Reinventing Community:
Collective Identity and Cultural Difference
in Recent Theory and Literature in French

Thesis Presented by Jane Hiddleston
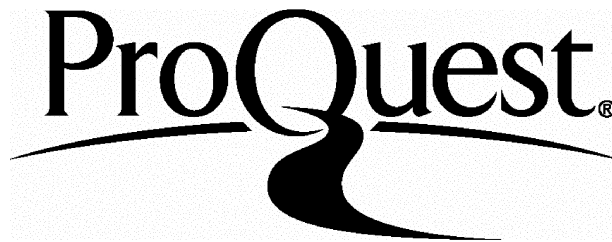For the Degree of Ph.D.

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Abstract

This thesis examines representations of 'community' in recent critical theory and literature in French. I argue that the theoretical discourses that emerged through the eighties and nineties affirming the extinction of community need to be rethought. Derrida, Lyotard and Nancy have all suggested that the notion of the 'in-common' be replaced with attention to radically diverse and dissimilar beings, arguing that consensus is usually both dangerous and illusory. However, while these conclusions serve to a certain extent to rescue particular cultural perspectives from appropriation by assimilative discourses, the emphasis on intractable difference also risks perpetuating fragmentation and marginalisation. By juxtaposing theory with socio-political debates on multiculturalism in France, I demonstrate how a conception of the coexistence of cultural specificity with various forms of dialogue constitutes a more accurate depiction of actual community formations, as well as providing a more effective means to counteract prejudice. I then use Nancy's more recent work to show how singular beings continually converge and diverge within a wider interactive network.

The rest of the thesis explores the complex mediations between singularity and collectivity represented in a range of texts written in French. The intersection of diverse cultural positions is enacted in representations of bilingualism and multilingualism; Khatibi and Glissant, for example, evoke the ways in which any language or idiom is unsettlingly shot through with traces of other dialects. Furthermore, literary works discussing North African immigrant communities testify to a shift from a reflection on cultural frontiers to a more unstable movement between particularity and relationality. While 'first-generation' authors reflect the emphasis on difference proposed in the work of Derrida and Lyotard, Sebbar and various Beur writers hover more uncertainly between exile and cultural or linguistic dialogue. These analyses convey the slippery relation between singularity and collectivity, problematising fixed models and blurring conventional cultural dichotomies. Fictional representation is shown to function as a locus where categories of 'identity' and 'difference' can be undermined, since its ludic and subjective form escapes the identification of any exemplary cultural position.

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Acknowledgements

Introduction

Je n'aime pas beaucoup le mot de communauté, je ne suis même pas sûr d'aimer la chose.[1]

Aujourd'hui, le caractère général de l'art occidental, ce qu'il partage entre les artistes, c'est l'absence de communauté.[2]

An increasing mistrust of the very notion of 'community' has characterised much recent theoretical and literary writing in French. Towards the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties, a spate of texts emerged in which 'community' was deconstructed, as writers expressed their loss of faith in many forms of collective framework, drawing attention instead to anomaly, to singularity, and to incommensurability between diverse standpoints. For these writers, community in the traditional sense is created by an illusory, mythical discourse that inevitably fails to take into account differences that remain irreducible. As a result, the collective is seen as an empty signifier that is unable to encapsulate the impossibly fragmented perspectives of which it is apparently comprised.

Among those thinkers pronouncing the extinction of community are names such as Nancy, Derrida, Lyotard, Blanchot, Badiou, and the Italian theorist Giorgio Agamben. All these writers in various ways emphasise alterity or difference in order to signal the end of straightforward communal identification. Collective identity is broken down and incommensurable singularities are privileged. Traditional or conventional communities are described as 'désœuvrée' or 'inavouable', the modern collectivity is renamed the 'communauté sans communauté', and conceptions of resemblance and belonging are replaced with gestures of negation and dissemination.[3] Nancy, for example, explores the traditional association of community with myth and the impossible quest for innate essences and origins. He then replaces these associations with a reflection on the empty frame of community, perceiving the term as the open signifier of the spacing or coexistence of finite, singular beings. For Agamben, this in turn implies that the experience of belonging is 'the

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[1] Jacques Derrida, 'Une "folie" doit veiller sur la pensée', *Points de suspension: entretiens choisis et présentés par Elisabeth Weber*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1992), 349-375 (p. 366).

[2] Edouard Glissant, *Soleil de la conscience*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1997) p. 75.

[3] See Jean-Luc Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée*, (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986) and Maurice Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable*, (Paris: Minuit, 1983). The phrase 'communauté sans communauté' is used by Nancy and also by Derrida in *Politiques d'amitié*, (Paris: Galilée, 1994).

relation to an empty and indeterminate totality'.[4] Derrida goes so far as to suggest that the very term 'le commun' needs to be abandoned, and democracy is seen as the impossible reunion of irreducibly singular beings. Furthermore, political thinking for writers such as Nancy, Derrida and Badiou must entail a rejection of any all-encompassing, sovereign position and of national, ethnic or cultural essence. Community instead always contains some form of internal difference.

I want to analyse these discourses first of all in order to identify their relationship with contemporary socio-political debates in France and with the ways in which community is perceived and experienced today. Theoretical discourses such as these frequently appear abstract, and they have been criticised for their disengagement from contemporary social issues. Writers such as Derrida, Nancy and Lyotard seem to operate on a generalised philosophical level, questioning meanings and models while paying scant attention to particular historical events. But I want to show that these sorts of theory do have the capacity to comment on the wider, practical sphere, since they interrogate the significance of certain fundamental concepts that in turn define the ways in which societies and territories are organised. Notions of 'community' and 'difference' are themselves discursively constructed, always functioning only insofar as they are believed in by constituent members of society. A sense of community depends on the creation of perceived unity, arising from a discourse of sharing and from discursive interaction rather than from innate or essential characteristics. As Benedict Anderson writes, 'communities are to be distinguished not by their falsity/genuineness but by the style in which they are imagined'.[5] Language itself is constitutive of community, and discourses of collective identity form the substance of the latter's existence. The analysis of the discourse of community undertaken by critical theorists can therefore be seen as part of a contemporary reworking of collective structures, since they re-imagine the foundations upon which social and political values and priorities are built. The relation between theories of community and their actual socio-political implications is not one between 'text' and 'world' (despite Derrida's uncharacteristic separation of 'le mot' and 'la chose' in the quotation reproduced above). The writing of community participates in and challenges many of the preconceptions involved in our understanding of what constitutes collectivity. These theories merit analysis because they

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function as an arena where meanings are shifted and overturned, problematising the underlying assumptions that persist in other discursive areas.

By setting theoretical writers in their context in this manner, my aim is to assess and re-evaluate the models they present. The reconceptualisations of community evoked in the work of Derrida and Nancy can be compared with those elucidated by socio-political writers, since they do interrogate and realign some of the patterns that underpin collective structures as they are experienced in the present. Topical debates in France regarding the fraught relationship between republican ideology and an increased sense of cultural difference can to an extent be seen to be reflected in Derrida and Nancy's work. The *existence* of such diversity is of course not itself new, but current discourses reaffirm its contemporary implications on both a theoretical and a practical level. I then want to use this juxtaposition to probe and test these theoretical configurations, investigating their degree of accuracy and questioning whether they can be seen to describe contemporary experience in a resonant or helpful manner. Writers such as Derrida and Nancy evoke the dilemmas involved in recent discussions of 'multiculturalism' and migration in France, but they also at times distort contemporary problems by upholding a series of generalised and at times inaccurate conclusions whose relation to the practical sphere as a result becomes unclear. In addition, this juxtaposition of abstract theory with more concrete writing can serve to bring to light the further political implications of these discourses of community, demonstrating their potential impact on the ways in which differences are reacted to and subsequently organised within the social world. By attempting to describe collective identity and cultural difference, these theorists also express certain more or less successful visions of how prejudices can be avoided or of how cultural interaction might take place. They do not propose practical policies to be implemented in concrete situations, but they do examine the patterns of understanding that lead certain groups to be treated in particular ways, and they can as a result propose structures that help to work against oppressive and inegalitarian modes of thought.

The purpose of this inquiry is ultimately to identify the difficulties involved in pronouncing the extinction of community and to locate a mode of thought that will convey the complexities of cultural interaction in an accurate and politically constructive manner. Discourses privileging difference are prevalent at the present time, and they do to a certain

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[5] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983 and 1991) p. 6.

extent help to rescue cultural specificities from appropriation by ethnocentric perspectives. The deconstruction of community may function as a critique of homogeneous categorisations of identity. However, I also want to ask whether the repeated emphasis on alterity as opposed to any broad form of communal identification could have problematic implications, figuring difference as a static quality and inadvertently reinforcing marginalisation rather than showing how cultures are in reality relational and interactive. Instead of conceiving community as necessarily self-contained and homogeneous, diametrically opposed to its distinct 'other', I want to blur the conceptual poles of sameness and difference and to underline the interaction between the singular and the collective. I am seeking a new mode of thinking along these lines both in order to depict the ways in which cultural groups in reality diverge, converge and interconnect, and as a means to counteract erroneous or prejudiced discourses that still persist in the French sphere. In addition to glossing over the actual prevalence of intercultural movements, perceptions of difference as insurmountable and static could lead to the entrenchment of prejudices and to the exclusion of 'minority' groups. Concomitantly, an awareness of forms of interpenetration, while preserving a sense of the specific composition of any identity or group, works against cultural reification and paves the way towards a forum where negotiation could eventually take place. I do not want to suggest that cultural conflicts and incompatibilities can be resolved simply by celebrating hybridisation and claiming to transcend difference in a utopian manner. But a depiction of the ways in which cultural identity is both singular and relational may help to invalidate inaccurate stereotypes and provide a starting point for the process of negotiation.

Given that community as a discursive construct needs to be reinterpreted in this way, I also want to focus on the ways in which language or linguistic interaction is itself a site of contestation. An analysis of the language of community in turn demands a reconsideration of communities of language. If the borders between 'community' and 'difference' can be blurred and softened in order to draw attention to the ways in which singular beings continually enter into a series of relations with other cultural systems, then this is also because linguistic frontiers themselves can be seen as fluid. Just as cultural alterity can be shown to be a complex, composite structure, so can theoretical perceptions of linguistic otherness be developed by a reflection on the ways in which language structures are perpetually interpenetrated with traces from diverse systems. By reading texts on language and community by Derrida, Khatibi and Glissant, I will investigate how singularity and

collectivity are intermingled through the formation and usage of languages themselves. Linguistic idioms announce their specificity and uniqueness, but they also arise from a process of engagement with plural collective systems, combining influences from diverse sources rather than originating from a single linguistic source. Community is reinvented by these processes of bilingual and multilingual exchange.

This examination of the ways in which singular and collective voices and positions intersect can subsequently be developed through analysis of a number of literary texts. While theory can comment on practical perceptions of community by interrogating the hidden meanings and associations that contribute to its discursive formation, literature could be seen to provide another form of subversive commentary because it can engage with the mechanisms of representation on a performative level. If 'community' and 'difference' are constituted by language, then fiction can be seen as a privileged site where such concepts can be examined through textual experimentation. Literary texts are a locus where cultures can be formed and reformed, as writers perform certain experiences of community in the very structures they employ. I have therefore chosen to couple my theoretical exegesis with analysis of texts by writers of North African origin, investigating the ways in which their depictions of community and cultural difference in France add further nuance to the theoretical questions raised in the early chapters. Writers such as Ben Jelloun, Sebbar and Begag portray a series of oscillations between cultural incompatibility and polyphony, actively miming the complex conjunction of the specific and the relational that characterises cultural interaction in the wider sphere. Their literary works convey experiences of cultural dialogue and difference while refusing to promote any exemplary or generalised vision, intertwining a rejection of conventional community formations with an expansive involvement in plural systems.

Since literary texts are frequently themselves inconclusive, giving rise to multiple interpretations and resisting identification with any single political stance, these representations perform the multifarious nature of collective identification on the level both of content and of form. The fiction studied here itself problematises theory, presenting a variety of voices and perspectives and performing cultural plurality through its own slippery and multi-layered structure. I therefore hope to reach a more subtle understanding of community and difference both by probing the foundations of a set of theoretical concepts, and by identifying the ways in which fiction unsettles those concepts, depicting certain experiences of communality while also refusing to adhere to any particular cultural position.

This literature scrambles preconceived patterns and adds unforeseen nuances, voicing a singular vision while resisting enclosure or categorisation. The novels by North African writers living in France discussed here reflect on the nature of the cultural community only in order to reveal how textual representations of collective structures remain at each juncture provisional and subject to revision.

The first chapter constitutes a critique of some of Derrida and Nancy's work on community. I begin by demonstrating how Derrida's *Politiques de l'amitié* and Nancy's early text *La communauté désœuvrée* strip community of its associations with resemblance and belonging, and they argue that the thought of the collective framework must be coupled with attention to absolutely singular identities. For Derrida, community must impossibly combine universal norms with a perception of the irreducible specificity of each individual. In Nancy's work, the 'in-common' is figured as an 'inoperative' frame, and singular beings are seen as coexistent but irrevocably separate from one another. Derrida and Nancy's writing is then compared to some concrete socio-political discourses in order to reveal their pertinence to discussions of the relation between immigrant identity and republicanism in France, and to the uncertainty surrounding existing cultural and national paradigms. My central argument in this context, however, is that this deconstruction of communal identification inaccurately portrays society as irrevocably fragmented, as well as suggesting that any working political consensus is impossible. I finish by exploring how the notion of 'partage', which is discussed in another part of Nancy's work, could be used to imagine how forms of cultural dialogue can be achieved, because it signifies not only division but also 'sharing out', juxtaposition and contact.

The second chapter examines how recent interrogations of community are founded upon a new understanding of difference. Again, theoretical discourses are set against the backdrop of more concrete debates regarding racism or the stigmatisation and exclusion of the other. Certain prejudiced discourses persist in France, revolving around a misapprehension of alterity and a desire to identify and demarcate 'self' and 'other'. I propose to counter these ideologies with an analysis of Lyotard's conception of the 'differend', which attempts to rescue the other from stereotypical classifications. Yet I also criticise Lyotard's mode of thinking on both a philosophical and a political level for focusing only on incommensurability rather than on possibilities of negotiation across differences. Similarly, Derrida's discussions of immigration and hospitality promote the

unconditional acceptance of any other, but this argument also stresses incommunicability, as well as declaring that adjudication is impossible. The final part of the chapter uses extracts from Nancy's later texts, *Le sens du monde* and *Etre singulier pluriel*, in order to articulate further this critique of models upholding absolute alterity. I argue that the repeated emphasis on otherness needs to be replaced with a more accurate and politically effective understanding of community that shows how the rigid incompatibilities upheld by certain philosophical discourses misrepresent cultural interaction. A consideration of the ways in which links are forged between different groups helps to work against prejudice and reveals in a more convincing manner how negotiation can be achieved.

The third chapter demonstrates how linguistic relations form a crucial locus wherein 'community' is shaken up and unsettled. A consideration of the interaction between languages aptly exemplifies the notion of dialogue between singular and specific perspectives proposed in the initial chapters. Entrenched conceptions of the purity of the French language reflect the republican drive to centralise and unify the French community. This can result in the occlusion of the 'minority' languages spoken in France or other francophone countries, and may mask their influence on the changing structure of French. The relation between language and community can be re-evaluated, however, through a consideration of the creative implications of monolingualism, bilingualism and multilingualism. Derrida's *Le monolinguisme de l'autre*, for example, indicates how alterity can subtend the limits of a single language, reflecting at the same time on the exclusionary effects of the imposition of French in Algeria. In Khatibi's work on Franco-Moroccan relations, on the other hand, bilingual identity evokes both the subversive interpenetration of languages and a sense of loss or division. Glissant presents a more affirmative theory of the interaction between languages, using Creole to evoke a polyphonic community composed of the entanglement of different voices. My readings of these texts will demonstrate how a conception of untranslatability can be intricately intertwined with a reflection on relationality or linguistic interaction.

The final three chapters of the thesis consist of textual analysis of works by North African immigrants living in France, and these representations are used to elaborate on the theoretical premises set up in the first part. I demonstrate how literature functions as an arena where various discursive conceptions of community can be acted out and juxtaposed, complementing or complicating the theoretical models. In chapter four, I analyse the portrayal of collective identity and difference in the texts by Tahar Ben Jelloun and Rachid

Boudjedra that describe the process of immigration and arrival in France. Situated in the seventies, these works underline the isolation of single immigrant workers from the Maghreb, demonstrating the exclusion of otherness from centralised French paradigms. Texts such as *Topographie idéale pour une agression caractérisée* and *La réclusion solitaire*, for example, portray the alienation of North African immigrants living in France, using the literary form also to perform the resistance of the other to conventional representational codes. While these texts on one level appear to criticise ideologies that privilege the exclusion of cultural alterity, however, I will also suggest that some of their depictions of community do seem to collude with that gesture. Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun display the troubling effects of maintaining rigid cultural frontiers, yet some of the metaphors and descriptions they employ serve to demarcate and classify cultures, emphasising incommensurability in a way that recalls the 'tout autre' of Derrida or Lyotard's theorisation.

In the texts of Leïla Sebbar, on the other hand, reflections on exile are coupled with a drive to embrace plurality and cultural mixing. Born in Algeria of a French mother and an Algerian father, Sebbar has lived in France since the age of seventeen, and her work expresses at once the loss of her 'native land' and an attempt to intermingle diverse cultural influences. If on the one hand Sebbar seems acutely aware of cultural difference, she also counteracts that sense of specificity with a representation of hybridisation and nomadic life. The *Shérazade* texts, for example, mourn the loss of Algeria while playing with archaic Orientalist stereotypes and intermingling Arabic signifiers with fragments of alternative, modern ways of life. Sebbar's work enacts and develops Nancy's theory, hovering between reflections on singularity and collectivity and using depictions of Maghrebian immigrants and their children to imagine the rupture and reformation of relations between communities inside and outside France.

In the final section, I read a selection of texts by various Beur writers as a demonstration of how a particular community can turn out to be more unstable and disintegrative than its uniform label seems to suggest. The term 'Beur', used to designate the second and third generations of immigrants, sprang up in the eighties from the French slang for 'Arabe'.[6] The word functioned to rescue the children of immigrants living in France from the indeterminacy of the dichotomy France/North Africa, providing them with a

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[6] 'Beur' is 'Arabe' in 'verlan', a form of French slang where the syllables of a word are reversed.

third term that paradoxically symbolised cultural mixing. The literature of the Beur generation can be read as heterogeneous and playful, depicting not a single community of North Africans in France but a wide variety of cultural combinations. Writers such as Azouz Begag, Mehdi Charef and Akli Tadjer exemplify cultural polyphony through the juxtaposition of different signs and voices, again offering a critique of notions of incommensurability and radical difference. Each Beur text seems provisional and experimental, however, portraying loss as well as affirmation and refusing to uphold hybridity as a utopian value beyond difference. These texts dramatise diverse forms of interaction between identities and cultures living in France, reflecting and advancing the singular-plural mode of thinking elucidated, through Nancy, in the earlier sections.

My aim is to combine different forms of discourse in order to provide an accurate and politically resonant view of cultural relations. I set French theory in its socio-political context, examining its intervention in contemporary debates regarding immigration and 'laïcité' and using its focus on the discursive to challenge some of the structures that underpin these political and cultural questions. In addition, the coupling of philosophical inquiry with analysis of the literature of immigration in France helps at once to clarify the sorts of discursive figures suggested by the theory and to develop a more subtle sense of the subversive role of the literature. Representational forms are revealed as sites of inquiry into the assumptions at work in our understanding of community and difference.

This analysis and argumentation builds on existing work in a number of different ways. Several critics have produced articles on Nancy's early texts, including most notably Bernasconi's 'On Deconstructing Nostalgia for Community within the West' or Strysick's 'The End of Community and the Politics of Grammar', both of which articulate the political implications of Nancy's discursive models. I develop these analyses, however, by probing further the relation between Nancy's work and discourses on immigration or collective identity in contemporary France. The collection of essays in *On Jean-Luc Nancy: The Sense of Philosophy* edited by Shepherd, Sparks and Thomas also develops many of his arguments, but the connection between Nancy's work and debates on multiculturalism is not discussed at length. I add a more specific critical angle to these approaches, and I draw out the implications of his work on singular-plural being in ways that have not yet been elucidated.

Of course, with regard to Derrida, a wealth of scholarship exists, but it seems surprising that little attention has been paid to the most recent work on hospitality or

monolingualism. Texts by Richard Beardsworth, Morag Patrick and Geoffrey Bennington examine his writing on democracy and political institutions in complex and rigorous ways. I build on these, however, in order to evolve a more specific critique of his position on cultural difference. Simon Critchley has discussed Derrida's political resonance in both *The Ethics of Deconstruction* and *Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity*, but I add nuance to his ideas by considering not only the relation between ethics and politics but also the problematic practical implications of particular philosophical models. Similarly, Lyotard's work has been extensively criticised, and the collection of essays in Rojek and Turner's *The Politics of Jean-François Lyotard* interrogate the implications of his thinking in a number of different contexts. James Williams's *Lyotard and the Political* also offers an intriguing reading of the political uses of Lyotard's work. As with regard to Nancy and Derrida, however, the relation between Lyotard's conception of incommensurability and perceptions of cultural difference in France has not itself been analysed. In my readings of all these texts, I propose a new critical angle and draw out strengths and weaknesses that have not yet been identified.

My study of the relation between community and language builds on existing work by considering the ways in which writing on bilingualism or multilingualism can actively question perceptions of cultural interaction. Several commentaries exist sketching Khatibi's literary merits, most notably the collection of essays entitled *Imaginaires de l'autre: Khatibi et la mémoire littéraire*, and the studies by Hassan Wahbi and Abdallah Memmes contain illuminating readings of *Amour bilingue*. Nevertheless, Khatibi's shifting perspectives, and the subversive quality of his work in relation to conceptions of the French language, have not been analysed in detail. Glissant's work has also provoked a lot of valuable critical work, and J. Michael Dash's study provides a stimulating reading of the novels in particular, as do the essays in *Poétiques d'Edouard Glissant* edited by Jacques Chevrier. I add to these analyses a more specific discussion of linguistic relations, using Glissant's theory to subvert conceptions of the linguistic community within France. Celia Britton focuses extensively on the role of language, perceiving it as a tool both of control and of resistance and revealing how the language of Martinicans moves from a sense of isolation to participation in the unsystematic system of Relation. I add to this reflection a specific analysis of multilingualism and of the relation between creolisation and a wider linguistic theory.

With regard to the literature, existing studies of Ben Jelloun and Boudjedra provide interesting thematic readings, but many critics do not focus extensively on the texts on

immigration. The chapters that do for the most part refrain from offering any critical view on their models. Sebbar's work has been analysed by a number of critics, but most examples concentrate on the *Shérazade* texts and the performance of cultural *métissage* rather than drawing attention to her perpetual shifting between exile and polyphony. The best articles on performance and subversion in Sebbar include Anne Donadey's 'Cultural Métissage and the Play of Identity in Sebbar's *Shérazade* Trilogy', printed in *Borders, Exiles, Diasporas* edited by Barkan and Shelton, and Winifred Woodhull's section on Sebbar in *Transfigurations of the Maghreb: Feminism, Decolonisation and Literatures*. Neither critic allies Sebbar's texts with the work of Nancy or with any theoretical conception of the movement between the singular and the plural. Finally, Alec Hargreaves has written extensively on Beur identity and fiction, and his contribution is invaluable for its introduction of this literature to the Anglophone critical world. I add to his discussions a reflection on the complexity of the term and a demonstration of the elusiveness and dynamism of the Beur community and its literature. Michel Laronde has theorised Beur experience in compelling ways, but I complicate his position by troubling the categories of sameness and difference, and by arguing that Beur literature acts as a testimony to the moving cultural relations that exist place within the French sphere.

This thesis reaches beyond existing scholarship by juxtaposing French theory and North African immigrant literature and by using that juxtaposition to formulate new modes of thought. While 'postcolonialism' has given rise to an abundance of critical reflection in the Anglo-American sphere, providing new readings of texts by 'multicultural' authors, the French field has seen few conjunctions of theory and literary analysis in that context. The theorists discussed here have recently begun to interrogate the significance of community and cultural difference, but little effort has been made to use these conceptions to reinterpret fictional representation. By coupling Derrida, Nancy *et al* with literary writers such as Ben Jelloun or Sebbar, I hope to unsettle the opposition between 'French' and 'francophone' writing and to investigate the intricacies of contemporary perceptions of communal relations within these discourses. The relationship between theory and literature is shown to be complex and dynamic, and the critiques I offer with regard to each genre ultimately reveal the mobile nature of collective structures within the contemporary French-speaking world.

Chapter One: The Deconstruction of Community

Une fois qu'on a bien marqué que le commun n'était pas le commun d'une communauté donnée mais le pôle ou la fin d'un *appel* («*appel* à franchir la distance, *appel* à mourir en commun par la séparation»), la question reste entière de ce qu'on appelle ainsi, de ce qu'on appelle l'*appel* et de ce qui s'appelle «commun».[1]

In the extended treatise on friendship and democracy that constitutes *Politiques de l'amitié*, Derrida wonders how to conceive the interaction between singular beings without having recourse to the notion of the 'in-common'. Observing that the motif of communality implies a set of requirements or restrictions, the desire to define the other within the community with reference to the concerns of the self, Derrida questions the appropriateness of the notion of 'le commun' and suggests that the description of human relations requires another sort of terminology. If 'le commun' implies resemblance, normativity or indeed fraternity between certain types of 'masculine' positions, then the various forms of sharing and interaction that characterise the social world in a wider sense need to be conveyed using a looser conception of the collective frame. The challenge remains, he concludes, to reinvent the relation between the individual and the collective so as to take into account the inevitability of difference and separation.

The series of questions with which Derrida ends *Politiques* evoke a complicated contemporary debate. A range of discourses seem at the present time to be involved in this reinterpretation of the singular and the collective, struggling to reconcile a sense of manifold cultural differences with some conception of a wider framework or linking structure. Commentaries on 'multiculturalism' and diversity in France testify to a recent re-evaluation of communal organisation, focusing on the ways in which frontiers are being traversed while reinforcing the presence of different groups within the nation-state. Certain commentators advocate the necessity of a new mode of thinking that will question both the hegemonic political power of the sovereign state and the cultural unification that at times the nation has been seen to imply. This debate is particularly thorny in France, since traditional visions of the 'universal' secular republic are being challenged by the increased self-affirmation of minority groups. Critical theorists such as Derrida and Nancy participate in these forms of questioning by interrogating the meaning of certain underlying concepts, commenting not

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[1] Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de l'amitié*, (Paris: Galilée, 1994) p. 330.

only on political and cultural shifts but also on the deeper philosophical implications of these shifts. Given that commentators are increasingly describing the heterogeneous nature of culture and society, Derrida and Nancy demand a re-evaluation of the very notion of community, reinterpreting the fundamental representational models upon which sociological and political writers construct their hypotheses.

I want to use critical theory to identify the problems inherent in the discourse of community at the present and to locate a new understanding of the relation between the singular and any shared framework. I shall start by establishing the context of the debate, examining a number of contemporary socio-political discourses on community. These, as I have suggested, express the current questioning of conceptions of communal unity in favour of a reflection on cultural and ethnic diversity within the French Republic. I shall then analyse texts by Derrida and Nancy, considering the ways in which they can be seen to contribute to this debate and identifying the political implications of their thought. Derrida and Nancy suggest that community is always devoid of any essence while also commenting on the current climate and reflecting on the conflict between diverse cultural positions and any normative frame. For the most part they emphasise incompatibility and incommunicability. Moving on from Derrida and from Nancy's initial conclusions, however, I then hope to read Nancy's 'Le communisme littéraire' in order to evolve both a more accurate and a more politically constructive mode of thinking. Parts of Nancy's work seem to value conjunction as much as separation, problematising models that champion only incommensurability in favour of a renewed understanding of the collective as a flexible point of reference. I want to show that such thinking moves beyond the binary oppositions between community and difference, the universal and the particular, liberalism and communitarianism, in order to trouble these polarities and show how singular perspectives also intersect with one another in a wider, interactive forum.

To some extent, I shall develop in the French context the sort of thinking elucidated by a number of Anglophone theorists, who have recently sought similarly to re-imagine the relation between the singular and the collective. Writers such as Seyla Benhabib, Ernesto Laclau and Martha Nussbaum have considered ways of establishing a framework that might accommodate particularities while preventing the perpetuation of irrevocable dissensus. Benhabib, for example, uses Habermas's theory of communicative action, but she criticises his dependence on the notion of rationality, replacing this emphasis with increased attention

to the cultural specificity of diverse voices.[2] Habermas proposes the establishment of communicative dialogue, in which different beings would participate in order to formulate a consensus based on rational arguments.[3] Through communicative action, subjects would come to a reasoned understanding of their common life-relations and intersubjectively shared world. Benhabib uses this idea, but she criticises Habermas's conception of a shared set of rational arguments, as well as his separation of the public and private spheres and his exclusion of the 'private' self from the forum of debate. She also rejects his distinction between the 'generalised other' and the 'concrete other', arguing that both conceptions are needed in order to do justice to the specificity of the participant. Benhabib's argument retains Habermas's conception of collective dialogue, but proposes an increased emphasis on the participation of cultural differences in the establishment of general priorities and norms. She demands a notion of the universal in the form of a public forum for communication, but this must also include some 'situationalist' thinking.

In a similar way to Benhabib, Ernesto Laclau has also recently attempted to rethink community in order to represent multiple specific viewpoints while positing a framework or mediator from which equal rights could be established.[4] He argues that there is always a gap between the universal and the particular, but at the same time these concepts depend on one another, since the proliferation of singularities means that a forum for their just negotiation is necessary. For Laclau, the universal figures an ever-receding horizon, but one that we must keep in mind in order to maintain justice, equality, dialogue and so on. Martha Nussbaum also promotes a concept of the universal that would not signify a set of norms but would entail equality, choice and the freedom of the individual.[5] Such a concept establishes a minimum set of values, promoting the capability of each individual to voice her own

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[2] Seyla Benhabib, *Situating the Self: Gender, Community and Postmodernism in Contemporary Ethics*, (Cambridge: Polity, 1992). Benhabib's critique of Habermas can also be found in chapters seven and eight of *Critique, Norm and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

[3] See Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, trans. Thomas McCarthy, (Cambridge: Polity, 1984).

[4] Ernesto Laclau, *Emancipation(s)*, (London and New York: Verso, 1996).

[5] Martha Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Nussbaum's perspective is above all feminist, but her aim is to imagine a concept of universality that can incorporate feminine specificity. This type of thinking can also be used to consider cultural specificity. Nussbaum argues that universal human rights can be established on the basis that ten human capabilities are satisfied. These include basic life conditions such as health, emotions, thought, reason, social affiliations etc. The argument is that fulfilment of these conditions ensures the preservation of rights despite manifestations of diverse sorts of specificity. Nussbaum's list of capabilities can certainly be both disputed and deconstructed (from what perspective can any of them be presumed to be fulfilled?) I refer to Nussbaum, however, not to endorse this list but rather as an example of the dialogue between the universal and the particular.

claims, and the universal fulfilment of these implies equal respect while allowing for highly specific contexts. Finally, Drucilla Cornell argues for equivalent evaluation in the face of individual specificity and the perpetuation of a certain number of shared rights through interaction and exchange.[6] Keeping these sorts of theory in mind, I shall examine in this chapter the pertinence of such questions in the French context, where commentators across different disciplines struggle to imagine the 'universal' or the 'in-common' alongside cultural specificity. 'Community' will be rewritten as a formation where singular or specific perspectives can be seen to enter into dialogue rather than remaining forever irreducible to any larger system or structure.

The Socio-political Context

The theoretical deconstruction of the concept of the 'in common' takes place against the background of a set of socio-political discourses describing a transformation in perceptions of communal organisation in France. These imply that an appropriate new conceptualisation of collective identity remains to be identified. First, it is important that the French revolution saw the invention of the nation-state in France, which amalgamated into a totalised, almost mythical whole the state, the territory and its unified people.[7] This gesture is also associated with the discourse of the One and Indivisible Republic, which advocates the integration of people of diverse origins into a unified nation, equal and free, participating in a reasoned social contract. Citizens are equal under the law in a centralised and unitary state, bound together by contract rather than organically by blood or soil. The nation is therefore not an ethnic *Volk*, but a body of French citizens who made and obey the law, and who participate in the national community by an act of will. This heterogeneity of origins, however, means that cultural unity is perceived to be all the more important. Proponents of the dominant ideology regarding the cultural community in France have therefore argued that immigrants should be assimilated and that they should be rendered, both culturally and politically, French. Immigrants can attain French nationality provided that a number of conditions are fulfilled, but French remains the sole language of the Republic and the teaching of French culture and history in schools is privileged over those of immigrant

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[6] Drucilla Cornell, *Transformations: Recollective Imagination and Sexual Difference*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1993). Cornell's perspective is feminist, like Nussbaum's, but it can again be used to rethink the position of any sort of 'minority' within the collective frame.
[7] This association of the unified Republic with myth is explored in Suzanne Citron, *Le mythe national: histoire de la France en question*, (Paris: Editions Ouvrières, 1987).

groups. It is due to this that republican ideology also retains a strong concept of 'the universal'. The rational, secular and unified vision of the French Republic is seen to include (and assimilate) immigrants of non-French origin.

This ideology on the one hand advocates a form of political homogeneity that organises and unifies citizens from different backgrounds. At the same time, however, some commentators feel that the French political conception of citizenship is at times accompanied by a desire for cultural unity that fails actively to recognise diverse dialects, practices and beliefs. Ethnic minorities exist in France, but it is felt that they have few particular rights as communities. The French Republic is keenly aware of the existence of manifold immigrants within its territory, but, according to Azouz Begag, the actual concept of an 'ethnic minority' barely exists in French discourse.[8] The Republic welcomes immigrants on the condition that any person of non-French origin seeking to live in France will be integrated into the centralised state as an individual rather than as a member of any cultural community with particular customs or attitudes. The French state recognises its diverse citizens without drawing attention to the specificity of the cultures of certain types of citizens. It is significant that the vocabulary in discussions of immigration in France centres on holistic concepts such as 'intégration' rather than the British 'race relations' or 'equal opportunities', which reflect a sense of the fragmentation of cultural identity within the nation.[9]

The republican ideology of the integration of differences is accompanied by the particular ethic of the French secular state. In France, the concept of laïcité rules that religion and state are separate; the state is neutral and religion is consigned to the private sphere. As Dominique Schnapper points out, laïcité is supposed to signify an over-arching neutral culture that transcends the diversity of particular religious affiliations.[10] This logic, as it was applied to the educational system by Jules Ferry at the end of the nineteenth century, means that schools are a neutral forum where individuals come into contact with

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[8] Begag commented in private interview that "il n'y a pas de communauté parce que la France a un modèle d'intégration individualiste. En France, le terme 'ethnic minority' n'existe pas. L'idée de 'minority' n'existe pas. La France ne reconnaît que le citoyen. Dans l'esprit français, si on veut réussir, il faut le faire à titre individuel, donc il faut se détacher de l'idée d'appartenance communautaire.' See my 'Deux écrivains entre la mémoire et l'oubli', *The ASCALF Bulletin* 22 (2001), 6-29 (p. 20).

[9] I would not want to suggest in this context that the English terminology is more appropriate than the French. Both belong to specific ideological systems. If the French conception tends towards acculturation and the flattening of differences, perhaps the English system over-emphasises separation and difference. Of course, commentators also criticise the essentialising overtones of 'race'.

[10] Dominique Schnapper, *La communauté des citoyens: sur l'idée moderne de la nation*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).

one another while leaving their own particular religious beliefs or customs behind. Initially then, laïcitié was seen to promote the participation of different groups in a wider, centralised but non-essential community. At times, however, it seems evident that the state must inevitably have some part in deciding the nature of its relations with religious institutions; the secular state is perhaps not as neutral as it might appear but favours certain sorts of practice. In addition, the concept has on occasion come to be distorted and interpreted in a particularly dogmatic way, leading to a failure to recognise the practices of diverse cultures.

The problematic nature of this issue is exemplified by the adverse reactions and ideologies circulating around the practice of Islam in France. From the point of view of some interpretations of the unified and secular state, certain aspects of Islam conflict with the French ideology of assimilation. If laïcité describes the dissociation of church and state, what people perceive to be the Islamic understanding of religion as a public issue is incommensurable with this French ethic. This apparent incompatibility lead to a certain controversy with regard to everyday practices. In the famous case in 1989, three girls were excluded from school for wearing headscarves, creating a tense debate over the question of toleration and also giving rise to reactions against the existence of different religions and cultures in France. Some saw the exhibition of religious allegiance as contrary to the tenets of laïcité, arguing that the veil constituted an unacceptable form of proselytism. Many people perceived school to be a place where pupils could forget their cultural background and where they should be encouraged to think beyond their own identity and origins. In one article, for example, a group of intellectuals went so far as to assert that the wearing of the headscarf contradicted human rights, speaking of secular schools in the following terms:

> Le respect des traditions ne la concerne pas: ne sont respectables que les traditions et les
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> différences qui ne contrarient ni les droits de l'homme, ni le principe du libre examen. Or, en
>
> affirmant une croyance comme étant au-dessus de tout, en affirmant une distinction de nature
>
> entre les êtres humains, le foulard islamique contredit les deux principes.[11]

The problem here was clearly a complicated one: laïcité was set up in the name of equality and toleration rather than as an attempt to silence or flatten difference. In this case, however, the model of laïcité was misinterpreted to signify the active repression of another cultural practice that was perhaps in reality not as harmful, or as all-encompassing, as it

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[11] Elisabeth Badinter, Régis Debray, Alain Finkielkraut, Elisabeth de Fontenay, Catherine Kintzler, 'Profs, ne capitulons pas!', *Le nouvel observateur*, 2-8 Novembre 1989, 30-1, (p. 30). It is significant that the wearing of headscarves was immediately perceived by the press as an attack on the principle of laïcité. *Libération* , 4 October 1989, produced the headline, 'Le port du voile heurte la laïcité au collège à Creil.' This is quoted by Khosrokhovar and Gaspard in *Le foulard et la république*, (Paris: La Découverte, 1995) p. 12.

seemed. Many girls choose to wear the headscarf in France, not necessarily perceiving it as a symbol of subordination, and proponents of laïcité seemed to want to suppress that freedom of choice in an excessively dogmatic way. The clash between the secular republican community and Islamic culture was perceived by some to be insurmountable.

This heated controversy marked the beginning of prominent doubts regarding the appropriateness of France's integrative republican ideology. It seems that such a unified community cannot encapsulate adequately the current position of immigrants and their descendants, nor can it do justice to the coexistence of multiple cultural voices and practices. This echoes the more generalised questioning of sovereignty and the nation-state discussed earlier. As sociologist Michel Wieviorka suggests, such a discourse also exists partly because perceptions of immigration in France have changed in nature since the eighties.[12] If until then, immigrants were seen above all as a workforce, the eighties marked a shift in attitude towards an understanding of immigrant populations as a cultural phenomenon. Immigrant groups formed not a collection of individual labourers but demanded to be recognised as particular ethnic communities. The generation of workers that arrived in France in the sixties has settled more permanently in the Republic with their wives and children, and they need to be thought of not as a transitory workforce but as a specific cultural group residing in France for the long term.

It is in this context that sociological thinkers in France have begun to re-evaluate the notion of a centralised community, struggling to imagine the coexistence of particularities with a wider framework. The challenge remains to rethink the French integrative ethic while also allowing for diverse cultural specificities. Dominique Schnapper, in her most recent book on immigration in France, considers an adaptation of the most useful aspects of French universalism in order to accommodate increasingly affirmative and pronounced cultural differences.[13] She argues that the universalist principle can be useful in that it warns against the dissemination of different cultures into self-enclosed ghettos, yet at the same time, such a principle risks degenerating into assimilationism and the blurring of the other into the self. Conversely, however, an excessive reflection on ethnicity is equally dangerous, since it configures self and other as an inflexible dichotomy. In the face of this dilemma, Schnapper

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[12] Michel Wieviorka, 'Culture, Société et Démocratie', *Une société fragmentée? Le multiculturalisme en débat*, ed. Michel Wieviorka, (Paris: La Découverte, 1997) 11-60.

[13] Dominique Schnapper, *La relation à l'autre: au coeur de la pensée sociologique*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1998).

can tend to over-emphasise the importance of the universal and of an integrative ideology rather than considering an upheaval of the notion itself.

Michel Wieviorka also questions the implications of the model of integration. In contrast to Schnapper, Wieviorka asserts rather that any form of universalist thinking is unworkable and implies the dissolution of cultural specificity. Without contradicting the historical purpose of the Republic, Wieviorka suggests that its structure does need to be loosened and that the new democratic model should take as its starting-point the recognition of cultural diversity. The universalist perspective is in reality deeply tied up with a series of mythical illusions. Equally, the over-arching ethic of laïcité in its strongest form for Wieviorka carries the connotation of repression, which in turn encourages an unjustified sense of shame. It is also not neutral but implicitly advocates the dominance of French culture, history and language. For this reason, Wieviorka argues, 'nous ne pouvons plus dire: le modèle de l'intégration est en crise, sauvons-le. Aujourd'hui, il faut accepter l'idée que nous sommes entrés dans une nouvelle période historique, qui suppose la réinvention d'un modèle.'[14] The notion of a unified community has become dissociated from the reality of contemporary cultural diversity and a more flexible mode of thinking is required.

Such discourses represent a failing at the heart of the discourse of community. The French model of integration can result in a drive to assimilate diverse citizens, while commentators suggest that increasingly, the affirmative voices of various immigrant groups bear witness to the limited scope of that model. Socio-political thinkers are struggling to re-imagine collective identity, criticising unified models while attempting to reflect the participation of differences in the wider framework. In addition, discourses promoting shifting borders and an increased sense of widespread migration have also challenged the unity of the national community in an even broader context.[15] The term 'community' in the sense of a unified body is becoming inadequate. It is for these reasons that an exploration of

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[14] Michel Wieviorka, *Commenter la France*, (Paris: Aube, 1997) p. 154.

[15] It is also significant that these sorts of issues are similarly reflected in debates surrounding 'globalisation', the intricacies of which I do not have space for here. This term can according to David Held be understood as 'a shift in the spatial form of human organization and activity to transcontinental or interregional patterns of activity, interaction and the exercise of power'. See 'Democracy and Globalization', *Re-imagining Political Community: Studies in Cosmopolitan Democracy*, eds. Daniele Archibugi, David Held, Martin Köhler, (Cambridge: Polity, 1998) 11-27 (p. 13). This is accompanied by the sense that political thinking is being realigned to promote the acceptance of communities both above and below the nation. The problem with the term 'globalisation', however, is that it is not global, but dominated by particular Western seats of power. Further reflection is needed in order to take into consideration the ways in which different cultures and groups participate (or not) in this wider structure, rather than simply championing the questioning of self-same national identities as a new symbol of liberation.

theoretical configurations of 'community' is required, since the problems described above suggest the necessity for a profound re-structuring of the very notion of collective identity and cultural being-together. All these contexts imply the need for renewed debate over the possible meanings of problematic terms such as 'the in-common' and 'the universal', as well as a more developed sense of the ways in which singular differences are related to any broader frame. If 'community' in the cultural and socio-political context is struggling to live up to its name, then a re-evaluation of collective representational structures is evidently a necessary project.

Derrida and the Aporia of Democracy

Bearing witness to the sorts of shifts and problems analysed above, Derrida's writing on community figures collective identity in terms of an irreducible aporia impossibly combining diverse singular identities with the shared norms of a democratic society. *L'autre cap* shows how conceptually Europe is bound up in a paradox, whereby the theorist has to combine some sense of an over-arching culture with continual openness to the alterity of the other. *Politiques de l'amitié* imagines a new form of democratic community, which would be capable of maintaining general laws while simultaneously allowing for the incommensurability of singular beings. In both cases, however, Derrida's reflection on the dual necessity of thinking collectivity and singularity results not in an understanding of their interaction but in an impossible conception of their incompatibility. He identifies the difficulty in reinventing community in contemporary thought, yet his work rigidly polarises the concepts involved, resulting in a series of endlessly deferred (im)possibilities rather than contemplating the moving structure of actual communal identifications and showing how these could lead to forms of political negotiation.

In *L'autre cap*, Derrida demonstrates the paradox of 'community' by deconstructing identity and difference within Europe. He argues that Europe as a community is not self-same but contains difference within itself:

> Le propre d'une culture, c'est de n'être pas identique à elle-même. Non pas de n'avoir pas
> d'identité, mais de ne pouvoir s'identifier, dire «moi» ou «nous», de ne pouvoir prendre la
> forme du sujet que dans la non-identité à soi ou, si vous préférez, la différence *avec soi*.[16]

The very dichotomy of identity and difference is deconstructed, so that European identity *is* difference. No single subject position could account for the heterogeneity of European

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[16] Jacques Derrida, *L'autre cap*. (Paris: Minuit, 1991) p. 16.

cultures. This also means that the community of Europe cannot be constructed according to a traditional binary opposition of self/other, but alterity is relocated inside the community itself. Derrida draws our attention to the use of 'avec' rather than 'chez' in the quotation, since 'chez' might designate enclosure within the self, whereas 'avec' reinforces the separation between different entities. The relation between different identities within the collective figure of Europe is characterised by separation rather than proximity.

Derrida also plays with representations of difference within the community of Europe by reworking metaphors in Valéry's writing. Derrida takes Valéry's essay 'La crise de l'esprit', and deconstructs the earlier writer's metaphorical representation of Europe in a privileged, superior position over and above neighbouring continents.[17] Valéry constructs Europe as a head or a 'cap', a leader retaining an assured hegemonic position in relation to the other. He personifies Europe as if it were homogeneous and self-enclosed, both separate from and dominant over the other. Derrida, on the other hand, reverses this metaphor, representing Europe not as a privileged head but as the connecting extremity of a larger land mass, neither self-contained nor hegemonic. He instructs:

> Il faut se faire les gardiens d'une idée de l'Europe, d'une différence de l'Europe *mais* d'une Europe qui consiste précisément à ne pas se fermer sur sa propre identité et à s'avancer exemplairement vers ce qui n'est pas elle, vers l'autre cap ou le cap de l'autre, voire, et c'est peut-être tout autre chose, l'autre *du* cap qui serait l'au-delà de cette tradition moderne, une autre structure de bord, un autre rivage.[18]

The frontiers of Europe are rewritten not as marks of impenetrability and closure, but as sites continually giving onto the other side. Derrida's phrase 'l'autre *du* cap' implies otherness within the self again, as if alterity were an integral part of the existence of the 'cap'; the 'cap' cannot be thought without its relations with various others.

As the text proceeds, Derrida increasingly figures this democratic openness to difference as part of a philosophical contradiction. Continuing a complex play on words that mimes the diverse significations of a single concept, Derrida examines the possibility of reading 'la capitale' as a symbol of an established and secure centre to the community of Europe. Questioning whether Europe might be represented under the signifier of a centralised identity, Derrida demonstrates how the notion of a capital of Europe encapsulates the impossible paradox of the European community. The European capital would exemplify

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[17] See Paul Valéry, 'La crise de l'esprit', *Essais quasi politiques*, *Œuvres*, 1, (Paris: Gallimard, La Pléiade, 1957), 988-1014.
[18] Derrida, *L'autre cap*, p. 33.

European unity, yet it would also fail to accommodate the different identities that actually constitute the community. On the one hand, it would be dangerous and counter-productive if European cultural identity became dispersed into a collection of disparate, rival, nationalist provinces that resisted intercommunication. On the other hand, these diverse identities within Europe would be restricted and deformed by a centralising, hegemonic power, which through various channels could promote a single, uniform identity.

This dilemma is further borne out by Derrida's discussion of 'le capital' as a sign of the 'universal' culture of Europe. Capitalism is considered as a discursive problem, as Derrida examines the ramifications of capitalist culture for the conception of a collective identity. He traces how Valéry suggests in 'La liberté de l'esprit' that the word 'capital' could be employed to define culture in the Mediterranean. Yet, having established this primarily, Valéry then goes on to discuss the polysemy of the word 'capital', its incorporation of diverse significations. Derrida in turn uses this to demonstrate the difficulty of combining a regional understanding of capitalism with a universal capitalist culture, and he asks:

> Quelle est le moment le plus intéressant dans cette capialisation sémantique ou rhétorique
>
> des valeurs de «capital»? C'est, me semble-t-il, quand la nécessité *régionale* ou *particulière*
>
> du capital produit ou appelle la production toujours menacée de l'*universel*. Or la culture
>
> européenne est en péril quand cette universalité *idéale*, l'idéalité même de l'universel comme
>
> production du capital, se trouve menacée.[19]

The difficulty of conflating an understanding of regional capitalism with a wider sense of a shared, European capitalist culture again figures the same contradiction between the need for a general coherent community culture and the particularity of different regions. Europe's deconstructed identity must for Derrida be made up of an impossible amalgamation of these poles.

It is from this dual prerequisite that Derrida develops his notion of 'political responsibility' and the leap of thought that it must involve. Derrida slips here from the descriptive to the prescriptive, and his understanding of the contradiction of community becomes more ambivalent for implying an all-encompassing, yet paradoxical, ethical and political stance. He affirms that if the conception of the community is built upon an impossible contradiction between the individual and the collective, then political thinking must in some way account for these opposing factors. As the list of 'devoirs' at the end of

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[19] Ibid., p. 65.

L'autre cap suggests, any law or decision must have an awareness of common goals, yet it must also be capable of looking beyond that dimension to the singularity of the members of the community and to the incommensurability of their life-styles and priorities. Derrida feels a responsibility to struggle against uniformity without sacrificing the ability to understand and communicate with others. Reflecting on the duty to imagine both singularity and universal values, he asserts:

> Ce *même devoir* appelle certes une responsabilité, la responsabilité de penser, de parler et
> d'agir conformément à ce double impératif contradictoire – et d'une contradiction qui ne doit
> pas être seulement une antinomie apparente ou illusoire (ni même une illusion
> transcendantale dans une dialectique de type kantien) mais effective et, *à l'expérience*,
> interminable.[20]

Political thinking revolves around the impossible and the 'beyond', upholding the existence of norms while desiring to break with those norms, and it announces its own failure and defeat. The model thus opposes collective structures with irreducibly singular beings without considering the ways in which those beings also interact with the other positions with which they are juxtaposed. The conversion of this opposition into an ethical and political obligation then implies an unworkable paradox that it is difficult to relate to working forms of organisation.

Derrida continues his thinking on the aporia of the community in *Politiques de l'amitié*, where he analyses past and present discourses on friendship in order to formulate a conception of a democratic society. Derrida initially reads a series of discourses on friendship to identify the contradiction between generalised values and the privileging of particularities. While it is possible to speak of a collection of friends, implying the specificity of each friend, we cannot think in terms of an idea or essence of the friend, as each individual must be irreducibly singular. Singularity is at odds with the maintenance of a set of collective values. Moving obliquely from a reflection on private friendship to a wider consideration of the democratic community, Derrida again asserts that we cannot reconcile a universal politics of equality with the promotion or selection of certain, singular beings over others. Democracy is paradoxical, since it must include the recognition of possibly unequal singularities while representing absolute equality:

> Pas de démocratie sans respect de la singularité ou de l'altérité irréductible, mais pas de
> démocratie sans «communauté des amis» (*koina ta phílon*), sans calcul des majorités, sans

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[20] Ibid., pp. 77-8.

sujets identifiables, stabilisables, représentables et égaux entre eux. Ces deux lois sont
irréductibles l'une à l'autre. Tragiquement inconciliables et à jamais blessantes.[21]

As I shall show later, however, one of the difficulties with Derrida's thinking here is precisely that he conflates discourses on the private and the political sphere. While a reflection on friendship does necessitate this privileging of certain singularities, political thinking on democracy requires an alternative set of priorities.

Some aspects of Derrida's model are derived from a reading of Nietzsche's thinking on friendship. Nietzsche proposes the metaphorical figure of a new sort of community that would free itself from any reductive collective form. Derrida uses this to imagine the aporia between a common structure promoting some form of communion and attention to the absolute freedom of the individual. Reading *Beyond Good and Evil*, Derrida analyses Nietzsche's announcement of the coming of the new philosophers, friends of solitude with no proximity or resemblance. Nietzsche's free spirits form an anchoretic community of separation, of being-together without a larger sense of solidarity or collective identity; they coexist rather than share. Derrida predicts, 'ainsi s'annonce la communauté anachorétique de ceux qui aiment à s'éloigner. L'invitation vous vient de ceux qui *n'aiment qu'à se séparer au loin.*'[22] The binding together of individuals in such a community only occurs on the condition of their difference, distance and separation. It is precisely a community of unlinking, affirming the singularity of its members rather than similarity and communality. This model also implies a reinvention of the conception of 'appartenance', which now implies encounter rather than membership.

The community of the friends of solitude evolves into a paradoxical, self-deconstructing 'communauté sans communauté'. The very term 'community' folds back on itself, as Derrida strips it of its association with communality and retains it only as a framework from which to begin questioning such a traditional notion. Derrida again makes a leap here, associating the absence of community with a new ethical or political subject position, as the 'je' finds itself both bound to its singularity and simultaneously responsible to the other:

> Double responsabilité qui se dédouble encore sans fin: je dois répondre de moi ou devant
> moi en répondant de nous et devant nous, du *nous* présent pour et devant le *nous* de l'avenir;

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[21] Jacques Derrida, *Politiques de l'amitié*, p. 40.

[22] Ibid., p. 54. Derrida develops Nietzsche's notion that free spirits should fight against communality and homogeneity. Nietzsche condemns the passive tendency of human beings to assimilate and form a herd, advocating instead solitude and singularity. See *Beyond Good and Evil* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973).

> cela même en m'adressant présentement à vous, et en vous invitant à vous joindre à ce
>
> «nous» dont vous faites déjà mais ne faites pas encore partie.[23]

The individual must speak for its singular self while also situating itself within a community, even if that community has no being of its own. Thus there is no homogeneous 'nous', but all the same the 'je' must address the wider collective and open itself to a relationship with the other. The community without community involves a call to the other, as well as a response to that call, yet this is always from the position of singular solitude. Once again, however, this move from a description of absolute singularity to the formulation of a holistic prescriptive position seems hasty, failing to take into account necessarily variable responses to multiple sorts of difference.

Derrida then moves away from the notion of friendship to consider the implications of this theory for conceiving a wider, political community. Having investigated the possibility of a relation without fusion, he then shows how the democratic community of the nation can be read in the same way. Like the community of the friends of solitude, democracy is a collection of singularities, championing freedom and separation rather than assimilation and resemblance. Democracy would paradoxically entail some awareness of the 'universal', but only in the form of the requirement that we take into account multiple singularities, not as an essence in itself. This figures the aporia of deconstruction itself, as Derrida suggests that deconstruction works in that very space between the frame and its referent, the general and the particular. Both democracy and deconstruction think 'beyond' to the impossible reconciliation of community with singularity.

Derrida's focus is on a utopian celebration of singularity as opposed to the cultural homogenisation of any essential community. In the final chapter of *Politiques*, he once more reinforces the singularity/collectivity divide by comparing more explicitly the secret, invisible, unknowable discourse of private friendship with the generalised and normative concept of public friendship. He distinguishes 'l'amitié fraternelle' from the '*res publica*',[24] and uses this juxtaposition to suggest how many singular patterns of friendship have been excluded from established discourses. For example, friendship between women has not been examined in the traditional writings that Derrida looks at, implying again the resistance of that sort of relationship to the norm. As I noted at the beginning of the chapter, the result of this repeated insistence on singularity is that Derrida calls into doubt the possibility of

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[23] Ibid., p. 57.
[24] Ibid., p. 309.

thinking about 'le commun' at all. If 'le commun' can only exist as a call to the other, what do we actually understand by that word? The community of singularities no longer belongs to the order of 'le commun' or of sharing, and perhaps 'community' is not even an appropriate term for the distance and separation that Derrida claims it now involves. The politics of being-together no longer contains the motif of resemblance or belonging; a different sort of language needs to be invented that would focus instead on difference. Derrida replaces the very notion of 'community' with an impossible conception of an abstract democracy of the future.

One of the difficulties with Derrida's analysis in *Politiques* concerns the manner in which he shifts obliquely between discussions of private friendship and a consideration of the wider, democratic community. As I have demonstrated, Derrida associates friendship with the singular and with resistance to norms or collective sets of values. While this might be fitting in a discussion of the intimate sphere, however, this concept of singularity needs to be rethought in the wider, political context. The selection of a friend may revolve around the privileging of one individual over another and the refutation of collective values, but the democratic community precisely requires a weaker concept of singularity that stresses particularity without refusing the need for a collective forum. The democratic community cannot be thought in terms of irreducible specificity, since such thinking would only separate one perspective from another to the extent that interaction is foreclosed. The specificity of individual standpoints needs to be respected, but that specificity should not be emphasised to such an extent that dialogue appears to be impossible. In the social, political and cultural sphere, singularities are perhaps not as absolute as Derrida suggests, but they need to be considered as part of a more collaborative system.

Concomitantly, while Derrida's understanding of singularity seems too radical, it could also be argued that his conception of the collective frame is over-emphasised, implying again the absolute incommensurability of the general and the particular. On the one hand, Derrida leaps from a consideration of the intimate selection of a singular friend to a description of the impossible incorporation of particularities into the public frame of democracy. At the same time, however, Derrida's democratic model is also problematic because his understanding of the normative frame remains too strong. Given that he argues that such a collective structure is impossibly incompatible with a consideration of singularity, this suggests that the collective structure is perceived as rigid, normative and

ultimately highly traditional. Singularity is irreducible while community is a normative framework, and these contrasting conceptions are forced into a fixed paradoxical relation. Of course, Derrida's intention is not to fix concepts but to draw out their problematic nature, but the postulation of their impossible resolution finishes by rendering the poles more static.

In this way, the derivation of a conception of political responsibility from a description of singularity and friendship seems in Derrida's work to be uneasy. His desire to uphold the dual values of specificity and the collective frame leads to a series of generalised obligations that dwell on philosophical incompatibilities rather than advocating a suitable political perspective that would actively mediate between the two positions. The 'devoirs' at the end of *L'autre cap* are unworkable, paradoxical leaps of thought, which test the reader's preconceptions but which cannot constitute a project of their own, reinforcing the inevitability of contradiction rather than demonstrating how singular positions move and shift in relation to one another. As a result, it remains unclear how Derrida understands his philosophical aporias can be used to mediate between different positions and establish a policy for the recognition of cultural differences. Although there clearly is a sense of contradiction inherent in the modern community, perhaps it could be a question of balancing priorities rather than demanding an impossible reflection on irresolute binary oppositions.

Derrida's writing is formed of neat paradoxes, constituting precise philosophical models and abstract incompatibilities rather than taking into account the blurring of concepts in various fields of application. The modern community is reconstructed as a 'communauté sans communauté', or a 'communauté des amis de la solitude', yet these phrases seem to capture the crisis of the modern community only to wrap it up within another succinct formula. Such a mode of thought upholds opposing terms that can only neutralise one another, masking the ways in which the singular and the collective can be interlinked. Derrida describes the recent questioning of the concept of community in writers such as Blanchot, Nancy and Bataille in this manner, focusing above all on the impossible and self-defeating nature of the structures they employ:

> Ils les sigalent aussi dans la nuit, tantôt selon le temps sans durée de l'éclair ou de la foudre,
> tantôt selon le tour et le retour d'un phare, toujours en lançant des appels fous et impossibles,
> des avertissements quasiment muets, des mots qui se consument dans une sombre lumière,
> tels les syntagmes typiques et récurrents de «rapport sans rapport», de communauté sans
> communauté («communauté de ceux qui n'ont pas de communauté»), de communauté

«désœuvrée», de communisme ou de communauté «inavouable», et de tous les «X sans X»

dont la liste est par définition sans fin, finie d'être infinie.[25]

Derrida explicitly seems to celebrate the construction of mystical, abstract models, where one predicate ceaselessly negates another and where the emphasis is perpetually on the 'beyond' and the inaccessible.

This reconciliation of opposites into paradoxical formulae in turn positions Derrida's theory in a utopian realm of thinking. The aporia of democracy is unworkable and therefore must always remain to come: 'appartenant au temps de la promesse, elle restera toujours, en chacun de ses temps futurs, à venir'.[26] Derrida describes his thinking as 'messianic', which refers to something coming, hovering ever on the horizon, but deferring arrival or implementation. There is in his later work a constant calling to look to the beyond, a hope for the impossible, which confers upon his style a curious religious tinge, but which renders his work difficult to pin down in a precise or politically effective way. Derrida names deconstruction itself the experience of the promise, a faith in what is coming, and he considers the thought of a step beyond as an impossible but continually necessary demand. Justice, the community and democracy are 'messianic', implying an absolute openness to the unthinkable possibilities of the 'à-venir'. The messianicity of democracy means that it is not expected, imminent or predetermined in any way, but endlessly deferred. Derrida's aporetic community for this reason becomes strangely situated between the political and the philosophical, thinking with the utopian terms of the beyond and the impossible while attempting paradoxically to consider a contemporary socio-political situation.

Closely related to this discussion is the uncertain manner in which Derrida's writing is situated. First, there is an important slippage in Derrida's use of 'communauté' and 'universalité'. In L'autre cap, for example, Derrida moves from speaking about a European community to a consideration of universality, which might suggest a more general, global collective identity. As a result, his theory could be said to risk generalising a European perspective, implying that the heterogeneous European community figures the problem of community everywhere.[27] Similarly, Politiques is rooted in Western philosophy but does

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[25] Ibid., pp. 98-9.

[26] Ibid., p. 339.

[27] In his essay on L'autre cap, Jonathan Boyarin makes a similar point in reference to the position of the Jews in Europe. He perceives in Derrida's argument the continued drive to uphold Europe's centrality: the European case is set up as an example for any culture or history. In this way, Derrida posits any identity as the particular inscription of the universal rather than considering whether or not Jewish culture might be presentable in these terms. See 'From Derrida to Fichte? The New Europe, the Same Europe, and the Place of the Jews', Thinking in Jewish, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 108-139.

not draw attention to its geographical or historical specificity, so that the 'communauté sans communauté' risks forming a generalised, uniform model. It becomes a literary figure or trope, which can be accused of appropriating specific situations and masking their details and differences. This encourages the reader to view the world as caught up in a single set of problems, absorbing different political situations into a monolithic catalogue of concerns. The 'community without community' figures an ambiguous number of diverse communities and does not account for distinct community formations in different parts of the world. This recalls the way in which discourses of globalisation can mask the different relations between specific cultures and the wider global model.

For this reason, if Derrida participates in a process of socio-political questioning, his thinking is nevertheless made up of unworkable oppositions that seem both inaccurate and politically insufficient. On one level, Derrida's texts do maintain a relation with their political context and belong to a general social and political movement aimed at crossing and weakening borders and at integrating peacefully different cultures within the nation. Derrida does see his thinking as part of a contemporary phenomenon, as in *L'autre cap*, for example, he comments specifically on the climate of the 'aujourd'hui'. Furthermore, in an ambivalent passage from *Politiques*, he writes of Nietzsche's community without community:

> Bien que cette affirmation ne se fie à aucune contemporanéité assurée, nous *appartenons* (voilà ce que nous risquons ici à dire) au temps de cette mutation, qui est justement une terrible secousse dans la structure ou l'expérience de l'*appartenance*. Donc de la propriété. De l'appartenance et du partage communautaire: la religion, la famille, l'ethnie, la nation, la patrie, le pays, l'Etat, l'humanité même, l'amour et l'amitié, l'aimance, publique ou privée. Nous appartenons à cette secousse, si c'est possible, nous tremblons en elle. Elle nous traverse, elle nous transit.[28]

From this point of view, Derrida perceives the deconstruction of the thought of community as part of a historical shift in discourses and as a description of our experience of community in Western society now.[29] However, while he offers a succinct configuration reflecting the troubled relation between an increased sense of diversity and collective values, he then configures these above all as impossible, irreconcilable poles.

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[28] Derrida, *Politiques de l'amitié*, p. 98.

[29] The relation of Derrida's work to historical context is also explored in a passage in 'Une "folie" doit veiller sur la pensée', where Derrida describes deconstruction as a sort of historical upheaval, taking place in real events and not just in representation. He names the Gulf War as an example of a conglomeration of

Nancy and Community's Empty Frame

Nancy's *La communauté désœuvrée* describes the empty frame of the community of radically singular beings. His work bears a close relation to contemporary socio-political thinking on the opening out of communal structures, reflecting on the separation of various non-essential but particular entities from one another. Nancy's theory also echoes that of Derrida in that it underlines the impossibility of a traditional communal model. He uses paradoxes and aporias, retaining the term 'community' while emptying it of its associations with the common and implying the coming-together of irreducible differences. Some aspects of Nancy's analysis have problematic implications, however, because once again the emphasis on the unworkability of any collective framework suggests a denial of possibilities of interaction. Despite this tendency, I also want to suggest that certain suggestions arising from his work can offer the seeds of a more accurate and helpful conceptualisation of the relation between singularity and collectivity. Parts of Nancy's work replace the opposition between community and difference with the concept of 'partage', which instead implies both sharing and division in a more subtle and perceptive manner.

In *La communauté désœuvrée*, Nancy sets out to undermine any concept of communal unity. His reappraisal of community at this stage stresses disintegration, loss and separation. Describing the breakdown of communism as one of the most important signs of our time, he argues that this implies the dislocation of 'community' itself. If communism figured a holistic community beyond social divisions, then that very emblem has in our era lost its power. Equally, while communism represented this desire for a completed and unified community, this emblem also for Nancy implied a certain conception of the individual, which has in turn become unworkable in the context of contemporary discourses. For the communists, the human being was defined as a labourer, and concomitantly, 'comme producteur de sa propre essence sous les espèces de son travail ou de ses œuvres'.[30] The 'worked' community from this point of view would somehow be the accomplishment of this essence. For Nancy however, the very stumbling block in any thinking about community has been how to reconcile this common essence with the concept of the immanent essence of the individual. We need therefore not only to offer a critique of the

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'déconstructions'. Deconstruction 'happens' in history rather than in some abstract notion of text cut off from history. See p. 367.

[30] Jean-Luc Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée*, (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1986) p. 13.

fusion implied by communism but also to question the concept of the individual itself. Neither the individual nor the community should be thought of as absolute and essential; instead, we need to imagine community as the coexistence of non-absolute but separate beings. The individual is relative, and this implies not fusion with other beings but rather their continual mutual exposure. Nancy's thinking here forms a lucid deconstruction of the individual and the community and a reinvention of community paradoxically as the absence of unity.

Having started by linking the deconstruction of community with the specificity of the contemporary era, Nancy then goes on to explore how 'community' also subtends much of the history of Western thought in the form of an absent myth. He mentions Rousseau's reflections on the solitary figure within a dissolving society and traces paradigms of broken communities even further back into Greek, Roman and Christian thought. Community was itself never lost but exists in philosophy as a figure of loss. Social ties, the fluctuating association and dissociation of human beings, replace this absence or illusion, the real kernel of which has no name. Further, community can be defined as myth itself, since it is suggestive of essence and origin but was itself never realised. Myth is defined as the communication of an impossible common identity. Community points to the mythical nature of myth, figuring nostalgia for a perpetually receding origin. Myth for Nancy is thus 'interrupted' or broken down by the dissemination of collective identity and the uncovering of the illusory nature of any shared essence. The interruption of myth reveals the 'com- pearance' of separate, singular beings, and the origin is instead a limit demarcating differences or a border reinforcing separation: 'l'origine est le tracé des bords sur lesquels, ou le long desquels s'exposent les êtres singuliers'.[31]

Nancy's initial goal is to unravel community as *Gemeinschaft* in order to expose the manner in which immanent, common essences and roots have always been posited as that which has been lost. Nancy is seeking to deconstruct communities that set themselves up as essential, mythical wholes, such as Nazism in Germany, forms of self-enclosed nationalism or religious fundamentalism. These are founded on the exclusion of the other and on the construction of a myth connoting totalitarian forms of identity and power. Nancy's critique can therefore be seen as part of the movement to question the monolithic pretensions of the sovereign state discussed earlier. It is important to note, however, that the republican

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[31] Ibid., p. 83.

community also mentioned above is clearly not built on this notion of origin, forming instead a *Gesellschaft* founded on social contract. It is nevertheless significant that republican ideology contains a drive for unification that has resulted in the creation of a myth of secular 'Frenchness', and it is these sorts of myths that Nancy deconstructs. Most importantly, while Nancy uncovers the illusory nature of the communal myth throughout the history of Western thought, the less essentialist drive towards unification exemplified by the republican vision is also now being put into question. Nancy's rewriting of community undertakes this questioning, since it not only deconstructs original myths but also involves a reappraisal of the relation between the singular and any collective unit.

Nancy's thinking points to the emptiness of community in both a mythical and a political sense. Important here is his reflection on Bataille, whose text 'La Souveraineté' reconsiders the nature of sovereignty and communication. Nancy explores how Bataille's sovereign being always exists in relation to an outside: it has no immanence, but rather experiences itself in relation to that which is outside itself. Bataille affirms that 'la souveraineté n'est rien', implying the emptiness of subjectivity and the formless, non-essential nature of the 'sovereign' being.[32] Equally, the sharing of sovereignty cannot be thought in terms of a shared community. Instead singular beings are constituted by the shared consciousness of the absence of sovereignty; they are different from one another but also 'spaced' or defined by that relation with alterity. For Nancy, this describes 'l'expérience moderne de la communauté: ni œuvre à produire, ni communion perdue, mais l'espace même, et l'espacement de l'expérience du dehors, du hors-de-soi.'[33] Community is 'désœuvrée', a term that suggests the dismantling of the 'œuvre' of community in the sense of production or completion and emphasises processes of interruption, fragmentation and suspension.

Nancy's discussion of Bataille also leads him to underline relativity and mortality. Having undermined the fullness of sovereignty, Bataille concludes that community needs to be thought in terms of the finitude of beings and the impossibility of the absolute. That finitude is revealed above all in the death of the community's members. It is through death that community realises itself, at once because it portrays the mortality of each singular being, and because it draws together around the corpse the community of finite 'others': 'chacun est alors chassé de l'étroitesse de sa personne et se perd autant qu'il peut dans la

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[32] See Georges Bataille, 'La souveraineté', *Œuvres complètes* VIII, (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 243-456.

[33] Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée*, p. 50.

communauté de ses semblables.'[34] The death of another reveals to everyone the limitations of her own being and that experience is shared with other singular beings. The actual community of mortal beings is precisely the sign of their impossible communion. Even more, this non-transcendental community reveals to its members the very absence of communion between immortal beings. The association of community with death also occurs in the work of Blanchot and, more recently, Alphonso Lingis.[35] Blanchot stresses how the death of another draws attention to insufficiency and consolidates a sense of community between relative beings. Lingis discusses the experience of going to the deathbed of a loved one and he associates this with a sense of brotherhood through the sharing of mortality. This forms 'the community of those who have nothing in common', evoking the sharing of the experience of death or nothingness.

Nancy's central argument is that community signifies neither fusion nor communion, but it is precisely that which reveals to each singular member the limits of her own being. Such a community without community can never then transcend the finitude that it exposes; it consists only of the common exposure of mortality to singular beings. There is no higher form, no over-arching structure that draws together these finite and relative individualities. Instead, the inoperative community figures only the absence of such an essence and the 'in-common' is only the sharing of that contingency. The relationship between singular beings does not convey sameness, nor does it represent an association between origin and identity. It connotes rather the sharing of experience and the mutual exposure of alterity. Nancy removes the essence from community and re-imagines collectivity as an empty frame, an absence or a symbol of separation.

The conclusion that relations are defined exclusively by non-communication and radical separation seems, however, to have problematic implications. The initial philosophical premise regarding the emptiness of subjectivity is convincing, drawing attention to the ways in which death emphasises the shared experience of finitude and relativity. Yet if the mortality of the members of a community does form a focal point for an understanding of the insufficiency of being, it could also be argued that Nancy then makes a leap when he suggests that this experience constitutes the only remaining form of communal unity. Bataille's understanding of community and death is compelling, but in a

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[34] Georges Bataille, 'La Limite de l'utile. (Fragments d'une version abandonnée de 'La Part Maudite')'. *Œuvres Complètes* VII (Paris: Gallimard, 1976), 181-280 (p. 245).

sense this association seems extraneous to a more general discussion of social or cultural cohesion, stressing the existential experience of relativity rather than reflecting on forms of cultural interaction. Bataille's ideas regarding the role of sovereignty and of sacrifice highlight aptly the emptiness of the desire for communal essence, but this theory does not preclude other forms of socio-political or cultural dialogue, which Nancy at this point seems to ignore. The role of death in communal configurations begs a different set of questions from the socio-political sphere with which Nancy also wants to engage. The result is that parts of the text seem to fix exclusively on difference and separation.

Nancy's model in *La communauté désœuvrée* is a negative structure positing community without communion. The 'community without community' figures a paradox, re-establishing an old configuration while removing its substance and divesting it of its initial meaning. Once again, this implies that unity is absent and that beings exist in isolation. It turns on the inevitability of the failure and breakdown of collective structures, and leaves 'self' and 'other' stranded in a floating space with few points of contact. It upholds difference as a guiding principle or a quality to be affirmed, rather than demonstrating the unsatisfactory nature of aporetic models and problematising philosophical maxims that occlude intersections that actually occur. Nancy's work is also uneasy because it attempts to depict a socio-political stance, but this in turn erects barriers between individuals and cultures, perpetuates a model of dissensus and assumes non-communication to be the norm. While this theory might be set up in the name of openness to specific cultural voices, it ultimately reinforces marginalisation since it discredits the inter-relatedness of different cultural entities. This could in turn perpetuate states of inequality by de-emphasising change and interaction across cultural differences through the mobile relations of a network. Discussions of the failure of the notion of community form a part of the debates about the inadequacy of the universal frame of the Republic, as well as those proposing an open-ended, fragmented global community. But the configuration of a 'community without community' at this stage fails to offer an alternative vision of the changing interconnections between individuals, groups and broader structures.

The final risk with such thinking, as in Derrida's work, is that it formulates a certain type of model while rendering ambiguous the context or referents of that model. It upholds the absence of community as a general, philosophical premise while retaining a slippery

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[35] See Maurice Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable*, (Paris: Minuit, 1983) and Alphonso Lingis, *The Community of Those Who Have Nothing In Common*, (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994).

relation with the socio-political contexts upon which it intermittently claims to reflect. As I mentioned at the beginning of the discussion of *La communauté désœuvrée*, Nancy at times comments on the contemporary era, while also broadening his scope to refer to the 'history of Western thought'. It might be asked then, to what historical period does Nancy believe his thought belongs? Whose experience precisely does he intend to theorise? Nancy at once identifies the 'unworked community' with all of Western civilisation and with certain specific instances, among which he names May '68, the end of communism, even Sarajevo and contemporary multiculturalist thinking. In addition, what Nancy terms the history of Western thought is itself an uneasy and blurred category.[36] He thus frustrates the identification of any single referent, playing with the very concept of reference and slipping between philosophical reflection and a commentary on specific contexts. As in Derrida's work, this sort of discourse generalises a particular conceptual phenomenon without paying attention to the distinct ways in which various identities perceive their troubled experience of communality.

Despite these criticisms, however, close reading of certain extracts from Nancy's work suggests the beginnings of both a more accurate and a more politically effective mode of thinking. The later stages of Nancy's argument can give rise to another interpretation. This can be elucidated through further reflection on how we understand the nature of differences and incompatibilities. In this regard, it is significant that Nancy's thinking retains a different starting-point from that of other contemporary theorists such as Derrida and Blanchot. As Robert Bernasconi points out, Blanchot's 'other' in *La communauté inavouable* seems to be different from Nancy's 'other', and this, I would argue, encapsulates the specificity of Nancy's thought.[37] Bernasconi shows that Blanchot's thought (like that of Derrida) has a Lévinasian strain and for this reason, it is the irreducible, unknowable Other that renders community as communion impossible. In Nancy's work, however, alterity is

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[36] For more discussion of this see Robert Bernasconi, 'On Deconstructing Nostalgia for Community within the West: The Debate between Nancy and Blanchot', *Research in Phenomenology* 33, (1993), 3-21. Bernasconi criticises Nancy's conception of 'the West', pointing out the tension between what he acknowledges as historical and what he requires for the sake of his argument. Nancy's referents here are clearly very selective, referring to a few choice authors or traditions and not the entire history of Western thought at all.

[37] Ibid. Bernasconi hinges his argument on an ambiguous quotation from Blanchot's text, but broadens this to set up an opposition between Blanchot and Lévinas on the one hand, and Nancy on the other. He also critcises Nancy for paying less attention to the 'other', and he argues that community without exclusion is another form of totalitarianism. I disagree with Bernasconi here, since I understand Nancy's intention to be not to reject exclusion on the basis of including every entity into a total structure, but to realign 'community' in such a way as to focus on blurring and interaction rather than rigid or impenetrable frontiers.

secondary; the initial focus is rather the 'com-pearance' of singular beings in a structure that excludes exclusion itself.[38] This means that the 'unworked' community is one where 'others' do not confront one another in an oppositional sense, but rather where the structure of inside/outside, self and other is replaced by a series of relations. It would seem that Nancy's deconstructed community is less a community of 'others', like that of Blanchot or Derrida, than one in which differences coexist in a non-exclusive structure.

This suggests that the crucial starting-point could be re-formulated not as alterity but as a form of coexistence or 'sharing'. Nancy only hints at the importance of sharing in *La communauté désœuvrée*, drawing attention to it fleetingly between discussions of finitude and the impossibility of community as communion. Yet it is precisely this implicit suggestion of further contact that hints at a loosening of the philosophical model and a complication of excessive emphases on difference. Nancy's conception of 'partage' implies simultaneously creation and division, co-operation and dissensus, and this could lead to a more critical and fluid mode of thinking. In *Le partage des voix* for example, Nancy describes the deconstruction of logocentrism in terms of 'partage': the 'logos' is not a totalised form of meaning but is made up of multiple 'divisions'. For Nancy, however, unlike for Derrida, the implication seems to be less the irrevocable dissemination of separate meanings than the simultaneous division and sharing out of nuances in a polyphonic structure. Nancy's goal is ostensibly the same as Derrida's in this instance, yet the slight shift of emphasis points to a mode of thinking where difference is coupled with a more affirmative sense of coexistence. The *logos* for Nancy is both divided and shared out:

> La communauté reste à penser selon le partage du *logos*. Cela ne peut sûrement pas faire un nouveau *fondement* de la communauté. Mais cela indique peut-être une tâche inédite à l'égard de la communauté: ni sa réunion, ni sa division, ni son assomption, ni sa dispension, mais son *partage*.[39]

'Partage' in this context seems to propose an alternative understanding of the relation between meanings and textual associations to that of dispersion and dissemination.

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[38] The specific reference here is to Nancy's 'Cut Throat Sun', trans. Lydie Moudileno, *An Other Tongue: Nation and Ethnicity in the Linguistc Borderlands*, ed. Alfred Arteaga, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 113-123. Nancy imagines community 'as if it were no longer the closure that excludes, but the multiple, cut network from which exclusion only is excluded? Neither the integration of nations nor the disintegration of the masses nor a "*milieu*" between the two, and always threatened by both.' (p. 122). He also explains that exclusion is excluded not through fusion or inclusion, but through 'the inscription of cuts' or the incorporation of singularity into an open-ended, plural structure.

[39] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le partage des voix*, (Paris: Galilée, 1982) p. 90.

Subtending Nancy's thought is the desire to imagine not just incompatibilities but conjunctions and combinations. The notion of shared voices can be used to suggest the coexistence of different perspectives within a polyphonic forum; it implies participation rather than irrevocable separation and dissemination. Instead of remaining locked within the logic of irreducible dissensus, such a reflection on sharing and on the simultaneous existence of singularity and interaction problematises static models championing *either* community *or* difference (or an impossible aporia involving both). Similarly, Nancy's conception of 'compearance' suggests being-together, singular beings structured in relation to one another despite the absence of a common essence. This in turn complicates Derrida's model opposing irreconcilably the poles of community and radical, irreducible difference, emphasising how voices are juxtaposed within a shared space. This mode of thinking problematises models that fix on difference as a value in itself because it takes into account diverse sorts or degrees of participation in the wider collective forum.

The Language of Community

I have suggested that the role of theory is to comment on or to analyse the discursive structures by which community is maintained. If what we understand by 'community' and 'difference' is itself a product of representation, then critical theory can focus on the mechanisms of those representations and challenge some of their covert assumptions and patterns. Discourses of community propose arrangements or configurations of voices, and an apt understanding of these linguistic structures becomes one of the central criteria in the construction of an appropriate and successful model.

The centrality of language in the construction or deconstruction of community has been emphasised by a number of theorists and critics. Most notably perhaps, the interrogation of community ties in very closely with Lyotard's discourse on postmodernism and the more generalised drive to undermine any totalised or self-same 'grand narrative'. In *La condition postmoderne*, Lyotard argues that the collective communicational system advocated by Habermas reflects the last remnant of a totalising philosophical tradition that hopes to establish normative discourses and restrictive, if not totalitarian, ideals of consensus and conformity.[40] He replaces the principle of a universal metalanguage with the principle of a plurality of smaller perspectives that reflect the heterogeneity of different

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[40] Jean-François Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne: rapport sur le savoir*, (Paris: Minuit, 1979).

language systems ('language games'). This association of the realignment of communal structures with linguistic functions is also elucidated by the critic Michael Strysick. In 'The End of Community and the Politics of Grammar', Strysick takes the term 'grammar' from Nietzsche to develop a general trope signifying the ways in which we negotiate social, cultural, religious and moral structures.[41] 'Grammar' here denotes a certain form of discourse, idiolect or voice. Much of the recent attention to community and difference can be seen in terms of our adherence to multiple specific discursive practices that operate on the basis of a particular grammatical structure. 'Grammar' needs to be seen not as an imprisoning structure but should form an open-ended system, allowing for multiple voices and visions.

I therefore want to suggest that the success or failure of the critiques of community offered in Derrida and Nancy's work stems from the ways in which they understand discourse. In the case of Derrida's work, the most significant difficulty arises from his conception of the aporetic relation between collective and singular perspectives. For Derrida, that relation inscribes two irreconcilable discourses that cannot be combined. His oxymoronic figures negate themselves, forming a linguistic exercise that is defined by its very unworkable nature. Similarly, some aspects of Nancy's *La communauté désœuvrée* imply the absence of possibilities of communication. Nancy focuses less on the irreconcilable relation between a normative discourse and the specificity of diverse voices, than on the absence of linking structures and the separation of one discourse from another. He frequently seems to suggest that communication is only the confrontation between radically separate voices, drawing attention above all to alterity and dissensus. Communication becomes a symbol of the lack of communicability.

As I have begun to suggest, however, parts of Nancy's text evoke not just the dissemination of discourses but rather the division of voices within a shared space. *Le partage des voix* suggests a deconstruction of totalising positions through a conception of the sharing out of discourse and the coexistence of polyphonic voices within a more contiguous forum. This type of thinking can be developed through a reading of the essay 'Le communisme littéraire'. Here, although Nancy's emphasis does tend to remain on absence and contingency, the notion of polyphonic voices can be used to advocate both the interaction of different perspectives and a more constructive, dialogic structure. The idea

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[41] Michael Strysick, 'The End of Community and the Politics of Grammar', *Cultural Critique* 36, (1997), 195-215.

that 'myth' is interrupted by 'literature' implies the simultaneous articulation of coexistent singular voices. Nancy does not yet speak explicitly of relations, but it is significant that the 'worked' (completed or transcendent) community is replaced by a series of 'unworked' literary articulations which are voiced alongside one another and which share the absence of an essence. This idea of 'articulation' suggests the undoing of totality and the expression of specificity, but also, crucially, juxtaposition and mutual exposure:

> Par elle-même, l'articulation n'est que la jointure, ou plus exactement le jeu de la jointure: ce qui a lieu là où des pièces différentes se touchent sans se confondre, glissent, pivotent ou basculent l'une sur l'autre, l'une à la limite de l'autre – exactement à sa limite –, là où ces pièces singulières et distinctes plient ou se dressent, fléchissent ou se tendent ensemble et l'une par l'autre, l'une à même l'autre, sans que ce *jeu* mutuel – qui demeure sans cesse, en même temps, un jeu *entre* elles – forme la substance et la puissance supérieure d'un Tout. Mais ici, *la totalité est elle-même le jeu* des articulations.[42]

Evidently, Nancy's goal is still to undermine any unified discourse, but this quotation also implies the importance of the mutual encounter of singular voices rather than just their separation.

Nancy's thinking here involves a particular appreciation of the role of literature. Literary texts voice these singular articulations, and literature is a site where diverse discourses can express themselves. It is important, however, that this sort of expression could also initiate an awareness of juxtaposition and the creation of a forum where voices come into contact with one another. Literature becomes a figure for the conjunction or sharing out of voices. Furthermore, for Nancy the literary text can subvert the creation of any fixed figure or self-same identity. The text voices a singularity that is not self-enclosed and absolute but contingent and relative: 'il donne à entendre (à lire) le retrait de sa singularité, et il communique ceci: que les êtres singuliers ne sont jamais, les uns pour les autres, des figures fondatrices, originaires, des lieux ou des puissances d'identification sans reste.'[43] The mythic hero is 'interrupted' in favour of the presentation of singular but non-essential and relative voices. Nancy's use of the French term 'désœuvrée' is resonant again here, since it carries the connotation of the undoing of the 'œuvre', the completed masterpiece, in favour of a collection of singular, fragmented texts or voices. Nancy's vision of 'literary communism' also has political implications, suggesting a form of affirmation and interaction that would help to undermine the position of the hegemonic

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[42] Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée*, p. 188.
[43] Ibid., p. 194.

discourse. These articulations could be seen to represent the assertion of diverse perspectives within the larger national or cultural forum.

This mode of thinking indicates the importance of contiguity and relativity, drawing attention to the coexistence of different perspectives within a greater network of intersections. It initiates a critique of philosophical models positing either the irreconcilable aporia between the singular and the collective or the absence of any unifying structure, suggesting a type of discourse that would move between different standpoints. This conception of the sharing or mutual exposure of voices reinvents the relation between the individual and the community, suggesting that specific identities retain a sense of their own particularity while also maintaining contact with others. It suggests not only that voices are both singular and to a certain extent culturally specific, but also that each singularity is part of an on-going series of relations, interconnecting with other singularities and brushing against other influences. This critique also eludes the construction of an excessively generalised model. It represents a mode of thinking that advocates not the perpetuation of a particular trope or quality (such as incompatibility, difference, or separation) but portrays precisely the varying manifestations of singular voices in a series of dynamic relations. The polyphonic structure of Nancy's thinking does not imply that being is swamped by this mass of relations to the point where specificity is overrun. Rather, specific identities enter into contact with other cultures and those encounters define the nature of their composition.

This theory could also provide a response to some of the questions posed in more concrete sociological and political debates, since it privileges contact as well as separation. It reflects the specificity or uniqueness of each cultural voice but warns against the excesses of cultural relativism and the proliferation of irrevocably separated, incommensurable identities. While it remains suspicious of the normalising force of 'communicative action', it does suggest that standpoints will not necessarily be frozen in their incompatibility. It promotes the exchange of views relating to intersecting interests, rather than advocating either mutual identification or radical dissensus. In the context of discussions of the weakening of the nation-state, such thinking encourages a perception of the different relations between particular cultural groups above and below the nation rather than repeatedly stressing only the absence of a common identity. It upholds a notion of an open-ended community as neither an absent spectre nor a network defined by the unequivocal domination of certain Western paradigms, but shows how particular identities encounter other, plural positions in different ways and to different effects. Finally, the political slant to

Nancy's critique can contribute to reflections on the discourse of the French Republic, as it suggests that diverse cultural voices residing in the country can be seen to enter into contact with one another and they should not remain isolated or unrecognised. At the same time, it implies that universal, integrative models need to be opened out so as to accommodate different forms of confrontation between multiple voices. Assimilation is avoided here because specificity is privileged at the same time as contact.

The Connection between Theory and Politics

There has been in recent years a large amount of discussion of the relation between theoretical discourse and political action. The theorists of community discussed here have been caught up in a series of debates concerning the political efficacy of their work, as they reflect on contemporary socio-political issues while also abstracting from the concrete and imagining conceptual models rather than forging proposals for specific political projects. Writers and commentators have attempted to rethink the political itself in this light, contemplating a mode of political thinking that would distance itself from events while reflecting on a set of concepts and hoping that these might produce an effect upon the way in which practical questions are intellectually approached.

The arguments surrounding the work of Derrida seem particularly uneasy in this context. For Derrida himself, the political is defined by the set of dual responsibilities described at the end of *L'autre cap*. He conceives political thinking to be an engagement with the opposing requirements of a democratic community. As a result, the political involves a leap of thought or a contradictory obligation that defies resolution or implementation. Responsible political thinking involves an engagement with the 'beyond': 'l'événement étant chaque fois singulier, à la mesure de l'altérité de l'autre, il faut chaque fois *inventer*, non pas sans concept mais en débordant chaque fois le concept, sans assurance ni certitude.'[44] Concomitantly, Derrida's understanding of the concrete political implications of his thinking is complex and ambivalent. He imagines various links between his theory and the particular political context, commenting intermittently on the specificity of the contemporary era. Yet at the same time, he admits that those links are not necessarily unproblematic: 'il y a des liens, bien sûr, vous n'en doutez pas, mais ils peuvent ici ou là passer par des trajets qui ne sont pas signalés sur la carte du politique'.[45] Derrida for this

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[44] Jacques Derrida, 'Une "folie" doit veiller sur la pensée', p. 371.
[45] Ibid., p. 374.

reason suggests that the political efficacy of his thought lies rather in its formulation of 'zones discursives'. This reveals the traps and loopholes inherent in the construction of any self-same political discourse and points to a reinforcement of the dual requirements of a politically fair mode of thinking.

On some level then, it is a reappraisal of the issues involved in the production of discourse that provides the political slant to Derrida's work. This argument is developed by Morag Patrick, who asserts that we should not think in terms of an extra-discursive world to which deconstructive abstractions cannot be applied. Rather, all subjects are constituted or interpreted through the mechanisms of discourse itself. Derrida's conception of the undecidability between generalised norms and radically singular positions should be perceived as an integral part of the manner in which any political decision is made. In Patrick's view, Derrida reminds us that political thinking is itself not self-same; it will always leave a supplement that resists the formulation of any true, present and homogeneous standpoint. This ties in with more general arguments that perceive in deconstruction a greater political gesture hoping to undermine totalising institutions and a desire to draw increased attention to ineradicable traces of difference. Geoffrey Bennington also repeatedly demonstrates the political nature of deconstruction, perceiving the awareness of alterity as something that should inscribe itself into any political decision. Derrida's thought 'strives to keep open the event of alterity which alone makes politics possible and inevitable, but which political philosophy of all colours has always tried to close.'[46]

Evidently however, there remain a number of difficulties with the political implications of Derrida's thinking that need to be examined further. As I have already argued, Derrida's aporetic structures are highly problematic, retaining certain unsatisfactory implications for socio-political thinking. It is notable in this context that against critics such as Patrick, many other commentators have argued that Derrida's contemplation of the beyond and the 'à-venir' is distinctly apolitical, purposefully disengaging itself from particular political contexts and events. Many people have criticised Derrida for working only in the sphere of the textual, arguing that his work excludes the specificity of everyday problems and even more, renders positive political action defunct. Most notably, Simon Critchley's early work concludes that his thinking can be used ethically, while the derivation of any political project remains impossible. Critchley's stance at this point is that Derrida's

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[46] Geoffrey Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 33.

work contains vital insights regarding the ethical problems involved in the construction of a political democracy. Yet he perceives the leap between the undecidable and the political decision to be insurmountable:

> In the rigorous, quasi-transcendental delineation of undecidability as the dimension of political responsibility, is there not an implicit refusal of the ontic, the factical and the empirical – that is to say, of the space of *doxa*, where politics takes place in a field of antagonism, decision, dissension, and struggle? In this sense, might one not ultimately speak of a refusal of politics in Derrida's work?[47]

Criticisms of the political inefficacy of Derrida's work are also particularly virulent in reference to the philosophical abstractions of *Spectres de Marx*. Critics such as Eagleton and Ahmad have criticised Derrida for his post-structuralist contemplation of the mechanisms of signification and for his omission of any reference to specific political programs. Eagleton complains that Derrida is 'hardly concerned with an *effective* socialism at all', whilst Ahmad perceives Derrida's engagement with Marxism and 'the messianic' to be a disengagement from actual historical processes.[48]

All these reflections need to be refined. Certainly, Derrida's work is characterised by a desire to picture the political 'beyond' rather than a move to analyse working projects. To a certain extent then, Critchley, Ahmad and Eagleton are correct in pointing out the disengagement of Derrida's vague, 'messianic' structures from the concrete political sphere. It is significant, however, that Derrida's shortcomings stem less from his preoccupation with philosophical discourse *per se* than from the nature of the model he proposes and the discursive leap that that model involves. Derrida is at fault not because he engages with discourse rather than with events, since discourses themselves are an integral part of the construction of socio-political values. Instead, as I have suggested, the difficulty is that Derrida's model focuses on irreconcilable philosophical incompatibilities that provide a distorted vision of the interaction between singular positions and collective, dialogic networks. As I shall also argue in the next chapter, the concept of unconditional responsibility to any other implies too radical a severance of that other from any sort of negotiation or dialogue. Thus the problem here is not merely the leap between 'theory' and 'practice', since what we call 'practice' is intrinsically bound up with the mechanisms of discourse and representation. The difficulty is that the communication between theory and

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[47] Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Lévinas*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992) p. 200.

practice is foreclosed due to the impossible polarisation of community and difference implied by Derrida's contradictory configuration. Derrida's theory exceeds practice, becoming autonomous and self-serving.

If critics of Derrida in these ways seek to re-imagine the political and to pinpoint the role of critical theory in a socio-political context, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe have also attempted to resolve this problem. These thinkers associate the deconstruction of the community with a re-evaluation of political thinking. In 'The "Retreat" of the Political', Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe name the gesture to undermine transcendent political positions the 're-treat' of political thinking.[49] 'Re-treat' is a pun, hoping to figure both re-evaluation and withdrawal, implying both the end of politics as sovereignty and the formulation of a new political form. Tracing the construction of the political as a symbol of transcendence, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe identify three factors characterising the myth of the political: the articulation of power as transcendence, the relation of community to immortality and the community as representation of some being-in-common. They then argue that the retreat of the political is the retreat of sovereignty, transcendence and essence, and they conclude that the political has withdrawn into specificity. It can no longer function according to rules and regulations, and it no longer has any metaphysical ground. This also recalls the work of Alain Badiou, who describes a crisis in the political that stems from a loss of faith in the idea of community and the impossibility of conceiving politics to be based exclusively on the power of the sovereign state.[50]

However, the difficulty with this thinking is that Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's redefinition of the political ('le politique') also separates it too radically from 'politics' ('la politique') and from workable strategies and proposals. Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe use the reformulation of community to deconstruct the political as we know it, distinguishing the philosophical re-treat of sovereignty from working projects. For these writers, the political is no longer the implementation of a decision, but is bound up in a set of philosophical abstractions that are forced to withdraw from specific consideration of some external 'reality'. The goal is to bring out the philosophical and conceptual limits of the political,

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[48] See Terry Eagleton, 'Marxism without Marxism' and Aijaz Ahmad, 'Reconciling Derrida: "Specters of Marx" and Deconstructive Politics', *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's* Specters of Marx, (London and New York: Verso, 1999) 83-87 (p. 86) and 88-109.

[49] Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Retreating the Political*, ed. and trans. Simon Sparks, (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

[50] See for example Alain Badiou, *Peut-on penser la politique?* (Paris: Seuil, 1985) and *Conditions*, (Paris: Seuil, 1992).

deconstructing standpoints and projects and revealing how political thought is bound up with forms of representation. Thus if Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe do cleverly deconstruct the discourse of community and sovereignty, they also sever this gesture from other contemporary political discourses rather than considering the possible co-implication of the political with more contextualised reflections. Such thinking then inadvertently becomes bound up in the metaphysical rather than investigating the wider political implications of a certain type of discourse. It appears to exclude the possibility of attaching discourses to the formation of more concrete values in the socio-political sphere. This then comes to resemble a desire to exempt philosophy from political responsibility or from considerations of workability and application.[51]

While it is true that the emphasis on the discursive intricacies of the political is crucial to its constitution, it is precisely this separation of discourses that needs to be reworked. The definition of the political in terms of an abstract reconsideration of singularities, and the concomitant rejection of politics in any more concrete sense, implies an unrealistic discrepancy between 'text' and 'world'. It suggests that only the political corresponds to a certain re-imagination of discourse, implying that politics could remain untouched by such a gesture and connoting a discursive leap that allows for no correspondence between one sphere and another. Conversely however, it is important to reinforce the discursive nature of socio-political 'reality' and therefore the fluid interpenetration of theoretical discourses with more tangible political values. Theory provides models that in turn lead to the privileging of certain priorities and the formulation of particular values and emphases. It can in this way raise questions that might be taken into account in a re-evaluation of the notion of the socio-political community. Nancy's notion of 'shared voices', for example, is 'une limite, à laquelle toute politique s'arrête et commence', or a loose form out of which open political values such as participation and exchange could eventually emerge.[52]

This intermingling of the philosophical and the political can be theorised in terms of the necessity for a form of discourse that figures aptly the changing position of cultural

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[51] In this context, Critchley argues that Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe can be used to reconsider Derrida's relation to the political, but he again criticises their neglect of concrete politics. He suggests that this results in the desire to avoid practical action or 'dirty hands'. I agree with Critchley to a certain extent here, but I would suggest not that Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's failing is that they neglect the separate sphere of politics, but rather that they separate political-philosophical discourse from politics in too strict a manner. See *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, p. 215.

[52] Nancy, *La communauté désœuvrée*, p. 198.

differences in societies where 'community' symbolises not the 'in-common' but rather a more malleable forum. Theory can re-imagine the moving relation between the singular and the collective in such a way as to suggest the problems involved in reflections on radical dissensus, upholding certain open political values such as negotiation and dialogue and promoting respect for different participants in that structure. In a text by Jacques Rancière, for example, the political is defined neither by concrete events nor by an affirmation of philosophical disengagement, but as a site where the singularity and equality of different standpoints is affirmed. The political is a place of encounter between differences in an egalitarian forum. Specific voices interact in the space of the 'in-between': 'la politique est l'art des déductions tordues et des identités croisées. Elle est l'art de la construction locale et singulière des cas d'universalité.'[53] A political community is a place of encounters and interruptions, the entering into contact of different positions in a forum where equal respect is the only linking value. Rancière's thinking is significantly not utopian here, however, juxtaposing a 'community of equals' with a 'society of unequals' (ruptured by the experience of 'le tort') and discussing the ways in which the thought of the former might influence the disorder of the latter.[54]

Finally then, the aim of an analysis of critical theories of community is to identify a form of discourse that points to a workable combination of necessary coexistent values. As I have argued, this might involve the evolution of a way of thinking that would privilege the articulation of specificity within a forum where voices can interact. It is important, however, that this sort of thinking, derived from Nancy's conception of shared voices, should be seen as a political gesture because it brings out the wider implications of certain types of discourse. Its political efficacy lies in the attempt to undermine the formulation of ideologies, models and fixed perspectives in favour of an awareness of the shifting borders between different perspectives. As I shall explore further in the next chapter, Nancy's work can offer a critique of existing philosophical and political ideologies, stressing instead the slippery nature of concepts such as 'community' and 'singularity', as well as the possibility of their interaction. Nancy's is a discursive exercise, and though it does not describe particular strategies to be executed in specific contexts, it suggests that communal discourse

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[53] Jacques Rancière, *La mésentente: politique et philosophie*, (Paris: Galilée, 1995) p. 188.

[54] See Rancière's discussion in *Aux bords du politique*, (Paris: Editions Osiris, 1992). Badiou's thought is again relevant here, as he conceives political thinking to be defined by the emergence of singular events alongside a generalised idea of equality. Badiou suggests that 'égalité' should replace 'communauté' as a defining political concept. See both *Conditions* and *Abrégé de la métapolitique*, (Paris: Seuil, 1998).

itself is open to change and implies the importance of open political values such as exchange and equal respect. His text does not sit still and offers no fixed configuration of either community or difference, but it suggests that political discourse can be flexible and promotes an awareness of the importance of movement and interaction.

Chapter Two: Dialogues with the Singular Other

The deconstruction of the notion of community is hinged upon a re-evaluation of difference. An interrogation of the changing semantic implications of terms such as 'the universal' or the 'in-common' necessarily involves a reappraisal of the relations between diverse participants in the community structure and encourages reflection on the confrontation with the other. If 'community' can be understood as neither self-same nor self-contained, then the particular beings of which it is comprised may also not have any intrinsic resemblance or proximity, remaining separated and distinct from one another.

This section will investigate further the theories of Derrida, Nancy and also Lyotard in order to ascertain what sorts of perceptions of difference have been challenging discourses of community. This necessitates a renewed interrogation of the encounter between 'others' or singular beings. In Lyotard's work, for example, the idea of the 'differend' implies a conception of radical alterity that figures a relation with no possibility of communication or negotiation at all. His work also contains a theory of the singularity of any position with regard to the generalised framework of the law, and this too presumes that different positions are absolutely incommensurable with one another and with any unifying structure. In Derrida's work similarly, the other is defined not as the mirror image of the self but as an unknowable being who inevitably exceeds the enclosing framework of laws or norms. Thirdly, following on from the conception of 'shared voices' discussed in the previous chapter, Nancy's later work not only criticises 'community' but also offers a particularly subtle and resonant conception of identity and alterity. Nancy's most recent theories suggest that being is singular, but it is also defined by its relations and encounters with other beings. Those relations are changing and mobile, inviting dialogue rather than signifying only irretrievable dissensus.

If theories of community can both feed into and subvert more concrete discourses on the socio-political organisation of cultural identities, then the theoretical reconsideration of 'difference' also becomes a forum for the undermining or development of existing perceptions. In this context, it is significant that the 'universal' myth of republican France can be seen to be juxtaposed with a lingering drive either to exclude differences or to over-valorise alterity in a stereotypical manner. While certain discourses in the Republic advocate the assimilation of different cultures into a universal whole, at the same time there

remains a tendency to make too much of the difference of the other, so that it becomes fixed and static. Prejudicial discourses still circulate, that endeavour to proscribe alterity and to stigmatise certain categories such as 'immigrants' and 'Muslims' on the grounds that they resist inclusion into any self-same national identity structure. The Other from this point of view can become fixed in her alterity so as to preserve the purity of the hegemonic social body. A mode of thinking is therefore required whereby different cultures are perceived as valid while also remaining part of a dialogic system rather than the victims of exclusion and marginalisation. Critical theory can be mobilised in this context, since it can highlight the hidden mechanisms of the various ways in which difference is apprehended. Perceptions of otherness are at times bound up with the creation of labels and categories. The role of critical theory is to realign these deep-seated structural patterns.

Racism and the Exclusion of Difference

One important context for a discussion of community and alterity is the continued persistence of racist and prejudiced discourses. Racism in whatever form involves above all an inadequate understanding of cultural difference. Difference is the central pivot of racism, as the racist fails to remain open to alterity but conceives it rather as a threat and a source of fear. Cultural differences are consequently placed in a hierarchical structure, whereby the racist affirms his own superiority and denigrates the other precisely because of his or her otherness. Racism can then be defined as the use of difference against the other. For Albert Memmi, for example, '*le racisme est la valorisation, généralisée et définitive, de différences, réelles ou imaginaires, au profit de l'accusateur et au détriment de sa victime afin de justifier une agression ou un privilège*'.[1] A racist discourse also functions according to the binary opposition of sameness and difference, implying that the self is pure, belonging to a homogeneous identity category, whilst the other is fixed and demarcated from the self by a rigid frontier. Racism is bound up with determinism, whether it is biological, hereditary, ethnic or cultural, and consists of the placing of different identities into specific and self-enclosed categories.

The definition of racism has been discussed in a more complex manner by the theorist Pierre-André Taguieff.[2] Taguieff argues that racism can consist of either 'hétérophobie' or 'hétérophilie', both of which stem from a misapprehension of alterity. In

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[1] Albert Memmi, *Le racisme: description, définition, traitement*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1982) pp. 98-99.

[2] Pierre-André Taguieff, *La force du préjugé: essai sur le racisme et ses doubles*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1987).

'hétérophobie', difference is negated in the name of the preservation of homogeneity. Otherness is evaluated negatively, with the result that it is either denied or excluded. Conversely, 'hétérophilie' is the absolute affirmation of difference or the naturalisation and essentialisation of the alterity of the other. Racism in this sense revolves around the association of difference with the conceptual poles of either negation or excessive valorisation, both of which amount to an inappropriate perception of the changing identities of diverse 'others'. Taguieff also uses this analysis to demonstrate the traps inherent in the position of the anti-racist, who counters 'hétérophobie' with 'hétérophilie' and vice versa. In either case, the problem is the continued drive to insert identities and differences into classified compartments. Both the magnification and the rejection of alterity emphasise the demarcation between inside and outside. New theoretical discourses can be helpful here, since they can draw attention to the blurring of frontiers and demonstrate how these sorts of categories are subverted by more mobile identity constructions. Self and other can be revealed to interact in more complex ways.

Racism should be seen as a discursive act depending on a certain understanding of the idea of 'difference'. It is true that it can arise from unconscious fears and instinctive, visceral reactions related to the drive to protect 'one's own'.[3] At the same time however, these stem from a desire to define the self in a certain way and to set up boundaries so as to order and ascertain the racist's identity. The racist desires to represent both himself and the other in a static way, so as to delimit his own identity. His prejudice takes the form of a language that reduces and over-determines the other, and any more concrete action results from this attitude to his own self-image. The racist discourse is also bound up with metaphors and linguistic formulae, for example advocating purity or organic cohesion. It can be driven by a series of images and their associations, figuring difference and sameness with a particular set of analogies leading to further problematic implications. Purity, for instance, gives rise to a whole gamut of metaphors referring to the body, to parasites and disease, linking difference with the unhealthy and the sick. Similarly, the figure of an organic identity suggests roots, origins and fusion with the soil, pointing to the uncompromising division of cultures into geographical and topographical categories. Language and linguistic play are at the centre of racist beliefs, so that more concrete

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[3] Tahar Ben Jelloun discusses these sorts of reaction in *Hospitalité française: racisme et immigration maghrébine*, (Paris: Seuil, 1984).

manifestations such as violence, discrimination, exclusion and inequality are intricately associated with these discursive constructions themselves.

An example of this desire to create homogeneous identity categories can be found in the discourse of the Front National. The FN seeks to preserve the 'purity' of national identity and perceives difference as a threat. The goal is to 'reconquérir notre identité française, la fierté de ce que nous sommes, de notre patrimoine, de notre civilisation, de notre histoire, de notre langue',[4] and here the vocabulary of conquest immediately sets up a power relation between the self and any possible other. The other is demarcated from the self and then inscribed in a hierarchical relationship where the self is superior and dominating. Equally, Le Pen's manifesto contains the vocabulary of organic cohesion and geographical enclosure: 'la Patrie, c'est la terre de nos Pères, le sol défriché et défendu par eux au long des siècles; le pays façonné dans ses paysages, ses cités, sa langue, son histoire, et enrichi de leurs efforts, fertilisé de leur sueur et de leur sang.'[5] The imagery betrays a desire for a smoothly homogeneous national community with firm roots in the soil, and a central part of the ideology of the Front National involves the expulsion of any non-French immigrants who do not retain this organic relation with the earth. For Le Pen, French heritage belongs above all to the 'Français de souche', and immigrants have no right to participate in that heritage. Identity also becomes bound up with property and ownership, or the strict apportioning of possessions. Thus immigration is a 'marée' or an invasion, threatening the security of the French, and North African immigrants in particular should 'return' to their 'native' land as quickly as possible. Difference is something to be feared and expelled, so that it cannot permeate the boundaries of the 'pure' identity of the self.

The opposition between self and other inscribed both in racist discourses and in the ideology of the Front National is at times in France associated with the relation between the coloniser and the colonised. Here again, the difference of the colonised is in a double gesture fixed and then stigmatised or marginalised. Some prejudicial discourses in France still contain traces of colonialism, positing the 'Français de souche' in a hegemonic position and subordinating immigrant workers from the ex-colonies. This gesture in certain cases was not attenuated but exacerbated by decolonisation, as some continue to harbour resentment and to exercise domination over those who tried to break away from French rule. In his analysis of racism in France, Ben Jelloun states, 'on a omis de décoloniser

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[4] Jean-Marie Le Pen, *Les Français d'abord*, (Paris: Editions Carrere-Michel Lafon, 1984) p. 13.
[5] Ibid., p. 74.

l'imaginaire d'une grande partie des Français. Comment annuler cette image: ceux qu'on dominait hier encore dans les colonies sont aujourd'hui dans les usines et chantiers.'[6] He suggests that immigrants from Morocco and Algeria are still frequently subservient to the hegemony of the French, since they are still brought in as cheap labour. This then perpetuates the power relation and it can reinvoke fixed stereotypes of 'less civilised peoples' who need to be controlled by the superior power. The perception of these workers then in turn becomes a class issue, bound up with social inequality and prejudice. These traces of colonialism also conjure up memories of the Algerian war, establishing the Algerian other as an opponent or a rebellious force that French power attempted but failed to subjugate. Most importantly, these prejudiced discourses associate difference both with reification and with hierarchy while figuring the (national) community by contrast as something unified and self-same.

This sort of reification particularly of North African difference functions according to a series of reductive signifiers. First, the term 'immigré' becomes a vast catch-all category broadly connoting difference. People from diverse countries come to be associated with this single term, which inevitably can evoke nothing of the identity of the individual but signifies instead merely otherness or exclusion. An 'immigré' is ostensibly anyone who at first glance appears not to be unequivocally 'French'. The establishment of this category then itself has ethnic undertones, as Africans are more likely to be described as immigrants than Belgians, for example. Even more problematically, the term is often used to describe people of non-French origin, whether or not they ever emigrated in the first place and referring at times to individuals born in France. The past participle from which 'immigré' is derived becomes caught up in a paradox, since it denotes an action that has been completed, even though the people referred to by that term are still conceived with reference to that action or process. In addition, the term conveys images of the labourers of the fifties and sixties, yet it is used for young people of North African origin living in France now. In this context, the terms 'première et deuxième génération' are equally misleading, again continuing to describe those born in France as immigrants. This terminology also evokes a neat movement down the generations, while in reality the difference between one generation and the next can never be described as a single historical shift. Such signifiers serve to classify difference and to clarify the boundaries of 'French' and 'other' identities.

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[6] Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Hopsitalité française: racisme et immigration maghrébine*, p. 61.

In a similar vein, the term 'maghrébin', used by the French more than by North Africans themselves, is employed to amass people originating from different North African countries under the unifying umbrella of a single classification. The Maghreb may refer to a particular geographical area, but using the adjective to describe Algerians, Moroccans and Tunisians in the same way is inevitably misleading, since immigrants from these countries all encountered different sorts of experience. The processes of colonisation and decolonisation were different in each case, and each country's subsequent relations with France are distinct and various. The term forms a convenient screen, designating the North African other without describing any specific context or experience, and it can mask more than it reveals. These types of problem associated with the usage of collective terms also occur in the context of the neologism 'Beur', coined in the eighties to describe young people of North African origin living in France. I shall discuss the implications of the term extensively in my final chapter.

Implicit in many stereotypical descriptions of people of North African origin living in France is a set of preconceptions and suspicions regarding the Islamic other. In many instances, the term 'musulman' functions as another unifying label, connoting both alterity and inferiority, or a quantity to be feared. The word carries a series of associations that homogenise North African culture, perpetuating certain cultural myths. Some discourses ally Muslims unequivocally with fundamentalism, perceiving Islam as a fixed conceptual whole maintaining extremist and militant beliefs. Islam is often perceived according to the single cliché that it unifies religion and state, and is therefore in turn set up as an irreconcilable enemy of French secularism. Islam can be understood as a single identity category forming the other of the West, connoting not a diversity of practices but a monolithic construction characterised by fanaticism, extremism and terrorism. For some, it carries overtones of the Algerian war and its legacy of resentment, and it has also more recently been associated with the conflict of the Gulf war. This gives rise to a sense of anxiety over the allegiance of North Africans in France, evoking a perception of the irresolute opposition between cultures defined by past conflicts and wars. The subsequent identification of religion in terms of ethnicity, culture and politics contributes to a holistic definition that sets up a dichotomy between 'us' and 'them'.[7]

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[7] In *Covering Islam: How the media and the experts determine how we see the rest of the world*, (London: Vintage, 1997), Edward Saïd discusses this scapegoating of Islam, not only in France but also in the Western world in general. He argues that Islam is blamed for everything that we mistrust in new political and social

This sort of characterisation can be seen in reactions to the headscarf affair of 1989 discussed in chapter one. In this context in particular, a series of prejudices surfaced, stemming to a certain extent from postcolonial constructions of essential ethnic differences. The simple headscarves of the three girls were implicitly associated with Islam as a whole and with fundamentalist tendencies, again betraying a monolithic view of those practising the religion. Some French people tended to confer upon the veil a prefabricated meaning, connoting archaic beliefs, the overt subordination of women and a refusal of integration rather than perceiving the real variety of interpretations it can signify.[8] There was also a good deal of confusion between different types of veil, as the smaller headscarves were confused with larger robes that are used to cover most of the body. The veil in general was then read as a symbol of the irreconcilable conflict between Islam and laïcité, as each position was defined in simplistic terms. Laïcité was interpreted as firm neutrality, leading to an inability to recognise and accommodate differences, whilst Islam symbolised archaic tradition, the oppression of women and also the affirmative translation of religion from the private to the public sphere. This stereotyping of Islam, and the one-dimensional association of the headscarf with the political affirmation of fundamentalist beliefs, was deeply bound up with a set of clichés that masked the diverse manifestations of Islam in France.

This ignorance with regard to Islam seems to have led to the entrenchment of inaccurate stereotypes and the formulation of reductive categories. The cultural difference of immigrants and Muslims in France needs to be better understood, and concomitantly, the very construction of such reified definitions needs to be undermined and reshuffled. The prejudices discussed above are all alive and prevalent in the contemporary era, forming a counterpart to commentaries on the integrative, unified Republic and to perceptions of the fragmentation of community. If on the one hand the borders of the community are being thrown into question, then this must also be matched by a reappraisal of difference not in terms of boundaries but in some more subtle sense. The theories of Lyotard, Derrida and Nancy, then, can be read as discursive sites where the concept of difference is expanded in a move to subvert existing, inadequate representations. These theorists offer possibilities of

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patterns. He suggests that 'for the right, Islam represents barbarism; for the left, medieval theocracy; for the centre, a kind of distasteful exoticism.' p. lv.

[8] See Françoise Gaspard and Farhad Khosrokhovar, *Le foulard et la République*, (Paris: La Découverte, 1995). For another interesting discussion of the complexities of the 'affaire des foulards', see Diana R. Blank, 'A Veil of Controversy: The Construction of the "Tchador Affair" in the French press', *Interventions. International Journal of Post-colonial Studies*, (Special issue on *The Veil: Postcolonialism and the Politics of Dress*), 1.4, (1999), 536-554.

thinking about alterity other than as subject to the binary opposition of assimilation and repatriation or sameness and difference, finding ways to champion equal respect. The rest of this chapter will enter more closely into the intricacies of the concepts of the singular being and the other in the work of these theorists, tracing the implications of their thinking and locating their innovations as well as their problems. These critical theorists add to the reinvention of the notion of community a re-evaluation of cultural difference, undermining received discourses in various and more or less successful ways.

Lyotard's Theory of the Differend

As I mentioned in chapter one, Lyotard theorises postmodernity as a generalised pattern of thinking that uncovers the illusory nature of universal or transcendental narratives. Lyotard's conviction is that consensus is a horizon that can probably never be reached; instead, different narratives and conceptual systems will remain in a relation of continual dissensus. In this section, I shall concentrate most specifically on Lyotard's conception of difference in *Le différend* and *Au juste* in order to assess whether it can effectively challenge and realign the visions of alterity implied by the discourses described above. *Le différend* reveals the insurmountable conflict between different narratives or positions, implying a conception of alterity that resists any form of integration. Equally, *Au juste* argues for an ethical understanding of justice severed from knowledge, reinforcing instead the absence of rules or criteria and a principle of openness to multiplicity. Lyotard's work thus in some ways provides a subversive response to prejudiced discourses, since he seeks to rescue the other from reductive definitions and to open thought to the limitless nature of difference. On the other hand, however, Lyotard's thinking also becomes problematic because his conception of incommensurability fixes exclusively on separation and risks implying that the singularity of the individual is immutable. His discourse on the 'différend' and on the multiplicity of 'language games' seems not to account for shifts or possible points of contact.

Le différend upholds above all separation and incompatibility. Lyotard argues explicitly against Habermas's conception of communicative action, which states that consensus can be achieved on the basis of rationality and that any imaginable case can have a rational solution. Lyotard claims conversely that justice is not always based on agreement, but on the refusal to coerce anyone into a false structure of consensus. Justice is based on an awareness of incompatibility, and the differend names these sorts of cases where no

common ground can be found. The text starts with the postulation that a differend can be understood as 'un cas de conflit entre deux parties (au moins) qui ne pourrait pas être tranché équitablement faute d'une règle de jugement applicable aux deux argumentations'.[9] The positions of the two parties are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but no rule of judgement could satisfy both at once. They originate from different starting points and refer to different conceptual systems, so that no common idiom can be established. Lyotard's argument for the hegemony of dissensus thus arises from this sense of the absence of a universal genre of discourse to regulate the different positions in play. This lack of a universal perspective also often means that one of the positions is deprived of the means to argue its case, since its idiom is so cut off from that of the other. A differend occurs when the resolution of the conflict is carried out in the idiom of one of the participants without being able to incorporate the position of the other.

The differend for Lyotard is at root a linguistic problem. It names a disjunctive relation between heterogeneous genres of discourse. Lyotard explains that there are different types of discourse, including description, exposition, interrogation and so on, but between these discourses there is no implicit connection. No single set of rules governs different discourses, because there is no universal metalanguage and no authoritative position that can account for them all. The differend signifies this breakdown of linguistic unity, introducing a gap or a silence between different discourses and positions. Similarly, sentences obeying different discursive rules are untranslatable one to the other: they are interrupted by 'le vide, le néant, où un univers présenté par une phrase explose et s'explose, comme un feu d'artifice, quand advient la phrase, et où il s'éteint avec elle'.[10] Every sentence invites the succession of another sentence, but the passage between them will not necessarily be seamless. This conception is derived from the notion of language games elucidated in *La condition postmoderne*, where the rules of one sphere of discourse are seen to be irreducible to those of any other. Once again, while such thinking attempts to resist the imposition of assimilative discourses, Lyotard also reinforces the ineradicable blockage between areas of thought, focusing on interruption rather than on mediation or translation.

Lyotard takes as his example of the differend the impossibility of proving the existence of the Nazi gas chambers according to a certain kind of conventional logic. He describes Faurisson's attempt to prove what happened in the concentration camps by

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[9] Jean-François Lyotard, *Le différend*, (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1983) p. 9.
[10] Jean-François Lyotard, *Pérégrinations: loi, forme , événement*, (Paris: Galilée, 1990) p. 67.

locating an eye-witness as archetypal of the impossibility of the differend. Lyotard explains that Faurisson's attempt operates according to an impossible logic. If Faurisson argues that an eye-witness to the gas chambers is the only possible irrefutable proof of their existence, then the situation is caught in a differend, since the eye-witnesses must now be dead. Such a system of proof operates according to a different set of rules from the actual situation, and it places the victims in this impossible position, whereby they are deprived of the means to enter into argument. This situation is a differend for Lyotard since it hinges on the absolute foreclosure of consensus; there can be no point of contact or negotiation between the victim and the discourse of Faurisson. The differend is a clash between angles, whereby the victim cannot prove his position with reference to the logic of the other party.

This example, however, already signals many of the problems with Lyotard's theory. Lyotard describes this situation as resistant to proof; it is the gulf that opens up between the singularity of a situation and the logical language of proof. Yet here the gulf between standpoints again seems to be over-emphasised, as if the only means of establishing proof were through the impossible testimony of an actual victim of the gas chambers. It could be argued, however, that these criteria are inappropriate and unnecessary, since of course many other forms of proof do exist, including manifold documents, photographs, or the stories of other survivors or of German soldiers. There may indeed be a differend inscribed within Faurisson's attempted argument, but this can be criticised to reveal the erroneous nature of the supposedly insurmountable opposition between the eye-witness and logical proof. The very criteria used to evoke a differend here are insufficient, suggesting that the relation between discourses need not be perceived as so radically unworkable or incommensurable because other sorts of argument and communication can always be found. The possibility of problematising Faurisson's argument from other, quite simple perspectives suggests that the description of such a situation as a differend is questionable.

Lyotard's other significant example can be found in his writing on social conflict and the Algerian war.[11] Lyotard collaborated with the *Socialisme et barbarie* collective to produce a series of texts commenting on the Algerian dispute, yet he notes that something 'intraitable' lingered at the centre of all those discourses. The role of the group was therefore to allow that intractable difference to signal its presence. Observation of the struggles would draw attention to the differend that intervened between particular events and

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[11] See 'Le nom de l'Algérie', *La guerre des Algériens*, (choix de textes et présentation par Mohammed Ramdini), (Paris: Galilée, 1989).

wider interpretations. In the aftermath of the war, however, Lyotard argues that these intractable voices have been silenced, their idiom is no longer heeded and they are caught in an irresolute differend. Once again, however, while Lyotard successfully draws attention to the resisting force of singular positions, the example also seems exaggerated, implying the irrecoverable absence of communication and linkages, when in reality new ways of conceiving the relation between victims of the war and other positions can be imagined. Lyotard treats different discourses on the war as holistic perspectives, so that between them, no common ground can be found. Yet the details of these repressed standpoints could potentially be uncovered, and new forms of discourse are breaking through drawing attention to the silenced atrocities of the war. Equally, as James Williams points out, Lyotard's perception of irresolvable differences risks also implying the impossibility of concrete political action or change.[12]

Le différend can also be read in conjunction with the earlier text Au juste, where the notion of intractable difference provides Lyotard with an ethical position. Lyotard problematises the notion of justice, arguing that, because of the absolute singularity of the individual case before the law, there can never be a universal conception of justice. Judgement cannot operate according to a single set of rules, since these must cover incommensurable discursive systems and would therefore tyrannise the alterity of the differend. Justice works differently according to each case, and singular examples have different implications for the construction of the law itself:

> On travaille au «coup par coup», même quand on fabrique une Constitution: somme toute,
> elle ne devient réalisable qu'à la lumière de la pratique, c'est-à-dire qu'on va s'apercevoir
> que la pratique constitue un nouveau contexte pour les énoncés, qui exige que telle ou telle
> chose soit prescrite qui ne l'avait pas été dans la Constitution, laquelle sera donc amendée.[13]

There are therefore no universal criteria for judgement; the establishment of justice changes according to each singular situation. Justice, for Lyotard, must function in the absence of rules, not in the service of unanimous consensus, and it exists only according to its singular manifestations.

Justice in this sense revolves around no universal metalanguage and can never be pinned down and described. This is also because Lyotard dissociates prescriptive from

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[12] James Williams, *Lyotard and the Political*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000). Williams argues that Lyotard provides an illuminating analysis of the conflict, but it also refuses any form of political teleology. He does not criticise Lyotard's tactics at length, however, suggesting instead that Lyotard's politics is one of nostalgia or anamnesia.

[13] Jean-François Lyotard et Jean-Loup Thébaud, *Au juste*, (Paris: Christian Bourgois, 1979) p. 57.

descriptive statements. For Lyotard, prescriptive statements are not propositional or predicative and they cannot be obtained from descriptive statements. The passage from a descriptive to a prescriptive statement is interrupted; we could say that a differend arises between them. They resist one another because they operate according to incommensurable discursive systems. A prescriptive statement refers to an activity, the carrying out of an action, and it cannot therefore describe that action. Furthermore, a prescriptive statement cannot be commensurable with an actual, real situation, because, writes Lyotard, that reality is still to be. He then applies this to politics, to explain that in this sphere the true and the just are separate because politics implies the prescription of doing something other than what is. Justice has no ontology of its own but implies the imagining of effects.

Lyotard uses this thinking to formulate a political stance. He intends this perception of alterity to inform politics, presumably so as to draw attention to the aporias and inconsistencies of political discourses and to remind us that politics will always have to deal with a heterogeneous and irreducibly plural society:

> Si la politique était un genre et que ce genre eût prétention à ce statut suprême, on aurait vite
>
> fait de montrer sa vanité. Mais la politique est la menace du différend. Elle n'est pas un
>
> genre, elle est la multiplicité des genres, la diversité des fins, et par excellence la question de
>
> l'enchaînement. Elle plonge dans la vacuité où «il arrive que...». Elle est, si l'on veut, l'état
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> du langage, mais il n'y a pas *un* langage. Et la politique consiste en ce que le langage n'est
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> pas un langage, mais des phrases, ou que l'être n'est pas l'être, mais des *Il y a*.[14]

This suggests that different voices, intentions and purposes coexist and conflict with one another in the formulation of any politics. Politics is defined for Lyotard by the encounter between incommensurable language games in a situation where adjudication is deferred. Politics must always be 'pagan', structured by multiple distinct positions between which there is little possibility of mediation.

Yet while Lyotard successfully opens up the conception of difference in a gesture of resistance to racist or prejudiced discourses, many of his arguments in this vein get caught up in a number of problems. Lyotard's thinking forms part of the re-evaluation of community and singularity in modern French debates, but his theory has several epistemological difficulties that prevent it from providing either an accurate or a politically constructive vision of cultural differences in France. These difficulties stem above all from his particular perception of radical alterity, which in the first instance leads to an irresolute

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[14] Lyotard, *Le différend*, p. 200.

contradiction. On the one hand, Lyotard emphasises relativism and dissensus, as if to imply that 'anything goes'. He disallows adjudication precisely when such a process must usually be both necessary and unavoidable. Critics such as Barry Smart and Chris Rojek have levelled the criticism that the deconstruction of justice and the law makes it all too easy to defend questionable views and practices, such as environmental abuse or the oppression of women, in the name of cultural difference.[15] Lyotard's theories exempt particular language games from having to justify themselves in any way, since apparently any language game need only function according to its own internal justification. This law of dissensus is only too compatible with lawlessness, and it paradoxically risks accepting practices that infringe upon the values of openness and justice as Lyotard wants to perceive them.

At the same time, however, Lyotard is himself aware of this problem, so that at the end of *Au juste* he sets about trying to resolve it. In order to encourage a discourse of toleration rather than a proliferation of intolerant narratives, Lyotard sets up the dissolution of absolute criteria as an Idea in itself, with the hope that he is encouraging openness to alterity as a general principle. Lyotard uses the Idea in a Kantian sense, so that it connotes not a concept with a determinate meaning but an open-ended framework. Lyotard's Idea constitutes an ethics of multiplicity and inasmuch it is without manifest content. It is tied to Kant's ethical 'categorical imperative', since this too, though transcendent, has no totalised content. *Au juste* thus finishes with this contradiction:

> Et ensuite la justice de la multiplicité: elle est assurée paradoxalement par un prescriptif à
> valeur universelle. Il prescrit d'observer la justice singulière de chaque jeu telle qu'on vient
> de la situer: formalisme des règles et imagination des coups. Il autorise la «violence» qui
> accompagne le travail de l'imagination. Il interdit la terreur, c'est-à-dire le chantage à la
> mort des partenaires dont un système prescriptif ne manque pas de s'aider pour se rendre
> majoritaire dans la plupart des jeux et sur la plupart de leurs postes pragmatiques.[16]

Attention to the multiple manifestations of justice is held up as a transcendental and prescriptive value. Lyotard's argument seems to fold back upon itself here, as he creates a metalanguage of the very sort he had hoped to deconstruct and impossibly transforms that deconstruction into a totalised Idea in itself. As Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe has pointed out,

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[15] See Chris Rojek, 'Lyotard and the Decline of Society' and Barry S. Turner, 'The Politics of Difference and the Problem of Justice', in Rojek and Smart, eds. *The Politics of Jean-François Lyotard: Justice and Political Theory*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 10-24 and 43-62.

[16] Lyotard, *Au juste*, p. 189.

the discourse against transcendence here reintroduces transcendence into its own formulation.[17]

The shortcomings of Lyotard's theory stem as I have suggested from his postulation of singularity as incommunicable. Lyotard's Idea is paradoxical precisely because it upholds alterity as an absolute condition. The reinforcement of the resistance of alterity to broad gestures of appropriation does work against any tendency to over-determine cultural difference. But Lyotard's emphasis on the impenetrable barrier of the differend itself seems to reify difference, so that his work becomes caught in this impossible ethical dilemma, where adjudication and negotiation seem to be foreclosed. The manner in which the differend refuses contact and communication suggests that the singularity of any position remains frozen and intact, clearly differentiated from any other possible point of view. These singular positions become fixed in their alterity and reinsert themselves into a transcendent identity structure. In other words, the differend implies a conception of difference so radical that it becomes entrapped in the logic of the Same. While Lyotard endeavours to undermine the imperialism of totalising structures, he ironically reproduces the very same structure in the form of absolute and irreducible singularity. This theorisation of community and difference requires increased attention to different sorts of difference.

This idea of the radically singular position in turn stems from the notion that language games or discursive regimes are irreducibly heterogeneous. The problem with this, however, is that it too implies that each language game is self-contained and self-same. Again, this argument appears to allow for no slippage between language games, as if a 'scientific' language game, for example, can contain nothing of the artistic or the philosophical. It also suggests that the move from one discursive regime to another will always be characterised by rupture and blockage, when regimes must inevitably be blurred and intermingled. It is true that movement between regimes or games may not be entirely smooth and seamless, yet Lyotard seems to imply that discourse will always be traversed by impossible gaps and breaks. His position would convey a more perceptive view of the mechanisms of discursive association if these leaps were instead perceived as changeable and contingent.

Lyotard's postulation of the absolute singularity of different positions also implies that there is a standpoint from which that singularity can be identified. On the other hand,

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[17] See Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, 'Où en étions-nous?' *La faculté de juger*, Colloque de Cérisy, (Paris: Minuit, 1985), 165-193.

however, singularity can never be absolute or objective but is both subjective and culturally defined. Different people's perceptions of the nature of singularity are necessarily variable. Similarly, alterity is both relative and cultural, and there can be no single understanding of what comprises 'the other'. Singularity, alterity and difference are all extremely mobile and uncertain terms. When discussing the differend, Lyotard also sets up a falsely objective position, since he never makes it clear who decides what qualifies as a differend. He seems to imply that there is some external standpoint from which the differend can be discerned, when in reality the emergence of incommensurable viewpoints must be linked to highly subjective impressions. Clearly, a differend will only be considered a differend when looked at from a certain position (that of the victim?), with the result that, however problematic the dissociation between discourses, their incommensurability is not absolute in the way that Lyotard implies.

It is at these sorts of moments that Lyotard's argument seems to contradict itself, since he finishes by implying the existence of an objective and transcendental viewpoint in the very instance where he would most like to reject it. Lyotard ends up suggesting that his position has the power to identify and define the nature of the differend. His discourse provides a theory of the untheorisable, it establishes a metalanguage on that which resists metalanguage, and he speaks with authority about the absence of authority. He also uses a logical and argumentative discourse while trying to remind us of the gaps and leaps inherent in the production of any discourse. His work could even be perceived as part of a 'grand narrative' of post-structuralism, and it unifies its premises into a coherent argument against coherence. The criticism has also been made of *Au juste*, that while the relaxed form of the conversations between Lyotard and Thébaud pretends to enact dialogism and openness to the other, it in reality reinstates the hierarchy of the student/master relationship unashamedly.[18] Thébaud questions Lyotard's discourse, but the tone implies deference to the prestigious and well-published philosopher. Even Thébaud's ironic comment at the end, 'voici que vous parlez comme le grand prescripteur lui-même', is dismissed with laughter and does not seem to subvert Lyotard's hierarchical position.[19]

These problems with Lyotard's theory mean that the political implications of his work are also ambivalent. In addition to his over-emphasis on alterity, Lyotard contradicts

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[18] See Cécile Lindsay, 'Experiments in Postmodern Discourse', *Diacritics* 14.3, *(Special issue on the work of Jean-François Lyotard)* (1984), 52-62.

[19] Lyotard, *Au juste*, p. 189.

his own theory by leaping from the descriptive to the prescriptive, producing a problematic ethical and political stance upholding attention to impossibly disparate positions. He moves in a presumptuous manner from a perception of difference to a series of proposals for actual political behaviour, and once again, the result seems to be unworkable. As Caroline Ramazanoglu points out, Lyotard's denunciation of emancipation, liberation and progress as illusory grand narratives of capitalist society disables feminists from setting up any coherent political stance against oppression, and the implication is similar for ethnic and cultural minorities.[20] Most importantly, if societies are perceived to revolve around dissensus, how can minorities or oppressed groups create coherent narratives of identity? These sorts of communal narratives are necessary for groups and cultures where strategic political programs are needed in order to combat a dominant and oppressive voice. Lyotard's deconstruction of any coherent grounds for both politics and justice becomes problematic for any group that might need to propose a set of principles as part of an agenda against injustice and subordination. Programs combating racism, for example, could not according to Lyotard's schema set up any criteria for injustice, since justice is without rules or specific principles. A consensus against injustice seems incompatible with Lyotard's worldview.

Added to this is the problem that Lyotard's scepticism regarding consensus could imply that socio-political connections between, as well as within, cultural groups are unworkable. There is no implication in Lyotard's theory that cultural positions might influence and negotiate with one another, since dissensus is always raised above communication. Lyotard makes no suggestion for the encouragement of understanding and influence across discourses or positions. The theory of little narratives focuses only on dissemination and forecloses the possibility of dialogic contact between cultures. This conception of singularity also does not account for modern migrant identities that cross borders and communicate with different cultural traditions. As Honi Fern Haber points out, Lyotard 'universalises' difference rather than considering how subjectivities continually interact with multiple communities.[21] Haber's position is to some extent problematic, calling for an increased sense of 'similarity' in a straightforward manner rather than considering interconnections across different positions. His thinking is useful, however, in

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[20] Caroline Ramazanoglu, 'Saying Goodbye to Emancipation? Where Lyotard leaves feminism, and where feminists leave Lyotard', in Rojek and Turner, *The Politics of Jean-François Lyotard: Justice and Political Theory*, 63-83.

[21] See Honi Fern Haber, *Beyond Postmodern Politics: Lyotard, Rorty, Foucault*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

that it suggests that forms of communality do persist despite the need to deconstruct concepts of essence and belonging.

Finally, these problems with Lyotard's work suggest that the importance of his thinking for the configuration of community at the moment remains ambivalent. His theory at first seems potentially useful, encouraging the reader to listen to the other and to take into account her resistance to appropriating discourses. Yet Lyotard's interest in conceptual excess also spills over into an over-appreciation of radical difference, focusing only on dispersion rather than on confluence as well. His ethical and political injunctions also seem absolutist, omitting to theorise the blurring of influences that contribute to the production of that singular other. The generalised vocabulary advocating absolute singularity seems not to account for the possible intricacies of the relation between real individuals and various shifting communal narratives. His theory is important in that it draws attention to the limits of normativity, but the absolutist tone in his writing finishes by positing an unworkable political stance.

Jacques Derrida: Hospitality and the Stranger

The concept of alterity traverses almost the entirety of Derrida's work. Deconstruction is defined as a movement towards everything that escapes knowledge and mimesis, and Derrida repeatedly emphasises the irreducibility of difference in both cultural and linguistic terms. His thinking on justice, singularity and hospitality seems particularly pertinent in this context. In the texts on law, for example, Derrida's theory is very close to that of Lyotard, since he emphasises the singularity of any position in relation to the law, using a legal paradigm to illustrate the resistance of plural others to a single, universal set of principles. In the most recent texts on hospitality, Derrida focuses specifically on questions of toleration and acceptance, arguing for the suspension of judgement and unconditional openness to cultural others. Once again, however, I want to argue that the notion of intractable difference, while it is intended to signify the moving 'différance' of the other, risks stressing incommensurability rather than investigating the dialogue that might arise from the encounter between continually shifting positions. Derrida's thought also oscillates between a desire for practical engagement and an impossible, abstract model, and much of his work on hospitality revolves around the insurmountable and untheorised nature of that gap.

In the texts on singularity and justice, Derrida's conception of difference has much in common with that of Lyotard. Derrida argues for the irreducible heterogeneity of

interpretations of the law and he underlines the need for the law to address itself to the singular. As in Lyotard's work, every position is wholly other or singular, so that its relation with the generalised framework of the law will also be unique, just like any judgemental decision in its regard. In 'Préjugés' for example, Derrida reads Kafka's story 'Before the Law', which tells of a man waiting at the gates of the law for years, even centuries, before asking the doorkeeper why he is waiting alone. The doorkeeper tells him that that entrance to the law was made uniquely for him, implying that his confrontation with the law is absolutely singular. The point is that the man is alone before the law and his relation with it is unique. The man thinks that the law should be accessible at all times to everyone, but Derrida shows that the law is not universal:

> Il y a une singularité du rapport à la loi, une loi de singularité qui doit se mettre en rapport
> sans jamais pouvoir le faire avec l'essence générale ou universelle de la loi. Or ce texte-ci,
> ce texte singulier, vous l'aurez déjà remarqué, nomme ou relate à sa manière ce conflit sans
> rencontre de la loi et de la singularité, ce *paradoxe* ou cette *énigme* de l'être-devant-la-loi.[22]

The law has no essence of its own but exists as a set of singular interpretations. It occurs only in the form of an idiom, opens only to the individual and has no generalised form.

Derrida goes on to develop this position in *Force de loi*. Here he argues that discourses regarding the possibility of enforcing the law remind us that there is no essence to the law, it exists only inasmuch as it can be enforced in one way or another. For this reason, the law is deconstructible, which means that it can always be broken down into singular fragments rather than upheld as an essential and totalised position. Conversely, justice for Derrida is not deconstructible but rather it *is* deconstruction: it is the endlessly differentiated experience of the other. Justice is multiple, forming and reforming itself in relation to every singular and incommensurable case. Justice is incalculable, it is not the regulation of the law but focuses on that which exceeds regulation; it is undecidability giving itself up to the impossible decision.

As with Lyotard, this implies an innovative conception of the singularity of the other in the face of generalised programs, showing how the position of the other lies beyond the enclosing framework of the universal. To a certain extent, the notion of excess here works against the reductive force of social or cultural norms. On the other hand, however, the way in which Derrida and Lyotard describe singularity and alterity points not only to excess but to the radical foreclosure of links between positions. Rather than suggesting that *aspects* of

a given position might reside beyond the grasp of familiar conventions, they sever one standpoint from another in a way that undermines the possibility of locating any point of contact at all. In addition, as in Lyotard's work, this theory also proposes an understanding of openness that refutes the identification of any criteria for judgement. Once again, this seems to imply the unmediated acceptance of positions that might be held to be unacceptable, and Derrida focuses emphatically on the perpetuation of dissociation between particular frameworks.

Derrida's thinking on alterity and cultural difference is most explicit in the recent texts on hospitality. This reflection begins in *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*, where Derrida reads Lévinas in order to imagine both the endless alterity of the other and the necessity for unconditional openness in the other's regard. Derrida uses the thought of Lévinas to assert that hospitality is associated above all not with linkages and connections but with unbinding. It remains inseparable from the concept of separation itself. This is because genuine hospitality is unconditional and depends fundamentally on openness to any other regardless of his or her background, practices or language. Indeed, hospitality would not be hospitality if it relied on the fulfilment of certain conditions. Instead it must be defined by the welcoming of absolute alterity and by the absence of consensus or commensurability: 'l'hospitalité est infinie ou elle n'est pas; elle est accordée à l'accueil de l'idée de l'infini, donc de l'inconditionnel.'[23] It is significant that in an earlier text, Derrida seemed to want to soften Lévinas's insistence on alterity, imagining the simultaneous existence of interruptions and linkages between singular textual moments.[24] The later discussions of hospitality and alterity, however, focus on incommunicability rather than on any form of connection.

In both *De l'hospitalité* and *Manifeste pour l'hospitalité*, Derrida elaborates on this notion of unconditional openness to the irreducible other. His thinking again seems to revolve around the absence of any cultural points of contact. He sets up the idea of a general ethical law of hospitality, which would dictate that any other, however radically dissimilar and incommensurable, should be both accepted and welcomed by the host:

> L'hospitalité absolue exige que j'ouvre mon chez-moi et que je donne non seulement à l'étranger (pourvu d'un nom de famille, d'un statut social d'étranger, etc.) mais à l'autre absolu, inconnu, anonyme, et que je lui *donne lieu*, que je le laisse venir, que je le laisse

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[22] Jacques Derrida, 'Préjugés: devant la loi', *La faculté de juger*, Colloque de Cérisy, (Paris: Minuit, 1985) 87-139 (p. 104).

[23] Jacques Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*, (Paris: Galilée, 1997) p. 91.

> arriver, et avoir lieu dans le lieu que je lui offre, sans lui demander ni réciprocité (l'entrée
> dans un pacte) ni même son nom.[25]

This law of hospitality is unconditional and implies that we should be absolutely open to any stranger independently of whether or not there is any form of communication between our positions. Derrida goes on to reflect upon the possibility of questioning the 'arrivant', suggesting that the encounter always begins with an address between strangers. He is concerned to identify how far the host can require anything of the stranger, and wonders whether absolute hospitality, like the conception of justice towards absolute alterity, depends on openness without knowledge, familiarity or sharing. His example of this sort of difficulty is the decision of the French to allow Algerian Muslims French citizenship after the First World War. For Derrida, the French requirement that the Algerians renounce their own culture was at odds with an ethics of hospitality.[26]

This question, however, leads Derrida to the consideration of another aporia concerning the possibility of absolute openness. He perceives an impasse between the *law* of hospitality, dictating absolute openness to every other, and the *laws* of hospitality, or working policies on immigration. He writes that the law of hospitality allows for the alterity of any singular visitor, whereas the laws of hospitality can only function according to definite norms or codes. These two positions remain in a relation of ineluctable tension:

> Tout se passe comme si l'hospitalité était l'impossible: comme si la loi de l'hospitalité
> définissait cette impossibilité même, comme si on ne pouvait que la transgresser, comme si
> *la* loi de l'hospitalité absolue, *inconditionnelle*, hyperbolique, comme si l'impératif
> catégorique de l'hospitalité commandait de transgresser toutes *les* lois de l'hospitalité, à
> savoir les conditions, les normes, les droits et les devoirs qui s'imposent aux hôtes et aux
> hôtesses, à ceux ou à celles qui donnent comme à ceux ou à celles qui reçoivent l'accueil.[27]

In other words, there is an antithesis between unlimited hospitality and the limitations and conditions that a working concept of actual hospitality must entail.

This contradiction is explored further in some passages of *Manifeste pour l'hospitalité*. Derrida describes 'une hospitalité à l'infini', which, like the general law of

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[24] See Jacques Derrida, 'En ce moment même dans cet ouvrage me voici', *Psyché: Inventions de l'autre*, (Paris: Galilée, 1987), 159-202.

[25] Jacques Derrida, *De l'hospitalité (Anne Dufourmentelle invite Jacques Derrida à répondre)*, (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1997) p. 29.

[26] Ibid., p. 127.

[27] Ibid., p. 71. It may be worth adding a note here that Derrida perceives that modern conceptions of hospitality have changed because of modern technology. Telecommunications and the Internet mean that the boundary between public and private has been blurred, and it is no longer possible to have the same rules of hospitality, since the 'chez-soi' is already permeable to alterity through these new technical means.

hospitality examined above, implies the absence of questioning and the acceptance of the other no matter what her identity, language, religion and cultural practice. This ideal hospitality is characterised by 'non-savoir'. Yet having established this, Derrida then goes on to state that: 'les problèmes sociaux, politiques et autres se trouvent pris entre cette idée de pure hospitalité, cette poétique de l'hospitalité inconditionnelle, cet événement sans grammaire préalable, et les problèmes de conditions, d'ethnies, de frontières...'[28] The conflict stems from the notion that the pure ideal of hospitality would allow the other to act in any way, however disruptive and unwelcome, while working laws of hospitality have to focus on practical negotiation. Derrida perceives that debates on immigration must impossibly account for both of these poles. His example is once again the conflict between Islam and laïcité. He wonders how to resolve the situation where the visitor disagrees with the very principle that guides the concept of hospitality, namely the distinction between public and private implied by the secular state. If laïcité dissociates the public and the private in order to allow for the coexistence of different cultures, what should the host do, abiding by this secular ethic, about the desire of Islam to set itself up as a public issue? This is for Derrida the very sort of aporia that the law(s) of hospitality entail.

Again, the shortcoming of this theory is that the stranger implied by the pure ideal of hospitality is too definitively severed from the framework of the host. Derrida uses his conception of radical alterity to suggest that the conflict between Islam and laïcité is absolutely irresolute. He discusses the impossible nature of this conflict, and the noises he makes concerning where to go from there are vague and insubstantial.[29] This is again due to the desire to translate his abstract reflections on intractable difference to the practical sphere in a way that seems inappropriate, since he erroneously sets Islam and laïcité up as absolutely opposed and incommensurable. Each position is perceived as a conceptual whole, existing as an apparently self-enclosed ideology rather than as a plurality of relations between varying ideas and practices. Indeed, as I have mentioned, the difficulties associated with the integration of Islam into France stem from the tendency of some French people to see Islam as a single, fundamental set of beliefs that can be strictly demarcated from French

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[28] Jacques Derrida, 'Une hospitalité à l'infini', *Manifeste pour l'hospitalité: autour de Jacques Derrida*, avec la participation de Michel Wieviorka, sous la direction de Mohammed Seffahi, (Paris: Grigny Paroles d'aube, 1999) 97-106 (p. 98).

[29] After a series of questions concerning the aporia, Derrida somewhat half-heartedly writes: 'il faudrait, me semble-t-il, évaluer les conditions dans lesquelles ce conflit peut surgir, la manière la moins répressive, la moins violente et la moins réductrice de le traiter'. 'Responsabilité et hospitalité', *Manifeste pour l'hospitalité*, p. 116.

values. This notion of the aporetic relation between Islam and laïcité risks setting the religion up as an ideological monolith.

Another difficulty is that the law of hospitality presupposes a suspension of judgement in favour of the unconditional acceptance of any other. This could lead to a toleration of intolerant positions and an unmediated acceptance of possibly offensive and unacceptable others. The law of hospitality necessitates the welcoming of any stranger, no matter how unacceptable his ethics or practices. This seems impractical, however, since hospitality does inevitably function according to a number of conditions and legal requirements. As Richard Wolin argues, Derrida's sensibility to the alterity of the other has resulted in a pluralist stance and an avoidance of ethical hierarchies, to the extent that all points of view must in some way be equally valid.[30] The upshot is that Derrida's work incorporates a fear of any sort of qualitative judgement of who or what should be welcomed and accepted. Derrida's texts on hospitality may draw attention to the impossibility of implementing such an absolute ethics, pointing to its paradoxical but necessary coexistence with working laws of hospitality. Yet it would seem that that relation would not need to be so impossibly paradoxical if the law of hospitality were less absolute in the first place.

Related to this is the further problem, which again occurred in the writing on community, that the subject of Derrida's discourse seems excessively generalised. Derrida frequently uses the pronoun 'je' in this discussion, yet he implies that he is also setting up a form of universal ethics. Such a general position cannot do justice to situations where a certain type of judgement might be necessary but promotes instead an abstract system. This inevitably masks specific contexts and different sorts or degrees of cultural communication or hiatus. Even more, the establishment of this model as a generalised ethics implies that any host welcoming unconditionally any stranger will also expect reciprocity or the perpetuation of similar values in a different situation. If Derrida attempts to reach beyond reciprocity however, it is inevitable that at this point his thinking contradicts itself.

These problems point to the impossible duality in Derrida's work between political engagement and absolute, transcendental thinking. Derrida repeatedly signals his awareness of the leap between the mystical and the practical in his work, discussing at the end of *Adieu*

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[30] Richard Wolin criticises Derrida's earlier reflections on ethics in 'The House that Jacques Built: Deconstruction and Strong Evaluation', *The Terms of Cultural Criticism: The Frankfurt School, Existentialism, Poststructuralism*, (New York: Colombia University Press, 1992) 194-217. It is notable that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has also made the criticism that deconstruction renders action impossible because one has

the way in which Lévinasian ethics implies a withdrawal from politics *and* the demand that that sort of ethics still inform political thinking. He argues that Lévinas had in mind not only the situation in Israel but also problems with regard to migration in France and Europe when he conceived his ethical stance, but he suggests that an appropriate ethical consideration of the problem requires this very abstraction from laws, territories and boundaries. Hospitality is defined by that very withdrawal from the political into the realm of the unconditional and the absolute. Derrida even goes so far as to assert that the law of unconditional hospitality is 'politiquement inacceptable', if politics is understood in relation to the nation-state, but it is also intended to engender a wider form of ethical-political invention.[31] Similarly, in a recent essay, Simon Critchley revises his earlier criticisms of Derrida's political refusals, suggesting that the work on hospitality leads to a form of 'deterritorialised democracy'.[32] He suggests that the infinite ethical demand arises precisely out of singular situations calling for a reinvention of the nature of the political decision itself.

This reflection is valuable for its desire to step beyond the normative values of a self-enclosed nation-state, and the notion of a wider form of democratic thinking is undoubtedly compelling. At the same time, however, the leap from the politics of the everyday to this broader, formless community 'à venir' still seems difficult to overcome. We may want to think beyond the borders of the national community, but the injunction to remain hospitable to any irreducible alterity still seems too strong, stressing only the acceptance of incommunicability. For this reason, Derrida's thinking can be perceived as split between different tones, involving an irresolute leap of thought. Derrida's vocabulary frequently shifts from an aporetic, messianic realm to a more concrete realm where struggles and negotiations are meted out, and this shift finishes by distorting the specific complexities of concrete examples of cultural interaction.

The critic Richard Beardsworth makes a related point at the end of his book on Derrida and political thinking.[33] Beardsworth describes two possible futures for Derrida's philosophy, which seem to reflect the two seemingly incommensurable discourses that I

to agree to anything that might disrupt one's initial project. See *The Post-colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues*, ed. Sarah Harasym, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990).

[31] Jacques Derrida et Bernard Steigler, *Echographies: de la télévision*, (Paris: Galilée, 1996) p. 25.

[32] Simon Critchley, 'The Other's Decision in Me (What are the Politics of Friendship?), *Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Levinas and Contemporary French Thought*, (London and New York: Verso, 1999).

[33] Richard Beardsworth, *Derrida and the Political*, (New York and London: Routledge, 1996) p. 156.

identified above. The first of Beardsworth's predictions refers to 'a left-wing Derrideanism', which would foreground what he calls 'technicity', that is the spectral undecidability of time implied by new technology, and it would highlight technicity's relation with the human. It would be careful not to allow this sort of spectral discourse to reify into a transcendental logic and would establish links between discourses on the arts, philosophy and the sciences. The other possibility is a 'right-wing Derrideanism' that would reflect on technicity to think about the aporia of time, and would mobilise religious discourse. These hypotheses need to be looked at in relation to the rest of Beardsworth's text, which concentrates on the aporias of time and law in a way that I do not have space for here. Yet my sense is that Beardsworth's two predictions do reflect the schism in Derrida's writing between an engaged, human perspective and a messianic, mystical realm of unending undecidability. His writing does fluctuate between engagement with real cultural others or immigrants, and a more mystical thinking about absolute others, and these two discourses do not coalesce or interact in any easily identifiable way. His tone is constantly shifting from the messianic to the concrete, from the absolute to the specific, and it is these oscillations that render his work inconsistent and puzzling.

This schism operating within Derrida's work is demonstrated in clear terms in the text *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort!*. Here, Derrida reflects carefully on the notion of refugee towns, considering the ways in which Europe might loosen its borders further and allow for increased mobility and migration. Yet his analysis disconcertingly combines the political with a reflection on unconditional hospitality to radical alterity and the establishment of an impossible democracy to come:

> Cette expérience des villes-refuges, je l'imagine aussi comme ce qui donne lieu, un lieu de
>
> pensée, et c'est encore l'asile ou l'hospitalité, à *l'expérimentation* d'un droit et d'une
>
> démocratie à venir. Sur le seuil de ces villes, de ces nouvelles villes qui seraient encore autre
>
> chose que des «villes nouvelles», une certaine idée du cosmopolitisme, *une autre*, n'est peut-
>
> être pas encore arrivée.[34]

In this passage, Derrida's vocabulary again seems to combine the concrete with the abstract and the 'beyond', forming an irresolute shift between two registers that it is difficult to reconcile. A consideration of actual problems is paradoxically solved only by a reflection on the impossible.

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[34] Jacques Derrida, *Cosmopolites de tous les pays, encore un effort!*, (Paris: Galilée, 1997) p. 58. It should be noted that Derrida's title satirises the Marquis de Sade's discussion of republicanism entitled 'Français, encore

Derrida's thinking on alterity and hospitality seems to involve a double leap. On the one hand, Derrida moves obliquely from a perception of multiple differences to an absolutist ethical stance promoting unconditional acceptance. Next, he shifts from this 'messianic' ethics to a set of political concerns without exploring the way in which that translation might be achieved. Even if politics is rethought in terms of the ethical-political, the gap persists between his absolute ethical stance championing dispersion and dissensus, and the need to describe actual differences, which can be seen as relative, plural and mediated. Derrida's thinking may be politically motivated, yet the attempt to sever the other so definitively from dialogic connections remains problematic, upholding absolute incommunicability when in real terms, forms of negotiation can be sought and located. Equally, the proposal for unconditional acceptance becomes trapped in a transcendental prescriptive realm that is meaningless in situations of necessary judgement. Derrida's thinking attempts to rescue alterity from the reifying judgement of prejudiced discourses, but his exaggeration of the alterity of the other provides a problematic vision of political or cultural difference.

Relational Being in Nancy's Recent Work

Nancy's later work involves a reinvention of singularity that combines relationality and difference. Despite the fact that some of these texts precede Derrida's reflections on hospitality, the notion of singularity enunciated in Nancy's *L'expérience de la liberté* and *Etre singulier pluriel* can be read as a subtle critique of Derrida and Lyotard's thinking about the other. Building on the notion of the juxtaposition of shared voices discussed previously, *L'expérience* describes how being is singular, but it is also born into a system of inter-relations. The emphasis on 'unworking' in *La communauté désœuvrée* becomes here a renewed interest in re-working or reconstructing, and this reflection on new linkages already represents alterity in a more complicated and dialogic way. Nancy does not focus on absolute alterity but considers how individuals and cultures are both singular and plural, or both specific and relational. In addition, in *Le sens du monde* and then more extensively in *Etre singulier pluriel*, Nancy goes on to describe singularity not as absolute but as shifting and plural in itself. The singular being can no longer exist within a binary relation between self and other, but both positions remain dynamic, continually establishing new connections while resisting homogenisation and reification.

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un effort, si vous voulez être républicains', in *La philosophie dans le boudoir*, (Paris: Pauvert, 1795, recent edition in 1953) 190-277.

In *L'expérience de la liberté*, Nancy replaces the concept of the individual, or indeed of the intractable other, with a more flexible notion of the mobile relations between singular beings.[35] If the individual could traditionally be thought of as self-contained and autonomous, the singular being, on the other hand, is defined by a series of linkages and interlacings with others. The singular being is born into community, it is always in relation and forms part of a network or chain of connections. At the same time, however, Nancy also emphasises the rupture of the relation, figuring the interconnection between singularities as dynamic, changing, continually creating and recreating itself anew. The singular being depends on its relations with others, and those relations are repeatedly fractured and reformed:

> L'être *singulier* est dans le rapport, ou selon le rapport, aussi bien dans la mesure où sa
> singularité peut consister (et consiste toujours, en un sens) à s'excepter ou à se retrancher de
> tout rapport. La singularité consiste dans le «une seule fois, celle-ci», dont la seule
> énonciation – pareille au cri de l'enfant qui naît, et c'est en effet *chaque fois* d'une naissance
> qu'il s'agit – établit un rapport en même temps qu'elle creuse infiniment le temps et l'espace
> réputés «communs» autour du point d'énonciation. [36]

Relationality is temporally moderated and defined, implying that the singular being is constantly moving, weaving in and out of different relations and perpetually converging and diverging with others at different moments and through different points of contact. 'Community' is emptied of any association with unity and redefined as the mobile and contingent interaction of particularities. This emphasis on the mobility of the relation crucially reinforces how Nancy sees interaction not as assimilation, or as a movement towards the Same, but as dynamic process of both dialogue and differentiation.

Nancy's conception of the relational character of singularity leads to a renewed understanding of the constitution of the relation itself. If singularity is born into a structure of relations or linkages, those linkages have no substance of their own because they are continually being formed and reformed. There is therefore no essence to the relation between singular beings; they depend on the existence of a relation and are defined by it, yet there is no communality that could describe it in any definite manner. There is sharing between singularities but there is no essential being in common. Nancy affirms that there is no being without sharing, but that sharing has no being and no substance of its own. We do

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[35] Nancy's thinking here can be seen as a rereading of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, whereby ontology is defined above all by *Mitsein*.

[36] Jean-Luc Nancy, *L'expérience de la liberté*, (Paris: Galilée, 1988) p. 91.

exist as a plural 'we', but no particular attributes can define this 'we': what we share is only the existence of the relation. This understanding of the network simultaneously emphasises the continued importance of the specificities and differences that contribute to its formless composition.

The relation in this context is defined by the experience of freedom. By freedom, Nancy understands the mobility of the singular being and the absence of any essence. The relationality of singular beings is one where the only thing that can be shared is freedom. Freedom is this relation without relation, the coexistence of singular beings and the absence of communal essence. It is the sharing of nothing other than sharing itself:

> Elle est, depuis la naissance et jusque dans la mort – dernière naissance de la singularité –, ce
>
> qui jette le sujet dans l'espace du partage de l'être. La liberté est la logique spécifique de
>
> l'accès à soi hors de soi, dans un espacement chaque fois singulier de l'être.[37]

From this point of view, the experience of freedom also describes the movement of singular beings in and out of different relations; it is the disordered and illogical convergence and divergence of singular beings in the network of relations. This freedom derived from the constant movement of relations describes a new understanding of the interaction between the singular and the common, as opposed to the individual and the collective, since the latter would imply a restrictive principle of a shared essence. Instead, for Nancy, the being-in-common of singularities is an open-ended and formless experience of freedom. Concomitantly, this freedom itself is not a concept and has no substance of its own. It paradoxically denotes the sharing of that which divides us.[38]

Nancy's thought on singularity also provides a more accurate view of the ways in which interaction takes place, because in the more recent texts he underlines the mobility and fluidity within any singular being. In *Le sens du monde*, he develops this description of the multiplicity of the singular position, implying that any singularity is also itself plural: 'l'unicité du singulier consiste très exactement dans sa multiplicité'.[39] Any singular position implies the existence of other positions, and those others are also the condition of its

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[37] Ibid., p. 96.

[38] The critic Georges Van Den Abeele questions Nancy's conception of singularity here, worrying that it risks toppling into the absolute. See Georges Van Den Abeele, 'Singular Remarks', *Paragraph: Journal of the Modern Critical Theory Group* 16.2, (1993), 180-186. Van Den Abeele writes: 'the risk is, of course, to turn singularity into 'exactly the reverse', namely the absolute, – be it divine, or communitarian, or even literary – that is, to turn the singular into the universal of a principle. The question then, is whether the singular in Nancy is allowed to pursue its work of collision and repartee, or whether its swerve is dodged by its conceptualised rebound as absolute', p. 181. In response to Van Den Abeele, I would argue that the focus on continual relations prevents the singular from becoming fixed and transcendent.

[39] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Le sens du monde*, (Paris: Galilée, 1993) p. 116.

existence. Furthermore, there is no such thing as an absolutely individual, autonomous being, one cannot be without relation, but is always derived from the multiple. Singularity also does not create itself, nor is it created, but it exists in the form of an action; it is an actuality and not an essence or a constant position. It is a movement always taking place in relation to something else. Singularity is not absolute or wholly univocal but forms part of a chain of associations or multiple influences and intertexts.

Singularity for Nancy is not only multiple in its relations with other singularities but also plural within itself. In *Etre singulier pluriel*, Nancy discusses the manner in which any singular being is defined by its own internal fragmentation. This suggests that cultural identities might be particular, but that particularity also implies multiple internal differences. Due to the multiplicity and mobility of its different inter-relations with others, the singular being is fluid, possessing no essence but performing only the fragmentation of essence. Singularity implies no definite properties and contains mobility and alterity within itself: 'quant aux différences singulières, elles ne sont pas seulement «individuelles», mais infra-individuelles'.[40] Being is singular-plural, meaning that it is both plural in a singular way, that is a unique combination of different influences, and singular in a plural way, since it is specific despite its multiple intertextual relations.

This notion of plurality within the singular position problematises the relation between self and other, again disallowing rigid and insurmountable divisions and emphasising shared influences. Others for Nancy are not the direct opposite of the self, but they coexist with the singular being in the network of plural relations. Singular beings do not confront one another in the form of a set of immutable binary oppositions. Instead, since the singular being is defined by the relations into which it is born, plural singular beings coexist or 'com-pear' ('com-paraissent'). The relation is defined by the 'avec' rather than by radical contrast or dissociation:

> Les autres «en général» ne sont ni les autres «moi» (puisqu'il n'y a de «moi», et de «toi», qu'à partir de l'altérité en général), ni le non-moi (pour la même raison). Les autres «en général» ne sont ni le Même, ni l'Autre. Ils sont les-uns-les-autres, ou les-uns-des-autres, une pluralité primordiale qui com-paraît.[41]

Nancy replaces the thought of the other with the thought of the singular-plural, emphasising relations and interconnections while still deconstructing traditional self-same communal

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[40] Jean-Luc Nancy, *Etre singulier pluriel*, (Paris: Galilée, 1996) pp. 26-7.

[41] Ibid., pp. 89-90.

definitions. Otherness can retain a form of specificity but that specificity is neither wholly incommunicable nor permanently fixed.

This evidently reflects a particular understanding of collective cultural identity. In 'Eloge de la mêlée', a section at the end of *Etre singulier pluriel*, Nancy describes how every culture is formed from a basis of plurality; culture itself is singular-plural. Nancy's conception of singular-plural being also implies a new form of cultural specificity that is itself uniquely composite. Cultural specificity can be seen as the result of a particular set of combinations. Furthermore, Nancy distinguishes the idea of 'mélange' (a mixture or blend) from that of 'mêlée' (a more heterogeneous confusion). Culture is not only mixed but engaged in a process of mixing, of meeting and separating, communication and dispersal. It is the action of one voice confronting another and transforming itself in that process. This sort of thinking offers a critique of any traditional conception of community, in either the republican or the smaller, more relative sense. Yet it also refuses to replace the concept of community with an over-emphasis on diversity or difference. Both models are undermined in favour of an awareness of the coexistence of varying degrees of difference in a moving, relational structure. Cultural identity can be specific, but it must be perceived as part of a continuing process and not as a final achievement. It is also noteworthy that Alexander García Dütmann expands upon Nancy's thinking by suggesting that the incompletion of culture derives from the notion that recognition demands a sort of in-between position. Culture is never entirely itself because it must be recognised from some ambiguous standpoint that is both internal and external to its constitution.[42]

If this thinking on relationality points to a certain way of re-imagining community and difference, then this structure is also crucially seen to underpin the political decision itself. In *Le sens du monde*, Nancy develops an idea of the political to take into account the notion of the singular-plural and the coexistence of difference with relationality. His theory undermines the possibility of any fixed ideology and advocates instead the participation of different singularities in contingent decisions. Nancy's argument is that politics so far has been based upon an understanding of self-sufficiency. Taking the concept of the subject and the concept of the citizen, he shows how both fall into the trap of reification and self-enclosure. The citizen, defined by the external, public space of the city, is over-determined by material conditions and contexts. The subject, on the other hand, implies interiority, a

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[42] Alexander García Dütmann, *Between Cultures: Tensions in the Struggle for Recognition*, trans. Kenneth B. Woodgate, (London: Verso, 2000) pp. 11-12.

'self', and is based on 'the myth of an absolute foundation'.[43] The former implies only relative values, and the latter contains a conception of absolute value. Both positions are 'self-sufficient' or self-enclosed and are thus bound up in a restrictive logic that disallows the participation of singular beings in a more open-ended series of changing, collective decisions.

In response to this, Nancy demands a politics of non-self-sufficiency. By this, he means a politics of relationality that would seemingly take into account the idea of singular-plural being. This would be a politics of the 'nouage' (translated as the '(k)not'), implying neither simply a series of self-contained subjects, nor just a set of exterior relations, but linkages between the two. It implies the organisation of politics neither around the citizen nor around the subject, but moves beyond both poles to promote a series of mobile relations between singular-plural beings. The politics of the (k)not also recalls the relationality described above, as the term playfully puns on the coexistence of joining and separation, creation and negation: 'le nouage n'est rien, aucune res, rien que la mise en rapport qui suppose à la fois la proximité et l'éloignement, l'attachement et le détachement, l'intrication, l'intrigue, l'ambivalence.'[44] If the singular subject is only singular insofar as it is tied to other singularities, then political organisation needs to account for this necessary movement between different entities. Politics must focus on the forming and reforming of relations, on the tying and untying of singular interlacings, because political beings are neither absolute and sovereign, nor are they enclosed in a single community; they are unique but also relational. The political involves a series of different, singular voices in a polyphonic network.[45]

This critique of models depicting unity or difference in favour of an understanding of complex relations between singularities helps to provide an innovative perception of the changing position of immigrant identities and cultures. It implies a more apt conception of

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[43] This is the explanation of Jeffrey S. Librett in the 'Translator's Foreword' to the English edition of *The Sense of the World*, (Minnepolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997) p. xxi.

[44] Nancy, *Le sens du monde*, p. 174.

[45] Simon Critchley criticises this notion of a political stance in Nancy's text, in 'With Being With? Notes on Jean-Luc Nancy's Rewriting of *Being and Time*', *Ethics – Politics – Subjectivity: Essays on Derrida, Lévinas and Contemporary French Thought*. Critchley argues that Nancy reduces relations to a fundamental ontological structure, emphasising reciprocity, equality and symmetry. He suggests that Nancy's politics do not allow for the dimension of surprise or of separateness, and that the 'with' needs to be thought alongside the 'without'. I disagree with Critchley's view of Nancy, and I hope that my reading has shown that Nancy's relational structures do also include a sense of separation and of interaction across singular differences.

the exchange of cultural influences and the mutation of cultural identity as one singular being brushes against another. Such a theory suggests that 'community' and 'difference' are not opposed in a straightforward way; instead cultural positions are conceived as open to change and negotiation. Similarly, political decisions are seen to emerge from a series of exchanges or strategic conferrals about particular details rather than maintaining any greater ideology. This proposes a vision of a multicultural society as a set of particular voices and their polyphonic interaction that does not dissolve into cultural relativism but focuses on interconnection and contingency. At the same time, this conception does not go so far as to privilege hybridisation to the point that it becomes assimilation, leading to the negation of differences, but it emphasises how interaction occurs between specific positions.

Cultural identities are thus not wholly isolated differences but often arise from a combination of relations. 'Immigrants' exist not in opposition to a single national paradigm; instead they interact with a series of diverse and changing cultural paradigms. What is frequently perceived as the single national paradigm should therefore be replaced with a broader understanding of the nation as the coexistence of different subjectivities, participating in various collective groups whose specificity can be considered at the same time as their dialogue with others. Cultural identity should also be conceived as relational, because each singularity has plural origins and influences. No one individual or group is absolutely 'other', wholly excluded from the central, hegemonic category, but each has elements that might participate in different, more mobile categories. Such a conception of nationality and identity reduces the risk of any one ethnicity or culture being stigmatised, undervalued or discriminated against, because it suggests that any particularistic definition also often incorporates a variety of influences and alterity is never pure and self-same. As I shall demonstrate in chapter six, Nancy's work describes the sorts of formulation found among Beur texts, where subjectivity is a central focus while individuals participate in multiple collective paradigms, combining French, Algerian and Beur influences. Some Beur testimonies are singular-plural because they retain a sense of uniqueness while perceiving that identity to weave in and out of various communal structures.

If any culture is founded on plural interactions, then the illusions underpinning monolithic cultural ideologies also need to be uncovered. This is pertinent in particular in the debate between Islam and laïcité already discussed. As I have suggested, a number of commentators read the conflict between Islam and the secular French ethic as a binary opposition, based on the single over-arching premise that Islam hinges on the unity of

religion and state, whereas laïcité separates politics from the church. But the critique of philosophical incompatibilities demonstrated in Nancy's later work could be used to suggest that both poles are more complicated than such an interpretation implies. If culture can be seen as a 'mêlée', then Islam and laïcité are not two fixed, opposed collective cultures, but each can be seen as flexible and plural in its manifestations. Both concepts are open-ended, susceptible to various interpretations. Both have been associated with stereotypical and uncompromising points of view, yet in spite of the myths that have coagulated around them, both positions are looser and potentially more dynamic than certain interpretations suggest.

On the one hand, the concept of relational ideologies implies that French secularism should not be perceived as dogmatic. Some have interpreted laïcité to involve an attempt to assimilate differences, and it can connote the complete relegation of religion to the closed, intimate or private sphere. However, it can also on the contrary be read as a gesture towards openness and toleration. Laïcité does not have to signify the non-recognition of difference; it demands simply the separation of religion from the actual governance of the country and it can still actively encourage the expression of religious practices and beliefs in collective cultural and social life. Indeed, as Maurice Berbier points out in his book *La Laïcité*, as soon as the secular ethic sets itself up as a fixed ideology or system of beliefs, it acts contrary to its own aspirations. By becoming exclusionist and militant, it negates itself. By contrast, a more realistic interpretation would argue that laïcité is a position that, by refusing to associate itself with any positivist set of doctrines, encourages diverse different religions to practise alongside one another. Nancy's later work argues for this sort of dialogic perspective over and against the establishment of an ideological model.

Similarly, Muslims in France form not a self-same cultural community but uphold different interpretations resulting from interactions with other 'singular-plural' cultural groups. As sociologist Farhad Khosrokhavar demonstrates, the absolutist interpretation of Islam exemplified by some fundamentalists does occur in France, yet far more widespread are other forms of Islam displaying varying degrees of interaction with 'French' or 'Western' cultures.[46] Many young people born of Muslim parents in France have created a new sort of Islam that exists in dialogue with other cultures in the Republic. This forms not a self-enclosed set of beliefs but rather a provisional strategy reacting against racism and providing young people with a point of identification. It combines aspects of Islamic culture

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[46] See Farhad Khosrokhavar, *L'Islam des jeunes*, (Paris: Flammarion, 1997).

with a more integrated and emancipated life in France and does not hesitate to intermingle one culture with another. It offers a cultural backdrop without encouraging intolerance and inequality. An example of this might be the decision by some young women and girls to wear a headscarf, not necessarily as a sign of their subjugation but as a memorial of their parents' cultural specificity in a country where Islam is not always recognised. Young women wear the headscarf for a large variety of different reasons, often with the aim for example of inventing a new, modernised religiosity or in order to build a bridge between 'French' and 'Arabic' life.[47] Such gestures represent the specificity of a hybridised 'franco-musulman' identity, affirming a particular cultural voice while also retaining polyphony as their defining structure. Echoing Nancy's relational model, they mime the exposure of one 'community' to the other in inter-communal spaces with no unchanging identity.

If Islam in France and French secularism both have diverse and dialogic manifestations, this also suggests that each position is not a unity but rather a set of details. Islam should be seen as a large variety of practices, and should be dealt with as a series of singular-plural interpretations rather than as a cultural whole. The encounter of Islam and laïcité would from this point of view be less a confrontation between communities than a series of dialogues on specific details. In this way, the secular ethic might be able to tolerate Islam by finding ways of allowing particular practices to continue rather than stigmatising the whole. For example, places for prayer might be accommodated into the workplace, authorised leave might be allowed for Islamic festivals, and special schools could provide Muslim children with some religious teaching. A more flexible interpretation of laïcité might allow the introduction of such practices, since it might help to detract from the perception of the religion as a conflictual entity to be excluded. This understanding of Islam not as one fixed community but as a series of different practices existing in dialogue with other cultural forms helps to relieve the tension over the wearing of headscarves, since it could allow such a practice to continue without needing to associate it with a wider, more essential ideology. This conception can be seen as a development of Nancy's thinking in *Etre singulier pluriel*, as it replaces the myth of community with an open-ended system where specific identities can change according to their mobile relations with others.

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[47] In *Le foulard et la république*, Khosrokhovar and Gaspard interview a number of young Muslim girls living in France in order to identify different responses to the veil. While some girls wear the headscarf because they are forced to by their families, or have interiorised this sense of obligation, others perceive it as a sign of self-affirmation and resistance to assimilation.

Evidently, critical theorists such as Nancy are not trying to come up with new policies but to encourage a mode of political thinking that will have an effect on our deeper understanding of social and cultural organisation. Nancy's thinking can be used and applied to a more engaged thinking about cultural difference, because it proposes a realistic awareness of inter-relations that helpfully encourages negotiation rather than adhering to more rigid paradigms of cultural frontiers and national differences. Nancy's politics draw attention to relations between cultures, to inter-communal influences and to the mobile and changeable nature of convergences and divergences between identities. As I have already argued, the limits of Derrida's political usefulness stem from the tendency for alterity to be over-emphasised to the point where it becomes static, beyond negotiation. In Lyotard's work, the problem derives similarly from the rigid incommensurability implied by the differend. With regard to Nancy however, although his renovated understanding of the political is not concerned with political decisions, the more fluid conception of singular-plural being and of the mobility of political relations does help to elucidate a more resonant and politically effective perception of cultural interaction.

Chapter Three: The Identity of the French Language and the Language of French Identity

> The new cultural and creative consciousness lives in an actively polyglot world. The world becomes polyglot, once and for all and irreversibly. The period of national languages, coexisting but closed and deaf to each other, comes to an end. Languages throw light on each other: one language can, after all, see itself only in the light of another language.[1]

According to Bakhtin's now well-known theory, any language is always inherently dialogic. Discourses, phrases and idioms do not coalesce to form a single and self-enclosed monologic system, but they continually perform a dynamic process of interaction with other voices and dialects. Languages possess no original, mythical unity; instead they continually mutate, reforming and reinventing themselves through the endless exchange of signifiers, nuances and styles.

This chapter will expand upon this notion of linguistic dialogue in order to identify further the ways in which community is reinvented in contemporary thought. If community is constructed by discourse or by the ways in which the collective is both perceived and narrated, then language usage must itself form a crucial process whereby some form of shared culture can be created and understood. Community can be seen to be performed through language, and linguistic relations mime the broader activities of intersection and separation that contribute to the composition of cultural identity. For this reason, if the sorts of community I have been imagining so far are structured not by essence and resemblance but by relations between diverse singular voices, then this can in turn be demonstrated by a renewed understanding of the dialogic structure of codes and languages themselves. The deconstruction of 'le commun', identity, essence and unity suggests that the notion of a fixed and unified language can be replaced by an awareness of the mobility of different language structures. Nancy's singular beings, for example, could be seen to 'articulate' particular idioms while displaying the traces of their contact with other linguistic influences. Just as singular beings are born into and structured by relations, by multiple influences and dynamic contact with other cultures, then similarly the idioms they speak, though singular at any one moment, can also be seen as part of a process of evolution and reinvention.

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[1] Mikhael Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986) p. 12.

On the one hand, my argument stems from the thinking of writers such as Mikhael Bakhtin and George Steiner. I start with the idea that languages are dynamic and mobile, they cannot be pinned down and fixed, but are open to multiple and changing significations and associations. Every word is polysemic and capable of acquiring new and unprecedented inflexions; meaning changes in time. As Steiner argues, 'each different tongue offers its own denial of determinism. "The world", it says, "can be other".'[2] All languages are open to flux and ambiguity, creating diverse specific idioms at different moments in time. At the same time, contrary to certain conceptions of the French language, I want to suggest that each signifying system can itself be imagined as culturally plural and open-ended. Bakhtin's thought can be developed and reworked to evoke not only the polyphonic structure of the 'national' language but also the interaction between one linguistic code and another. Languages can be seen to be constructed through their contact with other languages, absorbing new nuances and inviting new associations. Brushing against other idioms and dialects, they continually inherit and reinvent signs from other cultures.

This conception of the mobile and polyphonic nature of language can also involve an understanding of the singularity of the idiom. Languages are continually subject to change and to permeation, but at the same time, the idioms that arise during this process are particular and not directly translatable. This idea of untranslatability does not mean that each language is an island, sealed off from other languages and connoting a system of thought that remains impenetrable to any other cultural system. Rather, it suggests that languages converge and diverge, they borrow from one another and recreate themselves, and during that process, unique and unprecedented idioms emerge. Mirroring the understanding of identity proposed by Nancy in *Etre singulier pluriel*, idioms are singular, yet they can also be perceived as part of a dynamic network of relations and are created through interaction with that network. Linguistic units resist translation, yet they are open to other systems and contain within themselves traces of their own plural origins. They are irreducibly specific, pointing to a single and particular cultural moment while at the same time existing in relation to past and future language events. In short, 'langue' is relational and polyphonic while each individual 'parole' represents manifold specificity.

To return to the French context, perceptions of the French language in history frequently revolve around conceptions of unity, purity and homogeneity. Given the

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[2] George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation*, 3rd edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) p. 246.

dynamic juxtaposition of languages spoken in France, however, some renewed thinking around polyphony and dialogue between languages is evidently long overdue. Having surveyed various historical arguments open to deconstruction, I want to examine notions of monolingualism, bilingualism and multilingualism in French and 'francophone' literary theory, with the hope of realigning the problematic interconnection between language and cultural identity. Derrida's *Le monolinguisme de l'autre*, for example, explores the ambiguous and potentially subversive position of the Jewish 'Franco-Maghrébin' in relation to the hegemony of the French language. Next, Khatibi's texts explore the innovative and creative possibilities of bilingualism, revealing how one language can subtend another in a relation of continual fusion and separation. Finally, Glissant's recent texts propose a vast and chaotic network of 'creolised' languages, where idioms are defined by the plural influences that contribute to their construction. Glissant's celebratory tone is utopian, at times denying the possibility of any form of cultural specificity, but his work can nevertheless be used to draw attention to the intersecting idioms that underpin the French language, unsettling at the same time the notion of a self-enclosed, rooted system.

This mode of thinking can also have political implications. By demonstrating the ways in which languages interact, it actively subverts perceptions of the hegemony and purity of the language of the Republic. It draws attention to continued relations between French and regional languages, and also with native languages in areas such as the Maghreb and the Caribbean, where French was imposed as the official language during the colonial era. My analysis reflects the ways in which French-speaking communities intersperse their use of the language with traces of Arabic and Berber, for example, and it figures this as a liberating gesture of re-appropriation. In practical terms, it implies that different languages exist and will continue to exist in metropolitan France, and that attempts to quell their usage are oppressive. French is intermingled with regional dialects and immigrant languages and is open to perforation and mutation through that sort of contact: the drive to impede that process denies the real vitality and dynamism of linguistic usage and creation. While literary theories such as those studied here do not communicate directly with policies on language usage, they can foreground the action of creative intermingling and uncover manifestations of plurality and alterity that traditional conceptions of monolingualism might have hoped to mask or hide. Such models may not eradicate all the traces of colonial power in linguistic usage, but they can reinforce an awareness of permeability that helps to subvert both the dominance of the hegemonic culture and its drive towards exclusion.

Historical Perceptions of the French Language

The conception of a polyphonic community evidently challenges many lingering deep-rooted beliefs in the unity and universality of the French language itself. To a greater extent than many other nations, the French have stereotypically for a long time been immensely proud of their language, perceiving it as a symbol of rationality and objectivity, clarity and measure. Language according to this perspective is both fixed and self-contained, functioning according to the universal laws of logic and retaining a universal hold on 'the people'.[3] Perceived to be structured by the rules of reason and mathematical logic, the French language is meant to be understood and spoken by *all* citizens in France, and any interference from the outside is seen as damaging and weakening that regulated structure. The French language has also been seen as the symbol of the nation, holding its diverse components together in a rigid and unified structure. Nationality was indeed for a long time conceived with reference to a common language, culture and history, and citizens were supposed not only to speak French, but the same variant of French, in accordance with its universal rational structure. The French language was perceived to possess a sort of mythical unity, closely bound up with the identity of the people and unifying any differences within its universal frame.

One of the first events marking the establishment of a unified French language was the edict of Villers-Cotterêts in 1539. This ruled that all legal and administrative documents were to be printed in French, so that French was effectively the official legal language of France. French replaced Latin as the written language, even though many people continued to use various regional dialects in everyday life. Next, the Académie française was formed in 1634, and it became an important centre for the establishment and perpetuation of a 'pure' French. The language was standardised as far as possible, and contemporaneously, the rules of grammar and spelling were fixed and laid out. Also during this period, Descartes wrote his *Discours de la méthode* in French, and the French language became associated with his teachings on rationality and clarity. Derrida, in *Du droit à la philosophie*, picks out this moment as a key stage in the history of the French language, since it marks the

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[3] For a discussion of this see David C. Gordon, *The French Language and National Identity (1930-75)* (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1978). Gordon also cites Rivarol, who first championed the idea that French was a symbol of clarity and rationality.

establishment of the French subject, the rational cartesian 'cogito'.[4] It also reflected the beginnings of a drive towards universality, since Descartes's intention by writing in French was, according to Derrida, partly to render reason and education accessible to everyone, including women. Descartes's text was part of a movement to uphold French as a symbol both of rationality and of universal inclusion.

Another significant moment in the history of the standardisation of the French language occurred just after the revolution. In 1790, Abbé Grégoire undertook a linguistic questionnaire and found that a vast number of French subjects were scarcely able to utter a few words in French due to widespread usage of various regional dialects. The conclusion was that these 'patois' needed to be suppressed in favour of the universal usage of French, which was to be the language of the Republic and which would unify its diverse citizens. Claiming, on this level justifiably, that citizens needed a common language in order to do away with the privileges of the monarchical system, and of course to be able to communicate with one another, Abbé Grégoire recommended that French be named the republican language and that dialects were to be forbidden in schools. The language was to be associated with norms and clarity, and every citizen was urged to master these rules, partly in order to be able to express his own interests to the state. As a result of this, however, the purity of the language became a priority, and regional dialects and particularities had to be wiped out, since they posed a threat to the hegemony of pure French. The 'patois' came to symbolise a dangerous other; they could not be pinned down and they resisted the conception of linguistic fixity and universality that the republicans held dear. As Certeau, Julia and Revel point out in their collective work on the politics of the language during the revolution, 'le patois demeure une proximité altérante, à la fois dangereuse et fascinante. C'est l'autre féminin.'[5] Dialects are compared to 'the feminine' here to convey the sense that they resist the control and knowledge of the 'phallogocentric' or hegemonic system. They are seen as unfamiliar and unstable, posing a serious threat to republican beliefs in centralisation.

Republican ideology clearly played an important role in the formation of this linguistic policy. The 'One and Indivisible Republic' hoped to bind diverse citizens together in a centralised state and emphasised the importance of cultural and linguistic unity, despite

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[4] See Jacques Derrida, 'Transfert ex Cathedra: le langage et les institutions philosophiques', *Du droit à la philosophie*, (Paris: Galilée, 1990), 283-394.
[5] Michel de Certeau, Dominique Julia et Jacques Revel, *Une politique de la langue: la révolution française et*

the presence of groups of heterogeneous origin in France. In addition, French secularism advocated the neutrality of the state with regard to religion, but in practice, it also failed to accord various different cultures with recognition and at times effaced the expression of cultural specificity, including the use of particular dialects. The ethic of 'laïcité', applied to the education system during the Third Republic by Jules Ferry, intimated that only the national language was to be used in secular education. Ferry's ideas also greatly influenced Emile Littré, who wrote his *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, as well as an important history of the French language, in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Littré's conviction was that diverse dialects were important in France; he believed they did hold a central position in the creation of French culture. However, the various 'patois' were seen to retain a set of common roots in Latin and were imagined as part of a single, unified and organic structure. Littré tended less towards universalism than Grégoire, but he still argued that a monologic foundational structure was what held the nation together. Littré's understanding of language revolved extensively around the imagery of roots, betraying a desire for fixed origins and common foundations rather than the free intermingling of plural influences: 'les patois ou leurs ancêtres les dialectes sont les racines par lesquelles les grandes langues littéraires tiennent au sol.'[6] This model can be seen as restrictive, however, failing to encapsulate the multifarious structure of actual linguistic construction. While many linguists and etymologists such as Littré seek to identify specific linguistic roots, languages in reality exist within a series of dialogues with other, equally multifaceted systems.

Colonialism also promoted this conception of the universality and hegemony of the French language. As Louis-Jean Calvet has pointed out, colonialism in the Maghreb and the Caribbean was accompanied by 'glottophagie', or the imposition of French as the official language at the expense of the native languages.[7] French colonies were perceived to be part of France, so the universal ethic regarding language was supposed to apply also to colonised peoples. The French believed in a strategy of assimilation both with regard to particularities within the Republic and towards their colonised subjects, most notably those in Algeria. As Calvet describes, the settlement of French-speaking military groups and administrators initially meant that any natives who hoped to participate in the government of the country

les patois, (Paris: Gallimard, 1975) p. 155.

[6] Emile Littré, *Histoire de la langue française*, (Paris: Didier et Compagnie, Librairies-Editeurs, 1863), Tome II, p. 103.

were obliged to speak French. The presence of this dominant, French-speaking élite then led to the attempt to establish knowledge of French culture in colonised countries, and the settlers gradually reinvented and reorganised the education systems to promote colonial needs and desires. French was taught in schools, in particular those of the élite, alongside French history, civilisation and literature. Colonial schools were supposed to conform harmoniously with the superstructure of the culture and language of the coloniser. 'Dialects' were thought to be inferior, less civilised forms of expression, and the French believed that the imposition of their language and culture would help to 'modernise' societies that they perceived to be backward. Indeed, by the time of the Third Republic, Arabic was taught in Algeria only as a second language and it was accorded little time. Next, Calvet asserts that a hierarchy developed between the towns and the rural communities, as industry, commerce and politics were carried out in the cities in French, while the inhabitants of smaller villages worked in agriculture and spoke their native languages. Important aspects of the native culture therefore remained outside the scope of official discourse, and inequalities were perpetuated by the exclusion of rural or less educated people from the sphere of government. French was the language of power, resulting in a climate of oppression and inequality. The notion of 'Francophonie' in the ex-colonies cannot now be dissociated from this colonial legacy.

In this century, the French government has been highly concerned to ensure the continued spread of the use of French overseas. With the decline of the French Empire, it is considered that the French language needs to be promoted and cultivated in the ex-colonies as far as possible, and the government desires that their language will still be taught for example in Algerian schools. In 1966, the 'Haut comité pour la défense et l'expansion de la langue française' was founded with these sorts of aims in mind. The eighties saw the creation of the 'Haut conseil de la Francophonie', which is also composed of many non-French nationals and concerns itself with the role and status of French in the modern world. In addition, one of the most marked testimonies to the French conception of the self-contained nature of their language has been the vehement defence against invasion by English terms and Americanisation.[8] Observing the diffusion of American culture into many parts of the world, and the accompanying widespread usage of English and American-

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[7] Louis-Jean Calvet, *Linguistique et colonialisme: petit traité de glottophagie*, (Paris: Editions Payot, 1979).

[8] For a detailed analysis of this phenomenon, see Claude Hagège, *Le Français et les siècles*, (Paris: Odile Jacob, 1987).

English, the French fear for the hegemony of their own language and are determined to defend the unity of French from infiltration by Anglo-American words. During the seventies, the French Academy attempted to exclude a number of English expressions from government dealings and proposed French neologisms as replacements for some of the terms that had crept into usage in France. This last move is justified in its bid to stave off the universalisation and homogenisation of Anglo-American culture, and is worthy because it is carried out in the name of difference. On the other side, however, it also betrays a deep-rooted fear for the self-contained unity of French itself. If in this case the motivation is the much needed preservation of difference from the Anglo-American norm, the vehement pride that some French people feel for their language does still retain traces of a desire for a unified, fixed and self-sufficient language.

Finally, multilingualism in France has in the latter part of the twentieth century become increasingly manifest in a number of ways, demonstrating the necessity for a more fluid understanding of the relation between language and national or cultural identity. In 1951, for example, the Loi Deixonne authorised the study of regional languages in schools, though this was to operate on an optional basis and would extend to just one hour a week.[9] Then in the sixties, a new generation of regionalists emerged, and many used the revolution of May '68 as a chance to express their refusal of what they perceived to be the dominant ideology. People started to use regional dialects in public, on the radio and in the newspapers, when those languages had until then been reserved for private use. Since then, a series of campaigns have argued for the increased recognition of regional variation, though for the most part, official legislation in their favour has been quashed. As recently as 1999, speakers of minority languages again demanded to be accorded official recognition, though Chirac refused on the principle that these dialects threaten the unity of the Republic. In addition, the languages of immigrant communities have drawn increasing attention to themselves, and the famous Berque report of 1984 revealed the need for the further recognition of diverse cultures, such as those of North Africa, in French schools.[10] Beneath the rhetoric promoting cultural difference, however, there lingered a drive to integrate particularities into a greater structure, so that the ultimate status of immigrant languages remained unclear. The important issue here is that linguistic diversity is apparent in France,

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[9] See Peter Rickard, *A History of the French Language*, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989) p. 123.

[10] For a discussion of the Berque report, see Jean-Pierre Zirotti, 'L'Ecole face aux jeunes issus de l'immigration', *France, pays multilingue*, ed. Josiane Boutet et Geneviève Vermes, (Paris: Harmattan, 1987),

and speakers of different languages and dialects are arguing their cause. Such claims, however, still conflict uncomfortably with arguments advocating French monolingualism.

Many studies of bilingualism also reveal the need for a renewed appreciation of bilingual activity. Commentators have shown that many people are suspicious of the effects of bilingualism, still harbouring the hope of maintaining the self-sufficiency of languages and discouraging the intermingling of codes. Myths have circulated in France and in England dwelling on the harmfulness of bilingualism, suggesting it can lead to learning difficulties or confusion and claiming it impedes the child's intellectual development.[11] Bilingualism is sometimes blamed for poor achievement at school and it has been suggested, or at least was suggested in the earlier part of the century, that it affects intelligence and causes mental retardation. Certain researchers have associated bilingualism with stuttering and inarticulateness in both languages. Others have perceived it as a sign of insufficient integration or acculturation. The term 'anomie' is coined for extreme cases of bewilderment and confusion, and it is supposed to pinpoint the adverse effects of exposure to more than one language. It has even been suggested that monolinguals retain more of a capacity for originality, while the thought patterns of bilinguals are too diverse and lateral. Such hypotheses seem to stem from the desire to preserve the unity of languages and to ward off 'impure' influences from 'other' cultures. Reacting against such prejudices, more recent tests have instead tended to prove the positive effects of bilingualism, for example in metalinguistic awareness and greater mental flexibility. Many researchers nevertheless stress the unreliable nature of any generalised conclusion, pointing out that tests are often not properly controlled and that social factors such as class, education, and parental input need to be taken into account.[12]

The terminology of certain studies of bilingualism also implicitly reflects a conception of the separateness of languages. 'Interference', or the infiltration of words from other languages, is often seen as dangerous on the grounds that it leads to grave errors, and certainly the term itself implies contravention of the norm. It has even been defined as

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189-204.

[11] Many studies of bilingualism describe these sorts of reaction, but a few useful references include Hugo Baetens Beardsmore, *Bilingualism: Basic Principles*, (Clevedon: Tieto, 1982) and Josiane F Hamers and Michel Blanc, *Bilingualité et bilinguisme*, (Brussells: Pierre Mardaga, 1983). Also, a useful comprehensive guide is Charlotte Hoffmann's *An Introduction to Bilingualism*, (London and New York: Longman, 1991).
[12] See for example Ellen Bialystock and Jane Herman, 'Does Bilingualism Matter for Early Literacy?' *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 2: 1, (1999), (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) 35-44.

'deviation' and associated with non-belonging, leading inevitably to poor linguistic mastery.[13] Even terms such as 'code-mixing' and 'code-switching', describing the combination of different languages within a sentence and within a conversation respectively, have been perceived to signify the decay and misuse of languages. The terms themselves also imply the self-contained nature of each code. Examples are treated as particular, unusual phenomena rather than as testimonies to the ongoing intermingling of linguistic dialects and forms.

Despite the persistence of such beliefs, it is clear that bilingualism is becoming extraordinarily widespread and in many countries it is not the exception but the norm.[14] In many contexts, languages interact and continually mutate according to mutual exposure. Languages are in a continual state of flux, and interference is not a marginal phenomenon but an integral part of the way in which linguistic forms develop. Phenomena such as 'code-switching' and 'code-mixing' should also be considered as sources of creativity and invention. The interpenetration of a language with words, phrases, associations and nuances from other cultural systems is at the centre of its life and construction, and it is out of this process of interaction that new idioms are created. Different languages and systems are bound up in a simultaneous movement of fusion and separation, inheriting aspects from one another but also evolving during that process. It is in this sense that languages can perform the repeated convergence and divergence of cultural influences in a community of 'singular plural' beings.

Derrida and Monolingual Alterity

If French discourses have in the past associated centralised republican identity with linguistic unity, then this model can be problematised through renewed consideration of the complexities intervening between an individual and the languages he or she uses. In *Le monolinguisme de l'autre*, for example, Derrida dwells on the cultural otherness at work within a single language structure and on the deconstruction of a self-same linguistic identity. He attempts to undermine notions of linguistic unity and to draw attention to the disjunction between monolingualism and cultural plurality. The French language, he writes, is also subtended by traces of alterity; the imposition of the colonial language in Algeria

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[13] Uriel Weinrich, *Languages in Contact: Findings and Problems*, (The Hague: Mouton, 1968) p. 1

[14] For more on this see William F. Mackey, *Bilinguisme et contact des langues*, (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1976).

meant that cultural difference was somehow incorporated within the 'universal', centralised frame. Derrida's tone remains uneasy in this work, and much of the text focuses on alienation, dispossession and the effects of the disruption of the original identificatory structure. Derrida hopes to affirm the validity of the singular idiom, dreaming of a perfect form of self-expression that would work against the hegemony of a fixed and universal French in Algeria, yet within the text lingers a continued reflection on the need for identification and purity.

Le monolinguisme de l'autre begins with the statement 'Je n'ai qu'une langue, ce n'est pas la mienne'.[15] Reflecting on his troubled relation to the French language while growing up in Algeria, Derrida asserts that he is monolingual, he speaks only French, yet he senses that he does not fully possess that language: it is also for him the language of the other. French is the language of the coloniser, originating from the distant metropole, and it represents a culture that is other than that of many of the natives of Algeria. Thus although it is his only language, and as such it would ordinarily be considered his 'langue maternelle', he is also outside it, absent from it, and he does not belong unproblematically to the culture that it seems to signify. The text also mirrors this sense of otherness or duality through the juxtaposition of two voices, one commenting on the reflections of the other, as if to dramatise Derrida's struggle to 'inhabit' any one single language and revealing his divided and unsettled consciousness. The second voice's initial misgivings regarding his sense of alienation from his own language reflect the real duality of his experience: he both is and is not at home in the French language, it both is and is not his 'langue maternelle'. The second voice points out the contradiction of Derrida's claim, drawing attention to the manner in which it simultaneously reflects possession and non-possession, yet the very existence of this dual voice highlights the paradox of Derrida's relation to his own discourse and language. Non-possession and non-identification are at the very centre of his linguistic identity.

Derrida's next reflection is perhaps one of the most enlightening moments of the text. He writes:

1. On ne parle jamais qu'une seule langue – ou plutôt un seul idiome.

2. On ne parle jamais une seule langue – ou plutôt il n'y a pas d'idiome pur.[16]

The first statement implies that the individual speaks only one particular idiom (presumably

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[15] Jacques Derrida, Le monolinguisme de l'autre, ou la prothèse d'origine, (Paris: Galilée, 1996) p. 13.
[16] Ibid., p. 23.

even if he is bilingual). Everyone has a singular way of speaking, even if it can involve different language systems. As for Derrida himself, he speaks only French, and his usage of that language is singular or unique to him. The second statement, however, indicates that it is impossible to isolate any one idiom from other traces and influences; indeed, an idiom is never pure but presumably necessarily composite. Derrida suggests that difference inhabits languages and idioms: no idiom is wholly itself but contains traces of the cultures from which it arises and with which it remains in contact. Although he himself only speaks one language, that language is different from itself and does not encapsulate a single, self-enclosed cultural identity. Straightforward, organic etymological roots cannot be identified in the sense that Littré might have imagined. Words can be related to other words in different linguistic systems, but the relation is part of a chain of associations rather than forming an attachment to a single root. Derrida hopes to undermine the presumed hegemony and fixity of the French language and to deconstruct it from within by drawing attention to its internal difference. French cannot be as unified and self-contained as it might have appeared, but it should also be perceived to contain the otherness of the Jewish 'Franco-Maghrébin'.

To this extent, Derrida's text elucidates a complicated, deconstructive conception of the functioning of language. Languages, he seems to argue, contain impure idioms and diverse origins. His own status as a 'Franco-Maghrébin' denotes internal difference, 'un trouble de l'identité', since it represents the existence of a different idiom within a monolingual French structure. It is not a superfluity, a combination of particular identities one with the other, but an internal schism, structured around the presence within the monolingual of traces of irreducible and irresolvable differences. This also derives from the ambivalent sense of linguistic dispossession experienced in particular by the Algerian Jews. The Crémieux decree of 1870 awarded Algerian Jews with French citizenship, only for this to be revoked for two years during the Second World War. The Algerian Jews were for a short period dispossessed of their French citizenship, with the result that they were consigned to a sort of no man's land, since it occurred 'sans que ledit groupe recouvre aucune autre citoyenneté. Aucune autre.'[17] Thus the Algerian Jews were curiously alienated from the language and culture to which they were supposed to belong. They spoke the language of the metropole, yet they were also deprived of a sense of belonging or

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[17] Ibid., p. 34.

identification with that culture. Derrida believes this constitutes a more unsettling experience than that of Khatibi for example, since Khatibi still feels he possesses his 'langue maternelle', reflecting on the movement and difference between languages rather than deconstructing what was thought to be the framework of a single 'national' language.[18]

While these observations evoke an unsettling experience of linguistic dispossession, it is significant that Derrida's reflections here are founded upon a certain understanding of the concept of identification itself. At the beginning of the fifth chapter, Derrida explains that autobiographical reflection requires one form of identification, above all with a particular language. This does not mean 'identité', which would constitute a received definition, but an interminable, fantasmatic process:

> En tout cas, la *modalité identificatrice* doit être déjà ou désormais assurée: assurée de la langue et dans sa langue. Il faut, pense-t-on, que soit résolu la question de l'unité de la langue, et donné l'Un de la langue au sens strict ou au sens large – un sens large qu'on étirera jusqu'à comprendre tous les modèles et toutes les modalités identificatoires, tous les pôles de projection imaginaire de la culture sociale ... Il faut déjà savoir dans quelle langue *je* se dit, je *me* dis.[19]

Derrida then argues that the difficulty for the Jewish Franco-Maghrébin is that the process of identification in language is disrupted; the 'je' cannot locate itself in a single, specific 'situation' but finds that its 'situation' is elsewhere or other. Identification is problematised or even foreclosed for the Jews in Algeria, as the smooth correlation between language and identity is upset by the political situation. It would seem that the colonial project in Algeria was such that the Algerian Jews' apprehension of their language was characterised above all by alienation and loss. Derrida implies that the French policy of assimilation and suppression gave rise not to a sense of cultural interaction but to an aggressive interruption of the process of identification itself. Bearing witness to the controlling effects of this policy, the text therefore refrains from using the association of language with otherness to propose a more open-ended model illustrating the participation of the individual in different cultural structures. Instead, Derrida's vocabulary reveals the pervasive power of the colonial model that adheres identity to language and culture in a direct and one-dimensional way. He suggests that 'identity' is constructed through an unmediated relation with one 'rooted' language system. The interruption of the straightforward location of the self within

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[18] I disagree with Derrida here, as I shall argue in the next section. Khatibi's investigation of the relations between languages implies a more open-ended structure than Derrida's identificatory model.

[19] Derrida, *Le monolinguisme*, pp. 53-4.

a single language leads to a sense of lack or loss. The colonial presence in Algeria for Derrida left the Jewish Franco-Maghrébin trapped in this position of occlusion.

The central part of the text continues this reflection and explores the manner in which difference was excluded from the colonial, hegemonic language. Derrida deconstructs the law of unity implied by the colonial discourse, criticising the 'souveraineté d'essence toujours coloniale et qui tend, répressiblement et irrépressiblement, à réduire les langues à l'Un, c'est-à-dire à l'hégémonie de l'homogène'.[20] The text then details the ways in which Jews in Algeria are cut off from both the French and the Maghrebian communities, remarking on the absolute dissociation between cultures and the severance of the Jews from any single narrative of collective memory. The Algerian Jews are alienated from Arabic and Berber languages, from French and from the memory of Jewish languages and history, and Derrida demands, 'où se trouver? À qui peut-on encore s'*identifier* pour affirmer sa propre identité et se raconter sa propre histoire?',[21] portraying the limits of linguistic identification in this context. Once again, Derrida retains a traditional theoretical conception of identification, suggesting that the colonial situation in Algeria deprived the Jews of a process that remains fundamentally necessary. This reveals the continued power of entrenched ideologies that seek to separate and demarcate both languages and cultures, focusing on the alienating effects of such a model and suggesting that the aggressive pursuit of this policy in Algeria created a traumatic sense of loss. The political context of Derrida's reflection is such that he sees any theoretical reinvention of the process of identification in language as implausible.

In addition, Derrida discusses in a footnote the different forms of identification with language described by the Jewish writers Rosenzweig, Arendt and Lévinas.[22] According to Rosenzweig, for example, the Jews have always been forced to inherit the language of their host. Arendt, on the other hand, identifies above all with the German language, her 'langue maternelle', and Lévinas writes in French while using Russian, Lithuanian, German and Hebrew in the 'familiar' sphere, relinquishing at the same time the concept of a mother tongue and of any originary, foundational language. Yet while Derrida investigates these various forms of identification in an informative way, he nevertheless holds back from using these testimonies as a starting-point for a re-evaluation of the mechanisms of linguistic

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[20] Ibid., p. 69.
[21] Ibid., pp. 95-6.
[22] Ibid., pp. 91-114.

identification, focusing on the loss of possession rather than other forms of participation or border-crossing. Furthermore, recent theories of diaspora have sought to make of Jewish experience an affirmative example, stressing its mobility and transnationalism as well as perceiving that mutual fructification could be derived from contact with different cultures.[23] Derrida stops short of a reinvention of cultural or linguistic identity in this vein, exploring how colonialism for the Algerian Jews figures the loss of any original identificatory structure or framework. The colonial language attempts to encompass and assimilate the otherness of the Jews rather than giving rise to an ability to move between different structures.

This reflection on the loss of identification gives way at the end of the text to a dream of a pure, unique and untranslatable idiom. Commenting again on his own unsettling location both within and outside of the French language, Derrida expresses as a solution his desire for an idiom that would be purely his own and that would consequently be both singular and untranslatable. Having dwelt on his sense of alienation and non-identification, Derrida describes his dream of a new idiom that would resist the enclosing framework of the hegemonic language and that would do justice to his non-identical Jewish, 'franco-maghrébin' experience. He concedes, as I have shown, that the idiom is never pure, that 'on ne parle jamais une seule langue', but he ultimately strives to imagine a form of absolute, irreducible singularity:

> Bien sûr, on peut parler plusieurs langues. Il y a des sujets compétents dans plus d'une langue. Certains même écrivent plusieurs langues à la fois (prothèses, greffes, traduction, transposition). Mais ne le font-ils pas toujours en vue de l'idiome absolu? et dans la promesse d'une langue encore inouïe? d'un seul poème hier inaudible?[24]

This idiom is for Derrida the other of language; it is the beyond, the promise of any utterance and the call that issues from every impure, plural idiom. It would somehow combine this impurity or otherness with a renewed sense of its own, untranslatable uniqueness. This also recalls a passage in 'Il n'y a pas le narcissisme', where Derrida writes of the desire to invent a new language: a language that would be absolutely proper and specific to the speaker, an idiom that would express and encapsulate absolute specificity.[25]

Derrida's theory at this point hopes to transform linguistic plurality into a new form

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[23] See for example Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, 'Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity', *Critical Inquiry* 19, (Summer 1993), 693-725. I shall discuss this further in chapter five.

[24] Ibid., p. 126.

[25] Jacques Derrida, 'Il n'y a pas le narcissisme', *Points de suspension*, (Paris: Galilée, 1992), 209-228 (p. 216).

of absolute singularity or purity. This drive to imagine pure singularity, divorced from the associations of the other, again lays the emphasis on the need for identification with a single type of idiom, voicing the dream of inhabiting entirely and unproblematically one's own particular form of expression. It conveys a sense of dissatisfaction with the imposition of the colonial idiom, implying that the hegemonic language retains an unsettled relationship with many of the subjects that it attempts to assimilate and imagining a way to rescue the idiom from that dominant, centralising force. As I have suggested, Derrida's understanding of the relation between language and identification does remain conventional here, asserting that the individual needs to 'possess' his or her language rather than considering looser forms of participation and border-crossing. Yet it also at the same time conveys the disjunctive effects of the colonial language, uncovering its association with dispossession and evoking his own, utopian and impossible desire to liberate his discourse from its connotations of the other's power. The tone is imaginative and affective, and Derrida's goal is not to readdress the very question of identification but to portray the pain and loss caused by the monolingualism of the other. Le monolinguisme remains subversive in that it stresses the alterity contained within the colonial, monolingual structure, but it also repeatedly contemplates the importance of a sense of purity and possession in the face of political oppression.

Before moving on to consider the manner in which Khatibi troubles this mode of thinking, however, the ambiguous political implications of Derrida's writing can be noted. As in the texts on alterity, the manner in which Derrida concludes with a metaphysical reflection on the impossible and the beyond again introduces a disjunctive tone into his project. Le monolinguisme is concerned with the deconstruction of the political hegemony of the French language in Algeria, and the text constitutes an important critique of the oppressive nature of that monolingual structure. However, the passages at the end reflecting on the call of the idiom do seem to fall short of providing a convincing political alternative. Derrida begins with a political critique but ends with a poetical and mystical reflection on his desire for an impossible but absolutely pure idiom, so that once again his discourse has shifted to a different realm, leaving the reader unable to connect the two styles. He also leaps from a consideration of Jews in Algeria to a more general, metaphysical desire for linguistic possession without discussing the relation between historical specificity and this

universal thought.[26] As I have discussed in the preceding chapter, Derrida's writing has a tendency to alternate between different and irreconcilable tonalities, between a desire for political engagement and a more poetic reflection on the realm of the impossible. The unsignalled leap between these two discourses is often the reason for the political insufficiency of his writing as a whole. In this case, the combination of the political and the messianic again seems to obfuscate Derrida's intentions, as he shifts from a specific discussion of Algerian Jews to the apparently more universal, poetical motif of the desire for perfect self-expression. Derrida himself fails to theorise this dual tone, with the result that although his critique is illuminating, his suggestions for a new configuration can remain unsatisfying in this context.

Derrida's writing offers the seeds of a compelling reconfiguration of the framework of a language, but his work also seems uneasy in this regard. *Le monolinguisme* troubles conceptions of the self-contained but universal scope of the French language, but the text also reveals how the entrenched model linking language with a single culture or identity continues to hold sway. His proposal for another mode of thinking revolves around a utopian dream of linguistic purity and absolute singularity, but he does not attempt to reimagine the very identificatory process that the colonial model disables in its drive towards homogenisation and exclusion. Derrida describes the otherness that resides within a single language system and reveals how the association of language with possession and habitation is upset by colonial imposition. Yet he imagines that such power could be contested only in a utopian and poetic manner by creating and possessing one's own singular, pure idiom rather than by considering any other form of linguistic participation or usage.

Bilingual Confrontations in the Work of Abdelkebir Khatibi

If Derrida attempts to problematise linguistic identity by investigating by turns the otherness or utopian purity of the idiom, then Khatibi builds on this reflection by examining the implications of bilingual interaction. In the texts on bilingualism, Khatibi reflects on the singularity of different language systems, yet he also works with their encounter, exploring

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[26] Azzedine Haddour criticises Derrida for writing about linguistic alienation in metaphysical terms rather than analysing the specific political histories of Algerians and Berbers (as well as Jews). Haddour's critique can be expanded further if we interrogate not only the occlusion of specificity but also the 'messianic' nature of the actual model that Derrida proposes. See Azzedine Haddour, *Colonial Myths: History and Narrative*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 162-167.

more fully the possibilities of linguistic interpenetration. His writing deals with cultural difference and alterity but is itself situated on the border, investigating the confrontation between languages and allowing nuances and associations to travel across linguistic frontiers. Derrida's *Le monolinguisme* opens with citations from Glissant and Khatibi, already suggesting that these writers further explore and elaborate on his thinking.[27] Unlike Derrida, however, Khatibi's focus is less on monolingualism and its problematic attempts to exclude difference than on the ambivalence of bilingualism, its alienating but also potentially liberating effects.

Khatibi's attitude is nevertheless highly ambivalent, as he sometimes leans towards an open-ended relational structure while also frequently becoming caught unsettlingly between two apparently incommensurable linguistic systems. Drawing on the experience of colonialism in Morocco, where French colonial policy was less oppressive and all-encompassing than in Algeria, he seems both to uphold the possibility of linguistic interaction and to expose the exclusionary force of French culture and language in the protectorate. He at times celebrates the creative potential of linguistic interaction, encouraging the writer or poet to open his or her language to the echoes and traces of other idioms and signs. Yet his writing is also suffused with a sense of alienation and untranslatability, lamenting the loss caused by the invasion of colonial culture. His tone is by turns affirmative and hesitant, celebratory and tentative, aspiring to the construction of a new, multilingual configuration while also remaining wary of its limits. His work is thus transgressive but also unsettled, at times stressing interaction while refusing to uphold polyphony in such a way as to ignore the oppressive force of colonial linguistic imposition. He stresses neither fusion nor separation but depicts a more complex process of negotiation between these two poles.

Khatibi's initial concern is to deconstruct and undermine the unity and fixity of some traditional conceptions of the French language. Questioning the efficacy of the term 'Francophonie', Khatibi hopes to de-centre the French language and to focus instead on its manifold forms and cultural contexts. Thus even though 'Francophonie' intends to draw attention to the culture of French-speaking countries outside of France, the term for Khatibi still posits France as the centre, reinforcing its hegemony and exemplarity in relation to other countries. In addition to this, the language retains a sort of mythical status:

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[27] Khatibi also uses Derrida extensively, comparing deconstruction to his thinking on decolonisation. Khatibi tends to focus on plurality as well as on Derridean otherness. See *Maghreb pluriel*, (Paris: Denoël, 1983).

> La langue classique demeure à nos jours le parangon de mesure et d'identité des Français. Parangon de la France autour de la centralité du pays, de l'Etat, d'une langue et d'une religion. Cette identité de soi à soi a été fixée par des codes de règles formelles qui régissent encore comme la charpente royale de la langue française.[28]

Commenting that the process of questioning this hegemony has only just begun, Khatibi points the way towards an emphasis on cultural interaction, hoping to problematise the borders of the French language and to remodel its structure in order to include the otherness of 'franco-maghrébin' experience. His aim is to criticise the pretension to 'l'identité de soi à soi' and, very much like Derrida, bring out the alterity that resides beneath the artifice of a self-same linguistic system.[29]

Due to this sense of the dominance of a fixed and unified French language, Khatibi's writing on the one hand dwells on exile and exclusion. Classical French denies the Arabic roots of the 'Franco-Maghrébin', encouraging acculturation and the absorption of French culture rather than contact with difference. In the essay 'Incipits', Khatibi contemplates the traces of exile and loss that underpin North African texts of French expression, describing the processes of separation and non-identification that characterise such a use of classical French. Reading Abdelwahab Meddeb's text *Talismano*, Khatibi focuses on untranslatability and on the incommensurability between French and Arabic sounds. *Talismano*, he writes, begins with the phoneme 'A', voicing the name of the author himself. However, this very letter 'A' is a substitution for a phoneme that cannot be expressed in French; it mistranslates a sound that can only be pronounced in Arabic. The same sound is also the signifier of the word 'eye', so that the text is inaugurated by the alteration of the name of the author and 'par un œil absent, par de la cécité, de l'invisible et de l'illisible'.[30] The author is in this way both present and absent from the text; he translates his experience into French but in that process excludes his own proper name. From the beginning, the text is marked by this absence and invisibility.

The bilingual text of a writer such as Meddeb reflects the brushing of one language

[28] Abdelkebir Khatibi, 'Francophonie et idiomes littéraires', *Penser le Maghreb*, (Rabat: Société marocaine des éditeurs réunis, 1993), 79-87 (pp. 84-5).

[29] The critic Winifred Woodhull criticises Khatibi in this context, suggesting that his attempt to subvert power struggles can become too abstract, failing to reflect real historical subjects and masking various and diverse manifestations of difference. In response to this, I would suggest again that Khatibi be considered for his discursive implications rather than for any attempt to formulate a direct political project. See Winifred Woodhull, *Transfigurations of the Maghreb: Feminism, Decolonization and Literatures,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

[30] Abdelkebir Khatibi, 'Incipits', *Du Bilinguisme*, ed. Khatibi, (Paris: Denoël, 1985), 171-195, (p. 173). The text is also printed as 'Bilinguisme et littérature', in *Maghreb pluriel* (Paris: Denoël, 1983).

against another but also the occlusion of the original language and the untranslatability of the proper name or the idiom. Khatibi explains:

> Ainsi le texte bilingue – qu'il le veuille ou non – est à la trace de l'exil du nom et de sa transformation. Il tombe sous le coup d'une double généalogie, d'une double signature, qui sont tout autant les effets littéraires d'un don perdu, d'une donation scindée en son origine. Un double don, qu'est-ce que c'est? La langue étrangère donne d'une main et retire de l'autre.[31]

The foreign language of the text calls back to the writer's native language, yet it also forces the original language outside of its own structure, remaining unable to figure its singular idioms. On the one hand, Khatibi suggests that Arabic culture is translated into French and aspects of its signification are conveyed in the foreign language, yet at the same time the French language excludes the nuances of the original and deforms its particularities and idioms. This conception of bilingualism and translation perceives the duality of cultural identity as an irrecuperable division that resists the formulation of a single new idiom. It suggests that languages reach out to one another but that cultural systems are in essence untranslatable, and this sort of interaction is less celebratory and polyphonic than alienating and divisive.

Part of this sense of alienation also comes from the double-layered nature of the separation of the bilingual writer from the language of the mother. Khatibi's analysis is also psychoanalytic, remarking on the process of translation that occurs in any subject between the Symbolic and the primordial communion with the mother. This rupture is heightened in the experience of the bilingual colonial subject, since he is severed from his original 'langue maternelle' and, having been educated in French, is forced to reconstitute his experience in the language of the coloniser: 'l'édifice de la langue sculpte le corps morcelé de l'écrivain, stèle, nom propre, signature, sépulture, livre entamé dans la langue de l'autre.'[32] The chaos of 'the Real' is structured and occluded not only by the Symbolic but also by the linguistic structures of an imposed foreign language, so that the alienation is double. Khatibi then goes on to suggest that echoes of Arabic disrupt Meddeb's text as if in an attempt to return to the mother, and the buried existence of these traces subtends the unity of the French language. Yet they are both there and not there, they live beneath the text but struggle to emerge to the surface, and the text is defined by this process of repression and loss.

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[31] Ibid., pp. 176-177.

Much of Khatibi's writing is underpinned by the destruction of a coherent identity. The bilingual text renders impossible the construction of a 'chez-soi', as the process of translation that defines its production leaves irresolute traces of the 'intraduisible'. Writing in French is also 'écrire sans fond et sans retour aux sources, exorcisme des revenants et des noms par association ou dissociation, de toutes façons, écrire à fonds perdu avec toutes les langues, les fragments (hallucinés) des langues.'[33] References to traces of other languages, signs originating from the native language, underpin the text but also get lost, remaining imagined or hallucinated. The bilingual text looks beyond itself to the remnants of the other language but also struggles to voice both cultures at once. Khatibi's autobiographical text *La mémoire tatouée* is thus an autobiography without foundation and without identity, containing exile and migration within its very structure. Khatibi's history and experiences somehow escape the confines of the text's language, so that it becomes an autobiography composed both of memory and of forgetting. He admits 'mon enfance, ma vraie enfance, je ne pourrai jamais la raconter',[34] and he implies that the text is not his past but a fractured, partial version; it is also 'tatouée', grafted with fragments of foreign signs. His childhood is split by the opposition between the marks of French colonialism and Arabic rituals or myths, and the French language struggles to narrate the substance of this discrepancy. The second half of the text recounts the narrator's travels around Europe while leaving the sense that many traces of the identity of the author remain outside the scope of the text's discourse.

This aspect of Khatibi's work draws attention to the incommensurability between language systems and the confusion of the divided bilingual subject. This perception of the specificity of cultural contexts and the insufficiency of the French language is to a certain extent useful in deconstructing linguistic hierarchies and hegemonies. Yet at the same time, Khatibi also questions this reflection on identification and lack, proposing a more open-ended mode of thinking that might preserve the singularity of the idiom while evoking more affirmatively the memory of plural linguistic origins. Khatibi's work on bilingualism has two sides, and his reflections on untranslatability are occasionally coupled with a drive to celebrate the multiple echoes that can be contained within a single language system. In a brief commentary on Derrida, for example, Khatibi commends the former's attention to the idiom but also wonders whether the deconstruction of the hegemony of the French language

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[32] Ibid., p. 186.

[33] Abdelkebir Khatibi et Jacques Hassoun, *Le même livre*, (Paris: Editions de l'Eclat, 1985) p. 53

[34] Abdelkebir Khatibi, *La mémoire tatouée*, (Paris: Denoël, 1971) p. 69.

might not give rise to new creative possibilities. In a long reflection at the end of the essay, he asks: 'en quoi cette impropriété, cette hybridation et ces troubles d'identité ont été favorables à des inventions idiomatiques et stylistiques?' He suggests that these muted codes might provide a form of energy and vitality, proposing: 'le fait de devenir de plus en plus étranger à ce qu'on écrit surélève-t-il notre pulsation de la vie et l'abstrait-il de sa douleur secrète et de la légèreté donnée à l'insouciance, en quoi réside peut-être la puissance du rythme et du style?'[35] Khatibi is clearly hoping to turn the sense of alienation and incommensurability into a more affirmative position, and he wants to use it to invent a new, more hybrid style. He imagines trying to open up poetic language to the rhythms of other languages and indicates the possible enriching effects of the permeation of one language with the traces and signs of another.

These moments in Khatibi's works are more assertive, since they move away from a consideration of the subject's exile in language and challenge the traditional psychoanalytic model. In the interview 'A propos du *Maghreb pluriel*', Khatibi expresses again the need for a new configuration. He reminds us that the colonial language does provoke a painful sense of loss and oppression in the colonised people. But he also suggests that there might be an alternative, more complex way to conceive the relation between language and identity, which would in turn actively subvert the hegemonic, monolingual model. Thus while he regrets the suffering of exile, he urges that 'l'important est de la transformer, de l'interroger dans une pensée qui la déborderait, une pensée plurielle, différenciée, attentive à l'ample mouvement mondial qui brasse civilisations, langues et techniques'.[36] Khatibi is attempting to look beyond the divisive structure of alienated bilingual identity and evoking a conception that would be composed of multiple interactions with different parts of the world. Such thinking would not need to be based upon identification, since it would seek not to inhabit a single language but to participate in many languages and shake off the shackles of static cultural frameworks. It also moves from a binary to a plural structure, embracing multiplicity rather than falling between two more fixed reference points. In *Maghreb pluriel* itself, Khatibi names this a 'pensée autre' or a 'pensée en langues': this would be made up of a multilingual series of codes and would consider any idiom in terms of its interaction with other idioms. It would be open to 'l'écoute de toute parole', if not openly combining

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[35] Abdelkebir Khatibi, 'Le point de non-retour', *Le passage des frontières: autour du travail de Jacques Derrida*, Colloque de Cérisy, (Paris: Galilée, 1994), 445-449 (p. 449).

[36] Abdelkebir Khatibi, 'A propos du *Maghreb pluriel*', entretien avec Thierry de Beaucé, *Penser le Maghreb*,

languages then at least manifesting an awareness of multiple linguistic origins.

More precisely, this conception also revolves around the resurgence of other associations within a single word or phrase. Sentences would make the echo of their own cultural otherness audible and would emphasise more forcefully the occluded, repressed traces that Khatibi discussed in 'Incipits'. This notion would allow one language to be twisted and remodelled by another, so that nuances from other cultures could eventually show through. Khatibi imagines:

> Il y a toujours dans chaque mot, chaque nom, chaque prénom et nom propre le dessin
> d'autres mots, sa calligraphie hospitalière. Dans chaque mot: d'autres mots; dans chaque
> langue: le séjour d'autres langues. Toujours le tout-autre veille sur la force poétique. [37]

This idea of internal echoes suggests that words and phrases can point to past and future contacts with other languages. In this sense, it undermines the fixity of the monolingual structure and suggests that the language of a community without community is formed by a series of dialogues from other sources and origins.

Khatibi's work on bilingualism is constantly split between a lamentation on the alienation of the colonised and a more affirmative imagination of the ways in which languages are inter-related, which he names the 'pensée en langues'. This tension between untranslatability and polyphony is most dramatically exemplified in the unsettling text *Amour bilingue*. This text examines in detail the dynamic fusion and separation that characterises a bilingual French-Arabic relationship, focusing at once on the 'jouissance' of the partners' interaction and also on the trauma and frustration of their irreducible singularity. The initial pages of *Amour bilingue* are characterised by lack and alienation. Early on for example, the narrator has a dream that begins with a sense of fusion, but this rapidly starts to break down, leaving him stranded in the no man's land of non-communication. Words from different languages come into his mind, but they are so precise and rigorous that they seem to erect barriers against one another and against the possibility of translation. In another instance, words become opaque, suffocating the narrator and seemingly even replacing their referents as if to reinforce his alienation in language and the barriers of separation that they represent. Words become autonomous and they carry out a battle in his mind: 'les mots qui le hantaient coulèrent en défilant par flots; et, se jetant les

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137-140 (p. 137).

[37] Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Figures de l'étranger dans la littérature française*, (Paris: Denoël, 1987) p. 205

uns sur les autres, ils se dévorèrent.'[38] The conflict between signs in this episode seems to occlude reality, and the narrator is at sea between incommensurable semiotic systems. At one moment, this confusion even renders the narrator deaf-mute, since the multitude of signs, all floating adrift from their referents, leaves gaps and blanks in its wake: 'l'écriture est hantée par sa scène sourde-muette, blancheur de la page handicapant le corps'.[39] The confrontation of one language with another emphasises the arbitrary nature of the sign and the division between signifiers and signifieds.

Khatibi again falls back on a psychoanalytic model here, suggesting that the separation within the bilingual relationship mirrors the lack and incompletion of any desire and focusing on the ways in which desire is also strengthened by this irreparable separation: 'l'intraduisible! passion de tout amour, quand le désir tombe dans l'oubli de soi − séparé'.[40] Desire is defined by ignorance and forgetting rather than by fusion and communion. This is in turn literalised and heightened by the French lover's absolute incomprehension of the narrator's native Arabic:

> Lorsqu'elle m'entendait parler en arabe, elle se sentait exclue, rejetée hors de toute entente absolue. Elle était cette femme absolue, pourquoi lui substituer ces hantises de traduction et d'oscillation? Je lui devenais incommunicable. Je pense aussi qu'elle désirait cet incommunicable, qu'elle le cultivait dieu sait pour quelles raisons secrètes, silencieuses.[41]

The relationship is constituted at once by a desire for all-encompassing communion, and by a sense of absolute difference that also ignites and intensifies the desire. In addition to this, Khatibi's narrator comments on the trauma of his own double alienation in language, stemming from the separation from the mother and then again from the process of translating from Arabic to French. He writes that his mother was illiterate, so that his relation with Arabic was already one of disjunction and separation. Arabic is his 'langue maternelle' but it has also lost its association with the mother and already contains a sense of exile. The movement of translation from Arabic to French is a double process of separation and rupture. It is also significant that, as in Derrida's *Le monolinguisme*, the voice of the narrator is itself double, fluctuating between 'je' and 'il' as if to mirror this alienation and internal alterity in the very form of the text.

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[38] Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Amour bilingue*, (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1983) p. 39.
[39] Ibid., p. 30.
[40] Ibid., p. 26.
[41] Ibid., p. 72.

Despite this sense of the untranslatability of the two languages, however, Khatibi's text also contains a positive drive to enjoy the intermingling of French and Arabic resonances. The chaos of signifiers that at times suffocates and disables the narrator can also lead to a kind of 'folie', as words energetically 's'écroulèrent les uns sur les autres avec fracas'.[42] This points to the joyful relinquishing of roots and memories in favour of pure linguistic jouissance. If at times the amnesia forced upon the narrator by his use of the French language alienates him from his native culture, at other times this amnesia becomes a symbol of liberation, allowing him to sever signs from their origins and to invent a fluid, fully bilingual discourse. Words and signifiers, as well as their attendant cultural implications, are detached from their roots and become intermingled in a plural, sensual encounter, such that 'deux pays se faisaient l'amour en nous'.[43] The lovers' discourse is also characterised by a carefree abandonment of structures, and they allow signs and phrases from either language to permeate the other, mirroring their hopes for communication and fusion.

This intermingling of one language with another in the text is highly complicated. Associated also with silence and untranslatability, these attempts at interaction do not constitute the smooth exchange of signifiers but rather the fraught echoes and traces of an underlying alterity. The narrator wonders:

> Lorsque je t'entretiens dans ta langue, où s'oublie la mienne? Où parle-t-elle encore en silence? Car, jamais, elle n'est abolie à ces instants. Quand je te parle, je sens ma langue maternelle glisser en deux flux: l'un, silencieux (silence si guttural), et l'autre, qui tourne à vide, se défaisant par implosion dans le désordre bilingue.[44]

The traces of Arabic that underpin the narrator's use of French are not always evident, but constitute instead silent echoes, rhythms and movements that somehow open his discourse up to the disorder of his cultural identity. The text itself contains a number of examples of this sort of plural association. On one occasion, the narrator translates the word 'seduction' by the Arabic word 'fitna', but adds that this term is 'cette homographie de guerre et de séduction'.[45] His discourse thus contains this underlying resonance. Later, reflecting on the brevity of the word 'fin', the narrator remembers the longer Arabic word 'fana' ('anéantissement').[46] In this way, 'death', 'nothingness' and 'end' become blurred, and the

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[42] Ibid., p. 10.
[43] Ibid., p. 24.
[44] Ibid., p. 48.
[45] Ibid., p. 17.
[46] Ibid., p. 54.

nuances of all three words subtend the initial thought. A final significant example occurs at the beginning, where the narrator moves from 'calme' to the Arabic word 'kalma', which also signifies 'mot'. The narrator also reflects on various dialectal forms, and the different tonalities or contexts of 'kalma', 'kalima' and 'klima'. A further association stems from the shift from 'mot' to the Arabic 'maut', signifying 'mort'.[47] The reflection demonstrates the migration of nuances and, quite literally, the plural echoes and associations of words. In all three examples however, the result is not the smooth integration of one language by another but rather a more fraught process creating unforeseen connections across different cultural systems.

Khatibi's model of bilingualism in this way implies continual fusion and separation. He proposes not the interruption of one language by another but the rustle of hidden traces and muted echoes from the past, and these haunt the recesses of his discourse. The bilingual relationship constitutes not only a chaotic confrontation between languages but also an intimate exchange, reflecting both interaction and separation. Khatibi ends the text with the exclamation, 'folie de la langue, mais si douce, si tendre en ce moment'[48] and this points to the coexistence of madness or disorder with communion or tenderness, reflecting once more the ambivalence of bilingual experience. The final phrase expressing the desire 'apprends-toi à parler dans tes langues' tentatively urges towards a celebration of plurality and multilingualism, but this is also posited as a future possibility or as an escape from the suffering caused by his own bilingualism. The co-implication of languages and the desire to speak across different cultural systems is still a nascent idea stemming from the unsettled nature of the narrator's relation to both French and Arabic. Hoping at this point to imagine the dynamic relationality of languages, Khatibi's narrator also conceives this multilingual structure against the background of his own very unsettled experience.

Khatibi's work develops and enhances Derrida's conceptions of linguistic otherness and untranslatability, complicating Derrida's belief in the singularity of the idiom with his drive to move more fluidly between linguistic systems. Khatibi reflects on the specificity of cultural idioms but also attempts to analyse their encounter and blur the frontiers of their confrontation. In this way, he maintains a conception of the importance of singularity but also hopes to problematise the relation between two singular beings and their bilingual linguistic usage. Yet at the same time, most of Khatibi's texts couple this analysis of

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[47] Ibid., p. 10.
[48] Ibid., p. 131.

bilingual confrontation with a number of reflections on exile and alienation, retaining the essential duality of the two languages and blurring only their borders. The echoes and whispers of Arabic in the French are remarked upon for their repression and their absence as much as for their presence, and the 'pensée en langues' is a dream of renewed inter-cultural communication rather than a direct refutation of the sense of exile caused by the association of the French language with the colonial project. There is in this way a tension in Khatibi's work between a reflection on cultural and linguistic alienation, and a desire to conceive identification in such a way as to resist the construction of linguistic barriers or gestures of exclusion. These works manifest a struggle for a freely multilingual identity while expressing a sense of anxiety towards any unequivocal, celebratory vision that might occlude the alienation experienced by the colonised in Morocco.

Edouard Glissant and the Multilingual Imaginary

Khatibi's conception of bilingualism can be developed further through an exploration of the linguistic interaction implied by multilingualism. In the later work of Edouard Glissant, for example, the embrace of multilingualism is associated with a celebration of innovative forms of creativity and poetic energy. Recalling to a certain extent Nancy's configuration of community as a series of relations between singular beings, Glissant's most recent work prioritises relationality above identity and views singular idioms as a product of the continual interaction between language structures. His ideas are significant in that they reinforce the importance of different dialects while showing that these idioms are part of a network to which every language belongs. In the context of colonialism in Martinique, this indicates that the boundaries of hegemonic colonial languages can be subverted by their permeation with echoes from the other languages with which they enter into contact. In a broader context, it suggests that the interspersion of French with regional or immigrant dialects should not be suppressed because it forms a central part of the development of the language itself.

While Glissant's work successfully problematises linguistic borders, I will also argue that his recent theories nevertheless seem unsettled, shifting ambivalently from a description of Caribbean experience to a wider affirmation of global relationality. Glissant describes the subversive potential of 'creolised' languages while also later moving beyond a specific notion of 'antillanité' in order to show how any singular voice exists within a universal system of interactions. He thus appears to graft the Creole metaphor directly onto any

language structure, despite the specificity of the circumstances of its creation and its particular relation to colonialism in Martinique. In addition, this leap from the specific to the global occludes other contexts where ideologies of self-enclosure persist, and it seems utopian in its desire to refute any form of cultural or linguistic frontier. 'Creolisation' begins as a subversive figure disrupting colonialist conceptions of linguistic hegemony and purity, but the application of the metaphor to the global sphere leads to an overt celebration of relationality and a desire to transcend any form of specificity in a way that seems unworkable. Glissant's thinking in this sense differs from that of Nancy, since the latter writer also stresses the rupture of relations and combines his description of interactive structures with a continued awareness of specific, if provisional, differences.

First, it is worth commenting in this context on Glissant's conceptions of 'langue' and 'langage', since the reinvention of their inter-relation forms the basis of the multilingual network. 'Langue' for Glissant, as for the linguist Saussure, is the overall language system, the cultural reference point and common, collective structure. It is noteworthy that for Saussure, however, 'langue' seems to imply normativity and fixity, whereas Glissant's thinking is much more open-ended and can be used to subvert static norms and rules. In Saussure's work, 'langue', or the language system itself, is distinguished from 'parole', its manifestations in individual usage, and the former is associated with unity while the latter signifies diversity within that regulated structure. Saussure also distinguishes synchronic and diachronic linguistic analysis, and although he concedes that language usage changes through time, his focus on synchronic structures betrays a belief in the existence of a finite and uniform set of fixed rules operating at any one time. He affirms that 'la langue existe dans la collectivité sous la forme d'une somme d'empreintes déposées dans chaque cerveau, à peu près comme un dictionnaire dont tous les exemplaires, identiques, seraient répartis entre les individus.'[49]

For Glissant on the other hand, the relation between 'langue' and 'langage' is more dynamic and dialectical, as the latter continually runs across the borders of the former. The language system is created and enacted through the infinitely mobile and variable forms of 'langage', which have plural roots and establish an interactive structure: 'la construction d'un langage dans la langue dont on use permet la visée vers le chaos-monde: parce que cela établit des relations entre des langues possibles du monde.'[50] The specific idioms of

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[49] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, (Paris: Payot, 1922) p. 38.
[50] Edouard Glissant, *Introduction à une Poétique du Divers*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 42.

'langage' perform and extend the dynamic and permeable framework of the 'langue'. A 'langue' is repeatedly constructed anew by the multiple singular enunciations of individual usage. Glissant's thinking thus combines a conception of relational structures with an understanding of the singularity of the idiom. The combination of different forms of usage constitutes the wider language structure, while each idiom remains specific: 'la langue crée le rapport, le langage crée la différence, l'un et l'autre aussi précieux.'[51] Languages can be seen as mobile frameworks that absorb multiple, particular cultural identities, while idioms combine various influences in order to create unique formulations. Glissant also suggests that translation mimes this process in succinct form, since it inter-links different languages while evolving new forms of composite idiom.

Glissant's theory of linguistic activity stems from his broader conception of the poetics of Relation. Here, Glissant reinvents the relation between the individual and the community, imagining these not as part of a binary symmetrical structure but deconstructing those very categories and perceiving instead the inter-dependence of particularities within a larger cultural network. Being and language are defined and constituted by Relation. This implies not relativity, since this would separate each cultural community from the others, but unending and unpredictable relationality. Like Nancy, Glissant asserts that every being is born into relationality; no individual precedes this collective network but is always created out of heterogeneous origins and elements: 'naître au monde, c'est concevoir (vivre) enfin le monde comme relation: comme nécessité composée, réaction consentie, poétique (et non morale) d'altérité'.[52] Equally, the concept of the 'être', implying identity and essence, is replaced with that of the 'étant', implying process and dynamic interchange. This 'étant' is not part of a conventional community structure but a shifting fragment in a vast series of relations. There is no self-contained 'community' and there is no overall, essential 'universality'; instead, we need to imagine the open-ended totality of all the dynamic relations between these plural 'étants'. Glissant criticises the idea of a rooted identity for its desire to restore homogeneity and for its reference to a single monologic origin or essence, and he recommends that instead, we should focus on the brushing and jostling of cultures one against the other. This then subverts the imagery of monologic roots described by etymologists such as Littré, implying that languages are 'rhizomatic' rather than retaining a

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[51] Edouard Glissant, 'Langue et multilinguisme dans l'expression des nations modernes', *Les études françaises dans le monde*. Première rencontre internationale des départements d'études françaises, Québec, (22-27 Mai, 1972), 10-15 (p. 13).

straightforward, identifiable relation to a particular origin: language is a moving and non-essential totality of relations.[53]

Glissant's theory is for the most part a poetic or literary one. He comments for example at the beginning of *Poétique de la relation* on the importance of migration and 'errance' in literature, tracing the ways in which artistic creation has often been based upon this investigation of plural influences. Major founding texts such as the Bible, the Iliad, the Odyssey and the Aeneid, he argues, contain this openness to travel and to contacts with other cultures. In the modern epoch, these relations have become closer and more immediate, for a number of reasons including transport, communication technology and a renewed awareness of the possibility of contact. The result is that otherness has become an inevitable part of our cultural consciousness. This experience is crucially voiced in Rimbaud's famous 'je est un autre', which for Glissant designates not only the poet's internal difference but also his contact with plural cultures. The writer or poet both listens to and expresses his experience of these relations, remaining singular and open to the multilingualism of the world. Any linguistic expression inevitably contains traces of other idioms and dialects, so that literature or poetry itself inscribes this unending relationality. The critic Celia Britton shows how this subversive vision of linguistic activity is demonstrated in the structure of some of Glissant's later novels.[54] Narrative is continually 'relayed', or passed on from one voice to another, undermining any conception of a stable identity and interweaving events and influences within a dynamic, polyphonic system.

At the centre of Glissant's theory of relations is a close study of the evolution of creolised languages. Glissant's general theory of language is based on an examination of the production of Creole heterogeneity. For Glissant, 'creolisation' 'transports' us into a multilingual imaginary.[55] In *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, Glissant explains that the Creole spoken in Martinique evolved from contact with Norman and Breton dialects during the seventeenth century, but it also absorbed influences from Sub-Saharan Africa.

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[52] Edouard Glissant, *L'intention poétique*, (Poétique II) (Paris: Gallimard, 1997) p. 21.

[53] The term 'rhizomatic' comes from Deleuze and Guattari's *Mille plateaux: capitalisme et schizophrénie*, (Paris: Minuit, 1980). Briefly, an 'arborescent' structure has a direct relation to a single original root, while the rhizome figures an open-ended network of different relations.

[54] Celia M. Britton, *Edouard Glissant and Post-colonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance*, (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1999).

[55] Edouard Glissant, 'Beyond Babel', *World Literature Today*, 63.4, (1989), 561-563 (p. 561). The suggestion is that Creole is a specific example of global multilingualism. This perception of the exemplarity of creolisation is also put forward by J. Michael Dash in *Edouard Glissant*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Thus its sources are extremely diverse and were initially unrelated, yet Creole brought together these heterogeneous elements in the creation of a new singular idiom. Glissant asserts that 'j'appelle langue créole une langue dont les éléments de constitution sont hétérogènes les uns aux autres',[56] so that 'creolisation' seems to reflect above all this reference to plural and diverse origins. In addition to this, Creole languages are also dynamic and changing, signifying the refusal of a language to sit still. Creole functioned as a ruse and was continually reinvented and adapted by the slaves of the Caribbean so that the masters could not understand them. Heterogeneous fragments were intermittently introduced, and the language grew through this strategy of continual addition and reconstruction:

> Le mouvement linguistique de la créolisation a procédé par décantations successives, très
> rapides, en hiatus, de ces apports; la syntaxe qui en est résultée n'a jamais été fixe dans les
> termes, tout en ayant affirmé dès le départ sa pérennité dans les structures.[57]

Creolisation in this sense mirrors the structure of the 'poétique de la Relation', since it is mobile and dynamic, continually interacting with other grammatical systems and structures. It is also significant that Glissant speaks of 'creolisation' rather than 'créolité', as Chamoiseau, Bernabé and Confiant did, since he wants to focus on process rather than product.[58] 'Créolité' risks becoming static, describing a more essential concept, whereas 'creolisation' describes mobile interaction between different languages. This shift recalls Derrida's replacement of 'identité' with 'identification' in Le monolinguisme, emphasising an unending process rather than a given fact. Glissant similarly celebrates an activity rather than a self-enclosed, folkloric culture.

The mobile structure of creolisation is also bound up with orality. Creole languages are spoken rather than written, and their dynamic character also comes from the openness of oral discourse to reformulation. Writing can fix a language, at least in the sense that it can only provide a single version, and while a written text might be susceptible to multiple interpretations, its structure and form are always set down by the immobility of the printed form. Oral discourse, on the other hand, is spontaneous, unpredictable and open to change. Oral narratives are not fixed but can be modified at each stage by additions, repetitions, digressions and omissions. In Le Discours antillais, Glissant goes so far as to ally writing

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[56] Edouard Glissant, Introduction à une poétique du divers, (Paris: Gallimard, 1996) p. 20.

[57] Glissant, Poétique de la relation, p. 83.

[58] See Patrick Chamoiseau et Raphael Confiant, Lettres créoles: tracées antillaises et continentales de la littérature de Haïti,Guadeloupe, Martinique, Guyane, (Paris: Hatier, 1991). Also Chamoiseau, Confiant and

and orality to notions of 'le Même' et 'le Divers', affirming that 'l'écrit est la trace universalisante du Même, là où l'oral serait le geste organisé du Divers'.[59] 'Le Divers' here implies the absence of essence and identity and the presence of transversal, heterogeneous relations. If Creole cultures are also oral cultures, then they too reflect a discursive structure constructed by change and mobility. Glissant's binary opposition here is extreme, suggesting too emphatically the fixity of the written and contrasting orality with writing in such a way as to imply the tyranny of the latter without perceiving its mobility. Yet the theory is suggestive in that it also invites us to loosen that opposition by opening the structure of writing up to the dynamism of the oral.

The linguistic model of creolisation also allows for an awareness of the particularity of the idiom, again promoting not fusion but diversity within the relational system. The heterogeneous structure of the language also leads to a 'droit à l'opacité', as irreducibly singular idioms are created at different moments in time from the coming-together of different influences. Creole idioms are also opaque, continually turning away from familiar structures by adding new nuances and structures. In addition, Glissant's conception of opacity is useful because it claims to denote not the absolute untranslatability of Derrida's idiom, nor the troubling exclusion of one idiom from the language of another analysed by Khatibi, but rather the right to the invention of singularity. The theory of opacity is bound up in the poetics of Relation and it figures the unprecedented idioms that are formed out of the brushing of one language against another or out of the meeting of plural, 'creolised' origins. Glissant explains that opacity 'n'est pas l'enfermement dans une autarcie impénétrable, mais la subsistance dans une singularité non réductible',[60] suggesting that the idiom is not necessarily self-enclosed, but that it figures the specificity of a certain combination of identities within a single cultural moment. The opaque idiom has plural origins and influences and it inevitably resists smooth translation into another language, but it is not for that reason self-contained and monologic. Like Nancy's conception of singularity, opacity is not pure untranslatability but also a sign of participation and confluence.

Jean Bernabé, *Eloge de la créolité*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1993).

[59] Edouard Glissant, *Le Discours antillais*, (Paris: Seuil, 1981) p. 192.

[60] Edouard Glissant, *Poétique de la relation*, p. 204.

Despite the subversive nature of Glissant's conception of the singular idiom within the relational linguistic network, however, some of his most recent and celebratory formulations require further thought. As I argued in the previous section, Khatibi's work is particularly subtle because it reflects a tension between a sense of cultural specificity and a desire for a more hybridised 'pensée en langues'. Khatibi aptly demonstrates how linguistic structures need to be conceived both in terms of their dynamic interaction and in terms of the barriers that they are frequently still perceived to erect. Khatibi's thinking is progressive and subversive, but it also suggests that notions of self-enclosure and unity within language systems cannot simply be dismissed. In Glissant's most recent work, on the other hand, the idea of a chaotic network of relations is increasingly posited as an all-encompassing, global model, named the 'chaos-monde' or the 'tout-monde'. He therefore risks upholding creolisation as a symbol of subversion that can operate worldwide, transcending in a utopian manner the notion of a self-contained language structure. Glissant usefully works against the tendency for 'national' languages to close themselves off from one another, but he also at times implies their actual dissolution in a way that seems hasty and unrealistic. This shift in Glissant's work has been described by Peter Hallward as a move from the 'specific', a relative concept dependent on context, to the 'singular', a manifestation of univocity within a world-wide, chaotic network, implying also the dissolution of rigid national structures.[61] As Hallward intimates, however, Glissant's conception of singularity cannot overturn cultural specificity in the way that he at times seems to claim. His celebration of unlimited relationality needs also to take into account the different ways in which particular cultures or languages can be seen to participate in, or indeed resist, that wider network.

In a number of Glissant's recent texts, the network of interactions implied by the 'poétique de la Relation' is described using the totalised figure of the 'chaos-monde'. Glissant describes the chaos-monde as 'le choc, l'intrication, les répulsions, les attirances, les connivences, les oppositions, les conflits entre les cultures des peuples dans la totalité-monde contemporaine'.[62] This chaotic structure demonstrates the multiple, buzzing movement of cultures across the world, their constant interaction and the unknowable, unpredictable effects that this process might produce. Glissant picks up on the metaphor of chaos, taken from a scientific background, and uses this to describe the infinite mobility of

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[61] See Peter Hallward, 'Edouard Glissant between the Singular and the Specific', *Yale Journal of Criticism: Interpretation in the Humanities*, 11.2, (1998), 441-464.

[62] Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, p. 82.

different cultural systems, as well as the importance of their inter-relations and the new idioms that arise during this process. He notes that in both the scientific and the cultural sphere, determined dynamic systems can at any moment become erratic, such that 'le système de valeurs flotte à un moment donné, sans qu'on sache à première vue pourquoi'.[63] Chaos is a series of unpredictable events, which, though starting from determinate circumstances, give rise to unforeseen new quantities. This sense of unpredictability means that cultures and languages across the world are affected by global relations in ways that they may not intend or understand. No 'national' structure can entirely cut itself off from the 'chaos-monde', because these dynamic connections and contacts are forged over and above nationalist ideologies, undermining any claim for homogeneity or unity. Glissant's metaphor serves as a description of the intercultural movements taking place throughout the world, imagining at the same time the end of the 'identité racine'.

Glissant's 'chaos-monde' is also the 'tout-monde', which names the unending totality of relations caused by 'errance' and migration. The figure of the 'tout-monde' undermines territory and nationality and instead promotes a mode of thinking that remains open to multiple cultures, literatures and languages. It reflects a theory of writing where the authority of any single author or perspective is deconstructed by his repeated contact with a chaos of different voices and idioms. In the *Traité du tout-monde*, for example, Glissant affirms 'écrire c'est dire: le monde',[64] revealing the importance of the interpenetration of writing and orality, as well as portraying the integration of a total system of linguistic relations into the construction of the text. Writing according to the 'tout-monde' constitutes a chorus of diverse voices, originating from different parts of the world and working themselves into this random, disordered relational system. Glissant's novel *Tout-monde* enacts this veritable storm of different murmurs and echoes:

> Alors encore vous entendez ces langages du monde qui se rencontrent sur la vague le mont, toutes ces langues qui fracassent l'une dans l'autre comme des crêtes de vagues en furie, et vous entreprenez, tout un chacun applaudit, de bondir d'une langue dans l'autre, ça fait de grosses dévirades d'imprévu.[65]

The writer or poet travels inexorably, listening to a multitude of voices and allowing them to confront one another in the chaotic 'tout-monde' of his plural text. Poetic inspiration derives from the unprecedented idioms that emerge from this massive, uncontrolled network.

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[63] Ibid., p. 84.

[64] Edouard Glissant, *Traité du tout-monde*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1997) p. 119.

[65] Glissant, *Tout-monde*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1993) p. 20.

The intricacies of *Tout-monde* are too complicated to analyse in detail here, but it is worth noting the performance of polyphony that Glissant stages in this text. The writer does not provide a single authoritative view of the world but voices the echoes that resonate from the various dynamic cultures with which he comes into contact:

> Le langage est un voyage et voyez qu'il n'a pas de fin. Les langues sont des étapes, où vous couchez à l'ablanie, pour noircir ou blanchir selon qu'il se trouve. Vous rassemblez les cris que vous avez poussés, récoltés alentour, fouillés dans la terre ou taillés sur leur branche, vous les désordonnez pour commencer la parole.[66]

Again, this reflects the idea that language, in the sense of the singular idiom, consists of a series of changing and dynamic cultural moments, just as a voyage is defined by the movement from one culture to another. The language structures themselves, in the sense of 'langues', are transient forms that shape these cultural moments, but the poet also continually traverses their frontiers, inhabiting them only temporarily before reaching beyond and outside. Similarly then, the novel itself consists of a sequence of different narratives, stretching across the world, covering a plenitude of different territories and involving a complex network of inter-related characters. The perspective changes in each section, focusing on the experience of a different character in each instance and putting into relation aspects of a vast diversity of cultures.

The difficulty with this theory is that the extent of its exemplarity remains unclear. Glissant frequently suggests that the model of the 'chaos-monde' is bound up with a new form of totality, overturning universality and replacing it with the more mobile and versatile relationality. Yet in much of Glissant's writing, the concept of the 'totalité-monde' suggests that all parts of the world participate in this totalised model or structure, leading to a utopian vision that risks occluding the nuances associated with each culture's relation to global interaction. The composite network of the 'tout monde' attempts to overturn discourses privileging cultural and linguistic specificity, rather than suggesting that forms of particularity can coexist with a sense of cultural intersection or dialogue. In *Introduction*, for example, Glissant affirms '*le monde se créolise*', and he identifies a shift in human consciousness towards an understanding of the mass of confrontations that occur between heterogeneous modern cultures.[67] Yet here the application of the term 'créolise' to the entire world is problematic, since some cultures retain a desire for unity and uniformity to a far greater extent than the composite Creole cultures from which Glissant takes his example.

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[66] Ibid., p. 267.

Glissant has shifted from a reflection on creolisation as a response to colonialism in the Caribbean to a celebration of the broader processes of hybridisation occurring across the world. But this metaphorisation of Creole culture risks occluding or denying both the specific effects of colonialism in Martinique, and the prevalence of discourses wherein some form of particularity remains a value to be upheld. Creolisation serves as a strategy to undermine the hegemonic uniformity of colonial discourse, but Glissant endeavours to reject any form of specificity rather than drawing attention to the ways in which both modes of thinking coexist in the contemporary sphere.

Glissant also claims that it is no longer possible to write as a monolingual, suggesting again that all languages enter into contact with one another within a massive, uncontrolled system. Here again, the tone is utopian, since although all languages are relational, some discourses do attempt more than others to close themselves off from these sorts of relational effects, and in practice writing frequently is monolingual. Glissant admits that his theory is utopian, yet he also explains that the 'tout-monde' is a worldwide phenomenon; the only difference between the cultures involved is that the process of creolisation occurs at different speeds. He describes the difference between Creole and 'atavistic' languages, where 'creolisation' occurred a long time in the past, but parts of his writing suggest that this difference can ultimately be transcended and overcome. Glissant's attempt to bring out the relationality of all language structures is progressive and original, but the model risks glossing over these varying speeds and patterns. Glissant's promotes the all-pervasive model of creolised chaos in order to overthrow ideologies privileging specificity. But this celebratory model risks denying the residual power of those ideologies, replacing 'identity' with creolisation rather than reflecting on the complex ways in which these concepts confront and interact with one another. Languages may be relational, but they also require some form of specificity in order to function.

In this way then, Glissant's multilingual imaginary provides a compelling vision of linguistic and cultural interaction, drawing attention to the permeable borders of languages that set themselves up as unified and self-same. At the same time, however, his drive to negate self-enclosed language and identity structures seems problematic. Glissant's work shifts as I have argued from a reflection on Martinican specificity to a celebration of global creolisation, but that gesture then occludes the particularity both of the experiences of the

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[67] Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, p. 15.

Martinicans and of the different ways in which languages are still perceived to function. Furthermore, as Chris Bongie argues, Glissant's work on the 'chaos monde' does not overturn specificity in the way that he would like, as *Poétique de la relation* at times describes the participation of *distinct* cultures in the wider network, and even the later novels, such as *Mahagony*, inadvertently betray a lingering desire for 'identity'.[68] From this point of view, the concept of the opacity or singularity of the composite idiom described earlier could be seen to merge with a conception of cultural specificity; the opaque structures of Creole perhaps also inevitably signify a particular cultural moment. Most importantly, Glissant's desire to embrace the chaotic relational network leads to the establishment of an excessively generalised and utopian model that unrealistically privileges hybridisation at the expense of any form of cultural or linguistic demarcation.

Finally, Glissant's writing can be seen as a dynamic and energised exploration of poetic effects rather than an unproblematic theory of the constitution of languages. His style is chaotic, spontaneous and at times idiomatic, as the very form of his texts explores the blurring of linguistic frontiers. Glissant invents a plethora of different metaphors, and his images and concepts overlap, mutate, and reformulate one another. *Le Discours antillais* constitutes a wry attempt to parody and explode the rigidity of traditional rhetorical structures: the text is made up of divisions, subdivisions and commentaries, which for the most part turn out to be artificial and insufficient categories. Glissant pretends to organise his thinking into neat classifications, though under closer scrutiny it is evident that the thoughts themselves are too complex and too inter-related to be divided into tidy subcategories. In addition, a text such as *Traité du tout-monde* is impossible to pin down, combining literature, poetry, philosophy and politics without restricting itself to a straightforward argumentative discourse. It is as much concerned with experimentation as it is with the actual construction of existing languages, and its aim is to demonstrate a complex set of conjunctions between concepts as well as to affirm any particular understanding of linguistic relations. Glissant is performing a subversive strategy, producing a creolised *œuvre*, where concepts themselves become blurred. He uses 'creolisation' to imagine a utopian, chaotic series of interactions, rather than analysing the different ways in which the relation between language and community is in reality perceived and experienced.

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[68] See Chris Bongie, *Islands and Exiles: The Creole Identities of Post/colonial Literature*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998). Bongie uses the construction 'post/colonial' to evoke how the 'postcolonial' also contains aspects of colonial discourse. Glissant's postmodernism for Bongie is underpinned by some of the

Glissant's configuration of the interaction of languages is to a certain extent suggestive and points to a new, liberating linguistic structure. His attention to the opacity of the idiom, as well as to its construction within a mass of dynamic relations, in some ways performs the sort of non-essential community of singular beings that I have been discussing in the earlier sections of the thesis. This type of thinking could also be seen to provide a socio-political commentary, since by highlighting the relativity of the French language, it undermines its hegemony as well as any attempts to suppress or restrict its contacts with regional or immigrant languages. It reminds us that the original construction of the language was itself heterogeneous and suggests that we need to open our understanding of French to include an awareness of its encounter with cultural diversity. More specifically, it might suggest that new composite discourses, such as those found in some immigrant and Beur texts, are the very life-blood of the language insofar as they actively perform its juxtaposition with Arabic and Berber, as well as with English and American terminology.

The shortcomings of Glissant's theorisation are related not so much to the nature of the model he proposes but rather to the presumption of its generalisation. As we have seen, all languages are polyglot, and the origins of any discourse are both multiple and composite. Caution is needed, however, when applying Glissant's celebratory multilingual model to the whole world, since he hastily rejects any conception of linguistic specificity rather than affirming the complex conjunction of relationality with processes of separation and enclosure. Glissant can be used to demonstrate linguistic polyphony, but diverse languages should be seen to be implicated in this network through varying historical circumstances and with different degrees of affirmation and openness. The notion of a relational network shows how the reinforcement of linguistic barriers, and the exclusion of 'dialects' from a hegemonic structure, can be oppressive and restrictive; but different languages embrace and announce their relational structure in different ways and to varying extents. Glissant's celebratory, 'rhizomatic' model needs to be coupled with an awareness of the different ways in which cultural frontiers operate within contemporary thought.

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more identitarian structures of modernism.

Chapter Four:

Cultural Oppositions in 'First-Generation' Immigrant Literature

While recent critical theories have raised questions regarding notions of community and difference, or multilingualism and *métissage*, immigrant literature can further investigate some of the implications of such issues. Theoretical discourses describe the necessity for an understanding of cultural and linguistic confrontation and interaction, but literary texts by North African immigrants living in France form an exemplary site where different voices or systems can themselves be actively asserted and juxtaposed. Literature functions as a locus of subversion, where various conceptions of identity and community within the French-speaking world can be openly performed and challenged. Manipulating diverse cultural signs, symbols and references, texts by writers of North African origin are pertinent precisely because they engage with the discourse of community on an active, primary level rather than from a metatextual perspective.

Literary representation seems particularly unsettling in this regard because it disrupts the identification of any exemplary configuration or model. Fictional works offer suggestions concerning the ways in which culture or community might be perceived and experienced, but the texts are also singular and autonomous. They are not necessarily representative of a wider social or cultural group, but they fictionalise the world, using language and form to bring out the potential or hidden connotations of certain cultural issues rather than offering a straightforward portrait of how things are. Literature differs from ethnography or sociology in the sense that it never provides a factual or unmediated depiction, but allows itself to be read on multiple different levels. It explores history and society not by affirming a self-same, argumentative perspective but by playing with the reader's expectations and by opening itself up to many interpretations. Rachid Boudjedra suggests:

> La littérature a les moyens de dire qu'il y a plusieurs façons d'explorer et d'appréhender
> l'histoire. Elle permet de dégorger les silences, les falsifications et les mensonges, sans se
> prendre au sérieux, sans faire œuvre objective parce que l'histoire bouge et fonctionne selon
> le principe des sables mouvants et des gouffres spéléologiques. [1]

From this point of view, analysis of the literature of immigration can be seen as important for this study because its open and ambivalent significatory processes enact the plurality of

culture itself. The literary representation of any one cultural identity contains other, plural traces. The text does not set up one ideological vision, it cannot be pinned down, but gives rise to multiple readings incorporating various cultural perspectives. It is singular, in the sense that it operates according to its own logic, but it is also plural, conveying a variety of meanings or positions. This abundance can reflect the protean form of culture itself.

In this section, I shall concentrate on the work of Rachid Boudjedra and Tahar Ben Jelloun, who describe the experiences of the 'first generation' of immigrants. This term is problematic, as I signalled in chapter two, since it classifies the generations without reflecting on the varying effects of the shift from one generation to the next. In this context, however, the term can be used broadly to designate texts commenting on the experiences of individuals arriving in France for the first time, as opposed to those born and raised in France by North African families. In texts by writers such as Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun, such characters are portrayed as singular, and the focus is on disidentification from national paradigms. These writers concentrate on the ways in which some immigrants neither retain strong ties with their countries of origin, nor are they fully integrated into metropolitan French culture. The texts portray the exclusion of the North African immigrant Other from traditional forms of community, as well as his or her resistance to conventional codes of representation. Literary structures are manipulated in order to show how the immigrant characters weave in and out of various cultural systems, with the result that their position remains indeterminate. Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun use this depiction to criticise the failure of the French to recognise different forms of immigrant identity, pointing out the limitations of discourses upholding self-same 'national' categories. Similarly, their texts convey a sense of otherness in language, seeking to problematise the relation between language and identity and to question the hegemony of classical French structures and forms.

For the most part, Ben Jelloun and Boudjedra's texts work against prejudice and marginalisation, depicting the problems associated with the enforcement of rigid cultural and national frontiers. Their characters traverse the borders between France and North Africa, and yet the desire to achieve some form of dialogue is repeatedly cruelly thwarted and undermined. At the same time, however, I also want to suggest that there remains a tension within these texts between a criticism of rigidly demarcated cultural categories and a form of collusion with such oppositional structures. Ben Jelloun and Boudjedra offer a

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[1] Rachid Boudjedra, *Lettres Algériennes*, (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1995) pp. 43-4.

critique of common binary structures, but some of their depictions of France and North Africa do risk perpetuating these stereotypes, despite their efforts to leave their conclusions open-ended. They condemn any form of exclusionary thinking, but they intermittently appear to buy into certain models that convey their unwitting adherence to the discourses they claim to denounce. Ben Jelloun and Boudjedra criticise conventional notions of community, yet they can slip into reproducing myths of essential ethnic differences. In this sense, the texts are not self-same and they do not provide an unproblematic view of cultural interaction. Instead their ideological position remains uneasy, containing multiple associations over which the author does not have complete control.

Reading Immigrant Literature Politically

Before beginning a close reading of the notion of community in the work of Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun, it seems necessary to investigate some of the difficulties involved in assessing the political implications of novelistic discourse. The novels chosen here, Boudjedra's *Topographie idéale pour une agression caractérisée*, Ben Jelloun's *La réclusion solitaire*, *Les yeux baissés* and *Les raisins de la galère*, all convey a form of political commentary, but as I have suggested, the specifically fictional quality of the works itself complicates any straightforward socio-political project. Literary texts can to a certain extent be read for the comments they make on the socio-political position of North African immigrants in France, but these texts are also not purely realist documents. Their social and political interventions are coupled with preoccupations with form and narrative, with the playful and indeterminate process of the production of meaning, and any political message is also intertwined with such literary concerns. The language of the text can produce associations that exceed the confines of a clear-cut political position.

First, Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun's novels are on one level deeply anchored in a set of pressing contemporary political concerns. Reflecting on the generation of workers that arrived in Paris in the seventies, and the violence and hostility with which they were greeted, they at times make explicit reference to the attacks that immigrants suffered. Boudjedra's *Topographie* describes the arrival in Paris of an Algerian emigrant, his disorientation and panic as he wanders in the labyrinth of the metro, and his subsequent assassination. The text is pointedly set on 26th September, 1973, a day when a number of Algerians were actually killed in Paris. Boudjedra also inserts into the text an extract from a newspaper charting the 'onze morts depuis le 29 août', emphasising the aggression and intolerance that the

immigrant workers endured.[2] The attack recounted in the novel is 'caractérisée', reflecting a

multitude of real and similar aggressions. This recalls a passage in Ben Jelloun's *Les yeux*

baissés, where soon after her arrival in Paris the heroine starts making a record of racist

attacks. The sombre list of names, ages and the manner in which the individuals were killed

clearly unveils the racism underpinning the French reception of North African immigrants.[3]

Both writers express their aim to demystify and denounce the treatment of immigrants in

France. Boudjedra, speaking of *Topographie*, affirms:

> Mon livre s'adresse surtout aux nord-africains dans la mesure où l'urgence du problème
>
> exige un nouveau processus de la politique de l'émigration. Je veux aussi démythifier le sens
>
> même du départ vers la France afin que les jeunes, surtout, comprennent que l'émigration est
>
> un piège.[4]

The text overtly criticises the way in which North Africans were deceptively seduced into

working in France, as the narrator complains that the French made promises regarding the

potential benefits that turned out to be illusory.[5] Equally, Ben Jelloun's *La réclusion*

solitaire can be read alongside his thesis *La plus haute des solitudes*, which constitutes a

sociological investigation of the sexual frustration of immigrant workers. It should also be

looked at in conjunction with his *Hospitalité française*, which studies the phantasms

experienced by racists with regard to perceived threats to their cultural and racial purity.[6]

These texts read together make a plea for the recognition of the social rejection and political

occlusion of North African immigrants in France.

Yet if on one level a demand for political recognition is a central part of the writing

projects of Ben Jelloun and Boudjedra, on another level both writers also resist purely

ethnographic readings by announcing the literary quality of their work and by playing with

form. The texts studied here do retain some form of reference, but they also use formal

experimentation to convey commentary and critique. Both writers uncover the ambiguities

of political discourse by attempting to open their novels to multiple interpretations and by

problematising the representation of cultural identity itself. Boudjedra's texts inherit certain

textual strategies from the *nouveau roman*, which debunks literature as representational and

instead presents the text as its own reality. While on one level it conveys a direct political

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[2] Rachid Boudjedra, *Topographie idéale pour une agression caractérisée*, (Paris: Denoël, 1975) p. 161.

[3] Tahar Ben Jelloun, *Les yeux baissés*, (Paris: Seuil, 1991) pp. 117-8.

[4] Boudjedra in *Romans maghrébins: un regain de vigueur. L'Afrique littéraire* 70 (1985) ed. Salim Jay, p. 61.

[5] See Boudjedra, *Topographie*, p. 119.

[6] See Tahar Ben Jelloun, *La plus haute des solitudes: misère sexuelle d'émigrés nord-africains*, (Paris: Seuil,

1977) and *Hospitalité française: racisme et immigration maghrébine*, (Paris: Seuil, 1984).

message against racism, *Topographie* also aims to challenge our preconceptions regarding reading itself, implying that no single interpretation can be guaranteed. Words, metaphors and descriptions are piled on top of one another so as to obscure the possibility of an identifiable portrait of the emigrant, and Boudjedra implicitly compares the reader's conventional search for meaning with the apparently inexhaustible entanglement of the Parisian metro system. Similarly, Ben Jelloun also upsets stereotypical or straightforward representation by allowing the layers of narration to proliferate. Myriad different voices are given free reign, and *Les yeux baissés* presents a jumble of cultural viewpoints that upsets the creation of an affirmative political stance. Texts such as *L'enfant de sable* incorporate various alternative conclusions, and the citations and conflicting hypotheses of the different 'conteurs' complicate the very notion of 'reality'. The political resonances of Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun's texts are coupled with a creative unwillingness to engage with the social in a straightforward and unmediated way. Both writers refer to the social and political world, but they also use form to disrupt our expectations regarding the construction of that representation.

Commentators such as Déjeux and Khatibi therefore suggest that within North African literature of French expression there exists a dual focus, whereby writers seek a way to combine formal innovation with the communication of a political message. One of the issues at the centre of the texts concerns the way in which the author might on the one hand retain political clout without reducing representation to mimesis or sociology, and on the other hand, how he might innovate formally without losing sight of politics. This issue is related to the balance between identification with a particular community and the desire to exceed context and create a work of literature on its own terms. For Khatibi, for example:

> Le roman maghrébin veut à tout prix justifier son efficacité par sa présence sociale et son
> rôle historique. Or cette histoire dont il parle se fait sans lui et comme toute idéologie, le
> roman maghrébin reste prisonnier de la situation qu'il désire s'approprier. Seulement, il
> s'agit dans ce cas d'une idéologie esthétique, c'est-à-dire narcissique, et qui ne se contente
> pas d'être le miroir du monde, elle veut sécréter sa propre existence.[7]

This implies that these texts are constructed around a struggle: they are products of a historical situation and they hope both to retain an active role in that situation, and to reach

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[7] Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Le roman maghrébin*, (Paris: Maspero, 1968) p. 111. See also Jean Déjeux, *Maghreb: littératures de langue française*, (Paris: Arcantère, 1993) 14-20.

beyond it. As Boudjedra repeatedly asserts, political engagement is important, but the novels also foreground their poetic qualities and the subversive capacity of language.[8]

As I discussed in relation to theoretical writing, however, this apparent dichotomy between textuality and politics can be softened if literary discourses are seen not as the conveyors of political messages but as forums where discursive constructions can be realigned in creative and suggestive ways. The political and the formal aims of the texts can to a certain extent be seen to converge. Literary texts, even more than theory, engage not necessarily with political action but with underlying representational strategies, which can pointedly question the assumptions lying behind terms such as 'community' and 'difference' in other, existing discourses. The socio-political resonances of these novels should be understood not as particular standpoints or affiliations but as strategies for subversion or suggestions for provisional reconfigurations. Liberated from the constraints of argumentative discourse, literature can subvert preconceived forms and stereotypes, manipulating language and signification in order to disrupt received perceptions of culture or collective identity. The disruption of an identifiable portrait in *Topographie*, and the plural voices of Ben Jelloun's texts, could from this point of view be assessed in terms of the way in which they comment on facile, reductive definitions of otherness, rather than in terms of their adherence to any particular understanding of North African difference. These texts convey a form of political critique without subscribing to any political orthodoxy, engaging with existing discourses while refusing to uphold any self-same alternative. Their complicated formal structures also mean that they resist being perceived as representative of a single community but call for different interpretations from various cultural perspectives.

An added complication regarding the political impact of North African novels of immigration involves the implications of their use of the French language. This anxiety has been discussed extensively, and I shall not examine all the intricacies of the situation here, but it is important to remember that Algerian and Moroccan writers' relationship with French is suffused in the ideology of colonisation. As I mentioned in chapter three, the French language was forced upon Maghrebians by their colonisers and is for this reason inextricably associated with political domination and alterity. Algerian and Moroccan

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[8] See for example the interview on politics in Hafid Gafaïti's *Boudjedra ou la passion de la modernité*, (Paris: Denoël, 1987) 17-30. This dual focus is further demonstrated in the field of literary criticism, as Marc Gontard argues for further examination of the formal properties of the texts and criticises existing studies for focusing on history or sociology etc. See *La violence du texte: la littérature marocaine de langue française*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1981).

literature of French expression could therefore in some ways be read as a participation in the culture of the coloniser. This relation is particularly unstable in novels discussing immigration, since the distinction between the immigrant and the culture of the country of adoption is even more blurred, and the threat of assimilation or appropriation is even more apparent. Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun must both use French to express their social and political criticisms, and retain some sense of difference from or resistance to French culture. They use French while remaining partially alienated and exiled in that language. In *L'écrivain public*, for example, Ben Jelloun writes frequently of his sense of separation and alienation when writing in French; French words become treacherous travesties, attempting to encompass him and define him while also denying the parts of his identity that it is unable to reflect:

> Ecrire c'est se séparer: quitter le corps de la mère; s'éloigner (un temps) de la terre natale.
> Ecrire c'est habiter son nom. Moi je l'habite dans une autre langue que celle de la mère. Je
> suis séparé et non exilé. J'écris dans cette rupture. J'éloigne de moi et de ce que j'écris mon
> visage. Cette brûlure d'absence est passion. Deux maisons. Deux rives. Un même exil.[9]

This experience of alienation and separation suggests that there is also a degree of compromise involved in writing in French, since claims for the recognition of the difference of the immigrant will also inevitably leave gaps when expressed in the language of another culture.[10] It should also be noted here that Ben Jelloun echoes Malek Haddad, one of the first North African writers to comment explicitly on the association of writing with exile, and both writers also underline the ambivalence of this experience of separation, drawing attention to its possible benefits.[11] The language of the coloniser alienates them, but it also allows them to express taboos and political dissatisfactions, regarding for example the position of women in Islam. These would not, at least initially, have been accepted by some

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[9] Tahar Ben Jelloun, 'Paroles d'exil', *Magazine littéraire*, 221, (1985), 39-40, (p. 40).

[10] For further analysis of the idea of compromise, see Jacqueline Kaye and Abdelhamid Zoubir, *The Ambiguous Compromise. Language, Literature and National Identity in Algeria and Morocco*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1990). Kaye and Zoubir are highly critical of many North African writers of French expression, arguing that their use of French colludes with colonialism and French tradition, and that it cannot express the concerns of the people of Algeria or Morocco themselves. They also complain that French is systematic and codified, so that it tramples over the more fluid North African tradition of oral culture. The book contains many original observations but is also rather one-sided in its dismissal of writers such as Ben Jelloun and Boudjedra.

[11] See Malek Haddad, 'Les zéros tournent en rond', *Ecoute et je t'appelle*, (Paris: Maspero, 1961), 7-46. Also important in this context are Ben Jelloun's comments in an interview, 'Deux cultures, une littérature', propos recueillis par Pierre Maury, *Magazine littéraire*, 329, (1995), 106-111. He explains how French is for him a language of seduction. He also says he uses it to speak about his mother in *Harrouda* (Paris: Denoël, 1973) with an audacity and frankness that would have been impossible in Arabic (p. 108). The final point to

Arabic-speaking readers in Algeria or Morocco had they attempted to publish in that language.

Again recalling the subversive activity discussed in chapter three, the specifically literary language of these texts means that the writer can subvert the political hegemony of the French language by twisting and disrupting its form. These writers use French while also stressing their refusal of the dominant French culture. As Khatibi suggests, writers such as Ben Jelloun attempt to express the otherness contained within the French language by including the echoes and traces of another dialect. Commenting on this tradition in general terms, Khatibi writes:

> La tendance dominante est représentée par Khaïr-Eddine, Ben Jelloun, Laâbi, Nissaboury, Mansouri. Malgré la diversité de leurs démarches, les poètes s'entendent pour essayer d'introduire dans le français un mouvement syntaxique proprement personnel (parfois inspiré de l'arabe dialectal), mouvement lui-même submergé par l'inflation lexicale: mots rares, mots inventés de toutes pièces, mots traduits littéralement de l'arabe dialectal.[12]

Recalling Khatibi's own work on bilingualism, Ben Jelloun introduces Arabic and Berber expressions into French, and *Les yeux baissés* performs the immigrant's traversal of cultural frontiers by borrowing traits from the traditional North African folktale and incorporating oral culture into the structure of the French novel. Similarly, Boudjedra parasites the French language from within by breaking the rules of grammar and syntax and by deconstructing rationality and teleology with his interminable winding sentences. He also claims to employ a different sort of French from that of the writer of metropolitan France, as he attempts to inject it with a sense of the alterity of the protagonist.[13]

A final, related problem with the political associations of Ben Jelloun and Boudjedra's work is the risk of canonisation and their apparent appropriation by the French academy. I have already warned of the risk that North African writers run when writing in French, and it is clear that Ben Jelloun and Boudjedra are both well read and received in France, probably far more than they are in Morocco and Algeria. That Ben Jelloun and Boudjedra are published by such prestigious names as Seuil and Denoël can give the impression that their texts are being canonised in France, despite the problem that they are

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remember here is that writing in French provides these writers with a wider readership, and, on a more practical level, makes it easier for them to make a living.

[12] Abdelkebir Khatibi, 'De la critique du langage à la lutte des classes', *Le Monde (des livres)*, 17 décembre 1971, p. 24.

[13] It should also be remembered that Boudjedra now writes his texts in Arabic, only later translating them into French.

known in their countries of origin only by an academic élite.[14] This has given rise to the objection that their texts cater for European readers rather than readers from North Africa. Several critics have argued that Ben Jelloun was presented with the Prix Goncourt in 1987 for *La nuit sacrée* precisely because the text fulfilled Orientalist expectations regarding the exoticised other. Kaye and Zoubir, for example, criticise Ben Jelloun virulently for depicting Morocco using a series of sexual and cultural stereotypes.[15] They also show how Ben Jelloun by turns either renounces his Moroccan identity by calling himself an 'écrivain français' or emphasises his identification with Arab culture as it suits him or his assumed audience. Ben Jelloun could be seen to fall into perpetuating a certain, received vision of cultural difference in a way that he might not have intended.

Identifying the theoretical and political implications of Ben Jelloun and Boudjedra's work is in this regard a complicated process. On the one hand, as I have argued, their literary texts seem to be open-ended, depicting not a single vision but performing the deconstruction of cultural identity and ideology themselves. They attempt not to portray the other in a particular, self-same way but to show how otherness exceeds the confines of straightforward representational processes. Language and form in their texts serve to leave gaps and inconsistencies in the depiction of communal identity structures. Despite this view of the playful nature of the fictional enterprise, however, both writers do also intermittently invest in certain myths, metaphors and stereotypes in such a way as to uphold their value. Their criticism of exclusionary structures is at times underpinned by a reified vision of either French or Moroccan culture and society. In addition, Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun attempt to upset straightforward representational conventions, but the texts at times underline in a way that recalls Derrida or Lyotard the very otherness of the other to the extent that it seems static. While much of their work sets out to reject traditional communal structures, at the same time they risk re-establishing cultural frontiers. Ben Jelloun and Boudjedra want to criticise racism and exclusion, but their underlying conceptions of the nature of communal identification remain uncertain and ambiguous.

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[14] For more information on the reception of North African writers in France, consult Jean Déjeux, *Maghreb: littératures de langue française.*

possessed the money for the journey home, and the prospect of return became increasingly elusive. This generation was never accorded adequate recognition in France, but the native land also became a distant and ever-receding horizon. Sayad sums this situation up with the contradiction that, 'on ne sait plus s'il s'agit d'un état provisoire mais qu'on se plaît à prolonger indéfiniment ou, au contraire, s'il s'agit d'un état plus durable mais qu'on se plaît à vivre avec un intense sentiment de provisoire'.[17] Caught ambiguously between these positions, the immigrants of the first generation inhabited an empty space, a 'non-lieu', where they were occluded and forgotten by the French even as they became irrevocably severed from their countries of origin.

Both Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun express this sense of indeterminacy and alienation in their novels. Detached from both the French and the North African communities, the protagonists of their texts seem condemned to drift alone in the 'in-between'. In *Topographie idéale pour une agression caractérisée* for example, Boudjedra examines the isolation and bewilderment of a North African emigrant arriving in the labyrinth of the Parisian metro. The central character is unable to engage in dialogue, he does not speak and we are never given access to his inner thoughts, underlining his unfamiliarity and unknowability. The first pages of the novel revolve around a potential portrait of the emigrant, only the text focuses precisely on what his distinguishing features are not, delaying characterisation and frustrating any attempt to construct a coherent picture. The signs we are given connote eccentricity and inappropriateness. His trousers, for example, seem unusual and oddly sewn together, as Boudjedra describes 'le pantalon de coutil dont la trame était formée de grains cotonneux bicolores (rouge et gris) mêlés sans idée préconçue selon une loi de combinatoire douteuse'.[18] Similarly, his shoes retain traces of the dust of the 'Piton', his original home, and these attributes neither fit with Parisian culture, nor do they carry sufficient cultural baggage for us to reconstruct a sense of the Algerian community. His single symbol of security is the screwed up paper he clutches in his hand that contains the address of his destination, and these tenuous remnants of Algeria reinforce the radical nature of his separation from his country of origin. Boudjedra refers to him as an 'émigré' rather than an 'immigré', thereby laying emphasis on his original home and on the action of departure rather than on integration into France. (The term is also subversive here

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[16] See Abdelmalek Sayad, *L'immigration ou les paradoxes de l'altérité*, (Brussels: De Boeck-Wesmael, 1991) p. 99.
[17] Ibid., p. 51.

since it would usually be used in French to denote departure from France, implying more affluence and prestige.) Yet the reader is allowed little information regarding the original home and it exists in the text only as a symbol of loss and uprooting. The hero of the text is cut off from Algeria and yet he seems impossibly alienated in the unwelcoming environment of the Parisian metro.

The emigrant's nonconformity with French culture is expressed by his disorientation and confusion in the apparently entangled logic of the metro system. The text depicts the disjunction between the rational, ordered system of the topography of the underground and the cultural otherness of the emigrant. The protagonist is continually baffled to the point of intoxication by the maze of zig-zag lines, as the network seems so alien to his mode of thinking that he finds it impossible to forge an itinerary across the city. The paths seem to go nowhere, there is no centre, and in his eyes, the system topples into chaos. The map is:

> Ce lacis de lignes enchevêtrées les unes dans les autres, s'arrêtant arbitrairement là où l'on s'y attend le moins, se coupant au mépris de toutes les lois géométriques (et ce manque de rigueur ne semble préoccuper personne parmi les usagers: le métro abrite pourtant 345 stations et 200 km de couloirs et il transporte 4 millions de voyagers par jour!), se chevauchant, se ramifiant, se dédoublant, se recroquevillant un peu à la façon de cette mémoire toujours leste à partir.[19]

The topography of the metro is meaningless for the emigrant newly arrived from a rural village in the mountains of Algeria, and his incomprehension becomes a symbol of this insurmountable cultural hiatus. The logic of the Parisian metro, in the mind of the emigrant, represents the entangled and indecipherable nature of the French cultural system itself. He becomes an unknown, faceless figure, excluded from this coded culture within which he battles fruitlessly to orient himself.

If Boudjedra portrays the alienation of a North African emigrant arriving in France, then Ben Jelloun similarly investigates this process of rejecting received patterns of identification. Ben Jelloun's immigrants are incommensurable with existing community formations; they seem irreducibly singular or 'wholly other'. In *La réclusion solitaire*, for example, Ben Jelloun traces the acute solitude of an immigrant worker living in Paris in the seventies. At the start of *La réclusion*, the protagonist lives in what he calls a trunk, and when he does succeed in moving into a room, he is greeted with an interminable list of prohibitions. He is also excluded from dialogue, recalling Boudjedra's emigrant, and his

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[18] Boudjedra, *Topographie idéale pour une agression caractérisée*, p. 9.
[19] Ibid., p. 20.

existence barely seems to be recognised by the French community. To counteract this non-recognition, he dreams of community and fraternity:

> L'idée d'exister autrement me hantait. Entrer dans un café, par exemple; les gens me regarderaient, me parleraient, me toucheraient (pas pour me faire mal, pas pour se débarrasser de moi dans un éclat de violence, pas pour vider un chargeur de pistolet mitrailleur sur ma silhouette quelque peu brune, agaçante et différente, pas pour l'injure et la gifle) pour échanger avec moi des mots banals, simples, quotidiens.[20]

Contact and dialogue become a fantasy, as the immigrant is barely looked at or spoken to and he is forced into the position of a faceless and voiceless nonentity. He lives to work, his body becomes a machine and his mind becomes frozen and oppressed. His sexual energy is also sapped, and he seems paradoxically to live in a permanent state of transience and contingency. This closely recalls the depiction of solitude and impotence in *La plus haute des solitudes*, where Ben Jelloun describes how the immigrant of the seventies is treated 'comme objet dans la production, exclu du désir et de l'affectivité'.[21]

While Boudjedra underlines the isolation of his protagonist by disallowing readerly access into his psychology, in Ben Jelloun's text the sense of loneliness is expressed through the replacement of a real community with the over-development of an imagined world. The identity construction of the protagonist takes place within a series of phantasms, as his dislocated self institutes a dialogue with an imaginary other: 'je me laissais aller dans des rêvasseries pour ne pas vomir la colère que je broyais en silence'.[22] He struggles to locate himself through an alter ego, attempting to grasp the fragments and snatches of different cultural identities that conflict within his consciousness. He creates an imaginary lover, who becomes interwoven with memories of his native land and provides him with a sense of home. She in turn becomes both a part of his psyche and an independent interlocutor, addressing him as if from the outside. Gathering together disparate images and myths, this interlocutor forms an attempt in the mind of the narrator to come to terms with his own sense of fragmentation and loss. She becomes a springboard for the narrator, a figure for him to define himself in relation to, as well as a lover and a symbol of communality. Even for the reader, objectivity and subjectivity in the narrative are confused, resulting in an inability to demarcate the limits of the immigrant's consciousness. In Boudjedra's text, then, the psychology of the emigrant is effaced in order to sever his thought processes from

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[20] Tahar Ben Jelloun, *La réclusion solitaire*, (Paris: Denoël, 1976) pp. 38-9.
[21] Ben Jelloun, *Le plus haute des solitudes*, p. 12.
[22] Ben Jelloun, *La réclusion solitaire*, p. 97.

our frames of reference. In Ben Jelloun's text, however, the immigrant's consciousness is expanded to form a world of its own, so that his isolation is expressed precisely through the power of the Imaginary to the detriment of the Symbolic, and through the confusion of fantasy and the real.

The representation of cultural alienation is developed further by the portrayal of the immigrants' relations with French or North African culture and society. In both Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun's texts, French and Maghrebian cultures are strictly differentiated, and the dislocation of the central character is underlined by the depiction of national identity as particular and self-enclosed. This on one level serves to denounce the prejudiced and exclusive nature of French society, criticising that drive to uphold a pure and self-contained identity structure. In *Topographie*, Boudjedra boldly criticises the racism of the French and the continued tendency towards over-determination. The other passengers are irritated by the emigrant, and unable to understand his confusion, they insult him, push him around and take his disorientation for stupidity, crying 'va te faire voir – idiot – quel culot – du vent – sale mec – tu pues – rentre au douar', and so on.[23] Observing that he originates from the mountains of Algeria, they perceive him to be backward and incompetent, and they reject him for his inability to conform to the French system. In one episode, some French passengers take one glance at him, perceive that he is Arabic and shout 'Fakir!', the single word of Arabic with which they are familiar, betraying both disrespect and ignorance of Arabic culture.[24] Of course, the assassination is also a powerful symbol of the French attempt to eliminate the other, as if to preserve cultural purity and clearly delimit the identity of the self.

This sort of critique is also offered in Ben Jelloun's *Les yeux baissés*, where the French reception of Maghrebians is similarly denounced and laid bare. The heroine is shaken and astounded by the murder of Djellali, the neighbour's son, as we are told in cold, direct terms: 'il était neuf heures dix, ce dimanche 27 octobre 1971, lorsqu'une balle traversa le cœur d'un enfant qui jouait au flipper dans un café de la Goutte-d'Or.'[25] It is this episode that incites the heroine to keep a record of all the attacks reported in the papers. In addition, the police seem to be guilty both of racism and of intolerance of Islam. Just at the

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[23] Boudjedra, *Topographie*, p. 179.
[24] Ibid., p. 68.
[25] Ben Jelloun, *Les yeux baissés*, p. 109.

moment when the heroine is beginning to feel more at home in France, the police break in and search all the apartments in her street, insulting the inhabitants and symbolically throwing a copy of the Koran out of the window. The immigrants also have no mosque in which to pray and are consigned to a shed, signifying again the marginalisation of Islamic culture in French society. These gestures of rejection cause the heroine to feel that 'Paris n'était pas ma ville, et que la France ne serait jamais tout à fait mon pays'.[26] To a certain extent, the exile and solitude of the immigrants can be seen to be caused by these demonstrations of racist aggression.

For both Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun, the French drive to exclusion is further demonstrated by the rigid demarcation of topographical boundaries. In *Topographie*, for example, Boudjedra criticises the desire to classify and delimit spaces according to strict geometrical rules. The map of the metro system helps to figure the separation of areas of the city one from the other into enclosed ghettos. Boudjedra seems perplexed by 'cette propension à tout fermer, clôturer, enfermer dans un assemblage de traits et de segments de droites et de courbes, le tout barricadé à l'intérieur d'une frontière dont la configuration stricte, nette et implacable rappelle les zones interdites entourées de fer barbelé.'[27] Similarly, in *Les raisins de la galère*, Ben Jelloun openly condemns the way in which French cities are built according to the demarcation of fixed boundaries. Nadia, the heroine of the text, ridicules the self-contained construction of the city, relegating those who are not 'Français de souche' to the suburbs. She perceives the fixed separation of centre and suburb as a reflection of the exclusion of immigrants from 'civilised' metropolitan France, reminding us of the segregation of immigrants into underprivileged areas. To her, the construction of communities according to such rigid barriers and closed walls is indicative of social and cultural inequality. City boundaries come to symbolise prejudice, as the French 'pensent que la banlieue ne fait déjà plus partie de l'Hexagone, mais que cet anneau-là a déjà décroché et dérivé du côté du tiers-monde, des pays non alignés, des régions en voie de sous-développement'.[28]

In Boudjedra's *Topographie*, this critique of French social thinking becomes associated with a denunciation of mass culture and the more generalised tendency towards over-determination brought about by an over-investment in signs produced by

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[26] Ibid., p. 103.

[27] Boudjedra, *Topographie*, p. 24.

[28] Ben Jelloun, *Les raisins de la galère*, (Paris: Fayard, 1996) p. 125.

advertisements. Recalling Barthes and the critique of the myths of mass culture elucidated in *Mythologies*, Boudjedra shows how slogans from advertisements invade the consciousness of the emigrant, highlighting the stereotypes that abound in modern culture.[29] If Barthes pointed out how advertisements transform culture into nature, rendering culturally-produced assumptions entrenched and essential, Boudjedra inserts fragments from such mythologised catchphrases into his text and brings out the manufactured nature of the metaphors they display. For example, there is extended reference to an advertisement for 'l'île des lotophages', and here the association of holidays with Homer's Odyssey (we are told that *'les lotophages servirent du lotus aux compagnons de Ulysse qui en oublièrent leur patrie*. Homère, *Odyssée*, 9'[30]) shows how the island is caught up in a cultural myth founded on artificial connections between signs. The advertisement brings the intertext of the Greek myth of the Odyssey into the modern world, yet it also flattens it, drawing it inside the cultural machine and appropriating it for its own purposes. The myths of advertising are also laid bare in a poster portraying fruit, where the slogan is 'chez nous la nature est restée naturelle'[31], and here the irony of the manufacture of 'nature' itself aptly encapsulates Barthes's theory of the artificial, mass-produced 'mythologisation' of cultural assumptions.

Associated with the denunciation of the narrowness and artificiality of this sort of cultural signification is a condemnation of the culture of the image. Boudjedra writes against the inward-looking tendency of the society of the spectacle, unveiling both its narcissism and its attempts to appropriate difference. He criticises the vanity that subtends the advertisements that cover the walls of the underground and points out that they reduce eroticism according to the workings of the cultural machine. These images appropriate and disavow difference. In *Lettres algériennes*, Boudjedra suggests that mass culture implies a sort of eternal debt, as it beckons the consumer to keep up with and adhere to its homogenising but alluring images. For Boudjedra, the French consumer is 'ballotté entre la

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[29] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, (Paris: Seuil, 1957). See for example p. 217: 'ce qui permet au lecteur de consommer le mythe innocemment, c'est qu'il ne voit pas en lui un système sémiologique, mais un système inductif: là où il n'y a qu'une équivalence, il voit une sorte de procès causal: le signifiant et le signifié ont, à ses yeux, des rapports de nature. On peut exprimer cette confusion autrement: tout système sémiologique est un système de valeurs; or le consommateur du mythe prend la signification pour un système de faits'. This confusion between facts and cultural values is interesting in the context of the community, as it implies that the specific is taken for the universal. Thus mass culture believes itself to be meaningful generally, when in reality it draws otherness in and appropriates it to form part of its highly specific symbolic system.

[30] Boudjedra, *Topographie*, p. 174.

[31] Ibid., p. 118.

publicité qui fait de l'hyperconsommation la bible de l'homme moderne, astucieux et plein de malice, de surcroît, et entre le surendettement qui fait de lui une proie facile pour les bonimenteurs et les bateleurs de bazars'.[32] Images ensnare the individual and catch him in a double bind, inducing him to fit with the system but also reifying and therefore alienating him. Individuals are paradoxically both defined by and fall short of the uniform mass cultural model. This also recalls Tournier's *La goutte d'or*, where a Berber comes to France only to be swept up by a mass of stereotypical images of Arabic culture, and photography is associated with lies and tyranny.

It should be noted, however, that Boudjedra's version of Frenchness also raises a number of questions. While he is clearly voicing a condemnation of the homogenising forces of mass culture, criticising this obligation to conform, Boudjedra risks encouraging the reader to associate mass culture too closely with 'Frenchness' in general, representing French society above all in terms of this monolithic fascination with myths and images. Boudjedra produces a vision of French society that itself risks becoming stereotypical and reductive. While this sort of invasive culture should be denounced, mass-produced images are of course not the only cultural force operating within French society. It seems problematic, then, that Boudjedra depicts the disjunction caused by immigration above all in terms of this opposition between mass culture and rural Algerian life, since it evidently again emphasises absolute incommensurability rather than drawing attention to the complexity within French and Algerian cultures themselves. Boudjedra's critique on the one hand endeavours to condemn the drive towards self-enclosure, but it also risks reducing French society to a homogeneous set of attitudes rather than clearly differentiating mass culture from diverse and varied forms of French identity. The polarisation of intractable difference and an all-encompassing, homogeneous cultural system perpetuates the perceived frontier between France and Algeria.

Ben Jelloun's *Les yeux baissés* provides a less detailed vision of 'Frenchness', but it similarly revolves extensively around the binary opposition between French and North African cultures. Ben Jelloun refrains from describing the French community, focusing above all on the Moroccan village that the heroine left behind, but his portrayal of the dissociation between cultures also risks raising a number of difficulties. Like Boudjedra,

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[32] Rachid Boudjedra, *Lettres algériennes*, (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 1995) p. 182.

Ben Jelloun wants to reveal how the individual might exceed established classifications, but those categories also remain intact, as he at times maintains a stereotypical idea of Moroccan life. First of all, the culture of the village revolves around superstition, fatalism and myths, perpetuated by a folkloric tradition. The heroine herself is perceived as the subject of a myth that has been passed down the generations, whereby she is said to be the chosen one, destined to find the buried treasure in the mountain and to save the village from disaster. The destiny of the village is said to be marked out in the lines of her hand. The secret of the treasure creates a sense of the legendary and situates the text deep in the banks of local memory. Yet since she is uprooted from the village and taken to France at an early age, the heroine also grows up acculturated according to French customs and expectations, and she resolves to live the life of an emancipated French woman. Her relation with the village remains disjointed and uneasy, even though racism and violence prevent her complete integration into France. This incompatibility and duality means that 'je ne savais pas comment retenir un bout de terre de ce village, le garder en moi, comme refuge ou comme un devoir envers la tribu'.[33] Immigration into France seems to demand a refusal of the original home. Cultures are revealed to be self-enclosed and incompatible.

On returning to the village towards the end of the novel, the heroine feels that 'nous venions d'un autre monde', and the move from France back to Morocco is again described as disjunctive.[34] She carries out her role as the saviour of the village, but she retains all the time a sense of detachment. While participating in the procession to the mountain, she retains the viewpoint of an objective observer, detecting the hopes of the villagers in their facial expressions but remaining unmoved by the experience herself: 'un sentiment de pitié et de honte rendait mes pas lourds ou hésitants'.[35] Having moved to France, her relation with the village has become uncomfortable; she has been educated in French culture, literature and history and the myths of the story-telling culture of the rural community no longer seem to make sense.

Yet while Ben Jelloun may to a certain extent be attempting to show how French society prevents the transportation of cultural references across geographical frontiers, it is significant here that the difference of the village is perhaps itself over-emphasised. The association of the village with a highly conventional vision of folkloric culture results in the

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[33] Ben Jelloun, Les yeux baissés, p. 144.
[34] Ibid., p. 200.
[35] Ibid., p. 268.

depiction of Morocco as an exotic and idealised world characterised by the myths of Orientalism. The village is described as a timeless idyll, retaining the unchanging culture of generations of ancestors, while France is synonymous with 'civilisation'. The village is also peopled with somewhat Manichean figures, derived again from a certain view of the folkloric tradition. The heroine's brother Driss, for example, who is killed by her aunt, is described as an 'ange'. By contrast, however, this aunt is perceived as an evil incarnation or spirit, symbolising death itself: 'la mort pour moi a un visage: celui de ma tante, un visage bouffi par la frustration, le manque, la jalousie, et l'immense malheur qui l'habite et qu'elle distribue à tour de bras pour se soulager.'[36] Characters are extreme and fantastic, evoking an exoticised story rather than a complex set of customs and influences. While on one level Ben Jelloun is seeking to escape from realist conventions here, this sort of portrait still inevitably connotes North African identity and finishes by misrepresenting real, complex traditions. The association of the village with this simplified view of the characters and tropes of a folktale inadvertently results in a reified vision of Moroccan difference. The radical separation of that culture from French society then risks reinforcing the absolute unfamiliarity of this strange, other world. France and Morocco are depicted as polar opposites rather than as fluid or permeable communities.

Concomitantly, Ben Jelloun continues to associate cultural identity with roots and with the soil, as the heroine herself describes the village as a tree with deep roots that cannot be pulled up. The heroine's expression of her own unease in these terms implies that Ben Jelloun himself buys into this metaphor, conceiving cultures in this organic and self-enclosed manner. Remembering the trees of the village, the heroine wishes she could uproot and transport them, carrying the culture of her original home back to France. But 'ses racines étaient profondes et très anciennes', suggesting that while human beings can migrate, their roots are forever embedded in their original native environment. In addition, the heroine recalls the words of a rhyme, 'ma patrie est un visage, une lueur essentielle', and she confesses:

> Je sentis venir le temps de l'incertitude et du sommeil difficile. Nulle brise ne vint faire de
> ce soir une cabane abandonnée au bord d'une plage ou d'un lac avec une porte entrouverte
> pour accueillir une âme fatiguée. Aucune lueur n'est apparue pour apaiser une conscience
> troublée. Nulle main n'est venue se poser sur mon épaule.[37]

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[36] Ibid., p. 47. The brother is described as an angel on p. 50.
[37] Ibid., p. 293.

Here the idea of a 'patrie' is mingled with its inhabitants as well as with nature and the elements, implying a national, organic, cohesive community apparently at harmony with itself. The metaphor bringing together the native land with human attributes contributes to the understanding of community as essential, natural and rooted. Such a personification associates nationality with one particular, familiar identity.

Similarly, in *La réclusion* Ben Jelloun on one level criticises the rejection of the immigrant by French society, but the terms used in the description of his alienation again reinforce the traditional conception of a rooted identity. This sort of model betrays a desire to perpetuate the dissociation of cultures, and it suggests that communities are established uniquely through the identification of monologic roots and origins. The text is littered with these sorts of analogy, suggesting that the experience of transfer from one country to another has similar destructive effects to the deterioration and drying out of an uprooted tree:

> Alors, nous restons ce corps cassé qui ne dit pas le malheur mais qui regarde le ciel et se souvient de la forêt décimée. Nous sommes un pays déboisé de ses hommes. Des arbres arrachés à la terre, comptabilisés et envoyés au froid. Quand nous arrivons en France, nos branches ne sont plus lourdes; les feuilles sont légères; elles sont mortes. Nos racines sont sèches et nous n'avons pas soif.[38]

This again implies an opposition between the native land and the country of adoption and suggests that the former does represent some form of organic totality. The metaphor implies that communities are on the whole rooted, 'arborescent' structures and that the experience of immigration can only be a departure from the norm. The immigrant's transgression of this original structure constitutes an anomaly; he has been uprooted and severed from a more essential and monolithic structure. While this metaphor might be important in its reflection of the persistence of this sort of organic configuration in popular French thinking, Ben Jelloun upholds that structure and confers upon it an emotive force that reinforces the restrictive ideology that accompanies it.

These depictions of solitude and incommensurability seem to be caught up in a tension. Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun for the most part endeavour to uncover the harmful effects of conventional communal models based on national frontiers and an organic relation with the soil. The immigrant characters to a certain extent exceed the boundaries of any traditional cultural category. Yet into this very gesture of criticism creep several assumptions and metaphors that suggest that the authors themselves cannot help but

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[38] Ibid., p. 56.

subscribe to the sorts of ideology they wanted to denounce. The texts attempt to disrupt and challenge the establishment of fixed cultural frontiers, but in particular those of Ben Jelloun also at times fall into perpetuating some of the preconceptions they set out to refute. It is in this sense that they hope to convey the exclusion of the immigrant from reified national identity categories while also implying the continued, perhaps uncontrollable influence of certain cultural associations.

Linguistic and Narrative Subversion

This anxiety regarding cultural confrontation is reflected in the uncertain response to the process of linguistic interaction. As I have suggested, Ben Jelloun and Boudjedra subvert monolingualism and the hegemony of the French language and community by disrupting the form of the language from within, interspersing the texts with echoes of foreign words. Both authors inscribe alterity into the language, undermining linguistic purity in a manner that recalls Derrida's *Le monolinguisme* or, in the case of Ben Jelloun, Khatibi's bilingual textual games. The reader is confronted with traces of opacity, replicating the defamiliarisation experienced by the immigrants themselves. Despite these gestures, however, the protagonists' own relationship with language often reflects not polyphony but the anxious juxtaposition of dialects in a structure that disallows communication between different systems. As at the more ambivalent moments in Khatibi's texts, Ben Jelloun and Boudjedra contemplate linguistic dialogue while expressing a sense of uncertainty regarding the possibility of any genuine form of interaction. They traverse linguistic borders while demonstrating the difficulty of transcending the form of self-enclosed thinking that these imply.

Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun challenge the monologic association of the French language with unity, purity and a self-enclosed national identity. Reacting to the traditional forms of ideology discussed in chapter three, these writers introduce into their narratives traces of cultural difference. Boudjedra intermittently translates Arabic proverbs and inserts them into his text, and he emphasises in *Lettres algériennes* how this sense of otherness infiltrates and defines his writing: 'quand j'écris en arabe, le français est là. Et quand j'écris en français, l'arabe est obsédant.'[39] In the same text, Boudjedra also suggests that one language can seduce another, remaining specific while reaching out to communicate other

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[39] Boudjedra, *Lettres algériennes*, p. 94.

influences and structures. On a more general level, his disruption of the rules of syntax and his pleasure in abstruse words contribute to this 'foreignising' effect. Ben Jelloun inserts references and words of Arabic and Berber extraction into his texts, entering terms such as 'djellaba', 'douar', 'fqih', 'cheikh' and 'kasbah' into his use of the French language. As I shall demonstrate later, Ben Jelloun also employs the structures and figures of the Moroccan folktale tradition, inscribing oral narration into the fabric of his written language.

At the same time, however, these evocations of linguistic dialogue are coupled as in Khatibi's work with a reflection on untranslatability. While these writers want to extend the boundaries of the French language by introducing foreign elements, their characters seem above all to suffer from an oppressive sense of the exclusion of one culture from the significatory processes of another. Language is subversively seen by turns as both permeable and self-enclosed. In *Topographie*, the emigrant's total exclusion from the French language evokes his otherness and inassimilability. He speaks only a little known Berber dialect, he can communicate with no-one and is left mute, silent and unapproachable. French-speaking observers scornfully denigrate his language and his non-comprehension of French, complaining that 'il ne parle pas une langue pas même celle de son pays il baragouine un dialecte montagnard que peu de gens connaissent'.[40] French words bombard and attack him, reinforcing his nonconformity and enclosing him in their unfamiliar logic:

> Puis largué, à nouveau, on le pousse fortement, on le presse, des mots lui transpercent les côtes, pires que des balles de 6mm parce qu'il ne les comprend pas et qu'il a honte de s'introduire dans ce monde forclos et exténuant où on le harcèle, on le ligote, on l'enferme dans une galerie souterraine où plus rien du monde réel ne subsiste et où tout est artificiel.[41]

The emigrant is also unable to read the signs of the metro stations, and the insistent repetition of place names such as 'Concorde – Concorde – Concorde' appears like a string of bullets forcing him outside of French society and signification.[42] Similarly, the words printed on the advertisements are meaningless, referring to an entire cultural system with which the emigrant remains unfamiliar, and this language barrier draws an impenetrable boundary between the emigrant and the French community.

The central character of *La réclusion*, though he is not excluded from the French language to the same extent as Boudjedra's emigrant, also finds that communication or self-expression is frustrated by the alterity of the other's language. Ben Jelloun's narrator is

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[40] Boudjedra, *Topographie*, p. 46.
[41] Ibid., p. 94.
[42] Ibid., p. 96.

exiled by his use of French, since he is unable to formulate satisfactorily an identity in a language that for him is associated with another culture. Setting out to construct a sense of self through autobiographical writing, the narrator finds instead that language fails him. Linguistic structures are travesties, leaving the subject floundering in their interstices. Words become dangerous, classifying but at the same time masking their referents and retaining a form of autonomy. The final epigram of the text, 'les mots m'ont tellement trahi que ce livre est un corps travesti',[43] suggests that the French language is treacherous, enticing the narrator to construct an identity while continually refusing to do justice to his singularity and failing to encapsulate him adequately. Words leave the narrator exiled, covering his specificity with a veil even as they beckon him to locate a sense of home. This recalls Ben Jelloun's fraught relation with language explored in *L'écrivain public*, where words simultaneously explore and obscure identity:

> Les mots sont un voile, un tissu fin, fragile, transparent. Tu souhaites, derrière ce drap tendu entre toi et le monde, qu'on ne trouve personne, en tout cas qu'on ne reconnaisse aucune figure. Une statue dont le visage serait raflé par le temps. Une statue qui va et vient dans le champ clos de tes images.[44]

Language is not a mirror but a shield, inducing the writer to adapt to its cultural system while also reinforcing his difference. Just as Boudjedra's emigrant is excluded from dialogue, similarly Ben Jelloun demonstrates how languages can set up cultural frontiers that insist unequivocally either on assimilation or on rejection.

While *Topographie* and *La réclusion* emphasise linguistic otherness and exclusion, *Les yeux baissés* portrays even more directly the struggle caused by the active confrontation of dual systems. Considering further the effects of linguistic juxtaposition, Ben Jelloun depicts not only the occlusion and resurgence of difference but also an overt battle between signifying systems that refuse to cohabit or intermingle with one another. Situated irreconcilably between Morocco and France, the heroine contends with two languages, and her arduous acquisition of French takes the form of a war between French and Berber words. Struggling to accommodate both languages and the different cultural systems they imply, she dreams that she is aggressed and taken hostage by foreign words:

> Tout d'un coup, je vis arriver vers moi des mots géants, tous armés de pelles. Ils marchaient en se dandinant. Ceux qui avaient aux pieds des *l* avançaient sans problème, mais ceux qui se terminaient par des *s* ou des *y* , avaient du mal à suivre le rythme de l'invasion. Deux

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[43] Ben Jelloun, *La réclusion*, p. 137.

[44] Tahar Ben Jelloun, *L'écrivain public*, (Paris: Seuil, 1983) pp. 104-5.

lignes tracées probablement par un *i* couché m'attachèrent contre l'arbre. Elles me ficelèrent

et firent un noeud avec plusieurs *œ*. Un grand *Y* me tenait la bouche ouverte, chaque œil était

maintenu par un *I* majuscule.[45]

It is as if French language and culture pin the heroine down and force themselves upon her against her will. French and Berber words destroy and contaminate one another, and she becomes caught in the no man's land of their battlefield. The different cultural systems contained within language are also brought out by the heroine's inability to master French tenses, since she remembers the conception of time in the Moroccan village as an unstructured, eternal present, which contrasts with the complex divisions of time implied by the French grammatical system. Ben Jelloun thus at once desires to blur these linguistic borders and to evoke the effects of their power. Different signifying systems come into contact with one another while also remaining incompatible and distinct. On the one hand, the combination of French and Berber signifiers subverts the notion of linguistic purity and hegemony. But at the same time, that very gesture is associated with untranslatability and with the non-assimilation of cultural difference.

Formal play in Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun's work similarly symbolises this ambivalent oscillation between a desire for subversion through the traversal of cultural borders and a renewed insistence on impenetrable alterity. Narrative techniques contribute to the critique of gestures of over-determination and exclusion, as both writers disrupt the process of representation and convey a sense of alterity through structural dislocation and innovation. If bilingual confrontations attempt as I have shown to undermine linguistic hegemony, then the formal construction of the texts also rejects conventional forms of depiction and narrative voice. Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun employ various subversive techniques, inheriting the unsettling facelessness of the *nouveau roman* or combining multiple conflictual textual voices respectively. I want to suggest, however, that again, these symbolic strategies at times risk reinforcing cultural boundaries and incompatibilities in a problematic way.

Much of Boudjedra's formal strategy is learned from the *nouveaux romans* of writers such as Alain Robbe-Grillet. Boudjedra plays with the novelistic form in order to debunk assumptions regarding narrativity and mimesis, using structure and language performatively to convey social and cultural criticism. One pertinent aspect of Robbe-Grillet's technique is

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[45] Ben Jelloun, *Les yeux baissés*, p. 80.

the rejection of the hero as unified and psychologically coherent in favour of a character constructed as a passive receptacle for impressions and sensations. *Topographie*, like texts such as *Dans le labyrinthe*, provides no sense of a self-contained subject position; instead the consciousness of the emigrant appears as a blank space, as we are told for example that 'il continue à avancer comme un automate rigide et encombré'.[46] Both writers deconstruct the heroism of the individual and leave the psychology of their protagonists open to multiple interpretations. In *Topographie*, however, this is not only a stylistic or formal strategy but contributes to the social point that Boudjedra makes regarding the resistance of the emigrant to European knowledge. European readers witness his reactions but are given no insight into his psychology, since it is violently ruptured from all our frames of reference. The reader is forced to perceive him as anonymous and impenetrable, just as the passengers on the metro see him as a nonentity, so that our cultural difference is brought home to us even as we read the text.

Boudjedra's rejection of conventional processes for deducing meaning is equally revealed in his portrayal of objects as absurd. The emigrant does not perceive his surroundings as part of a comprehensible and logical order; instead objects resist interpretation. As Robbe-Grillet describes in *Pour un nouveau roman*, the signification of elements of setting is not straightforward and evident; objects denote only their brute, impenetrable presence:

> A la place de cet univers des «significations», (psychologiques, sociales, fonctionnelles), il faudrait donc essayer de construire un monde plus solide, plus immédiat. Que ce soit d'abord par leur *présence* que les objets et les gestes s'imposent, et que cette présence continue ensuite à dominer, par-dessus toute théorie explicative qui tenterait de les enfermer dans un quelconque système de référence, sentimental, sociologique, freudien, métaphysique, ou autre.[47]

In Boudjedra's text, the walls, floors and tunnels of the metro system become blurred into a fog of damp, misty greyness, and neither the emigrant nor the reader is able to distinguish objects from one another and apportion them with meaning: 'tout était moite, mou, gris, épais, embrumé, rouge éclatant çà et là mais n'arrivant pas à effacer cette impression implacable de grisaille'.[48] The narrative fails to appropriate and report on different aspects of the setting; everything becomes amalgamated into a meaningless blur. This is also

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[46] Boudjedra, *Topographie*, p. 119.
[47] Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman*, (Paris: Minuit, 1963) p. 20.
[48] Boudedra, *Topographie*, p. 57.

reflected in the senselessness of the labyrinth, recalling Robbe-Grillet's *Dans le labyrinthe*, where the houses all resemble one another and where the streets form an endless web of paths that lead nowhere.[49] Boudjedra again adds signification to this gesture by using it to reinforce the emigrant's absolute inability to comprehend French culture. Equally, stripping objects of meaning could be interpreted as part of a performative strategy to denounce the tendency towards over-determination that characterises mass culture and the French reception of the other.

Topographie inherits techniques from the *nouveau roman* at once to perplex the production of meaning and to confer social or cultural significance upon this textual gesture. At the heart of the *nouveau roman* is the notion that texts cannot represent unproblematically an ordered, comprehensible reality. Robbe-Grillet states that 'l'œuvre n'est pas un témoignage sur une réalité extérieure, elle est à elle-même sa propre réalité'.[50] In *Topographie*, this could be perceived to have added significance, since the text subverts the reader's desire to know the emigrant or to locate in the text an unproblematic representation of the experience of the other and therefore to force that other to conform to familiar representational conventions. The confused labyrinth of the underground serves as a metaphor for the reader's perplexity at the text itself, and the emigrant's unfinished journey reflects our unsatisfied quest for meaning. Boudjedra plays with the idea of a 'topographie', mapping the emigrant's encounter with the apparently impenetrable network of the Parisian metro onto our frustrated desire to associate reading with teleology, direction and the communication of an identifiable figure or experience. He describes this conception of the literary project in an interview with Hafid Gafaïti:

> Longtemps la littérature universelle, le roman en particulier, a cherché à donner une fin à
> chaque livre, à chaque roman. Une fin vraisemblable, évidemment. La littérature moderne,
> nouvelle, est aux antipodes d'une telle conception. Il n'y a pas de fin et il n'y a pas de
> vraisemblance.[51]

Boudjedra attempts to free his texts from mimetic representation and to disappoint the reader's search for an unequivocal social or political depiction. *Topographie* and its

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[49] It should also be noted here that Boudjedra's novel recalls a further text by Robbe-Grillet, *Projet pour une révolution à New York* (Paris: Minuit, 1971), which takes place in the New York underground, associating it with delirium, dream and fantasy. The title of *Topographie* also echoes *Topologie d'une cité fantôme* (Paris: Minuit, 1976).

[50] Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman*, p. 132.

[51] Boudjedra in Hafid Gafaïti, *Boudjedra ou la passion de la modernité*, (Paris: Denoël, 1987) p. 113.

interminable sentences, its piling up of adjectives, synonyms and incompatible images, deliberately renders the novelistic representation of cultural difference uneasy.

One of the shortcomings of Boudjedra's project, however, is that once again it serves above all to perform cultural dissociation. Although such a gesture may help to rescue the emigrant from appropriation by conventional Western representational structures, this constant focus on incommunicability risks reinstating the inevitability of cultural divisions. In addition, this emphasis could itself be seen to participate in another European and American trend that continually privileges absolute alterity. The depiction of the facelessness of the emigrant to a certain extent colludes with modern Western theoretical conventions that underline the complexity of meaning and representation and that affirm repeatedly the resistance of the other to knowledge or understanding. The portrayal could be read as a participation in Derridean philosophy, conforming to a French philosophical tradition of celebrating otherness and the limits of knowledge. The unfamiliarity of the emigrant of *Topographie* could be seen to mime Derrida's visions of the cultural other as unknowable and incommunicable, again overemphasising the incommensurability of different cultural identities. Boudjedra's thought recalls the conception of alterity elucidated in the texts on hospitality and the stranger, so that it too could be seen to over-emphasise incompatibility to the detriment of forms of interaction. The novel portrays alterity while colluding with a certain French movement that itself at times fetishises the other.

If Boudjedra exploits the form of the *nouveau roman* in order to intensify his depiction of cultural alterity, Ben Jelloun employs another set of stylistic techniques. In *La réclusion*, the immigrant's ambivalent relation with the French language is expressed not through a proliferation of meandering sentences that endlessly defer meaning, but on the contrary, through a sparse, pared down narrative style. Unlike Boudjedra, who expresses his dissatisfaction with language by allowing adjectives and phrases to accumulate to excess, Ben Jelloun's text is elliptical and elusive, drawing attention to the gaps between words. Novelistic representation for Ben Jelloun in this case intimates the excess of that which is being represented. Sentences are by turns stark and bald, or disjointed and unfinished. The final 'itinéraire de l'expatrié' is a fractured series of unrelated words, 'misère locale – passeport – corruption – humiliation – visite médicale – office de l'émigration' and so on,[52] implying that the experience of the immigrant resists coherent narration. Some pages

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[52] Ben Jelloun, *La réclusion solitaire*, p. 136.

contain a single sentence or image that interrupts the narrative and draws attention to its insufficiency. For example, after an exchange with the imaginary companion, the narrative breaks off, and a single image is placed isolated in the centre of the next page: 'quelque part dans le territoire de mes insomnies, une ombre passe. C'est ma mère.'[53] The dialogue is revealed to be illusory, and the image of the mother's shadow reinforces the isolation of the narrator, his severance from his native land and his alienation within the Symbolic order. The reference to the mother also calls up echoes of psychoanalytic theories, implying that the immigrant's discontentment with the foreign language can be traced to the traumatic process of separation from the mother tongue, just as ordinarily the infant struggles to separate from the mother and enter into the Symbolic.[54] Such fragmented shadows and echoes express a sense of dissatisfaction with language and an awareness of the silences it leaves.

In contrast to such a sparse narrative style, however, *Les yeux baissés* expresses cultural division through the disjunctive combination of different symbols and forms. The structure of the binary division between Morocco and France is mirrored in the novel's dual, hybrid form. Ben Jelloun combines his modern French narrative with elements of a traditional Moroccan 'conte', performing cultural mixing and splitting in the structure of the text itself. In conformity with the traditional folktale, the story is filled with myths, rituals and superstitions.[55] As I have suggested, the novel is based on a myth passed down by the 'vieux sage' of the preface. In addition, the narrator possesses many of the attributes of a traditional folkloric heroine, she is clairvoyant and audacious, and the survival of the community depends on her. Her evil aunt epitomises the witch or ogress integral to any folktale, and her role as a chosen saviour involves benedictions, palm-reading and psychic vision, situating the text in the realm of fantasy and fairy-tale. It is also important that the novel contains many different 'conteurs', introducing the oral tradition into written form. In juxtaposition with this, however, Ben Jelloun is clearly writing a novel, inheriting from the *nouveau roman* and other contemporary texts a preoccupation with self-reflexivity and complications of form. The self-conscious reflections of the heroine, her search for identity

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[53] Ibid., p. 85.

[54] The association of the mother tongue with some sort of pre-symbolic language occurs in a number of texts on colonialism, migration and language, notably in those of Khatibi. The use of this trope can seem a little problematic, however, since the process of transferal from a state of fusion with the mother into the Symbolic order surely constitutes a greater leap than the shift from first to second language.

[55] For further discussion of Ben Jelloun's use of the folktale here, see Nelly Lindenlauf, *Tahar Ben Jelloun: Les yeux baissés*, (Brussels: Editions Labor, 1996).

and the attempt to narrate her own life, are also distinct from the traditions of the folktale, and these elements resist being taken up into the mythical fantasy form. Ben Jelloun plays with temporality, preventing the reader from establishing a single time of narration, and he also multiplies the narrative perspective in a way that exceeds the form of the traditional folktale. This hybridisation of the novel form reflects the dual identity of the heroine, again miming the opposition between Morocco and France that defines her history.[56]

The text enacts this hybridisation by including a proliferation of different voices. Like the narrator of *La réclusion solitaire*, the heroine invents stories, creating various characters to perform the polyphonic structure of her cultural identity and to provide a springboard for her location of a sense of self. The central character of her fantasies is Victor, a mentor who guides and instructs her, telling her 'her story' and reminding her of her destiny to save the Moroccan village from its curse. He recounts the history of the legend, telling her that her original identity was that of 'Kenza', who was twinned with 'Zineb', and he narrates at the same time how they came to possess and lose the key to the treasure. This narrative again equates the heroine's history with the folktale tradition, as 'elle sortait d'un gros livre plein de contes'.[57] Other characters, such as Rebecca or Rabhia, who identifies with American culture, Yacine, who revolts against his origins, or Moh, the devout Muslim, manifest different aspects of the narrator's identity. The heroine's inner dialogue is also juxtaposed with the stories of her grandmother, her aunt and the people of the village, Ahmed and Mohammed. These voices modulate between the poles of a rural Moroccan perspective and a metropolitan French cultural position, the extremes of which are exemplified by the wise old man of the preface and the writer living in France, based loosely on Ben Jelloun himself, whom the heroine consults in relation to the over-activity of her imagination. The result of this polyphony is that there is no narrative truth, no perspective retains authority over another, and no culture is allowed a hegemonic position. *Les yeux baissés* inserts orality into written form, investigating the continual conjunction and reformulation of different narratives. As Glissant suggested in his description of orality, this notion of passing stories from generation to generation or from village to village reflects a

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[56] The notion that the heroine's identity is 'hybrid' also has problematic implications, which fit in with my other reservations regarding Ben Jelloun's text. Robert Young suggests that the term 'hybridity' relies on a binary structure that retains a sense of the purity of both parts. Also significant here is Young's proposition that hybridity as a cultural description carries a politics of heterosexuality. He then goes on to analyse the history of the term and its associations with Darwinism, but it is these associations, he argues, which imply that hybridity is an anomaly; it is thought to be inferior and dangerous to racial purity. See *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

different conception of textuality, since enhancement and metamorphosis become an intrinsic part of the story-telling. Ben Jelloun's use of oral culture and his refusal to adhere' to a single perspective succeeds in giving voice to diverse cultural influences and mimes the crossing of cultural frontiers represented in the novel.

Yet while on the one hand this strategy enacts the traversal of cultural borders and the innovative juxtaposition of polyphonic voices, Ben Jelloun's gesture on another level seems ambivalent. The juxtaposition of the French novel with the North African oral tradition has creative potential, but Ben Jelloun also risks stereotypically implying that Moroccan culture is exclusively still founded on ritual, superstition and legend. The folktales narrated in the text seem stereotypical and reified, presenting an Orientalist vision of Moroccan culture. The stories of the old men of the village, for example, focus on exotic sexual experiences, such as when one of them constructs a dream of an ideal woman who becomes real and seduces him, and these suggest a fetishisation of 'Oriental' sexuality.[58] These stories are then succeeded by the evocation of Slimña/Fatouma's evil ghost, which pervades the city in a spectral, fantasmatic way:

> C'est le village de Fatouma, disparue puis revenue, échappée à la justice et à l'asile pour les
>
> malades de la tête et de l'âme. Fatouma est toujours là, même si je sais qu'elle est en prison,
>
> elle rôde autour de nous, fidèle à sa vocation, infatigable, éternelle, car ce sera elle le dernier
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> être vivant de ce lieu de malheur.[59]

The resultant opposition between the sexual ideal and the spirit of evil again constitutes a Manichean vision that presents the Moroccan tradition in a reductive, simplistic manner. The oral narratives in the text perpetuate these fantastic and exotic visions rather than evoking the subtleties of the folktale and its interpenetration with other influences or everyday life.

Another difficulty is that the different narrative voices tend to fall into conformity with either French or Moroccan traditions, expressing opposing perspectives rather than actively becoming intertwined. The stories recounted in the novel tend to signify either the rituals of the folktale or the ambiguities of 'Western' self-reflexivity, and there seems to be little sense of the possible interaction between the two forms. Victor's narration of the history of the legend, for example, is juxtaposed with the heroine's rejection of that tradition, as the following chapter abruptly begins, 'il n'était pas question pour moi de

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[57] Ben Jelloun, *Les yeux baissés*, p. 209.

[58] Ibid., pp. 170-180.

[59] Ibid., p. 185.

refaire le voyage de retour. Ce n'était pas mon affaire.'[60] It is as if the folktale, which is itself reincarnated in a reified form, is absolutely incompatible with any degree of conformity with French life-style and culture. Close examination of the heroine's invented characters (Victor, Rabhia, Yacine, Moh, etc) also reveals that each one personifies either an acceptance or a rejection of this traditional Moroccan culture. For this reason, Ben Jelloun's proliferation of narrative voices forms less a series of 'articulations' that interact within a shared space, than a disseminated structure where little contact can be made between contrasting perspectives. It mirrors the structure of 'paganism' described by Lyotard, where a single, over-arching authority is undermined in favour of plural little narratives, but where relations between standpoints seem at the same time to be defined above all by incommensurability. Ben Jelloun works convincingly against forms of representation that attempt to totalise and encapsulate a collective identity or culture, and his use of a supple and flexible literary structure performs this desire to resist a holistic grand narrative or ideology. But the radical separation between the cultural viewpoints that enter into his text at the same time overemphasises the process of dissociation.

The Possibility of Cultural Interplay

In some of Ben Jelloun's more recent texts, however, this reflection on rupture is replaced with a desire to relinquish cultural oppositions in favour of a celebration of combined influences. Texts such as *Les raisins de la galère* and *L'auberge des pauvres* in different ways express the disjunction caused by cultural frontiers at the same time as fleeting affirmations of cultural plurality. These texts hover ambivalently between a lamentation on cultural alienation and a more assertive resistance to conventional modes of thought, portraying a sense of dislocation while imagining a 'third space' where cultural influences are intermingled in a more liberating structure. The depiction of the individual's rupture from the traditional community structure tentatively gives way to a more open-ended configuration, where migrants participate in different cultures while upholding a sense of singularity within that series of relations.

On the one hand, in *Les raisins de la galère* Ben Jelloun seems at times resigned to continue his depiction of immigration as an uncomfortable experience of disjunction and

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[60] Ibid., p. 15.

uprooting. Discussing *Les raisins* in an interview, Ben Jelloun still associates deracination with the loss of cultural memory and of affirmative collective identification:

> Je parle de cette génération d'enfants d'immigrés qui est pour moi une génération totalement
> sacrifiée et vouée pratiquement à la non-vie. Je me rends compte que ce qui leur manque le
> plus, c'est une mémoire. [61]

In the text itself, the heroine can seem to fall between dual cultural reference points, remaining in a state of dislocation. Conscious of her situation somewhere in the division between French and Algerian culture, she remembers that she has 'encore de la terre algérienne collée à la plante des pieds',[62] portraying again a correlation between cultural identity and organic roots in the soil. Similarly, her father's memories of Algeria are compared to 'un sac rempli de la terre de Tadmaït'.[63] Nadia feels encumbered by this cultural baggage, unsure of how to accommodate her father's roots into contemporary life in France. Memories seem to be linked to the earth, resisting transfer across migratory frontiers. The imagery of the soil recalls *La réclusion* and *Les yeux baissés* and implies that immigration signals uprooting and detachment.

Yet in response to this state of cultural ambivalence, Nadia's attitude is at times an angry rejection of the binary opposition between her traditional Algerian heritage and the French drive towards assimilation. On the one hand, the novel opens with her vehement disagreement with Islamic conventions regarding the position of women, as she criticises the inequality of her sister's relationship with her husband and describes in romanticised terms her dream of working as a mechanic. She refuses to conform to a traditional woman's role, and intentionally or not, behaves aggressively towards men. Her work with the 'Association des jeunes de Resteville' includes saving young Algerian girls from oppression by their fathers and aiding them to achieve emancipation and the freedom to live in accordance with whichever patterns they choose. In one episode, for example, she attempts to rescue three Muslim girls who have been taken to Algeria by their father and kept locked away in their uncle's house, because he was shocked by the way in which men looked at them in France. In addition, however, Nadia also resists an unmediated acceptance of French identity, fighting against assimilation and the drive towards homogenisation. She is outraged by the

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[61] 'Entretien avec Tahar Ben Jelloun: Deux cultures, une littérature', Pierre Maury, *Magazine littéraire*, 329, (1995), 106-111 (p. 110).
[62] Ben Jelloun, *Les raisins de la galère*, p. 90.
[63] Ibid., p. 91.

label 'République française' which is printed on her identity card, and is also offended by the note 'signes particuliers: néant',[64] since this too connotes assimilation:

> *Je ne serai jamais la petite Beur qui passe à la télé pour dire combien elle est assimilée, intégrée, rangée. Non. J'ai la rage! J'ai la haine! Trop d'injustice. Je ne serai jamais galérienne.*[65]

Nadia voices her rejection of the term 'Beur', dissociating herself from another label that risks signifying classification and stigmatisation. The use of term 'galérienne', and its echo with 'algérienne', also performs this rejection of identification both with a sort of underclass within French society and with traditional Algerian culture. Nadia is determined to refuse the imposition of reductive cultural definitions.

Les raisins therefore charts the struggle to reinvent that space of identity construction. Although it does at times reiterate the experience of duality and splitting explored in *Les yeux baissés*, there appear to be moments when Nadia rejects that binary opposition and expresses her longing for an alternative form of identification. Images of the soil, roots and uprooting do recur, but they are coupled with a sense of dissatisfaction with that sort of vocabulary and a desire to locate a third space, which would conform to the cultural conventions of neither France nor Algeria. This notion of a 'troisième lieu' occurs briefly at the end of *Les yeux baissés*, but it is not until *Les raisins* that Ben Jelloun investigates more fully the possibility of such a new configuration.[66] In response to depictions of immigrants as uprooted trees, for example, Nadia writes:

> Mon père parlait de lui-même comme d'un vieux dattier transplanté sur le balcon d'une cité de banlieue. Moi, je suis plutôt du genre herbacée, sans doute de la mauvaise herbe, celle qui pousse n'importe où et qu'on arrache machinalement sans se poser de questions. A nous tous, nous faisons un immense terrain vague planté d'épineux, d'orties et de chiendent, nous risquons un jour de nous faire bouffer par une machine à tondre qui passera sur nos têtes pour les ratiboiser et rectifier l'énorme malentendu de notre existence.[67]

The herbaceous plant, unlike a tree with solid permanent roots, dies and is regenerated each year, and the image disrupts the identification of a single or permanent source or origin. A herbaceous plant is not unchanging or steadfastly rooted in a plot of soil, so that this image seems to reject the more traditional metaphors used extensively in *La réclusion* in favour of

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[64] Ibid., p. 124.

[65] Ibid., p. 22.

[66] Ben Jelloun, *Les yeux baissés*. The heroine's husband notes: 'je pensais que tu étais entre deux cultures, entre deux mondes, en fait tu es dans un troisième lieu qui n'est ni ta terre natale ni ton pays d'adoption,' pp. 295-6. This rejection of the binary structure in favour of a third space or configuration begins this process of reconstruction, but this seems to be the only mention of it in this novel.

a more mutable structure. Nadia also later speaks of her desire to 'ébranler l'arbre des ancêtres', as if actively to cut herself off from an obligation to her roots and to assert her own self-created identity.[68]

The community proposed by *Les raisins* is not diachronic but synchronic. It revolves less around history, tradition and origin than around the formation of ties among the young people of the present. Nadia's work with the Association creates a form of community where the links are not organic but arise from constructive action against racism and prejudice. It forms an attempt to replace the occlusion and non-identity of oppressed North African immigrants in France with an awareness of shared values and objectives. The focus is on strategy, contestation and dialogue rather than on identity and essence. It provides Nadia with a sense of belonging and with political meaning rather than attempting to reconstruct her relations with the past. Alongside this concrete community formation, Nadia also dreams of an ideal country beyond existing labels, where she and her friends could combine a sense of belonging with freedom from stereotypes and classifications:

> Je me serai exilée dans une contrée anonyme où je serai moi-même enfin devenue n'importe
> qui, ni plus ni moins qu'une personne sans signe distinctif, affublée d'un nom quelconque
> rappelant un arbre ou bien un animal, avec un visage au type indéfinissable, un corps qui ne
> trahit pas ses racines, une voix sans aucun accent...[69]

She hopes to liberate herself from her roots and from other people's assumptions regarding her identity, and she imagines living with her friends without having to reflect on the constraints implied by history or heritage.

This desire to abandon the rooted community, and the concomitant urge to invent a more complex form of collective identification, also occurs in *L'auberge des pauvres*. Here, Ben Jelloun traces a writer's journey from Marrakesh to Naples, implying the rejection of the native land and the conventions of 'bourgeois' family life and promoting the embrace of a foreign, multicultural community as a symbol of escape. Naples becomes a pretext for the activation of fantasy, and it encapsulates the creative dynamism of constant cultural mixing: 'une place des miracles avec des couleurs changeantes, des odeurs venues du lointain, des épices d'Afrique mélangées à la sueur des hommes'.[70] Having arrived in the city, the writer

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[67] Ben Jelloun, *Les raisins de la galère*, p. 120.

[68] Ibid., p. 131.

[69] Ibid., p. 123.

[70] Tahar Ben Jelloun, *L'auberge des pauvres*, (Paris: Seuil, 1999) p. 19. This also recalls a passage from *Les raisins*, where Nadia travels to Naples to find the fugitive Naïma (see p. 100). Naples is perceived on the one hand as a symbol of freedom, inhabited by a number of Maghrebians who seem liberated from the constraints

re-imagines his lifeless marriage as a loving romance with a beautiful woman, and the voyage becomes a symbol of liberation from normative constraints. The crossing of geographical boundaries becomes a traversal of the borders between the imaginary and the real. In addition, the central character soon stumbles on the 'auberge', where an old woman welcomes immigrants and writers in a forum where stories are endlessly invented and retold. The 'auberge' is a rootless community composed of individuals of diverse origins, where the nation fades into insignificance and where stories rewrite the world in a more unconventional manner. Hidden from the rest of the town, this refuge forms a 'non-lieu'; it is a space beyond identification, abstracted from the culture of Italy and symbolising the limitless boundaries of the imaginary. Memory and forgetting are juxtaposed, roots and origins are occluded whilst composite stories are recovered through the renewed amassing of fragments and traces. Many of the stories recounted also seem to echo one another, as the writer's Iza, an idealised figure hovering between fantasy and the real, resembles Idé, the lover of the Italian narrator Gino. One character re-imagines his history through the interstices of another, as connections are forged across cultural frontiers while geographical boundaries are traversed. Naples itself is seen to capture this process, as it is a place where, 'la vérité est multiple, jamais certaine, où le mensonge est nécessaire, où le vol est un art, le rire une volonté, les superstitions se mêlent à la réalité, le rêve descend dans les caves et les hirondelles font leur nid dans les mosquées'.[71]

Ben Jelloun's later texts gesture towards cultural liberation, but they also nevertheless continue to occupy an ambivalent space. As we have seen, *Les raisins* expresses both a sense of dispossession, using the imagery of uprooting, and a desire to transcend cultural oppositions in favour of a more fluid mode of thinking that conceives new sorts of cultural links. *L'auberge* also appears ambiguous, because the depiction of a community of travellers on the one hand seems to champion cultural dialogue, while the extent to which cultural interaction is genuinely achieved once again remains unclear. While on one level it associates migration with the free exchange of stories, the text intermittently slips into presenting a reified vision both of Naples and of the folktales that are told there. We are confronted with a utopian, transgressive community, determined paradoxically by a conventional and idealised image of the culture of the voyage. The genre

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of a particular cultural identity. Transgression and disorder are celebrated there. At the same time, however, Nadia also witnesses poverty, noticing the prevalence of unemployment and prostitution. Naples encapsulates this traversal of the borders between fantasy and reality.

of the folktale also again conforms to stereotypes, as the 'auberge' is associated with destiny and the stories all revolve around a form of sexual obsession, as if to fetishise and exoticise 'other' forms of sexuality again. Furthermore, the text performs the confrontation between cultural standpoints in an exotic and enticing context, but it fails actively to show how one position itself could become infiltrated with other influences. We are presented with a sequence of stories narrated one after the other, and Ben Jelloun retains a relatively traditional structure instead of imagining the ways in which the different cultural perspectives might themselves become unsettled.

These depictions of (im)migrant experience therefore remain uncomfortable. Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun's earlier texts attempt to voice the resistance of immigrants to cultural categories, using novelistic play to trouble the representation of cultural difference itself. The works employ various strategies to emphasise the limits of conventional forms of representation and to draw attention to some form of textual excess. This fiction wants to refrain from determining any particular model or portrait of cultural identity, but uses subtle forms of narrative to suggest that the North African Other cannot be contained within a straightforward, preconceived form. However, while Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun manipulate the process of narration in this way, some of the techniques they employ inadvertently undermine that initial gesture. Their insistence on otherness as a quality also inserts them into the Derridean tradition of privileging only cultural alterity and unknowability. In the later texts, Ben Jelloun questions more actively the endurance of cultural frontiers, investigating the possibility of alternative forms of identification and pointing fleetingly to a more 'singular-plural' mode of thinking. Yet these works also still hover in an unsettling space, tentatively rejecting existing configurations while simultaneously revealing the power of traditional cultural categories.

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[71] Ben Jelloun, *L'auberge des pauvres*, p. 127.

Chapter Five: Leïla Sebbar between Exile and Polyphony

> Si je parle d'exil, et c'est le seul lieu d'où je puisse dire les contradictions, la division...,
> c'est tellement complexe que je m'en veux chaque fois d'avoir simplifié. Si je parle d'exil, je
> parle aussi de croisements culturels; c'est à ces points de jonction ou de disjonction où je suis
> que je vis, que j'écris, alors comment décliner une identité simple?[1]

The work of Leïla Sebbar constitutes a repeated movement between a reflection on the solitude of exile and an affirmation of cultural polyphony. While the 'first-generation' immigrant writers stage a clash or confrontation between France and North Africa, Sebbar's texts seem at once anxious regarding the persistence of cultural incompatibilities and compelled to problematise such discursive oppositions. Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun focus above all on inassimilability and alienation, but Sebbar responds neither by dwelling on impenetrable frontiers nor by embracing cultural pluralism in a straightforward manner. Instead she reinvents the very term 'exile', complicating existing theories and oscillating between a lamentation on cultural uprooting and a more dialogic mode of thinking. Sebbar's novels are compelling precisely because they frustrate the depiction of any single cultural identity or experience, endlessly questioning their own propositions and preventing their meaning from becoming fixed and complete.

Much of Sebbar's work concentrates on the 'second generation' or on individuals of Algerian origin who were either born in France or who have lived in France for a long time. She presents characters who seem at least partially implicated in French culture, while all the time affirming the singular aspects of their identity that resist complete acculturation in France. Boudjedra and Ben Jelloun's early texts portray immigrants arriving in France after having grown up in Algeria and Morocco, but Sebbar for the most part represents the children of such immigrants, who are immersed in French culture but who remain unsettlingly conscious of their difference and displaced origins. These characters are to a certain extent 'French', yet traces of the cultural memory of their parents' native land continue to linger, leading to an assertive desire to differentiate themselves from the 'Français de souche'. Sebbar herself is neither unproblematically French, nor 'francophone Algerian', nor 'postcolonial'; she actively deconstructs those oppositions and attempts to

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[1] Leïla Sebbar et Nancy Huston, *Lettres parisiennes: autopsie d'exil*, (Paris: Bernard Barrault, 1986 and J'ai lu, 1999) p. 134.

invent a different location for her writing. She poses a series of irresolute questions regarding the rejection and reformulation of national and communal structures, suggesting in a way that recalls Nancy both the singularity of the individual and her possible engagement in different dialogues. Can any community be formed out of the dispersal and deterritorialisation of migrant experience? Must immigrant literature be deconstructive or can it also be reconstructive?

Comparison of Sebbar's fiction with the work of various postcolonial theorists helps to provide a sense of the complexity of her relations with specific conceptual models. Homi Bhabha's work to a certain extent recalls Sebbar due to the emphasis on disengagement from demarcated territories and the conceptualisation of the 'in-between'. In the volume *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha considers how subjects can be formed in the interstices or in excess of binary oppositions and categories of difference. He imagines a troubled conception of a 'Third Space', which names the ambivalent gap in the process of enunciation between the signifier and the individual referent, and which unsettles monologic and colonial discourse. The third space is a site of hybridity, where denied forms of knowledge subtend the dominant discourse and unsettle its authority. In Bhabha's words, it 'challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People'.[2] While colonial power is not the only normative force working on individuals of Algerian and Moroccan origin living in France, this model does seem to represent the move of writers such as Sebbar to undermine dominant, national discourses. Many of Sebbar's 'second-generation' immigrants move in a space beyond fixed national identifications and attempt to live 'in-between' a mosaic of different influences.

Bhabha's work retains a commitment to all that lies in excess of existing cultural formations, underlining the ways in which cultural meaning is performed in the in-between spaces of translation. Borders and frontiers are problematised through attention to the 'supplement' or to the residual traces of signification that disrupt traditional codes and encapsulations. For Bhabha, the narrative of the nation contains a disjunctive temporality, whereby unsettled referents remain discrepant from dominant discourses that establish a direct link with a homogeneous 'past'. National discourses can never catch up with the heterogeneous peoples that they hope to restrain and encode. More specifically, colonial

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[2] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) p. 37.

power is subverted through the resisting forces of such dislocated voices. Building on Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, where the nation is shown to be above all a discursive construct and national discourses are associated with the flourishing of print culture, Bhabha describes an alternative imagined culture in a suggestive way:

> This locality is more *around* temporality than *about* historicity: a form of living that is more complex than 'community'; more symbolic than 'society'; more connotative than 'country'; less patriotic than *patrie*; more rhetorical than the reason of the State; more mythological than ideology; less homogeneous than hegemony; less centred than the citizen; more collective than the 'subject'; more psychic than civility; more hybrid in the articulation of cultural differences and identifications than can be represented in any hierarchical or binary structuring of the social antagonism.[3]

Bhabha rethinks cultural identity as a series of discursive constructions that continually exceed the boundaries of their own processes of signification. These 'locations of culture' are malleable forms, continually suggesting new forms of identification while questioning the limits of representation itself. Sebbar can in some ways be read alongside these sorts of conceptions, since her work considers cultural collectivities while exploring the other voices that exceed the boundaries of the hegemonic community.

The difficulty with Bhabha's model, however, is that it relies on abstract and rhetorical discourse in a way that occludes the specific struggles of different cultural groups. Bhabha's initial intention is to theorise the damaging effects of colonial power, hoping to draw attention to the subjugated voices that static hegemonic discourses attempted to silence. Yet his work also seems to extrapolate from that to erect a generalised model of hybrid identity, and his thinking shifts between historical specificity and universal applicability in this ambiguous and uncertain manner. His statements risk suggesting that all identities are hybrid in the same way, and he hesitates in pinpointing the particularity of any one experience. As the critic Bart Moore-Gilbert argues, Bhabha's postulation of hybridity as universal means that it could actually occlude the specific historical circumstances of colonialism.[4] How can 'hybridity' help us to conceive postcolonial experience, if any identity can be described in this way? Moore-Gilbert also criticises Bhabha's use of psychoanalysis, arguing that it lacks the historicity of Fanon's thinking, with the result that the colonial situation serves instead to substantiate existing, Western theoretical tropes.

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[3] Ibid., p. 140. See also Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1983, 1991).

[4] See Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*, (London and New York: Verso, 1997).

Certainly, quotations such as that reproduced above rely for their momentum on rhetoric and linguistic play rather than on consideration of particular types of interaction between singularity and communal modes of thought. In addition, the very term 'hybridity', of which Bhabha seems enamoured, itself depends on the dual configuration that it initially set out to deconstruct, again figuring cultural interaction inadvertently as the meeting of two distinct reference points. As I shall demonstrate, however, while Sebbar echoes some of Bhabha's strategies in her representation of the in-between, her refusal to uphold a single model of hybridity and her abstention from adherence to any one type of cultural configuration renders her work more complex and suggestive. Her texts shift and migrate in the spaces between the singular and the plural rather than championing hybridity as a value in itself.

Another pertinent model in this context is that proposed by Deleuze and Guattari in the form of the rhizomatic network.[5] I have already used the term 'rhizome' on a number of occasions in order to designate a form of thinking where connections are made synchronically across borders rather than simply diachronically through the tracing of roots. Glissant used Deleuze and Guattari extensively in order to conceive a poetics of Relation working in opposition to static, identitarian thinking. Sebbar could be said to enact the dialogic network of the rhizome structure even more demonstratively, as some of her works actively combine symbols from different cultures and advocate a nomadic form of identity made of plural inherited signs rather than self-same identifications. Sebbar again seems more subversive, however, because the literary, self-questioning nature of her work means that no form of experience or model is privileged unequivocally over any other. Deleuze and Guattari, on the other hand, do seem to advocate 'rhizomatic' thought as opposed to 'arborescent' structures. While they briefly claim that each concept infiltrates the other, their descriptions in reality tend to revolve around the rejection of more settled forms of life in favour of dislocation, and they fail actively to explore the continued encounter of these two modes of thought. Deleuze and Guattari fall too quickly into affirming the superiority of nomadic existence rather than providing a more flexible forum for different sorts and degrees of interaction between voices. *Mille plateaux* ultimately re-establishes nomadic identity as a quality or privileged value, stressing the process of disengagement rather than

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[5] Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux*, (Paris: Minuit, 1980).

looking more closely at the intricate coexistence of deterritorialisation and re-territorialisation:

> Si le nomade peut être appelé Déterritorialisé par excellence, c'est justement parce que la reterritorialisation ne se fait pas *après* comme chez le migrant, ni sur *autre chose* comme chez le sédentaire (en effet, le sédentaire a un rapport avec la terre médiatisé par autre chose, régime de propriété, appareil de l'Etat...). Pour le nomade, au contraire, c'est la déterritorialisation qui constitue le rapport à la terre, si bien qu'il se reterritorialise sur la déterritorialisation même.[6]

Equally, as Christopher Miller perceptively argues, the rhizomatic forms proposed by *Mille plateaux* paradoxically reject representational thinking while relying heavily (and frequently inaccurately) on anthropological descriptions.[7] Deleuze and Guattari then become trapped in a new form of abstract, essentialist thinking that seems to promote a utopian or fetishistic view of nomadic life. Unlike these theorists, however, Sebbar promotes migration or *métissage* not as the (paradoxical) representation of a particular set of values, but as a collection of discursive symbols and references connoting at once exile and polyphony while frustrating the formulation of any single cultural configuration. Sebbar's work is less an ethnographic depiction of a certain type of nomadic life than a forum where various cultural identifications can be tested and challenged.

Rather than illustrating any specific model of cultural relations, Sebbar proposes a dynamic form of 'diasporic' experience that encompasses singularity as well as the possibility of plural communications. Although certain theories of diaspora can constitute a simplistic grafting of the model of the Jewish diaspora onto diverse forms of migration, James Clifford's more flexible understanding of the ways in which the term 'diaspora' can be applied seems to encapsulate the complexity of a writer such as Sebbar. Criticising Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin for the occlusion of specificity in their theory of diaspora, Clifford perceives diaspora as a non-normative starting point for an open-ended discourse

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[6] Ibid., p. 473.

[7] See Christopher L. Miller, 'Beyond Identity: The Postidentitarian Predicament in Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*', *Nationalists and Nomads: Essays on Francophone African Literature and Culture*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1998) 171-209. Miller argues that despite their desire to rescue thought from the restrictions of representation and reference, Deleuze and Guattari's footnotes citing anthropological sources reinstate a 'realist' discourse, establishing content, judgements and characterisations. The authors also misquote their sources, risking superficiality and imprecision. Miller's major argument is that there remains a contradiction between the text's desire to exceed the limits of both representation and value-judgements, and the persistence in the footnotes of a sense of ethnographic authority. Miller's cautionary approach to such celebratory 'rhizomatic' thinking echoes my desire to see how relationality coexists with some conception of cultural specificity.

covering different sorts of migratory conditions.[8] In a more general sense, discourses of diaspora imply that decentred or lateral connections may be as important as those formed around roots and origins, working against the norms of nation-states and creating forms of community consciousness that maintain identifications outside of national space and time. Clifford seems particularly suggestive here, however, since he argues that 'diaspora cultures thus mediate, in a lived tension, the experiences of separation and entanglement, of living here and remembering/desiring another place'.[9] Clifford condemns ahistorical uses of the term 'diaspora', but he also suggests that the term can be remoulded in different contexts to evoke varying reactions to migration. In this way, he offers a theory of the changing implications of diverse diasporic experiences, as they variously intertwine feelings of exile with new community formations and less regulated forms of participation. Sebbar can be read against this background, as she juxtaposes solitude and singularity with a move to imagine interactive combinations. Just as Nancy's conception of relationality resisted falling into a fixed philosophical model by emphasising movement, Sebbar's work also encourages this unsettled pattern of divergence and convergence. Her inconclusive literary forms enact this perennial shifting between singular and collective modes of identification.

Autobiographical Displacements

Sebbar's scattered narrations of her own experience of exile already imply the contradictory nature of her apprehension of traditional or reinvented communities. She seems to define herself above all by the categories to which she does not conform. Sebbar grew up in Algeria but has lived in France since the age of seventeen, and she perceives her experience of both countries as defined by dislocation or exile. Her mother, originally from the Dordogne region of France, lived in exile in colonial Algeria. Her father, himself an Algerian who met his wife in France, was exiled in his own country, where he was a teacher in the French colonial system. Sebbar's parents were therefore excluded from both national communities, and she herself feels she inherited that double exile. Reflecting on the curious

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[8] James Clifford, 'Diasporas', *Cultural Anthropology*, 9.3, (1994), 302-338. Clifford's theory seems to represent different kinds of diasporic experience, working explicitly against the production of any sort of cultural norm. He criticises the Boyarins in this context, pointedly asking 'whose experience exactly is being theorised? In dialogue with whom?' (p. 324) and suggesting that the term 'diaspora' risks forming a generalised pattern, when this is precisely the result he would aim to prevent. See also Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin, 'Diaspora: Generation and Ground of Jewish Identity', *Critical Inquiry* 19, (Summer 1993), 693-725.
[9] James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*, (London and Cambridge, Massachussets: Harvard University Press, 1997) p. 255. The replacement of 'roots' with 'routes' also seems suggestive in this context.

sense of dislocation that pervaded her upbringing, she describes how 'on vivait donc dans une sorte de lieu clos, institutionnel et en marge, dans une sorte de communauté curieuse, républicaine et laïque'.[10] Her parents dissociated themselves from the local communities, yet they were also displaced from the community of metropolitan France. It is at the moment of the Algerian war, when the tension between France and Algeria is of course at its height, that Sebbar first realises the nature of her exile and her ambivalent relationship with both sides.

Lettres parisiennes repeatedly reinforces the changeable nature of this experience of exile. On the one hand, Sebbar is at pains to stress her severance from conventional community structures, emphasising instead the uniqueness of her experience and exploring the specificity of her situation in the interstices or margins of traditional collective formations. She perceives herself as caught in a negative relation with national definitions, also dismissing terms such as 'immigré' and 'Beur' for their particular connotations and their tendency misleadingly to amalgamate different sorts of experience: 'je ne suis pas immigrée, ni enfant de l'immigration... Je ne suis pas un écrivain maghrébin d'expression française... Je ne suis pas une Française de souche... Ma langue maternelle n'est pas l'arabe.'[11] Sebbar is interested in the notion of Beur identity, reflecting in many of her texts on the contradictory nature of Beur experience, but she emphatically refuses to associate herself with that label precisely because it connotes the image of a certain generation of young people living in the Parisian suburbs in the eighties. She herself was not part of that generation, and she is interested in Beur identity rather for its association with cultural mixing and with flight or liberation from national categories.[12] Concomitantly, Sebbar remains outside of any associative group or unifying culture, hoping to preserve her singularity from constriction by wider forces: 'je me sens privée de la complicité, de la solidarité, de toute la force qui se transmet dans l'appartenance à un groupe, à un réseau, à un courant ... Pour moi, je n'ai pas de lieu, de terre amicale bienveillante et je ne me sens de place nulle part.'[13]

To this extent, Sebbar associates exile with rupture. Exile from this point of view is an experience of displacement and transition that is accompanied by a sense of loss. The

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[10] Sebbar et Huston, *Lettres parisiennes*, p. 51.

[11] Ibid., p. 133.

[12] See my 'Deux écrivains entre la mémoire et l'oubli'. Sebbar discusses how she became interested in the children of North African immigrants because they combine the experience of exile with the invention of new spaces of identification outside of traditional family structures.

exiled individual is marginal, dislocated from conventional communal structures, which themselves seem demarcated and contrastive. This impression reflects Edward Saïd's definition of exile as solitude experienced outside of the group. Saïd describes exile as the permanence of the provisional and the experience of suspension between two or more cultures, with the result that 'exile is life led outside of the habitual order. It is nomadic, decentred, contrapuntal; but no sooner does one get accustomed to it than its unsettling force erupts anew.'[14] Saïd's conclusion here stems from the vague desire to conceive exile as a positive experience, where 'contrapuntal' engagements promote a liberating sense of dialogue. For the most part, however, his emphasis is on isolation and on insurmountable rifts, and indeed, the term 'contrapuntal' still implies a dichotomy or an oppositional structure. The singular individual lingers uncomfortably between contrastive traditional groups, and the opposition between these two poles is underlined.

However, while Sebbar's descriptions of exile on one level recall these reflections on solitude, it is significant that she also obliquely complicates this definition, coupling the sense of isolation with a drive to combine cultural perspectives in a more interactive manner. Texts such as *Lettres parisiennes* revolve around a tension, whereby Sebbar intermittently embraces exile not as a source of alienation but as a site for the creation of new combinations. The letters at times seem to lament this impression of marginality, but at other times Sebbar portrays her sense of dislocation as leading to the fructifying interaction of different cultural references, and these in turn provide the source for her creativity. She writes, for example, that 'les sujets de mes livres ne sont pas mon identité, ils sont le signe, les signes de mon histoire de croisée, de métisse obsédée par sa route et les chemins de traverse, obsédée par la rencontre surréaliste de l'Autre et du Même, par le croisement contre nature et lyrique de la terre et de la ville, de la science et de la chair, de la tradition et de la modernité, de l'Orient et de l'Occident.'[15] This suggests that these moments of cultural encounter and exchange form vital new dialogues, rewriting the 'in-between' as a fertile ground where frontiers are blurred. Displacement and cultural transfer are a locus for innovative reconstructions and critiques of outworn trends. Sebbar also wonders whether she would perhaps be lost without her sense of exile, so that the very term becomes a signifier not only of rupture and disorientation but also of self-definition.

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[13] Sebbar, *Lettres parisiennes*, p. 130.
[14] Edward Saïd, 'Reflections on Exile', *Out There: Marginalisation and Contemporary Cultures*, (London and Cambridge Massachussets: MIT Press, 1990), 357-366 (p. 366).

Sebbar's unusual relation with the French language again expresses her double position. On one level, Sebbar perceives her exile as linguistic. She speaks only French and not Arabic, yet this monolingualism also contains a sense of otherness. She realises that she is enclosed by her mother's language, the colonial language, and that this limitation has denied her knowledge of the culture of her father's native land. She does not understand Arabic, and yet she still feels that its silence constitutes a part of her hybridised identity. She senses that French does not reflect the entirety of her cultural identity, but it also glosses over aspects of a repressed history. She feels she is in exile when she writes in French, introducing scattered signs and traces of Arabic into her writing.[16] At the same time, however, Sebbar also perceives the silenced traces of Arabic that linger beneath the folds of her written French as the impetus for her creativity. While Derrida's monolingual alterity gives rise to a desire for linguistic purity, Sebbar perceives that impurity precisely as a catalyst for new forms of writing:

> Avec la terre natale et l'enfance, le désir d'écrire si ancien, si lointain, impérieux, m'a posée
>
> d'autorité dans l'exil. Alors, à nouveau j'ai entendu la langue de mon père partout où elle se
>
> parle, en France et à Paris, et je suis allée partout pour l'entendre. Sans elle, je ne peux pas
>
> écrire et je sais que l'exil est devenu ma terre d'élection, le lieu privilégié de l'écriture.[17]

The occlusion of Arabic is the force behind her writing, suggesting that it incites new forms of creation. It is as if writing in French will offer Sebbar further access into the repressed interstices of her experience, giving voice to those hidden traces rather than consigning Arabic to a position of irretrievable loss.

Writing therefore becomes not only the starting-point for a reflection on cultural incompatibility and loss, but also the stimulus for a search for dialogic memories. Indeed, Sebbar's first piece of writing, the essays of 'Le mythe du bon nègre', traces how European culture attempted to make servitude acceptable, and her analysis reflects her project to uncover and rewrite the history of cultural hierarchy.[18] She then goes on to write novels in order to recreate her cultural history in a reconstructive fictional form. Although she associates writing in French with the experience of exile, she also turns this into a productive position, using her novels to cross borders and to explore the open territory of

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[15] Sebbar et Huston, *Lettres parisiennes*, p. 134.

[16] See for example Sebbar, 'La langue de l'exil', *La Quinzaine littéraire*, 436, (1983), 8-10. Also, 'Si je parle la langue de ma mère', *Les Temps Modernes* 379, (1978), 1179-88.

[17] Sebbar, 'Paroles d'exil', *Magazine littéraire* 221, (1985), 38-9 (p. 39).

[18] See Sebbar, 'Le mythe du bon nègre, ou, l'idéologie coloniale dans la production romanesque du XVIIe siècle', *Les Temps modernes*, 337-8, (1974), 2349-75, 2588-613.

métissage. In the absence of a single native land, writing becomes a forum for reconfiguring community and charting journeys between cultures and nationalities. Endlessly fictionalising her experience, Sebbar rewrites and reinvents the experiences of exile and migration in different, contrasting ways, using writing to create unforeseen possibilities and to invent cultural identities and relations anew. It is significant that Sebbar refuses to associate herself with a 'literary family', dismissing the construction of other writers as models or father figures. But she does embrace the repeated relocation of new forms of community within the act of writing itself, continually reading other writers in order to reinterpret their work. Her writing constitutes a nervous shifting between different positions, portraying both alienation and the affirmation of combined signs and traces.

Cultural Identification and the Generation Gap

In some of her early texts, Sebbar depicts the shift in attitudes between different generations, examining the exile of the 'first generation' and portraying the indeterminate position of the next generation, where individuals provisionally renegotiate their relations both with their parents and with their countries of origin. *Fatima ou les Algériennes au square* and *Parle mon fils, parle à ta mère* both stage the conflicts arising between Algerian parents and their offspring living in France, as characters of the 'second generation' perceive their relationship with existing community formations in different, often ambivalent ways. Like Ben Jelloun and Boudjedra, Sebbar tends to portray the alienation of the parents in relation to French culture, also conveying the revival of the Algerian community within a French setting and figuring 'immigrant' experience through the irresolute encounter between distinct cultures. The following generation, however, problematises the endeavours of the first generation to forge an Algerian culture within France and sets about seeking new connections and relocating new identities between exile and cultural dialogue.

In *Fatima*, Sebbar depicts the confrontation between the central character Dalila, growing up immersed in French culture, and her strictly Muslim parents. The novel opens with Dalila closing herself in her younger siblings' bedroom for eight days in order to avoid her angry father, who regularly beats her in order to assert his authority. Although he is not a drunk like many of the factory workers about whom Dalila hears, her father takes out his misery and frustration on his daughter, unable to accept her disjunctive relation to her origins and reacting against her entanglement with French culture. In one episode, the father spots his daughter wearing a short skirt and playing with French boys in the street, and he

becomes furious and acts violently. Dalila's father is portrayed as an authoritarian voice aiming to control his daughter's sexuality, hoping to constrain her within the confines of a strict, 'pure' Algerian and Muslim community. Even Fatima, Dalila's mother, whose sympathies are often presented as hovering uncertainly between those of the father and those of the daughter, strikes her daughter for asking the meaning of some French swear words, and the violence here is a reaction to the tension between Islam and French culture that immigrants are forced to negotiate. Muslim conceptions of the role of women, the rules against feminine sexual freedom and autonomy, and the encouragement of feminine modesty and subordination, clash with the customs of emancipated French women; the daughters of Algerian immigrants are caught up ineluctably in the centre of this clash.

Other points of conflict include Dalila's resistance to learning about Islam, since although her parents encourage her to pray and to read the Koran, she herself is not interested and finds it difficult to devote herself to study of the text. She refuses to participate in Ramadan and resists listening to her mother teach her how to cook Arabic food. She suggests instead that her Algerian origins should not necessarily dictate the specificity of her practices, customs and beliefs, again implying an open-ended relation between community and culture and disrupting the association of Algeria with a self-enclosed set of ideologies. She reflects instead that 'Algérienne, oui, elle pouvait le dire ou on le disait pour elle, mais musulmane, elle ne pensait pas qu'on pouvait la croire musulmane parce qu'elle était algérienne'.[19] Dalila also seeks ways to assert her freedom from the enclosure of her parents' home, such as on her occasional clandestine afternoon trips into town and to the shops. Sebbar further emphasises the difference between the parents and their daughter by portraying scenes where Dalila teaches her mother, Fatima, how to write. The sight of her name in French letters seems strange and unfamiliar to Fatima, as she perceives 'donc ce nom qu'elle entendait si rarement, FATIMA, c'était son nom et elle savait l'écrire'.[20] Fatima is barely able to communicate in French society, and Dalila constitutes her sole means of connecting to the world that exists beyond her transposed Algerian culture. A further irony is suggested here by Fatima's response that Dalila should learn to write in Arabic. Dalila speaks Kabylian but is reluctant to use it extensively.

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[19] Leïla Sebbar, *Fatima ou les Algériennes au square*, (Paris: Stock, 1981) pp. 22-23.
[20] Ibid., p. 47.

In response to these incompatibilities, the Algerian mothers meet every day in the square to narrate their experiences and recreate a sense of their own community through dialogue. The public space of the square becomes a meeting point where the women can voice their difficulties, tell their own stories and share their troubles. Other mothers here also narrate even more extreme instances of violence, further revealing the disjunctive experience of migration. Dalila is particularly fascinated, for example, by the story of Mustapha, a small child in a family too large for the father to support, who is beaten, falls ill, and whom the social services finish by taking into care. The square becomes a means for the Algerian women to share their experiences and recreate their own community, perpetuating the Algerian oral tradition and locating common histories. The hammam is also a habitual forum for the creation and re-establishment of links and relationships. These communities are defined paradoxically by the common experience of rupture and exile.

Dalila's relationship with this community is problematic, as she is divided between the need to share in this act of narration and the desire to break away from the Algerian enclave and discover her own specificity through contact with different cultures. She learns from her mother and the women of the square but finds she cannot conform exclusively to this displaced Algerian culture. Her father is working in order for the family to be able to return to Algeria (though this is difficult because of fatigue and illness), yet Dalila refuses to accompany them, resisting appropriation into what she perceives as an all-encompassing cultural system:

> Elle savait trop bien de quelle manière on prenait soin des filles en Algérie, dans les villages
> de l'intérieur. On les surveillait, elles ne sortaient plus, elles devaient obéir, écouter les
> autres femmes, tantes, cousines, grand-tantes… amies de la famille, toutes bienveillantes et
> vigilantes pour leur bien… Elle n'irait pas en Algérie. Elle ne resterait pas chez son oncle
> pour connaître mieux son pays et la langue de son pays puisqu'elle était algérienne. Son père
> le lui répétait assez. Même si elle ne voulait pas être française, aller vivre là-bas, elle le
> refusait aussi. Elle irait plus tard.[21]

As a result of her parents' discussions, she perceives Algeria as some sort of repressive institution for the punishment of young girls who have broken the rules while living in France. Her desire to visit the country later is also significant here, suggesting less an outright refusal of Algeria in favour of the unconditional embrace of French culture than the need to interpret her relation with Algeria in her own singular and independent manner.

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[21] Ibid., p. 109.

Similarly, this unease with specific Muslim conventions is expressed in a later episode, where one of the Algerian women discusses the subject of arranged marriages and the double subordination of Muslim women by their fathers and their husbands. Despite remarks that marriage could be a possible route to freedom from the original family, Dalila vows never to marry nor to allow her family to constrain her in such a way. The novel ends with her flight from the family and her difficult decision to leave her mother in search of freedom in France. Unable to live in France caught within this apparent cultural incompatibility, Dalila cuts herself off from the past and sets off in search of the new. Sebbar seems to be advocating here the relocation of identity through new contacts and paths of discovery. If the novel thus begins with Dalila's exile from the derritorialised community of the Algerians in France, it finishes with a reversal of that model, reinforcing the isolated nature of that Algerian community and promoting the establishment of another form of cultural definition and interaction. Most importantly, this interweaving of community and exile demonstrates the unsettled nature of Sebbar's attitude to immigrant experience and to collective identity.

The reinvention of community by people of Algerian origin is complicated further in this text by Sebbar's attention to racism and social problems. The women's narratives are interrupted by an aggressive dispute between bands of youths on the housing estate, giving rise to a series of observations regarding the ways in which people of North African origin become narrowly identified with certain problems. Alongside the discourses of the women, there is a stream of consciousness narrative from the policeman, portraying the prejudice of some French attitudes to immigrants arising from difficult social circumstances. Social problems tend to become associated with racial difference, as the policeman laments: 'les petits Arabes ils sont élevés dans la rue et même l'école n'a pas réussi à faire quelque chose d'eux dès qu'ils sont plus grands ils sèchent on en a souvent cueilli qui traînaient aux heures scolaires mais quand on les ramène à leurs parents si le père est là il gueule et il flanque les raclées ...'[22] Sebbar seems to suggest that if the reformation of communities is problematic, this is also due to French attitudes, to social inequalities and the poor quality of life of the immigrants on housing estates. Immigrants create an identity against a background of racial prejudice and inadequate living conditions, which renders the possibilities for dialogue increasingly difficult. It is perhaps for these sorts of reasons that some immigrants fall back

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[22] Ibid., p. 140.

on Islam as a symbol of their identity, reinforcing Muslim culture as a sign of resistance to hostility and as an attempt to salvage a sense of self from a situation where oppression is dominant. Implicitly then, conflicts in the novel seem also to be related to the relegation of many North African immigrants to factory jobs, to poverty and to inadequate housing conditions.

With *Fatima*, Sebbar portrays the problems arising from the cultural polarisation of France and Algeria, or indeed, laïcité and Islam, and evokes the beginning of a new form of questioning. On the one hand, she stages the attempts of the Algerian women to establish a community through narrative and story-telling, where cultural memory is combined with the shared will to understand conflict and incompatibility. In this context, oral narration reinforces the notion of a shared collective history achieved through the exchange of similar experiences. Yet on the other hand, Sebbar also reveals how the younger individuals in turn become severed from their original cultures, focusing less on the 'native' land and the customs of Islam than on the search for another form of cultural encounter. There is also the sense of a need for dialogue with the 'Français de souche' in order to combat stereotypes and resist ghettoisation. *Fatima* for the most part points out the existence of conflicts and difficulties rather than dealing explicitly with cultural dialogue, but the text subtly begins to express Sebbar's perception of the possible coincidence of the experience of exile with new sorts of negotiation between Algerian culture, Islam and French society.

Sebbar's anxiety over the generation gap is similarly continued in *Parle mon fils, parle à ta mère*. Here the difference is represented less in terms of violence and explicit conflict than through the rupture in communication between an Algerian mother and her Beur son. The son returns after a long period of absence, walks into his mother's home and, hardly speaking himself, listens to his mother's narrative as she recounts her impressions since his absence and her difficult acceptance of life in France. The characters are radically alienated from one another, as the mother attempts to establish some form of communication while the son remains distant and silent. This gap is also heightened by a language difference, as the mother reflects near the beginning: 'elle veut que son fils lui parle en arabe, c'est sa langue quand même, mais lui s'obstine, il parle en français, quand il parle; elle comprend tout, mais elle répond en arabe et lui comprend aussi, alors ça va.'[23] Although they do understand one another, the cultural difference represented by the different

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[23] Leïla Sebbar, *Parle mon fils, parle à ta mère*, (Paris: Stock, 1984) p. 12.

languages seems to mark a barrier between them. Another instance of this shift in attitudes across the generations is once again the son's ambivalence towards Islam. His mother reminds him of his Muslim upbringing, of the customs he used to practise, and she finds it difficult to comprehend his current rejection of those conventions. She also presses on him her desire for him to marry a Muslim woman and reminds him that Algeria must be his native land. Yet the response of the son is simply to remain silent and then to depart once again. The generation gap is also reinforced by the departure of the daughter Samira, and although Sebbar does not recount her story in detail here, her flight recalls that of Dalila, reinforcing the tension between Algerian Muslim parents and the young girl growing up in France.

At the centre of the text is the mother's troubled adaptation to French culture and her dissocation from Beur culture. Alienated from her Algerian community, she is still unable to forge a new identity in France and finds it difficult to understand the political activities of the Beurs. She speaks of the 'marche des Beurs' from Marseille to Paris in 1983 but does not comprehend their strategy, and the son has to explain that their goal is to cross all the regions densely populated by North African immigrants, drawing attention to the massive Beur presence in France. The son forms a part of that movement, but the mother is unaware of this new form of solidarity and her existence in France remains one of solitary exile. Even the word 'Beur' is meaningless for the mother, and even when her son has explained its implications, reflecting on how the single syllable retains a particular force, she complains that she does not like the sound of the word, clearly preferring to associate with her original culture. The dialogic structure of the text in this way becomes a symbol of separation and distance as much as of fusion and complicity, reflecting the incomplete transfer of cultural memory and the fraught movement towards new configurations. Both *Fatima* and *Parle mon fils* depict the necessity for the formation of new sites of cultural encounter, but they also associate that sort of experience with exile and rupture.

The *Shérazade* Trilogy: From Orientalism to *Métissage*

While *Fatima* and *Parle mon fils* display the generation gap and point to the uneasy emergence of a sense of dialogic interaction, Sebbar's next project, the *Shérazade* trilogy, puts this assertion more confidently into action. The texts occupy a territory that is neither wholly French nor North African, but which actively subverts fantasies of national communities in favour of a performance of cultural *métissage*. Another runaway like Dalila,

Shérazade leaves her strict parents' home and embarks on a physical and mental journey in search of self-definition and freedom. She investigates the double legacy of French colonialism and Algerian patriarchy in order to understand historical perceptions of Arabic women, to dissociate herself from these and to move on to forge her own more subversive mosaic identity. Gathering traces, signs and symbols from the history of cultural representations of Algeria, Shérazade both performs the role imposed on her by the Orientalist gaze and aggressively subverts any such totalised representation by interweaving the old with the new.

Shérazade's composite identity is enacted through the parodic reappropriation of Orientalist stereotypes. She feels exiled from these traditional depictions of Arabic identity, but she irreverently turns that sense of exile into a subversive combination of past representations with multiple symbols of modern living. To begin with, the heroine's name refers to the Shéhérazade myth of the *Mille et une nuits*, seemingly re-establishing her engagement with the culture of the past. At the same time, however, as the old Lebanese woman in *Le fou de Shérazade* points out, she omits the middle syllable, 'la syllabe la plus suave, la plus orientale',[24] in a gesture that explicitly works against processes of mythologisation and fantasy. The name in itself performs a subversive dialogue with the past in order to reinvent the specificity of the present. In addition, *Shérazade* ends with the heroine's project to make a journey to Algeria, only a car accident in the Loire results in Shérazade walking the rest of the way to Marseille. Then in the sequel, *Les carnets*, she hitchhikes around France with the truck driver Gilles, roughly following the route of the 'Marche des Beurs' from Marseille back to Paris. Sebbar seems to suggest that the young Beur will find her identity not in Algeria but through a patchwork engagement with the history of representations of the Arab, juxtaposed with cultural encounters with other travellers in metropolitan France. The motif of the journey and the duped 'mythe du retour' imply the creation of a diasporic identity which relies not on the revocation of roots and origins, as Ben Jelloun seemed to suggest, but on the blurring of diverse influences from within both France and Algeria.

The first two texts of the trilogy contain a wealth of Orientalist images, depicting the illusions and fantasies that structure the French imagination of the Arabic other. Both Shérazade and her friend Julien, who is of French descent but grew up in Algeria, are

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[24] Leïla Sebbar, *Le fou de Shérazade*, (Paris: Stock, 1991) p. 164.

fascinated by representations of odalisques. Julien is attracted to Shérazade because her green eyes remind him of one of the women in Delacroix's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*, and Shérazade's journey is triggered by her seeing Matisse's paintings of odalisques. Julien desires to exoticise Shérazade, interpreting her scarf to connote Arab culture and associating her bright green eyes with Pierre Loti's Aziyadé, a beautiful Turkish woman with whom Loti fell in love and who has come to exemplify Orientalist idealisation. By depicting Julien's association of Shérazade with Western fetishisations of the muted women of the harem, Sebbar reveals how modern North African immigrants are still obliged to negotiate with this series of fantasmatic representations. Read against the background of Said's *Orientalism,* Sebbar's text demonstrates how the perception of the 'absolute' difference of the Arabic other can impede the recognition of that other as a singular being with a specific trajectory encompassing diverse influences. Shérazade is perceived by Julien to exemplify a stereotypical vision of Arabic difference, as her cultural alterity is caught up in a series of illusions that occlude the plural components of her identity and history.

The second volume, *Les carnets de Shérazade*, also contains a number of references to Orientalism, and here the tendency to objectify difference is demystified through a comparison with stereotypical depictions of 'Frenchness'. Cultural fantasies persist on both sides, and Sebbar's strategy of turning the Orientalist gaze back onto the French helps to offer a critique of the myths at play in certain lingering perceptions of alterity. For example, Shérazade tells the driver Gilles of Mehmed Efendi, an Ottoman ambassador of the eighteenth century, who arrives in France and perceives 'Frenchness' as defined fetishistically by the chateaux and the monuments rather than by the multiple and changing realities of different parts of rural France. Efendi exoticises the beauty and sexuality of French women, seeing their blond hair as a mythical symbol of cultural otherness, just as Orientalist discourses fetishise the veil. This story is then juxtaposed with Lady Montagu's visit to Turkey, her ignorance of rural Turkey and her glorification of the palaces. This strategy of mirroring displays the illusory and damaging nature of hasty and ignorant associations, not only advocating the liberation of Algerian culture from reductive stereotypes but also criticising the process of mythologisation itself. In a later episode, the character Nasser juxtaposes Chateaubriand's idealised descriptions of Saladin in *Itinéraire de Paris à Jerusalem* with the *Chroniques arabes des croisades du XIIe siècle*, where French women are objectified and praised for their sexual prowess. Sebbar forces the French to confront their own Orientalist tendencies by positioning them as objects of

another's discourse, using this critique to reinforce the fluid nature of cultural identity constructions.

The *Shérazade* texts also associate colonialist and Orientalist fantasies with contemporary image culture. Julien repeatedly photographs Shérazade, and the heroine again expresses her dissatisfaction with these frozen portraits by refusing to obey his instructions. She ultimately tears the photographs up, crying 'tu as pas besoin de moi vivante, finalement',[25] implying that Julien's fantasies deny the mobility of her complex subject position and reduce her to the confines of a static, two-dimensional image. There is also a scene in *Shérazade* where a photographer tries to take a picture at a party, and Shérazade furiously snatches the camera from him and destroys it by hurling forcefully it against the wall. The reaction is an act of aggression against the double violence of Orientalism and patriarchy, expressed through the drive to reduce alterity to the controlled framework of a single, frozen image. Later, in *Le fou de Shérazade* Julien uses stereotypical Orientalist images in his preparation of a film: 'Julien a laissé des images gigantesques, ses «orientaleries», comme dit Shérazade, ses Vénus, Suzanne, Bethsabée, Salomé, Judith... et les inconnus au bain ou à la toilette.'[26] He also uses an uprooted olive tree to connote Arabic culture, again depicting complex cultural identities through monolithic signs and symbols. In the same text, Shérazade's experience as a hostage in Beirut is similarly appropriated by the controlling grasp of a series of French photojournalists. Sebbar locates a modern form of Orientalism in the drive to appropriation subtending the production of images, and she demonstrates how this too can function to objectify otherness.

The role of Shérazade, then, is to engage with these fantasies but also to problematise their borders and to subvert their totalising force. On one level, she uses signs to perform her identity as an Arabic woman, wearing a headscarf and, in the episode where she visits Loti's house, dressing up in traditional Arabic garb and masquerading as an odalisque. Yet at the same time, Shérazade is profoundly alienated by these representations, and she aims to puncture myths and stereotypes by coupling these signs with mockery and disrespect. The image of Shérazade wearing her walkman over her headscarf neatly encapsulates this parody, and her life in the squat, the shoplifting and hold-ups in which she indulges, become an active rebellion against her Orientalist performance. Mixing traditional signs with modernity, exoticism with crime, Shérazade's mosaic identity enacts her refusal

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[25] Leïla Sebbar, *Sherazade, 17 ans, brune, les yeux verts*, (Paris: Stock, 1982) p. 158.

[26] Leïla Sebbar, *Le fou de Shérazade*, p. 79.

to allow stereotypes to retain power and authority, as her masquerade teeters into parody. The manner in which the scene in Loti's house begins with a sense of mystery and fascination but ends with irony and laughter also expresses Sebbar's impatience with Orientalist fantasies, and the transposition of traditional costumes to the modern setting flattens them and makes them appear ridiculous. Shérazade mockingly names their setting 'un Orient de Prisunic',[27] undercutting the Orientalist project by associating it with the most prosaic aspects of modern everyday life. Shérazade also both marvels at and mocks the enormity of Loti's collection, and her ridicule underlines her distaste for the writer's drive to possess and accumulate objects and symbols. Shérazade's curt note to Julien at the end of *Shérazade*, 'je ne suis pas une odalisque',[28] also expresses her impatience with the fixity of that role, and her embarkation on a journey represents her desire for novelty.

This notion of the performance and subversion of (neo-)colonial desire can be explored using Bhabha's conception of mimicry. Although Bhabha writes for the most part of the unconscious ambivalence of colonialist discourse, the mechanics of mimicry can be used here to illuminate Shérazade's strategy of enacting Orientalist fantasies while also asserting her own resistance to those fantasies. Shérazade mimics the representations of colonial and Orientalist discourse, but as Bhabha points out, this act of mimicry contains ambivalence: it is *'a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite'*.[29] Masquerading as the object of Orientalist desire, Shérazade also continually reinforces her difference, demonstrating how her own identity exceeds the reified vision proposed by the Orientalist gaze. Bhabha also explains how mimicry functions metonymically: it represents authority only in part. As with Shérazade, certain cultural signs, like her headscarf for example, connote the colonialist vision, but they do not make up a totalised position and in this way they subvert the establishment of colonial power as a unified and authoritative whole. In Bhabha's words:

> As Lacan reminds us, mimicry is like camouflage, not a harmonization or repression of difference, but a form of resemblance, that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically. Its threat, I would add, comes from the prodigious and strategic production of conflictual, fantastic, discriminatory 'identity effects' in the play of a power that is elusive because it hides no essence, no 'itself'.[30]

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[27] Leïla Sebbar, *Les carnets de Shérazade*, (Paris: Stock, 1985) p. 162.
[28] Leïla Sebbar, *Shérazade, 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts*, p. 206.
[29] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p. 86.
[30] Ibid., p. 90.

Thus a performance like that of Shérazade depicts the presence of the authoritative discourse, but the difference which underpins that masquerade also implies the failure of the authority to hold full sway. It is in this way that performance and subversion come hand in hand in order to draw attention to the residual alterity that colonialist and Orientalist discourses fail to encapsulate.

Coupled with these acts of subversion are Shérazade's patchwork readings of other texts and Sebbar's intertextual references. Just as Shérazade's juxtaposition of the symbols of Orientalism with modernity subverts the authority of the former discourse, similarly Sebbar combines different textual citations so as to defeat the possibility of a single authoritative source. As I have already shown, Sebbar couples figures such as Efendi and Lady Montagu to display tendencies to Orientalism in history. Sebbar also refers to other important figures in literature and history, such as Abd-el-Kader, who unified the tribes to fight against French colonialism in the nineteenth century and resisted the French army for fifteen years before he was captured and imprisoned in France. Shérazade is equally fascinated by Flora Tristan: 'une voyageuse intrépide et passionnée qui proclame, parce qu'elle n'a pas de terre, que sa patrie, c'est l'univers.'[31] She then comments on her readings of Rimbaud, exploring his descriptions of his travels to Abyssinia and jokingly calling him Abdallah Rimbaud, and her cultural knowledge is shown to derive from a large intermingling of diverse, irreconcilable texts. Sebbar's strategy here is to demonstrate how no apparent textual authority can provide Shérazade with a narrative of her origins, but her identity is comprised of manifold images from diverse sources. This web of intertextuality forecloses the creation of identity by reference to a single origin and implies that Shérazade is herself a *métissage* of different texts.

Sebbar's attempts to parody and subvert the Orientalist drive to reify otherness can be seen as part of a move to readdress the question of community. As I have suggested, Shérazade's journey is not a search for roots but a creative engagement with diverse influences. She forges links not with an original community in Algeria but between cultures and across history, promoting sharing and dialogue rather than family ties, belonging or resemblance. Her relationship with Julien involves the exchange of cultural references across difference. He introduces her to nineteenth-century Orientalist painting and reads her famous Arabic poems, and she in turn tells him stories of popular Algerian culture and

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[31] Sebbar, *Les carnets*, p. 113.

introduces him to the oral tradition. Similarly, the journey across France recounted in *Les carnets* includes a vast array of characters and encounters, and national identity seems insignificant. Instead, there are a number of scenes where communities are formed spontaneously, such as at Fernande's farm with Marie. In this instance, the girls share in the activities of the farm, learning how to make traditional jam and pâté while also hiding from the authorities. The two scenes where Shérazade bathes in streams, first with Marie and later with Francette, imply a special community between women, which contains echoes of the hammam but is freed from any single cultural definition. The girls wash each other, tell secrets, laugh and form ties as outlaws, sharing their experiences and resisting the status quo while remaining open to the other's particular history.

Sebbar uses these sorts of scenes to set up connections between immigrant minorities and rural or regional communities in France. Shérazade makes friends and feels comfortable with the country people she encounters, and Sebbar indicates their shared resistance to the dominant authority of the established, centralised French community. This point is symbolised by the commentary on the juxtaposition of two paintings at the museum in Nantes: 'Shérazade put voir, dans une pièce réservée, où elle passa la journée avec la jeune femme, *Les Cribleuses de blé* à coté de *L'Esclave blanche*. L'odalisque et les paysannes.'[32] This juxtaposition could be read to symbolise a transcultural community or a connection between minorities that challenges any dominant discourse of 'Frenchness'.

This reconfiguration of community again relies both on the written and on the oral tradition. Sebbar's renovated community is dialogic, and this notion is developed further by the centrality of oral narration and exchange in the novels. In *Fatima* and *Parle mon fils*, oral narration is the central act of the text, as the characters seek both to invent themselves through the recounting of stories and to form connections with their interlocutors. In the Shérazade trilogy too, and in particular in *Les carnets*, oral narrative is crucial, as Shérazade reinvents herself through her exchanges with Gilles. That these narratives are spoken is highly significant, both because there are echoes of North African oral culture and because there is room for a real encounter with a listener. Rather than writing her life in a solitary manner, Shérazade discovers it through her dialogues with Gilles, so that interchange and communication are revealed to be central to an understanding of the self. The presence of an interlocutor means that the discourse is more immediately open to otherness, and, unlike

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[32] Ibid., p. 128.

in *Parle mon fils* where the mother's oral narrative forms a monologue with which her son finds it difficult to identify, Shérazade's discourse seems to be aimed at establishing contact through the swapping of stories. The *Shérazade* texts are particularly suggestive in this context because they express not the straightforward renovation of Algerian culture, as Ben Jelloun's portrayals of orality might, but precisely an interaction with other cultures, since Shérazade is interested above all in communicating with different sorts of people. Equally, as Glissant suggested, oral discourses leave room for change, reconsideration, re-evaluation and questioning, rather than fixing themselves into a static text. The spontaneity and openness of Shérazade's dialogues aptly shows how cultural identities can be both mobile and provisional.

Finally, however, it is worth remembering that if the *Shérazade* texts promote an awareness of singularity through changing relations, these new interactions are still combined with a lingering sense of uncertainty. Shérazade is portrayed as confident and assertive, rejecting outmoded practices and definitions and refusing to associate herself with reductive cultural categories. Nevertheless, her fascination with her historical and literary heritage and her constant re-interrogation of past and present narratives suggests not only the straightforward embrace of a polyphonic identity but also a degree of anxiety regarding the power of those representations and a sense of disorientation caused by the spectral presence of memory. Shérazade does not simply relinquish traditional definitions but unsettlingly engages and disengages with their meanings, remaining mindful of their power while also putting into question the foundations upon which they are built. She is therefore at once in exile, dissociating herself from traditional representations of Algerian culture, and involved in a process of cultural dialogue, parodying the history of representations of the Arab and combining the past with the contingencies of the present. Her experience entwines exile and polyphony, as her subversive engagement with different representations takes place against the background of her sense of dislocation and rootlessness. As the critic Anissa Talahite points out, 'as the novel never resolves the tensions between past/present, absence/presence, representational visibility/invisibility, it reminds us perhaps that the migrant's itinerary is not always a joyful celebration of difference but often an uncertain journey through the complexities of mixed histories.'[33] The *Shérazade* texts succeed in advocating the traversal of frontiers, yet that configuration does not imply a refusal of the past and cannot constitute

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[33] See Anissa Talahite, 'Odalisques et Pacotille: Identity and Representation in Leïla Sebbar's *Shérazade, 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts*', *Nottingham French Studies* 37.2, (1998), 62-72, (p. 72).

an uncomplicated celebration. Instead it portrays a repeated movement between a sense of uncertainty and a desire for interaction.

The Reconstruction of Memory and the Force of Amnesia

Sebbar's textual voyage across time and space in the *Shérazade* texts again gives way to a more anxious position in some of her more recent work on memory. While Shérazade counters her sense of exile with a confident reappropriation of selected fragments of cultural memories, many of Sebbar's more recent characters shift indeterminately between a desire to recreate the past and an awareness that many linking threads have been severed. Texts such as *Le silence des rives*, as well as the manifold fragments on the Algerian war, strive to re-establish a collective culture through reference to the events of the past, while also figuring the impossibility of that gesture and confining the individual to the singularity and contingency of a ruptured present. Sebbar's most recent work tentatively reaches across the borders of space and time, but the recreation of cultural relations exists in tandem with an insurmountable sense of loss. As in Nancy's discussion of singular-plural being, relations are continually formed, broken and reformed through time.

In *Le silence des rives*, Sebbar couples the search for cultural memory with a sense of the solitude and uncertainty of the individual. The text traces the unsettled experiences of an Algerian emigrant, a nameless and faceless 'étranger', who struggles to re-imagine the Algerian community from which he has been separated by the 'rives' of the Mediterranean. The story is centred on several experiences of loss, narrating first the death of the great grandmother and unveiling later the tragic death of the mother and infant brother during childbirth. Scenes of ritualised mourning highlight the strangeness and incomprehensibility of the customs of the villagers, as the 'belles sœurs' or 'sorcières' murmur prayers in a foreign 'langue secrète'. The text also emphasises the separation of 'l'homme' from these sisters, who mourn together in Algeria, also walking by the side of the river in an endless nomadic journey triggered by the experience of loss. The man and the sisters exist in parallel spaces that mirror but fail to communicate with one another: 'et lui, le fils, l'homme qui marche le long du fleuve, il oublie. Il ignore que les sœurs rôdent, on les a vus dans la région. Elles attendent pour entrer au village que la vieille maison délabrée s'écroule.'[34] The banks of the rivers, and also the frontiers symbolised by the shores of France and

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[34] Leïla Sebbar, *Le silence des rives*, (Paris: Stock, 1993) p. 26.

Algeria, become a locus where individuals hover uncertainly between memory and forgetting, between exile and cultural revocation. The characters of the text seem cut off from a sense of community and origin due to the primary experience of bereavement, and the writing strives to come to terms with the past while also underlining the inevitability of its rupture.

The death of the mother and the man's subsequent failure to remember and mourn reveal the breakdown of temporal and spatial links. The man is confined to exile in France, and he is able neither fully to re-establish a synchronic connection with the family in Algeria nor to revoke diachronically the culture of the past. The loss of the mother leads to the loss of a sense of origin, as well as to the failure of the cultural community to traverse geographical boundaries. The past becomes a series of muted traces or muffled echoes that fail to attenuate the contingency and solitude of the present: 'qui me dira les mots de ma mère? Dans la chambre blanche où je suis seul, qui viendra murmurer la prière des morts? Et qui parlera la langue de ma terre à mon oreille, dans le silence de l'autre rive?'[35] It is as if the mother's death disturbs and interrupts the linguistic recreation of the past, so that the central character seems trapped by silence and by the impossibility of cultural translation. The sparse narrative style of the text reflects the absence that subtends its language, as the faceless figure of the man is described only in terms of his sense of lack. Language leaves gaps and blanks that obliquely represent the silence of the past, and writing itself is bound up with death and with the shadows of forgotten lives.

Shared memories are fractured traces that weave in and out of the text while failing to form a coherent and satisfying narrative. The man desperately consults the clairvoyante Soraya hoping for news of his family, and he receives incomplete snatches and images that he tenuously uses to reconstruct some elusive sense of the past. In one instance, the man remembers looking at a swallow's nest with his grandmother, crying out with excitement when the first bird flew out from the nest. He hopes that Soraya will comfort him by assuring him that the swallows are still there, and this fleeting image provides a broken fragment of the lost culture while also resisting the formation of a wider contextual narrative. The fragile nature of such connections is then reinforced by Soraya's own disappearance when the man comes to look for her the following year. These fractured memories recall the ruins of the family house, as if certain shapes persist even as the whole

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[35] Ibid., p. 53.

has become indeterminate and invisible. Finally, textual reconstruction is itself problematised by the destruction of the poems written by the central character, and the submergence of their fragments beneath the waters of the river symbolises the effacement of the past and the transience of the written trace. Nostalgic recollections seem incomplete and difficult to grasp, while the contingency of the present defeats the attempt to conserve memory through textual reconstruction.

Sebbar's multiple fragments on the Algerian war also express this uncertainty. Memories of the war are above all structured in terms of spectral and incomplete traces, as connections across time and space seem both fragile and fraught. Most important here is the difficult transmission of the memory of the war across the generation gap, revealing the troubled relation that the children of Algerian immigrants retain with their parents' memories of the war. This highlights the disruptive effects of migration, as well as the attempted recreation of the past, in a similar way to *Le silence des rives*. An example of this disjunction can be found in Sebbar's use of photographs to evoke how young people attempt to recapture a sense of the war. In *Shérazade*, the heroine leafs through the photograph album *Femmes algériennes 1960* by Marc Garanger until tears stream down her face. In *Le Chinois vert d'Afrique*, the protagonist Momo, whose origins are a mixture of Algerian, Vietnamese and Turkish, obsessively collects photographs of the war and hides them in his secret cabin. Assembling various sorts of images of different wars, Momo builds a heterogeneous collection of traces, depicting incoherent fragments of scenes. In one example, some Algerians are carrying a body across a ford:

> Un homme, devant, s'est engagé sur les pierres du gué. Il est à moitié caché par le soldat
>
> français en gros plan, à gauche de la photographie. Ces hommes sont des Arabes, des
>
> musulmans. Le soldat est un Français. On ne la voit pas, mais on sait qu'il pointe son arme
>
> sur les hommes qui vont traverser la rivière.[36]

The photograph is the trace of a particular, singular event, ruptured from its context while also pointing to past and future violence. These fragments depict individual, contingent moments and they resemble the partial memories of *Le silence des rives*.

These photographs play a complex role. The photograph recalls Derrida's theory of the trace in that it connotes both presence and absence.[37] It is the mark of what has already

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[36] Leïla Sebbar, *Le Chinois vert d'Afrique*, (Paris: Stock, 1984) p. 142.

[37] See Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx: l'état de la dette, le travail du deuil et la nouvelle Internationale*, (Paris: Galilée, 1994). Derrida invents this notion of 'spectrality' in order to deconstruct the relation between the present and the past. Memories of the past are not enclosed within a self-contained category but consist rather of the lingering and resurgence of hints and traces across temporal frontiers.

happened and represents the flickering presence of its referent, while also emphasising the object's irrecuperable situation in the past. In this sense, the photograph is spectrality par excellence, transporting the mark of the past into the present without displaying continuity or cause and effect. The photograph reflects a singular referent at a particular moment in time while interrupting linearity and context. Thus Roland Barthes, in *La chambre claire*, defines the photograph as 'le Particulier absolu, la Contingence souveraine',[38] suggesting that it is the freezing of a unique moment and the transportation of that moment, 'spectrally', across time. The photographs pored over by Sebbar's Algerian second-generation immigrants depict the war in terms of broken fragments and de-contextualised traces that deconstruct both memory and time. Sebbar's photographs also have a violent aspect, snatching objects outside of their contexts and mimicking the violence of the war. In two stories, 'La photographie', printed in the collection *Nouvelles de la guerre d'Algérie* and 'Les photos d'identité' in *La jeune fille au balcon*, Sebbar narrates the story of a French soldier photographing some Algerian women. Although the soldier does not harm the women, this gesture reflects a desire for appropriation, recalling Shérazade's photographers again. That Sebbar also recounts this event twice in two different ways further reinforces the sense that it is a trauma that weaves in and out of time and recurs in the present in a haunting manner.

Similarly, just as photographs reflect fragments of a spectral memory, so do extracts from heterogeneous testimonies fulfil the same function in Sebbar's work. Many of her texts contain a series of oral narratives of particular experiences of the war, each representing different, singular moments. Again in *Le Chinois vert*, Momo listens avidly to the various testimonies of survivors of the war, yet it is important that their experiences also all contrast with one another. The policeman Laruel fought for the French but in the name of fraternisation and solidarity. Conversely, an Algerian in a café narrates his experience escaping from a captured village by following a funeral procession. Momo also learns of a young woman, Eve, who married a student who protested against the war and was killed. Each of these stories offers a brief glimpse of a single moment in the war, and their narration in the present recalls the transportation of the photographic trace across contexts and over time. Equally, *La Seine était rouge* explicitly reconstructs a fractured narrative of the Paris massacre in October 1961, where during a peaceful demonstration hundreds of Algerians

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[38] Roland Barthes, *La chambre claire: note sur la photographie*, (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, 1980) p. 15.

were thrown into the Seine, injured or killed. (The massacre was also greatly played down by the press at the time and has been discussed extensively only more recently.) The protagonist Amel listens one by one to a series of contrasting testimonies, painstakingly reconstructing a memory according to these momentary glimpses of the singular experiences of the narrators.

Memories of the Algerian war also often revolve around single individuals whose stories are difficult to insert into any imaginary communal narrative, again perplexing the idea of a collective consciousness. Sebbar's most recent collection of short stories, *Soldats*, reflects a set of individual, contingent memories, as well as a diversity of perspectives that present a deconstructed memory of the war. In these texts, Sebbar portrays above all individuals rather than greater causes. In 'Le village nègre', for example, she depicts a French officer who is posted to a small village in order to protect the harkis but who has no intention of engaging in the violence: 'c'est un pacificateur, il croit à la négociation, au rapprochement des communautés, à la fraternisation, au progrès social'.[39] He perceives the war as 'une guerre sans fin, sans loyauté, sans objet', and his purpose remains adrift from any collective, mythical understanding of the cause.[40] In 'Les mères', Sebbar reflects on the soldiers' mothers' reactions to the war, revealing their sense of its futility in relation to any collective ideology. Sebbar uses the example of the mothers in Chechnya who protested against the war that their sons had to fight, suggesting that the soldiers of both wars were not driven by a shared motive but seemed more like isolated individuals caught in a trap. Finally, in 'Hébron, la maison', Sebbar portrays the dialogue between an elderly man and his cousin, a young soldier going to war in Palestine. The older man reminds the younger man that each house he attacks contains a woman and her children, emphasising the intimate histories of individuals and the uncertain nature of any greater meaning beyond their singularity.

This sense of contingency is particularly heightened in the texts about harkis, the Algerian soldiers who fought on the side of the French during the war. In Sebbar's short story 'Monologue d'un soldat', for example, the memory of the harki cannot be rationalised and is therefore repressed. Remnants of the past only come to light piece by piece, as the son of the harki very slowly penetrates the hushed silence that surrounds his father's history. As a child, he picks up odd words and echoes from conversations between the men and

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[39] Leïla Sebbar, 'Le village nègre', *Soldats*, (Paris: Seuil, 1999) p. 23.
[40] Ibid., p. 27.

women of the village, and yet, 'je savais qu'il me fallait absolument les retenir dans l'ombre des bois et des draps frappés par le mistral. Combien de pages clandestines?'[41] Having understood the truth, he is then unable to articulate a narrative of the past; his father's history remains a blank page, and there is clearly no possibility of the transmission of a coherent memory down the generations. The text itself is also fractured, moving between past and present and only gradually revealing the secrets of the past, as if to mimic the son's fraught attempts to decipher his father's history among the whispers of the men and women. This pattern recurs again in 'L'enfer', a text from *La jeune fille au balcon*, where the son of a harki only later learns his father's story through the disjointed narrative of his grandmother's memories. Here again, the style is sparse and the narrative shifts uncannily back and forth in time.

Sebbar concentrates for the most part on the breakdown of community in her revocations of the war, stressing the inadequacy of language and the difficulty of constructing a collective narrative. In this context of the Algerian war, however, the problematic implications of an excessive focus on the singular do at the same time render themselves apparent. The excessive dissociation of the individual from the group also needs to be reconsidered, since in this case it leads to a number of political ambiguities. In the texts about harkis in particular, it is precisely the characters' disengagement from the greater implications of their actions that leads to their sense of contingency and that ultimately brings about their downfall. Collective meaning is in this context a deeply political issue, because the harkis' impression of incoherence and meaninglessness stems from their dislocated relation with any political perspective. A refusal of collective consciousness must in this context have unfortunate political consequences, exemplified by the harkis' betrayal and harmful contribution to the conflict. Sebbar's texts are thus emphatically apolitical, drawing attention to contingencies that slip beyond the reach of political narratives in a particularly troubling way. Furthermore, perhaps the impression of 'senselessness' here originates in a particularly unhappy relation with the political stakes, since the outcome of the war was not something of which the harkis would have been proud. The focus on singularity and contingency is bound up with feelings of guilt and repression, which exist because of this disjunctive relation with any greater cause.

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[41] Leïla Sebbar, 'Monologue d'un soldat', *Le baiser*, (Paris: Hachette, 1997) p. 15.

Finally, however, it is perhaps for this reason that once again, Sebbar hesitantly attempts not only to imagine isolation and singularity but also to use writing to traverse the borders between singular and collective memories in unforeseen ways. Sebbar's recent work focuses explicitly on exile, but her constant rewriting of similar situations in different contexts also conjures up other sorts of cultural links. The texts do evidently emphasise the contingency of the individual, but the interest in cultural dialogue suggested by the *Shérazade* trilogy expresses itself in the more recent texts through the author's desire to counterpose different testimonies in a series of fragmented stories where comparisons can be made. Sebbar is concerned by the rupture of the individual from collective narratives in these works, but her own enterprise seems paradoxically to be to reinvent common structures across space and time. She imagines collective identity and memory not by engaging with national projects but by identifying links between intimate and personal histories in different historical and geographical contexts. Textual fragments do interact with one another, exploring synchronic and diachronic links and suggesting that sharing and mirroring can be evoked across conventional frontiers.

On the one hand, the repression of the harkis' memories recurs in a series of different texts, as if Sebbar is struggling to invent a collective narrative interpreting their experience. Sebbar repeatedly in a number of fragments depicts the different ways in which harkis or their children reconstruct and make sense of their identity and history. At the same time, the stories of *Soldats* clearly mirror one another, as Sebbar describes encounters between individuals on different sides and recounts the establishment of similar sorts of friendships in different wartime situations. The stories all evoke the experience of personal loss in a way that transcends historical and geographical boundaries, creating links across cultures and tracing affinities and patterns. Equally, the perception of representation as appropriation or travesty and the individual's dissociation from mass-produced images is implied in both 'La cause du peuple' and 'Sarajevo, l'affiche', as well as in a number of Sebbar's other stories such as 'Le baiser', printed in the collection of the same title, implying paradoxically the shared experience of dislocation. The focus remains apolitical, examining cultural mirroring rather than political causes, but Sebbar's dissatisfaction with the singular as such does obliquely express itself through this construction of connections across contexts. These fragmented narratives represent cultural alienation but they also express the desire to use writing to relocate common histories and linking threads. Sebbar's work could in this way be seen to offer a commentary on widespread theories of communal and collective memory,

portraying the reconstruction of experience as a process of selection and reinvention, where individuals create as well as contest links between different epochs and territories.

The narration of interconnecting fragments again draws attention to the role of literature in socio-political and historical perceptions of singular and collective identity. As I suggested at the beginning of the chapter, writing for Sebbar forms a gesture towards the reinvention of an exiled identity and provides a forum for the continual recreation of singular/plural histories. Writing can render exile productive, provisionally inviting dialogue and experimenting with different sorts of interaction and engagement: 'la seule manière de ne pas souffrir de l'exil, parce qu'on peut en souffrir, même si ce n'est pas apparent – c'était de rendre cet exil productif, et le rendre productif, c'était dans l'écriture. Ecrire est ce lieu privilégié, la terre d'élection et d'adoption.'[42] In the process of writing this series of texts on cultural memory and the Algerian war, Sebbar is able to experiment with forms in a perpetual reinterrogation of the relation between the singular and the collective. Sebbar's work is compelling because it refuses to champion either hybridisation or exile, as the texts present different sorts of attitude and experience while also challenging and interacting with one another. The seemingly provisional and incomplete form of these literary texts demonstrates the necessary ambivalence of collective formations, suggesting one perspective only to invite further reflection. The hesitant depictions of a need for cultural dialogue in *Fatima* and the *Shérazade* texts are contested by the contingent revocations of memory in *Le silence des rives* and the other later works. However, these too comment on each other, suggesting comparisons even as they dwell more explicitly on the isolation of the individual and the breakdown of the traditional collective group.

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[42] Leïla Sebbar, 'Leïla Sebbar ou l'exil productif', propos recueillis par Monique Hugon, *Notre Librairie*, 84, (1986), 32-37, (p. 35).

Chapter Six: Resistance and Subversion in Beur Literature

Ce terme exprime l'émergence d'une identité urbaine multiculturelle, assumée et revendiquée. Il indique le refus d'une identité uniforme, homogène et niant ses diversités.[1]

Tout d'abord, j'aurai aimé que le terme 'littérature beure' n'existe pas.[2]

The concept of Beur culture encapsulates the paradox and dynamism of an open-ended 'community without community'. The term 'Beur' names a composite and multicultural group of people, forming at once an affirmative alternative to French and North African identities, and an open signifier pointing to heterogeneous experiences. This identity construction seems simultaneously to challenge national paradigms and to question the possibility of any uncomplicated refutation, setting itself up as a 'third term' between France and the Maghreb while also resisting reification and inviting a plurality of different interpretations. While 'first-generation' writers hover irresolutely between opposing national cultures, and Sebbar rewrites identity as ambivalent and shifting, at once specific and polyphonic, Beur writers go even further, actively inventing a new sort of community while preventing that community from falling into a traditional, restrictive framework. Beur culture masquerades as a homogeneous community while encompassing a series of perspectives that elude any temptation towards categorisation. It can be read as a dramatisation of Nancy's notion of the singular-plural, since it consists of a series of individual identities that voice different perspectives without proposing a specific set of cultural values. While Beur culture arises from the specific circumstances of North African immigrants living in France, the subversive form of collective identity depicted here can be seen as an intensified example of the singular-plural shifts that for Nancy characterise being in a wider sense.

As I have mentioned, the term 'Beur' is formed from the French slang for 'Arabe'. Etymologically, then, it already implies a complex dual structure, denoting an Arabic identity through the influence of a French discourse. The Beurs are wholly neither French nor Arabic, yet they somehow participate in both cultural systems. On the one hand, Beur

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[1] Saïd Bouamama, *Dix ans de la marche des Beurs: chronique d'un mouvement avorté*, (Paris: Desclée de Brauwer, 1994) p. 69.

[2] Ahmed Kalouaz, 'L'expression 'beur': esquisse d'une littérature', *Actualité de l'émigration*, 80, (1987), p. 25.

identity attempts to situate itself firmly within French society. Beurs are the children of North African immigrants in France, but unlike their parents, they themselves have not emigrated but were born in France. Although they are frequently spoken of as immigrants, they are not immigrants at all and they have experienced no such displacement or uprooting. France is their most immediate point of reference and many of them have French nationality: Tassadit Imache affirms quite definitely 'je suis française' and Azouz Begag recently asserted in a lecture that 'la France, c'est nous'.[3] Yet at the same time, the relation of these writers to that national category is not exclusive, and their Frenchness is inevitably coupled with influences and ties in North Africa. The Beurs are also still to a certain extent excluded from French identity by residual nationalistic discourses. On the other hand, however, Beur identity is uneasy because while it has Maghrebian origins, it cannot sustain the close relation with North Africa that some first-generation immigrants sought to maintain. The Beur's contact with Morocco or Algeria is frequently limited and fragmentary. While the first generation may encourage the second to pursue links with North Africa, perpetuate the original culture and in many cases practise Islam, many younger individuals of North African descent struggle to relate this to their experiences of living in France. Their knowledge of their heritage is often second-hand, narrated by their parents or actively sought out, but Moroccan and Algerian cultures are not necessarily an inherent part of their everyday lives.

Beur identity is therefore interesting because it arises out of a process of rejection and cuts across existing national frontiers. This generation is perceived as 'other' by two different identity categories, French and Arabic, and they perceive themselves as discrepant from both systems. Their identity construction is founded upon difference from, rather than on similarity to, two influential dominant discourses. There are two traditional collective identities with which the Beur is not able to identify himself unproblematically. The Beurs retain a negative relation with both their initial points of reference, and any affirmative identity is constructed against the background of this negativity or difference. The theorist Michel Laronde affirms:

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[3] Tassadit Imache et Frédérique Chevillot, 'Beurette suis et beurette ne veux pas toujours être: entretien d'été avec Tassadit Imache', *French Review*, 71.4, (1998), 632-644 (p. 635). Begag's comment was made at his lecture 'From Shanty-towns to Cités' held at the French Institute in London on 20.3.99.

Manipulée par les deux discours centraux, l'identité collective *beure* est alors annulée en réciprocité par l'un et l'autre discours: d'un côté, «*vous n'êtes pas Français mais Algériens*», de l'autre, «*vous n'êtes pas Algériens mais Français*».[4]

Alterity precedes identity or similarity in the construction of the Beur community, and their position is constantly one of dissociation or decentering. It is the shared experience of difference that comprises Beur similarity.

The centrality of negativity in the construction of a Beur identity points to the ambivalent position of the term. While on the one hand it seems to champion the affirmation of a third identity, the term does not designate a unified community but signifies instead a collectivity defined by continual, dynamic processes of disengagement and re-engagement. It points to a collection of people whose identity is composite and slippery, and individuals engage with various cultural paradigms with varying degrees of intensity. Different Beurs apprehend their cultural hybridisation in diverse ways, leaning alternately towards either assimilation or return and upholding intermittently both singularity and cultural dialogue. For this reason, if Beur culture has in some instances been seen as reified, closer examination of these identities reveals how the community is mobile and inconsistent. Beur identity may at times be perceived as a particular category, but in reality it refuses to signify a single viewpoint and figures a series of shifting relations and identifications. In this sense, the heterogeneity of Beur culture can be used as a further critique of theoretical models that fix on particular tropes and privilege certain qualities such as difference and incompatibility. The Beur community itself forms an example of the ways in which identificatory processes can move between the singular and the collective.

Analysis of Beur literature in particular adds to this sense of the incomplete or open-ended nature of the collective structures with which it engages. As I have mentioned with regard to Sebbar and the first-generation writers, fictional texts do not affirm a straightforward authorial intention but inscribe a chain of associations that often exceed the confines of a single cultural vision. Any one text on Beur identity provides not an unmediated, objective view but a subjective strategy that simultaneously calls up multiple, subtle resonances. In addition, the corpus of texts that are seen to belong to the category of Beur literature is inevitably plural and not self-same, as one text repeatedly comments on and reinterprets another. These fictional texts constantly re-theorise their own position, never producing a finished portrait but interrogating the hidden implications of their own

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[4] Michel Laronde, *Autour du roman beur: immigration et identité*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1993) p. 29.

status in different ways. Examination of this particular group of texts can in this way perform the continual self-questioning and reinvention of collective structures themselves.

The Trajectory of Beur Culture

The descendants of North African immigrants in France encounter a number of difficulties arising from the ambivalence of their position. Evidently, many young people find themselves trapped in a conflict caused by the generation gap or by the difference between their parents' worldview and common French ideologies and assumptions. North African parents attempt to remind their children of their Arabic identity, encouraging the practice of Islam and adherence to Muslim customs and traditions, while the younger generation struggles to render these practices compatible with French culture. As we witnessed in Sebbar's texts, young people are taught by their parents to obey one cultural system, but everyday life in France seems divorced from Islamic culture, proposing an alternative set of values that are difficult to ignore. For this reason, problems arise for example during Ramadan, when the young descendants of immigrants are obliged to conform to a culture with which they do not identify and which remains unrecognised by French society. Young people can be forced by their parents to fast, while their French companions remain ignorant of this tradition and school-life continues as normal. Even more notably, young girls become caught up in an impasse, when their fathers expect them to remain at home, to occupy themselves with housework and to obey Islamic laws repressing and masking their sexuality. At school, the young girls are given freedom to express themselves, whereas at home, they can be treated as the victims of repressive laws that determine their role as subservient. Muslim girls are also sometimes expected to have arranged marriages, and this sort of obligation conflicts dramatically with the customs of their French classmates, to the extent that they are torn violently between their parents' wishes and their own desires or expectations.[5]

The discrepancy between school and home becomes a symbol for the rupture experienced by this generation. While school teaches the acceptance of one cultural system, home life remains separate and dissociated from that culture, with the result that the children of immigrants are forced daily to switch between one environment and another in a rapid and disconcerting manner. Young people learn certain practices and evolve certain

[5] For extensive discussion of these sorts of conflicts, see Hervé-Frédéric Mecheri, *Les jeunes immigrés maghrébins de la deuxième génération et/ou la quête de l'identité*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1984).

expectations by attending French schools, but their parents often resist the maintenance of those values, coming to mistrust the school as a place of corruption of Algerian traditions. This conflict is played out in different ways and on different levels. In Begag's early texts, success at school becomes a way for the central characters to define themselves in opposition to their parents, although the young Azouz's intellectual ability also separates him from his 'Arabic' classmates. In texts such as Kettane's *Le sourire de Brahim*, the school itself reinscribes patterns of cultural conflict, as we are told for example of how the Arab children eat their lunch at a separate table from the French. The extremity of this conflict is expressed most unsettlingly in Belghoul's *Georgette!*, where the heroine obeys her father and writes her homework starting from the back of her exercise book, as if she were writing in Arabic. The teacher then of course opens the book from the front and believes the child failed to do her homework. The child's anger and confusion is also expressed in her attempt to procure the correct pencils for her schoolwork, and here again, her parents are shown to misunderstand school rules, giving her the wrong pencils and failing to comprehend the requirements of their daughter.

The disjunctive position of the younger generation is further symbolised by their use of language. Frequently, the descendants of immigrants are spoken to in Arabic or Kabylian by their parents, yet for the most part, they conduct the majority of their lives in French. They are taught in French at school, speak French with their friends, and can often be reluctant to respond to their parents in Arabic, since that language seems not to correspond to their cultural experience or lifestyle. For this reason, they retain a complicated relation with both language systems, either mixing them confidently or finding themselves stranded between the two. In the collection *Génération beur etc*, the interviewees discuss in different ways their response to bilingualism, at times suggesting that it frustrates them while others propose a more settled ability to negotiate the linguistic division. Ammar, for example, who was born in Kabylia but who uses both languages relatively confidently, affirms 'je me sers de la langue française pour construire mon quotidien, je m'exprime avec elle. Mais je l'utilise comme instrument. Il y a même des moments où je pense en kabyle et je m'exprime en français.'[6] In her study of linguistic dislocation among the descendents of

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[6] Ammar in *Génération beur etc: La France en couleurs*, ed. Jean-Marc Terrasse, (Paris: Plon, 1989) p. 164.

immigrants, however, Zerdaglia Dahoun describes how a few children become mute in response to the confusion caused by constant linguistic change.[7]

Alongside these cultural difficulties, the descendants of North African immigrants living in France also struggle with a series of social problems and inequalities. Many of these can be seen to stem from the sorts of geographical areas in which immigrants often live. According to Michel Laronde, the position of many immigrants in housing estates on the outskirts of large French cities such as Paris and Lyon mirrors their cultural 'décentrement' and re-establishes the hegemonic position of the French.[8] The division between centre and suburb for Laronde establishes a relation of 'surveillant' and 'surveillé', forcing immigrants into self-contained pockets outside of the main centre of the city. This relation is then exacerbated by the fact that it is difficult to form connections between the different suburbs; each exists in a displaced relation to the centre without encouraging solidarity between different, decentred groups. Laronde also perceives the passage from the 'bidonville' to the HLM as a movement inside the dominant power system, since the old shanty-towns had a culture of resistance whereas this became difficult to maintain in the more alienating, normalising environment of the housing estates. Begag develops this point by commenting on how the vertical structure of the HLMs contributed to the fracturing of the Maghrebian community, since, situated above and below one another rather than just next door, one family's relationship with its neighbours became more distant.[9] There was also little effort to animate these areas, and the estates were often run-down and soulless 'villes fantômes'.[10] The significant point here, however, is that immigrant groups find themselves placed in a subordinate position with relation to the centre, and their geographical position in the 'banlieues' can exacerbate this experience of decentering.

As Begag and Rossini point out in their recent study of sociological conditions *Du bon usage de la distance chez les sauvageons*, many immigrants and their descendants spend most of their time in the vicinity of the estate, rarely venturing across the borders into other

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[7] See Zerdaglia K. S. Dahoun, *Les couleurs de la silence: le mutisme des enfants de migrants*, (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1995).

[8] See Michel Laronde, *Autour du roman beur*. It is for this reason that Laronde perceives the representation of the destabilisation of centre and suburb as a possible tool for subversion. See his recent article 'Urbanism as a Discourse of Cultural Infiltration in Post-colonial Fiction in France', *Nottingham French Studies*, 39.1, (2000), 64-78.

[9] Begag discussed this in the lecture 'From Shanty towns to "Cités"' quoted above. He argued that the vertical structure meant that immediate eye contact between neighbours was prevented or cut down, and instead of stepping outside the door and engaging in conversation with the neighbours, inhabitants' most immediate apprehension of one another came from noise disturbance through the floors and ceilings, generating hostility.

[10] For more on this see Mehdi Lallaoui, *Du bidonville au HLM*, (Paris: Syros, 1993).

parts of town and limiting their universe to a relatively narrow space. This also limits the potential for cultural activity, since libraries, museums and cinemas are usually further afield, and many parents fear allowing their daughters in particular access to the outside world. Begag also shows how public transport can be a place of insecurity, as many immigrants have stopped using buses for fear of vandalism and attacks. All these factors contribute to the sense of alienation experienced by the younger generation, intensifying the need for renewed strategies for self-affirmation.

These social difficulties stem from, and in turn aggravate, French perceptions of immigrant identity. North African immigrants suffer from over-determination and subordination by various French discourses that, as I discussed in chapter two, respond to difference either by encouraging assimilation or by excluding it from the parameters of French identity. North Africans in particular are associated with fundamentalism and fanaticism, and unsatisfactory social conditions also give rise to another set of prejudices whereby immigrants are blamed for problems such as crime, delinquency and unemployment. Immigrants become a scapegoat for the inequalities and failures of French society itself. The younger generations feel excluded from French society even as they fail to identify themselves with North African culture, since the French at times struggle to accommodate cultural difference despite their desire to welcome diverse citizens into the Republic. As Nacer Kettane points out, French discourses encourage either repatriation or assimilation, both of which leave the descendants of immigrants uncertain of their social and cultural position: 'à droite, on nous invitait à prendre le bateau pour Alger; à gauche, on nous invitait au plus vite à nous mettre au jambon-beurre, quand nous n'étions pas suspects d'intégrisme.'[11] In both cases, young people of immigrant origin feel that they are being labelled and designated in inappropriate ways. In addition, evidently the vast numbers of attacks on immigrants have lead to a profound sense of insecurity and uncertainty, and racism must still be one of the most overwhelming forces with which immigrants and their descendants must contend.

It is in response to these sorts of issues that the concept of an affirmative Beur identity came into being in the early eighties. In many ways, coinage of the term 'Beur' was considered to be a new strategy for identification that would resist and overthrow French perceptions of difference and rescue the younger generation of immigrants from both over-

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[11] Nacer Kettane, *Droit de réponse à la démocratie française*, (Paris: Editions de la Découverte, 1986) p. 17.

determination and marginalisation. The term replaces 'Français' and 'Arabe' with a third term, derived from 'Arabe' but conferring upon it a new and specific signification and thus distinguishing its referents from Moroccans and Algerians 'de souche'. It names the second generation as different from the first, and points to the formation of a new community incorporating different sources. Rescuing the term from its pejorative associations, the Beurs actively redeployed it as a sign of their desire to define themselves alone, on their own terms. Laronde associates the emergence of the term with a new sort of community formation:

> Une communauté se constitue ainsi, réclamant de vivre ses différences, ethniques, culturelles et religieuses, dans l'égalité des droits au même titre que les autres citoyens français. Cette minorité qui prend chaque jour plus d'importance s'exprime surtout par une action culturelle chargée beaucoup plus de questionnement que de contestation active. Les vrais "Beurs", ce sont eux, à travers qui naît peu à peu une culture spécifique à la nouvelle génération maghrébine.[12]

Refusing to remain suspended within the dual structure of France versus North Africa, the proponents of Beur identity wanted to refigure that duality as an affirmative entity in its own right.

The construction of a specific Beur community in this way did become a political tool to reinforce solidarity and to create an active force combating racism. The Beurs launched slogans such as 'vivre ensemble avec nos différences' and campaigned for the 'droit à la différence', encouraging awareness of *métissage* in France. Along with the emergence of Beur culture also came the establishment of new organisations such as Radio Beur and the journal *Sans frontières* (later entitled *Baraka*), creating a forum for contact between Beurs across France. Speaking of Radio Beur, Nacer Kettane affirms, 'dans cette radio s'exprimait une nouvelle communauté «française» au sens ethnique: comme on pouvait envisager une radio corse ou arménienne à Paris, on pouvait aussi y envisager une radio maghrébine.'[13] It evidently provided a voice for a set of people whose identity had until then remained unrecognised. Gaspard and Servan-Schreiber describe the effect of *Sans frontières* similarly, arguing that it 'contribue à donner aux immigrés, au-delà de leurs spécificités, le sentiment que, vivant dans le même pays, la France, ils avaient une

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[12] Michel Laronde, 'La mouvance beure: émergence médiatique', *French Review*, 61.5, (1988), 684-692 (p. 686).

[13] Nacer Kettane, *Droit de réponse à la démocratie française*, p. 33.

expérience et un avenir communs'.[14] The editors also explicitly stated that the journal should be aimed at those who wanted to believe in a multicultural France. Equally, *SOS Racisme*, founded in the early eighties, provided a solid agenda attacking racism in France. The Beurs dissociated themselves from the group in 1985, feeling that the specific concerns of Maghrebians were being effaced by those of other cultural groups, but went on to found *France Plus*, an alternative association promoting specifically the rights of North Africans. Throughout the eighties, organisations sprang up seeking to promote political representation and recognition of Beurs living in France.

In addition to this upsurge in associative action, the 'Marche des Beurs pour l'égalité et contre le racisme' from Marseille to Paris in 1983 formed one of the central moments in the establishment of Beur identity. This event began with a general sense of unrest and a series of hunger strikes in the estate Les Minguettes, situated in Vénisseux, a suburb to the south-east of Lyon. Aided by the priest Christian Délorme, a group of Maghrebians initiated a protest that culminated in the march from Marseille to Paris, passing through a series of areas densely populated by North Africans. At each stage, the group accumulated supporters and grew in number, until the small gathering of original campaigners amounted to a group of close to a hundred thousand descending on Paris in December. The project created a strong sense of fraternity and sharing, as vast numbers of North Africans realised they were not isolated in their experiences and derived strength from the support of similar people. For Christian Délorme, the result was a concerted step towards further recognition: 'la marche, c'était et cela reste la fraternité inter-ethnique vécue, la France pluri-culturelle harmonieusement réalisée. Ce fut et cela reste l'entrée des jeunes Maghrébins dans l'histoire de la France, la manifestation et la prise de conscience de l'appartenance à une même communauté nationale.'[15] The 'Marche des Beurs' in this way became a symbol of celebration, providing a utopian vision of a multicultural France where Maghrebians could assert their specificity while being accepted by the broader society.

Inevitably perhaps, this desire for affirmation quickly appeared to be more complicated than the participants in the protest might have hoped. For a start, the positive effects of the 'Marche des Beurs' turned out to be limited. The protest did succeed in promoting the acquisition of the ten-year 'carte de séjour', and the one practical and legal achievement of the movement could be seen to be the widespread accordance of this

[14] Françoise Gaspard et Claude Servan-Schreiber, *La fin des immigrés*, (Paris: Seuil, 1994) p. 194.
[15] Christian Délorme, *Par amour ou par colère*, (Paris: Editions du Centurion, 1985) p. 112.

temporary identity card. Nevertheless, close analysis reveals that the situation of the Beurs did not change markedly after the end of the protest, and indeed, shortly after the march, Le Pen received more votes in Brittany than in any other election. Equally, the following year, 1984, saw a large number of attacks on young immigrants by French policemen. Much of the associative action also gradually dwindled and died down, as representatives became disillusioned with traditional political and bureaucratic structures. Members of associations were sometimes unable to pay their subscriptions, and they also tended to remain excessively suspicious of the political authorities. Another problem in this regard was that the successful integration of Maghrebian representatives at times resulted in their dissociation from the actual Beur community, as people felt that their concerns were not being voiced in the way that they desired.[16] Jocelyne Césari argues that they also failed to negotiate the relationship between general, universal claims for equality and the particularity of their own ethnic context.[17] By the end of the eighties, many organisations had dissolved.

Another difficulty was the appropriation of the term 'Beur' by the media and the accumulation of negative connotations. The invention of a new label and the attempt to hold Beur identity up as a symbol of affirmation evidently risked backfiring, leading to the ossification of new stereotypes and reasserting the very sort of category that its proponents set out to refute. The term has indubitably become associated with a certain kind of existence, with the 'banlieues', unemployment and crime, and thus for some might contain negative resonances. It too has become a locus for fantasy, as people use the term to denote a self-contained community responsible for certain social problems. Thus the very act of establishing a new identity in this way might also be seen as counterproductive, increasing 'ghettoisation' and marginalising immigrant groups even further. One interviewee in *Génération beur etc* argues against usage of the term, claiming 'me faire traiter de beurette, c'est tomber dans tout ce que j'essaie d'éviter: une étiquette, alors que je parle de coutume et de respect d'une tradition'.[18] According to this view, 'Beur' itself normalises different experiences, classifying and reducing its diverse referents.

The media evidently played a large part in the creation of this phenomenon. The media used the term to designate a fixed and homogeneous group of people, denying their

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[16] A discussion of the associative action of the Beurs can be found in Saïd Bouamama, Hadjila Sad-Souad et Mokhtar Djerdoubi, *Contribution à la mémoire des banlieues*, (Paris: Editions du Volga, 1994).

[17] See Jocelyne Césari, *Musulmans et républicains: les jeunes, l'islam et la France*, (Paris: Editions Complexe, 1998) p. 60.

[18] Hayette in Jean-Marc Terrasse, *Génération beur etc: La France en couleurs*, p. 79.

specificities and differences while conjuring up a set of negative images. While many young immigrants began to mistrust the term, associating it with a reductive stereotype, the media used it more than anyone, creating an image that was not always accurate. People became increasingly anxious regarding the term, worrying that they were again being manipulated by the dominant forces of a hostile French society. The younger generation of immigrants in this way became caught up in a complicated dilemma, whereby they hoped to affirm a new form of identity in order to reinvent their position of marginalisation, but they also had to question that term before external discourses froze and stigmatised their community. In the words of Sylvie Durmelat:

> Les enfants de l'immigration sont donc en face à une double exigence: la nécessité de se dire, et l'obligation de s'en dédire pour pouvoir exister par leur refus, en cas de récupération. Entre récupération et rélégation, 'intégration' et désintégration, le mot *beur* articule le lien entre le jeu de nominations et enjeux de domination. Il définit tout autant le groupe au'il désigne que le group qui désigne, car le pouvoir de nommer est un processus de labellisation mutuelle... toutefois, il n'en demeure pas moins inégalitaire.[19]

The term needed to be challenged even as it came into being, as the descendants of North African immigrants struggled to affirm their difference without falling into the trap of homogenisation and over-determination.

It is for this reason that most writers of North African immigrant origin prefer to reject the term 'Beur' while reinforcing the problematic nature of 'immigrant' identity. Most authors remain sceptical of the term, either perceiving that it connotes a community of which they are not a part or disputing the very attribution of labels or classifications. As I signalled at the beginning, Ahmed Kalouaz asserts unequivocally that he would have preferred that the term did not exist, as he does not perceive his writing as part of any such socio-political movement but expresses instead a subjective view while questioning the power of language itself. Similarly, Hocine Touabti states that 'je tiens à préciser que je refuse absolument l'étiquette de Beur', arguing that there is too much blurring between 'real' Beurs and those who are forced erroneously into that category.[20] Bouzid, who charts in detail his experience of the 'Marche des Beurs' in an autobiographical text, associates Beur identity with the Parisian suburbs, and he asserts that he prefers the term 'Arabe' since

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[19] Sylvie Durmelat, 'Petite histoire du mot *beur*: ou comment prendre la parle quand on vous la prête', *French Cultural Studies*, 9.2, (1998), 191-207 (p. 203).

[20] Hocine Touabti in 'L'expression 'beur': esquisse d'une littérature', p. 24.

he originates not from Paris but from the South.[21] Even Azouz Begag, one of the leading writers of Beur literature, questions the efficacy of the term, suggesting that for a certain period it was useful insofar as it drew attention to certain issues affecting North African immigrants, but at the same time it provided an inaccurate, generalised vision of that community. It amalgamated Moroccans, Algerians and Tunisians without drawing attention to the specificity of their relations with France.[22] It is also noteworthy that female Beur writers are even more sceptical, at times associating Beur culture with macho behaviour and dissociating themselves from that label. The title of Soraya Nini's *Ils disent que je suis une beurette* demonstrates this hesitation, since the publisher rejected Nini's initial title *L'entre-deux*, proposing *La Beurette* instead. Nini evidently disagreed with that classification but suggested the published title as a compromise, announcing at the same time her lack of affiliation with the term.[23]

As a result of these issues, it would seem that an alternative reading of the Beur community might be required. I have chosen to continue to use the term, partly because it is still employed to designate a certain group of people and partly because no other convenient term exists, but the people to whom it supposedly refers remain a diverse and fractured group. Beur identity escapes its own confines, remaining a drifting and mobile signifier while the specificity of its assumed referents is difficult to pin down. Beur identity is subversive precisely because it designates a formless community that is both constructed by difference and negotiates that difference in a variety of ways. It is a 'communauté [qui] n'en est pas une', a 'communauté éclatée', or a series of 'liens communautaires ... terriblement affaiblis, sinon brisés'.[24] It names a category that is not national but self-creating, and the very transience of the term suggests that it is an ephemeral identity category that questions and reinvents itself through time. The notion that the term signifies second-generation experience is also problematic, since there is no precise move from first to second generation. The two generations inevitably become blurred, as immigrants arrived in France at different times and had children at different moments.[25] Detailed analysis of the different

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[21] Bouzid, *La Marche: traversée de la France profonde*, (Paris: Sindbad, 1984).

[22] See my interview 'Deux écrivains entre la mémoire et l'oubli', p. 19.

[23] Alec G. Hargreaves points this out in his *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction: Voices from the North African Community in France*, (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1997) p. 178.

[24] See respectively Azouz Begag in *Génération beur etc*, p. 135, Christian Jelen, *Ils feront de bons Français: enquête sur l'assimilation des Maghrébins*, (Paris: Robert Laffont, 1991) p. 13 and François Dubet and Didier Lapeyronnie, *Les quartiers de l'exil*, (Paris: Seuil, 1992) p. 67.

[25] It is not clear at what age an individual must have arrived in France in order to be considered first or second generation. Leïla Houari, for example, moved from Fès to Brussels at the age of seven and is considered to be

reactions expressed in Beur fiction will reveal how the identities of the descendants of North African immigrants repeatedly overturn conventional communal models.

Identity Constructions and Subversive Strategies

Novels by the descendants of Maghrebian immigrants stage the difficulty of identifying simply with either French or North African culture. Demonstrating how society attempts to uphold categories, forcing individuals into conformity with certain cultural labels, many writers of Maghrebian origin depict the crudity of preconceived stereotypes and express their resistance to received ideas. If on the one hand, these writers see themselves as anchored one way or another in French society, their texts reveal the refusal of the French to integrate them unproblematically and accept that their difference might be a part of French national identity. In *Béni ou le paradis privé*, for example, Azouz Begag describes Béni's reception at school as yet another instance of the French desire to label Beurs as North Africans or immigrants, despite the way in which, having been born in France, they perceive themselves to a certain extent as French. In one exchange, for example, a well-meaning teacher still blindly associates Béni himself with immigration, inquiring:

- De quelle origine vous êtes?
- Humaine, j'ai dit pour plaisanter.
- Non, allez, sérieusement, elle a demandé en égal à moi.
- Algérien.
- Pour un étranger, vous maîtrisez plutôt bien le français. Félicitations.
- Je suis né à Lyon, j'ai corrigé.
- Félicitations quand même.[26]

Perceiving that Béni's full name (Ben Abdallah) is not typically French, the teacher makes a leap and assumes that he himself must also be 'foreign', beyond the reach of her narrow conception of Frenchness. Yet as we shall see later, Béni's struggle consists precisely in attempting to convince everyone that he too is French. This rejection by the French, and the drive to exclude from French identity anyone with a North African connection, is also represented by demonstrations of racism, such as when Béni is denied access to a night club at the end of the text. This exclusion again implicitly suggests that there is some sense of racial purity behind perceptions of 'Frenchness', since it is on the basis of skin colour that

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Beur, but Sebbar, who arrived in France at seventeen, is not. Is there therefore a point after which one can no longer be considered Beur? Probably there is a good deal of blurring and ambiguity in this.

[26] Azouz Begag, *Béni ou le paradis privé*, (Paris: Seuil, 1989) p. 38.

characters are denied inclusion in the French community. Béni is also excluded because he is overweight, and this parallel with racism indicates that the doorman's gesture is a surface reaction based on prejudice.

Begag takes this depiction of stigmatisation further in *Quand on est mort*, which opens with the assassination of a young man, Mourad, merely as punishment for not paying the correct taxi fare. The court's judgement of the event as a 'non lieu' forms a painful testimony to the denial of the existence of difference in France and the exclusion of young people of immigrant origin from French society. Begag uses this court ruling to suggest that justice and equality in France exist only on the condition that citizens are rooted 'Français de souche'. Mourad's brother, Amar, is enraged, asserting:

> NON-LIEU: pas eu lieu, somme toute. Le meurtre n'avait donc jamais eu lieu! Telle était la
> conclusion de l'enquête. Mourad était toujours vivant, alors? Ma mère n'avait pas LIEU de
> pleurer! Droits de l'Homme? Seulement de l'encre sur du papier.[27]

These acts of non-recognition or non-acceptance recur repeatedly in texts by writers of North African origin, such as when the youths of Lallaoui's *Les Beurs de Seine* are refused work probably on the grounds that their names are difficult to pronounce or because they are members of the 'Association des Marocains en France'. Akli Tadjer parodies such failures openly, renaming the Beurs 'Arabes non-identifiés', echoing the French term for 'unidentified flying objects' and mocking the way in which Arabic difference seems unacceptable or incomprehensible in French society. This phenomenon of non-recognition also takes place on the level of the reception of the works, as Tassadit Imache notes that her texts appear in the bookshops in the section entitled 'Maghreb-Proche-Orient' even though her nationality is French.[28]

On the other hand, however, many characters also maintain an uneasy relation with the Algerian community of their parents, revealing how their composite identity excludes them from both societies. While it is difficult for the children of immigrants to be accepted by the French community, their association with any Algerian community is also incomplete and unsatisfactory. Many texts trace the traumas of the generation gap, emphasising how the younger generation fails to comprehend the traditions of the older generation, resisting assimilation by the Algerian community as well. The Beur characters retain a highly fraught relation with Islam, since their parents continue to believe, yet many Muslim practices seem

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[27] Azouz Begag, *Quand on est mort c'est pour toute la vie*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1994) pp. 6-7.

[28] Tassadit Imache et Frédérique Chevillot, 'Beurette suis et beurette ne veux pas toujours être', p. 637.

incompatible with French society. In *Béni* for example, Béni is unable to understand the proposals for his brother's arranged marriage and he laments on the deprivation of freedom endured by young Muslim girls:

> Pauvres filles, je les imaginais dans leur minuscule village à l'abri du temps, drapées dans leur robe aux couleurs chaudes, cousue main, gamines pas plus âgées que moi, à qui un père, un cousin, un oncle venait demander une photo, la plus belle de la collection, celle qui la présentait comme une femme mûre et désirable, pour aller la proposer à un prétendant.[29]

This image of a traditional Muslim woman awaiting marriage is both unfamiliar and incomprehensible to the Beur growing up in France. Even more dramatically, texts such as Aïcha Benaïssa's *Née en France: Histoire d'une jeune Beur* recount the conflicts arising from the first generation's desire for their daughters to conform to the rules of Islam, coupled with the second generation's endeavours to entertain relationships with non-Muslims and lead an emancipated life in France. Young women such as Aïcha, rebelling against the subordinate position of women in Islam, cannot unproblematically identify themselves with Algerian culture and cannot perceive Algeria as their home. Such individuals are left in a double bind, since 'on nous identifie à nos parents comme si on voulait nier le fait que nous sommes ce que la France a fait de nous',[30] and this suggests that French society also both alters and rejects them. They are left in an impossible and indeterminate position between the two reference points.

In Sakinna Boukhedenna's *Journal: Nationalité Immigrée*, this double disjunction is expressed in succinct form. In the initial section, the narrator expresses her revolt against French society, rebutting the French desire to assimilate her and perceive her as a member of the 'second generation'. She believes that that drive is a remnant of colonialism and it can only reduce, stifle and misapprehend her difference. As a gesture of resistance, she decides to return to Algeria in order to relocate her origins and construct an affirmative Arabic identity, working in opposition to French traditions. Once in Algeria, however, she finds not only that she disagrees with the treatment of women, but also that Algerian society itself fails to accept her, perceiving her instead as a stranger because she cannot conform to its rules. She is refused entry to a number of hotels because she is neither a student, nor is she accompanied by a male family member, but is considered an 'immigrant' due to her non-conformity with this set of categories: 'résultat, en Algérie, sans famille, la démocratie

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[29] Begag, *Béni ou le paradis privé*, p. 107.

[30] Sophie Phonchelet in Aïcha Benaïssa, *Née en France: histoire d'une jeune Beur*, (Paris: Payot, 1990) p. 139.

algérienne offre la rue aux immigrés. Oui, la rue est aux exclues que nous sommes.'[31] People on the street also call her Jacqueline and Christine, again demonstrating how they perceive her as French rather than Algerian.[32] Consequently, the text concludes by underlining this double process of non-recognition. Boukhedenna finishes by lamenting that 'femme arabe, on m'a condamnée à perpétuité, car j'ai franchi le chemin de la liberté, on m'a répudiée, maintenant me voilà immigrée sur le chemin de l'exil, identité de femme non reconnue je cours le monde pour savoir d'où je viens.'[33]

It is significant, however, that various writers challenge those gestures by proposing alternative forms of collective identification that in various ways defy the process of classification itself. Close reading of a number of texts reveals how characters experiment with various modes of self-affirmation, perceiving their position in such diverse ways that the notion of a single, stigmatised Beur culture or experience is actively undermined. While certain characters identify with Frenchness more than with North African cultures, others seek a sense of self through a return journey to the native land and a revival of Islamic origins. Equally, a number of writers understand their situation through a celebratory, liberated participation in different cultural systems while others express loneliness or confusion while struggling to integrate past and present. Beur literature expresses not a single vision or cultural model but represents collective identity through a series of evolving strategies. Rather than interpreting Beur culture as the formulation of a 'third way', we should associate the term with a set of communal relations that are always subject to revision and reinvention.[34]

To return to Begag, the strategy proposed in *Béni* is unusual, as it reflects the desire of the young Beur to become unequivocally French. Béni idealises French culture, aims for assimilation and hopes to overcome his difference. At the beginning of the text, Béni endeavours to persuade his parents to buy a Christmas tree, feeling left out of the celebrations and remaining steadfastly disinterested in the religious implications or in his parents' Muslim heritage. Béni also purposefully shortens his name from Ben Abdallah in

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[31] Sakinna Boukhedenna, *Journal: Nationalité Immigrée*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987) p. 97.
[32] Ibid., p. 85.
[33] Ibid., p. 126.
[34] Alec G. Hargreaves suggests the notion of a 'third way' in his article 'In Search of a Third Way: Beur Writers between France and North Africa', *New Comparison: A Journal of Comparative and General Literary Studies*, 10, (1990), 72-83. Hargreaves uses the term as a way of transcending the dichotomy of France/North

order to convince his schoolteachers that his origins are French. Like the young Azouz, he also desires to succeed at school, which in his mind entails becoming like the French. Finally, the text recounts how he falls in love with a young blonde girl called, conveniently, France, and this teenage crush becomes a symbol of Béni's idealisation of Frenchness and his rupture with his parents' cultural identity:

> Entre France et mon père, j'ai choisi la blonde. J'en ai eu marre de ces discussions de pauvres, des projets de retour au bled, du camion Berliet, des sous, du mariage avec une Arabe blanche ou noire: je ne voulais plus écouter, alors je suis allé lire dans la chambre. Au fond de moi-même j'étais très content d'être un garçon, capable de prendre des decisions, de dire: Moi je reste là, et vous vous allez dans votre pays si vous voulez![35]

Although Begag is evidently not suggesting that the unequivocal embrace of Frenchness is necessarily the best way of negotiating Beur identity, the implication is that this is Béni's understanding of his position, and the struggle for acceptance that he therefore undergoes is a way of locating an identity. The text ends with his realisation of the necessity for resistance, implying that a process of learning has taken place and that Béni might enter a new period of affirmation.

At the opposite end of the scale, some Beur texts use the motif of a 'return' to Algeria or Morocco as part of a strategy for self-discovery. In Begag's later text *Quand on est mort*, the older brother of the young man who was assassinated embarks on a journey to Algeria, as if this action of rejection by the French sparked a need for an alternative space of identification. Amar hopes to achieve through his journey a stronger sense of his relationship with both countries. Yet very soon he feels tired and alienated, resolves to leave, only to become caught up in an endless and fraught journey through the country. The emphasis is constantly on Amar's difference and non-belonging, the unfamiliarity of the way of life, and the disappointment and repulsion he feels with regard to the hostility and violence that are thrown in his face. The Algerians reject him, perceiving his privileges as a betrayal of the country and resenting that he spends his time writing when there are so many social and political difficulties over there. In one dramatic interchange, Amar imagines a policeman overhearing the driver using the word 'Beur' and predicts the immediate endeavour to exclude him:

Africa and to locate a sense of Beur specificity. I want to suggest, however, that Beur particularity will itself be open to deconstruction.

[35] Azouz Begag, *Béni ou le paradis privé*, p. 110.

- BEUR? criera le sergent, écarquillant les yeux.
- Oui, enfin, y a rien de dramatique... essaiera-t-il de nuancer.
- DE FRANCE? ajoutera le sergent dans son cri de guerre contre l'ancien colonialiste.
- Oui, tu sais, ce pays des quatre cents fromages et... s'enlisera le chauffeur.
- A QUEL SIEGE IL EST ASSIS CE BEUR DE FRANCE? exigera de savoir le sergent.
- 35...non, 29...mais y a pas matière à...
- DIS-LUI DE DESCENDRE!

Point final.[36]

Clearly Amar senses that Beurs are emphatically not considered to be Algerian but must in one way or another belong in France. He therefore feels disappointed and alienated in Algeria, realising that his previous mental picture of the country was an idealistic but erroneous fantasy. That Amar now associates Algeria only with violence and unrest contributes to the problematisation of his identification with it and severs him from his supposed origins even further. The text ends by evoking Amar's relief at returning to Lyon and his reconciliation with his necessary position within French society.

Another text revolving around the duped 'mythe de retour' is Houari's *Zeida de nulle part*. Here the flight to Morocco is seen as a sort of necessary transitory phase, again not leading to a reassuring discovery of roots but becoming a part of a process self-realisation. The heroine of the text, Zeida, initially finds herself ill at ease in her home town of Brussels, retaining vague mystical memories of her early childhood in Fès and sensing they are a part of her heritage while remaining unable to grasp and rationalise them: 'tout se mélangeait, s'éparpillait, elle voulait se rappeler mais à cinq ans on ne retient que ce qui vous frappe'. [37] At the same time, Zeida's experience of living in Brussels renders her relationship with her mother problematic, as she finds herself passively agreeing to an arranged marriage in which she is unable to picture and recognise herself. This leads to her desire to go to Morocco, and next Zeida goes through a period of idealising Moroccan culture, even though this is tainted with her inability to understand Moroccan customs. She befriends a young man named Watani, only to find herself bemused by the way in which male/female friendships seem to be frowned upon in the small Moroccan village. Equally, although the inhabitants of the village are attentive to her, 'elle n'était pas encore considérée comme des leurs',[38] and they are puzzled by her desire to return to Morocco and leave the wealth and opportunities of Belgium. The result is that, when going for a walk with her cousin Mustapha, 'partout où ils

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[36] Azouz Begag, *Quand on est mort c'est pour toute la vie*, p. 96.
[37] Leïla Houari, *Zeida de nulle part*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1985) p. 22.

passaient elle croyait entendre Europe, Europe, fille de l'Europe'.[39] The important point is that Zeida's journey provides not a revelation of her roots, but indicates the nature of her specificity, reinforcing her need for independence from both national communities. Zeida's journey, like Béni's desire to assimilate, is part of a process of experimentation that leads her to accept and re-appropriate her position.

In contrast to these transitory or experimental engagements with French and Algerian cultures, however, Akli Tadjer's *Les ANI du 'Tassili'* not only examines different forms of identification but also parodies those very forms themselves. The text charts the hero Omar's journey from Algiers back to France on the boat named the Tassili and depicts him playing a sequence of subversive and ludicrous roles with the other passengers on board. Rather than attempting to redefine himself, Omar embarks on a series of parodies that mock the very drive to locate a specific cultural identity, playing up to the expectations of the people he meets and highlighting the presumptuous nature of their preconceptions. At the beginning of the text, Omar comments cheekily on the notes printed on his passport, asking the customs officer why he should be considered of Algerian 'origin' when he was born in 'Hauts de Seine'. The demarcation of categories such as 'nationality', 'identity' and 'origin' is already subverted here. Next, Omar pretends to explain his identity as an 'Arabe non-identifié', taking on the voice of an objective scientist attempting to document an unprecedented phenomenon. He proposes various specific perspectives, including that of a physicist, a geneticist, a climate-specialist and a sociologist or ethnologist, as if to parody such discourses that might attempt to master and delimit the specific nature of the descendants of Arab immigrants. Commenting on the 'ANI', he observes for example that:

> Ainsi donc un peuple nouveau est apparu sur la terre en les années 1950-1980 de notre ère.
> Le peuple porte le nom de son chronosome «500 000 ANI» (500 000 correspondant au nombre de cas dépistés et recensés, ANI signifiant Arabes non identifiés).
>
> Ils ont la redoutable faculté de s'adapter partout où ils se trouvent. Ils investissent tous les endroits que les chants des mosquées condamnent. Ils ont, en l'espace d'une génération, créé leur propre espace culturel, leur propre code, leur propre dialecte.[40]

Omar at once undermines any temptation to describe his identity in a scientific, schematic way and reinforces the mobility and dynamism of his cultural generation.

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[38] Ibid., p. 52.
[39] Ibid., p. 68.
[40] Akli Tadjer, *Les ANI du 'Tassili'*, (Paris: Seuil, 1984) p. 27.

Even more subversively, Omar also openly mocks the other passengers. When an old Muslim man invites him to pray, for example, he pretends to agree but clearly retains a critical distance, recounting that 'je souris et acquiesce hypocritement'.[41] Omar also teases two pied-noir passengers, calling them 'black-pannards' and responding to their concerned questions regarding the shop they used to own near Algiers by fabricating a preposterous story of the continued success of the place. Omar describes the invented customers of 'Au vraie beurre' in an excessively stereotypical and idealised way, actively subverting the French attempt to maintain their traditional French customs in Algeria by mimicking their bourgeois views. At the end of the text, Omar also parodies the naïve questions of Nelly, an interested and sympathetic young girl, who asks him earnestly about his experiences of racism. Omar deliberately evades the question, narrating an episode where he had to share a room with a cousin whose feet smelled and suggesting that his prejudice against those whose feet are unwashed may be his most significant encounter with racist beliefs. Here again, Omar sends up the role that he is expected to play, aware that his real experiences resist narration in that sort of context and mocking Nelly's endeavour to know and appropriate the specificity of his lifestyle. In this way he refrains from affirming another set of stereotypes or categorical definitions. Instead he demonstrates how Beur identity cannot be described and reduced but remains volatile and impossible to pin down.

One of Azouz Begag's most recent texts, *Zenzela*, again demonstrates this mobility, less by satirising a series of one-dimensional, naïve discourses than by promoting cultural mixing and interaction. Here, the very structure and focus of the text revolve around the interpenetration of Algeria and France and the subversion of national stereotypes through unforeseen combinations. *Zenzela* enacts the coexistence of Algerian and French culture and history in Beur life, since it is set in both countries at once and continually traces their moments of convergence and divergence. The text recounts the occurrence of an earthquake, 'Zenzela', in Sétif, which has a number of consequences or implications. First, the earthquake is reflected in a dream of the central character Farid: fear of exclusion by his team-mates becomes a terrifying image of the earth cracking, opening up and destroying houses and trees. The dream of the earthquake is important because it symbolises Farid's own unrest in France and the incomplete nature of his 'integration'. It also posits a psychological connection with events in Algeria: Farid seems to have some kind of second

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[41] Ibid., p. 63.

sight that enabled him to predict the earthquake. The novel then charts both the details of the earthquake itself on site in Sétif, and the characters' knowledge and reactions to it back in Lyon simultaneously, implying the interpenetration of the two worlds. In addition to this, the earthquake itself becomes a symbol of conflict, contestation and unrest. Locals start to wonder, 'une bonne zenzela «numéro 9 de Richter» ne détruisait-elle pas les fondations de la société et n'offrait-elle pas une excellente occasion de repenser l'organisation d'une véritable démocratie populaire et socialiste?'[42] Next, the French begin to suggest that the earthquake would not have happened had France retained power in Algeria, and it seems in some ways to represent resistance to the established regime. At the end of the novel, it comes to symbolise rupture, as Farid's family realise they will no longer be able to return and build a house in Sétif but must now settle themselves in France.

Begag's strategy here is to undermine prejudiced definitions by interweaving the two worlds as much as possible while reinforcing the establishment in France of the Algerian family. Passages entitled 'Lyon' and 'Sétif' succeed one another, as the focus constantly switches between the two environments. Begag also allows the different traditions to intermingle, as Farid's premonition and visits to the wise old 'marabout' are juxtaposed with rational everyday life in France. Begag borrows elements of myth and superstition from the North African folktale tradition, yet unlike Ben Jelloun, who tends to reify that tradition, Begag innovatively inserts it into the heart of Beur life in Lyon. Begag describes the marabout in mystical and exotic terms, but situates the scene in the shadows of the HLM:

> C'était surtout son regard qui dégageait une atmosphère d'extra-lucidité. Ses pupilles postées au centre de ses orbites avaient l'assurance de deux gardes noirs à l'entrée d'un palais royal. Dedans, on devinait des trésors amoncelés, la connaissance, l'intelligence, le savoir-vivre, l'expérience, l'abracadabra et même la sorcellerie. Ce lecteur occulte avait des accès directs aux clés du monde.[43]

This description takes place against the background of everyday life in the suburbs, creating a disjunctive, heterogeneous tone. The mysticism of the 'conte' is uprooted and set into both a realist and a French context. Begag is miming the complex movements between Algeria and France, and suggesting that this process of transferral leads to the establishment of new sorts of experience. Unlike both *Béni* and *Quand on est mort*, *Zenzela* seeks out Beur identity neither by wholeheartedly embracing Frenchness, nor by attempting to re-

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[42] Azouz Begag, *Zenzela*, (Paris: Seuil, 1997) p. 36.
[43] Ibid., p. 58.

establish roots in Algeria, but by putting both elements together and presenting this combination as an affirmative construction.

Reflection on the relationships and friendships depicted in many Beur texts further develops this sense of the mobility and fluidity of collective identifications. Several authors point to the existence of a sense of solidarity among youths of North African origin, but, as in Ben Jelloun's *Les raisins*, 'community' also consists of interaction between different perspectives. Farid's community in *Zenzela* contains links with Algeria, communality between Beurs, and connections with other French youths in similar social situations. It is not necessarily a community of Algerians who have been transported to France and who remain unchanged, but it contains diverse influences; it is a community made of plural relations between singularities or a community of cultural mixing. Equally, in Begag's *Le gone du Chaâba*, there is a strong sense of community derived from the 'bidonville', demonstrated when the men work together to establish a sanitation system and to defend the Chaâba against its bad name. Yet importantly, the children seem to perceive these connections as derived from shared living conditions rather than from common roots. Equally, when the family moves away from the 'bidonville' to the HLM, Azouz befriends another immigrant from Paris, as well as some Jewish brothers, implying the importance of connections between minorities above the perpetuation of national categories. In *Béni*, the teenager's circle of friends is also largely composed of French children rather than remaining comprised of Beurs with shared origins in Algeria.

In Mehdi Charef's *Le thé au harem d'Archi Ahmed*, the importance of friendship across cultural divisions becomes the central theme of the text. The novel focuses above all on the interaction between young people living on a housing estate, yet there is little sense of any need for an investigation of national roots. Living conditions are poor, work is scarce and crime is abundant, but a strong sense of community does persist through the sharing of experiences in a situation where origins can seem irrelevant. Indeed, the protagonist Madjid's reaction when his mother Malika speaks of his possible return to Algeria is one of singular disinterest; collective identity is not national or even historical but depends on common experiences in the present. If there is such a thing as a Beur identity here, it is not self-enclosed but consists of the construction of links with different cultures; Madjid is 'convaincu qu'il est ni arabe ni français depuis bien longtemps' and he resolves to

's'inventer ses propres racines, ses attaches, se les fabriquer'.[44] This abandonment of the original culture and the investment in friendships between different groups in the present is depicted clearly in Nacer Kettane's *Le sourire de Brahim*, where individuals from the local community replace national territories and roots. Kettane openly rejects national communities, championing instead immediate, contingent connections:

> Est-ce qu'il faut vraiment avoir un pays pour se dire qu'on existe? Ce pays, il l'aimait, comme il aimait l'Algérie, mais son territoire était là dans les yeux de Hocine, les rires de Tahar, les pitreries de Patrick, dans les mains gercées de sa mère, dans la voix rugueuse du père, dans l'odeur de la couscoussière.[45]

This perception of the value of friendships between individuals of different origins recalls Sebbar's attention to connections between Beurs and rural communities discussed in chapter five. These emphasise the way in which solidarity between underprivileged or minority groups helps to strengthen the integration of difference into France.

This corpus of texts does not nevertheless propose an uncomplicated set of subversive strategies, but reveals how the reinvention of collective identity is also fragile and provisional. While these texts loosen traditional communal models through the affirmation of new links, it is significant that a number of writers of North African immigrant origin focus at the same time on uncertainty and loss. As I discussed in relation to Sebbar, depictions of assertive, reconstructive identities are juxtaposed with testimonies where cultural dialogue is underpinned by exile, emphasising again that Beur identity should be perceived as formless and variable. The establishment of new sorts of relationships continues to take place against a background of unease, which prevents the culture of the second generation from forming a celebratory, dynamic 'third way'. These literary texts propose not a single ideology but rather a series of provisional and unstable textual experiments.

The ambiguous status of any new Beur community is depicted particularly notably in texts by women writers. While several male writers dream of new strategies for self-affirmation, it seems that some of the female authors remain more sceptical of the possibility of creating an alternative collective culture, dissociating themselves from masculine strategies as well as from the label 'Beur'. Female characters frequently seem confused and uncertain, struggling to derive any concrete vision from the plural cultural forms with which

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[44] Mehdi Charef, *Le thé au harem d'Archi Ahmed*, (Paris: Mercure de France, 1983) p. 17.

they contend. Perhaps because their role in Islamic custom is more problematic and more fraught than that of the men, the women continue to battle with cultural stereotypes, throwing into doubt the more celebratory tone of some of the male authors. According to Nacira Guénif Souilamas, young immigrant girls need to negotiate not only the cultural opposition but also the perceived dichotomy between modernity and tradition: 'les images contrastées des jeunes filles d'origine nord-africaine oscillent ainsi entre incarnation de la modernité universelle et résurgence fantasmatique de la communauté mythique.'[46] Young girls risk being perceived either as fully emancipated, modern social women or as conformists in an antiquated, enclosed Muslim community, and many writers display their struggle with these paradigms rather than conceiving Beur culture as an alternative to these forms.

Farida Belghoul's *Georgette!* seems particularly troubling in this respect. Recording the chaotic thoughts and impressions of a young girl of Algerian origin, the text bears witness to the uncertain oscillation of the child between the authority of her father and the demands of her teacher, both of which contradict one another in her consciousness while refusing rationalisation or explanation. As I mentioned earlier, this is reflected by the episode where she writes her homework at the back of her exercise book, failing subsequently to understand her teacher's bemused response. Rather than distinguishing one cultural view from another and negotiating her relationship with both, the child remains confused, perceiving her teacher as a madwoman while heeding advice from her father that does not seem to make sense. Words and symbols are intertwined and jumbled in her mind, while at the same time one cultural system refuses to be translated into the values of another. The child also remains nameless, without an identity: 'Georgette' is the French name that she imagines for herself when corresponding with an old French woman in the guise of the woman's lost sons. This facelessness, coupled with the arbitrary, archetypal name 'Georgette', serves aptly to figure the child's floating, formless position between both cultures, pointing to a traditional French identity while emphasising her dissociation from it. Ultimately, the heroine is killed in an accident, and the final symbol of suffocation in an inkpot, coupled with the unfinished sentence at the end of the text, points to her failure to achieve a completed identity and her floundering within the French cultural system.

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[45] Nacer Kettane, *Le sourire de Brahim*, (Paris: Denoël, 1985) pp. 172-3.
[46] Nacira Guénif Souilamas, *Des «beurettes» aux descendantes d'immigrants nord-africains*, (Paris: Grasset et Fasquelle, 2000) p. 87.

Similarly, Ferrudja Kessas's *Beur's story* also reflects on the ambivalent position of young girls of North African immigrant origin, focusing not so much on the discrepancy between school and home than on conflicting cultural and religious expectations. The central characters, Malika and Farida, struggle to achieve a lifestyle that would combine their personal desires with the restrictions inflicted upon them by their parents. Wishing she could rebel against her heritage and make decisions about whom she sees and where she goes, Farida starts to dislike her own image, perceiving in her skin colour a reminder of the trap of her origins: 'elle s'était méprisée en se contemplant avec horreur dans la glace, se donnant de terribles gifles, pour essayer de détruire cette face, un peu trop basanée, qui lui rappelait qu'elle s'appelait Farida et non Francine'.[47] In this case, cultural splitting becomes a starting point not for a new form of identity but for negation and self-deprecation. Furthermore, like many other Muslim girls, Malika is beaten for staying out too late, and Farida is even removed from school so as to work in the home and to foreclose contacts with other French teenagers. Finally, when she is told she must have an arranged marriage, Farida commits suicide, defeated by the incompatibilities of her position. Kessas's text thus depicts the conflicts and uncertainties experienced by the younger generation, revealing how the desire for a new identity can also result in failure and loss.

The severity of some parents' interpretation of Islam can lead to an insurmountable sense of being torn between two different systems of belief. Women writers frequently struggle to make sense of their position, experimenting with different sorts of performance and at times falling disconcertingly between the two models. Belghoul and Kessas's heroines fail to locate a way out of their indeterminacy, as cultural conflict and uncertainty finish tragically in death. Other texts by Beur women writers offer less pessimistic perspectives, but present the situation of young girls of North African origin as equally, irrevocably complex and irresolute. In Aïcha Benaïssa's *Née en France*, for example, the narrator is on the point of introducing her Italian boyfriend to her parents, when she is whisked away to Algeria and consigned to the care of her aunt. Her father removes her passport and tears up her French identity card, and Aïcha is barely permitted to leave the house. She manages to escape after plotting an elaborate strategy, but on her return to France she does not re-establish contact with her family for a long time, only later meeting up with her mother in secret. The extremity of the situation here aptly demonstrates the

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[47] Ferrudja Kessas, *Beur's story*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989) p. 14.

possible rupture experienced by young girls of North African origin, revealing how in certain cases cultural dialogue seems impossible and survival depends on a definitive and all-encompassing choice. Similarly, though the events are less dramatic, the heroine, Samia, of Nini's *Ils disent que je suis une beurette*, is beaten by her brother (renamed the KGB) until ultimately she manages to find work and leave her parents' home. Here again, Samia is torn brutally between opposing belief systems, and she saves herself only by renouncing her family's desires. Samia's identity does seem to be created out of a set of intercultural interactions, but the definition of a new cultural position takes place against a background of violence and disruption.

These diverse interpretations of Beur experience provide a sense of the uncertain status of new identity constructions. The Beur community is defined not by a specific set of cultural experiences but becomes unsettled by other, variable factors such as gender and religion. Different 'gendered' experiences suggest that the confrontation of French and Algerian influences can be either enabling or oppressive. As a result, cultural engagements are proposed and tested out in these texts, but no configuration has time to freeze into a conclusive form and reinvented identities are contested by other responding voices. While Beur literature could on one level be described as a quest for new forms of collective identification, those forms remain compelling precisely because they are constantly questioned and overturned.

Inventions of Language and Form

The literary and formal experiments taking place in these works demonstrate the diverse and multifaceted cultural perspectives proposed in the literature of young people of North African immigrant origin. If, as I have argued, literature can form a privileged site for the subversion of received ideas, then the linguistic and narrative play enacted in various texts actively animates that process of questioning, as various cultural signs and symbols are interspersed, manipulated and broken down. Many writers use form to articulate singular-plural perspectives, actively problematising existing cultural systems by disrupting unified positions and juxtaposing contrasting symbols with gaps or muted echoes.

Young people of North African immigrant origin frequently use both Arabic or Berber and French in their everyday lives. As I mentioned earlier, they interweave both languages, at times speaking Arabic with their parents and French at school, at work or with their friends. In certain literary texts, however, this bilingualism is presented not simply as a

source of confusion, but as a creative and subversive interaction, where codes are actively combined in the service of a new identity. Bilingualism is redeployed here, so that it becomes a symbol not of poor integration but of the liberating interpenetration of cultural forms in everyday living. This process of code-mixing, demonstrated most notably by Begag, Houari and Kessas, shows how the boundaries of a language can be seen to be permeable and implies that it need not be related exclusively to a pure national identity. The migration of linguistic terms leads to the creation of a multilingual dialect that can be seen as liberating because it refuses to conform to pre-existing categories that continue to function in an oppressive manner.

In Begag's work, for example, this mingling and subversion of languages takes place in the juxtaposition of 'arabismes' with Lyonnais slang, already announced in the very title of the text ('Chaâba' is an Arabic name while 'gone' is slang for a child from Lyon). Characters speak a mixture of French, Arabic, and various forms of slang, and individual words become distorted by these different influences. French words are sometimes pronounced with an Algerian accent, combining cultural systems through new intonations:

> A la maison, l'arabe que nous parlons ferait certainement rougir de colère un habitant de la
> Mecque. Savez-vous comment on dit les allumettes chez nous, par exemple? Li zalimite.
> C'est simple et tout le monde comprend. Et une automobile? La taumobile. Et un chiffon?
> Le chiffoun. Vous voyez, c'est un dialecte particulier qu'on peut assimiler aisément lorsque
> l'oreille est suffisamment entraînée.[48]

This bending and reformulation of languages into a new and heterogeneous form mirrors the coexistence of diverse cultural influences within the open-ended Beur community. Begag's glossary of 'mots bouzidiens' and 'mots azouziens' at the end of the text also purposefully draws the reader's attention to the invention of new dialects and languages, displaying the manner in which words of different roots and origins mutate. The text of *Le gone* is littered both with Arabic terms, such as 'mektoub', meaning 'destiny', or 'hallouf', meaning 'pig', and with hybrid signs, including 'l'icoule' for 'l'école' and 'broufissour' for 'professeur'. There is also an amusing episode where Bouzid translates the Arabic word 'chemma' as 'tababrisi', by which he means 'tabac à priser'. The young Azouz dutifully asks for some 'tababrisi' at the shop and is bemused when the seller does not understand immediately.[49] This distortion of linguistic terms dramatises the convergence and divergence of cultural

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[48] Azouz Begag, *Le gone du Chaâba*, (Paris: Seuil, 1986) p. 213.

communities, and Begag demonstrates how such forms of linguistic interaction can be seen as enriching. Different language systems are not figured as fixed polar opposites, but are involved in more fluid creative encounter.

The task of characters such as Azouz and Béni is to master the influences of diverse communities and to locate an appropriate idiom of their own. Both characters switch repeatedly between different linguistic systems, playing a series of roles and voicing their simultaneous involvement with various cultural paradigms. While using his father's hybrid dialect at home in the Chaâba, Azouz speaks a more traditional French at school, affirming in this context that 'depuis quelques mois j'ai décidé de changer de peau'.[50] This oscillation between different sorts of linguistic usage demonstrates the resistance of Beur identity to enclosure within a single cultural category. In addition, Begag, and even more extensively Charef, also uses slang as a sign of resistance to the dominant discourse, and they both show how the language of the young Beurs is also permeated by Anglophone influences. These provide an image of modernity outside of the France/North Africa division and suggest the importance of looking beyond national categories for cultural influences. Begag and Charef then make a statement by recording these heterogeneous dialects in written form. These ideas recall the work of Edouard Glissant discussed in chapter three, and they function both to extend the written form in order for it to do justice to an oral 'métisse' culture and to render the fleeting spoken forms more widely recognised.

Literary language itself in this way becomes a tool for the creation of singular-plural idioms. Literary forms allow authors to manipulate language and undermine hegemonic discourses through the active intermingling of voices and signs. Literature can propose new idiolects, drawing attention to the discrepancy between dominant ideological discourses and a collection of unclassified, marginal identities. This is demonstrated once again in Begag's work, where the characters themselves use writing to experiment with different sorts of idioms. In *Dis Oualla!* for example, the central character is fascinated with words, investigating French terms of foreign origin and sensually admiring their musicality. While his friends are interested in action, he asserts:

> Moi, je préférais les mots: les dire, les écrire, les essayer. Y en avait qui étaient de vrais émigrés clandestins, dans notre dictionnaire: tohu-bohu, brouhaha, cahin-caha, ahaner,

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[49] Ibid., p. 179. For further discussion of bilingualism in the work of Azouz Begag, see Marc Sourdot, 'Un héros décentré: *Le gone du Chaâba* d'Azouz Begag', *L'écriture décentrée: la langue de l'Autre dans le roman contemporain*, ed. Michel Laronde, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996) 109-121.

[50] Azouz Begag, *Le gone du Chaâba*, p. 60.

boucan, malotru, onomatopée, borborygme... Je préférais provoquer mes adversaires en duel de mots, c'était beaucoup plus rigolo! Jeux de mains, jeux de vilains. Jeux de mots, jeux royaux.[51]

These foreign-sounding words announce the otherness that already persists within the French language. The linguistic system is revealed to incorporate a multitude of sounds that contain echoes of other cultures, again demonstrating the supple, dynamic and relational character of linguistic evolution and reinforcing the constant shifting of the boundaries of codes. Momo's fascination with this process, and his desire to write a book in order to liberate himself from the oppressive forces that surround him, portrays how language can be stretched and remoulded so as to convey the experience of cultural hybridisation.

Akli Tadjer's *Les ANI du 'Tassili'* performs this affirmative, polyphonic form through the proliferation of different idioms and registers. On the one hand, the narrator's language is colloquial, retaining the spontaneity of free-flowing oral discourse. Omar's idiomatic voice pronounces his assertive resistance to formal or literary codes. At the same time, however, Omar constantly shifts his position, wearing masks and playing roles in order to enunciate a plurality of provisional standpoints. The text incorporates a variety of idioms, suggesting the dynamism of the narrator's position and depicting the multifarious nature of linguistic usage itself. His speech contains anglicisms, fragments of 'verlan', as well as a smattering of literary quotations or poetic forms. Conversations are interspersed with ironic poems and parodic songs. As the boat departs, for example, Omar pretends to voice a poetic lamentation, observing:

> Algérie s'est envolée.
>
> Algérie a disparu...
>
> Il fait chaud, trop chaud. Je cherche déséspérément un coin d'ombre. Il n'y en a pas.
>
> Le *Tassili* imperturbable continue de déchirer les eaux azurées de la Méditteranée.
>
> Algérie s'est complètement diluée...[52]

Once again, Omar's use of register and form reflect his adaptability, and citations convey his irreverence towards any imposed or set discourse. His ironical stance towards many of the discourses he uses also reflects his resistance to their hegemony, emphasising the slippery relation between shifting identities and artificial, static linguistic forms. Omar disrespectfully adopts a sequence of voices while resisting colluding exclusively with any single cultural system.

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[51] Azouz Begag, *Dis Oualla!* , (Paris: Fayard, 1997) p. 15.

[52] Akli Tadjer, *Les ANI du 'Tassili'*, p. 58.

The use of narrative perspective can also enact this attitude towards cultural interaction. The voice of the protagonist represents a particular position while diverse symbols reflect multiple contexts. On the one hand, many writers use a highly subjective form in order to place the focus on the individual within the community rather than evoking in any way the uniformity of the group. The subjects in most Beur texts to a certain extent stress the specificity of their cultural composition. At the same time, this narrative perspective is interesting because the subject also announces his relationships with different cultural forms and in this way encompasses both singularity and plurality. Characters use different symbols to signify their position, appropriating and subverting them by allowing one system to intermingle with another. In Begag's *Zenzela*, as we have seen, the narrator participates in both worlds, dialogically coupling traces from Algeria with everyday life in Lyon. Similarly, Béni moves in and out of French and Algerian cultural systems, imagining erecting a Christmas tree in his parents' Muslim home and winning a Christmas present by performing on stage at the party organised by his father's employer. Conversely, in order to attract the young girl France, Béni offers her a necklace and a copy of the Koran, actively reflecting his involvement with both cultures. The young Azouz in *Le gone* uses particular registers in different situations, and both characters are capable of role-playing in order to negotiate cultural divisions. The dialogic form is enacted in Houari's *Zeida de nulle part* through the narrator's successive immersion in different sensual worlds.

Important here is the subversive juxtaposition of religious references and symbols, displaying simultaneous participation in different traditions. Begag's texts, for example, contain repeated references to Islamic rituals, such as sacrifice, circumcision and Ramadan, but the protagonists also retain a perplexed distance from these symbolic rites. In Kettane's *Le sourire de Brahim*, Ramadan is mentioned, but the central character forgets that he is supposed to observe that tradition and chews gum. In Nini's *Ils disent que je suis une beurette*, the children reflect on the practice of Ramadan while mocking its meaning and announcing their participation in French cultural practices. The tradition is forced upon the children by their parents but they struggle to understand it, explaining it instead in a series of humorous, irreverent ways. Nini includes this scene not in order to display the ignorance of children of North African origin but to portray their simultaneous participation in different systems of belief. Some writers also reveal how individuals seek to reinterpret Islam, seeking a new form of 'Islam laïque' and adapting traditions in order for them to make sense in contemporary France. Nacer Kettane points out the diversity of manifestations of Islam

in France, as Muslims consciously or unconsciously adapt their practices according to the demands of modern Western life.[53] Many Beur characters participate in certain Islamic practices while rejecting religious dogma and intermingling symbols such as the headscarf with an involvement in French society and culture.

Boukhedenna suggests re-appropriating her Muslim identity in her *Journal*, but she stresses that she will accomplish this in her own way, not according to the imposed rules of a traditional Algerian society. She learns Arabic and corresponds with another Algerian, Kamel, and once in Algeria, she practises Ramadan and goes to the hammam. At the same time, however, Boukhedenna's narrator dissociates herself from tradition and refuses to obey the rules regarding the position of women. The text also symbolises this cultural hybridisation through the use of songs evoking and combining different references or backgrounds. The narrator writes a piece describing the experience of immigrants in Paris, repeating the refrain 'ils s'appelaient: Mohamed, Ahmad, Habib, Djamal', and here, the song form introduces another type of discourse into the text, again blurring the boundaries of generic classifications.[54] The migration of names across geographical and cultural borders equally voices this discursive interaction. The narrator is also interested in a heterogeneous collection of musicians, listening to Lou Reed, the Sex Pistols, Brel and Gainsbourg, as well as North African singers such as Mohammed Abdel Wahab and Oum Kalsoum.

Intertextual references demonstrate the existence of multiple spheres of interaction. Many writers emphasise the influence of French literature as well as Arabic sources, coupling these in turn with broader references to American culture or modern music and film. Boukhedenna strives to find a niche for herself in French society while praising the poetry and vitality of Kateb Yacine's *Nedjma* (a text that influenced a great number of North African writers, quoted also by Mehdi Lallaoui). In Nini's *Ils disent que je suis une beurette*, Samia inherits the Muslim traditions of her parents while also sporadically reading major French texts such as Beauvoir's *Mémoires d'une jeune fille rangée* and the poetry of Verlaine. Omar, in Tadjer's *Les ANI du 'Tassili'* picks up cultural references from a multitude of sources, learning contemporary expressions in the cafés of the eighteenth arrondissement in Paris while also reading Ibn Khaldoun and several reviews that help him to achieve a sense of the history of Arabic culture. Some writers also use French influences while twisting them to reflect the specificity of a different context. As Hargreaves points

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[53] Nacer Kettane, *Droit de réponse à la démocratie française*, pp. 66-7.
[54] Sakinna Boukhedenna, *Journal: Nationalité Immigrée*, pp. 57-8.

out, Leïla Houari's work recalls that of Duras while transporting that sparse, elliptical narrative style to her descriptions of the forgotten village in Morocco.[55] Kettane's *Le sourire de Brahim* goes even further, when the central character subversively misquotes Apollinaire to describe the violence of October 1961, lamenting 'sous le pont Mirabeau avait coulé le sang'.[56] Even more, many writers suggest that American films wield as much influence as French or Arabic literary texts, as Béni attempts to model himself on Robert Redford, and Kessas's *Beur's story* points to the intertexts of *Love story* and *West Side Story*, as well as citing references to films such as *Elise ou la vraie vie* or the work of Francis Coppola. These references portray a diversity of influences while undermining the authority of any single culture and demonstrating the way in which the heritage of one community can be manipulated and intermingled with the echoes of another. Frontiers are questioned and traversed through this disordered patchwork of cross-cultural readings.

While language can serve to create new idioms and systems, however, writers of North African immigrant origin at times voice their identities over a series of gaps and silences, figuring the aspects of their experience that escape the confines of representational codes. The manipulation of language can offer new opportunities, but writers also express their anxiety regarding dominant discourses by evoking the inconsistencies that these codes inevitably occlude. Hopes for a reconstructed identity are both expressed and questioned, as the evocation of memory, for example, figures both fragmentation and regeneration. Collective identity is both fuelled and perplexed by the unsettling representation of past events. In *Dis Oualla!*, for example, Momo's writing project begins with a sense of loss and uncertainty regarding the past, as he perceives how his history has somehow escaped the possibility of narration. He writes, '*celui qui a oublié son passé est condamné à vivre au présent*', and '*à quoi sert la mémoire quand on n'a pas d'avenir?*', and the juxtaposition of these phrases reveals both a desire to relocate the past and a sense of doubt with regard to the capacity of narrative to achieve that reconstruction.[57] Memory seems both necessary and out of reach, as the child hopes to redefine his history while failing to reconcile different epochs or moments. Recalling Sebbar's work, revocation seems both fundamental and

[55] See Alec G. Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction*, p. 125.
[56] Nacer Kettane, *Le sourire de Brahim*, p. 23.
[57] Begag, *Dis Oualla!*, p. 67, p. 69.

evasive, and Beur writers strive to describe the chequered influence of past events on the construction of a renewed collective identity in the present.

The work of Ahmed Kalouaz takes this juxtaposition of narrative and silence as its central theme. *L'encre d'un fait divers*, for example, traces the experiences of Naïma, a young girl imprisoned in France for having attacked a young man, Driss, with a knife because he attempted to abuse her sexually. The text consists of her thoughts and letters to her friend, Céline, demonstrating her attempt to narrate her experience and to establish a form of communication. The stakes of the narrative seem to be the location or invention of an appropriate language, and this takes place against the background of the silence of the prison and a sense of the insufficiency of conventional representational strategies. Gazing at the stars, Naïma addresses Céline and affirms her desire for a singular idiom that might somehow encapsulate both her trauma and her solitude: 'je vais tirer le rideau derrière la vitre, et t'envoyer des lettres de notre invention. Avec un vocabulaire de nous, une grammaire certaine, des codes, des humeurs, de la salive de nos langues.'[58] Naïma desires to create a singular voice that would evoke the intimacy of their relationship and express the privacy of her thoughts and impressions. This language is nevertheless fragile and evasive, connoting at once complicity and silence: Céline's letters sometimes fail to arrive and Naïma struggles to makes sense of events. Naïma affirms 'ne pas perdre le fil, j'écris pour te parler', yet the writing risks both not being completed and not being read.[59] The text itself seems to be composed of both language and silence, as the reader is presented with fragments of thoughts and traces of memories while much of Naïma's story remains shrouded in uncertainty and diary entries are interspersed with gaps. The heroine narrates fleeting impressions and images at the same time as conveying a sense of a life that slips beyond the grasp of ordinary writerly conventions.

This unsettling search for an idiom, coupled with a sense of the limits of communicability, is repeated in Kalouaz's *Point kilométrique 190*. Here, the author focuses on the true story of the death of Habib Grimzi, who was thrown out of the window and killed on a train journey from Bordeaux to Ventimiglia. The text is written from the point of view of the journalist charged with investigating events, and it consists of her attempt to provide a voice for Habib and somehow give form to the silence that surrounds his death. The establishment of a dialogue between the journalist and the victim is combined with a

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[58] Ahmed Kalouaz, *L'encre d'un fait divers*, (Paris: Editions de l'Arcantère, 1984) p. 17.
[59] Ibid., p. 95.

sense of the inadequacy of language and the resistance of the event to narration. Voices are juxtaposed and interchanged, fragments are revoked, while silences and blanks break the teleology of the narrative. On the one hand, the victim's subjectivity is expressed in terms of writing or by the marks and traces of ink or paint: '*j'étais poète de la révolte ou de la nostalgie, les soirs d'abandon. J'étais une encre échappée du troupeau asservi.*'[60] At the same time, however, the relocation of a narrative or voice is perplexed both by cultural otherness and of course by the all-encompassing silence of death: 'ta voix est d'un autre rivage, tu ne parles plus d'avenir. C'est une langue enflée de syllabes meurtries et de désespoir.'[61] The text oscillates between this desire for expression and an awareness of the inability of language to accomplish any appropriate representation or to resuscitate the muted voices of the past.

This combination of language and silence seems most striking in the (lack of) evocations of the Algerian war. On the whole, memories of the war are surprisingly sparse in Beur texts, perhaps signifying the widespread suppression of those memories and the troubled relation that the second and third generations retain with this complex series of events. Aïcha Benaissa mentions in *Née en France* that the war is a taboo subject, never discussed in her family. Similarly, one of the characters in Lallaoui's *Les Beurs de Seine* discusses the repression of the events of October 1961, and it is clear that memories of the war are problematic and difficult to access. Kettane's *Le sourire de Brahim* opens with a scene from the Paris massacre in '61, but there is little sense of connection with the events in Algeria itself. The text that pays the most attention to the war, Charef's *Le harki de Mériem*, attempts to narrate the experiences of a harki and the effects of his actions on his family while living in France, but even here, there is little sense of a reasoned transmission of memory across the generation gap. For a start, the text endeavours to reconstruct the past, while aspects of the harki's experience resist the formulation of any communal or teleological narrative. If Charef wants to reconstruct and understand the war, the narrative also resists comprehension and explanation, as the protagonist Azzedine finds himself bewildered by the senseless momentum of the war machine. In a similar way to Sebbar's harkis, Charef's soldiers opt to fight for the French for a number of personal reasons: Azzedine simply wants to be able to feed his family, another character, Naïm, wants vengeance after his father was killed by the maquis, and another, Tofla, was humiliated by a

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[60] Ahmed Kalouaz, *Point kilométrique 190*, (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1986) p. 18.

[61] Ibid., p. 41.

woman. Yet for all the characters, the war has no meaning in itself, there is no shared ideology, no community and no greater impetus. Each individual becomes alienated from the chaos of events that spiral beyond his control. Azzedine cannot ally himself to any greater cause, but is instead ruptured from the very people for whom he is fighting. The textual reconstruction of events also fails to provide any meaning or understanding.

Charef's text combines extracts of Azzedine's seemingly senseless memories with an evocation of the alienation of the harkis and their children in the present, again reinforcing the troubled relation between different epochs in this context. This also indicates the highly complicated position of harkis and their children in France after the war, as individuals were rejected by both communities and stigmatised on both sides. The text begins with the brutal murder of Sélim, Azzedine's son, by racists in France who cannot believe his identity papers are marked 'nationalité française'. In the build-up to the murder, Charef reinforces Sélim's isolation and his sense of rupture from his origins: 'coincé toute sa vie entre le rejet d'une communauté française et les insultes de l'autre, l'algérienne, Sélim se frayait un chemin à coups de poing.'[62] Azzedine's family is caught in a no man's land, unable to reconstruct an acceptable memory of the past and unable to settle in French society. This alienation is pinpointed by the irony that the Algerians will not allow Sélim to be buried in Algeria. His burial and commemoration take place in France, alongside the very people who excluded him from their society. Charef's text combines the present with the past, attempting to rewrite the memory of the harkis and to give form to their experience of uncertainty and rupture. Yet the text also revolves around the senselessness of their unspoken memories, foregrounding the difficult translation of those memories into a comprehensible form in the present.

The alarming and incomplete resurgence of memory is reflected even more violently in Charef's recent text *La maison d'Alexina*. Here, the setting is a quiet home for troubled children, yet the reason for the central character's angst is only revealed suddenly and brutally at the end, in the form of a nightmare rooted deep in the past. The dream brings back a series of disjointed images of the war:

> Ces corps de fusillés qu'on jetait dans les camions militaires, les supplications des indigènes aux pieds des soldats, la nuque sous la fusil, ma mère en tête, afin qu'on leur rende les corps; les courses folles, pieds nus, derrière les camions, pour suivre le chemin du charnier, et les camions qui accéleraient, puis disparaissaient... Et moi, enfant, épuisé, la salive âcre de

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[62] Mehdi Charef, *Le harki de Mériem*, (Paris: Mercure de France, 1989) p. 48.

poussière, les joues mouillées de larmes, je m'asseyais et laissais courir les grands, et ma mère vers je ne sais où...[63]

This memory takes the form of a hidden trace that transfers the past into the present while also resisting coherent narration. The occlusion of the past in this case leads to the sudden emergence of a senseless fragment of trauma that breaks the temporality of the narrative. Young people of immigrant origin in France are shown to hover between the possible recreation of repressed memories and a sense of confusion caused by the resistance of the past to explanation and narration.

These texts use language and form to voice singular idioms while also at times announcing the insufficiency of that project. Scattered and fleeting images of the Algerian war evoke the uncertain position of the subject in relation to his or her history and origin, demonstrating how present identities are subtended by the silences of the past. Writers of North African immigrant origin use literature to express their composite position, but their affirmative standpoints are also coupled with a sense of loss and contingency. Linguistic forms are for this reason provisional and experimental, proposing new perspectives while remaining aware of their limitations and continually interrogating their own processes of construction. Narratives can propose alternative identities, but the formation of any new code will always be subject to reappraisal, leaving blanks and holes while presenting a partial or strategic view.

In conclusion, it should be remembered that the gesture of subversion is a complicated and slippery one. Any subversive representation risks either falling into the affirmation of another reductive category, or remaining marginal, propping up the hegemony of more accepted discourses. On the one hand, the assertion of a subversive position could contain its own set of fantasies, undermining one hegemonic discourse while establishing another reductive set of beliefs in order to replace the original ideology. The creation of an alternative perspective risks becoming another coercive force, setting itself up as an enlightened viewpoint and assuming its own mechanisms of power and delusion. On the other hand, subversive activity can also backfire by retaining a marginal status, reinforcing the dominant position of other ideologies and forming the exception that proves the rule. The attempt to undermine authoritative or traditional views could merely serve to

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[63] Mehdi Charef, *La maison d'Alexina*, (Paris: Mercure de France, 1999) p. 133.

demonstrate the extent to which those discourses wield power, emphasising the division between mainstream and marginal positions.

For this reason, the most effective way to offer a critique of conventional conceptions of collective identity is evidently not to propose an alternative communal model, nor necessarily to stress the specificity of different minority groups. An alternative depiction of 'Frenchness' would repeat the self-enclosed structure of traditional ideologies, while a straightforward portrayal of Beur difference might just confirm their marginal or excluded position. While these strategies seem problematic, however, perhaps subversion will be more likely to succeed if the writer endeavours not to replace unsatisfactory representations with alternative descriptions but instead draws attention to the sorts of illusions circulating in other inaccurate discourses. The best way to question the power of the hegemonic discourse is to uncover the fallacies in its very structure and critique above all the gesture of creating categories. Subversion involves not the replacement of one model by another but the action of laying bare the inappropriate structure of existing configurations.

It is due to these implications that the literature discussed here retains its critical force and succeeds in advocating the liberation of young people of North African immigrant origin from erroneous and reductive definitions. These texts are subversive precisely because they resist reproducing categories of sameness and difference but show how collective identity among immigrant groups is both relational and heterogeneous. Beur literature forms an unsettling corpus of texts that at times promotes a reconstructive perspective while also continuing to play with monolithic identity constructions by depicting a variety of different forms of identification. These fictional texts theorise their own existence but they also never seem to exhaust that process. Providing continual alternative visions of itself, Beur literature reveals how the community will always resist stable and finite knowledge. The fiction examined here can therefore itself reflect back on theoretical discourse, since it functions as a critique of the drive to theorise cultural identity in any single, completed way. It is involved in a process of self-interrogation and does not set up any conclusive stance. While both theory and literature are to a certain extent concerned with experimentation and strategy, the literature announces and enjoys that provisionality in an affirmative and active way. Fictional representation here is subversive and compelling because the production of models of culture and community within this series of texts is never complete.

Conclusion

If the last two decades have seen a loss of faith in the idea of community, then one of the most important implications of this theoretical trend is that models of identity and difference need to be reassessed. Critics have thrown into question communitarian thinking, and this must also imply that alternative models need to be treated with suspicion, since they too might reinstate uniform patterns that will inevitably turn out to be illusory. Just as the notion of 'community' evokes a dangerous form of homogeneity, so too could the unconditional privileging of 'difference', however limitless and irreducible it is conceived to be, inadvertently finish by suggesting that distinct types of difference can be treated in the same way. Concomitantly, the celebratory embrace of 'creolisation' as a universal identificatory model risks glossing over and denying situations where a sense of specificity needs to persist. In response to these problems, however, it seems that the shifting positions of Sebbar and the Beur writers, and of Nancy's politics of the 'nouage', convey multiple forms of collective identity and succeed in rejecting the imposition of a strict set of values. Forms of collectivity are created not according to rigid concepts of community and difference but through fluctuating combinations of specificity and relationality.

I have therefore attempted to underline the importance of critique in this context, proposing not one specific configuration designed to represent multiculturalism in France but an emphasis on the action of blurring conceptual poles. I have wanted to recommend discourses that allow for movement and variability. Nancy's evocation of singular-plural being, for example, stresses the continual formation and rupture of relations, as one singular position interacts with certain influences while also remaining able to reject those in favour of new combinations. The singular and the collective are not upheld as values in themselves but are seen to engage and disengage from one another in an on-going series of intercultural movements. The idea that being is hybridised or relational is not conceived as an unproblematic means to resolve and attenuate differences; these relations are instead seen as shifting processes leading to a sense of specificity derived from particular, transient combinations. Neither relationality nor alterity is endorsed as a value to be preached. Rather, I have criticised an excessive emphasis on either position in favour of a more nuanced perception of the ways in which both concepts are needed in order to evoke the complexity of cultural interaction.

In the literary or linguistic sphere, Glissant's representations of creolised identities reinforce the necessity of a form of relational thinking, but his work also seems problematic because it attempts to advocate the 'tout-monde' as an exemplary global model. In the work of writers such as Khatibi, Sebbar or the Beur community, on the other hand, specific cultural configurations are questioned while singular-plural positions remain unsettled. These writers transgress frontiers and throw into uncertainty categories of sameness and alterity, or familiarity and difference, demonstrating how a seemingly self-enclosed identity can be coupled with intermittent movements towards polyphonic interchange. The cultural other is not presented as wholly other, as it tends to be in the work of Derrida, Lyotard, Boudjedra or Ben Jelloun, but as bound up in a process of interrogation, carving out its own space while also moving into broader cultural sites. Depictions of specificity are coupled with a sense of doubt regarding the absolute nature of that specificity, giving rise to a desire to imagine wider interactions with other spaces and epochs. The literary works of writers such as Khatibi, Sebbar or the Beurs are additionally pertinent in this context because they continually question and reinvent their own position, representing a community or set of communities that are never simply themselves.

My questioning of discourses pronouncing the end of community and focusing on irreducible differences is in this way not intended to lead to a utopian vision of smooth cultural dialogue. I have wanted to problematise conclusions affirming the extinction of community, but this is not with the aim of resolving incompatibilities or promoting a simple vision of unproblematic, global cultural cohesion. In this regard, discourses championing post-colonial hybridity need to be reworked, since once again they can imply that conflicts would be terminated if only everyone accepted the existence of migrant or *métis* groups. At times it can seem that thinkers such as Glissant or Bhabha believe that increased attention to creolisation or to interstitial spaces would pave the way automatically towards a new, more just global order.

The mode of thinking that I am proposing here strives not to resolve all conflicts but to offer a critique of models that privilege and reify conflict. This does not mean that antagonisms would be effaced and that dialogue would be achieved unproblematically between any two groups or identities. Rather, social and cultural conflicts would be perceived not as absolute but as contingent, since divided parties would continually re-interrogate their own mobile, plural position. It is worth remembering that there will always remain a discrepancy between ideals of cohesion and the real chaos of divergent positions.

As Laclau points out, for example, societies are inevitably constructed upon a core of antagonisms arising from the gap between the particular and the empty framework of the universal. From the point of view of Badiou, there is a discrepancy between being, which is multiple, and the interruption of the unpredictable, unknowable 'event'. Aspects of this argument can from a distance seem to resemble Derrida's opposition between generalised norms and irreducible singularity in his discussion of the impossible democracy to come. The crucial point that I want to draw attention to, however, is not the irrevocable dispersion of different beings within the democratic community, but the persistence of moments of discord that evade any totalised form of social organisation. Communal unity is interrupted not by absolutely insurmountable differences but by the continual emergence of new social struggles.

Badiou's work seems particularly informative in this context. His notion of the event, for example, implies not alterity as such but something that supplements the order that is already multiple, forming a moment of rupture that is both a part of a given situation and a singular element of resistance.[1] We need to think of the ethical question not in terms of the irresolute conflicts that arise between pockets of self-enclosed specificity. Instead, Badiou argues that being is always already multiple, and that the truth of this universal multiplicity (its excess) consists not of a plurality of particular communities but of singular, unpredictable events. In *L'éthique*, for example, we are told that truth emerges from 'l'*événement*, qui fait advenir «autre chose» que la situation, que les opinions, que les savoirs institués; qui est un supplément hasardeux, imprévisible, évanoui aussitôt qu'apparu'.[2] The singularity of the event resides beyond cultural specificity, it constitutes a fleeting moment of unfamiliarity or resistance that 'interpellates' beings regardless of their community. Badiou's desire to distance his thinking from a preoccupation with cultural specificity may become problematic, since it claims to transcend prevalent instances where some form of particularity is upheld, and the implications of these should still be taken into account. His association of particularity with conformity casts a negative light on groups

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[1] Badiou's conception of the event is first elucidated in *L'être et l'événement*, (Paris: Seuil, 1988).

[2] Alain Badiou, *L'éthique: essai sur la conscience du Mal*, (Paris: Hatier, 1993) p. 60. Badiou also develops this thinking through a discussion of Saint Paul. Badiou argues that Saint Paul is pertinent today since his conception of universality works against self-enclosed particularisms and instead points to a wider sense of the universal derived from the truth of the singular event (the resurrection of Christ). As a result, 'la vérité est dialgonale au regard de tous les sous-ensembles communautaires, elle ne s'autorise d'aucune identité, et (ce point est évidemment le plus délicat) elle n'en constitue aucune. Elle est offerte à tous, ou destinée à chacun, sans qu'une condition d'appartenance puisse limiter cette offrande, ou cette destination.' Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: la fondation de l'universalisme*, (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997) p. 15.

who need affirmatively to claim a degree of specificity in order to resist either assimilation or exclusion.[3] Badiou's thinking is resonant here, however, because it suggests that society is broken down or severed by contingent processes rather than by clashes between fixed or permanent identities.

I draw attention to these observations in order to stress that the concept of singular-plural being does not imply that social or cultural antagonisms can be simply resolved. Rather, it suggests that conflicts arise not out of the confrontation of immutable differences but from a series of changing struggles. Social difficulties stem not from an assortment of 'differends' or insurmountable cultural hiatuses. Rather, clashes can be seen to emerge in a contingent manner as patterns of identification converge and diverge, and linkages are by turns established and severed. As I have suggested, the agonistic relation between Islam and laïcité should not be seen as absolute and insurmountable, since each concept shifts according to specific historical moments, and the struggle between them could be seen to change in nature through time. Cultural confrontations are not permanent and unchanging, but they reinvent themselves at each juncture, leading to new combinations that in turn produce varying effects. Most importantly, the space between the generalised hegemonic position and diverse particularities can be seen not as an empty no man's land beyond negotiation but as a field where struggles are meted out in different ways through time. Relations are continually created and broken between singular positions that are themselves bound up in a process of evolution.

Finally, this type of thinking helps to elucidate how we can perceive the role of the critic or of the theoretical academic thesis. Intellectual reflection based on representational or literary concerns does not necessarily seek to provide generalised models, solutions or particular political projects. The literary critic should neither set up exemplary configurations nor elucidate full-blown socio-political ideals. Textuality itself forecloses the derivation of such straightforward conclusions. By studying discursive strategies and forms, however, the sort of analysis undertaken here can introduce subtlety into existing arguments and unsettle the hasty conclusions that can persist in other spheres of discourse. We should be careful when creating new categories, questioning those that fix unequivocally on absolute values and shaking up simplistic patterns or neat, formulaic oppositions. Approaching socio-political questions from a literary or theoretical perspective provides an

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[3] Badiou favours an understanding of the universal over the particular because it can imply non-conformity. See *Saint Paul*, p. 118.

opportunity not to promulgate a particular world vision but to test the limits of certain concepts and to complicate processes of signification. In this instance, the combined reflection on singularity and collectivity leads to a stronger sense of the movement of cultural identities in the contemporary situation and to an awareness of the ways in which notions of 'community' and 'difference' are realigned in the context of 'multicultural' France.

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