

VANISHING IN THE PRESENT:  
DISAPPEARANCE IN THE MEDITERRANEAN FRENCH NOVEL

by

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## ABSTRACT

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Vanishing in the Present: Disappearance in the Mediterranean French Novel

Thesis directed by College Professor of Distinction Warren F. Motte, Jr.

This dissertation examines the ways in which postcolonial Francophone novels use the concept of disappearance to make sense of contemporary experience. I study that trope with the aim of understanding how the political pasts of Algeria, France, and Morocco, changing notions of subjectivity, new, globalized socio-economic realities, and unstable forms of individual and social identity contribute to a present-day “structure of experience” where disappearance defines one’s mode of being in the world. My dissertation investigates four novels—Georges Perec’s *La disparition* (1969), Mahi Binebine’s *Les funeraillles du lait* (1994), Tahar Ben Jelloun’s *Partir* (2006), and Assia Djebar’s *La disparition de la langue française* (2003)—in order to outline the nature and consequences of that mode of being and its connection to contemporary issues such as migration, trauma, the body, memory, and sexuality, and nation.

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## INTRODUCTION

In a number of recent French-language novels, both of North African and French origin, disappearance stands out as an idea that warrants study. Different forms of disappearance—of an individual, of a way of life, or as a more general notion underlying other themes—figure prominently in works by authors such as Tahar Ben Jelloun, Mahi Binebine, Éric Chevillard, Assia Djébar, Jean Echenoz, Youssef Amine El Alamy, Mohamed Nedali, and Georges Perec, to name a few. While it is a trope that has been used extensively in many more literary works than those, and perhaps in every era as well, I will argue here that at least four novels—Perec’s *La disparition*, Binebine’s *Les funérailles du lait*, Ben Jelloun’s *Partir*, and Djébar’s *La disparition de la langue française*—portray disappearance as a concept with special relevance to the kinds of subjects they depict, and with special meaning in the worlds they inhabit. In order to shed light on the usefulness and importance of the idea of disappearance, I will investigate the ways in which each of those works uses the trope as a tool for describing and understanding different past events and experiences in the present. When viewed together, the texts I study suggest that the concept of disappearance is fundamentally relevant to contemporary experience: my hypothesis is, in short, that Perec, Binebine, Ben Jelloun, and Djébar’s novels consider the concept of disappearance to be a privileged structure of experience in the postmodern, postcolonial world, and especially in the North African context.

Such a hypothesis is encouraged by the observation that a wide range of events and experiences—including ones often considered emblematic of our era—are commonly described

as forms of “disappearance.” Enforced disappearances are a hallmark of a number of recent conflicts, including Morocco’s *années de plomb*, the Algerian Civil War, or the conflicts in South America that served to transform *disappear* into a transitive verb. In recent decades, the increasing movement of human populations brings the notion of disappearance to mind each time an overloaded boat capsizes and migrants vanish into the sea, or when the scale of rural flight or economic exodus in a given community leads to a perception of generational loss. A more extreme example of an event steeped in the notion of disappearance may be found in the Holocaust. However removed from those events one might feel today, and whether or not events involving the idea of disappearance are in fact more common now than in the past, disappearance stands out as a concept underlying many such events and processes, including the social and economic changes brought about by globalization. Those changes are in many cases apprehended as disappearances, not mutations—or as the utter effacement of a structure rather than a change in its form.

The works I study revolve primarily around the disappearance of individuals, but symbolic readings of each are encouraged by the presence of “disappearance” in contemporary discourse, much in the same way that representations of the most obscure, historically- and geographically-specific detention camp, real or imagined, evokes the Holocaust, Soviet gulags, and related imagery. Like detention camps, the notion of disappearance might be termed *polyresonant*. In Assia Djebar’s *La disparition de la langue française*, for example, the disappearance of the protagonist Berkane while revisiting the site of his internment during the Algerian War points to the experience of political dissenters in Morocco, Argentina, and elsewhere. Moreover, his vanishing invites allegorical readings encompassing more general notions: searching for collective memories and identities that seem to have disappeared,

questions of marginality, vanishing subjectivity, the postmodern nullity of the self, disappearing meaning and unanchored language, and so forth. In turn, these associations suggest further connections to the reader, in a fashion similar to Michael Rothberg's notion of multidirectional memory.<sup>1</sup> While all figures and notions in narrative are polyresonant or multidirectional to some extent, the resonance of disappearance seems to enjoy particular range and intensity.

In addition to the polyvalence of "disappearance" as a label, its interest as a subject of study is heightened by the incongruity of the notion that persons or things might simply *disappear* today. In part, the idea of disappearance might seem especially out of place in the contemporary world because of the radical expansion and increased accessibility of knowledge in modernity. The technological and social changes of the last hundred years have greatly extended our ability to gather and record many kinds of information. In principle, then, it ought to be less common now than ever before for an individual, a group, a memory, or information to die out, vanish, or change without leaving a trace of itself in the amplified human archive. Our ability to access, transmit, and interpret the information contained in that archive has been multiplied by technologies, too, and, again in principle, we are more capable now than at any time in the past of finding missing individuals, of cataloguing species, identities, and worldviews in ascent or decline. Even recognizing the limitations of our knowledge in all domains, the sense that the collective human gaze is now somehow fundamentally closer to *total* is a mark of our time. In that light, it is striking to observe that the notion of disappearance seems especially descriptive of present experience, for some authors, and that the notion provokes sufficient unease to prompt the classification of enforced disappearance as a crime against humanity.<sup>2</sup> It

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<sup>1</sup> Rothberg develops this idea in *Multidirectional Memory*.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Susan McCrory's "The International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance." The International Criminal Court now considers enforced disappearance (or "forced

seems all the more plausible, in light of its incongruity and the attention and condemnation it has received internationally, to consider that much can be gained from studying the ways in which disappearance signifies today—especially as a structure of experience, and not only as an event.

The contemporary French-language novel is a domain in which a study of disappearance may be especially productive. As Dominique Rabaté points out in the collection *Un retour des normes romanesques dans la littérature française*, novels by French authors have evoked the notion of disappearance with notable frequency and intensity in recent years (67). As I have suggested, the figure is present and important in North African French-language literature as well, where it is perhaps especially evocative, given that literary tradition's association with sister notions of liminality, alterity, identitary effacement, and cultural flux. Consequently, my study of disappearance does not focus exclusively on North African or “hexagonal” French literature, instead selecting works from each tradition that approach the figure of disappearance from different angles or use it as a means of understanding contemporary experience.

Addressing the figure of disappearance in novels involves a particular terminological difficulty. As I have suggested, “disappearance” is a term used to describe a wide range of events and experiences. In addition to polyresonant, it might also be termed a *polysemiotic* notion, because it can be used to describe highly disparate phenomena. It might be the case that any death, absence, or transformation—sudden or slow—, any significant departure or migration, or any radical change can be termed a “disappearance,” depending only upon a hypothetical observer's point of view and personal inclinations. Mamaya, the protagonist of Mahi Binebine's *Les funerailles du lait*, provides an example: it is possible to read the disappearance of her son as only being a disappearance *for her*, because his sudden absence is entirely explainable to the

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disappearance”) a crime against humanity as a result of the Rome Statute, which entered into force in 2002 after adoption in 1998.



individuals that caused him to “vanish” into a grave somewhere in Morocco’s desert South. If one understands “disappearance” to mean a *completely* unexplained absence, then her son did not disappear. Yet from Mamaya’s perspective, the term seems correct, even despite Binebine’s hints to the effect that she understands *exactly* what happened. At every turn, the notion of disappearance operates in an atmosphere of contradiction and within a web of interrelated meanings, potentialities, and points of view, resisting neat definitional constraints while nevertheless seeming entirely apposite.

Although the ambiguity of disappearance makes defining its essential characteristics a thorny proposition, certain limits can be applied to the term to sharpen its meaning and allow it to perform more efficiently as a heuristic. Two criteria in particular focus attention on the aspects of the notion of disappearance that permit it to be legible as a structure of experience in the ways I will discuss in the following chapters. First, I understand “disappearances” to be events or experiences that bring some intractable epistemological difficulty to light. Using that criterion, Mamaya’s son’s disappearance in *Les funeraillles du lait* qualifies because, while it is *theoretically* possible to provide an account of his fate, it is all but impossible for Mamaya to do so in practice, let alone to her complete satisfaction. Consequently, Mamaya’s situation invites contemplation of an important question: what kind of knowledge or narrative could *ever* produce “knowing” of the kind she might hope for? In Mamaya’s case, the pertinence of that question is underscored by the incongruous realization that the lacunae in the narrative of her son’s fate are, in one sense, relatively minor: the facts of his (probable) demise seem almost entirely known to Mamaya, in fact.

Despite knowing almost everything, her son’s disappearance casts doubt on the possibilities and benefits of *knowing* in general, because what appear to be minor lacunae are

portrayed as affecting her so greatly that she cannot move beyond them. In addition to the actual absence of her son (or his remains), the unsettling aporia resulting from such epistemological difficulties motivates Mamaya's journey and the ritual she undertakes in an effort to close the open wound of her son's probable demise, which signifies as a disappearance in the epistemological flux I describe.

An analogous criterion can be used to distinguish more abstract senses of loss (as of a language or identity) as disappearances as well. Like in Mamaya's case, "intangible" disappearances of that kind could be understood *as* disappearances, according to my approach, because they involve an impression that knowing something more might be helpful while raising doubts concerning *what* should be known or how knowing it might be possible. Using the criterion of epistemological difficulties leading to unsettling aporia will, I believe, render a portion of disappearance's versatility and potency as a figure understandable in ways I will explore, especially in Chapter 1.

The second criterion I use to distinguish representations of disappearance that suggest a broader importance of the figure is its association with a powerful and incontrovertible affective charge. *Les funerailles du lait* once again provides a useful example of my meaning. Mamaya's son's disappearance affects her profoundly, and, as a result, she feels compelled to respond to it in one way or another in order to address its ongoing influence on her life. The fact that her son *disappeared* is vitally meaningful for Mamaya, and a source of significant pain and distress, to such an extent that the idea of disappearance itself seems as important in the text (and in the kind of world it represents) as the notions of loss, absence, death, or injustice.

Focusing on disappearances represented as emotionally significant or especially troubling helps to elucidate the sense in which I suggest disappearance functions as a figure and concept.

A strong affective charge connects instances of disappearance to a network of other striking or traumatic events, including the ones I mention above, called “disappearances” today. By extension, the affective charge of disappearance, such as in *Les funerailles du lait*, encourages consideration of the ways in which the figure might describe the diffuse “trauma of modernity” implied by taking such events to be emblematic of our time. The importance of the figure in Mamaya’s story sets the machinery of association in motion with greater urgency than emotionally flat or purely intellectualized cases of disappearance might, and soliciting the reader’s empathy—or even identification—helps the figure of disappearance to resonate within a wide semiotic network of similarly unsettling or painful experiences. Were it not for its affective charge, the figure would be far less important.

Clearly, neither criterion (nor their combination) is sufficient to differentiate disappearance *essentially* from other figures or phenomena, and each allows only a rough means of distinguishing “meaningful” cases of disappearance, for my purposes. However, in addition to placing productive limits around my project, the criteria I propose do help focus attention on those representations of disappearance that are most plausibly legible as commentaries on the significance of the figure. They are also criteria that describe representations of disappearance that evoke the kind of distressing “threshold state” of oscillation between aporia and excess of meaning, impossible to resolve, that characterizes much contemporary thinking about language, writing, and living in the world.

My dissertation is organized into four chapters that explore the figure of disappearance in connection with other themes, each focusing on one novel. Chapter 1 examines a number of structural characteristics of the notion of disappearance through a reading of Georges Perec’s *La disparition*. I explore the impossible demand for narration and understanding that disappearance

seems to provoke there, and I suggest that it is depicted as an experience similar to the encounter between writer and literary language described by Maurice Blanchot. Just before naming what is missing from the lipogrammatic text in *E*, certain characters die abruptly and disappear from the narrative. As a result, the resolution of the mysterious disappearance defining their existence is always deferred in the same way that the completion of the “Work” perpetually recedes before the efforts of Blanchot’s author. Similarly, for the reader of *La disparition*, reading “around” the letter *E*’s absence evokes the feeling of indefinite circumlocution and almost-but-never-grasping that characterize the author’s experience of the process of writing.

Chapter 2 concentrates on the connection between disappearance and the body in Mahi Binebine’s *Les funerailles du lait*. The many roles played by the body in that text—whether Mamaya’s body, which is figured as an important tool for making sense of the disappearance of her son, or the body as a metaphor—further elucidate the ways in which an individual such as Mamaya might apprehend the idea of disappearance. In addition, while it is surely the disappearance of her son as an individual, a personality, a loved one, or a family member that causes the greatest distress for Mamaya, *Les funerailles du lait* examines the consequences of the disappearance of persons *as bodies* as well. One goal of a car journey Mamaya undertakes after her mastectomy, for example, is the ceremonial burial by proxy of her son’s unreturned remains, a process that is depicted as a vital response to his disappearance. Through the body, too, *Les funerailles du lait* also invites the reader to interrogate the role of the body in producing meaning, because Binebine’s text proposes the body as a privileged site where the aftermath and recovery from the traumatic loss of Mamaya’s son are negotiated. Her story and the symbolic web in which her body is situated—especially as a *mother’s* body—ask the reader to consider how the body and its symbolism can be brought to remediate such an experience. Finally, the

text hints that confronting the notion of disappearance might result in the subversion of the notional boundary between one's *own* body and the body of the Other.

My third chapter explores the relationship of disappearance to migration and trauma in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Partir*. When Azel, the protagonist, journeys across geographic, social, and sexual boundaries in *Partir*, an underlying "tone" of disappearance characterizes his experiences, and he ultimately disappears literally for a short time at the end of the text. His departure from Morocco, his relationship with an older Spanish man named Miguel, and his desperate bid to stay in Spain after their relationship ends all contribute to that tone of disappearance, which is portrayed as endemic to experience in the postmodern, globalizing world. Azel's migration ultimately crystallizes in a progressive and ineluctable form of trauma, which is related to the kinds of disappearance to which he is subjected.

My fourth and final chapter focuses on the themes of memory, identity, and disappearance in Assia Djebar's *La disparition de la langue française*. Djebar's text associates the theme of disappearance with a journey into the protagonist Berkane's remembered past, and, by extension, into the collective Algerian past he explores simultaneously. Berkane vanishes while visiting an important *lieu de mémoire*, and the particularities of his fate suggest that a form of disappearance is inherent to recollection itself. By extension, disappearance also underlies the forms of commemoration a subject or society might employ to guard against processes of forgetting—willful or otherwise—at work in the present.

The goal of each chapter, and the aim of their juxtaposition, is to test the hypothesis that their combined example might indicate a special importance for disappearance as a figure describing a structure of experience particular to the present. I argue that the emotionally-charged, polysemiotic vanishings in each text I examine support that claim. In my conclusion, I

suggest avenues of further study—including more sustained engagement with the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and Paul Virilio—that could enrich the necessarily incomplete readings of the notion of disappearance I undertake here.

Before proceeding, it should be noted that the political ramifications of the figure of disappearance are particularly acute in the North African context, especially when exploring disappearance as it relates to collective memory and identity. The enforced disappearances and ignoble deaths of Morocco's *années de plomb* or the Algerian Civil War of the 1990s are volatile subjects. I do not propose political readings of the texts I have chosen, nor political conclusions based on particular treatments of the theme. It is my intention to write generally about the figure's usage, implication, allusiveness, and its negotiation on a conceptual level using the texts I have chosen as case studies. However, given the context and subject matter of the works I examine, some political implications can be drawn from an analysis of their themes. I hope merely that my readings of the figure will be interpreted as they are intended: as an examination of the figure's particular force and depth rather than as an ideological inquisition. Indeed, as I hope to make clear in the following chapters, much of the interest of disappearance as a concept lies distinctly outside the political dimensions it might possess. Ultimately, I believe that the figure of disappearance—viewed through any of the thematic lenses I have proposed—calls out for such critical attention by virtue of its startling breadth and depth as a notion that resonates with present experiences and its potential as a figure that enacts, interrogates, and invites engagement with general anxieties of the present.

## CHAPTER I

It is easy to overstate the importance of a title, but the title of Georges Perec's novel *La Disparition* presents the reader with a meaningful ambiguity that can be turned to productive ends. The ambiguity arises from two different uses of definite articles in French, which may indicate either the specificity or generality of a noun. Consequently, at least two interpretations of the title "La Disparition" are possible. If its definite article is understood to indicate specificity, it might be rendered in English as "*The Disappearance*." If, on the other hand, the same definite article is understood to indicate generality, the title might be read simply as "*Disappearance*" instead.

Each interpretation entails its own set of expectations about the text. The title "*The Disappearance*" suggests, for example, that the subject of the work in the reader's hands is a particular event—a disappearance—recounted for the reader's consideration. This primes the reader to view the text in a certain way. If a particular event constitutes the heart of the work, her most important task is to understand its role and meanings in the economy of the text or in relation to the historical, social, or literary moment in which it is situated. The fact that something *disappeared* may or may not be important in itself, however, depending on the reader's interpretation of the event and what it appears to figure. Reading the same title as "*Disappearance*," on the contrary, suggests that the work might deal explicitly with the *concept* of disappearance, and that the exploration of that particular concept constitutes the work's principal aim.

Sensitive readers rarely allow their understanding of a text to be so over-determined by its title, of course, but each reading of “La Disparition” illustrates a distinct and productive way of approaching Perec’s text. The first reading corresponds to an approach that focuses attention on Perec’s use of a constraint—specifically a lipogram, or systematic exclusion of a particular letter or letters—in writing *La Disparition*. Foregrounding constraint-based writing is one logical consequence of considering *La Disparition*’s main point of interest to be *the* particular disappearance it recounts. For while the title might appear at first to allude to Anton Voyl’s disappearance (or to the related vanishings or sudden deaths of a number of other characters), *La Disparition*’s lipogram stands out as the most primal and central disappearance in the text for a number of reasons.

The lipogram corresponds best to *the* disappearance announced by the title in part because it appears to be the root cause of other vanishings it precedes – even if, as becomes evident later, the notion of “preceding” in this instance is problematic. Ultimately, nothing is so thoroughly implicated in Voyl’s and others’ disappearance as the absence of the letter E from the text. Disappearance or sudden death generally befalls characters the moment they appear to understand the truth of that original void, after all. Perec’s playful references to the letter E’s shape, to the numbers five, six, 25, and 26—the position of the letter E in the alphabet or the number of vowels or letters it contains, etc.—serve to ensure that the reader understands the nature of that void. Even Voyl’s name—the word *voyelle* absent the letter E—is an onomastic reminder of the excision—the disappearance—the lipogram demands. In sum, as Jean-François Jeandillou writes, *La Disparition* constantly draws attention to that particular absence in the text: it is a “récit lipogrammatique dont l'intrigue même et les modalités narratives concourent à signifier cette absence, ce manque, cette vacuité, sans jamais la divulguer explicitement” (387).



As a result, individual disappearances in the novel may be interpreted to derive from the far more pervasive one represented by the lipogram. The number of clues connecting the lipogram to disappearances in the text is so great that a reader may even be excused for concluding that the detective work of Voyl's companions is more pretext than text, serving only to showcase the true, original, lipogrammatic disappearance that lies at the heart of *La Disparition*.

A critical approach seeking to underscore *the* particular disappearance in *La Disparition* therefore draws the reader's attention inexorably to the text's composition, and by extension to the general idea of constrained writing. Within that framework, events figured in the novel signify primarily in their capacity to refer to the constraint. The disappearance of Voyl is an echo of the lipogrammatic excision of E; the deaths of his friends occur, in one sense, as insistent reminders of it; and the fact that their deaths occur the moment they are poised to understand the lipogram that governs their existence demonstrates the absoluteness and rigor of the text's adherence to a rule. Consequently, the better part of those events' interest derives from what they say *about* constraint, the cleverness with which they reflect it, or their capacity to hold the reader's attention as she works her way through *La Disparition's* unusual prose. The particular content of *La Disparition's* story proves interesting to the extent that it might reveal something about the metaliterary concerns of constraint-based writing, the potentialities of literature, the limits of the novel form, and so forth.

A reader who subscribes to that approach would not deny that *La Disparition* also interrogates the concept of disappearance in and of itself, even if only insofar as it would be impossible to represent *a* disappearance without evoking the general notion that describes the particular event. Yet it is a critical approach, or "readerly orientation," that does situate the

primary theoretical value of the work squarely in its metaliterary concerns. It is furthermore an approach that characterizes much of the critical work on *La Disparition*: though scholars point out the special importance of the notion of disappearance in a general sense for Perec,<sup>3</sup> many more pages have been dedicated to the exploration of *La Disparition* as an embodiment of Oulipian principles and procedures, or of Perec's dedication to methodical and exhaustive writing, than to what *La Disparition* might say about the nature and meaning of disappearance *per se*. There is much in *La Disparition* to validate this critical approach, for any attentive reading of the text reveals its evident metaliterary gestures. Assuming it is recognized, the lipogram in Perec's text is, after all, imposing, inescapable, and engaging enough that, before ever laying eyes on the text itself, students and readers of *La Disparition* are often already familiar with its associated metaliterary *enjeux*.

As Christelle Reggiani suggests in *Rhétoriques de la contrainte*, the Oulipian principles of textual production also support a metaliterary readerly orientation to *La Disparition*. Those principles situate the contingent constraint of a text like *La Disparition* in a chronologically and hierarchically superior position to the particular themes and content of the text produced according to it. Reggiani writes that, for the Oulipo, “On peut dire [. . .] que l'écriture contrainte constitue en fait un art biphasique instable” (110). The first, superior phase of writing involving the generation of constraints is associated with a rhetoric of invention. During that phase, an inventor engages in the explicitly contingent activity of generating new and interesting rules that might be applied to the production of literary texts. The relative importance thus accorded to the

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<sup>3</sup> Scholars such as Warren Motte, Rosemarie Scullion, David Bellos and others have remarked that Perec's father's death on the battlefield and his mother's deportation to a concentration camp during World War II render the theme of disappearance particularly interesting and poignant for Perec. However, their analyses of Perec's work are not generally based on an exploration of disappearance-as-concept in Perec. In many cases, too, it is understandably the far more autobiographical *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* rather than *La Disparition* that serves as a touchstone for discussions of Perec's past and the importance of disappearance in his life.

constraint as non-derivative, and the discourse of invention with which the constraint is associated, both point to the constraint itself as the most important window onto the meanings and importance of a work.

When the constraint is later adopted by a poet, or “scriptor,” in a second phase of production, the contingency of the first phase implies, according to Reggiani’s reading of Michel Charles, that Oulipian works belong to a *rhetorical* discourse of textuality rather than a scholastic one. Whereas a scholastic text is considered monumental in nature, which is to say generally “unitaire et clos” (481) as a textual object, and one whose primary interest lies in *what* is said, though not to the exclusion of *how*, the constrained text is a “remise en cause, plus ou moins radicale, des formes reçues de la textualité – qui sont, globalement, des formes scolastiques modernes” (481). The constrained text therefore performs a primarily rhetorical function, both in the sense of its implicit argumentation against scholastic monumentality and in the sense that it is concerned with the style, effect, or use of language.

Since a constraint determines the possibilities for a work’s content to a certain (and sometimes very large) extent, and since constraints are explicitly contingent, the content of the work produced under them must itself be at least as contingent. Jean-Jacques Thomas and Lee Hilliker describe the implications of that logic for critical engagement with a text like *La*

*Disparition*:

The text thus produced can no longer be the object of the fetishizing critical reverence accorded to traditional literary texts; interest is necessarily shifted toward the programmed “generating” text, toward this creating creation which is the objective source

and the authorization—the author and the source which authorizes—of the literary text produced.<sup>4</sup>

Any disappearances in *La Disparition* therefore ought to be read (mostly) as I have described—that is, as clever and engaging reactions to the “generating text” of the lipogram, as devices in the service of producing a *texte à contraintes*, but not necessarily as solid foundations for an analysis of any broader themes or notions to which they appear connected. As such, Voyl’s disappearance and the twists and turns of the resulting detective story of *La Disparition* may be seen as a form of play in engagement with constraint, as Warren Motte has suggested.<sup>5</sup> In any case, viewing *La Disparition* as rhetorical in nature necessarily diverts the reader’s attention from particular themes in the text and toward an examination of what kind of text(s) constrained writing enables.

The second interpretation of *La Disparition*’s title mentioned above—reading “La Disparition” as *disappearance*, simply—illustrates a different critical approach by which Perec’s work and its constraint may be understood. A reading of the text through this second approach proceeds on the supposition that, as emblemized by that reading of its title, *La Disparition* concerns itself, in the first instance, with *disappearance* generally rather than *the* (lipogrammatic) disappearance it figures. Such an interpretation invites the reader to consider disappearances figured in that work—even its lipogram—as case studies of that general idea, and the metaliterary concerns of the work as illustrations of the theme. If she subscribes to this point of view, the reader’s most important task becomes the exploration of what *disappearance* is, according to *La Disparition*, rather than what its disappearances have to say about literature.

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<sup>4</sup> Thomas, Jean-Jacques and Lee Hilliker. “README.DOC: On Oulipo.” *SubStance* 56 (1988): 18-28. Print.

<sup>5</sup> See Motte, *Playtexts* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

This readerly orientation to *La Disparition* imagines that the relationship between constraint and thematic content described by Reggiani and Charles may be inverted, at least in this case, and that *La Disparition* may be provisionally re-inserted into a scholastic tradition. It permits the figurations of disappearances in that text a greater degree of thematic self-referentiality than they may enjoy as allusions to or illustrations of the metaliterary concerns of constraint-based writing. Viewed in this way, *La Disparition*'s constraint might even be considered a consequence of its thematic content instead of the converse. At the least, this critical approach to Perec's novel regards the principles of constraint-based writing and its claims regarding the contingency of constrained texts with some degree of ambivalence and asks what might be gained by transforming that rhetorical, constrained text into a monument to the concept of disappearance and pursuing the analysis thereof.

I argue that this second readerly orientation is productive of meaning through the engagement it proposes with *La Disparition*'s thematic content. For while a critical approach focusing on the metaliterary, rhetorical wagers of *La Disparition* enlightens the reader, it does so in two competing senses. The reader is "enlightened" by her attention to the text's lipogram insofar as it leads her to reflect on constraint, on the novel, on the possibilities of writing, and so forth. In another sense, however, she is simultaneously "enlightened" because this reflection asks her to consider much of the text a gateway to metaliterary critical reflection rather than an object of study in itself. A thematically-oriented approach complements this dominant form of reading (that otherwise potentially overshadows and even dismisses implicitly *La Disparition*'s content in favor of its form) by reexamining certain elements of the text often unexplored, though never overlooked, by readings of *La Disparition* as a paragon of Oulipian constraint-based writing.

Adopting a more thematic or conceptual orientation to *La Disparition* extends the range of meanings ascribed to *La Disparition* and opens up a space of inquiry in which *La Disparition* may be fruitfully connected to other novels, North African or otherwise, through common attention to what disappearance *is* and *means*. That approach finds precedent in some scholarly work on Perec, at least insofar as it serves to explore the possibilities of expanding upon comments by critics concerning, for instance, the connection between the absent “E” of *La Disparition* and the homophonic “eux,” whether the latter is interpreted to refer to Perec’s parents or more broadly, perhaps, to the millions of Jews murdered in the Holocaust.<sup>6</sup>

This chapter thus explores what kinds of productive readings of *La Disparition* may be performed if *La Disparition* is analyzed as a text *about* disappearance above all. My aim will be to attend more fully to those elements of a poetics, ontology, or aesthetics of disappearance Perec’s novel offers its readers in the interplay between constraint and content, and to make clearer the place the text might occupy in a dialogue with other thinkers whose writing touches on the subject of disappearance as well.

A number of problematics connected to the notion of disappearance stand out in *La Disparition*. Particularly prominent concepts, themes, and devices “in play” in *La Disparition* in this respect—clearly, its lipogram included—will constitute the principal axes of investigation in this chapter. First among them is the act of reading, which is figured distinctly, early, and often through both the content and form of *La Disparition*, demonstrating a relationship to disappearance that appears fundamental. Exploring acts of reading (and misreading) in *La Disparition* reveals that doubling—of meanings, of texts, of realities—is a phenomenon connected to disappearance as well. Time and death likewise represent prominent themes that

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<sup>6</sup> See again, for example, Warren Motte’s discussion of Perec in *Playtexts*.

inform the understanding of disappearance *La Disparition* conveys. Ultimately, *La Disparition*'s figuration of reading, doubling, time, and death suggest important similarities between the disappearance in Perec and the writings of Maurice Blanchot, and the last section of this chapter will be dedicated to proving the hypothesis that, in many ways, to experience disappearance is to be exposed to the same anxieties and demands that Blanchot associates with writing.

What reading *La Disparition* from the perspective I have suggested above makes clear is that it may serve as fertile ground in which to root a discussion of the forms, notions, and experiences of disappearance characterizing certain works by Maghrebian authors, in particular, and perhaps characterizing certain strains of contemporary thinking on meaning more generally. It may be impossible, through Perec's work or any other, to satisfy a humanist reader's desire for a total portrait of disappearance and its effect on human experience. *La Disparition* nevertheless offers, contingent though they may be, productive readings in that regard.

### **Disappearance, Reading, and Sleepless Nights**

Acts and processes of reading are intimately connected to the notion of disappearance in *La Disparition*, where reading, in more than one sense of the term, is constantly represented, foregrounded, interrogated, and subverted both through the material form of the text itself and within the narrative world that Voyle and his associates inhabit. From the reader's first encounter with Perec's strange prose, to Anton Voyle's maddening attempts to decipher the almost-intelligible patterns in his rug, to the deductions in the detective story following his disappearance, the apprehension and understanding of texts are issues of great importance for characters and reader alike.

The material form of *La Disparition* draws the reader's attention to the act of reading and to her encounter with the text as such in a number of ways. From the outset, reading is problematized through the material form of the text. Even the cover of its 2012 reprinting, through the lack of contrast between the embossed white lettering of the title and its white background, hints at *La Disparition's* concern for the potential difficulty of reading the words it contains – words, in this case, portrayed as if in the process of disappearing. The blending of the title's lettering into its background suggests symbolically that the reader may have difficulty in discerning all that is written on *La Disparition's* pages.

The overwhelming absence of the letter E in *La Disparition* likewise draws attention to the activity the reader undertakes in collaboration with the text, even if she fails to recognize that lipogram. As Warren Motte writes, “It is impossible to read this text without perceiving its difference, even if (like certain reviewers when the novel first appeared) one doesn't quite know to what it should be attributed” (*Playtexts* 112). When the reader does recognize the lipogram, the fundamental concern in *La Disparition* for the act of reading becomes even clearer, for the lipogram responsible for the text's difference “is *literally* inscribed many times upon each page; each sentence swerves away from normative language in function of the constraint” (*Playtexts* 112). The reader's awareness of *La Disparition's* modified alphabet is constantly refreshed, she cannot help but remark the unusual (and often difficult) vocabulary and cadence of the work's prose, and “the ostentation with which the text proclaims its own textuality” (*Playtexts* 115) demands the reader pay attention to her own reading, an activity made as present to her as the letter E is absent.

In order to sketch out the connections in *La Disparition* between the act of reading and the notion of disappearance, a selected inventory of moments where reading plays a pivotal role in



the text is useful—a list, in Perecquian fashion. Several passages and episodes in *La Disparition* illustrate the general ways in which reading is shown to function in *La Disparition*'s universe and to function—or to fail to function—specifically in relation to the notion of disappearance. Together, they suggest that, for Perec, disappearance is an event that renders reading and interpretation problematic in a number of ways, and not simply because disappearances involve uncertainty by definition. For Voyl and his comrades, as well as for readers of their story, reading is an activity whose very structure and possibilities are reshaped and undermined in disappearance's wake.

Several early elements of *La Disparition* in particular indicate that reading is an activity that produces unreliable results inside and outside the world of the text. The title of the work's first numbered chapter, for example, announces an incongruity between the apparent subject of the chapter and what the reader later comes to understand about it. The title claims that the text it introduces “d’abord, a l’air d’un roman jadis fait où il s’agissait d’un individu qui dormait tout son saoul” (17). Presumably, the name of that individual is Anton Voyl, mentioned in the section heading on page 15 and thereby introduced as the focal point of the first portion of the novel. The use of the qualifier “d’abord” implies that the chapter's true subject is not a well-rested individual after all, and that a more accurate title might eventually be deduced by the reader. While reaffirming *La Disparition*'s concern for reading, the title thus simultaneously figures a failure of interpretation that invites the reader to reconsider her own initial perceptions of the work.

It is true that initial readings of any text may be supplanted by subsequent, deeper understandings, and that that progression often constitutes a fundamental readerly expectation regarding the novel form. The novel tacitly promises its reader that her time and effort may be

exchanged for more and more refined and meaningful readings of a situation, theme, or idea that supplant her initial (and presumably more limited) point of view. Immediately following the example above, however, the same chapter title calls into question the validity of even preliminary readings of the text as well.

The first sentence following the title accomplishes this by informing the reader that “Anton Voyl n’arrivait pas à dormir” (17). The incongruity between the chapter’s title and the immediate mention of Anton Voyl’s inability to sleep shows that the title’s claim is both true and false. It is true insofar as a well-rested individual proves not to be the subject of the chapter, since Voyl is unable to sleep. But it is false in that the first chapter does not in fact appear even *at first* to concern such a person, since what is figured there *at first* is only the sleepless Anton Voyl. Even if the reader concludes that the title itself ought to be included in her interpretation of “at first” as it applies to the work’s first chapter, the *question* of how to interpret the title remains apparent. Perec alerts the reader early on that the outcomes of textual interpretation, like the title’s reading of the chapter it introduces, should be viewed with suspicion at the least.

That suspicion is reinforced when the reader comes to recognize a similar titular incongruity even earlier in the text. *La Disparition*’s avant-propos, which recounts the violent deaths of more than a million individuals during a period of generalized unrest and confusion, bears a title reminiscent of the first chapter’s. That title—“Où l’on saura plus tard qu’ici s’inaugurait la Damnation”—also suggests that the full significance of the text to come will be revealed only after the reader becomes acquainted with more of the novel. Also like the first chapter’s title, however, that initial claim becomes more and more questionable under scrutiny.

After becoming acquainted with Voyl and his associates, the reader might conclude that the bloody events of the avant-propos are responsible in some way for the curse of disappearance

or death that suffuses the novel. However, the narrative of Voyle's associates' detective work provides an entirely different account for that curse, which Ottaviani, Savorgnan and the others attribute at one point to a clan's draconian population-control efforts meant to prevent violent conflicts over inheritance (257). Later, at the conclusion of *La Disparition*, Aloysius Swann offers another explanation when he explains many of the killings attributed to the curse by revealing that he was their perpetrator. Swann explains that he worked on behalf of an unnamed "Barbu," serving as "son loyal bras droit, son commis, son proconsul" (300). The term *Barbu* is ambiguous enough to allow interpretation as a reference to Perec, in which case Perec himself is the true cause of the events of the avant-propos and the real force behind the curse—not the avant-propos' events themselves. Still later, Aloysius Swann casts doubt on the possibility of understanding such events at all. He explains:

Nous avançons pourtant, nous nous rapprochions à tout instant du point final, car il fallait qu'il y ait un point final. Parfois, nous avons cru savoir : il y avait toujours un "ça" pour garantir un "Quoi ?", un "jadis," un "aujourd'hui," un "toujours," justifiant un "Quand ?", un "car" donnant la raison d'un "Pourquoi ?"

Mais sous nos solutions transparaissait toujours l'illusion d'un savoir total qui n'appartint jamais à aucun parmi nous, ni aux protagonistes, ni au scrivain, ni à moi qui fus son loyal proconsul. (304)

Here and in the surrounding text, neither Swann nor the ever-knowledgeable Squaw makes reference to the events of the avant-propos, and Swann's discourse on the "point final" of the text explicitly questions causal links between any of its elements.

Absent an intradiegetic explanation for the sense of the avant-propos and its title, the reader might turn to the lipogram of *La Disparition* to interpret their meaning. In that case, the

lipogram itself constitutes both the “Damnation” ostensibly inaugurated in the avant-propos and the “Law” or curse mentioned frequently in the text—damning in that it condemns the text to a form of linguistic eccentricity and its characters to disappearance and death in their attempts to understand the curse placed upon them. However, the claims of the avant-propos’ title are still untrue when “Damnation” is read to refer to the lipogram. It may indeed constitute such a reference, but it is not true that the lipogram is inaugurated by the avant-propos. The lipogram begins instead with the poetic incipit by “J. Roubaud” immediately preceding the avant-propos – or with the work’s title page prior to the incipit, or perhaps even with the work’s cover, provided the reader imagines red lettering in *La Disparition* to be extra-textual. It is therefore unclear in what sense the Damnation of *La Disparition* was inaugurated in its avant-propos.

In all cases, the reader of *La Disparition* encounters some degree of frustration in her attempts to *read* fully a particular element of that text by re-interpreting it in light of a new understanding gained over time. Indeed, the understanding promised by the avant-propos’ and first chapter’s titles instead *recedes* further beyond the reader’s grasp as she reads more of the work. No interpretation of *La Disparition*’s metaliterary dimensions or of the events it recounts provides stable ground on which to base such an understanding, because the text subverts the understandings to which the reader is promised access “plus tard,” in the case of the avant-propos, just as it questions interpretations the reader arrives at “d’abord.”

For the reader who sees *La Disparition* as primarily concerned with the notion of disappearance, the deeply ambiguous figurations of reading in that text may be read as something other than a version of the postmodern questioning of the possibilities of reading that characterizes many texts from the past century. Instead, *La Disparition* seems to suggest that there exists a link between disappearance, a theme clearly of equal importance in the text, and

the forms of troubled reading I have described: in a world characterized by disappearance(s), reading breaks down. It does not break down, however, only when it is attempted in connection with the discrete events specifically characterized as “disappearances”—again, events that defy immediate explanation by definition—such as of the letter E or Anton Voyl. As the examples of the avant-propos and first chapter show, reading is problematic at *all* moments in Voyl’s world and in the text that gives it form. The relationship between the avant-propos and the rest of the text, as well as additional examples of problematic reading like Amaury Conson’s difficulties in making sense of Voyl’s journal after the latter’s disappearance, hint that reading is more fundamentally broken, in a sense, when attempted in such a world. At the least, its habitually (or necessarily) overlooked limitations are made explicit and inescapable, and its ability to provide even provisional answers to questions of meaning is contested. By implication, no investigation of the disappearances of the letter E or Anton Voyl *could* result in a satisfactory narrative of their causes, as Aloysius Swann hints at the end of the text.

The ways in which (and the extent to which) reading and interpretation break down following a disappearance are elucidated by several scenes in *La Disparition*. Anton Voyl’s experiences early in the text suggest that reading is “broken” firstly in that it is incapable of serving as a means of temporarily (and beneficially) suspending reality. In the first chapter, Voyl, unable to sleep, turns on the lights and reaches for a novel late at night:

Il poussa un profond soupir, s’assit dans son lit, s’appuyant sur son polochon. Il prit un roman, il l’ouvrit, il lut ; mais il n’y saisissait qu’un imbroglio confus, il butait à tout instant sur un mot dont il ignorait la signification.

Il abandonna son roman sur son lit. Il alla à son lavabo ; il mouilla un gant qu’il passa sur son front, sur son cou. (17)

Voyl's gesture is familiar to any reader who has sought to lose herself in reading a text when faced with a stressful reality, as Voyl seems to be. Opening a novel offers Voyl no relief, however, since he is incapable of understanding the words he finds there.

When the unease that keeps Voyl awake transforms into serious physical and mental distress at the end of *La Disparition*'s first chapter, a neighbor brings him to the hospital for an examination. Once more, however, a problem of reading prevents him from finding relief, this time from the symptoms of a powerful malaise rather than anxious insomnia. The "oto-rhino" he sees at the hospital attempts to read the meaning of Voyl's "afflux sanguin" (23) in order to diagnose his sickness. He concludes that "il y a constriction du sinus frontal, il va falloir ouvrir" (23). Voyl undergoes the surgery, but its outcome is mixed: "Huit jours plus tard, Voyl pouvait sortir: il sortit donc. Ajoutons qu'il dormait tout aussi mal; mais il souffrait moins" (25). The doctor's reading of Voyl's symptoms appears confident, but after Voyl's surgery, it is apparent that the text of his symptoms was not as legible as it may have seemed. The doctor's reading of it produces only a reflection of his own expectations as an ear, nose, and throat specialist, perhaps, since his diagnosis falls squarely (and suspiciously, given the nature of Voyl's symptoms) within the range of conditions such a specialist might expect to encounter in a patient.

While the doctor proves as unable as Voyl to read the texts (that is, the patients) he encounters, his misreading nevertheless appears at first to reduce Voyl's suffering. Strikingly, the doctor's diagnosis *does* something for Voyl despite being utterly incorrect: although that reading hardly even pertains to Voyl's mind, the apparent seat of his problems, the act of interpreting Voyl's symptoms and arriving at a conclusion about his health seems to palliate his suffering somewhat.

That relief is short-lived, however, and ultimately the oto-rhino's diagnosis fails to cure Voyl. In hallucinations brought about by his deepening torment, Voyl encounters tantalizingly suggestive texts—such as a hallway in which one of 26 folios is missing from a shelf—which, like the doctor's diagnosis, fail to identify the root of Voyl's suffering. This despite their apparent clarity to the reader of *La Disparition*, who likely understands by now that the disappearance of the letter E is responsible for Voyl's distress. Voyl instead remains haunted by the feeling that something has disappeared, and suggestive images like the folios in the hallway appear to him briefly, only to vanish before yielding anything concrete. Voyl himself then disappears at the beginning of the fourth chapter, none of his attempts at reading his symptoms or their apparent cause having functioned as one might have hoped.

Voyl's difficulty in reading and the oto-rhino's misdiagnosis humorously evoke the plight of the real-world reader struggling to decipher the strange language of *La Disparition*, but they also serve as two among several examples demonstrating that texts and texts-within-texts, like the novel Voyl abandons or the symptoms the oto-rhino fails to understand, are rendered incomprehensible in Voyl's post-disappearance reality. The theme of illegibility recurs often enough in *La Disparition* to suggest that illegibility is in fact an integral characteristic of that reality: After Voyl's own disappearance, for example, repeated instances of ineffectual reading demonstrate that incomprehensible texts are the norm under the omnipresent pall of disappearance hanging over him and his associates.

When a friend named Amaury Conson inquires after Voyl around the time of the latter's disappearance, alerted by a troubling (and cryptic) note that all might not be well with him, he finds Voyl's residence empty. His search for clues uncovers Voyl's notes on various subjects:

Puis Amaury mit la main sur un fort carton qu'il ouvrit. Il y trouva maints manuscrits prouvant qu'Anton avait du goût pour l'instruction car il y gardait non sans un soin tatillon l'acquis qu'on lui inculqua jadis. Ainsi, lisant mot à mot, Amaury put-il parcourir l'instructif curriculum studiorum d'Anton. (60)

Conson's reading of sections of the notes reveals no sign of Voyl's whereabouts or fate. Conson remains unaware of the lipogram that motivated Voyl's disappearance despite its use in passages in three languages and Voyl's inclusion in his notes of an entire alphabet missing only the letter E (62). A more promising document comes to light when "tout à la fin, sur un sous-main qui imitait l'or jauni du simlicuir, Amaury Conson trouva l'Album dont Anton Voyl avait fait son journal. Il l'ouvrit. Il lut jusqu'au soir" (66). Reading the journal, like reading Voyl's notes, reveals nothing.

After enlisting the help of a policeman named Ottavio Ottaviani, Conson revisits the troubling note he received initially—a message Voyl also sent to others before he vanished:

Dans son mot, continua Amaury Conson, il y a un post-scriptum tout à fait saisissant. Il dit "Portons dix bons whiskys à l'avocat goujat qui fumait au zoo." À coup sûr, il voulait par là nous fournir un jalon. À mon avis, on pourrait d'abord voir ça. Puis nous lirons son journal d'où, croyons-nous, il y a moult informations à sortir... (68)

Conson attempts to make sense of the note, but once again his reading of a text does not produce useful information. Conson and Ottaviani do manage to find a smoking lawyer named Hassan Ibn Abbou next to a pond full of animals, recalling Voyl's cryptic post-scriptum. Yet they soon discover that Ibn Abbou's resemblance to Voyl's description results from his having received the same note as the others and having attempted to decipher it as they did. Conson and Ottaviani question Ibn Abbou, who reveals the reason for his presence in the "zoo":



- Connais-tu la signification du post-scriptum ?
- Non. Ou plutôt j'ai cru saisir qu'Anton faisait allusion à moi quand il parlait d'un avocat qui fumait. Voilà pourquoi j'accours à tous instants au zoo. Quant aux dix whiskys, j'ignorais jusqu'à aujourd'hui à quoi ça faisait allusion quand j'ai lu dans un journal qu'on allait courir un Prix important dans trois jours à Longchamp. (70)

Rejecting their first reading of Voyl's note, the investigators turn their attention to Ibn Abbou's interpretation of " dix whiskys." It too proves fruitless.

For a detective story like the one spurred in *La Disparition* by Voyl's disappearance (or, more fundamentally, by the disappearance of the letter E) to maintain the interest of a reader, successful readings of its puzzles must be deferred to a certain extent, like they are for Conson, Ottaviani, and Ibn Abbou. However, those characters' inability to generate productive readings of any signs and clues related to Voyl suggests a tendency in *La Disparition* for *all* acts of reading to prove ineffectual instead. Because Voyl's and others' failed readings occur within an established context of lipogrammatic disappearance brought constantly to the attention of the reader, Perec seems to suggest that disappearance is responsible for the near-equally omnipresent illegibility figured in the text: a generalized difficulty of reading that applies to much more than the particular disappearances, like Voyl's, that the novel recounts.

Despite its apparent impossibility, reading is nevertheless figured in *La Disparition* as an insistent demand. Though it offers no comfort to Voyl, and though Voyl's abandoned novel and medical misdiagnosis reflect a far-reaching problem with the act of reading, reading becomes the near-exclusive focus of his existence for eight days before he disappears. During his period of sleeplessness, Voyl sees captivating, ambiguous, and ephemeral patterns suggestive of the letter

E take form in his rug. Drawn into the images he sees there, Voyl tries unsuccessfully to decipher them,

y traquant l'apparition d'un signal plus sûr, d'un signal global dont il aurait aussitôt saisi la signification ; un signal qui l'aurait satisfait, alors qu'il voyait, parcours aux maillons incongrus, tout un tas d'imparfaits croquis, dont chacun, aurait-on dit, contribuait à ourdir, à bâtir la configuration d'un croquis initial qu'il simulait, qu'il calquait, qu'il approchait mais qu'il taisait toujours. (19)

Echoing the false promises of the avant-propos' and first chapter's titles, each of the images Voyl sees points to a "croquis initial" and promises ultimately to reveal something about a "noyau vital dont la divulgation s'affirmait tabou, substitués ambigus tournant sans fin autour d'un savoir, d'un pouvoir aboli qui n'apparaîtrait plus jamais, mais qu'à jamais, s'abrutissant, il voudrait voir surgir" (19-20). Though the nature of this revelation is unclear to Voyl, the confluence of his desire to decipher the images and a general sense of promise in that regard conspire to instill in him an insatiable need to understand what he sees. That need is sufficiently powerful that Voyl "s'acharna huit jours durant, croupissant, s'abrutissant, languissant sur l'oblong tapis, laissant sans fin courir son imagination à l'affût [. . .] poursuivant l'illusion d'un instant divin où tout s'ouvrirait, où tout s'offrirait" (20).

Though Voyl ultimately is unable to make sense of the "text" before him, much like the novel he tried and failed to read, the persistent nature of his torment and his dedication to his impossible interpretive task suggest that the disappearance he is so intent on solving *demand*s, unrelentingly, interpretation and understanding: a demand both overwhelming and impossible to satisfy. The overwhelming nature of the demand is reflected in its impact on Voyl's mind and physical health, both of which deteriorate in proportion to his efforts at reading. The

impossibility of satisfying it is demonstrated by Perec's repeated staging of Voyl's and others' inability to *read*, truly, the texts they encounter.

Each of the scenes I have explored may be interpreted on several additional levels. On one, the frequent staging of characters' inability to understand texts in *La Disparition's* might be understood as an evocation of general postmodern views on the possibilities of meaning. Viewed as a commentary in that regard, their doomed attempts to address the various disappearances they encounter by interpreting textual clues reflect the impossibility of gaining access to any ultimate meaning through the apprehension of signs. Like the real-world, post-Saussurian, post-Derridean reader, characters may never make true *sense* of a text because of the inherent properties of language.

In the postmodern reader's case, the self-referentiality and *différance* of language forbid realizing moments of complete semiotic clarity, but allow provisional, contextualized meanings reminiscent of Voyl's temporary relief after his visit to the oto-rhino. The lipogram that fundamentally shapes the words giving life to Voyl's universe may be read in a similar way. Voyl can never fully comprehend the absence of the letter E, or arrive at a moment of ultimate clarity in that respect, because "arriving" at the letter E, so to speak, is an act forbidden by the fundamental law of the narrative that causes Voyl to exist. In both Voyl's and the postmodern reader's case, then, no sign or representational tool can provide the kind of final meaning in whose pursuit each labors. The nature of signs and the law of the lipogram render such meanings purely hypothetical. Nevertheless, the possibility that their use should generate *some* meaning constitutes the kind of hope and hopeless demand for their user reflected in Voyl's interaction with his rug and the oto-rhino's momentarily-helpful diagnosis. Read in this light, other

characters *must* seek to decipher the truth of Voyl's disappearance, if for no other reason than that they serve to demonstrate the necessity of reading in the face of its own impossibility.

On another level, the scenes I have explored (and many others) evoke the notion of play and invite the reader to consider the connection between play and reading. The lipogram of *La Disparition*, especially, provides the opportunity for a series of puzzles directed to the— a game with which Voyl struggles greatly. Voyl is incapable of discerning what is symbolized by the “rond pas tout à fait clos,” the “roi brandissant un harpon,” or the “main à trois doigts d'un Sardon ricanant” (19) that he glimpses in his rug, but the reader bests him by making out the sign that Voyl can't. The more adept the reader/player, the earlier she perceives *La Disparition's* lipogram, and the greater her sense of victory in contrast to Voyl. From this point of view, characters' inability to interpret texts may be viewed as a mechanism by which to seduce the reader and an interrogation of the reasons for which one reads in the first place.

On a third level, though, the same scenes demonstrate that reading in *La Disparition* is depicted in a way that neither general postmodern doubt about meaning and language nor ludic engagement with the reader seems sufficient to explain. The usual corollary to discussions of the impossibility of meaning in the postmodern context, for example, is that the structural impossibility of conveying meaning in language is attenuated by the nonetheless real ability to communicate, understand one another, and generally *function* despite that fundamental doubt: language and meaning as functioning paradoxes rather than dead ends. But Voyl does not continue to function. The demand to decipher the vanished symbol entirely dominates his life, and his inability to *read* his rug prevents him from functioning in his world at all.

The demand of reading is *absolute* for Voyl, and the object of his investigation is presented (to the reader, at least) as singular, clear, and not at all provisional. Additionally, his

compatriots' efforts in solving the enigma of his disappearance and in understanding the Damnation that plagues their world must result in death, not understanding, provisional or otherwise. Disappearance engenders destruction and a kind of resignation to fate, or to Damnation, not merely deferral of meaning. As depicted by Perec, disappearance is therefore a phenomenon that, for individuals such as Voyl, brings to mind postmodern doubts about meaning while refusing any compromises in the search for it. Unlike putative "normal cases" of individuals faced with crises of meaning, Voyl and his companions pursue meaning to the point of annihilation. Their zeal in the pursuit is sometimes accompanied by the realization of a fundamental lack, figured by the lipogram, which must not be expressed and which negates the very being of characters (by necessitating their death, in a sense) who persevere too long in examining *La Disparition*'s disappearances.

*La Disparition*'s pervasive insistence that a solution to characters' attempts at understanding their world *really does* lie just over the horizon is another facet of the text that suggests disappearance is a phenomenon that figures more than the paradox of language. That insistence is reflected in the numerous narrative moments in *La Disparition* and in certain characteristics of Voyl's reality. When Douglas Haig Clifford notices a suggestive pattern developing on the corner of a billiard table, for example, he remarks that

un bon quart du drap du billard paraissait avoir moisi: tout un bord offrait un amas d'intrigants points blancs, hauts tout au plus d'un pica, cailloutis biscornus, anormaux, flocons plus ou moins grands, plus ou moins ronds, plus ou moins constants. (156)

Though at first these markings are thus described as "biscornus," "anormaux," and qualified by ambiguous terms such as "plus ou moins," a moment later the narrator assures that these white points are ones

dont, surtout, l'organisation paraissait fonction d'un propos conçu, d'un but aussi clair qu'admis : non pas un signal au hasard, mais, au plus fort du mot, un signal signifiant, à l'instar, sinon tout à fait d'un manuscrit, du moins d'un quipos (ruban nodal qu'utilisait pour la communication la civilisation inca). (156)

Likewise, when Anton Voyl later insists on the need to decipher the mysterious signs on the table, he is uncertain whether it may be deciphered but confident nevertheless that he will be able understand one piece of the Damnation's puzzle:

— Mais alors... l'inscription..., pâlit Augustus.

— L'inscription nous dira – il s'agit là d'un souhait, non d'un savoir – pourquoi la Damnation s'attacha au Zahir.

— Mais qui saura saisir sa signification ?

— Moi, dit Anton Voyl d'un ton sûr. Haig m'a jadis fait un croquis approximatif qu'à loisir j'ai pu approfondir, consultant parfois un savant à l'Institut ou au CNRS. J'ai, aujourd'hui, sinon un vrai savoir, du moins cinq ou six notions qui, à coup sûr, nous fourniront la solution ou, au moins, aplaniront nos complications. (193)

Voyl's "souhait" is paired with "five or six" notions that will *certainly* provide at least a partial solution to the enigma, and the reference to the number of vowels in the alphabet suggests he may be close to understanding the truth.

Indeed, Perec's frequent use of a suite of clues, hints, and subtle winks to *La Disparition's* reader—aside from their ludic functions—produces an impression that, despite a certain level of uncertainty in their discourse, Voyl and the others are constantly poised on the brink of understanding the lipogram. Especially from the reader's position of knowledge, it often appears that the slightest additional suggestion of the shape or sound of the letter E might

catalyze a chain reaction of connections, interpretations, and understandings in a given character's mind. The tension generated by this state of affairs is heightened in proportion to the degree to which characters' thoughts or actions converge on artifacts of the damnation that afflicts them, such as mysteriously-worded writings like Voyl's. The tension is never resolved, however, because death intervenes at the (apparent) instant of understanding. Victory over the mystery of the vanished letter E is pyrrhic, but the possibility of victory is also real, imminent, and palpable. The effect of the contradictory insistence on both the impossibility and the real possibility of conclusive reading is to engender throughout *La Disparition* a sense that one always stands on the very threshold of interpretive certainty forbidden by general postmodern conceptions of language and meaning.

*La Disparition* also insists upon the imminence of meaning through the frequent metalepsis that characterizes the text. By constantly referring to its own textuality, *La Disparition* brings its constrained intradiagetic reality into proximity with the reader's, where (in principle) complete knowledge of what *La Disparition* lacks—a complete alphabet—is known and readily brought to mind. *La Disparition's* foregrounding of its own textuality is accomplished through various means, including the reader's recognition of its lipogram, of course, and in distorted references to terms from the reader's reality that cannot occur in the text. The lipogram calls attention to the nature of the object in the reader's hands, and every word of it invites her to imagine a potential text "outside" of the actual one, comprised of what *could have been* present in Perec's novel were it not for the constraint.

The conflict between *La Disparition's* apparent and potential texts questions the former's status as an ostensibly stable object, but it also suggests the truth of Perec's prose might be accessed through a form of translation. Each element of the actual text promises meaning in this

exchange with and difference from the potential text, much like, more generally, words gain meaning through referring to the words they are *not*. *La Disparition* thus reinforces its sense of imminent meaning through staging this kind of metaleptic movement, even if the reader concludes that it is impossible to determine the exact content of the supposed original text to which *La Disparition* and its lipogram point. The problem of disappearance in *La Disparition* is thus presented as one that *must* and *does have* a solution that nevertheless cannot be known, and Voyl and the others as always infinitely close to seizing a truth they cannot grasp except in the moment of their own annihilation.

If the reader is tempted to believe that the progress of Perec's characters toward a discovery that recedes before them is therefore a figuration of Derrida's perpetual *différance*, *La Disparition* depicts structures which arrest that movement rather than perpetuate it. I use the term *différance* here in a limited sense to refer to the recursive process of words endlessly referring to other words to define themselves negatively, creating the possibility of meaning while always deferring arrival at that meaning until some later moment. Voyl and his associates approach an understanding of *La Disparition's* lipogram through a similar chain of signifiers available to them in the semiotic network of their world. From their perspective, however, lexical recursion and temporal deferral are not as limitless as they are for Derrida, since a broken link in the lexical chain is a necessary property of their existence. The term (in this case a letter, or the words containing it) to which many others point in *La Disparition* cannot itself be spoken or written and thus cannot participate in the ebb and flow of difference and deferral at the heart of Derridean language. An utter void exists in the series: the absence of a sign, or the sign of an absence, resulting from the lipogram, figures a rupture in the semiotic chain.



In a second sense, *différance* is arrested because deferral of meaning in time (rather than a lexicon) is represented in *La Disparition* as other than perpetual. Meanings generated there, such as the oto-rhino's diagnosis, do not defer Voyl's or other characters' suffering or their insistent need for concrete understanding indefinitely. Instead, moments arrive in the text when lexical acrobatics or blindness to symbols resembling the letter E can no longer keep characters turning around the truth of *La Disparition's* void. Temporal and lexical deferral cease in these blinding moments of revelation and annihilation, and Perec seems thereby to suggest that, unlike hypothetically "unhindered" *différance*, which allows one to act *as if* meaning were generated through its motion, something about disappearance limits that possibility radically.

Voyl's desire to find "un signal plus sûr, un courant plus approchant, sinon tout à fait un fil initiatif" (31) as his suffering intensifies in the first chapters of *La Disparition* gains additional significance in this light. Aware that an omission, or "un non, un nom, un manquant" (31) hangs over his existence, the narrator explains that, for Voyl,

Tout a l'air normal, tout a l'air sain, tout a l'air significatif, mais, sous l'abri vacillant du mot, talisman naïf, gris-gris biscornu, vois, un chaos horrifiant transparaît, apparaît: tout a l'air normal, tout aura l'air normal, mais dans un jour, dans huit jours, dans un mois, dans un an, tout pourrira: il y aura un trou qui s'agrandira, pas à pas, oubli colossal, puits sans fond, invasion du blanc. Un à un, nous nous tairons à jamais. (31-32)

Voyl's difficulty in reading the disappearance that torments him is shown here to relate to the foundations of language and the words that compose it. The word provides a weak and illusory shelter, a "talisman naïf," standing between Voyl and the "chaos horrifiant" that he sees, but no promise of provisional meaning ensures the talisman's efficacy. Instead, it is nothing more than a veil over the bottomless pit of silence, forgetting, and nothingness of *La Disparition's* omission.

### Doubled Reading, Doubled Texts

The insistent suggestion that the meaning of the haunting and unnamable difference Voyl and others detect in their world *must* lay just beyond their grasp reveals that, for Perec, disappearance is as an event that leaves behind itself the trace and promise of an unadulterated text in which it intervened. Despite the terrible silence and nothingness Voyl perceives beneath the appearance of his world, a phantom or an echo of the disappeared seeps into his reality. As I hope to demonstrate, certain experiences of the characters Olga Mavrokhordatos and Amaury Conson, too, suggest that disappearance never perfectly or completely alters the world-text it touches. The reader's constantly-refreshed awareness of *La Disparition's* lipogram and the often ludic juxtaposition of her understanding of that text in comparison to its characters' limited viewpoint imply the same. Together, these phenomena point to a second major themes Perec associates with disappearance: namely, textual doubling.

Textual doubling, as I use the term here, refers to the tendency in *La Disparition* for attempts at interpreting one text always to reveal the presence of a second. That second text may constitute an alternative version of the first that questions the latter's legitimacy or integrity, or it may present itself as a complement to be understood in order for either text to make sense. This kind of doubling occurs in *La Disparition* both as a result of the form and structure of the novel and within the story of Voyl and his associates.

In the edition I consulted, the red print used for certain elements of *La Disparition's* opening and closing pages creates a second-order paratextual effect that foregrounds the notion of textual doubling and underscores its importance in the work. The reader first encounters red lettering in sections of Perec's novels that are paratextual in their own right: information concerning *La Disparition's* author, the name of the publisher's collection to which it belongs,

its copyright information, and so forth. The “Métagraphes” at the end of the book, the table of contents’ title, and references within that table to the “Métagraphes” and to the table itself are printed in red as well. The selective application of color indicates that some portions of the text are intended, much like the table of contents, to be read *differently* than others.

However, red lettering is not consistently applied to entire paratextual elements of *La disparition*. Certain references in the table of contents are printed in black, for instance, as is the work’s avant-propos, which straddles the supposed divide between text and paratext by prompting the reader to begin shifting her focus from the world outside the text to the one inside. The black print of these elements contradicts the idea that red text denotes only paratextuality, and the reader is left with an impression of difference without explanation until she recognizes (or recalls) the text’s lipogram. Red text then proves to be differentiated from black by its inclusion of the letter E, and it has the effect of pointing out a second form of doubling beyond the one that occurs if and when the reader considers *La disparition*’s table of contents or title to stand apart from its narrative.

The reader might therefore conclude that the practical necessities of publishing a novel require violating the novel’s lipogrammatic law to a certain extent. Yet the choice of red for these inclusions, a color typically associated with editorial excisions, corrections, or additions in the context of a written work, evokes the possibility that *La Disparition* has undergone a process of redaction. The red text suggests that a different, original work might have preceded the one in the reader’s hands, transformed by necessity in consideration of *La Disparition*’s lipogram. By extension, the same text invites the question of what *La Disparition* would have been had the lipogram not demanded that certain portions of it disappear, effectively, by excision or

transformation. *La Disparition*'s red text thus intimates the presence of a second, uncontaminated or original version of the work to which the reader is denied access.

The particular case of doubling illustrated by the red traces of the suppression of the letter E is emblematic of a general sense of textual doubling within *La Disparition*. Heather Mawhinney describes another manifestation of an intrinsic phantom text the reader encounters at the same time as she reads the words on *La Disparition*'s pages. In her article entitled "Vol du Bourdon: The Purloined Letter in Perec's 'La Disparition,'" Mawhinney suggests that a form of doubled or bifurcated reading necessarily results from *La Disparition*'s lipogram and constitutes a certain "strategy with regard to the reader" (50) employed by Perec. To read *La Disparition* is to grapple with two texts, because:

in order to realize or confirm that *La Disparition* (or any other text) is a lipogram, the reader must view the text typographically, but in order to follow the narrative, the reader must see the words in the text in terms of their meaning, and it is impossible to do both simultaneously. (50)

Attention to the narrative elides the lipogram while attention to the lipogram elides the narrative, and "the reader is enticed and encouraged by the author to alternate between the two" (50) ways of viewing the text, either "viewing" it in its material presence or "reading" it interpretatively.

That alternation draws the reader's attention to "the exact instant of transformation of the text from form to meaning, which is to try to watch himself experiencing an illusion fundamental to the process of reading a text" (50). By virtue of the inherent omnipresence of *La Disparition*'s lipogram and with assistance from Perec's references to it through staging of the alphabet, the shape of the letter E, the numbers five, six, 25, 26, and so forth, Perec discourages the reader from settling her gaze definitively on either form or meaning. The reader remains in a state of

oscillation in which she continues to perceive Mawhinney's "instant of transformation" by virtue of the division of one text into two.

Through his discussion of one of "the game[s] that the reader of *La Disparition* is invited to play" in *Playtexts* (115), Waren Motte illustrates another instance of textual doubling at work in Perec's novel. Using the example of the term "Smith-Corona," Motte writes:

When in the novel Aloysius Swann kills Arthur Wilburg Savorgnan, he uses a Smith-Corona, a curious murder weapon, to say the least (303). Strangeness and surprise serve as the invitation to a game here, proposed by author to reader. For, in order to decipher the passage (or the mystery), in order to *play*, the reader must refer to another code, that of the detective novel, which permits him or her to reconstitute a more classical murder weapon, the Smith & Wesson. The recognition of this transformation (a rather trivial one, at that) entails an identification of the lipogrammatic strategy and consequently a reflection upon novelistic technique and the process of production. (115-116)

The playful inclusion of such puzzles encourages and seduces the reader, thanks to the satisfaction she derives from her successful "identification of the lipogrammatic strategy" that permits deciphering and mastering Perec's word games. In addition, however, Perec's play also seduces the reader by encouraging her to believe she has gained access to a periodically-visible and "true" text underneath the playful words of *La Disparition*'s story.

On one level, *La Disparition*'s ludic references in the vein of "Smith-Corona," whether to various literary figures, genres, cocktails, or place names, create the appearance of doubled (or multiple) texts in the same way as any other form of verbal irony. Recognizing irony in a written phrase generates two possible readings of the text to which it belongs: one hewing to the explicit terms in use, another to the tone they may adopt in the broader context of the work. Though the

use of Smith-Corona and other terms in the same vein certainly constitutes a form of verbal irony, the reader's playful engagement with Perec's word games corroborates the qualms brought to light by *La Disparition's* red text: namely, that it is possible that *every* part of the work might be a derivative or adulterated version of an ever-present phantom text deduced or imagined by the reader.

That complete phantom text resides in the space created by the uncertainty the reader experiences in her encounter with each word of *La Disparition*. Jean-François Jeandillou describes that uncertainty as a necessary property of the text. The reader cannot be sure which elements of *La Disparition* do or do not imply doubled reading because she cannot distinguish between terms it includes expressly and ones used as replacements for words excluded by the lipogram. Jeandillou writes:

Chacun des mots figurant dans le roman témoigne par définition de la contrainte lipogrammatique, mais tous ne sont pas susceptibles d'alerter le lecteur sur les incidences précises de celle-ci. Qu'il soit question de *CHALAND*, de *MICROSILLON*, de *TOUBIB*, ou encore du *TOUT-PUISSANT* n'implique pas que ces désignations apparaissent en lieu et place de *\*client*, *\*disque*, *\*médecin*, *\*pharmacien* et *\*Dieu* : un choix proprement stylistique suffit à les justifier en contexte, de même qu'il peut légitimer—pour des raisons sémantiques ou esthétiques—l'abandon des éventuels e-mots correspondants. (388-389)

Each of those terms may be used independently of any lipogrammatic constraint, of course, and therefore “rien ne garantit (faute de traces autographes, en particulier) le bien-fondé du palimpseste artificiellement mis au jour” (389) when the reader presumes that certain terms and not others were employed in response to limits on *La Disparition's* lexicon.

The presence of a phantom text is thereby sustained in an idealized form, at least, for Jeandillou's uncertainty implies that even a reader of unusual brilliance—a cultured polyglot well-versed in Perec's references, a connoisseur of everything and possessor of a remarkable vocabulary playing the game Motte describes—must be incapable of drawing a reliable boundary between elements of the text explicitly *in play*, like “Smith-Corona,” and elements that are not. The notion of “incidences précises” of the lipogram thus break down. The very nature and universality of *La Disparition*'s lipogram, echoing the text's red signs of redaction and its ludic use of terms like “Smith-Corona,” ensures that nothing is out of bounds of the game. Every word or phrase *can* indeed be read as one that Perec used in the place of another—or not.

The material form of *La Disparition*'s prose constantly functions as the sign of an entire hypothetical second text to which it points or in whose place it might potentially stand. The reader cannot help but imagine that every part of the text may constitute a transmuted, wholly ironic version of what Perec *could have written* or meant to express, but modified for the sake of constrained writing. Unlike the doubling engendered by the subtext revealed through verbal irony, the kind of textual doubling suggested by Perec's lipogrammatic novel applies to its entirety, questioning the integrity of its every aspect.

Mawhinney, Motte, and Jeandillou's examples thus suggest that, in the generalized context of disappearance that defines Perec's novel, investigating the meaning of any sign, like “Smith-Corona,” offers the reader the possibility of an all-encompassing, hypothetical, parallel text. The reader conscious of *La Disparition*'s lipogram always and already reads two texts rather than one. Her search for meaning in the novel draws attention both to the materiality of the language she encounters and to the notion that a more pure version of it—its meaning, perhaps—might be found through the analysis of that materiality. In both cases, however, the reader also

twice encounters the inherent limitations of language and the impossibility of its use. Likewise, the inhabitant of a world characterized by disappearance, like Voyl, discovers himself torn between a (false) world-text he sees and one he suspects to exist but must fail to fathom.

All of these forms of doubling obtain for every aspect of *La Disparition* because of the all-encompassing nature of the lipogram. Any constraint might imply a “disappearance” and demand a degree of the kind of bifurcated readings Mawhinney, Motte, or Jeandillou describe. But because it is “*literally* inscribed many times upon each page” (Motte, *Playtexts*, 112), the lipogram contaminates every page, sentence, word, and letter of *La Disparition* and consequently expands the scope of the textual doubling and the doubled failure of language figured there.

In addition, *La Disparition*'s lipogram functions such that the experience of doubling is irremediable in at least one sense. The moment in which the reader realizes that *La Disparition* is based upon a fundamental disappearance is a point of no return beyond which integral or unitary reading of that work is no longer possible. For no amount of readerly reverse engineering can re-establish the unity of *La Disparition*'s text with itself, so to speak, even if that unity is simply an illusion of coherency applied its readers. Whereas intermittent irony in a novel, or perhaps even a text using a non-lipogrammatic constraint, might not preclude a reader from re-immersing herself in its story despite the potentially unsettling ambiguities that irony brings to light, the same cannot be said of *La Disparition*. It is hard to imagine a reader returning to a state in which its lipogram does not overshadow her reading.

The recurring use of the word “ou” in *La Disparition*'s narrative descriptions and in characters' responses to the objects and events they encounter further underscores the novel's concern for the theme of doubling in the context of a disappearance. When Amaury Conson



searches for clues to Voyl's disappearance in the latter's house, for example, he finds a number of books in addition to the manuscripts and journal discussed earlier in this chapter:

Amaury ouvrit, un à un, un amas d'in-octavo aux dos salis, aux plats avachis, qui s'accumulait sur trois rayons branlants. Chacun portait tout un tas d'annotations, marginalia qu'il parcourut mais qu'il comprit fort mal. Il distingua pourtant cinq ou six bouquins qu'Anton Voyl paraissait avoir soumis à un travail plus approfondi. (60)

No resolution is offered for the ambiguity introduced by *ou* in this passage, and there remain two possibilities for the true number of works commented in depth by: either five books or six.

The use of *ou* in passages like the example above is not likely a case of strategic imprecision, such as that employed by an author to create an *effet de réel* or a narrator to convince the reader of their honesty by displaying the kind of ambiguities that pepper the accounts of realistic observers. The *ou* applied to Voyl's books is paralleled by dozens of other instances where two alternatives are presented concerning what characters perceive, hear, say, see, or otherwise encounter. Conson mentions five *or* six clues in Voyl's journal (68), rigodons *or* madrigals are heard in the street when Douglas Haig and Olga Mavrokhordatos are married, Voyl consulted a savant at "l'Institut" *or* the CNRS to learn more about the sign on Haig's billiard table (193), and even the quickly-forgotten sound preceding Ottaviani's death near the end of the novel is presented as either a "plof" *or* a "ploc" (299).

Neither the elimination of the word *et* from Perec's lexicon due to *La Disparition's* lipogram nor certain references to the lipogram, like the phrase "five *or* six", referring to the number of vowels in the alphabet, necessitate the use of *ou*. Its use is not restricted to ludic references to the absent E, either. Instead, the repeated use of *ou* reflects and reinforces the

atmosphere of uncertainty Jean-François Jeandillou describes and the notion that characters, too, read two texts rather than one when they interpret their reality.

Doubled readings also occur in the events and scenes surrounding Voyl's maddening attempts to interpret the signs he perceives in his rug. In one, Voyl hallucinates, imagining himself in a novel as a character named Ismaïl. The *mise en abyme* in this passage is evident, and it constitutes a form of doubled reading both by its evocation of a second novel within *La Disparition* and by doubling Voyl himself in the form of Ismaïl, who is in turn a near-double of Ishmael from Melville's *Moby Dick*. For Voyl and the reader, understanding *La Disparition* thus involves reading (at least) two texts at different diegetic levels. Voyl is confronted with an image of himself and an alternate reality that might have some heuristic value for understanding his own. Likewise, the reader is confronted with both a doubled image of Voyl and a text she might take as a synecdoche of *La Disparition* itself, not least because of the clear suggestion that Ahab's obsession with his white whale and Voyl's quest for a disappeared letter, which leaves behind a white space, or *blanc*, have something in common.

Within Voyl's hallucinated novel, Ismaïl experiences an interesting form of textual doubling as well. Ismaïl lives alone in exile on an island until it is visited by a group of individuals among whom Ismaïl remarks an appealing woman named Faustina. When attempting to speak to or interact with her, however, Ismaïl discovers that the world around him is not entirely what it appears, and that his desire for Faustina is in vain. The narrator explains:

On aurait dit qu'un Troll malin, un mauvais Kobold avait tout durci autour du casino, arrosant tout d'un gaz volatil, un fixatif qui s'incrétait partout, allait au plus profond, s'incorporait aux noyaux, aux ions, à tous corps, à tous champs.

*Tout paraissait normal*, il voyait, il croyait voir [. . .] Puis Faustina sortait, laissant choir sur son coussin un lourd bijou d'or [. . .] Ismaïl bondissait [. . .].

Mais sa main n'affrontait coussin ou bijou qu'un court instant; il abandonnait aussitôt, abattu, transi, hagard: il touchait, non un coussin, mais un bloc dur, compact, un roc aussi dur qu'un diamant: tout paraissait pris dans un magma jointif: on aurait dit un champ clos, fini, un corps indivis au poli parfait, au grain mat: dans son champ, l'humain, ou l'inhumain, gardait un pouvoir positif; ainsi Faustina pouvait ouvrir un battant, s'alanguir sur un divan; ainsi son compagnon pouvait-il lui offrir un whisky [. . .] Mais, hors du champ, or tout indiquait qu'Ismaïl y fut, il n'y avait plus qu'un continuum sans un pli, sans articulation, un corps compact plus compact qu'un stuc, [. . .] tout collait à tout, sans solution, sans discontinu. (37-38)

The doubling experienced by Ismaïl in this scene takes the form of a sense that he exists out of phase with Faustina's reality. Two planes of existence seem to overlap in the "casino," and Ismaïl is unable to penetrate the invisible barrier that separates them and renders him invisible to Faustina. He is, as the narrative suggests, "hors du champ," or rather caught in a reality split into two separate planes where there ought to be one.

The doubled nature of Ismaïl's reality contrasts with the nature of Faustina's plane, which is characterized as profoundly singular despite its appearance. Like words that cannot be set against others in order to generate meaning, the objects in Faustina's plane are fused such that no boundary differentiates the surface of one from that of another. Everything within that plane constitutes one "corps indivis au poli parfait," or one surface "sans discontinu." Though Ismaïl perceives different objects in the room before him, reaching out to them reveals his perception to

be an illusion. Two texts are laid out before him, but one lays on the other side of an invisible rupture in his existence and proves absolutely unyielding to his touch.

The absence of discontinuity in Faustina's plane mirrors the kind of absent discontinuity encountered by Voyl when he attempts to comprehend the signs of the vanished letter E in his rug, the missing fifth folio from a series of 26, and other such images. These constitute, in a sense, the texts and traces of a hypothetical existence predating the lipogrammatic disappearance to which they all refer. So long as the lipogram is enforced rigorously, no moment of discontinuity can exist between a time where the letter E was present and the time of its absence, because no mention could be made of it at *any* time. The horizon of the letter E's absence is unbroken and ever-receding, just as the surface of Faustina's "field" is a "continuum sans un pli" (37).

Voyl's hallucination thus suggests a contradictory association between doubled texts and radical textual unity or singularity. Ismail's apparent separation from Faustina's plane of existence suggests differentiation between her reality and his, but the radical sameness of all things in Faustina's plane depicts as perfectly unitary and consequently unintelligible: untouchable, as Ismail demonstrates, and incomprehensible in the sense that he is able to make no distinction there between one object in it and another. Ultimately, through Ismail's case and in other instances where texts of various kinds are doubled, Perec thus suggests that the experience of disappearance effectively splits reality into two parts. Neither is stable and legible, as the experiences of Voyl and his associates demonstrate, but understanding both is necessary in order to construct meaning in the context of disappearance that renders it paradoxically impossible and simultaneously imminent.

That bifurcated reality, as in the case of Conson's catalog of Voyl's books, is characterized by fundamental doubt. In a sense, Conson discovers neither five nor six books containing extensive commentary by Voyl, because the possibility that *either* number is accurate implies that both are invalid. However minor the differences between alternate readings of the scene, the reader may not settle on either, just as she alternates between perceiving the form and content of *La Disparition* according to Mawhinney. Collectively, moments of doubling testify to disappearance's capacity to insist that an unknowable phantom text be read, too, in order to make sense of another, and to refuse that it be set aside.

### **Machine Reading and the Problem of Time**

Finally, an additional form of reading—machine reading—pervades *La Disparition* as well and suggests that disappearance is an event with an unusual relationship to time. As I use it here, “machine reading” refers to algorithmic, automatic acquisition and translation (in the etymological sense of horizontal displacement) of a text rather than apprehension and interpretation intended to produce meaning in a traditional fashion. The most evident form of machine reading at work in *La Disparition* is its lipogram, an algorithm that may be understood to have filtered out words that may not be used in its composition or to have transformed a (conjectural) original Perec might have had in mind before excising the letter E from it.

More specifically, however, Anton Voyl's writings are a particular source of evidence of lipogrammatic machine reading that helps illustrate the relationship between disappearance and temporality. When Olga Mavrokhordatos, Amaury Conson, and Arthur Wilburg Savorgnan examine Voyl's journals and the materials he sent them before his disappearance, they find therein a number of suggestive texts, among which are “six madrigaux archi-connus, qu'on a

tous lus dans un Michard ou dans un Pompidou” (116). For the reader, it is clear that the “madrigals” are poems by Mallarmé, Hugo, Baudelaire, and Rimbaud, each of which has been subjected to alterations of vocabulary, sounds, meanings, or imagery in order to conform to *La disparition*’s lipogram.

The result of that modification is a set of new and different works that coexist, for the reader, with the ghosts of their originals. Their presence in *La Disparition* and the contrast between the reader’s knowledge of them and characters’ reactions to them suggest that the experience of disappearance, in one sense, cannot be pinpointed on a timeline. Olga Mavrokhordatos’ words are illustrative. When she offers the poems to Amaury Conson and Arthur Wilburg Savorgnan for their consideration, she expresses doubt concerning their usefulness in the investigation of Voyl’s disappearance:

Craignons qu’à mon tour ma contribution n’ait aucun pouvoir, fit, au bout d’un long instant où chacun n’osa l’ouvrir tant il y avait dans l’air ambiant un inconfort grandissant, Olga. Craignons, car au moins y avait-il dans vos journaux, placards ou tankas, allusion à un point connu, à un point commun: au Blanc. Mais, dans mon cas, tout paraît dos à dos : autant vos manuscrits sont obscurs, pourris d’allusions, ardu à saisir, autant mon manuscrit paraît clair, positif, admis... (115)

Though Conson retorts that the solution might be found precisely in the clarity of Mavrokhordatos’ texts, she is adamant that they contain nothing revelatory:

—Mais non, culpa Olga, tu n’as pas compris. Il n’y a, dans mon cas, ni allusion, ni signal. Car il s’agit, non d’un travail original, mais d’un corpus compilant cinq ou six travaux d’autrui, travaux qui, fort connus, n’ont pour nous aucun attrait significatif... (116)

When Mavrokhordatos, Conson, and Savorgnan ultimately decide to read the poems, it is because they must. As Conson remarks, “nous n’avons pas grand choix: si Anton a cru bon d’accomplir la transcription, il nous faut y voir un jalon!” (116).

Conson’s use of the term “transcription” is significant, perhaps especially in light of the fact that the lipogram does not forbid him from uttering “traduction” as a possible alternative. Though each poem appears to the reader as the product of a mechanical process where a well-known original text is read, processed, and reformulated in accordance with *La Disparition*’s lipogram, it is clear that none appears at all strange to Mavrokhordatos or the others. Conson’s use of the term “transcription” is accurate from his perspective, since it reflects his and his associates’ understanding of the texts: as far as they are concerned, the poems appear indeed to be mechanical *reproductions*, not works that have been *altered* mechanically.

The fact that Mavrokhordatos, Conson, and Savorgnan do not recognize that a change has occurred and see Voyl’s poems as faithful transcriptions suggests that the versions they read “dans un Michard ou dans un Pompidou” were the same as the ones rendered in Anton Voyl’s hand. Yet the *difference* of the texts is evident to the reader of *La Disparition*, and the juxtaposition of those two perspectives on the same texts suggests that, for Mavrokhordatos and the others, the machine reading of *La Disparition*’s lipogram—which is to say, from one point of view, its preeminent *disappearance*—did not *occur* at all.

As evidenced by their reaction to the poems in contrast with the reader’s understanding of their ostensible originals, that mechanical process is depicted as having always and already been complete for the characters, its influence on their experience total and not localizable in their timeline. Accepting the reader’s position as the stable, original, unprocessed reality from which the altered poems in *La Disparition* derive is problematic, but the possibility of doing so

nevertheless stages the idea that to live in a world profoundly altered by a disappearance is to be unable to conceive of a time before its mechanical transformation of the world began.

In their search for an answer to Voyl's vanishing and the primordial disappearance that provoked it, characters find—though they do not fully recognize—only the product of a machine already at work and perceptible only indirectly. Their world is different, but intangibly, and the text altered by disappearance is all-encompassing, or nearly so: its translation is total, but Booz, at least, retains his name. The disappearance-machine appears to the reader to have worked both forward and backward in time from the notional moment of its own occurrence. Perec's apparent use of well-known poems supports this perception by encouraging the reader to view *La Disparition's* versions as alterations of the ones she knows from her own, notwithstanding that the very idea of an intradiegetic past for Mavrokhordatos or Ottaviani not represented by the text is purely conjectural.

Voyl's poems and the machine reading they foreground thus reveal an additional and unusual characteristic of Perecquian disappearance: it affects the act of reading, certainly, but its peculiar relationship to time also suggests that it is not experienced as a punctual event. *La Disparition* and its lipogram represent it instead as an event without discernable periods of *prior-* and *post-*, and therefore as un-situated in time. Rather than anachrony, disappearance produces a state of achrony, or indeterminacy with respect to the ideas of causality and sequential time. The untruth of the terms "plus tard" and "ici" in the avant-propos' title's claim that "l'on saura plus tard qu'ici s'inaugurait la Damnation" (11) and the term "d'abord" in the title of *La Disparition's* first chapter take on additional significance in this light. With respect to disappearance, it seems, the clarifying retrospect they propose to the reader must break down in the face of an event of the kind.



In addition to figuring problems of reading and interpretation, the avant-propos' promises also stage that temporal breakdown. By revealing the avant-propos' use of "ici" to be false, for example, the poem by "J. Roubaud" immediately preceding it demonstrates that inaccuracies of *La Disparition* are revealed to the reader in retrospect rather than greater truths. Should the reader be tempted to believe that retrospect has in fact aided her instead in locating the real origin of the Damnation in Roubaud's poem, she need only reflect on the doubt Jean-François Jeandillou describes (and that she discovers in her reading) concerning evidence of the lipogram's application in order to conclude that progress in the text has proved more subversive than not. Jeandillou's doubt suggests that no origin of the Damnation in the text of *La Disparition* can be proved, impossible as it is to determine whether a given word lacks the letter E by coincidence or because of supposed adulteration.

The reader's supposed retrospective comprehension of *La Disparition* thus disintegrates over time rather than develops. Aloysius Swann explains that timelines, causal relationships, and logical explanations the reader might hope to find in *La Disparition* are sought in vain:

Nous nous rapprochions à tout instant du point final, car il fallait qu'il y ait un point final. Parfois, nous avons cru savoir: il y avait toujours un "ça" pour garantir un "Quoi ?", un "jadis," un "aujourd'hui," un "toujours," justifiant un "Quand ?", un "car" donnant la raison d'un "Pourquoi ?".

Mais sous nos solutions transparaisait toujours l'illusion d'un savoir total qui n'appartint jamais à aucun parmi nous, ni aux protagonistes, ni au scrivain, ni à moi qui fus son loyal proconsul, nous condamnant ainsi à discourir sans fin, nourrissant la narration, ourdissant son fil idiot, grossissant son vain charabia, sans jamais aboutir à l'insultant

point cardinal, l'horizon, l'infini où tout paraissait s'unir, où paraissait s'offrir la solution.  
(304)

The discourse with which Aloysius Swann ends the text suggests that any other outcome was impossible.

Though the date and time of an actual disappearance may be identified, and though it may be true in principle that a real individual's condition or experiences before and after that disappearance may be described, *La Disparition* proposes that those who live in the shadow of disappearances experience their post-disappearance existence as if that were not the case. None of *La Disparition's* characters, at least, may access the "pre-disappearance" reality intimated to the reader or perceive that their present reality differs from it. Voyle can never solve the troubling mystery of the void in his existence he nevertheless senses at every turn, for his lipogrammatic, post-disappearance world disallows the existence of time or space prior to E's vanishing. Any application of the categories "before" or "after" to that void makes no sense.

Just as the reader's recognition of *La Disparition's* lipogram represents a turning point beyond which the text is forever doubled, it is also a moment when the reader is able to witness, in one sense, an example of disappearance working forward and backward in time. Though she might accurately state that there existed for her a period in which she read *La Disparition* with no knowledge of its lipogram, recognizing the lipogram forever colors that initial reading in addition to her future encounters with the text. Moving backward from "ça" to "quoi," as Aloysius Swann might put it,<sup>7</sup> is perhaps impossible for the reader just as Swann suggests that moving in the opposite direction from "quoi" to "ça" is impossible for *La Disparition's* characters.

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<sup>7</sup> In other words, it is perhaps impossible to return to a state in which the question of the cause of *La Disparition's* unusual prose remains open—a moment of "quoi"—from a state in which a reason, *ça*, has been named.

The crux of the connection between disappearance, reading, and time thus lies in the deception described by Aloysius Swann in the passage cited above. Though “we” may have believed in the possibility of reading backward—as Arthur Wilburg Savorgnan and the others attempted to do in order to render Voyle’s disappearance legible in part by situating it on a causal timeline—disappearance is depicted as subverting the kind of timeline necessary to realize that possibility. For, as Perec tells us through Swann, “jadis”, “aujourd’hui”, “toujours”, “car” and “quand” are terms incapable of generating meaning in a text or in a reality in which such a phenomenon is represented or experienced: the very syntax of the narrative phrase, so to speak, or the possibility of *structuring* that narrative temporally, breaks down. The outcome, suggests Aloysius Swann at the end of the text, is inevitably “la mort” which announces to us “la fin du roman” (305).

### **Death, Decay, and Blanchot**

Death, whether bloody and bodily or of a philosophical nature, is an inescapable theme in *La Disparition*, and it is the final one I will discuss. In part, death is omnipresent in the text because of its voids and disappearances, which in turn are suggestive of the profound absence in Perec’s life that the death of his parents during his childhood constitutes. The vanishing of Perec’s mother into a concentration camp and the death of his father on the battlefield are elicited strongly enough in *La Disparition*, that, as Warren Motte writes, “Perec’s three-hundred-page novel written without the letter E [can] (and, I would argue, *must*) be read as an account of

radical privation and loss” (“Georges Perec and the Broken Book,” in *Auschwitz and After*, 235).<sup>8</sup>

The loss of Perec’s parents is a productive lens through which the reader may view the themes of death and absence in *La Disparition*, but Perec’s novel demonstrates a concern with death of a more abstract, philosophical nature as well. That concern is most visible in the interplay of the themes of reading, doubling, time, and disappearance, as an examination of the theme of death in *La Disparition* will show. Ultimately, I will suggest that *La Disparition* associates the experience of disappearance with the kind of “death” and fundamental passivity described by Maurice Blanchot as an essential component of the encounter between a writer (or any user of language) and the literary language with which she attempts to describe the world and her innermost being.

*La Disparition* broaches the subject of death in a stunning fashion. The reader is confronted with, “at an absolute minimum, 1,000,789 murders in the 312 pages of *La Disparition*, for an average of 3,207 murders per page: that’s a lot of blood, however anemically fictional it may be” (Motte, *Playtexts*, 116). The vast majority are referenced in the avant-propos, and their prominence and variety bring death in many forms to the reader’s attention while signaling its importance as a thematic concern. There, Perec’s catalog of ways to die is

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<sup>8</sup> Perec’s biography plays a distinct role in other of his works as well. Many passages of *W* recall themes and devices in *La Disparition* that relate to Perec’s childhood, for example. Among them especially is a memory concerning a Hebrew letter a three-year-old Perec identified (and later claims to have misidentified) in a newspaper. Warren Motte discusses this passage, arguing that “The letter, in all its strangeness, is clearly a sign of alienation, of marginality,” in part because his amended memory of the letter figures “the distance between Perec and his first language, Yiddish” (*Playtexts*, 242) and demonstrates the tenuousness of what memories he retains of his past: that is, it figures loss and privation, here of a sense of historical continuity and integrity of the self that, one imagines, might be repaired by a conversation with his parents had they not died long ago. Motte shows that “the radical loss that [Perec] describes in *W*,” or the death of his parents, “is in fact *double*: loss of life, first; and, second, absence of memory” (*Playtexts*, 241). *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* was published after *La Disparition*, but the echo of the absent letter there and the “radical privation and loss” of *W* invites the reader to imagine Perec had the same kind of loss in mind when composing his earlier work.

impressive: it includes the guillotine, fire, assaults, attacks, pogroms, and massacres; beheading by knife, plastic explosives, murder, bombardment, lapidation, beating, bow and arrow, a shank, a bazooka, napalm, and disease; sunstroke, death by razor, in the bathtub, and by tank; a whip, guns, crucifixion, drowning, boiling, auto-da-fé, lions, bloodletting, gassing, strangling, and mutilation, among other forms (11-14). As is often the case in *La Disparition*, a ludic spirit underlies the profusion of that list: as if in playful response to the challenge of the work's lipogrammatic constraint, Perec inventories to excess, including as many methods of death and murder as can be mentioned without using the letter E.

The excess and morbid playfulness of the avant-propos invites the reader to consider other forms of death encountered elsewhere in *La Disparition*—ones less focused on the physical destruction of an individual—as both serious and important by contrast. This is accomplished in part because, for the reader who recognizes the game at work in Perec's catalog of demises, the otherwise obscene and genocidal violence, overwhelming morbidity, and evil of the avant-propos' murders become conspicuously (and uncomfortably) comical and even banal.

As Stella Béhar writes, “Quand l'histoire d'Anton commence au Chapitre I, conduisant par la suite le lecteur par les méandres de l'enquête policière, la mort est déjà banalisée par ce climat de violence politique décrit dans l'avant-propos” (Béhar 20). The banality of those deaths is reprised in the few that occur after the avant-propos, which are often comical as well. When particular characters suddenly perish on the cusp of recognizing the lipogram that governs their world, for instance, their deaths are easily taken as ludic signs of Perec's authorial hand intervening in his own creation. Characters who understand too much and threaten to put an end to the lipogram must be snuffed out, after all, if both author and reader are to continue playing the game the lipogram represents. One instance, at least, reinforces the theatricality of such

sudden deaths: Douglas Haig Clifford meets his inevitable end while on stage (*La disparition* 105-106). Additionally, though they are cause for concern among associates of Clifford and others, the material, bodily deaths of individual characters are recounted as relatively matter-of-fact occurrences in the style of the avant-propos.

*La Disparition*'s playfulness in depicting the end of so many lives thus causes a less matter-of-fact and less tangible form of death also present in *La Disparition* to stand out in sharp relief to the banalized bodily demise of someone like Clifford. That other form of death is, of course, the generalized sense of absence, doom, and Damnation that hangs ominously over everything *La Disparition*'s characters do. It is set apart from (relatively) inconsequential bodily deaths in a number of ways, including its more "serious" presentation despite its relationship to the same lipogrammatic constraint that demands certain characters' execution. It is also set apart by the language used to describe it. Whereas descriptions of the avant-propos' mass murder are profuse, the insidious death of the text's Damnation is associated with silence. It is, for instance, a death that announces the end of the novel and of novels (depending on one's interpretation of "la fin du roman"):

la mort,  
 la mort aux doigts d'airain,  
 la mort aux doigts gourds,  
 la mort où va s'abîmant l'inscription,  
 la mort qui, à jamais, garantit l'immaculation d'un  
 Album qu'un histrion un jour a cru pouvoir noircir,  
 la mort nous a dit la fin du roman. (305)

Unlike the avant-propos' excess of words, these final lines describing *La Disparition's* abstract and "serious" death are written in the economical language of poetic verse as well.

Likewise, and again in contradistinction to the blatant deaths in the avant-propos, which, although numerous, are relatively contained within that section of the text, *La Disparition's* Damnation pervades the text entirely and often subtly. It is reflected, for example, in images of rot, decay, and disease that appear in all parts of *La Disparition's* world—in the avant-propos, too, and even in the world-en-abyme of Voyl's hallucinations. During the violent upheaval of the avant-propos, a fearful populace loots food only to find it has spoiled: "À Rocamadour, on pilla un stock: on y trouva du thon, du lait, du chocolat par kilos, du maïs par quintaux, mais tout avait l'air pourri" (11). Voyl's apartment consists of "murs blanchis à la chaux, tapis salis faits d'un mauvais coton qui partait par flocons," a "living-room à l'abandon," a "sofa moisi," "un bahut puant l'oignon pourri" (60). Voyl's alter-ego Ismaïl "s'abritait dans un trou où, huit jours durant, il agonisait; il traînait, moribond. Son pouls tombait. Il attrapait la malaria. Il frissonnait; il suffoquait; il s'affaiblissait" (32), and the character Aignan in the same imagined novel wastes away, malnourished and clothed in rotting rags (48-49).

The Damnation is also a form of death presented as neither a punctual, discrete occurrence, nor able to be narrated in the same way as deaths by machine gun or machete. Deaths in the avant-propos are classified, quantified, and related in the relatively dispassionate tone of the chronicler, as when the narrator reports that "Dans la nuit du lundi au mardi 6 avril, on compta vingt-cinq assauts au plastic. L'aviation bombardait la Tour d'Orly. L'Alhambra brûlait, l'Institut fumait, l'Hôpital Saint-Louis flambait" (12). Those short, utilitarian phrases and sentences offer the reader an ostensibly definitive account of death made in a clear and straightforward register of language. The verses describing *La Disparition's* Damnation on page

305, however, are far less terse and utilitarian, and they belong to an elevated register stereotypically associated with difficult or profound subjects. Globally, the registers of the avant-propos and of *La Disparition*'s Damnation contrast in the way that historical accounts, with their presumably straightforward descriptions and dates, are stereotypically thought to contrast with the subjects and methods of literature.

The banalization and playful tone of “bodily” death thus invite the reader to believe that the omnipresent yet inscrutable void of the lipogram, embodied for Voyl and friends in part through *La Disparition*'s Damnation, is the form of death with which the text is truly concerned. *La Disparition* treats the material end of particular lives differently than it treats moments where characters or narrator attempt to address the disappearance they are never quite able to understand despite its paradoxical omnipresence. Disappearance thus appears to constitute a form of death different and abstract enough in comparison to others that it necessitates different modes of representation, and it is one that simultaneously demands and refuses to be treated in language. Literary language seems necessary in order to address the Damnation associated with the lipogram, but the lipogram's rules dictate that that *all* language in the world of *La Disparition* must fail to explain or figure it. As a result, it is an intangible form of death that underlies *La Disparition*'s entire world, sensed rather than represented directly, visible only in ephemeral images like those in Voyl's rug, and tangible only through similarly long-running themes like rot and decay. Both characters and the narrator find it difficult to put it into words,<sup>9</sup> too, and consequently it is addressed in probing, exploratory verses like those near the end of the text. In sum, *La Disparition* encourages the reader to consider the experience of death-in-

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<sup>9</sup> Both in the sense that they struggle to express fully the significance of that death and in the sense that the law of the lipogram forbids placing that “death,” which is to say the absent letter E, into the actual words they use in *La Disparition*.



disappearance specifically in its most philosophical, general sense, rather than as a foundation only for a metaliterary discussion of the novel or constrained writing.

Examining the ways in which *La Disparition*'s lipogram functions is a useful first step in elucidating that "experience of disappearance," and the form of death it represents, with which I claim *La Disparition* is concerned. Different facets of that experience are suggested by a number of the lipogram's effects and implications in Voyle and his companions' world. Firstly, the lipogram's structure—the fact that it influences all of Clifford's reality, for example, but never can be truly *seen* by him lest he die—suggests that disappearance profoundly affects those who experience it while paradoxically leaving no trace of itself on their world. The truth or reality of such an occurrence cannot be made fully present to an observer, in other words, and not merely because the term "disappearance" implies mystery or uncertainty by definition. Coupled with the different registers and tones *La Disparition* uses to contrast disappearance with "normal" death, the lipogram's structure thus suggests that part of disappearance's specificity is its ability to evoke the conflict and frustration arising when the desire to represent encounters the limits of mimesis in the medium of language.

The relatively unproblematic presentation of deaths in the avant-propos and its contrast with the difficulty of narrating disappearance are emblematic of that conflict. The avant-propos' deaths are situated (however impersonally) in historical narrative in the sense that they are transformed into sequential, statistical accounts by the avant-propos' dispassionate narrator. Incomplete or reductive as such an account may be, those deaths do not appear to exceed in principle the capabilities of the narrative that encompasses them. Disappearance, on the other hand, is shown through the lipogram to create a structure of experience in which the particular form of death it inflicts always and necessarily exceeds attempts to understand it. A complete

account of traces and signs of the letter E's absence is impossible, and felt to be so, since no amount of sleuthing and no amount of description may ever explain what exactly has "died" (or how). That impossibility holds true even though Voyl, other characters, or the narrator of *La Disparition* are shown to be capable in principle of understanding what occurred. Accordingly, Voyl's companions' investigation must fail to arrive at the sort of outcome an individual might seek (but, *La Disparition* implies, never obtain) when an inquest is made into a disappearance or death in the real world.

As a result, *La Disparition* also suggests, on one level, that making sense of a disappearance is a fundamentally illegitimate activity. One might presume that a real-world investigation of a disappearance is "legitimate" in the sense that it may succeed in uncovering hidden bodies, unexplained motives, timelines, and causes. In short, it may transform ignorance and lack of closure into historical accounts, or unexplained vanishings into crimes, reports, or *faits divers*. The context of lipogrammatic disappearance surrounding *La Disparition*'s investigations, by contrast, is one that suggests that disappearance renders that kind of transformation impossible and makes that impossibility known, though indistinctly. To understand that something disappeared is, somehow, to alter the very possibilities of knowledge concerning the disappeared. In Voyl's world, even when the truth of what disappeared becomes apparent, the structure of the lipogram is such that that truth inevitably must be corrupted by virtue of a disappearance simply having taken place, since the disappearance of the letter E is both a form of death and an unassailable law. A thing becomes both absent, like the letter E, and simultaneously irretrievable.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Warren Motte's description of a similar structure of double death in *W ou le souvenir d'enfance* (there, loss of both life and memory) resonates strongly with the lipogram's structure in *La Disparition*. The lipogram erases memory, too, an erasure which is visible only from the reader's perspective, as I have described in relation to Voyl's "transcribed" poems that only the reader "remembers" as having ever taken another form.

Above all, *La Disparition* and its lipogram depict disappearance as a more complete and impersonal form of death than any of the inventive but banal forms enumerated in the avant-propos. In part, it is more complete because it is accompanied by the types of doubling I discussed earlier in this chapter. The various instances of doubled reading, doubled texts, and doubled meanings in *La Disparition* serve to double the “death” of disappearance, since, as a result of that doubling, the reader or character is offered two distinct opportunities to arrive at the same aporetic destination. In the reader’s case, for example, Mawhinney’s description of the doubling of *La Disparition* into its typographical and semantic content allows for a doubled experience of the kind of phantom text I have described, once from each vantage point Mawhinney identifies. Or, for *La Disparition*’s characters, doubled interpretations of the meanings of Voyl’s notes or even Ismaïl’s doubled planes of reality serve to demonstrate twice over the impossibility of making sense of their reality.

The experience of disappearance as related by *La Disparition* constitutes an impersonal form of death because it has no truly perceptible cause or origin within the text, and its purpose is equally inscrutable: it is directed at no one in particular. Instead, the different elements of that experience are depicted through the work’s lipogram as incontrovertible properties of Voyl’s and the others’ reality. The reader might interpret the lipogram as a sign of Perec the author at work or as a persistent reference to the novel’s textuality, but the characters living in the world subtended by that disappearance cannot attribute it to a particular hand and must experience it only as an implacable law. For them, it is a generalized, philosophical form of death that concerns possibilities of reading, meaning, and time more than the bodies or numbers so prominently associated with the extinction of lives early in the text. Indeed, the common ground between the individual, particular deaths or absences of Savorgnan or Douglas Haig Clifford, for

instance, is that their deaths and disappearances are never exclusively their own. They point instead to the impersonal absence of the letter E and to the meaning and functioning of that absence as a sign of the *general* idea of disappearance, or to the structural characteristics of the lipogram which make decisive descriptions of their particular vanishings or deaths impossible.

In *La Disparition*, then, disappearance engenders a sense of inherent impossibility and leads to an experience of a void different than the sense of absence that obtains when a friend or loved one simply leaves or dies. The void is figured paradoxically as predating the occurrence of that disappearance, since it is depicted as a characteristic of the world in which it comes to pass. Instead of lending itself to explanation (in principle) by the discovery of missing information, disappearance corrupts possibilities of knowledge and narration by virtue simply of having occurred.

The parallels between the form of doubled, impersonal, and philosophical death brought about by disappearance in *La Disparition* and Maurice Blanchot's exploration in "La Littérature et le droit à la mort" of the paradoxes and double death (in a similarly philosophical sense) encountered by a writer of literary language are clear. Both Blanchot's writer and Perec's observer of disappearance confront a profound void, and both experience a sense of impossibility and nullity in that encounter. Whether or not Blanchot influenced Perec directly, something similar to Blanchot's thought is present in Perec, and the examination of the two side by side represents a plausible method of elucidating and enriching my reading of *La Disparition*.

In *La Disparition*, the act of reading is presented as a paradox similar to the one Blanchot identifies in the act of writing: both promise to create meaning while twice revealing the impossibility of doing so. For Perec, a fundamental question—what, truly, has disappeared, and how?—demands that various clues in *La Disparition* be read and interpreted, or that meaning be

*made* of them. However, as is especially apparent from the reader's privileged point of view, characters' attempts to read those clues result in a greater and greater sense that meanings that seemed imminent are either impossible or invariably lethal for the mind that (nearly) grasps them. In the process, characters encounter the kinds of doubling I have described previously. Despite this, Perec never allows the sense of imminence that teases both characters and reader to dissipate, and the result is an insistent demand that reading continue nevertheless.

For Blanchot, writing (and literary writing in particular) is likewise an impossible, paradoxical activity subtended by an equally insistent and fundamental question. In his essay "La littérature et le droit à la mort," Blanchot identifies a question a writer or reader encounters when she writes or reads. It is:

la question qui, peut-être à son insu, n'a cessé d'interroger l'écrivain tandis qu'il écrivait ; et maintenant, au sein de l'oeuvre, attendant l'approche d'un lecteur—de n'importe quel lecteur, profond ou vain—repose silencieusement la même interrogation, adressée au langage, derrière l'homme qui écrit et lit, par le langage devenu littérature. (*La Part du feu* 293)

Blanchot's *interrogation* is an insistent call for attention to the nature of writing itself, of language, and of literature, and one that reveals to the writer and reader certain disquieting and paradoxical truths about those concepts. Among them is a fundamental void both inherent in language and responsible for making literature *literature*.

Referring to ideas from Hegel, Blanchot illustrates a paradox of writing that begins to unveil that void to the writer. He explains:

Dès son premier pas, dit à peu près Hegel, l'individu qui veut écrire est arrêté par une contradiction: pour écrire, il lui faut le talent d'écrire. Mais, en eux-mêmes, les dons ne

sont rien. Tant que ne s'étant pas mis à sa table, il n'a pas écrit une oeuvre, l'écrivain n'est pas écrivain et il ne sait pas s'il a des capacités pour le devenir. Il n'a du talent qu'après avoir écrit, mais il lui en faut pour écrire. (*La Part du feu* 295)

The result of this contradiction, according to Blanchot, is that the writer finds herself in an impossible and reciprocal relationship with the work she produces. The work undertaken establishes (or creates) the writer *as* writer, in a sense, even though she already must have been a writer to have produced the work in the first place. Otherwise stated, an individual is a writer only when she begins to write, but it takes a writer to begin writing. Despite this impossible relationship between herself and the work, at a given moment and in particular circumstances, the writer writes nevertheless.

The work produced by the writer appears at first symmetrical to herself in the sense that it seems momentarily to succeed in expressing some part of her own inner reality or truth. However, as the writer soon discovers, that sense of perfect symmetry is doomed, for the work cannot truly be *hers*—it cannot be a perfect reflection of *her*—if it is indeed a work of literature.

To be a work of literature, a work must be accessible and legible to others, and in order to be legible, it must be rendered in language that necessarily reduces the particularity of its objects to more generalized concepts. “Je dis: cette femme,” writes Blanchot, and in so doing, “Le mot me donne ce qu’il signifie, mais d’abord il le supprime. Pour que je puisse dire : cette femme, il faut que d’une manière ou d’une autre je lui retire sa réalité d’os et de chair, la rende absente et l’anéantisse” (312). Language must destroy the singularity of its objects in order to render them generally meaningful, and, as a product of language, the writer’s work “nie en fin de compte la substance de ce qu’elle représente” (301). The work of literature necessarily negates the ideal of the writer’s interior truth just as words necessarily negate the particularity of the objects they

purport to represent, even if the work's words maintain *something* of that truth and something of those objects within the meanings and concepts brought about by language. A perfect reflection of an individual would require a singular and perfect language, but were such a language possible, it would not be a *language* at all, for it would be perfectly incomprehensible. Thus it becomes clear to the writer that the very tool she has used to express her essential self is inherently incapable of describing and transmitting anything in its (hypothetical) essential, irreducible form.

If that is the nature of the writer's work, "L'oeuvre pour lui a disparu, elle devient l'oeuvre des autres, l'oeuvre où il n'est pas, un livre qui prend sa valeur d'autres livres, qui est original s'il ne leur ressemble pas, qui est compris parce qu'il est leur reflet" (*La part du feu* 298). The writer's work can say nothing true or complete, and she finds herself in the strange position of *being* nothing while having generated *nothing* from that being—before the advent of the work, after all, the writer did not exist as such, and the properties of language demonstrate that the work is ultimately the embodiment of a void. Nullity, and not a perfect image of herself, is what the author sees reflected in the work. For Blanchot, this nullity is part and parcel of what makes literature literature—and its revelation is a form of death to which the writer is exposed through writing.

The nullity of language brings to light a disappearance that literature attempts to address and an origin to which it attempts to return. Blanchot explains:

Dans la parole meurt ce qui donne vie à la parole; la parole est la vie de cette mort, elle est "la vie qui porte la mort et se maintient en elle." Admirable puissance. Mais quelque chose était là, qui n'y est plus. [. . .] Comment le retrouver, comment me retourner vers

ce qui est *avant*, si tout mon pouvoir consiste à en faire ce qui est *après*? Le langage de la littérature est la recherche de ce moment qui la précède. (316)

In her search, a writer might explore the materiality of language, elided when words are used in everyday, functional speech, as a means of making that “quelque chose” reappear. By foregrounding the sounds, shapes, or other tangible properties of words as *things* in concert with their meanings—by engaging in a more literary use of language—the writer might hope to make present again “ce qui donne vie à la parole” (316), or to use the interplay of words’ material forms as compensation for their inherent limitations and to communicate meaning more fully: to provoke a “révélation de ce que la révélation détruit” (317).

Again, however, the process of writing exposes the writer to a void, for the writer’s literary use of language demonstrates the inherent impossibility of *ever* expressing the fullness reality in words. Ordinary language, according to Blanchot, pretends to offer some compensation for destroying the particularity of objects it claims to represent:

Le langage courant appelle un chat un chat, comme si le chat vivant et son nom étaient identiques, comme si le fait de le nommer ne consistait pas à ne retenir de lui que son absence, ce qu’il n’est pas. [. . .] [Le langage commun] admet que, la non-existence du chat une fois passée dans le mot, le chat lui-même ressuscite pleinement et certainement comme son idée (son être) et comme son sens—le mot lui restitue, sur le plan de l’être (l’idée), toute la certitude qu’il avait sur le plan de l’existence. (*La Part du feu* 314)

Literary language, on the other hand, does not. Through rendering the materiality of language more visible and interrogating it more explicitly than everyday speech, literary language reveals that the promise of ordinary language is illusory and that the writer’s attempts to make use of its materiality are doomed:



En outre, [le langage littéraire] observe que le mot chat n'est pas seulement la non-existence du chat, mais la non-existence devenue *mot*, c'est-à-dire une réalité parfaitement déterminée et objective. Il voit là une difficulté et même un mensonge. [. . .] Comment l'absence infinie de la compréhension pourrait-elle accepter de se confondre avec la présence limitée et bornée d'un mot seul? Et le langage de chaque jour qui veut nous en persuader ne se tromperait-il pas? En effet, il se trompe et il nous trompe. La parole ne suffit pas à la vérité qu'elle contient. [. . .] Déjà le sceau qui retenait ce néant dans les limites du mot et sous les espèces de son sens s'est brisé; voici ouvert l'accès d'autres noms, moins fixes, encore indécis, plus capables de se concilier avec la liberté sauvage de l'essence négative, des ensembles instables, non plus des termes, mais leur mouvement, glissement sans fin de "tournures" qui n'aboutissent nulle part. (315)

Literary language thus reveals that the meanings offered by everyday language in exchange for effacing the pure particularity of an object are null. Furthermore, by examining literary language closely, the writer learns that manipulating the material form of literary language—"tout ce qui est physique [. . .]: le rythme, le poids, la masse, la figure, et puis le papier sur lequel on écrit, la trace de l'encre, le livre" (316-317)—could never succeed in allowing *some* form of more perfect signification.

Language is ultimately impersonal and empty, as Blanchot writes: "si le sens précis des termes s'est éteint, maintenant s'affirme la possibilité même de signifier, le pouvoir vide de donner un sens, étrange lumière impersonnelle" (318). Literature both reveals and confronts this impersonality because it concerns itself with understanding "le mouvement de négation" of language, the exhaustion of that negation (319), and the "existence inconnue, libre et silencieuse"

and the “présence interdite, l’être qui se cabre devant la révélation” of what has been negated.

Literature becomes

la seule traduction de l’obsession de l’existence, si celle-ci est l’impossibilité même de sortir de l’existence, l’être qui est toujours rejeté à l’être, ce qui dans la profondeur sans fond est déjà au fond, abîme qui est encore fondement de l’abîme, recours contre quoi il n’y a pas de recours. (320)

Literature searches for a time before the world is a *world*, or the time before an imagined “pure” and fully-signifying reality is simultaneously corrupted and made intelligible through the regime of language. However, as Blanchot suggests, the process of writing that literature only reaffirms the void and death of language: first in the encounter with the impossible and reductive nature of words, then again in the realization that that very impossibility is also the necessary precondition for the writer’s attempts to remediate the void to which she is exposed. Meanwhile, and in spite of the paradoxes it brings to light, she experiences writing as a demand insisting that she undertake those attempts.

The consequence of the series of realizations Blanchot describes is a form of death more total and impersonal than the end of a particular life: in discovering the nullity and necessary “deaths” inherent in language, Blanchot’s writer simultaneously discovers her own nullity as a writer-subject. Here again Blanchot builds on ideas from Hegel and, in turn, from Martin Heidegger. Hegel considered consciousness a negative force which, because it *is not* what it intends, destroys what it intends by transforming the immeasurably particular into an ideal—or experience into language. In this process, the destruction of objects in themselves (or the “death” of particularity) creates meaning, which is to say it causes the appearance of a world as an intelligible world.

For Heidegger, too, death generates meaning, though in a somewhat different sense. In Heidegger's thought, human consciousness (*Dasein*), characterized by endless possibility, becomes truly individuated and capable of meaningful, authentic action through awareness of its own eventual and inevitable death. This occurs because, for such a being, only limits on its possible choices, actions, thoughts, and so forth make any particular one of them more or less meaningful than another. Awareness of death is tantamount to the imposition of such limits. Knowledge of the eventual end to all of *Dasein*'s possibilities thus allows it to actualize its "basic state" (*Being and Time* 293) of care, which is to say concern for its *own* being and possibilities, differentiated from ones prescribed by the anonymous, collective "they" or the infinite options it might imagine for itself. The combination of *Dasein*'s own concern and any number of factors such as personality, material circumstances, historical moment, and so forth allow *Dasein* to act authentically in the world and inform the particular meaning of "authenticity" for a particular *Dasein*.

For both Hegel and Heidegger, then, the finality and annihilation of death is a productive and profoundly individual, individuating phenomenon that is necessary for the production of meaning. For Blanchot's writer, however, the encounter with literary language denies her even the productivity of the death she finds there. Instead, it leads her to experience annihilation *as* a writer-subject. "Par bonheur, le langage est une chose," writes Blanchot (*La part du feu* 317), but, as Blanchot tells us, precisely because words are *things*, they may operate independently of any writer. Consequently, language is fundamentally anonymous. It is "un élément, une part à peine détachée du milieu souterrain—non plus un nom, mais un moment de l'anonymat universel, une affirmation brute, la stupeur du face à face au fond de l'obscurité" (317).

The anonymity of language and the ability of words to be shared, appropriated, re-used, and taken up in contexts and times other than the writer's mean that any effort on her part to establish even provisional and limited completeness, certainty, or stability in her writing, or to express *her own* words, however imperfect, are as impossible as communicating pure particularity through a sign. Blanchot explains:

le langage exige de jouer son jeu sans l'homme qui l'a formé. La littérature se passe maintenant de l'écrivain: elle n'est plus cette inspiration qui travaille, cette négation qui s'affirme, cet idéal qui s'inscrit dans le monde comme la perspective absolue de la totalité du monde. [. . .] Elle n'est pas non plus la mort, car en elle se montre l'existence sans l'être, l'existence qui demeure sous l'existence, comme une affirmation inexorable, sans commencement et sans terme, la mort comme impossibilité de mourir. (317)

The use of literary language and the act of writing thus cause the writer to experience two forms of death: first in the inherent void of language and again in the revelation that it is impossible for the writer to “die” in a productive, Heideggerian sense.

By making evident that words need no author to express them and demonstrating that an author's work always escapes her control, literature refuses the author's wish to cement and actualize some part of her innermost self in writing. In turn, it refuses the transformation of the infinite possibilities of that interiority into an *end* to them on paper, and therefore denies the author the productive, limiting “death” that could provide her work and her existence meaning. Though her work is meaningful in that its words may be taken up, appropriated, and transformed by a reader, it is based on a profound and neutral void and non-mastery of the indefinite possibilities into which her subjectivity dissolves. By writing, a writer learns that she cannot establish *any* final and conclusive expression of the infinite possibilities of her being—as a

writer, and as she is constituted in and by the work—through the words she produces. The concept of writer as author, origin, and guarantor of a work that embodies her (thanks to the productive limits of Heideggerian death) is shown to be impossible—to be nothing—just as surely as language refers to *nothing* but itself: the writer is therefore *nothing* writing *nothing*.

The writer of literature thus experiences emptiness and nullity twice: first in her experience of the death or disappearance of the existence of a thing rendered in language, and secondly when literary language reveals even the being (*être*) exchanged for existence to be ever-receding, or the effacement of the author not to constitute a productive *end*. Blanchot's two forms of death constitute, together, a more total annihilation than occurs when the life of an individual ends or when a sign makes an object intelligible by destroying its particularity. Moreover, it is a far more non-specific or "neutral" kind of annihilation, because it reveals to the author the profound nullity encountered when she interrogates the problematic nature of meaning and her own inability to create finality for herself in a work.

The meanings of the madness and disappearance of Voyle, his companions' quest for knowledge, the ever-present shadow of death in *La Disparition*, and the themes of reading, doubling, and time in relation to its lipogram find clear parallels in Blanchot's thought. Voyle and his associates' attempts to regain access to a "time *before*" a disappearance through detective work, for example, resemble the attempts of Blanchot's writer to reestablish the plenitude of a reality altered by the fundamental lack inherent in the language she must use to describe it. Like writing for Blanchot, disappearance is likewise figured in *La Disparition* as the origin of an insistent demand to grasp and utter language that does not speak from (and of) the void left by the absent letter E. In responding to the demand of disappearance, *La Disparition*'s characters experience a form of death or annihilation structurally similar to the philosophical death that

befalls Blanchot's writer in her encounter with literary language: all arrive at the realization of the fundamental impossibility of generating the kind of speech that would overcome the questions that haunt them.

Still other parallels between Blanchot and Perec reinforce such connections: the experience of disappearance in *La Disparition* and the foundation of literature for Blanchot both rest on the experience of a *double* form of negation or death, for instance. In Perec, the doubling of negation occurs (in one sense) through the reader's oscillation between two incomplete texts she encounters, while for Blanchot, the double death of literary language results from the two senses in which language is revealed to be fundamentally null. In *La Disparition*, too, disappearance is experienced as a fundamentally impersonal void and also undermines the possibility of Heideggerian death as literary language does for Blanchot's writer. The insidious, omnipresent, and neutral erasure (both of the letter E and of the characters who discover its absence) is impersonal in that it is an immutable *law* and *damnation* that is part and parcel of Voyle's existence. And, as is perhaps especially apparent to the reader, *La Disparition* explicitly denies the possibility of finality or closure with respect to its lipogrammatic excision of E. As I suggested previously, every word on its pages evokes a conjectural, phantom text that may never be reconciled with the "actual" text in the reader's hands, and *La Disparition*'s many scenes of impossible reading (as well as the nature of lipograms in general) remind her that interpretational closure through such reconciliation is necessarily impossible.

### **The Stakes of Disappearance**

Reading Georges Perec's *La Disparition* as a text concerned primarily with the idea of disappearance provides one explanation for why disappearance—as a general notion, a literary

theme, or a label for an occurrence—is an especially salient and useful descriptive device for a number of contemporary experiences. As *La Disparition* suggests, the salience of the figure derives in part from its ability to express an experience of nullity or aporia with many structural similarities to Blanchot's double death of literary language. My reading of Perec suggests that, in that regard, disappearance may be interpreted as a figure through which to grapple with general forms of postmodern doubt concerning language and the limits of our ability to comprehend our experiences and form meaningful narratives based upon them.

*La Disparition* also offers an equally important interpretation of what it is to apprehend and attempt to understand disappearance, whether as a stand-in for postmodern anxieties, or as a particular, concrete event in one's world. Part of the nature of experiencing a disappearance, according to my reading of Perec, is the inevitable (and forceful) confrontation with such generalized postmodern anxieties that a particular event of the kind presages. When disappearance leaves a void in his world, Voyle, perhaps as surely as any real individual faced with a disappearance, seeks to understand the meaning of the absence he experiences. He and his companions believe they see a sign *in* that absence—evanescing in Voyle's carpet, hidden in the transcriptions he produces, derived from the long chain of causality (involving old traditions, conflicts of inheritance, and so forth) leading to his vanishing—and are compelled to understand that sign's meaning.

However, as they discover, their efforts to understand the absence of the letter E only engender greater and greater madness and death as they come to realize that the entire regime of signs is bankrupt. No matter how suggestive, for example, shapes resembling the letter E or related symbols can never *be* the letter that has gone missing, and something of the truth of Voyle's disappearance must always escape others' understanding. The apparent rupture in Voyle's

narrative may never be fully repaired because of the very nature of the reality he and the others inhabit.

By extension, one might therefore imagine that living through a disappearance pushes those affected toward a similarly inevitable and forceful revelation of the same fundamental postmodern doubts. Moreover, real disappearances do not afford their “readers” the luxury of abstraction offered to the reader of *La Disparition*: Perec’s model suggests they are pushed toward an encounter with the void of language, like Voyl, but that they also behold something akin to the fundamental passivity and nullity of Blanchot’s double death applied to a very real element of narrative landscape. When a loved one, a language, a culture, or another cherished and foundational attachment of the self disappears in reality, that disappearance inflicts a profound form of distress—more profound even than that resulting from death—because it both renders something absent and proposes the utter impossibility of its reality.

That distress, according to my reading of Perec, derives from the structural similarities between disappearance and the experiences of Blanchot’s writer. In the first instance, those similarities suggest that disappearances, unlike other forms of trauma or loss, are events through which an object that disappears “dies” twice. At first, it dies inasmuch as it ceases to be present in the reality of an individual like Voyl or any of his companions: effectively, it ceases to be; it is absent from their narrative world. This form of death applies no matter how much uncertainty surrounds a disappearance, as in the case of a kidnapped dissident, for instance, who may or may not actually have been killed by her abductors. To a certain extent, this first “death” of an object that disappears can be redressed if a prisoner is released or a person in general returns after their unexplained departure.



What cannot be remediated, however, is the second, neutral, Blanchotian form of death that disappearance inflicts upon its victims. In the eyes of an observer, the disappeared dies a second time when disappearance undermines the possibility of reconstituting any truths or meanings about their former place in the world or the events surrounding their vanishing. When the structure of disappearance foregrounds the impossible nature of language, it makes clear to the observer, like literary language to Blanchot's author, that language cannot be used to accomplish either of those tasks, and forbids by extension any limiting, Heideggerian closure to their narratives and possibilities. Without such closure, a victim of disappearance therefore both dies in reality (as is often the case—or, if still living, at least ceases to be present), then dies again when Blanchot's double death undermines the very idea that narrative could render even provisional, final truths with respect to his or her existence and (probable) untimely end.

Just as importantly, the experience of disappearance thus necessarily carries with it an undercurrent of doubt concerning the possibilities of action and meaning available to the observer as well. In the process of making the inherent limits and paradoxes of language apparent, Perec's model of disappearance in *La Disparition* suggests that such an event forces the observer to confront the limits of his or her subjectivity. Like Voyle or Swann or Clifford, the observer who examines disappearance senses a threat to their agency and coherence as a self. In *La Disparition*, the threat is made apparent by Perec's references to a generalized sense of dread, then actualized when characters who *do* attempt to understand disappearance are essentially excised from their textual world. For an individual in the real world, the threat might instead take the form of a (perhaps subtle) suspicion that nothing could ever fill the void left by a disappearance. Her suspicion is confirmed through the realization, brought about by the similarities between disappearance and Blanchotian double death, that the potential to "write" a

conclusive, intelligible end to anything in a world made intelligible through language—or to realize the individuating, meaningful authenticity of limits, as Heidegger describes—is an illusion. Through all of this, the subject-observer discovers herself not to be much of a subject at all: instead, she is fundamentally passive.

Perec's treatment of disappearance in *La Disparition* thus provides one explanation of the figure's polyvalence and force in literature, and perhaps one additional way of interpreting its place and importance in certain public discourses as well. My reading of Perec and Blanchot suggests that the *desaparecidos* in South America, the vanished victims of the *années de plomb* in Morocco, young generations "vanishing" through economic migration, cultural change, and other disappearances may attract particular attention (and condemnation) because their stakes are greater than their most evident personal, political, or economic elements. As a form of absence and death that shows Blanchotian nullity to be the foundation of language and passivity to be the essential quality of subjects operating in a world made intelligible by words, disappearance entails an attack on the very ideas of meaning and subjectivity and represents a potential source of existential as well as personal or collective trauma.

Consequently, responses to disappeared or disappearing people, languages, ways of life, and so forth could be seen in many respects both as attempts to come to terms with terrible events and as acts of faith in defiance of the kind of passivity disappearance brings to light. Reestablishing the story of the demise of the disappeared or incorporating the void of their absence into a more general, intelligible, meaningful world-narrative are acts that take on great additional significance in this light.

In the following chapters, I will explore texts by Mahi Binebine, Assia Djebar, and Tahar Ben Jelloun wherein such attempts at narrating disappearance are foregrounded, and I will

examine the ways in which those works both supplement and contradict the model of disappearance found in *La Disparition*—and, perhaps, offer entirely different models and modalities by which to understand the idea and the experience of disappearance.

## CHAPTER II

The heart of this chapter and its analysis of Mahi Binebine's *Les funerailles du lait* is a straightforward proposition: Binebine's novel intimately links protagonist Mamaya's experience of her son's disappearance, and by extension the concept of disappearance in general, to the human body. Both the physical body and the "conceptual body," or the connotations, metaphors, and symbolisms of the human form, are the most salient tools Binebine uses to represent disappearance. The corporeal is thus the medium in which *Les funerailles du lait* makes sense of the nature and effects of disappearance.

In one sense, connecting disappearance to the body is inevitable when an individual disappears, as is the case in *Les funerailles du lait*. A lack of knowledge concerning the location of a person's body in space plays an essential role in determining whether or not he could be said by an observer to have disappeared in the first place. The distinction between disappearance and departure or absence usually rests on that lack of knowledge and on the degree to which it worries the observer. In that sense, the body is always in question when speaking of a person who disappears.

Not knowing the location of a body is not the only criterion by which the disappearance of an individual is defined, but it is perhaps the most essential. It is common in normal, everyday contexts to be unable to locate a person in space—we rarely know with any precision where all our acquaintances are situated at any given time—but whatever mystery might surround their location is usually perceived as solvable and temporary. Even if it would be impracticable,

nothing in principle usually prevents an interested party from locating someone else. That person may be far away or difficult to find, but without evidence to suggest otherwise, he remains *somewhere* in the eyes of others, and “somewhere” is understood to be an accessible space, however many real places it might comprise. Thus a person does not “disappear” (in any distressing sense of the term) when he steps out of a room or leaves the company of his friends unannounced. In most circumstances, experience also suggests he will be seen again, eventually, and will not remain merely “somewhere” forever. So long as the uncertainty surrounding an absence remains within the bounds of accepted social conventions, logic, or experience, “disappearance” or “disparition” are words most would use only ironically.

When does the absence of a body become a disappearance? Other criteria are clearly necessary. Perceiving an absence as a troubling, perhaps painful, and likely permanent rupture in an otherwise acceptable series of events (in an otherwise acceptable narrative, in other words) seems to be as important as a missing body.

The well-known topos of the husband who abandons his family after “going out for cigarettes” illustrates the point. His departure becomes a disappearance only when it is clear to his loved ones that an aberration has occurred, from their point of view, in their personal narratives concerning his role in their lives or in broader social narratives prescribing certain behaviors for husbands and fathers, and proscribing abandonment without reason or notice. When it becomes clear that the husband’s actions are incongruous with archetypical stories of love and family “told” by culture, the simple fact of his unexplained absence may come to be considered a disappearance instead. Though such a rupture in narrative (or any other criteria) may be required in order to call his absence a disappearance, the first condition of using that term relates to what is known about his body.

When they involve an absent body, disappearances also evoke and problematize the understanding of object permanence<sup>11</sup> that underpins our most basic beliefs about the physical world. As small children, we learn that bodies are continuously present in space, like any other object, whether or not we can detect them with our senses. We know a body can't move from one place to another without passing through space. We understand that lacunae in our perception shouldn't equate to actual lacunae in an object's being, and we use these notions to make sense of physical reality. But when a person disappears, a discontinuity in their being *appears* to occur, even if we know that to be impossible.

That perceived discontinuity<sup>11</sup> is related in part to our expectations of narrative. Just as we expect objects to be continuously present in space, we treat everyday narratives that describe them, even ones as simple as "Jane does exist," as if possessed of their own form of object permanence. Though we may know they are shaped by the inherent shortcomings of language, we often overlook those shortcomings and allow the limited information they provide to produce a sense of continuity analogous to the one we experience when objects become unavailable to the senses. Narrative space is conceived as continuous, like physical space, and its objects are conceived as being "somewhere" within it as well. A narrative could never hope to reproduce those objects, their actions, or changes they experience in perfect detail, but the reductive, limited nature of narrative is only as unacceptable as the similar limitations of our senses.

When people disappear, however, their bodies *do* cease to be permanent within the observer's narrative space in addition to the physical world, and they *do* move from one "point"

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<sup>11</sup> Object permanence is described by Jean Piaget as a milestone in one of four stages of early human development. It refers to a child's ability to understand that objects in the world continue to exist when they are not seen or otherwise detected by the senses. Before understanding object permanence, infants may attempt to interact with objects that are partially hidden from view, but not with objects entirely concealed. Piaget theorized that such objects effectively cease to exist from the infant's perspective. See for example Piaget (1952).

to another in an instant: their body effectively passes from a concrete and accessible narrative “somewhere” to an obscure and indescribable one. From the perspective of the narratives that make *sense* of the physical world and its objects and persons, a lacuna in object permanence is produced by disappearance no matter how true it is that physical reality never ceased to conform to our expectations. Consequently, one might say that the disappearance of a person simulates the incomprehensible possibility of a world without object permanence to give it shape and continuity—a simulation that stages an uncomfortable clash between experiential and narrative realities.

Other connections between disappearance and the body are more straightforward. When circumstances suggest that a person’s disappearance is a likely indication that he has also died, the physical body (or the lack thereof) becomes immediately important in a number of ways. The appearance, lifelessness, and other qualities of a body are important proofs that death has occurred, for one, but ones that require access to a corpse. In part because these signs cannot be seen and confirmed by loved ones, the status of an individual who never returns from a trip or expires in a secret prison can remain in doubt, if their body is never recovered, even when the likelihood of their survival is negligible.

Many ceremonies marking the end of a life require some form of interaction with a body as well. In predominately Islamic societies, that interaction is meant to take place within hours of death. A person’s remains must be washed, shrouded, transported and buried as soon as possible. The preparation, viewing, and burial or burning of an individual’s body are often necessary steps in rituals and processes of grief, which can contribute to a sense of closure among loved ones of the deceased. The stakes of the correct treatment of bodies can be higher as well: returning a body to the earth is sometimes considered essential to ensuring that both the dead and the living

remain connected to a divine order underlying or reflected in immanent reality. If a person disappears, it may be forever impossible to know whether his body was treated in the way custom or religion demands.

The body plays an important role in social and political rituals, too: in addition to helping integrate a person's death into the social fabric of his immediate community, some interactions with bodies can perform a similar function for more abstract social groups—generations, ethnic groups, or nations, for instance. When a death or deaths are associated with highly-charged political or social events, bodies (both in their materiality and as symbols) sometimes gain special significance for those wider groups in addition to their importance to family, friends, and local communities. Recovering and returning the bodies of the disappeared can function as a form of public contrition or reconciliation even when more complete justice is desired but improbable. When an individual disappears (or is disappeared), of course, his body—and his funeral, and his grave—cannot be part of collective or political rituals that might rely on the body as a focal point, and traditional formulations of those rituals may become inoperative as a result.

In addition to the general senses in which disappearance is connected to the body, *Les funeraillles du lait* figures the body as a medium through which the effects of the disappearance of a loved one are manifested. Mamaya experiences the disappearance of her son into a Moroccan prison in the South (and his near-certain death there, and his probable burial in an unmarked grave) in and through her flesh. When she undertakes a ritual to acknowledge her son's death and explain some part of its meaning near the end of the text, it involves her flesh as well: she buries a part of her own body as a proxy for the remains of her son, which she is unable



to recover. Throughout the novel, the physical body is an important site where disappearance, and Mamaya's responses to it, play out.

The symbolism of the body is one of the most important tools Binebine utilizes in representing and making sense of the disappearance of Mamaya's son as well. The body functions as a central metaphor in the text, and Mamaya's contemplation of and responses to her son's disappearance are given meaning by the connotations and symbolisms of particular kinds and parts of bodies. Mamaya's is always a *female* body, for example, and her breast inevitably evokes notions of motherhood and nourishment. What is done to and with her body happens on a symbolic level as well, and her infirmities and wounds can be read accordingly. For the (contingent) meanings of bodies, as well as the *habitus*—an idea developed by Pierre Bourdieu in *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*—that shape our interpretation of them are inseparable from representations of the human form. In *Les funérailles du lait*, evocative corporeal imagery and symbolism thus describe Mamaya's experiences as much as her physical suffering.

It is also especially through the connotations and symbolisms of her body that Mamaya's experiences function as an allegory for collective "Moroccan experience" during the *années de plomb*. Whatever broad truth concerning the effects of disappearance on the Moroccan polity or Moroccan society the reader imputes to *Les funérailles du lait* is steeped in the same corporeal, symbolic language that contributes to the meaning of Mamaya's individual suffering. Symbolisms of the body offer *Les funérailles du lait*'s readers an avenue of approach to the subject of disappearance on different levels, then, and raise questions about the relationship of body and world and the enlisting of Mamaya as a (female) incarnation of a body politic in the process. The reader's understanding of disappearance as a social and political phenomenon is shaped by those questions and by the many ways in which Mamaya's body signifies.

Finally, I argue that applying the claims of Lakoff and Johnson's *Philosophy in the Flesh* to my reading of *Les funérailles du lait* creates a productive link between the centrality of the body in Binebine's novel and the way in which my reading of *La Disparition* characterizes disappearance. Through Lakoff and Johnson's arguments, it is possible to view Binebine's focus on the body as a particularly understandable (and perhaps even inevitable) consequence of experiencing an event that evokes the Blanchotian paradoxes and aporias of writing and literary language. Consequently, my reading of *Les funérailles du lait* suggests that the body and its symbolisms may be important mediators of all kinds of disappearances, whether of individuals or of cultures, memory, ways of life, or identities.

### **Disappearance *in* the Body**

*Les funérailles du lait* recounts the story of a woman named Mamaya whose son disappeared eighteen years before the central events of the novel. As the narrator explains, he harbored opinions deemed unacceptable by the Moroccan *makhzan*,<sup>12</sup> which led to his imprisonment and almost certain death, like many other real or imagined dissidents during Morocco's *années de plomb*.<sup>13</sup> The novel describes Mamaya's journey to Sidi Boulghmour, tomb

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<sup>12</sup> *Makhzan* (مخزن) is an Arabic term meaning "storehouse" or "depot" that also refers to the Moroccan government and the privileged individuals and groups (certain families, the upper class, etc.) from which its officials are usually recruited. I use *makhzan* to refer to the Moroccan political apparatus in general, both parliamentary and royal.

<sup>13</sup> The label *années de plomb* is used retrospectively to describe a period from (approximately) the 1960s through the 1980s during which, under Hassan II, a number of factors led to significant political repression and the imprisonment, torture, and disappearance of numerous dissidents. The Instance Équité et Réconciliation (IER) established in 2004 by Hassan II's son and successor Mohammed VI investigated the fate of (at least) 742 such individuals. Attempted military coups, first in 1971 and again (most notoriously) by trusted General Mohamed Oufkir in 1972, contributed to a wave of repression, purges, and reprisals against real and perceived opponents of the *makhzan*. Some dissidents, like Mahi Binebine's brother Aziz, were held (often for many years) in facilities such as Tazmamart, a notorious prison in the South. A number were ultimately released; others were murdered or died in secret and were presumably buried in Morocco's deserts, in mass graves, or near the detention centers where they were held. Many of those graves were uncovered by the IER in the last decade.

of a *marabout*<sup>14</sup> and resting place of other members of her family and the events immediately preceding it. That literal voyage mirrors her figurative voyage of understanding and memorializing her son's disappearance. As Mamaya prepares for her journey and when she visits her childhood home, scenes from her and her mother's pasts enrich and contextualize the narrative present. Her voyage occurs soon after she undergoes a mastectomy to treat cancer in her breast, after which she asked her doctor to recover and return her severed flesh to her for safekeeping. The reason for Mamaya's unusual request becomes clear when, upon finally arriving at the *koubba*<sup>15</sup> of Sidi Boulghmour at the end of her journey, Mamaya digs a grave there and buries the breast in place of her absent son's body. As this final scene suggests, Mamaya's body is strongly associated with how she feels, understands, memorializes, ritualizes, and otherwise makes sense of the disappearance of her son.

An atmosphere of corporeality pervades *Les funerailles du lait* because of the novel's pointed use of body-related imagery and terms, among which references to Mamaya's infirmity stand out as emblematic. In the first passages describing her, for instance, Mamaya is depicted as having an aged body with "yeux ternes" and a "figure pâle" (7), she must take medication "à six heures précises" (9), and she is feeble enough that her servant Johara must "découper la viande" (9) in order for her to eat. The seated position (7) in which Mamaya is frequently represented serves to indicate the degree to which she continually confronts the realities of her (deteriorating) body.

One analepsis in particular in Binebine's narrative underscores the text's apparent concern with the body and its functions. An unusual scene involving a past interaction between

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<sup>14</sup> In the Maghreb, *marabout* usually refers to a venerated religious teacher, leader, or mystic whose burial place sometimes becomes a site of pilgrimage.

<sup>15</sup> The term *koubba* refers in context to the (probably domed) structure at the tomb site of the associated *marabout*.

Johara and Mamaya's children, whom the former "avait torchés, mouchés, dorlotés" (11), focuses attention on the materiality of the body by depicting a failed attempt at breastfeeding. Referring to the children, the narrator explains that Johara "leur avait même donné le sein en cachette, bien que son corps n'ait jamais eu de lait" (11). In addition to suggesting that Johara desires to perform the functions of a mother—a genitor—in some sense, like Mamaya does, her ineffectual attempts to nurse the children foreground one of the most primal functions of the flesh, which the female body in particular evokes: to create and nourish a new iteration of itself.

Still other scenes and recurring corporeal vocabulary make the body nearly inescapable in *Les funeraillles du lait*. Mamaya's nights are only peaceful when "elle se sent son corps si engourdi que même les épines semblent en disparaître" (39), and even a description of a moment in which she surrenders to the memories that seem to invade her consciousness involves her body. Her process of recollection is one in which she "se laisse glisser. Nue. Son corps inerte fend le brouillard d'un ciel aveugle" (39, emphasis mine) before images from her past present themselves. Like Binebine's descriptions of Mamaya, many of these scenes are characterized by a sense of desiccation, decline, or corruption of the body that resonate with Johara's inability to produce milk.

Mentions of Mamaya's physical condition and infirmities, along with the evident importance of her breast and of corporeal imagery in the text in general, invite the reader to associate Mamaya very strongly with her body. In *Narrative Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Narratology*, Daniel Punday suggests that the degree to which characters are associated with or distanced from their bodies is an important device through which narratives use bodies to create meaning. Through their similarities and differences with respect to others in a work and with respect to general understandings of the body—how it works, how it reproduces itself, how it

grows, and so forth—bodies become “part of a system of meaningful contrasts for semantic and thematic purposes” (58).

Mamaya’s high degree of embodiment differentiates her from other characters in *Les funerailles du lait*, and the novel’s general “corporeal atmosphere” intimates an important purpose behind that differentiation. Some of the distinct corporeality associated with Mamaya might be explained plausibly as *effets de réel* in response to the logical necessities of depicting a character of her age and poor health—she is certainly old, as the narrator makes clear, she was stricken by cancer, and she did recently undergo a mastectomy. Such brushes with death might also provoke reflection on the impermanence of the flesh, even in the young and otherwise healthy. However, Mamaya’s high degree of embodiment serves instead to foreground the importance of her body with respect to her experience of her son’s disappearance and in her “voyage of understanding” that concludes at Sidi Boulghmour.

As early scenes in *Les funerailles du lait* suggest, Mamaya’s body plays an important role in that voyage as a medium in which the reality of her son’s disappearance is transmuted into relatively tangible and describable physical phenomena. Disappearance *acts on* her body, and she and the reader find some of its effects legible there. In the first instance, it manifests as a general degradation of her health and a suite of physical afflictions.

The link between Mamaya’s son’s disappearance and her physical condition is established during a conversation between her and her neighbor—a functionary of the *makhzan*, an affiliation which becomes significant much later—when she enlists his help to drive her to Sidi Boulghmour. While speaking with him, Mamaya draws a parallel between her son’s disappearance and the degradation of her physical condition, beginning with her response to the neighbor’s half-hearted reassurance that she looks well. “Voilà, il me reste peu de temps à

vivre,” she explains. “Ne dites pas de sottises, Mamaya, vous vous portez comme un charme...,” the driver responds, although with a telling ellipsis. When the driver then asks after her son, Mamaya reveals the extent to which he is mistaken concerning her health and indicates that her son’s disappearance is responsible for her condition.

Comments Mamaya makes to the fonctionnaire concerning her long wait for word of her son’s pardon and release—or at least definitive news of his death—establish the context in which she later claims that his disappearance has affected her body.

— Au fait, les gens n’osent pas vous demander de ses nouvelles. . .

— Je n’en ai pas, monsieur le fonctionnaire. Pas l’ombre d’un écho depuis. . .

— Longtemps, Madame, je sais.

— Trop longtemps, monsieur le fonctionnaire ! Mais j’attends. Toutes les fêtes que Dieu fait, j’attends une grâce. (17)

When Johara suggests prayer as a kind of remedy against the terrible uncertainty described in that exchange, Mamaya’s dismissive response indicates that supplications to God have produced no results—and no relief for her, either:

— Il nous reste la prière, Madame, dit Johara en entrant.

— Dix-huit ans, trois mois et quelques jours de prières. Voilà de quoi lasser le plus croyant des anges !

— En tout cas, rétorqua la servante, je peux vous assurer, Madame, que le bon Dieu ne s’en lasse pas ! Chaïbia affirme que la prière c’est comme Sa nourriture.

— Il faut croire qu’Il n’a rien à faire de mes miettes, coupa Mamaya en se tournant vers le fonctionnaire. (17-18)

Finally, having made plain her ongoing suffering to Johara and her neighbor, Mamaya explains that the disappearance of her son and the ensuing 18 years of waiting, wondering, and futile prayers are responsible for the degradation of her body:

Non, monsieur le fonctionnaire, depuis qu'on les a transférés quelque part dans le Sud, je n'ai plus de nouvelles. Vous voyez, je ne me porte pas comme un charme, tant s'en faut. La machine est usée. Jusqu'à la corde. (18)

Mamaya's "vous voyez" and "tant s'en faut" indicate that, for her, the disappointments and failed supplications she described—and their cause, of course—are the reason for her state. The disappearance of her son is responsible for the "machine" being "usée," and in that sense its effects are inscribed in her flesh.

The anniversary of her son's disappearance is an occasion that further exhibits the extent to which that event manifests in Mamaya's body:

Mamaya tombe malade chaque mois de mars. Une vieille habitude, d'avant même que le mal prenne racine en elle, au temps où les cellules de son corps, selon la formule chère au docteur Perez, "gardaient raison et ne s'entretenaient pas comme des bêtes." Ou comme les hommes. (67)

The effect of the anniversary on Mamaya's physical well-being is great enough that Doctor Perez instructs Johara not to mention it at all for fear it will provoke a "rechute" (68).

The addendum to Doctor Perez's "formule chère" in the preceding citation encourages a reading of Mamaya's cancer as perhaps the most prominent and harmful corporeal manifestation of her son's disappearance. Given the subject matter of Binebine's novel, the equation of the animals in Doctor Perez's violent image with "les hommes" creates a readily-legible link between the internecine violence of Morocco's *années de plomb* and the violence done to

Mamaya's body by her own cells. In light of Mamaya's claims about the reasons for her "machine" being "usée jusqu'à la corde," her cancer becomes in that passage a corporeal symptom of her son's disappearance.

Mamaya's relationship to her other children suggests that it is the anguish of disappearance in particular, and not merely separation (as might also be caused by death or distance), that afflicts her body. A sentence preceding the revelation of Johara's failed breastfeeding of Mamaya's children revealed that they numbered seven in total, all of whom Johara "avait vu naître" (11). Mamaya's surviving sons and daughters are almost entirely absent from the text—and her sons, at least, are even more absent, in the sense that they live far away. "Ses trois filles" are "confortablement mariées; quant aux garçons. . . Bon, ils s'en sont allés conquérir le monde: l'un en Orient, l'autre en Europe, le tout dernier aux Amériques" (73). Though they too are separated from Mamaya by one means or another, only the absence of her disappeared eldest son is connected to her bodily well-being.

By virtue of the connection Mamaya establishes between disappearance and the flesh, other properties of her body, such as its postures and capabilities, are legible as products of disappearance in the same way as her cancer and general decline. In particular, the generally seated or prone posture of Mamaya's body throughout *Les funeraillles du lait* seems meaningful in that light. In the first scene of *Les funeraillles du lait*, Mamaya is presented to the reader "assise dans un fauteuil profond" (7), a position in which she often finds herself. In other instances, she is depicted lying down, as in one important scene where she witnesses a phantasmagoric transformation of the objects in her room while lying in bed. On the anniversary of her son's disappearance, we learn that "Mamaya n'a pas quitté son fauteuil de la nuit; son lit n'est pas défait" (67), and in that position "Mamaya demeure immobile" (68). When she travels



to Sidi Boulghmour, too, almost all of her trip is spent seated in a car, except for a brief and difficult walk to her childhood house (93). She completes her trip seated (once again) on a peasant's cart (98). Finally, when Mamaya buries her breast, she does so seated on the ground (103).<sup>16</sup> The positions of Mamaya's body in those scenes and the sense of immobility they evoke suggest that disappearance inhibits the body, rendering it nearly immobile and mostly inert, since the suffering and degeneration (and cancer) caused by disappearance result in Mamaya's confinement to seated and prone postures.

Both the narrator's straightforward descriptions to that effect and the inertia communicated by Mamaya's bodily dispositions are reinforced by the contrast Binebine establishes between her post-disappearance immobility and pre-disappearance dynamism. "Autrefois, avant chaque départ en voyage, Mamaya faisait le grand ménage à la maison" (75), the narrator explains, but in the narrative present she undertakes her voyage to Sidi Boulghmour in a mostly passive state. Johara "prit la décision de ne pas rompre avec les vieilles habitudes" (75) and undertakes the "grand ménage" in her stead. Likewise, Mamaya's present inertia differs significantly from the movement and freedom expressed in scenes depicting her frenetic, uninhibited responses to her ex-husband Sidi Magdoul's excesses. While they still lived together, Sidi Magdoul often frittered away his meager salary on new *babouches* and *djellabas* for himself

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<sup>16</sup> Malek Chebel suggests in *Le corps dans la tradition au Maghreb* that, in everyday North African life and conceptions of the body, horizontal postures are more common than vertical ones (18-22). Chebel's analysis suggests that Mamaya's more or less horizontal positions are not necessarily significant, and her age and physical condition undermine the symbolism of her postures. However, Binebine calls the reader's attention to her immobility and horizontality explicitly enough that they appear to constitute something more than an *effet de réel*. Given Mamaya's symbolism as a mother-of-the-disappeared, and given the fairly explicit connections she herself draws between disappearance and the state of her body, it is plausible to read her postures as contrasting with the straight-spined, upright, presumably more vigorous and fully actualized form Chebel identifies as another traditional (and no doubt idealized) image of the Maghrebian body. The consequences of Mamaya's cancer (and her age) may be understood as equally symbolic representations of the effects of disappearance, whether on her as an individual or on Moroccan society, which she embodies by virtue of her resemblance to the many aggrieved parents and friends of the *années de plomb*'s victims.

rather than food for his family, and Mamaya sometimes expressed her frustration through violence. The “coups de griffe” and the blows she delivered to her husband—sometimes in the street and in view of others—were such that a chastened Sidi Magdoul worried for her health as much as his own: “ne tape pas si fort, Lalla Mina, tu vas encore te faire mal aux poignets, t’abîmer les menottes, regarde, elles sont couvertes de sang. . .” (65). Not even the public humiliation of her fights with Sidi Magdoul nor the figurative prison of their loveless marriage restricted Mamaya’s use of her body, since she defies her husband (and social mores) physically, without hesitation, and in plain view. However, the disappearance of her son is figured as having accomplished what the threat of social shame could not: it *binds* Mamaya through its effects on her body and saps the vitality that characterized her past interactions with Sidi Magdoul.

In addition to threatening Mamaya’s health, according to Doctor Perez, the anniversary of her son’s disappearance is an occurrence associated with immobility and restriction as well. Thinking about the anniversary seems to freeze Mamaya’s body. Immediately after Johara explains to Doctor Perez that “c’est l’anniversaire de son absent” (68), for instance, Mamaya “demeure immobile. Elle semble éprouver des difficultés à soulever sa lourde tête. Ses mains reposent l’une sur l’autre” (68).

The promise of *responding* to her son’s disappearance, on the other hand—of traveling to Sidi Boulghmour and burying her breast in place of his body—animates her. When Johara invokes Mamaya’s upcoming journey, “les pupilles de Mamaya bougent inopinément: deux fenêtres soudain ouvertes dans son visage. [‘]L’idée du voyage doit sûrement faire son chemin’, pense Johara” (69). Whereas the anniversary deadens her body, the idea of the trip brings it to life. Indeed, generally speaking, it is only the prospect of visiting Sidi Boulghmour and performing her planned burial that causes Mamaya to move through space and causes

“movement” with respect to her otherwise calcified relationship to the past. Such contrasts between immobility and mobility depict the experience of a disappearance (and its recurrence in the form of the anniversary) as one that deadens the body, renders it inert, and restricts her access to the surrounding world by virtue of her immobility. Mamaya’s refusal to eat on the anniversary of her son’s disappearance might even be interpreted as a form of negation of the body as well, since she rejects (at first) the needs of her material self while already poised on the brink of a “rechute.”

Another connection in *Les funeraillles du lait* between disappearance and the body is established in a phantasmagoric nighttime scene in Mamaya’s bedroom. Strongly reminiscent of Henri Michaux’s poem “La nuit remue,” the scene depicts Mamaya’s past, which is marked most distinctly by the disappearance of her son, as capable of clouding her senses and blurring the lines between the real and the imagined when it is brought to light in the present. While lying in bed one night, Mamaya sees the objects in her room come alive. They appear to her as “êtres bizarres” in the darkness, “des êtres pernecieux, faits d’ombre et de silence, qui bougent, respirent et vont même jusqu’à s’enlacer” (22). Having apparently witnessed something of the kind before, Mamaya expects the transformation of her nightstand into a “chien boiteux” and observes “le lampadaire qui s’éveille soudainement dans son coin et glisse vers l’étagère. . .” (24). Other shadowy figures not specifically derived from pieces of furniture begin to inhabit her room as well. Inside her armoire, Mamaya remarks:

[un] long couloir subitement creusé dans le bois, dans le mur. Le sol cendreux y fume comme après un incendie. Un feu follet éclaire par instants une silhouette brune, légère comme une ombre de revenant; elle se promène là, pieds nus, sans peur de se brûler. Mais les ombres ne craignent pas le feu. (28)

As morning approaches, the shadowy forms' activity becomes frenetic, the smoking shadow of the armoire is in flames, and "Mamaya les entend rire. Et leurs rires ressemblent à des lamentations, du chagrin travesti" (29). First light then causes them to dissipate.

As that scene suggests, night is an important time for Mamaya because, above all, it is the moment when memories and images of the past pursue her. Throughout the scene above, the "démons" (22) that live in the darkness draw her gaze, her thoughts, and the reader's attention to different objects in her room. The objects are charged with significance, since each recalls a moment or feeling from her past, and many are connected with her son's disappearance. The passage describing the lamp's movement toward the bookshelf, for example, ends with an ellipsis that introduces reminiscences concerning Mamaya's son's books, the construction of a (different) set of shelves to house them, her son's short life, and his love of honey cakes. The smoking and burning armoire contains a letter Mamaya received from the *makhzan* after her son's trial (26), as well as other objects from her past, brought to her attention in part by her fear for their safety after seeing the figure of a woman in the armoire's shadows:

Car là-dedans, dans cette armoire à glace, tout son passé est enfermé, toute son histoire.

Au temps où elle parvenait encore à se tenir debout, elle y aurait trouvé en un clin d'oeil le moindre foulard de soie hérité de son aïeule, le certificat d'études de son absent, le sachet d'encens rapporté de la Mecque dix ans plus tôt par une amie, une photo oubliée, ternie, vieille comme le souvenir qu'elle contient [. . .] Comment permettre à un étranger de s'immiscer de la sorte dans sa vie [. . .]? (28)

The presence of a mirror in Mamaya's armoire helps to crystallize the notion that night is a time of unbidden, uncontrollable, phantasmagoric reflection on the past. In Mamaya's case, the

disappearance of her son and the pain of his absence are perhaps the most important component of that reflection and “la peur et ses sicaires” (30) that accompany it.

If the invasion of Mamaya’s thoughts by her past and the blurring of reality, memory, and imagination that occur during the night are read, like the condition of her body, as resulting (in part) from her traumatic experience with respect to her son, the scene I have described suggests that disappearance disrupts her body’s relationship to the world. It does so by associating Mamaya’s past with the disruption of her senses, since the moment at which Mamaya’s past becomes most prominent in her thoughts is also a moment in which the distinction between seeing, feeling, and remembering is clouded: rather than simply failing to perceive objects in the darkness of her room, Mamaya sees and hears things that are not there. The “effroi” (32) she feels at night testifies to the extent to which her hallucinations constitute a true failure of her eyes and ears to perceive reality. The central and painful role of Mamaya’s son’s disappearance in her memory, the association between night and reminiscence, and the evident unreliability of her sight and hearing in the darkness thus work together to figure disappearance as a phenomenon that renders her body an unreliable mediator and translator of reality.

In the same vein, a passage at the beginning of *Les funeraillles du lait* enigmatically describes Mamaya as having decided to remain silent, and that decision takes on additional significance in juxtaposition to Mamaya’s nighttime experiences. The narrator reveals Mamaya’s silence through a description of her cat, who “se refuse à quitter cette pièce depuis le jour où Mamaya a cessé de lui parler. Cessé de parler, tout court” (7) and adds that:

quand on décide de se taire, on devient sourd et aveugle. Autant dire un peu mort. Mais puisque la mort, la vraie, tarde à venir, eh bien, Mamaya ira la chercher là où elle se cache: dans les recoins les plus sombres, les plus reculés de l’absence. (8)

The absence in which Mamaya pursues death is that of her son, of course, and coming into contact with it—thinking about his disappearance, remembering it, and experiencing it again in the memories that appear—is figured again as something that deprives Mamaya of the ability to interact with the world through the use of her body and its senses: here, speech, sight, and hearing, as if she were a living corpse. Disappearance thus proves to be an experience that effects a generalized sclerosis in Mamaya’s body: senses muddled, movement restricted, bodily powers deadened, Mamaya suffers the “symptoms” of disappearance and operates in an attenuated reality.

### **The Body as a Site of Memory**

In addition to its effects on her physical well-being, Mamaya’s body is connected to the disappearance of her son to the extent that her body both mediates and contains many of her memories. Whether they relate to her son and his disappearance specifically or to other elements of her past, Mamaya’s memories inhabit her flesh and are represented in some cases as a part of her body like any other. The narrator depicts them in that way when explaining Johara and Doctor Perez’s attempts to avoid mentioning Mamaya’s son on the anniversary of his disappearance, noting that “sa mémoire reste intacte; elle est l’unique parcelle de son corps que le temps ait épargnée” (70). Vulnerable to the same forces that act on other “parcelles de son corps,” Mamaya’s memory is equally corporeal even if it is not equally ravaged.

The link between Mamaya’s body and her memory is reinforced by the relationship between her degree of embodiment in *Les funérailles du lait*’s descriptive passages and the extent to which she either invites or suffers the past to enter her thoughts. During the Michaux-like scene where Mamaya’s room comes to life, for example, the “total épuisement de son corps

fourbu” (23) precedes her visual and memorial tour of her room and the souvenirs it contains. In another scene, it is when she “se sent son corps si engourdi que même les épines semblent en disparaître [. . .], emportée par le flot de ses pensées” that Mamaya surrenders herself to memories of her childhood and of the events leading to her love affair with Pierre, her former schoolmate and the real father of her disappeared son. In other instances, as when her eyes and ears “show” her both phantasmagoric figures and images from her past in her bedroom, Mamaya’s body likewise becomes important and apparent in her experiences, there in the form of her (misleading) senses. In those cases, Mamaya’s forays into the past are associated with an increased emphasis on the corporeal.

In those moments, Mamaya’s body mediates her experience of the past, since it is alternatively the condition of her body or the degree to which it occupies her thoughts that seem to determine whether or not memories well up within her. Mamaya’s flesh thus serves as a gatekeeper of memory, and it is capable of determining the modality of her recollections as well, as it does when her senses provide the raw material of her hallucinations at night. In sum, Mamaya’s memories are most present to her when she is most associated with her physicality.

In *Days and Memory*, Charlotte Delbo describes a similar association between memory and the body. Like Mamaya’s memories of her past, Delbo’s memory of Auschwitz is situated in—or rather is a part of—her body, and it is not entirely subject to either the will or the intellect. As Delbo explains,

when I talk to you about Auschwitz, it is not from deep memory my words issue. They come from external memory, if I may put it that way, from intellectual memory, the memory connected with thinking processes. Deep memory preserves sensations, physical imprints. It is the memory of the senses. For it isn't words that are swollen with emotional

charge. Otherwise, someone who has been tortured by thirst for weeks on end could never again say “I'm thirsty. How about a cup of tea.” (3-4)

Mamaya's experiences are certainly different than Delbo's, and I do not wish to equate the disappearance of her son with the suffering of the Second World War's concentration camps. However, some of Mamaya's memories share a particularly corporeal character akin to the kind Delbo discusses, and reading *Les funeraillles du lait* with the latter in mind suggests that disappearance, perhaps like other terrible traumas, drives memory under the skin and into the flesh. Accessing and addressing those memories, as Delbo writes, then becomes a task that neither the will nor the intellect may accomplish alone: the memories are buried too deep, and have become as vital a part of Mamaya as her heart or her brain.

As a vessel in which her memories are contained, Mamaya's body functions in *Les funeraillles du lait* as a *lieu de mémoire*. It does so in two ways. Firstly, it is a focal point for Mamaya's thoughts that she sometimes “visits” by virtue of her physical condition occupying her attention, as the scenes I mentioned above suggest. Those visits prompt her to consider the past and its relationship to her present. Like a monument or gravestone, it is an object with the power to remind. In a second sense to which I will return later, it also serves as a *lieu de mémoire* for *Les funeraillles du lait*'s reader, to the extent that Mamaya translates or symbolizes collective Moroccan experience during the *années de plomb*. In both cases, her body serves as a touchstone that evokes the disappearance affecting her so profoundly.

Mamaya's body operates as a *lieu de mémoire* in a context where it is not possible for her to construct other types of memorial sites. The secrecy of the *makhzan*, and perhaps the traumatic nature of her son's disappearance as well, results in restrictions on the kinds of *lieux de mémoire* Mamaya (or anyone else) might turn to under normal circumstances. The end of a



passage in which Mamaya recalls her son's first days hints that *his* body—if it were available to bury and therefore to visit—might have played a similar role to the one her own body assumes:

Mamaya s'en souvient. Un jour pareil ! Son [her son's] corps chétif pouvait enfin clamer au monde sa puissance, sa force de vie. Pourquoi s'obstiner à lui faire oublier un tel événement ? Ni les murs ni les cachots creusés en terre du Sud ni même l'incommunicabilité et le silence n'y sont parvenus ! (70)

Mamaya's question relates to Johara and Doctor Perez's attempts to prevent her from dwelling on the loss of her son by avoiding all mention of him on the anniversary of his disappearance. By equating their efforts with the effects of the "murs" and "cachots creusés en terre du Sud," Mamaya suggests that concealing her son's body (for he is almost certainly dead) also constitutes an attack on her memory, and that his body (and grave) ought normally to serve as *lieux de mémoire* in all of the ways one might expect. *Oubliette* might be as fitting a term as *cachot* for her son's prison as a result, and the "cachots creusés en terre du Sud" that obscure the bodies of disappeared dissidents like her son deprive Mamaya and others like her of both a fixed place and tangible, "monumental" remains to invest with memory. Mamaya's body can be read as standing in for both.

In *Le corps en Islam*, Malek Chebel's analysis of the importance of bodies in Islamic contexts and in the Maghreb in particular lends support to interpretations of the absence of Mamaya's son's body as a form of memorial deprivation. A relevant passage discussing some of the social functions of the bodies of the dead is worth citing in its entirety:

Le mort n'est pas seulement celui qui apparaît dans les rêves, il est aussi celui avec lequel le proche parent entretient une "relation suivie", constituée de visites, et de rapports "affectifs" qui ressemblent beaucoup à ceux, courants, des vivants entre eux. Le mort,

dans la conception maghrébine, n'est pas un être à part. Il fait partie de la même communauté, sauf qu'il est au-delà de ce que l' "oeil observant", *el-`âin el bassîr*, peut appréhender. Le mort est donc un intermédiaire entre le monde sensible des gens "périssables" et celui des êtres "éternels" de l'au-delà. C'est pourquoi il est invoqué dans différentes situations anxiogènes pour en atténuer les effets, contre quoi, de nombreuses promesses lui sont faites consistant en sacrifices et immolations diverses dont la visiteuse, après avoir prononcé les paroles d'usage, s'acquitte consciencieusement.

Cette pratique est massivement suivie et la régularité avec laquelle la femme maghrébine s'acquitte de sa promesse montre clairement que le rapport entre les communautés en vie et dans la mort est respecté avec scrupule. (144)

The relationship Chebel describes between living and dead communities is predicated on the existence of a particular (and accessible) place to visit, and one which must contain a body: a mere monument would not do; "le mort" himself must occupy the place. The importance of both place and remains as intermediaries between the two communities demonstrates the vital role played by the bodies of the deceased in constructing their own *lieux de mémoire*, and Mamaya's son's disappearance effectively dispossesses her of exactly such a site.

Along with the body's importance as a lieu de mémoire, Chebel's claim that the dead are not considered "être[s] à part" in the Maghreb suggests that the implication of the connections between disappearance and the physical body in *Les funeraillles du lait* are extensive, and include basic beliefs about the nature and meaning of death. Disappearance effectively excises Mamaya's son from the "relation suivie" and "rapports affectifs" between living and dead, and from the community of which he ought to have been a part even after his demise. Given Chebel's remarks, it is no exaggeration to say that disappearance effectively prevents Mamaya's son from

*dying* at all, at least with respect to the conception of death Chebel describes, since his (probable) absence from the community of the living is coupled with absence from the community of the dead and from the sense of continuity and commerce that link the two. His absence even disconnects Mamaya (or others of his loved ones) from that economy as well, since he cannot serve as an “intermédiaire entre le monde sensible et celui des êtres éternels.” Through its relationship to the body, then, disappearance constitutes a particularly egregious rupture in the relationship of the living to the dead and the divine, and it upends the accepted practices concerning how the dead are kept alive in the memory of someone like Mamaya—whose own body assumes some aspects of the roles of her son’s.

As *lieux de mémoire*, or as vessels and mediators of memory, it is perhaps unsurprising that bodies in *Les funérailles du lait* also trigger recollection in much the same way that a madeleine does for Marcel in Proust’s *Du côté de chez Swann*. Tasting a tea-soaked madeleine evokes a part of Marcel’s past he is unable to access otherwise. As he explains, memory is sometimes beyond the reach of one’s “intelligence,” “caché hors de son domaine et de sa portée, en quelque objet matériel (en la sensation que nous donnerait cet objet matériel) que nous ne soupçonnons pas” (Proust 65). At times, Mamaya’s body has the same effect as the “objet matériel” Marcel describes: contact with her flesh catalyzes recollection.

Mamaya’s severed breast in particular possesses properties similar to the madeleine. In one scene, in order to reassure herself that her breast remains safe in its hiding place under her chair, Mamaya reaches for it with her foot: “La vieille dame glisse son pied sous le fauteuil, tâtonne, palpe le ballot de chair puis le retire avec ses orteils. Elle se baisse tout doucement, le prend dans ses mains, le colle à son ventre. Elle tremble” (Binebine 48). Like Marcel, who, “à l’instant même où la gorgée mêlée des miettes du gâteau toucha [son] palais, [. . .] tressailli[t]”

(Proust 65), Mamaya shakes when she touches the breast, and the contact causes her to recall a crucial moment in her son's life—namely, the moment of his conception. Her trembling precedes a series of recollections about Pierre, her son's true father, “qui éveilla jadis ce sein” (Binebine 48), and their brief, youthful love affair. Mamaya's flesh possesses the power to trigger those memories even though, as the narrator explains a few pages later, “jour après jour, le temps a fait de la mémoire de Mamaya un vrai désert de cendre; des cendres refroidies que des tas de présences remuent encore” (52). The body's ability to catalyze memory thus also serves as a form of opposition to the amnesic force of time.

All of the connections in *Les funérailles du lait* between the physical body and disappearance that I have described so far suggest that the experience of disappearance plays out in the flesh and demands the engagement of the flesh in order to address its deep and lasting effects. When the “symptoms of disappearance” in Mamaya are read as psychosomatic manifestations of the past, it is clear that she suffers bodily as a result of her son's disappearance, in addition to the emotional toll it no doubt took on her. Mamaya ages, withers, endures cancer, and ultimately must amputate a part of her body as a consequence of her experiences. In addition, both her son's absent body and her mastectomy reflect the extent to which his disappearance alienates Mamaya from a part of herself, whether by enacting a rupture in her relationship to the communities of the living and dead or by rendering a part of her body Other and uninhabitable because of the cancer that began to grow there.

### **The Body's Privilege**

Despite that alienation, and despite the apparent damage done by Mamaya's son's disappearance, *Les funérailles du lait* also figures the body as perhaps the most powerful and

essential means of addressing disappearance. The usefulness of the body in that respect is made apparent by the contrast between Mamaya's apparently productive act at Sidi Boulghmour and the disappointing attempts to memorialize her son that preceded it. Through that contrast, Binebine intimates that the body is a more effective medium than others for the kind of closure and memorialization that Mamaya seeks. Before her trip to Sidi Boulghmour, Mamaya's religious, political, monumental, and calendrical commemorations of her son fail to help her make peace with that event, and are associated instead with emptiness and silence. Burying her breast, on the other hand, seems to have the opposite effect—in addition to inciting Mamaya to speak.

An exchange between Mamaya and Johara during a conversation with Mamaya's neighbor, the functionary whom she engaged to drive her to Sidi Boulghmour, suggests that Mamaya turned at one time to prayer as a response to her son's disappearance, and that she dismisses it now as pointless. When Mamaya explains that it has been "trop longtemps" since she last heard any news of her son, Johara responds that "il nous reste la prière, Madame" (17), proposing religion as a means of coping with eighteen years of silence. Mamaya's response is terse and critical:

— Dix-huit ans, trois mois et quelques jours de prières. Voilà de quoi lasser le plus croyant des anges!

— En tout cas, rétorqua la servante, je peux vous assurer, Madame, que le bon Dieu ne s'en lasse pas! Chaïbia affirme que la prière c'est comme Sa nourriture.

— Il faut croire qu'il n'a rien à faire de mes miettes, coupa Mamaya en se tournant vers le fonctionnaire. (17-18)

In Mamaya's view, additional prayer will do nothing to effect her son's return, and her tone indicates that religious expression did not redress the rupture that haunts her. If in other respects religion provides a cohesive, meaningful narrative through which Mamaya understands her life and place within a transcendental order, it does not seem to do the same with respect to her son. Because God apparently "n'a rien à faire de [ses] miettes," the only product of her prayers is a void of silence in response to her supplications regarding the void of her son's disappearance.

When Mamaya turns to her neighbor—a functionary, and therefore a representative of the *makhzan*—as she dismisses Johara's suggestion, she symbolically turns to the political sphere as another potential arena in which to address her son's loss. Not coincidentally, she then describes her efforts to learn of her son's fate through the *makhzan*'s lists of deceased (or released) prisoners immediately after her comments on prayer:

Il arrive parfois qu'on annonce l'amnistie de certains, des "comme lui", qui ont *mal pensé*. Jusqu'à présent, je n'ai jamais trouvé son nom sur une liste. Pourtant, j'ai cherché comme une folle. Même qu'on a fini par me chasser de la préfecture, tellement je les embêtais. Mais je revenais, jour après jour, pleurer sur cette liste. Vous savez, une liste qui ne porte pas le nom de votre enfant, mort ou vif, c'est comme une tombe vide. Une tombe sans dépouille. . ." (18)

Like other mothers of the disappeared—perhaps including the Argentinian mothers whose demonstrations and demands for information on the Plaza de Mayo her own efforts recall—Mamaya's attempts to learn of her son's fate through a government agency, like her prayers, are thwarted by silence. Despite her tenacity, filling her son's "tombe vide" through action in the political sphere is likewise ineffective.

Later, the narrator explains that Mamaya also attempted to cope with her son's disappearance by reading all of the books that belonged to him. Along with the rest of his personal effects, they were shipped to Mamaya when he was "transferred" (which is to say disappeared) to a prison in the South. When her gaze passes over them during her nighttime hallucinations, Mamaya remembers how deep an affinity she felt for the books after her son vanished:

Ces livres, Mamaya les avait lus et relus. Souvent à haute voix de façon à ce que Minouche puisse en profiter. Et, si sa vue le lui permettait, elle passerait au crible, une fois de plus, cette panoplie de grands esprits gisant sous la poussière comme des corps entassés dans une fosse commune. Le contenu de ces livres, Mamaya le connaissait sur le bout de ses doigts [. . .]. Lecture après lecture, Mamaya cherchait à déceler dans ces romans les personnages auxquels son fils aurait pu s'identifier. Et, lorsqu'elle les découvrait, elle se mettait à les aimer. Très fort. Elle leur prêtait le visage chiffonné de son absent, ses yeux de hibou, le timbre de sa voix, ses gestes maladroits. . . [. . .] elle n'a pas eu le temps de le connaître, ce fils. Alors, autant le remplacer dans son amour par les fantômes des romans, leur faisant adorer, comme il les adorait, les dattes mûres farcies de beurre salé, les gâteaux au miel saupoudrés de graines de sésame. (25)

Mamaya's interaction with the works is intimate and exhaustive, and she hopes to find in them some remnant of her son: as the narrator explains, "on abandonne souvent une parcelle de soi dans un livre qu'on a aimé; alors, forcément, il finit par nous appartenir un peu, ce livre. Et on le garde" (26). Although she projects aspects of her son onto the characters in those works, and despite keeping them in her possession, her son's books prove as ineffective a coping mechanism as Mamaya's prayers and requests to the *makhzan*. Mamaya values the books, "ces livres,

vestiges d'un amour en ruine" over which she "veillait comme à un trésor," but only as "un trésor d'archéologue" (26), as if their words proved only informative curiosities from a distant past instead of the means of generating the meaningful *presence* she sought.

All of the other objects in Mamaya's possession are likewise ineffective, for she continues to suffer despite possessing them and displaying them in her room. Though they too are important enough that she fears losing them, objects that house her memories sometimes inspire unease in Mamaya, not comfort, as when they come alive at night. Whatever ability they might have to bring her son to mind is mitigated by their phantasmagoric instability and the limitations (such as their status as "un trésor d'archéologue," like the books) that Mamaya attributes to them.

During the Michaux-like scene in her bedroom, Mamaya's recalls the installation of shelves to house her son's books, which served as a monument to his loss when he never returned to claim them. After receiving the letter announcing the return of her son's personal effects, Mamaya imagines that they include cases upon cases of his books, and she commissions a set of shelves large enough to hold them:

Il ne pouvait s'agir que de ses livres, elle le savait. Il en possédait des mille et des cents. C'est pourquoi elle avait dépensé une fortune pour installer la bibliothèque en merisier couvrant tout un mur de sa chambre. [. . .] Mamaya imaginait déjà cette bibliothèque, celle de son petit, garnie du sol au plafond des oeuvres les plus diverses. Un jour, se disait-elle, il sera bien content de les récupérer. (26-27)

In that passage, Mamaya associates the imagined books and the construction of the shelves with the hope of her son's eventual release and, in that way, she imbues them with the power to resist (or at least defer) his erasure through death and disappearance at the hands of the *makhzan*. Like



a shrine or a monument, the shelves are an object that bridges the gap between the past and present, and they permit Mamaya's son to continue to inhabit Mamaya's time and place in absentia via the memories and the promises with which they are invested. And, by serving as a container for the books that Mamaya treats (at first) as the vicarious substance of her son, the shelves also function as a form of reliquary.

Unfortunately, the delivery of her son's books belies Mamaya's initial belief that they would be numerous enough to fill the large shelves she prepared:

Une semaine plus tard, le facteur apporta deux caisses de livres et une vieille valise. Le reste allait sans doute suivre, pensa Mamaya. Johara fit le déballage, dépoussiéra les ouvrages qu'elle classa soigneusement du plus grand au plus petit. Seul un demi-rayon avait été couvert. La bibliothèque resta vide. Un vide affreux, insupportable. Mamaya en souffrait. Dès qu'elle entrait dans sa chambre, son regard se heurtait à la nudité des planches. Cette misère imprégnait chaque rainure, chaque noeud du bois, atteignait les trèfles noirs du papier peint, longeait les rideaux de velours, envahissait les fleurs mauves du couvre-lit, les meubles et le tapis. Tout n'était plus qu'absence. Un vrai néant. (27)

The hope and the presence that the shelves were intended to embody crumbles eventually, and Mamaya views them as an empty shell in the end. Her reaction to the shelves indicates that erecting a monument to her absent son proved as empty a gesture as her prayers, her demands on the *makhzan*, and her reading. Rather than preserving the memory of her son, and instead of contesting his erasure, they instead mirror the void of his absence. They become intolerable for Mamaya, who barter them away, and her disappointment—another in a series—reflects the failure of the monument she built to respond productively to the rupture of his disappearance.

Another form of commemoration—marking the anniversary of her son’s disappearance, this time—proves as disappointing and unproductive as the others. Like her prayers, requests to the *makhzan*, mementos, and bookshelves, the anniversary only underscores his absence and threatens to reopen Mamaya’s psychic and physical wounds, a threat reflected in Johara and Doctor Perez’s fear of a “rechute.” Unlike other kinds of anniversaries, perhaps, the anniversary of her son’s disappearance threatens her well-being rather than inviting reflection on and renegotiation of an event safely contained in the past. Each of the techniques utilized by Mamaya in her attempts to address the disappearance of her son—prayer, political supplications, mementos, and the erection of physical and temporal monuments through the shelves and yearly acknowledgement of his loss—is thus ineffective in offering her closure, stability, or meaning.

One of Mamaya’s endeavors *is* figured as productive, however, in the sense that it breaks her silence and leads to rituals roughly analogous to the ones she might have undertaken were her son’s body available. Mamaya’s journey to Sidi Boulghmour affords her the opportunity to dig a grave for her son and to inter her breast in his place. At that moment in her story, Mamaya speaks at length about her suffering and succeeds in committing flesh at least *associated* with her son (through its symbolism and through its biological function) to the earth. The relative success of that act strongly suggests that, at least for Mamaya, responding to disappearance by means of the body produces movement and progress with respect to an issue that had, until then, engendered only sclerosis. Mamaya’s body serves as the foundation for the one monument—the gravesite—that is *filled* by her breast and her words rather than exuding emptiness and resulting in silence like the bookshelves and her requests to the state. And, at least vicariously, that monument reinserts her “son,” as she comes to call her breast (106-109), into the earth at Sidi Boulghmour and into the social and memorial landscape of tombs and shrines.

The associations made in *Les funeraillles du lait* between Mamaya's experiences and her body thus underscore the important role of the flesh in connection with disappearance. When her son's disappearance manifests in Mamaya's body, it exists for her as a set of identifiable and tangible symptoms that contrast with the ambiguity of Johara, Perez, and the driver's half-hearted insistence that he might still be alive and awaiting release. As a reservoir for Mamaya's memories and their gatekeeper and mediator, Mamaya's body is involved in negotiating her understanding and experience of the past. And, of course, Mamaya's breast provides her with a corporeal object to bury in the absence of her son's remains, which in turn permits rituals of finality and closure that parallel the ones generally expected by custom and religion when a loved one dies. In each of these instances, a body (or a part of one) speaks against the silence surrounding disappearance and animates Mamaya's journey in the text.

### **Mamaya's Symbolic Body**

Though *Les funeraillles du lait* connects Mamaya's material self to disappearance, both her body and the "symptoms of disappearance" she suffers are legible on a symbolic level as well. Mamaya's breast is never only a breast, for instance, since it is invested with meaning both by Mamaya and through the connotations bodies (and their parts) may possess for the readers of Binebine's novel. Whether it is read as an emblem of femininity or motherhood, or interpreted as a sign of the extent to which Mamaya's body is "uncovered" and made vulnerable in Binebine's prose, the breast always signifies plurally. When she buries it in place of her son, its symbolism works in concert with its materiality and corporeality to generate some of the meaning of her ritual at Sidi Boulghmour, as Mamaya herself explains to her functionary-turned-chauffeur neighbor: "Ce que j'enterre ici, c'est ma tendresse. C'est quoi le sein d'une femme, le sein d'une

mère? Un trop-plein de baisers, d'étreintes, de pleurs et de caresses. . . Le bonheur, en somme” (112). Just as the burial of her breast is also a burial of tenderness and motherly kisses, hugs, and tears, the rest of her body, its parts, and the effects of disappearance upon them operate on a symbolic level in *Les funeraillles du lait* as well, since representations of bodies in any circumstance are rarely devoid of symbolism.

Suggesting that Mamaya's body be read on a symbolic level inevitably raises the question of the limits of reasonable interpretation. Any reading of a text does as much, but interpreting the meaning of bodies and their gestures, maladies, postures, and so forth is an especially precarious activity given the practically limitless variety of meanings attributed to all of those phenomena by culture, experience, or even the reader's individual dictionary of corporeal symbolisms. It is easy to over-interpret common gestures in everyday social circumstances, and perhaps even more so in a work of literature where a reader might imagine all gestures to be laden with hidden meaning. As Mary Douglas writes in *Natural Symbols*, “the human body is common to us all. Only our social condition varies. The symbols based on the human body are used to express different social experiences” (vii). It is dangerous to make sweeping statements about the symbolism of the body given that none of those experiences is precisely the same as any other, and the danger is compounded by the potential for misapprehension of representations in another cultural tradition.

Nevertheless, in my view, a number of symbolic readings of Mamaya's body (or its parts, or its dispositions) have sufficient support in *Les funeraillles du lait* to mitigate that danger. They revolve around themes and ideas prevalent enough in the text to suggest that such readings are both plausible and productive, even if certain elements of them are colored by individual perceptions of the meaning of gestures or body parts. First, in part due to Mamaya's own

explanations of her physical state and in part due to *Les funerailles du lait*'s focus on her personal experiences, her body may be read as an allegory of the self when faced with disappearance. Second, Mamaya's unusual actions with respect to her breast and the overall importance of the flesh (and its dispositions and uses) in her story suggest that her body may be read as evidence that disappearance provokes renegotiation of what Pierre Bourdieu terms *habitus*. Third, and finally, the inescapable political overtones of Binebine's novel (and the clear political motivations behind her son's imprisonment) lend credence to a reading of Mamaya's body as an alternative depiction of a Moroccan body politic.

The images of femininity and motherhood evoked by *Les funerailles du lait* constitute another important theme in that work. Binebine privileges female perspectives and figures in the text: Mamaya is its most prominent character, of course, but her mother's point of view also structures the narrative during several of *Les funerailles du lait*'s forays into Mamaya's past. Those contextualizing vignettes, which add depth to Mamaya as a character and heighten the sense of discontinuity resulting from her son's disappearance, revolve primarily (though not exclusively) around the experiences of women. Male characters like the son—though he is omnipresent in the narrative by virtue of his absence—play smaller roles in the novel, generally speaking, than Mamaya, her mother, or Johara. Mamaya's breast, too, is a frequent reminder that it is a conspicuously female and conspicuously maternal body that mediates and represents disappearance. However, rather than attempting to treat Mamaya's gender and status as a mother separately, I will instead address those themes in each of the three symbolic and allegorical readings of her body I have proposed.

### Mamaya's Symbolic Afflictions

The notion that bodies may be read as outward signs of the qualities of a person or (similarly) as material communiqués of an underlying transcendental order is an old one. Malek Chebel writes that the tendency to view bodies as “monstrous” in that sense—from the meaning of the Latin *mostrare*, “to show”—is pronounced in the Maghreb. Chebel suggests that bodies there are “read” as tableaux on which metaphysical principles are manifested: “notre présence sur terre, toute trompeuse qu'elle puisse paraître, n'est que l'incarnation de ce principe supérieur, vers lequel nous tendons irrémédiablement” (*Le corps dans la tradition au Maghreb* 30). I argue that, perhaps not coincidentally, *Les funeraillles du lait* operates according to the same logic with respect to Mamaya's body, though what it “shows” are corporeal metaphors for the experience of disappearance rather than material signs of divine will.

Understanding Mamaya's body in such a way adds a layer of symbolism and meaning to the symptoms of disappearance I described in the first section of this chapter. The degradation of Mamaya's health, her postures and infirmities, and her muddled senses are then legible as symbolic degenerations of the self and of its ability to discern what is real and to interact with the world. Mamaya's breast cancer and generalized sclerosis are particularly productive of meaning in the same vein, and they function as metaphors figuring the corruption of the self by disappearance, in certain respects, and the disruption of the proper functioning of the self as a whole by one of its parts. Mamaya's symbolic body suggests that disappearance thus creates Otherness within an individual (and within one's memory), and alienates the self from its own substance.

The symbolism of Mamaya's breast cancer with respect to the effects of disappearance on the self derives from the nature of the disease and from the fact that it is located in her breast.

Doctor Perez points to one aspect of that symbolism when he describes the cancer as a war amongst Mamaya's own cells (67): it is a disease *of* her own body. If Mamaya's body is considered "monstrous" in the sense I mentioned above, then, and since Mamaya also describes her physical state as a product of her son's disappearance, her cancer can be read as a sign that part of her self was corrupted by that event. It is corrupted in the sense that the disease changes the substance of her cells, provoking the war Doctor Perez describes, which is to say that it alters the nature of a portion of her self and renders it harmful to the rest.

Reading Mamaya's body in this way implies that the pathology (and the treatment) of disappearance thus differs from other "conditions" to the extent that cancer is perceived to differ from other illnesses. By figuring disappearance through her cancer as a "disease" of and within the self, *Les funeraillles du lait* seems to suggest that, unlike loss due to other causes—murder, perhaps, or death in war—the absence of Mamaya's son cannot be confronted as an "external" enemy like a virus or parasite. Though its ultimate cause may be external to her and to her son, disappearance spreads its contamination by altering the self in such a way that, slowly and imperceptibly at first, Mamaya herself is the efficient cause of her degeneration. And, her case suggests, the disease eventually necessitates the complete excision of the part of the self that it touches most.

For Mamaya, the part of her body most afflicted by the cancer of disappearance is one associated with femininity and the nourishment of children. The symbolism of her breast in those regards suggests that disappearance attacks Mamaya's gender identity and her status as a mother along with her health. In that light, Mamaya's mastectomy represents an amputation of those particular elements of her identity in addition to its symbolism as a more generic ablation of a

part of her self or psyche. When her breast is removed, Mamaya becomes defeminized, and the source of the milk buried in the novel's titular funeral is cut off in the process.

No longer entirely female and no longer maternal, in that sense, Mamaya is symbolically reduced to a relatively genderless, biologically inert state, deprived of her ability to sustain the life of a child and cut off from the essential biological, emotional, and existential economy of reproduction. As Malek Chebel notes, flat chests among women carry strong connotations of sterility in the Maghreb,<sup>17</sup> and Mamaya's mastectomy evokes those connotations, reinforcing the sense of impuissance that her postures and her infirmity also convey. Her symbolic sterility has social implications, too: "la stérilité est innommable, du côté du mythe défensif et ignominieuse socialement," writes Chebel, and:

L'opprobre ne flétrit pas seulement la femme, il est d'abord atteinte à l' "honneur" familial, au *châraf* de la belle-famille. [. . .] Cette honte, cet avilissement provoqué insidieusement par la stérilité, est contenue dans les mots, dans les dénominations, dans les épithètes qui servent à la désigner. La femme stérile est dite *âkera*, *âquera*, *aguerra* [عاقرة, or barren, dried up] selon les régions et les phonétiques locales. (*Le corps dans la tradition au Maghreb* 32)

As a result of her son's disappearance, then, Mamaya is figured as both biologically and socially sterilized, and she is stripped of the transcendental qualities associated with bodies that reproduce. Chebel continues:

La relation au corps grévité est honorée par son association à la divinité créatrice. Cette relation (*çilatou er-rahîm*) inaugure et introduit la femme au statut glorifiée de la féminité accomplie et heureuse. Elle devient *al walûd*, celle qui procréée. La stérilité apparaît alors

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<sup>17</sup> See *Le corps dans la tradition au Maghreb*, chapter 2, "Vocabulaire du corps."



comme une rupture de la filiation, un arrêt dans la succession spirituelle. [. . .] Corps en creux, corps aux parois lisses, utérus éternellement vacant, conduit, cavité, espace. . . , autant de notions qui rappellent complaisamment une présence organique qui n'en est pas une. L'utérus devient précisément cette cavité "inutile" dans laquelle vient s'écouler un sang menstruel dont la périodicité inflige à la femme les plus néfastes tourments. (33)

Mamaya's son has been both killed and utterly erased—in the sense that his executioners attempt to “erase” memory of him through silence—and Mamaya's claim to participation in “divinité créatrice” and the “succession spirituelle” of filiation is nullified along with him. Though Mamaya has other children, whatever promise of continuity they might represent to her is overshadowed by the rupture of disappearance that dominates her thoughts (and *Les funérailles du lait*'s narrative), since her other children are mentioned only in passing.

Compared to the more explicit limitations imposed on Mamaya by her age, degeneration, and surgery, then, disappearance is figured through Mamaya's symbolic body as an even more radical “attack” on the self and its connections to the world than her physical condition alone would indicate. Through the ever-present absence of her son, her inert, fruitless body, the periodic reminders of loss on the anniversary of his disappearance, and the connotations of sterility evoked by her mastectomy, Mamaya is figured as radically disconnected from both the physical and social worlds, a non-agent whose interactions with space and other human beings are curtailed through the deadening of her sensing, feeling body and through her symbolic sterility. Moreover, she is disconnected from the continuity of the divine order whose relationship with the imminent world is normally affirmed when a loved one is lost to “mere” death and committed to the earth. A passage in the Qur'an cited by Chebel in *Le corps en Islam* is emblematic: “N'avons-nous pas fait de la terre un lieu de réunion pour les vivants et les

morts?” (*Le corps en Islam* 23). Mamaya, however, cannot participate in any “réunion,” and she is rendered a silent non-participant in the ongoing dialog between the living and dead, a notion reprised by her self-imposed taciturnity throughout much of Binebine’s novel and again in the connotations of flat chests that Chebel describes (*Le corps dans la tradition au Maghreb* 54).

### ***Habitus and Disappearance***

The importance of Mamaya’s body in *Les funérailles du lait* and the unusual nature of her actions indicates, I argue, that the disappearance of her son necessitates novel adaptations and contestations of the *habitus* that otherwise structure the use and dispositions of her body. Pierre Bourdieu defines *habitus* in *Esquisse d’une théorie de la pratique* as unconscious, socially-influenced “dispositions” and practices that arise from the particular, objective, social and material circumstances of an individual, or:

les structures qui sont constitutives d’un type particulier d’environnement (*e.g.* les conditions matérielles d’existence caractéristiques d’une condition de classe) et qui peuvent être saisies empiriquement sous la forme des régularités associées à un environnement socialement structuré produisent des *habitus*, systems de *dispositions* durables, structures structurées prédisposées à fonctionner comme structures structurantes [. . .] objectivement adaptées à leur but sans supposer la visée consciente des fins et la maîtrise expresse des opérations nécessaires pour les atteindre et, étant tout cela, collectivement orchestrées sans être le produit de l’action organisatrice d’un chef d’orchestre. (256)

Those practices both reproduce social tendencies concerning the way bodies are used, seen, and understood and instill them in others through the same mechanisms of transmission (imitation,

acculturation, witnessing “what is done” and “what is not done” with and to the body, and so forth) through which they were acquired by the previous generation. Though grounded in contingent, shared circumstances, they are shaped to an extent by individual idiosyncrasies as well. While specific dispositions of a body may appear meaningfully geared toward particular ends, *habitus* are not representations of mental states: they are not reflections of an underlying belief or a desire.

Mamaya’s bodily practices thus should not be read as a sign of specific intentions or desires on her part (or on Binebine’s), but they *can* be read as manifestations of the *habitus* commonly operative within her environment, or, perhaps, as deviations, adaptations, or mutations of the same. Especially in a narrative like *Les funeraillles du lait*, the *habitus* evinced by a body participate in implicit or explicit systems of contrasts just as bodily characteristics and types do, according to Daniel Punday in *Narrative Bodies*. Mamaya’s practices depart from certain norms of her social context, and the unusual *habitus* she enacts can be read as a reflection of her son’s disappearance in the same way as her cancer or other infirmities.

Doctor Perez’s recollection of Mamaya’s request to recover her breast after it was removed during her mastectomy is one indication of her unusual practices concerning the body. Perez expresses shock at Mamaya’s solicitation in an exchange with Johara:

— Récupérer un bout de chair ensanglanté! reprit M. Perez. Le chirurgien ne voulait pas en entendre parler, cela est contraire à notre éthique. Il a même avancé qu’il s’agissait peut-être d’un gris-gris.

— Non, Monsieur, ça jamais! Madame ne croit pas à. . .

— Je le sais bien, ma petite Johara. Il n’empêche que je me suis senti un peu ridicule. . .

(15-16)

Based on his reaction, it is clear that Doctor Perez considers rejecting and (quickly) disposing of flesh removed during surgery (or otherwise separated from the body's contiguous whole) to be the evident and acceptable course of action in context. Mamaya does not seem to harbor the same reservations as the Doctor, despite being a part of a similar social milieu and therefore, in Bourdieu's estimation, likely to reflect and produce similar *habitus*. Both are part of a relatively elevated social stratum. Mamaya long ago obtained "sa capacité en droit" (84), propelling her to a social station comparable to the Doctor's and worthy of respect in the eyes of her peers, who "la considérai[ent] déjà avec *les égards dus à son grade*" (86) shortly after the conferral of her degree.

Mamaya underscores the difference of her way of thinking about the body after arriving at Sidi Boulghmour. Mamaya describes her breast to Johara as "ce pauvre sein qui vous a tant embarrassés, le bon docteur Perez et toi" (107)—*vous*, Mamaya says, and not *nous*. Her sense of what should and should not be done with and to the body seems to respond to a different set of pressures and inclinations than Johara's or the doctor's, and the clearest pressure on Mamaya in *Les funérailles du lait* is the need to address the open wound of her son's disappearance before she dies.

The range of Mamaya's novel bodily practices expands when she buries the breast within Sidi Boulghmour's *koubba*. After asking the shrine's caretaker to begin digging the hole intended for it, Mamaya explains that the tomb will in reality be her son's, thereby equating her breast with his dead body and suggesting that the grave will function as a site of memory in much the same way that it would if his bones were truly present. "Oui, mon fils est un héros," she declaims,

et ces crapules voudraient me prendre sa mémoire. Comme si cette vie qu'ils ont murée vingt ans Durant dans le desert, comme si le feu qui me consumait les entrailles pendant tout ce temps-là ne leur suffisaient pas. Je les empêcherai, tu entends! Sa mémoire, ils ne l'auront pas. Sur la pierre tombale du petit, je ferai graver cette inscription: "Ici repose mon héros. Il a commis le crime de penser aux autres." (107-108)

Though burying her breast is certainly a symbolic gesture, at Sidi Boulghmour that piece of Mamaya's flesh also becomes a valid artifact of her son, because it is assigned the roles and the social and ritual significance of his body. Such is the case individually for Mamaya, certainly, but it is also established as a public reality through her pronouncement and by virtue of the presence of witnesses—one of whom is, moreover, an agent of the state.

As if to signal the spread of this novel *habitus* according to which a deeply symbolic piece of Mamaya's own flesh may be treated as a legitimate participant in the ritual meant for her son's body, a shepherd woman who was near the *koubba* when Mamaya and the others arrived perceives the breast to be the body of a child:

Prise de curiosité, elle s'approcha de la pièce, glissa timidement sa tête à travers la porte et salua. Son regard se posa aussitôt sur le sac en plastique qui, de toute évidence, contenait de la chair et du sang. D'un air soupçonneux, elle dévisage le bédouin [the caretaker], puis Johara, enfin Mamaya, qu'elle reconnut sur-le-champ. [. . .] celle-ci se tourna vers la servante et lui fit un signe d'intelligence: cela voulait dire: "Non, je n'ai jamais vu de sac en plastique contenant un bébé découpé!" (109)

When she realizes that the shepherdess misunderstood the nature of the breast, Johara dismisses her as a backward hayseed: "Avec un geste de dépit, Johara se tourna vers Madame et commenta: —Qu'ils peuvent être ignorants, ces culs-terreux" (110).

Ironically, perhaps, what Johara considers a misapprehension of Mamaya's breast is in fact a correct reading of that object within the interpretational limits established by Mamaya's corporeal practices. Mamaya causes the breast to incarnate her son by referring to it as such, and her actions at Sidi Boulghmour suggest a conception of the body that allows for such a transmutation to occur. For her, the definition of an individual's body may extend to flesh he never "inhabited" in the past like other parts of his contiguous physical self, and, as a result, Mamaya's breast *is* her son to the same extent that a corpse *is* any person. It does not merely represent him. When the shepherdess recognizes the breast as the body of a child, then, she is not mistaken. Knowingly or not, she responds to the *habitus* Mamaya performs, the associated ontology of the body, and the breast's appropriation of social and religious significance the *habitus* allow.

Through Mamaya's example, *Les funerailles du lait* thus suggests that disappearance, a structuring element of Mamaya's reality, either actively reconfigures *habitus* or opens the door to their renegotiation with respect to the bodies of the dead and to burial. More generally, Mamaya's actions suggest that, for her, a change has occurred with respect to what is considered *a body* in the first place. That renegotiation seems to stem from the need to resolve a conflict Mamaya encounters between the demands of the *habitus* of her milieu (bodies are meant to be buried when someone dies, and their burial maintains their place in a continuous divine order) and the impossibility of retrieving her son's remains. Mamaya's unusual actions allow her to enact relatively normal burial practices—the preparation, transportation, shrouding, and entombing of *a body*—when the *right* body is unavailable. And, finally, Mamaya's new *habitus* are legitimated in *Les funerailles du lait* in part by the series of failed responses to her son's disappearance that precede Mamaya's mastectomy and burial-by-proxy. Her new *habitus*

generate acceptable analogues of the effects that her commemorations, mementos, and monuments could not produce.

### **Body Public, Body Politic**

In addition to its other meanings, the parallel drawn by the narrator between Mamaya's self-destructive cells and the violence of the *années de plomb* points to a third frame through which Mamaya's symbolic body can be read: as an incarnation of the Moroccan polity. That interpretation of Mamaya's body is based on what Moira Gatens terms "the claim that the body politic is constituted by a creative act, by a work of art or artifice, that uses the human body as its model or metaphor" ("Corporeal Representation" 80). Gatens cites as examples of that practice Plato, Aristotle, and Hobbes, for whom the human body is indeed a metaphor for society and the state. Mamaya participates in the same tradition.

The symbolism of Mamaya's cells as men who "s'entretuaient comme des bêtes" (Binebine 67), her own description of her physical condition as a product of disappearance, and the politically charged subject matter of Binebine's novel work together to figure Mamaya's body as a body politic. It is one that bears the signs of the *années de plomb*: the extent to which disappearances like her son's have affected her body politic is made clear through the afflictions I described earlier in this chapter, and the translation of those afflictions into social and political terms is relatively straightforward. Just as Mamaya is sclerotic, so is the polity, gripped by the disappearances in its past; just as the past infiltrates and distorts the present in her room at night, so the violence of the *années de plomb* still haunts the collective consciousness of Moroccans. Perhaps the most important characteristic of Mamaya's body politic are the manifestations of

that period of Morocco's past in her flesh, which, by implication, may not have been visible on more idealized models of the polity.

Unlike Hobbes' or Plato's body politic, Mamaya is female. Gatens argues that bodies politic are usually masculine by default, just as "recent feminist work has shown that the neutral body, assumed by the liberal state, is implicitly a masculine body" ("Corporeal Representation" 84). The Hobbesian leviathan is the product of an idealized compact between men who consider the public domain the exclusive purview of their sex, and it unsurprisingly mirrors their physical form. It acknowledges and incorporates the female half of the polity it represents by force:

In the absence of a female leviathan, natural woman is left unprotected, undefended, and so is easy prey for the monstrous masculine leviathan. Like the hapless Jonah, she dwells in the belly of the artificial man, swallowed whole, made part of the corporation not by pact, nor by covenant, but by incorporation. (82)

A female body politic contrasts sharply with the male image Gatens describes—an image that seems especially apt in Mamaya's context given the importance of the king in the Moroccan system of government—because it stands outside of and independent from the “belly of the artificial man.”

Mamaya's leviathan participates in a system of contrasts like other bodies, and those contrasts suggest several ways of interpreting the meaning of her body politic and the relationship between the disappearance that marks it and the polity it incarnates. Two interpretations of the differences between her female body politic and the implied male body it inevitably evokes seem to me to be particularly salient.

First, Mamaya's female body politic makes use of the widespread tendency to view female bodies as the negative Other of male bodies, weak and vulnerable while the male is



strong and secure, for instance, playing on such stereotypes to portray disappearance as a particularly egregious act against the Moroccan polity. Fatima Mernissi writes that there exists a “contradiction between what can be called ‘an explicit theory’ and ‘an implicit theory’ of sexual dynamics” in Muslim societies like Morocco (*Beyond the Veil* 32). “The explicit theory is the prevailing contemporary belief that men are aggressive in their interaction with women, and women are passive,” Mernissi explains. It is the stereotypical perception of males as physically- and sexually-powerful aggressors and women as the (weaker) aggressed that aids in developing the sense of egregiousness associated with the effects of disappearance on Mamaya.<sup>18</sup>

The narrative attention to Mamaya’s body after the loss of her son has a similar effect. Mamaya’s breast is repeatedly “exposed” to the reader’s attention by virtue of its central role in her story, just as it was exposed to others’ view as a result of her mastectomy. The rest of her body is likewise put on display in *Les funeraillles du lait* as a tableau representing the effects of disappearance. At Sidi Boulghmour, too, Mamaya’s severed breast is bared in front of a variety of other characters. Causing anyone’s body to be uncovered in front of others may be perceived as a terrible offense under certain circumstances. However, doing so to a *woman* in particular is an act that carries with it a particular sense of transgression in light of the “explicit theory of sexual dynamics” Mernissi describes, since even fully-clothed women are preyed upon in that model of male-female relations. Disappearance is the root cause of the uncovering of Mamaya’s

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<sup>18</sup> The “implicit theory” Mernissi describes, which she considers to be “driven far further into the Muslim unconscious,” is “epitomized in Imam Ghazali’s classical work,” referring to Ghazali’s *Revivification of Religious Sciences*. That theory sees female sexuality as active and potent, and “civilization as struggling to contain women’s destructive, all-absorbing power. Women must be controlled to prevent men from being distracted from their social and religious duties” (Mernissi, 32). The implicit theory seems less meaningful in Mamaya’s case, since she is maternal and aged, and therefore much more likely to generate sympathy than be taken for a symbol of women’s power to provoke uncontrollable desire in men. Mernissi’s implicit theory might play a role with respect to the *uncovering* of Mamaya’s body politic (via the exposure of her breast and the simple fact that her body is central to the text), but deep-seated fears of uncontrolled female libido seem much less apposite to *Les funeraillles du lait* than the symbolism of exposing and afflicting a “weak” female, an elder, and a maternal figure.

body and, accordingly, it comes to possess the air of a particularly troubling and invasive breach of propriety as well.<sup>19</sup> Binebine's depiction of Mamaya as aged and weak enhances the effect by attenuating the titillation that could result from unveiling a younger woman's body, and the overall pathos of Mamaya's suffering enhances it further.

The fact that Mamaya's body politic takes the form of a non-threatening and sexually-neutral female thus aids in depicting the disappearance of her son (and the refusal to return his body) as an illicit form of violence done to the polity. Whereas the purpose of a leviathan's *licit* violence is the defense of its constituents or the domination of their adversaries, the violence done to Mamaya seems scandalous, unnecessary, and malicious, and the disappearance that so afflicts her is thereby rendered all the more morally objectionable. Mamaya's cancer, or "les hommes" that "s'entretuaient" (Binebine 67) like her cells, is an unjust form of war brought to bear on an illegitimate target.

Mamaya's status as a mother likewise contributes to the depiction of disappearance as an egregious act against the body politic, in particular through the associations of mothers with what Hédi Abdel-Jaouad terms "pure values" and "Maghrebian authenticity." Abdel-Jaouad writes that mothers in Maghrebian literature are often portrayed as saints, though not one-dimensionally so, and that "this portrayal of the mother [. . .] is a recurrent image in the fiction of both male and female writers" (19). The writer's reasons for invoking the figure of the mother may vary, and

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<sup>19</sup> Exposure of male bodies involves its own set of taboos and possible interpretations as a sign of invasion or emasculation, but, as Mernissi's analysis of sexual dynamics in Muslim societies suggests, exposure of female bodies is more likely to be associated with a sense of victimization since women are seen as weak and passive—at least so long as the women in question are considered virtuous. Mamaya's status as a mother ensures that she be considered in exactly that way. More generally, in many cultures, literatures, and often in political discourses, female bodies are endowed with special significance as tableaux where the signs of a society's purity and well-functioning are manifested, and they become symbolic battlegrounds where fears of assault or contamination by the Other play out as a result. The phenomenon is emblemized by the trope of Other despoiling "our women" commonly deployed in moments of cultural or political conflict. The female body is always plural in that sense, a manifestation of an individual and of a social order.

Abdel-Jaouad suggests that mothers' saintly quality is the product of complex social and psychological realities, never merely a sign of veneration. Its complex psycho-social origins and functions notwithstanding, the figure of the mother connotes "pure values" (22) in the Maghrebian imaginary as the former of "two mutually exclusive types: the *madonna* or the *putana*" (19). The figure of the mother is further associated with a sense of authenticity: the "search for the mother as an immutable image is a male search for Maghrebian authenticity" in the literature that Abdel-Jaouad invokes (24).

As Abdelwahab Bouhdiba writes in *Sexuality in Islam*, "the cult of the mother [. . .] seems to me to constitute one of the keys to an understanding of the basic personality of the Arabo-Muslim societies. The physical mother/child relationship is transformed into an extended psycho-sociological unity" (214). Because it is maternal in addition to female, Mamaya's body politic evokes the same idealized notions of purity and saintliness—and accompanying inviolability—found in the literature Abdel-Jaouad examines and the venerated mother-image Bouhdiba describes. The inviolability of the mother figure plays a role in the way the reader might interpret the effects of disappearance on Mamaya when she is seen as an incarnation of the Moroccan polity. Her status as a mother confers upon those effects the quality of deviant violence committed against the "purity" of the Moroccan collective and against the sacrosanct "umbilical cord that links the adult to his *usul*, his authentic roots, [. . .] an exemplary bond, or, in the Prophet's phrase, 'an extension of existence'" (Bouhdiba 215). Mamaya's motherhood thus again reinforces the sense that her son's disappearance and the ensuing degeneration and mutilation of her body are shocking and impermissible: an abhorrent response to political dissidence, perhaps more so than mere imprisonment, or even death in legitimate combat.

Mamaya's body politic is meaningful in part in contrast with the default "human body"—a male body, as Gatens writes—and with the male, royal leviathan it necessarily evokes, but those contrasts do not necessarily imply that hers possesses an exclusive claim to represent the Moroccan polity. Rather than challenge or overthrow other bodies politic, Mamaya seems instead to complement them. The attitudes toward women and mothers evoked and utilized by Binebine's depiction of Mamaya also render her female leviathan relatively benign. As an aged, maternal, and desexualized form (both by virtue of her age and through the symbolic defeminization of her mastectomy), Mamaya's body politic is a relatively non-threatening recasting of the male body of the king and state.

Though the interaction between Mamaya's breast and the Moroccan flag during the ritual at Sidi Boulghmour is accusatory in certain respects, the aim of her actions is the exposition and recognition of the past rather than vengeance against the state in the present. After a grave is dug for her "son," Mamaya realizes that she has forgotten an essential part of the burial preparations:

A l'intérieur du marabout, le regard de Mamaya s'assombrit. La nuit s'installa dans ses yeux, son visage devint vieux de mille ans, comme si le temps l'avait subitement sillonné de rides. Comment avait-elle pu, elle d'ordinaire si prévoyante, oublier l'essentiel? Le suaire, c'est sacré! Enterrer sa chair dans un bout de plastique serait la pire des profanations. Le bon Dieu n'admettrait pas une telle négligence. (110)

Mamaya frantically asks those around her to find a suitable shroud: "apportez-moi un drap! Un drap propre" (111), she exclaims, and ultimately the Bedouin who conveyed her to the *marabout* proposes using the flag he had placed on his cart: a flag to wrap the body of a soldier and to transform Mamaya's ritual into a state burial.

Aside from its relatively clear symbolism in those respects, the flag comes to signify an idealized, uncorrupted version of the state because of its history. As the narrator explains, it served the Bedouin as a sort of talisman against the corruption of police who demanded a portion of every sale he made at the souk:

Une curieuse histoire, ce drapeau-là. Un jour, de retour du souk, le bédouin avait aperçu, à la hauteur d'oued Tassaout, une magnifique voiture noire, comme échappée du paradis; elle était garnie d'un petit drapeau sur l'aile droite. [. . .] Impressionnés par cette vision, les gens se tenaient au garde-à-vous, comme les gendarmes eux-mêmes. Un spectacle royal. Le bédouin décida donc de pavoiser sa propre carriole. [. . .] il voulait simplement que [les policiers] cessent de lui réclamer une part de ses gains. (98)

In light of the Bedouin's story, the flag also represents the basic respect and just treatment he hoped to enjoy by placing it on his cart as a reminder to the police. During the burial at Sidi Boulghmour, then, Mamaya also shrouds her "son's body" in a symbol of desired justice and dignity in the face of state power.

When she lays the plastic-enclosed breast on the flag, it is embraced by the arms of the flag's central star. However, the narrator remarks that:

le sac avait dû se déchirer car le sang se répandit aussitôt sur le drapeau. La pièce toute entière empestait la charogne. Incommodé par cette odeur putride, le fonctionnaire battit en retraite. Mamaya ne semblait rien sentir, comme d'ailleurs la solidaire servante. (111-112)

The functionary's reaction to this development draws the reader's attention to the flag, as if to ensure that the symbolism be remarked: "Reprenez vos esprits, madame, supplia le fonctionnaire. C'est le drapeau national que vous souillez là avec ce lambeau de chair pourrie!"

(112). After that brief exchange with the functionary, Mamaya embarks on a long soliloquy, much unlike her silence at the outset of *Les funerailles du lait*, and explains her pain and her loss. The symbolism of the blood now staining the cloth can be read as a condemnation of the state's violence against individuals like her son and of its failure to live up to the ideal of justice with which the Bedouin's story imbues the flag. Like the violence of the années de plomb, the bloody stain on the nation might not easily be recognized or pointed out, since it is a red mark on a red background, but the smell of putrefaction is inescapable. In my reading of Mamaya's symbolic body, the blood on the state's "hands"—the blood of her body politic and the vision of the Moroccan polity it represents—is thus at last made evident (and tangible) in that scene.

The bloody flag casts blame, but the voice Mamaya seems suddenly to find at Sidi Boulghmour is raised not only to denounce the state or to seek moral vengeance for her son's disappearance. If Mamaya is a body politic, she speaks as a collective consciousness that suffered the disappearance of loved ones years ago and now suffers the phantasmagoric return of the past when alone with her thoughts at night. By breaking her silence, she names, defines, and addressed the trauma underlying a sclerosis in the polity like the one in her body, and she demands the state do the same by insisting that the functionary look at the bloodied flag. Meanwhile, the proxy remains of her son break through the plastic that isolated them from the world like the prison cell and grave that occulted his actual body. However, the scene does not give free rein to its accusations. After making her breast (and all of its meanings) visible to the functionary, she then buries it, removing it from sight and filling the empty tomb of her son. The civil servant makes an uncomfortable joke that is emblematic of the combination of revelation, accusation, and acceptance (though perhaps not forgiveness) that prevails at the end of *Les funerailles du lait*:

—J'espère que ce n'est pas moi qu'on cherche à enterrer ici, hasarda le fonctionnaire.

La plaisanterie ne fit rire personne.

—Rassurez-vous, monsieur le fonctionnaire, nous avons encore besoin de vous pour le retour! (106)

Mamaya's retort deflates the grandeur of the state by reducing fonctionnaire to function, just as the flag is transformed over the course of *Les funeraillles du lait*'s last pages from a symbol for which "beaucoup d'hommes [sont] prêts à mourir" (112) into a shroud for the dead soiled by her son's (and the polity's) blood. But Mamaya quickly refocuses attention on the issue at hand and abstains from additional scorn: "Mamaya esquissa un triste sourire et poursuit: C'est la tombe de mon fils que l'on creuse là?" (106), she asks, redirecting the narrative away from the potential for violence the functionary seemed to sense.

The connections established earlier in the text between the body and memory further suggest that Mamaya's purpose at Sidi Boulghmour, as a body politic, is to memorialize the disappeared rather than to exact revenge on their executioners. By burying her proxy son in a flag—an appropriate shroud for someone who died for the state—and by performing that ritual in public view (via the symbolism of the functionary), Mamaya reinserts an obscured part of Morocco's collective past (and its victims) into a system of spaces and rituals that connect the dead with the living and the divine. She simultaneously insists on their status as "true Moroccans" worthy of ceremony and burial in sacred ground and in a shroud that indicates *service* to the state rather than opposition. Instead of exacting vengeance against other bodies politic, like the functionary—or the king—, the "new" leviathan embodied by Mamaya *speaks*, and she claims the right to contest and negotiate the meaning of the past and the disappearance of

the individuals she incarnates, like her son. However, as Mamaya's interaction with the functionary indicates, it is a leviathan that abstains from wrathful reprisals.

Mamaya's legitimacy as a body politic and as a figure that claims the right to speak in the political domain is established in part through the symbolic "forfeit" of her health and her breast. As Moira Gatens writes,

From its classical articulation in Greek philosophy, only a body deemed capable of reason and sacrifice can be admitted into the political body as an active member. Such admission always involves *forfeit*. From the original covenant between God and Abraham—which involved the forfeit of his very flesh, his foreskin—corporeal sacrifice has been a constant feature of the compact. Even the Amazons, the only female body politic that we "know" of, practiced ritual mastectomy. ("Corporeal Representation" 83)

Mamaya offers such a forfeit and thereby legitimizes her speech, including the "speech" incarnated by her body and its many symbolisms. Her forfeit preemptively deflects the dismissal of her speech as a mere "woman's perspective" in an arena dominated by men. Mirroring the ritual mastectomy of the Amazons and the sacrifice of Abrahamic traditions, the loss of her son, her breast, and her vitality is the steep price she pays for admission into political discourse—or, rather, the price that is exacted from her.

Finally, Mamaya's body politic may also be read as a defense (and encouragement) of female political action and a rejection of what Fatna Sabbah describes as the three qualities of female beauty—obedience, immobility, and silence, also "the three qualities of the believer vis-à-vis his God" (18)—in her work *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*. Though Mamaya begins as a silent and immobile victim of cancer, her rebelliousness, independence, and arduous transformation into the driving force behind her long funeral procession to Sidi Boulghmour



contrast sharply with the demure image Sabbah outlines. Mamaya's female Leviathan breaks through the barriers to political participation implied by that image; she speaks rather than remain silent; and she refuses to accede to certain taboos. She insists on recovering her breast after surgery, for one, but also confronts the taboo surrounding discussion of the *années de plomb*. The predominately female perspectives of *Les funerailles du lait* and the portrayal of Mamaya's actions and speech at Sidi Boulghmour as legitimate and productive suggest as well that *female* voices must confront the phantoms that haunt Mamaya, and that haunt the Moroccan collective consciousness she embodies.

### **The Foundational Body**

Mamaya lies at the heart of a network of connections between disappearance and the body in *Les funerailles du lait*. Disappearance causes corporeal suffering: Mamaya experiences the loss of her son in and through her flesh. Her health declines, cancer spreads in her breast, and a generalized sclerosis restricts her movements and manifests itself in her bodily dispositions. The body plays a vital role in her responses to the disappearance of her son, and it is especially through the body that *Les funerailles du lait* represents disappearance as an individual and collective experience. Mamaya's conceptual body—the connotations of her various body parts, her body as a metaphor for the self, a figuration of *habitus*, and a body politic—is a reservoir of symbolisms through which her son's disappearance is given meaning, and her breast serves as a proxy for his absent remains. Faced with disappearance, an experience that seems to defy complete explanation or understanding in the ways I discussed in Chapter 1, the body is a semantic touchstone that helps Mamaya and the reader to confront and express that phenomenon in language through corporeal symbolisms.

The success of Mamaya's rituals at Sidi Boulghmour suggests moreover that recourse to the body is a *productive* response to disappearance in ways that other efforts are not. Although it exacted a pound of flesh from Mamaya, and although neither Mamaya's nor the narrator's words near the end of the text suggest that it constitutes a panacea for disappearance, the rituals and burial by proxy she accomplishes there are nevertheless actions with tangible results, and ones which Mamaya felt compelled to undertake. Like her mastectomy, which prevents the spread of cancer, the burial stanches a wound, even if its outcomes could never restore wholeness to her body or spirit.

However, *Les funeraillles du lait* leaves open the question of whether disappearance and the body are *necessarily* connected in any deeper, structural sense, beyond the straightforward questions of absent bodies that I mentioned earlier in this chapter. Binebine's novel uses the body as a source of metaphors through which to represent the consequences of disappearance, but are those metaphors any more apposite than others? I argue that applying ideas from Lakoff and Johnson's *Philosophy in the Flesh* to *Les funeraillles du lait* provides a plausible and affirmative answer to that question, while simultaneously suggesting a link between my reading of *La disparition* and my interpretations of the corporeal in Binebine.

Lakoff and Johnson argue that the body constitutes the objective, structuring ground upon which reason itself and all the constituent elements of thought (including metaphor) are built. That claim occurs in a philosophical context established by many philosophers, but a brief summary of Descartes and Merleau-Ponty's concepts of the body may be particularly helpful in making sense of Lakoff and Johnson's arguments and their relevance to *Les funeraillles du lait* and *La Disparition*.

The Cartesian conception of body and mind sees each as an entity with a different nature, and that is the backdrop against which Merleau-Ponty, Lakoff, and Johnson's ideas are set. The "malin génie" argument in the *Méditations métaphysiques* implies that the mind could in fact exist separately from the body, since Descartes concludes there that the first absolute truth he can establish is the *cogito*. In his estimation, it is thus possible that "je ne suis donc, précisément parlant, qu'une chose qui pense, c'est-à-dire un esprit, un entendement ou une raison" (14) without flesh or other physical extension. While Descartes recognizes that one's experience of one's mind is intertwined with a body, that relationship is not a necessary one, and even if the two are enmeshed, they are not alike.

Based upon that essential distinction, Descartes develops a theory of perception that further underscores the duality of mind and body: Cartesian human understanding of reality is based on a mental representation of the external world,<sup>20</sup> and perception therefore occurs "inside" the confines of the thinking thing whose existence is assured. The body and its senses are connected to the mind, able to share with it the sensations they receive, and the mind is "corporeal" insofar as it is expressed in union with the body, but the ontological differences between the two mean that sensations are not *part* of the mind or its processes. Or, as Merleau-Ponty explains in his lecture "The Union of the Soul and the Body in Descartes," "each time Descartes affirms, in one sense, the corporeality of the soul, he adds that the soul is not corporeal in the same way as 'whatever is made up of the substance called body' (*Letter to Hyperaspistes*)" (*The Incarnate Subject* 34).

The effects of her son's disappearance on Mamaya's body suggest that Mamaya's experiences do not correspond to the dualistic Cartesian model of mind and body. She suffers

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<sup>20</sup> See Lawrence Hass' explanation of Descartes and his importance for Merleau-Ponty in *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, 11-25.

undeniable emotional distress as a result of her son's disappearance, but that "mental" anguish is expressed in her flesh. In turn, the condition of her flesh is expressed in her thoughts, as evidenced by the connections between her body, memory, and disappearance that are made apparent at several moments in Binebine's novel. The narrator's unequivocal description of Mamaya's memory as a *part* of her body suggests that distinctions between mental and corporeal substances do not apply to her. Instead, the mixing of mind and body depicted by that same moment in the text (and by scenes like Mamaya's nighttime hallucinations) indicate that the relationship between Mamaya's body and mind more closely resembles the model of mind, body, and perception described by Merleau-Ponty.

Merleau-Ponty argues against the dualism of Descartes and proposes, in Lawrence Hass's words, that "perception is not 'inside' me, like a beetle in a box, but rather emerges *between* my organizing, sensing body and the things of the world. It is a *synergy*, to use Merleau-Ponty's favored term" (*Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy* 36). Merleau-Ponty's model of perception, as well as other recent philosophies, is based on the notion that the body and mind are not separable at either the physical or conceptual level.

The blending of body and mind figured by Mamaya is interesting enough in and of itself, especially because the disappearance of her son could be read as its cause (in part, at least), but its implications are especially intriguing. In *Philosophy in the Flesh*, Lakoff and Johnson discuss some of the consequences of considering the distinction between mind and body to be null. They build upon Merleau-Ponty's model of perception and suggest that, in fact, it is the particular nature of the human body that *produces* the "mind" and the fundamental elements of human thought processes. The body is the ground of the "cognitive unconscious," which Lakoff and Johnson describe using "the term *cognitive* in the richest possible sense, to describe any mental

operations and structures that are involved in language, meaning, perception, conceptual systems, and reason” (12). The cognitive unconscious is the “hidden hand that shapes our conscious thought, our moral values, our plans, and our actions” (15), and it is fundamentally and necessarily embodied, unlike the “theory of faculty psychology” corresponding to Descartes and “in which we have a ‘faculty’ of reason that is separate from and independent of what we do with our bodies” (16-17). Mental abilities like categorization arise from the nature of our nervous system and the simple fact that its existence makes us “neural beings” (17-19).

Perhaps most importantly for my purposes, Lakoff and Johnson also argue that “what we call *concepts* are neural structures,” and these neural structures are “*actually part of, or make use of, the sensorimotor system of our brains*” (20, emphasis in original). The implications of that claim are far-reaching, according to Lakoff and Johnson, and include the notion that “human concepts are not just reflections of an external reality, but [. . .] are crucially shaped by our bodies and brains” (22). The body is not merely a necessary tool through which the mind is able to perceive things other than itself—rather, the body and brain are both the seat of perception and the essential determinants of its nature. That is, in short, exactly what Mamaya’s experiences suggest.

As a result, the most basic, structuring concepts we use to make sense of the world are necessarily rooted in and derived from the body. Basic-level categories of objects that the mind can visualize, like *chair* and *bed* (27), are a product of human embodiment and physiology, “mediated by the body rather than determined directly by a mind-independent reality” (28), because our capacity to visualize derives from the structure of our sensory organs, and our capacity to form concepts and categories are a product of the structure of neurons and the way

they interconnect. Spatial-relations concepts like “*in front of* and *in back of*” (30) and thinking of a space as an abstracted “container” (31-34) are likewise the product of *embodied* experience.

The same is true for the metaphors we use to reason about reality and experience. Their derivation from embodied experience is sometimes plainly visible, “as when we conceptualize understanding an idea (subjective experience) in terms of grasping an object (sensorimotor experience) and failing to understand an idea as having it go right by us or over our heads” (45), and “the cognitive mechanism for such conceptualizations is conceptual metaphor, which allows us to use the physical logic of grasping to reason about understanding” (45). Metaphors that are *not* evidently derived from the body are made up of elemental units that are. Those units, “primary metaphors” that have “a minimal structure and [arise] naturally, automatically, and unconsciously through everyday experience by means of conflation” (46), are the building blocks of complex concepts and reasoning, all of which therefore (inevitably) arise from embodied experience. Concepts and metaphors are “realized in our brains *physically*” (59) and they “provide subjective experience with extremely rich inferential structure, imagery, and qualitative ‘feel,’” Lakoff and Johnson write. “We have a system of primary metaphors simply because we have the bodies and brains we have and because we live in the world we live in” (59)—one we understand and navigate through the body and the “corporeal realism” that results from embodied experience.

If the body is the source *and content* of the primary metaphors we use to make sense of reality—to categorize experiences and objects, to reason about them, and to make inferences and associations—, then Binebine’s attention to the body in *Les funeraillles du lait* and my Blanchotian reading of *La disparition* may be related. An intriguing similarity between the conceptions of disappearance in those two texts, brought to light by Mamaya in a monolog

concerning an encounter with another mother of the disappeared, helps to explain that relationship. The passage is worth citing in its entirety:

Car, vous savez, la mort on vous la vole aussi. À la prefecture, j'ai connu une femme don't l'enfant avait disparu comme le mien. Contrairement à nous toutes, elle ne cherchait pas son nom sur la liste des libérés, elle se tenait loin de la bousculade. Car elle savait. Une mère sait ces choses-là. Elle réclamait uniquement son corps, afin de l'enterrer avec décence, comme le veut l'islam [*sic*]. Mais nul ne l'écoutait. Nul ne comprenait que ce petit bout de femme au visage gris, les bras vides et ballants, portait à elle seule, dans son ventre, dans ses seins, dans son regard erni et ses cheveux blancs, dans sa peau fanée et jusqu'au bout des ongles, la douleur de toute l'humanité. Quand la foule se dispersait, elle venait s'asseoir près de moi, sur les marches en marbre. Et nous pleurions ensemble. On ne lui a jamais rendu son garçon, monsieur le fonctionnaire. Même mort, il n'avait plus droit à la paix. Ni au repos. (102)

That woman's son, like Mamaya's, cannot truly *die*—cannot achieve the finality of “paix” or “repos,” for instance—for having disappeared. In that sense, some of the same Blanchotian paradoxes, voids, and impossibilities I identify in Perec's exploration of disappearance are at work in Binebine's as well. Mamaya's experiences, like the other mother she mentions, involve a *deathless* void reminiscent of the Blanchotian *neutre* encountered by Anton Voyl and his associates. Mamaya responds to that deathless oblivion by means of corporeal symbolisms and imagery.

In light of Lakoff and Johnson's arguments, it is possible to read that turn to the corporeal as recourse to the most fundamental elements of human thought in the face of the incomprehensible, intractable, Blanchotian nature of disappearance, an equation made plausible

by Mamaya's recognition of its associated "impossibility of dying." As a result, it *is* also possible to posit a special relevance for the body in representations of disappearance. My reading of *La disparition* in Chapter 1 suggests that disappearance evokes the aporetic paradoxes and impossibilities Blanchot encounters in literary language, and Lakoff and Johnson claim that metaphors derived from the body are the most essential *meaningful* elements of thought to which someone like Mamaya could turn when the failings of language are made apparent. Like Voyl's progressive madness in *La disparition*, Mamaya's silence in *Les funeraillles du lait* suggests that she finds herself in precisely such a situation. When the disappearance of her son nevertheless demands a response—as it seems to do, judging by Mamaya's dogged efforts to memorialize him, initially through the unsuccessful monuments and commemorations I described—, Lakoff and Johnson's work suggests that the corporeal is the mode of expression of last resort for the response disappearance requires.

In that sense, *Les funeraillles du lait* figures disappearance as an experience particularly likely to provoke renegotiation of the body and corporeal practices, since its essential role in the production of meaning may become more apparent when words and the thoughts they structure become their own subjects of inquiry in the (non-)light of the Blanchotian *neutre*. In Perec, disappearance provokes an encounter with the limitations of language; in Binebine, following such an encounter, the body subtends Mamaya's responses to her son's loss because it must—and, once visible in that role, the body becomes a question as well as a representational tool. In both novels, the inescapable command to create meaning that follows disappearance seems to render the encounter inevitable, for both Voyl and Mamaya are impelled to persevere in their attempts to recover something from their respective voids.



In the process, Mamaya's actions reveal that disappearance is capable of engendering change in *habitus* and of provoking confrontation with fundamental notions concerning the definition and limits of bodies. The supposed differences between the mental and physical break down at night in her room, her own flesh comes to incarnate her absent son, and her body becomes a female Leviathan as well as an individual testament to the effects of disappearance. In addition to my description of disappearance through Perec in Chapter 1, then, my reading of *Les funerailles du lait* suggests that disappearances may cause *the* body to appear—as an unstable, renegotiable object and mode of experience—when *a* body, or perhaps any other thing or idea of great import, vanishes.

### CHAPTER III

In Tahar Ben Jelloun's novel *Partir*, a young Moroccan man named Azel emigrates to Spain. Unlike the letter E in Georges Perec's *La disparition* or Mamaya's son in Binebine's *Les funerailles du lait*, Azel's actions and whereabouts before and after his time in Spain are mostly known to his family and his closest associates, with a few notable exceptions. Yet I argue that *Partir* depicts, through Azel, a form of disappearance as troubling and paradoxical as the others I have examined, even if he never vanishes in the same sense as Perec's or Binebine's characters. Moreover, it is a form of disappearance that raises interesting questions about the experience of millions of migrants and refugees who traverse political and cultural borders in search of a better life. And, as a figure used in part to represent some of the effects (and causes, perhaps) of migration, disappearance in *Partir* invites interrogation of the traumatic aspects of migration itself and of the social and economic forces influencing the decision to leave one's home.

The form of disappearance that affects Azel in *Partir* differs in several respects from the most evident forms of disappearance in *La disparition* and *Les funerailles du lait*. Firstly, neither Azel nor his associates are primarily concerned with the unexplained absence of individuals. Accordingly, they do not remark upon, investigate, or react to disappearances in the same way Anton Voyle or Mamaya do. In fact, few characters in *Partir* are explicitly preoccupied with the *idea* of disappearance in and of itself, even if their thoughts sometimes link the desire to leave Morocco with the possibility of disappearing, as Azel's occasionally do, and even if the backdrop of their desire to emigrate includes stories of individuals who vanish into Islamist

networks or drown at sea, never to be seen again. Their overarching concern is instead the act of *leaving*, and the material and psychological benefits they hope might result from a trip in a *paquebot*'s overloaded boat.

Secondly, the most important disappearance in *Partir* is not punctual—it does not *occur* at a particular moment in time, or at least appear to do so, in the same way that the letter E in Perec or Mamaya's son in Binebine vanished at a particular moment in the narrative past. *Partir*'s disappearance is brought about gradually, and is itself a consequence of gradual processes. Many of those processes may be read as elements within the constellation of changes associated with globalization and its motilities, anxieties, and instabilities.

Thirdly and finally, the concept of disappearance in *Partir* relates primarily to abstract notions rather than comparatively tangible, discrete individuals or letters. What vanishes (or risks vanishing) in Binebine's novel are, instead, a sense of belonging to a community, forms of identity, and the foundations of Azel's sexuality, to name a few examples. As a result of the instability sown in those domains by Azel's experiences, a sense of disappearance suffuses *Partir* much like it does *La disparition* and *Les funérailles du lait*, but the *occurrence* of a disappearance is not a dominant point of articulation in *Partir*'s narrative, despite the fact that a few (relatively minor) disappearances do indeed take place there. In order to elucidate some of the possible meanings and consequences of vanishing abstractions of those kinds, I will dedicate a significant proportion of this chapter to examining how Azel's departure, changes in his identity (sexual and otherwise) and the "melancholia of migration" he suffers constitute forms of disappearance.

In addition to the connections between disappearance and contemporary economic and political realities Ben Jelloun invites the reader to consider via Azel, *Partir* offers a productive

basis upon which to examine the relationship between disappearance and trauma. For although the notion of trauma is undoubtedly relevant to *La disparition*, *Les funeraillles du lait*, and many other stories of disappearance, the non-punctual, diffuse nature of disappearance in *Partir* and its connection to identity and sexuality suggest that the trauma of disappearance may be described more fully by looking beyond the consequences of losing a loved one.

Like Perec and Binebine's novels, *Partir* is thus a story of disappearance, and one whose particularities further aid in explaining the utility of the concept of disappearance in describing a broad range of phenomena in contemporary novels, North African or otherwise. *Partir's* contribution lies in part in suggesting that the increasingly common experience of migration in a globalized economy catalyzes an encounter with a sense of emptiness and slipping-away when abstractions such as "identity" or "self" are challenged by emerging social realities and economic necessities. Disappearance becomes a mode of experience, it seems, in the wake of that encounter, whether or not an event by that name could be said to have *occurred*. Perhaps just as importantly, Azel's experiences suggest that the *desire* to depart—in the many senses of "departure" explored in *Partir*—is no certain inoculation against disappearance in that sense, nor does it necessarily save Azel from suffering an indelible wound.

### **Disappearance in Transit**

Dreams, illusions, and the blending of the real with the imaginary characterize the introductory scene of *Partir*. In it, the men of the Hafa Café in Tangier spend an evening sitting, drinking tea, smoking *kif*—"la potion qui ouvre les portes du voyage" (11)—and contemplating the Strait of Gibraltar separating them from Spain. Many hope one day to cross it. As they pass around pipes of *kif*, they wait for a sign from Toutia, the name they have given to a terrible

personification of the sea, described as “l’araignée tantôt dévoreuse de chair humaine, tantôt bienfaitrice parce que transformée en une voix leur apprenant que cette nuit n’est pas la bonne et qu’il faut remettre le voyage à une autre fois” (13). In their state of reverie, a number of the men contemplate leaving behind their life in Morocco in favor of a better one in Spain or France or elsewhere, and they recall those who have already tried.

Meanwhile, as if in “un rêve absurde et persistant” (13), *Partir*’s protagonist Azel imagines himself as one cadaver among many lying on the bottom of the ocean. The desire to leave Morocco connects him to the others in the café, whose fixation on an imagined departure seems to encourage the blending of reality and mirage: as the café-goers wait at dusk for the first lights of Spain to appear on the horizon, “ils les suivent sans les voir et parfois les voient alors qu’elles sont voilées par le brume et le mauvais temps” (12). The image of half-finished cups of sweet tea containing drowned bees, “qui finissent par y tomber dans l’indifférence des consommateurs perdus depuis longtemps dans les limbes du haschisch et d’une rêverie de pacotille” (11), sums up the atmosphere of the café and the dream-like distraction of the café’s patrons.

Azel’s imagined death, the ominous figure of Toutia, and the bees in patrons’ glasses suggest that his and his compatriots’ reverie involves an underlying menace, which relates at the very least to the risk of drowning faced by migrants (in reality and in *Partir*) attempting to cross the Mediterranean. That danger is well known to Azel, as the reader soon learns, because the Strait (and a *paquebot* named Al Afia’s overloaded boat) claimed his cousin’s life some time prior. An echo of that menace is felt “chaque fois qu’Azel quitte ce silence où aucune présence ne s’impose” at which point “il a froid” and “quelle que soit la saison, son corps est secoué par un léger tremblement. Il sent le besoin de s’éloigner de la nuit, il refuse d’y entrer” (16). Despite

Azel's awareness of the dangers of leaving Morocco, however, "l'idée de prendre le large, d'enfourcher un cheval peint en vert et d'enjamber la mer du détroit, cette idée de devenir une ombre transparente, visible le jour seulement, une image voguant sur les flots à toute vitesse, ne le quitte pas" (15).

Additionally, however, the same images that evoke the danger of drowning in the Strait also suggest that the menace of departure does not relate to death alone. Azel's death on the dark and inaccessible ocean floor and the unstable reality of the Spanish lights suggest that departure involves a risk of disappearance. That risk is underscored by the symbolism of Azel's hope to become a "transparent shadow" and an "image" by departing, in the silence of his moments of reverie, in the darkness he flees, and even in the complicated symbolism of the green horse that carries him across the Strait. As I will show in this chapter, the risk of disappearance associated with emigration does not relate only to the sense in which an émigré might "vanish" by cutting ties (willingly or otherwise) with any friends or family who remain behind.

The connections between the notion of disappearance and visions of death, sequestration in an inaccessible location, "transparent shadows" and immaterial "images" are relatively straightforward, but the green-painted horse Azel rides in his imagination resists interpretation. The image of the horse is worth examining here because plausible interpretations of its green color foreshadow the kind of disappearance—or silence, gulf, or un-becoming communicated by the other images—that underlies Azel's hoped-for departure. Green is an important color in Islam, and Islam is an important part of the social and political context of North Africa. Within that tradition, green is associated with fecundity, life, and renewal, and additionally appears in the Qur'an as the color of garments and furnishings worn and enjoyed by those accepted into

heaven, itself occasionally represented as a (green) garden.<sup>21</sup> The horse, which is to say the vehicle of Azel's escape from Morocco, invokes connotations of life and renewal as well, suggesting that Azel imagines departure as means to flourish and Morocco as a place in which to wither. However, it is paint that confers that color to the horse, and the artifice implied by the paint may be read as a sign that the promise of departure is a hollow one, and that disillusionment will surely follow Azel's ride.

A second scriptural echo of Azel's green horse occurs in the Bible. While Christian religious texts are perhaps less likely points of reference for Azel, Ben Jelloun, or in the North African context generally speaking, it is in the well-known figure of the four horsemen of the apocalypse that a green horse may be found.<sup>22</sup> Death is its rider, and its ashen, sickly green color connotes pestilence and decay, suggesting that the same may be as inherent in Azel's departure. In *Partir*, decay and death take the form of an inexorable sense of slipping-away, or disappearance, that subtends Azel's experiences.

As the images and symbols surrounding Azel's imagined departure suggest, and as the events surrounding Azel's migration to Spain demonstrate, the call to leave heard by the Hafa Café's patrons is also a call to disappear. As he responds to that call, rifts and transformations become dominant features of Azel's sense of place in the world, and he suffers as several important foundations of his identity seem to slip away from him, undermining his integrality as a self. Early in the text, Azel's sense of belonging (or "rootedness") with respect to his community is challenged by his economic and social circumstances in Tangier and by the

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<sup>21</sup> See for example Al-Baqarah 2:25, Al-Kahf 18:31, Al-Hajj 22:63, Al-Rahman 55:76, Al-Dahr 76:21.

<sup>22</sup> See Revelation 6:8. Many translations of the Bible refer to Death's horse as "pale" (English Standard Version) but not green, while many others call it "pale greenish gray" (Tree of Life Version), "pale green" (New Revised Standard Version, Contemporary English Version), or "a greenish pale horse" (Orthodox Jewish Bible).

corruption that permeates social and economic life there. Later, the prospect (and ultimately the reality) of exchanging sex for economic advancement and emigration to Spain undermine the sense of identity Azel derives from his sexuality when he receives the help of an older Spanish gentleman named Miguel. More generally, Azel's powers of description and narration with respect to his own situation also decline over the course of the novel, as if his grasp on language and meaning are slipping away. Together, those changes constitute a gradual and seemingly ineluctable process of disintegration within Azel that is best described as a form of disappearance.

### **Leaving Morocco**

The first of Azel's gradual transformations that aids in characterizing the form of disappearance at work in *Partir* relates to his gradually-diminishing sense of belonging to a place and a community, a process at work before he leaves Morocco and that continues while he is in Spain. His disconnection from a particular (physical) space of belonging, or a place he might otherwise consider an origin and home, is apparent even at the beginning of the novel. Like his compatriots at the Hafa Café, he seeks to leave his country and hopes to make a life in Europe instead. Whether or not his stay there would be permanent in reality, Azel's desire to leave indicates that whatever affinity he feels for Morocco as "his place" is secondary to his desire to achieve the kind of economic well-being another country might provide. The dissolution of Azel's belonging to Morocco as a place, in that sense, is manifest in a number of his experiences in Spain to which I will return later.

His dissociation from a sense of belonging to community in social rather than spatial terms is less evident, perhaps—especially due to the ambivalence toward Morocco Azel reveals



in a series of letters he writes to his “cher pays”—but it is an equally important form of migration, and ultimately a form of disappearance, that parallels his movements through space. One of the first indications of Azel’s dissociation from the imagined community of Morocco, to borrow Benedict Anderson’s term, occurs in a monolog he delivers shortly before being beaten and thrown out of a bar he visits on his way home after *Partir*’s opening scene. Azel foresees the importance of the moment before he walks in: “il eut un pressentiment, une sorte de désir fou d’aller au-delà de son destin” (17), and his desire to “go beyond his destiny” hints at the possibility of a rupture with the society into which he was born and which is therefore responsible for some part of the “destiny” he hopes to supersede.

The groundwork of that rupture is apparent in a monolog Azel delivers inside the bar. There, he sees a local caïd and human trafficker named Al Afia, whom he confronts verbally after several beers. Azel’s monolog addresses specific crimes Al Afia committed against Azel’s cousin, who drowned trying to cross the Strait in one of the caïd’s boats, but Azel’s vitriol is also directed at what Al Afia represents: namely, the deep and general discontent Azel feels toward his society. Al Afia embodies the corruption and unfairness that dominate Morocco and that drive Azel (and others like him) to its margins. When he accuses Al Afia of such corruption directly, for example, the focus of Azel’s discourse shifts quickly to the failure of Morocco, both state and society, to address the Al Afias in its midst:

Il achète tout le monde, normal, ce pays est un vrai marché, tout le monde se vend, il suffit d’avoir un petit peu de pouvoir, ça se monnaye, et ça coûte pas cher [. . .] mais pour les gros coups, ça peut aller loin, de l’argent passe de main en main, tu veux que je ferme les yeux, précise-moi le jour et l’heure, t’auras pas de problème, mon frère, tu veux une signature, une petite griffe en bas de cette feuille, pas de problème, passe me voir [. . .]

c'est ça le Maroc, y en a qui triment comme des fous, ils travaillent parce qu'ils ont décidé d'être intègres, ceux-là, ils travaillent dans l'ombre, personne ne les voit, personne n'en parle alors qu'on devrait les décorer [. . .] et puis il y a les autres, ils sont légion, ils sont partout, dans tous les ministères, car dans notre pays bien-aimé, la corruption, c'est l'air que l'on respire, oui, nous puons la corruption, elle est sur nos visages, dans nos têtes, elle est enfouie dans nos coeurs. (19)

Azel considers Morocco to be generally corrupt—certainly the state, as evidenced by his denouncement of its ministries, but also its local communities and the individuals within them. Corruption resides in all parts of the Moroccan body politic: breathed into its lungs, on its face, in its head, and in its heart. Azel's premonition proves correct, in the sense that his actions in the bar precipitate many of the events that widen the rift he perceives between him and Moroccan society, which he hints at in his denouncement of Al Afia and which leads him to denounce his own Moroccan-ness, depart, and ultimately look with disgust upon many Moroccans he encounters in Spain.

As his encounter with Al Afia and his henchmen unfolds, Azel is figured as an outsider to the social system that allows them to obtain power and profit through corruption. Al Afia's position within that system is entrenched, and challenges to it are likely to result in death for the challenger: "Décidément," exclaims one of the caïd's henchmen while violently ejecting Azel from the bar, "tu cherches à rejoindre ton copain!" (20), referring to Azel's dead cousin. And, as the narrator explains, there is no reason for Azel to expect change in that state of affairs. "De temps en temps, les autorités de Rabat envoyaient une patrouille de l'armée pour arrêter des embarcations et leurs passeurs" (21), such as Al Afia, but the narrator characterizes their efforts as ineffective. Al Afia retains the loyalty of the few men punished during the raids by keeping

them on his payroll while they serve prison terms, he is never arrested himself, and he suffers no social consequences, either: “il passait aux yeux de tous pour un homme généreux, ‘le coeur sur la main’, ‘la grande maison’, ‘la demeure du Bien’, etc.” (22).

As a microcosm of the wider problems Azel decries, Al Afia and the disgust he engenders are more or less interchangeable with the disgust Azel feels toward the country he wishes to leave, and the relationship between the two indicates the extent of the rift in addition to its existence. The growing divide between Azel and the society to which he ostensibly belongs comes to a head symbolically when he calls Al Afia “de son vrai nom et le qualifia de ‘zamel’, c’est-à-dire d’homosexuel passif” (23) during a second drunken evening at the bar. That particular insult is exceptionally derisory, and the combination of Azel’s contempt and the reaction of one of Al Afia’s henchmen depicts a double rejection: Azel rejects the social order, and the social order rejects him and the critical thoughts he espouses. The henchman’s words are illustrative in that regard: “Espèce d’intellectuel, tiens, prends, t’as de la chance, ici on n’aime pas les mecs, sinon, ça fait longtemps qu’on t’aurait enfilé. Tu craches sur ton pays, tu en dis du mal, t’inquiète pas, la police se chargera de te faire dissoudre dans de l’acide” (23-24).

A narrative passage that intervenes in the moments between Azel’s insult and his second, more brutal ejection from the bar underscores his disillusionment and the social rejection figured by Al Afia’s henchmen. The narrator explains that “Azel avait fait des études de droit” (24), but his belief that his effort and time would be exchanged some day for a respected role in society proves misguided. The uncle whose law practice he intended to work for loses his clientele because he is unwilling to engage in the corruption that afflicts even the courts, and thereafter “Azel comprit que son avenir était compromis et que sans piston il ne trouverait pas de travail” (24). The give-and-take between individual and society concerning the exchange of labor and

fealty for belonging and opportunity has all but broken down in Azel's case. When the narrative shifts on the following page to a digression on Azel's desire to leave in spite of the pleasures he has enjoyed in Morocco through association with a man named El Haj, departure is presented as a response to the "humiliation" (25) Azel feels as a result of his inability to find work and at the hands of corrupt, untouchable elements like Al Afia. Azel's humiliation is yet another indication of the extent of the divide between himself and his society, and the pleasures he would abandon by leaving accentuate the depth of his frustrations.

When Azel finds himself "blessé, jeté sur le trottoir" (53) outside the bar once again, Al Afia's henchmen symbolically eject Azel from the social order, embodying the forces responsible for his misfortune against which he is powerless to act. "Deux hommes au-dessus de lui étaient sur le point de l'achever" (53) as he lay in the street, outnumbering and overpowering him: the strong-arms assert Al Afia's dominance over Azel, the dominance of his form of corruption over Moroccan life, and the control Al Afia exercises over a public space and membership in the collective life within its walls.

Despite the adversity he faces, Azel "était persuadé que cette nuit lui appartenait: il sut à cet instant précis que sa vie allait changer" (53). Rather than a miraculous intervention by agents of the state, however, the impending change takes form in Miguel, an older Spanish man whose arrival precipitates the departure of Azel's assailants. With Miguel comes the promise of Europe as well, and in the symbolic economy of the scene, Spain displaces the violence and corruption decried by Azel and reified in his assailants.

Whatever sense of loyalty or belonging Azel may have felt toward his society is erased shortly after his encounter with Miguel. When he stops there a third time, again on his way home from the Hafa Café, police charged by the King with cleansing the North of drug dealers and

traffickers raid the bar, and they discover enough *kif* in Azel's possession to warrant his arrest. While he is detained, Azel is interrogated, beaten, and brutally raped by his questioners. Their contempt for Azel's education, their fury when "ils venaient d'avoir la confirmation qu'Azel n'était pas un trafiquant," and the pressure to "en trouver au moins un avant l'aube" (68) crystallize in sexual violence, and the very institution meant to address the corruption driving Azel and other like him away from Morocco instead widens the rift between them incalculably. Azel is besieged from all quarters, it seems, and feels he must abandon his birthplace.

The next day, Miguel finds Azel at the police station, brings him to his home, and Azel's sister comes to see him there: "elle était aussi humiliée que lui et promit qu'elle ferait tout son possible pour l'aider à fuir cette ville et ce pays" (71). Violated and humiliated by the state, Azel's dissociation from his society culminates in the realization that his suffering is meaningless. It becomes clear during his recovery at Miguel's house that the King's campaign will produce no real change in the everyday corruption and denigration that distanced Azel from his society in the first place, and the apparent hopelessness of the King's cause is summed up by the ultimately impotent accusations of a Moroccan parliamentarian against a corrupt minister at the end of the chapter. The parliamentarian's remarks cause a stir, but "le président de l'Assemblée décida de mettre fin à cet incident et suspendit la séance durant une heure" (73).

Through his interactions with Al Afia and the police, Azel is alienated both from specific spaces and areas of social life—the bar, for instance, and a job in the legal profession on condition of accepting corruption—and from the ontological categories of "nation" and "nationality." As Benedict Anderson writes, "nation-ness is the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time" (*Imagined Communities* 3), and it is a property that situates individuals in a system of signs, much like profession, lineage, gender, or any other property an

individual or group deem fundamental, *meaningful* units of identity. When he is ejected from a communal space and effectively deprived of some of the rights and privileges of nation-ness, including the protection of laws and the possibility of legally-sanctioned work, Azel is symbolically deprived of the nation-ness Anderson describes.

Nation-ness is a property all individuals in our era are presumed to possess, and the stakes of losing it are high, in part because of the important place it has come to occupy in modern social structures. Anderson writes:

The century of the Enlightenment, of rationalist secularism, brought with it its own modern darkness. With the ebbing of religious belief, the suffering which belief in part composed did not disappear. Disintegration of paradise: nothing makes fatality more arbitrary. Absurdity of salvation: nothing makes another style of continuity more necessary. What then was required was a secular transformation of fatality into continuity, contingency into meaning. As we shall see, few things were (are) better suited to this end than an idea of nation. (11)

Anderson is careful to stress that the nation does not necessarily result from or supersede either the notions of “religious community” (12) or “dynastic realm” (19) with whose decline its development coincides, but the nation’s power to transform “contingency into meaning” nevertheless mirrors the centrality of those other constructs in the identitary framework of individuals from prior eras. Given the importance of the nation and nationality in that regard, the potential *loss* of nationality in a contemporary novel like *Partir*—leaving aside complicated questions of nation-ness in modern Morocco specifically, which would require consideration beyond the scope of this dissertation—is no less than an identitary catastrophe.

It is precisely that sort of catastrophe that seems to occur in Azel's case, especially when judging by four characteristics of the nation identified by Anderson: namely, that it is *imagined*, *limited*, *sovereign*, and *a community*. As Anderson writes, the nation "is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (6). The relationship between Azel and his "fellow-members," however, is characterized by rupture as much as by communion. Anderson describes the nation as "limited" (7) in the sense that "no nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind" (7), and each has boundaries in real space; Azel seeks to transgress those limits and physically distance himself from the territory that defines the *center* of his nation.

According to Anderson, Nations are "sovereign" in the sense that they claim a form of universal legitimacy previously accorded to divinely-ordained structures:

[ . . . ] the concept was born in an age in which Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm. Coming to maturity at a stage of human history when even the most devout adherents of any universal religion were inescapably confronted with the living *pluralism* of such religions, and the allomorphism between each faith's ontological claims and its territorial stretch, nations dream of being free, and, if under God, directly so. The gage and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state. (7)

The gage and emblem of Azel's freedom, on the other hand, is work: he seeks a job that affirms his worth and autonomy as an individual, "paying" him both materially and in terms of the social status and self-worth conferred by working, all of which are denied him by *his* nation and offered, at least in theory, by another. In that sense, *specific* nations have ceased to function as

gages of freedom in the world Azel inhabits. Finally, Anderson describes nations as “a *community*, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (7). As the passages I mention above demonstrate, “horizontal comradeship” is hardly an apt description of Azel’s experience of nation-ness.

### **Azel’s Sexuality**

A second transformation Azel undergoes in *Partir* relates to his sexuality. Azel’s own perception of his sexuality is characterized as relatively stable and unproblematic early in *Partir*, as when he accepts an invitation to the house of El Haj, a middle-aged, well-off man with whom he entertains a unique friendship. Azel’s thoughts and actions at the party El Haj organized suggest he is heterosexual:

El Haj mit de la musique, Siham et les autres filles se levèrent et se mirent à danser. Azel les regardait, ému. Il avait envie de les prendre une à une dans ses bras et les serrer contre son coeur. Il était heureux mais sentait la fragilité de ces émotions. Ce soir-là, il fit l’amour avec Siham. (43)

Azel’s affinity for women is evident in his care for El Haj’s female guests and in his relationship with Siham, with whom he enjoys emotional as well as physical intimacy. He reveals to her his intention to leave Morocco, for instance, and even tells her that he loves her. “Dans ce pays, on n’avoue pas à une femme qu’on l’aime, question de pudeur, paraît-il. Moi, je te le dis” (43), he exclaims, though he ultimately does not pronounce the words “je t’aime.”

While in bed together, however, an exchange between Siham and Azel foreshadows a transformation in his sexuality that takes place over the course of the novel. Siham asks Azel if



he might take her with him when he leaves Morocco, and “elle lui avoua ensuite qu’elle cherchait à se marier avec un Espagnol ou un Français” (43). Azel’s response includes an unintentional suggestion that he too would marry a Spanish or French man in order to leave: “‘Moi aussi,’ rétorqua Azel. Ce qui la fit rire et elle rectifia, une Espagnole ou une Française!” (43). Rather than immediately correcting what appears to be a slip of the tongue, Azel seems to treat the mistake as cause for reflection on the extent to which his sexuality might be flexible if such flexibility allowed him to emigrate: “Il s’arrêta un instant puis dit sur un ton grave: ‘Quelle importance à partir du moment où je réalise mon rêve...’” (43).

Despite the surprising seriousness of Azel’s consideration of homosexuality as a means of emigration, he considers himself to be essentially heterosexual. His own view of his preferences is symbolized by his rejection of Siham when she “lui ordonna de la prendre par derrière,” after which “Azel débanda” (44). The command “avait quelque chose de pornographique, d’excitant et en même temps d’insupportable” (44) for Azel, who explains moments later that “quand j’étais adolescent, je l’ai fait quelquefois avec des garçons, et jamais avec des filles. J’aime pas beaucoup” (45). Azel’s experiences as an adolescent and his ambivalence regarding Siham’s request intimate that he probably does not view sexuality in stark, black-and-white terms, but they also suggest (symbolically, in Siham’s case, and very straightforwardly otherwise) that he prefers heterosexual contact. Later, after receiving help from Miguel for the first time, Azel’s compatriots at the Hafa Café suggest he ought to “embobiner” Miguel in order to emigrate, to which Azel responds “je ne supporte pas qu’un homme me touche” (62).

As Azel’s story progresses, though, forces that push him to emigrate begin to influence his sense of his sexuality, and the resulting ambiguities undermine his sense of coherence as a

self. His rape at the hands of the Tangier police, for example, forces him into the position of a *zamel*, a highly derogatory term for a homosexual man who allows another to penetrate him. The violent imposition of that status upon him helps to explain the shame that prevents Azel from denouncing the policemen who assaulted him or even seeing a doctor while recovering at Miguel's home. "Je devine ce qui s'est passé. Je vais appeler un médecin," says Miguel, to which Azel responds: "Non, surtout pas, j'ai honte, honte!" (70).

In and of themselves, the abhorrent actions of the police do not suddenly change Azel's orientation, but they are emblematic of a more sustained attack against his sexuality mounted by the pressure of unemployment and the dissolution of his connectedness to his society. The social and economic "passivity" of Azel's interactions with Al Afia and by his status as a jobless graduate echo the logic of the *zamel*, according to which action is virile and passivity confers a sexual identity subaltern even to generic homosexuality, and they do so within a strongly-heteronormative social order. Ironically, perhaps, Azel's principled disgust for the corruption prevalent in his society thus symbolically transforms him into a *zamel*. What's more, *accepting* the practical realities of his society would make a symbolic *zamel* of Azel as well, since abandoning his principles and "giving himself" to the corruption he decries would also be analogous to sexual passivity. Although Azel seems to consider himself heterosexual, then, forces from all quarters seek to transform him into a *zamel*.

That pervasive pressure may help to explain why Azel comes to view a sexual arrangement with a European man as a (barely) acceptable means of realizing his dreams of emigration. Already subject to forces seeking to transform his sexual identity symbolically, and faced with the inevitability of compromising his virility and heterosexuality in order to achieve economic and social position, Azel reluctantly elects to do so in a way that promises some sort of

compensation. That the development of a relationship between Azel and Miguel is Azel's *choice* is far from clear, but Miguel nonetheless provides Azel an opportunity both to earn money and to mitigate some of his symbolic sexual passivity in exchange for real sexual activity.

In order to avoid the difficult ethical and identity questions surrounding what amounts to a form of prostitution—emotional and physical—he engages in with Miguel, Azel mentally evades admitting the reality of their arrangement. Though it is clear that part of him understands the conditions attached to Miguel's patronage, Azel halfheartedly pretends that he does not. When Miguel first brings Azel to Spain, for example, Azel's hesitation before asking about his responsibilities is telling:

“On doit tout de suite régler le problème de tes papiers. Avec ton passeport nous irons dès demain à la préfecture remplir une tonne de paperasse. Ensuite on passera chez mon avocat établir le contrat de travail définitif par lequel je t'engage.” [. . .] Azel hésita un instant avant de lui demander quel serait au juste son travail. “Allons, allons, ne fais pas l'imbécile, tu as très bien compris...” “Non, monsieur Miguel, je vous assure...” “Allez, ça suffit, les manières! Occupons-nous de ces histoires de papiers. Le reste on verra plus tard.” (92-93)

Perhaps unable or unwilling to fully admit the nature his contract with Miguel, Azel prefers to avoid forcing the issue.

Although it begins as a well-delineated (despite Azel's supposed naïveté), quasi-contractual exchange of sex for money, a job, and a way out of Morocco, and presumably for freedom from the corruption and stagnation of his home country, Azel's relationship with Miguel ultimately becomes a disquieting source of unease, a malaise whose progression is gradual and seemingly inexorable. Some of Azel's unease stems from the gradual blurring of boundaries

between the “work” of sleeping with Miguel and his presumed *true* heterosexual identity, which he expresses through ongoing relationships with women like Siham, and which presumably bring him pleasure, while his contact with Miguel does not. When Azel first admits the true nature of his relationship with Miguel to Siham, however, he indicates that his experiences with Miguel have given rise to uncertainties:

"Je suis devenu l'amant de Miguel." Après un long silence, Siham, qui avait envie de pleurer, lui demanda s'il en éprouvait du plaisir. "Je ne sais pas; quand je lui fais l'amour, je pense très fort à une femme, toi par exemple. Voilà, maintenant tu sais tout. Je suis nu devant toi." (105)

Azel *does not know* if sex with Miguel involves pleasure, tellingly, and he confides in Siham his fear that he will end up doubting his sexuality (106) as a result of his relationship with Miguel. Azel's doubts are an indication of the extent to which, even in this relatively early stage of his association with Miguel, his supposed simulation of homosexuality for Miguel's benefit (and his own benefit, of course) has taken on uncomfortable tinges of reality.

In an attempt to hold on to his previous self-identification as heterosexual, Azel makes a point of going to a brothel at least once a week (126). However, such efforts to ward off the increasing ambiguity surrounding his sexual identity are not entirely effective. As Miguel eventually remarks, Azel becomes increasingly defensive with respect to his “pulsions,” and conflict seems to grow within him:

De son côté, Miguel n'était pas dupe. Il savait pertinemment qu'Azel n'était pas amoureux de lui, et qu'il profitait surtout de la situation. Bien sûr, ce n'était pas aussi simple. Il y avait souvent entre eux de vrais moments de tendresse, des moments où ils se sentaient

proches l'un de l'autre. Mais Azel ne se laissait jamais aller, il se contrôlait, avait peur de ses pulsions. (133)

Azel's "simple" heterosexuality at the outset of *Partir* slowly becomes a more complicated question than even Azel envisioned when he first wondered whether he could accept sleeping with a European man as a means of escaping Morocco, and one which Azel finds it increasingly difficult to answer.

One scene in particular showcases the extent to which Azel seems to lose control of his sexual identity as his story progresses. When Azel's repeated visits to a brothel and a prostitute named Soumaya become too much for Miguel to bear, he demands that Azel participate in an unusual party he throws in Barcelona, though he does not explain what the party will entail. At first, Azel is unsure of Miguel's intentions, but they become clear in short order:

Enfermé dans la chambre de bonne, Azel ne savait pas à quoi s'attendre. Il entendait le bruit de la fête mais ne bougeait pas. Carmen lui apporta un caftan, une perruque presque rouge, une ceinture brodée d'or, des babouches et un voile. Que des habits de femme! Il saisit d'un coup l'intention de Miguel. (135)

Azel understands in that moment that Miguel intends for him to dress as a woman and entertain Miguel's guests as the centerpiece of the party. Miguel's gesture places Azel's conflicted sexual identity on stage in three senses: first by placing him on a public stage created by his partygoers and his living room, secondly by forcing Azel to see his own sexual ambiguities represented on the stage of his male body, now juxtaposed with the feminine clothes covering it, and thirdly by creating a *mise en abyme* of the sexually ambiguous *character* Azel portrays, as if an actor on stage, in his ongoing relationship with Miguel.

Miguel's actions alone do not *cause* Azel's sexuality to change; rather, they bring the reality of Azel's crisis to light, perhaps cruelly, and punctuate a gradual transformation initiated long before. More importantly, they provide one indication that Azel experiences that transformation as a form of disappearance. A particularly significant image is brought to Azel's mind as soon as he understands Miguel's intentions for him at the party: "C'est alors que l'image de Nouredine, cet ami qui était mort noyé, s'imposa brusquement à Azel. Terrifié, il alla se regarder dans le miroir mais n'y rencontra que son propre visage fatigué, prêt à devenir un masque" (135). The equation in that passage between Azel's fate and Nouredine's, as well as the image of his face as a mask, invoke the premonitory imagery of *Partir*'s opening scene. Like Nouredine or the bees in the Hafa Café's patrons' glasses, Azel finds himself drowning, pulled downward into the sea and toward its inaccessible, dark floor, unable to find solid identity ground on which to stand and save himself. The falsity of his "mask" and the emptiness of death implicated in that imagery serve to underscore the sense that a part of Azel's identity is slipping away into the half-reality of simulation and the non-place of oblivion where Toutia inters her victims.

Although Azel attempts to regain some form of power over the expression of his sexual identity before going "on stage" at Miguel's party, comments by Miguel's guests and the manner in which Azel is described in that scene demonstrate that his efforts are ineffective. He first attempts to reassert control by playing his part in earnest. "Se reprenant, Azel décida de jouer le jeu, et d'étonner son patron. Il se maquilla comme une mariée, prit soin d'enfiler correctement les vêtements féminins, ajusta sa nouvelle chevelure, et attendit la suite" (136). The narrator's use of the reflexive "se reprendre" describe Azel's actions is particularly significant in that regard: by

purposefully playing the game Miguel has arranged, Azel hopes to *re-take* a part of himself by actively overplaying the character he finds himself representing.

Miguel's guests put the lie to Azel's supposed re-taking and undermine what he hoped to achieve by acting in earnest when Azel's character produces an effect opposite to the one he intended. "Mais quelle belle statue," one guest exclaims, equating Azel with a mere representation of a person made of inanimate stone. "Et quel mélange parfait, mi-homme, mi-femme! Mais c'est que Miguel nous gâte. Oh, la moustache! Regarde cette barbe de quelques jours, comme c'est excitant," the guest continues. Another responds: "C'est la plus belle crevette du Maghreb!" With each remark, it becomes increasingly apparent that Miguel's guests see Azel either as the blend of man and woman his costume was intended to produce or as a "crevette" or "statue." Azel himself, the actor playing the role, disappears behind the chimera he projects, and in a sense he thereby fulfils his original wish to "devenir une ombre transparente, visible le jour seulement, une image voguant sur les flots à toute vitesse" (15). Instead a form of immateriality allowing him to cross the sea, however, Azel's transparency during Miguel's party is a form of negation. An interjection by Miguel indicates both the seriousness of his relationship with Azel and of the scene he has staged: "Non, non, détrompez-vous, lui, ce n'est pas une crevette, et encore moins une passade, c'est du sérieux, je vous assure!" (136).

The show Azel puts on for Miguel's guests only serves to render him still more transparent. "Azel avançait comme un comédien ou un danseur avant d'exécuter son ballet" (136), according to the narrator, and his status as an "actor or a dancer" in the narrator's description again indicates the extent to which performance has become integral to his identity. Miguel further characterizes Azel as an object rather than a self or subject—as a conquest, a body, a bronze, and a possession—when he presents him to his assembled guests:

Mes amis, je suis heureux de vous présenter ma dernière conquête: un corps d'athlète sculpté dans le bronze, avec en supplément un chouia de féminité. C'est un étalon rare; il a fait des études mais connaît aussi les bas-fonds de Tanger, la ville de tous les bandits et de tous les traîtres; Azel, bien sûr, n'es ni un bandit ni un traître, il est simplement un très bel objet, un objet de toutes les tentations. Voyez donc sa peau magnifique! Vous pourrez le toucher. Faites la queue, mais surtout ne vous bousculez pas, il est là, il ne va pas partir. Caressez-lui la hanche, par exemple, et retenez bien vos pulsions. Il est à moi, et pas question qu'on se le dispute! (137)

Whatever agency Azel hoped to assert by playing his part in earnest is washed away by the objectifying discourse of the party, and the scene emphasizes the inexorability with which his sexual identity seems to be slipping away from him, caught up, like Azel, in a system of forces that both dominates him and changes him over time.

As Azel's unease over his relationship with Miguel grows, and as his discomfort with the form of prostitution he is engaged in increases, Azel becomes increasingly unstable. When he returns to the Hafa Café on a visit to Tangier, he describes his troubled state of mind to his friend Abdeslam:

Tu veux que je t'avoue quelque chose? Je ne vais pas bien, je ne sais même plus exactement ce que je suis dans toute cette histoire. Un *falso*, un faux sur toute la ligne, je passe mon temps à faire semblant, à fuir, il n'y a qu'avec Siham que je me sens à l'aise, mais elle est très peu disponible et n'habite pas Barcelone. (165)

In part, the destabilization of Azel's sexual identity and the resulting destabilization of his sense of control and coherence as a self—as evidenced by his perception of himself as “un faux sur toute la ligne”—manifests in defensiveness and, ultimately, denial of reality. When Abdeslam



asks who is “passif” and “actif” between Azel and Miguel, Azel admits the nature of his relationship, but reflexively defends his masculinity: “Je suis un homme, pas un *zamel!*” (165). Later, when Kenza attempts to speak with him about his sexuality, Azel denies that the relationship is sexual at all:

Azel niait avant même qu'elle ait abordé la question; il s'enflammait, criait: mais quoi, pour qui me prends-tu? Je ne suis pas une paillasse, je ne suis pas un mendiant, Miguel est un ami, un prophète envoyé par Dieu pour sauver une famille, c'est un homme généreux, pourquoi insinues-tu que cette générosité est minée par l'intérêt, mais enfin, tu ne connais rien de ma vie, ma vraie vie [. . .]. (183)

As the pressure building within Azel mounts, he becomes withdrawn, unreliable, and standoffish.

A second transformation accompanies Azel's instability: as his malaise deepens, his sexual identity becomes increasingly null. For, as he discovers when he visits Siham one day in Marbella, a Spanish town where she found work as an aide for a handicapped child, he is increasingly incapable of intercourse with members of any sex:

Eh bien, la semaine dernière, *walou!* Tu sais ce que ça veut dire, *walou?* Rien de rien, j'étais incapable d'être un homme, excuse-moi, mais il faut que je parle, il faut que ça sorte, la honte, l'immense honte, la *hchouma!* Elle a été gentille, elle n'a pas fait de commentaire, elle a juste dit, c'est pas grave, c'est la fatigue, le stress, le changement de climat. Quelle fatigue, quel stress? (233-234)

The stress Azel fails to recognize in that passage, and which leads to the impotence he describes, is the stress that he denies in his earlier conversation with Kenza: namely, the disintegration of his sexual identity and sense of masculinity, a process that began even before his first encounter with Miguel and only grew more acute thereafter.

In the end, Azel's occasional impotence becomes permanent, and his sexuality is symbolically effaced altogether as a result. He sums up his condition in a remark to a doctor friend of Miguel: "Tu sais, je ne bande plus!" (264). Their meeting takes place after Azel's relationship with Miguel comes to a dramatic end and after he "eut comme un sentiment de soulagement" (219) when their ties are severed. "Je suis libre, enfin libre," he exclaims, and "je n'ai plus besoin de baiser un mec pour vivre confortablement!" (219). His sense of freedom is illusory, though, because instead of reasserting his heterosexuality, as one might expect, Azel becomes symbolically asexual, and it seems that the transformations he undergoes are both ineluctable and nullifying.

### **The Loss of the Word**

A third element of Azel's self that seems to slip away from him gradually over the course of *Partir* concerns language. Unlike other émigrés, perhaps, the loss of language that Azel experiences is not related to confusion or conflict between his mother tongue and the language of the country he lives in. Azel's loss relates instead to the more general capacity to use language to make sense of the world and of himself: or, in short, his power of narration.

Azel's declining ability to use language is reflected firstly in his inability to produce and control a narrative of his sexuality. To the extent that all identities are products of language, created and understood through negotiations of complex individual and social narratives, Azel's increasing powerlessness to maintain a satisfactory self-image with respect to his sexuality (figured by scenes like Miguel's party) is evidence that he feels his grasp on certain aspects of those narratives weakening. A more general inability to speak and express himself develops over the course of *Partir* in parallel with the slipping-away of the sexual foundations of his identity,

visible in the contrast between early scenes in which Azel is verbose, sometimes to his detriment, and later ones that depict him struggling to find words or having no desire to speak.

Early in *Partir*, Azel expresses himself at length and without heed to his safety in scenes such as his barroom confrontation with Al Afia. Azel's diatribe against the corrupt *passeur* consists of a single sentence stretching over a page and a half of the novel (19-20). Azel's words in the bar are public, numerous, and delivered with such emotion that he "criait de plus en plus fort" (20). Gradually, though, Azel speaks less and less, and he becomes increasingly silent in a number of senses. His refusal to denounce the police officers who raped him (73) is one such form of silence, and the unspoken understanding of the nature of his future "work" with Miguel is another (93). Nearer the end of the novel, Azel both refuses to speak in some circumstances and finds in others that he has no desire to. As his relationship with Miguel progresses, "Azel était de plus en plus tendu, et évitait de se retrouver seul avec sa soeur" (173), likely for fear that she would attempt to force him to speak about his troubled state of mind. Azel comes to envy "la facilité qu'avait Abbas," an acquaintance from the Ramblas neighborhood of Barcelona, "pour parler de sa vie, dire ses problèmes, ses difficultés, se confier," while Azel, "lui, il n'osait pas" (198). When Miguel finally throws Azel out after his frequent absences, theft, and inconstant work at Miguel's galleries become intolerable, Azel returns to the Ramblas where he sees familiar faces but feels "aucune envie de parler avec eux," for he "se sentait même étranger à leur langue, à leurs manières, à leur monde" (216). Though he "insista pour que Kenza écoute ses explications" after a verbal altercation concerning her boyfriend Nâzim, and though "Azel avait tellement besoin de parler" (232), the introspection contained in the multi-page monologue he delivers to his sister is derailed by superstition and misplaced blame for his condition, which

he attributes alternatively to a spell cast by Carmen, Miguel's housekeeper, or to the supposedly critical moment when Miguel asked him to urinate on Brazilian guests (233-236).

The gradual restriction of Azel's speech also applies to the written word. After it becomes clear that he will be able to leave Morocco, the description of Azel's wait for his first flight to Spain suggests that securing his departure prompted him to write. At the airport, Azel "eut envie de relire la lettre qu'il avait écrite à son pays le jour où il avait reçu son visa d'entrée et de séjour en Espagne" (87). The letter resembles a written farewell after ending an unhealthy relationship, and its prose is lucid and flowing. "J'ai enfin la possibilité, la chance de m'en aller," writes Azel, "de te quitter, de ne plus respirer ton air, de ne plus subir les vexations et humiliations de ta police, je pars le coeur ouvert, le regard fixé sur l'horizon, fixé sur l'avenir" (88). An enumeration of some of those "vexations et humiliations" follows, accompanied by reflections on his rupture with Morocco, which he viewed as a temporary estrangement at the time, and the nature of the "folie" (89) he seeks to escape.

As if to foreshadow a decline in Azel's written expression, a bee appears while he reads his letter. "À un moment, une abeille vint tourner autour de la table, il se surprit à la suivre des yeux" (87-88). The insect recalls the bees in the half-empty glasses of tea in *Partir's* opening scene and connects Azel's writing with the imagery of drowning and disappearance evoked at the Hafa Café. Azel's unexpected attention to the bee hints at its significance, and its arrival as he reads his letter suggests that, just as he "drowns" as his sexual identity slips from his grasp, so too he will experience a similar form of figurative drowning with respect to language.

The contrast between Azel's written production early in the novel and his abandonment of writing while in Spain supports that notion. The periods before and immediately after Azel's departure are relatively productive in terms of writing. Azel continues his letter and records his

thoughts in a notebook at several moments throughout the text, including the night immediately following his arrival in Spain. However, his writing becomes less frequent and less focused over time, and it takes on an increasingly despairing tone as well. After his visit to Siham in Marbella during which Azel discusses his sexuality briefly, for instance, he spends a night out on the town in Màlaga where, perhaps due to alcohol and *kif*, he imagines himself being forced to return to Morocco. Both the hallucination and its aftermath hint at difficulties with language of the kind I have suggested Azel comes to suffer: in his hallucination, he is unable to speak to others: “il se débattait, criait mais personne ne l’entendait” (107), and after he returns to his hotel he “eut envie de continuer la lettre à son pays, mais était bien trop faible pour écrire” (107).

The next day, Azel “put enfin reprendre son cahier” (107), but rather than a flowing letter to his country, what he now writes consists of questions about his perception of fellow Moroccans and expressions of his “honte” (108) concerning his status. None of the relief and sense of liberation evident in his earlier writing can be found in that most recent entry in his notebook. Then, some time later, Azel once again finds it difficult to write after the party during which Miguel forces Azel to dress like a woman. “Il sentit pour la première fois depuis des semaines le besoin d’ouvrir son cahier et d’écrire” the day after the party, but when he does open his notebook, “aucun mot ne sortit. Juste un trait barrant la page” (138).

Azel’s fatalism further characterizes the ability to create or alter narrative as outside of his control. Even before he encounters Miguel or leaves Morocco, suffering the diverse crises of identity departure seems to imply, Azel is described as being “de ces hommes convaincus que tout ce qui leur arrive est dans l’ordre écrit des choses, écrit peut-être pas dans le grand Livre celeste, mais écrit quelque part” (8). His vague belief in *al-mektoub* (المكتوب), or “what is

written,” evoke a fatalistic mindset regarding the future that is common in some quarters of Moroccan society and in some popular understandings of Islamic theology.

The metalepsis of Ben Jelloun’s reference to the notion of predestination in written form also reminds the reader that Azel’s experiences are, in fact, determined in advance from the reader’s point of view: he is a character in a novel. After his falling-out with Miguel and his ejection from Miguel’s house, too, “fataliste, il pensait que son destin devait prendre ce chemin et qu’il ne fallait pas le contrarier” (284-285). Like Diderot’s *Jacques*, Azel feels that he is a pawn in a story whose trajectory he cannot alter, and he is figured as doubly incapable of constructing any narrative that might help him negotiate the meaning of his actions and experiences: constitutionally incapable, given his personality, and also lacking the authorial power of Ben Jelloun.

Comparisons of Azel to actors and dancers occur at other moments than the party scene at Miguel’s house as well, and they further aid in depicting him as an individual who executes rather than creates a script. Azel “avait l’air d’un prince d’Orient, ou d’un personnage de film en noir et blanc des années cinquante” (81) when he welcomes guests to Miguel’s house before leaving Tangier, for instance. When Azel’s relationship with Miguel begins to disintegrate, their house is described as “en train de se transformer en un théâtre où se jouait une mauvaise pièce” (183).

After their separation seems inevitable, Azel’s belief in predestination grows stronger: he then believes “fermement” in destiny and in premonitory dreams, and he “se laissait guider parce qu’il appelait ‘les effluves du parfum de la mort’” (215). Moreover, “il était devenu un véritable menteur professionnel, un *comédien* qui savait retourner la situation la plus inextricable en sa faveur” (215, emphasis mine). In sum, Azel’s fatalism and Ben Jelloun’s metaleptic

gestures suggest that Azel's migration involves a growing awareness that the language through which he exists and acts—as a Moroccan, as a self-identified heterosexual man, and also as a character in a book—is beyond his control, and his ability to *use* language to express himself meaningfully slips away.

### **From Departure to Disappearance**

Azel's fraying ties to his community, the deterioration of identity that stems in part from his sexual compromises, and the decline in his powers of expression over the course of *Partir* are a form of disappearance to which he is subjected over time. The connection between Azel's story and the notion of disappearance is supported not only by the nature of the transformations that take place within him and of his troubled state of mind, but also by the many instances in which he or another character is described as vanishing (for a short time, at least, in Azel's case) without explanation. Such "individual" or "total" disappearances occur with some frequency in *Partir*, and they signal a connection between Azel, his departure, and the idea of disappearance, inviting the reader to consider the ways in which his experiences constitute forms of disappearance in their own right. When imagining his drowning at the beginning of the novel, Azel envisions his body, for instance,

dans une barque peinte en blanc et en bleu, une barque de pêcheur s'éloignant avec une lenteur démesurée vers le milieu de la mer, car Azel a décidé que la mer qu'il voit face à lui a un centre et ce centre est un cercle vert, un cimetière où le courant s'empare des cadavres pour les mener au fond, les déposer sur un banc d'algues. (14)

That vision evokes the “total” disappearance of individual migrants and their bodies during their journeys, and for some readers may also recall other texts, like Youssef Amine El Alamy’s *Les clandestins*, where that specific cause of disappearance is prominent.

Likewise, when an Islamist recruiter approaches Azel to join an international network channeling fighters to conflicts in the Middle East, the danger of an individual’s “wholesale” disappearance is at issue. Azel recalls the sudden disappearance of his friend Mohamed-Larbi and the conversation between the latter’s father and a police officer who explains how unexpectedly that danger may manifest:

C’était impossible, répétait pourtant le père de Mohamed-Larbi. Son fils, affirmait-il, était un mécréant, il ne faisait pas le ramadan, se saoulait souvent, c’était même un drame pour la famille et les voisins. Justement, lui expliquait un officier de police, c’est exactement ce genre de type qui les intéresse. Ils ont leurs méthodes pour le convaincre.

(34)

In some cases, communication from recruits like Mohamed-Larbi ceases entirely, and many never return to their homes. Whether because of the secrecy of Islamists’ operations or the recruits’ death on the battlefield, the temptation of the Islamist message is associated with the possibility of vanishing without a trace. A reader with a basic understanding of Islamist recruitment in reality might speculate that both Mohamed-Larbi and Azel became part of a process leading to disappearance as a consequence of similar social, economic, or political pressures.

Other moments in which a term like “vanish” is used to describe an individual’s actions underscore the connection between departure and disappearance in *Partir*. When Miguel first comes to Azel’s aid, Azel “profita d’une courte absence de son hôte pour disparaître” (59) after



polite conversation at Miguel's house. When waiting for his flight to Spain and while reading his letter to his country, Azel "eut soudain l'envie de *s'éclipser*, de s'en aller loin d'ici lire à haute voix cette lettre que beaucoup de ses copains auraient voulu écrire" (88, emphasis mine).

Mohamed-Larbi "obtint un visa et on ne le revit plus" (113), the narrator reveals that Miguel's first love "a tout quitté et a disparu" (154), Azel "disparut" (159) when Kenza and Miguel are married, Miguel worries that Azel is "introuvable" (187) after they fight, Kenza "disparut" (274) after discovering her lover Nâzim had hidden his past (and his family) from her, and Abbas, an undocumented friend of Azel, explains his method of evading the police:

Je suis le champion toutes catégories de la clandestinité, je me fais aussi noir que la nuit pour qu'on ne me voie pas, je me fais aussi gris que l'aube et la brume pour passer inaperçu, j'évite les endroits déserts, je me tiens tout le temps prêt à courir [. . .]. (197)

Finally, Azel "ne donna plus de nouvelles à personne" (306) for several days before he is found dead at the hands of the Islamist "Brothers" he spies on for the Spanish police.

Unlike Mohamed-Larbi, and unlike Mamaya's son in *Les funeraillles du lait*, however, the form of disappearance Azel experiences does not conform to the model suggested by those instances in which the location or fate of an individual (or his body) are unknown. Instead, Azel's experiences, emblemized by his relationship to his community and his sexuality, represent a form of gradual, partial, and ineluctable *disappearing* of the self and its foundations, including the ability to construct meaning and stable identities through narrative.

The conversation between Mohamed-Larbi's father and the policeman who explains Mohamed-Larbi's disappearance includes a passage that exemplifies the kind of *disappearing* Azel undergoes. After joining his new Islamist brethren, the police officer explains, an individual like Mohamed-Larbi is subjected to a process of indoctrination:

Ils [. . .] lui donne un passeport et des visas, faux évidemment, mais il ne le sait pas, une fois arrivé de l'autre côté, une autre équipe, plus dure, s'en occupe, les choses deviennent plus claires, faire la révolution pour nettoyer les pays musulmans des mécréants locaux et étrangers, le tout prend de trois à six mois, le lavage de cerveau ne se fait pas immédiatement, ils prennent leur temps [. . .]. (34)

The recruit's brainwashing results in a transformation in his thoughts and personality so extensive that his family may find him unrecognizable upon his return, if he returns at all. The officer explains to the father that "ton fils réapparaîtra un jour, barbu, tu ne le reconnaîtras pas, il aura changé, alors préviens-nous, tu rendras service à ton pays..." (35).

Like Azel, the recruit's experiences seem to alter fundamental parts of his identity, such that he becomes unrecognizable even to the individuals that know him best. In that sense, the person who departed does in fact "disappear" over the course of his journey in the Islamist underworld, though it would be impossible to identify a specific moment at which the disappearance occurred. The transformation itself constitutes a *process* of disappearance, in the recruit's case, and perhaps one from which recovery analogous to his physical return is impossible. No longer the son whose trace the family sought, and now reclassified by the state as a threat, something of the individual who departed slipped away. Almost as if the returnee were only a simulacrum of the departed, the presence of the former underscores the absence of the latter.

Both the transformation of recruit into zealot and the changes that Azel undergoes are portrayed in *Partir* as disappearances, rather than mere changes, by virtue of the insistent demand, the void, and the sense of aporia surrounding them. The result is an atmosphere and a type of experience not unlike Anton Voyl's and Mamaya's. The demand to investigate the

absence of the letter E in *La disparition* and the demand to address the absence of Mamaya's son in *Les funeraillles du lait* find a parallel in the call to *leave* felt by Azel and other characters in *Partir*. For him, the call is already figured as all-consuming in *Partir*'s first scenes, albeit only momentarily so, and it becomes a demand he cannot ignore when the forces driving him to leave become more compelling than his ties to his society and even his sexual preferences.

The rupture that then occurs—even though he considers it to be temporary—is depicted as the result of forces beyond his control. Although Azel is not “called” by desire or love to engage in a sexual relationship with Miguel, it is the only plausible condition (from his point of view) upon which he is able to respond to the insistent call to leave. As such, compromising his perceived sexual identity is as much of a demand as the call to leave itself. And although Azel is not “called” to stop speaking or writing, the decline in his powers of expression is presented in *Partir* as something likewise imposed upon him by the distress he suffers but finds it difficult to grasp fully.

Like the disappearance of the letter E in *La disparition*, which predates Voyl's existence and shapes his actions, the corruption, economic stagnation, and violence Azel encounters in Morocco are a part of the environment, and Azel seems to perceive them as an absence in the same way that Voyl is certain that something that ought to be present in his reality has disappeared. Consequently, from Azel's point of view the communion and support he believes ought to exist between a society and its members appears to slip away *from* him. Similarly, his sexuality and sense of self are caught up in currents, like the ones that pull his body to the ocean floor in his imagination and like the political climate that precipitated the disappearance of Mamaya's son, whose causes and consequences are not immediately perceivable. And, also like Voyl and Mamaya, the problems Azel encounters are ones he finds impossible to remedy from

within the social, political, or traditional frameworks in which they arose. The product of Azel's impossible situation is a form of aporia that manifests in silence, albeit a silence that is as untenable as the demand to leave that seems to have produced it in the first place.

The emptiness of Azel's departure and of his disintegrating sense of self is reflected in his uprooting from Morocco, in the absence of any new sense of rootedness while in Spain, and in the nullity of his silence and "neutral" sexuality by the end of *Partir*. Azel's relationship to different physical spaces, especially in Spain, symbolizes his alienation from both his old and new homes. When he first arrives in Spain, for instance, "le soir Azel se retrouva seul dans la petite chambre" that was prepared for him, and "il avait envie de sortir mais craignait la réaction de Miguel" (94). The supposed freedom and self-affirmation bestowed by productivity and income, which Azel believed he might enjoy in Spain, is immediately belied by his virtual imprisonment in his room.

Later, when Miguel proposes a visit to Tangier—a return, from Azel's perspective—the idea barely interests his new conquest, who seems as detached from his home city as he is from his current one. Miguel, by contrast, is not hindered in his movements, able to travel at will from one country to another and even to enter a space where, in Morocco, "les non-musulmans n'ont pas le droit d'y mettre les pieds" (156). As a favor to Azel and his sister Kenza, Miguel agrees to a *mariage en blanc* with the latter, converts to Islam, and is thereby granted access to mosques. Moreover, he is also granted access to a social status conferred by marriage. After Miguel and Kenza's wedding, one of the *adouls* (legal and religious notaries and officiants) who oversaw the ceremony asks Miguel about his knowledge of Islam:

- Vous savez ce que dit l'islam à propos du mariage?
- Parfaitement: un bon musulman s'accomplit en se mariant.

— Je vois, vous ne faites pas semblant! (158)

Whereas Miguel enters privileged spaces (both figurative and literal) by marrying Kenza, “Azél, dans son coin, assistait à la cérémonie en pensant à Siham. Il ne se voyait pas la demander en mariage. Il aimait trop sa liberté et fuyait les responsabilités” (158). A physical distance separates Azel from the religious space created by Miguel’s ceremony, and his thoughts concerning Siham place him at a figurative distance from being able to “s’accomplir” within the dominant traditions of his social context. By virtue of his knowledge, his conversion, and his marriage, Miguel also finds himself at ease in spaces that ought to be more familiar and comfortable for Azel, whom the entire affair unsettles: “Azél, mal à l’aise, disparut, laissant Miguel seul” (159). Miguel’s mobility and Azel’s distances and unease underscore the sense that the latter is alienated from *all* spaces of belonging and from the identity touchstones found in them.

Eventually, Azel openly addresses the question of belonging to no particular space and place when Miguel refers offhandedly to his house in Tangier as “notre maison.” “Oui, ‘notre’ maison, comme j’aurais pu dire ‘la’ maison, enfin, tu sais bien que tu es chez toi que ce soit ici ou là-bas,” Miguel explains, to which Azel responds: “Ça veut dire quoi ‘être chez moi’? Est-ce que cela veut dire que je peux faire ce que je veux dans la maison, que je peux en disposer comme je veux?” (139-140). The tacit answer to his second question, of course, is *no*. Miguel has homes in both Morocco and Spain, but Azel has neither a physical residence to call his own nor ties of belonging to either place.

Flaubert, a Cameroonian man Azel encounters one day in a park, further highlights the latter’s alienation from the social and physical spaces he attempts to inhabit, since Flaubert manages to remain connected to his place of origin even while abroad. Flaubert thinks of his

country fondly and considers himself to be rooted in its spaces and places even while he finds himself separated from them. He calls Cameroon “la terre de mes ancêtres” (271), and he speaks of his connection to those ancestors as well. Azel, on the other hand, is figured as belonging in (and to) no place at all, and he despises rather than reveres Moroccans. Consequently, Azel seems to teeter on the edge of a void of non-belonging into which only his association with Miguel prevents him from sliding. By virtue of his legal status in Spain and because of his alienation from Morocco, Azel risks effacement as a member of any society and faces a social and legal void reminiscent of the stateless, nationless migrant’s particular kind of exile.

The “void” in question with respect to Azel’s sexuality concerns the absence of sexual identity implied both by the ambiguities he discovers in his relationship with Miguel and by his impotence near the end of *Partir*. In Azel’s estimation, sexuality’s importance for one’s identity is ontological in nature: one’s sexual preferences can determine what one *is*. When Kenza tries to speak to Azel about his relationship with Miguel, Azel’s defensive reaction illustrates the point: “je ne suis pas une paillasse, je ne suis pas un mendiant” (183), he exclaims, and the wording of his response indicates his fear that admitting his relationship with Miguel would redefine him as either a contemptible object or a beggar.

While not particularly significant alone, that exchange is emblematic of a general connection drawn in *Partir* between Azel’s unmoored sexual identity and the threat of erasure. As I discussed previously, for example, Azel is referred to as a “statue,” “crevette,” and “objet” (137) when he is forced to enact his sexual ambiguity while dressed as a woman at one of Miguel’s parties. In that scene, Azel’s personhood is effaced in the eyes of the guests (and Miguel) when he disappears behind the character he plays. In another scene, Azel voices the fear of being unable to define what he *is* when he explains to his friend Abdeslam that “je ne sais

même plus exactement *ce que je suis dans toute cette histoire*” (165, emphasis mine). His inability to define himself in that manner invites the question of whether he *is* anything in particular and implies the possibility that he may not be anything at all. Though he attempts to define himself when he says he is neither a “paillasse” nor a beggar, he does so purely through negation, indicating the extent to which his sense of self crumbles over the course of the novel.

Azel finally names the threat of erasure he senses when his impotence deprives him of whatever sense of worth and identity he might draw from being “un homme” who penetrates others, “pas un *zamel*” (165) who does not. “Je suis troublé,” he admits to Siham, “je ne bande pas!” (171), and he equates his increasing impotence with being a *walou*, a “rien de rien” who is “incapable d’être un homme” (233). Meanwhile, Azel disappears without notice with increasing regularity, and he begins to rely on drugs to maintain a semblance of equilibrium. Even after he leaves Miguel and finds what he considers to be useful work as an informant gathering information about an Islamist network for the Spanish police, Azel still turns to those drugs to stave off the emptiness that continues to stalk him (305-306).

As he finds himself less and less able to speak and write, Azel encounters a similar sense of emptiness through his realization that he is powerless to shape both “*ce que je suis dans toute cette histoire*” (165) and the overall trajectory that story itself. Defined by others in nearly every sense—as Miguel’s conquest by his party-goers, as a possession when Miguel exclaims that “il est à moi” (137), as an idealistic, intellectual, troublemaking outsider by Al Afia and the Tangier police, for example—, Azel is unable to construct and control a meaningful narrative account of himself, and a “malaise” grows within him as words fail. When the police pick him up after he blacks out in the street, Azel explains to his sister that:

[. . .] ils croyaient que j'avais eu un malaise. En un sens ils n'avaient pas tort, mais c'est un malaise ancien, très ancien, un malaise qui dure depuis si longtemps, un immense malaise, quelque chose qui fait mal, comme des aiguilles qui joueraient avec mon coeur, avec mon foie, des aigreurs, des envies de vomir. (235-6)

The malaise he mentions is not named directly, but Azel's gradual disintegration, which begins even before he meets Miguel, suggests that it is related at least in part to the economic, political, social, cultural, and other forces that push him to leave Morocco and that prevent Azel from exercising control over the "story" of his identity and place in the world. The disappointments he suffers in Spain and his downward spiral of despair are symptomatic of that underlying crisis of agency. Azel comes to suspect that those forces control the story of what he *is* to a far greater extent than he does, and effectively discovers in that suspicion the possibility of his own non-reality as a character in another's narrative.

Azel flees the void surrounding his emigration by avoiding Miguel, by attempting to exorcise the ambiguity of their sexual relationships in the arms of Siham or his favorite prostitute Soumaya, and through intoxication, but he cannot escape that void even when Miguel's patronage is no longer necessary in order for him to stay in Spain. After becoming an informant for the Spanish police, a position which allows him both to feel "utile" (305) and to stay in the country,

Il s'habillait avec élégance, faisait attention à l'alcool. En revanche, il n'arrivait pas à arrêter le kif. Il en abusait au point de se trouver souvent mal. Des maux de tête violents le paralysaient, qu'il ne parvenait à calmer qu'en mélangeant de l'aspirine, du paracétamol et de la codéine. (305-306)



The unease afflicting Azel still haunts him, and ultimately he disappears in two senses near the end of the novel. He disappears in a conventional sense when he “ne donna plus de nouvelles à personne” (306) for several days, after which his police contact finds him dead in a hotel room, where he lay “par terre, la gorge tranchée, la tête dans une flaque de sang. Comme un mouton de l’Aïd-el-Kébir, les Frères l’avaient égorgé” (306). Secondly, though, Azel’s short absence before his death also marks the culmination of the progressive alienation and effacement at work even during first kif-fueled imaginations in the Hafa Café, a result of the many factors, including his growing inability to write or speak, that open up the void into which Azel gradually slips.

Finally, the demands and the emptiness Azel encounters in his death spiral are figured as beyond his comprehension or control. Azel attempts to make sense of his desire to leave Morocco in his letter to his country, and he attempts to defuse the tension of his compromised sexual identity by depicting his experiences as unpleasant duties required by “le contrat de travail définitif” (92) between himself and Miguel. However, he is ultimately unable to halt the progress of the malaise “qui dure depuis si longtemps” (235). His inability to define its point of origin in time recalls the doom that hangs over Anton Voyl and the other characters of *La disparition*, and, like the full accounting Mamaya hopes for in *Les funérailles du lait*, total (and presumably restorative) comprehension of Azel’s malaise is beyond his reach, much like his denouncement of Al Afia suggests that the economic and political forces behind his disillusion with Morocco are too entrenched and too diffuse for him to address.

*Azel’s disappearance*, then, is an existential one, and it progresses as elements of his worldview (his place in a social order, his sexuality, his agency, and so forth) crumble or slip out of his control. As it does, the notion of disappearance also obtains as a mode of experience associated with the call to leave Morocco.

### Azél's Malaise

The terms “trauma” and “traumatic” have come to be applied to an increasingly broad range of negative events, especially in popular usage, but Azél’s experiences (and his reactions to them) distinctly recall elements of Freud’s foundational model of trauma. The humiliation and alienation to which Azél is subjected, for one—not to mention his rape at the hands of Tangier’s police—are at least partly responsible for his gradual unraveling, and that process involves lacunae and repetitions of the kind Freud identifies as products of similarly terrible and traumatogenic events. In other respects, Azél’s suffering also parallels Cathy Caruth’s depiction of traumatic experience in *Unclaimed Experience*. Similarity to Freud or Caruth’s models is not a definitive or exclusive metric by which to judge whether an individual’s suffering is traumatic or not—indeed, both have been critiqued by other scholars of trauma theory<sup>23</sup>—but the parallels that exist between Freud and Caruth’s ideas and Azél’s experiences suggest that the concept of trauma is an appropriate and productive one to explore in attempting to understand his suffering and the importance of the trope of disappearance in *Partir*.

Such parallels suggest that Azél experiences trauma, but the nature of that trauma differs in important respects from the type of event Freud and Caruth describe. The notion of disappearance, which my reading of *Partir* places at the center of Azél’s perception of his world,

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<sup>23</sup> I refer here especially to Ruth Leys’s critique of Caruth in *Trauma: A Genealogy*. Leys identifies a fundamental tension in trauma theory revolving around the question of “mimesis.” In late 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century studies of trauma, Leys writes, “trauma was defined as a situation of dissociation or ‘absence’ from the self in which the victim unconsciously imitated, or identified with, the aggressor or traumatic scene in a condition that was likened to a state of heightened suggestibility or hypnotic trance. Trauma was therefore understood as an experience of hypnotic imitation or identification—what I call *mimesis*—an experience that, because it appeared to shatter the victim’s cognitive-perceptual capacities, made the traumatic scene unavailable for a certain kind of recollection” (8). Opposed to this mimetic model of trauma, an antimimetic theory understands the subject to be “essentially aloof from the traumatic experience, in the sense that she remains a spectator of the traumatic scene, which she can therefore see and represent to herself and others” (299). Leys asserts in the conclusion to her work that oscillation between mimetic and antimimetic theories of trauma is inherently unavoidable, and argues that Caruth errs in believing either theory is *capable* of superseding the other.

complicates the otherwise relatively straightforward reading of trauma one might perform. If in fact “trauma” is an appropriate term to describe the suffering Ben Jelloun depicts, it is a trauma related as much to the concept of disappearance as it is to either the social and economic forces that drive Azel to leave Morocco or the process of migration itself. Examining the interplay of disappearance, departure, Azel’s unraveling self, and Freud and Caruth’s ideas on trauma will help to shed light on the nature and meaning of the “trauma of disappearance” *Partir* describes.

Freud’s model of psychological trauma focuses on an individual subjected to a terrible (and perhaps life-threatening) event. Unprepared for the event’s horror or danger, the conscious mind never fully *experiences* the unfolding disaster it faces. Consequently, the disaster remains unavailable to the conscious mind thereafter. The event cannot be recollected, nor may any work be performed upon whatever impressions or feelings the event might engrave into some inaccessible part of the mind. Although the victim might walk away unscathed from a train wreck, as in one of Freud’s examples, the event may return to haunt her later, when she unwillingly relives some aspect of that event when a given stimulus, even one with no evident relationship to the initial trauma, triggers its reappearance in the present. Cathy Caruth explains that, in Freud’s model, “the experience of trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will” (*Unclaimed Experience* 2). The experience of trauma is *in* that repetition rather than the event itself, since it remains by definition unintegrated into the conscious mind, its narratives, its networks of signs and meanings, and so forth.

Azel’s suffering in *Partir* aligns with this model in a number of ways, including in the sense that Azel, like Freud’s trauma victim, lives through a disaster—multiple disasters, in fact, and ones that *return* in a way roughly analogous to the recurrence of an unincorporated traumatic

event. A striking example of traumatic recurrence plays out shortly before Azel entertains Miguel's guests while dressed as a woman. A moment after understanding Miguel's intentions, "l'image de Noureddine, cet ami qui était mort noyé, s'imposa brusquement à Azel. Terrifié, il alla se regarder dans le miroir mais n'y rencontra que son propre visage fatigué, prêt à devenir un masque" (135). The image of Azel's dead friend arises unbidden in that moment, becoming present and real enough to inspire terror, and it echoes Azel's own imagined death in the opening scene of *Partir*. Likewise, Azel's experience of powerlessness and his brush with death during his confrontation with Al Afia and his henchmen recurs in *Partir* in several forms, including in the control Miguel exercises over Azel and his sexual identity. It is entirely through Miguel and the work he provides that Azel is able to enjoy a simulacrum of the autonomy and status as a productive member of society he seeks, and as a result, Azel never fully escapes the humiliation and subjection he endured in Morocco: it returns daily.

Azel's problematic relationship with space and belonging while in Spain may be read as an analogous recurrence of the rift that develops between him and Morocco as well. Even after Azel rejects Miguel and the form of control inherent to their relationship, he finds himself in a remarkably similar situation after becoming an informant for the Spanish police in order to avoid deportation to Morocco. Like Miguel, it is entirely within the power of Azel's new patrons to dispose of him as they wish, since his freedom is guaranteed only by his usefulness to them, and the impossibility of truly belonging to Spain under those circumstances echoes the crumbling sense of national belonging emblemized by Azel's ejection from the bar in earlier scenes.

The sexual trauma of Azel's rape at the hands of Tangier's police is also repeated in a limited sense through his sexual relationship with Miguel. Whereas the police use sexual violence to force the status of *zamel* onto Azel, economic necessity confers a similar status when

desperation to leave Morocco encourages him to become Miguel's lover. A great deal of ambiguity surrounds Azel's views on that relationship, certainly. It is not tantamount to rape, yet there exists in it some trace of the earlier sexual violence he suffers. The theme of sexual violence again haunts Azel on an identitary level when he must dress in women's clothing to entertain Miguel's guests, since he is forced in that moment into a situation that explicitly problematizes his sex and gender.

Although it is possible to read Azel's powerlessness, brush with death when confronting Al Afia, or rape by the police as exactly the kind of disaster Freud had in mind, the "event" which returns most frequently in *Partir* is not an event at all, but rather the malaise that predates Azel's other terrible experiences. That malaise is, after all, "ancien, très ancien," and it is one that "dure depuis si longtemps, un immense malaise [. . .] qui fait mal" (235-6). Each of the other events that befall him may contribute to Azel's traumatization, but they are not figured as individually and/or entirely responsible for the distress that repeats itself, so to speak, in the form of a tone of disappearance underlying the entire novel. In that light, particular events such as Azel's rape are legible both as traumatogenic in their own right and as irruptions of an underlying trauma represented in part by his malaise. Perhaps the most "central" disaster Azel experiences in *Partir*, then, is to be found in the identitary shifts and dissolutions he seems to undergo, which constitute as much of an existential danger to him (as an individual, as an agent, or as a Moroccan, for example) as a derauling train does for its passengers.

That disaster, perhaps even to a greater extent than others that befall him, is one that Azel also fails to experience on an entirely conscious level. Evidence in support of that claim may be found in the dream-like quality of many of *Partir*'s scenes, in Azel's deteriorating powers of expression, to some extent, and especially in Azel's contradictory uncertainties and evasions

concerning his relationship with Miguel. I have discussed each of those themes previously, and will not return to them at length here, except to suggest that Azel's exchange with Siham on the subject of sex with Miguel is emblematic in that regard.

The exchange reveals a sharp contrast between the clarity with which Azel describes certain aspects of his experiences and his inability to describe others. Azel admits to Siham that "je suis devenu l'amant de Miguel" (107), and his short, unambiguous remark demonstrates that he understands (and is capable of naming) his place in their arrangement. However, when Siham asks him whether he finds the relationship pleasurable, Azel responds that he does not know: "je ne sais pas; quand je lui fais l'amour, je pense très fort à une femme, toi par exemple" (107). With Miguel's image hidden behind that of a woman, Azel does not fully participate in the reality of their interaction or confront the questions it raises. Accordingly, the fact that Azel is unable to determine *whether* he feels pleasure suggests that certain aspects of his experiences are not consciously available to him, recalling Caruth's description of trauma as located in the way an event's "very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (*Unclaimed Experience* 4). Azel is unable to answer Siham's question, not unlike a trauma victim who is unable to purposely recall and consider a disaster.

Caruth's description of trauma as an experience that "simultaneously defies and demands our witness" (5) suggests another sense in which *Partir* depicts Azel's disappearance as traumatic. Referring to the texts she analyzes in *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth writes:

[. . .] each one of these texts engages, in its own specific way, a central problem of listening, of knowing, and of representing that emerges from the actual experience of the crisis. If traumatic experience, as Freud indicates suggestively, is an experience that is not

fully assimilated as it occurs, then these texts, each in its turn, asks what it means to transmit and to theorize around a crisis that is marked, not by simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness. (5)

The problem of listening, knowing, and representing trauma arises because “traumatic experience, beyond the psychological dimension of suffering it involves, suggests a certain paradox,” according to Caruth, namely “that the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it” (91-92). Like the father whose child burned to death while he slept, who “was unable to witness” the event “as it occurred” (100), the trauma victim has difficult re-presenting something that was not *presented* to him in the first place. The nature of trauma thus ensures an inherent and insurmountable contradiction in any attempt to speak of a disaster.

Azel’s difficulty in writing and speaking about his malaise suggest that he too may be attempting to represent an event that defies witness. He speaks *around* the malaise rather than *of* it ways that suggest a “central problem of listening, of knowing, and of representing” underlies his experiences. When he mentions his “malaise ancien” (232) to his sister, for example, he neither names it nor describes it, and speaks about his impotence, a symbol of his malaise, rather than the identitary disintegration that seems to cause it. In those instances, and in scenes where Azel finds it difficult to write, the language he uses is incapable of bearing witness to the forms of disappearance to which he is subjected, and his difficulties mirror Caruth’s description of “what, in trauma, resists simple comprehension” (6).

While Azel’s story is certainly characterized by disaster, and while he finds it difficult to speak or write about his malaise, his suffering does not correspond entirely to Freud and Caruth’s models of trauma. In several of the examples I have used to illustrate his difficulty with

language, Azel nevertheless *does* attempt to represent his malaise, and *does* speak about it with limited success, suggesting that the notion of an unknowable event might not provide a full account of his suffering. For all of their similarities, Azel's experiences and Caruth or Freud's "unspeakable disaster" models of trauma are difficult to reconcile with Azel's apparent awareness of the forms of disappearance affecting him. In one passage of his letter to his country, for instance, Azel identifies his problematic relationship to Morocco and to his sexual identity as sources of his malaise when he calls himself a "traître" and "renégat à son identité". Wondering what his mother would say if she saw him, Azel asks: "*comment lui dire que son fils n'est pas un attaye, un donneur, un homme qui se met à plat ventre, une paillasse, un traître, un renégat à son identité, et à son sexe?*" (109, italics in original). Yet Azel only "bears witness" to this aspect of his trauma in his journal, never speaking to his mother of his experiences and only confiding in his sister belatedly. In the private space of his journal, then, he may speak of components of "his disaster," but it is effectively unspeakable even in the intimacy of family bonds, leading Azel to choose to believe that his mother understands his situation in a particular way. "*De toute façon,*" he writes, "*elle a sûrement tout compris elle-même, elle est intelligente. Son fils est viril, il fait l'amour à une femme, à un homme. Ce sont des choses qui ne se disent pas*" (109, italics in original). His disaster is perhaps even more unspeakable in the public sphere, where Azel is dismissed as a *zamel* or silenced by figures such as Al Afia and the Tangier police.

Likewise, the disaster Azel experiences does not possess the same temporality as the kind of disaster Freud and Caruth envision in their models of trauma. The trauma in Freud's example of a train crash, as well as in the texts Caruth studies in *Unclaimed Experience*, results from discrete events. Caruth's analysis of *Hiroshima mon amour* revolves around the punctual traumas of the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the death of the unnamed woman's German



lover, and her reading of Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* identifies the moment of Moses' murder and its repression as a foundational trauma of Judaism. Azel's disappearance, on the other hand, involves both punctual events and diffuse forces that he partially fails to experience and that recur over the course of his migration and relationship with Miguel in forms he seems not to recognize. In my reading of *Partir*, "events" like the disintegration of Azel's ties to his country and his unraveling sexual identity are repetitions of a disaster in progress *and* integral to its occurrence.

The diffuse nature of Azel's suffering and the difficulty of ascribing it to specific experiences in *Partir* suggest that the nature of his trauma might be described more accurately by the model proposed by Stef Craps in *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds*. Craps argues that the dominant model of event-based, individual trauma, described by Freud and accepted as relatively unproblematic by Caruth, is a contingent product of primarily Western notions of subjectivity reflected in the field of psychoanalysis. It may be problematic, then, when it is applied to non-Western subjects. Moreover, Craps suggests that that model fails to account for systemic or structural causes of traumatization such as racism, colonialism, or oppression, all of which may cause trauma, in Craps' estimation, and none of which may be reduced to a seminal, traumatogenic event. In my reading of *Partir*, the malaise haunting Azel and the forms of disappearance underlying it may not be attributed to one specific event either. Instead, a progressive form of trauma seems to afflict him.

Craps argues that modern manifestations of racism are capable of causing trauma in just such a progressive fashion, even when racist oppression involves no singular events or overtly racist act threatening the life or bodily integrity of a minority subject or his close associates. Such a threat is the primary criterion by which trauma is defined in the fifth edition of the

*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.<sup>24</sup> Rather than acts of violence, though, Craps argues that modern racism is characterized by subtle and frequent experiences of oppression such as being passed over for promotion or—a phenomenon given some attention in the media recently—being disproportionately suspected, arrested, or mishandled by the police. Craps writes that “one such incident alone may not be traumatizing, but traumatization can result insidiously from cumulative micro-aggressions: each one is too small to be a traumatic stressor, but together they can build to create an intense traumatic impact” (*Postcolonial Witnessing* 26). Azel’s rape by the Tangier police is no subtle micro-aggression, of course, but his malaise predates that event and is associated with analogous, subtly-oppressive forces including the pervasive corruption embodied by Al Afia. Those forces “aggress” Azel continuously and begin doing so since long before he is assaulted while in police custody.

Craps also argues that Freud and Caruth’s models of trauma are limited by their focus on the individual. According to Craps,

Dominant conceptions of trauma have often been criticized for considering trauma as an individual phenomenon and distracting attention from the wider social situation, which can be particularly problematic in a cross-cultural context (Wessells 269-71; Summerfield, “Critique” 1453-55). After all, in collectivist societies individualistic approaches may be at odds with the local culture. Moreover, by narrowly focusing on the level of the individual psyche, one tends to leave unquestioned the conditions that

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<sup>24</sup> The DSM-5’s first diagnostic criterion for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in adults is “exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence” either directly, as a witness, or by “learning that the traumatic event(s) occurred to a close family member or close friend. In cases of actual or threatened death of a family member or friend, the event(s) must have been violent or accidental” (271). The term “event” is used throughout the DSM-5’s section on PTSD, and while the possibility that repeated exposure to an event may be necessary in order to create trauma, the essential feature of PTSD in any case is “the development of characteristic symptoms following exposure to one or more traumatic events” (274).

enabled the traumatic abuse, such as political oppression, racism, or economic domination. (27-28)

Here, too, Craps argues in favor of a conception of trauma that includes experiences more closely resembling Azel's, which are neither entirely individual nor wholly social or collective in nature. Azel's economic situation and sexual relationships, his perception of the corruption he encounters, and his belief that the government and king are unable to address Morocco's problems may all be particular to him, but the disintegration of nation-ness and the social rejection Azel experiences are "events" that transpire in and through a social medium. It is in part the *meanings* of being unemployed or being a *zamel* that trouble Azel, and those meanings are likewise mediated by collective negotiation. The suffering produced by Azel's migration, relationship with Miguel, and disappearance is therefore partly produced and experienced *through* others.

Craps suggests that Frantz Fanon is one theorist who addresses the problem of collectivity in traumatic experience. While Craps points out that Fanon is not usually considered a theorist of trauma, *Peau noire, masques blancs* presents the experiences of colonialism and racism in such a way that "trauma" seems an appropriate term to describe them. He also describes those experiences in a way that evokes the trauma of disappearance in *Partir*. As Craps notes, "Fanon calls attention to the social nature of the trauma caused by racial oppression" (30), referring to a passage from *Peau noire, masques blancs* in which Fanon writes:

Il demeure toutefois évident que pour nous la véritable désaliénation du Noir implique une prise de conscience abrupte des réalités économiques et sociales. [. . .] On verra que l'aliénation du Noir n'est pas une question individuelle. A côté de la phylogénie et de

l'ontogénie, il y a la sociogénie. En un sens, pour répondre au vœu de Leconte et Damey, disons qu'il s'agit ici d'un sociodiagnostic. (8)

“Des réalités économiques et sociales” seem to be implicated in Azel's trauma, too, in addition to causes the reader of *Partir* might classify as more or less individual.

The form of trauma Fanon describes also involves feelings of erasure similar to the ones Azel experiences as components of his identity slowly vanish over the course of *Partir*.

Describing an encounter with the (white) Other in a train, Fanon recalls that “je me découvrais objet au milieu d'autres objets” (88), later adding:

Ce jour-là, désorienté, incapable d'être dehors avec l'autre, le Blanc, qui, impitoyable, m'emprisonnait, je me portai loin de mon être-là, très loin, me constituant objet. Qu'était-ce pour moi, sinon un décollement, un arrachement, une hémorragie qui caillait du sang noir sur tout mon corps? (91)

Fanon uses the metaphor of imprisonment to describe being ontologically fixed as a “sale nègre” (88) by the White gaze, a gesture which erases his agency and particularity as a human subject.

Azel experiences a similar type of imprisonment in *Partir*, which manifests in different forms of immobility and in his similar objectification under the gaze of Miguel's party guests. In that moment in particular, Azel finds himself to be an object, much like Fanon.

Like Azel, Fanon is faced with erasure, or a “décollement, un arrachement, une hémorragie,” that touches his *being*, and it occurs on a social level as much as an individual one. For, Fanon claims, “toute ontologie est rendue irréalisable dans une société colonisée et civilisée” (88)—not only due to the direct experience of the colonizer's gaze, but also because of a worldview instilled in the colonized that defines their being through its subordinate relationship to the colonizer:

Il y a, dans la *Weltanschauung* d'un peuple colonisé, une impureté, une tare qui interdit toute explication ontologique. [. . .] L'ontologie, quand on a admis une fois pour toutes qu'elle laisse de côté l'existence, ne nous permet pas de comprendre l'être du Noir. Car le Noir n'a plus à être noir, mais à l'être en face du Blanc. [. . .] Le Noir n'a pas de résistance ontologique aux yeux du Blanc. (88-89)

The trauma of what Fanon describes is partly located *in the Weltanschauung*, suggesting that the trauma may be inflicted upon the “peuple colonisé” both by colonial domination and by the diffuse, unconscious, socially-mediated transmission (including subsequent generations) of a worldview. As Craps writes, “Fanon’s analysis brings to light the harm done to marginalized groups by continuous exposure to ‘a galaxy of erosive stereotypes’ (129), which leads them to develop feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and self-hatred” (*Postcolonial Witnessing* 30). Azel’s own trauma may not result from the exact same “erosive stereotypes” Fanon had in mind, but the figure of the *zamel* haunts him in the same continuous fashion, for one, and feelings of inferiority and self-hatred are an undercurrent of his relationship with Miguel as well as an overt consequence of his impotence. Whatever its other properties, then, Azel’s suffering is largely similar to Craps’ and Fanon’s descriptions of (post)colonial trauma, and his experiences (and the forms of disappearance that structure them) are something that Caruth’s and Freud’s event-based models cannot adequately describe.

### **Absence, Loss, and the Trauma of Disappearance**

Although his trauma—the trauma of disappearance staged in *Partir*—corresponds in many respects to the notions discussed by Craps, even Craps’ model does not describe Azel’s suffering entirely. Some of Craps’ remarks on Dominick LaCapra’s distinction in *Writing*

*History, Writing Trauma* between the notions of absence and loss will, I believe, offer a point of departure for illustrating the novelty of the trauma of disappearance depicted in *Partir* and the paradoxes it contains alongside the ones inherent to Freud, Caruth, or Craps' models.

LaCapra defines losses as historically-situated (and potentially traumatogenic) events affecting individuals or groups. The concept of absence, on the other hand, possesses a different temporality. LaCapra "would situate the type of absence in which [he is] especially (but not exclusively) interested on a transhistorical level [. . .]. In this transhistorical sense absence is not an event and does not imply tenses (past, present, or future)" (*Writing History, Writing Trauma* 48-49). LaCapra warns against confusing or conflating absence and loss, stating that the stakes of the distinction "certainly include intellectual clarity and cogency, but they also have ethical and political dimensions" (44).

Craps, for his part, situates racism and similar forms of trauma that are irreducible to particular events in a category apart from either loss or absence:

Useful as these distinctions are, it is hard to see how the trauma of racism fits into this picture. Unlike structural trauma, racism is historically specific; yet, unlike historical trauma, it is not related to a particular event, with a before and an after. Understanding racism as a historical trauma, which can be worked through, would be to obscure the fact that it continues to cause damage in the present. (*Postcolonial Witnessing* 32)

Craps' differentiation of racism from LaCapra's absence and loss merits attention firstly because, as Azel's experiences show, a simple substitution of the word "disappearance" for "racism" in Craps' remarks would produce a useful description of Azel's suffering. Like racism, the sense of disappearance characterizing Azel's reality is neither exactly the product of specific events (a historical trauma) nor of an essential, transhistorical lack (a structural trauma). Craps invokes

Rosanne Kennedy in order to suggest that “other concepts” than absence and loss “are needed” (32) for an accounting of gradual trauma like racism, and, it seems, perhaps for the trauma of disappearance as well.

Craps juxtaposes LaCapra’s distinction between absence and loss with the lived experience of racism in part to demonstrate the limitations of event-based trauma theory for (post)colonial subjects and contexts. That juxtaposition usefully illustrates a similar difficulty in applying dominant understandings of the term “trauma” to the forms of disappearance that affect Azel. “Other concepts” may indeed be necessary to describe his suffering, but my reading of *Partir* suggests that it would be inaccurate to conclude that Azel’s trauma is characterized by *neither* absence *nor* loss, abandoning those notions in favor of others yet to be fleshed out. Indeed, moving *beyond* absence and loss leaves something of the particularity of Azel’s trauma behind. Reading Azel’s story as one deeply rooted in the concept of disappearance suggests instead that the trauma he suffers—the trauma of migration, perhaps, but especially the trauma that arises when disappearance structures experience, as it does for him—is *composed of* both absence and loss even if some of its properties differentiate it from either concept. Further explanation of absence and loss will, I think, support such a claim.

Using the Holocaust and apartheid as points of reference, LaCapra argues that indistinct boundaries between the concepts of loss and absence lead to difficulty in working through traumatic events. LaCapra writes, for instance, that discourses of absence ought not to be applied to losses because:

[. . .] a basic point is that individuals and groups in Germany and South Africa (as well as in other countries) face particular losses in distinct ways, and those losses cannot be adequately addressed when they are enveloped in an overly generalized discourse of

absence, including the absence of ultimate metaphysical foundations. Conversely, absence at a “foundational” level cannot simply be derived from particular historical losses, however much it may be suggested or its recognition prompted by their magnitude and the intensity of one’s response to them. (*Writing History* 45-46)

In addition, LaCapra continues,

When absence is converted into loss, one increases the likelihood of misplaced nostalgia or utopian politics in quest of a new totality or fully unified community. When loss is converted into (or encrypted in an indiscriminately generalized rhetoric of) absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted. (46)

In LaCapra’s view, then, it may be possible for an absence to engender trauma, and a loss might do so as well, but it is neither conceptually nor ethically permissible to suggest that one cause of trauma be described by both concepts, whether simultaneously or by transforming one into the other.

Yet that impermissible confusion is precisely what characterizes Azel’s experiences, in one sense, and not only because Azel himself intentionally or unwittingly blurs the distinction between absence and loss. Azel’s malaise, for example, is figured as the symptom of both losses *and* absences. On the one hand, he suffers as a result of (relatively) historically-situated forces, such as the corruption he considers endemic in Morocco. These are analogous to the historically-situated aspect of the traumatogenic process of racism in Craps. Azel suffers as a result of specific events as well, including his rape, his humiliation at Al Afia’s hands, and perhaps difficult moments in his relationship with Miguel, such as the party in Barcelona I invoked



previously. I have argued that such events may be read in a certain light as *manifestations* or *symbols* of Azel's underlying malaise, but it is hard to imagine that his rape, especially, contributes nothing in and of itself to his traumatization. Each of those experiences is legible as a loss.

On the other hand, though, his overarching malaise has neither a beginning nor an end in *Partir*. Azel's death might seem to constitute an end to his suffering, at least, but the moment of his death does not occur in *Partir*'s narrative, which cloaks it behind a disappearance. Even that disappearance is, in one sense, not a rupture in Azel's being so much as a continuation of a process that defined it, here applied to what Heidegger might call its *most* defining moment. Borrowing LaCapra's terminology, his malaise is therefore "not an event and does not imply tenses (past, present, or future)" (*Writing History, Writing Trauma* 49): it is an absence.

LaCapra suggests that such a blending of absence and loss may itself be read as a sign of trauma having occurred, rather than as a sign that a novel form of trauma is at work in the way I am suggesting. He writes:

To blur the distinction between, or to conflate, absence and loss may itself bear striking witness to the impact of trauma and the post-traumatic, which create a state of disorientation, agitation, or even confusion and may induce a gripping response whose power and force of attraction can be compelling. The very conflation attests to the way one remains possessed or haunted by the past, whose ghosts and shrouds resist distinctions (such as that between absence and loss). (46)

To some extent, that may be the case for Azel as well. For it is true that Azel has difficulty in identifying the sources of his suffering, especially when he attributes his impotence—the most

distressing manifestation of his malaise, perhaps—to a spell or to having been asked to urinate on Miguel’s Brazilian friends.

Yet the moment in which Azel suggests that his malaise has no precise point of origin in the past is figured in *Partir* as a moment of clarity, not confusion, or a moment in which Azel is *least* “possessed or haunted” by the traumatogenic processes (and by the drug use) that seem to cloud his perception in other circumstances. In contrast to the indistinct apprehension he feels at other times, that moment of clarity appears to make at least some of Azel’s situation available to his consciousness, albeit perhaps with the belated lucidity of a man condemned to die, since he is unable to arrest the progress of the malaise he finally addresses. In its clarity, Azel’s declaration indicates that absence is indeed part of his experience, just as his letter to his country points out identifiable losses that affect him as well. The forms of disappearance characterizing all of those experiences, then, might require Kennedy’s “other concepts” in order to explain their traumatic effects in full, but absence and loss are each integral to his suffering nonetheless. Some part of the particularity of Azel’s trauma seems therefore to lie in the paradoxical coexistence and combination of *both* absence and loss in the process of traumatization. That, perhaps, is one identifiable property of the trauma of disappearance—and of migration as well.

The nature and effects of the forms of disappearance staged in *La disparition* and *Les funeraillles du lait* would seem to support the claim that this paradoxical traumatic combination underlies the encounter with the concept of disappearance in other instances. The vanishing of the letter E in Perec, for example, constitutes both an event and an absence for Voyle and *La disparition*’s other characters. They sense that a change has occurred, though they are unable to describe it, and their reality is wholly circumscribed by a form of emptiness both resulting from a loss and simultaneously predating it in the ways I described in Chapter 1. In a similar fashion,

the loss of Mamaya's son in *Les funerailles du lait* is an event that becomes a defining characteristic of Mamaya's experience of the world, as if the event were transformed into absence because of its nature as a form of disappearance.

One more characteristic of the trauma of disappearance can be derived from its presentation in *Partir*, and it relates to the interaction between trauma and memory. Because they are unassimilated into structures of meaning by those who experience them, traumatogenic events in Freud and Caruth's models of trauma are not objects of memory at all, since they are both unmediated by the conscious mind while they occur and therefore impossible to recollect thereafter. To a certain extent, this is true of Azel's experiences. In all of the ways I have suggested in this chapter, he is unable to assert complete control over the narration of his partially-unintelligible disappearance, and is consequently unable to convert both past events and present experiences into meaningful experience that he might ideally work through. In that sense, he does not *remember* the disaster he experiences, and his suffering evokes the "central problem of listening, of knowing, and of representing" (*Unclaimed Experience* 5) Caruth describes.

However, in the same way that the disasters responsible for Azel's trauma are nevertheless partially "speakable"—he *does* write about them, even if writing seems to fail him too; he *does* speak about them by name, even if imprecisely, to his friends and his sister—they are also partially recoverable in memory. Moreover, some part of the traumatogenic events and processes that affect Azel persist in his memory as an unwanted presence that *recalls* traumatic repetition and its sudden irruption in consciousness but is not identical to that process. Shortly before his disappearance and death at the end of *Partir*, and in the last of the chapters bearing his name, Azel expresses his desire to be able to forget his departure and his wish to return to Morocco "comme un héros":

Il faut juste que je réussisse à oublier l'épisode de mon départ du Maroc, juste ne plus y penser, voilà, ce souvenir n'est le reflet d'aucun acte... j'ai beau chercher, je ne trouve rien, oublié, effacé, ce moment où je partais et écrivais à mon pays...

Azel voulait surtout effacer pour toujours en lui l'image de son départ et revenir au Maroc comme un héros. Ne contribuait-il personnellement à lutter contre le terrorisme qui menaçait l'Europe ? Il rêvait maintenant de passer à la télévision où on le présenterait comme le bon musulman grâce à qui une tentative d'attentat aurait été déjouée. Tout cela faisait passer au second plan les problèmes sexuels d'Azel. (304-305)

One of the problems facing Azel, then, seems to be his inability to forget his “departure”—a term that refers to much more than Azel’s journey to Spain, in my reading of *Partir*—rather than the impossibility of its recollection. Azel remembers his departure, and while I have argued that the particular events of Azel’s story neither individually nor jointly responsible for the entirety of his suffering, they are implicated in that suffering nevertheless. As such, even Azel’s literal departure *is* a part of the traumatization he experiences, and in that sense he remembers some part of the disaster that befalls him. He performs work on that memory, too, when writing a letter to his country in which he negotiates the meaning of his departure. Unlike other trauma victims, perhaps, in order to forge a new, integrated identity as a hero, Azel seeks to dis-integrate part of his past and break the referential link between his memories and the real events they are connected to.

In sum, then, the numerous similarities between Freud, Caruth, and Craps’ models of trauma and the way in which *Partir* stages Azel’s experiences suggest that his departure and the forms of disappearance underlying it cause him to suffer in a way similar to trauma victims. At the same time, however, the various contradictions and paradoxes of his suffering make it

difficult either to ascribe it to particular events or to a transhistorical absence he confronts. He experiences both loss and absence, confusion and clarity, silence and speech, remembrance and the lack of memory, and he is both aware and unaware of different aspects of the disasters to which he is subjected. For their part, those disasters are sometimes punctual, sometimes diffuse and ongoing, sometimes historically situated and sometimes a consequence of the contamination of his reality by the notion of disappearance.

In that light, it is just as inaccurate to say that Azel has *been traumatized* as it is to suggest that his trauma is identical to the kind described by Freud and Caruth. In effect, the timelessness of his malaise, his simultaneous re-membering and “de-membering” of the past, the various paradoxes of his experiences, and the unusual structure and temporality of the disappearances underlying his suffering all work together to suggest that, in a sense, trauma has not precisely *occurred*. Especially in light of the trope of disappearance and its persistence in Azel’s story, he seems instead suspended in an ongoing moment of *traumatogenesis* with no conclusive outcome, much like he experiences the *vanishing* of a sense of belonging to a nation and of his sexual identity. The notion of disappearance, like the notion of trauma, points to a moment of conversion where historically-situated loss becomes absence. The moment of traumatization is one that blends loss and absence in the sense that a historically-situated disaster becomes, in Caruth’s terms, a “breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world” (*Unclaimed Experience* 3), or a lacuna that collapses temporality when it returns in later moments of traumatic repetition. Traumatogenesis, then, is the making of the breach, and I suggest that Azel experiences something akin to that gesture as a permanent fixture of his reality reflected in the disappearances and departure that structure his experience. In my reading of *Partir*, Ben Jelloun stages a paradoxical, progressive form of disappearance he situates in the

postmodern, globalizing present, and he uses that trope to elucidate an equally paradoxical form of trauma at work in the experience of the postcolonial subject operating within that context. Rather than speaking of that subject—of Azel—as having already suffered a wound or a trauma, *Partir* depicts him as involved in a recursive process in which he is both the witness and the object of a wound to come.

## CHAPTER IV

Viewed in a certain light, memory and the notion of disappearance go hand in hand. Contemporary theories of memory suggest that what we remember is the product of a selective, interpretive transformation of experience into an intelligible form the mind can use. In the process, most of the impressions and stimuli that affect us are necessarily discarded, even if some leave traces behind.<sup>25</sup> In that sense, memory is predicated on an incalculable number of disappearances. The fact that many aspects of reality leave behind *no* trace when they are discarded, despite once being present to the mind, suggests that memory involves loss analogous to the disappearances represented by Perec, Binebine, and Ben Jelloun in the works I have studied. Contemplating memory places us in a position similar to Anton Voyl's in *La disparition*: we may be confident that an element of reality has disappeared, but must remain entirely unable to apprehend its nature. The selectivity of memory dictates that our experiences resemble Voyl's in that respect, because the paradox of *ars oblivionalis* described by Umberto Eco applies as much to experiences we do not retain as to what we might wish to forget using a technique.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> For a discussion of different views on memory in general, and cultural (or collective) memory in particular, see especially *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, a collection of essays from which I draw heavily in this chapter. Priming and semantic memory are two phenomena that suggest that impressions not "stored" in a format accessible by the conscious mind are nevertheless influential in some cases.

<sup>26</sup> See Eco, Umberto, "An *Ars Oblivionalis*? Forget It!," trans. Marilyn Migiel, *PMLA* 103.3 (1988): 254-261.

Memory and disappearance are therefore also linked by a form of nullity that each involves. When Mamaya's son disappears in *Les funeraillles du lait*, she is unable to come to terms easily with his loss because it is a deeper form of emptiness than a "normal" death might imply. The traces he leaves behind—his books, for instance, or the significance his disappearance lends to a particular date—cause her to confront that emptiness repeatedly as she ages and tries to find a means of addressing it. Similarly, the everyday experience of remembering and forgetting sometimes results in awareness of the disappearance of experience, as when we remember having known in the past something we are unable to recall in the present. Awareness of imperfect erasures invites an encounter with nullity when, in light of what we know we forget, we also ask how much of the past we must no longer know *anything* about. The experiences we do not retain and the ones we forget entirely become null: they are, for practical purposes, non-entities, formless and without content, to which a person cannot *refer* at all. Long-forgotten events sometimes return with the help of a madeleine, but others never do, whether or not the recollection of all experiences is even theoretically possible.

Like language, memory also involves a form of disappearance because it reduces reality. Blanchot writes that words necessarily erase the specificity of their objects in order to become intelligible: "pour que je puisse dire: cette femme, il faut que d'une manière ou d'une autre je lui retire sa réalité d'os et de chair" (*La part du feu* 312). Like words, the impressions the mind retains are not engrams or direct traces of our experiences, like representational theories of memory suggest.<sup>27</sup> Instead, they are encoded, linguistically or otherwise, and "stored" as already subjective representations. If memory encodes its objects in a meaningful form, then it is a faculty that brings about their disappearance to the same extent as language. Knowledge of that

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<sup>27</sup> For a description and refutation of trace theories of memory, see Howard Alexander Bursen's *Dismantling the Memory Machine*.



erasure might produce an impression that a perfect recording of reality could somehow be created, perhaps mirroring the ideal of perfect referentiality that haunts Blanchot's writer, but the "body" of experience, like the body of Mamaya's son, cannot be retrieved.

Assia Djebar's *La disparition de la langue française (LD)* explores connections between memory and the notion of disappearance by means of its protagonist Berkane. An expatriate who returns to Algeria after two decades in France, Berkane takes up residence at an inherited seaside villa where he sets about reconstructing the past through photographs, letters, journal entries, conversations, and an autobiographical novel entitled *L'adolescent*. Around him, the kidnappings and violence of the Algerian Civil War multiply, looming in the background as he undertakes a mnemonic quest for his origins.

The war becomes more and more central to Berkane's story as he unearths his past, because what he remembers seems related to the instability, "abandon," and "dégradation" (66) of the present. The war also becomes important for Berkane because of its impact on his brother Driss, a journalist, who must take extraordinary precautions to avoid being kidnapped and killed by Islamist extremists. Nadjia, a friend of his brother whom Berkane meets at his villa, leaves Algeria to avoid the war as well. Driss evades capture and Nadjia flees to Padua, but Berkane appears to become another kidnapped victim of the war while on an expedition to a particularly important site from his past. Berkane's story and his brother's peril recall the fate of many journalists and (especially French-speaking) intellectuals threatened or made to disappear during the Algerian Civil War for speaking out against the state or Islamist groups like the opposition *Front islamique du salut* (FIS). Others "vanished" into exile, like Nadjia, in order to escape the violence and instability in Algeria or to find opportunity elsewhere.

Like those journalists and intellectuals, Berkane constitutes a threat to powerful interests because of his archaeological work of recollection. What he remembers (and writes down, and shares with others) contrasts with certain dominant discourses concerning Algeria's past. Through Berkane, as Jenny Murray argues in her essay in *Anamnesia: Private and Public Memory in Modern French Culture*, Djébar suggests that amnesia concerning the Algerian War of Independence is an important factor in present-day political realities, and partly responsible for the (then very recent) civil war of the 1990s as well. Berkane's journals, letters, and novel might threaten the state, Islamists, or both, and their responsibility for his fate is implied by the historical context of Berkane's return to Algeria and by events following his disappearance.

It is also possible to see a deeper connection between memory and disappearance in *La disparition de la langue française* by interpreting Berkane's significance as the protagonist in a fiction of memory. I borrow that term from Birgit Neumann, who defines fictions of memory as "texts which represent processes of remembering" and explains that:

The term "fictions of memory" deliberately alludes to the double meaning of fiction.

First, the phrase refers to literary, non-referential narratives that depict the workings of memory. Second, in a broader sense, the term "fictions of memory" refers to the stories that individuals or cultures tell about their past to answer the question "who am I?", or, collectively, "who are we?" These stories can also be called "fictions of memory" because, more often than not, they turn out to be an imaginative (re)construction of the past in response to current needs. Such conceptual and ideological fictions of memory consist of predispositions, biases, and values, which provide agreed-upon codes for understanding the past and present and which find their most succinct expression in literary plot-lines and myths (cf. Nünning, "Editorial" 5). (334)

My reading of *La disparition de la langue française* will treat it as a fiction of memory in both senses Neumann describes, and will consider the novel's themes primarily in terms of how they contribute to the idea of memory presented through Berkane's story.

Because he is the protagonist of a fiction of memory, Berkane is legible at once as an individual who strives to understand the past, as a commentary on Algerian collective memory, and as an example of human consciousness confronting the phenomenon of memory. Conspicuous ambiguities surrounding his disappearance encourage a multiple reading along those lines. Ultimately, his fate suggests a complicated, fraught, and perhaps even causal relationship between the exploration of one's memory and the idea of vanishing without a trace. Other themes in *La disparition de la langue française*, such as the connection between language, writing, and memory, or the notion that many voices contribute to Berkane's recollections, help to flesh out the nature of that relationship.

Like the novels I have examined in preceding chapters, *La disparition de la langue française* thus uses the trope of disappearance to make sense of one of the preoccupations of contemporary thought: here, the possibilities, uses, and abuses of memory, both in a particular historical and political context and on a more philosophical level. Pierre Nora writes about the importance of memory in the postmodern era in the introduction to the first volume of *Les lieux de mémoire*, noting that “peu d'époques dans notre histoire ont été sans doute aussi prisonnières de leur mémoire, mais peu également ont vécu de façon aussi problématique la cohérence du passé national et sa continuité” (XII). What Nora says about national pasts might be said with equal conviction about individuals, since the postmodern subject who experiences what Nora terms “accélération de l'histoire” and “un basculement de plus en plus rapide dans un passé définitivement mort, la perception globale de toute chose comme disparue—une rupture

d'équilibre" (XVII) is often considered to be as fragmented as the discontinuous national pasts Nora describes. In addition to the other meanings it may reveal, then, exploring disappearance in Djébar's novel is a means of exploring the experience of memory, which Nora identifies as a central concern of postmodernity.

That concern seems to me equally central to this dissertation, which seeks to understand the use of disappearance by the authors I study and the reasons for its apparent resonance, as a concept, with a variety of present-day experiences. In each of the novels I have examined, the question of the relationship between the past and the present underlies the aporetic forms of non-death, uses of the body, and trauma of globalized postmodernity I study. The insistent demand to discover the truth concerning *La disparition*'s missing letter, for example, can be read as an injunction to remember. The importance of the body in *Les funérailles du lait* derives in many respects from its ability to allow for a useful form of commemoration to occur. And some of Azel's difficulties in *Partir* seem to stem from his inability to maintain a sense of identity—to situate himself within an acceptable narrative that links his past to his present—in the face of countervailing forces. For that reason, I believe that a discussion of disappearance and memory in *La disparition de la langue française* will serve as a productive endpoint for my reading of the significance of disappearance in contemporary francophone novels from around the Mediterranean.

In this chapter I will first describe the properties, purposes, and limitations of memory as they are depicted in *La disparition de la langue française*. That account of Djébar's model of memory will then serve as the backdrop for a reading of disappearance that focuses on its significance with respect to Algeria in particular and to the human experience of memory in general. Jenny Murray's analysis of Djébar's idea of memory, which she describes in

*Remembering the (Post)Colonial Self*, will inform my reading, but I will focus my study primarily on the themes of language, writing, and voice, and their role in the fiction of memory Djébar's novel contains. The result is a reading of *La disparition de la langue française* that complements Murray's. In particular, I believe that careful consideration the ambiguities surrounding Berkane's sudden and unexplained disappearance will lead to a reading of memory that Murray's work does not set out to provide and that is particularly meaningful for my purposes.

### **The Properties of Memory**

The importance of memory as a central theme of *La disparition de la langue française* is apparent in the novel's opening sentences, where the narrator describes returning to an important site from his past:

Je reviens donc, aujourd'hui même, au pays... "Homeland", le mot, étrangement, en anglais, chantait, ou dansait en moi, je ne sais plus: quel est ce jour où, face à la mer intense et verte, je me remis à écrire – non, pas le jour de mon retour, ni trois jours après mon installation dans cette villa vide. (13)

The homeland to which he refers is Algeria, and the villa where he is staying, he explains, is part of his inheritance that he shares with his brothers. The scene invokes the idea of reconnecting with the past on several levels. Because of his return to Algeria, important places and spaces from the narrator's past becomes present to him again as immediate and accessible surroundings rather than a distant (spatially and temporally) point of origin: he revisits a remembered place. Additionally, by taking up residence in his inherited villa, Berkane takes possession of a material trace of his family's history. Symbolically, he thereby assumes a position within a system of

patrimony connecting him with his forebears. The villa is essentially empty, too, and the image of Berkane entering its rooms bears a striking resemblance to the initiate of the *ars memoriae* who begins to fill his memory palace with meaningful objects. And, finally, the narrator reconnects with the past by reminiscing about his childhood in Algiers' Casbah. As he settles in to his new surroundings and begins to write, "ainsi s'envole mon imagination vers les rues de cette Casbah, juste avant les 'événements', comme disaient les Français alors" (13-14).

The variety of images and metaphors found in the first pages of *La disparition de la langue française* suggest that Djébar's idea of memory has many dimensions. For one, the narrator's relationship to the past seems to involve much more than simple episodic recollection<sup>28</sup> of events he experienced personally. As Jenny Murray points out, a "relationship between cultural or folk memory and identity" (*Remembering the (Post)Colonial Self*, hereafter *RPS*, 242) characterizes his recollections as well, as it does in several of Djébar's works.<sup>29</sup> The narrator's reference to his impressions of *Imazighen*, "les Ancêtres" (14), suggests that historical knowledge and folk icons influence the way he understands his personal past. Indeed, as he explains, different aspects of the past mix together when the narrator reminisces:

En ce jour de mon retour, allongé sur la terrasse, face à l'infini de la mer plate, je mélange tout en m'enfonçant dans ma sieste: mon enfance, les rues en escalier de mon quartier à la Casbah, mon amour précoce pour Marguerite—la seule fillette "roumia" de l'école—et jusqu'aux pirates du temps des Barberousse. (14)

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<sup>28</sup> I use the term "episodic," here and in many other instances, in the sense developed by Endel Tulving to describe the kind of memory that involves personal experiences one is able to state explicitly and associate with a place and time. See, for example, David Manier and William Hirst's chapter "A Cognitive Taxonomy of Collective Memories" in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. I use the term "autobiographical," here and throughout, in a less strict sense to refer to memories or stories that Berkane or others consider relevant to their present condition or sense of self or identity.

<sup>29</sup> In particular, according to Murray, *L'amour, la fantasia, La femme sans sépulture*, and *Le blanc de l'Algérie*.

Perhaps as an illustration of the point, the narrator also blends two ethnicities into his conception of his ancestors. *Imazighen* is the plural term in Berber for Berber peoples, and he also refers to them as “nos héros, eux, les corsaires *turcs* qui avaient écumé la Méditerranée” (14, emphasis mine). All of the narrator’s knowledge about the past, including his autobiographical memories, cultural touchstones, and even the “éclats de voix de ma mère disparue, mais vivante en moi, mais épanouie dans mon coeur” combine in the narrator’s thoughts as he turns his attention toward the past and begins to feel at ease in his new surroundings. “Je m’assoupis dans un début de bien-être: vrai, je vis, je revis chez nous” (14), the narrator exclaims, concluding the novel’s first chapter.

For Djébar, then, an essential characteristic of memory in *La disparition de la langue française* is multiplicity. The narrator’s memories contain the traces of many influences, including his mother’s voice, mythologized history, and particular spaces like the Casbah of Algiers. The latter signifies both in terms of its importance to the narrator as an individual and as an identity touchstone related to a social structure, way of life, or even resistance against the French during the war for independence. Such *lieux de mémoire* and the other influences that make up the narrator’s memories are figured as disordered and overlapping, and the narrator’s claim that “je mélange tout” (14) serves as an indication (or perhaps a warning) that common distinctions between the remembered past and the learned past may be meaningless in his case. Consequently, drawing clear lines between his memories and others’ might prove impossible as well.

Recollection of those memories is depicted as an equally multifarious act, both in the first chapter and elsewhere. The narrator’s initial foray into the past indicates a complex interrelationship between remembering, languages, places, ancestry, history, speech—as when he

hears his mother's voice—and indicates a special role for writing. At least at first, the narrator's "bien-être" suggests that Plato's opposition between writing and memory might be inverted in *La disparition de la langue française*. Plato characterized writing as a way to remind one of the past rather than recall it, but writing seems to hold for the narrator some promise of helping him make sense of the past instead. Still, the narrator's status as a writer, and the suggestion that his memory blurs categorical distinctions between remembering and knowing, raise the question of the extent to which the product of his work will be autofiction.

Recollection of the past also involves multiplicity in the sense that it takes place in relation to (and frequently in dialog with) multiple Others, present or absent, real or imagined. The first chapter's narrator might be understood to address a future version of himself or the reader of *La disparition de la langue française* when he begins to write about his exploration of the past. Depending on the reader's interpretation of the narrator's identity—a question to which I will return later—the narrator might even be understood to use Berkane, whose name appears only in the second chapter, as a constructed Other in dialog with whom he creates a meaningful depiction of his past.

For Berkane, remembering more clearly involves dialog with others, since much of his recollection—in addition to his interrogations of the purposes and possibilities of memory—takes place through letters to Marise or conversations with individuals he meets in Algeria. Berkane's first letter to Marise indicates that writing to her is a means of understanding the past, which he hopes to accomplish firstly by feeling close to her despite the distance that separates them:

Chère Marise, je décide de t'écrire un peu à la va-vite, ou, plutôt, négligemment. Puisque tu me manques, puisque d'emblée je l'avoue aisément—sans accent de reproche, ni, à



plus forte raison, sur on ton de jérémiades—je t'écris, c'est tout, pour converser et me sentir, le temps d'une lettre, proche de toi. (19)

The deeper concern motivating his communiqué is a “trouble inattendu” he encounters while attempting to take up work again on the “roman de formation” (18) he began and abandoned while in Paris. The letter allows him to contemplate the “trouble” and its causes:

Je ne sais ce qui résiste soudain en moi, dans ce projet de vouloir enfin écrire... (20) [. . .]  
 je sens un trouble inattendu en moi; ce trouble, j'espère, à la fin de cette conversation silencieuse avec toi, l'atténuer, me retrouver simplement moi, sans questions superflues: ni sur ma vie ainsi choisie, ni sur le passé—surtout pas celui qui nous a noués, puis dénoués, mais, plus gris derrière, le flux de ces longues années écoulées en France sans but... S'agite en moi le pourquoi de cet exil si long et clôturé si tard—une interrogation? Plutôt un flou, une équivoque dont j'ignore la nature et que, j'espère, mon soliloque développé devant toi, dans ces deux ou trois pages, éclaircira ou, tout au moins, chassera.  
 (20)

It is by addressing his thoughts to Marise that Berkane is able to speak about the unease and “désarroi au coeur” (21) he feels in her absence and to examine “la conscience réaffleurée, celle de mon retour au pays” that “me saisit, me ficelle, m'emprisonne...” (22). Berkane uses her to give shape to his “trouble,” overcome “ce qui résiste,” and respond to “le pourquoi de cet exil.” In that sense, the success of his autobiographical memoir depends upon an Other.

Many of Berkane's recollections also occur in conversation with a fisherman named Rachid, a shopkeeper named Hamid, or with Nadjia, a woman with whom he spends several passionate nights at his villa. Sometimes the conversations take place within himself as well, or with voices that speak from within him while remaining distinct from his own, such as his

mother's. Berkane converses with himself to a certain extent as well when he exclaims "un retraité, je deviens!" and notes that "une voix en moi, même pas ironique" (27) responds by asking whether it was to retire that he returned to Algeria.

Berkane's description of a dream about a violent confrontation he witnessed as a child depicts dialog with others as shaping the way he remembers events as well. Berkane "rêve cinq minutes au moins, le temps d'une scène entière qui n'en finit pas, dont il émerge, le coeur battant d'affolement." After waking, he "fait redérouler le rêve, scène après scène" (32), and describes its final scene, which takes place in his former home in the Casbah. The scene focuses on a flag seen by "the child" during the demonstration, where he also saw a French butcher lynched by the crowd after shooting a demonstrator. After the day of the demonstration, "quelques jours plus tard, mais toujours dans les bras de sa mère Mma Halima, l'enfant avait parlé du 'chiffon aux trois couleurs, avec du vert, du rouge, et du blanc!' que la foule agitait aux premiers rangs" (34). His mother explains the significance of the flag, saying that "ce drapeau que tu as vu, c'est le nôtre!" and that "l'autre, celui qu'ils affichent à la porte de l'école, c'est le leur!" (35). Their conversation greatly affects Berkane's understanding of the events he witnessed and even causes certain of its aspects to fade from his memory. Berkane writes:

Ce dialogue s'incrusta dans la tête de l'enfant qui oublia tout: la scène de rue, et même le boucher suspendu de dos, lui dont les jambes gigotaient dans le vide. Il ne garda en mémoire que le drapeau, le nouveau "avec du vert" qu'il voyait pour la première fois; "le nôtre!" avait précisé Mma, différent de celui de l'école, "le leur". Cette symétrie qui a rassuré l'enfant l'aida à oublier la violence de la foule, ce jour de la manifestation. (35)

Berkane's dream, in which the memory of the violence returns to him, thus depicts interaction with Others as important both in recollecting the past and in shaping the way events are remembered in the first place.

After his dream, dialog is again implicated in shaping the way Berkane shapes his account of the past into a narrative he transmits in the present. Perhaps as a result of the dream, Berkane delays a trip into Algiers and instead speaks with Rachid, a fisherman whom he met and befriended shortly after his arrival at the villa. While eating lunch together, "les deux hommes conversent" and, "devant la curiosité de Rachid" (36), Berkane describes the demonstration whose memory he ostensibly retrieved through his dream. At the same time, when compared with the narrator's previous description of that event, Berkane alters its content and meaning as a function of his interlocutor. The narrator explains:

Il ne veut pas s'enfoncer dans la chronique politique, après tout, le pêcheur est bien jeune, la trentaine, il reprend simplement le fil de ses jours d'enfant. Attendrissement ou joliesse des images de cet âge, il préfère l'évocation gentille au mélodrame que ceux de sa génération affectent d'ordinaire, dans toute évocation de leur passé. (36)

It is through this tailored reconstruction of the past created in an exchange with Rachid that Berkane describes (and makes sense of) the trouble "our" flag caused him one day at school (37-40). It is also through conversation with Berkane that Rachid revises his own understanding of Algerian history. "Pour moi," explains Rachid, "le drapeau algérien et les manifestations autour, à Alger, des femmes, des hommes et des enfants de tous âges, qui ont manifesté, avec force, c'était, m'a-t-on dit, en décembre 1960!" (37). Berkane situates his recollection of the butcher's death in 1952. For both characters, dialog with an Other, and the overdetermination of that dialog by its context and audience, are part of a dynamic process of bringing the "truth" of events to

light—an idea made especially questionable by the origins of Berkane’s memory, perhaps—and renegotiating narratives concerning the past. It is also a captivating process in which “Rachid, yeux élargis, devient un auditeur fasciné” (37).

Together, Berkane’s letters and conversations portray recollection in *La disparition de la langue française* as fundamentally collective, and perhaps impossible to achieve without the involvement of an Other in some capacity. Indeed, it is often at moments where he feels most connected to Marise or Nadjia that Berkane’s memories and writing flow the most freely, as evidenced by the sudden bursts of productivity in those respects that follow his dreams of Marise (31) or his nights with Nadjia (102-103). When Berkane’s intimacy with Nadjia deepens to the point that she becomes his “reine” (104), he writes profusely and to the exclusion of all else:

De toute cette journée, je n’avais quitté mon lit que pour ma table – écrire café après café, écrire encore, être dans la voix de Nadjia et dans le souvenir de sa jouissance, m’installer surtout dans la chaleur de son dialecte, de ce *ditié* d’amour particulier à ma visiteuse, mais où chercher le secret, quelle porte ouvrir, par quelle issue? Je ne suis pas sorti de la journée [. . .], je suis descendu furtivement, tel un voleur dans ma propre maison lorsque Rachid a sonné [. . .], comment lui dire que, à cause de tous ces mots écrits ou remémorés, j’avais perdu ma propre voix? (104-105)

As the passage suggests, Berkane’s success as a writer and an interpreter of the past via his “roman de formation” (18) is profoundly influenced by his connections to other people.

Berkane’s understanding of the past is further depicted as fundamentally collective in the sense that the overall account he creates through his various writings involve stories clearly attributable to others. Nadjia’s account of the death her grandfather (86-99), for instance, is important enough to Berkane that he writes about it at length, and for the reader of *La disparition*

*de la langue française* it comes to constitute a significant portion of a narrative otherwise mostly concerned with Berkane's experiences. By including multiple characters' stories in a fiction of memory centered around Berkane, and by indicating their importance to Berkane as well, Djébar suggests that multiple stories are needed in order for him (or the reader) to make sense of the past.

The essential collectivity of Berkane's introspection, his letters, journal entries, other writings, and even scenes following his disappearance near the end of the novel thus raise the question of canons<sup>30</sup> in relation to reconstructions of past. In Berkane's case, if we presume that his efforts are directed at developing a more "canonical" version of his past than the one he begins with, the canon of his (auto)biography includes stories that are not only by or about him. Nadjia's recollection of her grandfather's death—which certainly seems to be part of the canon of events most significant to her—is likewise composed of others' stories in addition to elements she considers to have originated with her. Her knowledge of her Baba Sidi's perfect French is emblematic in that respect, because its inclusion in her description of him is the result of information gleaned from others: "Il parlait, me dit-on, un français parfait" (87), though it is uncertain whether she ever heard him do so herself.

Berkane and Nadjia's recollections, themselves a reflection *en abyme* of Djébar's use of multiple characters in her novel, seem to imply that recollection *necessarily* involves the kinds of multiplicity I have outlined, and that only in that way could it be (ideally) true or effective.

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<sup>30</sup> I use the term *canon* in keeping with Aleida and Jan Assmann's work on the concept. For them, a "canon" of cultural memory is the set of events, artifacts, images, narratives, rituals, or other texts or practices that members of a group consider to be the most important or meaningful keys to understanding the relationship between their past and present. The canon is actively maintained in a kind of "cultural working memory" by the group in order to selectively preserve parts of the past *as present*. What is not entirely forgotten could be relegated instead to an archive, where the past is preserved *as past*. Both canon and archive are concepts meant to be used as heuristic tools to conceptualize processes of valorization and deprecation in cultures' (or individuals') understandings of the past. See Aleida Assmann's chapter in Erll and Nünning's *Cultural Memory Studies Reader*.

Consequently, memory in *La disparition de la langue française* is thus depicted in a way that suggests that Berkane's mnemonic quest for an understanding of his past certainly *concerns* him as an individual, but is perhaps never entirely *about* him, produced *by* him, or made meaningful *through* him alone. The past is instead only legible as an inherently social reconstruction of his impressions blended with others', whose voices therefore "speak" when he reminisces. Memory is portrayed as a product of culture, history, family, or any number of other influences—even dreams and myths—and Berkane's recollections and writings always involve others, in that sense, even if he claims to write "pour moi seul" (103).

Djebar's fiction of memory aligns with a collective model of memory first developed by Maurice Halbwachs in the 1930s and amended by numerous scholars since. In *La mémoire collective*, Halbwachs argues that committing things to memory and recalling them later are inherently collective activities in a way similar to the model at work in Berkane's case. Using the example of two friends who meet after a long separation, Halbwachs asks rhetorically:

Les faits passés ne prennent-ils pas plus de relief, ne croyons-nous pas les revivre avec plus de force, parce que nous ne sommes plus seuls à nous les représenter, et que nous les voyons maintenant, comme nous les avons vus autrefois, quand nous les regardions, en même temps qu'avec nos yeux, avec ceux d'un autre?

Mais nos souvenirs demeurent collectifs, et ils nous sont rappelés par les autres, alors même qu'il s'agit d'événements auxquels nous seuls avons été mêlés, et d'objets que nous seuls avons vus. C'est qu'en réalité nous ne sommes jamais seuls. Il n'est pas nécessaire que d'autres hommes soient là, [. . .] car nous portons toujours avec nous et en nous une quantité de personnes qui ne se confondent pas. (2)

The involvement of others in shaping memory is not limited to their role in reminding a friend about her past or rendering it more vivid through their own versions of it. For Halbwachs, it is always in relation to others and within a social context that memory operates, just as Berkane's explorations of the past involve dialog with others, are influenced by his relationships, or involve events that are significant both personally and for a group's history and identity, such as the 1954-1962 War of Independence and its aftermath.

Halbwachs argues that Others always have a role in memory because, even when a person experiences something while completely alone and recalls it later, she does so within "un 'courant de pensée' sociale [qui] est d'ordinaire aussi invisible que l'atmosphère que nous respirons" (20). Citing Charles Blondel, who describes a childhood memory of falling into a hole while exploring an abandoned house alone, Halbwachs argues that memory of the event is conditioned by Blondel's relationship to a group even though it appears to be a purely individual experience. "Le groupe dont l'enfant, à cet âge, fait le plus étroitement partie et qui ne cesse pas de l'entourer, c'est la famille" (19), he writes, and it is because of the young Blondel's knowledge of his *separation* from his family he is not precisely alone when he falls. "Mais alors il n'était seul qu'en apparence," Halbwachs remarks. "C'est la pensée de la famille absente qui fournit le cadre" of the event and allows it to be reconstructed meaningfully later. The environment in which the memory took shape *was* the absence of the family, and "l'enfant n'a pas besoin, comme dit M. Blondel, de 'reconstituer l'environnement de son souvenir', puisque le souvenir se présente dans cet environnement" (20).

Berkane's memories are shaped by his environment in the same sense, and his environment is as defined by social relationships as by his physical location or any other quality. He thinks of Algeria and his former neighborhood in the Casbah *through* his relationship with

Marise (and withered relationship to Algeria) while in France, and *through* his relationship with Nadjia while in Algeria, for instance. His vision of the past takes on a different shape (and is organized into written narratives) through his intimacy with each and partly as a function of the shift in “courants de pensée” he experiences by returning to Algeria. For Berkane, then, the content of his memories are collective in the sense Maurice Halbwachs describes, and their recollection is collective as well.

Another passage from Nadjia’s account of her grandfather’s assassination underscores the notion of collectivity in the model of memory described by *La disparition de la langue française*. After recounting her family history, Nadjia begins to tell the story of the day he died. “Tout ce détour, reprit Nadjia, pour en venir à un seul jour: celui où mon grand-père Larbi fut assassiné par le F.L.N., exactement le 10 octobre 1957...” (90). Berkane, who is older than Nadjia, realizes that she must have been very young in 1957 and asks about her age. “Je n’avais que deux ans et quelques mois! Cela peut paraître peu vraisemblable, mais j’ai pu tout reconstituer de cette journée funeste...” (90), Nadjia replies. The clarity and vehemence of the well-organized narrative she presents is striking, and it seems implausible to conclude that her story is a product only of her own episodic memory—or even a relatively faithful account—given her age at the time. In fact, Nadjia continues, she does not exactly “remember” the events herself:

Je dis bien “reconstituer” car le traumatisme premier, je l’ai vécu. Sur ce choc, j’ai eu le temps d’accumuler des strates, les multiples relations, celle de mon père, celles de tant de femmes. Les femmes de la maison des Hadj Brahim, comme on nous appelle, à Oran...  
(90)

Nevertheless, the story Nadjia tells is one that she considers to be *hers*, and though it is the product of many voices, it functions as if part of her own episodic, autobiographical



recollections. “Je voudrais vous raconter *mon* histoire... celui de mon grand-père...” (86), she explains to Berkane, and she makes no distinction between the parts of her story that may have been provided by others in the first instance and other parts that might reasonably be attributed to her alone. Her story is emblematic of the sense in which the idea of individual memory is a contradiction in terms in *La disparition de la langue française*.

### Memory and Language

In addition to being collective, Berkane’s memories and recollections are intimately related to language in several senses. To a certain extent, the thematic association of language with other themes in *La disparition de la langue française* is as inevitable as it is in other novels, since it is through language that *everything* is depicted in a written work. Consequently, the uses and limitations of language are an inevitable undercurrent to Djébar’s fiction of memory, but the theme of language is brought to the fore by the fact that Berkane, like Djébar, is a writer. His attempts to make sense of the past by composing a novel suggest a sustained concern with the question of the extent to which the past can be reanimated through words—and, more specifically, through written words.

Djébar’s interest in the relationship between language and memory extends to particular national languages as well. *La disparition de la langue française* suggests that memories of different languages—Berkane’s recollection of the multiple linguistic traditions that contributed to his own past and Algeria’s history, for instance—are essential for the rehabilitation of Algeria’s present. At the same time, Berkane’s letters, as well as his conversations with Nadja, indicate that using one language or another to think and speak about the past, or remembering *in*

a particular language, might influence (and potentially limit) what one is likely, or perhaps even *able*, to recall.

Much like the novel's thematic focus on memory, the importance of the many languages referenced or used in *La disparition de la langue française* is apparent in the earliest pages of the text. The work's opening sentence draws attention to the fact that the narrator of the first chapter is multilingual, for instance. "Je reviens donc, aujourd'hui même, au pays... 'Homeland', le mot, étrangement, en anglais, chantait, ou dansait en moi, je ne sais plus" (13), the narrator explains, and his reaction to the intrusion of English into an otherwise French narrative hints at its significance. Like the use of the Berber term "Imazighen" on the following page, the English word signals that linguistic multiplicity will play an important role in Djébar's fiction of memory.

Linguistic multiplicity is important firstly in the sense that several languages played important roles in Berkane's past. Especially when he thinks about his mother or Marise, Berkane remembers hearing, using, or seeing French, English, formal Arabic, Darija (dialectal Arabic of North Africa), Berber, and Spanish. His mother spoke Darija, and so does Berkane, in addition to the French he is implied to have learned as a child and which he certainly used extensively while in France. His father, who "se sentait fier d'être Chaoui" (14), probably spoke the Chaouiïa dialect of Berber. Marise "aimait chantonner en espagnol" (18) as well. Multiple languages thus make up *what* Berkane is figured as remembering, and as a result his past is the literal product of multiple linguistic traditions.

Perhaps because multiple languages are a part of *what* Berkane remembers, linguistic multiplicity also seems to play an important role in his acts of recollection in the present.

Berkane and other characters use several languages to represent their pasts. Berkane reminisces

in Darija when speaking with Nadjia and Rachid the fisherman, for instance, and that language is depicted as the principal medium in which he speaks about important memories such as his father's role in shaping his understanding of the anticolonial movement. Berkane is also figured in part as using Darija to describe the time he spent in a detention camp during the war of independence.

On the other hand, Berkane records all of his recollections in French when he writes. He writes to Marise, records his thoughts in his journal, and composes his autobiographical novel in French. And, of course, French is also the language through which Djébar represents Berkane's or Nadjia's use of Darija in *La disparition de la langue française*. With the exception of occasional Arabic or Berber terms, French is the language used to communicate the past on multiple diegetic levels.

Of course, writing *La disparition de la langue française* in Darija or in both Darija and French would result in a highly restricted audience for the novel. The use of French certainly can be understood as a necessity in that respect. It might also be possible to interpret the inclusion of words such as "homeland" (13), "imazighen" (14), "El Bahdja" (31, 53), "khou" (175), or "houma" (54, 64, 204) as an *effet de réel* related to Berkane's context and backstory. However, particular languages are also depicted as influencing Berkane's (and others') relationship to the past by shaping the content and the limits of memory. Berkane's reflections of his own use of French point to its importance as more than a practical necessity for Djébar as well.

Berkane evokes and questions the relationship between particular languages and memory in his first letter to Marise. There, he describes the ways in which the language of his childhood was involved in the most intimate moments of their relationship:

[A]ux instants les plus secrets de notre tendresse, ton pseudonyme pour le public (Mar-Ly-se!)—qui devenait, sur mes lèvres, le “chérie” que je ne sais pas prononcer spontanément, à la place, fusaient deux, trois vocables arabes de mon enfance, étrangement ceux de l’amitié, presque de la consanguinité, qui, s’accouplant à ton nom de théâtre, exprimaient mon attendrissement...

Pourquoi évoquer ici nos enlacements, alors que je ne peux t’écrire en mots de ma tribu, exprimer le manque que je ressens de toi [. . .]?

Les mots de notre intimité, et leurs sons dispersés, tu les entendais comme une musique seulement. Te souviens-tu qu’il m’arrivait de m’attrister que tu ne puisses, à l’instant où nos sens s’embrasent, me parler en ma première langue! Comme si mon enfance, au cœur même de nos étreintes, ressuscitait et que mon dialecte, resurgi malgré moi, aspirait à t’avaler. (20-21)

Shared language is the key to more complete intimacy for Berkane, and his sadness stems from the difficulty of achieving that intimacy through a second language rather than his first. His inability to express the term of endearment “chérie,” mirroring Marise’s inability to speak Darija to him while making love, is a sign of Berkane’s inability to commune with her to the extent that sharing his (first) childhood language would permit in principle. Nothing in *La disparition de la langue française* suggests that Berkane’s French is imperfect, but French and Darija both constitute meaningful barriers for himself and Marise respectively. Indeed, Berkane’s evocation of an image of inhalation portrays a void seeking to be filled. Judging by the length of Berkane’s relationship with Marise and its importance to him, the imperfect communion he describes in his letter did not prevent them from leading a life in common. But the language barrier arising

during intimate moments indicates that belonging to separate linguistic (and therefore cultural) traditions nevertheless creates a certain social distance between them.

To the extent that memory is collective, though, as it is portrayed to be in *La disparition de la langue française*, it is predicated upon social communion and shared social and narrative traditions. Since language is perhaps the most powerful expedient of that communion, it is also one of the most significant limitations on social belonging, and it shapes the possibilities of an individual's memory accordingly. Berkane speaks French very well, his connection to Marise is deep, and his intimacy with her is a key to his understanding of the past. Because French is only one of the languages he uses, though, that understanding may be incomplete.

Berkane's interactions with Nadjia and their mutual use of Darija provide him a form of communion with a social group—and therefore access to memories—from which he was separated while in France. She is an interlocutor with whom he is able to remember *differently*, in no small part because both speak the same language(s). Berkane's newfound access to the past and the importance of Darija are figured through the stories he and Nadjia share. When Berkane writes about Nadjia's desire to tell him the story of her grandfather's death, for instance, he recalls his insistence that she tell it in Arabic: “je m'entendis répondre vivement: Raconte-la moi, ton histoire, mais en arabe!” (86). Given Berkane's experiences with Marise, his preference for Arabic foregrounds the question of whether certain “histoires”—stories *or* histories; both meanings of the term could apply, in context—are better shared in one language than another.

The intimacy that develops between Berkane and Nadjia immediately after she recounts her story suggests an answer to that question. “Je l'ai, en un éclair, désirée,” Berkane writes. “Elle le devina, je crois, car je choisis, cette fois à dessein, le tutoiement de notre dialecte commun pour l'inviter: Viens, si ça te dit, chez moi, à l'étage au-dessus pour bavarder plus à

l'aise: il y a à boire, il y a à manger!" (100). Through his invitation, Berkane demonstrates that his connection to Nadjia operates in and through the language they share, which for Berkane is a "langue de proximité" (86). Ultimately, Berkane's closeness to Nadjia seems to provide him greater access to his past, since it is following their liaison that Berkane symbolically moves beyond Marise as his muse by sweeping her letters aside (103) and feels once again motivated to write, this time "pour moi seul!" (103).

Through Nadjia and through their use of Darija, Berkane also reconnects symbolically with Algeria, which gains renewed significance as an identity touchstone, and distances himself from France. The symbolism of his relationship with Nadjia is underscored by references elsewhere to Marise as "une Française" or "la Française" (45, 69, 131), and the stories they recount together likewise gain in significance as symbolic episodes of Algerian collective history. The story of Nadjia's grandfather becomes, in that regard, a story of "our" grandfathers for Berkane and for fellow Algerians. When Berkane asks Nadjia to relate her "histoire" in Arabic, then, he also seems to imply that the reconstruction of the Algerian past is linked to the use of that language as well. By implication, recounting it in French might produce something *less*.

The way in which particular languages are connected to the past in Berkane's letter to Marise and his interactions with Nadjia recalls Lera Boroditsky's description of the link between languages and memory in her 2001 article on Mandarin and English speakers' conceptions of time. Rejecting Benjamin Lee Whorf's hypothesis "that thought and action are *entirely* determined by language" (emphasis mine), Boroditsky writes:

Although the strong linguistic determinism view seems untenable, may weaker but still interesting formulations can be entertained. [. . .] Languages force us to attend to certain

aspects of our experience by making them grammatically obligatory. Therefore, speakers of different languages may be biased to attend to and encode different aspects of their experience while speaking. (“Does Language Shape Thought?” 2)

While the idea that one’s language fully determines how one remembers may be untenable, Boroditsky suggests that particular words, meanings, or ways of structuring language nevertheless *do* influence one’s understanding of the past. That seems to be the case especially for Berkane. He finds it particularly meaningful to reminisce about his childhood in Algeria with Nadjia and in Darija, as Boroditsky might suggest that he would, as if something in Darija itself resonates with the memories he seeks to recover.

Berkane’s “rediscovery” of Arabic evokes the contentious question of the role of the French language in Algerian society before and after independence. Because Arabic is portrayed as an important means of reconnecting Berkane with his past, and symbolically of reconnecting Algeria with its history, his (and Djébar’s) use of French to write about the past seems questionable at best. At worst, the incongruity between the French language and the past it depicts could be likened to the violence done to Algerian culture and identity by the imposition of French during the colonial period. For many participants in the Algerian War of Independence, liberation necessarily involved recognizing and remedying the damage done by linguistic and cultural domination as well as military. A violent scene from Berkane’s childhood is symbolic in that regard. During a night of troubled sleep, Berkane remembers a lynching he witnessed when he was five or six years old:

Il revit un effroi assez confus de petit garçon! Il a six ans, ou cinq. Et il regarde, voracement, un corps d’homme suspendu, de dos et dont les jambes, en l’air, très haut – par rapport à lui, garçonnet au regard figé – oui, dont les jambes gigotent.

— Le Français! crie une voix à côté de lui.

— C'est lui, le boucher! (32)

The hanging Berkane witnessed took place during a demonstration in the Casbah, where Berkane found himself amongst “une foule vociférante, ou joyeuse, il ne sait plus” (33). He remembers that, after hearing shouts from the crowd, he saw an opening form in front of the local (French) butcher’s shop and a pistol in the butcher’s hand. Two shots rang out, and Berkane glimpsed a wounded man bleeding on the street. Finally, men from the crowd lynched the butcher, the image of whose legs catalyzed Berkane’s mnemonic archaeology.

The similarity of “le Français” and “le français” encourages a symbolic reading of the scene according to which the French language is a much a “butcher” as the man who guns down a demonstrator. Viewed in that light, the scene also depicts the crowd’s attack on the French language as integral to the greater struggle for liberation from colonial rule, since the altercation with the butcher sets in motion a subsequent attack on a commissariat (34). Elimination of French and the self-actualization of an independent Algerian nation—including control over its understanding of its past—are thereby made to seem inseparable, and the relationship between particular languages and the past takes on a distinctly political aspect.

The relationship between Arabic and French, and between languages and memory in *La disparition de la langue française*, ultimately proves more complex for Berkane than the Whorfian undertone of the ideology represented in the crowd’s attack on the butcher. While Berkane privileges Arabic for a time, and while his reconnection with Arabic raises questions like the ones I have outlined, it is not only by necessity that he ultimately chooses to represent even his conversations with Nadjia in French when he writes. For him, French is never unproblematic, but it also is not a one-dimensional “butcher” of the kind denounced by the



proponents of strict Arabization after independence. Nor is Darija, or any other form of Arabic, entirely unproblematic itself.

The relationship of French and Arabic to Berkane's recollections is complicated by the way in which the notion of a "purer" language through which to reconstruct the past is belied by differences he notices between the dialects he and Nadjia speak. Each is certainly similar to the other, but it would not be accurate to say that Berkane and Nadjia speak *exactly* the same language. In their first conversation, Berkane is "sensible depuis le début aux différences" (101) of Nadjia's dialect from his own, for one, and those differences are again foregrounded when Nadjia asks: "Mon dialecte ne te gêne pas? Ma mère est marocaine, je parle comme à Oran, mais un peu aussi comme ma mère" (101). Berkane jokingly responds that he will speak "dans mon algérois de la Casbah" (101). Their exchange raises the question of exactly which "arabe" he and Nadjia will use in telling their stories, and it undermines the idea that Berkane achieves a kind of complete linguistic communion with Nadjia that he was unable to achieve with Marise. As if to reinforce the point, Nadjia points out that *her* linguistic heritage includes the Moroccan version of Darija, since her mother "est marocaine" (101). Moreover, the linguistic multiplicity Berkane describes as contributing to his (perhaps idealized) past contradicts the notion that any one language could ever be used alone to give access to Algeria's past, since that past already contained (at least) Berber *and* Arabic languages—even Turkish, too, considering the importance Berkane affords to the heroic "corsairs turcs" (14) that symbolize an element of Algeria's past glory for Berkane.

The relationship between national languages and memory is not reducible to a diametric opposition between French and Arabic, and exclusive preference for one over the other is depicted as dangerous in *La disparition de la langue française*. In addition to his joy at

rediscovering his first language, for example, Berkane's first letter to Marise expresses his fear that he might cease dreaming of her—that she might be erased, in effect—as a result of his exclusive use of Arabic. For a time, Berkane uses only Darija in conversations with Rachid the fisherman and Hamid, a shopkeeper who works near Berkane's villa. Although he writes that he rediscovers Darija “avec l'excitation d'avoir retrouvé une sorte de danse verbale de tant de mots perdus, d'images ressuscitées, un ton...” (24), he equates abandoning French with the effacement of an important part of his past. In his letter to Marise, he asks:

Pourquoi s'entrecroisent en moi, chaque nuit, et le désir de toi et le plaisir de retrouver mes sons d'autrefois, mon dialecte sain et sauf et qui lentement se déploie, se revivifie au risque d'effacer ta présence nocturne, de me faire accepter ton absence? Serait-ce que mon amour risque de se dissiper, toi devenue si lointaine? (25)

Since it is partly through his connection to Marise that Berkane writes about and understands his past, abandonment of French would also be tantamount to erasing an integral and important part of his memory. Marise is additionally responsible for Berkane's return to Algeria, which paves the way for his reconnection to Nadjia and to his country of birth. “Tu m'as pacifié,” he writes to Marise, and “c'est pourquoi j'ai pu effectuer ce retour, chez moi!” (131).

The danger of monolingualism is made more apparent when Berkane returns to the Casbah of his childhood. He considers the Casbah to be a particularly important part of his past—and it is a symbolically important part of Algeria's collective past, too, as a site of resistance against French colonialism and otherwise. When he sets out to visit the Casbah, he believes he will see “ce vieil Alger: *Djazirat el Bahdja*—la belle, la glorieuse, si longtemps l'imprenable, sa ville en ‘pomme de pin’, ‘ma cité des pirates légendaires’” (53). What he discovers instead is a veritable ruin.

The degradation of the place Berkane remembers is closely associated with the use of Arabic to replace French place names, and with the replacement of the variety and ebullience of its inhabitants by the single visual “language” of the veil. The substitution of Arabic for French is an initial sign, for Berkane, that his Casbah has undergone a profound and disquieting change:

Et tandis qu’il roule vers l’est, un début d’inquiétude se lève en lui et, comme des boules de billard, les noms changeants des artères glissent: noms français d’hier (rue du Chat, de l’Aigle, de la Grue, rue du Cygne, celle du Condor, de l’Ours), et ceux qui lui viennent aussitôt en arabe (rue du Palmier, rue de la Fontaine de la soif, rue des Tanneurs, des Bouchers, rue de la Grenade, rue des Princesses, et celle de la Maison détruite...). (54)

Though Berkane continues to hope that he will rediscover a Casbah where “tout bougeait, encombrait, s’entremêlait” and “cette profusion [. . .] d’identités multiples” that “a habité sans relâche ses nuits à l’autre bout de la terre” (54), the attempted theft of his camera by knife-wielding boys who teargas him in his car (57-58) foreshadows the disillusionment he ultimately experiences.

After meeting up with a photographer friend named Amar and discussing Algiers and its history at length, including its jarring new “centre de loisirs pseudo-culturels” and “monuments de commémoration pour nos héros dans un style d’un néoréalisme stalinien hideux” (62), Berkane enters the Casbah. There, he exclaims: “vingt ans après, revenons à la place du Cheval!” (64), but the place du Cheval of his memory is gone. In another letter to Marise, he explains his “délaissement par rapport à mes lieux d’origine” upon encountering a Casbah that “s’est présentée à moi souillée” (65). He writes:

Mon royaume d’autrefois, je l’ai cherché dans les moindres rues, les artères, les placettes, les impasses et jusqu’aux fontaines, aux petites mosquées, aux oratoires des carrefours!

Se sont présentés à moi, ce jour d'avant-hier et sous une lumière implacable, sont venus à moi, presque en images désolées de manège, tous les lieux! Mais, je le constatais, ils se sont mués quasiment en non-lieux de vie, en aires d'abandon et de dénuement, en un espace marqué par une dégradation funeste! (65-66)

The Arabization of place names is not somehow uniquely and directly responsible for the “dépérissement misérable” (67) he perceives, but neither is it incidental: the two phenomena are intimately associated. Altered place names are figured as signaling changes in Algerians’ relationship to the past. Berkane remarks that French names describing significant historical events have been erased, for example, and the events themselves have been occulted in the process: “quant au souvenir de la ‘bataille d’Alger,’” writes Berkane, “on s’est contenté de remplacer les noms souvent évocateurs du passé colonial par simplement les noms d’état civil de tant de victimes de la répression de 57!” (68). Along with the Casbah Berkane remembers, then, the disappearance of the French language in Algiers obscures a collectively-important episode in Algeria’s war of independence. The erasure of French in the Casbah is paralleled by the erasure of the “voiles blancs, élégants, soulignant les hanches” (67) he remembers from his childhood as well. Now, he sees “passantes, ensevelies désormais sous des tuniques longues, grises à la marocaine, leurs cheveux disparaissant sous un foulard noir” (67) instead, and the hidden women seem to symbolize the suppression of the liveliness and pluralism of the Algerian past.

Berkane’s experiences in the Casbah indicate that damage is done to the past when languages are erased, not only when they are used in place of another, and damage has been done to the Casbah and Algeria’s history by the “abandon presque voulu par les pouvoirs publics locaux ne tenant même pas compte du passé prestigieux des lieux” (68). The disappearance of French in Algiers symbolizes the sense in which linguistic plurality is necessary in order to relate

to Algeria's past, and rejection of that plurality does violence to memory. Because particular languages influence memory, and because Algeria's past consists of many, the disappearance of a language—even French, despite its history—is the disappearance of part of the past, ignorance of which is portrayed as leading to the “abandon” of the present.

Moreover, as Nadjia remarks following Berkane's description to her of his experiences in the Casbah, the single language of the present-day “fanatiques” has itself become corrupted:

Mais les autres, de l'autre côté, les fanatiques, as-tu senti leur fureur verbale, la haine dans leurs vociférations? Leur langue arabe, moi qui ai étudié l'arabe littéraire, celui de la poésie, celui de la *Nahda* et des romans contemporains, moi qui parle plusieurs dialectes des pays du Moyen-Orient où j'ai séjourné, je ne reconnais pas cet arabe d'ici. C'est une langue convulsive, dérangée, et qui me semble déviée! Ce parler n'a rien à voir avec la langue de ma grand-mère [. . .]. La langue de nos femmes est une langue dm'amour et de vivacité quand elles soupirent, et même quand elles prient: c'est une langue pour les chants [. . .]. Et tu le sais bien, *ya habibi*, il y a cet arabe pour la sexualité, presque pudique, restant au bord, allusif, mais si prometteur... (118)

The language of the “fanatiques,” stripped of the richness Nadjia describes and having little in common with the language of her ancestors, thus reduces the past both when it is used to the exclusion of French and when it is used in the manner she describes.

Continuing to make use of French is not, however, an exercise without ambiguities and risks, as Berkane confirms in his writings. After their time together, Nadjia leaves Berkane's villa and ultimately finds her way to Padoua. In her absence, Berkane writes to her in French. He interrogates the meaning of that choice, but cannot seem either to justify it fully or reject French. Berkane equates writing in the Arabic alphabet with the talismanic power of copied suras, but

remarks that, “enfant, j’inscrivais les bribes du texte sacré [. . .] sans savoir que cette calligraphie ne servait pas pour guérir, mais pour bénir seulement et prévenir tout malheur!” (126-127).

Perhaps since the Arabic alphabet does not promise a form of “healing,” he chooses the Latin alphabet instead, invoking its equally longstanding connection to Algeria’s history and perhaps thereby legitimating its use. It is, “tout de même, celui qui, sur cette terre, a traversé les siècles; il fut creusé sur des pierres rousses, puis oublié dans des ruines. Mais celles-ci demeurent, pour la plupart, somptueuses” (127).

Finally, before he ends his letter with several “stances pour Nadjia” (127), Berkane questions his use of French on the grounds that it might unfaithfully represent words and meanings Nadjia communicated originally in Arabic:

Cette voix de si proche langueur: déplacer ces mots arabes, les faire glisser pour les garder en langue seconde? Ses mots, proférés dans notre langue maternelle, je les entends dans leur musique particulière: et le français me devient une porte étroite pour maintenir l’aveu de volupté, qui scintille dans l’espace de mon logis. (127)

The “door” French offers him may be narrow, but, as he explains, “écrire et glisser à la langue franque, c’est le moyen sûr de garder, tout près, ta voix, tes paroles” (128). Even then, he vacillates between French and Arabic, deciding at one point that “je ne m’adresse alors à vous qu’en arabe, ma soeur-amante” (128), though ironically writing those words in French. Finally, he wonders whether his use of French will simply stop him from speaking at all: “ce français va-t-il geler ma voix? Tandis que ma main court sur le papier, serais-je en train de tendre un linceul entre toi et moi?” (129).

It is not simply the case, then, that Berkane connects more fully to his past when he speaks Arabic, nor is it the case that French is transparently useful. Both monolingualism and the

use of multiple languages are accompanied in *La disparition de la langue française* by a risk of unfaithfulness toward the past, but French and Arabic are each integral to Berkane's success in making sense of it. Reactionary Arabization is unhealthy, as evidenced by the exclusively Arabic place names in Berkane's Casbah. Instead, at least for Berkane and Nadjia and in their context, memory must involve multiple languages in order to function.

### **The Languages of Memory**

In addition to being collective and modulated by the use of particular languages, remembering in *La disparition de la langue française* also occurs through more than one medium. One proves dominant in the end—Berkane's mnemonic project manifests mostly in his writings—but writing is not the only tool used to make sense of the relationship between past and present. Each medium in which the past is represented constitutes a different “language of memory” whose particular metaphors, ideologies, and expectations influence the nature and reception of what it represents. In addition to his letters, journal entries, and novel, Berkane uses photography, speech, and audio recordings to mediate his explorations of the past. Marise, for her part, also uses the theater.

At the same time that he writes letters to Marise, which begin shortly after his arrival in Algeria, Berkane photographs various places and buildings near his villa in Douaouda. “Je suis presque toujours dehors; mon appareil Leica dans ma poche” (27), he writes, and he considers the photos he takes to be an important part of his overall effort to remember:

J'ai pris quelques photos. Pas au hasard, au flair. Comme si je m'assurais une récolte inattendue, un butin personnel. Pour ainsi dire, comme si je commençais à me laver les

yeux; m'avancer, en trébuchant, pas à pas, conscient enfin que je suis vraiment revenu!...

(28)

Photography is a “language” that prepares Berkane to accept the fact of his return, and thereby to negotiate his relationship with the places he visits and with Algeria more broadly. It also provides him a sense of clarity that seeing those places in person does not produce. “Certains matins, à cause d'une nuance éphémère de la lumière—la plage déserte: à moi seul, ce vierge et mouvant royaume—, je n'en reviens pas d'être là; de retour” (28), he explains, whereas his photos are part of a process in which he begins to “laver les yeux” (28). By affording Berkane that clarity in the present, photography is useful in allowing him to begin making sense of his past in relation. Only if the present seems real, one imagines, could Berkane meaningfully connect the Algeria he finds in the here and now to the Algeria he remembers, and perhaps especially to the Casbah “où mon enfance palpite” (70).

However, while Berkane's use of photography acknowledges its value as a language of memory, it also highlights the comparatively greater importance he assigns to writing. Three photos he takes of a dilapidated *kouba*<sup>31</sup> on three successive days are emblematic of a sense in which photography *per se* proves less important for Berkane than the creation of narrative sequences, photographic or otherwise. Berkane describes his original intention to develop his negatives of the *kouba* into “une série de plus en plus délavée” (30) of photos. From this, he imagined choosing “ensuite une épreuve, l'agrandir le plus possible, la fixer dans ma chambre face à mon lit, sur le mur blanchi à la chaux” (30).

The series might be a part of the “récolte” Berkane describes, and he appears interested in the ability of photography to allow him to represent the places he visits from a position of

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<sup>31</sup> As it does in Binebine, *kouba* refers here to a domed chapel, usually constructed at the gravesite of a saint or mystic.



temporal and spatial remove, which is to say after developing his negatives and placing the results in his room. That remove seems to allow a form of understanding that his walks near Douaouda do not, and his imagined series creates meaning: Jenny Murray writes, for example, that the resulting image of “the run-down mosque is symbolic of the degradation which Islamic fundamentalism represents for traditional Islam” (*RPS*, 212). That might not be Berkane’s understanding of the mosque’s importance, since he offers no interpretation of the image and has yet to encounter the degradation he finds in the Casbah, but it seems promising nonetheless.

At the same time, Berkane’s treatment of his photos suggests that it is the sequence itself, or the narrative they produce, and not the photographs as such that draws his attention. Whatever unique representational (or re-presentational) powers photographs possess, it is almost as a reader arriving over time at an interpretation of a novel that Berkane plans to interact with them. Single photographs might contain (or be) narratives, too, but in Berkane’s case, photography is simply a language of memory he adopts, finds useful in some regards, and does not consider indispensable to his quest, judging by the minuscule role played by photography in the rest of *La disparition de la langue française*. Roland Barthes writes that “the type of consciousness the photograph involves [. . .] establishes not a consciousness of the *being-there* of the thing (which any copy could provoke) but an awareness of its *having-been-there*” (*Image, Music, Text* 44). Perhaps Djébar agrees: if Berkane needs to be fully aware of his return, and if he hopes to make the past *present* again, then his greater interest in “being-there” than “having-been-there” might lead him away from photography as a language of memory.

Speech is another medium in which Berkane reconstructs the past, and one he uses much more extensively than photography. His conversations with Rachid and Nadjia are depicted as catalyzing both the recollection of particular memories and various reflections of the possibilities

and pitfalls of memory in general. Berkane writes that a conversation with Rachid causes him to contemplate his past with Marise, for instance: “Mais il a suffi de ce soupir de Rachid: ‘Ah les femmes!’ Un trouble m’a saisi. La nostalgie de ta voix, de nos propos, de nos dialogues de la nuit, de ton corps” (24). Berkane’s nostalgia leads him to consider the importance of the languages he and Marise used and worry that his rediscovery of Arabic might erase her “présence nocturne” (25).

Berkane also considers recording and replaying Nadjia’s voice as a means of recreating her presence after she leaves the villa. Berkane writes that he especially misses Nadjia’s voice after her departure:

J’aurais dû prévoir l’état de manque sonore (c’est sa voix qui me manque surtout) dans lequel je me trouverais, pourquoi n’ai-je pas songé à enregistrer Nadjia? Dans une des valises non encore ouvertes, j’ai un petit magnétophone: pour conserver le bruit des vagues, certains jours... Mais vivre avec Nadjia m’a fait oublier qu’elle s’éloignant, je tomberais dans le vide de l’inaccoutumance... (125)

Through the tape recorder, Berkane would have been able to “remember” Nadjia’s voice in the way suggested by representational theories of memory: as a trace of the original event, not an encoded *understanding* of the event, that can be replayed in lower fidelity later. That sort of reproduction seems to promise to fill some of the “vide” Berkane describes.

The importance of Nadjia’s speech is clear in that instance, and the overall importance of speech in *La disparition de la langue française* suggests that it is a language of memory Berkane finds much more indispensable than photography. Perhaps, as Jenny Murray argues, Berkane’s memory is Augustinian. Augustine “famously conceived of memories in terms of images. For Augustine, these ‘images’, the imprints left by sensory perception, could be retrieved on

demand” (RPS 209). Recollection of the past might then be especially likely or powerful when it is spurred by similar sounds and sights to the ones in memory, such as Nadjia’s recorded voice or the sounds of Berkane’s childhood language when it is spoken out loud. In some instances, that seems to be the case, especially in cases where “the visual nature of Berkane’s memories is striking (209). Tellingly, though, the suitcase containing Berkane’s tape recorder remains unopened.

Marise employs another language of memory when she tries to come to terms with Berkane’s disappearance and keep something of him alive in the present. After he vanishes, Marise accepts the “le rôle de Mathilde dans une reprise du *Retour au désert* de Bernard-Marie Koltès” (203) and, through her work in the theater, Marise creates a “ghost” of Berkane:

Marise se sentit destinée à porter Berkane définitivement en elle, sous les projecteurs: elle serait donc sa tombe de lumière, puisque, hélas, elle l’avait poussé, deux ans auparavant, à retourner vers la terre des ses ancêtres. Retour en terre obscure! [. . .] Tout contre Mathilde, le personnage, mais au-dedans de Marise sur scène, Berkane revenait en fantôme pour habiter son amie: lui, vivant et absent, écrivant et muet, lui qu’elle cachait mais d’où elle retirait une force neuve. (203)

All of Marise’s time on the stage after Berkane vanishes, and “chacun de ses rôles désormais” (204), serve to counteract the nullity of his disappearance and work to cause Berkane to persist in the present. Marise even learns to pronounce *houma* “exactement comme Berkane le disait” (204), thereby bringing something of him to life in her voice.

Each language of memory used by Berkane and others in *La disparition de la langue française* helps to depict recollection as something that can and should take place in more than one medium, but writing is the form of expression to which Berkane turns the most in order to

make sense of the past. When he declares that “je ne peux qu’écrire” (*LD* 125), his remark can be read either as a lamentation (about having forgotten about his tape recorder, in context) or an expression of the importance writing possesses for him as a language of memory. Given Berkane’s sustained interest in writing and the variety of genres he uses—including letters, journal entries, and his novel *en abyme*—, it seems plausible to conclude that its merits as a language of memory outweigh its limitations.

The theme of writing in *La disparition de la langue française* has far too many dimensions to address here. In particular, though, the mimetic relationship between writing and memory suggested by Berkane’s experiences, as well as the connection between writing and the French language, are two particularly helpful areas to explore. Doing so aids in characterizing how writing and memory function together in Djébar’s fiction of memory and in developing a reading of Berkane’s disappearance.

Writing is important to Berkane firstly because representing memories in writing involves a degree of mimesis. What Berkane considers to be meaningful memories are, for the most part, narrative accounts of the past structured by language. When Berkane remembers the death of the French butcher, for example, what he brings to light in his mind is an *account* of those events, which he had first retained as a child. What he remembers is a narrative—a series of events represented in time—which was altered by his conversation with his mother (35). In the present, he re-reads the altered version of that narrative and finds it to be flawed.

That Berkane is able to re-read his memory in that way suggests that what he recalls generally *has* a narrative structure and is not only represented *through* narrative structures when he reminisces. In that way, Berkane’s memories correspond to the model of memory described by the social theorist Jürgen Straub. Straub writes that, according to contemporary research in

psychology, in many cases memories have just the sort of narrative structure Berkane's example suggests. Memories are representations, and "representations are constructions, with whose help the pasts, the presents, and the envisaged futures can be *shaped*, articulated and reflected *as a story*, history, or biography" ("Psychology, Narrative, and Cultural Memory" 220, emphasis in original). If that is true, then:

Memory is no [. . .] neutral storage medium which passively records just anything and on demand reproduces it unaltered. It works and interferes with its "contents," arranging and organizing them. For this, it deploys different "schematic" possibilities, from the first operation of "conserving" to the topical re-arrangements and pragmatic-semantic re-writings. A salient feature in these operation is the narrative structuring of events. (220-221)

Straub further notes that Frederic Bartlett's experiments in the 1930s provided early evidence of the narrative structure of memory by demonstrating that many memories are encoded in meaningful forms. Although some memories may be primarily sensorial—a face or piece of music might even be remembered *more poorly* if it is described in words, for example<sup>32</sup>—, it is commonly the case that the "storage" of memories and the composition of narrative in meaningful language are equivalent operations. It is in that sense that writing imitates memory for Berkane, because it is also a process in which events are represented in time and through language. Although writing is not the only medium capable of transmitting narratives, the novel he writes would seem to be a particularly apt medium for describing his past since, at the very least, its similarity to the structure of his memories is straightforward.

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<sup>32</sup> See Jürgen Straub's chapter in *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, pp. 215-228.

For Berkane, then, both the content of memory and the medium of its expression are hardly distinguishable from one another. He remembers narratives, and he remembers them *through* narrative as well. Borrowing a phrase from Straub, different “schematic possibilities” are deployed in his letters to Marise, journal entries, and novel, each of which uses narrative conventions of its genre, and Berkane makes use of them to excavate and understand a past whose artifacts are made of the same substance as his tools. Likewise, the collective Algerian past that Berkane and Nadjia are depicted as remembering, and to which their stories contribute through Djébar’s novel, is an equally narrative construct.

Jenny Murray’s argument that Berkane’s memory is strongly related to sensory impressions does not contradict my reading. “Berkane himself evokes the importance of the role of the senses in the formation of memories” (*RPS* 213), Murray writes, but the passage she uses to support that claim also supports the idea that *La disparition de la langue française* depicts memory and narrative as fundamentally equivalent. Murray points out that, when Berkane remembers the torture he experienced after being arrested by the French, he writes that: “de ce passage dans la souffrance purement physique, bizarrement, c’est un détail purement visuel qui me reste, *que j’ai besoin de décrire*, qui fait l’originalité de mon petit calvaire” (*LD* 163, emphasis mine). Clearly, the “détail purement visuel” is important. Yet it is the *description* of that “détail”—knowledge expressed in language—that motivates Berkane, and that constitutes its meaningful recollection for him. In that sense, the visual is useful as the catalyst for narrative, but the detail in and of itself is only meaningful (and transmissible) when understood through narrative. The senses influence Berkane’s memory, then; I simply argue that sensory perceptions, like Berkane’s photos, do not function in and of themselves, in *La disparition de la langue française*, as important *contents* of memory.

In addition, if memories have narrative structures, and if the faculty of memory allows those structures to persist through time, writing imitates memory in that respect as well. Berkane's use of writing aligns with that notion, since he uses it to create a sense of Marise or Nadjia's presence when they are distant from him in time and space. In his first letter to Marise, Berkane writes that "je t'écris, c'est tout, pour converser et me sentir, le temps d'une lettre, proche de toi" (19). Similarly, Berkane explains that he uses writing to "reconstitute" Nadjia and the story she told concerning her grandfather:

Or moi qui écris désormais, des jours et des jours plus tard, je reconstitue, je me ressouviens de Nadjia, de sa voix qui se remémore: je saisis, j'encercle son récit, sa mémoire dévidée. [. . .] J'écris, oui: je suis le scribe, un petit scribe solitaire. (94)

As a "scribe," Berkane transforms ephemeral conversation into a more permanent "voix qui se remémore" that speaks again through his written account. Berkane also sees writing as the key to maintaining the "presence" of French when he confronts the possibility that his Arabic conversations with Rachid might efface his past with Marise (24). Interestingly, in one instance writing is even portrayed as somehow preferable to continued speech. While Berkane finds it helpful to write to Marise, he never takes it upon himself to call: "C'est toujours elle qui appelle, le plus souvent, le dimanche matin..." (130).

The mimetic quality of written narrative as a language of memory recalls Gérard Genette's discussion of Plato's distinction between *mimesis* and *diegesis* in his essay "Boundaries of Narrative." Genette writes: "for Plato, the domain of what he calls *lexis* (or manner of speaking, as opposed to *logos*, that which is said) can be theoretically divided into imitation properly speaking (*mimesis*) and simple narrative (*diegesis*)" (2). Furthermore, "Plato opposed *mimesis* to *diegesis* as a perfect imitation to an imperfect imitation" (5). For Genette,

that opposition is based on a tautology underlying *lexis*, which he uncovers by examining the difference between “narrative” and “discourse,” or between writing meant to provide a “verbal representation of the acts of Chryses” in the *Iliad* and verses that purport to reproduce his speech in written form. Genette concludes:

The very notion of imitation on the level of *lexis* is a pure mirage which fades away as one approaches it. Language can but perfectly imitate language; more exactly, a discourse can but perfectly imitate a perfectly identical discourse. In short, a discourse can but imitate itself. As far as *lexis* is concerned, direct imitation is a tautology. (3-4)

Genette’s purpose in uncovering that tautology is to demonstrate that there is no opposition between *mimesis* and *diegesis*: rather, “*mimesis* is *diegesis*” because “a perfect imitation is no longer an imitation; it is the thing itself. Ultimately, the only imitation is the imperfect one” (5).

Something of Genette’s tautology is reflected in Straub’s description of memory and Berkane’s use of writing. To the extent that Berkane’s memories *are* narrative, the use of narrative to represent them elicits a similar equation: narrative can but imitate memory. Certainly, writing is inherently unable to re-present events or impressions in themselves, but the narrative conveyed by a written work imitates *memory* itself. If memory *is* diegesis, writing—like other media, too—is one language of memory in which memories can be presented *as* memories.

If writing has some advantage over other narrative media, for Berkane, it is perhaps because it is associated with the French language. The use of French—and written French in particular—is a topic he brings up with some frequency. Berkane wonders, for instance, why he writes to Marise “alors que je ne peux t’écire en mots de ma tribu” (21) and remarks on the difference between the language he uses to write and the spoken Darija he uses with Nadjia. He



notes that Nadjia recounted her story “en mots arabes que j’inscris, moi, en mots français” (94) and describes pages of his writing that are “pleines, malgré mes mots français, pleines de sa voix de la veille, de la nuit passée, de celle qui nous attendait” (106). How, Berkane wonders, could he alter Nadjia’s words, “déplacer ces mots arabes, les faire glisser pour les garder en langue seconde?” (127).

Berkane’s answer to that question lies partly in the fact that, having chosen writing as a primary language of memory, he chooses to use French by necessity. For him, writing and French go hand in hand. The French language is portrayed as the means by which he is able to continue “ma seule trace, ma seule traque, vers toi, vers ton ombre” (128) when he writes to Nadjia, and when he states that “écrire et glisser à la langue franque, c’est le moyen sûr de garder, tout près, ta voix, tes paroles” (128), it is partly because French is Berkane’s “langue d’écrivain” (129). It is a language in which he finds himself “installé en profondeur, prenant racine, pourrais-je dire” (129), and one in which “plus je cherche mes mots, plus je trouve un rythme à moi” (129). French is enabling in that regard: in using it to write to Nadjia, Berkane’s writing “devient ma peau, mes muscles, ma voix: mon français fluctue pour que vous l’entendiez, comme vous entendiez le bruit des vagues sous ma fenêtre, vous vous en souvenez?” (129). Whether simply through habit or because of his ability to evoke even the sounds of waves by using it, French is Berkane’s language of recollection. “En écrivant mes souvenirs de jeunesse, avait-il confié à son jeune frère, le français devient ma langue de mémoire...” (186). And, since it is the medium in which Berkane seems best able to make use of that “langue de mémoire,” writing is an equally important part of his mnemonic quest.

### Why Berkane Remembers

In addition to examining the properties of memory and the process of recollection depicted in *La disparition de la langue française*, examining *why* Berkane remembers is helpful in making sense of the meaning of disappearance in Djébar's novel. Like the rest of his relationship to the past, the reasons for which he remembers can be read on two levels. On one level, memory serves Berkane's purposes as an individual attempting to make sense of his past and as an embodiment of a collective Algerian experience whose experiences—and especially his disappearance—are legible as commentary on memory in the Algerian context. As Jenny Murray argues, for example, Berkane's story can be read as an admonition "to understand how the current political crisis has come about" (*RPS* 225). I suggest that a reading of *La disparition de la langue française* as a fiction of memory permits a reading of Berkane's motivations on a second level, where they are lent a broader significance as commentary on the uses and limitations of memory in the postmodern, postcolonial world of today. In that way, a description of the reasons for which Berkane delves into his memory will contribute two elements to my reading his disappearance.

In the first instance, Berkane's return to Algeria and his attempts to understand the past are responses to his belief that he is "sans avenir" (15). Before leaving France, both his professional and personal life appeared to be leading nowhere. As the narrator explains, "ce fut ainsi, un matin, lorsqu' il s'était réveillé dans son studio de Blanc-Mesnil: 'Sans avenir! Je ne me vois aucun projet!' avait-il constaté tout haut, et en français, alors qu'il tournait seul dans son logis" (15). When Marise then leaves him, Berkane's sense of being "sans avenir" is redoubled, and is symbolized by his aimless wandering in Paris two weeks later. "Il erra dans Paris, prenant un bus jusqu'au terminus, un autre bus, dans un autre sens, jusqu'au terminus, finit par

s’immobiliser debout” (16), finally arriving at a quai where he imagines “un désert de pierre en lui: ou, plutôt, peu à peu surgissant, l’image d’un mur haut, [. . .] cette muraille devant ses yeux surgissait pour lui barrer tout horizon” (17). An image of a moment shared with Marise, then an Algerian beach from Berkane’s childhood, then a memory of his mother, and finally her voice promise Berkane a way around the wall he sees: reconnection to the past offers a means of finding a way forward into the future.

From time to time, Berkane remembers without conscious motivations when the past returns of its own accord. As Jenny Murray writes, “in addition to his conscious search for memories, there are also instances in the novel when Berkane experiences involuntary memory” (*RPS* 202). Some of his memories were repressed, according to Murray, and they inevitably resurface in the present. When they do, they bring with them a sense of nostalgia and an implicit demand for a response. Such is the case after Berkane’s vision of the desert wall. “Dans ce studio du Blanc-Mesnil, en s’endormant le soir, quinze jours après que Marise l’eut quitté, il entendit distinctement la voix maternelle dérouler le *Chant de la cigogne* dans la verison de Tlemcen” (*LD* 17-18), the narrator explains. Rather than soothing him, his mother’s voice enjoins Berkane to act: “non, gémit-il, elle ne me berçait pas, elle m’enveloppait ou, plutôt, les mots de sa poésie, son accent chantant et la dernière note de sa complainte qu’elle faisait tremblée vibraient indéfiniment...” (18). In that moment, Berkane remembers because he must: a confrontation with the past is inevitable, because it cannot be repressed forever, and the nostalgia and lamentations he experiences are like voids crying out to be filled. In turn, he writes because he must, as he explains in his journal. “La nécessité d’écrire est une poussée: lorsque l’être aimé s’en va et que vous ne pouvez plus l’oublier, vous vous mettez à écrire pour qu’il vous lise!...”(134).

Berkane ends his long period of exile in France in order to remember (in) Algeria, and after his arrival, the inverse is true as well: he seeks to remember in order to end his exile from a language, culture, and identity he left behind twenty years prior. His first letter to Marise is emblematic in that respect. “Cette lettre parce que, bien sûr, tu me manques,” he writes, but also because he feels “un trouble inattendu en moi; ce trouble, j’espère, à la fin de cette conversation silencieuse avec toi, l’atténuer, me retrouver simplement moi, sans questions superflues: ni sur ma vie ainsi choisie, ni sur le passé” (20). The rest of the letter, which discusses Berkane’s “trouble inattendu,” his past with Marise, and his love and “nostalgie – *el-ouehch*” (26) for her in the present, seems intended to reestablish Berkane’s sense of integrality as self, absent the gaps and doubts implied by his mention of “questions superflues” and need to be “simplement moi.” The sense of unreality and disconnectedness he feels from his childhood home begin to dissipate through his explorations of the past—including Nadjia’s past, which he considers connected enough to his own to write about at length. Remembering allows Berkane to “reaffirm his sense of identity, which was eroded during his years of exile” (*RPS* 216).

Berkane’s desire to reconstruct a self that is “simplement moi” is additionally meaningful to the extent that he embodies a population of Algerians with similarly complicated senses of identity. In that respect, the fact that Berkane is a francophone writer allows him to symbolize a class of multilingual intellectuals who, imagining a return to Algeria, might find themselves similarly alienated. Berkane’s initial hope to return to Algeria “ni en étranger ni en touriste attardé” (54) transforms into shock on the way to the Casbah when he is “ulcéré de se voir, si près de son quartier, paraître un étranger fortuné, victime tentante pour les petits voyous d’aujourd’hui” (58) and realizes he might also appear to be a “coopérant, ou un riche touriste” (59). A central purpose of Berkane’s reconstructions of the past is to determine how he could

appear to be so, to understand the Casbah's decline—Algeria's decline—and to renegotiate a relationship with an Algerian history and identity with room for individuals like himself. That negotiation includes persons like Nadjia as well, whose experiences are similar to Berkane's despite not being connected to French (and to the colonial history it symbolizes) in the same way. When Nadjia explains to Berkane that “moi qui ai étudié l'arabe littéraire, [. . .] qui parle plusieurs dialectes des pays du Moyen-Orient où j'ai séjourné, je ne reconnais pas cet arabe d'ici” (118), she both underscores the violence of the discourse put forth by the “fanatiques” (118) and embodies a distinctly non-European intellectual tradition exiled from Algeria.

In addition to his symbolism as a francophone writer, Berkane also embodies the significant number of Algerians exiled<sup>33</sup> by economic necessity or the civil war. As such, his efforts to regenerate a sense of self, partly by renegotiating his relationship with a society and identity from which he was distanced for a time, signify as an effort to reintegrate fragments of Algeria into a renewed whole. Berkane's purpose in *remembering* the past is thus also to *re-member* both his sense of self and an Algerian collectivity implied to have lost parts of itself over time. In part, that loss resulted from monolingualism, as is evident when Berkane enters the Casbah, and especially from the kind of purposeful amnesia he encounters there. Such amnesia is, in Jenny Murray's words, “the source of the current Algerian conflict” (“La mort inachevée” 76). Remembering is a prescription for the “sickness” of Berkane's (and Algeria's) “trouble inattendu” following his return, and for the “mauvais réveils” and “effroi rallumé dans le noir”

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<sup>33</sup> If Berkane can be said to have been “exiled” from Algeria, it is most likely due to a lack of economic opportunities. His case mirrors the departure of many Algerians of the generation to which he is portrayed as belonging. Many factors contributed to emigration from Algeria in the 1970s, including the collapse of Algeria's agricultural sector following independence, which led to depopulation in rural areas and economic hardship that placed great pressure on many individuals to migrate. It is in that sense that I read Berkane's time in France as a form of exile applicable to a broad range of Algerians. See John Ruedy's *Modern Algeria* for a discussion of some of the economic pressures leading to migration after independence. The civil war, for its part, required many intellectuals to choose between departure and possible death at the hands of Islamist extremists.

(22) accompanying the return of memories repressed<sup>34</sup> amongst “un peuple pas tout à fait guéri, même trente ans après, de ses plaies de la guerre d’hier!” (132).

Pursuing the metaphor further, the purpose of memory is to provide the means to heal a suffering individual and a suffering nation, and Nadjia’s conversations with Berkane about her grandfather showcase the futility and harm caused by the “alternative medicine” of amnesia. Nadjia initially commits herself to forgetting the events surrounding her grandfather’s assassination, as she explains at the end of her conversation with Berkane. Upon seeing her father and grandmother return from the scene of the assassination, Nadjia tells Berkane that:

Accroupie, je les attends, les observe dans leur approche; je dois déjà souffrir avec eux, je le sais. Comme si cette douleur échevelée, accouplée allait m’emmailloter, moi, à jamais! Non, pas à jamais! Non, après ce jour du sang de Baba Sidi, j’irai partout dans le monde et partout, je décide que j’oublierai. (99)

Yet Nadjia’s efforts to forget do little to help her overcome that part of her past, as evidenced by her deeply-felt need to speak with Berkane. Her voice, which was “gonflée d’une violence sous-jacente, comme quelqu’un qui trop longtemps s’est tu, a gardé un secret, s’est étouffé d’amertume ou de peine” (85), reveals that she remains “symptomatic” despite trying to forget. And, as Berkane remarks after she finishes her story, she is limited by the past, having become “une femme épanouie, ancrée mais où donc? Dans cette scène du premier drame, ou dans la douleur ininterrompue de son aïeule, qu’elle a transportée en chacun de ses exils?” (99).

Speaking about the past might not completely heal her, but it does remove a weight: “Nadjia

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<sup>34</sup> Murray examines the Freudian notion of repression in *Remembering the (Post)Colonial Self*, and argues convincingly that, through Berkane, Djébar depicts repression as an important mechanism underlying Algeria’s relationship to the past and the degradation Berkane encounters in the Casbah. See *RPS*, especially pp. 201-207 especially.

s'allégeait devant moi: comme si elle déposait un manteau peut-être, pas forcément sa douleur" (99-100).

Memory is thus used for political purposes in *La disparition de la langue française*, and ones that relate to more than the Algerian context alone. Just as Berkane's quest can be read as one that Algeria ought to undertake, Djébar seems to view Algeria's relationship to the past as emblematic of a wider problem with memory in the postcolonial context. After remarking that the "Bataille d'Alger" had been replaced in public memory by "simplement les noms d'état civil de tant de victimes de la répression de 57" (68), Berkane asks:

N'est-ce pas là le lot de cette anesthésie des mémoire en pays du tiers-monde? Comme si l'inscription des souffrances sur les lieux eux-mêmes n'existait pas plus qu'un tampon: le nom! un point, c'est tout! N'est-ce pas là la preuve que la société entière, à bout de souffle, court en avant, se précipite en aveugle vers les tâches de survie élémentaire? (68)

Berkane's question suggests that the beneficial uses of memory in the Algerian context might serve as a model for other "pays du tiers-monde" to transcend their singular focus on the present and unencumber themselves of the menial "tâches de survie élémentaire" in which they are mired as a result of both a difficult past and difficulty in dealing with it in the present. Memory is the means of revitalizing the anesthetized organism, restoring its ability to breathe calmly, and allowing it to see beyond the present.

Viewed together, the uses of memory proposed through Berkane's example are primarily (and perhaps ideally) additive rather than competitive. It is certainly the case that Berkane's and Nadjia's accounts of the past seek to redress injustices like the ones identified by Jenny Murray, for whom they "rehabilitate the memory of the forgotten victims of the Algerian War of Independence, whose memory has been subjected to abuse and manipulation by successive FLN

governments” (“La mort inachevée 72). Djebbar thus uses individual memories to “correct the official historical narrative” (*RPS* 215).

Indeed, Berkane’s depiction in *L’adolescent* of his uninformed adoption of FLN narratives involves just such a process of correction. In *L’adolescent*, Berkane recounts his arrest in 1961, at the age of 15 or 16, and the torture he endured as a result of an ill-fated attempt to incite support for demonstrations organized by the FLN. He had become an FLN supporter because, “dès les premières années de la guerre, j’ai su combien les règlements de comptes, dans notre quartier, ont été féroces. Finalement, c’est le FLN qui l’avait emporté, comme dans toute la capitale” (168). Having revealed nothing, Berkane was transferred to “le camp dit ‘de Beni Messous’ où je me retrouvai avec plus de sept cents détenus” of different political stripes (166-167). Because he had fallen under the sway of the FLN and its narratives, he viewed a member of the MNA named Mourad, who shared his barracks at the camp, as “un représentant de ce groupe nationaliste que tout mon entourage, à la Casbah, dénonçait comme des ‘renégats’” (168). With the benefit of hindsight, the narrator of *L’adolescent* further explains that:

Personne ne m’avait dit jusque-là que leur chef, Messali, avait été, dans les années vingt, un devancier, le fondateur historique de “notre” nationalisme politique. Nul, en outre, n’aurait su m’expliquer le pourquoi des divisions entre “chefs” petits et grands qui avaient suivi, après 45... La vérité était une et toute simple: le 1er novembre 54 avait été déclenché par le F.L.N. Tous ceux qui avaient refusé de se rallier à cette impulsion, dont ce M.N.A., étaient “des traîtres!” (168-169)

At the time, then, Berkane represented the “nouvelle génération” who “ne savent rien, politiquement” (170), according to Brahim, an FLN detainee who intervened when Berkane threatened Mourad with a knife. His memory of the Beni Messous camp thus places a



corrective lens over the distorted image of the past that depicts the FLN as wholly heroic liberators and the MNA as traitors. In a similar vein, Nadjia's story of her grandfather's death at the hands of the FLN offers a modest correction to the idea that the FLN used violence only because it was necessary in order to combat French colonialism.

While they provide a counterpoint to hegemonic discourses about the FLN's past emanating from the FLN itself, Berkane's and Nadjia's stories neither entirely vilify that organization nor deny its role in bringing about Algerian independence. Brahim's level-headedness in his rebukes to Berkane and his injunctions to always be fair when judging others' politics contribute to a more nuanced portrait of the FLN than the caricature of the MNA Berkane subscribed to for a time. In that way, Berkane and Nadjia's stories seem intended to append forgotten narratives to the historical record rather than re-litigate the conflict between the FLN and MNA.

Djebar's inclusion of the story of Berkane's uncle Tchaïda is illustrative in that respect. Tchaïda, a politically-unaffiliated barber and drug addict, is portrayed as a martyr to the cause of independence. Berkane tells Tchaïda's story to Rachid, who asks: "Les héros, en Algérie, pendant la guerre, on les a appelés des *moudjahiddin*, un terme religieux, n'est-ce pas?" (77). Berkane responds by explaining that his uncle, too, was heroic, and that the *moudjahiddin* were not the only figures worthy of inclusion in the pantheon of martyrs to Algerian independence movement. Berkane responds: "Rien à voir, dis-je, avec les héros de mon enfance. Considéré comme 'le dernier des derniers' parce que drogué chaque jour! Mais, à sa mort si tragique, le petit peuple en a fait un personnage exemplaire..." (77). While Berkane and Nadjia's stories do correct the record to some extent, they also simply expand that pantheon to include both

politicized figures like Nadja's grandfather or the stoic MNA member Berkane assaults and other forgotten contributors like his uncle Tchaïda.

In that respect, Djébar's fiction of memory recalls Michael Rothberg's argument in *Multidirectional Memory* that the "canon" of collective and public memory need not be thought of as an exclusive space in which memory is a limited resource. "Against the framework that understands collective memory as competitive memory—as a zero-sum struggle over scarce resources—I suggest that we consider memory as multidirectional," Rothberg writes, and "as subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing; as productive and not privative" (*Multidirectional Memory* 3). For Rothberg and for Djébar, it is possible to generate a (provisional, contingent) narrative of the past that is "corrected" by increasing its plenitude rather than its perceived exactitude, or through process of addition and relation, primarily, rather than substitution or subtraction. Berkane's fear that his use of Darija and his reconnection with childhood memories will *replace* his memories of Marise hints at the dangers of exclusivity, much like the dilapidation of the Casbah suggests the dangers of linguistic exclusivity.

By making such additive history possible, remembering counteracts reductive symmetries like the ones that led Berkane to forget or repress certain parts of his past in the first place. The "tranche de vie lointaine" and "effroi assez confus de petit garçon" of the French butcher's death remained among Berkane's obscured memories because, in a conversation with his mother, a narrative containing a seductive symmetry obfuscated the complicated reality of the event. Days after he witnessed the butcher's death, Berkane writes that "l'enfant avait parlé du 'chiffon aux trois couleurs, avec du vert, du rouge, et du blanc'" that had led him to follow the demonstrators. "C'est pour le voir que j'ai suivi leur marche désordonnée!" se dit-il et il comprend, en voulant ordonner à présent son récit, il comprend que le boucher a menacé justement à cause de ce

chiffon” (34-35). When he spoke about the flag with his mother, their dialog cast the French flag as “le leur” and the crowd’s flag as “le nôtre.” For Berkane, “la logique semblait sans faille: chacun son drapeau, sauf que ‘le nôtre, on le cache, mais pourquoi?’” (35), and the dialog itself replaced the violent scene of the butcher’s death in his memory:

Ce dialogue s’incrusta dans la tête de l’enfant qui oublia tout: la scène de rue, et même le boucher suspendu de dos, lui dont les jambes gigotaient dans le vide. Il ne garda en mémoire que le drapeau, le nouveau “avec du vert” qu’il voyait pour la première fois; “le nôtre!” avait précisé Mma, différent de celui de l’école, “le leur.” Cette symétrie qui a rassuré l’enfant l’aida à oublier la violence de la foule, ce jour de la manifestation. (35)

Finally recalling the demonstration and the butcher’s death helps Berkane to overcome the facile symmetry of “le leur” and “le nôtre” and to produce a more nuanced narrative of the violence than one promoted by self-justifying nationalist sentiment, symbolized by the flag. It helps Berkane to expand Rachid’s understanding of the past as well. After remembering the story, Berkane is able to share it with the fisherman, for whom “le drapeau algérien et les manifestations autour, à Alger, des femmes, des hommes et des enfants de tous âges, qui ont manifesté, avec force, c’était, m’a-t-on dit, en décembre 1960!” (37). According to Berkane, the butcher’s death took place in 1952.

In sum, perhaps one of the most important purposes of remembering in *La disparition de la langue française* is to pluralize the past. Berkane’s and Nadja’s recollections underscore the plurality of languages that operated *in* the past and, because both Arabic and French are necessary for each of them, they also insist on the plurality of languages needed in order to remember. Likewise, their stories of events that took place during the war of independence pluralize the figure of the resistance hero, and their memories encourage moving beyond

categorical binaries that obscure the past even as they shape individual and collective Algerian histories. Through the collective nature of memory, too, Djébar depicts recollection as a pluralizing activity because, upon examination, it reveals itself to be structurally antagonistic toward authoritative, univocal claims about the past.

Indeed, for Berkane, no single voice—not even his own—wields hegemonic control over the representation of the past, and only absent that control can the etiology of Algeria and Algerians’ present-day “sickness” of memory be explained by archaeological work like Berkane’s. When he visits his photographer friend Amar before going to the Casbah, Berkane describes his desire to make visible to a forgetful public the “cimetière de mosquées, de palais, de maisons” (63) razed by France in the 1830s in the area around the Djemaa el Djedid: “La destruction, dis-je, tu sais combien c’est pour moi une douloureuse fascination! J’aurais dû étudier pour être archéologue, diriger des fouilles, et là, sur cette place, j’aurais exhumé des pierres plutôt que des cadavres!” (*LD* 61). The metaphorical bodies Berkane uncovers are the victims of the violence done to memory by singular narratives and monolingualism. Amar exhorts Berkane to avoid the same kind of abuse by judging each form of destruction in its context:

Ne juge pas hier avec la logique d’aujourd’hui! conseille Amar, marchant à mes côtés.

Qu’on le veuille ou non, la destruction était la règle partout, au dix-neuvième siècle: nous avons subi, en 1830, l’implacable loi du vainqueur... Que dire plutôt de ces deux dernières décades, quant à la politique d’urbanisation de nous gouvernants d’aujourd’hui?

(61-62)

Bringing forms of destruction—both colonial and post-colonial—to light while avoiding simplistic, anachronistic judgments about their meaning is one of the ways in which Jenny

Murray suggests “Djebar sets out to revalorise Algeria’s multicultural heritage by pitting individual memories against the hegemonic discourses propounded by FLN and Islamist propaganda” (*RPS* 76) through Berkane.

Finally, then, another purpose of remembering in *La disparition de la langue française* is to assert a version of History whose events and characters are subject to kinds of negotiation and reformulation implied by the possibility of additive remembering. That framework for (re)constructing individual and collective pasts offers some chance that the Berkanes and Nadjias of the world will find something in those pasts that they can relate to, in turn making it possible “to counterbalance the collective amnesia or silence which [Djebar] identifies as the source of the current Algerian conflict” (*RPS* 76).

### **Voice and Memory**

The personal and political aims of recollection in *La disparition de la langue française* cast memory as a powerful means of addressing wounds related to Algeria’s past. At the same time, though, Berkane’s use of writing as a language of memory, as well as the collectivity of his memories and acts of recollection, work together to lend a deeply skeptical undertone to Djebar’s fiction of memory that questions the possibilities of memory. It is an undertone perhaps best illustrated by the ways in which different voices at different narrative levels of the text contribute to Berkane’s story and relate ambiguously to one another, and it concerns memory both in the Algerian context and in general. Berkane’s disappearance further encourages interpretation of Djebar’s novel along those lines, and the theme of disappearance is made more significant, I believe, when considering the dangers and limitations of memory suggested by the interplay of voices in the text. I use the term “voice” in a broad sense to include characters, narrators, and all

of the implied or imagined points of view the reader might perceive as contributing to the narrative in Djébar's novel. Assia Djébar's implied voice counts among the many it contains, in that sense, because the reader might consider her to "speak" through the themes, structure, or style of the novel.

A scene I have cited before proves useful again here as an example of the multiplicity of such voices at work in *La disparition de la langue française*. When a seemingly omniscient narrator explains Berkane's "irrevocable" decision to stay in Algeria, several voices become apparent to the reader as they take part in representing or performing elements of Berkane's recollections:

"Eh bien quoi," Berkane se réveille et son esprit a presque machinalement déroulé les jours précédents, puis le moment exact où il a pris sa décision irrévocable.

— Irrévocable! répète-t-il, à voix haute, en français.

Il a un moment de surprise. "Pourquoi me parler ainsi seul et face à la mer?" Cette pensée le secoue, comme s'il craignait quelque maladie sournoise, d'inattendus symptômes mal définis...

— Me voici en retraite qui déclame devant la mer! ironise-t-il, cette fois dans la langue des aïeux.

Aussitôt en lui, sa mère, Halima, émet un long soupir presque rauque, voluptueux.

Car il a pris sa retraite, Berkane. (15-16)

The voices of Berkane and the narrator are prominent in that passage. The presence of each is relatively unproblematic, given the conventions of the novel as a genre: omniscient narrators who reproduce characters' speech are commonplace enough. But theirs are not the only voices figured as speaking. As Berkane begins to reminisce, his mother's voice also intervenes in the

narrative. It is portrayed as speaking “en lui,” as if she were autonomous and *present* at that moment, rather than “speaking” figuratively through one of Berkane’s memories. Underscoring its autonomy, her voice responds to Berkane’s words, too, and when the narrator explains that Berkane indeed retired, it is in response to the mother’s voice *as distinct from Berkane’s* that the latter’s misconception about his status is explained.

What is particularly interesting about the voices in the passage above is that they make up only a part of a broader multiplicity of voices that seem to operate from within the text and without. Two separate voices speak when Berkane recalls the days leading to his “retirement” that were “machinalement déroulé” in his mind. An additional voice—the narrator—conveys those recollections to the reader. A fourth voice is then created by Berkane’s surprise at having exclaimed “irrévocable!” out loud, because it indicates that he speaks with two of them: one that blurts out “irrévocable” from outside his conscious control, and another that reacts. The duality of Berkane’s speech is part of a chorus of voices involved in explaining his past, still more of which are introduced elsewhere in the text. The section of *La disparition de la langue française* entitled *L’adolescent*, for instance, which shares its title with Berkane’s novel *en abyme*, introduces an additional narrator and even an additional Berkane. If the reader understands that section to be a reproduction of Berkane’s manuscript, presumably recovered after he disappeared, then its narrator is not the same as the one who often explains Berkane’s actions or thoughts elsewhere. That protagonist of *L’adolescent* is not identical with Berkane, either, in the same way that Marcel is not identical with Proust. Consequently, there are at least three Berkanes whose voices contribute to *La disparition de la langue française*—two that work through Berkane as he is figured in chapter two and elsewhere, and a third manifest in the Berkane given life through *L’adolescent*.

Those voices are in turn conveyed through others after Berkane disappears. His writings, presumably including the manuscript of *L'adolescent*, are retrieved by his brother Driss, who gives them to Marise for safekeeping in Paris. Driss and Marise are present elsewhere in Djébar's novel, but their voices become especially important in the absence of Berkane's. Since they are portrayed as the keepers of Berkane's writings, too, the reader must wonder whether they are responsible for organizing them into the contents of *La disparition de la langue française*. In that case, Berkane only speaks as he does by virtue of their curation and publication of his writings. Berkane's voice is also made to speak through Marise in another sense when, "chaque soir sur scène, elle se nourrirait de [. . .] la présence en creux de Berkane," and again when she reproduces something of his voice in her own. Marise laments Berkane's absence by uttering *houma*, "le seul mot arabe que Marise sache prononcer," just as Berkane used to. "Elle a appris à rendre le 'h' aspiré; elle peut même s'exclamer: 'Ya ouled el houma!' exactement comme Berkane le disait" (204).

Even the voice of Erasmus can be heard, so to speak, in the final lines of *La disparition de la langue française*. There, Driss reads a copy of Erasmus' *Lettre sur les songes* sent to Berkane by Nadjia, who was as yet unaware he had disappeared:

Dans son studio pour clandestin, Driss se remet au lit. Il lit lentement la *Lettre sur les songes* d'Érasme. Tout somnolent, il se répète une phrase, soulignée par Nadjia: "Je ne parle pas du ciel des anges..."

C'est Érasme qui parle, ou peut-être Nadjia, ou Berkane, de là où il se trouve. Marmonnant les mêmes mots "du ciel, du ciel des anges!" Driss sombre enfin dans la nuit. (216)



The inclusion of Erasmus' letter introduces his voice—his imagined voice, that is, based on the reader's knowledge of his work—as another to which certain parts of the text might be attributed, “speaking” when a theme or idea in Djébar's novel is interpreted as being influenced by his work. In cases where the influence of Erasmus' ideas is not as evident as in others, his voice might be said to blend with others in the same way that several voices blend as Driss reads what appear to be Erasmus' words.

The multiple voices involved in Berkane's story and in his recollections mingle with one another and interact in such a way that, perhaps like the reader, Berkane sometimes has difficulty in distinguishing one from another. In that sense, if memory is salutary for Berkane and for Algeria, it is also chaotic. In a scene that takes place after Berkane's “retirement” and before his return to Algeria, for example, Berkane's mother's voice blends with Marise's when he remembers a song his mother used to sing. In his “studio du Blanc-Mesnil, en s'endormant le soir, quinze jours après que Marise l'eut quitté, il entendit distinctement la voix maternelle dérouler le *Chant de la cigogne*” (18). A week later, Berkane finds it difficult to determine whether it is his mother's voice or Marise's that sings:

Une semaine sans discontinuer, il eut des veillées à la fois de tendresse et de nostalgie. Le quatrième ou cinquième soir, il ne savait plus si c'était sa mère ou la voix de Marise (elle aimait chantonner en espagnol) qui l'accompagnait jusqu'au cœur de sa nuit. Car il n'entendait plus les mots, seulement la mélodie, ou son ombre, et la tristesse de cette mélodie qui finissait, déchirante. (18)

The blurring of distinctions between voices and the number that are involved in Berkane's recollections work together to portray memory as subject to an important and open question: *who speaks* when one talks or writes about the past?

Indeed, it is sometimes difficult in *La disparition de la langue française* to determine which voice to credit with particular memories or passages in the text—or even to distinguish clearly the different diegetic levels of the novel. At first, for example, it seems reasonable to believe that instances where *je* appears (outside of direct discourse) in the text can be read as reproductions of Berkane’s first-person journal entries or letters. In that case, Berkane and the omniscient narrator who sometimes speaks about him in the third person are clearly distinct from one another, each existing on one of two primary diegetic levels of *La disparition de la langue française*: the level of Berkane’s actions and the extradiegetic level of the narrator. Yet the identity of at least one *je* in the novel is in fact deeply ambiguous, and the unresolved question of the relationship between that *je* and Berkane invites a degree of doubt concerning how all of the other characters and narrators in the text might be understood.

The *je* in question appears as the first word of the first chapter of *La disparition de la langue française*. The first chapter begins with a statement in the first person: “Je reviens donc, aujourd’hui même, au pays...” (13). Circumstantial evidence suggests that *je* is none other than Berkane. *Je* is male, according to the adjectives that describe it, *je* arrives in Algeria, like Berkane, and *je* is also a writer. Yet *je* is never named in chapter one, and an earlier verse from Mohammed Dib included before the opening of *Le retour*, the first section in Djébar’s novel, seems designed to invite doubt concerning *je*’s identity: “Celui qui dit ‘je’ aveugle... trébuchant et tombant / dans toutes les fondrières: / c’est le ciel, se dit-il, le ciel qui s’ouvre!” (9). The reader’s first act when beginning to read chapter one, of course, is to utter the word *je*, silently or aloud, perhaps as blindly “celui qui dit ‘je’” in Dib’s verses.

When juxtaposing the first sentence of each of *La disparition de la langue française*’s first two chapters, the relationship between *je* and Berkane becomes all the more uncertain. The

second chapter opens in a similar manner to the first: “Berkane est de retour après vingt ans d’émigration en banlieue parisienne” (15). The sentence is striking for the parallel between “je reviens donc” and “Berkane est de retour” as well as its shift to the third person. Despite the similarities between *je* and Berkane, the conspicuous parallel structure and the especially conspicuous use of a name rather than a pronoun would seem to indicate that they are not the same person.

As if to underscore the uncertainty surrounding *je*, the emphasis placed upon it as the first word of the novel’s first scene invites two additional interpretations of its identity. Since the reader knows that the words on the novel’s pages were composed by Assia Djébar, it is possible to understand *je* as referring to Djébar herself, perhaps imagining her own return to Algeria from her exile in the United States. The use of masculine adjectives to describe *je* might encourage the reader to conclude that *je* is someone else, but the invitation to conflate the two remains. In light of the aforementioned quote from Mohammed Dib, the masculine adjectives might even be explained away as a red herring, or a generic use of the masculine in the absence of a definite gender, perhaps, rather than evidence of *je* and Berkane’s identity. Secondly, though, the pivotal *je* could be seen as an invitation to reflect on the reader’s own involvement in the work, since the reader must enunciate that word in the act of reading it, and by doing so is made to appropriate the text and its memories.

The doubt surrounding the nature of *je* is unresolvable, and it leads to equal doubt concerning the nature of the author(s), narrator(s), and different diegetic levels in play in *La disparition de la langue française*. It seems clear that *je* and Berkane are not *necessarily* the same entity, but it is possible to read their relationship in several ways. If the reader imagines the initial *je* to be Djébar herself, Berkane’s story could be seen as a kind of calque of Djébar’s

hoped-for or imagined return to Algeria. If *je* is interpreted to be neither Djébar nor Berkane, all subsequent chapters remain legible as the contents of the novel *je* writes after returning to Algeria, in which case Berkane is a *product* of *je*, and the two may or may not be seen as inhabiting the same world. His novel, *L'adolescent*, then becomes a novel represented within a novel represented within Djébar's.

If, on the other hand, the reader concludes that *je* and Berkane are more closely related, then Berkane could be understood as a character in *je*'s third-person autobiography—or autofiction, perhaps. Alternatively, and with encouragement from *je*'s indicated gender, it is possible to read the first chapter as a journal entry Berkane wrote before work on his novel begins, presented in *La disparition de la langue française* before an omniscient narrator explains its origins. In that case, only two novels are readily apparent: Berkane's and Djébar's. Berkane's past and *je*'s would then include “automne 1991” (11) in Douaouda, Algeria, and all of the conversations and events leading up to his disappearance. The omniscient narrator, on the other hand, might be understood to be speaking about events, including Berkane's disappearance, from a point in time after they occurred. Djébar's choice to cast a writer as the protagonist of her fiction of memory only reinforces the complexity of the possible relationships between *je* and Berkane, thereby complicating the relationships between all of the voices that contribute to his account of the past as well. Writing seems to be enabling for Berkane in many respects, but *La disparition de la langue française* also depicts narrative concerning the past as (perhaps inevitably) steeped in the sorts of interpretational difficulties I have outlined here. It is difficult in the end to determine the manner in which Berkane “speaks” in the work, on whose behalf, and even the nature and diegetic level of the past he seems to speak about.

The importance of the ambiguities I have described, to my mind, is their effect as a part of the overall fiction of memory in which Berkane participates. While it does not act alone, Djébar's ambiguous *je* contributes to and is emblematic of such a complicated relationship between narrators and diegetic levels involved in speaking about the past that skepticism concerning memory itself seems warranted. While that skepticism might be made more or less intense depending on the reader's stance concerning *je*'s identity, it seems unavoidable, and the question of who exactly "speaks" when one remembers is portrayed as deeply fraught. Berkane, *je*, their respective novels, and the conversations and fundamentally collective reconstructions of the past they represent, certainly blur ready-made distinctions between an individual's memory and a group's, between memory and history, and between reality and other fictions as "true" foundations for narratives concerning the past.

Details from Berkane and Nadjia's biographies further question the idea that a faithful reproduction of the past could ever follow the utterance "I remember." On the one hand, Berkane and Nadjia possess the narrative authority traditionally granted to those who are present for the events they recount. Berkane *saw* the butcher's death—or so it seems to him in the present—and Nadjia witnessed her father and grandmother's grief. On the other hand, both were children at the time. I argued previously that Nadjia's age, like her emphasis on the verb *reconstituer* (90) in describing her recollections, serves to highlight the collectivity of her memories. Yet it also provides another troubling answer to the question of who speaks when one remembers: in this case, a child, and one so young that the reader must wonder whether her reconstituted "memories" ought specifically to be read *as* a child's, with all of the caveats usually applied to children's versions of events.

Since the collective reconstruction of her grandfather's death is responsible for a great deal of her memories, too, she embodies the notion that the meaning even of powerful, episodic, autobiographical memories is negotiated with others. The reader is faced with the question of whether to trust Nadjia's account both because she was a child and because it hardly belongs to her at all. Berkane, while older at the time of the butcher's death, was nevertheless a child as well, and his understanding of that event *changes* when he reviews it in the present. It is figured as becoming meaningful for him (and particularly symbolic for the reader of *La disparition de la langue française*) through its *re*interpretation, in fact. For both Berkane and Nadjia, then, the reader is asked to confront the idea that the voices contributing to their accounts of the past belong either to unreliable sources or to no one in particular. Even if their childhood perceptions were faithfully recorded, tucked away, and left intact over the years (as Jenny Murray suggests they might be<sup>35</sup>), they are mediated by their present selves and through dizzying layers of Djébar's narrative architecture.

The question "Who speaks?" takes on an additional dimension when Djébar invokes Erasmus through Nadjia's letters to Berkane. The reference to Erasmus reminds the reader that the intertextuality of Djébar's novel, or any literary work, causes it to speak partially in the "voice" of its literary forebears. Erasmus' name also evokes the ideals of the *République des lettres* and the textual exchanges it represents, and his voice seems to speak in *La disparition de*

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<sup>35</sup> Murray argues that Berkane and Nadjia's memories do stay intact. "Like Freud, Djébar conceives of memory as a living entity which has the power to survive the ravages of time" (*RPS* 15), Murray writes, adding that some of Berkane's memories "have survived undamaged by the course of time" (213-214). The durability of memories results from their repression, in some cases, or from their relationship to the senses. Murray remarks that "Freud illustrates how repressed memories, by virtue of the very fact that they have been repressed, are preserved intact despite the passage of time" and suggests that Berkane's repression of the butcher's death allowed it to persist in his memory accordingly. With respect to the senses, "like Augustine, Djébar too conceives of memory as a sort of store in which memories, the imprints of sensory perception, are stored" (209). Those impressions are lasting: "For Djébar, as for her illustrious predecessor, once a person experiences an event, the memory of that event remains in the person's memory" (209).

*la langue française* as well, at least in the sense that evoking Erasmus encourages the reader to see his influence at work in various scenes or ideas in the work. Yet the “*Lettre sur les songes d’Érasme de Rotterdam, écrite à Padoue, en 1508, à Thomas Grey et à son frère, étudiants à Louvain*” (213) cited with great specificity in Djébar’s novel does not appear in collections of Erasmus’ correspondence. A letter by that name does appear, however, in a book of poetry by Claude Michel Cluny,<sup>36</sup> where Dider Érasme is also used as a pseudonym.<sup>37</sup> The misleading invocation of “Érasme,” like the polyphony and ambiguities of Berkane or *je*, is emblematic of the indistinct provenance of narratives—and of memories—in *La disparition de la langue française*.

Reading Djébar’s novel as a fiction of memory and exploring the multiplicity and ambiguity of the voices at work in Berkane’s attempted reconstruction of the past leads to a general conclusion: for Djébar, remembering is an activity that blurs the boundaries of the remembering subject. Certainly, Berkane remembers the past—but is it really *his*? While recollection seems to promise him (and Algeria) a degree of identitary restoration and re-integration, the way in which it is portrayed to work—perhaps especially in writing, since that is its primary medium for Berkane—his example also reveals that the subject attempting to remember itself might bring about its own diffusion. Within the world of *La disparition de la langue française*, Berkane and his associates might not reach that same conclusion, but the fiction of memory in which they take part encourages the reader to do so. Consequently, while

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<sup>36</sup> It is possible that Djébar intentionally or unintentionally misrepresented the date or recipients of a real letter written by Erasmus, and that I have failed to discover the correct reference. However, see for example P. S. Allen’s *Opus Epistolarum des Erasmi Roterodami* or Francis Morgan Nichols’ *Epistles of Erasmus*, in which the *Lettre sur les songes* does not appear, nor any similar letter coinciding with the dates mentioned in *La disparition de la langue française*. The only mentions of a *Lettre sur les songes* I was able to locate occur in relation to Cluny’s 1989 *Poèmes du fond de l’oeil, suivi d’une lettre d’Érasme sur les songes*.

<sup>37</sup> Cluny used this name only for the *Poèmes du fond de l’oeil*, according to the Bibliothèque nationale de France: see [http://data.bnf.fr/12163722/didier\\_erasme/](http://data.bnf.fr/12163722/didier_erasme/).

Berkane pursues a cure for an amnesic illness affecting both himself and Algeria, the negotiated, narrative character of memory—precisely what allows him to perform his archaeological work—also encourages profound skepticism about its possibilities and fear of its inherent dangers.

### **Disappearance and Memory**

I have attempted to describe the properties and complexities of Djébar's depiction of memory in *La disparition de la langue française* because it is in light of those complexities that an especially rich, two-part reading of the theme of disappearance becomes manageable. The first part of that reading considers the possible meanings of Berkane's disappearance in light of the Algerian context in which it occurs. One way in which it signifies in that context, according to Jenny Murray, is as a kind of warning. "While in *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*, Djébar demonstrates that the quest for a postcolonial Algerian identity must begin with a reassessment of the country's past," Murray writes, "the fate of the protagonist of *La Disparition de la langue française* reveals the dangers of such a quest" ("La mort inachevée" 71). The relationship Djébar's novel stages between language and memory in particular provides an indication of why the warning should be heeded.

The second part of my reading of the theme of disappearance can be developed by viewing Berkane's disappearance as a commentary on the possibilities and pitfalls of memory *per se*, as I have done to some extent already. A more sustained consideration of Berkane's symbolism in Djébar's fiction of memory ultimately reveals intriguing similarities between his disappearance in *La disparition de la langue française* and the other forms of disappearance I have examined in this dissertation. Ultimately, I believe that such a reading also helps to explain



the sense in which Djébar, like Perec, Binebine, or Ben Jelloun, portrays disappearance as a privileged structure of experience in the postmodern, globalizing world.

The ambiguity surrounding Berkane's fate encourages the kind of double reading I propose. At first, a number of clues implicate the Algerian government in Berkane's disappearance. Shortly after he vanishes, Driss and Marise speak by telephone. "Averti par la police de Dellys qui avait ouvert l'enquête, Driss s'était précipité jusqu'à ce petit port; de là, le soir, il avait appelé Marise qu'il connaissait depuis longtemps" (183), the narrator explains. During their call, "la communication avec Paris fut coupée" (184), as if a third party to their conversation intervened.

Driss' subsequent experiences with the police also hint that Berkane's disappearance was state-sponsored. When the investigation into his kidnapping stagnates, Driss travels again to Dellys to meet with the chief of police. An unnamed representative of the *Sécurité militaire* joins them, and his presence, like the behavior of both representatives of the state, is suspicious:

Driss expliqua l'histoire du retour de Berkane. [. . .]

— Il écrivait? interrogea le commissaire, l'œil soupçonneux.

— Il écrivait un roman...

Un suspens dans l'air. [. . .] À ce moment-là, l'observateur "des services" avait choisi de se lever. Trop pressé était-il, trop important se sentait-il sans doute, pour s'attarder sur le cas d'un quidam anonyme. (185)

The chief's suspicion, the "suspens dans l'air," and the narrator's description of the observer's intentions lend credence to the idea that the "services" might know more than the observer lets on. The phrase "sans doute" reads as an ironic interjection as a result.

Still, the actions of the observer and the police chief hardly *prove* their involvement in a crime. To the contrary, an impartial observer might interpret the “suspens” and the observer’s behavior as natural reactions to the kind of case Driss brings before them. Having plausibly seen such cases before, given the timing in relation to the events of the civil war, they might simply recognize the political sensitivities and personal risks involved in investigating Berkane’s disappearance. Such an investigation might, after all, result in an appreciable danger of meeting a fate similar to Berkane’s.<sup>38</sup>

An alternative explanation of Berkane’s disappearance presents itself in a detail Driss left out of his report to the police. It was “un détail, peut-être important – cela l’avait réveillé déjà dans la nuit, comme un remords” (186):

Comme deux autres de ses collègues, il recevait, depuis deux ou trois semaines, à son domicile à Alger et par la poste, “la lettre fatale”: à savoir un morceau de coton blanc, une petite dose de sable dans un étui et un papier plié en quatre sur lequel était inscrit en lettres arabes, un seul mot: “renégat”. [. . .] Au cours de l’entretien avec la police à Dellys, Driss s’était demandé si Berkane, portant le même nom que lui, n’avait pas été victime d’une erreur. (187)

The threat leveled against Driss strongly suggests an Islamist group was responsible for Berkane’s disappearance. Given the fact that Berkane was an intellectual and a writer—and given the fact that he did not hide his occupation from others, like Rachid—his kidnapping might not even have been a mistake, either.

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<sup>38</sup> While Islamist groups such as the *Armée islamique du salut*, the armed branch of the FIS, claimed responsibility for most kidnappings and assassinations of journalists during the civil war, state involvement in some cases was suspected as well. See for example the International Crisis Group’s report entitled *Entre menace, censure et liberté: La presse privée algérienne se bat pour survivre* (4).

However, like the clues to the identity of the *La disparition de la langue française*'s first narrator, the evidence pointing to Berkane's capture by the government or an Islamist group are circumstantial. Moreover, unlike the suggestive meeting with the police or *lettre fatale*, the passage in *La disparition de la langue française* that describes the scene of Berkane's disappearance is devoid of clues. Most importantly, it is a scene ambiguous enough to cast doubt upon the idea that he was kidnapped at all. The reader learns only that "la voiture de Berkane avait été retrouvée dans un fossé, sur une route écartée, à moyenne altitude; elle était simplement renversée. Aucun bagage, ni papier; pas le moindre indice. Des buissons piétinés autours; sans plus" (183). The absence of details in the passage leaves room for interpreting the car's state as the result of an accident, and too many readings of the "buissons piétinés" are possible to draw any conclusions about their meaning.

Doubt concerning Berkane's fate is further encouraged by the fact that no group claims responsibility for kidnapping him. Following Berkane's disappearance, Marise travels to Algeria to join Driss, who explains that Islamist groups usually do claim the abductions and killings they perform:

Driss [. . .] eut la sensation physique [. . .] que son frère, qu'à la fois il admirait et aimait, ne reviendrait plus... Berkane évaporé dans l'air ou déjà cadavre au fond d'un fossé? Il s'entendit dire, presque sèchement, à Marise qui se mouchait:

— Rien n'est perdu, je crois... Si ce sont "eux" qui ont fait le coup et s'ils l'avaient tué, ils ont l'habitude de revendiquer, par tract ou par lettre, leur crime! (189)

Since no such claim is ever made, Driss' comment also hints that Berkane might have vanished for reasons other than the ones he and Marise fear. At that time in Algeria, too, "les assassinats se multipliaient, presque tous revendiqués. Comme si Berkane et sa disparition muette se

trouvaient au centre même, en creux, mais au cœur de cette tourmente, de cette folie. Lui, le solitaire!” (198). Given the unusual circumstances and silent aftermath of his disappearance, it seems plausible to conclude that Berkane may not have been kidnapped or killed by “eux.”

In light of the ambiguity of Berkane’s disappearance, each approach I have proposed to interpreting its meaning is both plausible and seemingly encouraged by Djébar. If the reader accepts the circumstantial evidence linking his disappearance to the state or Islamists, it signals the dangers of exploring the past in the Algerian context—especially, though perhaps not exclusively, during the period of the civil war. One such danger relates to the way in which his attempts to pluralize the past dispute some of the moral and political legitimacy of the FLN, which it derives from a reductive version of history that obfuscates events like the assassination of Nadjia’s grandfather.

The stories contained in Berkane’s writings, including Nadjia’s, also revolve around secular martyr figures, and the possibility of their dissemination might have been reason enough for an Islamist group to see Berkane as an enemy. Reminders of the contributions of the unreligious to Algeria’s independence undermine Islamist claims concerning the necessity of strict adherence to their religion. Nadjia’s grandfather was an “Arabe à la clientèle autant européenne que juive et musulmane” who “se payait [. . .] la cure à Vichy” but “n’avait jamais, par contre, programmé les lieux saints de La Mecque” (87). Berkane’s uncle Tchaïda, on the day of his death, was “le martyr de ce jour, [. . .] lui le drogué, lui, le coiffeur de génie qui ne voulait coiffer que ceux qui lui plaisaient parce qu’il ne travaillait pas pour l’argent, mon oncle, mais pour l’art!” (77). Both the grandfather and the uncle function as counterpoints to the claim that religiosity is necessary for righteous action and Algerian progress, since each of them was as

much a righteous martyr as the many others—including their more devout compatriots—who died in the cause of independence.

When reading Berkane's disappearance as a consequence of unearthing the Algerian past, it is significant that he vanishes near the site of the Beni Messous camp in which he was interred as an adolescent. For Berkane, that site, more than many others he visited, evokes aspects of the war of independence—like Berkane's political illiteracy (123) or the internecine violence figured by his attack on supporter of the *Mouvement national algérien* (MNA) named Brahim<sup>39</sup>—that seem related to the civil war of the present. The same forgotten episodes Berkane symbolically uncovers through his own recollections also threaten to complicate Algeria's understanding of its history, since they serve as reminders of the messy and sometimes morally dubious acts that paved the way to independence. Berkane thus disappears at the moment of his greatest proximity to the symbolic source of Algeria's mnemonic sickness, which is also a pillar of the FLN and Islamists' power and, for many Algerians, an integral component of narratives of personal or national identity that might be painful to undermine.

With respect to the Algerian context, too, Berkane's disappearance is significant in relation to each of themes I have discussed in this chapter. Because of the association made between language(s) and memory in *La disparition de la langue française*, and because of Berkane's connection to one language in particular, his disappearance also symbolizes a grave injury done to Algerian memory and identity by suppression of the French language and its speakers. Whatever the benefits of other media, For Berkane, written narratives are essential to understanding the past and transmitting that understanding to others, and the French language

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<sup>39</sup> Berkane is portrayed as having been a somewhat unwitting, but nevertheless zealous, supporter of the FLN at the time. The FLN and MNA fought each other while also opposing French colonial control of Algeria. See John Ruedy's *Modern Algeria*.

specifically is the “*langue de mémoire*” (186) he must use when writing. Berkane embodies the multilingual, partially francophone tradition to which he belongs, and an entire language of memory—including the past to which it corresponds, given the connections between language and memory in Djébar’s novel—disappears symbolically when Berkane does. If he is understood to have been kidnapped, his disappearance constitutes an abuse of memory via enforced monolingualism, and one that only encourages metastasis of the mnemonic illness his recollections seek to address. Berkane, perhaps like Algeria, “*avait tant besoin de ses deux langues*” (198), and great violence is done to an entire chapter of Algeria’s past when he vanishes.

Moreover, Berkane’s disappearance symbolizes the erasure of a political vocabulary whose terms and ideas must be discussed in order for Algeria to progress, according to Berkane’s experiences. A scene from Berkane’s time in the Beni Messous camp is illustrative in that regard. Six months before independence, Berkane explains, “*dans le camp où j’étais détenu [ . . . ] arriva parmi nous un nouveau*” (121) who was astonished by the detainees’ lack of political awareness and involvement. The newcomer argued “*que nous serions plus forts si nous parlions de l’après... Après? Oui, du temps après!*” (121). Perhaps hoping to awaken the other detainees to one of the most crucial questions of the “*après,*”

Cet homme [ . . . ] se lança dans un discours assez éloquent, qu’il termina par une phrase en français:

— Après l’indépendance, conclut-il ardemment, il y aura plein de questions à discuter, de directions à choisir... Par exemple, voici une question essentielle, et il passa au français, seulement alors: “*Est-ce que l’Algérie sera un pays laïc?*” (122)

The question he asks is significant: in part, the FLN's rejection of the FIS' 1991 electoral victory could be seen as an answer to that question, and the brutal civil war that resulted as a "discussion" of it by other means. Referring Nadjia's account of a recent, heated interaction with an Islamist taxi driver, Berkane points out the continuity between the discussion in the camp and its importance for the present when he asks: "Pourquoi ai-je raconté, à Nadjia, cette histoire du camp? Peut-être parce qu'elle avait si bien mimé sa dispute avec le chauffeur de taxi qui assurait que, dans un mois, toutes les femmes du pays seraient, de gré ou de force, 'déceimment vêtues'" (123).

The newcomer's use of French to ask the question of *laïcité* is significant as well. As Berkane explains, the term "laïc" was difficult to translate into Arabic or Berber at the time. Unlike the (often multilingual, and often francophone) circles of intellectual and political power in which the concept of *laïcité* was more readily understood, the segment of the Algerian population represented by the detainees lacked even a term to summarize the concept. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, the newcomer discovered to his surprise that the idea of creating a "pays laïc" had hardly crossed the other detainees' minds. Their response to his question is a comical misunderstanding:

Certains, autour de moi, s'empressèrent de traduire cette phrase à ceux qui ne parlaient qu'arabe ou berbère: 'l'Algérie', ils n'avaient pas besoin de traduire, tous avaient répété *el Djezair*; 'un pays', bien sûr, ils ont traduit. Mais lis ont tous buté sur le mot: laïc.

Ce dernier mot, je me souviens, a circulé comme une rumeur autour de moi. La plupart avaient compris l'*Aïd* avec prononciation française—car "laïc", ils n'avaient jamais entendu ce vocable, durant ces six ans de lutte collective. (122)

The connection between the camp scene and Nadjia's experience with the Islamist taxi driver suggests that the discussion of the term *laïc* never really took place, and that the absence of dialog concerning *laïcité* is partly responsible for the civil war.

The newcomer's recourse to French reveals that that language plays an important role as a source of the very political vocabulary necessary for such a discussion. While the implications of using French to discuss Algeria's political future are many, and while the connection of French to the violence of colonialism cannot be ignored, the camp scene portrays its political vocabulary as vitally important. Berkane's disappearance, which also symbolizes the disappearance of French, is thus tantamount to the suppression of one means of starting a discussion of which Algeria is depicted as being desperately in need.

Reading Berkane's disappearance in light of his story's more abstract significance as a fiction of memory suggests equally abstract and symbolic interpretations of the purposes for which he remembers and the limitations of memory he encounters in the attempt. As the protagonist in Djébar's fiction of memory, Berkane's trajectory is the trajectory of a contemporary mind that attempts to make use of memory to produce meaning. It is from that perspective that Berkane's disappearance becomes especially meaningful for my purposes, because it bears a certain resemblance to disappearance in the other works I have studied and is legible as a phenomenon related to memory itself in the present. It is also from that perspective that I suggest the connection between memory and disappearance characterizes the latter as a privileged structure of contemporary experience.

Analyzing the reasons for which Berkane's efforts to remember lead to his disappearance will, I think, reveal the intriguing connections I identify between Djébar's work others. One reading of Berkane's disappearance in that vein can be performed by reexamining the ways in



which *La disparition de la langue française* associates language and memory. That association suggests, through the manner in which Berkane's story unfolds and his actions within it, that the experience of delving into memory is similar in several respects to the experiences of Anton Voyl in *La disparition*. In the first instance, their experiences are similar because each character's journey stages a confrontation between consciousness and the limitations of language and meaning. In Voyl's case, as I argue in Chapter 1, that confrontation is brought about by the structure of disappearance as a concept to which he is exposed and must respond. Voyl's maddening certainty that his reality has been marked by a disappearance and his quest to discover the nature of what has disappeared reveal to him the kind of nullity and double death encountered by the writer Maurice Blanchot describes in "La littérature et le droit à la mort." The order of operations is inverted in *La disparition de la langue française*, in a sense—Berkane first experiences the limitations of language, *then* disappears—but the overall equation is similar.

The limitations of language and meaning are a central issue for Berkane because his attempts to recollect the past—and to write about it later—reveal the equivalence between memory and narrative. If memories *are* narratives, then to "store" an impression in the mind or recall it later is to subject it, consciously or not, to the limitations of its format: namely, language. As Elena Esposito writes, "remembrance is the actual activation of processes activated before" ("Social Forgetting: A Systems-Theory Approach" 185) rather than the re-creation of an impression that the mind then interprets again in the present. Since for a great number of memories "the processes activated before" amount to the interpretation of impressions *in meaningful, organized language*, Berkane's activity as a writer can be read as a figuration of what happens when anyone attempts to make sense of the past. Whether or not he actually places

words on a page or speaks a single word to Rachid or Nadjia, insofar as he is a subject that remembers, he is a writer, and his memory works similarly to the system Esposito describes:

[Memory] does not operate as a storage system, but rather as a computing device that does not include data but only procedures that generate the data again, and in a different way, each time. Memory does not record the past, which would be of no use and would only be an overload, but reconstructs it every time for a future projected in ever new ways. (185)

Berkane inevitably assumes that role every time he directs his mind at the events and meanings of the past, at which point they are not so much *represented* as *remade*. In principle, then, he faces the difficulties and paradoxes of working with language described by Blanchot, for whom it is also a writer who uncovers a kind of multiplicity of voices at work in language—but never exactly the writer’s own. Berkane’s disappearance thus can be read as the moment of his realization that the aims of memory and the aims of literature are the same, and that each foray into writing and memory engenders a confrontation between the writer of literature, or the writer of the past, and the necessary lack of her medium.

Independently of the fundamental limitations of language, memory in *La disparition de la langue française* also nullifies the subject by virtue of its collectivity. Berkane’s composition of an over-arching narrative of his (and Algeria’s) past is predicated upon the contributions of others: Nadjia’s story, for instance, in addition to the many voices like his mother’s that contribute to his efforts. While the plurality (and perhaps multidirectionality) of Berkane’s memories allow them to serve as a model for inclusion and healing in a context dominated by univocal and monolingual claims about the past, the question remains whether Berkane is the “writer” of his memories to begin with. Even when provisionally accepting the notion that the

subject withstands the confrontation with memory's relationship to language, Berkane's multivocal, multi-level story seems to present a model of memory fundamentally at odds with idea that it could serve as a foundation for a subject's sense of coherence with itself. Indeed, Djébar presents a fiction of memory in which Berkane initially sets out to "reconnect with himself," so to speak, and prescribes collective access to a more complete narrative of the past as a means for Algeria to do the same. Yet the links between language and memory and the collective construction of the past make the idea that he could reconnect with *himself* deeply problematic, and his case suggests there is no unambiguous trace of *itself* for any subject to find in memory—only others' voices, perhaps, and sometimes misattributed. In that light, it is again significant that Berkane disappears near the Beni Messous camp, since it is a site whose meanings are especially overdetermined by collective narratives.

In light of the model of memory *La disparition de la langue française* presents through Berkane, his disappearance seems inevitable insofar as it symbolizes the effacement of the remembering subject when approaching the "core" of memory in much the same way that Berkane approaches the "core" of Algerian amnesia at the camp. If memory underpins the self's sense of continuity and coherence over time, the self must "disappear" when the systematic interrogation of that faculty brings its necessary emptiness to light.

Berkane and Anton Voyl share a final characteristic that suggests a way of reading the theme of disappearance in *La disparition de la langue française* as an exploration of the centrality of the concept to experience in the present. Both Berkane and Voyl find themselves in a reality marked by absence, and they feel compelled to redress it. For Voyl, the restitution of the letter E might suffice; for Berkane, rehabilitating the past might achieve something similar. Each of their quests hinges upon an illusion of plenitude, though, whose impossibility proves, upon

examination, to be both a defect and essential condition of reality. *La disparition*'s lipogram is the non-being necessary for Voyl's being, since it defines the narrative in which he exists, just as the inherent emptiness of language is the paradoxical foundation of the (non)existence of Blanchot's writer. The emptiness symbolized by Berkane's disappearance is also the basis for a sense of identity in the present, in the sense that memory—portrayed in *La disparition de la langue française* as narrative in nature, multivocal, of unclear provenance, mutable, and so forth—undergirds identity while also seeming to ensure its destruction.

*La disparition de la langue française* thus figures disappearance as a privileged structure of experience in the present because it is inherent to the act of remembering, and the act of remembering seems particularly important in an era that, according to Pierre Nora, is characterized by “un basculement de plus en plus rapide dans un passé définitivement mort, la perception globale de toute chose comme disparue – une rupture d'équilibre” (XVII). Berkane's example seems to suggest that making use of (and writing down) the remembered past, which would seem at first to be a means of addressing the “basculement” Nora describes, might instead simply make that “basculement” more apparent and complete. At the same time, studied ignorance of the kind Berkane encounters when he returns to his Casbah seems not to be an acceptable alternative.

Furthermore, *La disparition de la langue française* suggests that disappearance as a structure of experience might have special relevance for postcolonial subjects like Berkane, who has a stake in more than one memorial tradition, and for whom the re-negotiation of memory is a central feature of cultural and political discourse—a consequence, perhaps, of “cette anesthésie des mémoires en pays du tiers-monde” (68) that affects other nations as well. As Berkane discovers in the Casbah, the signs of that re-negotiation are apparent even in day-to-day life,

since they are inscribed in the language of its place names, the look and spoken languages of its occupants, and, in Nadja's case, the rhetoric of taxi drivers and religious personalities. Memory and its disappearances are issues that Berkane might only be able to ignore with deliberate effort. As Umberto Eco might argue, however, such efforts cannot succeed, and instead it is disappearance that obtains as an overall structure of Berkane's experiences, and, by extension, of the postcolonial societies and postmodern subjects for which he may be read as a symbol.

## CONCLUSION

Two common threads unite the novels I have studied here, and each one serves as the basis for a number of general observations concerning the meaning of disappearance in those texts. First, *La disparition*, *Les funeraillles du lait*, *Partir*, and *La disparition de la langue française* involve disappearance in the form of one or more pivotal and troubling events. In *La disparition*, Anton Voyl believes that his world has been profoundly affected by a specific moment of loss in the past, which the reader identifies as the letter *E*'s vanishing. The protagonists of Binebine, Ben Jelloun, and Djébar's novels likewise represent worlds in which a disappearance occurred in the past or is happening in the present, including the gradual forms of change that facilitate Azel's unmoored sense of self in *Partir*. And, of course, three out of four of the novels' protagonists vanish as well, even if only for a time.

When read *as* events, the forms of disappearance each text represents are meaningful in part because they are legible as references to real occurrences, whether historical, punctual, gradual, or ongoing; whether situated in Morocco, France, Algeria, or elsewhere. In that light, each work signifies as an exploration of the nature of such events and their importance (and terrible consequences, as my readings show) for individuals who confront disappearance in reality. The novels I have studied indicate that "disappearance events" are pivotal, particularly influential, and that they have long-lasting implications for both individuals and societies.

My readings suggest that disappearances are pivotal events in part because of the insistent demands they impose. Judging by Anton Voyl and Mamaya, for instance, they demand

attention, inquiry, and redress at the very least, and not only because they are mysterious by definition or involve a loved one or friend. *La disparition* and *Les funérailles du lait* portray disappearances as “demanding” by virtue of an encounter they bring about with essential forms of nullity and impossibility. Resembling the encounter between Blanchot’s writer and literary language, the experience of a disappearance event involves a sense of impossibility, aporia, and sclerosis manifesting in the madness or physical decay of Perec and Binebine’s protagonists especially. In part, disappearances demand action because of the danger of exposure to such unsettling realizations, which are depicted as far more consequential than the frustration one might feel when faced with other kinds of mysteries.

As Voyl, Mamaya, Azel and Berkane’s examples indicate, forms of disappearance that mark an individual or society’s past have the potential to influence the present both deeply and negatively. Voyl enters into a downward spiral of madness and obsession, Mamaya is consumed by the need to commemorate her son many years after his loss, Azel becomes unmoored from sources of his identity because of economic and social processes that began before his birth, and Berkane is erased in the process of attempting to reconstruct his (and Algeria’s) past. Each character’s fate suggests that the Second World War, the Holocaust, the *années de plomb* or the Algerian Civil War might have a similar effect on French, Moroccan, or Algerian society. Attempting to make sense of such events is both necessary and perilous on a fundamental level, because they hold up for examination the possibility that forms of emptiness underlie all experience. This is one possible interpretation of the power of disappearances as events, both in reality and as figures employed in literature, and one way of reading representations of disappearance in literature: as a means of working through some of the possible (and possibly

inherent) difficulties involved in giving meaning to a very particular form of loss that Perec, for his part, depicts as a form of rot that takes hold in the fabric of one's reality.

My readings also suggest tentative interpretations of how each text indicates that one might address and understand disappearances. The nature of the lipogrammatic disappearance structuring *La disparition* prevents straightforward conclusions regarding how someone like Anton Voyl might avoid the Damnation that haunts him. Still, *La disparition* does imply that addressing disappearances and coming to terms with the inherent limitations of language are related activities. If that is so, the way forward with respect to disappearances might be through continued engagement with thinkers like Blanchot and others building upon his work.

*Les funerailles du lait*, on the other hand, proposes the body as a source of metaphors and material that may allow an individual (or a body politic) to begin coming to terms with the disappearances of the *années de plomb*. Corporeal metaphors are productive in describing the long-lasting effects of the disappearance of Mamaya's son, and a ritual involving a part of her own flesh holds out some promise of comfort for her. While it constitutes a departure from accepted norms, the ritual and the flesh propose a way of legitimating the tomb she prepares for her son, which in turn allows him to reassume a place in a historical narrative and spatial economy of burial sites from which the Moroccan state effectively excluded him. At the heart of Mamaya's efforts in that regard is a form of incarnation through which she comes to see an already symbolic part of her body as her son's flesh. Mamaya's actions hint, by extension, that a similar loosening of categorical distinctions between one's own body and another's, or between "concrete" grave sites and symbolic monuments, could aid in redressing some of the *années de plomb's* losses.



The way Azel's experiences in *Partir* play out implies that the ambience of loss and alienation—the inchoate impression of disappearance—underlying his sense of place in the world might be addressed by discovering (or creating) new foundations upon which to construct one's identity. Azel feels unsettled in Morocco in part because he cannot find work, in part because of the corruption he witnesses daily, and, perhaps most importantly, because “society” does not live up to its name. He finds little solidarity or inclusivity in Moroccan society, which, as evidenced by his interactions with Al Afia and the police, is one to which Azel belongs only notionally. The great personal cost of Azel's initial stake in work, communion with a nation, economic gain or even sexuality as pillars of his identity demonstrates that new forms are necessary in order to cope with the realities of the postmodern world and its globalizing economies. Additionally, Azel's failure to discuss his situation openly and honestly with his sister Kenza contributes to his unraveling, and his half-acknowledged, half-tacit understanding of his arrangement with Miguel fuels his inner turmoil. *Partir* thus underscores the potential value of frank representations of the forms of disappearance (and their unique type of trauma) affecting Azel and others like him, such as his compatriots at the Hafa Café and the segment of the Moroccan population they collectively represent.

*La disparition de la langue française*, for its part, proposes written testaments of memory—literary ones, especially—as an important vehicle for redressing the effacement and degradation of the vibrant past Berkane's highly symbolic Casbah enjoyed. Djébar portrays remembering as an activity leading to the diffusion of the subject, and communicating meaning through the written word as inherently problematic. But Berkane's memories nevertheless persist after his disappearance, occupying the pages of his manuscripts, living on in Marise's thoughts, and inflecting the artistic production she undertakes in its wake. Berkane's narratives represent

his memories of the past *as* memories, too, insofar as the substance of both memories and novels *is* narrative. In written, narrative form, Berkane's memories therefore are as intelligible and complete to their reader as the reader's own, and his work performs *as* memory for readers who accept his novel or his diaries as truthful or useful in their opposition to the monolingual, monocultural narratives of Algeria's present. Berkane's example also suggests that recollecting the past, representing it, accepting and utilizing the narrative quality of memory, and submitting oneself to the forms of erasure inherent to remembrance and narrative ultimately allow for a sacrificial mode of action in opposition to the disappearance of history or language.

The second thread uniting the novels I have studied is that they represent disappearance as something *more* than an event. As my readings indicate, each work additionally portrays disappearance as a conceptual undercurrent of characters' way of perceiving the world and acting within it. It is for that reason that I consider each novel to address disappearance as a *structure* of experience: for Anton Voyl, Mamaya, Azel, and Berkane, it is both the what and the how of different aspects of their lives. It is a concept central to the ways in which the world becomes a world for each, because it proves to be an inseparable part of language, memory, the underpinnings of one's identity, and the way a subject relates to economic or social systems of the moment. Apprehending reality and positioning oneself meaningfully within it is, in short, its own form of disappearance.

In *La disparition*, for example, disappearance is figured both as a defining event and a fundamental part of the fabric of Anton Voyl's existence. Initially, Voyl is struck by a vague and ominous sense that something was lost from the world. Other characters are similarly confronted with instances of disappearance that demand investigation, not least of which is Voyl's own sudden and cryptic absence. In their investigations, however, all attain a necessarily indistinct

awareness of the indispensability of disappearance in their reality—because, of course, their world is constructed in a text and by a reader that follow a rule dictating as much. The attempt to understand the disappearances they perceive to have affected their world must therefore reproduce that disappearance again and again. Since the rule and the world are not dissociable, too, explaining the rule must entail a process of vanishing *from* the world that the explanation would undo: death, silence, and erasure are the result. Faced with that limitation on their ability to act, Voyl and his associates must recognize disappearance as a fundamental operative concept of their reality.

For Mamaya in *Les funérailles du lait*, disappearance similarly constitutes both an event in the world and a modality of being. Because of the association between the disappearance of Mamaya's son and the state of her body, her physical degeneration, disease, immobility, and aging—the “fading away” of age and physical decline—are legible as metaphorical forms of disappearance that characterize her relationship to the world after the more concrete vanishing of her son. Indeed, Mamaya is a subject that experiences life in the mode of disappearance: cancer renders part of her body alien and dangerous, her mastectomy symbolizes her loss of integrality as a self, and she gradually becomes more object-like as she becomes all but inanimate in her chair and in her choice to be silent. In her nighttime phantasy, too, the boundary between the real and the imagined become indistinct while Mamaya is still awake, and such scenes depict Mamaya as a subject infiltrated by the world from which she notionally stands apart.

Likewise, in *Partir* and *La disparition de la langue française*, Ben Jelloun and Djébar's protagonists perceive forms of disappearance to be at work in their respective worlds and, through their own experiences, simultaneously portray living in the kind of world they inhabit as its own form of disappearance. Azel finds himself in an increasingly decentered position with

respect to important sources of identity—nation, work, and sexual orientation, for instance—and deeply affected by the desire to leave Morocco. He believes that departure is the key to his salvation, and the key to rediscovering the sense of rootedness and belonging that is implied to have vanished with the help of corruption, globalization, and economic difficulties. Yet the outcome of his departure, his liaison with Miguel, and his stay in Spain all contribute to the erasure he hoped to escape, suggesting that decenteredness is a more deeply-rooted problem in Azel's world than could be solved merely by finding a job in Europe. His symbolic abandonment of sexual and national identity for the sake of advancement in an impersonal, transnational economic machine are continuations of his unsettling trajectory in Morocco, and effacement is depicted as a universal rule rather than a geographically localized risk in the kind of world he inhabits.

Berkane discovers similarly fundamental forms of erasure to be involved in acts of memory, in addition to the “erasure” he risks as a writer and intellectual engaged in politically-charged renegotiation of Algeria's past. Though he hopes to redress the debasement of his Casbah as a result of monolingual, monocultural abuses of memory, he discovers instead that that his efforts entail the diffusion of his voice and the privileging of one of his languages over the other(s). The deeper Berkane delves into his memories of his past in Algeria, the clearer it becomes that remembering undermines its own goals, because it is a process whereby the rememberer experiences forms of doubling rather than the identitary affirmation that memory ostensibly allows. In authoring his own story, Berkane becomes a conduit for a form of ventriloquism: many voices speak in parallel with his own. His disappearance at the end of *La disparition de la langue française* can be read both as an enforced disappearance and as the culmination of exploring memory and attempting to bring its meanings to bear on the present.

Perec, Binebine, Ben Jelloun and Djébar's portrayal of disappearance as a concept underlying subjectivity and perception of the world, or as a structure of experience with special relevance to the present, is suggestive. The interplay of disappearance with other themes in their works indicates that it is a powerful and versatile idea in part because it encapsulates something of the anxieties in postmodern thought regarding the generation of meaning. Attempting to crystallize those anxieties in the metaphor of disappearance could be understood as an effort to think through the essential emptiness of language or the diffusion of the subject, for instance, exploring disappearance as an operative concept through the characters in each work.

If disappearance is as productive a metaphor for the structure of contemporary experience as my readings (and its use by multiple authors) indicate, what are its implications? My readings are not sufficient grounds for making sweeping statements in that respect, but certain limited observations follow from the ways in which each work depicts the nature and consequences of disappearance as a structure of experience. And, while that structure of experience is not unique to North African authors, Binebine, Ben Jelloun, and Djébar's novels do indicate limited senses in which disappearance may be an especially meaningful figure in the North African postcolonial context.

The implications of the structure of Anton Voyl's experiences in *La disparition* are many, but they revolve around a paradoxical superposition of pessimism and optimism concerning the possibilities of living in a world subtended by disappearance. In Voyl's reality, several characters are undone by the demand to address the emptiness they perceive behind the foundational disappearance whose traces they hope to discover in rugs and writings. Yet their reality is meaningful: Perec's novel is legible, as are its characters' actions and motivations, despite the letter *E*'s supposed excision—"supposed" because it is only possible to impute its redaction, not

prove it, and, strictly speaking, *nothing* disappeared; nothing was lost in Voyl's reality, and even the reader cannot be entirely sure that something disappeared from hers. In a sense, then, Perec's novel portrays disappearance as a structure of experience that only becomes deadly when it is perceived to be an ineluctable damnation from without—and therefore something that necessitates an outwardly-directed *response*—rather than a question of expectations that must be managed from within.

*Les funerailles du lait* intimates that a subject whose experience of the world is structured by the concept of disappearance may come to rethink the notion of the body and its boundaries. Mamaya, who lives in just such a world, dissolves the classical distinction between body and mind—in practice, in a sense, rather than in principle—and expands the possibilities concerning what can be considered “a body.” For her, and by extension for those yet to come to terms with disappearances in the past, disappearance is a structure of experience with withering effects. At the same time, though, it also opens the way for new types of meaningful action based on an expanded form of subjectivity. Mamaya's physical degradation ultimately results in the opportunity for her body to become a deeper reservoir of symbolic and material resources to use in response to the loss of her son. Mamaya becomes a new kind of body politic that reincorporates its disappeared members, such as her son, in its infirmities and scars—but one that becomes capable of meaningful action as a result, just as Mamaya is capable of finally burying her son when her cancer and mastectomy provide her the symbolic means.

In *Partir*, on the other hand, Azel's experiences imply that disappearance is a structure of experience endemic to present-day social and economic realities—especially in Morocco, and perhaps in other postcolonial states where departure is viewed as a means of salvation. Azel progressively “vanishes” in the interplay of his identitary foundations with the realities of the

(post)modern, globalizing world. The neo-colonial overtones of Azel's fixation on Europe and the compromises he makes in order to secure a visa suggest that disappearance is a structure of experience with special relevance to postcolonial subjects because the pressure to migrate and the difficulty of economic success increase with distance from the world's economic centers of gravity. At the same time, Azel's "colonization" by a progressive form of erasure is not directly attributable to imperial Europe—it is an impersonal and indirect consequence of a great many factors, including the shortcomings of his own state, or a form of colonization by a structure rather than a people and its armies. Ben Jelloun's representation of disappearance as a structure of experience suggests a bleak outlook for the contemporary subject—especially for a postcolonial North African subject like Azel—in the absence of meaningful political action and social reform.

The possible meanings of the way disappearance structures experience in *La disparition de la langue française* are also multiple, but Djébar's novel at least suggests that a sacrificial mode of action can produce meaning concerning the past. Again echoing Blanchot's description of the writer's encounter with the paradoxes of literary language, Berkane negates himself in the act of remembering. The nature of memory, as it is portrayed in Djébar's novel, may always ensure a variation on that outcome. Though a form of disappearance is inherent to memory, Berkane's work creates a counterpoint to the dominant narratives and languages of the present and their collusive reduction of Algerian history. Though he disappears, his narratives are a kind of remainder that are capable, by nature, of being reintegrated (or reinforced) in Algerian collective memory. Consequently, his sacrifice—whether the reader understands it to be at the hands of Islamists or due to the nature of memory—is a deeply meaningful one in a high-stakes conflict.

Although my readings provide only a rough sketch of the possible meanings of the figure of disappearance in the novels I have studied, they point to the work of Martin Heidegger as a potential basis for better theorizing and understanding disappearance as a structure of contemporary experience. While I invoke aspects of Heidegger's thought in Chapter 1, a sustained engagement with his philosophy, especially *Being and Time*, may provide a framework for more focused consideration of the idea of "structures of experience" in general. Heidegger's primary concern in *Being and Time* was to provide a footing for the investigation of *being*, understood in the most general sense of the term. In order to do this, Heidegger considers it necessary first to examine the *way* of being particular to the (human) entity who intends to investigate being in general. Heidegger's attention to ways of being lends credence to the idea that his approach, and what it reveals about *Dasein*, may be especially useful heuristics in working through disappearance as a structure of experience and the reasons for its descriptive power in *La disparition*, *Les funérailles du lait*, *Partir*, and *La disparition de la langue française*.

While my interpretations of the figure of disappearance leave many questions unanswered, they nevertheless support the hypothesis I proposed in the introduction. The novels I have studied give reason to consider that disappearance *is* a privileged structure of experience in the postmodern, postcolonial world, and they provide tentative indications of how and why that may be the case. Finally, my readings of Perec, Binebine, Ben Jelloun, and Djébar's representations of disappearance also illustrate the polysemiotic and polyresonant nature of the figure, and ultimately underscore its potential as a productive object of continued study.



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