

# Kristeva's Stranger Within: The Question of the Foreigner in Daniel Prévost's Le Passé sous silence

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This article draws on Kristeva's theories of the foreigner within the national boundaries and, together with her earlier work on the abject, considers the challenge posed by the individual who is rejected as foreign, to the boundaries which constitute collective and individual identity. With reference to Prévost's Le Passé sous silence (1998), it argues that the solutions posited by Kristeva are of limited value within contemporary French society, and concludes by considering the potential of literature as an alternative means of reconciliation with otherness.

Keywords: Kristeva, foreigner, abject, nation, France, Algeria.

With the establishment of nation-states we come to the only modern, acceptable, and clear definition of foreignness: the foreigner is the one who does not belong to the state in which we are, the one who does not have the same nationality.<sup>1</sup>

In a recent article, Sam Haigh returns to the issues raised by Julia Kristeva in her analysis of France's contemporary relationship with the foreigner, and explores how the questions surrounding the figure of the stranger exceed those proper to the non-citizen.<sup>2</sup> Her argument, in which she interrogates the position of the French

Caribbean subject, and suggests that Antillean migrants occupy a location somewhere between the ‘absolute other’ of the Arab immigrant, and the dominant, white Français de souche, or Franco-French, individual highlights the challenges in categorising national difference. Arguing that the Antillean colonies’ relative lack of rebellion has cast them in the guise of the ‘good’ colonial children of France, she suggests that, while the French Caribbean’s difference may be experienced as a threat by the (white) French person, it may also been seen as proof – as long as the Antillean continues to behave as the model colonial subject – of France’s superior civilisation and hospitality. Although she does not specifically discuss the issue, Haigh’s focus on the French Caribbean, which since departmentalisation in 1946 has produced French citizens living on French soil, highlights the fact that, whilst in Strangers to Ourselves Kristeva defines the foreigner in terms of nationality, contemporary debates around immigration in France are not limited to the status of the non-citizen. Haigh does not analyse the complexities of discourse on immigration; indeed, she elides the distinction between foreigner and citizen when she contrasts the French Caribbean subject with the conflated terms ‘Arab or beur’.<sup>3</sup> Kristeva’s definition therefore neglects the reality that the most bitterly contested ground in recent debate is not immigration per se, but concerns the second and third-generation descendants of North African immigrants, who hold French citizenship but are rejected by sections of the majority population.<sup>4</sup> The beur subject is one who is indistinguishable before the law, who enjoys the advantages of citizenship, and who therefore is seen to present a more insidious threat to the integrity of the nation because the characteristics of foreignness have been internalized. The relationship

with the foreign is now a relationship between France's body politic and its constituent parts.

The beur presents a complex intersection of foreign origins and French education, which creates a perceived challenge to notions of a unified Republican identity through the production of a distinctive, primarily urban, community that does not correspond either to French or Maghrebi categories. However, the success of beur culture in achieving mainstream recognition, realized through a combination of cultural production and political campaigns, has effectively transformed it into another established, even fixed, identity which, although far from unified, is not significantly more heterogeneous than other identity categories. The result is that, once labelled, foreignness can be contained; it becomes domesticated and familiar. In contrast, the situation analysed in this article escapes easy definition, since it concerns an individual of mixed Franco-Algerian parentage. As the son of a French mother and Algerian father, Denis, the narrator of Daniel Prévost's autobiographically inspired Le Passé sous silence (1998) inevitably faces complex questions of identity in coming to terms with his place within French society. His interstitial position, as one who is both French and foreign, produces a series of conflicts, which invite an application of Kristeva's work. An examination of her theories in conjunction with the strategies undertaken in the novel demonstrates how Kristeva illuminates our relationship with the foreign, whilst suggesting that her advocacy of psychoanalysis may be only one of a range of possible approaches in the encounter with otherness.

## The uncanny

In Strangers to Ourselves, Kristeva theorizes the position of the foreigner in the Western tradition, and asks why the foreigner within the nation's borders provokes such anxiety. She argues that through psychoanalysis we can become aware of and reconciled to our own strangeness, which inhabits us through our unconscious, and so can come to acknowledge that in some sense we are all foreigners. Psychoanalysis therefore enables us to embark on a journey towards what she calls an 'ethics of respect for the irreconcilable'.<sup>5</sup> Central to Kristeva's argument is Freud's notion of the Unheimlich, a term which has its roots in the word 'heimlich' [homely]: '[T]he anxiety can be shown to come from something repressed which recurs [...] this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression'.<sup>6</sup> However, whereas Freud originally conceived of the Unheimlich as the return of the repressed within the individual psyche, Kristeva ascribes it to the reaction of a collective when faced with the stranger within the national borders, thereby drawing parallels between the individual and the collective.

Although Kristeva's choice of the term 'uncanny' to describe the reaction to the stranger's presence initially seems unexpected, Sara Ahmed suggests that an economy of recognition operates around our relationship to the stranger: the stranger is the one whom we have always already encountered, so that 'we recognize somebody as a stranger, rather than simply failing to recognize them'.<sup>7</sup> This recognition appears to operate both as a means of maintaining distance between Self and Other, and of neutralising the threat that he might pose by placing him in a

familiar, 'known' category. Most commonly this is a temporary resolution, acceptable in the absence of a more permanent solution which Kristeva says has historically taken the form either of the destruction of the foreigner, or of his assimilation into the fraternities of 'the "wise," the "just," or the "native"'.<sup>8</sup> The foreigner is perceived as a threat, not only to the individual citizen but to the integrity and identity of the body politic, hence the need to neutralize his foreignness. For Tzvetan Todorov, this attitude results from an inability to accept the existence of difference.<sup>9</sup> According to this logic, either the Other is seen as equal and therefore as the same or identical ('égalité-identité', the logic of assimilation), or viewed as different and therefore as unequal or inferior ('différence-inégalité', the logic of slavery and massacre). Difference which cannot be assimilated – and in practice this applies to all difference, at least in colonial terms – inevitably equates to inferiority. Such disavowed ethnocentrism is at the root of the racism often experienced by foreigners.

Kristeva's description of the foreigner as 'in addition' helps to illuminate our understanding of the source of this dread.<sup>10</sup> It returns to questions about the constitution of the national community, which Benedict Anderson argued is based on an imagined, shared identification.<sup>11</sup> But while Anderson focuses on the features of nationalism which unite individuals, Kristeva is interested in what happens when the unity of the nation-state breaks down, where the presence of the foreigner creates a challenge to that national unity. Slavoj Žižek touches on similar issues when he argues that the element which holds together a given community cannot be reduced to the point of symbolic identification, for 'the bond linking together its members always implies a shared relationship towards a Thing, towards Enjoyment incarnated.

This relationship toward the Thing, structured by means of fantasies, is what is at stake when we speak of the menace to our “way of life” presented by the Other’.<sup>12</sup> The foreigner therefore embodies an excess which has been projected out of the national Thing, but which escapes and may return to threaten the boundaries which constitute identity, in what Žižek refers to as the dread of ‘the theft of enjoyment’.<sup>13</sup> The mechanism of this return of the repressed is similar to the functioning of the uncanny, albeit on a more collective scale.

However, this imagined unity is problematized by the arbitrary nature of nationality which is the determining criterion in Kristeva’s definition of the foreigner, particularly in light of the colonial argument that Algeria was not a colony but rather an integral part of la plus grande France. As the supporters of Algérie française were wont to claim, the Mediterranean flowed through France, just as the Seine flowed through Paris.<sup>14</sup> The imagined vision of French Algeria was limited in scope, since although the land was assimilated into the territory of metropolitan France in 1848, its inhabitants occupied a more ambiguous position. Unlike the residents of France’s Antillean colonies, or their piéd noir neighbours, the Arabs and Berbers of colonial Algeria were classed as French subjects, denied French citizenship until the colonial laws of 1863 and 1865, when citizenship was offered on condition that the individual renounced his Islamic identity.<sup>15</sup> Few took this step, since conversion was considered an act of apostasy. The provisional status of the migrant population which arrived in France after World War II was further demonstrated in 1962, when the advent of Algerian independence brought about the category reversal of Français musulmans resident in the Hexagon, to foreign Algériens. The historical specificity of the Algerian case therefore means that its

people, who have been both 'French' and 'foreign', provoke a reaction which is different from that of people of other nationalities in France. This is in part due to the bloody history between Algeria and France, and in part because, as a result of immigration, those people who have been French, and then foreign, now have children who are French. When she speaks of the foreigner 'whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify', Kristeva might therefore be referencing the reactions of many white French to their fellow citizens:

Confronting the foreigner whom I reject and with whom at the same time I identify, I lose my boundaries, I no longer have a container, the memory of experiences when I had been abandoned overwhelm me, I lose my composure, I feel 'lost', 'indistinct', 'hazy'.<sup>16</sup>

The threat posed by the uncanniness of the foreigner to those borders which constitute identity is commonly seen in terms of national boundaries. However, here Kristeva figures the challenge in individual terms, where the boundaries which become blurred are those which maintain individual identity.

### The abject

The formulation of the foreigner's challenge to individual identity is reminiscent of Kristeva's earlier work on the abject, which considers the process by which the self is constituted through differentiation from the mother's body, which the child comes to find both fascinating and horrifying.<sup>17</sup> As the first stage in subject formation, the mother's body is not yet an object for the child but, as an abject, it is something opposed to the child's 'I'.<sup>18</sup> The abject is therefore intimately linked to the maternal, and to the process of identity formation and maintenance. While this occurs at the

level of individual subjectivity, by drawing on Mary Douglas and her work on defilement and social ritual, Kristeva argues that the process can also operate at a collective level.<sup>19</sup> Defilement, particularly that issuing from the feminine (menstrual blood), indicates the danger emanating from within social and sexual identity. As a recurring trigger of abjection, it must be continually contained and kept at a distance.

The abject therefore shares certain characteristics with the uncanny, in that it is repressed only to recur periodically when triggered by some external stimulus. Kristeva describes the effect of its return in terms similar to that of the uncanny: ‘A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome’.<sup>20</sup> Given the significance of the maternal for the abject, it is also notable that Freud connects the Unheimlich to the maternal in the form of the uncanny strangeness experienced by men when faced with the female genitals; according to Freud, this is because ‘this unheimlich place (...) is the entrance to the former heim [home] of all human beings, to the place where everyone dwelt once upon a time and in the beginning’.<sup>21</sup> However, in defining the abject Kristeva is clear that the two terms cannot be conflated: ‘Essentially different from “uncanniness”, more violent, too, abjection is elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory’.<sup>22</sup> As we shall see, the notion by which individuals find themselves unable to ‘recognize their kin’ is exactly that experienced by the mother of Prévost’s narrator. Eligible for dual nationality, the narrator is far from the foreigner whom Kristeva has in mind in Strangers to Ourselves, yet through abjection he struggles with the boundaries which constitute identity on both an individual and collective basis.



Positing a relationship between abjection and the boundaries of individual and collective identity enables us to look at the effects of abjection on the individual who embodies the excess of the (Algerian) foreigner, but within the citizenship of the (French) nation. It draws on Kristeva's notion of the foreigner as one who has suffered the loss of mother, of motherland, and often of mother tongue, and so endures the consequences of abjection on a personal level. On another level, however, the individual represents the excess and foreignness of Algeria within French society, a foreignness which provokes a violent reaction because it represents the return of the repressed, the return of what was familiar because Algeria was once a part of la plus grande France, before the brutal separation of Independence. The individual therefore threatens the boundaries of national identity, and must endure the consequences of being abjected.

Kristeva defines the abject subject as 'what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'.<sup>23</sup> It is a description which corresponds exactly to the experience of the narrator of Le Passé sous silence, Prévost's second novel inspired by events in his own life.<sup>24</sup> The novel is narrated by Denis, a Parisian journalist and writer who discovers in his thirties that his father was not French, but Algerian. Faced with his mother's silence, he struggles to discover more about this absent figure, who died when his son was still young. While this and Prévost's earlier novel, Le Pont de la Révolte, share similarities, each featuring a narrator of Franco-Algerian parentage, there are significant differences in the experiences and relationships related in each text.<sup>25</sup> It is therefore productive to disengage the present novel from its autobiographical roots, and treat it as a fictionalised account of events. It opens with

the presentation of what will become the narrative's pivotal moment: the receipt on Denis's fifty-sixth birthday of a postcard from his mother Louise, in which she accuses him of being 'the offshoot of a rotten root' (13) (l'issue d'une racine pourrie). The trigger for her venomous words, which haunt her son, is Denis's insistence on discovering the truth about his father, which has led him to contact members of his father's Algerian family, and to publish a novel telling his story. As a result of her rejection, Denis has to come to terms with the foreignness in his life on a number of levels: firstly, the discovery, in his mid-thirties, that he is not who he thought he was, or that, at least, the Frenchness on which his identity was based is spliced with a foreignness of which he knows nothing; and secondly, in terms of his immediate social context, he has to deal with the rejection from his mother and her traditional Norman family, who have always known and despised his origins. He must also forge a new place in society at large which can accommodate his new, more complex identity. Kristeva's work on the abject is useful in theorising these questions although, as we shall see, it is perhaps less successful in offering any solution.

### The abject(ed) mother

Given the inner turmoil and cultural conflict which frequently feature in autobiographical texts by beur authors, the ease with which Denis adapts to the news of his mixed origins is striking. Painfully conscious of his father's absence, the discovery of his Algerian origins and culture is welcomed as a father-substitute. Fascinatingly, Denis does not struggle with the complexities of being both French

and Algerian (or Kabyle, as he prefers to see himself), but embraces certain aspects of Kabyle culture (food, music, time spent with his Algerian family) which do not compromise his Parisian identity and allow him to continue to enjoy the status of a cosmopolitan journalist. This suggests that his transition to a Kabyle identity is facilitated by the professional status and respect which he already enjoyed when he discovered his paternal origins.

Indeed, as the opening of the novel suggests, Denis's biggest issue is his mother. Louise Drancourt had a love affair with Mohand Aït-Salem when she was young, but with pressure from her disapproving, indeed racist, family, she refused him access to the young son who resulted from their liaison. Since marrying Raymond, Denis's hated step-father, she has refused all references to the past and insists that Raymond is Denis's only father. Her difficult relationship with Denis is caused by her repression of the past, a past which returns to trouble her each time she sees her son, and poisons her relationship with him.

In Kristevan terms, then, it becomes evident that Louise has sought to separate herself from the relationship with Mohand which she now sees as unsuitable and disgusting. Since the affair threatened her identity as the daughter of a good family, she has repressed the memory of it. Denis, however, is the embodied evidence of the event, and his appearance, with its foreign element, functions as the abject for his mother, disrupting her carefully constructed version of reality. Had it not been for her son, Louise's attempts to bury the past might have been successful; in the event it is her status as mother which is the source of her dread of the foreign. As Kristeva maintains, '[The] fear of the archaic mother turns out to be essentially fear of her generative power'.<sup>26</sup> In this context, her contention holds true, although

on reading it we might not have anticipated that the fear would reside within the mother.

Louise is fully implanted in a patriarchal discourse which sees sexual relations between a French woman and an Algerian man in colonial terms, as a threat to established order.<sup>27</sup> The presence of her son, a reminder of the uncertain border between the maternal body and the child, which is reminiscent of the blurred border between French citizen and French subject, forces her to endlessly re-establish the separation required to maintain her chosen identity. As Kristeva, drawing on Douglas, makes clear, the threat to order and identity often comes through liminal elements: vomit, shit, blood, decay, bodily matter. It is in these terms that Louise conceives of her son, his father, and the whole Algerian people, as ‘the offshoot of a rotten root’, a phrase which opens and closes the novel (13; 240; 241). As a result, she must constantly re-establish the threatened boundaries, presenting Raymond, the replacement father, as a ‘healthy root’ to be grafted in place. When this fails, she begins to effect a separation from the one she has abjected, telling Denis’s wife, Hanna: ‘I will be happy the day that I no longer see Denis. I’ll know that he is fine, and that will be enough!’ (160) (Je serai heureuse le jour où je ne verrai plus Denis. Je saurai qu’il va bien et ça me suffira!).

#### The abjected stranger: filth and dirt

Forced to deal with the consequences of being abjected by his mother, Denis internalizes her attitude of contamination: ‘I was soiled’ (21; cf. 27) (J’étais souillé). The lies and revulsion of his mother, to whom he is linked by a history of maternal

fluids, create a sense of defilement which threatens to overwhelm his sense of self. Abjected by her, he repeatedly abjects in response. The repugnance that he feels towards his mother and stepfather recurs throughout the text – ‘I am the offshoot of a sickening family’ (145) (Je suis issue d’une famille à vomir); ‘We took leave of Louise and Raymond (...) I wanted to vomit with disgust’ (203) (Nous prîmes congé de Louise et Raymond (...) J’avais envie de vomir de dégoût) – but as the child in the relationship, he struggles to establish his independence from the mother. Despite the violence of his feelings, Denis cannot either voice them or translate them into action which would achieve the separation from his mother. He is therefore left unable to articulate his individuality or affirm his subjectivity. For both Lacan and Kristeva, the necessary separation of the mother-child dyad is achieved through the father, who intervenes in the imaginary relationship between mother and child. The child learns that it cannot be the mother’s Phallus, the object of her desire and her gratification, because the presence of the father signals that the mother desires the father, an object of desire which is not the child.<sup>28</sup> Consequently the child begins to realize that it cannot be everything to the mother. The intervention of the father between mother and child is the Law of the Father.

In her discussion of this process, Kelly Oliver adds that it takes place ‘even if the father is not around’, because of the child’s intuition that in order for it to have been conceived, the mother must once have desired the father.<sup>29</sup> However, in the case of Denis, the Law of the Father has not been adequately asserted, for not only has the father been absent, but Louise has consistently refused to speak of him, producing a space of absence and silence. It is years before Denis is able to discover his father’s name: Lacan’s ‘Name/No of the Father’ is a literal absence for him. As a

consequence, the separation of mother and child is partial, achieved through the Law of the Mother, who finds herself abjecting the child whose presence she both loves and reviles. Denis is left with a single parent who becomes the focus of the emotions normally attributed to mother and father. He sees her Law of the Mother – ‘la mère castratrice’ (229) – as performing the function of castration, as if to punish him for the crime of desiring the father. He imagines her reading about his search for his father in his book, Saint-Denis-la-Révolte, and then tearing its pages and cover:

The photo of Denis is intact. With surgical precision, she tears her son’s face from the forehead down. Suddenly she has an idea, she will use the scissors to cut up his face of shame – shame that he inflicted on her by his birth, and again in the present. She (...) grabs the scissors and pierces the eyes of Denis her son. She puts his eyes out. (90)

(La photo de Denis est intacte. Avec la précision d’un chirurgien, elle déchire le visage de son fils à partir du front. Soudain il lui vient une idée, elle va l’entailler à coupes de ciseaux, ce visage de honte – honte qu’il lui a fait subir par sa naissance, puis à présent. Elle (...) s’empare de la paire de ciseaux et transperce les yeux de Denis son fils. Elle lui crève les yeux.)

The passage is imagined by the narrator: it is a reflection of the emotions which Denis imputes to his mother. The blinding is a classic symbol of the fear of castration, indicating Denis’s anxiety that, rather than creating a child capable of independence, Louise intends to neutralize the potential of her son.

Kristeva’s solution to the problem of foreignness

Although Strangers to Ourselves and Nations without Nationalism were written in the context of social disquiet regarding the very issues of integration which feature in Prévost's novel, Kristeva's depiction of the foreigner is strangely ahistorical. Her appeal to psychoanalysis, which illuminates the otherness within each of us and so transforms us all into strangers, neglects the lived realities of today's migrants, exiles and refugees. By directly comparing the situations of 'a Maghrebian streetsweeper riveted to his broom [and] an Asiatic princess writing her memoirs in a borrowed tongue',<sup>30</sup> she elides the economic differences which historians of immigration have argued are a major factor in the violence experienced by migrant workers, and glosses over diversity in favour of the argument that, since Freud's discovery of the unconscious, we are all foreigners now.<sup>31</sup>

By contrast, Prévost emphasizes the heterogeneous experiences of foreigners by juxtaposing Denis's treatment at the hands of his family with that experienced by his Danish wife, Hanna. The inclusion of a blonde, blue-eyed, European female underscores the ambivalence of the foreign and highlights the diverging reactions on the part of the Franco-French characters, in particular Denis's step-father Raymond. While Denis's foreignness provokes repulsion, Hanna finds herself the reluctant object of Raymond's lascivious attention: 'See, nordic girls, they're hot for it. They're sexually liberated, it's handy!' (72). ('Remarque, les filles nordiques, elles ont pas froid aux yeux. Elles sont libres sexuellement, c'est commode!'). By brushing aside the material specificities of the foreigner's experience in favour of an emphasis on the outcome promised by psychoanalysis, Kristeva neglects the need for the individual foreigner to address and overcome the immediate obstacles with which she is confronted. She therefore opens herself to accusations that, by privileging the

psychic over the conflict in social relations, she is reducing material oppression to issues of psychology. As Ewa Ziarek argues, such reductionism risks aestheticising the problem of political violence.<sup>32</sup>

This objection notwithstanding, Kristeva does offer a model of respect for difference which, if achievable, would transform social relations. In proposing her solution, she appeals to political sociology, and the cosmopolitan Enlightenment philosophy of Montesquieu, whose thought she presents as modern and universalizing. She advocates a return to the notion of an esprit général, based on the notion that each culture produces a distinctive behaviour, in which citizenship becomes a relative question, of confederates rather than citizens. According to this view, the esprit général represents a totality within which specificity and difference can take their place as part of a greater whole, without being repressed or assimilated. With foreignness abolished, this cosmopolitan community would produce, as Kristeva says, ‘an understanding between polyphonic individuals, respectful of their mutual foreignness’ (*une entente entre des êtres polyphoniques, respectueux de leurs étrangetés réciproques*).<sup>33</sup> In this way Kristeva addresses one of the fundamental questions of French nationhood, and one which is central to her project of the relationship between foreigners and the state in which they find themselves, namely, the contradiction contained within the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, which restricts universal freedoms to members of the nation. Kristeva is aware of this irony: ‘Never has democracy been more explicit, for it excludes no one – except foreigners...’.<sup>34</sup> In contrast, she draws attention to the cosmopolitan aspect of Montesquieu’s writing, which highlights the interdependence of nations:



We should note this observation, astonishing for its modern tone: ‘Europe is no more than a Nation made up of several others, France and England need the richness of Poland and Muscovy as one of their Provinces needs the others; and the State that thinks it increases its power through the downfall of its neighbor, usually weakens along with it’.<sup>35</sup>

However, despite Montesquieu’s cosmopolitanism, Kristeva sees a specifically French quality to his thought. ‘I should like to argue that the nation as esprit général [...] is one of the most prestigious creations of French political thought’,<sup>36</sup> she states, while elsewhere we find that ‘this common denominator which is the basis of the Republic (...) is our symbolic antidepressant’ (ce commun dénominateur qui fait le sol de la République (...) est notre antidépresseur symbolique).<sup>37</sup> Kristeva sees immigrants and foreigners as linked both to the cause of France’s contemporary depression (through the lost ideal of national unity linked to the colonial past, of which the current debate around immigration and integration is a constant reminder), and to its cure, since psychoanalysis advocates learning to live with (inner) alterity. She hints at this in her discussion of Montesquieu, arguing that where the rights of man are privileged beyond the rights of the citizen, ‘the obliteration of the very notion of “foreigner” should paradoxically encourage one to guarantee a long life to the notion of... “strangeness”’.<sup>38</sup> Referring to the use of the psychoanalytic as a model for the nation, Sam Haigh shows that, for Kristeva, a relationship with the immigrant as other offers a privileged means through which a national sense of self can begin to be re-established in France.<sup>39</sup> The foreigner therefore becomes central to the troubled nation, no longer a source of division, but of reconciliation with self. This requires a radical reversal of thought, to conceive of the marginal as the potential cornerstone on which a national sense of self can be

built. As Haigh shows, the process is structured on the transference relationship between the analyst and analysand, providing the depressed nation with an other in relation to whom a sense of self can be constructed. Were this process to prove possible, it would offer a fundamental means of resolution of the intractable problems raised by immigration in France.

Nevertheless, when applied in practice there are difficulties with Kristeva's theory. On an ethical level it presents certain issues for, as a consequence of this process, the immigrant ceases to be a subject, and becomes simply a tool which facilitates the recovery of the French subject. Kristeva offers no comment on the neo-colonial overtones of this manoeuvre, despite the colonial origins of a majority of France's immigrants. Moreover, as I have argued, her emphasis on the need for the foreigner to achieve psychic reconciliation in the face of material oppression is problematic, and appears even more so if, as she suggests, the renewal of the French nation is dependent on the foreigner's success. In Nations without Nationalism, Kristeva questions the extent to which the Franco-French population is aware of the notion of the Republic's esprit général; elsewhere she not only questions awareness amongst the majority populace, but highlights the need for Montesquieu's model to be reconstructed through schools and programmes initiated by political parties and the media.<sup>40</sup> If her assessment is correct and there remain only faint traces of the esprit général within the Hexagon itself, a dependence on foreigners being aware of and therefore able to enact successfully the esprit général appears unrealistic. She claims that it is time to ask immigrants what motivated them to choose the French community, with its historical memory and traditions, as their new country; however, her assumption that there is a motivating factor beyond the economic opportunities

and knowledge of French provided through the colonial relationship (which she acknowledges) appears overly optimistic.<sup>41</sup> Why should immigrants be motivated by an historical memory and traditions which are not theirs, and which, moreover, have been so dissipated that organized programmes which would restore the nation's cultural heritage are required even for the Franco-French?

Moreover, the efficacy of Kristeva's approach is questionable when applied to the situation of the abject 'foreigner', Denis. Firmly implanted in the French intellectual establishment, there is no question of Denis refusing to integrate, as Kristeva suggests may be the case for certain foreigners. His foreignness is only evident to those members of his immediate family who are aware of his Algerian roots. Following Todorov, their racism can be read as stemming from the belief that (colonial) difference equates to inferiority; the fact that Denis's foreignness is not visible, and that he himself is integrated, only makes him a more insidious threat. Denis's family therefore represents those sections of the French population which Kristeva identifies as being unaware of or disregarding the notion of Montesquieu's esprit général. However, the challenge to Kristeva's project may lie in the difficulties inherent in persuading French nationals of the need for a change in their attitudes. Their racism is based on an ethnocentric confidence in French superiority; for them, any change must take the form of neutralising, not to say destroying, the perceived source of difference.

Indeed, having accepted foreignness once, Louise in particular seems determined not to repeat her mistake. Her attitude towards Algerian difference can be seen as symbolic of the general feeling within French society towards Algeria: the historic move to welcome and incorporate difference offered by France's civilising

mission having been violently rejected, sections of French society now refuse all attempts at reconciliation, viewing representatives of Algerian difference as part of a fifth column. In a context where change is conceptualized as weakness, Kristeva's approach may have little appeal in the face of the stubborn resistance of deep-rooted racism. Indeed, the fact that 'foreigners' have integrated themselves into French society to the point that, in legal terms at least, they are indistinguishable from other French citizens, is in itself justification for 'Franco-French' citizens to reinforce the boundaries which they perceive to be under threat. The resulting notions of threat, contamination, and expulsion simply re-enact the mechanisms of the abject. It would appear, therefore, that while Kristeva's theories serve to illuminate the situation facing 'foreigners' in France, whether official, second generation, or of mixed parentage, they function more as descriptors than as possible sources of resolution. In the case of Prévost's novel, the difficulties which exist around the abject, both in relation to individual conflict, and on the level of conflict between individual and social context, remain unresolved, albeit more clearly illuminated. However, since Prévost does not abandon his protagonist in this predicament, a reading of the strategies employed by Denis may prove instructive in suggesting a possible means of resolution.

### Writing reconciliation

Louise's denial of crucial areas of her son's life fundamentally curtails his ability to express his sense of self; within his family Denis is forbidden to talk about his father or his Algerian origins. According to Kristeva, abjection and separation from the

mother are required in order to enter the linguistic realm of the Symbolic, but Louise's power stifles this process. Denis can therefore speak out only at the cost of crippling guilt, as when he tries to tell Louise about his holiday in Algeria:

I started my sentence softly, watching my delivery, my words, all the while feeling this uncontrollable anguish rising in my chest, born of my guilt at having transgressed the imposed law of silence. 'Oh! We saw lots of things, landscapes, lots of people'.  
(44)

(Je commençai doucement ma phrase, surveillant mon débit, mes mots, tout en sentant resurgir en ma poitrine cette incontrôlable angoisse, née de ma culpabilité d'avoir transgressé la loi du silence imposé. 'Oh! nous avons vu beaucoup de choses, de paysages, beaucoup de gens'.)

Nonetheless, despite the cost Denis persists in his struggle, driven by the need to speak in order to affirm his existence. Language is a prerequisite for his subjectivity, and he continues to struggle against his mother's domination.

Literary production provides his primary strategy for exploring and developing his own sense of identity. In The Grain of the Voice Barthes speaks of the way in which the act of writing is a bodily act, linked to corporeal drives, controls and rhythms which in turn shape the narrative that is created.<sup>42</sup> By creatively imagining the psychic consequences of maternal rejection, which are manifested as physical affect within his protagonist's narrative, Prévost suggests that it is in the bodily sensations of defilement that Denis's writing project is formed. Denis's experience of abjection shapes his narratives, and offers his readers the opportunity to encounter in a literary, even phenomenological, sense texts which are imbued with the strangeness of his experience. His novel within the novel functions as a mise en abyme, which involves us as readers in a process of doubling. The fictional character

offers his fictional readers an encounter with prose inflected by otherness, with abjection presented in literary form. While we do not have access to Denis's text, his narrative functions as our fictional text, marked by abjection, in which we encounter the strangeness of the foreigner. Through his creative imagining of his character's experience and response, Prévost introduces otherness into his text, and with it, an ethical dimension to the debate around the stranger, which raises questions about the implications for us as readers of his text. In considering the nature of our literary encounter, we return to fundamental questions about what constitutes literature.

Jean-Paul Sartre and Jacques Derrida, amongst others, have questioned the specificity of literature and concluded that there is, in the totality of the literary text, something which escapes and exceeds the individual signification of the words which constitute it.<sup>43</sup> Derrida talks of literary writing in terms of its openness to difference: for him it is characterized by an inventiveness which destabilizes the existing order, and challenges the boundaries of our preconceptions as readers:

This writing is liable to the other, opened to and by the other, to the work of the other; it works at not letting itself be enclosed or dominated by the economy of the same in its totality.<sup>44</sup>

Derrida is concerned here with the potential of literature, which offers a privileged site in which the reader can encounter what is strange and other. As Derek Attridge observes, in the individual act of reading otherness enters the reader's world through the inventiveness of writing, bringing with it the potential to alter momentarily the reader's views.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, he suggests a link between the otherness of the 'stranger', which Kristeva discusses, and the otherness identified by Derrida which we encounter through inventive literature:

to the extent that I apprehend the ‘already existing other’ in the form of a person it is not other: I recognize the familiar contours of a human being, which is to say I assimilate him or her to my existing schemata of understanding (...) but these are responses to the person not as singular individual but as (generic) person (...) It is in the acknowledgement of the other person’s uniqueness, and therefore of the impossibility of finding general rules or schemata to account fully for him or her, that one can be said to encounter the other as other.<sup>46</sup>

The literary representation of the individual foreigner thus exposes the reader to the experience of a singular otherness. For Sartre, literature which is open to otherness calls for an ethical response from the reader, a reaction which he calls ‘générosité’.<sup>47</sup> In the act of reading the literary representation of abject strangeness, the reader is brought close to the experience of otherness, and is prompted, but not compelled, to respond in a direct and personal sense to the foreigner who threatens the integrity of national identity. This suggests that the privileged relationship between literature and otherness is what attracts Denis to seek a resolution to his personal difference through writing.

As a means of reconciliation with the seemingly irreconcilable, as represented by the foreigner who is not a foreigner, neither French nor Algerian, literature therefore offers a potential alternative to Kristeva’s advocacy of psychoanalysis. Indeed, speaking of the need for a discourse on the ‘national’ that does not descend into racism whilst still respecting difference, she suggests that psychoanalysis, philosophy and literature, which she refers to as ‘a defense of the dignity of the strange’, may all have a contribution to make in helping us to accommodate singularity and otherness.<sup>48</sup> This is to be welcomed: since the issues posed by the ‘foreigner’ within France’s national borders remain pressing it seems likely that a

number of strategies will be required, of which writing is merely one. Indeed, Denis himself enters psychoanalysis at the end of Le Passé sous silence. However, since many of the majority population undoubtedly bear a closer resemblance to Louise, with her refusal to acknowledge any need for change, than to Denis, regardless of its merits psychoanalysis may not offer a solution for many. Through this and other novels, then, literature offers one means of enabling the reader to encounter and welcome otherness, allowing it to reshape what is known and familiar. By letting literature alter our preconceived categories in this way, we as readers also allow it to challenge our conceptions of ourselves. In addition to addressing the issue of the stranger within the national boundary, therefore, it seems that writing might offer a path towards what Kristeva calls an ‘ethics of respect for the irreconcilable’, encouraging us to welcome and respect the stranger that is within each of us.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Julia Kristeva, Strangers to Ourselves, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 96.

<sup>2</sup> Sam Haigh, ‘Migration and Melancholia: From Kristeva’s “Dépression nationale” to Pineau’s “Maladie de l’exil”’, French Studies, 60 (2006), 232–50. Beur is a term frequently used to refer to the French-born descendants of immigrants from North Africa.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Migration and Melancholia’, 239.

<sup>4</sup> Kristeva addresses France’s situation directly, in terms consistent with Strangers to Ourselves, in Nations Without Nationalism, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Strangers to Ourselves, 182.



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- <sup>6</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"', Collected Papers, edited by Joan Rivière (London: Hogarth, 1950), IV, 368–407 (394).
- <sup>7</sup> Sara Ahmed, Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), 21 (emphasis in original).
- <sup>8</sup> Strangers to Ourselves, 2.
- <sup>9</sup> Tzvetan Todorov, The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other, translated by Richard Howard (Norman: Oklahoma University Press, 1999), 42.
- <sup>10</sup> Strangers to Ourselves, 4.
- <sup>11</sup> Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism (London: Verso, 1991).
- <sup>12</sup> Slavoj Žižek, Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 201.
- <sup>13</sup> Tarrying with the Negative, 203; 206.
- <sup>14</sup> Margaret A. Majumdar, Postcoloniality: The French Dimension (Oxford and New York: Berghahn, 2007), xxv.
- <sup>15</sup> The Jewish population of Algeria was accorded French citizenship under the Décret Crémieux of 1870, only to be stripped of it by Vichy in 1940.
- <sup>16</sup> Strangers to Ourselves, 187.
- <sup>17</sup> Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection, translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).
- <sup>18</sup> Powers of Horror, 1.
- <sup>19</sup> Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo (London: Routledge, 1966).
- <sup>20</sup> Powers of Horror, 2.
- <sup>21</sup> 'The "Uncanny"', 398–9.
- <sup>22</sup> Powers of Horror, 5.
- <sup>23</sup> Powers of Horror, 4.
- <sup>24</sup> Daniel Prévost, Le Passé sous silence (Paris: Denoël, 1998). Translations of the novel are the author's own, and subsequent page references are given in the text.
- <sup>25</sup> Daniel Prévost, Le Pont de la Révolte (Paris: Denoël, 1995).
- <sup>26</sup> Powers of Horror, 77.

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- <sup>27</sup> While the evolution of Louise's relationship with Mohand is unclear, there is no suggestion that their liaison was anything other than consensual.
- <sup>28</sup> Jacques Lacan, Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the École Freudienne, edited by Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, translated by Jacqueline Rose (London: Macmillan, 1982), 83.
- <sup>29</sup> Kelly Oliver, Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-bind (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press: 1993), 22.
- <sup>30</sup> Strangers to Ourselves, 9.
- <sup>31</sup> Gérard Noiriel, 'French and Foreigners', in Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past, volume 1, under the direction of Pierre Nora, edited by Lawrence D. Kritzman, translated by Arthur Goldhammer, 3 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 145–80 (152).
- <sup>32</sup> Ewa Ziarek, 'The Uncanny Style of Kristeva's Critique of Nationalism', *Postmodern Culture*, 5.2 (1995) [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern\\_culture/v005/5.2ziarek.html/](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/postmodern_culture/v005/5.2ziarek.html/), consulted 15 August 2006, (para. 6 of 28).
- <sup>33</sup> Julia Kristeva, Contre la dépression nationale: entretien avec Philippe Petit (Paris : Textuel, 1998), 77; translation by the author.
- <sup>34</sup> Strangers to Ourselves, 149.
- <sup>35</sup> Montesquieu, Réflexions sur la monarchie universelle in Oeuvres complètes, vol. 2, edited by Roger Caillois, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1985), 34, quoted in Strangers to Ourselves, 130.
- <sup>36</sup> Nations Without Nationalism, 57.
- <sup>37</sup> Contre la dépression nationale, 99; translation by the author.
- <sup>38</sup> Strangers to Ourselves, 132.
- <sup>39</sup> 'Migration and Melancholia', 237.
- <sup>40</sup> 'Julia Kristeva, 'What of Tomorrow's Nation?' in Nations without Nationalism, 47; 'Open Letter to Harlem Desir' in Nations without Nationalism, 59.
- <sup>41</sup> 'Open Letter to Harlem Desir', 60.
- <sup>42</sup> Roland Barthes, The Grain of the Voice: Interviews 1962–80, translated by Linda Coverdale (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984).
- <sup>43</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, What is literature?, translated by Bernard Frechtman (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 32; Jacques Derrida, 'Psyche: Invention of the Other' in Psyche: Inventions of the Other, translated by Peggy Kamuf and Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 1–47.
- <sup>44</sup> 'Psyche: Invention of the Other', 46.

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<sup>45</sup> Derek Attridge, The Singularity of Literature (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>46</sup> The Singularity of Literature, 32–3.

<sup>47</sup> What is Literature?

<sup>48</sup> 'Open Letter to Harlem Desir', 51.