

**DISORIENTATION:
NATIONAL IDENTITY IN FRENCH CULTURAL PRODUCTIONS OF THE
LATE TWENTIETH AND EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES**

by

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This dissertation employs a selection of French cultural productions between 1986 and 2010 to analyse the divide between nationally promoted and personally experienced versions of French national identity. In line with the rapidly shifting demographics of the French population, this work advocates for a new paradigm for the study of French national identity. I adapt Sara Ahmed's use of the term disorientation in queer theory to foreground national identity as an orientation not dissimilar to sexual orientation wherein persons living counter to normative expressions of Frenchness inevitably stand out from the crowd. The corpus reveals, however, that non-normative representations of French identity never completely disengage from French subjectivity. The underlying backgrounds or orientations that permeate society assume Frenchness as a fixed and common set of beliefs, desires, mannerisms, origins, and expectations. The cultural productions of my study highlight the individual and familial deviations, which promote Frenchness as incredibly diverse and arduous to define. I examine examples of disoriented French identity through three main areas of inquiry: the cultural valuation of objects of national importance, international tourism, and the mother-child relationship. These three seemingly disparate topics together show France in its contemporary state as reimagined and distinct from the national narrative promoted by the nation-state.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1.0	LA CHUTE D'UNE NATION	1
1.1	GUIDING PRACTICE: DISORIENTATION AS THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR NON-NORMATIVE EXPRESSIONS OF FRENCHNESS	5
1.2	MODELING THE NATION: AN EVOLUTION OF THE DEFINITION OF THE NATION.....	9
1.3	INCORPORATING THE NATION: TOWARDS A NEW MODEL OF FRENCHNESS	14
1.4	ADAPTING TO THE TIMES: CONTEMPORARY ANECDOTES OF DISORIENTATION.....	17
1.5	CONNECTING THE DOTS: E PLURIBUS UNUM.....	18
1.6	PLOT(TING) THE NATION: ARTIFACTS OF DISORIENTATION.....	22
2.0	OBJECTIFYING THE NATION IN IN LES GLANEURS ET LA GLANEUSE, L'HEURE D'ÉTÉ, AND LE NOM DES GENS.....	31
2.1	INTRODUCTION	31
2.2	LES GLANEURS ET LA GLANEUSE.....	38
2.2.1	Introduction	38
2.2.2	Qu'est-ce que le glanage?.....	39
2.2.3	Le glanage et la loi	41

2.2.4	Claude F. et co.....	45
2.2.5	Les fruits (et les légumes) de la terre	52
2.2.6	Filming/Genre	53
2.2.7	The museum as object	58
2.3	L’HEURE D’ÉTÉ.....	60
2.3.1	Introduction	61
2.3.2	Scene Analyses	63
2.3.2.1	“Préparez-vous pour la suite.”.....	64
2.3.3	Chez le patriarche—malgré lui	66
2.3.3.1	Corot, Frédéric, and his children: Three lost generations.	71
2.3.4	From curating the home to curating the Musée d’Orsay	72
2.3.5	The role of the museum in L’heure d’été	74
2.3.6	In the eye of the beholder: Gaze(s) in the space of the Musée d’Orsay	79
2.4	LE NOM DES GENS.....	80
2.4.1	Introduction	80
2.4.2	De quoi Baya Benmahmoud et Arthur Martin sont-ils les noms?	83
2.4.3	Flashbacks: A la recherche des souvenirs perdus	86
2.4.4	Les pré-noms	88
2.4.4.1	Le <i>non</i> des gens.....	89
2.4.4.2	Autour de la télé.	91
2.4.4.3	Impostor Syndrome.	95
2.4.4.4	“And Here My Troubles Began”	98
2.4.5	Allons enfants à la mairie!	100

2.4.5.1	Shoah Tardif.....	107
2.4.5.2	Art Spiegelman’s <i>Maus</i> and Madame Martin.....	109
2.4.5.3	L’avenir des noms.	110
3.0	THE NATION ON VACATION: TOURISM AND FRENCH IDENTITY IN LANZAROTE, PLATEFORME, AND LA CARTE ET LE TERRITOIRE	113
3.1	INTRODUCTION	113
3.1.1	The texts.....	119
3.2	LANZAROTE	124
3.2.1	Nous, les touristes de l’Europe?	125
3.2.1.1	Les guides touristiques de référence.....	129
3.2.2	Le touriste français v. le touriste belge: A trip to the bottom	130
3.2.2.1	Rudi and Michel: Capital (city) punishment.....	135
3.2.2.2	Après Michel, le deluge.....	136
3.2.2.3	Le début de la fin.....	138
3.2.3	Sex(uality), tourism, and national disorientation	139
3.2.3.1	National time on vacation.....	140
3.2.4	Les possibilités d’une île.....	142
3.2.4.1	Rudi’s escape from Lanzarote.	151
3.3	PLATEFORME	153
3.3.1	Occidental Nihilism	157
3.3.2	Départ imminent: Thaïlande	159
3.3.3	Bodies and Tourism.....	163
3.3.4	Imagined tourist communities: Eldorado Aphrodite	164

3.3.5	Pattaya: L'attente latente	171
3.4	LA CARTE ET LE TERRITOIRE.....	177
3.4.1	Jed, l'artiste de tourisme.....	185
3.4.2	Voyage au bout de la vie: l'euthanasie patriarcale	192
3.4.3	Return of the Jed(i): The region strikes back	198
3.5	CONCLUSION	203
4.0	(M)OTHERING THE NATION: THE INTERPLAY OF AUTOFICTION, LANGUAGE, AND BIRTHPLACE IN NATIONAL DISORIENTATION.....	206
4.1	INTRODUCTION	206
4.1.1	Language: Maman, Parles-tu français?	211
4.2	LE GONE DU CHAÂBA	213
4.2.1	Introduction	213
4.2.2	You can take the Gone out of the Chaâba.....	217
4.2.2.1	La Silence du Chaâba: Mamans muettes.....	222
4.2.3	Autofiction and narration of the childhood	223
4.2.4	Les langues d'enfance.....	226
4.2.5	Birthplace	228
4.2.6	To be or not to be (Arabe)? That is the question.....	229
4.2.7	The intersection of body and (birth)place	233
4.2.8	Les liens de parentalité.....	238
4.3	MES MAUVAISES PENSÉES.....	239
4.3.1	Introduction	240
4.3.1.1	Les figures parentales.	245

4.3.2	Generic non-conventions.....	248
4.3.3	La peau buvard.....	254
4.3.4	La langue de l'autre.....	256
4.3.5	Lieu(x) de naissance(s)	257
4.3.6	La naissance des mère(s).....	262
4.4	LE PAYS.....	263
4.4.1	Introduction	263
4.4.2	Autofiction comme outil de disorientation	266
4.4.3	Autofiction and the nation	269
4.4.4	The phantom menace: Specters of the national identity.....	275
4.4.5	Langue maternelle, langue de maternité	278
4.4.5.1	L'analphabétisme yuoangui.....	281
4.4.6	Womb to tomb: Birthplace and deathplace as incubators of the nation	283
4.4.7	Birthrights	285
4.4.8	Section conclusion.....	289
4.4.8.1	Le système reproductive des yuoanguis.....	290
4.5	CHAPTER CONCLUSION.....	292
5.0	CONCLUSION.....	294
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	300

PREFACE

I first had the idea of pursuing a PhD in French literature while studying abroad in Rennes, France. One night after a couple of glasses of Leader Price's finest pinard, my best friend, Chris Blackmon, and I planned out our lives until we would be—*quelle horreur*—thirty years old. My plan included staying in school as long as possible, because, as a budding student of French at the time, I never wanted the magic of language learning to end.

While my plans have taken longer than my then 20-year-old self would have cared to imagine, this chapter of my academic journey is finally coming to an end. The years spent in the PhD program have taught me far more than what any library contains. I have forged life-long friendships and worked with incredible faculty, mentors, and staff at the University of Pittsburgh to whom I am eternally grateful.

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1.0 LA CHUTE D'UNE NATION

In 2010, Yann Reuzeau's episodic theatre piece, *Chute d'une nation*, took metropolitan French theater by storm.¹ Reuzeau's brilliantly written political drama plays out over four, nearly two-hour long episodes (*La petite phrase*, *Fratricide*, *Chaos* and *Dernière Extremité*) chronicling the intensity of a fierce French presidential campaign, which unearths huge cultural and social divisions and shakes the *métropole* to its core. Jean Vampel, a devout Catholic altar-boy type, who also happens to be a parliamentarian member of *L'union de gauche*, is called upon to enter *les primaires* running against a feisty fellow party-member, Camille Baubrac. Vampel is a relatively unknown politician who truly strives to fly under the radar, by his own admission: "Moi non plus je ne suis personne, même si je suis député" (69). Vampel, *malgré lui*, goes from political pawn to political game-changer through a series of almost unimaginable events in which he narrowly wins *le premier tour des présidentielles*.

The play is set during a contemporary fictive presidential election cycle, which appeared all but won for the current president, Laurence Alatar, *Alliance* member (facsimile of L'UMP). Shortly before the official kick-off of the campaign season, she is suddenly killed in a car accident involving her presidential convoy and all political hell breaks loose as both the left and right seize this opportunity to re-boot themselves as viable candidates in the elections. An American member of Alatar's government, Allan Johnson, is slated as interim president and

¹Yann Reuzeau is a young Parisian playwright who in addition to writing and producing *Chute d'une Nation* also founded the playhouse *Manufacture des Abbesses* where it debuted. He is also the author of numerous other socio-critical plays and has garnered several awards for his work as well as significant critical acclaim. For more information and critique on the piece, see: <https://lestroiscoups.fr/chute-dune-nation-de-yann-reuzeau-theatre-du-soleil-a-paris>

quickly loses control of the government and country as continual mass protests rock the country over a myriad of issues that have both enraged and engaged *le peuple français*. Mass unrest creates a power vacuum in which the old traditional parties *l'Union* and *l'Alliance* no longer accommodate the currently divided *esprit du peuple*. This political chaos translates into a crowded candidate field in *le premier tour*, which is evidence of the deep fissures in the social fabric of the nation.

The results of *le premier tour* cause almost as much upheaval as the president's sudden death: Jean Vampel narrowly wins the highest result with only 9.7% closely followed by far-right candidate, Thomas Mérendien. The presumptive overall winner, Camille Baubrac, *l'Union's* candidate, is shut out of the second tour in a shocking and devastating defeat, which she clearly did not anticipate (speaking to Vampel in *Fratricide*):

Rassurez-vous, vous n'êtes pas une menace... Votre candidature est juste embarrassante et décrédibilise toute la gauche. Et je ne vous parle pas des primaires, je m'en fous, des primaires. Mon obsession, c'est le deuxième tour des présidentielles. Il faut absolument que je dépasse les 40%, c'est vital non seulement pour le parti, mais aussi pour l'équilibre politique de ce pays... (82)

Evoking the political equilibrium of the whole of France, she underscores just how critical the elections are to the fate of the entire country and any future possibilities of national unity.

In *le deuxième tour*, the obvious choice appears to be the left-of-center Vampel, who would at the very least keep the nation out of the grips of the right-wing Christian extremist, Mérendien. Political scandal and the mishandling of finances once again rock the Vampel campaign and lay waste to his presumed victory. The final episode, "Dernières Extrémités," ends

without announcing the winner but leaves the audience on the edge of their seats to imagine the treacherous political climate that would reign for the following five years. Reuzeau's eery (seeming) clairvoyance of the actual events of the 2017 presidential elections wherein Emmanuel Macron, a complete party outsider, rose out of nowhere to not only make it through *le premier tour* but to go on and beat the *Front National* candidate, Marine Le Pen. In spite of this important yet fortunate discrepancy, the underlying premise remains that France, in both fictional and actual realms, is undergoing significant social shifts and cultural upheaval.

What relates this play to the present-day in France is not only the uncanny resemblance to how the current state of affairs has played out but also the oversaturation of the news cycle that has enraptured society during recent campaigns both in France and the United States. The vast cast of characters not only includes campaign workers and politicians but also a bevy of journalists and television commentators who fan the flames of political hysteria. The journalists highlight the minutia and often controversial workings of the French political machine, including back-room dealings, thinly veiled threats of ruining careers, blackmail, and the clamoring for (and/or) shunning of the media's attention. All these characters and goings-on point to a self-serving political system that is incredibly out of touch with the lived realities of French society and the consequences of their actions.

The France that Reuzeau depicts through the political chaos in *Chute d'une nation* is terribly divided and directionless. This play reveals a much larger theoretical issue at play in modern France, which is a lack of vision for the future of what France should look like because it has lost cohesiveness; it has become disoriented. In *Chute*, extreme right candidate, Thomas Mérendien, makes note of this confusion following the President Alatar's death:

Je pense que ce résultat est très fidèle, au contraire, à ce que notre pays traverse. Il

est en plein doute. Après la mort brutale de la présidente Alatar, nos concitoyens hésitent manifestement sur la direction à prendre. Ceux qui polémiquent sur le scrutin laissent parler leur frustration, leur échec... La réalité est que le pays se cherche un nouvel homme fort. (249)

This bold statement on the set of a political talk show is indicative of the lack of direction that France has fallen victim too. Perhaps, it is even a sign of France's increasing irrelevance in the international political and cultural realms it once held great sway over. For too long, France has rested on its laurels as a maker of taste, culture, art, music, and fashion; a simple utterance of "les Français" to this day conjures an image of a by-gone era that is now virtually undetectable in today's France. The current realities of a French society in a downward spiral or, as numerous sociologists and political theorists refer to it as "la maladie" or "malaise française" or "le déclinisme" violently clash with the commodified France that is promoted in tourism brochures and reified in cheaply-made replicas of Parisian landmarks. The cultural geology of France has produced amongst overlapping topographies and France(s): France for foreigners, France for the French and France for the questionably French. The tectonic shifts between these starkly divergent realities/countries which must conterminously occupy the same physical space has led to what Sara Ahmed refers to as "queer moments" or "moments of disorientation" (2006, 3). France is grappling with its future because it has not successfully incorporated its past; coupled with a tumultuous present there can be no imaginable future.

1.1 GUIDING PRACTICE: DISORIENTATION AS THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR NON-NORMATIVE EXPRESSIONS OF FRENCHNESS

Chute d'une Nation questions what it means to be French in both political and affective terms. When Jean Vampel and interim President Johnson, an American who never took French citizenship, discuss the far-right candidate's proposal to codify citizenship along ancestral lines, two divergent opinions are put forth. The left-wing Vampel remarks, "Je pense qu'être français est un droit personnel, et que nous ne sommes pas responsables des actes ou des nationalités de nos ancêtres..." (200), whereas the right-wing Johnson believes, "je crois qu'on ne peut pas s'appropriier un pays, une histoire, quand on vient d'y arriver, quand rien dans nos gènes ne nous y lie" (200). Both opinions present nationality as a guiding principle of the idea of France and implicate the method(s) of citizenship acquisition as a means test of "true" Frenchness. While heritage-based distinctions of one's Frenchness may prevail in informal social settings, the universal standards of Frenchness still stand as law.

Citizenship in France is just one of many orientations that comprise the sum of the "who, what, when, where, and how" one is French. Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* offers a theoretical apparatus for my use of the term "disorientation" in this study. Ahmed argues that the world is always already structured around/towards socially defined normative "orientations":

To be oriented is also to be turned toward certain objects, those that help us to find our way. These are the objects we recognize, so that when we face them we know which way we are facing. They might be landmarks or other familiar signs that give us anchoring points. (1)

While Ahmed's context for her study of "orientation(s)" is sexuality studies and sexual orientation(s), I call for an appropriation of these terms within nation studies. The nation

replicates the construction of sexual orientation as, it too, is full of landmarks, signs, and objects, which define and limit the parameters of standards of Frenchness and French subjectivity. The erection of historical moments, commemorative plaques, and the exposition of objects of “patrimonial” value in museums and other public spaces are material manifestations of a national orientation. The materiality of this orientation implies that the nation is an innate and natural presence in society which pre-dates society itself. When the idea of France is accepted as a given, then French citizens would logically tend towards objects which reify their Frenchness, “Indeed, orientation is a powerful technology insofar as it constructs [sexual] desire as a magnetic field: it can imply that we were drawn to certain objects and other *as if* by a force of nature” (85). This is exactly how orientation, as Ahmed and phenomenology in general define the term, can be applied to the study of the nation. Orientation takes what is taken for granted, what is considered a given, or a pre-condition of belonging to the nation and explicates the socially constructed nature of its force and continued appropriation. Ahmed conveys that the artifice of orientations is an organizational metric for all of society, “The fantasy of a natural orientation is an orientation device that organizes worlds around the form of the heterosexual couple, as if it were from this ‘point’ that the world unfolds” (85). Where Ahmed uses the heterosexual couple and heterosexual desire as the point of departure for organizing the world with the implications it has for familial inheritance, the nation again readily fits into this device as it is a form of social construction that is considered both innate and the origin for all other forms of social organizations.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I conceive of orientation as a pull or directionality towards the nation, whose pervasiveness makes it difficult to eschew. For example, one’s subjective heritage or path to citizenship is a form of orientation, or generally accepted conduit

towards an identity or idea. The nation, as an orientation, implies a level of inevitability whereby the nation is an unavoidable construct that grants itself authority through its mere existence and perpetuation. By contrast, then, I use *disorientation* to describe the events, situations, or actions, which deliberately work against the flow of national orientations and unveil their very existence. *Chute d'une nation* is a two-pronged example of disorientation. First, the very form of the play, taking place over four separate two-hour long episodes, follows a formula more typical of a televised mini-series and not that of live theater. Viewing the entirety of *Chute* is a considerable commitment of time, attention, memory, and money, comparable to more standard-format works, perhaps rivaling Wagner's operatic masterpiece, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Second, the content of the piece shows a political field in sudden disarray with unexpected in-party political maneuvering leading to unsettling results from *le premier tour*, which completely upend the rank-and-file structure of France's political party system. Jean Vampel's decision to run against Camille Baubrac as an unsanctioned candidate from the same party undermines the "tending-towardness" (85) of the authority of the political party.² Both the concept and content of *Chute* highlight instances where the "natural" tendency toward a specific type of organization is effectively brought to its knees by the actions of a few persons who depart from the "natural" order of things. In this dissertation, my research provides examples of film and literary texts which act as agents of national disorientation. Each work elucidates micro-level interactions with the structures of the nation unearthing tensions and revealing alternative national realities as experienced by individual citizens versus the realities that are espoused and propagated by the nation.

²I establish the term "tending-towardness" from Ahmed's quote: "In other words, subjects are *required* to "tend toward" some objects and not others as a condition of familial as well as social love" (85).

The concepts of *la maladie française* or *le mal français* began to appear with more frequency in the 1970's and refer to the macro-level cultural and economic shifts that rippled through French society. While it might be easy to equate the term "disorientation" with *malaise*, I see disorientation as the micro-level, or individual and family-level manifestation of the *malaise française*. Ahmed explains that disorientation results in a "feeling of distance" (166); distance between the expected and the lived experiences of Frenchness is where disorientation resides. She argues that, "disorientation involves contact with things, but a contact in which 'things' slip as a proximity that does not hold things in place" (166). The things of which she writes might be material objects, passports, school supplies, trash, agricultural products, art, or they may be immaterial things such as names, rituals, traditions, foreign languages, faith, or tourism. Each of these items is a point of contact in the works I examine in this dissertation. Each protagonist, narrator, and character either becomes disoriented through his or her interaction(s) with some combination of these "things" or they use them to disorient their situations.

Disorientation stems from one's distance from the national cultural rhetoric; it can be for the sake of self-preservation or even self-assertion as an other or disorientation can be the result of de facto ostracizing. Self-preservation requires a proactive ignoring of cultural expectations for the sake of maintaining authenticity and personal realities. Ahmed is again useful here by relating the idea of "queer moments" to the development of disorientation, "queer moments happen when things fail to cohere. In such moments of failure, when things do not stay in place or cohere as place, disorientation happens" (170). This idea is particularly applicable to my analysis of the experiences of *Beur* citizens and their difficulties in establishing a hybrid space for their particular cultural expressions. Yet, it is not only culturally hybrid citizens who must declare themselves French through their actions and words. Any person, family, or minority,

who does not readily integrate into the French landscape, either willfully or through exclusionary national practices, is an active transmitter of national disorientation. The roots of national disorientation develop in cultural productions where poetic and artistic licenses permit alternative, yet private sentiments of national belonging to ascend to public significance. It is therefore the central aim of this dissertation to elaborate the trajectory of the contemporary French nation through a variety of cultural artifacts which demonstrate an increase in the agency of private individuals in publicly re-defining French identity.

1.2 MODELING THE NATION: AN EVOLUTION OF THE DEFINITION OF THE NATION

Theories of what and when the nation is are abundant. From the earliest traces dating back to medieval times to the reign of Louis XIV during which his consolidation and centralization of power around the crown created a central beacon of French identity, the nation has been omnipresent in all discussions of France and French culture. So pervasive is the nation in France that questioning its authority or impact on diverse sectors of the population has generally proven to be a futile endeavor. That is not to say that the nation has not at times been challenged, but its endurance and unending presence is demonstrative of its vast reach and implications in the lives of all French citizens. What can be said of the current state of affairs in France? Cultural productions are ever more attuned to expressing alternative ways of being French and living Frenchness; while these alternatives often expose deep divisions in contemporary society, they are less and less unconventional and slowly becoming the norm. If cultural productions attest to changing norms, how then is the existence of these alternative films and literary works

reconciled with the continued existence of the nation? These questions fuel my research bolstered by several major theories of the nation, which shape my understanding of the role of the nation in everyday life.

In 1882, Ernest Renan theorized, in his pivotal essay “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?”, what a nation is in large part by defining what it is not: “L’homme n’est ni esclave de sa race, ni sa langue, ni sa religion, ni du cours des fleuves, ni de la direction des chaînes de montagne” (52). He predicates that the nation is not founded upon tangible markers or matters of cheap commonalities, such as language and religion, but rather a “conscience morale qui s’appelle une nation” (52). The nation then for Renan is a feeling, an intangible entity with highly tangible effects on those who espouse its existence and very material affects which act as receptacles of national memory. In other words, the nation cannot merely arise from the soil it exists upon but rather from the collective will of the people who inhabit the soil; as such, the nation should be blind to ethnic and racial difference in exchange for collective cohesion. Renan upbraids the use of race as a geopolitical basis for a population’s unified existence under a political flag: “La vérité est qu’il n’y a pas de race pure et que faire reposer la politique sur l’analyse ethnographique, c’est la faire porter sur une chimère. Les plus nobles pays, l’Angleterre, la France, l’Italie, sont ceux où le sang est le plus mêlé” (42). His insistence that France is a country of great *mixité*, the denial of which is farcical and runs counter to the actualities of the contemporary failures of universalism. However, Renan’s statement does clearly warn of the political instability that stems from false ethnic basis for the French nation. Today is one of the most racially and ethnically diverse countries in Europe with millions of citizens claiming heritage from the former colonies in the Maghreb, sub-Saharan Africa, and Southeast Asia; these citizens have retained much of their cultural heritage resulting in an extremely multicultural

amalgamation. Yet, in today's France, Renan's long-standing theory no longer holds up to the *faits divers* and harsh cultural and economic realities du jour.

Renan's theory of the nation as a "conscience morale" is one possible starting point for tracking how France has become disoriented. At the time of Renan's writing, France had a huge colonial presence abroad and domestically was still primarily an agrarian society with wealth concentrated around urban centers dotting the landscape. Despite Renan's optimistic repulsion of race and religion as defining criteria of national membership, his theory largely ignored the colonies and any justification of their existence. Fast forward 100 plus years and unfortunately, race and religion remain major factors in the unrest in France. Grand projects of integration for the cause of this "conscience morale" have largely failed and have even further alienated the very populations it attempted to "make" French. Moreover, since the 1960's, national economic strategies have consistently failed several generations of youth who have lost faith in upward mobility outside of the caste-like system of *les grandes écoles*. Though Renan's definition of the nation remains useful, it is no longer fully sufficient.

Political theorist Etienne Balibar's work on the nation correlates the nation to the structures of race and class, which Renan saw as irrelevant to the national project. In *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities* (1991), Balibar, alongside Immanuel Wallerstein, write of the emergence of the nation out of economic and class struggles. They argue that, "[the nation is] an effective ideological form, in which the imaginary singularity of national formations is constructed daily, by moving back from the present into the past" (87). This grab for scraps of the past that are pieced together to create a seamless origin story is a form of orientation around which the nation is grounded. The nation through its commemoration of objects, places, and histories of past glories, victories, and heroes, orients citizens towards an image of France

that supports its continued existence in a very diverse contemporary landscape. Sara Ahmed notes the “binding” nature of orientations through the perception of objects, which are grouped together:

Orientations are binding as they bind objects together. The move from object to object is shaped by perception—the gaze that turns to an object brings other objects into view, even if they are only dimly perceived—as well as by how orientations make things near, which affects what can be perceived. (88)

An orientation of the nation then would be a collection of certain objects (of the nation) in lieu of others, which would create a perception or an aura of importance around these said objects. By focusing on these objects and not *those* objects, the nation is perpetuated along a specific perception of its definition. The post-war urban planning of Parisian suburbs is one example of how proximity versus distance reinforces a national orientation. The consolidation of the sites of commemoration: museums, statues, parks, etc. near the white, Christian or atheist, educated, and moneyed French citizens of Paris creates the perception of association between France’s greatness and history with this population. The suburban estrangement of immigrants and non-Christian French citizens of color from the former colonies reinforces this orientation and its blanched perception of Frenchness. The fortified social boundaries between city and *banlieue* as a case study is not as exclusively linked to perceptions of difference as one might be lead to believe. Ahmed claims the contrary:

Nearness is not then simply a matter of “what” is perceived. The nearness of objects to each other comes to be lived as what is already given, as a matter of how the domestic is arranged. What puts objects near depends on histories, on how “things” arrive, and on how they gather in their very availability as things to

“do things” with. (88)

Therefore, the “given” ordering of the city and *banlieue* in turn influences the very arrangement of the objects of their perceptions. The city, i.e. Paris, is systemically perceived as the center of French life because of the grouping of intrinsically valuable objects of the nation within a specific proximal zone. These objects are gathered near one another because of their perceived importance to the nation, which is an act of distinction between near and far.

Balibar explains that beyond creating an imaginary pre-existing national community that pre-dates state institutions, the central problem of the nation is, “to make the people produce itself continually as national community” (89). He argues that once the nation embedded itself into the “private lives” of the community through the management of daily life and family structures, the nation became somewhat indispensable. Therefore, the encroachment of the nation and state into the governance of the individual, what Michel Foucault called “la biopolitique,” is what ultimately anchored the nation’s existence and what keeps it alive today. What I am most interested in looking at in this study is what it looks like when individuals turn away from the nation and for what reasons. There is a zeitgeist of the last 25-30 years that has allowed for national disorientation to become more visible in the public eye and cultural productions. The grand projects of re-building and modernizing France in the post-war period have settled comfortably into retirement and the reality of postcolonial immigration and the resultant demographic shifts have opened the way for new perceptions of Frenchness to flourish in recent cultural productions. While this dissertation remains focused on this specific time period, one artifact in this dissertation, *Le Gone du Chaâba*, appears as a temporal outlier. The late-eighties publication of this text, which tells the story of an early 1960’s upbringing, does not seem to coalesce with the other highly contemporary works. I chose to incorporate this novel to

demonstrate the some of the earliest examples of national disorientation in its contemporary configuration wherein the idea of “nature vs. nature” as the structure for the replication of Frenchness first collided in former colonial immigrant populations. My approach to understanding contemporary Frenchness—through the concept of disorientation—emphasizes a new era of identity expressions through new literary genres and topics and new cinematic approaches.

1.3 INCORPORATING THE NATION: TOWARDS A NEW MODEL OF FRENCHNESS

Scholars have been hypothesizing the “what” and the “who” of the French nation for centuries. Scholarship on the nation and its decline in France is as vast as it can be limiting in what is permitted into its scope. Theories of the nation will never be static as they must remain relevant with the on the ground, lived, daily experiences of the nation. Where I set myself apart from Renan and Balibar is in my focus on micro-level manifestations of national disorientation; how these broad theoretical assertions trickle down to the individual and become apparent in the minutiae of everyday life. The image and objects (of the nation) promoted by the French state versus those depicted in the media versus those highlighted in nation scholarship each differ greatly from each other; the cinematic and literary interpretation(s) of the lived experiences of common French citizen is where I find disorientation most apparent and most interesting.

The works that I have selected support my overall argument by locating the nation within

the realm of the mundane, in interpersonal interactions, and private possessions. The reliance upon individual sentiments of national belonging or mis-belonging within each work shows the nation's persistent powerful role in identity production. The broad themes of objects/memory, tourism/sexuality, and autofiction/motherhood with which I engage respectively in chapters three and four reveal a common thread throughout: a disconnect between personal and public perceptions of national identity as they enter zones of public engagement. Ahmed uses Mary Louise Pratt's notion of a "contact zone" which she defines as "a space of contact between cultures that is also where bodies encounter other bodies" (qtd. on 148) to discuss the incorporation of foreign objects into the domestic space:

The contact between objects put more than objects near, insofar as objects reside or dwell within cultures as embodiments of their history, and even take the shape of this dwelling. Such contact may be *asymmetrical* and yet it affects both 'sides', creating cultural forms that are not simply one or the other.³ (148)

The multivalent aspect that objects and persons generate by circulating between different "contact zones" is what gives disorientation its initial agency. The nation would not allow for multiple perceptions of what it sets out as the desired perception; Ahmed reasons that the contact between foreign and domestic (i.e. national) objects and, I would add, persons, is what initiates a distortion of overarching orientations. Disorientation in the "contact zone" is a unifying mechanism that creates a safe space for cultural difference; however, as Ahmed suggests, "we need to avoid is the presumption that "contact" itself provides a common ground" (2006, 149). She further clarifies that this "contact zone" remains a divisive one based on "what we 'do' and 'do not' come into contact with [in this zone]" (149). And what different persons do and do not

³Italics are mine.

come into contact with in this ‘contact zone’ is based what Ahmed calls ‘inheritance’ (148) or set of passed down values, objects, histories, which limit persons to what is realistically available to them. This funneling of access is an orientation that *becomes* a disorientation through the disruption of perceptions in the public sphere. To this effect, Ahmed ponders, [if] “disorientation [is] a bodily sign of ‘dis/organization’, [if it is] the failure of an organization to hold things in place?” (158). I argue against Ahmed’s question by demonstrating the agency of individual subjects whose focus is on their own lives.

Throughout this dissertation, private memory takes on patrimonial value through personal possessions, tourism affords access to sexual pleasures constrained by nationally espoused mores, and autofictive writings of mother-child relationships relate a very private experience in very public way. National disorientation is what happens in this space of the in-between public and private selves where ownership of national identity and influence becomes a grey area of mutual influence. Essentially, what the collection of films and novels I have assembled here demonstrates is that the nation is far more malleable than imagined.

I am not working with the concept of universalism here in this dissertation, because my works demonstrate that it is an already failed concept. The personal experiences of dissatisfaction, racism, xenophobia, and erasure or ignorance of community memory demonstrate that universalism is not only dead, but that its persistence can also be detrimental to contemporary society. The films and texts I work with are not necessarily revolutionary artifacts of the nation; they do, however, all point towards a deep disconnect between the community and the individual. The narrators and characters I analyze highlight the limitations of universalism as an orientation of the nation by making alternative manifestations of Frenchness visible and viable. I employ the term disorientation to carve out a new line of thinking about how the

internal and external conflicts of multi-layered cultural identities reflect increased tensions and loss of importance of the French nation.

1.4 ADAPTING TO THE TIMES: CONTEMPORARY ANECDOTES OF DISORIENTATION

Despite the nightly twinkling lights of the Eiffel Tower serving as the perfect *tire-l'oeil* for tourists, France has lost its spark; or, perhaps, it is better to say that this loss has finally become more apparent and publicized. The rise and spread of Islamic extremism, political disillusionment, the rise of *le Front National*, a sluggish economy, an increasingly diverse population, and the decline of prominence in global politics has instigated national anxiety. Furthermore, this *maladie française* or undeniable mood of uncertainty has made *la nation française* in the twenty-first century all the more difficult to define. Author Erik Orsenna astutely formulates a question of identity applicable for these times:

On ne sait plus qui sont les Français, on ne sait plus combien il y a de France, où sont les clivages, où sont les durées, les horloges. Fronder ou non, libéraliser ou non, se situer plus à gauche ou plus à droite, on ne sait plus ce que cela veut dire! Être plus à gauche, est-ce vouloir davantage d'impôts? Est-ce bétonner l'emploi de ceux qui en ont, donc fermer la porte à ceux qui n'en ont pas? Est-ce cela, être de gauche? On se croirait dans la chanson de Stromae, *Papaoutai—Papa, ou t'es?* —À remplacer par: La France, où t'es? (17)

Even in posing the question, “La France, où t'es?”, there is an immediate implication of a previously existing national unity and implies that there is something to be regained and

reinstated if only it can found. This implication that the pretext of universalism is suddenly a failed project lies on the false pretense that it was ever successful. Regardless, since the turn of the millennium, French cultural productions—especially film and literature—have a noticeable commonality: they confront French identity boldly at its source, Paris.

It is not necessarily surprising then that since the dawn of the twenty-first century Paris has in many ways become a new sort of beacon, of violence, protest, and political extremism. The *banlieues* of Paris in the early 00's were a hotbed of riots and police brutality, which made already overcrowded and neglected areas more treacherous. These zones of violence erupted as reactions to extreme social inequalities that have continued to keep generations of French citizens from full participation in the greater French community. These violent clashes and the political vitriol spewed by two generations of Le Pen(s) have created two divergent forms of disorientation though their existence fuels each other's hate. The nationalist discourse of the *Front National* effectively seeks to disorient the nation once again by erasing the efforts of universalism, re-establishing an ethnic-basis for citizenship, and corroding France's international engagements—not all forms of disorientation are benevolent. Each film and text that I engage with draws attention to the diverse ways one can express Frenchness today. Not all manners are flattering, but they do exist and are just as deserving of scholarly attention.

1.5 CONNECTING THE DOTS: E PLURIBUS UNUM

National identity garners meaning from many sources of patriotism: images, objects, and events that tell the imagined story of common origins. I have chosen to organize this dissertation into three broad chapters which each offer examples of cultural productions that disorient commonly

advanced national images. Chapter two examines the relationship between objects and memory, looking at how different actors engage with objects of national values and affect change on both the object and its commemoration. Chapter three looks at tourism and sexuality and how these two heavily commodified activities act as a barometer of the French psyche. Tourism being one of the largest economic sectors in France and sexuality intrinsic to personal well-being, Houellebecq combines these two and presents the idea that (sexual) happiness is no longer feasible in France but only beyond its shores. Chapter four conducts a close reading of the mother-child role in the development of roots and national identity.

I have chosen to study these cultural artifacts together for two primary reasons: the general timeframe and the use of banal, everyday experiences as the sword of disorientation. Chronologically, I look to the last thirty years as a time of great political, social, and technological change in both France and across the globe. The creep of the repercussions of the end of colonization, the collapse of communism, the rapid advancement of economic globalization, and the rise of terrorism and sectarian violence in France and *l'Occident* as a reaction to imperialistic structures. The selected timeframe bridges two centuries and two millennia, has been a period filled with incredible and rapid social and technological advancements, which are present in all films and texts in this study. None of these texts or films could have been produced or written outside of this time period as they each implicate technological objects as markers of status or even simplification of everyday tasks. The political shifts in France (ping-ponging from left to right with the increase of far-right sentiments as evidenced in the two-time presence of a *Front national* candidate in *le deuxième tour*, the increasing reach of the European Union, and realignment of world powers over the last thirty years has ushered in both a period of heretofore unknown and immeasurable freedom of

movement and goods. These issues have also caused certain states to reinforce their borders as legal (and illegal) immigrants have entered their territories, changing the make-up of their populations and causing potential economic burdens.

Lastly, the face of the family has changed drastically over the last thirty years, with social mores being more accepting of single-parent households, multigenerational households, and same-sex couples. The slowing of the birth rate amongst certain sectors of French society (non-religious, Caucasian) versus its increase in others (Maghreb descent, Muslim) has also made literary and cinematic audiences more receptive to works that portray their lifestyles and families in more realistic and community-affirming ways.

Ernest Renan argued that, “The essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things” (qtd. in Kritzman 7). Across all of the texts and films in this dissertation, the authors, directors, producers, actors, and protagonists do, in fact, have many things in common: language, setting, and common experiences of having lived in France. It is useful here to remind of Renan’s argument that these common characteristics do not institute a nation, rather it is the aspect of forgetting that makes the nation so persistent and why the focus on the individual and their body in these works is so destabilizing. Sara Ahmed equates disorientation with the body and its loss of place: “[disorientation is] a bodily feeling of losing one’s place, and an effect of the loss of a place: it can be a violent feeling, and a feeling that is affected by violence, or shaped by violence directed toward the body” (160). This “loss of place” and “violence” can take numerous forms as shown in the following chapters. For example, in the film *Le Nom des gens* (2010), the violence succumbed by the protagonist’s mother is administrative; at the *Mairie*, she is forcefully reminded of her family’s traumatic history of deportation when she cannot provide an original

birth certificate. In the autofictive novel, *Le Gone du Chaâba* (1986), the violence is architectural, when the family is practically forced to move from their shantytown into an anonymous and foreign-seeming apartment block built for immigrants. Violence takes the form of artifice in the novel *La carte et le territoire* (2010) through a repurposing and masking of Paris and its less savory realities all in attempts to uphold the romantic and whimsical vintage Parisian image that attracts millions of tourists and their money to France each year. Disorientation is not only about the variety of the violence in these examples, it is also loss of place as a residual effect which leaves the protagonist “homeless”—not in the sense of the *heimatlos* or *obdachlos*—but errant and ungrounded.⁴ Ahmed argues that, “Disorientation involves failed orientations: bodies inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape, or use objects that do not extend their reach” (160) The three works mentioned just above, along with the remaining cultural artifacts in this study, demonstrate how spaces and objects are formidable purveyors of national identity in the ways they are curated, manipulated, and established as orientations to be followed. The forced reminder of painful episodes of personal history, indelibly marked by national historical events that have been ignored or conveniently commemorated in a neatly curated form, is an act of disorientation because as Ahmed writes, [it] “shatters our involvement in a world” (177). Taking the personal and making it the national without replacing one for the other is a form of disorientation that is a prevalent throughout these works and permits a joint reading of these texts.

⁴*Heimatlos*, meaning without homeland in the sense of having lost contact with one’s origins and *obdachlos*, meaning figuratively, homeless as in a person who lives on the streets, but literally, can be translated to “without a roof”. The protagonists and characters I allude above are not without dwelling, but they are unable to reconcile the space they inhabit with a sense of “homeness”.

1.6 PLOT(TING) THE NATION: ARTIFACTS OF DISORIENTATION

This dissertation is comprised of three lengthy chapters, each of which contends with a specific aspect of national disorientation. Each chapter is further divided among three cultural artifacts each containing close readings of literary works or films to expand each chapter's focus; this format allows for organizational uniformity throughout with ample evidentiary analysis for the themes of each chapter. While certainly not necessary, given the chosen timeframe of my analysis, it would be neglectful not to incorporate at least one genre that digital technology has afforded. More importantly, I have chosen to include both literature and film in this dissertation because of the varying representational strategies that present Frenchness as disoriented.

Chapter two, "Objectifying the nation in *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, *L'heure d'été*, and *des gens*," engages with three films from the early twenty-first century all of which demonstrate a triangular appropriation of memory onto objects between national (read: political and even historical), social, and personal significance. I apply the terms "terre," "terroir," and "territoire" sequentially to each of the films being analyzed to extoll the physicality and spatiality of objects in the creation and perpetuation of Frenchness. Each of these three terms emphasizes slightly different registers of disorientation in these films, which cinematic portrayals afford through both spoken and visual cues.

Through Agnès Varda's *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* (2001), I explore how waste—both physical objects and metaphorically-speaking, society's most neglected members—becomes mindlessly discarded social detritus which is nevertheless subject to the micro-management of national policies. This film shows how one is both simultaneously and perpetually bound to and rejected by the state through venues and objects of interaction such as agricultural refuse, overproduction of consumer goods, and choice of dwelling location. Varda intersperses the rag-

tag aesthetic of this film with polished, edited scenes of high culture and museum artworks which further drives the divide between the realities of what the nation curates as French and what is the lived reality on the “terre.”

L'heure d'été (2010) intrinsically links family artifacts and the estimation of their value (emotional, financial, patrimonial) to the nation. Families are considered by some to be the heteronormative building blocks of the nation; the health and wellbeing of the family being a barometer of the national family at large. The Berthier family mirrors the realities of modern French society where loyalty to the idea of France plays second fiddle to the necessities of surviving and thriving in the global economy. Thus, when confronted with dealing their family's estate, the adult siblings' attachment(s) to some very valuable pieces of historical art arouse discussions of what an object's true value is and how [the object] is an agent of identity formation. Ultimately, the family's decision to donate their valuable works to the Musée d'Orsay demonstrates how their personal possessions are imbued with significance for the entire nation, blurring the lines between private and communal. I evoke the term “terroir” for this film as the objects, possessions, and artifacts belonging to the family synthesize into specific identity and feeling that can only be experienced in this home, with the objects it contains and the persons who interact with them. When the objects are displayed at the Orsay, the patrimonial significance of each piece erases the personal residue that had built up over generations of use and interaction.

Le Nom des gens employs the name as its object of inquiry. This romantic comedy delves into the social and historical networks embedded into one's name linking it [the name] and its beholder to a much broader national context. Baya Benmahoud and Arthur Martin are onomastically-speaking polar opposites, the former name bearing itself as foreign, not French,

whilst the latter name appears to be so French as to be void of further consideration. It is, however, revealed that Arthur has deeply buried family secrets (his mother was born Jewish and raised in an orphanage after her parents were apprehended and sent to the camps), which link him to the national trauma of the Shoah. Baya, too, struggles with the burden of family memory and national trauma. As the daughter of an Algerian immigrant and a *bobo* French mother,⁵ her allegiance to French identity is one that is fraught with guilt, shame and anger, but also thrust upon her based on her appearance and voice. The relationship between names and national memory inevitably upends any semblance of identity stability and proves how the nation penetrates every aspect of one's life.

In chapter three, I conduct a close reading of three novels by Michel Houellebecq, texts which appropriate tourism as a marker and sculptor of national identity. Tourism both perpetuates and distorts the nation through the residue of stereotypes of Frenchness, nationally-commodified tastes and preferences and the sexualization of leisure time. I show how tourism extends national myths through glossy images and attractive promises of exotic activities and “authentic” experiences of local culture. Tourism, sex, and national identity in *Lanzarote* coalesce around the potency of protagonist Michel's “tourism-time” fling with a German lesbian couple. The temporary escape from his monotonous single lifestyle in Paris reveals deep-seated linkages between sexuality and national identity. The consensual adult relations between Michel and the German lesbians are contrasted by the sallow misery of a Belgian tourist named Rudi, whose inability to partake in the delights of the flesh is not a physiological dysfunction but the result of national and social failures that follow him well beyond the borders of Belgium. Rudi

⁵“Bobo” is an abbreviation of *bourgeois-bohème*, which typically refers to a style of dress that is shabby chic in nature.

swaps one failed tourism experience with another attempt to disassociate from the failed nation: by joining the Raelian cult. This drastic act inevitably fails in a grand reminder of the omnipresence of the nation and its jurisdiction over its citizens, even those who have socially and culturally disengaged themselves from the national narrative.

The second text, *Plateforme* demonstrates how, in reality, tourism constructs a divisive caste system amongst participants: those who buy into a cultural suspension of belief and those who see through the artifice, but choose to participate anyway. As in *Lanzarote*, sex and tourism remain central to the expression of national identity. The tourism industry substitutes the nation in both identifying and reproducing standards of Frenchness—as presented in travel brochures. It is only once the narrator, also named Michel, embarks upon his first group travel adventure to Thailand that his cynicism towards France and his fellow citizens/tourists becomes apparent and enduring. Michel surmises that his travel-mates are victims of sexual dissatisfaction, which prevents them from embracing the leisure aspect of tourism. This national trend has caused France, and particularly Paris, to become socially dysfunctional.

Sexual freedom and satisfaction is presented as a human right in *Eldorado Aphrodite*, an exclusive, hedonistic vacation club that Jean-Yves and Valérie—alongside Michel—establishes in Thailand to facilitate holistic sexual satisfaction through free love without social bonds. A massive Islamic terrorist attack near the facility kills tens of beachgoers including Michel's lost interest, Valérie, though he ultimately survives unscathed. This seminal event in his life is a metaphor for the death of France; he can no longer return to Paris and face the depressing aura that permeates the entire country. Michel makes the decision to return to Thailand, where his status as French "citizen-subject" forces him to live in limbo, one of his own choosing in which he remains French in passport only, forsaking all other implications of Frenchness.

La carte et le territoire takes an inward turn looking at how domestic tourism has turned France and more specifically, Paris, into tourist havens with little space left for French citizens. The whimsical images of a by-gone France used in tourism marketing are purposefully ignorant of current social realities and render the touristic descriptions of France far more appealing than what is found. The protagonist and artist, Jed Martin, foreshadows this with his photographic exhibition, *La carte est plus intéressante que le territoire*, wherein he presents large-format, close-up photographs of Michelin road maps. The perception of France or the image of France, as he suggests, is more interesting and more beautiful than the land itself. The orientation of the consumer's gaze toward these cartographic illustrations of France, which Ahmed uses Said's argument that "geographies [are] "man-made" (113) to explicate, devalues the nation's role in representing itself because the Guide Michelin usurps this role. The Guide Michelin exports an image of France that ensures through its maps and guidebooks that its readers observe its carefully cultivated orientations. Ahmed describes this experience of being directed along certain paths and not others as a participatory act, which reifies the idea of place, of what it is and is *not*: "To orientate oneself by facing a direction is to participate in a longer history in which certain 'directions' are 'given to' certain places: they become *the East*, *the West*; [they become France]" (113). Therefore, it might be said that the Guide Michelin is in many ways better acquainted with the realities of France today and consequently more astutely defines the imagined image of France better than government agencies.

The space of limbo in all three of Houellebecq's texts is the very dwelling place of disorientation in which there is neither, full disengagement from the nation, nor full participation. The decided distancing from all forms of community, the lingering in the present, ignoring of the past (not the kind of historiographic forgetting necessary for the nation to continue to exist)

points to disorientation as the only possible means of existence for Houellebecq's characters. Furthermore, his use of death, be it social or literal, as the only means of true personal salvation for his characters is counter to his narrators who never die, but persistently subsist and wait—for what, for who, for when, we do not know. These narrators exemplify disorientation in their boundedness to legislated national subjectivity and passive refusal of the indoctrination of national mores, objects, and orientations.

In chapter four, “(M)othering the nation: alterity, language and birthplace in mother-child autofiction”, I conduct a close reading of three texts of mother-child focused autofiction: Azouz Begag's *Le Gone du Chaâba* (1986), Nina Bouraoui's *Mes mauvaises pensées* (2005), and Marie Darrieussecq's *Le pays* (2005). As self-referential texts, each narrator relies heavily on family cultural heritage as a keystone of personal identity. Their foreign lineage, in spite of France's policy of universalism, is immediately at odds with the French nation. The narrators label themselves as “French” either by birth, political status, or integration; in doing so, these texts interrogate how, when and why one is or becomes French. These divergent orientations towards French identity produce tensions between their private and public personas as I argue through three approaches: genre, language, and birthplace.

The very nature of autofiction grants the author/narrator with unfettered access to their individual experiences of Frenchness. I argue that these works of autofiction paint the fluidity of national identity as the norm in contemporary France, thereby weakening the agency that national subjectivity imposes upon it. Gill Rye and Amaleena Damlé suggest that, “subjectivity, in the twenty-first century climate of unprecedented globalisation and technological development, is always already deterritorialised, set apart and elsewhere. Hybrid, nomadic, displaced subjects are never at home, or entirely at ease” (9). The amalgamation of social trends

in the twenty-first century can be alienating, yet the narrators in these three texts demonstrate how simultaneous circulation in multiple worlds of subjectivity results in a fractious internalized identity and a permanently hybridized exterior.

In *Le Gone du Chaâba*, the young Azouz exemplifies the struggle that young *Beur* children often undergo as cultural pawns between their immigrant parents and their early foray into cultural integration in the French education system. Set in the early 1960's, *Le Gone* recounts life in the *Chaâba* an autonomous shantytown on the outskirts of Lyon where Azouz grows up. The *Chaâba* is structured, both socially *and* architecturally, on the Algerian culture and values of the community members who emigrated there. Standards of hygiene, discipline, and cuisine differ greatly from the surrounding French community causing friction between the elders and the young school children who are being indoctrinated in local French schools. Not knowing where to align himself between what is being taught as correct manners by the clean, white French-speaking teachers at school and his Arab-speaking parents whose domestic practices and skin tones do not match his lessons on France, Azouz is considered an outsider at school and a traitor at home. After Azouz naively reveals the details of an illegal halal butchering service taking place at the *Chaâba*, the community is disbanded and forced into “desirable” apartment blocks with the utilities and amenities expected by white, middle-class French citizens.

Azouz, far more than his siblings and fellow *Chaâbi* children, becomes French in his manners and linguistic register; he shuns Arabic in public and succumbs to embarrassment from his mother's uneducated ways and broken French. Linguistically, Azouz's mother reifies his otherness despite the strides he makes in school; society simply does not allow one to ignore their mother's origins in its culture labeling.

Mes mauvaises pensées is a stream of conscience recounting of therapy sessions in which (Nina), the unnamed autofictive narrator, delves into the terribly knotted threads of her identity. The child of an Algerian father and a French mother, she was born in Rennes, France, but raised in Algeria; she is a national misfit par excellence. Too white to be Algerian, too distant from France to be French, (Nina) reveals how she is not the identitary chameleon of *Le Nom des gens*' Baya, but an irreconcilable amalgamation of her parents' homelands and upbringings.

Her birthplace, though she only spent her first six months there, gives more credit to her Frenchness than she can bear, where she feels such regret and shame for not being more physiologically and linguistically connected to her childhood in Algeria. (Nina) frequently relates France to illness and Algeria to youth and well-being and her own physical and emotional presence is the "contact zone" of both worlds. If we consider this "zone" as an action, as being in a state of disorientation, then the response to what Ahmed asks, "What do we do, if disorientation, itself becomes worldly or becomes what is given?" (159) must be the creation of a new identity beholden to neither side that rejects fixed categories of national affiliation.

In *Le pays*, Marie Rivière, Darrieussecq's narrative representative, embarks on a journey of re-discovery in her estranged homeland the fictive, *pays yuoangui*. The novel is not pure autofiction, but the self-narration of her disorienting experiences of being a linguistic and cultural foreigner in her own birthplace. The very form of the novel itself embodies the sense of displacement in bilateral voices; a dual-time narration of her return to *le pays yuoangui* and her newly discovered pregnancy. The narrator and author are frequently depicted in moments of limbo in which her very grounding disappears and she is neither French nor yuoangui, mother nor daughter, neither single nor wife. The cultural traditions of her homeland further exacerbate this sentiment, for example, in the *Maison des morts*, a funerarium where one "visits" with

uncanny, realistic hologram versions of deceased friends and family.

2.0 OBJECTIFYING THE NATION IN IN LES GLANEURS ET LA GLANEUSE, L'HEURE D'ÉTÉ, AND LE NOM DES GENS

To investigate our relation to objects is thus to investigate the very structure of self and identity. (Jacobs and Malpas 286).

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In the non-fiction book, *Faute d'identité* (2011), Michka Assayas, Olivier Assayas's brother, recounts his experience of losing his passport and the bureaucratic fallout that follows. The process of re-doing his papers takes him on a long, difficult and often insulting journey through the institutions of French bureaucracy. Assayas was born and raised in France by immigrant parents, but never considered himself anything other than French—it was never something he ever questioned or doubted, it simply was—until the day he is forced to respond to the question: “Comment êtes-vous français, Monsieur?” (24) This simple question dredges up countless possible responses varying from the bureaucratic to the sarcastic to the genealogical to the historical; no single response could ever adequately engage with the monumental question being posed. *Comment est-on français?* is a question that underscores the central focus of this entire dissertation, which for this chapter, I frame my response through cinema. In the case of Assayas, a revelatory storehouse of documents, from birth certificates to marriage licenses to travel

manifests, attempts to provide physical evidence of his *françité* in the eyes of the state. But what of other physical (or invisible) objects that “make” someone French or reinforce his or her Frenchness? Is *le passeport français* the most symbolically and politically imbued object of Frenchness or can other objects also invoke French identity in similar ways? If so, how, what, when, and why? The embodiment of national memory within objects of seemingly banal value is where I first begin my research into national disorientation.

Pierre Nora’s work on *lieux de mémoires* surveys the purpose of sites of memory (statues, monuments, plaques, etc.—physical objects, real places) throughout France as they relate to the construction of the historical events they intend to commemorate. He argues: “Memory takes root in the concrete, in spaces, gestures, images, and objects” (9) and defines memory as “the gigantic and breathtaking storehouse of a material stock of what would be important for us to remember, an unlimited repertoire of what might need to be recalled” (13). The memory of which he writes is national and collective in nature; each instance, object, and act attempts to link together distinct occasions and historical objects within the vast network that supports the reification of French identity. In this chapter, I look specifically at the objects showcased in three films as the point of convergence between memory and identity. The result of object interactions is a shunning of the imagined cohesiveness of the nation, which Benedict Anderson argues is “imagined as a *community* because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (7). The objects discussed in this chapter debunk the notion of a deep connectedness between the involved agents due to the variances in personal and family memories that arise through interactions with the objects. In *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse*, *L’heure d’été*, and *Le Nom des gens*, the source of national disorientation intrinsic to each film can be found through things. Things,

artifacts—or as I more often call them in this chapter—objects are the sites upon which various actors have projected their individual and collective identities. Each of these films contextualizes the traces of the nation ensconced in objects, both of a tangible and intangible nature, by homing in on the daily and banal interactions of their characters. These routines and rituals associated with objects create a network of memories that travel with and throughout object-actor engagements.

In Varda's *Les glaneurs*, gleaning was once an act symbolic of collectivity and community vitality, whereas now it has mutated into an individualized act whereby different sectors of the population have repurposed and reinvigorated the meaning of gleaning. While gleaning for some is an act of defiance, art or continuity of a by-gone era, for others, it is an act of those who have been marginalized by globalization and the excesses of contemporary capitalism in France. David Morgan comments that, "most objects acquire their significance through engagement with people and an object's users interactions with other people and objects" (101). The cinematic presentation of object-owner relationships as vessels of collective memory and national identification drive the individual appraisals of the nation in my analysis. Deciphering what makes an object a point of national inquiry will be based on the "veneers of significance" (Morgan 102) or the residue, which remains from interactions with particular objects, whether it be the relics of a lost social art: gleaning (*Les glaneurs*), the valuation of kinship through artwork (*L'heure*) or given names and their agency (*Le Nom*). Olsen supports the study of objects in *In Defense of Things* maintaining that, "it is the social practices in which artifacts are engaged which determine how remembrance is socially experienced and mapped out" (100). These theories guide me to the central question in this chapter: How then do these three films affirm the presence of the nation through cultural objects and how do interactions with these objects then

subsequently divest the nation of meaning?

All three films in this chapter engage with national identity through deconstructive representations of normative French society: the discarding of disfigured vegetables, the dissolution of family heritage, and the struggles that come with nomenclatural stereotypes. The on-screen interactions between objects and their users/owners reveal a vast stockhouse of hidden meanings and memories that must be disentangled to better understand how meanings and memory weave in and out of state-promoted concepts of French identity. In all three films, the objects in focus are cast through socially-perceived and nationally administrated norms of usage. Objects are flexible in ways that, for example, thoughts or persons cannot be; as inanimate things, they can only be given meaning from external sources and their placement, usage and governance are all external to themselves. Objects are brought into existence by humans and then granted meaning(s) through a series of cultural specifications that change over time and space. Their inanimate nature, even the “living” vegetables in *Les glaneurs*, is essential to understanding their significance in the evolution of a French national identity because objects only take on the meaning that is given to them at any one point in time. Just as historical figures and events can be forgotten, mis-remembered and/or re-commemorated by different groups so can the value of cultural objects; what make objects stand out however is their embeddedness in our understanding of ourselves and our time. Olsen reminds that “things are not just traces or residues of absent presents; they are effectively engaged in assembling and hybridizing periods and epochs. [...] Things make the past, present and tangible” (99). Objects deeply affect our perceptions of our world(s) and open a dialogue for incorporating them into the contemporary landscape of French identity. The physical attributes of an object can age, wither, or even disappear over time forcing its significance and signification to evolve and be adapted in

different times. However, the same might be said of non-physical objects which are subjected to the same forces of aging or distancing from an event, yet tend to slip through the cracks more easily than their visible counterparts.

Each film in this chapter employs a variety of cinematic techniques to depict object-user/owner interactions as part of daily life in French society and also as integral to a much wider grander historical/historicized context. How these interactions evolve over time implies that objects encode social thought just as much as objects become imbued with meaning through constant manipulation. As Morgan contends, “The contact for understanding things, in other words, is practice. But practice understood as the cultivation of embedded or embodied ways of thinking” (101). Practice can be linked also to embodied memory and commemoration that an imagined community brings to their mutually accepted approach towards handling cultural objects. That said, national identity as experienced by the individual, not the community, is of greater import to my argument. The evolution of individual practices highlights divergent points of reference, emotions, and appreciations that can be bestowed upon the cultural objects examined in this chapter. To better frame the practices presented above, I have chosen to schematize each film through one of three categories: *terre*, *terroir*, *territoire*. Each of these terms evince deep political and social ramifications within discussions of the French nation.

These terms necessitate further contextualization with reference to the objects highlighted in this chapter. While *terre*, *terroir*, and *territoire* signify distinct concepts, they are nevertheless each intertwined in their authority over collective identity and remembrance. *Terre* meaning Earth, earth, ground, or dirt conjures a tactile and embedded materiality in relation to the cultural significance of agricultural products in *Les glaneurs*. The re-appropriation of the industry’s discarded agricultural products unveils a fight against capitalist engines and an imbalanced

renaissance of agrarian community values. The scenes focusing on agricultural gleaning of traditional French staples question how the nation is rendered inadequate and disruptive of efforts to institutionalize this age-old tradition of living off the fruits (or vegetables) of the land. *Terroir* is linked to a parcel of land, whose particular soil, climate, and emanating agricultural (and I will later argue the artistic) products cannot be naturally (and sometimes legally) reproduced elsewhere. Both France and the European Union, through a system of certifications attesting to the regional, cultural, and agricultural uniqueness of a product, have institutionalized this concept, such as in France with the label, A.O.C. (Appellation d'origine contrôlée).

In *L'heure*, the term *terroir* explicates the emotive connections between space and objects of the family homestead. The artistic collections of the home are a unique blend of family history, French history and generational succession. Though *terroir* generally applies to the specificity of agricultural products, the unique climate exemplified in the film highlights the specificity of factors that create family dynamics.

Lastly, the term *territoire* is more of a political appellation, which constructs and enforces borders, institutionalizes personal origins, and supersedes specificity through the promotion of social uniformity. The central cultural artifact in *Le Nom*, one's name, is not a material object but is nevertheless just as important as its physical counterparts. A person's name is their most private, longstanding, and most public possession—the public nature of one's names is at the very intersection of *territoire* and personal history. The two main characters of this film, Baya Benmahmoud and Arthur Martin, are built up in a dichotomy in which both must confront the daily repercussion of their names. The burdens, anonymity, and family histories evoked through one's name are salient examples of cultural artifacts, which have daily implications within the *territoire français*.

These symbolic associations (*terre, terroir, territoire*), metonymic for France, bolster my choice of these three films because each associated term allows for an exploration of different types of objects and their interface with the state and nation. Additionally, as these films share a defined temporality from 2000 to 2010, they reflect a trend of dissociation from national constructs and values, or disorientation, by groups of non-normative French. The shape-shifting structures of kinship and interconnectivity and ever-expanding globalization (through international standardizations, relocations, and intermarriages) together undo hard and fast national fundamentals. Individual evocations of memories or belongings as projected onto objects turn them in kaleidoscopes of the nation wherein small shifts create large changes in perceptions. Textual, manual, digital, and administrative interactions with objects act as the keystone of the collective memory in these three films; personal identities and memory morph according to the attention and manipulation specific objects receive.

Later in *Faute d'identité* as Michka Assayas reflects upon his experience of responding to the question “Comment êtes-vous français, Monsieur?” he asserts that “Personne n’est naturellement historien de son propre passé” (54). As I intend to show in this chapter, it is the collection of objects and the residue of memory upon them that best reveal one’s history, Frenchness, or lack thereof.

2.2 LES GLANEURS ET LA GLANEUSE

2.2.1 Introduction

In *Les glaneurs*, the French nation is textualized through a subjective socially oriented documentary (Tyrer) on a subset of economically and artistically marginalized French subjects and their daily realities. Agnès Varda relies on spontaneously available filming sites in fields and on shores and the whims of impromptu interviews and images of people who glean to survive. As many scholars note about the film, the reasons and purposes, as well as the actual objects that are gleaned, are manifold. Some glean for survival or leisure, others for art; what I glean from this film differs from what others have said about this film. The genre, aesthetic value, aftermath, social critiques within and about this film have provided volumes of insight into the powerful place it holds not only in Varda's filmography but also within French society as well. The attention drawn to the re-use of refuse has arguably opened up society's eyes to a forgotten, once common act and even breathed a sense of cool into this often dirty act. However, what is lacking in the scholarship (Fischer; Powrie; Tyrer) is sufficient attention to the traces of nation and Frenchness inherent within Varda's "road movie".⁶ In particular, I am interested in the agricultural objects and by-products in Varda's filming which when considered together act as a sort of *Exposition universelle* of France's agricultural bounty.⁷ That is of course not to say that

⁶Neil Archer notes a marked uptick in films working with "questions of displacement and identity [...] with a particular emphasis on marginal identities and economic migrations" (3) and the emergence of French and European versions of the road film which transcend international borders (3).

⁷France played host to the *Exposition universelle* in 1855, 1867, 1878, 1889, and for the final time in 1900. These massive undertakings covered huge swaths of Paris and attracted millions of visitors funneling them through carefully choreographed exhibitions of objects and curiosities that promoted specifically constructed images of French innovation and cultural prominence.

wheat or potatoes or grapes are not produced en masse in other countries or regions, but that there is an intrinsic nostalgia towards the French superiority of these products and even a totemic value to them that has been overlooked. The film allows the questioning of how and which objects harken a sense of national identity through on-screen representations. Furthermore, I contend that there is no *one* aspect or object which points to the presence of the nation; rather it is the combination of randomly selected persons and objects as depicted through multiple cinematic methods, such as the documentarist /director voiceovers and narration, as well as the rejection of the perfect for less valuable, more vulnerable subjects and objects. Varda manages to make *patrimoine* out of the sub-human and sub-standard, which as an act of resistance, reveals the presence of the nation in the most unlikely venues.

2.2.2 Qu'est-ce que le glanage?

“‘G’ ‘comme glanage. C’est ramasser après le moisson” are the first lines of the film spoken by a female voice, which the viewer discovers as that of Varda herself. Her very first self-insertion into the film begins with the definition of gleaning according to the *Nouveau Larousse Illustré*; the camera zooms in on the printed definition, which includes the image of Jean-François Millet’s famous painting, *Les glaneuses*. This image shows gleaning as a task embedded in the social memory of the nineteenth century, which is now safeguarded for posterity at the Musée d’Orsay. Not only is the painting guarded as canonical to its time period, but so too is the act itself which is but only rarely seen in modern times. Here, the first objects of national identity are brought to the viewer’s eyes and immediately indicate a strong reliance on the placement and significations of objects throughout the rest of the film. *Glaner* [gleaning] at the turn of the twenty-first century, as Varda and her camera depict, has spread into urban milieus and has

evolved into a more individualized act than the community-reaffirming acts presented in nineteenth century paintings of gleaners. Gleaning was then an act memorialized in the high art of the nineteenth century, when quaint agricultural images of peasant farm workers helped to expound nationalist ideals of collectivity and agrarian virtues. Panning from rural farming fields to abandoned vegetables at a Parisian open-air market, the camera connects the two contrasts by focusing only on persons who are bent over rummaging through the vegetal refuse left behind. Varda remarks here in a voice-over, “À la ville, comme à la campagne, hier comme aujourd’hui, c’est toujours le même geste modeste de glaner.” This obsession with the *geste de glaner* is one of the primary vectors Varda uses to show socio- historical lineage between the past and present manifestations of this act. Furthermore, Varda’s voice-over, as the film’s narrator, draws a similar parallel between rural and urban contexts highlighting the contemporary iterations of poverty and disenfranchisement in both milieus. This alternative network of survival—a combination of physical sustenance, waste prevention and tradition—unites the rural and urban gleaners in *Les glaneurs*: “Si le glanage est d’un autre âge, le geste est inchangé dans notre société qui mange à satiété. Glaneurs agricoles ou urbains, ils se baissent pour ramasser. Y a pas de honte, y a du tracas, du désarroi.” However, the agricultural gleaner not only bows down to gather, he must also bow down before the heavily codified law. Gleaners in this film only come into existence as national subjects through the objects of their gleaning. Prior to the Industrial Revolution and the slow death of peasant culture, gleaners were typical amid French landscapes. In today’s globalized neoliberal economy, which commodifies agricultural products through universal aesthetic standards and normative shopping practices, gleaners have evolved into crude vestiges of a by-gone era. Varda’s contemporary gleaners uphold a nearly lost “deep memory” as Young terms it, which, through legal and social marginalization efforts seems to be

actively forced to the recycling bin of history.

2.2.3 Le glanage et la loi

Gleaning is, in fact, an activity that long pre-dates France, even its most distant ancestral kingdoms and territories. Numerous references gleaning exist in the Old Testament, particularly in Leviticus, which states:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the *gleanings* of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger [...] (King James Version, Lev. 19.9-10).

Rules allowing for the poor and nomadic to reap fringe benefits from the harvest go far further than the first mentions of gleaning in *le Code pénal français* .

In one early scene, Varda interviews a *maître* (French attorney) to have him explain the legal basis for gleaning.⁸ The camera jump cuts from a fig orchard where Varda had interviewed the property caretaker regarding the permissibility of gleaning the still perfectly good figs hanging in the trees. The interviewee summarizes that although it is not illegal, they have never officially allowed gleaning in the orchard. In response, Varda, now physically present in front of the camera, states with an air of indignation, “Ils veulent pas qu’on glane parce qu’ils sont pas gentils. C’est tout.” This remark exemplifies Varda’s personal stance on the emotions associated with present-day gleaning and her distaste for waste, especially agricultural and food waste.⁹

⁸In total, three different *maîtres* (one man, two women) are interviewed in the film on the legalities of gleaning, dumpster picking and the ownership of urban waste. I will for the case of my present argument focus solely on the male *maître* as he speaks only of laws specific to agricultural gleaning.

⁹This distaste may stem from individual experiences with the rationing during the Second World War through

Back in the cabbage field, the camera pans from rows of recently harvested heads of cabbage to the Maître who is standing in the tall vegetation at the other side of the field, wearing his full judicial robe holding “sa petite bible, qui est le code pénal.” This framing [of the *maître*] within the physical space of the law he interprets reinforces the oft un-remarkable legal authority that the *état français* holds over agricultural production and value of its soil/*terre*. The intersection of the laws on gleaning and their practical applications lead to a new dilemma in contemporary society where the law as purveyor of the nation is divergent from social actualities. The mostly-empty field is akin to the break in institutional memory that the decline of gleaning as a traditional activity has led to.

Varda’s camera then switches from a medium shot of the *maître* to a close-up of him hunched over and kneeling in a nearby tomato field—he has himself been transformed into a *glaneur* by the choice of camera angles which briefly focused only on his lower body and hands parsing through stems and leaves to reveal still perfectly edible tomatoes. What is interesting about this particular change in angles and focuses is that when the *maître* is shown down on the ground, he is no longer in his legal garments, but in civilian clothing. This transition between *homme de la loi* and *homme de la terre* juxtaposes two realities: one legal, the other social and traditional in nature. Whilst the *maître* cites the first laws on gleaning, including when and where gleaning may occur, the camera zooms into focus on the open *Code pénal* book in the *maître*’s hands close to the soil. This terrestrial proximity along with the voice of the maître stating the law intertwines the state with the land. The camera then abruptly returns to the Maître once again

which Varda lived during her early teenage years. This also harkens back to the first woman interviewed on screen, who as previously quoted stated “Finis de ramasser pour ne pas gaspiller”. The “gaspillage” or waste of foodstuffs seen as an almost evil act of ignorance and disdain for the bounty the soil has provided. On the other hand, the act of gleaning is then almost by default held up as a sacrosanct act with allusion to the New Testament’s Beatitudes, “Blessed are those who hunger, ye shall be filled.” (Luke 6.20-22)

in his robes standing in the field, where he cites additional historical edicts on the rules of gleaning which have a heavy focus on the disenfranchised of society: “Cet édit qui date du 2 novembre 1554 autorisait *les pauvres, les malheureux, les défavorisés* de venir glaner après la récolte.”¹⁰ This Renaissance-period reference aligns with biblical obligations to care for the poor, but in today’s highly secularized French state, the edict appears in tension with the social stigma and disgust bestowed upon the less-fortunate.

Varda reacts to the *maître* by asking, in the role of quasi-subjective documentarist, what of gleaners who glean for pleasure?¹¹ In another auto-referential statement, Varda subtly declares her role as the *glaneuse* of the film’s title; the *maître* responds that these persons are also completely within their rights to glean alongside those who do so out of necessity. This reaffirmation, through the voice of the law, opens Varda’s exploration of gleaning beyond its literal definition in the agricultural realm: “Pour ce glanage-là, l’image d’impressions, d’émotions, il y a pas de législation.” This statement implies the first shift towards the examination of a more abstract form of gleaning as *hors-la-loi*,¹² which acts as a hinge between the first part of the film where the agricultural and legal focus gives way to less commonly imagined scenes of contemporary forms of gleaning. Romain Chareyron argues:

Varda’s filmic approach thus understands the act of gleaning as a social, political and aesthetic gesture. In doing so, she privileges a visual regimen where the relationship between the spectator and the images is based on a tactile mode of apprehension rather than the mastery of the gaze. By resorting to the “mute”

¹⁰Italics are mine.

¹¹Varda asks, here clearly understood through the more realistic sound of an interviewer vs. the more artistic sonority of her voice-over elsewhere in the film, “Les textes anciens parlaient des pauvres, des indigeants, mais comment va-t-on considerer ceux qui ne manquent de rien mais qui glanent par plaisir?”

¹²“Hors-la-loi” can be either an adverb meaning illegally or outside of the law, or it can also be used as a noun, meaning an outlaw or a black sheep.

significance of images to convey a sense of contact between spectator and the meanings connected to the objects and bodies recorded on film in order to express their “non-reducible” qualities. (93)

The meanings extrapolated from the agricultural objects and the rituals surrounding them come from the very act of their requisition i.e. gleaning. The bent-over or slumped over body, equated at times with Varda’s own decaying body, is another focal point of the Varda’s lens through which the gleaning subject becomes a national subject.

The singular attention given to gleaners and the fruits (or vegetables) of their labor is deeply rooted in a broader social critic of French society. The necessity of being clean to be seen—not only in informal social networks of accountability but also with regard to taxes, ID cards, census participation, permanent housing, participation in the economy—is a huge part of the nation-reifying activities in which all citizens must actively partake on a daily basis.¹³Michael Herzfeld asks the question, “Why do people continually reify the state?” (5), despite their external indifference to it. In doing so, they problematize the necessity of the state that often rejects or marginalizes those who need it most. Herzfeld continues:

Behind every such invocation lurk the desires and designs of real people. Paradoxically they blame this ill-defined but all-important presence in their lives for their failures as they would a living human being and at the same time appeal to its impersonal ‘thingness’ as the ultimate guarantee of disinterested authority. (5)

The blame-game he speaks of is depicted in a sequence in which Varda meets Claude F. and his

¹³See Ross.

band of marginalized friends living in a *terrain des gens du voyage*¹⁴ on the outskirts of town.

2.2.4 Claude F. et co.

Claude F. and his band social misfits, due to a series of unfortunate events, have ended up unemployed and unemployable; yet, in spite of living on the brink of all out homelessness, still attempt to remain independent and *un*-dependent on the state for handouts. They glean from local fields and grocery store dumpsters to survive. The blame Claude F. and co. place on state institutions is not based on their lot in life—in fact, Claude F. is very honest about how he ended up there—but rather on the precariousness of their housing situation, which is threatened by the very disinterested authority who has no regard for their personal situation other than to rid the outskirts of town of these less than savory looking characters. In doing so, *Monsieur le Maire*'s disregard for the human aspect of this situation reduces Claude F. and co. to mere unsightly objects/wards of the state, but objects that must be purged from view so as to spare the clean image of the city. The city must purify its image by maintaining the pristine values of the nation even at the most micro-level. This is inherently how national indoctrination continues to thrive,

¹⁴*Terrain des gens du voyage* is essentially a large parking lot situated on the outskirts of a town or village in France which has basic water and electricity connections for those who are travelling in motorhomes and require a place to park their vehicles overnight. For further information, see <http://www.collectivites-locales.gouv.fr/laccueil-des-gens-voyage>. La loi Besson II states, "Les personnes n'ayant ni domicile ni résidence fixes de plus de six mois dans un Etat membre de l'Union européenne doivent être munies d'un livret spécial de circulation délivré par les autorités administratives. Les personnes qui accompagnent celles mentionnées à l'alinéa précédent, et les préposés de ces dernières doivent, si elles sont âgées de plus de seize ans et n'ont en France ni domicile, ni résidence fixe depuis plus de six mois, être munies d'un livret de circulation identique. Les employeurs doivent s'assurer que leurs préposés sont effectivement munis de ce document, lorsqu'ils y sont tenus." Loi n° 69-3 du 3 janvier 1969 relative à l'exercice des activités ambulantes et au régime applicable aux personnes circulant en France sans domicile ni résidence fixe. <https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/affichTexte.do?cidTexte=JORFTEXT000000317526&categorieLien=cid>. Web. Accessed: 13 August 2016.

by surviving off of its smallest entities.

Daily interactions with the state call its perpetually broadening influence into existence; however, what is even more significant is the exercise of “forgetting” or selectively remembering specific events or actions from the past. To forget is to forge new ideas of how the nation was, is, and will be cast. Kristen Ross argues that this forgetting is due to the processes of swift modernization that France underwent in the post-war decades: “Modernization promises a perfect reconciliation of past and future in an endless present, a world where all sedimentation of social experiences has been leveled” (11). This amnesia supposes an undeniable dichotomy in which historical remembrance and commemoration become an “us versus them” game; only that which promotes “us:ness” remains, repudiating “them” as unknown, undesirable and even potentially dangerous to the cohesiveness of the nation. Lawrence Kritzman writes, “Forgetting [...] is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation” (11). This act includes the selective forgetting of past differences, origins, historical embarrassments and political errors, but what of the forgotten objects and citizens of the nation—the gleaners, the gleaned objects and the culturally dislocated? The very act of filming waste and its purveyors is, in itself, subversive as it goes against cultural norms of rejection and disdain for trash and those who deal with it. Similar to the Hindu caste system in which the untouchables are the lowest social class with no symbolic power or room for mobility because of their work with decay, waste, and disposal of human remains, so too, are the homeless, quasi-homeless, rejected, dejected souls in France marginalized and removed from view. Varda, however, treats these undesired objects and less-than-human subjects with the same reverence as the priceless museum works of art that are shown in the film. The political agency of her depiction acts as a sort of great equalizer of the nation.

Lucy Fischer analyzes Varda's deep affect for refuse: "For Varda, [...] leftovers are never 'loathsome remains of the day'; rather, they are sacred relics—poignant and precious remnants of sentient and insentient worlds" (135). This allusion to sacred relics is a perfect analogy for the tender attention that Varda affords to the most dejected of crops and people she comes across. By doing so, the gleaners she films become "martyrs" of sorts and the crops "icons" or "(religious) relics" of the almost religious fervor she espouses both for those who glean as well as through her own voice-over employed throughout the film. One of Varda's most grandiose "martyrs" is found in the personage of Claude F. He is a forgotten man whose only is only "re"-membered into society when he is found to be doing something illegal or at the limits of legality. In the eyes of the nation, such persons must be forgotten or discarded so as to maintain the sacrosanct image of uniform cleanliness.

Claude F. and his friends still manage to uphold French eating habits in spite of their social neglect.¹⁵ Their haphazard dumpster searches look undeniably similar to a shopping trip inside the grocery store behind which they are located. Claude F. spends his time seeking out fruits and vegetables, even delighting when he comes across unexpired wheel of Camembert in a dumpster. In the next shot, back inside his caravan, Varda films Claude F. drinking wine and talking about the meals he can make in these conditions. While he and his friends attempt to appropriate post-war domesticity, i.e. the interiorization of daily life that has since become de rigueur in France (Ross), it is clear that they are excluded from the full embrace of national subjectivity because of the space in which they live.

¹⁵Later in the film, Varda comes across an African immigrant and his Vietnamese immigrant friend who subsist on reselling discarded items they find in the streets. They are proud of the meals they can cook, especially a rather high-end meal of rabbit that Varda shows being shared amongst friends.

Claude F. is not “homeless” in the sense of without a roof—but in the French legal sense of S.D.F. (*sans domicile fixe*)—as he lives in a camping trailer with two friends on the outskirts of town in a *terrain des gens du voyage*. He is a victim of his own failings, having lost his driver’s license to driving under the influence and thus his right to work as a long-haul truck driver. He himself calls the sequence of events that followed—“*la dégringolade*”—figuratively meaning “fall from grace” a term which further outlines Claude F.’s depiction as a social martyr of sorts.

The sequence in which he first appears is rich with realistic images, movements and sounds that merit closer examination. This realist style as Ross explains: “give[s] a shape to the experiences [... of] the ones caught just outside, [...] the ones for whom abundance is accompanied by a degradation in their condition of existence” (13). Varda’s lens shows us then how Claude F.’s role as gleaner is not linked to a time-honored, but now lost tradition of gleaning but out of need, stemming from a society that has all but discounted his very existence. We first see Claude F. walking away from the camera with the accompanying voice-over in which Varda says, “Un peu plus tard, presqu’au même endroit, on a vu s’avancer un homme.” That Varda considers him human, “un homme”, is more than can be said of society at-large or even of the state. The viewer can hear the very particular sound of his feet crunching through dirt and the wind blowing against the camera’s microphone—diegetic sounds that frame the desolation of the world that Claude F. inhabits. The next frame jumps to a side-profile of Claude, stooped down to glean potatoes from an abandoned pile. Though Varda approaches him to ask rather banal questions about the potatoes and fields, he never deviates from his mission.

Like the vast majority of Varda’s randomly assembled cast of gleaners and social commentators, she leaves him to be experienced by the viewer just as she discovered him,

untouched and unkempt. This focus on the raw and realistic brings the nation into an oppositional focus against the more stylized objects of the nation, as seen in the museum scenes or straightforward pure documentary-stylized scenes such as with the Michelin-starred restaurateur or famed psychoanalyst, Jean Laplanche.¹⁶ What Varda does here is illuminate how anything and everything can become *patrimoine* invoking a sense of nation-belonging at all social levels and states of existence. Kritzman evokes the necessity of: “[analyzing] the multiple spaces of culture within and external to the nation so as to provoke a crisis in the representation of a unified national subject” (17). In asserting her power as a renowned director and long-time contributor to the French cinematic tradition, Varda’s exploration of Claude F.’s (and others’) world(s) unveils hidden layers of culture in France which are seldom considered culture, but rather as a social blight.

Claude F. has in fact constructed a set of daily routines and a place to call home. It is not the type of household that one might consider to be typically French—he lives in a dilapidated camping trailer with two friends in a *terrain des gens du voyage*. While he finds himself in both a cultural and juridical noma(n)d’s land, he does not appear to harbor bitter feelings and was still able to find love in Ghislaine, on his trailer mates. Putting faces and names (though only typically first names) on the otherwise anonymous and discarded “gens du voyage” is a hugely political act in itself. It is an act, which re-essentializes the very existence of the nation and its limitations in integrating even the most undesirable and dirty. Many objects (in this case, people) go unnoticed, but what the agency of this film does differently is highlight the image and

¹⁶I do not take as granted that there is only one ‘pure’ model or format for documentary films. What I intend here is that throughout *Les Glaneurs* Varda slips between a variety of modes of ‘documenting’ between use of her new DV camera and more staged sequences where she frames both the narration and the scene in an ordered manner, as in several scenes such as the restaurateur. Lucy Fischer refers to this fluidity as “Varda’s aesthetic itinerancy [which] boldly operates ‘without roof or rule’ within the cinematic and generic terrains” (124).

movements of these persons and their objects and imbue them with new life, such as with Claude F. and Ghislaine. He was merely an abject disabused body, but this film gave him the chance—albeit it brief—to once again be somebody. His mere existence being canonized on the screen gives him and his *terrain* dwellers purpose, despite their protestations to the contrary. Michael Herzfeld’s concepts in *Cultural Intimacy* support my analysis of this sequence:

Even citizens who claim to oppose the state invoke it—simply by talking of “it” in that way—as the explanation of their failures and miseries, or accuse “it” of betraying the national interests of which it claims to be both expression and guardian. In the process, however, they are contributing, through these little acts of essentializing, to making it a permanent fixture in their lives. [...] most citizens of most countries thus participate through their very discontent in the validation of the nation-state as the central legitimating authority in their lives. (2)

Claude and Ghislaine, though clearly living at the limits of society—literally and figuratively—have managed to live within the confines of the very laws that repress them. After speaking to Claude F. in the field, Varda shifts her focus to the space of the *terrain des gens du voyage*. She first comes across a small group of “gitans” (gypsies) who proclaim, “C’est les clochards qui sont en caravans ici, nous, les gitans qui voyagent tout le temps, c’est pas les même gens que nous.” This shows how Claude F. and co.’s social status even at the limits of the city and society is regarded as the worst of the worst. They are the undesirables, an unofficial caste of French society, who in spite of their misfortune still respect society’s most basic tenets of self-sufficiency and legality. Ghislaine, on the other hand, is filmed making a brief outburst about their living conditions and desire for respect. “C’est Monsieur le Maire qui nous a mis ici. Moi, ça fait quatre ans que je suis ici et maintenant il en juge qu’on s’en aille. Il a dit qu’il en avait

marre d'avoir des gens de voyage et moi, j'ai envie de rester ici!" In using the term "*Monsieur le Maire*," a polite title of authority, Ghislaine proves that though she is a social and national outcast she still recognizes the role of the state in her life. The residue of national terminology speaks to an impenetrable indoctrination that all French citizens are subject to.

The subsequent scene pans immediately to a fast-paced industrial kitchen where Michelin-starred Chef Loubet is spouting out the day's menu in his high-end restaurant. The quick-scene switch between the lowest and highest forms of cuisine in France—from subsistence to extravagance—nevertheless link Claude F. and Chef Loubet through agricultural objects. Both men are gleaners: Claude F.'s connection to *glanage* is summed up as "C'est mieux d'aller dans les champs que d'aller voler dans les magasins," whereas Loubet is what Varda calls a "un glaneur né"; one is born out of necessity, the other out of the *terre* and culture he was raised on. Loubet picks up a *bouquet d'herbes fines* (similar to the one Claude F. found in the dumpster) and explains that as a cost-saving measure he picks his own herbs from nearby fields. In the next frame, he is posed outside of his restaurant in chef's coat and toque proudly holding a large *potiron*. The rapid scene change between Claude F. and Loubet is disorienting as it depicts two antithetical situations—camping-stove, dumpster cuisine, and Michelin-starred restaurant—which are ultimately linked through the same objects of their desire. The same connection to these crops that these two very different men experience bolsters the argument that object interaction is what supports national identity. Both men are filmed out in fields gleaned what they can, as best they can; yet, Varda comments that Loubet looks like a "petit santon" during this act. The staging of the two sequences one in overcast skies in a place of desolation, the other in bright sunlight in a place of great achievement and opulence shows how the layers of culture formed through the very same objects can diverge so significantly between the social and

economic origins of the viewer. The divergence experienced between high and low cultures does not however dilute the Frenchness embedded within them. What Varda does in showing these two distinct gleaning landscapes is reaffirm the centrality of agricultural products to the French psyche and highlight how the nation is evidenced in both realms of consumption: extravagant commercial or subsistence.

2.2.5 Les fruits (et les légumes) de la terre

Though Varda is equally enamored with the random people she encounters on her trips around France, she continuously guides her lens towards the gleaned crops and agricultural products with which they interact. These objects promote communal and regional identities while simultaneously conjuring a sense of national pride in their quality and uniqueness. The crops which Varda films as *la glaneuse par excellence* are as follows: wheat, potatoes, herbs (high culture), grapes (high culture), figs, tomatoes, cabbage, oysters, apples and cheese/fish/packaged food, etc. This “tour de France” through its crops is an alternative engagement with national identity as constructed through food. She deliberately avoids clichéd recipes or finished dishes, focusing solely on the human connection to the foundational ingredients of many famous French dishes. As she circumnavigates France, Varda examines the underbelly of agricultural consumerism through the angle of waste.

The unsteady sensation in the filming of gleaning scenes more closely aligns with the inconsistent and non-uniform results from each harvest. Where she distinguishes herself from the post-harvest “editing” of produce, though, is in her acceptance and embrace of the rotten or misshapen parts of her filming. Nothing is enhanced or polished to create more visually pleasing products. Varda selects a heart-shaped potato as a sort of souvenir from her agricultural trip

down memory lane. She comes back to it later in the film to show how it has sprouted eyes and shriveled a bit, connecting her own aging and social exclusion to the *terre*. She re-visits people and things as she films, cycling back through an original perception of the thing or person to reattach a new understanding to it, once more information has been gleaned.

The agricultural focus of Varda's film is a critical response to the dissolution of agro- social ways of life in France and the waste that is caused by the rampant industrialization of harvesting processes. Agricultural industrialization has not only changed French means of harvest and consumption but it also made standards of quality more uniform with the after-effect of massive and widespread waste. The post-WWII attraction to clean, shiny, uniform crops and foods as well as new goods, fuels both the human component of agricultural production and trends in consumption. This shift significantly reduced the human labor component from harvesting and effectively killed off a way of life that was intrinsic to French (peasant) identity. The resulting products must still meet the strict, socially enforced requirements of regional heritage and authenticity. The crops or products that do not meet these standards are discarded, almost of if they were organically produced traitors of Frenchness. The ensuing disconnect from *la terre* and the standardization of crops draw a clear parallel to how less desirable members of society are tossed aside, but are still held to the same impossible standards of Frenchness.

2.2.6 Filming/Genre

Varda's DV hand-held camera highlights the rapid evolution of cultural opinions and nation-

al imagery on the cusp of the twenty-first century.¹⁷ The continuous movement from village to village and between suburban, urban, and rural milieus mimics the social instability of its time which Varda herself explains in the film: the new millennium represents an irreversible cultural and technological shift in which the power of individuality trumps respect for commonality. The turn of the millennium is filmed as a movie within a movie—the televised New Year’s fireworks filmed with a monologue voiceover. This distance between the filmmaker and the focus of her camera is often played with throughout the film—sometimes Varda herself appears onscreen, sometimes she films only her hands—a space which creates zones of questionable preference for the individual over the communal, a point she seems to fight against fervently. Varda’s travels across France are something akin to a pilgrimage venerating agricultural and refuse objects. This political act of making objects, which have been forgotten or disabused, visible again is tantamount to the deep cultural significance given to sites of historical commemoration, as elaborated by Pierre Nora in *Lieux de mémoires*. Nora sets out a problematic aiming to explicate the acceleration of present history and historical sites, monuments, and events that imbue France’s collective memory with meaning:

¹⁷At the time of the film’s shooting DV cameras and their availability to the mainstream public were quite new and Varda espouses the liberty that they allow in filming is revolutionary in a way. There is one specific scene in the film in which she films the instructional manual that came with her new “toy” while discussing its many new functions. I say this because of the ludic nature in which she plays with her camera in several more autobiographical scenes, her hand “catching cars” on the highway, the scene with the “dance of the lens cap” as well as her overall tone of enthusiasm when discussing the amazing new features of this DV camera. The DV camera here in a way acts as a precursor to the panoptical usage of today’s cell phone camera and video camera functions in which no act, intentional or purposeful, banal or extraordinary, incriminating or liberating can go unpunished or unpublished in the hands of billions of cell phone owners across the world. If Varda were to recreate this same film, using cell phone technology—instead of the DV camera—in the middle of the second decade of this new millennium, it would certainly end up being a very different film with, I can only assume, far fewer opportunities for “objective” self-portraiture. It cannot be said that Varda presages the now omnipresent “selfie”, however, the scenes in which she imitates paintings of gleaning in the past can certainly be seen as prescient of the trends in self- portraiture to come.

Our interest in *lieux de mémoire* where memory crystallizes and secretes itself has occurred at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists. There are *lieux de mémoire*, sites of memory, because there are no longer *milieux de mémoire*, real environments of memory. (7) Varda's work with *les glaneurs* across France parallels Nora's attention to breaks with the past; her film showcasing a collection of once common and communal habits or *milieux de mémoire* (Nora). A multitude of social and economic forces stemming from industrialization to the “‘swiftness of change’ [in the post-war period]” (Ross 3) have turned society inward and individualized acts that were previously communal. The near-empty landscapes and hidden spaces of contemporary gleaning serve as anti-sites of memory because there is no formally fetishized place or routine that calls all French citizens to reflect on a reconstructed moment or action from the past. Whereas Nora delineates a historical progression and philosophical approach to the reproduction of cultural memory in the present, Varda homes in, not on the digressions of gleaning, but on the resulting social and legal confrontations modern-day gleaners face considering twenty-first century actualities. In as much as Pierre Nora serves as a theoretical cornerstone for this chapter, his work here furthers the idea that gleaning is akin to a living *lieu de mémoire*. Varda's detailed attention to this nearly lost (or at the very least transformed beyond recognition) activity parallels how the nation commemorates once forgotten events or local through deliberate petrification of memory in physical objects (monuments, statues, etc.) and communal and national celebrations. The modern-day gleaner through Varda's lens is the ultimate purveyor of the nation through their tenacity to remember the past through their repetitive acts in today's

society.

Les glaneurs depicts a variety of reasons for gleaning—artistic, maintenance of tradition, necessity, or protest—the gleaners are all portrayed as peripheral actors within French society. The generalized relegation of gleaners to French society’s lowest rungs is deeply rooted in the compulsions of capitalist, globalized society, which fervently rejects superficial blemishes at the cost of losing the riches below its surface. This rejection is evidenced in discussions of the *fruits de la terre*, the apples, potatoes and other vegetables that growers must dispose of because they are unsellable due to their size and/or appearance. This commercial policy applies, too, to the persons who have been rejected by society as unusable, such as those who live in *terrains de gens de voyages*, squatters and those living in *foyers*.¹⁸

The inassimilable are foisted out of the mainstream view to rot or fend for themselves. The close reciprocity between these objects of refuse and the refused themselves is made clear through Varda’s use of camera angles and the unfinished quality of the DV camera. The quality of the camera produces a raw, unpolished feel akin to the unadulterated speech and images of the marginalized objects and persons themselves. However, the social significance of this film does not lie solely in its documentary vision of society; the documentary format can be seen as judgmental and narrow in scope due to the angle it chooses to examine a particular issue. However, the experimental nature of Varda’s cinematography in *Les glaneurs et la glaneuse* along with the raw-editing ideals merits further exploration as it breaks from the structure of the documentary.

I contend that this film might also be considered as a hybrid film, a unique in its kind

¹⁸In France, a “foyer” is communal dormitory for adult-aged persons who require basic and cheap housing during periods of unemployment, university studies, or personal crises.

blending of auto-referential, documentary, and road-trip film elements. Scenes of long-haul trucks on the highway draw viewers' attention towards the journey aspect of this film. To fully extrapolate the variety of gleaning practices in France, Varda has had to traverse substantial distances to uncover France's agricultural riches. The distances between locations of filming trace the work of Varda's lens. She re-appropriates her own spatial connection to France and links disparate populations of gleaners to an extra-institutional cultural network. By this latter term, I mean that those who continue to glean have clung to traditional and cultural mores in spite of and as a refusal to accept the national and institutional legislation that has worked to debase this once integral and commonplace activity. The gleaners cling to a communal identity ensconced in the historically self-referential act of gleaning.

Varda highlights that this contemporary network of gleaners is inadvertently linked through their consideration of and reuse of objects and agricultural refuse which advocates non-compliance within French social and legal norms. The marginalization of French citizens depicted in this film demonstrates how France, i.e. the nation, not only relegates inassimilable immigrants of color and different religious beliefs, but also forcibly neglects many of its own. Varda's choice of camera angles, digital hand-held camera work allows for her to infiltrate the hotbeds of gleaning and create a sense of national community that does not organically arise from the individualizing and sporadic act of gleaning.

The scenes of travelling between active spaces of gleaning outline the connections between culturally distinct and geographically-dissimilar regions of France. Though much of the film's allure arises from the seemingly pell-mell filming and collection of characters, the cyclical re-examination of objects, people, and places does give the film its "road film" aspect (Archer). By road film, I infer that though there is no specific destination set out for at the

beginning of the film, the movement between places and the emphasis on the journey through a multi-layered France, firmly sets the film up for the label road film. The film itself then can be taken as an object itself, because it creates a new multi-layered look at a France conflicted between its past and present and inability to move towards new horizons without leaving old ones behind.

While there is no destination per se in *Les glaneurs*, the point of departure is always from when an object or person have been discarded or deemed unusable. Varda never films the interior of a brightly lit supermarket or the bustling pitch of an outdoor market, but opts instead to capture scenes of dumpster diving and the rummaging through the post-*marché* heaps of unsold produce. In doing so she avoids explicit commentary of the normalized modes of French existence.

Varda's post-production editing and the flow of the DV camera between scenes of raw agricultural products to interior scenes within museums where Varda films on a fixed camera is even more disjointed than the unsteady hand behind the DV camera. The DV camera focuses on the unpolished, untouched nature of the objects gleaners are so keen to hand pick and put to good use despite their societally-constructed uselessness. The (35mm) camera smoothly pans the carefully selected and meticulously orchestrated scenes of high culture whereas the unsteady hand manipulating the DV better discerns the untoward layers of society. The camera dismisses the socially-accepted assumptions that are showcased in both high and low settings which invite the viewer to reconsider gleaning and its relationship to national identity.

2.2.7 The museum as object

Varda also gives considerable attention to the late nineteenth-century artistic representations of

gleaners in which these agrarian women are essentially painted as wheat-picking versions of Greek goddesses or precursors to Communist propaganda art. This tableau anchors the lineage of gleaning in its historicized version and skews the societal role of the modern-day gleaner. In one of the first scenes of the film, the camera zooms in on the most famous painting of gleaners in France, François Millet's *Les glaneuses* hung prominently in the Musée d'Orsay. This museum dedicated to nineteenth century French art is pinnacle to Varda's editing as she speeds up the film to show the steady stream of museum visitors contemplating this work. The time-lapsed view of this painting fast-forwards the tradition of gleaning from its collective efforts to today's iteration. The accompanying music piques the viewers' sense reminding that this idyllic image is fleeting and from a by-gone era. The abrupt transition between locales—museum to countryside and between camera speeds, shows the film's first [former] gleaner in a barren wheat field, similar to the one depicted in Millet's painting. This former gleaner tells us, "Glaner, c'est l'esprit d'antan, ça." From this point, it is clear that the gleaning as defined in the Larousse dictionary of the opening shot of the film is not the focus of this film, but in fact, the antithesis of Varda as *glaneuse*.

The space of museum is in stark contrast to the unbridled wind and terrain of the first potato scenes remarking on the elasticity of French identity between high and low versions of French. The very space of the museum contains the relics of another time which Varda tells us has (d)evolved in new ways to accommodate changing values, social and economic *précarité* as well as consumerist tastes. What the museum allows for is a stoppage of time that is misaligned with the speed of social change. The slippage between the esthetic appraisals deemed worthy of museum curation and the reality of historical and present-day events is essential for the national production of collective memory. Varda inserts her camera into a forgotten realm (gleaning) and

thus deflates overly glossy concepts of past and contemporary national collectivities. Much as gleanings have now become an individual activity, so has the assumption of French identity. In earlier times, national memory seemed infallible, however as populations have grown and become more diverse, so have the needs of individuals to commemorate their personal or ethnic communities' histories increased and become more urgent. The museums that Varda films feel limited in the scope of what they can offer to these new urgencies in memory production. Alas, Varda's entire film serves as a living open-air museum for these individual memories of national misfits.

Glaner in the twenty-first century is of an entirely different nature and not idealized in high culture as in the nineteenth century, when quaint agricultural images helped to expound nationalist ideals. Switching from rural fields to urban heaps of sidewalk refuse, Varda's voice over draws the parallel between rural and urban spaces highlighting problems that afflict them both and unit center and periphery through a differently formed network. As noted earlier in this section: "Si le glanage est d'un autre âge, le geste est inchangé." The obsession with the *geste de glaner* is one of the primary connections Varda makes between the past and present, an obsession found in all three films through the manipulations of and interactions with objects.

2.3 L'HEURE D'ÉTÉ

[Because of the obsession with *patrimoine*], the present is lived in as a stock of the past for the future. (Noudelmann 13)

2.3.1 Introduction

The centrality of objects to the construction and portrayal of French identity is undeniable. From the low culture of agricultural products to the high culture of masterful artworks, objects embody layered identities that are thrust upon them through their usage, display, and even financial values. In this next section, I shift from the purposely-discarded agricultural objects (terre) of Varda's *Les glaneurs* to the valuable artistic objects (terroir), which must be—begrudgingly parted with in *L'heure*. Directed by Oliver Assayas, *L'heure d'été* depicts the story of a French family whose adult children must deal with the emotional, financial and archival burden of their family's valuable art collection in the wake of their mother's passing. Though the film is generally both light and light-hearted in its simplicity, two main themes within the film, the dissolution of contemporary kinship structures and the materiality of memory, will serve as fields for exploring the disorientation of French identity. Loyalty and necessity, which previously kept families closely connected, have been replaced by career ambitions and overseas opportunities in the film. The second focus, the materiality of memory, explores the intersections between the memories and emotions projected onto familial artifacts, the modern-day commemoration of daily life in France's past and the archivalization of personal objects. These two themes are not necessarily mutually exclusive or unrelated; the loosening of family structures and loyalties permits projects—such as new museums, exhibits, exhibitions and events—to reify a collective French national identity through the lens of the personal experiences with the objects of daily life in France.

In *L'heure*, French identity is evidenced through the interactions with objects in overlapping categories: personal, familial, and national. The intersection of these specific categories appears in the relationship(s) that each shares with the family's belongings or

artifacts, which also happen to be of great historical and national value. In this way, the sentimental value of the family's inherited objects collides with the value they espouse for the French *patrimoine*.¹⁹ The collective family identity that is assumed as shared through the personal objects in this film show that the solidity of kinship structures is inherently weak or even non-existent. In addition to close textual examination of pertinent scenes, my purview will also include the role of the Musée d'Orsay as both an object itself and as the film's *raison d'être* and source of funding. These additional aspects bolster the overarching argument about how societal forces on kinship at the micro-level have repurposed French identity at the macro-level in this film. There has been a mutual dependency between the nation and kinship as a parallel to the family unit to promote and uphold long accepted standards of French identity that, as this film depicts, are as fragile as the very objects it portrays.

Before analyzing selected scenes from the film, I would like to offer a brief genealogical synopsis of the film and its main characters as they pertain to my argument of family-object interaction and identity (dis)formation. The family matriarch, H  l  ne Berthier, was the niece of a famous French painter, Paul Berthier, to whom she was obsessively loyal in keeping his collections intact and known to the world.²⁰

H  l  ne's passing early on the film forces her three adult children, Fr  d  ric, Adrienne and J  r  mie, to come together and confront how the inheritance will be split and who will benefit, financially and culturally, from the outcome. The family collections contain not only Paul Berthier's work but also an incredible showcase of furniture, paintings and decorative

¹⁹This particular family has until now been in possession of various works that hold far more than the emotional value associated to them; these works are specifically valuable to the art history of France and its numerous schools of design.

²⁰H  l  ne Berthier chose to revert to her maiden name after her husband's passing as it holds more renown than the name of her late husband who was blue-collar worker. This is a point of contention for Berthier's eldest son, Fr  d  ric, who accuses his mother of not valuing her married family's heritage.

pieces from his most famous contemporaries which we later find out had long been eyed by the Musée d'Orsay for their collections.

After the family's decision to transfer nearly the entirety of their collection to the museum *par dation*²¹ the film pivots away from the family-level considerations of affect upon these objects to their national significance in the museum's mission of exhibiting mid-nineteenth to early twentieth-century art. This information is of note because it lends attention not only the mission of the film, as a piece commissioned for the twentieth anniversary of the museum, but also more importantly it draws attention to the disconnect between judgments of taste and sentimentality on objects of greater cultural value.

2.3.2 Scene Analyses

As the cornerstone to the family identity, Paul Berthier's legacy is portrayed at once as a point of pride and a burden for which increasingly distanced and disinterested younger generations will be responsible. Hélène is both cognizant and ambivalent about the fact that the memories and secrets associated with these collections will cease after her death; while her oldest son, Frédéric presumptive torchbearer of the family's identity, adamantly dismisses the notion of losing both his mother and his family heritage. This sense of duty fuels his desire to maintain the estate and all its belongings, as they have always been.

²¹This is a legal manoeuver in estate management where objects of value are "given" with financial compensation to a museum or non-profit group in order to avoid the hefty price tag of French inheritance taxes.

2.3.2.1 “Préparez-vous pour la suite.” While visiting the family’s estate for Hélène’s 75th birthday party, Frédéric is pulled aside by his mother to discuss “la suite”—meaning the succession of the family’s belongings and the home itself. He is taken aback by his mother’s candor in discussing what will come to pass after her passing and that she appears so cool and collected by the possibilities that her life’s passion and collections will not remain in the family. As she guides her eldest child through her office and the home’s collections that Frédéric knows so well, she relies heavily on practicality and the financial value afforded to each object more so than the emotional attachments embedded in them.

Hélène maintains a fatalistic predisposition to give up on the family unit due to geographical distance and personality differences. Frédéric, on the other hand, insists that the family unit will continue on unchanged for future generations. When Hélène speaks in regards to the home and its objects: “Après moi, c’est une autre histoire,” Frédéric brusquely retorts, “La nôtre.” His assumption that the family unit will continue to exist organically comes off as naïve and ignorant of the external forces that are pulling it apart. Hélène further insists to her son that, “Non, vous avez votre vie, vous n’avez pas à être gardien de son [Paul Berthier’s] tombeau.” She knows that she cannot rely on the work of one person, her son, to care for the family legacy as she has—nor does she seem to mind.

What she originally calls “pièces de musée” during the more practical aspect of the tour is antithetical to what she describes. There are in fact museum-quality pieces found throughout the home; however, in their current states, filled with children’s toys and other odds and ends, it is nearly impossible to see their broader value to society. Hélène then refers to these same objects as “bric à brac d’un autre âge.” This change in register between the objects’ potential value in a museum and as mere old junk shows exactly how the financial, emotional or

even political value of such objects is entirely fluid. This scene demonstrates how the context and setting for such objects are intrinsic to their possible value to the nation. The passing of memory from the realm of the family to the nation embraces the fluidity of objects; re-framing them within the space of the museum encapsulates their value to national identity at the cost of the family's curated specificity dissolving within the space of national memory.

In the final scene before we learn of H  l  ne's death, she waves her children and grandchildren goodbye after her 75th birthday dinner. She pauses and turns slowly to climb the stairs from the yard back to her house; the diegetic sounds of cars driving off fades to a soft and bittersweet musical score and the tunnel of vines surrounding the staircase slowly drains the light from the screen. Next, H  l  ne sits alone in a dimly lit room casting her gaze outwards towards seemingly nothing, reflective on the past and the future of this space and the personal memories that are so deeply embedded in it. In a brief conversation with her housekeeper, Elo  se, she remarks: "Il y a beaucoup de choses qui vont partir avec moi. Des souvenirs, des secrets, ces histoires qui n'int  ressent plus personne." She continues, her voice softening, "Mais il y a le r  sidu, il y a des objets." The camera promptly pans to Elo  se, the receiver of this monologue, who is cloaked in bright light contrasted against the shadowy entombment around H  l  ne. Elo  se appears far more optimistic towards the succession of the homestead, while the more sophisticated H  l  ne is more acutely aware of the tasks and routines that must be repeated to keep memory alive. The scene ends with a fade-out to total darkness accompanied by long and sentimental musical score marking a definitive break in the film which signals the end of the "Home."²²

²²I use the capital H to signify that Home is more than just the physical structures. It is the sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations of a place. (de Certeau, 'Everyday Life'; 'Place/Space' Habermas)

This play with light and shadows in these two brief scenes indicates a passing of (an unlit) torch to the next generation. Though it is never explicitly stated that H  l  ne dies, her fading away through chiaroscuro is a foreshadowing of the end of an era because it stands as a sharp contrast to the beautiful light in the works of Paul Berthier and in the scenes where the entire family is present. The reason for H  l  ne’s existence—her family and the cultivation of her ancestor’s legacy—comes to an end with family relocations abroad and the culmination of commemorative projects based on Paul Berthier’s work which had until then consumed her. It appears as though she too has a premonition of her waning importance and favors slowly disappearing from the shadows and quietly delegating the continued work of commemoration to her children just as it had been her life’s work.

In this manner, instead of an abrupt announcement of H  l  ne’s passing, the viewer subtly learns of her death in a brief conversation with the undertaker/cemetery caretaker who offers his condolences at the *Mairie*. This impersonal paperwork-heavy process is critical to the national psyche where the state keeps track of ones every move even in death. The state is here shown as immortal, never-ending and perpetual; its existence unflinching.

2.3.3 Chez le patriarce—malgr   lui

Despite the preparatory tour that his mother gave him before her passing, Fr  d  ric is forced to step into the role that his mother previously held at the helm of the family. He is now the rock of the family that anchors it both emotionally and geographically to France; he stands as the nation in lieu of his mother for she can now only exist in when called into memory. In this

scène, following Hélène's funeral, the family gathers at Frédéric's apartment to discuss "la suite," i.e. what should be done with this burdensome and exquisite inheritance. Each sibling confronts their personal allegiances to both French and family identity in the process. Adrienne lives in San Francisco whereas Jérémie lives in Beijing and both have effectively disengaged themselves from the constraints of the nation and the objects—the family estate, the works of art, writings— that might otherwise keep them attached to it. Both overseas siblings are avatars of the very real stakes of globalization and disassociate themselves more liberally from the memories and familial connections entombed in these belongings because of geographical distant.

Frédéric, however, is an ardent supporter for keeping the collection intact as an unspoken means of keeping the family and its *terroir*, vis-à-vis their unique art collection, alive and thriving. Memory becomes more and more second-hand and not lived as the generations continue and the spark that created the affective attachment to an object dissipates. In the case of this film, one man's treasure is another man's junk; by junk I mean the inutility of an item for either emotional or financial gain.

The specific objects of the Berthier collection have been, pointedly, zoomed in on by Assayas' lens. Diana Wade writes, "Assayas traces how each object, once an intrinsic part of Hélène's life, is transformed into a commodity and finally into a purely esthetic item, valued for its shape and rarity and not for the memories and stories it invoked" (1). The family is always a micro-museum of sorts because it curates itself and develops its own *raison d'être*. A distinct identity is formed and self-perpetuated through family rituals and possessions and when the family sells off its possessions, their micro-museum disintegrates before their very eyes.

The family homestead, *sans matriarche*, is replete with memory-laden objects, many of

which are of high cultural and patrimonial value, many of which are later donated to the Musée d'Orsay for its collections where the materialization of memory is put on display for all of humanity. These items which are accepted into and displayed in the hallowed grounds of a state-run museum show how issues of personal heritage versus French patrimoine complicate the collective memory associated with "lieux de mémoire" as the personal, family memories associated cannot be effaced. Many of the famous Berthier paintings and sketches that will be showcased at the museum are, one could argue, actual "lieu[x] de mémoire."

Significant portions of Berthier's works of art were not only painted on the premises of the family, but also painted a variety of banal scenes from the estate. This is important because it opens the private space of the family and its estate to be gazed upon by museum visitors who will see these images not as the personal space of a homestead, but as a specific representation of a French country estate, effectively rendering the entire family and their property emblematic of a France most of them no longer feel an attachment to. Herein lies proof of a major disconnect between the France preserved and curated for museums and the France that is lived and evolves on a daily basis.

The museum both constructs and deconstructs the nation. It is an instrument in nation building as a "repository of memory" (Jacobs and Malpas 288), which anchors a specific viewpoint of what the French nation is or was through specific curated objects. However, the objects within the museum, no matter how well they are displayed and curated, are always decontextualized by their very presence in an artificially created space of observation where interaction is often limited to the visual.

As the film continues, the *terroir* aspect of the film is heavily questioned through scenes with Hélène's three adult children and their spouses. Each sibling is in one way or another looking out for their own best interests and appears to have moved on from interdependence of

kinship structures that the French nation once thrived on: normative structures of familial succession. The three Marly (adult) children who made the decision to give most of the collection to the Musée d'Orsay each maintain varying levels of affective connection to these long-cherished family relics. Jérémie and Adrienne who both reside overseas and have relatively physical connection to France show the least emotional connectedness to these objects; in fact, the children living abroad both focus more on the financial benefits of selling these pieces than keeping them in the family as they have been for generations. The dispersal of the family's belongings and ancestral home effectively acts as a point of dissolution of the family.

Adrienne and Jérémie both assume new modes of Frenchness in their expatriate lives, Frédéric as the only sibling still living in France, is set at a difficult crossroads within his family as he faces more frequent reminders of what has been lost and what needs to be remembered. François Noudelmann explains Frédéric's position by contextualizing it at the national level: France's return to cultural roots in other words, its self-imposed confinement to the patrimonial museum—bespeaks a troubled and hemorrhaging present, one divided between multiple histories that no longer fit in the Republican mold. The genealogical turn merely projects a nostalgic desire for wholeness, contested by France's actual heterogeneity. It is most likely not even a 'turn', but rather a crossroads, a traffic jam, or a re-drawn map of national identities. (13)

The Marly/Berthier family in *L'heure* is depicted as heterogenous, with varying intentions, understandings and visions for their futures. Frédéric's desires to keep the family (and its objects) together presupposes that family was ever a cohesive unit and that it could ever continue to be so without their mother.

After Hélène the matriarch's passing, her children decide to transfer the artwork and various pieces of furniture and housewares to the Musée d'Orsay in one part to avoid crushing

inheritance taxes and in another to, begrudgingly so to Frédéric, share their family's collection with a wider audience: the visitors of the Musée d'Orsay.²³ In one of the final scenes where all three siblings appear together, they sit down after their mother's funeral to discuss the family affects. Each sibling takes a turn to share their opinion about what should be done with the inheritance they are slated to receive. It is understood through his silence and various bodily gestures and facial expressions that Frédéric assumes that they will keep family's home. Jérémie's body language posits otherwise with a quick knowing glance to his sister and then proceeds to speak up stating, "Pour le présent et l'avenir, ça [the family's belongings] ne nous représente pas grande chose." This statement also implies that the past can be dismissed simply by escaping from the presence of the objects, which continue to drag its existence into the present.

The siblings are framed in this scene so that the two brothers stand at either side of the shot, representing antithetical opinions whilst their sister Adrienne is seated in between and depicted as a mother figure who must make the tie-breaking decision. In her monologue regarding the decision at hand, she states, "La maison non seulement je vais pas profiter, mais avec les années, elle ne veut pas dire grand chose pour moi, ni la France d'ailleurs." The family

²³“Article 2 Modifié par Décret n°2010-558 du 27 mai 2010 - art. 2 Dans le cadre de son projet scientifique et culturel, l'Établissement public du musée d'Orsay et du musée de l'Orangerie a pour missions: 1° De présenter au public, en les situant dans leur perspective historique, les oeuvres représentatives de la production artistique de la deuxième moitié du XIXe siècle et des premières années du XXe siècle ainsi que les collections dont le musée national de l'Orangerie des Tuileries a la garde ; 2° De conserver, protéger et restaurer pour le compte de l'Etat les biens culturels inscrits sur les inventaires du musée national d'Orsay, du musée national de l'Orangerie des Tuileries et du musée national Hébert ainsi que sur ceux du musée national du Louvre, dont il a la garde ; 3° De contribuer à l'enrichissement des collections nationales par l'acquisition de biens culturels pour le compte de l'Etat, à titre onéreux ou gratuit ; 4° D'assurer dans les musées qu'il regroupe, et par tout moyen approprié, l'accueil du public le plus large, d'en développer la fréquentation, de favoriser la connaissance de leurs collections, de concevoir et mettre en oeuvre des actions d'éducation et de diffusion visant à assurer l'égal accès de tous à la culture ;” Décret n°2003- 1300 du 26 décembre 2003 portant création de l'Établissement public du musée d'Orsay et du musée de l'Orangerie. http://www.musee-orsay.fr/fileadmin/mediatheque/integration_MO/PDF/Decret_statutaire_EPMO_actualise.pdf. Web. Accessed: 2 August 2016

unit is here undeniably linked to French identity as the erasure of one leads to the other.

2.3.3.1 Corot, Frédéric, and his children: Three lost generations. In counterpoint to Hélène who deliberately spoke of a dying past and who wanted the estate's things to be sold or given to the Musée d'Orsay for curation, Frédéric attempts to cast the importance of the past onto the future of his children in a scene where he speaks to them about two paintings depicting the French countryside by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, nineteenth century landscape painter. The scene has Sylvie and Pierre, Frédéric's teenage children running loudly through the house, "Sylvie, Pierre, faites doucement, vous êtes chez la grand-mère. Tiens, venez avec moi je vais vous montrer les deux Corot(s) dont je vous avais parlé." This comment sets the stage for the brief visit to the family museum of which they will one day become curators; it also implies that "chez la grand-mère" is more like a museum whose rules on noise and movement need to be respected rather than a place for youthful frivolity.

Sylvie's follow-up question "C'est qui, Corot?" hints that as important as these pieces are to both her family heritage and France, their significance is worthless to her. Frédéric tells them, "Ces tableaux seront à vous un jour" which inspires no sense of propriety, pride or appreciation of these incredibly important works of French art. This inability to confer an understanding of what these paintings represent for both family and national heritage is very difficult for Frédéric to deal with as his deep sense of personal responsibility to safeguarding the family's history is most fervently anchored in these very objects. Pierre Nora has written about significant cultural shifts that have, of late, disturbed previously held constants about historical collective memory:

We do not know what our descendants will need to know about ourselves in order to

understand their own lives. And this inability to anticipate the future puts us under an obligation to stockpile, as it were, in a pious and somewhat indiscriminate fashion, any visible trace or material sign that might eventually testify to what we are or what we will have become. (Nora, “Reasons” 4)

Frédéric, then, much like his mother who was the “curator” of Paul Berthier’s works and legacy, must take over these curatorial tasks to preserve the family history and heritage at the personal level while risking the appearance of naïveté and nostalgia for an irreconcilable past. Sylvie and Pierre’s reaction to the piece is emblematic of what Nora alludes to as an uncertain future and even less certain past. By this it means that the past though already transpired is not complete(d) because it is never certain as to what objects or events future generations will cling or what meaning they will piece together from a past they never directly experienced. The past can be constructed in an infinite amount of ways depending upon which objects come to occupy the forefront of narrative of the past. Where Frédéric perhaps fails at keeping his family’s “past” together, the Musée d’Orsay steps in as conservator of his family’s past. However, there are many concessions that are made in allowing the museum to take over this precious task.

2.3.4 From curating the home to curating the Musée d’Orsay

The home as private museum is what Hélène has considered it to be for many years. However, as tourists (family visits) waned, she was acutely aware of the need to confer curatorial responsibility to a broader audience with the capacity to grow appreciation, not combat disinterest in her prized possessions. Once the decision to sell to the Musée d’Orsay has taken effect, a unique scene transpires where a team of art historians and restorers from the museum visit the home to choose what they will take and how it will be transported away. The curious

curators occupation of, as well as their pacing through the space, recalls the scene where Frédéric is given a tour of family objects by his mother. This time, however, though Frédéric is perhaps more knowledgeable about the possibilities of this collection, he acts far less assured in his tour. This post-Hélène scene employs a cast of both actors and real-life experts from the Musée d'Orsay adding authentic elements to the film's depiction of high art. This blended casting style makes for slightly awkward flow in the scene because some are clearly acting for the first time, while others simply appear to be doing their everyday jobs with cameras in the room. He is clearly uneasy with the decision that has been made and cannot seem to shake a feeling of shame and disbelief that the materiality of his family identity is slipping away, even if for laudable reasons. Adrienne on the other hand inversely mimics the tour her mother gave to Frédéric in the; she does so with more assured movements and tones of voice, opening drawers, doors and cabinets to allow the curators a freer look into everything in their possession. As previously explored, Adrienne's connection to France is weak and the identity embedded in these objects is minimal, so her actions are not surprising. She has far more to gain from the celebrity/renown attached to being part owner in a museum's collection that she could ever possibly gain financially.

The curators circulate through the home and are surprised to find many of the objects stuffed full of children's toys, scribbled drawings or plastic bags full of junk. One such bag of junk contained a poorly wrapped and broken, but extremely valuable Degas sculpture. It is almost comical how an object of such value could be stashed away in an E. Leclerc grocery after it was broken during a childhood fight. This statue's consequent restoration links the family story to the space of the museum in a sequence, which flows through the coulisses of the

museum.²⁴ This sequence of scenes and images from within the Musée serves as the bridge between the family story and the original reason for the making of this film to celebrate the Orsay's twentieth anniversary.

2.3.5 The role of the museum in *L'heure d'été*

Within *L'heure*, the museum itself plays a role that is both subtle and central at the same time. The nature of the objects in the family's possessions have always been known to be museum-quality and desired by the administration of the d'Orsay for their collections. The very purpose of the film was founded in a collaborative project between several major national cultural organizations looking for unique ways to honor the d'Orsay's twentieth anniversary. The film is an original screenplay written and directed by Assayas who he himself [...] notes that:

This film has roots in a project that was imagined by the curator of the Musée d'Orsay. He wanted modern art and he wanted cinema to be associated to the celebration of the anniversary of the museum, so he started discussing specifically with Serge Toubiana who is the head of the French cinémathèque how he could develop a project that would connect cinema and the Musée d'Orsay.²⁵

Though the actual physical spaces of the museum enjoy only limited screen-time in *L'heure d'été*, its relationship to the film and its role in commemorating French identity or Frenchness is

²⁴The statue and its *restaurateur* are framed with a plastic grocery bag in the background which is a nod to its former resting place in a plastic E. Leclerc grocery bag.

²⁵His comment continues: "And they came up with the idea of asking filmmakers from different cultures to contribute one short segment and do some kind of omnibus movie [...] with three to four segments. So the idea for the film, the desire to make the film comes initially from a very abstract reflection on what art is about and how it happens and how it lasts or not and gradually grew into something about basic human feelings: loss, mourning and about family. So, on one side, it allowed me to go further on a reflection on modern art [...] and on the other side, it gave me an opportunity to deal with the notion of family." (Bonus material from the Criterion Collection's-2 disc DVD set of *L'heure d'été*).

omnipresent.

The museum was opened in Paris 1986 with the mission of fortifying the nation through art, specifically:

1° De présenter au public, en les situant dans leur perspective historique, les oeuvres représentatives de la production artistique de la deuxième moitié du XIXe siècle et des premières années du XXe siècle ainsi que les collections dont le musée national de l'Orangerie des Tuileries a la garde; 2° *De conserver, protéger et restaurer pour le compte de l'Etat*²⁶ les biens culturels inscrits sur les inventaires du musée national d'Orsay, du musée national de l'Orangerie des Tuileries et du musée national Hébert ainsi que sur ceux du musée national du Louvre, dont il a la garde. (Décre no. 2003-1300 du 26 décembre 2003 portant sur la création de l'Établissement public du musée d'Orsay et du musée de l'Orangerie.)

The clear purpose of the Musée d'Orsay (and all other *musées* “dits nationaux”) is to serve the *L'état* [français], consequently, constructing a certain vision of the collective French past. It is, of course though, *la nation française*, which is here being glorified; the state cannot name the *nation française* as such because *la nation* is already inherently the reason for its [state's] very existence. Whereas Louis XIV famously stated, “L'état, c'est moi,” in today's France, the impression that is expounded through “liberté, égalité, fraternité” is “L'état, c'est nous”²⁷. It is this “nous,” this alleged linear and singular version of a “French” collectivity that transcends time that allows the works of the Musée d'Orsay (and museums, in general) to curate a specific image of France. Kritzman suggests that, “the aesthetic of civilization is often the result of forced

²⁶Italics are mine.

²⁷Phrase and Italics my own.

consent, and that the ‘national contract’ has an unpleasant side that forces an insidious means of cohesion on the nation” (8). Visitors to the museum, French or foreign, in their perambulation through various exhibits and galleries consent, knowingly or not, to the aesthetic story that is on display. One must not question the absence of certain artists, works, or artforms as it would disrupt the assumption of historical cohesion.

The museum and its collections espouse, for both French and foreign visitors, a version of France’s artistic heritage which glorifies its cultural superiority and conjures *natsukashii* a difficult to translate Japanese term referring loosely to nostalgia or longing for a place or moment in time to which one can never return. Jacobs and Malpas consider nostalgia as an experience that originates from itself: “Yet if so, the nostalgia it evokes is nothing other than the nostalgia that accompanies all genuine remembrance the melancholic recognition of the sense of loss that inevitably accompanies the felt experience of the world in its richness and indeterminacy” (289).

It is Frédéric in this film who is reluctant to selling the family home and its objects and seems to long most strongly for the essence of what the house represents but no longer embodies: family cohesion, pride, and respect for tradition. The house acted as a family museum whose organic curatorial style made the objects within it more than just the sum of valuable paintings and furniture pieces. Frédéric is not unlike the house in that he, too, can be understood as an object. The objects influence him (memory, identity, financial status, workload, etc.) as much as he influences them (their care and handing over to the museum for archiving). As the family’s repository of memory, Frédéric inevitably fails to safeguard the material aspects of his family’s identity from the (over)reach of the museum *comme* nation.

The intertwining of a state-supported institution of national commemoration featuring a

private family blurs personal and communal (i.e. national) identities through objects, especially those of high art-historical value. This tactic presupposes that the value of these objects and their role in commemorating a certain stylized aspect of the French collective past is greater than the quotidian value placed upon in the space of the home. The erasure of personal affect upon an object is invoked for the greater good(s) of the national project.

The family's connection to objects is most profoundly felt within the bounds of their own home where there are no limits (implicitly or explicitly defined) on the interactions with such objects, for example, the desk that H el ene uses in her office is a famous Louis Marjorelle and the F elix Bracquemond vases that Elo ise uses to set out bouquets of flowers are priceless masterpieces—uses that would raise eyebrows among collectors and museum curators.²⁸ But something essential dissipates between the space of the home and the exhibits of the museum: the meaning that an object takes on through its practical and tactile usage. In the museum, the Berthier/Marly's objects behind ropes and glass and can no longer be manipulated as in the home.

Whilst touring the Berthier exhibit, Fr ed eric pauses and ponders his family's vases on display there.²⁹ "Ces vases, tu trouves qu'ils ont une histoire? Moi, je pense qu'ils prennent leur sens avec des fleurs, dans un salon. Si la lumi ere est vivante, sinon ils sont desenchant es. Ils sont inanim es." His personification of inanimate objects indicates Fr ed eric's grief from giving up his

²⁸Following H el ene's passing, Elo ise, the family housekeeper, is offered to take something from the house as a souvenir. She unknowingly chooses one of the Bracquemond vases, because she could continue to put flowers in it like she did for H el ene. She later tells her nephew, "J'ai pris un objet banal. De toute fa on un objet de valeur, je n'aurais pas su quoi en faire." This statement reveals the juxtaposition between the imposed importances that national institutions place upon objects that once removed from those formal settings return to being mere mortal objects.

²⁹The label accompanying the objects on display states "Collection Paul Berthier," which further erases any traces of Fr ed eric and his immediate family from the objects' parcours.

family's possessions. Several objects from H el ene's collections are showcased in glass display cases in this exhibit and as if through the process of sacred transubstantiation—they become national. Their enclosure and display alters their previous existence as a mere vase into an object that requires reverence and distance and can only be handled by those granted special access. The objects have passed through an irreversible process extolling their "rightful" place in the history of French art.

After the pieces have been removed from the Berthier homestead and put out for display, their significance shifts from the personal to the collective. There is no prize or formal recognition of previous ownership, which distinguishes them from everyday tourists. The family is drowned out and relegated to the collective ranks of visitors who enter the museum to gaze upon history. As a result when Fr ed eric and his wife first visit the museum, they too become the sheep of the nation and are disaffected from their personal connection.

The use of the Mus ee d'Orsay as the new home for the Berthier/Marly family's possessions forces a reconsideration of the personal, i.e. non-monetary, non-historical, values attributed to them. The setting of the exhibition space, the exact positioning of and restrictions on physical interaction with certain objects, and lighting inhibit the memories and emotions that were associated with their belongings. In the distance between the object's organic placement in the home and its new permanent display, the essence of its value to the nation takes shape, sloughing off its former meaning. This is most clearly supported in two scenes taking place within the museum. The first involves the in/attentive gazes of visitors, the second depicts Fr ed eric and his wife reflecting on how the family's objects have been archived to emphasize their place in collective French identity and by default, erase any traces of the family's history.

2.3.6 In the eye of the beholder: Gaze(s) in the space of the Musée d'Orsay

In the first scene, the camera slowly pans the Great Hall showing its grandeur before reaching a group of foreign tourists being led through the furniture exhibit (where parts of the Paul Berthier collection are housed) by a museum guide. The tour is conducted in English proof of the enduring global allure and influence generated by French art even in an age of a dwindling French exceptionalism. The speed of the tour and the tourists' fleeting glances at the objects in this exhibition reveal a level of disinterestedness similar to that previously expressed by Frédéric's children. There is no deeper critical engagement with these pieces, just a brief glance to see if it is pleasing or not to the eye. Even the camera appears distracted from the exhibit as it follows one museum visitor stepping away from the tour and focuses on him somewhat irreverently answering his cell phone.

The exhibit space now stands as mausoleum of sorts for Frédéric and his wife, a space worthy of reverence for their objects on display. On entering the exhibit space, Frédéric's gaze comes upon his mother's Marjorelle desk. His blank, sad stare hovers as he appears deep in thought over his loss, perhaps not only of his mother but also of his own family memories whose physical anchors are now out of reach. However, just like the tourists and their fleeting glances, his respect and attention is only granted to objects with which he has/had an affective bond. While still frozen in front of the desk, Frédéric turns to ask his wife about a pair of luminaries set on the same riser as the desk, "C'est de qui ces luminaires-là?" She steps aside to check the placard, and responds non-chalantly, "Machin truc. Ça ne me dit rien." This brief statement attests to the inattention that most visitors espouse for objects which extend to them no deeper meaning or connection.

I have argued the importance of objects in the sustenance of family identity, focusing

heavily on Frédéric's role as intermediary between mutually exclusive (dis)interested parties. Family identity is here deeply linked to the shift between levels of interactions that their objects are subjected to in their transfer to the museum. One could also discuss the role of museum in the film and how it redefines identit(ies) through the re-purposing of objects in a more sterile space. Additionally, it would be incredibly useful to further explore the extra-cinematic realization of this project, including the external financial, cultural and administrative support granted. These domains would help to explicate in greater detail how the family and nation collide through cultural appropriation and how one side influences the other through conscious and subconscious means.

2.4 LE NOM DES GENS

2.4.1 Introduction

In the two previous films, the objects and artifacts of my examination have been tangible markers bearing emotional and physical traces of the nation. The third film of this chapter, *Le Nom des gens*, centers on names and intangible objects such as the embodied memory of national trauma, which both reaffirm and set adrift national identity. Names act as incarnations of memory, stereotypes, and family secrets, which blur the boundaries between individual and collective spaces of recollection. A name is at once a humble signifier and a mighty epitaph of familial association and collective belonging to a larger, national community. Kasof suggests that, “a name activates a rich set of semantic information—from connotations of the bearer's age, to intellectual competence, race, ethnicity, social class—which impacts impression formation

and evaluation” (qtd. in Laham et al. 752). This information and the impressions are controlled, in part, by institutions of the state and in part by social conventions; names can bear within their very utterances or spellings incredible political and cultural agency. They can be incredibly powerful signifiers of individual and collective memory, for better or worse.³⁰

While it cannot exactly be said that one owns his or her name, one must constantly bear the gravitas of the social and cultural ramifications attached to it.³¹ These ramifications might include the legal privileges and restrictions embedded in identity cards or passports, but it also includes the historical residue of family heritage. Names become tangible possessions in the legal realm—state-produced and promoted categories of identification such as: gender, race, ethnicity, economic class or place of origin. Depending on the name, these categories can be decoded in the mere written, spelled-out form and destines its beholder to social constraints beyond their capacity to change.

However, when a name is uttered aloud, either by its beholder or called out by someone else, the naming of the name becomes a sort of Austinian speech act. Stating a person’s name is a speech act of sorts because it substantiates the physical person—including the prejudices, assumptions and known face—about whom, one is speaking. The calling out of a person’s name frequently evokes social and cultural assumptions solely based on the utterance of the name. For example, if the name has an unusual resonance compared to the grouping of names typical to a specific region or country, it [the name] immediately distinguishes its beholder as an outsider or other. While this nominative othering serves as a large part of my analysis of French identity in

³⁰Many countries have strict governance over names that can be given to a child, so as not to cause undue social aggravation, bullying or misunderstanding for the child. Germany requires that the name (except in the case of ‘foreign’ names) clearly depict the sex of the child, male or female.

³¹Except in the cases where persons or legal entities may own the copyrights to the public use of a person’s name.

Le Nom des gens, it will not however not be my only tool of analysis.

Cinematic techniques, such as flashbacks, breaking of the fourth wall and close-ups often include an overlapping of historical periods and sceneries to link family experiences of historical trauma with the nationally espoused versions of commemoration³² “The family”, as Aleida Assman suggests, “is a privileged site of memorial transmission” (qtd. in Hirsch 109). The use of family’s history in *Le Nom* creates the parallel between private and national memories and shows how the two so frequently bleed together. The varied cinematic techniques that show these historical parallel help to create a distinction between the spoken and unspoken both at the family and national level and repeatedly shows the gaps in memory that families and the nation have constructed as a means of distancing oneself from the gravity of the events. What Assman continues to say on the matter of memory transmission amongst families is that:

The ‘group memory’ in her schema is based on the familial transfer of embodied experience to the next generation: it is intergenerational. National/political and cultural/archival memory, in contrast, are not inter- but trans-generational; they are no longer mediated through embodied practice but solely through symbolic systems. (qtd. in Hirsch 109)

Thus, the intangible objects in this film can be understood as duly embraced by both the inter- generationally (dis)embodied experiences of the characters and the symbolic systems of the nation because they fluidly intersect both realms of experience and disorient the stability of the symbolism upheld by the nation.

Physical images and objects related to family backstories come to life at sites of national commemoration. The frequent appearance of memorials, museums, and *la mairie*, underscore the

³²The flashbacks in this film are not straightforward reel excerpts from a past event. I use the term “flashback” to include a variety of loosely similar cinematic elements employed in this film.

conflicting versions of personal i.e. family versus collective understandings of major historical events. The interactions within the institutions of official identity production evoke the unresolvable legacies of the French role within the Holocaust and colonization/post-colonization of Algeria and subsequent assimilation projects. The sequences and objects of my focus serve as avatars of French identity constantly reminding the viewer that the French nation is inescapable, yet constantly (re)constructed through (un)conscious appreciations of seemingly everyday acts and objects. The modus operandi of national disorientation in this film is espoused in the day-to-day personal expressions of identity as filtered through memory. The coterminous development of the main characters' private experiences of nationally commemorated events is what most saliently drives the rebuttal of national interference in their daily lives.

2.4.2 De quoi Baya Benmahmoud et Arthur Martin sont-ils les noms?³³

The name-bearers, Arthur and Baya, in *Le Nom* are members what Marianne Hirsch refers to as members of the generation³⁴ of “postmemory” (105).³⁵ “‘Postmemory’ is ‘the particular relation to a parental past described, evoked, and analyzed [... and] has come to be seen as a ‘syndrome’ of belatedness or ‘post-ness’” (106). Arthur and Baya are depicted as bound to their parents' past as almost as if duly victimized by the same event. First, they are recipients of their parents' trauma but also are themselves traumatized by the inability to stake a claim to the original event and furthermore, by the lifelong effects of the names their parents chose for them. One name,

³³Adapted from Alain Badiou's essay 2007, *De quoi Sarkozy est-il le nom?*

³⁴The title of the article cited is “Generation of Postmemory” in which *generation* used as a synonym for creation or manufacturing. However, I use a separate meaning of generation to refer to the linear kinship structure of subsequent offspring's belonging to a loose temporally defined group of members.

³⁵Hirsch uses this term primarily in regard to the children and grandchildren of Holocaust survivors, however, since both main characters are indirect recipients of the historical traumas that their parents lived through, I think it is quite appropriate to apply it to both.

Arthur Martin, effacing evidence of family trauma, the other Baya Benmahmoud, provides an immediate link but is downplayed in many other ways.

Le Nom's main characters, Baya (Sarah Forestier, breakout star of *L'esquive*) and Arthur (Jacques Gamblin), aside from the functions of their names, are superficially complete opposites.³⁶ Baya is in her mid-twenties and dresses, acts, and speaks very provocatively—constantly seeking to grab attention. She is a pale-skinned French and Algerian hybrid bombshell whose exterior appearance matches her extroverted personality; much like her evocative clothing, she wears her family's heritage on her (often sleeveless) sleeve constantly proclaiming her dualistic identity as French and Arab. Arthur, on the other hand, is a 47-year-old veterinary epidemiologist who very much dresses the part of his rather morbid and institutionalized line of work. His subtle personality and *franchouillard*³⁷ name deflects ethnic interrogation, including heretofore self-speculation, into his family's deeply buried secret: Arthur's mother is an ethnically Greek Jew whose parents (Arthur's maternal grandparents) were deported to Auschwitz in 1940. These autobiographical intrigues are woven into an unlikely romance that ensues between Baya and Arthur. Though, once a sexual relationship begins, their family histories soon surface as one of their most salient commonalities.

Baya, though she looks "French," is half-Algerian and a fierce defender of *les droits de l'homme*; Arthur, on the other hand, looks French and has a French-sounding name which hides a much richer story of his family's ethnic difference. On the characters' embrace of personal

³⁶The choice of Forestier for the role of Baya was explained by the screenwriter as appropriate, because the character is based off his real-life wife who is half French, half Algerian, but does not bare an external appearance which denotes her Algerian heritage.

³⁷"Franchouillard" is a term used by Baya at several points in the film to describe her mother's maiden name and Arthur's name. This moniker along with another expression Baya uses "français de chez français" meaning "Frenchy" or "as French as they come." Baya employs these expressions primarily in a perjorative manner to imply that cultural purity is something to be avoided at all costs.

difference, Zoé Protat contends, “Et si Bahia embrasse sa singularité comme une véritable force créatrice de vie, Arthur, bien dressé par le conformisme familial, la refoule et l’enfouit” (8). Should it be said then that one or the other is a more apt national subject? It would naturally be foolish to say that one is more French than the other based conformity or lack there towards social norms; however, what is indicative of the disorientation of French identity is the interplay between names and the historical trajectories woven as the common thread for digging into (family) histories that might be better off left undisturbed.

Family history and national history run on parallel tracks; generations tend to be identified through the larger social and historical events, which took place during their lifetimes. Michel Leclerc, director and co-producer, notes that: “En se racontant l’itinéraire de nos deux familles, qui en fait sont assez proches de celles du film, on s’est rendu compte qu’à travers l’histoire de nos parents, on avait un portrait assez précis de l’histoire de France des 50 dernières années” (qtd. in Protat 9).³⁸ This exploration of the last half-century of French history and the repercussions of its crystallization into national memory synthesizes around the repetitive obsession with names in the film (only 24 seconds into the film do we hear the first name declaration). Arthur appears on-screen speaking to the fourth wall first and recounts a quip about a Korean World Cup soccer team who had too many players with the same name, to explain how he, too, is one of many identically named Frenchmen. He follows by stating, “Moi...je m’appelle Arthur Martin. Nous sommes 15 207 à porter le même nom.”³⁹ Arthur is shot in close-up only showing the chest up, seated indoors surrounded by subdued lighting with no diegetic noise to detract from his words. He poses seriously, lost in an anonymous crowd of like-named

³⁸The film is a fiction based on the lives of its screenwriters Baya Kasmi and Michel Leclerc, who were, at the time of filming (2009-2010) a real-life couple.

³⁹“Arthur Martin” is an actual brand name of appliances that was founded in France in 1854 whose naming license currently held by Electrolux.

Frenchmen based on the backdrop and camera angle. His name is not the first utterance from his mouth whereas when the shot switches to Baya, the first words she says are: “Je m’appelle Baya Benmahmoud. Je suis la seule en France à porter ce nom-là.” The confidence with which she states her name alongside the framing of her full body outside in natural outdoor lighting with a light, jovial musical interlude paints Baya as so extroverted so as to have nothing to hide. Being the only person in France to bear her name she cannot remain onomastically invisible and must assume her name in direct opposition to the 15, 207 Arthur Martins of France who live in relative anonymity. Baya’s whimsy is as much developed in her provocative style⁴⁰ and gregarious personality as it is in the uniqueness of her name; Arthur’s homogeneity is cinematically depicted as the polar opposite. These facts are broken down throughout the film through a gradual and sporadic unveiling of each character’s family background in the form of flashbacks.

2.4.3 Flashbacks: A la recherche des souvenirs perdus

The historical capital associated with each of the protagonists’ names is unveiled through a variety of auto-biographical and inter-generational flashbacks which show how they as well as their names are both the by-products of major episodes in recent French history: France/the Vichy Regime’s shameful role in the Holocaust and the Algerian War. The use of the family as a microscope of the events of recent French history is ingenious in that it allows us, as viewers, to better ingest the stakes and pitfalls of fully conceding personal experiences of history to the annals of national rhetoric and commemoration. To this effect, the film deploys a variety of cinematic techniques such as character-specific autobiographical flashbacks, fourth-wall

⁴⁰Baya is often scantily clad in the film and even appears completely nude, save for her shoes, in one scene because she is so scatter-brained she leaves her home without putting clothes back on.

breaking monologues and voice-over narrations, which intermingle to expand upon the character's backstory. The autobiographical flashbacks shuttle the viewer between the hidden or un-communicated layers of Arthur and Baya's pasts and presents by deconstructing the deeply imbedded cultural misunderstandings arising from nominative stereotypes.

In an interview for *Ciné-Bulles*, co-producer and director Michel Leclerc spoke of his varied utilization of techniques stating, "Ce sont les personnages qui guident le forme" (Protat 8). This is evidenced in the way Baya is presented more assuredly in the present, whereas Arthur repeatedly drifts into flashbacks. The flashback is Arthur's way of working through the unspoken experiences of his family, in particular, his mother's experience as a child survivor of the Holocaust. Each flashback grasps at uncovering some fact or emotion, which can never be fully elucidated because national commemoration and its consequential forgetting have too firmly anchored themselves into the Martin family psyche.

The performative conventions used in the film's plot development are quite distinct in how they disassemble the fourth wall between not only the actor and the audience, but also on a more meta-character level where Arthur's younger selves (young boy and teenage Arthur) interact with his adult self. From the start of the film, on-screen narrative monologues directed toward the viewing public give anecdotal information about the emotions involved with each historical moment. These dialogues could be said to be what Marc Augé has defined as "non-spaces" (non-lieu) because of the necessity to "read" these monologues distinctly from the plot-centered dialogues. As Augé defines them, "non-spaces" are not necessarily physical locations, but can be also areas, objects, and visual cues that create a sensation of place without actually ever going there. These narrative breakouts, along with family backstories, continuously pierce through Arthur and Baya's daily lives drawing attention to the ever-present role of the nation of

in their daily lives. Several flashbacks directly engage Arthur, as his present-day adult self, into scenes from his past and include his child and adolescent versions. All of these cinematic approaches heavily rely on the play between both first and last names and extrapolate upon the more broad-reaching social implications of one's name.

2.4.4 Les pré-noms

The protagonists' names, Arthur Martin and Bahia Benmahmoud, could not be more dissimilar; one is remarkably commonplace in the French landscape, while the other is culturally dissonant. In a parallel scene, Baya also speaks of the immediate consequences of her name. Before ever seeing either character on screen, based an image of what they might look like already exists in our heads—a point central to the plot and character development in the film. Arthur and Bahia's back stories focus on their family heritage using their most publicly identifiable possessions: their names.

The social agency of Arthur and Baya's names both incite further comment from anyone they meet.⁴¹ Due to his name, Arthur Martin has always been able to blend into in the French cultural landscape—except when he is reminded that his name is the same as a trusted brand of kitchen appliances.⁴² Baya, on the other hand, is routinely asked what the origin of her name is and/or where she comes from; the unfamiliar nature of her name preempts her fellow French

⁴¹The repercussions of a name have not been ignored by French cinema as of late. The film, *Le Prénom* (2012), also revolves around the heavy consequences that can come with a certain name. In this film, one of the protagonists shares the name he intends to name his unborn son, "Adolphe". Though he insists that the spelling with a "phe" ending frees him of any misgivings associated with the "f" as the most infamous Adolf in history, his friends and family are in shock and spend a significant portion of the film aiming to convince him that the child's life as well as his own would be ruined with such a choice of name.

⁴²This is almost a running gag in the film as the viewer is exposed to the repeated annoyances Arthur is subjected to whenever someone mentions that his name is the same as the appliance brand.

citizens to discount her as “authentically” French. These simple acts of classification by name is an allegory of the state’s role in classifying each citizen by name and other distinctive details which can, at least socially, marginalize them from full participation in the nation.

Both Arthur and Baya are legacies to these national traumas—both individually and on a national level. Beyond that however, it is essential to point out that actual traumas in question were lived by Arthur’s mother and Baya’s father and the residue of these experiences is passed on almost as if it were embedded in the very DNA of their progeny, Baya and Arthur. How each of them integrate these second-hand experiences into their persona and daily lives is not merely a question of which trauma was worse or why, but also how society controls the space in which they do so.

2.4.4.1 Le *non des gens*. One flashback in which an object of national memory collides with the personal experience of an event takes place through a history lesson focusing on a new schoolyard plaque commemorating the deportation of former students. This newly unveiled plaque reads:

À la mémoire des élèves, Déportés de 1942 à 1944,

*Parce que nés juifs, victimes innocentes, De la barbarie nazie, Et du
gouvernement du Vichy, Ils furent exterminés,*

Dans les camps de la mort,

Ne les oublions jamais.

Void of any specific names or numbers of students lost during this shameful period in French history, this plaque neglects the individual personal experiences of trauma. It places the burden

of guilt on external players, the Nazis and the Vichy Regime without any reference to the entity “France.” The plaque at once incites reflection upon the events but also deflects responsibility of the act itself. The very object that is intended to force collective remembrance also incites collective forgetting of the human aspect of the event.

Arthur’s teacher asks her students, “Qu’est-ce qu’on appelle le devoir de mémoire?” Two female classmates give vague textbook responses about how the forgetting of innocent victims is sad and how they need to remember those who died during the war. However, it is Arthur’s interjection, which most poignantly responds to the question. He raises his hand and asks, “Pourquoi se souvenir que de leurs morts?” He begins to slowly assert his own personal second-generational experience of the Holocaust here, as he continues: “Si j’imagine que moi, j’ai été assassiné, et que tous les jours je passe devant un truc qui me rappelle à quel point c’était horrible d’être assassiné, je pense pas que ça soit très sympa. Je pense que ça serait mieux de se rappeler du jour où ils ont mangé de la crème Chantilly pour la première fois.” Unfortunately, without outing his mother’s experience with the Holocaust and making the personal connection, he is promptly brushed off as being a “smart aleck.” Marianne Hirsch, in relation to this tension in Holocaust memory, posits that:

[...] as public and private images and stories blend, distinctions and specificities between them are more difficult to maintain, and the more difficult they are to maintain, the more some of us might wish to reassert them to insist on the distinctiveness of a specifically second-generation identity. (113)

Adult Arthur narrates the scene with the comment, “C’est mon petit trésor caché et je n’aime pas qu’on me fasse de la concurrence.” Over time, the shrinking space for personal accounts devalues this *trésor* leading to the possibilities of erasure of memory and this aspect of

his identity. Once again here, Hirsch explicates how Arthur's *trésor secret* can be contextualized by the concept of "postmemory":

To grow up with such overwhelming inherited memories, to be dominated by narratives that preceded one's birth or one's consciousness, is to risk having one's own stories and experiences displaced, even evacuated, by those of a previous generation. It is to be shaped, however indirectly, by traumatic events that still defy narrative reconstruction and exceed comprehension. These events happened in the past, but their effects continue into the present. This is, I believe, the experience of postmemory and the process of its generation. (107)

Because this is *his* secret, one of which he does not even know the full details, Arthur's own experience of the Holocaust as in this scene is rejected and becomes even more fragmented through the muddled and sparse facts of his mother's experience.

2.4.4.2 Autour de la télé. The manner in which both Baya and Arthur cope with the scars of their parents' pasts at individual and collective levels are antithetical to each other precisely because of the shield or lack thereof that their names have provided. Michael Herzfeld states that, "Rethinking the tangle of multiple pasts often happens in the intimate space of culture" (12). There is a vacuous space created by the shuttering off of past personal traumas in which this "tangle" hangs in the balance until it is provoked by exterior factors; Baya's are unavoidable, Arthur's must be drawn out. Such is the case of the politics of name-changes in which the political agency that Arthur and Baya's families exercised in changing their names to hide

painful and embarrassing family secrets.⁴³ The memories of past generations of name-bearers become the possessions of future progeny coming with a particular burden and duty to uphold. In Baya's case, she finds herself in an "othered" no-man's land where she can fully embrace neither her Frenchness nor Algerianness; she is not Muslim by belief but by culture. In one scene, Baya and a large group of Algerian (first and second generation) family friends are gathered closely around a televised political debate program about the standing of Muslims in France. Two sides are present—a friend of Baya's community representing cultural Muslims and the other more sinister debater is Hassan Hassini, who rails against the failed national failed assimilation projects and contends that all Arabs in France are Muslim. Hassini firmly states, "[nos enfants] n'auront jamais le nom qu'il faut," reinforcing the societal implications of names and their limitations.⁴⁴ He acts on the same side of the nation by implying that identity is predetermined by familial constraints and that granting precedent to one's French identity is treasonous towards one's heritage in the hierarchy of personal identities. The very object—a name—which denotes participation in a specific cultural community, is also the same object, which obfuscates belonging to the nation. Through his assertion that having a certain name or type of name is required for integration into French society, he chips away at the prevailing state-level promotion of *laïcité* and *les droits de l'homme*.

Both projects seek to include all French persons into the nation; however, the erasure of

⁴³In both families, it was the mother whose names were changed and not only through marriage. Arthur's mother's name was changed from the very Jewish-sounding Annaliese Cohen to Annabelle Colin by the director of the orphanage she is sent to after her parents were sent to Auschwitz. Her married name then permanently erased any resemblance to her birthname which is mired in the traumatic events of WWII. Baya's mother, on the other hand, was originally named Cécile Delivet, a bourgeois name for the daughter of a bourgeois family—an upbringing she detested. Her marriage to Baya's Algerian father was finally an opportunity to permanently differentiate herself from her shameful past.

⁴⁴Soon after this evening program, Baya decides that Hassini will be her next target in her mission of political conversion through sex. While she does later sleep with him, her plan backfires and she is briefly converted to his side of the argument.

outward or cultural differences has failed greatly in many ways. In one scene, Baya and a large group of Algerian (first and second generation) family friends are gathered closely around a televised political debate program about the standing of Muslims in France. Two sides are present—a friend of Baya’s community representing cultural Muslims and the other more sinister debater is Hassan Hassini, who rails against the failed national failed assimilation projects and contends that all Arabs in France are Muslim. Hassini firmly states, “[nos enfants] n’auront jamais le nom qu’il faut,” reinforcing the societal implications of names and their limitations.⁴⁵ He acts on the same side of the nation by implying that identity is predetermined by familial constraints and that granting precedent to one’s French identity is treasonous towards one’s heritage in the hierarchy of personal identities. The very object—a name—which denotes participation in a specific cultural community, is also the same object, which obfuscates belonging to the nation. Through his assertion that having a certain name or type of name is required for integration into French society, he chips away at the prevailing state-level promotion of laïcité and les droits de l’homme. Both projects seek to include all French persons into the nation; however, the erasure of outward or cultural differences has failed greatly in many ways.

The persistent urge or tendency to classify people according to their otherness inherently creates a system of cultural hierarchy which conflagrates exclusion from the nation. This scene shows the counter-arguments of the suppressed who (in)advertently apply the same tactics to fight back. Throughout the film, actual clips from the past media events play on family’s television screens in order to propel the storyline through its historical frameworks. Each time however there has been no comment on the actual events just the use of body language and

⁴⁵Soon after this evening program, Baya decides that Hassini will be her next target in her mission of political conversion through sex. While she does later sleep with him, her plan backfires and she is briefly converted to his side of the argument.

changing channels to express uneasiness or resistance to the topics being depicted on screen. However, in this particular scene that I analyze, a television news show (that is fictional to the film's viewers, not the viewers depicted in the film) incites strong reaction from those who are watching alongside Baya. The immediacy of the show's content and its effect on viewers' lives causes an uproar that news footage and documentaries of the past prevent in other similar scenes. It is as if the television's interlocutor can be directly addressed and change can be affected upon their statements merely by reacting loudly to the television.

One of Baya's friends retorts (at the TV):

C'est [Hassini] un communautariste. Ça lui arrange de mettre les gens dans les cases. Le problème, c'est pas Hassini, c'est le problème d'être Musulman dans ce pays. C'est quand même une position dans ce pays où on te case dans la tête. Tu t'appelles Fatima ou, je sais pas comment, Aïcha, t'es systématiquement musulman.

With names like "Fatima" or "Aïcha" certainly come preconceived ideas, perhaps not as much of likely appearances, as much as cultural and religious belongings. The clash of actual lived beliefs and experiences versus the preconceived stereotypes that these names might conjure, for example, a non-Muslim Fatima or a hijab-wearing Aïcha, is an example of how national whitewashing—not in a racial sense—but of cultural difference chips away at the cohesion of the nation.

In this intimate space of culture, names as an object of identity development are disentangled; the close proximity to one another within the safe space of the living room permits Baya to be herself amongst other persons whose personal cultural perceptions cannot be easily pigeonholed. Outside of these safe spaces, Baya cannot be fully French because she is "tainted"

by her father's Algerian blood, and cannot be fully *Beur* because of her mother's Frenchness. Her self-recognition as *both* declassifies her as *pur Beur* or what Baya terms "jambon beur(re)."⁴⁶ In this scene, the cultural artifacts of names and the French obsession "la question musulmane" (as here shown through a popular televised debate format) reifies the bi-directional resistance towards classificatory systems of identification. The name is the object onto which otherness and (in)assimilability is repeatedly projected and used as a weapon to segregate, disenfranchise, and exclude persons bearing certain names from the national political discourse.

2.4.4.3 Impostor Syndrome. While Baya's name requires her to routinely explain her origins or reaffirm her French status, her non-Mediterranean appearance, however, is traitorous and often requires her to perform exaggerated cultural tropes to be believed as Beur or Algerian. A subsequent scene at a hookah bar shows Baya who must now, alternatively, prove her Algerianness to her sexual prey, Hassan Hassini.⁴⁷ He is the leader of an anti-assimilation pro-Islam movement which rails against the existence of a secular Muslim culture—the very one to which Baya herself ascribes. His role in the film lends credence to Baya's cultural struggles with full belonging in either community.

The scene begins with Baya and Arthur sitting together on a couch in the same hookah bar where Hassini and several male friends are gathered to smoke. As Baya stands up to go over to Hassini, she is dressed as a French flag: royal blue blazer, white dress and red purse. She has personified *le drapeau français*, which she promptly disrobes the royal blue blazer and leaves

⁴⁶This is a play-on-words with the classic French sandwich *jambon beurre* (ham and butter).

⁴⁷Hookah bars are now quite prevalent throughout France. Though in Maghrebi and Middle Eastern cultures they are primarily masculine spaces places where men gather, in France these bars have less gendered stigma attached to them. That said, the particular scene discussed here depicts a more authentic male-centric space in which Bahia's presence appears out of the ordinary.

her red purse behind, dressed now only in white before approaching Hassini dressed head-to-toe in black: a sartorial battle of good and evil. In disrobing her Frenchness—here depicted as external—for a more bare exposure of her Algerian side, she leaves her French identity at Arthur’s table for him to safeguard.

Though she speaks to Hassini in Algerian Arabic, her risqué clothing stunts her recognizability as Algerian within the Muslim-as-believer context. The framing of the scene at hookah bar with its subdued lighting, the air filled with smoke, background conversations and music in Arabic mirrors this public change in Baya’s cultural identification. These exaggerated acts of Algerianness lend credence to her cultural struggles of belonging because her Algerian heritage is portrayed as independent from the tether of her father’s identity. Though she is at ease in this foreign place, Arthur, on the other hand, is uneasy and fidgety just as he is with Baya’s shameless use of her family heritage for political motives.

While Baya is off working her charms at the other end of the bar, Arthur redirects his distant gaze from Baya to a much shorter gaze pointed at his long-deceased Greek Jewish grandparents who suddenly appear on the neighboring couch in full traditional ethnic garb. Speaking Greek, his grandparents encourage him to tell Baya about his family’s past and his own “exotic” ethnicity. He responds, almost comically, in French to their questions and comments in French though he certainly does not speak Greek. This linguistic mirage of sorts shows how Arthur’s maternal heritage is already embedded deep in his psyche despite his family’s policy of avoidance.

Arthur’s teenage avatar also then appears in between adult Arthur and their grandparents and pushes him [adult Arthur] to tell Baya about this part of his heritage. Arthur snaps back, “On n’est pas obligé de raconter la vie de sa famille jusqu’à la 10e génération.” The problem remains

that since his family actively avoids the trauma his mother and grandparents endured he does not feel like he should be allowed to be martyred for something that he did not himself experience.⁴⁸ Marianne Hirsch elaborates on this thought through the concept of the “postgeneration”, a term she coined to name the phenomenon of experiences of trauma as felt by subsequent generations of survivors of the Holocaust. “Postgeneration” implies both a visceral connectedness to the personally unexperienced event, but also speaks to the manner in which generationally distant experiences are unique unto themselves and are deserving of special attention:

And yet, for better or worse, one could say that, for the postgeneration, the screens of gender and of familiarity and the images that mediate them function analogously to the protective shield of trauma itself: they function as screens that absorb the shock, filter and diffuse the impact of trauma, diminish harm. In forging a protective shield particular to the postgeneration, one could say that, paradoxically, they actually reinforce the living connection between past and present, between the generation of witnesses and survivors and the generation after. (Hirsch 125)

This concept of ownership of the memory and experience of the Holocaust and its legacy within second and third generations of survivors is a source of great debate and scholarship. Marianne Hirsch’s work on “postmemory” (as briefly touched on earlier) is one of the most widely cited critical theories regarding the transmission of memory and of the experience of generationally-distanced survivors, such as the case of Arthur who is conflicted as to his

⁴⁸This same point is made earlier in the film when Arthur tells two fellow female classmates about his mother’s and grandparents’ trauma. He only does this to make himself more appealing to his female love interests. One of his classmates asks, “Pourquoi tu ne le nous as pas dit avant?” following up with “Tu sais, c’est pas bon la silence.” But Arthur is keenly aware of both the danger and power of silence. Once he realizes the power his avowal had in exciting his classmates, he immediately seems revolted by his own admissions and recants his true story pretending to have made it up.

belonging to survivorhood or ownership of memory. An earlier flashback in the film reveals the source of Arthur's disdain for telling his mother's backstory when he states, "C'est mes grandparents qui meurent, ma mère qui en souffre et c'est moi qui prend la médaille de mérite...et c'est déguelasse." Arthur's distaste for the appropriation of trauma or what James Young calls a "vicarious past" (1) comes to a head at the hookah bar.

This scene acts as a turning point in the film in which Baya and Arthur's distinct cultural journeys reach a crossroads because both are "outed" as other in this non-French setting. From this point on, Baya and Arthur both speak more openly about their families' secrets and Arthur seeks to learn more about the facts of his grandparents' deportation and his mother's childhood in an orphanage. This scene, in particular, leads to further questioning of how collective, *voire national*, identities form through personally-lived experiences and the baggage of one's family ancestry(ies). Against the rigid laws and policies of national identification, it is almost impossible to disseminate a collective, but diverse identity as anything other than anti-French.

2.4.4.4 "And Here My Troubles Began"⁴⁹ The institution of the family, problematized by both characters, is analogous to institutions of the nation which are just as troubled by the "devoir de mémoire" set against the backdrop of present-day political and social realities and marked desire to re-write shameful episodes from their pasts. The imagined belonging to the collectivity forcibly washes away differences while it conveniently avoids dealing with past traumas head on.⁵⁰ Arthur's family history then specifically acts as an allegory of national identity in its lifelong policy of conformity and forgetting. His mother's hushed Holocaust survivorhood has

⁴⁹ Borrowed from the subtitle of Art Spiegelman's *Maus II: And Here My Troubles Began*

⁵⁰A collective imagination, which is routinely promoted through many forms most salient of which centralized curricula of public schools through tales of distant French origins and the infamous "Nos ancêtres les Gaulois". In the case of Arthur's family name, 'Martin', which sounds is a French equivalent of 'John Doe', they are primed

long carefully avoided any legal references or categorizations, which might force reconciliation with this part of her life. In an early flashback, Madame Martin is shown in the orphanage where she was hidden from the Nazis as a little girl in 1940. Susan Rubin Suleiman characterizes Madame Martin's status as child Holocaust survivor as "old enough to remember but too young to understand (approximately [those] age four to ten)" (283).⁵¹ Martin of course remembers the events but was unable to process the weight of the events that led to her new life. When asked her name, she, the child version of Madame Martin, responds sheepishly, "Annette Cohen" to which her well-meaning caretaker responds, "Non, maintenant, tu t'appelles... Annabelle Colin". This abrupt nominative erasure sets in motion a life of orchestrated avoidance of these painful memories. As an example, Arthur narrates a subsequent flashback to his childhood, "Dans les années 70s, le tabou familial rencontre l'obsession nationale. La France expie le crime en en parlant toute la journée et chez nous c'est une gymnastique invraisemblable pour qu'on s'aperçoive de rien." Arthur as narrator stands to the side as he looks upon himself as a child, who is sitting silently on the couch alongside his mother and father while watching television. A constant barrage of news clips, documentaries, interviews, and even a game show referring to the Holocaust appear on each and every channel which his father responds to simply by repeatedly getting up to change the channel. The silence—save for sound bites from a report on Klaus Barbie's trial, an interview with a survivor, and horrific black and white images of emaciated camp prisoners—overwhelms the scene. Neither Arthur nor his mother move or make any glances at all to indicate discomfort there lingers only the simultaneous acts of the false stoicism of a trauma survivor and her young son following her lead. However, Arthur's own need to

⁵¹Madame Martin would have been 6 or 7 at the time of her parents' deportation.

reconcile his emotions and testimony of the Holocaust is evinced in the Arthur's imaginary conversations with his deported grandparents and younger versions of himself.

2.4.5 Allons enfants à la mairie!

These categorizations of *citoyen*, *étranger*, *personnes en situation d'irrégularité*, *les sans domiciles fixes* amongst others are all worked out in the institution of *la mairie*.⁵² *La mairie* and *le maire* (Monsieur or Madame) are integral to mundane performances of French identity.⁵³ For the context of this film, there are three actions taking place within the *mairie*, which are of *La mairie* appears on-screen at multiple junctures, each time presenting a new engagement with the French nation, which reifies its intrusions into private citizens' lives. The category of marriage is intrinsic to the maintenance of French values, which are based upon the existence of a nuclear heteronormative family units as building block of the nation. Additionally, it is this point during which two consenting adults declare before the law and *l'état* that they intend to live their lives as a uniquely identifiable and legal unit. However, during the on-screen weddings, each couple is married for different reasons as narrated through Arthur and Baya's sequential voice-overs.

⁵²The *mairie* is a French administrative structure wherein all registrations of births, deaths, and identity papers become official. The term *la mairie* translates to mayor's office or city hall—the entity, not only the building. The *mairie* is a French administrative structure wherein all registrations of births, deaths, and identity papers become official. Italics are mine. *Mairies* are most often located at the very epicenter of villages, towns, or cities—its very geographic situation attesting to its centrality to life in France. No matter the size, every municipal entity maintains a *mairie*; it might only host *heures de permanence* for several hours a week, but every person living in France—alien or citizen—has at one point or another interacted with *la mairie*.

⁵³Official functions of *le maire*, in addition to municipal governance, also include conducting marriage ceremonies and civil baptisms, which are a relatively new addition to their repertoire. In the latter, *le maire* acts as a surrogate of the state and baptizes the child/person as a citizen of France. *Le maire* traditionally wears a *banderole tricolore*, or tri-colored sash, which serves as a garment of their almost “anointed” status within French culture. Other buildings/entities that replicated the church, the Panthéon where France's most revered artists, authors, politicians and statesmen are entombed in a central and glorified church-like structure where great French citizens can be secularly venerated.

Arthur's parents' marriage is explained as one, which occurred because his mother was relieved "lorsqu'il [Arthur's father] lui propose de donner son nom...Martin." The framing of Monsieur and Madame Martin on the steps of *la mairie* is shot in black and white, obviously to show the historical setting, yet it also speaks to the prudish acceptance of the state's role. Madame Martin's her/story is in black and white signifying a strict adherence to a forward-moving trajectory of identity formation. When Arthur himself appears in the sequence to continue narrating his own provenance, he states his date of birth as if he were stating it out of necessity for legal reasons because his tone of voice shifts to conform to the sanctimoniousness of the space.

The marriage of Baya's parents, conversely, stems from a love that was built upon her mother's desire to regularize her father's illegal immigrant status as a protest against the government, but ultimately, it was a marriage of love. This marriage, too, was a way for her [Baya's] mother to change her identity by eschewing her bourgeois name, Céline Delivet, for a name with more diversity-laden panache. This marriage also takes places at *la mairie de Bagnolet* thirteen years after the Martins' were married and stepped out of the national baptismal font of sorts into the world as newly minted name-bearers. Even Baya herself partakes in a wedding, admittedly her third, and only to get her new husband residency papers—again, at *la mairie de Bagnolet*. Showing all of the main characters, except for Arthur, in these spaces of national performativity links them together in ways that less politically imbued social settings cannot. They are citizens of France on paper, but their reasons for marrying tell that they are not *citizens*,⁵⁴ who are filled with emotion for French identity.

In the wedding scenes, the stairs of the mayor's office are depicted as the prime spot for

⁵⁴Term and italics are my own.

family pictures and joyfully celebrating the newlyweds. The ending of the scene wherein Madame Martin must “refaire ses papiers” due to a stolen wallet depicts this location of jubilant celebration as a march into doom. Arthur and Baya accompany his mother to *la mairie* to help her with the requisite paperwork of acquiring a new national identity card.⁵⁵ As this scene will show, a trip to *la mairie* is as much a normal rite/right of passage for all French citizens as it is an opportunity for the French state to reinforce its power in daily life. Michael Herzfeld comments on the power dynamics of these processes:

People recognize as familiar, everyday phenomena some of officialdom’s most formal devices [proving who is and is not French according to their set standards], and this generates active skepticism about official claims and motives. Moreover, most citizens may agree that since the state is staffed by rapacious bureaucrats, too much obedience to the law is merely silly. That is hardly the stuff of which the rhetoric of national unity is officially made, yet it informs the mutual recognition that one finds among a country’s citizens everywhere—even among its state functionaries. (4)

The ridiculousness of Madame Martin’s situation (i.e. having to re-prove a citizenship that she has always held) chips away at the rhetoric of national unity because it implies an instability within French citizenship. Yet, this experience of having to do so, is also perversely a community-building exercise which forces citizens who are otherwise shielded from this precariousness to reaffirm their Frenchness through institutional means.

⁵⁵Baya is again dressed in a royal blue blazer, white dress and red purse as she and the Martins walk into *la mairie*. Again, this shows how Baya is a chameleon, which shifts from one identity to the other based on the setting. Here she is performing as French and dresses the part.

The scene commences non-chalantly with a *fonctionnaire*, Patricia, seated behind the desk, greeting Madame Martin politely, as an old acquaintance. When told what documents she will need to provide to prove her identity, Madame Martin hesitates and says “[mon acte de naissance] j’ai dû l’égarer quelque part”. The viewer immediately registers that it was lost during her parents’ deportation. The *fonctionnaire* sits more upright and speaking in a more terse tone of voice says, “Mais l’acte de naissance est obligatoire, Madame Martin, il faut le trouver”. The slowly receding gaze in Madame Martin’s eyes appears to announce instead, “il faut *te* trouver,” an act that would require her to break through the walls she has constructed around the traumatic memories of her childhood. “Vous avez un certificat de nationalité?” Patricia asks in a lighter tone sensing a change in Madame Martin’s demeanor. The shot closes in on Madame Martin’s face which now looks more anxious of being outed as (formerly) Jewish, when Patricia asks, “Vos parents, ils étaient bien français?” Madame Martin remains speechless a moment with Baya immediately interjecting “C’est incroyable! Vous êtes un flic ou quoi?!” Until now, Baya is unaware of the Martins’ status and explodes at the chance to decry this accusatory injustice. Patricia asks again, this time more tersely, “Madame Martin, est-ce que vos parents étaient français?” With some hesitation and insufficient explanation—Madame Martin simply cannot explain the truth—she circumlocutes the situation prompting Patricia to ask, “Donc, vos parents n’étaient pas français?” to which Madame Martin can only mutter “Mais moi, si”. Patricia retorts, “Qu’est-ce qui me prouve que vous êtes bien française, Madame Martin? Il me faut de la preuve, c’est la loi. Il y a tellement de gens qui trichent.” This comment prompts a violent reaction in Arthur who jumps across the counter and grabs Patricia by the collar for her accusatory attitude and insensitivity. It is the first time that Arthur is seen on screen defending his cultural identity against an attack. Madame Martin emotionally shuts down, turns away from

the camera sheepishly, and leaves the shot enveloped in a melancholic musical interlude, thereby rendering the scene all the more painful.

Back inside, Arthur continues the paperwork process with a blank stare similar to his mother's that shows him lost in a faraway realm that has never been unlocked. Patricia asks, "Le nom de famille de ses parents?" Arthur is embroiled in the thought that he must now publicly reveal his family's secret identity, asking "comment?" Patricia repeats herself prompting Arthur to state the name: "*Cohen*." Patricia retorts: "Cône, comme la cône de l'arc?" Arthur: "non, *Cohen*." Patricia: "Ah, d'accord parce que ses parents étaient..." The trailing silence of this statement along with the solemn music playing in the background supports the notion that a person's name can be a forceful signifier of personal and national history. The camera, remaining in close-up range, pans to Baya who is depicted as surprised but empathetic to this unveiling of Arthur's *trésor secret*. The frame switches to a distant-shot looking at Madame Martin on the steps of the same *mairie* that she was married in. The shot frames her surrounding by architectural symbols of France but quickly draws in closer to a medium-shot in which we can see the expression of bewilderment on her face; eyes lost to the distance, mouth slightly agape. The sounds of her slow and shuffled footsteps can be heard over the music adding to the gravity of the opening of Pandora's box. As the camera draws even closer, a police car drives through the frame causing Madame Martin to freeze in place and look around suspiciously as if the newly public(ized) knowledge of her heritage will cause her to be deported as well. This scene is akin an undesired secular bar mitzvah wherein Arthur and his mother are both forced into a community with which they do not identify.

What Michael Herzfeld refers to as "*disemia*—the formal or coded tension between official self-presentation and what goes on in the privacy of collective introspection" (4), is a

useful concept to bolster my analysis of Madame Martin's decline beginning in *la mairie*. Herzfeld continues: "While the official aspect is a legitimate (and indeed necessary) object of ethnographic analysis, the intimacy it masks is the subject of a deep sense of cultural and political vulnerability" (14). Madame Martin's exposure to state-enforced cultural vulnerability when her very national and long-standing identity is called into question is a violent re-opening of wounds that have been long scabbed over. For her, this is a deeply painful and traumatic event that, as I will argue, leads to her death later in the film.

This scene not only exposes Arthur's mother as Jewish, but also for the first time forces Arthur to assume his family's past as more than a genealogical factoid but rather a concrete connection to a major national trauma. Due to the matrilineal succession in Judaism, Arthur is Jewish in spite of himself; for Baya, this exposure of Arthur's diverse roots is the ultimate political aphrodisiac. When Baya presses Arthur about the details of his mother's past, "Mais où ça?", Arthur responds only "Auschwitz, je pense". Baya is ecstatic and retorts enthusiastically, "Auschwitz? Non, mais 'est génial!" The mere mention of *Auschwitz*—*le lieu culte* of the Shoah in France—signals, without further elaboration, Arthur's entire family history. This unfortunately glosses over the individually lived experiences of the millions who lost their lives there in favor of a conveniently collective writing of this trauma. With Baya's next comment, "Attends, t'es juif, Moi, chui Arabe. C'est parfait!" This ebullience over ethnic diversity is exactly what Arthur's family has been avoiding their entire lives, something which Baya has never been able to live without in large part due to her name. Arthur defiantly retorts, "Chui pas juif moi, ok? Je crois pas en Dieu. J'ai jamais mis les pieds dans un synagogue, je

m'en fous d'Israël et *Je m'appelle Arthur Martin!*"⁵⁶ His nominative shield has been broken and he can no longer escape his true heritage.

His form of trauma mimics his mother's in that, now as an adult he must atone for his family's past. Despite the strictly ordered walls his family had built to avoid references to the Shoah or their Jewish identity, external social forces have ruptured the intimacy of their family secret. Preference for secrecy or the purposeful omission of the past in the recounting of the Martin's family history parallels the nation's writing of collective history that must redirect attention towards or away from certain events to keep the collective memory in tact.

Arthur states in an earlier voice-over, "On préfère mourir de maladie que de honte. Cela dit, sur le podium des tabous familiaux, la déportation de mes grand-parents arrive loin, loin, loin devant tous les autres." And for France's historical rhetoric this, too, is essential. At this point, the camera pans out the window to show his grandparents standing atop an Olympic podium in the yard. They simply wave back to Arthur who is shown in triplicate, pre-teen Arthur, teenage Arthur, and adult Arthur all smiling vapidly and waving back. All three are wearing the same outfit from the seventies representing a decades-long imagination and private obsession with his maternal grandparents.

Pandora's box now opened, Madame Martin and Arthur are both naked to the trauma they have been subjected to. Arthur has the gift of time and distance to save him from falling into a mental abyss; Madame Martin does not—the memories are too raw and she knows too much. She has kept almost everything regarding her past from her son, which has been a dual-

⁵⁶Italics are mine to emphasize the change of tone in Arthur's voice when he states that phrase. Baya initially responds back to Arthur's statement about 'Auschwitz': "Et on plus, on a plein de monde dans nos familles qui sont morts à cause des flics français! Non, mais attends, c'est trop la classe! À nous deux on est la France, tu comprends. Nos familles c'est une partie de l'histoire qui fait l'amour à l'autre. Je crois que ça me donne envie de pleurer là.

edged sword. On the one hand, his ignorance of the exact details is now protecting him from the cellular-level pain his mother is experiencing, but which has also prevented him from digesting his own history in ways that he could graft onto his own identity.

2.4.5.1 Shoah Tardif. Monsieur Martin simply calls “fatigue”. Even at this critical juncture, the line must be towed at all costs. Arthur visits his mother in the hospital where he attempts to garner more details about the events of his grandparents’ deportation. After a long and awkward silent pause, Madame Martin blurts out “Double flèche dans le coeur” without any further explanation, but clearly referring to the loss of both parents.⁵⁷ Arthur moves to end his visit and heads for the door. Before leaving he asks why she never told him anything about his grandparents. She looks all over, guiltily to avoid his questioning, when she suddenly says, “J’étais dans son taxi quand *c’est* arrivé.”⁵⁸ Arthur immediately follows, “Quand *quoi* est arrivé?” Bittersweet music cues to break the silence. He moves back towards his mother and sits down face to face, the camera closes in on the this intimate moment when Arthur asks again more affirmatively, “Quand *c’est* arrivé *quoi*?”⁵⁹ She begins setting the scene of deportation, “J’étais dans son taxi...” but is promptly interrupted by a nurse coming to give her a shot. Arthur asks, one more time hoping to get in a quick answer before she is sedated, but she merely mutters, “triple flèche dans le coeur”. This mystified statement is what James Young (as borrowed from Carl Friedlander) refers to as “deep memory” (11), “as that which is essentially inarticulable and unrepresentable, that continues to exist as unresolved trauma just beyond the reach of meaning” (11). The move from double to triple flèche dans le coeur is a premonition

⁵⁷Sits on the bed, darting glances, disheveled hair, the look of a person unhinged or deep in traumatic thought.

⁵⁸Italics are mine for emphasis.

⁵⁹The ambiguity of the indefinite pronouns “*c’est*” and “*quoi*” reinforce the unknown and unknowable that Arthur seeks to discover. These two words must remain terms of replacement so that the replaced words “*déportation*” and “*Auschwitz*” never actually leave his mother’s mouth.

that she intends to insert herself into the role call of those deported. The silence and vagueries of Madame Martin's few utterances never amount to the facts of what actually happened nor the events as she perceived them which only more deeply recalls her victimhood as a voiceless survivor of the Holocaust.

A few frames later we learn of Madame Martin's death with a moment of levity. Arthur is on the job investigating the death of a swan presumably killed by the H1N1 virus. He is out in a pond up to his waist in water when his cell phones rings and sets down the dead swan to answer it. It is his father calling to say that the nurses had found his mother dead, apparently from sleeping pills. Arthur hangs up the phone, picks up the lifeless swan, and stares around aimlessly stumbling a bit from the shock of the news.

The imagery of Arthur holding this swan looks very similar to Michaelangelo's *Pietà* in reverse, wherein Arthur steps into a maternal role upholding the memory of his mother as embedded by the gentile swan. The truth could not set her free, it could only kill her. Baya enters the scene jubilantly unaware of Madame Martin's passing, crossing over police-tape to find Arthur just exiting the pond. Through his blank stare, he tells her, as though he was speaking metaphorically to himself, "Tu n'as pas le droit de pénétrer dans ce périmètre de sécurité". This "périmètre de sécurité" can be taken as the wall that Madame Martin built around her relationship to the Holocaust, a zone that should not ever be entered because of the risks and perils of the emotions it might force to the surface. Arthur then mumbles, "Elle a pas supporté que je lui parle de ses parents." This admission of guilt connects him to her death as her murderer, having sent her to kill herself as a tardy victim of the Holocaust or what Susan Suleiman calls the "belated trauma of childhood survivors" (283).

2.4.5.2 Art Spiegelman's *Maus* and Madame Martin. This scene lends itself to be read as an intertext to a sub-section of Art Spiegelman's *Maus I: My father bleeds history* entitled, "Prisoner on the Hell Planet". In this short comic strip, Spiegelman recounts his mother's 1968 suicide and its immediate aftermath. The physical anguish experienced upon learning of his mother's [Spiegelman's] death mirrors Arthur's stumbling from the news as well as his sudden inability to cope with Baya with whom he promptly breaks up and dismisses from the scene. The physicality of grief in both *Maus* and *Le Nom* is indelibly linked not only to the physical disappearance of the mother, but also to the shame and guilt emanating these suicides. Both mothers are tardive victims of the Holocaust due to an inescapable haunting from their pasts. Both sons are left to bear witness not only to the memories of the Holocaust inherited through their mothers but also to the deep sensation of having had a culpable role in their deaths. The final scene of "The Prisoner on the Hell Planet" depicts a teenage Spiegelman behind bars and reads, "Well, Mom, if you're listening... Congratulations!... You've committed the perfect crime... YOU put me here... shorted all my circuits... cut my nerve endings... and crossed my wires!... You MURDERED Me, Mommy and you left me here to take the rap!!!" (103) This outcry is what Suleiman might consider to be a result of "the phenomenon of decades of silence and the unconscious transmission of traumatic memories to children born after the way [and] may perhaps be considered as 'forms of collective behavior' that characterize the adult survivor generation" (286). Spiegelman embodies survivor's guilt because of the prolonged silence regarding the Holocaust that he endured. Yet, what differs between Spiegelman and Arthur is that while Spiegelman feels he is a second victim of his mother's suicide, Arthur feels as though *he* is the one who has killed his mother. Both are skewed perpetrators or victims of crimes that lie far beyond Arthur becomes an object of memory through his mother's death and

can be considered both a delayed victim and criminal through the tension built into memory. Digging into the construction of memory is here a fatal tactic that leaves no room for manipulation of memory. As asked earlier in the film, “Qu’est-ce que le devoir de mémoire?”, it is a duty tormented by such situations in which the true responsibility lies in respecting the unknown and unknowable and all that lies in between. One possible *devoir* that ties up this section is the generational progression of new memories and experiences overlapping and at times superseding the old. The failures of the past are learned from and project new memories to be formed in a more positive light, their direct personal experience. Yet, this “belated experience” has proven to be an unavoidable burden in their lives.

2.4.5.3 L’avenir des noms. Baya and Arthur have distinct experiences because of their names, they are inextricably linked through their *bâtard* heritages. Baya declares after learning of Arthur’s Jewish heritage, “Les bâtards, c’est l’avenir de l’humanité,” which is ultimately the resolution of the film. In order to fight against the oppressiveness of national identity, often burdened by an ignorant past and the persistent stereotypes of those who experience Frenchness differently, the world must be populated by people whose parents choose names, which do not solicit ethnic considerations. Case in point, the second to last scene of the film depicts Baya and Arthur declaring the name of their new baby to a hospital nurse:

Nurse: “Vous ne m’avez pas dits comment il s’appellait le petit?” Baya: “Chang”.

Nurse: “Il a des origines, euh...” [interrupted pause]

Baya and Arthur in unison: [in unison] “Des origines on s’en fout.”

Nurse: “Donc, Chang Martin?”

Baya: “Chang Martin-Benmahmoud”...

Their child is an onomastic misfit and represents a hope for the future where identity will no longer be so excruciatingly embedded in one’s name but in one’s actions. The very last phrase of the film is “De quoi notre bébé sera étranger?” The film’s ending line is of note because it implies that future generations in France, particularly through their blended names, will resolve the lopsided and sometimes xenophobic tendencies carried in Frenchness.

Names are everything—in society, for the government, for the sake of history. This film evinces French identity as constructed through an almost geological layering of past generations’ joys and traumas that are connected through family name. In *Le Nom*, the characters’ interactions between their names and everyday lived experiences upend any social stability that identity might falsely provide. A whole host of taboos and secrets can be exposed to accidental exposure at the national or personal level have a great impact upon the psyche and physical well-being of the beholder.

Much like French collective memory, family memory is also a carefully constructed story. In *Maus I & II*, Spiegelman learns that his mother had kept immaculate journals of her time since the Holocaust, priceless documentation of the emotional and mental journey of a Holocaust survivor in the immediate decades after the war. He also learns that following his mother’s suicide, his father had thrown burned all of these journals because he felt they were of no use to anyone. Cherry-picking the convenient or lighter parts of a family’s past only creates future conflicts. As generations progress from the actual historical acts endured, the residue of their experience becomes more and more dependent upon the objects that remain: the carefully manipulated stories, artifacts and images that are passed down or in the case of the protagonists, not shared, like Spiegelman.

Baya and Arthur's constructions of their parents' lived experiences is primarily understood through the intersection between public and private uses of objects. There are however, several areas that I have left unexplored which also merit attention. The manner in which television clips of news programs or current events propel the plotline and attempt to explicate France's obsession with trendy traumas would make for an excellent segue into delving deeper in Baya's backstory as a survivor of the traumas of the Algerian war and sexual abuse.⁶⁰ Linking the publicized underpinnings of Baya's past to her current personality would help to better delineate the shape of her memories, which have never been hidden like Arthur's.

⁶⁰Both Arthur and Baya's personal experiences of trauma were also national media obsessions. The Holocaust is depicted as the "trauma du jour" in the 1970's whereas pedophilia and childhood sexual abuse was en vogue in the 1990s.

3.0 THE NATION ON VACATION: TOURISM AND FRENCH IDENTITY IN LANZAROTE, PLATEFORME, AND LA CARTE ET LE TERRITOIRE

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Michel Houellebecq has been a major literary persona in France since the early 1990's, at times lauded, at times chided for his controversial musings on the social decline of contemporary French life. His first novel *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994) received critical acclaim for putting words to a hopeless generation coming of age during the early banal years of the digital revolution. His works have since then consistently evoked *le déclinisme* of French society as well as the trials and tribulations of the male singlehood in France. One recurrent theme that bridges these issues is sex (and/or the lack thereof) that Houellebecq employs as a mirror for a societal self-reflection. When his characters engage in sexual relationships, their outlooks on France and its future tend to be more optimistic; when there is nothing but rejection and loneliness, the societal ills of France become the scapegoat for libidinal misery. One "cure" that Houellebecq prescribes in his works is tourism, yet as I will demonstrate, it is not always the panacea that the reader is led to believe.

In this chapter, I use tourism and sex to interpret the breakdown of social and national cohesion or "disorientation" as multi-faceted distancing from the national influence on social trajectories. This distancing can be voluntary or involuntary, ephemeral, cyclical, or permanent.

For example, the reoccurrence of islands as travel destinations—Lanzarote in *Lanzarote*, parts of Thailand and Cuba in *Plateforme* and a man-made estate *comme* island in *La carte et le territoire*—shows a desire to escape the confines of France while also destabilizing national borders.

Travel and displacement are age-old themes that have always existed in the cultural and specifically literary imagination of France and the nation. Where Houellebecq distinguishes himself from prior content is in his focus on a specific type of travel: hyper-modern, middle-class, escapist vacations or mass tourism. This twentieth-century economic and cultural phenomenon has become one of France's largest economic sectors and brought about an entirely new set of cultural goods for French citizens to use as markers of social capital. Tourism as a literary theme sets itself apart from travel and displacement not only because of its economic basis, but also, and more importantly because of the way in which it constructs place *à la* Michel de Certeau, and presents cultures and experiences as “authentic” instead of merely curated representations.

The global tourism industry markets destinations and travel packages differently for different nationalities, income levels, and ethnicities. The tendency to “purify” a vacation spot accommodates specific tourists' expectations and values, which are largely based on national patterns of consumption, safety, and standards of hygiene and comfort. Houellebecq hones in on these tendencies and adds the possibility of sexual pleasure and temporal reprieve of social dissatisfaction as an attractive benefit of tourism. Tourism inoculates its participants from the heavy responsibility of societal participation and understanding, whilst creating a sanitized and curated version of the local culture or destination.

Claudio Minca, a prominent tourism scholar, posits that the “tourist experience” is

inherently fraught with tensions:

[Tourism] is a genuinely modern process, based within an extraordinary tension. The tourist experience is a product of this tension, a tension born of the fact that the tourist as a travelling subject constantly struggles to be able to place her/himself contemporaneously—within two epistemological fields. The tourist seeks an impossible balance between the need for order in the world—mapped and mappable tourist spaces, landscapes and cultures—and the desire/possibility of transgressing that same order, of going behind and beyond the ‘map’. (434)

This tension between two epistemological fields can also be understood as disorientation. The nation implements the everyday ordering that the tourist seeks to evade, but is inevitably so engrained, so enshrined in the tourist’s psyche as an *orientation* that the smallest transgression equates to a significant disruption in national identity. Ultimately, tourism is disorientation under the guise of leisure, pleasure, relaxation, and discovery—at least those who can afford it.

The nation is most perceptible in its collective forgetting of the past and formation of a unified identity expression based on the illusion of community. In Houellebecq, the existence of quasi-loner tourist narrators eviscerates the nation-propagation in the tourism industry by highlighting the similitudes between the language of the nation and tourism marketing as well as temporal and spatial organizations of guided tours. I will now engage with performances of the disoriented nation which I find most apparent in three of Houellebecq’s works: *Lanzarote*, *Plateforme*, and *La carte et le territoire*.⁶¹ These three novels, while not together constituting a trilogy, all employ tourism as a framework through which national subjectivity is propagated. Tourism becomes both the means for escaping the nation and its constraints as well as a process-

⁶¹These works will be further referred to as *Lanzarote*, *Plateforme* and *La carte* in in-text citations and LZ, PF, and CT in parenthetical citations when the reference is not immediately apparent.

based means of reducing national identity to citizenship and market-researched cultural preferences.

If the nation, and subsequently national identity, is considered as a societal orientation—along the same lines as race, heteronormativity and temporality—then, I argue here, tourism in Houellebecq’s novels functions as a rejection of the nation. Disorientation through tourism involves distancing oneself from both the physical and geographical spaces of France and the intangible social parameters holding the nation in place. This distancing may be voluntary (i.e. the choice to travel, participate in tourism, or self-exile), involuntary (i.e. imprisonment, kidnapping, forced escape), or even temporal in nature (ephemeral, cyclical, or permanent). The act(s) of tourism, specifically, substantiate my examination of national disorientation in the Houellebecqian context and show the nation as both static and elastic, oriented *and* disoriented. The reoccurrence of the island as a travel destination—Lanzarote, in *Lanzarote*, the islands and beaches of Cuba and Thailand in *Plateforme*, as well as a giant fenced-in man-made estate comme island in *La carte*—unearths a desire to escape from and isolate oneself from the social and territorial confines of France. These desires subvert national borders and therefore, the authority of the nation. Michael David comments on the *Lanzarote* and *Plateforme* series’ subtitle, *Au milieu du monde*:

Plateforme, l’un de ses [Houellebecq’s] romans, a d’ailleurs comme surtitre “au milieu du monde,” à ceci près qu’il décrit l’épuisement d’un monde dans lequel ses personnages, hommes et femmes, sont errants et plus ou moins égarés au centre d’une contemporanéité sans pitié, un monde dans lequel l’amour et même la compassion ne sont plus, un monde surplombé d’un ciel vide ou d’un soleil noir conduisant fatalement à la perte du sentiment de la vie ainsi qu’à la

déréliction la plus radicale. (13)

The daily travails of the vapid, trajectory-less population criss-crossing the French landscape serve as muses in Houellebecq's novels. David's attention to the "contemporanéité sans pitié" emphasizes both the fluid notions of time and space in Houellebecq's characters and the social antipathy Houellebecq repeatedly decries as rampant in modern-day France and across "l'Occident." While I distance my reading of these texts from David's description of an entirely bleak world, I am indebted to his reflection on the novels' protagonists being lost in the shuffle. David's explanation leaves "monde" open to interpretations as to which type of world(s) Houellebecq supposes.

I read tourism and the tourist in Houellebecq as allegories of the widespread social malaise that generate his views of contemporary France. The tourist is constructed through temporal and spatial multiplicities, which extend well beyond the linguistic and temporal boundaries of the French nation. The nation then can be read through varying tourist points of view: that of the French tourist, other non-French tourists, and those involved in the tourism industry. Notably, the voice of the French state *en terme propre* is conspicuously absent from my reading, having been replaced by external players, such as the nationalizing narratives in tourism brochures, catalogues, and the descriptions published in guidebooks such as *Le guide du routard* and *Le Guide Michelin*. Brief, yet ebullient depictions of idyllic vacation spots and the sensations to be experienced attest that the language used in tourism replaces the discourse of the nation, which is shown to be insufficient for providing pleasure and release.

For the tourist, the nation is always already abandoned. Travelling outside the territorial boundaries of France reduces the effective and affective power of the state over its subjects; it does not however entirely efface traces of Frenchness. Houellebecq dwells on this point through

lengthy passages describing the tourism industry and the power it wields in shaping and propagating French identity through superficial categorizations of potential clientele and consumer desires based on anonymous data and sales figures. As such, the language of tourism brochures, catalogues, and guidebooks re-imagines the needs, desires, and expectations of certain classes of clients (citizens). Houellebecq's works suggests that tourists are more likely to conform to the image of the ideal tourist produced by the data-driven tourism industry than to ideals that the nation projects onto its subjects.

The economic forces of tourism supersede national institutions and borders, and as these three texts ascertain, France appears powerless in the realm of identity production.⁶²⁶³ Because of the money-driven relationship between tourist and tourism provider, French tourists are temporally dismissed from their daily duties to the nation.⁶³⁶⁴ The temporary reprieve from communal duties and responsibilities that national subjects are subject to within national borders (both administrative and intangible) is a process of conversion from national subject to tourist, which results in a temporary, self-centered existence. Tourism prioritizes the sensations of pleasure and the experience of the individual above the daily sacrifices and routines of national belonging. The time and spaces of tourism disrupt the repetitive practices and perceptions of daily life in an attempt to maximize the consumer's sensorial experiences. Schedules on tourism-time are more fluid, and unattached to the pre-set times of working hours, metro schedules, even evening news programs. There is more variation in the choreographed movements between places where the tourist spends their day, however, the choreography where they go to sightsee is

⁶²According to statistics published by the The World Travel and Tourism Council, tourism accounts for 9.1% of French GDP and 10% of employment in France is related to this field. <https://www.wttc.org/-/media/files/reports/economic-impact-research/countries-2016/france2016.pdf> Accessed: 23 April 2017

⁶³Be it any person or entity involved in providing services related to the tourism industry from tourism marketing firms to travel agents to the sex workers who linger in tourist spots.

based on a societal choreography not entirely dissimilar to that of the French nation. Time both in tourism and in the nation is an orientation or forced choreography; it dictates limitations of personal choices of movement, finances, and patterns of consumption.

3.1.1 The texts

Over the course of these three novels, there is an evolution of the tourist's purpose, one that aligns with contemporary events and societal mood in France and more-broadly Europe and the West. *Lanzarote* and *Plateforme* both reflect the uneasiness of a new millennium and the need to redefine Frenchness for a progressively digitized and globalized world where national subjectivity is more vacuous than ever. *La carte* evokes an inward shift in French society and authorial intent, where French culture is increasingly produced by and for foreigners—France is not for the French. The evolution I refer to can be summed up as the peak and decline of (sexual) pleasure which is still achievable in *Lanzarote*, achieved but not sustainable in *Plateforme* and virtually absent from *La carte*.⁶⁴ Houellebecq implicates sexual dissatisfaction and dysfunction as the harbingers of the social dysfunction happening at the national level.

Lanzarote acts as a scaffold to *Plateforme* by introducing the freedom of sexual exploration that tourism affords and which is stifled in France by the superficiality of bureaucratic/societal standards of masculinity and heteronormative sexuality. Though the narrator, Michel, does not become the French alpha-male of sorts in *Lanzarote*; rather, it is through (sexual) interactions with non-French tourists, which inadvertently construct him as

⁶⁴I would further venture to say that penile performance through its virility and increasing flaccidity can be read as an embodiment of France's most prominent (and phallic) symbol, the Eiffel Tower, whose symbolic meaning is devalued currency in today's political climate.

French. In *Plateforme*, the tourist-narrator, Michel, also seeks out sexual satisfaction; however, he does not presume the existence of like-minded tourists in his group to achieve this goal.⁶⁵ He fully embraces a capitalistic approach to sex through the frequenting of prostitutes—much to the scorn of his fellow French tourists. The microcosm of French society accompanying him through Thailand, both upholds and refracts some of the internal stereotypes of being French all of which appear to be misaligned with the orientations of the nation. This scorn is not, of course, limited to Michel, but to the very persistence of tourist-targeted prostitution. His actions are disdained because he is acting outside of the parameters of French culture and morals, which disavow prostitution, particularly of sub-altern women. The narrator relies on the pervasive distaste for sexual tourism in France, which he points out on several occasions in part two of *Plateforme*.⁶⁶

These first two texts attempt to exhaust the narrative voice of being a French tourist outside the national borders; in *Lanzarote*, Rudi, a prominent character lands in jail for pedophilia, and in *Plateforme*, Valérie's murder and Michel's social death (through his self-exile of *attente*) essentially destroy the possibilities of living in a state of permanent tourism. It is important to note that the narrators of both texts are essentially iterations of the same person and that each subsequent prominent character has their *semblable* in the other text. Both *Lanzarote* and *Plateforme* rely on the characteristics of an early middle-aged narrator for whom sexual satisfaction is critical and life-affirming but increasingly difficult to obtain.⁶⁷ *La carte et le*

⁶⁵*Plateforme*'s other tourists are French and point towards the implication that the French are most inhospitable to each other.

⁶⁶During the consideration of *Les clubs Aphrodite*, Jean-Yves, the project's director, appears hesitant of promoting easy access to overseas sexual tourism: "Il repensa aux clubs Aphrodite, se rendit compte pour la première fois que l'idée aurait peut-être du mal à passer auprès de sa hiérarchie; il y avait un état d'esprit assez défavorable au tourisme sexuel en ce moment, en France" (PF 272)

⁶⁷One particular diatribe is of note in which Valérie, Michel's paramour, questions his reasoning for frequenting prostitutes: (Valérie) "Pourtant tu es quand même allé dans les salons de massage, alors que tu n'as pas essayé de me draguer. C'est ça que je ne comprends pas. Qu'est-ce qu'elles ont, les filles là-bas? Elle font vraiment l'amour mieux que nous?" (PF 153). Michel responds: "Tu ne peux pas t'en rendre compte, mais tu

territoire, in stark contrast to *Lanzarote* and *Plateforme*, attests to a sophistication of sexual desires and less forceful rejection of national boundaries. This novel offers a less ambitious international tourism agenda, one, which no longer extends (but, briefly) beyond the political borders of metropolitan France. Instead, it turns its focus towards tourism within the borders of France and shows how “France” has been re-envisioned as a touristic Shangri-la for foreign visitors ignorant of the day-to-day realities of its subjects. These three texts bookend the firstdecade of the twenty-first century as an eerily omniscient precursor to the more violent and unsettling episodes that have comes to pass in the years since the publication of *La carte*.

Houellebecq’s successful integration of tourism into a broader societal critique is bolstered by stinging commentaries on the decline of sexual satisfaction in a hyper-capitalistic dog-eat-dog world and the death of the father-(figure) in each of these texts.⁶⁸ Houellebecq’s depictions of sexual activity are indicative of a French nation that is increasingly misaligned with

es une exception. C’est vraiment rare, maintenant, les femmes qui éprouvent du plaisir, et qui ont envie d’en donner. Séduire une femme qu’on ne connaît pas, baiser avec elle, c’est surtout devenu une source de vexations et de problèmes. Quand on considère les conversations fastidieuses qu’il faut subir pour amener une nana dans son lit, et que la fille s’avèvera dans la plupart des cas une amante décevante, qui vous fera chier avec ses problèmes, vous parlera de ses anciens mecs—en vous donnant, au passage, l’impression de ne pas être tout à fait à la hauteur—et qu’il faudra impérativement passer avec elle au moins le reste de la nuit, on conçoit que les hommes puissent préférer s’éviter beaucoup de soucis en payant une petite somme. Dès qu’ils on un peu d’âge et d’expérience, ils préfèrent éviter l’amour; ils trouvent plus simple d’aller voir les putes. Enfin pas les putes en Occident, ça n’en vaut pas la peine, ce sont de vrais débris humains, et de toute façon pendant l’année ils n’ont pas le temps, ils travaillent trop. Donc, la plupart ne font rien; et certains, de temps en temps, se paient un petit peu de tourisme sexuel. Et encore, ça c’est dans le meilleur des cas: aller voir une pute, c’est encore maintenir un petit contact humain. Il y a encore ceux qui trouvent plus simple de se branler sur Internet, ou en regardant des pornos. Une fois que la bite a craché son petit jet, on est bien tranquille” (PF 153).

⁶⁸ In an interview with Susannah Hunnewell, Houellebecq (the author) reflects on these societal changes and the havoc that it wreaks, not one that he claims to promote or induce, but one that he merely “observes”: *What I think, fundamentally, is that you can’t do anything about major societal changes. It may be regrettable that the family unit is disappearing. You could argue that it increases human suffering. But regrettable or not, there’s nothing we can do. That’s the difference between me and a reactionary. I don’t have any interest in turning back the clock because I don’t believe it can be done. You can only observe and describe. [...] But that’s what I do: I show the disasters produced by the liberalization of values.* Web. Accessed 23 April 2017. <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6040/michel-houellebecq-the-art-of-fiction-no-206-michel-houellebecq>

contemporaneous social forces out of its control. These three novels effectively question the survival of the French nation in the twenty-first century through the role of the tourist who projects an image of Frenchness inconsistent with state-promoted ideals. What tourism is and does to the experience of French can be understood through Claudio Minca's definition of "modern tourism":

Modern tourism is based on the reproduction (and re-enactment) of the coming together of representation and (bodily) experience, of abstraction and materiality (Crang 2004, 2006; Crouch 2004; Edensor 2001, 2006). It is a genuinely modern process, based within an extraordinary tension; [...] a tension born of the fact that the tourist as a travelling subject constantly struggles to be able to place her/himself—contemporaneously—within two epistemological fields. [He suggests] indeed, that the tourist seeks an impossible balance between the need for order in the world—mapped and mappable tourist spaces, landscapes and cultures—and the desire/possibility of transgressing that same order, of going behind and beyond the 'map'. (434)

Minca's explanation of tourism mirrors the disoriented state of French subjects who also must navigate two "epistemological fields": the ordering of daily life within national structures and the conduct of life according to one's desires, personal expectations, and obligations.

In Houellebecq, the tourist is the most apparent muse of the disconnect between the French nation and its subjects for several reasons. *Malgré lui*, the tourist is always an ambassador for France, like an *escargot*, slowly leaving traces of Frenchness wherever he goes. These traces are, however, not always consistent with the image desired for export. For one, the temporal re-ordering of each day, which happens through tourism relieves the traveler of what I

refer to as “nation-time.” Nation-time is the state-wide organization of time; store opening hours, legislated working hours, national holidays, school times, family obligations, amongst other standardized schedules around which French citizens conduct their daily lives. Nation-time further requires a constant, but perhaps unconscious, consideration of both the past and the future at all times through the commemoration of feast days, national holidays, or even the vestiges of the Catholic church’s importance through the sounding of church bells at specific prayer times.

The tourist lives entirely for and in the present easily forgetting about *la patrie*—in a suspension of identity and responsibility. One of the primary purposes of tourism for the Houellebecqian narrator is anonymous (sexual) pleasure. This anonymity represents the erasure of the nation through the forgetting of the past and intentional refusal of futurity—a time period, which is rarely evinced in these texts. The emphasis on the time of the present disengages the narrator from the anchors required for affective attachment to people and belongings. Though tourism is used as the broader reasoning for the suspension of time in these works, the almost complete absence of familial roots further highlights the narrator, not his fellow tourists, as an inconsequential member of society, responsible for no one and to no one; his mere existence in France is always already decontextualized.⁶⁹ This chapter presents close readings of the nation and tourism in three of Houellebecq’s more recent works. To study Houellebecq and his works requires a certain amount of patience and perhaps even a bit of impropriety and it is useful to offer here a brief portrait of the author, not as an apology for his more offensive passages, but just the opposite, to draw attention to the passages that are often overlooked, yet equally deserving of scholarly assessment. Houellebecq draws attention to the less-than-desirable effects

⁶⁹In fact, the family lives of Rudi, Jean-Yves and Valérie in *Lanzarote* and *Plateforme* receive considerable description and involvement, which reinforces the contrast of Michel as unattached citizen. Jed in *La carte* deals with his father’s life at great length, however, the strange details of his father’s death and Jed’s subsequent social reclusion bring his character back into line with the previous Michels.

of capitalism, considers sex tourism a panacea to the decline in sexual satisfaction, and does so in a language that is at once colloquial and loyal to the post-modern literary tradition. His published works have caused scandal both in France and abroad and even landed him in court to counter charges of denigration and slander against Islam and Muslim citizens in France.⁷⁰ His novels have been received with varied critical responses in the literary world ranging from utter garbage to acclaim as the novelist of our times, comments which translated into massive financial successes and eventually *le Prix Goncourt* for his 2010 novel *La carte et le territoire*.

Aside from the oftentimes grotesque (and not wholly inaccurate) descriptions of Houellebecq the man, his writing reveals the uglier sides of capitalism, sex tourism, and French social isolation. I, by no means, consider myself an apologist for these literary and social transgressions; however, what I do set out to demonstrate in this chapter is how tourism and sexualit(ies) in Houellebecq's works reflect the unnameable, yet deeply palpable social dysphoria at play in late twentieth and twenty-first century France.

3.2 LANZAROTE

I went to a shrink to analyze my dreams, she says it's lack of sex that's bringing me down, I went to a whore, he said my life's a bore, so quit my whining cause it's bringing her down.

-“Basket Case” (Green Day)

⁷⁰Houellebecq was ultimately acquitted of the charges brought against him for “complicité de provocation à la discrimination, à la haine ou à la violence à l'égard d'un groupe de personnes en raison de son appartenance à une religion” by various Muslim institutions and watch group. These charges stemmed from comments made during a 2001 interview with Didier Sénécals for *L'Express* in which he stated: “Et la religion la plus con, c'est quand même l'islam. Quand on lit le Coran, on est effondré... effondré!” For more in-depth details of the charges and trial, see Masson.

Lanzarote is a little studied novella in which the narrator Michel embarks on an organized tourism vacation to the island of Lanzarote off the coast of Spain. During this trip, sexual interactions with a few Belgian and German tourists provide the terrain for critical examination of how tourism disorients national identity.⁷¹ Wrought with the crass sexual terminology typical of Houellebecq's works, *Lanzarote*'s lexicological landscape is evidence of pervasive social dissatisfaction, which he argues, comes at the hands of sexual frustration and societal emasculation. The narrator's sidebar discourses on tourist stereotypes and the inevitability of poor social decisions made in attempts to alleviate this malaise reify the tourist as an allegory for national subjectivity. The underlying tone of cynicism towards his (fellow) French compatriots and dystopian views of Western society in *Lanzarote* are contiguous in Houellebecq's canon of novels, essays, and poems; yet, it is his evocative vocabulary choices that make the rawness of the social desperation all the more urgent.

3.2.1 Nous, les touristes de l'Europe?

Narratorial classifications of tourists who come to Lanzarote showcase assumed cultural motivations for visiting the island. Each tourist forges a unique path across the island by asserting his/her preconceived spatial framework in culturally distinct ways. The narrator's

⁷¹Éditions Flammarion published *Lanzarote: Au milieu du monde* (the novel) as the second work in a two-volume work entitled *Lanzarote*. Both works are a departure from the standard physical shape of the novel, with both editions having been published in the A4 (8 ½ by 11 in.) format. The first volume is an accompanying book of pictures that Houellebecq himself took while visiting the island. The photographs are uncommented but add a compelling dimension and story to the vivid imagery of the landscape that is described in the accompanying novel. Éditions Libro opted to publish *Lanzarote* without pictorial accompaniments. Libro's paperback edition is published under the title, *Lanzarote et autres textes*, the subtitle 'au milieu du monde' found in Flammarion's edition is blatantly absent from the cover of the book. The 'autres textes' include short essays by Houellebecq entitled: *Compte rendu de mission: viser en plein centre; Sortir du XXe siècle; Cléopâtre 2000; Consolation technique; Ciel, terre, soleil.*

sarcastic observations on various nations' tourists void the validity of national signifiers by portraying each nation through sweeping generalizations. These observations parallel the discourses of vacation packages, which synthesize national identities through heavily coded depictions and market-researched ideals of pleasure.

The tourism industry paints its clients with a singular brush that reflects class and ethnic assumptions and reconstructs the tourist through the eyes of the commodifying Other. By virtue of literally buying into the stereotype, the tourist inadvertently performs according to the expectations set forth by the tourism industry. As I articulate throughout this chapter, national identity is most evident through a tourist's behavior and the degree to which they can detach themselves from their daily grind, relax, and unwind. For example, the British and French are equally chastised for their insular touristic penchants; the narrator uses the French definite article "le" to sum up the entirety of one nation's tourists, "l'Anglais" or "le Français". The narrator comments that "L'Anglais se rend dans un lieu de vacances uniquement parce qu'il est certain d'y rencontrer d'autres Anglais" (16). The definite article of "l'Anglais" is a crude overgeneralization about [British] tourists. The British tourist appears to seek out familiarity and security through insularity. The narrator continues his commentary on the British tourist: "Regroupés en colonies compactes, ils se dirigent vers des îles peu vraisemblables, absentes des brochures de voyage continentales—telles que Malte, Madère, ou, justement, Lanzarote. Sur place, ils reconstituent les principaux éléments de leur mode de vie" (16). It is noteworthy that the British tourist is attracted to spend their vacation on other islands, symbolic of the geographical insularity of the United Kingdom.⁷²

According to the narrator Michel, the British traveler is not disoriented in the same ways

⁷²See Claudio Minca. "The Island: Work, Tourism and the Biopolitical" *Tourist Studies*, 9.2, 08/2009.

a French tourist would be:

Interrogés sur les motifs de leur choix, ils fournissent des réponses évasives, à la limite de la tautologie: ‘Je viens ici parce que je suis déjà venu l’an dernier’. On le voit, l’Anglais n’est pas animé d’un vif appétit de découverte. De fait, on constate sur place qu’il ne s’intéresse ni à l’architecture, ni aux paysages, ni à quoi que ce soit.⁷³ (17)

The attachment to certain vacation spots and the lack of even moderate ambition to acquire cultural and social capital through a sort of hushed competition between compatriots displays major differences between the overarching expectations of French and British tourists. Throughout *Lanzarote*, Frenchness is constructed, as if through a vacuum, by referencing other European cultures’ tourist motivations and preferences. The legacy of the concept of “l’exception française” is useful here to explicate why France is posited as unique amongst its European (and even “Western”) cohorts. “L’exception française” is a belief in an almost mythical uniqueness about the French language and system of governance that through its innate greatness must be spread to other lands. As Bénédicte Gorrillot explains, it emanates from a certain pride in the participation in federative system:

Ce “sentiment” fédérateur (gommant les luttes régionales) naîtrait donc de la fierté à participer à un certain état d’esprit, lié à un terroir et à un ensemble culturel communément ressentis comme uniques et supérieurs. Il génère le désir politique de promouvoir cet esprit différentiel, pour l’imposer à l’extérieur. Certes, mais il ne s’agirait encore que d’une poussée nationaliste. Pour parler d’exception, il faut que ce nationalisme soit tendu par un fort désir de se

⁷³For a quick comparison of linguistic register between the *Guide du routard* and the *Guide Michelin*, see *Plateforme* pg. 66: “Le premier arrêt eut lieu à Kanchanaburi, ville dont les guides s’accordent à souligner le caractère animé et gai. Pour le *Michelin*, c’est un “merveilleux point de départ pour la visite des contrées environnantes”; le *routard*, quant à lui, la qualifie de “bon camp de base”.

démarquer, non pas d'un, mais de plusieurs autres modèles internationaux, vécus comme concurrents voire dominants. Ainsi ne va-t-on pas simplement défendre, mais imposer la « francité » comme nouvelle (ou troisième) voie, face à la supériorité contestée d'une ou deux autres puissances politiques. (403)

While this definition homes in on the traditional political and cultural aspects of “l'exception française,” it is appropriate to add tourism as an additional marker of French exceptionalism.⁷⁴

In *Lanzarote*, Michel embodies this “exception” as the only French person to appear in the novel. Michel distances himself from his own French subjectivity by objectifying the Frenchman as a distinct object of cultural parody that only exists when outside of the borders of France. This emphasis on nationally-constructed tourists extends the social and corporal outlines of the French tourist, whom the narrator laments as: “[Le Français], si épris de lui-même que la rencontre d'un compatriote à l'étranger lui est proprement insupportable. Dans ce sens, Lanzarote est une destination qu'on peut recommander aux Français” (16). The selfish sense of novelty that comes from isolating oneself from other Frenchmen underscores a national superiority complex that inadvertently undermines one of the main tenets of *la république*: “Fraternité.” Seeking exile not only from the physical space of France, but also from the cultural tendencies of other French citizens, implies the dissolution of national solidarity. Houellebecq depicts the Frenchman—particularly Parisians—as prone to individualism and isolation; a characteristic recurrent in the narrators across all three novels.

⁷⁴According to the French government website *France Diplomatie*, France is the number one tourist destination in the world with over 83 million foreign tourists crossing its borders each year. France's cultural, touristic importance is nearly unparalleled in other desired tourist destinations worldwide, a fact duly supported by its importance to the French economy; the tourism sectors represents 7% of French GDP.

3.2.1.1 Les guides touristiques de référence. Michel reinforces the emptiness and desolation of the island of Lanzarote by noting that the island does not have a dedicated *Guide du routard*. The *Guide du routard* was created in the early 1970s by two Frenchmen, Philippe Gloaguen and Michel Duval, who were inspired to share their experiences of budget travel during a long road trip they took together across Europe. The *routard* prides itself on providing quirky off-the-beaten-path, budget-friendly sightseeing and lodging recommendations; it is more or less the antithesis of the more refined *Guide Michelin*. When Michel mentions the *Guide du routard*, the average French reader would immediately conjure an image of a *routard*: “Privé de son *Guide du routard* habituel, le touriste français ordinaire risque, il faut le reconnaître, d’éprouver rapidement à Lanzarote tous les signes d’un solide ennui” (17). This observation is demonstrative of the emptiness of both the island and the ego of the French tourist; without the seal of approval of the *routard*, the French tourist has no way of gauging the cultural and social capital to be gained from experiences at a specific destination. The *Guide du routard* and the *Guide Michelin* act as qualifiers of French social standing; the narrator makes the case that all French tourists could be classified as adherents to one of these travel bible of sorts for maximizing their tourism experiences. Acquiring these destinations and experiences can then be re-appropriated as symbolic social capital upon return to France. As well-read persons can impress with seemingly infinite knowledge, “well-travelled persons” are similarly able to categorize themselves by dispersing their own *récits de voyage*.

Houellebecq’s tourism works lend the acquisition of social capital through tourism as one of the biggest motivations for tourism conducted outside of France. However, the narrators as tourists in these three texts embody national disorientation most clearly because they repeatedly distanciate themselves from the glossy images and implied preferences of French-targeted

tourism brochures. Though the tourist seeks temporal and geographical evasion, the emphasis on national identity is heightened in inverse proportion to the distance between the home and host countries. Between the *Guide Michelin*, *Guide du routard*, and the machinations of the tourism industry in France, the narrators find themselves lost in the mêlée as un-typecast-able tourists.

3.2.2 Le touriste français v. le touriste belge: A trip to the bottom

On the very first page of *Lanzarote*, the narrator describes the happenstance circumstances of his departure into the world of tourism, “Le 14 décembre 1999, en milieu d’après-midi, j’ai pris conscience que mon réveillon serait probablement raté—comme d’habitude. J’ai tourné à droite dans l’avenue Félix-Faure et je suis rentré dans la première agence de voyages” (9). This random act of desperation distinguishes Michel from other tourists who spend more time and give more thought to the process of planning a vacation. His interaction with the travel agent highlights his depressive and isolationist tendencies that filter through to his expectations as a tourist:

Feignant la décontraction, j’ai commence à ramasser des prospectus sur les présentoirs. ‘Puis-je vous aider?’ ai-je entendu au bout d’une minute. Non, elle ne pouvait pas m’aider; personne ne pouvait m’aider. Tout ce que je voulais, c’était rentrer chez moi pour me grater les couilles en feuilletant des catalogues d’hôtels-clubs; mais elle avait engagé le dialogue, je ne voyais pas comment m’y soustraire. (9)

Help with what? While Michel does not answer to his own rhetorical question, the statement clearly demonstrates a conflicted state of existing society. Michel wants more for his life, but just does not know how to affect change in his own life, other than changing the scenery through organized vacation packages.

The power of the tourism industry and its effects upon the travel market are routinely scrutinized throughout *Lanzarote*. The relationship that is attempted between (potential) tourist and travels agent reads, according to the narrator, along more clear-cut lines of commerce:

Le dialogue du touriste et du voyageur—c'est du moins l'idée que j'ai pu m'en faire, sur la base de différentes revues professionnelles—tend normalement à dépasser le cadre de la relation commerciale—à moins, plus secrètement, qu'il ne révèle, à l'occasion d'une transaction sur ce matériau porteur de rêves qu'est le "voyage" le véritable enjeu—mystérieux, profondément humain et presque mythique—de toute relation commerciale. (9)

This special relationship between two strangers transubstantiates a purchase into the hope of a better tomorrow based on the snap judgement of entering the travel agency. Through the "catalogues hôtels-clubs" pretending to offer a variety of travel packages suited to French tastes, the underlying nationalizing agenda is a point against which Houellebecq directs considerable criticism. The narrator portrays the tourist/travel agent relationship as a peculiar guessing game. Thus, the national image that is dispersed wherever the French may roam is removed from the power of the nation-state and put into the hands of foreign investors and marketing executives at the major tourism firms, such as *Nouvelles Frontières* and *Club Med*. The narrator then does not struggle to devoid the term "French" or "Frenchness" of meaning, rather he subscribes to its already empty meaning. By merely elucidating the capitalistic basis of the contemporary tourism sector, it becomes clear that tourism—both the industry and the act of travelling—in today's French society is an agent of disorientation.

Travel agents peddle the potential for pleasure, which has been funneled into the products made available for various socio-economic classes, ages, and personality types. As such, travel

agents are effectively complicit in reifying a certain defined image of the French subject. This profits-driven industry blanches the experience of travel through pre-defined routes and paths to allow for a maximization of comfort, pleasure, and industry profit. The critique that Houellebecq appears to be making through his tourism novels is that “adventure” and “experience” have become so commodified that the attainment of pleasure from a vacation has become elusive, yet, remains the only viable space for its attainment. Most evidently in *Lanzarote*, Houellebecq conceives of the touristic pleasure through the corporeal; the focus on female breasts, vaginas, penises, and other erotic zones, serve as the very epicenter of disorientation.

The narrator depicts himself in relation to the other tourists—Norwegians, Italians, Belgians, Germans—that he encounters on Lanzarote; his self-critiques help construct a sense of his own personal identity. Michel is a *carte blanche* onto which traces of his inevitable Frenchness are developed by his tourist Others. At first, Michel’s male Other is defined through the personage of Rudi, a French-speaking Belgian tourist whose initial corporal descriptions conjure images of failed masculinity. In the space of a page, the narrator refers to Rudi as “le moustachu” (18), going on to describe the tourist outfit *par excellence*, “sweat-shirt ‘University of California’ et son bermuda blanc” (18). While the mustache implies a certain level of masculine virility, his clothing choice and unkempt appearance point toward a depressive lack of self-care, which speaks volumes of his sexual desperation. Though Rudi and Michel differ significantly in their non-tourist lives, they are on some levels similar in their demasculated sexualities.⁷⁵ Both protagonists are in their forties and have, according to society, surpassed their sexual prime; Michel even goes so far as to describe Rudi’s physical appearance as “l’image

⁷⁵I purposely use the term “demasculated” here instead of “emasculated” which implies weakness or in the absence of “masculinity”, femininity. “Demasculated”, in this context, would allow for a sense of slovenliness or lacksidical hygiene that is not hinged upon one’s gender.

classique d'un pervers pédophile" (60) with "son ventre, sa moustache et ses grosses lunettes" (60)—a depiction that marks him as sexually dysfunctional and lacking social confidence. Even before Rudi's name is revealed, the narrator immediately focuses his attention not to the landscape of the island, but rather towards Rudi's comportment: "J'avais croisé l'homme [le moustachu belge] alors que, dans une immobilité parfaite, il fixait un gros cactus violacé, en forme de bite, artistiquement planté à côté de deux cactus périphériques" (17). The Belgian's fixation upon this collection of cacti resembling male genitalia indicates a longing for *un membre virile* which Rudi pains to incorporate through this gaze.⁷⁶ This is as close to sexual fulfillment as Rudi gets; his failure to achieve any sense of pleasure inversely represents Michel's sexual dissatisfaction with his life in France. Rudi's very presence in the text is the unshakeable shadow of Michel's life in Paris that follows him even beyond the borders of France. Rudi is presented as a failed male Other and a failed tourist whose lack of sexual prowess is a consequence of living in the emasculating Belgian nation. Rudi's dysfunctionality results also in part from his career as a police officer in Belgium, a public position, in which Rudi is the ultimate scapegoat and whipping boy for Brussels' depravity. He is heavy with the responsibility of keeping the peace and upholding the national agenda, but crumbles under the sheer disregard for his authority.

The narrator on the other hand never offers the reader a physical description of himself to counter Rudi's dilapidated physique. Michel's only physical descriptions are delivered through images of his penis during sexual acts with two female German tourists, Pam and Barbara: "Elle entourait *mon sexe* pour le branler par petits va-et-vients amicaux" (LZ 41). / "Peu après, je sentis la petite bouche de Pam qui se refermait sur le bout de ma *queue*" (42). / "Pam avait une manière très particulière de sucer; [...] mais en passant la langue tout autour du *gland*" (43) / [...] "avant

⁷⁶There is an entire interdisciplinary field of study on the "tourist gaze," which would help to expand upon my argument here. For more reading, see Urry.

de refermer son autre main sur mes *couilles*” (43).⁷⁷ These examples erect a sexualized image of Michel’s body, in contrast to Rudi, whose genitalia are never mentioned.⁷⁸ The narrator’s body is delineated entirely through hyper-sexed episodes during which his penis is repeatedly the purveyor and guarantor of pleasure for his female sex partners. This invention of the narrator’s body through his genitalia creates the tourist-body which echoes its being “out of context”. Jacquelyn N. Zita, in her work on “male lesbians,” offers how the body transitions between contextualized spaces and daily routines:

The body under postmodernist imagery can be extracted from its historically concrete daily context and “shifted” into an ever-increasing multiplicity of positionalities, a creative movement, according to Suleiman (1986), which “invents” the body itself. The simple unities and stabilities of self in the modernist world are shattered in this choreography of multiple selves, as the body loses its surety of boundary and its fixity of truth and meaning. (109)

The narrator’s penis is fixed at the center of his tourist existence and demonstrates the fluidity of the body between tourist and non-tourist states. This elision is a result of the tourism industry’s pleasure-promising ambitions, which can only be sustained whilst in the role of the tourist. At the intersection between tourist and French subject, tourist sex acts as “body-building” techniques which (re)-insert masculinity, if only temporarily, into his identity as French.

⁷⁷Italics are my own.

⁷⁸In fact, in the first scene where Pam and Barbara and Michel become sexually active with each other on a secluded beach, Rudi excludes himself from the act by remaining seated “quelques mètres plus haut, l’air renfrogné; il avait gardé son short” (41), a sort of self-imposed, sartorial “cock block”.

3.2.2.1 Rudi and Michel: Capital (city) punishment. Travelling is an anonymous state; the entry into new surroundings and a new temporal ordering of one's days encourages the adoption of temporary persona. The erasure of national subjectivity is rooted in this redefinition of one's own personality; however, full erasure is neither achievable nor sustainable. In *Lanzarote*, cultural familiarity is often sought out not amongst compatriots but amongst the reassuring cultural stereotypes of fellow non-French; Rudi, the Belgian, is a quintessential example. His quest to escape his depressing home life in Belgium is prevented in part by his inability to separate from his Belgianness as he experiences it at home and to re-invent himself as his exoticized Belgian self (or any other nationality) in a foreign land. Rudi materializes almost as if the punchline to a classic *blague belge*, yet Michel exhibits empathetic sentiments for his social situation that he does not offer toward his fellow countrymen.

In their non-tourist lives, both the narrator and Rudi live in the capitals—Paris and Brussels—of their respective countries. Quotidian participation in the daily life of the cultural and administrative centers of France and Belgium's production of identity does not bolster either man's connection to these nations; instead, they both experience terrible social isolation. To this effect, Michel muses: "Dans l'ensemble les gens restent chez eux, ils se réjouissent que leur téléphone ne sonne pas, ils laissent leur répondeur branché. Pas de nouvelles, bonnes nouvelles. Dans l'ensemble, les gens sont comme ça. Et moi aussi" (54). Paris, read here as emblematic of the whole of France, is portrayed as the ambivalent epicenter of a disingenuous and disconnected French identity. Michel's critique of his compatriots can be read throughout the text in the glaring absence of other French people; rather, Michel prefers to accept a European identity.

The few vague references to Paris insinuate a general ambivalence towards national identity, which is not the case for Rudi whose fervent disgust with Brussels (Belgium) is

repeatedly expressed: “La Belgique est un pays délinquant et absurde, un pays qui n’aurait jamais dû exister” (30). The use of the past conditional tense “n’aurait jamais dû exister” reifies the constructedness of the Belgian state and voids it of any imagined organicity in its creation. The deleterious union of the Flemish and Wallon peoples under the epithet of Belgium is allegorized in the emasculated and downtrodden physical aspects of Rudi’s character. Rudi’s disparaging commentary on Brussels is replete with despair that transcends the national level and knows how the national has become the personal. Following a conversation with Rudi, the narrator sums up Brussels as filled with random, senseless violence and as “un sanctuaire terroriste” (30). Living in a city with no cohesive identity or *raison d’être*, which is furthermore known externally (and almost farcically) as the “Capital of Europe” and as a major terrorist safehaven and breeding ground, makes Rudi’s plaintives all the more real.

3.2.2.2 Après Michel, le deluge. In 2000, the European Union had already been in existence for eight years and member-states across Europe were re-constructing their external identities in accordance to this new supra-national entity.⁷⁹ The capital of the European Union being set in Brussels as a neutral, fairly centralized location for the then member-states to gather in a setting conducive to the projects of deepening European bonds. For Rudi, however, this city does not evoke the positive aspects of the European project, instead: “[Rudi] me parlait de la capitale européenne comme d’une cité au bord de la guerre civile” (30).⁸⁰ Here, the reference to Brussels— not as the capital of Belgium—rather as the capital of Europe reinforces the

⁷⁹Previous iterations of the European Union dating back to 1951 when the Treaty of Paris founded the European Coal and Steel Union as one of the first post-war supranational economic communities which later evolved into the EU (officially created by the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992).

⁸⁰Since I began working on this dissertation, Brussels did succumb to a massive terrorist attack during which 35 people killed and hundreds injured, on March 22, 2016.

timeframe of a budding European Union during which *Lanzarote* was written. Earlier in the novel, Michel muses that societal cohesion at the level of “humanité” is minimal (This theme resurges again in a letter Rudi leaves for Michel, which explains his sudden departure from the island) and increasingly absurd given the contemporary shifts toward individualism.⁸¹

La transition de l'âge militaire à l'âge industriel, annoncée par le fondateur du positivisme dès 1830, était bien lente à s'accomplir. Pourtant, à travers l'omniprésence des informations planétaires, l'appartenance de l'humanité à un destin et un calendrier apparaissait de plus en plus frappante. Même s'il n'avait rien de significatif en lui-même, le changement de millénaire fonctionnerait peut-être comme une *self-fulfilling prophecy*. (27)

The more one knows of his Others, the less he understands them. In the case of Rudi and Michel, despite their close and intense interactions together in their role as tourists, Michel remains utterly dumb-founded by Rudi's reason for leaving: joining the Raélians cult, the same way in which it is too difficult to understand how humanity maintains affective connections in the technology era.⁸²

Numerous references to “l'humanité” consistently expose disbelief in the possibility of a *humanité* as a cohesive unit of existence, undercutting national unity to (co)exist for and within itself. Lacking the suspension of disbelief in a national project, the narrator cannot write himself specifically into the nation. Rudi's presence is emblematic of Houellebecq's obsession with the rise of sexual dissatisfaction and subsequent decline of social cohesion in contemporary

⁸¹References to “l'être humain” and “l'humanité” in both *Lanzarote* and *Plateforme* are frequently in reference to the rapid onslaught of unbridled individualism that capitalist societies enforce. The loss of societal solidarity instigates the societal malaise of the French and the Western world as a whole; the few areas of common ground that remain are immigration policies and nostalgia as the French past.

⁸²The Raélians are a UFO-believing cult founded by Claude Vorilhon in 1974 based on the principles of sexual freedom and expression as well as humanity's alien origins. For further reading, visit: <http://www.rael.org>

European society.

3.2.2.3 Le début de la fin. After gazing powerlessly upon Michel's sexual encounter with *les Allemandes*, Rudi takes a drastic stand against his depression and failed social status within the Belgian nation-state and joins the Raélians who he first engaged with during an excursion on the island. His premature departure (much like the embarrassment of a premature ejaculation) from his vacation is explained in a lengthy missive he left behind for Michel. In this letter, Rudi's assertive, yet twistedly optimistic voice expresses hope about his new life within the Raëlian cult. Rudi's progressive disassociation with the societal principles of the Belgian nation leads to his sudden departure, which he chronicles for in Michel's letter. Yet, his adherence to the Raélians is merely a substitution of one national structure for another.

His decision to commit what is tantamount to social suicide is predicated more as an alternative to national belonging, explaining that his role/place in Belgium is unsustainable:

Vous ignorez sans doute encore davantage ce que c'est d'être belge. Vous ne mesurez pas la violence—latente ou réelle, la méfiance et la crainte auxquelles nous sommes confrontés dans nos rapports quotidiens les plus élémentaires. Nous ne formons plus, en Belgique, ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler une 'société'; Nous n'avons plus rien en commun que l'humiliation et la peur. C'est une tendance, je le sais, commune à l'ensemble des nations européennes.⁸³ (49)

The signifier “belge” is used here as void of intended signified meaning, *désormais* representing a permanent state of anguish rather than a state with a collective identity. Using Belgium as the poster-child for national malaise is a metaphorical status for the whole of Europe. In “Qu'est-ce

⁸³Italics in text.

qu'une Nation?" Ernest Renan posits that national crises foster sentiments of solidarity and work to form unifying national ideals. In the case of Belgium, and contemporary Europe more generally, the crisis that Rudi writes about no longer originates in a definable enemy against which people can come together; rather, it results in a disparate sense of loss and increasing state of fear.

Rudi's choice to recklessly abandon his life in Belgian society underscores the scope of his disillusionment with Belgium. In joining the Raélians, he is radically reorganizing and redefining his place in society with this effectively permanent departure. The Raélian cult, however, in many ways, follows a similar logic of the nation. There is a myth of common origin, a set of governing institutions, administrative hierarchy, and a performance of belonging to the group. Each new day within the cult requires actions demonstrating belonging as well as personal sacrifices for "commonality." This cult appears fanatic, yet for Rudi, this new way of life presents a chance at freedom from the current condition of Belgium's society.

3.2.3 Sex(uality), tourism, and national disorientation

Up to this point, I have framed Rudi and Michel primarily through the psycho-social impressions that have been foisted on them in their homelands. Rudi and Michel appear to face similar problems and it is readily understood that both men came to Lanzarote to "get away from it all" rather than to soak up the culture of the island. Houellebecq regularly uses vacations in his works as a tool for keeping France at a distance. On this note, Benjamin Verpoort asserts that: "Houellebecq réduit le voyage à une entreprise égotiste avec le seul but d'isoler le voyageur en un vacuum [...], le protégeant ainsi contre le vide du monde extérieur" (305). "Le monde extérieur" in Houellebecq's writings is not the world *out there*, but rather the world *in here*, i.e.

France. Social isolation does not stem entirely from a misanthropic nature—after all, Michel and Rudi both *chose* to participate in group vacations. Group tourism serves as a safe and lazy way for these unadventurous men to temporarily escape their lives in a comfortable and culturally sterile fashion. Though the tourists have travelled beyond the legal, political boundaries of France and Belgium, they have only metaphorically left their zone of social responsibility. In this section, the theme of tourism is considered through the temporal and spatial effects on the everyday life of the tourist.

Both Michel and Rudi are deeply affected by the social dystopias in which they currently work and live. The common goal of their vacations is to escape the confines of an undesirable society and to reestablish their own sense of humanity through the sexual exploits so common in tourism. Michel's sexual successes and Rudi's failures emphasize the unique opportunity that being a tourist presents: sexual freedom. Rudi's sexual inaction on Lanzarote is both palpable and painful. I would argue then that, in contrast, Michel is an ideal tourist whereas Rudi is a disappointment—at least by Houellebecq's standards. The socially disenfranchised Belgian is doomed from the start by his pre-existing condition of Belgian-ness and history of romantic and sexual failures. Rudi's narrative construction deliberately breaks down at the conjectures when Belgium and the discussion of sex are intertwined. Here, my readings of sex scenes with two German lesbian tourists, Pam and Barbara, will show how Rudi's lack of participation in touristic sex reinforces a state-promoted heteronormative form of sexuality. As such, Michel and Rudi become each other's sexual Other delineating the borders between tourist and non-tourist.

3.2.3.1 National time on vacation. The nation is notably founded upon state-administered unwavering orientations, one of which is temporality. A distinct construction of past time and history, a common present, and a hopeful future, plot out the conception of national time as

linear and cohesive. Sara Ahmed's argument on orientation(s) as beneficial explicates the linearity of national time:

The concept of orientations allows us to expose how life gets directed through the very requirement that we follow what is already given to us. For a life to count as a good life, it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one's futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. Such points accumulate, creating the impression of a straight line. To follow such a line might be a way to become straight, by not deviating at any point. (554)

Life in the nation is constantly organized according to a hierarchy of temporal expectations and the hard and fast rules of capitalism in which time is a merely a commodity. For the tourist, the daily routine of life is suspended and restructured according to the type of vacation planned. The friction between the new leisure time and the deeply engrained time of the nation causes national identities to become more apparent to fellow tourists during the period of adaptation. This slippage of time then might allow the tourist to be considered as (temporarily) queer because of his deviation from an inherited trajectory. As Hazel Andrews notes, "Due to a disruption in habitus and the heightened sense of self, in terms of group and individual identity, brought into focus by the machinations of the tourism industry, the latent possibilities of national identity find outlets and potentialities for greater expression" (33). Outside the confines of Belgium, Rudi's increased self-awareness as a tourist exacerbates feelings of detachment from his already fractured Belgian identity.

3.2.4 Les possibilités d'une île

Michel uses Rudi as his muse, his ingénue who is a Belgian “proche de la catastrophe humaine totale” (30) asserts Michel. The trip seems like a futile attempt to escape his empty existence as a police officer in Brussels. The narrator pretends to know why Rudi initially decided to come to Lanzarote: “l’incertitude, le besoin de vacances, une employée d’agence de voyages entreprenante: bref, le scénario classique” (31), denoting a certain level of desperation.

It is important to understand how the actual physical space and landscape of the island are intrinsic to the story being told. The island is a space of discontinuity, protection, and vulnerability; as a tourist landscape, the island plays an important role in creating both tangible and abstract borders between the tourist and their personal home realities. The unconscious choice of an island destination can be seen in Claudio Minca’s work on biopolitics and the island as a space for tourism. He explains: “The island is, then, a very modern trope of a parallel world, an aestheticized dream of a space of purity, a refuge for our escapism, for the possibility of a spatial and temporal suspension; it is a metaphorical and real place in which to seek a new temporary identity” (93). It does look as if Rudi’s intention to visit Lanzarote was based on a need to mentally and metaphysically distance himself from the chaos of contemporary Belgian society and his own personal life.

The narrator approaches Rudi as a cautionary tale of a sexless life that leads to despair and ends in complete social failure. The Belgian’s anxiety and pensiveness reflect deeply anchored feelings of shame and guilt towards non-normative sex acts, which are prohibited by the nation’s “imagined” foundation on heteronormative family structures. There is an obvious desire to evade these national sentiments; however, the tourist experience proves inefficient in fully erasing the nation from the body. In contrast, Michel’s sexual exploits on Lanzarote help

him to cast off the chains of the nation calling out the abstract nature of national biopolitics. Actions taking place around the body draw out how absolutely the nation directs the performance of the body.

The narrator never refers to himself as French, which provides a semantic distance from any notions of Frenchness; just as his body is physically outside of France so his identity becomes less important. This freedom from the national constructed male body grants Michel the freedom to live out a very sexualized identity in the temporal suspension of this vacation. Having sex with Pam and Barbara at once reinforces the heterosexual/masculine-constructed nation, whilst also skewing Michel's uneasy masculinity. His newfound freedom to perform sexually in the space and time of tourism corresponds to approaches, which say masculinity can be reconfigured in a new cultural context. Todd Reeser, for example, posits: "For cultural and spatial movement reconstructs gender and masculinity, and, as a result, the home constructs may be transformed in unexpected ways when one goes abroad or into other cultural spaces. The move to a new space may unrepresent certain desires that 'civilized' or Western culture tend to repress" (194). The anonymity that tourism allows for the creation of a network in which sexual exploration flourishes and new identities emerge. In this milieu, the mediocrity of Michel's life in Paris is expelled and is replaced with a more virile phallo-centric self-image. Michel's male body, i.e. species *gallico hominem*, serves as a structure through which Pam and Barbara's sexual and German identities are elaborated; conversely, it also acts as an object of comparison against which Rudi is drawn as sexually and socially-castrated. Susan Frohlick observes that: "[In tourism studies], male bodies remain the normative performing active mobile tourist subject" (52). While Frohlick's work aims to deconstruct this static anthropological perception, Houellebecq employs the male body in tourism as a site of non-normative performances of

national identity. Narrative discourse of Michel's body is reduced to his male genitalia and ejaculations, which lend immediacy to his masculinity, yet stops short of rendering this newly discovered virility permanent. The best examples of this idea can be observed in sex scenes involving Michel, Pam and Barbara.

First introduced during an island excursion organized by the hotel, Pam and Barbara quickly become the targets of Michel's sexual mission. As he scans the human landscape for potential sexual partners, Michel's thoughts wonder off at the sight of two German lesbians who he can only imagine through sexual acts. "Pourtant, sur le plan sexuel, je me sentais plus attiré par les Allemandes. Il s'agissait de deux fortes créatures, aux seins lourds. Probablement des gouines; mais j'aime beaucoup, pour ma part, voir deux femmes se branler et s'entrelécher la chatte" (19). It appears then that this sexualized construction of the female body would prevent the narrator's potential relationship with these Germans; the avowal, "n'ayant pas d'amies lesbiennes, je suis en général privé de cette joie" (19) tells us otherwise. The female body is an object of obsessive reverence whose temple is constructed with frequent references to female genitalia "la chatte" (42) and erogenous zones through the "seins lourds" (42). Houellebecq is well known for his employ of very colloquial, often vulgar sexual vocabulary. In *Lanzarote*, Houellebecq exclusively uses more vulgar terms such as "chatte" (41) and "pussy" (42) to refer to the vagina and terms such as "queue" (42), "couilles", (42) and "gland" (43) to refer to the penis. Curiously, in reference to the female breast, Houellebecq chose to use the clinical terms "seins" (42) and "poitrine" (43). I would argue that his distinction of female genitalia as purely erotics ecosystems stems from a sense of social immaturity due to few and failed romantic experiences as well as his disdain for maternity and motherhood in his novels.

In both *Lanzarote* and *Plateforme*, it is common for sex acts to culminate with Michel

ejaculating on the breasts. As a tourist, this imagery territorializes the foreign female body and repudiates parenthood by wasting *la semence*, diverting it from reproductive purposes. Territorializing the foreign female's body through ejaculation designs Michel's masculine virility and forcibly creates a sexually dominated Other. The male body is also outlined through genitalia, yet differently; for Michel, his genitalia is only elaborated through images of erections and ejaculation. In his critique of pornographic films, Mutak Aydemir explains that the "money shot" is a quintessential moment for the expression of masculinity: "Men need to have their ejaculations captured on film because, emotionally near-dead, they want to convince themselves of their being alive" (15). Though Aydemir writes in a cinematic context, the same "need" can certainly be applied to Houellebecq's novels.⁸⁴ The novelistic money shot is a frequent trope throughout Houellebecq's tourist novels. In the beach scene, there is striking evidence of the redeeming qualities that this shot grants to Michel's psyche:

Elle [Pam] dirigea ma queue vers la poitrine de Barbara et recommença à branler par petits coups très vifs, ses doigts en anneau à la racine du gland. Barbara me regarda et sourit; au moment où elle pressa ses mains sur le côté de ses seins pour accentuer leur rondeur, j'éjaculai violemment sur sa poitrine. J'étais dans une espèce de transe, je voyais trouble, c'est comme dans un brouillard que je vis Pam étaler le sperme sur les seins de sa compagne. (43)

Here in this scene, Michel becomes the student of Pam and Barbara's lessons in pleasure. Barbara—not Michel—is the one who redirects the stream of his sperm onto herself. This action

⁸⁴In *Plateforme*, the narrator Michel masturbates to an erotic passage from John Grisham's 1991 novel *The Firm*: "J'éjaculai avec soupir de satisfaction entre deux pages. Ça allait coller; bon, ce n'était pas un livre à lire deux fois" (96). For more on the function of ejaculation and sperm in Houellebecq works, see Clément (2003).

is a misaligned representation of heteronormativity that falls short in its attempt to fertilize Barbara in Michel's masculinity. The assertion of Michel's masculinity through the vivid imagery of virility (re)affirm his alive-ness through a "performance" of tourist sexuality. Tourist sex is palpitating because there is always a hint of secrecy, *du jamais-vu*, lack of consequences, and feelings of superiority.

Many of these first-person interactions with Pam and Barbara take place on the beaches of Lanzarote. The liminal space of the beach creates a metaphorical zone in which the residue of Michel's sexual dissatisfaction in France fades away. Michel's first verbalized utterance to the German lesbian couple, "*You have very nice breast*" (26), sets an erotic tone for the rest of the tourists' interactions.^{85 87} From that first interaction, Michel's gaze stays focused on their erotic zones and his own sexual self-awareness is heightened: "Je ne pouvais pas m'empêcher de regarder ses [Pam's] seins; je pris conscience que je bandais" (26). The linguistic and cultural differences that would typically keep these two parties as at a distance dissipates in the space of by the presence of these two Germans. Earlier in this section, I quoted Michel as saying, "[...] personne ne pouvait m'aider" (9); the notion of "personne," I would argue, refers to other French citizens. "Personne" is directed towards French citizens because outside of the context of tourism, Michel would generally only have quotidian interactions with other French citizens. Furthermore, it is only Michel's interactions with non-French persons who do effect any change in his mood. The unspoken, unofficial, and perpetual judgement that citizens of the same country pass upon each other fades away in their absence, whence the absence of other French characters in this novel. Michel's interactions with foreigners, the Belgian Rudi and the German lesbians do

⁸⁵*Tourisme et la franchise*. Something Michel would never have been able to get away with in France, socially or linguistically. The linguistic space between mother tongue and foreign language lowers social barriers out of necessity to communicate with fewer words.

actually help unveil an affective side to his otherwise bland persona. Rudi, on the contrary, incites pity and feelings of guilt, while Pam and Barbara evoke feelings of satisfaction and renewal.

The multifaceted identity of the tourist is structured more evidently between tourists of different national origins than through interactions with locals where expectations are constructed around consumerist and stereotyped interactions. In Wearing, Stevenson, and Young contend that, “The hybridization of the tourist self enables a communication in which ‘they’ or the Other is transposed into ‘you’ and ‘I’” (109). The “you and I” appellation is organic to the relationship that unfolds between Pam, Barbara, and Michel. Conversations between these tourists are sparse and develop primarily to address sexual desires and ambitions. However, the content of these conversations develops into playful iterations of national identity.

In *Lanzarote* minimal attention is given to the host culture and contrary to *Plateforme*, there is no mention of personal interactions with the native population. The approachable Other is perceived through the German lesbians in a vacuum that is formed around them through organized excursions and the orientation of the tourists’ gaze. They, too, serve as Michel’s Others (and Rudi’s sexual refusal as Other) through the exoticisation of their capacity for sexual satisfaction. By intertwining national identity and sexual wellness, Pam and Barbara’s “Germanness” implies a functional German society contrasted against Michel’s barely detectable Frenchness and the dysfunctionality of Rudi’s Belgianess. Narrative representations of Pam and Barbara paint their sex acts as instances of pedagogical modeling of pleasure and self-appropriation of national identity.

A shift in Michel’s demeanor becomes most notable after his initial sexual interactions with the Germans: “Je suis allé me baigner tout de suite, avec Pam et Barbara. Tout en restant à

quelques mètres, je ne me sentais pas vraiment exclu de leurs jeux” (41). This subtle indication signals a turn toward sexual (read: national) parity between Michel, Pam, and Barbara—from which Rudi is effectively excluded. Back on the beach, Michel places his towel a mere meter from Barbara’s with the hopes that he will soon be included in “leurs jeux.” Rudi, on the other hand, plops down further up the beach fully clothed, “l’air renfrogné” (41). Pointing out that Rudi keeps his clothes on while the others are presumably naked or at least only partially clothed is interesting for two reasons. First, it labels Rudi as socially restrained by the expectations of normative sex acts and his inability to (even temporarily) become a tourist, free from the confines of his everyday home life. Referring back to Aydemir’s quote on the necessity of the money shot, Rudi can be labeled as sexually dead as he never ejaculates in the novel. Sexual dysfunction is national dysfunction—at least in Houellebecq’s world.

Barbara’s invitation “*You can come closer...*” (43) sets the tone for Michel’s vacation. Elizabeth Freeman speaks of the proximity of bodies in the construction of a habitus:

Habitus produces bodies that are like other bodies, it is a replicative system, but not a heterosexually reproductive one. [...] a subject acquires a bodily schema through proximity, through the physical motions of imitating or being directed in an activity, which process may or may not result in a self-understood or culturally symbolized identity. (306)

This observation holds true for Michel’s character who remains very two-dimensional and shadowy as he is slowly constructed through the emotions arising from contact with Pam and Barbara.

From his initial trip to the travel agency, Michel proceeds in sharp contrast to the Michel-on-the-beach who has made immense social progress since his chance meeting with two kind-

hearted and hyper-sexualized German lesbians. Michel-in-the-travel-agency mused that: “J’avais entendu dire que le prestige des Blancs était encore très grand en Afrique de l’Ouest. Il suffisait de se pointer en discothèque pour ramener une nana dans son bungalow; même pas une pute, en plus, elles faisaient ça pour le plaisir. [...] je n’avais pas envie de baiser” (11). His lack of desire to “baiser” stems from a similar society-wide malaise by which Rudi has been consumed; the commodification of everything, including sex, was disparaging for Michel but he is rehabilitated, in a sense, by the sheer leisure of sex with Pam and Barbara. He has sex with Germans, one because there are no black women or even local women available for interaction on Lanzarote and because sleeping with the Germans is a metaphorical affirmation of European unity. A unity that both transcends and transgresses European institutions as it reduces the human connection to sex and the body.

When Pam asks, “Ça vous a plu?” (41), in regards to watching her climax, Michel’s response, “Beaucoup. Sincèrement, beaucoup” (41) appears notably human. He continues before being interrupted, as denotes the ellipsis, “‘Je m’en rends compte...’ Je n’avais pas cessé de bander. [Pam] entoura mon sexe de sa main pour le branler par petit va-et-vient *amicaux*” (41).⁸⁶The use of the adjective “amicaux” reinforces the emotive connection that Michel is establishing towards Pam and Barbara, whose performance of the role of steward(esses) of his happiness reinvigorates Michel’s attitude toward humanity.

The lesbians’ comportment toward Michel is remarkably humane and generous.⁸⁷ Pam offers up Barbara to Michel for penetrative sex as she herself is no longer accustomed to it;

⁸⁶Italics are mine for emphasis.

⁸⁷Christian van Treeck argues that there is no ulterior motive in Pam and Barbara’s relations with Michel: “Si les deux Allemandes se montrent décontractées au point de faire l’amour avec le narrateur sous les yeux d’autrui—le cas échéant Rudi, le quatrième protagoniste—elles ne cherchent pourtant pas à impressionner ou à choquer leur entourage. Leur comportement n’est pas motivé par le narcissisme mais résulte tout simplement d’un heureux tempérament” (324)

however, this division of sexual labor sharply contrasts the gendered images that Michel had painted of his new lovers: Barbara “divinité femelle”...Pam “salopettes” (16). Lacking condoms for safe, penetrative intercourse, Pam reassures Michel that, “on trouvera bien un moyen de s’occuper de vous” (41). This statement sounds much like generic tourism slogans meant to entice the eager consumer, yet it more deeply attends to a joint pleasure in providing for Michel’s sexual needs and rebirth. The first sparks of Michel’s renewed faith in humanity appear when, in the same scene as Rudi’s disappearance, Michel asks himself: “*Suis-je le gardien de mon frère?*” (42). This inkling of empathy for his fellow man illuminates the self-renewal that Pam and Barbara’s sexual cultivation have awakened in Michel. A feature of Houellebecq’s *Au milieu de monde* series is to correlate intense, spontaneous sexual interactions with personal balance and a reinvigorated engagement with humanity.

Earlier in the same scene, Pam receives cunnilingus from Barbara; this instance might be described pedagogically as presentation and guided practice. Michel’s subsequent independent practice would be to demonstrate what he has learned from Barbara by then in turn pleasing her in the same way in which she pleased Pam. When Michel awkwardly asks, “*You look a good girl. May I lick your pussy?*” (42), Barbara responds, “Ja, ja!” (42), an exuberant indication that the oral exam may commence. Michel’s broken tourist English coupled with Barbara’s German interjections recalls the challenges of both cross-cultural communication and language barriers. This lesson in national identities reaches its apex when Pam explicitly refers to Michel as “monsieur le Français” (43). This instance is the only time in the entire novel where the heretofore nationally-anonymous Michel is named as French. He never introduces himself as French, but is called out as such by other tourists; Michel names Rudi as Belgian before actually being told. This signification through the eyes of the other enables “Frenchness” or

“Belgianness” to stand as a hollow signifier for persons who themselves do not portray themselves as the “signified”.

Overall, this novella attests to a profound sense of social complaisance in Western (European) society. Verpoort posits that, “Houellebecq présente le tourisme comme une croisade impitoyable d’une classe occidentale relativement fortuné (dont il fait partie lui-même d’ailleurs)” (306). Houellebecq’s crusade indicates a failure to comply with the requirements of the French nation as well as the state’s repeated ignorance of the current social experiences of France. The state, the nation, and national subjects are like geological layers of the earth whose presence only surfaces through tectonic cultural collisions, which expose each layer as distinct yet interdependent.

3.2.4.1 Rudi’s escape from Lanzarote. Michel’s sexual apprenticeship with Pam and Barbara creates the French nation through the gaze of Michel’s German Others. However, these readings are bound in the temporality of the vacation and dissipate once the abstract role-play of tourist has been abandoned. In the case of Rudi, however, the consequences of national disorientation are much graver. Whereas Michel’s Frenchness is externally imposed by other tourists, Rudi dictates his Belgianness through his own words and actions. These avowals place Rudi in a cultural vacuum in which social failure becomes inevitable. The inability to fully play the part of the tourist highlights Rudi’s dis-integration and the extent to which he has been irreversibly scarred by Belgium’s social instability. The Germans are stable, free-loving models of the world Houellebecq wishes could exist.

This novel advocates tourism as a temporary antidote to the crushing banality of everyday life in France and Europe overall, yet demonstrates that this not always effective.

Michel's travel to Lanzarote serves as a minimally-invasive, temporary treatment for what ails him, whereas Rudi opts for a complete social amputation. The Raëlian cult is a drastic attempt to sever connections with Belgium and to delineate a new nation-like institutional hierarchy.⁸⁸

Rudi's real life overshadowed his time in Lanzarote. As Mike Robinson argues, it is possible that Rudi's unsuccessful life experiences are too painful and fresh for him to be able to set himself free in this new locale:

Places in fiction are generally anchored to the emotions generated at particular times by the characters of a novel, or more explicitly in the author providing the narrative. Thus, from a tourism point of view, the reader is presented with destination images laden with predispositions, shaped by feelings of the moment and the spectrum of life experiences. (56)

The bureaucratic machinations, performance of national time and rituals, the unified representations of an imagined past do not merely disappear from view. Therefore, when Rudi exchanges Belgian rituals for those of the Raëlians, the nation is being disoriented or perhaps even reoriented in a manner that is not sustainable. Near the end of *Lanzarote*, we learn of Rudi's arrest for sexual delinquency with a minor, which shatters the walls that protected Rudi from the nation.⁸⁹ In spite of Rudi and Michel's attempt to shun the confines of national identity (i.e.

⁸⁸Houellebecq's fascination with the Raëlian cult humorously re-surfaces in *La carte et le territoire*, in which Jed Martin paints a tableau entitled "Claude Vorilhon gérant de bar-tabac" (209). Claude Vorilhon, aka Raël, is the leader and founder of the Raëlian movement, inspired by his visitations by aliens in the early 1970s. "Le patron de l'établissement avait même oublié qu'il avait, une dizaine d'années auparavant, autorisé Jed à prendre des photos de lui de son café, dont celui-ci devait s'inspirer pour la réalisation de "Claude Vorilhon gérant de bar-tabac," le second tableau de sa série des métiers simples—pour lequel un courtier en bourse américain venait d'offrir la somme de trois cent cinquante mille euros" (CT 209). For more on Houellebecq's interactions with the Raëlian cult, see: <http://rael-justice.org/celebre-ecrivain-francais-michel-houellebecq-sur-rael-mouvement-raelien>

⁸⁹Near boundless sexual freedom and exploration is a tenet of the Raëlian cult and they do not espouse limitations on sexual interactions between members of any age in flagrant conflict with almost universal restrictions on sex between adults and minors.

stereotypes) and the nation (i.e. administrative limitations, temporal structures), they are both restricted even if only in intangible ways.

3.3 PLATEFORME

The second book in the series *Plateforme* further implicates contemporary mass tourism as one of the driving forces of the economic liberalization and social dysfunction of French society in the twenty-first century. In lieu of benefitting from fewer social restrictions, as Houellebecq would suggest, society becomes less and less cohesive as a result. Sabine van Wesemael's essay on Gilles Lipovetsky's *L'ère du vide* supports this idea and affirms the effects of Houellebecqian angst:

L'espérance révolutionnaire a disparu, la contre-culture s'épuise et rares sont les causes encore capables de galvaniser les énergies. L'ère révolutionnaire est close. Seule demeure la quête de l'égo et de son intérêt propre, l'extase de la libération personnelle, l'obsession du corps et du sexe. *Mais plus les mœurs se libéralisent, plus le sentiment de vide gagne.*⁹⁰ (85)

As *Plateforme* attests, *le vide* is an omnipresent force driving the economic engines of tourism and sexual dissatisfaction. *Le vide* is the fallout from the hyper-individualist society that has firmly taken root in post-1968-era France. The social cohesion that had previously kept national identity strong is now barely visible.

Houellebecq's writing style can be compared to Balzac and Flaubert for the realist

⁹⁰Italics are mine for emphasis.

character portrayals as well as the vivid social and physical degradation of his narrator-protagonists, similar to *Père Goriot* and *Madame Bovary*. In all three novels in this chapter, the narrators confront their fathers' deaths with little bravado (in *Plateforme* ruled accidental homicide, in *La carte*, an assisted suicide) with a froideur reminiscent of Camus' *The Stranger*. Through death, the disillusionment with the father figure coincides with and to some extent parallels a disoriented conception of the nation.⁹¹ The father figure's deaths in all three novels concur alongside basically in-existent mention of a mother.⁹² It is of interest that in French, France is referred to as "la mère patrie" while in many other languages this same concept of a parental homeland is referred in the masculine as the Fatherland.

The breakdown of one of the central underpinnings of national structures, the family, coupled with narrator Michel's touristic-exile in Thailand suggest that the orientation(s) of the nation are destabilized ideals, greatly affected by trends of globalization.⁹³ In today's highly globalized society persons are freer to move about previously inaccessible spaces, especially in exotic locations such as Thailand and Cuba. The airplane becomes, not only a means of transportation but also a means of disorientation, a space of nowhere-ness that is neither here nor there and which skews our axis of existence.

⁹¹In all three Houellebecq novels in this chapter, the place of Michel's mother is markedly absent from any discourse other than perhaps a passing mention in *Plateforme* and *La carte* that she passed away or disappeared at any early age in Michel's life. It is difficult to deny that this omission of the mother is taken directly from Houellebecq's own life story. His mother Lucie Ceccaldi, who has since Houellebecq's ascent to fame, penned an autobiography (*L'innocente*, 2008) attempting to both clear her name and simultaneously slander her son, who she sent to live with his maternal grandparents in La Réunion at the tender age of six.

⁹²*Plateforme* does contain one short sentence explaining that Jed's mother died from suicide when he was a young boy; *La carte* has few paragraphs relating to the suicide of the protagonist's mother. Houellebecq's biological mother was still alive at the time of *La carte*'s publication and passed away at the age of 83 in May 2010.

⁹³For one of my understandings of "orientation" derives from Sara Ahmed's work on queer phenomenology: "Bodies hence acquire orientation by repeating some actions, over others, as actions that have certain objects in view, whether they are the physical objects required to do the work or the ideal objects that one identifies with" (*GLQ* 553). I would argue here that that this is how the nation proliferates its intending meaning, through what Michel de Certeau theorizes in his work *Practice of Everyday Life*.

Plateforme's national limits and boundaries are confronted through “imagined communities”, starkly contrasting binaries between Eastern (i.e. Thai) and Western (French) sexual mores and time/space relationships. Benedict Anderson’s concept of the imagined community is pertinent in describing Michel’s tourist group, which performs as a microcosm of French society. We see these identities on full display in situations where the group is forced to be together: at meals, organized outings, or on their tour bus. One evening at dinner, Michel refers to the self-segregating effect that imitates social groupings in his everyday life.⁹⁴ He notes particularly that he, as a single male tourist, is excluded in light of his unidentifiable nature: “On avait dressé deux tables de six; toutes les places étaient prises. Je jetai autour de moi un regard légèrement paniqué” (70). This panic reaffirms his awkward presence amongst his fellow countrymen—he cannot find his *semblable* because he has none, he cannot have one. The nation is built upon a heteronormative family hierarchy, which prioritizes the heterosexual couple as the basis of the family, thus Michel’s *célibat* creates a queer space at the table. Sara Ahmed explains, “[making things queer] disturbs the order of things. The effects of such disturbance are uneven, given that the world is already organized around certain forms of living—certain times, spaces, and directions” (*GLQ* 565). Michel is *au milieu du monde*, but not *dans le monde*, for his directionless lifestyle does not fit into the (French) order of things. The table that Michel eventually dines at is only situationally cohesive, with no “affinité réelle” (70), which signifies a lack of social solidarity and belonging amongst his presumed peers:

Je m’installai donc à la table qui était apparemment celle des *couples constitués*:
les écologistes jurassiens, les naturopathes [...] et les deux seniors charcutiers.

⁹⁴Much more so in *Plateforme* than in *Lanzarote*, “typical” tourism, i.e. the mass middle-class vacation packages provided by *Nouvelle Frontières*, among others, is both intended and marketed for travel in couples. That Michel travels alone makes his position in the group even more awkward and perhaps even, suspicious.

Cet arrangement, j'en eus vite la conviction, ne répondait à aucune affinité réelle, mais à la situation d'urgence qui avait dû se présenter lors de l'attribution des tables; les couples s'étaient regroupés instinctivement, comme dans toute situation d'urgence; ce déjeuner n'était en somme qu'un *round d'observation*. (70)

Allusions to cohesion among these French tourists are merely situational and superficial. This microcosm *à table* is reflective of France as a whole, which Michel concludes by stating: “Qui avait pu accrédi-ter cette idée que la France était le pays de la *gaudriole* et du *libertinage*? La France était un pays sinistre, entièrement sinistre et administrative” (71). Anderson’s imagined communities would have us falsely believe that there would be immediate recognition and acceptance of other French people based on common objects and experiences. A group made invisible because their status as *célibataire* prevents them from full participation in certain common experiences of Frenchness. However, Houellebecq’s attention to single persons and their presumably “sad” lives makes visible a population, which the nation by extension renders invisible. *Les Français*, when examined through the lens of tourism, are far more contemptuous of one another, than, say, “les Anglais” or “les Allemand(e)s” in *Lanzarote*, wherein the French ego and pride in individual tourism choices is negated in the presence of other French citizens.⁹⁵

Plateforme disorients national subjectivity through a combination of role reversals and dismissals. What was once considered to be normative has been upended through Houellebecq’s narratorial discourses that often outrage readers because of the realities that he is compelled to name. *Plateforme* reveals deeply hidden and entrenched psychosocial behaviors of Western society that globalization and capitalism have laid bare and of which the West is often most

⁹⁵Previously quoted in the section on *Lanzarote*, “[Le Français], si épris de lui-même que la rencontre d’un compatriote à l’étranger lui est proprement insupportable”.

ignorant. This section demonstrates how orientation(s) of the nation, towards the nuclear family unit, towards the propagation of life, and towards hetero-normative sexual perceptions of the nation are disoriented in Houellebecq's work.

3.3.1 Occidental Nihilism

Whereas in *Lanzarote* disorientation was a stepping away from the accepted trajectory of the nation in both geographical and temporal realms, here I extend my understanding of disorientation in *Plateforme* to incorporate more philosophical dimensions such as national and touristic nihilism. Bülent Diken claims, in his work on Houellebecq and nihilism, that Houellebecq's work comprises at times a variety of nihilistic forms that align with the recurrent themes of tourism, sex, and the decline of Western [read: French] society. Citing Heidegger, Diken states: "there are two consequences of the death of God—disorientation (passive nihilism) and despair (radical nihilism): disorientation because, if the highest values disappear, 'then nothing more remains to which man can cling and by which he can orient himself' (100)."⁹⁶

While Diken blames the death of God, I suggest that, for this work, his reasoning can be read as the death of republican values *liberté, fraternité, égalité*, i.e. the foundational tenets (and orientations) of the secular French nation. Sabine Van Wesemael's concept of the disappearance of "l'espérance révolutionnaire" parallels Diken's thoughts on the loss of French hierarchical guiding strategies or orientations but she goes further by stating: "L'affaiblissement des croyances révolutionnaires efface les idéologies au profit d'un vide comblé uniquement par des

⁹⁶This concept will again hold true for the section on *La carte et le territoire* in which the narrator's father, Jean- Pierre Martin, becomes a tourist one last time, leaving France to partake in assisted suicide in Zurich where such services are legal.

jouissances matérielles. Plus de grands projets messianiques” (85).⁹⁷ This shift towards material stockpiling is what Houellebecq repeatedly derides as a matter of societal dysfunction. In *Plateforme*, material acquisitions take the form of the collecting certain touristic experiences, which serve only to inflate—not enlighten—the egos of those who seek them out. No longer is there a sense of unity or a belief in the specificity of French revolutionary ideologies rather merely the remnants of its tattered image to be found amongst a constant grab for more and more stuff.

In the text, French and Western societies are repeatedly asserted as derelict and/or dying: “Qu’avais-je, pour ma part, à reprocher à l’Occident? Pas grand-chose, mais je n’y étais pas spécialement attaché (et j’arrivais de moins en moins à comprendre qu’on soit attaché à une idée, un pays, à autre chose en général qu’à un individu)” (339). Sex, tourism, and death as developed in *Plateforme* are antithetical to the orientating principles of the state within the territorial borders of France. These would be the principles that Sara Ahmed names as inherited or given structures that are ignorantly followed out of precedence and providence, not out of need or desire. While I will not attribute these principles solely to heteronormativity, it is an important concept from which many others emanate. These include, heteronormative coupling, the genealogical family as building block of nation-sustenance, and sex as means of reproduction. The cultural and sexual interactions that tourism affords, as well as the violent deaths of the protagonist’s father and several key characters bolster Houellebecq’s argument that French identity is defunct due to its distancing from the above principles. Michel loses his father, his

⁹⁷To this effect, Houellebecq comments: “Je vivais dans un pays marqué par un socialisme apaisé, où la possession des biens matériels était garantie par une législation stricte, où le système bancaire était entouré de garanties étatiques puissantes” (PF 33).

lover, and in the end, his nation at the hands of Islamic extremists.⁹⁸ As a result, he succumbs to a total loss of internal, moral, and figurative compasses.

3.3.2 Départ imminent: Thaïlande

While *Plateforme* addresses a multitude of social issues, I limit my focus to Michel's travels and sexcapades in Thailand and Cuba. His first trip to Thailand is organized by *Nouvelles Frontières*, a large-scale tourist corporation, which is critiqued *ad nauseum* in lengthy passages pedantically extrapolating upon the tourism industry in France. Just as the Michel of *Lanzarote* was attracted to his destination by the description given by his travel agent, *Plateforme's* Michel is even more susceptible to the attractive wording of a travel catalogue: "Un circuit organisé, avec un zeste d'aventure, qui vous mènera des bambous de la rivière Kwai à l'île de Koh Samui, pour terminer à Koh Phi Phi, au large de Phuket, après une magnifique traversée de l'isthme de Kra. Un voyage 'cool' sous les Tropiques" (35). This middle-class tagline is sufficient to entice Michel to sign on to this *routard*-esque experience.

On his first trip to Thailand with *Nouvelles Frontières*, Michel meets a young, independent Breton woman named Valérie with whom a whirlwind sexual relationship turns into romance ensues upon their return to France. Valérie becomes the heroine of the novel as she fills *le vide sexuel* in Michel's otherwise pathetic Parisian life. Coincidentally, this paramour works for *Nouvelles Frontières* herself and shares similar beliefs about the overly uptight sexual lives

⁹⁸The loss of these characters in the novel is always linked to fanatical acts done in the name of Islam. Michel's father is killed by the brother of his young lover Aïcha. "Un des frères d'Aïcha avait rapidement avoué qu'il était venu "demander des explications" au vieil homme, que la discussion avait dégénéré, et qu'il l'avait laissé comme mort sur le sol de béton de la chaufferie" (PF 27). Valérie is killed by a random terrorist attack on Pattaya Beach in Thailand, attributed to Islamist terrorists. (PF 339-342) Houellebecq uses brief, but decisive passages to subtly equate Islam with murder and sow disgust amongst his readers.

of Westerners. Everything about this relationship upends the monotony of *métro, boulot, dodo*.⁹⁹ Valérie's character allows Michel to briefly embrace a non-fatalistic view of the world, through moments of mutual respect and attentive love. Michel describes Valérie in affective terms not used elsewhere in the text and certainly not without such finesse:

C'était une bonne fille, me dis-je, une fille affectueuse et attentionnée; c'était aussi une amante sensuelle, caressante et audacieuse; et elle serait probablement, le cas échéant, une mère aimante et sage. '*Ses pieds sont d'or fin, ses jambes comme les colonnes du temple de Jérusalem.*' Je continuais à me demander ce que j'avais fait, au juste, pour mériter une femme comme Valérie. Probablement rien. Le déploiement du monde, me dis-je, je le constate; procédant empiriquement, en toute bonne foi, je le constate; je ne peux rien faire d'autre que le constater. (295)

Valérie embodies the version of France that Michel wishes for himself: sensitive but sensual and unafraid. These wishes are of course foolhardy and ephemeral; in true Houellebecqian form, personal happiness is unsustainable because society inevitably proves itself to be incapable of long-lasting reforms that would remedy the *déclinisme*.

Valérie's central role is accompanied by Jean-Yves, a secondary male protagonist, who is also her boss at *Nouvelles Frontières*. Together with Michel, Jean-Yves and Valérie, develop an innovative resort-style vacation experience targeting the social disenchantment of sex-deprived Europeans. This new venture *Eldorado: Aphrodite* aims to suspend the monotony of everyday life in Western Europe and serve as a philosophical stand against the social status quo while, providing discreet access to free love and hedonism in a warm, tropical setting. Jean-Yves, too, is emblematic of a starkly different Frenchness against which Michel's national identity appears

⁹⁹A common adage about the tenets of life in Paris: "Metro, Work, Sleep".

nebulous and vapid. Jean-Yves is a stereotypical Parisian *homme d'affaires* who is underappreciated at home and in his marriage, undersexed in the bedroom, and overwhelmed at work; his character is an allegory for Michel's social commentaries on the decline of masculine sexuality and the failures of family life in contemporary French society.

Situated in Thailand, this new tourism venture encourages European tourists to actually relax and evade the spaces and places that bring them down. Though Thailand is the backdrop for *Plateforme's* sexual exploration of the Other, the freedom to partake in the sexual alterity that the distant shores of Thailand offers to the world-weary undersexed Westerner is untenable.¹⁰⁰ *Plateforme* hones in on this cultural moment in the West when capitalism has nearly destroyed the possibility of sexual satisfaction:

S'il est question, dans *Plateforme*, de tourisme sexuel, si Michel Houellebecq ne se montre pas bégueule dans ses descriptions, plus proches d'ailleurs de la précision clinique que de la complaisance pornographique, c'est que le phénomène apparaît de plus en plus porteur de sens et se dessine déjà comme l'un des marqueurs profonds de notre temps. (Lebrun)

Houellebecq's writing style forces the reader to confront unsightly truths about themselves and France and slowly has the reader shift their attention from the scenes of pornographic descriptions to the more important critique and portrait of society that he ultimately

¹⁰⁰In an interview with Hunnewell, Michel Houellebecq comments on the rampant sex scenes through *Plateforme*: "I'm not sure that there are such an unusual number of sex scenes in my novel. I don't think that's what was shocking. What shocked people, was that I depicted sexual failure. I wrote about sexuality in a nonglorifying way. Most of all I described a basic reality: a person filled with sexual desire, who can't satisfy it. That's what people don't like to hear about. Sex is supposed to be positive. Showing frustrated sexual desire is obscene. But it's also the truth. The real question is, who is allowed to have sex? I don't understand, for example, how teachers survive with all these alarming young girls. When women become sexual tourists that is even more hidden, shameful, and taboo than when men do it. Just as, when a woman professor puts her hand on a student's thigh, it's even worse, even more unspeakable" (Hunnewell). To give a conflicting viewpoint, Murielle Lucie Clément's article "Cunnilinctus et fellation. Le sexuellement correct", she notes: "Une trentaine de fellations sont également distribuées dans *Plateforme*" (186)

paints. The experience of reading *Plateforme* is an uneasy one because of the forced look into the mirror that it holds up to society. Travelers and tourists alike remain forever marked by the subjectivity imposed upon them by their homelands. The postmodern novel here redirects subjectivity away from its legal definitions and allows it to be replaced by the subjectivity allocated by the tourism industry. Houellebecq himself, in an interview with Dominique Guiou, remarked, “J’ai le goût des voyages. Pour écrire sur le monde, il faut se déplacer. On ne peut pas se contenter de la télévision et de l’Internet.” To write the world, one must be in the world, embrace it and experience it, the tactile sensations and motivations of tourism are irreplaceable both in life and in the novel.

The tourist as an individual subject is as an ambassador of their entire nation of origin through spending trends, aesthetic preferences, and expected standards of comfort in lodging, gastronomy, activities, and excursions. Aedin Ní Loingsigh comments that tourism in *Plateforme* is:

[...] essentially part of an overall inquiry into the nature of contemporary French society and an ambitious attempt to trace the influence of leisure travel on its values. The place accorded to foreign package holidays, short domestic breaks and the tourist industry illustrates the extent to which the practices and values of mass tourism and holidays have become an integral part of an increasingly mobile and global society. (76)

Plateforme's elongated missives on the machinations of the tourism industry and plethora of accompanying economic data and statistics affirm its importance in French society. France is a one of the biggest countries in the global tourism market in both number of visitors per year and per capita tourism expenditure and exerts its force through its emphasis on tourism within its

borders. Travel and tourism is more than just a hobby of the privileged few in France, it is practically a legal right. With an average of thirty paid vacation days per year, eleven public holidays coupled with the tradition of “faire le pont,” French employees have ample time for leisure activities. Partaking in tourism and pleasure is what *Plateforme* posits as perhaps the only true unifying activity of the French; “le droit au tourisme” practically promoted as a twenty-first-century addendum to *les droits de l’homme*.

3.3.3 Bodies and Tourism

As Giuseppina Mecchia argues in her review of Muriel Lucie Clément and Sabine van Wesemael’s tome *Michel Houellebecq sous la loupe*, all discussion of the Other develops around the body (154), the most frequent expression of which centers on erogenous zones of the body and sexual activity. The body acts as the esteemed place of encounter where civilizations collide, both sexually and metaphorically. In one such scene in Thailand, Michel visits a “Health Club” (PF 53), where he selects a brothel worker named Oôn for his desired services.¹⁰¹ Oôn divulges during a post-coital conversation that, “Elle n’avait pas beaucoup de clients, [...]; c’était plutôt un hôtel destiné aux groupes en phase terminale, des gens sans histoires, à peu près revenus de tout. Il y avait beaucoup de Français, mais ils semblaient rares à apprécier le *body massage*” (54).¹⁰² Here, Michel’s overarching beliefs that French society is in decline because of its

¹⁰¹During the sex act itself, Michel’s only utterance is, “Oh non, Oôn, non!” (PF 54), shouted at the point of premature ejaculation. This comment is noteworthy because it speaks to Houellebecq’s flair incorporating levity and humor into erotic scenes. Houellebecq is a master of this technique throughout his novels, encasing major plot turns almost as non-sequiturs to nonchalant passages; the example of the terrorist attack at Pattaya Beach is a perfect example of this usage.

¹⁰²This brief passage presages a scene in *La carte* in which Jed Martin chases down his father who absconds to Switzerland to have himself euthanized in an almost resort-like center specializing in this morbid and morally-questionable service. The street on which the euthanasia society is located sits right next door to a brothel, which Jed’s taxi driver surmised was his actual destination. The emplacement of these two businesses in such

inability to experience pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, is reaffirmed in *Oôn*. This admission (54) demonstrates French tourists are clearly interested in sexual tourism in spite of their vocalized disgust. Additionally, the medical-sounding terms, “Health Club” and “body massage,” expose Thailand’s marketing of sexual health as integral to personal well-being.

The narrator frequently draws close attention to the general societal malaise of Western people and portends that this is due to a lack of sexual freedom and pleasure: “Les Occidentaux n’arrivent plus à coucher ensemble; c’est peut-être lié au narcissisme, au sentiment d’individualité, au culte de la performance, peu importe. [...] Ils passent trente ans de leur vie, la quasi-totalité de leur âge adulte, dans un état de manque permanent” (250). Michel, who generally comes across as a complete misanthrope, demonstrates compassion for his fellow “Occidentaux” but only for their chronic lack of sex. This empathy that Michel exhibits towards society can only be felt in regard to the invasive pandemic of sexual insufficiency which is not a result of individual misgivings but society-wide problems: “Le dépérissement de la sexualité en Occident était certes un phénomène sociologique, massif, qu’il était vain de vouloir expliquer par tel ou tel facteur psychologique individuel” (251). The plague upon the West is relegated to the problems associated with the rampant commodification and commercialization of life in Western society. *Eldorado Aphrodite* is more than an economic venture—it is an act of civic duty, of empathy, of mercy for fellow French citizens.

3.3.4 Imagined tourist communities: Eldorado Aphrodite

Though the narrator decides to embark on an organized tour to Thailand, which has a very cliché,

proximity speaks volumes of the societal desperation and economic tendencies that push clients into outsourcing these two very organic life activities, sex and death

pre-packaged feeling to it, he decides to seek out solitude in a group setting. Selecting from a menu of pre-planned vacations removes and inherently protects the Western tourist from the “inconveniences” of vacation planning as well as ensuring a Tupperware-esque protection from the reality of indigenous life in Thailand. The primary purpose of the narrator’s first trip to Thailand is primarily sexual tourism and to blend in among the masses. Sabine von Wesemael emphasizes the narrator’s complete lack of desire to feel, experience, or truly absorb Thai culture on his travels (162). Michel’s oscillating tourist trajectories highlight the geopolitical shifts and as affecting national subjectivity. Houellebecqian characters are constantly in motion within and without of the French imagined community though shreds of this community follow them along their travels. Aedin Ní Loingsigh suggests that reading *Plateforme* might be most palpable for some “to explore the contradictions inherent in the novel’s representation of the tourist” (82). The tourist is “an ambiguous and split individual” (82) who Michel describes in a variety of ways, which critique the development of tourist mentalities and tropes of French identity. Each tourist on Michel’s trip to Thailand is upon first glance labeled as a typecast member of French society. Ní Loingsigh underscores the epithets Michel uses to describe the couplings of his fellow tourists: “‘salopes’, ‘écologistes jurassiens’, ‘seniors charcutiers’ and ‘beaufs’” (Houellebecq qtd. in Ní Loingsigh 78). These descriptions create a dynamic and often satirical critique of French society.

When several of Michel’s compatriots in Thailand refuse to attend schedule performances or demonstrations because of their inauthenticity or overly touristic allure, he retorts that “tout est touristique” (55). Josiane, a holier-than-thou group member, confronts Michel on this matter asking:

“Vous n’êtes pas allé au dîner-spectacle”...fit observer la salope—Vous non

plus... retorquai-je du tac au tac. Cette fois elle traîna un peu sur sa réponse, elle faisait sa chochette. “Oh non, je n’apprécie pas trop ce genre de choses ... [...] C’est un peu trop touristique...” Qu’est-ce qu’elle voulait dire par là? Tout est touristique. (55)

This faux-bourgeois attitude, which many of Michel’s fellow tourists exhibit, serves as a point of departure for his critiques of French society. The statement, “C’est un peu trop touristique” is hypocritical upon the superficiality inherent in contemporary French society and reinforces the constructed and orchestrated nature of most social interactions outside of the tourist world, where happenstance encounters are, in Houellebecq’s worlds, the most natural and uninhibited. As a French/Western tourist in an Asian landscape, French stereotypes and the accompanying hypotheses on culture become all the more evident in this non-Occidental light. Malcolm Crick explains that the “modern cultural form of self-loathing” is particularly associated with one tourist disassociating him/herself from the other to avoid recognition as a tourist (qtd. in Ní Loingsigh 83).¹⁰³ Houellebecq, however, has his protagonists confront this issue head on.

Michel dares to stray from the group and partake in the services of Thai prostitutes. Michel’s sexual exploits with Thai prostitutes, in this regard, make him one of the most extroverted members of this French tourist group. His social interactions with and literal penetration of Thai women in their place of employment—sex clubs and massage parlors—grants access to a very raw and arguably more authentic Thailand than the one presented to and performed for the tourist group. Michel is the ultimate anti-*routard*, in this sense; he goes off the beaten path to experience a real, less-than-savory version of Thailand. These experiences grant

¹⁰³Ní Loingsigh notes also a minimal engagement with mass tourism in literature due to this *self-loathing*. While certainly not the only contemporary [French] author to do so, Houellebecq’s novels stand out for their excessive treatment of tourism’s importance in contemporary society.

him the authority, at least in so far as sex tourism goes, to claim that he has truly experienced Thai culture. Michel's initial voyage to Thailand was not specifically to partake in or promote sex tourism, but rather to flee his unsatisfactory sexual life in France and alleviate pent up sexual needs. His assumptions about Thai sexual permissiveness allow him a release that he is incapable of experiencing in France¹⁰⁴. He appreciates Thai prostitutes and portrays them as being kinder, more attentive, and generally more sincere than his Western (French) counterparts. Overt descriptions of sex acts erode the family-unit basis of the nation, and scathing commentaries on the death of sex amongst Westerners promotes the perverse benefits of sado-masochistic sexual tourism that is developed later in the novel. Jean-Yves is one example of a family man gone bad à la Rudi. He is a successful 35-year old business man in a miserable, failing marriage who cheats on his wife with their fifteen-year old babysitter, Eucharistie, in another disgusting nod towards pedophilia. Though the affair that he conducts with Eucharistie is consensual, it is outright illegal and morally reprehensible given the abuse of the power dynamic between the two. After his young son briefly catches his father and babysitter *in flagrante delicto*, the narrator muses: "Quelque chose lui est apparu, comme la révélation d'une impasse. La confusion des générations était grande, et la filiation n'avait plus de sens" (303). The strangeness of impromptu sex acts which fester and eat away at the minds of Houellebecq's characters is indicative of a broader social commentary that is prevalent throughout Houellebecq's deeply nihilist canon.

This recurrent commentary in the novel extends the notion that the West has become victim to its own treatment of the rest of the world and that the poetic human is dead. The life of a simple cockroach outlines Michel's philosophy on sex and life back in France:

Un cafard apparut alors que je m'apprêtais à pénétrer dans la baignoire. Justement

¹⁰⁴One might also read "Eastern".

c'était le moment d'apparaître, dans ma vie, pour un cafard ; il ne pouvait pas tomber mieux. [...] À quoi bon lutter ? [...] Les cafards copulent sans grâce, et sans joie apparente ; mais ils copulent nombreusement, et leurs mutations génétiques sont rapides ; nous ne pouvons absolument rien contre les cafards. Avant de me déshabiller je rendis encore une fois hommage à Oôn, et à toutes les prostituées thaïes. Ce n'était pas un métier facile qu'elles faisaient, ces filles.¹⁰⁵

(57)

At first read this passage comes across as quite fatalistic; however, its simplicity draws attention to the fallibility and mortality of humans, through the lens of sex. Other than a much slower speed of copulation and rate of reproduction, there is little that separates the joyless sex lives of Westerners from those of cockroaches. The reductive nature of this comment reaffirms the masculine orientation of Western sex tourism in which the “consumer” receives sex in exchange for money. Michel’s connection to the prostitutes he frequents stems from masculine ideals of the travel experience upon which modern tourism is inherently based (Chambers 60).

Michel is the *force motrice* behind the novel’s obsession with pleasure: masturbation, fellatio, sodomy, S&M, and swinging are just a few of the sexual activities that Michel engages in throughout the novel. Michel literally masturbates with and most likely onto a *Guide du routard*, a book for which he harbors disdain throughout the novel: “J’empoignai mon *Guide du Routard* [...] Je me masturbai légèrement pour aborder ma lecture avec sérénité; il y eut quelques gouttes” (57). Later, Michel comments again:

¹⁰⁵As von Wesemael and Noguez observe, the only Thai women spoken of in *Plateforme* are prostitutes, and even further, their real or exotic names have been masked by oddly kitsch Anglo-Saxon names, which distance them from real selves.

C'est sans doute dans le chapitre consacré à Phuket que le *Guide du Routard* atteint son plus haut degré de haine, d'élitisme vulgaire et de masochisme agressif. "Phuket, pour certains, annoncent-ils d'emblée, c'est l'île qui monte; pour nous, elle est déjà sur la descente." " Il faut bien qu'on y arrive, poursuivent-ils, à cette perle de l'océan Indien ..."¹⁰⁶ On encensait encore Phuket il y a quelques années : soleil, plages de rêve, douceur de vivre. Au risque de faire désordre dans cette belle symphonie, on va vous avouer la vérité : Phuket, on n'aime plus ! *Patong Beach*, la plage la plus célèbre, s'est couverte de béton. Partout la clientèle se masculinise, les bars à hôtesse se multiplient, les sourires s'achètent. Quant aux bungalows pour routards, ils ont subi un lifting version 'pelle mécanique' pour faire place à des hôtels pour Européens solitaires et bedonnants. (108)

Michel soon thereafter throws his *Guide du routard* away stating, "'Le masochisme occidental', me dis-je" (108).

Yet, Houellebecq time and time again connects this "masochisme occidental" to French immovability on issues of sexual freedom and prostitution. He does this by contrasting France to its European neighbors, especially Germany, which is much more open to his sexual ideals:

Le voyageur allemand semblait de très bonne humeur, apparemment les choses s'annonçaient bien. Début novembre, Jean-Yves recut un exemplaire du catalogue destiné au public allemand; ils n'y étaient pas allés de main morte, constata-t-il aussitôt. Sur toutes les photos les fille locales étaient seins nus, portaient des strings minuscules ou des jupes transparentes; photographiées à la plage ou

¹⁰⁶Ellipsis is my own for emphasis.

carrément dans les chambres elles souriaient d'un air aguicheur, passaient la langues sur leurs lèvres: il était à peu près impossible de s'y tromper. (305)

Here is an example of a tourist catalogue that targets one specific national market based on that country's tolerance for sexual tourism, upon which Valérie comments, "un truc pareil ne serait jamais passé en France" (305). France is again singled out as being systematically anti-sex tourism or against the blatant promotion of it, while Germany and other European countries acknowledge its existence and codify it to prevent it from going underground. Jean-Yves' subsequent remarks overturn Michel's recurrent umbrella regrouping of "l'occident" and "les occidentaux" because he calls out individual nation's acceptance of sex tourism:

Il était curieux de constater, solilqua-t-il, qu'à mesure qu'on s'approchait de l'Europe, que l'idée d'une fédérations d'États devenait de plus en plus présente, on n'observait pourtant aucune uniformisation dans le domaine de la législation sur les moeurs. Alors que la prostitution était reconnue en Hollande et en Allemagne, qu'elle bénéficiait d'un statut, nombreux étaient ceux en France qui demandaient son abolition, voire une sanction des clients, comme cela se pratiquait en Suède. (305)

This assessment of European morals in relation to this tourism venture posits that France remains a hopeless romantic that admonishes the commodification of sex, preferring the spontaneous and organic development of amorous relationships. However, *Eldorado Aphrodite* takes off successfully, "Dès le début de décembre il fut évident que les clubs Aphrodite allaient être un carton, et probablement un carton *historique*" (315).¹⁰⁷ It is "un carton *historique*" due to its novelty and necessity of such a club for the world-weary, sex-deprived European tourist.

¹⁰⁷This is the name of the vacation venture that Jean-Yves and Valérie set up with the consultation of Michel.

When Michel, Valérie, and Jean-Yves return to Thailand for the grand opening of *Eldorado Aphrodite*, the slogan of their new endeavor, “Eldorado Aphrodite: parce qu’on a *le droit* à se faire plaisir” (266), puts the emphasis on the seeking out of pleasure and giving of pleasure.¹⁰⁸¹¹⁰ The goal of this new type of tourism is to allow Western couples a vacation space where they can guiltlessly participate sexual freedom in an exotic locale under Western conditions, which contradicts the contemporary state of sex in France.

3.3.5 Pattaya: L’attente latente

During the inaugural session at *Eldorado Aphrodite*, an Islamic terrorist attack on Krabi Beach violently massacres hordes of tourists and local merchants unassumingly lying on the beach.¹⁰⁹ Valérie is consumed by the spray of bullets while somehow Michel, who lay a mere few feet away, is left unscathed; his wounds, however, are deep and abstract though he was not physically harmed. The instantaneous loss of Valérie as well as the clash of civilizations between the sexual freedoms of the West and the acts of terror linked to Islamist extremists blindsides the reader, a point that I believe Houellebecq makes to further exacerbate the place of disorientation in this novel. Michel was finally happy, content with his life, sexual partner, and the plans they had made to stay in Thailand, but this attack shows that in the current state of global affairs sexual pleasure will inevitably be chastised.

In the paragraph immediately preceding the beach massacre, Michel provides a well-positioned discourse on Western society:

¹⁰⁸Italics my own for emphasis.

¹⁰⁹Much has been made in literary reviews of the “eerie” prescient nature of the attack in *Plateforme*, namely related to a similar attack on Bali shortly after the publication of this novel. See Ní Loingsigh for an excellent bibliography related to this connection.

Qu'avais-je, pour ma part, à reprocher à l'Occident? Pas grand-chose, mais je n'y étais pas spécialement attaché (et j'arrivais de moins en moins à comprendre qu'on soit attaché à une idée, un pays, à autre chose en général qu'à un individu). La vie était chère en Occident, il y faisait froid; la prostitution y était de mauvaise qualité. (339)

Why does Michel use the term “Occident” and not “France” in this instance? It appears that it is important for him to declare that France is but a pawn in the game of West vs. the rest of the world. The recurrent usage of the term “Occident” allows for a smoother transition to the East and also delivers a starker contrast than comparing Thailand to France, for example. The force of bringing two civilizations together for comparison, in neither of which Michel is particularly comfortable, highlights all the more the extreme solitude and total absence of belonging which affronts the narrator.

The final section of *Plateforme* entitled “Pattaya” shares a name with the town in Thailand to where Michel returns to lives out his days in the absence of everything and everyone he has ever known. There is an emotional charge to Houellebecq's passive nihilism, which Bülent Diken astutely points out, “the man of *ressentiment* turns against God—kills him—and places himself in his place” (100). Effectively, it is this point after the terror attack, when Michel becomes a vagabond of time and space; he reaches peak disorientation. His immediate repatriation to France finds him unable to withstand the trauma of the attack on Krabi so he enters a mental hospital, where time and body dissipate into thin air. Michel comments on the intake interview at the hospital, “Je ne souffrais pas, mais je me sentais, effectivement, amoindri; je me sentais amoindri au-delà du possible. Il [the psychiatrist] me demanda ce que j'avais l'intention de faire. Je répondis: ‘Attendre’” (353). This final utterance “Attendre” embodies

disorientation within this text; there is no longer a promoted, desired or even forced, trajectory in life, Michel simply chooses not to kill himself, as is feared of those in the mental hospital.¹¹⁰

On life in the hospital, Michel writes, “La vie passe facilement à l’intérieur d’une institution, les besoins humains y sont pour l’essentiel satisfaits” (355). This in large part becomes the narrator’s philosophy of life, to fulfill human need, nothing more, nothing less. Though Michel eventually returns to Thailand to spend the rest of his days, he has no specific project or plans. As Laforest notes, “La narration houellebecquienne cultive depuis toujours ces déphasages qui font intervenir sans crier gare la réflexion de forme plus ou moins théorique; on peut cependant remarquer que le voyage, thème désormais généralisé dans l’œuvre, favorise notablement ceux-ci” (268).

The term “(dis)orient” is yet again reinterpreted based on the separation of the prefix dis-, which colloquially means to disrespect and critique and the stem “orient” as would be used in the Saïdian sense, as a construction of the West. The disorientation at play here is centered on Islam and prefigures later works by Houellebecq, in particular *Soumission* (2015). Islamophobia in Houellebecq offers a picture of France, which is not painted as particularly negative, but as a rather matter-of-fact reflection of the social, cultural, and administrative tensions that have risen from what Houellebecq ventures to highlight as Islam’s proliferation in twenty-first century France. Together, this understanding of the term promotes a discussion of narratorial xenophobia in Houellebecq’s works. Michel is not only full of hatred for Islam, his father was killed by a Muslim Frenchman after all, but is also, as discussed above, disgusted with his own countrymen.

¹¹⁰In all three texts in this chapter, the central characters do not necessarily die, so much as subsist into oblivion and wait. Suicide is too drastic and would require strong motivation to act. Waiting for nothing à la Beckett is far more indicative of the depressive chokehold on satisfaction in French society. In the case of Rudi, Valérie (of *Plateforme*), and Jean-Pierre Martin, Jed’s father, making an affirmative choice to ameliorate one’s existence always results in death (or for Rudi, a social death as he ends in prison). Doing nothing can be then understood as an act of self- preservation

Fleshing out the categorical xenophobic remarks and threads in *Plateforme* aids developing a more coherent vision of the world Houellebecq depicts versus the one he avoids against what other characters in the novel perceive as the contemporary and contemptuous French world. Michel clearly delineates between his tolerance for the East (i.e. the Far-East) and his absolute disdain for the Middle East. This is, in part, initially evidenced in chapter three aboard the plane to Thailand:

Une carte vint remplacer ces indications: nous abordions le survol de l’Afghanistan. Par le hublot, on ne distinguait évidemment qu’un noir total. De toute façon les talibans devaient être couchés, et mariner dans leur crasse. “Bonne nuit, les talibans, bonne nuit...Faites de beaux rêves...” murmurai-je avant d’avaler un deuxième somnifère.¹¹¹(39)

The profoundly sarcastic hatred evidenced in this quote remains a constant throughout the entire novel, reaching its peak in the attack on the pristine beach in Krabi. This Islamist is used to represent the entire Muslim world severed his final connection to France—his love for Valerie. Once Michel returns to Thailand post-attack, all dialogue ends and his remarks become more and politically motivated:

L’Islam avait brisé ma vie, et l’Islam était certainement quelque chose que je pouvais haïr; les jours suivants, je m’appliquai à éprouver de la haine pour les musulmans. J’y réussissais assez bien [...] Chaque fois que j’apprenais qu’un terroriste palestinien, ou un enfant palestinien ou une femme enceinte palestinienne,

¹¹¹A related passage appears in *La carte* wherein Jed laments the current state of air travel based on industry reactions to persistent terrorism: “À partir du début des années 1970, avec les premiers attentats palestiniens—plus tard relayés, de manière plus spectaculaire et plus professionnelle, par ceux d’Al-Qaeda—le voyage aérien était devenu une expérience infantilissante et concentrationnaire, que l’on souhaitait voir s’achever au plus vite” (CT 134).

avait été abattu par balles dans la bande de Gaza, j'éprouvais un tré saillement d'enthousiasme à la pensée qu'il y avait un musulman de moins. Oui, on pouvait vivre de cette manière.¹¹² (357)

These deplorable statements demonstrate how Michel distances himself from the Saïdian "Orient" and oversteps the geographical realm of the Middle East to live in the less-hated Far East. In France, such outright public vitriol is legally and socially unacceptable; yet, it exists rampantly in social sub-currents and state measures against immigration.¹¹³ In Thailand, however, where the Pattaya attack took place, Michel is free to live without Muslims and can essentially wait for the end in hate-fueled peace.

Michel's social *mépris* towards the West dissolves the territorial borders of France and even those of Europe by relegating notions of exclusion (i.e. restrictions and borders) to winners and losers in capitalism and the pursuit of sexual satisfaction.¹¹⁴

Pour l'Occident je n'éprouve pas de haine, tout au plus un immense mépris. Je sais seulement que, tous autant que nous sommes, nous puons l'égoïsme, le masochisme et la mort. Nous avons créé un système dans lequel il est devenu simplement impossible de vivre; et, de plus, nous continuons à l'exporter. (369)

The failure of *Eldorado Aphrodite* due to the attack on Pattaya Beach is an example of cultural exportation gone awry. Similarly, in *La carte*, the exportation of French culture and a Western system of existence ends up being the undoing of French society itself. France becomes a land for tourists of a certain revenue and ethnic background and loses its core principles in the

¹¹²In an interview for *Paris Review*, Susannah Hunnewell asked the author in relation to this specific quote from *Plateforme*, "How do you have the nerve to write some of the things you do?" To which Houellebecq responded, "Oh, it's easy. I just pretend that I'm already dead."

¹¹³State measures include forced cultural integration courses, the prohibition of the Niqqab and other Muslim symbols in public, the continued violence in the banlieues, amongst others.

¹¹⁴By "exclusion", I mean the borders and restrictions that are imposed on society, which create losers and reinforce social and economic binaries.

process. Houellebecq's narrators serve a point of departure for further discussion of globalization and transnationalism in *Plateforme: au milieu du monde*. Dominique Noguez calls Houellebecq a "transécrivain" which he defines as:

[écrivain] qui s'aventure non seulement dans plusieurs genres littéraires, non seulement dans les genres littéraires, non seulement dans les zones frontalières où la littérature s'associe à d'autres arts en gardant la part belle (comme la chanson), mais dans des pratiques artistiques autonomes, où elle peut n'avoir quasiment plus son mot à dire. (14)

Noguez further argues that since *Lanzarote*, Houellebecq's works have been subtitled "Au milieu du monde" (14), reinforcing the *terre à terre* connection that the author retains in his works. The *transnational* formulations within these novels speak volumes of France's diminished or distorted importance in the daily life of its citizens. The nation is never stable and over time citizens adopt new traits that often times do not align with the reality of social constructs, which have separately evolved. Why and how then do the nation and/or the state remain necessary when basic needs such as even love and sexual pleasure can be outsourced?

Permanently situated between life and death, between here and there, the narrator of *Plateforme* is a choice pawn of disorientation. What he manages to do is remove himself, as much as possible, from affective attachment to France and for that matter the West and he relegates himself to the world of paper-traces and bureaucratic obligations. As a postmodern novel, Houellebecq's characters learn nothing new from their past lives nor do they undertake any major efforts for a *prise de conscience*. Where Houellebecq's novel differs from other postmodern novels is in his use of language, reminiscent of the modern novel save for the flagrant use of obscenities and sexual imagery that had been guarded for pornographic works.

Beyond language, Houellebecq invents a new space for imagining the nation through organized international tourism. Though Houellebecq's works solicit many varied reactions, he is merely a product of his times wrought with rampant and degenerate consumerism and dangerous forays into extremism of all kinds. His works would have been utterly impossible to write thirty or more years ago as they are embedded in the technological and digital speed-of-light advances that pepper the pages of his novels. Moreover, the expansion of the international tourism market into the middle and lower-middle class sectors of French society is a fairly recent development of the last forty or so years. Such extravagant travel opportunities were formerly available only to the extremely wealthy and many areas of the world were simply too politically unstable or underdeveloped to travel to. This proves that modern advances in transportation and the effects of globalization allow for contemporary authors to work the angle of the nation as a weakening force in society. Though the nation may not be as valued as it was in the immediate post-war period, Houellebecq shows us through his writing that today's society disorients commonly accepted and adhered to orientations of the nation in individuals' lives. Swept up in the web of globalization and capitalist domination, Michel ends the novel disoriented on multiple levels from which his escape is impossible and re-orientation is impossible.

3.4 LA CARTE ET LE TERRITOIRE

C'était peut-être vrai, se dit-il, que la France était un pays merveilleux au moins du point de vue d'un touriste. (CT 95)

The nihilistic, *décliniste* tones of Houellebecq's works have evolved considerably since the publication of his first major novel, *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (1994) to his 2010 Prix Goncourt-winning novel, *La carte et le territoire*.¹¹⁵ Subsequent novels, published volumes of poetry, as well as a sundry of other creative cinematic projects and partnerships, amongst others with rockstar Iggy Pop and artist Jeff Koon, have added to Houellebecq's mystique and fame.¹¹⁶ *La carte* burst onto the literary scene nearly a decade after *Plateforme* and his 2001 defamation case made Houellebecq a strange media darling; the evolution of the man Houellebecq as well as his writings and other artistic projects hint at an authorial (and possibly, cultural) maturation and coming of age.¹¹⁷

La carte evokes an authorial progression towards more a self-reflective protagonist/narrator alongside a cast of characters who are also markedly more mature and less sex-focused, travel-crazed than in previous novels.¹¹⁸ Until the publication of *La carte*, and with the exception of Bruno in *La possibilité d'une île*, all of Houellebecq's narrators/main

¹¹⁵Houellebecq has engaged in a myriad of non-literary cultural engagements as his stardom has rocketed upward, situating him among the ranks of artistic glitterati and fame. He has famously worked on an album with Iggy Pop. He also provided text for the catalogue of *Jeff Koons Versailles* (Currently out of print), which examines Koon's excessively kitsch art installation at the Chateau de Versailles. For further reading on the installation, see: Villeneuve, Paquerette. "Jeff Koons ou l'incongru de Versailles". *Vie des arts*, 52.213 (2008-2009).

¹¹⁶Other non-novel, literary works include: *Rester vivant, méthode*, (1991); *La Poursuite du bonheur, poèmes* (1992); *Le Sens du combat, poèmes* (1996); *Interventions, recueil d'essais* (1998) *Renaissance, poèmes*, Flammarion (1999).

¹¹⁷In the years following the publication of *Plateforme*, Michel Houellebecq found himself mired in legal and cultural scandals for his unapologetic remarks on Islam and immigrants. This legal battle drew considerable negative attention onto the author but incited a huge commercial success in terms of book sales. While Houellebecq was spared a fate like Salman Rushdie's *fatwa*, the author has remained synonymous with his Islamophobic remarks and points of view.

¹¹⁸During this time, Houellebecq's reputation suffered from media hubris of his court case for xenophobic declarations. The author Houellebecq was foisted into the limelight of the French literati without much control over this newfound fame. Houellebecq's well-known penchant for solitude and isolation became much less tenable amid the success of his novels and surge in academic scholarship surrounding his work. The man as much as his work has been made the object of vast examinations by critics, fans, detractors, and scholars.

protagonists have been named Michel,¹¹⁹ and the Michels of earlier works seem to spill over from novel to novel with traces of the previous Michel(s) reappearing as very similar, yet each time slightly modified protagonists.¹²⁰ The Michel(s) of *Lanzarote* and *Plateforme* are not given last names, which suspends them in time and place, because they are at once nameless, yet named. The repeated use of Michel as the main protagonist's name is a type of character cloning, which despite all outward appearances is in fact each time a new entity that bears uncanny resemblance to his predecessor. This nomenclatural choice implies the impossibility of real change in one's lot in life or personality and even the anonymity of national subjectivity, embedded in this all-too-French and all-too-bland name.

In *La carte*, however, the protagonist has both a first and last name: Jed Martin. Jed is first named as the protagonist on the second page of the novel, whereas his full name Jed Martin is not fully revealed until the third chapter of part one (62). The last name "Martin" is unveiled much earlier on page 20 through his association to his artwork focusing on his father:

L'architecte Jean-Pierre Martin quittant la direction de son entreprise était depuis longtemps terminé, stocké dans la réserve du galériste de Jed, en attendant une exposition personnelle qui tardait à s'organiser. Jean-Pierre Martin lui-même—à la surprise de son fils, et alors qu'il avait depuis longtemps renoncé à lui en parler—avait décidé de quitter le pavillon du Raincy pour s'installer dans une maison de retraite médicalisée à Boulogne. (20)

"Jed" is a jarringly Anglo-Saxon and rather uncommon name, whereas "Martin" is an ambiguous

¹¹⁹Michel was the name of Bruno's twin brother, thus still somehow present.

¹²⁰There is a Michel present in this novel in the character of Michel Houellebecq who is present as himself and who ends up the victim of a heinous murder and dismembering at the hands of a sadistic surgeon. *La carte* is as much tourism narrative as it is crime novel, vacillating between the minutia of tourist guides and maps and the drudgery- until-success machinations of the Parisian homicide detective services.

family name that can easily be French or Anglo-Saxon. I might assert here that Jed is an inspired combination of *JEff* Koons and *Damien* Hirst, especially since Jed is first introduced through his work as an artist. Jed as protagonist appears to incarnate characteristics of both artists in his artworks, actions, and self-descriptions, particularly in becoming the world's richest artist, a title that Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst have exchanged back and forth for the last two decades. In fact, the first three pages of *La carte* begin with a premonitory description of Jed's major masterpiece entitled *Jeff Koons et Damien Hirst se partageant le marché de l'art* (208).¹²¹ "Jeff Koons" (9) are the first two words of the entire book and "Damien Hirst" (9) is first mentioned on the fifth line, both names appearing before "Jed" is mentioned.

The name of the protagonist is salient to this analysis because it supports the observation of narratorial and authorial evolution in the text. While I would not go so far as to say that the "Michel" of previous texts is dead [incarnations of his old ways do resurface from time to time], I argue that "Michel" has matured and aligned himself more closely to the author *Michel* than in previous texts. Previously, biographical similarities between the author and the protagonists could not be truly associated with the author *Michel*, wherein part the lack of last name eluded to these connections. Jed is an older, differently critical of the world version of Michel.

This protagonist as well as other prominently developed characters from earlier works are re-purposed through personal characteristics, the fragments of which are scattered amongst *La carte*'s cast of characters. For example: in *La carte*, traces of Pam and Barbara (*Lanzarote*) and Valérie (*Plateforme*) are discernible in Jed's new Russian love interest, Olga, the upwardly-mobile director of marketing for *Le Guide Michelin*, while Rudi's (*Lanzarote*) avatar can be found in the much older form of Jed's father, Jean-Pierre Martin. The character of "Michel

¹²¹Jed is never actually able to finish the tableau.

Houellebecq” further demonstrates that prior “Michel(s)” cannot be unambiguously tagged as auto-referential to the author. In *La carte*, Jed introduces us to the expected, much publicized personnage of Michel Houellebecq, the author; this narratized Houellebecq differs greatly from interviews with the author that portray him to be far more laidback and intellectually-grounded than the “Michel Houellebecq” in *La carte*. A more self-reflexive protagonist inspires an increased sense of nostalgia in Houellebecq’s writing. *Lanzarote* and *Plateforme* cannot be labeled as works of nostalgia because they are uniquely held to a very present-centric temporality that does not allow for retrospective glances.¹²² The more teleological progression of time and well as the situation of the plot within the territory of France opens a space for Jed as well as his fellow Frenchmen to be more self-critical about the re-appropriation of the landscape and cultural shifts that have taken place over the last few decades in France.¹²³

The text itself, the subject matter, and the location of *La carte* provide additional evidence of the authorial and novelistic development since the publication of the *Au milieu du monde* series. While this novel’s protagonists are portrayed as more comfortable in their adulthood and seem to embrace the domestication that comes with maturity, this is something that cannot be said of the narrators and characters of *Lanzarote* and *Plateforme*.¹²⁴ For example, the Michels of *Lanzarote* and *Plateforme* are often depicted as living in small, Parisian apartments in boring neighborhoods and subsisting on bland, unhealthy diets of, for example,

¹²²The visceral anxieties associated with French society at the turn of the millennium in the *Au milieu du monde* series make the more linear progression of time in *La Carte* feel much less angst-ridden, a point which Éléonore Sulser wrote in her book review for *Le Temps* (2010): “Car *La carte et le territoire* est un livre dans lequel on peut entrer tranquillement justement, sans crainte d’être mordu, sans crainte de s’ennuyer.”

¹²³In some ways, the deep veins of nostalgia that arise in *La carte* might be considered to be an opposing reaction to the myriad of futures in *La possibilité d’une île* in which only the future can be relied upon with any sort of certainty

¹²⁴There is a quasi-obsession with the water-heater recurrent throughout the novel and an appreciation for artisanal artisanship and repairs. This is in comparison to a complete absence of domestic life in *Lanzarote* and a much hastier impatient domestic life that is evidenced in *Plateforme* through the frequent mentions of “zapping” and microwavable or quickly prepared foods, which are stereotypical of a bachelor lifestyle.

instant mashed potatoes and TV dinners. Jed, however, embodies a more refined version of the sedentary lifestyle, dining in fine restaurants and showing a preference for travel closer to home within France. The vast majority of the *La carte* takes place within the borders of France compared to nearly exclusive overseas settings in *Lanzarote* and *Plateforme*.¹²⁵ The scenes of France from these two novels were located almost exclusively in Paris, reducing Michel's conception of France to its capital city. This choice emphasizes France's most internationally exported images, which often equate Paris with the sum of France and ignore the immense cultural and geographic variety spread throughout the rest of the country. What *La carte* really does in terms of tourism is to point out how the France that is simultaneously inhabited by tourists and citizens creates two distinct conceptions of the same space and how to interact with it. Boyer notes that there are two different populations who inhabit the cultural spaces of Paris—the locals who generally ignore the museums nearest to them and the tourists who spend their time and money soaking in this “French” culture:

Il ne faut pas confondre le public, le non-public indigène et le flux touristique. Pierre Bourdieu, dans *Un amour de l'art*, avait montré que la majorité des habitants de Paris ne visitent pas leurs musées; cet amour de l'art est le privilège de l'élite, comme l'est aussi la familiarité avec la musique classique. C'est exact... Mais, en vacances, les mêmes personnes vont voir des musées, des monuments qu'ils ne visiteraient pas chez eux; ils vont à des festivals assister à des spectacles qui, chez eux, les rebuteraient. Les pratiques élitistes du tourisme ont une grande aptitude à être imitées; cela se produit sans intervention extérieur.

¹²⁵In fact, with the exceptions of two short business trips to Ireland and a very brief sojourn to Switzerland for family business, the entire novel is set in France. The primary modes of transportation, trains and automobiles, reaffirm the pied-à-terre maturity and slowing-down of the protagonists' lifestyles.

(395)

In delineating two distinct populations which coexist—however briefly—in the same Parisian landscape, there opens a space for the discussion of how and why France has increasingly become a haven for foreign tourists all the while minimizing the importance of domestic tourism. Jed is an excellent example of a vapid Parisian, who, so embroiled in his own work and small neighborhood, does not even notice the tourist sites of his own hometown.

Beyond the relatively small area that Jed circumnavigates on a daily basis à la Michel de Certeau, he does not truly know his city or his country. The admission of getting lost in his town highlights the disconnect between himself as an inhabitant of Paris and someone in Paris as a tourist:

Il erra longuement dans Paris avant de rentrer chez lui, se perdant même à deux reprises. Et les semaines suivantes ce fut la même chose, il sortait, marchait sans but défini dans les rues de cette ville qu’il connaissait finalement mal, de temps en temps il faisait halte pour s’orienter dans une brasserie, il devait le plus souvent s’aider d’un plan. (114)

This last sentence is perhaps the most ironic of all in that *les plans* or *cartes routières* Michelin that he used as his muse for his art show are precisely what helped him the most. In fact until *La carte* any domestic departures from *l’île de France*—though very few in number—were linked to obligatory family visits or funerals; otherwise, Houellebecq’s tourist protagonists jumped on planes to distant destinations rendering France mere “flyover country.” It is not until Jed’s photography exhibition rockets his previously mediocre success as an artist to great heights—“la cinq cent quatre-vingt-troisième place [mondial]—mais dix-septième en France” (30)—that he begins to comprehend the intertwined machinations of the art and tourism sectors.

Tourism intrinsically links the cultural and artistic identities of France. Many areas thrive or suffer economic consequences based on the moods and trends of tourism spending. One particular trend within the French cultural landscape, and more generally in the Western world, is the focus on nostalgia. The longing for the experience of “simpler” times: artisanal hand-made

crafts, the slow-food movement, and the resurgence in popularity of traditional festivals dictate what the narrator, to his surprise, remarks as: “pour la première fois en réalité en France depuis Jean-Jacques Rousseau, la campagne était redevenue *tendance*” (89) or what the press considered “la magie du terroir” (90). After centuries of nationalizing projects based on the centralization of education, cultural administration, and governmental authority, the consumer markets are fighting back to re-individuate regional specificities and charm, making a fortune in the process.

In this section, I broadly examine France through its domestic tourism sector. Domestic tourism spending represents 70% of the nearly 78 billion euro industry indicated that even French prefer stay close to home in the world’s number one tourist destination. *La carte* implies however that certain sectors within the tourism industry are increasingly marketed towards and developed for wealthy foreign travelers which end up putting certain experiences or images of France out of the reach of the average consumer. Many of these images of France are based on falsely nostalgic tropes of French music, food, and literature from the late-nineteenth through mid-twentieth centuries. Thus, my examination of *Le Guide Michelin*’s influence on the tourism markets emphasizes a multi-pronged approach to French culture that goes beyond standard modifications for foreign preferences as a result appearing to construct an image of France that would be foreign even to the French themselves.

In the second prong of this section, I explore the case of Jean-Pierre Martin, the protagonist’s father—who avails himself of assisted suicide tourism to Switzerland. Though this is a very small sub-sector of medical tourism, the number of foreigners who cross international borders to eschew their own domestic laws and prohibitions on euthanasia have been steadily increasing. The ramifications of Jean-Pierre’s defiant tourism ripple through his Jed’s life triggering a decision to “return” to his family’s homestead in central, rural France.

The final point of study is the latter half of Jed’s life in La Creuse, where he procures hundreds of acres of land surrounding his grandparents’ homestead essentially creating a secluded island where he spends his days in a semi hermit-like existence. His transition from the

Parisian landscape to this rural region arouses suspicion and disdain among “les autochtones”(408) as this “onslaught” of new urban arrivals is predicated on the increase in the appreciation and consumption of handmade and homemade goods and foods., Jed blames the reawakening of these rural regions on the market values of new bourgeois patterns of consumption.

3.4.1 Jed, l’artiste de tourisme

Jed Martin is by profession an artist whose breakout public installation involves micro-perspective photography of rural *cartes routières Michelin*. During his exhibit’s gallery opening, Jed meets Olga, a marketing director for the *Guide Michelin*, with whom he embarks on a whirlwind romance. Her well-connected social network spans from Paris to the French countryside’s luxury hotel and restaurant sector, which allows her to take Jed on a tour of France through the eyes of a foreign tourist. It requires a “Russian intervention” to introduce Jed to his own city and country.

Olga’s post within Michelin’s marketing sector grants her a cultural authority that not even Jed as a native-born French citizens possesses. She is responsible for the printed rhetoric of the most touristically important regions and sectors within France and defines who and what is French enough for foreign tourists. Jed notes, “La firme avait vite pris conscience que les Français n’avaient, dans l’ensemble plus tellement les moyens de se payer des vacances en France, et en tout cas certainement pas dans les hôtels proposés par ces chaînes” (68). Olga’s unique position of authority makes her a purveyor of the French nation in ways that not even the government is capable of.

The works of art that Jed produces are just that: strange artistic hommages to a recently extinct past:

Martin pourrait donner l’impression d’une nostalgie, pourrait sembler regretter un

état antérieur, réel ou fantasmé, de la France. Rien, et c'est la conclusion qui a fini par se dégager de tous les travaux, n'était plus étranger à ses préoccupations réelles; et si Martin se pencha en premier lieu sur deux professions sinistrées, ce n'était nullement qu'il voulût inciter à se lamenter sur leur disparition probable: c'était simplement qu'elles allaient, en effet, bientôt, disparaître, et qu'il importait de fixer leur image sur la toile pendant qu'il en était encore temps. (119)

The nostalgia that Martin avoids falling prey in his artwork as a semi-objective archivalization resurfaces in the marketing of hackneyed tropes of France for foreign tourists. As Dollidon, Lipovetsky, and others argue, these recycled, repurposed conceptions of France are trappings of the era of supermodernity. Lipovetsky contends that in this era, “l'ancien et la nostalgie sont devenus des arguments de vente, des outils marketing” (qtd. in Betty 86), whereas Dollidon adds that, [la supermodernité] is more than l'absence d'Histoire mais une manipulation d'Histoire (9). A manipulation of the story of France that equates to major spending in the tourism industry: “Quelle que soit la région, les restaurants qui se prévalaient d'une image “traditionnelle” ou “à l'ancienne” enregistraient des additions supérieures de 63% (CT 95). Houellebecq's blending of real tourism market factoids into his own experience of France through Olga's (i.e. the foreigner's) eyes splits France into two categories of nostalgia: one for tourists and one for citizens.

The touristic nostalgic France exists in what Dollidon, borrowing from Marc Augé's term, calls a “non-lieu.” “Non-lieu” are generally spaces of transit such as airports or highways to which little meaningful memory can be affixed— “nostalgie sans memoire” (9). The nostalgia for tourists stems from guidebook marketing ploys wherein nostalgia is commodified through well curated highlights of the French countryside:

Le succès croissant, sur l'ensemble du territoire français, des cours de cuisine; l'apparition récente de compétitions locales destinées à récompense de nouvelles créations charcutières ou fromagères; le développement massif, inexorable de la randonnée, et jusqu'à l'outing de Jean-Pierre Pernaut, tout concourait à ce fait

sociologique nouveau: pour la première fois en réalité en France depuis Jean-Jacques Rousseau, la campagne était redevenue *tendance*. (90)

Though “We’ll always have Paris,” the countryside becomes some new non-lieu for tourists in which the very objects of its organically-created façade are just that, façades creating an illusion of desire (Ahmed 85). Jed reads through one of Olga’s travel guides and discovers France’s two-tiered world of nostalgia: “À travers l’ouvrage la France apparaissait comme un pays enchanté, une mosaïque de terroirs superbes constellés de châteaux et de *manoirs*, d’une stupéfiante diversité mais où, partout, il faisait *bon vivre*” (90). The experience of “fauxstalgia”, as Moss calls it, is a trend of supermodernity sweeping through not only major cities and French countrysides, but also affects the very objects that once made each area unique. Like Chef Loubet in *Les glaneurs*, who converts the time-honored tradition of gleaning—once a method of subsistence for the poorest of the poor—into a Michelin-starred restaurant experience, which glorifies nearly lost traditions, at a price that makes the experience exclusive and highly sought after. These trends that Olga extrapolates in her work for Michelin help portray Jed as an upper-middle-class target of her marketing schemes, looking for someone with money, a good education, and who can appreciate the finer things in life of a certain social class.

Jed Martin no longer travels the same extreme distances that previous narrators did for reprieve and relaxation; instead, he opts for escape through domestic solitude and isolation within the borders of France. Now as a tourist of France, Jed no longer performs as a tourist in the previous sense for several reasons. For one, the narrative construction of time is very dissimilar to those of the “Michel(s)” in *Lanzarote* and *Plateforme* in which the time of tourism is extremely concentrated around itineraries, which maximize sightseeing, local experiences, and leisure so that the consumer gets “the most bang for their buck.”¹²⁶ Second, Jed, even prior to his insane international success that takes him to the highest echelons of financial success in the art

¹²⁶This concept might be a double-entendre for the Michel’s of *Lanzarote* and *Plateforme*, in which Michel seeks the most sex for what his tourism *francs* can afford him.

world, is a man of a slightly elevated means who could already afford the finer things in life.

The turn towards introspective observations of France reflects an increased exportation of a fetishized and commodified image image of French [read: Parisian] culture over the past two decades. Contrary to the exportation of American culture throughout the world, which has led to the Americanization of styles of dress, music, and cinematic productions, the exportation of French goods has not lead to a new hybridized culture, but rather exhibits a highly stylized unrealistic image of France and French culture intended to attract the newest waves of *nouveau riche* foreigners. Every tourism guide attracts a different clientele to their promotions. The *Guide Michelin* in this case attracts a more career-established clientele with more expendable income to enjoy the higher-end fineries that France has to offer. The *Guide Michelin* is for foreign tourists the guide to France. Its longstanding renown for high standards, beautiful routes, accurate and up-to-date information, as well as its famous system of stars for restaurants has long attracted a clientele that can afford to partake in the offers the guide provides:

Un questionnaire distribué dans les *French Touch* l'année passée avait montré que 75% de la clientele pouvait se répartir entre trois pays: Chine, Inde et Russie—le pourcentage montant à 90% pour les établissements “Demeures d'exception,” les plus prestigieux de la gamme.¹²⁷ (68)

These tourists are foreign and have long been force-fed the images of a romantic France with scenes and sounds reminiscent of Edith Piaf's era. This is why the image of France as frozen in time has been nicely packaged in tourist brochures and guides as a means of creating and propagating the stereotype of *la vieille France*.¹²⁸

¹²⁷*French Touch*, though used by Houellebecq as a magazine title, actually refers to a musical style from the 1990s which is a blend of French electronica artists influenced by British house music.

¹²⁸Movies such as *Amélie Poulain*, *Le Môme*, *Midnight in Paris*, *Paris, je t'aime*, among others have impressed

Olga faisait partie de ces Russes attachants qui ont appris au cours de leurs années de formation à admirer une certaine image de la France—galanterie, gastronomie, littérature et ainsi de suite—et se désolent ensuite régulièrement de ce que le pays réel corresponde si mal à leurs attentes. (71)

The *Guide* establishes what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner refer to as “incommensurate geographies” (qtd. in Ahmed 106), which essentially delineate new “France/s” and new ways of being oriented. Ahmed uses Berlant and Warner’s expression to relay how alternative worlds can be fleeting (for example, the geographical orientation during tourism time) and that they do not necessarily overlap with the world as it is currently oriented. In the case of *La carte* and the *Guide Michelin*, it is the inherent nostalgia of suggested tours that may be “incommensurate” with the current image of France (106).

Founded in the early 1800s as an importer and developer of rubber, the company skyrocketed to fame through its second generation of entrepreneurs, the brothers André and Edouard Michelin. André and Edouard took a company on the brink of disaster and re-branded themselves to stay alive, whence the Michelin tire. At the turn of the twentieth century, when automobiles were increasing in number—at least among the wealthiest members of society—these same brothers helped to chart France’s expanding system of roadways and were influential in developing modern-day route signage.¹²⁹ These maps and guides have themselves become objects of cultural production and assisted in opening up remote areas and seemingly insignificant sights to tourists. The painstaking cartographic detail applied in each map deems even the most remote rural towns and villages worthy of a visit, simply by naming them on its

upon foreign audiences, with great critical and financial success, a very stylized vintage image of France that, if it ever did, no longer exists.

¹²⁹See Harp.

pages. In a sort of Saussurean cartography, naming the place lends signification to the signifier of the town and thus rendering a space, a place.

Jed Martin's breakout photography exhibition entitled "LA CARTE EST PLUS INTÉRESSANTE QUE LE TERRITOIRE" (82) is a collection of digital photography that zooms in on various less-than-touristic regions on Michelin road maps. Jed's initial interest in *Les Cartes Michelin* comes about through a happenstance stopover at a highway rest stop en route to his beloved grandmother's funeral: "Jed acheta une carte routière 'Michelin Départements' de la Creuse, Haute-Vienne. C'est là, en dépliant sa carte à deux pas des sandwiches pain de mie sous cellophane, qu'il connut sa seconde grande révélation esthétique" (54). Following in the footsteps of his early twentieth-century forbearers, Jed's marveling at the map exacts an historical linkage between those who were seeing paved roads for the first time and Jed who is *seeing* the map as more than just a guide for the first time. Jed is mystified by the beauty of the map and the extra-cartographic potential it holds:

Cette carte était sublime; bouleversé, il se mit à trembler devant le présentoir. Jamais il n'avait contemplé d'objet aussi magnifique, aussi riche d'émotion et de sens que cette carte Michelin au 1/150 000 de la Creuse, Haute-Vienne. L'essence de la modernité, de l'appréhension scientifique et technique du monde, s'y trouvait mêlée avec l'essence de la vie animale. Le dessin était complexe et beau, d'une clarté absolue, n'utilisant qu'un code restreint de couleurs. Mais dans chacun des hameaux, des villages, représentés suivant leur importance, on sentait la palpitation, l'appel, de dizaines de vies humaines, de dizaines ou de centaines

d'âmes—les unes promises à la damnation, les autres à la vie éternelle.¹³⁰ (54)

This rush of emotions is what propelled Jed toward his return to photography with as his muse: the map.

In a 1912 Michelin publication, *Ce que Michelin a fait pour le tourisme*, an advertisement for Michelin road maps boast the slogan, “La carte se compulse comme un livre,”¹³¹ evoking the pleasure one might receive from simply navigating their way with a Michelin map. Fast-forward nearly one hundred years and his incorporation of Michelin maps into his work transforms the above slogan into “*la carte se compulse comme une oeuvre d'art*.”¹³² It is no surprise that Jed would become obsessed an object such as *la carte routière Michelin* as his university studies at Les Beaux-arts de Paris (40) focused on “la photographie systématique des objets manufacturés du monde” (40). The focus of his studies was to establish “un catalogue exhaustif des objets de fabrication humaine à l'âge industriel” (41). This passion follows him throughout his life and career in his appreciation and cataloguing of objects and careers of a by-gone era. He proceeds through these projects not with a sense of nostalgia but more with an aesthetic appreciation of the human element they required in an age of rapid mechanization of both manufacturing and artistic

¹³⁰In *Plateforme*, Michel expresses his like of “catalogues de vacances” with the underlying attention to the possibilities that these texts hold in store: “Pour le décès d'un ascendant directe, on dispose dans la fonction publique d'un congé de trois jours. J'aurais donc parfaitement pu rentrer en flânant, acheter des camemberts locaux; mais je pris tout de suite l'autoroute pour Paris. Je passai ma dernière journée de congé dans différentes agences de voyages. J'aimais les catalogues de vacances, leur abstraction, leur manière de réduire les lieux du monde à une sequence limitée de bonheurs possibles et de tarifs; j'appréciais particulièrement le système d'étoiles, pour indiquer l'intensité du bonheur qu'on était en droit d'espérer. Je n'étais pas heureux, mais j'étais le bonheur, et je continuais à y aspirer” (PF 22). Similarly, Michel's impulsive decision to leave for Thailand is made en route from his father's funeral—whereas in *La carte* the spontaneous purchase of the map subsequently introduces the plot for the rest of the novel, also happens en route to a funeral. Family members' deaths in these three works of Houellebecq always incite a new plot-changing project or emotional rupture for the protagonists.

¹³¹*Ce que Michelin a fait pour le tourisme*. <http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148bpt6k353447/f6.image>

¹³²Similar lyrical bursts of emotions are traceable in *Lanzarote* and *Plateforme*; however, the bursts are primarily directed towards sexual partners and prostitutes who grant the Michel(s) temporary reprieve from their sexual duldrums.

processes. Jed's work on the *les cartes routières* Michelin specifically the "Michelin Régions" and "Michelin Départements" (62) series decenters tourism's focus on Paris and vivifies the oft-forgotten networks of transportation networks of rural France. The installation exhibits primarily his grandmother's village, where he spent time as a child and where he ends up spending the last few decades of his life. His choice of maps as his medium coupled with the exact location of his focus indicates a vague nostalgia for the *arrière pays*.

3.4.2 Voyage au bout de la vie: l'euthanasie patriarcale

Tourism in *La carte* takes a sinister turn. Passages of last minute trips to the travel agency to fulfill Michels' travel and sexual needs in previous novels yield to Jed's last-minute trip to Zurich confirm/avenge his father's international suicide in Switzerland. During what turns out to be Jed's final visit with his father, the latter indicates his intention to resort to legal assisted suicide in Switzerland. Jean-Pierre Martin is a retired and rapidly ageing architect with a highly successful career under his belt who had moved to a posh assisted living facility, where in spite of the creature comforts, finds himself increasingly morose and miserable. He considers his body *en forte dégradation* which is almost comically described as: "S'il devait encore continuer il allait falloir lui changer son anus artificiel, enfin il trouvait que ça commençait à suffire, cette plaisanterie" (343). Jean-Pierre no longer takes his life seriously and no longer sees any effective respite for his physical suffering and ennui other than the bourgeois assisted suicide.¹³³ Jean-Pierre's extremely matter of fact pronouncement of his intentions is as comical in its absurdity as it is jarring in its content: "Ça me parassait mieux de te prévenir, et je ne me voyais pas t'en

¹³³During an earlier visit with his father, the narrator comments that his father is "pensionnaire [...] [qui] attend la libération, l'envol" (25).

parler au téléphone. Je me suis adressé à une organisation, en Suisse. J'ai décidé de me faire euthanasier" (342). Jed's reactionary trip to confront the staff of *Dignitas* and to find out the fate of his father is reminiscent of other international voyages that Houellebecq's protagonists embark upon to deliver themselves of social imbalances.

Jed's father is the ultimate tourist—in the sense of one final destination. His final act is a strange trip—a sort of non-refundable tourism package which disguises the more macabre decision not to “commit suicide” so much as to “die with dignity” at an officially licensed euthanasia practice in Switzerland. Crossing one last international and linguistic border was probably part of the attraction for Jean-Pierre Martin as it promised discretion and simple comforts—much like the very seaside resorts he was responsible for designing at the height of his career.

The assisted suicide or the death with dignity movement has gained some international traction—particularly in the Western world. It is legal in only a few countries and U.S. states and may take place only after a sizable number of legal, ethical, and administrative hurdles have been conquered. “Dignitas,” the euthanasia clinic in *La carte* is a disturbingly pleasant, yet macabre death mill where terminally ill or suicidal patients just seem to drop in to drop dead. Switzerland is one of the world's leaders in assisted suicides as it grants foreigners the same access as it does its own citizens. In fact, many news outlets have salaciously portrayed Switzerland as some sort of assisted suicide Shangri-la, making note of the number of foreign clients. *Dignitas* is an actual non-profit, volunteer-run organization, which promotes and facilitates access to assisted suicide. In Zurich, volunteers for *Dignitas* rent several properties for the purposes of providing a safe space for those who choose to use their services. The *Dignitas* clinic that Jean-Pierre Martin privies for his final act is described as an exaggerated facsimile of the actual locales and as a

generic architectural embodiment of the mediocrity of *banlieue* living:

[c'était] un immeuble de béton blanc, d'une irréprochable banalité, très Le Corbusier dans sa structure poutre-poteau qui libérait la façade et dans son absence de fioriture decorative, un immeuble identique en somme aux milliers d'immeubles de béton blanc qui composaient les banlieues semi-résidentielles partout à la surface du globe. (370)

This architectural notation is remarkable in its social normalization of the activities that take place within; the description of the location alongside a railroad track extends this suggestion of normalization in that each day hundreds if not thousands of commuters and travelers pass by without fighting back against the ethically questionable services offered within. Curiously enough, a short distance further on the same street, the *Babylon FKK Relax-Oase* offers a sardonic contrast in decor, services, and frequentation compared to *Dignitas* whose business is so plentiful, the doors must be set ajar to facilitate the sheer number of “satisfied clients” being transferred to a waiting hearse—the volume of cremated remains spread on the nearby Zürichsee is having a detrimental effect on the aquatic life of the lake. The strange and clinical normalcy of *Dignitas*' facilities would have us believe that assisted suicide is just like any other medical treatment option or facility, though, clearly it is not. The scene's narration accentuates Houellebecq's penchant for normalizing groups whose goal it is to upend the current organization of society such as *Les Raeliens* or in this instance *Dignitas* (Morrey 120). Morrey asserts that the depiction of *Dignitas* in *La carte* “serves as further dour warning against the encroaching acceptance of euthanasia, which, in Houellebecq's eyes, risks becoming an imposition rather than a choice” (130). The encroachment fears stem arguably from the demographics of the “*candidats au suicide*” (CT 372) who sometimes cross international borders

to reach *Dignitas*. When Jed enters the waiting room there, he describes those waiting there as:

[un homme] avec ses moustaches blanches et son teint rubicond, était manifestement un Anglais; mais les autres, même du point de vue nationalité, étaient difficiles à situer. Un homme émacié, au physique latin, au teint d'un jaune brunâtre et aux joues terriblement creuses [...] devait venir d'un pays sud-américain quelconque. (372)

That “assisted suicide,” “death with dignity,” or the almost crass, animalistic-sounding “euthanasia” have become a reason for international tourism conflates the narrator’s observation that the market value of ending suffering has outpaced that of pleasure (371). This reflection is based on the simple observation of the number of persons/bodies entering and exiting *Dignitas* versus the sex club situated less than a block away. Sex tourism has lost its revered status in Houellebecq’s works making way for more fatalistic reasons to travel. This drastic shift goes against Marek Bienczyk’s argument on nihilism in Houellebecq in which he suggests that it is an, “apocalypse du désir, mais une apocalypse à rebours qui consiste plutôt en un graduel reflux du désir, son évanouissement, son autolimitation; sa stagnation dans un délire et dans une mort lente et paresseuse” (qtd. in Reader 113). Protagonists in Houellebecq never succumb to suicide, literal or social, rather they stagnate and fester in their own suffering. However, characters with whom the protagonists have established affective connections, i.e. Rudi in *Lanzarote* or Valérie in *Plateforme*—perish in sudden and unexpected ways.

3.4.2.1 La défonce/defense de la famille. Nancy Huston contends that the vast majority of nihilistic literature of the late-twentieth century tends to involve childless narrators (qtd. in Morrey 120)—a point that I argue has a tangential effect on the shift from sex tourism to suicide tourism. Sex tourism has participants of all ages who travel with the primary purpose of sex and

leisure time. Childless narrators, such as Jed, exist in a vacuum that interrupts the orientation of what Ahmed refers to as “genealogical lines”. The suicide of Jed’s father disorients the “natural” lineage of identity inheritance and thrusts Jed into a position from which his only recourse is to plead his status as an already partially-orphaned child: ““Déjà, être un enfant de suicidé, ce n’est pas très drôle...” (343). Jean-Pierre’s retort, “Et puis d’ailleurs, en quoi est-ce que ça te concerne?” (343); the “ça” being his decision to control his own demise, triggers a sense of dis-belonging to a family line. Jean-Pierre’s suicide removes him from the familial equation and dispossesses Jed of any affective allegiance to their family. Jed’s disapproval of his father’s plans negates his role as the son in his attempt to father his own father as the figure of the father represents far more than the person itself. Ahmed consolidates the source of the family into the father’s body:

The imagined thing called ‘the family’ is, of course, associated with the body of the father: his body is metonymically associated with the body of the family, just as the ‘leader’ is associated with ‘society.’ So identification with the father (the wish for his love) becomes an allegiance to the form of the family in the sense of desire to continue its ‘line,’ whereby such allegiance is also to be aligned with others, or even to ‘side’ with others, who have also taken ‘the family’ as their ego ideal. (74)

Therefore, when Jean-Pierre deliberately chooses his own death in spite of his son’s—albeit muted—protests, he destroys his own objectification as family leader and eliminates the family line.

The family line is what maintained Jed’s national subjectivity and rootedness to France; now *sans famille*, Jed is henceforth subjectivized through other means—his artwork and his vast

fortunes. Upon hearing that his father had departed his *maison de retraite* without much ado, Jed heads to Zurich to avenge not only his father's suspected death, but also his genealogical destruction. When Jed confronts the manager of *Dignitas*, "Qu'est-ce que le corps est devenu?" (375), her smug, corporate response triggers a violent reaction from Jed who proceeds to forcefully attack her. This brief but violent moment is a metaphor for Jed's anguish over the manner of his father's death and the way in which this "association," which as the manager confirms, acts "en parfaite conformité avec la loi Suisse" (375), treats their line of work as just one more option in an outsourcable service industry. While it seems absurd and ironic that the famously neutral Switzerland would permit the commodification of death within its borders, political neutrality and the Swiss financial system are not necessarily incongruous, given Switzerland's notoriety for banking anonymity and less than scrupulous financial regulations. The diegetic consideration of the true cost of the euthanasia drug and cremation service versus the fees collected from "*les candidats*" deems this extreme difference as scandalous given that assisted suicide is "un marché en pleine expansion, où la Suisse était en situation de quasi-monopole" (376). This morbid industry is a virtual gold mine symbolic of a general societal malaise or ennui from a hyper-capitalized life in which satisfaction, if ever actually attainable, is never sustainable.

Social dissatisfaction is pervasive throughout Houellebecq's canon despite the relatively *aisé* financial status of the protagonists and ancillary characters. Suicide tourism is symptomatic of Keith Reader's argument that, "cultural over-stimulation rather than financial under-achievement" [that] leads to dissatisfaction" (126). The bodily-decomposition and under-stimulation of old age as staked out in the acts of Jean-Pierre emphasize the harsh cultural expectations of French citizens whose social utility turns to burden as they age. Reader is again

helpful here in his explanation that, “that different epochs of capitalism have different ways of making their victims suffer” (126). These “different epochs of capitalism” manifest themselves as the various stages of life when one is either, bluntly speaking, a contributor to or a burden on society. Jean-Pierre’s utility had waned and he chose to remedy that issue in a manner that could only be conducted in a foreign land. This act is essentially no different than those of the Michel(s) of *Lanzarote* or *Plateforme* who also leave France to unburden themselves of French life. Yet, traveling to die and dying to travel are two very distinct forms at play in these works on tourism. Jean-Pierre, in an earlier passage, discusses his wife’s (Jed’s mother’s) suicide:

Je sais qu’elle n’était pas satisfait de notre vie,” reprit-il; “mais est-ce que c’est une raison suffisante pour mourir? Moi non plus je n’étais pas satisfait de ma vie, je t’avoue que j’espérais autre chose de ma carrière d’architecte que de construire des résidences balnéaires à la con pour des touristes débiles, sous le contrôle de promoteurs foncièrement malhonnêtes et d’une vulgarité presque infinie. (215)

Jean-Pierre seems to have shared the same impulse for living that Jed does, but it manifested itself quite differently. As an architect of bland tourism apartments destined for mass tourism, Jean-Pierre has long been a cog in the tourism sector and only can only truly escape from its grip in one final departure to Switzerland. Though the drive to stay alive ends for Jean-Pierre, not out of a generalized sense of dissatisfaction, but out of a corporeal lassitude that caused him to subsist in a drug-induced haze. His Swiss suicide allowed him to take the French state out of the equation of corporeal regulation—a blatant act of disorientation.

3.4.3 Return of the Jed(i): The region strikes back

In the wake of his father’s suicide, Jed inherits both his father’s mansion in Le Raincy and his

grandparents' estate in Châtelus-le-Marcheix in the La Creuse department at which point he decides to leave his cold and empty Parisian life behind.¹³⁴ His former love interest, Olga, had taken Jed on a several tours of his home country as “market research” for Michelin, but he now must (re)integrate himself in *la France des régions* without the help of the sumptuously worded guidebook. His arrival in his ancestral home raises eyebrows and suspicion of his intentions and status as a “native” foreigner:

À la question de savoir quand un étranger au pays pouvait se faire accepter dans une zone rurale française, la réponse était: *jamais*. Ils ne manifestaient d'ailleurs en cela aucun racisme, ni aucune xénophobie. Pour eux, un Parisien était un étranger à peu près au même titre qu'un Allemand du Nord, ou qu'un Sénégalais; et les étrangers, décidément, ils ne les aimaient pas. (407)

The unified front against all outside invasions is comically refreshing in its “color-blind” xenophobia; however, it is a comprehensible fear that the locals' lifestyles, once shunned by the industrialization of the post-modern era are now making a vibrant comeback. The onslaught of new “agri-curious” tourists and urban re-settlers threatens the locals' traditionally insular ways of living in their homeland. This effect sets in motion a slow turning of the tables in which the heightened market values of once-forgotten rural properties, farms, and workshops, forces locals to vacate their premises in search of more affordable areas.

Jed uses his vast wealth to strictly avoid contact with the locals who become disgruntled with his land grab acquisition of neighboring forests, which had been formerly used as public land for deer hunting. Though his “renovations” look more like the construction of his own

¹³⁴His apartment is literally always cold because he has an almost comedic episode with his “chauffe-eau” that occupies nearly the first ten pages of the book. A lack of heat in the weeks just before Christmas surmises a sense of animal-like survival tactics to stay home in the dog-eat-dog Parisian landscape.

personal fiefdom—he builds a private road to avoid contact with the locals—he insists he is acting under “les limites strictes de la légalité” (410). His legal actions however run counter to the actual application of the law amongst locals who might have ignored such laws out of solidarity. For the next 10 years or so, he limits his outings to the big-box grocery store in a neighboring town to avoid human contact. When he finally does venture into the village he resides in, he is shocked to discover that not only had most locals disappeared, but that the once sleepy village of his grand-parents had been transformed into a cutesy, “traditionally”-stylized rural village open to tourists and urban refugees in need of space and air.

The narrator explains that this re-adaptation of France is entirely the work of market forces which circumvent national policies of re-invigorating economically depressed areas: “[De nouveaux arrivants] avaient entrepris de repeupler *l’hinterland*—et cette tentative, après bien d’autres essais infructueux, basée cette fois sur une connaissance précise des lois du marché, et sur leur acceptation lucide, avait pleinement réussi” (414). The acceptance of market forces and the resurgence of nostalgia as a décor motif create a false sense of authenticity tantamount to disorientation. If disorientation in large part explains the effects of breaking with tradition or what comes before us and what we reject or fail to accept, then the commercialization of “*l’art de vivre*” (416) is in a sense the queering of the countryside. The narrator observes a distinct break from the former inhabitants in style and behavior, “les nouveaux habitants des zones rurales ne ressemblaient nullement à leur prédécesseurs” (416). Whereas when Jed initially arrived in Châtelus-le-Marcheix some time ago, he was almost forced to self-exile within his own property, such was the disdain for outsiders. However, now, as foreigners’ spending accounts for a substantial portion of the “new” countryside’s revenue, foreigners are now embraced (417).

There is a sharp contrast in the language and depiction of the two populations changing the landscape of France. On one side, the white, educated, moneyed populations who “re-invigorate” the countryside irreversibly altering its demographic makeup and the other side involves persons of color, Muslim or other non-Christian religion adherents, with lower incomes who are depicted as invaders who do nothing but burden France with new societal problems. The common denominator between these two populations and how they are perceived in France is money and tourism.

As a country that is extremely reliant upon tourists’ spending habits, rates of tourism to Paris were directly affected by the spate of terrorist attacks in 2015. According to statistical reports, the number of tourists visiting Paris declined by 1.5 million visitors in 2016; the biggest drop was among Chinese and Japanese tourists where racial homogeneity is nearly universal and terrorism is practically non-existent.¹³⁵ Therefore, there is a correlation between the ways in which “invading” populations produce ripples on the economy based on how they are written about and considered in tour guides and Houellebecq’s literature, in general.

One such example from an earlier passage in *La carte* depicts Olga and Jed perusing one of her Michelin guides to select a weekend destination. Olga points to one particular hotel entry in the guide for Jed to read aloud. His initial reaction is: “C’est quoi, ce galimatias?” (What’s this jibberish?) as the text at hand is so dissonant with Michelin’s standards. The description states: “‘Au cour d’un Cantal matiné de Midi où tradition rime avec décontraction et liberté avec respect...’ [...] ‘Martine et Omar vous font découvrir l’authenticité des mets et vins’” (96). Olga’s retort, “elle a épousé un Arabe, c’est pour ça le respect” (96), indicates hesitation about the relevance and authenticity of this restaurant. “Omar” is a cultural liability and his presence in

¹³⁵<https://www.independent.co.uk/travel/paris-tourist-numbers-drop-franch-terror-attacks-further-charlie-hebdo->

the Guide is incongruous with the image that Olga aims to sell through her marketing strategies. Her proclamation, “Mais moi je suis une touriste, je veux du franco-français” (96), equates tourists’ desires with an impossible standard of “cultural purity.” She continues, “un truc franco-marocain ou franco-vietnamien, ça peut marcher pour un restaurant branché du Canal Saint-Martin; sûrement pas pour un hôtel de charme dans le Cantal” (96). The hyphen in “franco-français” connotes a unified image of France in French cultural tourism offerings while the hyphen in “franco-marocain” and “franco-vietnamien” is a crutch that supports a sort of culinary xenophobia. In applying “franco” to the demonymic adjective, the exotic flavor of these cuisines is domesticated because of its association to the refined French palette. Furthermore, in equating the popularity of these hybrid cuisines with a popular urban neighborhood of Paris, firm border between Paris (cosmopolitan, diverse, not purely French) and the rural regions of France, which have been economically developed to attract foreign tourists to the stylized replication of an authentically French meal or experience. Olga finishes this passage by remarking: “Je vais peut-être le virer du guide, cet hôtel...” (96). This editorial decision is proof of a calculated marketing scheme, which continues to paint France with a very white brush. An internal memo upholds this practice:

Nos nouveaux clients, nos clients réels, issus de pays plus jeunes et plus rudes, aux normes sanitaires récentes et de toute façon peu appliquées, sont au contraire à la recherche, lors de leur séjour en France, d'une expérience gastronomique vintage, voire hard-core; seuls les restaurants en mesure de

*s'adapter à cette nouvelle donne devraient mériter, à l'avenir, de figurer dans notre guide.*¹³⁶ (97)

The purveyors of taste in France create an ideal of French culture that is a much a replica of *l'idée de la France* as it is a response to the markets and foreign requirements of what France is and should be.

3.5 CONCLUSION

Se désorienter, the verb form of disorientation, means to become lost or confused, to lose focus or one's way. The root, "orient," meaning to guide or direct, of course also refers to the Western's world concept of an area of the world which is distant or even oppositional to the West in all manners of existence. The "Orient" is a construct continues perpetuated in the twenty-first century through less antiquated and more geopolitically current terminology such "terrorist," "prostitués thais," or "refugié"—all terminologies and concepts extant in the Houellebecq tourism novels studied in this chapter. Therefore, *se désorienter* might also be viewed in a way that obfuscates the "Orient" and redirecting the gaze toward "l'Occident," an obsession in Houellebecq. The narratorial gaze appraises the place of the West in today's world and repeatedly critiques its downfalls, among others, greed, corruption, and demagoguery:

De manière plus générale on vivait une période idéologiquement étrange, où tout un chacun en Europe occidentale semblait persuadé que le capitalisme était condamné, et même

¹³⁶Italics are in the text, as are quotes.

condamné à brève échéance, qu'il vivait ses toutes dernières années, sans que pourtant les partis d'ultra-gauche ne parviennent à séduire au-delà de leur clientèle habituelle de masochistes hargneux. Un voile de cendres semblait s'être répandu sur les esprits. (CT 397)

This collective disintegration of belief and trust in the structures and processes of Western society exacerbates the feelings of disorientation espoused by Houellebecq in these three texts. Houellebecq's novels employ the tourist as a mappable trope of society's shortcomings—the incapacity for love in our post-modern era of hyper-capitalism and egocentrism—surface in the characters who “fail” as tourists and are unable to let themselves be transformed by the experience of escape. Claudio Minca's conception of tourists evokes the sense of conflict that:

[runs] between the inclination for putting places and people in their proper order and a fatal attraction towards disorder, between rationality and desire, between an essentialized sense of place and a progressive sense of place (Massey qtd. in Minca 1993). This tension not only speaks to tourists' understanding of certain 'emplaced' cultures, but also reflects their role as active agents of disorder; as (un)conscious producers of a specific (idea of) 'disorder', of an implicit 'cultural messiness.' The relationship between different epistemological fields is thus constitutive of the tourist as a modern subject. (434)

It is precisely this function as “active agents of disorder” that supports my argument that tourism acts as a form of disorientation. But what can be garnered from national identity and disorientation? Minca reasons that the “cultural messiness” apparent in the wake of tourists' experiences is what constructs their subjectivity, yet this assertion is dismissive of the complexities of national identities bound in tourism preferences which misalign the cultural framework of a specific destination. All of this shows that national identity is at both weakened

and strengthened as international borders are crossed for the purpose of tourism.

4.0 (M)OTHERING THE NATION: THE INTERPLAY OF AUTOFICTION, LANGUAGE, AND BIRTHPLACE IN NATIONAL DISORIENTATION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The family as an institution is a recurrent trope in narrative works alluding to the nation. The intersection between familial and national spheres of influence is a productive site for questioning personal origins and uncovering the inevitable “in-betweeness” that arises from familial alterity. Marianne Hirsch, in *The Mother/Daughter plot*, evokes the Freudian concept of *Familienroman* to explicate her investigation of the function of the family in a broad range of works from the nineteenth-century through to the late twentieth-century. She clarifies Freud’s definition of *Familienroman* as, “the family romance is an imaginary interrogation of origins, an interrogation which embeds the engenderment of narrative within the experience of family” (9). As such, *the family* is the prime starting point for imagining *the personal* affects towards origins and thus, national identity. All three texts in this chapter, beyond their generic epithets as autofiction, should also be considered as *familienroman* as it further supports the examination of (national) origins that each narrator undertakes through the lens of the family. While Hirsch relies primarily on observations on female authors’ to note this trend, I do not limit myself to female authors. I am more interested in the ways in which writing the family, more specifically the mother, produces traces of a disoriented national identity in autofictional narratives. Reading

these three authors/works together is a deliberate attempt to surpass the confines of female authorship as a defining and conditional requirement for writing the mother into the investigation of origins and national identity.

In the fifty or so years since decolonization, an ever-increasing number of autofictional novels employ the mother, motherhood, and matrilineal lineage as a theme for delineating various, often conflicted, subjectivities. Mothers in these texts are often foreign-born, native speakers of languages other than French and they, themselves, only marginally exist within French society. The mother as other disorients their child's political and cultural subjectivities as an ambivalent pawn in the narrators' upbringing. Parallels between fraught mother-child relationships and the wide-reaching crises of French national identity arise, in part, from the failure of state-promoted societal assimilation projects.¹³⁷ To this effect, I choose to read mother-child and matrilineal relationships¹³⁸ as the instigators of national disorientation in three texts which deal specifically with these issues: Azouz Begag's *Le Gone du Chaâba* (1986), Nina Bouraoui's *Mes mauvaises pensées* (2005) and Marie Darrieussecq's *Le pays* (2005).

Each of these texts is a variation of autofiction or narrative of the self, wherein the narratorial assertions of multi-national identities destabilize the static imagined narrative of the French nation. Through their dual-national attractions pulling them in opposing directions, Frenchness is illuminated as a choice to be made between familial and societal ways of living.

¹³⁷I use the term "autofiction" as first officially coined and defined by Serge Doubrovsky.

¹³⁸As Naomi Schor argues, "To this day French national identity remains bound up, at least in official discourse, but also in ongoing intellectual debates with universal human rights, of which France considers itself the inalienable trustee. French, accordingly, is the idiom of universality" (46). Therefore, the very existence of the French nation hinges upon the blind acceptance and perpetuation of the "myth" of universalism. Universalism bound with French essentialism becomes a brittle trope considering the numerous recent contemporary literary productions focusing on personal accounts of (conflicted) Frenchness. Accounts in which universalism as the litmus test of belonging fail those whom it inevitably deems as other and who are unable to integrate and be integrated for a myriad of reasons.

These three texts analogously treat the narrator's dual-national identities through their voices as the children of mother-child relationships in which the mother's existence as a (domesticated) foreigner is a contentious element in the formation of their child (narrator)'s national identity. The mother-child relationship is one in which political and cultural subjectivities are imbued with agency beyond the control of the narrators. Just as Marianne Hirsch suggests, the mother can never fully assert herself as a mother without the child because this unique position forfeits itself to the subjectivity projected upon it from outside (1989, 12). One cannot be a mother to oneself¹³⁹ and one can only be identified as a mother through someone else's eyes; just as this chapter's narrators cannot define themselves as both French and other (Algerian or *Yuoangui*) without the reflection in other's eyes.

The mother is the first point of affective attachment to a place, the creator of space and security, and also, in the case of these three works, a symbol of national mis-identification. The (m)other(s) in each of these texts is/are of a differing national origin than their own child, an imperative point in the context of autofiction. The fictionalized mothers embody the societal anxiety surrounding unclassifiable national subjects because the moniker of mother transcends all other cultural labels. The mother is reduced to this one specific societal, anthropological function, just as the narrators are unable to declare themselves French and Other. National identity in autofictive texts with an emphasis on the mother and mother-child relationship leads

¹³⁹Though I might argue that Marie in *Le Pays* does attempt to become a mother to herself in the scenes in which deals with the silence and mystery surrounding her deceased infant brother, Paul. "Dans l'arbre genealogique, une petite impasse, une petite branche morte: Paul, né un jour et mort le même mois. Je les regardais, mon père et ma mère, aussi accidentels que tout parent pour tout enfant, aussi étranges et familiers. Je les regardais et j'essayais d'imaginer leur histoire, leur histoire qui continuait, qui se superposait à la mienne. L'histoire de leur chagrin. J'étais la soeur, eux les parents. J'étais orpheline d'un frère, eux d'un fils. Je ne pouvais pas davantage participer à leur histoire qu'eux à la mienne" (180). The ephemeral and fragile nature of families spurs Marie into action to fill this void and create a brother for herself as she attempts to build a profile for Paul at the *Maison des morts*. This attempt at creating a hologram, a "physical" trace of his existence, proves unsuccessful as she cannot mother herself into existence.

to questioning the origins of national subjectivity. If national subjectivity is a political construct, how then do the mother and the mother-child relationship affect its limitations? In these texts, I examine what strategies, both implicit and explicit, exist to delineate the mother's role as the bridge between two (or more) national identities. Is it the mother, the mother-child relationship or the autofiction genre itself that make national disorientation most visible? To answer these questions, this chapter provides textual evidence of the mother's role in the development of national identity and national sensibilities through the choice of genre, the use of French versus "mother" tongue, and the matter of birthplace.

Each autofictional text in this chapter is based on personal, family-centric experiences of otherness and othering, which can all be traced to the intersection(s) of mother, child, and nation. The maternal role in creating or skewing each narrator's relationship to France occur in slightly differing ways in each of these three texts, consequently demonstrating the variances of French identity. The mother serves as a pivot point between the fictional and biographical elements in the text in that she is totemic of the origins of national disorientation. The mother is a permanent purveyor of mis-belonging to the wider national community, whilst being the anchor of belonging to the family and personal community. The attachment to the mother does not dissipate over the life of the child, it merely transforms as the narrators themselves mature.

While it is critical to distinguish the author's biographical elements from those of the narrators', it is perhaps even more critical to explore the varied uses of autofictional generic conventions in each of these texts and how they relate to the formation of national subjectivities and identity. The appearance and explosion of autofictional texts in recent decades has been particularly robust in France. This shift in cultural productions points to societal phenomena, which increasingly unearth the multiplicities of France(s) in which contemporary citizens dwell

and circulate on a daily basis. Autofiction and its iterations are keenly aware of the country's cultural and social moods and push the boundaries of the experience of France through communally relatable, yet thoroughly personal accounts.¹⁴⁰ Gasparini defines autofiction as “le récit autobiographique [qui] développe une réflexion critique sur la genèse du sujet, sur son identité, sur sa précarité, sur ses mutations” (11). The focus on the maternal conception of the subject is an essential element of autofiction. “L'autofiction, quant à elle, ne se donne pas pour une histoire vraie, mais pour un ‘roman’ qui “démultiplie” les récits possibles de soi” (15). The multiple selves that autofiction permits is what Paul Nizon calls, “le moi [comme] chose très fluide, insaisissable” (qtd. in Gasparini 18). This fluidity complicates national institutions' attempts to classify and subjectivize persons into clean categories of personhood. Nizon further promotes the process of autobiographical writing as, “[une descente] vers ce moi inconnu afin de le constituer d'une manière ou d'une autre, comme personnage. Le “je” n'est donc pas le point de départ, comme dans l'autobiographie mais le point d'arrivée” (qtd. in Gasparini 18) The author's ability to say ‘je’ or ‘I’, claiming their subjectivity. Thus, as autofiction relates to communal experiences of national events and culture, the process of writing is as just important as the result. The very discussion of or unearthing of the very objects or actions that make the self multiple is what distinguishes autofiction from autobiography. The self in autobiography is a unilateral condensation of the facts and events of one's life through the experiences of grand historical trends and overtures.¹⁴¹

¹⁴⁰I will continue throughout to use “autofiction” as a loose umbrella term under which many other synonymous keywords fall, i.e. “narratives of the self”, etc.

¹⁴¹ Philippe Lejeune argues that autobiography can be only for persons of great cultural importance towards the end of their lives. (qtd. in Gasparini 14).

4.1.1 Language: Maman, Parles-tu français?

Language is the very modicum of discourse that constructs the nation. It is what binds and shuns, what builds up and deconstructs a grouping of disparate communities within a geopolitical territory—language is a force to be reckoned with. Language is one of the first performative acts of national identity within the public sphere of the nation. But it is the mother whose role in the teaching of language and its production, whence *la langue maternelle*, serves as the bridge between public and private spheres. The mother is therefore fundamental to the construction of national identity because her effect on language is the creation of a bridge between the private and public spheres of existence. Language, particularly French, is not only an object and means of communication in these texts, it is also constructed as a transitional zone between family and national identities which engenders considerable confusion and internal conflict.

Each text in this chapter is written in French by authors/narrators all of whom are bilingual to some degree stemming from a foreign language used within their families.¹⁴² Yet, the mother's own *langue maternelle* is not the same as that of the local community, resulting in an immediate clash of civilizations and a pre-linguistic means of othering. From the utterance of their very first words to the novels in which they appear, the narrators, even as adults, are indelibly marked by the family language(s), regardless of their written or oral proficiency in French.

The mother is taken as purveyor of all things national, all things French—thus, the narrators born to foreign mothers are sentenced to perpetual explanations of their national

¹⁴²Azouz speaks French and Arabic, (Nina) speaks French and has minimal knowledge of her *langue paternelle*, Arabic, and Marie speaks French and has a basic working knowledge of the fictional *yuoangui* language. Her connection to language resembles more closely Nina's connection to the language of her childhood paysage as an almost natural part of the landscape.

identity and their entitlement to belong. In all three texts, reference to the birthplace in either implicit (*Le Gone*) or explicit (*Pensées* and *Pays*) mention plays an undeniable role in the creation of a French political subjectivity. One's place of birth is a very subjective means of establishing political subjectivity but thrives as the most universal means of doing so.¹⁴³ The references to birthplace almost as if they were material objects mask the brutal political subjectivity forced upon children from their very first breath. By this, I mean that one is never born as a subjective blank slate subject. A mother imbues their child with fundamental set of identity cues that start as primal and bodily (during gestation) vestiges and through delivery subjectivizes their symbiotic relationship transforming a fetus into a "subject." As biopolitical legislation has evolved over the last centuries creating subjects where there were none, the emphasis of to whom one is born has shifted to where one is born. This change puts the onus on the nation to take care of the child, outside of the home, out of the arms of the mother, since the child belongs to the community as much as to his or her genetic family.

In all three texts, political subjectivity is presupposed practically at the DNA-level. In *Le Gone*, Azouz is born in France to Algerian parents, (Nina), in *Pensées*, is born in France to a French mother and Algerian father and in *Le pays*, the narrator, Marie Rivière, is born in the fictional pre-independence *pays yuoangui*. These tumultuous combinations reinforce how a place of birth is a powerful agent of subjectification, whilst inverting how Frenchness is acquired and relinquished through political manoeuvring. The French birthplace, *la terre natale*, exists only as an ideological construct, which due to parental otherness, ignores geographic location and

¹⁴³Most parameters of citizenship acquisition across the globe are based on birthrights, either *jus solis* or *jus sanguinis*. This means that the rights of citizenship are tied to place of birth or right to citizenship based on blood, i.e. parental-lineage based rights to citizenship which grant citizenship independent of place of birth so long as one or both parents are of a specific nationality. The United States maintains *jus solis* and *jus sanguinis*.

excludes the “native-born” child from full acceptance within the nation. The similarities in the construction of the mother in all three texts indicate that at the crossroad between public and private personas, [the mother] is both the source of identity fracturing and the source of its difference. Ultimately, the works of autofiction that I examine in this chapter reinforce how Frenchness at the individual level, presented through micro-level histories, underscores the inadequacies of ideology-shaped policies and terminologies in producing a clear blueprint for experiencing and maintaining Frenchness.

4.2 LE GONE DU CHAÎBA

4.2.1 Introduction

France in the 1960’s experienced massive cultural and demographic transformations that greatly challenged the structures and authority of national identity. As inhabitants of former colonies arrived en masse to seek work and better lives, their presence and cultural imports infiltrated the supposedly impenetrable walls of French society and consequently shaped how national subjectivity would be henceforth discussed and enforced. These *bona fide* French citizens—musulmans français d’Algérie—were technically guaranteed the same human rights and privileges of their metropolitan compatriots but were most often in actuality disadvantaged in their access. Political and cultural assimilation campaigns presented impossible goals for these citizens who embodied the life of the French periphery, socially and architecturally. It was the children of these initial Maghrebi immigrants who acted not only as the linguistic translators for their communities but also as the cultural interlocutors for their home communities and France at

large. This humanized bridging of cultures and languages subsequently effected as much change on France as it did on these youngest citizens. *Le Gone du Chaâba* offers particularly applicable narrative evidence of this phenomenon.

Le Gone is a narrative commemoration of a *Beur* childhood structured on accounts of banal rituals and daily life of an Algerian-immigrant self-built shantytown on the outskirts Lyon, in the 1960's. The spatial juxtaposition of communities—the *insalubre* shacks of the Chaâba (Algeria) against the French habitations in Lyon—reduced the avenues for assimilation to the children who repeatedly crossed the cultural and geographic boundaries between the desired invisibility of the imported Algerian lifestyle and the dominant local French culture.¹⁴⁴ The privacy of the Chaâba allowed for the flourishing of kinship relations to develop between its unrelated inhabitants: men became brothers, the women became sisters and the children circulated as if a unified band of siblings or cousins. While traditional Algerian patterns of everyday living and values triumphed in this space, the children of the Chaâba were the embodiment of the convergence between the private and public spheres.

These children who were born politically French and culturally Algerian, colloquially referred to as *Beurs* (descendents of North African immigrants), present a fertile territory for the examination of how self-narration is a form of national disorientation. Because they straddle the delicate balance between two national allegiances, France and, in the case of *Le Gone*, Algeria, the literature produced by this population is a political act, which stakes out a cultural space in which they are able to validate their unique experience. Aina Reynés-Lineares reasons that

¹⁴⁴For more on the history of the Chaâba, see:
http://lerizeplus.villeurbanne.fr/arkotheque/client/am_lerize/encyclopedia/fiche.php?ref=55

amongst this population the impetus to write their story comes from “un besoin vital, une façon de ‘gueuler,’ et une sorte de catharsis identitaire” (164).

Le Gone is an autofictional account of childhood that attempts a reconciliation of the narrator’s hybrid identity through the chronicling of his most formative childhood years. The very existence of *Beur* children forced France to address the necessity for new social considerations towards assimilation in part because this population defied previous social and cultural subjectivities; their coterminous upbringing in two distinct worlds was held in tension by their cultural hybridity. Beyond the need to qualify their own identities as valid and valuable to the story of France, Kathryn Chenchabi-Lay contends that *Beur* writing is also an act of ensuring that their parents’ generation did not become invisible to history despite their inability to write their own stories. She considers *Beur* narratives, “[an] homage to the past generation, the parents who have suffered displacement, dislocation, humiliation and racism in silence” (97). While *Beur* children, too, as Azouz points out, suffered humiliation, their formal education gave them the tools to establish a voice strong enough to represent both themselves and their forebearers. *Le Gone* evokes the *Beur* child’s responsibility to their (Algerian) community and commemorates the experiences of all *Beur* children through Azouz’s voice, which Samia Mehrez considers to be, “[a] confession and apology to the *Beur* community” (37). Azouz’s text is an indictment of the difficulties that *Beur* children face(d) in national and cultural recognition “as a part of a generation that is ‘here for good’” (Mehrez 37), but also of the affect that these children manage to express for both France and the mythicized homeland of their parents.

Le Gone was published in 1986 at a time when *Beur* representations in literature, film, and media was beginning to surge. This timeframe corroborates with the earliest waves of *Beur* citizens reaching adulthood and an age gave them the necessary temporal distance from their

youth to retrospectively shape a self-conception of national identity, now as adults. My close-readings of *Le Gone* examine the two biggest influences on the *Beur* child's identity: the parents and the school.

The parents—especially the mother, but also a slew of biological and non-biological kin—stand in for Algeria, Islam, and ethnic and racial alterity, while the school embodies France, whiteness, and Judeo-Christian values. Aina Reynés-Lineares claims that the school is so important in *Le Gone* since it is the stage for social integration in France and represents, “l’endroit de la perte de leurs repères qu’ils soient linguistiques, religieux ou historiques” (165). I argue how the confrontation of Arabic and French languages imitates parallel cultural clashes and how from this confusion Azouz creates his own sense of home.

These overlapping influences are best represented in Begag's childhood narrative, with the use of a vernacular that is loyal to both the narrator's young age and the colloquial parlance of his community. My insistence upon language as a modicum of disorientation is based on Azouz's use of French both as a tool of integration in the school setting, but also inadvertently as a cudgel of family roots. Azouz's parents speaks little to no French so their immediate influence on his life is limited to domestic spaces. This linguistic lacuna leaves Azouz to conduct himself according to the influences he deems important for social mobility and survival. Paul A. Silverstein notes that this sought-after mobility was “a means to escape the authority of their parents and other village elders” (154). This escape is not necessarily a full-on rejection of the parents' authority but the call for a fluid third space between purely French or Algerian identities.

Yet, even in this new space of identity, the maternal presence, in particular, clouds any attempts at integration into French society. Miller and Constante reason that the mother is a

“metaphor for something at the center of the self that has been dislocated or disengaged through traumatic separation” (102). The mother represents the genealogical trauma of emigrating from Algeria, a burden that is passed on from generation to generation despite the *Beur* child having been born in France. Like Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory,”¹⁴⁵¹⁴⁷ Azouz shows us that he always returns to feelings of guilt and disloyalty when he distances himself from his maternal lineage because of her cultural and ethnic difference. Azouz has no “center of the self” because he errs between two identities, which arose from the trauma of his mythical separation from Algeria. The resulting cultural disorientation overlooks the biographical facts of Azouz’s birth in France and his scholastic successes, which at times appear mere desperate attempts to integrate. My examination of this novel also argues that the orientation of the *Beur* community is parallel to that of the French nation-state by outlining the intersections between genre, language, and birthplace.

4.2.2 You can take the Gone out of the Chaâba...

France in the 1960’s experienced massive cultural and demographic transformations that greatly challenged the structures and authority of national identity. As inhabitants of former colonies arrived en masse to seek work and better lives, their presence and cultural imports infiltrated the supposedly impenetrable walls of French society and consequently shaped how national subjectivity would be henceforth discussed and enforced. These *bona fide* French citizens—musulmans français d’Algérie—were technically guaranteed the same human rights and privileges of their metropolitan compatriots but were most often in actuality disadvantaged in

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¹⁴⁷See Hirsch 2012.

4.2.2.1 La Silence du Chaâba: Mamans muettes. The first pages of *Le Gone* depict the daytime rituals of the Chaâba through a fight amongst its female dwellers. The Chaâbi women stayed at home and ruled semi-autonomously, while the men were away at work, abruptly acquiescing to the masculine authority upon their return. Azouz tells that this self-mandated silence attests to a vague sense of feminine solidarity:

Le soir, quand les hommes rentrent du travail, aucun écho ne leur parvient des incidents qui se produisent pendant leur absence du Chaâba. Les femmes tiennent leur langue, car elles disent qu'en dépit des conditions de vie difficiles elles ne gagneront rien à semer la discorde entre les hommes. (11)

Women's silence is noted in relation to the patriarchal power; it also mimics their lack of voice and powerlessness vis-à-vis the French national community and its assimilation goals. While in this example, patriarchal culture is the impetus for silence, *Le Gone* shows Algerian immigrant women as dual victims—silenced by the patriarchy and the “patrie”—both of which effectively render them invisible. This predicament makes the women's reliance upon the male—particularly their sons—all the more urgent to give them a voice and make them visible. The child is tasked then with deflecting ignorance of his fragmented subjectivity through the work of memory and narration to give his parents', family's, and ancestors' stories a voice.

Dissimilar to *Pensées* and *Le Pays*, the narration of *Le Gone* remains within the temporal space of his youth. Begag's reliance on childhood memories and affect from this time in his life has influenced what Janet Carsten refers to as “memory work” (18). She defines its effects “as a restoration of the disjunctures of the past” (18). The literate child blurs the boundaries between home and nation precisely because his literacy skills give him an innate power to be write himself and his story into existence.

Azouz's older sister, Zohra, often fulfills the role of public mother. Acting as a French and Arabic translator for her parents and other adults in the Chaâba, but also between the worlds of literacy and illiteracy, Zohra links two disparate worlds:

C'est en effet sur ma soeur que repose le sort de chaque écolier, au Chaâba. Elle traduit en arabe les appréciations du maître. Ce soir [...] elle ira de baraque en baraque, annoncera le classement de chacun, tentera d'atténuer la sentence qui s'abattra sur les irrécupérables, montrera aux pères l'endroit où ils doivent marquer leur croix sur le carnet d'approbation. (87)

This activity indicates a reversal of parental roles that is both necessary and degrading. Zohra speaks and reads French allowing her to penetrate the male-dominated power structure of the Chaâba; she is the trusted link between the *gones*, the school, and the heads of family. In doing so, her role in the Chaâba surpasses any biological distinction as Bouzid's daughter; she becomes the schoolmaster of both her youthful Chaâbi and of the adult males whom she instructs about the ways of the French school system.

4.2.3 Autofiction and narration of the childhood

Homi Bhabha's work on nation and narration tells us that no one element is what leads to the self-conception of national identity; instead, there is a cyclonic combination of repetitive performances of daily life which open up the space for writing the nation: The scraps, patches, and rages of daily life must be repeatedly turned into the signs of a coherent national culture, while the very act of the narrative performance interpellates a growing circle of national subjects. In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is

through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*. (144)

For the child, venturing into the world beyond the family equates to an immediate confrontation with the spectacle of the nation, even in its most finite aspects. Narration of childhood in the autofiction novel elucidates the primal origins of external influences on self-identification. Childhood is a *carte blanche* period of subjective development highly malleable to the cultural stimuli from surrounding environments and sources of authority, such as parents, schools, friends, and the national community at large. Begag writes the story of his childhood, as the story of all *Beur* childhoods in the 1960's or as Gans-Guinoune suggests, "Dans la littérature maghrébine, [...] Le 'je' y équivaut au 'nous'. Il peut aussi utiliser le 'nous' pour dévoiler le 'je'" (64). Begag's upbringing in the Chaâba is typical of the childhoods of so many other immigrants to France whose families congregated in similar extra-Algerian communities and experienced the disappointments of assimilation from both within their families and in the community at large. Yet, in fictionalizing his own [Begag's] experiences, he situates the *Beur* experience within the broader scope of the twentieth-century (his)tory of France.

Le Gone is an indisputably fictionalized account of Azouz Begag's upbringing in the shantytown known as "le Chaâba." The autodiegetic narrator bears the same name, birth year, and many other biographical similarities, yet it remains an account of fiction. This autofiction is uniquely attributable to *Beur* literature not only because of its author but more because of what it does. *Le Gone* acts as an artifact of the earliest *Beur* experiences in the post- Algerian War era. It embodies and embraces the experiences that were common or familiar to all young children of Maghrebi immigrants who were raised in culturally and linguistically Algerian, Moroccan, or Tunisian households and who faced numerous instances of racism and failed entries into French

culture which resulted in humiliation and frustration. This novel acts as a testament of these experiences that are in fact as French as any *Martine* book and advocates for a broader recognition of the existence of these communities and their tribulations as part of France's history.

However, this novel has a very oral quality that harkens to non-Western literary traditions and bridges the divide between storytelling and the novel. Timothy Brennan uses Walter Benjamin's theories of the form of the postmodern novel to show how these two cultural artifacts are representative of a much broader cultural tumult: "this conflict of the oral and the written, of course, suggest the conflicts now occurring between developed and emergent societies" (55). *Le Gone's* style would then indicate an authorial embodiment of the struggle between the oral traditions of his Algerianness and the literariness of French identity. Begag resolves this conflict through a hybrid textual format that gives voice to those in his community—namely his parents—who are illiterate and unable to have their own voice.

Writing that gives voice to the unseen, forgotten, or ignored, is a political demand upon the greater community of France to acknowledge the contributions and treatment of immigrants and their native-born descendants. *Le Gone* concretizes the *Beur* community through a combination of storytelling and autodiegesis in a language that is familiar to and fluent in that community. By employing elements of both storytelling and the novel, Begag makes this text unequivocally available to both the *Beur* and French communities.

This text straddles communities and narrative styles, yet it is still grounded in diegetic elements of introspection and denial in moments when Azouz's Arabness or Frenchness is probed. These instances elucidate, in the narrator's own words, the path or orientation that he must choose: "Je suis persuadé que le maître a commencé à comprendre *mon orientation*. J'ai

bien fait de me placer au premier rang” (61). In naming his decision to work hard towards academic success, Azouz aligns himself with a French orientation—an act considered by some in his Arab community as treasonous—an act Sara Ahmed would consider “disorientation.”

4.2.4 Les langues d'enfance

Kathryn Lay-Chenchabi asserts that Begag’s “position as both insider and outsider, of knowledge of the dominant language, allows [him] to subvert it from within. Known expressions are transformed through hybridization, and thus are owned by their user” (101). Begag transforms his own childhood language into text by replicating the sonority of his community’s vocabulary, especially the language of his parents. We are told that Azouz’s mother speaks very little, which typically suffices for her infrequent circulation between private and public locales.

Begag includes three small glossaries for the reader’s comprehension: “Guide de la phraséologie bouzidienne” (233), “Petit dictionnaire des mots bouzidiens (parler des natifs de Sétif)” (235), and “Petit dictionnaire des mots azouziens (parler des natifs de Lyon)” (237). These glossaries contain vocabulary and phrases that are a part of Azouz’s mother tongue, “le Chaâbi”, which incorporates, in addition to the dominant local language French, Arabic words, local slang, and Arabicized French expressions used by his father. The application of these terminologies paints a rich narrative backdrop to the story Azouz tells.

This linguistic portrait of his youth does more than just apply an aural tone to the page, it also fights back against what Mireille Rosello refers to as, “the underlying assumption [that] culture is viewed as a separate territory to which one ‘belongs’—a territory that corresponds with the boundaries of the nation” (17). Azouz’s language belongs to himself and to his fellow Chaâbi children, the few but fluent speakers of his true *langue maternelle*. The specificity of the Chaâbi

language is evinced late in the novel after Azouz's family has left the Chaâba and moved into a nearby apartment. When Azouz's cousin Ali introduces him to a classmate, Babar, who also happens to be a neighbor, the ensuing humorous conversation shows Azouz's linguistic specificity stemming from infrequent social interactions outside of the Chaâba:

-Qu'est-ce que tu branles, maintenant? questionne Ali. -Qu'est-ce que je quoi??
dis-je surpris. -Qu'est-ce que tu fous, quoi?
-Je vais chez moi. Je suis obligé parce que mon frère est déjà rentré, et il faut que
je rentre avec lui, sinon mon père me scalpe...
-Bon, on va t'accompagner, comme ça tu nous montreras où tu crèches... Je fais
une mine étonnée. Ali précise: -Où tu habites, quoi... *Putain, mais où tu as appris
à jacter, toi?*¹⁴⁸ Lui et Babar se moquent amicalement de mon ignorance.¹⁴⁹ (178)

What this passage highlights is another layer to Azouz's linguistic alterity, even amongst his *Beur* peers. Azouz's parents kept his extra-curricular vagabonding under strict watch and did not avail Azouz to the parlance of his peers, who he has now shown to be in a different linguistic profile than Azouz.

Because he only uses French in school and Arabic at home, Azouz's vocabulary in both languages is at times stymied by the well-separated venues he inhabits. When these same friends ask about Azouz's parents, he responds, "Kouci kouça" (179) which is a replication of his parents' accented pronunciation of "comme ci, comme ça." This and other instances show how Azouz replicates his parents' accented French: "Je lui ai dit non, *pardi!*"¹⁵⁰ The space of this familiar language complies with neither French nor Algerian borders yet does not completely

¹⁴⁸Italics are mine. "Jacter" is a very familiar slang term meaning to talk or converse.

¹⁴⁹"où tu crèches?" is a familiar statement, meaning "where do you crash (at night)?" or "where do you live?"

¹⁵⁰Pardi! stands for "par dieu". Other examples include Azouz's salutations, "B'jour, m'sieur! B'jour, m'dame!" (69)

erase their belonging to either territory.

4.2.5 Birthplace

Sara Ahmed repeatedly writes of inheritance—not in the financial sense—as an orientation, which begets and propagates certain cultural expectations and values; this means that a child automatically “inherits” certain cultural and societal attributes from their parents and their community. Ahmed uses the concept of “inheritance” to delineate presumed “heterosexuality” as an inheritable orientation, while I do not foray here into sexual identity issues, I believe this phenomenological concept is useful to trace the agency of language inheritance between culturally foreign parents and their native-born children. These orientations dictate the intangible parameters of how objects and actions are passed on to the next generation and how they are spatially and socially mapped out.

Objects also have their own horizons: worlds from which they emerge, and which surround them. The horizon is about how objects surface, how they emerge, which shapes their surface and the direction they face, or what direction we face, when we face them. So if we follow such objects we enter different worlds. (Ahmed 147). Examples of such objects would be ‘l’bomba’ and the modern amenities of their new apartment such as single beds, refrigeration, and television. It is a new birthplace for Azouz’s mother who is violently forced into a world unfamiliar and hostile to her. A world in which Azouz cannot yet himself navigate because of his age but is in turn forced into a position in which he must mother his own mother based on the new domestic objects foisted upon them. Here is where Algeria comes to die, suffocated by the “foreign” architecture” and lack of community Mireille Rosello contends that, “modernization becomes a challenge to the father’s authority over the tightly knit community of the *bidonville*”

(20). While the term “modernization” is effective in this context, it merits further expansion. I would suggest here that “modernization” might be understood as any “foreign” invasion (school books, newspapers, non- Chaâbi friends, nosy neighbors, French ideals on hygiene, etc.) of the private sphere of the Chaâba, which pierces the fragile biome of paternalistic and Algerian autonomy. These corrosive ideas and objects that are flagrantly smuggled back into the Chaâba largely originate in the French educational system.¹⁵¹

4.2.6 To be or not to be (Arabe)? That is the question

The school is the theatre in which French national culture is first presented to the *Beur* child. The nation is on stage but its audience—read: students’—participation is required. Performative speech acts of the classroom demand full submission to the historical imagination of France. Azouz’s participation—at times unknowing and at others fully cognizant—situates him at odds between his family’s culture and the one in which he is being educated. Young Azouz exuberant “Oui, maître!” (60) is a faithful response to Monsieur Grand’s classroom declaration, “Nous sommes tous descendants de Vercingétorix! [...] Notre pays, la France, a une superficie de...” (60). The use of the first- person plural pronouns “nous” and “notre” attempts to efface of diversion from the national historical narrative in the classroom. Azouz’s repetition of these falsely inclusive statements show complete belief in the educational system, “Le maître a toujours raison. S’il dit que nous sommes tous des descendants des Gaulois, c’est qu’il a raison, et tant pis si chez moi nous n’avons pas les mêmes moustaches” (60). “Le maître” is Azouz’s Frenchman role model *par excellence*; through his educated status and official title, he

¹⁵¹I extend that ideas also includes the use of the French language, which acts a tool of inverting power strata between the literate, French-speaking child and the illiterate, Arabic-speaking parent.

becomes the proxy through whom French cultural identity and heritage is learned.

Having been born in France, Azouz has only ever known Algeria through its fragmented cultural expressions in the Chaâba, especially through the image of his mother. The *maître* accepted as figure of authority and truth outside of the Chaâba cannot be denied in his public role. Zohra's interpretations of the young Chaâbi students' grades, for example, bring the national performance into the Chaâba. Superfluously proper behavior deemed desirable in the eyes of the French is, however, posed as undesirable and traitorous amongst the young "Arabe" community in the school. Azouz's compliance with French rules and the lessons of his teachers on French morale, hygiene, history, paint him as assimilated or at the very least, assimilatable. The resulting conversion seems to be taken as an affront against his Arabeness. Various moments in the text show instances in which Azouz's (Arabic) peers directly question his community loyalty and what Mireille Roseillo relates to the problem of "the need to imagine a particular group (whom they can see only in terms of dual allegiances or dual origins) as a special case because they would otherwise be obliged to abandon their assumption that culture is a territory to which one can belong" (23). "Départenance" would thus be a way of acknowledging that one had been called upon to "belong," while fully recognizing what would be lost if one remained satisfied with a national or cultural identity fashioned by others. The term offers an opportunity to rethink the supposed necessity to choose between universalism and culturalism without succumbing to disaffection or indifference. One might even think of the *Beurs* as the symptom of an era during which people can only envision "départenance" in terms of an apocalyptic vision (23).

In Azouz's newest school *Lycée Saint-Exupéry*, he is one of the only Arab students and as such, is burdened with both representing and defending his entire community. M. Loubon, his

pied-noir teacher, conducts a debate on “l’héritage” (210) in which Azouz unveils his community’s notion of the term, “Chez nous, tout est à tout le monde” (210)—a notion distinctly contrary to the French understanding of the term. Azouz must raise his voice to be heard over the classroom din, unveiling and affirming his Arab identity through this explanation. His innocent lesson is short-lived because a classmate blurts out: “C’est chez les sauvages qu’on fait ça!” (210).

Azouz’s evolves from “gone du Chaâba” to simply “enfant de Lyon” in his school years. His decision to become more like his French classmates of whom moral behavior and educational success is expected of them sets Azouz in yet another world of conflicted identity. In doing so, Azouz plays with the cultural demarcations of youth, between *Beur* and French at its most available site, the school. His teacher, M. Le Grand, conducts a lesson focused on “la morale” which for the children of the Chaâba evokes images and standards of an entirely different character; the Chaâbis morality is predicated on the autonomy of Algerian traditions and lifestyles re-composed in the space of the Chaâba. In explaining the proceedings of the “morale” debate, Azouz pits the French students against the Arab in their capacity for participation. “Une discussion s’engage entre les élèves français et le maître. Ils lèvent tous le doigt pour *prendre la parole*, pour *raconter* leur expérience, pour montrer leur concordance orale avec la leçon d’aujourd’hui.¹⁵² Nous, les Arabes de la classe, on a rien à dire” (57).¹⁵³ I emphasize the terms of speech here to draw attention to two issues. First, that the French students can all speak on behalf of morality which indicates assumptions of cultural superiority and a French claim to defining morality and secondly, as a result, the Arab students are voiceless,

¹⁵²Italics are mine.

¹⁵³This is an obvious play on words of the infamous statement, “Nos ancêtres les gaulois,” repeated by indigenous students in the French colonial education system.

therefore, inferior and immoral. Azouz situates himself dualistically in this statement first setting himself in opposition to the “*élèves français*”, then using the pronoun “*nous*” which sets up an us versus them construction of identity. The note of bitterness shows Azouz’s enlightenment to the plight of “*Arabes*” in France, which the *Chaâba* had protected him from. Meaghan Emery asserts that “*Le Gone du Chaâba* moves towards resolving the we/they schism by reclaiming a conciliatory voice for him [Azouz] within French narrative” (1152)—a voice that Azouz finds in the space of the classroom.

During the same passage, Azouz silently engages himself in the hygiene debate: “*les yeux, les oreilles grands ouverts*” (57). Opening the body to receive the national message is akin to the public (the debate) taking precedence over the private (the body), which Meaghan Emery considers necessary for successful national integration (1154). This pivotal commitment to become less “*Chaâbi*” and more French, a feat he sets out to accomplish through scholastic success, is again related to the body and its metamorphosis: “*J’ai honte de mon ignorance. Depuis quelques mois, j’ai décidé de changer de peau.*”¹⁵⁴ *Je n’aime pas être avec les pauvres, les faibles de la classe. Je veux être dans les premières places du classement, comme les Français*” (58). The choice of corporal terminology in the word “*peau*” sets up an irremediable dichotomy in which he links poverty to academic ability as if both were the fault of the child. It appears as if Azouz’s desire for acceptance would operate under the guise of full cultural, ethnic, familial erasure, however, his defense of *Arabe* belonging shows that he is merely seeking acceptance in both communities. His trailblazing path from “*Nous, les Arabes de la classe*” to the accusation that Arabs are “*les pauvres, les faibles de la classe,*” shuns not only his compatriots from the *Chaâba* but also the whole of Maghrebi second-generation immigrants in this same situation.

¹⁵⁴Italics are mine.

This disavowal signifies that Azouz has been so affected by the institutional racism and xenophobia inherent in certain nationalizing discourses that he himself has bought into this plan. He continues: “Mes idées sont claires à présent, depuis la leçon de ce matin. À partir d’aujourd’hui, terminé l’Arabe de la classe. Il faut que je traite d’égal à égal avec les Français” (59). Again, the erasure of Arab identification requires a limiting of the intersections between his public and private selves. For Azouz, treating and being treated on par with the French, requires academic achievements that surpass what even they are capable of. One immediate example would be the decision to sit at the front of the class; this abrupt spatial move draws the attention of the entire class, most importantly, the teacher and most indignantly, his fellow Arab classmates. Azouz understands this maneuvering is bold decision, an *orientation* that he has chosen to follow: “Je suis persuadé que le maître a commencé à comprendre mon *orientation*. J’ai bien fait de me placer au premier-rang” (61).¹⁵⁵ Azouz’s new *orientation* is a political one, not without its consequences. Moving to the front row is a symbolic of giving birth to a more French identity, which holds French values over the Algerian ones of his home.

4.2.7 The intersection of body and (birth)place

Despite Azouz’s “orientation” towards academic success *comme* French identity, he is also insistent on defending his belonging to the Arab community— a belonging that repeatedly returns to the body, especially his circumcision. As an act ordained by his parent’s religion— Islam—Azouz undergoes circumcision at the tender age of seven whence forth he is considered to be a man in the eyes of his family and community. The immediate recognition of brotherhood

¹⁵⁵ Italics are mine.

through “le bout coupé” is an insufficient marker of belonging, as it generally remains hidden and unseen. The more visible signs and actions of alliance with the French set Azouz up for failure of recognition amongst his Arab peers. Within the same few pages, Azouz goes on to defend his Arabeness through additional reference to his circumcision and through this rite of passage he deserves full consideration as an Arab. His claims range from the self-affirmative, “Non, cousin Moussaoui, j’ai passé mon diplôme d’Arabe. J’ai déjà donné” (109) to indignation, “Me traiter de faux frère, avec tout ce que j’ai donné!” (109) to the defeatist, “J’avais cédé mon bout de chair pour rien” (112). Azouz grounds his Arabness in his lost foreskin, a loss that begets another loss of trust in his community.

This corporeal defense continues to nullify his plight because his classroom performances of obedience and academic successes arouse suspicion of collusion amongst his peers. Azouz “dares” to defend or excuse their teacher—emblem of French authority *par excellence*—and becomes accused of national complicity and treason. One instance in particular portrays the conflict between Azouz and his “Chaâbi” band of brothers. During a lesson on proper hygiene, the boys’ teacher, Monsieur Grand asks his students to take off their shoes and lay their socks out on their desks for an impromptu hygiene inspection. Azouz politely obliges—relieved that he had changed into fresh socks that very morning—and takes special note of the “couleurs pures de ses chaussettes en Nylon” (96) of his French tablemate, Jean-Marc. This observation of a clean and obedient French classmate prefaces the *saleté* and *insolence* of the interaction one of Azouz’s fellow Chaâba inhabitants conducts with the teacher.

Moussaoui, Azouz’s cousin, refuses Monsieur Grand’s order to remove his socks, causing the latter to become irate: “Tu as les pieds sales. C’est pour ça que tu ne veux pas ôter tes chaussettes” (97). This accusation uses the informal “tu” which even Azouz notes “sans s’en

rendre compte, tutoie son élève” (97); this linguistic register change hints not at an authoritarian show, but a flash of cultural superiority in which the dirty-footed Moussaoui is not worthy of his respect. Moussaoui slams back: “Tu n’es qu’un pédé! Je t’emmerde” (97). The verbal attacks volley back and forth between student and teacher, until its zenith wherein the teacher breaches the Chaâbi walls, threatening, “Continuez! Quand vos parents ne toucheront plus les allocations familiales, vous serez content!” (98). Moussaoui attempts to paint the teacher as racist, but is stopped in his tracks when Monsieur Grand brings up Azouz’s classroom success: “‘Regardez Azouz... ‘C’est aussi un Arabe et pourtant il est deuxième de la classe’... ‘Alors, ne cherchez pas d’alibi’” (99). The teacher’s labeling Azouz as “Arabe” only exacerbates the confusion of his belonging in both France and his own community. Moussaoui’s subsequent accusations against Azouz require him to prove his loyalty to his cousins, though Azouz’s insistence falls on deaf ears:

—Si! Je suis un Arabe! —Si t’en étais un, tu serais dernier de la classe comme nous! fait Moussaoui. Et Nasser reprend: —Ouais, ouais, pourquoi que t’es pas dernier avec nous? Il t’a mis deuxième, toi, avec les Français, c’est bien parce que t’es pas un Arabe mais un *Gaouri* comme eux. (102)

It is, however, his actions in the classroom, his reluctance to stand with his cousin Moussaoui as he berates their teacher that calls his ethnic loyalty into question. Ahmed contends that: “The relationship between identification—wanting to be “like”—and alliance formation—who one sides with—is crucial” (145). Moussaoui lances the insults against Azouz for non-conformity, “‘T’es pas un Arabe! T’es un Français! Faux frère! Fayot!’” (103). These accusations strike Azouz below the belt as he defends himself by recalling his ultimate sacrifice:

Mais que leur ai-je donc fait, aux cousins de la classe? ‘T’es pas un Arabe!’ Si! Je

suis un Arabe et je peux le prouver: j'ai le bout coupé comme eux depuis trois mois maintenant. C'est déjà pas facile de devenir arabe, et voilà qu'à présent on me soupçonne d'être infidèle. (103)

The continuous slander against Azouz ends with him being called a "Gaouri", the *Beur* community term for a French person. The final insult is tantamount to a quasi-religious shunning which uses a label that is perhaps stronger than being considered a "faux-frère."

The repeated name-calling manifests itself as shame in Azouz. Holden, Ronning and Johannessen describe the concept of shame as the point, "as a result of their conscious understanding of the dislocation between the world of their families and that of late-modern society" (160). Even Azouz's initial avowal of shame is connected to the body and how it is employed to mimic French manners: "J'ai terriblement honte des accusations que m'ont portées mes compatriotes parce qu'elles étaient vraies. Je joue toujours avec les Français pendant la récré. J'ai envie de leur ressembler. J'obéis au doigt et à l'oeil à M. Grand" (103). The desire to physically resemble his French *compatriotes* is one that is rooted in a desire for whiteness, to erase his own physical otherness that, regardless of his actions will always prevent full acceptance into the white paradigm of French identity.

Ahmed makes a particular useful argument about heterosexuality and inheritance that can equally can be applied to the Azouz's situation of wanting to tend towards his classmates' whiteness or immediate recognition as French. If I substitute "ethnicity" where Ahmed uses the term "heterosexuality," the effect remains essentially the same: So the gift,¹⁵⁶ when given, produces the one who has received the gift as indebted and demands its endless return. [Algerian identification] is imagined as the future of the child insofar as [Algerian identification] is

¹⁵⁶Ahmed implies heterosexuality.

idealized as a social gift and even as the gift of life itself.¹⁵⁷ The gift becomes an inheritance: what is already given or pre-given. [Algerian identification] becomes a social as well as familial inheritance through the endless requirement that the child repay the debt of life with its life [or as Azouz might say, with his “bout coupé”]. The child who refuses the [Algerian identification] thus becomes seen as a bad debt, as being ungrateful, as the origin of bad feeling. (86)

Therefore, when Azouz makes conscientious moves to adopt a French identity through behavioral or physical adaptations, he is inherently rejecting “the gift” but still ends up a liability in both peer groups. He develops feelings of shame over his identitarian *prise de conscience* and the unintended consequences of his in-limbo identity:

À l'école Léo-Lagrange, les Arabes de la classe me traitaient de faux frère, parceque je n'étais pas dernier avec eux. Et ici, les Français ne vont pas tarder à jaser sur mon compte, parce que Loubon et moi nous avons l'Algérie en commun. Mais je ne les crains pas. J'ai un peu honte, c'est tout. (211)

What Azouz does in these instances of acquiescing to French society is tantamount to a cultural betrayal in the eyes of his community. As Lay-Chenchabi and Do posit, “[...]in traditional Maghreb society, an individual who sets himself apart from the group is not only to be frowned upon, but is committing a ‘péché impardonnable’ that of breaking the unity of the group” (Lay-Chenchabi and Do 43). This is how Begag writes the narrator’s action into the backdrop of his family’s history. Time and time again, even the most innocent of acts or utterances have major unintended consequences which break up the unity of the Chaâba, for example, the police raid on illegal butchering in the Chaâba.

¹⁵⁷In my substitutions here, the idea of it being life-giving itself allows for a religious connection to Islam in *Le Gone*. Azouz’s father, as a devout Muslim man, frequently speaks of Allah’s guidance in all things from creation to the outcome of one’s fortunes.

4.2.8 Les liens de parentalité

Azouz is a cultural chameleon who adapts to his surroundings and its varying circumstances with less ambiguity than the adults in his life. His adaptability is not always seen as a skill or talent—it is also be seen as an act of cultural treason or a sign of the impossibility of full cultural integration. Azouz is depicted more often as having to validate his Arabeness more than to prove himself worthy of existence in the French sphere. Azouz’s family alliance is also greatly challenged from within domestic spaces through interactions with his mother. In one passage where Azouz laments of their living conditions in the Chaâba (Algeria) and his desire to move (to become French), his litany becomes too burdensome for the mother to bear and she breaks down into tears, “Ah, mon Dieu, que t’ai-je donc fait pour mériter une telle souffrance? Il me fait pleurer chaque soir, et mes enfants s’en prennent à moi, ils me torturent... Ah, mon Dieu, laisse-moi mourir!” (144). The mother’s typical silence is broken, the edifice of ethnic strength and stability has collapsed. When Azouz comments, “Je me suis senti l’âme d’un assassin, celle du bourreau qui m’a volé mon bout de chair,” he equates one painful life-changing experience with that of his mother’s. There is a distinct before and a distinct after in which the rupture of the experience reorients one’s construction of the world. Abdel-Jouad portends that, “The son’s desire to emancipate his mother is first and foremost, a desire for self-emancipation” (116).

That young Azouz was born in Lyon, France makes him an excellent arbiter of the conflicted national identities espoused in this text. Azouz routinely hears of stories of *El-Ouricia*, a distant land he has never seen with his own eyes.¹⁵⁸ The ramshackle Algerian shantytown that

¹⁵⁸“El-Ouricia” is the Arabic word for Algeria and Azouz often uses when his parents speak of their distant homeland. Azouz does switch back and both between *El-Ouricia* and *l’Algérie* when referring to Algeria in the

he grows up in is the only place he has ever called home, yet it too becomes eventually becomes foreign to him. Azouz first becomes aware of his “foreign” upbringing at school during a lesson about hygiene routines with Monsieur Grand, one of his elementary school teachers. Though Azouz was born in France, he is marked by society—both by his “compatriots” and his fellow classmates—as not fully belonging to one side of the other. His attempts to obey both the rules of the school and the rules of the Chaâba outline an impossible reconciliation of these two sources of authority, which opens up the space for a new identity, independent of both. John Durham Peters argues that Azouz’s situation requires considering his identity distinct from his place of birth or place of upbringing: “In conceiving of identities beyond the boundaries of national origin, etc. we also open up the space for nomadic subjects whose identity is not based on a relationship to any one fixed place, community or culture” (121). Though Azouz might be a “nomadic subject,” he is not immune from the pressures of both affiliative identities.

4.3 MES MAUVAISES PENSÉES

“Étrangement, l'étranger nous habite: il est la face cachée notre identité, l'espace qui ruine notre demeure, le temps où s'abîment l'entente et la sympathie” (Kristeva qtd. in Delvaux 685)

text, yet use of the former tends to be associated with the emotional, almost mythical place that his parents left behind.

4.3.1 Introduction

In *Mes mauvaises pensées*, the narrator, much like Azouz, recollects images and emotions through confessional flashes of her childhood and anxieties; in doing so, she explicates the contours of her national identit(ies) as *Beur*. This novel takes place within the space of her psychologist's office, which much like the private and intimate spaces of the Chaâba allows a frankness not possible in more open settings. A child of an Algerian father and a French mother, the female narrator never explicitly names herself, recounts her lived identit(ies)—gendered, sexual, as a child, as French, as Algerian, as an author, as a daughter, as a lover, as a friend—to her therapist and confronts throughout how her dual-national identity is as much inherently learned and inherited as it is biological.

Pensées was published in 2005, but spans the time between then and 1967 the year in which Bouraoui was born in Rennes. The very span of time between the publications of *Le Gone*, 1986 and *Pensées* in 2005 is one fraught with increased tensions between marginalized *Beur* populations and the cis-French.¹⁵⁹ The nearly forty-year span between the immediate aftermath of Algerian independence and French decolonialization and *Pensées* publication was fraught with cultural violence and societal confusion about France's changing role in global order. This cultural and political unrest comes through in the frenetic stream of conscience flow of the novel as well as through the frequent allusions to guilt, shame, and “mauvaises pensées.”

Bouraoui experienced these tense years acutely because she was raised in a land she claims she can never again be reunited with, Algeria. From the age of six months until her early teens, Bouraoui grew up in Algiers where her life followed a mirror-image path of Azouz's life

¹⁵⁹It is important to temporally situate this work on two fronts because while the book was published in 2005, it covers the author's entire lifespan, nearly forty years.

of mis-belonging. Bouraoui was only superficially integrated into Algerian society, attending French-language schools, participating in extra-curricular activities for expatriots, and maintaining friendships primarily with other French and European children. Her statement, “[...] je sais que je ne suis pas comme les pieds-noirs” (112), made about her own departure from Algeria, which took place in part because of to her mother’s deteriorating health—not under the same conditions of duress as the *pied-noirs*’ of the late 1950’s and early 1960’s. This statement suggests also an acute awareness of her French and Algerian heritage which more strongly distances herself from the Algerianized classes of *pied-noir* who had been more firmly rooted in Algerian language and culture yet remained French. If she cannot identify with the *pied-noirs*, nor with the Breton members of her extended family, nor with the *Beurs* of France, than with whom can she associate, how does she construct a sense of national identity if she does not belong anywhere? I argue that her national identity exists in the figments of her imagination, it exists only when others call it into being, it exists in the depictions of nature, the body, and Parisian sidewalks. While it certainly has roots and anchoring points, her sense of national identity can be likened to freckles on her skin. There is a genetic link to skin freckling, which indicates an inevitability of their appearance if exposed to certain conditions, namely full sun exposure. (Nina) writes of her childhood body, “j’ai des tâches de rousseur à cause du soleil” (53). The French term for freckles is “tâches de rousseur,” with the term “tâche” meaning “stain” and “rousseur” meaning “redness,” we then might consider freckles as an analogy of the fragmented stains of her national identities which appear and fade according to conditions of exposure to locales, languages, or family members. These “stains” either become more visible or slowly dissipate and change her appearance and subjectivity as either French or Algerian, though she is always capable of both, she is never fully at home in either, leaving traces of herself

wherever she goes.

In his introduction to *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics*, José Esteban Muñoz asks the question, “Can a self or a personality be crafted without proper identifications?” (7). This question, posted in the context of queer theories of gender, sexuality and identity, relates to the permanent cleavage in her own perception of self and in the way that the structuring of self-identity in *Pensées* eludes the terminology of identification. What it does however is attempt to craft a resolution to disjointed childhood and familial affiliations; the resulting identity remains manifold and settles for being a mosaic of parts of the author’s identity. (Nina) shows us that subjects exist in a constant state of fluctuation between external determinations and disidentifications and that, for persons of her culturally hybrid background, the weight of other persons’ labels on her identity define prevents her from fully defining herself.

The concerns of self-identification are essential to my reading of *Pensées* where I link maternal alterity to identity confusion in genre, language, and birthplace. I equate belonging here with a desire to build relationships and heal the guilt and sense of abandonment that she experiences at the hands of her family.¹⁶⁰ Her acute empathetic suffering almost always loops back to the mother and grandmother and their unrequited mother/daughter relationship. The positing of the self in *Pensées* develops through the diverse recollections, memories, repetitions, and subjective experiences that structure the schizophrenic flow of her confessions. The narrator flows from one topic to the next with little remorse or closure. These utterances manifest themselves through corporeal and natural images of the author’s (childhood) past as evidence of a disoriented conception of the French nation. These considerations lead to the question, how

¹⁶⁰See Freeman 308.

does this novel upend normative approaches and understandings of the family in their bearing upon national affiliations? *Pensées* appeals for a reformulation of the theoretical approaches used in *Le Gone* to account for generic and socio-historical dissimilarities. I suggest that expressions of childhood hauntings and adult anxieties stem from the non-linearity of her family ties, or disruption of inheritance. In this instance, non-linearity helps to trace the role reversals of parent and child and skip certain generations in explicating bonds for or against the French nation.

As a native daughter of both France *and* Algeria (literally and figuratively), Bouraoui's identity crises are more corporeal and abstract than in *Le Gone*. In *Pensées*, assimilation is at once presumed, being the daughter of French mother, yet simultaneously denied, because as we see later in the novel, the author's arrival in France at age of fourteen proves too late an age to erase the effects of her Algerian upbringing. Bouraoui's trajectory begins with her birth in Rennes leading to her childhood and early adolescence in Algeria, mid-adolescence in Zurich, with a final settling in Paris; a de-territorialization distinct from the one's depicted in *Le Gone* and *Le pays*. The narrator in *Pensées* explicitly tells us, "[mon père] dit que je suis en train devivre—le dépaysement—[qui] est fondateur pour mon avenir, qu'il faut visiter le monde pour se connaître soi, ce que je comprends ainsi: il faut visiter les autres pour se savoir soi, nous n'aimons jamais la même personne, nous nous adaptons au dépaysement" (49). Here, the present tense refers to a continuum of displacement, in place since the beginning of her life, where a life of cultural confusion has been the only line presented to her. Sara Ahmed herself is the product of mixed-race parents of which she writes, "[the mixed-race family] does not easily incorporate[d] as a social ideal, precisely because the two sides do not necessarily create a new line" (145). Without a new line to continue the family heritage of backgrounds of association (as Ahmed suggest "whiteness" and the objects and backgrounds which support "whiteness" as an

orientation to tend toward), it becomes nearly impossible to consolidate the two worlds, one from each parent, without compromising one or the other.

What appears to ground the author amidst frequent displacement is the unlikely fixity of her emotions, “je me dis que les *zones* floues sont grandes et multiples et je sais que ma vie est d’un trait, mes émotions ne changent pas selon mon âge [...] qu’il n’y a que des ruptures ou des silences, que tout se répète, qu’il y a quelque chose d’infini dans la vie qu’on ne peut capturer” (245). The repetition of life and its problems is underscored through the transferal of anxieties from one generation to another, which in the context of *Pensées* errs on the maternal side. The continuity of emotions infers the absence of a stereotypically innocent childhood and, in Kathryn Bond Stockton’s words, a “retroactive birth.” (Nina) gestates herself in weekly one-hour sessions the (womb-like) space of the therapist’s office, where she tumultuously works through the established worlds of her life to forge yet further worlds of interaction.

In Elizabeth Freeman’s essay “Queer Belongings,” she offers the term “belonging” to express a more profound framework for thinking “queerness” and “belonging”. She proposes that [queer belonging] “is to long to be bigger not only spatially, but also temporally, to ‘hold out’ a hand across time and touch the dead or those not born yet, to offer oneself beyond one’s own time” (299). This is substantiated through parental role reversal and the desire to resolve past relationships and their continued effects on her life. Bouraoui’s identification as queer appears to be the only static identity in her life as it does inherit traumas from the past in the same way as national belonging does. (Nina’s) mixed-race/mixed-nationality family thus infused every type of relationship in her life, including those to material objects.

There is never any mention of political assimilation because of her dual national identities, however, an interior clamoring between her past, her family, and herself may be read

of symbolic of the struggles she undoubtedly endured within the institutional structures of France and Algeria. Writing through her childhood as an adult, (Nina) maintains the unique advantage of being able to retrospectively parse out the very origins of her identity crises; this component remains a zone of resolution, while national identity is tormented.

4.3.1.1 Les figures parentales. In *Pensées*, both parents are implicitly tropes of a disoriented belonging to the nation. Their choice of spouse and residential territory demonstrates a refusal to be imagined into their national communities. (Nina's) mother and father are painted most commonly through the public and private spheres through two tableaux: corporality and materiality. The mother's identities are grounded in bodily images and affiliations, whereas the father's identities are embedded in the material preservation of the past. The parents transcended as mere biological relations and become more than parents, they form additional kinship bonds that blur the boundaries between parent and child. This ambiguity appears to be—at least in part—a significant cause of the angst and anxiety expressed in the space of the therapist's office, the roots of which are anchored in the turbulent past of the narrator's matrilineage. Unnamed, yet readily implied accusations of improprieties between the (French) maternal grandfather and narrator's mother, underscore the non-linearity of the author/narrator's life progression.

(Nina's) mother is maladroitly constructed through both public and private spheres. Her interactions within the public sphere are brief and often lead to a retreat into the deep emotive recesses of her private identities. (Nina) exploits this through the reversal of roles between mother and child, with (Nina) taking up the tasks of family management in the presence of the mother. In recounting her childhood, (Nina) works through the childhood she never had and her mother's past to alleviate the fears that have subsequently been caused by the ancestral violence:

Mon grand-père me fait penser à l'Algérie parce que ma mère disait souvent, là-

bas: ‘J’ai dû mettre deux mille kilomètres entre lui et moi,’ ce qui me faisait penser à une immense fil invisible, dont les extrémités étaient reliées à jamais, par un sentiment si fort qu’il ressemblait à de l’adoration, ou à de la haine; je pense vivre, aussi, au travers de cela, et quand ma colère vient, je crois qu’il y a une *information* familiale, on ne transmet pas seulement la chair à ses enfants mais aussi les conflits; le rapport de ma mère avec son père influe aussi sur le rapport que j’ai avec le monde, avec les hommes.¹⁶¹(157)

“Information” could also be read here as “déformation” alluding to the unspeakable trauma between father and daughter; within the family structure, this lingering doubt and fear destroys the foundational structure of the family as a place of protection and comfort. The incarnation of fear and violence is posited as a biologically inherited trait that can be made to be recessive through the buffer that scriptural walls of the novel offer. The mother’s body is mapped out through the sacred intimate moments a mother and child share; the instances which seem to have been perpetrated by the narrator’s grandfather, in the absence of a strong mother. The grandfather is the origin and epicenter of the familial fears and in turn incarnates the image of the brutal colonizer, which is scarcely hidden from the father/son-in-law relationship.

(Nina’s) *mauvaises pensées* are essentially expressions of the author’s fears of inflicting bodily harm and pain on those she cares for most dearly. More than that they are feelings of inadequacy shrouded in a desire to alleviate the irreconcilable pain of past genealogical traumas:

les phobies se sont déplacées, comme moi je me déplace, du réel à un monde qui

¹⁶¹The emphasis is mine.

n'existe pas, l'angoisse est une chute vertigineuse, de l'esprit, dans le corps: je tombe ou je *me* tombe, je deviens le vigile de mes mains, celles qui pourraient griffer, étrangler, dépecer; on se réveille un jour et ce jour n'est plus le jour d'avant, on se réveille avec un visage et sous la beauté de la peau se déploient les écailles d'un monster, je ne sais plus qui je suis et pire encore, je crois devenir ce que j'ai toujours été. (15)

The residue of family traumas is incarnated in (Nina) as a set of dangerous impulses hidden under beautiful corporal façades:

La beauté de sa peau [de la mère] que j'ai peur d'ouvrir avec une petite paire de ciseaux qu'elle a laissée près du téléphone, la beauté de sa solitude, de ce chagrin dans mon Coeur qui me donnera toujours des yeux différents sur les femmes que je fréquente, sur les femmes de la rue; toutes les femmes sont seules, parce qu'elles passent toutes par le corps isolé de ma mère que je viens voir chaque dimanche puis un dimanche sur trois à cause de mes pensées. (23)

This assertion highlights (Nina's) attempt to distance herself from her mother, coincidentally giving birth to herself, and supplanting the violence of her mother's childhood. The appearance of resolution is however consistently denied in the author's recounting of the process of reconciling her inherited fears.

The mother figure is slippery as she is not easily categorized, at times asserting herself as a mother-subject in generational lineage and authority, while at other times, she is relegated to the state of being a child. The fluctuation of roles appears to be linked, in part, to "territoire," a term (Nina) frequently employs to imagine a safe-space for her "entre-deux" identity. One is born in a "pays" but officiates the space of the "territoire" under their own self-identifying

auspices. In *Le Pays*, (Marie) also writes of “territoires” as spaces of disorientation which deplete any sense of national belonging for political gain:

Une terre, ça appartient à quelqu’un. Un territoire, ça se dit même pour les animaux. “Territoire Cheyenne” pour laisser les Indiens sans terre, “territoires d’outre-mer” pour n’être pas émancipés. On est d’une terre. La terre est le sol où on enterre ses morts. Les États sont là pour que les terres existent, et que les territoires n’existent pas. (128)

The mother is inscribed as the corporeal manifestation of the geographic space of the (Nina’s) French and Algerian communities. “Ma mère occupe tous mes territoires [...] Alors se supposent nos deux lieux, l’Algérie sur la France puis la France sur l’Algérie” (253). Intertwined in maternal and territorial affectivity, (Nina) homes in on the interstices of international objects and how each affects the others. In a note of conclusion, (Nina) asks herself if, “la conscience enregistre ces trous noirs, si nos peurs d’adulte ne sont pas reliés à nos égarements d’enfants” (282). The purpose of the section is to observe the fragments of (Nina’s) identity which depict the nation as disoriented in its failure to escape the “emancipatory strategies” (Hirsch “Mother,” 8) that autofictional novels provide.

4.3.2 Generic non-conventions

According to Alex Hughes, the autobiographical genre, establishes parameters for sexual difference to be incorporated into the development of identity:

L’écriture de soi tends, as a discourse of selfhood and experience, to incorporate representations of sexuality and sexual difference, to point up issues of gender and engenderment and, often, to privilege its rendering of sexed subjectivity—

because, self-evidently, sex and gender (formation) constitute fundamental organizing components of human identity. (4)

If we replace sexual with national or sexuality with nationality, we maintain the same effect these components are fundamental for the study of a post-modern subject that Crang and Thrift posit as originating from the “textualization of the self” (8).

Gasparini insinuates that: “toute narration autobiographique tend à se développer comme un roman” (18), which is the case for all novels in this chapter but particularly so for *Mes mauvaises pensées*. This autofictive novel is written in non-stop prose, with no paragraph breaks, subtitles or headings. The unique format of this text is a stream of conscience adaptation of (Nina’s) confessions to Docteur C. during several years of psychotherapy sessions. Hayes affirms that: “If the Nation is a narrative construct, the challenge to traditional narrative forms[...] is also a challenge to the Nation” (123). Thus, the fragmented and restless writing that Mañes refers to as a “ritournelle sans fin” (34) is a re-writing of the nation in such a way that textually and physically replicates the experience of constantly shifting affiliations and adaptations. (Nina) employs this circular writing as an entity, whose whole becomes a place of protection and soothing—a frenetically spun cocoon or as (Nina) notes: “L’écriture est l’écriture du mouvement de la vie” (172). And (Nina’s) life has taken her from Rennes to Alger then Zurich to Paris with stops in Mexico and Provincetown—the life of a postmodern nomad. Vollmer argues that: “in self narratives, the temporally different elements of one’s existence are integrated and regarded as interrelated parts of a whole, of a single life that unfolds continuously over time” (201). While this does apply to *Pensées*, (Nina) tells us that her life is a series of events that constitute more than just one life.

Despite the lack of a named protagonist, we know that this work is self-referential

because of the parallel biographical facts of (Nina's) and Bouraoui's lives. What we do not know is whether or not this text is in fact the ultimate cure to Bouraoui's life-long identity quest as Mañes so fervently iterates: "*Mes mauvaises pensées* est, somme toute, le récit de la vie en partage et l'accomplissement identitaire, générique et scriptural, par la rencontre de l'âme sœur. C'est finalement par l'écriture que Bouraoui, après un long parcours, parvient à dévoiler et à braver tous les interdits" (46). However, I would agree more with Agar-Mendousse who suggests that: "The Bouraouian autobiographical subject is always becoming, always already inclining towards something else, in constant metamorphosis" (28), which I understand as there being no possible culmination to the exploration and writing of her own identity. Grasset extends a third way of understanding the identity quest in *Pensées*:

L'écriture de *Mes mauvaises Pensées*—cette écriture circulaire—tente de résoudre un conflit identitaire par le biais de la narration des événements importants de la vie du narrateur, mais la seule réponse que Bouraoui finit par accepter est l'identification du conflit initial. Il nous reste l'écriture, bien sûr, mais aussi la prise virtuelle de conscience de tout ce que Bouraoui a toujours été. Dans son inachèvement, la tâche de l'écriture est finalement accomplie. (182)

Therefore, as Grasset reasons, the circularity and repetitions of the non-stop stream of prose in (Nina's) writing leads her only to a confirmation that it is impossible to reconcile the identity, but that it is possible to put an end to the process of writing. Helen Vassallo also recognizes (Nina's) identity as an evolution (50), the writing/genre of which will morph over time to accommodate new aspects of her self. All three scholars seem to imply that, as Vassallo offers: "The only way in which she can embrace this 'othered' identity as an adult is to live it in France and evoke it in writing [...] (50). But what kind of writing is actually being alluded to?

(Nina) frequently stakes out her claim as the pen-holder in this novel, while stating her ownership of the novel's writing: "je ne suis plus l'auteur du roman, je suis à l'intérieur du roman, et je forme à mon tour une particule infime de ce qui constitue le monde, notre monde, mon monde" (178). The dispensation of the author and interiorization of the narrator is another reason why I have chosen to use parentheses around the author's name. (Nina) chastises her therapist Docteur C. for her lack of note-taking reaction during her psychotherapy sessions as a means of staking her claim to authorship" "[...] vous ne prenez aucune note alors que je déploie un livre, le livre rêvé, qui ne s'écrit pas mais qui se dit" (16). This process of writing, nay, pronouncing a novel into existence, is an act of self-discovery, "[l'écriture] ne vise pas à faire connaître celui qu'il était mais à faire surgir un aspect de lui-même qu'il ignore" (Nizon qtd. In Gasparini 19). (Nina) slowly divulges the secrets of her identity which present themselves as a dispersal of Proustian flashbacks to her childhood which reveal the sporadic imagery of her budding queer identity and complications of establishing a national identity in line with family belongings.

Il y a un glissement de la terre algérienne sur mon corps, je veux dire par là que j'ai le statut de l'enfant sauvage. Je ne me suis pas remise de cela, vous savez. L'écriture vient de là. Je n'ai aucun désir du monde; je ne pouvais qu'écrire en retrait, seule, penchée sur mon bureau, seule avec les spirales des mots; l'écriture c'est la terre, c'est l'Algérie retrouvée, c'est l'état sauvage aussi: tout mon amour pèse sur ma main qui écrit, j'écris ce que j'aurais dû vivre: je couvre la terre quittée. (191)

The form of the novel itself supports this restitution of Algeria. Although there appears to be no political point to be made in writing without pause—as the novel is written as a catalogue

of confessions to Bouraoui's therapist, Docteur C., who is only ever referenced in subtle, passing 'vous'(s). The therapist has no voice other than occasional digested reiterations resurfacing through the pen of narrator. This depicts the therapist as the archivist but (Nina) ultimately as the curator of her mental archives and responsible for the resulting neutralized identity.

The narrator does not extend an imagined community of belonging to either her French or Algerian identities. As Anderson hypothesized, the nation must be imagined as recognizable among its subjects. *Pensées* opposes an imagined national community because she repulses her maternal French grandparents who are depicted as the standardbearers of imagined Frenchness—the grandfather is a retired doctor, her grandmother a neatly kempt housewife with more affection for her small dogs than her own progeny. (Nina) is in turn repulsed by the consequences of their actions or inactions against her mother from whom she inherits fear and trauma and as an effect never fully claims to know herself as French with Algerian experience nor Algerian with French tendencies. The complexity of the author's writing style is evidenced in the unique approach taken in *Pensées*. Written in stream of conscience verse, Bouraoui's prose replicates, in both rapidity and repetition, the mental confusion associated from her bi-national upbringing. It is indeed an uneasy task to speak of a "writing style" within this novel as the genre itself becomes part of the recounting; perhaps one might say an "inked speech act" to explain this novel. The negation of the author as a(n) (auto)biographical subject merits further analysis and the phenomenological approach of assessing authorial content helps to explicate the space of the novel itself in this work.

(Nina) tells us, "je ne suis plus l'auteur du roman; je suis à l'intérieur du roman et je forme à mon tour une particule infime de ce qui constitue le monde, notre monde, mon monde" (187). The repetition of "monde" reinforces my response to Badiou's questions of "In what

worlds are we living in?” by advocating a multiplicity of spaces in which the novel at once relies on the biographical aspects of the author’s life as its muse, yet supplies a guarded layer of entry into authorial intention. “Je suis à l’intérieur du roman” implies a corporalization of the text. The narrator’s utterances establish an indelibly marked skin in which she can both hide and present herself to the world. The novel becomes the portable vault of the confessions spoken to Docteur C., akin to her own identity conflicts which only ever appear stable when reduced to the space of the narrator’s body. Phenomenology would tell us that, “to know [the author’s] mind, we must not refer to anything we actually know about the author—biographical criticism is banned—but only to those aspects of his or her consciousness which manifest themselves in the work itself” (Eagleton 51).

Bouraoui channels her internal musings through confessions to her psychologist and in a manner of speaking, effaces her external personality. Reducing the novel to the speech acts of this private space, bridges the external and internal conflicts that asunder the narrator’s conscience. The space of the psychologist’s office as well as the space between Docteur C. and the narrator grants a fulfillment of “the human desire to communicate, to be believed, to be taken seriously” (Willging 4). Traces of auto-referential information are evident throughout; the narrator is never named and cannot be named because “the narrating ‘I’ is intended to be read as a textual representation of the author herself” (4). If the narrator were to be named, the freedom of confession that the sacrosanct space of the office grants would shatter due to a loss of implied anonymity and would subsequently force an attachment to a being unwilling to be tied down to a specific title.

4.3.3 La peau buvard

Her dual identity is frequently evoked through sentiments of corporality and draws the distinction between the public and private sphere of the nation to the level of the body. “Je suis aussi la peau buvard de ce monde comme je suis la peau de ma grand- mère qui enterre sa seconde fille et qui dira un jour à mon père dans un simple murmure: ‘Ce sont toujours les meilleurs qui partent’” (80). The numerous references to blood “sang” and skin “peau” generally form the barrier between her public and private selves and are nearly always linked back to a disjointed sense of family belonging. In one scene, Bouraoui recounts to her therapist the events and emotions associated with her presence at her maternal aunt’s funeral. This scene is written as an avowal of her own concept of identity as it is one that searches to delineate a boundary around it: “je sais rien de ses derniers jours, je ne sais rien de ces derniers mois, nous sommes une famille éclatée et c’est la raison de ma présence, ici, dans votre cabinet, je répare les liens” (81). At the funeral, Bouraoui desperately seeks out a familiar trait amongst her maternal family members, perhaps in attempts to substantiate a physical and corporeal connection to France:

C’est un travail de magicien, je cherche, dans ce cercle [amongst her French family members surrounding her aunt’s casket], une ressemblance dans nos visages, dans nos voix, dans notre allure, je ne trouve pas, je cherche, sur les photographes de mes grands-parents algériens, une ressemblance et je crois trouver, dans les yeux, dans le menton, sur la peau, mais je ne sais pas vraiment, je suis un parfait mélange, je suis quelqu’un qu’on ne peut pas reconnaître dans les traits d’un autre. C’est mon seul côté étranger, puisque je suis française, puisque j’ai la nationalité de cette famille. Mais je n’ai pas leurs yeux, mais je n’ai pas leur peau. (81)

The search for herself in her family members' physical traits attempts to extend her personal connection to France beyond mere political subjectivity. In finding herself more genetically similar to her Algerian ancestors, she dissociates herself from a subcutaneous sense of belonging to France. The declaration, "je suis un parfait mélange, je suis quelqu'un qu'on peut pas reconnaître dans les traits d'un autre," also excludes (Nina) from the contemporaneous burgeoning *Beur* identity. These statements reaffirm the truly singular situation from which Bouraoui the writer and (Nina) narrator arise and resist against third-space labels. Her physical invisibility grants her both the freedom to circulate between French and Algerian cultures, but also burdens her with never being able to situate herself "here" or "there" or even be able to ascribe to the collective identities forming out of *Beur* and immigrant cultures. Though I have argued that Bouraoui's identity is more or less irreconcilable, there are many points in the novel where the narrator expresses an orientation towards one or the other national identity. A close reading of these mother/daughter interactions is where the most promising instances of disorientation appear.

The mother is an essential component to raising a child as French, because she is an easily identifiable point of origin and conveyor of French culture. However, (Nina's) mother does not occupy the classically constructed figure of sympathy and subtle strength. Instead, her mother is feeble, sickly, and ultimately confined to private spaces. Like Azouz, (Nina) writes herself as a sort of mother who must take care of her parent as much as she must take care of herself.

Bouraoui's mother is from an upper-middle-class family in Rennes, where the author herself was born just after *la guerre d'indépendance*. Therefore, her connection to the Algeria she was raised in is not entirely dissimilar from Azouz's version because it passes through a

maternal filter. Both (Nina) and Azouz are connected to Algeria through their blood lineage which (Nina) always links back to her father as a living vestige of the essence that she left behind, “Mon père, il est le seul lien avec le pays où j’ai grandi” (270). Bouraoui’s father remained in Algeria after she moved to France with her mother and becomes a hologram-like figure such as those in *Le pays’ Maison des morts*, who can be summoned into an intangible abstract existence through photographs and phone calls. (Nina), too, exists in an Algerian hologram of herself, “Je suis irréaliste là-bas, je suis encore l’hologramme” (254). Her Algerian side is ephemeral yet her French side is continuously dismantled through the revealed family discontinuities between grandmother and child.

Mes mauvaises pensées requires an altogether different approach for several reasons. First, the craggy terrain of the stream of conscience writing makes finding themes within the novel quite tricky. Second, the novel is written as an adapted account of therapy sessions with Docteur C., Bouraoui’s therapist. Though the novel’s clinical setting is not immediately obvious, the novel’s opening line, “Je viens vous voir parce que j’ai des mauvaises pensées” (9) refers us to the present, referring to the narrator’s current grappling with anxiety and fearful thoughts that we learn much later originate from un-reconciled relationships and memories of the author’s childhood. These open-ended vestiges of past trauma are slippages in the author’s ability to form a clear conception of her self.

4.3.4 La langue de l’autre

Language is always a marker of difference and of belonging. Different registers and dialects are immediate signals of alterity. Though (Nina) grew up in Algiers, her Arabic language skills are

limited. (Nina's) mother never learned to speak Arabic and because of this non-communicability further concretizing her into a traditional role of motherhood and master of the domestic space. "et j'entends des garçons qui parlent entre eux, certains en français, d'autres en arabe, je ne comprends pas tout et je m'en veux de cela, je suis presque totalement française, à cause de ma langue maternelle, et pourtant il y a ici quelque chose qui se fait [...]" (93). (Nina's) childhood idiolect defines her beyond her control, "[...] monsieur B. rit parce que je parle arabe avec un accent français, c'est une autre famille, c'est un autre pays, c'est une autre Algérie, vous savez, ou alors c'est un pays dans un pays" (64). Her language within a language, country within a country mimics the narration of this text.

4.3.5 Lieu(x) de naissance(s)

Though Nina Bouraoui's official *lieu de naissance* is France, nothing about how the author develops her sense of connection to the actual place of her birth denotes any sense of pride or belonging as in *Le Gone* and *Le pays*. (Nina) attests to this in a dogged admission of her family origins: "C'est toujours cette histoire, au fond de moi, de venir de deux familles que tout oppose, les Français et les Algériens. Il y a ces deux flux en moi, que je ne pourrai jamais diviser, je crois n'être d'aucun camp" (52). This final sentence, "je crois n'être d'aucun camp," might be read as "je crois *naître* d'aucun camp," that the place of her actual birth is irrelevant because (Nina) is born through cross-Mediterranean moves and personal explorations of identity. In this sense, she removes her mother's pivotal role in birthing her and appropriates that task unto herself. This birthing process appears to happen over the three-year period during which Bouraoui participated in weekly psychotherapy sessions. In a press release for her publishing house, Éditions Stock, Bouraoui offers an explanation for the origins of *Pensées*:

À chaque séance, j’avais l’impression de lui donner un livre, il s’agissait toujours de liens, de séparations, de rencontres, à chaque séance, je construisais et déconstruisais un édifice amoureux. *Mes mauvaises pensées* est le récit de cette confession, j’ai voulu raconter le mériter de vivre et le métier d’aimer. Ce n’est pas le récit d’une thérapie, ce n’est pas une légende, c’est un roman parce que c’est une histoire rapportée; c’est l’histoire de ma famille, de l’Amie, de la Chanteuse, d’Hervé Guibert, c’est l’histoire de mes deux pays. Je n’ai jamais quittée l’Algérie, on m’a enlevée à l’Algérie, je n’ai jamais fait mes adieux, j’ai appris à devenir en France et je crois que je suis née deux fois. *Mes mauvaises pensées* est aussi mon retour vers le pays où j’ai laissé quelque chose qui n’a jamais cessé de grandir dans mon dos, et qui n’a jamais cessé de m’effrayer.¹⁶²

(Bouraoui, Éditions Stock)

Bouraoui’s comment that “je suis née deux fois” forces the questions of where the second birth might have happened, Alger? Paris, upon her return to France? Somewhere in between? I would argue that it takes place in Alger because there is such a rupture between landscapes, material objects, languages, gender roles, and general perceptions of the world. The paradigm shift took place after her departure from Alger shows the evidence of the trauma of leaving, therefore implying that her first “birth” happened in the land of her father where she first learned to exist: “Il n’y a pas d’enfance en Algérie, il n’y a qu’une première vie” (19). This first “life” closes the door on the physicality of her Algerian existence and inaugurates a prolonged series of internalized conflicts that (Nina) attempts to resolve through the writing of this novel: “Alger existe parce que j’y ai vécu, parce que je m’y suis laissée; c’est moi qui fais Alger et non

¹⁶²Bouraoui Press Release. (<http://www.editions-stock.fr/mes-mauvaises-pensees-9782234057982>)

l'inverse. Je ne suis pas une exilée, je suis une déracinée" (19).

(Nina's) affirmation of *déracinement* is closely related to Sara Ahmed's concept of inheritance: "Inheritance can be understood as both bodily and historical; we inherit what we receive as the condition of our arrival into the world, as an arrival that leaves and makes an impression" (2006, 125). (Nina) arrives in France, into the world, as an innocent infant and inherits a host of phobias, anxieties and traumas from her mother's own life: "on ne transmet pas seulement la chair à ses enfants mais aussi les conflits; le rapport de ma mère avec son père influe aussi sur le rapport que j'ai avec le monde" (149). These traumas are in her DNA and she cannot escape from these "birth defects." However, (Nina) inherits trauma from both sides of the family: one inheritance is personal, the other historical and national. Vassallo portends that: "The violence that Bouraoui carries within her as an inheritance from the troubled historical past with which her personal story is irrevocably entwined, prevents her from living her 'othered' identity in Algeria" (49).

Each of (Nina's) confessions about her phobias implies a sense of confusion of belonging. This confusion shows the narrator is never able to escape from past homes, past loves, past landscapes, past addresses—meaning that as she ages, different people and places pile on top of her current identity as a weight that she can never lose:

Avec les mauvaises pensées, j'ai si peur de ne plus savoir qui je suis. Au début, je décline mon identité, nom, prénom, âge, date et lieu de naissance; ensuite, je dis: "Quelle est mon adresse?" Et cela arrive au fond de la nuit, mon adresse est l'adresse où je vis. Puis j'ai un doute, non, mon adresse est l'adresse de mes parents, et j'ai encore un doute, mon adresse est sous les préaux de l'immeuble sur pilotis, je viens de là, je viens des peurs. (247)

She is haunted by her metaphorical kidnapping from Algeria and (re)-implantation in France which casts permanent doubt and fear over situation in the world.

(Nina's) fears and phobias long pre-date her very existence in this world. In fact, the initial moment of disorientation originates in her mother's "treasonous" act of bringing home an Algerian partner (Nina's father) to meet her parents: "To bring a lover home, for instance, is to show one's parents one's choice of a love object. It is to wait for social approval, which when given repays the debt to the parent" (Ahmed 127). This act was taken as an affront against the patriarchal sensibilities as a symbol of stable, pure Frenchness. (Nina) shares what her grandfather lanced at her mother: "Tu finiras mal," "Tu l'as épousé pour m'embeter," Tu n'aurais jamais dû quitter la maison" (81).

The dismissal of subjectification as either fully French or fully Algerian does easily reveal to the reader with which identity Bouraoui the narrator more closely identifies. The identities that emerge are subjective to relationships, spaces, and times in her life as well as corporeal sensations with her parents and family. The two most stable identities in the entire novel are her longstanding self-realizations as author and a masculinized lesbian. As the embodiment of the unstable relationship between France and Algeria's past, Bouraoui's hybridized national identity is unveiled through a repetitive series of childhood memories and explorations of her sentimental connection to each of her parents.

Her parents' unique circumstances further complicate any possibility of a resolution of the self, because their very biological imposition on Bouraoui's life denies the possibility of "proper identification", a term which I read as legalized biogenetic codifications of identity. To be French, one cannot be both French and something else, one must be French and French alone, or you are not French. This tenet is one that Bouraoui plays with endlessly in *Pensées* by

redefining approaches to expressions of identity and blurring the lines that have become more rigid in the decades following the end of colonialism.

Bouraoui's parents' life together is itself a conundrum because it simply should not have been; her father is an agnostic, very modern Algerian, while her mother is described more as an independent woman seeking to get as far away as possible from her past in Rennes. Yet, the trauma of Rennes remains, it remains in (Nina's) confusion of place, in her decision to be born twice, to live in *l'entre-deux* of her homelands: "Je pense que Rennes est une ville maudite; je pense que je viens aussi d'ici, de la mort. Alger serait du côté de la vie, de ma vie nouvelle, de ma vie inventée" (74). Her mother on the other hand was a rebel of sorts, leaving France for a former colony at the height of its tensions with France, while her father was perhaps seen as a bit of a collaborator for marrying and having children with a French woman. Neither of them exactly fit into the frameworks of the each other's families or national identities leaving (Nina) and her older sister left in the wake. Muñoz appropriates the term, "identities-in-difference," primarily to refer to queers of color, however, in the case of Bouraoui, this expression foregrounds her *identités* in relief by normalizing her own differences against the expectations for a normative self-identification as extolled through national dialogues.

Mes mauvaises pensées as some have claimed is the culmination of a tripartite series on identity exploration, including also *Garçon manqué* (2000) and *Poupée Bella* (2004), in which the author writes of her identity crises as a lesbian and as the daughter of a French mother and Algerian father. This complex novel nevertheless touched a societally pertinent nerve and was awarded the *Prix Renaudot* in the same year as its publication. The first five years of the twenty-first century were politically tumultuous in France. Intense debates surrounding French and NATO member participation in the war in Iraq, the Chirac/Le Pen presidential run-off vote in

2002, and the suburban riots in Clichy-sous-Bois stand out as major points of political upheaval in the lineage of French identity. The 2002 presidential elections, which ended in a landslide *deuxième tour* victory for Jacques Chirac, marked a sea change in Republican values and ideals. The two stand-alone candidates from the presidential primaries turned out to be Jacques Chirac and Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of the Front National (FN), whose party espouses a return to pure French values and the necessity to deal with the immigrant problem. By 2002, immigration issues ranked high on the political agenda and assimilationist policies decried the need for immigrants and second-generation Maghrebi citizens to adopt the republican values of *liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*. This political climate provided fertile ground for Bouraoui's eccentric exploration of her multifarious self-identifications within French society and beyond.

4.3.6 La naissance des mère(s)

(Nina's) confessions reveal multiple mothers and multiple forms of motherhood. There is (Nina's) mother, (Nina's) maternal grandmother, and (Nina), who herself fulfills many maternal duties despite having no children of her own. (Nina's) mother suffered from "asphyxies," the origin of which stems in part from childhood trauma. Episodes where the mother's body fails or is seen as insufficient because of her alterity, thrust young (Nina) into a maternal role that flips the conventional top-down descentance of maternal care. In one instance (Nina) recalls her mother being tended to by emergency medical personnel during which she becomes the mother: "Je suis à la tête de notre tribu, c'est à moi qu'on demande l'identité et les antécédents de ma mère" (261). Replacing the mother, the French mother, (Nina) also leans more towards her French roots, towards the traditionally feminine expectations of caregiving. Her childhood becomes the childhood that her mother never had and is dictated by her mother's phobias.

(Nina) stands permanently in the “entre-deux,” incarnated in a comment once made to her by her grandfather: “Tu as une cuisse bretonne, une cuisse algérienne” (199). A Breton thigh and an Algerian thigh will also stand parallel to each other, yet always be interdependent on each other for stability. The thighs are connected to the body through the hip joints and pelvis, the very entry point into the world for all new human life. Yet, (Nina) is childless and will not reconcile this bodily bridge with an actual new life. Instead, she relies on these two pillars—French identity and Algerian identity—of her existence to birth a new identity into existence, not one that passes through the birth canal but through her mouth, through her words which are spoken, not out loud but on the pages of *Mes mauvaises pensées*.

4.4 LE PAYS

“(…) *Autobiographie ? Non. Fiction, d'événements et de faits strictement réels. Si l'on veut, autofiction, d'avoir confié le langage d'une aventure à l'aventure d'un langage en liberté*”.¹⁶³

4.4.1 Introduction

This chapter has thus far observed the effects of maternal alterity on two *Beur* narrators' personal and private experiences of Frenchness. Their mothers' political subjectivity as foreign transcends administrative status and becomes embodied in their offspring despite the location of the

¹⁶³“Serge Doubrovsky, critique littéraire et romancier, a créé le néologisme d'autofiction et l'a défini sur la quatrième de couverture de son roman *Fils* (Galilée 1977)” (Qtd. in Kaprèlian interview with Darrieussecq).

narrators' birthplace and upbringing. The narrators' self-identifications as French are inevitably perpetuated, yet never completely whole; a case of nature vs. nurture as applied to national identity. Azouz in *Le Gone* and (Nina) in *Pensées*, respectively, face a steady stream of external and internalized conflicts in their expression of national identity, which hinge in large part upon the narrators' maternally inherited cultural and linguistic alterity. It is in the mundane acts of the quotidian rituals of going to school, playing outside, walking around town, and visiting family, where the clash of allegiances to family heritage and France cause the biggest stir. For instance, the use of French versus the family's (mother) tongue or the adoption of French manners of conduct is considered an act of betrayal. Acting "French" or acting "other" is a continual decision-making process, which alienates the narrator/subject, regardless of their choice. They can then only fully come to exist in the spaces of national in-betweenness or "non-lieux" (O'Beirne).¹⁶⁴

This unstable belonging opens a new sphere of identification, that of the nomad, in which these differently French subjects can circulate without recourse. The nomad is born somewhere, but lays no further claim to cultural belonging beyond the political subjectivity of citizenship. Linguistic and cultural "othering" is ubiquitous in France and drives the perpetuation of the national imagination. Read together *Le Gone* and *Pensées* push for a broader examination of how *Beur* child narrators simultaneously rebuke and yearn for "normative" Frenchness. As children of foreigners *and* children of France, these narrators occupy a unique territory in which they can deliberate *both* subjectively and objectively about their identification as French. This straddling

¹⁶⁴Emer O'Beirne employs Marc Augé's concept of "non-lieu" to explicate isolation and empty spaces in, among others, Marie Darrieussecq's works. She argues that, "To feel at one with them [non-lieu] is impossible in Darrieussecq's universe; in Houellebecq's it can be done, but it requires ceasing to be human. For these two, then, contemporary human alienation far exceeds Augé's diagnosis of 'traceless' super-modern spaces of transit or non- lieux; theirs is a tragic vision where our estrangement from the natural world through architecture and technology has ironically made nature not a refuge but the ultimate articulation of our lack of connection, a non-lieu par excellence" (390).

viewpoint reveals internal *and* external origins of racial and ethnic discrimination that cause both narrators to reconsider their allegiances to family and nation. Yet, their legitimacy in groups remains fragile due to the alterity of their parents, especially the mother. I now shift my examination to Marie Darrieussecq's *Le Pays* (2005), a text in which the narrator positions her conceptions of Frenchness through both her roles as mother and daughter. This bi-directional outlook on the formation of national identity demonstrates how she both affects her progeny and is in turn affected by the internalization of maternal alterity within her own life.

Le Pays is a loosely autofictional novel in which the narrator Marie Rivière navigates the emotional and linguistic repercussions of returning to her native land: *le pays yuoangui*.¹⁶⁵¹⁶⁶ The novel simultaneously chronicles her second pregnancy from: “la croix bleue” (60) of the pregnancy test to the birth of her daughter, Épiphanie, tracing her return as a sort of (re)-birth. Throughout the gestation period, Marie's *retour aux sources* and rediscovery of family, place, and self, is embodied by the corporeal development of her unborn child's growing presence. The narrator's re-birth as a daughter of her native soil as well as the (pro)-creation of a new *yuoangui* citizen can be summed up as: “Neuf mois pour un moi neuf” (Chartier-Atlan 30).

The structure of *Le Pays* switches between two persons, Marie, a first-person narrator, and (Marie), a third-person narrator who masterfully flow back and forth between two distinct typefaces which mimics Marie's nomadic erring between French and *yuoangui* identities. The result is a fragmented identity whose manifestation is only possible in the very form that supports it. The almost limitless possibilities of self-writing in the autofiction genre allows new

¹⁶⁵*Yuoangui* is the demonym from the citizens of *le pays yuoangui* who also speak *yuoangui*. It is entirely fictive. Darrieussecq is herself from the Basque country of France. In an interview for Euskonews.com, Darrieussecq punts the question of whether *le pays yuoangui* is in fact based on the Basque Country. M. D.: “Après avoir lu mon roman, j'ai des amis qui m'ont dit que cela ne ressemblait pas du tout au Pays Basque. C'est exactement ce qu'on appelle l'inquiétante étrangeté, cela y ressemble tout en étant différent.” (Accessed: September 18, 2017. <http://www.euskonews.com/0549z/bk/gaia54903fr.html>)

structural forms, such as those in *Le Pays*, to arise. Arnaud Genon points out that what autofiction incites is of rebirth of the subject as fragmented and deconstructed at its own hands (qtd. in Baillargeon 4), which Marie writes into existence as both a novel and the writing of a novel. These side-by-side narrations suggest that literary and geographical nomadism leads the reader to perceive of the identity struggles accompanying such rootlessness as universal struggles.

4.4.2 Autofiction comme outil de disorientation

Marie Darrieussecq gained rapid renown on the French literary scene after the rampant success of her first novel *Truismes* (1996) published by P.O.L. became a finalist for the *Prix Goncourt*. Darrieussecq was only twenty-five at the time of its publication and widely lauded for her social critique of contemporary France and the treatment of women. Her numerous subsequent novels (and critical works) have garnered her a place in the early twenty-first century French literary canon as well as plethora of scholarship dedicated to work.¹⁶⁶ Though the focus of Darrieussecq scholarship is multivalent, there is considerable more work dedicated to repetitive elements in her works such as ghosts, the *fantastique*, or feminist approaches prevalent in her writings. *Le Pays* is one of Darrieussecq's least critically examined novels, which stems in part from what Darrieussecq herself considers in an interview for *euskonews.com* with Thomas Pierre: "La problématique basque n'est pas du tout glamour, ce n'est pas à la mode et, d'ailleurs, *Le Pays* est celui de mes livres qui a le moins marché. Pourtant, il n'est pas plus difficile qu'un autre de mes

¹⁶⁶In this chapter, I utilize a number of secondary sources focusing on *Le Pays* (Simon Kemp 2012; Brenda Garvey, Helena Chadderton 2012, amongst others). I also rely heavily on thematic critical examinations of her collective of works, particularly the 2012 Dalhousie French Studies edition, which focused solely on Marie Darrieussecq. For an exhaustive list of critical works on Darrieussecq's oeuvres, see: <http://www.mariedarrieussecq.com/bibliographie>

livres. Mais il traite d'un sujet déroutant, les gens n'en ont rien à faire.”

Le Pays is written as two near parallel texts; one is the novel itself and the other is a shadow of the process of writing the novel and its coming into being. The two sections are distinguished through two distinct typefaces requiring particular diligence on the part of the reader. The distinctive use of near parallel narrative voices carves out multiple identities and viewpoints for existing in the world. The structure of the novel creates a complicated read, switching between two temporally distinct yet proximal voices: one retrospectively omniscient and the other—the novel itself—lagging behind.¹⁶⁷ One belongs to the first-person autofictive narrator, Marie Rivière, and the other, an omniscient third-person narrator, (Marie). Both narrators are authors who track one another's progress in a sort of playful literary *mise-en-abîme*. “Tout était distant et surréel j'étais dans *Le Pays* et pas dans le pays. L'espace entre les deux était un territoire, un pays de possibles” (188). This example of meta-writing informs the reader not only of Darrieussecq's writing process but also of the space of disorientation from which this text emanates.

“J/e” ne comprends pas. **This dual identity is particularly notable in the way in which Marie uses a *je clivé* or split first-person pronoun: je=“j/e.”** The concept of a “Je” distinct from its subject was revolutionized by Arthur Rimbaud's poem “Je est un autre” (I is an other) which converts the I into a subject of its own making. Morag Young details the brief evolution of the *je clivé*—which is both a term and a typographical format—“j/e.” “J/e” was originally coined by Monique Wittig in the early 1970s; Darrieussecq has appropriated this in *Le Pays* not as a form

¹⁶⁷*Le Pays* switches between two different typefaces to distinguish two quasi-parallel narratives. The sections printed in normal typeface employ the passive voice in the imperfect, pluperfect, and future conditional tenses, while the sections printed in the Baskerville Old Face typeface employ a variety of verb tenses, with the notable distinction of the present tense and a more active voice.

of feminist protest as in Wittig, but as a sporadically-used device that reinforces the separateness of the two narrators of the text (Young 2012, 63). Marie first uses “j/e” at the start of the novel to denote a process of self-division: “Je devenais j/e” (13). This transformation from a singular self to one that is split evokes the multiple dichotomies of Marie’s person and psyche namely, the narrator’s pregnancy in which she becomes two persons in one and her identifications as both *yuoangui* and French/Parisian. “j/e” also symbolizes the formation of a (new) national *yuoangui* persona that is both cognizant of the impossibility of full re-acceptance into the *yuoangui* landscape *and* the influences of having lived in French, in Paris where she was both geographically and linguistically distanced from her ancestral lineage. As a result, Marie now only superficially inhabits the *yuoangui* world, which exists more clearly in her mind than in reality: “Avec le même soulagement que lorsqu’on glisse vers le sommeil, j/e basculais vers d’autres zones” (13). These “autres zones” are the political zones, not regions, of *le pays yuoangui*, which Marie refers to throughout the novel.¹⁶⁸ Young’s reasons that the “j/e” is the “dreamlike state” or psychic source of her writing. (2012, 64) persons/literary works which could possibly even be read independent from one another: Marie, the physical embodiment and author

¹⁶⁸An example of biographic authorial preferences in terms of word choice can be seen in Marie Darrieussecq’s interview with Thomas Pierre for *euskonews.com*: M. D. — “Pour le dire vite, disons qu’en Pays Basque français, il y a une adhésion aux valeurs des Lumières, aux valeurs républicaines, qui sont contre le maintien des langues qu’on appelle “régionales”. **C’est affreux, j’ai horreur du mot région.** Il y a des gens qui se sentent personnellement menacés par l’existence de la langue basque. Je pense que c’est de l’ordre de la menace. De l’ordre de la peur. Demander une baguette en basque dans une boulangerie d’Ahetze ou d’Hendaye, par exemple, et on vous regarde comme un terroriste. Puis il y a cette idée selon laquelle, au fond, ce serait tellement plus simple si tout le monde parlait une espèce de sabir anglais! Alors que vient faire le basque au milieu de cette idée? Il apparaît archaïque, ringard, dépassé, désuet. Lorsqu’on perd une langue, je ne sais pas ce qu’on perd mais on perd quelque chose. La disparition des langues rendent certaines personnes malades. Je n’en suis pas là mais il se trouve que, par attachement familial, j’aime la langue basque. Ma participation, c’est écrire un roman, en parler aux médias quand je peux parce qu’ils ne sont pas toujours réceptifs et, un jour, de traduire un écrit en basque. Je trouve fascinant et troublant que l’on donne tellement la parole en France à quelqu’un comme Fernando Sabater qui est présenté comme le Salman Rushdie local. Je trouve très regrettable la situation dans laquelle il est, mais qu’on le mette tellement en exergue par rapport aux journalistes d’*Egunkaria* entre autres, c’est vraiment agaçant. C’est de la peur jacobine et de la méconnaissance du dossier.

and (Marie), her life chronicler. The out-of-body sensation that is the in-the-body experience of pregnancy is remarkably similar to the split identity that is invoked: “J’/avais laissé la maison et le pays et notre récent emménagement, les cartons et le bazar: derrière moi” (13). The active “moi” here is clearly established as separate yet unequal, leaving (Marie) the writer, to take the lead and explore these “new” surroundings without hindrance. The “j/e” is French/*yuoangui*; one cannot escape the traces of the other in the expression of identity:

J/e devenais la route, les arbres, le pays. S’absorber dans, absorber le paysage, c’était une partie de la pensée, une partie de l’écriture. Se remémorer le monde, une heure de rang, en courant. Le pays m’entourait, ce paysage familier qui devenait tous les paysages. [...] Le psychologique et l’étatique, le privé et le familial avaient disparu. Ce qui avançait sur la route c’étaient des sphères jouant les unes autour des autres, un équilibre de chutes et de rebonds, un ensemble de sauts. Ni moi ni autres ni personne. Air, paysage, course. J/e ne pensais à rien et dans le rien perçaient les phrases, de plus en plus vite. (14-15)

The processes of becoming, of adapting, of absorbing these surroundings is vital to Marie/(Marie)’s rediscovery of her *yuoangui* roots. This identity involves a tactile, visual, and physical relationship to the landscapes. When Marie first left *le pays* as a teenager, *le pays yuoangui* did not yet exist as a political entity. Her adult-age return requires a conflicted reorientation within this freshly autonomous space, a process that can only take place as an ever-cognizant “j/e.”

4.4.3 Autofiction and the nation

The nation is imagined in both narratorial forms; some of the most salient expressions of national

identity are espoused by (Marie)'s more philosophical musings on *le pays'* path to existence both as a state and as a novel:

Dans ses moments de fatigue, elle enviait les écrivains d'ici. Ils héritaient de la littérature mondiale, et tout leur restait à inventer. Mais sans pays à défendre, sans langue à sauvegarder, seule devant sa page, elle était libre. La langue était une contrainte à dépasser, comme le sol, comme l'histoire. Tant qu'il restait des mots, dans quelque langue que ce soit, on pourrait encore les assembler à neuf pour decrier le monde, et en repousser les limites. (114)

(Marie)'s freedom to write comes from a lack of engagement with identity politics in France or *le pays yuoangui*. She is not tasked with helping to build the literary canon of a new nation, nor is she hindered by French literary conventions. The effect of Darrieussecq's choice of autofictive narration portrays the narrators as national asymptotes whose perceived nearness to both French and *yuoangui* cultures is an illusion that maintains Marie/(Marie) at an atavistic distance. The gap between opens the space for a narration that is both national and personal.

The use of generic elements in *Le Pays* diverges from the *Le Gone* and *Pensées* in several ways, most visibly in that at first read it appears to be less auto-referential to the biographical author, Marie Darrieussecq. The author's name does not exactly match that of Darrieussecq who herself revealed that the narrator's last name, Rivière, is actually a play on the meaning of her own family name.¹⁶⁹ Secondly, *le pays yuoangui* is a fictitious land based on the Basque country from where Darrieussecq herself hails. Dollidon supports this fictitiousness:

¹⁶⁹The choice of name "Rivière" again reveals a deeply personal connection, which closely links the narrator to the author. In an email exchange with Darrieussecq, she confirmed the "Rivière" is play on her own last name and its linguistic origins. "Rieu, ce n'est pas en basque mais en gascon. "De la rivière sèche" [que je ne cesse de remplir... a reference to a citation from *Le Pays*]. Le nom vient d'un arrière-arrière-grand-père né à Peyrehorade." "Question Sur Le Pays." Received by Marie Darrieussecq, *Question Sur Le Pays*, 18 Jan. 2018.

le pays yuoangui ressemble à un pastiche de lui-même, la version édulcorée d'un lieu qui se voudrait organique, anthropologique, mais qui, à cause de son passé aliéné par une plus grande nation—on imagine que c'est la France—et ravivé par des hologrammes de ses morts, vire à l'événement médiatique. La narratrice navigue entre les croyances locales en femme du vingt-et-unième siècle accroc au passé. (10)

The result is an almost farcical game of grabbing at straws for legitimacy through a hurried production of national literature to support its existence alongside its “oppressor” language, French, which (Marie) argue considers in through the comparison of French to the *yuoangui* language: “[French] son avenir restait celui d'une langue d'écrivain” (114) versus “La langue yuoanguie d'opprimés, une ancienne langue orale qui était une langue neuve pour la littérature” (114). These linguistic traits contribute to the factiousness of *Le Pays*.

While I do consider this text to fall under the umbrella of autofiction, I prefer the label of what Arnaud Schmitt calls “self-narration” (2010, 123). He defines this genre as one that is “loosely-referential” and one which does not completely adhere to Serge Doubrovsky's guidelines for *autofiction*, namely lacking its psychoanalytic angle (2010, 126) and failure to comply with Philippe Lejeune “pacte autobiographique”:

[It is] referential because there is no protective distance between the narrator and the author, consequently there is also a degree of assumed responsibility for the text's content. Literary because it resorts to every formal weapon offered by novels and does not make it one of its duties to be true to life. Self-narration is a mature genre that has learned its subjective lesson. It is aware that every life narrative, as honest as it purports to be, is flawed simply because our memory is

also by definition flawed. We forget, we misunderstand or only partially understand, we lie, we use our imagination to escape our limited empirical experience. (129)

This description of the self-narration is one that applies well to Darrieussecq's novel as it takes into consideration the flawed nature of her memory of *le pays* and Paris, rendering the novel porous and elastic just like her own perception of national identity. These autoreferential elements reflect the fragmented nation, remembered and constructed in dribs and drabs, yet compiled and presented as a seamless unity. Though Jensen intimates that there is eventually a "reconciliation of her two nationalities" (33) in *Le Pays*, I advocate instead that the novel's ending takes the shape of a slippage in which the narrator comes so close to passing as *yuoangui*, but is, by virtue of her inability to speak the local language, discredited as belonging.

In *Le Gone* and *Pensées*, the maternal role in the development of the child's sense of national belonging is more immediate and distinct. The mothers are both foreigners in the lands in which they raise their children (the narrators) and inevitably face cultural clashes in which the hybrid child is a pawn of both sides. These examples are by no means black and white; the mother-child narrator in *Le Pays* even further complicates the mother-child relationship to national identity. Marie Rivière, unlike Azouz and (Nina), is more than just a daughter, she herself is already a mother and now expecting a second child. This hinge-like viewpoint incorporates multigenerational, multinational explorations of how national identity comes into being. Darrieussecq employs two side-by-side narrators, Marie Rivière, written in the present tense, active first-person voice and the other, (Marie) in the imperfect, passive third-person; the very format of this text mimics Marie Rivière's dual-identification as (cosmopolitan) French and

yuoangui.¹⁷⁰

Le Pays charts Marie Rivière's, move *from* Paris *back* to her homeland, the recently independent (from France) *pays yuoangui*. The novel begins with the discovery of Marie's second pregnancy and culminates with the birth of her daughter, Épiphanie. The heightened physiological self-awareness that accompanies pregnancy echoes Marie Rivière's re-birth or re-awakening of her *yuoangui* roots.¹⁷¹ Her journey to reclaim her "pays"—in the sense of the land, language and culture—for herself as *yuoangui de souche* is depicted as a gestation of sorts; one which parallels her actual pregnancy and birth of her second child. Both the pregnancy and adaptation to this (new) national identity prove arduous as she re-establishes herself and her family under this new national moniker.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰I use the "cosmopolitan" to denote how the narrator is French through her years in Paris and how she was/is a French citizen by birth because at that time, *le pays yuoangui*, had yet to become an independent nation. "Et moi, passeport français, je voyais encore la planète comme un espace idéal. Ceux qui souffraient de ne pas avoir de frontières, je leur opposais la petitesse de leur pays, et la splendeur d'un monde ouvert. [...] Je marchais sur leur plaie ouverte" (96).

¹⁷¹MD: Encore une fois, la "Marie Darrieussecq née à Bayonne en 1969" n'est pas exactement ni Solange, ni le personnage de *Truismes*, ni la narratrice de *Tom est mort*, ni même *du Pays*, qui est pourtant le plus autobiographique de mes livres (si l'on exclut le Bébé, qui, lui, est strictement autobiographique). (pg. 5; Paris, Juin 2012. Rencontre avec Marie Darrieussecq interviewée par Elyse Petit, étudiante en thèse à l'Université d'Arizona. http://darrieussecq.arizona.edu/sites/darrieussecqweb.arizona.edu/files/interview%202_5.pdf)

MD: Il me semble que j'ai fait de l'autofiction dans *Le Pays*. Certaines parties du roman, très proches de ce que j'ai vécu, sont écrites à la première personne. Le personnage s'appelle Marie Rivière, qui est un jeu de mot tout bête sur mon nom – « Darrieu » veut dire « de la rivière ». Elle se rend dans une maison des morts, une sorte de parler funéraire où on rencontre ses morts sous forme d'hologrammes; c'est une idée que je reprendrai sans doute, car elle est très vivante pour moi. Cette autofiction-là m'intéresse énormément. Le terme autofiction a été largement repris par la presse et est redevenu simplement le roman de soi. Ce n'est pas différent de ce qui se faisait jusque-là, ni mieux ni pire : c'est un genre qui se déplace et se transforme avec le temps, parce que les vies changent – on ne vit pas aujourd'hui comme on vivait en 1960 ou au XIX^{ème}. Cette forme ne m'a jamais trop attirée, car ma vie n'est pas très intéressante, et j'ai une tradition autobiographique de silence dans ma famille, à la fois très lourde et très belle, de ce silence où les gens ne disent rien y compris sur des drames qui nous ont tous fracassés. J'ai hérité de cela et ce serait extrêmement difficile de trouver une forme qui dise ce silence et le respecte—si je racontais l'histoire, quel intérêt! Les drames sont toujours les mêmes depuis Homère: il faudrait plutôt trouver la forme du silence. (Kaprelian 12)

¹⁷²Her firstborn child, a son, Tiot, was not born in *le pays yuoangui*, and will never in spite of his growing up in the language and culture never be afforded the same rights and privileges as his mother. His foreign birth denies him political subjectivity through citizenship.

Marie Rivière was born and raised in *le pays* (yuoangui)¹⁷³ prior to its acquisition of statehood. As the novel opens, she is living in Paris just having decided to return to *le pays* to raise her young son Tiot alongside her Argentine husband, Diego. They both desire to give their son a *paysage* in a familiar and more open landscape unlike Paris, which seems claustrophobic and suffocating. Marie's pregnancy in *Le Pays* grants the narrator(s) the liberty to imagine the new baby's existence in a similar manner. She does not yet know her unborn child, yet nevertheless imagines her into being analogous to the national imagination of disparate communities that are unduly considered to be French. The narrator resists the nation in how she does not hypothesize her unborn daughter's national identity; leaving the innocent being to her own devices. This "luxury" is not afforded to her son, Tiot, as the fate of his subjectivity had already been decided at birth.

Tiot, Marie's son, was born in Paris and can never acquire *yuoangui* citizenship because of his place of birth. However, because he is so young, he will be able to become more culturally *yuoangui* than his mother. Diego, Marie's husband and Tiot's father, can become neither French nor *yuoangui*; his presence is unequivocally embedded in his marriage and its grounding force in Marie's life. In some ways, his national identity seems to be the most stable as it is not beholden to feelings of or administrative limbo: "Mon barbare de mari s'est installé dans le français qui lui va, quand il s'est estimé compris et qu'il a estimé comprendre" (100). He is the perfect other because he neither attempts nor desires to assimilate more than is required for social and linguistic needs. His nonchalant attitude towards relocating to *le pays* inversely mirrors Marie and (Marie)'s internalized litanies questioning belonging and place in this world.

¹⁷³I employ this construction of "le pays (yuoangui)" to distinguish between the contemporary geopolitical states of the state *le pays yuoangui* and the status of the *le pays*, as still the yet-to-be independent land of Marie's youth.

4.4.4 The phantom menace: Specters of the national identity

In a theme that has been recurrently addressed across Darrieussecq's works, there are many specters filtering through this novel which not only sprinkle *Le Pays* with elements of the fantastic, but also offer new ways of perceiving how the nation is constructed.¹⁷⁴ Not all of Darrieussecq's specters function in the same way and not all are dead. In fact, all of the specters that Marie deals with are portrayed in their "living" forms. Marie's (still alive) adopted brother, Pablo, Marie's unborn daughter, Épiphanie, and the *Maison des morts* holograms of Marie's grandmother, Amona, and Paul, her deceased infant brother—all function as muted fragments of national identity. Pablo is Marie's younger brother who was adopted from Peru as a young boy after her biological brother Paul passed away as an infant. The secrecy shrouding Paul's brief life is a constant source of speculation and morbid curiosity for Marie, who now as a mother herself seeks to finally mourn someone of whom she has no memory. Each of these family ghosts represents some aspect of national belonging that Marie grapples with in her transition back into *le pays*.

Pablo was adopted from Peru as a child at an age when he already spoke Spanish; his appropriate through language foreign to him. Though he lived in *le pays* for a time before moving to Paris, he was clearly far more influenced by the French language and culture that he was exposed to during his adolescence. Now permanently institutionalized in a Parisian mental hospital, he has become a mere schizophrenic shadow of his former self, signs of which only briefly appear between episodic outbursts during which he exclaims, "Je suis le fils du général de

¹⁷⁴For more on ghosts and phantoms in Darrieussecq's work, see Dolidon, 2012; Fréville, 2013.

Gaulle” (26).¹⁷⁵ His repetitive declarations of personal filiation to one of most recognizable French figures of the twentieth-century present themselves as subconscious attempts to assert his belonging to the French community as through verbal osmosis. His national subjectivity has been replaced with a new set of codes, temporality, and titles in this institution; Pablo is not truly disoriented, but reoriented in this new system. Dollidon posits that “Le corps du fou, d’une certaine manière est aussi l’enveloppe d’un esprit—un spectre—qui n’est plus dans ce monde même s’il est de ce monde” (6). Pablo’s is mirrored in *Le Nom des gens* (See: chapter two), in which Madame Martin, Arthur’s mother, is placed in a mental hospital for what appears to be a bout of resurfaced PTSD following a traumatic episode at *la mairie*. When pressed about her childhood trauma the unwavering rituals of the hospital subdue cryptic utterances; a nurse interrupts her conversation with Arthur to give her a tranquilizing shot. Madame Martin, too, is an adopted child whose past was forcibly erased and which comes back to haunt her again late in life.

During her final visit to the institution, Marie informs Pablo of her impending return to *le ays* and that she will no longer be visiting him. In the brief process of preparing her departure visiting Pablo is the only human interaction she notes. This point supports the idea that Marie’s relationship with France was more spatial and material in nature, because she herself was always already an outsider:

Elle avait choisi Paris, des années auparavant, pour recouvrer un centre. Elle ne connaissait que deux remèdes à la solitude: être enceinte, ou se sentir au centre du monde, c’est-à-dire dans un lieu qui vous tient compagnie. Les centres se

¹⁷⁵Marie’s visits to the hospital, both out of feelings of obligation and morbid curiosity, are not dissimilar to the visits she makes to *La Maison des Morts* to interact with her grandmother’s or baby brother’s hologram or even to the gynecologist where she “visits” with the sonogram of her daughter, Épiphanie. All three characters are glimpses and facades of interaction, which cast an uncanny shadow across familial connections.

déplacent dans l'espace et le temps, ils correspondent parfois aux capitales, parfois aux bords de mer ou aux montagnes, ils peuvent se confondre avec les croisements de l'Histoire, mais ils ne sont pas nombreux. (142)

(Marie) delineates here a sense of social and geographic disorientation that explains her extended absence from her homeland. As a quintessential nomad, self-sufficiency and mobility are essential to her wellbeing, yet she relies on the spaces she inhabits to create a personal root system. The shifting centers push against the fixity of France as a cultural beacon and as Paris as the concrete center from which emanate French national sentiments, unifying laws, and political rhetoric. Marie cannot be read exclusively as *yuoangui*, nor French.

The second living ghost appears in the form of Marie's unborn daughter, Épiphanie, whose presence is the coupled with the gestation of the writing of this novel. This unborn child, who does not physically enter the world until the final two pages of the novel, is born into a subjectivity that she will not need to struggle with like her mother. She will be raised as *yuoangui* a new baby in a new state, a physical representation of her mother's *conception* of identity; I read the baby's late apparition in the novel as a metaphor for Marie's (re)-birth as *yuoangui*. Having finally given birth, Marie reorients and re-anchors herself within the topography of this country to feel secure and whole. Épiphanie is not only the very embodiment of this new state, but she is also the personified culmination of the writing of this novel.

And lastly, *les hologrammes*... Amona, Marie's deceased maternal grandmother, is the filiative figment of Marie's collective *yuoangui* imagination. Amona's hologram comes to life with the flip of a switch in *La Maison des morts* and illuminates Marie's connection to the people of this land through a shared obsession with cultivating the digital death archives of her

ancestors.

(Marie)'s narrative traces the most foundational national moods and moments of Marie's life. The trajectory that these third-person sections depict not only outline her personal life, pregnancy, and the writing process of the novel, but also brings into view, the collective experiences which have indelibly marked her life experiences. "The individuated figure of the autobiography is impossible without the collective; the relationship to others naturally includes a national identity" (Spear 104). Marie/(Marie)'s depictions of her family lineage necessarily include her mother's renown as across *le pays yuoangui*; an artistic shadow from behind which Marie must stake her own claim. The shadow is always inextricably linked to the national through its owner—the one whose body generates the shadow—nation of one, nation of none.

4.4.5 Langue maternelle, langue de maternité

Jacques Derrida was born a French-Algerian Jew, raised in the language of his very oppressors. In his work, *Monolingualism of Others*, he claims that his status as a monolingualist speaker of French is the cause of immense personal and collective suffering. He maintains that linguistic oppression is perhaps one of the most severe types of cultural oppression as it forces the oppressed to use the language of their oppressors to fight their own oppression. "La vieille langue" as the narrators most commonly refer to "la langue yuoanguie" is a vestigial language of Marie's childhood.¹⁷⁶ It is a language to which she was exposed throughout her childhood as an oral tradition of others, of the grown-ups—a collective, yet private mode of expression, which was one more concrete tool in her people's irredentist struggles: "[...] j'entendais la vieille

¹⁷⁶(Marie) explains the origination of the term *yuoangui*, "Le mot *yuoangui*, en vieille langue, veut dire *être humain* comme *inuit*, *pygmée*, *papou*, et tous les sauvages du monde" (185).

langue comme la langue des autres, comme la patrie de ceux qui n'en avaient" (133).¹⁷⁷ The name of the country itself, "le pays yuoangui", in spite of its independence, does not have singular name, relying instead on its demonymic adjective to name itself. This vacuous linguistic space, in which an entire people languished as linguistic orphans, what Derrida calls the "*être-chez-soi* in language" (16) is a slippery slope for Marie whose inability to speak *yuoangui* renders her a national disappointment.¹⁷⁸

Language is the national orientation of *le pays yuoangui*. Speaking it, writing it, producing new works in it, is the force that binds the nation together under a new *yuoangui* state. It is a language which despite its own recent oppression is manipulated in such a way that it ends up as an exclusionary tactic *comme* vector of unification. The codification of the *yuoangui* language makes it stiff and dissonant with the pliable language of Marie's ancestors and institutes an even deeper disconnect between herself and her new homeland. The imitation of the language institutions of *le pays'* former presumed oppressor (France) establishes a two-tiered linguistic ordering in which the organic "vieille langue" acts as a reminder of oppression while the new language dictates orders of unanimity like their former oppressor:

¹⁷⁷Referring to Pablo, "Lui, d'où il était, dans sa sidération, Pablo, fils de De Gaulle—lui, ce pays, il n'en faisait pas toute une histoire. Pays Yuoangui, pays sans nom, le pays avec adjective comme il y a un pays dogon et un pays masai. A la lettre P ou la lettre Y, dans l'hésitation de ce qui prime, le nom ou l'adjectif, le générique ou le particulier, Pays Yuoangui, pour lui, qu'est-ce que ça voulait dire?" (91).

¹⁷⁸In an interview with Jean-Marc Terrasse, Darriussecq responds to a question about her works and the Basque language. "JMT: La langue basque joue-t-elle un rôle dans l'élaboration de vos textes et dans l'élaboration de votre langue? MD: Paul connaît beaucoup d'écrivains qui ont un rapport à la langue... Comment dire... Ma mère parlait basque, mon père parle français et une partie de la famille parlait espagnol puisqu'on habitait à une frontière. Très tôt, j'ai eu conscience que la langue n'était pas un état de nature mais une convention. [...] On peut appeler ça "water", "agua", "ur" en basque ou "eau". Très rapidement, j'ai su ça. Je ne parlais pas basque pour diverses raisons, je le comprenais mais je ne le parlais pas parce que mon père ne le parlait pas. Je m'exprimais donc exclusivement en français mais je crois que les écrivains ont un rapport particulier à la langue maternelle. Ils osent y toucher, ils osent considérer ça comme quelque chose qui est extérieur à eux, qu'ils peuvent casser, avec lequel ils peuvent jouer, avec le corps de la langue. Ce n'est pas une nature, c'est une convention, ç'aurait pu être un autre corps. 'Comment j'écris' Le basque est une langue non écrite, du moins jusqu'aux années 1970, une langue familiale et très obscure quant à son origine. Le basque et le français étaient en opposition pour moi au sens où le français était la langue de l'école, de la République, la langue de Descartes, la langue des auteurs que je lisais, la langue que j'allais pouvoir manipuler. Le basque avait presque une dimension sacrée au contraire: je n'osais pas y toucher, je n'osais même pas le parler. Je ne sais pas comment cela a joué".¹⁷⁸

Une des premières choses qu'avait instituées le Gouvernement Autonome, dans les années quatre-vingt (en plus de la Maison des Morts) c'était une Académie. Un mot moyen avait été décidé pour chaque élément du monde. Tiot n'apprenait pas la langue qu'avait parlée Amona. C'était une nouvelle vieille langue que parlaient l'institutrice, et Christelle, et tous les fonctionnaires, et qu'elle-même était réduite à ânonner dans sa voiture. La langue ne flottait plus entre les gens, de famille en famille, de groupe en groupe. Elle était désormais endiguée dans des livres; et elle, dans son pays (si c'était son pays) à défaut d'être prophète elle était analphabète. (185)

The use of the conditional, "si c'était son pays," shows how (Marie) questions the logic of her belonging to a nation in which she is now twice removed from the language. Frantz Fanon stated in *Black Skin, White Masks*, that: "The Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter—that is, he will come closer to being a real human being—in direct ratio to his mastery of the language" (8). Marie explains that the word *yuoangui* actually means human being, therefore, her non-mastery of the language of *yuoangui*—especially "la nouvelle vieille langue"—dehumanizes her and prevents her from ever gaining full acceptance into her nation. In the new *pays yuoangui*, the very thing that had fueled the drive for independence is the legitimization of the *yuoangui* language. "*Le pays yuoangui s'était toujours appelé Pays Yuoangui dans toutes les langues autres que la vieille langue. Le pays sans nom, que les nations nommaient pays en lui niant être un pays. Un qui n'existait pas? Le pays où l'on n'arrive jamais?*" (129). Even language itself is insufficient in reinforcing the national imagination needed to sustain a nation and fill the newly established political borders of *le pays* with any meaning:

Ainé et ses amis yuoanguis cherchaient à l'enfermer dans leur communauté

tragique: depossédés de la langue de leurs parents, nés dans un pays où demander son chemin en vieille langue était perçu comme une provocation, où scolariser ses enfants en vieille langue était déjà un attentat. Mais elle voulait rester un individu.

Ainé se mêlait d'une histoire familiale, névrotique, non historique. (124)

(Marie) aims not to become imbricated in the political machinations of the new “pays,” because she was absent for its birth. Her desire to stay out of the linguistic mêlée indicates a desire to forge her own version of *yuoanguï* identity connected to the landscape.

4.4.5.1 L’analphabétisme yuoanguï. Marie Rivière is a successful French-language author whose return “home” creates significant buzz at a colloquium on *yuoanguï* literature. Her categorization as, “écrivain yuoanguï de langue française,” (49) is an epithet that castigates her lack of language skills as tantamount to cultural treason. “En tant qu’écrivain yuoanguï de langue française, que pensais-je de l’avenir du pays?” This question robs her of an identity that she holds dear, by using language as a litmus test of identity. Clearly, she feels like a fake, a cheat, “[...] Je baragounai lâchement les politesses yuoanguïes que je connais. Le jeune zoomer filmait l’enfant prodige, la fugitive qui renoue avec ses racines, la traîtresse qui rapplique après la bataille” (50). The use of the *yuoanguï* language by those who never left is a point of pride and a means test for inclusion. Marie’s minimal language proficiency is subtly chastised through simply daily interactions with her “fellow” *yuoanguï* whose condescension towards her is a constant reminder of the stain of her Frenchness:

La maîtresse la retient sur le seuil, elle lui [Marie] en vieille langue ce qui semble être des recommandations. Elle connaît la maîtresse, elles étaient dans le même lycée à une année d’écart. Elle s’appelait Estelle ou quelque chose comme ça. Maintenant elle s’appelle en vieille langue. Elle articule et parle lentement, pour

bien marquer à chaque mot qu'elle aura beau rentrer mille fois au pays, elle ne sera jamais d'ici. (69)

Here, her son's preschool teacher, an old childhood acquaintance, linguistically ostracizes (Marie) by refusing to acquiesce to her inability to communicate in *yuoangui*. Instead, she speaks to her as if to one of her own pupil's slowly articulating instructions as is often the case when poor speakers of a foreign language are spoken to—even when she forgets to collect her son from school the voicemail receives in “(en vieille langue)” (175). The parentheses are a punctuational eye-roll at the obnoxiousness of speakers of *yuoangui* who ignore that someone can be *yuoangui* without speaking the language: like Derrida's monolingualism.

The repeated, vague nods of disapproval appear even in the most private of settings: the delivery room. In this space of agony and joy, Marie finds herself linguistically empowered as if attaining temporary fluency through the monumental nature of the event:

La sage-femme me parlait en vieille langue et je la comprenais, depuis cinq bonnes minutes la vieille langue entrait dans mon cerveau et je la comprenais. Toute à mon affaire, toute à ma lessive, toute au roulement des contractions qui m'obligeaient à m'arrêter, à respirer, à souffler, j'entendais la vieille langue sans y penser. Je buvais la langue. Je nageais dedans. Ça se pensait tout seul. Ça ne se traduisait pas. (245)

In the process of bringing a brand new *yuoangui* into the world, Marie's brain is awash with the sounds and waves of the “vieille langue”. The experience channels her ancestral connections and renders her—however briefly—*yuoangui*, just like Marion and Amona, a mere generational linguistic vessel in which Épiphanie, too, will join the ranks of her foremothers.

Yet, this brief moment of linguistic ecstasy is shattered when she loses her footing.

“Jusqu’à ce qu’une tache noire apparaisse—un papillon qui s’empêtrait, déchirait les maillages, entortillait les fils—j’avais raté un mot, puis deux et le sens s’était débobiné. ‘Encore une qui ne comprend rien’: je rattrapais le fil” (245). Marie is diminished into a shell of herself through the use of the third-person “une”. In this one word, she is disconnected from her people, all the while producing their newest citizen. The effect of these repeated comments on Marie’s linguistic abilities is that it reduces national belonging and inclusion to the language. It is ignorant of the myriad attributes that make one *yuoangui*, aspects, which Marie reveals repeatedly throughout the text. The traditions of the *Maison des morts*, the landscape, the smallness of the land, her own ancestral connections blend together to paint the canvas of what being *yuoangui* means to her. Marie herself avoids using discussion of the language as trait that supports cultural belonging and national identity. Yuoangui identity arises in the institutions that set them [les yuoanguis] apart from their larger neighbors, “Le *nous* me venait spontanément quand j’évoquais nos traditions funébres, par une sorte de solidarité indigène” (179). Marie experiences the concept of an “us/*nous*” through this uncanny institution which is viewed from the outside as absurd or even morbid, but for her and her *yuoangui* compatriots, the digitization of her ancestors transcend linguistic borders and frees her from the chains of being monolingual.

4.4.6 Womb to tomb: Birthplace and deathplace as incubators of the nation¹⁷⁹

The place where one’s life begins, i.e. one’s birthplace, as I have shown in *Le Gone* and *Pensées*, orients one’s life path. At times, a mere demographic factoid, at others, it is a powerful determinant of political subjectivity. Marie differs from Azouz and (Nina) in that she, as a

¹⁷⁹Writing of her brother Paul, (Marie) writes, “mais son point d’origine était une entrée vide dans le dictionnaire—lieu de naissance: néant” (LP 92).

mother herself, has the authority to “objectively” write about what her child(ren)’s national subjectivity and identity that will be other because of her past and her choices. She often substitutes the notion of national belonging and the rootedness it evokes with the concept of *paysage*. *Paysage* is the multi-dimensional biosphere of the visual, sensory, auditory, gustatory, and olfactory sensations of a place that collaboratively establish a sense of belonging to a community, to a nation. As Marie contemplates her decision to return to *le pays*, she invokes her son’s future connection to a land almost as a gift: “Qu’est-ce que c’est, un paysage d’enfance? Des visages, des images, des spectres? Un parfum, une musique? Quel sera le paysage de Tiot? [...] Je voulais un paysage pour Tiot, est-ce que la porte d’Orléans est un paysage? Je voulais proposer un pays à Tiot, rentrer pour lui aussi” (44). “Proposer,” here in the sense of offering, implies that he will be able to later choose to not have a *paysage* that he could somehow erase the orientations of his childhood from his identity. This was proven impossible with Tiot’s uncle/Marie’s brother, Pablo, whose schizophrenia, is symptomatically linked to his *dépaysement*.

Throughout *Le Pays*, newly minted *yuoangui* citizens appear to use their newly institutionalized *yuoangui* language as an irredentist form of shunning those whom they consider linguistic traitors. In the years since her departure for Paris, *le pays* has become semi-foreign even to her. Though she is routinely linguistically discounted by her peers, referred to as “écrivain yuoangui de langue française” (50), Marie is by virtue of her birth in *le pays yuoangui* (before it was *le pays*, in the politically autonomous sense), a *yuoangui* citizen. She is the winner of a chance lottery in which, by sheer virtue of where she happened to be born, her reward is a *yuoangui* passport. In *Le Pays*, birthplace is a signifier of circumstance and belonging *malgré*

soi; it is “a space into which I happen to be born” (Soyinka qtd. in Spear 100).¹⁸⁰

4.4.7 Birthrights

Marie’s birthplace in *le pays yuoangui* grants her rights and privileges that distinguish her from her Parisian counterparts. Stéphanie Posthumus’s argument that Marie’s “struggle to identify with the new country as a political identity” (108) is abated by her connection to the *yuoangui* landscape and topography as well as “personal encounters of specific places” (108). If belonging to a nation is in part rooted in the locational happenstance of a place of birth, then how is belonging sustained outside of that space and how does it belong if it is umbilically-linked? Marie insinuates for the reader’s comprehension that belonging or self-identification in the *yuoangui* community is a more visceral, molar-level concept embedded in the land and traditions of a people which transcend time itself, “C’est peut-être ça, être de quelque part. Un sentiment géographique, reconnaître une terre comme on reconnaît un visage” (43). As Thomas C. Spear ascertains, “every ‘thinking’ individual is bound in relationship to the collective, national space” (97), Marie’s progeny would too be bound in their *yuoangui*-ness based on her actions and choices. Nevertheless, Marie still extolls the ambiguity and feminine authority that mothers possess in the determination of (national) identity. This is evidenced in Marie’s choice to move her family, though she is aware that this move will create political foreigners within her own immediate family:

Diego restait argentin, il n’avait pas le choix; moi je souhaitais obtenir la double nationalité, française et yuoanguie. Depuis l’Indépendance je pouvais nommer la

¹⁸⁰Wole Soyinka in relation to his birthplace Nigeria.

nation dont je venais, et m'enorgueillir comme une enfant; ce qui était écrit sur la carte d'Europe serait bientôt inscrit sur ma carte d'identité, et mes amis parisiens n'auraient plus rien à dire: je venais de là. Ce serait comme une *petite naissance*, un nouvel état civil, un état civil complet. [...] J'aurais la nationalité yuoanguie au bout d'un an, automatiquement, puisque j'étais née au pays. L'enfant que je portais l'aurait si mon utérus s'ouvrait sur le sol du pays. Diego et Tiot ne l'auraient pas. (75)

This “*petite naissance*” keeps intact the sacrosanct matrilineage of Rivière’s *yuoanguie* family: Amona—Marion (Marie’s mother)—Marie—Épiphanie: *les gardiennes de l’identité*. Yuval-Davis makes that the regulation of women’s nationalities has historically been linked to the men in their lives (23). This matrilineal lineage of *yuoanguie* citizenship upsets the masculine orientation of the nation, wherein men and male progeny are seen as the “border guards” (Yuval-Davis 23) of the nation. Since Diego and Tiot are excluded from citizenship, Marie essentially assumes the historically masculine role of citizenship determination.

The link between national identity and pregnancy mapped out through the repetitive naming of the parts of the female reproductive system: *utérus*, *matrice*, “au fond de mon vagin un autre petit vagin” (142). Each of these terms collectively traces the mother’s body and link it to the procreation and delivery of a national identity.

(Marie) lends a keen physical awareness to the female role in the designation of national belonging: “*Mais le sol, c’est aussi le lieu au-dessus duquel s’ouvre l’utérus des femmes. [...] le nourrisson humain, là où il échoit, là est son pays. La matrice détermine la patrie. Par le sexe des femmes le sol devient national*” (153). The use of the words “nourrisson humain” and “échoit”, from the verb “échoir”, meaning to hatch, highlights the animal nature of human birth

and insinuates a deceptive primacy that mothers have in national determination. Mothers are painted in a primal aspect—one that transcends the national imagination and affixes birthplace to a geographic and not necessarily national destiny. Alexander submits that “it is women—and not (just?) the bureaucracy and intelligentsia—who reproduce nation, biologically, culturally, and symbolically” (qtd. in Yuval-Davis 1). The mother is responsible for this process of *devenir national* and must bear the burden and suffer the consequences of her geographical choices. Furthermore, the construction of the mother through the female reproductive organs and the birth process sketches the mother as a universally symbolic giver of both life and national identity. The use of the third person in this context explicitly makes the mother the reference point of all origins regardless of where a person is brought into this world or where they are raised.

Darrieussecq employs three distinct terms to refer to place: “sol,” “pays,” and “patrie,” each of which refers to the location of birth, yet this novel portends deeper meanings. “Sol” indicates the materiality of the earth, the bare soil underneath one’s feet, the solid natural grounding that one needs to bloom: “*Un sol, c’est un morceau superficiel de l’écorce terrestre*” (128). “Pays” is the ensemble of geographies, cultures, filiations and affiliations—it is a holistic term, which bundles tangible and intangible aspects of place.¹⁸¹ “Patrie” is a more abstract term, used quite sparingly throughout the text as it alludes to the historical objects and literature of a country. “*La matrice détermine la patrie,*” “matrice” meaning womb with the root “mat-,” related to the mother and “patrie,” meaning fatherland, with the root “pat-” relating to the father, is a thought-provoking phrase which confuses gender roles and goes against physiological sex-

¹⁸¹“Filiation” and “Affiliation” are terms I borrow from Edward Saïd’s *The World, The Text, The Critic* which represent genealogical relationships (the former) and non-genealogical relationships and networks which arise from the collective existence in society (the latter).

determination.¹⁸²

The point of whether gender or maternal roles are more consequential in the construction of national identities in this novel is also raised. While I would argue that it essentially does not matter, what does matter is the intersection of maternity/motherhood with the establishment of a topo/geographically-anchored basis for identities. Simon Kemp argues that these geographical shifts lead to perpetual nomadism: “Ces troubles géographiques dans les romans de Marie Darieussecq représentent une mise en question du chez-soi des voyageurs, qui menace d’en faire de vrais nomades, toujours étrangers en n’importe quel pays, y compris celui qu’ils habitent et celui où ils sont nés” (Kemp qtd. in Lasserre et Simon 162). This space of limbo in which the narrator finds herself, over and over again, is also destined to be the *patrie* of her children who will inherit this fluid identity. The maternal desire to gift her offspring with a country conflicts, however, with the reality of geopolitics:

De même qu’une ville de province ne deviendra jamais une capitale, dût cette province se transformer en pays, la densité de mercure de Paris ne se déplace pas. Je ne voulais pas que dans ses flashes géographiques Tiot voie le square du Serment-de-Koufra. Je ne voulais pas que ce soit son paysage, le square du Serment-de-Koufra. (50)

Because Tiot was born in Paris, he will forever remain a political foreigner—like his father—not a linguistic outsider like his mother. Marie has been heavily influenced by her time in the capital city: “*Elle avait choisi Paris, des années auparavant, pour recouvrer un centre*” (133). This time away was not an exile, it was not an escape, nor was a complicit collaboration with the presumed oppressor of the *yuoangui* people. This time in Paris is intrinsic to Marie’s

¹⁸²Wherein the male’s sperm determines the baby’s sex.

conception of self-identification, linguistically and culturally speaking: “*Elle avait vécu trente ans dans la vision du monde française*” (133). These three decades of a French frame of reference with *yuoangui* roots has made her the woman she is today and she cannot suddenly erase the markings of this time in her life for the sake of “national” unity.

4.4.8 Section conclusion

Marie’s pregnancy and the administrative and medical interactions she partakes in, often politely and subtly “chastise” her inability to speak *yuoangui*, the most public moniker of belonging in this new nation. As in the labor and delivery scene where an exasperated nurse brushes her off as just another foreigner, Marie recurrently bumps against up the edges of the *yuoangui* language and asserts her attachment to this land through non-linguistic traditions. One peculiar custom is that of *La Maison des morts*, wherein *yuoangui* families digitize their deceased loved-ones through painstakingly detailed computer holograms with which they can interact and converse in real time as if they were still there.

Marie makes frequent trips to “visit” her beloved grandmother, Amona, through whom her genealogical *yuoangui* identity is most succinctly linked. The obsession with “visiting” Amona and fine-tuning the computer files of her grandmother’s hologram are likened to a gambler who simply cannot stay away, in part because of her birth place gives her free access: “Ma naissance au pays était un laissez-passer” (207) and “Aux Yuoanguis de souche on ne demandait rien. L’accès aux morts était illimité” (207). Her birthrights give her access to these digital mausoleums and coalesce to portray her deepest connections to the culture of her people. In the uncanny spaces of *La Maison des morts* is where Marie’s rebirth into the *yuoangui* collectivity is most forceful and where she attempts to given birth digitally to her deceased baby

brother, Paul.

Tomb(s) of the Unknown Soldier dot the political remembrance landscape across the globe. They are solemn destinations demanding reverence and gratitude for the ultimate sacrifice made for the good of the nation; these tombs are the sites of celebration of national holidays or anniversary commemorations. Anderson's observation of the phenomenon of these sites blends well with the place of function of *La Maison des morts*: "Yet void as these tombs are of identifiable mortal remains, they are nonetheless saturated with ghostly national imaginings" (9). Paul, her deceased infant brother, stands as her unknown soldier, whom she unsuccessfully attempts to recreate through a stock-photo hologram. This failure to find the precise image of a child she has no recollection of and who remains shrouded in secrecy is emblematic of her inability to pinpoint her own status as *yuoanguis*. Marie appears to seek his image as a rehabilitation of childhood memories that have simply slipped away and remain permanently beyond her grasp.

4.4.8.1 Le système reproductif des yuoanguis

Avant l'indépendance, la violence impliquait Paris et Madrid; résonnait jusqu'à Barcelone, s'entendait jusqu'à Belfast peut-être, par empathie. Guère plus loin. Rien, chez les Yuoanguis, ne semblait nulle part très grave. Les Yuoanguis étaient riches, ils avaient un joli bord de mer, ils n'étaient ni tués en masse ni déportés, et leur passé était passé. Surtout, ils n'existaient pas. Dès qu'elle fut à Paris, il lui fut très facile de s'en convaincre. Il y avait des centres et des évidences, des lieux communs mondialisés. Les Yuoanguis étaient terriblement périphériques. (54)

In the first pages of *Le Pays*, Marie states, “Il était temps de rentrer au pays” (14).¹⁸³ This admission is a deep sea-change in her thinking about connections with space and the memories that make it into a place. She expresses fatigue with Paris and the need/desire to raise her child(ren) in the distant, yet familiar landscapes of her childhood and family heritage. Paris as the epicenter of France constructs Marie’s consideration of Frenchness through its confining architecture and insular cultural institutions.

Marie is a sort of nomad who ultimately chooses where to set roots, not only for herself, but for her growing family as well. Lasserre and Simon define a nomad as “un transhumant, pas un touriste: il ne se meut pas pour le simple plaisir du voyage et du dépaysement sans risque” (14).¹⁸⁴ This definition jives well with *Le Pays* as it underscores the perilous and extenuating effects of her displacement. Whilst a nomad may change scenery with some frequency, he or she is never untouched by the place(s) they (have) inhabit(ed). The third-person narrator, (Marie), evokes her reasoning for one last nomadic journey back to the “le pays”¹⁸⁵ to avoid the fleeting superficiality of the cosmopolitan lifestyle of major urban centers. Cities, such as Paris, are not places to be “from,” but merely places to dwell:

Ils rentraient au pays pour échapper aux squares, à la torpeur des squares et des jardins publics. Ils avaient adoré Paris, ils étaient de Paris comme sont new-yorkais et londoniens et sans doute shanghaiens ceux qui se sont un jour installés à New York, Londres et Shanghai... Mais le square était une épreuve désormais

¹⁸³In English, “pays” translates to *country* as in a political nation-state entity. However, colloquially, ‘le pays’ can more informally mean region or one’s place of origin—acertain long-term connection to a space is implied.

¹⁸⁴“transhumance” refers to the seasonal departure of cattle to higher and lower pastures based on the time of year.

¹⁸⁵When referring to *le pays* as in the country/land, I will use the lower case and italics. When referring specifically to the novel, I will use upper case and italics.

au-dessus de leurs forces.¹⁸⁶(44)

For Marie, leaving Paris to return to “le pays” is tantamount to abandoning the comfortable but punishing routine to which urban dwellers succumb. The need for roots, for untouched nature, for recognition as being from somewhere with a history is incredibly important for a child’s well-being. The establishment of roots and creation of the places you will be from is a mother’s task that is not ever fully accomplished.

4.5 CHAPTER CONCLUSION

This chapter demonstrates how three contemporary works of autofiction contend with the effect that mothers have on the development of personal expression(s) of Frenchness and national identit(ies). The mother is pivotal agent in identity construction; depending on her own status as foreigner, native, or other, she acts as either a filter or propagator of national identity since she is the first meaningful interpreter of society and culture to which a child is exposed. In all three texts, the mother-child/nation-subject confrontations are espoused along similarly discernable frameworks: the autofictional genre, the textual representations of language barriers, and the significance of birthplace in inclusion/exclusion in the nation.

The autofictional genre demarcates daily life practices through which identity builds its foundations. It is not through the participation in grand historical moments or sacrifices, but in

¹⁸⁶Baskerville Old Face font is the classical choice of Gallimard’s *livre de poche* “folio” series. Web. <https://fontsinuse.com/uses/15781/folio-book-series-gallimard>. Accessed: 31 August 2017. To clarify citations from the two narrators, I will refer to the first-person narrator as Marie and the third-person narrator as (Marie). Additionally, in citations from the first-person narrations, I leave the quotes in original typeface; in citations from third-person (Marie) narrations, I set them in italics to mimic the textual presentation. I feel it important to specify the typographical origin of quotes to better distinguish which narrator is speaking.

most private spaces of existence: the home, the school, the therapist's office, and even the womb. Azouz reveals his mother's poor command of French as a hindrance to his own social integration and her barely comprehensible Arabic accent devalues his attempts at civic participation *comme* integration. In *Pensées*, (Nina)'s French mother, as it seems, speaks no Arabic despite spending well over a decade living in Algiers. This lacuna reinforces a maternal fragility and otherness within the Algerian landscape and inhibits Nina from being fully embraced and identified as Algerian through her paternal affiliation. Finally, *Le Pays* serves as a counterpoint to *Le Gone* and *Pensées* in Marie's dual role of mother and child. Marie Rivière's extended time living in France and abroad during the crucial period of independence has left her as a linguistic foreign, political insider, and cultural traitor in her newly independent homeland, *le pays yuoangui*. Unable to communicate and participate in the post-independence resurgence of the *yuoangui*, she is a constant representation of otherness within her family heritage; this linguistic disadvantage also provides moments of discomfort and even embarrassment when she realizes that she as a mother is unable to provide a mother tongue for her son.

5.0 CONCLUSION

My methodology throughout this dissertation has been to highlight, define, and analyze instances of national disorientation across a variety of cultural productions from the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries through an adaptation of Sara Ahmed's conceptualization of the term disorientation as she engages with it through phenomenology and queer studies. Ahmed's novel application of queer studies to the theoretical canon of phenomenology gives birth to a new vector of social analysis in which objects and their backgrounds are shown to be and act differently for queer persons versus heterosexual persons, or persons of color versus white persons. Any deviance from the white and/or heteronormative construction of the Western world is an act of queering; it can result in social and psychological damage, or what Ahmed considers as disorientation. This definition leads to the question, what does the call for a queer phenomenology have to do with nation and disorientation?

I have argued that Ahmed's phenomenological queer conception of orientation and disorientation is interchangeable with the nation because of the deviations from the social lines that they inherit because society is oriented upon heterosexuality and national normativity. The same can be said of the French nation, which is constructed upon the similar tenets of assimilation and integration to present a universal image of acceptance. But, not all who come to France are able to integrate or assimilate into the fabric of French society. France is itself aorientation; its very language, politics, and objects of cultural value promote an ordering and

perception of the world that advocates a smooth transferal of ideals and goods from one generation to the next in both public and private spheres. This national orientation also controls bodily movement in the regulation of spaces, zones of transit, and schools to name a few. Sara Ahmed notes that “the starting point for orientation is the point from which the world unfolds: the here of the body and the where of its dwelling” (2006, 545). The French body is always oriented by the nation through a vast network of prohibitions on movement, occupation of space, modes of comportment, among others; even the ubiquitous signage of movement control such as, *Défense de stationnement* or *Prière de ne pas marcher sur la pelouse*:

And, for sure, bodies that experience being out of place might need to be orientated, to find a place where they feel comfortable and safe in the world. The point is not whether we experience disorientation (for we will, and we do), but how such experiences can impact on the orientation of bodies and spaces, which is after all about how things are “directed” and how they are shaped by the lines they follow. (2006, 158)

France is as much a geopolitical space as it is a call to action—perpetually needing to exalt its own existence through cultural phenomena and nationalizing processes. Unfortunately, these same virtues that extoll the nation often result in situations that ostracize persons or actions, which do not subscribe to the forward-moving goals of the nation.

Instance(s) of being or falling out of line or of being mis-aligned with the directives of the nation have been the primary target of my study of national disorientation. Every cultural production in this dissertation was selected for the manner(s) in which it challenges the stability of French identity. The national infrastructure of rituals, traditions, histories, imagery, commemorative objects and events, appear to extend an inclusionary branch to its citizens and

inhabitants who endeavor to keep France French. I have shown that the nation is disoriented perhaps more significantly by “normative” French citizens—those who were born and raised in France, bearing French-sounding names, and abiding by French cultural conventions—than by the easy targets: foreigners and immigrants.

I have produced three chapters each of which delves into a varying foundational aspect of the nation: memory and objects, sex and tourism, and the effects of maternal alterity on a child’s own concept of identity. The material objects of our identities and the way in which the manipulation of these objects push back against cultural forces is seemingly beyond our control. While Ahmed argues that the world is orientated around the hegemonic structures of whiteness, heterosexuality, and patriarchy, there is optimism in her work. It suffices to offer examples to the contrary, not necessarily subversive or groundbreaking works, but ones in which normal, everyday citizens, living their lives push back against these top-down directionalities. Ahmed describes disorientation as “an ordinary feeling, or even a feeling that comes and goes as we move around during the day” (157). It is not in the grand overtures of the national celebrations, wars, or sacrifice, but in the minutiae of the banal lives of ordinary citizens that we *all* experience disorientation.

The rise in popularity of interdisciplinary studies in the humanities and social sciences highlights the vast areas of unexplored or underexplored themes in available scholarship. My research has attempted to incorporate—where possible—critical works from a variety of social science disciplines, particularly sociology and anthropology; I have however discerned gaps in the scholarship that would greatly benefit from further attention. For one, the interactions with quotidian objects in chapter two have led me to question the hidden orientations or attractions towards certain objects which trace out the nation and bare physical or emotional traces within

them. There has been of course significant attention given to the artifacts of the nation, however, yet I find that it is either too limited or outdated. Pierre Nora's epic study of *lieux de mémoire*, for example, is already over twenty-five years old, and though still extremely valuable to understanding the imagining of the nation, relies perhaps too heavily on public spaces, national holidays, and national monuments to explicate the increase in French *déclinisme* of the last thirty years. I call for a study of national orientations and consequently disorientations through the scope of the objects of the hyper-capitalistic, digital era we currently live in. This study would necessarily span multiple disciplines that perhaps have not been traditionally brought together, such as economics and literary theory, or anthropology and cinema. Such a project would also be phenomenological in nature so as to tie in Ahmed's work with lines of inheritance and how we come to some objects and not others.

Another area of investigation that I consider to be currently lacking is the role of mass tourism in French film and literature. Not only does tourism account for nearly 10% of France's GDP, it is also major cultural and psychological fixation. There are quite large sub-sections of sociology, anthropology, and economics, which study the tourism of every possible geographic region of the world and its consequences for the tourists who visit and on those who are visited. It is a fascinating area of research—that I suspect as mass tourism continues to become more affordable and accessible in France—will gain increasing amounts of attention from producers of cultural content whether it be in film, literature, or art. A consequence of more affordable means of transportation to foreign destinations is the rise of medical tourism, sex tourism, and even, as Houellebecq surmises, suicide tourism. It is now, more than ever before in human history, easier to evade the legal and moral constraints of French society by simply jumping on a plane to rejoin another part of the world where the “services” you desire are available. I

envision linking Pierre Bourdieu's theories on taste and habitus to Ahmed's queer phenomenology as a possible critical framework for examining how mass tourism engages with French citizens self-perceptions of national identity and how the industry both declines and influences these perceptions.

One final "extension du domaine de la recherche" would be to expand the work of the fourth chapter's engagement with maternal alterity and national identity. In this section, I became intrigued with what Marianne Hirsch identifies as the lack of women writing about the experiences of motherhood because they cannot write their own subjectivity as a mother; women can only become mothers through the existence of offspring—biological or adopted—who make them mothers. However, motherhood in the twenty-first is a differently lived experience than at any time in history not only in terms of reproduction assistive technologies such as in-vitro fertilization, egg donation, or surrogacy, that transpire across international borders, but also the ways in which expectations of mothers have shifted and become more public. These maternal border-crossings amount a problematic in which national authority is legally transgressed, but in which female bodies (and babies) become somehow queer. To make things queer is to disturb the order of things (Ahmed 161) and that the technological advancements that make these services possible disorients the directions of national identity as a birth-right/"gift" given as birth.

In *Cultural Intimacy: Social Poetics in the nation-state*, Herzfeld portends that "national harmony displays a deceptively transparent surface [that] does not reveal the underlying fissures easily" (2). He goes on to suggest that the ignoring these fissures for simplicity's sake leads to "scholarly complaisance with official perspectives" (2) as deeper inquiry is time-consuming and far easier to presume. While I do not wish to intimate that the scholarly gaps espoused above

originate from apathy, I do suggest that it is an arduous task to challenge the veneers of national cohesion and excavate the interdisciplinary origins of these “fissures.” However, in the last half-century, cultural productions in France have done the dirty work of normalizing non-normative directionalities that make one (differently) French.

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