

WRITING PAST AND PRESENT:
NARRATIVE STRUCTURE IN THE WORK OF J. M. G. LE CLÉZIO

by

NICOLE M. THORBURN

B.A., University of Wyoming, 1993

M.A., University of Wyoming, 1995

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Dr. Warren Motte

Dr. Elisabeth Arnould-Bloomfield

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Thorburn, Nicole M. (Ph.D., French Literature, Department of French and Italian)

Writing Past and Present: Narrative Structure in the Work of J. M. G. Le Clézio

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Representations of the past figure prominently in the work of J. M. G. Le Clézio. Yet, despite a large and rapidly growing body of criticism devoted to his oeuvre, how Le Clézio incorporates the past into an often more contemporary narrative is one subject that has yet to be treated in detail. In my dissertation, I examine the narrative structure of several of Le Clézio's novels, short stories and nonfiction texts. After an introduction to Le Clézio's work, I discuss the various means by which he introduces the past into the narrative, including the use of historical settings, events and figures; characters' remembrances; embedded narrative; and documents such as letters, journals and photographs. Through an examination of these techniques, I argue that the past plays an important role in the narrative, both thematically and structurally. I then conclude with a discussion of the implications of this use of the past with regard to the present, suggesting that by incorporating the past, Le Clézio shows how past and present are invariably linked.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: J. M. G. LE CLÉZIO AND HIS WORK

Since the inauguration of his career in 1963, with *Le procès-verbal*, 2008 Nobel Laureate Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio has published over 40 works, including novels, collections of short stories, essays, children's books, autobiographical and biographical texts, and translations. Le Clézio's interests are wide-ranging, as is his use of genre. He writes about nature (especially the sun, the sea and the desert), modern society and those marginalized by it, and escape; he's also written about Mexico, Central America and indigenous peoples. Having traveled extensively and lived on different continents himself, Le Clézio sets his stories in various parts of the world: Africa, Europe, Oceania and Asia, as well as North and Central America. Le Clézio's characters often travel between two or more continents. In Margareta Kastberg Sjöblom's words, the writer "passe en effet pour l'écrivain-voyageur par excellence" (203). In November 2008, *Lire*'s François Busnel praised Le Clézio for abolishing borders, which Busnel sees as one of Le Clézio's greatest strengths (5). In addition, Le Clézio has been praised for his clear, accessible prose, and above all for his descriptions—especially of the desert and the sea—while his writing has been labeled contemplative and nostalgic (Salles *Le Clézio* 15). His work has been well received by critics and the literary community: Le Clézio was awarded the Prix Théophraste Renaudot for his first novel, *Le procès-verbal*; the Académie Française's Grand Prix de Littérature Paul Morand for *Désert* (1980); for his work as a whole, Grand Prix Jean Giono (1997); and, of course, the 2008 Nobel Prize in Literature. Other awards include the Prix Valéry

Larbaud (1972), the Prix Littéraire de la Fondation Prince Pierre de Monaco (1998), and the Stig Dagermanpriset (2008).

While many authors find either critical praise or commercial success, Le Clézio has enjoyed both. French readers have proved a welcoming public: in her foreword to Marina Salles' *Le Clézio: Notre contemporain*, Francine Dugast-Portes describes how readers, from children to high school students in addition to adults, wait for Le Clézio's new releases and anticipate his rare radio and television appearances. A documentary, *Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio entre deux mondes*, filmed in South Korea, Mexico and Brittany (released in 2008), contains travel footage and interviews with the author. Another indication of Le Clézio's status in contemporary French culture is his inclusion, among authors like Colette, in *France: A Traveler's Literary Companion*, a different take on a travel guidebook. In it, instead of lists of hotels, restaurants and sites worth visiting, the different regions of France are characterized by literary selections. With Le Clézio's stories often set in or around his native city of Nice, it is not surprising that his work would be chosen to embody the south of France: the short story "Villa Aurora" from the collection *Mondo et autres histoires* represents Nice. "Villa Aurora" tells about a villa and garden with almost magical qualities where a boy spent much of his childhood playing. Depicting the harsh reality of the modern world, often a prominent element of Le Clézian fiction, the protagonist then returns in his early adulthood to find the land and villa encroached on by the development of roads, schools and impersonal concrete high-rise buildings. Further evidence of Le Clézio's increasing popularity, the "Association des lecteurs de J. M. G. Le Clézio" was founded in 2005, its goal being to provide a forum for Le Clézio enthusiasts—including readers, bookstores, publishers, writers, and academics—and to organize and support events designed to publicize his work. Just as Le Clézio's themes often extend beyond the hexagon (Haddard-Khalil 7), his popularity is not

limited to France itself or even the French-speaking world. The website of the “Association des lecteurs de J. M. G. Le Clézio,”¹ has members from 15 different countries, and lists 13 languages into which Le Clézio has been translated,² as well as 13 of his publications which have been translated into English. Having been awarded the Nobel, there is little doubt that much more of his work will soon appear in translation.

One could attribute Le Clézio’s popularity, at least in part, to his range. He has proven himself an accomplished author of everything from simple prose for children to engaging novels and essays on history and language. But while Le Clézio has practiced many different genres, his work does not show a clear progression from one to another. Throughout his career, he has moved from genre to genre and back again. He stated in *L’extase matérielle* that the forms that writing takes have no importance; it is only the act of writing that is important for him (106-107). In an interview with Roger Borderie, Le Clézio suggests: “En ce qui concerne le genre, je continue de penser que ni le roman, ni la nouvelle ni l’essai n’existent plus vraiment” (11). Indeed, some of Le Clézio’s work resists classification. The cover of *Le livre des fuites* (1969) labels it as a “roman d’aventures,” but the third-person narrative (whose narrator is both intrusive and self-conscious) of the wanderings of Jeune Homme Hogan is interspersed with chapters entitled “Autocritique” which comment on the telling of the story and writing in general. This self-criticism questions the validity and the very existence of the form:

Est-ce que cela valait vraiment la peine d’écrire tout ça, comme ça ? Je veux dire, où était la nécessité, l’urgence de ce livre ? Peut-être bien que cela aurait mieux valu d’attendre

¹ <http://www.associationleclezio.com/>

² As of 10 March 2012, those languages include Afrikaans, German, English, Bulgarian, Spanish, Finnish, Italian, Dutch, Norwegian, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian and Swedish.

quelques années, replié sur soi-même, sans rien dire. Un roman ! Un roman ! Je commence à haïr sérieusement ces petites histoires besogneuses, ces trucs, ces redondances. Un roman ? Une aventure, quoi. Alors qu'il n'y en a pas ! Tout cet effort de coordination, toute cette machinerie—ce théâtre—, tout cela pourquoi ? Pour mettre au jour un récit de plus. (54)

That ambivalence toward genre is reiterated in the preface to *La fièvre*: “La poésie, les romans, les nouvelles, sont de singulières antiquités qui ne trompent plus personne, ou presque. Des poèmes, des récits, pour quoi faire? L’écriture, il ne reste plus que l’écriture, l’écriture seule, qui tâtonne avec ses mots, qui cherche et décrit, avec minutie, avec profondeur, qui s’agrippe, qui travaille la réalité sans complaisance” (8).

Les géants (1973) is also categorized as a novel but it, too, has sections which resemble essays more than fiction. In those sections (nine in all, including the opening and closing chapters), the first-person narrator addresses the reader directly, describing the state of the modern world and language and calling the reader to action. The fictional story, whose presentation resembles a parable (Waelti-Walters 125), is told in chapters that alternate with the narrator’s first-person commentary. The story illustrates the points the narrator makes in his appeal to the reader: you are being watched and controlled, and you must liberate yourself before it is too late. Additionally, scattered throughout *Les géants* are pages of assorted excerpts from advertisements, quotations, passages, characters and numbers. Together, the three different types of text that compose the novel serve to expose the control that modern society and its “masters” have over the thoughts, actions and language of the individual.

Le Clézio’s early work, including the aforementioned texts and others written before 1980, falls into a period where Le Clézio earned a reputation for being a “difficult” author

(Siganos, “Le Clézio,” 27). Isa van Acker agrees, at least with respect to *Le livre des fuites*, calling it “un texte qui résiste au lecteur plutôt qu’il ne s’ouvre à lui” (19). Questioning and highly critical of modern society, Le Clézio’s work during that time is darker than his more recent work and stretches the limits of form by including long lists of words or names, images, the text of signs or scraps of paper, advertisements, and random words and phrases in different font types and sizes. During this period Le Clézio also questions the ability of words to represent sufficiently the reality they try to express, as well as the relationship between the author, the text and the reader. *Terra Amata* (1967) approaches questions of writing both explicitly and playfully, addressing the reader directly in the prologue: “Vous avez ouvert le livre sur cette page. Vous avez tourné deux ou trois pages, en regardant distraitement le titre, le nom de l’auteur, l’éditeur, et vous avez peut-être cherché cette phrase entre guillemets qu’il y a presque toujours au début des romans, parce que ça fait bien et que l’auteur se protège un peu en se référant à quelqu’un de plus important que lui” (9). *Terra Amata* tells of the life of Chancelade (summarized by the chapter titles which in themselves form a poem), and ends with much the same spirit as it began, inciting the reader to consider his or her role: “Mais j’ai assez parlé. À vous de jouer, maintenant” (272).

While presenting the world through the eyes of the young girl named Bea B., her school notebook and her correspondent and friend Monsieur X, *La guerre* (1970), too, comments on words and language but in a more somber—and more pessimistic—fashion. Like with *Les géants*, words are linked to society and those who try to manipulate it (corporations, for example). In an interview with Pierre L’hoste, Le Clézio states that “... actuellement on vit dans une société en guerre permanente. Guerre de la masse contre l’individu, guerre des objets contre

l'être humain, guerre des êtres humains entre eux" (30). Words are weapons in this war, as evidenced by the following passage of *La guerre*:

Il y a tant de mots qui résonnent, partout, tant de mots incompréhensibles, tant de cris gutturaux. Tant de mots dieux et de mots démons, sur les murs, sur les pages des journaux, gravés sur les portes des latrines. Ils ne cherchent pas à communiquer. Ils ne disent rien. Ils veulent seulement bondir sur moi, m'écraser, me frapper à la tête et à la gorge. Ce sont les mots de la guerre, qui viennent pleins de colère pour vaincre le monde. Ils jaillissent du fond des vitrines, avec leurs éclairs bleuâtres, BRANDT, Chemical Co, WINTSON, SALEM, *Frill*, Airborne, UNITED FRUIT. Ils jaillissent et blessent avec leurs dards acérés, ils électrocutent. Monsieur X, je vois toutes ces armes, partout, sans pitié, qui traversent l'air. Peut-être que les mots vont m'abattre, un de ces jours. Peut-être qu'ils vont me frapper dans le dos, pendant que je marcherai le long d'un mur, peut-être qu'ils vont scier ma nuque et broyer ma colonne vertébrale. (195)

At the same time, stories are necessary. Bea B. admits needing them in a letter to Monsieur X, telling him how she'd appreciate his help beginning with writing the creation of the world, the birth of plastic, vinyl and woman: "Il faudrait raconter toutes ces histoires émouvantes et rutilantes qui tourbillonnent tout le temps autour de moi, ces histoires hurlées par les moteurs, explosées par les juke-boxes, murmurées par les tubes de néon. Ces histoires qui vont durer pendant des siècles" (197). This is an impossible task, however. The narrator points out that there are not enough words to compete with war, and that the words aren't strong enough to provide adequate shelter from it.

L'inconnu sur la terre (1978), written at the same time as *Mondo et autres histoires*, also comments on writing, reality, and the relationship between the two. Neither a novel nor an essay,

L'inconnu sur la terre is a series of loosely related reflections on topics as diverse as rain, beauty, writing, vegetables, the power we have over ourselves and the light that shines in the eyes of children. These short essays, which take advantage of varying narrative voices (first, second and third person in both the singular and plural) are woven together with brief episodes about “le petit garçon inconnu.” Overall, the text seems to develop an appreciation of the world, or at least to identify what can be admired in it. *L'inconnu* ends on a rather optimistic note: under the watchful gaze of the unknown young boy, night comes but brings with it assurance that the source of light will return.

Writing and reality are questioned again in *Le déluge* (1966). Between a prologue with an intertextual opening (“Au commencement, il y eut des nuages, et des nuages, lourds et noirs, chassés par quelques vents, retenus à l’horizon par une ceinture de montagnes” [9]) and an epilogue, *Le déluge* tells of thirteen days in the life of François Besson. According to Germaine Brée, “Le but de cette histoire singulière fut, selon Clézio, de ‘refaire l’histoire du monde,’ c’est-à-dire semble-t-il d’incorporer par l’écriture un point de vue sur ce qu’il tenait alors pour réel, l’incertitude justement de ce qui passe pour ‘réalité’” (44).

Voyages de l’autre côté (1975), too, combines elements of essay and novel. The adventures of Naja Naja and her friends are recounted between two brief sections that tell of different times. The opening chapter, “Watasenia” (a species of squid which lives at great depths and is capable of producing light), presents the birth of the world, before people, roads or frontiers, a time before language and words were useful. “Pachacamac” (the closing chapter and name of a Peruvian archeological site which contains frescos of fish from centuries ago), recounts a time after language: “Il n’y avait plus de mémoire, plus les mots agiles des hommes” (297). Naja Naja, however, capable of transformation into wind or smoke, is able to cross to the

“other side,” as the title describes, and travel without borders. The book closes with a ten-headed snake, presumably Naja Naja (also a species of cobra found in India), at the center of the universe, just as “Naja Naja” is the central story and figure of *Voyages de l’autre côté*.

Le Clézio’s first published short story, “Le jour où Beaumont fit connaissance avec sa douleur,” appeared in 1964. The story of a lonely man who wakes up in the middle of the night with a toothache so painful it becomes all-consuming, “Le jour” treats themes such as solitude, emptiness and the sun that appear in much of Le Clézio’s writing. The short story was also included in *La fièvre*, a collection which followed in 1965. In its nine stories “de petite folie,” *La fièvre* presents characters in everyday situations (such as having a migraine or trying to fall asleep) that provoke intense feelings or reactions. With the publication of the short story collection *Mondo et autres histoires* in 1978, Le Clézio seems to head in a different direction. Less violent, less cerebral and more readable, Le Clézio’s short stories treat many of the same themes as his novels published since 1980. The characters are often young and dealing with the difficulties of growing up in a cruel world with little or no family support—certainly the case in 1997’s *Poisson d’or*, a novel whose heroine was kidnapped and sold at age 6 and who later searches for a home and her identity while moving from North Africa to Europe, to the United States and eventually back to her homeland. Returning to *Mondo*, a homeless boy of about ten roams the city (presumably Nice). Rather than emphasizing the difficulties often associated with poverty and city life (crime, panhandling, prostitution), the short story paints a more optimistic picture of childhood homelessness, emphasizing the title character’s freedom. While Mondo is essentially on his own in the city, his life is not presented as a particularly difficult one. He is well liked by those for whom he works at the market or meets as he wanders around the city. These “friends” give him food and even start teaching him to read and write. In fact, the most

negative characters are not the street performer, the drunk or the “retraités des Postes” who spend their time on the park benches, but the dog catcher and especially the policeman who sees Mondo as a savage rather than a young boy torn between his independence and a strong desire to belong to a family. The other stories in this collection are similar in that all of the protagonists are young and seem to search for freedom outside of societal norms. Even under harsh circumstances (in which they may choose to put themselves), they seem to feel at home. There is Lullaby, whose father is abroad and whose mother isn’t well after an accident, who skips school to escape the cement and barred windows and to experience the freedom of the sea; Jon, who is drawn to an Icelandic mountaintop by the June light; and Juba, who escapes his work overseeing cattle turning a water-wheel to irrigate fields by dreaming of himself as king of the ancient city of Yol. The other protagonists include Daniel, the mediocre student who leaves his family and boarding school to live alone by the sea that he had never before seen; Alia, who lives in a shantytown whose residents prefer it to the government-proposed “Ville Future” with big houses and roads straight like rail lines; and Petite Croix, who spends her days on a cliff in the desert far from people where she plays and communicates with her friends the snakes, the bees, the clouds and a foreign soldier who sometimes visits her. In the final short story, we meet Gaspar, a city boy who wanders into the desert and joins a group of young shepherds as they make their way to a sort of utopian valley where they settle for a time. Overall, themes of nature abound: the sun, the light, the sea, the wind. These elements may be harsh at times, but there is a freedom that comes with living in harmony with nature as opposed to society.

Le Clézio followed *Mondo* with *Désert* (1980), a novel described by André Siganos as the first of three works of “extrême maturité” (“Le Clézio,” 30), the other two being a short story collection published in 1982, *La ronde et autres faits divers*, and 1985’s *Le chercheur d’or*. *La*

ronde et autres faits divers, like *Mondo*, presents young protagonists in some form of flight or escape, but the stories are more pessimistic, even violent. Much like the reports we see on the news, the characters are for the most part experiencing the difficulties and cruelty of urban life and (so-called) advanced civilization rather than the wonder and freedom of a natural environment.

Printemps et autres saisons is another collection of short stories, published in 1989. Like the short stories of *Mondo et autres histoires* and *La ronde et autres faits divers*, those in *Printemps et autres saisons* have themes that unify the collection. The central characters are all young, beautiful, exotic women living in France but not native thereto. From Algeria, Morocco, and Mauritius, these women are seen through the eyes of men (with the exception of Saba in *Printemps*) who have been enchanted by them. We see their beauty and strength but also how they are marginalized by society.

The importance of origins and family history is another dominant theme in Le Clézio's writing. Among his novels that deal with origins are *Désert* and *Le chercheur d'or*, *Voyages à Rodrigues* (1986), *Onitsha* (1991), *La quarantaine* (1995) and *Révolutions* (2003). Since this is a topic that deals with the past, I will discuss those novels in more detail in later chapters, and some of the short stories—rich with the theme of memory—from the collection *Coeur brûlé et autres romances* (2000). Some of Le Clézio's essays, too, deal with origins: both *Le déluge* and *L'extase matérielle* begin with discussions on the origins of life. Other novels deal less with origins but still with the past, including *Étoile errante* (1992) and *Ourania* (2006).

Many critics identify a third period in Le Clézio's writing, defined by his travels and interest in the Amerindian world. While the writing of these texts certainly overlaps with others grouped either with his early or later work, it begins in the 1970s. *Haiï*, written after Le Clézio's

stay with the Embera Indians in Panama, is described by Keith Moser as “a long meditative essay upon the value of Amerindian culture and life” (53). No doubt inspired by his work and travel in New Mexico and Mexico, Le Clézio published *Mydriase* in 1973. Mydriasis is the dilation of the pupil due to disease, trauma or drugs, the latter being the catalyst for this essay, since Le Clézio writes about light and vision after having drunk a *breuvage noir*. Also as a result of Amerindian world’s influence, Le Clézio published translations of two sacred texts, *Les prophéties du Chilam Balam* (1976) and *Relation de Michoacan* (1984). Between those translations came *Trois villes saintes* (1980), three short essays which are highly descriptive reflections on cities lost to civilization. His next book related to the Amerindians, *Le rêve mexicain ou la pensée interrompue* (1988), defines the Mexican dream by telling the story from different perspectives: first, the Spanish conquerors’ dream of gold and riches, followed by the “Rêve des origines” of the Mexican people. Le Clézio leans heavily on historical texts (notably *The Bernal Diaz Chronicles*, *The Chronicles of Michoacan*, and Bernardino de Sahagun’s *A History of Ancient Mexico*) to retell Mexican history and describe a culture that would be lost if not for the historical texts. Le Clézio explains: “Grâce à ces livres—livres des Rois, livres des Morts, chroniques, almanachs sacrés, recettes médicinales ou inventaires des richesses du monde—nous pouvons revivre aujourd’hui un peu de ce temps fabuleux” (122). *La fête chantée et autres essais de thème amérindien* followed in 1997. The collection’s first essay, “La fête chantée,” is a personal account of the author’s stays with the Emberas and Waunanas in the Darién province of Panama from 1970-1974. In the essay, the author enumerates what he learned and discovered during his time there, and talks about how it changed his entire life and way of thinking. As the title indicates, Le Clézio describes the festival of “Beka” (“la fête chantée”), which had a significant impact on him. He writes: “. . . d’avoir participé à ce rite m’a changé

complètement, a modifié toutes les idées que je pouvais avoir sur la religion, la médecine, et sur cet autre concept du temps et de la réalité qu'on appelle art" (22). The second essay is an overview of three sacred texts (including the two mentioned above that he had already translated) that are in many ways the "memory" of the civilizations that were conquered (and whose codex, sacred objects and way of life were destroyed) by the Europeans. The essays that follow summarize and highlight the content and importance of the three sacred texts, primarily the *Relation de Michoacan*. The remaining essays touch on other rites, celebrations, literature, revolution and the long-term consequences of the conquest of the new world on the Amerindian peoples. The final essay, "La danse contre le déluge," closes the collection by returning to Le Clézio's personal experiences in the Panamanian forest. Le Clézio describes in particular a rite which celebrates the god Hewandama and consists of dance and prayer, asking that the god not destroy the world by sending a new flood. Le Clézio concludes by questioning what an author (or a man) can do to save the world from the threat of the "nouveau déluge," suggesting that we could do just as the Waunanas: "Écrivons, dansons contre le nouveau déluge" (240).

In addition to his essays, Le Clézio's oeuvre is interspersed with other works of non-fiction. The essay *Raga, approche du continent invisible* (2006), shows Le Clézio's appreciation—through a description of his travels—of nature in Oceania and the "invisible" continent's struggle to preserve culture and myth in the face of modernity and the violence of colonialism. A biographical novel, *Diego et Frida*, the story of the relationship of Mexican painter Frida Kahlo and muralist Diego Rivera, based on historical texts as well as biographies written about the two, appeared in 1993. Le Clézio also labels *L'Africain* (2004; an account of his voyage to Africa as a youth to meet his father) as biographical rather than autobiographical, referring to his father in the book as "mon père" rather than by name (Cortanze, "J. M. G. Le

Clézio: ‘Mon père,’” 69). Le Clézio’s only autobiography to date, co-authored by his wife Jemia Le Clézio, is *Gens des nuages* (1997), un “compte rendu d’un retour aux origines” (15) written about their voyage to the land of her ancestors in the Saguia el Hamra valley of southern Morocco, and whose goal was to rediscover his wife’s lost heritage. *Gens des nuages* includes photographs by Bruno Barbey, a Moroccan-born Frenchman with whom the Le Clézio’s also collaborated on *My Morocco* (2002), a book of photographs of Morocco interspersed with texts written by and for Jemia and J. M. G. Le Clézio. Both the photographs and the text depict the simplicity and the traditions of Moroccan life (fisherman fixing their nets, men praying, women at festivals or at the souk); Barbey points out in his introduction how the Moroccans “have adapted to the ‘modern’ world while retaining their own culture” (4). The book celebrates the diversity of cultures and landscapes (the desert to the mountains, towns to rural areas) that defines Morocco. Le Clézio also collaborated on *Enfances*, a book of photographs by Christophe Kuhn published by Enfants réfugiés du monde in 1998. Both *Les années Cannes: 40 ans de festival* (1987) and 2007’s *Ballaciner* (published for the 60th anniversary of the festival) demonstrate Le Clézio’s interest in cinema. The latter of the two is at the same time a homage to cinema and a very personal essay which describes the importance of cinema in the author’s life—especially his youth—while providing an overview of the cinematic contributions of many different countries (Japan, Italy, America, Iran, Korea, etc.) and filmmakers to the industry. Le Clézio also wrote the preface to *Notes sur le cinématographe* by Robert Bresson (1995).

Through articles published in magazines, newspapers and journals, Le Clézio has shown an interest in other writers, including Nathalie Sarraute and Jean-Paul Sartre. He wrote his master’s thesis on the theme of solitude in Henri Michaux’s work, and in 1978, he published *Vers les icebergs*, a laudatory essay on Michaux and his poem “Iniji.” According to the Wallonie

Bruxelles Images website,³ a feature film of the same name was in the pre-production stages as of February 2012. Although Le Clézio left to do his military service in Thailand before completing a dissertation on Lautréamont, he did publish articles on Lautréamont in *La Nouvelle Revue Française* and *Europe* in the 1980s. Other authors and artists appear in Le Clézio's novels and essays: Arthur Rimbaud is a character in *La quarantaine*, Antonin Artaud's vision or "rêve" of Mexico merits a chapter in *Le rêve mexicain*, and Maurice Ravel's orchestral piece *Boléro* plays an important role, as we will see in my Chapter Four, in *Ritournelle de la faim*. This last novel, published in 2008, also shows Le Clézio's interest in the consequences of war (in this case, the plight of Jews during World War II) and, to a lesser extent, the losses one can incur by trusting in those who prey on the young or naïve.

As evidenced by his uses of form, his style and his broad range of interests, Le Clézio has proven himself an adept writer capable of captivating many different audiences. Speaking to the protean aspect of Le Clézio's work, Claude Cavallero very aptly describes its dimensions:

Quelle distance en effet entre le jeune écrivain en révolte contre les conventions du roman et les excès du monde techno-industriel et l'essayiste proche de l'anthropologue érigeant en modèle les sociétés amérindiennes plus harmonieuses, plus authentiques !
 Quel contraste entre le poète des mythes fondateurs enclin aux reconstructions identitaires et l'intellectuel engagé qui prend le parti des immigrés sans-papiers et publie un roman en leur faveur ! Et cependant, en dépit de ces jeux d'ombre et de lumière, il se dégage de l'œuvre entière une étonnante cohérence d'écriture, de sensibilité, et de générosité éthique. (Cavallero, *Témoin* 8)

³ http://www.wbimages.be/index.php?id=films_detail&filmid=111&L=2. The site includes the following synopsis: "Le film se veut une évocation, entre la fiction et le documentaire, autour du poème d'Henri Michaux, Inji publié pour la première fois en 1959."

Outside of his own writing, Le Clézio participates in the literary community in other ways. He has written prefaces to several other works, including but certainly not limited to Max Jacob's *Derniers poèmes en vers et en prose* (1982), Juan Rulfo's *Le llano en flames* (2001), Lao She's *Quatre générations sous un même toit* (2000), Jean Grosjean's *La genèse* (2001) and, more recently, the collection of poems in Innu and French, *Comment je perçois la vie, grand-mère* (2010), by Quebecois author Rita Mestokosho. Those prefaces illustrate Le Clézio's interest in literature beyond the hexagon. According to Bruno Thibault, "J. M. G. Le Clézio est un écrivain très proche des écrivains francophones contemporains de la périphérie" (*J. M. G. Le Clézio* 6). Le Clézio is on the panel of judges, representing Mauritius, for the Prix des Cinq Continents de la Francophonie. This prize is awarded to a French-language author, regardless of his age, for a novel which enriches the French language. In addition, Le Clézio was among the signatories of the manifesto "Pour une littérature-monde en français," which appeared in *Le Monde des Livres* in March 2007. Le Clézio identifies himself as a dual-nationality (French and Mauritian) citizen and author. Emphasizing his lack of belonging solely to one culture or another, Le Clézio said in an interview with Tirthankar Chanda that "La langue française est peut-être mon seul véritable pays" (np).

Perhaps Le Clézio has found that with success comes the possibility to effect change. During his Nobel address titled "Dans la forêt des paradoxes," Le Clézio expressed his hope that no child remain hungry or illiterate in this new millennium. Le Clézio ties this desire to the act of the writer through the following passage, quoted in his address, from Swedish author Stig Dagerman's *La dictature du chagrin*:

Comment est-il possible par exemple de se comporter, d'un côté comme si rien au monde n'avait plus d'importance que la littérature, alors que de l'autre il est impossible de ne pas

voir alentour que les gens luttent contre la faim et sont obligés de considérer que le plus important pour eux, c'est ce qu'ils gagnent à la fin du mois ? Car il (l'écrivain) bute sur un nouveau paradoxe: lui qui ne voulait écrire que pour ceux qui ont faim découvre que seuls ceux qui ont assez à manger ont loisir de s'apercevoir de son existence.

In 2009, Le Clézio penned a letter to American President Barack Obama regarding the forced exile of the indigenous peoples from the Chagos archipelago (particularly the island of Diego Garcia) after an agreement with the British Government which enabled the United States to establish a military base there. In his letter to the 2009 laureate of the Nobel Peace Prize, Le Clézio urges president Obama to permit that people to return to their native soil.

In addition to being a prolific writer, Le Clézio has inspired many others to write about his work. While a comprehensive study of all that has been written about the author would be valuable, such an undertaking would go beyond the scope of my present project. I will therefore limit my discussion to those who have published books dedicated solely to Le Clézio, as well as to those who have contributed, in my opinion, valuable work—or that which is pertinent to Le Clézio's use of the past—in the form of articles or dissertations.

In *J. M. G. LeClézio* (1977), Jennifer R. Waelti-Walters presents a critical study of Le Clézio's early work (from *Le procès-verbal* to *Voyages de l'autre côté*), presenting major themes, structures and recurring images for each text followed by a discussion of Le Clézio's influences. She concludes that Le Clézio's writings of that period are inter-referential (either directly or by further developing previously-discussed themes). Waelti-Walters finds that Le Clézio's characters are dominated by the sun and the sea, while other major themes include solitude, travel and alienation from society (160-62). She continues her study of Le Clézian texts

in *Icare ou l'évasion impossible: Étude psycho-mythique de l'oeuvre de J. M. G. Le Clézio* (1981) by exploring the myth of Icare as a unifying theme in his work through *Mondo et autres histoires* et *L'Inconnu sur la terre*. Waelti-Walters equates the fall of Icarus with the vertical movement of Le Clézian characters (the downward movement from an apartment to the streets, the suburbs to the city, or the mountains to the sea); identifies the sun, responsible for melting the wax which caused Icare's fall into the sea, as a powerful and destructive force; and argues that the sea often represents masculine prowess and death. As for Icarus's desire for flight, Waelti-Walters sees a correspondence with Le Clézio's characters' need for movement and attempts to escape solitude, leading them to wander through cities or to try to flee from them. Finally, she compares the labyrinth that imprisons Icarus (and the point of departure for his fall) to Le Clézio's representation of the city, which is in turn identified with women and thus the maternal womb. Man leaves the womb to flee or to go on a quest but is generally destined to fail. While these elements of the Icarus myth are identified to varying degrees in different texts, Waelti-Walters finds, overall, a correlation between the myth and Le Clézio's desire to escape the human condition.

In 1983, Teresa di Scanno published a series of essays on Le Clézio's work under the title *La vision du monde de Le Clézio: Cinq études sur l'œuvre*. The five studies cover *L'Extase matérielle*, *Les Géants*, *Mondo et autres histoires*, *L'Inconnu sur la terre*, *La montagne du dieu vivant* and *Désert*, and discuss the search for a lost self and the author's vision of the world, particularly with respect to solitude and the human condition. Di Scanno suggests that Le Clézio's early work dealt with problems that were "à la mode" at the time: language and matter, but that those were only a point of departure considering his work as a whole. Early attempts to group Le Clézio with the "nouveaux romanciers" also failed to define the author's work over the

years. But as Di Scanno points out, as early as 1970 Gerda Zeltner defined Le Clézio's novels as being "scandaleusement inclassables" (di Scanno 9). In her five essays, Di Scanno finds that Le Clézio's characters, pitted against the constraints and difficulties of modern society, struggle with their circumstances yet find a way to work with the forces around them and ultimately accept their place in the world.

In her 1990 *Le monde fabuleux de J. M. G. Le Clézio*, Germaine Brée takes a very straightforward approach, discussing one text after another through 1989's *Printemps et autres saisons*. Brée finds that Le Clézio's stories, because of their multiple layers (composed of proverbs, epigraphs, references to other texts, etc.) awaken memories of legendary tales in readers. Those tales then echo in the Le Clézian stories and allow the reader to engage with them in a very personal way. Also in 1990, Michelle Labbé takes a different approach in *Le Clézio, l'écart romanesque*, looking at how Le Clézio's work fits in (and differs from) both his predecessors and contemporaries. Labbé tackles such topics as the death of the "roman traditionnel"; language and writing; the relationship between characters, the author and the reader; and the structure of the story. Labbé observes, for example, that in Le Clézio's writing, "la notion du récit, avec celle de personnage et de temps, se trouve subvertie" (166). If Le Clézio's writing, or if Le Clézio himself, is hard to categorize, it is perhaps due to the nature of writing. Labbé states: "Les relations que J. M. G. Le Clézio entretient avec la forme romanesque paraissent ambiguës, parfois contradictoires, justement parce que, pour lui, l'enjeu de l'écriture est trop grave pour que se décident simplement et définitivement les modalités et les valeurs de l'expression" (259).

Jean Onimus' *Pour lire Le Clézio* (1994) takes a tripartite approach to Le Clézio, beginning with a discussion of the writer as seen through his work. Onimus then takes on Le

Clézio's "vision du monde," describing dominant themes and ideas in his work by categorizing them into two different "faces," those of light and shadows. Among the many themes that belong under the former are nature, childhood and the sacred, while the latter includes the mechanized world, crowded cities and production/consumption. The final section provides an analysis of Le Clézio's writing, highlighting its dream-like aspects along with the often-seen opposition between nature and modern civilization and describing Le Clézio's writing as postmodern.

In *Henri Michaux, J. M. G. Le Clézio: L'exil des mots* (1995), Jean-Xavier Ridon discusses how both authors in his study attempt to express the Other while using a language that doesn't allow for such expression. According to Ridon, Le Clézio does not simply try to describe the Other with words and language inherited from his Western culture; he understands the impossibility of language's ability to represent what is foreign to it. It is through his questioning of writing and language within his writing that he is able to escape dominant western discourse on the Other and *approach* an expression of the Other in early works, such as *Le livre des fuites*, *L'inconnu sur la terre*, *Terra Amata*, *Relation de Michoacan* and *L'extase matérielle*.

Sophie Jollin-Bertocchi's 2001 *J. M. G. Le Clézio: L'érotisme, les mots* takes on eroticism—both eroticism of words and the words of eroticism—, recognizing that it is not a principal theme nor one that is realized directly, but rather one that is subtle and often implicit. While Ook Chung's *Le Clézio: Une écriture prophétique* was published in 2001, it covers only texts from the ten-year period beginning with *Le procès-verbal* and ending with *Les géants*. Chung traces prophetic discourse in these early works, proposing that they form a distinct cycle within the whole of Le Clézio's writing. Excluding the essays of Mexican and Amerindian influence, Chung contends that the early period is dominated by a reflection on writing itself, while after *Désert* Le Clézio returns to a more traditional narrative style.

In *Le chercheur d'or et d'ailleurs: L'utopie de J. M. G. Le Clézio* (2003), Jacqueline Dutton traces the theme of utopia, beginning with Le Clézio's realization of the concept through the course of his writing, seeing a predisposition to the theme—communicated through criticism of the modern city—before a conscious expression of it. She next moves to the manifestations of utopia, including the places associated with it and its corresponding social and political aspects. After dividing Le Clézio's work into five distinct phases and noting how the idea of utopia gains importance through them, Dutton then progresses to the change reflected in Le Clézio's work with regard to the possibility of a utopian existence, which morphs over time from an impossible concept to a prospect on the horizon.

Ruth Amar writes of solitude and void in articles and her 2004 *Les structures de la solitude dans l'œuvre de J. M. G. Le Clézio*. Amar proposes that many Le Clézian themes (e.g., the desert, silence and nature) are in fact linked to a larger theme, solitude. She therefore looks at that idea through an investigation of geographical and textual space followed by a study of solitude as it pertains to the Le Clézian character, looking at his relationships with nature and society. Amar concludes that solitude, present throughout Le Clézio's work, is seen in primitive and marginalized peoples or children, those who are most capable of finding harmony with nature. Additionally, she finds that the failure of human dialogue as an effective means of communication leads to solitude.

Marina Salles has published studies on Le Clézio's *Le procès-verbal* and *Désert* (1996 and 1999, respectively), and more recently has released *Le Clézio: Notre contemporain* (2006) and *Le Clézio, "Peintre de la vie moderne"* (2007). In *Le Clézio: Notre contemporain*, Salles decides to abandon what she considers the usual themes covered by critics—travel, myth, origins, otherness and marginality—and instead considers Le Clézio's work in its historical,

cultural and literary context with regard to the ethical, epistemological and esthetic considerations of the latter part of the twentieth century. The third section of the book is devoted to Le Clézio's place in the world of contemporary literature, including those who influenced him. In *Le Clézio, "Peintre de la vie moderne,"* Salles (with a nod to Baudelaire's "Peintre de la vie moderne,") discusses the presence of modernity in Le Clézio's writing by analyzing his representation of cities, objects, certain aspects of society (related to work and leisure time) and of the human condition. Salles also serves as the secretary of the "Association des Lecteurs de J. M. G. Le Clézio," and has both contributed to and edited its journal, *Les Cahiers J. M. G. Le Clézio*, which the association began publishing in 2008. The first issue of the journal, *À propos de Nice*, is a collection of articles centered around Le Clézio's native city. In their introduction, Salles and Isabelle Roussel-Gillet defend their choice of Nice as a central topic (despite dominant themes such as the quest for origins, travel and encounters with Mexico and Morocco) because as a port city, Nice "est déjà une invitation à embarquer et à saisir l'interculturalité à l'œuvre" (7). The second issue of *Les Cahiers J. M. G. Le Clézio*, entitled *Contes, nouvelles et romances*, contains interviews with author Michel Butor and illustrator Georges Lemoine in addition to articles about Le Clézio's many short stories. The third and fourth (a double) edition, *Migrations, minorités et métissages dans l'oeuvre de J. M. G. Le Clézio*, examines questions of south-to-north immigration in the 28-year period from the publication of *Désert* to *Ourania*. Publication of the fifth issue, titled *La tentation poétique de J. M. G. Le Clézio*, is currently slated for April 2012. Work on the sixth issue, *La chance de rester femme*, has also begun.

In 2007's *J. M. G. Le Clézio: Évolution spirituelle et littéraire—Par-delà de l'Occident moderne*, Masao Suzuki takes a historical and chronological approach to Le Clézio's corpus from 1963 through the 1980s. Suzuki illustrates how Le Clézio, first concerned with ideas of

existence and conscience rooted in the modern West, passed to the Amerindian world after his time spent there in the 1970s and moved to themes surrounding the opposition between the Western and non-Western worlds. While Suzuki does not cover (in this volume) what Le Clézio has written in the last two decades, he does warn about a pitfall of criticizing European ethnocentrism—favoring the non-Western world to the point of making it the lone model for reference—and suggests that Le Clézio failed to avoid completely that trap in the 1990s.

While many critics have concentrated on the study of certain texts or major themes in Le Clézio's work, Margareta Kastberg Sjöblom decided to approach the author's writing through its language and vocabulary. In her 2006 book *L'écriture de J. M. G. Le Clézio: Des mots aux thèmes*, Kastberg Sjöblom studies vocabulary structure, frequency and diversity; the Le Clézian sentence, its structure and rhythm (including length, punctuation and complexity); and the distribution and function of grammatical categories such as nouns, articles, adjectives, pronouns and verbs. Kastberg Sjöblom's book also includes a section on lexical semantics and the use of lexicometry as a platform for the analysis of thematic structures, a technique that uses software to identify recurring senses and elements surrounding a word as well as the links between those words. Her semantic analysis then leads to a discussion of Le Clézio's writing from two different perspectives, the first being exogenous, or compared to the writing of others. Conclusions include the dominance of words relating to nature and urban life as well as the importance of third-person narration. According to Kastberg Sjöblom, the infrequent use of possessive adjectives emphasizes Le Clézio's negative view of possession while the infrequent use of the verb *faire* illustrates a common theme in Le Clézio's work: immobility. A second endogenous perspective compares writing within Le Clézio's corpus, identifies the main themes of each book and allows for an analysis of the evolution of vocabulary used by Le Clézio. Kastberg Sjöblom

interprets, for example, the increased use of words such as sister, mother, child, baby and marriage as a demonstration of the importance of family life with the increasing maturity of the author. Unfortunately, Kastberg Sjöblom's study sheds little light on the use of the past: *oubli* is on the list of words used less and less (216) and words like *mémoire* and *passé* aren't discussed.

Naturally, interest in Le Clézio's work was only heightened after the author won the Nobel Prize. Many new books and articles have appeared since the 2008 Nobel announcement, some by those who had previously published on Le Clézio's work. Claude Cavallero, for example, has been publishing articles on Le Clézio since taking on the theme of marginality in his 1992 dissertation, entitled *J. M. G. Le Clézio ou les marges du roman*. Cavallero has studied the quest for origins and identity—including Le Clézio's own—as well as the importance of the sea, the question of flight and Le Clézio's writing in general. A prominent Le Clézio scholar, Cavallero published his first book on Le Clézio, *Le Clézio, témoin du monde* after the laureate's speech to the Swedish Academy. The book is somewhat biographical in nature—perhaps to satisfy newcomers to Le Clézio—and discusses many of the same themes as Cavallero's previous articles. Cavallero uses the thread of Le Clézio as a “witness to the world” to approach Le Clézio's work. He begins with a section devoted to Le Clézio's life and his first forays into writing and literature and moves on to writing (genre, language, narrative) in a second section. The third part of Cavallero's study—and this part leans heavily on his previously published articles—treats several themes in Le Clézio's fiction. The fourth and final section discusses Le Clézio as a contemporary author and intellectual, the influences of the Amerindian world on his work and his image and rapport with the media. Cavallero rejects the often-proposed reputation of Le Clézio as a secretive writer and a travel writer/defender of nature in search of his past. Cavallero resists the temptation to do as he has seen other critics do—simplify Le Clézio's

image—when his body of work is complex, rich and varied. Instead, Cavallero proposes the image of an “écrivain attentif et actif dans le monde d’aujourd’hui” due to, among other things, Le Clézio’s championing of the marginalized and attention to other social questions (*Témoign* 334-35).

Cavallero is not the only critic to see an autobiographical dimension in some of Le Clézio’s texts; Lorenzo Devilla has published articles on the autobiographical elements in *Le chercheur d’or*, *Voyages à Rodrigues*, *Onitsha* and *La Quarantaine*. Nor is Cavallero the only one to study the importance of origins: André Siganos and Yvonne Cansigno have both contributed articles on that subject. Abdelhaq Anoun also discusses origins, but works with a single novel is his 2005 study, entitled *J. M. G. Le Clézio: Révolutions ou l’appel intérieur des origines*. Anoun discusses how the story is pieced together, not in a classic or linear fashion, but rather through a work of juxtaposition and the intersection of events happening in different chapters and different time periods. He finds that by using internal retrospection, overlapping narratives and tools such as a blind storyteller, stories recounted by characters themselves, and empathy, Le Clézio creates a return to origins that serves as the foundation to the story (Anoun 15). What characters witness and retell is of primary importance, as Anoun later argues: “l’essentiel du récit se construit sur la somme des témoignages des personnages” (15).

In 2008’s *Carnets de doute: Variantes romanesques du voyage chez J. M. G. Le Clézio*, Isa van Acker discusses three of Le Clézio’s novels, looking particularly at voyage as theme. After first situating Le Clézio in the history of travel writing, van Acker studies *Le livre des fuites*, *Le chercheur d’or* and *La quarantaine*. These three novels, all recounted in the first person by a masculine protagonist, share another common element: their travel is prompted by an experience of loss. As van Acker explains, Jeune Homme Hogan’s flight results from a

pressing need to escape from the big city; for the narrators of *Le chercheur d'or* and *La quarantaine*, the departures are due to a desire to revisit or rediscover their family home or native soil after their families' expulsion. Van Acker also compares the format of the three novels (fragmentary, cyclical and composite, respectively) and discusses how the characters in each relate to their surroundings throughout their travels. He concludes that all three, while representing different types of voyage (a frenetic flight, a mythical quest and multiple wanderings), are marked with uncertainty.

Also published in 2008, Keith A. Moser's "*Privileged Moments*" in *the Novels and Short Stories of J. M. G. Le Clézio: His Contemporary Development of a Traditional French Literary Device* looks at "moments of enigmatic ecstasy resulting from direct contact by means of one or more of the senses" (ix) which appear throughout Le Clézio's work. After a discussion of these "privileged moments" in Proust, Camus and Sartre, Moser identifies three types found in Le Clézio's writing: moments related to nature, musicality and sexuality. Moser is particularly interested in those moments with regard to the transformation that Le Clézio undergoes due to his experiences with indigenous peoples, which transform his views on writing, art and life in general.

Gérard de Cortanze, another specialist, has published both articles on and interviews with Le Clézio, in addition to two biographical essays: *J. M. G. Le Clézio: Le nomade immobile* in 1999 and *J. M. G. Le Clézio* in 2009. Like Cavallero's post-Nobel book, Cortanze's 2009 *J. M. G. Le Clézio* is biographical in nature and discusses major themes found in Le Clézio's work, focused around the seven chapters: "Nice," "Partir," "Mexique," "Désert," "Disparition," "Écritures" and "Envahissement." Cortanze's assertions are strongly supported by quotes from

interviews with Le Clézio (conducted primarily by Cortanze himself) and passages from Le Clézio's work.

Over the course of the last two decades, Bruno Thibault has published several essays on Le Clézio—on topics ranging from myth and the sacred to wandering and immigration. These ideas converge in his 2009 *J. M. G. Le Clézio et la métaphore exotique*, where Thibault discusses the notions of “l'espace” and “le voyage” in Le Clézio's work with regard to Michel Foucault's ideas on the relationship between language, time and space. Looking at Le Clézio's work with texts grouped together by their commonalities, Thibault finds that each voyage or displacement has a dual signification: “Chaque voyage est en effet chez cet écrivain un voyage vers soi, c'est-à-dire non seulement un voyage vers un Ailleurs et vers le Dehors, mais aussi un voyage vers le Dedans, vers le monde intérieur et vers ‘l'autre côté’ de la psyché” (14).

Other critical works cover intertextuality (Borgomano, Thierry Léger, Thibault), nomadism (Harrington, Suzuki), memory (Mudimbe-Boyi), modernity (Ravoux-Rallo, Salles), language (Smith, Astier), travel and wandering (Borgomano, Cavallero, Tritsmans, Van Acker), the Other (Amar, Barclay), solitude (Amar, Salles), emptiness or void (Amar), and feminine characters (Cansigno). Of course, with Le Clézio's growing international popularity, there are newcomers to this field of criticism. Christelle Sohy's book *Le féminin chez J. M. G. Le Clézio* appeared in July, 2010. Le Clézio's renown has also prompted the publication of new collections and special issues celebrating his success, the most recent of which include *Le Clézio, passeur des arts et des cultures* and *J. M. G. Le Clézio Prix Nobel de littérature: Hommages, témoignages, analyses* (a special issue of the Mauritian journal *Italiques*), both published in 2010.

Despite this large and rapidly growing body of criticism, the past, or more specifically how the author incorporates the past into his work, is one element of Le Clézio's writing that has yet to be treated in detail. Studies have been done on memory in *Onitsha* and on the quest for origins in some novels (*Le chercheur d'or*, *Voyage à Rodrigues*, *Révolutions*). Much has been written in the past few years about the plurality of narrators and composite nature of some of Le Clézio's novels, but a comprehensive work on how the past is important in Le Clézio's work as a whole—including how it is reflected in the structure of the narrative—has yet to be published. In the chapters that follow, I propose to study the narrative structure of several of Le Clézio's novels, short stories and non-fiction texts. I argue that the past plays an important role in much of his writing, both thematically and structurally. Le Clézio's characters—and one could also say he himself—are often haunted by the past, at times by what they remember but perhaps more often by what they do not remember (or could not know) about the past. When characters do not have personal memories to guide them, they look to other sources of information—travelling (retracing the steps of their ancestors, for example) to uncover the past or better to understand their present, or documents (letters, journals, photographs) from the past, which are often inserted into the narrative and are thus available to the characters and the reader alike. In Chapter Two, I propose a discussion of the past as a salient aspect of the Le Clézian narrative, including how the past is introduced. In doing so, I will be concentrating on Le Clézio's use of historical elements (time, place and historical events) as the setting for his fictional stories, looking specifically at how fiction and reality interact in the narrative.

CHAPTER 2

INTRODUCING THE PAST IN THE LE CLÉZIAN NARRATIVE

Whether in fiction or nonfiction, recalling and documenting the past is a preoccupation of J. M. G. Le Clézio's. The author's essays on Amerindian cultures, influenced by his work and stays in Panama and Mexico, present colonial and pre-colonial times, or describe rites and a way of life that reflect those times. Le Clézio's fictions are often centered on actual historical events—primarily war or social conflict—and in some novels include historical figures. A few examples provide an indication of the extent to which Le Clézio makes use of history in his fiction. British colonial efforts in Nigeria, leading up to the country's civil war, form the backdrop of much of *Onitsha*, while parts of the novel look even further into the past. The storyline of the aptly-titled *Révolutions* spans from the French Revolution through Mauritian independence, the Algerian War of Independence, and, finally, to revolution in Mexico. *Ourania* begins with a description of the narrator as a young boy in France during World War II, but then skips to his time in Mexico mapping the Tepalcatepec valley. World War II provides the setting of much of *Ritournelle de la faim* and *Étoile errante*, the latter of which also takes place against the backdrop of the Arab-Israeli war of 1948. In *La quarantaine*, while events referenced span from roughly the mid-1850s to 1980, much of the novel is set on Flat Island (off the coast of Mauritius) in late 1891. Dealing primarily with Léon Archambau, his family history and his quest for origins, *La quarantaine* also depicts the emigration of manual laborers from India to Mauritius. In doing so, the novel touches on the historical reasons for the emigration and the treatment of the laborers by both the British and Mauritians.

Based on these examples alone, one could assert that place names and dates in the Le Clézian oeuvre provide a sort of “survey” of modern history. In fact, in *Le Clézio: Notre contemporaine*, Marina Salles details over several chapters how Le Clézio’s work recalls “à peu près tous les grands événements qui ont ébranlé le siècle” (25). Of course, the past in Le Clézio’s work is not limited to situating his fictional stories in a historically accurate time or place. Often, the setting is (at least in part) more contemporary to today’s society. When this is the case, Le Clézio’s characters—prompted by memories, photographs or other triggers—look back in time. This retrospection takes many different forms. An author unquestionably aware of the power and implications of storytelling, Le Clézio uses various narrative techniques in his writing. Characters’ remembrances—often rendered in the form of flashbacks—help characters to question and determine their identity. Stories told, documents read, and photographs studied also point characters (and the reader) to earlier times. Embedded narrative is another device that Le Clézio uses to incorporate different periods (and, equally important, different points of view) into a given novel. While my current chapter concentrates mainly on the historical (time, place and events) in Le Clézio’s writing, my chapters Three, Four, and Five will focus on other means of incorporating the past into the narrative. Over the course of this study, I propose to show that in addition to the past being an important theme in Le Clézio’s writing, it also figures very prominently in the structure of his work.

This intersection of theme and structure calls for close examination and provides an opportunity to investigate the importance of the past, and, perhaps more importantly, to discuss its implications with regard to the world of today. To that end, I will be taking a narratological approach to Le Clézio’s work. Narratology, defined by Gerald Prince as “the study of the form and functioning of narrative” (*Narratology* 4), provides the basis of and the terminology for an

investigation of how the past is incorporated into a given work. It also allows us to see how the past is expressed and viewed by different actors (e.g., characters, narrators, narratees, implied or actual authors and readers) in the literary process. Since the history of narratology and its many contributors has already been well-documented,⁴ I will not provide an overview of it. Instead, I will limit myself to discussions of those narrative devices which are relevant to this study, as I encounter them, and to a few brief explanatory comments here. In an article titled “On a Postcolonial Narratology,” Gerald Prince points out the continued relevance and particular usefulness of narratology in “examining, exposing, or contesting the values and consequences of the postcolonial or the (neo)colonial.” A narratological approach can be productive because “even the simple characterization of the points of view selected, the speeds adopted, the modes of discourse exploited, the actantial roles foregrounded, the transformations favored in particular narratives can help to shed light on the nature and functioning of the ideology those narratives represent and construct” (372). While Le Clézio hails from “l’Hexagone,” his writing deals with many of the same, or related, themes as postcolonial Francophone literature. For this reason, I find that Prince’s comments apply equally well to an examination of Le Clézio’s work. Monika Fludernik, too, underscores the usefulness of a narratological approach: narratology, as “an applied science and a theory of narrative texts in its own right” allows us to “highlight *how* the text manages to have certain effects and explain *why* these occur” (39; emphasis in orig.). It is this *how* and *why* that I propose to examine here.

In closely studying the Le Clézian narrative, I am interested in three main ideas: how the past is woven into the present in various works; to what extent the past is itself a part of the fiction, including the implications of this use of the past in the narrative; and finally, in cases

⁴ See, for example, James Phelan and Peter J. Rabinowitz’s *A Companion to Narrative Theory* or Paul Cobley’s *Narrative*.

where fictional stories are based in a historically accurate setting, how the “real” past and the “fictional” past or present interact. By the past,⁵ I refer to time and events that take place before the present moment. When referring to the past in a work that takes place (at least in part) in the “present,” however, we must limit this definition to time and events prior to the “present” of the narrative. I believe that a critical examination of the narrative can shed light on the importance of the past in Le Clézio’s work—as it provides insight into why (and to what extent) the past is used. It can also show the connection between the structure and the content of his work. Le Clézio himself commented on the link between form and content in his early writing:

Les idées sont toutes objectives. C’est le réel qui donne naissance à l’idée, et non pas l’idée qui exprime ce qu’il y a de concevable dans la réalité.

Une des erreurs de l’analyse est de distinguer forme et fond. Il est bien évident que forme et fond ne sont qu’une seule et même chose, et qu’il est tout à fait impossible de les dissocier. Parler de telle ou telle façon, employer tel ou tel mot sont des modalités qui engagent tout l’être. Le langage n’est pas une “expression,” ni même un choix ; c’est être soi. (*L’extase matérielle* 51)

From my explorations of the past in the Le Clézian narrative, I will speculate on what the inclusion and treatment of the past might say about the world which has welcomed and studied Le Clézio’s writing with interest for nearly fifty years. In formulating my conclusions, I will occasionally refer to Le Clézio’s essays, in which he discusses (among many topics) writing; I will also support my assertions with quotations from Le Clézio’s interviews and public appearances.

⁵ Taking into account Bob Chase’s comments on the “knowability” of the past, as quoted in de Groot: “The past is something that we impose order and meaning upon, but which is ultimately unknowable: ‘Since “the past”, by definition, does not exist, surely we can “know” it only by way of representations”’ (111).

Before further delving into the past in Le Clézio's fiction, however, I propose a cursory look at the author's treatment of the past in his nonfiction. How the author discusses and concentrates on the past in nonfiction provides insight into its use in his fictional work.

Looking at Le Clézio's works of nonfiction—especially those influenced by his time among the Amerindians in Mexico and Panama—the importance of documenting the world around us for posterity is abundantly clear. This is particularly true of *Le rêve mexicain ou la pensée interrompue*, an essay which aims both to document and shed new light on old documentation of the conquest of Mexico. To that end, Le Clézio presents two opposing sides: the story (or dream) of the conquerors, and that of the indigenous peoples. Le Clézio's approach is to offer a contemporary perspective on ancient events—with the advantage of hindsight that several hundred years has provided—by discussing old, original texts written by eye-witnesses to actual events. For example, Bernal Díaz Del Castillo's book, *Historia verdadera de la conquista de la Nueva España*, provides the basis for much of *Le rêve mexicain*'s first chapter, "Le rêve du conquérant." According to Le Clézio, one of the goals of Díaz Del Castillo, who was "irrité par les erreurs des historiens chroniqueurs de la Conquête, par leur complaisance et leur maniérisme," was to tell the truth about the wars of conquest "sans cacher le moindre détail, sans essayer la moindre flatterie" (12). Le Clézio, who acknowledges that the dream is told through the gaze of Díaz Del Castillo (15), recognizes that historical texts may be more or less faithful to the events described. However, Le Clézio suggests that an author can convey a more accurate version of events by not omitting details and by avoiding the insertion of opinion while presenting facts.

In Chapter Two, “Le rêve des origines,” Le Clézio looks to Bernardino de Sahagun’s *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, “sur laquelle se fonde la mémoire du peuple de Mexico” (61). Le Clézio writes that Sahagun’s inspiration for writing was different than Díaz Del Castillo’s: the latter wrote to rediscover a time of wonderment and to tell the truth as opposed to the lies of the historian Gomarra. Sahagun, however, motivated by what would be a historical catastrophe (64), undertook to write “le grand livre du peuple mexicain, son ultime monument” (61). Le Clézio describes that book as a sacred memory and a treasure:

Pareil aux anciennes pyramides, pareil aux mythes de l’errance des Chichimèques, l’*Histoire générale* offre au monde—à ceux qui l’ont détruit—un souvenir sacré. Le mystère, le rêve des origines dépassent le créateur de ce livre, car il n’est que l’interprète d’une parole dont il ne peut saisir tout le sens. Sahagun n’est pas un historien au sens moderne de ce mot. Il est semblable à un homme qui, cherchant les traces d’un filon, aurait découvert sans même s’en rendre compte un trésor immense et inépuisable. (61)

In Sahagun’s achievement, Le Clézio finds a powerful voice, the preserved voice of a people: “Livre charnière, au moment du basculement de l’ancien monde, annonçant l’ère moderne du Mexique, cette mémoire n’est pas seulement un document scientifique; elle est aussi la voix d’un peuple qui veut se survivre” (65-66). As an interpreter to a vanishing people, Sahagun allowed them to record their own culture on the eve of its loss:

Avant de disparaître, ces hommes s’expriment au-dessus de leur propre ruine. Il n’y a ni illusion ni vanité dans leur ultime message. Au contraire, il y a la même force mystique qui a animé le peuple mexicain, et qui semble se prolonger dans un rêve d’éternité. Voici sans doute le sens le plus profond de la mémoire. Par la voix du Conquérant qui l’a détruite, cette civilisation exprime pour les hommes de tous les temps ce qu’étaient sa

vie, sa parole, ses lois et ses dieux. Toutes ses prières, tous ces chants, ces espérances, ces souffrances pouvaient-ils disparaître avec les hommes qui les avaient vécus et portés? (62)

Le Clézio insists that the author's desire to preserve is in itself insufficient to create such a rich and lasting document. If Sahagun had not found the Indians willing to participate in the project by communicating their knowledge, the project would certainly have failed. In this way, contends Le Clézio:

Leur rêve est le même. Il s'agit d'aller au-delà du destin, en sauvant de l'oubli ce qui peut être sauvé. Il y a dans ce livre plus que de la curiosité, un sentiment d'urgence et de hâte. Avec fièvre, les auteurs indiens—prêtres, poètes, savants, médecins—racontent, dictent leur mémoire, l'écrivent parfois sur les feuilles de papier d'agave, comme autrefois les scribes des temples. Ils se hâtent de dire tout ce qu'ils savent, allant même au-devant du désir du religieux espagnol, comme s'ils avaient compris dans la tragédie de leur défaite que seul le temps à venir pouvait leur être offert, et qu'ils s'adressaient désormais à d'autres hommes, pas encore sur cette terre, afin de leur léguer le trésor de leur vie. (63)

At the same time, the conquered peoples would not have succeeded in recording their customs, their "memory," without the author. Le Clézio emphasizes the important role of Sahagun, describing him as more than just a recorder or interpreter: "Certes, sans l'organisation du franciscain, sans l'usage de l'écriture alphabétique, sans l'asile inespéré offert par les couvents contre la violence des conquérants armés, ce témoignage n'aurait pu voir le jour. L'œuvre de Bernardino de Sahagun est celle d'un compilateur et d'un moraliste, mais aussi celle d'un protecteur" (64). Yet Le Clézio sees that the truth imparted by this text is not uncontaminated. He points out that in recording the rites, dreams and myths of this people,

Bernardino de Sahagun adds his own culture, to such an extent that he mixes demonic Aztec figures into Western pagan myths. “L’on est très loin d’un simple témoignage,” adds Le Clézio. This doesn’t seem to detract from the value of the work, which succeeds, in Le Clézio’s view, in assuring the survival of the people: “En restituant complètement le passé de ce peuple païen, Sahagun proclame la survie de l’âme indienne” (68).

Le rêve mexicain thus presents Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who tells of the conquerors, while Bernardino de Sahagun records the lives of the conquered. What is perhaps most important, however, is that the “truth” about the conquest doesn’t come from just one side or the other, it appears at the intersection of the two different accounts: “C’est justement dans cette rencontre des deux rêves, d’un côté la magie, de l’autre l’or, qu’on voit bien où est la vérité, où le mensonge” (26). Neither account alone presents the truth, but in the meeting of the two, the accounts are able to approach the truth, or at least to discern truth from falsehood. Le Clézio’s *Le rêve mexicain*, by taking these works of non-fiction and analyzing them, highlights how they work together to present a more complete picture of the past. This retrospection, however, is not presented without opinion. Le Clézio occasionally inserts his own interpretations of the historical texts: “On voit ici la valeur du capitaine Cortés. S’il est digne de passer à la postérité, ce n’est pas à cause de son courage ni de sa foi, encore moins à cause de la grandeur de sa geste. C’est à cause de sa ruse” (28). *Le rêve mexicain* is therefore a sort of commented non-fiction, one elaborated with the benefit of hindsight that time affords. In it, the preservation of the past is of paramount importance, which is highlighted by Le Clézio’s choice of vocabulary. The word memory (*mémoire* or *souvenir*) is used in association with notions like sacred, treasure, saved, urgency, haste, eternity, trace, vein (mineral wealth) and knowledge. When knowledge or

memory is in danger of disappearing, the terminology changes accordingly: loss, tragedy, and catastrophe describe the potential loss of the past.

These same themes, especially the importance of preserving the memory of peoples and cultures that would otherwise be lost, appear in Le Clézio's other works of nonfiction. *Trois villes saintes* presents reflections about cities whose disappearance is a great loss to mankind: "Les villes conquises sont défaites pour toujours. Leurs temples sont vides, leurs murailles ne protègent plus. Les dieux humiliés détournent leur regard et oublient les hommes. Il y a un très grand silence maintenant, un très grand vide" (16-17). In *La fête chantée*, Le Clézio's descriptions of people, celebrations and rites—known and experienced by very few outside the Amerindian world—preserve them in written form. In the same series of essays, Le Clézio describes the significance of two texts that he translated: "*La Relation de Michoacan*, comme les *Livres du Chilam Balam*, est aussi l'ultime tentative d'arrêter la fuite du temps, de sauver une mémoire en train de se perdre" (42). In writing about ancient texts and in translating others, Le Clézio goes a step further in guaranteeing the survival of Amerindian culture. In so doing, he makes the past—here the conquest of Mexico—accessible to a wider audience. His translations open up the history of the conquest of Mexico to Francophone readers and preserve the memory of the Amerindian peoples in the French language, just as the original texts preserved it before. In this way, Le Clézio's writing is an extension of the memory recorded in the original texts.

Diego et Frida, too, records the lives and times of its title characters, Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo. Le Clézio details the world in which the two artists live, showing how events in their lives are significant to their work. Marina Salles states: "Comme il convient pour des artistes très engagés dans leur temps, le biographe de Diego et Frida accorde une grande importance au contexte historique et politique de leur création" (*Le Clézio: Notre contemporain*

100). As is the case with the historical figures Diego and Frida, we will see in later chapters how fictional characters' pasts remain a formative and essential part of their lives.

Le Clézio recognizes another part of the world, Oceania, in *Raga, approche du continent invisible*. In this essay, he celebrates the region's success in maintaining cultural integrity in the face of colonial violence. Le Clézio speaks specifically of the islands of Vanuatu and how their geographic features tell of the past: "Raga, île de mémoire, île du temps d'avant les catastrophes et les guerres mortelles. À Santo, à Ambrym, à Tanna, la mémoire est écrite sur les roches noires, sur les monuments. À Raga, la mémoire est dans les montagnes, dans les arbres, dans les barrancas où cascade l'eau lustrale" (104). While the memory of Oceania has been inscribed quite differently than that of the Amerindians, Le Clézio's essay reinforces the importance of its preservation.

Based on the above passages, I believe it is clear that Le Clézio views the documentation of peoples, customs and cultures, which over time inevitably become the past, as a means for protecting what would otherwise be lost. As we move on to discuss the presence of the past in Le Clézian fiction, it will be interesting to see if the same ideas surface.

The examples I mentioned at the opening of this chapter suggest that little, if any, of Le Clézio's work is pure fiction⁶: the reader can easily determine the setting (both time and place) of his stories. These narrative elements may be explicit (locations and dates are sometimes provided in chapters titles, as headings or within the text itself). In cases where they are not, references to historical events, the inclusion of street or neighborhood names, or geographical descriptions help the reader to identify where and when a story takes place. In short, Le Clézio's oeuvre is

⁶ Gérard Genette defines pure fiction as "a narrative devoid of all reference to a historical framework" (*Narrative Discourse Revisited* 81).

“fermement indexée sur le monde réel...” (Salles, *Le Clézio: “Peintre”* 13). In *Le procès-verbal*, for example, while the area around Nice may be recognizable through descriptions of a vacant home high on a hill above the city, the city is not named. The few toponyms in the novel appear in an inserted newspaper clipping, which includes one story recounting Adam Pollo’s arrest (placing Adam in Carros) and another telling of drownings in Corsica (Adam is witness to the discovery of the corpses washed up on the beach). Commenting on the same newspaper clipping, Germaine Brée points out how Le Clézio makes use of history in fiction beginning with his first novel:

[Le Clézio] dès *Le procès-verbal* a pris soin de situer ses écrits incidemment mais délibérément dans l’actualité, de les “dater”. Ainsi, dans *Le procès-verbal*, il introduit (PV, 201) une page fictive de journal où, à côté d’un entrefilet qui résume l’aventure du héros de son “roman”, paraît l’annonce de la mise en liberté d’un chef du parti nationaliste algérien, Ben Bella, annonce qui situe l’action en mars 1962. Il est de même pour les autres textes pourvus de points de repère qui les lient à un “hors-texte” historique et au temps biographique de la vie de Le Clézio. Cette zone frontière entre le monde objectif et le monde subjectif est celle où s’aventure l’écrivain refusant d’accepter les démarcations entre fiction et réalité, objectivité et subjectivité, individu et collectivité dans la constitution de ses textes. (11-12)

In other novels and short stories, we can recognize unreferenced surroundings to some degree, a North African coastal city in *Désert*, for example. In “La ronde,” the only topographical name mentioned is “la rue de la Liberté,” but this is not a story that depends on time or place. The theme—young girls searching for adventure in the busy city streets—is more universal in nature. In fact, “La ronde” could take place in any sunny city populated with

imprudent youth, businessmen and distracted drivers. Unlike this short story, however, most of Le Clézio's fiction would fall under Gérard Genette's umbrella term "historical narrative of fiction":

The term is certainly very indefinite, or at least here I think it has to be taken in the broadest possible sense, as covering every type of narrative (a) that is explicitly placed (even by only one date) in a historical past, even a very recent one, and (b) whose narrator, on the basis of that single piece of information, sets himself up more or less as a historian and therefore (if I may attempt this very slight oxymoron) as a *subsequent witness*. (NDR 80)

We have already seen that the past plays an important role in Le Clézio's work. What, then, does the presence of the past contribute? The effects of introducing the historical past into a work of fiction are many and wide-ranging. Specific dates can anchor a story in time, setting fictive events against the backdrop of history. Readers would certainly have different expectations of a novel set in Paris in 1940 than of one set in Mexico in 1910, or of one with no reference to time or location. A particular setting may also provide background information that is necessary to understand characters' feelings or actions. In this way, setting can be used to increase or decrease a reader's knowledge or familiarity, perhaps prompting the reader to be more or less comfortable with the events taking place. Of course, the author could choose to challenge readers' expectations by telling a story unrelated to what readers might be anticipating. Traditionally, though, the setting—whether or not it includes historical elements—serves to ensure what we often refer to as a narrative's verifiability, plausibility or assurance. As Mieke Bal explains, "In some realistic novels, descriptions of space are executed with great precision. It is important that the realistic aspects in such descriptions be clearly visible: the space must

resemble the actual world, so that the events situated within it also become plausible”

(*Narratology* 99). Accordingly, Richard Shryock discusses the believability of a narrative:

“Believability is directly related to the receiver’s understanding of the real and to narrative presentation” (53). Realistic aspects can of course include historical fact, as is the case with Le Clézio’s historically-oriented fiction. In *Révolutions*, for example, Jean leaving France for England would not have the same significance if he weren’t seen as a deserter, trying to avoid conscription in the Algerian War of Independence. Historical facts integrated into the story can also assure the reader by making the story more realistic. Gerald Prince describes the importance of assurance in the narrative:

If narrativity is a function of the discreteness and specificity of the (sequences of) events presented, it is also a function of the extent to which their occurrence is given as a fact (in a certain world) rather than a possibility or probability. The hallmark of narrative is assurance. It lives in certainty: this happened then that; this happened because of that; this happened and it was related to that. (*Narratology* 149)

Facts from history can cause or justify events or actions in a fictional story. Based on Prince’s statements on assurance, the amount of historical detail in *Ritournelle de la faim*—whose primary narrative tells the story of Ethel, a young girl growing up in Paris in the thirties—would contribute to the novel’s narrativity. Her story is punctuated by the events of the time, beginning with a visit to the Paris Colonial Exposition in 1931 and followed by events leading up to the war, and eventually the war itself. Ethel and her great-uncle (Monsieur Soliman) visit the Colonial Exposition. This provides the reader not only with background information on the man’s heritage (we learn that he was raised on Mauritius), but helps to create the atmosphere of Paris at the time, when France was eager to promote a positive image of its colonial empire.

Details about the war and political figures mentioned in the narrative contribute to a verifiable, realistic setting for Ethel's story, which is also a story of the war. The dates and places mentioned in *Ritournelle de la faim* serve as points of reference for the characters and their actions while simultaneously telling the story of what was happening in Europe at that time, including the Russian Revolution and laws promulgated against the Jews. The reader learns about many developments leading up to the war through characters' discussions of it in the "Conversations de salon." These "Conversations" are passages recorded by Ethel which serve to bring the "real" past into the fictional narrative. The first Sunday of each month, friends and family came to have lunch and spend the afternoon at the Brun household. Ethel would listen to the adults and write down what she heard, feeling the conversations were too important to forget: "Le soir fiévreusement, Ethel écrivait sur les pages de son agenda la retranscription des échanges de la conversation, comme si c'étaient des phrases de la plus haute importance qu'il fallait ne jamais oublier" (59). The conversations would start with current events but would then wander because of all the different personalities present. Ethel's notes include tidbits about politics, comparisons between Russia's Kerenski with France's Mirabeau, discussions of the American stock market crash, cars, and the importance of aircraft for purposes of war. Ethel recorded conversations about the impending war as well—what the Japanese, the Italians, and Hitler were doing, and discussions about the relationship between England and France. As Ethel matured, she would also write what she found to be ridiculous or hateful in the adults' conversations, noting plays on words, insults against Protestants or most often Jews, such as: "L'honnête Français exploité par le banquier juif cosmopolite" (78), or "Pour le Juif, la France est un pays viager. Ils ne croit à rien d'autre qu'à l'argent, son paradis est sur la terre (Maurras)" (78-79). While these comments don't express historical fact, they do provide a cultural view of history.

Their inclusion introduces what may have been common opinions at the time. However, presenting them from Ethel's point of view allows for a simultaneous critique of those opinions. Her character opens up history by providing a critical view of people and events of the time.

Elements of the past are also introduced in the narrative through Ethel's friend, Xénia Antonina Chavirov. We learn that Xénia had to flee from Russia after her father's death in prison, perhaps at the hand of the revolutionaries, by travelling through Sweden and Germany with her mother and sisters, before finally settling in Paris where her mother found work as a seamstress. The character of Xénia thus enriches the novel with details that present a different perspective: the circumstances and movement of Jews throughout Europe. Yet, because of the amount of detail presented, *Ritourelle de la faim* paints a broad picture of the war. In a work of fiction set so firmly in historical reality, one is unlikely to question the plausibility of Ethel's story when it is surrounded—indeed built on—fact. Because of this continual *va et vient* between history and story, it is not always clear where fact ends and fiction begins. The historical fact doesn't simply remain in the background; it becomes a part of the story. What appeared at first to be setting increased in thematic importance, a possibility that Mieke Bal explains:

Spaces function in a story in two ways. On the one hand, they are only a frame, a place of action. In this capacity a more or less detailed presentation will lead to a more or less concrete picture of that space. The space can also remain entirely in the background. In many cases, however, space is “thematized”: it becomes an “acting place” rather than the place of action. It influences the fabula, and the fabula becomes subordinate to the presentation of space. The fact that “*this* is happening here” is just as important as “the way it is *here*,” which allows these events to happen. (*Narratology* 95-96; emphasis in orig.)

If in the beginning of *Ritournelle de la faim*, the war appears to be primarily a setting for the story, we see the importance of the war increase as the story progresses. The war becomes a major theme uniting the narrative, the characters, and the past and present. The narrator mentions the conflict in the introduction as the backdrop of the main narrative. Then, in the final two chapters, this same narrator looks back on the war, as does Ethel's son, who also narrates part of the novel. In the penultimate chapter, "Aujourd'hui," Ethel's son instinctively goes to the place in Paris that his mother loved, but that is also the site of the Vél'd'Hiv (Vélodrome d'Hiver, or winter velodrome), where Parisian Jews (including Laurent's aunt Léonora) were taken before being deported to the concentration camps in the Roundup of July 1942. This framing of the story, a concept that I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Four, positions war as the central theme of the novel.

A story's setting can also increase reader interest if it is one that speaks to readers for any number of reasons. Examples might include the anniversary of a glorious battle or of an invasion that marks a dramatic change in a country's history; either could regenerate wide interest in past events. A fictional story based on such events can draw in readers who may already harbor a curiosity in them, but who crave a more poetic or personal account than one typically finds in a nonfiction historical narrative. Fact and fiction work together in this way: the facts make the fiction appear realistic, while the fictional elements add interest to the historical facts. "Indeed, an event which is individualized will contribute more to narrativity than one which is not. Narrative shies away from abstraction and thrives on concreteness. It concentrates on the particular and not the general" (Prince *Narratology* 149). Historical events or places and people known to the reader will then increase narrativity (for that reader). However, as Prince also

points out, a high degree of narrativity may make for a better story, but it does not guarantee one (148).

Le Clézio's use of the past generally goes beyond setting and the inclusion of historical events. He demonstrates his dedication to providing a credible representation of the past through his careful choice of words and detail. *Onitsha* includes words and phrases in pidgin, spoken by Bony (and occasionally by the colonial officers poking fun at the native population). The narrator of *Ourania* recalls his mother referring to the Germans as "Les Boches" (16), a disparaging term referring to Germans, especially to soldiers during the two world wars, and also as "les Frisés," "les Teutons," or "les Huns" (18). In *La quarantaine*, Le Clézio uses terms such as "sepoy," an Indian soldier under the command of the British, and "coolie," a common designation for manual laborers from Asia, now considered a racial slur. While some of this terminology is outdated or considered offensive today, its usage in historical literature helps to create an atmosphere distinct from the present. Particular words, when used in a manner consistent with their meaning at the time of the narrative action, also help to present the past as historically accurate. Accordingly, for those novels set at the time of the French Revolution, Le Clézio presents dates using the French Republican calendar. This is the case in *Révolutions* and *La quarantaine*, both of which contain journal entries penned by characters living while the calendar was in use. In *La quarantaine*, such dates mark the passing of days on a sea voyage. The wedding date (le 10 vendémiaire l'an V) and location (la mairie du Port de la Liberté) of Marie Anne Naour appear in *Révolutions* (172). In the same novel, Le Clézio incorporates other pertinent historical information which affected Bretons at the time, such as laws passed regarding the use of and instruction in the Breton language: "La loi du 30 vendémiaire de l'an II, article 7, proclamait que *dans toutes les parties de la République, l'instruction doit être faite seulement en*

français” (177; italics in orig.). Other historical details that enrich the narrative include monetary customs of the time and the forms and value of currency, all of which are expressed in the following passage:

Cependant, notre bonheur était miné par l’inquiétude du lendemain. La dot versée par les Naour n’était pas considérable. Les quelque six cent quatre-vingt livres que j’avais reçues de mon parrain, l’oncle Étienne Soliman, le jour de mes dix-huit ans, sous la forme d’assignats, s’étaient réduites en peau de chagrin au fur et à mesure de la chute de la valeur du papier-monnaie. Il n’en restait plus que deux cent dix à la fin de 93, et à peine soixante au mois de prairial de l’année suivante. (175-76)

Le Clézio uses place names, too, with respect to history. For example, *Isle de France* (rather than *Maurice*) designates the island of Mauritius before the English took possession of it. *Révolutions* also references political figures and political and cultural events. The characters mention consequences of the Revolution such as hunger, begging, and hard winters: “Le blocus des Anglais faisait qu’on manquait de tout” (176). Another consequence of war was the loss of religious liberty: “La Révolution, qui avait œuvré pour libérer tous les peuples de la terre, s’acharnait à présent à restreindre cette liberté, refusant à chacun le droit de pratiquer selon ses croyances et sa tradition” (176-77). Later in the novel, Jean and Mariam see the movie *Blow-Up*, a British-Italian film directed by Michelangelo Antonioni and starring Vanessa Redgrave. The film’s title isn’t necessary to situate this part of the novel in time (the film won the Grand Prix at the 1967 Cannes Film Festival), because the novel includes the exact date the two saw the movie: Wednesday, 14 June 1967. But the inclusion of the title, in addition to the well-known actors’ names, paints a more detailed picture of the time.

The introduction of historical figures, too, adds to the historicity of the narrative. We don't simply learn, for example, that Jean's father served in the colonial army. We also learn exactly whom he fought to protect. Jean reflects on his father's past when he returns home from England: "Jean a été stupéfait de sa beauté. Maintenant il ressemble au soldat de l'armée coloniale, au temps de la guerre des Chiens-Courants, quand il avait tenu tête au haut commandement pour sauver la vie de la terroriste chinoise Lee Meng. Cette histoire qui était sa légende, sa gloire et son échec, et qui l'avait renvoyé en Europe brisé et malade" (*Révolutions* 354). The introduction of Lee Meng into the narrative draws a more precise picture of Jean's father's war experience. The presence of a historical figure can thus have an impact similar to that of setting: the story is better defined and the narrative more convincing. In *Révolutions*, the fact that Jean Eudes Marro fights under a true historical figure makes the character's war experience more realistic than if he were fighting under an unnamed commander or one with a fictional name—at least to readers knowledgeable about history, or who have a propensity to Google names as they come across them. On the whole, *Révolutions* is a historically rich novel, not just in storyline or setting, but in the detail of the narration.

It would be naïve to suggest that authors place their fictional stories in historically accurate settings (with or without other historical detail) just to create plausible, convincing stories or to assure their readers. The use of time and place, and of historical events, figures and detail, may serve an entirely different purpose. An author may situate a fictional work in a particular time or place less to guide (or possibly distract) the reader than to comment on history, historical narrative, perceptions of the past, or any number of questions. In *The Historical Novel*, Jerome De Groot mentions some of the possibilities that historical novels offer: "A historical

novel might consider the articulation of nationhood via the past, high-light the subjectivism of narratives of History, underline the importance of the realist mode of writing to notions of authenticity, question writing itself, and attack historiographical convention” (2). As much as Le Clézio’s novels make use of historical fact, setting, vocabulary and other “tools” which lead to a believable, realistic narrative, his use of the past goes beyond that of the traditional historical or realistic novel. In my view, Le Clézio clearly uses the past not only to anchor his fictional stories in history but to explore questions about the past, the representation of the past in literature, and the relationship of the past to the present. The Le Clézian historical novel more closely resembles what Linda Hutcheon defines as historiographic metafiction. In *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon distinguishes between historical fiction and historiographic metafiction:

Historical fiction (*pace* Lukács) usually incorporates and assimilates [historical] data in order to lend a feeling of verifiability (or an air of dense specificity and particularity) to the fictional world. Historiographic metafiction incorporates, but rarely assimilates such data. More often, the process of *attempting* to assimilate is what is foregrounded: we watch the narrators of Ondaatje’s *Running in the Family* or Findley’s *The Wars* trying to make sense of the historical facts they have collected. As readers, we see both the collecting and the attempts to make narrative order. Historiographic metafiction acknowledges the paradox of the *reality* of the past but its *textualized accessibility* to us today. (114; italics in orig.)

La quarantaine is an excellent example of the incorporation of the past in a novel which uses the past as a stage to question rather than trying to provide a definitive representation of it. Léon Archambau, like the narrators Hutcheon mentions above, tries to collect information about the past and make sense of it. And we, as readers, witness those efforts. After having followed

his ancestors' steps—by means of travel, stories, and documents—in hopes of finding some trace of his lost great-uncle, Léon comments on the outcome of his search: “J’avance le long de la rue étroite, comme si je touchais au but, que tout allait s’éclairer. Comme si j’allais trouver le Disparu, une trace, un signe, une fleur tremblotant dans le vent d’une cour, un arbre sous lequel il s’est assis, un nom gravé sur une pierre. Chaque maison, chaque fenêtre, chaque porte est témoin” (539). The use of *comme si* followed by the imperfect indicates that he does not reach his goal; he does not learn what happened to his great-uncle. After all that Léon has learned about his family history, he fails to find what he was searching for. He tries to make sense of his past, but obtains no concrete answers from it: “J’ai quitté Maurice sans savoir si j’y retournerai jamais. Je n’emporte rien de ce que je suis venu chercher. [. . .] Il ne reste rien du passé, et c’est sans doute mieux ainsi. Comment vivre avec la mémoire du sang versé, de l’exil, des hommes sacrifiés au Moloch de la canne à sucre?” (527-28, my ellipsis). Léon’s longing to know the past, but his failure to do so, begs the question of whether knowing one’s past is really possible. Linda Hutcheon speaks to this difficulty:

Historiographic metafiction appears to privilege two modes of narration, both of which problematize the entire notion of subjectivity: multiple points of view (as in Thomas’s *The White Hotel*) or an overtly controlling narrator (as in Swift’s *Waterland*). In neither, however, do we find a subject confident of his/her ability to know the past with any certainty. This is not a transcending of history, but a problematized inscribing of subjectivity into history. (117-18)

In *La quarantaine*, multiple narrators present different points of view which allow for a closer view of Léon’s grandparents and great-uncle’s experience in quarantine. Still, these multiple viewpoints do not help the younger Léon capture what has been lost. Multiple narrators

and the juxtaposition of the past with the present in *Onitsha*, as we will see in Chapter Four, provide another example of how Le Clézio incorporates the past. But again, the past provides a space for questioning its importance as it relates to the present.

Like historiographic metafiction, Le Clézio's fiction is highly intertextual with respect to both history and literature. As Linda Hutcheon explains, again in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, history is equally fertile ground for intertextual reference as is literature: "we have seen that there also exists quite another view of history in postmodern art, but this time it is history as intertext. History becomes a text, a discursive construct upon which fiction draws as easily as it does upon other texts of literature" (142). Just as references to literary works or characters can enrich a novel or provide grounds for comparison, so too can references to history. We could again draw on the many examples of historical events that enrich Le Clézio's novels. Hutcheon also discusses how historical intertext can be used to reconstruct history, citing how John Barth, in *The Sot-Weed Factor*, "rewrites history, taking considerable liberties: sometimes inventing characters and events, sometimes parodically inverting the tone and mode of the intertexts, sometimes offering connections where gaps occur in the historical record" (132). *Onitsha*, while set in the historical past, includes figures not typically mentioned in historical accounts. Fintan's parents, for example, are not portrayed as the characteristic European civil servant and his wife. Instead of embracing the colonial lifestyle, Geoffroy and Maou reject it. Geoffroy spends his free time researching African myths, while Maou shows contempt for the colonials: "elle avait trouvé cette société de fonctionnaires sentencieux et ennuyeux, habillés de costumes ridicules et coiffés de casques, qui passait leur temps à bridger, à boire et à s'espionner, et leurs épouses, engoncées dans leurs principes respectables, comptant leurs sous et parlant durement à leurs boys, en attendant le billet de retour vers l'Angleterre" (168). Fintan, too, rejects the socks and shoes that

are typical European garb and opts instead for running barefoot like his friend Bony. Just as Assia Djebar rewrites women into history in novels such as *L'amour, la fantasia*, Le Clézio often writes in minorities and the marginalized. The victims of society who are left out of History or who are underrepresented in it—the poor, the homeless, immigrants, and those who understand and support them—are painted in a positive light within a historical framework. Again, this follows Hutcheon's distinction between historical fiction and historiographic metafiction. Where the former presents "types," the latter presents "ex-centric" (67) characters, those who are "outside" (or traditionally seen as such), and who can provide a new perspective on things past. Furthermore, intertext is not limited to the literary or historical: "In historiographic metafiction, it is not just (serious or popular) literature and history that form the discourses of postmodernism. Everything from comic books and fairy tales to almanacs and newspapers provide historiographic metafiction with culturally significant intertexts" (Hutcheon 133). As we saw with *Le procès-verbal*, Le Clézio uses newspaper clippings to reference events outside, but related to, the story. In other works, he references music, film, poetry, journals and photographs. I will discuss the incorporation of the past through such documents in Chapter Five.

Another difference that Hutcheon points out between the historical novel and historiographic metafiction is the treatment of historical figures:

Lukács's third major defining characteristic of the historical novel is its relegation of historical personages to secondary roles. [. . .] In many historical novels, the real figures of the past are deployed to validate or authenticate the fictional world by their presence, as if to hide the joins between fiction and history in a formal and ontological sleight of hand. The metafictional self-reflexivity of postmodern novels prevents any such

subterfuge, and poses the ontological join as a problem: how do we know the past? What do (what can) we know of it now? (114-115)

The presence of the poet Arthur Rimbaud in *La quarantaine* illustrates this point. *La quarantaine* is a novel with multiple intertextual references: poets mentioned include Shelley, Longfellow, Hugo and Verlaine, all of whom are favorites of Suzanne Archambau (20). The novel is also rich with historical intertext. These references help define both the time of the narrative and the characters that populate it. Arthur Rimbaud, however, is not simply mentioned as a poet of the time. He is a character in the novel, as is Paul Verlaine. Both interact (Rimbaud to a much greater extent) with other characters. In *Narratology*, Mieke Bal defines referential characters and their importance in a narrative:

All these characters, which we could label *referential* characters because of their obvious slots in a frame of reference, act according to the pattern that we are familiar with from other sources. Or not. In both cases, the image we receive of them is determined to a large extent by the confrontation between, on the one hand, our previous knowledge and the expectations it creates, and on the other, the realization of the character in the narrative. Opting for a referential character implies, in this respect, opting for such confrontation. The ensuing determination, and the extent to which it is realized, may therefore be an interesting object for research. (83)

Rimbaud's encounters with fictional characters in *La quarantaine* go beyond making the fictional world seem real; there is confrontation between reality and fiction, and at times the lines between the characters' lives are blurred. The encounters are brief, but some are told repeatedly, thereby underscoring their importance. First, the two poets appear in a café where Jacques (only nine at the time) sits waiting for his uncle. True to Rimbaud's reputation, the novel portrays the

young poet as drunk, troubled and belligerent; and, since Rimbaud and Verlaine leave the café together, alludes to their relationship. The narrator continues to situate Jacques and his younger brother Léon's childhood with respect to Rimbaud's life: "lui, le voyageur, a parcouru les extrémités de la terre. Et tandis qu'il quittait tout pour Aden et Harrar, pour le ciel qui brûle jusqu'aux os, Jacques et Léon devenaient grands, apprenaient à vivre dans la solitude. Léon avait appris par cœur *Le bateau ivre*, *Voyelles*, *Les assis*, que Jacques avait recopiés pour lui dans ses cahiers d'école" (25). Rimbaud appears again when Jacques and Léon stop in Aden on their way to Mauritius. This time, although not mentioned by name, the poet is recognizable because of the location (Aden), the nature of his injury (the patient is refusing amputation of his bandaged leg), and, above all, the narrator's reference to Jacques's first encounter with the poet. While Rimbaud and Verlaine's presence is minimal as far as narrative space is concerned, their thematic importance is greater. In fact, Jacques's grandson Léon, who narrates parts of the novel, draws many parallels between Léon's great-uncle (also named Léon) and Rimbaud, both of whom disappeared in the summer of 1891 (Rimbaud died in November of that year). Léon also links Rimbaud to Anna when he sees her lying in bed: "Je ne sais pourquoi, j'ai pensé à Rimbaud sur son lit de mort, à l'hôpital de la Conception. C'est vrai que lui aussi empoisonnait les chiens de Harrar, sans doute pas pour les mêmes raisons—mais qui sait?" (504). Because of his family's encounters with Rimbaud, Léon feels a connection to the poet, a link that leads him to retrace Rimbaud's last steps. The novel ends with Léon visiting the site where Rimbaud died. In some ways, the young narrator's life (story)—and the novel itself—are defined by Rimbaud's life, which was inextricably bound with the older Leon's life. As a young boy, because of stories told to him by his grandmother, the younger Leon quite innocently attributes to Rimbaud the status of family: "C'est à lui que je pense, encore. Je m'en souviens, j'avais dix ou onze ans, ma grand-

mère m'avait parlé de ce qui s'était passé, ce soir-là, dans le bistrot de Saint-Sulpice, elle m'avait lu des passages du *Bateau ivre*, je lui ai demandé: 'Mais ton Rimbaud, est-ce que c'est comme un oncle pour moi?' Je croyais qu'on l'avait caché, chassé, juste parce qu'il était un voyou, qu'il était parti en abandonnant tout le monde, comme Léon" (538). Léon experienced a sense of abandonment caused by both his great-uncle's and Rimbaud's disappearances. Perhaps more importantly, the notion of wandering (and consequently the lack of homeland and Léon's family's ruin), are related to the poet: "Comme si, après [Rimbaud], avait commencé toute l'errance, la perte de la maison d'Anna, la fin des Archambau. Cette image que [Jacques] a transmise à Léon, puis, à travers Suzanne, jusqu'à moi. En moi aujourd'hui, mêlée à ma vie, enfermée dans ma mémoire" (32). Léon's interest in his past prompts his physical journeys to Mauritius and Marseille, as well as his narrative journeys through the past, all of which together form the novel.

In what way, then, does the presence of Rimbaud shape or limit the reader's expectations? As a canonical French poet, his work and life story are well known. The interaction of fictional characters with Rimbaud permits the reader to situate those characters with respect to the poet's life. Since the character Rimbaud acts as one would expect based on historical accounts of his life, the poet's presence guides the reader through time, providing points of reference by which to measure the actions of other characters. Referencing Paris in 1891 would provide a reader who has knowledge of French history with a certain image. Mentioning the Paris where Rimbaud roamed the streets might provide those familiar with Rimbaud's life with a better-defined image of the Paris in which Jacques and Léon also grew up. Since Rimbaud plays such an important role, both as a character and a favorite poet of another character in the novel, his importance as a nineteenth century poet is accentuated through the

storyline. Going beyond the storyline and considering *La quarantaine* as a literary work, it is one which records (parts of) Rimbaud's life in a work of twentieth century fiction. The novel as a whole serves as (among many things) another interpretation of Rimbaud's life, adding to what readers may already know (or causing them to question what they think they know) about the poet.

Up to this point, I have discussed the use of historical elements to achieve certain effects in a narrative, which include providing a setting that makes a story more realistic or presenting a forum for commenting on the past (or various ways of expressing it). We might also consider how a narrative—even a fictional one—might provide a record of the past. As we saw in *Le rêve mexicain*, Le Clézio regards the texts of Bernal Díaz del Castillo and Bernardino de Sahagun as the memory of peoples and cultures that have disappeared. His documentation of rites and customs in *La fête chantée* also aims to preserve what would otherwise be lost. But can we expect the same from fiction? I have just suggested that *La quarantaine* provides an account, albeit limited, of the life of Arthur Rimbaud. That account is not complete, if that were indeed possible; nor is it the main subject of the novel. Still, the novel opens up this part of French history for the reader to (re)consider. Of course, the notion of fiction's ability to accurately represent the past raises many questions. But then, with the work of Hayden White and scholars such as Michel Foucault and Linda Hutcheon, the ability of the written word to convey the truth in historical writing has also been called into question. In *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, White credits his predecessors: "Continental European thinkers—from Valéry and Heidegger to Sartre, Lévi-Strauss, and Michel Foucault—have cast serious doubts on the value of a specifically 'historical' consciousness, stressed the

fictive character of historical reconstructions, and challenged history's claims to a place among the sciences" (1-2). White in turn proposes that "the historian performs an essentially *poetic* act" (x). This statement brings to the forefront important questions (some of which Le Clézio alludes to) about the recording of history. Is it possible to convey the truth about the past by means of the written word? Hutcheon suggests that no, it isn't: "Semioticians have recently questioned whether even the most direct of facts used by historians can be assumed to refer directly and unproblematically to a real past world" (146). One such problematic aspect of historical writing is the selection of what the historian chooses to incorporate. In *Les abus de la mémoire*, Tzvetan Todorov describes the politics of selection encountered by historians, which is linked to the "truth":

Le travail de l'historien, comme tout travail sur le passé, ne consiste jamais seulement à établir des faits, mais aussi à choisir certains d'entre eux comme étant plus saillants et plus significatifs que d'autres, à les mettre ensuite en relation entre eux; or ce travail de sélection et de combinaison est nécessairement orienté par la recherche, non de la vérité, mais du bien. L'opposition réelle ne sera donc pas entre l'absence ou la présence d'un but extérieur à la recherche même, mais entre des buts différents ; non entre science et politique, mais entre une bonne et une mauvaise politique. (50)

Based on White's and Todorov's comments, then, a historian's work is inherently fictive, poetic and political. This is an interesting statement to consider with regard to Le Clézio's oeuvre, since he is a writer of both fiction and non-fiction. If his work as a historian (non-fiction) is poetic, and if his fiction is firmly anchored in the historical, can one truly be seen as more accurately representing the past? Or, can certain types of fiction, such as that defined by Linda Hutcheon as historiographic metafiction, now be placed on equal footing with historical writing?

If “equal footing” is a stretch, Hutcheon at least suggests that we can no longer see historical texts as the only text-type with a “truth-claim”:

Historiographic metafiction refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claims to truth from that identity. This kind of postmodern fiction also refuses the relegation of the extratextual past to the domain of historiography in the name of the autonomy of art. Novels like *The Public Burning* and *Legs* assert that the past did indeed exist prior to its “entextualization” into either fiction or history. They also show that both genres unavoidably construct as they textualize that past. The “real” referent of their language once existed; but it is only accessible to us today in textualized form: documents, eye-witness accounts, archives. The past is “archaeologized” (Lemaire 1981, xiv), but its reservoir of available materials is always acknowledged as a textualized one. (93)

If we accept, as Le Clézio appears to, and as theoreticians now agree, that historiography (the writing of history), like fiction, is a construct based on (limited by) the elements of language, and that cannot live outside of it, we must question its ability to represent or to transmit the past. Or we might at least question its dominance over fiction as a means of doing so: “to re-write or to re-present the past in fiction and in history is, in both cases, to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological” (Hutcheon 110).

Keeping this in mind, I will continue to look at Le Clézio’s fiction and the different ways in which the author incorporates the past into his stories. We will see how fiction can be a tool

for (re)considering our past and its importance, and will continue to investigate the efficacy and value of fictional representations of the past. Is fiction any less capable than historical writing to “capture” the past and convey it? After discussing other means of incorporating the past into Le Clézian fiction in Chapters Three (characters’ remembrances), Four (embedded narrative), and Five (documents and photographs), I will return to this question in Chapter Six.

CHAPTER 3

REMEMBERING THE PAST IN THE LE CLÉZIAN NARRATIVE

While much of his fiction is grounded in the historical, J. M. G. Le Clézio uses other means to introduce the past into his work. How the past is remembered or preserved is an important aspect of his narrative technique: many of the author's texts bring up memories of the past from the onset of the story. A review of the opening pages of Le Clézio's many works points to the importance of memories, or the absence thereof, as a recurring theme. The first paragraphs (if not the opening sentences) either express memories or reference them. Often, the memories are of a person or an element of nature (the sea, for example) which have significantly impacted the narrator's or a character's life. The memories are so strong that the person has never forgotten, nor will ever forget, them. Alternatively, the references can be to what the narrator or a character has forgotten.

Several examples illustrate to what extent memory is an integral part of the Le Clézian oeuvre. The narrator of *Le chercheur d'or* begins by describing memories of the sea from his childhood, which have stayed with him: "Du plus loin que je me souviene, j'ai entendu la mer. Mêlé au vent dans les aiguilles des filaos, au vent qui ne cesse pas, même lorsqu'on s'éloigne des rivages et qu'on s'avance à travers les champs de canne, c'est ce bruit qui a bercé mon enfance. Je l'entends maintenant, au plus profond de moi, je l'emporte partout où je vais" (11). Likewise, Esther's childhood memories in *Étoile errante* are connected to the sound of water, described in the second paragraph of the novel:

C'était peut-être ce bruit d'eau son plus ancien souvenir. Elle se souvenait du premier hiver à la montagne, et de la musique de l'eau au printemps. C'était quand? Elle marchait entre son père et sa mère dans la rue du village, elle leur donnait la main. Son bras tirait plus d'un côté, parce que son père était si grand. Et l'eau descendait de tous les côtés, en faisant cette musique, ces chuintements, ces sifflements, ces tambourinades. Chaque fois qu'elle se souvenait de cela, elle avait envie de rire, parce que c'était un bruit doux et drôle comme une caresse. Elle riait, alors, entre son père et sa mère, et l'eau des gouttières et du ruisseau lui répondait, glissait, cascadaient... (15-16, ellipsis in original)

Similarly, the third paragraph of *Onitsha* announces that Sunday 14 March 1948 (the day that Fintan and his mother set sail to join the boy's father in Africa) is a date that Fintan would never forget (14). Like Fintan, Nassima (in *Hasard*) is strongly affected by a ship, one she sees coming in to port: "Le *Azzar* est revenu. Nassima se rappelle très bien la première fois qu'elle l'a vu. C'était quelques jours avant le 4 juillet" (*Hasard* 13). That ship goes on to play a major role in the story. In *Révolutions*, the narrator explains how Jean remembers a building, La Kataviva, where his grandmother lived: "D'où venait ce nom? D'Afrique, avait pensé Jean, ou bien des îles de la Sonde? Ou bien peut-être avait-il imaginé que c'était pareil à tous ces noms de Maurice, qui tournaient dans sa mémoire, venus de son père et à travers lui de ses grands-parents, ces noms drôles, un peu inquiétants, comme Tatamaka, Coromandel, Minissy" (13-14). In *Ritournelle de la faim*, the opening paragraphs are a written expression of the narrator's remembrances of the hunger he experienced during the Second World War. His memory of hunger has enabled him to remember things that he otherwise would have forgotten: "Cette faim est en moi. Je ne peux pas l'oublier. Elle est une lumière aiguë qui m'empêche d'oublier mon enfance. Sans elle, sans doute n'aurais-je pas gardé mémoire de ce temps, de ces années si longues, à manquer de tout" (12).

Le Clézio's short stories, too, demonstrate the importance of memory early on. "Chercher l'aventure," from *Coeur brûlé et autres romances*, begins:

La nuit tombe et avec elle vient le souvenir des peuples nomades, les peuples du désert et les peuples de la mer. C'est ce souvenir qui hante l'adolescence au moment d'entrer dans la vie, qui est son génie. La jeune fille porte en elle, sans vraiment le savoir, la mémoire de Rimbaud et de Kerouac, le rêve de Jack London ou bien le visage de Jean Genet, la vie de Moll Flanders, le regard égaré de Nadja dans les rues de Paris. (87)

The notion of memory is particularly interesting in this passage, since it suggests that literature becomes a part of us and remains with us—even if we are unaware of it. From the same collection, "Hôtel de la Solitude" begins: "C'était le souvenir d'une autre vie, pour Eva, un temps sans limite" (99). The same paragraph ends: "il ne lui restait plus que la richesse des souvenirs" (99), suggesting that our memories not only define us, but may be all we truly have at the end of our lives. Samaweyn, from "Trésor," remembers his father's voice and the stories his father would tell about the past:

C'était au temps où on n'égorgeait pas les chevaux lorsqu'ils étaient devenus trop vieux pour servir, mais on les laissait partir dans les montagnes, pour qu'ils rencontrent la mort dans l'ivresse de la liberté. C'est cela que son père racontait. Samaweyn se souvenait de sa voix, quand il racontait le temps ancien, le temps où les esprits habitaient encore avec les hommes dans Pétra, auprès des sources, quand ils commandaient aux vents et aux orages, et qu'ils gardaient le secret des tombeaux. (151)

At times it is not memory that surfaces, but forgetting. Characters may experience a failure of memory, which can define their lives in much the same way that strong memories do. The young narrator of *Poisson d'or* begins the novel by noting her absence of memory:

Quand j'avais six ou sept ans, j'ai été volée. Je ne m'en souviens pas vraiment, car j'étais trop jeune, et tout ce que j'ai vécu ensuite a effacé ce souvenir. [. . .] C'est pourquoi je ne connais pas mon vrai nom, celui que ma mère m'a donné à ma naissance, ni le nom de mon père, ni le lieu où je suis née. Tout ce que je sais, c'est ce que m'a dit Lalla Asma, que je suis arrivée chez elle une nuit, et pour cela elle m'a appelée Laïla, la Nuit. Je viens du Sud, de très loin, peut-être d'un pays qui n'existe plus. Pour moi, il n'y a rien eu avant, juste cette rue poussiéreuse, l'oiseau noir, et le sac. (11, my ellipsis)

Again from *Cœur brûle*, “Vent du sud” opens with: “Je ne me souviens plus très bien du jour où j’ai rencontré Maramu pour la première fois” (135). Similarly, in the opening paragraph of “Le temps ne passe pas,” David struggles to remember a girl from his youth who disappeared from his life: “Je ne me souviens plus comment je lui ai parlé pour la première fois, ni de ce qu’elle m’a dit. Je me souviens seulement du jour où je l’ai vue, sur la petite place au-dessus de la rue Rossetti” (147).

It isn’t only in Le Clézio’s fiction that we see the importance of memory. Just one page (excluding the prologue) into the biographical *Diego and Frida*, Le Clézio makes use of the image of fog to illustrate the nature and clarity of memory: “Tout se perd dans la brume du souvenir, tout est à la fois véridique et mythique dans cette première rencontre” (26). In the opening paragraphs of *L’Africain*, Le Clézio speaks of his coming to know his father: “En souvenir de cela, j’ai écrit ce petit livre” (7).

The above passages come from novels and short stories published after 1985, but we may note a precursor to this emphasis on memory in Le Clézio’s earlier work. Adam Pollo’s lack of memory in *Le procès-verbal* is of paramount importance in the plot, which I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter. In two essays, including *L’extase matérielle*, the notion of memory is

present, although more vague and implicit: “Quand je n’étais pas né, quand je n’avais pas encore refermé ma vie en boucle et que ce qui allait être ineffaçable n’avait pas encore commencé d’être inscrit: quand je n’appartenais à rien de ce qui existe” (11). The narrator here is talking about his existence as a human being, but the indelible nature of life links it to memory: our existence leaves a trace. Similarly, *Voyages de l’autre côté* mentions a memory of things prior to their existence: “C’était le souvenir des choses qui ne sont pas encore apparues” (14).

If the presence of memory and forgetting in the opening pages of Le Clézio’s works underlines their thematic importance, further reading underscores it: the recurrence of the notions of memory and forgetting permeate much of the author’s work. Based on the examples I have cited and on further character and plot development (which I will continue to investigate), it becomes clear that a large part of the Le Clézian character’s identity derives from what he remembers—or has forgotten—about his past. The faculty of memory makes the presence or absence of that knowledge of the past possible. In an interview with Pierre Assouline, Le Clézio admits that “rien ne [lui] paraît plus romanesque qu’un homme qui ne connaîtrait pas ses origines” (48).

In this chapter, I propose to discuss characters’ remembrances (or lack thereof), how they guide or limit the narrative, and to what extent they produce a “reliable” narrative. After considering remembrance and memory within the narrative, I will explore the possibility of narrative as memory. For clarity’s sake, especially because there is not a direct correspondence between the words used to designate memory and remembrance in French and English, I will pause here to explain my use of a few key terms. According to *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, the words memory, remembrance, recollection and reminiscence all mean “the capacity for or the act of remembering, or the thing remembered. Memory applies both to the

power of remembering and to what is remembered. [. . .] Remembrance applies to the act of remembering or the fact of being remembered” (“memory”). For my purposes, I will use remembrance as the act of recalling the past⁷ and as a “memory of a person, thing, or event” (“remembrance”). I use the term memory both as the power to remember, or to refer to what is remembered. In this respect, memory is both the concept that allows for the act of remembrance and the product of that process. Memory, remembrance and recollection can all be defined as *souvenir* in French. In English, however, the word recollection differs from remembrance in that it implies a conscious effort in the act of remembering. The French *souvenir* is often used in the plural with the meaning of memories or remembrances (e.g., things remembered). Memory can also be defined in French as *mémoire*, which, like in English, refers to the power to remember.

How, then, is memory associated with narratology? First, fiction allows us to forego the responsibility of truth-telling in a narrative while still writing about the past. A narrator’s or characters’ remembrances are one way to do this. Just as a secret or a lie might determine the structure of a work and the actions of characters,⁸ so, too, can a character’s knowledge or absence of knowledge. This, of course, would be true of a character’s remembrances. In the Le Clézian novel or short story, characters have different degrees of knowledge of their past. Memories may be clear or blurred, and therefore guiding, unhelpful or even misleading. Accordingly, the absence of memories may lead a character on a journey of discovery that may or may not be fulfilled. If a narrator’s or characters’ memories seem clear, the narrative, accordingly, may seem credible. On the other hand, weaker memory, or the absence of memory, may detract from narrative credibility. If a narrator’s memory is (at times or consistently)

⁷ Remembrance can also refer to a memorial, a means of commemorating past events, a concept I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Six.

⁸ See Mieke Bal’s discussion of “Truth Value” in *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (34-35).

unreliable, narrative authority, too, is brought into question: “A narrator may also be more or less reliable; in other words, (parts of) his account may be more or less worthy of trust in terms of the narrative itself” (Prince, *Narratology* 12). Consequently, if a narrator’s story or a character’s actions are based on memory or remembrance, which can be incomplete or flawed, it influences how we see those actions: whether or not we find the narrator to be worthy of our trust contributes to our understanding and interpretation of certain actions or, perhaps, the entire story. As Gerald Prince states, “the narrator’s unreliability forces us to reinterpret many of his statements in order to arrive at a knowledge and understanding of ‘what really happened’” (*Narratology* 13).

It is this link between memory and narrative structure that I propose to discuss here. Most of the critical work published to date on memory in Le Clézio is related to the idea of a return to origins. This is of considerable importance in novels such as *La quarantaine* and *Révolutions*, as critics Abdelhaq Anoun, Claude Cavallero, and André Siganos have shown. I would like to concentrate my analysis, however, on other representations of memory. Memory and remembrances, as we will see, can be a burden that must be borne, as in *Hasard*, “Le jeu d’Anne” or *Ritournelle de la faim*. In the latter, for example, the narrator states: “Être heureux, c’est n’avoir pas à se souvenir” (12). Alternately, memory and remembrance can be a comfort (*Onitsha*). Depending on its use, the presence or absence of memory can cause Le Clézian characters to be ignorant of their past, curious about their past, or haunted by it. Additionally, the “present” moment is documented as a means of preserving what, given time, will become the past.

While I would argue that memory is an important theme in many Le Clézian novels, I will concentrate on *Révolutions*, *Le procès-verbal* and *Onitsha*, as well a selection of Le Clézio’s

short stories. In addition to an inquiry into how the notions of memory and remembrance function in the narrative, I intend to show that those themes are reflected and reinforced by the structure of the narrative itself.

I begin with 2003's *Révolutions* for two reasons. First, the notions of memory and origins permeate the novel. More importantly however, Abdelhaq Anoun paves the way for a discussion of memory and the past in Le Clézio's work. In *J. M. G. Le Clézio: Révolutions ou l'appel intérieur des origines*, Anoun discusses the importance of identity and its relationship with origins, finding that "Le Clézio a un besoin pressant de suppléer le sens d'une vie présente par celui d'une vie passée" (7). Anoun discusses the structure of the narrative and how narrative elements, including memory, work together to construct the story: "chez Le Clézio, la part de la mémoire est plus importante que chez d'autres écrivains. La mémoire structure le récit par ses relais imprévisibles" (64). Although he works with a single novel, Anoun's study is an important one with respect to the incorporation of the past, and especially of memory, in Le Clézian narrative. I therefore propose to highlight some of Anoun's main points before moving on to discuss remembrance and narrative structure in other novels and short stories. I will show that the presentation of memory and the past in some novels is very similar to that of *Révolutions*, while in other novels and short stories it is quite different.

First, Anoun sees a return to origins as the foundation of the text. Characters look to the past, which is (re)constructed at the same time as the novel. Jean, for example, is anxious to hear stories told to him by his great-aunt, whose storytelling abilities are keen—no doubt due in part

to her blindness,⁹ a topic to which Anoun devotes an entire chapter. The importance Anoun attributes to Catherine's role is not unwarranted, as evidenced by the narrator's description of her:

La tante Catherine savait pourquoi Jean venait. Elle était le dernier témoin, la mémoire de Rozilis. Quand l'expulsion avait eu lieu, en 1910, le père de Jean n'avait que trois ans, il ne se souvenait de rien. C'était Catherine qui s'était occupée de lui, à Rose Hill, jusqu'à son départ pour la France avec ses parents, après la guerre. À présent, il ne restait rien de Rozilis. [. . .] Pour Jean, seuls les temps anciens pouvaient resurgir, comme des fantômes personnels. (*Révolutions* 104-05, my ellipsis)

The narrator reiterates the same image of Catherine as "the memory" of the Marro family only pages later, thereby emphasizing her role: "Catherine est la mémoire des Marro. Après elle, il n'y aura plus personne. Le père de Jean ne veut pas parler de cela, quand il est entré dans l'armée britannique, il a tout effacé" (111). Jean is captivated by Catherine's memory and by the stories it allows her to tell. Those stories, linked to an oral tradition, introduce the past into the present of the novel and contribute to what Anoun labels a literature of memory:

Certes le temps est irréversible mais le récit donne cette possibilité de le remonter. La littérature donne, en effet, cette chance de faire revivre le souvenir, elle permet de toucher au passé comme si c'était l'actualité, de "télescoper le temps" ; car en excédant la limite formelle de la phrase narrative et en en faisant une valeur d'indice temporelle, cette littérature du souvenir manifeste chez l'auteur le goût de la rétrospection. (Anoun 30-31)

⁹ A blind warrior in the novel *Désert* is also a storyteller, recounting legends and stories from times past to Nour and to Ma el Aïnine's soldiers at night when the caravan makes camp (365-68).

As the memory of the Marro family, Catherine appears to be a very reliable source. The narrator describes her memory as being “sans fond” (*Révolutions* 23) and “béante” (26): “Elle pouvait parler sans s’arrêter ou presque, pendant des heures, d’une voix très douce, comme si elle se parlait à elle-même: ‘Autrefois, du temps de Rozilis’” (26). But Catherine’s “trésors inépuisables” prove incapable of lasting. When her health starts to fail, she questions whether she is repeating or confusing things. Jean, too, begins to realize the frailty of his great-aunt’s memory: “‘Parle-moi. S’il te plaît, tante, parle-moi d’Ébène, de Rozolis, je veux tout savoir, parle-moi.’ [. . .] Elle était émue, et sa mémoire défaillante était une fissure dans laquelle tout pouvait s’en aller” (109, my ellipsis). As Jean watches his aunt’s memory begin to fail, he ponders the cruelty of losing something so valuable:

La mémoire est une chose terrible, pensait Jean. Jouissance et souffrance à la fois, une substance qui a sa vie propre, qui se développe et se rétracte, sans qu’on puisse rien faire pour la diriger. [. . .] Et c’est encore un jour qui s’en va, pensait Jean, encore un jour et chaque instant qui part arrache un morceau au temps passé dans la vie de Catherine, un morceau aussi indispensable qu’une pièce dans un puzzle. (113, my ellipsis)

Little by little, Jean loses his access to the past: “Il lui semblait que le temps de Rozilis se défaisait malgré lui, c’était une eau qui fuyait quoi qu’on fasse, goutte après goutte, on regardait de côté, on oubliait quelques heures, et des litres avaient coulé, s’étaient perdus à jamais” (263). Consequently, Jean is very aware of the limitations of memory:

Un long moment, Jean est resté immobile devant la porte, à guetter les bruits de l’immeuble. Un brouhaha d’enfants, montant de la cour, l’aboïement grêle d’un roquet quelque part dans les étages du bas, c’est tout. Plus rien à quoi s’accrocher pour appareiller vers le temps passé. Ce sont les bruits et les odeurs qui manquent le plus à la

mémoire, comme s'ils étaient les éléments les plus réels, la substance du temps perdu.

(356)

Over time, Catherine's storytelling becomes more about preventing the loss of memory than about the pleasure of telling or hearing the stories. Through that process, we see the importance of passing on memories, an idea reinforced by the fact that not everyone is worthy of such a gift: "Jean était le seul à qui Catherine parlait de cette façon. Elle n'avait jamais rien raconté au père de Jean, qui était pourtant son vrai neveu, ni à personne. Les autres ne devaient pas comprendre. Ou bien ils ne valaient pas la peine qu'on leur dise. Elle avait choisi Jean pour lui donner sa mémoire" (23).

When Catherine is no longer able to tell stories, it is Jean who takes over that role, telling them to her: "Maintenant c'est à Jean de parler, la mémoire de Catherine est en lui. Tout ce qu'elle a vécu, tout ce qu'elle a connu est passé dans son cœur, il parle doucement, malgré le chahut de la salle d'animation, malgré *Parlez-moi d'amour* et *Mexico*, de la même voix avec laquelle elle racontait" (359). This passage also suggests that memory, rather than being a function of the intellect, is instead contained in the heart.

Jean looks to the past for different reasons, one of which is to confirm his own identity: "L'essentiel de l'identité est à extraire du passé ; le récit retrace l'exploration de la mémoire (dans le cadre d'un milieu familial intime) réduisant et canalisant les forces de l'imaginaire au lieu de les libérer. L'impression générale est alors celle d'une nostalgie familiale" (Anoun 67). In addition to confirming identity, this retrospection also serves to help Jean make sense of his present:

Dans *Révolutions*, l'épaisseur du passé, ou du moins, ce qui en reste, sert à reconstruire et à rectifier la vie du présent. Ces allers-retours systématiques assurent la permanence de

l'être par un effet de rémanence et donnent une plus grande importance à l'action de la mémoire. Cette dernière devient une faculté réversible qui marque une fusion entre les événements d'un présent incertain, et ceux qui, seraient sous forme de cristallisation les traces d'un passé authentique. (Anoun 62)

Most importantly, Anoun describes a link, which I see in other Le Clézian novels, between the workings of memory and narrative structure:

La nature de la mémoire n'est pas tout à fait étrangère à la faculté narrative universelle. Il y a une large similitude d'effet entre l'activité de la mémoire et les procédés narratifs rétrospectifs du genre romanesque. Tous deux exposent à travers une certaine organisation d'événements plus ou moins riches de péripéties et de rebondissements, la référence à une genèse, la biographie d'un individu, l'épopée d'une famille, l'intuition d'un déjà vécu, la réminiscence d'un paradis perdu. (Anoun 59)

Catherine's storytelling is representative of how memory works. Like memory, and the structure of *Révolutions*, her stories are not told in linear fashion. Along with Jean, the reader pieces together Jean's family history based on Catherine's accounts, in addition to other sources, which contain varying degrees of detail and come from different time periods. Catherine may tell a new story, or retell one that she has previously told, but with new details. Of course, some of what she tells is a product of what someone once told her, who may have heard it from someone before him: "Elle hésite un peu, puis elle parle d'une chose qu'elle n'a encore jamais dite, du bateau qui s'appelait la *Rozilis*, le brick aventurier sur lequel le premier des Marro était venu à l'île de France avec sa femme et sa fille. 'C'est mon grand-père Charles qui m'en a parlé, lui-même l'avait su en écoutant son grand-père Jean Eudes'" (*Révolutions* 112). The lack of chronology in the construction of the novel and in the stories told by Catherine both imitate the

workings of memory. Dena Elisabeth Eber and Arthur G. Neal, in their introduction to *Memory and Representation: Constructed Truths and Competing Realities*, explain: “We do not experience the world directly. Instead, our perceptions and experiences are always partial and incomplete. The recall of past events takes the form of memory fragments rather than complete narratives on the unfolding of events” (5). Gerald Prince also identified a link between memory and narrative in Maupassant’s *Bel-Ami*: “Narrative is [. . .] linked to problematic memory” (*Narrative as Theme* 83; my ellipsis). Prince continues: “narrative expresses not the past but at best its (imperfect) recollection, not the present but its (distorted) retailing, not the future but its (often deluded) expectation” (83). This imperfect, fragmentary nature of memory is depicted in the fragmentary structure of the Le Clézian narrative. In stories where memory is not in question, the narrative is more chronological and cohesive. However, when memory is absent or questioned, the narrative reflects that deficiency through its fragmentary structure and lack of sequentiality. Fragments come together to structure the narrative, much as an archivist pieces together the past: “Le Clézio va bâtir sur le potentiel de la mémoire familiale l’essentiel de sa stratégie narrative: car tel est bien l’enjeu, l’écriture littéraire fonctionne comme un travail d’archivage familial et culturel” (Anoun 68).

Memory plays a similar and equally significant role in *La quarantaine*, a novel in which family is (at least partially) intact and very important. As is the case with other Le Clézian stories, the novel opens with a reference to what a character could not forget: “Dans la salle enfumée, éclairée par les quinquets, il est apparu. Il a ouvert la porte, et sa silhouette est restée un instant dans l’encadrement, contre la nuit. Jacques n’avait jamais oublié” (15). The first paragraph continues to describe Rimbaud’s entrance into a café where the narrator’s grandfather sat waiting for his uncle William, an incident that is central to the story’s development. It is to

that memory that the narrator returns to tell the story of his ancestors and to (try to) understand his past and present. In contemporary times (1980), Léon Archambeau recalls the story of his grandparents and great-uncle Léon's voyage to Mauritius in 1891 and their subsequent quarantine.

The narrator of *La quarantaine*'s search for origins is done through a retelling of family stories. Léon, the first narrator of the novel, tells of his grandfather's encounter with Arthur Rimbaud as a child and again as a young adult on his way to Mauritius with his wife and younger brother. Trying to retrace the steps of both his great-uncle Léon (le Disparu) and Rimbaud, the younger Léon starts with a story told to him by his grandmother Suzanne. Léon realizes the importance of relating a story truthfully, as Suzanne, who loved telling stories (often invented) once told him: "Fais bien attention. Ce que je vais te dire est authentique, je n'ai rien ajouté. Quand tu auras des enfants, il faudra que tu le leur racontes exactement comme je te l'ai dit" (19). Léon is clearly expected to remember what he is told and to pass it on faithfully. But Léon also openly admits to his failure in doing this. When telling the story of how his grandfather Jacques first saw Rimbaud, he warns that he is no longer sure of the details: it might have been raining, it seems he dreamed it all, or perhaps he's added his own personal memories—despite his grandmother's recommendations. Only for Léon, this is merely the beginning of a longer story: the search for his great-uncle of the same name who disappeared after being quarantined on Flat Island.

Because of Léon's namesake's disappearance, the great-uncle's memories have not become a part of the family history, leaving gaps. The absence of memory occurs on more than one level, however. It is also experienced by Léon's grandparents. As Jean-Xavier Ridon points out, the voyage undertaken by Jacques, Suzanne and Léon's great-uncle was in itself a quest for

origins, a search for the missing past, “For their dream had been built around an absence of memories, in particular those regarding the very reason for their exile in France” (“Between” 719). Despite the absence of the great-uncle Léon’s memories, the bulk of the novel tells of his experiences in quarantine, recounted from his own point of view. It is interesting that the story of the quarantine is told mainly from the perspective of the one relative (of three) who left no trace, aside from what the others could tell about him. The novel recounts moments that couldn’t be known to anyone but those who were never seen again: “In the absence of a history, it is a memory which the text provides. It is this memory-fiction which the narrator elaborates around the gaps in his story in order to construct an account of others’ memories” (Ridon, “Between” 722). The others include here the immigrants that were stranded and left to fend for themselves or to die trying. In essence, then, the younger Léon, through the retelling of this time in his family’s history, tells much more:

What Léon, the narrator of the novel, discovers, through the story told about the first Léon and the quarantine where he winds up, is the living memory of those immigrants forgotten not only by the authorities on Mauritius, but also by the history of these lands as it has been painted by the West. This history has subsequently been overtaken itself by the discourse of tourism, which has tended to function with the same partiality. It is for this reason that memory appears as a form of resistance against the official voice of history and, consequently, against quarantine itself. (721)

We might compare this notion of memory as a “form of resistance” to Tzvetan Todorov’s ideas on memory. Todorov identifies two forms of memory, literal and exemplary, and how they might be used: “L’usage littéral, qui rend l’événement ancien indépassable, revient en fin de compte à soumettre le présent au passé. L’usage exemplaire, en revanche, permet d’utiliser le

passé en vue du présent, de se servir des leçons des injustices subies pour combattre celles qui ont cours aujourd'hui, de quitter le soi pour aller vers l'autre" (Todorov, *Les abus* 32). Todorov further defines the two forms of memory: "l'usage commun tendrait plutôt à les désigner par deux termes distincts qui seraient, pour la mémoire littérale, mémoire tout court, et, pour la mémoire exemplaire, justice" (32). I would argue that the fictional representation of memory in *La quarantaine* is a form of justice for those who experienced indentured servitude and quarantine. By revealing another side of history, by encouraging readers to see historical events from a new perspective, and by emphasizing that we should remember those victims, Le Clézio honors them, which may be the only possible justice after so much time has passed.

Abdelhaq Anoun sees memory as a link between past and present in *Révolutions*. The same can be said for *La quarantaine*. Like Jean in *Révolutions*, Léon's links to the past consist of the stories he is told by others:

Julius Vêran ne quitte plus son cauchemar. Je l'entends qui prend les Metcalfe à témoin: "Remember Cawnpore", répète-t-il d'une voix lugubre. Jacques m'a raconté un jour ce qui s'est passé là-bas, au nord de l'Inde, quand l'armée de Nana Sahib a pris Cawnpore, et a massacré tous les Anglais, hommes, femmes et enfants, dans les eaux du Gange. Mais le coup d'œil que lui renvoie John lui répond clairement qu'il n'en a aucun souvenir. (*La quarantaine* 131)

While Léon holds the memory of this event because his brother passed it on to him, we once again see, similarly to *Révolutions*, the weakness of memory. Catherine's memory began to fail with age, and John Metcalfe's fails due to illness. Still, both novels communicate the value of passing memory from one generation to the next.

It is equally important, however, to consider what happens in novels where memory—as a link to the past—is damaged or absent. Several Le Clézian characters have little or no family, and therefore no means to access the past via their ancestors. If memory, too, is in question, the connection between past and present is severed.

It is fitting to continue with a discussion of Le Clézio's first novel. Like *Révolutions*, the structure of *Le procès-verbal* is fragmentary. Memory, however, no longer links present and past. In *Le procès-verbal*, the main character, Adam Pollo, is unsure of his past—he can't remember if he is a deserter from the military or if he has escaped from a psychiatric facility. The novel, while narrated in the third person (although not exclusively), does not have an omniscient narrator—or at least one that can fill in the gaps of Adam's past—he describes only what happens to Adam in the present. The narrator isn't privy to all of Adam's thoughts either, as he admits: “Il ne savait pas trop où aller ; il ne savait pas s'il aimait la pluie ou non” (136).

As the preface to *Le procès-verbal* suggests, it is possibly Adam's lapse of memory which isolates him from the rest of society. Adam does not suffer from complete amnesia, but most of what he knows about himself—and what the reader knows about him—comes from what Adam writes in or reads from his own journal, which is transcribed within the pages of the novel. We learn from Adam's journal, for example, that before coming to live in the vacant house, Adam threw his motorcycle into the sea so that he could pass for dead. We don't, however, learn why. It is also his lack of memory that makes his future uncertain: will he be held responsible for his actions? He writes in a letter to Michèle: “J'imagine qu'il va falloir passer sous peu devant un tribunal d'hommes; je leur laisse ces ordures en guise de testament” (130). This lack of memory guides—or perhaps limits—the narrative, which, like Adam's memory, is full of uncertainties. There are missing elements, words crossed out (but still legible) from Adam's

journal, and missing pages. In addition, the narrator underlines the doubt surrounding certain events: “Sur le dos du cahier, Adam a signé son nom, en entier: ‘Adam Pollo, martyr,’ Bien qu’on ne puisse rien affirmer avec certitude, il y a de fortes probabilités pour que le texte reproduit ci-dessus ait été terminé à l’endroit où on l’a retrouvé plus tard, par hasard, dans les W.C.-hommes du ‘Torpédo Snack-bar’” (225). The uncertainty of Adam’s past is thus mirrored in the uncertainty of the narrative. Letters (written to Adam by Michèle and his mother) and pages of a newspaper inserted into the narrative help to fill in the gaps: the reader learns more about the drownings mentioned earlier in the story, as well as a different point of view on the arrest of Adam, “Un maniaque arrêté à Carros” (252).

During his interrogation, Adam speaks of literature: “Je sais, on fait tous de la littérature, plus ou moins, mais maintenant, ça ne va plus. Je suis vraiment fatigué de—C’est fatal, parce qu’on lit trop. On se croit obligé de tout présenter sous une forme parfaite” (300). Perhaps this is a reflection on the validity of *Le procès-verbal*, which, much like memory, is not presented in a perfect form. Still, if the journal is not in perfect form because of lacunae, its importance is undeniable. Were it not for the journal, what would Adam know of himself? Based on Adam’s memory alone, there would be little to tell. In this way, the journal—the written word—serves as a crutch; it is a tool which holds and permits the transmission of Adam’s memory. The written word is thus the foundation for both the content and the form of the story. To what extent, though, does this imperfection affect the reliability of the narrative? Interestingly, the doubts and uncertainties expressed by the narrator serve to increase our trust in him, rather than diminishing it, by giving the impression that we, as readers, are being told everything the narrator can possibly tell us. It is not that the narrator is lying or withholding information from the reader; the narrator simply does not have more to share. There is nothing to doubt in the telling of the story;

nothing, at least, that the narrative does not explicitly state. This, coupled with the narrative assurance provided by the grounding of the narrative in the historical (as I argued in Chapter Two), contributes to the reliability of an otherwise fractured narrative.

While Adam's past is in question in *Le procès-verbal*, the novel does not present a return to origins, which is the case in other Le Clézian novels. Like *La quarantaine* and *Révolutions*, however, the narrative is constructed from multiple sources. What is known about Adam's past is presented in the narrative, but neither Adam nor the narrator attempts to reconstruct it.

The notion of memory also permeates the novel *Onitsha*, although memory functions differently than in *Le procès-verbal*. In *Onitsha*, the importance and function of memory is distinct for different characters. While one's past can occasionally be seen as a burden, memories are reassuring and comforting. Memory can also be linked to a strong criticism of modern society. As such, memory is presented as a means of imparting lessons, a way to avoid making mistakes by learning from the past. Additionally, memory can serve as legacy, a way to discover or confirm personal identity.

In *Onitsha* (and as is often the case), memory, through analepsis, provides a means of introducing past events into the story without disrupting the flow of the narrative. Mieke Bal explains how "External retroversions often provide indications about the antecedents, the past of the actors concerned, in so far as that past can be of importance for the interpretation of events" (*Narratology* 60). In *Onitsha*, we learn of Maou's past—her early relationship with Geoffroy and her and Fintan's life during the war—while she sits on the terrace of Ibusun reminiscing, or lies feverish under the mosquito net. Remembering can provide reassurance in difficult times, as demonstrated by Maou retreating into her memories when she is sick. It can also be comforting: "C'était bien de repenser à ce temps-là, dans le silence de la nuit. Elle se souvenait de ce qu'il

racontait alors, de sa fièvre de partir” (96). Memory can be a burden as well, and it is here especially that we can see society’s faults. One is often forced to forget or to let go of one’s past (and with it identity) in order to fit in: Maou remains an outsider in Onitsha because of her maternal language, Italian. Fintan experiences the same problem while trying to re-assimilate into European society after leaving Africa. At the Bath Boys’ Grammar School, Fintan initially lives two lives, one of lessons and dormitories and another, of Africa, when he closes his eyes. But living in two different worlds doesn’t work. Fintan, inadvertently speaking pidgin at the school, is punished for the disruption it creates: “Il fallait oublier cela aussi, ces mots qui sautaient, qui dansaient dans la bouche” (268). He also had to forget Bony in order to deal with the cruel boys at the school. “Il faut oublier” (268), the narrator explains.

Overall, *Onitsha* presents a constant struggle between what characters want or need to remember and what they are driven to forget. Forgetting is not always easy, however. Witnessing violence and the suffering of others leaves its mark, emphasized here by the repetition of *il ne peut pas oublier*:

Mais Fintan ne peut pas oublier le regard des enfants affamés, ni les jeunes garçons couchés dans les herbes, du côté d’Owerri, du côté d’Omerun, là où il courait autrefois, pieds nus sur la terre durcie. Il ne peut pas oublier l’explosion qui a détruit en un instant la colonne de camions qui apportait des armes vers Onitsha, le 25 mars 1968. Il ne peut pas oublier cette femme calcinée dans une jeep, sa main crispée vers le ciel blanc. Il ne peut pas oublier les noms des pipe-lines, Ugheli Field, Nun River, Ignita, Apará, Afam, Korokovo. Il ne peut pas oublier ce nom terrible: *Kwashiorkor*. (272)

Still, memories, even those of horrifying events, are beneficial in that they help Fintan to deal with his present situation. When being caned by a teacher at school, Fintan thinks of the

slaves he saw in Africa, forced to walk in ankle chains, in order to cope with the punishment.

Memories of Africa serve not only as a survival mechanism, but also as a source of strength:

Il fallait être dur, ne jamais oublier ce qui s'était passé. La mémoire du fleuve et du ciel, les châteaux des termites explosant au soleil, la grande plaine d'herbes et les ravins pareils à des blessures sanglantes, cela servait à ne plus succomber aux pièges, à rester brillant et dur, insensible, dans le genre des pierres noires de la savane, dans le genre des visages marqués des Umundri. (271)

Among the extensive uses of memory in this text, two aspects that I would like to focus on are those of the past serving as a legacy—a key to identity—and as a lesson for the present (or future). I suggest that Le Clézio tells stories in such a way as to lead readers to not only rethink certain events, but to learn from them, much as Todorov describes his own use of memory:

Ou bien, sans nier la singularité de l'événement même, je décide de l'utiliser, une fois recouvré, comme une instance parmi d'autres d'une catégorie plus générale, et je m'en sers comme d'un modèle pour comprendre des situations nouvelles, avec des agents différents. L'opération est double: d'une part, comme dans le travail d'analyse ou de deuil, je désamorce la douleur causée par le souvenir en le domestiquant et en le marginalisant; mais, d'autre part—et c'est en cela que notre conduite cesse d'être purement privée et entre dans la sphère publique—, j'ouvre ce souvenir à l'analogie et à la généralisation, j'en fais un *exemplum* et j'en tire une leçon; le passé devient donc principe d'action pour le présent. (*Les abus* 31)

It is in the novel's final chapter, "Far From Onitsha," that Le Clézio's treatment of memory is most pronounced. Through a letter (included in the narrative¹⁰) that Fintan writes to his sister, Marima, Le Clézio shows that in the absence of the knowledge of one's past, identity can be at risk. Marima, unlike her brother, never knew Onitsha. The family returned to France before Marima was born. Regarding her relationship to Africa (or lack thereof), Fintan writes: "À Nice, dans ta chambre de la Cité universitaire avec son nom d'anges, tu es séparée, il n'y a rien qui retienne le fil. Quand la guerre civile a commencé là-bas, il y a un an, et qu'on a commencé à parler du Biafra, tu ne savais même pas très bien où c'était, tu n'arrivais pas à comprendre que c'était le pays où tu es née" (277). This is not even a question, but a statement, since Fintan knows that now, after the war, Onitsha no longer exists as it once did: "Marima, que puis-je dire de plus, pour te dire comment c'était là-bas, à Onitsha? Maintenant, il ne reste plus rien de ce que j'ai connu" (275). But this pertains only to the destruction of the place; Fintan's memories remain intact and stronger than ever: "Je n'ai rien oublié, Marima [. . .] Même ce que j'avais oublié est revenu au moment de la destruction, comme ce train d'images qu'on dit que les noyés entrevoient au moment de sombrer. C'est à toi, Marima, que je le donne, à toi qui n'en as rien su, à toi qui es née sur cette terre rouge où le sang coule maintenant, et que je sais que je ne reverrai plus" (279-80, my ellipsis).

The passing on of memory here, through writing, is a personal obligation but also a gift, preserving something that Marima wouldn't have known otherwise and that defines her. Fintan has of course learned of this gift firsthand through his mother, who passed the time by writing in

¹⁰ In Chapter Five, where I consider the inclusion of documents in the narrative, I will discuss the importance of the letter itself.

notebooks¹¹. When the rest of the family left England for the south of France, Maou gave her notebooks to Fintan, in essence passing her memories on to him. Through them he learns about her and “the secret of Marima’s birth.” Even after 15 years, the effects are profound: “Après tant de temps, il sait encore des pages par cœur” (201).

Fintan’s memory therefore preserves the legacy of Onitsha and his sister Marima’s origins—for she was conceived there and we are told (and reminded¹²) that “à Onitsha, on appartient à la terre sur laquelle on a été conçu, et non pas à celle sur laquelle on voit le jour” (278).

If Fintan communicating his memories to his sister ensures the preservation of those memories, we might consider the novel itself as a means of preserving and conveying a memory of Onitsha. In a series of interviews on *France-Culture* (later published as *Ailleurs*), Le Clézio revealed the beginnings of his novel: “Et je suis en train d’écrire un roman, qui se passe en partie en Afrique et qui raconte des souvenirs d’enfance, des souvenirs de voyages que j’ai faits—ces souvenirs dans lesquels j’écrivais que je voyageais” (122). These childhood memories of Africa include the termites, heat, snakes, tall grasses and above all the “long voyage” (*Ailleurs* 123). Le Clézio’s novel, a work of fiction, is therefore a means of recording and sharing memories, much like Maou shared hers with Fintan, and Fintan with Marima. Le Clézio, however, shares with his readers, especially the person to whose memory the novel is dedicated: a friend of Le Clézio’s

¹¹ See Warren Motte’s “Writing Away”: “Maou no longer writes now; but Fintan does. Following his mother’s example, Fintan had begun to write long ago, during the ocean voyage from France to Africa. Even at that initiatory moment, Fintan senses that writing may provide him with the same kind of solace that Maou finds in it” (693).

¹² See 93, 185, 198.

father, M. D. W. Jeffreys¹³. This dedication reinforces the idea of memory as legacy, one that the author is leaving to others. The novel paints a picture of Africa at a certain time, a picture that is preserved as a novel, which then enters into the realm of collective memory, perhaps as a *lieu de mémoire*. Fintan suggests that nothing may remain: “La guerre efface les souvenirs, elle dévore les plaines d’herbes, les ravins, les maisons des villages, et même les noms qu’il a connus. Peut-être qu’il ne restera rien d’Onitsha. Ce sera comme si tout cela n’avait existé que dans les rêves, semblable au radeau qui emportait le peuple d’Arsinoë vers la nouvelle Meroë, sur le fleuve éternel” (274). The very existence of the novel, however, ensures Onitsha’s survival, or at least a representation of it. This (fictional) representation, as I mentioned in Chapter Two, may not provide an accurate historical record (if that were indeed possible), but it certainly portrays a part of the world at a particular time in history that may cause the reader to imagine, to question or to reconsider important events.

As a means of selection, memory is similar to historical writing, which, as we saw through the comments of Linda Hutcheon, Tzvetan Todorov and Hayden White, is also a process of selection. Historians don’t simply establish fact; they choose the most significant facts among many and record them, thus conserving some while leaving other, unselected facts susceptible to loss. We might see a comparison between this process and another, described in Tzvetan Todorov’s *Les abus de la mémoire*, which involves memory, preservation and forgetting:

Il faut d’abord rappeler une évidence: c’est que la mémoire ne s’oppose nullement à l’oubli. Les deux termes qui forment contraste sont l’*effacement* (l’oubli) et la *conservation*; la mémoire est, toujours et nécessairement, une interaction des deux. La

¹³ See Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi, “The State, the Writer, and the Politics of Memory”: “Geoffroy Allen, Fintan’s father in the novel, was in actuality the author’s father’s friend M. D. W. Jeffreys, a British social scientist who had published on rituals and practices of the region as well as on the kin ship between Ancient Egypt and West Africa” (159).

restitution intégrale du passé est une chose bien sûr impossible (mais qu'un Borges a imaginé dans son histoire de *Funes el memorioso*), et, par ailleurs, effrayante; la mémoire, elle, est forcément une sélection: certains traits de l'événement seront conservés, d'autres sont immédiatement ou progressivement écartés, et donc oubliés. (14)

This process of selection is not independent of other factors. In Le Clézio's writing, there are phenomena, such as war, which influence the preservation or loss of memories. In *Onitsha*, Fintan writes that war erases memories (274). The active nature of the verb "to erase" demonstrates the profound effect of this external influence (war) on the process of memory. Elements of our harsh modern society or of nature may do the same. In *Les géants*, Tranquilité's efforts to remember are impeded by the labyrinthine Hyperpolis with its harsh lighting and barrage of noise: "Mais la jeune fille a beau faire de grands efforts, elle ne se souvient pas de son nom, ni de son âge, ni de son adresse. Les courants d'Hyperpolis ne lui laissent pas le temps. Ils traversent l'immensité en quelques secondes, et ils passent à travers son corps en perçant des quantités de trous glacés" (117). In *Désert*, too, society and nature together prevent the retention of memories: "Est-il possible que quelque chose d'autre ait existé ? Y a-t-il un autre monde, d'autres visages, d'autre lumière ? Le mensonge des souvenirs ne peut pas survivre au bruit de l'autocar poussif, ni à la chaleur, ni à la poussière. La lumière nettoie tout, abrase tout, comme autrefois, sur le plateau de pierres" (412).

If sun, light, heat and noise prevent the preservation of memory, other factors encourage it. The narrator of *Ourania*'s memories of his mother are linked to the sensorial, particularly to sight, touch and sound: "Elle passait beaucoup de temps au soleil, je me souviens de la peau de ses jambes, brillante sur les tibias, sur laquelle j'aimais passer mes doigts. Nous n'avions pas grand-chose à manger. Les nouvelles qui nous parvenaient étaient angoissantes. Pourtant, je

garde de ma mère à cette époque le souvenir d’une femme gaie et insouciante, qui jouait des airs à la guitare et chantait” (13). The ability of outside forces to have an effect on memory underscores their importance. The powerful elements of nature and inhospitable aspects of modern society—themes that recur in Le Clézio’s work and which are widely discussed by those who study it—influence the narrative in that they may, through their effects on memory, push characters to behave in certain ways.

Memory also plays an important role in some of Le Clézio’s short stories. Often less defined with regard to locale or time, they comment instead on general ideas, such as how memory guides our actions. In “L’échappé,” there are memories so ingrained in Tayar that they cannot be forgotten. That form of memory is closely related to instinct, as when Tayar knows to press a sharp rock to his chest, inducing pain which allows him to forget the pain of hunger: “Maintenant, il se souvient. C’est son oncle Raïs qui le lui a dit la première fois, mais il le savait déjà, comme si c’était quelque chose qu’il avait appris le jour de sa naissance” (*La ronde et autres faits divers* 71). The power of recall is so strong that even what was either thought to be forgotten or disregarded may come back automatically:

Tayar reste longtemps recroquevillé, sans bouger, à regarder les étoiles. Il se souvient peu à peu de la place des étoiles, autrefois, il les reconnaît une à une, sans savoir leur nom, ni rien d’elles. Puis vient la lueur du lever de lune, vers l’est, une large tache blanche qui grandit dans le ciel. Il y a si longtemps de tout cela, que Tayar avait oublié comment c’était. Mais c’est plus fort que toute la vie, cela revient en lui, le vide, le purifie comme la faim et la soif. (74)

Despite the harsh conditions, there are some things that can't be taken away from us. Memory and instinct (which are so closely linked here that one wonders if it is important to differentiate between the two) allow Tayar to remember what the passing of time, especially time spent in the city, had taken away: "Instinctivement, il retrouve les gestes anciens, ceux qu'il avait oubliés en vivant dans la ville" (62). Again, while Tayar searches for water, we see a connection between instinct and memory: "Au fur et à mesure qu'il approche de la falaise rocheuse, son instinct l'avertit qu'il y a de l'eau, quelque part, au sommet. Il ne la voit pas, il ne l'entend pas, mais il la sent avec l'intérieur de son corps, comme un souvenir" (63).

The presence of instinct and memory in "L'échappé" establishes a constant shift between Tayar's past and the present of the narrative, although the use of verb tense doesn't always reflect these shifts. The story is recounted primarily in the present, following Tayar's journey of flight into a mountainous area outside of a city (presumably Nice) on the Mediterranean coast. As Tayar searches for food, water and shelter, he reflects back to times hiding out in a similar mountainous region of Algeria. At first, these memories of the past are in the imperfect, indicating how things used to be for Tayar. His memories help him to find his way:

Il connaît bien ce paysage, sans y être jamais venu. C'est le même que de l'autre côté de la mer, le même des roches, des buissons d'épines, des crevasses, des éboulis. Personne. Quand il était avec son frère, et qu'ils gardaient ensemble les troupeaux, il marchait ici, ici même. Il s'en souvient bien. Alors, malgré la nuit qui cache encore la moitié des choses, il trouve l'abri qu'il cherche, l'épaule d'un roc usé par le vent, et les branches maigres d'un arbuste recourbé. [...] C'est comme cela qu'il faisait autrefois, avec son frère et son oncle Raïs, quand ils devaient dormir au-dehors en hiver. (58, my ellipsis)

Because his actions depend on his memory, it is memory which guides the narrative. As the story progresses, however, Tayar's continued forays into the past are rendered in the present tense, only distinguishable from the present of the story through details, such as the presence of other family members. As Tayar lies on the ground, suffering from hunger and fever, he suddenly sees not the ants that he has been studying, but the past: "Tout d'un coup, il voit autre chose. Il est avec son oncle Raïs, sur la montagne du Chélia, du côté du soleil couchant" (64). Again, after Tayar realizes that he no longer has matches to start a fire—they were taken from him in prison—he remembers back to times when his brother would build fires: "Autrefois, dans les cachettes du mont Chélia, son frère rapportait des branchages, de lichen pareils à des cheveux, et il s'accroupissait sur ses talons pour faire le feu" (72). This account continues over the next paragraphs, but in the historical present, as if Tayar were experiencing everything now, rather than long ago. After watching the fire die away with his brother, we are brought back to the present, as if it were a dream: "Tayar rêve du feu, les yeux ouverts sur la nuit" (74). This constant shift—at times clear and at others ambiguous—invites a comparison between past and present. In comparing them, however, we discover that there is little difference between what was and what is in Tayar's world. Tayar knows what to do and how to find his way because of his past experiences. Whether it is through instinct or memory, Tayar has access to the past. And because he survived similar experiences before, he knows what to do. Memory, therefore, has the power to transgress time and place. Although Tayar is now alone and on the other side of the sea, what he learned from his uncle and brother helps him to survive. Tayar's shifts from present day to his memories of the past are reflected in the narrative: in both, there is little need to differentiate between the two. Just as the narrative goes back and forth from past to present, so does Tayar's memory. In this way, the boy's memory guides his actions and thus the narrative.

As “L’échappé” shows, not all Le Clézian characters partake in a quest for origins. Jean-Xavier Ridon finds that, for Jeune Homme Hogan in *Le livre des fuites* and the “petit garçon inconnu” in *L’inconnu sur la terre*, “Il n’y a pas d’éléments nostalgiques en eux, le désir de retrouver un ‘chez soi’ n’existe pas” (*L’exil* 73). Nor do all Le Clézian characters experience a lack of memory. They may be defined, in fact, by their memories of the past, without any kind of search for origins. In “Le jeu d’Anne,” from the collection *La ronde et autre fait divers*, it is the presence of memory, rather than its absence, that drives the narrative. For Antoine in “Le jeu d’Anne,” memory is extremely important. Antoine admits having forgotten some things, including what his father was like. But one particular memory, which he would like to forget (and cannot), determines his actions: “Il sait où il va, où il doit aller. Il n’a même pas besoin de faire d’effort pour se souvenir. C’était comme cela, tout à fait comme cela que tout devait se passer” (141). As readers, however, we do not yet know what that memory is, nor do we know what must happen. At the beginning of the story, we learn that Antoine is going to rejoin Anne. The third-person narrator then recounts Antoine’s journey in his old Ford and his thoughts—mainly memories—along the way. The reader learns that Antoine divides his memory into time before and after he met Anne. While remembering the distant past (before Anne) is disorienting for Antoine, he also finds it comforting: “Il sent alors un étrange vertige, d’avoir plongé dans le plus lointain de ses souvenirs. Cela creuse un trou douloureux au fond de lui-même, et en même temps cela le soulage et l’apaise, comme chaque fois qu’il s’échappe, qu’il se souvient du temps où il ne connaissait pas Anne” (139). We also learn that there is something that Antoine does not want to remember because it makes him suffer (140). There are clues in the narrative which allude to an unmentioned event that affected Antoine: “Du coin de l’œil, il voit passer l’embranchement du chemin de l’Observatoire, mais son corps ne réagit pas. Où plutôt, il réagit

en se durcissant, en maintenant sont attention douloureuse, la vitesse, la route, les talus qui filent vers l'arrière" (140). As readers, we are left to wonder what exactly the driver should be reacting to. The narrator also describes how a road which Antoine is familiar with, so much so that he could navigate it with his eyes closed, suddenly seems completely new to him. The newness of the road signals that this day is different from all the rest, leaving us to question why. As the story progresses, Antoine continues to remember. Memories that invoke suffering guide Antoine's actions as he remembers how Anne smells or recalls a day they spent together at the Observatory. Other memories, from before Anne, prompt Antoine to stop and walk around a plateau where boys from the city bring girls for romantic interludes. That is the one place where Anne's shadow is not, where she cannot come. Antoine knows she is waiting elsewhere, and so he returns to his car, knowing where he is going—although we still do not. Antoine's actions are the direct result of what he clearly remembers, even if he does not want to: "Il ne veut pas se souvenir, il ne le veut pas, comme si c'était un mauvais rêve qui, à l'instant même où il s'abandonnerait de nouveau au sommeil, le reprendrait, le ferait souffrir davantage" (140). The narrator also knows, as he hints at things without fully disclosing them. He tells us that, despite Antoine's desire to not remember, "cela vient, malgré lui" (140). The, reader, however, does not have knowledge of that event, and learns of it only as the story comes to a close, essentially remaining in the dark until the very end. The narrator and the protagonist know the past, but the reader does not, thus creating a reaction to the past rather than a search for it. Here, then, memory is present; and it is used to create suspense. It slowly draws the reader, along with Antoine, into "Anne's game" (as the title suggests), although the game is different for the reader. For us, whose knowledge is incomplete, it leads to a surprise at the story's conclusion: we have

known from the first line that Antoine was going to join Anne, but not until the end do we learn exactly what that entails.

With Antoine's memory intact, coupled with the narrator's seemingly full knowledge of events, the reader has no reason to question narrative reliability. Unlike the incompletely omniscient narrator of *Le process-verbal*, the narrator of "Le jeu d'Anne" knows Antoine's past, what Antoine feels and where he is going. There is no disconnect between narrator and protagonist that would lead the reader to question the narrator's knowledge or trustworthiness. Nor is there anything to suggest that Antoine is misled by his memories. To the contrary, Antoine's memories, which guide his actions, seem reliable. The last lines of the story indicate a sense of relief and of peace before the protagonist's last violent act. Indeed, heeding Anne's call and following the signs she has left for him has led him to the *trésor* (149).

In *Hasard*, too, a character's memories—unknown to anyone but himself—drive his actions. Nassima, a young girl from Villefranche, slips aboard a yacht and is discovered only after the ship sets sail. Nassima becomes an unlikely member of the ship's crew, which consists only of the captain, Juan Moguer, and its pilot. Together, they sail to Majorca, along the African coast to Tenerife, and across the Atlantic to Central America and the Caribbean. While the storyline includes a few cursory references to time (leaving Malaga in early December, Christmas Day at sea, and an inscription in a Bible which places Nassima in a school for girls in 1980), the events included in the narrative are limited to those of the fictional characters. Still, the past is important, even paramount, in the novel. Something that happened in Juan Moguer's past, an event the reader gradually comes to know more about over the course of the narrative, determined the course of Moguer's life from that point on. We learn that the life he leads (sailing, lack of work or attachment, divorce) is one of escape. When characters in Le Clézio's

fiction do not have memories, they search for them. Alternately, when characters do have memories, as in *Hasard* or “Le jeu d’Anne,” they help to determine those characters’ future actions and life course—good or bad—and it often takes time and effort to come to terms with them.

Another short story, “Hôtel de la Solitude,” from the collection *Cœur brûle*, is very brief (only five pages); but it, too, is rich with memory. In many ways, the story is similar to “Le jeu d’Anne.” Both are narrated in the third person and deal not with the absence, but the presence of memories. In “Hôtel de la Solitude,” the narrator tells about Eva, an older woman who is alone in a hotel room, waiting for death. Eva passes her time recalling her past, which now seems like another world to her: “elle se remémorait tout ce qu’elle avait connu, tout ce qu’elle avait vécu” (100). Eva had a rich life, full of travel, adventure, fame, wealth and love, but now only memories remain: “Ici, à Almuñecar, hôtel de la Solitude, Eva ne possédait plus rien, même plus assez d’argent pour continuer à vivre. Rien que ces souvenirs heureux, l’illusion de l’éternel retour, et la certitude à peine voilée de la nécessité de s’en aller bientôt, pour toujours” (102-03). Again, we see the written word used as reinforcement for memory. To avoid confusing all the cities “toutes différentes et pourtant si semblables” (100) that Eva had visited, she refers to open books set out on the tables. Eva turns the pages of the books “peut-être pour exorciser la mort” (100), as if happy memories could keep death at bay. She reminisces about time spent in Colón, Buenos Aires and Colima, remembering even the names of the hotels she stayed in.

Despite the similarities with “Le jeu d’Anne,” the narrator of “Hôtel de la Solitude” does not slowly reveal Eva’s memories to create suspense, and the memories do not bring about the story’s conclusion. Eva’s death seems a foregone conclusion; she even jokes about it with the concierge. When he comments on the weather, “Les pluies vont bientôt commencer, la morte-

saison,” Eva’s response is telling: “Ma saison, donc” (102). Her memories, rather than leading to her death, might not drive it away, but they do comfort her as she waits for it.

“Vent du sud,” also from the collection *Cœur brûle*, is different in that the protagonist and narrator, Tupa, tells little about the present. In fact, the story has virtually no action in the present day. The opening sentence, which I cited earlier in this chapter, situates the narrator in the present through the comment “je ne me souviens plus” (135). Aside from the periodic use of the verb *se souvenir*, which serves to remind us that the narrator is reminiscing, and a couple references to the present day, the entire story is narrated in the past. What is more, the few references to the present are uncertain. For example, we do not know the narrator’s real name, only the *maohi* name, Tupa, given to him by Maramu. Tupa mentions only what he has heard about Maramu’s son, whom Tupa never met: “Il paraît à présent qu’il travaille dans un hôtel, à Hawaii” (137). Tupa knows as little about Maramu: “De Maramu je ne sais plus grand-chose. Quelqu’un m’a dit qu’elle s’était mariée avec Tomy et qu’elle avait fait le tour du monde” (148). Immediately after both of the aforementioned statements, the narrator makes the following comment: “Le temps a passé” (137, 148). The narrator therefore attributes his lack of knowledge to the passing of time. His uncertainty of Maramu’s and Johnny’s whereabouts in the present, expressed through the verb *paraître* and the expression “someone told me,” only accentuates the importance of the past to the narrator. Tupa tells of time spent with Maramu, his father’s mistress and a very influential person in Tupa’s childhood after his mother left. The boy recalls memories of Maramu and the painful departure of the young woman from his life that eventually, as time passes, fade to memory. There is no omniscience, only what Tupa remembers or does not remember. He remembers Maramu coming to get medicine for her son, how she sat, how she would sing, the song playing when she took him to a bar, and the stories she would tell him on

the terrace, each remembrance introduced by the often-repeated “je me souviens.” Here, as in other Le Clézian stories, memory is linked to the sensorial. Tupa remembers Maramu’s appearance, her voice and her stories. Maramu, too, tells Tupa what she remembers of his mother. Overall, the short story demonstrates how the importance of events that seem paramount in one’s life eventually diminishes with time: “Le temps a passé. Vous dites des choses, vous avez mal et vous pensez que vous pouvez en mourir, et quelques années plus tard ce n’est plus qu’un souvenir” (148).

In this chapter, I have discussed how remembrance and memory are important themes which often appear early and figure prominently in Le Clézio’s novels and short stories. Memories help to define characters and determine their identity. The presence or absence of memories often drives the narrative since characters either go in search of their past or try to escape it. Memory is also (to varying degrees) reflected in the structure of the narrative itself. Gerald Prince describes how narrative can be representative of life, but I find that his comments apply equally well to the relationship between memory and narrative:

The past is not recaptured. The self is not illuminated. The riddle cannot be solved.

Though it does provide a fragile sketch of or blueprint for the (re)construction of a life or a world, narrative does not fully restore what was and does not conquer time, forgetfulness, and death. But perhaps, from a narrative point of view, these failures are not to be deplored. After all and paradoxically, they can be said to signify narrative’s mimetic power and adequacy, since they reflect the elusiveness, discontinuity, and problematic nature of life and self. Besides, the primary function and importance of narrative may well be semiotic rather than mimetic, or even constitutive rather than

imitative. If narrative is the (imperfect) record of something that happened, even more it is the manifestation, recognition, and reminder that something happened. If narrative represents (my) life, even more it constitutes it. (*Narrative as Theme* 131-32)

If narrative can both represent and constitute life, I would argue that it can both represent and constitute memory. After all, both are inherently “discontinuous,” “problematic” and “imperfect.” Struggling against those qualities of memory, we turn to narrative to record the past. In turn, narrative serves as a very fittingly imperfect means of storing our memories. Le Clézio seems to understand this, and to play with the idea. As imperfect as memory may be, or as imperfect as the system of language is to express ourselves and the world around us, we see through Le Clézio’s work that writing is still a necessity and a positive channel for transmitting memory.

In addition to introducing the past in the narrative through historical detail (as I discussed in Chapter Two) or remembrance, Le Clézio incorporates the past by means of other narrative devices, including embedded narrative, journals, photographs and other documents. In the two chapters that follow, I will continue to look at the past in Le Clézian fiction through a study of the use of embedded narrative. In Chapter Four, I will define this concept and discuss its use in four novels. Chapter five will be an extension of this discussion, dealing more specifically with documents, maps, and photographs, including how they are used to incorporate the past in the Le Clézian novel or short story.

CHAPTER 4

EMBEDDING THE PAST IN THE LE CLÉZIAN NARRATIVE

The use of embedded narrative has a long history, dating from often-cited early works such as *The Arabian Nights* and *The Canterbury Tales*. French literature, too, has long made use of this narrative tool, widely used during the eighteenth century with the epistolary novel and famously used by Prévost in *Manon Lescaut*. Chateaubriand's *René* and Balzac's *Le lys dans la vallée* are examples of embedded narrative from the 1800s, a century in which "embedded stories thrive" (Shryock 1). An important example from the early twentieth century is of course André Gide's *Les faux-monnayeurs*, which makes use of the mise en abyme, the "purest" form of embedded narrative, by presenting a character who is writing a book itself called *Les faux-monnayeurs*. Touching on the history of the narrative device in his *Tales of Storytelling: Embedded Narrative in Modern French Fiction*, Richard Shryock states: "[embedded stories] virtually disappear at the time of the New Novel in the 1950s and 60s. However, as Michel Tournier's *La goutte d'or* of 1985 shows, embedded narrative still is used in the "post"-New Novel era" (1). Of course, there are still examples of embedded narrative associated with the nouveau roman, such as Michel Butor's *L'emploi du temps* (1956). Le Clézio, too, was writing at this time, and his work certainly shows that the use of embedded narrative is alive and well in contemporary French literature.

In this chapter, I will discuss this narrative device that Le Clézio has embraced throughout his career. In 1963's *Le procès-verbal*, pages from Adam Pollo's first-person journal entries are interspersed within a mostly third-person primary narrative, as are letters, lines of

poetry and prayer, excerpts of books and even pages from the newspaper which describe events that occur in the novel. *Le livre des fuites* (1969) also has embedded narratives, including an obituary for a tree, song lyrics, chapters entitled “Autocritique” (in which the first-person narrator reflects on the process of writing), and a travel journal dated using the Revolutionary calendar (this same type of travel journal appears to a greater extent in 2003’s *Révolutions*). Since 1980’s *Désert*, however, Le Clézio’s novels have become less experimental and more “readable.” Among his many novels, the use of embedded narrative differs: some narratives are framed, others episodic. Indeed, some contain multiple embedded narratives of different types and at different levels. In order to discuss the use of embedded narrative, however, it will first be necessary to define the term.

By embedded or (borrowing Gérard Genette’s term) metadiegetic narrative, I am referring to a narrative within a narrative. Gerald Prince’s definition of “embedding” provides a much clearer description: “A combination of narrative sequences (recounted in the same narrating instance or in different ones) such that one sequence is embedded (set within) another one” (*Dictionary* 25). Difficulty may arise, however, when trying to determine what constitutes a narrative, for it has been argued that a sentence as simple as “I walk,” while “minimal,” is in fact a narrative (Genette *NDR* 19). Based on this example, one could say that all of Le Clézio’s (or almost any author’s) work includes embedded narrative—any work with an inserted letter, newspaper clipping or even a character’s direct discourse could satisfy this broad definition. Even the two lines surrounded by whitespace on an otherwise blank page of *Voyages de l’autre côté* would be considered embedded narrative:

Do cats eat bats?

Do bats eat cats? (134)

While this embedded narrative is not insignificant (as William Nelles points out, “Every embedded narrative, however brief or simple, must be considered to have strong potential for structural/formal, dramatic/proairetic, and thematic/hermeneutic significance by virtue of the sole fact of its being embedded” [149]), treating every instance of embedded narrative—regardless of its length or relationship to the primary narrative—is too vast an undertaking for this chapter and would go beyond its scope. For purposes of this study, I would like to use embedded narrative in a more restricted sense and include neither “minimal” narrative nor direct discourse, which I will consider to be a change of speaker rather than a change of narrator (according to Nelles, a character may speak without narrating [124]) unless, of course, a character’s speech is used to bring the past into the story (as opposed to asking or answering a question or making a statement, which, while it may be important to the story or to the development of a character, does not significantly alter/interrupt the narrative in which it is located).

What, then, constitutes embedded narrative? In his *Tales of Storytelling*, Richard Shryock points out that it is a character narrating in the place of the main narrator—among other shifts in the narrative situation that “fundamentally [alter] the narrative situation” (1)—that differentiates an embedded story from another part of a narrative, yet he finishes by limiting his own definition to “a shift in the *production* of the narrative from one source to another” (2). Following his lead, I propose to use a similarly restricted definition of embedded narrative here and will include text offset from or included within the primary (or any subsequent or subordinate) narrative with events narrated by a different narrator or by the same narrator, but with different focalization or a different implied reader. It is perhaps also prudent to clarify the term “primary narrative,” which I use to designate narrative order rather than importance. Responding to criticism of his own use

of “primary narrative,” Genette explains that confusion would only arise if “primary” were understood as “thematically more important” (87). Instead, he argues: “One narrative can scarcely ‘embed’ another without indicating the operation and, therefore, without designating itself as the first narrative. *Can* the indicating and the designating be done silently or fallaciously? I confess my inability to conceive of this situation” (*NDR* 87-88). If the word primary suggests subordination, that subordination should be understood on the level of narrative: “It is a fact that the embedded narrative is narratively subordinate to the embedding narrative, since the former owes its existence to the latter and is based on it. The opposition *primaire/second(aire)* conveys this fact in its own way, and we must, it seems to me, accept this contradiction between unquestionable narrative subordination and possible thematic precedence” (90).

As we will see through examples of Le Clézio’s work, embedded narratives are of varying importance with reference to the primary narrative, both thematically and structurally. While this narrative device is not always used to introduce the past into a story, as with *Étoile errante*, this is often the case with Le Clézio: characters intervene in the primary narrative to tell their own story in place of the general narrator, characters tell stories about the past (which may or may not be offset from the primary narrative), or find journals or letters written earlier which are reproduced in the novel. Some embedded stories are more mythical in nature, not told or written by a character, but narrated instead in the third person as in Goeffrey Allen’s pursuit of the past in *Onitsha*. Of course, embedded narrative is not simply a means of bringing the past into the text; the embedded narrative itself is significant in terms of narrative discourse. How the embedded and primary narratives play off each other is equally important: one must be interpreted with reference to the other(s), which often means seeing the present with regard to the

past, or vice versa. By closely studying the narrative, I hope to illustrate to what extent the embedded narratives are historical, mythical or fictional, and how they interact with the primary (or any subsequent) narrative(s) using the typology Genette presents in *Narrative Discourse Revisited* as a guide. He defines six different types of metadiegetic narratives by function according to the “main types of relationships” they maintain with the primary narrative: explanatory, predictive, purely thematic, persuasive, distractive and obstructive (92-94).

While Le Clézio has written many novels that include embedded narrative, I’ve chosen to work primarily with four: *Désert*, *Onitsha*, *La quarantaine*, and *Ritournelle de la faim*. Not only do these four novels cover a significant span of Le Clézio’s career, from 1980 to 2008, they make use of different types of embedded narrative, which allows for a broad (if not thorough) investigation of this narrative device over the latter two-thirds of his (published) writing career. Perhaps most importantly, the embedded narratives in these novels work with the past in different ways. My discussion of embedded narrative will also overflow into the chapter that follows, which treats documents such as letters, journals, photographs and maps included in the narrative. To some extent, the division between these two chapters is artificial. A letter, journal or diary inserted into a narrative would certainly be considered an embedded narrative. Then again, journals and letters can also be considered documents (even historical documents). Therefore, regardless of which chapter I chose to discuss them in, there would be overlap from one chapter to the next. When making this decision, I tried to consider both the length and the function of the embedded narratives. Although an embedded narrative’s length is not necessarily a factor that determines its role or its importance within the novel, journal entries and letters are typically brief and therefore in many ways similar to a photograph or map. Interestingly, we will see that in some cases an embedded narrative which recounts much of a novel’s story can have

more in common with a short letter embedded in a novel than with another embedded narrative of comparable length, proving indeed that the textual space occupied by a narrative is not necessarily indicative of its function or importance.

Within this chapter, I have organized my analysis around the different types of narrative, beginning with an alternating structure then moving to frame narratives (which consist of, as the name suggests, a narrative that encloses another just as a frame does a picture), and finally working with novels that use a combination of the two. First, in the episodic or alternating structure, a narrator (or narrators) tells two or more stories in some form of alternating sequence. William Nelles calls this “horizontal” embedding and defines it as a type in which “texts at the same diegetic level, but narrated by different narrators, follow one another” (132). This is the case of *Désert*, a novel which tells two stories in alternating chapters. I am not the first to talk about the structure of this novel; Simone Domange devoted half a chapter to the topic in 1993’s *Le Clézio ou la quête du désert*. While hers is a general view, she has pointed out important elements that I will need to include in my analysis of the narrative(s), although I will discuss those points with particular reference to the past. *Désert* begins in the Saguiet el Hamra, a region in the northwestern Sahara desert in the winter of 1909-1910, and tells the story of “les Hommes Bleus,” men of the Western Sahara whose skin is stained from the indigo dye that is the hallmark of their clothing (Hoffmann 202). “Le guide” and his son Nour lead a caravan of men, women, children and animals across the desert to the holy city of Smara. Nour, we learn, is the son of a “chérifa,” a woman of noble birth: she is a descendant of Sidi Mohammed who was called Al Azraq or “l’Homme Bleu” (54). Like many other nomads whose land has been encroached upon by the colonials, they go in search of new land and the advice of the sheikh Ma el Aïnine. The sheikh is a historical figure who led the resistance against the French penetration of Mauritania

and “declared himself sultan early in 1910, proclaiming that it was his duty to free the Muslims from Christian control” (Abun-Nasr 370). This historical narrative presents the struggle between the nomadic peoples and “les soldats des Chrétiens” who were recruited among the Senegalese and other African nations such as the Ivory Coast and led by Colonel Mangin (*Histoire* 60) who defeated the Blue Men outside the city of Agadir on 30 March 1912. (This date is perhaps better known historically as the day that France established a protectorate over Morocco.) After the battle, the warriors who were able to escape began their march once again, this time toward the south and back to their desert, “là où personne d’autre ne savait vivre” (439).

This narrative is interrupted by another presenting the story of young Lalla, a girl living with her aunt in the slums of a city by the sea and at the edge of the desert. In addition to telling a different story set in a different time period, this narrative is visibly different from the primary narrative. The first observation the reader is likely to make when opening *Désert* is the large left margin of the primary narrative; nearly one-third of the page that would typically be occupied by text is instead whitespace. This isn’t true of the secondary narrative (which I’ll refer to as the “Lalla” narrative), whose text occupies the full page (normal margins). Lalla, like Nour, is a descendent of the Blue Men and is drawn to them. She often goes to the edge of the desert to wait for the appearance of one of them, whom she calls “Es Ser” or the Secret, not understanding what he wants but intrigued by him and his *regard* all the same. Lalla learns about her parentage and a more distant past through stories told to her by her aunt Aamma. Through Aamma’s stories (and those told by other characters), we learn much about the characters, their history and the importance of the spoken word in Lalla’s world. Passed down orally rather than in written form, a story may change over time or depending on the person recounting. Aamma is not immune to this; we learn that her stories are never quite the same, as she tells Lalla about her birth:

“Quelquefois Aamma raconte l’histoire différemment, comme si elle ne se souvenait plus très bien. Par exemple, elle dit que Hawa n’était pas agrippée à la branche de l’arbre, mais qu’elle était accrochée à la corde d’un puits, et qu’elle tirait de toutes ses forces pour résister aux douleurs. Ou bien elle dit que c’est un berger de passage qui a délivré l’enfant, et qui l’a enveloppé dans un manteau de laine” (89). Questions of memory, however, aren’t the only reason for variations in a story: “Chaque fois qu’Aamma raconte l’histoire d’Al Azraq, elle ajoute un détail nouveau, une phrase nouvelle, ou bien elle change quelque chose, comme si elle ne voulait pas que l’histoire fût jamais achevée” (120). Her stories, presented as direct discourse, are narratives embedded within the Lalla narrative which sometimes border on the mythical because of the lack of witnesses, as Aamma explains: “Personne de ce temps-là n’est encore vivant [. . .] Ce qu’on dit de lui est ce qu’on raconte, sa légende, son souvenir. Mais il y a des gens maintenant qui ne veulent plus croire cela, ils disent que ce sont des mensonges” (121). Those stories introduce the past into the novel (even events that precede those of the primary narrative) and in doing so affect the narrative situation, helping the characters to understand themselves better and the reader to know the characters and understand their presence in both narratives. The stories within the story thus serve a metanarrative function and provide Lalla with a connection to her past at the same time as they link the secondary and primary narratives. Between the passages recounted by Aamma, we see Lalla’s reactions, including what she likes, sees and feels as presented by the narrator. When Aamma tells of Al Azraq’s miracle at the spring, her story is interrupted several times to demonstrate the story’s effect on the girl. We first learn that it is Lalla’s favorite and that each time she hears it, “elle sent quelque chose d’étrange qui bouge au fond d’elle” (123). Aamma begins the story, but is soon interrupted by the narrator telling how clearly Lalla can see her ancestor Al Azraq, associating him with the man at the edge

of the desert with the penetrating gaze who seems to know when she really needs him. This story leads her mind to wander back and forth from the present to the past and to ponder the presence of Es Ser. Once the story is ended, Lalla continues to think about the fountain created from the water that springs forth from under the rock while “l’ombre de l’Homme Bleu se retire, silencieusement, comme elle était venue, mais son regard plein de force reste suspendu au-dessus d’elle, le l’enveloppe comme un souffle” (124-25). These stories told by Aamma demonstrate both Lalla’s interest in the past and her need for a link to it in her present-day life, a link so necessary that Es Ser is perhaps only an apparition to help show Lalla the way, a guide whose stare haunts her and whose voice is that of the wind (117-18). At the same time, the fountain illustrates the theme of narrative. Just as Al Azraq creates a source of water from the desert, his words create a source of stories for generations to come: “Peut-être qu’[Aamma] pense, elle aussi, à la belle fontaine d’eau profonde jaillie sous la pierre du chemin, comme la vraie parole d’Al Azraq, la vraie voie” (125).

Aamma isn’t the only character telling Lalla stories in *Désert*. Naman the fisherman tells the story of *Balaabilou* (Le Clézio published this story at Gallimard Jeunesse in 1985), which like Aamma’s stories is interrupted by narrative commentary telling what Naman is doing as he recounts or describing the reactions of the children who listen. We see the power of the storyteller through the fact that the children can hardly breathe when Naman stops speaking, and also through the representation of time, for it is as if the fisherman has the power to take those who listen back to another era:

Quand le soir vient, comme cela, sur la plage, tandis qu’on entend la voix grave du vieux Naman, c’est un peu comme si le temps n’existait plus, ou comme s’il était revenue en arrière, à un autre temps, très long et doux, et Lalla aimerait bien que l’histoire de Naman

ne finisse jamais, même si elle devait durer des jours et des nuits, et qu'elle et les autres enfants s'endormaient, et quand ils se réveilleraient, ils seraient encore là à écouter la voix de Naman. (148)

Another character who connects Lalla to her nomadic ancestors is le Hartani, a shepherd who doesn't speak her language but manages to communicate with her because of his way of living so closely to nature. Le Hartani teaches Lalla to look at the sun and really see the light, to appreciate the flight of a bird, to use her sense of smell to find flowers or shrubs, or to find traces left behind of old paths through the desert. The two come to understand each other and he, too, tells her stories. Even though they are composed of signs rather than words, Lalla prefers them to Aamma's and Naman's.

Unfortunately for Lalla, the time of her childhood that is filled with stories and exploring the dunes comes to an end. After a failed attempt at factory work, she learns that she is to be married to a suitor who comes for visits bearing gifts for the family. These visits instill fear in Lalla and prompt her to flee with le Hartani, to live with him and become his wife so that she cannot be forced to marry another. In times that Lalla finds difficult, she reaches to her past for help just as she does when searching for le Hartani after leaving her aunt's: "Lalla marche en regardant fixement l'étincelle, comme si la pierre lui donnait de la force, comme si elle était un signe laissé par Es Ser, pour lui montrer la route à suivre." (216).

Once le Hartani finds Lalla and they run away together, a new sequence of the primary narrative begins, with the caravan moving north through the enormous valley of the Saguiet el Hamra over countless days. The travelers experience fatigue, hunger and thirst. They also hear news of the Christian soldiers coming from the south, the west and the sea, continuing to push the inhabitants of the desert to the north. There is optimism, however, upon their arrival at

Taroudant, as they see the beauty of the place and express hope that the city will open its doors to them. This narrative sequence and the preceding one, both of which end on a note of hope for the future, are grouped together in a section entitled “Le Bonheur,” which ends at this point. The happiness fades with it, as a new section with a very telling title, “La vie chez les esclaves,” begins with a new sequence of the Lalla narrative picking up a few months after it left off. The reader learns that her journey with le Hartani (a journey which is never recounted) failed. Having been rescued by the Red Cross, Lalla makes the voyage to Marseille (where her aunt now lives) alone, le Hartani having continued his path south “parce que c’était ça qu’il devait faire depuis toujours” (265).

In Marseille, the hope Lalla felt is now replaced by fear. Through her wandering the city and experiences with others, we see the difficulties of immigration (a woman with a sick baby that was turned away because the child wasn’t authorized to enter the country, the crowded and filthy living conditions of immigrant laborers, the interrogations (and fear) of the immigration police, etc.) which are a consequence of the events of the primary narrative. Lalla learns to become invisible as a defense mechanism, to protect herself in a harsh environment. As the text alternates between the present and the past Lalla too moves between two worlds, both physically and emotionally (from the desert to the slum, to Marseille and back again; but also emotionally in the sense that she “escapes” her present through her link to the past, her mind wandering as she hears stories). She would also like to escape Marseille in this way, but finds it impossible knowing that le Hartani and Es Ser couldn’t reach her: “Ils ne pourraient pas la voir à travers cette taie blanche, qui sépare cette ville du ciel” (312).

Desperation and despair are felt in the third sequence of the primary narrative as well, which is subdivided into two chapters. The first continues the story of Nour and les Hommes

Bleus as the animals, children and elders begin to die of starvation and fatigue, the city of Taroudant having refused to open its doors to them or even to offer food to the suffering nomads and thus forcing them to continue their march north, this time towards Marrakech. In this sequence we learn that Nour and Lalla have something else in common. Like Lalla, Nour is captivated by stories of the past. The blind warrior tells the story of Ma el Aïnine, embedded in the narrative as are Naman's and Aamma's in the Lalla narrative. His story is also told in passages that alternate with narrative commentary. Also like Lalla, Nour is carried away by what he hears: "Ainsi, chaque soir, la même voix continuait la légende, comme cela, en chantonnant, et Nour oubliait où il était, comme si c'était sa propre histoire que l'homme bleu racontait" (368).

While the two alternating narratives up to this point show how the past has brought forth the present colonial condition (the African slums, the immigration problems in France) and how the nomadic people share a freedom long forgotten or unknown by the modern world, it has not shown the point of view of both sides of the colonial question. The primary narrator's focalization is certainly on the warriors of the desert and the various difficulties they experience, as seen through Nour. Ma el Aïnine is presented as a warrior leading his people in search of a new territory as the land formerly available to them is slowly swallowed up by the Europeans. The second chapter of the primary narrative's third sequence marks a difference from this point of view. It is introduced by a new location and title, "*Oued Tadla, 18 juin 1910*" (373). While we are clearly in the same story as before, the focalization of the narrator has changed: the reader now sees the conflict from the perspective of General Moinier, his men and an "observateur civil" who accompanies them. The description of Ma el Aïnine is certainly different: "Il y avait si longtemps que le général Moinier attendait cet instant. Chaque fois qu'on parlait du Sud, du

désert, il pensait à lui, Ma el Aïnine, l'irréductible, le fanatique, l'homme qui avait juré de chasser tous les Chrétiens du sol du désert, lui, la tête de la rébellion, l'assassin du gouverneur Coppolani" (374). These stronger words used to describe the Mauritanian Sultan resemble those found in a more historical (nonfiction) text. *Realm of the Evening Star* points to the enormous influence of the "Blue Sorcerer" and how he "harassed the French in their efforts to push north from Senegal and add Mauritania to their colonial empire" (Hoffman 202). Also, "supported by his son, 'El Hiba,' he fomented trouble for them north of the Atlas—trouble such as the murder of [French Doctor Emile Mauchamps] in Marrakesh" (203). Hoffman continues to use words on the order of "harassed" and "fomented" such as "mischief" and "murder" while the French reactions are "reprisals" (203). This as opposed to the narrator of *Désert* who, until this chapter, describes Ma el Aïnine's move north more as a search and a flight in the interest of saving his people than of a troublemaker. In the fourth and fifth sequences of the primary narrative, we return to the focalization through the perspective of the Blue Men. The defeat of the desert warriors at Agadir in the novel is certainly described in harsher terms than a "reprisal": "Est-ce que le temps existe, quand quelques minutes suffisent pour tuer mille hommes, mille chevaux?" (436). Colonel Mangin and his army of black soldiers are painted instead as heartless: "Ils sont partis sur la piste de l'est, vers Taroudant, vers Marrakech, à la poursuite de Moulay Sebaa, le Lion. Ils sont partis sans se retourner sur le lieu du massacre, sans regarder les corps brisés des hommes étendus sur les galets, ni les chevaux renversés, ni les vautours qui étaient déjà arrivés sur les rives" (437). Returning to the primary narrative's third sequence, one could argue that it is a question of two separate narratives, the change of focalization marking a change in the narrative situation, thus indicating embedding. However, we have seen in other parts of the novel (in both the primary and secondary narrative) instances where the narrator's focalization

becomes larger, if only temporarily. In the second Lalla narrative, we see into the thoughts of Lalla's photographer and how he sees her, rather than how she sees him (we typically see her view of the people and places of Marseille). Again, and perhaps more noticeably, the third sequence of the secondary narrative is not about Lalla, but her young panhandler friend Radicz: not only his actions but also what he likes and feels. This changing focalization expands what the author is able to bring into the novel: different perspectives of, or new information about, the same events. At the same time, the changing focalization does not prevent the presence of characters in sequences that are not told from their own perspective. For example, although Lalla is not mentioned by name in the sequence about Radicz, the narrator does point to her presence at the end of it: "Pas très loin de là, à la lisière du parc des palmiers, il y a une jeune femme très sombre, immobile, comme une ombre, qui regarde de toutes ses forces. Elle ne bouge pas, elle regarde seulement, tandis que les gens viennent de tous les côtés, s'assemblent sur la route autour de l'autobus, de la voiture noire, et de la couverture qui cache le corps brisé du voleur" (396). While Lalla is not the focus of this sequence, she remains a character in it, a witness to its culminating event. In the third sequence of the primary narrative, we see a corresponding situation. No longer concentrating on the caravan of Nour and Ma el Aïnine, the narrator brings into the novel events happening elsewhere related to the same conflict: l'Acte d'Algésiras, other battles, and the betrayal of the Sultan's allies. Still, Nour and the blind warrior appear in this chapter, although they are nameless: "Quelque part, sur la pente de la vallée, au milieu des buissons d'épines, un jeune garçon est assis à côté d'un guerrier mort, et il regarde de toutes ses forces le visage ensanglanté où les yeux se sont éteints" (385). It is as though the narrator, while omniscient, chooses at times to concentrate only on certain characters, and can change focus but never quite loses sight of his hero or heroine. We might compare the narrator's role to that of the

prison guard in Michel Foucault's image of the Panopticon in *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*. Based on a model prison proposed by Jeremy Bentham, the Panopticon is a circular building whose prison cells have windows looking to the exterior and to a guard tower in the center of the building. Its design allows for the constant surveillance of its detainees: from the tower's central location, the guard can monitor any prisoner at any given time. What's more, since the prisoners cannot see the guards, the prisoners never know exactly when or if they are being monitored. Foucault's resulting theory is that prisoners will always act as if they are being watched and therefore do not require constant surveillance. The surveillance is thus "permanente dans ses effets, même si elle est discontinue dans son action" (202). The narrator of *Désert* has a role similar to that of the Panopticon's guard. From where he "stands," he is capable of seeing all of his characters. While the presence of those characters in a narrative may be intermittent, they remain within the narrator's view, and he occasionally returns his gaze to them, even if he is focusing his attention on other characters.

Through the changing focalization of the narrator in *Désert*, we have the advantage of seeing a different side of the conflict and have access to much more information, making the big picture (both each narrative and the novel as a whole) more complete. For example, the defeat that Ma el Aïnine's men face in later sequences comes as no surprise since this chapter (and also the section title "La vie chez les esclaves") certainly foretells his losing the fight.

We have seen some similarities and some differences between the two alternating narratives, but it is also important to consider how the two work together. The primary narrative takes place in the past while the alternating sequences of Lalla's narrative tell a more contemporary story. Simone Domange rightly points out the clearly presented elements of time and place in the primary narrative. Its sequences are introduced by them, "*Saguiet el Hamra*,

hiver 1909-1910,” for example, and they mention historical and geographic names within the text as well, while such indications do not appear in the secondary narrative (*Le Clézio* 114-115). The coastal city where Lalla grows up is never named, nor are any concrete dates mentioned, although the reader is able to glean general ideas from the descriptions and the characters. The presence (or absence) of places names and dates is logical when considering to what extent each story is fictional. Much more historical in nature, the primary narrative is anchored by actual locations, dates of events and also by historical figures. The fictional aspects of the narrative (Nour, the blind warrior and some elements of the story) are created around them. The Lalla narrative, while it may be historically accurate, is not built around specific historical events and people in the same way. However, the primary narrative grounds the secondary through their shared characters and events that have consequences for both. As Domange says: “le récit II apparaît non plus comme distinct du récit I, mais comme sa conséquence: la défaite des hommes bleus entraîne la colonisation, l’exploitation des peuples du désert, l’exil provisoire de Lalla” (*Le Clézio* 116). The Lalla narrative in turn adds value to the primary narrative by showing its continued influence (the power of the desert and the strength and freedom of its people) as it helps a young woman survive in the modern world. The alternating narratives in *Désert* are of therefore of equal importance. The primary narrative has one more sequence but fewer pages (150 compared to 269). Both are enhanced with stories from the past and the changing focalization of the narrators, and both add value to each other. They continue to work together through the end of the novel as well. The two protagonists who have common ancestry and experiences encounter difficulties in the harsh worlds they enter (hunger, thirst, flight, a search for a new home, the death of a friend), but after experiencing “La vie chez les esclaves,” both return to the desert. Lalla, like Nour and her ancestors, was forced to flee her home in search of a

new one, only to find a harsh, hostile and unwelcoming world from which she would need to make the journey back. But with the journey home comes freedom. Lalla returns to the desert alone to give birth—perhaps the greatest symbol of hope—to her daughter just as her mother did, in the shade of a fig tree and thanks to the *gestes ancestraux* that come to her by instinct.

Similarly, and even in defeat, we are pointed to the freedom of the nomads, the last free men:

“Ils étaient les derniers Imazighen, les derniers hommes libres, les Taubalt, les Tekna, les Tidrarin, les Aroussiyine, les Sebaa, les Reguibat Sahel, les derniers survivants des Berik Al-lah, les Bénis de Dieu” (438). So although Nour and the remaining Blue Men “s’en allaient, comme dans un rêve, disparaissaient,” we know their story does not end by the very presence of the Lalla narrative.

Nelles defines a second “vertical” type of embedding, “in which narratives at different diegetic levels are inserted within (Bal) or stacked on top of one another (Genette)” (132). Frame narratives, including classic examples such as *The Decameron*, *The Heptameron*, *The Canterbury Tales* and *The Arabian Nights*, would fit in this category. Much like a preface, the embedding narrative (the frame) introduces the embedded narrative (the picture) and provides a backdrop for it. Unlike a preface, however, a frame narrative picks up again after the embedded narrative and may provide the novel a sense of unity or closure. While both the first and final sequences in *Désert* are of the primary narrative, and while they are certainly linked to the secondary narrative and provide some introduction and closure to the whole of the novel, they do not directly comment on the secondary, and therefore fit better under the alternating narrative category. Both *Étoile errante* and *Ritournelle de la faim*, however, use the frame style of embedded narrative. While I will discuss *Ritournelle* in more detail, I will also touch on *Étoile* for purposes of comparison, since both are very different, especially with respect to the past. The

structure of *Étoile errante* is built around the novel's two protagonists: each of its five sections bears the name of one of them or of a family member. Or, one could say that all five names used as section titles refer to Esther's "family." The first two sections, "Hélène" and "Esther" are actually the same character (a Jewish girl during the war who is called by different names at home and outside the home). Esther considers "Nejma," the heroine and title character of the third section (whom Esther met only once), to be her "sœur au profil d'Indienne aux yeux pales" (315). "L'enfant du soleil" (the fourth section) is Esther's son; and lastly "Elizabeth" is her mother. These sections, however, are not simple divisions of a single narrative. "Hélène" is a third-person narrative about the 13 year-old and her family's experiences in Saint-Martin-Vésubie during the Second World War and their subsequent flight across the border into Italy. The second section begins in December 1947 in a different setting, Port d'Alon. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, Esther now tells her own story: "J'ai dix-sept ans" (143), begins this narrative. The change of narrator of course indicates a "shift in the production" of the narrative as Shryock suggests. Nelles speaks to the importance of this change: "the shift of narrator is thus the most prominent marker of a range of other important shifts and the most obvious point to focus on in studying them" (139). Because of the ellipsis that occurs between the two narratives (time has passed since we last saw Esther) and Esther's age when she begins narrating, it is as if the first section was an introduction to Esther. Her story was told for her when she was perhaps too young to tell her own, but when she reaches a more mature age, she is quite capable of recounting her life by herself. "Nejma," the third section and a yet another narrative sequence, is written as a memoir, which fact is announced in its opening paragraph: "Ceci est la mémoire des jours que nous avons vécus au camp de Nour Chams, telle que j'ai décidé de l'écrire, moi, Nejma, en souvenir de Saadi Abou Talib, le Baddawi, et de notre tante

Aamma Houriya. En souvenir aussi de ma mère, Fatma, que je n'ai pas connue, et de mon père, Ahmad" (223). As the third of five narrative sequences, this is the central narrative of the text. In it, the person the most removed (genealogically) from Esther tells her own story. The fourth section, "L'enfant du soleil," marks a return to the second narrative with Esther again recounting, now at a communal farm in Ramat Yohanan in 1950 where she learns of her fiancé's death (just after learning that she was carrying his child). It then changes to Montreal in the winter of 1966 with her and her son—now the same age as she was when she boarded the *Sette Fratelli*—ready to depart again to visit their native land. "Elisabeth" continues this narrative with Esther as the narrator, only many years have now passed (another ellipsis). The last chapter of this section, however, untitled and scarcely five pages in length, returns to a third person narrator as we saw in the first section of the novel. Because "Nejma" is the central narrative (structurally speaking), it is framed by the other two, and the novel could be broken down as such: N1, N2, N3, N2, N2 / N1, with N1 being the third-person narration about Esther, N2 being Esther's first-person narrative, and N3 Nejma's memoir.

While the novel is composed of embedded narrative sequences, none of them (as a whole) brings the "past" into the "present" moment of the story; the structure of *Étoile errante* is symmetrical but its timeline is linear. In fact, the novel is rather chronological, beginning in 1943 when Esther is 13 and ending with her, forty-some years later, as an adult scattering her mother's ashes. Nejma's story parallels Esther's own at that time of her life—and is therefore used as a comparison not between the past and the present, but rather as two opposing sides of a conflict (a Jewish girl fleeing during the war and returning to a homeland while a Palestinian girl suffers exile). This comparison leads the reader to reflect on an issue that remains on the forefront of politics today—are the (people involved in the) two sides so different? Or are both merely

innocent victims on opposing ends of the same struggle? Certainly both suffer because of the political and economic climate they grow up in. The embedded narrative then has both a thematic function (with Nejma's story a sort of inverse *mise en abyme* of Esther's) and, considering the novel as a whole, a persuasive one, as Le Clézio shows (and therefore encourages the reader to see) both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a more neutral perspective. Shryock points to this possibility of interpretation based on what I'll call the "big picture" rather than on what is presented directly in the narrative:

Not only do embedded narratives function within the diegetic level of the embedding narrative, they also have a larger function. Some narratives gain their significance not in the immediate context of the *énonciation*, but on a larger level of the *énonciation* that is not necessarily available to the characters present in the storytelling situation: this context can either be the work as a whole or 'outside' the text in the socio-historical context. (65)

Ritournelle de la faim, too, makes use of a frame narrative, but unlike *Étoile errante*, *Ritournelle*'s embedded narrative takes place in the past while the embedding narrative is in the "present." The former, composed of three numbered sections including 1) *La maison mauve*, 2) *La chute* and 3) *Le silence* (all of which are further subdivided), is framed by, in Genette's terms, an extradiegetic narrative composed of an opening frame, "Je connais la faim," and of a closing frame, "Les dernières mesures." In the opening, the narrator reminisces about the hunger he felt as a child during World War II and how his hunger has kept him from forgetting that time. He then introduces the embedded narrative: "C'est d'une autre faim qu'il sera question dans l'histoire qui va suivre (13)." This "other hunger" is the story of a young girl growing up in the years leading up to, during and just after the war. The general narrator thus—and explicitly—points out the doubling of the story-line created by the embedded narrative. This is also reflected

in the title, as “ritournelle” (ritornello) is a type of instrumental motif that is *repeated* before each verse of a song (we will see that this comes into play again later in the novel), but can be also be defined familiarly as “the same old story” (“ritournelle,” *Harrap’s*). Between the title of the novel and the introduction of the framing narrator, we know that the embedded narrative will be both similar and at the same time different from his own story. Both will be about hunger. The framing narrator’s hunger is literal; he experienced the lack of food (expressing in particular memories of bread, milk and salt) during the war. There is the same hunger in the embedded narrative. Ethel comments, for example, on how the majority of Parisian cats ended up in the saucepan. There is also a chapter is entitled “La faim,” in which both money and food become scarcer after Ethel and her mother move to Nice. The two even feel compelled to help Alexandre’s former mistress, who is nearly starving of hunger. In addition to this physical hunger, the embedded narrative also contains one that is figurative: Ethel’s son’s hunger is one for knowledge and understanding of the past, as evidenced by his visit not of Parisian monuments but of historical sites (such as the Plate-Forme, where Jews were held before being transported to the concentration camps during the war) significant to his mother’s life during the war.

The framing of the embedded narrative in *Ritournelle* is discernible in the content and structure of the novel, and is also visible by the arrangement of the Table of Contents. Furthermore, the organization (by chapter, at least) of the novel is symmetrical. The first and third sections are further broken down into 6 chapters, while the middle section is composed of two chapters. The reproduction of the Table of Contents below illustrates both the framing and the symmetry of the novel’s organization:

I.	LA MAISON MAUVE	15
	<i>Ethel</i>	17
	Xénia	28
	Conversations de salon	47
	<i>Les choses se sont précipitées...</i>	64
	Conversations de salon (suite)	69
	<i>Toujours le même bruit</i>	77
II.	LA CHUTE	91
	<i>C'est par Xénia</i>	93
	Le Pouldu	125
III.	LE SILENCE	135
	<i>Le silence sur Paris...</i>	137
	1942	143
	La faim,	152
	<i>Ils sont partis à l'aube...</i>	173
	Adieu	184
	Aujourd'hui	199
	<i>Les dernières mesures</i>	206

The embedded narrative is recounted in the third-person, with the exception of the last chapter of the third section, “Aujourd’hui,” which reflects two changes, the first being from the past to the present (moment, not tense). The second change is from third person to first, the “je” being the son of Ethel and Laurent who has returned to Paris 50 years after “cette chose atroce, impossible à imaginer, impardonnable” (201). He has come to visit the places that his mother told him about repeatedly, so much so that he memorized them. In fact, the street names so familiar to him are included in the narrative, presented in a list set off from the text which emphasizes their importance. This last chapter is then another level of embedded narrative (framed like the secondary narrative within the primary, but not within the secondary narrative, nor is it alternating as it is limited to one “episode” which concludes the secondary narrative). By moving to a first-person narrator in the present that is so personally invested in the story and still affected by it (Ethel’s son), the novel shows not only the Second World War as experienced by

Ethel and her family and friends, but also, in retrospect, the horrors of the war (those not witnessed by the characters and therefore not conveyable by them) and how much the war still affects the lives of people today. It is therefore through the structure of the novel that this is communicated rather than through a single narrator, which gives more of an impression of reality than of opinion being expressed by the author through his narrator. This technique is effective. Without the character in the “present” looking back, the reader doesn’t have a link between then and now, and may or may not feel as strong a reaction to the events of the past. Or, if the present-day narrative were told by the same omniscient narrator as the secondary narrative (about Ethel’s son rather than by him), the narrator recounting the character’s (re)actions or feelings could more readily be taken for the point of view of the author. As Genette points out: “Homodiegetic narration, by nature or convention (in this case, they amount to the same thing), simulates autobiography much more closely than heterodiegetic narration ordinarily simulates historical narrative” (*NDR* 77). Autobiography, as an account of a person’s life, is generally accepted as a form of writing that presents the truth, more so than fiction, including historical fiction. The homodiegetic narrator thus lends the story more of an element of truth, making it seem like the character’s feelings are truly his own (whether or not he is a fictional construct), and not feelings as seen or interpreted by the narrator, or even the feelings of the author channeled through a narrator. I say this because an omniscient narrator is more readily associated with the real author (which is not to say that he or she should be) than is a first-person narrator who is also a character in the story. If an author uses an omniscient narrator to tell about the past, but has a character-narrator come in to draw conclusions from that story, it takes the focus off the narrator (and perhaps the author by association) and leaves it squarely with that character. The reader is then given a connection between the present and past, but it is one from which a feeling of

“preaching” on the part of the narrator has been neutralized by the change of narrator/narrative. Shryock speaks to the efficacy of constructing rather than designating a position of reception, which is in essence what Le Clézio does here (as he did with *Étoile*) through the narrative structure:

A narrative is more likely to succeed if it does not openly designate a position of reception, because such a strategy is too much akin to didactic literature or *roman à these* whose social impact is often limited by the degree to which readers already agree with their stated goals. If a text is able to construct a position of reception from numerous elements in the narrative, it increases the likelihood of producing the (or a) desired effect because its narrative authority is based on a wider range of social codes that may already be shared by a real reader. (65-66)

As we have seen, the framing and embedded narratives in *Ritournelle* are linked both structurally and thematically. In *Narrative Discourse Revisited*, Genette points out that while the embedded narrative is forcibly subordinate to the main narrative, it can, and most often is, more important thematically (90). That is certainly true here, where the frame narrative occupies less space thematically and textually. The two framing chapters combined contain scarcely five pages, while the embedded narrative has roughly 200. Because of its length, the framing narrative would be of much less interest without the accompanying embedded narrative. One must also consider the inverse: what would the embedded narrative be without the frame? It would certainly survive alone more effectively because its longer length allows for more plot and character development. And its story is interesting (a very subjective comment, to be sure), tracing the childhood of a girl—with ties to Mauritius, as is the case with many Le Clézian characters—as she and her family navigate troubled times. They cope with the war, especially

the treatment of the Jews, but also betrayal, failed financial endeavors, a subsequent bankruptcy, and—for Ethel and her friend Xenia—the bridge to womanhood. The embedded narrative could very well stand on its own. Still, combined with the narrative that frames it, a new level of interest is created. And although the reader may already have admired or felt for Ethel based on the embedded story alone, in the frame narrative we see the general narrator’s admiration and respect for his mother, going so far as to call her a heroine: “J’ai écrit cette histoire en mémoire d’une jeune fille qui fut malgré elle une héroïne à vingt ans” (206-07). This creates another link between the two narratives, proposing the idea (without actually saying it) that Ethel was a heroine for surviving and going on to have a family whose son was touched and intrigued by her past.

Another element shared by the two narratives is the actual “*Ritournelle de la faim*,” Maurice Ravel’s one-movement orchestral piece *Boléro*. Ethel recalls having gone to *Boléro*’s opening with Maude (her father’s mistress) when she was about eight. While mentioned only briefly in the embedded narrative, the reappearance of *Boléro* in the closing frame amplifies its importance considerably. Because *Boléro* is the main subject of the closing frame and through it we can see further correspondence with the embedded narrative, I will reproduce the closing frame entirely:

Les dernières mesures du *Boléro* sont tendues, violentes, presque insupportables. Cela monte, emplît la salle, maintenant le public tout entier est debout, regarde la scène où les danseurs tourbillonnent, accélèrent leur mouvement. Des gens crient, leurs voix sont couvertes par les coups de tam-tam. Ida Rubinstein, les danseurs sont des pantins, emportés par la folie. Les flûtes, les clarinettes, les cors, les trompettes, les saxos, les

violons, les tambours, les cymbales, les timbales, tous sont ployés, tendus à se rompre, à s'étrangler, à briser leurs cordes et leurs voix, à briser l'égoïste silence du monde.

Ma mère, quand elle m'a raconté la première du *Boléro*, a dit son émotion, les cris, les bravos et les sifflets, le tumulte. Dans la même salle, quelque part, se trouvait un jeune homme qu'elle n'a jamais rencontré, Claude Lévi-Strauss. Comme lui, longtemps après, ma mère m'a confié que cette musique avait changé sa vie.

Maintenant, je comprends pourquoi. Je sais ce que signifiait pour sa génération cette phrase répétée, serinée, imposée par le rythme et le crescendo. Le *Boléro* n'est pas une pièce musicale comme les autres. Il est une prophétie. Il raconte l'histoire d'une colère, d'une faim. Quand il s'achève dans la violence, le silence qui s'ensuit est terrible pour les survivants étourdis.

J'ai écrit cette histoire en mémoire d'une jeune fille qui fut malgré elle une héroïne à vingt ans. (206-07)

It is once again important to consider the structure of the novel, this time with regard to this final passage. Elements of the description of the *Boléro* parallel what happens in the embedded narrative and correspond to some of the chapter and section titles. "*Les choses se sont précipitées*" and "*Toujours le même bruit*" describe the time in Ethel's life but could just as easily refer to the impending war as well as the repetitiveness (le même bruit) and crescendo (the adjective "précipité") of the musical piece. After "La chute" (both the family's financial ruin and France's entrance into the war), the third section is entitled "Le silence," which, according to the general narrator's description, results from anger and hunger that culminates in violence and is terrible for the survivors. For him, the *Boléro* is a representation of Ethel's life and of the war, and the structure of the embedded narrative then reflects both: the precipitation of events, the

repetitiveness of the first-Sunday-of-the-month “salon” and the conversations of their guests, the bankruptcy, the war, and the hunger and silence that follows. Finally, the closing frame is entitled “*Les dernières mesures*.” Again, these same words are found in the general narrator’s description of the piece, labeling them as tense, violent and nearly unbearable (206).

Onitsha, like *Désert*, contains alternating embedded narratives, but in the former, the narrative sequences are also framed within the primary narrative about Fintan. Unlike *Ritournelle*, however, the narrative in *Onitsha* is asymmetric. The novel is composed of four main sections: “Un long voyage,” “Onitsha,” “Aro Chuku,” and “Loin d’Onitsha,” each of which is divided into untitled chapters. “Un long voyage” introduces the novel’s protagonist, twelve-year-old Fintan, and his mother, whom he affectionately calls Maou, making the voyage from France to Onitsha (in Nigeria, although the novel does not mention this). There, they are to reunite with Fintan’s father, Geoffroy Allen, a stranger who Fintan has seen only once when Geoffroy visited him in 1939 just before the war. Part One of the novel, “Un long voyage,” takes place on a ship called the *Surabaya*, and sees the creation of a story of the same name written by Fintan, a story which mirrors in many ways Fintan’s own: Esther came to Africa in 1948, she goes up the river and arrives at Onitsha, where she will live in a big house. Oddly enough, Fintan is writing these events in his journal before they happen to him. Part of this journal, which serves as a sort of fictional prolepsis, introduces the future rather than the past into the novel (because the story that Fintan writes is about Esther rather than him, this is more an example of foreshadowing than of flashforward). The journal is reproduced in the main narrative and can be considered an embedded narrative, although it is smaller in scope than the other embedded narratives discussed in this chapter. Only a few sentences are provided and they are interwoven with the main narrative, set off from it only by the style (the sentences are simple, as if written

by a child) and in that they appear in capital letters to differentiate the text of Fintan's story from the novel it appears in, and perhaps so the reader can see the effect that writing has on the young boy. The implication is that writing provokes memories or perhaps, more correctly, erases time that separates present, past and future, all of which are intertwined in the following passage:

ESTHER. ESTHER EST ARRIVÉE EN AFRIQUE 1948.

ELLE SAUTE SUR LE QUAI ET ELLE MARCHE DANS LA FORÊT.

C'était bien, d'écrire cette histoire, enfermé dans la cabine, sans un bruit, avec la lumière de la veilleuse et la chaleur du soleil qui montait au-dessus de la coque du navire immobile.

LE BATEAU S'APPELLE NIGER. IL REMONTE LE FLEUVE PENDANT DES JOURS.

Fintan sentait la brûlure du soleil sur son front, comme autrefois, à Saint-Martin. Un point de douleur entre les yeux. Grand-mère Aurelia disait que c'était son troisième œil, l'œil qui servait à lire dans l'avenir. Tout est si loin, si vieux. Comme si cela n'avait jamais existé. Dans la forêt Esther marche au milieu des dangers, guettée par les léopards et les crocodiles. ELLE ARRIVE À ONITSHA. UNE GRANDE MAISON EST PRÉPARÉE, AVEC UN REPAS, ET UN HAMAC. ESTHER ALLUME UN FEU POUR ÉLOIGNER LES FAUVES. Le temps était une brûlure qui avançait sur le front de Fintan, comme autrefois quand le soleil de l'été montait très haut au-dessus de la vallée de la Stura. Le temps avait le goût amer de la quinine, l'odeur âcre des arachides. Le temps était froid et humide comme les geôles des forçats à Gorée. ESTHER REGARDE LES ORAGES AU-DESSUS DE LA FORÊT. UN NOIR A APPORTÉ UN CHAT. I AM HUNGRY, DIT ESTHER. ALORS JE TE DONNE CE CHAT. À

MANGER? NON, COMME AMITIÉ. La nuit venait, calmait la brûlure du soleil sur le front de Fintan. (56-57)

Time is nonexistent here in two ways. First, past memories are juxtaposed with writing in the present about events foreshadowing the author's future. Secondly, much time passes between the sentences of the boy's journal. Fintan writes a couple of lines in his cabin at night. After two more sentences from his journal, he is clearly out on the deck of the ship, the sun burning down on him. A few more sentences written and the day is passing by, as evidenced by the passing of heat across his forehead. A few more sentences and it is again evening. Has an entire day passed, or have many? Both time and the memory of his voyage are blurred. This first section ends with the ship's arrival at port, where Fintan and Maou find Geoffroy Allen waiting for them, to take them to Onitsha.

The primary narrative continues in "Onitsha," the second part of the novel. The narrator describes Fintan and Maou's introduction to this new world of the river, storms, fever, solitude and of the colonized, some of whom are to become their friends. It is here that we learn of Geoffroy Allen's true intentions for working in Africa: he is to fulfill his dream, to go back in time to find the place where the queen of Meroë had founded her new city. Geoffroy Allen's quest is presented in chapters that alternate, from this point on, with the primary narrative. This embedded, alternating narrative is visibly different from the primary narrative, in that it is set off by a large left margin (in Allison Anderson's English translation, the text appears in a sans serif font rather than having a larger margin). It reads differently as well, departing from the story of Fintan and his mother to the wanderings and musings of Geoffroy as he investigates, imagines, writes, is told about and dreams of the legend of the Umundri and their black queen. While the narrative remains in the third person and the time of the narrative doesn't change (both are

recounted in the same “present”), the change in narrative situation is reflected through focalization. It is as though two partially omniscient narrators are telling different parts of the same story in alternation, each focused on different characters and events. Fintan and Maou are experiencing the wonders of Africa and the intricacies of colonial life, including the manner of dress, the behavior, and the customs of both the English and the native people; this is the “present” of Onitsha. We also see their thoughts, fears, their interactions with Geoffroy, and sometimes their memories. In the embedded narrative sequences, Geoffroy is trying to uncover the past, the legend of Aro Chuku, presenting a historical and mythical view of Africa. The embedded narrative sequences thus introduce the past into the novel, both the distant past and Geoffroy’s more recent experiences. For example, the narrator tells of Geoffroy’s quest and through flashback goes back to how he first saw, upon his arrival in Onitsha, the *itsi* sign engraved on the faces of the Umundri. Through indirect discourse, we go much further back and learn of the time of Eze Ndri and the myth of how the sign came to be. An old man who remembers the oracle, Moïses, tells Geoffroy about how the descendents of Eze Ndri came to wear the sign of the sun. At this point we can see how the two narratives begin to work together: the story that Geoffroy hears complements the primary narrative by explaining the markings that Fintan sees on Okawho’s face. Geoffroy’s search is for origins, for the “la plus ancienne mémoire du monde” (156). He is obsessed: he spends time poring over maps and through books to discover the secret. It is through these passages that the reader gains a better understanding of Geoffroy, no longer presented from Fintan’s perspective as angry and impenetrable. He too, although he blushes and becomes angry when Maou exclaims that the black workers (prisoners) need water and food, sees the injustice and cruelty of the officers and their wives: “C’est pour [les Unumdri] que Geoffroy est resté dans cette ville, malgré l’horreur que lui inspirent les

bureau de la United Africa, malgré le Club, malgré le résident Rally et sa femme, leurs chiens qui ne mangent que du filet de bœuf et qui dorment sous des moustiquaires” (99). He believes, if he could only find the truth—the path to Meroë—that it could save this place and its people:

La ville est un radeau sur le fleuve, où coule la plus ancienne mémoire du monde. C’est cette ville qu’il veut voir, maintenant. Il lui semble que s’il pouvait parvenir jusqu’à elle, quelque chose s’arrêterait dans le mouvement inhumain, dans le glissement du monde vers la mort. Comme si la machination des hommes pouvait renverser son oscillation, et que les restes des civilisations perdues sortiraient de la terre, jailliraient, avec leur secrets et leurs pouvoirs, accompliraient la lumière éternelle. (156)

Le Clézio thus presents the idea, through Geoffroy, that memory could change the direction of the world, making it a better place. The author of *Onitsha* echoes this redeeming quality of memory in one of the *Ailleurs* interviews: “ces civilisations offraient toutes sortes de leçons qu’on devrait bien écouter” and “si on sait écouter les messages qu’elles nous ont laissés — parce qu’en mourant elle nous ont laissé des messages —, si on sait les lire, on pourra retrouver tout ça” (124-125). Le Clézio, receiving these messages, is able to translate (write) them, leaving to us to know how to read them.

After the first Geoffroy narrative, Fintan encounters Oya. Here the narrator informs us that Oya is in fact “la déesse noire qui avait traversé le désert, celle qui régnait sur le fleuve” (107). Fintan, too, comes to this realization, prompting him to continue writing in his journal: “Fintan allait dans sa chambre, il prenait le fameux cahier d’écolier, il écrivait UN LONG VOYAGE. Maintenant, la reine noire s’appelait Oya, c’était elle qui gouvernait la grande ville au bord du fleuve, là où Esther arrivait. Pour elle, il écrivait en pidgin, il inventait une langue. Il parlait avec des signes” (108). There is a play between the two narratives as the reader pieces

information together from each to form the story-line of the novel as a whole, with Geoffroy as the character who links the two, or at least who is trying to connect the two by discovering the pieces of the past that are missing. Geoffroy lives in both worlds—he is torn between his desire to uncover the past and his family life, though is largely missing from the latter because of his work and research: “[Geoffroy] s’enfermait dans sa chambre, devant son bureau, là où était épinglée la grande carte de Ptolémée. Il lisait, il prenait des notes, il consultait des cartes” (133). As time passes, and as Geoffroy stops discussing his research with his wife and son, Maou begins to wonder whether there is still a place for them in Geoffroy’s life. She confronts Geoffroy about “la reine noire”: “autrefois tu me parlais d’elle. C’est elle qui est entrée dans ta vie, il n’y a plus de place pour moi” (169). When Geoffroy finally chooses between waiting for “le jour où tout pourra renaître” and his family (the choice is in part made for him when the United Africa Company does not renew his contract), he makes a discovery: “il écoute la respiration de Maou qui dort, et tout d’un coup, c’est ce qu’il y a de plus important au monde” (248). At that point, the secondary narrative ends.

It is important to note that it isn’t only in the secondary narrative that the past intervenes in the present moment. As I mentioned in Chapter Three, we learn the (hi)story of Maou and Geoffroy through Maou’s reminiscing, which, unlike the more mythical past introduced in the secondary narrative, is a very personal past and one brought back easily. Memory is not a problem for Maou, and the narrator does not point to any “holes” that present problems of comprehension or understanding of the past to either the characters or the reader. In fact, through the narrator we are able to see and feel what the characters do, and we can share their memories, down to the “cuisine étroite, peinte en jaune” of the flat at 18, rue des Accoules (75).

In “Aro Chuku,” the third part of the novel, Maou announces that Fintan, Maou and Geoffroy must leave Onitsha, which is soon followed by Geoffroy receiving notice that his contract is not to be renewed. The secondary narrative tells first—through a dream of Geoffroy’s—of the people of Meroë’s search for a place to build their new city, where the new queen will be born. Geoffroy sees the queen in his dream, and her name is Oya, which again links the two narratives. We also learn of her destiny, as she was born “pour que l’île devienne la métropole d’un nouveau monde, pour que tous les peuples de la forêt et du désert s’unissent sous la loi du ciel” (192). The next embedded sequences from this section tell of Geoffroy’s voyage to Aro Chuku, guided by Okawho—a voyage that he certainly must make before leaving Africa. But as Geoffroy travels east, it’s as though he goes back in time as well. We learn of the impending annihilation of the village and the oracle by British forces in the early twentieth century, which will leave the young survivors to wander, looking for a new place to build their city. We also learn of the merciless mission of the British forces, led by Lieutenant Colonel Montanaro, to quash the uprising, destroy the city and kill all the men over age ten. Meanwhile, in the primary narrative, Fintan witnesses important events: Oya gives birth to a son, Okeke, on the shipwrecked *George Shotton*; and the uprising begins at Gerald Simpson’s house resulting in the shooting of the convicts digging the swimming pool. In both the primary and secondary narratives, we see violence against the colonized and its consequences, which may cause the reader to pause and reflect on Oya’s fate: just as her ancestors were forced to flee, will she have to as well? There are allusions to more difficulties to come with regard to colonization, as the narrator poses the question: “Est-ce cela que Geoffroy est venu chercher, comme une confirmation de la fin prochaine de l’empire, ou comme la fin de sa propre aventure africaine?” (203). It will, in fact, be the end of his African adventure. After becoming ill and having to return

to Onitsha, the secondary narrative ends with Geoffroy realizing that he will never see the rebirth of the Umundri people, he will never realize his dream, a dream that has consumed him. Maou, too, noticed Geoffroy's preoccupation, after he stopped talking to her about his research. She tried to understand, asking him about it:

“C'est elle, n'est-ce pas ? ”

“Elle?” Geoffroy la regardait.

“Oui, la reine noire, autrefois tu me parlais d'elle. C'est elle qui est entrée dans ta vie, il n'y a plus de place pour moi.” (169)

After his failed voyage, however, Geoffroy must let go and in doing so, in coming to terms with their departure, he will finally be able to live in the present:

Oya [. . .] porte enfermée en elle le dernier message de l'oracle, en attendant le jour où tout pourra renaître.

Sur le lit de sangles, Geoffroy écoute la respiration de Maou. Il ferme les yeux. Il sait qu'il ne verra pas ce jour. La route de Meroë s'est perdue dans le sable du désert.

Tout s'est effacé, sauf les signes *itsi* sur les pierres et sur le visage des derniers descendants du peuple d'Amanirenas. Mais il n'est plus impatient. Le temps n'a pas de fin, comme le cours du fleuve. Geoffroy se penche sur Maou, tout près de son oreille il murmure comme autrefois, les mots qui la faisaient sourire, sa chanson: “I am so fond of you, Marilu.” Il sent son odeur de la nuit, douce et lente, il écoute la respiration de Maou qui dort, et tout d'un coup, c'est ce qu'il y a de plus important au monde. (247-48)

After having left his wife in Europe and missing much of his son's childhood to chase his dream, he was able to make the voyage. And even though he won't know the truth, he now finds his family more important than his desire to reconstruct the past. The voyage to Aro Chuku

changed not only Geoffroy, but Okawho as well, who never returned to Sabine Rodes' house but instead bought a canoe to take Oya and his son away from Onitsha: "Il était déjà parti, déjà loin, avec Oya, dans un autre monde" (241). In the same short chapter, we have a foreshadowing of why: Okawho and Sabine had seen prospectors from the great oil companies on Bonny Island, to which Sabine commented: "La fin de l'empire" (242).

The chapter immediately following (and the last of the embedded narrative sequences) tells of the fall of Aro Chuku to the English on 28 November 1902 and the destruction of the oracle the following month, leaving only one thing: the sign of the *itsi* on the faces of the first-born. The reader thus learns that Okawho is a descendent of this people and with Oya, they will continue the flight that began so many years ago. The back and forth between the fall of Aro Chuku and the present creates suspense and draws parallels between the two periods. As Okawho's ancestors were forced to flee in the wake of violence, the reader could foresee violence to come in Onitsha. The end of the embedded narrative signals as well the end of Fintan's family's time in Africa – the next chapter (and the final one of "Aro Chuku") details their last days and preparations for departure.

The fourth and last part of the novel, "Loin d'Onitsha," finds Fintan in Bath, England, in the autumn of 1968, teaching at a boy's school where he himself was enrolled after leaving Africa. There is a large ellipsis in the narrative which covers the rest of Fintan's adolescence and his schooling. The lack of narrative from that period—filled in only partially by flashbacks to his school days in Bath that he would rather forget—only accentuates the importance of Africa in his life. The first three sections, which detail his time there beginning with their voyage to Onitsha and ending the day of their departure, total some 253 pages, while this fourth contains a mere 22. In fact, this section serves almost as an epilogue, not only giving the reader an indication of how

Fintan's life turned out after leaving Africa, but wrapping up other loose ends such as the fate of Geoffroy, Maou, and also of Onitsha. Again in the "present" (now the late sixties), it moves everything that preceded it into the past, allowing for a retroactive vision of those events and hence an opportunity to express an opinion on them. Based on narrative space accorded to the past, though, we see that it is of primary importance: Fintan's time in Africa was much more important in his upbringing than his time in England, where he was surrounded by cruel children and harsh teachers, so unlike the warmth of their African friends and the freedom of Onitsha. As a schoolboy in Bath (and like Lalla in *Désert*), Fintan reflects on the past as a way of dealing with the present. To cope with punishment (being caned), Fintan pictures the chained prisoners being marched through the city; to go sleep at night, he hears the river. When Fintan hears of the Biafran war, he wants to return to Africa but realizes that it is too late, that perhaps he should never have left. When he goes to see Geoffroy, who is dying, it is the primary narrative that continues Geoffroy's story (when Geoffroy abandoned Africa and his dream, the secondary narrative ends, Geoffroy begins to live in the present and is therefore viewed through the primary narrative). He sees in his last moments that Onitsha, where he spent all that time, was in fact where the queen had led her people: "La nouvelle Meroë s'étend sur les deux rives du fleuve, devant l'île, à Onitsha et Asaba, à l'endroit même où il a attendu pendant toutes ces années" (285). This "lumière de la vérité" brings Geoffroy peace: the joy is visible on his face (286). The narrator also shows that the story of the people of Arsinoë, despite the war and everything that has happened, has not ended: "La route de Meroë n'a pas de fin" (287).

As we have seen, there are themes and characters common to both narratives that work together to create a unified novel. The secondary (embedded) narrative is structurally subordinate to the main narrative (as all embedded narratives are): "It is a fact that the embedded

narrative is narratively subordinate to the embedding narrative, since the former owes its existence to the latter and is based on it” (Genette *NDR* 90). However, as the novel progresses and the two narratives overlap, we begin to see how they play off each other and in doing so, the embedded narrative gains importance from a thematic standpoint. While each concentrates on different characters and events, they have characters in common who experience both worlds. Geoffroy is the link between the two narratives, and it is through his research that we learn about Oya and Okawho, the human link between the present and the past. Seeing their history helps us to read the present. We see the “ville rebelle” of Aro Chuku destroyed by the English because of the oracle preaching their destruction, and then we see the rebellion beginning in Onitsha with massacre at Gerald Simpson’s house. History, it appears, is beginning to repeat itself. This, coupled with the fact that Oya and Okawho leave Onitsha definitively just as their ancestors had to flee, points to the future Biafran war. By showing how certain events yielded certain results in a historical/mythical narrative, Le Clézio uses fictional characters set in similar circumstances to “direct” the reader to see a correlation between the two. Since, speaking outside of literature, history tends to repeat itself, and in Le Clézio’s writing we often see themes of war and violence against children, we could see the novel *Onitsha* presenting a universal truth: we should learn from the past. In some respects the novel comes full circle – it begins with Fintan going to meet his father and ends with him going to bury his father. It also goes from a discovery of Africa to a vision of colonialism which crescendos into violent conflict.

The ability to use embedded narrative (and other narrative tools) to present history as a lesson is dependent on many factors. The narrative (narrator) must first be able to convince the reader. This can be accomplished through narrative authority; setting the story in appropriate social, economic or historical circumstances; and, as we see in *Onitsha*, through the relationship

between narratives which support and complement each other. Richard Shryock's discussion of the production of interest, although general, applies very well to *Onitsha*:

Interest is produced as before in the construction of a relationship of the ordinary to the extraordinary where the former is an expectation derived from the embedding narrative and the latter being in some way different from the former. As is the case with receiver-present embedded stories, interest can be produced by either an informational or an ideological difference between the two narratives. The difference in information uses a written embedded narrative to enter new facts into the embedding story. Ideological difference results from an embedded narrator presenting an alternative vision of the same events related in the main narrative. Usually there are degrees of both types of difference. The embedded narrator's voice must be able to offer something that the main narrative voice cannot. [. . .] Embedded narrative tends to be a rewrite of a part of the main narration from the perspective of a different type of narrative discourse. A shift in a (represented) type of narrative discourse causes a change in the conventions of reading attached to that narrative. For example, readers bring different assumptions and strategies to reading a fairy tale than something that is taken to be true. Thus, there is some degree of alterity between the embedded and embedding narratives whether it is a result of content, perspective (ideology), reading conventions or a combination of any of these. (90; my ellipsis)

Just as the two narratives work together to create the structure of the novel, the interwoven stories, by showing the present as opposed to the past and the colonized to the colonizers, create a bigger picture. In one or the other, the reader would see difficulties that arise through colonization, but in the juxtaposition of the two we see something greater—Fintan's

family living in a foreign country and accepting, learning, and loving the people and world around them versus the English officers and “society” people who keep and impose their (sometimes ridiculous) customs.

La quarantaine is another important novel for a discussion of embedded narrative in Le Clézio’s work. The novel is composed of multiple embedded narratives, some set in the present (1980) although the majority are in the past. It is divided into four main sections, the first of which, “Le voyageur sans fin,” is narrated by Léon Archambau, a man of about forty who is searching for traces of his great uncle, the man for whom he was named. In order fully to understand what happened to his family and especially his uncle, the younger Léon explains that he must start from the beginning, the point after which everything falls apart for his family. This starting point, as Léon tells it, is his grandfather Jacques’s childhood encounter with Arthur Rimbaud. “Le voyageur sans fin” then tells the story of their chance meeting and also introduces the reader to the Archambau family: Léon’s grandparents Jacques and Suzanne; Jacques and (the older) Léon’s parents Antoine and Amalia, their expulsion from the family home on Mauritius because of Antoine’s brother Alexandre, “le Patriarche”; and Major William, who took care of Amalia, “l’eurasienne,” after the death of his brother who had adopted her. The fourth and final section, “Anna,” also narrated by Léon, picks up shortly after the first left off, in August of 1980 with Léon in Mauritius visiting Anna, the last of the Archambau family, and finally back in France. Between these two sections, which form a narrative frame, are two others that take place years before. The second section of the novel, “L’empoisonneur,” also narrated by Léon, goes back to May of 1891 and tells of the stop in Aden that his family members Léon, Jacques and Suzanne made while on their way to rebuild their lives on Mauritius. Since the narrator was not alive at the time the action takes place, he could not recount these events based on his own

observations. This alone doesn't cause a problem for the narrative, as his telling could very well be founded on what he knew of the events as they were told to him, perhaps by his grandmother who "aimait par-dessus tout raconter des histoires" (19). Leon's discourse allows for this, being careful not to breach narrative authority. The section begins with an admission that he imagines what his ancestors saw: "Je pense à la mer à Aden, telle que l'a vue mon grand-père, avec Suzanne et Léon, du pont de l'*Ava*, le matin du 8 mai 1891, la mer lisse comme un miroir sous un ciel sans nuages" (37). This is important because a homodiegetic narrator recounting outside of what he should know could create problems for the credibility of the story. As Genette points out, "In fiction, the heterodiegetic narrator is not accountable for his information, 'omniscience' forms part of his contract, and his motto might be this retort by a character of Prévert's: 'What I don't know, I guess, and what I don't guess, I make up.' As for the homodiegetic narrator, he is obliged to justify ('How do you know that?') the information he gives about scenes from which 'he' was absent as a character, about someone else's thoughts, etc., and any breach of that trust is a *paralepsis*" (*NDR* 77-78). Léon, who was not yet born to witness the events about which he tells, does not pretend to be all-knowing. In addition to imagining the circumstances that surround the facts he relates, he questions (and sometimes suggests answers for) certain actions of the characters whose story he is telling: "Qu'est-ce qui a poussé Jacques et Léon à monter à bord de la baleinière qui fait le va-et-vient avec le ravage?" (37). And again, wondering how Rimbaud knew that his grandfather was a doctor: "Comment a-t-il su que Jacques est médecin? Sans doute en questionnant le second commandant Sussac" (43). It would be easy to cite several other examples as the narrator consistently fills in the gaps of what he knows by guessing or narrative inferencing, including whether or not his great-uncle was able to guess Rimbaud's identity: "Comme s'il avait pu deviner, dans ce corps rongé par la douleur et la sécheresse, la

grace de l'enfant qui dansait les mots, son regard ironique qui voyait à travers tous les oripeaux, et sa fureur. Mais je me trompe. Léon ne l'a pas reconnu. Personne ne pouvait le reconnaître" (56). Information is more complete, however, for dates and descriptions for which Suzanne was present, such as the ship's departure on 9 May or the Japanese gown she wears on deck for the occasion.

The third and by far the longest part of the book, "La quarantaine," is itself composed of multiple narratives and begins as a series of journal entries, the first of which is dated 27 May, the day of the passengers' arrival on Flat Island where they are held in quarantine because of a smallpox outbreak on board. This section ends with a journal entry for 7 July 1891, the day that Jacques and Suzanne depart Flat Island for Mauritius. The primary narrative of this section is largely recounted in the first person by the former narrator's great-uncle, Léon le Disparu. Léon's journal entries are interspersed, however, with John Metcalfe's "Journal du botaniste," short dated passages detailing the Protestant missionary's explorations of Flat Island's plant life. While not signed, we know these journal entries were not penned by Léon, because they refer to him in the third person: "Avec L. avons poussé la reconnaissance du côté ouest..." (78). Léon later finds Metcalfe's journal after his death (which allows for their presence in the novel), and feels that John left it for him so that he could remember: "Il me semble que John l'a laissé juste pour moi, pour que je me souviene, que je continue après lui les leçons de botanique" (448). As we saw with *Onitsha*, the passing on of a journal from one character to another is done to preserve memories, but it also serves a purpose with regard to how the novel is presented to the reader. The botanist's journal allows for the presentation of specific information, not only about the island's native plant life, but also proof of its prior use as a quarantine, as evidenced by non-native species that Metcalfe finds, planted some thirty to forty years before. When the journals

stop appearing, that too is telling. The structure of the narrative (through the absence of the embedded narrative sequences) reflects John Metcalfe's death before we learn of it in the story-line. The last entry in the botanist's journal is dated "21 juin?," the question mark perhaps indicating its author's confusion due to illness. But it isn't until over a week later (1 July) that we learn the reason for the end of the journal entries: John Metcalfe had died on 22 June.

Yet another narrative, *La Yamuna*, brings an even more distant past into the novel, and is told in alternating chapters with Léon's retelling of their time spent in quarantine. Also the name of a river in India, *La Yamuna* (a tributary of the Ganges), is the story of Suryavati's mother, Ananta, and how she came to Flat Island years before. A four-year-old English girl rescued by Giribala after the death of her parents at Cawnpore, Ananta accompanies her new mother on a voyage downriver that eventually leads them into indentured servitude. The *La Yamuna* passages are told in the third person, and while the narrator is not explicitly identified, there are signs which point to the great-uncle Léon as the narrator of this story as well. The first passage begins just after a sequence from the "La quarantaine" narrative in which Léon talks about how Surya spoke to him about Maurice, her father who died when she was only one, her grandmother who also died when she was very little, and of India. Léon's response is telling: "Il me semble que je suis emporté dans un voyage avec Surya, à bord d'un radeau de pierre, devant la montagne pareille à une vague" (183). *La Yamuna* then begins: "C'est comme si j'avais vécu cela, comme si je l'avais rêvé hier" (184). Just as the younger Léon recounted the voyage of his great-uncle, Jacques and Suzanne on the *Ava* after hearing the story from his grandmother, the narrator is writing his version of Surya's story after having heard it from her. He continues a bit further: "C'est à Ananta que je pense, sa petite main serrée dans la main de sa mère, tandis qu'elles attendent toutes les deux debout sous l'abri circulaire du camp" (184-85). Also like his great-

nephew, the narrator must imagine to fill in the gaps of what he has learned of the events since he did not witness them himself. His language indicates his lack of certainty toward details:

“Alors il doit régner un grand silence sur le camp de Bhowanipore” (185), the verb “devoir” in this case indicating that that *must* have been how it was. Nevertheless, this “honesty” on the part of the narrator lends an element of truthfulness to the story and increases its credibility. At the conclusion of the story, the narrator is disappointed to see his role in the events come to an end: “Elles partent, elles vont disparaître. Un instant encore, je voudrais les voir, les retenir, telles quelles, Ananta et Giribala, assises à même le débarcadère, entre les racines du grand arbre de l’Intendance” (475). This embedded narrative is important to both the characters in the story and to the novel’s structure. Knowing Suryavati’s past helps Léon to understand her and to know himself better. For the reader, it grounds the story in history and provides insight into how the other inhabitants of Flat Island came to be there. There are comparisons between the first ship’s passengers (what happened to them) and what is happening to the Europeans which lead the reader, along with the characters, to make conclusions about the situation: if so many died when this happened before, how could they let it happen again? When looking back, the younger Léon asks: “Fallait-il qu'on ait perdu la mémoire à Port-Louis pour que pas une voix s'élève pour demander qu'on envoie des secours, qu'on mette une chaloupe à la mer pour libérer les prisonniers de la Quarantaine. Et quand au mois de juin, après cinq mois d'oubli, le garde-côte du service de santé se rendit à l'île Plate, des huit cents coolies débarqués, il n'en restait que quelques dizaines” (529-30). As we saw earlier, Léon felt it was important to start the story from the beginning in order to understand it. In other words, to understand himself, he must understand what happened to his family. And the logic continues: to understand what happened to his family, he must know about what happened to those who were quarantined before them,

including the history of indentured servitude on Maurice. The result is a constant layering of stories that is necessary to explain and understand the present, including the younger Léon's understanding of Léon le Disparu. The latter's disappearance is accounted for by his experience in quarantine, exacerbated by the fact that their family on Mauritius did nothing to help them, all of which is recounted in "La quarantaine."

As we saw with the margins in *Désert* and again in *Onitsha*, Le Clézio helps guide the reader through the different narratives of *La quarantaine* by changing the appearance of the text. While Léon's journal entries are introduced by dates and Metcalfe's journal appears in italicized text, the story of *La Yamuna* is titled and set off by a large left margin. Each narrative (or sequence of narratives) is thus visibly different in appearance. Additionally, there are chapter breaks (untitled, with the exception of the first) separating the *La Yamuna* narrative passages from the others. With the several different layers of embedded narrative that compose the novel, it is important to consider how they work together and the effect they have on the novel as a whole. By using distinct narratives set in different periods (as opposed to one general all-seeing narrator telling the story through a single narrative), the story (stories) remains very personal yet still covers a very long period. At the same time, the reader is presented with different perspectives surrounding the same issues or different views of the same characters. The use of embedded narrative permits two different views of Léon le Disparu, one presented by himself as narrator of "La quarantaine" and another presented by his great-nephew in the other sections. This is the case with other characters as well. For example, we see Jacques and Suzanne differently in the frame and embedded narratives. We see that it was through Jacques's stories as a young man that his younger brother learned about his family and heritage. But as grandparents, it was Suzanne who was the storyteller: her grandson learned his family history from her while

Jacques remained taciturn. Accordingly, we know Suzanne as a grandmother in the frame narrative before we meet her as a young woman in “La quarantaine.” It is therefore through the intersection of the different narratives that we develop a deeper understanding of the characters, having seen them in different times of their lives. Additionally, seeing them as grandparents in the frame narrative changes our reading of the other levels. For example, when Suzanne is terribly ill on Flat Island from smallpox, the disease that has killed so many others, we do not worry about her dying, nor that she and Jacques will never leave the quarantine. We cannot; we’ve already seen her as a grandmother living in France. Because of the embedding and the sequence in which the events are told, we know that the action recounted is not intended to create suspense for the reader about what is to come. It’s “intention” lies elsewhere, certainly in the importance of knowing one’s history in order to understand one’s present and be a whole person, but also (and perhaps more so) how we (collectively) should learn from the past. In short, it is not so much the “what” of the storytelling as the “how” that is significant. In “Anna,” the final section of the novel, we see that Léon has not found what he came to Maurice to look for: “Je n’emporte rien de ce que je suis venu chercher. . . . Il ne reste rien du passé, et c’est sans doute mieux ainsi. Comment vivre avec la mémoire du sang versé, de l’exil...” (527). Instead, his quest for the past has shown him what (or more accurately who) it *is* important to remember:

Au contraire, ceux qu’il ne faut jamais oublier, ce sont les premiers immigrants venus de Bretagne, fuyant la famine et l’injustice, en quête d’un nouvel Éden, les Malouins, les Vannetais, les gens de Lorient de Paimpont, de Pontivy, de Mûr-de-Bretagne, tous ceux que la Compagnie la plus cruelle du monde bafouait et abandonnait sur les îles lointaines, et sur lesquels elle prélevait chaque année sa livre de chair.

Ceux qu'il ne faut pas oublier, ce sont les négriers aux noms terrifiants, le *Phénix*, l'*Oracle*...chacun chargé de sa cargaison d'un demi-millier d'hommes, de femmes et d'enfants capturés sur les côtes du Mozambique, à Zanzibar, à Madagascar. Enchaînés deux par deux, transportés à fond de cale dans un espace de cinq pieds cinq pouces de long sur quinze pouces de large, et de deux pieds six pouces de haut. Ne pas oublier le nom du capitaine Larralde, de Nantes, qui fit fortune en percevant cinq pour cent sur le prix de vente de chaque esclave vendu à Bourbon et à l'île de France. Ne jamais oublier non plus les coolies indiens, les "pions" attirés sur les bateaux, à Calcutta, à Madras, à Vizagapatnam, les jeunes gens kidnappés dans les villages par les arkotties, les duffadars, les mestries, revendus aux agents des compagnies sucrières, enfermés dans des camps, sans soins, sans égouts, presque sans nourriture, et embarqués à bord des nouveaux bateaux négriers, le *Reigate*, le *Ghunama*, le *Tanjore*, pour un voyage sans retour. Ne pas oublier l'*Alphonisine*, la *Sophie*, l'*Eastern Empire*, le *Pongola*, ne pas oublier l'*Hydaree*, parti de Calcutta en janvier 1856, chargé d'immigrants venus de l'Oudh et du Bhojpur, fuyant la famine et la guerre, la répression anglaise contre les insurgés sepoys, et abandonnés pendant des mois sur les rochers nus de Plate et de Gabriel. (528-29)

This very straightforward account of what should be remembered marks a departure from the other novels I have studied in this chapter, in which the lessons to be learned are presented more implicitly through overlap of the narrative levels. Here we have both, as though the narrator felt it necessary to reinforce the ideas already "embedded" in the novel by overtly stating them to guarantee reader reception. One wonders if, according to Shryock, this narrative might be less likely to "succeed," since it more openly states its position—although the "position

of reception” is created not only through the narrator’s telling but is constructed through the narrative prior to the above citation.

Léon goes on to question the conduct of those, including his ancestor Alexandre Archambau, who did nothing to help those stranded on Flat Island. Despite the fact that the novel follows Léon’s family and the first-person narration keeps it very personal, *La quarantaine* is in many ways more about history than of one man’s search for his origins. It is a sort of homage, a way of preserving a memory of the many people who came to Mauritius/Flat Island before Léon’s great-uncle and who, according to the narrator, should never be forgotten. Yet, even if the story is centered on real events and prompts us to remember a period in history, it is still fiction. We already saw how Léon filled in the gaps of his great-uncle’s and grandparent’s stop in Aden by imagining and questioning certain details. While the format alone doesn’t lead us to question the validity of the entire third section of the novel (the first-person account of Léon le Disparu), we could do so. Again, this section is presented as a series of dated journal entries, along with the alternating journal entries of John Metcalfe and the *La Yamuna* narrative. The younger Léon having obtained the journal is the only way Léon le Disparu’s story could be told as written, but unlike the other journals in the story (John Metcalfe’s and Anna’s), we never learn of the younger Léon finding it, nor of it being passed down to him. In fact, Léon says that all that he has of Léon, Jacques and Suzanne are words: “Le bruit d’une légende qui commence à l’île Plate et à Gabriel, où tout a été divisé à jamais” (531). The presence of the journal contradicts this. One possible explanation is that the novel simply doesn’t explain when, where or how Léon could have retrieved the journal from his great-uncle, who was never seen again after leaving Flat Island. Another is that “La quarantaine” is a construction of the younger Léon, who pieced it together based on what his grandmother told him (in part, she would not have had access to

much of the detail presented). Several passages in the narrative point to this. There are moments in the story where we see the younger Léon imagining himself to be his great-uncle, and to have lived what he lived: “Parfois il me semble que c’est moi qui ai vécu cela. Ou bien que je suis l’autre Léon, celui qui a disparu pour toujours, et que Jacques m’a tout raconté quand j’étais enfant” (21). Again in “Anna,” Léon blurs the lines between himself and his great-uncle: “Alors j’étais Léon, l’autre Léon, celui qui avait rompu toutes les attaches et avait tout changé, jusqu’à son nom, pour partir avec la femme qu’il aimait” (531). And again: “Alors je suis devenu Léon, celui qui disparaît, celui qui tourne le dos au monde, dans l’espoir de revenir un jour et de jouir de la ruine de ceux qui l’ont banni” (531-32). Léon also admits to *choosing* Suryavati’s name: “Parfois il me plaît d’imaginer que Léon et Suryavati—(puisque c’est le nom que je lui ai choisi, en souvenir de la princesse du Cachemire pour qui Somadeva écrivit l’*Océan des contes*, la première version de *Mille et une nuits*)—ont disparu pour toujours dans ce déchaînement du ciel et de la mer . . . ” (533). Perhaps it is in “becoming” his great-uncle that he is able to tell his story—it may be the only way it could be told. In going back one step from the present, he imagines in order to tell a story (“L’empoisonneur”). In going back yet another, he “becomes” his great-uncle Léon and reproduces his story, in the first person, of his time on Flat Island. Regardless of whether or not the journal is presented in the narrative as being written by Léon le Disparu or by his great-nephew, it, like the other embedded narratives in *La quarantaine*, (re)produces stories that would have otherwise remained untold (including the botanist’s journal, the story of Ananta, and finally Anna’s friendship with Sita). Reproducing them, even in fiction, draws attention to a period in history with events that—and this is quite clear in the narrative—are to be remembered.

In Le Clézio's writing, embedded narratives provide a way to bring the past into the novel. Yet also, when considered with other narrative techniques, they demonstrate the importance of the past and how it can be used. The juxtaposition of ideas, characters and stories through framing, alternation or a combination of the two, allows for the drawing of comparisons. Not only the past in regard to the present as in *Désert*, *Onitsha*, *Ritournelle* and *La quarantaine*, but also between opposing sides of a conflict as in *Étoile errante*. Through these comparisons, the reader is exposed to certain historical events and by "remembering" them, is encouraged to consider how we might learn from them. In the following chapter, I will continue to examine how the past is incorporated in Le Clézio's writing by studying documents such as photographs, journals and maps embedded in the narrative.

CHAPTER 5

DOCUMENTING THE PAST IN THE LE CLÉZIAN NARRATIVE

The forms that writing takes are both varied and, with respect to reader reception, significant. Readers have certain expectations when they approach a novel, a piece of scholarly work, a personal letter, or a diary. Novels ask us to enter a fictional world and (often) to disregard indications that that world is anything other than real, while diaries tell us not to read them unless they are our own. Cartoons bring humor into our lives—for the sake of laughter or to draw attention to a political or social issue—and lists remind us of important things, perhaps what we need to do or remember. It is the very form of these types of writing that announces their (intended) purpose. At times, though, authors might surprise, provoke, inform or amuse readers by using or combining forms in unexpected ways.

J. M. G. Le Clézio is an author acutely attentive to the structure of his work. As we have seen, this attention to form manifests itself in different ways. Le Clézio admittedly places little importance on genre:

Il n'est pas d'une importance extrême de définir ce que c'est qu'un roman ni ce que c'est qu'une nouvelle. Il s'agit simplement d'une question de rythme. Quand vous commencez certains livres, vous avez un rythme qui vous guide vers ce qui va être un roman, c'est-à-dire vers une œuvre qui est plus musicale peut-être que dans le cas de la nouvelle. Pour d'autres, vous vous rendez compte que cela s'apparente davantage au fait divers. [...] Le genre littéraire me semble moins facile à déterminer que le rythme qui est préexistant à l'écriture, et qui est absolument incontrôlable. Dont je ne suis absolument pas

responsable. Mon dernier roman, *Poisson d'or*, était en fait un conte qui devrait avoir une quinzaine de pages tout au plus, et qui est devenu, presque à mon corps défendant, un roman. (Cortanze, "Une littérature de l'envahissement" 35)

Although Le Clézio's works are often labeled, on the cover and title pages, as *roman*, *essai*, or *nouvelles*, some cross lines between genres. Several critics, for example, have written about the autobiographical aspects of novels like *La quarantaine* and *Le chercheur d'or*. Le Clézio himself has pointed to the connections between the fictional *Onitsha* and *Désert* and the biographical and autobiographical *L'Africain* and *Gens des nuages*. Still, genre does seem to have a place in Le Clézio's writing. The novel *Voyage à Rodrigues*, presented as the author's journal of his trip to the island of Rodrigues, carries the appropriate distinction *journal*. Le Clézio's short stories are characterized by labels beyond *nouvelles*. They are grouped into what we might call subgenres (romances, stories, fantasies) of that short form, as the titles of the collections indicate: *Coeur brûle et autres romances*, *Mondo et autres histoires*, *La ronde et autres faits divers*, *Printemps et autres saisons* and most recently *Histoire du pied et autres fantaisies*.

Looking beyond genre, it is within each individual novel that we truly see Le Clézio's attention to structure. Indeed, Le Clézio often plays with novelistic form. In *Ourania*, for example, some chapter titles complete the last sentence of the chapter that precedes them, thereby creating a close link between the two chapters. The opening chapter, for example, ends with the seemingly incomplete "Jusqu'à ce jour, longtemps après, où le hasard m'a réuni avec" (22), only to be completed by the title of the following chapter, "le jeune homme le plus étrange que j'ai jamais rencontré" (23). Alternatively, when a chapter ends with a complete sentence, the following chapter title serves as the beginning of that chapter's first sentence. The text of the

chapter entitled “L’exil” begins: “a commencé pendant la semaine de Noël” (206). The subject of this sentence, in the absence of any other, is clearly the chapter’s title *l’exil*. In addition, stories and letters (told, written in notebooks or transcribed) by characters other than the protagonist and narrator Daniel Sillitoe help to compose the novel. The chapters of *Le déluge* are preceded by a few words and phrases which summarize the chapter content, an uncommon practice for novels. For the first chapter of that novel, in between the title “Chapitre premier” and the chapter text, we find “François Besson. –François Besson écoute le magnétophone dans sa chambre. –Début de l’histoire d’Anna. –Le départ de Paul. –Conseils de la mère de Besson. –La vendetta” (47).

In Chapter Four of this study, I discussed how Le Clézio helps to guide his reader through the alternating narratives of *Désert* by means of margin settings and whitespace. Other visual cues, including text type (changes in font or use of italics), guide us through *La quarantaine*, *Révolutions* and *Onitsha*. By simply flipping the pages of those novels, the reader can immediately see an attention to form. While this is certainly visible through the use of embedded narrative and playfulness with chapter titles and symmetry, it is perhaps most evident through the introduction of documents in the narrative. At times, these documents do not introduce the past into the text. In Le Clézio’s early works, small bits of inserted text are not uncommon. To mention only a few of numerous possible examples, *La guerre* includes the text of a simple sign “ACCÈS INTERDIT” (183) and the information from the top of an electric light bulb (the most beautiful thing the narrator has ever seen) (80), both center-justified and preceded and followed by blank lines to set them off from the main narrative. Or, again in *Le déluge*, we find a list of words from a dictionary open to page 383 (120-121) and the reproduced text of a check from a self-service restaurant (191). Although these instances of embedded text do not

record the past, many others do. In this chapter, I will focus on those documents—letters, journals, photographs and maps—that either bring the past into the narrative or propose to serve as documentation at a future time. I will begin my discussion with letters, concentrating on one from *Onitsha*. I will then move to journals, looking at the short story “Trésor,” followed by *Voyage à Rodrigues*, a particularly interesting novel because in addition to its form (itself a journal), it contains (parts of) and references many other documents. I will follow with a discussion of other types of documentation which allow for the incorporation of the past into the narrative. Lastly, I will treat photographs, looking first at Le Clézio’s autobiographical and biographical work before considering the importance of photographs in short stories.

As I suggested in my chapter on embedded narrative, my current chapter is, in many ways, a continuation of that discussion. Letters and journals inserted into a narrative certainly qualify as embedded narratives. At the same time, they have specific consequences in how they represent the past. A story that is told (as opposed to written) and passed down from one generation to the next may gradually change over time. Or, as we have seen, a narrator’s story may be interpreted in different ways due to a narrator’s credibility. Given the intrinsic functions of letters and journals, coupled with the fixed nature of the written word, those types of text may more closely resemble documentation than stories. If fiction is sometimes a way to suspend reality, the general purpose of letters is different. Correspondence serves to communicate information from one person (or group of people) to another. Similarly, a journal’s primary function is to record a person’s thoughts, feelings or experiences, usually for personal use rather than public dissemination. While both letters and journals may be used as a form of narration (which is the case historically and in many Le Clézio novels), they can also have a documentary function. For this reason, I discuss them here, with photographs and maps included in the

narrative. All of these forms—journals, letters, maps and photographs— whose primary purpose may be communication or documentation, contain a certain measure of authenticity. Their forms alone, when they adhere to accepted norms, communicate to the reader. After all, “narrative discourse should be understood according to the standards of what it is represented to be. In other words, a personal diary calls forth different composition and reception strategies” (Shryock 109). Documents can therefore be seen as more real, and as communicating their content in a more reliable manner, than a more traditional, straight-forward, narrator-telling-a-story narrative. Richard Shryock provides an example with his comments on the ability of Edouard’s journal in Gide’s *Les Faux-monnayeurs* to seem real: “Edouard’s narrative is presented as notes from his journal which suggest that the depiction is raw and unfiltered, giving the impression that it too is ‘close to reality’” (Shryock 119). This could be true of other (pieces of) narratives presented in journal form. Fictitious or not, a reproduced journal gives the impression that the thoughts and experiences recorded in it are the true feelings and actions of the journal’s author. The same applies to letters included in the narrative. The reproduction of a letter signals to the reader that the text of the letter is what the letter’s author has written, setting it apart from the rest of the fictional narrative which is recounted by a (perhaps different) narrator. Of course, readers are certainly aware that a letter or journal inserted into a work of fiction is likely to be entirely fictitious. Still, those “raw” and “unfiltered” qualities inherent to journals and letters help to reinforce the suspension of reality that fiction can create, through other narrative techniques (like the omniscient narrator or the inclusion of historical fact).

From a narratological standpoint, there are differences between letters and journals: the former have an intended recipient, while in the latter the narrator and narratee are identical.

Shryock highlights those differences in his discussion of receiver-absent and receiver-present narrative:

Beginning in the late nineteenth century a different type of storytelling situation begins to be used with increasing frequency: one where no receivers are depicted in the text. Two frequent forms of this phenomenon are instances where a character is an author and writes a narrative which is textually reproduced (as in Duras' *Le Vice-Consul*) or where a character writes a journal or diary which is reproduced (as in Gide's *La Porte étroite*). I will refer to this type of embedded narrative as "receiver-absent," as opposed to the "receiver-present" stories [. . .]. Receiver-absent embedded narrative is defined not only by the lack of a depicted receiver, but also by a shift in narrators. Thus, a work narrated in the first person which includes a flashback, flashforward, diary, letter, etc. written by the first-person narrator does not qualify as a use of receiver-absent embedded narrative. (87, my ellipsis)

Although narratologically different, letters and journals may still serve a similar purpose. Much like other embedded narratives, both letters and journals can introduce information and points of view not offered by or available to the other narrator(s). Even in areas where the two document types are considered to differ, they may not differ much. This is the case with regard to Richard Shryock's comments on the function of receiver-absent embedded narrative:

Receiver-absent embedded narrative represents not only a fictive world, it also represents a type of narrative discourse (i.e. diary, literature). This makes the form of narrative discourse more important than the narrator because, in most cases, the receiver-absent embedded narrative does not mediate between two characters. Receiver-absent embedded

narrative thus takes its function primarily (but not exclusively) in its relation to other forms of narrative discourse. (109)

We will see, however, that receiver-absent embedded narrative (in the form of journals) in Le Clézio's fiction do sometimes "mediate" between two characters. Since they are often passed down from one generation to the next, they function as guides or a means of comparison. Much like a letter, they allow for communication between characters, whether or not the communication was intended by the journal's author. The difference between letters and journals, at least in Le Clézio's fiction, might be that letters communicate over distances while journals do so over time.

Several Le Clézian narratives have letters or journals included within them which are important with respect to the past. *Le procès-verbal* contains both letters and a journal and plays on the "discovered" notebook as a means of telling the story. *Onitsha*, *Ourania*, *Le chercheur d'or* and *Révolutions*, too, contain both letters and journal entries. I have discussed some of those works in previous chapters, but it is worth reconsidering them with particular attention to their content and their role in the structure of the narrative.

In Chapter Three, I indicated that a letter written to Adam by his mother in *Le procès-verbal* helps to fill in the gaps of Adam's memory and the story. From his mother's letter, we learn much about Adam's past: his age, the fact that he disappeared without warning his parents, and that he has a family who cares about him. We learn of the humiliating story of the "bol bleu cassé," that Adam was a difficult and anti-social child, and that he is educated. The letter, from a trustworthy person who knows Adam perhaps better than anyone else, presents reliable information about an otherwise enigmatic character. As such, it has a primarily explanatory

function:¹⁴ by knowing more about Adam's personal and family history, the reader is better able to understand him.

In *Onitsha*, I suggested that a letter from Fintan served as a "vessel" of memory, a way to pass on Fintan's personal knowledge and vision of Africa to his sister Marima. In the present chapter, I aim to show how the letter introduces aspects of the past not already presented in the novel. I will then build on my discussion, also from Chapter Four, of how the letter and the other narratives that compose *Onitsha* work together. First, it is important to note that Fintan's letter appears in the last section of the novel, "Loin d'Onitsha," which presents Fintan's life in England after his stay in Africa. In the Folio edition, the letter spans just six pages of text with a large left margin. Though minimal in terms of length compared to the whole of the novel, the letter is significant in what it contributes. Through the letter, both the character Marima and the reader learn what happened at Onitsha subsequent to Fintan's departure. Fintan writes of the destruction of Onitsha: the bombing, the soldiers, the burning buildings and the resulting refugees. The violence expressed here contrasts with the beauty that Fintan discovered, including the tastes, smells and noises that he fears will be lost forever. The letter's placement near the end of the novel—only nine pages of text follow it—allows the reader to come to know and appreciate Onitsha just as Fintan did, before learning (or being reminded) of the war that destroyed it.

Throughout this study, I have argued that historical information can lend a sense of authenticity to a narrative. This is the case in *Onitsha*, too, although the way in which the details of the Biafran war are presented—under Fintan's pen—urge the reader to rethink the events with an emphasis on the war's (African) victims. Fintan has a sense of belonging to Onitsha. He

¹⁴ I will continue, as I did in Chapter Four, to rely on Gérard Genette's typology for discussing the function of embedded narratives (explanatory, predictive, purely thematic, persuasive, distractive and obstructive) based on their relationships with the narrative(s) in which they are embedded. See *Narrative Discourse Revisited* 92-94.

understands and appreciates both the place and its people in ways that the other Westerners did not. Because the information about Onitsha's destruction comes directly from Fintan, it has a very personal quality. In addition to lending a personal perspective to the events described, the letter functions as a narrative device which relegates the dissemination of this information to a fictional character rather than a narrator. This creates distance between the author of the book (Le Clézio) and the ideas presented. What's more, if a narrator who was not a character in the story had presented the same events, they would certainly come across as more neutral, perhaps even journalistic in tone. Fintan's letter also suggests an interpretation of the war, comparing its origins to its effects on children:

A Umahia, à Okigwi, à Ikot Ekpene, les photos des enfants foudroyés par la faim, leurs visages enflés, leurs yeux agrandis. La mort a un nom sonore et terrifiant, *Kwashiorkor*. C'est le nom que les médecins lui ont donné. Avant de mourir, les cheveux des enfants changent de couleur, leur peau desséchée casse comme du parchemin. Pour la mainmise sur quelques puits de pétrole, les portes du monde se sont fermées sur eux, les portes des fleuves, les îles de la mer, les rivages. Il ne reste que la forêt vide et silencieuse. (*Onitsha* 279)

In addition, the letter presents a social criticism of the West's response to the war: "Les journaux, les nouvelles de la BBC sont laconiques. Les bombes, les villages rasés, les enfants qui meurent de faim sur les champs de bataille, cela ne fait que quelques lignes" (279). Coming from Fintan, this is not overly sermonizing since he, too, is guilty—not of indifference but of his failure to act. Fintan compares his inaction with the heroics of others:

J'aurais voulu te dire plus, Marima. J'aurais voulu partir là-bas, comme Jacques Languillaume qui est mort aux commandes du Superconstellation, en essayant de franchir

le blocus pour apporter des médicaments et des vivres aux insurgés, être là-bas comme le père James à Ututu, si près d'Aro Chuku. J'aurais voulu être dans Aba encerclée, non pas comme un témoin, mais pour prendre la main de ceux qui tombent, pour donner à boire à ceux qui meurent. Je suis resté ici, loin d'Onitsha. Peut-être que je n'ai pas eu le courage, peut-être que je n'ai pas su agir, que de toute façon c'était trop tard. (278)

Fintan's letter serves both explanatory and persuasive functions. Like the letter that Adam received from his mother, Fintan's letter is explanatory in that it allows the reader to learn more about him. Also on the level of the story, Fintan is educating his sister about her connection to Africa and its history. He is encouraging Marima to hold on to what he has told her, to prevent the loss of memory about Onitsha as it once was. This gives the letter a persuasive function, and not just within the story. In a sense, the letter presents the moral of the novel:

Est-ce que tout cela doit disparaître à jamais?

Pas un instant je n'ai cessé de voir Ibusun, la plaine d'herbes, les toits de tôle chauffés au soleil, le fleuve avec les îles, Jersey, Brokkedon. Même ce que j'avais oublié est revenu au moment de la destruction, comme ce train d'images qu'on dit que les noyés entrevoient au moment de sombrer. C'est à toi, Marima, que je le donne, à toi qui n'en as rien su, à toi qui es née sur cette terre rouge où le sang coule maintenant, et que je sais que je ne reverrai plus. (279-280)

The short story "Trésor" from the collection *Coeur brûlé* makes use of all the narrative techniques to incorporate the past that I have discussed in previous chapters: historically accurate detail; characters' remembrances; and a structure of embedded narratives, including a journal and a letter embedded within frame narratives. The opening narrative tells of a boy, Samaweyn,

who is in possession of a case filled with treasure sent to him by his father. Other characters (Samaweyn's maternal uncle's family) imagine that the case contains jewels, gold or money, but Samaweyn alone knows its true contents: "Au font de la valise, il y a des papiers attachés par une ficelle, des photos, des lettres. C'est cela le trésor, rien que des papiers et des photos" (154). This is one of many examples in Le Clézio's work where documents are portrayed as something of great value.

The beginning of the journal in "Trésor" marks a clear departure from the narrative which precedes it. Since the opening frame is narrated in the third person, the "je" of the journal denotes a change of narrator. The journal also announces the time and place of its creation: "*Eldjy, hiver 1990*," and its author: "Ainsi, moi, John Burckhardt, je pénètre à nouveau dans le mystère du temps" (157). Although the journal recounts the narrator's contemporary voyage, he constantly compares his steps to those of "le voyageur," the narrator's namesake—Swiss traveler John Lewis (Johann Ludwig) Burckhardt—who made the same voyage in August of 1812. Treasure is a theme that links the Burckhardt and the Samaweyn narratives. John Burckhardt, following John Lewis Burckhardt's journey (for clarity's sake, I will henceforth refer to the more contemporary character as John Burckhardt, and to his ancestor as John Lewis Burckhardt), finds something of far more value than precious stones or metals. John Lewis Burckhardt discovered the ancient city of Petra, formerly unknown to the Western world. Over one and three-quarters of a century later, John Burckhardt follows in his ancestor's footsteps and sees the treasure for himself: "Tout d'un coup, je l'ai vu. Le Trésor. La légèreté, la tendresse. La nouveauté. Une idée, mieux qu'une idée, un rêve" (163). Like Samaweyn's treasure, the discovered city of Petra far surpasses material wealth, indicated in the journal by the capital letter of *Trésor*.

In addition to the qualities I mentioned earlier in this chapter which enable a journal to appear as a truthful account of past events, this particular journal has other qualities that lend to its appearance of reliability. First, it is grounded in history. The names, dates and locations of the original voyage that the narrator duplicates are historically accurate. Furthermore, John Burckhardt's numerous comparisons to his ancestor's journey imply his possession of, or prior access to, documents recording his ancestor's voyage. At times, John Burckhardt seems to have detailed knowledge about his ancestor's experiences:

Comme cela [le Trésor] lui est apparu, en cette matinée du 22 août 1812, vers huit heures, au débouché du Syk, après tant de fatigues et d'atermoiements, immense et brillant comme l'aurore entre les parois noires de la montagne. Alors, comme moi, il titubait sur la place, enveloppé dans les tourbillons du vent de poussière, il posait l'outre d'eau par terre et il s'asseyait pour mieux voir. Le guide avait déposé la chèvre ligotée sur le sol, et lui aussi regardait la demeure des génies. Puis il s'est retourné vers Burckhardt, il lui a demandé: "Que fais-tu?" (163)

The detail presented in this passage, in addition to the direct quotation and the absence of words of speculation, lead the reader to believe that the narrator has his ancestor's own journals or books as source material. There are also passages in the journal that show John Lewis Burckhardt recording his trip: "[le voyageur] essaie de prendre des notes et des croquis, les mains cachées sous sa robe" (167). At other times, John Burckhardt only imagines John Lewis Burckhardt's experiences: "C'est [la pierre] que le voyageur a dû voir lui aussi, quand il a pénétré dans le Syk pour la première fois. Le guide a dû poser la chèvre sur le sol pour revenir en arrière, et tirer le voyageur par la manche de sa robe, en disant des mots de colère" (161). The use of the verb *devoir* signals to the reader that the narrator is envisioning what must have

happened. We eventually learn that John Burckhardt's knowledge is not all speculation, but based on his ancestor's documentation:

Je marche dans un rêve. Ou bien dans les pages de ce livre que j'avais lu dans la bibliothèque de mon grand-père, à Zurich, ce livre relié de cuir rouge, qui parlait de ces lieux fabuleux, Damas, Kerak, Shaubak, Maan, Akaba. Les pages qui parlaient d'Eldjy, de Wadi Moussa, du Syk, et de ce peuple au nom étrange, les Lyathenes. C'était mon histoire, écrite au fond de moi, je la reconnaissais à chaque pas. (162)

If at times John Burckhardt attempts to visualize his ancestor's experiences, we could say that he is simply trying to expand on what he already learned from the leather-bound book.

John Burckhardt's journal is then testimony to two voyages separated by close to two centuries. The historical information helps to validate the truth value of the journal, as does the fact that the journal's author shares John Lewis Burckhardt's name. The family connection accounts for the younger Burckhardt's interest in and intimate knowledge of his predecessor's travels.

Of course, John Burckhardt's journal contributes to the meaning of the short story as a whole. In addition to the theme of treasure that connects and pervades both the Samaweyn and Burckhardt narratives (le "trésor" in the first being a case of personal family documents, and le "Trésor" in the second being the ancient city of Petra), the "real" past that the journal presents allows for a meaningful comparison of Petra as it was and now is. At times, it is as though time has changed nothing. John Burckhardt walks the same path, visits the same tombs, and writes about other similarities: "Je respire le même vent, la même poussière. J'entends les mêmes cris d'oiseaux, les croassements des corbeaux, les sifflements de l'aigle. [. . .] Je suis dans la vallée de la mémoire, dans la faille où le temps est tapi comme une ombre" (165, my ellipsis). Other

moments suggest that time barely exists, allowing John Burckhardt to feel close to his ancestor: “Le temps n’est qu’un battement, et je suis tout près du voyageur, je marche dans son ombre” (161).

There are also considerable differences between the past and contemporary journeys to Petra. Dangers faced by John Lewis Burckhardt and his guide included potential bandits and angry spirits. More contemporary concerns include the war in nearby Iraq and throngs of noisy tourists. John Burckhardt imagines 1812 to be a simpler time: “Il me semble que si j’atteins le secret, maintenant, tout sera différent. Je serai réuni au temps du premier voyageur, quand le monde était encore innocent” (163). Of course, foreigners learning the secret, beginning perhaps with his ancestor’s discovery, is what caused the loss of innocence in Petra. After all, the opening frame announced how foreigners accessing the *Trésor* (the very subject of the journal) would lead to the Bedouin people’s expulsion from Petra. Are we to conclude that the expulsion is the result of spirits avenging the fact that foreigners were allowed to see the Treasure and leave with its secret, and therefore chasing the Bedouin people from Petra? The city is certainly no longer a secret: the knowledge of Petra’s existence has led to its development as a tourist attraction and historical site.

There are two narratives that follow the journal, both continuing Samaweyn’s story. The last, or closing frame, brings the (short) story full circle. We learn, as we might have suspected, that Samaweyn is descended from one of the Bedouin tribes forced to leave Petra, and that his maternal uncle’s house is in a nearby village:

Tout cela est passé. Maintenant, mon oncle est mort. Il avait été dans la légion du grand Abdullah, quand ils se battaient sur les épaules de la terre, pour la ville sainte. Il est mort dans sa maison de ciment, au village bedouin, le visage tourné vers la ville des esprits, là

où il était né, là où mon père et le père de mon père étaient nés. Mais les esprits eux-mêmes ont cessé d'y vivre, ils ont été remplacés par les touristes et les curieux qui traversent jour après jour comme un vent de poussière. (185)

A fourth narrative separates the journal and the closing frame. That narrative, a letter from Samaweyn to "l'étrangère," is distinguishable from the journal by its narrator and narratee, and from the closing frame by a change of narratee. Since the foreign woman disappeared without revealing her name, Samaweyn does not expect his letter to reach her. The letter begins: "Je t'écris, à toi qui vis de l'autre côté de la mer, dans ce pays si lointain dont tu ne reviens pas. J'écris ces mots sachant qu'ils n'iront jamais jusqu'à toi. Je les écris pour les envoyer sur le vent, quand le vent souffle du désert vers le couchant, car seul le vent peut franchir les montagnes et la mer" (177). Since the foreign woman will never receive the letter, it functions more as a journal, an outlet for Samaweyn to express himself. On the level of the narrative, it tells of Samaweyn and the foreigner's journey to Petra from his perspective (he served as her guide).

As one piece of the short story, the journal brings in the background information necessary to understand the other pieces—John Burckhardt's desire to retrace his ancestor's steps, and why Petra's original tribes no longer inhabit the city. In essence, the journal documents the past, which allows for an understanding of the present. It shows how intricately we (all people, regardless of country and culture) are entwined, both with each other and with the past. Unfortunately, what we in the West perceive as great discoveries may in fact be secrets which, if not carefully guarded, could adversely affect other cultures. But "Trésor" is not unreservedly pessimistic. Samaweyn abandons his treasure but accepts his fate and moves forward, if not with treasure, than at least with confidence: "Je suis le dernier des Samaweyn,

léger d'argent et sans trésor. Aujourd'hui, j'ai quitté l'incertitude de l'enfance et je marche jusqu'à ma mort sur la même route, comme doivent le faire les hommes" (188).

Voyage à Rodrigues is interesting, and different from "Trésor," in that the entire work is presented as the author's journal of his trip to Rodrigues. Isa Van Acker calls *Voyage à Rodrigues* the "pendant autobiographique" of the 1985 novel *Le chercheur d'or* (*Carnets* 97). The "Le Chemin" edition of *Voyage à Rodrigues* includes *Journal* on the cover and title page (although the same label does not appear on the Folio edition). Even the title *Voyage à Rodrigues* has the simplicity of a journal entry; it is a label which clearly defines its contents. Unlike many journals, however, the entries of *Voyage à Rodrigues* do not begin with any kind of identifying information, such as a date or precise location. There is little, then, to guide the reader with respect to when, or over what span of time, the journal was written. There is no table of contents—not surprising for a work presented as a journal—and although the entries are grouped into sections, titles introduce only two of them: "Le ravin" (89) and "Euréka" (125). Within each section, breaks of one to three lines separate entries, seemingly divided due to the narrator's change of thought or topic rather than of day or time. Not considering its designation as a journal, the reader would probably not, at first glance, identify the work as such. Its appearance is really more like that of a novel. Still, from the opening lines, it is clear that the first-person narrator provides a written account of a journey as he is making it.

Not only is *Voyage à Rodrigues* in and of itself presented as a journal, it includes other forms of documentation: diagrams, coded messages, and bits of journal entries from the narrator's grandfather's prospecting days. Those documents are extremely important. First, they help the narrator trace the steps of his ancestor. At times, his familiarity with the maps and notes leads him to feel as though he has been there before: "Je redescends, et maintenant, je reconnais

le ravin, comme si j’y étais déjà venu” (11). What is more, the voyage to Rodrigues—and therefore the novel itself—would not be possible if not for the documents left to the narrator by his grandfather. Those documents are the substance and the guide for the narrator’s quest. The narrator repeatedly references his grandfather’s papers and maps. At times he does so to find his way: “Mais où est le ravin en cul-de-sac, et la source tarie? Carte à la main, à l’ombre d’un badamier, je cherche à comprendre où je suis” (9). Other times the documents have a more historical, even philosophical value:

Regardant à nouveau la liasse de documents provenant de mon grand-père—lettres, cartes, plans, schémas, messages codés et cryptogrammes, et, plus mystérieux encore, ces graffiti et ces calculs que mon grand-père a ajoutés en marge,—je suis étonné par tous les êtres et les actes que sa quête implique, comme s’il s’agissait vraiment d’une histoire parallèle aux souvenirs de notre monde. (79)

Within this journal, the narrator includes—directly—information passed on to him from his grandfather. He does not content himself with reporting his grandfather’s words, but reproduces them exactly. This use of direct discourse carries more force, a sense of truth and exactness that gets lost through indirectly reported speech. Because of all the documents either embedded or referenced in *Voyage à Rodrigues*, one could argue that its structure is based entirely on documentation. A journal itself, it is a form of documentation which, in turn, is the result of a voyage that came to pass because of other records of the past:

Aurais-je fait ce long voyage jusqu’à cette vallée aride devant la mer, ce lieu sans passé ni avenir, si je n’y avais pas été attiré comme malgré moi par les jalons laissés par mon grand-père ? Aurais-je écrit ceci, aurais-je rêvé si longtemps d’écrire le roman du chercheur d’or—le seul récit autobiographique que j’aie jamais eu envie d’écrire—s’il

n'y avait eu cette cassette noire dans laquelle mon père gardait les documents relatifs au trésor, tous ces plans, ces cartes, ces feuillets écrits de cette écriture si fine et appliquée dans laquelle il me semblait reconnaître ma propre écriture, s'il n'y avait eu cette amorce à mes rêves, ces fragments comme extraits d'un livre que je ne pouvais retrouver tout entier qu'en l'écrivant à mon tour ? Les écrits ne sont jamais indifférents. (142-143)

As we saw with the journal in "Trésor," the narrator's constant comparisons with his ancestor's voyage work to reinforce the authenticity of the journal itself. The narrator locates the same summit that his grandfather used as a point of reference, the *Vigie du commandeur*, although it is now called the "Citadelle" and has suffered damage during the 70 years that separate the two men's voyages. The narrator is able to find some landmarks described in the journal, while others have disappeared due to farming, development or the effects of time.

The narrator's grandfather's journal not only brings in events from the time that his grandfather lived, it also introduces a more distant past: the time of "le *Privateer*." Also called "notre corsaire" by the narrator's grandfather, "le *Privateer*" is the man who came to Rodrigues years before and hid the treasure. All three men, each from a different time, are linked by their common quest. The narrator explains the connection between his grandfather and "le *Privateer*": "C'est lui que mon grand-père ne cesse pas de retrouver ici, uni à lui par le paysage, par la même quête sans issue, fantômes pareils à des insectes parcourant sans se lasser le chaos de pierres de cette vallée" (18). The link between the narrator and his predecessors is only possible because of the documentation the narrator's grandfather left behind. *Voyage à Rodrigues* also mentions other prospectors who came to the island. While time might have erased most traces of them, those who wrote in journals ensured the survival of their experiences and observances. The narrator compares descriptions from French astronomer Alexander Pingré's journal to those of

his grandfather, concluding that the latter had certainly read from Pingré's "vieux cahier relié conservé à la bibliothèque Carnegie de Curepipe" (29). A passage of Pingré's journal appears in *Voyage à Rodrigues*, as does a quotation from François Leguat, another French explorer who wrote of his travels to Rodrigues. The inclusion of bits of older journals and books within this journal attests to the importance of writing in order to pass knowledge on to future generations. It also provides a history of the exploration and development of Rodrigues, even if it is unofficial.

Voyages à Rodrigues has a lot to say about the importance of documents. They have given the narrator an opportunity to find treasure—perhaps not the treasure initially sought, but one of even greater value: "Quand je suis entré pour la première fois dans le ravin, j'ai compris que ce n'était pas l'or que je cherchais, mais une ombre, quelque chose comme un souvenir, comme un désir" (134). Jacqueline Dutton explains how the narrator's quest for treasure transforms as it progresses: "La quête de l'or se trouve détournée de son but original et se fixe plutôt sur un autre royaume de Bonheur, celui de l'avenir. Au fur et à mesure que cette quête avance, il s'avère de plus en plus que la compréhension de la vie harmonieuse est ce qui importe plus que l'or" (210). The author's true quest was for a knowledge and understanding of his grandfather:

J'ai voulu retrouver un homme, un homme tout entière, avec son secret, sa crainte, son désir, son savoir. Les plans et les documents écrits au long de ces trente années ne me guidaient pas vers une chachette, vers ces diamants des mines de Golconde (ou d'ailleurs, quelques carrières de verroteries qui ont servi à conquérir le monde !). Ils me conduisaient jusqu'à l'homme qui les avait rêvés, qui en avait souffert, qui en avait été transformé, enfiévré, ensorcelé. (134)

Le Clézio also draws attention to the fact that some people have a closer connection to the past, or to their ancestors, than do others. The documents that serve as a point of departure, motivation and constant guide to the narrator in *Voyage à Rodrigues* hold absolutely no value for the narrator's aunt: "Je pense à tout ce qui a alimenté mon rêve: ce drôle de bagage, lourd comme une maison, chargé de mots et de signes, une nébuleuse d'idées, d'images, d'amorces, et tout cela contenu dans ce vieux classeur de carton attaché par une ficelle, portant écrit à la main de ma tante, ce titre vengeur et drôle:

PAPIERS SANS VALEUR" (124).

The importance of family documents to ensure the passing of information from one generation to the next reveals itself in Le Clézio's works of non-fiction as well. In his essay *Ballaciner*, Le Clézio discusses the history of cinema and its influence on his life, including his first forays into the seventh art. Le Clézio writes about his father going to see one of the first art films, *Œdipe roi*, on Mauritius at the age of 17. Le Clézio learned about the experience in one of his father's notebooks, revealing the importance of recording one's life in journal form. Without the journal, Le Clézio would not know about his father's cinematic experience. As it is, he knows very little: "Il ne me reste rien de cet après-midi bouleversé. Seulement le petit carnet de mon père, qui porte cette annotation écrite au crayon, à demi-effacée par le temps : '10 décembre 1914, allé au cinéma voir *Œdipe roi*'" (Ballaciner 26).

The very form and appearance of some documents announces to the reader "I am real." In addition to letters, journals and photographs, this is true of maps and newspaper articles, both of which can bring the past into the narrative. *La quarantaine*, for example, includes a map of Flat Island with nearby Pigeon Rock and Gabriel Island, all of which are mentioned in the novel.

Contributing to the map's appearance of authenticity are its title and legend: "FLAT ISLAND according to the Surveys in 1857 by Corby Govt Surveyor," and the inclusion of the lithographer, "Langlois del. E. Crook lith" (10-11). The map is not of present-day, but appears to have been drawn—as its label indicates—prior to the time of the characters' quarantine. As such, the document serves two purposes. For Le Clézio, it surely acted as a guide to ensure that the fictional narrative was geographically accurate (this, of course, would be true even if the map was not included in the novel). For the reader, the map confirms the presence and location of geographical points referred to in the narrative. It also allows the reader better to follow characters as they move around the island(s) and to visualize the characters' surroundings. In my view, this helps the reader feel closer to the characters and the situations in which the characters find themselves. Placed after the dedication but before the text, and appearing to be genuine, the map also points the reader to the location of the events to unfold before he even begins to read. In doing so, the map draws "real" boundaries and consequently conceals those of the fictional world that the reader is about to enter.

Ourania also contains maps, but in that novel they appear in an appendix. The maps in *Ourania* differ from that of *La quarantaine* in that they do not indicate their origin. While not sketched by hand, they do not come from an identifiable source outside of the novel. Instead, the reader is likely to attribute their existence to the novel's protagonist, Daniel Sillitoe, a cartographer who went to Mexico to study the Tepalcatepec valley. The appendix also contains other documents, including a journal-style itinerary (*Itineraire du Paricutin à la vallée du Tepalcatepec*). The first map, a visual representation of the itinerary that follows it, shows the towns and landmarks mentioned in it. The second map is of Campos, the village Sillitoe learns of and visits after meeting one of its residents. Following the map of Campos is a list of that

community's laws. The documents here straddle the line between truth and fiction. If the characters and events of the novel are fictitious, the novel is based, at least partially, in the real world. The Tepalcatepec Valley, which the protagonist set out to study, is located in the Michoacan province of Mexico where Le Clézio lived. A third map, *Passage des pléiades au zenith*, shows a cluster of stars, much like the (more detailed) map of the "Ciel austral" included in *Raga*. Although none of these documents bring the past into the narrative, they do serve as records of the characters' experiences. Like *Ourania*, the maps, itinerary and laws it contains are a product of Daniel Sillitoe's time in Mexico.

In my previous chapters, I discussed the use of historical detail and embedded narrative in *Ritournelle de la faim*. I shall now return to that novel to discuss how it uses documents relating to the Holocaust as part of its narrative structure. First, *Ritournelle* includes a map (of sorts). The narrator, looking at a map of concentration camps at a Holocaust museum in Paris, reproduces a list of those concentration camps on a page in the novel. There is no true map here—no borders, no legend, nothing but the camp names. When compared with a geographical map, however, it is evident that the camps appear on the page (roughly though not to scale) where they would on a map: Fuhlsbüttel and Neuengamme to the north, Dachau and Mauthausen to the south, Natweiler-Struthosf to the west and Belzec to the east. This rudimentary map "reproduced" in the novel communicates what the narrator sees at the museum. Additionally, through its form, it draws the reader's attention, much like the map in the museum has captivated the narrator's. As many camps as there are, a simple list within the narrative might cause the reader to pause and reflect. However, coupled with the arrangement on the pages, it reinforces what the narrator refers to as "la géographie de l'horreur" (203) by depicting the vast geographic range of the camps. This representation is more effective than an actual map would be at

reflecting the horror witnessed by the narrator. Void of any detail, the reader sees only the names: symbols marking cities, rivers, and borders between countries would draw attention away from the camps. We might even ask what importance those details would have to the children (pictured in the museum photographs) who “sourient à l’objectif,” “semblent poser pour un portrait de famille” et “ne savent pas qu’ils vont mourir” (203).

Ritournelle de la faim also includes laws and other excerpts from France’s *Journal officiel* and *Gringoire*. Rather than merely mentioning laws and decrees relating to Jews, the text of certain laws and decrees is reproduced within the novel, indented and in italics to set them apart from the narrative in which they are embedded. The laws are also enclosed within quotation marks, indicating that they are accurately reproduced: “Et sur les murs de la mairie du XV^e, placardés les décrets publiés par le *Journal officiel*:

‘Article premier, est regardé comme Juif toute personne issue de trois grands-parents de race juive ou de deux grands-parents si le conjoint est juif. Article deux : l’accès et l’exercice des fonctions publiques et mandats sont interdits aux Juifs, comme suit : . . . ’” (139).

Other laws reproduced in the novel include the “*Loi du 2 juin prescrivant le recensement des Juifs*” (139) and the June 17 law prohibiting Jews from working in certain professions (140).

Names of Jews, too, are listed just as Ethel reads them : “Les noms des chefs d’entreprise juifs sur la place publique, affichés dans le *J.O.*, par ordre alphabétique, une liste honteuse, sans fin :

Aksebrad

Achtenkiem

Abramowski

Astrowicz

Berger Gidel

Blumkind. . . .” (140-141)

While the novel reproduces only part of the list (through the first name beginning with “g,” and I have included only part of that list), it still allows the reader to access the articles much like Ethel does. Beyond the historical value they bring to the novel (which is present thematically regardless of form), the manner in which they are displayed accentuates their importance and draws the reader’s attention. A character mentioning that he is reading a list of World War II victims has less impact than the (even partial) reproduction of that list within the pages of the novel.

The lists, laws and other excerpts support the narrative by providing a visual complement to it. However, we should recognize that the inclusion of historical documents, or representations thereof, function much the same as the inclusion of historical locations or figures. Documents are open to interpretation by historians, by authors of fiction, and by readers. Linda Hutcheon summarizes how documents process and transmit facts:

Dominick LaCapra has argued that all documents or artifacts used by historians are not neutral evidence for reconstructing phenomena which are assumed to have some independent existence outside them. All documents process information and the very way in which they do so is itself a historical fact that limits the documentary conception of historical knowledge (1985b, 45).¹⁵ This is the kind of insight that has led to a semiotics of history, for documents become signs of events which the historian transmutes into

¹⁵ Linda Hutcheon references Dominick La Capra’s “On Grubbing in My Personal Archives: An Historiographical Exposé of Sorts (Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Transference),” *Boundary 2* 13, 2-3 1985: 43-67.

facts (B. Williams 1985, 40).¹⁶ They are also, of course, signs within already semiotically constructed contexts, themselves dependent upon institutions (if they are official records) or individuals (if they are eye-witness accounts). As in historiographic metafiction, the lesson here is that the past once existed, but that our historical knowledge of it is semiotically transmitted. (*A Poetics* 122)

The use of documents in writing—fiction or historical—can then open up a topic for reexamination by readers, causing them to reconsider the facts or events presented in a new light, perhaps within the fictional world that surrounds them. This is the case in *Ritournelle de la faim*, where the reader reads articles along with Ethel during the war, and visits a Holocaust museum with Ethel's son later in the novel.

“Photographs are documents whose evidential authority is rivaled by few if any other forms of visual representation” (Pedri 155). Thus begins Nancy Pedri's “Documenting the Fictions of Reality,” based on the use of photography in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes*. In her article, Pedri summarizes different scholars' views on the capacity of photography to replicate, represent or authenticate reality. Those views range from “the photograph's reliability as a direct (and, hence, truthful) impression of the visible word” (157), to a photograph as “the trace of an actual event” (158), to the idea that “the photograph does not or, better, cannot enact an objective link to the real world” (160). After considering various theories pertaining to photography, Pedri herself argues that the “photographs in creative biographies bridge ‘reality

¹⁶ Here, Hutcheon refers to Brooke Williams' *History and Semiotic* (Toronto: Toronto Semiotic Circle Prepublications, 1985).

and fantasy’¹⁷ by serving as documentary evidence. They corroborate the narrative’s claims to truth and provide readers with a means to check and assess the historical accuracy of such claims” (Pedri 162). That said, Pedri also recognizes that photographs can do more than document and authenticate the truth of the narrative: “Like life writing, photography does achieve a reality effect, a bracing emotional immediacy that speaks to readers directly of the real world. Yet for all their merit as credible renderings of the real, photographs are neither innocent nor transparent” (Pedri 167).

Photographs illustrate a few of Le Clézio’s works. They appear in the biographical *L’Africain*, the autobiographical *Gens des nuages* and the essay *Haï* (all of which could fall under Pedri’s category of “life writing”). Photographs also play a role—with varying degrees of importance—in novels and short stories, including *Révolutions*, *Étoile errante*, *Ritournelle de la faim*, “Le temps ne passe pas,” “Vent du sud,” and “Le Trésor.” What, however, is that role? I have argued that other narrative techniques—the incorporation of historically accurate detail, characters’ remembrances and embedded narrative—may serve thematic, predictive, explanatory or evidentiary functions. Do photographs operate differently, and if so, how? Those are the questions I now propose to explore.

Before delving into the use of photographs as a link to the past in Le Clézio’s writing, however, I believe that it is important to recognize Le Clézio’s interest in photography more generally. Evidence of this interest is apparent in Le Clézio’s collaboration with Bruno Barbey on *My Morocco*, a book of photographs with texts by Le Clézio and his wife and Moroccan

¹⁷ Nancy Pedri quotes Corey K. Creekmur in “Lost Objects: Photography, Fiction, and Mourning,” in *Photo-textualities: Reading Photographs and Literature*, ed. Marsha Bryant (Newark: University of Delaware P, 1996) 75.

native Jemia Le Clézio. In Octavia Lamb's review of the book, she describes the Le Clézio's contributions:

Interspersed with the photographs are delicate pieces of prose written by prominent French author J. M. G. Le Clézio and his wife Jemia. Le Clézio is a master at evoking ambience, and he enriches this photographic portrait of Morocco with descriptions of festivals, rituals, sounds, smells and light. The pictures and the words complement each other perfectly, and together succeed in transporting you to another world. (64)

J. M. G. Le Clézio also wrote the text introducing Christophe Kuhn's photographs in *Enfances*. In Le Clézio's introduction, he directly addresses the children of war and refugee camps. In doing so, he acknowledges their suffering but also the hope he sees in people, particularly a Mexican girl named Rosa who dedicated her life to adopting over 300 children.¹⁸ Another project on which Le Clézio collaborated is *Pétra: Le dit des pierres*, a book of stories and photographs put together, in part, in the hope of introducing Petra into literature. In the book's introduction, Philippe Cardinal describes how Egyptian sites such as the Giza pyramids attract ten times the visitors that Petra does—not because they are more majestic or provide better tourist accommodations, but because they are present in hundreds of literary works and therefore better known to travelers. To facilitate Petra's access into literature, Cardinal helped bring in twelve writers—six francophone and six Arab speaking—and five photographers to work on the project. Le Clézio's contribution was the short story "Trésor," which later appears in his own collection *Cœur brûlé*.

Underscoring his interest in both Mexican culture and photography, Le Clézio contributed an essay entitled "Three Indian Celebrations" to Geoff Winningham's *In the Eye of*

¹⁸ Le Clézio also tells (a slightly different version of) Rosa's story in "Trois aventurières" (*Cœur brûlé* 110-113).

the Sun: Mexican Fiestas. In that essay, Le Clézio attests to the power of the imagery, commenting that “Geoff Winningham’s photographs are not simply images. They invite us into the movements of the dance, urging us to put on our own masks, to lose ourselves in the violence and the truth of the ceremony” (11). Preferring to allow Winningham’s photographs to speak for themselves, Le Clézio chooses instead to write about the festivals that he witnessed in Mexico and Panama. Le Clézio also records his thoughts and experiences from his time spent in Mexico and Panama in his own *Hai*. Numerous images of Indian artifacts from Le Clézio’s personal collection (photographed by Maurice Babey) and of nature, in addition to advertisements and photographs of contemporary society, are interspersed throughout the essay. The juxtaposition of those image types creates a dialogue which complements the ideas Le Clézio introduces in the text of *Hai*: “Le rencontre avec le monde indien n’est plus un luxe aujourd’hui. C’est devenu une nécessité pour qui veut comprendre ce qui se passe dans le monde moderne” (11). Le Clézio compares the open, simple lifestyle of Indian peoples compared to the walls of concrete in which city-dwellers have trapped themselves. A full-page photograph showing nothing but tall city buildings and another with a river flanked on both sides by lush vegetation illustrate this comparison. Later, paragraphs describing the surprising, profound and natural beauty of Indian women contrast sharply with advertisements of hair-care products featuring women with elaborate hairstyles in alluring poses (22-23). Giant words in neon exploding from huge screens in London’s Piccadilly Circus (39) and cigarette ads shouting “Yes” (30) stand out against Le Clézio’s descriptions of the thoughtful silence respected by the Indians. Those few examples show that *Hai*’s photographs add force to Le Clézio’s arguments by pointing to the vast differences between the Indian world and our modern one.

Other scholars have noted Le Clézio's interest in and use of photography. Mary Vogl has written about photography in Le Clézio's work in *Picturing the Maghreb: Literature, Photography, (Re)Presentation* (2003). In her book, Vogl shows how Le Clézio and other contemporary writers (Michel Tournier, Tahar Ben Jalloun and Leïla Sebbar) "are using literature and photography to intervene, to remake the image of the Maghreb." She also addresses "the ways cultural identity is being questioned in France as well as the ways in which North Africans are portrayed by themselves and by others" (*Picturing* 11). While Vogl mentions the importance of photographic representation in Le Clézio's work generally, she concentrates on *Désert* and *Gens des nuages*. Vogl discusses the notion of photography in *Désert*, which, "as a cultural practice symbolizes the attempts of contemporary Western civilization to see, objectify, master, and control the Other" (79-80). It is worth noting that *Désert* does not contain any photographs or illustrations. Still, Vogl emphasizes the importance of photography and the visual, arguing that Lalla "becomes the victim of a French photographer who tries to know and control her. [Lalla's] exterior image is also exploited for the exotic associations it evokes in the French viewer/consumer" (63).

Mary Vogl also discusses the documentary nature of *Gens des nuages*, an illustrated account of J. M. G. Le Clézio's trip to the Sagia el Hamra valley of southern Morocco. Vogl questions the purpose of the photographs which accompany the text yet are not explicitly referred to in it:¹⁹ "What do the authors see as the purpose of including the images? Is it too "authenticate" this trip of their dreams come true? Is it to sell a book that would otherwise strike

¹⁹ Aside from a short identification in the table of illustrations at the end of the book, the authors provide the reader with no captions. A few photographs—of people (100, 104-05), a solitary bush on the desert landscape (41) and a small herd of camels gathered near a single tree (66)—are not identified in the legend. I would argue, however, that the photographs are referred to, if only indirectly, in the text.

readers as being too dry or abstract?” (*Picturing* 86). Vogl’s questions validate Nancy Pedri’s claim that “In both nonfictional and creative life writing, photography rarely operates as indisputable documentary evidence that corroborates, validates, or even establishes claims of empirical truth. Instead, the photograph’s evidential value is oftentimes undercut by a number of narrative choices that force readers to question what *exactly* underlies the photographic documentary” (162, emphasis in original). Vogl does question the “why” of the photographs and concludes: “It seems as if the book, ‘a product of and for the Western world,’ has succumbed to the ‘power of images,’ and yet the Saharaouis and the land around them have remained untouched” (*Picturing* 86-87). I take a more optimistic view of the inclusion of the photographs, but agree that they are used precisely to show that time has changed little of (this part of) the Saharan landscape: “Nous sommes ici avec lui, nous voyons ce qu’il voyait. Alors la vallée ne devait pas être différente de ce qu’elle est aujourd’hui : immense, vide, un réceptacle pour la pensée” (*Gens des nuages* 124). The lack of change to the landscape attests to the power of the desert, capable of withstanding—indeed erasing—any and all indication of man’s presence: “Aujourd’hui, il ne reste rien, que ces marques sur le toit du Rocher, le cercle de pierres qui entoure la stèle, et les noms gravés sur la paroi noire. Toutes les autres traces de présence humaine ont été effacées” (125). The photographs, then, do not bring the past into the narrative. They are contemporary to the Le Clézios’ voyage, and it is the text, not the images, that speak of the past. For this reason, I will continue with a discussion of other works in which photographs bring the past into a more contemporary narrative, beginning with *L’Africain*.

Unlike *Gens des nuages*, which documents the Le Clézios’ 1994 voyage, *L’Africain* delves much further into the past. In *L’Africain*, aided by memories and photographs, Le Clézio recounts his trip to West Africa where he went to meet and live with his father. He goes on to tell

his father's story, a man whose only passion was Africa. Several pictures accompany the narrative, which, as the author points out in an interview with Gérard de Cortanze, is extremely important for different reasons. First, he says, the pictures (there were over 500 to choose from) allowed him to access his memories and bring them to life. And perhaps more importantly, the photos chosen for the book became an integral part of the text: "Je n'imagine pas ce livre sans les photos. Je n'aurais pas été porté de la même manière, j'aurais eu le sentiment de quelque chose d'abstrait. Les photos sont aussi un peu la participation du sujet au livre qui parle de lui. C'est presque un livre écrit à deux. Un dialogue qui se noue maintenant ("J. M. G. Le Clézio: Mon père," 70). The idea of image and text working together to complete the story of Le Clézio's father is addressed, again by Mary Vogl, in "Le Clézio en noir et blanc: La photographie dans *L'Africain*." Vogl finds that the photographs serve as evidence of Africa as Le Clézio's father experienced it: "L'œuvre entière de Le Clézio s'appuie sur le travail de la mémoire. Les faits historiques sont évoqués, et dans *L'Africain*, les photos servent de preuve : ceci a existé, l'Afrique fut ainsi au temps du bonheur de mon père. Comme les descriptions réalistes, les photos accentuent l'effet de réalité dans un récit" ("Le Clézio en noir et blanc" 84). Many would argue that photographs are a more powerful means of representing reality than is description. According to Pedri, photographs' "documentary force depends not on visual resemblance or similarity but on a real, actual contact with the object that the photographic image represents and points back to" (158). This contact is a necessary part of the process that creates the image based on what is in view of the camera lens. We might consider the difference between the descriptions in the novel *Désert*, which Le Clézio wrote before having visited the region, and the photographs of *Gens des nuages*. Even if those photographs cannot "enact an objective link to the real world" because the "real is always already lost in representation" (Pedri 160), they still represent objects

and people that were in front of the camera. While the descriptions in *Désert* may appear to be the product of first-hand observation, they are in fact either the product of imagination or of secondary sources (perhaps Le Clézio's rendering of descriptions with the help of Jemia Le Clézio's mother).²⁰ Despite the (arguably) superior "evidential authority" of the photographs of *L'Africain*, they do not tell Le Clézio's father's story on their own. Le Clézio's imagination and words are still necessary to complete this biographical work: "l'œuvre littéraire exige à mesure égale un travail d'imagination. [. . .] Les photographies prises par son père [...] ne remplacent pas le travail de la mémoire ni l'effort de l'imagination ; au contraire, elles les inspirent" (Vogl "Le Clézio en noir et blanc" 84 ; my ellipsis). While the photographs were of paramount importance in the writing of *L'Africain*, it is how they prompted Le Clézio's memory that is perhaps most important: "Si les photos l'ont aidé à évoquer des souvenirs, la vraie compréhension de ce père ne vient pas simplement du regard mais surtout du travail de la mémoire et de la reconstitution que les photos rendent possible" (Vogl "Le Clézio en noir et blanc" 85). As Mary Vogl concludes, what Le Clézio learns about his father comes not from the photographs themselves, but from the memories they generated. The text of *L'Africain* supports this: "Tout cela qu'aucun portrait, aucune photo ne pourra jamais saisir" (103).

While photographs are an important link to the past in *L'Africain*, I am most interested in Le Clézio's novels and short stories which use photographs to bring the past into a more contemporary fictional narrative. In those works, photographs are only described, not reproduced, and have varying degrees of importance. A photograph referred to but not shown in the short story "Trésor" has an evidentiary function, explaining the reason for Samaweyn's father's absence. The boy's treasure (his case filled with documents) contains a yellowed

²⁰ Mary Vogl states that Jemia's mother "was an important source of information for J. M. G. as he composed the novel" (*Picturing* 85).

photograph of him as a baby in the arms of a woman, “l’étrangère blonde venue de l’autre côté de la mer et qui a emmené son père avec elle” (155). Despite the fact that Samaweyn’s father has left for Europe with this woman, Samaweyn still chooses to think of her as his mother. His real mother having died in childbirth, Samaweyn holds on to the first image of a motherly figure that he knows. This certainly attests to the power of a photograph to fill in for an absence of memory.

In “Le temps ne passe pas,” a short story from the collection *Printemps et autres saisons*, another photograph that is described, not shown, plays a much larger role in the narrative. In fact, it forms the basis for the short story.²¹ The story opens with the narrator, David, admitting his desire to tell about Zobéïde but acknowledging the difficulty of such an undertaking: “D’abord, je voudrais vous dire qui était Zobéïde, comme elle était belle, unique. Mais au moment de le dire, je ne sais plus très bien par où commencer” (147). At first, David tries to remember. He recalls a school-age friend of his, Zobéïde, who has long disappeared “non seulement du présent, mais aussi du passé, comme si on l’avait effacée, comme si elle s’était jetée du haut d’une falaise, ayant fait un trou dans le ciel de tous les jours” (147-148). David has had no contact with Zobéïde since their adolescence (he was 16 and she a couple years older), which explains her absence from the present. Her disappearance from the past is due in part to her mysterious nature: “Elle avait caché ses traces, dès le début” (148). David’s fading memories—a product of time—also contribute to the loss. While time has clouded David’s memory—he no longer remembers how he spoke to Zobéïde for the first time, or what she said—, a class photo she gave him, and to which he refers at several points in the story, prompts him to look back: “le souvenir que je garde d’elle, c’est cette photo qu’elle m’a donnée un jour quand on a commencé à se voir”

²¹ Mary Vogl acknowledges, but does not expound on, the importance of the photograph in this short story: “Photographs play a central role in a number of Le Clézio’s nonillustrated texts as well, such as the story “Le temps ne passe pas” [. . .], in which the only trace the narrator keeps of his adolescent love, Zobeïde, is the photo of her high school class” (*Picturing* 71).

(148). He reflects on a time when each day was the same as every other, and tries to understand what he did not know about his friend: “Je ne sais pas combien de fois j’ai regardé cette photo, pour essayer de comprendre. Comme s’il y avait une histoire secrète écrite sur ces visages, que j’allais pouvoir déchiffrer” (149). Le Clézio’s use of “comme si” here indicates the impossibility of uncovering any such secret: photographs do not have the power to do that. Similarly to *L’Africain*, we see the limits of photography for communicating the past. While pictures can be a springboard for memory, they cannot tell us everything. Still, David’s photograph opens up the past for him, and it is the detail of the photograph that directs his thoughts. The clearest information about Zobéïde comes from the class picture, which triggers David’s memories. The face that David imagines when he thinks of Zobéïde is her face as it appears in the photograph. Thinking of her face leads David to remember her hair, which he is then able to describe. After contemplating her gaze in the photograph, David wonders how she could have lived among the other students who never really saw her. For him, it is a contradiction: Zobéïbe felt invisible, but when David looks at the picture, he sees no one but her. David’s reminiscences about Zobéïde’s visibility subsequently lead him to recall how he used to follow her through the city to discover where she lived. He then remembers her building with its unique name, “Happy days,” and the names of its residents: “ces noms dont je me souviens encore maintenant comme de noms magiques, écrits à la main sur des bostols fixés aux boîtes. Balkis, Savy, Sauvaigo, Eskenazy, André, Delphin. Au bout de la range, écrit d’une jolie main sur un rectangle de papier d’écolier punaisé sur la boîte, ce nom, qui est devenu pour moi le nom le plus important du monde, le plus beau, le nom que je crois avoir toujours entendu: Alcantara”²² (152). Like her name, David has

²² David also recalls the names of other classmates, not based on his relationships or memories of them, but because of how, when Zobéïbe showed him the class picture, she pronounced their

not forgotten how Zobéïbe, so different from the others, smelled: “Je me souviens de l’odeur de Zobéïde, jamais je n’avais senti une telle odeur, piquante, violente, qui me gênait au début, puis que j’aimais, que je ne pouvais plus oublier” (154). At that point, memories seem to be flooding back, and the narrator is able to recount his adventures in detail, including the afternoon of their first kiss. David says that the photograph is all that he has left of Zobéïde, but the photograph is immediately associated with memory. It is as if the picture were a door allowing access to a formative time of his life: “Je n’ai gardé d’elle que cette photographie d’une école où je n’ai même pas été. Le souvenir de ce temps où chaque jour était la même journée, une seule journée de l’existence, longue, brûlante, où j’avais appris tout ce qu’on peut espérer de la vie, l’amour, la liberté, l’odeur de la peau, le goût des lèvres, le regard sombre, le désir qui fait trembler comme la peur” (161). David also admits that his most vivid memories are those created around the time Zobéïde gave him the class picture. The last night before she left is one of those memories: “c’est le souvenir de cette nuit qui me semble le plus extraordinaire, très proche du monde de la photo d’école, je crois que c’est cette nuit-là que j’ai été le plus près d’elle” (157). While David is able to recall quite clearly the events of that night, what he said to her is less clear. We see the ephemeral quality of the spoken word when David is unable to remember how he responded when she asked him what he wanted: “‘Rien, je ne veux rien. C’est bien d’être ici, de ne rien vouloir.’ Il me semble que j’ai dit cela, mais peut-être que je l’ai rêvé. J’ai peut-être dit encore : ‘C’est bien, on a tout le temps, maintenant.’ On dit tant de choses dans une vie, et puis ce qu’on a dit s’efface, ça n’est plus rien du tout” (159). The words we speak—unlike those we write, or faces we capture in a photograph—disappear. David’s memories of moments when Zobéïde

names: “Je me souviens de certains de ces noms, j’avais écouté avec attention sa voix quand elle les prononçait, et c’était la chose la plus important du monde” (149).

most closely resembles how she appeared in the picture are also sharp. He remembers, for example, her dark skin, bare legs, and what she wore the afternoon they first became friends.

Like *L'Africain*, the narrative of “Le temps ne passe pas” is based on memories brought back from an old photograph. Since so many of David’s memories stem from or refer back to Zobéïde’s class picture, it is the picture that advances the narrative. What is different in “Le temps ne passe pas” is that the photograph is not included in the narrative. Consequently, the photograph and the text cannot complement, contradict or play off each other. We readers, instead of contemplating the image ourselves, can only see Zobéïde as David describes her. We can only appreciate her beauty and uniqueness—those characteristics which David wanted to share from the beginning—based on what he is able to remember and tell. But perhaps that is the point. Nancy Pedri describes how “empty photographic frames” in autobiographies “force readers to imagine and thus reinterpret, and consequently, reinvent the original photographic document” (170). Of course, “Le temps ne passe pas” is fiction rather than autobiography, but that classification makes the assertion no less true, as Pedri suggests: “It is certainly true that belief in the photograph’s unique documentary power, in its authenticating transparency, or in its ultimate negation as a process of signification is effective regardless of the context, fictional or otherwise, in which the photograph appears” (162). The photograph does not appear in the short story, but Pedri’s comments still hold true: “The absence of the photographic image exposes photographic meaning and, more importantly, the photographic documentary is grounded not in the objective but rather the subjective” (170). Because those qualities that David appreciates in Zobéïde—beauty and individuality—are so subjective, we might form our own opinions, perhaps based on our prejudices, about Zobéïbe. We might then be unable to understand David’s point of

view, his fascination with the girl from his past, if we were to see her with our own eyes. It is better, then, that we are left only with David's memories, his descriptions.

Likewise, in "Vent du sud" from *Cœur brûlé*, the protagonist, Tupa, finds a picture of his parents, despite Tupa's father's attempts to remove everything that would remind the boy of his mother. The power of letters and photographs is demonstrated by the fact that Tupa's father felt he had to get rid of them: "Il avait enlevé tout ce qui pouvait lui rappeler ma mère, les lettres, les photos, même les bibelots qu'elle avait achetés" (135). Tupa initially treats the photograph as a treasure: "J'ai gardé la photo dans ma chambre, dans la boîte secrète où je rangeais les choses importantes" (136). It is a key to the past that would otherwise be completely forgotten. While Tupa's photograph is important thematically, it does not serve as the foundation for the narrative like the class picture in "Le temps ne passe pas." Structurally, the photograph in "Vent du sud" serves only as a link to the past, a way to incorporate a description of Tupa's mother into the story. Since Tupa was only six or seven when his mother left, all that he is able to remember of his mother (outside of the photograph) is "son rire, sa voix un peu chantante" (135).

Similarly, in *Ritournelle de la faim*, Xénia can only tell about her past in bits and pieces: "Par bribes, Xénia racontait sa vie" (35). Because of this, coupled with her young age, she may not be considered a reliable source, even when it comes to telling about her family and family history. Since Xénia was born when her mother fled Russia after that country's revolution, she would not be able to describe her life there, including her father (who was perhaps shot by revolutionaries and died in prison) or her parents' grand house in Saint Petersburg—at least not based on her own memories. One recourse to her lack of memory, then, is to turn to a photograph of her parents, which provides her with an image of the past that she would not otherwise have access to. It also works to back up her story (not that the reader has reason to doubt its

truthfulness). Despite Xénia's inability to give a complete account of her family history, the photograph she shows to Ethel establishes the validity of what Xénia is able to tell. The photograph confirms Xénia's parent's social standing: Ethel witnesses for herself the youth, beauty and elegant attire of her friend's parents. Perhaps more interesting, though, is the comparison drawn between the degraded condition of the photograph and the state of affairs in Russia after the revolution. Time has been hard on the photo, now aged and yellowed, but time also seems eager to erase that period in history: "Xénia a apporté une photo, déjà jaunie et tachée, comme si le temps voulait effacer cette époque" (35). In addition to serving as a link to Xénia's past, the photograph invites the reader to reflect on events of an earlier time.

Le Clézio's use of photographs shows that they can contribute to a narrative much as historical information or embedded narratives do. Photographs may either help to tell a story, validate a story, or prompt the reader to think about a story or events in a different way. As Mary Vogl suggests, "although Le Clézio casts doubt on the capacity of writing or photography to adequately and justly represent other cultures, in the end he suggests that if these practices are implemented with self-awareness and humility, they can at least be a means of raising important questions on topics such as human societies, postcolonial relations, and identity politics. While language and images have been used as tools for domination, for Le Clézio they also offer possibilities of liberation" (Vogl, *Picturing* 65). Just like those other narrative techniques, however, it is necessary to consider a photograph's limitations to accurately or fully represent the past. Dena Eber and Arthur Neal make this point in the introduction to *Memory and Representation: Constructed Truths and Competing Realities*: "As Roland Barthes (1972, 1980) explained many years ago, the photograph is not a direct reflection of the external world" (15). When a photograph is only referred to but never visible to the reader, however, the question of

accurate representation is related to text rather than to image. With no image to view on the page, the reader only has the narrator's textual description of the photograph to go on. Any image produced will therefore be in the mind of the reader (and certainly different for every reader). Consequently, photographs that are not pictured open the narrative for even further interpretation. The text suggests the photographic image, but leaves the construction of that image to the reader. In such a way, "absent" photographs still provide a means of complementing or authenticating the narrative, but since they do not impose an image on the reader, they do not limit the reader's ability to create their own images.

Throughout this chapter we have seen that documents—whether they are letters, maps, photographs or notebooks—are generally treated with respect in Le Clézio's work. Even in "Trésor," when Samaweyn leaves his case full of treasure to the sorceress knowing she'll throw it away, he does so to repay her for her hospitality. His leaving the treasure is not a show of disrespect toward the papers and photographs that comprise it, but rather a symbol of his moving from childhood to adulthood. He also leaves his treasure behind confident in the fact that, although the sorceress will throw his belongings away, she will use the case to store her own treasure. Le Clézio thus acknowledges that treasure is defined not by its monetary value, but on the value it represents for its possessor: we all define what has value to us. Still, the importance given to documentation throughout Le Clézio's work points to his valuing it over wealth. Knowledge of the past and of family heritage—all that would otherwise be lost if left undocumented—is repeatedly accorded more importance than objects of wealth.

Regardless of a document's form or value—or whether or not it is reproduced or only referenced in a given narrative—it remains clear that any such object could never represent the

whole of a period (or story, or the past). Photographs alone could not tell Le Clézio's father's story in *L'Africain*: it was the marriage of image and text which made that task possible. Nor were Le Clézio's grandfather's documents simply reproduced in *Voyage à Rodrigues*: it took the narrator's own voyage, and the documentation of that voyage, to understand his ancestor and discover the true nature of the narrator's quest. The same is true of "Trésor." If documents alone are insufficient, however, a story comprised of multiple documents, sources and voices is able to present a more accurate and complete story, and thus a "truer" one. In this way, the structure of many works such as *L'Africain*, *La quarantaine*, *Onitsha* and *Révolutions* demonstrate not only the value of personal documents and historical sources of information, but of the power of those documents when combined with text. The story and its meaning cannot be found in any individual document, but in their coming together. The impression of truth that results from the use of documents and historical detail has led some critiques to study the autobiographical aspects of Le Clézio's work, although it is often difficult in his novels to determine where reality ends and fiction begins. Regardless, the reader, encountering letters, journals and other documents within the narrative, is obligated to see a link between their importance—often presented as a valuable treasure—and the fact that those same types of documents construct the narrative. If these documents constitute a treasure for the owner, should the reader not also see them as such? In the chapter that follows, I will continue to address that question. I will also look back at the narrative devices addressed in previous chapters and discuss the importance and effects of incorporating the past in the Le Clézian narrative.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION: WRITING PAST AND PRESENT

In the previous chapters of this study, I introduced Le Clézio's œuvre and discussed how the author introduces the past into the narrative—both thematically and structurally—by means of historical detail, remembrance, embedded narrative and the inclusion of various types of documents. Because of the differing genres and the diversity of Le Clézio's writing, it would be impossible to come to one overall conclusion about the use and importance of the past, which certainly varies by text and time period. Nevertheless, I now propose to reconsider the importance and effects of incorporating the past in order to suggest general patterns of practice in Le Clézio's work.

While the past figures prominently in both Le Clézio's fiction and non-fiction, and he demonstrates a certain reverence and respect for it, his looking back is not, in his view, nostalgic. In François Caillat and Antoine de Gaudemar's documentary, *Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio entre les mondes*, Le Clézio discusses his reasons for writing, which have changed over the years, but include the possibility of reinventing the world and questioning values and systems. Writing also gives Le Clézio a sense of adventure, a feeling of moving forward. In fact, the author admits his dislike of longing for things past: "Ne pas trop regarder en arrière. Je n'aime pas la nostalgie, c'est quelque chose que je n'aime pas du tout. Au contraire, aller voir ce qu'il y a de l'autre côté de la colline, ça me parle." If the frequent inclusion of the past is not due to reasons of nostalgia, we must then consider other avenues for interpretation. It is possible to distinguish some recurring themes.

First, many of Le Clézio's novels and stories suggest that an understanding of the past is essential to living in and understanding the present. As critics have previously pointed out, the Le Clézian character is often on a quest for origins. At the heart of that quest is a need to discover identity: the past defines us, serving as a point of reference and a means to understand our present situation. We better understand who we are, and also the world around us, by having a certain familiarity with our past. As such, we have a natural interest in learning about and documenting that past. Le Clézio illustrates this in his writing as well as in his own life. In *La guerre*, words are related to survival, and the importance of passing stories from one generation to the next is emphasized: "C'est ça que je cherche, Monsieur X. Je cherche les mots et les signes qui peuvent m'aider à survivre. Je cherche dans la forêt inextricable les plantes amies, les cailloux, les serpents, les oiseaux amis. Je veux retrouver les légendes anciennes, et te les raconter, pour que tu les racontes ensuite à d'autres" (194). In an interview with Gérard de Cortanze regarding the voyage documented in *Gens des nuages*, Le Clézio discusses the challenges he and his wife Jemia faced with respect to uncovering their family history:

Il y a une grande différence entre Jemia et moi. Elle est issue d'une famille extrêmement ancienne. Comme beaucoup de Français, je remonte difficilement au-delà du XVIII^e siècle simplement parce que les archives ont disparu, parce que la mémoire s'est effritée, et surtout, parce que, dans mon cas, mes ancêtres sont des fermiers bretons qui, avant 1750, ne savaient ni lire ni écrire, donc ne laissaient aucune trace, qui de plus, ne s'exprimaient qu'en breton. Au contraire, Jemia peut remonter très loin puisqu'elle descend de la fille aînée du prophète et peut ainsi, de génération en génération, remonter jusqu'en l'an 620. Mais ceci relève du monde des idées. Dans celui des faits concrets, par les aléas de la vie, par le simple fait que sa mère ait émigré, et ait quitté le territoire natal,

il y a une rupture totale, et elle ne sait plus rien. Sa connaissance de ce qui s'est passé était totalement abstraite. Aller à la Saguia el Hamra, c'était permettre la réunion entre deux histoires: la légendaire et la physique. J'allais vers l'inconnu, elle retournait vers son passé. ("Le Clézio par lui-même" 35)

Similarly, we see Le Clézio's characters trying to overcome such ruptures that limit their knowledge of the past, and therefore their knowledge of self. In *La quarantaine*, the narrator Léon (writing in the 1980s) admits that he must go back to a moment of his childhood, to when his grandfather first encountered the poet Rimbaud, in order to understand: "Pourtant, c'est à Paris qu'il faut revenir, si je veux bien comprendre" (32). In *Révolutions*, too, Jean's knowledge of Rozilis, the name of the family's home in Mauritius prior to their expulsion from the island, is necessary for him to understand his family history: "C'était plutôt à la manière d'un chaînon manquant, un élément qui faisait défaut dans son histoire, sans lequel Jean ne pouvait comprendre. Sans Rozilis, le nom des Marro restait inintelligible" (*Révolutions* 105). It is for that reason that Jean listened to his great-aunt Catherine's stories. He makes it clear that he doesn't want just memories or ideas; he prefers, rather, to capture the sights, smells, and sounds of that house and its inhabitants. In *Révolutions*, your past does not leave you. Instead, it is forever a part of you, a fact with which Jean struggles, but also counts on. The narrator explains how not just Jean, but Mariam and Catherine too, are always, simultaneously, in the past and in the present:

Jean et Mariam ont abouti à une sorte de plateforme, en haut de la colline, devant la piste balisée de bleu de l'aéroport. C'est un sentiment bizarre, être à la fois ici et ailleurs, appartenir à plusieurs histoires. Mariam, petite fille à Oran, et lycéenne ici, en attente de ses examens. Jean à Londres, mais en même temps à Ébène en 1910, le jour de l'An,

quand tout va basculer dans le hasard. Et la tante Catherine à Josaphat, chaque nuit, les yeux ouverts sur ce vide noir qui est en elle depuis vingt-cinq ans. (*Révolutions* 369)

This passage suggests that our lives are composed of stories, and that those stories remain with us and define us. In Jean's case, it is not just his own stories, but also those of his ancestor Jean Eudes, which form his identity. Bruno Thibault, too, sees the formative effect that stories have upon identity in Le Clézio's work: "Tout son œuvre témoigne que nous sommes traversés et construits par des récits: que l'identité repose sur le tissage de plusieurs récits, tissage toujours en cours, et toujours à l'épreuve du vécu" (*J. M. G. Le Clézio et la métaphore exotique* 12).

The past as a measure of comparison to today's society (often presented as cold, cruel and unforgiving) emerges as a second theme developed through the juxtaposition of different time periods. The combination of photographs and text in *Hai* illustrate those differences. Similarly, in *Trois villes saintes*, Le Clézio's descriptions of the conquered and disappeared Amerindian cities form a sharp contrast with what he sees in that region today: asphalt, American cars, neon signs, and even a giant Pepsi bottle sitting atop a red-roofed building.

More often, though, the play between past and present reveals an extension of the theme of comparison: commonalities exist between two time periods, and our history can be used as a lesson. Learning from our past, Le Clézio suggests, allows us to avoid making the same mistakes as those who came before us. In an interview with Adam Smith, Editor-in-Chief of Nobelprize.org, Le Clézio describes what he finds appealing about the Amerindian culture:

It's probably because it's a culture so different from the European culture, and on the other hand it didn't have the chance of expressing itself. It's a culture which has been in some ways broken by the modern world, and especially by the conquests from Europe. So I feel there is a strong message here for the Europeans . . . I am European essentially.

So, I feel there is a strong message here for the Europeans to encounter this culture which is so different from the European culture. They have a lot to learn from this culture; the Amerindian cultures. (np; ellipsis in original)

The loss of that culture is a loss to mankind, both present and future generations. As I suggested in Chapter Three, the idea of learning from the past surfaces in *Onitsha*, a novel that Mary Vogl characterizes as “un refus de l’oubli, un plaidoyer pour le souvenir des temps anciens” (“Le Clézio en noir et blanc” 84). In that novel, the situation between the colonials and the locals, which culminates in the uprising in the primary narrative, recalls the mythical narrative in which the people of Meroë are forced from their land and into exile. Commonalities between the two distinct narratives suggest that history repeats itself due to the absence of historical memory: the people of Meroë’s story was lost to everyone, with the exception of Fintan’s father. As Geoffroy tries to unfold the story of Meroë, whose memory can heal the inhumane and cruel world in which they live, so Fintan tries to capture the story of *Onitsha* so that it, too, will live on. And it does, in the novel that Le Clézio presents to the reader. We can then see the entire novel as a lesson from which we should learn: *Onitsha* provides the reader with an example of the consequences and cruelty of colonization and war.

In an interview with Label France,²³ Le Clézio comments on literature’s power to recall, thus supporting the discourse presented in *Onitsha* that recovering the past could serve as a lesson for the present²⁴: “je sais ce dont j’aimerais parler publiquement. J’aimerais parler de la guerre qui tue les enfants. C’est, pour moi, la chose la plus terrible de notre époque. La

²³ Published online under the title “La langue française est peut-être mon seul véritable pays.”

²⁴ This answer comes in response to the question: “On vous dit nobélisable. Imaginons que demain vous receviez le prix Nobel de littérature. Qu’auriez-vous envie de dire lors de la cérémonie de la remise de prix?” His response begins: “C’est une question très hypothétique ! Je ne sais pas pour le prix Nobel, ...” The rest of the quotation is cited above.

littérature est aussi un moyen de rappeler cette tragédie et de la remettre sur le devant de la scène” (np). Le Clézio speaks about war and its effects on children in *Onitsha*. He does so explicitly through his characters and more implicitly via comparisons between past and present brought about through the use of embedded narrative. The alternating narratives suggest what might be done by presenting a precursor to events which started similarly but ended tragically. The events are linked more than just thematically—both narratives share not just the destruction and violence resulting from colonial intervention in Africa, but also a character, Oya, whose presence in both narratives links them.

In *Ballaciner*, we see a similar notion: the images presented to us through film (documentaries) enter into our memory and stay with us. That notion is accompanied by the hope that future generations, upon seeing those images, will do something to prevent similar tragedies:

Mais qu’il soit aujourd’hui impossible de tuer un enfant au coin d’une rue, au hasard d’une fusillade, ou d’enfermer des humains dans des cages pour les exterminer, sans que le monde entier en soit averti, n’arrêtera sans doute pas les pogroms et les guerres urbaines. Mais en fixant ces crimes dans notre mémoire, la caméra nous en rend responsables, nous en rend redevables. Peut-être un jour nos enfants, ou nos petits-enfants, voyant ces images, refuseront le retour fatal de ce qu’elles montrent. (*Ballaciner* 108)

While Le Clézio recognizes the power of film to pass on memory and perhaps motivate people to action, Tzvetan Todorov identifies other means to maintain living memory, including trials of war criminals: “Outre qu’il y a là le danger de pratiquer une justice pour l’exemple, pour l’enseignement qui pourrait en découler, il y a bien d’autres lieux où cette mémoire se préserve: dans les commémorations officielles, dans l’enseignement scolaire, dans les médias, dans les

ouvrages d'histoire" (*Les abus* 58). Todorov goes on to defend the preservation of memory and suggests its potential benefits. Despite the length of the passage, I have chosen to include it here because I believe we can see Todorov's thoughts echoed in much of Le Clézio's work. In the closing pages of *Les abus de la mémoire*, Todorov writes:

Il n'y a plus de nos jours de rafles de juifs ni de camps d'extermination. Nous devons pourtant maintenir vivante la mémoire du passé: non pour demander réparation pour l'offense subie, mais pour être alertés sur des situations nouvelles et pourtant analogues. Le racisme, la xénophobie, l'exclusion qui frappent les autres aujourd'hui ne sont pas identiques à ceux d'il y a cinquante, cent ou deux cents ans; nous ne devons pas moins, au nom de ce passé, précisément, agir sur le présent. Aujourd'hui même, la mémoire de la Seconde Guerre mondiale est vivante en Europe, entretenue par d'innombrables commémorations, publications et émissions de radio ou de télévision; mais la répétition rituelle d'"il ne faut pas oublier" n'a aucune incidence visible sur les processus de purification ethnique, de tortures et d'exécutions massives qui se produisent pendant le même temps à l'intérieur même de l'Europe. Alain Finkielkraut remarquait récemment que la meilleure façon de commémorer le cinquantième anniversaire de la rafle du Vel' d'Hiv' serait, plutôt que de clamer sa tardive solidarité avec les victimes d'antan, de combattre les crimes commis par la Serbie à l'égard de ses voisins. Ceux qui, à un titre ou à un autre, connaissent l'horreur du passé ont le devoir d'élever leur voix contre une horreur autre, mais bien présente, se déroulant à quelques centaines de kilomètres, voire quelques dizaines de mètres de chez eux. Loin de rester prisonniers du passé, nous l'aurons mis au service du présent, comme la mémoire—et l'oubli—doivent se mettre au service de la justice. (60-61)

If those mechanisms identified by Todorov, especially publications, allow for the preservation of memory, could the same not be said for fictional works, particularly those which encourage the reader to reconsider past events or to learn from them? By planting stories of the past in the reader's mind—or memory—the written word (like the movie camera) passes to the reader the responsibility to prevent reoccurrences of tragic events. In that way, Le Clézio acts as an agent of Todorov's idea of *mémoire exemplaire*. It is important to recognize Le Clézio's view that written works which can succeed in mobilizing our imaginations are rare. Authors who have succeeded at evoking the horror of war, according to Le Clézio, include Goethe (the battle of Valmy), Stephen Crane (the Civil War), Tolstoy (the invasion of Russia in *War and Peace*), and the poetry of Paul Éluard, Guillaume Apollinaire and René Char (*Ballaciner* 97-98).

The idea of fiction as an instrument capable of storing and transferring memory leads to a third conclusion about the past in the Le Clézian narrative: the power of the written word to serve as memory. In Chapter Two, I discussed how Le Clézio's writing about Amerindian cultures emphasizes the importance of documenting those cultures to ensure their preservation. In *La fête chantée*, for example, Le Clézio writes: "Seule demeure aujourd'hui, comme un testament, par la grâce de la *Relation* anonyme, la mémoire de cette grandeur, la légende émouvante et vrai du temps passé, quand la poésie et l'histoire ne faisaient qu'un et que le royaume des hommes ressemblait au domaine des dieux" (115). I then turned to the incorporation of historical information—and its implications—in Le Clézio's fiction. At the end of that chapter, I proposed to examine whether fiction is any less capable than historical writing to "capture" the past and convey it. Some of Le Clézio's writing suggests that we can, in fact, prevent the loss of important historical and cultural information through the writing and sharing

of stories. *Voyages de l'autre côté* depicts books as human memories: “tous ces livres, mémoires des hommes écrits sur les feuilles de papiers blanc; tous ces tableaux, tous ces poèmes” (18).

Le Clézio's views on writing as a way to witness and testify also support the idea of writing as memory. In his interview with Adam Smith from Nobelprize.org, Le Clézio explains why he writes: “to be true to myself, to express myself in the most accurate way. I feel that the writer is just a kind of witness of what is happening. A writer is not a prophet, is not a philosopher, he's just someone who is witness to what is around him. And so writing is a way to ... it's the best way to testify, to be a witness.” The title alone of Claude Cavallero's book, *Le Clézio: Témoin du monde*, reinforces the idea of Le Clézio as a writer and witness. Le Clézio's descriptions—for which he is well known—are certainly a result of his role as witness. In *Le Clézio: “Peintre de la vie moderne,”* Marina Salles describes how Le Clézio's descriptions immortalize—a strong word, to be sure—the image of a traditional harvest: “Le temps de l'histoire dans les romans de Le Clézio s'étale souvent sur plusieurs décennies, ce qui offre une perspective sur les évolutions du siècle. C'est ainsi qu'*Étoile errante*, dont le récit commence en 1943, immortalise le tableau d'une de ces moissons à l'ancienne à Roquebillière, avec les charrettes à chevaux, la répartition des tâches entre toutes les générations” (*Peintre* 144). Salles also describes the importance of Le Clézio's descriptions of Marseille's *Le Panier* neighborhood: “L'œuvre de Le Clézio sera sans doute un des derniers témoignages sur les ruelles étroites et insalubres du Panier, ce quartier faisant l'objet d'une réhabilitation progressive ne ressemblera bientôt plus aux descriptions qu'en fait l'auteur” (*Peintre* 27). Le Clézio's descriptions of objects, too, capture Salles' attention:

La modernité est sans conteste omniprésente dans ses livres dont la lecture permet de retrouver la vie d'un demi-siècle en ses aspects les plus divers, voire en ses évolutions.

Les occurrences nombreuses de machines, de moyens de communication, de l'électricité, l'inventaire des objets fabriqués en séries, des nouvelles substances de l'industrie pétro-chimique, l'importance de la consommation, soutenue par les recherches parascientifiques de "la désiologie", reflètent dans les premiers romans la prospérité des Trente Glorieuses en Occident, les livres de Le Clézio remplissant le rôle de document archéologique, qui sauvent de l'oubli des articles déjà disparus. (*Peintre* 295)

Salles' comments certainly attest to the power of Le Clézio's fiction to store the memories of places and things. It is important to reiterate that Le Clézio's characters, too, turn to text (notebooks, journals, letters) and photographs as sources of memory. Again, in *Onitsha*, we see those types of documents, and also nursery rhymes and songs, providing a link to the past. In the end, Fintan expects that Onitsha, which, due to revolution, no longer exists as it did during his time there, will live on in his sister. Although Marima never actually lived in Africa, the passing on of memory is possible through Fintan's written account of his time there. Since writing within the novel can serve as memory, the novel itself should be seen as a memory or testimony of that time in African colonial history. Although Anne Donadey is referring to postcolonial writers and not to Le Clézio, she speaks to that idea: "Because of the gaps existing in historical discourse due to the erasure of records, the dearth of archives, and the death of the witnesses, postcolonial writers often turn to fiction to reconstitute a past that will help them and the community/Nation heal in the present and move forward into the future" (112). In an interview with Gérard de Cortanze, Le Clézio attests to the advantages of fiction as a means of representing the past: "Je reconnais qu'un roman est beaucoup plus enthousiasmant pour traiter le passé et régler les problèmes qu'on peut avoir avec lui [mon père] ou avec sa mémoire" (*J.M.G. Le Clézio: "Mon père l'Africain"* 70).

Victor Hugo certainly saw text as a viable way to preserve (aspects of) the past. Indeed, he hypothesized that the book, thanks to the printing press, would outlast what many of us often consider to be more durable objects (*Notre-Dame de Paris* 173-75). But while historical texts such as public records and history books attempt to preserve a true, reliable version of the past, ought we to expect or accept the same of fictional works? Because of the nature of discourse, which I discussed in Chapter Two, we can—at least with regard to historical fiction (or historiographic metafiction):

What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past (“exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination”). In other words, the meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those past “events” into present historical “facts.” This is not a “dishonest refuge from truth” but an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs. (Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* 89)

As Deborah Cartmell and I. Q. Hunter state, in their introduction to *Retrovisions: Reinventing the Past in Film and Fiction*, “Oscar Wilde remarked that there was no fog in London till the Impressionists painted it. In the same spirit we might say that history is the invention of creative artists as much as an objective record of true events” (1). Following that idea, I suggest that fiction—which can be “an objective record of true events” in addition to “the invention of creative artists”—can rival historical writing in its ability to communicate the past. What’s more, fiction does not claim the same truth value as historical writing. It thus allows, or perhaps encourages, the reader to think about past events openly rather than conclusively.

Le Clézio himself broaches the subject of writing as testifying and recording memory with respect to truth in *L'extase matérielle*:

Écrire, si ça sert à quelque chose, ce doit être à ça: à témoigner. A laisser ses souvenirs inscrits, à déposer doucement, sans en avoir l'air, sa grappe d'œufs qui fermenteront. Non pas à expliquer, parce qu'il n'y a peut-être rien à expliquer; mais à dérouler parallèlement. L'écrivain est un faiseur de paraboles. Son univers ne naît pas de l'illusion de la réalité, mais de la réalité de la fiction. [. . .] L'écriture est la seule forme parfaite du temps. Il y avait un début, il y aura une fin. Il y avait un signe, il y aura une signification. Puérile, délicate, tendre comédie du langage. Monde extrait, dessin accompli. Volonté implacable, éternelle avancée des armées de petits signes mystérieux qui s'ajoutent et le multiplient sur le papier. Qu'y a-t-il là? Qu'est-ce qui est marqué? Est-ce moi? Ai-je fait rentrer le monde enfin dans un ordre? Ai-je pu le faire tenir sur un seul petit carré de matière blanche? L'ai-je ciselé? Non, non, ne pas se tromper là-dessus: je n'ai fait que raconter des légendes des hommes. (105-106; my ellipsis)

Still, if fiction is unable to capture and represent the world as it is, it does have the power to captivate a reader, and can indeed be an effective way to preserve aspects of the past and pass them on to future generations. This is especially true in Le Clézio's writing, given the thematic and structural emphasis placed on the past. It is here that narrative structure emerges as fundamental to the notion of fiction as a means to store and transmit memory. In Chapter Three, I argued that memory, as a basis for narrative, does not allow for assurance: due to its fragmentary and unreliable nature, memory is incapable of producing an effective narrative. When memory is in question, however, it is often supplemented by other sources of information about the past. Going back to my discussion of *Le rêve mexicain* in Chapter Two, we can

conclude that the “truth” which appeared not from one or the other side of the story, but at the crossroads of the two, is perhaps a description of what we see in *Étoile errante*. The intersection of the two girls’ lives results in a truer story—one that neither one nor the other side could convey on its own. That, in fact, could be true of the many novels incorporating characters’ remembrances, embedded narratives, or both. In *Onitsha*, Fintan’s story is completed by the story of Geoffroy’s search for the black queen, and the manner in which the two stories are intertwined gives the novel its force and meaning. Similarly, the meaning communicated through the use of embedded narrative in *Ritournelle de la faim* and *Révolutions* surpasses what any one narrative instance composing either novel could.

As an extension of that idea, I return to the notion that neither fiction nor history alone can accurately convey the past. A more accurate version of the past, however, can be found where the two intersect—an idea reminiscent of Georges Perec’s Foreword to *W or The Memory of Childhood*. Of the link between his adventure story and his autobiography, Perec writes:

In this book there are two texts which simply alternate; you might almost believe they had nothing in common, but they are in fact inextricably bound up with each other, as though neither could exist on its own, as though it was only their coming together, the distant light they cast on each other, that could make apparent what is never quite said in one, never quite said in the other, but said only in their fragile overlapping. (Foreword)

Le Clézio’s remarks about the photographs and text working together to tell the story in *L’Africain* echo Perec’s comments.

Of course, central to this argument lies the importance of writing. Whether it be to document or to understand, it is important to recognize the value of writing throughout J. M. G. Le Clézio’s oeuvre. For Le Clézio himself, we see memory tied to the origins of writing. Le

Clézio says that he began writing, “fictionalizing,” his visit to Africa before his arrival on the continent. It is that very story, “A Long Voyage,” (or at least a version of it), that appears as an embedded narrative in *Onitsha*. This, I believe, underscores the importance of memory: it and writing are invariably linked, and were from the beginning. It was memory (or lack thereof) and Le Clézio’s desire to tell his stories that drew him to his chosen path: writer and witness. In his writing, he communicates the importance of writing through his characters that either read or write in order to question or better to understand the world in which they live.

Regardless of how we might interpret Le Clézio’s use of the past, it remains clear that writing, to ensure the communication of knowledge, stories, historical or cultural information from generation to generation, is of vital importance. Those themes which appear throughout Le Clézio’s work—the importance of understanding the past in order to understand the present; comparing past and present to understand and learn from mistakes of previous generations; and the power of the written word (including the novel) to communicate memories—show that the importance of the past does not lie in itself, but within its relationship to the present. Multiple voices, multiple narratives, and multiple time periods—past and present—contribute to historical accuracy and greater perspective, all of which enable the novel to entertain, to educate and, perhaps, to motivate the reader. By writing past and present, J. M. G. Le Clézio succeeds in telling stories that attract readers and critics alike, while exploring questions about the past, the representation of the past in literature, and the relationship of the past to the present, showing that they are always, invariably, linked.

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