as a way of understanding how W works, the lexis of religion, biology and luck all create the impression that the laws which govern W can be changed neither by the Athletes nor by those in power.

⁷⁵ W, 156, italics in original.

This language obscures the fact that those in power are fully in control of W's laws, and resist establishing fixed laws, because the instability of the rules governing society concentrates power in their hands: '*La Loi est implacable, mais la loi est imprévisible. Nul n'est censé l'ignorer, mais nul ne peut la connaître. Entre ceux qui la subissent et ceux qui l'édicte se dresse une barrière infranchissable.*'⁷⁶ Perec suggests that the lawlessness and unpredictability of life on W are a large part of what keeps the Athletes in a state of desperation, so that they are willing to fight for the smallest scrap of privilege, and so preserve the competitive ethos of W. We see that its preservation requires constant effort in this quotation where the narrator describes the core logic of W as that of:

une injustice organisée, fondamentale, élémentaire, qui, dès le départ, instaure parmi les participants d'une course ou d'un concours une discrimination qui sera le plus souvent décisive.

*Cette discrimination institutionnelle est l'expression d'une politique consciente et rigoureuse. Si l'impression dominante que l'on retire du spectacle d'une course est celle d'une totale injustice, c'est que les Officiels ne sont pas opposés à l'injustice. Au contraire, ils pensent qu'elle est le ferment le plus efficace de la lutte et qu'un Athlète ulcéré, révolté par abus de pouvoir, les empiétements, le favoritisme presque exagéré dont fait preuve à tout instant les Juges, sera cent fois plus combatif qu'un Athlète persuadé qu'il a mérité sa défaite.*⁷⁷

Perec implies here that injustice of the scale found on W has to be chosen. Paradoxically, to maintain a state of lawlessness, authorities must become more active rather than less active. Manet van Montfrans argues that the political and legal system on W fulfils Hannah Arendt's description of the totalitarian society as a system where the implacability of the law in certain circumstances goes hand-in-hand with its irrelevance in others.⁷⁸ Van Montfrans sees the Athletes' powerlessness as arising both out of this sense of lawlessness and out of the Officials' decision to privilege the logic of natural selection. Van Montfrans draws attention to the limitless nature of the workings of natural selection on W and there is a parallel

⁷⁶ W, 154, italics in original.

⁷⁷ W, 147, italics in original.

⁷⁸ van Montfrans, pp. 225-226, quoting Hannah Arendt, *Les Origines du totalitarisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1972), p. 205.

between this process and the use of the law in totalitarian states. Neither system operates according to ideas of concrete standards which can be achieved; both aspire to infinite power or improvement. The boundless nature of the way selection operates on W means that an Athlete can never reach a secure position, just as an individual in a totalitarian state is never entirely safe.⁷⁹

Perec's exposition of the way W's lawlessness is contrived in order to keep the Athletes powerless underlines the tragic irony of the Athletes' belief that there is nothing they can do to change their situation. Perec allows the reader to understand the workings of W at a higher level than the Athletes in order that he or she might more fully appreciate the Athletes' blindness. By identifying the Athletes' belief that the way they live is natural or inevitable, and by giving the reader enough information to see that this belief is misguided, Perec encourages his readership to question the division between the political and the natural. This is a project he shares with Robert Antelme, who recorded his time as a political detainee in Nazi concentration camps in a memoir entitled *L'Espèce humaine*. As the title of the memoir indicates, Antelme saw the question of the nature and limits of the human species as central to understanding the ideology behind the concentration camps and its relationship to life outside the camps.

For Antelme, biological and ideological imperatives were intertwined in the camps. Antelme writes that the camps were designed to contest the humanity of the prisoners, and that this idea is not merely a theoretical understanding of the camps' purpose, developed after his time as a prisoner, but was rather an integral part of his lived experience as a detainee.⁸⁰ The battle

⁷⁹ van Montfrans, p. 226.

⁸⁰ Robert Antelme, *L'Espèce humaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 11.

to preserve human life therefore takes on an ideological value, in that it thwarts the authorities' ambition to exercise total control over the prisoners' bodies, a control to be eventually expressed in the prisoners' death from privation. This is what Antelme writes about the attitude of the SS to the prisoners, and of the prisoners' response:

Ils ne nous ont ni fusillés ni pendus mais chacun, rationnellement privé de nourriture, doit devenir le mort prévu, dans un temps variable. Le seul but de chacun est donc de s'empêcher de mourir. Le pain qu'on mange est bon parce qu'on a faim, mais s'il calme la faim, on sait et on sent aussi qu'avec lui la vie se défend dans le corps. Le froid est douloureux, mais les SS veulent que nous mourions par le froid, il faut s'en protéger parce que c'est la mort qui est dans le froid. Le travail est vidant – pour nous, absurde – mais il use, et les SS veulent que nous mourions par le travail; aussi faut-il s'économiser dans le travail parce que la mort est dedans. Militer, ici, c'est lutter raisonnablement contre la mort.⁸¹

The lexis of will and rationality prevails in this passage ('rationnellement', 'prévu', 'raisonnablement'), indicating that biological imperative and an ideological imperative join in the prisoners' fight to stay alive. Antelme takes the example of a prisoner eating rotten peelings from a bin to make his point. He writes that some prisoners thought that eating peelings was a sign of a loss of self-respect, and that it was not worthy of a political prisoner. Antelme, on the contrary, believes that this apparent loss of dignity and submission to biological drives acts in fact as a form of ideological opposition. The description of the man eating peelings ('épluchures' in the French) is a loaded moment in the text, which Maurice Blanchot describes as expressing 'la vérité la plus forte du livre'.⁸²

Perec praises Antelme in an early article entitled 'Robert Antelme ou la vérité dans la littérature' and thought about dedicating the fictional part of the autobiography to him.⁸³ Because of Perec's practice of embedding hidden quotations from authors he admires in his fictional work, and because of the centrality of the peelings episode in Antelme's narration,

⁸¹ Antelme, p. 45.

⁸² *L'Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), p. 195.

⁸³ Perec, *L.G.: une aventure des années soixante*, p. 115.

the appearance of the words ‘épluchures’ and ‘l’espèce humaine’ in close proximity in the autobiography can be read as an allusion to Antelme’s point about the connection between biological and ideological imperatives in the camps. ‘Epluchures’ appears when Perec describes a time when German soldiers came to visit his school during the war:

A midi, le bruit se répandit qu’ils avaient seulement regardé les registres du collège et qu’ils étaient repartis en réquisitionnant le cochon que le cuisinier élevait (je me souviens du cochon: il était énorme; il se nourrissait exclusivement d’épluchures).⁸⁴

Shortly after this comment, when describing a photograph, Perec writes: ‘Sept individus – quatre appartenant à diverses espèces animales, trois à l’espèce humaine – apparaissent au premier plan.’⁸⁵ This slightly jarring use of ‘l’espèce humaine’, along with the seemingly gratuitous detail about the pig’s diet of peelings, suggests that the beginning of this passage is intended as an homage to Antelme. If Perec pays tribute to this aspect of Antelme’s memoir, it is because the narration of life on W is designed to encourage the reader to see the ways in which matters which appear to belong to the sphere of the biological, such as food, reproduction, bodily health and disability, can become political matters. The way W works shows the reader that political systems which seek to exercise control over the individual can mask this ambition through recourse to ideas about what is and is not natural. In the Athletes’ blindness to the forces directing life on W, the reader sees that propagating one’s own idea of what is natural or inevitable can be an important tool of oppression. Like Nabokov and Chamoiseau, Perec engages with ideas about the characteristics of human nature in order to show the reader that what at first appears to belong to the sphere of the natural is often influenced by culture and ideology, and that realising this is a necessary first step in questioning the legitimacy of unjust or oppressive power structures.

⁸⁴ W, 135.

⁸⁵ W, 135.

The Uncanny Effect of the Use of *Tabula Rasa* Figures

Because each of these authors chooses to engage with history through the depiction of ahistorical and apparently apolitical scenarios that can be mapped on to a range of times and places, his treatment of historical trauma takes on a certain uncanny quality. Freud defines the uncanny as ‘that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar’.⁸⁶ This tension between burying and surfacing, the familiar and the strange is also at play in these authors’ use of *tabula rasa* figures. The *tabula rasa* figures are strange to an extent, because they have their roots outside of contemporary reality and written history, yet the reader recognises within them elements of historical violence. The fact that the authors take run-of-the-mill scenes as a starting-point for this layering of prehistory and modern history further complicates this dynamic. By removing references to imperialism, totalitarianism and the Holocaust from the frameworks in which they are most usually found, and by transplanting them into blank spaces, such as the unmapped island of W, or apparently anodyne places, such as the cupboard under the stairs in Chamoiseau’s home, or a butcher’s shop, these authors contrive to make the reality of historical violence both distant and close, both familiar and strange.

This is especially the case in Perec’s portrayal of the island of W. As it is an abstraction and reduction of several different societies, it seems to call for its condensed meanings to be opened out and explored in a number of different ways. Just as Perec later shows how the letter W can be broken down into its various segments and then rearranged to form a whole

⁸⁶ Sigmund Freud, ‘The Uncanny’, in *The Uncanny*, ed. by Hugh Haughton, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003) pp. 123-161(p. 124) (first publ. in *Imago*, 5 (1919), 297-324.

range of symbols, including a Swastika and a Star of David, so the elements of W society can be separated and then re-arranged to form a picture of several different times and places. In the names of the competitions, the invocation of the Olympic ideal and the practice of infanticide, the reader will find an echo of Ancient Greek and Spartan societies. The references to the Athletes wearing triangles, and the piles of poor-quality soap and fillings, as well as Perec's quotation from David Rousset's memoir of his time in a Nazi concentration camp, evoke Germany during the Second World War. The ending's reference to Pinochet's dictatorship complicates this and encourages the reader to see W as a depiction of a more recent instance of political violence. Due to the way Perec purges parts of the narration of any concrete reference to totalitarian regimes, it is possible to read W as an allegory of the suffering experienced by the poor in contemporary capitalist societies. Claude Burgelin suggests looking at the text in this way when he writes that W is a study of a society where competition is highly valued, rather than merely an allegory of the Nazi camps.⁸⁷ Statements such as the following could arguably be designed to express Perec's disapproval of the gap between the powerful and the powerless in contemporary French society: '*Il y a deux mondes, celui des Maîtres et celui des esclaves. Les Maîtres sont inaccessibles et les esclaves s'entre-déchirent.*'⁸⁸ The allusions to the episode where the prisoner eats the vegetable peelings in Antelme's *L'Espèce humaine* provide support for such a reading, as Antelme spoke of the situation of the camp prisoner as an extreme version of the suffering and contempt experienced by those marginalised outside the camps for belonging to the wrong race or class.⁸⁹ Anne Roche observes that Perec's use of 'crouilles', a derogatory term for North African immigrants to France, to refer to those with the fewest rights on W, introduces

⁸⁷ Burgelin, pp. 154-159.

⁸⁸ W, 216, italics in original.

⁸⁹ Antelme, p. 228-229.

a reference to the Arab world into the text.⁹⁰ Silverman notes that the way the narrator of the fictional part says he will write in the style of Ishmael brings in a further reference to the Arab world.⁹¹ It is possible, then, that the portrayal of the sporting society is partly designed as a critique of the elements of racist exclusion within the France of the 1970s.

Perc brings different societies into relation with each other through his accumulation of words from different historical and social contexts. He also uses single words that concentrate allusions to different systems of thought, and so draws out connections between ideologies the reader is likely to see as quite separate. An example of this is his use of ‘sélection’ in the following passage:

*A peu près au centre du quadrilatère formé par les quatre villages, se trouve le Stade central, beaucoup plus imposant, où ont lieu les Jeux, c'est-à-dire les compétitions opposant des représentants de tous les villages, et ce que l'on nomme des « épreuves de sélection », ou plus brièvement « sélection », c'est-à-dire des rencontres opposant les villages non connexes.*⁹²

This use of ‘sélection’ creates an echo with the process whereby prisoners of the Nazi concentration camps would be, on arrival, separated into two groups; one group would do forced labour, while the other group would be gassed immediately. By using this word for a certain kind of sporting event, Perc complicates its resonances. In the context of a competition involving physical fitness, ‘selection’ also has connotations of Darwinian natural selection. This one word thus criss-crosses the systems of thought behind sporting events, the concentration camps, and evolutionary biology.

⁹⁰ ‘Perc et le monde arabe’, in *Georges Perc et l'histoire: Actes du colloque international de l'Institut de littérature comparée, Université de Copenhague du 30 avril au 1^{er} mai 1988*, ed. by Steen Bille Jørgensen and Carsten Sestoft (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum, 2000), pp.159-169 (p. 159).

⁹¹ Silverman, p. 109.

⁹² W, 100, italics in original.

It is the partially ahistorical character of *W* that allows it to act as a condensation of or a distorting mirror to a number of different ideologies and societies. Susan Stewart has this to say about the capacity of miniature portraits to represent a range of times and places:

The miniature offers a world clearly limited in space but frozen and thereby both particularized and generalized in time – particularized in that the miniature concentrates upon the single instance and not upon the abstract rule, but generalized in that that instance comes to transcend, to stand for, a spectrum of other instances.⁹³

The way ‘a spectrum of other instances’ are present in Pécerc’s portrayal of *W* makes it an example of what Max Silverman has referred to as palimpsestic memory, where one historical event is remembered through engagement with multiple other times and places.⁹⁴

We also find this palimpsestic approach to the relationship between separate times and places in Nabokov’s engagement with historical forces. An example of this is Nabokov’s description of the Grunewald near Berlin, where he and his wife would sometimes take his son. He talks about the broken furniture people dump in the forest, and the incongruity of its presence. He focuses on the twisting springs of an iron bedstead, a dressmaker’s dummy under a hawthorn bush and the drunken swaying of an upright mirror.⁹⁵ He then goes on to say that this rubbish acted as ‘a fragmentary vision of the mess to come, a prophetic bad dream of destructive explosions, something like the pile of dead heads glimpsed by the seer Cagliostro in the ha-ha of a royal garden’.⁹⁶ The presence of objects that belong indoors in the forest evokes the displacement and disorder of history. These ordinary objects acquire dark connotations when used as anticipatory signs of the coming war. The iron springs of the bedstead could suggest barbed wire or prison railings, while the black dressmaker’s dummy evokes the rigidity of human corpses. Silverman notes that because the Nazi project involved turning human beings into everyday objects, literally in the case of the use of human ashes in fertilizer or soap, as

⁹³ Stewart, p. 48.

⁹⁴ Silverman, p. 3.

⁹⁵ *SM*, 237.

⁹⁶ *SM*, 238.

well as on a philosophical level in the denial of the individual's autonomy, '[t]he everyday has become a façade hiding the most unimaginable of crimes.'⁹⁷ Nabokov's use of imagery suggests the potential of ordinary object to take on the connotations of unimaginable crimes, as does Perec's invocation of the Nazi camps through reference to piles of wedding rings, glasses, clothes and dusty filing card boxes.⁹⁸ Perec does not explicitly relate these objects to the Nazi camps, referring to them instead as 'les vestiges souterrains d'un monde qu'il croira avoir oublié', when he evokes the remnants of W to be discovered by some future visitor. Nabokov is no more specific, referring simply to 'the mess to come' and 'destructive explosions'.⁹⁹ Because neither of the authors names the Nazi camps, they lead the reader to recognise her own ability to see in these objects signs of historical catastrophe.

This episode forges links between different historical epochs, but it is also connected with an earlier moment in Nabokov's literary production. In *Дар*, Nabokov's final Russian novel, the Grunewald is the place where the protagonist has a kind of epiphany which seems to be initiated by his exposure to the sun's rays.¹⁰⁰ This is an overwhelmingly positive episode in the novel, but when Nabokov returns to the idea of sunbathing in his autobiography, it is portrayed in a much more negative light. A direct link is established between the episode in the autobiography and that in the Russian novel by the appearance of a 'рваный матрац со сломанными ржавыми пружинами'.¹⁰¹ Whereas the bedstead in *Speak, Memory* is part of a disdainful description of 'refuse' and 'rubbish', in *Дар*, after referring to the mattress and other abandoned rubbish, Nabokov exhorts the reader, 'не брезгуй ими'.¹⁰² In *Дар*, Nabokov

⁹⁷ Silverman, p. 45.

⁹⁸ *W*, 218.

⁹⁹ *W*, 218.

¹⁰⁰ Vladimir Nabokov, *Дар* (St Petersburg: Simpozium, 2000), pp. 506-510.

¹⁰¹ *Дар*, p. 506, 'torn mattress with broken rusty springs'.

¹⁰² *Дар*, p. 506, 'don't be squeamish about them'.

refers to his protagonist's attitude towards the nudity of other people in the Grunewald with the light-hearted comment, 'Всматриваться он избегал, боясь перехода от Пана к Симплициссимусу.'¹⁰³ In *Speak, Memory*, by contrast, the sunbathers' nudity becomes associated with dirt, disease and hints of sexual aggression.¹⁰⁴ The transition from a positive to a negative portrayal of the Grunewald, and in particular the precise changes made to the description of the broken bedstead and the other sunbathers supports Anna Brodsky's argument that Nabokov's post-war work takes a much more conflicted approach towards the relationship between evil and the pleasures of everyday life, and provides evidence for the idea that Nabokov's negative portrayal of the Grunewald in *Speak, Memory* is designed to suggest the war-time destruction, which had yet to occur when *Дар* was being written.¹⁰⁵ As well as connecting everyday pleasures with anticipatory signs of historical catastrophe, Nabokov links art and violence in his description of Yalta, where his family spent some time after fleeing St Petersburg. He writes:

Every other day, on the white Yalta pier (where, as you remember, the lady of Chekhov's 'Lady with the Lapdog' lost her lorgnette among the vacational crowd) perfectly harmless people had weights attached to their feet and then were shot by tough Bolshevik sailors imported from Sebastopol for the purpose.¹⁰⁶

Earlier Nabokov has written of the lorgnette held by Louise Pointdexter, the girl in *The Headless Horseman* who intrigues him, and of the way her lorgnette was passed to Emma Bovary and then to Anna Karenina before being lost by the lady in Chekhov's story.¹⁰⁷ In this way, the lorgnette is associated with three of the authors Nabokov most esteemed, as well as with literary works likely to be well-known to the reader. It is perhaps intended to denote

¹⁰³ *Дар*, p. 510, 'He avoided looking too closely, fearing a transition from Pan to Simplicissimus.' *Simplicissimus* was a German satirical journal, published between 1896 and 1967.

¹⁰⁴ *SM*, 238.

¹⁰⁵ Brodsky, p. 167.

¹⁰⁶ *SM*, 191.

¹⁰⁷ *SM*, 157.

Nabokov's admiration for the visual descriptions and the importance of detail in the works of Flaubert, Tolstoy and Chekhov. Because of its association with these writers, the image Nabokov creates of it possibly mingling with the corpses is disturbing. This reference to the bodies in the sea is uncanny, because the narrative shines a light on what would otherwise have remained hidden, and brings the scene of violence into relationship with a detail from Chekhov's story which would otherwise seem to have nothing to do with it.

The uncanny is present in the way Nabokov brings the hidden graveyard under the sea to light, but also in the way he speaks about aspects of the remote past becoming part of the present. We see this in the following quotation, where Nabokov addresses his wife and speaks about protecting his young son from dangers in the outside world:

You and I did our best to encompass with vigilant tenderness the trustful tenderness of our child but were inevitably confronted by the fact that the filth left by hoodlums in a sandbox on a playground was the least serious of possible offenses, and that the horrors which former generations had mentally dismissed as anachronisms or things occurring only in remote khanates and mandarinates, were all around us.¹⁰⁸

Both spatial and temporal distance are evoked by 'remote khanates and mandarinates', and a sense of powerlessness is created by the image of the worst elements of the remote past swarming around the young family in 1930s Europe. In this passage, Paris joins Berlin, Yalta and St Petersburg on the list of places associated with atrocity in the autobiography. The way these references to violence occur in a variety of different scenes suggests the rootless character of these 'horrors' which seem to arise in a range of places and circumstances. This conveys the idea that Nabokov does not see any one episode of racial or political violence as unique; he draws attention to the mirroring and resemblances between violence occurring in different times and places. This emerges most explicitly when he writes about the political arguments he would have with other students in Cambridge. Left-leaning students would

¹⁰⁸ *SM*, 239.

refuse to believe Nabokov when he said that Lenin's regime was much more repressive than the tsarist regime which preceded it, while right-leaning students would be all too eager to condemn Lenin, out of opposition to his political stance, rather than disapproval of his use of terror and development of the police state. In each case, the students were blind to the human suffering inflicted by the regime.¹⁰⁹ In this context, Nabokov places the following sentence, where he contrasts the students' willingness to make an exception for Lenin's use of terror and violence with his own refusal to make distinctions between different manifestations of state-sponsored or racial violence:

Indeed, I pride myself with having discerned even then the symptoms of what is so clear today, when a kind of family circle has gradually been formed, linking representatives of all nations, jolly empire-builders in their jungle clearings, French policemen, the unmentionable German product, the good old churchgoing Russian or Polish *pogromshchik*, the lean American lyncher, the man with the bad teeth who squirts antimorality stories in the bar or the lavatory, and, at another point of the same subhuman circle, those ruthless, paste-faced automatons in opulent John Held trousers whom – or shall I say which? – the Soviet State began to export around 1945...¹¹⁰

In Nabokov's drawing out of connections between different instances of state-sponsored or racial violence, he brings to light resemblances which remain hidden in more conventional historical discourse. He also hints at the way a focus on peculiarity can lead to a more permissive attitude towards cruelty. It is the left-leaning students' perception of Lenin's regime as novel or unique which leads them to make a moral exception for the regime's violence, or to avoid investigating it fully. This misunderstanding recurs when, shortly after the Nabokovs' flight from Russia, Nabokov's father meets H.G. Wells, 'whom it proved impossible to convince that Bolshevism was but an especially brutal and thorough form of barbaric oppression – in itself as old as the desert sands – and not at all the attractively new revolutionary experiment that many foreign observers took it to be'.¹¹¹ In Nabokov's ironic

¹⁰⁹ *SM*, 204-206.

¹¹⁰ *SM*, 206.

¹¹¹ *SM*, 199.

use of positive epithets for some of the perpetrators of violence in the above passage - 'jolly', 'good old churchgoing' and 'lean' – and the way these contrast with the nouns 'empire-builders', 'pogromshchik' and 'lyncher', he suggests the essential irrelevance of the surrounding circumstances to the fact of the act of murder. The palimpsestic approach to memory and its uncanny effects each serve the aim of complicating any distance the reader feels from the historical events Nabokov engages with. The connection established between the Chekhov story, the holiday crowd and the killings in Yalta by Bolshevik sailors, the linking of the sandbox in Paris with Nabokov's worry over his son in Hitler's Germany and war-time Paris, and the movement from the workings of the Soviet state to the home-grown (from an American reader's point of view) crime of lynching all work to join a historical episode likely to be distant from the reader to a scene or historical fact more likely to be familiar to him or her. Nabokov's movements between distant and familiar histories work against any tendency by the reader to disengage with his evocation of historical violence, as they lead the reader to perceive familiar scenes through an estranging filter. The effort of following the author's somewhat disconcerting moves between different histories makes it more likely the reader will pay close attention to the text at these points.

Like Nabokov and Perec, Chamoiseau layers different historical periods in such a way as to bring to the fore surprising connections between them. References to a number of separate historical periods are blended in passages such as the following, where he describes playing with his friends near a building site:

La petite troupe traversa le labyrinthe malfaisant du chantier et atteignit la confusion terreuse de ses frontières. Plus loin, derrière les pyramides de planches à coffrage et les déchets pétrifiés du béton, s'ouvrait la sylve originelle, infestée de serpents, de zombis et d'une série de monstres tombés des films d'Hercule.¹¹²

¹¹² *A Bout*, 248.

The mention of ‘pyramides’ recalls Ancient Egypt, while the ‘sylve originelle’ refers back to prehistoric time. These distant times are connected to the legends of Ancient Greece, via twentieth-century commercial entertainment, through the reference to the Hercules films.

Monsters from these films exist side-by-side with the zombie, which has ties to African and Antillean culture, and the snake.¹¹³ Though not quite as explicit as the other historical markers, the ‘labyrinthe’ could be a further reference to Greek mythology, while the ‘déchets pétrifiés du béton’ suggest a kind of compressed, industrial version of geological time. The snakes make present the ecological reality of Martinique, and perhaps remind the reader of the power gained by the underdog Gros-Lombric, when the snake he brings to school sends pupils and teachers into a panic. Because of the snakes’ presence in a place of origin, they perhaps also suggest a transposition of the Genesis story into Martinique, where it is fused with references to other kinds of mythologies, foreign and local, recent and ancient. Through this dense layering of historical and cultural references, Chamoiseau is drawing attention to the way in which any one historical period is always perceived through the lens of others. Just as the adult author notes at the beginning of the trilogy that he occasionally catches a glimpse of the wooden building he grew up in in the reflection of a car’s windscreen, here he is making the reader aware that an approach to any one moment of the past will always be shaped by detours through other parts of the past and present.

However, it is not merely Chamoiseau’s memory of his childhood that proceeds through other times and places. Rather, he portrays his lived experience of it as tied simultaneously to the local and the global. The child’s life is influenced both by a significant (though

¹¹³ Lucy Swanson, ‘Digging Up the (Living) Dead: The Roots of *Antillanité* and *Créolité*’, in *Antillanité, créolité, littérature-monde*, ed. by Isabelle Constant, Kahiuidi C. Mabana and Philip Nanton (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), pp. 137-147.

weakening) link to local Creole folk culture and by exposure to elements of the international world of commerce and entertainment. We see this in the way he seeks knowledge about girls through consulting his sister's Italian fotonovelas, watching films made for an international audience in the cinema, and consulting Gros-Lombric on the precise meaning of various Creole words for contact with the opposite sex.¹¹⁴ Another instance of this co-existence is when the razor-blade which Chamoiseau connects with 'l'âge de l'outil' is named as a Gillette blade, thus tying the child's early play both with prehistoric time and with the global flow of French goods.¹¹⁵ This inter-weaving of the local and the global situates everyday life in Martinique as tied to global movements of people, goods and history.

These global movements of people and goods do not take place within a vacuum but are, of course, inter-woven with histories of violence and subjugation. Chamoiseau portrays the child's life as open to the echoes of these histories. This fits in with his concept that contemporary Martinican society has been born out of the 'crime fondateur' of genocide, colonisation and slavery, and that it is living with the as yet unprocessed effects of these traumas.¹¹⁶ His attitude towards other children sometimes seems to show signs of these unprocessed traumas. We see this when he describes his attitude to little girls:

au fond de lui, il refusait de les nommer. Leur attribuer un nom les rapprochait encore de l'humanité, et compliquerait la chose s'il y avait un jour nécessité de les exterminer toutes... Il est bon que l'ennemi n'ait pas de nom... Il est déjà difficile de lui concéder un visage ou d'acceptables manières. L'indistinction lui convient mieux... Longtemps, il s'accrocha au terme générique de 'petite-fille' avec le sentiment qu'en employant cet obstiné vocable, il pourrait mieux maîtriser le phénomène ou, le cas échéant, trancher le nœud gordien...¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ *A Bout*, 189; 192; 196.

¹¹⁵ *Antan*, 34.

¹¹⁶ *De la mémoire obscure à la mémoire consciente*, p. 15.

¹¹⁷ *A Bout*, 141.

Here, the child's reference to mass killing along with his refusal to give a name to the little girls calls up the history of the Holocaust and other genocides. This comment also recalls an episode in *Chemin-d'école* where the schoolteacher reproaches the children for not recognizing their names when he calls the register, or for pronouncing 'Présent' with a strong local accent, and tells them that having a name is a privilege for which they should be grateful.¹¹⁸ In this episode the autobiography establishes an individual's attitude to his or her name as a place where he or she first comes into contact with the French state and encounters traces of historical trauma.¹¹⁹ Because of the connection set up between Martinique's history of slavery and the children's knowledge and ownership of the public version of their names, the passage above is linked both to genocide and to slavery. As this refusal to name and willingness to countenance the possibility of killing is linked to the frustration arising from his quest to 'maîtriser le phénomène' of femininity, this episode also evokes the aggression towards women found in patriarchal societies. The emphasis on mastery echoes that found in Chamoiseau's colonial explorations in the cupboard under the stairs. In this brief passage, then, Chamoiseau calls up echoes of colonialism, patriarchy, slavery and genocide.

Disturbingly, the child is the one who is speaking of other children in dehumanising terms. Episodes such as these make clear that the child's life is not insulated from the forces of oppression and violence. By giving the child thoughts that the reader might be more likely to associate with adults implicated in an oppressive political system, Chamoiseau, like Nabokov and Perec, places the roots of mass violence in a surprising place. The school playground, like the Berlin forest in Nabokov's work or the sporting stadium in Perec's, becomes a place where both signs of past and possible future instances of mass violence are found.

¹¹⁸ *Chemin*, 51-55.

¹¹⁹ *Recovering Memory*, pp. 67-68.

By criss-crossing the familiar and the strange, the everyday world of childhood and adolescence and the killing-fields of history, these authors are likely to elicit unease in the reader. The disturbing nature of these authors' engagement with violent history contests any tendency to place the roots or after-effects of mass violence in a place or time removed from the present. Instead, these authors bind together the distant and the near, so that even if the reader chooses to avoid more overt references to violent historical episodes, she will encounter their implicit presence in evocations of scenes which at first glance appear to lie beyond the bounds of public history. These texts portray the private, everyday world of childhood as an echo-chamber where traces of multiple historical traumas are found. As such they are part of the tradition of multidirectional or palimpsestic memory identified by Rothberg and Silverman.

The Ambivalent Nature of Play

The unease this linking of childhood and catastrophe is likely to elicit is heightened by its location within places of recreation, such as the park, the stadium and the playground mentioned above. This association between places dedicated to play and the traces of mass violence complicates the opposition these authors make between utilitarian and nonutilitarian modes of engaging with the world. In their engagement with narratives of human origin and human nature, each author rejects the idea that competitive strife, work, or the search to dominate the surrounding world lead to beneficial change. A natural alternative to these modes of engagement with the world would seem to be non-utilitarian, ludic kinds of relationships. Indeed, when Nabokov states that 'The world was made on Sunday' or when he marvels at the miracle of 'smooth round objects conquering space by tumbling over themselves, instead of lifting heavy limbs to progress,' he associates leisure and play with

creativity. Equally, Chamoiseau makes the transition from violence to respect when he begins to enjoy interacting with the old rat merely for the pleasure of it, rather than as part of a quest for domination. Perec's exposure of the oppressive nature of W's social structures is based around the idea that, far from seeking to cultivate physical prowess for its own sake, the ethos of W is utilitarian. In contrast to this, Perec's account of the times he is able to play with his cousin Henri is one of the few episodes in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* where the child has a relationship not defined by disappointment or injustice, although this positive relationship will not last.¹²⁰ Reading adventure stories for pleasure and acting them out seems to give the child a way of negotiating the absences and instability of his life.¹²¹ In this sense, then, ludic relationships are proposed as salutary alternatives to strife. However, play, like childhood and the everyday, is shown to have an ambivalent value. Although it can foster creativity and respect, its separation from the forces which lead to dehumanisation and violence is never complete. These authors' exploration of the ambivalent nature of play reinforces the uncanny effects of their inter-weaving of historical catastrophe with childhood.

This is how Johannes Huizinga defines play:

It is an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space, in a visible order, according to rules freely accepted, and outside the sphere of necessity or material utility. The play-mood is one of rapture and enthusiasm, and is sacred or festive in accordance with the occasion. A feeling of exaltation and tension accompanies the action, mirth and relaxation follow.¹²²

Every positive associated with play can quickly become a negative. Its removal from the everyday world of work and care can lead participants into a dangerous disconnection from reality. The 'rapture and enthusiasm' of play can transform into a kind of madness, while the transition from tension to relaxation can become an obsessive drive which overrides other

¹²⁰ W, 194-195.

¹²¹ W, 191.

¹²² *Homo Ludens* (London: Paladin, 1970), p. 154.

concerns. The freedom of play can descend into the destruction of even necessary constraints. Conversely, the rules and delimitations necessary to create the possibility of play can become suffocating rather than stimulating. The way play requires common assent to a certain set of constraints can lead to a demand for total submission of individual will. These authors show that the line between creative play and violent strife is apt to shift very quickly. The layering of everyday scenes with moments of historical trauma and the connection established between play and violence both serve the same purpose: they draw the reader's attention to the potential of apparently benign activities to take on a menacing character. Indeed, because the nature of play is to call up contexts which are not immediately perceptible, descriptions of play and engagements in textual play are prime sites of the return of, or appearance of traces of, totalitarian or colonial violence.¹²³

Although each of these authors explores the negative potential of play in several different ways, many of which overlap, for the sake of clarity and to avoid repetition, this piece will draw out one particular aspect of each author's portrayal of the problematic nature of play. It will look at the ways in which Perec focuses on the necessity of maintaining a separation between the space of play and the ordinary world, and of the problems that can arise from that necessity. It will examine the portrayal of the absorbing quality of play in Nabokov's work, and the ways in which its enrapturing power can lead an individual to neglect his duty towards others, or even distort his perception of reality. Chamoiseau draws out the ambivalence of the social bonds created through play, and the ways they can work to exclude and oppress as well as bind people into fruitful relationships. These authors' explorations of the nature of children's play, like their invocation of narratives of human origin, and their layering of different historical periods, open out the arena of memory so that, instead of

¹²³ Stewart, p. 20.

reinforcing a certain cultural, national or ethnic identity, it becomes a place of exploration of the fundamental nature of human life.

As Huizinga notes, play is ‘an activity which proceeds within certain limits of time and space [...] outside the sphere of necessity or material utility’.¹²⁴ The creation of a place where play can take place thus depends on the creation and maintenance of boundaries. In *W ou le souvenir d’enfance*, Perec explores the problematic nature of the creation and maintenance of such boundaries. The difficulty in maintaining the separation between play and work, freedom and oppression, enjoyment and violence, is shown through a depiction of the failure of the utopian project of W. W is intended as a space separate from the rest of the world, where people can devote themselves to sport, free from the pragmatic considerations that hamper such devotion in the outside world. By the end of the narration, however, the reader can see that life on W replicates the very aspects of the ‘old world’ from which its founders fled. Perec’s portrayal of the ways in which the sphere of war and politics overlaps with that of child’s play further calls into doubt the idea that a firm boundary can be maintained between the serious and the ludic. His exploration of the implications of the way spaces devoted to play exclude people who cannot take part in the game encourages the reader to question whether the creation of a separate space for play is desirable, even if it is possible.

The origin-story of W calls up the paradoxical tensions at work in the creation of a space of play. There is some doubt about how exactly the society on W began, but the narrator seems certain that it is named after a man called Wilson. Various stories circulate about who Wilson was and why he founded the island society. According to some, he was a lighthouse keeper responsible for a catastrophe, while others say he was the leader of a group of convicts who

¹²⁴ Huizinga, p. 154.

revolted during the journey to Australia.¹²⁵ Another version says he was ‘un Nemo dégoûté du monde et rêvant de bâtir une cité idéale.’¹²⁶ This is the final version of the story:

Une quatrième variation, assez proche de la précédente, mais significativement différente, fait de Wilson un champion (d’autres disent un entraîneur) qui, exalté par l’entreprise olympique, mais désespéré par les difficultés que rencontrait alors Pierre de Coubertin et persuadé que l’idéal olympique ne pourrait qu’être bafoué, sali, détourné au profit de marchandages sordides, soumis aux pires compromissions par ceux-là mêmes qui prétendraient le servir, résolu de tout mettre en œuvre pour fonder, à l’abri des querelles chauvines et des manipulations idéologiques, une nouvelle Olympie.¹²⁷

Each version of the origin story engages with another facet of the separation between the space of play and the rest of the world. In the first version, the lighthouse-keeper fails to do his work as he should and responds to this by making a virtue out of separation from the world and setting up his own society, ostensibly devoted to play, not work. In the group of convicts who rebel, we see how separation from the ordinary world can act as a punishment as well as an escape. In the final version, separation from the world allows pursuit of an ideal. The champion or trainer seeks a space free from ‘manipulations idéologiques’ and ‘marchandages sordides’. For the second-time reader of the W narrative, this is heavily ironic. In the way the very features the athlete or trainer Wilson wished to avoid recur in the W society described by the narrator, we see the difficulty of creating a space which operates differently to the ordinary world. This occurs with the other stories too. The indifference to human life that led the lighthouse-keeper to neglect his duty and cause a catastrophe is also part of W. The convicts who fled from imprisonment imposed by the force of law find themselves in a society where the combination of strict rules and utter lawlessness abolishes human freedom.

¹²⁵ W, 91.

¹²⁶ W, 91.

¹²⁷ W, 91.

This dynamic of separation dissolving into connection is associated with island spaces in general, as Maeve McCusker and Anthony Soares note when they write, ‘the very seas that would appear to act as guarantors of separateness have always been conduits, facilitating movement and exchange between peoples and cultures.’¹²⁸ The reader sees that the sea quite literally begins to undo W’s separation at the beginning of the autobiography, where sea winds are described as blowing in sand from the coastline over the wreckage of the W stadium.¹²⁹ The sea also brings the adult Gaspard Winckler, who carries the story of W back to Europe where its founder(s) once lived. The island’s adoption of the Olympic motto, the use of the names of real European sportsmen for the Athletes, and the use of nicknames which make reference to regions of Germany all allow the reader to see that the project of creating a society fundamentally different to European societies has been a failure.

Arguably, the greatest failure of the W project is the way in which the human body is treated on W. It was set up so that the ‘idéal Olympique’ could be pursued in peace. This ideal involves cultivating the healthy body and athletic prowess for its own sake, and not for any utilitarian purpose. By cultivating the body for its own sake, and not for the sake of work or survival, the Athletes, in theory, demonstrate their freedom from ‘marchandages sordides’. The tension between this ideal and how life actually works on W is evoked by the ambivalent language used to describe it:

*...la vie, ici, est faite pour la plus grande gloire du Corps. Et l’on verra plus tard comment cette vocation athlétique détermine la vie de la Cité, comment le Sport gouverne W, comment il a façonné au plus profond les relations sociales et les aspirations individuelles.*¹³⁰

¹²⁸ *Islanded Identities*, p. xii.

¹²⁹ W, 9-10.

¹³⁰ W, 92, italics in original.

The accumulation of verbs of control here (*'détermine'*, *'gouverne'*, and *'a façonné'*) suggests a lack of freedom, rather than the expression of freedom. In particular, the fact that *'aspirations individuelles'* becomes the object of a verb of control suggests that individual freedom is restricted on W. It is striking, too, that *'Corps'* and *'Cité'* are capitalised, while *'vie'* is not. This is one of the early signs of the way human life is treated with less respect than W's quest to glorify the body. The placing of value on an idealised body which is young, male and healthy marginalises female bodies, less athletic bodies and the bodies of the elderly and disabled, as explored previously. By directing all life towards the glorification of a reified body, the system in fact works to destroy bodies that fall outside the ideal. The most striking instance of the reification of the body occurs in the description of the *Atlantiades*, where the narrator refers to rape as *'la Victoire'* and says that one of the advantages of this event is that *'la récompense – une femme – accompagne immédiatement la Victoire'*.¹³¹ Here, the human body becomes a transferable, consumable sign of victory, an object of use rather than a free subject.

Playing, and playing a game, depend not just on a space that is delineated clearly and separated from the normal world, but also on a clear separation between those who are part of the game and those who are not. Athletes who do not have the idealised body-type are prevented from competing in the normal competitions, and their inability to do so is made a spectacle of through their inclusion in the pentathlons and decathlons, which are put on as mock competitions.¹³² We can see that the question of how inclusion and exclusion operate in terms of games is important to Perec because of a link that he creates between the end of the chapter where the humiliation of disabled Athletes is described, and an incident in the next

¹³¹ W, 178, italics in original.

¹³² W, 116.

chapter. At the end of the chapter on the pentathlons and decathlons, Perec writes that these events, as well as disabled Athletes, would include, for example, ‘*un Athlète en exercice évincé à jamais de la compétition à la suite, par exemple, d’un accident, s’il est encore trop jeune pour jouir des droits des vétérans et trop manifestement inapte à deviner entraîneur.*’¹³³ In the next chapter he speaks about living near his adoptive family and about going to play with his cousin when his aunt Esther visited his aunt Berthe. Perec describes the incident in this way:

Je trouvai Henri et l’un de ses lointains cousins, nommé Robert (sa tante était la femme du cousin de son grand-père maternel), assis à même le sol, en train de jouer avec acharnement à la bataille navale mouvante (variante assez compliquée de la bataille navale dans laquelle, on l’a deviné, les vaisseaux ont le droit de se déplacer au cours de la partie : j’aurai l’occasion de reparler de ce jeu) ; ils refusèrent d’emblée de m’associer à leur partie, affirmant que j’étais trop petit pour en comprendre le mécanisme, ce qui m’humilia beaucoup.¹³⁴

Perec’s ‘trop petit pour en comprendre le mécanisme’ echoes the ‘*trop jeune pour jouir des droits des vétérans*’ which appears in the closing sentence of the previous chapter.¹³⁵ The link between the two chapters is tightened by the previous chapter’s mention of ‘rachitique’ as one of the qualities which excludes an Athlete from normal competitions.¹³⁶ Elsewhere Perec says he suffered from rickets during the war.¹³⁷ The child Gaspard Winckler, as well as being deaf and mute, is also referred to as ‘un garçon malingre et rachitique’.¹³⁸ He is associated with the concept of exclusion from a group bringing death or grave danger, because it is possible his mother and the other adults on board the *Sylvandre* decided to abandon him.¹³⁹ The recurrence of the word ‘rachitique’ links the Athletes, the child Gaspard Winckler and

¹³³ W, 116, italics in original.

¹³⁴ W, 117-118.

¹³⁵ W, 116, italics in original.

¹³⁶ W, 116.

¹³⁷ W, 107.

¹³⁸ W, 36.

¹³⁹ W, 83.

Perec. By layering the Athletes' exclusion from certain athletic events with Perec being left out of a family game and the possibility of the child Gaspard Winckler being abandoned at sea, Perec draws attention to the potentially fatal consequences of not meeting the requirements to be included within a certain game or group. The ominous nature of the way games require firm boundaries between players and those outside the game is signalled in a comment embedded within the description of the selection process for the mock competitions:

*Un novice faiseur de grimaces, ou affligé de tics, ou légèrement handicapé, s'il est par exemple rachitique, ou s'il boite, ou s'il traîne un peu la patte, ou s'il présente quelque tendance à l'obésité, ou s'il est au contraire d'une maigreur extrême, ou s'il est atteint d'un fort strabisme risquera fort – mais l'on court souvent des risques encore plus grands que d'être livré aux facéties d'un public hilare – d'être affecté à l'équipe du pentathlon ou du décathlon.*¹⁴⁰

The remark placed between dashes in this quotation joins laughter and an implicit reference to violence. This association of light-heartedness with questions of life and death is sustained in the sentence which immediately follows the passage where Perec remembers being left out of the game of 'bataille navale mouvante':

Du monde extérieur, je ne savais rien, sinon qu'il y avait la guerre et, à cause de la guerre, des réfugiés: un de ces réfugiés s'appelait Normand et il habitait une chambre chez un monsieur qui s'appelait Breton. C'est la première plaisanterie dont je me souviens.¹⁴¹

This develops the theme of inclusion within a group, as the joke depends on the fact that 'Normand' can mark an individual or group identity, depending on the context. The mention of the 'monsieur qui s'appelait Breton' adds weight to this episode, because Perec recalls elsewhere that he might have been told that he was Breton so that he would not tell people he was the son of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe.¹⁴² Thus his position was in a way analogous to that of the man in the joke. In both cases a Breton identity is referred to, not as a

¹⁴⁰ W, 116, italics in original.

¹⁴¹ W, 118.

¹⁴² W, 51.

way of expressing a fact, but rather as a way of pointing away from, or towards, another identity. The connection established between the Athletes' exclusion from certain events, the child's exclusion from a game with people who both are and are not part of his family, the possible abandonment of the child Gaspard Winckler by his family, and the idea of displaying a false family and regional identity in order to avoid imprisonment draws attention to the seriousness of inclusion and exclusion within certain groups. Here, Perec links his first experience of humour with the questions of origin and masked identities which played such a fateful role in his family's history. This association between apparently gratuitous activities, such as telling jokes or playing board-games, and cataclysmic historical events, is sustained throughout the autobiography and contributes to the undermining of the idea that firm boundaries can be maintained between play and serious concerns.

One such association between children's play and vast historical events occurs when Perec and Henri play a game where they use flags to mark the movement of the Allied armies across Europe.¹⁴³ In this way, their play becomes associated with war, death and survival. The weightiness of Perec's games with Henri is echoed by the way the children and adolescents on W play at taking part in the more sinister aspects of adult life on W. This is what the narrator of W writes about the children's games:

*Ils savent que ce sont les signes de fêtes grandioses auxquelles ils seront admis un jour. Ils les miment parfois en de grandes farandoles joyeuses, ou bien, la nuit, brandissant des torches embrasées, ils se livrent à des cavalcades effrénées, et, hors d'haleine, ivres de joie, tombent pêle-mêle les uns sur les autres.*¹⁴⁴

The signs which the children see appear to be those of a festival, even though the reader knows by now that the degree to which a victory is feted is proportional to the cruelty of the

¹⁴³ W, 201-202.

¹⁴⁴ W, 187.

punishment inflicted on the loser.¹⁴⁵ The way the hilarity of the children's play calls up images of the Nuremberg rallies (*'torches embrasées'*), the desperation of the half-starved W Athletes, who need to win a race to eat a full meal (*'cavalcades effrénées'*), and even the piles of bodies photographed in the camps after the Holocaust (*'pêle-mêles les uns sur les autres'*), lends this portrayal of youthful playfulness connotations of catastrophe.

The potentially sinister nature of the W children's play is echoed when, at the end of the autobiography, Perec draws attention to the porous boundaries between a child's imagination and past and future barbarity:

J'ai oublié les raisons qui, à douze ans, m'ont fait choisir la Terre de Feu pour y installer W: les fascistes de Pinochet se sont chargés de donner à mon fantasme une ultime résonance: plusieurs îlots de la Terre de Feu sont aujourd'hui des camps de déportation.¹⁴⁶

Here the child's inventions and drawings look back towards the Second World War but also forward towards Pinochet's Chile. This troubles the divisions between past and present, the imagined and the real, the juvenile and the adult, the ludic and the fatal. By blurring these lines, Perec situates the origins of oppressive violence and dehumanising attitudes toward others within the self, the everyday and the realm of art.

This situation of the roots of violence and dehumanising attitudes within the self also occurs in Nabokov's work. As noted previously, Nabokov rejects work as a means of beneficial change and sets up play as an alternative. Play initially seems to carry a positive value. On a closer reading, however, it appears more troubling. Whereas Perec complicates the concept of play by drawing attention to the problematic or damaging nature of the boundaries between playful and serious activities, Nabokov draws the reader's attention to the ways in which an

¹⁴⁵ W, 145.

¹⁴⁶ W, 220.

individual's absorption in play can blinker him or her. The blindness induced by an undue absorption in play has two kinds of negative consequences. The first is that it can make the individual unobservant of or indifferent to the suffering of others. Secondly it can lead him to inhabit a solipsistic universe and to make choices based on a false perception of the world. Like Percec, Nabokov draws a firm association between cruelty and the sphere of recreation, suggesting that the pleasant nature of recreational activities makes perpetrators and spectators of cruelty unconscious of the implications of their actions.

He makes this point in relation to other people, but also in relation to himself. He writes of how his love of lepidoptery had a certain obsessive quality: 'Its gratification admitted of no compromise or exception.'¹⁴⁷ He goes on to give an example of this inflexibility in action. He remembers how a schoolmate of his who had just lost a parent, and whose family was in financial difficulty, walked and cycled a long distance to spend a few days at the Nabokov country estate. Eager that the visit should not interrupt his morning of butterfly-hunting, Nabokov slipped out early leaving his friend to wonder where he had gone. Strikingly, the way Nabokov recounts the incident makes clear that he was aware at the time that this was unkind, but his fascination with lepidoptery prevented him from acting on that awareness. He writes:

On the morning following his arrival, I did everything I could to get out of the house for my morning hike without his knowing where I had gone. Breakfastless, with hysterical haste, I gathered net, pill boxes, killing jar, and escaped through the window. Once in the forest, I was safe; but still I walked on, my calves quaking, my eyes full of scalding tears, the whole of me twitching with shame and self-disgust, as I visualized my poor friend, with his long pale face and black tie, moping in the hot garden – patting the panting dogs for want of something better to do, and trying hard to justify my absence to himself.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁷ *SM*, 96.

¹⁴⁸ *SM*, 96.

In Nabokov's portrayal of the mixture of shame at his unkindness and relief at having successfully slipped away, there is an echo of Humbert Humbert's self-aware narration of a similar mixture of shame and anticipation after the first time he sleeps with Dolores Haze.¹⁴⁹ Of course, Humbert Humbert's transgression is much worse, and much more sustained, than Nabokov's, and this is reflected both in references to monstrosity, darkness, nightmare and pain which are absent from the episode where Nabokov abandons his friend, and in the way Humbert's shame is mingled with every intention to repeat the transgression. There is no equivalency between Humbert's months of child abuse and Nabokov's single thoughtless action. However, although the two transgressions are of different magnitudes and durations, the process that informs the perpetrators' attitude towards them is comparable. In both cases the devotion to a private fascination removes the willingness to act on the promptings of one's conscience, though it does not silence the conscience itself. This power to weaken moral agency is the darker side of play's capacity to entrance.

The association between Humbert Humbert's pursuit of Dolores and the fascination exercised by lepidoptery is suggested by the name of the town to which Humbert takes Dolores after this episode. It is called Lepingville, and is described earlier as 'the gay town of Lepingville, where a great poet had resided in the early nineteenth century'.¹⁵⁰ When asked which great poet had lived there, Nabokov replied, 'That poet was evidently Leping who used to go lepping (i.e., lepidoptera hunting) but that's about all anybody knows about him.'¹⁵¹ The way Nabokov places this reference to lepidoptery just after Humbert's first awareness of his guilt is perhaps intended as a gesture towards the double nature of quests to capture. In these

¹⁴⁹ Vladimir Nabokov, *The Annotated Lolita*, ed. by Alfred Appel, Jr. (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1993), p. 140.

¹⁵⁰ *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 112.

¹⁵¹ *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 376.

episodes, Humbert and Nabokov insist upon exercising the freedom to pursue what fascinates them. Both fascinations involve elements of capture. Paradoxically, the insistence on exercising this freedom ends up forcing them to do things they know to be wrong. Humbert's successful capture of Dolores leaves him feeling 'an oppressive, hideous constraint as if I were sitting with the small ghost of somebody I had just killed'.¹⁵² There is an echo between this 'small ghost' and the image of Nabokov's friend which haunts him even when he has successfully escaped. The images of other people that haunt Humbert and Nabokov reflect the failure of the attempt to live as if one's own fascinations trump others' welfare. Play tempts the individual towards solipsism, but does not entirely destroy the awareness that other people have an independent existence which must be respected. The individual is then left with the uncomfortable knowledge that his actions do not fit with what he knows to be his duty. Nabokov's portrayal of the potentially dangerous and blinding nature of recreational activities extends to his depiction of other people's interests. This is especially the case in his narration of his cousin Yuri's death fighting for the White Army in the Russian Civil War. Yuri's absorption in imaginative ideals of heroism does not lead him to damage others; when he neglects the independent existence of others, it results in harm to himself. Nabokov begins the chapter where he narrates Yuri's death with a memory of the popularity of the fiction of Mayne Reid in early twentieth-century Russia and then recounts how he and his cousin would act out scenes from *The Headless Horseman*. His memories of playing with his cousin as a child and as an adolescent are filled with associations between play and the danger of death, as the two boys play with increasingly sophisticated toy guns, engage in 'mutual manhunts', attempt to cross a river by walking on pine logs, and delve into an old well.¹⁵³

¹⁵² *The Annotated Lolita*, p. 140.

¹⁵³ *SM*, 152-153.

The most intricate inter-weaving of play and violence occurs in this passage, where Nabokov recounts Yuri's death:

There was a swing in the center of a small circular playground surrounded by jasmins, at the bottom of our garden. We adjusted the ropes in such a way as to have the green swingboard pass just a couple of inches above one's forehead and nose if one lay supine on the sand beneath. One of us would start the fun by standing on the board and swinging with increasing momentum; the other would lie down with the back of his head on a marked spot, and from what seemed an enormous height the swinger's board would swish swiftly above the supine one's face. And three years later, as a cavalry officer in Denikin's army, he was killed fighting the Reds in northern Crimea. I saw him dead in Yalta, the whole front of his skull pushed back by the impact of several bullets, which had hit him like the iron board of a monstrous swing, when having outstripped his detachment he was in the act of recklessly attacking alone a Red machine-gun nest. Thus was quenched his lifelong thirst for intrepid conduct in battle, for that ultimate gallant gallop with drawn pistol or unsheathed sword.¹⁵⁴

Play is linked with death in two ways here: in the way the swing the two boys played on becomes linked with the fatal blow to Yuri's head, and also in the way earlier mentions of Yuri's absorption in fictional adventure stories become implicated in his death. His overwhelming commitment to the vision of himself as a heroic figure, and of the world as one where heroic figures will win out, is evoked in the depiction of the attack which led to his death. It is also anticipated by two earlier images linking Yuri's interests in military life with fixed bodily posture. This is Nabokov's account of his first encounter with his cousin:

I remember him coming out of a souvenir shop and running toward me with a breloque, an inch-long pistol of silver, which he was anxious to show me – and suddenly sprawling on the sidewalk but not crying when he picked himself up, unmindful of a bleeding knee and still clutching his minuscule weapon.¹⁵⁵

For a second-time reader, the moment when Yuri 'suddenly sprawl[s]' anticipates the rapidity with which Nabokov's narration of the two boys' game with the swing veers into a recollection of Yuri's dead body. The parallel between a child's prone body and a young adult's corpse also occurs in a poem which begins, 'When he was small, when he would

¹⁵⁴ *SM*, 154-155.

¹⁵⁵ *SM*, 152.

fall'.¹⁵⁶ Yuri's unwillingness to relinquish his toy pistol echoes his later reluctance to relinquish his view of himself as a heroic soldier. 'Still clutching' resonates with the use of 'still compressing' in this passage:

The following summer he was away in Switzerland with his mother – and soon after his death (in 1919), upon revisiting the same hotel and getting the same rooms they had occupied that July, she thrust her hand into the recesses of an armchair in quest of a fallen hairpin and brought up a tiny cuirassier, unhorsed but with bandy legs still compressing an invisible charger.¹⁵⁷

Like the soldier, Yuri is frozen into a role, and he maintains it without regard to the situation he finds himself in. Just as Nabokov resolves to go butterfly-hunting in the morning, no matter what other obligations arise, and Humbert Humbert decides to satisfy his desire for Dolores, although he knows that doing so hurts her, so Yuri's dedication to his passion prevents him from paying heed to reasons not to pursue it. Although Nabokov and Humbert hurt someone else, while Yuri only damages himself, what these three instances have in common is that in each a form of play leads to faulty perception of the world, which in turn causes pain.

Nabokov connects play with cruelty and pain at the level of the self, at the level of the 'proximate other' in the shape of his cousin Yuri, and also in descriptions of the recreational activities of strangers and acquaintances. In these descriptions, the unconscious cruelty of certain forms of play spills over from past to present. We see this in his description of an organ-grinder's monkey on one of his family's estates during his youth. He writes:

I saw the jersey and skirt of his little bald female monkey, her collar, the raw sore on her neck, the chain which she kept plucking at every time the man pulled it, hurting her badly, and the several servants standing around, gaping, grinning – simple folks terribly tickled by a monkey's 'antics.'¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Vladimir Nabokov, *Collected Poems*, trans. by Dmitri Nabokov, ed. by Thomas Karshan (Penguin: London, 2013), p. 166.

¹⁵⁷ *SM*, 153.

¹⁵⁸ *SM*, 174.

Here, as before, the servants' absorption in the spectacle prevents them from perceiving the monkey's suffering. Because it is the sound of the organ grinder's music that introduces the narration of this scene, and because Nabokov describes the painted scene on the front of the organ-grinder's box, art is implicated in this scene of cruelty. The fact that Nabokov hears the music as he is composing one of his first poems tightens the link between this scene and art. The alliteration of 'several servants standing around', 'gaping, grinning' and 'terribly tickled' evokes Nabokov's disgust at this scene. The reference to 'simple folks' is ironic; the fact that 'the raw sore' on the monkey's neck is a perfectly clear sign of her suffering suggests that the servants are just as complex as Nabokov in their ambivalent attitudes towards cruelty and diversion. In this remark, Nabokov draws attention towards the co-existence of an apparently wholesome demeanour and complicity in violence. He also makes this association in the sentence directly following the one quoted above:

Only the other day, near the place where I am recording these matters, I came across a farmer and his son (the kind of keen healthy kid you see in breakfast food ads) who were similarly diverted by the sight of a young cat torturing a baby chipmunk – letting him run a few inches and then pouncing upon him again. Most of his tail was gone, the stump was bleeding. As he could not escape by running, the game little fellow tried one last measure: he stopped and lay down on his side in order to merge with a bit of light and shade on the ground, but the too violent heaving of his flank gave him away.¹⁵⁹

In the parallel Nabokov draws between the scene in pre-Revolutionary Russia and the one that takes place in America at the time of writing, he conveys the idea that this kind of cruelty is not confined to any one place or time. The reference to the chipmunk attempting to camouflage himself amongst the light and shade has the same effect as the reference to the organ-grinder's music and the painting on the front of his instrument. Elsewhere in the autobiography, Nabokov speaks of the mimicry found in nature as an inherently artistic process, and the play of filtered light and shade is associated with love, art and memory. By

¹⁵⁹ *SM*, 174.

connecting mimicry and the play of light with the animal's pain and desperation, Nabokov complicates their positive associations and reinforces the suggestion that even life's most artistic and creative aspects can become mixed up with evil.

Just as there is a muted echo between Humbert Humbert's crimes and Nabokov's unkindness towards his friend, so there is a relationship between Nabokov's depiction of the persistence of these relatively minor acts of cruelty and his attitude towards the beginnings and after-effects of the Nazi genocide. As explored in the previous section, Nabokov refuses to confine the cruelty of the Nazi regime within the spatial and temporal boundaries of 1939-1945 in Germany. Instead, he has it spill over those boundaries to linger on in contemporary Germany and even touch America. The association between play and violence is sustained as Nabokov's exploration of the Nazi genocide and its relationship to the present is introduced through a description of a recreational activity, in this case the hobby one of Nabokov's German students has of attending executions and taking photographs. As in the case of the Russian servants and the American farmer and his son, he draws attention to the ordinary and even pleasant aspect of this acquaintance, whose name is Dietrich. He writes that he is 'well-bred, quiet, bespectacled' and there is an echo of the farmer's 'keen, healthy' son in Nabokov's description of Dietrich's 'freckled nose'. Nabokov goes on to connect Dietrich's hobby to killings conducted on a national scale during the Nazi regime. He writes:

Although I have lost track of Dietrich long ago, I can well imagine the look of calm satisfaction in his fish-blue eyes as he shows, nowadays (perhaps at the very minute I am writing this), a never-expected profusion of treasures to his thigh-clapping, guffawing co-veterans – the absolutely *wunderbar* pictures he took during Hitler's reign.¹⁶⁰

Just as Nabokov transfers the time and place of the Russian organ-grinder's cruelty to modern America, so here he underlines his view that Dietrich's enjoyment of cruelty is still very

¹⁶⁰ *SM*, 218.

much a present reality. The parenthetical phrase drawing Dietrich's voyeurism into relationship with Nabokov's writing further emphasises the potential of art and cruelty to become intertwined. Just before this quotation Nabokov writes that during his time in Germany, he never came across the 'so-called wholesome and kindly folks that during the last war homesick soldiers from the Middle West seem to have preferred so much to the cagey French farmer and to brisk Madelon'.¹⁶¹ In this way he underlines evil's potential to appear in apparently innocuous, and even 'wholesome and kindly' guises.

In his portrayal of the potentially menacing nature of recreational activities, Nabokov has further displaced the locus of historical trauma from extreme to more familiar situations. He has complicated the opposition he makes between utilitarian and non-utilitarian activities in his portrayal of the origin of human life by showing how the 'feeling of exaltation and tension' and the transitions between 'action, mirth and relaxation' identified by Huizinga can become obsessions, and so prevent individuals from honouring moral obligations and blind them to the independent existence of those around them. Just as Perec ends his autobiography by drawing attention to the links between his childhood drawings and stories about W and the German and Chilean concentration camps, so Nabokov engages in a comparable yoking together of childhood play and war-time violence. The imagined world of W from Perec's childhood turns out to be central to his autobiographical project and to his engagement with historical and contemporary instances of oppression. Nabokov's depiction of the potentially dangerous nature of play also brings together childhood and adulthood, imaginative activity and harm to others. Play is not an activity which is left behind upon entry into adulthood, but is rather a kind of bridge which joins the two periods and even enables the transition from one to the other. We see this in the way that Nabokov and Yuri's reading of *The Headless*

¹⁶¹ *SM*, 217.

Horseman is in some senses a childish activity, but in others it shapes each boy's movement from childhood to adulthood. Yuri shapes his identity as a young adult around images drawn from the novel, while it marks the beginning of Nabokov's interest in the opposite sex.¹⁶² Nabokov connects the novel with his adult life by noting how the image of the American West which the book had as a frontispiece in his childhood has been replaced by the real thing in his adulthood.¹⁶³ Similarly, he portrays continuity between his youthful absorption in entomology and his current attitude towards it, and between the organ-grinder's cruelty in pre-Revolutionary Russia and similar instances of callousness which he observes at the time of writing. By drawing attention to the way play enables transitions, not only from action to relaxation but also from childhood to adulthood, the imagined to the real, freedom to constraint, creative activity to cruelty, Nabokov makes it seem less a wholly positive activity, and more an activity associated with flux. This is the other side of the association Nabokov makes between play and evolutionary leaps. Play enables transformations, both positive and negative. By associating play with potentiality, and then by interweaving play and violence, Nabokov links violence with potentiality. This connection is reinforced by the movements Nabokov makes from relatively minor incidents of violence or complicity in violence, such as Dietrich's interest in photographs of executions, and violence on a national and international scale, such as the Nazi genocide. This connection between potentiality and violence contributes to the way the text works against the idea that episodes of historical violence can be left behind in the past. Rather, traces of the after-effects and anticipatory signs of violence are shown to be present in apparently innocuous scenes, always poised to take on much greater and more frightening proportions.

¹⁶² *SM*, 156-158.

¹⁶³ *SM*, 151.

Chamoiseau's exploration of the nature of children's play also suggests that past historical traumas resonate beyond the boundaries of time and space supposed to contain them. Echoes of slavery, imperialism and genocide arise in his narration of memories of play. Whereas Nabokov portrays the danger of the absorbing nature of play leading to a blindness to others' suffering and to external danger, Chamoiseau looks at the social bonds formed by play between groups of children and brings to light the damaging relationships which can result from them. Thomas Karshan draws attention to the association between play and aggressive competition in Nabokov's thought, writing that '[p]lay is a continuation of war by other means'.¹⁶⁴ He notes that Nabokov's 1925 essay on play 'reminds us that there is an element of conflict, and therefore, potentially, of violence, in all forms of play'.¹⁶⁵ Chamoiseau brings out this war-like quality of play in his autobiography. He shows how the groups children form magnify their worst impulses. These groups of children turn against individuals who are different, and also against other groups of children. Joining a group seems to create or reinforce a sense of superiority and fuels the children's tendency to see certain others as less than human. We see this when Chamoiseau describes the building site where the children would play:

La cité étant immense, elle avait un Sud, un Centre et un Nord. La confrérie des preux tenait le territoire du Nord, mais le Sud et le Centre étaient infestés d'australopithèques et d'*homo erectus*, qu'il fallait civiliser à coups d'icagues vertes et d'un lot de projectiles qu'aucune convention de guerre n'aurait autorisés¹⁶⁶

Here an implicit opposition is established between the kind of relationship which limits violence and that which fosters it. The reference to 'convention de guerre' draws attention to the way war can work like a game with commonly agreed-upon rules and defined spatial and temporal boundaries. Conversely, although the children's activity is ostensibly a game,

¹⁶⁴ 'December 1925: Nabokov Between Work and Play', *Nabokov Studies*, 10 (2006), 1-25 (p. 9).

¹⁶⁵ *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Play* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 12.

¹⁶⁶ *A Bout*, 236.

because of the apparent lack of constraints on the children's behaviour, it has the qualities of total war. The first sentence of the quotation implicates certain ways of relating to space in dehumanising attitudes towards others. The division of the building-site into geographical zones associates map-making and certain kinds of geographical thinking with the dehumanising logic that can lead to violence. This implication of map-making with violence echoes the connection Aimé Césaire draws between the compass and gunpowder in *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*.¹⁶⁷ The children's attitude towards the building-site mirrors the attitude of colonising powers towards the world and its inhabitants because they use a spatial division as a springboard for categorising some lives as more developed and valuable than others. 'Infestés', along with the use of 'australopithèques' and 'homo erectus', marks the way the children place distance between themselves and other children by thinking of them as less than human.

Chamoiseau links civilising work with violence, as he does above with the phrase 'qu'il fallait civiliser à coups d'icaques vertes', when he speaks about the children's games with kites. In one way, the kites are associated with art, because Chamoiseau speaks of the intensity of feeling he experiences while playing with them as 'un terreau pour l'écriture'.¹⁶⁸ In this positioning of rotting vegetable matter, which one would usually connect with the earth, in the sky, Chamoiseau draws out the double nature of the kites. They are tied to two elements at once, because the kite tugs away from the child towards the sky even as the child remains firmly rooted to the ground. The double nature of the kites extends to a simultaneous association with art and violence. On the one hand, they are connected with creativity because of the way they stimulate later writing, and because the memory of them calls up

¹⁶⁷ *Cahier*, p. 22.

¹⁶⁸ *A Bout*, 102.

'[s]ouvenirs de couleurs, de beautés, de magie aérienne, d'élévation sans fin'.¹⁶⁹ The kites also allow the children the pleasures of transformation: 'On devenait oiseaux, nuages, vent, on vivait de longues heures dans le ciel, et cela vous gratifiait d'une amplitude illimitée.'¹⁷⁰

Yet the interaction of the kites in the air echoes the violence of the children on the ground. The element of competition in the children's games with the kites means that they also become associated with the search for domination over others. The child who teaches Chamoiseau to fly a kite, whom Chamoiseau refers to as a 'nabot', also teaches him to kill birds, toads and crabs.¹⁷¹ The fine balance between the dimensions of the kite, which influence whether it will fly or plummet, is connected with the way it slips from enchantment to violence:

Avec une queue trop longue, la bête ne montait pas au vent et s'égorgeait elle-même. Avec une queue trop courte, elle devenait le jouet des alizés, piquait cul pour tête à la moindre occasion et allait s'empêtrer dans les fils électriques. Calculée juste, la queue s'érigeait en gouvernail au vent, en pulsoréacteur et pivot d'équilibre. Mais le nabot, voué à son intelligence reptilienne, lui apprit surtout à y fixer des lames Gillette en des points stratégiques. Et, d'un coup, ce qui aurait pu être une pacifique merveille se transformait en aigle destructeur...¹⁷²

The connection between the kites and destruction is intertwined with the way they stimulate creative activity later in life. In the same passage where Chamoiseau writes about the 'couleurs', 'beautés' and 'magie aérienne' of the kites, he also refers to his '*regard predateur qui embrassait le ciel*' and exhorts himself: '*Viens, mets-toi auprès de moi, retrouve cette cruelle innocence, les cerfs-volants sont là...*'¹⁷³ Chamoiseau twice refers to the games with the kites as a 'guerre' and speaks of 'victimes', 'adversaires', 'le vainqueur'

¹⁶⁹ *A Bout*, 101, italics in original.

¹⁷⁰ *A Bout*, 102.

¹⁷¹ *A Bout*, 98.

¹⁷² *A Bout*, 98-99.

¹⁷³ *A Bout*, 101-102, italics in original.

and ‘l’ennemi’.¹⁷⁴ The reference to the razor blades attached to the kites and the use of the verb ‘trancher’ connects them with the child’s colonial explorations under the stairs at the beginning of *Antan d’enfance*.¹⁷⁵

The agonistic nature of the children’s games heightens the tendency to attack others directly or indirectly and to see each other as less than human. Chamoiseau speaks of children from other areas of the city as ‘crasses vivantes’.¹⁷⁶ As in the division of the building-site into ‘un Sud, un Centre et un Nord’, spatial boundaries are connected with the creation and preservation of dehumanising attitudes towards others:

Les cerfs-volants rappelèrent au négrillon que la ville était divisée en territoires ennemis. [...] D’une rue à l’autre, on pouvait se transformer en étranger, en métèque, en zoulou, en immigrant, en réfugié, en juif errant, en envahisseur, en fellagha, en tsigane, en martien, en vieux chien-fer galeux, ou toute espèce de n’importe quoi qu’il fallait pourchasser...¹⁷⁷

By connecting the kite-flying with patterns of violence and exclusion as well as with memories of beauty, colour, and elevation, Chamoiseau, like Nabokov, fuses the sources of violence and art.

In the case of the kites it becomes clear that competitive games foster the children’s tendency to seek to dominate other individuals or other groups. In Chamoiseau’s description of the hostility displayed towards a child who has left his own area, we also see that when the children play in groups, this fosters an instinct to turn on individuals who are in some way different or weaker. Banding together in groups seems to remove all moral constraints on behaviour: ‘Les êtres-humains pouvaient être d’une férocité animale quand ils se

¹⁷⁴ *A Bout*, 98-103.

¹⁷⁵ *Antan*, 101.

¹⁷⁶ *A Bout*, 104.

¹⁷⁷ *A Bout*, 102-103.

constituaient en bandes. Leurs violences pouvaient être sans limites, et leur cœur, si on le titillait trop, pouvait se révéler sans pièce miséricorde.¹⁷⁸ Where constraints do operate, they are not chosen by the children, but are rather imposed on them by their relative weakness : ‘Et s’ils n’allaient jamais jusqu’au bout des massacres c’est qu’ils vivaient encore dans les impuissances et les impossibles de l’enfance...’¹⁷⁹ Although related as a kind of parody of the *chanson de geste*, Chamoiseau’s narration of the way he is banned from the building-site and the surrounding area where the children play because of his interest in a girl who lives nearby, reinforces the idea that banding together in groups brings out children’s tendency to exclude others.¹⁸⁰ Childhood here becomes a time of violence rather than a time of innocence. Chamoiseau ties the victimisation of individuals in the play-ground to a range of histories of violence:

Les voués au génocide relevaient de catégories précises dont il valait mieux se tenir éloigné. [...] Contre ceux-là, victimes structurelles ou martyrs d’occasion, les êtres humains en bandes n’avaient pas de pitié: ils étaient négriers, colonialistes, cowboys, assassins, tueurs en série, persécuteurs, inquisiteurs, maîtres en lapidation, incendieurs sans baptême...¹⁸¹

As Nabokov does in the passage where he writes of a ‘kind of family circle joining representatives from all nations’, here Chamoiseau makes reference to violent episodes with a wide range of magnitude and moral weight. He moves from the systematic oppression of the slave trade and colonialism, using words that generally have negative connotations in the contemporary context, to ‘cowboys’, a word which generally has neutral or positive associations, although it obscures the great loss of life that accompanied America’s Western expansion. In contrast to this, the violence perpetrated by ‘assassins’ and ‘tueurs en série’ is of a much smaller magnitude and is not usually associated with systematic oppression.

¹⁷⁸ *A Bout*, 87-88.

¹⁷⁹ *A Bout*, 89.

¹⁸⁰ *A Bout*, 256.

¹⁸¹ *A Bout*, 88-89.

Chamoiseau then moves to the very general 'persécuteur' before introducing a reference to religious persecution with 'inquisiteurs' and 'maîtres en lapidation'. 'Incendieurs sans baptême' jostles uncomfortably with 'inquisiteurs', as the use of 'sans baptême' as a negative attribute would seem to be in line with the mind-set behind the Inquisition. There is also a tension between the co-existence of 'colonialistes', 'négriers' and 'incendieurs' within one list, as cane-fields were sometimes set on fire as a way of sabotaging the colonial project. This mixture of public and private crimes, systematic oppression motivated by economic gain or religious hegemony and killing done for its own sake serves to disrupt any tidy classification of historical episodes of violence. The juxtaposition of the different kinds of killing means they rub off each other in a way likely to surprise the reader and encourage her to re-assess her view of violence in the past. The use of 'tueurs en série' in this list detracts from economic explanations for the violence of colonialism and the slave trade and directs the reader's attention instead to the psychopathic quality of colonial violence. The use of 'inquisiteur' associates the other kinds of violence referred to with the pre-industrial period, rather than with modernity, thus reinforcing Chamoiseau's project of upsetting the association between Western modes of development and knowledge acquisition with modernity.

The fact that Chamoiseau uses the children's victimisation of other children in the playground as a springboard for this accumulation of references to different kinds of killing is part of the way his autobiography, like that of Nabokov and Perec, situates the origin and traces of historical violence in surprising places. By associating play with the traces of particular historical catastrophes as well as general tendencies towards cruelty and oppression, these authors connect both childhood and art with violence past and present. In doing so, they extend their uncanny interweaving of historical trauma with everyday objects

and scenes. The connection between play and violence is significant because, as explored in the previous chapter, elsewhere in their work, these authors place a high value on play, portraying it as widening mental horizons, stimulating creative activity, and nourishing fruitful relationship between self and other. By linking play, which has such positive connotations elsewhere, with disturbing aspects of history and of human nature, these authors suggest that no activity can be entirely separated from the potential for cruelty and oppression.

Conclusion

The use of *tabula rasa* figures to explore the place of play and violence in human life, the uncanny portrayal of everyday scenes as intertwined with historical catastrophe and the connections established between play and cruelty all serve one aim: they complicate the reader's apprehension of the familiar and the strange in the recounting of traumatic histories. By placing the legacies of imperialism and totalitarianism within settings associated with childhood, recreation or the everyday, these authors place traces of public history within private settings. In this way the familiar world of everyday life and the potentially strange world of large historical movements are brought into dialogue. The jarring nature of such dialogue means the portrayal of historical violence in these texts often has a troubling quality which more familiar depictions of imperialism and totalitarianism have arguably lost through familiarity. Part of what makes these authors' portrayal of histories of violence disturbing is their refusal to contain them within fixed spatial or temporal boundaries. In these texts, the cruelty which drives imperialism and totalitarianism is never fully held in abeyance, but is always in danger of seeping out of periods of heightened expression, or of arising in seemingly innocuous activities. The traces of state-sponsored violence can never truly be

erased, but linger on even in children's play, which might seem to lie beyond the bounds of public history. The tendency of racialized or political violence to manifest itself in a variety of circumstances means that these authors do not perceive Nazi war crimes, Lenin's terror or the colonial genocide and institution of slavery in the Caribbean as isolated events, but rather as historical episodes which both call up and disguise the memory of other incidents of statesponsored violence. The use of *tabula rasa* figures which can be mapped on to a range of periods draws the reader's attention to the presence of common elements in different manifestations of racial or political violence. Memory of such traumas does not reinforce a given cultural or national identity, but rather opens out the individual's experience of history to bring it into contact with that of people who have suffered the effects of oppression in a number of times and places. Although each author follows the traces of a particular historical trauma in his own life, studying them together is faithful to the way each brings his own experience into dialogue with that of others.

Conclusion

the demography of the new internationalism is the history of postcolonial migration, the narratives of cultural and political diaspora, the major social displacements of peasant and aboriginal communities, the poetics of exile, the grim prose of economic and political refugees. [...] What is striking about the 'new' internationalism is that the move from the specific to the general, from the material to the metaphoric, is not a smooth passage of transition and transcendence. The 'middle passage' of contemporary culture, as with slavery itself, is a process of displacement and disjunction that does not totalize experience.¹

Homi K. Bhabha's listing of different modes of displacement in this quotation points the reader's gaze toward the co-existence of multiple categories within the idea of an international life. His vocabulary ('narratives', 'poetics', 'grim prose') insistently draws attention to the role of literary language in the articulation of distinctions between such experiences and suggests a relationship between particular literary forms and a given experience of displacement. His movement from 'the poetics of exile' to 'the grim prose of economic and political refugees' intimates that some experiences of displacement are more likely to find a home within the literary than others, and returns us to Said's comment on 'refugees without urbanity' with which we began. Bhabha's reference to 'grim prose' hints that, like Said, he believes that U.N reports and newspaper headlines are more likely than literary texts to hold the experiences of the mass migrations of modernity. Both Bhabha and Said suggest that such experiences in some way resist or lie beyond literary narration. Yet an examination of these authors' autobiographical works suggest that it is their literary qualities

¹ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 6-8.

which allow them to gesture beyond the author's own experience, making space for experiences of migration, linguistic change and political oppression which lie outside the bounds of his own life.

Close reading of Nabokov's text provides much evidence that the distinction between the poetics of exile and the grim prose of political refugees is in any case not as sharp as it might be. As we saw in the Introduction, Nabokov's work is often used as a paradigmatic example of a text where exile is celebrated for the aesthetic gains it brings and where its material causes and consequences are passed over. There is certainly truth to this, but as the examination of Nabokov's portrayal of home showed, turning away from explicit engagement with the material can itself be read as a political gesture. The presence of traces of personal and collective trauma in his evocation of the world of the past further complicate the conception of *Speak, Memory* as existing above and beyond the legacy of painful histories. The attention to echoes between past and contemporary instances of cruelty and violence suggests the troubling presence of memories of past upheaval, even when the author is inhabiting a very different and ostensibly more peaceful time and place. Nabokov's description of the relationship between the composition of chess puzzles and literary art roots the mental displacements occasioned by the literary in a context of historical displacement triggered by fear of political persecution.

All three authors connect salutary literary estrangement with painful histories of historical displacement, a move also present in Bhabha's use of 'middle passage' to refer to both the transportation of African slaves and to contemporary cultural phenomena. Though Bhabha and Said suggest there is a tension between the literary and the narration of the mass migrations of modernity, it is the very literary qualities of *Une Enfance créole* and *Wou le*

souvenir d'enfance which allow the text to become a site where the author's own experience is brought into dialogue with more anonymous experiences of mass migration, linguistic change and oppression. These texts' non-linear temporal structures, their use of silence, their active processes of re-embodiment of the inert traces of untold histories and their investment of bodily marks with the multiple meanings usually ascribed to literary language all work to interleave the author's own experience of living largely in one country in relatively peaceful times with more painful experiences that lie beyond his own, while intersecting with it.

Though all three authors move 'from the specific to the general, from the material to the metaphoric' to connect their own history with that of other people, such movements are never one-way, nor are the specificities explored in these texts merely illustrative of a larger point. Instead, each author constructs constellatory, back-and-forth movements between the specific and the general, the material and the metaphoric. The three tropes which have been examined in this thesis – home, the traumatic and the ludic – all serve as ways to maintain tension between the history of the self and wider histories. As explored in the first chapter, the interior space of the home can be mapped on to many other spaces, from interior, mental spaces like the inner life of the child, to larger, collective spaces such as that of the nation. Images of the home's boundaries then call up questions about what is interior and exterior to the self, the family and the nation. Yet such engagement with wider questions always passes through the author's contemplation of the specific buildings where he spent his childhood. This contemplation of individual buildings roots wider questions about the boundaries of the self, the family and the nation in a specific geographical location and moment in time. This dual engagement with specificity and generality is also present in the way these texts approach the trauma of personal loss. Trauma's etymology connects it with bodily injury, though in its contemporary usage it most often refers to psychic wounds, so the word itself

already contains a movement from the material to the metaphoric. These authors all draw attention to specific images of marks of trauma while mapping these fixed images on to various contexts. In the image of the diagonal scar on Perec's lip, which gestures towards a singular bereavement while also recurring through the creative work he does and absorbs, the reader sees the way the loss of a parent is bound into relationship with a broader cultural loss and the way both kinds of losses inflect the author's literary practice. The indeterminate position of the 'registres de cicatrices' in *Chemin-d'école* also draws attention to the interface between specific injuries and broader, cultural losses. The mirroring between Nabokov's laconic narration of his father's death and the brief references to the deaths and suffering of people outside his family together work to draw connections between the author's personal loss and the demise of a social and cultural world. The ludic, like traumatic loss and images of the home, already holds within it the idea of movements between the concrete and the imagined. Because imaginative play by its nature calls up other times, places and contexts, the movement from images of children's play to theatres of violent histories allows these authors to invest this everyday activity with uncanny echoes of past upheaval without abandoning the commitment to the exploration of a particular childhood.

Such explorations of the places between the individual, the relational and the collective situate these texts within what Bhabha calls the "'middle passage" of contemporary culture'. Bhabha's metaphor of the middle passage gestures toward the presence of fluidity and pain in the transition between specific and general conceptions of the international or transnational. Such a privileging of identity as disarticulation is present in the relational models of selfhood these authors construct, where the self is most itself at those moments where its boundaries soften or dissolve. We see this in the imagery of Nabokov drinking in beauty and memories from the outside world, in Chamoiseau's celebratory evocation of his vivid, symbiotic

relationship with his mother and the old house, and in Perec's depiction of the pain and solitude of inhabiting a world which will not fuse with the self.

The idea of identity as a process of disarticulation is also linked to the ambivalent attitudes towards French literary images of childhood discussed in the Introduction. As we saw, such imagery is deployed to draw attention to the author's place between French literary culture and other languages and cultures. In these texts, childhood is figured as an intermediate stage in a generational process of linguistic, cultural or geographical migration, as well as the beginning of the author's life. Evocations of childhood thus involve explorations of the interstitial places between cultures. As we saw in the fourth chapter, the exploration of the spaces between different modes of belonging goes beyond connections between the author's ancestral identity and his current life to include a wide range of histories lived in different times and places. Each text thus sets up a comparative historical framework whose value this thesis sought to test. Close readings of these texts in dialogue with each other reveals the potential of such comparative frameworks to enrich contemporary theories of the intergenerational transmission of memory, and to bring out overlaps which might not be obvious otherwise, such as the re-working of Proust's ideas on involuntary memory, the crossovers in each author's conception of writing as a ludic practice, and the common engagement with a post-war tradition of multidirectional memory. Such resonances speak to the migration and contestation of French writings on memory and perception from Russia, to America to the Caribbean, where they are reworked and reshaped to make them adequate to the aftermath of violent histories. The way the interpretation of these texts and theories of memory, selfhood and cultural belonging are enriched by a comparative approach suggests the value of following these authors in the surprising connections they make between

different times and places. Readings of autobiography and narrations of displacement can only benefit from attention to the way such texts gesture toward other people's histories.

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