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**Palimpsestic Life Narratives in French by Women from  
Contemporary Tunisia**

Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
Department of French, Faculty of Arts, University of Bristol

NICOLA PEARSON

January 2022

78,974 words

# Abstract

This thesis is the first study to focus particularly on francophone life narratives by women from contemporary Tunisia. Due to their innovative methods and original engagement with Tunisian contexts, the texts in this corpus provide us with an opportunity to revisit definitions of the genre of life narrative. Although other scholars have previously employed the figure of the palimpsest in their theoretical discussions of literary and filmic texts (e.g., Genette, Gilbert and Gubar, Dillon, Silverman and Donadey), this is the first time that it has been theorised in relation to the genre of life narrative. My analyses of four Tunisian life narratives across diverse media—a blog by Ben Mhenni (*A Tunisian Girl*, بنينة تونسية, 2010-2012); a documentary film by El Fani (*Même pas mal*, 2012); a photobook by Fellous (*Pièces détachées*, 2017), and a literary life narrative by Zouari (*Le Corps de ma mère*, 2016)—allow me to define a new concept of the palimpsestic life narrative as a multi-layered, transnational and relational text in diverse media that takes as its subject an author's life in a complex postcolonial context.

I explore the extent to which each female creative practitioner can be seen to overwrite censorship and patriarchal order by adding their own, female-authored, life narrative to the palimpsest of Tunisian history. Additionally, I discuss the degree to which there are internal tensions between the narrative 'layers' of each text, which may work to produce ambiguous identities that resist interpretation and easy classification. Furthermore, I explore the extent to which the figure of the palimpsest can be employed as a mode of reading to envisage the constructed 'selves' that are evoked across this thesis. Finally, I evaluate the degree to which the corpus might be said to enact a politics of palimpsestic identity: a strategy of resistance to monolithic templates for national identity in Tunisia following the 2011 revolution.

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I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: Nicola Pearson

DATE: 24 January 2022

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# Introduction.

In the field of French and francophone Studies, Tunisian literature and cinema have historically been left in what Samia Kassab-Charfi describes as ‘le désert tunisien’ of criticism, with scholars preferring to focus on texts from Algeria, Morocco, the Caribbean and Sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>1</sup> Now, in the wake of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ uprisings, there has been a surge of interest in Tunisia as the birthplace of the revolts. Many studies have already focused on the role of women during the Tunisian revolution, and some studies have focused on literary and artistic forms of engagement by Tunisian women that emerged before and during the uprisings.<sup>2</sup> While these studies have provided important groundwork in beginning to address the rich and varied plethora of cultural production from contemporary Tunisia, my thesis is the first study to focus on life narratives in French by Tunisian women. I will focus on four sub-genres of life narrative by Tunisian women from different generations: a blog by Lina Ben Mhenni (*A Tunisian Girl*, *بنية تونسية*); a documentary film by Nadia El Fani (*Même pas mal*); a photobook by Colette Fellous (*Pièces détachées*), and a literary life narrative by Fawzia Zouari (*Le Corps de ma mère*).<sup>3</sup> In contrast to reductive Western

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Rencontre avec Samia Kassab-Charfi autour de l’œuvre “Un siècle de littérature en Tunisie : 1900 - 2017”’, *Institut Français de Tunisie*, 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ksgchOvr7aM>> [accessed 09/01/2022].

<sup>2</sup> The most significant studies on women’s art and literature from contemporary Tunisia are: Sonia Alba, *Tunisian Women’s Writing in French The Fight for Emancipation: From Ben Ali’s Rise to Power to the Eve of the Tunisian Revolution, 1987–2011* (Sussex: Sussex Academic Press, 2019); Christine Bruckbauer and Patricia Triki K., ‘The Turn المنعرج Socially Engaged Art Practices in Tunisia’, *Ibraaz*, 2016 <<https://www.ibraaz.org/essays/158/>> [accessed 6 May 2020]; Siobhán Shilton, ‘Art and the “Arab Spring”: Aesthetics of Revolution in Contemporary Tunisia’, *French Cultural Studies*, 24.1, 129–45; Siobhán Shilton, ‘Digital Art and the Tunisian Revolution’, *Wasafiri*, 31.4 (2016), 69–75; Laetitia Deloustal, *Le nouveau paradigme de l’art à l’épreuve de la création contemporaine féminine en Tunisie* (Perpignan: Presses Universitaires de Perpignan, 2018); Anne Marie E. Butler, ‘Unintelligible Bodies: Surrealism and Queerness in Contemporary Tunisian Women’s Art’ (University at Buffalo, 2019); Lilia Labidi, ‘Political, Aesthetic, and Ethical Positions of Tunisian Women Artists, 2011–13’, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 19.2 (2014), 157–71; Elsa Despiney and Ridha Mounni, *Artistes de Tunisie* (Tunis: Cérés éditions, 2019); Dounia Georgeon, ‘Revolutionary Graffiti: Street Art and Revolution in Tunisia’, *Wasafiri*, 27.4 (2012), 37–41.

<sup>3</sup> Lina Ben Mhenni, ‘A Tunisian Girl, *بنية تونسية*’ (selected posts from 2010-2012), <<https://atunisiangirl.blogspot.co.uk/2010/10/purple-attitude.html?m=0>> [accessed 09/01/2022]; Nadia El Fani, *Même pas mal*, 2012; Colette Fellous, *Pièces détachées* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017); Fawzia Zouari, *Le Corps de ma mère* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016).

interpretations of the genre of autobiography in the Maghreb, this thesis argues that my selected texts can be characterised as ‘palimpsestic life narratives’: multi-layered, transnational and relational texts in diverse media that take as their subject an author’s life in a complex postcolonial context.

Although other scholars have previously employed the figure of the palimpsest in their theoretical discussions of literary and filmic texts (e.g., Gérard Genette, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Sarah Dillon, Max Silverman and Anne Donadey), I consider the metaphor specifically in relation to the genre of life narrative.<sup>4</sup> My analyses of four Tunisian life narratives across diverse media will allow me to define a theory of the palimpsestic life narrative in relation to this specific corpus and its distinctive engagement with Tunisian contexts. In undertaking a close analysis of these texts, I suggest that there are different ‘palimpsestic’ tendencies to observe in relation to both content and form across the corpus. I will explore the extent to which each female creative practitioner can be seen to overwrite patriarchal order, rigid categories for national identity and orthodoxies by adding their own, female-authored, life narrative to the palimpsest of Tunisian history. Additionally, I will discuss the degree to which there are internal tensions between the narrative layers of each text, which may work to produce ambiguous identities that resist interpretation and easy classification. Moreover, I will explore the extent to which the figure of the palimpsest can be employed as a mode of reading to approach the hybrid, composite and multiple ‘selves’ that are evoked across this thesis. In analysing the various ways in which they engage the reader or spectator, I will consider the utility of the figure of the palimpsest as a useful *grille de*

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<sup>4</sup> Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes: La littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982); Philippe Lejeune, *Moi aussi* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1986) ; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979) ; Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (London: Continuum, 2007) ; Max Silverman, *Palimpsestic Memory: The Holocaust and Colonialism in French and Francophone Fiction and Film* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013); Anne Donadey, ‘Rekindling the Vividness of the Past: Assia Djebar’s Films and Fiction’, *World Literature Today*, 70.4 (1996), 885–92 (p. 886).

*lecture* for envisaging the ways in which a reader adds a further layer to a text as they co-author it in the process of interpretation. Finally, I will evaluate the degree to which the corpus might be said to enact what I am terming a politics of palimpsestic identity: a strategy of resistance to monolithic templates for national identity in Tunisia following the 2011 revolution, as I shall return to discuss further below.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, due to their innovative methods and original engagement with specific Tunisian contexts, this corpus of contemporary life narratives provides us with an opportunity to revisit the problematic legacy of Western criticism of the genre of autobiography in the Maghreb. Indeed, the genre arguably still carries with it a somewhat troubled legacy in this space. Tahar Ben Jelloun once ambivalently described it in 1996 as ‘un ghetto’ in the context of Maghrebi literature in French.<sup>6</sup> In 2007, Lia Nicole Brozgal posited that “‘the ghetto of autobiography’” would appear to be less a category under which North African writers have banded together and more the result of critical inattention to their works’ ambiguities and intricacies.<sup>7</sup> However, it is important to establish that, particularly in the last two decades, many Western scholars across the field of francophone Maghrebi literary studies have produced rich and nuanced studies of autobiographical texts from the region, which demonstrate an important evolution of thought on the genre.<sup>8</sup> However, texts from Tunisia

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<sup>5</sup> My use of the term ‘revolution’ (without a capital) in this book draws on Nouri Gana’s definition of the Tunisian revolution as a ‘historic event and a historical process that has been years in the making and is not over yet. It is the crowning moment of decades of collective endeavors, fragmented engagements, transversal tactics, small-scale or micro-rebellions, and social, political, literary, and cultural practices of insurrection and revolt’. Nouri Gana, ‘Introduction: Collaborative Revolutionism’, in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, ed. by Nouri Gana (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 1–31 (p. 22).

<sup>6</sup> Tahar Ben Jelloun employed this in: ‘Ce premier roman de Lofti Akalay est une réussite totale et fait sortir la littérature maghrébine d’expression française du ghetto de l’autobiographie et d’une certaine mauvaise conscience.’ Tahar Ben Jelloun, ‘Règlement de Contes’, a review of *Les Nuits d’Azéd* by Lofti Akalay’, *Le Monde*, 17 May 1996, p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Lia Nicole Brozgal, *Reading Albert Memmi: Authorship, Identity, and the Francophone Postcolonial Text* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Harvard University, 2007), p. 90.

<sup>8</sup> See, in particular : Françoise Lionnet, *Autobiographical Voices: Race, Gender, Self-Portraiture* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1991); Valérie Orlando, *Nomadic Voices of Exile: Feminine Identity in Francophone Literature of the Maghreb* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1999); Debra Kelly, *Autobiography and Independence: Selfhood and Creativity in North African Postcolonial Writing in French* (Liverpool: Liverpool University

have garnered less attention than those from Algeria or Morocco and more work is required to theorise the genre of autobiographical writing in French from Tunisia. Additionally, if we turn our attention to literary criticism produced from within Tunisia, Kassab-Charfi points out that Tunisian literature since Independence (1956) has been confined by many within the limits of a ‘littérature nationale’.<sup>9</sup> In light of a recent flourishing in the production of art and literature since the 2011 revolution, there is both an opportunity—and possibly an urgency—to revisit and revise critical approaches to francophone autobiographical material produced by women from Tunisia. Indeed, this corpus gives us cause to revitalise and celebrate the artistic quality of a genre that has been at various times left in the ‘désert’, banished to the ghetto, confined to the nation or declared dead.

Departing from the term autobiography, my analyses in this thesis are couched within the framework of Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson’s concept of ‘life narrative’, which they propose as an alternative to the exclusionary and Western-centric politics of the genre of autobiography.<sup>10</sup> In contradistinction to the term life writing, which tends to encompass written forms of self-expression, their concept of life narrative is ‘a general term for acts of self-presentation of all kinds and in diverse media that take the producer’s life as their subject, whether written, performative, visual, filmic, or digital.’<sup>11</sup> However, although this concept might provide a useful alternative to the concept of autobiography, and its traditional associations with both the masculine subject and prose narratives, the term was originally developed in relation to mostly Western life narratives and has not yet been applied to

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Press, 2005); Anne Donadey, *Recasting Postcolonialism : Women Writing between Worlds* (Portsmouth, N.H: Heinemann, 2001); Jane Hiddleston, *Writing After Postcolonialism: Francophone North African Literature in Transition* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017); Antonia Helen Wimbush, ‘Exile in Francophone Women’s Autobiographical Writing’ (University of Birmingham, 2018).

<sup>9</sup> ‘Rencontre avec Samia Kassab-Charfi autour de l’œuvre “*Un Siècle de littérature en Tunisie : 1900 - 2017*”’. See, also, Jean Fontaine’s reflections on a national literature in Tunisia: Jean Fontaine, *Vingt ans de littérature tunisienne, 1956-1975* (Tunis: M.T.E, 1977).

<sup>10</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography : A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, 2nd edn (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography : A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, p. 4.

Tunisian texts.<sup>12</sup> I propose that these women's life narratives in French from contemporary Tunisia give us cause to revisit and nuance Smith and Watson's definition as I explore how the genre emerges in this alternative context and pay particular attention to how female creative practitioners from Tunisia articulate their identities on their own terms.

### **Decolonising the study of women's francophone life narratives from Tunisia**

In 2022, at a time when huge efforts are being made to decolonise the Western academy, there is an urgency to look beyond Eurocentric paradigms for approaching and interpreting texts in French from Tunisia. In particular, it is important to address Jean Déjeux's problematic statement that the genre of autobiography in the Maghreb is a Western import, with French constituting 'la langue natale du 'je''.<sup>13</sup> As Leila Ahmed and Amira Hassan Nowaira have crucially established, forms of autobiographical discourse existed in classical Arabic literature well in advance of French colonialism.<sup>14</sup> While the development of literary culture in French in Tunisia is evidently tied to the history of the French Protectorate in the country (1881-1956), Déjeux's definition of the genre of autobiography is outdated and inadequate for encapsulating the heterogenous and transnational character of women's life narratives in French from Tunisia in the twenty-first century. This is arguably also the case

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<sup>12</sup> In their Chapter 6, 'The Visual- Verbal- Virtual Contexts of Life Narrative', Smith and Watson do notably analyse three works by non-Western women: Marjane Satrapi's two books of autographics about Revolutionary Iran, *Persepolis* (2000) and *Persepolis 2* (2001), and Mona Hatoum's artwork *Pull* (1995). Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, pp. 172–76.

<sup>13</sup> 'Cette émergence du 'je' durant les années 1945–1950 dans la littérature maghrébine (algérienne en particulier) de langue française se tient à plusieurs facteurs : changements socio-économiques dans les sociétés, mutations dans les mentalités, entrée à l'école française, voyages, acculturation donc, dans le contexte musulman qui est celui du Maghreb. Les modèles occidentaux faisaient éclater et bouger l'unanimité des attitudes et comportements traditionnels basés sur les manières islamiques de voir le monde et de l'éprouver.' Jean Déjeux, 'Au Maghreb, la langue française « langue natale du Je »', in *Littératures autobiographiques de la francophonie*, ed. by Martine Mathieu (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1996), p. 180.

<sup>14</sup> Leila Ahmed, 'Between Two Worlds: The Formation of a Turn-of-the-Century Egyptian Feminist', in *Life/Lines: Theorising Women's Autobiography*, ed. by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), p. 154; Amira Hassan Nowaira, 'Arabic Autobiography', in *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, ed. by Margaretta Jolly (Chicago and London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001), pp. 45–47 (p. 45).

for Kateb Yacine's famous description of the French language in the Maghreb as *un butin de guerre*: a tool that the formerly colonised employed to resist the coloniser in the language of the coloniser.<sup>15</sup> It will thus be pertinent to discuss the extent to which the female practitioners in my study are employing the French language in ways that bear the traces of this violent colonial history, or indeed if the French language signals a break with this troubled past.

In addition, the use of the term 'francophone' in literary and art criticism is hotly debated because of its potential associations with a neo-colonial perspective. In her 2016 study of Maghrebi cinema, Florence Martin argues that '[l]abeling a constellation of cinemas "francophone" or "post-francophone" continues to force them to relate to an increasingly remote French center.'<sup>16</sup> This echoes Charles Forsdick and David Murphy's point that the term francophone 'has often involved an "exclusionary" gesture, which is used to emphasise ethnic or racial "difference" from a perceived "French norm"'.<sup>17</sup> Forsdick and Murphy attempted to 'decolonise' the term, emphasising that 'Francophone', specifically with a capital 'F', refers to *all* cultures where French is spoken, including France itself.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, as Michel Tétu argues in *Qu'est-ce que la francophonie?*, the term 'francophonie' (small f) designates the ensemble of countries and persons who use French (consistently or occasionally) as their language of communication.<sup>19</sup> In this thesis, I also employ 'francophone' (small f) as a decolonised term that refers to all cultures where French is spoken, including France itself. With this framework, I seek to avoid enforcing a relationship between my selected narratives and France as a 'remote centre' (reprising

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<sup>15</sup> See Catherine Milkovitch-Rioux, *Kateb Yacine, ou la naissance en guerre de l'écrivain*, Université Clermont Auvergne, 2016, p. 8 <<https://hal.uca.fr/hal-01323801/document>> [accessed 05/ 01/ 2022].

<sup>16</sup> Florence Martin, 'Cinéma-Monde: De-Orbiting Maghrebi Cinema', *Contemporary French Civilization*, 41.3–4 (2016), 461–75 (p. 468).

<sup>17</sup> Charles Forsdick and David Murphy, 'Francophone Postcolonial Studies : A Critical Introduction', in *Francophone Postcolonial Studies : A Critical Introduction*, ed. by Charles Forsdick and David Murphy (London: Hodder Arnold, 2003), p. 305 (p. 7).

<sup>18</sup> Forsdick and Murphy, p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Michel Tétu, *Qu'est-ce que la francophonie?* (Paris: Hachette, 1997), p. 14.

Martin's use of this phrase) simply because they are written in French.<sup>20</sup> However, as I shall demonstrate, many of the texts do engage specifically with the troubled legacy of French colonialism in Tunisia. In this respect, these authors actively choose to evoke this relationship to France themselves.

### **Tunisian literature as 'une littérature transnationale'**

In addition to resisting Eurocentric categories imposed on Tunisian cultural production from outside Tunisia, contemporary writers, artists and academics are also challenging restrictive paradigms for thinking about art and identity *within* Tunisia itself. While the post-independence regimes sought to unify the Tunisian people around a political discourse that advocated the country's Muslim and Arabic-speaking identity, creative practitioners from contemporary Tunisia are employing experimental strategies to challenge this restrictive nationalist paradigm. Responding to this shift, Kassab-Charfi and Adel Khedher's recent book, *Tunisie : Un siècle de littérature en Tunisie*, published by Honoré Champion in 2019, marks a significant turning point in scholarship on Tunisian literature.<sup>21</sup> Focusing on an extensive corpus of works produced from 1900 to 2017, the study brings together texts from multiple different sub-cultures and linguistic backgrounds—including Arabic, French and Italian—to expose the transnational character of this literature and its linguistic diversity. By adopting an inclusive and flexible definition of the term 'littérature en Tunisie', Kassab-Charfi and Khedher move beyond the geographical borders of Tunisia's *terroir* to address a multitude of literary voices with varying levels of connection to the country. Their objective, they say, is to place the onus on the reader to decide what it means to be Tunisian today:

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<sup>20</sup> Martin, 'Cinéma-Monde: De-Orbiting Maghrebi Cinema', p. 468.

<sup>21</sup> Samia Kassab-Charfi and Adel Khedher, *Un Siècle de littérature en Tunisie. 1900-2017* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 2019).



‘Nous avons décidé d’inviter nos étudiants à réfléchir sur cette complexité avec nous. On ne voulait pas un rendu fallacieusement homogène qui ne correspond pas à la réalité des faits. Elle est hétérogène cette littérature.’<sup>22</sup> While these scholars have laid important groundwork in beginning to emphasise the multilingual character and global outlook of literature in Tunisia, the genre of life narrative is still yet to be discussed in relation to this recent transnational turn in academic scholarship on the topic. With the 2011 revolution and the lifting of decades of censorship, it is arguably more important than ever before to address how Tunisian women are expressing their personal, cultural and political identities in life narrative and discuss their resistance to both internally and externally imposed stereotypes concerning their identities.

While Kassab-Charfi and Khedher focus on literary fiction, poetry and essays in their study of Tunisian literature, my thesis aims to shift the emphasis from the written word to the multisensorial. Taking up the gauntlet thrown down by Smith and Watson, I will adopt an ‘intermedial’ approach and discuss how identity is constructed, enacted or performed across four different sub-genres of life narrative: a first-person written narrative; a photobook; a multimodal blog and a documentary film.<sup>23</sup> In analysing four different types of life narrative across different media, I provide a more enriching and fruitful analysis of the palimpsestic life narrative than a study of the literary life narrative alone would provide. Indeed, this strategy will allow me to approach the idea of ‘layering’ in terms of how the different media intersect and relate to one another. For example, I may find interesting dialogues or tensions between text and image in Fellous’s life narrative, and between the visual framing, text,

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<sup>22</sup> ‘Rencontre avec Samia Kassab-Charfi autour de l’œuvre “*Un Siècle de littérature en Tunisie : 1900 - 2017*”.

<sup>23</sup> According to Irina O. Rajewsky, the term “intermediality” can be said to serve first and foremost as a flexible generic term that can be applied, in a broad sense, to any phenomenon involving more than one medium and thus to any phenomenon that – as indicated by the prefix inter – in some way takes place between media. Accordingly, the crossing of media borders has been defined as a founding category of intermediality. Irina O. Rajewsky, ‘Border Talks: The Problematic Status of Media Borders in the Current Debate About Intermediality’, in *Media Borders, Multimodality and Intermediality*, ed. by Lars Elleström (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 51–68 (pp. 51–52).

videos and photographs in Ben Mhenni's blog. I might also find conflict between the sonic, visual and verbal elements in El Fani's filmic collage. In embracing an intermedial approach to the study of life narrative, and in following Smith and Watson's call for scholars of the genre to embrace digital forms, this thesis allows for the development of the theory of life narrative across media.<sup>24</sup>

Additionally, building on Kassab-Charfi's and Khedher's approach, I have selected these texts for analysis because of their engagement with transnational identities and how they problematise readings of the genre of Tunisian women's life narratives along the lines of nation. However, while their study celebrates the transnational character of literature from Tunisia, their discussion does not take into account the problems associated with this term or indeed the negative impacts of globalisation on local cultures in Tunisia. As Paul Jay argues, 'transnationalism [...] runs the risk of marginalizing the local and the particular.'<sup>25</sup> It is 'a way of seeing which can, paradoxically, become a way of *not* seeing.'<sup>26</sup> Indeed, for Jay, it is important to take a 'dialectical' approach to the study of literature, one that takes into account the complex interaction of local, regional, national and transnational forces in its production.<sup>27</sup> Because, ultimately, 'the relationship between the local and the global is symbiotic.'<sup>28</sup> In view of Jay's important argument, I aim to pay attention to *both* the local and the transnational in my selected life narrative texts.

Silverman's theory of palimpsestic memory can be used to nuance Kassab-Charfi's and Khedher's definition of Tunisian literature as 'transnationale' and 'transtunisienne'.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> 'In the future, critics of life writing will need to raise fundamental questions about what constitutes the autobiographical in cyberspace.' Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, p. 227.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Jay, *Transnational Literature: The Basics* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2021), p. 10. See, also: Paul Jay, *Global Matters: The Transnational Turn in Literary Studies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Jay, *Transnational Literature: The Basics*, p. 10.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Kassab-Charfi and Khedher. Silverman.

His concept '[...]' gives us a way of perceiving history in a non-linear way and memory as a hybrid and dynamic process across individuals and communities.<sup>30</sup> Crucially, his theorisation of the palimpsest allows for the local and the global, and the personal and the collective, to be held in tension or dialogue. For Silverman, these are not mutually distinct categories; rather, they overlap with one another. Silverman's concept underpins my own definition of the palimpsestic life narrative in relation to francophone cultural production from contemporary Tunisia, as I shall discuss further below. The main thread that links my project to Silverman's is the use of the figure of the palimpsest to associate memories from disparate contexts, and to view personal and collective memories, and the local and the global, as overlapping with one another. However, I seek to develop the concept of the palimpsest in relation to a new project with a new corpus and different aims and research questions, as I shall now outline.

### **Towards a definition of the palimpsestic life narrative**

As James Arnold explains, a palimpsest in antiquity consisted of 'a lambskin, or velum, that one scraped to erase an earlier layer of writing before applying a new one.'<sup>31</sup> Indeed, Dillon, author of *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory*, argues that palimpsests before 1845 'were palaeographic oddities of concern only to those researching and publishing ancient manuscripts.'<sup>32</sup> However, Dillon argues that since 1845—when Thomas De Quincey's essay, 'The Palimpsest', was first published—the concept of the palimpsest as a metaphor was inaugurated.<sup>33</sup> She states that it subsequently emerged as 'a strange, new figurative entity,

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<sup>30</sup> Silverman, p. 5.

<sup>31</sup> James Arnold, 'Césaire's Notebook as Palimpsest: The Text before, during, and after World War II', *Research in African Literatures*, 35.3 (2004), 133–40 (p. 134).

<sup>32</sup> Dillon, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> In 1845 Thomas De Quincey published an essay in Blackwood's Magazine entitled 'The Palimpsest'. As Dillon argues, '[c]oupling 'palimpsest' with the definite article 'the' (for the first time in a non-specific sense),

invested with the stature of the substantive.’<sup>34</sup> The figure of the palimpsest has since drawn the attention of several other prominent literary theorists (e.g., Gérard Genette and Philippe Lejeune) and film scholars (e.g., Antoine de Baecque and Rosamund Davies).<sup>35</sup> Dillon notably makes a distinction between the ‘palimpsestic’, which is ‘the process of layering that produces a palimpsest’ and the ‘palimpsestuous’ (a term first coined by Lejeune), as the ‘structure with which one is presented as a result of that process’.<sup>36</sup> In this study, I employ the term ‘palimpsestic’ to evoke the way in which life narrative is both a *process* as well as a product.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, Dillon also points out that ‘Palimpsestuous relationality, ‘palimpsestuousness’, treads the line of the problematic of incest – the intimacy that is branded as illegitimate since it is between those who are regarded as too closely related.’<sup>38</sup> I have opted not to use the term ‘palimpsestuous’ to describe the narratives in the corpus as the idea of illegitimate intimacy is not consistent across all the texts. Indeed, the layering of media, narratives and memory traces is not always presented as taboo. I suggest that the term ‘palimpsestic’ allows for a broader interpretation of the metaphor of the palimpsest that includes its associations with the ideas of colonial (and neo-colonial) violence, suppression, re-writing and creation.

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De Quincey’s essay inaugurated – that is, both introduced, and initiated the subsequent use of – the substantive concept of the palimpsest.’ Dillon, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> Dillon, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Genette, p. 452; Antoine de Baecque, ‘L’Histoire qui revient: la forme cinématographique de l’histoire dans *Caché* et *La Question humaine*’, *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 63.6 (2008), 1275–1301; Rosamund Davies, ‘Don’t Look Now: The Screenwork as Palimpsest’, *Journal of Screenwriting*, 4.2 (2013), 163–77.

<sup>36</sup> Dillon, p. 4. As Genette indicates in *Palimpsestes*, the adjective was first coined by Lejeune (‘cet adjectif inédit qu’inventa naguère Philippe Lejeune: lecture *palimpsestueuse*’). Genette, pp. 556–7. Note that Genette does not provide a precise source; his reference is to Lejeune’s pastiche of Roland Barthes, which he published in 1980. Barthes had used the concept of the palimpsest in his essay ‘La mort de l’auteur’ (originally published in 1967), referencing Baudelaire’s translation of De Quincey, *Les paradis artificiels*. Roland Barthes, ‘La mort de l’auteur’ in *Le bruissement de la langue* (Paris : Seuil, 1984), p. 65.

<sup>37</sup> Indeed, as Hannah Westley argues: ‘[...] narrative refers not only to a product but a process, just as identity is a process [...]’ Hannah Westley, ‘Reading the Self in Selfies’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 13.3 (2016), 371–390 (p. 372). See, also, Smith and Watson’s suggestion that life narrative is a performance or process rather than a ‘tool’ for rendering a pre-existent ‘self’: Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, p. 168.

<sup>38</sup> Dillon, p.5.

Given that I am focusing exclusively on women's life narratives in this study, it is important to note that the figure of the palimpsest has already been theorised in relation to Western women's writing. In 1979, with the publication of their landmark work of feminist literary criticism, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar evoke the palimpsest as a feminist strategy:

In short, like the twentieth-century American poet H. D., who declared her aesthetic strategy by entitling one of her novels *Palimpsest*, women from Jane Austen and Mary Shelley to Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson produced literary works that are in some sense palimpsestic, works whose surface designs conceal or obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning. Thus these authors managed the difficult task of achieving true female literary authority by simultaneously conforming to and subverting patriarchal literary standards.<sup>39</sup>

While this model was relevant to Western women's texts in 1979, it is not adequate for encapsulating the complexity of Tunisian women's texts in the contemporary era. Indeed, whereas Gilbert and Gubar referred to Western women authors' simultaneous conformation to, and subversion of, Western patriarchal literary standards, they do not consider how ethnic difference and the legacy of colonial histories and literary standards (such as the Orientalist gaze) might intersect with debates about gender in a palimpsestic narrative. In this respect, I will focus on how my corpus contributes to the development of the concept of the palimpsestic life narrative and the specificity of this in a Tunisian context. Indeed, while it will be important to address the ways in which the texts subvert 'patriarchal' standards for literature and film, such as the trope of the (male) public individual in old-fashioned definitions of autobiography, I will also need to explore how they deal with neo-colonial stereotypes regarding both the genre of life narrative and Tunisian women's identities.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, p. 73.

<sup>40</sup> As Smith and Watson argue, the concept of autobiography was celebrated by an earlier generation of scholars, such as Georges Gusdorf and Karl Joachim Weintraub, as 'the highest achievement of individuality in western civilization'. Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, p.3.

Moreover, Tunisia has a distinctive literary heritage and experience of both ‘feminism’ and ‘patriarchy’. I have deliberately placed these nebulous terms in inverted commas here to indicate that they are widely misunderstood and under-theorised in popular discussions of Tunisian society in the West. Indeed, in Tunisia, there is not one singular brand of feminism but multiple variations, ranging from ‘state feminism’ (a series of state reforms, promulgated via the *Code du Statut Personnel* in 1956, that granted women significant new rights) and secular forms of grassroots feminism to movements advocating Islamic models for feminism.<sup>41</sup> In this respect, it will be pertinent to discuss the distinctive ways in which Tunisian forms of both feminism and patriarchy emerge in—or are challenged by—the corpus.

Writing in 1996, Donadey was the first scholar to apply the concept of the palimpsest specifically to francophone women’s fiction from the postcolonial Maghreb. In her study of Djébar’s films and fiction from postcolonial Algeria, Donadey pointedly argues that the concept of the palimpsest is a suitable metaphor for the violence of colonialism in Algeria:

the act of using a palimpsest is of necessity a violent act, since it entails scratching off a previous inscription to cover it over with another. The palimpsest is a fitting metaphor for colonization, one of whose consequences is the forcible erasure of all traces of a people’s history, culture, and way of life in order to replace them with the colonizer’s. Successful colonization, like successful use of the palimpsest, would entail complete erasure of what was there before. But in both cases, such complete erasure is impossible. Just as it is impossible to wipe out a culture entirely, there always remains traces of the previous writing on the palimpsest, even if it may require a special light in order to decipher them. Djébar both provides this special light, a

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<sup>41</sup> The CSP prohibited polygamy, made a woman’s consent a prerequisite for marriage, increased the minimum marriage age to seventeen and gave women the right to initiate divorce. Also, note that views on state feminism vary. For detailed discussions of this topic, see: Nabila Hamza, ‘Engendering Tunisia’s Democratic Transition: What Challenges Face Women?’, in *Women’s Movements in Post-“Arab Spring” North Africa*, ed. by Fatima Sadiqi (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 211–22; Amel Grami, ‘Gender Equality in Tunisia’, in *Gender and Diversity in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. by Zahia Smail Salhi (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 57–70; Emma C. Murphy, ‘Women in Tunisia Between State Feminism and Economic Reform’, in *Women and Globalization in the Arab Middle East: Gender, Economy, and Society*, ed. by Eleanor Abdella Doumato and Marsha Posusney Pripstein (London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2003), pp. 169–94; Monica Marks, ‘Women’s Rights before and after the Revolution’, in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, ed. by Nouri Gana (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 224–51; Isobel Coleman, ‘The Payoff from Women’s Rights’, *HeinOnline: Foreign Affairs*, 83.3 (2004), 80–95 (p. 87).

deeper gaze on the palimpsest of Algerian history, and does violence to colonial history by overwriting it from the perspective of the colonized.<sup>42</sup>

Indeed, she is referring here to Djébar's innovative overwriting of colonial archive material in *L'Amour, la fantasia*.<sup>43</sup> In a later study in 2001, Donadey also compares the author's strategy to Nancy K. Miller's theory of feminist 'overreading', which 'works self-consciously against [reading woman out of history]'.<sup>44</sup> While for Miller, overreading is the process of 'reading woman back in', Donadey sees in Djébar's fiction that it is a process of reading the Algerian woman back into Algerian history against dominant colonial histories.<sup>45</sup>

Building on Donadey's discussion of 'overreading' and the metaphor of the palimpsest in Djébar's fiction, I will attempt in this thesis to explore how my selected life narratives may overread both patriarchal and colonial histories, and the extent to which they use their narratives to insert their female identities back into history. I will explore whether they not only read the Tunisian woman back into history but also contribute to an overwriting of outdated Western assumptions about the genre of francophone autobiography in the Maghreb. I say 'contribute to' here as it is important to acknowledge the rich critical interrogations by Western academics of the genre over the last five decades, which have allowed for more nuanced interpretations to emerge than those provided by critics such as Déjeux.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Donadey, 'Rekindling the Vividness of the Past: Assia Djébar's Films and Fiction' (p. 886).

<sup>43</sup> Assia Djébar, *L'Amour, La Fantasia* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995).

<sup>44</sup> Donadey, *Recasting Postcolonialism: Women Writing between Worlds*, p. 46. Nancy K. Miller, in her landmark essay 'Archnologies', proposes a feminist strategy of 'overreading', or 'reading woman back in' to history. Nancy K Miller, 'Archnologies: The Woman, the Text, and the Critic.', in *The Poetics of Gender*, ed. by Nancy K Miller (New York: The Poetics of Gender, 1986), pp. 270–95 (p. 292).

<sup>45</sup> Miller (p. 292).

<sup>46</sup> In the field of scholarship on francophone autobiographical texts from the Maghreb, see in particular, Orlando; Kelly; *Textual and Visual Selves: Photography, Film, and Comic Art in French Autobiography*, ed. by Natalie Edwards, Amy. L Hubbell, and Ann Miller (Lincoln: The University of Nebraska Press, 2011); Rachel Gabara, *From Split to Screened Selves: French and Francophone Autobiography in the Third Person* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2006); Wimbush; Hiddleston, *Writing After Postcolonialism: Francophone North African Literature in Transition*.

In many ways my approach is similar to that of an archaeologist: I aim to draw out any hidden or buried elements in the text which might suggest other layers of meaning. I will discuss the extent to which the narratives contain obscure elements, involuntary memories, contradictions or blindspots that evoke personal or collective trauma. I will also analyse the extent to which any tension or antagonism between the layers of the palimpsestic life narrative might convey conflict in the narrator's identity. This will be particularly important to consider when I come to analyse the different ways in which El Fani, Zouari and Fellous experienced rupture from their homeland, Tunisia, and how this is evoked via the palimpsestic process in their narratives.

An intermedial approach to the study of the genre of life narrative also allows me to address multiple forms of expression—beyond the dominance of the written word—that might evoke overlapping layers of meaning differently. Indeed, given that the French language still bears its associations to the former coloniser in discussions of Maghrebi autobiographies, I will discuss the extent to which my authors employ other languages—visual, verbal and sonic—to communicate their identities in ways which transcend conventional associations between the French language and troubling colonial histories, as well as outdated assumptions that the genre of autobiography is a Western import in the Maghreb. For example, Déjeux previously defined French as 'la langue natale du 'je''.<sup>47</sup> I will also examine how the texts may incorporate different perspectives via photography and footage. For example, Fellous's insertion of her daughter's photographs in her text may create an interesting interplay between generational perspectives while presenting a relational identity that is not 'bounded' but in dialogue with otherness. Additionally, El Fani's use of montage may allow her to explore the overlapping of the personal (her story of cancer) and

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<sup>47</sup> Déjeux, 'Au Maghreb, la langue française « langue natale du Je »', p. 180.



the collective (her engaged struggle against fundamentalist Islam in Tunisia) in ways which differ from purely verbal strategies.

The corpus here is deliberately limited, focusing on one work by each author, to enable close readings of the creative strategies at work in each text. It is also limited in scope to creative practitioners who produce narratives predominantly in French. While this decision stems partly from my own limitations as a scholar with limited Arabic language skills, it is also driven by my interest in how the French language emerges in this specific cultural context. As mentioned above, I will explore the extent to which the French language still bears traces of its colonial legacy—and its connotations with Yacine’s ‘butin de guerre’—or if it has taken on an alternative meaning for Ben Mhenni, Zouari, Fellous and El Fani.<sup>48</sup>

Some critics might also query my intention to focus solely on women writers. Indeed, with timely debates on gender and non-binary identities, my decision might appear somewhat reductive. Indeed, more than thirty years ago, in *Écrivaines tunisiennes*, Jean Fontaine also questioned his decision to focus on themes that pertain only to Tunisian women:

[...] je me suis efforcé de définir les thèmes particuliers aux femmes. Il me semble aujourd’hui que cette recherche est dépassée, dans la mesure où précisément nous ne sommes plus en présence d’un mouvement revendicatif qui utilise la littérature à des fins féministes, mais d’auteurs qui se trouvent être des femmes.<sup>49</sup>

However, although my research focuses on a different period to that studied by Fontaine (1956 – 1987), I query his statement that his selected authors did not use their writing to challenge the patriarchal system in which they lived. Indeed, Sonia Alba’s excellent study on Tunisian women’s literary production from 1987-2011, which demonstrates the ways in

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<sup>48</sup> See Milkovitch-Rioux, p. 8. Although Alba has already addressed this in interview with a number of female Tunisian authors, my study focuses on different texts from a different time period. Alba, *Tunisian Women’s Writing in French The Fight for Emancipation: From Ben Ali’s Rise to Power to the Eve of the Tunisian Revolution, 1987–2011*.

<sup>49</sup> Jean Fontaine, *Écrivaines tunisiennes* (Tunis: Gai Savoir, 1990), p. 94.

which women authors challenged patriarchal systems via the medium of literature.<sup>50</sup> My own study will also focus solely on women's life narratives for the following reasons: I seek to emphasise Tunisian women's ownership of their representation during a time in which their rights were under threat; secondly, to explore concerns that are specific to women in a society still marked by patriarchal values and 'state feminism'; finally, to provide an additional platform from which these Tunisian female voices—which are in many ways still subaltern voices in Western academia—may be projected.

Additionally, given that my thesis is focused on educated and globally mobile women, the issues that they are concerned with will likely be different to those addressed by women from non-educated or deprived backgrounds. In this respect, their life narratives are very particular and not broadly representative of all Tunisian women. Even though the aim of the thesis is not to consider *all* Tunisian women's experiences (such a task would be impossible), some readers might query my intention to focus exclusively on such a limited number of works from a privileged demographic. Nevertheless, there are still some important generational and class differences between the women that allow for fruitful comparisons and readings of their identities. Fellous was born in 1950 during the Protectorate, just six years before Independence; Zouari was born in 1955 on the immediate eve of Independence; El Fani was born in 1960 in the early years of Bourguiba's reformist regime, and Ben Mhenni was born in 1983, just four years before Ben Ali's coup. Zouari was born on the eve of decolonisation and grew up in the post-colonial state. Born into an isolated rural community in south-West Tunis, she shares more modest origins compared to the others who were all born into middle-class backgrounds. While Ben Mhenni and El Fani were born into politically engaged families with leftist values and ideologies, the families of Zouari and

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<sup>50</sup> Alba, *Tunisian Women's Writing in French The Fight for Emancipation: From Ben Ali's Rise to Power to the Eve of the Tunisian Revolution, 1987–2011*.

Fellous were less involved with political movements. Furthermore, Zouari, Fellous and Ben Mhenni were able to pursue university studies to a high level. While Zouari completed a Ph.D. in French literature in Paris, Ben Mhenni taught English at the University of Tunis and Fellous had spent time working towards a PhD in French literature at the *École pratique des hautes études* in Paris—notably with some teaching by Roland Barthes.

In addition to generational and class differences, there are also religious and linguistic differences between the selected writers. For example, Fellous is of mixed Twansa and Grana Jewish origins. Although she grew up in Tunis in a majority Arabic-speaking community, she was not taught Arabic as a child and chose to learn this language in her adulthood. El Fani is half French and half Tunisian; while her father was Muslim, and thus legally passed on the Muslim identity to his daughter, El Fani rejects this identity today and declares herself an atheist. Although her films are produced predominantly in French, she understands Tunisian Arabic and often practises ‘code-switching’ between the two languages, a phenomenon that is also evident in Ben Mhenni’s multilingual blog.<sup>51</sup> While Zouari was born into an Arabic-speaking family, she was encouraged by her father to learn French as a second language at school. The similarities and differences across the corpus, in terms of the women’s linguistic and religious backgrounds, class, political upbringing and class, provide a rich and fruitful basis for comparison. This is further enhanced by the varied ways in which the women choose to express their identities, and their perception of Tunisia, across different media.

### **A palimpsestic history of Tunisia**

In order to study the life narratives in this corpus, it is first necessary to discuss the complex historical circumstances in which they emerged. The next section of this Introduction thus

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<sup>51</sup> In the field of linguistics, code-switching or language alternation occurs when a speaker alternates between two or more languages, or language varieties, in the context of a single conversation or situation.

provides a detailed overview of the 2010 – 2012 revolution in Tunisia, the country’s history as a French Protectorate (1881 – 1965), the dictatorships of Habib Bourguiba (1956 – 1987) and Zine El Abidine Ben Ali (1987 – 2011), the concept of ‘state feminism’ and the ongoing transition to democracy post-2011. The main purpose here is to evoke Tunisia’s rich and ‘palimpsestic’ heritage, the complex status of women in Tunisia and the particular challenges that the country was facing at the time that these narratives were produced.<sup>52</sup> In particular, I will outline the complicated relationship between Islamism and secularism in the country’s ongoing transition to democracy post-2011.

On 17<sup>th</sup> December 2010, Mohamed Bouazizi, a twenty-six-year-old fruit seller, immolated himself in Sidi Bouzid in a raging act of protest against police brutality and economic injustices. While discontent and dissent had been brewing in Tunisia for many years, Bouazizi’s self-immolation served as a catalyst for mass uprisings in the country. In the immediate wake of his ultimately fatal demonstration, frustrated Tunisians from all different sections of society came together to oust President Ben Ali from power. After years of oppressive censorship, state corruption, rising unemployment, and poor economic management, the President fled for refuge in Saudi Arabia on 14th January 2011, where he eventually died in exile in 2019. The revolution, which officially claimed 338 lives, was a major catalyst for revolutions in five other Arab countries: Libya, Egypt, Yemen, Syria and Bahrain.<sup>53</sup>

Over the last decade, scholars within the fields of history and the social sciences have turned their attention to developments in Tunisia since the dawn of the revolution.<sup>54</sup> In her

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<sup>52</sup> Hédi Bouraoui’s volume *Tunisie plurielle* evokes Tunisia’s diverse and plural history. Hédi Bouraoui, *Tunisie plurielle* (Tunis: l’Or du temps, 1997).

<sup>53</sup> Sdiri Wafa, ‘Tunisie: 338 martyrs et 2147 blessés victimes de la révolution et les snipers n’existent pas’, *Tunisie Numérique*, 2012 <<https://www.tunisienumerique.com/tunisie-338-martyrs-et-2147-blesses-victimes-de-la-Revolution-et-les-snipers-nexistent-pas/>> [accessed 20 November 2020]. See, also, Christopher Alexander, *Tunisia: From Stability to Revolution in the Maghreb*, 2nd edn (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016); Nouri Gana, ‘Introduction: Collaborative Revolutionism’, in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, ed. by Nouri Gana (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 1–31.

<sup>54</sup> In this thesis, the nomenclature ‘Tunisian revolution’ will be used (or simply ‘revolution’).

2011 book *Tunisie: le Pays sans bruit*, the Franco-Tunisian historian Jocelyne Dakhliya discusses how European politicians and commentators were shocked that Tunisia was the birthplace of the ‘Arab Spring’.<sup>55</sup> Dakhliya explains that, prior to 2011, Tunisia was generally perceived by Europeans as stable, docile and, as her book’s title suggests, ‘sans bruit’ regarding political matters.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, ‘[b]ien qu’il ait constitué l’une des principales destinations de vacances de l’Europe, le pays demeurait pour le commun des visiteurs une sorte de terre inconnue, sans grand intérêt politique.’<sup>57</sup> As Dakhliya observes, the social tension and dissatisfaction that were brewing within Tunisian society prior to the revolution went largely unnoticed by foreign politicians and commentators: ‘En dehors de cercles de fait restreints, la Tunisie était un non-sujet.’<sup>58</sup> Yet, as Dakhliya and other scholars have argued, resistance movements were effervescing in the country well in advance of 2011.<sup>59</sup> As Alba argues, worldwide media commentary on the revolution contributed to ‘reinforcing Orientalist stereotypes which have long affected the region.’<sup>60</sup> For example, Western journalists’ use of the term ‘Arab awakening’ is patronising and serves to imply that Arab peoples have previously been docile and passive. As Alba argues, ‘the tendency to regroup Arab countries within the “Arab world” and “Arab women” within one homogeneous group ignore[es] fundamental cultural, religious and ethnic differences among each country and people.’<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Jocelyne Dakhliya, *Le Pays sans bruit* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2011), pp. 7–16.

<sup>56</sup> Dakhliya, pp. 7–16.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> ‘[...] on avait affaire à une société déjà [emphasis in original] politique.’ Dakhliya, pp. 91–92. Additionally, in 2008 the Gafsa-basin phosphate mine workers protested the fact that the few jobs available were given to people based on connections and bribes. The Compagnie des Phosphates de Gafsa (CPG) announced that they were reducing the number of employees from the local area from 11000 to 5000. This led to a popular uprising in which people demanded jobs and socioeconomic justice. See: Rikke Hostrup Haugbølle, ‘Rethinking the Role of the Media in the Tunisian Uprising’, in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, ed. by Nouri Gana (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 159–80 (pp. 168–69). The Gafsa uprising is also featured briefly in Leila Bouzid’s film about the eve of the Revolution: *À peine j’ouvre les yeux* (2015).

<sup>60</sup> Alba, *Tunisian Women’s Writing in French The Fight for Emancipation: From Ben Ali’s Rise to Power to the Eve of the Tunisian Revolution, 1987–2011*, p. 5.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

In addition, as Christopher Alexander argues, ‘Tunisia’s ties to Europe are truly ancient’, with modern-day Tunisia having been home to the ancient Phoenician city of Carthage, which later fell to the Romans.<sup>62</sup> In terms of the relationship between France and Tunisia, their histories have been intertwined since the French established their colonial rule in Tunisia in 1881. Unlike Tunisia’s neighbour Algeria, which formed three fully integrated *départements* of metropolitan France from 1848, Tunisia had more autonomy as it was formally classed as a protectorate.<sup>63</sup> As Michael J. Willis argues, ‘[t]his was a distinction of both form and substance. Integration into France itself entailed a forced transformation of Algeria to a degree to which neither Tunisia nor Morocco was subjected.’<sup>64</sup> During the era of the protectorate in Tunisia, supreme authority was bestowed upon the French resident general and the French military were authorised to occupy the country. However, the Ottoman bey of Tunisia, Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq, still remained Tunisia’s monarch and Tunisians continued to be his subjects. In the wake of other independence movements of other European-ruled colonies in the twentieth century, the Tunisian independence movement soon gathered steam under a young Habib Bourguiba, who eventually became the country’s first national president in 1956.

Bourguiba’s presidency was characterised by a reformist outlook and a desire to modernise the country in terms of its infrastructure, industry and education. As the Tunisian historian Sophie Bessis argues, he had an in-depth knowledge and understanding of French history, culture and republican values because of his many formative years as a student in

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<sup>62</sup> Christopher Alexander, *Tunisia: Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghreb* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), p. 14.

<sup>63</sup> In the French collective imagination, Algeria was viewed as an extension of France itself rather than as a separate country. This colonial slogan sums it up: ‘La Méditerranée traverse la France, comme la Seine traverse Paris.’

<sup>64</sup> Michael J. Willis, *Politics and Power in the Maghreb: Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco from Independence to the Arab Spring* (Abingdon: Oxford University Press, 2014), p. 19.

France.<sup>65</sup> As mentioned above, *Le Code du Statut Personnel* (1956) gave Tunisian women significant new rights. In addition, abortion was legalised in Tunisia in 1973—an achievement that was advanced at the time not only for Tunisia but also by Western standards. Yet scholars such as Monica Marks have since queried the motives behind Bourguiba’s top-down ‘state feminism’:

[a]lthough biographical evidence suggests Bourguiba was committed to the altruistic value of certain liberalizing reforms, such as expanding girls’ education, political expediency also factored into his decisions. The 1956 PSC did more than prohibit polygamy and grant women the right to divorce—it also served a politically useful function, hastening the marginalization of religious and kin-based forms of authority from which Bourguiba’s Youssefist opponents drew strength.<sup>66</sup>

Bourguiba’s complex relationship to political Islam is something that is still debated today. While Tunisian Islamists tend to claim that he went too far in his secularisation of Tunisian society, others argue that he was successful in unifying the country around an Islamic heritage and identity while introducing modernising reforms and keeping his more conservative Islamist opponents, such as Ben Youssef’s faction, at bay.<sup>67</sup> As Hélé Béji puts it: ‘il n’avait pas l’idée de briser la physionomie musulmane du pays. Il combattait l’ignorance et la superstition, non la croyance. Il avait pu maintenir un subtil équilibre entre la foi privée et la neutralité de l’État, en arbitrant la tension irréconciliable entre religion et nation.’<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> ‘Après une scolarité au collège Sadiki, établissement d’enseignement bilingue et pépinière de futurs dirigeants nationalistes, il poursuit des études de droit et de science politique à Paris. Le jeune avocat rentré à Tunis en 1927, doté d’une solide double culture, aura rapporté de ses années parisiennes une parfaite connaissance des mœurs politiques de la métropole et une sympathie qui ne se démentira pas pour cette France laïque et républicaine qu’il aura pourtant passé la première moitié de sa vie d’adulte à combattre.’ Sophie Bessis, ‘Bourguiba: un destin tunisien’, *Le Monde diplomatique: Manière de voir* (Paris, August 2018), pp. 7–11 (p. 7).

<sup>66</sup> The term ‘Youssefist’ is employed here to refer to those who supported Salah Ben Youssef, a religious nationalist who took a conservative approach to women’s rights and emphasised the importance of veiling. Monica Marks, p. 227.

<sup>67</sup> See Bessis’ discussion of Bourguiba’s contested legacy: Bessis, pp. 7–8.

<sup>68</sup> Hélé Béji, *Domage, Tunisie: la dépression démocratique* (Paris: Gallimard, 2019), p. 23.

It is important to bear in mind that political Islamist groups have historically constituted the main opposition to the status quo in Tunisia since Independence.<sup>69</sup> The more radical elements of political Islam subsequently provided Ben Ali with an excuse to introduce more severe forms of authoritarian control. As Murphy argues, when Ben Ali took over in 1987, the threat (real or perceived) to the stability of the regime posed by a growing Islamist movement in Tunisia, gave the newly appointed president the incentive and the justification to tighten his hold on power.<sup>70</sup> Many leading Islamist campaigners and politicians were imprisoned or forcibly sent into exile by the authorities. As Alexander argues, Ben Ali did not repress these groups in the name of secularism but because of their popularity: they constituted the greatest threat to his monopoly of power. According to Alexander, political Islam at this time had ‘a reputation as a threat to the status quo [...]’.<sup>71</sup> Yet in the wake of the 2011 revolution, the power vacuum created by Ben Ali’s disposal gave way to the popular re-emergence of political Islamist groups.

Unlike earlier waves of civil disobedience that were brutally suppressed under Ben Ali, the 2011 uprisings involved what Greta Bliss described as ‘an unprecedented admixture of activist networks and participants from all sectors of society.’<sup>72</sup> The mass scale of the uprisings means that the causes and significance of the revolution cannot be easily defined. As I shall show in the final chapter of this thesis, El Fani’s first-person documentary *Même pas mal* exposes some of the conflicting interpretations of the revolution in its immediate aftermath. While many liberal and secularist groups wanted to enshrine *Laïcité*, a specifically French and much-debated concept that obliges the state to abstain itself from intervening in religious affairs, in the new post-revolution constitution, many political Islamist groups saw

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<sup>69</sup> Alexander, *Tunisia : Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghreb*, p. 121.

<sup>70</sup> Murphy, p. 169.

<sup>71</sup> Alexander, *Tunisia : Stability and Reform in the Modern Maghreb*, p. 121.

<sup>72</sup> Greta Bliss, ‘Reworlding Tunisia: Sacrifice in Post-Revolutionary Cinema’, *Contemporary French Civilization*, 43.1 (2018), 32–54 (p. 52).



the new power vacuum as an opportunity to return to the political sphere from which they had been previously outlawed.<sup>73</sup> This revivalist Islamist movement was reflected in the rising visibility of Islamic practices in public life, as Bliss argues: ‘the resurgence of public religiosity is reflected in the popular post-revolutionary reappearance of the hijab and, notably, in the adoption of the austere, imported burqa by a growing minority of women.’<sup>74</sup> As I have discussed elsewhere, the Tunisian photographer and academic Dora Latiri reflects on this immediate rise in Islamic veiling practices following the revolution in her photobook, *Un amour de tn: carnet photographique d’un retour au pays natal*.<sup>75</sup> Latiri, like many other women at this time, expressed her fears about what she perceived to be the increasing Islamification of Tunisian society at this time and the threat that this posed to women’s rights.<sup>76</sup>

On 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2011, an election for a constituent assembly was held in Tunisia. The elected assembly would be tasked with drafting the country’s new post-revolution constitution. On 25<sup>th</sup> October 2011, it was announced that Ennahdha, the leading Islamist party, had won a plurality of votes but fell short of an outright majority. As Béji argues, ‘L’islam, qu’on croyait en sursis, est entré sur la scène politique par les portes grandes ouvertes de la démocratie.’<sup>77</sup> Although Ennahdha describes itself as a moderate Islamist party, whose goal is to govern the Tunisian people based on Islamic principles and culture, some of its proposals for the new constitution were met with outrage from the country’s secular communities and also advocates of ‘state feminism’. In particular, they were concerned with the party’s declared intention to re-write the constitution so that Islamic

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<sup>73</sup> The concept of *Laïcité* also affirms freedom of conscience and freedom to practise as long as this latter freedom does not disturb public order. For a more in-depth and nuanced discussion of *Laïcité* as a complex paradigm with multiple interpretations, see: Amélie Barras, ‘Secularism in France’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism*, ed. by Phil Zuckerman and John Shook (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 142–54.

<sup>74</sup> Bliss, ‘Reworlding Tunisia: Sacrifice in Post-Revolutionary Cinema’, p. 38.

<sup>75</sup> See: Nicola Pearson, ‘Narratives of Exile and Return: Francophone Women’s Identities in the Aftermath of the 2011 Tunisian Revolution’ (The University of Nottingham, 2016), pp. 102–5.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>77</sup> Béji, p. 25.

Sharia law would form the basis of the legal system in Tunisia. Significantly, it drafted a controversial line stating that women are complementary, rather than equal, to men.<sup>78</sup> In August 2012, thousands of people took to the streets in Tunis to protest against Ennahdha's intentions to remove the right to equality that Tunisian women had previously gained under Bourguiba. For the most part, the demonstrators were angry and disappointed that an Islamist group had come to power as they saw this as a threat to the personal and social freedoms they had fought for in the revolution. Following this fierce resistance from citizens across the political divide, the controversial line was subsequently withdrawn from the draft.

The final version of the 2014 constitution is the result of a compromise between Ennahdha and the opposition forces. It provides for shared executive powers and, for the first time in legal history of the MENA region, introduced a target parity between men and women in elected bodies.<sup>79</sup> Additionally, as Article 6 now enshrines freedom of conscience (as opposed to its previous guarantee of the freedom of religion), Tunisia is now the only Muslim-majority country in the world where it is not illegal to be an atheist. Nevertheless, references to Islamic values and heritage still feature prominently in the constitution. For example, despite the emphasis on freedom of conscience, article 1 paradoxically identifies Islam as the religion of Tunisia and article 74 restricts the office of the Presidency to Muslim Tunisians.<sup>80</sup> Additionally, Article 39 affirms the importance of anchoring young people in a Muslim identity and of promoting Arabic as the national language: 'L'État veille également à

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<sup>78</sup> For further discussion of this, see Mounira M. Charrad and Amina Zarrugh, 'Equal or Complementary? Women in the New Tunisian Constitution after the Arab Spring', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 19.2 (2014), 230–43; *Gender, Women and the Arab Spring*, ed. by Andrea Flores Khalil (London: Routledge, 2015); Andrea Flores Khalil, 'Gender Paradoxes of the Arab Spring', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 19.2 (2014), 131–36; Andrea Flores Khalil, 'Tunisia's Women: Partners in Revolution', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 19.2 (2014), 186–99.

<sup>79</sup> Note that while the Constitution declares a strong desire to improve the position of women in the new Tunisian democratic society, the inheritance law is still currently in force in Tunisia according to which women are entitled to only half of what comes to men.

<sup>80</sup> Islam was recognised as the state religion until 2014, when the constitutional revision introduced a more ambiguous phrase identifying Islam as the religion of Tunisia. See article 1 of the 2014 Constitution: 'Constitution de la République tunisienne', *Journal officiel de la République tunisienne*, Numéro Spé (2015), 1–30.

l'enracinement des jeunes générations dans leur identité arabe et islamique et leur appartenance nationale. Il veille à la consolidation de la langue arabe, sa promotion et sa généralisation.<sup>81</sup> These paradoxical elements are the product of contentious debates on the status of Islam in Tunisian politics and on how to define Tunisian identity in the post-revolution era.<sup>82</sup> As we shall see, Ben Mhenni, Fellous, El Fani and Zouari all deal in interesting ways with these questions and offer valuable perspectives on this key transitional period in Tunisian history.

A further paradox of the revolution, as Fabio Merone argues, is that although Tunisia was widely viewed as a model for its democratisation process, '[it] produced at the same time a big Salafist, radical movement.'<sup>83</sup> Indeed, one of the most significant challenges that the country has faced since 2011 is the jihadist Islamist violence that has targeted art exhibitions, film screenings, the Bardo Museum in Tunis and the touristic beach of Port El Kantaoui in Sousse. The topic of rising fundamentalist extremism is something with which many of the works in this thesis are concerned. Yet while many Western commentators have pitted secular democracy against religious extremism in Tunisia, it is important not to generalise or disavow the complexity and specificity of the different episodes of Islamist violence that we might encounter in the narratives of this corpus. In their book chapter 'The Rise of Salafism and the Future of Democratization', Merone and Francesco Cavatorta provide a nuanced and thorough discussion of the different branches of Tunisian Salafism and their specific genealogies and ideologies.<sup>84</sup> This historical context will be important to bear in mind when I

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<sup>81</sup> See article 39 of the 2014 Constitution : 'Constitution de la République tunisienne'.

<sup>82</sup> Although the state now legally guarantees freedom of conscience, Katia Boissevain argued in 2014 that those who convert from Islam into another faith are still often perceived as traitors as they undermine the generally accepted concept of 'la relation « naturelle » entre tunisianité et islam.' Katia Boissevain, 'Des Conversions Au Christianisme à Tunis', *Histoire, monde et cultures religieuses*, 4 (2014), 47–62 (pp. 55–56).

<sup>83</sup> Fabio Merone, 'Tunisia', *University of Oxford, Middle East Centre Podcast* (Oxford, 27 March 2017) <<https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/tunisia>> [accessed 24/11/2020].

<sup>84</sup> Fabio Merone and Francesco Cavatorta, 'The Rise of Salafism and the Future of Democratization', in *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution: Contexts, Architects, Prospects*, ed. by Nouri Gana (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 252–69.

come to analyse the authors' engagement with Salafism, especially the more radical aspects of it that emerge in both Fellous's and El Fani's life narratives. Indeed, Merone, Ester Sigillò and Damiano De Facci argue that Islamist movements and parties are the most important opposition groups in Tunisia and that they are the main actors in the politics of contention and mobilisation.<sup>85</sup> In this respect, it is important to recognise the complexity of this issue so as not to approach the texts with rigid, or indeed neo-colonial, assumptions that pit perceived 'progressive' Western democratic values against 'regressive' and 'violent' political Islamist groups.

Béji's poignant political tract on the revolution, published by Gallimard in 2019, contributes a further important perspective on neo-colonial narratives and Tunisian politics.<sup>86</sup> She calls on European observers of the Middle East and North Africa to awaken to their blindspots regarding the concept of democracy: 'chers Européens, c'est ignorance de soi que de vous croire démocrates depuis la nuit des temps, par nature. Vous pouvez ne pas le rester. Peut-être avez-vous déjà commencé à ne plus l'être.'<sup>87</sup> She also emphasises the hypocrisy of Western commentators who condemn violence in Arab contexts in the name of democracy: 'Combien de siècles a-t-il fallu à l'Europe pour que la tyrannie politique cédât aux libertés modernes telles que nous les connaissons ? [...] C'est par une histoire tragique que les hommes gagnèrent l'émancipation.'<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, she argues that while Tunisians came together with 'enthousiasme pour leurs élections' after the revolution, the European identity crisis 'est plus aiguë que jamais.'<sup>89</sup> Béji's timely essay ultimately calls on her readers to recognise the complexity of the current political transition and avoid neo-colonial

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<sup>85</sup> Fabio Merone, Ester Sigillò, and Damiano De Facci, 'Nahda and Tunisian Islamic Activism', in *New Opposition in the Middle East*, ed. by Conduit Dara and Akbarzadeh Shahram (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 177–201 (p. 177).

<sup>86</sup> Béji, *Domage, Tunisie: La dépression démocratique*.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, p. 7.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, p. 21.

interpretations of democracy as a Western ‘gift’ to the MENA region. Her caution regarding neo-colonial and simplistic thinking about Tunisia and democracy informs my own research aim in this thesis to move beyond rigid and neo-colonial assumptions about the genre of life narrative in Tunisia. In light of this brief overview of the historical context in which my selected texts were produced, the following literature review now situates the corpus in relation to existing debates on Tunisian women’s writing in French.

### **Existing criticism on Tunisian women’s writing in French**

In 1968 Abdelkébir Khatibi argued that ‘en Tunisie, la littérature d'expression française était et demeure peu importante’.<sup>90</sup> This followed on from Albert Memmi’s prediction in 1956 that literature in French would not survive in Tunisia after Independence. It would appear nevertheless that writing in French continues to flourish in the country. Although there has not yet been a comprehensive study of the genre of women’s life narratives in French from Tunisia, a number of studies from 1990 onwards have considered the broader field of literary production in French.<sup>91</sup> Indeed, life narrative studies, with its overwhelming focus on

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<sup>90</sup> Abdelkébir Khatibi, *Le Roman maghrébin*, 2nd edn (Rabat: SMER, 1979), p. 24.

<sup>91</sup> See, for example, Jean Fontaine, *La Littérature tunisienne contemporaine* (1990); Jean Fontaine, *Histoire de la littérature tunisienne par les textes* (1994); Tahar Bekri, *Littératures de Tunisie et du Maghreb* (1994); Majid El Houssi, Mansour M’Henni, Sergio Zoppi, *Regards sur la littérature tunisienne* (1997); Tahar Bekri, *De la littérature tunisienne et maghrébine* (1998); Jean Fontaine, *Histoire de la littérature tunisienne: de l’indépendance à nos jours* (1999); Lora G. Lunt, *Mosaïque et mémoire: paradigmes identitaires dans le roman féminin tunisien* (unpublished doctoral thesis, McGill University, 2000); Habib Salha, ‘La Tunisie dans la littérature tunisienne de langue arabe et de langue française’, actes du colloque organisé les 17 et 18 avril 1998 à la Faculté des lettres de Manouba (2001); Baccar-Bournaz, Alia. *Essais sur la littérature tunisienne d’expression française* (2005). More recent publications include: Linda Beji, *L’Orientalisme français et la littérature tunisienne francophone: relations et influences* (2009) and Ali Abassi, *Espaces francophones tunisiens ou main de Fatma* (2011). Also: Abir Kréfa, ‘Domination de Genre et Résistances Dans les poèmes de deux Tunisiennes nées dans les années 1930’, in *Voi(es)x de l’autre: Poètes femmes, XIXe-XXIe siècles*, ed. by Patricia Godi-Tkatchouk and Caroline Andriot-Saillant (Clermont-Ferrand: Presses Univ Blaise Pascal, 2010); Abir Kréfa, ‘The Body and Sexuality in Tunisian Literature: Issues Surrounding the Recognition, Costs, and Effects of “Transgressing”’, *Travail, Genre et Sociétés*, 26.2 (2011), 105–28; Abir Kréfa, ‘Entre injonctions à dire et à taire le corps: les voies étroites de la reconnaissance littéraire pour les écrivaines tunisiennes’, *Ethnologie française* (Presses universitaires de France), 44 (2014), 631–42.

Western cultural production, broadly continues to overlook Tunisian literary production in French.<sup>92</sup>

In 1990, Fontaine found that few texts in French were produced by Tunisian women in the first three decades following the country's independence.<sup>93</sup> Indeed, between 1956 and 1979 there were 21 books produced by Tunisian women: fourteen in Arabic and seven in French.<sup>94</sup> Additionally, according to both Fontaine and Abir Kréfa, Tunisian women were writing in French much earlier in the twentieth century but under pseudonyms.<sup>95</sup> Focusing more specifically on the decade of the 1970s, Fontaine found only four published novels that were written in French by Tunisian women: *Cendre à l'aube* by Jalila Hafsia (1975), *La Vie simple* by Souad Guellouz (1975), *Rached* by Aïcha Chaïbi (1975) and *Vie et agonie* by Souad Hédri (1978).<sup>96</sup> According to his assessment, these texts in French written by Tunisian women were concerned with 'la constatation des maux sociaux' and 'la révolte contre la condition faite à la femme.'<sup>97</sup> Domestic life was, for these women authors, 'souvent le motif principal des interruptions observées dans leur production.'<sup>98</sup> Yet Fontaine's final assessment of Tunisian women's literature as 'un appendice de la littérature masculine' is problematic.<sup>99</sup> The word 'appendice' comes from the Latin word *appendix*, meaning an addition or something attached, and from *appendere*, which means to cause to hang (from something). Yet given Tunisia's history as a country marked by patriarchal systems and values, his

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<sup>92</sup> There have been a handful of monographs on life writing from the MENA region, such as Tahia Abdel Nasser's book, *Literary Autobiography and Arab National Struggles* (2017), Valerie Anishchenkova's (2014) *Autobiographical Identities in Contemporary Arab Culture*, Nawar Al-Hassan Golley's (2003) *Reading Arab Women's Autobiographies* and Norbert Bugeja's (2012) *Postcolonial Memoir in the Middle East*. Cynthia Franklin (2009), Bart Moore-Gilbert (2009) and Gillian Whitlock (2006; 2015) have also published studies of Arab life writing.

<sup>93</sup> Fontaine, *Écrivaines tunisiennes*, pp. 5–7; 36.

<sup>94</sup> Cited in: Lunt, p. 19.

<sup>95</sup> Fontaine, *Écrivaines tunisiennes*, p. 5 ; Kréfa, 'Domination de genre et résistances dans les poèmes de deux Tunisiennes nées dans les années 1930', p. 116.

<sup>96</sup> Fontaine, *Écrivaines tunisiennes*, p. 41.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid*, p. 16.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid*, p. 94.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid*, p. 94.

qualification of Tunisian women's writing fails to consider the ways in which they might *write over*, rather than *hang from*, patriarchal models that have been both internally and externally imposed on women.

In her 2000 doctoral thesis on Tunisian women's literature in French, Lora G. Lunt argues that Fontaine missed out a significant piece of Tunisian women's literature in French from the 1970s: Nine Moati's *Mon enfant, ma mère* (1974).<sup>100</sup> This omission, she argues, was deliberate. Although Fontaine does not include Jewish writers in his definition of Tunisian literature, Lunt argues that they should be included in order to represent the diversity of women's voices from Tunisia:

[Fontaine] n'inclut pas les écrivains juifs comme Nine Moati (et Albert Memmi) parmi les écrivains tunisiens. Quoique leur identité soit problématique à cause de leur statut de minorité habitant en France, les écrivaines juives reconnaissent toujours l'importance de leur pays d'origine. Nous préférons les inclure pour montrer la diversité des voix féminines représentant la Tunisie.<sup>101</sup>

Via the metaphor of a mosaic, Lunt argues that Tunisian women's literature in French features female subjects whose identities are composed of different elements or 'morceaux':

Le roman féminin tunisien éclaire le statut de « maghrébin » et de « femme contemporaine » à la croisée des siècles et dans un monde multiculturel. Dans le cadre de cette analyse, ce qui frappe le lecteur c'est la multitude de morceaux que l'individu réussit à intégrer dans sa « mosaïque identitaire ». Parfois l'expérience de 'morcellement' ou 'fragmentation' est ressentie par les personnages comme une aliénation et un exil. Cependant, le plus souvent, les protagonistes, et surtout les protagonistes-écrivaines, arrivent à réconcilier et à utiliser ces morceaux multicolores dans la construction d'une identité plurielle et ouverte au monde.<sup>102</sup>

While Lunt's concept of a mosaic to describe Tunisian women's identity is compelling, and slightly prefigures Mildred Mortimer's well-known comparison of the Maghreb to a mosaic surface embellished with a myriad of colourful tiles, it is my hypothesis that Lunt's definition

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<sup>100</sup> Nine Moati, *Mon Enfant, ma mère* (Paris: Stock).

<sup>101</sup> Lunt, p. 19.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, p. 179.

of the term is insufficient for encapsulating the complexity of the texts in my study.<sup>103</sup> Indeed, while Lunt's vision of the literary mosaic reconciles tensions, my selected texts arguably resist cohesion and possibly include conflicting elements. Furthermore, Lunt problematically envisions her selected writers as being at a distance from their cultures of origin:

L'idée selon laquelle il faut se mettre à une certaine distance pour saisir le dessin d'une mosaïque, soulève aussi l'hypothèse selon laquelle les auteures qui s'éloignent de leur pays d'origine aperçoivent plus clairement la structure de la société. Nous avons vu que le fait d'écrire en français au lieu d'écrire en arabe représente déjà une étape de distanciation.<sup>104</sup>

Lunt's emphasis on stepping back to visualise and 'saisir le dessin d'une mosaïque' might preclude other forms of insight. Indeed, the texts in my corpus by Ben Mhenni, Zouari, Fellous and El Fani complicate any straightforward distinctions between the narrating subject and her birth culture, or indeed between personal and collective memories. In addition, there may be formal strategies that interpellate the reader, blurring the boundaries between their own subject position and that of the narrated subject.

In the most recent study that has emerged on Tunisian women's literature in French, Alba analyses texts from the dawn of Ben Ali's presidency in 1987 to the eve of the Tunisian revolution of 2011.<sup>105</sup> Building on Nancy Fraser's and Robert Asen's theories of feminist counterpublics, Alba argues that '[...] a Tunisian women's counterpublic should focus on challenging negative collective imagining which prevents certain women from accessing the public sphere and, by the same token, prevents women from acquiring full gender equality.'<sup>106</sup> In her study of literature from Zouari, Sophie Bessis, Béji, Lina Ben Mhenni,

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<sup>103</sup> Mildred P. Mortimer, *Maghrebian Mosaic: A Literature in Transition* (Colorado and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001).

<sup>104</sup> Lunt, pp. 179–80.

<sup>105</sup> Alba, *Tunisian Women's Writing in French The Fight for Emancipation: From Ben Ali's Rise to Power to the Eve of the Tunisian Revolution, 1987–2011*.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, p. 26.



Sonia Chamkhi and an anonymous blogger known as Nadia, Alba argues that ‘[...] Tunisian women writers have been able to escape the muting of subalternity and have thus ceased being subalterns.’<sup>107</sup> Alba’s argument is a useful foundation for my own study as it draws out the feminist characteristics and resistance strategies of a corpus that emerged directly prior to my own. Indeed, she also considers earlier examples of work by Ben Mhenni and Zouari, who are both central to my corpus. However, it is my hypothesis that my selected texts do not fit neatly within Alba’s definition of a Tunisian women’s counterpublic. Although Alba writes that ‘[...] the continued relevance of the feminist maxim the personal is political is evident,’ it appears that in my selected life narratives by Ben Mhenni, Zouari, Fellous and El Fani, the relationship between the personal and the political is sometimes obscure or inconsistent.<sup>108</sup> Indeed, as I shall discuss in chapters two and four, El Fani and Zouari both evoke nuanced and shifting relationships to the political contexts in which they create and, at times, call into question the resistance status of their narratives.<sup>109</sup>

While Alba analyses texts produced prior to the revolution in her study, her assessment of post-2011 literature may benefit from further nuancing and discussion. For example, she claims that ‘[t]he relatively smooth – yet ongoing – transition from dictatorship to democracy in Tunisia has conceivably allowed Tunisian writers to make the most of their newly found freedom of expression allowing them to continue producing a literature that merits greater academic attention.’<sup>110</sup> In terms of a ‘newly found freedom of expression’, Alba is possibly referring here to the lifting of political censorship and the emergence of more direct forms of contestation after the revolution. While this is true, we must also be

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid, p. 167.

<sup>109</sup> As Jane Hiddleston argues, francophone North African writers in the generation or more after independence have both upheld and questioned the emancipatory potential of literature: ‘These texts all exploit the capacity of literature to challenge orthodoxies, though many nevertheless either reluctantly admit or more fully analyse its limitations, its frustrations and its deceptions.’ Hiddleston, *Writing After Postcolonialism: Francophone North African Literature in Transition*, pp. 259–60.

<sup>110</sup> Alba, *Tunisian Women’s Writing in French The Fight for Emancipation: From Ben Ali’s Rise to Power to the Eve of the Tunisian Revolution, 1987–2011*, p. 165.

careful to note that the revolution did not constitute an obvious teleology of progress and emancipation for artists and writers. As Greta Bliss argued in relation to the Tunisian art scene in 2018,

while all artists are now theoretically free to treat any and all political subjects – which, naturally, includes the newly permissible denunciation of Ben Ali – secular speech no longer enjoys its former freedoms. An artist who openly critiques state-sanctioned religiosity can expect to face intimidation, threats, and even physical danger. Artists have found their freedoms curtailed not only by threats from fellow civilians (individuals acting as Islamist activists or as self-appointed religious police) but also by the state’s ratification of religious notions of public decency and safety. Nervousness has given way to outright fear and to an insidious undercurrent of self-censorship.<sup>111</sup>

Nevertheless, while Bliss is right to point out these new challenges for artists, her emphasis on outright fear and self-censorship also requires some nuancing. In a similar manner to Alba, Rachida Triki, the Tunisian art historian and curator, evokes the sense of freedom that many artists felt in the immediate wake of the revolution : ‘[l]a dynamique démocratique générée par la révolution du 14 janvier 2011 a donné beaucoup d’espoir aux artistes visuels qui se sont emparés librement de leur environnement et de l’espace public, jusque-là confisqué.’<sup>112</sup> Indeed, in this respect, it appears that artists were facing both new opportunities *and* new restrictions. Throughout my own study, it will be important to take into account these varied perspectives on the revolution and the position of artists in Tunisian society at this time. Additionally, I seek to remember Gana’s discussion of ‘the longevity of dissent [in Tunisia], which made the revolt inevitable.’<sup>113</sup> In this way, I hope to avoid contributing to the myth of the revolution, common in many media narratives at the time, as a radical and progressive break with the past. Although there were new opportunities for artists and writers to approach previously censored topics and occupy public spaces that had been hitherto off-limits, there

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<sup>111</sup> Bliss, p.38.

<sup>112</sup> Rachida Triki, ‘Enjeux sociopolitiques des arts contemporains en Tunisie’, *Archivio antropologico mediterraneo*, 15.1 (2013), 25–28 (p. 25).

<sup>113</sup> Gana, p. 3.

were also strong currents of conservatism and social censorship that restricted freedom of expression during this period.

At a conference on ‘Arabs at Home and Abroad’ at Manchester University in June 2016, Latiri made the following statement:

One of the challenges of the revolution is the birth of the individual. As you don’t have the template of monolithic identity being imposed on everybody, if people can withdraw within themselves and find their own voice, they become diverse, they become themselves. The discourse is about diversity, which is a very strong political issue in the Arab world. So, the emphasis is on the individual with an autobiographical narrative. The stream of consciousness highlights the potential for all of us to be unique and different.<sup>114</sup>

When she cites the birth of the individual, she is not referring to the neoliberal sense of market-driven individualism, but to the liberation of citizens from decades of censorship and authoritarianism. While it is unclear exactly what Latiri means by a ‘monolithic identity’, we can assume that she is referring to the monolithic template for national identity that was outlined in both the 1959 Tunisian constitution and its reformed version in 2014.<sup>115</sup> Taking on board Latiri’s argument regarding the political status of the genre of life narrative, I am interested in the extent to which the life narratives in my corpus might be categorised as political and in what sense.<sup>116</sup> I will suggest the metaphor of the palimpsest as a mode of reading allows for a nuanced understanding of the texts—and their politics—to emerge. Indeed, as we shall see, ‘surface’ layers of the narratives may conceal or suppress other, less readily accessible, ideas and memory traces.

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<sup>114</sup> Dora Latiri, *A Return to Tunis after the Revolution: Nostalgia, Taking Part, Narrating* (Manchester, 2016) <<http://events.manchester.ac.uk/event/event:w8t-ioygho6s-m9wk2f/arabs-at-home-and-abroad-politics-society-and-art>>.

<sup>115</sup> See my discussion of the Constitution above.

<sup>116</sup> Latiri.

## Critical approaches to the genre of autobiography in the Maghreb

My discussion so far suggests that there may be limitations to existing assumptions about, and definitions of, the genre of Tunisian women's writing in French. In the next section of this introduction, I focus more specifically on the complex status of the genre of autobiography in the Maghreb and explain how I position my own study in relation to debates on this topic.

In an article published (posthumously) in 1996, Déjeux suggests that the European model of autobiography was *imported* into the Maghreb and celebrates the way in which the Western Enlightenment notion of the individual was introduced via the French school system: 'Nous nous arrêtons à l'école et à la maîtrise de la langue française, c'est qu'il y a là, nous semble-t-il, un facteur plus privilégié et plus radicalement bouleversant des mentalités.'<sup>117</sup> Déjeux's argument recalls Gusdorf's conception of autobiography as a genre that can never fully belong to non-Western subjects.<sup>118</sup> Yet, Leila Ahmed makes the important argument that: 'Autobiography is an anciently known form in Islamic-Arabic letters. Famous early autobiographical works include one by the religious scholar and philosopher Al-Ghazali [...], and another by Usama ibn Munqidh [...].'<sup>119</sup> This has been further evidenced by Tahia Abdel Nasser who demonstrates that premodern forms of biography, religious tracts, travelogues and biographical dictionaries from the Maghreb all employ languages of the self.<sup>120</sup> While this might be obvious to those who are familiar with the region's literary heritage, Sophia Brown argues that 'such context is a necessary parallel history to the chronicling of Western

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<sup>117</sup> Déjeux, 'Au Maghreb, la langue française « langue natale du Je »', p. 188. Note that he takes the case of Mohammed Kacimi who passed from '[...] l'univers religieux à celui de l'individualisme "laïque, séculier"'.  
<sup>118</sup> Georges Gusdorf, 'Conditions et limites de l'autobiographie', in *Formen Der Selbstdarstellung: Analekten Zu Einer Geschichte Des Literarischen Selbstnortraits*, ed. by Günter Reichenkron and Haase Erich (Berlin: Duncker und Humblot, 1956), pp. 105–24 (p. 105).

<sup>119</sup> Ahmed, p. 154. See, also, Hassan Nowaira, p. 45.  
<sup>120</sup> Tahia Abdel Nasser, *Literary Autobiography and Arab National Struggles* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 7.

life writing in which the field is certainly more versed. It also, of course, importantly demonstrates that Arab life writing is not merely a belated adaptation of an established Western genre.’<sup>121</sup>

Brozgal addresses the remarkable out-of-step rhythm between advances in, on the one hand, European literary theory and, on the other, European criticism of Maghrebi texts.<sup>122</sup> She claims that from the 1950s onwards, ‘[...] literary theory was perhaps not ready to march hand in hand with the newly-decolonized. As a result, we are left with readings that account for the author without accounting for the evolution of theories on the author.’<sup>123</sup> She claims that many great literary texts in French from Maghrebi authors such as Memmi, Mouloud Feraoun and Driss Chraïbi were thus categorised narrowly as ‘autobiographies’, with European critics focusing on the authors’ lives and intentions at the expense of form and textual complexity. She insists that francophone Maghrebi authors do not need to ‘catch up’ with the complexity and nuances of European literary theory; rather, this complexity already exists in many of their texts but has been previously overlooked by European critics who have *contained* these texts narrowly within an outdated (and Western) model for the genre of autobiography that disavows their textual ambiguity.<sup>124</sup>

While Brozgal was the first to apply this idea specifically to francophone Maghrebi ‘autobiographies’ in 2007, the call to attend to the literary in criticism of postcolonial literature has already received a good deal of attention in other contexts.<sup>125</sup> Alongside Brozgal, a number of other literary critics have highlighted the inadequacy of readings of postcolonial literature that focus on history and politics to the detriment of form and that

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<sup>121</sup> Sophia Brown, ‘Literary Autobiography and Arab National Struggles’, *Life Writing*, 17.4 (2020), 621–24 (p. 621).

<sup>122</sup> Brozgal, *Against Autobiography: Albert Memmi and the Production of Theory* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

<sup>123</sup> Brozgal, *Against Autobiography: Albert Memmi and the Production of Theory*, p. 32.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

classify texts as straightforward historical testimonies, or windows onto other cultures, without considering their aesthetics.<sup>126</sup> Additionally, since the publication of Brozgal's study in 2007, much work has been done by scholars to nuance readings of francophone Maghrebi autobiographical texts. This scholarship draws on advances in definitions of the genre of autobiography in France, which have grown and evolved, since the dawn of the *nouveau roman* in the 1950s, to encompass ambiguous, hybrid and deconstructed versions of the discourse of the self. Theorisations of narrative ambiguity in relation to the genre of autobiography took off in the second half of the twentieth century, with Paul de Man famously arguing in 1979 that autobiography is not a genre but a reading strategy.<sup>127</sup>

The next section of the Introduction unpacks the specific ways in which gender intersects with debates on authorship and definitions of the genre of life narrative in the Maghreb. This is important as, with regard to the particular historical period that I have glossed above, there is an urgent need to think through the particular status of women in Tunisia in this transitional period.

### **Gender, authorship and the genre of life narrative**

As Miller argues, critics of feminist and postcolonial literature have long grappled with the problem of Barthes' 'Death of the Author' and Sean Burke's subsequent 'Return of the Author'.<sup>128</sup> She suggests that as women have not been burdened by too much ego, the death of the author/subject does not necessarily hold for them.<sup>129</sup> Indeed, for Miller this

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<sup>126</sup> See, for example: Deepika Bahri, *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics and Postcolonial Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003); Nicholas Harrison, 'Who Needs an Idea of the Literary?', *Paragraph*, 28.2 (2005), 1–17; Jane Hiddleston, *Decolonising the Intellectual: Politics, Culture and Humanism at the End of the French Empire* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014).

<sup>127</sup> Paul De Man, 'Autobiography as De-Facement', *MLN*, 94.5 (1979), 919–30 (p. 922).

<sup>128</sup> Nancy K Miller, 'Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing and the Reader', in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern, a Reader*, ed. by Sean Burke (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

<sup>129</sup> Miller, 'Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing and the Reader'.

‘death’ forecloses the possibility of agency for women, who have historically been denied this, and precludes discussions of identity for marginalised groups. Crucially, for Miller, it matters *who* is writing. Many feminist and postcolonial scholars have firmly established the argument that agency and authorship remain important for women and previously colonised subjects. Indeed, Spivak’s influential concept of ‘strategic essentialism’ posits that an essentialised group identity position can be employed as a useful strategy for pursuing chosen political ends.<sup>130</sup> In contrast, Toril Moi argues that women can embrace the liberating potential that comes with the loss of the (traditionally patriarchal) author.<sup>131</sup> In addition, the literary movement of *écriture féminine* formed in the 1970s in France in resistance to patriarchal discourse and emphasised the multiplicity of women’s narrative personas.<sup>132</sup> Yet, as Antonia Wimbush has argued, the movement ‘which has been extremely influential for contemporary women authors in metropolitan France, neglects to consider how racial difference intersects with debates about gender equality [...]’<sup>133</sup> Her argument thus reinforces the need for an alternative framework with which to approach women’s francophone life narratives from contemporary Tunisia. As discussed above, I have also insisted on the need to pay attention to the local contexts and specific experiences of gender and ‘feminism’ that emerge in this Tunisian context.

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<sup>130</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In Other Worlds. Essays in Cultural Politics*. (London and New York: Methuen, 1987).

<sup>131</sup> Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, 2nd edn (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp. 61–62.

<sup>132</sup> Francophone feminists such as Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva brought together Lacanian psychoanalysis with linguistics and literature, focusing on how language shores up patriarchal order but can also be the site for the disruption of this order. This thinking led to the ground-breaking movement of *écriture féminine*. The concept, which can be applied to different styles of women’s writing, is based on an analogy between physical sexual difference and one’s relationship to language. Male sexuality is aligned with a structure of narrative that is linear, authoritative and end of climax-oriented, whereas female sexuality is conceived as more diffuse and multiple and is seen to correspond to a more fluid and ambiguous style of narrative. Indeed, the multiplicity assigned to women’s identities is understood in this sense as related to women’s capacity to create life and give birth.

<sup>133</sup> Wimbush, p. 291.

This literature review demonstrates the need for a fresh perspective on Tunisian women's writing in French and the genre of life narrative. While we have witnessed a shift in the last fifteen years from socio-political readings (or indeed 'autobiographical' readings) to a closer engagement with textual form and ambivalence, the life narratives in my study have often been read, as we shall see, in relation to their historical contexts—as narratives of feminism, resistance or progress—at the expense of their formal ambiguities, contradictions and experimentation. In this study, I aim to undertake a close reading of the text's formal properties, as well as their distinctive engagement with Tunisian contexts.

### **Methodology: theories of the palimpsest in literature and film**

As Angela Kimyongür and Amy Wigelsworth argue, the palimpsest 'is defined by its tantalizingly incongruous marriage of the notions of destruction and suppression to those of preservation and creation.'<sup>134</sup> In proposing the term 'palimpsestic life narrative', I am not simply referring to multi-layered identities (although this is of course still relevant), but also to these tensions between suppression and creation in this distinctive and complex postcolonial context. The concept of the palimpsest may be employed in this context to evoke these Tunisian women's nuanced engagement with histories that have formerly excluded or silenced them, such as French colonialism; Bourguiba's 'State Feminism'; Ben Ali's state censorship and authoritarianism; the complex history of the Tunisian Jewish diaspora, and the rise of fundamentalist Islam post-2011. In authoring their own life narratives, they insert themselves into history and bring to the fore their complex heritages.

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<sup>134</sup> Angela Kimyongür and Amy Wigelsworth, 'Introduction', in *Rewriting Wrongs : French Crime Fiction and the Palimpsest*, ed. by Angela Kimyongür and Amy Wigelsworth (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), pp. 1–14 (p. 1).



As discussed above, Lunt's concept of the mosaic is useful in so far as it evokes the diversity of Tunisian women's literature; however, it is limited by her idea that writers (and, therefore, readers) can visualise Tunisian society from afar—as if it were '[un] dessin'—with objectivity.<sup>135</sup> Additionally, the concept of a mosaic-image implies that diverse fragments come together to create a harmonious whole. Leaving aside the concept of the mosaic, the metaphor of the palimpsest provides a more appropriate theoretical framework with which to approach the complexity of the texts in my corpus. Crucially, my selected texts are embedded with obscure elements, contradictions and suppressed memory traces that are not necessarily harmonious, and which are sometimes hard to interpret with any clarity or ease. In this respect, the metaphor of the palimpsest may provide a more appropriate model for conceptualising the ways in which these multi-layered texts thwart authoritative interpretation of their authors' identities.

In *Palimpsestic Memory*, Silverman applies his theory to the study of twelve key works of film and literature across the broad field of twentieth-century French and francophone Studies post-World War Two, ranging from Alain Resnais' *Nuit et brouillard* to Djébar's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* and Patrick Modiano's *Dora Bruder*.<sup>136</sup> In his analyses, he displaces the conventional definition of the palimpsest as a layered text that contains *one* hidden text to be revealed. For example, Gérard Genette uses the figure of the palimpsest (in *Palimpsestes: La Littérature au second degré* (1982)) to describe the 'transtextual' layering of texts in which one can be seen through another.<sup>137</sup> Additionally, Antoine de Baecque employs the concept of the palimpsest in his analysis of French films in order to focus on the return of *one* buried memory in each film (the Holocaust in *La Question*

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<sup>135</sup> Lunt, pp. 179–80.

<sup>136</sup> Silverman, pp. v–vi; Alain Resnais, *Nuit et brouillard* (France, 1955); Assia Djébar, *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* (Paris: Des Femmes, 1980); Patrick Modiano, *Dora Bruder* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997)..

<sup>137</sup> Genette.

*humaine* and 17 October 1961 in Michael Haneke's *Caché*).<sup>138</sup> Additionally, although the concept of the palimpsest is largely under-theorised in relation to the genre of life narrative, Smith and Watson do briefly refer to it in their 2002 book *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance* and similarly suggest that the term refers to the erasure of only one image: 'In a *palimpsest* [their emphasis], one image lies submerged, apparently erased or overwritten by a second image; but traces of what has been erased or overwritten leak through the overlaid surface.'<sup>139</sup> However, Silverman suggests that the palimpsest 'represents the condensation [i.e. the superimposition of porous layers] of a number of different spatio-temporal traces.'<sup>140</sup> His definition of palimpsestic memory is employed to render visible the interconnections between multiple and *disparate* memory traces that are normally viewed as belonging to separate nations, cultures, races or ethnicities. Indeed, this concept enables him to visualise the ways in which distinct and disconnected memory traces might travel and overlap with one another.<sup>141</sup> In developing this concept, his main aim is to challenge the idea that memory should be strictly compartmentalised along the lines of nation, race or culture.

Silverman's understanding of memory as 'a hybrid and dynamic process across individuals and communities' is particularly useful when considering the mobile status of the authors in my study, three of whom were travelling between France and Tunisia while creating their life narratives.<sup>142</sup> Indeed, given that my selected life narratives from Tunisia are also dealing with memories and histories that cannot be compartmentalised within the boundaries of a single nation, race, culture or language, Silverman's palimpsestic memory is

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<sup>138</sup> De Baecque.

<sup>139</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, 'Mapping Women's Self-Representation at Visual/Textual Interfaces', in *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance*, ed. by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2002), pp. 1–44 (p. 28).

<sup>140</sup> Silverman, p. 10.

<sup>141</sup> Silverman, p. 8.

<sup>142</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

an appropriate starting point for my analysis. Indeed, Zouari travels between her Amazigh and Muslim roots in rural Tunisia and her metropolitan life in Paris. In *Le Corps de ma mère*, she describes (in French) how she switches between French and Arabic as she transitions between these two spaces. Her life narrative draws on memories of the 2011 Tunisian revolution but also histories of French colonial oppression in Tunisia and the negative effects of modernisation and globalisation on local cultures. In *Pièces détachées*, Fellous layers second-hand traumatic memories of the Holocaust, the discrimination that her parents experienced as Tunisian Jews during World War Two and its aftermath, the 1967 war in the Middle East and its impact on Jewish-Muslim relations in Tunisia, her parents' subsequent exile to Paris, the 2011 Tunisian revolution and recent waves of radical Islamist terrorist attacks in Tunisia. As the last book in a series about Fellous's relationship to Tunisia, *Pièces détachées* can itself be viewed as the top layer of the palimpsestic structure of Fellous's autobiographical oeuvre.<sup>143</sup> In her blog, Ben Mhenni writes in multiple languages—French, Modern Standard Arabic, English, German and *Arabizi* (Arabic text that is written using Latin characters)—and discusses global affairs and histories in addition to events in Tunisia. Additionally, El Fani's documentary life narrative constitutes a complex personal and historical conjuncture in which French Republican imagery that symbolises France's 1789 revolution, is brought into dialogue with memories of the 2011 Tunisian revolution and the director's battle with both breast cancer and radical Islamists in Tunisia. Drawing on Silverman's approach, my intention is not simply to decipher an original layer of memory or factual 'truth' in any of my selected life narratives; rather, I propose to consider them as

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<sup>143</sup> The other life narratives in the series: Colette Fellous, *Le Petit casino* (Paris: Gallimard, 1999); Colette Fellous, *Aujourd'hui* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005); Colette Fellous, *Avenue de France* (Paris: Gallimard, 2004); Colette Fellous, *Plein été* (Paris: Gallimard, 2007); Colette Fellous, *La Préparation de la vie* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014); Colette Fellous, *Un amour de frère* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011).

multiple and involuted texts that comprise different perspectives and memory traces which often exist in an ‘anxious relationship’.<sup>144</sup>

Moreover, the corpus might also provide us with an opportunity to develop the concept of the palimpsest in relation to the genre of life narrative in Tunisia. Whereas Silverman employs the concept of palimpsestic memory to literature and films dealing with the traumatic memories of genocide and massacre, exploring how these can be seen to haunt or contaminate the present of the filmic and literary image, I seek to apply the figure of the palimpsest to a different genre in an alternative cultural context: female-authored life narratives from contemporary Tunisia.<sup>145</sup> While Silverman has previously focused on the association of the palimpsest and histories of extreme violence, I am interested in how the figure of the palimpsest might illuminate an understanding of these life narratives as constructed through various layers, producing a multiple rather than a singular ‘self’ or linear life story. Indeed, while Silverman applied his concept to some texts that can be classed as life narratives, he does not address the ways in which the ‘selves’ of these different narratives might be said to constitute palimpsests.<sup>146</sup> By this I mean that the authors might layer past and present memories and temporal perspectives. As we shall see, the blog by Ben Mhenni, first-person written life narrative by Zouari, the photobook by Fellous and the documentary film by El Fani all employ the figure of the palimpsest to layer different aspects of their identities. They also incorporate different voices and perspectives into the palimpsestic structures of their narratives. I will thus consider the extent to which the figure of the palimpsest may provide a more useful model than that of Lunt’s mosaic for approaching the layered identities and texts in this corpus.<sup>147</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Silverman, p.28.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid. De Baecque also argues that ‘[...] dans *Caché* et *La Question humaine* le film-récit du présent, omniprésent, recouvre un récit passé, traumatisant, culpabilisant, qui est une histoire enfouie’. de Baecque, p. 1279.

<sup>146</sup> Silverman.

<sup>147</sup> Lunt, p. 179.

Apart from Zouari's *Le Corps de ma mère*, the other texts employ visual forms of expression to create intermedial palimpsests. While Ben Mhenni incorporates photographs, videos and hyperlinks into her blog, Fellous employs written text and photographs in her printed book. Different voices and sounds in El Fani's documentary life narrative are also layered with photographs, filmed footage and text to form a visual-verbal-sonic palimpsest. The film also recycles television footage and includes intertextual references to El Fani's other films. The texts' experimentation with varied strategies such as relational perspectives; photography; digital media; intertextuality; collage and metalepsis allow for a development of the concept of the palimpsestic life narrative.

## Structure

In the first stage of my argument, I will discuss the extent to which we can observe palimpsestic tendencies and patterns in Ben Mhenni's blog, *A Tunisian Girl/بنية تونسية*.<sup>148</sup> The author began writing her blog in June 2009 and employed it as a platform for self-expression until her death in January 2020 from a chronic autoimmune disease.<sup>149</sup> I will show that the metaphor of the palimpsest emerges in Ben Mhenni's attempts to superimpose her own female perspective on contemporary Tunisian politics while suppressing—or overwriting—dominant state and/or media narratives. Building on Miller's concept of overreading, but applying it in this distinctive Tunisian context, I will discuss the extent to which Ben Mhenni can be seen to reappropriate Ben Ali's state narratives, both visual and verbal, and re-frame them in her feminist, locally based citizen's narrative of the revolution. Additionally, I

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<sup>148</sup> In my correspondence with the author, she stated that the Arabic section of the blog title is a translation of the English. According to Ben Mhenni, although the spelling is the same in both Modern Standard Arabic and Tunisian Arabic, the pronunciation differs between the two languages.

<sup>149</sup> As it is beyond the scope of this chapter to address the entirety of the posts on the blog, I will be focusing solely on the posts created in the period under study (October 2010 - December 2012). This timeframe has been selected as it covers what I term to be the height of the revolutionary period.

suggest that her multi-layered and multilingual identity cannot be contained within monolithic paradigms for Tunisian female identity.

My analysis in the second chapter allows for us to further nuance and expand our definition of the palimpsestic life narrative. Building on the idea of overreading that we find in Ben Mhenni's blog, I will argue that we find a similar strategy at play in El Fani's filmic life narrative: *Même pas mal*. I will discuss the ways in which she employs collage strategies to overread radical Islamist and misogynist hate campaigns of which she was a target in the immediate wake of the revolution. However, notwithstanding the similarities between the overreading strategies in the two texts, there are important differences. While in Chapter One we find that authenticity and the perceived referential status of Ben Mhenni's blog posts—including their written text, photographs and videos—are important to the author in her combat against the censorship of citizen's voices, my discussion in the next chapter allows us to problematise the concept of Lejeune's 'pacte autobiographique' that has been conventionally associated with autobiographical texts.<sup>150</sup> Indeed, I will explore the extent to which different layers of El Fani's filmic collage come together in tension or dissonance in a way that complicates readings of her identity. Additionally, I will discuss the extent to which she employs intertextuality as a further form of layering which blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction in her life narrative, as well as between internal and external perspectives on Tunisia.

In Chapter Three, I will turn to consider the dialogue between different visual and verbal elements in a life narrative by a writer of Tunisian-Jewish origin: Fellous's *Pièces détachées*.<sup>151</sup> In contrast to the two previously discussed texts in chapters one and two, this

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<sup>150</sup> 'Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité [...]'. Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975), p.14.

<sup>151</sup> Colette Fellous, *Pièces détachées* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017).

text can be situated in relation to more conventional definitions of the genre of life narrative because it is a literary text in the form of a book. However, I suggest that my analysis of this text allows us to add further complexity to my definition of the palimpsestic life narrative—and the specificity of this in the Tunisian context—because of the innovative ways in which ‘layering’ emerges in both its form and content. In focusing on the ways in which Fellous superimposes disparate contexts of memory, I will explore the extent to which she constructs a multi-layered narrative that displaces the retrospective gaze on both ‘self’ and Tunisian history. I will also suggest that Fellous places the reader in a liminal position, between different levels of the narrative and possible readings, in order to evoke her own status between different, and possibly irreconcilable, interpretations of history. Additionally, I will discuss the extent to which Fellous’s text-image strategy, and her merging of different generational perspectives, may allow us to envisage Silverman’s concept of the ‘condensation’ of memory traces in an alternative way.<sup>152</sup>

In the final chapter, I will explore palimpsestic tendencies in a text which explores the author’s identity in the aftermath of losing her Tunisian mother, Yamna, in 2007.<sup>153</sup> We find similarities between Fellous’s text and Zouari’s *Le Corps de ma mère* in the sense that both evoke a palimpsestic relationship between the perspectives of mothers and daughters. Additionally, given that the ideas of creation and ‘suppression’ are inherent in the idea of the palimpsest, I suggest that the metaphor arises from both texts as a means to convey the relationship between the acts of narrating and repressing memories.<sup>154</sup> Indeed, in the last chapter, we find that although Fellous sought to preserve traces of her family’s history, she also suggested memory gaps, blindspots and traumatic memory traces in her life narrative. In

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<sup>152</sup> Silverman argues that ‘my use of the palimpsest is to suggest that it represents the condensation of a number of different spatio-temporal traces.’ Silverman, pp. 9–10.

<sup>153</sup> Zouari, *Le Corps de ma mère*.

<sup>154</sup> Kimyongür and Wigelsworth, p. 1.

*Le Corps de ma mère*, I will analyse the extent to which the author articulates a palimpsestic relationship between the ideas of covering and disclosing memories in her narrative.

Additionally, I will argue the metaphor arises from the text as a means to convey the author's perception of the 'problem' of representing her mother in language.

Finally, while I am proposing the term 'palimpsestic life narrative' as a useful means to categorise these texts from contemporary Tunisia, I nevertheless recognise the way in which this term may appear redundant to some. Indeed, if the metaphor of the palimpsest evokes the idea of layering, literary scholars have long since grappled with, and theorised, this in relation to the genres of autobiography and life narrative. As Sheringham pointedly argues, 'The subject of autobiography is a hybrid, a fusion of past and present, self and other, document and desire, referential and textual—not a product but a process'.<sup>155</sup> If, for Sheringham, the narration of selfhood is an engagement with 'otherness', then all life narratives involve a kind of layering of self and other.<sup>156</sup> In this respect, when I qualify these Tunisian life narratives as 'palimpsestic', I am thinking beyond the idea of the self as a layered construction in narrative. As I shall demonstrate across this thesis, the metaphor of the palimpsest is particularly useful to describe the tensions at play in this distinctive corpus between speaking and not speaking, overwriting and erasure, covering and revealing, and violence and creation.

Indeed, drawing on the rich and fruitful metaphor of the palimpsest, which Donadey has previously associated with the violence of colonialism in Djébar's fiction, I suggest that these texts all exhibit 'palimpsestic' tendencies and patterns.<sup>157</sup> Each female author or filmmaker articulates their personal narrative in response to a history, movement or event that has

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<sup>155</sup> Michael Sheringham, 'Memory and the Archive in Contemporary Life-Writing', *French Studies*, LIX.1 (2005), 47–53 (p. 21).

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> Anne Donadey, 'Rekindling the Vividness of the Past: Assia Djébar's Films and Fiction', *World Literature Today*, 70.4 (1996), 885–92 (p. 886).



previously excluded or silenced her. In asserting their voices against (social and/or state) forms of censorship and dogma, they overwrite dominant histories and make themselves visible. Moreover, I will argue that the figure of the palimpsest arises from these texts as a way to convey the authors' challenges to surface readings of Tunisian identity which negate its plural and diverse history. Finally, the thesis demonstrates that as readers we can undertake a 'palimpsestic reading': a mode of reading which pays attention to what is obscured in addition to what is revealed, as well as to the porous relationship between factual and fictional layers. Indeed, as a critical tool or *grille de lecture*, the palimpsest allows us to consider the ways in which the texts preclude authoritative readings of their authors' lives and identities.

## Chapter 1. Digital ‘overreading’ in Lina Ben Mhenni’s *A Tunisian Girl*/بنية تونسية.

Donadey has previously built on Miller’s concept of ‘overreading’ in Western women’s texts and applied this to her theory of the palimpsest in Djébar’s francophone writing from Algeria.<sup>158</sup> She argues that Djébar ‘overreads’ the colonial archives in her fiction and then ‘overwrites’ their presence by writing over colonial documents, making her fictional text into a palimpsest.<sup>159</sup> This chapter considers how palimpsestic ‘overreading’ emerges distinctively in a digital work of life narrative from Tunisia: Ben Mhenni’s *A Tunisian Girl*/بنية تونسية.<sup>160</sup> I define this blog as a life narrative in the sense that it stages the historically situated identity of its author and her lived experience. While Donadey has previously associated the violence of colonialism with the violence of the palimpsest, which erases and suppresses earlier narratives, Ben Mhenni’s text deals with a different, and specifically Tunisian, context of violence and oppression: Ben Ali’s dictatorship and the events of the Tunisian revolution.<sup>161</sup> Although this is a multilingual blog written in five different languages—French, English, Arabic, *Arabizi* (Arabic text that is written using Latin characters) and German—my analysis focuses on posts written in English and French.<sup>162</sup> Led by the patterns and tendencies that I

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<sup>158</sup> Donadey, *Recasting Postcolonialism : Women Writing between Worlds*, p. 46.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> In my correspondence with the author, she stated that the Arabic section of the blog title is a translation of the English. Although the spelling is the same in both Modern Standard Arabic and Tunisian Arabic, the pronunciation differs between the two languages.

<sup>161</sup> In her study of Djébar’s films and fiction, she argues that ‘[...] the act of using a palimpsest is of necessity a violent act, since it entails scratching off a previous inscription to cover it over with another. The palimpsest is a fitting metaphor for colonization, one of whose consequences is the forcible erasure of all traces of a people’s history, culture, and way of life in order to replace them with the colonizer’s. Successful colonization, like successful use of the palimpsest, would entail complete erasure of what was there before. But in both cases, such complete erasure is impossible. Just as it is impossible to wipe out a culture entirely, there always remains traces of the previous writing on the palimpsest, even if it may require a special light in order to decipher them. Djébar both provides this special light, a deeper gaze on the palimpsest of Algerian history, and does violence to colonial history by overwriting it from the perspective of the colonized.’ Donadey, ‘Rekindling the Vividness of the Past: Assia Djébar’s Films and Fiction’, p. 886.

<sup>162</sup> Where necessary, I also provide translations of Arabic quotations.

find in the blog, I will suggest that the metaphor of the palimpsest emerges in the following terms: in the way that Ben Mhenni ‘overreads’ censorship and dictatorship; in her layering of different languages, media and hyperlinks, and in the sense that the blog constitutes a multi-layered site of autobiographical material which acquires new layers of meaning with new readers.

Focusing specifically on blog posts produced from 2010 – 2012, during the height of the popular uprisings, I consider the extent to which the author’s blogging activity constitutes a form of digital ‘overreading’ that resisted the silencing tactics of Ben Ali’s dictatorship and its widespread censorship of dissident voices online, as well as the persistence of patriarchal limitations on female self-expression, at the time. Importantly, given that Ben Mhenni employs mixed media in her narrative strategy—including verbal text, photographs, images, videos and hyperlinks—her blog provides us with an opportunity to rethink the concept of ‘overreading’, which has previously been associated exclusively with prose texts. In addition, I suggest that different layers of the blog may come together in a dissonant relationship. In particular, I am concerned with the incongruous layering of Ben Mhenni’s anti-dictatorship activism and the embeddedness of her blog within a Google-owned, capitalist interface. Employing a multimodal framework in my critical approach, I seek to consider visual and verbal aspects of the blog’s interface and how it may limit or shape the author’s self-expression on the screen. Finally, given that Ben Mhenni passed away in January 2020 due to Lupus disease, a chronic autoimmune condition, I propose that we can employ the figure of the palimpsest as a mode of reading the blog, which ultimately ceased activity on 26 January 2020 (the day before her death). I suggest that new layers of meaning can be produced as we consider how the real-time and active status of the blog has now shifted to become a palimpsestic site of memory in which traces of the past, and the author’s identity, come together in a composite structure.

Furthermore, while Silverman has previously perceived palimpsestic tendencies in Djébar's writing, I argue that we can observe different inscriptions of the figure of the palimpsest in Ben Mhenni's blog.<sup>163</sup> Silverman suggests that his concept of palimpsestic memory emerges in Djébar's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* because of the way in which plural women's voices intersect and cut across cultures, times and spaces:

[...] Djébar, like Picasso, releases the women Delacroix has imprisoned from their harem by fragmenting the linear narrative and transforming it into a collage of laments, or songs of suffering, by women whose voices normally go unheard. By opening out the cloistered world of Algerian women, Djébar subverts not only patriarchal order but also the imprisoning categories of nation and culture. Songs from the past recounting the different but interconnecting memories of various women 'tear' the rigidified present and transform the city of Algiers (the new harem in which women are confined twenty years after Algerian independence) into a hybrid space which cuts across cultures and nations.<sup>164</sup>

In some ways, we find similarities between Ben Mhenni's blog and Djébar's inscription of palimpsestic memory: both authors fragment the linear narrative and bring the voices of women to the fore to challenge patriarchal order. In recounting her personal lived experience and interconnecting memories of others in a networked and multilingual narrative online, Ben Mhenni also constructs a hybrid space which cuts across cultures and nations. Yet I propose that the digital characteristics of the blog, its autobiographical dimension, as well as its distinctive engagement with censorship and the Tunisian revolution, may enable us to develop the theory of the palimpsest further in relation to this alternative form and context.

Additionally, while Silverman emphasises the polyphonic character of Djébar's text, I suggest that Ben Mhenni's blog articulates a more singular and stable narrative identity.<sup>165</sup> As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the supposed 'Death of the Author' in Western literary criticism had led to a movement in which the genre of autobiography in the Maghreb

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<sup>163</sup> Silverman, p. 81.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

was devalued by literary scholars.<sup>166</sup> To reiterate Ben Jelloun's comment, autobiographical texts were placed in the 'ghetto de l'autobiographie'.<sup>167</sup> However, as discussed, feminist and postcolonial scholars have firmly established the argument that agency and authorship remain important for women and previously colonised subjects.<sup>168</sup> In this chapter, I propose that Ben Mhenni insists on the importance of claiming a stable identity position from which to speak and challenge not only censorship but also state violence and misogyny. Moreover, she discusses the importance of facts in a context of state propaganda and widespread censorship of dissident voices. Her narrative strategy is thus dependent on both a stable identity and the idea of a 'pacte autobiographique' with her readers as she 'overreads' hegemonic discourse, asserts her political identity in the face of censorship and violence, and writes herself into the palimpsest of Tunisian history.<sup>169</sup> In this respect, my analysis of Ben Mhenni's strategy may enable us to envisage an alternative vision of the literary palimpsest: it is a form of overwriting political oppression from a stable and secure position of 'self'.

While there has been a great surge of interest in digital life narratives in the last decade, criticism on blogs has tended to focus on prose at the expense of other media. For example, in her book *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit*, Gillian Whitlock provides a close reading of a popular blog entitled *Where is Raed?* by an Iraqi blogger named Salam Pax; however, her analysis is limited to the blog's prose and does not address any other media, such as the photographs and videos, which are present on the blog.<sup>170</sup> In addition, while Kate Douglas has analysed Malala Yousafzai's blog as a form of life narrative, she

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<sup>166</sup> See my discussion of this in the introduction to this thesis.

<sup>167</sup> Ben Jelloun, p. 4.

<sup>168</sup> See Miller, 'Changing the Subject: Authorship, Writing and the Reader'; Spivak.

<sup>169</sup> Lejeune, *Le Pacte Autobiographique*, p. 14.

<sup>170</sup> Gillian Whitlock, *Soft Weapons: Autobiography in Transit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp.24-44. Access Pax's blog here: Salam Pax, 'Where Is Raed?', 2004 <[http://dear\\_raed.blogspot.co.uk/2004/](http://dear_raed.blogspot.co.uk/2004/)> [accessed 13 June 2017].

similarly focuses purely on written content instead of the blog's digital form.<sup>171</sup> In this chapter, I aim to highlight the benefits of taking a multimodal approach to the study of blogs as I consider how the different media work together to produce meanings.

Furthermore, as mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Alba has previously addressed Ben Mhenni's blog in her study of Tunisian women's francophone writing from 1987 – 2011.<sup>172</sup> She argues that the blog constructs a 'subaltern counterpublic' because it explores women's issues that are not typically given space in public spheres in Tunisia.<sup>173</sup> In my own analysis of the blog, I take a different approach and focus: while Alba focused on the author's use of verbal text, I will consider the blog from a multimodal perspective and discuss the extent to which its different media may constitute 'layers' of a palimpsestic structure.<sup>174</sup> Furthermore, whereas Alba published her study in 2019 while the author was still alive and actively using her blog, my own analysis allows us to consider the extent to which new layers of meaning may arise from the text in the wake of her death.<sup>175</sup>

As the digital medium allows for the easy convergence of different modes, the concept of 'multimodality' is a useful framework for approaching digital works of life narrative. As is outlined in Carey Jewitt, Jeff Bezemer, and Kay O'Halloran's *Introducing Multimodality*, advances in digital technologies allow authors to combine different modes of meaning-making (e.g., video, image, text) more easily.<sup>176</sup> In the past, different disciplines had 'specialised' in different modes of meaning-making that fell within their remit. Elisabetta Adami states that 'now written texts are increasingly multimodal, due to digital technologies

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<sup>171</sup> Kate Douglas, 'Malala Yousafzai, Life Narrative and the Collaborative Archive', *Life Writing*, 14.3 (2017), 297–311.

<sup>172</sup> Alba, *Tunisian Women's Writing in French The Fight for Emancipation: From Ben Ali's Rise to Power to the Eve of the Tunisian Revolution, 1987–2011*, p. 119–62.

<sup>173</sup> 'Discussing private issues within such a public forum endows these blogs with a political and feminist connotation. By sharing personal matters – in particular matters related to the body – the bloggers have embodied the long-standing feminist adage the personal is political.' *Ibid*, p. 161.

<sup>174</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>176</sup> Carey Jewitt, Jeff Bezemer, and Kay O'Halloran, *Introducing Multimodality* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), p. 3.

for text production, there is an urgent need to start to set the ground for an analysis of the aesthetics of text as expressed by the use of multimodal resources.<sup>177</sup> Her framework looks at different signifiers on a blog, for example the colour, font, layout, images and text, and analyses their different meaning potentials.<sup>178</sup> She notes that, while sometimes the reader experiences several modes as projecting similar meanings, there is often a conflict between them which produces aesthetic dissonance.<sup>179</sup> It must be noted that while multimodality is a relatively recent term that has emerged from the field of linguistics, scholars in the field of literature and visual culture have been analysing the combination of different modes in artistic works for centuries. We can however draw here on Adami's tailored approach to studying multimodality in the blogging environment.<sup>180</sup> Furthermore, as her case studies are also limited to food blogs, rather than works of art, this kind of multimodal framework has yet to be applied to life narrative blogs.

In addition to taking a multimodal approach to the study of the blog, the chapter also intervenes in debates concerning the extent to which digital life narratives can be defined as either identity products or autobiographical acts that articulate identity in process. In 2004, a time when the genre of blogging was becoming widespread with Western internet users, Michael Renov argued that due to the almost simultaneous acts of narrating and publishing that occur in a blog, it is 'a species of autobiographical discourse that sacrificed its object status' in favour of ephemerality and can be compared to performance art.<sup>181</sup> This notably recalls Smith and Watson's argument that women's self-representation is 'a performative act constituting subjectivity in the interplay of memory, experience, identity, embodiment and

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<sup>177</sup> Adami, p. 48.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Michael Renov, *The Subject of Documentary* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), p. 238. Andreas Kitzmann also contends that the blogging medium privileges the moment the material is created and exchanged. Andreas Kitzmann, 'That Different Place: Documenting the Self Within Online Environments', *Biography*, 26.1 (2003), 48–65.

agency’.<sup>182</sup> In addition, in her 2016 study of the ‘selfie’ as a digital example of life narrative, Hannah Westley argues that scholars should view selfies found in social media as *both* products and processes: ‘It is as both practice and product that the selfie signifies and critics must remain attentive to this distinction. Selfies offer instances of identity but these identities only take shape through the framework of narrative.’<sup>183</sup> Indeed, Westley argues that ‘selfies function both as bounded texts, identity images that are open to narrative interpretation, and that they are part of an ongoing story, a multitude of overlapping images that give rise to a narrative of identity.’<sup>184</sup> In this respect, while Renov and Westley both draw attention to the ‘in-process’ status of digital life narratives, Westley crucially reminds us to consider the objectification—the presentation of self as a bounded entity—that also occurs in acts of photographic self-representation on social media sites.

As we shall see, Ben Mhenni employs the medium to write her thoughts and opinions and publishes her posts, themselves fragments of the blog, without editing or self-censoring them. She also goes out into the streets and almost simultaneously uploads photographs and videos of the revolutionary events as she witnesses them, which arguably gives the blog a semi-live character because of the almost real-time relationship between witnessing and narrating that occur. However, as I am analysing the blog today from the perspective of the author’s death, I suggest that Ben Mhenni’s blog may have lost its performative and ‘in process’ status. In this respect, I shall discuss the extent to which Renov’s argument concerning the ‘present-tense character’ of the personal Web page needs to be reconsidered.<sup>185</sup> Drawing on Westley’s call for life narrative scholars to pay attention to *both* practice and product in the construction of social media identities, I aim to explore the extent

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<sup>182</sup> Smith and Watson, ‘Mapping Women’s Self-Representation at Visual/Textual Interfaces’, in *Interfaces: Women, Autobiography, Image, Performance*, p.4.

<sup>183</sup> Westley (p. 388).

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid* (p. 376).

<sup>185</sup> Renov, p. 238.



to which these ideas are present in Ben Mhenni's blog.<sup>186</sup>

Furthermore, in paying attention to the relationship between process and product, we may find that the status of the blog has changed in the wake of the author's death in January 2020. Smith and Watson's recent theorisation of the 'afterlife' of a life narrative—including blogs—could provide a useful framework for approaching this question:

a published 'life' enters into circulation as new reading publics access different versions of it over time; and it acquires an 'afterlife' that shifts its relationship to archival material and generates other versions of the subject. A focus on afterlives makes clear that texts of self-life-writing, whether published or unpublished, full length or fragmentary, are objects of inquiry in movement – not transparent, stable phenomena that generate 'truth,' but dynamic sites open to interpretation over the course of their textual afterlife. An autobiographical narrative is, thus, never just 'the life': there are supplements, remediations, and new versions interacting with new generations of readers.<sup>187</sup>

The figure of the palimpsest could provide a useful model for approaching Ben Mhenni's blog's 'afterlife'.<sup>188</sup> I suggest that in taking a palimpsestic reading of Ben Mhenni's blog, whereby the reader co-authors the narrative in relation to their own context, lived experience and positioning, they may produce new interpretations and meanings in the wake of the author's death. As we shall see, while this would be the case for any life narrative once the author has died, there are particular aspects to take into account as it is a blog.

In terms of the structure of my argument, I will first consider how different layers of the blog come together, particularly the Google interface and the author's articulation of her life narrative via personal blog posts. I will discuss the extent to which the restrictions of the Google template may give us cause to nuance the blog's supposed 'revolutionary' status.

Then, focusing closely on Ben Mhenni's engagement with the revolutionary context in

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<sup>186</sup> Westley (p. 376).

<sup>187</sup> Smith and Watson, 'The Afterlives of Those Who Write Themselves: Rethinking Autobiographical Archives', *The European Journal of Life Writing*, IX (2020), 9–32 (p. 11).

<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

Tunisia, and her battle against state censorship, I will explore how she employs different media to ‘overread’ the violence of the dictatorship and write her female perspective into history. Indeed, the palimpsest is a useful model for understanding the ways in which she asserts her female voice over the violence of censorship. I will focus in particular on the photographs in Ben Mhenni’s ‘overreading’ strategy and the extent to which they may interpellate the reader in different ways to the written posts.

In the final stage of my argument, I will consider the ‘afterlife’ of the blog in the wake of the author’s death and explore the extent to which new meanings may be produced as I read the blog as a now static (as opposed to active and ‘in process’) life narrative.<sup>189</sup> In particular, in reading the author’s mixed media narratives of illness, family life, the deaths of revolutionary ‘martyrs’ and mourning, I suggest that a palimpsest is evoked as my reading of these posts is influenced by my awareness of the author’s future death. In drawing attention to the static and possibly archival dimensions of the blog, this chapter contributes to debates on definitions of the genre of life narrative in relation to digital contexts and serves to nuance interpretations of the blog as a ‘present-tense’ and performative text which evokes identity in process.<sup>190</sup>

### **The Google template as a layer of the blog**

While previous scholarship has focused on the sociopolitical resistance status of *A Tunisian Girl*/بنية تونسية, I consider here the incongruous and palimpsestic relationship between the

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Renov, p. 238.

Western capitalist platform and the author's activist narrative. Indeed, the blog was created and distributed on the website [blogspot.com](http://blogspot.com), a domain that is owned and managed by a global and multi-billion-dollar technology company: Google. I suggest that there is a paradox inherent in the idea that Ben Mhenni is 'overreading' internal hegemony in Tunisia while at the same time her activity is being read—and restricted—by the Google platform. According to media theorist Lev Manovich, 'new media in general can be thought of as consisting of two distinct layers – the "cultural layer" and the "computer layer".'<sup>191</sup> In respect of the tensions that we find between these different layers of the screen, I propose that Ben Mhenni's life narrative allows for a development of theories of the literary palimpsest, including Silverman's palimpsestic memory.<sup>192</sup>

Although the Google platform undeniably provides Ben Mhenni with a space in which to connect with other activists and voice her opposition to Ben Ali's regime, it also imposes rules that govern the layout and content of her narrative. Julie Rak has argued that users of social media are guided by what she terms 'affordances', digital prompts that encourage users to either give information or take a specific action (e.g., click on a hyperlink).<sup>193</sup> In *A Tunisian Girl*/*بنية تونسية*, Ben Mhenni is encouraged by the host site to display her text, photographs, videos and links in a pre-determined format. To summarise briefly here, the opened blog post is displayed on the left; on the right-hand side is a column featuring the 'Archive du blog', where the reader can browse the titles of archived posts organised by year and month. In the same right-hand column, beneath the archive, is a list of tagged words in alphabetical order. If you click on a particular hyperlinked word, this action directs you to a new page with the full blog posts (displayed on the left hand-side) that have been previously tagged by Ben Mhenni with that word. In this way, the author's self-

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<sup>191</sup> Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2001), p. 46.

<sup>192</sup> Silverman.

<sup>193</sup> Julie Rak, 'Life Writing Versus Automedia: The Sims 3 Game as a Life Lab', *Biography*, 38.2 (2015), 155–80 (p.160).

expression is visually contained within the geometric design of the blog and displayed according to chronological or alphabetical order. There are thus important restrictions to what the author can do with her blog: she has to operate within the existing template design.

Furthermore, at the same time users are reading the site, they are themselves being read and written by the network. When accessing the blog for the first time, we are confronted with the following message: ‘This site uses cookies from Google to deliver its services, to personalise ads and to analyse traffic. Information about your use of this site is shared with Google. By using this site, you agree to its use of cookies.’<sup>194</sup> In this manner, both Ben Mhenni and the reader enter into a relationship with Google: they agree to let the company govern and receive information about their online activity and to abide by its market driven rules. In exchange, Google provides the platform for their connection and sharing of life narrative material. While scholars such as Alba have discussed the political potential of the blog as a narrative which participates in the creation of a ‘subaltern counterpublic in Tunisia’, this blog’s embeddedness within Google’s network gives us cause to nuance our understanding of its resistance status.<sup>195</sup>

### **Ben Mhenni’s ‘overreading’ and the *pacte autobiographique***

While I have sought to nuance the supposed revolutionary status of the blog by drawing attention to its embeddedness within a capitalist network of data flows and exchanges, it is nevertheless important to address the ways in which the author ‘overreads’ regime censorship

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<sup>194</sup> This message appears at the top of the page when one first accesses the blog.

<sup>195</sup> Alba, *Tunisian Women’s Writing in French The Fight for Emancipation: From Ben Ali’s Rise to Power to the Eve of the Tunisian Revolution, 1987–2011*, p. 162.

and violence via her multimodal life narrative, thereby adding to the palimpsest of Tunisian history.<sup>196</sup> I suggest that Ben Mhenni constructs a Lejeunian ‘pacte autobiographique’ with her readers, which relies on the principle that the narrated ‘I’ is the same person as the narrating ‘I’.<sup>197</sup> According to Linda Warley, we can find digital evocations of Lejeune’s *pacte autobiographique* on personal home pages online:

‘[...] personal home pages conform to (at least in the most general ways) Philippe Lejeune’s pact, the tacit understanding between author and reader that the narrator and the author are the same person. While the authorial signature in the case of a home page might be an invented name, most of the time authors of personal home pages do use their real names and claim to be the persons there represented. [...] If we understand genres in terms of what they do rhetorically and how they are used, not by way of some list of common features that they share, then home pages are undeniably another genre of life writing. Home page authors use machines and materials, including computer hardware and software, to construct representations of their identities just as other autobiographers have used pen and paper.’<sup>198</sup>

In the case of *A Tunisian Girl*/بنية تونسية, we have no reason to conclude that the identity presented on the page is a hoax: several details appear to authenticate the author’s identity, from her self-portrait photographs to the link to her Instagram page. The presence of her email address provides a further authenticating detail here. Additionally, as the page includes her full name, Lina Ben Mhenni, in the ‘Contributeur’ section, we can think of this as providing a kind of authorial signature for the artist. When compared with analogue forms of media, a distinctive feature of the personal home page is the close proximity that it enables the reader to have with the author. In giving her readers her email address, she demonstrates that she is willing to engage in a kind of dialogue with them.

Given the context of heavy regime censorship in Tunisia prior to the revolution, the concepts of narrative authenticity and referentiality were highly important to the author who

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<sup>196</sup> See my discussion of ‘overreading’ in the introduction to this thesis.

<sup>197</sup> Lejeune, p. 14.

<sup>198</sup> Linda Warley, ‘Reading the Autobiographical in Personal Home Pages’, in *Tracing the Autobiographical*, ed. by Marlene Kadar and others (Waterloo, Canada: Wilfrid Laurier UP, 2005), pp. 25–42 (pp. 27–28).

sought to build trust with her readers and position herself as a reliable participant in, witness to, and recorder of, the revolution. Although Western scholarship has previously proclaimed the impossibility of the genre of autobiography because of the supposed ‘death of the author’, I propose that Ben Mhenni’s narrative—and its important challenge to autocracy and censorship—gives us cause to revisit debates on authorship and definitions of the genre of life narrative.<sup>199</sup> Writing her blog as a form of resistance to a regime which sought to silence and oppress her, Ben Mhenni claims a strategic position from which to speak and, in so doing, emphasises the importance of constructing a stable identity in her life narrative.

Importantly, Ben Mhenni was creating her blog at a time when Ben Ali’s Ministère de la Communication and l’Agence tunisienne d’Internet had imposed widespread bans on social media and news outlet websites, including some well-known domains such as Facebook, YouTube, DailyMotion, Blogspot and Al Jazeera.<sup>200</sup> The state had also closed down many blogs that voiced opposition to Ben Ali’s regime, including Ben Mhenni’s own blogs.<sup>201</sup> While contemporary social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, tend to foster the fetishisation of the individual online, I argue that Ben Mhenni’s blog treats ‘individuality’ as a necessary political tool to challenge censorship in contemporary Tunisia. On 9<sup>th</sup> November 2010, Ben Mhenni wrote in her blog that she believed the internet to be the last domain of free-expression available to Tunisian citizens, describing her experience of censorship as:

Une expérience à laquelle j’ai donné beaucoup de mon temps, de mon énergie et même de ma chair. J’y donne encore, et j’y donnerai encore plus car je crois que la libération des peuples passe par la libération de l’information. De nos jours, le seul moyen d’information qui reste relativement libre est l’internet, c’est pour cela que je suis prête à faire tous les sacrifices et les efforts nécessaires pour libérer ce moyen

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<sup>199</sup> See my discussion of poststructuralist challenges to authorship in the introduction to this thesis.

<sup>200</sup> See the author’s discussion of censorship in Lina Ben Mhenni, *Tunisian Girl: Blogueuse pour un printemps arabe* (Montpellier: Indigène, 2011), pp. 4–8.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid.

d'information.<sup>202</sup>

Towards the end of this same post, she instructs Tunisian readers to use a proxy to access links to other political articles and content that have been censored by the regime: a further act of digital 'overreading'. In this way, the blog becomes a tool that helps other citizens to circumvent the strict online surveillance and repression. By speaking out about censorship, and by educating others on how to resist it, her work challenges and disrupts Ben Ali's monopoly of power over public narratives. On 17<sup>th</sup> November 2010, furthermore, Ben Mhenni wrote a post entitled '7ell blog/ Commence à bloguer/ Let's blog'.<sup>203</sup> In this post, she reaches out to other Tunisian readers and encourages them to also take up the activity of blogging. She includes the following screenshot taken from the blog '7ellblog' that she helped to launch:

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<sup>202</sup> Lina Ben Mhenni, 'Mon expérience avec la censure et le blogging (épisode 1)', *A Tunisian Girl*, 2010 <<http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.co.uk/2010/11/mon-experience-avec-la-censure-et-le.html>> [accessed 19 July 2017].

<sup>203</sup> Lina Ben Mhenni, '7ell Blog/ Commence à bloguer/ Let's blog', *A Tunisian Girl*, 2010 <<http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.co.uk/2010/11/7ell-blog-commence-bloguer.html#!/tcmback>> [accessed 20 November 2017].



**Figure 1, Lina Ben Mhenni, ‘Blog Post: 7ell blog/ Commence à bloguer/ Let’s blog, A Tunisian Girl/بنية تونسية, screenshot, 2010.**

Given the context of heavy state censorship of the internet in Tunisia at the time, I suggest that this post evokes the extent to which, for Ben Mhenni, the personal is political. She does not encourage her readers to create ‘des blogs contestataires, politiques, ou d’activisme’; rather, she seeks to help them to ‘à écrire, et à s’exprimer’. In this respect, her call-to-action recalls Latiri’s statement, discussed above, that the first-person narrative is political in Tunisia because ‘one of the challenges of the revolution is the birth of the individual’.<sup>204</sup> Indeed, according to Latiri, writers who convey their diversity through the medium of writing participate in a collective challenge to monolithic paradigms for identity.<sup>205</sup> The multilingual title of the blog, ‘7ell blog/ Commence à bloguer/ Let’s blog’ aptly symbolises Ben Mhenni’s commitment to expressing her diverse identity and to connecting with a transnational audience.

<sup>204</sup> Latiri, *A Return to Tunis after the Revolution: Nostalgia, Taking Part, Narrating*.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.



The author also emphasises the importance of controlling the representation of her identity within the online space and articulates resistance to her image being adapted and overwritten by others. In a post entitled ‘Mauvaises Intentions’, published on 9<sup>th</sup> November 2010, she reveals that her own self-portrait image has been taken up by another blogger and edited with photoshop.<sup>206</sup> In the original image, Ben Mhenni holds a sign with writing in Arabic that denounces censorship; it can be translated into English as: ‘This is my handwriting, and this is my word. 404 Ammar enough; leave me alone. Tunisian Girl’.<sup>207</sup> Note that 404 Ammar is the nickname that Tunisian internet users use for the authority responsible for Internet censorship. In the photo-shopped image, the text has been edited and can be translated into English as: ‘Leave Ammar, and allow the proxy, and 404 silly thing.’<sup>208</sup> The editing of the image may bring to mind Jason Bengtson’s theory of the digital palimpsest in information science: the idea of data being deleted or partially overwritten.<sup>209</sup> In Ben Mhenni’s blog post, she puts both of the images—the original and the edited one—side by side and states: ‘Non seulement la modification est nulle mais celui qui a fait ça n’a pas pensé à l’impact d’une telle action sur toute une cause : celle de la lutte contre la censure.’<sup>210</sup> She thus shows an awareness of the instability of her self-image in the digital environment as it is subject to reproduction and mutation. In publishing the original image alongside the doctored image, and denouncing those who photoshopped it, she reclaims her self-image and life narrative.

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<sup>206</sup> Lina Ben Mhenni, ‘Mauvaises Intentions’, *A Tunisian Girl*, 2010  
<<http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.co.uk/2010/11/mauvaises-intentions.html>> [accessed 20 November 2017].

<sup>207</sup> Ibid.

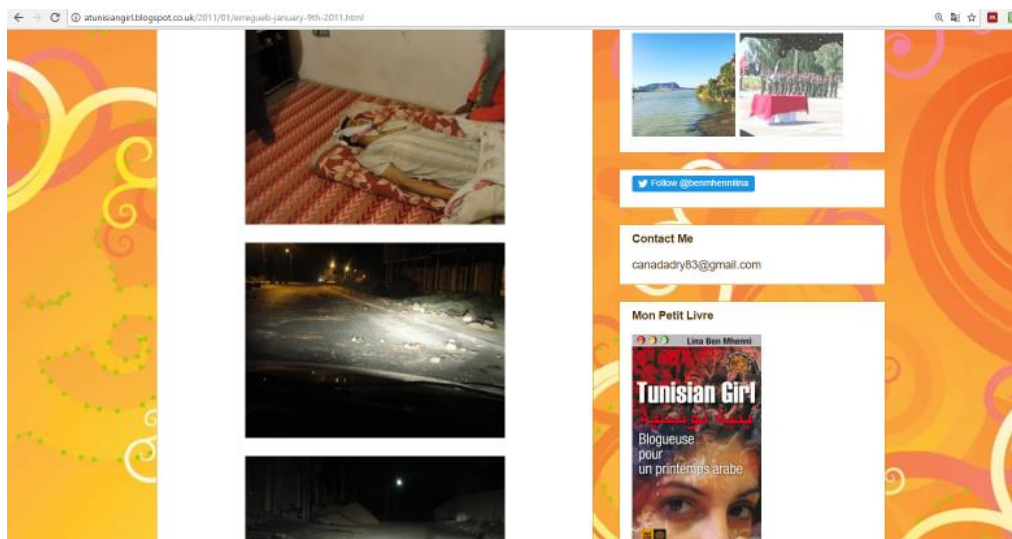
<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

<sup>209</sup> Jason Bengtson, ‘Preparing for the Age of the Digital Palimpsest’, *Library Hi Tech*, 30.3 (2012), 513–22 (p. 513).

<sup>210</sup> Lina Ben Mhenni, ‘Mauvaises Intentions’, *A Tunisian Girl*, 2010  
<<http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.co.uk/2010/11/mauvaises-intentions.html>> [accessed 20 November 2017].



**Figure 2, Screen captures taken from Lina Ben Mhenni, ‘Erregueb January 9<sup>th</sup>’, A Tunisian Girl/بنيّة تونسية, 2011**



**Figure 3, Screen captures taken from Lina Ben Mhenni, ‘Erregueb January 9<sup>th</sup>’, A Tunisian Girl/بنيّة تونسية, 2011**

We may ask if Ben Mhenni deliberately objectifies herself via photography as a means to claim political and feminist agency.<sup>211</sup> Although photography’s supposed referential

<sup>211</sup> See my earlier discussion of Spivak’s concept of ‘strategic essentialism’ in the introduction to this thesis.

status has been challenged and contested since the dawn of poststructuralism, it is still taken for granted in the media and popular culture. Marianne Hirsch and Linda Haverty Rugg both argued compellingly in 1997 that the referential status of photographs cannot be completely dismissed.<sup>212</sup> According to Rugg, ‘If, as inhabitants of the poststructuralist world, we feel obliged to discount photography’s evidential power, we should also remind ourselves of the small army of photographic selves that verify our status and agency in the world on passports, drivers’ licences, and so on.’<sup>213</sup> Hirsch argues, furthermore, that ‘[a]s much as I remind myself that photographs are as essentially constructed as any other representational form, that every part of the image can be manipulated and even fabricated, especially with ever more sophisticated digital technologies, I return to Barthes’s basic “ça a été” (“this has been”) and an unassailable belief in reference and a notion of truth in the picture.’<sup>214</sup> Indeed, as Paul John Eakin argues in his discussion of *La Chambre claire*, ‘When the austere tenets of post-structuralist theory about the subject came into conflict with the urgent demands of private experience, Barthes turned for solace to [...] photography’.<sup>215</sup> These discussions concerning the referential quality—if not certain status—of photographs is important to bear in mind as we analyse Ben Mhenni’s photographic testimony of the height of the revolution, as well as her long-term battle with her chronic illness. Indeed, I suggest that she employs photographs in order to convey evidence of the *ça a été* and, in so doing, reinforce the strategic political identity from which she enacts her ‘overreading’ of the regime.<sup>216</sup>

In her consideration of the relationship between critical posthumanism and the genre of autobiography, Laurie McNeill argues that the digital context ‘creates opportunities for

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<sup>212</sup> Linda Haverty Rugg, *Picturing Ourselves: Photography and Autobiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), p. 2. Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 6.

<sup>213</sup> Rugg, p.2.

<sup>214</sup> Hirsch, p. 6.

<sup>215</sup> Paul John Eakin, *Touching the World : Reference in Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p.4.

<sup>216</sup> Barthes, *La Chambre claire*.

new ways of thinking and creating selves and stories, but also reinscribes conventional categories and values of human experience.<sup>217</sup> Indeed, while the digital medium allows for experimental and fragmentary forms of expression, Ben Mhenni's blog may call to mind in fact more traditional and humanist forms of self-representation. I suggest that her construction of a stable narrative identity in her photographs works to affirm her agency in the context of a regime which had tried hard to silence her. For example, the triptych of self-portrait photographs, placed at the top of the blog's frame [See Figure 2], may be read in relation to theories of strategic essentialism. Indeed, the author's facial expressions are serious, angry and defiant, while her use of the microphone in the left-hand image—in what appears to be a public forum—reinforces the message that the blog is a platform for resisting censorship. The right-hand image, in which she is looking at herself in the mirror, communicates self-reflection and a sense of doubling, and evokes the autobiographical dimension of the blog. In addition, the amateur quality of the photographs suggest that this is not a professional blog but a grassroots narrative of an everyday citizen. This amateur quality of the media contributes to reinforcing the authenticity of the narrative, as well as to constructing the *pacte autobiographique*.

Nevertheless, it is important to nuance my point regarding Ben Mhenni's construction of a unified 'self' in her blog. There are also elements of the narrative that come together in a dissonant relationship and gesture to her heterogenous identity. As they navigate the blog, the reader is presented with a range of conflicting colours, frames, images, videos, facial expressions, fonts, links and verbal languages. The reader's eye is drawn to different aspects of the screen and readers may respond differently depending on what they find to be most visually exciting or interesting on the page. They may choose to read a blog post from 2009

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<sup>217</sup> Laurie McNeill, 'There Is No 'I' in Network: Social Networking Sites and Posthuman Auto/Biography', *Biography*, 35.1 (2012), 65–82 (p. 80).

and then click on one from 2012, which is immediately available on the right-hand side of the page in the ‘Archive’ section. Indeed, the reader does not navigate a blog in a continuous, linear manner but can ‘surf’ it in many different and multidirectional ways. Returning to Adami’s theory of a multimodal framework to analyse digital texts, we can see that there are different—and dissonant—modes at work in Figures 1 and 2.<sup>218</sup> The bright orange background of the blog’s template obviously clashes with the photograph of the dead martyr. With its swirling design, the background may be qualified as cheerful, youthful and frivolous. Yet, although it was selected by the author when she created the blog, suggesting that she identifies with the style, it nevertheless contrasts starkly with the sombre black and white self-portraits at the top of the template in which the author portrays herself as a serious activist. In this respect, the conflicting signifiers on the screen suggest the extent to which Ben Mhenni’s identity, like her blog, is composed of dissonant elements and cannot be ‘fixed’ by the reader.

### **A multilingual palimpsest**

Moreover, Ben Mhenni’s use of different languages in her blog evokes her multivalent, transnational and heterogenous identity. Indeed, her multilingual strategy liberates her from the limitations of the monolingual national identity outlined in the Constitution.<sup>219</sup>

Furthermore, the bilingual title of the blog, *A Tunisian Girl*/بنية تونسية, overlays the triptych of self-portrait photographs at the top of the blog’s platform and evokes the author’s linguistic hybridity. In referring to herself in the third person, and in English, as ‘a Tunisian girl’, Ben

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<sup>218</sup> Adami, p. 48.

<sup>219</sup> See my discussion in the introduction to this thesis of the monolingual national identity that was outlined in the country’s 1959 Constitution.

Mhenni is viewing herself from the perspective of a Western reader. Yet, as the English is immediately followed by the Arabic translation, this suggests that she also views herself as ‘a Tunisian girl’ who belongs to an Arabic-speaking community. The absence of French in the title is noteworthy and may bring to mind Martin’s argument that many francophone creative producers in postcolonial contexts are ‘de-orbiting’ away from France as their former centre.<sup>220</sup> Indeed, the title of the blog suggests that the language of the former coloniser is not central to Ben Mhenni’s identity as a ‘Tunisian Girl’. Her chosen languages—French, English, Arabic, *Arabizi* and German—constitute different linguistic layers in her palimpsestic narrative. Given the activist character of the blog, Ben Mhenni’s choice to write in these different languages suggests her desire to communicate her narrative of the revolution ‘from below’ to a transnational audience beyond Tunisia. Via her blog, she is able to communicate a grassroots perspective on the revolution that thwarts Ben Ali’s distorted state media narratives of the protests. However, it is important to note that Ben Mhenni does not provide translations or glossaries for her readers who are unfamiliar with all the languages; rather, she expresses herself in whichever language she chooses without apparent concern for her reader’s linguistic abilities, comfort or user experience on the web page. Additionally, while many websites provide visitors with the option to translate the content into their chosen language, typically for commercial reasons, Ben Mhenni’s blog includes a chaotic mix of posts written in different languages. For example, in December 2010, at the dawn of the popular uprisings, Ben Mhenni posted eleven times in English; ten times in French; six times in Arabic, and five times in German. There is no explanation provided as to the choice of language and the reason why most of her posts are in English and French; nor is there any consistency or pattern in her choice of language. This strategy notably has the benefit of thwarting authoritative interpretations of her identity: as most readers cannot

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<sup>220</sup> Martin, ‘Cinéma-Monde: De-Orbiting Maghrebi Cinema’ (p. 468).

understand all of the languages that she uses, they are unable to fix her identity or gain a sense of mastery over her text. In this way, she also runs the risk of alienating readers who cannot speak all of these languages by putting them into contact with foreign elements.

Yet in spite of the multiple and complex identity evoked in Ben Mhenni's multilingual strategy, we can nevertheless find a tendency toward presenting herself visually in more traditional forms of self-representation. I now turn to discuss how she employs photographs to objectify her body and, in so doing, 'overread' her experience of extreme illness.

### **'Overreading' her chronic illness**

Additionally, she uses photographs to communicate her long-term experience with Lupus, the disease which eventually took her life in 2020. Throughout the blog, the author is forthcoming with the details of her illness, describing the physical pain that she endured for years. On 15<sup>th</sup> February 2011, the fourth anniversary of her kidney transplant, she created a post entitled *Merci* which she dedicates to her parents: 'Maman ton rein vis [*sic*] en moi. Papa je n'oublierai jamais les heures que tu passais à me tenir la main pendant toutes mes séances d'hémodialyse.'<sup>221</sup> Below the text is a family portrait of the author with her family sitting around a dinner table [Figure 4]. There is a lot of food on the table and a shiny decoration hangs on the cupboard behind them, which indicates that they are celebrating a holiday together. This image of domestic family life contrasts greatly with the images of state violence enacted on bodies in the revolution, as I shall discuss further below. It shows Ben Mhenni eating and sharing with her family in a nurturing and protected environment. In this

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<sup>221</sup> Lina Ben Mhenni, 'Merci', *A Tunisian Girl*, 2011 <<http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.co.uk/2011/02/merci.html>> [accessed 25 May 2017].

way, the reader is invited to see her as a daughter and a sister rather than as purely an activist. We can also note that Ben Mhenni's choice of clothing in this image could be classed as Western. In contrast to her mother who is wearing a modest black top, Ben Mhenni's collar bone, arms and shoulders are uncovered. She portrays herself as a young and liberal woman who does not adhere to conservative Islamic codes of dress. Indeed, her outfit may bring to mind the name of her earlier blog, *Nightclubbeuse*, in the sense that a nightclub evokes a space of youth culture, dancing and freedom from conservative paradigms. Directly below this photograph she includes a triptych of photographs showing the scars left behind from the transplant [Figure 5]. The decision to place the triptych directly below the family portrait suggests that the author is inviting us to read these images together: the scars are symbolic of the precious vital organ that her mother gave to her to enhance her quality of life. Additionally, there is an ambiguity to these photographs as we do not know if they refer to Ben Mhenni's or her mother's scars—or both. In this way, the photographs of the torsos evoke the close bond between Ben Mhenni and her mother.

While the 'Merci' post suggests a sense of gratitude for her partial recovery, a later post reveals the author's feelings of disgust for her scarred body. She exclaims : 'Que je déteste ce corps malade et déformé !'<sup>222</sup> In this statement, the author experiences her body as grotesque and alien to her sense of self. In exploring her illness in the blog, and the effect it has had on her body, the acts of writing and imaging become a form of therapy. As Susan Sontag states, 'To photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed. It means putting oneself into a certain relation to the world that feels like knowledge—and, therefore, like power.'<sup>223</sup> Self-portrait photography arguably allows Ben Mhenni to mediate her relationship

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<sup>222</sup> Lina Ben Mhenni, 'Délires d'une Blogueuse Dégoûtée', *A Tunisian Girl*, 2011  
<<http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.co.uk/2011/12/delires-dune-blogueuse-degoutee.html>> [accessed 19 July 2017].

<sup>223</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1973), 4.



with her ill body; by becoming an ‘other’ to herself, she gains both a sense of mastery and a therapeutic distance.



Figure 4, Lina Ben Mhenni, ‘Blog Post: Merci’, *A Tunisian Girl*/بنية تونسية, digital images, 2011.



Figure 5, Lina Ben Mhenni, ‘Blog Post: Merci’, *A Tunisian Girl*/بنية تونسية, digital images, 2011.

Additionally, in exposing her unclothed, diseased body via close-up photographs of her surgery scars, she employs photography as a tool to resist societal taboos within Tunisia that restrict women's bodies, particularly ill and 'unfeminine' bodies, to the private sphere. Indeed, the blog permits the author to transform her experience of organ failure and transplant from a private, individual affair to a collective, public one. According to Déjeux, Maghrebi women, including Tunisian women, are traditionally expected to know their place and not expose their intimate lives to the public: '[la confession de la femme] dans l'autobiographie romanesque particulièrement, est difficilement tolérable pour certains, car il s'agit de démesure.'<sup>224</sup> Lunt also states in her thesis that : '[...] une femme qui écrit sur un ton personnel ne se conforme pas aux bienséances'.<sup>225</sup> In exposing her illness and her surgery scars, Ben Mhenni engages with collective questions about censorship and explores topics that have traditionally been taboo. A recurring concern, furthermore, for bodily images and metaphors suggests a desire to communicate physical presence, with photographs of bodies constituting guarantors of not only the author's identity, but also of her fellow citizens and revolutionary martyrs. In this sense, her performance of identity, via the blog, is historically situated, embodied and relational.

In the next stage of my argument, I consider how the metaphor of the palimpsest emerges in Ben Mhenni's attempts to superimpose her own female perspective on contemporary Tunisian politics while suppressing—or overwriting—dominant state narratives via her photographic practice.

### **Photographic 'overreading' in Tunis**

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<sup>224</sup> Jean Déjeux, 'La littérature féminine de langue française au Maghreb', in *Littératures Maghrébines : Colloque Jacqueline Arnaud*, ed. by Jacqueline Arnaud (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990), p.152.

<sup>225</sup> Lunt, p.21.

The process of feminist overreading—in this distinctive Tunisian context—can be compared to the way in which someone adds to a palimpsestic structure while suppressing, or erasing, what is already there. Ben Mhenni can be seen to reappropriate Ben Ali’s state narratives, both visual and verbal, and add her own layer of feminist interpretation to them. Her use of amateur photographs of herself and other Tunisian citizens, which she took herself in public spaces and domestic settings at the height of the revolution, allows her to ‘overread’ the staged and inauthentic state-controlled media images that were being disseminated to Tunisian citizens at the time on the national television station, TV 7. In her printed memoir from June 2011, *Tunisian Girl: Blogeuse pour un printemps arabe*, the author quotes a section of Ben Ali’s speech, broadcast on TV 7 on 28<sup>th</sup> December 2010, in which he attempts to suppress the growing resistance movement and invalidate the allegations of regime violence and corruption.<sup>226</sup> She provides the following quotation:

L’ampleur exagérée qu’ont pris ces événements à cause de leur instrumentalisation politique par certaines parties qui ne veulent pas le bien de leur patrie et recourent à certaines chaînes de télévision étrangères qui diffusent des allégations mensongères sans vérification et se fondent sur la dramatisation [...] et la diffamation médiatique hostile à la Tunisie.<sup>227</sup>

In addition to these statements, Ben Ali also staged a photography shoot in which he stood in a hospital room over the body of a man who was supposed to be Bouazizi: the now well-known ‘martyr’ of the revolution. According to Ben Mhenni,

Nous avons dû, encore, subir son spectacle au chevet d’une momie couverte de bandages qu’il prétendait être la dépouille de Mohamed Bouazizi. Les Tunisiens, rompus à ces ignobles mises en scène, n’ont pas manqué de remarquer que le président était entré au service des soins intensifs sans avoir pris la peine de passer la blouse stérilisée de rigueur.<sup>228</sup>

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<sup>226</sup> Ben Mhenni, *Tunisian Girl : Blogeuse pour un printemps arabe* (Montpellier: Indigène, 2011). Unlike the multilingual blog, this book was written exclusively in French. Nina Wardleworth has addressed this book in her article ‘The Roman Maghrébin in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring’; however, she does not engage with the form or content of the online narrative. Nina Wardleworth, ‘The Roman Maghrébin in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 20.1 (2016), 141–49.

<sup>227</sup> Ben Mhenni, *Tunisian Girl: Blogeuse pour un printemps arabe*, p. 15.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

In contrast to the constructed ‘spectacle’ that Ben Mhenni perceives in the dictator’s hospital photoshoot, which was designed to appease the public and quell opposition movements, her amateur photographs and anti-regime blog posts convey a form of history writing ‘from below’ that challenges official state narratives. In addition, if we recall our earlier discussion of Ben Mhenni’s anger that someone had used photoshop to manipulate and distort a photograph of herself, her inclusion of amateur photographs may also convey the author’s concern for authenticity. The term *petit récit* derives from Jean-Francois Lyotard’s critique of the grand narratives of modernity.<sup>229</sup> It refers to a narrative which is modest, locally based and often fragmentary in nature. As Elleke Boehmer has argued, it provides a counterpoint to ‘the so-called grand narrative of the official, male-authored and authorised nation.’<sup>230</sup> Ben Mhenni’s blog posts provide locally based and female perspective or *petit récit* of the revolution ‘from below’. While her decision to include amateurish photographs may have arisen from a practical choice (she may not have had access to higher resolution photography equipment), the aesthetic that she ultimately creates dramatises the citizen’s perspective as a counterpoint to glossy, high-resolution photographs of the Ben Ali regime.

Moreover, Laura U. Marks argues that the ‘Arab glitch’—the idea of sudden technical faults appearing on the surface of the screen—in low-resolution film points to a position of being ‘on the ground’.<sup>231</sup> If we look closely at the photograph in Figure 6, a grieving mother’s face is obscured because of the low-quality camera and its lack of focus. The low quality of the photographs suggests that they have been taken on someone’s phone and reflect a citizen’s, rather than a journalist’s, perspective. This photograph is featured in a blog post

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<sup>229</sup> See: Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

<sup>230</sup> Elleke Boehmer, *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*, p. 220.

<sup>231</sup> Laura U. Marks, ‘Arab Glitch’ in *Uncommon Grounds: New Media and Critical Practices in North Africa and the Middle East*, ed. by Anthony Downey (London and New York: IB Tauris, 2014), 257-271 (p.257).

from 9<sup>th</sup> January 2011, five days before Ben Ali and his family were forced to flee Tunisia. In this post, Ben Mhenni provides evidence of the state's violent attack on the revolutionaries in Regueb.<sup>232</sup> She includes a series of five photographs that are placed in a vertical column underneath a short paragraph of text [see Figures 6 – 10]. The photograph in Figure 6 shows a young man's corpse in his family home. We know from a 2017 post that the woman sitting on the right-hand side of the image is the victim's mother who had asked Ben Mhenni to come to the house to take photographs in the immediate wake of the tragedy.<sup>233</sup> The *mise-en-scène* anchors the body in a domestic, feminine and maternal environment. The bright colours and patterns of the soft furnishings are at odds with the violence and suffering portrayed in the scene. Whereas the government sought to portray the revolutionaries as terrorists, this image restores the humanity of the dead martyr, inviting the viewer to see him as someone's son. Photography has an important role to play here as it constitutes, as I have said above, a form of proof of the Barthesian 'ça-a-été'.<sup>234</sup> It is used to publicise the brutality of the regime, humanise the victims and contest official media narratives of the events. While the glitch in the photograph partially obscures the photograph, it arguably contributes to the authenticity—the referential status—of the image because it provides an important counterpoint to the glossy and staged photographs churned out by the regime at the height of the uprisings.

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<sup>232</sup> Regueb is a town and commune in the Sidi Bou Zid Governorate in central Tunisia.

<sup>233</sup> Lina Ben Mhenni, 'Regueb January 9th, 2011', *A Tunisian Girl*, 2017  
<<http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.co.uk/2017/01/regueb-january-9th-2011.html>> [accessed 20 July 2017].

<sup>234</sup> Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: Note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, Cahiers du Cinéma, 1980).



**Figure 6: Lina Ben Mhenni, Blog post: ‘Erregueb January 9th, 2011’, 2011, photograph.**



**Figure 7: Lina Ben Mhenni, Blog post: ‘Erregueb January 9th, 2011’, 2011, photograph.**



**Figure 8: Lina Ben Mhenni, Blog post: ‘Erregueb January 9th, 2011’, 2011, photograph.**





**Figure 9: Lina Ben Mhenni, Blog post: ‘Erregueb January 9th, 2011’, 2011, photograph.**



**Figure 10: Lina Ben Mhenni, Blog post: ‘Erregueb January 9th, 2011’, 2011, photograph.**

I suggest that the photographs do not only portray what *has been*; they also evoke Barthes’ perception of the present tense (le Temps *tout de suite, sur-le-champ*) in a photograph’s punctum.<sup>235</sup> Indeed, Barthes compared the punctum in a photograph to a Japanese haiku poem:

on dit « développer une photo »; mais ce que l’action chimique développe, c’est l’indéveloppable, une essence (de blessure), ce qui ne peut se transformer, mais seulement se répéter [...]. Ceci rapproche la Photographie (certaines photographies) du Haïku. Car la notation d’un haïku, elle aussi, est indéveloppable : tout est donné, sans provoquer l’envie ou même la possibilité d’une expansion rhétorique. Dans les deux

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<sup>235</sup> Roland Barthes, *La Préparation du roman I et II : cours et séminaires au collège de France (1978-1979 et 1979-1980)*, ed. by Nathalie Léger (Paris: Seuil/IMEC, 2003), p. 85.



cas, on pourrait, on devrait parler d'une immobilité vive : liée à un détail (à un détonateur), une explosion fait une petite étoile à la vitre du texte ou de la photo.<sup>236</sup>

In Figure 7 above, there are punctum details in the photograph that evoke 'une immobilité vive'.<sup>237</sup> The beam of light from the vehicle illuminates an empty space in the road, which is surrounded by broken bricks and rocks. Ben Mhenni's placement of this photograph directly beneath that of Ben Ibrahim's corpse suggests that they should be read together. In this way, the depicted scene evokes a site of violence (the 'blessure' of the punctum) and death.<sup>238</sup> Moreover, although the bricks and rocks appear to have been scattered in a random formation, it is possible to perceive a ring-like parameter, which may bring to mind a ritualistic stone circle, which contributes to the photograph's ambiguity. The dips in the sand, found toward the centre of the ring and in the spotlight of the vehicle's beam, also evoke the traces of a body that could have laid there. The haunting character of the image is further reinforced by the tensions between darkness and light, and between presence and absence. Indeed, we cannot see what—or who—lurks in the shadows of the image. In this respect, while the photograph has an evidence-giving function, capturing the traces of the past, it also has a present-tense quality because of its haunting character. It not only gestures to the 'ça a été'; it also evokes the 'c'est ça!' of Barthes' concept of the punctum detail in a photograph.<sup>239</sup>

In addition, there is no detailed 'expansion rhétorique' to accompany the images.<sup>240</sup>

She simply stated:

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<sup>236</sup> Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: note sur la photographie*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, ed. by Éric Marty (Paris: Seuil, 2002), pp. 785–892 (p. 828).

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Barthes, *La Préparation du roman I et II: cours et séminaires au collège de France (1978-1979 et 1979-1980)*, p. 86.

<sup>240</sup> Barthes, *La Chambre claire: note sur la photographie* (p. 828).

Tonight, I went to Regueb after hearing about clashes between demonstrators and the police and the death of several people killed shot by the police. Today 5 people were killed : Manel Boallagui (26) and mother of two children, Raouf Kaddoussi (26), Mohamed Jabli Ben Ali (19), Moadh Ben Amor Khlifi (20), Nizar Ben Ibrahim (22). I can't write the details now! I'll do it later. I'll let the pictures explain everything.<sup>241</sup>

This quotation suggests that the author's immediate goal was to upload and disseminate the photographs to her followers as quickly as possible. The short, staccato sentences also contribute to the urgency of her narrative. In addition, the title, 'Erregueb January 9<sup>th</sup>', provides no detail about the blog post's content. In focusing on the facts of the place, date, names and ages of the victims, she reinforces the testimonial emphasis of the post, as if she is recording the events for a court case. Furthermore, the fact that this post is, like the title of the blog, written in English, rather than French or Arabic, suggests an urgency to address an Anglophone international audience beyond Tunisia and to raise consciousness of the political situation. As the hastily written text involves many grammatical and formatting errors, and is written in a low standard of English, it can be qualified as amateur or non-professional and evokes the urgency of the post; it also suggests that the testimony is being provided from a grass-roots level. These visual and verbal modes work in synergy here to reinforce the agency and authenticity of Ben Mhenni's life narrative in contrast to Ben Ali's staged media spectacle in the hospital.

Furthermore, in the wake of severe police brutality, she photographs the wounded skin of Leila, a lawyer who was beaten by the police with a truncheon.<sup>242</sup> The photograph in Figure 11 is framed so that the wound is at the centre, which draws attention to the rupture of the skin. The distance between the camera and the flesh is minimal, and this close-up shot

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<sup>241</sup> Lina Ben Mhenni, 'Erregueb January 9th 2011', *A Tunisian Girl*, 2011  
<<http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.co.uk/2011/01/erregueb-january-9th-2011.html>> [accessed 20 March 2017].

<sup>242</sup> Ben Mhenni, 'Trace de l'agression de l'avocate Leila Ben Debba', *A Tunisian Girl*, 2010  
<<http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.co.uk/2010/12/trace-de-l-agression-de-l-avocate-leila.html>> [accessed 17 September 2017].

allows us to see the detailed marking of the bruise, which suggests the imprint of the truncheon, the variations in the bruise's purple colour and the texture of the red flesh emerging from the broken skin. We can also see that dirt has infiltrated the wound, suggesting contamination and invasion of the victim's body. It could be argued that the decision to frame the body in this way, omitting visual clues to the lawyer's identity, was a way for Ben Mhenni to protect her subject from the authorities. However, the title of the blog post includes the lawyer's full name, Leila Ben Debba, thus making her easily identifiable. The framing of the image cannot therefore be read as a form of identity protection. As the title of the blog post indicates, the photograph acts as a visual 'trace' of the violence enacted upon a particular subject. As the face of the victim is not shown, the photograph may resemble forensic evidence. Additionally, as it is difficult to make out what part of the body it is, there is a certain distancing effect at work too, through the use of the close-up. Yet beyond its evidence-giving function, the image may also elicit emotions that encourage empathy with the victim of the attack. For example, the framing of the photograph draws the viewer close to the texture of the subject's body and invites an intimate relationship with it. According to Laura U. Marks, haptic visuality is a way of looking that draws on bodily sense perception.<sup>243</sup> It is a kind of embodied looking distinct from the more common optic visuality.<sup>244</sup> The reader draws here on their own bodily memories of bruising, bleeding and cuts when they experience the image and 'feel' that site of rupture or unevenness. In addition, the photograph echoes the photographs of Ben Mhenni's scarred body as both draw attention to marked flesh. However, whereas the photograph of Leila's bruise highlights the state's violence, Ben

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<sup>243</sup>See: Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film : Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2000).

<sup>244</sup> Optical visuality is a way of looking associated with a distant view of a complete subject and is associated with Renaissance perspective. The viewer is distinct from the object beheld.

Mhenni's triptych of her scars highlights the loving relationship between mother and daughter.



**Figure 11: Lina Ben Mhenni, Blog post: ‘Trace de l’agression de l’avocate Leila Ben Debba’, photograph, 2010.**

In addition, Ben Mhenni includes photographs in her blog that convey the way in which Tunisian citizens undertook a visual ‘overreading’ of public spaces in Tunis at the height of the uprisings. As Christina Horvath argues in her article ‘Peripheral Palimpsests: Competing Layers of Memory and Commemoration in Contemporary Banlieue Narratives’, ‘the palimpsest metaphor has emerged as a key analytical tool in the study of great metropolises such as London, New York, Paris or Berlin.’<sup>245</sup> According to Sheringham, the history of Paris is ‘the product of accretion, juxtaposition and transformation and this history is made available to us on the surface’.<sup>246</sup> He also argues that Patrick Modiano turns Paris into a

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<sup>245</sup> Christina Horvath, ‘Peripheral Palimpsests: Competing Layers of Memory and Commemoration in Contemporary Banlieue Narratives’, *Francosphères*, 3.2 (2014), 187–200 (p. 187).

<sup>246</sup> Michael Sheringham, ‘Archiving’, in *Restless Cities*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont and Gregory Dart (London: Verso, 2010), pp. 1–17 (p. 12).

palimpsest in *Dora Bruder*.<sup>247</sup> Moreover, Horvath draws attention to Salman Rushdie's concept of an 'Under World beneath Over World' and his association of urban marginality with the idea of a manuscript on which a new text coexists with traces of old ones.<sup>248</sup> Building on Rushdie's concept of tensions between under worlds and over worlds in a palimpsestic city, it is pertinent to consider how Ben Mhenni employs photographs to demonstrate how oppressed citizens reclaimed public space during the revolution. Indeed, in a blog post from 29<sup>th</sup> October 2010, entitled *Purple Attitude*, she includes photographs which suggest how the regime tried to pervade visibly all areas of life in Tunis. In a photograph taken in Ezzahra [Figure 12], a small coastal town on the outskirts of Tunis, the lampposts have been painted purple in preparation for the annual celebrations to commemorate the anniversary of Ben Ali's political coup, which used to take place on 7<sup>th</sup> November each year.<sup>249</sup> To further draw our attention to the colour purple, the author has deliberately given the images dark purple frames. Traditionally the colour associated with the Ben Ali regime, it dominated the cityscape and acted as 'a symbol of dictatorship and repression'.<sup>250</sup> While most Tunisian readers will recognise the link between the colour purple and the regime, readers from other national contexts may not make this link as the author provides no written explanation to contextualise the photographs. As they are embedded within a stream of other anti-government posts, they can be read as an allusion to the way in which the regime sought to render its power omnipresent through the visual language of purple paint in the cityscape. In framing the lampposts, they become works of art that stand like sculptures in the urban

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<sup>247</sup> 'As he walks, ghost-like, in Dora's and his own past footsteps, Modiano's pedestrian itineraries in the Paris of the 1990s turn the city into a palimpsest, a multi-decked set of archival traces relating to various points in the history of the city's streets and monuments.' Michael Sheringham and Richard Wentworth, 'City as Archive: A Dialogue between Theory and Practice', *Cultural Geographies*, 23.3 (2016), 517–23 (p. 521).

<sup>248</sup> Rushdie, quoted by Godfried Engbersen, 'The Urban Palimpsest. Urban Marginality in an Advanced Society', *Focaal -- European Journal of Anthropology*, 38 (2001), 125–38 (p. 126).

<sup>249</sup> Ben Mhenni, 'Purple Attitude'.

<sup>250</sup> IFA, 'Rosy Future. Contemporary Art from Tunisia', IFA, 2012 <<http://www.ifa.de/en/visual-arts/ifa-galleries/exhibitions/rosy-future/rania-werda.html>> [accessed 4 May 2017]. See, also, the Tunisian artist Rania Werda's treatment of the colour purple in the Rosy Future exhibition.

environment. If we look closely, we can see that some of the lamps are broken and the furthest is missing a lamp on the left-hand side. In this respect, there is irony in the image: while the authorities have taken the time to paint the lampposts purple, the symbol of Ben Ali's power, they have left the lamps in disrepair for the public. The sense of imbalance and brokenness in the image mirrors that of the corrupt and broken regime.



**Figure 12, Lina Ben Mhenni, 'Blog Post: Purple [sic] Is Old-Fashioned', *A Tunisian Girl*/بنية تونسية, photographs, 2011.**



**Figure 13, Lina Ben Mhenni, ‘Blog Post: Puprple [sic] Is Old-Fashioned’, *A Tunisian Girl*/بنية تونسية, photographs, 2011.**

Significantly, on 18<sup>th</sup> January 2011, four days after the dictator’s fall from power, Ben Mhenni shared images of Tunisian citizens reclaiming the public space by painting the purple railings with white paint.<sup>251</sup> The stagnation and erosion evoked in the first image contrasts here with the purification symbolised by the white paint and the dynamism of the citizens who are taking control of the city’s physical space. In juxtaposing these two images, the author draws attention to the ways in which Tunisian citizens are reclaiming the aesthetics of public space and the borders between the establishment and the public. Her digital manipulation of the images serves to further reinforce their message. While the earlier image is framed with a dark purple line, symbolising Ben Ali’s omnipotence, the post-14 January photographs are left untouched. The absence of the purple paint and frame in the new photograph subtly reminds us of the erosion of the dictator’s power. In overwriting the purple paint, the citizens can be seen to displace the layer of the ‘over world’ in the city’s palimpsest.<sup>252</sup>

The title of the post, ‘Puprple [sic] Is Old-Fashioned’, further reinforces the meanings conveyed through the juxtaposition of the images, while the unintended misspelling of the word ‘purple’ provides a clear indicator that the author does not edit her writing before publishing it and does not seek approval or feedback from external sources. This example supports my earlier argument that her blog is a platform for uncensored self-narrative.

Indeed, my argument here counters that of Jordana Blejmar who states that the blog, in

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<sup>251</sup> Lina Ben Mhenni, ‘Puprple [Sic] Is Old-Fashioned’, *A Tunisian Girl*, 2011 <<http://atunisiangirl.blogspot.co.uk/2011/01/puprple-is-old-fashioned.html>> [accessed 4 May 2017]. Note: the spelling mistake is in the original title.

<sup>252</sup> Rushdie, quoted by Engbersen (p. 126).

contrast to the diary, is usually ‘carefully edited’ as it is intended to be shared with an audience.<sup>253</sup> The lack of attention to detail in Ben Mhenni’s post suggests that she is neither primarily interested in the literary quality of her writing nor in refining the finished product; rather, she is interested in narrative as a process. With its present-tense or ‘live’ qualities, the above post offers insight into how she weaves fragments of her experiences into a semi-live online ‘performance’ of lived experience and consciousness. The use of English further suggests that she is seeking to engage a Western and Anglophone audience, inviting foreign journalists to see how things are changing in her country. Indeed, Ben Mhenni’s blog is a way for her to record and bear witness to the events of the revolution. Not only does she record subtle changes in the public space, as we have seen above, but she also plays an active role in the protests in the streets of Tunis, using photography as a form of visual proof and employing the digital platform to disseminate it to other citizens and audiences beyond Tunisia.

However, it is important to nuance my point concerning the blog as a fast-paced, uncensored and semi-live life narrative ‘in process’. As Claire Bishop asks in relation to participatory art, ‘are we paying too much attention to process at the expense of considering a project’s larger cultural meaning?’<sup>254</sup> She suggests that critics should focus not only on artistic process but on the lasting importance of an artwork (as a ‘product’) for society.<sup>255</sup> Furthermore, as Marwan Kraidy and Marina Krikorian argue, through ‘[...] the use of new media, local performances become international phenomena, further complicating the idea of a revolutionary public sphere.’<sup>256</sup> Crucially, the traces of the Tunisian citizens’ ephemeral

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<sup>253</sup> Jordana Blejmar, *Playful Memories: The Autofictional Turn in Post-Dictatorship Argentina* (New York: Springer, 2016), 84.

<sup>254</sup> Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012), p. 176.

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>256</sup> Marwan Kraidy and Marina Krikorian, ‘The Revolutionary Public Sphere: The Case of the Arab Uprisings’, *Communication and the Public*, 2.2 (2017), 111–19 (p. 118).



performance—the painting of the public sphere—are archived on Ben Mhenni’s blog and can be read and reinterpreted by new generations of readers across the world. In recording this event in her blog, she creates a form of ‘overreading’ that is not only personal and ‘in process’; the blog entry becomes a narrative product that has broader cultural importance for Tunisian society.

### **A palimpsestic reading of the blog’s ‘afterlife’**

According to Smith and Watson, autobiographical texts have ‘afterlives’ because they circulate, are remediated and acquire new meanings with new generations of readers.<sup>257</sup> I suggest that in the wake of Ben Mhenni’s death, the status of her blog has shifted from an active and dynamic site of life narrative to a more static space, where traces of the author’s identity are layered in a palimpsestic structure. Just as an archaeologist approaches sedimented layers of history in the earth, the reader can approach the chronological layers in the blog and unearth digital traces of both personal and collective memories. Furthermore, in reading the author’s posts on violence, illness and mourning in the aftermath of her death, I suggest that new layers of meaning may be produced as the contemporary reader forges associations between the past and the present contexts of reading.

Whereas Renov’s previous scholarship on the genre of blogging has emphasised its ‘present-tense’ status and compared it to performance art, the silent and still character of Ben Mhenni’s blog post-January 2020 is striking.<sup>258</sup> Indeed, if we look at the ‘archive’ section on

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<sup>257</sup> Smith and Watson, ‘The Afterlives of Those Who Write Themselves: Rethinking Autobiographical Archives’, p. 11.

<sup>258</sup> Renov, p. 238.

the right-hand side of the blog's interface, we can find details of the regular blogging activity that the author carried out from June 2009 until the day before her death in January 2020. In total, she posted 1070 times in ten and a half years and this large output of material suggests the way in which her blog provided a platform for a kind of long-term identity performance in continual process. Yet, in the wake of her death, no longer does the blog articulate a staging of the author's identity to an audience of readers *in time*; rather, it has become a memorial space which seems to project more into the past rather than into the future. In this respect, we may ask if the blog has now lost its semi-live status and been transformed into a life narrative product; in other words, a finished as opposed to on-going narrative, which now has an enduring legacy for Tunisian society? Returning to Bishop's call for critics to pay renewed attention to artworks as products rather than focusing exclusively on process, I suggest that we can apply this framework to Ben Mhenni's blog; rather than focusing on its past life as a kind of identity performance in process, it is now pertinent to consider the lasting cultural importance of the blog in its 'afterlife' as a site of personal and collective memory of the Tunisian revolution.<sup>259</sup> Yet, as we shall see, the blog—like all palimpsests—is not a fixed narrative with fixed meanings. While Ben Mhenni's narrative has become a famous text linked to the history of the Tunisian revolution, it is still vulnerable to erasure and digital re-writings.

In revisiting the blog two years after the author's death, new meanings arise from the text, particularly with regard to the photograph of the dead martyr's body that I discussed above. In bringing my gaze together with that of Ben Mhenni's, a palimpsest emerges and my own awareness of the author's death comingles with the author's emotional reaction to Ben Ibrahim's death. Indeed, I do not only see the corpse and the author's mourning; I also

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<sup>259</sup> Bishop (p. 176).

perceive the author's own death in the photograph.<sup>260</sup> Furthermore, it is possible to superimpose further resonances and evocations onto the story of the grieving mother. Indeed, when we view the photograph a decade after it was taken and published in the blog, it may evoke other sites of suffering and loss. To reiterate Silverman's theory of palimpsestic memory, '[t]he notion of memory as palimpsest provides us with a politico-aesthetic model of cultural memory in that it gives us a way of perceiving history in a non-linear way and memory as a hybrid and dynamic process across individuals and communities.'<sup>261</sup> Drawing on this idea, I suggest that it is possible to perceive connections with other sites of suffering beyond the particular event of Ben Ibrahim's death. Ben Ibrahim's mother may bring to mind the photograph featuring Ben Mhenni's mother [see Figure 4]—who now similarly grieves the loss of her child. Moreover, the image of the grieving mother here may also recall Mouna Jemal Siala's video artwork in Tunisia, *Le fils*, which features photographs of the artist's adolescent son. According to the artist, the video evokes a mother's fear and malaise that her son may be manipulated by extreme jihadi ideology and killed in the process.<sup>262</sup> While Jemal Siala's video artwork gestures to a different context of violence and maternal grieving, it is possible to perceive connections today between the deaths generated by radical Islamist violence—such as in the Sousse beach massacre of 2015—and the murders of citizens in the revolution that were perpetrated by Ben Ali's police force. In this respect, a palimpsestic reading of the photograph allows for new connections and associations to be forged with other sites of memory and grieving beyond the particular historical events conveyed in Ben Mhenni's blog.

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<sup>260</sup> This brings to mind again Barthes' association of the photographic medium with the idea of death—the 'ça a été'. Barthes, *La Chambre claire. notes sur la photographie*.

<sup>261</sup> Silverman, p. 5.

<sup>262</sup> Mouna Jemal Siala, 'Oeuvres', 2018 <<http://mounajemal.tn/portfolio-item/le-fils-something-else-cairo-2015-biennale-de-marrakech-2015/>> [accessed 24 January 2022].

## The fragility of the blog as a computerised palimpsest

Building further on the idea of palimpsestic memory in the blog, as well as the idea of a haunting presence in the photographs of suffering, it is pertinent to consider the extent to which Ben Mhenni's blog may be vulnerable to distortion or erasure in the wake of her death. Indeed, in its 'afterlife', the autobiographical footprint left on the blog takes on a spectral quality as it is hosted in an intangible format on the internet with *a priori* no authorial control from a real-life, embodied subject. Indeed, as Andrew Hoskins argues, the digital revolution has caused a shift from bounded forms of media (in which he includes broadcast media) to the 'post-parenthetical' era: the era of connective digital technologies.<sup>263</sup> According to Hoskins, 'the connective turn unleashes a whole set of unpredictable decay times and hyperconnective archives that presences and unsettles the past in new ways.'<sup>264</sup> Indeed,

the sudden abundance, pervasiveness, and immediacy of digital media, communication networks and archives [...] forces a view unprecedented in history. This turn drives an ontological shift in what memory is and what memory does, paradoxically both arresting and unmooring the past. It has re-engineered memory, liberating it from the traditional bounds of the spatial archive, the organization, the institution, and distributed it on a continuous basis via a connectivity between brains, bodies, and personal and public lives. This opening up of new ways of finding, sorting, sifting, using, seeing, losing and abusing the past, both imprisons and liberates active human remembering and forgetting.

Hoskins's reflections on the connective turn in memory give us cause to consider who is responsible for conserving the layers of culturally important narratives that are inscribed in Ben Mhenni's blog. How long will the blog be hosted on the site and how vulnerable is it to

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<sup>263</sup> Andrew Hoskins, *Digital Memory Studies: Media Past in Transition* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2017), pp. 13-14.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

deletion by the global megacorporation in the West which owns it? Indeed, just as writing on a palimpsestic piece of parchment may be erased or written over by other inscriptions, the digital archive of *A Tunisian Girl* may be deleted at any second by the host company, Google, which owns all the content on the blog. Crucially, the design of the blog has already changed since I last accessed the blog prior to her death—the banner of self-portrait photographs, featured above in Figure 2, has disappeared from the blog’s frame in a manner which evokes her physical disappearance in death.

Furthermore, we can already note an influx of adverts in the comments sections of posts. This is especially affecting in the last post that Ben Mhenni created a day before her death; of the 476 comments that were left, there appears to be only 26 from her readership—the rest are spam messages. Indeed, spammers are strategically creating ‘backlinks’ in the comments sections—linking Ben Mhenni’s blog to their websites—in an effort to elevate their domain authority and optimise the performance of their own commercial websites in search engine rankings. Via these hyperlinks, the spammers construct a palimpsestic relationship between Ben Mhenni’s blog and their own webpages. Although writing on blogs is highly different to vandalism of physical memorial spaces, we may ask if such an influx of spam should be tolerated on the personal archive of a culturally significant figure in the wake of her death. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to consider such an issue, this sort of question will no doubt be of interest to scholars in life narrative studies and memory studies in the future as more of our lives shift online.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have found that the figure of the palimpsest emerges in both form and content. In addition to considering the author’s blog posts and aesthetic choices—the

autobiographical layer—I also explored how the Google interface forms a foundational layer, which both fashions and limits Ben Mhenni’s creative self-expression. In highlighting the restrictions that the interface imposes on the author, I have sought to nuance interpretations of *A Tunisian Girl* as a site of free expression and resistance to hegemonic systems. Indeed, while the concept of ‘overreading’ implies narrating from a position of agency and power, it is important to bear in mind that this ‘computerised layer’—borrowing Manovich’s term—shapes Ben Mhenni’s digital resistance and also imposes constraints on her authorial agency.<sup>265</sup>

Notwithstanding these restrictions on her identity construction, I found nonetheless that the author includes details in her narrative that convey a stable identity position and which appear to construct a ‘pacte autobiographique’ with the reader.<sup>266</sup> While scholars within the field of poststructuralism have previously proclaimed the death of the author, and the subsequent impossibility of referentiality in autobiography, Ben Mhenni demonstrates the importance of claiming a position from which to speak. With her blog, she ‘overreads’ an oppressive political system which had disallowed her political identity, as an opposer of the regime, and threatened her with violence and imprisonment for speaking out. The blogging platform crucially allowed Ben Mhenni to circumvent the authoritative and silencing gaze of the state authorities, as well as the critical eyes of editors at publishing houses, and reach a vast, transnational and multilingual audience. Additionally, in employing multiple languages and referring to her trips abroad and cultural influences from across the globe, she insists on her contemporary and transnational outlook while also liberating herself from a limiting and oppressive monolingualism.

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<sup>265</sup> Manovich, p. 46.

<sup>266</sup> Lejeune, p. 14.

Furthermore, in beginning to address the status of Ben Mhenni's blog in the wake of her death, I have sought to explore Smith and Watson's question concerning how to theorise the afterlives of life narratives in digital media.<sup>267</sup> Just as narratives obfuscate or erase earlier traces of narrative in a palimpsest, Ben Mhenni's life narrative is also at risk of deletion. Indeed, her autobiographical content in this blog ultimately belongs to the Google platform, 'Blogspot', and could potentially be erased in a second. I have also drawn attention to the fact that although the blog is a culturally and politically significant text, it is in the process of acquiring further layers of narrative from companies who are exploiting the comments sections of her blog posts for commercial gain. In this respect, although the author has passed away, the blog is not a static repository of material but a fragile, unstable and shifting site. The 'afterlife' of Ben Mhenni's life narrative raises questions about the ownership and conservation of digital life narratives on domains such as Blogspot, as well as the control that so-called 'Big Tech' companies have on the shaping, circulation and reception of life narratives online.

Finally, although I have raised concerns over the vulnerable status of Ben Mhenni's blog as a digital life narrative product, it is important to highlight the text's lasting legacy—not only for Tunisians who recognise its importance in the revolution, but for readers and activists across the globe. The nature of a palimpsestic text is that it is never complete; it projects into the future as it anticipates future authors, inscriptions and readers. As Ben Mhenni proclaims in the final line of her printed memoir: 'Il faut nous remettre devant nos écrans. Je le redis: le rôle d'un blogueur ne s'arrête jamais.'<sup>268</sup> I suggest that as future generations of readers engage with the 'afterlife' of her blog, her activist message will continue to circulate and inspire new forms of resistance. Indeed, the seeming silence of the

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<sup>267</sup> Smith and Watson, 'The Afterlives of Those Who Write Themselves: Rethinking Autobiographical Archives', p. 11.

<sup>268</sup> Ben Mhenni, *Tunisian Girl: Blogueuse Pour Un Printemps Arabe*, p. 121.

blog may be interpreted as a call to action: to make noise, express one's diversity in the face of oppressive paradigms and keep alive the spirit of the author's campaign to 7ell blog.

While in this chapter we focused on the blog's semi-live status, and analysed the urgent, immediate and unedited form of the narrative, El Fani's documentary, *Même pas mal* (2012), presents an author's *return* to memories of illness, violence and injustice. As Marie Pierre-Bouthier argues in relation to the genre of documentary in contemporary Tunisia, the form has '[...] mnemonic, cinematographic [and] aesthetic value—qualities which require temporal distance: time for remembering, for investigating, for conceiving the film, for staging and shooting the interviews, and for editing.'<sup>269</sup> In this respect, while the documentary form moves us further away from the dominance of the written word, it returns us to qualities that we associate with the printed book: both forms allow for temporal distance, editing and encompass a beginning, a middle and an end.<sup>270</sup> In other words, it is a form of 'parenthetical media'.<sup>271</sup> In this sense, although the documentary form tends to be excluded from definitions of life narrative, my analysis of *Même pas mal* shall demonstrate the ways in which the form inscribes 'literary' narrative techniques and characteristics in audio-visual forms.

My analysis in the second chapter allows for us to further nuance and expand our definition of the palimpsestic life narrative. Building on the idea of 'overreading' that we find in Ben Mhenni's blog, I will argue that we find a similar strategy at play in El Fani's filmic life narrative: *Même pas mal*. I will discuss the ways in which she employs collage strategies to 'overread' radical Islamist and misogynist hate campaigns of which she was a target in the immediate wake of the revolution. However, notwithstanding the similarities between the

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<sup>269</sup> Marie Pierre-Bouthier, 'Documentary Cinema and Memory of Political Violence in Post-Authoritarian Morocco and Tunisia (2009–2015)', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 23.1–2 (2017), 225–45 (p. 3).

<sup>270</sup> That is not to say that they are straightforwardly chronological or teleological in terms of their plots, but they constitute narratives that are read or viewed in a linear fashion.

<sup>271</sup> See Hoskins' comparison of parenthetical and post-parenthetical media.



overreading strategies in the two texts, there are important differences. While in Chapter 1 we find that authenticity and the perceived referential status of her blog posts—including their written text, photographs and videos—are important to Ben Mhenni in her combat against the censorship of citizen's voices, my discussion in the next chapter allows us to problematise the concept of Lejeune's 'pacte autobiographique' that has been conventionally associated with autobiographical texts.<sup>272</sup> Indeed, I will explore the extent to which different layers of El Fani's filmic collage come together in tension or dissonance in a way which complicates readings of her identity. Additionally, I will discuss the extent to which she employs intertextuality as a further form of layering which blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction in her life narrative, as well as between internal and external perspectives on Tunisia.

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<sup>272</sup> 'Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité [...]'. Philippe Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975), p.14.

## Chapter 2. Filmic Palimpsests in Nadia El Fani's Documentary Life Narrative: *Même pas mal*

Retaining a focus on the relationship between visual and verbal media that we discussed in the last chapter on Ben Mhenni's blog, I now turn my attention to a first-person documentary life narrative, *Même pas mal*, which centres on the life of Nadia El Fani, a Paris-based filmmaker and activist from Tunisia.<sup>273</sup> In tandem with the wider aims of this thesis, I consider how this autobiographical text gives us cause to nuance existing critical interpretations of the genre of francophone life narratives from Tunisia. I also explore the extent to which the metaphor of the palimpsest provides a useful framework for approaching the tensions in my selected life narratives between narrating subjects, buried histories and forms of censorship—particular to Tunisia—that threaten to silence and 'overwrite' women's voices. Building on my analysis of Ben Mhenni's female-authored contribution to the palimpsest of Tunisian history, including her use of mixed media and multilingualism to 'overread' censorship, state-induced violence, and reductive categories for her identity, this chapter takes the argument of the thesis forward by considering how El Fani's life narrative may further expand our understanding of the 'palimpsestic life narrative', as it emerges across this thesis in relation to the Tunisian texts under study, via devices that are particular to the medium of film.

Indeed, while in the last chapter we focused predominantly on verbal text and photographs, this current chapter allows us to explore how photographs and filmed images come together in the palimpsestic life narrative. In *Textual and Visual Selves: Photography, Film, and Comic Art in French Autobiography*, Edwards, Amy L. Hubbell and Ann Miller

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<sup>273</sup> Nadia El Fani, *Même pas mal*, 2012.

draw on the work of Barthes in *La Chambre claire* to differentiate the functions of photography and film.<sup>274</sup> They argue that, for Barthes, the photograph is invested with both a ‘studium’ and ‘punctum’ or ‘wounding force’, which will hurt the spectator by reminding him/ her of the future demise of the photographed subject who becomes a ghost.<sup>275</sup> However, they say that film, according to Barthes, ‘has a different relationship with both reference and time...but not one that feels like a ghost.’<sup>276</sup> This is because ‘[w]hereas a photograph immobilizes time, the cinematic image is pulled into the future "protensif" (extensive in time), not melancholic.’<sup>277</sup> Given that El Fani mixes photographs with filmed footage and other images in her montage strategy, it will be pertinent to discuss the extent to which a ghostliness—or otherness—may in fact arise from the film. Indeed, as we shall see, Fellous’s layering strategy, and the way in which photographs erupt into the moving image, may evoke the presence of an offscreen otherness that complicates our reading of El Fani’s narrative identity. Moreover, the tension between the stillness of the photograph and the moving filmic image may also evoke the thematic tension between life and death in the narrative, as El Fani battles both cancer and death threats issued by fundamentalist Muslim groups.

Ever since Elizabeth Bruss pronounced in 1980 that films should be excluded from the genre of autobiography, scholars have been debating the traditional boundaries of autobiography as a purely print-based and prose genre.<sup>278</sup> According to Bruss, the medium of film is ontologically unsuitable as a vehicle for autobiographical narratives for two main reasons.<sup>279</sup> First, it does not have a single source but arises from a disparate group of

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<sup>274</sup> Edwards, Hubbell, and Miller, pp. 5–6.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid, p.5.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid, pp.5-6.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid, p.6.

<sup>278</sup> Elizabeth W. Bruss, ‘Eye for I: Making and Unmaking Autobiography in Film’, in *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. by James Olney (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), pp. 296–320. For further discussion of autobiography in French and francophone films, see: Edwards, Hubbell, and Miller; Gabara, pp. 67–70.

<sup>279</sup> Bruss.

individuals who are involved at different stages. Second, the on-screen person cannot simultaneously be the subject of the camera's gaze and the perceiver of the image through the camera lens.<sup>280</sup> She surmises that while the medium cannot produce the old self-knowledge of autobiography, it allows for other ways of representing the self. Of note is her argument that the body becomes a locus for identity rather than a mask for the self. In a similar manner, Lejeune also argued for the impossibility of filmic autobiography, claiming the filmmaker would need to be present at any screening in order for it to be classified in this way.<sup>281</sup>

Since Bruss's and Lejeune's early interpretations of the genre, definitions have evolved to be more inclusive of film. Writing in 1995, Wendy Everett argued that 'film constitutes a privileged medium for the expression of autobiographical memory. [It] has the capacity for the reconstruction of past worlds reimagined and realised not in accordance with historical veracity but with memory.'<sup>282</sup> Additionally, in opting to include El Fani's filmic life narrative in my corpus, I draw on Smith and Watson's claim that the genre of life narrative (a term that they distinguish from the exclusionary term autobiography) can be 'filmic'.<sup>283</sup> Adding to Smith and Watson's approach, which considers mainly Western women's texts, I employ the term 'life narrative' as a way to distinguish my approach from scholarship that considers Tunisian women's francophone 'life writing' or 'autobiography' in isolation from other non-verbal forms and media. Indeed, while Smith and Watson have not applied their theory of life narrative to Maghrebi women's texts, the thesis gives us an opportunity to

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<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

<sup>281</sup> Ibid

<sup>282</sup> Philippe Lejeune, 'Cinéma et Autobiographie: Problèmes de Vocabulaire', *Revue Belge Du Cinéma*, 19 (1987), 7–13.

<sup>283</sup> See: Smith and Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, p. 4. In this respect, they build on existing scholarship by both André Gardies and Wendy Everett who have argued that films can constitute autobiography. Wendy Everett, 'The Autobiographical Eye in European Cinema', *Europa: An International Journal of Art, Language and Culture*, 2.1 (1995), 3–10 (pp. 4–6); André Gardies, 'Le Spectateur en quête du Je (et réciproquement)', in *Le Je à l'écran*, ed. by Jean-Pierre Esquenazi and André Gardies (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2006), pp. 9–23.

theorise the term in relation to Tunisian women's life narratives and debates on the status of the genre of autobiography in the Maghreb.

*Même pas mal* was created in response to the violent threats and misogynistic character assassinations that El Fani received from Tunisian Muslim fundamentalists following the release of her documentary *Ni Allah Ni Maître*, later renamed as *Laïcité Inch'Allah!*, in 2011.<sup>284</sup> This earlier film, which advocated the need for separation between religion and state in Tunisia, triggered violent reactions in the country and caused El Fani's films to be banned there for six years.<sup>285</sup> While we saw in the last chapter that Ben Mhenni evokes the ways in which her experience of severe illness intermingled in her consciousness with the extreme emotions that she experienced as an activist, El Fani draws a surprisingly similar parallel in this film between her battle with breast cancer and her experience of being on the receiving end of a misogynist hate campaign in Tunisia, which was perpetrated by fundamentalist Muslims.<sup>286</sup>

As I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the concept of the palimpsest in film and literature has been analysed by a number of scholars, most notably Silverman in relation to francophone texts.<sup>287</sup> In his book *Palimpsestic Memory*, Silverman focuses on how traumatic memories of war and genocide are evoked via a palimpsestic collage in two French films: Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962) and Resnais's *Muriel* (1963).<sup>288</sup> In relation to *Muriel*, Silverman argues that '[t]he intercutting of narrative sequences related to two moments of catastrophic violence – the Second World War and the Algerian War – [...] subverts a

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<sup>284</sup> This film (a play on the *Ni dieu ni maître* slogan coined by French socialist Louis Auguste Blanqui in 1880) was released under the title of *Laïcité Inch'Allah!* in France following the controversy provoked by the film's original title.

<sup>285</sup> The first screening of *Même pas mal* was at La Palace cinema in Tunis on 10th November 2017.

<sup>286</sup> As Marzia Caporale observes, '[w]hile the hate campaign and the political and personal attacks perpetrated against El Fani by Muslim fundamentalist groups constitute the primary referential frame in *Même pas mal*, a second parallel diegetic line detailing the director's battle with breast cancer is juxtaposed and interwoven into the main narrative.' Marzia Caporale, 'Creativity and the Feminine: Sexual Politics and Cinematic Aesthetics in Nadia El Fani's Documentary-Making', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 58.2 (2018), 81–95 (p. 83).

<sup>287</sup> Silverman.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.* Note that Silverman refers to the use of a 'collage' strategy in these films on pages 51 and 54.

normalized understanding of space and time.’<sup>289</sup> He also discusses the way in which memory is non-individualised in *La Jetée*.<sup>290</sup> While Silverman’s study is a useful starting point for thinking about how collage contributes to the palimpsestic process in the medium of film, my focus is different as I am not dealing with a text that explores extreme acts of violence. I evaluate instead how the figure of the palimpsest emerges from El Fani’s *Même pas mal* as a means of constructing and exploring female identity in contemporary Tunisia.

Indeed, while Silverman interprets the convergence of identities in the palimpsest of *Muriel* as a strategy that ‘denies’ a psychological interpretation of the self, we find that El Fani’s film articulates a highly personal, subjective account of her lived experience.<sup>291</sup> Although she is an authoritative narrator that we both hear and see on-screen, we find subtle references to the presence of an alter-ego. These references seem to allude to the fictional persona of Kalt, the anti-capitalist and anti-Islamophobia activist from her earlier film, *Bedwin Hacker*, which was released in 2003.<sup>292</sup> As Rosalia Bivona argues, it is because of the post-9/11 context, which brought devastation upon the Middle East and on Muslim minorities in France, that El Fani repeatedly describes *Bedwin Hacker* as ‘un film d’urgence’: a resistance to Islamophobic narratives and stereotypes.<sup>293</sup> In focusing on El Fani’s use of intertextuality and an aesthetics of ‘hacking’, the rupture of a hidden element into the surface layer, I argue that the film gives us an alternative way of understanding her identity as palimpsestic.

I am also interested in how the filmmaker brings together ‘personal’ and ‘collective’ memories in her collage by intercutting private amateur film sequences or photographs with

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid, p. 54.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid.

<sup>292</sup> *Bedwin Hacker* (2003), El Fani’s first feature-length work of fiction, centres on a female, bisexual woman from Tunisia named Kalt (Kalthoum) who operates as an anti-capitalist hacker under the pseudonym of Bedwin Hacker.

<sup>293</sup> Rosalia Bivona, ‘Subversion, liberté et modernité dans le film “Bedwin Hacker” de Nadia El Fani’, *Expressions Maghrébines*, 5.1 (2006), 27–42 (p. 33).

footage that had previously been viewed by larger audiences (for example, on television or on YouTube). I will consider how she brings together personal and collective memories in a different way. In particular, I will focus on an important difference in El Fani's film: her attention to editing and crafting the narrative. Indeed, we found in the previous chapter that a defining characteristic of Ben Mhenni's blog is its 'semi-live' status, which relates to the almost simultaneous acts of narrating and publishing that occur. We found that the lack of attention to detail in her blog posts (e.g., typographical errors and spelling mistakes) suggest that she is neither primarily interested in the literary quality of her writing nor in refining the finished product; rather, she is interested in narrative as a *process*, instead of a product, and a means to communicate with her audience. Yet, as we shall see, El Fani's narrative strategy is carefully considered and constructed. In an interview with Marzia Caporale concerning *Même pas mal*, El Fani explained how she uses her lived experience as a point of departure for the work she does as a filmmaker who manipulates and crafts a constructed work of art:

C'est plus un film de montage, où il a fallu se servir d'images filmées existantes et les mélanger à des séquences tournées spécialement pour le film, je reste une cinéaste même si je pars de mon vécu. Donc je construis, je mets en scène, je joue avec tout ce qui est utile à mon récit.<sup>294</sup>

While I have so far defined El Fani's process of layering in the film as 'collage', it is important to note the filmmaker's use of the term 'montage' to describe her process. In this thesis, I take Group Mu's definition of collage as a device that enables disparate images, excerpts of footage and sonic elements, which are not normally associated with one another, to be placed alongside one another in new relationships.<sup>295</sup> However, I recognise that the terms 'collage' and 'montage' are occasionally used interchangeably and the boundaries

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<sup>294</sup> Caporale, p. 92.

<sup>295</sup> 'Each cited element breaks the continuity or the linearity of the discourse and leads necessarily to a double reading: that of the fragment perceived in relation to its text of origin; that of the same fragment as incorporated into a new whole, a different totality. The trick of collage consists also of never entirely suppressing the alterity of these elements reunited in a temporary composition.' Anna Poletti, 'Periperformative Life Narrative: Queer Collages', *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, 22.3 (2016), 359–79 (p. 361).

between them are porous. For example, in *Palimpsestic Memory*, Silverman uses both terms ‘montage’ and ‘collage’ to describe the same process of layering in *Nuit et brouillard*.<sup>296</sup> In this chapter, when I refer to El Fani’s montage strategy, I am referring to the way in which she cuts images in a sequence; when I refer to her collage strategy, I employ this as a broader term that encompasses different types of visual, verbal and sonic media, including subtitles. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the political connotations with the term montage and its previous status as a controversial device. Indeed, film theorist André Bazin was famously weary of montage and its distortion of reality.<sup>297</sup> In *Montage interdit*, he argued against any device that can be used to manipulate the audience’s perception of the scene and its potential to remain ambiguous and open to interpretation. For Silverman, the device of montage notably has an important artistic value for conveying palimpsestic memory: ‘montage denies the notion of meaning inherent in the image itself (hence Godard’s critique of André Bazin’s prohibition of montage) and proposes instead the notion that meaning is produced in the space opened up by the interaction between images [...]’<sup>298</sup>

If El Fani’s use of collage/montage strategy produces a signifying chain in which some images are divorced from their historical contexts, and placed in new association, it will be important to assess the risks associated with this strategy—particularly in the political context of the Tunisian revolution and the rise of online activism. Indeed, collage allows Fellous to bring seemingly disparate memories and images together. She associates footage and photographs of her cancer treatment with her battle against her radical and misogynist Islamist opponents (to whom she refers as Salafists).<sup>299</sup> As we shall see, she also suggests that

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<sup>296</sup> See footnote 58 in Silverman, p. 65.

<sup>297</sup> André Bazin, ‘Montage interdit’, in *Qu’est-ce que le cinéma?* (Paris: Les éditions du Cerf, 1958), pp. 117–29 (pp. 123–29).

<sup>298</sup> Silverman, p. 124.

<sup>299</sup> We know the fundamentalist Muslims responsible for the hate campaign against El Fani belong to Salafism as El Fani refers to them as ‘Salafistes’ in an interview with Louise Mailloux : Louise Mailloux, ‘De



her chemotherapy is a metaphor for this battle. Indeed, while *Même pas mal* features footage of El Fani's 'real' life, she emphasises in the quote above her role as an editor who constructs a 'montage' and manipulates the narrative for her own (creative and, possibly, political) agenda. Her priority is to create art rather than verisimilitude. It is clear that the images and footage that she includes in her montage present a highly biased perspective on Tunisian politics. As we shall see, she associates her cancer with fundamentalist Islamism and includes scenes of violence that may stoke Islamophobic tendencies. In Caporale's study of the film, El Fani's distinctive use of corporeal metaphor—in which she compares her cancer to fight against Islamism—has notably been overlooked. Caporale argues that

El-Fani uses her subject-centered and woman-centered cinematic approach to destabilize and eradicate entrenched socio-cultural paradigms of coercion, religious intolerance, and gender-based violence, the female body becoming the principal acting subject in the peaceful yet forceful process of defying phallocracy.<sup>300</sup>

Given the controversial and provocative status of El Fani's metaphor, we might query Caporale's argument that the director employs her cinematic approach to eradicate religious intolerance. Additionally, Caporale's interpretation of El Fani's process as 'peaceful' may benefit from further discussion, particularly when read in relation to the scenes of violence that the director incorporates in her montage. In a different vein, Greta Bliss contends that El Fani links her body to the revolutionary themes of sacrifice and 'martyrdom' in order to decry religious extremism.<sup>301</sup> The terms 'sacrifice' and 'martyrdom' notably evoke here the

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*Laïcité, Inch'Allah à Même pas mal: Entrevue avec la réalisatrice Nadia El Fani*, *L'Aut'Journal* <<http://lautjournal.info/articles-mensuels/320/de-laicite-inchallah-meme-pas-mal>> [accessed 10 September 2020]. For a detailed discussion of Tunisian Salafism, see : Merone and Cavatorta.

<sup>300</sup> Caporale, p. 90.

<sup>301</sup> In relation to the official poster for *Même pas mal* [see Figure 32 of this chapter], Bliss argues that '[t]he painful, open wounds [on El Fani's nude back] appear to have been inflicted by a scalpel, conjuring the effects not of medical intervention but of sadistic torture and invoking the iconography and bodily experience of martyrdom. The image shocks not only with its gruesomeness but also its gendering: the woman's nudity under her shirt implies vulnerability to misogynistic assault. Thus reflecting the symbolic and psychic violence done to El Fani by her Salafist detractors, the poster seems to respond in kind.' Bliss, 'Reworlding Tunisia: Sacrifice in Post-Revolutionary Cinema', p. 44.

ideas of passivity, stillness and surrender. Yet, El Fani's political aesthetic, conveyed by her dynamic, fast-paced montage strategy, may in fact convey a more active and forceful resistance to her opponents.

I begin my analysis by focusing on the visible aspects of the palimpsest, those on the surface, before considering the hidden and less accessible layers of the narrative. In the first part, I consider how the process of feminist 'overreading' functions with regard to El Fani's response to misogynist character assassinations of her identity within Tunisia.<sup>302</sup> I explore how she reinscribes Tunisian Islamist-authored media in her filmic palimpsest and reframes it within her subjective narrative of resistance—via collage, voiceover narratives, music and *mise-en-abyme* strategies. Additionally, I discuss how tensions between different media in the collage add complexity to my definition of the palimpsestic process. Then, I proceed to analyse the problems that may emerge from El Fani's collage strategy, particularly with regard to her incorporation of visual elements that have been divorced from their historical contexts. After establishing some of the ways in which the film might appear to portray a 'Eurocentric' perspective on contemporary Tunisia and Tunisian Islamism, I then explore the ways in which other, less accessible, layers of the narrative appear to disrupt the flow of the narrative and complicate viewers' interpretation of El Fani's identity.

Ultimately, El Fani's filmic palimpsest is characterised by collage, 'overreading' strategies and intertextual remediations. It thus contributes a further layer to our existing understanding of the palimpsestic life narrative across media—developed across this thesis—and its specificity in the Tunisian context. Not only does the figure of the palimpsest emerge from this text as a means of constructing and exploring identity; the metaphor also provides a

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<sup>302</sup> I am here developing Miller's concept of feminist 'overreading' in an alternative (Tunisian) context.

*grille de lecture* for approaching the specific tensions, both visible and less accessible, at work in El Fani's life narrative.

### **The surface layer: overreading misogynistic narratives**

In this first stage of my argument, my intention is to elucidate the ways in which the 'surface' layer of the film's narrative constitutes a form of feminist 'overreading' that is specific to El Fani's positioning and the Tunisian context. Indeed, I am concerned with the extent to which El Fani reinscribes misogynist footage in her film in order to add her own female—and feminist—interpretation to them.<sup>303</sup>

In *Même pas mal*, the director creates a palimpsest in which her own narrative voice and editing strategies work to reframe and 'overread' footage of her attackers' threatening messages and damaging campaign against her reputation. She notably reinscribes footage from a 2011 Ennahda (the moderate Islamist party who won a majority in Tunisia's 2011 Constituent Assembly election) rally, the 'Meeting pour la jeunesse du parti Ennahdha' in Tunisia, in which damaging lies were told about her earlier film, *Laïcité Inch'Allah*, which had been released that year. Indeed, the footage shows the party's leader, Rached Ghannouchi, publicly arguing that El Fani employed her film to claim that the 2011 Tunisian revolution constituted a political movement against Islam: '[...] ce fameux film répugnant, qui dit "Ni Dieu, Ni Cheikh", qui prétend que la révolution ne s'est pas faite contre Ben Ali, mais contre le prophète Mahomet.'<sup>304</sup> He proceeds to declare that 'Ces gens-là [referring to El Fani and her production team] doivent réaliser que la Tunisie est le pays du prophète Mahomet. Elle est le pays de l'Islam [...] Nous nous disons que tout le peuple tunisien est musulman.' Ghannouchi's statement reflects his broader campaign to keep Article 1 of the

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<sup>303</sup> See my discussion of 'overreading' in the introduction to this thesis: p. 18.

<sup>304</sup> *Même pas mal*, Nadia El Fani and Alina Isabel Pérez, dir. (2012).

Tunisian constitution—which concerns Tunisia’s official identity as a Muslim country—unchanged in the 2012 redraft. He later admitted in an interview that he had never seen *Laïcité, Inch’Allah!* prior to making these condemnatory and inflammatory statements about it.<sup>305</sup> As El Fani argues in an interview with Caporale, ‘[...] les événements autour de mon film dépassaient parfois la fiction, et j’ai pu avoir les images de certains moments surréalistes, je pense notamment à Ghannouchi, ce “leader islamiste” tunisien qui se permet de citer mon film dans un discours en mentant sur son contenu. Et aucun journaliste n’a jamais dénoncé cette manipulation!’<sup>306</sup> Her evocation of ‘surreal’ moments in the Tunisian media may also bring to mind the highly constructed spectacle of Ben Ali visiting Bouazizi in hospital, discussed in the last chapter. As I shall now show, El Fani’s re-inscription of this footage in *Même pas mal* allows her to ‘overread’ Ghannouchi’s manipulative and untruthful statements and frame them within her own personal narrative strategy.

It is important to note that El Fani does not employ her voiceover narrative to denounce Ghannouchi’s comments explicitly; rather, she employs the palimpsestic process to layer the footage of the rally between two different excerpts of her personal footage filmed with a hand-held camera. The narrative progresses from El Fani’s amateur aerial footage of the French countryside—taken from a small airplane in which she is flying with a friend following the successful completion of her breast reconstruction surgery—to anonymously taken footage of the rally, where Ghannouchi makes his inflammatory comments about El Fani’s film. Then, from the rally, the montage shifts to amateur footage of the director and an unknown person in Paris at night-time. Although these three sequences feature distinct spatiotemporal traces of memory, they do not exist in the narrative as disconnected elements. The Group Mu argues that the device of collage brings fragments together in temporary

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<sup>305</sup> Hadani Ditmars, ‘Nadia El-Fani: A Soldier of Secularism Fights On’, *Middle East Institute*, 15 February 2018 <<https://www.mei.edu/publications/nadia-el-fani-soldier-secularism-fights>>.

<sup>306</sup> See Caporale’s interview with El Fani: Caporale, p. 92.

relationships, breaks the linearity of the narrative and stimulates a double reading: ‘that of the fragment perceived in relation to its text of origin; that of the same fragment as incorporated into a new whole, a different totality’.<sup>307</sup> The anonymously taken footage of the Ennahda rally, bookended by El Fani’s personal documentary footage, is imbued with new meaning in this collage: it functions as audiovisual evidence of the misogynist hate campaign that was directed against her. In including this ‘collective’ memory trace, she brings it into the present and underlies temporal distance through the contrast with the ‘now’ of her perspective as the film’s narrator. In this respect, while the spectator recognises that the footage is an external fragment (that was not authored by El Fani), they perceive it here, in the collage sequence, as imbued with her narrative perspective.

In addition, the footage of Ennahdha’s rally—a ‘collective’ memory trace—is not *contained* as a distinct entity or silo within El Fani’s personal documentary footage. The audio narrative from Ghannouchi’s speech begins in the preceding visual frame, during El Fani’s aerial footage of the French countryside. As Geoffrey Cox observes in relation to sound in documentary film, ‘this tendency of sound to break the frame makes it ambiguous and ephemeral.’<sup>308</sup> It has an emotive and associative potential that allows for subtle links to be suggested between different frames. If we compare the bucolic countryside scene in Figure 14 and the rally in Figure 15, the French subtitle, ‘La campagne médiatique’, appears twice—once in both sequences—despite the fact that we only hear it once. This repetition conveys how the start of Ghannouchi’s speech carries over from one visual sequence to the next, thus reinforcing the links between them. This idea recalls the Group Mu’s statement that collage ‘never entirely suppress[es] the alterity of these elements reunited in a temporary composition.’<sup>309</sup> El Fani draws here different sequences into association and conveys the way

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<sup>307</sup> Quoted in: Poletti, p. 361.

<sup>308</sup> Geoffrey Cox, ‘Introduction’, in *Soundings: Documentary Film and the Listening Experience*, ed. by Geoffrey Cox and others (Huddersfield: University of Huddersfield Press, 2018), pp. 1–12 (p. 2).

<sup>309</sup> Quoted in: Poletti, p. 361.

in which her personal narrative intersects with, and frames, the anonymously taken footage of the rally.

Additionally, there is also some irony in the fact that both El Fani and Ghannouchi both employ the word ‘campagne’ differently here. In the voiceover narrative accompanying the flight take-off, El Fani says that ‘un repos à la campagne me fera le plus grand bien’; the aerial view evokes her health and (temporary) transcendence of her personal and political struggles. In contrast, Ghannouchi’s voicing of a ‘campagne médiatique qui tente de salir la révolution’ evokes dirt, toxicity and manipulation. In this respect, the relationship between the layers of different media here evokes—on a subtle level—a broader metaphor of the film: the portrayal of political Islam as a ‘disease’ that infects the healthy cells of Tunisia’s body politic, a topic that I shall return to discuss further below.



**Figure 14.** *Même pas mal*, Nadia El Fani and Alina Isabel Pérez, dir. (2012).



**Figure 15.** *Même pas mal*, Nadia El Fani and Alina Isabel Pérez, dir. (2012).

Building further on this idea of sound as an invisible layer in the palimpsestic life narrative, I turn now to consider how music interacts with mise-en-abyme framing strategies and the process of translation (via subtitling) to evoke a visual-verbal-sonic form of layering that subverts misogynist narratives. According to Michael Chanan, the role of music in the medium of documentary film ‘[...] isn’t factual, or neutral or even limited to the descriptive, but [...] is emotive, expressive and associative. It therefore inevitably functions as a form of commentary, sometimes all the more insidious for not declaring itself as such’.<sup>310</sup> In *Même pas mal*, radical Salafist rap music functions as an emotive signifier that evokes the anger and aggression of El Fani’s detractors. The fast-paced beats and aggressive sounds serve to stimulate the fears of viewers. As Steven Connor argues, compared to seeing, hearing is associated more with sensual feeling than understanding, since the experience of listening can

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<sup>310</sup> Cited in: Cox, p. 6.

be intense but without clear specificity.<sup>311</sup> Indeed, the music constitutes a layer of the palimpsest which eclipses other, less reasonable, forms of apprehension and understanding.<sup>312</sup> However, the director does not allow their music to signify here *on its own terms*; rather, the invisible and ‘insidious’ signifier is translated into visible French subtitles.<sup>313</sup> As James Nicholson argues in his chapter on hierarchies of voices in documentaries, the filmmaker’s narration tends to be the most powerful voice that influences our interpretation of the other voices we hear:

[...] when a filmmaker uses multiple voices the interaction between voices is governed by a hierarchy of power in which narration dominates over interview and overheard voices. This means that the filmmaker’s choice to use narration, interview and/or overheard voices is a fundamental factor in the position the filmmaker adopts towards his or her subjects.<sup>314</sup>

In *Même pas mal*, El Fani’s narrative voice, which dominates the other voices in the film, emerges via her voiceover narrative *and also* her subtitles. In the still shown in Figures 16 and 17, El Fani’s white and italicised subtitles translate lyrics from a rap song: ‘Je suis contre toute personne qui touche à ma religion, je l’attaque à la kalatchnikov sous la forme de la religion’. In a further still, the rap lyrics include the (translated) expression: ‘je vous coupe la tête’. The subtitles are layered over a YouTube video for the song, which features a fantasy scene from Marjani Satrapi’s film, *Persepolis* (first published as a *bande dessinée*), in which God is shown talking to a little girl.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Cited in: Cox, pp. 2–3.

<sup>312</sup> Jennifer M. Barker has also argued that cinema is not purely a visual medium but a multisensorial and ‘tactile’ medium: ‘To say that we are touched by cinema indicates that it has significance for us, that it comes close to us, and that it literally occupies our sphere. We *share* [emphasis in original] things with it: texture, spatial orientation, compartment, rhythm, and vitality.’ Jennifer M. Barker, *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 2009), p. 2.

<sup>313</sup> In the film credits, El Fani is listed as the person responsible for translating content and writing the French subtitles.

<sup>314</sup> James Nicholson, ‘Vocal Hierarchy in Documentary’, in *Vocal Projections: Voices in Documentary*, ed. by Maria Pramaggiore and Annabelle Honess Roe (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 219–34 (p. 220).

<sup>315</sup> For a scholarly discussion of *Persepolis* as a personal (and performative) narrative, see: Jennifer Worth, ‘Unveiling: Persepolis as Embodied Performance’, *Theatre Research International*, 32.02 (2007), 143–60.





Figure 16. *Même pas mal*, Nadia El Fani and Alina Isabel Pérez, dir. (2012).



Figure 17. *Même pas mal*, Nadia El Fani and Alina Isabel Pérez, dir. (2012).

This scene was deemed highly controversial and problematic by many Islamists because of its characterisation of God. Indeed, the imagery is employed here as part of a violent Salafist-

authored campaign against the screening of *Persepolis* (2007)—itself a form of life narrative—by Iranian director Satrapi on Nessma TV (Tunisia’s commercial TV channel). By including this music video in *Même pas mal*, and translating the subtitles into French for a francophone audience, El Fani suggests her solidarity with Satrapi, a female creator who was similarly attacked by radical Islamists on the grounds that her personal narrative is blasphemous. In October 2011, hundreds of radical Salafist protestors attempted to set the Nessma television station on fire after it aired the film. El Fani’s act of translation—via her French subtitling—adds further complexity to her palimpsestic life narrative. This process allows her to ‘overread’ the rap music by translating it into French and, in so doing, gain some narrative mastery over it. This act of translation works to create distance between the translating subject and the subject matter. They enable an authorial perspective that ‘overreads’ from a position of authority. Of course, the invisible sonic layer of rap music cannot be completely dominated by the subtitles; as Chanan suggests above, music is emotive, associative and ‘insidious’.<sup>316</sup> It appeals to the sensual rather than the cognitive and, in this respect, cannot be translated into language. However, I argue that the subtitles neutralise somewhat its aggressive power by evoking El Fani’s narrative perspective, which functions here as a linguistic ‘layer’ or barrier that works to prevent viewers from being fully immersed in the music.

Over the course of the film, El Fani constructs a visual-verbal-sonic form of ‘overreading’ in her film which works to undermine the violent, Salafist-authored attacks on her identity. For example, the tinny and low-quality sound of the music (played from the speakers of the laptop that is being filmed in the sequence) serves to build further distance between the spectator and the immersive potential of the music. The framing of the YouTube videos (in both Figures 18 and 19) also contributes further to the process of ‘overreading’

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<sup>316</sup> Cited in: Cox, p. 6.

here. As the viewer is not immersed in the frame of the video itself, the visibility of the platform constitutes a layer or barrier that helps to *contain* the violent content. Indeed, the branding and logo of the YouTube website may evoke a sense of security for the spectator, when compared with the controversial video content, because of its familiarity. Via a mise-en-abyme strategy, the laptop screen is further contained by El Fani's camera, the shaking of which serves to further reinforce her presence and subjective perspective. Additionally, elements on the page gesture to El Fani's capacity to control how she consumes and interacts with the content. For example, the cursor—in the shape of a hand—is ready to click on the pause button if required. Indeed, this trope functions as a subtle signifier of El Fani's authorial agency throughout the film. For example, in Figure 18, which features a still from a sequence in which El Fani plays a video message from one of her radical Salafist opponents, the cursor hovers over a button with a message that reads 'désactiver le son'. We can also see the French subtitles that she has layered over the video. All these elements evoke her directorial authority over the aggressive content. Further signifiers of El Fani's subjective 'overreading' include the sound of keyboard tapping and mouse clicks, as well as the presence of her hand in front of the computer screen [see Figure 19], which draws attention to the physicality of the screen as a kind of barrier between the spectator and the on-screen hate messages. In this respect, via the framing, the subtitles, the music and these 'tactile' elements, El Fani builds in a visual-verbal-sonic layer into her palimpsest that works to undermine the violent and misogynist narratives of her Salafist opponents.<sup>317</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> For further discussion of cinema's 'tactility', see: Barker, p. 2.



Figure 18. *Même pas mal*, Nadia El Fani and Alina Isabel Pérez, dir. (2012).

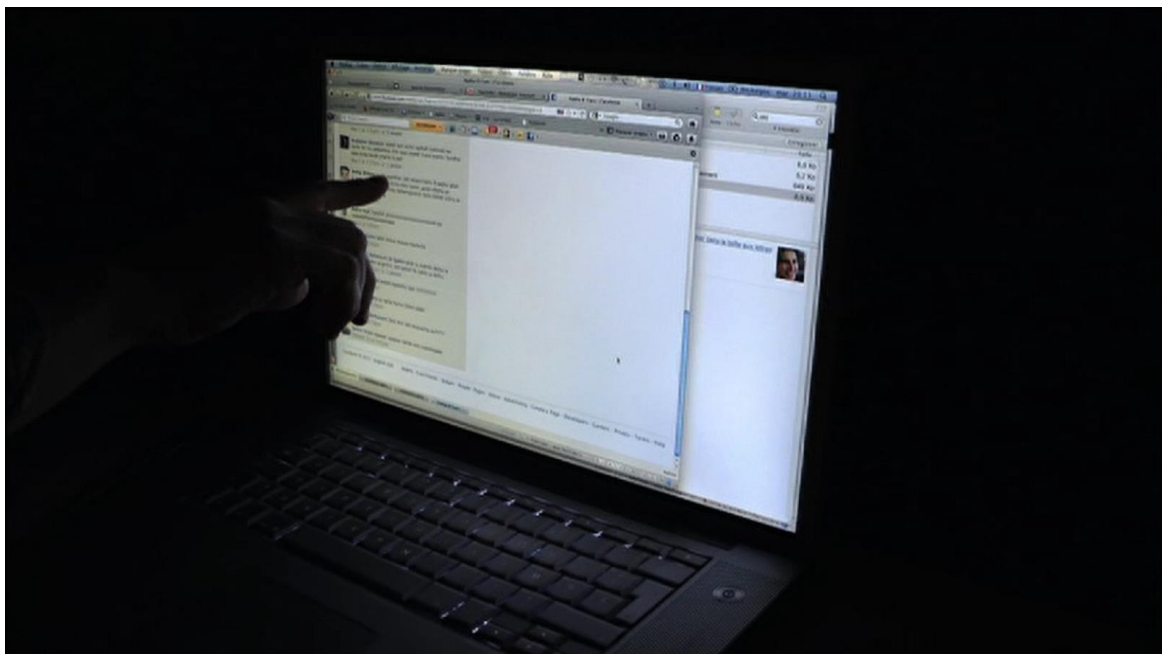


Figure 19. *Même pas mal*, Nadia El Fani and Alina Isabel Pérez, dir. (2012).

El Fani's palimpsestic (and feminist) overreading does not only emerge in these framing and editing strategies; it also arises in the way that she stages her own body on the screen. The self-portrait photograph [see Figure 20] of her convalescence, in which she is bald due to chemotherapy, resists absorption into the objectifying male gaze.<sup>318</sup> Taken by an anonymous person (possibly her co-director and 'compagnon' at the time, Pérez), the close-up photograph provides a non-voyeuristic and everyday perspective on El Fani's body that contrasts with the Salafist authored memes of her baldness. Indeed, we must remember that in *Même pas mal* El Fani is responding to Salafist-authored attacks on her baldness, which gave her a non-normative body image in terms of conventional standards of femininity in Tunisia. On a radical Salafist Facebook page with circa thirty-five thousand followers, El Fani was variously portrayed as Satan, Gollum from J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, an alien or a pig, which is conventionally perceived as an unclean animal in Islam [see Figure 21].<sup>319</sup> All of these images were concerned with the 'unfeminine' attributes of her appearance. I argue that her staging of her body—via photography and personal film—adds further complexity to her palimpsestic process of 'overreading': she is overwriting stereotypical norms concerning the representation of female bodies and inserting her bald, diseased and 'unfeminine' body into the public arena. The campaigners' manipulation of El Fani's image into 'grotesque' characters evokes their repressed fears and anxieties concerning the women who exist outside of the strict parameters of traditional gender roles.<sup>320</sup> In associating her baldness with cultural symbols or characters that are deemed evil, vile, otherworldly, or untrustworthy, they dehumanise her and make her into a target for

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<sup>318</sup> See Alba's discussion of Ben Mhenni's staging of her diseased body as a political act: Alba, *Tunisian Women's Writing in French The Fight for Emancipation: From Ben Ali's Rise to Power to the Eve of the Tunisian Revolution, 1987–2011*, p. 140.

<sup>319</sup> El Fani notes that the page had 35,000 likes from Tunisia in this panel interview: 'Celebrating Dissent: Neither Allah nor Master by Nadia El Fani (01 September 2019)', *De Balie TV, Amsterdam*, 2019 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FgI9VMINwBI&t=67s>> [accessed 21 September 2020].

<sup>320</sup> For a detailed introduction to the concept of the female grotesque and its transgressive status, see: Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund, *Grotesque* (Abingdon and New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 2013).

hatred. Indeed, the filmmaker's baldness is presented by these social media users as proof of her status as a transgressive, and thus dangerous, woman. Combined with her dissident opinions and filmmaking, it constitutes a threat to the cultural identity of these fundamentalists who seek to inscribe traditional Muslim gender roles and values in Tunisian society. Indeed, as Hafez argues, 'Once in the public sphere, women's bodies are regulated and disciplined by the male gaze, which ensures that the masculinity of the public domain remains protected from the potential chaos introduced by non-masculine, transgressive bodies.'<sup>321</sup> In this respect, the inclusion of her self-portrait photograph enables the director to stage her (bald) body as an alternative strategy to 'overread' contemporary misogynist attacks, as well as the censorship of Tunisian women's ill and non-masculine bodies in the public sphere.



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<sup>321</sup> Sherine Hafez, 'The Revolution Shall Not Pass through Women's Bodies: Egypt, Uprising and Gender Politics', in *Gender, Women and the Arab Spring*, ed. by Andrea Khalil (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 42–55 (p. 47).



**Figure 20. Nadia El Fani in chiaroscuro lighting. *Même pas mal*, Nadia El Fani and Alina Isabel Pérez, dir. (2012). <http://cinematunisien.com/2020/06/06/meme-pas-mal/> [accessed 05 February 2021]**



**Figure 21. *Même pas mal*, Nadia El Fani and Alina Isabel Pérez, dir. (2012).**

Additionally, although this was possibly not an intention of the directors, the photograph in Figure 20 can be read as a (Tunisian feminist) ‘overreading’ of Orientalist depictions of Maghrebi women, such as the *The Siesta* (1878) depicted in Figure 22 by Arthur Bridgman.<sup>322</sup> In such representations, women’s private and interior worlds have historically been presented as sensual and erotic spaces that reflect the fantasies of the Western male

<sup>322</sup> In this respect, we can situate the film in relation to Martin’s discussion of Maghrebi women’s non-voyeuristic cinema: Florence Martin, *Screens and Veils: Maghrebi Women’s Cinema* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana UP, 2011), pp. 32–35. Bridgman was one of the Orientalists who, after several trips to North Africa during the 1870s and 1880s, completed many paintings of Maghrebi women.

onlooker.



**Figure 22. Frederick Arthur Bridgman, *The Siesta* (1878), oil on canvas.**

If we compare Bridgman's painting with Figure 20, there are striking similarities and differences. The positioning of the subjects is similar in both images: they are lying down in daylight in private spaces with their left arms raised over their heads. However, in Bridgman's painting, the light is notably focused on the female subject's thighs and her body language is open for consumption by the male artist's gaze. In contrast to the warm colours and soft lighting found in Orientalist representations, which often allude to sensual pleasure and desire, the lighting in El Fani's photographic portrait is overexposed, harsh and devoid of eroticism. The sharp contrast between dark and light (described by Caporale as 'chiaroscuro lighting', which is common in Italian Renaissance painting) serves to evoke the pairing of dynamism and weakness that the director experienced at this point in her life.<sup>323</sup> As El Fani has commented in an interview with Caporale: 'J'étais à la fois pleine d'énergie, combative,

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<sup>323</sup> Caporale, p. 86.



intellectuelle, et épuisée physiquement! Ça s'est donc aussi traduit comme ça, par ce jeu de l'ombre et la lumière [...].<sup>324</sup> Indeed, while her illuminated head suggests her intellectual vigour and passion for her revolutionary activities, the darkness of the room evokes her illness. The staging of female illness is itself a powerful form of resistance to common tropes of 'feminine' beauty and purity that are highly prized in Tunisia. The Tunisian scholar Nédra Ben Smaïl argues that Tunisian society continues to value purity and virginity as signifiers of femininity.<sup>325</sup> Yet in the photograph above, El Fani is not objectified as 'feminine' or virginal. The gleaming and over-exposed lighting on her bald scalp and face is reminiscent of the marble forms of classical sculpture. El Fani renders solid, bold and majestic what is typically considered to be taboo in respect of normative traditions of female representation (both internal and external to Tunisia): the ill and 'unfeminine' female body.<sup>326</sup>

El Fani's layering of photographs and filmed footage in this sequence also works to add further complexity to our definition of the 'overreading' that we find in this corpus. The photograph of El Fani in Figure 20, discussed above, 'cuts' the visual continuity of the film. Indeed, in the preceding sequence, we see amateur footage of El Fani reading out details of her upcoming breast reconstruction surgery. The subject's voice in this sequence breaks the frame and is layered over the photograph of her convalescing in her apartment. The photograph is then on the screen for seven seconds. There is a split temporality here: El Fani's present-tense voice contrasts with the *ça a été* of herself—objectified—in the past of the photograph.<sup>327</sup> Raymond Bellour suggests that when filmmakers use photographs from the past, the split temporality can be unsettling.<sup>328</sup> This is because, in one way, the pact is

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<sup>324</sup> Ibid, p. 92.

<sup>325</sup> Nédra Ben Smaïl, *Vierges? La nouvelle sexualité des Tunisiennes* (Tunis: Cérés éditions, 2012), p. 253.

<sup>326</sup> For further discussion on the taboo of the diseased female body, see Larissa Luica and Simona Necula, 'Racontar le corps féminin à la lumière de la « révolution de la dignité » : Étude sur *Le Corps de ma mère* de Fawzia Zouari', *Études Francophones*, 30 (2019), 213–28. See, also : *Penser le corps au Maghreb*, ed. by Monia Lachheb (Tunis and Paris: Karthala and IRMC, 2012).

<sup>327</sup> Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire. Notes sur la photographie* (Gallimard, 1980).

<sup>328</sup> Raymond Bellour, 'Autoportraits', *Communications*, 48 (1988), 327–88 (p. 338).

more direct: the autobiographical subject says, ‘I am me and that was me,’ but in another way the previous self seems unconnected to the present self, even if the voice-over tempers the effect of rupture.<sup>329</sup> Bellour argues that the photographs fragment the subject and make it intermittent, evoking a series of ‘small snapshot-deaths’.<sup>330</sup> Despite the effect of forward momentum rendered by the continuity of El Fani’s voice, the seven second pause—an unusual caesura in the generally fast-paced visual montage of the film—suspends the impression of movement through time: this stillness evokes the enforced periods of convalescence and the spectre of death that she was resisting via her medical treatment. Indeed, this tension between the visual and verbal ‘layers’ of media evokes, on a formal level, the fragmentary nature of El Fani’s identity—split between past and present incarnations of ‘self’—as well as the tension between life (symbolised by the continued audibility of the director’s voice across the sequence) and death (symbolised by the fixity of the photographic medium).

We have so far found that El Fani enacts a distinctive process of feminist ‘overreading’ and shown how the layering of different media works to add complexity to the concept of the palimpsestic life narrative in its filmic form. In an interview with Caporale in 2018, El Fani reflected on the way in which her battle against fundamentalist Islam in Tunisia was also bound up with her personal story of breast cancer in the film: ‘*Même pas mal est une réponse aux Islamistes qui m’ont attaquée [...] Et de façon tout à fait mégalomane, j’ai fait un parallèle entre mon histoire et celle de la Tunisie.*’<sup>331</sup> Indeed, we find in the film that the political turbulence in Tunisia overlaps, and collides, with her personal battle with cancer. While the expression above, ‘tout à fait mégalomane’, displays the filmmaker’s self-awareness, and a degree of humour, concerning her artistic choice, it raises an important idea:

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<sup>329</sup> Bellour, p. 338.

<sup>330</sup> Bellour, p. 338.

<sup>331</sup> Caporale, p. 91.

the power of the life narrator.<sup>332</sup> If we bring to mind the image of a palimpsest, in its traditional sense, the one who is writing on the surface can conceal and suppress the inscriptions beneath. In the next section, I discuss the extent to which El Fani's use of montage and collage draws the personal and the collective together in a political aesthetic.

### **Cancer and fundamentalist Islam: the layering of personal and collective histories**

When viewing *Même pas mal*, spectators may find it difficult to encounter images of political Islamist groups that are violent, emotive and de-historicised. The parallel drawn between the fight against cancer and fundamentalist Islam might also be seen, by some viewers, as contributing to Islamophobic stereotypes of the MENA region. Indeed, one of the important questions that arises from my analysis in this chapter is whether or not we, as readers of life narrative, 'should' make an effort to re-historicise the images to which we are exposed in the collage/montage strategy.

Silverman's discussion of 'promiscuous collage' in *Nuit et brouillard* helpfully illuminates the problems that may arise when images from 'different' times and places are de-historicised when layered together in a palimpsestic text:

Resnais's use of montage is a crucial part of this political aesthetic. This is not to say that the painstaking effort involved in re-historicizing Resnais's promiscuous collage of places and times is not of the utmost importance (for example, distinguishing between those images relating to the concentration camps and those of the extermination camps, or recognizing that the young girl framed in the doorway of the cattle-truck (shot number 61) was not a Jew but, most probably, a Romany).<sup>333</sup>

He suggests here that two different readings are possible: a reading of the montage as a political aesthetic and a reading which painstakingly re-contextualises the images. While the

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<sup>332</sup> Caporale, p. 91.

<sup>333</sup> See footnote 58 in Silverman, p. 65.

former serves the purpose of overlaying different spatiotemporal traces in a palimpsestic and non-linear vision of history, he states that the act of re-historicising the images is ‘of the utmost importance’.<sup>334</sup> In El Fani’s film, we find that elements are sometimes abstracted from different contexts and brought together in new associations. While this presents a biased view of Tunisian politics, this is her right as a creator of life narrative and serves to articulate what life was like for her at this time of her life. While I acknowledge that elements of her montage would require further explanation, discussion and nuancing if presented as part of a historical discourse on contemporary Tunisia, this is a work of life narrative and requires a different approach. As a scholar of life narrative, I will approach her uses of collage and montage as artistic devices which convey El Fani’s emotional ‘truth’ and political aesthetic.

We find in the film that references to cancer and radical Islamist violence come together in disturbing ways to evoke the extent to which the two ideas overlapped in El Fani’s mind at this time of her life. Toward the beginning of the film, viewers encounter video footage of a night-time scene with a bridge in an unknown urban environment. In the voiceover narrative, El Fani states that ‘parfois les cellules agressifs, tapis dans l’ombre, attendent le moment propice pour attaquer.’ While she is ostensibly referring here to her personal experience of breast cancer, the references to terrorist cells may bring to mind widespread fears of international jihadist terrorism. Such fears are commonly expressed both in international media narratives, as well as in Tunisia itself. The unknown person behind the camera, positioned in the shadows, observes the people and the cars that cross the bridge. The anonymity of the off-screen subject, the unnamed city and the ambivalent reference to the unspecified ‘cellules agressifs’ combine here to evoke the director’s fear of the unknown and,

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<sup>334</sup> Silverman, p.65.

possibly, a sense of hypervigilance vis-à-vis her cancer diagnosis and the *fatwa* that had been issued against her life.

El Fani goes on to build a political aesthetic with her montage strategy, which conveys her resistance to the gendered and religiously motivated violence that she was experiencing at this time. Throughout the film we are shown multiple excerpts of decontextualised footage featuring angry Tunisian men in various emotionally charged scenarios and, as Bliss argues, towards the end of the film, '[...] the pace of the narrative accelerates in an almost frantic crescendo and displays, through a process of juxtaposition and superimposition of multiple images and sounds, poignant examples of religious intolerance.'<sup>335</sup> For example, she features several Salafist-authored YouTube videos denouncing El Fani; the protests against Charlie Hebdo; protests against the screening of *Persepolis*, and the Ennahda rally. When we view the film ten years after its initial screening in 2012, in its 'afterlife', the montage of violent scenes takes on an even more disturbing quality. Indeed, the references to Charlie Hebdo will now be read in relation to the 2015 massacre at the Charlie Hebdo office in Paris, which was perpetrated by two French fundamentalist Muslims and took the lives of twelve staff members. Additionally, of particular note is the video footage, taken by an unidentified person, of the Salafist protest at Tunis's Cinéma d'Africart, during a screening of El Fani's *Laïcité, Inch'Allah!* in 2011. This sequence is particularly disturbing as we see images of radical Islamist men making throat-cutting gestures towards the film's audience. We also see the camera shaking and hear screams as the person holding the camera runs away from the threatening faces of the radical Islamist protestors. The visual cutting gestures are echoed in El Fani's editorial choices as she 'cuts' sharply between images in the montage, as well as the visual depiction of her cut flesh in the film poster (see Figure 32) that evokes the psychic violence inflicted upon her by her

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<sup>335</sup> Bliss, 'Reworlding Tunisia: Sacrifice in Post-Revolutionary Cinema', p. 86.

opponents. In this way, El Fani evokes the extent to which she felt overwhelmed by the violent threats she was facing at this time in her life.

Nevertheless, El Fani's presentation of multiple sequences of fighting between Islamists and secularists may risk presenting the revolution in binary terms and reifying neo-colonial stereotypes concerning Muslim men as violent and volatile. With no commentary to explain, contextualise or nuance the juxtaposed images, she risks sensationalising the popular re-emergence of political Islam in Tunisia. In creating a collage of footage featuring Tunisian Muslim men's aggression, and consistently employing her cancer as a metaphor for political Islam, El Fani risks stoking Islamophobic tendencies and encouraging binary thinking with regard to secularism and religion. Given that El Fani describes the film as a process of 'catharsis', it appears that she reproduced this disturbing audiovisual content in her documentary in order to process, and heal from, her own experience of Salafist-authored violence.<sup>336</sup> Indeed, I argued above that she employs framing and *mise-en-abyme* strategies to try and contain her attackers' social media content and evoke her subjective power and control over it. However, by including this violent content in her collage, without any detailed historical context, her narrative amplifies the anger of a minority group of radical Islamists but does not allow for the expression of more nuanced—and less polarised—dialogue between secularists and Salafist groups.

Furthermore, in having empathy for El Fani and her battle with breast cancer, as one of the more common forms of cancer, viewers might be more sympathetic to the metaphoric link that the director creates between her battle against cancer and her condemnation of Tunisian Salafist groups. As Laura Rascaroli argues, 'In the case of the essay film proper, they are asked to take the film as its author's subjective reflection and to connect with her, to

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<sup>336</sup> Caporale, p. 91.

share or reject her line of reasoning. [...] they are invited to engage with the truth that the author is telling about himself and his experiences.<sup>337</sup> Over the course of the film's narrative, images of the director's cancerous body, as well as those of her medical treatment, are brought into dialogue with the political context. For example, in Figure 23, a photograph of El Fani in hospital following her surgery, suggests her vulnerability and weakness. In the featured sequence, this photograph is accompanied by a verbal conversation with her lawyer in Tunis, Mounir Baatour, who was defending her against the charges that were brought against her by some radical Salafist groups in Tunisia in 2011 (following the screenings of *Laïcité Inch'Allah*). The lawyer lists the charges that El Fani faces: 'La plainte est pour blasphème : pour insulte à la personne de dieu, atteinte aux bonnes mœurs, blasphème contre les religions, atteinte à un rituel religieux, propagation d'idées basées sur l'extrémisme religieux, une peine à la haine contre des religions.' When El Fani asks if blasphemy is a crime in Tunisian law, he responds: 'le blasphème n'est pas un délit mais l'insulte contre dieu est un délit.' When El Fani replies 'Ah bon?' with laughter, there is a touch of satire in her tone. In layering this legal conversation, via sound and subtitles, over the photograph of her hospitalised body, El Fani constructs a clear link between her battle against cancer and her battle against religious intolerance in Tunisia. Although I am not suggesting that she deliberately intended to exploit her viewers' empathy and mobilise them against political Islam, I do think that we need to be aware of the problems that emerge when viewers are ontologically enmeshed in El Fani's private, tactile world and exposed to her bodily suffering. In the words of Paul Ricoeur, 'La fiction donne au lecteur des yeux, des yeux pour voir et pour pleurer.'<sup>338</sup> In the genre of the first-person life narrative (moving away from Ricoeur's focus on fiction), readers (or, in this case, viewers) are able to access the personal

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<sup>337</sup> Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (London: Wallflower Press, 2009), p. 14.

<sup>338</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit III* (Paris: Seuil, 1983), p. 274.

lived experience and partisan perspective of the author. In this manner, they not only see and cry (as in Ricoeur's argument regarding fiction) but see and cry *with* the author's perspective. As El Fani is the filmic 'heroine' of the story, the viewers' empathy is with her, as it would typically be with the protagonist of a fictional story. The viewers' emotional response to the story is arguably heightened by the fact that she is facing breast cancer, one of the most common, and therefore possibly relatable, forms of the disease. While this narrative allows for universal resonance with women who have experienced breast cancer, or who are facing it today, the film's exploration of this theme makes it hard to keep an objective and critical perspective on the broader historical situation of post-revolution Tunisia and the place of Tunisian Salafism within it.



**Figure 23.** *Même pas mal*, Nadia El Fani and Alina Isabel Pérez, dir. (2012).

As the film progresses, El Fani draws much stronger associations between the ideas of her personal diseased body and what she perceives to be a 'diseased' Tunisia. In the voiceover narrative, she states that:



[m]alheureusement, il n'y a pas de chimiothérapie ou chirurgie radicale contre le cancer de l'obscurantisme. [...] Ces métastases sèment à tout vent l'intolérance, le racisme et la violence sur le champ de l'ignorance. Des cellules déviantes infectent avant tout les cellules de la matière grise. Elles neutralisent leur capacité de réflexion.

The language employed here is deliberately provocative. Consider, for example, her statement that there is no 'chirurgie radicale' to cure 'l'obscurantisme' (a term often employed to evoke radical forms of Islamism) in 'les cellules de la matière grise' (brain cells).<sup>339</sup> This kind of medical language is reminiscent of language employed to evoke mental disorders. Although El Fani's statement is not destined to be taken at face value, her imagining of a 'chirurgie radicale' to target radical forms of Islamism is controversial. It may bring to mind barbaric brain surgeries, such as lobotomies, that were employed in the early twentieth century to treat mental illness. In this respect, Caporale's argument, referenced above, regarding the film's pacifist character, does not apply here: El Fani's use of her cancerous body as a metaphor for Tunisian society risks exacerbating social tensions rather than contributing to a 'peaceful' process of political change.<sup>340</sup> Recalling Siobhán Shilton's and Dakhliya's arguments regarding unhelpful dichotomies in discourse on contemporary Tunisia, El Fani's use of medical metaphor contributes to a tendency to polarise the debate, pitting 'secularists' against 'Islamists', while arguably reinforcing neo-colonial stereotypes of violence and religious fanaticism in North Africa.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> See, for example, David-Setbon's use of this term to evoke radical Salafist groups in Kairouan: 'cet islam obscurantiste'. Danielle David-Setbon, *Paris-Tunis-Kairouan* (Paris: hemisphères, 2017), p. 204.

<sup>340</sup> Note Caporale's use of the adjective 'peaceful'. Caporale, p. 90.

<sup>341</sup> According to Siobhán Shilton, [p]aradoxical external perspectives of the country have continued, since the events of January 2011, either to assimilate 'Tunisia' within a teleological narrative of 'progress' towards democracy or to communicate a fear that the former autocratic regime will be replaced by an Islamist state. From either point of view, a dichotomy is constructed wherein 'democracy' is absolutely tied to a Western model and 'Islamism' is associated irrevocably with extremism Shilton, p. 130. According to Dakhliya, 'Le temps n'est plus d'une binarité absolue postulée entre islamistes et démocrates. [...] Dans le moment politique qui est le nôtre, nous observons qu'il est de multiples façons d'être démocrate, tout comme il est de multiples façons de se réclamer politiquement de l'islam, dans un brouillage des dichotomies.' Dakhliya, pp. 109–10.

El Fani's life narrative strategy here is deliberately provocative and we must remember that she, as an artist, had faced heavy political and social censorship throughout her career. In her interview with Caporale, she notably discusses the emotive potential of the cinematic medium and its relationship to censorship:

[L]e cinéma a ce pouvoir d'imprimer des images au fond de la rétine qui continuent parfois à alimenter des rêves, des pensées et en ce sens ça peut être considéré comme un pouvoir qui fait peur. Sinon il n'y aurait pas autant de censeurs prompts à censurer!<sup>342</sup>

In emphasising her awareness of the haunting potential of cinematic images, El Fani's statement suggests some degree of awareness of her film's powerful—and possibly manipulating—impact on her viewers. It is also pertinent that she refers here to cinema as 'un pouvoir qui fait peur'. The medium enables El Fani to create a politicised narrative of resistance to her attackers and she is aware that, in so doing, she is manipulating her viewers' emotions. This raises an important hermeneutic 'problem' for scholars of life narrative: how to approach biased and controversial accounts of history? Recalling Silverman's discussion in *Palimpsestic Memory* of Resnais's use of montage, we may deem it 'of utmost importance' to re-historicise the images we encounter in El Fani's film, particularly those that may risk evoking Islamophobic clichés.<sup>343</sup> However, we must also acknowledge that the montage strategy evokes the chaos and overwhelm that the director was experiencing at this time in her life. She did not move through her life with an objective and neutral perspective reminiscent of omniscient narrators. Her palimpsestic layering of images in her montage strategy works deliberately to convey her political aesthetic and the emotional 'truth' of her experience at this time.

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<sup>342</sup> Caporale (p.91).

<sup>343</sup> See footnote 58 in Silverman, p. 65.

As I shall now demonstrate, the collage strategy works, perhaps problematically, to associate French Republican symbols with the Tunisian revolution. In turn, as we shall see, these elements are woven into the narrative of her fight against cancer: a metaphor for her ideological battle (which she describes in the film as a philosophical ‘guerre’) against Islamism. In this respect, I will discuss how El Fani’s collage strategy adds complexity to my definition of the palimpsestic life narrative.

While I have so far focused on the ways in which El Fani employs her body as a metaphor for Tunisia, one ambivalent sequence in the film appears to stage El Fani’s body in a more celebratory context. In footage of the prize-giving ceremony for the *Prix de la laïcité de la République française*, of which she is one of the principal winners, at the Hôtel de Ville in Paris in 2011, El Fani dances with her friend [see Figures 24 and 25]. Although we have previously found that El Fani’s montage strategy serves, at times, to create a binary between ‘French’ secular values and ‘Tunisian’ Islamism, she evokes here a more harmonious layering of ‘French’ and ‘Tunisian’ symbols. The hand-held camera shakes slightly as it films El Fani dancing and the close-up shots provide viewers with a sense of intimacy, as if they are in the party and participating in her celebration. Although she is receiving a prize that celebrates the specifically French concept of *Laïcité*, her choice of clothing evokes her Tunisian heritage: she is wearing a white Kaftan, embellished with silver details, and a long blue scarf over her left shoulder. The dance also evokes popular forms of dance from the Maghreb. As she dances, El Fani holds the white trophy, which takes the form of a bust of the Republican symbol of *Marianne*, on top of her head.<sup>344</sup> This sequence might call to mind Zoulikha Bouabdellah’s work of video art, *Dansons*, in which the artist embodies the figure of *Marianne* and belly dances to the French national anthem: the *Marseillaise*.<sup>345</sup> Indeed, this

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<sup>344</sup> Although this was possibly unintentional, the placement of her fingers, which frame Marianne’s right breast, subtly prefigures the theme of her next film: female breasts as tools for activism in *Nos Seins nos armes* (2013).

<sup>345</sup> For an excellent discussion of this artwork, see: Siobhán Shilton, ‘Belly Dancing to the Marseillaise: Zoulikha Bouabdellah’s *Dansons*’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 12.4 (2008), 437–44.

part of the film may, on the surface, seem to celebrate El Fani's transnational identity, with both French and Tunisian symbols coming together in a celebratory moment.



Figure 24. *Même pas mal*, Nadia El Fani and Alina Isabel Pérez, dir. (2012).



Figure 25. *Même pas mal*, Nadia El Fani and Alina Isabel Pérez, dir. (2012).

However, this sequence does more than simply convey El Fani's hybrid identity as a Franco-Tunisian woman. The Republican figure of *Marianne*, which is placed at the top of El Fani's head while she is clothed in Tunisian dress, and while dancing a Maghrebi form of dance in this Parisian seat of the political establishment, may evoke colonial hierarchies. Moreover, the idea of a *Prix de la laïcité de la République française* may, in itself, also be problematic as it offers cash prizes to those who seek to promote the concept—in France but also, in some cases such as El Fani's, in France's former colonial territories. While the sequence conveys the complexity of El Fani's identity positioning, as a postcolonial subject who identifies strongly with her 'French' heritage, it is also a provocative statement of the author's politics: she wants a core concept of the former coloniser's republican ideology, *Laïcité*, to be implemented in Tunisia.

As we have found so far, El Fani is aware that cinema is 'un pouvoir qui fait peur' and she is committed to resisting, via her cinematic life narrative project, censorship, misogyny and religious orthodoxies. Her strategy of drawing different ideas together, in ways which may provoke discomfort or controversy, may be understood as her challenge to spectators' expectations about her cultural positioning and affiliations. As I shall show later in my analysis, her narrative perspective shifts in subtle ways throughout the film. This ultimately makes it difficult for spectators to 'know' and interpret her identity.

In one striking sequence, El Fani creates a filmic palimpsest by layering 'Western' feminist perspectives of Tunisian women together with French Republican imagery, footage of her chemotherapy medicine and a photograph of a French newspaper article, in which El Fani explicitly associates Tunisia in 2011 to France in 1789. In this palimpsest, she notably features footage of an interview with Sihem Habchi, the president of the French feminist group, *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*. This group has been critiqued for its discourse on Muslim women and its attempt to 'liberate' them with Western models of feminism, which notably

recall colonial practices of ‘unveiling’.<sup>346</sup> This was filmed by El Fani in the *NPNS* headquarters in Paris. As mentioned above, although this movement is distinct from FEMEN (a Ukrainian feminist group to which El Fani has been affiliated), it has similarly been criticised for its attempt to impose Western models of feminism on women from the MENA region. At the start of the sequence, Habchi’s advocacy *Laïcité*, and her criticism of Islamic veiling practices is briefly layered over close-up footage of El Fani popping chemotherapy pills out of a packet [see the still in Figure 27]. Recalling El Fani’s featuring of her diseased body as a metaphor for the nation, this visual-sonic layering strategy works provocatively to associate the ideas of chemotherapy and *Laïcité* in the viewers’ minds.

Additionally, it is important to note that the president’s discourse notably does not acknowledge the different branches of feminism within the Maghreb that function independently from *Ni Putes Ni Soumises*, or indeed from other Western brands of feminism. Habchi states that ‘Il faut qu’on la défende [la Laïcité], parce que sinon les filles qui se battent dans les pays arabes, elles vont lâcher [...] c’est ça qui doit protéger les filles. Ce n’est pas le voile, ce n’est pas la burqa. Quand on est couverte, ça veut dire qu’on est vierge ou qu’on est mariée. Voilà les deux modèles féminins qui sont respectés.’ Her argument—delivered in French, from the French capital—that Maghrebi Muslim women should be unveiled is problematic in that it is reminiscent of neo-colonial acts of ‘un-veiling’.<sup>347</sup> As we hear Habchi’s voice denounce Islamic veiling practices, the camera pans over posters in the 141rganization’s office of unveiled and urban ‘Mariannes’ [see Figure 26] who function as symbols for the ‘feminist’ 141rganization’s vision of liberated and modern French women. While the model on the left wears the Republican symbol of the Phrygian cap, the one on the

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<sup>346</sup> See, for example, an Algerian female scholar’s critique of *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* and the Islamophobic tendencies that she perceives in the movement. Houria Bouteldja, ‘De la cérémonie du dévoilement à Alger (1958) à Ni Putes Ni Soumises : L’instrumentalisation coloniale et néo-coloniale de la cause des femmes’, *Oumma*, 13 October 2004 <<https://oumma.com/de-la-ceremonie-du-devoilement-a-alger-1958-a-ni-putes-ni-soumises-linstrumentalisation-coloniale-et-neo-coloniale-de-la-cause-des-femmes/>>.

<sup>347</sup> See Kraidy on neo-colonial ‘Un-veiling’: Kraidy, pp. 180–98.

right stands with her right arm raised. This is possibly a subtle reference to the Republican symbol of Marianne, who is often depicted with her right hand raised with the *tricolore* flag. The graffiti present in the background of this poster evokes the Parisian *banlieue* environment where the *NPNS* project began. Habchi, who was born in France to Algerian parents, has notably been featured on the façade of the L'Assemblée Nationale in Paris (in 2003) as one of the 'Mariannes d'aujourd'hui'.<sup>348</sup> These references notably echo the sequence in which El Fani dances with the statue of *Marianne* and reinforce the neo-colonial hierarchy that we discussed earlier.



**Figure 26. *Même pas mal*, Nadia El Fani and Alina Isabel Pérez, dir. (2012).**

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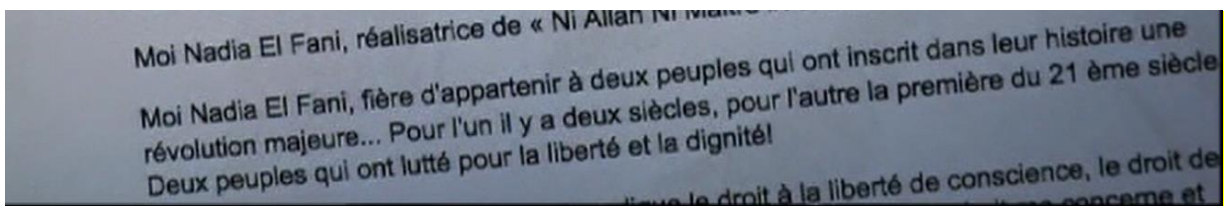
<sup>348</sup> Pierre-François Naudé, 'Sihem Habchi', *Jeune Afrique* (Paris, 16 June 2008) <<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/100362/societe/sihem-habchi/>> [accessed 06 February 2021].





**Figure 27. *Même pas mal*, Nadia El Fani and Alina Isabel Pérez, dir. (2012).**

In the same sequence, El Fani draws a problematic association between France's 1789 revolution and Tunisia's 2011 revolution. Via the strategy of montage, the director associates the interview footage with Habchi to a still featuring an online petition that was created by *NPNS* in solidarity with her campaign for *Laïcité* in Tunisia. We see here the line 'Moi Nadia El Fani, fière d'appartenir à deux peuples qui ont inscrit dans leur histoire une révolution majeure [...] Deux peuples qui ont lutté pour la liberté et la dignité !' [see Figure 28 below].



**Figure 28. *Même pas mal*, Nadia El Fani and Alina Isabel Pérez, dir. (2012).**

In her article on art and the Tunisian revolution, Shilton argues that the use of French revolutionary icons in Tunisian activism risks evoking 'neo-colonial identifications of



Tunisia in 2011 with France in 1789'.<sup>349</sup> According to Shilton, these identifications are also problematic because '[...] opposition to the dictatorship was neither initially supported by France and Europe nor motivated by any religious group within Tunisia.'<sup>350</sup> Yet we have so far found that El Fani uses symbols of French republicanism without any apparent concern for the extent to which they might evoke a neo-colonial perspective on Tunisia. Indeed, the end of this sequence is cut with footage of the Eiffel Tower, taken from a car in which El Fani is travelling at night, and the illuminated and sparkling monument seems to evoke the director's deliberate celebration of French republican values. This layering of *NPNS*'s discourse on Maghrebi women and the illuminated Eiffel Tower thus contributes further to a neo-colonial association of the French revolution of 1789 and the Tunisian revolution of 2011, which are explicitly brought together in the photograph of the online newspaper article. A palimpsest is thus constructed in this montage, which layers elements that are divorced from their original contexts. French republican symbols, the legacy of 1789, Tunisia's 2011 revolution, Western models of 'feminism', ambivalent references to Islamism and El Fani's *personal* battle with cancer intersect here in disturbing ways. We find here that El Fani presents a palimpsestic presentation of memories from 'different' contexts that serves to evoke the superimposition of the 'personal' and the 'collective' in her consciousness. It is also pertinent to remember that, as I explore throughout this thesis, the palimpsest suppresses or conceals other narratives at the same time that it reveals new ones. In constructing a highly subjective account of her lived experience at this time via the device of montage, El Fani also 'overreads' the contexts from which she has abstracted the different symbols and images in order to create a political aesthetic. As she makes no effort to explain or contextualise the

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<sup>349</sup> Shilton, 'Art and the "Arab Spring": Aesthetics of Revolution in Contemporary Tunisia', p. 130.

<sup>350</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 130–31.

images and historical references that she presents, her film may also be seen to suppress or conceal other histories.

In the final stage of my argument, I explore how ‘surface’ layers of the narrative intersect with deeper, less accessible, levels. In analysing how these different layers intersect and dialogue, I aim to establish how the film might contribute further to the palimpsestic process that I perceive in this film. While we found above that there are tendencies in the film that present a Eurocentric perspective on Tunisia—particularly via her staging of her breast cancer as a metaphor for Muslim fundamentalism, and her cure as a metaphor for Laïcité—there are notably tropes that emerge in the palimpsestic structure that work to complicate this reading. El Fani’s use of intertextuality—the layering of internal and external elements—and a ‘hacking’ strategy combine to provide an opposing force or layer, which calls into question the film’s apparent Eurocentrism. By ‘hacking’, I am referring to abrupt and unexpected cuts that create a temporary rupture in a sequence, and which are accompanied by noises of static interference. I specifically examine how the mode of hacking intersects with the idea of the palimpsestic process in the genre of life narrative. I assess the extent to which hacking episodes might suggest rupture and conflict between different levels of the narrative, as well as tension within El Fani’s identity.

### **‘Hactivism’ and Intertextuality: reversing the Eurocentric perspective?**

Crucially, some ambivalent moments in *Même pas mal* recall El Fani’s fictional character of Kalt, the anti-capitalist and anti-Islamophobia hacker, from her earlier film, *Bedwin Hacker*. In her 2014 thesis on Maghrebi film and literature, Bliss refers to *Bedwin Hacker* as a

‘hactivist intervention’.<sup>351</sup> Her use of the term ‘hactivist’ derives from Paul A. Taylor and Tim Jordan’s term ‘hactivism’, which they define as ‘[...] a combination of grassroots political protest with computer hacking.’<sup>352</sup> Bliss argues that ‘the film’s formal hacking episodes—cinematographic hacks—call out for political action by playing with, and cutting across, the film’s intra- and extra-diegetic levels.’<sup>353</sup> Building on Bliss’s existing analysis of *Bedwin Hacker*, I analyse here the ways in which echoes of this hacking aesthetic appear in *Même pas mal* to create surprising ruptures in the palimpsestic process that we have so far discussed in relation to the devices of montage and collage.

In a similar manner to Bliss, Josef Gugler observes a call to resistance in *Bedwin Hacker*.<sup>354</sup> He suggests how this call might be interpreted by three different types of audiences:

Tunisian audiences may see El Fani calling on them to challenge Western dominance of the global media, to embrace the emancipation of women, to resist the lure of emigration, and to reject the authoritarian regime of Ben Ali. [...] Western audiences are called upon to understand and support efforts to curb the global domination of Western media corporations, to recognize the modernity of the Arab world and jettison their preconceptions about Arab women, and to extend sympathy to the plight of immigrants. First- and second-generation emigrants from the Maghreb [...] will see the film proffering various forms of resistance, and they will hear a call to return to their roots.<sup>355</sup>

Although Gugler writes that Tunisian audiences ‘may’ interpret the film in a certain way, he uses more prescriptive language to define the response of Western audiences and first- and second-generation emigrants from the Maghreb.<sup>356</sup> This might be because the film’s

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<sup>351</sup> Bliss, ‘Untranslating the Maghreb: Reckoning with Gender in Literature and Film from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia’ (University of Minnesota, 2014), p. 123.

<sup>352</sup> Tim Jordan and Paul A. Taylor, *Hactivism and Cyberwars: Rebels With a Cause?* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

<sup>353</sup> Bliss, ‘Untranslating the Maghreb: Reckoning with Gender in Literature and Film from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia’, p.124.

<sup>354</sup> Josef Gugler, ‘Bedwin Hacker: A Hacker Challenges Western Domination of the Media’, in *Film in the Middle East and North Africa: Creative Dissidence*, ed. by Josef Gugler (Austin: Texas UP, 2011), pp. 285–93 (p. 286).

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*

protagonist is focused on delivering explicit messages to Western audiences in her ‘hactivist’ interventions and there is less ambiguity regarding the call to action for these groups. Yet to what extent does the same ‘hactivist’ aesthetic produce a call to resistance in *Même pas mal* and, if so, what is the nature of the call and to whom is it directed? Or, alternatively, does the hacking aesthetic produce political ambiguity in this later film? I will now go on to argue that this intertextual dialogue between the two films, and the remediations and reworkings that it produces, result in a palimpsestic life narrative which evokes ambivalent tensions in El Fani’s identity and enables multiple perspectives to emerge.

*Bedwin Hacker*, released in 2003 in the wake of 9/11, notably challenges Eurocentric and Islamophobic clichés. Throughout the film, Kalt hacks live European television broadcasts with flickering screens, Tunisian Arabic script, digital raï music and a cartoon camel.<sup>357</sup> As Bliss argues in her analysis of Kalt’s hacks, ‘[...] El Fani shatters Islamophobic associations between Arabic and terrorism.’<sup>358</sup> In one of her hacks, she notably insists on her intention to make her Western audiences conscious of ‘[...] other epochs, other places, other lives.’<sup>359</sup> The ambiguous message clearly speaks to the widespread Islamophobic discourse of the period in which the film was made. Indeed, throughout the film we see female Tunisian characters—including Kalt—behaving in ways which subvert both internal and external stereotypes for Arab women: we notably see them in apartments doing ‘unfeminine’ things such as drinking alcohol, smoking and, in some cases, displaying their bisexuality. In view of *Bedwin Hacker*’s aim to debunk and demystify stereotypes concerning Tunisian women and Muslims, it is noteworthy that El Fani appears to stoke Islamophobic tendencies and evoke

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<sup>357</sup> According to Bliss, ‘Raï is a style of popular and folk music that originated in the Oran region of Algeria. A blended music genre from its inception, raï mixes traditional Bedouin melodies with influences from European, African and Arab musical traditions. Since its emergence in the 1930s, raï has a long tradition of being an innovative and contestatory art form, though it has also been periodically recuperated by dominant powers.’ Bliss, ‘Untranslating the Maghreb: Reckoning with Gender in Literature and Film from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia’, p. 121.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid, p. 166.

<sup>359</sup> El Fani, *Bedwin Hacker* (2003).

Eurocentric perspectives of Tunisia in her later film, *Même pas mal*. However, as I shall now demonstrate, traces from this earlier film, re-emerge in the palimpsestic process of *Même pas mal*. Given that this *Bedwin Hacker* interrogates Eurocentric clichés of Tunisia, I suggest that the palimpsestic relation between the two films serves to complicate further viewers' reading of El Fani's identity positioning and politics.

Before proceeding to analyse how the mode of hacking emerges specifically as a strategy in *Même pas mal*, it is pertinent to consider how the film demonstrates in other ways that it is in dialogue with the fictional narrative of *Bedwin Hacker*. As I shall now show, there are moments of textual ambiguity and intertextuality in the film which enable Kalt's presence to be evoked. I argue that these moments signal the director's attempts to interfere with or disrupt what appears to be her 'French' and external perspective on Tunisia.<sup>360</sup> In this respect, we cannot simply interpret *Même pas mal* without some understanding of the director's earlier cinematic activism in *Bedwin Hacker* and the ways in which this resurfaces as an intertextual layer in the film. Indeed, the film can be read more productively as a palimpsestic structure within which aspects of El Fani's identity are, at different points, revealed, suggested or in tension with each other.

Echoes of Kalt's 'hactivist' identity are woven into the palimpsestic structure of *Même pas mal* to evoke El Fani's anti-establishment alter-ego: a character who challenges the notion of authority attributed to Western television news broadcasts. While these references are not made explicit in the narrative, attentive viewers will notice parallels between both films. For example, both films end with highly similar sequences. In *Bedwin Hacker*, Kalt looks to her left while she puts a dark cap on; then, she turns to her front to look directly into the camera and smiles. This final image freezes into a still, which lasts five seconds on the

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<sup>360</sup> See Bliss's use of the term 'untranslation' to describe Maghrebi-authored texts which interfere with their own status as cultural artifacts which appear, on the surface, to inform Westerners about the Maghreb. Bliss, 'Untranslating the Maghreb: Reckoning with Gender in Literature and Film from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia'.

screen. On the other hand, in the final sequence of *Même pas mal*, El Fani walks along a Parisian street in daylight following the successful completion of her cancer treatment; she is also wearing a cap and, like Kalt in the aforementioned sequence, one single hoop earring in her left ear. The travelling shot, in which her body moves in and out of the frame, sends a final message of unknowability and mobility to viewers: she cannot be contained by our voyeuristic perspective. The film ends similarly with El Fani smiling and looking directly into the camera and this final image freezes to a still, which stays on the screen throughout the film's credits. In both sequences, the protagonists are dressed in a similar style and both are frozen in stills at the end of the films. The final sequence in *Même pas mal* is thus imbued with subtle traces of Kalt's activist identity in *Bedwin Hacker*.<sup>361</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> It may also bring to mind the final panel of Satrapi's graphic novel, *Persepolis*, to which I referred earlier. As Worth argues, 'at the end of *Persepolis* [the protagonist] is a woman who realizes that the only way to permanently leave behind 'the veil' is to embrace her marginal status and leave for a new country, France, where she need not worry about being one or the other, or even one and the other. This change is presented visually in the final panel of each book [...] Marjane, now a woman, smiles and waves to her family.' Worth (p.159)



**Figure 29.** *Même pas mal*, Nadia El Fani and Alina Isabel Pérez, dir. (2012).



**Figure 30.** *Bedwin Hacker*, Nadia El Fani, dir. (2003).



**Figure 31.** *Bedwin Hacker*, Nadia El Fani, dir. (2003).





**Figure 32: DVD cover for *Même pas mal*, Nadia El Fani and Alina Isabel Pérez, dir. (2012).**

A further visual parallel is evoked in Figure 31, taken from *Bedwin Hacker*, which features Kalt's nude back, cropped earring and silver hoop earring in the left ear. This still shows her just after she has taken off her top, thus revealing her nude and braless back to the camera. If we consider the official poster for *Même pas mal* in Figure 32, an unknown woman (who I

assume to be El Fani) with dark cropped hair, and a silver hoop earring in her left ear, is also lifting her top to reveal her braless back. The visual similarities here are striking and evoke an undeniable parallel between the two narrative personas (one ‘real’ and one fictional).

Additionally, as I shall now demonstrate, the aesthetic of hacking—previously attributed to Kalt—re-emerges in the palimpsest of *Même pas mal* and evokes the way in which memories of Kalt’s (fictional) activism surface in El Fani’s identity narrative. As I shall explain further below, these traces of Kalt’s identity gesture to the otherness of El Fani’s ‘self’ within her life narrative. Yet, as we shall see, the relationship between these different palimpsestic layers of the narrative are not obvious and may provide a destabilising experience for viewers.

Suggestions of Kalt’s presence serve to call into question El Fani’s role as the Tunisian interlocutor who explains, on French television, contemporary Tunisia to French audiences. While in the first part of the film we see El Fani as someone who appears regularly on French television debates to comment on Tunisian politics, later references to Kalt’s ‘hactivism’ evoke El Fani’s own anti-establishment position and her challenge to the dominance of the Western medium of television. Kalt, as the anti-Islamophobia activist based in Tunisia, thus functions as an antidote or counterforce to El Fani’s somewhat Eurocentric perspectives on Maghrebi women and Muslim fundamentalist groups that we discussed in the earlier parts of this chapter. These contradictions and ambiguities contribute to her complex identity positioning as a Franco-Tunisian woman.

In one ambivalent sequence of *Même pas mal*, El Fani makes an intertextual reference to *Bedwin Hacker* as she appears to ‘hack’ her own television interview on TV5 news. In this interview, she discusses the backlash and hate campaigns that were directed at her following the release of *Laïcité, Inch’Allah !* and reinforces her defence of the concept of Laïcité:

Aujourd’hui je dis à tous ces gens qui perdent leur temps à m’insulter sur internet, à créer des pages Facebook en trafiquant des photos pour m’insulter [...], qu’il y a des enjeux qui sont beaucoup plus important que cela [...] Je pense que pour aller dans un terrain progressiste, on doit passer par la Laïcité parce qu’on doit respecter tout le monde. Aucun parti politique ne peut s’emparer du pouvoir sur des principes religieux.

Throughout this sequence, the TV5 footage of El Fani is spliced with an image of a Salafist meme which flashes sporadically onto the screen [see Figure 33]. The meme, a doctored photograph of El Fani, shows her with red devil horns. On the right-hand side, a stubbled man spits onto El Fani’s smiling face; on the left, a cartoon-like knife is stabbing her eye. This somewhat childish meme, which contrasts starkly with the professional and high-resolution television studio footage, appears naïve and ridiculous in this montage.



**Figure 33. *Même pas mal*, Nadia El Fani and Alina Isabel Pérez, dir. (2012).**

The meme flashes onto the screen in five distinct episodes throughout the interview and works to disrupt the visual continuity of the televised footage. In the cinematography used to convey the hacks, El Fani employs flickering screens and bleeping noises that suggest the

hacker's interference with the television signals. With each new hacking episode, the duration of the meme's presence on the screen increases, thus suggesting the growing momentum and intensity of the attack. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, El Fani views the audio-visual documentary form as a means by which she can resist flat and simplistic caricatures of her identity.<sup>362</sup> Indeed, over the course of the film we see several other television clips featuring El Fani's public persona on French current affairs programmes. The professional news footage, taken in the television studios, presents El Fani as a confident and authoritative speaker. Yet, here, the hacking aesthetic disrupts her discourse and undermines her narrative authority. Indeed, we know that the 'hack' was not staged as a live event by a real hacker because the image of El Fani in the meme was clearly taken from this TV5 interview footage. She is wearing the same outfit and the studio background is the same. In this respect, El Fani—as film editor—can be seen to hack her own interview. Her editing of this sequence recalls Kalt's efforts to 'write back'—via her hacking narratives—to Western and neo-Imperialist forms of hegemony and prejudice.<sup>363</sup> The memes flash onto the screen as if they are repressed elements of the director's memory that suggest her awareness of her fictional character's attempts to subvert dominant Western media narratives. The unexpected bursting of the naïve and childlike meme into the frame contrasts with the glossy and smooth television set.<sup>364</sup> While the cutting of the sequence with this sudden eruption evokes the real threat of violence that El Fani faced in her personal life, it also dramatizes an interesting tension between privileged 'on-screen' spaces in republican France and the hidden 'other' in the *hors champ*.

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<sup>362</sup> Caporale, pp. 91–93.

<sup>363</sup> In postcolonial theory, 'writing back' has become a key catchphrase: the empire writes back to the centre and 'back' might signal against, to or for.

<sup>364</sup> This may bring to mind the tensions between the childlike drawings and the glossy television set in Haneke's *Caché*.

Indeed, in choosing to stage the ‘hack’ during the footage of her television interview (which she has previously defined in her interview with Olivier Barlet as a Western medium ‘[...] des images purement occidentales : la télévision’), El Fani appears to question the medium of television and draws attention to its dominance in mediating reality.<sup>365</sup> This notably recalls the character of Kalt’s attempts in *Bedwin Hacker* to critique the television as a spectacular medium which functions in collusion with Western capitalist and hegemonic forces.<sup>366</sup> It also recalls, in a different way, Tunisian artist Mouna Karray’s post-revolution video artwork, *Live* (2012), which layers the sounds of a Tunis-based taxi journey over propagandist photographs of President Ben Ali. As Shilton argues, Karray’s ‘disjunctive use of static images and ‘travelling’ voices disrupts the passive, unquestioning mode of image consumption that is associated with television, providing a wider critique of the use of this medium to perpetuate myths.’<sup>367</sup> Similarly, El Fani’s aesthetics of hacking in *Même pas mal* disrupts and undoes the continuous flow of the interview, thus breaking television’s illusion of truth. This audiovisual interference thus functions as a prod to the viewer: it calls their attention to the constructed nature of television footage, and indeed of the documentary genre.

While the persona of El Fani that we see on TV5 news is in a position of authority, the hacktivist aesthetic belies an unspoken effort to question, and even undercut, her establishment status. Indeed, this suggests she is aware, on some level, of the contradictions that she embodies in her film. On the one hand, we see in the film that she is supported by the French liberal elite and media because of her fight for Laïcité and her stance against political

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<sup>365</sup> ‘Casser les clichés : À propos de Bedwin Hacker entretien d’Olivier Barlet avec Nadia El Fani’, *Africultures*, 2002 <<http://africultures.com/casser-les-cliches-a-propos-de-bedwin-hacker-2511/>> [accessed 16 November 2020].

<sup>366</sup> In her thesis, Bliss argues that the hacking aesthetic in *Bedwin Hacker* recalls Guy Debord’s notion of *détournement*, that is, the rerouting or hijacking of dominant discourse or media in order to inspire a critique of the system that produced it. Bliss, ‘Untranslating the Maghreb: Reckoning with Gender in Literature and Film from Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia’, p. 123. Should this come earlier?

<sup>367</sup> Shilton, ‘Art and the “Arab Spring”’: Aesthetics of Revolution in Contemporary Tunisia’, p. 133.

Islam. As Bliss argues, El Fani became a ‘symbolic cultural martyr’ in the world of French film festivals and cultural prizes.<sup>368</sup> In footage of the *Carrosse d’or* film festival, shown in *Même pas mal*, Agnès Varda pays tribute to El Fani as a hero of secularism; we later see her win the French *Prix de la Laïcité* at the Hôtel de Ville in Paris. Indeed, as shown above in Figure 24, the interior elements of the building—with its palatial columns, arches and chandeliers—evoke the grandeur and elitism of this Parisian establishment space. On the other hand, she is a radical, anti-capitalist filmmaker with a history of challenging dominant media narratives, including Eurocentric stereotypes of the MENA region. Crucially, when *Bedwin Hacker* was released, she stated her intention to challenge clichéd portrayals of the Maghreb and ‘[...] inverser le rapport Nord-Sud.’<sup>369</sup> In *Même pas mal*, the hacking aesthetic is a strategy that she employs to undermine, albeit in subtle ways, her newfound position of media celebrity and stature within the establishment of the former colonial power.

Indeed, in *Même pas mal* there are several elements that disrupt the linear flow of the narrative and call into question the narrative authority of El Fani as the intermediary between France and Tunisia, or ‘native informant’ on Tunisia for Western television (or, indeed, cinema) audiences.<sup>370</sup> The figure of Kalt, as a palimpsestic layer in the narrative, emerges more strongly in the final sequences of the film. El Fani employs strategies to suggest—albeit in subtle ways—a shift in her status following the arrival of Ennahda to power in Tunisia’s Constituent Assembly elections on 23<sup>rd</sup> October 2011. She employs framing, sound and editing techniques to suggest some distance between herself and the French intellectual establishment that embraced her at the height of the Tunisian revolution. For example, during a radio interview with FranceInter radio in the immediate wake of the results, the French

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<sup>368</sup> Bliss, ‘Reworlding Tunisia: Sacrifice in Post-Revolutionary Cinema’, p. 44.

<sup>369</sup> ‘Casser les clichés: À propos de Bedwin Hacker entretien d’Olivier Barlet avec Nadia El Fani’.

<sup>370</sup> Edward Said uses the term ‘native informant’ critically to describe one of the ways in which the figure of ‘the Muslim’ is viewed/used in Western discourse: ‘At best, the Muslim is a “native informant” for the Orientalist’: Edward W. Saïd, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 301.

radio presenter challenges El Fani's refusal to accept Ennahda's status as a 'democratic' and moderate political party; El Fani replies that 'Moi, j'ai jamais pu dire modéré pour un Islamiste. Je les appelle même les antidémocrates.' Yet the interviewer proceeds to state that the party 'semble accepter le jeu démocratique.' While earlier footage shows that she was previously hailed by the French media as a defender of Western democratic and secular values, it now appears that her opinions are out of sync with her interviewer's perspective on what constitutes democracy in Tunisia. In this sequence, El Fani layers multiple soundscapes over one another: the radio dialogue; the sound of her chemotherapy pills fizzing in water and her personal voiceover commentary to create a kind of sonic palimpsest. The interviewer's dialogue gradually fades away to give precedence to El Fani's omniscient voiceover narrative.<sup>371</sup> The faded-out interview in this sequence suggests El Fani's desire to distance herself from 'official', and possibly sensationalist, French media platforms.

The 'hacktivist' aesthetic in *Même pas mal*, and its specificity to the medium of film, adds something different to the concept of the palimpsestic process in the genre of life narrative. Indeed, the unexpected and somewhat aggressive rupture in the narrative—evoked by the cinematographic hack—demonstrates a conflict between the layers that is not present in any of the other narratives in this corpus. This form of intertextual 'hacking' in the palimpsest uniquely evokes suggestions of dissonance and ambiguity in El Fani's identity: she is a filmmaker who both reifies and resists—intentionally or not—Eurocentric narratives of contemporary life in Tunisia.

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<sup>371</sup> It is pertinent to recall Nicholson's argument, discussed above, concerning the hierarchies of voices in documentaries and the idea that the filmmaker's narrative dominates over interview and overheard voices: Nicholson, 'Vocal Hierarchy in Documentary', in *Vocal Projections: Voices in Documentary*, ed. by Maria Pramaggiore and Annabelle Honess Roe (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 219–34 (p. 220).

## Conclusion

The figure of the palimpsest emerges from El Fani's *Même pas mal* as a means of constructing and exploring identity in the medium of documentary film. We have found that she reinscribes misogynist footage concerning herself and reframes it in her subjective narrative of resistance, thereby inscribing Miller's concept of feminist 'overreading'—adding a feminist reading to an existing text—and developing it in relation to two new contexts: the medium of film and the Tunisian context. Yet, moving beyond the surface—the *overreading*—we have found that there are deeper, less accessible, elements that are suggested in the palimpsest. The traces of Kalt, as the anti-Islamophobia and anti-establishment figure, subtly evoke the complexity of El Fani's positioning as someone who is based in France and advocating for French values to be adopted in Tunisia, but who is also keen to distance herself from Western stereotypes and neo-colonial narratives of her country. This complexity complicates and undercuts the film's Eurocentric messaging and its tendency to polarise the debate between Western secular values and Islamism. This understated dialogue between the films builds up layers of meaning, producing a multiple, transcultural and layered narrative.

Furthermore, the film constitutes a complex personal and historical conjuncture in which Tunisia's 2011 revolution, debates on what constitutes democracy, Islamism, French republican values and Western models for feminism intersect in the collage. As a critical tool or *grille de lecture*, the palimpsest allows us to consider the ways in which the film precludes authoritative readings of El Fani's life and identity. Rather than articulating a linear life story centred on the story of her life, as evoked in Lejeune's theory of autobiography, *Même pas mal* presents the story of a particular chapter of the director's life, as told through a dispersed



narrative that includes the presence of others' gazes, and opinions, on herself.<sup>372</sup> She notably enacts a process of layering of footage (both personal and recycled footage from other sources), photographs, images, audio narratives and subtitles, which evoke the presence of other perspectives and contexts. In evoking split temporalities (e.g., via the contrast of photography and film), and multiple narrative perspectives (e.g., via the dialogues between on-screen subjects, subtitles, mise-en-abyme strategies and the voiceover narrative), the palimpsestic life narrative works to complicate the intelligibility of El Fani's voice and perspective.

In this manner, my definition of the palimpsestic life narrative in Tunisian women's francophone narratives notably moves us away from Lunt's existing model for understanding identity in francophone Tunisian literature. Her concept of the mosaic requires an author to have distance from their society in order to create a representation in which different fragments come together in a harmonious manner, where all parts are visible to viewers. However, just as we found that Ben Mhenni's *petit récit* facilitated a resistance to official and sweeping narratives of history and memory, El Fani's filmic palimpsest troubles any simplistic reading of the film as an easy or neat narrative of Tunisian culture, or indeed her own identity. By drawing her viewers' attentions to her crossing of cultural borders—and, indeed, crosses media and narrative levels—while preventing her 'life' from being easily read or interpreted, the text demonstrates the complexity of El Fani's vision of resistance.

This chapter ultimately provides an alternative perspective on our existing definition of the palimpsestic life narrative: going beyond the expectation of factual accuracy, conventionally associated with the genres of autobiography and documentary, El Fani's creative treatment of collage, re-inscription, sound, subtitling and framing works to evoke

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<sup>372</sup> Lejeune, *Le Pacte autobiographique*, p.14.

her multiple identity and emotional ‘reality’. However, we have nonetheless found that the emotive and suggestive potential of the cinematic image, and the superimposition of disparate images via collage, may encourage problematic readings that do not account for historical complexity. While this strategy works to evoke the layering of personal and collective memories, we found that it also risks merging disparate elements in a confusing totality, in which different ideas are divorced from their original contexts and layered together without nuanced forms of explanation. In this respect, the chapter has highlighted the potential violence of the palimpsestic life narrative: it entangles, suppresses and erases at the same time that it reveals. While this may raise problems for viewers who are mindful of the context of Islamophobia in the West, it is important to recognise the ways in which the personal and the political are layered in El Fani’s narrative. While the cinematic montage manipulates and haunts the spectator, eliciting unreasonable and emotive responses, it conveys the director’s palimpsestic memories of her illness and political activism in an unsettling yet powerful manner. As a creator of life narrative, it is after all her right to express her lived experience and emotions in her own distinctive manner. While her art may be disturbing and provocative, it may also shake spectators out of complacency and passivity. She ultimately conveys the fear and discomfort that she experienced while living under a *fatwa*.

As we move through the next stages of my argument, the texts that I analyse now become progressively less explicitly ‘activist’ in their messaging. Crucially, they also exhibit more literary and poetic qualities and evoke, arguably, a more nuanced inscription of the palimpsestic process in life narrative. The next chapter on Fellous’s photobook, *Pièces détachées*, takes the argument of the thesis further by considering how the author might employ a palimpsestic process to avoid simple and reductive interpretations of both her identity and Tunisian history. Indeed, unlike Ben Mhenni and El Fani, Fellous does not include visual images of politicians, scenes of violence or protest; rather, the amateur

photographs that she includes feature local beach scenes, buildings, quiet streets or everyday life. In this respect, her strategy might avoid the problems that we have identified in El Fani's film with regard to her use of inflammatory footage of Tunisian Muslims and reductive metaphors that risk evoking neo-colonial perspectives of Tunisia. Indeed, Fellous employs a strategy of collage in a more subtle manner—with text and image—in what appears to be a more conventional 'literary' form of life narrative.

However, in tandem with El Fani, Fellous also employs the figure of the palimpsest to suggest the ways in which hidden, and less accessible, elements haunt the 'surface' layers of the narrative. While El Fani brings together internal and external perspectives of Tunisia, Fellous 'condenses' different spatiotemporal contexts and generational perspectives. Given that the author engages with several different contexts of extreme suffering and violence, including the Holocaust and the Palestine-Israel conflict, it will be pertinent to engage with Silverman's concept of palimpsestic memory in my analysis of her text. In my analysis, I add to his concept by considering how it emerges in a specifically Tunisian context—and within the genre of Tunisian women's francophone life narratives.

### **Chapter 3. Liminal spaces and repressed memories in the palimpsest of Colette Fellous's photobook: *Pièces détachées*.**

Building further on the idea of tension between different layers as a distinctive feature of the palimpsestic life narrative, I now turn to consider Fellous's *Pièces détachées*.<sup>373</sup> This text, published by Gallimard in 2017, was produced in response to the author's return trip from Paris to her homeland of Tunisia in 2015. Drawing on Silverman's concept of palimpsestic memory, I will discuss the ways in which Fellous layers disparate memories, from different time periods and seemingly separate ethnocultural contexts, to suggest the connections between them.<sup>374</sup> I propose that her narrative allows us to add a further layer of complexity to Silverman's concept in the way that she draws alternative Tunisian contexts of suffering together with her (inherited) memories of the Holocaust. These different traces come together in an intermedial narrative that suggests tensions between text and image, as well as different generational perspectives. As we shall see, Fellous places her reader in a liminal space 'between' different layers of the palimpsestic narrative; this creates a destabilising effect for the reader, as they are placed between multiple different possible interpretations.

In tandem with El Fani, Fellous also responds to the perceived threat posed by radical Islamist groups in Tunisia in the aftermath of the revolution. However, whereas El Fani employed the filmic medium to recycle and 'overread' footage of her attackers' narratives, Fellous notably includes no visual images concerning contemporary politics. As we shall see, she includes photographs of apparently peaceful scenes of seascapes, streets and domestic life. Crucially, no *ekphrasis* or captions accompany these visual elements. I suggest in this

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<sup>373</sup> Colette Fellous, *Pièces détachées* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017).

<sup>374</sup> Silverman, pp. 1-8.

chapter that this strategy serves to destabilise the reader, rendering it difficult for them to decipher meaning. Additionally, while the text was written ostensibly in response to the radical Islamist terrorist attack that targeted (mostly British) tourists in the region of Sousse in 2015, the text overlays this memory of extreme violence with the author's personal memories of her family's exile from Tunisia, as a result of antisemitism, and her childhood encounters with images of the Holocaust. The imagery of the victims in Resnais's *Nuit et brouillard*, a film that Fellous saw for the first time while at school in Tunis, and which became her first point of contact with the history of the camps, functions as the suppressed layer in the textual palimpsest of *Pièces détachées*: traces of this film permeate the text, as if it is constantly in dialogue with other personal and collective memories. Silverman has notably already discussed *Nuit et brouillard* in relation to his concept of palimpsestic memory. He argues that

[...] the concentrationary art of *Nuit et brouillard* institutes a notion of memory as the haunting of the present and an uncanny superimposition of the visible and the invisible. This version of memory, detached from a linear notion of time to open up the becalmed aftermath of the war to the persistence of horror, translates the interconnections between different moments of radical violence proposed by David Rousset, Hannah Arendt and other post-war theorists into a politicized aesthetic in which the present is always contaminated by multiple elsewheres.<sup>375</sup>

Silverman's concept is a useful framework for approaching the way in which Fellous layers together seemingly disparate contexts of extreme violence—notably the Holocaust and the Sousse massacre—in *Pièces détachées*. Additionally, in a similar manner to *Nuit et brouillard*, Fellous's narrative is also haunted by violence from multiple elsewheres—not only the radical Islamist violence in Sousse, but also the traces of the violence of French colonialism, the Vichy regime's collaboration with Nazism, anti-Semitic discrimination in Tunisia in the 1960s, and her family's exile from Tunis and her mother's mental illness. I

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<sup>375</sup> Silverman, p. 5.

suggest that Fellous's palimpsestic presentation of memories allows us to develop further Silverman's concept of palimpsestic memory in relation to distinctive Tunisian contexts.

Indeed, while Silverman has written about several francophone texts from Algerian contexts (e.g., Djébar's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement*; Dib's *Qui se souvient de la mer*; Cixous' 'Pieds nus', and Derrida's *Le Monolinguisme de l'autre, ou le prothèse de l'origine*), or from French contexts that address traumatic memories of colonialism in Algeria (e.g., Haneke's *Caché*; Resnais' *Muriel*; Modiano's *Dora Bruder*), he does not develop his concept of palimpsestic memory in relation to Tunisian contexts.<sup>376</sup> In *Pièces détachées*, Fellous notably constructs a palimpsestic life narrative in which she poetically conveys interconnections between radical Islamist-authored violence in Tunisia in 2015, her own ambivalent sense of 'exil' (p. 95) in the country, and the images of *Nuit et brouillard* that surface in her mind throughout the text.

Building on my discussion of El Fani's film in the last chapter, I will consider how the visual and verbal 'layers' of Fellous's palimpsestic narrative relate to each other and the extent to which there may be friction between them. As Tara Collington argues in relation to Fellous's first life narrative, *Avenue de France*, the reader is on a 'threshold' between text and image:

'[t]hose readers keen to link an image to its textual counterpart might flip backwards and forwards through the pages, trying to make those connections. This creates a strange impression of coming and going, of navigating the frontier between the verbal and the visual, of always being on the threshold of attributing meaning.'<sup>377</sup>

Adding to Collington's concept of the threshold, I consider the extent to which this strategy adds further complexity to the palimpsestic process in *Pièces détachées*. I consider the extent

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<sup>376</sup> Silverman.

<sup>377</sup> Tara Collington, 'Visual and Verbal Thresholds: A Chronotopic Reading of *Avenue de France* by Colette Fellous', in *The Unknowable in Literature and Material Culture*, ed. by Margot Irvine and Jeremy Worth (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), pp. 109–27 (p. 124).

to which Fellous deliberately places the reader in a liminal position between text and image (with no *ekphrasis*) in order to evoke her malaise and her anticipation of suffering.

In addition, I discuss how Fellous's verbal narrative frames her daughter's photographs and the extent to which Silverman's idea of 'condensation' in the palimpsest emerges via this merging of different generational perspectives.<sup>378</sup> He argues that the palimpsest 'represents the condensation of a number of different spatio-temporal traces.'<sup>379</sup> The idea of condensation evokes the concentration of water in a liquid form, and may bring to mind images of condensation on a window or a mirror. He notably refers further to the idea of liquidity when he argues that palimpsestic memory 'gives us a critical lens through which to perceive identity and community, the moment and history in a "liquid modern" world.'<sup>380</sup> In this statement, he refers to Zygmunt Bauman's well-known concept of 'liquid modernity', which evokes the condition of constant mobility and change that Bauman perceives in relationships, identities, and global economics within contemporary society.<sup>381</sup> Bauman argues that: 'We are now passing from the "solid" to the "fluid" phase of modernity; and "fluids" are so called because they cannot keep their shape for long [...].'<sup>382</sup> Yet although Silverman refers briefly to liquid modernity in his discussion of palimpsestic memory, he does not consider how this relates specifically to form in his corpus. I propose that Fellous's narrative—with its 'condensation' of different generational perspectives via photography, as well as its material merging of different images—may give us an opportunity to explore further the function of liquidity in palimpsestic memory.

The concept of liquidity in photography has recently garnered significant critical attention from Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer in their 2020 study: *School Photos in Liquid*

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<sup>378</sup> Silverman, p. 10.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid, p. 178.

<sup>381</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

<sup>382</sup> Bauman, *Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), p.51.

*Time*. They argue that while photographs are rendered materially from liquid, they also invite ‘liquid’ readings:

[o]ver time, moreover, we might say that photographs keep developing in unforeseen directions when they are viewed and re-viewed by different people in different presents. In “liquid time” they are not fixed into static permanence; rather, they remain dynamic, unfixed, as they acquire new meanings, in new circumstances. [...] Such a “liquid” and multitemporal reading displaces the retrospective gaze, shadowed by a known and predetermined outcome, that has dominated critical approaches to images of past violence, war, and genocide.<sup>383</sup>

Hirsch’s and Spitzer’s concept of ‘liquid time’ can be employed here to discuss the ways in which the photographs in *Pièces détachées* do not lend themselves to fixed interpretations.

The concept may also bring to mind Smith and Watson’s discussion, raised in Chapter One of this thesis, concerning the ‘afterlives’ of life narratives, whereby ‘a published ‘life’ enters into circulation as new reading publics access different versions of it over time’ and acquires new meanings with new readers.<sup>384</sup> I will discuss the extent to which the photographs in *Pièces détachées* are invested with new possible meanings as the reader associates them with verbal ‘layers’ of the narrative. Indeed, I suggest that they may take on a “liquid” quality and a multitemporal character. They may also acquire new meanings with the reader’s unique interpretations of the narrative, as they co-author and add to the palimpsest.

Moreover, whereas Donadey previously argued in 2000 that Djébar provides ‘a deeper gaze on the palimpsest of Algerian history, and does violence to colonial history by overwriting it from the perspective of the colonized’, I propose that we see a different use of the metaphor of the palimpsest in *Pièces détachées*.<sup>385</sup> Fellous does not ‘overwrite’ Tunisian history from the perspective of the ‘colonised’; rather, she occupies, like Memmi and other

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<sup>383</sup> Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, *School Photos in Liquid Time : Reframing Difference* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2020), p. 13.

<sup>384</sup> Smith and Watson, ‘The Afterlives of Those Who Write Themselves: Rethinking Autobiographical Archives’ (p. 11).

<sup>385</sup> Donadey (p. 3).



Tunisian-Jewish writers who were alive during the years of the Protectorate, an ambivalent position between the categories of coloniser and colonised. As Brozgal argues, ‘Tunisian Jews experienced more deeply and in a more profound way the draw of the colonizer; already marginalized in their own country, they looked to the *valeurs universelles* of France to provide a new framework for subjectivity.’<sup>386</sup> In this respect, my analysis of *Pièces détachées*, and the specificity of Fellous’s positioning as a Tunisian writer of Jewish origin, adds further complexity to Donadey’s existing interpretation of the metaphor of the palimpsest in relation to Djébar’s literature.

Furthermore, in the only existing academic study of *Pièces détachées*, Kassab-Charfi asserts that the text is concerned with processing and healing from the family’s traumatic experience of exile: ‘Ce qui est recherché n’est pas tant une atmosphère, que la cohérence acceptable, recevable, d’une histoire familiale, personnelle, reposée au bon endroit.’<sup>387</sup> Kassab-Charfi seems to suggest here that Fellous is putting the pieces of her family memory together to create a coherent picture. This notably recalls Lunt’s theorisation of the concept of the mosaic in Tunisian women’s writing: ‘la multitude de morceaux que l’individu réussit à intégrer dans sa “mosaïque identitaire”’.<sup>388</sup> Indeed, Lunt also employs the same metaphor to evoke a totalising vision of Tunisian society : ‘L’idée selon laquelle il faut se mettre à une certaine distance pour saisir le dessin d’une mosaïque, soulève aussi l’hypothèse selon laquelle les auteures qui s’éloignent de leur pays d’origine aperçoivent plus clairement la structure de la société.’<sup>389</sup> It will be pertinent to discuss the extent to which Fellous attempts to bring together her ‘pièces détachées’ of memory into a coherent and harmonious vision of

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<sup>386</sup> Brozgal, *Reading Albert Memmi: Authorship, Identity, and the Francophone Postcolonial Text*, p. 106.

<sup>387</sup> Kassab-Charfi, ‘Dispersion, disparition, appartenance chimérique : Colette Fellous et la poétique de *Pièces détachées*’ (p.91).

<sup>388</sup> Lunt, p. 179.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 179–80.

the past or if, alternatively, the metaphor of the palimpsest may be a more useful model for approaching the overlapping histories from ‘different’ sites that she engages with.

Indeed, *Pièces détachées* offers a valuable contribution to an often-overlooked aspect of Tunisian history: the effects of the memory of the Holocaust on second-generation Tunisian Jews. As Kozlovsky-Golan argues in her study on the ‘The Absence of North African Jewry in Visual Depictions of the Experience of World War II’, the stage was set for the application of the final solution in Tunisia, and North African Jews’ ‘end could have been much worse and bitter were it not for the conclusion of the war before the Nazis could carry out their nefarious designs.’<sup>390</sup> She explores how the post-war dominance of a ‘Eurocentric vision of the horrific events of the Holocaust’ led to a situation in which North African Jews felt unable to express the trauma of their own experiences in audiovisual media.<sup>391</sup> She describes this phenomenon as a ‘site of amnesia’.<sup>392</sup> Throughout this chapter, I will explore the ways in which Fellous employs text and image to evoke her own troubled relationship to the events of the Holocaust and the Nazi occupation of her hometown. Adding further to Silverman’s concept of palimpsestic memory, I discuss the extent to which the metaphor of repressed layers in a palimpsest can be employed to evoke Fellous’s suggestions of these troubling personal and collective histories.

I will begin the analysis by considering the way in which Fellous’s narrative of the Sousse attack is contaminated by narratives of violence from elsewhere, most notably the imagery of the camps. Then, I will move on to explore how her use of photographs might evoke an aesthetic of haunting, as seemingly ‘everyday’ scenes are anchored within a verbal narrative that anticipates violence and suffering. I shall consider the extent to which the reader is placed in a liminal space between visual and verbal ‘layers’ of the palimpsest; how

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<sup>390</sup> Kozlovsky-Golan (p. 174).

<sup>391</sup> Ibid (p. 157).

<sup>392</sup> Ibid (p. 153).

the ‘condensation’ of different generational perspectives (via text and photography) adds to the complexity of the palimpsest, and how liquidity emerges in the text, both materially in the photographs and as a strategy for reading the past and present. Focusing specifically on the relationship between different layers of memory, and between text and image, I suggest that Fellous holds seeing and not seeing in an ‘anxious relationship’, recalling Silverman’s theorisation of palimpsestic memory, with the Nazi camps and the history of the Vichy regime forming suppressed layers in the narrative.<sup>393</sup> The traces of these difficult histories are evoked—but not explained—in her palimpsestic presentation of memories.

### **Disparate yet interconnected sites of memory in the palimpsestic narrative**

Fellous’s life narrative constructs an ambivalent relationship between the specific event of the Sousse attack in 2015 and the vague malaise that she feels in relation to the universal phenomenon of extreme violence. Her use of the palimpsest does not reductively fuse different sites of suffering and generational perspectives together; rather, she uses language in such a way as to suggest the connections between them. Indeed, the author reads the Sousse massacre through a distinctive lens and associates her complicated sense of exile from her homeland with the violence of the Sousse massacre. Before I demonstrate the ways in which she draws these different traces of memory together into the palimpsestic structure of the narrative, it is necessary to discuss Fellous’s complex sense of exile that she had during her childhood in Tunisia.

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<sup>393</sup> Silverman, p.28.

Like Memmi in his well-known novel *La Statue du sel*, Fellous writes about her complicated positioning as a francophone Tunisian Jew during the Protectorate.<sup>394</sup> In her textual meditations on the absurdity of the terrorist attack, she layers memories of her childhood in the ‘ville européenne’ of Tunis that was marked by an ambivalent sense of ‘exil’ (p. 95), as her family occupied a liminal position between ‘coloniser’ and ‘colonised’. Although Fellous was immersed in French culture throughout her childhood in Tunis, she says in *Pièces détachées* that she had never seen France ‘avant l’âge de dix-sept ans’ (p. 95), when she moved to Paris for her studies. Indeed, her childhood as a Tunisian-Jewish girl was characterised by an identity conflict—a crisis of what it meant to be ‘other’ from the majority Muslim and Arabic-speaking population:

En Tunisie, j’étais en exil, quelque chose clochait, je n’arrivais pas à le définir, c’était pourtant bien mon pays de naissance et je donnais l’apparence d’une enfant heureuse. J’ai appris très tôt à être déchirée [...] (p. 95)

The adjective ‘déchirée’ (p. 95) recalls the title of the work, *Pièces détachées*. While both evoke the extent to which the author experiences her identity as composed of multiple scattered parts, the adjective is more highly charged and may evoke a form of violence in the fragmentation of her identity.

Crucially, Fellous also suggests in subtle ways an association between memories of her fragmented identity as a child to the victims of the Sousse attack, who were notably targeted because of their foreign status. The term ‘invité’ (p. 38), which she uses to describe her own exilic condition in Tunisia during her childhood (‘[...] en vérité nous n’étions que des invités, mais nous ne le savions que confusément.’ (pp. 38-9)), is the same word that she employs to describe the tourists who were murdered by the fundamentalist Islamist terrorist: ‘On a tué des invités’ (p. 15). In this way, she constructs a subtle association between herself

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<sup>394</sup> Memmi, *La Statue du sel* (Paris : Editions Correa, 1953).

and the European victims of the attack. Additionally, she is perturbed by the fact that the attacker told other Tunisians on the beach that he only sought to murder the foreign tourists:

[...] le garçon qui a tué les touristes à El-Kantaoui a prévenu les Tunisiens qui se baignaient à côté qu'ils ne devaient pas avoir peur, il n'allait pas les tuer, eux, seulement les autres, il a dit, seulement les étrangers. Je ne peux pas me défaire de cette scène ni de ces mots, cet attentat a tracé la limite de ce que je pouvais supporter [...] (p. 140)

Her description of the event as 'la limite' of what she could bear echoes Michel Foucault's concept of the 'limit-experience' in his conversation with Duccio Trombadori: 'the point of life which lies as close as possible to the impossibility of living, which lies at the limit or the extreme.'<sup>395</sup> It is an event which tests the limits of an individual's ordered experience of reality.<sup>396</sup> Just as El Fani describes *Meme pas mal* as 'une réponse aux islamistes qui [l]'ont attaquée', the extreme violence perpetrated by radicalised Islamists in Sousse constitutes a central theme of *Pièces détachées*. Her reflections on the violent scenes that she encounters in the media prompt further reflections on other troubling memories. While the narrative hangs on the particular episode of violence in Sousse, we find that her reflections on this 'limite expérience' start to become layered with more personal memories of her alienation as a child and a kind of hypervigilance that she has experienced since her youth.

Indeed, Fellous likens her confused and alienated state to that of Guy de Maupassant's protagonist of *Le Horla*, thus adding a further layer to the palimpsestic presentation of memory traces.<sup>397</sup> She notably writes that she identified with the protagonist in her childhood: 'j'entendais comme lui des bruits bizarres dans la maison, une présence menaçante qui ne me quittait pas [...] quelqu'un allait peut-être venir nous tuer tous, d'un coup?' (p. 132)

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<sup>395</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The "Experience Book"', in *Remarks on Marx: Conversations with Duccio Trombadori* (New York: Semiotext(e), 1991), pp. 30–31.

<sup>396</sup> Fellous worked on a thesis on George Bataille in the years 1971 – 1975, and this writer inspired Foucault's development of his notion of the 'limit experience'. It is therefore likely that Fellous was inspired by this concept when working on *Pièces détachées*.

<sup>397</sup> Guy de Maupassant, *Le Horla* (Barcelona: Folio classique, 2014).

Originally published in the newspaper *Gil Blas* in 1886, *Le Horla* is a short horror story written in the style of a journal. In the text, the narrator conveys his troubled state of mind after seeing a Brazilian boat, to which he had impulsively waved. In so doing, he unconsciously invited a supernatural being to haunt him. Throughout the narrative, he cannot escape the sense that he is being followed by a menacing and intolerable presence, to which he refers as the ‘Horla’ (a play on the expression ‘hors là’). In *Pièces détachées*, Fellous describes her personal experience of the ‘Horla’ as an explicable emotion which ‘n’était pas très clair mais la violence ou la catastrophe semblaient imminentes’ (p. 152) This notably echoes the language she uses to evoke the anonymous character of the fundamentalist Islamist violence that threatens contemporary societies today, describing it as ‘[une] violence diffuse qui guette’ (p. 16). The adjective ‘diffuse’ conveys how this violent force is circulating in a hidden, vague and unspecific form, which renders it even more dangerous and frightening. Fellous’s evocation of the ‘Horla’ may notably bring to mind the menacing offscreen presence—the *hors champs*—of the anonymous hacker in *Meme pas mal*. Both evoke the idea of hidden threats that may erupt suddenly.

This indeterminate menace—which I define here as the *Horla* effect—was further amplified when Fellous was shown *Nuit et brouillard* for the first time by her schoolteacher in 1963.<sup>398</sup> As we shall see, images from the film surface in her mind sporadically throughout the text. When thinking back to the first time that she saw the film, the author describes her inability to speak about the images with her father because of their traumatic impact:

J’ai treize ans, je veux lui raconter l’horreur des images mais je n’y arrive pas, je n’en ai retenu que deux ou trois, les montagnes de cheveux, les chaussures entassées, le regard perdu des hommes et des femmes alignés, les corps nus et si maigres, mais aussi les voies ferrées obsédantes, le froid glacial qui recouvre le noir et blanc de ces vies assassinées. (p. 65)

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<sup>398</sup> See : Resnais.

The narrator suggests here the inadequacy of language to express extreme acts of violence evoked in the film. This notably recalls our earlier discussion of Fellous's 'limit experience' when she was confronted with the unspeakable horror of the Sousse massacre. Crucially, Fellous makes a subtle connection between this radical Islamist-authored massacre in 2015 and the Nazi camps, as if she is reading the former through the latter:

Cette inquiétude lancinante qui me traversait, enfant [...] et qui m'assaillait régulièrement dans la nuit, voilà qu'elle résonne si fort dans cette scène [...] Cette menace indéfinie que je pressens depuis la toute petite enfance a pris hier la forme de ces quarante minutes de terreur sur la plage de Sousse, vers El-Kantaoui. C'est arrivé, c'est arrivé aussi ici, on a tué des invités parce qu'ils étaient des invités. (p. 141)

The 'c'est arrivé aussi ici' (p. 141) gestures to the ways in which the two events—the radical Islamist shooting and the unspeakable horror of the Holocaust—are associated in the mind of the narrator. In emphasising that the victims were 'invités' (p. 141) in both contexts, she highlights a common motivating factor for the massacres: a desire to eliminate a foreign group of people. The passage also brings to mind Fellous's use of the term 'invité' to describe her own sense of alienation as a child growing up in Tunisia (p.38). Building on the idea of 'overreading' in the palimpsestic strategy, discussed in the last chapter, it is possible to see this passage as Fellous's way of reading her female, Tunisian and Jewish perspective into this history of both of these events. Because of her 'postmemory' of the Holocaust, recalling Marianne Hirsch's theorisation of this term, which is a deeply traumatic memory for all people of Jewish origin, she is particularly fearful of the potential for violence against people who are perceived to be foreigners.<sup>399</sup> Indeed, she states that '[l]a violence a pris toute

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<sup>399</sup> Hirsch's ground-breaking theory of postmemory provides a conceptual tool for thinking about the ways in which the traumatic memories of one generation's lived experience can be transferred to the next: '*Postmemory* [...] describes the relationship that subsequent generations bear to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma or transformation of those who came before—to events that they "remember" only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these events were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. Postmemory's connection to the past is thus mediated not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation [...].' Hirsch and Spitzer, p. 14. The concept first emerged in: Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*.

la place' (p. 46) and 'quoi faire de cette violence, tous ces morts sur la plage, tous ces morts partout, ils sont en moi, me collent aux lèvres et aux yeux [...]' (p. 47) In this respect, she reads herself, and her body, into the attacks and suggests her inability to process the images that she has seen. Although the exile of Jewish communities from Tunisia in the 1960s, the Holocaust and the Sousse attack are vastly different in terms of their scales and political contexts, Fellous holds these different memory traces in tension in her palimpsestic life narrative and suggests their interconnections in her mind.

At times, Fellous's palimpsestic presentation of different contexts of suffering leads to narrative confusion and chaos, which suggests a psychological breaking down of memory. For example, following the part of the narrative in which she evokes her troubled memories of *Nuit et brouillard*, she imagines holding her father as a baby in her arms in the year 1909 (p. 52). This peaceful moment of cradling her father-as-baby is disrupted by mutilated bodies that enter the room. The transtemporal character of the passage, which condenses the present-tense time of narration with the year 1909, is a further inscription of palimpsestic memory. The use of language here evokes the narrator's traumatised imagination:

Des corps en morceaux entrent dans la chambre [...] j'ai la fièvre, ma vie est en pièces détachées, elle est composée de tous ces morts, je dois la reconstruire pour voir un peu plus clair, personne ne pouvait imaginer que notre monde se transformerait à ce point, je t'en supplie, aide-moi, c'est pour que tu m'aides que j'écris ce livre. (pp. 55-56)

We can note the language of fracture ('morceaux'; 'pièces détachées'), reconstruction and a desire to see more clearly. This provides evidence to suggest that Fellous is trying to form a more nuanced perspective on her complicated historical positioning; she attempts to come to terms with the violence that marks her Jewish heritage. The passage also conveys a sense of feverish delirium and vulnerability as she begs her father to help her psychologically process the traumatic images. The body parts '[...] se télescopent à toute vitesse en rouge et noir' (pp.



54-55). While the colour red evokes blood, and black symbolises death, the red and black together may gesture to the colours of the Nazi flag. However, although the imagined mutilated corpses can be linked to the real ones that she saw in *Nuit et brouillard*, she does not anchor them in a specific spatiotemporal context. In this respect, they could refer to the victims of the Sousse shootings, the Charlie Hebdo attack in Paris, the Bardo museum attack or the ‘tuerie du Bataclan’ (p. 55) in Paris, to name just a few of the violent episodes that are cited on the same page. It is as if the bodies of the victims from these disparate historical moments are layered together in the text, invading the narrator’s mind, and colliding with one another in a way that may recall the montage of violent imagery in *Même pas mal*. Yet, in Fellous’s text, the anonymity of the bodies renders them even more sinister. Additionally, the idea of ‘[s]a vie’ being in ‘pièces détachées’ (p. 55) reinforces the ideas of psychological disturbance and the shattering of illusions. However, this is not experienced as empowering or liberating; rather, the nightmarish quality of the passage, which recalls earlier references to the *Horla* effect, evokes insanity and suffering.

While in the last chapter, we found that El Fani’s use of footage concerning contemporary Tunisian politics raised concerns for viewers, as she drew an association in her montage between imagery of her chemotherapy and Tunisian Islamism, Fellous’s use of visual media is more ambivalent. While her verbal narrative suggests the impact of violent images on her psyche, the photographs that she incorporates into the narrative are amateur images of landscapes and domestic objects that have no obvious connection to Tunisian politics. Building on my idea of the *Horla* effect, I now consider how Fellous’s verbal narrative might be said to frame the ‘everyday’ in the photographs, including those taken by her daughter, within a context of malaise, as if the reader is always on the edge of violence.

## **Intergenerational perspectives and liminal spaces**

In many ways, there are important similarities between El Fani's film, discussed in the last chapter, and Fellous's photobook. While El Fani brings together apparently naïve perceptions of Tunisia together with more complex and nuanced readings, Fellous frames her daughter's touristic photographs of Tunis—taken from a foreign and external perspective—within her own more complex narrative of exile from her homeland. I am particularly interested in this idea of liminal space between the different layers of the palimpsest, and the extent to which Fellous deliberately places the reader between multiple different possible 'liquid' and multitemporal readings in order to displace the retrospective gaze. In not providing any *ekphrasis*, she creates a destabilising experience for the reader. As they are required to leaf back and forth through the narrative to make connections between the photographs and the verbal narrative, they are given the freedom to interpret those connections, or lack thereof, in their own manner.

In including photographs that were taken by Malartre, the text constructs a kind of *mise-en-abyme* in which Fellous's narrative frames her daughter's perspective. As we shall see, this strategy enables Fellous to hold naïve external perspectives of Tunisia in tension with her own more nuanced, yet traumatic, memories of her childhood in the country. However, unlike the narratives that we have previously discussed by Ben Mhenni and El Fani, Fellous includes no self-portrait photographs or imagery of political demonstrations, violence or even faces (the exception is the classic Hollywood film poster on page 122, which features the faces of two actors, as I shall discuss later). While her photographs feature a seascape, some amateur photographs of flowers and lemons and a lone figure in the street, her daughter Malartre's photographs feature beach scenes, the Sidi Bou Saïd Mausoleum, a cat in the street, some bagels and two photographs of girls taken from behind. In relying

mostly on her daughter's visual framing of the world via photography, she evokes her own difficult relationship to reality. Whereas, for the narrator, '[l]a violence a pris toute la place' (p. 46), the daughter's visual perspective provides a kind of layer or barrier that mediates the narrator's relationship to the world. This idea can also be linked to the impossibility of representing, or indeed assimilating narratives of, the Holocaust and extreme acts of violence more broadly.<sup>400</sup> Her intermedial narrative provides instead an alternative way of approaching the themes of suffering and trauma. In layering, via her palimpsestic narrative, her daughter's visual perspective with her own more troubled perception of the world, she captures an anxious relationship between naïve and sophisticated modes of seeing, as well as her own personal dichotomy of remembering and forgetting.

The first photograph that we encounter in the book is one taken by Fellous herself: printed in black and white, it depicts a seascape with a mountain range in the background. The small size of the image suggests that the narrator's optimism and hope, conveyed in the 'tout peut recommencer' (p. 10), is contained within a small window in her mind. It is like a fragment or *pièce détachée* of her memory; while it evokes Noah's promised land, it also serves as a visual reminder of the narrator's childhood homeland. While this is not stated anywhere in the text, the mountain range in the background is recognisable as that of Jebel Boukornine, which overlooks the Gulf of Tunis. It was taken from the perspective of someone standing on the beach, or possibly from a sea-facing terrace, in the coastal town of Sidi Bou Saïd.<sup>401</sup> Its small size suggests distance between the narrator and the landscape, as if she wants to contain her homeland within a small, and therefore manageable, frame. This

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<sup>400</sup> See Silverman's overview of scholarship dealing with the idea of the 'unrepresentable' in literature addressing extreme violence: Silverman, pp. 94–97.

<sup>401</sup> See the mountain range depicted in the author's photographs of Sidi Bou Saïd here: 'Le Sidi Bou Saïd de Colette Fellous', *Le Monde*, 18 April 2014 <[https://www.lemonde.fr/style/portfolio/2014/04/18/le-sidi-bou-said-de-colette-fellous\\_4403305\\_1575563.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/style/portfolio/2014/04/18/le-sidi-bou-said-de-colette-fellous_4403305_1575563.html)>. Note that this town is different from the similarly named city of Sidi Bouzid, which is often associated with the beginning of the Revolution.

photograph ostensibly evokes a peaceful landscape; the water is still and flat, and a ray of sunshine is reflected on the surface. Yet the photograph's placement in the chapter suggests its associations with extreme suffering, as violence lurks outside the frame in the verbal narrative above: '[...] le monde est blessé, moi aussi bien blessée, il s'est passé quelque chose ici, en vrai [...].' (p. 10) When associated with the medium of photography, the adjective 'blessé' may also bring to mind Barthes's use of this term, as discussed in Chapter One, in relation to the the punctum.<sup>402</sup>

While Fellous does not explain the context of the wounding, the text suggests that the scene in the photograph is the site of a potential tabula rasa: 'mais tout peut quand même recommencer, tout peut recommencer, j'y crois très fort [...]' (p.10) and 'je suis comme au balcon du monde, d'un monde disparu' (p. 10). Although not rendered explicit in this first chapter, a subtextual theme of *Pièces détachées* is the religious story of Noah's Ark (told in the first book of the Jewish Torah) and its associated ideas of destruction, reconciliation and renewal: on the penultimate page of the book, she refers to a photograph of her painting of 'l'Arche de Noé' (p. 164). The photograph on page 10 may thus bring to mind the promised land, described in the Book of Genesis (a further evocation of her Jewish heritage), in which Noah was tasked with beginning a new society based on the foundations of God's new covenant with humanity. While the Sousse attack is not mentioned specifically here, Fellous's memory of this event surfaces five pages later: 'Des touristes ont été assassinés hier sur la plage [...].' (p. 15) She also recalls the terrorist attack at the Bardo museum in March 2015, which similarly targeted tourists: 'D'autres sont morts au musée du Bardo [...] ils étaient descendus au port de La Goulette de leurs bateaux [...].' (p. 15) In this respect, the ambivalent event that she refers to in the first chapter ('il s'est passé quelque chose ici' (p.

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<sup>402</sup> Barthes, *La Chambre claire: note sur la photographie*, p. 828.

10)) could be linked to either of these attacks, which are both connected to the sea. However, given that these events are mentioned five pages later, it is difficult for the reader to attribute meaning to the photograph, as well as to the author's mention of wounding ('blessé' (p. 10)). In not naming the 'quelque chose' (p. 10), she gestures to its traumatic impact, which may be difficult to convey in words. As with the insidious *Horla* effect, the anonymity of the event renders it even more disturbing for the reader.

Additionally, the liquidity of the sea in the photograph can also be associated with its 'liquid' meaning in the palimpsest, as it invites multiple and unfixed readings. Indeed, the ambivalent event could also possibly refer to the death of her friend Alain, whom we learn died at sea in the following chapter, or it may refer to a perilous crossing of migrants because, on the same page as the photograph of the seascape, we learn that 'Un bateau blanc glisse tout au fond [...] petit point tremblé qui brille droit vers la Sicile.' (p. 10) It is well known that Tunisians and other migrants, who seek to migrate illegally into Europe, frequently travel in small boats to the island of Sicily, which is their nearest entry point into Italy. Towards the end of the book, Fellous draws an explicit parallel between these migrants and the history of her own family's exile from Tunisia in the 1960s: 'C'est l'histoire de tant d'exilés, de tous ceux qui traversent aujourd'hui la Méditerranée et qui perdent leur vie en mer, par milliers ils s'en vont, par milliers ils se perdent [...]' (p. 136) and 'leur histoire est aussi la nôtre [...]' (p. 136). Given that the narrator tells us that she can see the boat travelling toward Sicily, but it is not visible in the frame of the photograph in on page 10, the boat and the reader are situated in a liminal position. They are in an 'elsewhere' between different layers of the textual palimpsest, where meaning is uncertain, and the idea of suffering is evoked poetically but not explained.

Additionally, Fellous also places her reader 'between' her own perspective and that of her daughter, Marianne, whose photographs are included in the text. If we compare the

seascape on page 10 to the other eleven images in the narrative, it is by far the smallest. In contrast, Malartre's photographs of the Sidi Bou Saïd coastline are much larger. They notably reflect a French, and thus external, perspective of the Tunisian landscape. Taken from the perspective of someone standing on the beach, the first of Malartre's images (p. 31) features some wooden poles in the shallow waters of the shoreline. In the background, we can see the same Jebel Boukornine mountain range that was visible in her mother's photograph on page 10. Additionally, in the photograph on page 7, we can see some anonymous figures at the water's edge looking out to the same mountain range on the horizon. They are not reduced in size to become manageable fragments of memory; instead, each of these images takes up its own page. The enhanced size of the images enables the viewer to have a more immersive experience as they are able to see the landscape more clearly; it also suggests that they will spend longer looking at them. In this manner, Malartre's photographs evoke a less complicated, but possibly more naïve, relationship to the Tunisian landscape.

As Rugg argues in relation to how the medium of photography functions in the genre of autobiography, naïve and sophisticated readings of photographs can be brought together with empowering effect.<sup>403</sup> What Rugg finds particularly fruitful is the medium's ability to hold these different readings together at the same time to draw out productive interpretations.<sup>404</sup> We can also use this idea to think about how different readings come together in the 'liquid' condensation of memories in Fellous's palimpsestic life narrative. On page 37, the photograph appears to feature a simple beach scene, which could be the scene on a clichéd postcard or touristic image of Tunisia. Although the author stated in an interview with Fabien Ribery that the photograph was selected because of the way in which it captures the character of Sidi Bou Saïd, 'ça dit quelque chose du lieu', the accompanying written text in the book,

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<sup>403</sup> Rugg, p. 19.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid.

situated on the left-hand page, anchors the image within Fellous's personal narrative of trauma.<sup>405</sup> She directly links her childhood experience of 'une menace ambiante' (p. 36) to a confused feeling of non-belonging: 'Je suis parmi eux sans être tout à fait eux [...]' (p. 35). Additionally, as the subjects represent an anonymous collective from which the narrator and the reader are separate, the composition reinforces the idea of alienation—reflected in the verbal narrative—from a majority group. Although Fellous tried to separate herself from this feeling when she was a child, she was unable to do so, 'même quand [elle le comprend] un peu mieux.' (pp. 35-6) We can infer that her enhanced comprehension of this fear came with some maturity and understanding of her family's relationship to complex histories of displacement and violence. However, this passage suggests that this self-awareness did not enable her to free herself from the memory of her parents' trauma—in terms of their experience as Jews living Nazi-occupied Tunisia and their proximity to the Holocaust. Indeed, given the idea of haunting that underpins the verbal narrative, it is evident that the image does more than simply tell us 'quelque chose du lieu'.<sup>406</sup> If we read Malartre's image as in dialogue with Fellous's verbal narrative that precedes it, it is invested with new meaning and evokes the 'malaise' and fear that Fellous had felt as a result of her confused position in the world. In this way, Fellous's verbal narrative invites 'liquid' and multitemporal readings of the photograph.

When thinking about this photograph in relation to the broader narrative of *Pièces détachées*, it is impossible to divorce it from the themes of violence and death. As discussed above, Fellous's viewing of *Nuit et brouillard* marked a significant turning point in her life. I propose that Resnais' careful juxtaposition of everyday beauty and traces of extreme horror

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<sup>405</sup> Fabien Ribery, 'La photographie comme une cigarette : Entretien avec Colette Fellous', *L'Intervalle Blog*, 2017 <<https://linterveille.blog/2017/04/13/la-photographie-comme-une-cigarette-entretien-avec-colette-fellous-romanciere/>> [accessed 7 April 2020].

<sup>406</sup> Ribery.

in the film finds echoes in the relationship between the visual and the verbal in Fellous's life narrative. The author is similarly fascinated by the oxymoron of the everyday and horror that she perceives in the images of the Sousse attack. In an interview with *Les Fugitives* publishing house in 2019, Fellous suggests the ways in which violence and sweetness intersect as layers in a 'palimpseste' of human experience:

La violence est là, mais je crois que plus on se tient près de la douceur, mieux on voit, mieux on comprend l'autre, mieux on comprend les autres. On comprend le palimpseste qui est le monde. Je suis toujours traversée, comme nous tous, par ce mélange de violence et de douceur. Mais j'aime bien l'oxymore « le combat pour la douceur ». C'est presque comme il faut se battre pour atteindre cette douceur et la rendre collective.<sup>407</sup>

This quotation recalls in many ways Silverman's discussion of *Nuit et brouillard* in *Palimpsestic Memory*.<sup>408</sup> He argues that the classic opening of the film 'plays precisely on shifting perspectives across the barbed wire at Auschwitz and a tension between the camp and the surrounding countryside, horror and the everyday.'<sup>409</sup> In *Pièces détachées*, Fellous also meditates on the overlapping moments of sweetness and violence in the Sousse beach attack. Nine pages after we see Malartre's beach scene on page 37, the narrator imagines the faces of 'ceux qui souriaient ou s'embrassaient une seconde avant de tomber [...]' (p. 46). Although the photograph was taken in a separate time and place, there are undeniable connections here to the Sousse beach massacre. The stillness of the image evokes the moments of leisure and pleasure before the arrival of the attacker. As I mentioned briefly in Chapter One, Barthes famously argued that photographs evoke the idea of death: 'En me donnant le passé absolu de la pose (aoriste), la photographie me dit la mort au futur.'<sup>410</sup> When brought into dialogue with Fellous's verbal reflections on the victims' innocent leisure

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<sup>407</sup> 'Colette Fellous interviewed on 18 September 2019 at the Institut français du Royaume-Uni, London.', *Les Fugitives*, 2019 <<https://www.lesfugitives.com/books/colette-fellous-this-tilting-world>> [accessed 6 January 2020].

<sup>408</sup> Silverman, p. 162.

<sup>409</sup> Silverman, p. 162.

<sup>410</sup> Roland Barthes, *La Chambre claire: note sur la photographie* (Paris: Gallimard Seuil, Cahiers du cinéma, 1980), p. 80.



activities, which come ten pages later, the photograph of everyday pleasure on the beach appears to prefigure the Sousse massacre. Although her daughter's perspective provides a less complicated relationship to the figures and the landscape, the narrator anchors this image within her own more nuanced, and more troubled, relationship to the world. In this way, the tension between the mother's and the daughter's perspectives evokes Fellous's vision of 'le palimpseste qui est le monde [...] ce mélange de violence et de douceur'.<sup>411</sup>

Indeed, when situated in relation to the different contexts of suffering to which Fellous alludes in her verbal narrative—her exile, the camps, the Sousse massacre—the apparently peaceful beach scene cannot be apprehended in a pure and uninterrupted manner. In the two pages that precede the photograph on page 37, Fellous builds an increasing sense of anxiety. Blurring her present adult perspective with her memories of being seven years old in Tunisia, she says that she likes to keep watch ('veiller' (p. 35)) as she may need to 'sauver un jour' (p. 35) the members of the public that she encounters. It is not clear if these anonymous figures, which seem to echo the ambiguous poles in the photograph on page 31, are from the past or present. Gesturing to a dream-like state, she writes that she does not know when she will be required for this task: '[...] je ne sais pas quand, c'est très confus [...]' (p. 35) We thus get the sense that she is watching and waiting in a state of heightened alertness. Additionally, as the figures in the photograph have their backs turned away from us, and they are small in relation to the wider landscape, they appear vulnerable. This interpretation of the photograph is further reinforced when we consider how the verbal narrative anchors the image in this context of fear and foreboding: the narrator poses the rhetorical question: 'C'est sans doute cette angoisse du soir qui revient dans mes yeux?' (p. 35) As readers, we embody these eyes of the narrator: our reading of the photograph is inflected with her 'angoisse' (p. 35) and a desire to keep watch and protect the figures that she sees. Additionally, the ambivalent poles

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<sup>411</sup> 'Colette Fellous interviewed on 18th September 2019 at the Institut français du Royaume-Uni, London.'

that are featured in both Figures 35 and 36 may be interpreted as monuments to the victims of the violence that the mother's narrative anticipates. When considered in relation to the verbal 'layer' of the narrative, Malartre's photographs have a 'liquid' quality, recalling Hirsch and Spitzer's theory; they do not keep a fixed shape, but are invested with multiple meanings, as the reader brings them into dialogue with different textual elements of Fellous's palimpsestic narrative.

Building further on the idea of liquidity in the palimpsestic life narrative, Fellous's strategy also evokes the way in which the 'condensation', recalling Silverman's use of this term, of memory traces is rendered materially in her photographs.<sup>412</sup> If we look closely at the photograph in the beach scene on page 37, it is possible to decipher another trace of memory, a photograph from the following page [p. 38], that is visible underneath:

While the layering of images clearly resonates with the idea of the palimpsest, the idea of one image bleeding into another on the printed page also recalls Hirsch and Spitzer's concept of 'liquid' and 'multitemporal' time in photography.<sup>413</sup> Behind the mountains in the photograph on page 37, we can see the faint outline of a dark box-shape. This shadow is, in fact, a trace of a photograph of an Islamic place of worship: Le Mausolée de Sidi Bou Saïd [p. 38].

According to the credits, this photograph was also taken by Malartre. The iconic thirteenth-century mausoleum, which was built to honour the saint which takes its name, is widely regarded as an important place of Sufi worship in Tunisia.<sup>414</sup> Significantly, it was damaged in

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<sup>412</sup> Silverman, p. 10.

<sup>413</sup> Hirsch and Spitzer, p. 13.

<sup>414</sup> Lilia Blaise argues that '[l]a destruction du mausolée de Sidi Bou Saïd a fait suite à une série d'actes de vandalisme qui a touché les lieux représentant le culte soufi en Tunisie. Dans tout le pays, près d'une quarantaine ont été incendiés dont une vingtaine entièrement détruite en moins de dix mois.' Lilia Blaise, 'En Tunisie, le mausolée de Sidi Bou Saïd fait peau neuve grâce à la mobilisation citoyenne', *France24.Com*, 2013 <<https://www.france24.com/fr/20130724-tunisie-mausolee-sidi-bou-said-incendie-soufisme-islam>> [accessed 30 May 2020].

an arson attack that was carried out during the night of 12<sup>th</sup> January 2013.<sup>415</sup> In the wake of the revolution many saints' shrines were vandalised and bulldozed by radical Salafists who questioned the buildings' compatibility with the monotheism of Islam.<sup>416</sup> The journalist Lilia Blaise argues that

[L]es thèses se contredisent d'ailleurs encore sur l'origine de l'incendie. Le maire a dénoncé un acte de vandalisme commis par des « extrémistes » et a porté plainte contre le leader du parti islamiste Ennahda, Rached Ghannouchi, pour « responsabilité morale ».<sup>417</sup>

While the mayor of Sidi Bou Saïd referred to the influence of Ennahda's Islamist politics on the arsonist's motivations, the former President of Tunisia, Béji Caïd Essebsi, argued that the violence, which he attributed to Salafists, stemmed from fundamentalist ideology that had been imported into Tunisia from abroad.<sup>418</sup> He also stated that this specific event was one of the main reasons why he decided to return to Tunisian politics: 'Le pays risquait de perdre ses repères historiques, religieux. Il devenait urgent de lancer un mouvement qui s'oppose à de telles exactions, signe d'une dérive fatale.'<sup>419</sup> Although we are not sure if Fellous is aware of Essebsi's reflections on the attack, the inclusion of this photograph gestures to a collective crisis of both identity and history in Tunisia at a time of rising extremism. The dark clouds that encircle the top of the minaret give it an ominous quality which evokes its troubled history as a site of fundamentalist violence. In this respect, it also brings to mind the series of photographs in Ben Mhenni's blog, discussed in Chapter 1, which portray empty street scenes

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<sup>415</sup> Emily Jane O'Dell refers to the destruction of the Sidi Bou Saïd mausoleum in her article. She argues that '[t]hose who are driven to destroy such heritage out of a "Salafi" ideology also believe that they are preserving the past—by demolishing all "idols" to "re-create" the conditions under which Islam was practiced in the 7th century.' Emily Jane O'Dell, 'Waging War on the Dead: The Necropolitics of Sufi Shrine Destruction in Mali', *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress*, 9 (2013), 506–525 (p. 510).

<sup>416</sup> Roua Seghaier, 'Thirty-four Mausoleums Vandalised in Tunisia since the Revolution', *TunisiaLive*, January 2013.

<sup>417</sup> Blaise.

<sup>418</sup> Béji Caïd Essebsi and Arlette Chabot, *Tunisie : La Démocratie en terre d'Islam* (Paris: Plon, 2016), p. 90. Essebsi notably mentions that he was born in this mausoleum.

<sup>419</sup> Essebsi and Chabot, p. 90.

and buildings in the aftermath of the regime's murder of five Tunisian citizens. As with the beach scene which lies beneath the photograph of the mausoleum on page 38, there is an ambiguous and sinister quality to the image as we do not know if the violence has already occurred or if this reflects a moment in time before the attack, when the photograph was possibly taken as part of a touristic trip. Malartre's distanced 'French' perspective is here overlaid with a sense of collective fear and mourning that also captures her mother's personal trauma. In her interview with Ribery, Fellous stated that, in this photograph, '[...] on voit des passants de dos venir regarder la mer à la fin du jour à Sidi Bou Saïd. C'est comme une prière, ou un chant collectif. Tous les jours à la même heure, au même endroit, c'est pareil, ils sont là de dos et ils regardent la mer.'<sup>420</sup> This collective 'chant' that she perceives in the image may recall the endless and timeless cry which closes *Nuit et brouillard* and connects memories of suffering across different times and geographical sites. Indeed, her daughter's beach scene, lying on top of *and* underneath the mausoleum—via the 'condensation' of memory traces in the merging of the photographs—is inflected with grief.

The last photograph in the narrative that was taken by the author herself (p. 134) is a significant element of the palimpsest as it addresses the author's attempt to come to terms with the traumatic memories of suffering and exile that have characterised her relationship to both her father and her homeland. This photograph, like most of the others we have discussed, is not accompanied by a caption or *ekphrasis* and this creates a destabilising experience for the reader. Although we do not know where it was taken, the selection of traditional Tunisian baskets outside the shop suggest that it was taken in Tunis. Anchored within Fellous's personal narrative, the photograph may evoke her grief for the loss of her father and the difficulty she has in coming to terms with the suffering that he experienced as a result of his exile. Indeed, the verbal narrative that follows the photograph—two pages

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<sup>420</sup> Ribery.

later—evokes her longing for her father and her sadness that she was unable to heal his trauma. Its placement within the verbal narrative gives the reader clues as to how they should interpret it. Indeed, the photograph precedes the section of the book in which she describes her father's 'grande rupture' (p. 136) from Tunisia when the family had to leave suddenly for France in 1967. Crucially, she mentions that the hardest thing for him had been to leave his shop, which was home to the agricultural equipment business that he had built up over many years: 'il lui avait fallu abandonner sa vie, son métier, sa maison, ses habitudes, ses musiques, ses paysages et surtout son magasin qui était toute sa vie, comme il disait.' (pp. 135-6) In this respect, due to the proximity of the photograph to these sentences, and the fact that its unknown subject appears to be male and standing on the threshold to the doorway of a shop (recalling her father's *magasin*), a poetic link is evoked between this anonymous figure and the narrator's father.

Significantly, Collington observes that Fellous's life writing often contains multiple references to windows, doors and staircases.<sup>421</sup> She argues that images of thresholds in her narratives can symbolise both the threshold 'from life into death', or the passage from one culture into another.<sup>422</sup> In the photograph on page 134, the man's passage from the street into the dark room of the shop may be interpreted as a metaphor both for her father's liminal state, as an immigrant who had to make the passage from his home to an unfamiliar country, and for his death. The reading works if the figure is a customer, too: on the threshold of the store, he evokes the liminal status of the *invité* who, as discussed earlier, is associated in Fellous's mind with her own childhood, the victims of both the Sousse attack and the camps. Despite Fellous's expression of frustrations with her father's tendency to repress and shield her from difficult histories concerning her Jewish heritage, as I shall discuss later in the chapter, the

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<sup>421</sup> Collington, p. 114.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid, pp. 117–19.

narrative of *Pièces détachées* is underwritten by many anecdotes relating to her father and her love for him. She tells us that after ten years of living in Paris, he had described a vivid dream about returning to his former shop in Tunis: ‘C’est incroyable, [...] c’était un rêve mais je croyais que c’était vrai, que je le retrouvais vraiment mon magasin, j’étais content!’ (p. 148) She remembers that although he never used to speak about his former life in Tunisia, this dream had given him pleasure: ‘ce jour-là son visage rayonnait à nouveau.’ (p. 148) However, when Fellous asked him if he wanted to return to Tunis to see his shop, ‘[i]l n’a pas répondu, il ne pouvait pas répondre.’ (p. 149) In this respect, the image may gesture to her father’s dream-like state, as she remembers both his longing for his homeland and the trauma that prevented him from returning. The text and image come together here to provide a visual threshold into a poetic elsewhere that evokes both the inherited trauma, or ‘postmemory’, and her personal grief for her father’s death.<sup>423</sup>

This layering of different generational perspectives also poses a challenge to paradigms for the genre of life narrative which insist on its status as a retrospective prose genre concerning the factual life story of an individual.<sup>424</sup> In placing the reader in a liminal space between text and image, her narrative strategy echoes her thematic concern with her own liminal position between overlapping sites of culture and memory. Indeed, Fellous’s narrative strategy of including photographs aims to give the reader freedom of interpretation. As she states in an interview with Ribery,

[e]n les posant dans le texte, en leur donnant leur propre voix, c’est-à-dire en n’étant pas illustratives, je créais un jeu entre ce qui était écrit et ce que les images laissaient voir, je jouais avec le temps, je le déployais, le dépliais, je pouvais passer d’un siècle à l’autre en une phrase, ça ne me gênait pas, j’étais à l’aise.<sup>425</sup>

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<sup>423</sup> Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory*.

<sup>424</sup> See my discussion of Lejeune’s definition of the genre of autobiography above.

<sup>425</sup> Ribery.

Without captions or explanations, her images are not anchored in a specific temporal or spatial context and are liberated from fixed interpretations. This strategy resonates strongly with Silverman's concept of palimpsestic memory as both advocate forms of looking that are partial and ambivalent instead of omniscient and authoritative. Fellous is attempting to move beyond strict and rigid categories for exploring and inscribing personal and collective memories. Ultimately, this narrative strategy mirrors the author's resistance to orthodox categories and reductive ways of thinking about Tunisian history and identity. Her crossing of the borders that traditionally separate text and image in literary narratives mirrors here the author's challenge to the 'pure' categories for national, religious and linguistic belonging.

Having considered the role that intermediality plays in condensing disparate generational perspectives, including those of the child-Fellous and the adult-Fellous, I now build on this idea to explore how intertextuality intersects with intermediality as a distinctive characteristic of Fellous's use of the palimpsest, thus adding further complexity to our definition of the palimpsestic life narrative. Shifting the emphasis from Malartre to Fellous's mother, Béatrice, I discuss how the mother figure emerges as a repressed layer in the palimpsestic structure of the text. While we have previously discussed how Fellous condenses nuanced and naïve forms of looking via her appropriation of her daughter's touristic photographs of Tunisia, I now explore how her inclusion of a classic Hollywood film poster might function both as a symbol of the author's mother and of the influence of American culture on her upbringing in Tunisia. Engaging closely with the relationship between text and image, I explore how the friction between them might facilitate an exploration of the tensions that exist between layers of trauma and 'douceur' in her palimpsestic life narrative. I focus on two central chapters of the book—the chapter in which the poster is featured and the one immediately following it—to explore how Fellous's memories of her mother's illness are brought into dialogue with her inherited memory of the

camps, the Nazi occupation of Tunis, and her family's exile from Tunis. In this way, I explore the extent to which her traumatic personal memories of her mother add further complexity to the palimpsestic presentation memories of violence and exile that we have so far discussed.

### **The mother figure as a repressed layer in the palimpsest**

While eleven out of the twelve images included in the narrative are photographs taken in Tunisia by the author or her daughter, the remaining image (the ninth to appear in the text) is distinctive because it is a poster for a film that has no obvious link to Tunisia. Situated on page 122, it advertises Albert Lewin's classic Hollywood film from 1951: *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman*].<sup>426</sup> The image, which is the same as the film's lobby card featured in Figure 34, displays the characters of Pandora Reynolds (played by Ava Gardner) and Hendrick van der Zee (played by James Mason) on the beach of the fictional town of Esperanza in Spain.<sup>427</sup> When conceived of as a memory trace in the author's palimpsestic narrative structure, this image is a mysterious element with multiple possible interpretations. Originally produced in 1951 for the film's release, the poster is a cultural artefact from the period in which the author was born.<sup>428</sup> Inspired by the interpretive frameworks of an archaeologist or an historian, it is possible to read this image in a diachronic or synchronic manner. Indeed, Fellous also indicates that she uses 'toujours mes yeux d'archéologue et je retrouve.' (p. 128) On the one hand, a diachronic reading would permit us to read the image *through time*, as an artefact representing the plot of the 1951 film. On the other, a synchronic

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<sup>426</sup> Albert Lewin, *Pandora and the Flying Dutchman* (United States of America: Cohen Media Group, 1951). In subsequent reference to the film, I refer to it as *Pandora*.

<sup>427</sup> Pandora is, like the mythical figure she is named after, a beautiful and enchanting woman with whom several male characters become infatuated.

<sup>428</sup> Fellous was born in 1950.



reading would allow us to interpret it *in one time*: in relation to the verbal narrative which precedes and follows it. The reader can bring both perspectives together to illuminate this *pièce détachée* of Fellous's palimpsestic life narrative and the interesting ways in which she plays with both intertextuality and intermediality.



**Figure 34: Lobby card for Pandora and the Flying Dutchman (MGM, 1951).**<sup>429</sup>

In order to understand more about this image and the scene depicted, we can employ our diachronic reading to analyse the image in relation to the film it advertises. Woven into the narrative of *Pièces détachées*, the Hollywood film poster evokes the palimpsestic history of Tunisia as a counterpoint to ideologies that seek to suppress it. In the last chapter on *Même*

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<sup>429</sup> Available online: <https://www.gettyimages.ae/detail/news-photo/pandora-and-the-flying-dutchman-lobbycard-from-left-james-news-photo/1137200331> [accessed 1st February 2020].

*pas mal*, we notably discussed the footage of the Salafist attack on the CinémAfricArt in Tunis. Fellous's celebration of Tunis's former golden era of cinema serves, in this context, to evoke the arts as a counterpoint to Muslim fundamentalist violence that censors and silences artists. To the right-hand side of the poster, on the following page, the author states that '[...] Tunis a bien été une ville-cinéma, avec sa centaine de salles' (p. 123). This line underlines the fact that the Tunis of her early childhood had been a city which enjoyed and valued the arts.<sup>430</sup> In a similar manner to Fellous, Corriou argues that [i]l est difficile, aujourd'hui, d'imaginer la centaine de cinémas qui couvraient le pays [...].'<sup>431</sup> While conveying the cultural paradox that informed the young Fellous's identity in Tunisia, the film poster also constitutes a memory trace, or '*pièce détachée*', that evokes a broader collective memory of the city of Tunis as a space which valued cinematic culture. It also suggests the way in which film helped a young Fellous to transcend cultural and geographical borders in her imagination.

Furthermore, the image provides a subtle nod to the paradox of Fellous's upbringing in Tunisia; although the country was adopting an increasingly nationalist model for Tunisian culture, it was open to influences from different cultures. Indeed, although Fellous's childhood was marked by Tunisia's independence from France in 1956, and the rise of a nationalist discourse that sought to unify the country around Muslim values and traditions, it was also influenced by American cinematic culture. Morgan Corriou, a scholar of Tunisian cinema, observes that in the immediate wake of independence from France,

[l]a Tunisie s'est trouvée placée au cœur d'un paradoxe. Celui d'un pays qui possède ses traditions et sa sensibilité propre, mais qui s'accommode néanmoins de l'image

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<sup>430</sup> Corriou states: 'Certes, la production, soumise aux multiples contraintes engendrées par la situation coloniale, est alors quasi inexistante. Mais les chiffres de fréquentation attestent la place essentielle du loisir chez les Tunisiens: la pratique cinématographique est, à cette époque, bien ancrée dans le mode de vie des citoyens.' Morgan Corriou, 'La consommation cinématographique: Les plaisirs du cinéma en Tunisie au tournant de 1956', *Africultures*, 3-4.89-90 (2012), 116-41 (p. 116).

<sup>431</sup> Corriou, p. 116.

des problèmes de la jeunesse américaine et applaudit aux réussites des plus « classiques » vaudevilles du cinéma français.<sup>432</sup>

In including this film poster in her narrative, Fellous evokes her multivalent identity and the influence of classic Hollywood cinema on her early artistic development: ‘L’écran du Palmarium [...] nous raconte la grande Amérique, il nous apprend à rêver.’ (pp. 122-3) In this way, cinema functioned as an important ‘threshold’, reprising Collington’s use of this term, that allowed Fellous to come into contact with Western art forms.<sup>433</sup>

By including this film’s poster within her narrative of *Pièces détachées*, Fellous evokes her own distinctive inscription of the palimpsest, as she reinscribes traces of the film into her text. Indeed, there is an interesting parallel between the film and *Pièces détachées*. Just as Fellous considers herself to be an ‘archéologue’ (p. 128) in terms of how she stimulates the return of memories in her imagination on her return trip to Tunis, the film also features an archaeologist of antiquity, Geoffrey Fielding, who narrates the story of the star-crossed lovers featured in the poster. Fielding links his account of their love story to his archaeology project; he is attempting to reassemble the broken pieces of an antique vase. The mystery or ‘problem’ of the love story is mirrored both in the ‘problem’ of Fielding’s ancient vase and Fellous’s own *pièces détachées* of her memory. Although the action is set in the 1930s, the character of Hendrick, also known as the Dutchman, is a seventeenth-century nobleman who has been cursed by God to sail the seas for eternity as punishment for murdering his wife in a jealous rage. Every seven years, he is permitted to find land in order to search for a woman who might love him enough to die for him and so release him from the curse. In the film’s denouement, Pandora and the Dutchman declare their mutual love for one another, which

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<sup>432</sup> Corriou, p. 116.

<sup>433</sup> As the poster also recalls the imagery from Michael Curtiz’s *Casablanca* (1942), a Hollywood film depicting a glamorous stereotype of the Maghreb, it also suggests how the influence of American cinema provided Maghrebi spectators with romanticised and highly stylised portraits of the Maghreb.

ultimately breaks the curse. That same night, a powerful storm arrives, and they die together out at sea in Hendrick's yacht. When the lovers are united in death, Fielding finds the very last fragment to complete the vase. Fellous's intertextual—and intermedial—strategy evokes a palimpsestic concept of time and the search for lost fragments of memory.

Having established the way in which themes from the film overlap with those of Fellous's narrative, it is important not to overstate the importance of these intersections. Taking our synchronic reading of the image in relation to the verbal narrative that precedes and follows it, we must take into account the fact that the reader does not necessarily recognise or understand the significance of the image when they first come to it in the text. As the first verbal references to the film are included eight pages later, the reader would need to leaf back through the narrative to find the image and determine its relationship to the verbal narrative on pages 130-1. Moreover, as Fellous does not name the title of the film in her 'Crédits photographiques', the reader may in fact never make the association between the image and the verbal narrative which refers to the film. This creates a destabilising reading experience and further contributes to the idea of the reader occupying a liminal space between text and image. It also evokes the extent to which the image is imbued with a sense of secrecy and mystery. In this respect, it is possibly a repressed layer within the palimpsestic structure of the narrative.

While no photographs of the mother are included in *Pièces détachées*, and little attention overall is paid to her throughout the text, the punctum of this image suggests Fellous's remembrance of, and grief for, her mother. Crucially, the moon in the image is clearly connected to Béatrice as the narrator remembers her humming the tune of *Tintarella de Luna*, an Italian song (a further nod to her transnational heritage) about a girl with a moon tan (p.

121).<sup>434</sup> It is also the only image that is inserted between paragraphs of text—the other eleven are notably situated at either the beginning or the end of a chapter. It is worth asking why Fellous uses this image in a different way to the others. While the others function as visual blocks that begin or end a chapter, this one is embedded within the author's prose. I suggest that this evokes the extent to which the film constitutes an important and highly charged memory for Fellous; it surfaces in her prose as a dominant visual metaphor for her mother. Indeed, the image of the film poster is situated within a short chapter in which the colours, sights and sounds of her childhood summers are superimposed with memories of death. This superimposition of different memory traces gives the narrator a feeling of vertigo: 'Les années, les visages, les objets se superposent et m'étourdissent encore.' (p. 120) The chapter is structured around scent and colour: firstly, she remembers the 'coton blanc' and the perfume of her father; she then remembers seeing '[u]n cageot de figues vertes' and '[leurs] grains si rouges' (p. 120). The next section of the passage is dominated by blackness, as she remembers seeing a black car driving towards the beach and up to the shoreline: 'une Peugeot noire', 'des traînées noires', 'un nuage noir' and 'les grosses chambres à air noires' (p. 120). This move into blackness marks a transition from sensory pleasure into a more disturbing state of mind: 'Un chaton gris me regarde [...] c'est mon chat d'amour, il est en train de mourir du typhus [...].' (p. 121) This is the cat that died in her arms when she was eight years old. She remembers that she buried him alone in her garden and told nobody about what had happened. In this moment, she '[a] appris toute seule comment on pouvait mourir en une seconde' (p. 121). There is an element of secrecy that marks this passage, as if we are given privileged access to the most intimate memories of the narrator as she remembers how she learned early on to suppress her feelings: 'je serre mes larmes pour qu'elles ne s'échappent

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<sup>434</sup> Furthermore, the brightly lit scene possibly provides a subtle nod to Selene, the Greek goddess of the moon who took pity on the mythical figure of Pandora after she was tricked into opening her vase to release evil into the world. The intense moonlight is a symbol of Selene's safeguarding of hope, the one element that did not escape from Pandora's vase in the ancient Greek myth.

pas' and 'je raconte rien de mon aventure' (p. 121). Yet this loneliness and grief are held in tension with language evoking the summer: 'Tout autour c'est le plein été' and 'c'est l'heure de la sieste' (p. 121) and echo the earlier descriptions of summer fruits. The passage thus captures the narrator's trauma relating to this period in her life and evokes the way in which moments of sensory pleasure are overlaid with moments of pain. It also notably recalls the photograph of the cat on page 42. As this photograph was taken by Malartre, we can yet again see the ways in which photographs take on a "liquid" quality and a multitemporal character as they are invested with new meanings within the mother's narrative.<sup>435</sup>

Crucially, this memory of the cat's burial leads directly to the memory of her mother: 'Un parfum poudré traverse et scande les saisons, on le reconnaît. Ma mère en robe de soie rose [...].' (p. 121). As Fellous was the same age when her cat died and when her mother first became depressed, the two memories are clearly associated. The fact that she told nobody about the dead cat suggests that she felt somewhat alone at this point in her life. She also tells us that her mother's mental illness had triggered a reversal of the mother-daughter dynamic: '[...] c'est moi qui devrait devenir sa mère et je ne sais pas si j'y arriverai, trop petite pour raccommoder son histoire si lourde.' (p. 60) Indeed, the early trauma of her cat's death is layered in the palimpsest with this turning point in her life in which she had to take on a caring and protective role for her mother. However, the passage holds trauma and sensory pleasure in tension: the idea of death is here brought into dialogue with memories of the mother's scent and the evocative colour and texture of her dress. Furthermore, as the passage detailing the cat's burial is on the page that precedes the film poster, it sits *beneath* the image of her mother's favourite film. Returning to the verbal text which accompanies the image on page 122, Fellous also constructs a friction between the verbal and visual to exacerbate this note of sadness in the image. Although the verbal narrative—just above the image—tells us

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<sup>435</sup> Hirsch and Spitzer, p. 13.

that there are '[...] que de couleurs partout et que de joie' (p. 122) in the memories of Tunisia that appear in her mind, the film poster is notably in monochrome. This juxtaposition suggests the ways in which happy and traumatic memories are held in tension in the palimpsest. The idea of hope that we previously drew from the image, in terms of it conveying her mother's passion for film, is thus held in tension with grief and loss. In this way, the written text forms a layer of memory traces that underwrite this image, anchoring it within a palimpsestic narrative that holds sensory pleasure and grief in tension.

While the film *Pandora* is not mentioned in the chapter in which the poster sits, it emerges in the following one. In this chapter, Fellous layers multiple different memory traces together in a palimpsest which evokes the associative character of memory. Her trauma is captured in the fragmented and chaotic structure of the writing, which moves sporadically from one idea to the next: after she remembers her school friend's 'extraordinaire robe blanche de première communiant' (p. 124), which links poetically to Gardner's white dress in the film poster, there is a swift shift from memories of childhood innocence to the theme of genocide:

Les images de *Nuit et Brouillard* entrent à nouveau dans mes yeux qui ne veulent désormais plus se fermer, ils n'en reviennent pas de ce qu'ils ont découvert, pour la première fois je me demande si je fais partie d'un nous, si moi aussi j'aurais pu être un de ces corps anéantis [...]. (p. 125)

The juxtaposition between the purity of Marie Thérèse's and Gardner's white dresses and 'ces corps anéantis' (p. 125) of the camps provides a powerful juxtaposition which heightens the sense of horror. This contrast also recalls the tension between the 'everyday' and the absurdity of the camps that is evoked in Resnais's film. Furthermore, in this passage Fellous remembers that the film prompted her to ask herself if she was part of a broader, transnational narrative of Jewish persecution and suffering. This questioning is important as it demonstrates her perception of interconnections between narratives of the Ashkenazi and

Maghrebi experiences of the Holocaust. It also invites a revision of existing scholarship on the author. In relation to her earlier body of life writing, Watson judged that Hirsch's concept of postmemory is not appropriate for the study of Fellous's work because it derives from the Ashkenazi Jewish experience of the Holocaust.<sup>436</sup> He argues that:

Hirsch's notion of postmemory [...] seems useful in the context of the last generation of Maghrebi Jewish writers born before exile, yet its derivation from the Ashkenazi experience of the Holocaust renders it problematic. How can Maghrebi Jews tell their own story, which is one of exile not extermination, dispersion and not disappearance? Their experience needs to be distinguished from that of the more recognizable European Ashkenazi narrative, since Maghrebi Jews' homeland has not been destroyed.

Indeed, caution clearly needs to be exercised when comparing the experiences of European and North African Jews; while not seeking to create a hierarchy of suffering, attention needs to be paid to the different types of persecution experienced by different Jewish communities on either side of the Mediterranean. Notwithstanding this important distinction, Fellous seeks to render visible the connections between the Ashkenazi and the Maghrebi Jewish experiences of antisemitism in World War Two. In the passage quoted above, rather than emphasising their separateness, she draws them into dialogue. Her use of a rhetorical question ('je me demande [...]') (p. 125)) to engage with this complex subject matter also suggests that she is in a mode of personal reflection and exploration, and that she may also be encouraging her reader to explore these interconnections with her. Watson fails to address the ways in which postmemory is, like Silverman's concept of palimpsestic memory, a connective framework for approaching the study of memory *across* sites, times and generations. The fact that Fellous situates herself in relation to a broader narrative of Jewish history in this passage, one that includes the Ashkenazi experience of the Holocaust,

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<sup>436</sup> Robert J. Watson, *Cities of Origin, Cities of Exile: Maghrebi Jewish Diasporic Life-Writing in French, 1985-2011*, p. 27.



demonstrates how the histories of Jewish communities from Europe and the Maghreb overlap, albeit in subtle ways, with one another in her textual palimpsest.

The images from *Nuit et brouillard*, which she keeps at the forefront of her mind, form a visual layer through which she sees the world. As discussed above, this is the layer through which she views the media images and footage of the Sousse attack. Her emphasis on keeping one's eyes open ('mes yeux qui ne veulent désormais plus se fermer' (p. 125)) also suggests how the film awakened a new sense of vigilance and historical awareness in the teenage narrator. The fact that her eyes 'n'en reviennent pas de ce qu'ils ont découvert' (p. 125) evokes a commitment to shedding the veil of illusion and to remembering the images she has seen. Indeed, Fellous describes how seeing the film as a child changed her life forever ('comme si moi, je n'étais plus la même.' (p. 125)) and had a lasting traumatic impact, with its imagery surfacing involuntarily in her mind: 'Il réapparaîtra aux moments les plus inattendus, moments d'amour, moments de joie ou moments de peur, quelque chose de terrible va nous arriver c'est sûr, sans prévenir.' (p. 125) As the film constitutes the subject of the sentence, it is imbued with agency, as if it is a being comparable to the invisible but ever-present menace—*Le Horla*—of her childhood. The narrator has no control over her memories of the film and when they will resurface. This suggests a sense of powerlessness when faced with the complex and traumatising memories of the Holocaust and evokes the extent to which they provide a conceptual layer through which she engages with the world.

Adding further complexity to this palimpsestic presentation of memories, she superimposes her childhood memory of Yom Kippour, the most sacred and solemn day in the Jewish calendar, onto images of *Nuit et brouillard*, as she watches the film again as an adult:

Et lorsque je revois le film, bien des années plus tard, je superpose aussitôt, aux amoncellements d'objets, de chevelures, de montres et de cadavres, la mémoire de ces grands rassemblements qu'on voyait par le balcon, toutes ces familles réunies sous un châle de rayures bleues et blanches le jour du Grand Pardon. (p. 126)

The use of the word ‘aussitôt’ (p.126) here suggests that the adult-Fellous had no hesitation in superimposing this memory onto the disturbing piles of the Holocaust victims’ corpses, hair and objects. This powerfully suggests how the memory of the Holocaust impacted her. In connecting the memory of the Jewish ritualistic gatherings in Tunis with the images of corpses in *Nuit et brouillard*, she conveys her personal connection to a wider transnational Jewish community that shares the history of the Holocaust. Indeed, when remembering how the Tunisian Jewish communities carried out their daily lives and rituals ‘dans un pays musulman [...]’ (p. 126) before their mass departure from the country, she wants to cry. She asks: ‘Comment expliquer que c’était justement ce mélange de cultures qui avait donné à ce pays sa matière unique ?’ (p. 126) This rhetorical question conveys the author’s sadness regarding the mass departure of Tunisia’s Jewish communities due to increased levels of antisemitism in the country during the period of the Six Days’ War in the Middle East.<sup>437</sup> In this respect, in overlaying this image of a Tunisian Jewish ritual together with the corpses from the camps, she gestures to the dangers of polarised, and polarising, categories for cultural identity.

Due to the indescribable horror of the genocide, discussions concerning remembrance and forgiveness in this context are deeply complex. The blue and white prayer shawl, the tallit, that symbolises ‘Pardon’ (p. 126) and atonement in the context of the Yom Kippour

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<sup>437</sup> Nonetheless, it is impossible to select one main reason for the departure of the Tunisian Jewry. As Albert Naccache observes, the diverse range of motivations included: ‘[...] les mesures hostiles prises contre notre communauté en pleine fièvre nationaliste pendant l’indépendance tunisienne, l’affaire de Bizerte en 1961, les émeutes à la suite de la guerre de Six Jours en 1967, notre méconnaissance de l’arabe littéraire et l’absence d’avenir [...] notre rêve de vivre en Israël ou en France.’ Albert Naccache, *Les Roses de l’Ariana: 1943-1961, Une Enfance et une adolescence en Tunisie* (Rennes: Cheminements, 2010), p. 148. This perspective is equally evident in Lucie Cariès’ documentary, *Bon baisers de la Goulette* (2007), in which a broad range of Tunisian Jews from the diaspora speak about their complex and varied reasons for departure. While some cite isolated episodes of anti-Semitic discrimination as a reason for leaving, others refer to their strong connection to European culture and identity. Many who had learned French and received a French education in Tunis also felt a strong impetus to move to France because of their affinity with the French language and culture. See: Lucie Cariès, *Bon baisers de La Goulette*. (France: Image & Compagnie, 2007) <<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/xpjtps>>.

ritual is superimposed—in Fellous’s mind—on the piles of corpses and objects in the camps. In her palimpsestic presentation of memories, Fellous brings together these different contexts of suffering and suggests the connections between them; however, there is no ‘special light’, recalling Donadey, here which allows us to decipher the ways in which the memory traces are interlinked in the palimpsest.<sup>438</sup> Instead, they exist here in tension with one another and resist easy interpretation. In fact, as the chapter progresses, Fellous suggests the breaking down of her memory, which further emphasises my point about the hidden and intelligible aspects of her palimpsestic life narrative: ‘Mémoire en morceaux, pièces détachées à rassembler patiemment, pour essayer de comprendre’ (p. 126). Yet while Kassab-Charfi argues that Fellous succeeds in bringing the disparate pieces of her memory together to create a coherent picture, I suggest that these ‘pièces détachées’ suggest psychological suffering and the limits of artistic expression for evoking complex emotions and trauma.<sup>439</sup>

Indeed, this breaking down of memory is further heightened by the way in which Fellous suggests connections between her mother’s mental illness and her earlier wartime experience of the Nazi occupation of Tunisia. These memories coalesce around Fellous’s memory of the steps of the Grand Synagogue in Tunis. As discussed above, Fellous remembers seeing the Yom Kippour ceremony from her balcony, and this was because her childhood home was ‘presque accolée à la synagogue’ (p. 125). While she previously layered her memory of the synagogue onto her memory of the imagery in *Nuit et brouillard*, she now imagines her parents’ life in Tunis before the Second World War. In the late 1930s, the Grand Synagogue was being built next door to their home: ‘Cette synagogue avait été inaugurée le 23 décembre 1937, ma mère était enceinte de sept mois, elle avait suivi de son balcon l’évolution du chantier, elle était impatiente.’ (p. 126) In associating the ‘birth’ of the

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<sup>438</sup> Donadey (p. 886).

<sup>439</sup> Kassab-Charfi, ‘Dispersion, disparition, appartenance chimérique : Colette Fellous et la poétique de *Pièces Détachées*’ (p. 91).

synagogue with her mother's fertility (she was pregnant with her older brother), she suggests the ways in which both her mother and the Jewish community at this time were healthy and thriving. Yet this memory leads to a darker and more troubling one: during the German occupation of Tunis in 1942, Nazi officers seized the synagogue and employed it as their lodgings. Fellous says that her mother 'les voyait aller et venir par le balcon, ils discutaient sur les marches dans leurs uniformes effrayants [...] elle voulait protéger tous ses enfants, elle refermait les persiennes et allait écouter Radio-Londres pour avoir des nouvelles.' (p. 127) The Nazi occupation is further evoked, later in the narrative, when she imagines her parents' fear of 'des Allemands qui se préparaient à lancer de grandes arrestations dans leur quartier' (pp. 136-7). This line is key as it suggests the seriousness of the Nazi occupation in Tunisia, which is frequently overlooked in the field of Holocaust studies, and how close her parents were to receiving the same fate as the victims that she saw in *Nuit et brouillard*. As mentioned above, Kozlovsky-Golan suggests that 'the representation of North African Jewry's experience during World War II is a site of "amnesia"'.<sup>440</sup> While Fellous's parents' experience of the occupation is left underexplored in *Pièces détachées*, it forms a suppressed and opaque layer of history in the palimpsestic structure of the text, which she approaches through various 'pièces détachées' of personal and inherited memory traces. Yet again we have this idea of the reader being placed in a liminal space between the different 'layers' of memory in the palimpsest, where they are unable to apply confident interpretations to their readings.

We have so far found that this particular chapter of the book layers many different memory traces together in a palimpsestic narrative that evokes the associative character of memory—the way that seemingly disparate memories from different spatiotemporal contexts can come

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<sup>440</sup> Kozlovsky-Golan (p. 154).

together in the mind of the narrator. The chapter ends with a reflection on human nature, and how canonical French art and literature by Flaubert and Maupassant taught her about the ‘fragilité des êtres’ (p. 132). She realises that she read *Le Horla* as a girl with her mother in mind: ‘en quelques jours il était devenu possédé [...] Cette métamorphose, je pouvais toutefois la comprendre puisque ma mère avait aussi plusieurs visages [...] j’étais témoin de cette guerre.’ (p. 132) This adds further complexity to the palimpsest, as the *Horla* effect that we previously associated with extreme acts of violence is now explicitly connected to memories of her mother’s mental state. While her mother’s ambivalent ‘pertes tres anciennes’ (p. 131) are not explained, they are possibly linked to the trauma she experienced as someone who lived on the edge of extreme violence and horror before the end of the war. In this way, the film poster takes on a ‘liquid’ meaning here, as references to *Pandora* are embedded within a chapter which links her mother’s wartime suffering to her later psychological suffering. Fellous’s ‘liquid’ condensation of different traces of memory in the palimpsestic narrative combine to create the ambivalent feeling of malaise, which is always eluding the retrospective gaze.

While we have established the ways in which ‘personal’ memories of Beatrice’s illness intersect with Fellous’s memories of exile and her inherited memories of the Second World War, the next section seeks to address an important question that arises out of this section: how does Fellous reconcile her passion for French culture—discussed above—with her knowledge that the French Vichy regime collaborated with the Nazis that were preparing to arrest the Jewish families in her *quartier*? Indeed, French canonical literature was her ‘radeau’ (p. 131), allowing her to escape from her difficult childhood, but to what extent does she address France’s complicity in the indescribable horrors of the camps? How does she situate herself in relation to this traumatic history? Furthermore, to what extent does

Maupassant's antisemitism provide a further repressed layer in the palimpsestic life narrative?

The final section of the chapter now turns to explore an even deeper layer of Fellous's palimpsestic life narrative: I address how the narrator came to a difficult awareness of her historical positioning and the narratives of suffering that have informed her identity as a francophone woman of Tunisian-Jewish origin. Just as Fellous's verbal narrative evokes the ways in which the Hollywood poster projects an unrealistic and idealised vision of reality, the author conveys how her earlier romantic notions regarding France and Frenchness, that she inherited from her father, came to be challenged by her maturing awareness of France's complicity in both colonialism and the Holocaust.

### **Fragments of the 'le miroir brisé': approaching the history of Vichy**

Like many French people who subscribed to de Gaulle's unifying myth of *La France résistante*, Fellous evokes a somewhat romanticised vision of French values and culture in *Pièces détachées*; this is, at least, the memory of her youthful impressions of France that she gives to her readers. Indeed, Watson argues that the colonial education system in Tunisia had created '[...] a France of letters that young Jews could identify with regardless of France's policies.'<sup>441</sup> However, we must take Celine Piser's important statement into consideration here: 'The pain of the Vichy collaboration (and indeed, Vichy's independent role in the persecution of France's Jews) is present for all Jews living in post-war France, whether they immigrated before or after World War II.'<sup>442</sup> Equally, the title of the book, *Pièces détachées*,

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<sup>441</sup> Watson, p. 104.

<sup>442</sup> Celine Piser, 'Writing National Identity: Postmemory in Contemporary France' (University of California, Berkeley, 2014), p. 120.

resonates strongly with Henry Rousso's notion of the splintering of an idealised memory into shards: he describes the postwar period from 1971 – 1974 in France as the period of 'le miroir brisé'.<sup>443</sup> According to Rousso, this period was characterised by a fragmentation of the unifying Gaullist narrative of French resistance into multiple stories.<sup>444</sup> In *Pièces détachées*, the presence of the Vichy collaboration constitutes a kind of spectral layer within the palimpsestic structure of the narrative, and may be linked to what Fellous refers to as the uncanny threat or feeling that dominated her childhood.

Crucially, it is important to note that Resnais's film, which constitutes an important layer in the palimpsest of *Pièces détachées*, contains subtle and brief references to France's complicity in the Holocaust. As Virginia Bonner observes, the film script refers to arrested members of the French Résistance who were interned at Pithiviers, herded at Compiègne and arrested at Vel'd'Hiv.<sup>445</sup> Resnais was asked by the French government to mask a French gendarme's képi (the cap with visor that is part of the French military uniform) in one five-second shot of the French Pithiviers concentration camp.<sup>446</sup> Additionally, *Nuit et brouillard* is both an evocation of the brutality of the camps and an allegory for the war in Algeria; in an interview with Charles Krantz in 1984, Resnais stated that 'The whole point [...] was Algeria.'<sup>447</sup> Krantz argues that although the film was ostensibly a documentary on Nazi camps, 'Resnais used their horrors as the foreground for an impassioned cry against the mounting atrocities committed by Algerian rebels and by the colons, the French settlers in

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<sup>443</sup> Henry Rousso, *Le Syndrome de Vichy* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), pp. 118 – 248.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid, p.118.

<sup>445</sup> Virginia Bonner, *The New Executioners: The Spectre of Algeria in Alain Resnais's Night and Fog* (Morrow, 2009), p. 6 <<https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/scope/documents/2009/february-2009/bonner.pdf>>.

<sup>446</sup> 'Though the film won the Prix Jean Vigo in January 1956 and had been unanimously selected to represent France at the 1956 Cannes Film Festival, the French government tried to withdraw it, conveniently citing pressure from Germany's ambassador. After three months of negotiation, Resnais refused to acquiesce to the majority of the government's censoring demands. He did, however, finally concede to mask a gendarme's képi [...] thus eliminating clear visual evidence of French complicity. Resnais was then permitted to exhibit *Night and Fog* at Cannes, but only outside of official competition.' Bonner, p. 6.

<sup>447</sup> Charles Krantz, 'Teaching Night and Fog: History and Historiography', *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, 15.1 (1985), 1–11 (p. 7).

Algeria.<sup>448</sup> Despite the film's references to the Vichy regime's complicity in the Nazi camps, and its anticolonial message, Fellous does not explicitly address these themes in *Pièces détachées*. I argue, however, that we can discern a suppressed layer in the text with regard to what is not being said or made explicit.

After the Sousse massacre, Fellous is overwhelmed by the intersecting memories of the Holocaust and the contemporary images of violence that she has witnessed, particularly within a cosmopolitan memory culture of 'never again'. In a moment of exasperation, she imagines criticising her father for having never prepared her for the cruelty and violence that she would later encounter in the world: 'tu aurais quand même pu me prévenir' (p. 56) and:

De la barbarie, du désordre des hommes, de la laideur. La folie, l'imprévisible, le mensonge, la trahison, la brutalité. Tu ne nous as rien dit, jamais rien dit, même pour les camps tu n'as rien dit, tu ne voulais pas nous blesser ni nous effrayer, mais ton innocence, tu nous l'as transmise et maintenant, prisonniers nous aussi, sans défense ni protection. (p. 56)

Fellous's frustration with her father is given a cathartic release in this passage. Her reference to 'les camps' suggests her anger towards him for failing to teach her about the camps and her family's personal connection to this traumatic history. Her frustration might also be linked to his failure to teach her about the injustices of the French colonial project. This lack of memory transmission had a destabilising effect on the young narrator, leading her to feel that she was 'sans défense' (p. 56) and vulnerable to the ambivalent threat that she associates with *Le Horla*. The spectres of antisemitism and colonialism haunt the passages like unwritten layers and gesture to these ambivalent (and, for Fellous, painful) connections across disparate sites of memory.

Although she recognises that her father had tried to protect her from being frightened and 'bless[ée]' (p. 56) by the traumatic histories, she blames him, nonetheless, for her

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<sup>448</sup> Krantz (p. 7).



ignorance. This imagined criticism of her father is, in this respect, a masked criticism of her own naivety. Fellous writes that her father ‘ [a voulu] embellir nos vies et à jeter un voile sur ce que nous sommes, sur qui nous sommes’ (p. 66) and claims that her parents were part of ‘une génération entière qui a élevé ses enfants de la même façon. [...] On a tous fait mine de ne pas voir’ (p. 66). Both these sentences gesture to the acts of veiling and pretending not to see. Crucially, the use of the ‘on a tous’ (p. 66) conveys her participation in the community’s collective suppression of the memory of the camps, and possibly conveys a sense of guilt regarding the ways in which her community complied with, and benefited from, colonial systems of hierarchy and oppression. This is also evident in her statement in her preceding life narrative, *Le Préparation de la vie*, that ‘[...] je n’étais pas très à l’aise dans ma langue maternelle’.<sup>449</sup> This discomfort can be associated with her position as a minority within a predominantly Arabic speaking nation: her linguistic identity as French speaker, who can only speak a few words of Arabic, reinforces her alienation from the dominant culture that she grew up in. Indeed, she is aware on some level that she has participated in the creation and propagation of collective myths that protect her family, as well as herself, from difficult truths.

Finally, while Maupassant’s *Le Horla* provides a common theme throughout the narrative, which Fellous employs to evoke the anonymous threat which threatens her everyday reality, the author’s antisemitism contributes further complexity to the palimpsestic process at play in the narrative. Indeed, as suggested above, her frequent references to Maupassant throughout the text convey the extent to which she had been taught to view the world through the prisms of the French language and high French culture. In one passage, she

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<sup>449</sup> Fellous, *Le Préparation de la vie*, p.86.

explicitly condenses her own childhood perspective of Tunisia with that of Maupassant's traveller's gaze:

Avec lui, je le vois pour la première fois. Je mêle à son regard mes propres années d'errance, celles de l'enfance, quand je devais déchiffrer ce que j'avais sous les yeux et qui était assez confus. (p. 44)

Yet Fellous does not address a suppressed layer that lies beneath Maupassant's travel writings. Crucially, in 1890 he wrote an antisemitic account of the Jewish presence in the town of Kairouan in Tunisia, writing that the Jews 'y pullulent et la rongent'.<sup>450</sup> Of the Jewish presence in Algeria, he is even more scathing:

[...] la race juive se révèle sous un aspect hideux qui fait comprendre la haine féroce de certains peuples contre ces gens, et même les massacres récents [...] ces rapaces qui sont le fléau, la plaie saignante de notre colonie, le grand obstacle à la civilisation et au bien-être de l'Arabe.<sup>451</sup>

As the Tunisian writer David-Setbon argues, Maupassant 'méconnaissait la réalité sociale et diversifiée des populations qui vivaient dans ces pays. [...] il méconnaissait les juifs qui vivaient dans les pays arabes, leur culture et leur histoire.'<sup>452</sup> Yet Fellous does not acknowledge Maupassant's antisemitism at any point in her narrative and writes simply that 'Il s'étonne qu'il y ait tant de juifs dans Tunis.' (p. 45) Perhaps this is because, as David-Setbon argues, many of Maupassant's writings from his travels in North Africa have been edited to remove these antisemitic statements.<sup>453</sup> In this respect, his antisemitism provides a hidden layer of the palimpsestic life narrative—it is also a problematic layer of history which has been overwritten by French publishing houses. When we bring this 'layer' into dialogue with the author's recognition of France's complicity in the Holocaust, the *Horla* effect takes

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<sup>450</sup> Guy de Maupassant, *Vers Kairouan, la vie errante*, 1890. Quotation cited in David-Setbon, p. 109.

<sup>451</sup> Maupassant, *Au Soleil*, p. 53. Quotation cited in David-Setbon, pp. 108–9.

<sup>452</sup> David-Setbon, p. 108.

<sup>453</sup> See David-Setbon's discussion of this: David-Setbon, p. 110.

on an even more disturbing character: as readers, we may understand more clearly the author's reasons for presenting her memory 'en morceaux' and in 'pièces détachées'.

## Conclusion

Returning to Silverman's theory of 'condensation' of spatio-temporal traces in his concept of palimpsestic memory, we have found that this idea takes on a distinctive form in Fellous's life narrative. Her condensation of generational perspectives, via her framing of her daughter's photographs, creates a mise-en-abyme strategy and, in drawing together these different perspectives, she creates a tension between external and internal perspectives of Tunisia. Adding further to the idea of condensation in the palimpsest, we also found that her photographs take on a 'liquid' function within the life narrative—recalling Hirsch and Spitzer's concept of 'liquid time'—as they can be seen to 'develop' in multiple directions and acquire new meanings in relation to different temporal contexts that are evoked in the verbal narrative. We also saw in one example how this 'condensation' of different memory traces is rendered materially.

In addition, the concept of condensation emerges in the idea that Fellous sees everything *through* her childhood memories of *Nuit et brouillard*. The apparently peaceful scenes of seascapes, streets and domestic life in the photographs take on new meanings when viewed through this lens; we get the sense that Fellous cannot view everyday life in the same manner in the aftermath of seeing the film, as if violence is always just beyond the frame. Furthermore, in contrast to Ben Mhenni's and El Fani's narratives, which visually depict political struggles and violence in the immediate wake of the revolution, we have found that *Pièces détachées* does not include any photographs of either violence or people's faces. This

has the effect of rendering the images more ambivalent and disturbing, as the themes of violence, exile and insanity in the verbal narrative are brought into dialogue with apparently peaceful and ‘everyday’ scenes, thus evoking the idea that violence is always present.

Furthermore, in placing the reader in a liminal position ‘in between’ different possible interpretations, this has the effect of evoking her own outsider status—recalling again her identity as the ‘invité’. Indeed, the reader’s process of leafing back and forth through the different pages of the book to decipher meaning mirrors her own attempt to make sense of her historical positioning. Whereas Donadey suggested that a ‘special light’ could be employed to decipher the suppressed layer of the palimpsest in Djébar’s text, referring specifically to the voices of the colonised, this is not possible in *Pièces détachées*. As we have discovered in this analysis, Fellous’s text is not only dealing with the problem of colonialism as a violent ‘layer’ in her text, but with an arguably much more complex history and identity positioning as a francophone author of Tunisian Jewish origin. In addition to the multiple different contexts of personal and collective suffering that converge in her text, we have found that there are also multiple sites of amnesia that are buried within deeper layers of her palimpsestic narrative. While traces of traumatised memories are suggested, they are not decipherable or explainable. In contrast to history books, the genre enables a subjective reading of history in which different personal and collective memory traces—from different contexts—can come together in a quasi-surreal or dreamlike state.

Having established the ways in which condensation, liquidity and repressed elements emerge in Fellous’s palimpsestic life narrative, it is clear that Lunt’s metaphor of the ‘mosaïque’ in Tunisian women’s francophone literature does not encapsulate the text’s complexity.<sup>454</sup> Indeed Lunt compares the idea of viewing a mosaic to her Tunisian female authors’ supposedly distanced perspective on Tunisia, which enables them to view and

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<sup>454</sup> Lunt, pp. 179-80.

portray ‘plus clairement la structure de la société’ with a totalising gaze.<sup>455</sup> Yet we have found throughout this analysis that Fellous evokes instead a breaking down of memory and an inability to process the past. Additionally, in contrast to Kassab-Charfi’s argument outlined in this chapter’s introduction, in which she says that Fellous achieves a sense of ‘cohérence’ in reassembling her family memory, we have found, on the contrary, that she presents herself as a situated narrator with a partial viewpoint: she does not purport to have a distanced or omniscient perspective on history.<sup>456</sup> Instead, through layering different memory traces in a palimpsestic process, the author evokes a tension between the acts of remembering and forgetting. Her ‘mémoire en morceaux’ recalls Rousso’s ‘miroir brisé’ and her struggle to situate herself in relation to dissonant narratives of the past.<sup>457</sup>

In the next chapter, I will discuss how condensed mother-daughter perspectives, and tensions between remembering and forgetting, in Zouari’s *Le Corps de ma mère* might contribute to my definition of the palimpsestic life narrative. While Fellous evokes the limits of expression for evoking trauma, Zouari reflects on the inadequacy of language for representing her mother’s life in the wake of her death. She is anxious about the power that comes with her *regard écrivain*, as she inscribes second-hand memories of her mother’s oral life story into written French, an act which her mother had previously forbade.<sup>458</sup> Indeed, this idea of ‘overreading’ recalls our earlier discussion about the violence of the palimpsest, as an author suppresses or erases an existing narrative at the same time as they create a new layer. Additionally, given that the idea of a boundary between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction’ continues to divide Western theorists within the field of life narrative, *Le Corps de ma mère* provides us

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<sup>455</sup> Ibid.

<sup>456</sup> Kassab-Charfi (p. 91).

<sup>457</sup> Rousso, pp. 118-248.

<sup>458</sup> In an interview with *Radio Tunis* in 2016, Zouari stated: ‘Comment voir le corps de la mère nu? Comment parler du corps de sa propre maman, ce qui vous savez pour nous, dans notre tradition, est quelque chose qui est interdit, qui est de l’ordre de la profanation. C’est pour cela que je me sentirai toujours coupable—d’avoir regardé ma mère avec un regard écrivain.’ Radio Tunis Chaîne Internationale RTCI, ‘Intersignes: Comar d’Or 2016 pour Fawzia Zouari l’auteure de « *Le Corps de ma mère* », 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDfOXdNiepE>> [accessed 10 October 2018].

with an opportunity to explore this problem further in relation to my concept of the palimpsestic life narrative.

## Chapter 4. Palimpsestic identity in Fawzia Zouari's *Le Corps de ma mère*

L'écrivain est quelqu'un qui joue avec le corps de sa mère... pour le glorifier, l'embellir, ou pour le dépecer...<sup>459</sup>

As Komyongür and Wigelsworth argue, the palimpsest 'is defined by its tantalizingly incongruous marriage of the notions of destruction and suppression to those of preservation and creation.'<sup>460</sup> In the last chapter, we found that although Fellous sought to preserve traces of her family's history, she also suggested memory gaps, blindspots and traumatic memory traces in her life narrative. It is this tension between the ideas of creation and suppression, inherent in the metaphor of the palimpsest, that I seek to analyse in closer detail in the next section of my argument. My focus here is on Zouari's *Le Corps de ma mère*, a text that explores the author's identity in the aftermath of losing her Tunisian mother, Yamna, in 2007.<sup>461</sup> The figure of the palimpsest emerges as a useful *grille de lecture* to approach the tensions between the covering and disclosure of memories in the narrative; additionally, the metaphor also arises from the text as a means to convey the author's perception of the 'problem' of representing her mother in language.

Indeed, Zouari perceives violence in the act of representing her mother's life in writing, especially in the language of the former colonisers, and suggests that it is an impossible task. In this respect, her text brings to mind poststructuralist critiques of the genre of autobiography and its conventionally perceived referential status.<sup>462</sup> Indeed, the tensions

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<sup>459</sup> Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: Seuil, 1973), pp. 51–52.

<sup>460</sup> Kimyongür and Wigelsworth, p. 1.

<sup>461</sup> Zouari, *Le Corps de ma mère*.

<sup>462</sup> According to Paul De Man, 'The difficulties of generic definition that affect the study of autobiography repeat an inherent instability that undoes the model as soon as it is established. Genette's metaphor of the revolving door helps us to understand why this is so: it aptly connotes the turning motion of tropes and confirms that the specular moment is not primarily a situation or an event that can be located in a history, but that it is the manifestation, on the level of the referent, of a linguistic structure.' De Man (p. 922).

between creation and destruction in the idea of the palimpsest can be compared De Man's argument that there is both 'figuration and disfiguration' in the concept of autobiography.<sup>463</sup> Representation always involves the imposition of power because the subject becomes an object of the artist's and reader's interpretive frameworks; in this respect, while there is creation, there is also loss of agency and power for the subject. In this chapter, I argue that the concept of the palimpsestic life narrative helps us to envisage the internal tensions between creativity and violence, and fact and fiction, in *Le Corps de ma mère*. In reinscribing her mother's oral narrative into her text, she risks distorting it as she reauthors it through translation and ventriloquism. Yet in leaving it unheard, she risks letting her family's history and way of life be threatened by the wave of sociopolitical change that the revolution represents to her.

The metaphor of the palimpsest emerges in *Le Corps de ma mère* in the sense that Zouari reinscribes, and adds to, oral accounts of her mother's life. She gathers details and second-hand stories and reinscribes them into her own life narrative: an act of representation that she describes as both a 'tabou' and a transgression of her mother's authority.<sup>464</sup> Indeed, as part of her research, Zouari discovers that Yamna had recounted her life story to her maid, Naïma, who shared this story with her in oral Arabic. Zouari subsequently translated it into written French and Yamna's first-person story is given its own central chapter in the book: 'Le conte de ma mere'. Whereas Zouari's speaking position appears—on the surface—to be separate from that of her mother, I propose that she struggles to sustain this separation between their identities throughout the text. Indeed, although the daughter appears to have narrative authority over the representation of the mother's life, she is haunted by the idea of her mother who resides in a deep layer of the palimpsestic narrative.

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<sup>463</sup> De Man (p. 926).

<sup>464</sup> Sansal.



While I shall be focusing on the Tunisian specificity of *Le Corps de ma mère*, it is important to note that there are similarities between her writing and several texts by Djébar. Donadey notably argued in 1996 that Djébar's entire body of work, especially her novel *L'Amour, la fantasia*, has 'a palimpsestic structure':

The superimpositions are visible on at least three levels: the encounter between written, European archives and the oral transmission of history (as well as the insistence on the process of rewriting history through fiction); the multiplication of female voices and the parallels between different female figures; and finally, the recurrence of temporal superimpositions between different periods of Algerian history.<sup>465</sup>

In *Le Corps de ma mère*, I propose that we find similar palimpsestic relations between oral narratives in Arabic and their translation into written French; historical fact and fiction, self and other via the superimposition of female narrating voices, and different periods of Tunisian history. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 1, Silverman suggests that his concept of palimpsestic memory emerges in Djébar's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* because of the way in which plural women's voices intersect and cut across cultures, times and spaces.<sup>466</sup> Drawing on Silverman's analysis of Djébar's work, we find a similar palimpsestic process at work in Zouari's life narrative. As we shall see, female voices intersect across times, cultures, languages and geographies in a way which subverts patriarchal order and the imprisoning categories of nation and culture that have dominated Tunisian politics. Yet, going beyond both Donadey's and Silverman's interpretations of Djébar's palimpsestic strategy, it will be important to consider the Tunisian specificity of *Le Corps de ma mère*. In this respect, I will explore the degree to which the text allows us to develop Donadey's and Silverman's discussions of the palimpsest further in relation to Zouari's distinctive heritage and historical positioning.

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<sup>465</sup> Donadey, 'Rekindling the Vividness of the Past: Assia Djébar's Films and Fiction', p. 885.

<sup>466</sup> Silverman, p. 81.

Furthermore, it will be pertinent to discuss the extent to which we find memory traces of colonial violence in Zouari's palimpsestic life narrative. As mentioned above, the author frequently evokes her guilt and anxiety with regard to her representation of her mother's life and body in the language of the former colonisers, which her mother referred to as the 'langue des Infidèles' (p. 66). Whereas Silverman focused on the ways in which Djébar subverts Delacroix's Orientalist and objectifying gaze on Algerian women's bodies, Zouari suggests her awareness of the violence that is inherent in her writing project in the sense that she is objectifying her mother who cannot now speak for herself. It will thus be pertinent to consider the extent to which the figure of the palimpsest takes on an alternative meaning in *Le Corps de ma mère*: by inscribing her mother's oral narrative in Arabic into written French, Zouari may suggest the ways in which the acts of translation and 'overreading' recall colonial hierarchies and violence.

Moreover, as discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Donadey has previously associated the violence of the palimpsest with the violence of colonialism in Djébar's fiction.<sup>467</sup> Crucially, she also argued that Djébar constructs a multilingual palimpsest in which French is deterritorialised: 'I analyze her use of Arabic words in her texts in French to argue that she creates a multilingual palimpsest which both reflects the process of violent French colonization of Algeria and subverts it linguistically by "arabicizing French".'<sup>468</sup> Given that Zouari includes some Arabic words and expressions in her narrative, I will discuss the extent to which she may similarly subvert colonial hierarchies with this linguistic strategy. Or we can consider if Zouari's writing, published precisely twenty years after Djébar's last volume in her 'Quatuor algérien' series (*Le blanc de l'Algérie* (1996)), evokes a more harmonious form of layering: one that conveys a more peaceful relationship to, and between, both

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<sup>467</sup> Ibid.

<sup>468</sup> Anne Donadey, 'The Multilingual Strategies of Postcolonial Literature: Assia Djébar's Algerian Palimpsest', *World Literature Today*, 74.1 (2000), 27–36 (p. 27).

languages.<sup>469</sup> Indeed, at the time of the book's publication in 2016, Zouari made several statements about her desire to 'pacifier' and rebaptise the status of the French language in Tunisia.<sup>470</sup> Additionally, in 2018, at the *Parlement des écrivaines francophones* in Orléans, she says that she seeks to cleanse the French language of its associations with colonial violence:

[i]l y a une langue française que je veux rebaptiser, mais aussi redéfinir en la débarrassant de toute cette scorie masculine... [la] terminologie de guerre, que les hommes ont mis dans cette langue, en disant c'est notre tribu de guerre, c'est la langue du colonisateur. Moi, je dis non. C'est ma langue. Donc cette réappropriation de la langue française m'intéresse [...]<sup>471</sup>

Nevertheless, it will be pertinent to discuss in this chapter the extent to which her francophone narrative in *Le Corps de ma mère* evokes in fact traces of this difficult colonial history.

Indeed, this chapter advances the argument, articulated in the last chapter, regarding the usefulness of the palimpsest—as opposed to Lunt's mosaic—as a *grille de lecture* for approaching buried memories and blindspots in the genre of life narrative.<sup>472</sup> I will suggest that there is a tension between the ideas of covering and revealing past violence in Zouari's palimpsestic life narrative. This emerges not only in relation to colonial histories but also in terms of the author's personal memories of her mother and the ambivalent memories of sexual assault (attempted by Zouari's uncles). While we found a similar tension between surface and subtextual layers of narrative in *Même pas mal* and *Pièces détachées*, Zouari's *Le Corps de ma mère* can be distinguished from these texts in the sense that it explicitly draws the reader's attention to its fictional status. As we shall see, the author speaks at times directly

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<sup>469</sup> Djebbar, *Le blanc de l'Algérie* (Paris, 1996).

<sup>470</sup> RTCI ; 'Rencontre avec Fawzia Zouari pour le parlement des écrivaines francophones à Orléans' (France : France 3 Centre-Val de Loire, 2018) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vLahNsO7jw>>.

<sup>471</sup> 'Rencontre avec Fawzia Zouari pour le 'Parlement des écrivaines francophones à Orléans'' (France: France 3 Centre-Val de Loire, 2018) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vLahNsO7jw>> [accessed 05/ 01/ 2022].

<sup>472</sup> Lunt, pp. 179–80.

to readers and warns them about the porous nature of the boundary between fact and fiction in the text; she also reflects on the ways in which both herself and her mother employed fiction as a means to cope with traumatic memories, grief and exile. It will thus be necessary to explore how the metaphor of the palimpsest, and its evocation of (buried) traces of the past, might convey trauma in the narrative.

Existing criticism on the text has neglected these complexities. In the first academic paper that was written on *Le Corps de ma mère*, published in May 2019, Larissa Luica and Simona Necula argue that Zouari succeeds in gaining a sense of mastery over her difficult memories of her mother:

[Zouari] réussit à comprendre pleinement la génération précédente. Elle réussit à tout dire pour pouvoir être à l'aise et vivre dans son monde moderne, sans remords et sans besoin de rupture intergénérationnelle, [...] pour ne plus se sentir étranger, pour en finir une fois pour toutes avec les ancêtres.<sup>473</sup>

In arguing that Zouari has a full understanding of the past, their approach is reminiscent of the totalising gaze in Lunt's theory of the mosaic in Tunisian women's writing.<sup>474</sup> It may also call to mind Kassab-Charfi's perception of Fellous's coherent interpretation of the past in *Pièces détachées*.<sup>475</sup> Indeed, Luica and Necula notably do not acknowledge the internal conflict in Zouari's narrative identity (particularly concerning her writing project), tension between different narrators in the text, as well as several traumatic memories of sexual assault that are not clarified or explained. I suggest that these elements render the author's writing more complex than Luica and Necula's interpretation. Additionally, I query Aliaa Ahmed and Abdel Wahed's argument that Zouari's written account is more reliable than her mother's oral narrative and serves to resolve any narrative inconsistencies for the reader:

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<sup>473</sup> Luica and Necula (p. 213).

<sup>474</sup> Lunt, pp. 179–80.

<sup>475</sup> Kassab-Charfi, 'Dispersion, disparition, appartenance chimérique : Colette Fellous et la poétique de *Pièces détachées*' (p.91).

On conclut que l'écriture d'un récit de vie demande l'habileté du témoin-sujet à narrer sa vie et le talent de l'écrivain pour la transcrire. Grâce à leur contribution, la biographie dépasse ses détournements et ses impasses narratifs. L'étude révèle que le témoignage par écrit reste plus fiable que celui transmis par plusieurs rapporteurs.<sup>476</sup>

Indeed, rather than guiding the reader away from 'impasse narratifs', Zouari indicates that there are many memory gaps and buried histories in her textual palimpsest.

Furthermore, the author explicitly draws her readers' attention to the way in which fiction becomes a strategy to cope with painful memories of the past. In this respect, my analysis of this text also adds to important debates on the fact/fiction border in francophone life narratives from the Maghreb. In her study of Memmi's writing, Brozgal argues that critics of Maghrebi texts might benefit from distancing themselves from infinite debates that concern the boundary between autobiographical fact and fiction.<sup>477</sup> She suggests that Genette's concept of the 'tourniquet', which she translates as whirligig in the following passage, may be a way to do this:

I suggest that critics of Maghrebian novels (and other texts) might benefit from remaining within this whirligig that oscillates rapidly between novel and fiction, blurring the distinctions and creating an intermediary space which, while conserving elements from both, blends them together to create something that is neither one nor the other. [...] Reading from within the whirligig should not only free the Maghrebian novel from the ghetto, it should also allow the primary object of interest—the text—to come to the fore.<sup>478</sup>

Adding to this existing debate, I suggest that the palimpsest—in contrast to the whirligig—arises from *Le Corps de ma mère* as a way to convey how fictional and factual elements are overlaid in Zouari's life narrative. Moreover, we discover in the text that the author's childhood in rural Ebba was immersed in her mother's storytelling, myths, metaphors and

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<sup>476</sup> Aliaa Ahmed and Abdel Wahed, 'Le témoignage dans *Le Corps de ma mère* de Fawzia Zouari', *Jfafu*, 1.1 (2022), 1044–78 (P. 1079) <[https://jfafu.journals.ekb.eg/article\\_186032\\_782dc9f687bb8b68e11341fb605fe69d.pdf](https://jfafu.journals.ekb.eg/article_186032_782dc9f687bb8b68e11341fb605fe69d.pdf)> [accessed 04/ 01/ 2022].

<sup>477</sup> Brozgal, *Reading Albert Memmi: Authorship, Identity, and the Francophone Postcolonial Text*, p. 99.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid.

conversations with the supernatural. In this respect, we should be mindful that *some* conventional Western assumptions about the genre of autobiography, concerning its supposed status as a ‘true’ account of what happened in an individual’s life, are inadequate for approaching Zouari’s unique presentation of her childhood memories and relationship to her ancestors. Indeed, though literary scholars in the West have nuanced definitions of the genre in recent decades, allowing for a more flexible understanding of the relationship between fact and fiction in texts classified as autobiographies, this debate has not yet been settled. For example, Arnaud Schmitt has produced a study in which he calls for a strict border to be enforced between autobiography and autofiction, asserting that the ‘[...] the blurring of the fact/fiction border would deprive us of an unlimited wealth of literary resources: the possibility of telling someone else in an aesthetic manner and context what *really* happened to us.’<sup>479</sup> Furthermore, we found in Chapter One that Ben Mhenni demonstrated a commitment to telling in an unambiguous manner the facts of what happened: this was crucial in her political battle against censorship and campaigns of misinformation. However, in this chapter, I suggest that the metaphor of the palimpsest may be useful for conceptualising the ways in which multiple narrative ‘layers’ of fact and fiction are at play in *Le Corps de ma mère*. As we shall see, fictional stories coalesce with ‘real’ memories and present an alternative vision of autobiographical ‘truth’ than the ones proposed by Schmitt and Ben Mhenni.

Finally, when considering Zouari’s first work of life narrative in relation to her earlier fiction and essays, it is clear that this text marks a significant turning point.<sup>480</sup> Unlike her

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<sup>479</sup> Arnaud Schmitt, *The Phenomenology of Autobiography: Making It Real* (London: Routledge, 2017), p.50.

<sup>480</sup> Fawzia Zouari published in chronological order: *La Caravane des chimères* (Paris: Orban, 1998); *Ce Pays dont je meurs* (Paris : Ramsay, 1999); *La Retournée* (Paris: Ramsay, 2002); *Le Voile islamique* (Paris : Favre, 2002); Fawzia Zouari, *Pour en finir avec Shahrazad* (Aix-en-Provence: Edisud, 2003); *Ce voile qui déchire la France* (Paris : Ramsay, 2004); *La Deuxième épouse* (Paris: Ramsay, 2006); *J’ai épousé un Français* (Monaco : Rocher, 2009); *Sous le jasmin les pavés* (Paris: Moment, 2011); *Pour un féminisme méditerranéen* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2012).

previous work, Zouari employs her own voice with the first-person pronoun in *Le Corps de ma mère*.<sup>481</sup> In her study of Tunisian women's writing in French, Alba notably focused on Zouari's earlier work of fiction, *La Retournée*, which presents a fictional story—not dissimilar to that of *Le Corps de ma mère*—of a Tunisian woman's return from Paris to her rural birth village, which is also situated in Kef and has Amazigh influences.<sup>482</sup> According to Kobia, Amazigh identity has been 'almost completely erased from the collective psyche of Tunisians because of Tunisian governments' policies and only between two to three percent of the Tunisian population regards themselves as Amazigh.<sup>483</sup> Alba argues that '[b]y highlighting the protagonist's Berber origins, Zouari acknowledges the rich cultural roots of Tunisian identity, echoing John Kobia's claim that "there are many possible answers to the question of exactly what defines a Tunisian" (p. 416).'<sup>484</sup> However, Alba also acknowledges that Zouari's protagonist is narrowly 'defined [by others in the text] through narrow dichotomous categories of "Arab" and "non-Arab"; having fled to France the protagonist is considered to be more "non-Arab" than "Arab".'<sup>485</sup> Building on Alba's analysis of *La Retournée*, I will discuss the extent to which the figure of the palimpsest arises in *Le Corps de ma mère* as a strategy to evoke the author's rich, transnational and multivalent identity (including her Amazigh heritage) in contrast to rigid and surface readings of Tunisian national identity.

In the first stage of my argument, I seek to build on the last chapters by considering the different ways in which Zouari enacts a process of feminist 'overreading'—adding a

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<sup>481</sup> Although Susan Ireland asserts that Zouari's 1999 novel *Ce Pays dont je meurs* can be classed as life writing, she admits, nonetheless, that it is 'largely fictional in nature'. Susan Ireland, 'Deviant Bodies: Corporeal Otherness in Contemporary Women's Writing', *Nottingham French Studies*, 45.3 (2006), 39–51 (p. 43).

<sup>482</sup> Alba, pp. 33-74.

<sup>483</sup> John M. Kobia, 'Gender Roles in African Oral Literature: A Case Study of Initiation Songs Among the Igembe People of Meru of Kenya.', in *African Cultures and Literatures: A Miscellany*, ed. by Gordon Collier (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2013), p. 416.

<sup>484</sup> Alba, *Tunisian Women's Writing in French The Fight for Emancipation: From Ben Ali's Rise to Power to the Eve of the Tunisian Revolution, 1987–2011*, p. 49.

<sup>485</sup> Alba, p. 49.

female authored narrative to existing patriarchal histories—that is specific to her positioning in the Tunisian context. In particular, I will consider the extent to which her personal narrative of her family history can be viewed as a form of political resistance to radical Salafist ideology that seeks to impose a rigid and monolithic template for national identity on Tunisians. Then, I will consider the extent to which she employs her narrative as a way to overread her mother’s patriarchal values. Next, I will consider the relationship between fact and fiction in the life narrative and the extent to which the text invites ‘palimpsestic readings’ that account for remediations and reinterpretations of autobiographical ‘truth’. Finally, I will consider the extent to which the metaphor of the palimpsest may be employed to evoke tensions between suppression and preservation, covering and uncovering, silence and articulation, and the resurfacing of difficult memories.

Zouari’s narrative is a multi-layered, transnational and relational text in which ‘self’ and ‘other’, oral and written narratives, and fact and fiction, overlap and integrate in a palimpsestic structure. Ultimately, the author’s self-reflexive statements about the constructed character of her narrative allow us to expand the definition of the palimpsestic life narrative in this chapter: it is a narrative mode that suggests the extent to which there are buried histories and potential violence in the act of representation. Additionally, as readers we can undertake a ‘palimpsestic reading’ that goes beyond the conventional limitations of the genre of autobiography. In employing the metaphor of the palimpsest as a *grille de lecture*, we can approach the text as a surface phenomenon to which we can add our own layer of interpretation.



## **The personal is political: overreading radical Salafist ideology in the wake of the revolution**

While Donadey has previously associated the metaphor of the palimpsest with the violence of colonialism, it arises here as a metaphor for conveying Zouari's perception of radical Islamist violence and its potential to suppress and overwrite the culture of both her mother and her birth community.<sup>486</sup> As we have discussed throughout this thesis, in traditional understandings of a palimpsest, earlier inscriptions of text are overwritten by new narratives. I now turn to explore the 'surface' layer of Zouari's palimpsestic narrative and the distinctive ways in which she enacts a process of feminist 'overreading', quoting Miller again, that is specific to her positioning in the Tunisian context.<sup>487</sup> This strategy seeks to preserve her family's history in the face of what she perceives to be radical political movements that threaten to erase this heritage.

Throughout the book, Zouari establishes a palimpsestic relation between her mother's oral transmission of her life narrative in Arabic and her reinscription of this story into written French. In highlighting the oral culture of her mother and her maid, Naïma, who become transmitters of Tunisian history in Zouari's palimpsest, the author explores the relationship between written and oral traditions. Indeed, Naïma's narrative of Yamna's life is an important discovery for the author: it is a layer of the palimpsest of her family history that had been hitherto occluded. Throughout her life, Yamna had explicitly chosen not to share details of her past with her own children. Zouari remembers her anger and frustration when she realised that Yamna was growing old without passing on any of her stories or family history: '[...] j'enrageais de la voir partir avec les temps révolus, le registre des alliances et

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<sup>486</sup> Donadey, 'Rekindling the Vividness of the Past: Assia Djébar's Films and Fiction', p. 886.

<sup>487</sup> Miller, 'Arachnologies: The Woman, the Text, and the Critic.', p. 292.

les noms des anciens, les épisodes de sa vie conjugale. Jusqu'aux tournures de ses phrases qui commençaient à s'altérer sous l'effet de la modernité.' (p. 22) She also remembers fearing her death and the rupture in intergenerational memory transmission that this would signify : '[...] son mystère restera entier et qu'elle mourra en nous laissant orphelins de sa mémoire.' (p. 76) When facing her mother's imminent death in the hospital, Zouari realises that 'je n'en sais plus sur la vie de ma mère que sur son corps. Rien sur ses sentiments. Nulle allusion ou détours sur son enfance ou sa relation avec son mari. [...] je n'ai jamais pu tirer d'elle la moindre confiance, loin de là.' (p. 34) In this respect, Zoauri's realisation that Naïma can recount her mother's life story is '[u]n vrai scoop' (p. 79) for her, as if she has unearthed a hidden layer of a palimpsest.

Building on the ideas in the last two chapters concerning El Fani and Fellous's methods of overreading radical Islamist violence, we find in *Le Corps de ma mère* an effort to preserve the author's family's memory in the wake of contemporary radical Salafist attacks on the culture of her birth village. In a radio interview on *Radio Tunis Chaîne Internationale* in 2016, Zouari recalled witnessing radical Salafist-authored attacks on the mausoleum of Sidi Askar, a sacred space for her mother.<sup>488</sup> She reflected that 'Le monde de ma mère est en train d'être détruit [...] Cette tentative de destruction, du pays et de ma mère, que je ne pouvais pas supporter.'<sup>489</sup> In the last chapter on *Pièces détachées*, we found that Fellous's narrative also evokes a radical Salafist attack on a mausoleum in Sidi Bou Saïd in 2013, which was vandalised because of the perpetrators' belief in the building's incompatibility with the monotheism of Islam. Luica and Necula notably argue that Zouari's life narrative project was born from her anger after seeing this violence : '[a]u moment du retour des

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<sup>488</sup> RTCI.

<sup>489</sup> Radio Tunis Chaîne Internationale RTCI, 'Intersignes: Comar d'Or 2016 pour Fawzia Zouari l'auteure de « Le Corps de ma mère », 2016 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDfOXdNiepE>> [accessed 10 October 2018].

salafistes qui veulent détruire les saints du village, l'indignation déclenche chez elle l'envie d'écrire.<sup>490</sup> In this respect, both Fellous and Zouari suggest the ways in which their life narrative projects seek to overread the radical Islamist-authored violence on mausoleums, which themselves represent, according to Sophie Ferchiou, a Tunisian sociologist, 'distinctively Tunisian' practices of ritual and tradition.<sup>491</sup>

Indeed, Zouari gestures to the hybrid identity of Tunisia as a country with an ancient, composite and multilayered history that is typically overlooked by radical Islamists:

A travers ce livre j'avais aussi peur pour la Tunisie. C'est pour ça que j'ai mis cette mère [dans le livre]. Cette mère, elle est morte avant la révolution. Quand la révolution arrive, je me demande : est-ce qu'elle va laisser des traces? [...] C'est pour ça que je veux l'accrocher à travers un livre ; je veux la rattraper. La Tunisie de ma mère ne sera plus [...] Parce que cette Tunisie dans laquelle vous vous reconnaissez, et beaucoup d'autres, les jeunes maintenant dans quelques années ne s'y reconnaîtront pas. Donc il y a une tentative vraiment de garder un patrimoine qui est dans ce livre. Les terroristes oublient cette Tunisie millénaire dans laquelle les civilisations se sont succédées. Parce que cette mère-là elle est kabyle, berbère et arabe. Elle comprend le français sans n'être jamais allée à l'école. Elle est la mère, elle est l'origine du monde.<sup>492</sup>

As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, advocates of fundamentalist political Islam seek to anchor Tunisians within a 'pure' national identity as Arabic speaking Muslims.<sup>493</sup>

Although Zouari does not suggest here that her mother is an allegory for the nation (a cliché in Western criticism of Maghrebi characters), her evocation of Yamna's multivalent identity suggests the ways in which she is a product of Tunisia's diverse, porous and 'palimpsestic' heritage.<sup>494</sup> Indeed, the metaphor of the palimpsest arises from the text as a means of unearthing and reinscribing Zouari's maternal heritage as a strategy of resistance to 'les

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<sup>490</sup> Luica and Necula (p. 225).

<sup>491</sup> Cited in: Seghaier.

<sup>492</sup> RTCI.

<sup>493</sup> See my discussion of this in the main thesis introduction.

<sup>494</sup> Note that Ahmed and Wahed evoke this cliché in their interpretation of the text: 'Tout ce que témoigne le biographié fait partie de son identité personnelle et sociale. Il devient porteur d'un sens profond à portée communautaire, à transmettre toute un patrimoine culturel et toute une mémoire collective à une époque et un pays donné.' Ahmed and Wahed (p. 1079).

terroristes’ that had attacked her family’s heritage.<sup>495</sup> As she stated in *Ouest France* in 2021, ‘[d]ans le contexte d’après Révolution et de prédominance des islamistes, le francophone est devenu un traître. [...] J’attends un discours féminin qui puisse réconcilier avec le français. Pour moi, c’était plus qu’une langue, c’était un voyage de vie. Une quête de liberté totale et infinie qui fait peur aux islamistes.’<sup>496</sup> In writing *Le Corps de ma mère* in the French language, Zouari seeks to read her own—and her mother’s—female authored narratives into the palimpsest of Tunisian history, preserve them for future generations of Tunisians and resist what she perceives to a growing rejection of French in Tunisia because of the re-emergence radical Islamist groups. Moreover, in an interview with *La Croix* in 2018, Zouari also suggests that her use of the French language is a strategy to distance herself from religious orthodoxies and patriarchal order: ‘Pour beaucoup en Tunisie, la langue arabe est langue sacrée, celle que Dieu a choisie entre toutes [...] C’est aussi la langue du père, tandis que la voix féminine est interdite, illicite. Alors, comment douter, si ce n’est dans une autre langue ?’<sup>497</sup> Her use of French may also be a deliberate strategy to distance herself from the idea of maternal judgement. Indeed, just as Zouari suggests that radical Islamists consider a French speaker in Tunisia to be a ‘traître’ (see above), she employs the same term when referring to her mother’s perception of those who become writers: ‘Écrivez, vous voilà au rang des traîtres.’ (p. 70) In this respect, there is a kind of narrative palimpsest evoked here in which Zouari’s challenge to Salafist orthodoxies is brought together, though not in an explicit way, with her transgression of her mother’s cultural norms.

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<sup>495</sup> RTCI.

<sup>496</sup> Cited in: Pierre Momboisse, ‘Fawzia Zouari milite pour « un discours féminin réconciliateur » avec la langue française’, *Ouest France*, September 2021 <<https://www.ouest-france.fr/culture/fawzia-zouari-milite-pour-un-discours-feminin-reconciliateur-avec-la-langue-francaise-0254a7be-1ed7-11ec-9081-ae76e8026b03>> [accessed 04/01/2022].

<sup>497</sup> Marie Verdier, ‘Fawzia Zouari, porte-voix des femmes du monde’, *La Croix*, September 2018 <<https://www.la-croix.com/Monde/Fawzia-Zouari-porte-voix-femmes-monde-2018-09-28-1200972152>> [accessed 05/01/2022].

Zouari's enhanced focus on the personal distinguishes her from the other three texts that we have so far discussed across this thesis, which all deal in explicit ways with 'collective' memories of violence. Indeed, in contrast to El Fani and Fellous who all discuss in explicit ways the threat of regime authored, or radical Islamist, violence within their narratives, Zouari engages with Tunisian politics in a much more subtle manner. While she evokes the threat of radical Salafism, and its destructive potential, in several paratextual interviews at the time of the book launch in 2016, she never discusses it in the text. The only suggestion of her fear concerning the threat of the revolution and its aftermath arises in the prologue. In this section of the book, Zouari remembers grieving for her mother in the summer of 2007, following her death in the spring, when she had to 'réapprend[re] à vivre sans maman.' (p. 13) She was able to do this '[j]usqu'à ce mois de janvier 2011. La Révolution vient d'éclater en Tunisie.' (p. 13) She notably says here that the uprisings threatened to wipe out her mother's memory:

[u]ne voix de l'intérieur me commande sur le ton des oracles : « Vite, vite, sait-on jamais, les révolutions, ça vous souffle le passé comme tornade et ça vous ravit une enfance en un tour de main ! Il faut que tu rattrapes ta mère avant de te la faire dérober. La sédition qui monte risque de noyer sa mémoire. Votre horizon, à ta mère et toi, ne sera plus alors qu'une ligne imaginaire et votre passé un filet à fictions ! » (pp. 13-4)

The ambivalent voice, which recalls the tone of oracles, may bring to mind the voice of the Saint Sidi Askar, whose mausoleum was destroyed by the Salafists. In addition, the passage is also laden with metaphors that evoke threats to memory, such as the metaphor of a tornado destroying the past, which recall the violence of the palimpsest that erases and suppresses existing traces of narrative. The verbs 'ravir' (p. 13), 'dérober' (p. 14) and 'noyer' (p. 14) also suggest the violent ways in which the rise of radical Salafism threatens to erase traces of a background ('horizon' (p. 14)) that belong not only to Yamna but also to Zouari. While we know from extratextual interviews that Zouari wrote this book in response to the threat of

radical Salafism, and the violence she witnessed on her birth village, this is not made clear in the passage. Indeed, the ‘sédition’ (p. 23) to which she refers could easily apply to the mass anti-regime protests of the general public at the dawn of the uprisings in 2011. In this respect, Zouari’s overreading strategy takes the form of a personal life narrative that does not explicitly engage with the topic of radical Salafism. Although traces of violent histories linger in deeper layers of the textual palimpsest of *Le Corps de ma mère*, they are not discussed or explored at length. In this respect, the act of writing about her personal life becomes a political act: it is a way to overread, in a subtle manner, the violence of the terrorists that seek to destroy the culture of her birth village.<sup>498</sup>

Zouari adds to the palimpsestic history of ‘cette Tunisie millénaire’ by evoking her connection to a longstanding heritage that exceeds pure and rigid categories relating to contemporary Tunisian national identity.<sup>499</sup> In the prologue, we learn that at the dawn of the uprisings in Tunis, in ‘janvier 2011’ (p. 13), she puts on her mother’s traditional Amazigh robe: ‘[...] je glisse dans la mélia de ma mère en guise de robe d’intérieur, et je serre sur mon bassin sa vieille ceinture berbère’ (p. 14). As Zouari indicates in a footnote on this page, a mélia is ‘[un] habit traditionnel fait d’une grande étoffe sans couture, tenue par des fibules au niveau de la poitrine et d’une ceinture au niveau du bassin.’ (p. 14) In wearing this garment, she retreats away from the ‘collective’ political upheaval ‘là-bas’ (p. 14), outside in the streets, and turns inward to her personal memories and family history. The evocation here of her Amazigh heritage suggests the ways in which her ‘Tunisian’ identity is itself hybrid and uncontainable within the monolithic paradigm of national identity that is enshrined in the

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<sup>498</sup> See Zouari’s interview with Sansal in which she states that: ‘Je n’ai pas de cause précise. La seule que j’ai, c’est l’écriture. [...] En fin de compte, à travers la fiction, vous avez quelque chose qui est fondamentalement contre les esprits fermés, contre le dogmatisme, contre l’obscurantisme. Par la fiction, qui est en soi un acte de liberté absolu, nous sommes véritablement contre ceux que ne sont pas pour la liberté.’ Boualem Sansal, ‘Rencontre d’auteur: Boualem Sansal et Fawzia Zouari’, *Bibliothèque de Toulouse*, 2017 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=arPkyzzIUCY>> [accessed 10 March 2018].

<sup>499</sup> RTCL.

2014 Constitution.<sup>500</sup> Just as an actor dresses up to become a character, Zouari performs her mother's identity by putting on her clothes and ensuring that her memory is preserved for future generations. Crucially, Yamna's narrative also incorporates references to the pre-Islamic era (referred to as 'l'époque de l'Ignorance' (p. 99)) and feminine divinities ('Allat et al-Uzza!') from this time. Furthermore, Zouari states that Yamna spoke in a lyrical manner that recalled the language of the pre-Islamic poetess, 'Al-Khansa' (p. 67). Naïma also describes her memory of an annual sex ritual that took place in the fields 'où les ruraux avaient l'autorisation une fois l'an de s'adonner à toutes sortes d'orgies.' (p. 125) If we consider the historical context in which the book was written, these multiple references to Amazigh, pre-Islamic and pagan traditions serve to evoke a portrait of Tunisia that is multilayered and diverse. Read together, they create a subtle strategy of resistance to religious orthodoxies and rigid categories for Tunisian national identity.

The figure of the palimpsest emerges in *Le Corps de ma mère* as a means to convey Zouari's overreading of different types of censorship that aim to silence women or repress cultural difference in Tunisia. Although we found above that she seeks to preserve her mother's memory through writing *Le Corps de ma mère*, she also employs her narrative as a way to overread her mother's patriarchal values. as I shall now discuss.

### **Overreading the mother's authority**

Zouari was born in 1955, four years before the introduction of the 'State Feminist' agenda, and grew up in a rural and traditional village called Ebba (in the region of Kef in north West

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<sup>500</sup> See my discussion of the Constitution in the main thesis introduction: pp. 31-2.

Tunisia) which had a strong patriarchal order.<sup>501</sup> Although the author benefited from Bourguiba's 1958 educational reforms that provided access to education for girls, patriarchal values continued to dominate in Ebba in the wake of the leader's modernising reforms.<sup>502</sup> Crucially, it was Zouari's father—instead of her mother—who insisted that she should stay in school and gain a secondary education, a privilege that had been denied to her two elder sisters: Jamila and Noura.<sup>503</sup> Susan Ireland notably argues that 'many years later, the author continues to express her gratitude to him for standing up to her mother and for placing learning above tradition, thus setting her off along the path that would lead to her becoming a writer.'<sup>504</sup> As Ireland argues, furthermore, Yamna is portrayed by Zouari as 'an authoritarian figure and as the enforcer and embodiment of many of the rules that [Zouari] would later reject.'<sup>505</sup> In turning to the career of writing, and strategically forging a 'self' in her francophone narrative, Zouari rejects her mother's rules and reverses the previously held power dynamics between them. Indeed, she writes that 'je suis celle qui a commis les deux péchés les plus graves à ses yeux : j'ai taillé dans le vif de l'honneur tribal en épousant un étranger et j'ai fait de l'écriture un métier.' (p. 49) She thus demonstrates that writing is itself a form of self-imposed exile.

Zouari evokes her early development of a voyeuristic gaze: the seedling for her *regard écrivain* in *Le Corps de ma mère*. She writes that, as a child, '[j]'étais celle qui s'éloignait pour observer les siens de la fenêtre d'en face. Tandis [que ma mère] avait toujours déconseillé à ses enfants de s'aventurer dans la maison d'en face, justement' (p. 70).

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<sup>501</sup> In the narrative, the village is referred to as Ebba (the abbreviation of its ancient name: Ebba Ksour). However, the modern name for the village is Dahmani.

<sup>502</sup> Bourguiba's 1958 educational reforms which sought to unify the country and promote social development. For the first time in the country's history, education was available and encouraged for all primary school aged girls across Tunisia, including those in rural areas.

<sup>503</sup> Her father demonstrates a keen interest in Western medical practices that were brought over by the French; see: pp. 116-7.

<sup>504</sup> Fawzia Zouari, 'Afterword by Susan Ireland', *I Die by This Country* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2018), p. 131.

<sup>505</sup> Ireland, *Afterword*, p.131.



‘La maison d’en face’ (p. 70) can be read as a metaphor for the author's future host culture and language (France and French). Her image of neighbouring houses suggests her capacity to inhabit and travel between cultures that are connected yet which remain distinct. The mother’s anxiety regarding unfamiliar spaces is here juxtaposed with Zouari’s openness to other cultures and travel. By reflecting on her early memories, she roots the process of internal exile in her childhood experiences. In this respect, her desire to observe her mother from a distance, and the betrayal this represents, began long before their geographical separation.

As mentioned in the last chapter, Wimbush argues that exile is ‘a sexual, gendered, racial, and linguistic otherness’, a definition that notably transcends the conventional definition of exile as geographical displacement.<sup>506</sup> Over the course of *Le Corps de ma mère*, we discover that Zouari’s multiple exilic condition emerges during her return trip to Tunisia in several ways: she is considered by the other villagers as ‘française’ because of her earlier migration to France, and has a linguistic otherness, reprising Wimbush’s phrasing, because of her adoption of the French language.<sup>507</sup> Indeed, like El Fani and Fellous, Zouari is narrating her memories of Tunisia in French, instead of Tunisia’s national language of Arabic, and from an external perspective in Paris. In the same previously mentioned interview with Boualem Sansal in 2016, Zouari discussed the privileged perspective that exile gave her:

J’ai appris, en étant à l’extérieur, comment peut-être retourner pour transgresser les frontières. Et les frontières chez nous sont de toute sorte, y compris celle de partir, celle de parler de l’intimité, du clan, de la tribu, et encore celle de parler de la mère, du secret de la mère et de la faire parler d’une façon qui est inédite dans notre tradition, où il est dit le paradis est sous le pied de vos mères. Donc, à la limite, nous n’avons qu’une parole élogieuse vis-à-vis des mères.<sup>508</sup>

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<sup>506</sup> Wimbush, p. 4.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid.

<sup>508</sup> Sansal.

Her geographical displacement and linguistic otherness enabled her to rebel against the tribal customs that kept women from her village in silence. In this respect, she is not only overreading threats to her mother's memory and cultural heritage; she is also adding to the local history of her tribe and overwriting its gendered stereotypes that censor female expression and narratives of motherhood. We may also define Zouari's *regard écrivain* as a 'gendered' otherness because she breaks one of the main rules of femininity in Ebba that forbids women from speaking publicly—and especially from speaking about the tribe.<sup>509</sup> As Zouari explains, furthermore, '[...] la voix féminine était aussi honteuse chez les miens que la nudité.' (p. 18) The term 'nudité' is employed here to refer to an unveiled woman. With her *regard écrivain*, Zouari adopts a narrative position of authority that allows her to overread her mother's life (and body) on her own terms and resist the culture of female silence into which she was born.<sup>510</sup>

Throughout Naïma's narrative, Zouari's dominant subject position emerges in occasional interruptions that disrupt the flow of the mother's story. Zouari's interjections are recognisable as they always form stand-alone, italicised sentences or paragraphs. For example, this voice may appear to confirm an element of Naïma's narrative (*C'est si vrai!* (p. 134)) or to dialogue with it by cross-referencing it with her own memories of her mother: for example, '*Oui. Je me souviens très bien du cérémonial.* (p. 87)' and '*Je lui rapportais son parfum préféré, effectivement...*' (p. 109). In these instances, Zouari attempts to make sense of Naïma's narrative by connecting it to her own private memories of her mother. Or, on occasion, she clarifies or explains something for the reader. For example: '[e]n ces années-là (*je suppose que c'est le milieu des années trente*), [...]' (p. 113). In this way, Zouari reminds

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<sup>509</sup> Recalling Wimbush's definition of exile again. Wimbush, p. 4. Rephrase as full sentence.

<sup>510</sup> RTCI.

the reader of her presence. The italicised text reminds the reader in a subtle manner that the author is remembering and reinterpreting the oral narrative.

Additionally, the author's frequent translations of words from Arabic into French constitute a further form of authorial 'overreading' of Naïma's and Yamna's narratives. Indeed, throughout Naima's narrative we find occasional words in Arabic that have been transliterated into the Latin alphabet. Zouari also includes a footnote in which she explains the word for a francophone reader. For example, the word '*abroug*' (p. 109) is explained in French as 'Écharpe ample et colorée'. Other examples are: '*habous*' (p. 111), translated as 'Biens fonciers régis par la loi musulmane au profit de la communauté' ; '*kafir*' (p. 111), translated as 'Mécréants', and '*Hattaya*' (p. 121), translated as 'Nomade'. While these acts of translation for a Francophone readership may evoke, symbolically, the violent process of French colonisation, the presence of these Arabic words (and others) in the narrative also serves to evoke the author's hybrid linguistic identity. In peppering her French narrative with Arabic terms, she constructs a distinctive form of writing in French and arguably succeeds in her mission to make French 'sa langue maternelle', despite the fact that it is not her mother tongue.<sup>511</sup> Indeed, in Arabicising French, she employs the language on her own terms and liberates her writing from the arguably oppressive constraints of monolingualism.

However, Zouari also draws the reader's attention explicitly to the limitations of translation when she reflects on her inability to convey the richness and complexity of her mother's use of Arabic to her francophone children. She says 'J'étais contrainte de leur expliquer les mots de leur grand-mère en recourant au français, et c'était comme emprunter la porte de la voisine pour rentrer chez soi. Je désespérais à l'idée qu'en eux se fut éteint l'écho des mondes maternels.' (p. 44) Yet again, she refers to the idea of travelling to a neighbour's

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<sup>511</sup> RTCI.

house, which was an activity that her mother had advised against. We get the sense that Zouari mourns here the fact that there is loss in the act of translation, and that her use of the French language cannot adequately articulate her mother's life.<sup>512</sup> Indeed, in this respect, it is important to consider the ways in which Zouari suggests that her *regard écrivain*—the surface level of the palimpsestic life narrative—is also unstable and unable to assume a consistent position of authority over her mother's life story.

As Mairéad Hanrahan has stated in relation to Hélène Cixous' *Osnabrück*, a life narrative about the author's mother, 'Writing about the mother means translating her untranslatable singularity, but not writing about her means leaving her untranslated: either way there is betrayal.'<sup>513</sup> Zouari is caught in a similar predicament: her mother's past may be forgotten—or deliberately buried by others—if she does not recall it, but remembering it runs the risk of destroying it. In other words, by reactivating the memories of her mother, she risks distorting them by writing them into her palimpsestic life narrative. In the next section, I now turn to discuss how the idea of her mother's body causes her narrative perspective to shift, and how this creates tension between different 'layers' of the narrative.

### **Between violence and creation: representing the mother's body**

Whereas Silverman found that Djébar employs the palimpsest as a strategy of resistance to rigid identity categories and the fixing gaze of Orientalism on Algerian women's bodies,

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<sup>512</sup> Additionally, one of the explanatory notes that she provides is possibly somewhat limited and serves to convey the difficulty, and loss, inherent in the translation process: she translates 'hajjama' (p. 100) as 'Coiffeuse'. Indeed, although it commonly refers to a hairdresser, the term also conveys the practice of cupping therapy: an ancient healing practice that is practiced widely in Asia and the Middle East.

<sup>513</sup> Mairéad Hanrahan, 'The Place of the Mother: Hélène Cixous's *Osnabrück*', *Paragraph*, 27.1 (2008), 6–20 (p. 7).

Zouari shuttles between the positions of the transgressive voyeur, who studies and objectifies her mother, and the obedient daughter who seeks to protect her from external gazes. Indeed, in the final line of the book, her daughterly perspective emerges to express her remorse for representing her mother's body in the French language: 'je me vois en train de lui demander pardon pour avoir transporté sa mémoire jusque sous les toits de France et l'avoir couchée dans la langue étrangère.' (p. 232) Moreover, Zouari frequently articulates her guilt and anxiety for using her mother's life as a subject for her writing. She is notably haunted by visions of her mother's dead body: 'Soudain, son corps étendu sur une civière [...]' (p. 11). It is unclear if the vision of the mother's corpse is a real memory, triggered from looking out of the window, or if it surges from her imagination. This ambiguity regarding the tensions between reality and imagination serves to reinforce the haunting, inescapable and omnipresence of the mother-idea: she surfaces, voluntarily and involuntarily, at any moment. When envisioning Yamna's dead body in the street below her window, Zouari sees '[...] les mots fondre sur lui comme des charognards'. (p. 11) The violence evoked in this image causes the narrator to suppress the image, stating: 'Je recule, effrayée' (p. 11). The disturbing metaphor suggests that Zouari is aware that she is enacting a form of violence on her mother through objectification and representation: her words are metaphorically eating her mother's body. Indeed, the writer is inevitably in the position of subject, whereas the mother is an object of the daughter's *regard écrivain*. While the image of the words feeding off Yamna's corpse reflects Zouari's personal anxiety regarding the ethics of representing her mother, it also goes further than this: it provokes broader theoretical questions related to the genre of life narrative and representation. Her imagery may bring to mind the fact that all representation necessarily deforms the subject in some way, as well as De Man's discussion of disfiguration in autobiography.<sup>514</sup> Indeed, Zouari's text self-reflexively engages with the

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<sup>514</sup> De Man (p. 926).

‘problem’ of creating life narrative, and of adequately representing the self and/or (m)other in writing.

While we found above that Zouari queries both the ethics and the possibility of writing her mother in the French language, there are also moments in the text where she draws her reader’s attention to the fictional status of her project. As discussed above, Brozgal argues that we need to move away from ‘infinite’ debates on the border between fact and fiction in Maghrebi novels.<sup>515</sup> She suggests that they should let the text come to the fore and remain within the critical ‘tourniquet’ (quoting Genette’s use of this term): a mode of reading that allows for a porous border between fact and fiction.<sup>516</sup> Additionally, in *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler recognises the fictional status of self-writing practices but suggests that this should not hinder authors from putting their lived experience into narrative: ‘[t]he irrecoverability of an original referent does not destroy narrative; it produces it “in a fictional direction” [...] We can surely still tell our stories, and there will be many reasons to do precisely that.’<sup>517</sup>

Indeed, one of the key issues that continue to trouble and divide Western theorists of autobiography is the genre’s ‘tightrope’ (a term employed by Leah Hewitt) between fact and fiction, and the always problematic gap between representation and referentiality.<sup>518</sup> Schmitt would no doubt reject Zouari’s text from the genre of autobiography because Naïma’s ‘imagination’ (p. 80) might introduce fictive elements and compromise its truth value.<sup>519</sup> Schmitt’s policing of the boundaries of autobiography notably echoes popular debates on the

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<sup>515</sup> Brozgal, *Reading Albert Memmi: Authorship, Identity, and the Francophone Postcolonial Text*, p. 99.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid.

<sup>517</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), p. 37.

<sup>518</sup> Leah D. Hewitt, *Autobiographical Tightropes* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), p. 1.

<sup>519</sup> Schmitt, p.50.

fact/fiction border that surfaced in 2006 with the James Frey controversy.<sup>520</sup> However, as David Bahr argues, the problem of a fact/fiction border does not necessarily deprive us of the possibility of recounting what really happened to us; rather, it complicates it: ‘This is what makes autobiography such a unique and exciting form. People, like myself, struggling in good faith to write and read lives, are aware of this complexity, and as much as some may wish to codify the process, it is not a science.’<sup>521</sup> Zouari’s palimpsestic strategy in *Le Corps de ma mère* works to problematise the distinctions between fact and fiction and move beyond Schmitt’s prescriptive theory that the genre should be rooted purely in the ‘factual’.<sup>522</sup>

The metaphor of the palimpsest provides a useful *grille de lecture* for approaching the slippery relationship between fact and fiction in *Le Corps de ma mère*. As we have previously discussed, the strange pairing of creation and suppression is implicit in the idea of the palimpsest. It thus arises from the text as a means to convey the way in which the author recognises the loss that is inherent in her storytelling: in writing her life narrative from her own authorial perspective, she is also overwriting others’ narratives and suppressing or distorting memory traces. While Zouari draws attention to the inadequacy of her narrative for representing the complexity of her mother’s life story, she also suggests her need to preserve it in writing it.

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<sup>520</sup> This scandal, in which readers discovered that Frey’s bestselling memoir, *A Million Little Pieces*, was based largely on invention rather than the truth of his lived experience, was popularised through Oprah Winfrey’s brutal interrogation of the author on her prime-time television show in America. As Gillian Whitlock argues, worries about ‘quality control’ arose in the wake of this scandal: people started to ask if readers had ‘rights’ to know if a text was referential, and if publishers had responsibilities to police the fact/fiction border. She also argues that the label of ‘nonfiction’ was critical to the best-seller status of many texts as it fulfils ‘a desire for facts and truth that is promised by the autobiographical pact’. Whitlock, p. 111.

<sup>521</sup> David Bahr, ‘Book Review: The Phenomenology of Autobiography: Making It Real by Schmitt, Arnaud’, *Life Writing*, 2018, 1–4 (p. 3).

<sup>522</sup> Schmitt, p.50.

## **A palimpsestic relation between oral and written narratives, fact and fiction**

While Smith and Watson argue that ‘to read life narratives only within the realm of fact is to ignore the genre’s complexity’, I argue that to read *Le Corps de ma mère* only within the realm of fact is to negate and ignore the cultural specificity of the text.<sup>523</sup> Indeed, when we consider Zouari’s narrative of her childhood in Ebba, and the fact that she was immersed in her mother’s myths, supernatural stories and unconventional relationship to time, it is impossible to situate her text within the framework of Western models for the genre of life narrative or women’s writing that police the border between fact and fiction; rather, it is distinctive to her own cultural specificity and experience as a Tunisian woman from Ebba. Indeed, Zouari has access to the richness of an oral tradition and mythology that have been transmitted by her mother and female ancestors. In writing her French narrative with what she terms the ‘rythme de [s]a mère’, she inscribes her work in the feminine oral tradition in which she finds her inspiration.<sup>524</sup>

The author demonstrates that the ‘facts’ of her mother’s life are harvested through her detective work, from the second-hand memories of others, and shows an awareness of the ways in which stories are reimagined and reinvented through their retellings: ‘Il se peut que Naïma y soit allée de son imagination pour arranger quelques séquences à sa manière. [...] Mais, pour l’essentiel, je pense que Naïma a rapporté ses propos avec une fidélité qui n’a d’égale que la foi dont elle les investissait.’ (p. 80) This statement is ironic as Zouari has also arranged details of her mother’s life in her own version of the story. Crucially, Zouari is not only transcribing her mother’s story from oral to written words but is also translating it into French from Arabic. This strategy creates multiple levels of distance between the original

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<sup>523</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, ‘Metalepsis in Autobiographical Narrative’, *The European Journal of Life Writing*, VIII (2019), 1–27 (p.1).

<sup>524</sup> RTCl.



oral narrative and the reader's third-hand reception of the story. Furthermore, Zouari notes that Naïma had received Yamna's oral narrative of her life over many years: 'Depuis des années, maman faisait venir sa bonne, quelle que soit l'heure du jour ou de la nuit [...].' (p. 79) However, Naïma relates her own condensed version of the story to Zouari in a matter of hours, over the course of a night: ('Et cette nuit-là, l'incroyable a lieu. [...] j'étais loin de deviner qu'elle pouvait débiter en quelques heures plus de paroles qu'elle n'en avait prononcé en quarante années de vie.' (p. 79) In highlighting this comparison, Zouari suggests that many of her mother's original details may have been lost or forgotten. In turn, Yamna's story is reinterpreted by Zouari herself in written form. In the process of retelling her mother's story, she selects from, edits and adds to Naïma's narrative. This means that Yamna's original story is reauthored with each new telling, and also each new time that it is read. In addition, Zouari writes that Naïma recalls Yamna's phrase: 'Il était une fois ma vraie vie.' (p. 80) This phrase suggests that Yamna also managed her listener's expectations of her narrative. Indeed, 'Il était une fois' anchors the listener within the context of a fairytale: a genre which is open to the strange and the supernatural. In such stories, the narrator is highly important as they explicitly guide the reader from the beginning of the story through to its eventual climax and resolution. With these phrases, the author draws the reader's attention to the *constructed* character of her narrative, which interweaves both fact and fantasy.

While many scholars have focused on the relationship between two layers in a palimpsest, the surface layer and one hidden layer, Zouari suggests that an original 'truth' or layer is impossible to find in her textual palimpsest.<sup>525</sup> This notably recalls the ways in which both El Fani and Fellous resist authoritative readings of their identities in their palimpsestic life narratives. Nonetheless, *Le Corps de ma mère* is in many ways a detective narrative or

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<sup>525</sup> See Kimyongür and Wigelsworth's discussion of the distinction between structuralist and poststructuralist approaches to the palimpsest in literature. Kimyongür and Wigelsworth, p. 10.

*roman à clef*: it is a story of Zouari's efforts to uncover the true story of her mother's life. Indeed, she writes that Naïma 'détenait la clef qui ouvre sur la vie de maman.' (p. 79) This storyline notably intersects thematically with a further 'layer' of the narrative: the villagers' hunt for the folkloric lost treasure of Ebba. When Zouari refers to Naïma's story of her mother's life as her 'butin de mère' (p. 79), the hidden treasure becomes a metaphor for the mother's story. However, the author subsequently calls into question the 'truth' status of the hidden narrative that is brought to the fore in the 'Le conte de ma mère' chapter via Naïma's narrative. Indeed, the author explicitly speaks to the reader and gestures to the constructed nature of the narrative: 'Je me suis permis de reconstituer son récit sans chercher à en dater les étapes ni à rendre crédibles les événements. Et je me dois d'avertir le lecteur : accepter l'authenticité de ce qui suit engage à entrer dans un autre temps. Et à croire l'incroyable. Car il en sera et il en fut ainsi de la vie de ma mère.' (p. 80) In warning her reader that they must enter into 'un autre temps' (p. 80), she suggests that they must suspend their disbelief.

Indeed, at times, Zouari's narrator appears to break the 'surface' of the palimpsest (as a metaphor for the text). This is an example of metalepsis: a narrative mode or level in which the text demonstrates an awareness of its own textuality.<sup>526</sup> Zouari's use of metalepsis—crossing over conventional boundaries between the text and the reader—adds further complexity to my definition of the palimpsestic life narrative. Following Brozgal's call to move away from infinite debates on the border between fact and fiction in Maghrebi novels, and instead let the text come to the fore, we find here that Zouari's self-reflexive statement allows for a similar mode of reading.<sup>527</sup> Indeed, the author problematises the reader's encounter with this border in a fruitful manner and adds a further layer of complexity to her

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<sup>526</sup> See Smith and Watson's discussion of how the figure of metalepsis fruitfully problematises definitions of the genre of autobiography in Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, 'Metalepsis in Autobiographical Narrative', *The European Journal of Life Writing*, VIII (2019), 1–27.

<sup>527</sup> Brozgal, *Reading Albert Memmi: Authorship, Identity, and the Francophone Postcolonial Text*, p. 99.

textual palimpsest. Moreover, as readers we can undertake a palimpsestic reading that goes beyond the conventional limitations of the genre of autobiography and see the text as a surface phenomenon to which we can add our own layer of interpretation.

The conventional boundaries between French writing and dialectical oral Arabic, between oral storyteller and writer, lose their rigidity in Zouari's palimpsestic life narrative. For example, at the beginning of the second chapter entitled 'Le conte de ma mère', Zouari brings the first-person voice of Tounès, her maternal grandmother, into the narrative. The ambivalent narrator (that combines the voices of Zouari, Naïma and Yamna) introduces an imagined scenario in which Tounès is pregnant with Yamna in Ebba. According to the narrator, 'la coutume voulait que les mamans se confient à leur enfant le temps de la grossesse, leur murmurant des aveux, les nourrissant d'une mixture de sang et de mots.' (p. 83) Following this custom, Tounès speaks to Yamna while she is in the womb and describes the life story of Saint Charda, her female ancestor. It is a religious story filled with supernatural elements: Charda ran away from a king 'qui voulait l'épouser et qu'elle n'aimait pas.' (p. 86) When she was being chased by an army of soldiers, '[l]a fugitive sentit des ailes pousser dans son dos et se transforma en hirondelle par la grâce de Dieu !' (p. 86) Speaking directly to Yamna in the womb, Tounès says, '[d]e ce miracle, tu parleras, mon bébé. Et toi, plus que les autres. Tu rendras hommage à la sainte quand tu seras une femme !' (p. 86). In imagining and evoking her maternal grandmother's dialogue with her unborn baby, Zouari gives herself creative permission to imagine her female ancestors as characters in her narrative. This strategy allows for the voices of self, mother, Naïma and Tounès to co-exist and, at times, converge. Although we do not know if Tounès spoke to Yamna in this way, Zouari's life narrative is a creative 'elsewhere' in which she can imagine multiple female perspectives and stories within stories. The oral quality of the narrative evokes her matrilineal heritage and the strong bonds between women. Indeed, unlike the other texts that we have

studied in this thesis, Zouari draws explicit attention to the porous relationship between fact and fiction in *Le Corps de ma mère*.

Indeed, throughout her life narrative she evokes her mother's distinctive relationship to time and history. In incorporating matrilineal myths, metaphors and occasional supernatural elements into her narrative, she also emphasises the way in which her life narrative cannot be bound by Western rules that have been conventionally attached to the genre of autobiography—particularly in terms of Lejeune's 'pacte autobiographique' and his insistence on the linear story of an individual self.<sup>528</sup> In addition, her emphasis on storytelling, as opposed to testimony, is evoked in the title of the second chapter: 'Le conte de ma mère'. Zouari could have selected other titles here, such as 'La vie de ma mère' or, perhaps, 'Le témoignage de ma mère'. Her use of the word 'conte' suggests a narrative with alternative generic rules and expectations. Indeed, in this chapter the narrator incorporates myths and conversations with saints into her account of Yamna's life story. These elements are woven into the narrative and presented as factual anecdotes to the reader. Yamna's dialogue with spirits and ancestors is portrayed as part of her daily life: 'Une fois qu'elle avait accompli son devoir à l'égard des vivants, Yamna se tournait vers les autres mondes [...].' (p. 134) Additionally, Zouari remembers that '[l]'heure de maman convoquait toutes les heures à la fois' (p. 20) and she 'faisait de la mémoire un mur lisse dont les fenêtres donnaient sur toutes les époques à la fois.' (p. 20) In this way, Zouari evokes her mother's strange and unorthodox relationship to time, myths and storytelling. Crucially, Zouari's writing strategy in *Le Corps de ma mère* does not emulate existing Western models of women's writing—such as *écriture féminine*—but evokes instead a distinctive relationship to time that is particular to her own experience and heritage. This self-reflexive overlap between fact and fiction allows us to further expand the definition of the palimpsestic life narrative.

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<sup>528</sup> Lejeune, p.14.

Indeed, Zouari self-consciously makes visible the complex interaction of factual and fictional elements in her narrative. Her palimpsestic life narrative overlays different voices and meanings and blurs the boundaries between the present and the past, self and other, the *réel* and the imaginary. In evoking her mother's distinctive relationship to myths and storytelling, she opens up an alternative style of life narrative that does not adhere to conventional Western generic rules concerning the border between fact and fiction.

### **Fictionalising trauma: overwriting difficult histories in the palimpsest**

The porous relationship of the border between fact and fiction is expressed more explicitly in the third and final chapter of *Le Corps de ma mère*, entitled 'L'exil de ma mère', in which Naïma (and, subsequently, Zouari) exposes Yamna's use of language to perform alternative realities in her old age. According to the narrator, this was a conscious strategy to help her cope with the trauma of moving from her village to the capital, Tunis, to be cared for by her youngest daughter, Souad. We learn that ' [...] aucun de ses enfants ne se doutait de son chagrin. La plupart pensaient qu'elle était contente de vivre dans la capitale, alors même que son départ du village venait de mettre un coup d'arrêt à sa vie réelle.' (p. 200) The narrator explicitly describes her mother's performances as a strategy to cope with her rupture from her village life: 'Maman se soignait ainsi de l'exil' (p.201). Although some of her children believed that she had Alzheimer's, the narrator says that she was using this as a ruse: 'elle s'occuperait au jeu de mémoire' (p. 205). In letting people believe that she was senile, she was able to escape from social expectations and bask in the comforting memories of her life in the village. As soon as she overhears two of her daughters diagnosing her (in French) with Alzheimer's, '[Yamna] se mit à pétrir les temps, comme jadis son pain, mixa le réel et la fiction et intervertit volontairement les époques. Hier et aujourd'hui se rejoignirent en un

scenario ou elle associa sa propre vie à celles des rois, des saintes et des prostituées sacrées.’ (p. 201) In this respect, the narrator suggests that Yamna was deliberately inventing worlds, playing and performing senile behaviour as a strategy to cope with her exile from Ebba.

The ambivalent position of the narrator is compelling here: we know that Naïma’s subject position is ostensibly guiding the narrative because, at the very end of the second *livre*, Zouari tells us that Naïma ‘a déjà entamé son récit en empruntant le ton sibyllin de sa patronne.’ (p. 193) Yet, as discussed above, Zouari’s francophone and first-person narrative always recycles, reframes and reinterprets Naïma’s oral narrative. In this way, Zouari—as the most powerful narrator in the hierarchy of narrators—inscribes her mother’s experience in terms of her own awareness and emotional understanding of her life. Additionally, the level of precision and detail in the narrative produces ambivalence here: it is hard for the reader to believe that the direct quotations (in Yamna’s first-person narrative voice) have been faithfully remembered, translated and transcribed into French. In this respect, the precision of the direct quotations serves to evoke, in a subtle way, Zouari’s narrative influence and, possibly, her interference as she reads her own emotions into the palimpsestic narrative of her mother’s life.

Moreover, Zouari undeniably brings her own mother’s experience of exile into dialogue with her own (ambivalent) condition of exile. She notably refers to her sister’s previous criticism that she was projecting her trauma onto her mother: ‘Souad s’esclaffe. Elle me soupçonne de diagnostiquer chez maman mes propres maux. L’exil, vous avez entendu ça !’ (p. 61) Souad, like the other sisters, believed that Yamna was suffering from cognitive impairment due to her old age; she indicates here that Zouari may be overidentifying with her mother’s situation, in reading it in terms of her own lived experience of exile instead of acknowledging her mother’s illness. Indeed, it is possible that Yamna did have Alzheimer’s as the narrator refers at one point to ‘ses oublis réels’ (p.214) and concedes that medical

professionals had agreed on this diagnosis (p. 61). Yet the title of the third part of the book, 'L'exil de ma mère' encourages the reader to agree with Zouari's interpretation of her mother's behaviour in her final years: that it was indeed rooted in her experience of exile. However, as discussed above, the ambivalent position of the narrator, and the direct quotations from Yamna, give the reader cause to doubt the authenticity of the narrative. It is possible that Zouari is, ironically, imagining her mother's performances and reading exile, as an experience that she alone could share with Yamna, into her creative interpretation of her final years. In this respect, she is adding a further layer to the palimpsestic narrative of her mother's life.

Building further on the idea that there are internal tensions within the palimpsestic structure of the text, Zouari recognises that her adult perception of Tunisia, as a writer now living in France, may contrast with her childhood lived experience in the country. While Zouari writes that her 'besoin de retraverser l'existence de [s]a mère' (p. 55) is motivated by her geographical separation from Tunisia, she fears that living abroad may have distorted her memories of her childhood and caused her to adopt an external, romanticised and nostalgic perception of her homeland:

Je sais que je n'ai rien oublié, je crains juste les impostures du temps. Car il se peut que toutes ces années vécues en France aient travesti le passé et donné à ma vie au village le goût des contrées lointaines et le charme suranné des anciens mondes. (p. 54)

Although she does not refer here to neo-Orientalism, her use of language is reminiscent of stereotypical views of Tunisia as a docile, timeless and charming country that is suspended outside of history.<sup>529</sup> Indeed, idealised portrayals of the Maghreb are common in Maghrebi

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<sup>529</sup> See, for example, Dakhli's discussion of this cliché: Dakhli, pp. 7–16.

immigrant writers' literary representations of their former homelands. As Robert Watson argues,

[...] the non-Maghrebi reader expects a certain “dépaysement,” integral in French travel literature. Publishers and authors are also working with these expectations, as can be witnessed on book jackets. For example, the jacket of André Nahum's work *Tunis-la-juive* features the Orientalist descriptions “hauts en couleur,” “coloré” and “pittoresque” in addition to expressions belonging to a more nostalgic register; “faire revivre un monde disparu.”<sup>530</sup>

The fact that Zouari is expressing this fear about the unreliability of her memory is important: she suggests that she is aware of her tendency to exoticise her village from an ‘external’ perspective in the country of the former coloniser. In consciously reflecting on her impulse to employ a nostalgic register in her narrative of her childhood, Zouari points to an experience that is common in the art of exiled writers and artists for whom the lost homeland is an idealised object of longing and desire. Crucially, she also evokes the extent to which the passing of time enacts a similar process to that of the palimpsestic process: its passing may lead to the suppression, or erasure, of memory traces as the human brain re-wires itself in response to trauma—a form of ‘overwriting’ that is both biological and psychological.

In many ways, Zouari's impulse to exoticise, and romanticise, her childhood in Tunisia recalls her paratextual statements regarding her intention to ‘rebaptiser’ French and ‘pacifier’ its status in Tunisia.<sup>531</sup> There is a strong parallel here with Fellous's efforts in *Pièces détachées* to employ language and imagery that evoke ‘douceur’ as an antidote to her memories of extreme violence.<sup>532</sup> The metaphor of the palimpsest emerges from both of these

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<sup>530</sup> Robert J. Watson, *Cities of Origin, Cities of Exile: Maghrebi Jewish Diasporic Life-Writing in French, 1985-2011*, p. 11. A tendency to present childhoods in Tunisia with a lens of nostalgia is also arguably present in Leïla Sebbar and Sophie Bessis's 2010 anthology: *Enfances tunisiennes. Enfances tunisiennes*, ed. by Leïla Sebbar and Sophie Bessis (Tunis: Elyzad).

<sup>531</sup> ‘Rencontre avec Fawzia Zouari pour le 'Parlement des écrivaines francophones à Orléans' (France: France 3 Centre-Val de Loire, 2018) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vLahNsO7jw>> [accessed 05/ 01/ 2022]; RTCL.

<sup>532</sup> ‘Colette Fellous interviewed on 18 September 2019 at the Institut français du Royaume-Uni, London.’



texts as a strategy for layering idealised projections over complex, nuanced and often painful histories.

Indeed, throughout this thesis we have explored the different ways in which the metaphor of the palimpsest arises in these texts as a means to convey the suppression of difficult (personal or collective) memories. In the previous two chapters, we found that there were blind spots or suppressed memories in El Fani's and Fellous's palimpsestic life narratives: elements that made it hard for the reader to interpret the constructed 'self' that emerges in both texts. In *Le Corps de ma mère*, it is possible to detect traces of anger toward the mother in deeper layers of the palimpsestic narrative. At the beginning of the book, on the second page of the *Prologue*, Zouari declares her inability to blame her mother for her past actions. Yet, in the process of declaring her neutrality and lack of rancour, she lists several ways in which her mother inflicted physical and psychological violence upon her:

Maman me battait quand j'étais petite, c'est vrai. Elle a failli me priver d'études et me vouer à la réclusion. Elle m'a greffé la culpabilité dans la peau pour être partie à l'étranger alors que les femmes de mon pays ne traversaient pas la frontière. Et quand je touche mon corps, je le découvre encore cousu de ses peurs. Mais je ne peux pas lui en vouloir. Comme s'il y avait une fatalité chez les Arabes à absoudre les mères.' (p. 12)

The use of the list suggests that Zouari has been keeping an inventory of her mother's negative behaviour towards her. The instances spill over from one sentence to the next—as if one episode of violence leads to the next in a long chain of traumatic memories. In this respect, it is difficult for the reader to believe that Zouari is incapable of *any* judgement or blame with respect to her mother's past behaviour. Indeed, her statement that 'je ne peux pas lui en vouloir' (p. 12) can be read in relation to her fear of 'les impostures du temps' (p. 54), discussed above, which may distort her memory. We get the sense that Zouari may, in this instance, seek to frame her traumatic memories of her mother within a narrative of acceptance and forgiveness. Yet this passage is notably at odds with what she has said in an

interview about her intentions regarding her portrayal of her mother. Zouari states that she seeks to ‘tailler dans le culte de la mère’ in Tunisia.<sup>533</sup> Her statement above suggests that she aligns herself with those that sanctify the institution of motherhood and place mothers above reproach. Indeed, we find tensions in the narrative between ideas of blame and forgiveness that in many ways echo her contradictory relationship to French as the language of the former coloniser. Her use of the verb ‘absoudre’ (p. 12) notably recalls her use of the verb ‘rebaptiser’ in a paratextual interview discussion of her approach to the French language in Tunisia and her desire to cleanse it of its colonial and violent history: both these verbs evoke the ideas of forgiveness and religious purification.<sup>534</sup> There are also clear parallels between these ideas and the metaphor of the palimpsest that overwrites existing narratives. Traces of anger towards, and conflict with, the mother appear beneath the surface of this palimpsestic narrative.

In the next stage of my argument, I consider the extent to which Zouari avoids confronting, and exploring, traumatic memories in her writing. In this respect, I am concerned with the extent to which objective ‘facts’ are suppressed in the storytelling, and the degree to which the narrative may in fact be a creative strategy that interweaves fact and fiction in order to avoid, repress and forget difficult memories. This tension between fact and fiction, and memory and forgetting, adds further complexity to our definition of the palimpsestic life narrative.

### **Tensions between remembering and forgetting**

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<sup>533</sup> Vanessa Herzet, ‘Fawzia Zouari en conversation avec Vanessa Herzet’ (France: Passa Porta, 2017) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wMGvoCPBFZQ>> [accessed 05/01/2022].

<sup>534</sup> ‘Rencontre avec Fawzia Zouari pour le 'Parlement des écrivaines francophones à Orléans’ (France: France 3 Centre-Val de Loire, 2018) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vLahNsO7jw>> [accessed 05/ 01/ 2022].

In the last chapter we found that Fellous employs a palimpsestic narrative strategy to evoke her situated and partial perspective on the past. In contrast to Lunt's theory of the mosaic as a metaphor for conveying francophone Tunisian women writers' retrospective gaze on Tunisian society, we found instead that Fellous's narrative comprises 'pièces détachées' or disjointed narrative elements that do not cohere in a clear picture of the past; rather, disparate memory traces overlap, converge and intersect in a textual palimpsest which evokes concealment as well as disclosure. In *Le Corps de ma mère*, we find that memory gaps and blindspots are similarly evoked in the palimpsestic structure of the text. In paying attention to the pairings of remembering and forgetting, self and other, in these texts, we might instead approach this writing vis the lens of the palimpsestic life narrative: a multi-layered, relational and transnational narrative of identity in which we find both concealment as well as exposure of memory traces.

While we have discussed tensions between different female generational perspectives in the palimpsestic text, we also find that Zouari's memory of her deceased sister, Henda, is a suppressed layer of the narrative. In the *dédicace*, Zouari writes: 'A la mémoire de ma sœur Henda, partie trop tôt.' Given that Zouari dedicates the entire novel to Henda's memory, we can infer that her death was significant for the family. From this perspective, *Le Corps de ma mère* is framed by Zouari's memory of Henda, which provides an entry-point into her palimpsestic life narrative. However, the details of her birth and death are not discussed in the narrative. In this respect, Henda is a mystery for the reader. As the author's experience of bereavement is never fully known or communicated, she suggests that this particular moment of suffering is beyond sharing.

In our discussion of *Pièces détachées* in the last chapter, we found that the mother figure was an important yet suppressed theme of Fellous's palimpsestic life narrative. Pleasant childhood memories came together in tension with more troubling memories of her

mother's mental illness. While the glamorous Hollywood poster ostensibly evoked her mother's love of film, it covered memories of suffering and loss. This narrative strategy evokes the pairing of violence and sweetness that Fellous perceives in 'le palimpseste qui est le monde.'<sup>535</sup> In *Le Corps de ma mère*, we find a similar tension between the ideas of violence and sweetness in Zouari's presentation of her childhood memories of her mother. Yet while Fellous employed text and image to convey a dialogue between pleasant and difficult memories, Zouari uses the voices of her sisters to suggest the presence of violence in her childhood. I propose that Zouari employs the voices of her three living sisters—Jamila, Noura and Souad—to convey some of the more difficult aspects of Yamna's character, particularly violent behaviour and failure to protect her daughters from the sexual advances of their uncles. This tension between the ideas of revealing and suppressing memories is notably reminiscent of our discussion of the palimpsest in the last chapter.

As discussed above, the figure of the palimpsest emerges in the superimposition and multiplication of female voices, especially with regard to Zouari's reinscription of Naïma's oral narrative. Yet, while existing scholarship on *Le Corps de ma mère* focuses on the contrast between the narrative positions of Zouari, Naïma and Yamna, the presence of the sisters' voices has been overlooked by critics. Upon a close reading of the narrative, we find that the relationship between Zouari and her sisters is of great importance. The voices of her sisters constitute further 'layers' in the palimpsestic process of the narrative. Although her elder sisters, Jamila and Noura, are openly critical of Yamna's patriarchal values and style of mothering in the narrative of *Le Corps de ma mère*, the author is deliberately vague with regard to some of the more traumatic memories of her mother. Crucially, although she briefly gestures to memories of sexual abuse and incest in her family, she is remarkably vague about

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<sup>535</sup> 'Colette Fellous interviewed on 18 September 2019 at the Institut Français du Royaume-Uni, London.'

the details of these incidents and does not comment on them. Instead, criticisms of Yamna arise via the mouthpiece of Jamila, her eldest sister:

Maman avait menacé de nous trancher la gorge si nous nous laissions aller à flirter avec un homme. Et dire que, à la maison, tout trahissait le sexe ! [...] Elle avait beau rôle de tirer sur nos robes et de coudre nos membranes. Mais, quand ses frères venaient la nuit rôder autour de nos lits, quand ils nous coinçaient derrière les portes, elle faisait semblant de ne pas voir. (p. 52)

In these quotations, Jamila refers to her mother's practice of sewing her daughters' hymens when they were children. Earlier in the text, we learn that she did this as part of a ritual to protect her daughters 'du sexe des hommes' (p. 46). As Ben Smaïl explores at length in *Vierges ? La nouvelle sexualité des Tunisiennes*, this is a practice that continues in contemporary Tunisia, with many turning to medical intervention to restore their hymens and keep them intact before marriage.<sup>536</sup> According to Marion Breteau, Tunisian women are subject to sociocultural forces that uphold virginity as the only form of socially acceptable feminine identity outside of marriage: 'Perçue comme le sceau de l'honneur, à la fois fragile et tout puissant, aux limes de la sacralité, celle-ci doit être préservée jusqu'à la nuit de noces qui célèbre le mariage. Elle est preuve de vertu et sa perte, dans un cadre non admis, c'est-à-dire en dehors du mariage, est signe d'indécence.'<sup>537</sup> Yet in the passage above, Jamila evokes her mother's hypocrisy regarding this practice designed to protect her daughters' virginites. While she does not explicitly say what her uncles did to her and her sisters in their family home, she indicates that there was sexual abuse, 'tout trahissait le sexe' (p.52), to which her mother turned a blind eye. Noura, Zouari's second eldest sister, also contributes her own memory of an attempted sexual assault from an uncle: 'Son frère Mustapha avait le chic de me surprendre chaque fois que je traversais l'oued. Je dois ma survie à la vitesse de mes

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<sup>536</sup> Ben Smaïl, p.1.

<sup>537</sup> Marion Breteau, 'Nédra Ben Smaïl, Vierges ? La nouvelle sexualité des Tunisiennes', *Lectures [En Ligne], Les Comptes Rendus*, 2014, p. 3.

jambes.’ (p. 52) Souad, Zouari’s younger sister, then exclaims ‘Mais comment un oncle peut-il désirer sa nièce ? [...] C’est incestueux !’ (p. 52) While Jamila and Noura contribute testimonies of the abuse, and Souad demonstrates her outrage and names the behaviour as incest, Zouari is notably silent on the topic.

Crucially, the author expresses no anger or resentment towards her mother in the wake of her sisters’ testimonies. As readers are denied access to the facts, they may imagine worst-case scenarios that are particular to their own imaginations. Additionally, the repressed details in the narrative may evoke the extent to which sexual abuse is still a taboo subject in Tunisia, although one that has been explored by some Tunisian writers, including Zouari herself in her earlier work of fiction: *Le Retournée*.<sup>538</sup> Indeed, as Alba argues in her study of Tunisian women’s writing in French, Zouari’s decision to deal with the issue of rape in *La Retournée* enables her to give space to women who have been raped or threatened with rape and ‘break the victim/perpetrator binary that dominates patriarchal discourse.’<sup>539</sup> Yet while Alba finds a strategy of resistance in Zouari’s earlier text to the culture of silence and shame that women are subject to in the aftermath of sexual violence, we find in *Le Corps de ma mère* that the author’s relationship to the topic of rape is less intelligible for the reader. Indeed, returning to Komyongür and Wigelsworth’s point that the palimpsest is defined by its ‘incongruous marriage’ of destruction and preservation, suppression and creation, we find that the metaphor arises here in the sense that Zouari’s opinions on the incest are absent from the text.<sup>540</sup> As the sisters’ opinions are reinscribed in the narrative, this suggests that Zouari has acknowledged them and wants her reader to do the same. However, she provides no

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<sup>538</sup> In her 2002 novel *El korssi el hazzaz* (The Rocking Chair), Amel Mokhtar describes the rape suffered by the narrator during her childhood.

<sup>539</sup> Alba, ‘The Fight for Emancipation in Tunisian Women’s Writing from Ben Ali’s Rise to Power to the Eve of the Jasmine Uprising’ (University of Leicester, 2017), p. 226.

<sup>540</sup> Komyongür and Wigelsworth, p.1.

authorial comment on their memories and, in this respect, her silence conveys self-censorship and the idea of suppressed or occluded histories in the palimpsest.

Zouari's deliberately vague narrative evokes a haunting presence of trauma that is bound up with taboo, specifically concerning sexual violence on women's bodies. Indeed, the only comment that the author provides on her sisters' testimonies relates to her surprise at Jamila's public condemnation of their mother: 'Je m'étonne de la propension grandissante de ma sœur à accabler publiquement notre mère à mesure qu'elle la sait condamnée.' (p. 52) She also writes that '[...] non seulement maman l'avait retirée de l'école, mais elle l'avait abandonnée à la merci de ses propres frères ; comme si, devant un certain instinct des hommes, maman laissait jouer insidieusement la fatalité ...'. (p. 52). The language employed here is ambiguous: although Zouari does not explain what she means by the term 'abandonner à la merci de [...]' (p. 52), the phrase possibly evokes sexual assault. The vague memory trace is arguably more insidious because of its imprecision. Moreover, the paragraph also evokes a protective narrative layer in Zouari's overreading strategy: her use of the phrase 'instinct des hommes' (p. 52) is significant as it codes the brothers' behaviour as *natural* from her mother's perspective and that of tradition. While I am not suggesting that Zouari validates her uncles' ambivalently described sexual behaviours in her narrative, her use of the term 'instinct' (p. 52) suggests her attempt to understand, and justify to the reader, her mother's permission of this sexual harassment. The metaphor of the palimpsest arises here to convey the way in which Zouari's surface narrative of acceptance—in which she is supposedly at peace with the past—ostensibly 'covers' and frames her sisters' narratives of anger and blame.

Crucially, just before Zouari introduces her memories of her sisters' discussion of the sexual assaults, she evokes the idea of avoidance in her narrative approach. Indeed, when she is covering her mother's hair with a scarf in the hospital, she does not look closely at her

body and states : '[l]orsque je retourne pour lui recouvrir la tête, j'évite le détail, de crainte que mon œil ne soit celui de l'écrivain et non celui de l'enfant qui compatit.' (p. 50) This sentence subsequently leads to her sisters' account of sexual abuse on the same page. There is a clear parallel here between the two memories: her fear of looking at her mother's body mirrors her fear of speaking about her mother's life. In this respect, while we found earlier in this chapter that Zouari overreads difficult memories of her mother, it is clear that she is also afraid of her *regard écrivain* and the objectifying power that it gives her. This notably recalls the tension that we found in Fellous's narrative between seeing and not seeing complex and traumatic family memories. While Zouari allows her sisters to voice their anger and frustration, she does not allow these emotions to infiltrate her first-person 'surface' narrative that frames the others. In maintaining narrative distance between her own speaking position and those of her sisters, she conveys a compassionate stance toward her mother and does not support her sisters' testimonies. Yet again we can think of the idea of the haunting image of Yamna's corpse being eaten by Zouari's 'charognards' that symbolise her literary project. Although Zouari seeks to know and understand her mother's life, she also suggests that some memories are out of bounds to her as a writer.

We have so far found that the figure of the palimpsest emerges in *Le Corps de ma mère* as a means to convey Zouari's overreading of multiple forms of censorship—religious, political and gendered—that seek to silence women's voices or suppress cultural diversity within Tunisia. Yet we have not yet explored the ways in which 'French' and 'Tunisian' elements come together in the palimpsestic structure of the text. While seeking to avoid constructing a binary between the two countries in my analysis, it is clear that there are neo-colonial tensions at work between Zouari, the francophone narrator, and the figure of the Arabic-speaking mother. Over the course of the narrative, Zouari refers several times to her mother's hatred of the (now former) colonisers and her disapproval of her daughter's career



as a writer who employs ‘la langue des Infidèles’ (p. 66). In order to understand the tensions at work between different levels of the palimpsestic narrative, it is necessary to consider in greater detail Zouari’s ambivalent relationship to the French language.

### **‘Le débat de deux cultures’ in Zouari’s palimpsestic narrative**

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, Zouari stated in 2018 that she seeks to mark a historical turning point in which the French language’s colonial and militaristic history in Tunisia is left in the past. Yet her reflection concerning the ‘rebaptis[me]’ of the French language is potentially problematic: the idea of baptism evokes Christian values that are more closely associated with France than Tunisia.<sup>541</sup> Additionally, we may think again here of Donadey’s association of the idea of the palimpsest and violence.<sup>542</sup> While Zouari attempts to break with the violent history of the French language, and pacify its status, her efforts to overwrite its colonial associations paradoxically recall the violence of the palimpsest that suppresses and erases.

Moreover, we find in *Le Corps de ma mère* that Zouari demonstrates her unease with the French language. Indeed, just as Fellous expressed her confused sense of childhood exile—that was rooted in her linguistic alienation from the Arabic speaking majority in Tunis—Zouari also evokes her ambivalent relationship to the French language as an indicator of her otherness. For example, when conversing with the other women in the village, she compares her use of French to adultery: ‘[Je glisse] dans les mots en français qui s’échappent involontairement de ma bouche et que je ravale très vite, comme une amante s’empresse de

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<sup>541</sup> ‘Rencontre avec Fawzia Zouari pour le ‘Parlement des écrivaines francophones à Orléans’ (France: France 3 Centre-Val de Loire, 2018) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1vLahNsO7jw>> [accessed 05/ 01/ 2022].

<sup>542</sup> Donadey, ‘Rekindling the Past’ (p. 886).

cacher une preuve d'adultère.' (p. 35) Zouari highlights here the French language's associations in her mind with betrayal but also attraction and the pleasure that comes with transgressing boundaries. It can also be read as a nod to her actual forbidden (because it was deemed exogamous) relationship with a Frenchman, an Alsatian whom she later married. The fact that the French words escape from her mouth 'involontairement' (p. 35), before she tries to swallow them, evokes the bodily discomfort—in addition to the emotional suffering—that arises from this internal conflict. She is somewhat 'tongue tied' and attempts to suppress aspects of herself in order to conform to established cultural paradigms and familial expectations. Additionally, the use of the verb 'glisser' (p. 35) reinforces the slippery nature of her identity. These ambiguities and contradictions within the text complicate readings of Zouari's narrative perspective, that we previously associated with 'overreading', and serve to demonstrate how she often exists in an ambivalent place of tension: not only between the *écrivain* and the *filles*, but also between France and Tunisia, and between French and Arabic. Indeed, as Sansal argues, an important aspect of the text is 'le débat de deux cultures'.<sup>543</sup> Although Zouari lives in France and speaks French, Sansal notes that 'il y a aussi un enracinement dans cette Tunisie profonde.'<sup>544</sup> Crucially, her position between French and Arabic, France and Tunisia, also recalls the tensions that we discussed in the life narratives by El Fani and Fellous. The ambivalent and intricate relationship between these different facets of Zouari's identity adds further complexity to the palimpsestic structure of the narrative. As with El Fani's and Fellous's narratives, there are repressed elements in *Le Corps de ma mère* that surface in the palimpsestic narrative and call into question the narrator's 'surface' overreadings and extratextual statements about the narrative and her relationship to the French language.

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<sup>543</sup> Sansal.

<sup>544</sup> Ibid.

Moreover, there is a palimpsestic quality to the way that Zouari reappropriates Yacine's well-known description of French as 'un butin de guerre': she claims that French is instead her 'butin de mère' (p. 79).<sup>545</sup> Indeed, *Le Corps de ma mère* takes the form of a quest narrative in which Zouari is attempting to discover her mother's secrets in the wake of her death. This quest is often compared to the villagers' hunt for the lost treasure of Ebba. In the narrative, we realise that Naïma is the key to the treasure, which the narrator describes as her 'butin de mère' (p. 79). As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the French language was once seen as a form of war booty—or 'butin de guerre'—during Maghrebi anticolonial movements.<sup>546</sup> Whereas Maghrebi authors have historically employed the French language either to challenge the authority of the former colonisers, or as a tool to challenge internal patriarchy and oppression by distancing themselves from the language of the Quran, Zouari wants to give new meaning to the act of writing in French in the Tunisian context. Indeed, she does not want to borrow the language for political intent but seeks to embrace it and rejoice in it as her own language. For Zouari, it is this French language, rather than Arabic, that allows for a creative path back to her mother in the wake of her death:

A partir du moment où cette langue me donne mon butin de mère, c'est-à-dire me redonne ma mère, c'est ma langue. Elle est même avant ma langue maternelle. A partir du moment où elle rend hommage à la mère où elle est fidèle à la mère, c'est ma langue. Quel que soit le continent où elle est née cette langue, quel que soit le peuple à qui elle appartient, c'est moi qui invente ma mère et la langue en même temps.<sup>547</sup>

Here, she claims her right to take ownership of the French language as '[s]a langue' in spite of the fact that it is a second language.<sup>548</sup> While she does not refer to Yacine's term, 'le butin de guerre' within *Le Corps de ma mère*, she does refer to her writing as 'mon butin de mère' at several points (e.g. p. 79). She consciously repurposes Yacine's term here in order to signal

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<sup>545</sup> See: Milkovitch-Rioux, p. 8.

<sup>546</sup> See my discussion of this on p. 13.

<sup>547</sup> RTCL.

<sup>548</sup> Ibid.

the way in which her own writing breaks with this historical stereotype regarding the status of French in the Maghreb. She claims the French language as her own because it is the language with which she can conjure up her mother in writing: '[je] peux toujours l'invoquer, exactement comme elle invoquait les esprits.' (p. 232) In this respect, the author's discovery of her creative power to evoke her mother in the French language is the real haul ('butin') that she discovers.

Yet there is notably a repressed layer in the textual palimpsest of *Le Corps de ma mère* that suggests the way in which Zouari's mother embraced the French language as a strategic gain during the era of the Protectorate. In this respect, we find a tension between the ideas of 'butin de mère' and 'butin de guerre' within the life narrative. Indeed, one of the key facts that Zouari discovers about her mother's private past is that she supported the construction of the first French language school in Ebba during the Protectorate.<sup>549</sup> Yamna's narrative (retold here by Naïma, and subsequently Zouari) suggests that French was a tool that the colonised Muslims of Tunisia could gain from their oppressors in order to advance their education and, ultimately, compete with them. In Naïma's account, we learn that Yamna declared to the leaders of the village that '[...] l'ancêtre des Cherif était venu la visiter en rêve. On lui avait appris qu'un certain Monsieur Joiffre savait lire et écrire et le saint avait répondu qu'aucune nation ne devait dépasser en savoir les musulmans.' (p. 149) In this respect, she claims that her decision was guided by her faith and desire to support the success of the colonised Muslim peoples. She cites this event as a reason for building the school, which she says should be paid for by 'les nôtres' (p. 149). Indeed, Yamna herself sold her

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<sup>549</sup> Although Yamna did not have a public-facing role in Ebba, we learn that she made many important decisions for the community from the privacy of her home. As women were forbidden from speaking in public, her verdicts were delivered by her husband or son. This was because, according to Naïma, 'en ces temps-là, il était interdit aux messieurs d'entendre la voix des dames. En principe.' (p. 16) In highlighting her mother's matriarchal power in the village, the author 'overreads' patriarchal historical knowledge and adds a further layer to the palimpsest of Tunisian history. Indeed, in contrast to patriarchal narratives of masculine public achievements, her mother becomes here the central figure of history.

jewellery to support the financing of the French school. When Béchir argues that this may lead to future generations of boys leaving the fields, Yamna states: ‘Un jour viendra où personne ne se courbera sur un épi. Alors, à défaut, envoyons les garçons apprendre autre chose.’ (p. 149) She thus recognised the opportunities that would open for the boys—albeit not the girls—in the village if they learned French. She is presented as a matriarchal figure who wanted to adopt the French language as a strategic gain from the colonisers in order to ‘assurer la survie du clan, à définir intuitivement la stratégie pour les jours à venir’ (p. 150). Ultimately, Yamna’s perception of the French language here recalls Yacine’s definition of it as ‘un butin de guerre’.<sup>550</sup>

Whereas Zouari states her intention to cleanse the status of the French language from its history of colonial violence in Tunisia, she paradoxically evokes her mother’s resistance to the violence of the colonial project. As discussed in the introduction to this thesis, Déjeux argues that the French school system helped to teach Republican values—including the Enlightenment concept of the individual—to Tunisian schoolchildren.<sup>551</sup> Yet the narrator suggests that Yamna had no intention of adopting the Republican values of the French government’s *mission civilisatrice*: although she saw the benefit of teaching French to the local boys, she did not envisage ‘un seul instant, de concéder une once de son être aux étrangers [...]’. (p. 150) Indeed, we know that Yamna ‘détestait la France’ (p. 181) and feared meeting the gaze of the only Frenchman in the village, Monsieur Joiffre: ‘Sait-on jamais ce qui pouvait arriver si elle fixait l’étranger et que la France lui subtilisait un jour l’un de ses enfants, à la manière des maladies mortelles...’ (p. 146). Indeed, in the same way that Yamna feared the gaze of the French foreigner, she also feared the idea of literature, which Zouari evokes as a further foreign territory for her mother: ‘Celui qui fait office d’écrire

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<sup>550</sup> See: Milkovitch-Rioux, p. 8.

<sup>551</sup> Déjeux, ‘Au Maghreb, la langue française « langue natale du Je »’, p. 188.

subtilise la flamme de la vie, s'installe hors du regard de la mère, en territoire étranger, avec l'intention sacrilège de dérober l'intime réfugié sous la peau des femmes.' (p. 70) The author suggests that, in encouraging the construction of the French school, her mother did not want to embrace French Republican values; rather, she wanted her tribe to benefit from the opportunities that the French language could bring to them as 'un butin de guerre'. In this respect, a paradox arises in the sense that Zouari evokes the anticolonial struggle of her ancestors in the French language (their 'butin de guerre') while also claiming that she wants to cleanse French of its associations with colonial conflict.

Upon our close reading of the narrative, we find that the complicated colonial history of the French language, and her mother's relationship to it, surfaces as a troubling layer of the palimpsestic life narrative: one that may render the 'rebaptism' of French difficult for the author as she attempts to cleanse memories of colonial violence from the French language's status in contemporary Tunisia. In reinscribing her mother's voice, via the narrative of Naïma, it is impossible for the author to bypass her family's colonial past.

## **Conclusion**

Over the course of *Le Corps de ma mère*, the metaphor of the palimpsest emerges in multiple ways: via the process of reinscribing female Tunisian oral narratives into writing; in the act of translation from Arabic to French, and in the idea of 'overreading' the mother's previously held authority, patriarchal law and rigid categories for Tunisian national identity. While Zouari seeks to write her mother's story into the palimpsest of Tunisian history, she also employs her writing project to overread difficult memories of her mother.

In this text, we notably find key similarities with the other texts we have studied: all four employ the figure of the palimpsest to convey tensions between different levels of their narratives. Additionally, the palimpsest arises from each of the texts as a means to convey the authors' distinctive challenges to a pure—and 'surface' interpretation of—Tunisian national identity. However, Zouari's text gives us an opportunity to further expand on our definition of the palimpsestic life narrative. While the dominant narrative is rooted in a subjective and factual account of the author's lived experience, other voices and fantastical elements surface in the palimpsestic process. Furthermore, the author's narrative position appears at times to merge with that of her mother's. Instead of excluding the text from the (Western-centric) genre of life narrative because of its fictional elements, and its relational status, I suggest that these complexities render the author's writing more interesting and fruitful: it calls for an alternative framework that accounts for its distinctive engagement with Tunisian contexts and oral traditions.

Furthermore, although Donadey and Silverman have previously argued that Djébar employs the figure of the palimpsest in her writing to subvert colonial narratives of Algeria and Muslim Algerian women, its inscription in Zouari's *Le Corps de ma mère* is different.<sup>552</sup> Not only does it articulate a distinctive engagement with local Tunisian contexts, particularly the rural character, oral traditions and Amazigh origins of Ebba, but it also stages an ambivalent relationship between the ideas of 'coloniser' and 'colonised' in the text. Indeed, whereas Donadey wrote that Djébar's textual palimpsest consists of a narrative in which the voices of the colonised are detectable underneath the surface colonial narratives, we find that Zouari occupies an uncertain position between the coloniser and the colonised.<sup>553</sup> In representing her mother's life story and body in the 'langue des Infidèles' (p. 66), she

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<sup>552</sup> Donadey, 'Rekindling the Vividness of the Past: Assia Djébar's Films and Fiction', p. 886; Silverman, p. 81.

<sup>553</sup> Donadey, 'Rekindling the Vividness of the Past: Assia Djébar's Films and Fiction', p. 886.

suggests that she may be complicit in constructing colonial hierarchies and neo-orientalist narratives.

In this respect, our discussion of the palimpsestic process in *Le Corps de ma mère* can be distinguished from Donadey's and Silverman's existing interpretations of the metaphor in relation to Djébar's oeuvre.<sup>554</sup> Zouari draws our attention to her uncertain position in the narrative as her surface *regard écrivain*—that objectifies the mother—is threatened by her identity as the 'fille' that seeks to cover her mother's 'corps nu' and seek her forgiveness for writing her into the language of the colonisers. We thus find a tension in Zouari's palimpsest between the ideas of covering and revealing the past, censorship and self-expression, representation and 'defacement' (recalling De Man's use of this term in relation to autobiography), self and mother, French and Arabic, and the positions of coloniser and colonised.<sup>555</sup>

Finally, while Brozgal argues that we might benefit from staying in Genette's 'tourniquet', a space where the distinctions between fact and fiction are blurred, we have found that the metaphor of the palimpsest arises from *Le Corps de ma mère* as a means to convey the ways in which fictional and factual elements are overlaid in Zouari's literary imagination. Her metaleptic crossings between different levels or layers of the narrative add further complexity to my definition of the palimpsestic life narrative. The author, as we have seen, addresses the reader—at times directly—while simultaneously keeping them at a distance. This forces a break in the seamlessness of the narrative and calls into question readers' conventional expectations, still common in regard to the genres of autobiography and life narrative, about the illusion of a referential or "real" world, in which the story of a singular "I" unfolds. Ultimately, the palimpsest is both a critical tool—a *grille de lecture*—and

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<sup>554</sup> Donadey, 'Rekindling the Vividness of the Past: Assia Djébar's Films and Fiction', p. 886; Silverman, p. 81.

<sup>555</sup> De Man (p. 926).



a figure that emerges from the text as a means to construct and express Zouari's multilayered, relational and transnational identity.

## Conclusion.

Before one can look to the present and the future, one must come to terms with the scars of the past on the palimpsest of historical discourse.<sup>556</sup>

Projecting forward and backward at the same time, a palimpsestic text is open to rereading, reinterpretation and over-writing. Looking backwards—or perhaps underneath—palimpsests recuperate memories, histories and identities. Looking forwards, the reader actively participates in reauthoring the palimpsest and in constructing new meanings. While francophone Maghrebi texts have been, in the past, narrowly interpreted by scholars in relation to outdated definitions of the genre of autobiography, pigeonholed as stories of the nation, or as ‘windows’ onto other cultures for Western readers, this thesis has contributed to an existing scholarly debate that calls for an increased focus on form and textuality in discussions of postcolonial texts. I ultimately found that the metaphor of the palimpsest provides a rich and illuminating *grille de lecture* for the life narratives by Ben Mhenni, El Fani, Fellous and Zouari. It arises from each of the texts in three important ways: in terms of their form, content and as a mode for reading their identities.

Yet while I have employed the adjective ‘palimpsestic’ to describe these life narratives across different media, my theoretical term ‘palimpsestic life narrative’ may still open more questions than it resolves in terms of how it helps to categorise the texts. In a straightforward way, the term denotes the idea layering: of different visual-verbal-or sonic media, as well as narrative perspectives and histories. However, as we discussed in the

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<sup>556</sup> Donadey, ‘Rekindling the Past’ (p. 886).

introduction to this thesis, all life narratives are in some way multi-layered in that they bring into dialogue different perspectives, and the past and present selves of narration. It is therefore important to re-affirm and clarify that the ‘palimpsestic life narrative’ is *not* a new critical term for all life narratives that include layering. Such a term would be redundant. The thesis has, however, highlighted the usefulness of the term for approaching life narratives produced within the complex postcolonial context of Tunisia.

Indeed, over the course of this research, what has struck me about the metaphor of the palimpsest is that it goes beyond the, perhaps simple, idea of layering: it also has important associations it has with ideas of violence and creation. Given the context in which the selected works were produced—encompassing the legacy of colonialism; the violence of the 2011 revolution; forms of political and social censorship, and the re-emergence of conservative political Islam—the idea of the palimpsest is a rich and illuminating framework. Because when you add to a palimpsest, you are over-reading and over-writing existing narratives and/or histories, and there is a tension at play between erasure and creation.<sup>557</sup> One of the findings of the thesis is the sense of empowerment that comes with creating life narratives. The women take control of their own representation and, in doing so, overread existing narratives of their female Tunisian identities. In adding to the palimpsest of Tunisian history, they reframe and resist narratives that have previously sought to silence them or erase or disavow their rich and diverse cultural heritage.

Moreover, the thesis has argued that the metaphor of the palimpsest can be employed as a useful model when approaching the ‘problem’ of referentiality in the genre of life narrative and its constructed character. Indeed, in the act of representing a life there is always

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<sup>557</sup> Because, if we recall Kimyongür and Wigelsworth’s rich thinking on the palimpsest, it ‘is defined by its tantalizingly incongruous marriage of the notions of destruction and suppression to those of preservation and creation.’ Kimyongür and Wigelsworth, p. 1.

also suppression of other voices, memory traces and buried histories. The model of the palimpsestic life narrative allows for this ‘problem’—the inadequacy of art to represent the ‘self’—because the figure of the palimpsest is by nature unfixed and evolving. Although other scholars have previously employed the figure of the palimpsest in their theoretical discussions of literary and filmic texts (e.g., Genette, Gilbert and Gubar, Dillon, Silverman and Donadey), this thesis has been the first study to consider the metaphor specifically in relation to the genre of life narrative.<sup>558</sup> My analyses of these Tunisian life narratives across diverse media have allowed for a development of the theory of the palimpsest in relation to this particular corpus. In particular, while Silverman’s theory of palimpsestic memory has informed my approach to the study of the presentation of lived experience in my chosen texts, I have developed it in relation to specific Tunisian contexts.<sup>559</sup> In undertaking a close analysis of *Même pas mal*; *Pièces détachées* and *Le Corps de ma mère*, I found that there are different palimpsestic tendencies to observe in relation to both content and form across the corpus. Each of the women can be seen to overread patriarchal order and rigid orthodoxies by adding their own, female-authored, life narratives to the palimpsest of Tunisian history. Additionally, we find that there are internal tensions between the narrative layers of each text, which work to produce ambiguous identities that resist interpretation and classification. Furthermore, each text contributes to a reading of Tunisian identity as uncontainable within monolithic and surface readings of national identity. Finally, I have argued that the figure of the palimpsest can be employed as a mode of reading to approach the hybrid, composite and multiple selves that are evoked across this thesis: it is a useful model for considering how a reader adds a further layer to a text as they co-author it in the process of interpretation.

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<sup>558</sup> Genette; Gilbert and Gubar; Dillon; Silverman; Donadey, ‘Rekindling the Vividness of the Past: Assia Djebar’s Films and Fiction’.

<sup>559</sup> Silverman.

One of the key questions that I addressed was the extent to which the selected Tunisian women authors enacted a process of ‘overreading’, drawing on Miller’s use of this term in relation to Western women’s writing, that is distinctive to their positioning as Tunisian women.<sup>560</sup> Indeed, this theory, which Donadey associates with the idea of a palimpsest in Djébar’s fiction, posits that women read themselves back into a patriarchal history that has excluded them.<sup>561</sup> While Miller’s theory was relevant to Western women’s texts in 1988, we found that it is not adequate for encapsulating the complexity of Tunisian women’s texts in the contemporary era. The authors in this study engage with alternative forms of (internal and external) patriarchy and locally specific forms of ‘feminism’.<sup>562</sup> However, this theory of ‘overreading’ was useful for considering how they are reflecting on their own lives, and in many cases the lives of their parents and ancestors, and inserting themselves into history.<sup>563</sup>

In the first chapter, we found that Ben Mhenni enacts a form of ‘overreading’ in the sense that she publishes her personal blog in opposition to the state censorship and silencing tactics of Ben Ali’s regime. Although state representatives had physically assaulted her, blocked her blog and tried to stop her from speaking publicly, she employed proxies to overcome the restrictions and continue to communicate with her global audience. In this respect, her blog constitutes a distinctive form of ‘overreading’ of regime censorship in Tunisia at the height of the revolution. Additionally, given that El Fani had received a *fatwa* from radical Islamists in Tunisia for her advocacy of Laïcité in her filmic work, her resistance to these threats in *Même pas mal* constitutes a further form of ‘overreading’ that is specific to the Tunisian context. In her palimpsestic life narrative, she reinscribes misogynist

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<sup>560</sup> Miller, ‘Arachnologies: The Woman, the Text, and the Critic.’, p. 292.

<sup>561</sup> Donadey, *Recasting Postcolonialism : Women Writing between Worlds*, p. 46.

<sup>562</sup> Miller, ‘Arachnologies: The Woman, the Text, and the Critic.’, p. 292.

<sup>563</sup> Miller, p. 292.

narratives and imagery in order to denounce them. In so doing, she also re-reads and re-writes the narrative of the Tunisian revolution, which she perceives has been claimed by her attackers as an Islamist revolution. In a similar manner, both Fellous and Zouari articulate their personal narratives as forms of resistance to the re-emergence of radical Islamist ideologies in the wake of the revolution. They both evoke their families' marginal histories as a way to resist these radical movements, which threaten to impose a monolithic template on Tunisian national identity.

A further intervention of the thesis is its reconsideration of Lunt's existing interpretation of Tunisian women's writing in French.<sup>564</sup> Over the course of this study, we have found that the metaphor of the palimpsest enables a more nuanced understanding of the authors' identities than Lunt's existing concept of the mosaic.<sup>565</sup> Her insistence on the ways in which the metaphor harmonises opposing fragments to create a unified 'dessin'—of both the self and society—can be questioned for two main reasons: it emphasises the shibboleth of the unified subject, which was for a time dominant in autobiography studies, and insists on the harmonious reconciliation of different cultural elements. We have found instead that the figure of the palimpsest allows us to envisage identity as a dynamic site that is composed of disparate traces and fragments; or, to borrow Fellous's title, 'pièces détachées'. These elements might be explicitly signified in the surface layers of the text or may be buried and suppressed within deeper levels of the narrative structure. Indeed, in the life narratives of Zouari, Fellous and El Fani, there are obscure elements relating to the authors' trauma and blindspots that resist narrative interpretation. The metaphor of the palimpsest evokes the confusion of the reader who is faced with the 'problem' of interpreting disparate fragments that cannot be easily pieced together or reconciled, and of locating lost or suppressed

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<sup>564</sup> Lunt, pp. 19; 179.

<sup>565</sup> Ibid.

elements. Ultimately, unlike Lunt's mosaic, which displays a unified 'whole', the multi-layered palimpsest evokes the unknowability of the other: the subject of our interpretative gaze.<sup>566</sup>

Furthermore, we found that the reader/spectator is frequently placed in an uncertain position between different layers of the palimpsestic narratives. Ben Mhenni's multilingual palimpsest deterritorialises the French language by placing it in association with English, Arabic, *Arabizi* and German. While she frequently translates the same post into each of these languages, there is a lack of consistency in this strategy. As sometimes she will just employ one or two languages to convey a message, she runs the risk of alienating readers who cannot speak those chosen languages. In this way, she destabilises her reader and thwarts their attempts to interpret and fix her identity. We found a similar palimpsestic play at work in the narratives of Fellous, Zouari and El Fani. Each of these texts conveyed tension between internal and external perspectives of Tunisia, and evoked tensions between different 'French' and 'Tunisian' layers of their identities. In *Pièces détachées*, we found that the author places the reader in a liminal position 'between' text and image, and between different possible readings of the narrative. This strategy gestured to the author's own complex and ambivalent position between different cultures and contexts of memory, and her struggle to interpret the past. Indeed, both Fellous and Zouari evoke the presence of trauma, colonial violence and buried histories in their textual palimpsests. Their life narratives resist authoritative interpretation, place the reader in a liminal position between multiple possible readings, and displace the retrospective gaze on both history and self.

Additionally, while Ben Mhenni emphasises the importance of facts and evidence when creating a life narrative in a context of heavy state-endorsed censorship and misinformation, both El Fani and Zouari create unstable self-portraits that resist definition and raise questions

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<sup>566</sup> Ibid.

about authorship. El Fani gestures to the presence of her fictional alter-ego, Kalt, while Zouari demonstrates a slippery relationship between fact and fiction in her presentation of her own—and her mother’s—life narrative. In addition, both can be seen to provide an alternative mode of postcolonial ‘writing back’: in layering factual and fictional elements in their palimpsestic texts, they leverage indeterminacy as a critical apparatus and thwart rigid interpretations of their narrative identities. They also both present their hybrid, bilingual and multivalent identities—with strong affiliations to both France and Tunisia—as a way to resist ‘pure’ and dogmatic interpretations of Tunisian national identity. Indeed, both stage their personal narratives in opposition to fundamentalist Muslim groups that threaten to silence, or erase, them.

Indeed, across this thesis I have discussed the ways in which the local and specific identities that emerge in these texts might be seen to challenge ‘surface’ readings of Tunisian national identity that negate the country’s cultural and linguistic diversity. Indeed, in the introduction to this thesis I examined the simplistic definition of national identity that is set out in the 2014 Tunisian Constitution and the extent to which it marginalises non-Muslim and non-Arabic speaking communities.<sup>567</sup> In *Palimpsestic Memory* Silverman argues for a politics of the palimpsest that would facilitate a new approach to memory and history across the lines of nation, race and culture: a ‘paradigm of hybrid and overlapping rather than separate pasts, between the particular and the universal – a ‘cosmopolitical’ memory – could serve as a model for imagining new democratic solidarities in the future across the lines of race and nation commensurate with the interconnected world of the new millennium.’<sup>568</sup> His theory notably brings to mind David-Setbon’s call for historians and writers to remember Tunisia’s

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<sup>567</sup> See my discussion of this in the introduction to this thesis.

<sup>568</sup> Silverman, p.179.



multi-layered and plural history.<sup>569</sup> In her 2017 book on Jewish memory in the Tunisian city of Kairouan, she argues that it is necessary to:

[...] faire entendre encore la réalité de la Tunisie et de son histoire dans sa diversité et participer par-là, nous l'espérons, à *l'écriture de son histoire plurielle*. Cette tâche apparaît d'autant plus nécessaire aujourd'hui que la Tunisie se trouve engagée dans un combat contre les forces et les démons qui voudraient la réduire à sa seule identité arabo musulmane, gommer la richesse des groupes de populations et des civilisations qui ont façonné son histoire, la soumettre par là à un projet totalitaire.<sup>570</sup>

I have ultimately found in this thesis that each of the texts in this corpus stages a politics of the palimpsest in relation to this distinctive post-revolution context in Tunisia. Each author narrates from a place of geographic, cultural, linguistic or gendered 'exile', borrowing Wimbush's definition of this term, and they evoke their multi-layered and transnational identities as a way to challenge (state and social) censorship of their voices, as well as rigid categories for gender and nation.

Ben Mhenni's multilingual blog is situated within a fluid digital space which allows for real-time communication with a transnational audience. I found that the digital medium provided a fertile space in which the author could articulate herself in contrast to rigid categories—internal and external to Tunisia—for Tunisian women's identities. Additionally, El Fani creates a politics of the palimpsest in her film through collage, intertextuality and the bringing together of conflicting perspectives on both 'self' and contemporary Tunisian politics. While the spectator may be tempted to interpret her narrative as providing a Eurocentric and potentially Islamophobic perspective, her evocation of the anti-Islamophobia theme of *Bedwin Hacker* calls this 'surface' reading into question. With these different layers of the filmic palimpsest that come together in tension, El Fani evokes an identity that is negotiated, evolving and uncontainable within 'pure' or surface categories for the nation.

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<sup>569</sup> David-Setbon, pp. 211-12.

<sup>570</sup> Ibid.

Fellous constructs a distinctive politics of the palimpsest in relation to the question of Tunisian identity by superimposing disparate memory traces from different contexts of extreme suffering in and beyond Tunisia. Indeed, she conveys ‘liquid’ and multi-layered presentations of both personal and collective identities. In this way, her narrative challenges the compartmentalisation of memory within the confines of nation, race or culture. In deliberately placing her reader in a liminal position between the visual and the verbal levels of the palimpsestic narrative, and between her own and her daughter’s perspectives, she displaces the authoritative and retrospective gaze and invites multiple interpretations of both ‘self’ and Tunisian history. Ultimately, Fellous’s multiple crossings between text and image, violence and ‘douceur’, and past and present, invite us to see what she terms ‘le palimpseste qui est le monde’.<sup>571</sup> In studying this work and situating it in relation to recent debates on the genre of life narrative, memory studies and contemporary Tunisian history, this thesis hopes to foster greater intercultural awareness, as well as a more nuanced appreciation for readerships in the West of Tunisia’s complex, transnational and palimpsestic history, as well as the little-known impact of the Holocaust on Tunisia’s Jewish communities.

While I have focused my study on a selection of texts from contemporary Tunisia, future scholarship could study the palimpsestic life narrative’s multiple French language iterations. For example, it would be possible to consider the extent to which the metaphor of the palimpsest emerges in life narratives from other contemporary contexts where French is spoken, including France, Algeria, Morocco, Madagascar, Guadeloupe, Vietnam and Rwanda. Additionally, a study could focus on palimpsestic tendencies in Maghrebi life narratives by both male and female authors from the twentieth century. A comparative analysis of the life narratives of Djébar, Memmi, Khatibi, Fellous, Béji, Nine Moati and

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<sup>571</sup> ‘Colette Fellous interviewed on 18th September 2019 at the Institut français du Royaume-Uni, London.’

Gisèle Halimi might allow for further development of the concept of the palimpsest in relation to the colonial and post-colonial contexts of this era.

Additionally, a timely and pressing research topic to investigate is artistic resistance in Tunisia to the oppression of LGBTQ+ individuals and communities. At present, Article 230 of the Tunisian Constitution criminalises homosexuality. Although we have touched upon El Fani's queer identity in this thesis, we found that she did not address this topic explicitly in *Même pas mal*. Future studies might situate her earlier fictional film, *Bedwin Hacker*, and its resistance to conventional gender and sexuality norms, in relation to more recent works of art and literature that address LGBTQ+ rights. In addition, future studies might draw on non-binary gender theory and widen the corpus of women's life narratives to examine works of life narrative produced by marginalised writers and artists with gender identities different to those assigned to them at birth. This would extend the debate on how to define this genre. Queer artist Moncef Zahrouni's ground-breaking art project, *TranStyX*, may provide the opportunity for a rich and illuminating study of a transidentity in contemporary Tunisian life narratives.<sup>572</sup>

Ultimately, palimpsestic life narratives exceed conventional Western definitions of the genre of autobiography as a linear, retrospective, first-person prose narrative about an author's life. They are multi-layered, transnational and relational texts in diverse media that take as their subject an author's life. Across this thesis I have observed several pairings in these palimpsestic life narratives: self and other; the particular and the universal; personal and collective memories; 'French' and 'Tunisian' identities; the visual and the verbal, and fact and fiction. In blurring the conventional boundaries between these paired ideas, and in allowing differences to resonate in both conflict and harmony, palimpsestic life narratives

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<sup>572</sup> TranStyX is an art project addressing transgenderism. The project includes a play, an art installation and a book and a series of conferences. See <https://transtyx.com/> [accessed 08/01/2022].

celebrate multiplicity and encourage us to rethink the modes through which we perceive 'self', history and collective identities. The authors' palimpsestic presentation of their memories reminds us of Tunisia's multiple pasts while facing potential futures in the post-revolution era.

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