Siting the Periphery: Representations of Space in the Contemporary French Basque Novel

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SITING THE PERIPHERY: REPRESENTATIONS OF SPACE
IN THE CONTEMPORARY FRENCH BASQUE NOVEL

by

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has been approved by the Department of French and Italian

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Find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards
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Whiteman, Caroline (Ph.D., French Literature)

Siting the Periphery: Representations of Space in the Contemporary French Basque Novel
Thesis directed by Professor Warren Motte

My dissertation explores the dynamic but often overlooked peripheral literature of the French Basque Country, examining the different ways in which space is represented in the contemporary novels of that region. In four chapters focusing on physical, literary, linguistic and narratological spaces, my analysis examines on the work of four authors from Bayonne: Itxaro Borda, Marie Darrieussecq, Marie Cosnay, and Xabi Molia. Using a variety of novels by these four authors, I examine some of the diverse approaches they have taken to those spaces in their work. At the same time, however, their work also exhibits certain shared characteristics, such as an emphasis on innovation, the desire to challenge convention and blur boundaries, and an interrogation of concepts like identity and the periphery. All four authors question the need to define and categorize, embracing movement and change and, ultimately, raising some important questions: What is space? What is the periphery? What does it mean to be Basque? Like Borda, Darrieussecq, Cosnay, and Molia, I do not endeavor to provide definitive responses, but rather to examine the ways in which the four authors from Bayonne explore those questions through the representations of space in their dynamic and innovative work.
I am grateful to my parents for their love, support, and encouragement, and for believing in me. I would also like to thank Warren Motte, for his invaluable support and guidance as a mentor. It was his class that sparked my interest in contemporary literature, and working with him has taught me a great deal about language, literature, and writing. Warren has opened many doors for me and he also introduced me to several of the authors whose work is the subject of this dissertation. Additional thanks go to Itxaro Borda, Marie Darrieussecq, Marie Cosnay, and Xabi Molia, who graciously allowed me to interview them and were willing to discuss their texts with me. I would like to thank all of my committee members, as well, and everyone in the Department of French and Italian at the University of Colorado. I am grateful to my friends, for their moral support and for understanding the dissertation process, and to my brothers for their enthusiastic encouragement.
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Introduction

For many people, the phrase “contemporary French literature” brings to mind the work of a handful of well-known authors, generally located in Paris and, more often than not, published by one of the major Parisian houses like Gallimard, P.O.L or the Éditions du Seuil. However, as one may well imagine, this limited sampling represents only the tip of the iceberg. A more thorough examination reveals the existence of several vibrant and dynamic literary peripheries in France, including that of the French Basque Country, which I have chosen as the subject of my dissertation.

Peripheral literature, also referred to as regional literature at times, has become a vital source of innovation, and a catalyst for literary regeneration that we cannot afford to ignore. Nevertheless, perhaps as a result of France’s longstanding tradition of centralization, the literature of the periphery is often considered to be less prestigious than that of the Parisian center, and some critics would go so far as to call the literary periphery inferior. Indeed, many authors feel that writing from the periphery inevitably confers the stigmatized label of “regional author,” a pejorative classification that can impose certain limits on the direction and amplitude of an author’s career. For that reason, some writers go to great lengths to avoid the periphery. Other authors, however, embrace it, preferring it to what they view as the restrictive, confining nature of centralized mainstream literature. The four authors that I have selected as the focus of my dissertation, although all born and raised in the Basque Country, have each reacted differently to the French Basque literary periphery. Their diverse approaches are reflected in the manner in which their texts negotiate the question of the representation of space.

1 While most regional literature falls into the category of peripheral literature, the inverse is not necessarily true. For example, while Beur literature, queer literature, and “progressive” literature of the type published by Éditions de Minuit are not, for the most part, generally considered mainstream, they do not usually fit into the category of regional literature, either.
2 Aurelia Arcocha discusses this label in her essay “Writing in Basque in a Global Space from the Periphery.”
Even a brief contemplation of the word “space” makes the decidedly ambiguous nature of the term clear: the list of the possible meanings and interpretations of “space” is nearly endless, ranging from the concrete and tangible to the abstract and metaphysical. It is a concept that refuses to conform to the neat categories that we rely on in our attempts to organize and make sense of the world around us. In the interest of clarity and coherence, it is therefore necessary that I limit and specify the types of space that I will address in this dissertation. Based on the nature of the texts that I will analyze and their place in the French literary world, I have decided to focus on physical, literary, linguistic, and narratological space, all of which I shall define with greater precision in the chapters to come.

Rather than organize my dissertation by author, I have opted for a thematic organization, dedicating one chapter to each type of space that I will examine. The general organizational trend will be from least to most abstract. Accordingly, I shall begin with a chapter on physical space, because as the most concrete of the four categories, it tends to be what first comes to mind when most people think of the word “space.” Due to the fact that my dissertation is about literature, I shall devote the second chapter to literary space. It seems logical to transition from literary space into linguistic space, given the inherent connection between literature and language; therefore, linguistic space will constitute the focus of my third chapter. Finally, my fourth chapter will provide a consideration of narratological space. In a sense, narratological space can be seen as a kind of extension of both literary and linguistic space, and as a result I feel that it is important to discuss the latter two spaces before proceeding with a narratological approach. Because these four spatial categories are still extremely broad, I will further divide each chapter by author into four sections, in the interest of lending some additional structure to my work.
The choice of which authors to include in my dissertation also requires some clarification. My decision to write about the French Basque literary periphery inevitably brings up the question of what defines a French Basque author. The fact that of the four authors in this dissertation, just one writes in Basque is itself problematic; and when combined with the fact that only two of the four authors still live in the Basque Country, the use of the term “French Basque author” seems even more dubious. However, there is no universally accepted definition of the term to fall back on, and consequently, certain points remain open to debate. Is a French Basque author someone who is a native of the French Basque Country? Someone who lives there? Does moving to the Basque Country as an adult count, or must one be born there? The question of language is also unavoidable. Is a French Basque author someone who writes in Basque? If the answer is yes, then the question becomes even more complicated. Must a French Basque author write about Basque topics? If so, a definition of “Basque topics” is needed. These are just a few of the questions that arise when attempting to come up with a list of criteria for the label of “French Basque author.”

The goal of my dissertation is not to prove or disprove the French Basqueness of these four writers but rather to examine and analyze the ways in which these four authors, born and raised in the same place, have addressed the problem of the representation of space in their texts. For the purpose of my dissertation, I have decided to base my identification of these authors as French Basque writers on two things: first, where the author was born and raised, and second, a strong presence of or influence of the Basque Country in that author’s work. The four authors on whom I have decided to focus were all born and raised in or around Bayonne, which is generally considered to be the capital of the French Basque Country.\(^3\) While they have varying degrees of

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\(^3\) I will explain Bayonne’s status as the *de facto* French Basque capital in my chapter on physical space.
familiarity with the Basque language and only two of the authors still live in Bayonne, all four maintain active ties with the Basque Country and consider it a major influence on their work.  

The four writers upon whom I will concentrate are all living authors, with texts published from 1996 to the present. Itxaro Borda, Marie Darrieussecq, Marie Cosnay, and Xabi Moliá are all active authors, as well, and they continue to publish new works even as I write this dissertation. On one hand, their dynamic writing and productivity have provided me with a wide selection of texts to choose from for my various analyses. On the other, however, it has not always been practical or possible to incorporate their latest work into my dissertation and at times, I have been forced to omit some very interesting and relevant texts because they were published after my work on a given chapter was done. Certainly, studying ultra-contemporary literature has obliged me to impose some limits on the scope of my work, but it also confers a number of advantages. One major benefit of working on this time period is the fact that I had the opportunity to meet with and interview all four authors during the summer of 2012 to discuss their work. In addition to yielding valuable insight into the authors’ texts, the conversations I had with them also influenced the form of my dissertation. For example, literary space and linguistic space were part of my original plan, but I added physical space and narratological space after the interviews. Similarly, I made the decision to exclude other spatial categories that I had previously intended to use, based on some of my conversations with these writers.

I shall begin each chapter by looking at Itxaro Borda’s novel 100% Basque from the perspective of the spatial category in question. Borda’s text offers an astute and often humorous critique of contemporary Basque society, examining its many spaces from a variety of angles.

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4 All four authors cited the Basque Country as a major source of influence when I interviewed them during the summer of 2012.
5 For example, I discarded the categories of “minor literary space” and “political space” after discussions about Deleuze and Guattari, the term “regional literature,” and the extremely complicated political situation in the Basque Country and its relationship with literature.
Drawing on clichés and stereotypes, she uses an unorthodox combination of canonic literature, pop culture, and theory to craft a series of insightful anecdotes from the perspective of a woman living in the French Basque Country. Yet it is impossible to engage in any meaningful discussion of Borda’s novel without mentioning the fact that the French text 100% Basque used in my dissertation is an adaptation of %100 Basque, its Basque-language predecessor. Although my focus here will be on the French-language novel, it is necessary to acknowledge the monumental significance of the original Basque text. A groundbreaking novel by any standard, %100 Basque won the Euskadi Saria (Euskadi Prize) in 2002, marking the first time that the prize was awarded to an author from the French Basque Country—or to a woman.

In fact, the majority of Itxaro Borda’s work is written in Basque and has not been translated into French, 100% Basque being a notable exception. Before I began working on my dissertation, I made the decision to exclude primary sources not written in French, and consequently, my considerations of Borda’s work are limited to this single novel. There are several reasons for my choice to omit Basque language texts. First and foremost, there is the question of coherence. Second is the issue of relevance: given that my field of inquiry is in French literature, it would be inappropriate to shift my focus here to literature written in a language other than French. Last but not least, there is the very practical problem of linguistic limitations. My knowledge of the Basque language is elementary and nowhere near advanced enough allow me to appreciate the nuances of a text as complex as 100% Basque or to engage in a worthwhile discussion or analysis. Any treatment of Borda’s Basque language work that I

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6 I do mention %100 Basque in a few of the sections on Borda, but these remarks are confined to a few brief comments that relate directly to the French language adaptation.
might attempt would be woefully inadequate and would ultimately detract from the quality of my dissertation more that it would enhance it.\textsuperscript{7}

The second section of each chapter will concentrate on Marie Darrieussecq, the most mainstream of all the authors I will include in this dissertation. Darrieussecq lives and works in Paris and her novels are published by a major Parisian publishing house (P.O.L). Her work, unlike that of the other authors in this study, can be easily found in bookstores both large and small all over the Hexagon.\textsuperscript{8} Over the course of her career, Darrieussecq has written an extensive assortment of novels, ranging from metafictional meditations on writing and motherhood like \textit{Le Bébé} and \textit{Le Pays} to narratologically experimental texts like \textit{Le Mal de mer} and \textit{Bref séjour chez les vivants}. The diversity of Darrieussecq’s oeuvre presents both a challenge and an opportunity: if daunting in its size and heterogeneity, Darrieussecq’s work also provides an opportunity to compare differing approaches to the same type of space in different novels by the same author. For that reason, I have opted to analyze two texts in three of the four sections dedicated to Darrieussecq, instead of choosing a single text like I do for each of the other writers.\textsuperscript{9}

The third section of each chapter will focus on Marie Cosnay’s work. Although they generally take the form of novels, Cosnay’s texts blur the borders between genres like poetry, fiction, biography, and journalism. Her unorthodox generic combinations and her innovative narrative techniques call into question our assumptions about what a novel is or should be. The relationship between Cosnay’s work and the Basque Country is for the most part readily

\textsuperscript{7} It is worth noting that some of Marie Darrieussecq’s novels have been translated into Basque, and I have likewise excluded them from this project, for the same reasons.

\textsuperscript{8} As an experiment, I visited bookstores (both small, independent ones as well as large, national chains like the FNAC and Elhuyar) in several French cities (Bayonne, Toulouse, Bordeaux and Paris) to see which authors they had in stock (physically in the store) and where their books were located (in the regional section, in the \textit{Folio} or \textit{Livres de Poche} aisles, etc.). Darrieussecq’s novels were the only ones to be widely available in several different locations in France. I found that fact especially interesting, considering that Xabi Molia lives and works in Paris, as well, and his work is also published by two major Parisian publishing powerhouses (Gallimard and the Editions du Seuil).

\textsuperscript{9} I explain my reasons for concentrating on a single Darrieussecq in the relevant chapter (narratological space).
apparent; other than Itxaro Borda, no other author in this study places a greater or more overt emphasis on the Basque Country in his or her work than Cosnay. More specifically, the physical space of Bayonne is a permanent and undeniable presence in many of Marie Cosnay’s texts, at times explicit and at other times metonymous. In *Villa Chagrin*, a novel which constantly points to the Adour River that runs through Bayonne, Cosnay uses that presence to invite her readers to reflect upon convention. Despite being firmly anchored in time and space, the novel’s lack of a clear protagonist or plot is a call to reexamine our literary expectations. Must a novel always have a discernable protagonist? To what extent is a novel “about” its plot? Cosnay’s play with generic norms in *Villa Chagrin* or in other texts like *Entre chagrin et néant* creates a dynamic literary space that is shaped by her insightful considerations of language and the ludic movement of her narratives.

The fourth and final section of each chapter will center on Xabi Molia, the youngest author of the group by far and one who has experimented not only with style but also with medium. His work spans multiple genres and includes not only novels and poetry, but also film and a graphic novel. While I have tried to familiarize myself with all of his work, my dissertation will restrict its focus to his novels in the interest of maintaining a continuity of genre in my analysis. That said, I do include *Vers le nord*, Molia’s graphic novel, in my work because I consider the graphic novel to be a type of novel, as opposed to a separate genre. Through his skillful manipulation of a variety of spaces, Molia uses his texts to challenge the use of narrative

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10 In *Entre chagrin et néant*, for example, some of the detainees evoke certain neighborhoods or unique characteristics of Bayonne in their testimonies, without specifically naming the city. A reader familiar with the area would have no trouble making the connection between Saint-Esprit and Bayonne, for example, but this association would be lost on other readers.

11 The text is regularly time stamped with indications like “Hiver 1941.”
to create meaning and explore the role of the novel in contemporary society.\textsuperscript{12} Molia’s novels never cease to make his readers question their preconceptions about generic limitations and conventions and he does not hesitate to combine traditional forms like the epistolary novel with contemporary cultural topoi like zombies,\textsuperscript{13} proving the dynamic nature of the novelistic genre and demonstrating its ability to evolve. Ultimately, Molia’s work is evidence that literary tradition and innovation are not mutually exclusive, and that a synthesis of the two is not only possible, but also has the potential to be stimulating and enjoyable.

Much like these four authors, I cite the Basque Country as an important influence on my work, as well; and as I have no family ties to the region, I am frequently asked to explain my interest in Basque culture, literature, and language. Although I cannot pinpoint a specific reason for my long-standing attraction to the Basque Country, I can nonetheless identify a few potential sources. There is no question that my studies in French and Spanish have been a factor, but my interest in history and geography, as well as my inexplicable fondness for small countries, steered me towards the Basque Country long before I began learning any foreign languages. I was fortunate enough to be able to spend a year or more on each side of the border, and the time I spent there confirmed and further encouraged my interest in this field. With this dissertation, I hope to shed light on an interesting area of study and thereby encourage interest in what I believe is a vital and dynamic place.

\textsuperscript{12} Philippe Brand discussed these points in the paper he gave at the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association in October 2012.

\textsuperscript{13} While they are never explicitly identified as such, the infectés in \textit{Avant de disparaître} are depicted as zombie-like figures.
In spite of its rich culture and tradition, study of Basque literature has been surprisingly limited outside of the Basque Country and the academic circles of the Basque diaspora.\footnote{Most notably, the University of Nevada, Reno, and Boise State University offer Basque Studies programs. Many of the Basques who came to the United States settled in Nevada and Idaho, resulting in a large concentration of Basque-Americans in these two states and consequently, a demand for cultural and linguistic organizations.} Moreover, what scholarship exists has primarily concerned itself with the Spanish Basque perspective. By contrast, my focus here is on the French Basque Country, because my training has been in French literature. Thus, many important considerations concerning the larger Basque literary scene will be mentioned only in passing or even omitted from my dissertation. This is not due to lack of interest or relevance, but instead because a more comprehensive study of Basque literature would be well beyond the scope of this project. My dissertation works with several extremely broad concepts—space, Basqueness, and the novel, to name a few—and consequently, it is imperative to impose limits if those ideas are to be explored in any depth.

Finally, it is critical to emphasize the academic nature of this project, which is not to be mistaken for a political manifesto. Given that any mention of the Basque Country inevitably conjures up certain political implications, I wish to take this opportunity to affirm that my dissertation should be understood in a purely literary context. At the same time, however, it would be naïve to ignore the political aspect of contemporary Basque society entirely, since it has an undeniable impact on Basque literature on both sides of the border. Therefore, while certain chapters will necessarily acknowledge the political situation in the Basque Country, my occasional references to the Basque political scene constitute no more than a simple acknowledgment of its existence and of the influence it has on contemporary Basque culture and society. Any such references should not be misinterpreted as my endorsement or condemnation of any particular issue, but rather as contextualization.
As I hope the chapters that follow will show, the novels of Itxaro Borda, Marie Darrieussecq, Marie Cosnay, and Xabi Molia offer a rich and varied terrain for an exploration of the many representations of space in the contemporary French Basque novel. One major advantage of this topic is its emergent nature. The fact that relatively little work has been done on this subject has allowed me to find an original angle from which to analyze these texts. Yet the goal of my dissertation is not to define and domesticate fixed categories of space, nor is it to establish a definitive and uniquely legitimate reading of the work of these authors. I do not believe that there is a single “right” way to read these texts; many interpretations are possible, and I simply endeavor to offer a coherent, original approach to them. Likewise, I do not attempt to define space, the novel, or even French Basqueness. On the contrary, I have aspired to provide a few analyses and observations of an emerging field, without imagining that those analyses are definitive or absolute in any way. I hope that my study will open doors to new considerations of the representations of space, and to new ways of thinking about peripheral spaces.
Chapter One

Physical Space

Defining “physical space” is an unexpectedly difficult endeavor. Although it is the most concrete of the four types of space I discuss in my dissertation, it is by no means simple to give a clear and concise definition of this complicated term. In the context of this chapter, I will loosely base my considerations on one of the definitions provided by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, which describes space in general as “a boundless three-dimensional extent in which objects and events occur and have relative position and direction.” This definition encompasses the tangible aspect of space while still leaving ample room for a wide variety of interpretations. Indeed, physical space can be approached from a number of angles and can be related to a range of disciplines from geology and geometry to architecture and literature. Physical space is one of the organizing principles of my dissertation, as well. Itxaro Borda, Marie Darrieussecq, Marie Cosnay, and Xabi Molia all come from the same physical space: the city of Bayonne, on the southwestern coast of France.

The second-largest city in France’s Pyrénées-Atlantiques department, Bayonne is also a major Basque city, both culturally and economically. Most relevant to my work, however, is Bayonne’s role as common denominator in a group of writers who otherwise appear more dissimilar than alike. The prominence of Bayonne in these authors’ work varies considerably. While it cannot be said that Marie Darrieussecq and Xabi Molia’s work ignores Bayonne, the

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17 Home to the only Euskaltzaindia (Académie Basque) office north of the Franco-Spanish border, Bayonne is also the capital of the Basque province of Lapurdi and, along with Biarritz, is generally considered to be the de facto capital of the French Basque Country as a whole.
city and its surrounding area are by no means as central to their texts as they are to Borda and Cosnay’s novels. For these two women, Bayonne serves as the foundation of their work, both physically and thematically. In other words, Cosnay and Borda’s writing is primarily based in and on the city. However, a common setting does not mean that they represent space in the same way. Accordingly, I have opted to approach the work of each of these four authors from a different angle.

I will begin with an examination of binary spatial organization in Itxaro Borda’s 100% Basque, whose insightful criticism of Basque society reveals how physical spaces are dichotomized both from the inside and the outside. I have chosen to concentrate on two divisions: center and periphery, and north and south, followed by a brief discussion of the stereotypes that often arise from these dichotomies. Borda uses her novel to encourage the reader to revisit and reevaluate spatial preconceptions, for while the process of creating binaries is unconscious more often than not, this instinctive reaction to a given space does not easily accommodate the growth and change she believes necessary in Basque society.

Next, I will use Marie Darrieussecq’s work to consider the relationship between physical space and the two faces of memory: remembering and forgetting. In another exploration of automatic responses to physical space, I will examine how remembering is tied to particular places and, conversely, how we seek out other spaces when trying to forget. In Tom est mort, I will show how physical space provides the foundation for a grieving mother’s journey to come to terms with the loss of her young son, while in White, I will investigate the role of space in forgetting, as two scientists fleeing the ghosts of their pasts go on a mission to Antarctica.

Marie Cosnay’s Villa Chagrin will be the focus of a study of a more dynamic physical space. Movement, in the form of Bayonne’s Adour River, structures and defines Cosnay’s text,
which shows how physical space and time can converge into a narrative. The people\textsuperscript{18} in the novel leap from city to city and across continents, while their intercalated stories jump back and forth in time, challenging generic norms and proving that change is the only constant.

Finally, I will conclude with a more technical approach to space in Xabi Molia’s *Avant de disparaître*, where spatial organization and geometry are an instrumental part of his portrayal of post-apocalyptic Paris. The senses, too, are a way of mediating the experience of physical space, and they figure prominently in *Avant de disparaître*. Molia effectively uses sensory details to communicate the places in his text to the reader, thus transforming them from words into physical spaces.

Itxaro Borda

Born and raised in Bayonne, Itxaro Borda still lives there today. A native speaker of Basque, she is a dynamic part of the Basque community and an active member of Basque literary circles. Her background, combined with her extensive knowledge of pop culture and the arts, provides her with the tools for her thorough and insightful critique of contemporary Basque society in *100% Basque*. In large part, her unflinching assessment is based on an interrogation of the system of binary oppositions that she sees as both defining terms and limiting factors for the Basque community and culture around her. Such an evaluation runs the risk of falling prey to dichotomies, but her nuanced and thoughtful critique manages to steer clear of this danger while still raising several important questions.

If, as Borda’s critique suggests, binary divisions can be so problematic, the question of why they exist in the first place must be asked. Quite simply, the world we live in is too large a

\textsuperscript{18} I prefer to avoid calling them characters and will explain my reasons in the section on Cosnay’s work.
place for us to be able to perceive or understand it as a whole. In order for us to make sense of
the space around us, we must first break it down by separating and hierarchizing it. More often
than not, the categories that result from this process are binary in nature, opposing two distinct
antipodes. In theory, this method of classification is ideal: easy and definitive, it provides us with
a straightforward approach to any object or entity. To this effect, humanist geographer Yi-Fu
Tuan notes in his observations about space and place that “environmental value[s] require [their]
antithesis for definition” (Topophilia 102). This sort of clear-cut separation is especially
applicable to physical space, where oppositions like in and out, up and down, left and right, or
here and there are particularly common in descriptions of space.

The world, however, is not a vacuum, and it is due to the complex and dynamic nature of
its space that the usefulness and efficacy of what Tuan terms “simple dichotomies” (Topophilia
15) become less certain. The subtle intricacies of the universe do not always fit neatly into boxes,
and trying to force them into orderly, definitive compartments inevitably results in the
oversimplification or even the trivialization of large portions of our nuanced world, imposing
limits that may do more harm than good. Moreover, the fact that many of these binaries are a
question of perspective only adds to the problem. Far from objective absolutes, such divisions
depend on multiple factors like time, place, history, and culture for meaning. What is familiar to
one person may be foreign to another, and what that person considers art may be just the
opposite to his neighbor.

As Borda demonstrates in 100% Basque, the complex space of the Basque Country
provides a valuable opportunity to observe the way such binary thought patterns and structures
create and shape a given physical space. Eric Prieto explains: “Place is perspectival […] it is not
an objective, material fact there to be discovered but rather an interaction between a physical
environment and an active, experiencing agent who both shapes and is shaped by that environment” (Poetics 29). Accordingly, 100% Basque also considers the close relationship between physical and social spaces, exploring the influence they exert on each other and their potential as catalysts for change. In this section, I will focus on two specific binary oppositions in Borda’s text: center and periphery, and north and south.

The contrast between center and periphery is one of the most basic divisions of space in both its concrete and abstract forms. It is so fundamental that for Henri Lefebvre, it is impossible to conceive of, let alone understand space without making a distinction between “strong points (the centers) and weaker and dominated bases (the peripheries)” (Production 213). It is an incontrovertible fact that objective physical centers exist as mathematically determined middle points, but the opposition in question here is not purely geometric in nature. Human tendency is to conflate the idea of the center with social, political, and economic power, and consequently, many centers are anything but objective: “‘Center’ is not a particular point on the earth’s surface; it is a concept in mythical thought rather than a deeply felt value bound to unique events and locality. In mythic thought several world centers may coexist in the same general area without contradiction” (Tuan, Space 150). Such centers are also referential, meaning that they depend on each other for definition and can only exist in context. Furthermore, they are mobile, shifting with time and perspective.

As mutable as the division between center and periphery may be, it is a non-negotiable part of the human experience of space. Its proportions can change, but it never ceases to exist. The relationships between different spaces that result from this separation make up the building blocks of society. Tuan remarks that “the illusion of superiority and centrality is probably necessary to the sustenance of culture” (Topophilia 31). Each person is at the center of his or her
own world, both individually and culturally. Naturally, we are eager to endow ourselves with the “prestige of the center” (Tuan, *Space* 38), conferring importance to our persons and our cultures.

Although the distinction between center and periphery is universally relevant, it is of most interest to us here insofar as it concerns the Basque Country. This dichotomy is already of great importance to this physically divided nation because of its fragmentation, but even more so because part of it lies in a country famous for its emphasis on centrality. Both the physical layout and social climate of France attest to its insistence on a highly hierarchized geography, which places Paris at the center. All other spaces with the French borders are subordinate to this nucleus. This tendency is concretely evident in physical structures like the highway system and the railroads, but it can also be seen in the French attitude towards *les provinces*, or the extra-Parisian areas of the country. Whatever regional affiliations or identities people living in those areas may have are considered secondary to a predominant and homogenized national identity.

Essentially, the Parisian center has dictated that above all, people in France are French. Any unique or distinctive characteristics of a particular group are either suppressed or, through a process of forced assimilation, rendered folkloristic and therefore “harmless,” effectively robbing them of their cultural value. Fully cognizant of this situation and of the unlikeliness that it will change in the foreseeable future, Borda uses it as a metaphor for hopelessness in general. So desperate is the plight of France’s regions that at one point, the narrator of *100% Basque*

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19 This system is simultaneously global and individual: “The idea of ‘center’ and ‘periphery’ in spatial organization is perhaps universal. People everywhere tend to structure space—geographical and cosmological—with themselves at the center and with concentric zones (more or less well defined) of decreasing value beyond” (Tuan, *Topophilia* 27).
20 Tuan states: “Human groups nearly everywhere tend to regard their own homeland as the center of the world. A people who believe they are at the center claim, implicitly, the ineluctable worth of their location. In diverse parts of the world this sense of centrality is made explicit by a geometrical conception oriented to the cardinal points. Home is at the center of an astronomically determined spatial system” (*Space* 149).
21 See Augé, *Non-places* 64.
describes her failed attempts at having a romantic relationship as “inutile[s] comme le sont les langues régionales en France” (196).

The result of this repeated devaluation of the periphery by the center is a sense of invalidation and opposition. Borda portrays the periphery’s resentment and anger in a scene describing a group of angry Basques who are tired of the French government’s refusal to acknowledge them and their language: “Les militants qui ouvraient dans le domaine de la langue basque en ressentaient une profonde injustice qui les incitait à nous appeler à mener une lutte sans merci contre le pouvoir jacobin” (101). Jacobinism, synonymous here with the French government, is clearly perceived by these activists as an oppressive antagonist. Not everyone shares this opinion, however, and the attitude of people in the French Basque Country towards Paris is far from uniform. The mixed reaction encountered by the government official who introduces the *Euskaltzain* about to be honored in a ceremony is a good example of how peripheral perception of the center can vary considerably from one individual to the next:

Le sous-préfet termina son discours à l’accent méridional et au style banlieusard: voilà comment se construit la France, songeait-il. Il essuya le front d’un revers de main et pliant son papier, le rangea dans la poche arrière de son jean 501, sous les applaudissements fournis de la majorité du public et quelques sifflets stridents (à gauche) prouvant au représentant de l’État que ce territoire n’accepterait jamais la loi jacobine de l’hémoglobine libertine. (185)

Beginning with Louis XIV in the seventeenth century, the power of the French state has been founded on the domination of the Parisian center over the peripheral areas. What is often

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22 *An Euskaltzain* is a member of the *Euskaltzaindia*, which is the Basque equivalent of the Académie Française.

23 In addition to the overt division in public opinion depicted here, there is also a quiet irony in the physical spatiality of the scene, as the Basque protestors are on the left, the side historically associated with the Jacobin movement.
overlooked, however, is the fact that although Paris is incontestably the largest and most dominant center in France, it is by no means the only center.

While the idea of multiple and separate centers within the same space may seem contradictory, it is consistent with Tuan’s claim that centers are not mathematically determined, but rather established by a variety of social, political, and economic factors. Given the number of potential determinants, it is not only possible, but also likely, that a given space will be concurrently influenced by multiple and at times, competing centers.\textsuperscript{24} The logical corollary is that a space can be simultaneously central and peripheral, or even doubly peripheral, as is the case of the French Basque Country. As part of France, it is peripheral to Paris, and as part of the Basque Country, it is peripheral to Euskadi.\textsuperscript{25}

References to the Parisian center are not hard to find in \textit{100\% Basque}, but neither are mentions of the Basque center of Bilbao,\textsuperscript{26} which is the object of sharp criticism on several occasions. In the chapter about the French Basque \textit{Euskaltzaindi}, the narrator surveys the audience, drily commenting: “L’académie basque, comme un seul homme, avait fait le voyage depuis Bilbao, afin de célèbrer son membre le plus vivace” (184). Such remarks and observations are common throughout the text. The first reference to Bilbao’s linguistic hegemony comes early, at the very beginning of the novel, where Borda does a sort of voice-over, bypassing the narrator and addressing her audience directly. Her words are a combination of playfulness and sarcasm,\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{24} Lefebvre comments: “[There is a] distinction between strong points of space and the \textit{centers}—of power, wealth, material and spiritual exchange, leisure, and information, which as likewise multiplied and hierarchized—and the \textit{peripheries}, which are also hierarchized, at varying degrees of distance from some principal or secondary center” (215).

\textsuperscript{25} Euskadi is an autonomous community in Spain comprised of the historically Basque provinces of Álava, Guipúzcoa, and Vizcaya.

\textsuperscript{26} While Vitoria-Gasteiz is the official capital of Euskadi, Bilbao is regarded as a sort of \textit{de facto} capital. Culturally, it is the seat of the \textit{Euskaltzaindi}, or Academy of the Basque language and was the original location of the University of the Basque Country (there are now additional campuses elsewhere in Euskadi). Economically, it is home to the BBVA (Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argenteria), the second-largest bank in Spain, and is a major seaport.
but could not be more to the point. Her sense of injustice and alienation from the center is unmistakable:

Tiens, je voudrais à l’occasion de la publication de ce roman-vécu, adresser une requête franche à nos honorables messieurs et madame académiciens basques: ne pourriez-vous pas, lors d’une de vos futures réunions à Bilbao, inventer un joli nom en langue basque pour nommer ces situations délicieuses même pour les plus chastes où les cons se débitent en carrés et vice versa? (35)

Although veiled in humor, the narrator’s commentary is criticism of the fact that Basque linguistic policy is decided in Bilbao, the de facto power center of the Basque Country. In her eyes, Bilbao’s linguistic domination is no different from the disregard for linguistic differences and regional variations exhibited by the Paris-based Académie Française.

The concurrent existence and at times, the competition of these two centers (Paris and Bilbao) is further complicated by the international frontier running through the Basque Country, splitting it between France and Spain. This geopolitical line has been the source of much contention in the Basque Country in recent years and the polemic surrounding it can be seen in many aspects of society, including literature. Some context is required, however, in order to appreciate its significance. History, a necessary consideration in any question involving the geopolitical divisions of a space, is critical in a place like the Basque Country, where the territory

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27 Vitoria-Gasteiz, the capital of Álava, is the administrative capital of the autonomous community of the Basque Country, but both Bilbao and San Sebastián (the capitals of Vizcaya and Gipúzcoa) more influential in all other domains.

28 Although I continue to emphasize the fact that this dissertation is strictly literary and should not be approached from a political angle, it is impossible to deny the influence of politics on the Basque situation today, which in turn is the subject of 100% Basque. Completely omitting any mention of politics would be detrimental to a meaningful discuss of Borda’s text; however, due to the fact that this is not a political work, my treatment of history and politics will be brief and basic.
in question has been divided and assigned to two different sovereign states. Surprisingly, the Basque Country has never been a single, unified state. Moreover, the location of the Franco-Spanish border is not a recent development; this frontier is in fact one of Europe’s oldest, dating back to the Treaty of the Pyrenees, which was signed in 1659 (Bray and Keating, “European Integration” 143). Thus the simple existence of the border cannot be considered the sole cause of a controversy that it predates. The psychosocial aspects of the frontier, however, are far-reaching and extend well beyond those of the line itself.

There is a strong correlation between physical and national unity; a group that is united in physical space is far more likely to feel a sense of nation and community than one that is not. Tuan confirms: “A people can more readily identify with an area if it appears to be a natural unit” (Topophilia 101). Essentially, by interrupting the continuity of the Basque Country’s physical space and splitting it between different states, the border has prevented the creation of a strong sense of Basque unity. Hindering the construction of a single, collective Basque identity, it has directly contributed to the creation of two separate identities, French Basques and Spanish Basques, and has given rise to what is arguably the most significant example of an internal binary division in the Basque Country: the space inhabited by the French Basques is called Iparralde, meaning “north side,” and the Spanish territory is referred to as Hegoalde, or “south side.”

Each side of the border has its own character and distinct function: the southern side is associated with activism and modernity, while the northern side is regarded as more apolitical.

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29 On the French side, all of the Basque Country is located in the same department, the Pyrénées-Atlantiques. On the Spanish side, however, it has been subject to further fragmentation. The País Vasco autonomous community contains three of the four Spanish Basque provinces while Navarra, the fourth province, is its own separate autonomous community.

30 Bray explains: “If the Basque Country as a whole can be identified as a loosely defined cultural and geographic concept, the only time that it formed anything close to a united administrative entity was at the beginning of the eleventh century under the king of Nafarroa, Sancho the Great” (Boundaries 45).
pastoral, and traditional. Nonetheless, despite, or perhaps because of, their differences, they have in common the fact that on both sides, a single, conclusive definition of what constitutes “Basqueness” is lacking. Whether urban activism or rural agriculture is more “authentic” is a question of perspective. But this polemic comes as little surprise in the context of a nation that has yet to agree on a universal definition of its physical space. What is meant by “the Basque Country,” conceptually and geographically, historically and today, can differ widely from one individual to the next. In *100% Basque*, the narrator’s descriptions of the *Route du fromage* that she drives almost nightly reveal that for her, *Iparralde* is the physical space of the Basque Country. Recalling her long drives home after nocturnal political meetings, Borda’s narrator recounts: “Le meilleur moyen pour rentrer à la maison restait la Route du fromage qui traversait le Pays basque d’est en ouest […] La Route du fromage représentait l’axe principal du *vasconum mundi* en action” (39). Her use of the term *vasconum mundi* implies comprehensiveness, but further description of this road in terms of the cities and towns it connects reveals that its course is limited to the French Basque Country: “[La route du fromage] serpentait, paresseuse, entre Bayonne et Mauléon, *via* Sare et Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port” (10).

It is not that she is unaware of or refuses to acknowledge *Hegoalde*, it is simply that for the narrator, the French Basque countryside traversed by the *Route du fromage*, the place she has always called home, is the center of the world. The narrator clearly knows that in the context of the Basque Country as a whole, *Iparralde* is peripheral to *Hegoalde*, but her upbringing and experience make *Iparralde* more immediately significant to her on a personal level than a distant center more than 150 kilometers away and on the other side of the border. At the same time, she does not hesitate to speak openly about the power dynamic between the northern and southern

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31 Bray and Keating note: “Nationalism on the French side […] has been contained by political strategy” (“European Integration” 137).
parts of the Basque Country and brings up subjects that are often considered taboo, like the financial backing provided by Euskadi to Basque institutions north of the border. Discussing an acquaintance’s job, the narrator describes his employer in no uncertain terms as “une association culturelle basque financée par le Pays basque Sud” (55). Later on, in another section, she explains the dangers of the hierarchy set up by this relationship:

Quelques années auparavant, prétextant l’absence de bascophones qualifiés, toutes les instances culturelles du Pays basque Nord avaient embauché des Basques du Sud qui avaient apporté avec eux leur mode linguistique, leurs journaux, leurs écoles, leurs associations culturelles et leurs traditions gastronomiques. (154)

Borda’s choice of words is telling: eux and leur designate outsiders not belonging to the speaker’s group. The narrator’s phrasing suggests that she is one of the many French Basques who see themselves as separate from their southern neighbors and are wary of the Spanish Basque Country’s dominance, believing that they must look out for themselves and defend their own interests against those of the center. On another occasion, the narrator recalls a conversation with a different acquaintance whose political philosophy underscores the rift between the peripheral north and the central south: “Joanes me faisait la liste des nombreux avantages pour le Pays basque et plus particulièrement pour sa partie nord” (215). The wording here suggests that the needs of the Basque Country as a whole are not necessarily the same as the needs of the French Basque Country; what is advantageous for the former may not always benefit the latter. What is more, the fact that the speaker makes a distinction between the “Pays basque” and the “partie nord” hints at internal divisions that go beyond physical borders.

32 Evidently, not all French Basques share this opinion.
In addition to their linguistic habits, media, schools, and cuisine, the southern Basques are depicted as also bringing a sense of superiority with them. In the chapter about the French Basque *Euskaltzain*, the narrator remarks that a public homage to him was attended by “des admirateurs qui venaient des six coins du Pays Basque” and then focuses particularly on “les admirateurs qui arrivaient en bus d’une ville du Pays basque Sud.” She notes that “nul ne corrigea l’abbé hâbleur eu égard à son âge et à son origine ‘du Nord’ qui les invitaient à la pitié et au paternalisme” (183). Even towards a distinguished *Euskaltzain*, the narrator perceives a patronizing attitude and condescension on the part of the southern Basques.

Still, despite these numerous and not insignificant internal divisions and disagreements, the Basques remain for the most part a united front against outsiders, in whose eyes they are all peripheral, whether they come from the French Basque Country or the Spanish side. Their sense of “Basqueness” is reinforced when they look beyond borders and consider themselves and their nation in a larger context. Prieto observes:

> Our sense of the homeland […] is enriched not only by an exploration of its center but also by a willingness to look outward to the rest of the world, exploring the ebb and flow of exchanges between inside and outside—between the “irreducible center” and its “incalculable margin.” (*Poetics* 179)

Indeed, it is precisely by looking outward to France, Spain, Europe, and beyond that collective Basque identity is strengthened and confirmed, blurring lines between north and south and mitigating internal problems. In this sense, the same border that divides the Basques can also unite them against a common opponent. Consequently, the border has become the banner of the Basque cause for many, but not always for the same reasons.
When the Basques project the appearance of an undivided whole, they reinforce group identity, but presenting a strong and unified front to outsiders can also have negative consequences. Often ignorant of the numerous internal divisions that are so obvious to the Basques themselves, the French and Spanish governments have a tendency to perceive them as a single, homogenous group, which can lead to simplistic reductions and stereotyping. Similarly, Basque territory is regarded as a generic space whose details and nuances are overlooked or dismissed. Prieto explains the reason for these two radically different viewpoints: “A place can be represented in one of two ways: from a depersonalized “outside” perspective as, for example, a point or shape on a map; and from a subject-centered “inside” perspective, as a kind of environing milieu within which we move” (Poetics 19). In other words, the Basque Country is little more than a region on a map to outsiders, but to its inhabitants, it is the complex and dynamic environment that they call home.

For those unfamiliar with a given physical space, it is natural to conceive of it abstractly. A point or line on a map has little to do with us personally, so it remains two dimensional in our mind. When we visit a space, it acquires a third dimension, but that third dimension is only superficial. A tourist has a visual impression of a space he visits, but his cursory evaluation lacks the detail and depth that results from actually living in it. Tuan observes: “Only the visitor (and particularly the tourist) has a viewpoint; his perception is often a matter of using his eyes to compose pictures. The native, by contrast, has a complex attitude, derived from his immersion in the totality of his environment” (Topophilia 63). When someone lives in a place, he or she develops intimate ties with it that an outsider cannot hope to comprehend and often cannot even perceive. Yet it is not a question of there being one objective truth for each space and a clear “right” or “wrong” way of experiencing it. Multiple valid viewpoints can coexist, and each side
has its own advantages and drawbacks. If those on the inside of a space develop a personal relationship with it, they do so at the cost of missing the big picture. Visitors, on the other hand, miss the details and subtleties, but they have a more comprehensive perspective that allows them to evaluate the space as a whole.

Due to his or her superficial, global viewpoint, the outsider’s images of a space are necessarily simplistic and often rely on clichés and stereotypes. For outsiders, then, binary systems of classification hold considerable appeal, enabling visitors to assess and interpret an unfamiliar space with relative ease and speed. Inhabitants of a space, on the other hand, are aware of the nuances that are lost to this practice and often resent such reductionism. In 100% Basque, Borda’s frustration with the oversimplified external conception of the Basque Country is further compounded by the fact that many Basques seem to ascribe to it, as well. This tendency is perhaps due to the fact that some of the external representations of the Basque Country are in some way advantageous to certain Basques.

For example, the Basque Country’s strong agricultural tradition has lead to its frequent portrayal as a sort of pastoral paradise, left behind by modernity. In the public’s imagination, the Basques are little more than simple farmers and shepherds. Perpetuating this bucolic image serves two purposes. First, it is economically beneficial to both the region and the state. An agrarian paradise of this sort easily attracts tourists, especially those anxious to get away from big cities like Paris or Madrid. Second, it is reassuring to the general public, effectively diffusing any fears it might have about potential political threats, since picturesque farmhouses and their farmers are not typically perceived as dangerous. Essentially, the Basques are “exploited as folklore but deprived of political meaning” (Bray and Keating, “European Integration and the Basque Country in France and Spain” 137). Borda and her narrator are fully cognizant of this
strategy, which she depicts in a chapter criticizing not only the French and Spanish outsiders who orchestrate it, but the Basques who accept and perpetuate it, as well: “L’axe principal de la culture basque est l’agriculture, proclamaient-ils à la suite des politiciens, une culture particulièrement pastorale avec l’euskara qui lui confère une certaine authenticité, si ce n’est une authenticité certaine” (43).

The Basque Country’s strong agrarian sector and long agricultural tradition, particularly on the French side, are an indisputable fact, as is the existence of some peaceful shepherds and familial farms. It is precisely this basis in fact that makes the government’s technique of portraying the Basque Country as a rural paradise possible and effective. This approach works through synecdoche: one aspect is used to represent the whole. Evidently, the defining characteristic chosen to stand for the whole must have a foundation in truth in order to be credible, but the resulting image does not constitute an accurate representation of the group. Thus, transforming a few shepherds into the Basque ideal of authenticity is misleading to outsiders and unfair to the Basques, who may consequently feel pressured to conform to this image, inaccurate as it may be.

Accompanying the figure of the Basque shepherd is the portrayal of the Basque countryside as a georgic wonderland of agrarian abundance. The more rural a given place is, the more authentic it is considered to be by the non-Basque public. Accordingly, they deem the Basques living in the coastal cities as less “Basque” than those who live in the rural, agricultural areas further inland. In 100% Basque, the way that a colleague of the narrator introduces her to an acquaintance is a good example of this trend. Her colleague announces: “Elle vient de l’Intérieur, du Pays basque […] Elle est totalement indigène!” (85). This attitude is so prevalent that many Basques have come to believe it, and even the narrator admits to having had her
doubts about what constitutes authenticity: “Il est vrai qu’un temps, habitée par l’idée qu’un vrai Basque vivait au contact de la terre mère, je rêvais de devenir bergère solitaire et sans terre” (119-120).

In the end, however, the narrator chooses a simple and real appreciation of the space she calls home. For her, it is the Route du fromage that embodies the essence of the Basque Country and showcases the diverse aspects of its beauty, as she recalls: “Je suivis encore la Route du fromage, celle qui perçait la pénombre en longeant les vallées encaissées et les humbles montagnes” (105). This space does not require an official stamp of authenticity to be real and valuable to her, and she does not need external confirmation of her identity to be Basque. She has the confidence and the self-awareness to feel comfortable expressing her Basqueness as she sees fit, whether that be as a shepherd, a farmer, a teacher, or a writer. Letting go of categories and rejecting labels, she is content simply to exist in the space that she knows and loves.

Marie Darrieussecq

Of the four authors whose work I examine in my dissertation, Marie Darrieussecq’s is among the most geographically diverse. The places of Darrieussecq’s texts span the globe to include everything from the Basque coast to Vancouver, and Iceland to Australia. The environments in which her stories take place vary, as well. The fictional Basque town of Clèves\(^{33}\) is small, little more than a village in the eponymous book. Its rural setting contrasts sharply with the urban space of Truismes, whose action unfolds in Paris. The geographic and environmental diversity across Darrieussecq’s oeuvre is not coincidental. Far more than a simple desire for exoticism or glamorous adventure, the spaces and places in Darrieussecq’s work have an

\(^{33}\) Readers who know the French Basque Country can easily identify Clèves as Bassussary.
important functional and thematic role whose effect on the narrative is instrumental to the success of her texts.

In this section, I will examine the function of setting in two of her texts. First, in *Tom est mort*, I will explore the relationship between physical space and memory. My inquiry will reflect upon the inherent link between place and remembering and will consider concepts like *lieux de mémoire*, as place becomes a vehicle of remembrance for a family who loses a child while living abroad. In *White*, the second novel I have chosen for my analysis, physical space takes on an opposite function, that of forgetting. I will discuss the ways in which the novel’s two protagonists use space in their attempt to escape the past. They hope that putting physical distance between themselves and the places where past tragedies occurred will also distance them from the memories of these traumas, but this endeavor ultimately fails.

1. *Tom est mort*

In *Tom est mort*, the importance of physical space is apparent from the outset. Although it is not explicitly revealed right away, the setting is strongly hinted at as early as the first page, where Tom’s mother mentions her interest in koalas and Tasmanian devils, thereby laying the foundation for the text’s insistence on place. Later, when it is confirmed that the mother is in Australia, the numerous implications of her location are already apparent. The mother, whom the synopsis on the book’s back cover describes as “une Française en exil,” is far from her home, her parents, her friends, and her language. Her husband and her other two children are with her, but she still feels very much alone.

Linguistically, she does not even have her family to turn to, and her isolation is nearly complete after the death of Tom, the only one of her children who spoke French. One afternoon,
years after Tom’s death, she watches her children play on the beach and reflects upon their linguistic abilities: “Stella n’a jamais appris le français. Stella comme Vince ne parle toujours que la langue de son père” (126). Her phrasing makes it clear that her surviving children speak a language that is not hers, as well as implying that she and her husband do not share the same language. Stuart, her husband, can speak French, but it is not his native language in the way that it is hers and it was Tom’s.

Surrounded by a foreign language and far away from her support system, the mother has no outlet for her grief after Tom’s accident and feels more alone than ever. When she calls home to share the terrible news, she hears her mother’s voice on the other end of the line and becomes acutely aware of the enormity of the physical distance that separates them: “Les voix filent dans l’espace, rebondissent aux satellites, repartent en ligne droite, ailleurs. Futiles. Bavardes. Techniques” (44-45). Her mother speaks French, but nonetheless, the narrator cannot escape the feeling that “[sa] mère au bout [du] fil […] est une voix parmi les autres” (45-46), a voice that becomes disembodied and impersonal as it travels halfway around the world to her, little comfort to her physically at a time when she needs her mother more than ever. Nothing can mitigate the immense physical distance that separates them: “Nous sommes dans la nuit entre l’Europe et l’Australie. Elle d’un côté, moi de l’autre, aube ou crépuscule, nous sommes deux points arrêtés et la Terre tourne lentement” (44).

Although the great expanse of space between her and her mother distresses her, it is in temporal distance from her son’s death that she finds some measure of consolation. After Tom’s accident, she struggles to locate him in physical space but cannot: “Je ne savais pas où était Tom. Je ne pouvais pas croire qu’il était là. Je le cherchais” (75). When she seeks him out in her memories, however, she has no difficulty at all finding him. These memories are painful, acutely
so at first, but as time distances her from the tragedy, the memories of her son’s life gradually become a source of comfort. These recollections of happier times take her around the world to a variety of places. She observes: “Tom, à quatre ans et demi, s’est déjà posé sur trois continents” (55). She recalls Tom’s fascination with the movie *Finding Nemo*, associating it with his arrival in Australia: “Sydney, dira-t-il quand il arrivera, comme dans *Nemo.*” (51). She remembers the phone calls between them when the children were staying with her parents in France and Tom’s preference for the French language over English.

Most of the memories are from their time living in Vancouver, however. Tom died in Australia, but the majority of his life was spent in Vancouver. Consequently, the name “Vancouver” and the mental images the mother keeps of that city eventually come to represent her son’s life. Even after his death, “il était resté fixé dans l’espace, immuable, un point tellurique qu’elle avait identifié: l’île de Vancouver” (145). Accordingly, her most poignant memories are snapshots of their life there before moving to Australia. For example, she remembers their bedtime routine in Canada, recalling that “à Vancouver [elle] se penchait, d’un côté sur Tom à gauche, de l’autre sur Vince à droite, des lits jumeaux” (43).

For Pierre Nora, connections like these between space and memory are inherent: “La mémoire s’enracine dans le concret, dans l’espace, le geste, l’image et l’objet” (*Lieux* xix). Mundane objects and otherwise prosaic scenes from everyday life can become deeply significant, taking on special meaning when associated with intense emotions. Nora explains that these moments, “[d]es événements où, à la limite, il ne se passe rien,” expand and become “immédiatement chargés d’un sens lourdement symbolique” (*Lieux* xxxix), transforming them into powerful *lieux de mémoire*. Such is the case when the mother unexpectedly finds an old bottle of the shampoo she used on Tom as a baby and the memories come flooding back:
“J’ouvre le flacon et je suis avec Tom, au moment du bain dans notre appartement à Vancouver [...] J’ouvre le flacon et je me drogue de Tom. Le passé enfermé dans la bouteille. Le passé présent, dans le présent, dès que j’ouvre” (97). The weight of the object, the space it takes up in her hands, the scent of its contents, the brand name on the label—everything leads back to Tom and becomes a memorial to him, physical evidence of his life and the time he spent on the planet. The shampoo bottle is the most ordinary of objects, but for Tom’s mother, for whom it represents her son and contains his very essence, it is of extraordinary and irreplaceable significance.

In contrast with the happy memories that she associates with their apartment in Vancouver, the apartment in Sydney where Tom died has almost exclusively negative connotations in the mother’s mind. Most of her memories of the Sydney apartment, which she often calls simply “Victoria Road,” are not of Tom’s life, but rather of Tom’s death and of the pain and grief that followed. For her, this space is a constant and agonizing reminder of Tom and a silent witness to her loss. When the family finally moves out of the apartment on Victoria Road a few years later, the mother remarks that “[l]es fenêtres avaient vu le sang” (205). The apartment was the scene of Tom’s death and as the reader learns on the last page of the novel, was also its cause.

It is not only their apartments in Vancouver and Sydney that remind the mother of Tom, but the cities and even their respective countries, as well. The physical spaces of Vancouver, Sydney, Canada, and Australia have all become symbolic in their own way, each representing different aspects of her son’s life and death:

Je conçois qu’on aime une ville, comme un corps, comme une créature. J’aime Vancouver. C’est la ville des vivants. Quand on meurt, on laisse à Vancouver quelque
chose de soi, qui scintilla dans les buildings, dans la mer, dans les forêts. Et on part en
Australie. Les morts vont en Australie. (177)

Sydney, for her, is a “mauvaise ville” (147), a place that has taken her son away from her. As a result, the mother establishes mental connections between Sydney and death and Vancouver and life. For example, despite Tom’s death in Sydney, the mother firmly believes that a living version of Tom somehow persists in Canada, inhabiting the space of their former apartment: “Tom errait à Vancouver. Il revenait dans l’appartement. Il traversait les murs” (143). On the other hand, the mother associates Sydney so strongly with death that she is convinced that Tom’s death began the very moment that he first set foot in Australia, which was at the airport in Sydney. Yet it was at that same moment, the beginning of his death, that she and her family became permanently bound to the country, as well. She qualifies Australia as both “le pays où Tom est mort” and “le pays où [ils se sont] installés dans la mort de Tom” (159). But in addition to being the place of Tom’s death, Australia is the space of the family’s survival. Looking back, years later, the mother recognizes the effect that Australia had on her family: “La mort de Tom nous a faits australiens” (178).

Nonetheless, if the family has somehow become bound to the country of Australia, that is not the case for Sydney, which they have no difficulty leaving when, three years after Tom’s death, they relocate to “une petite ville au Sud-Est des Blue Mountains” (204). Their new home has only “cinq ou six mille habitants” which the mother considers “pas si petite pour l’Australie” (204-205) and is rural without being isolated, described by the mother as a place that “vit du trekking et des koalas, et de Canberra pas trop loin” (204-205). Tom’s mother enjoys the koalas, but Canberra has little appeal. It is not tainted by Tom’s death like Sydney is, but Canberra feels too large and too empty, nonetheless, despite its 300,000 inhabitants. Composed of “des
supermarchés géants et des musées sans visiteurs,” Canberra is a place where “tout est un peu trop grand, il y a de l’espace” (210). Within its limits, she feels a loneliness and alienation reminiscent of how she felt immediately after Tom’s death.

Instead, she seeks the unexpected comfort of the rural Blue Mountains. Their dense forests and rocky sandstone peaks are home to an assortment of exotic flora and fauna whose ruggedness gives physical form to what she has been through. She explains:

L’exotisme a un léger pouvoir consolateur; une distraction que la nourriture ou le cinéma ont perdue. La perte des habitudes, le manque de certains objets, de certaines attitudes, ça occupe. La perte des paysages. L’exil. Il me semble que c’est le seul chez moi depuis la mort de Tom, depuis que la mort de Tom m’a jetée hors de moi. La cohérence de ce paysage bizarre, ces arbres que je connais avec ces animaux que je ne connais pas, ces vallées qu’il me semble avoir parcourues déjà, mais au fond desquelles il y a des dragons rouges. (204)

It is there that she finally begins to come to terms with her loss, putting some distance between her and the site of the trauma, while still remaining close enough to remember.

For this mother and her family, Australia is a space of death and loss. It is the far-off land where a tragic and unexpected accident cost their four-year-old son his life, and for that reason, it is a place of pain and grief. But Australia is more than just a space of loss; it is also a place of survival. The country where Tom died becomes part of them, the physical representation of their survival of a horrible tragedy. If, as the mother believes, Tom somehow lives on in Vancouver, a part of him remains in Australia nonetheless, and as long as the family stays there, they remain with that part of him.
2. White

Physical space also plays a very important role in White, although its function and representation are very different from what was seen in Tom est mort. In the latter, place is tamed and wilderness is tempered; even the rural town in the Blue Mountains is evoked in terms of its proximity to the capital city. The space of White, on the other hand, is utterly savage, its harshness unchecked and unmitigated. Throughout the novel, Darrieussecq spends a considerable amount of time describing the setting in terms of its physical characteristics. The opening paragraph, a contemplation of the physical traces left by man on Antarctica’s desolate landscape, sets the scene, giving the reader an immediate sense of the barren desert in which White takes place:

Des traces: une tranchée sous l’horizon, s’élargissant sur un cercle de neige battue.
L’empreinte de chenillettes puis de semelles: sentiers reliant les baraques, piétinements.
Des pistes étroites (scooter des neiges). Des crachats noirs (essence ou suie). Une esplanade, une sorte de centre, lisse et poudreux entre les tentes vides. (11)

The spectral narrator of this sequence then proceeds to a scientific assessment of the terrain, noting the amount of snow since the previous year (two centimeters) and the number of humans in a four thousand mile radius (three), but hesitates when it comes time to quantify the intangible remains of the past, wondering if ghosts can in fact be counted (11). The precision that characterizes the narrator’s description of the land is applied to the sea, as well. The water must be evaluated in objective terms, meaning that the adjectives that can be applied to the waves are strictly based on size, as prescribed by a navigation handbook. The sea is “belle” when the waves
are less than fifty centimeters, “agitée,” “forte,” or “grosse” with waves from six to nine meters, and “énorme” if the waves reach a length of more than fourteen meters (11-12).

The characters are introduced in a similarly detached fashion, factual to the point of dryness. The presentation of Edmée, the novel’s female protagonist, reads more like a curriculum vitae or an intelligence debriefing than a literary text: “Edmée Blanco, ingénieure bilingue en télécommunications, la trentaine, née à Bordeaux, France, résidant à Douglastown, Texas, épouse de Samuel, administrateur à la Nasa, est autorisée à rendre visite au commandement de bord” (23). The description of Peter Tomson, the male protagonist, has a very similar style: “Peter Tomson, la trentaine, ingénieur chauffagiste, né on ne sait trop où mais de nationalité islandaise, de parents ayant pris un nom local (enfin: leur idée du nom local), bref Pete Tomson, coincé contre un hublot” (21).

Despite their distant places of origin and their very different backgrounds, both protagonists are characterized with respect to space. Edmée is connected to France and Texas, while Peter is tied to Iceland and, paradoxically, to a lack of place. From an official standpoint, he is Icelandic, but the location of his birth is unknown and it is implied that he does not specifically identify with any place. But physical space is also what brings them together: their mission, Project White, is to build a permanent European research station in Antarctica, a project which requires that they commit to spending six months at the end of the earth. The two protagonists are drawn to this harsh landscape and the solitude of the South Pole for the same reason: they see Antarctica as a way to escape from past trauma.

Edmée is fleeing from a horrific murder that took place in Douglastown, the Houston suburb where she lives with her husband Samuel. Two years prior to the beginning of the novel, her neighbor, not quite a friend but more than an acquaintance, brutally killed all but one of her
children. Since then, what the novel terms “l’affaire Higgins” has haunted her almost continuously; Edmée is plagued by thoughts of what if and the feeling that she should have known, or could have somehow prevented the tragedy. Peter, on the other hand, is running from a childhood of abandonment, alienation, and loss. He remembers nothing of the first six years of his life, before the Gudmundssons, his foster parents in Iceland, took him in. After five years with the Gudmundssons, Peter’s world was turned upside down again when his parents suddenly reappeared, accompanied by his nounou, but without his sister Clara, whose disappearance was never explained. At school in Iceland, he was painfully different from the other students and was cruelly mocked by his classmates, who called him “le Fou, ou le Taré, ou le Mongol, parce qu’il ne comprenait rien ou parce qu’il a[vait] cet air oriental” (52).

Therefore, Project White—and its six months at the cold and barren South Pole—seems to be the perfect escape for Edmée and Peter, who are seeking “une vacuité au bout du monde” (83). Their plan is simple: “Nourri[s] logé[s], pas de questions à se poser. La distance énorme. Le travail qui justifie. Lui sa centrale, elle sa radio. Autant demeurer sur les lieux du problème. Et ne penser à rien, laisser filer la saison, jusqu’au gros chèque, et voilà” (101). In Antarctica, their survival depends on their ability to do their jobs; they must keep the station heated and connected to the rest of the world, and there is little time for idle contemplation. The mechanical, automatic quality of this life is appealing to Peter and Edmée, who want to be swallowed up by the nothingness of the frozen continent.

The text insists repeatedly on the emptiness of Antarctica, characterizing it as “vide d’un vide parfait” and “un vide primal” (169). The void is attractive in that it seems to promise a certain restfulness and freedom from the ghosts of the past, but in reality, it is simply “la compagnie des mêmes” (147). In other words, Peter and Edmée are still plagued by the same
traumatic memories that tormented them in Douglasville and Reykjavik. The ghosts that haunted them at home have followed them to the South Pole and joined the multitude of other specters already inhabiting the desolate space around them. Like an invisible zombie horde, these ghosts seek out and then overwhelm Edmée and Peter, accompanying them everywhere and at all times. One ghost describes Edmée’s invisible entourage: “Dans cette fébrilité de l’espace entre-deux Edmée attend et nous attendons avec elle; dans cette vacuité de l’espace entre-deux elles nous croise, elle nous ignore” (142). They will not leave her side and remain “cramponnés à [elle]” (44) wherever she goes. It is much the same for Peter, whose ghosts observe his work at the power station curiously, one of them “penché sur [son] épaule” (48).

Just beneath the surface, this seemingly empty space is teeming with ghosts from every time and place imaginable. Consequently, the white desert does not live up to its promises of oblivion and forgetting, serving more to intensify the memories than to mitigate them. What is more, although the barren wasteland ostensibly offers itself as a place to forget, it cannot truly be considered a place at all; Antarctica is in fact a “non-place” (154). Marc Augé’s characterization of non-place is almost eerie in its resemblance to the setting of *White*. He describes it as a “space in which neither identity, nor relations, nor history really make any sense; spaces in which solitude is experiences as an overburdening or emptying of individuality” (*Non-places* 87). Augé qualifies it as a sort of “traveller’s space” (86) or a site of transit, and Antarctica is exactly that. It is a vast and cruel land where no one lives, save the multitude of ghosts from a jumbled assortment of times and places. The people who do come to the South Pole are travelers, adventurers, or scientists on a finite mission. It is somewhere people like the members of Project White go to escape their pasts and lose themselves in nothingness for a while, but like Edmée
and Peter, they inevitably find that the emptiness around them is filled with the very memories they came to forget.

In many respects, what initially appears to be an austere wasteland is also a space of overabundance. Paradoxical as it may seem, the South Pole is simultaneously dominated by lack and excess. Many things lack: warmth, color, civilization, and human connections, to name a few. But at the same time, much else is in overabundance: time, space, whiteness, cold, and memories. Augé believes that such excess is a defining characteristic of what he calls “supermodernity”—that is, the acceleration of time, the overabundance of information, and the overall rate of change in the world around us. Non-places, he argues, are the physical embodiment of supermodernity, a consequence of the “spatial overabundance” that accompanies other excess, like that of events and information (*Non-places* 40). Places, he notes, provide identity, imply relations, and reflect history, and non-places do the opposite: they lure people with the promise of anonymity, solitude, and timelessness (*Non-places* 52). In other words, they appear to offer exactly what Peter and Edmée seek, yet this emptiness is not the respite they hope for, but rather an abundance of time and memories. Antarctica, then, is an archetypical non-place and it is there that Peter and Edmée experience “un silence comme on n’en entend pas sur la planète, un silence de capsule, un silence de vide intérieur” (180) that is nonetheless filled with the echoes of the past.

Peter and Edmée are left with little choice: they must face the memories, giving them word and form, or else be destroyed by them. But how can they find the words to do so amidst such a silence? The answer is in the space around them. Its white void is the page upon which they must tell their story. By narrating, they give the ghosts of the past—and this non-place that is Antarctica—meaning. Augé confirms: “The link between individuals and their surroundings in the space of non-place is established through the mediation of words, or even texts” (*Non-places* 52).
In a place where “the landscape keeps its distance” (*Non-places* 97), where “le vide est si intense, que ce qui arrive laisse une trace, il en demeure quelque chose dans l’espace” (128), that same terrain ultimately becomes a vehicle for its expression, as “its natural or architectural details give rise to a text” (Augé, *Non-places* 97). Such is the case of *White*, where, without the physical space of this non-place, there would be no text. It is the landscape of Antarctica that ultimately narrates what Peter and Edmée cannot, giving them the means to face their ghosts.

In both *Tom est mort* and *White*, physical spaces are a critical part of the story. In *Tom est mort*, Vancouver and Australia become spaces of memory for a mother who has lost her young son. Her recollections of him take her across continents and it is ultimately through place that she is able to come to terms with his untimely death. In *White*, Edmée and Peter have come to the bottom of the world to escape traumatic memories in the anonymity of the void. The topography of this non-place forces them to face their pasts and allows them to tell their story. In the same way, the frozen expanse of Antarctica is the page upon which Darrieussecq has written her book and it is the harshness of the land that gives her the words to tell her story.

Marie Cosnay

It is difficult to imagine Marie Cosnay’s work without thinking of physical space. From *André des Ombres* and *Déplacements* to *Entre chagrin et néant* and beyond, Cosnay’s novels are not only set in locations near and far, but also steeped in them. Her strong emphasis on space and place is unusual because, as Marie-Laure Ryan points out, “space in narrative usually serves as a background for characters and their actions, and not as a focus of interest” (“Space” 428). When place is no more than a background, narratives are easily transposable from one setting to
In contrast, texts like the ones I explore in this chapter put place center stage in their narratives and are thus bound to their spaces. Cosnay’s *Villa Chagrin* is a novel that does not simply take place, but rather is place. Even the title of the book is a reference to a specific, concrete place: *Villa Chagrin* refers to a prison in the Saint-Esprit neighborhood of Bayonne.

The physical scope of the narrative of *Villa Chagrin* extends well beyond the space of the prison, however. From the beginning, the reader is struck by the text’s insistence on place in general. The sheer number of locations mentioned is not only staggering, but also notably comprehensive, ranging from broad areas like “Europe centrale” (58) to extremely specific references like “111, rue Aristide Briand, à Montrouge” (17). The diversity of these spaces is also striking, including everything from extra-planetary references like Uranus (70), exotic locales like Rangoon (71) and Zambia (20, 42), more familiar names like the Porte d’Orléans (17, 42) and the rue Mouffetard in Paris (39), and small, intimate places like Saint-Esprit (35) and the Mandrill hardware store (11, 14, 51). Islands of stability, these places help physically orient the reader in what proves to be a highly mobile text.

*Villa Chagrin* can be said to be a novel in motion in multiple senses. Physically speaking, the people of *Villa Chagrin* are remarkably mobile. Even within the clearly delimited space of Bayonne, motion is a constant. The narrator, for example, walks through Saint-Esprit and along the Adour River regularly as she thinks about painter Bram van Velde and his companion, the writer Marthe Arnaud. Other people take movement almost to the point of nomadism. In particular, the narrator’s perpetually absent partner, known only as “l’homme que j’aime,” is defined by his motion. His travels “de ville en ville” (15) are one of the few things revealed about this enigmatic figure.

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34 “Cinderella,” for example, could take place in Tokyo or Buenos Aires with no effect on the plot.
Likewise, a great deal of the information given about Bram and Marthe is related to their physical location at a given point in time. The narrator (and by extension, the reader) follows Bram from the Netherlands to France to Mallorca and Marthe from Alsace to Zambia before the paths of these two figures finally intersect in Paris. From there, Bram and Marthe move to Bayonne, where their walks along the banks of the Adour foreshadow those of the narrator seventy years later. She imagines that they walked “non loin peut-être de l’endroit où la quincaillerie Le Mandrill […] sert de repère pour indiquer le chemin de [la] maison” (14). There are certainly moments of immobility and instances of stagnation—Bram’s four-week imprisonment in the prison called Villa Chagrin comes to mind as an example—but by and large, Cosnay’s text is structured around mobility.

However, it is not only people who are in motion in Villa Chagrin, nor is theirs the most important movement in the text. The most significant source of movement in Cosnay’s novel is water. Several rivers traverse the text: the Rhine, the Seine, the Loing, and even an anonymous “fleuve du Sud” (30) are mentioned. Yet the most important river in Villa Chagrin is unequivocally the Adour. Separating the Saint-Esprit neighborhood from the rest of the city, the Adour runs through Bayonne on its way to the Bay of Biscay. It also serves as the dividing line between the Pyrénées-Atlantiques department in which Bayonne is located and the Landes department to the north, physically defining the northern limit of the French Basque Country. Despite its humble course over a mere “trois cent cinquante-cinq kilomètres” (25),35 it is nonetheless the lifeblood of the text, the “large veine blanche” (74) whose passage through Bayonne mirrors its passage through the novel.

35 Cosnay puts the length of the Adour in perspective when she compares it with the Rhine, which at 1325 kilometers is well over three times as long as the Adour (25).
There is little ambiguity with regard to setting in *Villa Chagrin*. The text is extremely precise: not only does it take place in Bayonne, but more exactly in “a triangulation whose terms are the prison, the Adour, and the narrator’s home” (Motte, “Nobody’s Novel” 49). The narrator describes the Mandrill hardware store, for example, as the “endroit symétrique” of the Adour (11). The boulevards Alsace-Lorraine and Jean-Jaurès figure into the equation, as well, providing specific names to help orient the reader to this critical point of textual and geographical convergence. For instance, the narrator uses these avenues to clarify her location when she finds herself “au coin des boulevards Alsace-Lorraine et Jean-Jaurès, non loin de l’Adour et non loin de chez moi” (56), thus adding a more objective element to her spatial position than the imprecision and relativity of “chez moi.” Without a doubt, the Adour is the most important reference point of the text, one to which all other places, even the prison that gives the novel its name, are subordinate. This hierarchy is revealed when the narrator describes Villa Chagrin’s location, which she explains as “cet endroit presque exact de mi-chemin entre l’Adour et la maison de j’habite” (65). It is the Adour, then, that is the physical center of the text.

Still, it is important to remember that rivers like the Adour do not exist alone, but rather within a larger aquatic system. They must necessarily begin and end somewhere, and are often connected to dams, streams, canals, and other rivers. The size of different fluvial networks varies, but they can cover great distances and even span continents, creating dynamic connections between physical spaces near and far. In *Villa Chagrin*, the rivers that connect distant cities serve as the tenuous tie between the narrator and the man she loves. Much like the Adour, which never stops flowing, the mysterious “homme que j’aime” often mentioned by the narrator is also in
continuous motion. He travels “de ville en ville” (15), frequenting cities with rivers\(^{36}\) from Barcelona to Milan and Padua to Los Angeles (15). At one point, the narrator explains that his movements “suiv[ent] le ruban de l’eau entre les rues étroites” (29), mirroring her movements along the Adour in Bayonne. The man is more often away from the narrator than with her and over the course of the novel’s seventy-five pages, rivers are the only physical connection shown between them.\(^{37}\) The man is from everywhere and nowhere at the same time; all that can be said of his provenance or his destination is with respect to rivers: “L’homme que j’aime est de toutes le villes et va le long de tous les fleuves. Il pense que le temps va d’une phrase à une autre, qu’il s’élabore” (48).

The connection between space and time made above by the narrator is not coincidental, but rather is one of many indications of the strong bond between them in the novel. In addition to the almost encyclopedic range of places cited in the text, Cosnay’s novel is characterized by its remarkable precision with regard to timing. For example, Bram’s story begins with his birth “le 19 octobre 1895 […] à Zoeterwoude” (28), and Marthe’s story ends “le 11 août 1959, rue Bobillot” (75). Certain sections of *Villa Chagrin* read more like an official document than a literary work, meticulously cataloguing dates and locations, then listing them in a succinct, purely factual formal. Their brevity, almost telegraphic, is striking:

1936. Lily meurt à Majorque. Bram est rapatrié. Il n’a jamais eu de papiers d’identité et n’en aura jamais.


Celle-ci est charge de tenir la maison.

\(^{36}\) All of the cities mentioned by the narrator (I have cited only a few here) have or are associated with major or distinguishing rivers.

\(^{37}\) In “Nobody’s Novel,” Warren Motte observes that “like the narrator, [the man] spends his time in cities traversed by rivers” (54).

1938, juin. Marthe et Bram se promènent à Mauléon, en Soule.

Ils arrivent à Bayonne. L’Adour. Les ponts. (63)

While this excerpt can by no means be considered a biography of Bram or Marthe, it succeeds nonetheless in defining the date and location of landmark events in their lives. Even in a text like *Villa Chagrin* that has few, if any, superfluous words, the economy of this list is remarkable. Stylistically, such lists may seem out of place in a novel, but these lists are a valuable part of *Villa Chagrin*, offering the reader objective information and much-needed stability in the temporal dimension.

It is also notable that once again, the Adour has a critical unifying role in the novel, for in addition to its functions in physical space as a landmark and a demarcation line, the Adour unites the past with the present in *Villa Chagrin*. Essentially, it bridges the temporal gaps between the novel’s various storylines, just as it geographically links distant places. In a text where the skips and jumps back and forth in time are just as, if not more, important than its leaps and bounds in physical space, the Adour is well-suited to its role as narrative linchpin because, as Warren Motte points out, “the river has traversed a significant span of both time and space in order to arrive at the here and now” (“Roman-fleuve” 174). The Adour represents spatiotemporal continuity: despite its perpetual motion, it is a physical constant that existed in Bram and Marthe’s Bayonne and the narrator’s Bayonne alike.

This tangible and dynamic tie between past and present proves vital to the narrator, who uses it to establish a connection between herself and the people and events she investigates over the course of the novel. The narrator finds herself particularly drawn to Marthe and feels a certain kinship with her due to the similarity between their situations. She frequently finds
herself think about “l’abandon, le mien et celui de Marthe” (52), admitting “je voulais du moins qu’ils fussent les mêmes” (52). The narrator searches for something to explain why both of them have been abandoned by the men they love, but that task proves to be difficult, since the narrator has “aucun renseignement précis sur Marthe Arnaud, son œuvre, l’amour qu’elle donnait, la révolte, les accroupissements” (27). She does not find what she is looking for in the manuscript pages or records she searches for at the municipal archives, but instead finds herself returning to the river time and time again. In this sense, the Adour provides a physical tie between the two women, as both have walked along its banks, told it their secrets, and contemplated its flow. Nearly seventy years separate them, but the river brings their stories together: “20 mars 2005. Je tenais cette histoire de juin 1938, je tenais l’endroit où sur l’Adour les demeures se reflètent, près de la prison appelée la villa Chagrin” (43). Although she cannot say exactly what, she senses that “quelque chose avait bien commencé ici, à l’angle de la villa Chagrin et de l’Adour” (45). Whatever began there between Bram and Marthe is a part of her own story, as well: “La question touchait Bram et Marthe. Elle me concernait aussi” (45).

The importance of the Adour in Villa Chagrin does not end there. The same waters that link Marthe’s life to the narrator also have a larger narratological function: the Adour is the thread that holds the narrative together structurally. It skillfully weaves back and forth between the text’s different stories and narrative levels, resulting in a work that, while challenging and unconventional, still remains accessible and comprehensible. Still, there is no question that Villa Chagrin presents numerous narratological difficulties, even for a sophisticated reader. It is true that the narrator remains the same throughout the text—always an anonymous female je, who may or may not be the author—but the narrative is characterized by its frequent shifts in time,

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space, and focalization. Furthermore, the anonymity of the narrator, combined with the conspicuous dearth of personal information offered about her, makes it difficult to consider *je* the protagonist of *Villa Chagrin*. Whether or not the reader’s restricted access to the narrator’s person and life is due to intentional concealment or simple unawareness on the part of the narrator is unclear. In March 2005, she finds several photographs taken by the man she loves. Paradoxically, she simultaneously identifies and cannot recognize herself. Initially, she confirms:

Les quinze photos qui suivent sont des portraits de femme. Je la reconnais tout de suite, c’est bien moi, elle appelle, de la bouche, l’homme qui regarde. J’appelle. Je la reconnais tout de suite, elle est visible dans le cadre, les yeux sont grands ouverts, elle voit, elle est vue. C’est moi, dans le cadre de l’homme. (39)

She sees herself in the pictures, but the repeated affirmations that it is in fact her in the photos seem to be more of an attempt to convince herself of something she doubts than confirmation of an established fact. Indeed, it is only half a page later that the narrator changes her mind and recants her previous statements, asserting that “*il ne [l’]a jamais prise en photo, en portrait, quinze fois*” (49, italics in original).

Given her apparently limited self-awareness, it is perhaps to be expected that the narrator should have similarly limited information about Bram van Velde and Marthe Arnaud. She mentions on numerous occasions that she does not know much about Bram and Marthe, despite the long hours she has spent in the library and municipal archives. She reiterates that although she has searched with “*autant de curiosité dans l’histoire*” (44), she knows little about either of the two subjects of her inquiry. And yet the narrator is not always able to make sense of what she does know, either. Often, she cannot determine where something fits into the story, admitting
that she “ne savai[t] pas quoi faire de Marthe, enthousiaste, enfantine, accroupie, douloureuse, combative” (46).

In spite of the missing pieces cited by the narrator and her frequent inability to interpret the pieces she has in her possession, Bram and Marthe are without a doubt the two figures about whom the reader knows the most. Even so, regardless of this relative surplus of facts, neither Bram nor Marthe truly qualifies as protagonist, either. Told in disjointed fragments, their stories are still too incomplete to constitute a real story based exclusively on them. At the end of *Villa Chagrin*, their portraits remain unfinished, leaving large swathes of their lives and personalities shrouded in mystery. Bram and Marthe’s shadowy silhouettes reveal just enough information to pique the reader’s interest, but fall short of providing the necessary framework to develop them into full-fledged characters, let alone to consider either of them the protagonist of *Villa Chagrin*.

If information about the narrator, Bram, and Marthe is lacking, even less is known about the other people referenced in the text. Pierre M. “s’est donné la mort dans son appartement de la rue Saint-Maur” (18) in August 2003, the Rigauds take Marthe into their home in Aix for a time before putting her on the train to Paris (53, 75), Bram’s wife Lily died in Mallorca in 1936 “d’une grossesse mal venue” (55), Jacques Putman maintains a collection of Bram and Marthe’s work (54, 75), and “l’homme que j’aime” travels the world in leaps and bounds, following rivers. The pages of *Villa Chagrin* are sprinkled with such references, some more detailed than others, but none of the people they mention can truly be called a character, as they contribute little, if anything, to the narrative structure of the novel and in some cases, do not even appear related to the rest of the story. For the reader, they are no more than names, and in the case of “l’homme que j’aime,” not even that. As a result, despite the actorial status implied by the mention of these names, there remains an unsettling feeling of absence about this apparently characterless text.
Why is this difficulty in identifying characters so troubling? Traditionally, characters are one of the cornerstones of narrative, acting as a point of entrance into a story’s universe and providing the reader with perspective. Even today, in an age where experimental literature is flourishing, most readers are instinctively drawn to and comforted by the presence of characters and rely on them to approach a text. Ultimately, there is no doubt that, as Warren Motte points out, “character remains the surest guarantor of textual accessibility” (“Nobody’s Novel” 47). If character is essential to narrative, a novel such as *Villa Chagrin* that lacks substantial characters is highly problematic not only for the average reader, but for sophisticated readers, as well, as even they require some sort of reference point upon which to structure their understanding of the novel.

Who, then, or what, is Cosnay’s text about? How can or should a reader approach it? The answer, Motte argues, lies in the flowing waters of the Adour. He proposes that “the main character of this text is not a person, but rather a river, the Adour, whose very fluidity provides a model of narrative strategy” (“Nobody’s Novel” 48). In a novel composed of highly dynamically and shifting textual threads, it is only fitting that the narrative itself should be similarly fluent, streaming from the past to the present and back to the past again, establishing a connection between geographically distant people and places as it flows across countries and continents. The Adour is thus the center of the text, orienting the reader across dimensions through use of a distinctive geographical feature that is characteristic of Bayonne and of the French Basque Country. On a more personal level, the Adour links Villa Chagrin to the narrator’s home, thereby bringing the novel to the place where “le hasard [la] fit vivre” (45).

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39 Sharon Spencer observes: “Novel readers continue, by and large, to seek in fiction the classic ideals of a joyous realism along with a ‘story,’ a ‘plot,’ and ‘characters’ depicted in the nineteenth-century manner” (Spencer xv).
It is the Adour that accompanies Bram and Marthe on their walks in 1938 and the narrator on hers in 2005. The Adour witnesses Bram’s imprisonment and the rise and fall of his love story with Marthe. A silent observer of the abandonment and loneliness experienced by both Marthe and the narrator, the river also bears witness to their writing. Thus *Villa Chagrin* was born in the flowing waters of the Adour, the product of love, grief, and above all, change. It is not the titular prison then, but rather the Adour, that is most emblematic of the text’s rhythm and motion, embodying its essence in a way that cannot be rivaled by any of the people or places in the text.

As the dominant element of the novel, there is no doubt that the Adour surpasses Bram and Marthe, the narrator and the man she loves, and even the prison, in importance. Because of its position as the indisputable measure of time and space in the narrative universe of *Villa Chagrin*, it is easy to overlook the narratological significance of the Adour, but its role in the structure of the text should not be underestimated. The simple fact that the Adour is a viable, if not lone, contender for the title of “character” or “protagonist” in *Villa Chagrin* is itself evidence of another kind of movement, one away from convention and generic norms.

In all respects, *Villa Chagrin* is a mobile text. It is about many things—art, love, life, death, and disaster, to name a few—but also about motion. At the hospital in April 2005, the narrator is injected with iodine contrast dye for a test. Seeing her veins turn purple, she observes: “On laçait les routes des veines, on les suivait. Prenez et déchiquetez. Dessinez. Voyez, évaluez. On vit. Ce qui était vivant on le vit, le tracé des sentiers vivants au-dedans” (73). The Adour is much the same, flowing through the text like blood through veins, giving it life. It is followed, photographed, and observed by the people it connects, but it never stops moving. Stopping would signify its end and its death, much like the “circulation précisément arrêtée” (50) that the
narrator observes after the suicide of her friend Pierre M. Always and everywhere, Cosnay’s novel flows with “les rubans des fleuves et des mots” (25), constantly in motion, never standing still.

Xabi Molia

In *Avant de disparaître*, Xabi Molia represents a physical space that differs considerably from that of the other novels considered in this chapter. Molia’s text transforms a familiar city into a broken and embattled fortress. Playing with geometry and the senses, he paints a space of fear and desolation that transcends the page. Antoine, the protagonist, embarks on a quest to find his missing wife, Hélène. His life is turned upside down as he tries to retrace her steps and discover her fate. As he searches, the physical space of the city he traverses mirrors the twists and turns of the mystery he seeks to unravel. His journey, every bit as psychological as it is physical, leads him through dark alleys and into underground tunnels, whose sensory depiction is instrumental in communicating these spaces to the reader.

Looking at city plans, it is not unusual to discover a highly geometric structure behind the hustle and bustle of urban life. Even the unpracticed eye can identify lines, circles, squares, and triangles in the layout of streets and placement of buildings. These shapes and forms are particularly evident in planned cities, where lines are engineered to be straight and circles are not casually broken. Remarkably, this is not merely a Western phenomenon, but rather is found around the world and across the ages. In large part, this universal drive to geometrize space is due to the way the mind processes it. On the most basic level, humans need a coherent system for
organizing space in order to understand it, and we naturally gravitate towards lines and polygons as a method for sorting, dividing, and categorizing. Yi-Fu Tuan explains:

In the Western world systems of geometry—that is, highly abstract spaces—have been created out of primal spatial experiences [...] Human beings not only discern geometric patterns in nature and create abstract spaces in the mind, they also try to embody their feelings, images, and thoughts in tangible material. The result is sculptural and architectural space, and on a large scale, the planned city. (*Space and Place* 17)

Essentially, geometry provides humans with a way to approach an otherwise inaccessible space. Unchecked and unformatted, space is simply too much to apprehend in its natural form: “Nature is too diffuse, its stimuli too powerful and conflicting, to be directly accessible to the human mind and sensibility” (Tuan, *Space and Place* 111-112).

In addition to creating geometric forms, we also ascribe symbolic value to them. Man has a particular predilection for the circle, which for thousands of years, was privileged above other polygons in Europe and the Middle East. Tuan argues that it is the original and most basic form because it represents the mechanisms of the natural world, maintaining that “first man creates the circle [...] and then he can discern circles and cyclical processes everywhere in nature” (*Space and Place* 112). At the same time, circles have a spiritual aspect, as well. A large part of the original reason for the circle’s dominance was religious in nature; a circle “divided into four sectors by two axes” (*Topophilia* 153) was a common symbol of heaven. Finally, circles also represent safety, creating a distinct inside and outside that separate the organized space of civilization from the raw, unprocessed space of nature. This virtue was particularly exploited in Europe during the Middle Ages, when the geometrization of urban spaces was characterized by

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40 Tuan cites the “walled, circular settlements of predynastic Egypt” (*Topophilia* 154).
the construction of circular fortresses and city walls. Anthony Vidler describes this formation as “reassuring to the dweller enclosed ‘in the peace of the fortress’ as the elemental forces of nature were held back” (Warped Space 86). The circle’s unique ability to encompass the concreteness of the natural world and the abstraction of the sublime, in combination with the capacity to satisfy man’s physical and emotional need for security, led to thousands of years of spatial dominance. Indeed, it was not until the early eighteenth century that its primacy was challenged.

Today, urban geometry is more varied, but certain spaces maintain a distinct “geometric personality” (Tuan, Space and Place 17) nonetheless, preferring one shape to all others. Paris, a city known for its arrondissements, is a notable example of this phenomenon. Since the Middle Ages, Paris has been characterized by its circular form, and this tendency has been reinforced over the years, initially by its defensive walls and more recently, by the Boulevard Périphérique that circumscribes it. While the circle is by no means the exclusive geometric form in Paris—a wide variety of polygons can be found in both its structured and natural spaces—it is without a doubt the city’s primary geometric influence. Even today, in a time of shifting boundaries, Marc Augé asserts that it is still possible “to make a detailed description of the arrondissements, their activities, [and] their ‘personalities’” (Non-places 72).

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41 Or their lack thereof. While a radial-concentric design was common, along with grids, some cities were built quickly and haphazardly as necessary defense against invaders and thus had no discernable shape at all (Tuan, Topophilia 157).
42 Tuan comments: “The ancients believed that movement in nature was disposed towards the circular path. The circle symbolized perfection. The moderns, following Newton’s revolutionary thought, postulated the straight line as the natural path of all moving matter” (Topophilia 148).
43 The word arrondissement comes from rond (round), the adjective used to describe the shape of a circle.
44 Yi-Fu Tuan explains that “the medieval core of Paris was concentric in pattern and focused on the Cathedral of Notre Dame on the Île de la Cité” (Topophilia 159).
45 The extension of Parisian metro and RER lines to connect Paris with the surrounding areas is one example of blurred borders.
In the context of *Avant de disparaître*, urban geometry serves as a powerful tool for separating the Paris of the reader’s world from the Paris of the novel. The physical traces left by the war on the fictional Paris are testimony of what the city has endured, battle scars that contrast sharply with the geometry of the pre-war city, which is more or less spatially synonymous with the reader’s Paris. In addition to physically distinguishing the fictional city from the Paris of the real world, the changes seen in the fictional city also show the psychological toll of the war against the *infectés*, the zombie-like figures who threaten the survival of mankind, as the sociocultural effects of the ongoing war are reflected in the revisions to the city’s geometric layout.

Gone are the trappings of modernity and progress that previously characterized contemporary Paris, and what remains of the ruined city has been stripped down to its structural foundation. Noted landmarks like the Eiffel Tower and the Bastille, once focal points of the city, have fallen and have been replaced by a citadel. Antoine describes the skyline one evening after a bombing: “Un rideau de fumée noire se lève au-dessus de Bastille. De nouvelles rafales résonnent depuis les fortifications” (43). The barricades and fortifications that now dominate the urban landscape are the city’s answer to the threat of another invasion by the *infectés*. Terrified, the surviving Parisians have built a circle around themselves for protection. This response is even more logical when one considers where the *infectés* entered the city. The highly symbolic entry point of the invaders was none other than the Porte de Versailles, which, despite its contemporary real world status as a metro station, was once a gate in the old walls encircling Paris. The incursion of the *infectés* at this particular location represents a breach in the protective circle that surrounds the city, and the construction of the fortifications is also the physical reparation of a psychological trauma. Ultimately, it was not only the city that was damaged in the
attack, but the morale of its inhabitants, too, as the physical interruption of the circle severely shook their confidence.

As the city pulls back from the enemy that surrounds it, the area inside the protective circle decreases. Fortifications are built closer and closer to the heart of the city: “On fermait les rues débouchant sur le quai de Jemmapes et le boulevard Richard-Lenoir, on condamnait les portes et les fenêtres des immeubles adjacents, on construisait des fortifications” (33). Located in the 10\textsuperscript{e} and 11\textsuperscript{e} *arrondissements*, the boulevard Richard-Lenoir and the Jemmapes quai are considerably closer to the center of the city than the Porte de Versailles, physical evidence of the city’s reaction to the threat that surrounds it.

Given the emphasis placed on circles by the new citadel and fortifications, it is surprising that the *arrondissements* are virtually absent from the text. Despite the abundance of references to specific streets and metro stations, there is conspicuously little mention of the *arrondissements*. In the world of *Avant de Disparaître*, the *arrondissements* belong to pre-war Paris, and any rare mention of them is a reference to the past. The reorganization of the city into four sectors, named for the cardinal directions, suggests a physical and psychological disconnect between pre-war Paris and the city’s current embattled state. It is as if the physical destruction of large parts of Paris has changed the way its inhabitants conceive of and organize the city, and the change in its spatial divisions is a clear dividing line between past and present.

For example, Archer, the private investigator hired by Antoine to help find Hélène, lives “dans l’une de ces rues du secteur Ouest, proche des fortifications du boulevard Richard-Lenoir” (128). When he tells Antoine what he has learned about François Murillo, on the other hand, he brings up the actions of Murillo’s anarchist group after his death, reporting that “le groupe prônait l’action violente et avait revendiqué plusieurs attaques, dont un avait frappe un
commissariat du cinquième arrondissement” (181). The use of pluperfect, which temporally situates two past actions or events with relation to one another, puts the attack on the precinct in the past of the past, emphasizing the temporal distance between the attack and the narrative present. The arrondissements are a relic of the past, a means of locating things in a city that, after years of invasion and destruction, no longer bears much resemblance to its pre-war self.

Spatial organization is not one dimensional, however, and although the dichotomy between arrondissement and secteur is fundamental, it is important not to overlook the vertical and horizontal dimensions of the city, which can also carry important symbolic meanings. For Yi-Fu Tuan, “vertical elements in the landscape evoke a sense of striving, a defiance of gravity, while the horizontal elements call to mind acceptance and rest” (Topophilia 28). When juxtaposed, the contrast between the two represents the difference between transcendence and immanence (Topophilia 28). Tuan’s theory fits the depiction of Paris in Avant de disparaître almost perfectly. With the destruction of vertical symbols like the Eiffel Tower, the focus of the city’s inhabitants has shifted downwards, to a street or even subterranean level. The lofty, transcendental ideals that characterized pre-war France and, more specifically, pre-war Paris, are no longer practical in a world where basic needs like food and shelter are not guaranteed. People must concentrate on protecting themselves and their families from the maladie and from attacks like the bombings that have razed much of the city. It is not yet a question of transcending the threat posed by the infectés, but rather of simply surviving them.

The flattening of the city’s horizontal profile corresponds to the general shift in attitude, as well, serving as a constant reminder of what it has been through and providing a visible representation of the Zeitgeist. Waiting for his turn at the police station, Antoine contemplates the desolation of the war zone that he sees from the window:
On aperçoit au-delà le ciel strié de colonnes blanchâtres et la silhouette ruinée de la tour Eiffel. Je ne l’avais plus vue depuis un an peut-être. Le sommet déchiqueté tremble dans l’air et donne l’impression que l’édifice dans son entier, dont on ne peut voir la base à moins de se trouver sur les remparts, est désormais suspendu en vol stationnaire au-dessus du champ de ruines, comme un engin spatial, ou comme un temple extraterrestre apparu dans notre époque de désolation. (14)

The horizontal axis of the city is a panorama of destruction, and the vertical is one of despair. The Eiffel Tower is not merely a monument in Paris, it is Paris, and has a nearly mythical status as the synecdochical embodiment of the city. The Eiffel Tower’s devastation is therefore much more than the simple but unfortunate collapse of a physical structure; it represents the ruin of the Parisian spirit, as well. What is left of it can only be seen in its entirely from the ramparts, which are a constant visual reminder of the city’s day-to-day struggle to survive. The beautiful has been replaced by the functional, and the destruction of this powerful symbol of transcendence and aspiration is a heavy blow to morale. A casual conversation between Antoine and the father of three young patients reveals the significance of the monument to the people of the city. The father remarks: “Quand j’ai appris que Joseph Bel allait faire réparer la tour Eiffel […] j’en étais presque à pleurer de joie. La tour Eiffel, c’est quelque chose, non ? Voir comment ils nous l’ont abîmée, ça fait vraiment mal au cœur, qu’on soit de droite ou de gauche” (114). Repairing the Eiffel Tower and reshaping the vertical axis of the city means restoring hope and represents the possibility of not only surviving, but also of transcending the present circumstances.

Oppositions like vertical and horizontal, and inside and outside, are not only important for the actors of a story, but also for the reader. Such contrasts are a crucial part of translating the physical space of a text into terms that the reader can understand. Using these dichotomies to
map a story’s setting allows the reader to conceive of and process the space, which is critical to the success of the story as a whole. As Mieke Bal reminds us, “events always occur somewhere” (*Narratology* 8). Consequently, she classifies location as one of the essential components of a fabula. Its role in the narrative can vary, but without place, there is no story (*Narratology* 8). In the context of a fabula, then, the successful narration of a physical space is no less important than the physical space itself, and binary oppositions are an effective way to communicate these spaces.

Much as spatial elements can be dichotomized, so can the approach to the physical space of a narrative. Essentially, there are two angles from which to consider a space. First, there is the way the actors move within the space of the story and second, there is narrative distance, which can imply physical distance. For Marie-Laure Ryan, there are also two ways of organizing spatial information in a narrative. The map is a panoramic view, seen from above. Ryan explains: “In this mode of presentation, space is divided into segments and the text covers them in systematic fashion, e.g. left to right, north to south, front to back” (“Space” 427). On the other hand, the tour is a dynamic perspective, seen from an actor’s point of view and described by Ryan as “the embodied experience of a traveler” (“Space” 427). The tour approach is far more common in fiction, but the map strategy is an equally important consideration when used. Both can be found in *Avant de disparaître*, which alternates between a distant and global viewpoint and a closer, more detailed perspective.

These two approaches can be employed to achieve different effects, and *Avant de disparaître* makes skillful use of both techniques. On one hand, nearly all of the passages that describe the war or give background information about Antoine use the map approach. These
sections take a global view of space, visualizing Paris and France from above, as the following example shows:

De l’avis général, la France n’était désormais plus qu’un pays uniforme de gravats et de cendres, avec pour seules irrégularités, autour de Paris-Citadelle, quelques plantations fortifiées, grâce auxquelles la ville survivait encore, et des “bases opérationnelles avancées,” bunkers vieillissants dans lesquels se terraient des malheureux attendant la prochaine mission d’appui. (152)

The way this space is presented visually makes it clear that this aerial perspective does not belong to any of the actors in the story. In addition to being seen from above, the range of vision implies a physical distance; this panorama could only be seen from afar. All of the action of the novel takes place on the ground and most of it takes place in Paris, which eliminates the actors as potential narrators or focalizors. Here, heterodiegetic narration both reinforces and is reinforced by the physical distance necessary for the global perspective of this passage.

On the other hand, Antoine’s walks through the city are narrated in a more dynamic style, one that follows him through the streets and includes a visual field consistent with that of someone on the ground. The focalizor is not above the action, but rather is in the action, taking in the space around him and experiencing it as it comes:

Je pars faire ma tournée en remontant le boulevard de Belleville. Une foule très dense s’est rassemblée sur le plein-terre. On se renseigne, on gesticule, tandis qu’un fourgon évacue des corps ensanglantés. L’explosion a eu lieu dans la rue adjacente. Un attentat, me dit une jeune fille, dont les yeux luisent d’horreur et de jubilation. Nous toussons à cause de la poussière de plâtras qui noie le ciel du boulevard. De partout, des gens ont
accouru pour voir. Les attroupements, encore et toujours. Se tenir ensemble pour regarder ce qui se passe. (107-108)

This second passage is thematically similar to the first, but the way that the destruction is perceived and narrated differs considerably. While the narration of the first example insists on its distance from the action, the second excerpt does exactly the opposite, positioning the focal point inside the spatial frame. Accordingly, the first selection provides the reader with a global overview of a space, and the second offers a level of detail that is only possible when the focalizor is a part of that spatial frame. It is precisely the combination of these two approaches that gives the reader a balanced perspective of the physical space in Avant de disparaître.

This combination is not only preferable, but also necessary, because while there are certain advantages to both spatial strategies, each one also has its weaknesses. Pierre Bayard points out that the nuanced approach runs the risk of losing the reader in the details (Comment parler des livres 38-40). In other words, the emphasis on specific, isolated features can make it difficult to conceive of a space as a whole. Conversely, an exclusively global view of space may overlook crucial details necessary for the creation of the mental map required for spatial comprehension of a specific text.

One of the principal advantages of narrating from within a given space is that it allows for the inclusion of sensory details that are imperceptible from afar. The human experience of space is characterized by our multisensory experience of it, and providing information about the sights, sounds, smells, and textures of a place is integral to projecting it into the reader’s mind. With few exceptions, sight is man’s dominant sense. Therefore, it is primarily through sight that
spaces are perceived and comprehended. It is certainly possible to conceive of a space through sight alone—distant, global perspectives like maps are exclusively visual—but relying exclusively on sight is limiting, as there is far more to the world than what is visually perceptible. Other types of sensory input like sound, smell, and touch are also important to the narration and perception of a space and their inclusion in a narrative can help communicate that space to the reader.

Sounds can indicate distance and direction, giving the listener a sense of the size and shape of a space. Experience is necessary to determine exact distances, but from a young age, humans know that the louder a sound is, the closer it is to the person hearing it. Although its influence is subtler, smell also contributes to the way a given space is processed. Citing human tendency to qualify odors as “heavy” or “light,” Tuan argues that smell has dimension, in that it can imply mass and volume (Space and Place 13). Like sight and sound, odors can be perceived from a distance, meaning that while most intense when experienced at their source, they do not require physical presence in that space. By contrast, touch is a direct, unmediated experience of space. Touch requires physical presence and interaction with a space. Tuan explains: “Touch is the direct experience of resistance, the direct experience of the world as a system of resistances and pressures that persuade us of the existence of a reality independent of our imaginings” (Topophilia 8). Touch provides us with immediate and unequivocal feedback about a space and for that reason, it can be argued that touch is more necessary for our survival than any other sense.

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46 So prevalent is this reliance on vision that the phrase “I see” has also come to mean “I understand” in many languages (Tuan, Space and Place 10).
47 Although taste can evidently contribute to perception, its role is generally minor and is limited to specific spaces and circumstances.
48 Indeed, although most humans rely primarily on vision and to a far lesser extent, sound, to make their way through the world, neither is indispensable. The most famous example of someone who lived without sight or
Such non-visual sensory details are often overlooked or excluded from descriptions, but they figure prominently in *Avant de disparaître* and provide added depth and dimension to textual space. Furthermore, Molia integrates his multi-sensory approach into the storyline, making the scents, sounds, and tastes of his novel thematically relevant, as well. His use of certain sensory details is consistent with the novel’s plot and adds to the reality of the fictional world he has created. For example, the limited access to electricity in post-war Paris means that the characters’ vision is impaired after nightfall. In the darkness, they must rely on their other senses to navigate the space around them. One evening, upon realizing that he is being followed, Antoine turns to chase his pursuer, which leads him through an unlit section of the city. The person gets away, and Antoine, forced to give up the chase, takes stock of his location:

> Je m’appuie contre un mur pour reprendre mon souffle. Les bruits de Paris m’entrent dans les oreilles, la modulation des querelles nocturnes, les cris des alcooliques, les appels qu’on ne comprend pas, le murmure sans fin d’un transistor, la rumeur d’un avion dans les nuages et, plus loin encore, l’écho mat des canons. (117-118)

In the darkness, Antoine’s experience of the physical space around him is mainly auditory. The world is a sea of sounds, from arguments and radios to airplanes and cannons. This contrasts sharply with the description of the brightly lit café he enters afterwards:

> Dans un café plein de monde, de l’autre côté de la rue, Hernandez est assis près de la fenêtre, devant une jeune femme qui plisse les yeux en expirant la fumée d’une cigarette. Je m’approche; le lourd visage de l’inspecteur est animé d’un sourire que je ne lui avais jamais vu, effronté, comme s’il pouvait dire des choses drôles, d’ailleurs la femme rit. Au

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hearing is Helen Keller, who, despite being both blind and deaf, went on to earn a college degree. Without touch, however, survival is virtually impossible (Tuan, *Topophilia* 8).
moment d’entrer, je jette un regard derrière moi. L’homme qui me suivait a disparu.

(118)

By simply crossing from one side of the street to the other, Antoine has entered a new space, whose opposition to the dim urban labyrinth from which he has just emerged is emphasized by the change in both the action and the sensory vocabulary. As short as it is, the passage cited above contains several examples. First, the young woman with Hernandez is characterized by the wrinkling of her eyes, the visual organ. Next, Antoine remarks that he has never seen Hernandez smile before. Then, Antoine glances behind as he enters the café. Finally, he discovers that the man who was following him has disappeared, or vanished from his field of vision.

However, the most varied descriptions of space, from a sensory point of view, are those of Antoine’s subterranean forays. The lighting in the underground tunnels is dim and unreliable, so Antoine is forced to supplement his visual perception of the tunnels with his other senses:

Il reprit connaissance dans les décombres, les yeux brûlés par la poussière, sa jambe gauche bloquée sous une poutrelle et sa tête curieusement posée sur le flanc de l’autre homme, qui était mort. Sa poitrine lui faisait mal et il toussa longtemps. Quand il libéra son bras droit, il y eut un glissement de gravats, le bas de son corps s’affaisse d’un bon mètre et la poutrelle vint s’enfoncer contre sa hanche, ce qui le fit gémir. Il entendit un grognement, détecta une odeur putride autour de lui et finit par apercevoir le visage de l’infecté, qui agonisait à un mètre de là, tout proche dans l’obscurité des éboulis. (228)

Although his eyes are burning from the dust and there is very little light, he can still hear the groaning of the infecté, smell his decaying body, and feel the beam pressing into his hip.

Yet Molia’s focus on non-visual senses is not only due to the environmental constraints of certain spaces. In the second half of the novel, Antoine begins to have vision problems, which
gradually worsen until he becomes completely blind. Molia incorporates Antoine’s increasing visual impairment into his descriptions and as Antoine’s blindness progresses, there is a global shift in the narrative towards the other senses. Tactile, olfactory, and auditory sensations, whose influence was previously prioritized only in dark spaces, take on an increasingly dominant role as Antoine’s vision fails:

Mes yeux ne voient presque plus rien, mais je reconnais son bras en écharpe dans la grande silhouette boîteuse qui se glisse à couvert derrière une citerne. Il se met à pleuvoir très fort. Les gouttes frappent le sol autour de moi, la terre gicle. J’entends des appels, le moteur hurlant d’une voiture, puis deux nouvelles explosions derrière la bâtisse. (306-307)

Here, Antoine’s inability to see the space before him is offset by the tactile sensation of the falling rain and the splashing mud and the sounds of cries, car motors, and explosions.

Another example of the progressively larger role played by non-visual senses is Antoine’s description of the unidentifiable place where he waits to be taken to Compiègne. Antoine comments that the area around him has “pratiquement ni son ni odeur” (292), then admits he has “aucune idée de l’endroit où [il se] trouve” (292). He hears voices around him and swims in a nearby river, part of which is covered by a “pellicule huileuse qui [l’]a laissé un peu partout le corps des marques brunes et irritantes” (292). Exploring one of the abandoned buildings, which he believes to have been a supermarket, he comes across some old cans. Most are badly damaged, but one is “encore pleine d’une matière gélatineuse à l’odeur sure.” Exhausted, he finally falls asleep on a “fauteuil humide,” only to be awoken by “les échos d’un bombardement et le son perçant des avions” (293).
In all respects, *Avant de disparaître* offers a variety of approaches to physical space. From the geometric shapes that organize and characterize cities and the use of dichotomic oppositions to delimit and define spaces, to the way places are perceived through different sensory experiences, Molia’s novel shows how different physical spaces can be constructed and represented in a literary context. More than a simple background setting, Paris is a central part of the narrative, attaining a status that is almost actantial in nature. Unquestionably, Molia plays on the fact that few other cities are as famous for their geometrical shape as Paris. The strong association between Paris and its *arrondissements* is instrumental because it means that changes in spatial mapping like the reorganization of the city into *secteurs* and the altered vertical profile of the city are immediately obvious.

The layout of Paris also lends itself exceptionally well to the binary oppositions Molia uses to characterize the city and its people. The clear divisions between vertical and horizontal structures and the circular city walls that separate inside from outside are an effective means of communicating the destruction of the city. Finally, while the novel’s sensory explorations of place are not unique to Paris, there is no doubt that they are of particular interest in a city whose spaces offer such a wide variety of potential sensory experiences.

Unarguably, physical space is a fundamental part of the work of these four authors. Borda, Darrieussecq, Cosnay, and Molia take very different approaches to portraying the physical space of their novels, which ranges from Sydney, Australia, to the rivers and mountains of the Basque Country and post-apocalyptic Paris to the barren wastes of Antarctica. Approached from a geometric, political, sensory, psychological, or other angle, these places become more than a background or setting and develop into dynamic, instrumental components of the narrative.

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49 It is worth noting that in France, it is not only cities whose spatial organization and identity are geometrically determined. On a national level, the French frequently refer to their country as “the Hexagon.”
In 100% Basque, dichotomies are central to the text and demonstrate how binary oppositions can simultaneously unite and divide by creating spaces that shape our thoughts and our actions. *Tom est mort* follows a mother as she mourns her son, embarking on a journey that is both physical and emotional. She retraces her steps from France to London to Vancouver to Australia, where Tom’s death profoundly changes her relationship with these places. *White*, on the other hand, is a study in forgetting and facing the past. Edmée and Peter go on a six-month mission to the ends of the earth, fleeing past traumas, but the bitter cold and the endless white expanse of the Antarctic continent prove to be less conducive to forgetting than expected. In *Villa Chagrin*, a river unites time and space, connecting a narrator to an artist and a writer who lived in Bayonne in the 1930s and 1940s and ultimately revealing itself as the unlikely protagonist of this unconventional and extremely mobile text. Finally, *Avant de disparaître* grafts an imaginary world onto a real place, using Paris’ distinctive geometry and rich, multi-sensory detail to transform its streets into a bleak, post-apocalyptic space that is still accessible to the reader.

In the end, it is not the physical spaces themselves that are the most interesting, but rather the ways in which the authors of these texts choose to represent them. The same space can be portrayed in a nearly infinite number of ways, and with a simple change in perspective, can be rendered almost unrecognizable. Consequently, my analyses of these diverse places are not intended as a sole legitimate approach to these novels, but rather as one of many potential ways of accessing and understanding their respective spaces.

As overwhelming as this universe of possibilities may be, literary portrayals of physical space will always have one thing in common. Character is not as indispensable as it was once thought to be, and the concept of plot has proven to be similarly flexible, but the fact remains...
that all stories must take place somewhere. For this reason alone, representations of physical space will never cease to be relevant to literature.
Chapter Two

Literary Space

“Literary space” is, by all accounts, a loaded term. Indeed, it is nearly impossible to utter those two words without evoking Maurice Blanchot’s eponymous work. A landmark text, *L’Espace littéraire* is certainly a worthy subject of study, but it is important to clarify that it is not the basis for this chapter. More specifically, this chapter is not intended as a commentary about, corollary to, or analysis of Blanchot’s text. On the contrary, the literary space discussed in this chapter is the sphere in which the novels considered in this dissertation exist as works of literature. Here, I examine this sphere in its broadest sense and from a variety of angles, which range from the comprehensive and interdependent view of literature afforded by concepts like intertextuality to the introspective and contemplative deliberations of metanarration.

Given that this is a dissertation on literature, some readers may wonder why I have not chosen to focus on literary space in my first chapter. While I do not dispute that it is central to my field of study, literary space remains on a far more abstract plane than its physical counterpart, and accordingly, I have decided to make it the subject of my second chapter, rather than my first. In many respects, literary space is the broadest of the categories examined in this dissertation. Arguments can be made for nearly any aspect of literature, even tangential ones, to be included in this section. Of the multitude of possibilities, however, I have preferred to limit myself to approaches that do not fit into any of the other spatial categories considered in this dissertation, in the interest of minimalizing potential overlap with other chapters.

I shall begin with an examination of intertextuality in Itxaro Borda’s *100% Basque*. One of the most striking characteristics of Borda’s award-winning novel is its awareness of context.
In other words, 100% Basque is extremely conscious of its place in the vast literary tapestry of Western culture. Borda’s writing leaves little room for doubt that she is exceptionally well read, and consequently, her frequent and varied literary allusions may initially appear to be ostentatious name-dropping. Yet, as is frequently the case in this complex text where little is as it seems, a closer look reveals Borda’s technique to be a thoughtful consideration of the connections between literature and culture. Moreover, her incorporation of other, non-literary references into her novel constitutes an attempt to contemporize and expand the idea of intertextuality, much as she seeks to broaden and modernize thinking in Basque society today.

Next, I will discuss the concept of metafiction in two of Marie Darrieussecq’s novels, Le Bébé and Le Pays. Metafiction is, by definition, a work of fiction that is conscious of itself as such. One of the many forms this technique can take is writing about writing, and it is precisely this that I shall analyze in these two Darrieussecq texts, both of which feature a writer as protagonist. Despite this initial similarity, the two works show how the same theme can be approached differently in terms of both diegesis and structure. In these two novels, Darrieussecq explores literal and metaphorical metanarrative techniques, drawing clear parallels between the content of her work and its form, while questioning some of the rigid boundaries and limits that she believes concern writers today.

Third, I will consider Marie Cosnay’s Villa Chagrin through the lens of ludics, examining the ways in which Cosnay playfully challenges and defies generic conventions in her text. Beginning with a discussion of the difficulties in defining the novelistic genre, I will

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50 It is impossible to discuss Marie Darrieussecq in the context of the larger literary scene without mentioning the charges of plagiarism brought against her by Marie NDiaye and Camille Laurens, accusations which she addresses directly in her 2010 text Rapport de police: Accusations de plagiat et autres modes de surveillance de la fiction. I do not, however, wish to entangle myself in that particular controversy, nor do I believe I could do it justice in the very limited space of a chapter section. Consequently, I have decided to restrict my consideration of the matter to this footnote, and I would direct interested parties to Darrieussecq’s aforementioned text for a more comprehensive discussion of the issue.
establish a link between text, movement, and play. Although “play” is a somewhat problematic term, I shall outline a basic theory of play as described by Warren Motte, and focus on two of its primary manifestations in Villa Chagrin, namely, the reader-writer dynamic and the complicated relationship between text and image. Through her exploration of these two themes, Cosnay’s novel becomes the playground for some fascinating and highly relevant games.

Finally, I shall conclude this chapter with an exploration of Xabi Molia’s Fourbi and its place in the debate raging between popular fiction and literature. On one level, an argument can be made for considering Molia’s first novel as genre fiction; more specifically, as a detective story. But closer examination uncovers a text that is also extremely literary, with structural, stylistic, and diegetic elements that are clearly steeped in tradition and carefully built on Molia’s keen understanding and awareness of literary history. A discussion of some of the characteristics of both genre and literary fiction will serve as the criteria for evaluating Molia’s text against both categories, with the goal of determining how Fourbi fits into the increasingly diverse space of contemporary literature.

Itxaro Borda

Intertextuality is simultaneously a very simple and enormously complex concept. On its most basic level, “intertextuality” is exactly what the term suggests: inter- means between or among, text comes from the Latin textus, “to weave,” and –ity describes a “quality, state, or degree.” When these various elements are combined, the resulting “intertextuality” refers to the relationships that exist between different texts. In the words of Michael Riffaterre, “an intertext is one or more texts which the reader must know in order to understand a work of literature in

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terms of its overall significance” (“Compulsory Reader Response” 56). Essentially, our understanding and interpretation of the texts we read is dependent on our comprehension of these interwoven literary relationships.

However, things inevitably become more difficult when we try to define the precise nature of those relationships. What exactly constitutes an intertextual relationship is not always immediately evident; and to complicate the matter further, there is no universal consensus on that issue. On the contrary, there are many theories explaining how and why texts are connected and, on a larger level, how those connections can be used by the reader. In the context of this dissertation, I cannot hope to elucidate those theories; their sheer number and the level of analysis required to do them justice far surpass the scope of my work here and to attempt such an endeavor would only distract me from the task at hand. Thus, I shall limit my considerations of intertextuality here to the aspects most relevant to Itxaro Borda’s 100% Basque.

Despite their differences, theorists from Michael Riffaterre to Gérard Genette agree that all texts are inherently intertextual, although to varying degrees. This is because, as Pierre Bayard points out, “there is no such thing as an isolated text” (How To Talk About Books 117). No text exists in a vacuum, but rather as part of our literary culture. Many authors, striving for originality, may seek to minimize or obscure their intertextual influences, but that is not the case for Borda, who, on the contrary, openly embraces them. Moreover, not only is Borda overtly cognizant of the importance of these relationships, she also uses them both diegetically and structurally as a framework for her text, drawing themes and strategies from that intricate network. In her work, nothing is hidden and everything is connected; nearly every page of 100%
Basque contains some sort of intertextual reference. In this chapter, I shall identify several important intertextual references in 100% Basque and examine their role in the novel. Then, I will evaluate their effectiveness, revealing how and why they function in the text. Finally, I will explore some of the references that Borda borrows from other media, demonstrating why they are an appropriate addition to her text and revealing how they constitute a sort of social commentary that mirrors Borda’s larger message for Basque society.

100% Basque begins with a grandiose intertextual reference that is anything but subtle: “Longtemps je me suis couchée tard, contrairement à Marcel, pauvre asthmatique tellement, tellement, oui tellement attendrissant!” (9). This incipit is, of course, an overt nod to Proust, one so obvious as to be readily apparent even to those who have not read the Recherche. Yet we must resist the temptation to conflate blatancy and simplicity, for this loaded declaration has multiple functions beyond its obvious one. On one level, this monumental phrase functions as a sort of prolegomenon, an introduction to the nocturnal meetings that serve as the premise for much of the novel. At the same time, however, this sentence also carries significant symbolic meaning, forging a link between Proust’s work and Borda’s, and thereby announcing generic and thematic ties between the two. Michael Worton and Judith Still observe that such instances of intertextuality “function as textual strategies, as tropological events, as metaphors” and remark that as a result, the reader is compelled “to read the borrowing not only for its semantic content but also for its tropological or metaphoric function and significance” (Intertextuality 10-11).

Thus, beyond its immediate meaning as a disclosure of the narrator’s bedtime habits, Borda’s inaugural phrase is also a symbolic statement which, by evoking a cornerstone of the

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52 I am considering intertextuality here in a broader sense that is perhaps better described as intermediality, a concept I will explore in greater detail later in this section.

53 Proust’s Recherche is a theme throughout the entire novel. For example, attending her meetings requires the narrator to drive across the Basque Country on a road she calls the Route du fromage. The cheese she associates with these nighttime journeys and this road is a Basque version of the Proustian madeleine.
literary canon, situates her novel in what Bayard calls the “collective library” (*Books* 117), or the ensemble of literature that comprises the framework of Western culture. In *100% Basque*, the metaphorical meaning is no less clear or deliberate than the semantic one, and Borda’s narrator openly iterates her intentions: “Voilà que par la magie d’une phrase, je place mon roman naissant sous la houlette d’une tradition littéraire réputée, universelle et confirmée” (9). Here, there is no question of a simple admiration of Proustian phrasing, nor even of a particular predilection for Proust’s work in general. Instead, this is a complex statement that simultaneously accomplishes three things. First, it recognizes literary convention, acknowledging norms and accepted limits. Second, it establishes the place of Borda's novel within the literary system, determining its place in the larger space of literature. Finally, it guides the reader’s expectations, giving him or her an idea of what to expect and creating parameters for interpretation. Based on this sentence, the reader can make certain assumptions about Borda’s novel, for “to read an explicitly (or tacitly) quoting text is not to engage in a simple play with and of sources, but to recognise and establish criteria of significance” (Worton and Still, *Intertextuality* 12).

A second potential objective of this rather direct first paragraph is an appeal to legitimacy. Highly unconventional in many ways, Borda’s novel risks being overlooked or even dismissed because of its idiosyncrasies, given that it ignores a good number of generic traditions concerning plot, structure, and character. Furthermore, the fact that *100% Basque* is intended as a social critique means it is crucial that Borda’s novel be taken seriously if it is to have any chance of effecting social change. Consequently, not only is this legitimizing function consistent with her objectives, it is also central to them, even critical. There is no doubt that a text which, to paraphrase Borda, anchors itself in tradition and affiliates itself with the work of an author like

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54 I address many such departures from convention in *100% Basque* in my other chapters.
Proust, hopes to associate itself with that work’s indisputably established place in the literary canon. Yet at the same time, that act of association also sets up a relationship of opposition. By linking itself to a canonical work, the text in question also calls attention to its own departures from the canon.

Ross Chambers explains:

If intertextuality functions within the literary system as an oppositional gesture toward (socially) canonised texts of the “tradition,” it constitutes at the same time, by virtue of its own implicit but necessary address to a readership that will so recognise it, an appeal for canonisation on its own behalf, that is for the (social) acceptance of its own (socially and literarily) oppositional gesture. (“Alter Ego” 145) 

In other terms, a text’s appeal for association with an established canonical work paradoxically functions at the same time as a statement of differentiation from that same work. What is more, it is not simply from Proust that Borda seeks to differentiate herself, but also from what Proust represents. Bayard notes: “We never talk about a book unto itself; a whole set of books always enters the discussion through the portal of a single title, which serves as a temporary symbol for a complete conception of culture” (Books 73). In effect, Proust’s *Recherche* functions synecdochically here, standing in for not only the literary canon, but also for the status quo and convention in general; and it is only by acknowledging and defining these established and accepted cultural norms that *100% Basque* can separate itself from them and criticize them.

Furthermore, the intertextuality at play between Borda’s novel and the canonical texts that she references mirrors the sort of binary oppositions that she exposes behind people’s spatial and social preconceptions and prejudices in the Basque Country.55 Riffaterre explains:

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55 These dichotomies are explored in more detail in my chapter on physical space.
Intertextuality enables the text to represent, at one and the same time, the following pairs of opposites (within each of which the first item corresponds to the intertext): convention and the departures from it, tradition and novelty, sociolect and idiolect, the already said and its negation or transformation. (“Compulsory” 76)

100% Basque does precisely that. Borda’s text juxtaposes narrative and structural innovation with French and Basque literary traditions, while her exploration of language and linguistic politics in France and in the Basque Country as a whole sheds light on existing sociopolitical hierarchies through direct and indirect references to theorists like Pierre Bourdieu. Similarly, she interrogates concepts like “authenticity” by examining and deconstructing clichés and through her use of traditional Basque figures like the bertolari, or singing poet. As a technique for exposing the reality behind stereotypes and stripping away façades, intertextuality is a critical part of Borda’s novel and an indispensable tool in her mission to reveal cultural and societal shortcomings.

While there is little doubt about the metaphoric and contextual value of Proust in 100% Basque, the role of other, lesser-known allusions in the text is not as clear. A good number of Borda’s references are mainstream, which means that they will be easily picked up on by most readers, who will recognize names like Hugo and Zola even if they have not read their work. However, there are also several fairly esoteric references that are less accessible to the average reader. Axular de Sare, for example, does not enjoy the same name recognition as Jean-Paul Sartre or even Georges Perec, and therefore will not elicit the same immediate response. In spite of the fact that he is considered to be one of the fathers of Basque literature, knowledge of Axular’s work is primarily confined to well-educated Basque circles. Accordingly, many readers

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56 I discuss some of these deviations in detail in my chapter on narratological space.
57 Including both the Spanish and French Basque provinces.
58 Pedro de Axular (1556-1644) was the author of Gero, one of the cornerstone texts of Basque literature.
will miss Borda’s references to the colorful popular legends surrounding him and, perhaps more importantly, they will be unaware of his canonical status. What, then, is the interest in writing that the “curé Axular de Sare qui, privé de son ombre, égaré en se rendant à l’Université de Salamanque, se démenait comme un beau diable pour lutter contre le péché en prêchant tout et son contraire” (13-14) when a significant portion of readers will only appreciate the semantic value of this sentence?

If, as Chambers argues, “there can be no intertextuality […] except as it is produced by a reader in the act of perceiving the textual discourse as part of the literary system” (“Alter Ego” 145), it is impossible not to wonder about the purpose of intertextual references to works like Axular’s Gero; and indirect references like the one above to José Miguel Barandiarán’s collection of tales about Axular are of even more dubious utility. In other words, “the question arises as to whether intertextuality ceases to work when the reader is unfamiliar with the intertexts involved” (Riffaterre, “Compulsory” 73). Does lack of familiarity with a reference render it useless? The answer, for both Riffaterre and Borda, is no.60

According to Bayard’s argument that a text’s specific content is superseded by its contextual significance, it is possible to circumvent this problem by providing an adequate frame of reference. As he observes, “most statements about a book are not about the book itself, despite appearances, but about the larger set of books on which our culture depends at that moment”

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59 It is important to remember that there are two different versions of 100% Basque (one in Basque and one in French) and that those editions have different audiences. The original text, published in Basque, is aimed at a relatively narrow audience, predominantly comprised of well-educated Basques on both sides of the border, most of whom will in fact be familiar with Axular, as well as the other Basque literary figures referenced in the text. The French version, on the other hand, has a more heterogeneous readership, composed of a more mainstream public in the French Basque Country and in the Hexagon, as well as Francophone readers in the Spanish Basque Country. Since this dissertation is about French literature, my focus here is primarily on the French adaptation of Borda’s novel.

60 Nevertheless, this “no” is a qualified one. As I shall later demonstrate, although esoteric references do not entirely cease to function in the presence of an uninitiated reader, they do in fact work distinctly in that case. Essentially, intertextuality works differently for different readers, depending on their knowledge of the intertexts in question.
Consequently, being cultured is not a question of having read a given number of books, but rather of understanding how those books fit together. He argues:

Culture is above all a matter of orientation. Being cultivated is a matter not of having read any book in particular, but of being able to find your bearings within books as a system, which requires you to know that they form a system and to be able to locate each element in relation to the others. *(Books 10-11)*

Indeed, the solution to the problem of unfamiliar texts is proper contextualization. By heralding her novel as “l’union littéraire de Proust et d’Axular” *(14)*, Borda pairs the seminal Basque author with the far more well-known Proust, whose status in the canon is indisputable. The marriage of familiarity with esotericism makes Axular—and by extension, Borda’s novel—more accessible to the uninitiated reader. That practice is by no means unique to Borda, nor is it a literary novelty. As Riffaterre observes, it is in fact quite common to provide additional clues to ensure that the reader is aware of the relevant intertextual connections:

As always in literary texts, a number of secondary signals ensure that even the most absent-minded readers will find the thread leading to the solution. These signals consist in repeating words from the descriptive systems […] or amplifying these words into periphrases, each of which constitutes a mini-description to make the point explicit.

*(“Compulsory” 65)*

Borda makes frequent use of that technique, which allows her to include references whose significance would otherwise be entirely lost on the majority of her French language readers. Harnessing the power of context, she does not hesitate to make allusions to authors who are even lesser known than Axular:
J’ai consulté les volumineux lexiques d’Azkue, de Lhande, de Lafitte, de Casenave et de Sarasola à la recherché d’adjectifs spécifiques pour dire mon envie de toi(t) […] Je pense donc, champs pour champs tel Bourdieu, que la création d’un corpus de mots positifs désignant le sexe devrait constituer une des premières actions dévolues au Conseil de la langue. (35-36)

Alone, it is doubtful that the names of the authors of the aforementioned “voluminous lexicons” carry much, if any, meaning for the reader; but by identifying their connections with linguistics and language, the reader is able to deduce their approximate place in the collective library. Bourdieu, for his part, is a strategic addition to this anecdote, providing an island of familiarity in a sea of foreign names that the reader may be able to use as a point of reference.

In the same way, Borda’s allusion to Clausewitz and Sun Tzu in a chapter about Basque separatist politics is also phrased in such a way as to orient the reader and minimize confusion by using contextual clues to suggest their place in literature and history. The more familiar name of Sun Tzu is matched with that of the lesser-known Prussian military strategist, and both are incorporated into a paragraph about war:


As Borda repeatedly proves, references to authors that might otherwise be dismissed as inconsiderate or even elitist can, when properly contextualized, be appreciated by a relatively broad audience. Thus, while it is doubtless desirable for readers to have some concept of the
identity and importance of the authors who are mentioned and a general idea of their work, intimate knowledge of the content of these authors’ texts is by no means required for these references to be effective. Because of her skillful use of context, Borda’s allusions to unfamiliar authors and literature, Basque or otherwise, are far from the insurmountable obstacle that they may initially appear to be.

At the same time, however, it is important to recognize that no amount of contextualization can entirely close the gap between initiated readers and the general public, and that each reader will have a different understanding of the references in 100% Basque—or any text, for that matter—based on his or her literary and cultural background. Borda’s carefully calculated intertextuality can be understood on several levels. First, for readers who have read or are familiar with the Basque canon, her references to it are immediately evident. For example, when Borda tells of slowing down one night on the Route du fromage to avoid running over a hedgehog, these readers will doubtless recognize that as a reference to the Basque literary giant Bernardo Atxaga and his writing. For those who have not read Atxaga’s work but have heard of him, Borda cites “le poème d’Atxaga” (225) in the next sentence, indicating the type of text in question, but not divulging its content. Finally, for readers who have neither read nor heard of Atxaga, she clarifies the association between the Basque author and the animal: “Selon le poème d’Atxaga, cet animal possédait un vocabulaire limité à vingt-sept mots. Conscient de cette pauvreté lexicale, il tentait pourtant d’aller à la rencontre du monde” (225). That explanation is sufficient to ensure that the third type of reader is not entirely lost, and it provides him or her with enough information to understand the intertextual reference literally as well as metaphorically. Even so, it is important to acknowledge that despite Borda’s efforts to level the
playing field, a reader from the first group will retain an important advantage over the others and will, in the end, have the most nuanced understanding of that allusion.

Despite the text’s ultra-literary character, use of intertextuality in *100% Basque* is not restricted to the literary realm, however. On the contrary, Borda’s application of intertextuality is a global one that is best described as *intermedial*, given that it encompasses a wide variety of domains, including music, current events, and sports, to name only a few. Borda’s references to groups like the Beach Boys and conspiracy theory hubs like Roswell, New Mexico may be surprising, interspersed as they are among her allusions to Hugo and the Garat brothers. Indeed, some may view that unorthodox technique as a dissonant clash between pop culture and tradition. Others still will question the relevance of Dolly the cloned sheep in a text that dares to compare itself to Proust’s *Recherche*. Yet those references are no less intentional, no less carefully considered than her mentions of Zola or Perec—and in this text, they are no less appropriate.

Much like Borda’s abundant literary allusions, her intermedial references serve several different purposes. First and most obviously, the addition of this unexpected dimension is a way of appealing to a wider and more diverse audience. In essence, Borda’s comprehensive intermedial approach is an invitation to readers with a variety of interests and backgrounds, which provides them with an alternative means of orienting themselves both within her text and within the larger system of which it is part. While, as I have noted, many readers will not have read Axular or Clausewitz, most will recognize references to mainstream music like Massive Attack and popular figures like James Bond, and Borda uses that familiarity to her advantage.

At the same time, those intermedial allusions also serve as a temporal reference. The literary canon is not known to be a particularly dynamic body; it is generally slow to change. For

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61 By *intermedial*, I mean that it crosses the boundaries between different media.
instance, a reference to Plato’s cave from a text written well over two thousand years in the past can be as relevant and meaningful today as it was fifty, a hundred, or perhaps even five hundred years ago. Granted, some contemporary authors figure in 100% Basque, but those mentions are relatively few when compared with Borda’s numerous allusions to traditional, time-honored literature. By contrast, her references to other media are, for the most part, grounded in the present. The fact that Borda discusses Dolly the sheep, for example, means that her novel cannot have been written before 1996, the year of Dolly’s birth. Although the novel’s date of publication is readily procurable, it is unlikely to be in the forefront of the average reader’s mind and subsequently, that reference, like many others, is a subtle way of establishing a timeframe for her text. Since 100% Basque is intended as social critique, it is especially important that the reader know not only who, what, and why Borda is criticizing, but also when, if Borda’s comments and observations are to mean anything.

Finally, on a metaphorical level, the intermediality of 100% Basque represents the possibility of a symbiotic relationship between literature and other media, a particularly important issue today, when the value of the printed page—and more specifically, the novel—is constantly called into question, and the novel is seen as being in competition with digital media. Borda’s text shows that writing and other media are not mutually exclusive and suggests that there is room for both in today’s world. That problem would be difficult, if not impossible, for Borda to evoke with an exclusively literary intertext.

It is evident that intertextuality is a major part of 100% Basque, central not only to its narrative character, but also to its potential as a tool for social critique. Borda begins by citing Proust, a technique which serves to locate Borda’s text in the collective library of Western culture, thereby providing the context necessary to understand more esoteric references.
Incorporating a variety of media into the novel appeals to a larger audience, in addition to establishing a timeframe for her critique and raising important questions about the role of various media in contemporary culture.

Unconventional as this intermedial and transtextual approach may be, it is also structurally and thematically characteristic of 100% Basque. While she acknowledges and appreciates tradition, Borda is not afraid to challenge it, either, and her use of intertextuality is one of her primary methods of doing so. Effectively, Borda’s novel offers the reader proof that tradition and innovation can coexist, a message that applies not only to literature, but to Basque society, as well.

Marie Darrieussecq

One of the most notable characteristics of Marie Darrieussecq’s œuvre is without a doubt its self-awareness; her novels are conscious of themselves as texts and of Darrieussecq as an author. Far more complex than a simple or formulaic mise en abyme,62 Darrieussecq’s work is, in fact, an excellent example of metafiction, defined by Patricia Waugh as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to itself as an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Metafiction 2). This self-awareness can take many forms, but essentially, metafiction is “fiction about fiction—that is, fiction that includes within itself a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity” (Hutcheon 1).

While that terminology is new, the technique is not; dating back to Cervantes at the very least,63 compelling arguments can equally be made that it existed as early as Aristotle, evident in

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62 This is not to say that the mise en abyme is a simplistic or irrelevant technique, but rather that metanarration takes multiple forms in Darrieussecq’s work, instead of limiting itself to this single manifestation.

his writings about mimesis and diegesis (Hutcheon 5). Although these two ideas are frequently presented in opposition to one another, portrayed as neatly defined categories, they are not necessarily diametrically opposed concepts, nor are they automatically mutually exclusive in metafiction (Hutcheon 48), and that marriage of methods ultimately results in a text that is “both the storytelling and the story told” (Hutcheon 10). However, they manifest themselves textually in different ways; that is, diegetic metafiction is generally found in the discourse of a narrative, whereas mimetic metafiction is most often seen in the structure. In either case, both styles aim to “call [the] reader’s attention to the activity of writing as an event within the novel, as an event of equally great significance to that of the event of the story which he is supposed to be telling” (Hutcheon 12).

Metafiction takes a variety of forms in several of Darrieussecq’s novels, but its most readily apparent expression can be found in Le Bébé and Le Pays, the two texts I have chosen as the focus of this section. For each text, I shall examine the ways in which Darrieussecq uses diegetic and mimetic metanarrative techniques to tell her story, considering the literal and metaphorical aspects of their narrative, as well as exploring their discursive and structural manifestations. I will begin with the Le Bébé, which I believe contains a more elemental expression of those concepts, and conclude with Le Pays, which offers a more nuanced and developed study of those themes.

1. Le Bébé

As the title suggests, Le Bébé is essentially a meditation on babies. It is the story of a new family, composed of a mother, a father, and their baby boy. Chronicling the first nine months of the baby’s life, it traces the transformation of the couple’s son from a premature newborn to a
lively and curious nine-month-old baby. But despite its insistent focus on babies, Darrieussecq’s text is also very much about writing. The protagonist of Le Bébé is the baby’s mother, a writer by profession, who must reevaluate her priorities after her son is born, raising important questions about her work and questioning her identity as a mother and a writer. Le Bébé is an excellent metafictional case study because, as Hutcheon notes, “the self-consciousness of a text often takes the shape of an explicit thematization—through plot allegory, narrative metaphor, or even narratorial commentary” (Narcissistic Narrative 23). Yet Darrieussecq is not content with an easy or exceedingly obvious allegory, and consequently she takes the idea of metafictionality a step further in Le Bébé: one day, the protagonist decides to write a book about babies and, as the story unfolds, the reader discovers that the very text he or she is reading is the novel being written by the protagonist.

From a diegetic perspective, the metanarration in Le Bébé can be divided into two types, literal and metaphorical. In the case of the former, the most conspicuous incidence is the protagonist’s unabashed declaration that she is writing a book. The mother clearly spells out her intentions, commenting: “Je commence à dire à mes proches que j’écris un nouveau livre, pour la première fois une version de vie: un livre sur ‘le bébé’” (136). This apparently simple statement is charged with meaning, however, and it is significant on several levels.

First, there is the fact that it is written in the present tense. There is no separate present progressive tense in French, so the use of the present here can suggest immediacy, a lack of delay between the moment the words are spoken and the moment the protagonist writes them down. In this sense, the protagonist’s sentence can be seen as an act of creation, a speech act that calls Darrieussecq’s text into existence by announcing its birth, while at the same time, actually

64 Hutcheon’s description of an “interesting kind of overt diegetic self-consciousness [in] which the focus is on the process of actually writing the fictional text one is reading at the moment” (Narcissistic Narrative 53) fits Darrieussecq’s scenario in Le Bébé perfectly.
being the text in question. Second, there is a potential play on the word proche. Mes proches means “the people with whom I am close,” and while it is implied that the closeness in question is an emotional one, a physical closeness would be not be out of place here, either, given that we, as readers, are physically close to the statement on the page. Thus, it is a nod to the reader, an acknowledgement of his or her proximity to the text as a concrete object and of the reader’s role as a witness to its creation. Finally, the quotation marks around “le bébé” are highly suggestive of the possibility that the words are being used as a title, rather than just to indicate the topic of the protagonist’s book. Indeed, the fact that it happens to be the title of the book that the reader has in his or her hands seems unlikely to be purely coincidental.

As a rule, the protagonist’s references to the book in progress place a critical emphasis the immediacy of her writing. For example, the mother explains: “Pour prolonger de quelques minutes l’écriture de cette page, je l’ai retourné sur le ventre: il se rendort profondément. Cette position, de nos jours, est déconseillée par les médecins: elle favoriserait ‘la morte subite de nourrisson’” (14-15). Rather than une page, which would be equally logical here, it is worth noting that she chooses a demonstrative adjective instead. Cette page suggests, even insists on, a simultaneity of process: we are reading what she writes as she is writing it. The ink on the page has scarcely had time to dry, and this page does not even have the time to become that page or a page before we read her work.

The mother’s disclosure that stomach sleeping is not advised, after her confession that she has nonetheless resorted to the practice, leads to another theme of the diegetic metanarrativity in Le Bébé, namely, the novel’s persistent questions about the compatibility of motherhood and writing, which is no less the subject of this book than are the baby and the writing process. A mother and an author herself, Darrieussecq uses her protagonist’s writing to
question the validity and legitimacy of her own text: “La trivialité qu’on prête aux femmes, leur côté “terre-à-terre”—bouffe, couches, mamelles, harassement du quotidien—, les questionneurs la liront aussi dans mes pages” (80). On several occasions, the protagonist comments that there is a distinct prejudice against authors and working mothers, one that Darrieussecq has doubtless experienced firsthand. The mother’s description of her administrative battles with daycare stand alone as commentary on this issue: “La vieille hantise resurgit, qu’on réduise l’écriture, ce travail, à une lubie de femme oisive. Hantise qu’on décide que mon métier n’en est pas un, et qu’on me supprime ma place en crèche” (134). Ultimately, however, Le Bébé makes Darrieussecq’s position on the matter clear: one can be both a good writer and a good mother. In the words of her protagonist: “Bonheur d’écrire, bonheur d’être avec le bébé: bonheurs qui ne s’opposent pas” (99).

The novel’s mise en abyme is not only diegetic in nature (a book talking about a book), but also structural, in that the novel being written is the very one the reader is reading. Most evident is the fact that the novel is organized into cahiers rather than a more conventional division into chapters or parts. The protagonist regularly references the notebooks she uses for writing, creating an unmistakable association in the reader’s mind between the cahiers used for the protagonist’s drafts and the cahiers that the reader is reading. As a result of that structural tactic, the reader, who holds a physical piece of the narrative in his or her hands, is actively drawn into the story. When the protagonist reveals: “J’écris pour conjurer le sort—tous mes livres: pour que le pire n’advienne pas. J’écris ce cahier pour éloigner de mon fils les spectres, pour qu’ils ne me le prennent pas” (79), readers have the feeling that by holding ce cahier, they, too, are helping the mother keep her son safe.
The fact that *Le Bébé* is simultaneously the novel being produced and the novel as a product corroborates Hutcheon’s observations regarding the metanarrative tendency towards conflation of process and product; but even so, the reader cannot help but wonder about the compatibility of those two seemingly antinomical states of existence. Hutcheon quotes David Caute, who declares: “Allow me a touch of McLuhanesque glibness: the product is the process. Language and literature must revive their true identity—as the cutting edge of perception. Creativity and the critical spirit must achieve a new harmony and interdependence” (*Narcissistic Narrative* 17). In *Le Bébé*, not only is the act of writing the subject matter of the novel, it is also the formal link between the content of the narrative and the structure of the text at hand.

But what kind of text is *Le Bébé*, exactly? Is it simply a novel, or perhaps something more? As many readers are likely aware, *Le Bébé* was published when Darrieussecq’s son was born. That fact, in conjunction with several textual clues, hints strongly at the possibility that *Le Bébé* is an autobiographical work. If we consider Philippe Lejeune’s definition of autobiography as a “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” (*Le Pacte autobiographique* 14), then it is not unreasonable to entertain the idea, especially given that much of the text’s metanarrative self-awareness comes from elements likely drawn from Darrieussecq’s own life. The most striking example of the text’s autobiographical tendencies is the list of writing projects assembled by the protagonist of *Le Bébé*, which includes “un roman en Antarctique, *White*, en deux volets distincts” and “La Princesse de Clèves, à écrire par éclatement, comme un mobile de Calder” (147), two texts that Darrieussecq did in fact write after publishing *Le Bébé*. Although it is never explicitly stated in the text, it is generally accepted

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65 For example, the narrator goes to visit her mother, who lives in a small town in the Basque Country.
that *Le Bèbé* is at least partially autobiographical, which brings up the unavoidable question of classification. Can a text still be considered a novel if it is autobiographical, given that the designation of “novel” is typically reserved for works of fiction? If metafiction, by definition, only applies to fiction (as opposed to in autobiographies, which are generally considered to be nonfiction), is it appropriate to consider *Le Bèbé* a work of metafiction?

In “Autobiography as Intertext: Barthes, Sarraute, Robbe-Grillet,” Ann Jefferson notes that “both Sarraute and Robbe-Grillet […] insist on presenting their autobiographies as continuations of their ever-evolving fictional enterprise” (*Intertextuality* 110). I believe that the same is true for Darrieussecq, who published *Le Bèbé* at the same publisher she uses for her texts that indisputably belong to the novelistic genre and who is careful to avoid using the word “autobiography” anywhere in the textual or paratextual space of her book. Perhaps it is better to think of *Le Bèbé* in terms of autofiction then, a sort of middle ground between fiction and autobiography. As the protagonist of *Le Bèbé* observes, there is an undeniably fictional component to reality at times, for the boundaries between fact and fiction are not always as clear as we might wish to believe. She sums up that dynamic well when she remarks: “L’autre livre affleure, l’envers sombre de ce livre, sur les lieux mêmes de nos vies. La fiction, pour dire la totalité” (120). If our lives are, to a certain extent, fiction, then perhaps it is more accurate to call the autobiography autofiction, instead. In that case, a metafictional approach to *Le Bèbé* would not be inappropriate.

Unquestionably rich in metanarrative devices and structures, *Le Bèbé* succeeds in telling a convincing story without letting itself be overwhelmed by form or theory. In spite of the fact that Darrieussecq never lets the reader forget that he or she is reading a novel, that does not

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66 *Truismes, White,* and *Naissance de fantômes* come to mind, for example. Like *Le Bèbé,* those texts were published by P.O.L.
detract from the quality of the narrative, but rather enriches it. At the same time, *Le Bébé* offers a thoughtful contemplation of the writing process, as well as interrogating related social issues like the perceived incompatibility of career and motherhood. Much like the baby—an apparently simple being whom Darrieussecq’s text reveals to be far more complex than he or she seems—*Le Bébé* is a much deeper work than it initially appears to be, resonating across diegetic and structural boundaries and offering profound reflections on life, love, and creation.

2. *Le Pays*

In *Le Pays*, Darrieussecq offers another, more nuanced example of metafiction. The story of a woman who returns to live in the newly independent land where she grew up after a long self-imposed exile in Paris, *Le Pays* follows protagonist Marie Rivière and her family on a journey that is no less metaphysical than it is concrete. Soon after moving back to the Country, as she calls it, renowned writer Marie discovers that she is pregnant, and before she knows it, finds herself involved in the birth of a child, a country, and a novel.

As is the case in *Le Bébé*, there is considerable and clearly intentional overlap between the product and the process in *Le Pays*, both diegetically and structurally. Once again, Darrieussecq has written a book about writing a book, but there are important differences between the two texts examined in this chapter. If, for example, the quotation marks around “le bébé” in *Le Bébé* left some room for doubt as to whether or not the protagonist’s project and the reader’s book are one and the same, there is no question here about the shared title of Marie’s work and the book in our hands. Marie recounts the moment when her nascent text acquired a name: “Je contemplai ce flacon qui contenait mon livre et j’écrivis le titre sur la couverture du

On a metaphorical level, distinct parallels can be drawn between the various types of creation in the text: the Country is established, *Le Pays* is written, and the protagonist’s daughter is born. For Marie, a novel, like a child, must be born; and much like one must wait nine months for a baby, waiting is also an important part of the writing process: “Ce roman que j’avais en tête, j’étais incapable de m’y mettre. Mais ça n’était pas grave. Les livres viennent. Celui-ci se nourrissait du vent du sud, des fougères, du vide. Il prenait son temps. L’attente est l’état originel de l’écriture; l’atermoiement, son lieu de naissance” (66). Writing, as Marie experiences it, has an unquestionably physical dimension to it, born in the Country’s winds and the sea, and reinforced by her contemplation of the globe in her office:

> J’aimais le globe sur mon bureau et j’aimais ce promontoire sur la mer parce que j’avais besoin, souvent, de renouer avec la sidération comme un point d’origine de l’écriture. Se tenir debout sur la Terre, dans le cosmos et le néant: l’écriture et cette sidération c’était la même chose, c’était constater notre présence face au vide, et là, comme on pouvait, penser. (227-228)

That moment of understanding and the narrator’s subsequent realization of the connections between the Country, writing, and creation, is summed up in the name of her daughter, Épiphanie. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, two possible definitions of the word “epiphany” are “a usually sudden manifestation or perception of the essential nature or meaning
of something” and “an illuminating discovery, realization, or disclosure,” both of which are potentially applicable here.

On a structural level, the metanarration of *Le Pays* takes the form of alternating narrative levels (*je* and *j/e*—homodiegetic, *elle*—heterodiegetic), which are distinguished by different fonts. When seen through the lens of metanarrativity, the reader is compelled to wonder if the different levels of narration correspond to different levels of textual self-awareness. The homodiegetic sections of *Le Pays* are generally very self-conscious; in fact, they are precisely what Hutcheon considers “overt metanarrative” (*Narcissistic Narrative* 7). Heterodiegetic sections, on the other hand, are self-reflective, but not necessarily self-aware, and are therefore better described as covert metanarrative (Hutcheon 7).

Given the diegetic content of the novel, it is not unreasonable to explore the possibility that the heterodiegetic sections might be excerpts from the book that the narrator of the homodiegetic sections is writing. For example, the second heterodiegetic section opens with the following declaration: “Il était temps de rentrer au pays” (18). Later, homodiegetic narrator Marie relates:

Un jour, alors qu’il restait encore une douzaine de cartons à ranger, j’ouvris mon cahier et j’écrivis une phrase qui me tournait dans la tête, une phrase comme un air de chanson: "Il était temps de rentrer au pays." Ça faisait un programme, un rythme, un horizon, ça faisait une première phrase. (72)

Similarly, Marie contemplates mobiles in one homodiegetic section, remarking: “Si je trouvais une forme, un lien intuitif entre les éléments du mobile, il deviendrait lisible, il deviendrait un livre” (68). These meditations return in a subsequent heterodiegetic sequence describing the

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68 Accordingly, I have put quotations from the heterodiegetic sections in a different font, one similar to the one used in the text.
landscape of the Country: “Le pays tourne au-dessus de sa tête dans la raideur des branches de tamaris. Un mobile. Il se transforme en livre” (84). The wording here also contributes to the overall effect; there is a subtle play on the word pays, which seems a priori to refer to the country in which she is living, but could equally be an allusion to the text itself.

The je and j/e opposition is reprised on both levels, as well. The text opens with a presentation of that duality, when, in the very first section, Marie describes the shift from unified to binary subject, explaining: “Je devenais j/e” (13), and bridging the gap between her split self and her writing:

D’une certaine façon, j’avais aussi laissé l’écriture. Ça s’écrivait tout seul. Les pas, ceux de mon corps et ceux qui m’accompagnaient, écrivaient pour moi. Mais: où s’inscrivait la phrase, sur quelle page laissait-elle sa trace? La mémoire, parfois, en attrapait une, de phrase, mais de fait, que devenaient les phrases qui s’écrivaient alors? Elles s’évaporaient au-dessus de ma tête. (13-14)

Further on, in a heterodiegetic segment, focalizor Marie reflects upon life, writing, and identity, musing: “Il aurait fallu écrire j/e. Un sujet ni brisé ni schizoïde, mais fendu, décollé” (177). Is this cleavage of the self, this compartmentalization of identities, indicative on some level of a similar split in the fabric of the text? The text offers no clear answers to these questions, but certainly seems to suggest that possibility.

At another point, the heterodiegetic narrator notes: “Intuitivement, il lui semblait que l’écriture résultait bien d’une alternance, mais pas celles des états d’âme, plutôt celle des états du corps: quand le corps était là, ou qu’il n’était pas là. Dans ce mouvement de balancier, dans cette dynamique, l’écriture avançait” (99). This particular example is remarkable in its subtlety, because in addition to depicting one of the states of philosophical reverie that are characteristic
of *elle*, it seems that this *alternance* may also be a reference to the format of *Le Pays* itself, and more specifically to the alternation of homo- and heterodiegetic sections, where Marie’s corporal status does, in fact, vary.

The homodiegetic narrator *je* is necessarily present in Marie’s body, but the heterodiegetic narrator, unable to actually inhabit her body and appropriate her *je*, can only focalize her. A statement made by the narrator Marie one afternoon when she is working in a beachfront cafe supports this hypothesis. She is absorbed in her writing when her husband and son, who have been swimming and playing on the beach, approach the table where she is seated: “J’étais dans *Le Pays* et celle qui habitait le pays s’occupait d’embrasser et de bavarder pendant que ma main embarquée finissait sa phrase” (189). This example shows a symbolic separation of the self, a split between the Marie who narrates and the Marie who is the protagonist of her novel. The narrator uses the first person, while “celle qui habitait le pays” is restricted to the third person.

The intercalation of heterodiegetic segments in the homodiegetic narrative of *Le Pays* is creative, to say the least, but in addition to the diegetic and formal variety that it contributes to the text as a whole, that alternation also leads to important metaphorical considerations about textual structure. The potential implications of that format are monumental: does the juxtaposition of these two narrative styles suggest the potential for a symbiotic coexistence of process and product? Here, then, it is not a question of replacing the product with the process, but rather of a finding a way to combine the two harmoniously and create an intermediary metanarrative form. Much work is left to do, as *Le Pays* leaves many questions about the precise shape of this new hybrid unanswered, but the possibility has been suggested and the way forward to creation is wide open.
In both *Le Bébé* and *Le Pays*, Darrieussecq endows the text with a dual functionality. On one hand, they do what all good fiction does: they tell a story. On the other, however, they serve a more abstract purpose, challenging convention by questioning existing labels and limits. Important questions arise from these novels: can someone be both a writer and a mother? Can the product and the process coexist? In these two works, Darrieussecq seeks not only to address those controversies, but also to explore textual self-consciousness on narrative and structural levels through her use of metanarration. Indeed, Darrieussecq has written far more than mere fiction here, because *Le Bébé* and *Le Pays* are also statements about the act of writing itself, as well as explorations of the process of creating a text. By exposing the act of writing to the reader and stripping away some of the artifice of the novel, Darrieussecq creates texts that are works of art, ones that are both diegetic and functional.

Marie Cosnay

Not unlike the word “space,” the noun “motion” has a vast array of possible meanings. The numerous definitions provided by the Merriam-Webster dictionary include physical, mechanical, legal, and musical considerations, to name a few, and allow for a variety of characteristics. Motion can be active, impulsive, or deliberate, for example. The serious side of motion is often emphasized, but it is important to remember that motion can also have a ludic side, one that delightfully engages in play, both concrete and abstract. Though the traditional concept of play is generally restricted to swing sets and chessboards, it exists equally in the literary world, where it is particularly relevant to the novel, a genre whose shape is constantly changing and which can thus be said to be in perpetual motion. That mobility poses a challenge

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to the scholars and literary theorists who seek to define the novel, and despite many valiant attempts at formulating a clear and conclusive definition of the genre, it seems that the only thing theorists can agree upon is the fact that its perpetual change and continuous self-renovation make the novel resistant to classification.

Play is likewise a complicated concept whose nature has traditionally been difficult to articulate. Important work was done in this area by Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois, both of whom endeavored to describe and categorize the characteristics of play but, as Warren Motte demonstrates, their diametrical opposition of play and seriousness is ultimately problematic. Instead, Motte argues, play can be defined as an articulative movement between players, games, and worlds (Playtexts 25), one that can be identified as part of our sociocultural foundation, as well as found in the details of everyday life. What is more, play is a vital component of literary space. Motte asserts: “Play is an essential, non-negligible dimension of literature. The amplitude of play may vary from text to text, from reading to reading, from language game to language game, but play itself is a constant” (Playtexts 27).

Play, then, is at the core of the novel today, a cultural form that is, in its very essence, “an artifact constantly in motion, one that is difficult to apprehend in any way other than on the run” (Motte, “Roman-fleuve” 173). That statement is particularly applicable to Marie Cosnay’s work as a whole, but it is perhaps most embodied in Villa Chagrin, a text which, as I have shown, is extremely concerned with movement. It is difficult to articulate what Villa Chagrin is about, in terms of plot, but structurally, there is no doubt that it is about motion. In this section, I shall argue that Cosnay’s text is not only a mobile work, but also a ludic one. I shall reveal some of the games being played, identify the players, and finally, I will briefly return to the question of

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70 For a comprehensive evaluation of play, see Warren Motte’s Playtexts: Ludics in Contemporary Literature. His article “Playing in Earnest” is also a helpful corrective to Huizinga and Caillois’ theories.
71 I discuss movement in Villa Chagrin in my chapter on physical space.
defining the novel by its movement and play. In *Villa Chagrin* there are no giddy or haphazard games, but rather thoughtful and sophisticated play that is very serious indeed.

There are a variety of players involved in *Villa Chagrin*, and none of them are inconsequential. These players are not all characters in the novel, however. On the contrary, the author and the reader have much to do in the text, as well, and although their role is less overt than that of Bram and Marthe, for example, it is no less important. *Villa Chagrin* invites the reader to take part in its palimpsestic games, and by opening the book to the first page, we are accepting its challenge. In the space of literature, the act of reading itself constitutes the reader’s consent to the terms of the game.

In his book on play, Warren Motte declares: “I take as my starting point the relation of player and player, or, more specifically, writer and reader” (26), and accordingly I shall do the same. Rather than work with a single, straightforward storyline, Cosnay spins a web of multiple interwoven narratives in *Villa Chagrin* that span decades and continents, and the extent of her novel’s constant movement back and forth in time and space leaves the reader a bit breathless, regardless of whether or not he or she has been forewarned of the text’s mobile nature. In the space of just one page, for example, the narrative moves from Mallorca in 1936, to Zambia, then back to 1903 in the Netherlands, followed by a fast-forward to Normandy in 1959, a quick leap to Paris, and finally a sojourn in Geneva in early 1960 (20). This dizzying game of spatiotemporal hopscotch is but one of many that characterize the text. The inclusion of these dates and places is not arbitrary or superfluous, however; they serve as landmarks to orient and stabilize the reader. These bits of information are also used to intrigue the reader and draw him or her into the text. What was Marthe doing in Zambia? How did Bram end up in Switzerland? If the reader desires answers, he or she must play the game and read on.
One advantage of the multi-stranded narratives included in *Villa Chagrin* is the fact that they allow for numerous parallels to be drawn in the text. Once again, Cosnay helps initiate her readers to her textual universe, “invit[ing] us to imagine that different worlds collide incessantly here—the world of Bram van Velde, that of the narrator, the writer’s world, our own world, for instance—and then recede from each other once again” (Motte, “Nobody’s Novel” 50). In that way, Cosnay urges us to cross diegetic borders and join her in the play space of the text.

The similarities between the couples formed by Bram van Velde and Marthe Arnaud in the past, and the narrator and the man she loves in the present constitute an excellent example of that phenomenon. The narrator and “l’homme que j’aime” are rarely in the same place at the same time and it seems that their relationship, like Bram and Marthe’s, is falling apart. As a result, the narrator strongly identifies with Marthe and therefore feels compelled to contemplate “l’abandon, le mien et celui de Marthe” (52) at length. Given this commonality, it is only natural that she should consider the potential parallels between their writing, as well. Motte observes: “The implicit question that Cosnay puts forward hinges upon the analogy of Marthe’s writing and her own. Will her writerly efforts meet the same outcome as Marthe’s? Are her own efforts to seize the image and come to successful terms with it through words equally doomed?” (“Roman-fleuve” 183). Those questions are an appeal to us, her readers, as well, a request that we continue reading in order to ensure that her writing does not meet the same fate as Marthe’s.

Even when she is not explicitly guiding the reader, the narrator never ceases to engage him or her. Cosnay’s narrator instinctively feels a connection—a locus of articulation, if you will—between Bram, Marthe, and herself, which she describes as an acute awareness that “quelque chose avait bien commence ici, à l’angle de la Villa Chagrin et de l’Adour, où le hasard

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72 The narrator’s perpetually absent partner is frequently referred to as “l’homme que j’aime” in the text.
me faisait vivre. La question touchait Bram et Marthe. Elle me concernait aussi” (45). The narrator cannot yet formulate the question she senses behind the junction of the river and the prison, nor can she answer it, but she lays it before her readers nevertheless, imploring them to help her solve the puzzle. By inviting them along on her quest to uncover Bram and Marthe’s story, she enlist their help in writing her own.

Not all of the interactions between author and reader require the author to take the active role. Moments of narratorial lassitude also figure among the exchanges described in the text because, in spite of her exuberance and stamina, the narrator of Villa Chagrin must rest at times, exhausted by the stories she tells and the games she plays. She recognizes and accepts her need for respite in an explanation that is clearly addressed to the reader: “Il faut que je m’arrête là, un instant. Je bois du thé vert japonais aux feuilles taillées menue, je trépigne d’impatience, il faut s’arrêter” (54). These diegetic “time-outs” are, of course, an opportunity for the narrator to catch her breath, but they are also a nod to the reader, an acknowledgement of his or her continued presence, and a means of assuring that he or she is still in the game.

There are many games present in this complex novel, but ultimately, I believe that Cosnay uses Villa Chagrin to play with the question of how to represent the unrepresentable. The Adour River that traverses both the city of Bayonne where the narrator lives and the text that Cosnay writes is evocative of that theme. Motte observes: “The manner in which the river resists representation limns a discourse on representational difficulty that flows unabated through Villa Chagrin” (“Roman-fleuve” 175). However, Cosnay’s discourse on representation does not end with the Adour. On the contrary, it takes the form of an elaborate and palimpsestic game that is played out between text and image in Villa Chagrin. On the surface, it can be seen as another round in the contemporary sparring match between visual and written media, but on a deeper
level, it represents the difficulties that arise when attempting to “translate” a work from one medium to another.

From the outset, there is a palpable tension in *Villa Chagrin* between what is written and what is seen. The shortcomings of each side are laid out clearly: departing from the same source text does not lead to a unique image, while an image can provide details and context that are exceptionally difficult to put into words. It is often said that a picture is worth a thousand words, and not without reason. But it is also question of movement here, or rather, lack thereof: “One of the particularities of the photographic image, as Roland Barthes has noted, is that it testifies to presence, it guarantees a kind of *being-there* in space and time” (Motte, “Roman-fleuve” 185). Barthes’s observations paint a picture of the image as a relatively stable commodity. For Barthes, photographs are comfortingly stationary in time and space. Obviously, that puts the image at odds with the novel, a work whose medium is verbal, whose text is engaged in perpetual playful movement, and whose comprehension is contextual, depending on time and place.73 Next to the novel’s dynamic qualities, the image is rendered almost static by comparison. How, then, is the immutable image to be reconciled with the ludic and mobile text?

That question is a vexing one indeed, and the reader is not alone in asking it. In *Villa Chagrin*, Cosnay evokes Samuel Beckett, who found it notably difficult to write about Bram van Velde and his art:74 “‘Que reste-t-il de représentable si l’essence de l’objet est de se dérober à la représentation?’ écrivait Beckett à propos de Bram van Velde” (Cosnay 74). Not unlike Beckett,

73 A text may be read differently at different points in time, often according to what is in vogue. The appreciation and comprehension of a text depend place, too. The *nouveau roman*, for example, is understood differently in France than it is elsewhere, and even literary movements that share the same name are not necessarily analogous across national borders. For instance, what is meant by “formalism” in Russia is not the same as in France or even the United States.

74 See Motte, “Roman-fleuve” 182.
Cosnay’s own narrator finds herself at a loss for words, as well, when she tries to describe the woman pictured in a photograph:

Sur la photo, dans ma poche, la femme avait un visage. L’impossibilité où je suis de décrire de façon claire l’image enfouie, surgie, déplacée, cachée de nouveau—malgré cette sorte de fierté secrète éprouvée—décourage la pensée qu’un jour, quelqu’un, moi, sœur ou femme, figure, aspect d’être vivant, ait ou ait eu visage vu, visible. (12-13)

The picture somehow eludes the narrator’s attempts to speak about it, stubbornly resisting representation through its refusal to be portrayed in words. The narrator must settle for the woefully inadequate verbal approximation that we read in the text, one that ultimately renders the image nearly unrecognizable. I believe that there are important questions here, ones that relate to Cosnay’s endgame. For example, if she cannot express the essence of that photo in words, does it cease to exist when it is out of sight? Is it real for someone who has never laid eyes on it? Does an object (or a person) lose its nature or its meaning when it is represented?

Faced with a similar dilemma in a section about fatigue, the narrator discovers that the reality of the feeling cannot be described, only seen or felt. She explains:

On ne saurait partager la fatigue. Les bras en tombent, il faut voir ceux du dehors qui n’ont pas science de la fatigue, il faut voir les yeux qui s’étonnent, au mieux patientent et devant des yeux pareils pousser des cris graves et—émiettant toutes les pages qui volent dans les parages et griffant chaque peau à commencer par la sienne puis méthodiquement chaque autre—, tomber de froid, sans un mot. (16)

In other words, exhaustion can only be summed up by the comprehensiveness of the image.

Words, which she describes as crumbling and flying away, fail her. These words are in physical,
as well as metaphorical, motion, fleeing from the narrator in the wind and from the image in their ineptitude in capturing the essence of the feeling.

On this subject, Motte remarks: “Essentially, the passage from image to word—or from word to image, for that matter—can never be achieved in an entirely satisfactory manner, according to Cosnay, try as one might” (“Roman-fleuve” 183). Such passage is a surprisingly difficult task indeed. Though deceptively simple at first, it soon reveals its true nature, as the narrator of Villa Chagrin comments: “D’abord il était facile de faire un tableau, ce n’était pas le problème. La vraie tâche était de cerner la bête” (44). Yet Cosnay does not shy away from “the beast” and is not afraid of the skirmish that ensues when she faces off with it. In a characteristic display of her own particular brand of ludics, Cosnay has decided to divide the text into three parts, entitled Image 1, Image 2, and Sans image, a choice that is all the more interesting for its categorical lack of images—visual ones, at least. On the page below the titles, in open defiance of the image, there is nothing but text.

On a larger level, this difficulty in reconciling image and word can also be read as a metaphor for Bram and Marthe’s relationship. Bram van Velde was an artist, a painter of some renown, while Marthe, on the other hand, was a writer of considerably lesser fame. Marthe’s lack of widespread acclaim is perhaps the reason why Cosnay had difficulty finding information on her. She comments: “Jusqu’à présent je n’ai aucun renseignement précis sur Marthe Arnaud, son œuvre, l’amour qu’elle donnait, la révolte, les accroupissements” (27).

The relationship between Bram’s art and Marthe’s writing was no less complicated or troubled than their personal relationship. On some occasions, they did in fact collaborate, as such when “Bram illustra Les Enfants du Ventre [que Marthe] écrivit” (27). However, there were many other times when this cooperation was frustrated. The narrator indicates: “[Marthe] avait
demandé à Bram d’illustrer *Manières de Blancs*, qu’elle publiait aux Éditions Sociales Internationales. Il avait refusé” (43). It is also interesting to note that Bram drew on the letters sent to him by Marthe during his time in prison. The narrator reports coming across these sketches during her search for artwork by Bram:

> Je cherchais le Carnet de Bayonne, il réunissait les œuvres de Bram peintes à Bayonne, je le trouvai chez un bouquiniste, il coûtait huit cents euros, je ne l’achetai pas. Les encres avaient couvert l’écriture sage des lettres de Marthe, elles semblaient promettre l’élan des gouaches futures. (43)

Does the superposition of Bram’s image on the words of Marthe’s letters adumbrate the novel’s position on the two forms? Possibly, for while the intrinsic value of text or writing in general is never doubted in *Villa Chagrin*, “it is clearly the image itself that serves as the common denominator of those various discourses, the one invariable integer in Marie Cosnay’s literary algorithm” (Motte, “Roman-fleuve” 184). Ultimately, it is the image that dominates *Villa Chagrin*, much like Bram is shown to overshadow Marthe.

Still, despite the emphasis on the image, Cosnay’s text does not fail to acknowledge that Bram did in fact write at times, though his writing was extremely informal and is not considered to be part of his work. In a short excerpt from *Villa Chagrin* taken from a letter he wrote to Marthe in 1952, Bram makes it abundantly clear that he does not see himself as a writer: “Je ne peux pas écrire beaucoup. Mais cela ne fais rien, ne te fais pas de soucis pour moi” (42). Those lines, casual and brief as they are, scarcely seem worth including in *Villa Chagrin*; but metaphorically, they speak volumes. Does Bram’s inability to write symbolize the untranslatability of image into text? Perhaps, but even if we agree with Cosnay’s position that image and text are not interchangeable, that by no means implies that they cannot still playfully
engage each other. For instance, Motte notes that “each of the different tales that Cosnay tells in *Villa Chagrin* springs from an image” (“Roman-fleuve” 186). While they cannot replace each other, text and image can inspire creation. Built on a foundation of pictures and words, *Villa Chagrin* is a notable example of that type of play in action.

At first glance, *Villa Chagrin* may appear to be a simple text, a mere seventy-five pages in length, but as I have shown, a great deal of complexity lies beneath the surface. Many games are being played here, and the players are engaged on multiple terrains. The relationship between the author and the reader is productive and vital. It transcends narratological boundaries and is most readily characterized by its movement and energy. Together, reader and writer are complicit in the creation of the novel at hand. The relationship between image and text, on the other hand, is considerably more complex than that of the author and reader, but it is a close and constructive one nonetheless. Without playful dynamics and mobile games like these, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of this text.

Likewise, it is hard to conclude my discussion of play in *Villa Chagrin* without briefly returning to the issues of generic definition that I mentioned at the beginning of this section. Despite the absence of categorical generic parameters, there are nonetheless certain general guidelines regarding elements like character and storyline, for example, against which any text vying for classification as a novel must be evaluated. Considering these criteria, many would protest that *Villa Chagrin* cannot be called novel at all—it lacks a conventional plot, and the protagonist, if there is one, is a river. However, I would argue that it is precisely these departures from tradition that make Cosnay’s text a novel. In his article on Lukács and Bakhtin,

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75 Cosnay includes selections from Bram and Marthe’s correspondence in the text, as well as from letters received by them from friends and relatives of the couple. However, the bulk of the narrator’s story is constructed on the photographs she finds, photographs in which she is unable to recognize herself.

Prabhakara Jha suggests that “the distinguishing feature of novels [is] a fundamental opposition to precisely all that is formalised, privileged and fixed” (‘Lukács or Bakhtin?’ 40), a statement which could not be more applicable to Cosnay’s text.

In the end, a novel must be novel, in the adjectival sense of the word, and *Villa Chagrin* is not lacking in novelty. Seen in this light, Cosnay’s work is, in fact, an exemplary model of the genre. Nonetheless, the original problem remains, one that underscores the ludic character of the novel that I have explored in this section. As soon as we pin down the genre long enough to define it, the novel changes again, escaping the constraints of its definition and engaging us in a game of literary hide-and-seek in which it eludes all but momentary capture. In the end, it would seem, trying to slow down the novel long enough to define it is like trying to stop the flow of the Adour.

Xabi Molia

As we have seen in previous sections, the novel has a long history as a controversial genre, and since its early days, it has been the subject of much debate. Even before it was a question of coming to a consensus on a categorical definition, the morality of the genre was considered suspect. Originally dismissed as a frivolous genre, novels notably contributed to the downfall of Emma Bovary, for example, who naïvely sought out the romantic thrills of Heloïse and Ivanhoe in her everyday life. By contrast, the novel is a respected literary form today; but even so, its general acceptance has not exempted it from controversy. The various polemics currently surrounding it are no longer the same ones that plagued it at the time of Flaubert’s unfortunate heroine, but that does not mean that they are not equally strident in tone.
In this chapter, I have discussed a few of those disputes, most notably my brief considerations of the novel's resistance to classification in the previous section. Complicated as those issues may be, however, they are further compounded by the existence of internal generic rifts, schisms which have deepened in recent years as the identity and purpose of the novel are once again called into question. The distinction between “serious” or elite literature and its popular counterpart, also known as genre fiction, is under fire, and a debate rages about their respective worth and purpose. This is far from a new controversy, but its pitch has intensified in recent years, as boundaries between the two become increasingly blurred and ideas about them must be reexamined.

In 2012, authors Arthur Krystal of *The New Yorker* and Lev Grossman, writing in *Time* magazine engaged in a lively exchange about literary fiction and its troubled relationship with genre fiction. In spite of their differences of opinion on several points, both recognized that for better or for worse, genre fiction is on the rise. Zombies, werewolves, and apocalypses abound like never before, and have gradually become a regular part of popular fiction. Despite what some critics may claim, this change in the literary landscape is in no way due to a dearth of innovative and enjoyable literary fiction, but rather to the increasing tendency for the two types of fiction to overlap. Although for the most part there is a general consensus about which of the two categories a particular work of fiction belongs to—Joyce’s *Ulysses* is indisputably “serious literature,” for example, whereas Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series is distinctly not—some texts are more difficult to classify, and that difficulty gives rise to several important questions. What

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77 In this section, I use "serious," "elite," and "literary" fiction as synonyms of literature, and the terms "popular" and "genre" fiction or literature are likewise interchangeable.


exactly makes a particular novel literature and another one genre fiction? Can a given text ever be simultaneously popular and literary? Where does one category end and the other begin?

The novels of Itxaro Borda, Marie Darrieussecq, and Marie Cosnay are easily identified as belonging to the literary category; but things are much less clear when it comes to Xabi Molia’s work. For instance, novels like Avant de disparaître contain signature genre elements like the mysterious disappearance of the protagonist’s wife and a post-apocalyptic city threatened by zombie-like creatures, but they also include distinctly literary considerations like Molia’s skillful play with urban geometry and his experimentation with alternating diegetic styles.

Indeed, there are many excellent examples in Molia’s oeuvre, but in this section, I shall focus on Molia’s first novel, Fourbi.\(^80\) On one hand, it is a gripping detective story: who is Gaspard Fourbi and what is his crime? On the other, it is an epistolary novel—a most literary of forms—replete with references to authors like Rabelais\(^81\) and movements like OULIPO.

Moreover, Fourbi was published by Gallimard, one of the most venerable French literary publishing houses. Such a blend of literature and genre fiction makes Fourbi a fascinating object of study. First, I shall consider Molia’s novel against various classification criteria, identifying some of its popular and literary aspects. Then, I will examine the ways in which Molia blurs the borders between elite and popular fiction in Fourbi and challenges our ideas about them. Finally, I will explore the goals of the text and evaluate its success in achieving those aims, ultimately using them to determine whether Fourbi is literature or popular fiction.

In his survey of genre fiction, Ken Gelder begins by outlining some of the characteristics of literature’s popular cousin. From a structural perspective, Gelder sees the primary difference between the two as being genre fiction’s reliance on the tradition story arc, a predictable

\(^{80}\) Fourbi was published under Xabi Molia’s legal first name, François-Xavier.

\(^{81}\) The name of a former target of the Inquisition, Alcofrías Puentes, is an obvious reference to Rabelais’ famous pseudonym (33).
progression from exposition to rising action to climax, falling action, and finally, conclusion. Literature, on the other hand, can take a much freer form. Gelder explains: “Literature doesn’t need a story or a plot, but popular fiction couldn’t function without one” (*Popular Fiction* 19), adding that “so much popular fiction is built around plot, action, ‘scenarios,’ character conflict, and dialogue” (*Popular Fiction* 28). A text that makes limited or unconventional use of those elements is therefore unlikely to qualify as genre fiction.

In terms of function, Gelder highlights popular fiction’s emphasis on entertainment, contrasting it with literary fiction’s aspirations to enlightenment. If elite fiction eschews the notion of entertaining its audience, genre fiction, which Gelder describes as “by nature mindful and respectful of its audience” (*Popular Fiction* 23), actively embraces it. This is a widely held belief among writers and critics. Indeed, Lev Grossman sees Arthur Krystal’s position in a similar light, summing it up as the difference between escapism (popular fiction) and art (literature).  

What is more, Gelder stresses what he qualifies as the commercial nature of that escapism as being the key to understanding it. For him, “the field of popular literature is quite literally a ‘culture industry,’” one which accordingly views its audience as consumers rather than readers (*Popular Fiction* 1, 24).

At first glance, *Fourbi* initially appears to be a fairly straightforward example of a modern detective novel, a mainstay of genre fiction. The premise of the novel hints at an exciting plot that also seems to place *Fourbi* squarely in the popular fiction category. A group of Inquisitors living in modern-day France begins investigating a mysterious figure named Gaspard Fourbi. Fourbi leads a simple life of solitary pleasures, reading Hegel at the Centre Pompidou and eating bacon cheeseburgers at McDonald’s. Those activities are a red flag for Martin, a

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young apprentice Inquisitor who quickly labels Fourbi a target for surveillance and eventual elimination. Despite that innocuous beginning, the storyline becomes more and more convoluted, taking twists and turns to the point of parody, and in the end making no sense at all. By the conclusion of *Fourbi*, the reader has no more idea of Fourbi’s crime than he or she did at the beginning. *Fourbi* contains undeniable genre fiction elements, with an unarticulated conspiracy hanging in the air and agents from a secret and age-old organization pursuing a shadowy target, but it cannot be said that *Fourbi* relies on plot in the way that pure genre fiction does.

Once again in the popular fiction category, the emphasis that *Fourbi* places on the figure of the investigators, which, in this novel, take the form of Inquisitors, is characteristic of detective fiction (Gelder 63). Little by little, Cormiarof, Alexia, Abel, François, and Martin’s stories are revealed, in tantalizing bits and pieces that the reader—a detective him- or herself here—must try to assemble into a coherent narrative. For example, when Martin suspects that Flaubert’s *L’Éducation sentimentale* may be a key to the Fourbi mystery, he suggests consulting Alexia, because “c’est elle la littéraire” (19). He allows that François might also be helpful, but less so, given that “il n’est pas prof” (19). Similarly, we deduce that Cormiarof has had an affair with Alexia and discover that his mentor, Maître Alexandre Kremer, may have killed himself.

In another nod to the detective genre, there is a clear, if satirical, emphasis on what Ken Gelder calls “issues and ideologies of crime, law, and justice” (*Popular Fiction* 64). As members of the Inquisition, the “detectives” are charged with eradicating heresy, a historically criminal offense, enforcing the laws of the church, and delivering justice to those who do not uphold the law. Molia reminds his reader of the Inquisition’s historical role on multiple occasions,

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83 In the Inquisitorial Register, Cormiarof writes: “J’eus toujours mes rations de tendresse, bien sûr, car Alexia redoublait parfois d’affection avec les hommes qu’elle n’aimait plus” (186).
84 In a surveillance report to Cormiarof, Abel brings up the death of Kremer, recalling: “Tu as toujours voulu croire qu’il s’agissait d’un accident de pêche. Je sais que c’est parce que tu ne voulais pas entendre parler de suicide” (52).
referencing a classic fifteenth-century text on witch hunting entitled *Malleus Maleficarum*\(^{85}\) (49) and describing a group of “sorcières basques” who were forced to dance naked before being burned at the stake (137). Deciding whether or not Fourbi is in fact a suitable subject for investigation is a preliminary hearing of sorts, and the debate about whether or not he should be killed is essentially his trial. Exasperated by Fourbi’s “comportement un petit peu particulier,” (116), Martin is eager to “eliminate” the former, but what exactly is so unusual about Fourbi’s behavior is left unclear, whereas in true genre fiction, it would almost certainly be revealed at some point. As in Kafka’s *The Trial*—a very literary piece of writing by any standard—the precise nature of the Fourbi’s crime is never revealed.

Alexia maintains that Martin’s vehement insistence that Fourbi must be killed stems simply from the fact that Martin does not understand his target, suggesting: “Donc ce que tu proposes, c’est d’assassiner un mystère?” (117). When Martin confirms her suspicions, she admonishes him: “On ne va pas assassiner quelqu’un parce qu’il lit *Tintin* en polonais” (116). While humorous, Alexia’s reply is by no means an example of the escapist entertainment that Gelder, Grossman, and Krystal believe to be constitutive of popular literature. Similarly, although the various misadventures of the Inquisitors are certainly entertaining, the reader’s amusement at Martin’s incompetent antics in Fourbi’s apartment or François’s persistent and pompous narcissism is in no way escapist in nature and ultimately finds itself more aligned with literature on that count, as well.

Other important departures from the conventions of popular fiction can also be observed in *Fourbi*. For example, although arguments can be made that *Fourbi* makes use of a variation of the traditional “clue-puzzle mystery” (Gelder 57) typical of classic detective fiction, Molia’s

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85 *Malleus Maleficarum* was written by Heinrich Kramer, whose name bears a striking resemblance to that of Cormiarof’s Inquisitorial mentor, Alexandre Kremer.
deviations from the clue-puzzle formula in *Fourbi* are considerable ones that are not easily dismissed. In its established form, the clue-puzzle mystery involves a murder, multiple suspects, and multiple clues (Gelder 57). While there are a few collateral deaths over the course of the narrative, *Fourbi* is far more focused on a potential murder than on any actual one. A good part of Molia’s novel is dedicated to chronicling the ongoing debate between the Inquisitors: should Fourbi be eliminated or not?

Molia offers a nuanced take on the rule requiring multiple suspects, as well. The Inquisitor Abel, whose wife is an avid cruciverbalist, discovers what he considers to be suspicious clues in the crossword puzzles written by the enigmatic Gaspard Briouf (16). Abel begins by investigating Briouf, but quickly determines that there is no one by that name in Paris. Consequently, he becomes intrigued by the possibility that his Briouf and Martin’s Fourbi may be one and the same, noting that “Briouf […] a de très fortes chances d’être l’anagramme de ‘Fourbi’” (29). Thus, the single suspect is effectively, if artificially, doubled, resulting in the requisite multiple suspects.

Finally, the stipulation that there must be multiple clues, as well as subjects, must also be satisfied in puzzle-clue mysteries; but once again, Molia’s approach to this convention is innovative rather than traditional. Instead of providing clues to Fourbi’s unidentified crime, hints about the Inquisition, whose true nature and purpose are themselves a mystery, are given in the form of crossword puzzle clues. In a note to Cormiarof, the obsessive and single-minded Abel worries about the similarity between certain clues in the puzzle and the activities of the Inquisition: “Coïncidence bizarre, il y avait aussi, vertical, en six lettres, ‘chambre froide’: morgue. ‘Morgue,’ c’était bien le nom de code d’une de nos dernières ops, non?” (14). He is

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86 Molia also includes an anagrammatic tribute to his mentor, Warren Motte, in the name of an author called Réné Warmott whom Martin cites in a letter to Cormiarof (176).
particularly suspicious of a clue “en onze lettres, horizontal: ‘sacré briquet.’” The solution, it appears, is “Inquisition” (14).

The connections Gelder makes between popular literature and consumerism are also addressed in *Fourbi*, though Molia does so symbolically, using Fourbi’s evening meal as a metaphor. Every night, Fourbi stops at McDonald’s on the way home from the library and orders the same meal, which he appears to enjoy immensely. Both Martin and François are fascinated by that ritual, and François goes so far as to include a lengthy account of it in the Fourbi dossier. After providing a detailed description of how Fourbi unwraps, touches, and chews his McBacon cheeseburger, François remarks: “Gaspard ne consomme pas, il mange” (151). By contrast, when François later orders the same meal, hoping to recreate Fourbi’s rich sensory encounter with his food, he finds his experience woefully lacking. The discrepancy that François notes between Gaspard’s dining experience and his own sums up the difference between the way a work of literature and piece of popular fiction are processed. The former, like Fourbi’s hamburger, is savored, while the latter, symbolized by François’ disappointing dinner, is merely consumed.

This small selection of examples makes clear that despite definite influence from genre fiction—or more specifically, from the detective novel—*Fourbi* remains nonetheless a literary text in its essence. Indeed, the abundant references to canonical literature throughout the novel and numerous nods to a variety of literary movements firmly anchor Molia’s debut novel in literary tradition. Some of these allusions are quite explicit. It is difficult to miss the significance-laden clash between the Hegelians and Kantians at the Pompidou library, for example. However, others have a subler, more structural manifestation that is not immediately evident, particularly to those unfamiliar with literary history. The most obvious structural element of *Fourbi* that testifies to its literary core may be its epistolary format. Enormously popular during the
eighteenth century, the epistolary novel served as the framework for many influential and foundational literary works, including Laclos’s *Liaisons dangereuses*, Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther*, and Richardson’s *Pamela*. A common premise for these novels is that a collection of letters was either found by or given to a third party, then subsequently published, often with the intention of morally improving the public. For example, the notice “au lecteur” of the anonymous *Lettres portugaises* reads: “J’ai trouvé les moyens, avec beaucoup de soin et de peine, de recouvrer une copie correcte de la traduction de cinq Lettres portugaises qui ont été écrites à un gentilhomme de qualité, qui servait au Portugal,”87 (39), while the rédacteur of *Liaisons dangereuses* insists that he has published the letters in order to “rendre un service aux mœurs.”88 In the same spirit, *Fourbi* opens with a “note de l’éditeur,” a disclaimer of sorts. Although he does not claim that the text provides any moral or educational benefit, he does insist on the traditional anonymity of the author and editor, stating:

> Certains livres ont des genèses mystérieuses. Celui-ci est né de pères inconnus. François-Xavier Molia, ou—plus vraisemblablement—l’homme qui a utilisé ce nom d’emprunt, n’en est pas, à proprement parler, l’auteur, mais plutôt une sorte de responsable, de coordinateur, tout au plus l’un de ses épisodiques rédacteurs. (7)

But the true author of most epistolary classics was nearly always discovered in the end, and *Fourbi* is no exception here, either, although Molia does offer a novel twist. Unlike the mysteries shrouding the Inquisition and Fourbi, which are never entirely resolved, the identity of the purported “editor” is unexpectedly revealed in the last few pages of the book, in a scene where Cormiarof is sitting in a café with the Fourbi dossier: “Entre deux cafés, j’ai tracé mes lettres sur une serviette en papier, I, V, A, N, A, L, E, X, I, S, C, O, R, M, I, A, R, O, F, et j’ai composé

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87 *Lettres portugaises* 39.  
88 *Les Liaisons dangereuses* 29.
mon anagramme. François-Xavier Molia. Il faut un nom d’auteur pour publier des livres, n’est-ce pas?” (229).

In addition to serving as one of the creative keys to Molia’s novel, that surprise ending constitutes an excellent example of the numerous word games that characterize his text. Anagrams are the most overt form of that linguistic play, setting up the opposition between Fourbi and Briouf, as well as that of Cormiarof and Molia, but they are not the only word games in Fourbi. A particularly interesting case is the code that a girl in the library claims that her boyfriend found in Victor Hugo’s writing. Questioned by François, she explains: “Maximilien est tombé […] sur le dernier texte que Hugo avait rédigé […] : ‘Pirjiv giwx piw eyxviw’” (103). She believes that the way the letters are grouped is unusual and that they therefore must be a secret code, which, once deciphered, reads: “Lenfer cest les autres” (105). According to her, that unpunctuated line of text reveals that Sartre’s famous statement was plagiarized from Hugo.89

These games certainly add a ludic dimension to Molia’s work, but they contribute far more than simple humor to his novel. Such puzzles and games are one of the calling cards of OULIPO,90 and Molia, who as a normalien91 is certainly familiar with this group, actively adopts their style in these instances. In particular, Molia plays on this technique in a statement by Alexia summing up the mission statement of the Inquisition: “La seule contrainte que nous nous soyons donnée est celle d’assassiner des gens intéressants” (212). Oulipians operate with constraints, and so, it would seem, does the Inquisition.

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89 Fourbi contains an elaborate explanation of the code, relating it back to Caesar and breaking down its structure. The exchange between François and the girl from which this account is taken can be found on pages 102-110 of the novel, but due to its length, I have opted not to include it in its entirety here.

90 OULIPO, or the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle, is a group of French-speaking writers who work under a system of constraints. One of the most notable Oulipian texts is Georges Perec’s La Disparition, a novel of over three hundred pages in which the letter e never appears.

91 A normalien is a graduate of one of the Écoles normales supérieures, which are prestigious grandes écoles in France.
Clearly, structure is undeniably central to *Fourbi*, especially, as I have pointed out, given that Molia’s novel cannot rely on plot in the same way that genre fiction must. Despite containing plot elements typical of a detective story, the majority of the questions raised in the storyline remain unanswered at the novel’s end. Instead, Molia’s text turns to structure as a unifying force. *Fourbi* is tied together not by the neat and satisfying conclusion of a traditional story arc, but rather by creative constraints and other structural devices which, in their own way, are no less gratifying than a well-written dénouement.

This difference between narrative resolution and structural play is essentially the same distinction as the one Gelder makes between entertainment and art. For him and many others, that discrepancy is one of the primary distinguishing features between literary and genre fiction. People read literary fiction for the challenge or as a sort of intellectual exercise, while genre fiction is, to quote Arthur Krystal, better qualified as a “guilty pleasure” (“Easy Writers”), a sort of escape from reality that distracts and amuses the reader. Elite literature, it seems, is not meant to be easy or “fun,” at least not in the light and effortless way that is characteristic of popular fiction. Krystal explains it well when he characterizes literature as “an exercise in aesthetic and psychological subtlety, […] written not for people with time on their hands but for those willing to put in the time to master it” (“Good Books”). *Fourbi* is an entertaining text, but there is no doubt that time, energy, and intellectual effort are required in order to enjoy it fully.

Certainly, Molia’s debut novel is a demanding text, one that requires work from its readers. Beyond the enjoyment of a delightfully jumbled detective story, a great deal of the pleasure derived from reading *Fourbi* comes in fact from its wit and self-awareness. For example, casual allusions to Agatha Christie and her iconic detective novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*...
or her Belgian investigator Hercule Poirot (175) confirm Molia’s familiarity with the
detective genre, and recurring references to Flaubert, who was put on trial for immorality after
_Madame Bovary_ was published are, in a sense, symbolically echoed by the vague charges raised
by Molia’s Inquisition against its targets.

But above all, _Fourbi_ is a text that recognizes itself as a work of fiction. The Fourbi
dossier kept by the Inquisition is composed of the correspondence between the five Inquisitors
and their assorted accounts of their subject; but at the end of the novel, it is revealed that the file
was eventually published by the group’s leader, Maître Ivan Alexis Cormiarof, in the form of the
book that the reader is holding. As William Cloonan points out in his review, “_Fourbi_ is a novel
about writing fiction, consciously or otherwise, in an effort to make sense out of human
experience. Each Inquisitor writes his or her imaginative and imagined version of who Gaspard
is.” As a self-proclaimed novelist, the Inquisitor François sees Fourbi as the potential protagonist
of a future book, but as the Fourbi dossier becomes more and more convoluted, François gets lost
in his own fiction and has an increasingly difficult time distinguishing the story from reality. In
his final letter to Cormiarof, he declares: “Je suis l’amant de la bibliothèque. Je suis Gaspard
Fourbi” (218). Cormiarof, for his part, has no trouble recognizing the fictionality of Fourbi—or
_Fourbi_, for that matter—and after the disappearance of the latter, admits: “Sa fin nous appartient
désormais. C’est à nous de l’écrire” (193). Finally, there is Alexia, who promises: “Je vais créer
un mythe. Je vous dois bien ça” (213). Whether this _vous_ refers to her colleagues at the
Inquisition, the reader, or perhaps even both, is ultimately for us to decide.

Molia also uses his fiction to represent various positions in the debate between literature
and popular fiction. The clumsy and uncultivated Martin, described by Cormiarof as having “un
penchant désarmant pour l’ineptie” (22), is by his own admission not particularly well-versed in
literature: “Je [n’avais] pas beaucoup lu, avant, et, à cause de Gaspard Fourbi, tout se mélanga dans ma tête, les matières et les langues” (90). Instead of considering the reading he has had to do for the Fourbi dossier as beneficial or enlightening, Martin resents and even regrets it, complaining: “Et Flaubert reste. Je n’aurais jamais dû le lire, il m’a noirci les idées” (90).

Evidently, intellectual reading does not appeal to Martin, who sees the world in far more practical and concrete terms. At a meeting of the Inquisitors, he reproaches Alexia and François: “Ça vous dérangerait pas qu’on arrête un peu de parler par métaphores? C’est pas le Salon du Livre, ici” (117).

At the other end of the spectrum, François is insufferably pretentious in his conceit as a self-professed intellectual and author, despite the fact that he is actually a parking lot security guard (212). François’s contempt for modern literature, which he believes greatly inferior to the texts of the past, is no less extreme than Martin’s hatred of Flaubert:


The contrast between the uncouth Martin and the snobbish François is effectively an exaggerated and stereotypical representation of the schism between popular fiction and literature, and Molia proposes *Fourbi*, with its appreciation of the simple act of writing—popular or literary—as a compromise.

Indeed, *Fourbi* brings together the best of both worlds, and with its unusual combination of plot twists and anagrams, it provides both entertainment and art. William Cloonan describes *Fourbi* as a “mixture of the popular, the literary, the traditional, and the outrageous” (French
Review 154), an assessment which accurately and concisely sums up Molia’s literary debut. But, as Cloonan notes, it is Molia himself who says it best, in a line from one of François’s surveillance reports that constitutes an excellent synopsis of the novel’s essence: “Assassiner quelqu’un, c’est un peu comme lire Proust, n’est-ce pas? La saveur croît à mesure de l’effort consenti” (78).

Literature today is a highly dynamic space, one that undergoes constant change and never stops evolving. Although this chapter is only a very cursory foray into that vital domain, I hope that I have succeeded in demonstrating some of its great potential for diversity and its enormous capacity for representation. Despite their obvious differences, what the authors examined in this chapter have in common is the fact that in one way or another, they all challenge conventional literary space, pushing the boundaries of tradition and testing the limits of their genre.

I began with an examination of intertextuality in 100% Basque, where I showed the power and the importance of literary allusion, even when the reference in question is not a widely known one. Drawing primarily on the work of Pierre Bayard, Michel Riffaterre, and Ross Chambers, I demonstrated how a reference is far more than an isolated title, and how knowledge of a particular text’s place in literature is far more important than intimate familiarity with its contents. Additionally, I explored intertextuality’s potential for intermedial expansion as a means of providing temporal context and as a way of uniting literature and other media in modern society.

I then proceeded to consider metafiction in two novels by Marie Darrieussecq, in whose work writers figure prominently. Using the theory outlined by Linda Hutcheon, I analyzed the ways in which Le Bébé and Le Pays are aware of themselves as novels. Both texts contain certain
autobiographical elements, featuring writers and mothers, and both draw important parallels between literature and other types of creation. On diegetic and structural levels, these novels interrogate the relationship between process and product, as well as questioning the limits placed by both the literary establishment and society in general on the identity of the writer and the act of writing itself.

Next, I proposed an analysis of Marie Cosnay’s *Villa Chagrin*, evaluating it as a mobile and ludic text, despite difficulties in defining the novelistic genre and the concept of play. Relying on Warren Motte’s definition of play, I assessed *Villa Chagrin* against his criteria, identifying two major fields of play in the text, namely, the close and cooperative relationship between author and reader, and the novel’s insistent juxtaposition of text and image, which is ultimately a manifestation of a critical textual theme: how can the unrepresentable be represented?

My final section focused on the polemic between popular and literary fiction in Xabi Molia’s *Fourbi*, a text whose novel combination of elements from both categories provides a thoughtful and intelligent meditation on the increasingly blurred borders of literary space today. Identifying characteristics of both categories based on observations by Ken Gelder, Lev Grossman, and Arthur Krystal, I considered the ways in which *Fourbi* can be classified as either popular or elite literature, and proposed the notion that perhaps it is both.

Each of the novels in this chapter can be approached from a variety of angles, including, but not limited to, the small sample of methods I have applied here. In no way do I mean to suggest that the approaches I have selected are the sole means of accessing these texts; rather, they are but a few of the many potential approaches available to readers wishing to visit a diverse and multifaceted literary landscape.
Chapter Three

Linguistic Space

In this chapter I will explore the role of linguistic space in the work of Itxaro Borda, Marie Darrieussecq, Marie Cosnay, and Xabi Molia, focusing on five texts. While these texts were selected for the variety of ways they represent this space and for the importance of language to their structure and plot, they are by no means the only texts by these authors to be concerned with linguistic space. Before beginning my analysis, it is necessary to define linguistic space. I shall designate the sphere occupied by language and over which language exerts influence as linguistic space. While to a certain extent, everything in a text is inherently linguistic in nature, the importance of language in a given text can vary considerably. In the case of the novels that I will discuss in this chapter, language serves as a critical agent for shaping and propelling the narrative. Although linguistic space is to a large extent abstract, its impact is no less tangible than that of physical space or its other more concrete relatives, and its effect on the reader is no less important than its role within the text. The complex interplay between these two spheres of influence ultimately means that as much as the novels in question construct their own linguistic spaces, these linguistic spaces also shape the very texts that created them. Pierre Bourdieu observes: “Ce n’est pas l’espace qui définit la langue, mais la langue qui définit son espace” (*Ce que parler veut dire* 26).

First, I will focus on the prominent role of language in Itxaro Borda’s *100% Basque*. The novel’s linguistic space has a doubly critical presence: its effects are felt both internally, on the level of the plot, and externally, in terms of its sociolinguistic repercussions on the world of its genesis, publication, and reception. On the one hand, Borda’s text represents
language as a defining characteristic of identity, a mark of authenticity, and a connection to tradition. Yet on the other, she exposes its potential as a tool for manipulation, the establishment of social hierarchies, and stereotyping. Borda offers a careful analysis and commentary of both the advantages and drawbacks of those aspects of language, using the anecdotes that comprise _100% Basque_ to demonstrate their effects on Basque society.

Next, I will look at two novels by Marie Darrieussecq, _Le Pays_ and _Tom est mort_. In _Le Pays_, Darrieussecq imagines a newly independent state that the reader will easily identify as the Basque Country. Questions of language arise on two levels: in the macrocosm of the nascent country’s adjustment to its independence, and in the microcosm of one woman’s personal experience as a writer returning to the place where she grew up. Although the physical space of the Country remains unaltered, its linguistic space has changed considerably during her absence. The protagonist finds herself surrounded by a language that is both familiar and unknown, and consequently realizes that in order to “come home,” she must learn to negotiate that space, a process that proves to be far more difficult than she anticipated. A far more somber text, _Tom est mort_ is a meditation on the linguistic space of loss: loss of country and familiarity, as a French woman follows her British husband from Vancouver to Australia, and personal loss, as the couple’s young son Tom dies in a tragic accident. We follow the mother through the various stages of her grief and witness her changing relationship with language during that process. Her ordeal reveals both the power and ineptitude of language as she struggles to come to terms with her loss.

Third, I will explore the linguistic space of immigration in Marie Cosnay’s _Entre chagrin et néant_. Cosnay’s nonfictional text chronicles the court appearances of illegal immigrants detained on the border between France and Spain. My analysis will mainly focus
on the role of certain players in the linguistic space of the courtroom, including the judge, the interpreter, and the detainees themselves. I will examine how these various actors help and hinder communication, and the effects that their actions have on the linguistic landscape of the tribunal. On a larger level, I will also consider the internally divided space of the French language itself, where Hexagonal speakers and their Francophone counterparts have a very different experience of a sphere that is theoretically shared by all speakers of French. My investigation will demonstrate that the same linguistic space can be experienced in a variety of ways.

Finally, I will explore the function and effects of language in Xabi Molia’s *Vers le nord*. Like much of Molia’s work, this text is an unlikely fusion of convention and innovation. *Vers le nord* is a modern take on the classic travel narrative and *Bildungsroman*, invigorated by the addition of a few fantastic elements and cast in the form of a graphic novel. Equally unconventional is the text’s use of four different languages. As *Vers le nord* demonstrates, the graphic novel is unexpectedly well suited to linguistic diversity. Indeed, it is precisely the combination of text and image that allows for the creation of a multidimensional paratextual landscape far beyond what is characteristic of more traditional novels. I will thus consider the relationship between language and paratext in *Vers le nord* and their role in shaping the linguistic space of the graphic novel.

Itxaro Borda’s 100% *Basque* is a candid discussion about the current situation in the Basque Country. Although the novel touches on many diverse topics, language is a common theme and is confirmed as a powerful force in the shaping of Basque culture. Borda examines
the changing role of Euskara in different contexts over time and invites her reader to consider
the role that Euskara plays in the Basque Country today. Rather than try to convince her
audience to espouse a particular view, Borda’s text serves as an invitation to the reader to
examine the facts and use critical thinking to come to his or her own conclusions.

100% Basque was originally written in Basque with the title %100 Basque. Published in 2001, it won the Euskadi prize in 2002. Not only was Borda the first woman to be awarded this prize, she was also the first writer from the French Basque Country to obtain the honor. Borda insists that the French adaptation of the novel, also published in 2001, is exactly that: an adaptation. She declines to use the word “translation” because certain aspects of the original cannot be translated into French and subtle nuances are inevitably lost in translation. %100 Basque was written in the Labourdine dialect of Basque rather than in the standardized Batua that is usually used for literature today. However, 100% Basque is written in standardized French because no officially recognized analogue to Labourdine exists in Hexagonal French. Indeed, the Académie Française was created to normalize French and ensure its homogeneity. One can thus say that the French language is uniform by design. Granted, there are a few regional variations in syntax and vocabulary, but those deviations are relatively small and are in no way comparable to the differences between Labourdine and Batua. Basque is a highly dialectical language, to the point that the Basque spoken in Mauléon would most likely be incomprehensible to someone from Bayonne, a mere 85 kilometers away. In response to that problem, Batua was created to provide a common language and facilitate communication in the Basque Country.

The narrator of 100% Basque is a Bascophone woman living in Bayonne. She grew up speaking Basque, but like the majority of Basque speakers in the French Basque Country, is
bilingual and speaks French as well. Questions of language and identity are a constant presence in her daily life and every decision involving Basque language or culture must be a conscious one. For example, she has chosen to educate her daughter in Basque, a choice with far-reaching sociolinguistic implications. However, despite the intensely personal nature of the situation, the narrator is able to take a step back and reflect upon the relationship between language and identity in the Basque Country today with a highly critical eye. Her discerning assessment spares nothing and no one, and she is by no means exempt from her own criticism, which exposes glaring inconsistencies in Basque society, as well as personal deficits and weaknesses.

In diglossic societies, language is closely tied to social class and contributes to the stratification of society. One language is valued more than the other, and accordingly, the use of each language by different groups and in different contexts is carefully prescribed. The Basque Country is no exception to this rule, and it is especially pronounced on the French side of the border, where the Basque language is often associated with rural settings and by extension, with a lack of culture and education. Linguistic exchanges in Basque are therefore considered to be of lesser value than those in French and consequently, speakers of French are often given preferential treatment. Borda’s narrator recounts:

Je connaissais la femme qui tenait le rayon fromage de mon supermarché habituel. Nos relations commerciales se faisaient en langue vernaculaire et cela me plaisait. Un jour, je patientais en face de son étalage, une main posée sur la vitrine, l’autre tenant le panier, personne: parfait […] Un homme déboula et se figea devant moi qui ouvrais la bouche pour héler la serveuse; je le regardai, médusée: il s’exprimait en un français pur et fluide. La vendeuse qui avait suivi mon manège pour
tenter de revendiquer mes droits de client me dit en plissant ses lèvres en cœur, avant de servir le bonhomme *illico*: Attends un peu, j’ai du monde là. (28)

Abruptly demoted to second-class citizen status, the narrator confirms what she already knows to be true in the form of a rhetorical question: “Il suffisait de s’exprimer en français pour passer devant tout le monde?” (28). In the case of Borda’s narrator, the issue is not lack of ability or inadequacy; she can and does in fact speak French fluently. Knowing this, the reader may wonder why she does not simply switch to French. The reason is not related to linguistic proficiency, but instead to questions of identity. French is not and will never be “her” language. For Borda, French is the language of the Other. In large part, her feelings are due to the historical background of diglossic linguistic landscapes like the one in the Basque Country. It is difficult to separate a language from its historical role, and a language that was once used to dominate will continue to be widely associated with oppression long after it has officially ceased to dominate. Further complicating the issue is the fact that while the age of colonization in an official capacity or physical sense has ended, it persists in other forms like linguistic imperialism. Derrida remarks: “Sur la terre des hommes aujourd’hui, certains doivent céder à l’homo-hégémonie des langues dominantes, ils doivent apprendre la langue des maîtres, du capital et des machines, ils doivent perdre leur idiome pour survivre ou pour vivre mieux” (*Monolinguisme* 56).

The narrator’s experience in the supermarket is a good example of linguistic hegemony. Moreover, the setting of this interaction is especially symbolic. Given the thoughtful, deliberate nature of each of Borda’s words, it is unlikely to be a coincidence that this linguistic skirmish takes place in a supermarket, a place where goods are physically exchanged. In the linguistic marketplace of the French society and culture that dominates the
French Basque Country, French is generally given preference over Basque. For Bourdieu, the concept of language as a commodity to be exchanged is central to understanding diglossic societies. He explains: “[L]a constitution d’un marché linguistique crée les conditions d’une concurrence objective dans et par laquelle la compétence légitime peut fonctionner comme capital linguistique produisant, à l’occasion de chaque échange social, un profit de distinction” (Parler 43).

That difference exists, argues Bourdieu, to facilitate the organization and stratification of society. Our inherent compulsion to categorize and sort humanity into two groups (Us and Other) means that there is a constant need for tools to effectuate the process of classification and separation. Commodities and marketplaces are one such tool, and Bourdieu maintains that their linguistic form is no less important or powerful a mechanism than their economic incarnation in the establishment of social hierarchies.

The language to which higher value and social status has been attributed emerges as the dominant one, and its speakers consequently occupy a higher place on the social ladder. Those who exclusively speak the language that has been deemed inferior are trapped at the bottom, with extremely limited opportunities for upward mobility. However, simply learning the language is not enough to guarantee social success. Bilingual speakers must be able to distinguish between situations in which the “lesser” language is acceptable and those where use of the “superior” language is required:

La compétence, qui s’acquiert en situation, par la pratique, comporte, inséparablement, la maîtrise pratique d’un usage de la langue et la maîtrise pratique des situations dans lesquelles cet usage de la langue est socialement acceptable. Le sens de la valeur de ses propres produits linguistiques est une dimension fondamentale du sens de la place
occupied dans l’espace social. (Bourdieu, *Parler* 84)

Thus, in the case of the narrator of *100% Basque*, her transgression is not the fact that she speaks Basque, but rather that she failed to recognize the necessity of speaking French in front of the man in the cheese aisle. Clearly, the position of the French language in the social hierarchy of the French Basque Country is well established, but that does not mean that Basque does not also have its place. Indeed, in the eyes of the exclusively Francophone mainstream, knowledge of the Basque language is considered to be a mark of authenticity and a measure of someone’s “Basqueness.” Borda’s narrator experiences this firsthand one evening when she goes to a poetry reading with a colleague, whose introduction of her is a classic example of the phenomenon:

- Qui as-tu là? demanda-t-on à mon collègue en me montrant du doigt. Il ne savait pas comment me présenter.

- Elle vient de l’Intérieur, du Pays Basque […] Elle est totalement indigène! Il plissait ses lèvres avec sensualité en prononçant le mot “indigène” et ajoutait, pour souligner ma véritable ethnicité identitaire:

- Elle sait le basque.

- Ah bon? Authentique alors? (85-86)

As exaggerated as it may seem, this exchange is a fairly accurate representation of the general attitude of the mainstream center towards the speakers of the “inferior” language, who occupy the periphery. The colleague’s qualification of the narrator as “authentic” based on her ability to speak Basque is characteristic of the center’s reductionist tendencies when trying to categorize the Other. While it is undeniable that the Basque language is an important part of the narrator’s identity, her colleague has failed to understand that language is not the only
factor that defines her. It is easy, and at times even convenient, for the mainstream to fall into the trap of substituting this undeniably important part of a person’s identity for his or her identity as a whole, and that phenomenon is not limited to the Basque Country.

Ultimately, her colleague and his misconceptions are symptoms of a much larger problem that extends well beyond the borders of the Basque Country: how to represent (and consequently, understand) regional or ethnic identity. Bourdieu notes:

On ne peut comprendre la lutte pour le définition de l’identité “régionale” ou “ethnique” qu’à condition de dépasser l’opposition que la science doit d’abord opérer, pour rompre avec les prénotions de la sociologie spontanée, entre la représentation et la réalité, et à condition d’inclure dans le réel la représentation du réel, ou plus exactement la lutte des représentations. (Parler 136)

Each side is anxious to establish itself as the sole purveyor of reality and as a result, as having the monopoly on representing the other. Nonetheless, as critical as Borda may be of the center’s habit of oversimplifying, she recognizes that at times, the periphery is guilty of an oversimplified self-perception, as well. Anxious to avoid falling into that trap, she refrains from espousing a blindly idealistic view of Basque culture. In fact, her assessment of the Basque people is no less unyielding than her appraisal of the Other. Her narrator playfully mocks the poems presented by four Basque farmers at a poetry reading and, effectively, the farmers themselves: “C’était comique mais un brin répétitif. Je m’ennuyais. Je sortis fumer une cigarette et ratai le poète suivant” (88). When she returns, she is both amused and appalled by the audience’s reaction to the latest terrible poem: “Wouah! Le dernier, extraordinaire! Il eut droit à une espèce de standing ovation” (88). The audience’s willingness to believe that anything in Basque, created by Basques, is outstanding is no less a reductionist
representation than the colleague’s appraisal of the narrator’s identity based exclusively on her linguistic abilities.

In addition to being perceived as a mark of ethnic authenticity, Borda’s narrator observes that Basque has also become a tool for ambitious politicians from all sides. Although some of them may feign an interest in the cultural and linguistic aspects of language, more often than not, the only real interest these politicians have in the Basque language is in its potential use as a means for advancing their careers and political agendas. Borda’s protagonist observes: “Sous prétexte de l’agonie de l’euskara, nous devenions l’objet et l’enjeu de la course aux ambitions personnelles d’individus appartenant à diverses formations politiques qui n’avaient aucune envie de réaliser les projets pourtant démultipliés sur le papier” (135).

For Borda, it is impossible to reduce the Basque language to a single idea concept like politics, independence, or even authenticity. Basque is simply part of who she is and part of the Basque Country that is her home. Thus, the invasion of her linguistic space by outsiders eager to exploit it for their own ends is not only a personal affront but also an example of the linguistic imperialism has long been present in the Basque Country.

On both sides of the border, familiarity with the historical context is essential for understanding the linguistic situation of the Basque Country today. Divided between France and Spain, the Basque Country has been subject to linguistic colonization at many points throughout its history, the most notable of which occurred on the Spanish side during Francisco Franco’s dictatorship (1939-1975), when any use of the Basque language was outlawed and punishable by imprisonment or even death. Although Basque was never unilaterally forbidden in the same way on the French side of the border, a certain de facto
prohibition did exist—and still does, to a certain extent. For centuries, French has been the sole official language in France, meaning that all legitimate government communication is carried out in French. While the state could not control what language was spoken in the home or in other non-official capacities, there do exist other, less official ways to enforce linguistic hierarchies. Subtle yet powerful, these techniques affect all levels of society and their influence on us begins at a young age. Derrida recalls his school years in Algeria:

> On avait le choix, on avait le droit formel d’apprendre ou de ne pas apprendre l’arabe ou le berbère. Ou l’hébreu. Ce n’était pas illégal, ni un crime. Au lycée du moins—et l’arabe plutôt que le berbère. Je ne me rappelle pas que personne ait jamais appris l’hébreu au lycée. L’interdit opérait donc selon d’autres voies. Plus rusées, pacifiques, silencieuses, libérales. Il prenait d’autres revanches. Dans la façon de permettre et de donner, car tout était donné en principe, ou en tout cas permis. (Monolinguisme 59)

Thus, despite the theoretical availability of other languages (Hebrew, Berber, and Arabic), they were never truly an option on a practical level. Clearly, social and pragmatic concerns are no less of a determinant of linguistic space than governmental and official factors. Indeed, language is closely tied to social perception and directly affects someone’s chances for social and professional success. The link between language and social mobility is well known to members of all social classes; but even so, people have a tendency to overestimate the strength of that connection and to misunderstand its mechanisms. The effects of these misconceptions on the linguistic space of the Basque Country can be as great as those caused by linguistic imperialism itself. Borda gives an example of that phenomenon in a chapter where her protagonist attends a ceremony honoring Balantsun, a fictitious renowned Basque singer who died the year before and in whose honor a statue is being unveiled. One of
the singer’s sons is there to represent the family and although he loudly extols the virtues of all things Basque, it is quickly discovered that he does not speak the language. The attendees are perplexed by that paradox:

- Mais votre père […] chantait qu’il ne fallait pas laisser le basque se perdre dans les maisons!
- Chez les autres, bien sûr! Nos parents, ils nous parlaient en français pour ne pas que nous soyons handicapés à l’école. (55)

It is important to point out that this last sentence is in French in both the original Basque text and the later French version. The French edition calls attention to that fact with an asterisk at the end of the sentence and a note at the bottom of the page. That addendum highlights the dissonant contrast between Basque and French linguistic spheres, which is evidently far more pronounced in the original Basque version, but no less significant in the French adaptation. The son’s statement reveals that Balantsun chose not to transmit his language to his children due to fear of its potentially deleterious effects on their future. Their “Basqueness” was less important to him than their ability to move up in the world and achieve more than he was able to as a poor, uneducated shepherd and musician.

Convinced that speaking Basque and getting a good education are mutually exclusive, Balantsun chose education over language and tradition. In stark contrast to that position, Borda’s narrator, who sends her daughter to a Basque language school, sees no conflict between “Basqueness” (both cultural and linguistic) and education. Borda even takes things a step further by seeking to establish a connection between Basque agricultural and literary traditions, two elements that are widely considered to be incongruous: “Je parcours les champs linguistiques de la parole. J’essaie de garder les langues et les syntaxes les plus affûtées
possible en les aiguisant périodiquement sur des vieilles pierres pesantes et rondes” (120). Evidently, Borda does not believe that education and “Basqueness” are incompatible, and she consciously endeavors to found her literary Basque on an age-old rural tradition.

Even so, despite her firm belief in the Basque language’s foundation in history and tradition and its complicated sociopolitical situation, Borda does not call for a closed linguistic space. Acknowledging the existing overlaps between Basque, French, and Spanish, she sees the potential for a non-destructive exchange between the three languages and their corresponding spaces. Yet her text implies that in order for that to happen, the Basques will have to reconsider their ideas about self and identity and their conception of linguistic space. In Bourdieu’s words, “les catégories selon lesquelles un groupe se pense et selon lesquelles il se représente sa propre réalité contribuent à la réalité de ce groupe” (Parler 158). A reconsideration of this magnitude will not be comfortable or easy, as 100% Basque shows, but Borda’s text proves that a reevaluation of the relationship between identity, language, discourse, and power has the potential to serve as a catalyst for social and political change and for a reshaping of their corresponding linguistic landscapes.

Marie Darrieussecq

1. Le Pays

If Borda’s narrator is indisputably a part of Basque linguistic space, that is not the case for Marie, the protagonist of Marie Darrieussecq's Le Pays. In notable opposition to 100% Basque, Darrieussecq’s novel shows the Basque Country from the perspective of someone whose linguistic landscape and social position are far less well defined. Unlike Borda’s narrator, who is considered to be a fully “authentic” Basque, assimilated into the Basque
community despite her criticism of it, the ethnic “authenticity” of Darrieussecq’s narrator, Marie, is repeatedly called into question. Despite having been born and raised in “the Country,” she experiences the community from the outside upon her return and finds that she must adjust to its linguistic space before she can integrate into its society. Although Darrieussecq’s novel is fiction, it is abundantly clear that the “Country” to which the title refers is the Basque Country and that the Yuoangui language is Basque.

Darrieussecq’s protagonist Marie is an ambitious young writer who, after finding literary success in Paris, decides to move back to the land of her childhood after it gains its independence from France and Spain. She grew up around the Yuoangui language but never truly in it. At home, the adults used it to discuss private topics without being understood, and public use of the language was prohibited. For Marie, Yuoangui is thus a familiar language, without really being a known one. While the reasons behind her parents’ decision to not teach her Yuoangui are never given, it is not unlikely that fear of jeopardizing her future was a major factor. Much like Balantsun in 100% Basque, Marie’s parents ostensibly placed social concerns above tradition when making linguistic decisions. However, when Yuoangui becomes the Country’s official language following its independence, Marie’s linguistic deficits reveal themselves to be a stumbling block on the road to integration, rather than the social advantage her parents hoped for. Her linguistic shortcomings instantly brand her as an outsider, despite the fact that she was born there, and she struggles to be accepted by the Yuoanguiphone residents of the Country. Marie’s encounter with a former classmate who is now her son’s preschool teacher is but one of many examples of the Yuoanguiphone community’s general attitude towards her. When she goes to pick up her son after school, Marie notices that “[la maîtresse] articule et parle lentement, pour bien marquer à chaque mot
que [Marie] aura beau rentrer mille fois au pays, elle ne sera jamais d’ici” (81).

Even so, regardless of her resentment of the French language and her contempt for it, the teacher is at least willing to talk to Marie. Other Yuoanguis categorically refuse to speak French, even when that means cutting off lines of communication. Marie’s experience at the pharmacy one day shows the extremes that some Yuoanguis go to avoid outsider languages. Marie endeavors in vain to explain that she wants to buy a pregnancy test, but the pharmacist acts as if she does not understand Marie’s attempts to communicate in French or Spanish. She is unwilling to compromise, despite her client’s obvious inability to express herself in Yuoangui. Ultimately, the pharmacist’s insistence that all verbal communication be carried out in Yuoangui means that Marie is reduced to using gestures to get her point across: “La pharmacienne ne voulut me servir qu’en vieille langue […] Je montrai mon ventre, je fis le geste de vomir, je ne voulais pas de Maalox, je ne voulais pas de Digédryl, elle était bouchée ou quoi, je voulais un test de grossesse, un test de embarazo, por favor” (54).

As a writer, Marie is no stranger to the power of words and their potential to facilitate or hinder the formation of connections, and as such, anticipates a certain degree of linguistic awkwardness and an adjustment period when she returns to the Country. Still, she does not truly understand the ramifications of living in a country where she does not speak the official language, and she is caught off guard by the challenges that her new situation presents. She has naively underestimated the extent to which independence and a new linguistic policy have changed the Country, and she has planned her return with the expectation that any differences between her childhood experience there and the current state of affairs will be superficial. It is not until she physically sets foot in the political and linguistic spaces of the Country that she finally realizes that her inability to speak Yuoangui has effectively made her a foreigner in her
native land. Lost in a sea of incomprehensible sounds and unable to communicate with those who do not (or will not) speak French or Spanish, her plight is not unlike that of many immigrants in France:

Je n’avais pas vu le moment venir, où je me transformerais en mamma, en fatma; en une immigrée récente comme j’en croisais à Paris, trimballées par un jeune enfant de la Poste à la boulangerie. L’enfant s’adressait à la guichetière, l’enfant achetait le pain. La mère, en retrait, n’osait ni bonjour ni merci, de peur d’abîmer les mots dans sa bouche incapable. (145-46)

Marie is afraid that she will never be able to navigate the linguistic landscape of Yuoangui on her own, and that like the immigrant women she used to see when she lived in Paris, she will have to rely on her son to interpret for her. Moreover, her concerns about losing her independence are compounded by her fear of losing her voice and being unable to communicate with those around her. On the opposite end of the spectrum is her son Tiot, who has a young child’s facility with language and quickly becomes fluent in Yuoangui. Unlike his mother, who struggles to make sense of an alien lexicon and decode the syntax of a new language, Tiot seems to have an innate understanding of Yuoangui linguistic space. Marie qualifies two-year-old Tiot as a “petite éponge à mots” (144), and is envious of his linguistic aptitude. Thanks to his language skills, Tiot’s assimilation into Yuoangui society is nearly effortless and it is not long before he is able to blend in with the rest of the children at his preschool.

Yet that transition is not as smooth as it appears, and it soon becomes clear that the strain of simultaneously living in two parallel linguistic universes is taking its toll on Tiot. Since his arrival in the Country, Tiot has been forced to sort the words he hears and separate
them not only according to language, but according to context, as well. He has difficulty adjusting to the dichotomy between the private linguistic space of the home (French) and the public linguistic space of school, shopping, and errands (Yuoangui).

Initially, he has problems distinguishing between those two spheres and he mixes them, treating them as virtually interchangeable. The resulting confusion leads Tiot to try to reconcile those two worlds, both externally, in the world around him, and internally, in his head. Eventually, he comes to understand that they are not exchangeable and that the border between them is in fact clearly delineated, but that realization does not come without a price. The day that he makes this discovery, the foundations of his universe are shaken and everything he knows is called into question. Marie recalls: “Quand il comprit que ce n’était pas un jeu, mon handicap le consterna. Il devint soucieux et limita ses phrases […] Il réclama à nouveau des couches. La maîtresse le trouva perturbé” (146).

Part of his anxiety is due to the fact that the Yuoangui language is the first thing that Tiot is unable to share with his parents, and he must enter its linguistic space alone. As a result, Tiot feels as isolated on the inside of Yuoangui linguistic space as Marie feels on the outside. Sensing her child’s distress, Marie’s attempts to learn Yuoangui take on a new urgency. No longer driven solely by a desire for assimilation or self-expression, Marie now endeavors to bridge the gap between Yuoangui and French that separates her from her son. Following the failure of her previous attempts to improve her language skills, Marie recognizes the need for a new approach and tries to replace the intellectual technique that she has been using with a more concrete one that would allow her to take possession of Yuoangui in a physical sense:

Elle aurait voulu englober le pays dans toutes ses composantes. Le contenir, le faire sien, et en être débordée, d’accord, mais l’avoir d’abord senti physiquement […] Elle
ne parvenait pas à englober le pays. Le temps qui coule, qui bat, physique, le temps qui fait les enfants, il lui semblait pouvoir le sentir. L’espace, c’était une autre affaire.

Although her reaction is impulsive, Marie’s strategy is not entirely illogical. To certain languages like Basque (and Yuoangui) the notion of possession is practically inherent: the Basque word for someone who speaks Basque is *euskaldun*, or “someone who has the Basque language.” Thus, from the point of view of semantics, speaking Basque means possessing Basque. Yet for Derrida, the problem of ownership has the potential to play out like Hegel’s master and slave dialectic, where the person who appears to be in command of the situation is in reality the one being commanded. This gives rise to the question of whether language can ever truly be possessed or if in reality, it is the language that possesses its speaker. Reflecting on this problem, Derrida wonders: “La langue est-elle jamais en possession, une possession possédante ou possédée?” (*Monolinguisme* 35).

Whatever one’s stance on the issue may be, it is important to acknowledge its corollaries. Treating a language like a physical object that can be possessed necessarily implies its existence in physical space. Consequently, Marie’s objectified approach to Yuoangui is the source of her physical experience of its linguistic space. Her feelings of disorientation from within Yuoangui syntax are strikingly similar to the way someone feels when lost in a geographical space. After several months in the Country, Marie is finally beginning to use simple phrases, but the grammatical structure of Yuoangui continues to elude her and she is unable to locate any “landmarks” like the subject or the verb. With no linguistic compass to orient her, it is difficult for her to understand the way the Yuoangui language orders the universe:
Ça commençait à entrer sous mon crâne, les au revoir et les merci et les pardon je ne comprends pas. Cependant, dans la série de sons du “je ne comprends pas,” j’ignorais où était le verbe, où était le sujet. Comment une syntaxe trouvait-elle à se loger dans ce long souffle en fond de gorge? Était-ce une phrase, ou un seul mot? Une onomatopée? Avaient-ils un mot, d’ailleurs, pour “onomatopée,” étaient-ils parvenues à cette complexité? Ils avaient des livres, je les feuilletais. Mais comment cet assemblage de syllabes opaques pouvait-il ordonner le monde que je connaissais, le monde des nuances? (144)

It is not until she realizes that the French language can seem similarly illogical and unintelligible to foreigners that she is suddenly able to see her native language through the eyes of an outsider. Her change in perspective helps her understand the extent to which her universe has been influenced by French linguistic space. The French language has shaped everything she knows, from her conception of self to her comprehension of the world around her:

Elle avait vécu trente ans dans la vision du monde française. Elle commençait ses phrases par le sujet, puis elle énonçait le verbe, puis tous les compléments. Le français la sommait de préciser le genre des choses […] Le français est une langue d’autorité. Le sujet, masculin, ordonne la phrase et s’appuie sur son verbe. Ce n’est en rien la langue du doute: je pense donc je suis, je reste premier. Le précisions du temps et de mode, l’espace la couleur, la façon, l’intention, basculent en fin de phrase comme les moraines d’un glacier. (133-34)

This new awareness forces her to reassess the geography of her native linguistic landscape and reconsider elements of its makeup that she previously took for granted. For
example, concepts like gendered nouns are a fundamental part of the French language and by extension, a fundamental part of the way Francophones experience the world. At the same time, the idea that nouns must be either masculine or feminine is not a universal one, and to those whose native language does not employ it, this notion can seem absurd:

Les Yuoanguis riaient quand on leur expliquait que le français est une langue cartésienne. Une langue qui détermine les pronoms—*son vélo, sa bicyclette*— selon un hypothétique genre des objets (quand une voyelle ne s’en mêle pas: *son escabeau, son échelle*). (134)

There is no doubt that Marie’s experience of Yuoangui and the Country is heavily influenced by words and language, but her family ties to the area are also significant. Some of these personal connections are strong: her brother Paul died in the Country, and most of her memories of her brother Pablo before the onset of his mental illness are from their childhood years in the Country. Other links are considerably weaker: her memories of the Country are of a region that no longer exists as such and her relationship with her parents is relatively strained. The simultaneous existence of both stable and fragile ties is a contributing factor to Marie’s conflicted relationship with the Yuoanguis as a group.

Although Marie is by no means an “authentic” Yuoangui in the same sense as Borda’s narrator is an “authentic” Basque, she is not a true foreigner either. Yet far from easing the process of social and linguistic integration, her vague status as a sort of “native immigrant” becomes an impediment to assimilation. In some respects, Marie feels like a Yuoangui despite her inability to speak the language. Her identification with the Yuoanguis is especially pronounced when she must decide between them and another, even more dissimilar group. For example, in front of other Europeans, Marie is proud to call herself a Yuoangui and be part of
what she considers to be an age-old indigenous tradition: “Le Pays Yuoangui est l’Afrique de l’Europe. Nous attirons autant d’anthropologues que les Pygmées et les Masais. Le nous me venait spontanément quand j’évoquais nos traditions funèbres, par une sorte de solidarité indigène” (179).

Marie is comfortable expressing her belonging to the Yuoangui community in this context, even though, paradoxically, she is incapable of doing so in the Yuoangui language, which clearly marks her as an outsider, despite her best intentions. However, that is not the only evidence of her distance from the group. One indication of the disconnect is her embrace of the term “indigenous,” a loaded word with a complicated history that is seldom appreciated or accepted by those whom it is meant to designate. As we saw in 100% Basque, that classification is seen by many as a derogatory term, an epithet casually tossed around by outsiders who are either eager to dismiss the Basques as uncivilized savages or who want to profit somehow from the perceived “authenticity” that accompanies the term. Marie’s treatment of the word seems especially cavalier and naïve given the fact that her use of the nous form to include herself in the Yuoangui collective is, by her own admission, contingent upon the circumstances and the subject in question. She is eager to be a part of the aspects of Yuoangui culture that are perceived positively by outsiders and that reflect favorably on her, but she does not hesitate to exclude herself from the Yuoangui community when it comes to what she considers to be cultural flaws.

In such cases, what Marie wishes to emphasize is not her belonging to the group, but instead her distance from it. Once again, language becomes a way for Marie to articulate her relationship with the Yuoanguis. Her frustrated encounter with the pharmacist who refuses to speak French is a good example of that linguistic disengagement: “La pharmacienne ne voulut
me servir qu’en vieille langue, au Sud ils sont encore plus pénibles qu’au Nord” (47). Here, her proud use of the *nous* that identifies her as a member of a noble indigenous people has been replaced by a boorish and unsympathetic *ils* from whom she is eager to disassociate herself. Those shifting pronouns serve as confirmation of Marie’s reliance on language to define herself and her place in the world. The landscape of her linguistic space shifts and changes in response to her doubts about who she is and where she belongs. Neither fully Yuoangui nor truly French, Marie’s return to the Country leaves her standing with one foot in each world, without fully belonging anywhere, yet unwilling to relinquish her hold on either one.

2. *Tom est mort*

Language also plays an important role in Darrieussecq’s *Tom est mort*, which is the story of a family who has lost a child. Told from the mother’s perspective, the novel follows her on her journey to come to terms with the death of her son. The French mother, whose name we never learn, has been living in Vancouver with her British husband and their three children, but the whole family relocated to Australia shortly before Tom’s fatal accident. Her English is minimal, so the typical difficulties associated with moving are compounded by her linguistic limitations. The challenges of adapting to life in a new country, language, and culture initially seem daunting to her, but they pale in comparison to the agony of her sudden and devastating loss. Consumed by grief, the mother abandons her efforts to adjust to her new environment and instead focuses her efforts on finding the words to express her despair: “Je ne sais plus parler, plus parler français, ne sais plus aucune langue entre Vancouver et Sydney […] Quelle est la langue de la mort de Tom?” (42).

She soon discovers that her situation transcends language: there are no words capable of
describing what she feels. Neither English nor French can provide her with what she needs, and she instinctively understands that no other existing language will suffice either. It is in the face of this inadequacy that the mother envisions the creation of a new vocabulary unique to her pain and anguish: “Je voudrais un mot à moi, un mot pour moi seule. On devrait, quand on perd Tom, on devrait se voir délivrer un dictionnaire à soi, dans une nouvelle langue” (66). Her inability to articulate her loss becomes a linguistic barrier that cuts her off from the world around her, preventing others from reaching out to her and obscuring her own comprehension of others’ speech. This sudden aphasia knows no limits: “Je perdais mon anglais de toute façon, je n’y comprenais rien. M’eût-on parlé français, je n’aurais rien compris” (73).

In an attempt to make sense of her loss and to initiate the reconstruction of her broken linguistic space, Tom’s mother begins to anthropomorphize the structure of her native language, attributing emotions to its grammar. For example, she explains that “le futur antérieur est douloureux mais beaucoup plus bénin, de toute façon, que les vrais souvenirs. Les images y sont sans consistance” (83), and “la folie est au conditionnel” (54). In order to process her grief, the topography of her linguistic landscape must serve as a proxy for the feelings that she cannot express otherwise, while still preserving the memories that evoke them.

Tom is invariably the protagonist of these memories, and for a time, he is the sole inhabitant of her new linguistic space. His presence there is especially significant for his mother because, of her three children, Tom was the only one who spoke French. Tom’s mother recalls that “Tom parlait très peu anglais” (24). Later, she contrasts this fact with the observation that her two surviving children speak only English: “Stella n’a jamais appris le français. Stella comme Vince ne parle toujours que la langue de son père” (126). The
connection between Tom and his mother, fortified by their shared linguistic space, seems to have been much stronger than her ties to her other children. She misses Tom so acutely that she admits she would give anything, including her other children, to see him again. She confesses: “J’aurais donné Vince et Stella” (68).

Indeed, language is a defining characteristic of the connection between Tom and his mother and the strength of this bond is such that even after Tom’s death, he lives on in her linguistic space, untouched by time, space, or mortality. In language, Tom’s mother is able to feel his presence: “Moi, je disais des consonnes […] Je m’efforçais, t, f, k, p, s, et Tom me répondait dans la même langue lacunaire” (142). Words that are otherwise devoid of meaning come to life and take on Tom’s shape: “J’arrondissais la bouche en grand pour faire des O grimaçants et muets, et Tom prenait forme” (142). For a time, Tom is her linguistic space.

Slowly, her linguistic landscape begins to change as the words she shares with Tom give way to muteness. The most deleterious effect of her inability to speak is obvious: the mother is cut off from those around her. However, this silence is not entirely negative. Like the words that defined the linguistic landscape she inhabited before Tom’s death, silence is a force that shapes her new linguistic space. As Michel Foucault points out, silence is as much a part of dialogue as words are:

Silence itself—the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers—is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within overall strategies. There is no binary division to be made between what one says and what one does not say; we must try to determine the different ways of not saying such things, how those
who can and those who cannot speak of them are distributed, which type of discourse is authorized, or which form of discretion is required in either case. There is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses. (*History of Sexuality* 27)

Those observations apply not only to the mother’s silence, but also to society’s muteness on the subject of death in general. Beyond an initial acknowledgement of someone’s loss and the ensuing formulaic condolences, death and dying remain a taboo subject whose mention makes people uncomfortable. Yet if death at its most basic level is difficult for people to discuss, the death of a child is even more so. Tom’s mother observes: “On ne parle pas des enfants morts” (220). That silence is not limited to simple linguistic avoidance; it can also become physical. When a scrupulous and conspicuous verbal evasion of the subject is not enough, people tend to avoid those most affected by the loss. Tom’s mother compares the behavior of their friends and certain members of their extended family to the way people react to a contagious disease: “D’ailleurs, depuis que Tom est mort, étrangement le téléphone ne sonne pas. Comme si nos proches […] avaient finalement senti, et renoncé. La peste. Nous apportons la peste” (41).

That reaction represents a sort of physical “silence,” a desperate attempt to distance oneself from the dialogue that persists in linguistic silence. The intensity of the response is proof that making a subject so tangibly taboo can itself be a way of talking about it. The mother notes: “Aucune chanson ne parle de la mort des enfants, mais toutes en parlent, les suppliques, les départs, les abandons, la peur” (181). In this sense, the mother’s silence is as much a reaction to the world’s treatment of her loss as it is to the loss itself. Her retreat into linguistic silence is her only means of dealing with a loss that she is unable and forbidden to
express in a more conventional dialogue. Yet there is considerable power in silence and in its potential as a means of articulating what cannot be spoken. Indeed, Tom’s mother finds a certain strength in her silence: “Déjà je ne pouvais plus parler. Les réflexes du corps s’inversent. On devient puissante, malade de puissance” (119).

However, there is a fine line between constructive silence and destructive silence. What begins as a protective mechanism and a refuge from unspeakable pain can easily become an impenetrable and isolating wall. The transformation from safe haven into prison can be a gradual and insidious one, and in the case of Tom’s mother, it is not until she finally tries to break the silence that she discovers her inability to speak. Recognizing that her mute world harms her more than it protects her and that she cannot escape from it alone, she reluctantly agrees to check into a clinic for treatment. Slowly, she begins to speak again, but she finds that the advances that she had previously made into the Anglophone world of her husband, her other children, and her surroundings have vanished: “Après la mort de Tom mon anglais, sa compréhension même, avait en quelque sort rétréci” (171).

Her journey back into Anglophone linguistic space is slow, and it is physical in nature, on the level of reflexes. At first, she can only repeat back simple phrases that are devoid of any real meaning: “Je n’étais plus mutique, mais je parlais pour rien, des phrases toutes faites, un anglais de sitcom” (213). Initially, those phrases are little more than sounds to her, but with time, they begin to acquire significance as she ventures out of her silence and reenters public linguistic space. That process teaches the mother that a language is far more than the sounds and words composing it, and makes her aware of the important overlap between linguistic and social spaces.

Bourdieu confirms: “une langue est un code, au sens de chiffre permettant d’établir des
équivalences entre des sons et des sens, mais aussi au sens de système de normes régulant les pratiques linguistiques” (Parler 27). These are the socio-linguistic norms that must be restored in order for Tom’s mother to experience meaning in language again.

Since those norms do not facilitate the discussion of her loss that she needs to process her grief, Tom’s mother decides to attend a support group in Sydney. The group is conducted in English, which she would likely consider an impossible obstacle in any other circumstances, but she is surprised to discover that this is no longer the problem that it once was. She may not always understand the individual words, but she instinctively understands the code that governs these meetings:

Quand deux personnes parlaient en même temps, j’étais perdue. Je ratais un mot et le sens se débobinait, mes forces m’abandonnaient. L’opacité gagnait toute la phrase et débordait les phrases suivantes, je perdais pied. Mais dans les groupes de parole, je savais de quoi on parlait. Alors j’arrivais à suivre. C’était presque reposant. C’était avec eux, que j’ai vraiment réappris à parler. Mes cours de langue. (171)

Her comprehension of the sociolinguistic code of the group is a bridge to the world and a road out of her solitude. The impenetrable walls surrounding the isolated linguistic space that she has inhabited since Tom’s death begin to crumble at last as she begins to speak again. Several different forms of language guide Tom’s mother on her journey out of the darkness into which her son’s death has plunged her. It is silence that protects her in the acute phases of her grief, yet that same muteness becomes a trap when it prevents her from developing the tools she needs to survive in a world without her son. With time, she begins to rebuild her linguistic landscape, a process which eventually helps her to come to terms with the death of her child. As she slowly makes her way back into language and society, she
discovers truths about herself, about the world around her, and about the nature of loss.

Marie Cosnay

For the illegal immigrants in *Entre chagrin et néant*, language is also about survival. Much like Tom’s mother and the protagonist of *Le Pays*, they must face the challenges that come with moving to a new country, and in most cases, to a new linguistic space. However, unlike Marie and the mother, whose relocation is protected by a visa, the detainees’ presence in France is illegal. For them, language and effective communication are their only chance of avoiding deportation, and they must plead their case in front of a judge who holds their fate in his or her hands. Their ability to navigate a foreign linguistic space successfully will determine whether or not they may remain in it.

In contrast to the other texts explored in this chapter, *Entre chagrin et néant* is nonfiction. The stories told by the immigrants, whether in an official setting like the courtroom or in a more casual context like the detention center, or over coffee with the author, were carefully and painstakingly recorded by Cosnay, who was present at all of the hearings. For a novel, the tone of Cosnay’s text may seem exceedingly technical in places, punctuated with enough legalese and acronyms to require the inclusion of a glossary, but the stories told by the detainees read much like the plot of a more conventional novel.

However, the tales of their various plights are only one part of the story being told in the tribunal. A second and subtler drama plays out in the courtroom itself, before the eyes of both Cosnay and the reader. The protagonists of this other story include predictable characters like the judges, lawyers, and detainees, but an unexpected yet equally important fourth figure
emerges, as well: the interpreter. In theory, the function of the interpreter is to serve as a bridge between two parties for whom lack of a common language would ordinarily severely limit or preclude communication. In the case of *Entre chagrin et néant*, these two parties are the non-Francophone detainees and the judge. As the text demonstrates, the interpreter can and often does play a much larger role in both the telling of the detainees’ stories and in the courtroom drama itself.

The diverse circumstances of these immigrants and the details of their detention are evidently important factors in the judge’s decision to allow them to stay in Europe or to deport them, but the manner in which they are communicated also affects the outcome considerably. This highly variable component of communication lies in the hands of the interpreter. While interpreters do not control the content of what they translate, the manner in which they convey this information is up to them, and their choice of vocabulary and phrasing directly affect the quality of the interaction. Therefore, it is not only what an interpreter translates, but also how he performs this duty that determines the judge’s verdict. The detainees must rely on the interpreter not only to tell their story, but also to evaluate the situation and subsequently determine the best and most effective manner of doing so. Thus, depending on the skill with which he carries out that duty, the interpreter can wield as much potential to harm as to help.

Yet even the best of interpreters can have a negative impact on communication. Before an interpreter opens his mouth, his presence in the courtroom already affects the outcome of the interactions he facilitates. No one questions the need for an interpreter when two parties do not share a common language, but his physical person inevitably serves as a constant and uncomfortable reminder to everyone there of the presence of an outsider. Whatever the

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93 The interpreters in *Entre chagrin et néant* are both male and female; however, I have opted to use masculine forms when speaking in the singular in order to avoid cumbersome phrasing.
relationship between the foreigner and the others in the courtroom may be, communication is always a necessity at some point. The interpreter is an artificial link between those two parties and enables the exchange between them.

As necessary as it may be, the creation of that temporary bridge does not come without a price. In order to facilitate the establishment of avenues of communication, certain norms must be relaxed. As a rule, the pronoun I (or je) is always auto-referential. When an interpreter translates, however, he must take on the persona of the original speaker in order to take on his words, an act which, though short-lived, constitutes an important exception to that otherwise cardinal rule. When an interpreter says I for someone, he effectively becomes that person’s voice. In a sense, it is ironic that the detainee must sacrifice his voice in order to communicate his meaning. Granted, that is also true for the judge, lawyer, and other players in the courtroom whose words are translated by the interpreter, but the loss has far more impact on the detainees, who are already at a significant linguistic disadvantage. They are outsiders in an alien linguistic space, while the judge and lawyer are in their native linguistic space. The detainees have few tools for navigating this unfamiliar landscape, and in many cases, the interpreter is the only resource available. The detainees' inability to say je for themselves in a way that their interlocutor can understand therefore requires them to pay this devastating price.

The effects of that sacrifice are many. One of the most damaging is the weakening of the link between language and self. Language is unavoidably and indelibly tied to identity and, as Derrida points out, “il faut déjà savoir dans quelle langue je se dit, je me dis” (Monolingualisme 54). Someone who is forced to rely on an interpreter in order to communicate has no choice but to entrust that stranger with his or her je, and in doing so, subsequently
relinquishes his or her voice. Routing every exchange through the interpreter is inconvenient at best and often clumsy, but the sequence of linguistic input (judge-interpreter-detainee-interpreter-judge) is critical nonetheless in that it is a means for both parties to take part in the exchange. That chain of communication is fragile, however, and any disruption of the interpretation sequence jeopardizes active and bilateral involvement in the exchange. If, for one reason or another, one of the parties decides to speak to the interpreter instead of through him, the third party is effectively eliminated from the equation. Excluded from the exchange, that person is cut off from his or her interlocutor entirely.

A few of the judges in Entre chagrin et néant exploit that short circuit to reinforce or even to increase their distance from the detainees. Preferring to minimize or even ignore the presence of the detainees, these judges instead focus their attention on the interpreter. The result of that approach is the transformation of the interpreter from a simple conduit into a proxy for the detainee whose case is being heard. These judges act as if the interpreter is not representing the detainee, but rather replacing him or her. That approach is a way for the judge to constrict the borders of the courtroom’s linguistic space in an effort (conscious or otherwise) to expel the detainee. Displaced from his intended role as a linguistic switchboard, the interpreter thus becomes a buffer zone between the judge and the foreigner who stands before him or her. Cosnay comments:

L’interprète semble protéger la juge de la relation directe. Il est possible que l’interprète exprime mieux qu’elle ce qu’elle veut dire. Comme s’il s’emparait de ses phrases et qu’elle en était moins responsable. Ce qui se passe dans une langue autre est dénué d’un peu de réel. (29)

Certain judges take things a step further. Rather than simply substitute the interpreter for
the detainee, they speak to the interpreter about the detainee, a phenomenon reflected by their choice of pronouns: “[La juge] passe du vous au il. Je remarquerai les pronoms mouvants chaque fois. Le système de la traduction simultanée facilite le glissement, mais aussi les moments de gêne, de mise à distance, de recul” (32).

It is worth noting that in French, the use of the pronoun he (il) is not restricted to people; it can refer to any masculine noun and therefore can be used to talk about a computer, a bed, or a cat just as easily as it can reference a male person. On the other hand, you (vous) is reserved for people. When il is used to talk about a person, it refers to a third person who is neither the speaker nor the listener. The transformation of vous into il therefore constitutes a redefinition of the subject as an object. This switch is not only indicative of a linguistic distancing, but also of a physical detachment: the interlocutor vous must be physically present in order to be addressed as such, while the use of il is not contingent upon the physical presence of the person or thing in question.

Sadly, these departures from standard procedure prove to be more of a rule than an exception in Entre chagrin et néant. Regular lapses in conscientiousness seem to characterize the judges’ behavior, and the negative impact of their negligence is felt on many levels. For example, many of the judges repeatedly forget to swear in the interpreter. While to a certain extent, it can be argued that the ritual is a mere formality, peripheral to rather than part of the actual exchange, its value on a symbolic level is significant. Reciting the oath serves as a signal for the interpreter to place his personal life and identity on hold temporarily, and its completion is a clear temporal demarcation of the beginning of the interpreter’s official duties.

Therefore, neglecting to swear in the interpreter blurs the lines between an interpreter’s
private persona and his professional function, and puts the effectiveness of the exchange at risk. An interpreter who is distracted by the details of his private life will not perform his duty well. It is thus with consternation that Cosnay remarks the omission of the swearing in ritual several times. In fact, that oversight is so common that she takes special notice of the occasions when it actually does happen: “Elle fait jurer l’interprète, je le note, car c’est la première fois” (83).

The judge is not the only courtroom actor with the potential to use the interpreter to destructive, rather than constructive ends. At times, it is the interpreter himself who impedes communication and degrades the quality of the interaction between the judge and the detainee. Unlike the judge, who is most often motivated by a desire to create or increase the distance between himself and the detainee, the unsuccessful interpreter’s poor performance is more likely to be caused by ineptitude than by malice. Certain interpreters are unable to put aside their personal issues long enough to satisfy their duties, while others take out their own shortcomings, linguistic or other, on the detainees:

L’interprète (“on m’a dit de venir je suis venue je fais mon boulot”) s’énerve de ne pas comprendre l’anglais de Monsieur Cissé. Elle montre, avec signes de tête, de bouche, de mains, qu’il est difficile de traduire cet anglais-là. Il ne sait pas trop où il va ni où il a été arrêté, dit-elle […] L’interprète ne traduit pas. Elle commente le fait qu’il n’ait pas répondu exactement à la question: il a du mal à comprendre ce qu’on lui dit. (91-92)

Clearly, this particular interpreter does more to obstruct the interaction than she does to facilitate the exchange. Her blatant disengagement and lack of competence obscure the linguistic space of the courtroom and consequently disorient the other actors present. The
encounter is doomed from the outset by her poor attitude, and her careless blunders compound the very problems that effective interpretation is meant to resolve.

Finally, the detainees themselves can have a negative impact on the courtroom’s linguistic landscape, and consequently on the eventual outcome of their hearing. One way in which some of the immigrants obstruct the exchange is by a categorical refusal to participate. By definition, an exchange implies the involvement of at least two parties, but when one of these players refuses to engage, the sequence of communication is interrupted. The most basic form of noncompliance is the refusal to speak. A young Asian man, initially silent, is presented to the TGI (Tribunal de Grande Instance), and his situation proves to be problematic on several counts: the authorities do not know who he is, where he comes from, or how to communicate with him. Their frustration with him is such that even when he finally begins to speak, the other players in the courtroom respond with their own silence, a refusal of his refusal:

Un jeune homme dont on ne sait s’il est chinois ou vietnamien. Au Centre de Rétention, devant Sarah, il ne parle aucune langue. N’en comprenait aucune. Puis il s’est finalement mis à parler chinois, à reconnaître le chinois. Muets les interprètes, muets les migrants, muets les magistrats. Silence au TGI. (109-10)

Although he has recovered his linguistic faculties, the young man continues to claim that he does not know his age or nationality. He has relinquished his silence, but in this case, his speech is no less of an obstacle to communication than his muteness was. Words come out of his mouth, but they do not provide any information or answer any questions. Despite the sounds he makes, he provides no actual information in response to the questions he is asked.

The young man’s initial silence and subsequent empty language are an effective
exploitation of the connection between language and identity: if no meaningful communication can be established, no identity can be determined. That tactic is a means of protection for the young detainee, and the obstruction of meaningful communication is precisely its mechanism. Furthermore, the fact that the detainee is intentionally impeding communication does not detract from its effect on the interaction. For the vast majority of detainees, effective communication represents success. Nevertheless, the goal of this particular young immigrant seems to be the exactly the opposite: he expends more energy trying to prevent the courtroom exchange than he does to further it.

However, even interactions that can be carried out without the services of an interpreter do not guarantee successful communication. For example, the detainees originating from former French colonies usually speak French, and consequently do not typically require an interpreter. Eliminating the intermediary has obvious advantages. These detainees are decidedly more difficult to dismiss or objectify than their non-Francophone peers. The absence of the interpreter means that the judge has no one to use as a mediator or as a substitute for the detainee on trial, and thus has no choice but to interact with him or her directly. Still, in spite of such direct communication, these immigrants somehow remain outsiders, proof that the simple ability to speak a language is not enough to ensure free and unimpeded access to its linguistic space, nor does it guarantee a uniform experience of that space. On a theoretical level, French linguistic space is shared by all Francophones, whatever their origin, but in practice, barriers do in fact exist within the French language that are intended to devalue or even exclude non-Hexagonal speakers of French.

The exchange between a Moroccan man and the judge hearing his case is an example of a largely unsuccessfull attempt at direct communication between a Hexagonal French
speaker (the judge) and a Francophone speaker (the detainee). As a native speaker of French, the Moroccan does not require an interpreter, but this does not mean that he is on equal footing with the judge in the linguistic space of the courtroom. Many factors contribute to the disparity of their positions, but one of the most influential factors is the detainee’s accent. From the moment he opens his mouth, it is obvious that the Moroccan is not French, despite the fluent nature of his speech. Indeed, a shared language, accented and coming from the mouth of an outsider, becomes the auditory symbol of his alterity. For Derrida, this is in large part due to the fact that “l’accent signale un corps-à-corps avec la langue” (Monolinguisme 78). That physical side of language puts people ill at ease because it is evidence of the presence of the Other in their linguistic space. The case of the Moroccan detainee and the negative effect that his accent has on the way that the way the judge perceives and interacts with him is evidence of the effect that accent can have on communication. Generally speaking, non-Hexagonal accents, no matter how fluent, are considered inferior by Hexagonal speakers. That value system not only characterizes the prevailing attitude among Hexagonal speakers, but it is also espoused by many of the very people whose accents are disdained by the French. Derrida admits “[qu’il] ne supporte ou n’admire, en français du moins, et seulement quant à la langue, que le français pur” (Monolinguisme 78).

Such preference for “pure” French is another important factor in shaping the character of the exchange. The Moroccan pleads his case in a combination of two languages, rather than in “pure” French, which angers the judge, who orders: “Exprimez-vous en français, puisqu’il me semble que vous me compreniez” (30). She interprets his reluctance to express himself exclusively in their shared language as a refusal of the olive branch that she believes herself to be offering him when she addresses him directly, without passing through the interpreter. The
lawyer finally intervenes and comments: “Pour comprendre les subtilités de ce qui a lieu ici, il faudrait un tout autre français” (31). As this observation shows, the lawyer knows that without Hexagonal French, his client’s chances of equitable and effective communication are reduced considerably.

Evidently, the judge interprets the detainee’s hybridized language as a conscious and willful refusal to communicate. What she does not appear to understand is the fact that in many former French colonies, French is only one of several languages. In the case of Morocco, French is widespread, although not official. As a result of these countries’ varying linguistic situations, it is not uncommon for their citizens to speak multiple languages, which are frequently mixed in everyday conversation. Furthermore, “pure” French tends to be a governmental and academic language in those countries more often than an everyday language, and as such, it remains a foreign language for many non-Hexagonal Francophones, despite being a familiar one. It is therefore far more probable that the Moroccan’s mixture of languages was due to habit rather than to the insolence attributed to him by the judge. The Moroccan likely associated the governmental context of the courtroom with French, but due to the anxiety of the situation, fell back on his native language, resulting in the linguistic blend that so offended the judge. Unfortunately, that sort of misinterpretation is a common characteristic of courtroom interactions, and the confusion that results from it impedes direct, efficient communication.

Clearly then, the courtroom is a complicated linguistic space that must be carefully navigated if miscommunication is to be avoided. The system of interpretation is a source of many obstacles, but problems can arise even when translation is unnecessary. Effective communication between a Francophone detainee and a French judge can be just as difficult as
a linguistic exchange that passes through an interpreter.

Yet while the use of an intermediary to facilitate communication offers many opportunities for miscommunication, the high degree of stratification that characterizes Francophone linguistic space presents just as many potential problems. Whoever the actors in this space may be, it is undeniable that language plays a major role in determining the quality of the interactions that take place there. For better or for worse, the way language is utilized affects communication on many different levels.

Xabi Molia

Xabi Molia and Élodie Jarret’s graphic novel *Vers le nord* explores the linguistic landscape of the text itself. It is perhaps surprising that a text whose genre specifically indicates a heavy visual component should be so concerned with language, but the combination of Élodie Jarret’s illustrations and Molia’s skillful use of the textual space offers the reader an opportunity to examine the role played by language in a variety of different textual and paratextual contexts.

*Vers le nord* is the story of a young man named Noé, who goes to Sweden to find out more about an ancestor of his who died there in the 1920s. At its most basic level, it is essentially a travel narrative. Language plays a critical role in both the physical and psychological aspects of Noé’s journey. In addition to recounting Noé’s voyage through Sweden, the text follows his personal growth and development over the course of his travels. Without being specifically *about* language, language is still a crucial theme in the story, which simultaneously creates and takes place in a rich and unusually diverse linguistic space that is carefully constructed to affect the reader’s experience of the text.
*Vers le nord* makes use of four different languages to tell its story: French, English, Swedish, and Basque. Rather than write in a source language and simply translate the content into the three other languages, Molia uses each language in a deliberate way, to distinct ends. The assignment of different languages to different textual functions is not accidental. In this section, I shall focus on the role each language plays in shaping the text. While the majority of the text is written in French, the importance of the other three languages should not be underestimated. Furthermore, although it may appear difficult to find a common thread uniting this rather eclectic group of languages, I will argue that the author’s selection is in no way arbitrary.

The two principal reasons for this degree of linguistic variety are the desire for authenticity and audience selection. Molia’s use of French, Swedish, and English is an accurate reflection of the linguistic experience that an average French person would be likely to have in Sweden, and can thus be considered “authentic” in that respect. If, following that logic, the small amount of Basque used seems irrelevant and unnecessary at first glance, the plot of the story quickly reveals its pertinence and justifies its addition to the text. However, the number of people who know Swedish, French, and English well enough to read the text without recourse to a dictionary or simply skipping over certain parts is unquestionably low. The inclusion of Basque in the text, even in limited quantities and in select contexts, makes a complete comprehension of the text by the average French reader even less likely.

In order to analyze the application of specific languages to particular components of the text, a clear definition of the word “text” is required. According to Gérard Genette, the text is “une suite plus ou moins longue d’énoncés verbaux plus ou moins pourvus de signification” (*Seuils* 7), and he adds that the text exists rarely, if ever, in a vacuum. In reality, the verbal text
is merely one piece of a larger whole that includes but is not limited to aspects like the author’s name, the title, the preface, and any illustrations, which Genette calls the paratext. The exact nature of the relationship between those elements and the more traditional verbal text of the narrative is not always easy to define, but the existence of that relationship is itself significant:

[Ces éléments] entourent [le texte] et le prolongent, précisément pour le présenter, au sens habituel de ce verbe, mais aussi en son sens le plus fort: pour le rendre présent, pour assurer sa présence au monde, sa “réception” et sa consommation, sous la forme, aujourd’hui du moins, d’un livre. (Genette, Seuils 7)

The question of the paratext is especially applicable to the genre of the graphic novel, which by definition relies heavily on illustrations to tell its story. Titles, page layout, and other paratextual components also play an important part, serving not only to present and surround the text, but also as an integral part of the text. While these same elements are also important in conventional novels, they are much subtler, and the reader is far less aware of their presence in the text. By contrast, in the graphic novel, the reader is constantly confronted by these paratextual aspects. Therefore, such “auxiliary” components exert an important influence on the text, as well as on its reception by the reader. These aspects thus become indispensable to any analysis of a graphic novel if it is to be understood as a whole. In the case of Vers le nord, the relationship between the text and the paratext is particularly relevant because that interplay provides the framework for the linguistic space of the text, which in turn drives the narrative. Although the rationale for certain paratextual choices may be unclear (for instance, the fact that there are no page numbers), it is possible to identify the reasoning behind certain other aspects of the paratext. In the case of linguistic delegation, it appears that Molia’s assignment
of languages to different textual and paratextual roles is based on two factors: first, a concern for authenticity, and second, as a way to communicate and exert extratextual influence.\(^\text{94}\)

The use of Swedish is for the most part confined to what would generally be considered “peripheral,” both on a visual and a narrative level. On a visual level, the majority of the text in the “scenic” portions of the illustrations is in Swedish. These visual-textual components include storefronts, advertisements, and signs, among other things. For the sake of authenticity, the choice to use Swedish for those elements is logical, given that the story takes place in Sweden. However, peripheral text is typically perceived as part of the scenery when it is accompanied by narrative text, and for that reason, peripheral text is not typically used as the primary basis for narrative development. Nonetheless, as the text reveals, the use of this space is carefully planned. As such, non-central text in another language, even one with which the reader is largely unfamiliar, is generally minimally disruptive to readers. With that in mind, it is tempting to disregard the peripheral text and instead focus the whole of our attention on the more central text of the plot. Even so, as insignificant as the peripheral text may seem, it remains an important part of the linguistic space of the text as a whole and should not be dismissed. Indeed, the tendency of readers to minimize or ignore the peripheral text can also be capitalized upon by a skillful author.

In the case of Vers le nord, the establishment of Swedish as a “scenic” language through its use in illustrations is a strategic move, meant to condition the reader to associate the use of Swedish with peripheral (unimportant) information automatically, even when it is used in a different capacity. One example is an adventure that Noé has with a girl named

\(^{94}\) For example, targeting or excluding a certain readership.
Lotta, whom he meets during his journey north. When she introduces him to her father, she warns Noé ahead of time that he lives in a tree and spends his time singing and dressed in a bird costume. The fact that he sings in Swedish is meant to be a sign to the reader that his songs are not part of the main storyline and can thus be disregarded if desired. His lifestyle and dress, depicted in the illustrations (another scenic component) suggest that he is not entirely sane, further confirming that his words can and probably should be dismissed rather than interpreted. Although the attentive and curious reader may wish to translate these parts, it is implied that such effort is by no means required. Indeed, from a purely technical perspective, it is possible to get through the text and have a global (if superficial) understanding of the plot without a translation. However, that type of incomplete reading results in a very different experience of the text. Taking the trouble to interpret the non-central information changes and enriches the text.

French, on the other hand, is the primary language of narration. That may seem obvious and trivial, given that both the author and the protagonist are French, but that fact is nonetheless meaningful on several levels. Certainly, with regard to the concern for authenticity, the nationality and native language of the narrator and author do in fact explain the text’s use of French as the main narrative language, and it is only logical that characters would think and speak in French. Nevertheless, that choice is also telling for another, less obvious reason: it identifies and delimits the target readership. It is reasonable to assume that a text written predominately in French is primarily addressed to a Francophone public, a conclusion supported by the presence of several authorial notes in the margins of the text. While those authorial asides are not part of the central narrative chronicling Noé’s journey, they constitute a sort of dialogue between the author and the reader. Rather than using the text
as a vehicle for indirect communication, Molia chooses to address the reader directly, in the language that is presumably native to both the author and the reader. Molia uses those notes to guide the reader through the complex linguistic space of his text, but in doing so, calls attention to the inconsistencies and fissures that inevitably characterize any linguistic space that is diverse to this extent.

The use of such an aside in the scene where Noé is about to meet Lotta’s father is a good example of the way Molia uses these notes on several levels. Lotte has explained her father’s unusual situation to Noé and told him about her father’s chaffinch costume. In the illustrations accompanying this episode, Noé is shown repeating the word “pinson,” which is French for “chaffinch,” followed by an asterisk. In a note perpendicular to the illustrations and main text, and situated outside the frame that marks the physical limits of the story on the page, Molia explains:

Manifestement, si Noé répète ici “pinson”, c’est parce qu’il n’a pas compris le sens du mot “chaffinch” (“pinson”, donc) en anglais. L’artifice de la traduction française, choisie pour votre commodité, ne permet pas de restituer ces moments de flottement lexical, accompagnés en général d’un sourcil froncé, que connaît tout usager d’une langue étrangère. Il pourrait même laisser penser que Noé ignore tout à fait ce qu’est un pinson en français, ou qu’il s’étonne que le père de Lotta ait choisi de devenir un pinson plutôt qu’un mésange ou un ornithorynque à crête chevelue. Ce qui n’est bien évidemment pas le cas.

The inclusion of this sort of note in the text has numerous effects, the most obvious of which is the fact that it interrupts the storyline, both visually and on a narrative level. Rather than allowing the story to flow, the note not only directly invokes the reader (“votre
commodité”), it awkwardly calls attention to textual ambiguities and certain holes in the narrative. Most authors endeavor to create a smooth, uninterrupted reading experience, and in order to do so, they must compromise realism to create and preserve the illusion of a seamless narrative for the reader. In reality, misunderstandings of varying frequency and intensity are a regular and inevitable part of interactions between two people who speak different languages, and those blunders can easily obscure the intended content of a conversation. In order to minimize the interference of those linguistic obstacles and allow the plot to develop unimpeded, many authors go to great lengths to attenuate and disguise them. Molia, however, seems to use his authorial asides to do exactly the opposite, consciously exposing and calling the reader’s attention to moments of linguistic confusion, and consequently inviting him or her to consider their significance.

Most readers do not actively consider the mechanics of translation or its practical implications in a literary context, and Molia’s notes compel the reader to acknowledge those narrative issues. However, words are not the only source of potential misunderstandings. As we saw in Entre chagrin et néant, the unspoken parts of dialogue can be easily lost in translation as well. The importance of moments of confusion, tone, and gestures is minimized or often missed when language passes through the filter of translation. Granted, there is a certain merit to authorial integrity, but that integrity can only be had at the price of the smooth, effortless narrative flow that many readers have come to expect from a novel. Listing the various potential reasons for Noé’s repetition of the word “chaffinch” not only distracts the reader from the original point of that particular observation (the fact that Lotta’s father is wearing a bird costume), but sidetracks him or her by presenting options that he or she would likely not consider, were they not mentioned by the author. Ultimately, whether or not Noé’s
apparent confusion is due to his unfamiliarity with the chaffinch, his surprise that Lotta’s father has chosen to dress as a chaffinch as opposed to another type of bird, or something else entirely, has little to no bearing on the main storyline itself.

Still, despite the fact that these “explanations” do not add anything to the plot in terms of content, they do have a larger effect on the text. In a sense, it can be said that exposing those narrative gaps and inconsistencies enriches the reader’s experience of the text as a whole, while detracting from the reader’s experience of the plot. Rather than presenting a polished, effortless storyline, these notes force the reader to negotiate many of the same linguistic stumbling blocks as the characters, and in that way, they create a linguistic space for the reader that mirrors the linguistic space of the storyline as it is experienced by the characters. One example is the note regarding the conversations between Noé and the people he encounters on his voyage. Those exchanges are mainly written in French, although they likely take place in a combination of broken English, Swedish, and French, in varying proportions. Many authors would simply proceed in French without addressing the issue either directly or implicitly, but Molia includes a note to explain his reasons for his “unrealistic” use of French, introduced by an asterisk and written sideways on the page at a ninety-degree angle to the main text. The addition of that note contributes a heightened degree of linguistic awkwardness and confusion by highlighting the artificiality of this authorial convention, which is something that would have likely been overlooked by the majority of readers if not pointed out by Molia. It also emphasizes what is lost as a result of this linguistic arrangement:

Pour ne pas embarrasser le lecteur pressé de suivre l’arc dramatique de ce récit et ne pas risquer de l’incommoder avec la désagréable sensation qu’on lui reproche à mots couverts sa faible maîtrise des langues étrangères ou sa procrastination concernant leur
apprentissage, les conversations de Noé avec les différents habitants du village
d’Abbotrask sont ici rapportées en français, ceci au mépris non seulement de toute
vraisemblance, mais également, ce qui est sans doute plus regrettable, des nuances de
la pensée que la langue anglaise, même quand elle est parlée par des étrangers, est
susceptible de véhiculer.

As is the case with the vast majority of French novels, a widespread and often
unrealistically uniform use of the French language is used to provide readers with an approach
to the novel as a whole, camouflaging the fissures and minimizing the difficulties caused by
the presence of so many different languages. Unlike most other authors, Molia insists on
forcing awareness of that convention on the reader, making his audience recognize the
impossibility of accessing the text in its “authentic” form.

On a practical level, the role of English in Vers le nord falls somewhere between that
of French, which dominates the foreground, and Swedish, which forms the backdrop.
However, it also bridges a symbolic gap between the two languages, in the sense that most of
Molia’s readers are fluent in French, presumably have little to no knowledge of Swedish, and
have some knowledge of English. In terms of narrative function, English’s linguistic space
serves as a liminal zone between events that take place at different points in time. A good
example is the story of Noé’s great-grandfather, related in interludes scattered throughout the
text at irregular intervals and introduced by titles written in English. It is interesting to note
that only the titles of these episodes are in English, while the main text containing his
ancestor’s story itself is in French. That practice confirms English as a sort of threshold
language, visually demarcating the narrative borders between past and present.

Similarly, many of the flashbacks to Noé’s life before he left for Sweden are also
framed in English. When the reader is introduced to Noé’s brother for the first time, Noé explains that “depuis qu’on va adapter sa vie pour une sérié télévisée, [son] frère ne parle plus qu’en anglais.” That statement is contrasted with the illustrations, which show him speaking French. Noé observes that his brother “dispose d’un certain nombre de SPÉCIAUX POUVOIRS et d’une très bonne élocution […] Il a le sens de la formule.” The illustrations accompanying that observation show Noé’s brother orating before a crowd and declaring that “la justice est un train qui n’attend pas.” When he speaks English, the content of his speech is much the same; and although his level of English is good, it is evident from his syntax that he is not a native speaker, despite the fact that he is clearly trying to pass for one.

In addition to its use as a temporal vestibule, the brother’s imperfect English also serves a purpose similar to that of Molia’s notes: it underscores the fact that the boundaries between languages and their corresponding spaces are not always as seamless as they are often portrayed to be. Rather than edit the brother’s English to make it sound more native, Molia once again chooses authenticity. The brother’s English is far from incomprehensible. As such, is not enough of a hindrance to relegate it to peripheral status in the same way that Swedish is, but it does not have the same fluid quality as the predominantly French narration. Although the contrived nature of the brother’s English is clearly intended to reveal his character, the same effect could have been achieved while maintaining a more native level of English. The differences in syntax between a native speaker and a well-spoken foreigner may be subtle, but their inclusion adds to the credibility of the text as a whole. These discrepancies are an “authentic” part of the exchanges between two parties who do not share the same native language, and as small as they may be, their existence leaves room for misunderstandings than can affect communication. There is an authorial tendency to polish those exchanges and
smooth over the linguistic landscape, but Molia prefers to avoid that artifice and instead emphasize the differences rather than camouflage them, once again compelling the reader to acknowledge their presence and consider their effects.

Finally, the use of Basque in *Vers le nord* is limited, but not without significance. Like Swedish, it is utilized as a peripheral language, although its function is slightly different. While Swedish is identified as such from the outset and is widely incorporated into the narrative scenery, only a reader familiar with the Basque language would recognize the occasional use of Basque words. Despite the fact that *Vers le nord* provides clues as to the identity of that language from the beginning, using illustrations that depict the Basques in a fairly stereotypical fashion, this would only be obvious to someone who was well acquainted with the Basque people and culture. It is not until the end of the text, when the Basques are finally identified in the text, that the average French reader would become aware of the use of Basque earlier in the novel. Ironically, that designation is made not in Basque (the language itself) or French (the native language of the majority of readers), but rather in English and Swedish, suggesting that perhaps that identity of the Basques and their language is meant to remain a mystery to the larger public.

The decision to identify Basque words in English and Swedish is yet another choice that can be attributed to concerns for authenticity and consistency. As I mentioned, the signs in Swedish advertising a Basque cabin or lodge are logical given the story’s setting. Although the English writing below it that announces Basque food and products presumably caters to tourists, this text is also meant for the reader who (much like those tourists) most likely does not speak Swedish, but probably speaks some English. In this sense, the reader’s discovery of the Basques in Sweden parallels that of both Noé and the tourists who pass through
Jokkmokk, the town in northern Sweden that is Noé’s destination.

Molia’s decision to portray the complicated linguistic space of Noé’s exchanges with the Basques in a realistic rather than polished way is further evidence of the author’s attention to authenticity. The conversations between Noé and the Basques are conducted in a multilingual space where although the Basques speak English and Noé responds in French, they are able to understand each other and have a meaningful exchange. Instead of homogenizing their exchange, Molia allows the reader to experience the interaction as Noé himself experiences it.

The multifaceted linguistic space inhabited by the Basque language in *Vers le nord* is representative of both the novel as a whole and Basque society in general, where Basque does not function in a vacuum, but rather in a dynamic space characterized by interactions between multiple languages. The Basque language itself is also a diverse linguistic space; the coexistence of dialects, variations, and the standardized *Batua* within the same language is evidence of the richness and vivacity of this space. Its ties to history and tradition are clear, but so is its potential for growth and adaptation, resulting in a linguistic space that looks forward without ever losing sight of its past.

In conclusion, although linguistic space is a common characteristic of the novels I have examined in this chapter, its representation can differ greatly from one text to another. In Itxaro Borda’s *100% Basque*, the author explores the linguistic space of the Basque Country today, utilizing satire and irony in her analysis of some of the issues that the area is currently facing. Marie Darrieussecq uses *Le Pays* to consider questions of familiarity and belonging in the case of a woman who returns to the area where she was born, which has recently become
independent. She encounters linguistic obstacles that make adjusting to her new life far more difficult than she anticipated. In *Tom est mort*, Darrieussecq focuses on the linguistic landscape of loss, following a woman who struggles to come to terms with the sudden and unexpected loss of her son. Darrieussecq’s protagonist must deal with that loss in the context of her family’s recent move to a new country and discovers that neither her native language nor the language of her new home can provide her with the words she needs to articulate her experience. Marie Cosnay’s *Entre chagrin et néant* is an exploration of the linguistic space of immigration. The courtroom and its various actors provide the setting for that analysis as Cosnay exposes the potential for communication problems that characterizes the interactions between the detainees, interpreters, and judges. In *Vers le nord*, Xabi Molia uses the multilingual text and paratext to create a rich and highly diverse linguistic landscape. His unconventional work can be read and understood on various levels by different groups of readers, and offers a distinct experience to different audiences.

All four authors use linguistic space to construct and direct their novels, providing a strong foundation for narrative development and influencing the reader’s experience of the text. Despite the differences between the texts explored in this chapter, the influence of language and its role as a tool for understanding one’s self and surroundings is a major theme in all of them. On the level of the text, the linguistic landscape shapes the actions and thoughts of the characters and drives the plot. On a larger level, these linguistic spaces force the reader to consider the role of language in his or her own life and to become aware of its immense potential to create, destroy, and change.
Chapter Four

Narratological Space

The title of this section may be a bit unexpected, as the words narratology and space are not typically associated with one another. Narratology is, as its name suggests, the study of narrative. Defining space is more complicated, but it is most often used to evoke a physical area. Given these two different phenomena, it is natural to wonder how a concept like space can be applied to a discipline that has no tangible manifestation. Therefore, some explanation of this unusual semantic pairing is in order. In my dissertation, I consider space in a broad and comprehensive sense, which, when seen through the lens of narratology, encompasses both fabula and structure. At times, narratological space may even extend beyond the physical text, drawing the reader in and making him or her an active participant in the creation and development of the narrative.

Narratological space is manifested differently in each of the four novels that I will consider in this chapter, but all of them challenge narratological norms and actively interrogate generic convention. Their structural variations provide an opportunity to explore a full range of narrative aspects that span the narratological spectrum. Unfortunately, an exhaustive narratological evaluation of each of these four novels is neither possible nor practical within the constraints of a single dissertation chapter, so I have chosen to limit my focus to a few selected topics in each text.

Since narratological terminology can differ greatly from one theorist to the next, I would like to offer a few clarifications of the terms that I will use in this chapter. The work of Gérard

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95 The 2014 edition of the Merriam-Webster dictionary proposes ten definitions, five of which are further divided into subsections.
Genette and Mieke Bal forms the theoretical framework for my analysis; accordingly, it is fitting that I use their terminology. However, despite their shared view of many narratological concepts, the vocabulary that they use to discuss them is not always the same. Given that my approach to many of the texts in this chapter will be a synthesis of Genette and Bal’s models, I have decided not to favor one term over the other, but to use them interchangeably throughout my analysis. *Fabula* and *histoire* describe “a series of logically and chronologically related events caused or experienced by actors” (Genette, *Discours* 5) or, to put it more succinctly, narrative content.  

*Story* and *récit*, on the other hand, refer to “la succession d’événements, réels ou fictifs, qui font l’objet d’un discours, et leurs diverses relations d’enchâinement, d’opposition, [et] de répétition” (Genette, *Discours* 13); essentially, the manner in which the fabula is presented.  

*Actors* are agents who perform *actions*, meaning that they cause or experience events, and an *event* is a transition from one state to another. Other terminology will be defined as it comes up in my analysis.  

I will begin with Itxaro Borda’s *100% Basque*, where I will address structural coherence, the roles of the actors and actants, and narration. I will evaluate the seemingly disjointed organization of Borda’s text using Mieke Bal’s principles of structure to demonstrate the existence of a coherent underlying framework that holds the novel together. Traditional actantial roles are challenged in *100% Basque* when the participation of the reader is required to carry out duties necessary for the realization of the narrative, resulting in the metalepses that ultimately come to define the text. Finally, I will examine narration in Borda’s novel, exposing the blurred boundaries between author, narrator, and protagonist and exploring the metaleptic consequences.

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96 Genette, *Discours* 15.  
I will continue my study of narration in Marie Darrieussecq’s *Le mal de mer*, 99 where I will concentrate primarily on focalization. The anonymity of the novel’s five focal characters has profound and far-reaching effects on everything from order to voice, ultimately forcing the reader to reconsider his or her preconceptions and expectations of narrative form and coherence. The fact that the focal characters are unnamed eliminates many traditional narrative reference points and makes it difficult to identify and situate the text’s many anachronisms. Deprived of conventional landmarks, the reader becomes a detective and must piece together the narrative using deictic clues to identify the actors, time, and place. Additionally, I will explore the symbolic effects produced by the text’s complex structure.

Next, I will examine the narratological categories of order, duration, and frequency in *Déplacements*, by Marie Cosnay. An assessment of *Déplacements* according to Genette and Bal’s theories of narrative movements 100 will reveal a departure from traditional novelistic rhythm and uncover the ways in which the textual movements parallel the content of the narrative itself. My evaluation of order will examine the repeating sequences in which the narrator obsessively revisits a fateful afternoon, a narrative technique that also concerns frequency and repetition. Ultimately, the framework of *Déplacements* pushes the limits of convention regarding narrative order, forcing the narrator and the reader to reassemble the scattered fragments of text and memory into a meaningful narrative.

Finally, Xabi Molia’s graphic novel *Vers le nord* provides an opportunity to explore the potential narratological role of graphic image in a traditionally text-based genre like the novel. By definition, graphic novels take a multimedia approach to structure and narration by using a combination of text and graphic image to tell a story. In my analysis, I will demonstrate the ways

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99 Narratological analysis requires an in-depth examination of a text and as a result, I have chosen to focus on only one Darrieussecq novel in this chapter.

100 There are some discrepancies between the two models, which I will address in my analysis.
in which the textual and visual components of Molia’s novel interact to shape the text, focusing specifically on their role in determining order, duration, and frequency in the narrative. *Vers le nord* tests the limits of narratological space, opening the door to further explorations of new narratological frontiers.

**Itxaro Borda**

Itxaro Borda’s *100% Basque* uses both its content and its narrative structure to reinforce the critique of contemporary Basque society that it offers. From its opening pages, which feature a not-so-subtle nod to Proust and his *Recherche*, to its science fiction conclusion, *100% Basque* makes use of a wide range of sociocultural references and narratological techniques to expose and call attention to the issues that affect Basque society today. Borda’s extensive use of allusions to diverse literary and cultural figures and phenomena serves as the base for a satirical yet honest appraisal of the world around her, but their incorporation into the text also results in what appears to be a haphazard, disjointed collection of anecdotes, rather than a novel.\(^{101}\) Paradoxically, it is precisely this approach that makes the text effective. Borda’s novel is no less rich and intricate than the society it describes, using an assortment of narrative techniques to paint a comprehensive yet insightful picture of the world around her. With so many objects of potential study, it is difficult to know where to start, but I have opted to begin with a consideration of narrative structure and coherence in *100% Basque*.

A coherent textual structure is more than just a convention or a convenience to the reader; it is a critical necessity in the *récit*, which, in the absence of logically or chronologically connected events, would cease to be a *récit*. Yet even this most basic of requirements poses a

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\(^{101}\) The chapters discuss or refer to a dizzying array of topics ranging from Proust and Sun-Tzu to Dolly the cloned sheep and the Kingston Symphony (to cite just a few examples). No connection between them is ever explicitly indicated, and the reader is left to make his or her own inferences.
problem for 100% Basque, whose apparent lack of organization or methodology seems to completely disregard this consideration. Borda’s text is composed of a series of anecdotal episodes divided into “chapters.” Some chapters contain récits, whereas others are more accurately described as meditations or observations. In either case, no logical or chronological relationship between them is apparent and consequently, calling them a novel seems incorrect. Furthermore, with the exception of the first chapter, which ceremoniously announces the place it is making for itself in established literary tradition, there is no indication of any narrative chronology, effectively making the order of the chapters in the book interchangeable.

The potpourri of intertextual references and the eclectic content of the anecdotes only add to the confusion. One chapter might recount the narrator’s attendance at a lecture on the origins of the Basque language, while another may relate her near-abduction by Martians or offer observations about the school system. There is no doubt that these anecdotes are entertaining and thought-provoking, but diversion is not a substitute for coherence and, as Genette points out, “il faut […] définir les relations qui unissent les segments entre eux” (Discours 27). In other words, there must be something holding the chapters together, justifying its classification as a novel and giving meaning to its structure and content.

To uncover the coherence behind Borda’s novel, it is necessary to look beyond standard criteria of logic and chronology and consider other, less obvious connections based on factors like actors and location. Expanding on more traditional definitions of a fabula, Mieke Bal

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102 I use the term “chapter” for lack of a better word. There is no title or number at the beginning of each new section, but in all others respects, the text’s sections visually resemble conventional chapters, with a distinct separation between each anecdote.

103 100% Basque identifies itself a novel both textually and paratextually (on the cover). For a more comprehensive discussion of the paratexte, see Genette’s Seuils (Ed. du Seuil, 1987).
identifies four principles that allow for a more liberal approach to structural coherence. Her system acknowledges and includes the normal temporal and logical ties, but extends to encompass actorial and geographical connections, as well. Indeed, when assessed according to Bal’s broader criteria, 100% Basque is able to satisfy the structural requirements for a narrative. In terms of actors, the narrator is a constant in the text, and although her level of involvement in the diegesis of the chapters varies, she is generally present to one degree or another. Subtler still is the structural role of geography in 100% Basque, where the road that Borda’s narrator calls the Route du fromage serves as the fulcrum of the text and geographically unifies the various chapters. Serving as a gastronomical extension of the Route du fromage, cheese also plays an important part in the novel, as it is mentioned in many, although not all, of the anecdotes. However, given that the novel is not technically about cheese, it would be misleading to say that cheese is a thematic link. Granted, these elements still do not designate or imply a logical order for the chapters, but in a text challenging societal conventions, the lack of more typical cohesion is a reflection of the text’s intentions. It is also worth questioning the need to structure a fabula around logic based on cause and effect. Genette declares:

Il me paraît fâcheux de chercher l’“unité” à tout prix, et par là de forcer la cohérence de l’œuvre—ci qui est, on le sait, l’une des plus fortes tentations de la critique, l’une des plus banales […] et aussi l’une des plus aisées à satisfaire, n’exigeant qu’un petit de rhétorique interprétative. (Discours 279)

104 Bal designates the following four principles as an alternative concept of structure: the identity of the actors involved, the nature of the confrontation, time lapse, and location (Narratology 194).
105 To be more accurate, it is the narrated I who is a constant, not the narrator. I will return to this distinction later on.
106 I will address the variations in narrative presence and perspective in 100% Basque in the last part of this section.
107 However, I have no problem with classifying the concepts of authenticity and identity that the cheese symbolizes and explores in the novel as themes.
Borda certainly seems to agree with Genette’s statement, but rather than see the critics’ apparent need for unity as an obstacle, she exploits this critical weakness. Using her novel’s unconventional order as a foundation, her refusal to conform to narrative norms becomes a narratological representation of her larger challenge to society to question the status quo and defy convention.

From the narrator’s tendency to jump back and forth between diegetic levels to the interminable series of Joanes, the characters and actors in 100% Basque are no less unusual than its unconventional framework. Bal makes an important distinction between characters and actors, defining actors simply as “agents that perform actions” and noting that these actors need not be human. Actors that are anthropomorphic may then be invested with traits and individualized, whereupon they become characters. Bal insists upon the importance of intention, emphasizing that by definition, actors must aspire to an aim, and any evaluation of them should first and foremost consider the relationship between the actor in question and his or her objective (Narratology 5, 8, 114, 197). Furthermore, actors can be organized into classes of actors called actants, who can then be categorized more specifically according to their function in the fabula.

The protagonist, or in other words, the actor whose goal is at the center of the narrative, is called the subject, and his aim is the object. The unnamed female narrator of 100% Basque is the obvious subject of the novel’s histoire, but identifying the object is far more difficult and raises an important question: should each chapter be seen as a separate text, or should the focus be on the novel as a whole? Determining the object of the chapters that contain an actual fabula is not the problem; the difficulty arises when the text is considered as a whole, since the topic of each chapter is so different. However, if 100% Basque is in fact a novel, a designation upon which it repeatedly insists, it must contain some sort of histoire and consequently, Bal’s stipulation
regarding actants and fabulas applies: “In principal, all actants are represented in each fabula: without actants, no relations, without relations no process, without process no fabula” (Narratology 199). Assuming that 100% Basque is a fabula, then, the narrator is evidently its subject. The lack of viable alternatives leaves the reader no choice but to consider the author’s own intentions as the object. Substituting Borda’s reasons for writing the novel for the aim of the narrator effectively transfers the duties of the subject to the author, a shift that casts an extradiegetic figure (the author) in a diegetic role: a metalepsis par excellence.\textsuperscript{108}

The text is characteristically vague about the relationship between the author and the narrator, implying at times that Borda is the narrator of an autobiographical histoire, but other unequivocally fictitious situations cast doubt on that assumption. The issue is never entirely resolved (nor is it ever explicitly evoked), but whatever the case may be, one thing is clear: the narrator and the protagonist are not one and the same. From the first page, the narrator openly declares that she is recounting the past adventures of her younger self, a self that is distinct and separate from her present person. Therefore, her past (protagonist) and present (narrator) forms can be seen as two different characters. If the narrator is not Borda, a third figure can be added as well, that of the author, who, as we have seen, plays an important part in the histoire no matter what her relationship to the narrator may be. In either case, the imposition of either the author or the narrator’s object on the protagonist constitutes a serious metaleptic infraction that once again challenges the integrity of the text’s narrative framework.

The task of identifying the other actants required in a fabula is even more daunting. In addition to the subject and the object, Bal recognizes four additional actants: \textit{power, receiver},

\textsuperscript{108}Genette defines a metalepsis as “toute intrusion du narrateur ou du narrataire extradiégétique dans l’univers diégétique (ou de personnages diégétiques dans un univers métadiégétique, etc.), ou inversement, comme chez Cortázar, produit un effet de bizarrerie soit bouffonne […] soit fantastique” (Discours 244).
helper, and opponent (Narratology 198-202). The power is the actor who helps the subject realize his or her goal, while the actor to whom this aid is given is the receiver. Often, the receiver coincides with the subject, which is true for 100% Basque. Identifying the power, on the other hand, poses the same problems as identifying the object. It is easy enough to determine the actants on a chapter level,\(^{109}\) but in terms of the novel as a whole, there is no obvious choice in the histoire. Once again, it is necessary to look extradiegetically, beginning with the novel’s extratextual subject. If the author is the subject and her aim is productive social critique, we must determine who is in a position to support the author’s intentions.\(^{110}\) Theoretically, the author could be sending her critique out into the void, but that would not be consistent with her objective, which is provoking discussion and enacting social change. Therefore, her criticism and commentary must be addressed to someone, and the destinataire, who gives Borda the means to achieve her goal by taking the novel’s message to society, must be the power. Involving another extratextual party in the fabula reinforces the effects of the original diegetic breach and underscores the metaleptic blurring of the lines that separate fabula from reality.

An inquiry into the helper and the opponent leads to the same place as the investigation of the other actants. Since no actors fitting the criteria are present in the histoire, the fabula must look beyond the text to complete itself.\(^{111}\) In that way, Borda’s novel manages to merge the literary universe with the real world, inviting her readers into the story and urging them to take her message beyond the text.

\(^{109}\) A chapter’s actants can be identified provided that the chapter contains an actual récit. Chapters that are only comprised of observations, with no histoire, do not require actants.

\(^{110}\) Bal defines the power as the thing or person who “support[s] the subject in the realization of its intention, suppl[ies] the object, or allow[s] it to be supplied or given” (Narratology 198).

\(^{111}\) Anyone helping or hindering the author in her quest to assess Basque society critically and enact change can be considered a helper or an opponent. Depending on the identity of the reader, he or she may be in a position to either further or obstruct the author’s goal.
With the majority of the novel’s actants in metaleptic situations that straddle the border between the *histoire* and reality, it is only natural to wonder about the remaining actors in the fabula. The majority are non-actants, which, rather than implying that they are unimportant, simply means that they do not fulfill an actantial function. In *100% Basque*, certain actors who do not have an actantial role are of considerable significance. The most important (and most salient) non-actant is the ubiquitous *Joanes*, who appears in eight out of forty total chapters.\(^{112}\) His surname differs from chapter to chapter, but the character himself is always essentially the same, with each *Joanes* held to be a paragon of “Basqueness”\(^{113}\) in some measure. The assorted *Joanes* come from all walks of life: they are linguists and politicians, shepherds and activists. Yet for all intents and purposes, they are more or less interchangeable, a phenomenon that Borda emphasizes in anecdotes like the one featuring four Basque poets at a reading who are all named *Joanes*. Initially, the reader pays close attention their individual stories, but, thanks to blatantly obvious cases like that of the poets, it soon becomes evident that the variations in surname and *récit* are no more than motifs in a theme. What matters is the repetition itself, because behind the façade, the *Joanes* are simulacra, a series of reproductions *ad infinitum*. Logically, the existence of these endless copies implies that there is an original somewhere, yet no mention is ever made of an original or “real” *Joanes*.\(^{114}\) Much like the Basque people and language, whose origin is unknown, the progenitor of the character representing the archetypal Basque is untraceable. Ultimately, the role of the *Joanes* figure has a symbolic rather than functional role in the text.

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\(^{112}\) A similar female figure named *Mairos* (or at times, *Maixan* or *Maialen*) also exists, but she appears far less often than *Joanes*. I do not feel that an in-depth discussion of *Mairos* is necessary, as it would be a repetition of my analysis of *Joanes*.

\(^{113}\) My term.

\(^{114}\) Jean Baudrillard offers a comprehensive discussion of the simulacrum in *Simulacres et simulation* (Ed. Galilée, 1981).
Numerous historical and legendary characters also appear in the *histoire*. Ranging from literary heroes to pop culture icons, the list is quite extensive. Their presence in the text is often limited to textual references or metadiegetic anecdotes, but some of them directly interact with Borda’s narrator, as well. One of the most notable chapters in the book recounts the narrator’s sexual encounter with Lili Marlen,115 the fictional subject of a popular World War II era love song. Despite the obviously imaginary nature of their rendezvous, the older version of the narrator interrupts her story to insist upon its veracity: “Je dois dire toute la vérité... [et] je ne cherche pas à me justifier” (72).

For Bal, historical or legendary figures pose several problems. She notes that these characters “fit a pattern of expectation, established in the basis of our frame of reference” and cautions that “the expectations aroused by the mere mention of a historical or mythical character are [...] traps for the reader” (*Narratology* 120-121).116 Personally, I was not familiar with Lili Marlen before reading the chapter, but to anyone from the time period or who is familiar with the music of that era, the mention of Lili Marlen would be highly significant.117 Therein lies the risk of historical and legendary characters: their meaning to the reader is highly variable, depending entirely on his or her frame of reference. Consequently, characters like Lili Marlen cannot be considered a reliable constant in the fabula, as they require the experience and participation of the reader in order to take on meaning. In this sense, such characters are also metaleptic,

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115 *Lili Marleen* is the most common spelling, although *Lili Marlen* is occasionally used. I have chosen to conserve Borda’s spelling in my analysis.

116 For example, the Greek goddess Athena is associated with wisdom. Therefore, the reader would immediately expect any character bearing that name to be wise, even before the text gave any information about her.

117 Originally written as a poem during World War I, *Lili Marlen* was translated into English and put to music in 1939. It became wildly popular with both Allied and Axis soldiers and one of the most well-known versions was recorded by Marlene Dietrich in 1944. Today, the song has been translated into at least eight languages. For more information, see *The Official Lili Marleen Page* at http://ingeb.org/garb/lmarleen.html.
reaching through the text twice: first to borrow from a pre-existing figure, then again to solicit their interpretation from the reader.

As we have seen, analyses of both narrative coherence and actorial and actantial roles in *100% Basque* inevitably lead back to the same common denominator: the narrator. It is undeniable that most novels rely heavily on their narrator, but this is especially true in *100% Basque*, where the narrator serves as the structural center of the text and as one of few common points of reference for both the actors and the reader. The narrator of *100% Basque* serves as a necessary constant in a text that is composed not only of chapters whose connections are not based on conventional logic or chronology, but also of several *récits enchâssés*, or stories within stories, inside the individual chapters. With such a high degree of complexity, narrative coherence depends greatly on the existence of a constant like the narrator. The subtlety of the transitions between one diegetic level and the next is evidence of narrative skill, but it comes at a price when the narratological terrain is so unfamiliar. Already destabilized by the story’s ordering and the unconventional assignment of actantial roles, the ambiguities of the narrative structure cause the reader to doubt his or her initial impressions of the text. For example, although the beginning of the novel strongly implies that the primary narrative is homodiegetic, and more specifically, autodiegetic, further reading shows that levels of narrative distance in *100% Basque* can vary from chapter to chapter and at times, even within the same chapter. Evidently, the reader’s perception of the narrator and of her relationship to the story she tells has considerable influence over the way the reader understands the novel as a whole. Therefore, a more complete explanation of the way I understand the narrator figure is warranted.

In the first paragraph of the novel, the narrator explains that she is recounting her own adventures from several years prior. Thus, a distinction is made between the “narrating I” (the
older narrator who is telling the story) and the “narrated I” (the younger version of the narrator who is the protagonist)\textsuperscript{118} from the very beginning. In my discussion of actors and actants, I brought up the question of whether or not the narrator and the protagonist can be seen as separate individuals. There is no unequivocal “right answer,” but it is important to be aware of the narratological consequences of each response. If the narrator and the protagonist are seen as two distinct actors, \textit{100\% Basque} cannot be considered homodiegetic or, by extension, autodiegetic. On the other hand, if the two are no more than different sides of the same actor, the designation of homodiegetic (and consequently, autodiegetic) is still possible. I see the narrator and the protagonist as two different figures who, because they are on different diegetic levels (with the occasional metaleptic exception) with different timelines, exist in different \textit{spaces} as separate individuals.

Whatever the case may be, there is no doubt that the narrator of \textit{100\% Basque} is a complicated figure, straddling multiple diegetic levels and playing several different roles.\textsuperscript{119} Given the numerous parts she plays and their corresponding duties, it is especially interesting and worthwhile to evaluate the narrator against the five narrative functions outlines by Genette. The first of these functions is the most obvious, as it is what defines the narrator at its most basic level: the narrative function. Essentially, if the narrator did not tell the story, she would cease to be a narrator.\textsuperscript{120} Fulfilling this function does not preclude performing other duties, but the most important duty is the one that defines her: the narrator must narrate.

\textsuperscript{118} I use the terms \textit{narrating I} and \textit{narrator} interchangeably, as well as \textit{narrated I} and \textit{protagonist}.\textsuperscript{119} If the reader understands the narrator to be the author, her roles extend even further, including that of the subject, receiver, and intermediary between the \textit{histoire} and reality.\textsuperscript{120} Genette observes: “Le premier de ces aspects est évidemment l’\textit{histoire}, et la fonction qui s’y rapporte est la \textit{fonction} proprement \textit{narrative}, dont aucun narrateur ne peut se détourner sans perdre en même temps sa qualité de narrateur” \textit{(Discours 267)}.
The second narrative function identified by Genette is the *fonction de régie*, or directing function, in which the narrator interrupts the story “dans un discours en quelque sorte métalinguistique (métanarratif en l’occurrence) pour en marquer les articulations, les connexions, les inter-relations, bref l’organisation interne” (*Discours* 267). Instances can be found where Borda’s narrator demonstrates indisputable awareness of the novel, but it is difficult to disentangle this second function from the third function of communication because of the text’s relationship with the reader and the resulting overlap between fabula and reality. As I pointed out in my discussion of actors and actants, there is some narrative conflation of the author, the narrator, and the protagonist in *100% Basque*, and at times, it is impossible to distinguish between the three decisively. Additionally, it is important to remember that the reader, drawn into the diegesis of the *récit* by narrative necessity, becomes an actant. Therefore, when the narrator addresses the reader, as she does on many occasions, it is hard to determine whether she is addressing the extratextual reader or the reader in his actantial capacity. These ambiguities give rise to the confusion in Borda’s novel between the directing function and the communication function, in which the narrator speaks directly to the reader. An excellent example can be found at the end of a chapter relating a conversation at work, after the narrator asks herself a long series of questions: “Lecteur, tu auras toutes les réponses à ces interrogations quand l’auteur de ce roman sans vraie logique littéraire trouvera un peu de temps à consacrer à son repos” (169). Is she speaking as the narrator and referring to the author as a separate person? Has the author suddenly entered the narrative as her own separate character and is now referring to herself in the third person? Is the reader being addressed outside of the *histoire*, or as part of

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121 It is also interesting to consider whether or not the extratextual reader and the actant reader are two separate entities (like the author, narrating I, and narrated I), or simply different sides of the same person.
the real-life fabula that unfolds when he or she takes on actantial duties and helps or hinders Borda’s message of social critique and reform?

The fourth function is testimonial, in which the narrator does exactly what the title suggests: testify. Genette observes that testimony can take the form of assurances regarding the veracity of the story, the source and degree of precision of the story, or the narrator’s affective response to it (Discours 268-269). In 100% Basque, that duty primarily manifests itself in the ample commentary provided by Borda’s narrator about her emotional reactions. To give a few examples, she references her “triste méprise” (73) on one occasion, confesses that “pour une fois, je ressentis de la haine” (218) on another, and announces her relief on a third, finding herself “apaisée” (178) at last. Sometimes, her emotional responses are combined with metadiegetic logic as she uses previous narrative digressions to help determine the veracity or reality of her current situation: “Sur la colline obscure et ravagée par les intempéries, en me remémorant cette histoire vieille de huit jours, je trouvai plausible de rencontrer des extraterrestres et dans un sens, cela me rassérénait” (241).

Finally, there is the ideological function, or the “discours explicatif et justificatif,” where the narrator’s role is described by Genette as “didactic” (Discours 268-269). As is the case for the previous four functions, the narrator of 100% Basque actively carries out that duty. Explanations, justifications, and advice are inherent to the structure of Borda’s novel, whose fabula is narrated by an older, more experienced person relating the adventures of her younger self. Indeed, the narrator begins her tale with a justification for the situation that is the pretext for the entire novel: “Il y a quelques années, je l’avoue, je participais à des actions populaires devant permettre, à plus ou moins longue échéance, la mise en place des structures politicoculturelles de la future nation basque” (9). Having the luxury of hindsight and the wisdom that it grants, the
narrator feels the need to explain her reasons for participating in activities of which the reader may disapprove. Her phrasing implies that she no longer participates in or agrees with that type of organization, but her phrasing clearly indicates her wishes to show that she had good intentions years back, when she was an active member.

On several levels, 100% Basque offers a rich and varied narratological landscape that challenges and engages the reader. The text’s apparent lack of cohesiveness and coherent structure is initially problematic since it does not respect traditional novelistic criteria requiring either a logical or chronological connection between chapters. However, an application of Mieke Bal’s broader principles of structure allows the reader to identify the framework that holds 100% Basque together. Borda’s approach to actors and actants is similarly unconventional, actively transgressing diegetic levels and obscuring the borders between narrative and reality. Borda draws the reader in, making him or her part of the fabula, then extends an invitation to carry her novel beyond the histoire and out into the world. Finally, the effectiveness of both the text and the narrative hinge on the narrator, who at times deceptively appears to converge with the author, and at others, with her younger self. It is through her skillful performance of Genette’s five narrative functions that the narrator is able to serve as an effective intermediary between narrative levels and establish a dialogue with the reader. In the end, Borda’s innovative approach to narrative and structure is an effective means of questioning the status quo and challenging convention, both narratological and social.

Marie Darrieussecq

A cursory description of Le Mal de mer shows a relatively straightforward plot: it is the story of a woman who, for unknown reasons, decides to leave behind the life she knows and start
over someplace new. With her young daughter in tow, she flees to the southwestern coast of France and takes up residence in Biarritz. Her husband, who is surprised and confused by her sudden, unannounced departure and angry that she has run away with their daughter and their savings, hires a private investigator to find them and eventually follows them to Biarritz. The woman’s mother goes to Biarritz, as well, hoping to improve her declining health with thalassotherapy treatments at a spa. Finally, there is also a real estate agent who rents an apartment to the woman and her daughter, observing them and analyzing the situation from an outsider’s perspective.

Yet a closer look reveals the novel’s unusual style of narrative, with a récit structured around alternating narrative perspectives, or focalizations. Focalization is “the relation between vision and that which is ‘seen,’ perceived” (Bal, *Narratology* 142), or the “focus of narration” (Genette, *Discours* 194). Both Genette and Bal underscore the need to differentiate between narration (who speaks) and focalization (who sees). The subject of focalization, or the focalizor, is defined by Bal as “the point from which the elements [of the fabula] are viewed” (*Narratology* 143, 146). In *Le Mal de mer*, five actors serve as focalizors: a woman, her daughter, the grandmother, the father, and the real estate agent. The narrative perspective shifts seamlessly between them, changing unannounced and at irregular intervals. The most salient characteristic of all of the focalizors is their anonymity. Simply referred to as *il* or *elle*, their identities and perspectives have a tendency to blur, requiring a vigilant and perceptive reader to untangle the story enough to understand the fabula.

The near imperceptibility of the shifts in focalization works both for and against the récit. On one hand, these switches provide an unusually comprehensive overview of the *histoire*, creating a multidimensional context compiled from multiple sources and angles that allows for a
more complete picture than a fixed focalization would. On the other, the lack of demarcation between focalizors can obscure the fabula behind the story. Not only is the reader deprived of names with which to identify and differentiate the actors, he or she additionally lacks the means to distinguish easily between narrative perspectives.

Nevertheless, the reader is not entirely without recourse. Despite the absence of traditional markers like names, there are other, subtler indications at the reader’s disposition. One such example is deixis, a type of reference using a word or expression whose meaning or interpretation is dependent on context\(^{122}\) and that is indispensable to comprehension in texts like *Le Mal de mer*, where numerous conventional components are missing. Deictic elements signaling person, place, and time become a valuable tool, serving as a narrative compass. Furthermore, not only can deixis be used to distinguish the focalizors from one another, it can additionally be used to determine their spatiotemporal relationships to each other and to their surroundings, permitting the reconstruction of an otherwise fragmented narrative. In his 1971 lecture series at the University of California at Santa Cruz, the linguist Charles Fillmore identified several categories of deixis, three of which are particularly relevant and useful in deciphering Darrieussecq’s novel: person, place, and time.

The events in a fabula are inherently tied to its actors; when something happens, an agent must either cause or experience it in order for a fabula to exist. Thus, one of the first questions asked about any narrative is who is involved. In the case of *Le Mal de mer*, this most basic of questions is difficult to answer. Determining and characterizing the actors and actants is a priority, for without names, identifying features, or context, the reader has no conventional

\(^{122}\) For instance, the word *you* has no fixed meaning and can refer to a wide variety of interlocutors, depending on the circumstances. The word *tomorrow*, another example of deixis, shows why deictics are sometimes called “shifters:” its meaning shifts with each new day. For a more extensive discussion and analysis of deixis, see the work of Emile Benveniste.
points of reference around which to base his or her understanding of the _histoire_. However, anonymity is not the only obstacle; compounding the problem is the fact that text has a variable focalization, where the fabula is related through the eyes of several different actors.

The novel begins from the woman’s perspective and the first-time reader, having no reason to suspect or anticipate a change in focalization, reads for several pages before realizing that something has shifted: _elle_ mentions her daughter several times but suddenly, a clearly infantile _elle_ begins talking about her mother. A few other clues give away the fact that the first _elle_ is not the same as the second and that the focus has moved from the woman to her daughter. The first chapter limits itself to alternating between the mother and daughter as focal characters, but the focalization becomes increasingly variable as the _histoire_ progresses. Chapter two introduces the grandmother, but there is no way of knowing that this third _elle_ is neither the mother nor the daughter until nearly halfway through the chapter. Similarly, the first male focalizor, the real estate agent, makes his first appearance a third of the way through the text. However, the introduction of the real estate agent is less likely to be missed because of the change in pronoun that he requires. The second male focal character and last of the five total focalizors is the father, who appears just before the halfway point of the novel.

Granted, the designation of focalizors as _il_ or _elle_ exclusively eliminates one of the most basic of markers, but it still provides a critical piece of information: the gender of the focalizor. Indeed, pronouns prove to be a valuable index in _Le Mal de mer_, and although they do not necessarily lead to a conclusive identification of a segment’s focalization character, they can at the very least narrow down the possibilities. Of the five focalizors, three are female and two are male, meaning that the choice of pronoun automatically limits the pool of potential focalization characters. Plural pronouns are also a helpful resource. In French, for instance, _elles_ cannot, by
definition, include any men. Therefore, when used to include the focalizor, it removes the novel’s two male characters from the list of potential focalizors.\textsuperscript{123}

An analeptic segment focalized by the daughter provides a good example of how subject pronouns can be used to establish context and determine identity: “L’année dernière, quand ils sont partis tous les trois à la montagne, elle avait déjà la charge des sardines, mais la méthode paraissait plus sûre, son père dedans avec les piquets, sa mère dehors” (20). At this point in the novel, the only focalizors (or even actors) who have been introduced are the mother and her daughter, both female. Thus, the pronoun \textit{ils} stands out, as it has important implications for the composition of the group of three, “tous les trois.” The reader can reasonably assume that the two female actors whose adventure is thus far at the center of the \textit{récit} (the woman and her daughter), comprise two members of the group. The identity of the third person is unknown, but the use of \textit{ils} instead of \textit{elles} means that the third person has to be male. Yet as indispensable as these ties between characters may be, it is essential to remember that they do not allow the reader to identify the characters of the novel individually, but rather only with respect to one another.

Although critical to identifying the actors and actants, person deixis alone is not sufficient to identify the focalizors. It is not just that \textit{Le Mal de mer} relies heavily on pronouns, the problem is that subject pronouns are used to the practical exclusion of all other referents, meaning that there is never an explicitly stated antecedent for any of the \textit{il} or \textit{elle} focalizors. Ascertaining their identity requires other types of deixis as well, in order to provide the reader with enough information to be able to identify and interpret the subject pronouns, and from there, find a way to disentangle the focalizing characters and their corresponding sequences.

\textsuperscript{123} It is interesting to note that this technique does not work in all languages. For example, it would not work in English, as the third person plural pronoun “they” is not gender-specific and thus would not imply the exclusion of the husband or real estate agent like it does in French. The linguistically-inclined reader cannot help but wonder how an English or German translation of the text would address this problem, especially in sections where identification of the focal characters is contingent upon pronouns.
Essentially, the reader of *Le Mal de mer* cannot make use of person deixis unless he or she has already established a context through the use of place and time deixis.

Place deixis, which includes adverbs like *here* and *there* and demonstratives like *this* and *that*, can help supplement the sparse information available about the actors. In contrast to the relativity\(^{124}\) that characterizes the reader’s knowledge of the focalizors, the information provided by the text about place is far more concrete, existing not only within the subjective space of the *histoire*, but also in the objective space of the world. Therefore, unlike person deixis, which serves only to establish relative connections between the actors in *Le Mal de mer*, place deixis can lead to a definitive determination of the location of the action in the fabula. For example, in a sequence focusing on the mother, she remarks that “ici, les gens parlent espagnol” (35). The mother’s comment is one of the very first indications given about her location, and while by no means conclusive, it considerably shortens the list of places she could potentially be. Given their mode of transportation (automobile), the reader can deduce that the mother and daughter are most likely still in Europe. The addition of information about the language indicates the direction of their travel (south), and from there, it can be reasonably assumed that they are either in the southernmost part of France, near the Spanish border, or somewhere in Spain. A few pages later, it is revealed that the mother and daughter are in fact in southern France:

Elle n’a toujours pas utilisé sa carte bancaire. Elle paye tout en liquide, a vidé le livret du couple avant de partir, dix mille francs. Elle sera bientôt obligée de trouver autre chose.  
Si elle n’est pas sortie du pays, elle aura peut-être le réflexe d’inscrire la gosse dans une école; la fin du mois de mai approche. (41-42)

\(^{124}\) The reader’s knowledge about the characters in *Le Mal de mer* is based exclusively on deixis and consequently, it is only in relation to each other that they have an identity or meaning.
“Du pays” is deictic because when used alone, “the country” contains no inherent information about which country is being referenced. Paratextual clues like the nationality and language of the author strongly suggest that the country in question is likely France, which is then confirmed by textual references to more specific identifiers like the currency (francs).

A bit further on, the mother reflects upon their living situation and comments that “ici, l’été, on loue à la semaine. C’est la mer qui veut ça” (47). Thanks to this observation, the reader can further reduce the list of potential locations for “ici” to the southern coasts of France, most likely near the Spanish border. As the narrative progresses, place deixis is often replaced by synecdochical allusions to objective (as opposed to deictic) places. The text never states their location explicitly, but the increasingly specific references make it easy to identify. When the grandmother later evokes the Basques and “la courbe spectaculaire des bords de l’Atlantique” (57), the Bayonne-Anglet-Biarritz zone is confirmed as the final location of all five focalizors, and several mentions of the Musée de la mer, the lighthouse, and the casino finally identify Biarritz as their position.

Time is by far the most concrete aspect of Le Mal de mer. If place is evoked primarily by means of deixis and then reinforced by specific references, the inverse is true for time, which is regularly and objectively indicated in the récit and only then supplemented by time deixis. Shortly after her arrival in Biarritz, the woman debates whether or not she should enroll her daughter in school but ultimately decides against it because “la fin du mois de mai approche” and school will soon be out for the summer. Later on, the real estate agent who is renting an apartment to the woman remarks at one point that she still owes him rent: “Après tout, elle ne lui a toujours pas réglé le mois de juin, et il pourrait la virer maintenant, juillet approche” (42, 98). At the very end of the novel, it is once again the real estate agent whose observations establish
the timeframe of the fabula. Watching the daughter eat her ice cream, he reflects upon the time
that has passed since he first saw her: “Depuis un mois qu’elle est là, il l’a vue bronzer, grandir
peut-être, à cet âge-là ça va vite, et même apprendre à nager” (121). Turning to the mother, he
studies her for the same changes:

Son visage est le même, aujourd’hui, et il y a un mois. C’est à se demander si elle a vu
passer les jours, s’adoucir le temps, enfiler les marées, venir l’été et grandir la petite. En
un mois le ciel est devenu bleu sombre, les feuilles des platanes ont atteint leur plein vert,
le vent s’est élargi. (121)

Together, these observations can be used to construct a timeline for the récit. The woman and her
daughter arrived in Biarritz sometime in late May, and the narrative concludes a month later,
near the end of June. The ability to construct an objective and meaningful timetable is a welcome
respite from the contextual dependence that characterizes other aspects of the text.

However, this is not to say that time deixis is entirely lacking from the novel. On the
contrary, it supplements objective markers like those indicating the day or the month, primarily
through the use of verb tenses and adverbs of time. Since simultaneous narration,^{125} used by all
five focalizors, is the primary type of narration in the histoire, the present tense serves as a
consistent standard against which to measure other tenses and gauge time. Having a reliable
temporal base is especially important given the fact that some verb tenses are themselves
deictic.^{126} Verb tenses do not function alone; it is in conjunction with temporal adverbs that the
reader is able to determine the chronology of the fabula. In Le Mal de mer, it is precisely this

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^{125} Genette defines simultaneous narration as a “récit au présent de l’action.” For him, it is the least complicated type
of narration: “[C]e type, au contraire (narration simultanée), est en principe le plus simple, puisque la coïncidence
rigoureuse de l’histoire et de la narration élimine toute espèce d’interférence et de jeu temporel” (Discours 225-226).
^{126} For example, the pluperfect is rarely found alone, as it is generally used to indicate which of two (or more) past
actions or events occurred first.
combination that gives the reader the means to distinguish between internal and external analepses.\textsuperscript{127}

For example, the anxious grandmother’s recollection of the telephone call that alerted her to the disappearance of her daughter and granddaughter shows how verb tense and time deixis work together to chronologically situate events in the \textit{récit}: “Quand son gendre a téléphoné, tôt ce matin, pour dire qu’elles n’étaient pas rentrées, elle n’a rien dit” (37). The \textit{passé composé} and \textit{plus-que-parfait} indicate that the call happened at some point prior to the moment in which the grandmother is remembering it.\textsuperscript{128} From there, knowing that the fabula began on the evening of the day that the mother fled with her daughter,\textsuperscript{129} the reader can determine, thanks to the addition of “tôt ce matin” that the telephone call constitutes an internal analepsis, most likely taking place the morning following the disappearance of the woman and her daughter.

Similarly, time deixis allows the reader to classify the mother’s memories of her trip to the department store as an internal analepsis. Enjoying the sunshine, she recalls the previous day’s shopping expedition: “Hier, en essayant des maillots aux Galeries, la marque du bronzage, dans le miroir, l’a étonnée” (101). The woman has only begun to tan since her arrival at the seashore and therefore, her observation that she now has tan lines (which are indicative of a time lapse, since that degree of tanning does not happen overnight), cements this retroversion\textsuperscript{130} within the chronology of the fabula, confirming another internal analepsis. Classifying the

\textsuperscript{127} An external analepsis is a “retroversión [that] takes place completely outside the time span of the primary fabula,” while an internal analepsis is a “retroversión [that] occurs within the time span of the primary fabula” (Bal, \textit{Narratology} 90). Genette’s definition of these terms is almost identical.
\textsuperscript{128} The narration surrounding this recollection is in the present tense, signaling a discrepancy in time between the grandmother’s current situation and the phone call.
\textsuperscript{129} In the second paragraph, the mother’s comments indicate that night has come: “Mais le soleil s’est couché, le haut du ciel est devenu noir, descend lentement en ferment la mer sur la mer” (\textit{Mer} 11). Further reading reveals that their flight began the afternoon of the same day, when the woman picked her daughter up from the grandmother’s house.
\textsuperscript{130} Bal prefers the term \textit{retroversion over analepsis} (Genettian terminology). Nonetheless, the two are synonymous.
daughter’s recollection of a family trip to the mountains as an external analepsis requires consideration of time deixis in conjunction with person deixis. Since there are no men in the *histoire* at that point, the subject pronoun *ils*, which implies the presence of at least one male, clearly places “l’année dernière” outside the scope of the fabula. The ability to establish not only a narrative timeframe, but also to situate analepses with respect to that timeframe, is invaluable to the reader, who, in a *récit* with so many missing pieces, needs a consistent point of reference.

Indeed, it seems that more pieces of the picture are missing than are present in *Le Mal de mer*. Although the *when* (May and June) is revealed, it is only a partial disclosure, as the actual year of the fabula’s action is never specified. Excepting extremely basic (gender) and predominantly relative information (the three female focalizors represent three generations of a family), the objective *who* is also unclear. The *récit* features three French women of different ages and two French men. In addition to the familial ties between the women, we also know that one of the men is the father of the youngest female focalizor, the son-in-law of the older woman, and the husband of the little girl’s mother. The fifth focalizor is unrelated to the other four. He rents an apartment to the mother and daughter pair, has some contact with the father when he follows them to Biarritz, and has no known interactions with the grandmother. Finally, the *why* is also missing. We do not know why the woman has run away, what her relationship with her mother, daughter, or husband was prior to leaving, or when whatever prompted her to flee occurred. No information whatsoever is given about her intentions, her reasons, or her past. At the end of the novel, we know only very little about her future. She is headed to Hobart alone, but it is impossible to say why she has chosen Tasmania as her destination, what she will do there, or how long she will stay. Thus, to varying degrees, the reader is a detective who, armed

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131 This is the same segment that I referenced in my discussion of subject pronouns. See page 185 for the full text.
with only the *what* and a handful of deictic clues, must seek out the other variables that comprise a fabula.

Adding to the reader-detective’s already difficult task is the fact that Darrieusseaq often withholds important deictic information until well after a shift in focalization has occurred. Such shifts generally occur at the beginning of new paragraph (with only a few notable exceptions), which means that every single new paragraph has the potential to change focalization, but does not necessarily do so. It is impossible to predict which paragraphs will introduce a new focalizor, as the different focalization sequences follow no discernable pattern. Ultimately, there is no way to anticipate impending changes in focalization based on segment length, subject, or type of language.

As frustrating as this narrative style may be, it is not without purpose. The sections of the *récit* that provide the fewest clues in the form of person deixis are also the segments that open with a description of the surroundings. In these sequences, the narrative prioritizes place over person, temporarily and unexpectedly transforming a location into a character. Detailed descriptions of the ocean, the beach, or the region dominate the beginning of many segments, overpowering the presence of the human focalizor, who is overshadowed by the forces of nature whose presence dominates these sequences. The human focalizor is not erased; he or she is simply minimized. In these sections, it is not *who* is seeing that is important, but rather *what* is being seen. For instance, one segment focusing on the daughter begins with a characterization of the scenery, painting a vivid picture of the sky, sea, and mountains as the sun sets and evening falls:

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132 For a more thorough discussion of the concept of character in the contemporary novel, see Warren Motte’s article entitled “Nobody’s Novel.”
Le temps change. La brume reste, en suspension, gommant les montagnes, les repoussant à l’extrême bord du paysage; à peine une ligne mauve à mi-pente du ciel, sur un azur de buvard. Le paysage s’est dilaté, l’air gonflé, la mer se creuse; non par vagues, mais par une sorte de dépression interne, comme sous la succion d’une pieuvre adossée au continent, dans les fosses où l’océan commence. (74)

The paragraph continues in a similar fashion and it is not until nearly a full page later, in the middle of the second paragraph of the segment, that elle is even mentioned. In other cases, il or elle may appear earlier in the segment, but without the deictic elements necessary to identify the focalizor beyond his or her gender. Without a focalization character to serve as an anchor or a point of reference, the narrative focus shifts to the scenery, forcing the reader to concentrate on the place that is being described until the person doing the observing is finally evoked.

Delayed disclosure of critical deictic clues not only serves to emphasize the forces of nature, but also to influence the way the text is read. When necessary information is not revealed until halfway through the segment, the reader is obliged to return to the beginning of that section and reread the text. Knowledge of the focalizor’s identity has a strong influence on the way the text is interpreted the second time around, and, seen from a new angle, the section becomes an entirely new text, transforming the story by shifting the focus from the environment back to the human focalizor.

Clearly, deixis has both its advantages and its drawbacks. It provides the reader with a tool to approach texts of all kinds and is especially useful when dealing with fabulas where certain information is not explicitly given or is omitted entirely. It is thanks to person, place, and time deixis that the reader of Le Mal de mer is able to make sense of a récit that is otherwise hermetic. Certainly, the objective information provided by the text is also of great importance,
but without the deictic elements that fill in the gaps, it would be impossible to assemble the pieces necessary to reconstruct the original fabula. On the other hand, there are times when the reader, attuned to the need to seek out clues in the form of deictic indicators, is actually hindered by his search, as it causes him or her to miss the symbolism found only in the big picture.

Marie Cosnay

Over the course of her career as a writer, Marie Cosnay’s innovative and diverse oeuvre has consistently provided a forum for narratological experimentation and her novel entitled Déplacements is no exception to the rule. Déplacements tells the story of a woman who is trying to come to terms with an enigma from her past, searching for a way to make sense of the events that took place in her garden one afternoon six years prior to the beginning of the novel. A major obstacle stands in her way: she cannot remember exactly what happened, and if she cannot remember, she cannot hope to understand it or to find closure. Following the woman on her journey, Cosnay crafts a story that depends as much on its narrative structure as on the content of the fabula to paint the picture of a woman who cannot move forward without first looking back. Negotiating the shifts between the protagonist’s present-day quest and that cryptic afternoon itself demands careful attention to the narrative’s structure, but also provides an opportunity to experiment with anachronies.

Although primarily structured around the alternations between past and present, Déplacements also contains several intertextual interludes involving characters from another of Cosnay’s novels, André des Ombres, thereby introducing an intertextual element. Additionally, several tales from Greek mythology have been inserted into the story. Despite their importance,

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133 Cosnay primarily focuses on the myth of Procne, even using it as the title of the second part of the text.
I have decided not to include the intertextual or mythological segments in my analysis. My choice was motivated by the need to limit my focus to an appropriate scope, as well as the desire to avoid topics that would be better addressed in a chapter on literary space.

I will begin with a brief overview of the text, as a certain degree of familiarity with the novel is necessary for any analysis. The novel opens *in media res* to find the female narrator examining the trees in a garden. She has not seen the trees (or by extension, the garden) in six years, but she has not missed them. She once lived in the house to which the garden belongs, and the trees that she was inspecting were planted when her son was born. At the same time, the garden also evokes painful and confusing memories: one evening, six years before the novel begins, the narrator is working in her home office and happens to look out the window. She sees her husband in the garden with their three-year-old son, who is naked. Confused, she goes outside and wordlessly starts to dress her son, which inexplicably angers her husband. Irate, he tries to strangle her before fleeing in their blue Ford. She initially pursues him, but night falls and she eventually loses him in the darkness and the fog. Her husband never returns home alive, and sometime later, his body washes up on the Basque coast. By that time, the narrator has sold the house in Toulouse whose garden was the scene of the action and moved to Bayonne. Fast-forward six years to the beginning of the novel, and the narrator is still struggling with the events that she witnessed that day. She knows that she saw something, but she doesn’t know what.

Attempting to put together the pieces and understand the pivotal afternoon that changed her life forever, the narrator travels from Toulouse to Paris, ostensibly to meet with a mysterious figure known as *l’homme de Phnom Penh* or at times, *l’homme d’Angkor*. She has exchanged several letters and telephone calls with him and hopes that he will be able to give her some insight into the past. By the end of the novel, she appears to have found some degree of peace,
although the story never shows her finding conclusive answers. Based on the traditional format
of a detective story, Déplacements breaks with generic convention both structurally and
thematically, leaving unanswered questions for reader and narrator alike and never offering a
true resolution.

Unfortunately, a brief synopsis of the fabula like the one above does not even begin to
reflect the complex récit that it becomes in Déplacements. Interspersed with numerous analepses,
the story is shaped by its approach to sequential ordering. The influence that order has on the
récit is extensive, but unsurprising, as ordering is inherently part of every story\textsuperscript{134} to the extent
that Mieke Bal even includes it in her definition of a récit, observing that in many respects, “the
story [can] be regarded as the result of an ordering.” Unlike reality, where things happen in a
logical series of actions and events based on cause and effect, stories have a dual temporality that
opposes the time that passes in the histoire with the time expressed in the récit (Bal, Narratology
78). The technical terminology used to refer to the two chronologies differs according to
language and theorist,\textsuperscript{135} but they are the same in principal, contrasting the chronology of the
fabula with the sequential ordering of the story. Discrepancies between the two, called
anachronies,\textsuperscript{136} are common, and are considered to be a traditional literary device by Genette and
Bal (Discours 25; Narratology 82, 84). Thus, it is not the anachronies themselves that are
unusual in Déplacements, but rather their effect on the way the text is read and understood.

\textsuperscript{134} Many stories contain analepses and prolepses, but even in the absence of anachronies, the decision to leave
events in chronological order is a conscious narrative choice.
\textsuperscript{135} Gunther Müller’s terminology is widely used across languages and is familiar to most narratologists. Müller has
chosen the names erzählte Zeit and Erzählzeit, with the former referring to narrated time and the latter describing
narrative time.
\textsuperscript{136} Anachronies are most often present in the form of what are commonly known as “flashbacks” and
“flashforwards.” Since both Genette and Bal eschew these terms, I shall use their Genettian names, analepses and
prolepses.
Instead of serving as a simple complement to the primary narrative, the analepses in *Déplacements* challenge its primacy. Despite being chronologically anterior to the present-day action, the scene in the garden that is the focus of the majority of analepses is the basis for the fabula, with everything else in the story dependent on or resulting from it.Repeatedly revisited, it becomes a sort of narrative constant in spite of the variations in its presentation. The primary narrative jumps around, bouncing from one scene to another, and often eliding the connections between these scenes, but each reiteration of the afternoon in the garden is a return to a stable place, fixed in time and space.\(^{137}\) The opposition of the roaming primary narrative and the immobile analepses destabilizes what is meant to be a solid point of narrative reference, but also characterizes the novel as a whole: the narrator cannot make sense of the present without first understanding the past, and the reader cannot make sense of the story’s ordering without the past context provided by the analepses.

Where these analepses stand with regard to what Bal calls anachronistic objectivity\(^{138}\) is no clearer than the sequential ordering of the *récit*. Although it appears that the analepses are subjective, taking the form of memories as opposed to actively experienced events, variations in presentation make it difficult to rule out the possibility that one of the iterations could be the original event, narrated as it occurs and therefore, objective according to Bal’s criteria. Still, the apparent subjectivity of the analepses contrasts sharply with the concreteness of the physical locations that are regularly evoked throughout the novel. When the narrator mentally revisits that afternoon in the garden, there is a notable difference between the physicality of place and the uncertainty surrounding the other details of the scene. The disparity between the objective

\(^{137}\) Indeed, the problem with this text stems from the fact that the events are objectively fixed in time and space, but not in the narrator’s memory.

\(^{138}\) Bal divides anachronies into two categories, objective and subjective. In the former, events are actually seen or experience, whereas subjective anachronies exist only as memories or in the imagination (*Narratology* 87).
elements like time and place and the absence of the other pieces necessary to complete the
*tableau* is repeatedly emphasized. The missing *what* and *why* obsess the narrator, provoking
repeated returns (both physical and psychological) to the scene of the action, where she begins to
question every minute detail and second-guesses herself, reconsidering everything she thought
she knew:

[…] dans la nuit je doutais toujours de ce que j’avais pu voir avant qu’il ne lève la main
sur moi […] Entre le saule pleureur et le figuier ce soir-là mon fils jouait. Je ne sais pas à
vrai dire si c’était entre les arbres. Je ne voyais pas les arbres, je ne les avais jamais vus.
C’était en tout cas dans le jardin qu’on voit de mon bureau, le corps de mon fils qui avait
trois ans, nu dans le jardin, je l’ai vu. Ce soir-là, quelques instants plus tard, mon mari
levait la main sur moi et après il s’enfuyait au volant de la Ford bleue. (18-19)

The narrator remembers what time of day it was, she remembers the color and make of
the car her husband took when he fled the scene, and she remembers that it took place in the
garden. At the same time, she cannot recall where her son was with respect to the weeping
willow and the fig tree in the garden. Originally, she says that he was playing between the trees,
but a moment later, overcome by doubt, she retracts her statement. Some people might dismiss
her concern about her son’s exact location with respect to the trees as an insignificant detail, but
that detail means a great deal to her, because all that she knows with certainty about the
afternoon can be reduced to the following: it happened in the garden that can be seen from her
office, and her three-year-old son was naked. She can confirm a few facts about the aftermath, as
well: her husband hit her, then fled the scene in their blue Ford. The events of that day and their
significance are obscured by the gaps in the narrator’s memory and she believes it necessary to
recapture each frame, each second, to make sense of what happened.
Compounding the absence of so many pieces of the picture\textsuperscript{139} that the narrator paints of the scene in the garden is the detachment that characterizes many of her recollections. The narrator repeatedly reviews the facts and the \textit{who} (her husband and son), \textit{when} (six years ago, in the late afternoon), and \textit{where} (in the garden outside her office window), have been established and reestablished, but there is no affective aspect to the scene as she describes it. Without knowing exactly what happened, she does not know how to react emotionally, and without an emotional connection to the scene, she cannot decipher it. The narrator is only too well aware that reconstructing the scene will inevitably lead to painful emotions and trauma and at times, she wonders whether or not remembering that day is worth the damage it has already caused and has yet to cause: “J’ai pensé que c’était un tort de vouloir à tout prix faire une histoire totale des morceaux amassés. Comment ne pas laisser vieillir le temps tristement autour d’une scène où la connaissance de soi s’est arrêtée, et de toute autre chose avec soi” (41). Even so, not knowing also comes at a high price. Consumed by her unanswered questions and plagued by her doubts, the narrator is suspended in a state of limbo that prevents her from coming to terms with the past, being at peace with the present, or giving direction to her life in the future. She must put together the scattered puzzle pieces of the scene that haunts her to discover its significance before she can finally move on.

Like the narrator, who must take apart the past before reassembling it into an intelligible picture of that afternoon, the reader must deconstruct the story in order to uncover the raw elements of the \textit{histoire}. However, unlike the narrator, it is not a personal need for closure that motivates the reader’s quest. Instead, it is the \textit{récit} itself that compels him or her to transform the fragments into a coherent fabula. To a certain extent, this drive is due to the storyline, where the

\textsuperscript{139} The \textit{what} and the \textit{why} are missing without a doubt, and the narrator begins to question the specifics of the \textit{where}. 
reader naturally wants to understand what “happened,” but narrative structure is also a motivating factor, as the way Cosnay uses the narrative movements that determine the rhythm of the *récit* contributes to the air of mystery that hangs over the story.

Both narrative movements and rhythm fall into the narratological category of *duration*, which concerns itself with the relationship between story time and fabula time. Narrative movements can be manipulated to obtain certain effects, like emphasizing one event to call attention to its importance, or omitting another to create suspense. Bal and Genette agree on four basic movements: *ellipsis, summary, scene, and pause*. Bal additionally recognizes a fifth tempo, the *slow-down*, which she situates between scene and pause. Generally speaking, each movement has a conventional use. The summary, for instance, is described by Genette as “*le tissu conjonctif par excellence du récit romanesque*” (*Discours* 93). Here, too, Cosnay’s text departs from tradition, minimizing the use of certain prevalent movements to the point of near-omission and shifting the narrative’s rhythm to other less frequently used tempi instead.

One example is Cosnay’s use of the scene,\(^{140}\) which is widely accepted as the most common of the narrative movements.\(^{141}\) Instead of advancing the *histoire* through the presentation of a series of related scenes, *Déplacements* focuses on a few specific scenes that are revisited multiple times. A more conventional approach might involve a maximum of two reiterations, the first in the form of a scene to establish the events, and the second in the form of a summary, to confirm them without dwelling on them. By contrast, Cosnay’s fabula is built on the scene that took place in the garden six years before the beginning of the novel, and that scene in particular is subject to a wide range of narrative movements. It is examined and reexamined by slowing it down, speeding it up, and at times, pausing it. It serves as a reference point for all

\(^{140}\) In a scene, story time and fabula time are approximately equal (Bal, *Narratology* 102; Genette, *Discours*, 91).

\(^{141}\) Bal observes that “the scene is, by definition, in the majority” (*Narratology* 105).
other narrative events, but its connection to them is often tenuous or elliptical. When the narrator receives a phone call notifying her that her husband’s remains have washed up on the beach, that is the first news she has had of him since he took off in the blue Ford after trying to strangle her. Similarly, the narrator’s return to her old house in Toulouse is evoked in the form of a garden scene where the narrator is inspecting the trees. The reader learns that the reason for her return to Toulouse is tied to the original garden scene that occurred there six years earlier, but the time between the two scenes is—and will remain, for the most part—blank.

Another departure from conventional narrative rhythm is the scarcity of summary in *Déplacements*. In a summary, narrative time is accelerated, providing a condensed account of the intervals between scenes without completely omitting them. Genette defines summary as “la narration en quelques paragraphes ou quelques pages de plusieurs journées, mois ou années d’existence, sans détails d’actions ou de paroles” (*Discours* 92). Its functions are to furnish background information in order to establish context and avoid narrative gaps by facilitating smooth and logical transition between scenes (Bal, *Narratology* 105). However, in texts like *Déplacements*, where the author intentionally leaves narrative lacunae, summary is of reduced interest and limited utility. As I mentioned, summary is relatively uncommon in *Déplacements*, which has the effect of isolating many scenes in the novel by depriving them of the logical or temporal connections to each other that would ordinarily be communicated in a summary. Yet even if an indication is given as to the length of the interval between certain scenes, little to nothing is said about what happened during that period, and there is no explicit explanation of how the *récit* got from point A to point B.

Such textual silences, or ellipses, characterize the rhythm of *Déplacements*. On the one hand, these omissions mirror the narrator’s memory lapses and by doing so, serve a symbolic
purpose. On the other, the predominance of ellipses in *Déplacements* limits the amount of background information or context that is available to the reader. For example, the reader does not know anything about the husband, although insight into his character and the sort of relationship he had with his wife and son might provide valuable clues about what happened in the garden. Depriving the reader of this information has the effect of putting him or her on the same level as the narrator. Neither knows what happened that day in the garden or why, and the missing context shatters the fabula into disjointed and confused pieces.

Many of the ellipses in *Déplacements* are what Genette categorizes as “explicit,” meaning that although they do not provide any information about what happened during a given period of time, the text does recognize that time is missing and acknowledges its omission from the story. In addition to reiterating the garden scene, the temporal interval between that day and the primary narrative is also repeated several times. Physically returning to the garden at the beginning of the récit, the narrator comments that “il y a six ans [qu’elle n’a] pas vu ces arbres” and later, on the occasion of a mental return to the garden, she describes “le chagrin venu six ans plus tard, poussiéreux” (7, 47), to cite just two examples. The objective information provided by explicit ellipses gives the reader the means to construct the outline of a timeline for the fabula, which consequently permits him or her to put the scenes in a logical and coherent order.

Not all ellipses provide information, however, and some contribute to the narrative enigma more than they help resolve it. For instance, when the narrator informs *l’homme de Phnom Penh* that she won’t be able to come to the meeting that they planned over the long weekend of May 8, she mentions a previous encounter: “Face à face sur la terrasse au dessus des jardins de Belleville nous avions gardé le silence” (83). When did that meeting occur? How do
the two know each other? Why did they meet? How much time passed between that meeting and the time she referenced it? The reader’s questions are met with an elliptical silence.

In addition to being a structural reflection of the gaps in the narrator’s memory, the text’s many ellipses are also representative of her trauma. In some respects, her amnesia is more traumatic than the actual events of the garden scene. Frustrated by her inability to remember or articulate what exactly occurred, the narrator remarks that “tous les traumatismes de l’histoire vont dans le mutisme” (67). The scene in the garden has cost her far more than her memories alone:

J’ai perdu du temps, passé des minutes longues devant la fenêtre et le yucca, dans le jardin, penchée sans émotion ni décision sur les herbes hautes qui entravaient les couleurs des azalées. J’ai perdu de nouveau, et sans raison que celles que j’y collais artificiellement, le sens. Je retrouvais la petite scène saisie par le carré de la fenêtre, la douleur d’être serrée là. (69)

If time has been on hold since that afternoon, both textually and in the narrator’s life, the question arises as to whether the events in the garden can still be considered a scene or if they are better categorized as a pause. The final of the four narrative movements, a pause is “a narrative [section] in which no movement of the fabula-time is implied. A great deal of attention is paid to one element, and in the meantime the fabula remains stationary” (Bal, *Narratology* 108). Depending on the iteration, the narrator’s recollections of the afternoon in the garden can fall into either category. The following section, where the play-by-play present tense narration reflects an approximate equivalence between fabula time and story time, fits the definition of a scene:
Mon tout petit garçon joue dans le jardin. Son père retourne le carré de terre qu’il prépare en potager ou bien il frappe à coups répétés sur la tôle rouge qui était un abri à bois.


On the other hand, the following account of that same day is comprised of descriptions rather than actions. It is as if the narrator has stopped time to paint a picture:

Malgré mes idées d’aventure et mes efforts, je n’ai qu’un seule chose à dire, elle émerge du tas d’efforts, de mots, elle ne forme qu’une image, constante dans sa violence, aux contours invariables. Au volant de ma voiture je poursuis la Ford de mon mari qui a failli m’étrangler après que j’ai vu quelque chose dans le jardin que je n’aurais pas dû voir, que j’ai cru ne pas voir, mais si je ferme les yeux […] c’est le corps nu de mon enfant dans le jardin de la maison. (25)

The narrator’s description of the events is similar to the way one would describe an image, and her choice of the adjectives constant and invariables to depict what she sees when she closes her eyes underscores the static, immobile quality of the memory. The story does not
advance and the moment becomes a photograph, a fixed image, as she freezes it in time, examining it and hoping to discover what she somehow missed so that she can believe what is before her eyes.

Other iterations fall somewhere between pause and scene. Here, the rhythm of the récit corresponds best to Mieke Bal’s fifth tempo, the slow-down, where fabula time moves in slow motion but does not come to a complete stop:

Brusquement une femme court au jardin. C’est le printemps, la lumière est chaude et dessine les arbres sur la mauvaise pelouse. Les années vécues se rassemblent en une sorte de boule de nerf ou de folie. Je ne le connais pas. La question se résout ici, en un temps trop bref pour savoir. La femme est jetée au sol et manque de souffle. L’enfant est assis à côté. Elle a de l’enfant une conscience aiguë. Un homme disparaît dans le brouillard qui tombe à toute allure. La nuit vient dans le jardin. (40)

The moments immediately before and after she saw her naked son lengthen as years of time come together to overwhelm her and she is on the ground, breathless. The récit only resumes its normal speed when she hears her husband driving away.

The narrative rhythm of these three passages may differ, but the story they tell is the same. In part, the diverse styles of presentation are what prevents the iterations from becoming tautological. The variations in narrative speed direct the reader’s attention to different aspects of the garden scene, which, as the basis for the récit, is revisited over and over, in different forms, at different speeds, and at different diegetic levels. The narratological category of frequency uses the term repetition to describe reiterations of this sort. Like rhythm, frequency examines the relationship between the fabula and the story, but instead of focusing on duration and speed, it concerns itself with the number of times an event actually occurs in the histoire and how many
times it is evoked in the récit. Frequency, then, deals with “the numerical relationship between the events in the fabula and those in the story” (Bal, Narratology 111).

There are numerous possibilities: an event that occurs once can be presented either once or multiple times, and several similar events can be presented either once or multiple times (Bal, Narratology 111; Genette, Discours 112-115). According to the criteria outlined by Bal and Genette, the garden scene is a clear case of repetition, which is used to describe instances where a single event is presented more than once. Generally, the conventional use of this technique in the novel is at least partially camouflaged by variations in style and perspective, with differences even more considerable than ones that I noted in my discussion of rhythm, and an overt application of the sort seen in Déplacements is less common. Cosnay’s text makes no effort to hide the extent to which it repeats itself, making conscious, active use of the iterations. Much like narrative rhythm, where differences in tempo shape the reader’s interpretation of the events by shifting the perspective (a quick, global scan, as opposed to a slow, detailed examination, for example), and ellipses reflect the narrator’s amnesia, the repetitions reflect her obsessive revisiting of that day and her inability to move past it as long as it eludes her understanding.

In the end, it is neither the content nor the structure alone that makes Cosnay’s text so engaging, but rather the interplay between the two and the way in which they complement each other. Through her use of various narrative devices, Cosnay deliberately and skillfully structures her story to mimic the fragmentation of the narrator’s fractured memories of the afternoon in the garden and her search for understanding. Even the lack of resolution at the end of the novel reinforces the parallels between the fabula and the text. The central problem of the histoire is

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142 Bal cites the epistolary novel of the eighteenth century as an example of events being told and retold by different characters in different ways (Narratology 112).
143 Except, perhaps, in the contemporary novel. Genette notes that “certains textes modernes reposent sur cette capacité de répétition du récit” (Discours 113). Alain Robbe-Grillet’s La Jalousie comes immediately to mind here.
never resolved and what exactly happened that day is never explicitly revealed. It is unclear if the beginnings of peace that the narrator appears to have found by the end of the novel mean that she has finally assembled the pieces of that enigmatic afternoon, or rather if she has simply come to terms with not knowing. In either case, the reader continues to visit and revisit the text, searching for answers, and recreating the narrator’s quest one more time.

Xabi Molia

As a contemporary graphic novel, Vers le nord may seem like an unlikely choice for a chapter about narratological space. Despite the popularity of graphic novels in France, they are still not accorded the same legitimacy or respect as conventional novels, and consequently, have been historically neglected by literary critics, who may be inclined to dismiss them as less “serious” literature. In the United States, where graphic novels do not enjoy the same popularity as in France, they are at an even higher risk of being dismissed by academics. This neglect is unfortunate for many reasons, only one of which is their rich potential as objects of literary study, especially with regard to their capacity for representation. Indeed, as Marie-Laure Ryan usefully points out, narratives take place in real-world space (“Space” 424), and image adds an additional dimension to the fabula that language alone cannot provide, because, as Bal explains, “events always occur somewhere” (Narratology 7). Therefore, illustrations should not be seen as an inferior form of representation, but rather as a valuable complement to text. Elaborating on the spatial component of fabulas, Ryan outlines the reasons for admitting images as part of an histoire: “Images are more efficient than words at representing a world populated by existents because of the spatial extension and visual appearance of concrete objects” (“Space” 424). Furthermore, if, as Michael Toolan posits, “coherence and full interpretation of a text often
require that we have access to more than the text alone” (“Coherence” 49) then images like the illustrations in a graphic novel have the potential to compensate for or even fill in textual lacunae.

As paintings, cartoon strips, and other visual media have repeatedly demonstrated, images do not by any means require text to tell a story, but they lack certain qualities necessary to give depth to complex fabulas or to construct a new one not based on familiar storylines or schemas. For that reason, they should not be seen as a substitute for a well-constructed histoire, but rather as a complement. A text like Vers le nord that offers complex narrative structure and images alongside one another therefore constitutes a valuable opportunity to examine the relationship between text and image in a novel and to see a visual representation of a variety of narrative techniques. There are many aspects of the text that merit consideration, but I have chosen three for my analysis, whose focus will be the narratological category of time and more specifically, the aspects of order, duration, and frequency.

As I have demonstrated, order is a critical part of every récit, but it is of particular interest in Vers le nord, where numerous anachronies simultaneously characterize the story and risk obscuring the fabula. The ability to determine a logical sequence of events and place them on a narrative timeline, relative as it may be, is critical to comprehension, and the fact that Vers le nord is a graphic novel does not make it an exception. In and of themselves, anachronies are not shocking or subversive; on the contrary, they are a common and well-established narrative technique that is used to achieve specific literary effects. What makes the anachronies in Vers le nord unusual is their prevalence and multidimensionality.

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144 They can and often do (paintings, cartoon strips, silent films, etc.).
145 By “familiar storyline,” I mean based on a fairy tale, fable, parable, etc. (Ryan, “Narration in Various Media” 272).
146 Images are not without shortcomings. For example, they cannot provide explanations or express temporality in the same way as a text (Ryan, “Narration in Various Media” 273).
147 By relative, I mean the ability to order events with respect to each other, as opposed to locating them in objective time through the use of dates.
Traditionally, anachronies can go in two directions with respect to the point in the narrative at which they intervene, or the degré zéro: backward, which is known as an analepsis (Genette) or retroversion (Bal), and forward, called prolepsis (Genette) or anticipation (Bal). Molia’s text introduces a third, lateral direction in the form of dreams and fantasy worlds that exist outside the outside the timeline of the primary narrative and are situated neither before nor after the degré zéro, but rather adjacent to it. For lack of a better term, and to avoid opening any Pandora’s boxes, I will simply refer to them as lateral anachronies. Compounding the challenges presented by the narrative’s multidimensionality is the lack of explicit textual transitions between diegetic levels. Certain shifts between temporalities are only signaled through visual transitions, and many require a combination of textual and visual logic to determine where one segment ends and another begins.

Before examining the anachronies in *Vers le nord*, a brief synopsis and some contextualization are required. The narrator and protagonist of *Vers le nord* is a young man named Noé who is on a northward trek in Sweden. The people he meets during his travels are inevitably curious about his trip and in response to their questions, Noé tells them the story of his great-grandfather, who went on a top secret mission to a small town in northern Sweden called Jokkmokk, never to return. The adventures of Noé’s ancestor, leading up to and including his time in Jokkmokk, are recounted analeptically in several installments. Other analepses provide

148 For a more complete explanation of anachronies and the degré zéro of narration, see Genette, *Discours* 24.
149 These lateral chronologies, which fall under the category of what Jan Alber calls “unnatural temporalities,” have become a subject of increasing interest in recent years and yielded a number of innovative approaches to texts that do not obey conventional narrative rules. Unfortunately, even the most cursory discussion of these theories would require an incursion into the field of what has been baptized “unnatural narratology” that is well beyond the scope of this chapter. Consequently, I have made the difficult decision to exclude this method of interpretation from my analysis, as I believe that omitting a discussion is preferable by far to a sloppy, incomplete discussion. For a thorough introduction to unnatural narratology, I would direct the reader to the work of Jan Alber.
150 To a certain extent, the Genettian theory of alteration, specifically of paralepsis (giving too much or inappropriate information) and paralipsis (omitting critical information), can also be applied to lateral anachronies. However, my analysis of *Vers le nord* is limited to questions of time, and as alterations are related to mode, I have opted to leave them out of this discussion.
glimpses of Noé’s life in France before he left for Sweden and offer insight into his reasons for undertaking such a journey. Lateral anachronies show Noé’s elaborate daydreams, fantastical scenarios that chronicle his gradual transformation from timid bystander into valiant hero. Noé’s wandering thoughts while on the road in Sweden are the basis for a brief proleptic episode featuring Lotta, whom he qualifies as “la jeune femme un peu perdue, dont [il va] tomber amoureux.” Finally, Noé reaches Jokkmokk, where a Basque extraterrestrial who knew his great-grandfather is able to give him the answers about his great-grandfather that he is looking for and in the end, Noé finds some answers about himself, as well.

Many of the anachronies in Vers le nord function as what Genette calls anachronies complétives, meaning that they provide missing information necessary for comprehension of the text. For example, the analepses involving Noé’s life in France reveal a shy, insecure screenwriter, overshadowed by his celebrity brother and repeatedly overlooked or turned away because his file or his musical ability is somehow always “un peu juste.” Given this background information, the reader quickly realizes that Noé’s self-described pèlerinage to Jokkmokk is just as much about finding himself as it is about discovering his great-grandfather’s fate. Similarly, the four-part analepsis that tells the great-grandfather’s story explains how he ended up in Jokkmokk in the first place, what he was doing there, and eventually, what happened to him. The final installment reveals an unexpected similarity between Noé and his ancestor that liberates Noé from some of his insecurities and puts him on the path to self-acceptance, giving him the confidence to pursue the girl of his dreams.

Thanks to a combination of textual indications and visual cues, two of the four segments of the great-grandfather’s story are obvious anachronies. Giant, curlicue headings, announcing “The Jokkmokk incident” and “The Jokkmokk incident suite” form a sort of marquee over the
graphic frames, thereby establishing a clear visual boundary between Noé’s story on the road and the tale of the Basque extraterrestrials who settled in Jokkmokk, prompting the intergovernmental inquest that took Noé’s great-grandfather to Sweden. The first Jokkmokk incident explicitly provides concrete dates (1909 and 1911) that unequivocally identify the sequence as an analepsis, but the second Jokkmokk incident is devoid of any such textual indications. Nevertheless, the combination of the name (the suite implies the chronological relationship between the two Jokkmokk incidents) and the visual similarities (the heading, the style of handwriting, the shape of the text bubbles used for extradiegetic commentary) signal an anachronism, compensating for the omission of dates from the second installment.

Most of the lateral anachronies feature extremely limited text, which is unsurprising given their dream or fantasy-based context. Consequently, the images that “narrate” these sequences are forced to assume a much larger role in the récit. Images are not only responsible for telling the story, but also for indicating the shift to a lateral anachrony. In other sequences, those graphics supplement the récit, but are of no use with respect to temporality. In those segments, no combination of text and image can definitively situate them on (degré zéro, analepsis, or prolepsis) or next to (lateral anachrony) the narrative timeline. Even together, the text and the images do not provide enough clues to classify the segments conclusively. To complicate matters, extratextual logic is also unhelpful in such situations, for the objective laws of the universe that allow people to predict cause and effect do not necessarily apply to storyworlds (Ryan, “Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality”). Noé’s interview with the Basque alien at the end of the novel could well be a fantasy storyline taking place in his imagination and adjacent to the timeline chronicling his travels, but it could also be real and take

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151 In the real world, seeing someone fly or hearing animals speak would be unequivocal indications of a daydream or hallucination. This is not necessarily the case in narratives, where the laws of our universe may or may not apply.
place within the timeline, as opposed to next to it. The textual and visual components of the narration offer no indications one way or the other, and as far as logic is concerned, the reader has no way of knowing if immortal aliens\textsuperscript{152} are an accepted part of the narrative universe in *Vers le nord*. Ultimately, while text and image can often be used to untangle a complicated récit or resolve other narrative difficulties, their concomitant use does not guarantee comprehensibility or any sort of definitive resolution.

The subject of narrative timelines in *Vers le nord* inevitably leads to an examination of narrative rhythm in Molia’s text. Belonging to the larger category of duration, rhythm is concerned with the relationship between narrative time and fabula time. The text begins by setting the scene: a young man is hiking through a forest in Sweden. He is headed north. The graphic panels in this sequence mainly depict trees, visually reinforce the location of the young man, whose name is later revealed to be Noé. Here, both text and image can be considered summaries, as they provide a concise overview of the setting and establish a contextual base for the primary narrative. Since the first few pages do not contain any true action or advance the récit, they cannot qualify as a scene, and because time is not actually stopped, they do not constitute a pause, either (Bal, *Narratology* 105).

In many ways, the repetitive quality of the initial sequence, with its uninterrupted depictions of sylvan scenery, is a visual summary of the time that Noé has already spent on the road. Additionally, it lays the groundwork for the undifferentiated forest that forms the backdrop of much of Noé’s journey. By contrast, most of the actual scenes taking place in the primary narrative have a setting other than the forest. Examples include Noé’s conversation with Snorri,

\textsuperscript{152} The illustrations depict the alien as an adult when Noé’s great-grandfather arrived in 1911, and he looks no older or younger when he meets Noé, presumably close to a century later (this estimate is based on a number of factors including the text’s date of publication, the average space between generations, etc.), so either aliens have far longer lifespans than humans do or the alien is immortal. Although neither of those possibilities is consistent with my experience of the universe thus far, it is impossible to say if that is also the case in Noé’s narrative universe.
the polyglot from Iceland, which takes place in a cafe, his sexual encounter with Lotta, which
occurs at her house, and his meeting with the Basque alien in a cabin. These scenes demonstrate
the importance of visual cues, even in scenes whose primary means of narration is textual.

Most of the scenes in Vers le nord can be found in the numerous anachronies that
frequently interrupt the narration of Noé’s travels, rather than in the primary narrative.153
Anachronies with a completing function154 (mainly analepses, in the case of Vers le nord) and
that are primarily text-based are the most likely to contain scenes, whereas those whose content
is predominantly visual or whose relevance to the primary narrative is questionable155 (mostly
lateral anachronies) are far less likely to contain scenes. For example, the ability of the analeptic
“Jokkmokk incident” and “Jokkmokk incident suite” to provide an adequate explanation of what
happened in Jokkmokk and why the great-grandfather was sent there depends greatly on scenes
detailing highly secretive government meetings and a combination of dialogue and extradiegetic
commentary in the form of text bubbles outside the main graphic panels. The story told in the
pair of Jokkmokk incident sequences represents such a drastic departure from familiar scripts
that textual narration is required for comprehension (Ryan, “Narration in Various Media” 272-
273). Images alone are capable of outlining the story, but they would be unable to convey its
intricacies at the same level as the text.

Scenes that serve more to emphasize a point than to make a new one are considerably less
dependent on text to communicate their message. For instance, Noé’s insecurity and lack of self-

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153 The lateral anachronies are a notable exception. Unlike the analepses in Vers le nord, where scenes are
prominent, anachronies that are clearly lateral (certain segments are difficult to classify and in some cases, may even
fall into both categories) tend to contain minimal dialogue and rarely advance the primary narrative, meaning that
there are very few actual scenes in these sequences.
154 The function of analepses complétives is to provide information necessary to the comprehension of the fabula
( Genette, Discours 41).
155 In other words, anachronies whose relationship to the primary récit can only be established by adopting an
expanded view of structural coherence, such as the one developed by Mieke Bal (Narratology 194).
confidence are conveyed through several analeptic sequences that depict scenes of rejection, where Noé is deemed inadequate and refused or turned away. The verbal exchanges successfully express the theme of rejection, but in the end, it is the visual representation of his meekness and doubts that drive home the message. Illustrations that show Noé naked and defenseless emphasize his insecurities and insist on his fragile self-esteem, concisely communicating his lack of confidence and feelings of inferiority. Likewise, the visual layout of the graphic panels depicting Noé and his brother together speaks volumes about their relationship. In many cases, Noé’s brother, whom he characterizes as “un héros très populaire en France,” is in the center, whereas Noé is off to the side. In life, as in the illustrations, Noé’s brother, who loves the limelight, overshadows him and Noé is overlooked, left on the sidelines.

The turning point in Noé’s life represents an unusual and particularly interesting use of image in narrative. Noé has a “spécial pouvoir,” which instead of giving him confidence, fuels his insecurity. He cannot articulate it, name it, or describe it. All that he can say about it is that “ce n’est pas le plus utile de tous les SPÉCIAUX POUVOIRS.” It is only thanks to the graphics that the reader can determine the nature of Noé’s power. In this case, the old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words holds true. There is no good way to describe his power; the easiest and most practical solution is quite simply to show it. Later, when Noé encounters the Basque extraterrestrial in the cabin outside Jokkmokk, it is again image that comes to the rescue. The alien offers to show Noé the pictures of his great-grandfather that he saved from a fire, and in the photographs, Noé realizes that his great-grandfather had the same power. As a result of his discovery, which makes him feel less alone, Noé becomes more confident. No longer hiding behind his special power or his insecurities, he is finally able to give his life direction.
Finally, detecting and assimilating the many ellipses that loom between the scenes in *Vers le nord* is facilitated in large part by the graphics. It is difficult to tell if Noé’s story on the road is paused for each anachrony, only to pick up where it left off upon the text’s return to *degré zéro*, or if time has gone by while the reader was “away.” Here, some detective work is required to determine the response. The text says nothing about at all with regard to time, but close inspection of the illustrations reveals some important clues. In the graphics of the primary narrative, the attentive reader can make out road signs that signal Noé’s increasing proximity to Jokkmokk, which in turns indicates the passage of time. The text is completely silent, and not only does it not give any indication of how much time went by, it does not even acknowledge that any gaps occurred, deceptively giving the impression that the story picked up exactly where it left off. Without the aid of subtle visual tip-offs like the road signs, such lapses would likely go unnoticed by the reader, and furthermore, even if the reader did suspect an ellipsis, he would have no objective way to prove that one occurred. This type of ellipsis, common in *Vers le nord*, falls under the category of what Genette calls *implicit ellipses*, meaning that the only way the reader can detect their existence is through logical inference (*Discours* 105). In the case of the graphic novel like *Vers le nord*, the reader also has recourse to various visual clues like the

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156 The signs Noé passes along the way point to towns that get closer and closer to Jokkmokk. Towards the beginning of the novel, he is seen heading out of Lursjön, which is 1543 km to the south of Jokkmokk. Later, he walks by signs indicating the roads to Skellefteå (262 km southeast of Jokkmokk) and Arjeplog (198 km southwest of Jokkmokk). Noé has insisted on several occasions that he wants to do as much of his trip as possible on foot, but even if he were to travel the entire distance between Lursjön and Skellefteå by car and took the most direct route possible, Google Maps estimates that it would take 13 hours and 20 minutes to cover those 1282 km. Using public transit instead of a private vehicle would increase travel time to 19 hours, whereas walking alongside the highway would take 245 hours, or ten days and five hours of non-stop walking. Assuming some combination of public transit and travel by foot, and allowing for the time spent at Lotta’s house (at least one day) and time lost eating and sleeping, it is not unreasonable to estimate a minimum travel time of two and a half to three weeks.
aforementioned road signs and changes in time of day,\textsuperscript{157} indications that can not only reveal hidden ellipses, but at times, even hint at their duration.

Despite its importance, the third and final aspect of time, frequency, is often overlooked by critics and literary theorists alike (Genette, \textit{Discours} 105). But frequency has a considerable effect on the way the other two aspects are interpreted, given its ability to reflect or distort order and rhythm (Bal, \textit{Narratology} 111), and as a result, should not be neglected. Molia’s text is difficult to classify according to the Genettian model of frequency, which posits four potential relationships between fabula and story: narrating once something that took place once, narrating \(n\) times something that took place \(n\) times, narrating \(n\) times something that took place once, and narrating once something that took place \(n\) times. On the surface, \textit{Vers le nord} appears to consist mainly of the first type of narration, which Genette calls \textit{singulative} narration, but closer analysis, along with careful consideration of order and rhythm, reveals a few potential instances of \textit{iterative} narration (\textit{Discours} 112-115), where multiple occurrences of an event are condensed into a single narrative act. Here, too, the visual components of the graphic novel pose a challenge to the system of established categories and classifications that governs textual narratives, but at the same time, the introduction of an additional narrative medium opens up a whole new world of possibilities and actively interrogates the limits of iterative narration.

Adjectives and expressions of time are perhaps the most obvious verbal indication of iterative narration. In \textit{Vers le nord}, Noé’s account of his life on the road is a typical example:

Le soir, je dors dans une petite tente, que j’installe à l’écart de la route […] J’entends chaque nuit des bruits étranges. Dans ces forêts, il doit se passer toutes sortes de choses mystérieuses. Je ne connais pas bien la mythologie suédoise, mais elle a dû prévoir des

\textsuperscript{157} For example, if the last graphic panel of \textit{degré zéro} before an anachronistic segment shows the sun high in the sky, but night has fallen when the text returns to the primary narrative, the reader can infer the passage of several hours, at the very least.
créatures suédoises pour les nuits noires et les forêts. J’ai un carnet dans lequel je note mes rêves, tous les matins.

Every evening, he sleeps in a small tent on the side of the road, and every night, he hears strange noises. Each morning, he records his dreams in a notebook. These actions and events occur on a regular basis, but a single mention of them suffices to get the point across. Their determination, or in other words, their diachronic limits, can be narrowed down to sometime during the month of October, although the exact year is unknown. The rhythm of reoccurrence, known as specification, is also clear. Noé sets up the tent once every twenty-four hours, and he also records his dreams daily. He may hear noises several times during the night, but night comes at regular and predictable intervals, as well.

This example is fairly clear-cut, but that is not always the case. With the exception of overtly obvious and artificial situations, there is no universal consensus on what exactly constitutes repetition. Genette, who sees the lack of a common denotation as an opportunity rather than a limitation, seeks to avoid rigid definitions, preferring instead to characterize repetition as “une construction de l’esprit” (Discours 111). He observes that even in contrived circumstances, “perfect” repetition is more of a hypothetical construct than a practical concept; technically speaking, each day is a new one and the sun that comes up one day is never exactly the same as the one that came up the previous day. Therefore, the Genettian criteria for what constitutes repetition are fairly loose, considering not just words, but the larger sense behind them. Genette categorizes repetition as “une série de plusieurs événements semblables et considérés dans leur seule ressemblance” (Discours 111-112).

158 A conversation that Noé has with his brother reveals that Noé will be in Sweden in October.
159 Unless the text says “the sun came up this morning, the sun came up this morning, the sun came up this morning” or some other verbatim repetition, there are bound to be some differences of opinion regarding the limits of repetition.
With this flexible definition in mind, the prospect of extending the concept of iterative narration to include the visual domain seems not only possible, but also necessary when dealing with the graphic novel. In my discussion of narrative movements in *Vers le nord*, I argued that the forest scenery that forms the backdrop for most of the primary narrative is repetitive. Evidently, the trees are not meant to be the exact same ones in each graphic frame, but they represent the same thing and each individual tree becomes a sort of archetype that is a synecdochical representation of the forest. Seen from this perspective, the particular tree that Noé leans against when he reads the letter from his great-grandfather is no less iterative than his account of putting up his tent every night. Despite the lack of textual component, the overall effect on the story is the same, proving that the idea of repetition is not unique to textual media and inviting reconsideration of generic and media-related limits.

In many ways, the rich narratological terrain of *Vers le nord* provides invaluable and diverse opportunities to explore the relationship between the verbal and visual aspects of the graphic novel. Text and image work together to complement each other both structurally and thematically, creating a strong narrative framework that is capable of supporting complex and multidimensional *récits*. The cooperative interaction of the text and the illustrations defines many of the narrative movements in the *Vers le nord*, highlighting its unconventional rhythm and demonstrating the potential of words and images to determine or maintain a narrative tempo. At the same time, visual and verbal components give new depth to the text in terms of frequency. Together, they dictate the relationship between the events that take place in the fabula and their expression in the story. All in all, *Vers le nord* proves that the graphic novel has a legitimate place in literary studies and can serve as a site for exploring the potential of narrative to represent and articulate a world of experiences and possibilities.
Clearly, narratological space is a vast and comprehensive concept, encompassing not only the text itself, but all that pertains to it, as well. As contemporary novels, the four texts that I discussed in this chapter offer particular insight into narrative conventions through their defiance of them. Between the four novels, I have had the opportunity to see a wide variety of narrative structures and approaches, which has at times highlighted some of the shortcomings and limitations of the genre, but has also shown its tremendous potential.

In 100% Basque, I began by exploring theories of narrative coherence, proving that Itxaro Borda’s apparently haphazard text does in fact have an underlying structure. Next, I examined the actors and actants, which revealed striking metalepses, both within the narrative and extratextually, a discovery that led to a brief exploration of narration in Borda’s novel. I began my analysis of Marie Darrieussecq’s Le Mal de mer by recognizing several textual difficulties, including anonymous actors and shifting focalization, and then identified deixis as a potential way to address the problems posed by the text’s unusual order. Focusing on deixis of person, place, and time, I worked to orient myself within the fabula that I reconstructed from the pieces presented by the novel’s story. From there, I showed the symbolic function of the novel’s challenging structure, illustrating how it reflects the reader’s experience of the text even as it leaves some questions unanswered. In Marie Cosnay’s Déplacements, I gave a short overview of the text before evaluating it against Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal’s theories of order, duration, and frequency. I demonstrated some of the ways in which a radical reorganization of a fabula’s order, combined with unconventional use of narrative moments and significant repetition of a critical scene, affects the text as a whole, also raising the question of its effect on the way the reader reads and understands the novel. Order, duration, and frequency were the focus of my
discussion of Vers le nord, as well, although my examination of those narratological categories in Xabi Molia’s text came from a very different angle. Molia’s graphic novel provided an opportunity to examine the interactions between text and image in the context of the novel and to investigate the role that they play in determining the timeline of a narrative. In my analysis, I identified situations where the story relied more or less on one component, as well as others where dynamic collaboration between the two was required to communicate necessary information efficiently or to achieve a desired effect.

My exploration of the narratological space of these four novels is by no means exhaustive. It leaves many important aspects of narratology unaddressed and many problems unresolved, as constraints on time and space forced me to limit my investigation of texts that could easily be the focus of an entire dissertation. This chapter was meant to initiate a discussion about narratological space rather than to conclude one decisively, and I hope that the questions raised by my analysis will stimulate further investigations of this fascinating topos.
Conclusion

Despite the richness of its culture, language, history, and people, the French Basque Country has a tendency to slip under the radar. When most people hear the word “France,” for example, it is not generally the French Basque Country that comes to mind. Likewise, when people talk about the Basque Country, it is usually the Spanish side that takes center stage—indeed, many people outside of France and Spain are unaware that the Basque Country extends into France. Yet as I have shown in this dissertation, this often overlooked area has much to offer. Behind the postcard images of red and white houses and beach resorts that many people associate with the area exists a literary scene that is very dynamic. Far from being out of touch with the times or places around it, I have argued that this doubly peripheral space is modern and relevant, and that it is an important source of innovation.

It is clear that physical space plays an important role in the work of Itxaro Borda, Marie Darrieussecq, Marie Cosnay, and Xabi Molia. Each of them has a different approach to its representation, and its scale in their texts ranges from the local to the global, including small, intimate spaces like the Saint-Esprit neighborhood of Bayonne, as well as immense and inhospitable places like the freezing wasteland of Antarctica. Whether their considerations of physical space are mathematical, sociopolitical, historical, or psychological in nature, these authors transform the places in their novels from simple backdrops into narrative centerpieces.

Dichotomies play an important role in 100% Basque, where Itxaro Borda demonstrates how binary thinking can unite and divide a given space, shaping the way both outsiders and its own inhabitants perceive it. In Tom est mort, Marie Darrieussecq traces the physical and psychological journey of a mother who lost her son in a tragic accident, following her protagonist across three continents, from Europe to North America to Australia. The life and
death of her son in those places permanently changes the mother’s understanding of their physical space. But if the emphasis of *Tom est mort* is on memory, *White*, the other Darrieussecq novel that I examined, explores the concept of forgetting. The novel’s two protagonists, Edmée and Peter, seek to escape past tragedies by signing on for a scientific mission in Antarctica, but they soon find that the bleak terrain of the frozen continent is not the vacuum they anticipated. Marie Cosnay’s *Villa Chagrin* represents time and physical space in terms of motion, where the Adour River links narrative threads across decades and continents. By holding together the various people and places of the text, the Adour unexpectedly takes on the role of protagonist in Cosnay’s fluid novel. Last but not least, Xabi Molia turns Paris into a post-apocalyptic urban wasteland in *Avant de disparaître*, where he skillfully manipulates geometry and the senses to create a brave new fictional world that nonetheless feels uncannily real.

There is no doubt that much can be said about the spaces considered by Borda, Darrieussecq, Cosnay, and Molia in their novels, but what principally interests me are the choices they make about how to represent the physical spaces in question. As I have demonstrated, there is no shortage of possible approaches to physical space; moreover, the same space can be considered in a number of different ways. The perspectives that I have identified in my authors’ work are by no means the only way of representing those spaces, nor is my study of them to be understood as a claim to a uniquely valid interpretation. On the contrary, I have simply sought to recognize and explore a few possible ways of accessing and understanding physical space in French Basque literature today.

As overwhelming as this universe of representational possibilities may be, there are nevertheless certain themes that can be identified across the work of my four authors. One of the most important of those motifs is the emphasis on innovation and change. It is clear that
contemporary literature in general is a highly dynamic space, but French Basque literature has given particular significance to literary experimentation and renovation. The texts of Borda, Darrieussecq, Cosnay, and Molia are, I believe, proof of its potential for diversification and its aptitude for representation.

Both the narrative and the underlying message of *100% Basque* rely heavily on intertextuality, where Borda makes use of methods both traditional and unconventional to accomplish her goal of effective social critique. Using the theories of Pierre Bayard, Michel Riffaterre, and Ross Chambers as the framework for my analysis of intertextuality in Borda’s novel, I demonstrated how a literary allusion is much more than a casual reference to a particular text or author. Borda skillfully uses contextualization to make her eclectic assortment of intertextual references accessible to her reader, in addition to illustrating the capacity of intertextuality for intermedial expansion, which, I have argued, strengthens the connection between literature and our increasingly multimedial society.

In contrast to Borda’s inter- and extratextual exploration, Darrieussecq focuses her gaze inward to reflect upon what it means to be a writer, as well as examining the writing process itself. Metafiction is an ideal venue for such considerations, and basing my analysis on Linda Hutcheon’s work, I investigated Darrieussecq’s metanarrative techniques in *Le Bébé* and *Le Pays*. The two novels have strong autobiographical leanings, focused as they are on women, who, like Darrieussecq, are both writers and mothers, and both of the texts establish parallels between the act of writing and other kinds of creation. Through their structure and narrative, *Le Bébé* and *Le Pays* actively explore the relationship between process and product, even as they challenge the constraints placed on writers, mothers, and novels.
For Marie Cosnay, literary space is a ludic one. In *Villa Chagrin*, the playful motion of the narrative back and forth in time and space sets the diegetic rhythm, establishing the rules of Cosnay’s game. I evaluated *Villa Chagrin* according to Warren Motte’s theory of play, and using the characteristics that he identifies as being essential to play, I distinguished two significant ludic terrains in Cosnay’s novel. First, I assessed the productive alliance between the author and the reader, and next, I looked at the novel’s stress on the relationship between text and image. With those parameters in mind, I examined the ways in which Cosnay approaches the question at the core of her novel: how can the unrepresentable be represented? *Villa Chagrin* is an exploration of that theme rather than a solution, but it raises interesting questions about that vexing conundrum that extends well beyond the play space of Cosnay’s text.

The relation of text to image is but one of many complex dynamics in literature, and in *Fourbi*, Xabi Molia takes on a similarly contested one. The long-standing rivalry between genre fiction and literary fiction is at the center of Molia’s debut novel, which combines elements from both sides of the aisle. With its unusual blend of popular fiction tropes and traditional literary forms, *Fourbi* offers the reader an astute contemplation of the increasing porosity of boundaries in contemporary literature. Using the guidelines set forth by Ken Gelder, Lev Grossman, and Arthur Krystal, I measured *Fourbi* against their criteria in order to determine whether it should be classified as popular fiction or literature, and ultimately proposing the possibility that it may be both.

As is perhaps to be expected in the Basque Country, linguistic space is a very important part of the literary scene, and the work of my four authors from Bayonne is no exception. However, despite their common place of birth, each of them has a unique understanding of that space. Accordingly, the representations of linguistic space in their work vary greatly from one
author to the next, and even from one text to another within the same author’s oeuvre. The most explicit commentary on the linguistic situation in the French Basque Country can be found in Itxaro Borda’s *100% Basque*, where the author makes use of humor and parody to facilitate a thoughtful and intelligent discussion of some of the major linguistic issues faced by the area today. *100% Basque* also highlights the power dynamics of language in a place where an individual’s linguistic choices can have important social, professional, and personal repercussions.

In *Le Pays*, Marie Darrieussecq explores the psychosocial functions of language in a fictional country that greatly resembles the Basque Country, interrogating notions of identity and belonging when her protagonist unexpectedly finds herself an outsider in a familiar place. The role played by language in coping with loss is a main focus in *Tom est mort*, where Darrieussecq’s protagonist must deal with the tragic death of her young son shortly after moving halfway across the world to a country whose language she does not speak. In her grief, Tom’s mother becomes isolated and mute, unable to find the words she needs to articulate the pain of her loss in any language.

Illegal immigrants are at the center of Marie Cosnay’s *Entre chagrin et néant*, which documents the legal hearings of people detained for their unauthorized presence in the Schengen Area. Cosnay’s text, which blurs the boundaries between novel and reportage, reveals the inner workings of the French courts and exposes some of the difficulties experienced by the detainees. Those who do not speak French must rely on an interpreter to make their case before the judge and are put in the unfortunate situation of being forced to let that interpreter speak both for them and as them. Francophone immigrants scarcely fare better, for despite the indisputable advantage of being able to speak directly to the judge, many find that they do not
share the same linguistic space as their Hexagonal interlocutors.

Xabi Molia proposes an alternative method of exploring the linguistic space of literature in his graphic novel, *Vers le nord*. Using four different languages as the framework for an exceptionally rich and diverse text and paratext, Molia takes advantage of the graphic novel’s format to shift the focus to the linguistic structure, rather than the more customary examination of narrative linguistic space commonly applied to traditional text-based novels. Ultimately, I suggested that Molia’s unconventional work can be interpreted in any number of ways, depending on the reader’s linguistic background and abilities, allowing for a plethora of different reading experiences and levels of comprehension.

There is no question that linguistic space is an important part of the framework of narrative development in the novels of Borda, Darrieussecq, Cosnay, and Molia; and, as we have seen, each author represents that linguistic space differently in his or her work. My analysis of the linguistic spaces of their literature has demonstrated the potential of language as a tool for understanding the self and the surrounding world. On one level, these authors’ representations of linguistic spaces can be read for their diegetic role, but at the same time, they push readers to reflect upon their own linguistic space and to recognize the power of languages in their lives.

Finally, narratological space is a simultaneously enormous and bounded concept. On one hand, it relates to text and narrative, but on the other, it extends beyond the book’s pages to include the author and reader. The novels that I examined afforded the opportunity to consider several different approaches to narratological convention, as well as to their authors’ defiance of those norms. The work of Itxaro Borda, Marie Darrieussecq, Marie Cosnay, and Xabi Molia shows a few of the ways in which narrative and structure can be approached—and challenged.
Each of those four authors has a novel perspective on narratological space, proving the extensive scope of that space and demonstrating its potential as a tool for innovation in contemporary literature.

Narrative coherence is a major issue in 100% Basque from the outset. The anecdotes that constitute Borda’s text initially give the appearance of being a disorganized, arbitrary collection of humorous sketches and profound meditations on life, but a closer look confirms the existence of a meaningful underlying structure, and an examination of the characters in the text reveals an unconventional but imperative collaboration between author, narrator, and reader. In Marie Darrieussecq’s Le Mal de mer, the author’s decision to alternate between five anonymous focalizors is a considerable challenge to the text’s accessibility. There, I identified deixis as the key to untangling the actors’ identities, which then allows the reader to arrange the focalizors’ observations and experiences into a coherent narrative. Marie Cosnay’s text Déplacements provides for an interesting study of Gérard Genette and Mieke Bal’s theories of order, duration, and frequency. My considerations of that novel showed some of the ways in which an extreme reorganization of narrative and repeated emphasis on specific scenes and concepts can shape the reader’s understanding and experience of a text. The narratological aspects of order, duration, and frequency are also of great interest in Xabi Molia’s Vers le nord, which provides an opportunity to investigate the diegetic and structural roles of text and image in the context of the graphic novel. There, I demonstrated how text and image both complement and supplement each other, and showed how they can be used to reconstruct a narrative timeline. Vers le nord confirms the possibility of a dynamic partnership between text and image, which, I argued, can be understood as evidence of the graphic novel’s value as a legitimate object of literary study.
As is the case for the other three categories of space that I explored in my dissertation, my analysis of the narratological spaces of a given set of novels is not intended as an exhaustive study or a conclusive judgment. I omitted many important narratological considerations, and I left many questions unanswered. The format of my dissertation required me to limit the scope of my investigation, but opportunities to expand upon my brief treatment of this subject abound, and I hope that my analysis will lead to new explorations of narratological space in the French Basque novel today.

The four authors who constitute the focus of my dissertation are excellent examples of the talent, creativity, and variety that have come forth from the French Basque Country in recent years. My authors constitute a heterogeneous group in many ways, but their work exhibits certain shared characteristics, such as an emphasis on innovation, the desire to challenge convention and blur boundaries, and an interrogation of concepts like identity and the periphery. These four authors question the need to define and categorize, and they embrace movement and change. In their own way, each of them asks the same questions that I set out to explore at the beginning of this dissertation. What is space? What is the periphery? What does it mean to be Basque? Borda, Darrieussecq, Cosnay, and Molia explore those questions from various angles, but ultimately, all of them recognize the impossibility of formulating a categorical response. I have not discovered a universal answer either, nor did I expect to. The goal of my dissertation is not to lay out a particular argument or prove a certain point, but instead to explore a fascinating and vital area of literature which, despite being an exciting source of innovation, has been largely neglected in mainstream accounts of French literature. With my study, I hope to open the door to further investigations of the French Basque novel, and to encourage new ways of thinking about space in literature and culture.
Bibliography


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