RELATIONAL NARRATIVES: CONSTRUCTING MEANING IN CONTEMPORARY LITERATURES IN FRENCH

by

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Abstract

The act of narrating permeates daily life: from the tales we tell about our identities to published works of fiction, narratives fundamentally shape human perception. With this in mind, *Relational Narratives: Constructing Meaning in Contemporary Literatures in French* explores narrative mode as a means for structuring innovative thought-models. Marrying close readings with socio-cultural analyses, it examines relational narrative modes in six works of prose published since the turn of the 1980s: François Bon’s *Sortie d’usine* (1982), Assia Djebar’s *L’Amour, la fantasia* (1985), Maryse Condé’s *Traversée de la Mangrove* (1989), Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco* (1992), Koffi Kwahulé’s *Babyface* (2006), and Annie Ernaux’s *Les Années* (2008). Part One, on narrative voice and temporality, argues that relational narratives bring temporally divergent voices into a single space of resonance. Part Two turns to the portrayal of narrative truths, whether collective, individual, historical, or purely fabricated, as well as to the mixing of genres, which include autobiography, historical realism, testimony, ethnography, and the marvelous. I contend that truth in relational narratives is multiple and shifting, and requires that the reader actively construct meaning. Finally, Part Three examines the political implications of relational narration. First, I show that relational narratives remain fully grounded in specific socio-cultural contexts — or their *lieu*, the space from which Édouard Glissant contends relation becomes possible. Second, I discuss each work as a life-script that exceeds the exclusionary logic of self-other thought-constructs. Reading through opacity, I demonstrate how relational narratives circumvent the identity politics
and linguistic conundrums associated with postcolonial literatures and provide models for constructing knowledge in a relational way.

Investigating works of prose as performative acts, where each text provides a particular historical view on gendered and collective becoming, my research dialogues with historiography, sociology, and gender studies, while my focus on Caribbean, Northern-, and Sub-Saharan African narratives also contributes to area studies. Highlighting narrative mode allows me to bridge the gap between “metropolitan French” and “Francophone” literary production. The thesis brings the diversity of literatures in French into a mutually informative space without falling into the traps of universalism: neither the generalizations of world literature, nor the particularity of francophone studies, but something between or beyond these two terms.

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Introduction

*L’écrivain est un renifleur d’existence.*

– Jean Bernabé et al.

If the collective reflections in *Je est un autre: pour une identité-monde* (Le Bris et al. 2010) are any indication of the literary zeitgeist of the new millennium, contemporary French-language writers feel widespread disillusionment toward the thought-constructs that lie at their disposal. In relating experiences of socio-cultural and linguistic hybridity, these authors reject rigid conceptions of identity in favor of more fluid ones that better correspond to their lived historical experiences as human beings in general, and as writers of French in particular. In highlighting this deficiency, the contributors to *Je est un autre* ask a much larger question — namely: what is it possible to think and articulate in the new millennium? As Michel Foucault writes in his treatise on genealogical method *Archéologie du savoir*, “on ne peut pas parler à n’importe quelle époque de n’importe quoi” (65); in Foucault’s parlance, then, we may ask what knowledge the contemporary *épistémè* allows writers to express? If we take heed of *Je est un autre*, it would seem that our imaginary constructs have outgrown the available discourses through which to articulate them.

In keeping with the notion that we “represent and structure the world in narrative form” (Mitchells, “Forward” viii), works of literature provide a privileged point of access onto the *épistémè* out of which they arise; they are necessarily to some extent

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1 Éloge de la Créolité, 39.
2 “Par épistémè,” Foucault writes, “on entend […] l’ensemble des relations pouvant unir, à une époque donnée, les pratiques discursives qui donnent lieu à des figures épistémologiques, à des sciences, éventuellement à des systèmes formalisés” (*Archéologie du savoir* 259).
symptomatic of their time. However, because literature inhabits the imaginary realm, it can equally act as a catalyst for fashioning innovative models of “worldmaking,” to borrow the title of Nelson Goodman’s study. Contemporary narrative theory, in effect, has turned away from the concepts of narrative as purely representational or bound up with the faculty of imitation, and towards a vision in which human subjects partake as creative agents.³ “The premise,” Sewell writes, “is that narrative […] is not only a means of representing life, used self-consciously by historians, novelists, and storytellers, but a fundamental cultural constituent of the lives represented. All people develop a sense of themselves as subjects in part by thinking of themselves as protagonists in stories” (482-483). Beyond “making worlds,” narratives act as what cultural critic Kwame Anthony Appiah terms “life-scripts,” which people actively assimilate and deploy in order to stake out positions and to articulate individual and group identities. Echoing Sewell, Appiah contends that “our personal histories […] are constructed, like novels and movies, short stories and folktales, within narrative conventions” (22); “one of the things popular narratives do,” Appiah adds, “is provide models for telling our lives” (22). Insofar as works of literature actively participate in the writing of these scripts, they harbor the creative potential to reshape the very thought-constructs of the era from which they originate.

At the turn of the 1980s, French-language literatures would be marked by a sharp return to the real. Contrary to their modernist predecessors, who rebuffed notions of identity and history in favor of distinctly subjective encounters with the world, contemporary authors reinvest in the socio-historic subject matter characteristic of

³ Though Goodman’s treatise embraces the multiplicity of worldviews and relativism between them, Ways of Worldmaking nonetheless remains within the aegis of representation, or what he describes as “systems of description” (2).
nineteenth-century realism. But if, as Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier assert in their survey, “la littérature contemporaine redonne des objets à l’écriture qui s’en était privée,” it is knowingly so, “[s]ans ignorer les critiques des décennies précédentes” (14). As a symptom of their times, these post-1980 texts participate in the writing of group-specific narratives that counter the all-encompassing nature and unitary vision of what has been theorized by cultural critics such as Jean-François Lyotard and Fredric Jameson under the term “Master Narrative,” the decline of which modernist literary works arguably register. Contemporary literatures return to, and thoroughly revisit, notions of identity, memory, and group history the better to fill in the gaps glossed over by those same narratives that the modernists challenged. Akin to nineteenth-century literary depictions of the social world exemplified in Hugo’s Les Misérables (1864) and Zola’s Rougon-Macquart series, they too tell the forgotten tales from the underside of History, recounting the travails of marginalized people groups or simply taking note of the intimate details of the everyday.4

Authors hailing from the French Metropole, such as François Bon and Annie Ernaux, consistently engage with subjects of marginality; both write “au-dessous de la littérature,” as Ernaux formulates her specific project in Une femme (560). Bon’s works of fiction often center on what Aurélie Adler refers to as “le « on » inexemplaire de l’anonymat de l’histoire” (12), and Dominique Viart as “l’inaperçu du monde” (François Bon 24): a set of anonymous, unremarkable spaces ranging from the factory milieu to the banlieue and even a parking lot!5 Ernaux’s œuvre broaches similar sociocultural themes, which she explores through her own life experiences in a determined effort to “se confronter au réel,” as Pierre-Louis Fort and Violaine Houdart-Merot put it (8). These

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4 I’m thinking here specifically of Hugo’s Les Misérables (1862) and.
5 Sortie d’usine (1982), Temps Machine (1992), and Daewoo (2006) depict the working-class milieu of the factory; Décor ciment (1988) and Prison (1997), the banlieue; and Parking (1996), the parking lot.
include a clandestine abortion,6 class mobility and migration from the blue- to white-collar milieu,7 and observations of everyday life in French new town of Cergy-Pontoise.8 In one text Ernaux even exposes her dirty laundry (literally!), but, in the same movement, crafts a compelling narrative about life, death, and sex predicated on a series of photographs.9 The works of French Antillean authors Patrick Chamoiseau and Maryse Condé, as well as the Franco-Algerian novelist Assia Djebar, also depict stories from the margins, though, contrary to Bon and Ernaux, their projects are more pointedly historical in nature. Chamoiseau’s texts are set entirely within the Caribbean space, and give voice to the unheard stories of the djobeurs, the conteurs, and, more generally, to Martinican peoples’ struggles to establish a self-determined sense of identity.10 Condé, for her part, gravitates towards more worldly themes, including historical novels that take place in Africa as well as the Caribbean and the Americas, but also tales of people negotiating multiple socio-cultural and national spaces.11 Assia Djebar’s works, in turn, are firmly grounded in the socio-historical context of present-day Algeria, and consistently tell the unheard stories of Arabo-Berber women’s roles in history, whether sacred or secular, recent or distant.12 Franco-Ivoirian author Koffi Kwahulé, on the other hand, doesn’t
initially seem to participate in this same writing of marginality. A latecomer to the novel, Kwahulé is first and foremost a dramaturge. But if his plays, like his novels, are indeed “en rupture avec la forme traditionnelle du roman africain,” as Augustine Asaah contends (358), Kwahulé’s oeuvre speaks without compromise to African-specific themes like the aftermath of the slave trade and the emergence of independent national cultures,13 albeit in a more oblique way than, for example, Ahmadou Kourouma’s portrayal of national and ethnic power struggles in Les Soleils des Indépendances (1970).

Given the themes these authors explore through narrative, their works unquestionably illustrate the return towards real-world subject matter that Viart and Vercier pinpoint. Their texts of course celebrate and promote understanding of specific people groups, and should be read and understood within their local socio-historical contexts. Yet reading these bodies of work solely through a particularist angle proves somewhat of a dead end. As Walter Benn Michaels argues in The Shape of the Signifier, the celebration of difference that has since the 1980s informed multiculturalism leads to a state of stagnant relativism. Or, to put it in Michael Hardt’s and Antonio Negri’s terms, “[t]he affirmation […] and the free play of differences across boundaries […] is liberatory only in a context where power poses hierarchy exclusively through essential identities, binary divisions, and stable oppositions” (142). For Hardt and Negri, global capitalism means that “[e]very difference is an opportunity” (152). The fragmentation of Master Narratives into as many competing micro-narratives, it would seem, doesn’t get us very far. And yet, the task of comparing vastly different works of literature has also

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13 “Toutes les pièces […] de Kwahulé,” as Virginie Soubrier writes in her monograph, “racontent une même histoire, celle d’un viol, celui que constituèrent l’esclavage et la colonisation. […] Mais le viol ontologique dont il est question dans tous les textes de Kwahulé, s’il a bien entendu à voir avec le tragique de l’histoire noire, parle de la violence contemporaine” (69).
proven challenging, if not outright vexing to critics. Though perhaps useful for crafting university curricula, the choice to group under the rubric of Francophonie French-language texts by non-Metropolitan writers of whatever nationality remains deeply problematic, both politically and culturally, insofar as such rubrics perpetuate the false dichotomy of French-center vs. Francophone-periphery. So too does the postcolonial approach tend to lump former colonies into one homogenous group and to imply a dichotomous colonizer-colonized relationship based on a Euro-centric notion of progress, as Anne McClintock cogently warns in “The Angel of Progress.” Moreover, neither of these paradigms allows for French Metropolitan texts to enter into dialogue with other French-language works, their often-shared reception contexts notwithstanding.

To counter this, many scholars have appealed to the postmodern school of thought, which, thanks to its emphasis on heterogeneity and non-essentialist identity-constructs, seems to offer a fruitful vein for approaching contemporary literatures from all parts of the French-speaking world. This scholarly approach has been the predominant one with respect to the works of the six authors to be studied here (Bon, Ernaux, Chamoiseau, Condé, Djebar, and Kwahulé). Key terms in these critical analyses include “composite,” “hybridity” “puzzle,” “mosaic,” and “patchwork,” terms that are employed as much to describe narrative poetics and genre as the narrative’s thematic content itself.

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14 A brief tour of recent publication titles suffices to indicate scholars’ general dismissal of Francophonie as a category of literary inquiry. Thus: Roger Little’s “World Literature in French; or is Francophone Frankly Phoney?” (2001); Rédia Bensmaia’s “Francophonie” (2003); Josephina Bueno’s “Francophonies plurielles” (2004); and Marc Gontard’s “Francophonie et globalisation” (2007). Alternately, the polemic that the publication of the collectively signed Pour une littérature-monde aroused, originally published in Le Monde as “Pour une ‘littérature-monde’ en français” (March 2007), also demonstrates the difficulty of situating literatures written in French. On this, see for example Alexandre Najjar’s and Abdou Diouf’s respective reaction pieces published in Le Monde in March 2007.

15 “The post-colonial scene,” writes McClintock, “occurs in an entranced suspension of history […]. If the theory promises a decentering of history […], the singularity of the term effects a re-centering of global history around the single rubric of European time. Colonialism returns at the moment of its disappearance” (86).
While these terms do have a certain currency, they remain flawed nonetheless. On the one hand, the drive to embrace “hybrid” narratives and identity-constructs feeds into the same logic as the celebration of difference. As Pnini Werbner notes, “hybridity-talk itself is in danger of becoming just another marketable commodity” (19).16 “The challenge,” Werbner continues, “is to develop processual models of hybridity to replace the current stress on contingent hybridity: a self-congratulatory discourse which leads nowhere” (22, emphasis added). This last point holds particularly true with regard to the study of narrative, and leads me to ask in this study: if contemporary literatures in French indeed craft fundamentally hybrid spaces, how do they go about doing so? And how might these narratives of “hybridization,” if we choose to call them that, reflect or challenge the life-scripts through which we apprehend the social world? To approach these questions, I propose to examine one text from each of the aforementioned authors through the particular lens of narrative mode.

By order of publication, these are François Bon’s Sortie d’usine (1982), Assia Djebar’s L’Amour, la fantasia (1985), Maryse Condé’s Traversée de la Mangrove (1989), Patrick Chamoiseau’s Texaco (1992), Koffi Kwahulé’s Babyface (2006), and Annie Ernaux’s Les Années (2008). Each of these texts remains firmly grounded in a different originating socio-cultural context; and yet, each unfolds in a comparable way. François Bon’s factory narrative Sortie d’usine eschews strict story chronology (this despite its division into four “Weeks”!), and neglects to develop any concrete plot or individuated characters. Instead, it slides between voices that diverge in time so as to transpose the laborers’ subjective experience of the factory itself. Similarly, Assia

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16 In “Reading between the ‘Posts,” John Hyland goes so far as to suggest that hybridity is presently giving way to its own Master Narrative, a hypothesis that doesn’t seem so preposterous, in the end.
Djebar’s *L’Amour, la fantasia* doesn’t follow any distinct plot. Divided into three main parts, each comprised of multiple segments, the text moves consistently between Djebar’s experiences in French colonial Algeria;\textsuperscript{17} French/Arabo-Berber warfare during the 1830s and 1840s; and women’s participation in the Algerian war of independence. Maryse Condé’s *Traversée de la Mangrove* likewise frustrates conventional readerly expectations with respect to plot. Composed through the perspective of nineteen different townspeople gathered at the funeral wake of Francis Sancher, the text tells nineteen different stories of the deceased’s life, which never add up to any coherent version.\textsuperscript{18} If, on the other hand, Patrick Chamoiseau’s historical novel *Texaco* does follow the plot of Marie-Sophie’s tale to establish a space of her own, it all but synchronizes three temporally distinct voices to do so, and depicts nearly a century of Martinican history through a keen blend of fact and fiction. The plot that Koffi Kwahulé’s *Babyface* (2006) develops is both protean and highly convoluted: depicting love and civil war in a fictionalized Ivory Coast, the text is divided into three divergent interfaces (a poem, a journal, and a first person perspective) that successively complement and contradict one another until the distinction between them collapses. Finally, Annie Ernaux’s transpersonal autobiography *Les Années* (2008), a late work almost vertiginous in its ambition, traces an entire generation’s history within Metropolitan France by stitching together collective discourse, historical events, and subjective experiences so skillfully as to create a sort of Venn diagram in which the members of a vast readership hear echoes of their own stories. To the extent that all of these contemporary French-language texts muddy plot lines, conflate voices, merge

\textsuperscript{17} Though the term “autobiography” does appear towards the end of *L’Amour, la fantasia*, the text’s autobiographical components are only fully recognizable by way of Djebar’s more overtly autobiographical works, notably *Nulle part dans la maison de mon père* (2007).

\textsuperscript{18} Sancher’s name also appears as Francesco Alvarez-Sanchez. I will employ the francized version, which is the most recurrent in Condé’s text.
temporal realms, present competing narrative truths, and mix divergent literary genres, they come across as deeply unstable and shape-shifting. Each acts as the “enigma” that literary critic Anne Roche reads in Bon’s *Sortie d’usine* (3), an enigma that even the most dedicated reader can never solve. By disallowing any clear interpretation, however, these texts shift the reader’s focus from story content (“what happens”) to the mode through which they are told (“how” it happens). They ask the reader to abandon her quest for clarity and, instead, to consider multiple and contradictory sources of information as mutually fecund.

It is my central contention in this study that each of these authors engages with what Édouard Glissant terms a poetics of relationality. Developing his thought from the socio-linguistic fact of creolization, Glissant proposes the notion of relationality in order to grasp the composite and shifting nature of the experiences not only of the Caribbean peoples, but, as he predicts, of the entire world’s: “*le monde se créolise,*” he asserts in *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (15). Schematically speaking, creolization in the Caribbean archipelago refers to the formation of its peoples, its cultures, and its languages through centuries of deterritorialization, domination, and mixing. As Michèle Praeger points out, the Caribbean peoples “short-circuit[ed] the mythic and epic ages, which are grounded in the idea of genesis and filiation” (44); for them, the notions of lineage, identity, and History that anchor atavistic peoples’ genesis narratives have no currency. This places Caribbean thinkers in a curiously advantageous position for conceptualizing the aftermath of Master Narratives, and leads Glissant to distinguish between single-root and multi-root identity-constructs, the latter of which informs his notion of relationality. To differentiate between these two identity-constructs, Glissant
turned notably to the conception of the rhizome developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Mille plateaux* (1980). “Quand j’ai abordé la question,” Glissant writes in *Introduction à une poétique du divers,*

je suis parti de la distinction opérée par Deleuze et Guattari, entre la notion de racine unique et la notion de rhizome […]. Ils l’établissent du point de vue du fonctionnement de la pensée […]. La racine unique est celle qui tue autour d’elle alors que le rhizome est la racine qui s’étend à la rencontre d’autres racines. J’ai appliqué cette image au principe de l’identité. (59)

Rhizomatic or multi-root identity-constructs, in this view, correlate to the Caribbean peoples’ formative experiences, but also extend to all people who cannot — or who refuse to — lay claim to an all-encompassing genesis myth.19 Single-root identity-constructs, inversely, correspond with Same/Other dialectics of méconnaissance; “unique[s] et exclusive[s] de l’Autre,” as Glissant puts it (196), they are informed by intransigent visions of nation, filiation, and legitimacy. To counter the absolutist nature of the predominant single-root construct, Glissant transposes the socio-linguistic fact of creolization into the thought-model that he terms Relation.

As if to respond to Frantz Fanon’s call in *Peau noire, masques blancs,* Glissant too asks us to “dépass[er] la donnée historique” (187), and “tout simplement […] [d’]essayer de toucher l’autre, de sentir l’autre, de [se] révéler l’autre” (188). More than merely to “touch” the Other, Glissant enjoins us to be open to the transformative potential latent in each encounter with difference. Indeed, he contends that such relational contact is synonymous neither with hybridization nor the dissolution of identity. “La

19 A number of scholars have employed terms akin to Glissant’s to describe postcolonial Maghreb. Within the field of literary studies, for instance, Hafid Gafaïti has underscored “diasporisation” as a process of “movement, repositioning, transformation, and redefinition” that is rapidly becoming a worldwide phenomena (see particularly part one of *La Diasporisation de la littérature postcoloniale*). From a similar, though more overtly political point of view, Étienne Balibar has advocated for the rethinkig of contemporary Franco-Algerian relations through the lens of a “Mediterranean space,” one he describes as a “point de rencontre et de conflits permanents entre histoire et entre cultures” (“Algérie, France: une ou deux nations?” 88).
créolisation,” Glissant writes in *Traité du Tout-Monde* “est la mise en contact de plusieurs cultures […], avec pour résultat une donnée nouvelle, totalement imprévisible par rapport à la somme ou la simple synthèse de ces éléments” (37, emphasis added); and he adds, again to counter the Hegelian account of subject formation, “[i]l n’est pas nécessaire de se renier pour s’ouvrir à l’autre” (154). Relation,\(^ {20}\) then, is focused less on product than it is on process — less a merger than a meeting —, any eventual outcome notwithstanding.\(^ {21}\) Glissant’s conception of relationality thus not only sidesteps the Same/Other dialectic, but it circumvents the relativizing tendency inherent in multicultural thought. Recognizing difference is only the first step in this process.\(^ {22}\) The veritable task at hand lies in superseding both the transcendental myths of foundation and the proliferation of micro-narratives of difference by appealing to thought-constructs that allow for opacity and that ground unity in relational multi-rootedness. With the end of the reign of Master Narratives, this transformation becomes all the more urgent, for without the assurance of such outwardly seamless foundational myths, how are we to piece together the fragmentary? What unity remains? To these questions, Glissant replies, “seulement la poétique de la Relation, c’est-à-dire de l’imaginaire, […] nous permettra

\(^{20}\) Glissant interchangeably employs the terms creolization and relation. To avoid narrowing the phenomena to the Caribbean and analogous spaces, I will stick with the term “relation” unless referring specifically to creolization as socio-linguistic fact.

\(^{21}\) Glissant’s understanding of creolization, with its emphasis on process, is of course only one of several. Christine Chivallon neatly sums up the differing takes on the term in “The Notion of Creolization,” and underscores the differences between them as lying in their varying emphasis on creolization as product or as process. Indeed, emphasis on either side of this equation led to quite a polemic surrounding Bernabé *et al.*’s manifesto, *Éloge de la Créolité*, which many scholars read as an apology for an intransigent conception of Creole identity. Glissant criticizes his Creolist colleagues in precisely these terms, telling Gauvin, “la créolité […] met un terme à un processus que je crois infini, qui est le processus de la créolisation” (21). For my part, I don’t ascribe to the tenants of this debate, which seem to harp on peccadilloes rather than analyze the larger conceptual framework proposed by Bernabé *et al.* I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter Five.

\(^{22}\) Again, the Caribbean acts as a microcosm in this respect: the recognition and validation of difference through figures like Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon, and the Négritude movement’s celebration of Black identity, constituted the first and necessary steps from which Glissant was able to form his thought on Relation.
At the close of the twentieth century and the new millennium, the texts of Bon, Djebar, Condé, Chamoiseau, Kwahulé, and Ernaux respond to this premonitory call with considerable force.

Rather than merely embracing multiplicity or celebrating difference, Sortie d’usine, L’Amour, la fantasia, Traversée de la Mangrove, Texaco, Babyface, and Les Années bring the multiple into productive spaces of relation. Indeed, it is only thanks to their relational poetics — made tangible through myriad writerly choices — that the “return to the real” in which these texts participate comes into full view. What I will call throughout these pages contemporary relational narratives combine the sociological and historical themes characteristic of nineteenth-century realism with the distinctively fragmentary and perspectivally layered prose of early to mid-twentieth-century texts.

Like modern writers whose vocation it is to depict, as Erich Auerbach contends, “not one order and one interpretation, but many,” so too do relational narratives harbor the possibility of multiple interpretations. Contrary to their predecessors, however, these “overlapping, complementing, and contradict[ory]” narratives do not “yield something that we might call a synthesized cosmic view” (Mimesis 549). Quite the opposite, they belie the possibility of synthesis. “Quel ce soit l’autobiographie, le romanesque, le post-colonialisme, le post-modernisme, ou encore la francophonie,” Sofiane Laghouati writes

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23 Gretchen Kellough has proposed the term “tisseroman” for texts that “weav[e] together multiple stories with multiple subjects” (186). Despite her attention to voice, mode, and truth, the conclusions Kellough draws from such texts, which she describes as fostering “solidarity among women” by telling the stories of “the oppressed, of the voiceless, of the forgotten,” nonetheless remain under the aegis of the micro-narrative (192-193). Lyn Thomas (“À la recherche du moi perdu”), Ruthmarie Mitsch (“Maryse Condé’s Mangroves”), and Philip Amangoua Atcha (“La Figure de l’écrivain”) have respectively described the works of Ernaux, Condé, and Kwahulé as “rhizomatic,” a term that certainly resonates with the approach I adopt, but which remains too metaphoric to grasp the complexity of relational narratives and the reading practices that these require.
apropos the work of Assia Djebar, “aucune théorie n’est en mesure de rendre compte de [leur] richesse” (116). But if no theory is capable of grasping the complexity of relational narratives, it is because their force lies not in the selective representation of diverse people groups (though they also do this), but in their re-scripting of the very means through which we interpret and come to understand the transcultural play of difference at all.

Following the lead of Christie McDonald and Susan Suleiman in French Global, I propose to read these relational narratives through a world perspective, and bring them into a space of mutually informative relation so as to draw out a “global positioning system” (x) that charts contemporary modes of life-scripting. To access these modes, Part I examines the poetics of relational texts in minutiae, exploring the diversity of narrative voices (Chapter One) and cryptic narrative temporality (Chapter Two). I argue that through such linguistic components as grammatical person, syntax, verb tense, and deictics, contemporary relational narratives obfuscate the position of the speaking subject, to the extent that temporally divergent voices can only be understood in a mutually informative way. A key component of relational texts, such linguistic components deny the possibility of the unitary speaking subject, and set up relationality as a mode of subjectivity that conditions and grounds the communication of socially significant narrative content. Part II turns to the content of relational stories themselves, which I approach through the concepts of truth, whether individual or group based, subjective or historical in nature, or simply fictional (Chapter Three), as well as genre, which range from autobiography and the historical novel, to the marvelous and detective fiction (Chapter Four). In both respects, I contend that contemporary relational narratives
exploit categorical boundaries so as to urge the reader to create meaning in the interstices that separate competing narratives and literary genres. Finally, Part III maintains that contemporary relational narratives remain firmly grounded in the socio-cultural specificities of their space of production (Chapter Five), while nonetheless modeling innovative life-scripts for narrating all manners of intersection between self and group (Chapter Six).

Ultimately, I endeavor to show that Bon, Ernaux, Chamoiseau, Condé, Djebar, and Kwahulé form the type of “famille d’écrivains” that Chamoiseau evokes in the roundtable discussion “La Relation et le rhizome”: a family based not on restrictive “marqueurs d’identité,” but rather on shared “structures d’imaginaire” (358). Approaching such socio-culturally disparate works through the concept of relationality, I aim to surpass the dialectical conundrum inherent in the paradigms of *francophonie* and postcoloniality, however pertinent these may be in other aspects, and will draw sometimes surprising parallels among these critically acclaimed French-language writers of the Metropole, the Caribbean, and Africa.24 By capitalizing on the instability that is part and parcel of all identity-constructs,25 and by transforming it into a veritable prose, authors of relational texts perform in and through narrative “a socially symbolic act,” in the words of Fredric Jameson. Doing so, these writers not only point to deficiencies within our contemporary epistemological constructs; they also push the boundaries of

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24 Each of these authors has received multiple literary distinctions and their works have been translated into several languages. To name a few, Bon received the *prix Louis-Guilloux* in 2002 and the *prix Wepler* in 2004; Djebar was elected to the Académie française in 2005 and awarded the Neustadt International Prize for Literature in 1996; Condé received the *prix de l’Académie française* in 1988; Chamoiseau’s *Texaco* was awarded the *prix Goncourt*; Kwahulé was decorated with the *prix Édouard-Glissant* in 2013; and Ernaux received the *prix Renaudot* in 1984 and the *prix de la Langue française* in 2008.

25 Interestingly, both Bon and Ernaux write from a place of social migration, as both authors were born in the working-class milieu and acceded to a higher social status through their vocation. In a way, they too are métis, as Charpentier contends with respect to Ernaux (“Les « Ethnotextes »”).
that very épistémè, to use Foucault’s parlance. To return to the epigraph by Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, authors of contemporary relational narratives “reniflent l’existence” in altogether innovative ways; they propose and perform relational modes for narrating the self, community, and history that break with essentialism, local determinism, and the false teleology of human progress.
Part I

Narrating Relation
Chapter One: Negotiating Polyvocality

Il est un chœur dissonant à lui seul, un ‘carrefour de paroles’ [...].

– Virginie Soubrier¹

Il n’y a pas d’énonciation individuelle, ni même de sujet d’énonciation.

– Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari²

In The Dialogic Imagination, Mikhaïl Bakhtin defines the novel as a genre that brings into contact differing “points of view on the world” (291) by incorporating a “diversity of speech types […] and a diversity of individual voices” (262). Bakhtin, in effect, views language as always already dialogic, and asserts that the novel only capitalizes on the “internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence” (263). Breaking with the then dominant structural understanding of language,³ Bakhtin’s discursive approach “donn[e] l'idée de l'Autre, des Autres, à l’œuvre derrière chaque image de texte littéraire,” as Catherine Depretto writes (15). As such, his work on dialogism can serve as a point of entry into the polyvocal nature of contemporary relational narratives,⁴ where a plethora of voices conveying a diversity of views on the world indeed resonate.⁵

¹ Le Théâtre de Koffi Kwavulé, 82.
² Mille plateaux, 101.
³ As Todorov writes of Bakhtin, “[o]n part ici d’une constatation: la matière linguistique ne constitue qu’une partie de l’énoncé; il existe aussi une autre partie, non verbale, qui correspond au contexte de l’énonciation” (67). Thus: “[l]a première conséquence importante du nouveau cadre est la nécessité de distinguer radicalement entre signification dans la langue et signification dans le discours” (72).
⁴ Bakhtin’s use of the term dialogic has led to some critical confusion, and is often conflated with the term intertextuality, in fact coined by Kristeva. My own use of the term intertextuality will be reserved for
Among those works studied here, Condé’s and Kwahulé’s are the most explicitly polyvocal, to the extent that their formal characteristics correspond with the voices of different speaking subjects; Chamoiseau’s and Ernaux’s, by contrast, are misleadingly enunciated through a singular point of view; finally, Djebar’s and Bon’s switch modes during the course of the text: from a singular narrative voice to an explosion of voices in *L’Amour, la fantasia*, and from enigmatic polyvocality to a singular voice in *Sortie d’usine*. Despite these differences, each of these texts destabilizes narrative voice through similarly open structures. Indeed, it is oftentimes impossible to situate voice with precision in these texts. Embracing their polyvocal qualities means, for the reader, not only perceiving divergent socio-ideological points of view on the world, as Bakhtin would have it, but also recognizing divergences within what might otherwise seem to be singular positions of narration. Voice in contemporary relational narratives, in effect, forms at the intersection of the realist novel’s penchant for heteroglossia, as exemplified in the works of Flaubert and Balzac, and the poetics of fragmentation that Dominique Rabaté (*Poétiques de la voix*) and Jean-Pierre Martin (*La Bande sonore*) identify in early and mid-twentieth-century prose. To return to the epigraphs from Soubrier and Deleuze and Guattari, each voice in relational narratives resonates in the manner of a veritable choir; each is situated at a crossroads of perspectives. Demonstrating that there is no individual speech act, narrative voices collide, converge, and diverge *ad infinitum*.
1.1 – Polyvocal Narrators

With the exception of its closing section, *Texaco* takes shape as the *a posteriori* written inscription of Marie-Sophie Laborieux’s oration to the scribe “Oiseau de Cham” — hence the title of the main text, “Le Sermon de Marie-Sophie Laborieux.” Accordingly, she assumes the role of storyteller, recounting her tale as if in the present tense. Indeed, *Texaco* is laden with those “traces of the storyteller” that Walter Benjamin describes as “cling[ing] to the story the way the handprints of a potter cling to the clay vessel” (“The Storyteller” 367). These include most notably first person enunciation and a storytelling lexicon, as well as the frequent reference to time and place, including in the form of deictics: “ne perdons pas le fil” (21); “[j]ourd’hui-encore” (71); “[m]ême à présent, quand j’y repense” (325). Further elements consist in the implication of gesture, exaggerated articulation, and oral turns of speech, all of which imply the bodily presence that Paul Zumthor, in his study of orality in medieval poetics, underscores as essential to oral delivery:6 so do we read such phrases as, “[i]l était à peine haut comme ça” (396); “[c]’est défolmanter. Dé-fol-man-ter” (447); “et que par ailleurs donc s’il vous plaît” (70). More tellingly, Marie-Sophie repeatedly addresses some outside listening audience, oftentimes the scribe himself:

Je n’ai jamais été voir car tu sais, Chamoiseau, ces histoires de pieds-bois ne m’intéressent pas trop. Si je te raconte ça c’est parce que tu insistes, mais moi-même, Marie-Sophie Laborieux, ma plaidoirie auprès du Christ [l’urbaniste] était un peu plus nette, et je l’ai prononcée parce qu’obligée vraiment, mais à vouloir écrire, j’aurais marqué autrement glorieuses que ce que tu griffonnes. (155)

6 “En régime d’oralité,” Zumthor writes, “cet acte est produit par un corps, qui parle et est totalement présent, même si, pour une raison quelconque, on ne le voit pas dans et par la voix entendue. Celle-ci emplit un espace qui est celui de ce corps, mais dépasse ses limites visuelles” (173).
The entirety of *Texaco* is thus staged so as to place the reader within a listening audience, alongside both the scribe — here, the *tu* — and the urban planner, to whom Marie-Sophie previously recounted her tale. Nonetheless, Marie-Sophie’s use of the *passé simple* complicates her status as storyteller: “bondieu seul sait en quel état tombé sans eux [les Mentōs] nous fûmes toujours” (71); “je sus qu’il [son père] y sombra” (89); “ils [ceux attendant la libération des esclaves] remontèrent désespérés, certains pleurant même *nia nia nia*” (123). The *passé simple*, as Barthes writes in *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture*, “suppose un monde construit, élaboré, détaché” (47). “Retiré du français parlé,” Barthes continues, “le passé simple […] signale toujours un art” (46); it thus contrasts sharply with Marie-Sophie’s storytelling voice, enough to jar the flow of reading. Her voice, in effect, is fused with another’s, her seemingly singular perspective, fractured.

The incorporation of character speech, which Chamoiseau rarely introduces by a dash or quotation mark, further splinters Marie-Sophie’s narrative voice. Embedded into her narration, character speech is at times formally demarcated through italics or a capital letter mid-sentence: “deux-trois imprudents avaient voulu l’intimider *On ne veut pas de kouli par ici*” (253); “il n’avait que le temps d’informer des nouvelles Tu comprends Esternome, les élections sont annulées” (151). At other times it is introduced by a tag or reference to an interlocutor: “[v]ieillesse, Marie-Sophie, est comme une lente surprise” (215). It may be presented through any combination of these devices, or, inversely, with no indication whatsoever. Marie-Sophie’s father Esternome furnishes perhaps the most prominent of these incorporated voices, notably during the first half of the text, where it

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7 Chamoiseau’s integration of Creole terms and expressions also contributes to the text’s oral resonance, as Helène Buzelin argues in “Creolizing Narratives across Languages.” My own reading of Chamoiseau’s use of the Creole language extends beyond its oral qualities and will figure in Part III.

8 Emphasis added.
is often difficult to distinguish between their two perspectives. For example, in a passage describing the time just following the abolition of slavery, narrative position successively slips from Marie-Sophie, to Esternome, and then to his lover Ninon, before returning again to Marie-Sophie:

Mon Esternome, lui, guettait le chabin fou qui rôdait à l’entour […].
Durant la soirée, il voulut la persuader [Ninon] de s’installer dans sa case d’En-ville, car de toutes les manières l’esclavage est déjà mort même si la liberté n’a pas encore débarqué, personne ne va venir te chercher. Mais Ninon voulait à toute forces remonter. Le commissaire de la République, lui expliquait-elle, annoncé sur le prochain Packet, celui du 10 mai, va ramener-venir la liberté, et il va distribuer toutes les terres, tu comprends […]. Elle repartit, le chabin lui servant d’ange gardien. (121)

Here, the shift in pronominal referents alerts the reader to the incorporation of reported speech: the reflexive pronoun *te* indicates that the clause beginning with *car* reproduces the words Esternome addressed to Ninon; the tag *lui expliquait-elle*, signals the latter’s retort; finally, the presence of the *passé simple* in the last sentence marks the return of the narrator-scribe. Yet even this is indefinite, as Esternome too speaks in the *passé simple*.

In one salient — and quite convoluted — example, Esternome describes his father’s experience of his own father’s death on the slave plantation:

Mon papa sut que l’homme du cachot était son père le jour où l’on *extirpa* du trou malodorant une dépouille infectée de champignons blanchâtres. Le Béké le fit *installer* sur un lot de campêches qu’il enflamma lui-même. […]
Nous avions tous étés rassemblés autour de ce bûcher, raconte mon papa. Agenouillés, mains jointes à l’évangile, *nous* gardions le front bas. À *mes* côtés, *ma* chère maman pleurait. […] Moi, ne comprenant rien, j’allongeais sur sa peine des yeux inquiets de crabe. Alors, elle m’abaissa la tête et me dit: *Prédié ba papa’w ich mwen*, Prie pour ton papa, mon fils… (53)

The first two possessive pronouns clearly situate the beginning of this passage within Esternome’s perspective. But narrative voice abruptly switches to the grandfather, as the tag *raconte mon papa* — rendered in the present tense! — and the pronoun *nous* denote,
with the subsequent possessive pronouns referring to the grandfather. And yet, perplexingly, both the father’s and the grandfather’s speech include usages of the passé simple, suggesting the intervention of the scribe. This layering of speech and of registers renders the speaking subject ambiguous throughout Texaco. Indeed, it muddies even the solicitation of an interlocutor, such as when Esternome ostensibly describes the plantation fields: “[I]es champs devinrent des marigots. […] Et c’est une véritable patate-manman, si l’expression peut s’excuser, que l’on découvrit dans la clarté sous-marine des avants-jours” (74-75). Who is apologizing to whom? Esternome to Marie-Sophie? Marie-Sophie to the urban planner or to the scribe? The scribe to the reader? Here, the status of the speaking subject is simply indeterminate, and so radically that the demarcation between scribe, narrator, and character dissolves.

The first half of Djebar’s L’Amour, la fantasia also takes shape under the guise of a seemingly singular narrative voice, which it similarly destabilizes. The division of Parts One and Two into autobiographical and historical segments already hints at this, as the corresponding perspective oscillates between the personal and documentary registers. Yet narrative voice also wavers within these segments. Recounting her early experiences in French primary school, for example, Djebar writes:

Fille arabe allant pour la première fois à l’école, un matin d’automne, main dans la main du père. (11)

Viendra l’heure pour elle où l’amour qui s’écrit est plus dangereux que l’amour séquestré. (11)

À dix-sept ans, j’entre dans l’histoire d’amour à cause d’une lettre. (12)

L’adolescente […] est cloîtrée l’été dans l’appartement […] (12)
Je me souviens de l’avoir défié [le bien-aimé futur] du regard […]. (12)

This fluctuation between the first- and third person pronoun splinters the speaking subject. While the first person conveys a posterior voice that connects past experiences to a more contemporary je, the third person reestablishes that distance as if the memory pertained to any fillette arabe. Subsequent use of the imperative, which relays some unknown voice of Muslim tradition, furthers this effect: “[v]oilez le corps de la fille nubile. Rendez-la invisible. Transformez-la en être plus aveugle que l’aveugle, tuez en elle tout souvenir du dehors” (11). These first few pages of L’Amour, la fantasia thus undermine the unity of the singular perspective, and foretell the shifting of narrative positions to come.10

Contrasting with the autobiographical segments, the voice narrating the historical segments of Parts One and Two assumes an objective stance. In these segments, Djebar (born Fatima-Zohra Imalayène) capitalizes on her academic training as a historian, and relates the first French/Arabo-Berber encounters in a deliberate tone and with meticulous detail. Thus, for example, this description of the events leading to the capitulation of Algiers:

Exactement vingt-quatre heures après [l’explosion du Fort l’Empereur le 4 juillet 1830], l’armée française entre dans la ville. (46)

Du 24 juin au 28, le baron Barchou dénombre, chaque jour, deux cent cinquante victimes françaises ou davantage. (48)

9 Anne Donadey quite rightly refers to the speaking voice in this segment as that of an “unnamed female narrator” (“Assia Djebar’s Poetics of Subversion” 107). While fully acknowledging this ambiguity, I will nonetheless designate the “personal voice” as Assia’s for sake of rhetorical clarity.

10 Scholars have sometimes read this oscillation as an indication of Djebar’s sense of alienation (see Joanna Goodman, “L’Écrit et le cri,” and Sonia Assa-Rosenblum, “M’introduire dans ton histoire”). And indeed, the elle does appear in situations charged with conflict, such as Assia’s near crushing by a tramway and her Muslim marriage in Paris. I argue, however, that we cannot grasp the socio-ideological dimension drawn out in these opening pages without first closely reading narrative voice. I will turn to these components in more detail in Part II.
Le 4 juillet, dès trois heures du matin, le dernier acte commence. Au Bordj Hassan une garnison d’élite de deux mille hommes — huit cents Turcs et mille deux cents Koulougis — résiste cinq heures au feu des batteries françaises. (48) 11

Terse sentence structure, which renders the graphic nature of the events in a matter-of-fact manner, also indicates this switch:

Renversement des corps mêlés. Ils se recroquevillent dans le sang versé; ils glissent dans le désordre des tentures maculées. Grognements sourds plus présents que les plaintes, que les glapissements de triomphe ou d’effroi. L’incendie lèche, de ses lueurs mobiles, coffres entrouverts, bijoux et cuivres éparpillés entre les premiers cadavres. Chute des femmes qui s’évanouissent. (78)

Although this account of the October 21, 1840 battle driven by Lamoricière describes brutal combat, no evaluative judgment or metaphorical language intervenes. On the contrary, the privilege given to nominal sentence form mutes the episode’s graphic nature and paints it as a calcified tableau. That said, descriptions of a more literary quality also surface in these segments. Following the passage introducing Amable Matterer’s arrival in Algiers the 13, June 1830, for instance, the city is described as a “[t]riangle incliné dans le lointain et qui […] se fixe adouci, tel un corps à l’abandon, sur un tapis de verdure assombrie” (14). In a slightly different vein, the eve of the June 19, 1830 Staouéli battle depicts the French as “cloaked in stench” (“une odeur de pestilence les enrobe depuis des jours,” 26). Both instances incorporate metaphoric and imaginative language, and thus imply a perspective that is neither historical nor autobiographical, but rather poetic. The narrator, then, performs three rhetorical roles concomitantly; her voice, in effect, is fissured.

Much as in L’Amour, la fantasia, subject pronoun use in Ernaux’s Les Années immediately fractures the unity of narrative voice. In lieu of the hitherto systematic use of

11 Emphasis added.
the *je* in her autobiographical works, Ernaux here employs the third person singular. In the first paragraph of the text’s opening section, the reader encounters “*un gros bébé*”; in the second paragraph, she meets “*une petite fille d’environ quatre ans*” and then, finally, the *elle* appears: “[e]lle apparaît boudinée dans son corsage” (934). Up to this point, the third person singular isn’t particularly jarring, the indefinite article *un* subduing its dissociative effect. By the third of the four photographs described in this opening segment — the description of family photos and home videos mark the passage of some significant period of time —, the *elle* strikes a bit more strangely. The reader infers that the *elle* will be a recurrent figure in this account: “[d]eux autres petites photos à bords dentelés, datant vraisemblablement de la même année, montre *la même enfant*” (935, emphasis added). As the child grows into adolescence, adulthood, and old age, distance between the *elle* and the narrating voice diminishes, rendering the maintenance of the third person singular increasingly unsettling. Indeed, if the reader continually rediscovers the same *elle*, she is led to do so by a more contemporary version of the same woman.

When the first person does sporadically appear (and Montémont counts up to fifty instances across *Les Années*), it is most often in instances of self-quotation. It too, then, is kept at a distance, and augments the disquieting effect of the *elle*:

> Elle ressent son métier comme une imperfection continuelle et une imposture, a écrit dans son journal « être prof me déchire ». Elle déborde d’énergie, de désir d’apprendre et d’entreprendre des choses nouvelles, se souvient de ce qu’elle a écrit à vingt-deux ans, « si je n’ai pas accompli ma promesse à vingt-cinq ans, écrire un roman, je me suicide ». Dans quelle mesure Mai 68 – qu’elle a l’impression d’avoir raté, trop installée déjà – est-il à l’origine de la question qui l’obsède: « Serais-je plus heureuse dans une autre vie ? » (1002)

Gleaned from Ernaux’s personal diary, passages like this one accord the third person singular the quality of the first person; they implicitly acknowledge that the *elle* is always
already a je. In an even more striking occurrence, the narrating voice and the elle veritably coalesce: “[e]lle est cette femme de la photo et peut […] dire avec un degré élevé de certitude […] : c’est moi = je n’ai pas de signes supplémentaires de vieillissement” (1078). This admission of identity is only possible thanks to the contemporaneity of the photograph and text. Elle “equals” je precisely because they are no longer temporally distinct. Like the opening sequence in L’Amour, la fantasia, then, the third- and first persons are distinguished by a temporal gap. Ernaux, however, employs the elle throughout the narrative, a practice that is indeed “illusoire,” as Nathalie Delgleize puts it (43).

1.2 – Entanglements of Speech and Discourse

Reading the works of Beckett, Sarraute, and Queneau, Jean-Pierre Martin asserts that “la représentation du dialogue est devenue […] une des questions majeures de l’esthétique romanesque” (133). Building off this, contemporary relational narratives rarely introduce character speech through conventional means. As Texaco demonstrated, they opt instead to weave speech into and out of the main body of text, intertwining character and narrative voices in open structures. Typography, punctuation, syntax, distribution of the text on the page: each conveys the incorporation of others’ voices, albeit through non-traditional means. Perhaps less novel in this regard than their precursors, whose refusal of the formal structure, as Martin argues, displaces focus from character to voice,12 relational narratives in fact go a step farther: they bring voice to the forefront, but only the better to complicate the position of the speaking subject. To return

again to the epigraph and to Bakhtin’s dialogism, each voice becomes a “crossroads” of voices.

In Condé’s *Traversée de la Mangrove*, things seem simple enough: nineteen voices gather at the wake to tell stories of the recently deceased. The opening section introduces this chorus: “certains reprirent leurs blagues et leurs rires. D’autres en silence se mirent à penser à Francis Sancher” (26). But this structural division between perspectives poses an immediate enigma, for some subsections are recounted in the first person, while others — all of which are male — are in the third. This distinction has often been read through a feminist lens, whereby female characters would be ascribed voice, and the males, deprived. Suzanne Crosta goes so far as to claim Condé identifies with the female characters over the males, and that the perspectival divergences aim to delineate a “female mode of perception” (154), whatever that might mean. However, any categorical interpretation of perspectival divide between the *je* and *il* unravels upon closer examination; as Chancé warns, “des nuances sont à prendre en considération” (“Maryse Condé” 69).

In the first person subsections, speaking voices indeed materialize; and like Marie-Sophie’s narration in *Texaco*, they too are laden with marks of storytelling. When describing her initial encounter with Sancher, for instance, schoolteacher Léocadie references place and uses both repetition and emphatic language: “il s’est mis à courir, courir avant de disparaître dans la noirceur entre les arbres et *je suis restée là*, la main sur ma bouche qui retrouvait le goût oublié des vieilles souffrances. *C’est vrai*” (150, emphasis added). Here, however, it is the question of audience that perplexes: who, in fact, is Léocadie addressing? Man Sonson’s subsection, which opens with her lamenting
the town’s lack of a cemetery, also raises questions of audience. Indeed, rather than merely bemoan this lack, Sonson explains it, providing information unknown solely to the reader. Moreover, Sonson repeatedly addresses an audience situated outside of the wake:

Ils font tous semblant de prier le Bon Dieu pour le malheureux Francis Sancher et prennent des mines enfunébrées comme si le chagrin les étouffait.

Pourtant, si je vous dressais la liste complète de tous ceux que j’ai vus défiler sur mon plancher pour me demander de lui faire du mal ou même carrément de soulager la terre des vivants de son poids, vous n’en reviendriez pas! (82-83)

Inviting an exterior perspective onto the internal happenings at the wake, Man Sonson even enjoins, “[r]egardez-les autour de moi!” (82). The initial premise of first person, present-tense speech around Sancher’s corpse, then, does not hold. The incorporation of reported speech within the first person perspectives further complicates matters. For instance, in Dinah’s subsection — Dinah is Mira’s stepmother, wed into the affluent Lamneaulnes family —, three layers of speech weave together to tell the tale of Mira’s illicit jaunt at Sancher’s. Dinah does not relate this story; Mira, rather, surreptitiously takes over narrative voice. Introduced by the remark “l’histoire qu’elle me contait […] mettait de l’eau dans mes yeux” (107), which is followed by a colon and an opening quotation mark, Mira’s voice dominates two subsequent pages. What’s more, Mira incorporates Sancher’s speech into her account, whose words are at times indicated by a dash, at others by a second quotation mark, this one, à l’anglaise. Three voices, then, layer atop one another during Dinah’s first person account; the “singularity” of her perspective is compromised.
A comparable troubling of narrative voice occurs in the third person subsections. With the exception of Sonny — Dodose’s deplorable son and Sancher’s friend —, each of the il perspectives begins with direct speech placing the male characters squarely within the wake.\footnote{Sonny’s subsection also places him at the wake, only through song rather than through speech: “[l]es yeux fixes sur le cercueil, Sonny exprima par une chanson la peine qui débordait de son cœur” (111).} After this, the ostensibly external position of narration takes over. And yet, speaking voices and marks of orality persist. Thus, for instance, Lucien’s subsection:

Un Cubain à Rivière au Sel! Un Cubain! Lucien, qui n’ignorait rien de l’épopée de Fidel Castro dans la Sierra Maestra, qui avait pris parti dans son différend avec le Che, qui avait admiré \textit{La Ultima Cena} des dizaines de fois au cours des festivals de cinéma du Tiers Monde et qui savait jusqu’au dernier homme le chiffre de la présence soviétique à Cuba, de ses yeux vu! À part peut-être les musiciens de la Sonora Mantecera qui faisaient les beaux jours du Quartier latin du temps où il était étudiant! Toutefois, il s’agissait là de Cubains vivant à Miami, d’exilés, de contre-révolutionnaires! (218-219)

Repetition, accumulation, turns of speech (“de ses yeux vu”), punctuation (five exclamation points!), each lends this passage remarkably spoken undertones. But, because Lucien is not accorded a first person perspective, narrative voice resonates here as a mixture of external narration and internal monologue. Internal perspective, in effect, is a troubling characteristic in all of the third person subsections. Mira’s brother Aristide, for example, is said to \textit{daydream} (“Il rêvait”) “[à] quoi ressemblait son île avant que l’avidité et le goût du lucre des colons ne la mettent à l’encan?” (66); and just the \textit{thought} of Sancher is said to disturb Vilma’s brother Carmélien: “la pensée de Francis Sancher l’arrêtait net dans ses élans. Que ferait-il s’il le rencontrait au détour d’une route?” (183). In both examples, an external narrator introduces the internal reflection that follows; but the boundary between the two remains blurry. As Aristide answers his own question — “Au Paradis que décrivait son livre de catéchisme” (66) —, so too does Carmélien…
continue his line of thought: “[s]i l’autre ricanait, insinuant qu’il mangeait sa reste? Qu’il finissait un plat dont il s’était rassasié? Que répondrait-il?” (183). This internal dialogue lends the third person subsections the same oral resonance as the first person perspectives. What’s more, character speech (whether thought or actually said) also surfaces without any narrative introduction whatsoever; only abrupt changes in tone reveal its presence: thus the jarring appearance of mid-paragraph exclamations such as “qui vit-il attablée sur la galerie en face de Francis Sancher? Qui? Oui, qui?” (118), or the intimacy in Sonny’s, “[i]l était mort, l’ami!” (119), which appears sandwiched between two rather neutral paragraphs.

The incorporation of speech similarly destabilizes voice in Kwahulé’s Babyface. What appears to be three distinct voices materialize on the very first page of text, each typographically differentiated from the others: a poetic verse opens the text at the top of the page; a passage placed in quotation marks taken from Jérôme’s journal figures below; and a first person perspective appears indented in the margins. During this opening chapter, the first person voice occupies little space. Inserted into the Fragment from Jérôme’s journal, a short blurb introduces Mozati, though we won’t learn her name until the following chapter: “Babyface aujourd’hui rencontré. Mo’Akissi avait raison” (9). The opening of the second chapter, however, reads, “[j]e m’appelle Mo’Akissi. Mozati et moi sommes amies” (17). The first person voice is thus split between the two female protagonists, whose passages often reflect and relay one another. Thus, for example, Mo’Akissi first evokes Mozati’s dropping out of school, which the latter then repeats on the following page: “[l]’école, on l’a faite ensemble, Mozati et moi. Jusqu’en sixième” (18); “[ç]a a été en sixième. En sixième l’école s’est devenue trop dure pour ma tête. […]
Mo’Akissi, elle, a continué” (19). In addition to the asterisk that intervenes between the two passages, differences in syntax also alert the reader to the switch between voices. Indeed, Mo’Akissi’s French reflects her continued education, hence the l’on and the past participle’s gender agreement on faite, as opposed to the lacking ne in Mozati’s c’est pas. Mo’Akissi employs complex structures, formal vocabulary, and even the passé simple: “[j]’étais ébaubie. Jamais, depuis l’âge de douze ans où Mozati connut son premier garçon, personne n’avait encore réussi à la faire pleurer” (49). Mozati’s passages, on the other hand, often disrupt the flow of reading, disregard basic rules of French syntax, and resonate on a markedly oral register: “[j]e suis. Comme une folle. Je. Enfin. Flotte. Je. Vole. Femme. Je suis. / […] Ça c’est classe, classe, classe” (50).

That said, the introduction of other voices within Mozati’s and Mo’Akissi’s first person perspectives complicates this alternating structure. Immediately following Mo’Akissi’s initial first person passage, for example, figures a letter composed by Babyface. Reproduced in italic characters and aligned to the right side of the page, the letter alone isn’t particularly perplexing; but it does prefigure the more obscure integration of voices to come. And, again, most of these take shape via the incorporation of another character’s speech. Reported speech introduced via a tag and a capital letter mid-sentence often signals a change in voice: “[m]ère dit souvent Un secret, on le cache pour mieux le dire. […] Mère dit C’est bien ainsi” (19). Slightly more ambiguous is the presence of a capital letter with no corresponding tag — “[j]’ai entendu la voix du maître Prends un Tip-top soda dans le frigidaire” (23) —, which at times also conveys internal dialogue: “Jérôme ne m’a donc pas dit C’est vrai ou C’est faux. Mais en retournant tout ça dans ma tête, je me suis dit Si le président ne lui avait rien demandé, Jérôme m’aurait
répondu direct Le président ne m’a rien demandé” (67). At other times, formal discrepancies reveal the presence of speech. This is the case, for example, after Babyface refers to himself as “le jeune homme à la face d’ange,” directly citing Jérôme’s journal:

Nous avons, Jérôme et moi, tourné nos regards vers lui […] . Car le fait d’évoquer « le jeune homme à la face d’ange » prouvait que Babyface n’ignorait pas l’existence du Journal imaginé (notes et fragments) de Jérôme.

   Babyface l’a pas lu.
   Je l’ai juste feuilleté.
   C’est moi qui le lui ai donné. On était ici, il s’ennuyait et je lui ai dit Voici, c’est Jérôme qui a écrit ça, tu peux le lire si tu as envie. Babyface m’a alors demandé si moi je l’ai déjà lu j’ai dit non. Il m’a demandé si tu ne serais pas fâché s’il le lisait j’ai dit non, que Au contraire Jérôme est content qu’on s’intéresse à son livre…
   Ce n’est pas un livre… […]
   Mais Babyface l’a pas lu… (53-54)

Here, indentations signal the inclusion of speech within Mo’Akissi’s first person perspective; but presented without tags, these integrated voices remain ambiguous. The exchange likely passes from Mozati to Babyface, then returns to Mozati before Jérôme interrupts and Mozati repeats her initial remark. Yet nothing anchors this free-floating dialogue; the reader must infer the presence of other voices based on discursive clues. Mozati’s reference to her earlier conversation with Babyface, integrated via the tag-capital letter structure, furthers this effect, and is particularly striking due to the lack of elision between que and Au at the close of the longer paragraph above. Like Dinah’s narrative in Traversée, three distinct moments of enunciation intertwine in the space of the Mo’Akissi’s “singular” perspective.14

14 Typography functions similarly in Jérôme’s journal. In a passage recounting Jérôme and Mozati’s separation, for instance, Jérôme briefly recalls their initial meeting: “[e]lles étaient entrées en riant aux éclats […]. On était venues pour l’anniversaire de Karidja. Elles étaient cinq, plus Mozati” (87). The italic characters denote Mozati’s voice, which can also be inferred thanks to perspective. Yet this voice perplexes: it stems from Mozati, but is reported through Jérôme, who writes of a friend’s death about which
In even more confounding instances, Mozati’s niece Nolivé, who is questionably involved with Mo’Akissi’s husband Streaker, assumes first person narration. Initially introduced through Mozati’s voice — “Nolivé m’a appelé Tantie Mozati il faut que je te parle” (120) —, Nolivé then assumes the dominant position of narration over the course of five pages. The passage, which also figures after an asterisk, immediately unsettles the reader who by this point has become accustomed to the alternating structure. More striking yet is the eruption of Nolivé’s voice within Mozati’s: “[j]e m’apprêtais à la plaindre,” Mozati states, “Ah ma pauvre petite Nolivé […]. Mais à peine j’ai ouvert la bouche que Ah out tantie” (143). Following this, by now characteristic, introduction of speech, Nolivé’s narration supplants Mozati’s entirely, and even reoccurs after an asterisk.15 Breaking with the established structure, the reader can only differentiate between the three first person voices via syntax and context. Fortunately, Nolivé’s speech patterns are distinctly verbose: “[m]ais j’étais heureuse persuadée qu’il me suffirait de sortir de la maison pour que tout le monde sente l’odeur de la souillure je croyais que jamais ne me quitterait la puanteur de ce qui Wachiira [Streaker] venait de me faire” (134) — hence our ability to recognize Nolivé’s voice, as well as Mozati’s bewilderment: “[j]’a l’impression que j’ai bu. Ou qu’on m’a bombardée” (142).

In L’Amour, la fantasia, the autobiographical, historical, and poetic registers discussed in the previous section constitute the most visible fissuring of narrative voice. Within the historical segments, however, a further splintering occurs. Indeed, Djebar integrates a wealth of written documents into these accounts, weaving into and out of her

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he, paradoxically, was never told: “[s]ix. Mo’Akissi, Pamela, Karidjia, et deux autres jeunes femmes […]; elles s’appelaient, si ma mémoire ne me trahit pas, Stéphanie et Affoué. Épiphanie et Mutualé. […] Je n’en ai jamais parlé à Jérôme, mais Mutualé est morte il y a plus d’un an de… tuberculose, disons” (87).

15 During her three-page narration, Nolivé also incorporates an earlier exchange that took place between her and a clergyman. Again, three layers of speech can be deciphered: Mozati’s account of Nolivé’s words, Nolivé’s words themselves, and the latter’s incorporation of a prior conversation.
own voice those of the source materials she consults. Like the incorporation of character speech in *Traversée* and *Babyface*, only conventional citation practices such as “Barchou se souvient donc et écrit: « […] »” (31) or “J. T. Merle note: « […] »” (46) clearly demarcate these perspectival shifts. Such use of punctuation and tags, however, is far from systematic; the vast majority of witness accounts incorporated are not cited as such. Moreover, quotation marks and reference to source material oftentimes have an effect inverse to their designed function, and render the surrounding context profoundly ambiguous. This occurs notably when source information is provided solely in narrative content, as it suggests that only part of the preceding and/or following paragraphs has been garnered from an original document. The passage that describes the July 4, 1830 explosion in Algiers, for example, is first told through *mufti* Hadj Ahmed Effendi’s perspective: “[d]ans son exil, il [Effendi] se rappelle ce 4 juillet et publie sa relation: / « L’explosion fit trembler la ville et frappa de stupeur tout le monde. […] »” (60).

Signaled by both a tag and by punctuation, this initially stable position of narration falters directly thereafter:

Puis il [Effendi] évoque succinctement les premiers négociateurs des pourparlers, que les chroniqueurs français décrivent, eux, avec force détails.

La discussion s’ouvre au son de la canonnade entre les représentants des deux clans: dans les décombres de Fort l’Empereur, les Français ont installé des batteries pour bombarder la forteresse de la Casbah, siège de pouvoir. Ce harcèlement s’arrête lorsqu’un Turc, « dont le costume, à la fois élégant et simple, annonçait un personnage de distinction », se présente par un chemin dérobé, un drapeau blanc à la main. (60)

The concession that what Effendi “evokes next” — possibly the final paragraph here — is also detailed in French records has the effect of destabilizing voice in this passage.

From where, exactly, is the information concerning the first French-Arab negotiations
gleaned? From Effendi’s account or, conversely, from an unnamed French version? Perhaps it comes from the historian’s narrative position? Or is it a mixture of the three? More importantly, what is the source of the incorporated citation? At a crossroads of voices, this passage disallows any definitive answer, and invites speculation.

Ernaux, too, integrates a wealth of other voices into *Les Années*; and like her Algerian counterpart, she rarely clarifies their presence. On the contrary, others’ words constitute the very substance of the parallel yet intertwined story of the *ils* and the *nous*, whether they be gleaned from works of literature, popular culture, song lyrics, advertisement slogans, conversations with friends and family, or statements made in the French press and by politicians. Ernaux, in effect, registers change in the Hexagon by way of the very collective discourse that articulated that same change.16 This, in turn, blurs the line separating narrative and discourse, between Ernaux’s voice and others’ voices; the two become virtually indistinguishable. Like *Traversée*, *Babyface*, and *L’Amour, la fantasia*, then, *Les Années* takes the shape of a myriad of voices that interact, overlap, and intersect so as to sketch out a broader picture of individual and group identity in Metropolitan France.

At the opening of Ernaux’s text, the family is the main narrative focus; through it, collective discourses filters down to the younger generation. This means, first and foremost, conveying a sense of national belonging through that “grand récit des événements collectifs” ceaselessly narrated at the family dinner table: “l’hiver 42, glacial, la faim et le rutabaga, le ravitaillement et les bons de tabac, les bombardements / […] l’arrivée des Allemands […] / Le Havre rasé […] / les Boches en fuite […]” (935). The

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16 The broad locution “collective discourse” intends to encompass all forms of extra-diegetic citation gleaned from the socio-cultural and political realms and thus existing prior and outside the narrative.
war, Ernaux writes, “[c]’était le roman de notre naissance et de notre petit enfance” (960). Indeed, if the younger generation is initially presented as an ils rather than a nous — “Les enfants n’écoutaient pas” (937) —, this is certainly because “la mémoire des autres [les] plaçait dans le monde” (940). Through the family, the chronicle of World War II anchors Ernaux’s generation in a historical narrative that instills in them respect for the nation, values that the Catholic school system, in turn, relays and reinforces:

Le courage quotidien n’était pas oublié, il fallait admirer le père de famille, « cet aventurier du monde moderne » (Péguy), « la vie humble aux travaux ennuyeux et faciles » (Verlaine), commenter en rédaction des sentences de Georges Duhamel et de Saint-Exupéry, « la leçon d’énergie des héros de Corneille », montrer comment l’amour de la famille conduit à l’amour de la patrie » et que « le travail éloigne de nous trois grands maux, l’ennui, le vice et le besoin » (Voltaire). (953)

By listing authors and citing specific passages from their works — a practice rarely employed —, Ernaux underscores the ideological use to which these texts were put in the classroom. Like the family, Catholic education transmits a collective discourse centered on hard work and the value of the nation-state.

Soon thereafter, however, emergent consumerist culture fractures the singular discourse carried by the family and the school. The arrival of a growing number of commodities, services, and new technologies ushers in a new collective discourse that is centered on the acquisition of belongings and on the notion of material progress.

Le progrès était l’horizon des existences. Il signifiait le bien-être, la santé des enfants, les maisons lumineuses et les rues éclairées, le savoir, tout ce qui tournait le dos aux choses noires de la compagne et à la guerre. Il était dans le plastique et le Formica, les antibiotiques et les indemnités de la sécurité sociale, l’eau courante sur l’évier et le tout-à-égout, les colonies de vacances, la continuation des études et l’atome. Il fallait être de son temps, disait-on à l’envi […]. (950)
Progress, here, is synonymous with modernity and consumerism; the need to acquire the objects and to utilize the services listed appears as if already internalized. Presented without quotation marks and in standard typography, the list reproduces the belief that *il faut être de son temps*. Television ads, jingles, slogans, and popular music carry the same message: “les réclames de Radio Luxembourg, comme les chansons, apportaient la certitude du bonheur et de l’avenir” (949); “[I]a pub montrait comment il fallait vivre et se comporter, se meubler, elle était la monitrice culturelle de la société” (999). By the late 1970s, this consumer-driven ideal of happiness is so predominant, Ernaux suggests, that even marital union and rupture are grasped in its terms: “[c]omme la liste des choses à acheter […], celle des choses à se partager matérialisait […] la rupture” (1014).

Consumerist culture, then, supplants the singular narrative of national origin transmitted by the family and the school, and provides a new, materialistic sense of identity.

The question of national identity remains nonetheless, particularly with regard to the non-national Other. Indeed, alongside the narrative threads relating the development of family relations and consumerist culture in Metropolitan France, themes of colonization and immigration continually resurface. During the Algerian war of independence, for instance, the collective discourse Ernaux inscribes neatly reflects the widespread refusal to name the “events” as war: “ils étaient tous d’accord, et nous aussi qui l’avions au programme du BEPC, l’Algérie avec ses trois départements était la France […]. Il n’y avait ni ennemi, ni combattant, ni bataille. On n’avait pas un sentiment de guerre” (961). Here, popular belief, secondary education, and State-supported propaganda veritably coalesce — hence the absence of quotation marks. After
decolonization, discourse shifts towards immigration and its stigmatization following a few short years during the 1980s that appealed to the droit à la différence:


This passage clearly illustrates the shifting terms used to articulate national identity vis-à-vis the non-national Other. The number of expressions demonstrates the prevalence of immigration on the national political platform, and their placement within quotation marks, their attribution to a particular group. “Touche-pas à mon pote,” for instance, was the slogan of SOS Racisme, formed in 1984. If, however, the use of quotation marks seems to distance the statements from popular belief, the interpretation of Rocard’s remark proves the contrary.17 The earlier “crainte […] à l’égard des « Arabes »” and the immigrant worker’s “visage de l’ennemi” (974) are thus less obsolete than they have been displaced, enlarged even to accommodate a wider public. Despite the more positive — albeit somewhat laughable — discourse on immigration that seems to crystalize in the “« dialogue des cultures »,” which ultimately “se résumait à s’approprier leur parler et à signer leur accent, à inverser les lettres et les syllabes comme eux, dire une meuf et un tarpé” (1021), “insecurity” in 2001 still has “la figure inavouée d’une population basanée de l’ombre” (1065). Though the terms have changed with the period, the thrust of the discourse conveying nationalist sentiment remains the same.

17 Rocard’s actual statement, produced in a discourse in front of the Assemblée nationale on June 6, 1989, reads: “il y a, en effet, dans le monde trop de drames, de pauvreté, de famine pour que l’Europe et la France puissent accueillir tous ceux que la misère pousse vers elles” (Deborde, n. p.).
1.3 – Unidentified Voices

Fundamental to relational narratives are also anonymous or indeterminate voices. Indeed, in these texts the characteristically enigmatic on plays a key role. In both Traversée de la Mangrove and Babyface, for instance, the on relays commonly held knowledge. In Rivière-au-Sel, word of mouth disseminates most of the beliefs held about Francis Sancher, as the incessant tags on dit and on croit indicate. Common knowledge, moreover, often materializes in Traversée as character speech does. For example, when the reader learns of postman Moïse’s and Sancher’s suspected homosexual relationship, she also witnesses the town’s reaction to it: “[i]ls examinèrent les compères avec incrédulité. Moïse, passe encore! Mais Francis! Il n’en avait pas l’air!” (37). Speech, here, is attributed to the townspeople as a collective unit; but, incorporated in a free indirect style, it is difficult to distinguish character speech from the external position of narration. The three perspectives cannot be dissociated.

Collective speech plays a similar role in Babyface, particularly in Jérôme’s Journal Fragments. The mythical tale of Président’s birth, for instance, is told through the people’s eyes: “« [l]e peuple raconte: Le père et la mère reviennent des champs […] »” (12). Placed in quotation marks, the story seems to emanate from the “people” as a collective entity. Indeed, word of mouth itself becomes the grammatical subject of a following sequence: “la chose se chuchotait […]: ‘Comment aspirer à l’Identité pure avec ces gens-là au milieu de nous?’” (57). Voice, here, has no grounding; it is the “thing” itself that whispers. This, in turn, sheds new light on those passages that neither adhere to

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18 Each of the passages reproducing Jérôme’s journal fragments is placed within quotation marks. To avoid overly cumbersome citations, I will omit them unless relevant to my argument.
the text’s tripartite vocal structure nor correspond with any defined first person voice.

Take this passage situated in the first person interface:

La communauté internationale se braqua et dépêcha ses experts en Eburnéa. […] Alors Eburnéa baissa les yeux, La honte. [...] / Mais le FER et ses partisans bombèrent le torse: Quoi? Quels regrets? Quelle condamnation? Quels charniers? Quelles tombes communes? Quels corps? La communauté internationale n’a-t-elle rien d’autre à faire qu’à s’intéresser à quelques cadavres de boyrodjans? (63)

Breaking with the asterisk pattern, and housed outside of Jérôme’s journal, voice in this passage is doubly opaque. While the list of questions clearly stems from the collective voice of the political group known as the FER, the initial two lines can only be ascribed to some unidentified, anonymous perspective. Contrary to James Gilroy’s argument, “enough clues” are not provided for the reader to “figure out who the narrator is at a given moment” (627).19

In Ernaux’s work, unidentified voices are more pervasive; both anonymous and collective, they emanate from the amorphous sources that disseminated period discourse. The opening list of images and locutions clearly sets this up: written in nominal or incomplete form, with neither initial capitalization nor concluding punctuation, the items catalogued appear as if severed from any speaking subject. In fact, there is only one instance of a personal pronoun standing in the primary subject position during these first pages; characteristically, it is the on: “[e]t l’on sera un jour dans le souvenir de nos enfants au milieu de petits-enfants et de gens qui ne sont pas encore nés” (930). But even here the conjunction creates a dissociative effect, as if the personal pronoun simply

19 To cite another salient example of this, an enigmatic passage occurs during the scene of Mozati’s and Babyface’s initial encounter. Sandwiched between two asterisk-marked passages from Mozati’s perspective, this sequence reiterates basic information about Babyface in nominal sentence form. Syntax, then, implies Mozati’s perspective, but the alternating structure suggests the contrary. What is interesting, again, is that voice cannot be definitely established here.
cannot occupy the dominant subject position. Moreover, when the on reappears in two subordinate clauses, the first is linked to a feminine person, while the second remains unmarked: “[d]es images où l’on figurait en gamine au milieu d’autres êtres déjà disparus avant qu’on soit né” (929-930, emphasis added). Ernaux thus immediately brings to the fore the enigmatic nature of the on, utilizing it such that her own story materializes and remains concealed at once. Indeed, Ernaux regularly employs the on in passages recounting collective experiences that nonetheless resonate as if from her perspective. Thus this description of the changing landscape of the 1980s:

Quand on roulait longtemps seul à la même vitesse, l’automatisme de gestes sus depuis longtemps faisait perdre la sensation de son corps […]. On n’était plus qu’un regard dans un habitacle transparent jusqu’au fond de l’horizon mouvant, qu’une conscience immense et fragile emplissant l’espace et, au-delà, la totalité du monde. On se disait parfois qu’il aurait suffi d’un pneu qui éclate […] pour qu’elle disparaisse à jamais. (1032)

The immediacy and intimacy of this passage implies an awareness emanating from an individual psyche; yet, by way of the on, that feeling is extended to the collective group.20

As this last example attests, the on is often used in its inclusive inclination in order to denote group identity. In this respect, it intermittently replaces the nous. In a passage concerning the early 1960s, for example, one paragraph describing “[l]es gens” is immediately followed by another, focalized on youths: “[n]ous, on préparait nos certificats de licence en écoutant le transistor. […] On ne sentait rien de commun avec les yéyés qui disaient Hitler ne connais pas […]. On avait l’impression qu’ils nous rattraperaient jamais” (975). Drawing on the logic of méconnaissance, Ernaux’s use of

20 Use of the pronoun on, in this sense, coincides with Ernaux’s established practice of addressing wider social phenomena while simultaneously gleaning from her own experiences. On this, see Aksoy Alp’s overview, “Écrire avec la voix du peuple.”
subject pronouns pits “us, the youth” against “them, the old”: “[i]ls n’avaient jamais assez de raconter l’hiver 42 […] / Ils parlaient de Pétain […] / Ils imitaient le vol et le grondement des V2 […]” (935-936). And the pattern continues, with the third person plural opening five successive paragraphs to drive home the distinction between generations. That said, the on also regularly appears in its exclusive function; standing in for the ils, it destabilizes the distinction Ernaux draws out between the ils and the nous. A this passage describing technological advances of the early 1950s is a case in point:

On s’émerveillait d’inventions qui effaçaient des siècles de gestes et d’efforts, inauguraient un temps où, disaient les gens, on n’aurait plus rien à faire. On les dénigrait: la machine à laver était accusée d’user le linge, la télévision d’abîmer les yeux et de faire coucher à des heures indues. On surveillait et on enviait chez ses voisins la possession de ces signes de progrès, marquant une supériorité sociale. Dans la ville, les grands garçons exhibaient leur Vespa […] On aurait voulu grandir de trois ans d’un coup quand on les voyait s’éloigner […] (949)

Here, the first on is not explicitly inclusive or exclusive, while the second and third are overtly attributed to the shared beliefs of “les gens.” Moreover, the first and third occurrences refer to two different groups of people, the first of which embraces novelty while the second rejects it outright. The fourth and fifth appearances, like the first, could either be inclusive or exclusive — that is, they may be synonymous with either ils or nous. The last occurrence, however, is tied to Ernaux’s own cohort, a particular grouping of youths constituted in opposition with another older group. There is, then, no hard and fast rule for interpreting subject pronoun use in Les Années, of which the enigmatic case of the on is the most emblematic. “Les « on »,” as Kiran writes, “cachent aussi bien l’instance d’origine qu’ils constituent une toile de fond floue et brouillée derrière le
discours de la narratrice” (163): the elle, and by extension the je, is always floating somewhere behind, next to, or within it.21

Like Ernaux, Djebar also employs the on indiscriminately, using it to refer to both the French and autochthonous peoples.22 And like Kwahulé and Condé, she too incorporates dialogue with no reference as to who is speaking, or worse yet, ascribes it only to someone: “—Il a défendu sa sœur contre cinq soldats! Précise une voix derrière” (79); “—Sept au total ont été exécutées par nos soldats, précise quelqu’un” (80). It is the explosion of Arabo-Berber voices in Part Three, however, that best embodies anonymity in L’Amour, la fantasia. Breaking with the pattern established in Parts One and Two, Part Three is divided into five “Movements” composed of six segments each: two autobiographical and two testimonial, between which figure, first, a lyrical segment and, second, one entitled “Corps enlacés.”23 Initially, distinguishing between the autobiographical and the testimonial voices proves tricky, as both are enunciated in the first person. The first testimonial voice, which opens “[m]on frère aîné, Abdelkader, était monté au maquis” (167), jolts in the reader, who can only infer the change in speaking subject. This unfamiliar je remains undefined throughout the segment and won’t be revealed as Chérifa until the final lines of the following lyrical piece: “[e]lle s’appelle Chérifa” (178). Chérifa, then, tells her story with no mention of her name, and returns

21 Moreover, as Francine Dugast-Portes points out, the first person plural always already implies the first person singular — that is, the je is part and parcel of the nous and thus also the inclusive inclination of the on (“Les Années d’Annie Ernaux, entre littérature et ethnologie”).

22 To cite one example, the pronoun on appears on a single page to refer consecutively to the Arabo-Berber troops and to the French: “le caïd Ben Kadrouma se retrouvait dans des conditions similaires: une délégation de notables mazounis accueillait à la porte de la ville (cette porte qu’on n’avait pas voulu ouvrir, deux ans auparavant, à Abdelkader […])”; “Saint-Arnaud déclarait, le visage rougi, la voix de plus en plus criard, […] que les troupeaux trop nombreux qu’on entendait bêler dans les jardins étaient ceux des réfugiés et des tribus rebelles…” (122, emphasis added).

23 This is with the exception of the Fifth Movement and Finale, which I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Five. See the table of contents in Appendix 1 to get a clearer picture of this breakdown.
some twenty odd pages later to pick up her account where she left off. Similarly, only reported dialogue obliquely identifies the voice recounting the Second Movement’s testimonial segment: “[l]e voisin passait donc son temps à m’épier. Ils se mit à aller donner des renseignements: « Telle compagnie est venue chez Sahraoui Zohra! […] »” (212). Movements Three and Four, in turn, omit names altogether. Amplifying the effects of the previous pages, they deny the testimonial voices the grounding of any affirmed identity whatsoever. What is striking about Part Three, then, is its utter disregard for the stability of the speaking subject; weaving between Dejbar’s voice and the voices of other unknown women, this Part is shrouded in a veil of anonymity that is both open and cryptic.

*Sortie d’usine*, in turn, resonates strongly with Part Three of *L’Amour, la fantasia*. Indeed, the near entirety of Bon’s first novel takes shape through an enigmatic, anonymous perspective — at times collective, at others individual. It is for this reason that I have yet to consider *Sortie d’usine*. In effect, its lack of the formal and typographical characteristics that elsewhere denote perspective divergences render its polyvocal nature slightly less visible. The opening pages, in fact, trace the daily commute of only one unnamed person — *lui*:

Une gare, s’il faut situer, laquelle n’importe il est tôt, sept heures un peu plus, c’est nuit encore. Avant la gare il y a eu un couloir déjà, lui venant du métro, les gens dans le même sens tous ou presque, qui arrivent sur Paris. Lui contre la foule, remontant. […] / La pendule, l’heure, regard réflex, dressé huilé. Ça marche en général à la minute près: six minutes il lui reste d’ici au quai, le temps donc largement pour qu’il prenne son journal (7)

Yet, two voices already resonate in this passage: one depicting the *lui* from an exterior perspective, the other reproducing the same *lui’s* interior monologue. Surfacing here in the phrase *il est tôt* as well as in the nominal sentence, internal monologue seems to
overflow from the outer voice that would contain it; it materializes in those “signes par
excès” that Jean-Pierre Martin describes as “[l]es signes de la voix” (29). Repetition of
identical information in two different modes further underscores the presence of these
two voices: “les arrêts qu’il ne compte même plus. / Ne les compte pas” (11). Like
*Babyface*, then, syntax and lexicon can signal changes in voice. Moreover, the exterior
perspective overtly recognizes the presence of this interior voice:

[L]’interjection presque muette à l’égratignure encore une, […] chercher un
chiffon propre parle la voix, le plus propre […]. Et laisse la pensée en
rêpeter les phases come pour seulement se divertir, à énoncer les actes
successifs du faire avant de la laisser se dissoudre, perdue par
l’automatisme des gestes (38, emphasis added).

Leaving aside, for the moment, the ideological implications of this passage, it is the
recognition of a split voice that is of interest here. It is the internal voice, then, that
resonates in those more enigmatic sequences that lack a grammatical subject, where the
recurrence of the infinitive-form verb transposes into an abstract realm the interior
monologue of the unnamed *il* himself: “*positionner* sur la machine la pièce, *serrer* les
écrous […]. *Lever* la table, la main gauche sur le volant lourd, la droite sur la manette
plus étroite de l’avance transperce, *faire* tangenter” (39, emphasis added).

Once the workday has commenced in the first Week, however, positions of
enunciation in *Sortie d’usine* start to multiply. Like the prologue, this section opens with
a paragraph containing no names or personal pronouns until the *il* resurfaces: “[l]e cri.
D’où, plus loin, de l’autre côté de l’allée. […] Le tour, oui, le tour […] / Il traversa” (29).
The reader seems to rediscover the same anonymous man introduced in the opening
pages; ultimately, however, this hypothesis cannot be validated. On the contrary, multiple
perspectives are woven into this section, and narrative voice continually shifts positions.
Rarely identified through the conventional use of dashes, or even tags like “ça s’en va y aller dit-il” (35) or “la rallonge en dépend dit-on” (36), changes in voices can sometimes be inferred by way of the imperative form: “[a]llez les gars, c’est fini. […] Restez pas là comme ça” (32). At other times, formal or typographical characteristics denote the presence of speech, such as the appearance of repetitive ellipses or even script in all capital letters, used to relay the act of shouting on the shop floor: “ON EST SOURDS. TOUS SOURDS. TOUS” (77). Contrary to the incorporation of speech in examined in the previous section, however, the position of the speaking subject remains unidentified in each of these instances. Indeed, speech most often appears with no formal or diegetic indications whatsoever:

Ou bien viennent là-bas un dessineux plus un type du contrôle c’est une affaire de loupés, bien sûr faut que ça retombe sur le quidam en fin de piste qui n’est pour rien, le chef il s’en fout il peut toujours gueuler en bas et lécher les bottes en haut ça y est volilà que ça s’engueule, le gars les mains appuyées sur son job, le chef avançant reculant comme attiré repoussé par l’immobilité de l’autre, ils sont mal tombés, celui-là c’en est pas un à dire deux mots au lieu d’un mais faut pas non plus venir lui en raconter, ce qu’il fait c’est bien fait et puis sûr que si le chef le prend trop à rebrousse-foil ce qu’il va lui sortir c’est qu’il en a vu d’autres, prendre son compte rendre sa caisse et trouver ailleurs il serait pas en peine, on sait tout cela déjà, sans attendre le rapport qu’on en aura tout à l’heure. (40)

Although unmarked, this passage incorporates several instances of speech. Between the initially exterior point of view point (ou bien) and the final absorption into the mass of the workforce (on sait tout cela déjà), the strikingly oral quality of the syntax and lexicon as well as the sheer amalgamation of clauses implies the presence of speaking voices. These could include an interior observer’s remarks (voilà que ça s’engueule), the sympathy of an understanding party (celui-là c’en est pas un à dire deux mots au lieu d’un; ce qu’il fait c’est bien fait), or the even the insulted worker himself. Ultimately, the

24 This occurs only once. See p. 87.
number and position of speaking voices cannot be determined; we can only that speech is in some way present. A subsequent ten-page passage narrated in the first person further complicates this prismatic presentation of perspectives. Clearly demarcated on the printed page by way of sizable page breaks, and enunciated in the imperative form, the passage initiates some novice to the factory space, perhaps too the reader herself: “[l]e nom de ces chariots, voyez-vous, c’est transpalette” (42); “un service en vaut un autre, si vous voyez ce que je veux dire” (43); “imaginez un peu le tableau” (44); etc. But the reader never discovers who, exactly, is the je uttering this discourse; the je has no corporeal grounding in the diegesis whatsoever, and disappears after the next break in text. His eruption in the narrative, however, has lasting effects, as it clouds with suspicion all subsequent appearances of the first person. Like the original il, the reader can only conjecture if each je refers to the same person.

During the second Week, which recounts the Passage ritual enacted following the death of colleague, singular narrative voices become sparse.25 Instead, a collective anonymous subject comes to the fore, and the individual laborers are as if swallowed up by the voice of the on: “[o]n tapait et cognait […] / On pressait les meules […]” (81); “on [se] vengeait” (82); “[o]n savait, on avait vu […]. On attendait” (88); “on mourrait […]. On s’arrangeait” (92); etc. Switching to the on, in effect, transposes the “seul bruit” or “arbre de bruits” that the workers form during the ritual. Reverting to the on, in fact, is key, as it conveys the group identity and shared knowledge of the individual laborers.

25 It is only the Week’s closing sequence that clarifies the few occurrences of the il. Used primarily to refer to the defunct, but also to the “vieux,” the “bonhomme,” and “le père Thomas” who instantiated the tradition itself, all three referents are eventually revealed as one and the same: “puisque c’est défunt son père, le créateur même de l’entreprise à laquelle il avait fièrement donné son nom” (98). As with Chérifa in L’Amour, la fantasia, then, the reader belatedly learns the name of the prior il, and is able to link each of its occurrences into one defined person. This belated naming, however, does not entirely resolve the conundrum of the il in Week Two. I will consider this more closely in the next section.
Thus, to the novices who are reticent to join, “[o]n disait que ça présentait plein
d’avantages, obligeant le nouveau à s’intéresser un peu plus loin que son atelier ou sa
table, […], apprendre la solidarité” (93). As one of the “occasions si rares de briser la
routine,” the Passage exceeds the boundaries of daily procedure; overturning order, it
affords a space in which the individual workers can join in on a “fête extrême du bruit”
(80) and bring the collective resonance of the on to the fore. Only the managerial staff, in
effect, are “[p]rivés du bruit, eux seuls dans l’usine” (89).

The third Week, which depicts an unusually long and animated strike, introduces
a new change in narrative voice. Like the Passage, the labor strike disrupts the monotony
of factory routine; it too overturns order. Roles are inverted: “[d]edans […] [l’]équilibre
changé, plus de blouses grises que de bleues” (115); clothing and language shift: “les
paroles non plus n’étaient pas les mêmes, se faisaient aussi civiles que les fringues”
(117); and the factory is silenced: “vide vraiment, aucun bruit” (120). This upheaval, in
turn, creates a space within which new identifications can materialize. Indeed, if the
shape-shifting il disappears during the strike, it is because “[o]n avait des difficultés à
situer tel ou tel, le reconnaître, tant le visage s’était associé à son ordinaire, une place, une
machine, couleurs geste” (118). But, contrary to the Passage, the on here tends to
function exclusively. If the third Week opens similarly to the second, depicting the blue-
collar workforce as a singular, operative unit — “on avait établit le piquet de grève. / […]
[O]n occupait le baracon des gardiens, […] on lisait l’Huma l’Équipe sur fond disco”
(101) —, the pronoun here tends to shift referents. During the account of an altercation
between workers and plant managers, for instance, the on appears upwards of ten times
per page, oftentimes referring to different groups of people:
On se contentait de tenir ferme et serrés les uns contre les autres […]. Eux savaient que le calme était la seule politique en la matière, ils n’étaient pas nés de la dernière pluie, on en avait vu d’autres, on s’en racontait les nuits de gardes des souvenirs de S.O. Bien sûr on avait fait bloc pour aider ceux du cordon, on s’était rapproché pour entourer au plus près les trois, mais seulement histoire de les isoler (106, emphasis added)

Akin to Ernaux’s use of the enigmatic on, the pronoun has multiple valences here: while the first and final two occurrences aren’t explicitly inclusive or exclusive, the second and third are synonymous with ils, referring to those who “weren’t born yesterday.”

Similarly, the on seems to refer to a group of sheet metal workers in one passage, but that same group is designated via the third person just a few pages later: “[à] la tôlerie on devait faire dans les soixante pour cent” (114); “ceux de la tôlerie, […] eux c’était l’inverse” (119). This fracturing of the on, then, transposes the laborers’ abandonment of their habitual positions and the subsequent formation of new groups: “ceux dont on attendait les interventions […]. Les radicaux de l’occupation, les durs. Les modérés. Les copains du C.E. […] Et puis des qui prenaient la parole pour se raconter” (119), etc.

1.4 – The Author’s Voice?

In La Bande sonore, Jean-Pierre Martin writes, “lorsqu’à la mythographie du Livre mallarméen s’est substitué une mythographie de la Voix, alors le corps de l’écrivain, élocutoirement disparu, peut faire obliquement retour” (159). It is this oblique return of embodied authorial voice that contemporary relational narratives actualize. Situated between all-powerful authorial function that Bakhtin reads in the nineteenth-century novel26 and the effacement of the author in the experimental period of the 1950s

26 “Heteroglossia,” Bakhtin writes, “once incorporated into the novel […], is another’s speech in another language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way” (324); “the author builds a superstructure over these languages made up of his own intentions and accents” (409).
to 1970s, authorial voice materializes in relational narratives as just another component contributing to the crossed chorus of voices they draw out. Curiously, only those texts that aspire to convey orality use the passé simple (Les Années being the exception), each occurrence of which undermines the oral quality of the narrative voice by implying an authorial presence. But of course authorial voice is already most easily ascertained in Ernaux’s work, given its autobiographical nature.27

In L’Amour, la fantasia, however, authorial voice is already a bit more complicated, particularly in the historical segments. Diverging from the historian’s matter-of-fact tone and the novelist’s poetic language, authorial voice in these historical segments comments on the nature of the witness accounts, the sequence of events, and the motivations guiding their actors: simply put, it is a voice that questions. Speaking of “[I]’agha Ibrahim, le gendre du dey,” for instance, it asks, “aurait-il aussi superbement négligé la défense, justement pour voir les assaillants s’approcher de plus près? Se croyait-il si sûr de les écraser […]?” (28). Even more explicit are the almost incessant remarks such as “je relis,” “je m’attarde sur,” “j’écris à mon tour,” “je suppose,” “j’imagine,” which point to the act of consulting original historical documents. Indeed, even as she highlights her source work Djebar overtly acknowledges fabricating some aspects of the historical accounts she rewrites: “je ne sais, je conjecture: la fiction, ma fiction, serait-ce d’imaginer la motivation des bourreaux?” (107).28 Ultimately, the presence of this authorial voice destabilizes all the narrative voices found in the text.

When, for instance, Lamoricière is planning an attack strategy during the early 1840s, he

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27 Conversely, authorial voice is the least ascertainable in Babyface, where it materializes more in form than by specifically vocal means. I will consider this more closely in Part III.
ostensibly asks himself, “comment passer de la défensive à l’offensive, et le plus vite possible?” (74), or when, in 1845, the French troops believe that Abd el-Kader has been defeated, they apparently “commencent à espérer: serait-ce la fin de la résistance algérienne?” (94). The presence of the authorial voice, combined with the lack of quotation marks or source information, renders these queries problematic: have they been copied out of or merely deduced from witness accounts? Or are they entirely fabricated? The muddled lines distinguishing one voice from another, historian from actor and writer from historian, risk vanishing entirely.

Authorial voice in Texaco similarly destabilizes the position of the speaking subject. Diverging slightly from the scribe’s voice, Chamoiseau’s voice materializes notably via the periodic, and often unconventional, use of footnotes. Indeed, of the twenty-nine footnotes scattered across the full text, only two are directly attributed to authorial voice; the majority of the others are enunciated from Marie-Sophie’s perspective and thus act less as ancillary explanations than as an “espèce de ‘trop-plein’ rejeté hors du flux narratif,” as critic Serge Dominique Ménager succinctly puts it (61). Chamoiseau thus thwarts the paratextual nature of the footnote and, by so doing, masks his voice in them. And yet, because they are incorporated as footnotes — that is, as the textual space par excellence of authorial intention — his intervention is implied in each.29 The text’s closing section further speaks to this oblique presence. Here, the author takes over first person enunciation and links the writing of Texaco with his previous work, Solibo Magnifique (1988): “[j]e découvris Texaco en cherchant le vieux-nègre de la Doum. Je voulais le rencontrer pour recueillir ses confidences [...] à me sortir d’un

29 As Chamoiseau tells Gauvin, he prefers to he utilize footnotes as a “petit jeu personnel qui n’entre pas dans une volonté d’éclaircir quoi que ce soit” (43).
drame: la mort de Solibo Magnifique” (491). This act of self-referencing anchors Chamoiseau’s presence in the narrative, both as author and as scribe. “Entrant dans la fiction,” as Danièle de Ruyter-Tognotti writes, “[il] se fictionnalise immanquablement, et […] quitte son autorité auctoriale pour s’envelopper dans un certain mystère” (131). Enigmatically intertwined throughout the narrative, authorial voice is both everywhere and nowhere at once.30

In Traversée, authorial presence materializes in the voice of common knowledge, which cannot be disjoined from the external narrator’s voice. Indeed, authorial voice quivers between an internal and external perspective, making it rather difficult to pin down. Thus, for example, the enigmatic occurrence of a je during Moïse’s subsection:

Les gens prétendent que c’est Mira, Mira Lameaulnes comme tout le monde l’appelait bien qu’elle eût aucun droit à ce nom, qui apporta la fâcherie entre Francis Sancher et Moïse. Selon eux, Moïse, ayant flaire l’odeur de la femme sur le linge de corps de son ami, en conçut de la jalousie. […] / Toutefois, je le répète, les gens disent n’importe quoi. / La brouille entre Francis Sancher et Moïse eut une tout autre cause (43-44).

The first person voice here ostensibly repeats another remark situated ten pages earlier, which also asserts, “les gens racontent n’importe quoi” (34). But the speaking voice is obscure in both cases: it could emanate from the external narrator, as the first instance seems to suggest, but it could equally constitute another instance of unmarked character speech, whether collective or that of Moïse. Dominique Chancé, for her part, conflates the narrator and the author here, reading it as “le narrateur, l’auteur qui prend la parole soudain” (75). While this interpretation is certainly plausible, the slippage between voices that occurs throughout the text renders problematic any categorical distinction. It is rather

30 Moreover, like in L’Amour, la fantasia, this renders other explanatory aside increasingly ambiguous. Who, in fact, provides the translation of Creole in “I té za mété bwa’ opadèhiè kay la… Cela signifiait […]” (84)?
Condé’s use of indeterminacy itself that is noteworthy. Both internal and external, narrative voice relays intimate knowledge and a global perspective. It is neither the “omniscient third person narrator” that Hewitt reads (91), nor is it “no better informed than the character,” as Jonassaint argues (156). Somewhere between these two positions, it both knows the community’s secrets (Aristide and Mira’s incest, for example), and equally questions the townspeople’s sincerity: “[à] voir les gens si nombreux, on aurait pu conclure à leur hypocrisie […]. [N]e doivent-ils pas crever dans l’indifférence?” (20).

Akin to Texaco, then, authorial voice in Traversée has a double valence in that it wavers between storyteller and writer. As storyteller, Condé’s voice resonates from within the wake as part of the Rivière au Sel community, and recounts the happenings viva voce. As writer, by contrast, she remains external to this universe, her voice surfacing in the passé simple as well as in the periodic intervention of footnotes. Contrary to Chamoiseau, however, Condé’s use of footnotes seems to be relatively conventional, as the notes tend to translate allolinguistic terms and expressions for a non-Creolophone audience. Yet, a closer look shows that these translations are often gloss-overs or one-word explications that transform a particularly ample Creole into a somewhat meager French. Furthermore, the vast majority of Creole terms and expressions are not translated, and those that are frequently reappear without repeated explication. Unsystematic and ultimately unconventional, the footnotes both reveal the figure of the writer and dismiss

31 Among the ninety-five footnotes, only four provide tangential information: two bibliographical (66, 148), two geographical (76, 102).
32 In an interview with Hardwick, Condé explains that the footnotes were not part of the original work but were required by her editor. The published text, then, acts as a tongue-in-cheek response to editorial demands, which, in turn, undermines Chamoiseau’s criticism of his Guadeloupian colleague’s use of them, as if he hadn’t actually read the notes himself (see “Reflections on Maryse Condé’s Traversée de la Mangrove”).
it, as if to reinforce the presence of the storytelling voice, which itself is little concerned with translation.

An authorial voice also materializes in *Sortie d’usine*, though not until its final pages. When the strike concludes at the end of the third Week, it seems normal factory activity will return: “allons enfants, on remet ça. Et les moteurs en route, et les compresseurs” (133). The reader thus expects that the collective *on* will coalesce once again. But no such reformation occurs; the fourth Week, rather, brings about the veritable “sortie d’usine”: more than mere exit, it is a both a literal falling down (physical injury) and a metaphorical rising up. Here, the internal voice again dominates, and the terse sentence structure featured in the prologue returns: “[c]ourir, courir, mais cela ne suffisait pas” (137); “[u]n claquement, un claquement très vaste. Puis ce stable fugace, un suspens à peine, courir où” (138). Tellingly, the *il* is depicted in a heightened state of anxiety:


The internal monologue depicted here is no longer restricted to a list of tasks to accomplish; diverging from the voice of the first Week and prologue, his voice is now inundated with a “[s]ensation moite et trouble” (145). Underscoring this change, grammatical subjects and verbs are severed from each other: “[s]e releva, sortir. Franchit. La porte de plastique” (138); “attendre cinq heures il. Ne viendrait pas demain” (139). So too do sentences ending abruptly with a preposition increase in number, as if their concluding thoughts are either of little consequence or simply ineluctable: “[v]ite parfois
puis. Plus lentement et” (139); “puis que la dernière fois quand” (141). Equally telling, there is also an increase in possessive pronoun use, as the il hopelessly attempts to return to “son coin, sa machine, s’asseoir” (139). And indeed, his ultimately fails, leaving the reader to witness his fall, “comme une de ces immenses chutes qu’on fait dans les rêves” (150), as if in slow motion, until definitive rupture: “[d]’un coup. Et rien ne tournait plus” (152).

After this fall, which materializes on the page via a large break, the il disappears, replaced by a je that narrates the final fifteen pages of text. It is this je that relays authorial presence. The newly formed first person voice, in effect, claims authority over the text, and admits having “ordonné tous les déplacements, figures, positions narratives”: “[a]utant de vaisseaux” as he calls them, “dont j’avais composé la constellation de mon texte” (163). We would be quick, however, to identify this je with Bon himself. This is not an autobiography, despite the inclusion of some autobiographical material: Bon’s experiences in his grandfather’s garage, for instance, as well as the anecdote of his first cigarettes figure in both Sortie d’usine and the more overtly autobiographical texts Mécanique (2001) and Autobiographie des objets (2012).33 That said, this final je does function in Sortie d’usine as the figure of an author, one who, like Bon, would be situated between the positions of insider and outsider (Bon did, after all, leave his position as factory manager to pursue a career in literature). It is only once having “exited” the factory as a singular and identified individual that the je is able compose this text, and yet still “retrouver la nécessité, l’explication de leurs déplacements” (162). It is precisely between these two positions that he situates the act of

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33 Thus, in Sortie d’usine: “[o]u bien le garage du grand-père, revenant de Paris, et déjà le nom de la ville, ramenant de l’Usine une voiture neuve, un nouveau modèle, du jamais vu. […] Plus tard, les premières cigarettes, fauchées dans les boîtes à gants des voitures de clients” (129).
writing: “ce double qui m’avait guidé, […] cette distance avec moi-même qui était le malaise où écrire” (163). With this authorial voice in mind, we can retrospectively piece together some of the text’s more enigmatic voices. Returning to the factory, for instance, the je evokes his “démission” (159), explaining, “je m’en étais bien sorti, plus que dehors” (162). Paradoxically, this concession establishes continuity between the je and the preceding il, but it also underscores the lack of connection between them:

Je n’aurais pas aperçu ce fourmillement indistinct: sa proximité au présent de l’usine aurait reconstitué pour lui chaque signe, et chaque attitude entrevue aurait associé un nom, un visage, à la silhouette anonyme. J’eus reconnu chaque machine, aussi facilement qu’aujourd’hui je distinguais le pont roulant. (162, emphasis added)

Like the elle in Les Années, the distinction between the first- and third person is a temporal one. The il is only a “je d’alors” (163). Though no definite association can be made between the final je and every il in the text, this acknowledgement does shed light on some of them. A reference in the fourth Week to the je’s first arrival in Paris, for instance, harkens back to a similar remark made in the third Week: “[a]rrivé à Paris, il avait immédiatement commencé la tournée des boîtes d’intérim” (130); “fraîchement arrivé à Paris, j’avais bêtement demandé dans quelle banlieue se trouvait cette gare” (159). Likewise, in the third Week we learn of one il’s desire to resign from the factory — “sa lettre de démission lors de cette grève il l’avait déjà écrite à plusieurs reprises” (132) —, as well as his passion for literature: “faute d’être écrivain pourquoi pas bibliophile” (132). In these instances, the je and the il seem to collide. Bon’s use of subject pronouns demonstrates the fundamentally unstable quality of voice in contemporary relational narratives. Whether by fusing voices together, layering voices one atop the other, or fissuring otherwise singular voices into temporally and socio-
ideologically divergent stances, relational narratives belie the notion of the unitary subject. These texts radicalize Bakhtin’s dialogic conception of the novel; they present each narrative voice as protean and capable of harboring myriad other voices, or worldviews, within.
Chapter Two: Navigating Temporality

“...choses ne veut pas dire désordre, néant, introduction au néant, chaos veut dire affrontement, harmonie, conciliation, opposition, rupture, jointure entre toutes ces dimensions [...].”

— Édouard Glissant

“I take temporality to be that structure of existence that reaches narrativity,” writes Paul Ricœur in “Narrative Time,” “and narrativity to be the language structure that has temporality as its ultimate referent. Their relationship is therefore reciprocal” (165).

Keeping with this, the distinctively polyvocal quality of contemporary relational narratives necessarily impacts the temporal realms in which they unfold. On the surface, *Texaco, Les Années, and Traversée de la Mangrove* seem to privilege linearity: the first two thanks to the broader parameters of history, the third, via the overarching structure of the wake. *Sortie d’usine, L’Amour, la fantasia,* and *Babyface,* on the other hand, are guided by no such chronological logic, and depict instead temporally disparate moments as if they occur simultaneously. A closer look, however, reveals that each narrative exploits polyvocality so as to challenge the conventions of narrative time and, consequently, linear readings of causality. Relational narratives, in effect, combine the

precise temporality characteristic of nineteenth-century realism with the poetics of discontinuity that literatures at the turn of the century tend to favor. Much as their narrative voices, they establish temporal frameworks only the better to obfuscate them. Synchronic, deceptively linear, unconventionally linear, and at times excessively cryptic, contemporary relational narratives proceed by way of the temporal “ruptures” Glissant evokes in the epigraph above, which the reader must navigate and ultimately link together if she hopes to make meaning within and despite “chaos.”

2.1 – Synchronic Narratives

The opening pages of Texaco present a timeline of Martinican history that spans nearly five millennia, from the first indigenous settlements of that preceded the Common Era until Marie-Sophie’s death in 1989. Listing historical events such as World Wars I and II alongside events specific to Marie-Sophie’s tale (the “probable” dates of father’s birth, Marie-Sophie’s settling on the Texaco petroleum site, etc.), the table sets up the story the reader is about to discover. The text’s sections, in effect, correspond with the table’s headings, and each of the events it lists also figures in the narrative. The chronology the table establishes is nonetheless misleading; if the text seems to develop along a linear axis, other factors foil this seeming linearity. The muddying of narrator, character, and authorial voices already hints at this, but must be looked at more closely to grasp its full effects on temporality. The incorporation of parallel texts, for instance, fundamentally compromises narrative chronology. Typographically set apart from the

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3 These are as follows: Temps de paille, Temps de bois-case, Temps de fibrociment, and, lastly, Temps de béton. Marie-Sophie’s tale commences after the first period, Temps de carbet et d’ajoupas. The text’s larger narrative divisions (Table première: autour de Saint-Pierre and Table deuxième: autour de Fort-de-France), however, thwarts this alignment, as they do not figure in the table.
main body of text and referenced bibliographically, these parallel texts disrupt the flow of reading and seem somewhat aberrant. Indeed, they present little to no continuity with the paragraphs that precede and follow them, tending rather to echo the content of the story in a different voice and from a different temporal dimension (most prominently the voices of Esternome, the urban planner, and the scribe).

Excerpts from Marie-Sophie’s notebooks, for example, most often relay Esternome’s direct speech. Although composed by Marie-Sophie herself, who sets to writing her father’s story when she first settles in Texaco, these excerpts reproduce Esternome’s voice as if in the flesh. Their incorporation has the effect of a sustained father-daughter dialogue that takes place not within the narrative, but somewhere next to it. The content of these excerpts, moreover, is only sometimes contemporaneous with the surrounding narrative. Thus Esternome’s query “être « libre » c’est quoi-est-ce?” (92), which figures just prior the sequence depicting the abolition period. At other times, however, the parallel texts are disjoined from the surrounding text. Curiously, the first incorporation of the urban planner’s parallel text pertains specifically of the Texaco neighborhood, which won’t be established for roughly another hundred years, or three hundred and fifty pages later. In fact, the urban planner speaks of Texaco while Marie-Sophie’s birth has yet to be narrated! “Texaco,” he states, “[i]l nous faut comprendre ce futur noué comme un poème pour nos yeux illettrés. Il nous faut comprendre cette ville créole dont les plantations, nos Habitations, chaque Grand-case de nos mornes, ont rêvé — je veux dire engendré” (152, emphasis added). The urban planner’s comment directs the reader on her own path towards the discovery and understanding of the Texaco neighborhood. Its function is metatextual in nature (but so too is Esternome’s query, as it
points to the notion of freedom as a central question this text poses). Indeed, his comment sets up the very concept of time that Texaco performs: one where the past and future are bound in mutually informative relation, rather than causation — hence the placement of this comment early in the narrative.

The scribe’s parallel texts also tend to produce a sustained dialogue between him and Marie-Sophie. For instance, when she ponders,

Oiseau Cham, existe-t-il une écriture informée de la parole, des silences, et qui reste vivante, qui bouge en cercle et circule tout le temps, irriguant sans cesse de vie ce qui a été écrit avant, et qui réinvente le cercle à chaque fois comme le font les spirales qui sont à tout moment dans le future et dans l’avant, l’une modifiant l’autre, sans cesse, sans perdre une unité difficile à nommer? (413)

he responds: “[j]e connais cette épouvante. Édouard Glissant l’affronte: son œuvre fonctionne comme ça, avec un grand bonheur” (413). Although textually contemporaneous with Marie-Sophie’s inquiry, and indeed directly engaging with it, the placement of the scribe’s response in an indented parallel text complicates this temporality. Moreover, the bibliographical reference figuring under the comment cites as a written, and thus posterior, response: “708e lettre du Marqueur de paroles à l’Informatrice” (413). In another telling example, Marie-Sophie mentions her transcription of the Mentô de la Doum’s speech and incites the scribe to read it: “il te faudrait lire ça un jour, Oiseau de Cham” (373). Perplexingly, the parallel text that directly follows reproduces that very speech.

The parallel texts, then, fundamentally undermine the narrative’s otherwise linear unfolding. Logically, Marie-Sophie’s notebooks exist prior to the story’s narration, and Esternome’s reported speech prior even to its written transcription; the urban planner’s comments occur after Marie-Sophie’s verbal account; and the author’s interjections take
place in the final instance. But, textually, each is presented as contemporaneous with the others. The linear narration following from Esternome’s birth to the establishment of Texaco is thus misleading, as the reader must incessantly negotiate temporal ruptures. Questions of audience further complicate narrative temporality: if Marie-Sophie originally told her story to the urban planner in an effort to save Texaco from destruction, then the printed text reproduces at one and the same time the tale, as heard at separate moments, by both Oiseau de Cham and the urban planner. Author, storyteller, and character are folded into one synchronic time of enunciation, and reader, urban planner, and scribe, into one synchronic time of listening.

If the structure of Texaco implies a linearity that ultimately falters, L’Amour, la fantasia presents no such organizing logic. Even considered separately, the autobiographical, historical, and testimonial segments do not proceed in chronological order. The autobiographical pieces, for instance, do not move from childhood through adulthood, but rather open and close with the same image of the young girl hand-in-hand with her father. Nor do the historical segments obey conventional chronology, often sliding backwards in time to establish the larger context within which the event in question takes place. That said, L’Amour, la fantasia does more than merely disregard linearity; like Texaco, it too embraces several distinct moments in time as if they were concurrent. The slippage between the historical and narrative voices, for instance, tends to confuse the historical past with the author’s present. Verb tense also participates in this, as nearly all the historical segments are composed in the present tense, which lends the events recounted a degree of intimacy. Recurrent use of demonstrative pronouns,

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4 For instance: “[l’]armée française n’avance […] pas. Certains piaffent, d’autres accusent l’état-major, de Bourmont attend Duperré qui, lui, attend un vent favorable” (47); [i]l est environ deux heures de l’après-
adverbs of time and place, and the first person plural furthers this effect: “ce 13 juin 1830” (14); “ce 4 juillet” (60); “[i]ls sont deux maintenant à relater le choc” (27); “Merle […] nous rapporte […]. Mais notre auteur n’avoue pas […]” (52); “[l]’Espagnole nous parle” (103); etc. 5 Semantically dispensable, the nous in these examples functions alongside the demonstrative pronouns and the present tense to render the historical past present again. Use of the future tense to indicate source material solidifies this effect, as it suggests that the documents cited have yet to be written: “[d]’autres relateront ces ultimes moments: […]” (63); “[d]eux hommes écriront le récit de cette expédition” (75). 6 A similar blurring of temporal realms occurs in the testimonial segments of Part Three. Like Marie-Sophie’s voice in Texaco, these segments are staged as oral testimonies, where the women continually point to the present tense of their narration. Thus one woman remarks, “à l’époque, j’étais éclatante de santé! […] Hélas, si un des frères de ces jours-là me rencontrait aujourd’hui, il jurerait que je ne suis pas la même!” (198); another points out her scars, stating, “[j]e garde depuis ces cicatrices sur le front et le cou” (230). 7 The presence of strikingly oral remarks — religious invocations like “que Dieu ait son âme” (227), exclamations like “hélas!” — also highlights these accounts as spoken in the present. Likewise, explanatory asides situate the telling of these tales in the here-and-now, the use of parentheses transposing a short pause or change in tone: “[j]’arrachai des feuilles d’un chêne (on dit que c’est bon pour la toux), je les mâchai en silence” (172); “j’ai appris à faire des piqûres (or maintenant, je ne peux plus à cause de ma santé: mes mains tremblent)” (186). In the most striking instances, the interlocutor

mardi, ce dimanche d’été. Vers l’ouest, du côté de Bab el Oued, sortent déjà de la ville les premiers groupes de l’émigration algéroise” (61).
5 Emphasis added.
6 Emphasis added.
7 Emphasis added.
and the act of speaking themselves are referenced: “vous rirez peut-être de moi” (256); “[j]e répétai, en arabe et avec cet accent que tu me connais […]” (279); “cette nuit dont je parlais” (245). Nevertheless, multiple factors interfere with the ostensible orality of these accounts. Besides the obvious — this is a written text —, the testimonial present is betrayed by the simple fact that these women are illiterate. As one woman uncannily concedes, “[h]élas! nous sommes des analphabètes. Nous ne laissons pas de récits de ce que nous avons enduré et vécu!” (212). Use of the passé simple to convey speech also undermines the status of the speaking voices, as the women’s testimonies include such phrases as “[i]ls me demandèrent si c’était vrai. J’acquiesçai” (189); “[j]e revins de nouveau à la montagne” (230); “mon garçon partit avec eux” (246); “[l]a France se mit à monter” (264); etc. As in Texaco, then, this merging of the classically written tense with the oral voice has the unsettling effect of fusing writer and orator into one voice — hence, into one synchronic temporal moment.

2.2 – Decomposing/Recomposing Linearity

At first glance, narrative temporality in Les Années perhaps most resembles Texaco, in which the parameters of history and of shared social phenomena ground the work in a clear chronology. But Ernaux also complicates this chronology by unraveling it from the inside out. Rather than propose a synchronic vision of disparate moments in time as does Chamoiseau, she untangles the very threads that feed the human perception of linearity. In fact, only the dates corresponding with each photograph and film lend Les Années a precise chronology. But even this system misleads, as each temporal jump

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forward also implies a sliding backwards. Thus, in 1955 the *elle* recalls the “traces des événements et faits divers” that had occurred two years prior: “la grande grève des trains de l’été 53 / la chute de Diên Biên Phu / la mort de Staline […]” (958). Introductory dates act more as rough indications of periodization than as components of a strict timeline. Moreover, these descriptions interrupt the flow of reading; the beginning of each period jars the otherwise almost imperceptible progression of the text. Given that few other dates are included, their presence, visually accentuated by a large intervening page break, is startling. But this system of periodization also renders the passing of time in an expressly subjective manner, like anyone who might realize with astonishment “it’s been \( x \) years since…” This helps to explain the key role photographs play in *Les Années*: the “support photographique” notes Fabien Arriber-Narce, “exprim[e] une sensation pouvant être partagée par tous: celle du temps […] passant — qui passe et qui a passé” (68-69).

Temporality in the collective passages is similarly nebulous. Dates become scarce here, as the passing of time is instead felt through references to movie releases, technological inventions, and political and world events. What is striking is less this unconventional choice of situating time through the enumeration of novelties, films, slogans, and events, than the perpetual present that it draws out. With something new always on the horizon, ties to the past fade and the force of the linear timeline diminishes, resulting in the impression that “on ne vieill[it] pas” (1054). As the narrative progresses, time appears more and more to stand still between the period bookends.\(^9\) Switches in narrative focus add to this effect, as each carries the reader back to the given time period’s starting point. Like Chamoiseau’s incorporation of subtexts, these temporal

\(^9\) Paradoxically, however, the repercussions of this illusory stasis are in fact quite the opposite — that is, when viewed in its totality, time appears to pick up speed as the narrative progresses: hence the time covered in each period elongates as the discursive realms multiply, particularly from the 1970s onwards.
ruptures are materialized by a small page breaks. The outcome in Les Années, however, is arguably the reverse of Texaco’s: logically, each narrative thread develops concurrently with the others, yet the distribution of the text separates them into as many quasi-autonomous temporal spheres. Viewed as a whole, they create a jagged chronology, a weave whose entangled threads run into, through, and around one another while collectively moving forward.

This dynamic makes Les Années deceptively linear. It is linear, but only inasmuch as it lays bare the asynchronous developments of the discourses, events, and individual occurrences that constitute the of that larger linear story of twentieth-century life in the French Metropole. Verb tense also participates in this temporal disjointedness. The present and future tenses used in the elle segments tend to depict her as perpetually moving forward, while the imparfait in the collective passages portrays the group as if always looking backwards:

\[
\text{L’an prochain, elle sera à la retraite. Elle jette déjà des cours, des notes sur des livres et des ouvrages qui lui ont servi à les préparer […]}
\]

\[
\text{L’an 2000 approchait. Nous en étions incrédules, qu’il nous soit donné à nous de connaître cela. (1059, emphasis added)}
\]

The temporal divide between the individual and collective planes is particularly striking here thanks to the repetition of the word l’an. Indeed, while we can’t know if the elle will indeed retire in 2000 — and this seems of little consequence —, the large blank space, the switch in verbal tense, and the recurrence of the same term amplify the break between the two sequences. The imparfait too participates in the text’s misleading continuity. As

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10 Consulting the preparatory materials for Les Années at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Richelieu showed that each typographical break corresponds with a specific type of narrative shift: five lines for a change in period, one for a different point of view on the same subject, three for larger jumps in perspective, etc.
Marie-Pascale Huglo writes, “[a]utant la discontinuité des cadres de l’expérience font éclater l’homogénéité d’une époque, autant la vitesse fait de chaque époque un continuum hétérogène filant à toute allure” (49). The imperfect, in effect, creates a false sensation of continuity that counters the text’s otherwise heterogeneous nature. But if this strange mix of continuity and discontinuity indeed registers the “enormous complexity of elapsing time,” as Nathalie Froloff asserts (“A Radical Renewal” 247), it also asks the reader to recognize that as people, we evolve simultaneously, and yet not necessarily along the same linear path.

On the surface, *Sortie d’usine* seems to fall on the opposite end of this temporal spectrum. Its formal division into four “Weeks” is arbitrary, and it lacks the historical and social parameters that ground *Les Années* in chronological time. As a result, narrative events in *Sortie d’usine* seem to unfold in an enigmatic, perpetual present. The abundance of nominal and adverbial sentences, for instance, as well as the use of relative pronouns and conjunctions with no corresponding clause (*que*, *de*, *si*, *et*, *mais*), depicts the factory as if in a state of stagnation. Use of conjunctions to begin sentences furthers this effect, as each seemingly picks up on an anterior statement, when in fact there is none. Syntax, then, mirrors the laborers’ own perception of time as a “[d]urée qui ne s’ouvrait que sur elle-même” (130), “cette durée pourtant répétée […], mais [qui] reste présente une fois liquidée révolue il y a demain” (37). That said, an underlying linear force also drives *Sortie d’usine* forward, bringing it closer to *Les Années* than might initially appear. To decipher this, however, requires examining each Week individually.

11 As Laurent Jenny argues, grammar can act as a form of mimesis: “la ‘complétude’ de la phrase” Jenny writes, “ne dépend pas au fond d’une structure linguistique […], mais plutôt d’une ‘synthèse’ d’ordre essentiellement esthétique” (170); “c’est […] comme puissance de métamorphose linguistique que la langue peut ‘mimer’ des événements et des changements d’état” (181).
During the first Week, the eternal present of the factory materializes in the form of many indecipherable present days, which, like in Les Années, are distinguished by means of breaks in the page. Thus, after the illusorily chronological prologue, the Week opens, “[l]e cri. D’où, plus loin, de l’autre côté de l’allée. […] / Il traversa. […] Cette impression du silence soudain […]. / La sirène, brutale” (29). Despite the use of the passé composé, which situates the scene in the past, the nominal sentences and the immediacy of narration render this passage strikingly present. Up to this point, temporality hasn’t diverged too much from the prologue. Following a large page break, however, the narrative turns to “un matin ordinaire” (33), “ce matin-là” (34), “[u]n jour donc qui n’en était qu’au matin de sa durée” (37) — possibly the morning of the preceding scene, though possibly not. When the internal voice materializes to describe his daily routine, present tense narration swells into something more immediate, hence the recurrence of infinitive-form verbs. During the following guided tour of the factory, yet another present-day surfaces. The first person, present tense voice continually situates his discourse in the here-and-now: “[v]oilà ce que c’est qu’un transpalette. […] Nous, c’est celui-là devant vous” (47). And two more temporal ruptures occur before the close of the Week! The first describes general interactions between the factory employees from the external position of narration; the second, recounts one worker’s personal history from the temporal position of “aujourd’hui” (65): “Ravignani finit présentement son clope” (68, emphasis added).

While remaining within the pattern of the present day, the second Week shifts slightly in focus. It seems, in effect, to depict a single day: the day of the Passage enacted for the recently deceased, Thomas. After the enigmatic sequence that introduces the
Week, which vaguely situates it “dans cette semaine d’entre Noël et le Nouvel An” (78), a large page break signals the shift. Like the earlier accident scene, this sequence depicts the Passage in the past tense, while syntactical structure lends it a more present quality:

Il n’y avait qu’à. Et frotter, forcer, battre, racler. On tapait et cognait, cela sifflait et craquait. Une barre de fer, un marteau, contre l’établi, le bâti de machine, le poteau de charpente, et quelque force encore humaine qui les jetât contre dans la luminosité violente du choc […]. (81)

After a smaller page break, however, veritable past tense narration materializes for the first time: “[l]e bonhomme, sa casquette à la main, chassait autour de lui les papillons” (85). The bonhomme, as we learn at the end of the Week, is none other père Thomas, the dead man himself. Retrospectively, then, the reader realizes the earlier sequences in fact describe Thomas without naming him, and that they are in fact temporally anterior to passages describing the Passage. Multiple days, then, are layered into what otherwise seems to be a single day.

An even more significant temporal shift occurs during the strike depicted in the third Week. Although it remains unclear when and for how long the strike takes place, the events are recounted in chronological order: “c’était bon pour l’après-midi, la deuxième entrevue ne devant avoir lieu que sur les quatre heures. […] A cinq heures […] / Et l’incertitude, arrivant le lendemain […]” (116, emphasis added). Lifting temporal ambiguity, this clear chain of events places the strike squarely in the past: “[o]n vit cette fois, belle surprise (mais plus tard on ne manqua pas de rapprocher ça à son état d’excitation […] ce coq de chef du personnel attraper lui aussi un mégaphone” (103, emphasis added). A subsequent use of the present tense further underscores this: Charlie, “pas si fier” (114) of his aggressive behavior at the time, “maintenant […] en parle à l’aise, c’est presque son jour de gloire” (113, emphasis added). Diverging from the
perpetual present of the first and second Weeks, the third narrates the strike from a posterior temporal moment; it looks backwards in time from some other unknown present day.

The opening of the fourth Week, in turn, consolidates the disparate temporal moments depicted in the previous Weeks into a single, slow motion event — the *il’s* arduous tread from the medic back to his work station:

S’asseoir, son coin, être seul. [… ] Viser au loin l’extrémité du hall, […] où il bifurquerait, rejoindrait son coin, sa machine, s’asseoir. […] Il marcha […] sans ralentir [… ]. Et le défilement à ses côtés des machines s’y prenait, se fondait dans la spirale où elles s’éloignaient dans l’indistinct. […] Rejoindre son coin, sa machine, s’asseoir. […] Se défendre de tout refuge, les abandonner, rejoindre son coin sa machine, se concentrer sur l’intersection là-bas, déjà plus proche maintenant. […] Non, il irait à sa machine” (139-148).

Spanning more than ten pages, and incorporating only one memory of a previous injury, this account is incongruous with the preceding Weeks. The *il*, of course, never reaches his station, and transforms into the *je* after his physical collapse. And it is this perspective of the *je* that retrospectively clarifies the jarring temporality of the previous Weeks, and brings to light the text’s underlying linearity.

Indeed, linearity in *Sortie d’usine* does not materialize in plot, but rather in mode and focus. The first Week, via its depiction of multiple present days and speaking subjects, brings the reader into the space of the factory. Proceeding from the prologue, we must “passer une étape” (26) alongside the *il*; we too are startled by the Week’s opening “cri.” The second Week, then, swallows the reader up in the factory’s anonymity, wherein past and present become virtually indistinguishable. Like the exemplary *il*, we are absorbed into the *on*. The third and fourth Weeks, in turn, progressively take us out of the factory milieu: the third by establishing a chronology not longer dependent upon the
repetition of manual labor; the fourth, via the slow-motion fall that gives rise to the
individuated, first person subject. Through this underlying linear structure that is little
concerned with establishing a precise chronology, we walk through the full experience of
the factory. The text leads us progressively into — hence the importance of the commute
in prologue — and out of the factory: we too exit the factory; we too progress almost
unknowingly through its perpetual present.

2.3 – Cryptic Temporality

Contrary to Texaco, L’Amour, la fantasia, and Les Années, nothing besides a
passing reference to the 1980s grounds Babyface in any temporal setting whatsoever.12
Of course, this is partly because the narrative is willfully not set in a concrete historical
context. Like Sortie d’usine, narrative temporality is cryptic in Babyface, though here, no
underlying linear pattern ever surfaces. On the contrary, Kwahulé seems to expressly
obfuscate narrative time. The very first sentence — “Raconter ça” (9) — sets the stage for
this ambiguity: with no possible referent, the ça opens the text in media res. Paired with
the following fragment from Jérôme’s journal, titled “Vision CXIX” (rather than, for
instance, “Vision I”) and the three typographically different excerpts on the same page,
this opening sequence prepares the reader for the temporal unpredictability to come.

As Chapter One above showed, the incorporation of speech in Babyface tends to
layer multiple speaking voices in time one atop the other. The echo effect drawn out
between the asterisked perspectives, for instance, often creates the effect of a dialogue
that is exchanged not within the narrative’s diegesis, but in some temporal realm beside

12 “[Babyface] avait toujours idolâtré […] Président mais […] ce qui emporta son adhésion lucide fut la
volonté de Président d’ouvrir, au tournant des années quatre-vingt, le pays à la ‘démocratie participative’”
(163).
it. Additionally, the use of repetition, expressions of time and place, the imperative form, and gestural language lend Babyface a strikingly oral quality. Thus, when Nolivé tells Mozati, “[r]appelle-le-moi tout à l’heure tantie” (132), or when Mozati’s details an unseemly scene between Mo’Akissi and Streaker — “il lui passe la main ici, il lui passe la main là, partout” (78) —, the reader has the impression of witnessing the events for herself. More striking, however, are the dialogues that Kwahulé incorporates wholesale into passages situated in completely different temporal realms. During the scene that recounts the childhood rape of Mozati by her then-teacher Monsieur Dieusibon, for instance, the six-page account is made up almost entirely of a dialogue that took place at that time. After exposing himself, Dieusibon asks, “tu as déjà vu ça?” (25):

Oui, Monsieur
Je mentais. Parce que je me suis dit que ça lui ferait plaisir que je lui réponde oui et pas non.
Où?
Derrière notre maison, monsieur.
Je mentais.
Ton père?
Pourquoi il pense que mon père aurait pu… aurait eu le désir de…
Non, monsieur, un autre monsieur.
Comment?
Je passais, il pissait, je ne voulais pas voir, monsieur, mais mes yeux ont vu.
Je mentais. Je n’en avais jamais vu. Sauf ceux des garçons de mon âge. […]
Donc j’en avais déjà vu, mais de grandes personnes jamais.
Ça te fait quoi?
Je n’ai pas regardé, monsieur.
Ça te fait quoi?
Mes yeux ont vu mais je n’ai pas regardé, monsieur.
Ça te fait quoi?
Je ne sais pas monsieur.
Il souriait.

Bois ton Tip-Top. Tu veux toucher?
Non, monsieur.
Touche.
Non, monsieur.
Touche!
… (26-27)

Here, typography indicates that what is reproduced is an anterior dialogue between Mozati and Dieusibon. The non-indented lines, then, would relay Mozati’s thoughts in the past tense, as if she were recalling the scene from the standpoint of the present day. And yet, the immediacy of the dialogue renders this temporal articulation unclear, particularly given the use of the present tense in *pourquoi il pense*. Past and present are thus tangled up in one inextricable knot; the reader witnesses the scene not first-hand, but through Mozati’s mental re-living of it. Capitalizing on his background as a playwright, Kwahulé renders scenes like these strikingly theatrical.

Another frustration of temporality through dialogue occurs towards the end of *Babyface*. Again it is relayed through curious typography. Here, Mo’Akissi reports having seen Babyface in the city streets, though Mozati believes him to be in Paris:

Je viens de voir Babyface… Streaker aussi l’avait déjà vu mais il est tellement menteur […] que je n’ai pas prêté foi à ce qu’il me disait alors…

Up to this point, the passage doesn’t present many difficulties: the reader infers from the possessive pronoun *mon* that it stems from Mozati’s perspective. It is the sheer length of the sequence, rather, that troubles. Indeed, the reported dialogue continues to alternate between Mo’Akissi and Mozati across three pages of block text, and culminates in Mo’Akissi reading aloud a letter Mozati received from Babyface:

14 To better visualize this typographic distribution, see Appendix 2.
Voilà même la lettre. Tiens. Vas-y, lis! Je l’ai reçue hier de Paris… *un grand sacrifice que je te demande là mon amour, mais…* 20 millions? Ben oui, 20 millions. Pour quoi faire? Mais pour ce qui est écrit là!… *obligé de me rendre à Houston, aux States, afin de compléter mon diplôme avec un master.* (199)

The letter takes up the entirety of the page and the beginning of the next, and is interrupted several times by Mo’Akissi’s comments and Mozati’s retorts, themselves denoted by a return to standard typeface (their conversation closes this passage).

Curiously, the integration of the letter doesn’t break with the block text format. Even more surprising, the passage doesn’t return to the temporality established by the first clause cited — “Je viens de voir Babyface” (196) —, which situates their conversation in an anterior temporal realm. Only in the following chapter do we return to the present-tense of Mozati’s initial narration: “[m]oi aussi j’ai fini par le rencontrer” (202). Like the preceding theatrical presentation of dialogue, the form of presentation used here indicates that Mozati mentally *replays* her exchange with Mo’Akissi, a hypothesis that is nonetheless foiled by the reading of the letter aloud.15

Ultimately, only Jérôme’s journal fragments lend *Babyface* a semblance of temporal grounding. Creating an echo effect similar to the one between the asterisked sequences, Jérôme’s journal often mirrors the first person passages. Jérôme’s narration of Babyface’s emergence within his and Mozati’s circle of friends, for instance, directly echoes Mozati’s description: “[i]l a les bras croisés *devant lui*, comme ça” (40-41, emphasis added); “[i]l était là, *devant moi*, comme une apparition” (41). The repetition of *devant* creates the impression that the accounts are simultaneous, an effect that is

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15 Alternately, this passage could stem from Mo’Akissi’s perspective, which would clear up the temporal ambiguity. Her voice, however, returns in the final lines of the chapter, stating that “[e]n quelques jours, Mozati réussit à brader ses deux villas et sa Rover” (200). Thus, either this sequence breaks with the asterisk pattern, or it is temporally cryptic. Either way, its status is indeterminate.
reinforced by their appearance on nearly the same line of text (Jérôme’s and Mozati’s passages form two columns on this page). The content of Jérôme’s journals, in effect, often reflects the story that unfolds in the first-person narratives: Mo’Akissi speaks of the “extravagante maison de Pamela” on the same page that Jérôme’s journal describes that very house (36); Jérôme journal cites Streaker’s “rendez-vous” as excuse for his absence at a gathering, a pretext that Mozati refutes, again, on the very same page: “Streaker n’a aucun rendez-vous” (77); Jérôme’s portrayal of the Streaker’s plea for forgiveness complements Mozati’s account of Mo’Akissi’s kicking him out (112); etc. The interconnectedness of these two interfaces in Babyface, then, seems to imply that the two occur concurrently; yet a closer look disallows any such interpretation.

Indeed, the Fragments take a number of different forms. While some entries are dated, others are titled “Poem” or “Vision”; still others are neither dated nor titled. Further, while some entries follow the plotline of the group of friends, others trace the political sphere and developing civil war in Eburnéa. Still others are detached from both plotlines, and function more as metatextual commentary. The dated entries, most of which correspond with the first-person passages, are perhaps the most troubling because the dates do not follow in chronological order but pass from July through April, then back to March before returning to April and proceeding up through September. With no corresponding year, only an extremely attentive reading can decipher the chronology underlying their progression; and even then, little certainty can be established. For instance, the Fragments dated February 13 and 16 and March 22 imply that Mozati and Jérôme are still romantically involved. The reader infers the flashback via reference to Nolivé:
J’ai enfin vu Nolivé que Mozati m’a plusieurs fois dépeinte […]. [E]lle n’a même pas onze ans, mais ce n’est plus une petite fille. (“Mardi 13 février,” 46-47)

Onze, douze ans. Peut-être treize. Mais pas plus. (“Vendredi 16 février,” 121)

Nolivé m’a entraîné à l’écart et m’a dit C’est donc vous le nouvel homme de tatie Mozati! (“Vendredi 16 février,” 98)

Here, contextual clues create a sense of continuity despite the discontinuous placement of the Fragments in the text. Yet the entry dated Thursday March 21 foils this chronology, as it suggests that Mozati and Jérôme’s relationship has already come to its term: “[u]n message de Nolivé sur mon répondeur: […] Dupuis qu’elle [Mozati] s’est laissé embringuer dans Dieu sait quelle aventure avec ce type, Babyface, elle ne touche pas terre” (128). Separated by only one day, these two entries are particularly frustrating and stall any attempt to establish the exact chronology of Mozati’s two relationships. The Fragment that recounts both her initial encounter with Jérôme and their ultimate rupture is unfortunately of no avail: it is undated.

Alternatively, the course of action could span several years, which would justify both March 21 and March 22 being labeled as Thursdays. But, in this case, during which year would Babyface’s July 3 introduction to the friend group and his August 30 departure for Paris take place? And when would the plotline around Nolivé’s pregnancy — which figures in entries dated April 20, 21, and 23, and September 1, 7, and 13 — transpire? Nolivé is four months into her term by April 23, and appears with the child in the final chapter. Moreover, her first-person narration implies that her pregnancy is contemporaneous with Babyface’s purported August 30 departure, as she claims that Babyface “n’est pas encore retourné en France” at that time (113, emphasis added).
Ultimately, then, Jérôme’s dated journal fragments only elucidate narrative temporality the better to obfuscate it. The various plotlines seem to take place around the same time, but in the end, no precise chain of events can be established. Babyface, rather, unfolds in a whirlwind of disparate temporal moments whose logic of interconnection remains — for now — enigmatic.

Narrative temporality in Traversée de la Mangrove is similarly cryptic. On the surface, the inhabitants of Rivière au Sel gather at the wake during Dusk, tell and listen to stories during the Night, and finally depart during Dawn. And yet, this linear structure starts to unravel even within Dusk: discovered on the opening page, Sancher’s body is sent for medical examination before being returned “l’après-midi du quatrième jour […] chez lui, […] allongé dans la prison de bois verni clair d’un cercueil” (23-24, emphasis added). Four days, rather than one sole evening, would thus transpire during the single Dawn of the section’s title. Furthermore, like Kwahulé, Condé never situates this story within any specific temporal frame. Time is only ever spoken around: the Ramsaran and Lameaunnes families arrived in Rivière au Sel “en 1904 ou 1905. En tout cas, avant la guerre de 14-18 et bien avant le cyclone de 1928” (20); the Alexis house, where Sancher takes up residence, was abandoned “vers les années 50, peut-être un peu avant, juste après la fin de la guerre” (31); the latest volcanic activity dates to 1976, “[c]ela fait plus de dix ans à présent!” (155); etc. Only this last example renders temporal setting retrospectively decipherable, placing it in the vicinity of the text’s publication date of 1989.

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16 I am here indebted to Lauren Brown’s close reading of temporality in “Spatial Identities and Glissantian Detour.”
Countering this temporal ambiguity, however, the timeline of each character’s story is almost absurdly precise. Léocadie opens the town’s first school in 1920 (140); Mira rejects Carmélia’s romantic overturns on August 15 (178); Dodose’s illicit lover is ordered to return to Paris December 23 (211); The Haitian Dénisor arrives in Rivière au Sel in November 1980, “[l]e 2 novembre exactement” (198); an earthquake strikes at “onze heures sept minutes très exactement” (71); and so on. Like Jérôme’s dated fragments, the precision offered here is aberrant, futile, even, given the lack of an overarching temporal framework. Frequent use of the demonstrative and indefinite articles before adverbial locutions of time furthers this effect: Mira joins Francis at his home “[c]e lundi-là” (62); Aristide resolves to leave Rivière au Sel “[u]n matin, pareil à tous les matins” (79); Sonny meets Sancher “[u]n matin,” the sun shining “comme les autres jours” (115); Léocadie encounters Sancher “un jour, un matin” (150); etc. Both indefinite and exact, temporality in Traversée functions like what Paul Ricœur, via Heidegger, refers to as “within-timeness” — that is, time before being “leveled to the abstract representation of time” (“The Human Experience of Time and Narrative” 26). The reader must enter into this time-space as if she had always been a part of it. Even Rivière au Sel’s inhabitants are presented as if already known, notably Sancher himself, who is referenced in pronominal form — “[p]as de doute: c’était lui” (14) — before being named three pages later. This pattern recurs several times, the pronoun harkening back to Sancher in each case as if the referent had been provided: Mira trips over “son corps” (50); Moïse bursts into the Ramsaran house, yelling “[e]lle est chez lui!” (68); Vilma exclaims, “[c]’est lui! C’est lui le coupable!” (191); and so on.
Similarly, each of the micro-narratives takes place as if in its own temporal setting. Carrying the reader into and out of the wake, they also depict interactions with Sancher and anterior family history. But the sliding between the temporal realms isn’t always evident. Mira’s five-page account of her first encounter with Sancher best exemplifies this. Initially speaking of her enchantment with the ravine, Mira abruptly mentions Sancher: “[j]e n’aime que les ravines […]. C’est mon domaine à moi, à moi seule […]”. Aussi, on n’y rencontre jamais personne. C’est pourquoi quand j’ai buté sur son corps […], j’ai cru que pareil à moi, il était bien venu pour moi” (50). Switches in verb tense are useful for grasping the temporal rupture here, the present tense replaced by the passé composé as Mira moves from speaking of generalities to her stumbling upon Sancher. But, as abruptly as Sancher appears, verb tense returns the present — “La solitude est ma compagne” (50) —, before stretching even further back in time to describe the Lameaulnes family history. The actual story of her encounter with Sancher in the ravine doesn’t appear again until nearly five pages later: “[u]n soir pareil aux autres, […] j’ai pris le chemin familier […]” (55). Similar to Babyface in this regard, incessant temporal ruptures frustrate Traversée’s chronology, juxtaposing paragraphs and even sentences with little to no continuity.

Although some leaps in time are signaled by a small graphic design, most materialize solely in the reader’s encounter with narrative content. Returning to the wake is one mechanism through which these jumps occur. All of the third-person subsections open and close at the wake, the first by way of quoted speech, the second via

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17 The design is not used systematically and disappears altogether for nearly one third of the text. Moreover, like the footnotes, it was not part of the author’s original conception of the book, but rather came from the father of a Mercure de France employee. Condé references this in an interview with Louise Hardwick, but does not comment on its unsystematic use.
a physical re-placement of the participant in its space: Loulou Lameaulnes help himself to some rum; Sonny joins in song; Sylvestre Ramsaran feels ashamed for smiling; the Haitian Dénisor’s stomach growls; Carmélien Ramsaran acknowledges the rainfall; etc. With a sustained effort, the reader can negotiate most of these ruptures, but some are so subtle that they can only be deciphered retrospectively. Thus, when one paragraph erupts, “[i]l était passé minuit” (41), the reader’s attention is both keenly drawn and at a loss: it won’t become clear until the end of the passage that the locution “past midnight” refers not the night of the wake, but to an evening that Moïse spent with Sancher.

Ultimately, cryptic temporality is fundamental to the structure of Traversée, the linearity announced by its section titles regardless. Though this form superficially reproduces the circularity of the wake setting in which speech passes around the casket, no temporal logic guides the order of the subsections. Indeed, this circularity only materializes once, when conteur Cyrille’s words “yé krik, yé krak” figure at the end and beginning of two consecutive character perspectives (151, 153). On the contrary, the subsections could be placed in any order and retain coherency. Moïse, for instance, references historian Émile’s appearance at Sancher’s residence nearly two hundred pages before Émile’s own subsection! Vacillating between the temporal realms specific to their own stories, the micro-narratives draw out an entirely disjointed narrative timeline. If we follow Jean Jonassaint’s argument, this unconventional temporality would result from the storyteller’s narrative position; however, the storyteller also participates in this spurious temporality: she is part and parcel of its indeterminate voices and its temporal

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18 As Jonassaint points out, nontraditional “chronological dating […] is a common feature to the orature that is put to use in a number of Caribbean novels” (153).
incoherency. With no apparent logic driving the text’s progression, then, how might the reader make sense of such a turbulent temporal and perspectival narrative?

2.4 – Linking Voices in Time

...constructed on a shifting terrain, the voices of contemporary relational narratives are at times impossible to situate in any specific spatio-temporal context. These texts, in effect, are deeply opaque. I suggest, however, that it is in this very resistance to meaning that meaning in relational narratives emerges. Disallowing any definitive point of view from taking shape or any certainty as to who speaks when, these texts require us not only to navigate cryptic temporal realms and to negotiate multiple voices, but also to focus on the web of relations drawn between them. To understand something, which is not to say everything, we must embrace the chaos Glissant evokes in the epigraph to this chapter, and link up divergent voices in time in a mutually informative, though not always stable, way.

...Given their disjointed structures, relational narration is perhaps the most evident in the works of Condé, Djebar, and Kwahulé. To grasp the organizing logic of Traversée de la Mangrove, for example, the reader must allow each subsection to resonate both independently and in interrelation. Indeed, it is only by so doing that she can gain a semblance of who Francis Sancher is: Cuban, European, African, French Creole… the people of Rivière au Sel suggest all of these variants on Sancher’s origins. In utter disarray, the reader becomes akin to Sylvestre Ramsaran who has heard so many different
versions of a childhood anecdote that he no longer knows the truth of the event. So too does relational narration better clarify the text’s shifting voices, which incessantly slip from internal monologue to external narration and to speech at the wake. It is likely for this reason that scholarship on Condé’s novel has been so divided on the question of narrative voice: in addition to Jonassaint’s argument that narrative voice coincides with character voice, and Hewitt’s view of the omniscient narrator, Sourieau equates the narrator with Condé herself, while Spear argues, perhaps more convincingly, that the text’s “unifying voice” is that of “the collective as a whole” (729). In the end, each of these interpretations holds; and yet, they miss the mark. For the rhetorical point of Condé’s novel is precisely that we can’t distinguish among these positions; rather, they blend into and out of one another. To make sense of this splendidly disjointed narrative, the reader must allow each account and each voice speak in and through the others; she must make meaning in the interstices between these voices that diverge in time.

It is also thanks to textual structure that relational narration in L’Amour, la fantasía comes to the fore. This is particularly the case in Part III, where the anonymous quality of the women’s voices leads the reader to focus less on who is speaking than on the resonances echoing between them. But it is the lyrical pieces, tellingly situated between the autobiographical and the testimonial segments, that act as points of contact between the autobiographical and the testimonial segments, that act as points of contact

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19 “Les bouches pleines de Colombo y ajoutaient [à cette histoire] des précisions fantaisistes, des détails à moitié imaginaires, ce qui fait que Sylvestre finissait par ne plus savoir s’il avait vomi, uriné, déféqué, s’il avait hurlé, s’il s’était enfui terrifié au bout de la savane” (133-134).
20 As discussed in Chapter One, my own reading aligns more with the notion of an implicit author that Chancé proposes in “Maryse Condé,” or the distanced author that Ramsay identifies in “The Nature of Hybridity.”
21 Indeed, the women recount tales of militancy that are both distinct and remarkably similar: Chérifa witnesses her brother’s execution and joins the insurgents as caretaker before being taken prisoner; Zohra provides food and refuge to moujahidines and is a victim of arson on three occasions; one widow provides food and services to the frères; another widow receives no compensation for her husband’s and three sons’ deaths; a third widow lacerates her face in hope of liberating her husband from French soldiers.
between the women’s tales, grounding their voices by means of the relational ties they weave. To summarize, _Clameur_... retells Chérifa’s story through a third person perspective; _Murmures_... imagines Zohra’s account from the point of view of the niece with whom she seeks refuge after the multiple burnings of her farmhouse; _Chuchotements_... links a written French account of the burning of Berkani family’s _zaouia_ in 1842 to the story told by the first widow, who descends from the same family; and _Concilabules_ depicts the writer-interlocutor’s role during the oral delivery of these testimonies: “[j]e pousse chaque portail, je m’assois sur la natte […] […] Oui, l’on me parle, voix dans l’ombre, je me tais, j’avale chaque timbre […]” (281). These segments not only blur the lines between distant past (the two periods of warfare), recent past (the testimonial act), and the present of writing, but they link them together in a mutually informative way. Authorial voice plays a prominent role in drawing out these points of connection. Within the lyrical segments, Djebar fulfills all those roles discussed in Chapter One at once: she acts as the scribe who transcribes oral testimony; as the historian who situates the accounts within a sociocultural context; as the novelist who embellishes specific details; and, finally, as the autobiographer who recounts her own experiences with these women. Doing so, she provides nothing less than a “lieu de mise en forme de l’acte de l’énonciation,” as Beïda Chikhi puts it (“Histoire et stratégie” 26). The lyrical segments, then, demonstrate _in fine_ the nature of temporality in all of _L’Amour, la fantasia_. Indeed, the narrative in its entirety weaves together multiple moments in time: those of French conquest, Algerian revolution, and Assia’s youth, but also the time Djebar spent listening to testimonies, consulting preparatory materials, and composing the very text we are given to read.
Ultimately, grasping the workings of relational narration in *L’Amour, la fantasia* is essential if we wish to understand such perplexing remarks as “je [la narratrice-auteur] suis née en *dix-huit cent quarante-deux*” (302) and “[l]es vergers brûlés par Saint-Arnaud voient enfin leur feu s’éteindre, parce que la vieille aujourd’hui parle et que je m’apprette à transcrire son récit” (251). The past-present relation implied in these two statements goes beyond mere causality. Rather, it is a matter of imagined correlation, where present and past time frames play equal roles in conjuring the historical imaginary.

So too does relational narration clarify polyvocality in the historical segments, where narrative voice resounds as if intermittently inhabited by other historical voices. Like Djebar’s imagined 1842 birth, the original documents and their re-telling collide in a shared space of relation. Thus the enigmatic voice that follows the depiction of the infamous cave smoke-out of the Ouled Riah tribe: “[i]l faut partir, l’odeur est trop forte. Le souvenir, comment s’en débarrasser? Les corps exposés au soleil; les voici devenus mots. Les mots voyagent. Mots, entre autres, du rapport trop long de Pélissier” (109). The “words” in question are indeed Pélissier’s, but, at the same time, they are also Djebar’s. It is of course the French military officer who “must leave” and push on to the next campaign; yet so too must Djebar, who, overwhelmed by the report, must now turn the page. Words *travel* in both directions. Reread and rewritten, Djebar renders these voices of the past present again, bringing them into one space of non-hierarchical relation.

In *Babyface*, it is again outward textual form that first points to relational narration. The asterisk structure, for instance, requires that the reader negotiate meaning in the space between divergent perspectives. Likewise, the text’s division into three typographically distinct interfaces forces the reader to choose which to read first, though
the order chosen may ultimately be of little consequence. Moreover, like the asterisked passages, the reader gleans meaning in the space between the two main interfaces. As noted earlier, the content of Jérôme’s journal often reflects the first person passages; they thus appear to occur contemporaneously. At other times, however, this structure falters. This is the case, for instance, in the entry dated March 21, which reproduces the voice message Nolivé had left for Jérôme in search of her aunt. Inserted in the middle of the twenty-page sequence that narrates Nolivé and Mozati’s conversation, the asynchronous nature of this Fragment is striking. Harkening back to Nolivé’s request in the midst of its very realization, the placement of this Fragment brings the two temporal moments into a contact so as to reinforce the urgency of Nolivé’s plight.

The Fragments pertaining to the political atmosphere and civil war in Eburnéa further demonstrate relational narration in Kwahulé’s text. Nearly all of the politically themed Fragments are labeled as “Visions” or “Poems,” an attribution that doubly underscores their removal from the friend-group plotline: not only are they presented as excerpts from Jérôme’s journal, and thus depicted as constructions rather than part and parcel of the narrative, but their headings as “visions” and “poems” lends them an illusory quality. Babyface, however, straddles both realms; indeed, his presence in the Fragments is unsettling. Thus his introduction to the reader in the text’s opening Vision:

\[\text{Du parapet du pont Ancien, Président, que l’on a entendu récemment, une ou deux fois, appeler le jeune homme à la face d’ange et aux lunettes noires Babyface, semblait, tel un général d’armée, surveiller quelque position ennemie sur le pont d’en face, l’autre pont de la ville, le pont du Renouveau sur lequel s’étaient retranchés au plus fort des événements Alibi-Saboteur et la La Muse. (9, emphasis added)}\]

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22 The political nature of the poems, which are signed “de Abibi à La Muse,” is nonetheless only recognizable retrospectively. While both characters appear during the opening Vision, their roles in the political events aren’t fleshed out until much later.
But a second introduction, which details Babyface’s emergence within Jérôme and Mozati’s friend group, occurs two chapters later in an entry dated July 3:


Logically, this excerpt must have been written prior the opening Vision, or at least prior some edited version of it, as the conditional tense of pourrait and the repeated occurrence of the name “Babyface” suggests. Corroborating this hypothesis, Jérôme admits in a later first person passage that “le jeune homme à la face d’ange” didn’t always have a name, and tells Babyface, “lorsque j’ai entendu Mozati prononcé votre nom, […] j’ai su que c’était vous… J’espère que cela ne vous dérange pas que j’utilise votre petit nom” (72). This seems to suggest that the Babyface of the friend group is the “real” person, whereas the Babyface of the Journal is invented.

Nonetheless, the separation between the political and friend group plotlines breaks down in several pivotal instances, and thus foils this hypothesis. In the middle of a first person passage in the fourth chapter, for instance, the collective voice surreptitiously emerges. A “rumeur née, racontait-on, des milieux informés” (54) would have it that Jérôme has been nominated Prime Minister of Eburnéa. The passage goes on to describe the people’s growing xenophobia and its culmination in the “premier massacre contre les étrangers […] à Foufafou” (56), which can be dated thanks to the appearance of vultures “sous le pont de Renouveau” one October morning (56). This imbrication of the political and friend-group narrative spheres has the uncanny effect of

23 The two veritably coalesce during the last fourth of the novel. I will turn to this in more detail in Part II.
24 This sequence also establishes Jérôme, like Babyface, as point of contact between the two plotlines — a point that will be significant later in my analysis.
rendering the Fragments both more “real” and more frustrating for the reader. Indeed, this passage projects both backward and forward: *le pont de Renouveau* figures in the first Vision, and Foufafou, in a subsequent political Fragment dated November 13, when Président pronounces a discourse “suite au rapport final […] sur le charnier de Foufafou” (64). Through these subtle contextual indications, the reader is able to piece together a crude political timeline that otherwise seems to unfold in a spatio-temporal vacuum. The two narrative realms, then, are mutually informative and mutually obfuscating all at once. Moreover, the political events take place roughly between October and December, and are thus thoroughly asynchronous with the dominant March-September timeline established in the other Fragments. They could equally occur before or after the friend-group plotline. Kwahulé, in effect, seems to suggest that chronology is of little importance (hence the non-dated Visions); what matters, rather, is drawing out the points of connection between the two diverging realms. And in this respect, *Babyface* comes full circle: its closing chapter describes Mozati’s internment in a psychiatric ward in both the first person interface *and* in a Vision, despite the fact that Jérôme, at this point, is dead. Peculiarly, Mozati’s hospital room number is 119, the very number of the opening Vision; and peculiarly, again, her closing narration identically reproduces her opening sequence: “[c]’est une belle histoire que je vis là les infirmières ont dit” (9); “[l]es infirmières disent une belle histoire que vous vivez là” (213).

Given their more homogenous structures, relational narration in *Texaco, Les Années*, and *Sortie d’usine* is perhaps less readily visible. Their interstices and points of juncture being more masked, it is through a retrospective vision of the whole that their relational quality comes to the fore. In *Texaco*, incorporation of parallel texts, as we have

25 Only three dates are provided: “un matin d’octobre” (56), November 13 (64), and December 24 (166).
seen, constitutes the most visible component of relational narration. The opening sequence in which recounts the urban planner’s arrival in Texaco is told through five different perspectives, also points in this direction. Ultimately, however, it is the imbrication of individual and collective voices that insists upon the relational. During the closing section of *Texaco*, for instance, Chamoiseau curiously claims to have played a role in establishing the eponymous neighborhood, writing:

*Je voulais* qu’il soit chanté quelque part, dans l’écoute des générations à venir, que *nous nous étions battus* avec l’En-ville, non pour le conquérir (lui qui en fait nous gobait), mais pour nous conquérir nous-mêmes dans l’inédit créole qu’il *nous fallait nommer* — en nous-mêmes pour nous-mêmes — jusqu’à notre pleine autorité. (497-498, emphasis added)

Recognizing his act of writing in the first person voice (*je voulais*), Chamoiseau then embeds his voice within the larger group of folks who “fought the city,” as if to claim community with them. Like for Marie-Sophie, “« moi » c’est comme dire « nous »” (402); only, for the author-scribe, the path is reversed. Indeed, both Esternome and Marie-Sophie must learn to say *je*. For Esternome, this occurs when he helps to found his own hillside community, an activity that leads him to realize his agency and creative potential: “mon Esternome battait-bouche dans le *Je*. Je ceci. Je cela. J’ai construit des cases […], je prenais l’acajou […]. Qu’est-ce que tu connais toi-même-là de ces bois, Marie-So? […] Moi je sais. Je. Je. Je” (173). For Marie-Sophie, the *je* materializes when she defies the guard who attempts to oust her from the Texaco site: “[j]e me levai — … je dis « Je », […] [r]amenant dans ma gorge la souffrance de mon Esternome, celle de mon Idoméné, les rages, les espoirs, les longues périodes de marche, les rancunes ravalées dans le désir de l’En-ville” (382). Contrary to Esternome, then, Marie-Sophie’s
je is grounded less in a sense of singularity than it is bound to a history of struggle. Her
je, then, is always already imbricated within the nous.26

The nous in Texaco is radically open. It is a nous in which any number of singular
subjects can enter even as they retain their singularity. This is what makes possible
Chamoiseau’s explicit identification with the people who “fought the city.” It is also what
allows the text’s three primary voices both to coalesce and to remain distinct. The voices
of Esternome, Marie-Sophie, and the scribe are entangled in a mutually informative nous.
Thus the scribe’s rendition of Marie-Sophie’s tale reflects the latter’s own delivery of it:

Elle me raconta ses histoires de manière assez difficultueuse. Il lui arrivait,
bien qu’elle me le cachât, d’avoir des trous de mémoire, et de se répéter, ou
de se contredire. […] Elle mélangeait le créole et le français, le mot
vulgaire, le mot précieux, le mot oublié, le mot nouveau… […] Parfois,
elle me demandait de rédiger telles quelles certaines de ses phrases, mais le
plus souvent elle me priait « d’arranger » sa parole dans un français
soutenu […]. (493-495)

The same holds vis-à-vis narrative temporality: if Esternome “n’avait jamais raconté son
histoire de manière linéaire” (256), Marie-Sophie, likewise, “ne racontait rien de manière
linéaire. Elle mélangeait les temps, les hommes et les époques, elle passait des semaines à
détailler un fait” (495) — hence the importance of the subtexts, which weave disparate
temporal realms into the seemingly linear narrative. But if definitively differentiating
between narrative voices proves an impossible task, and “direct communication” is
indeed “brouill[ée],” as Ruyter-Tognotti contends (128), it is possible to read within this
scrambling, and to recognize their productive points of contact.

26 This, perhaps, accounts for the use of the collective voice to recount episodes of which Esternome has no
memory, such as the Great War: “[l]a guerre (dont j’ai nul souvenir) fut départ-en-fanfare et retour-en-
queue-coupée. On partit en chantant, on revint pieds gelés. On partit en riant, on revint sans poumons […]”
(242). Here, Esternome appears to identify with his compatriots despite having no memory of the wartime
atmosphere.
Marie-Sophie’s assertion that “« moi » c’est comme dire « nous »” (402) equally holds in *Les Années*, as the analysis of shifting subject pronouns demonstrated. Again like Chamoiseau’s work, typography aids the reader in identifying the voices that constitute both the *nous* and the implicit *je*. In Ernaux’s transpersonal autobiography, however, it is her sense of self that brings these divergent voices into one relational unit; the singular span of her lifetime houses their various points of contact. Indeed, if *Les Années* is “premised on a reiteration of the definitive nature of the loss of past selves,” as Lyn Thomas contends (“À la recherche du moi perdu” 107), it is also permeated by a sense of unicity. Ernaux employs two metaphors for describing this sensation: the image of the Matryoshka doll set, and, alternately, that of Dorothea Tanning’s painting *Birthday*. Both of these are referenced in *Les Années*:

Elle se retourne souvent sur des images de quand elle était seule, elle se voit dans des rues de villes où elle a marché, dans des chambres qu’elle a occupées […]. Il lui semble que ce sont ses *moi* qui continuent d’exister là. […] Elle pense que ce tableau [Anniversaire] représente sa vie et qu’elle est dedans […]. (988)

Elle voit des silhouettes imprécises des femmes […] comme des images d’elle, détachées, désenboîtées les unes des autres à la manière des poupées russes (1041).27

The vision of the self Ernaux draws out here is both diachronic and synchronic. On the one hand, there are multiple, evolving versions of the *moi*; but on the other, all those discrete versions are as if contained or reflected the ones in the others. Towards the end of the text, this synchronic vision of the self surfaces more explicitly in terms of the body:

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27 These metaphors in Ernaux’s published writing journal: “[q]uestion que je me suis déjà posée, qu’est-ce qui correspond comme structure au tableau de D. Tanning, *Anniversaire*?” (*L’Atelier noir* 56); “[c]e projet a évidemment à voir avec les « images de moi », emboîtées comme des poupées russes” (127).
Dans ses insomnies, elle essaie de se rappeler de manière détaillée les chambres où elle a dormi […]. Dans ces chambres, elle ne se revoit jamais avec la netteté d’une photo, mais de façon floue, se laver les cheveux, des positions, assise à un bureau ou couchée sur un lit, arrivant parfois à se re-sentir dans son corps d’avant […]. (1041, emphasis added)

The body, then, provides a sense of unity and permanence despite the constant evolution of the moi. This feeling, moreover, materializes in precisely those moments when the socially constructed nature of selfhood wanes away:

[D]ans le demi-sommeil qui suit l’amour […], elle tombe dans un état particulier. Elle ne sait plus d’où, de quelles villes, proviennent les bruits de voitures, de pas et de paroles au-dehors. […]. C’est un temps d’une nature inconnue qui s’empare de sa conscience et aussi de son corps, un temps dans lequel le présent et le passé se superposent sans se confondre, où il lui semble réintégrer fugitivement toutes les formes de l’être qu’elle a été. (1058, emphasis added)

In moments when the body is the central focus — sex, but also caring for her sick mother —, the vision of interlocking selves dissipates, leaving in its wake a corporeal sensation that blurs all of these versions together.

Moreover, Ernaux speaks of this total, unifying perception as an “instrument possible de connaissance” (1058), though she later refutes this claim, asserting that it has “l’aménée nulle part dans l’écriture, ni dans la connaissance de quoi que ce soit. Comme les minutes qui suivent l’orgasme, elle donne envie d’écrire, pas plus” (1081). And yet, this corporeal sensation of unicity does inform Les Années. Although it is perhaps less readily ascertained, it in fact pervades the text, as the reader is continually led to the same realization the author describes — namely: “[e]lle s’étonne: c’est le même corps depuis qu’elle a cessé de grandir, vers seize ans” (1040). The body, then, can serve as a model

28 Ernaux, in fact, describes the two in parallel terms: “[l]es moments importants de son existence actuelle sont les rencontres avec son amant l’après-midi dans une chambre d’hôtel rue Danielle-Casanova et les visites à sa mère à l’hôpital, en long séjour. Les deux sont tellement liées qu’elles lui semblent parfois concerner un seul être” (1027).
for grasping the impression of unity that also materializes in this text. Countering and yet coexisting with the fragmentary picture of self it otherwise paints, the body houses all those temporally specific versions of the elle. Just as the text elicits the feeling of exhaustiveness, so too does the body provide a fleeting sense of wholeness and permanence, a “sensation qui supprime son histoire,” as Ernaux puts it (1059). Fragmentation and unicity in fact coexist, as the text develops along two “axes”: the first, “horizontal, port[e] tout ce qui lui est arrivé, qu’elle a vu, entendu, à tout instant”; the second, “vertical, avec juste quelques images, plong[e] vers la nuit” (1028). The elle’s life-story is just one of the possible narratives born of the crossing between these two axes.

Relational narration in Sortie d’usine procures a similar feeling of simultaneity. Indeed, if the text’s underlying linearity draws us progressively into and out of the factory, its relational quality situates us always already inside and outside the factory at once. Three voices, in effect, permeate the text, each of which conveys a varying degree of intimacy. At the furthest distance, the external narrator relays the experiences of the workforce. These phrases are more complex and employ a more formal lexicon. At the closest figures the internal voice, whose monologue is most often conveyed through incomplete syntactical structures. Between these two, a third voice relays the laborers’ speech, as markers of orality and use of the present tense indicate. These three voices, however, resonate throughout the entire text and enter into continual contact.

In a 2005 interview, Ernaux speaks explicitly of this sensation, linking orgasm to a feeling of permanence: “il y a une autre partie de mon unité, de mon identité, […] qui m’apparaît comme la permanence heureuse de l’être: l’orgasme, […] cela reste pour moi le fondement de l’identité” (228).

Roland Champagne’s contention that Ernaux’s writing accesses a “gender-specific understanding of time” is thus less wrong than it is terribly misguided (“A Woman and her Own Time” 147). While hinting at what I read to be an essential component of Les Années, Champagne makes the unfortunate move of generalizing and essentializing women’s experiences, and thereby does an injustice to the work Ernaux accomplishes in the text itself.
Distinguishing between them is by no means obvious. This is the case notably towards the end of the work when interior dialogue (incomplete sentences), literary enunciation (passé simple), and orality (repetition) all seem to collide within the emerging je. Indeed, the three voices are often mixed in the space of a single sentence. Sliding between these voices and stitching them together in a mutually informative way, the reader not only moves continually into and out the factory, but she is also able to grasp the complexity of the laborer’s experience on the assembly line.
Part II

Relational Truths and Genres
Chapter Three: Competing Narratives, Multiple Truths

As Dominique Viart and Bruno Vercier demonstrate in their survey, contemporary literatures in French have been marked by a penchant towards real-world subject matter. From the Metropole to the overseas departments, up through literatures in French produced in the former colonies, this subject matter has tended to depict the histories and everyday lives of marginalized peoples. This thematic material has often led critics to adopt sociological and postcolonial paradigms of interpretation. Yet as Jacques Dubois reminds us, reading through such lenses mustn’t come at the expense of the literary medium itself. Dubois writes, “si l’œuvre littéraire de type fictionnel produit une connaissance spécifique du social, ce ne peut être qu’avec les moyens de la fiction […]. On a donc à s’interroger sur sa manière de *figurer le monde*” (37, emphasis added). It is towards this manner of depicting the world that I will now turn.

Much like their narrative modes, contemporary relational narratives portray

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1 *La Littérature en péril*, 32.
2 *Mille plateaux*, 16.
diegetic worlds that are in flux; mixing, melding, and mutating, their narrative truths, too, are hard to pin down. This is perhaps most evident in Traversée de la Mangrove and Babyface, whose explicitly fictional nature gives them more latitude to disregard narrative coherency. Although Sortie d’usine, L’Amour, la fantasia, and Les Années center on group phenomena, be it the factory floor, the Moudjahidine, or simply the life of the average French person, they intertwine multiple narratives to do so, blurring the boundaries that might otherwise separate the individual’s tale from that of the group. Texaco, too, conjoins group and individual narratives, though here it is more a question of the historical vis-à-vis the subjective, a tension with which the reader of Les Années also engages. Ultimately, relational narratives reinvest in real-world subject matter while still maintaining the elliptical qualities found in earlier twentieth-century texts. Here too the reader must “agence[r] les séries sans les totaliser,” as Dominique Rabaté writes with respect to the works of Joyce and Conrad (Poétiques de la voix 141); here too “le sens ne se totalise pas, il s’échappe” (134). But if these contemporary texts disallow “total meaning,” their flattening of competing narratives and multiple truths onto one horizontal plane — or onto a single page, as Deleuze and Guattari put it above —, nonetheless incites the reader to actively untangle, reconnect, and bring differences into a mutually informative space of relation. Productively inhabiting the “inaccessible truth” that Todorov evokes in the epigraph, contemporary relational narratives promote an innovative construction of meaning within their diegeses.
3.1 – Individual and Group Narratives

Wrought with a tension between the recognition of singularity and the all-consuming nature of the workforce, Sortie d’usine provides fertile terrain for an investigation of the intersections between individual and group narratives. Bon’s work vividly illustrates what Bernard Doray describes as the “split within the very individuality of the wage-earner” (From Taylorism to Fordism 122-123). Following Doray, this subjective fissure results from the splintering of production into minute tasks, which leads the laborer to suffer “from the divorce between that part of his body which has been instrumentalized and calibrated and the remainder of his living personality” (82). In the factory, the human body acts only as a “tool in a machine-system” (67). Henry Ford himself, whom E. P. Thompson associates with the “apogee” of the “capitalist ethic” (“Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” 89), frequently employs the same metaphor to describe his vision of ideal efficiency. For Ford, the assembly line reduces “waste and losses” (Ford on Management 156) because each laborer acts as an organ or part within the machine-whole, which itself becomes the functioning body (64).

Pragmatically, this organization translates into a vast number of regulations, primarily concerning laborers’ use of time and occupation of space. It is the impact of these regulations that permeates Sortie d’usine, notably with regard to the workers’ perception of time:

Les jours qui filent sans particulier ni mémoire, où l’heure n’est plus tout à fait un temps et disparaît se voile dans la succession rigide des actes, leur enchaînement mécanisé, on sait qu’il est neuf heures parce qu’on revient de prendre le casse-croûte ou le café, puis ce moment plus tard de creux des onze, cette heure à la fois plus légère et plus lente parce qu’on écoute

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3 For more on this, see Chapter Three of Doray From Taylorism to Fordism.
4 For a detailed description of these regulations, see Chapter One of Doray’s study.
l’estomac […], on se retrouve à laver les mains et ce n’est plus travailler, cette heure quasi invisible du midi (34)

With each movement regulated, the workers’ bodies align with the clock: “tout fait temps” (41, emphasis added) — hence the somewhat laughable gift of a watch for fifteen years of service: “il était loisible de penser qu’après bien cinq mille journées pareilles on n’ait plus besoin de savoir l’heure” (130). Time, as a result, appears not to pass at all: “rien ne passe, on regarde la pendule et même pas dix minutes de filées depuis le denier regard” (40). At the same time, the passing of hours is also a source of comfort, “avec au fond quand même ce rassurant du temps, celui du sablier, son inéluctable imprononcé qu’on n'ose à soi-même se dire parce qu'on sait bien que ça finira par finir” (41). This acute awareness of time even materializes during the laborers’ daily commute. Like the factory, the commuter train too “ne laissait que le temps précis, déterminé” (15), resulting in an internalization of the schedule that it follows: “sinon le train de quarante et un arrivait à moins onze il pointait à moins trois, sauf retard de train qui […] bouffe une part des trois minutes de sécurité” (16). Likewise, the evening commute leaves just enough time for an after-work drink: “on prend un demi ensemble, puisqu’on se l’est enfoncée, la journée, et qu’il y a encore ces douze minutes avant le train” (42, emphasis added).5

Indeed, the repetition of regulated movements in time ultimately swallows up any semblance of agency. This logic, in turn, extends to the factory as a whole, resulting in the impression that it is a self-perpetuating force “qui avait commencé son ressassement bien avant lui et ne l’exigeait pas pour se perpétuer, tout en l’y employant” (131).

5 As E. P. Thompson notes, “[i]n mature capitalist society all time must be consumed, marketed, put to use; it is offensive for the labor force merely to “pass the time”” (“Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism” 90-91).
Within this seemingly boundless system, all expressions of individuality vanish — hence the lack of grammatical subject characteristic of the internal voice discussed in Part I, which depicts action, but no actor. The widespread lack of character names also demonstrates this, reflecting the fact that, even when colleagues recognize one another, it is “pas toujours par son nom” (130). Similarly, when the il examines his coworkers’ faces during his morning commute, he describes them as “marqués par le même quotidien, […] figés dans une même fixité” (13); extraordinary days amount to “le cadeau d’une panne de courant voire seulement la visite médicale” (34); and the lunch hour brings no surprise, from the cafeteria’s “bifteck du lundi les frites du mercredi le poisson du vendredi” (35), to the perpetual reasons to toast another’s success, “chaque midi provision toujours faite et soutenue d’une raison argumentée qui menait bien d’une bouteille à l’autre” (24). Even during the Passage ritual, which operates outside of factory regulation, “chacun devait être à sa place, bien à sa place” (93).

The extensive ordering of time and space has sizable consequences on the laborers’ perceptions of their bodies. This materializes most simply in the daily need to overcome aches and pains: “leur raideur au matin depuis les reins, il fallait sur le corps gagner, le contraindre comme on faisait sous les mains de l’acier” (56). But it also determines the norms of interpersonal touch between coworkers, which is ultimately only tolerated because labor renders the hand impersonal: “une main qui n’avait droit de toucher que parce qu’enveloppée comme d’un gant de ce cuir impersonnel du travail” (53). Paradoxically, the laborers also attempt reclaim individuality through their bodies; they seem, in effect, to embrace the very logic that regulates them: “faire respecter

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6 This depiction eerily echoes Doray’s description of the “utilitarian relationship” the “average” industrial worker maintains over his own body, “a relationship which mirrors capital’s expectations” (112).
comme aux lendits les distances imposées, *une place à soi-même nécessaire*, croire à une territoire comme à une chasse gardée inviolable sur le lieu de chacun de son corps” (57, emphasis added). Obscenities, too, gesture towards corporeal affirmation:

>Les photos scotchées […] auraient pu s’interpréter comme une affirmation de la possibilité quand même de la chair lascive […] malgré ce qu’on faisait d’eux les hommes […]. Au même titre donc le jeu circulant […] de ces dialogues à voix de châtrés grande folle, […] un ridicule cri de coq oh ne me touche pas ici devant tout le monde pour un geste le moindre, […] aurait pu s’interpréter comme une affirmation quand même du corps […]. (52-53, emphasis added)

Whether in the form of homoerotic play or saucy photography, such allusions exhibit the body as a living organism rather than a force of pure labor. Ultimately, however, this endeavor fails: following its own “ordre assimilé, intériorisé” (60), obscenity only “mim[e] le pervers pour conforter la norme” (57). This same tension surfaces in the workers’ speech; “[p]arler,” Bon writes, “c’était s’approprier chacun sa part de vie en lui conférant son visage propre” (69). And much as the sexual allusions, this too proves fruitless. Pragmatically speaking, factory clamor makes it such that “on s’entend pas à cinq mètres” (40). But on a more psychological level, the laborers’ speech tends to reproduce only what has already been said:

>Parler, comme laisser se déplacer la réplique d’une bouche à l’autre, tisser d’un visage à l’autre l’assentiment du bien commun de la vie qui va […]. Parole valide parce qu’on l’a entendue déjà, a déjà contenu et porté faits vérifiables […]. Non pas une parole en l’air, mais parole qui, venant de l’autre, *sert à fonder parce que déjà dite* […] (68-69, emphasis added)

Merely repeating established narratives, the laborers never actually communicate with one another — hence the jarring presence of orality discussed in Chapter One: neither monologues nor actual conversations, the workers’ voices seem to resonate as if in a void. In Bruno Blanckeman’s words, these are indeed “des personnages anonymes, que
seule définit une parole en lutte contre une réalité sociale” (“Les Tentations du sujet dans le récit littéraire actuel” 106).

During the third Week, factory order is breached just enough to create the space for an individuated voice to emerge. As the regulations of space and time-management dissolve, unexpected behavior patterns arise: gathering in front of the bosses’ entranceway, the workers overturn spatial order: “ce n’était pas leur porte celle-ci, […] ils n’étaient pas là chez eux” (102); likewise, without defined tasks, the men don’t know how to occupy themselves, “[c]omme de ne pas en avoir l’habitude, de ne rien faire” (117). This initial rupture gives way to an illicit tour of the factory, when a group “s’aventur[ent] où l’on n’aurait pu s’introduire, où nul prétexte du quotidien ne l’eût permis” (121). During this unauthorized excursion, signs of individuality start to take shape, notably via reference to personal affairs: “quelque chose de plus intime dans un coin, le coin de. […] Une chaise propre, avec un cousin de laine, fait à la maison, brodé” (121).7 These physical traces of the individual fundamentally oppose the logic of the factory, which aspires to transform bodies into pure tools. During the fourth Week, this discord sharpens: dismayed and distressed at having “plus de place, nulle place” (137), the nascent je no longer accords with the logic “une place pour chaque chose et chaque chose à sa place” (123). Hence, also, the peculiarity of his return to the factory site: “étrange ça devait être, quelqu’un qui passe ainsi, en pleine journée, sans autre motif apparent que de flâner, au long des murs si anonymes” (159). To come forth, the je must overcome the tension between singularity and anonymity; and yet, outside of the factory space, he has no function.

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7 Curiously, this passage recognizes individuality only to refute it: referring to someone’s intimate space, the lack of complement after the possessive “de” effaces that same individual as if in a single breath.
The title of Bon’s work, then, like the cautionary notice transposed within the prologue — “STATIONNEMENT INTERDIT / SORTIE D’USINE” (19) — indeed resonates “comme un défi” (19), but one addressed less to motorists than to the laborers seeking a veritable exit from the anonymous mass. As a result, anonymity in Sortie d’usine appears to connote negatively: just as the workers struggle to affirm their sense of individuality, so too must the je break free of the collective workforce in order to tell this tale. However, this is only true on the level of narrative content; in terms of narrative mode, as demonstrated in Chapters One and Two above, Bon’s work doesn’t denigrate anonymity or collectivity in favor of individuality. On the contrary, it delineates a relational space in which the individual informs the group as much as the reverse. The entanglement of the distanced perspective within interior monologue and direct speech illustrates precisely this phenomenon of entanglement. “Le morcellement et le heurt des voix” as Adler writes, “annulent en effet toute élaboration d’une thèse dogmatique” (208). Indeed, each voice is part and parcel of the others, and each is accorded equal clout in conveying the subjective experience of the factory.

A similar tension between anonymity and individuality builds in L’Amour, la fantasia, though the logic in Djebar’s work is the reverse. Anonymity characterizes Arabo-Berber women’s daily lives as much as it does the assembly line worker’s; but here, anonymity appears as a virtue. As Djebar concedes in an interview with Clarisse Zimra, the “upbringing that [she] received from [her] own mother and others around [her] had two absolute rules: one, never talk about yourself; and, two, if you must, always do it.

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8 It is interesting, in this regard, that the three blue-collar laborers whose names are indicated — Thomas, Ravi, Mimile — are those that die: one form of exit, indeed.
9 Indeed, Ieme van der Poel’s remark that “[les femmes arabo-berbères] sont prisonnières d’un corps qui en même temps leur est dénié” holds equally for the laborers of Bon’s work (42). This will be clearer in Chapter Five, when I turn to Djebar’s writing of multilingualism and her portrayal of song in Arab-Berber women’s circles.
anonymously” (“Afterward” 172, emphasis added). To write about her own experiences, as well as those of other Arabo-Berber women, Djebar must work within this structure of anonymity. To this end, most of the autobiographical segments remain largely anecdotal, and portray traditional meetings amongst women rather than conventionally “formative” experiences. Yet, by depicting Assia’s maturation within a community of women, these segments also elucidate the socio-cultural practice of anonymity. One segment, for example, notes the peculiarity of the women’s speech patterns: “[j]amais le « je » de la première personne ne sera utilisé” (221); “[c]omment dire « je », puisque ce serait dédaigner les formules-couvertures qui maintiennent le trajet individuel dans la résignation collective?” (223). These remarks clarify the anonymous quality of the testimonial voices found in Part Three of L’Amour, la fantasia, and also point out the authorial act of providing them an I.

More poignantly, we discover in another autobiographical segment that Arabo-Berber women don’t call their husbands by name: “[m]a mère, comme toutes les femmes de sa ville, ne désignait jamais mon père autrement que par le pronom personnel arabe correspondant à « lui »” (54). But the reverse is also true; Arabo-Berber men refer to their wives only in oblique terms. Hence the scandalous nature of the postcard Assia’s father addresses to his wife in her name:

La révolution était manifeste: mon père, de sa propre écriture, et sur une carte qui allait voyager de ville en ville, qui allait passer sous tant et tant de regards masculins, y compris celui du facteur de notre village, un facteur musulman de surcroît, mon père donc avait osé écrire le nom de sa femme qu’il avait désigné à la manière occidentale: « Madame untel… »; or, tout autochtone, pauvre ou riche, n’évoquait femme et enfants que par le biais de cette vague périphrase: « la maison ». (57, emphasis added)

10 With the exception of those depicting Assia’s first arrival to French school, her instruction in the Koran, and her wedding — though the following fifteen years of conjugal union are quickly dismissed as irrelevant: “[q]uinze années s’écoulent, peu importe l’anecdote” (163).
The refusal to name, then, like the suppression of the first person pronoun, turns on the notion of the gaze, where naming would be synonymous with denuding. Following Malek Chabel, Islamic doctrine is anti-individualistic and group-oriented; if seeing and naming are taboo, then, it is because these acts separate the individual from the group. As Djebar writes in *Ces voix qui m’assiègent*, “la culture islamique […] se définit d’abord par un interdit sur l’œil” (181). In addition to this, Arabo-Berber peoples are also subject to the exoticizing gaze that Edward Saïd discusses in *Orientalism*, whereby the nonreciprocal Western gaze establishes non-Western cultures and peoples as Other. “The gaze,” as Majumdar sums it up, “is the relationship of the subject, the voyeur, to the object of the gaze. The act of looking at another person transforms this person, the Other, into an object, a thing, determined and fixed by the gaze of the seeing subject” (85). Arabo-Berber woman, in effect, are vulnerable to both the patriarchal eye of Islamic tradition and the exoticizing Western eye.

That said, *L’Amour, la fantasia* continually complicates the notion of the gaze. When a Frenchman crosses paths with of group of Arabo-Berber woman, for instance, he is unable to “see” them: “[s]on regard, de l’autre côté de la haie, au-delà de l’interdit, ne peut pas toucher” (180). The women are thus shielded from his Western gaze. Conversely, when one young Algerian bride “expos[e], pendant deux ou trois heures, son visage, ses bijoux anciens, ses soieries brodées,” her mother-in-law “garde l’œil posé sur sa bru” (219). Under scrutiny, she is subject to the individualizing gaze of her female compatriot. In another vein, the act of the looking also serves as a means of exchange. When observing the interior of a French home, for example, young Assia is unable to

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11 See Malek Chabel, *L’Imaginaire Arabo-musulman*, particularly Chapters 2 and 5, which focus respectively on the religious and sexual imaginary.
divert her “œil […] fasciné par le rivage des ‘Autres’” (38). Similarly, the narrator of the historical segments insists on seeing through the eyes of the military men whose accounts she re-writes: “échafaudée[s] sous nos yeux” (51), “nous les suivons en témoins-acteurs” (75). Alternately, the gaze can act as a vehicle of subversion, as in the case of the indigenous combatant who refuses defeat by withholding eye contact: “[il ne] lève pas les yeux pour regarder son vainqueur. Ne le « reconnaît » pas. Ne le nomme pas” (83). The gaze in fact permeates L’Amour, la fantasia: it can be stolen, granted, refused, cherished, and even reciprocated, such as when Amable Matterer, disembarking from France by ship, “regarde la ville qui regarde” (16). But it also surfaces in the profusion of terms and expressions related to the performing arts, which beckon the reader to act as audience.

From ballet, opéra, spectacle, scène, public, décor, théâtre, drame, tragédie, even fantasia itself,12 a veritable lexicon of spectacle saturates Djebar’s text.

To write Arabo-Berber women’s stories without betraying their anonymity, then, Djebar must first re-appropriate the gaze and construe it anew, like she does in these thematic sequences, so that it no longer corresponds with unveiling or denuding. And this is precisely what she achieves, first, and most importantly, through her two cinematic productions La Nouba des femmes du mont Chenoua (1977) and La Zerda ou les chants de l’oubli (1979), written and directed during her ten-year hiatus from the literary stage. In La Nouba, Djebar collects testimonies in her maternal place of ancestry, near Cherchell, Algeria; these are the testimonies from which she draws when composing L’Amour, la fantasia.13 Focused on women’s stories, the film is still deeply enigmatic,

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12 As the title of her work suggests, the role fantasia plays in Djebar’s poetics is paramount, and will be analyzed in greater detail in Chapter 5.
13 On this, see Mildred Mortimer’s interview with the author, as well as the “Femme arable” sequence in Djebar’s work Vaste est la prison (1995).

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disjointed, and ethereal. It repeats sequences, overlays the women’s tales with voice-over and song, and splices in bucolic scenes of a fictional and Westernized woman filmmaker Lila traversing vast spaces. Difficult to follow on account of its lack of causal narration and its nonlinear structure, the film invites the spectator to take Lila’s lead when she asserts, “I’m not looking for anything, but I’m listing to the sound of broken memory.” Describing her return to writing after this foray into cinema, Djebar tells Zimra that, “[t]his time, [she] positioned [herself] neither as an outsider observer, nor as an Algerian woman, nor as a colonized being,” but rather “defined [herself] as a gaze” (“Afterward” 173). Much like the “image-son” distinctive of La Nouba (Clerc 13), L’Amour, la fantasie transforms the notion of the gaze from a phenomenon of sight to one of sound; in both the film and the book Djebar beckons the reader to listen. Rather than the “transgression” or “revolt against the masculine gaze” adduced by Mortimer (“Assia Djebar’s ‘Algerian Quartet’” 110), the writer transforms the gaze from within. Indeed, she intertwines voice and gaze so skillfully in L’Amour, la fantasie that, as Sonia Assar-Rosenblum remarks, “poser la question ‘Qui va là?’ (ou ‘qui entre?’) équivaut à demander ‘qui parle?’ (ou ‘qui écrit?’)” (67). This, in turn, allows Djebar to tell women’s individual tales while also remaining within the parameters of the group. As a result, the printed stories resonate together as a chorus, where each voice is present and blended into the texture of the others at the same time. Even the titles of the lyrical segments suggest this — murmures, chuchotements, conciliabules: all terms for muffled speech acts.

14 Mortimer’s argument, in effect, is firmly rooted the dialectic thought governing Self/Other relations (colonizer/colonized, male/female, etc.), which leads her to read Djebar’s works as calling “for an end to all vestiges of the closed and oppressive system of domestic organization Orientalists termed a harem” (“Reappropriating the Gaze” 863). But if Djebar does radicalize collective women’s spaces and voices in L’Amour, la fantasie, she does so in a way that circumvents the very dialectic thought Mortimer falls back on.
In an interview with Gauvin, Djebar describes her childhood as immersed in a “milieu de femmes de la famille, où l’interdit sur le corps est tellement intériorisé qu’on finit par ne plus le voir” (33). As author, Djebar restores these repudiated bodies in a way that circumvents, rather than transgresses, the interdiction. Indeed, the notion of *l’image-son*, largely transposed through the layered techniques of relational narration discussed in Part I, undermines the authority of the gaze, rendering it multidirectional. Djebar reworks anonymity from the inside out, transforming it into a positive force. Akin to Bon’s work in this respect, Djebar doesn’t pit the individual against the collective; no single voice has any more credence than the other, but each enter into mutually informative relation to delineate the socio-cultural specificities of Arabo-Berber women’s experiences. Like *La Nouba*, which pans between bucolic scenes, testimonies, and song, Djebar appropriates women’s voices by weaving between them: “de la marche et du tissage,” *L’Amour, la fantasia* “file,” writes André Benhaïm (185).

It is *Les Années* that arguably best exemplifies the intersections of individual and group narratives. Though typographically the two realms appear as separate entities, Ernaux’s keen manipulation of subject pronouns and innovative incorporation of period

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15 The oral quality of the testimonial segments, too, adds to this corporeal presence. As Zumthor notes, the oral register necessarily implies the presence of a narrating body (“Oralité” 173).

16 This slipperiness between the collective and the individual realms has been somewhat of a thorn in the side of Djebar scholars, who primarily form two groups of thought. The first view can be summarized by Marie-Sophie’s assertion “moi, c’est comme dire nous” — that is, some critics hold that anonymity generalizes women into a plural or universal entity. On this, see Chapter Three of Clerc, *Assia Djebar*; Holter, “Histoire et filiation féminine dans l’œuvre d’Assia Djebar”; or Fathi “Écrire des histoires, écrire l’histoire.” The opposite view holds that Djebar’s writing confers women specific voices, and hence, the status of individual. This is notably Poel’s argument in “Djebar, l’Algérie, et le corps politique,” and, to a lesser extent, in Calle-Gruber’s *Assia Djebar ou la résistance de l’écriture*, who, in a reading closer to my own, contends that *L’Amour, la fantasia* both brings forth individuality and recognizes the necessity of collective consciousness (48). In an effort to avoid the pitfalls Chandra Mohanty and Marna Lazreg pinpoint apropos the displacement of Western feminist discourse onto non-Western world views (Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes”; Lazreg, “Feminism and Difference”), I opt to sidestep the entire question of Djebar’s potential inauguration of a female-defined sense of self — whether individual or group oriented. I read, rather, the blurring between the two realms operative in the text as demonstrative of an altogether re-conceptualization of self, gender notwithstanding. I will analyze this dynamic more fully in Chapter 6.
discourse entangles the collective and the individual in manner comparable to Djebar’s work. For instance, within the opening inventory of personal and collective experiences that will “disappear” (927) and “be nullified” (930) — presumably after death —, figures the very concept of self. Thus the closing paragraph of this introductory section:

Tout s’effacera en une seconde. Le dictionnaire accumulé du berceau au dernier lit s’éliminera. Ce sera le silence et aucun mot pour le dire. De la bouche ouverte il ne sortira rien. Ni je ni moi. La langue continuera à mettre en mots le monde. Dans les conversations autour d’une table de fête on ne sera qu’un prénom, de plus en plus sans visage, jusqu’à disparaître dans la masse anonyme d’une lointaine génération. (933, emphasis added)

While this passage points to the finitude of the individual, implying that Ernaux here writes herself out of her own life narrative — a position that Shirley Jordan defends in “Writing Age” —, it equally underscores a sense of commonality: “one,” or rather each of us, eventually will become only a name vaguely recalled at the family gatherings of our descendants. This, in turn, begs the question: if the individual’s story will ultimately dissipate into the abyss of forgetting, why take pains to write the autobiographical tale? Is it merely to “[s]auver quelque chose du temps où l’on ne sera plus jamais” (1085), as the text’s closing lines state? A reexamining of the role that the third person pronoun plays suggests otherwise, as in the following concession:

Au moment de commencer, elle achoppe toujours sur les mêmes problèmes: comment représenter à la fois le passage du temps historique, le changement des choses, des idées, des mœurs et l’intime de cette femme, faire coïncider la fresque de quarante-cinq années et la recherche d’un moi hors de l’Histoire […]. Son souci principal et le choix entre le « je » et le « elle ». Il y a dans le « je » trop de permanence, quelque chose de rétréci et d’étouffant, dans le « elle » trop d’extériorité, d’éloignement. (1042, emphasis added)

The struggle Ernaux evokes cannot be reduced to the black-and-white choice between the je and the elle; it lies, rather, in devising a form capable of depicting the historic
impersonal and the intimate conjointly, not as amalgamate but as mutually informative entities.17

Opting for the *elle*, then, is the first step in de-individualizing the autobiographical subject. The second, more conceptually challenging step lies in Ernaux’s incorporation of collective discourse. And herein lies my objective in tracing the three narrative threads outlined in Part I: by describing the manifold changes within Metropolitan society (and by extension much of the Western world) in the very terms used to utter that change, Ernaux brings the ideology underlying period discourses to the fore.18 A sense of history; the notion of progress; nationalist sentiment: each of these thematic veins provide the means through which collective discourse feeds identity logic. Or, in Barthes’s terms, each sustains the broader myth of *who* the average French-person *is*. As Barthes argues in *Mythologies*, discourse utilizes language so as to establish a *second* system of signification; this second-level system naturalizes the message it carries, transforming it into a norm, or myth. Fundamentally semiotic, these myths are propagated through those same linguistic mediums Ernaux inscribes in her work. “[L]e mythe,” Barthes writes, “*est une parole*. […] [E]lle peut être formée d’écritures ou de représentations: le discours écrit, mais aussi la photographie, le cinéma, le reportage, le sport, les spectacles, la publicité, tout cela peut servir de support à la parole mythique” (193-194). Chronicling these discourse-types over the course of her lifetime, Ernaux demonstrates their role in molding identity-constructs, whether in terms of class, gender, or national belonging.

17 Remarks pertaining to this dilemma are also strewn throughout *L’Atelier noir*. For one emblematic — and quite early! — example, consider this entry from March 1982: “le je ou le on? Le « je » de quelqu’un” (19).
18 The three veins I explored in Part I hardly reflect the breadth of realms Ernaux treats in *Les Années*. For more on these, see Montémont’s discussion of private, public, and “third sector” speech (“*Les Années*: vers une autobiographie sociale”), as well as Kiran’s analysis of eleven distinct collective “voices” (“Une autobiographie et une identité”).
Acting as a “lecteur de mythes,” she demythifies the established the doxa and invites the reader to do the same.19

At times, the posterior narrating voice recognizes the mythical foundations of her sense of self, citing pop culture, books, and films in her depictions of each temporally specific elle. From the photograph taken in 1949, for instance, “[t]out révèle le désir de poser comme les stars dans Cinémonde ou la publicité d’Ambre Solaire” (943) — a discernment that is thereafter extended to all French girls: “elles savaient que la réalité et l’avenir se trouvaient dans les films de Martine Carol, les journaux dont les titres, Nous deux, Confidences et Intimité, annonçaient la désirable et interdite impudicité” (948). By the same token, the posterior voice avows feeling that “son existence, ses « moi », sont dans des personnages de livres et de films, qu’elle est la femme de Sue perdue dans Manhattan et de Claire Dolan, […] ou Jane Eyre, ou Molly Bloom — ou Dalida” (1059). Media provide the terms through which feminine identities are formed, and establish a norm that continues throughout the elle’s lifetime. Indeed, the myth of femininity is so vast that it allows the elle to identify with women in their 30s and 40s at once:

Elle dégage une impression d’abandon maîtrisé, de « plénitude » comme les journaux féminins disent pour les femmes entre quarante et cinquante-cinq ans. […] Elle se sent en coïncidence avec le mouvement de l’époque tel qu’il est tracé dans Elle ou Marie Claire pour les femmes de la classe moyenne et supérieure dans la trentaine. (1039)

In each of these instances, the narrating voice all but recognizes what Barthes pinpoints as popular culture’s pretention to represent “pure femininity” (Mythologies 58), which is of course imbued with a pervasive yet invisible male gaze.

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19 Following Barthes, “le lecteur vit le mythe à la façon d’une histoire à la fois vraie et irréelle. […] [C]’est le lecteur de mythes lui-même qui doit en révéler la fonction essentielle” (Mythologies 215).
However, such lucid acknowledgements are rare in the collective passages. It is rather through juxtapositions created between narrative threads that their ideological underpinnings come to the fore. These juxtapositions, in effect, underscore the intersections between discursive threads, harmonious and discordant alike. The translation of the discourse on “progress” into the domain of tangible goods and services constitutes one of the most prominent points of harmonious intersection. “Le progrès,” Ernaux writes, “était dans le plastique et le Formica, les antibiotiques et les indemnités de la sécurité sociale” (950, emphasis added). Echoing George Perec’s account of the same consumerist explosion in Les Choses (1965), Ernaux demonstrates the extent to which the individual’s life path is measured in terms of things — hence the adolescent’s desire for the moto and the couple’s listing of objects to divide up during their divorce. Ernaux also cites the ideological apparatus of the school system, in tandem with post-war reconstructionist ideals, as purveyor of the myth on progress: “[e]n classe de quatrième, les sujets de rédaction invitaient à composer sur les « bienfaits de l’électricité » où à écrire une réponse à quelqu’un qui « dénigre devant vous le monde moderne »” (950). The single theme of progress thus spreads through a range of discursive mediums, forming what Foucault terms a correlative discursive space; consumer objects, medical advancements, governmental policies, school programs: each feeds equally into the single discursive formation pertaining to progress. And yet, this discursive formation still fails to grasp the breadth of real life experiences: “[d]ans la réalité, l’exiguïté des logements obligeait les enfants et les parents, les frères et les sœurs, à dormir dans la même chambre” (950). Lived experience fits poorly within the schema drawn out by the myth

20 “Une formation discursive sera individualisée si on peut […] montrer comment elles dérivent toutes (malgré leur diversité parfois extrême, malgré leur dispersion dans le temps) d’un même jeu de relations,” Foucault writes in Archéologie du savoir (94, emphasis added).
of progress; or, as Perec put it in *Les Choses*, “il était presque de règle de désirer plus qu’on ne pouvait acquérir” (50).

This discord between meager material belongings and the idealized norm of progress functions much as the “gaps” within the “ideological becoming of the human being” that Bakhtin notes in *The Dialogic Imagination* (341-342). The individual, in Bakhtin’s view, must “selectively assimilate[e] the words of others” (341), and must navigate among discursive sources that are themselves wrought with contradictions. Contrary to Perec’s novel on the emergence of consumer society, however, the ideological gaps in *Les Années* are more moral in nature than they are economic, even though the same “loi de la civilisation” operates in both (*Les Choses* 50). Thus, for instance, the models of femininity to which the *elle* and, more generally, French “girls” identify during the mid 1950s are brutally countered by their actual rights:

> On aurait voulu ressembler aux héroïnes [de *Manina la fille sans voiles* et *La Rage au corps*], avoir la liberté de se comporter comme elles. Mais entre les livres, les films et les injonctions de la société s’étendait l’espace de l’interdiction et du jugement moral, on n’avait pas droit à l’identification. (954, emphasis added)

> *Prises entre* la liberté de Bardot, la raillerie des garçons qu’être vierge c’est malsain, les prescriptions des parents et de l’Église, on ne choisissait pas. (970, emphasis added)

Although the interdiction levied against young girls is certainly due to their status as minors, this passage forcefully pinpoints the discursive gap between cinematic representation and widespread moral belief. Caught in a catch-22, the “girls” cannot selectively assimilate, as Bakhtin would have it. Strangely enough, however, the

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21 The “règle de désirer plus qu’on ne pouvait acquérir,” Perec writes, “était une loi de la civilisation, une donnée de fait dont la publicité en général, les magazines, l’art des étalages, le spectacle de la rue, et même, sous un certain aspect, l’ensemble des productions communément appelées culturelles, étaient les expressions les plus conformes” (*Les Choses* 50).
injunction imposed on their bodies culminates in another, more harmonious intersection.

Indeed, militating for women’s rights in the French Metropole leads to a sense of sisterly commonality that may otherwise seem unlikely:

Même si c’était mal vu, on avait rejoint ceux qui réclamaient l’abrogation de la loi de 1920 et l’accès libre à l’avortement medical. On tirait des tracts sur la photocopieuse du lycée, les distribuait dans les boîtes aux lettres la nuit tombée, on allait voir Histoires d’A., on conduisait secrètement des femmes enceintes dans un appartement privé où des médecins militants leur aspiraient gratuitement l’embryon dont elles ne voulaient pas. […]. La clandestinité était exaltante, c’était comme renouer avec la Résistance, prendre la suite des porteurs de valise de la guerre d’Algérie. (996)

Despite — or perhaps thanks to — continued regulation of women’s bodies, an unforeseen sense of group identification emerges. Activism during the late 1960s leads French women to identify positively with altogether different forms of women’s actions, both of the past and of other socio-cultural contexts.

That said, none of these discursive veins remain static; a later intersection disrupts this initially harmonious tie. In a passage relating social changes during the early 1980s, a new gap between these groups of women emerges:

L’identité, qui jusque-là n’avait eu de sens que sur une carte avec photo dans le portefeuille, devenait un souci prépondérant. Personne ne savait exactement en quoi cela consistait. Dans tous les cas, c’était quelque chose qu’il fallait posséder, retrouver, conquérir, affirmer, exprimer. Un bien précieux et suprême. Dans le monde, des femmes se voilaient de la tête aux pieds. (1024)

Here, the juxtaposition between the two paragraphs poignantly renders the clash between the two realities described. Together, they point to what Barthes sees as a fundamental element of the petty-bourgeois myth: namely, its incapacity to conceptualize the Other.22

22 “[C]’est l’un des traits constants de toute mythologie petite-bourgeoise, que cette impuissance à imaginer l’Autre” (Mythologies 44); “toute la mythologie petite-bourgeoise implique le refus de l’altérité, la négation du différent, le bonheur de l’identité et l’exaltation du semblable” (87).
And yet, Ernaux’s rendition of this myth also deconstructs it. The juxtaposition of the two paragraphs, particularly the terseness and non-evaluative tone of the second, brings the two views into a single space of relation: Western and non-Western views meet, collide, and mutually inform one another. In a passage concerning the turn of the millennium, the conflict between the two realities assumes an arresting immediacy:


On ouvrait les yeux et on voyait une femme entrer tout habillée dans la mer avec sa veste et sa longue jupe, un voile de musulmane couvrant ses cheveux. Un homme torse nu, en short, la tenait par la main. C’était une vision biblique dont la beauté rendait affreusement triste. (1067)

Here, the discord registers within the individual, the on clearly standing for the je in this instance (la même femme, le même corps). Indeed, one person opens her eyes and witnesses a scene that counters her own sense of beatitude; and again, the juxtaposition of the two paragraphs intensifies the conflict, portraying the two visions as separate yet imbricated. Additionally, the subjective nature of the remark humanizes what otherwise might seem a cold ideological stance. The individual experiences this intersection, not as a conflict but rather as a splendid paradox.

In the end, Les Années depicts not only the multiple discursive sources that inform individual and group identity-constructs, but also the relations drawn between them within the structure of the Barthesian myth. As the post 1968 era ushers in a plethora of new identitary concepts, these myths grow and swell: henceforth, “[o]n baign[e] dans des langues inédites” (993). Available subject positions multiply, seemingly ad infinitum: “[i]l était accordé à chacun, pourvu qu’il représente un groupe, une condition, une
injustice, de parler et d’être écouté, intellectuel ou non. Avoir vécu quelque chose en tant que femme, homosexuel, transfuge de classe, détenu, paysan, mineur, donnait le droit de dire je” (993). Indeed, the list of post-68 concepts that Ernaux cites spans over a half-page in full paragraph form! The period discourse Ernaux incorporates here, in effect, lucidly demonstrates the bourgeoning celebration of difference that Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri contend is a fundamental component of global capitalism. Yet Ernaux also underscores the gaps left by this same system; the shifting discursive formation issuing from the post-68 era, to return to Foucault’s parlance, allows for a proliferation of “modèles à la verbalisation de soi” (1070) that, by the same movement, disallows others:

À chaque moment du temps, à côté de ce que les gens considèrent comme naturel de faire et de dire, à côté de ce qu’il est prescrit de penser, autant par les livres, les affiches dans le métro que par les histoires drôles, il y a toutes les choses sur lesquelles la société fait silence et ne sait pas qu’elle le fait, vouant au mal-être solitaire ceux et celles qui ressentent ces choses sans pouvoir les nommer. (989, emphasis added)

Much as the contributors to Je est un autre, Ernaux here identifies a deficiency within the contemporary épistémè. Negotiating the post-68 plethora of identity-constructs, then, not only requires selectively sifting through contradictory discourses, as Bakhtin and Barthes contend alike, but also reconciling the apertures that remain. Ernaux both states this and demonstrates it through the very construction of the text. It is this gesture that opens her autobiographical tale to such a broad contemporary audience. Untangling the mutually constitutive and mutually exclusive truths informing the elle’s construction of self, Ernaux also allows the reader to locate her own story therein. She too must navigate similar points of conflict and harmony, incorporating all, or some, of these discursive

23 Here, Barthes’s thought meets nicely with Bakhtin’s argument that the individual must selectively assimilate between discourses in order to overcome the gaps between them. Barthes similarly maintains that the myth “se moque des contradictions pourvu qu’il installe une sécurité euphorique” (Mythologies 93).
veins, perhaps adding or rejecting others. Ernaux indeed “tress[e] […] des existences et le siècle,” as Antoine Compagnon contends in his review of the book; but it is the act of un-braiding and re-braiding that demythifies the doxa, productively imbricating the individual’s narrative within that of the group.

3.2 – Subjective and historical truths

Much like Les Années, the group narrative seems to dominate in Texaco, leading Jack Jordan to contend that “‘[w]e has truly replaced ‘I’” in Chamoiseau’s text (57). While echoing Marie-Sophie’s claim that “« moi » c’est comme dire nous” (402), Jordan’s assertion is still only partially accurate. Like Bon, Djebar, and Ernaux, Chamoiseau productively occupies the porous space between individual and collective narratives; Texaco, too, multiplies narrative truths, among which two veins dominate. The first can be summed up by what Glissant refers to the “leurre chronologique” of a “squelette de faits” (Le Discours antillais 39). This is embodied in such historical events as the eruption of Mount Pelée, World Wars One and Two, de Gaulle’s visit to Martinique, and Césaire’s election as mayor of Fort-de-France. The second concerns the internal histories of Martinican peoples’ efforts at self-determination. Suspending our disbelief, for the moment, as to the fictional components of this historical narrative, what is striking in Texaco is its constant interplay between subjective and historical views.

Rather than a framework in which the individual stories would be inscribed or against

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24 This seems to be the thorn in Jacque Henric’s side, a critic whose review of Les Années questions the validity of the authoritative on in recounting collectively lived phenomena (see “Sauver”). The point, however, lies not in whether the ambiguous third person singular always coincides with the reader’s perspective, or even to what extent and in what circumstances it does or does not. What is of interest, rather, is that certain passages — the election of Mitterrand, in this circumstance — provoke such a strong stance of dis-identification. That is, Henric indeed sees his own narrative within this transpersonal autobiography, albeit in negative terms.
which they would revolt, historical events and individual truths interrelate, intersect, and mutually inform one another.\textsuperscript{25}

Thus, for example, the opening chronological table indexes temporal transitions in both subjective and historico-economic terms, listing shifts in the materials used for hut construction as well as for large-scale economic production: “temps de carbet et d’ajoupas” pairs with “les habitations sucrières esclavagistes”; “temps de paille,” with “le règne des grandes usines centrales”; “temps de bois-caisse,” with “le règne précaire des grandes usines à sucre”; “temps de fibrociment,” with “[l’effondrement de] l’économie sucrière”; and “temps béton,” with “l’anéantissement de la production économique” (13-15). Similarly, the table lists world events and Marie-Sophie’s experiences side-by-side, as if to lend them equal clout. The table sets the stage for the text’s subsequent “va-et-vient conflictuel et complémentaire entre l’Histoire traditionnelle et occidental […] d’une part, et les histories multiples, pittoresques, humaines […] de l’autre,” as Lorna Milne remarks (115). And indeed, these simultaneously conflicting and complementary visions of history play out throughout the text, which portrays historical events through a markedly subjective point of view. For instance, Esternome’s description of abolition and the \textit{livret de travail} curiously resembles historian Richard Burton’s account in \textit{La Famille coloniale};\textsuperscript{26} yet Chamoiseau’s rendition also depicts the former slaves’ grappling with this transition. Already \textit{affranchi} for some time, Esternome’s experience of abolition perhaps diverges from that of the wider slave population’s. In fact, he is more

\textsuperscript{25} As Chamoiseau tells McCusker, he doesn’t “see colonization as \textit{the} determining element,” adding, “it’s more important to identify the kind of relational fusion that was in play” (“On Slavery” 81).

\textsuperscript{26} See notably Chapters One and Two.
preoccupied with his then-mate Ninon than with the prospect of ensuing citizenship.27

Through this relationship, however, the reader gains special access to his negotiation of the radical change. Tellingly, he explains revolutionary ideals to Ninon in terms proper to both the Metropole and to their unique experiences:

Mon Esternome tentait d’expliquer à sa négresse des mots étranges comme Monarchie, Révolution, Royauté éphémère, Dynastie d’Orléans, Bourbon, Réforme électorale, Maréchal Bugeaud, République, Girondins, Marseillaise, Emancipations, Gouvernement provisoire… […] il lui dévoilait docte que la République coiffait tout un chacun de la couronne de roi comme si la rivière Roxelane plutôt que de descendre inversait son élan vers l’œil d’eau du cratère. (113-114)

Accorded a superfluous capital letter, these notions appear as if beyond Esternome’s grasp. He too, then, must assimilate new vocabulary in order to navigate this comically large discursive gap. “D’un trait d’encre,” the couple acquires “une existence officielle” (144); with this, the term “citizen” enters their vernacular: “[l]e mot intéressant était celle de citoyen. Comment allez-vous citoyen?… Bien bonjour citoyen… Eskisé citoyen… Citoyen ho… citoyen à toutes sauces, à l’huile et au piment. Poules, chattes, cochons […] devinrent ainsi, par la grâce du rêve, de parfaits citoyens” (145).28 Though here satirical, the gap appears more solemn when the term “work” replaces “citizen”: “[t]ous parlèrent de Travail, Travail, Travail, reprenez Travail sur vos habitations” (147). Indeed, the promises of liberation fail to materialize; in Françoise Verges’s words, Liberté, Fraternité, Égalité “devi[ent] dans la colonie, Dieu, la France, le Travail” (30).

27 As Marie-Sophie explains, “Liberté et Ninon se mêlèrent si tellement dans sa tête-mabolo, qu’il […] fut toujours pas très possible de distinguer de quelle-auquelle des deux il s’inquiétait vraiment” (112).
28 Moreover Chamoiseau’s depiction of Esternome’s and Ninon’s integration into civil status is both comical — Esternome is named “Laborieux” “parce qu’excédé le secrétaire à plume l’avait trouvé laborieux dans calcul d’un nom” (144) — and historically accurate. On the practice giving invented surnames to enfranchised slaves, see Chapter Two of Burton, La Famille coloniale, as well as Daniele Laouchez, “Quelques origines des noms de famille à la Martinique.”
this, the couple returns to fieldwork, roams the city streets, and eventually embarks to the hillside to establish their own community:

Ce qu’ils vécurent là […], des lots de bougres l’avaient vécu aussi. Eux étaient du nord, d’autres du sud, ou encore au mitan du pays. Si bien que pour me divulguer cette odyssée voilée, mon Esternome utilisa souvent le terme de *noukêta, noukêta, noukêta*. C’était une sorte de nous magique. À son sens, il chargeait un destin d’à-plusieurs dessinant ce nous-mêmes […]. (160)

To navigate the gap between freedom and enslavement, Esternome and Ninon, like “des lots de bougres,” found a hillside community that operates both within and against the dominant power structure. In a Glissantian move of *détour*,29 they circumvent the dialectical relationship of assimilation and outright rejection; they abandon “leurs histoires pour baille-descendre dans [une autre] histoire” (159) so as to forge an alternate sense of group belonging.

Marie-Sophie similarly navigates through historical happenings. After her parents pass away, she accumulates odd jobs in the city and encounters new ideologies with each place of employment. Working at *mulâtre* Alcibiade’s household, for example, she participates in the intense political debates concerning “La Mère-Patrie et ses enfants” (317) that animate the French Antillean territories under the Third Republic.30 Although she concedes “n’y [pas] compr[en]dre grand-chose” (314), Marie-Sophie rallies for a time to Alcibiade’s belief in “la France immortelle, glorieuse, universelle” (311). Doing so, in effect, initiates her into a “une société semblable” (309), and seems to rescue her

29 “Le détour” Glissant writes, “est le recours ultime d’une population dont la domination par un Autre est occulté: il faut aller *ailleurs* chercher le principe de domination, qui n’est pas évident dans le pays même: parce que le mode de domination (l’assimilation) est le meilleur des camouflages […]. Le Détour est la parallaxe de cette recherche” (*Le Discours antillais* 48).

30 Chamoiseau’s portrayal of the politically minded *mulâtre* folks again curiously resembles Burton’s account of the same period. The pillars of Alcibiade’s stance — centered on social organization and physical activity — illustrate the same flourishing of debates, trade unions, professional federations, and sports clubs led by *mulâtres* that Burton discusses in Chapter Three of *La Famille coloniale*. 
from a life defined solely by survival. Césaire’s subsequent election, however, foils this seeming bliss. After noting Alcibiade’s distress — “Un nègre se disant de l’Afrique, allait administrer la ville... et communiste en plus!” (322) —, Marie-Sophie nonetheless descends into the city streets to celebrate. When she returns that evening, Alcibiade rapes her for having transgressed his beliefs, after which she falls into a depression that doesn’t abate until she leaves the household to join another hillside community. Césaire’s election, by way of Alcibiade’s assault, thus marks a turning point in Marie-Sophie’s life: “[d’avoir été comme ça durant presque deux heures, le jouet flaccide de ce sieur Alcibiade, dut être ce qui m’amena à ne plus jamais me laisser commander par personne” (325). In her own gesture of détour — and after affronting many more tribulations — Marie-Sophie eventually settles on the Texaco site, and will struggle for its official recognition for another thirty years.

As this brief outline suggests, Chamoiseau’s portrayal of historical events in Texaco is expansive; to undertake an exhaustive study of them is not my endeavor here.31 Among those not yet discussed, the tour of the Madonna statue around Martinique and de Gaulle’s visit in 1964 are worth mentioning. Both offer a glimmer of hope to Texaco residents: contact with the statue ushers in a moment of good fortune, and de Gaulle’s visit provokes Marie-Sophie to implore the President for help. But, just as the good fortune brought by the Madonna falters, so too does Marie-Sophie’s pursuit of de Gaulle around the city fail.32 In the end, it is only by reaching out to Césaire that the Texaco

31 On this subject, Milne proposes a convincing reading of Marie-Sophie’s path as a symbol of Martinican consciousness writ large, noting the stagnating depression she suffers at the Alcibiade household as exemplary of the “crise d’identité propre aux Antilles” (124). See particularly pp.118-131 of her monograph.
32 Moreover, the timeline of these two events is curious. Though Burton places the Madonna statue’s arrival in Martinique in 1948, the inhabitants of Texaco don’t come into contact with it until after de
neighborhood achieves legitimate status. This triad of events, in effect, neatly sums up Chamoiseau’s portrayal of historical and subjective truths in *Texaco*. Fleshing out the “skeleton” of historical facts though a subjective perspective, Chamoiseau allows both views to interweave so skillfully that the distinction between them falters. What’s more, by appropriating historical material through *multiple* subjective perspectives, Chamoiseau’s work undermines the would-be authority of any singular point of view; the subjective nature of *all* stories comes to the fore. As the wise Mentô advises Marie-Sophie, “[t]outes les histoires sont là, mais il n’y a pas d’Histoire” (376).

Because of this multiplicity of perspectival truths, the otherwise unsettling contradictions that surface in narrative content lose some of their salience. These can be comical, like when Marie-Sophie refuses to recount one story to the scribe, a story that figures nonetheless in the parentheses that splice her disclaimer in two: “[j]’aurais pu raconter en cinémascope cette histoire d’amour ([…]) mais je n’ai pas cela à dire” (25-26); as well as more solemn, such as Esternome’s fluctuating view of the Metropole.33 As Esternome tells Marie-Sophie, “[d]ans ce que je te dis là, il y a le presque-vrai, et le parfois-vrai, et le vrai à moitié. Dire une vie c’est ça, natter tout ça comme on tresse les courbes du bois-côtelettes pour lever une case. Et le vrai-vrai naît de cette tresse” (160).

Like in *Les Années*, the braid metaphor is crucial for grasping *Texaco*’s portrayal of subjective and historical truths, for two reasons: first, it conjures up the gesture of crossing and weaving that is critical to the text’s relational narration; second, and more importantly, the braid implies the presence of interstitial spaces. Constructing “truth” in

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33 For example, in one notebook excerpt Esternome exclaims “VIVE MANMAN DOUDOU LA FRANCE!” (95), but in the main body of text refuses the idea that “la Liberté […] viendra des grandes traditions de la France,” and asserts that “la liberté va venir des nègres de la terre” (110). As Marie-Sophie concedes, “[m]on Esternome sur ce sujet me dit tout puis le contraire de tout” (95).
*Texaco*, then, means allowing its different versions to interrelate within and despite those zones that remain obscured by the braid’s constant crossings. There is no meta-historical narrative here; but, to echo Christine Chivallon’s argument in “On the Registers of Caribbean Memory of Slavery,” it not because of any incapacity to produce one. Rather, it is because Chamoiseau rejects authoritarian visions of the past and champions in its place a conception of truth — individual, collective, historical — that is multiple and productively unstable.

Ernaux’s chronicle of Metropolitan France similarly juxtaposes historical and subjective truths. Though her project is non-fictional at base, she too portrays historical happenings as individually negotiated phenomena. “La visée première des *Années,*” writes Ernaux, “c’était d’inscrire dans l’Histoire l’existence d’une femme et, partant, celle des femmes, et des hommes” (*Le Vrai lieu* 74). To this end, Ernaux folds national and global events into her work as just another source of collective discourse, lucidly demonstrating their absorption into the doxa. Like Chamoiseau, she too occupies the space between official historical discourse and a self-determined sense of the past. Ernaux, however, goes a step further. Albeit fabricated, memory in *Texaco* functions as a counter narrative to the Master Narrative of Euro-centric History. Presenting the Texaco tale through Marie-Sophie’s memory, Chamoiseau seems to participate in what Kerwin Klein refers to as “postmodern reckonings of history as the marching black boot of historical consciousness” (145). And to a certain extent, *Les Années* does this too; but Ernaux also narrates the progressive shift from a teleological conception of History toward an individually based one, or the emergence of memory in historical discourse, to borrow the title of Klein’s article. On this shift, François Hartog writes:
Dans l’ensemble, l’histoire a imposé sa loi. Car elle était tournée vers le futur, portée par le progrès et les lois de l’évolution, composant chaque jour le récit du devenir. Mais les grandes crises traversées ont entraîné […] des remontées ou des poussées mémorielles, dont l’histoire est, en partie, nourrie pour les transmuer en histoires […]. (Croire en l’histoire 52, emphasis added).

The collapse of History as Master Narrative (or as marching black boot) thus gives way to a multiplication of narratives that are subject-position specific, a shift which Les Années clearly registers. Initially dominant, History and the myth of progress start to wane with burgeoning consumer culture, which heralds the explosion of micro-narratives to come. The prominence of the “master terms” memory, commemoration, patrimony, and identity progressively overshadow the Great Narrative of the past.34 “La mémoire raccourcissait” (1011), Ernaux writes; “[I]e lien avec le passé s’estompa. On transmettait juste le présent” (1012). Les Années, in effect, portrays the shift from the “claire vision de l’avenir et de ses fins” that Pierre Nora asserts “nous dictait ce que nous devions retenir du passé pour préparer cet avenir” (Présent, nation, mémoire 25), towards the present as “la catégorie impérative de notre compréhension de nous-mêmes” (83).

Presentism is the term Hartog coins to define this shift, a term that curiously resonates with Ernaux’s project. “Je ne voulais pas faire un livre d’histoire,” concedes Ernaux, “ni même de mémoire, mais de rendre le passé comme il était quand il était un présent” (Le Vrai lieu 103, emphasis added). Indeed, her work is driven by a presentist impulse, which, in turn, lends her depiction of historical happenings their subjective quality. Les Années thus participates in the shift in historical consciousness that Hartog

34 “Master terms” is my loose translation of Hartog’s notion of “maîtres mots.” “S’il n’y a plus de grands récits” Hartog writes, “se sont mis à circuler, en revanche, des maître mots, qui fonctionnent comme supports de toutes sortes de récits fragmentaires et provisoires. Ils permettent des mises en forme; ils autorisent des prises de parole […] Il y a d’abord le quatuor formé par la mémoire, la commémoration, le patrimoine et l’identité, auquel il faut, au moins, adjoindre le crime contre l’humanité, la victime, le témoin, d’autres encore” (Croire en l’histoire 49-50).
and Nora respectively outline; and yet, the text doesn’t espouse presentism entirely. On the contrary, by exposing its workings, Ernaux also deconstructs its logic and, using it against the grain, shows how such micro-narratives can simultaneously inform and obfuscate a coherent sense of self. Ernaux states this in no uncertain terms. In citing “le présent commun” as a predominate conversation piece, for example, she also notes an “évitement instinctif des sujets réveillant les vieilles envies sociales” (1012). One discourse, in effect, has simply taken the place of another, occluding the biting, divisive social realities the older discourse might have better articulated.

Les Années also demonstrates the deficiencies of presentism through form and juxtapositions. When describing a political address of the early 1980s, for example, Ernaux writes, “on ne retenait rien, sauf une « petite phrase » à laquelle on n’aurait d’ailleurs pas fait attention si les journalistes […] ne l’avaient mise triomphalement en circulation” (1019). Here, Ernaux corroborates Nora’s idea that it is “aux mass media que commen[ce] à revenir le monopole de l’histoire” (Présent, nation, mémoire 37), or, in Hartog’s terms, that we have entered “dans un temps médiatique d’historisation” (Croire en l’histoire 60). Yet, by opting not to incorporate the “petite phrase” in question, she brings the reader’s attention to the media’s power, rather than whatever they might have retained from the specific political address. Similarly, juxtapositions expose the mere multiplication of subject-position specific narratives to be insufficient:

Nous mutions. Nous ne connaissions pas notre forme nouvelle. (1072-1073)

Designed to allow all types of group-identities to crystalize, the act of naming and commemorating events and movements in fact leaves the individual caught up somewhere between all and none of them. Listing the numerous identity-constructs available only brings this inaptitude further to the fore. Popular historiography, too, regularly appears at odds with individual narratives. Despite the disintegration of History into multi-perspectival histories, the individual remains disconnected from the course of historical events: “[o]n ne s’avisait pas d’évaluer ce qu’on vivait par rapport aux discours politiques ni aux événements du monde. […] Dans le cours de l’existence personnelle, l’Histoire ne signifiait pas.” (984). Even mass acts of violence have little currency in the unfolding of daily lives:

Qui, en dehors des parents des victimes, des rescapés, se souvenait des morts de la station Saint-Michel, dont le nom n’était écrit nulle part […], des morts oubliés plus vite que ceux de la rue de Rennes, pourtant anciens de neuf ans, et même ceux de la rue des Rosiers, encore plus lointains. Les faits s’éclipsaient avant d’accéder au récit. L’impassibilité augmentait. (1051)

Here, Ernaux passes over three fatal bombings occurring in the heart of Paris in a manner so offhand that it perfectly mirrors the “indifference” cited on the next line. Composed solely of a subject and a verb, the terseness of the final sentence encapsulates the previous paragraph, depicting the Saint-Michel attacks as barely significant in the public’s eyes, and those of the rue de Rennes and the rue des Rosiers as subjects of

35 This equally holds with regard to the narrative of Nation propagated by the family at the opening of Les Années. Indeed, because parents and grandparents only speaks about “what they saw,” never do they evoke the deportation of Jewish children, the Warsaw ghetto, or the nuclear holocaust in Hiroshima. “D’où l’impression,” Ernaux writes, “que les cours d’histoire, les documentaires et les films, plus tard, ne dissiperaient pas: ni les fours crématoires ni la bombe atomique ne se situaient dans la même époque que le beurre au marché noir, les alertes et les descentes à la cave” (936).
forgetting. But if these historical events fail to have a lasting impact on the elle’s individual story, why mention them at all?

One example may help to clarify. Discussing in Les Années the representation of women in the media during the 1990s, Ernaux points to a hole in collective discourse: “[l’]oubli tombait sur leurs luttes, seule mémoire à ne pas être ravivée officiellement” (1037). Without an official narrative retracing their struggles, the women’s liberation movement seems to fall into oblivion. By pointing this out, Ernaux exposes official narratives as arbitrary and dependent upon the marginalization of other narratives. By inscribing such a wealth of historical events into her text, then, she not only demonstrates the shift towards memory in contemporary historical consciousness, but she also points to the incapacity of even a memory-informed, identity-driven concept of history to grasp the individual’s experience. To echo Marie-Pascale Huglo in “En vitesse,” Les Années indeed underscores the “décalage entre la mémoire d’une époque et ce que l’Histoire a retenu de cette époque,” “romp[t] avec tout discours rétrospectif unifiant,” and “montr[e] que plusieurs médiations de l’Histoire cohabitent” (46). But Les Années also capitalizes on this “co-habitation”: in this life narrative, subjective and official historical truths — in all their variants — interrelate but never fully coalesce; the individual story takes shape somewhere in the intermediary and mutually informative space formed between the two.

3.3 – The Truth Isn’t Out There

Though not grounded in any specific historical context, Traversée de la Mangrove and Babyface shed interesting light on the phenomenon of multiple truths. However paradoxically, their more fictional modes allow them the latitude to poignantly address
the notion of historical truths discussed above. *Traversée*, specifically, seems to respond to what Meave McCusker describes as the “double bind” Antillean writers face as “oppressed by the overwhelming presence of the past, while at the same time […] haunted by its (apparent) dereliction” (Patrick Chamoiseau 76). For many Caribbean authors, Chamoiseau included, this has meant composing historical narratives that fill in the gaps left by the History of the slave trade and colonial domination. Condé, however, refuses this path, and offers instead an acute criticism of the notion of origins and the intransigent truths it generates.

As his double name intimates, the enigma surrounding Francis Sancher/Francesco Sanchez’s identity directly reflects the thematic preoccupation with origins in *Traversée*. Each of the village inhabitants seeks to decipher “d’où il sort, celui-là?” (234), “quelqu’un qu’on ne connaît ni d’Ève ni d’Adam” (31): “[c]’est la question!” (58).

Indeed, it is this fundamentally unanswerable question the entire narrative poses. Moïse the postman concludes that he is not native to Guadeloupe when he doesn’t understand the Creole salutation *Sa ou fè*, which “même les négropolitians […] de la banlieue parisienne savent” (31); Aristide calls him “n’importe quel vagabond” (72); even wise-woman Man Sonson, seemingly unthreatened by Sancher’s cryptic lineage, remarks, “qu’on dise de lui ce qu’on voudra, il n’était pas né n’importe où” (86). As if in an echo chamber, each character elicits a different version of the newcomer’s origins, his motivations for moving to Rivière au Sel, and the source of wealth:

Les histoires les plus folles se mirent à circuler. En réalité, Francis Sancher, aurait tué un homme dans son pays et aurait empoché son magot. Ce serait un trafiquant de drogue dure, un de ceux que la police, postée à Marie-Galante, recherchait en vain. Un trafiquant d’armes ravitaillant les guérillas de l’Amérique latine […] Ce qui était sûr, c’est que les revenus de Francis Sancher était d’origine louche. (38-39)
Most, in the end, believe Sancher to be of Cuban descent, though many also evoke extensive travel in Africa. When asked, however, Sancher ostensibly claims Colombia as his place of birth (221). What’s more, a land title and a published memoir — tellingly penned by an unnamed author — suggest that Sancher’s ancestors were French Creole slave-owners. It is through this angle of presumed commonality that Mira’s father Loulou solicits his sympathy:

Nous appartenons au même camp. Dans les livres d’histoire, on appelle nos ancêtres les Découvreurs. D’accord, ils ont sali leur sang avec des Négresses; dans ton cas je crois aussi avec des Indiennes. Pourtant, nous n’avons rien de commun avec ces Nègres à tête grinnée, ces cultivateurs qui ont toujours manié le coutelas ou conduit le cabrouet à bœufs pour notre compte. Ne traite pas Mira comme si elle était l’enfant d’un de ces rien-du-tout. (127)

But Sancher rebuffs Loulou, retorting: “je n’appartiens plus à aucun camp” (127).

Despite so many competing narratives, Sancher claims to belong nowhere. Even his name reflects this fact: as Renée Larrier points out, one of the combinations of the phonemes /sã/ and /∫e/ is “sans chez” — without home (“A Roving ‘I’” 88).

Though a conventional reading might try to resolve the enigma surrounding Sancher’s story, Traversée belies that possibility. The reader can only follow Vilma’s lead when she asserts, “je ne saurais pas dire la vérité dans toutes les bêtises que les gens de Rivière au Sel racontent” (194). Fundamentally unknowable, Sancher acts only as a mirror reflecting the townspeople’s fixation on origins, the white page onto which they

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36 I insist on the “ostensible” status of Sancher’s reported speech because he is always already an absent character. Any words ascribed to his voice necessarily pass through another townspeople’s perspective and thus lose a grain of reliability.
37 Embellished by historian Émile Étienne’s wife, gossip eventually transforms Sancher into the “descendant d’un béké maudit par ses esclaves et revenant errer sur les lieux de ses crimes passés” (224).
write their own stories.\textsuperscript{38} His position as enigmatic Other stems less from \textit{his} identity than from the villagers’ own xenophobia. The subsections, which tend to focus more on family history and individual hardships than on Sancher, make this amply clear.\textsuperscript{39} Indeed, some barely mention Sancher at all!\textsuperscript{40} In these tales, moreover, notions of race, skin color, and nationality dominate: Postman Moïse is described as “mi-Chinois, mi-Nègre” (39); Dinah questions her husband’s mistreatment of her by asking, “[e]st-ce que ma peau n’est pas claire?” (106); Carmélien Ramsaran “respects” the Lameaulnes family because they are “presque blancs” (176); Man Sonson dreads being buried “parmi des étrangers, des hommes, des femmes qu’on ne connaît ni d’Ève ni d’Adam” (81); both Loulou and schoolteacher Léocadie bemoan immigration: “il y [a] trop d’étrangers” (95); “ce pays-là est à l’encan. Il appartient à tout le monde à présent” (139); even wealth fails to create commonality between the two most affluent men of Rivière au Sel: “s’ils avaient certainement autant d’argent l’un que l’autre, ils n’étaient pas de même race” (129).

Race, skin color, origins: all these notions feed each character’s sense of self via the absolutist terms of a Same/Other dialectic. Despite their composite nature, the townspeople hold on to a single-root conception of identity.

Sancher, whose origins remain uncertain, disrupts this system. Indeed, his story never materializes with any certainty; only competing truths subsist. As a result, the reader must either accept \textit{all} or \textit{none} of them, which ultimately amounts to the same

\textsuperscript{38} The mirror analogy is Michael Lucey’s in “Voices Accounting for the Past,” the blank page, Francis Higginson’s in “Un cahier de racines.”
\textsuperscript{39} The first example of this occurs \textit{before} the start of the wake, spotlighting origin as a central theme: “si certains d’entre eux [les Ramsaran] avaient gardé leur sang pur […], nombreux étaient ceux qui s’étaient mariés dans familles nègres ou mulâtres de la région. Ainsi des liens de sang s’étaient tissés” (23).
\textsuperscript{40} Both Sylvestre Ramsaran and Dodose Pélagie “n’avaient pas de pensée à perdre pour Francis Sancher” (212).
thing.\(^{41}\) In the face of the townspeople’s preoccupations with origins, Sancher reflects only lack — hence the mirror and black page metaphors. On the level of narrative content, his uncertain origins exemplify the Caribbean identity conundrum, which Chamoiseau cogently articulates when asking, “who among us can claim a distinct genealogy, with well defined, sketched, and recognized branches? […] What Creole person in the Caribbean today possesses a transparent past that would authorize certainty?” (“Reflections” 392). Condé’s portrayal of identitary preoccupations thus realistically depicts the mixed heritages of Guadeloupian peoples wrought with racial and ethnic tensions. This is the approach Marie-Agnès Sourieau takes, coupling it with psychoanalysis, when she reads the novel an “immense conflit œdipien non résolu […] à deux niveaux — celui lié à l’origine culturelle et celui provenant de la filiation individuelle” (“Traversée de la Mangrove” 110).\(^{42}\) Yet Condé concedes in an interview with the same critic that she “présente ces personnages obsédés par le passé pour montrer les dangers de ce genre de quête” (1095). Turning our attention to narrative mode, then, the centrality of origin-based thought sketches an altogether different picture. The problem of origins, in this view, is a false problem. If by foregrounding the question of origin, Condé seems to participate in Caribbean authors’ long tradition of history- and identity-focused narratives, by disallowing any definitive narrative truth from taking shape, she in fact deflects the problem, undoing it from within.

\(^{41}\) I follow the lead of a number of scholars here, all of whom point to Sancher as being from “nowhere” and “everywhere” at once, or, in Ruthmarie Mitsch’s words, as “a man of multiple identities — or no identity” (“Maryse Condé’s Mangroves,” 54). Rose-Myriam Réjouis, in “Le véto héroïque” and Patrick ffrench, in “Community in Maryse Condé’s Traversée de la Mangrove,” make similar arguments.

\(^{42}\) Condé’s childhood experiences in Guadeloupe supports this interpretation. Born to a Black bourgeois family, she was prohibited from frequenting White, Mulatto, and Indian children, as well as those “Blacks” who did not “succeed.” On this, see her interviews with Françoise Pfaff and Vèvè Clark, as well as her autobiographical texts Victoire, ou le saveur des mots and La Vie sans fards.
In the end, it is through this straw man tactic that Traversée addresses the issue of Caribbean history; only, circumventing the historical in favor of the fictitious, Condé “dit les choses sans les dire,” as Delphine Perret puts its (“L’Écriture mosaïque” 200). Condé’s work suggests that narratives focused on origins — and, by extension, history —, are ultimately impotent, an impasse like the one the folks of Rivière au Sel find themselves in. “En fin de compte,” Condé tells Sourieau, “il est peut-être plus important de […] composer avec ce qui nous manque que d’essayer de s’inventer un passé pour combler ce manque” (1096). Again saying things without saying them, Condé here takes up arms with her Negritude predecessors and Creolist contemporaries. Obliquely responding to Aimé Césaire, her work “arrach[e] [les Antillais] à l’emprise utopiste et homogénéisante du Cahier [d’un retour au pays natal],” as Francis Higginson contends (97). I argue, however, that it also rejoins Chamoiseau, who, if the Creolist manifesto is any indication, embraces the heterogeneity lacking in Negritude thought. Contrary to Condé, however, Chamoiseau seems to write within the Negritude heritage, not only in his focalization on the past, but also in the role he accords to Césaire in Texaco (curiously, the sole literary publication listed in the opening table is Césaire’s Cahier…).

Traversée, on the other hand, not only suggests that “[l]’histoire, c’est [un] cauchemar” (235), but, by refusing any neatly packaged narration — even one marked by the seal of multiplicity —, it also portrays quests for truth as always already doomed to failure. In Sancher’s words, “[l]a vérité pourrait t’écorcher les oreilles!” (33). Indeed, Condé requires her reader to suspend all quests for clarity and, again, to construct meaning despite and within multiple truths.43 In this, her work resonates strongly with Glissant’s

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43 It is in this sense that the numerous gender readings the novel has stimulated seem less inaccurate than shortsighted. What Condé foregrounds are not male or female visions of Sancher, but rather the
thought, demonstrating that “[l]’important n’est pas dans la réponse, mais dans le questionnement” (Le Discours antillais 258, emphasis added).

Kwahlélé’s work echoes Condé’s on numerous counts: it too presents multiple versions of narrative sequences, pivots around the unknowable eponymous protagonist, leaves the reader with no definitive answers, and approaches history through a purely fictive angle. *Babyface*, however, is more grounded in the historical real than it might initially seem. An informed reader will quickly realize that Kwahulélé’s work is deeply entrenched in Ivorian history. Jérôme’s first journal fragment establishes this historical context: “[f]in des années cinquante. […] Les indépendances. […] Guerre froide” (10). The historical setting becomes more apparent as references to “l’Identité pure” (57) and ensuing civil war in Eburnéa surface. When the term “eburnité” (64) appears in a later Fragment, the historically real fate of the plot is sealed — *eburnité* would be nothing other than a thinly disguised version of Henri Konan Bedi’s notion of *ivoirité*. Following historians Mohamed A. El-Khawas and Julius Ndumbe Anyu, Bedi “amended the constitution to include Ivoirité, requiring that a presidential candidate must have two Ivorian parents […], intend[ing] to prevent Outtara, the former prime minister and a political rival […], from competing in the next presidential election” (42). “Outtara's Ivorian nationality,” they continue, “was being questioned” (42). It is precisely this notion of national purity that drives the political plot line in *Babyface*:

Président était hors de toute culpabilité. […] Président a exhibé à la télévision Constitution et nous a pris à témoin […]. Et c’était écrit noir sur blanc que le pouvoir n’appartenait qu’aux fils d’Eburnéa, et qu’à eux seuls, qu’il fallait être né sur le sol eburnéan d’un père et d’une mère eburnéans eux-mêmes nés de père et de mère eburnéans également nés…. Ce n’est donc pas lui, Président, qui a refusé qu’Abibi Dikété, […] se présentât contre lui aux élections présidentielles, mais Constitution. (162)
Abibi Dikété, le seul qui eût pu le battre [Président] dans un scrutin ouvert et réellement démocratique, était né de père et de mère étrangers… (163)

Kwahulé, then, only scarcely camouflages his portrayal of the civil war that plagued Ivory Coast at the turn of the millennium. It is through this fictional angle that he acutely, albeit allegorically, critiques all homogeneous narratives of national belonging.

First and foremost, nearly the entire political plot line takes place in Jérôme’s journal fragments, which are repeatedly underscored as fictitious: penned by Jérôme, labeled journal imaginé, and placed into quotation marks, the journal is almost excessively demarcated as fabricated. Moreover, the friend group often references the Fragments as if they were severed from the text’s other diegetic realms. Yet, as previously noted, the Journal routinely mirrors the first-person perspectives. The reader is thus led to question the veracity of both interfaces: is each “tissé de fictions et de réalités” (72), as Mo’Akissi says of the Jérôme’s compositions? Adding to this, two Journal fragments explicitly underscore Jérôme’s writing as purely imaginary. The first describes Pamela’s house, where the friend group regularly gathers, in a list form that appears as a work-in-progress: detailing exterior and interior design, the rooms, and the garden, Jérôme splices his description with remarks such as “probablement,” “certainement,” “à préciser,” and “se renseigner” (36-37). Even more troubling is his deliberately contradictory depiction of the Muse, Monique Monastier. Thus, apropos her eye color:

Petits yeux en amande…
— Vifs. (Insister sur cette vivacité dans les yeux de Monique Monastier …)
— Pas blues…
— Verts peut-être…
— Certainement bruns…
— De la lumière noire d’une gitane de cinéma…
— À moins qu’ils soient blues grâce à des lentilles de contact… (159)
Idem for the description of her hair, nose, mouth, and lips. Given the possible combinations of these variants, the portrait of the Muse is wholly worthless: she could be anyone or, conversely, everyone, which amounts to the same thing. What’s more, this Fragment cites Jérôme’s journal as an extant source of supporting evidence, and thus counters the friend group’s references to it as imaginary: “[q]uoi qu’il en soit, du moins si l’on en croit certains passages des ‘poèmes d’Abibi à la Muse,’ Monique Monastier n’est pas qu’on peut appeler une belle femme” (160, emphasis added).

Similarly, two renditions of the culminating political scene occur. During the first, Babyface enters the war zone, the rebel fighters lay down their arms, and the Muse, Abibi, and Président exit their shared tent in the nude. Holding a machete, Babyface remains silent as they speak to him. “[Faisant] un pas de retrait comme pour prendre la distance adéquate en vue de coup” (179), he seems to leave the trio to the militia’s will, telling them, “[i]ls sont à vous” (179). Babyface then disappears on the horizon, machete brandished over his head, while the reader infers the death of all three from following passage: “[a]u crépuscule, Little-Manhattan vit flotter sur les eaux de la lagune trois corps, ceux de deux hommes noirs et et d’une femme blanche” (180). Presented through the people’s point of view, the second version repeats much of the first. In this rendition, Babyface arrives machete in hand, and the Muse and Abibi exit the tent nude to meet him. Again, Babyface remains silent: “[La Muse] parle. Il se tait” (181); “Président à son tour parle à Pétit [Babyface]. Il lui parle, il lui parle, il lui parle. Mais Pétit ne lui répond pas” (185). Other components, however, both complement and contradict the first account. Faced with Babyface’s machete, the Muse attempts to sway him by seizing his genitals. Casting her away, he lets the machete drop in the decapitating move, whereas
the militiamen slay Président and Abibi “sans même réfléchir, comme si Pétit avait sifflé à [leurs] oreilles un ordre mystérieux” (186, emphasis added). But the Muse does not die: her body rises from the ground in search of the missing head, then pounces on Babyface to strangle him. Subdued by a bewitching song, the body eventually collapses; the head, however, transforms into a vulture and flies away. Finally, Babyface does not disappear victorious on the horizon, but vanishes altogether: “disparu […] plus personne ne l’a revu” (188).

Leaving, aside, for the moment, the magical quality of the second account, what strikes here is the presence of the two versions. Many of the contradictory details are of little importance: whether or not Président was dressed — he appears nude in the first version, dressed in the second — has no consequence on his outcome; likewise for Babyface’s ostensible directive to the militiamen. By including the two versions, then Kwahulé asks the reader to relinquish her quest for narrative truth and, in turn, embrace multiplicity. Rather than suspend her disbelief, she must occupy it fully. Indeed, Babyface never ceases to demand this, from the proliferation of names and nicknames,44 to the sliding between voices and diegetic realms, up through the multiple iterations of narrative sequences. This is the case notably with the Nolivé-pregnancy plot line, of which Augustin Asaah cites six different versions. Schematically speaking, Nolivé has purportedly been impregnated by Streaker, Mo’Akissi’s husband. The premises of this impregnation, however, remain unclear. According to an account in Jérôme’s journal, Mo’Akissi instructed Streaker to mate with her younger sister, herself unwilling to bear a child. Mozati, on the other hand, believes Nolivé to have “stolen” her best friend’s man.

44 Mo’Akissi’s husband’s name is Wachiira, but is most often designated as Streaker; President’s name is Adama Katajé, but this rarely appears in the text; Monique, the Muse, is also called Petite-queue-de-vache; Babyface is “le jeune homme à la face d’ange,” Pétit, and Djê Koadjo…
Nolivé, for her part, refutes both versions, claiming that Streaker seduced her of his own volition, and, later, that Mo’Akissi coerced her to seduce him. Other details of the story vary, contradicting one another to the extent that the reader is left entirely perplexed as to what transpired between the three. And, again, it is this impossibility of knowing that is key.

Kwahulé, in effect, impedes any definitive reading of the narrative, both in the friend group plotline and in the political one. The eponymous character himself reflects this most clearly. During the penultimate chapter, Mozati surprisingly encounters Babyface during a taxi ride to the airport. In a twist of fate worthy of a horror film, the taxi driver turns around, and reveals himself to be the same beloved Mozati hopes to meet in Paris. He then discloses his “true” identity to her:

« Je ne m’appelle pas Babyface, ni Djê Koadjo. Je ne suis pas étudiant. Je n’ai jamais mis les pieds à Paris […]. Mon bizness ce sont les filles comme toi, Mozatimélé, leur offrir l’homme dont elles n’osent même pas rêver. […] Je ne suis ni timide ni poli. Je n’en suis pas le contraire non plus. Je ne suis rien. Rien d’autre que ce que vous, les femmes, créez […]. » (204, emphasis added)

Babyface, it turns out, established an elaborate scheme of letter sending through a third party located in Paris only to swindle Mozati of her fortune. He was never who he claimed to be, and, more importantly, asserts having no identity whatsoever. For the friend group, Babyface plays a role modeled after Mozati’s affection, the defining details of which remain scant: “[v]ingt-trois ans. Des parents disparus dans un accident automobile. Ancien pensionnaire de l’orphelinat de Pingéville. Des études d’économie à Paris” (105). Within the political realm, Babyface receives no more description than the “jeune officier aux origines incertaines” (158, emphasis added). For the reader, he is as
difficult to untangle as is Francis Sancher in Traversée. Equally indeterminate, Sancher and Babyface act as the blank canvases on which both narratives, in all of their contradictory renditions, are written.

Mozati’s descent into madness quite neatly sums up this disregard for narrative truth in Babyface. After discovering her lover’s deceit, Mozati is interned in what the reader presumes to be a psychiatric hospital, where she continues to believe that Babyface will return:

Peut-être que Pamela a raison, et que Babyface n’est pas Babyface. Peut-être. Peut-être. Et alors? Ça change quoi à quoi? Qu’est-ce que ça change? Ça change quoi? […] Chaque fois qu’ils m’enfoncent dans la gorge leurs comprimés, chaque fois qu’ils me plantent dans le bras leurs piqûres, et que le sommeil, de tout son poids, s’assoit sur mes paupières, me reviennent ces mêmes images. […] Et la douleur qui traine après chacune de ces images, elle, est vraie. La nuit et le froid dans mon cœur, c’est vrai. Ce que je sens, c’est vrai. Rien ne cela. Rien ne cela. Rien ne cela. Cela rien ne peut l’empêcher. Même pas leurs comprimés. Même pas leurs piqûres. Même si Pamela a raison, même si Karidja a raison, même si Mo’Akissi a raison, même si tout Little-Manhattan a raison, cela ne change rien au fait que j’ai mal. (208-209, emphasis added)

For Mozati, then, truth is relative: maybe everyone else is right; maybe some absolute truth is out there; but, for her, it doesn’t matter. Her truth is defined only by her experience, desire, and pain. Transposing Mozati’s view onto the political realm, Kwahulé seems to suggest that relativism might counter the absolutist thought driving civil war in Eburnéa. But if Mozati’s status as victim leads us to empathize with her, her demise, on the contrary, acts as a cautionary notice (after all, she ends up in a psych ward). Ultimately, then, Kwahulé depicts the appeal to truths — even relative ones — as
an enterprise always already doomed to failure: Président and Abibi die, Mozati is psychologically unsound, and the reader is left on the verge of madness as a result of negotiating so many fissured, contradictory narrative sequences… Like the reader of *Traversée*, the reader of *Babyface* must abandon any quest for narrative truth to glean meaning from this forever fluctuating, impossibly unstable tale. In line with Kwahulé’s self-affirmed project, she can only *question*: “[c]e que j’écris est toujours, je l’espère, une question […] Je veux construire un édifice immatériel, qui sera toujours instable, […] qui ne sera pas quelque chose qui se fixe, qui se fige. […] Il sera une question perpétuelle” (Mouëllic, *Frères de son* 53).
Chapter Four: Relations in Genre

“Very genre [is] a peculiar reflection of reality, […] a genre must be based upon a specific truth of life.”

– Georg Lukács

“Les poétiques du monde mélangent allègrement les genres, les réinventant de la sorte.”

– Édouard Glissant

As the title of Marc Dambre and Monique Gosselin-Noat’s *L’Éclatement des genres au XXe siècle* suggests, systems of literary classification hold poorly with regard to texts heralding from the turn of century onward. Noting the variety of ways this fissuring takes place, Jean-Marie Schaeffer asserts, “il est question de subversion, de crise, d’hétérogénéité, de dérive, d’indétermination, de composite, de dissolution, de polyphonie, de transgénérique, [et] de fatras inclassable” (12). Exceedingly difficult to classify, contemporary relational narratives participate fully in this trend, performing multiple generic modes simultaneously. Realism, autobiography, and the historical novel are the three main genres with which these texts engage, some more overtly than others. But other academic discourses and literary traditions also inform their prose, whether the sociological, the ethnographical, and the historical approaches exploited in *Sortie d’usine*, *Texaco*, *L’Amour, la fantasia*, and *Les Années*, or the flavors of the marvelous, the theatrical, and the detective fiction found in *Babyface* and *Traversée de la Mangrove*. By

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1 *The Historical Novel*, 241.
3 I here follow Derrida in “The Law of Genre,” where he argues that works of literature participate in or give the effects of genres rather than “belonging” to them.
blending together such divergent prose models, relational narratives not only “bring the codes themselves to the foreground of our critical attention […] [and] problematize the entire process of narration and interpretation” as literary critic Robert Scholes writes of “post-modernist anti-narratives” (207); they also manipulate these codes so as to reveal them as mutually informative. To return to the epigraphs taken from Lukács and Glissant, contemporary relational narratives draw upon multiple genres to convey a “truth of life” that is aware of its own processes of construction, and that embraces those processes as multiple, shifting, and harboring the potential for relation.

4.1 – Realism Redirected

As a work of fiction deeply seated in the historically real experience of the factory, Sortie d’usine constitutes a pertinent document for generations to come, particularly given the timing of its publication, which coincided with mass factory closings in France. In this respect, Bon’s work can be read as a form of ethnotext. Following Anne Roche in “Sources orales, écritures ordinaires et littérature,” ethnotexts aim to “décrire et comprendre la vision que des communautés historiquement constituées avaient de leur histoire et de leur présent, ce à partir d’une pluralité des sources et notamment des sources orales” (178). The internal vision Roche evokes is indeed a key component of Sortie d’usine, as Bon’s manipulation of narrative voices, use of technical vocabulary, and portrayal of the strike demonstrate. Moreover, as ethnotext Bon’s work also dialogues with the tradition of the historical novel; its depiction of the assembly-line experience recalls Benjamin’s qualification of “the struggling, oppressed class” as “depository of historical knowledge” (“Theses on the Philosophy of History” 123).
That said, *Sortie d’usine* does not portray a broad vision of the proletariat’s struggles. Contrary to both Claire Etcherelli’s *Élise ou la vraie vie* (1967) and Leïla Sebbar’s *Mon cher fils* (2012), its realm of action is confined to the factory space. While union and party activities do figure in the narrative, they constitute only one aspect of the assembly-line worker’s daily life. Contrary to *Mon cher fils*, no vision of the larger cause surfaces. Likewise, if *Sortie d’usine* humanizes the anonymous workingman, it is through entirely different means than Etcherelli, who gives her protagonists names, backstories, ambitions, and desires. Bon, on the other hand, fully inhabits the laborer’s anonymity so as to reveal struggle from the inside.

If *Sortie d’usine* harbors socio-ethnological and historical significance, it is thus less on the level of diegetic content than it is in terms of narrative mode. Dominique Viart sums this up perfectly, writing:

*La force du livre provient de l’intensité même du réel qui s’y cristallise sous la forme décantée d’images essentielles. [...] L’ouverture tranche avec ce dont le lecteur a l’habitude: ce n’est pas la vision surplombante [...], mais une immersion en focalisation interne, dans des phrases syncopées où le sujet même se perd: [...] *comme si* la répétition machinale des gestes avait absorbé toute la conscience du sujet. (François Bon 21, emphasis added)*

The *comme si* is, in effect, key: narrative mode — the *how* of language, perspective, and form — appears *as if* embodying the factory itself. To nuance Viart’s earlier argument that in Bon’s oeuvre the “saisies du réel [...] renoncent à toute mimesis réaliste” (“Littérature et sociologie” 24), I contend that Bon in fact transposes mimesis from content to mode. As the discussion of relational narration in Part I demonstrated, Bon’s

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4 In *Mon cher fils* one Algerian man evokes his desire to “être avec les ouvriers, vivre leur vie la chaîne les humiliations l’exploitation la trahison des syndicats” (139), and explains that, “pour [lui], l’Histoire, la vraie, l’Histoire Vivante, c’était l’usine, la lutte dedans avec les Camarades et dehors, contre la société capitaliste” (140).
manipulation of the French language has acute consequences on how read this text, and thus on our mediated perception of the factory experience. The indiscriminate use of the *il*, for instance, depicts each laborer as an interchangeable piece: grammar, rather than pathos-laden description, shows him as stripped of his individuality. Much as the assembly line, the text “functions” through indiscrimination. Likewise, the three narrative voices and sentence structure types perform differing subjective experiences of the factory. But again, like the assembly line, each perspective only gains meaning in relation to the others: only together do they construct the total vision or product (the text, the automobile).

Ultimately, it is this performative capacity that lends Bon’s text its socio-ethnographic and historical significance. *Sortie d’usine* is profoundly realist, but its realism has been revisited and redefined so as to more aptly convey the laborer’s subjective experiences. This is not the naturalized realism that Barthes discusses in “L’Effet de réel” after the example of Flaubert; on the contrary, Bon does away with even the “illusion référentielle” that, according to Barthes, would efface the signifying function of realist texts. But, by so doing, the author of *Sortie d’usine* also raises the stakes of his very realist prose. Echoing Viart, Bon engages with “des pratiques d’écriture susceptibles *de faire saillir le réel*. D’en inscrire les intensités plus que de s’en faire le miroir” (*François Bon* 16, emphasis added). Indeed, Bon renders the socio-ethnographic and historical real of the factory experience by modeling his text after its everyday realities, rather than attempting to represent them through description.

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5 “La vérité de cette illusion,” writes Barthes, “est celle-ci: supprimé de l’énonciation réaliste à titre de signifié de dénotation, le « réel » y revient à titre de signifié de connotation; car dans le moment même où ces détails sont réputés dénoter directement le réel, ils ne font rien d’autre, sans le dire, que le signifier […] ; autrement dit, la carence même du signifié au profit du seul référent devient le signifiant même du réalisme” (“L’Effet de réel” 89).
Contrary to Sortie d’usine, the realist portrait that Traversée de la Mangrove paints of Guadeloupe primarily issues from narrative focus and theme. Adding to this effect, a wealth of cultural references situates the narrative in the contemporary world, among which the reader finds: the shoe store Bata, the Moulinex, the newspaper France-Antilles, and television shows Dallas and Dynasty, as well as French institutions and services such as la Sécurité Sociale, l’Inspection du Travail, the ANPE, and the École normale. Similarly, though Rivière au Sel is a fictitious town, a multitude of real-world cities and places are cited, including New York, Australia, Canada, California, Dakar, Barcelona, Bordeaux, Nice, Marseille, and Paris. Even the names of two Parisian streets (rue des Écoles and rue de Rennes) appear in its pages! Yet, rather than forming a realist setting in which the micro-narratives would occur, these references act only as indexes that help the characters to articulate their stories. References to historical events further demonstrates this: Aristide describes pre-colonial Guadeloupe while expressing his enchantment with the forest; Man Sonson evokes the “cyclone de 1928,” the “guerre 39-40,” and the “grande incendie de La Pointe” (83) in correlation with her prophetic visions; Dodose speaks of factory closings and independence sentiment because her husband is a political activist; Lucien ties his political awakening to the Algerian war and to Che Guevara; and so on. Like the cultural references, then, historical events weave into and out of the individual narratives alongside the characters’ subjective experiences — thus, if schoolteacher Léocadie provides a longer history of Guadeloupe, from the time when “l’Usine Farjol employait encore son millier d’hommes” (140) through the “temps Sorin” (147), it is surely because she is the oldest character. Like Texaco in this regard,
human subjects and historical facts not only “meet” in Traversée, as Nick Nesbitt argues (“Le Sujet de l’histoire” 115), but are mutually imbricated and accorded equal clout.

Condé, then, also revisits the realist tradition: her diffraction of the real into as many character-specific visions underscores the constructed nature of all narratives, including those that make realist claims. Barthes’s erased signifier returns, but only obliquely. Condé’s particular engagement with the detective novel genre furthers this effect. As a fundamentally unsolvable mystery — just who killed Francis Sancher, anyway?! — Traversée places more emphasis on the acts of questioning and narrating than on constructing a global vision of Sancher or of Guadeloupe; as James Arnold puts it, the novelist asks her readers to “cease trying to master the facts so as to prove ‘whodunit’” (716). The wake setting, moreover, brackets the quest for truth and the claims of realism. The Caribbean wake sanctions nonsense, riddles, games, storytelling, and a general upheaval of norms, as Roger Abrahams argues. By framing Traversée within this setting, Condé divests the individual voices of a measure of credibility; the tales they tell could be either serious or, conversely, merely part of the game-playing the wake authorizes. A space of license, the communal setting suggests that anything goes and that nothing is certain. The text’s nonsensical quality becomes a paradoxical component of its realism. Revisiting realism and the detective novel via the wake, then, Condé brings the fictive and performative nature of all narratives to the fore. Relativist, unsolvable, and wrought with riddles, her text pokes fun at the answers so that we might better envision the questions.

It is arguably Chamoiseau’s work, among the novels composing my corpus, that aligns most closely with literary realism in its classical sense. Indeed, Chamoiseau goes
to great lengths to produce a literary work that appears to be a veritable ethnological
document. The bibliographic references following the parallel texts, which cite Marie-
Sophie’s notebooks and letters as extant materials housed in Fort-de-France’s
Bibliothèque Schœlcher, contributes forcefully to this. As Serge Ménager puts it, these
references confer a “surcroît de réalité” (61) on the text, and lead the reader to conclude
that “[Marie-Sophie] doit donc exister, l’histoire ne peut être que vraie” (61). The
acknowledgment page figuring at the end of the work furthers this effect: although the
names listed differ from the character names, Chamoiseau here thanks the urban planner
Serge Letchimy as well as “tous les habitants du Quartier Texaco qui ont bien voulu
satisfaire [ses] impossibles curiosités” (498). Letchimy, it turns out, is an actual urban
planner who published a study on the Texaco community,6 just as Madame Sico, the first
of neighborhood’s residents thanked, exists, if we are to believe Chamoiseau’s interview
with Valeria Costa-Kostritsky. Yet, even without these paratextual and peritextual clues,
Texaco still resonates as authentic; the internal vision Marie-Sophie offers detracts from
the role authorial imagination plays, thereby guaranteeing the authority of the narrative:
“authentifier un acte de parole, […] justifier un contenu en en garantissant l’origine,” in
effect, constitutes a key characteristic of realism in Philippe Hamon’s view (149).

The exhaustive picture Texaco paints of Martinique also lends the text a strikingly
realist quality. The reader encounters a vast population, including European sailors,
soldiers, and travelers, as well as the more permanent Blans de France, Békés, Koulis,
Syriens, Mulâtres, Marrons, and Nèg-de terre. She likewise travels over broad spaces,
ranging from the slave plantation and the maroon hillside community, to the factory, the

6 The study is titled De l’habitat précaire à la ville, and I am indebted to Lorna Milne for having pointed
this out.
field, and the slums on the city edges, as well as the centers of both Saint-Pierre and Fort-de-France. She not only meets characters that espouse varying ideological positions, like Alcibiade, but also Antillean archetypes like the driveur, the djobeur, and the mentô. Moreover, Chamoiseau describes characters that merely cross Marie-Sophie’s path in almost excessive detail. Thus this condensed life history for an army commander whose role in the narrative doesn’t extend beyond this scene:

Thérésa-Marie rose eut beau parlementer avec le commandant (une sorte de singe rouge, à yeux bleus, fier d’être né à Avignon dans la ville des Papes, qui menait dans les colonies une ascèse de mémoire afin d’oublier une Québécoise morte en couches lors d’une trentième grossesse exigée par l’Église catholique comme rempart à une vague anglophone), les soldats emportaient tout. (283)

In this example, the parentheses reflect the superfluous quality of the added information; but this is not always the case. Frequent descriptions of the city, for instance, also swell with detail:

[I]l m’arrive de fermer les yeux afin de retrouver cette odeur composite qui pour moi nomme l’En-Ville: la gazoline, le ciment chaud, l’écorce vieille d’un arbre à moitié asphyxié, le caoutchouc chauffé, le fer gris, la peinture des façades qui s’écaille dans le vent, une pluie légère fusée en vapeur chaude sur l’asphalte de midi, et d’autres choses encore, fugaces à la narine, pérennes en la mémoire. (367)

The list of scents goes on to span nearly two full pages. In excess of the plot, this abundance of detail creates a sense of exhaustion, as if Texaco constituted an inventory of Martinique over the course of nearly two centuries.

Yet, as Oana Panaïté notes, Chamoiseau “crée l’illusion de l’enquête ethnographique et en même temps dénonce cette illusion” (“Poétiques de récupération” 74). Indeed, if Texaco illustrates some of the precepts of literary realism, it equally frustrates others. Following Hamon, authors of the realist tradition aspire towards
narrative transparency: “pas de guillemets, d’italiques, de procédés d’emphase, […]; pas de verbes, de locutions ou d’adverbes comme: peut-être, probablement, quelque, une sorte de, sembler, pour ainsi dire, on dirait que, un certain, on croirait” (150). Texaco, of course, is not transparent but opaque, and consistently underscores its dubious reliability through precisely such remarks as “il me semble,” “je pense,” “j’imagine,” and “peut-être.” When attempting to recall Esternome’s original account, for instance, Marie-Sophie often questions the accuracy of her memories. Thus, one footnote reads, “[c]omment me le confia-t-il? Une tristesse de fond de gorge? Un cil battant d’une larme refoulée? Une chanson sans veut-dire si ce n’est la douleur? Comment me le confia-t-il?” (103). Such expressions of doubt, however, actually lend Texaco an increasingly realist quality. Akin to Traversée in this regard, Barthes’s “effet de réel” is shown to be precisely that: an effect. The effect of Marie-Sophie’s lengthy description of the city is that it appears to be exhaustive; the effect of modulated narration is that narrative voice resonates as spoken; the effect of the total text is that the real-world residents of Texaco exclaim “« [m]ais c’est exactement ça! »” (Crosta-Kostritsky n. p.).

Another factor that foils the realist components of Texaco is the presence of magical practices and the supernatural. Sorcery is a key element, for example, in the passages describing Marie-Sophie’s mother Idoménée’s malevolent twin sister, Adrienne. The sister always appears with a cock perched on her shoulder; come nightfall, her spirit inhabits the beast, though her body remains soundly asleep: “Adrienne […] tellement raide qu'elle semblait avoir quitté son corps […], le coq chanta et se mit à marcher dans la case avec le pas de l’Adrienne” (230). Through the cock, the twin aspires to steal Esternome’s eyes, which she hopes to endow upon her blind sister. The text, however,
doesn’t substantiate Adrienne’s supernatural powers, but only references the belief structure that would support them. As Marie-Sophie states, “il s’était mis […] à croire aux diableries” (237, emphasis added). If Texaco presents some characteristics of the magical tradition, then, it also consistently questions the validity of its incredulous sequences; at one point it even describes magical agents as impotent.7 Compared to Simone Schwarz-Bart’s Ti Jean l’horizon (1979), in effect, Texaco narrates few occurrences that strike awe in the reader. And yet, the awe remains. To conclude the inventory of city smells discussed above, Marie-Sophie tellingly describes her list as insufficient, stating, “elle [l’En-Ville] est tout cela et ne prend sens qu’au-delà de tout cela” (367-368, emphasis added). It is this au-delà that strikes awe in the reader, and in this au-delà that the marvelous bubbles up, simultaneously countering and complementing the text’s realist effects. Esternome’s and Marie-Sophie’s encounters with Mentôs, those magical figures Marie-Sophie initially believes to be only “une histoire de folklore” (126), illustrate precisely this. The Mentô yields an otherworldly knowledge, termed La Parole, that empowers both her and her father in their respective endeavors. In the words of advice that le vieux nègre de la Doum offers Marie-Sophie,

Tu cherches Mentô. Pas de Mentô. La Parole! / Une parole est tombée dans l’oreille de ton Esternome. Une parole l’a porté. C’est venu La Parole. / […] C’est quoi La Parole? Si elle te porte, c’est La Parole. Si elle te porte seulement et sans une illusion. Qui tient parole-qui-porte tient La Parole. Il peut tout faire. C’est plus que force. […] / Mais La Parole n’est pas une parole. La Parole est plus un silence qu’un bruit de gueule, et plus un vide qu’un silence seul. (373-375)

As the vieux nègre de la Doum states, it is not the Mentô that matters, but rather his knowledge of the Word’s power, which emanates from something that is nonetheless not

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7 This is the case when Marie-Sophie’s endeavors to retain her then-mate driveur fail: “[j]e vis des petits quimboiseurs […]. Je vis des dormeuses […]. Je vis des Écriveuses […]. Je consultait un sorcier africain […]. Je vis une Brésilienne […]. Mais rien n’y fit” (458).
of the order of language. Like the Biblical Word, La Parole harbors a creative force that empowers Esternome and Marie-Sophie alike. Both everywhere and nowhere, “[La Parole] empli[t] l’univers,” and, as such, also permeates Texaco, imbuing the text with an element of fantasy that breaches the realist contract.\(^8\) Admittedly, the notion of literary realism with which I’ve been engaging is strictly Western in its conception, and one could rightly argue that its dogmatic point of view is untenable on the world literature stage. I’ve also expressly avoided the term magical realism, given the inflexible vision of the real it implies.\(^9\) My reason for doing so, however, is that Chamoiseau’s text seems to engage specifically with both Western and Antillean conceptions of realism so as to productively inhabit the generic instability between the two.\(^10\) Indeed, Texaco can only be qualified as a work of magical realism in the sense Stephen Slemon affords the term, where “two opposing discursive systems, with neither managing to subordinate or contain the other” (12), converge. Only, rather than oppose one another, the two systems mutually penetrate and inform one another.

4.2 – Fiction and Historiography

“[A]mnesia,” writes Derek Walcott in “The Muse of History,” “is the true history of the New World” (4). Faced with this amnesia, or what Glissant refers to as the “surdéterminination” of the Antilles’ history through the annihilation of indigenous

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\(^8\) Significantly, le vieux nègre de la Doum’s words do not appear within the main body of text, but figure in a subtext, as if, like Marie-Sophie claims, “il n’a jamais parlé” (372).

\(^9\) As Jacques Stephen Alexis questions, “[w]hat […] is the Marvellous, except the imaginary in which a people grasps its experience […]?” (196). For a concise history of the term, from its conception in art history in the early twentieth century to its subsequent spread and variegated uses, see Kenneth Reeds, “Magical Realism: a Problem of Definition.”

\(^10\) “The use of the concept of magic realism,” Slemon writes, “can itself signify resistance to central assimilation by more stable generic systems and more monumental theories of literary practice, a way of suggesting that there is something in the nature of the literature it identifies that confounds the capacities of the major genre systems to come to terms with it” (“Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse” 10).
peoples, enslavement of Africans, and the Euro-centric socio-economic and historical model that followed, many Caribbean authors have opted to invent regional history anew — a trend in which Chamoiseau certainly participates. Another literary genre with which *Texaco* engages, then, is the historical novel. Following Georg Lukács, the archetypical eighteenth-century historical novel strove to project a historical vision fitting for the emergent bourgeois class. Similarly, *Texaco* constructs a vision of the past modeled after a bourgeoning Antillean consciousness. Like Sir Walter Scott’s works, *Texaco* too “endeavours to portray the struggles and antagonisms of history by means of characters who […] represent social trends and historical forces” (34). Likewise, Chamoiseau’s subjective portrayal of history more or less correlates with Lukács’s contention that the “indirect contact between individual lives and historical events is the most decisive thing of all” (285, emphasis added). The more or less, however, is paramount. Lukács, in effect, denigrates authors who depict History subjectively rather than objectively, and contends that any “subjectivism vis-à-vis history” nullifies “History as a total process” (181). Chamoiseau expressly muddles the subjective/objective divide Lukács points to, and splinters History-as-process into as many interconnected and mutually informative stories. Moreover, his subjective portrayal of historical happenings is key for grasping the characters’ daily lives and, as a result, for understanding history writ large as only relatively determinant. Indeed, it is through subjectivism that

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12 In Clarisse Zimra’s view, “[i]t has become a (quasi) cliché to assert that Caribbean literature is obsessed with history” (“Righting the Calabash” 144). On the relationship between Caribbean writers and History see Wilson E. Harris, “History, Fable, and Myth in the Caribbean and Guianas”; and Edward Baugh, “The West Indian Writer and his Quarrel with History,” as well as “Reflections on ‘The Quarrel with History.’”

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Chamoiseau reveals what Lukács calls the indirect contact between individuals and historical events, or, to put in it Jean Molino’s terms, history’s internal truths.13

A more substantial dilemma arises when considering the fictitious components of the Texaco tale. In Lukács’s view, “[a] writer who deals with history cannot chop and change with his material as he likes. Events and destinies have their natural, objective weight, their natural, objective proportion” (290). Besides the obvious question of who, exactly, establishes this so-called “objective weight,” the main point of contention is the fact that the historical novel is, by definition, a work of fiction. Contrary to Molino, who recognizes that fact and fiction always form a composite in historical novels, Lukács doesn’t explore this intermingling as a productive process. Yet it is precisely this space that Chamoiseau’s work occupies, as it must, given the context of historical amnesia within which he writes. Ultimately, it is impossible to un-suspend our disbelief when reading this tale: on the one hand, the Texaco neighborhood and Madame Sico are as real as the historical events and trends Texaco depicts, as comparisons with Richard Burton’s La Famille coloniale show; but, on the other, Chamoiseau also concedes mixing Sico’s stories with his mother’s and “reinventing” Texaco after his own fashion (Costa-Kostritsky n. p.). Differentiating Madame Sico’s tale from Marie-Sophie’s is, de facto, impossible. Finally, framing this story through Marie-Sophie’s subjective perspective also muddles the lines between fact and fiction; her role as storyteller takes away from her reliability as narrator.

That said, Marie-Sophie’s status as storyteller also places her in the position of witness, which, in turn, restores her credibility. As Gilles Anquetil notes in his review of

13 “Histoire et roman,” Molino writes, “enchaînent des actions et analysent des caractères, mais ne recherchent pas la même vérité; à la vérité externe qui donne des causes en partant des actions s’oppose la vérité interne, celle de l’aveu” (“Qu’est-ce que le roman historique?” 213).
the novel, Antillean history “s’est faite […] sans témoignage. […] C’est cette mémoire enfouie […] que Patrick Chamoiseau s’est donné pour mission de déchiffrer et de rapporter. / Pour ce faire, il lui fallait s’inventer un témoin” (54). Marie-Sophie, then, testifies to a historical becoming otherwise absent from textbooks and archives. In this, Chamoiseau also participates in the rise of testimonial literature and scholarship on testimony that occurs around the same time period, a rise which Annette Wieviorka, like the historiographers discussed in the previous chapter, links to a democratization of History. “[L]’extraordinaire engouement pour les ‘récits de vie’ […] à portée ethnologique,” Wieviorka writes in L’Ère du témoin, “[place] [l]’homme-individu […] au cœur de la société et rétrospectivement de l’histoire. Il devient publiquement, et lui seul, l’Histoire” (128). But if Texaco correlates to Wieviorka’s description, it also frustrates Marie-Sophie’s status as witness. First, its relational narration defies the singular perspective associated with the testimonial act. Second, to what trauma she testifies remains entirely uncertain; the reader can only surmise, following Glissant: slavery, the false emancipation of 1848, the subsequent oppression of assimilation, the struggle to create a space of one own…? If trauma there is, then, it can only be in the collective

14 Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub’s study Testimony appears the same year (1992); Lawrence L. Langer’s Holocaust Testimonies, just one year prior (1991); re-readings of Freud’s Moses and Monotheism appear during the same decade, Yoseph Hyim Yerushalmi’s Freud’s Moses in 1991, and Richard J. Bernstein’s Freud and the Legacy of Moses in 1998; and Derrida first delivered his lecture on testimony in 1995, later published in Demeure (1998).
15 As Shoshana Felman writes, “to bear witness is to bear the solitude of a responsibility, and to bear the responsibility, precisely, of that solitude” (3).
16 Employing a markedly Freudian lexicon, Glissant asks, “[s]erait-il dérisoire ou odieux de considérer notre histoire subie comme cheminement d’une névrose? La Traite comme choc traumatique, l’installation (dans le nouveau pays) comme phase de refoulement, la période servile comme latence, la « libération » de 1848 comme réactivation, les délires coutumiers comme symptômes et jusqu’à la répugnance à « revenir sur ces chose du passé » qui serait une manifestation du retour du refoulé?” (Le Discours antillais 229).
sense that Freud put forth in *Moses and Monotheism*.\(^{17}\) In her monograph of Chamoiseau, Meave McCusker follows this avenue of interpretation, but where she turns to the polemical notion of corporeal transmission and repression of trauma that Cathy Caruth proposed in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996), it seems more appropriate to speak of the inter-generational un-intelligibility of trauma, as proposed by Ernst van Alphen. Against the grain of contemporary trauma theory, van Alphen suggests that trauma passes from survivor parents to children as a result of the “dis-connection” and “dis-continuity” between their narratives (488). Telling the Texaco tale as testimony, in this view, provides a means of overcoming the traumatic gap of intelligibility, which ultimately seems another way of saying, the trauma of historical amnesia. “Ne pas le faire,” as Marie-Sophie says of Esternome’s remaking of history, “c’était flotter au vent” (157).

Approaching the historical through the lens of testimony, then, Chamoiseau paradoxically renders *Texaco* more convincing and less reliable. Situated at the crossroads of truth and fiction, Marie-Sophie acts as witness in the sense Derrida develops in *Demeure*: her testimony is fundamentally undecidable. And it is this curious mixture of the push to belief despite and within the undecidable that lends *Texaco* its historiographical force. On the surface, the novel promotes the memory-as-history paradigm, transposing in literary form the conceptual shift in historical consciousness outlined in Chapter Three. Certainly, *Texaco* acts as a competing narrative of Martinican history, providing in Hayden White’s terms an “alternate emplotment” for it; but its

\(^{17}\) Drawing an analogy between the individual psyche and group history, Freud concludes that a similar model of trauma, schematized as “Early trauma – Defence – Latency – Outbreak of neurotic illness – Partial return of the repressed” (*Moses and Monotheism* 129), functions in both cases.
undecidable nature also underscores the emplotment of all historical discourses, or to return to Barthes’s terms, l’effet de réel issuing from l’illusion référentielle. To echo Molino, Texaco “oblige à mettre en question la validité des catégories « réalité » et « fiction »” (234), which, in turn, brings the book into the realm of the historiographical metafiction. Because reality and fiction cannot be untangled here, the reader cannot opt for one or the other route; she must wholly suspend her disbelief and allow the “true” and “invented” to speak to and through one another. Texaco, it turns out, is not a novel about collective trauma or collective history at all, but rather about the act of narrating trauma, group history, and individual experience in a way that creates new forms of intelligibility. Indeed, Chamoiseau only establishes the frameworks of realism, history, and testimony the better to obfuscate the boundaries that would separate and distinguish them.

Kwahulé’s work seems the farthest removed from the historico-realist narratives examined thus far. Babyface doesn’t pretend to tell a collective history or to recuperate some lost social reality; even common points of cultural reference are sparse. And yet, via its allegorical portrayal of Ivory Coast, it also participates in the creation of a new historical intelligibility. It too can be read as a re-inhabited and radicalized form of the historical novel. Like his Caribbean counterpart, Kwahulé expressly muddies the line between fact and fiction. The systematic inclusion of ellipses in Jérôme’s journal fragments, for instance, confers on them a starkly realist quality, as if the Fragments were indeed cut and chosen by Jérôme. However, where Chamoiseau leans more toward

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18 “How a given historical situation is to be configured,” White contends, “depends on the historian’s subtlety in matching up a specific plot-structure with the set of historical events […] This is essentially a literary, that is to say fiction-making, operation” (“The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” 283).
19 Barthes employs these two locutions apropos both realist and historical rhetoric: “l’illusion référentielle,” in his view, refers to all discourses that “prétend[ent] laisser parler le référent tout seul” (“Le discours de l’histoire” 69).
20 As Linda Hutcheon writes, “[f]iction and history are narratives distinguished by their frames […] frames which historiographic metafiction both asserts and then crosses” (“The Pastime of Past Time” 59).
realism, Kwahulé opts in favor of the fictitious or even marvelous dimension. In fact, the marvelous and the real intertwine within the work’s first pages. When the “people” describe *Mami Wata*’s role in Président’s conception, the list of the water spirit’s lovers embraces both mythical and historical figures: “Maciste, Hercule, Samson, Jésus-Christ, le général de Gaulle, Elvis Presley et Onassis furent des ‘amants de Mami Wata’; plus récemment le roi Pelé, Nelson Mandela, Michael Jackson, Bill Gates, Tiger Woods et, bien évidemment, Président” (16). This opening sequence announces the mixing of fact and fiction to come, and establishes the fictional as a powerful discursive tool with regard to the real.

Fiction, in effect, plays a performative role *within* Kwahulé’s work — that is, within the fictional narrative itself. Tellingly, Babyface asks Jérôme to remove him from the Journal after having read a book where a “personnage secondaire qui, se sentant négligé par le récit, est sorti du livre, fou de frustration” (108). The fictional character, turned flesh-and-blood human, proceeds to rape and butcher the writer, the writer’s wife and fetus child; once incarcerated, he does the same to the prison guards and to the other inmates. The sensational news is then taken up by the media, to the extent that, “[à] la fin, on n’a même pas eu à prendre le personnage échappé de la nouvelle, les livres s’en étaient à nouveau chargés. Il était redevenu de la fiction, il était retourné dans la tombe du livre” (108). It is for this reason that Babyface wants to be removed from the Journal; “[il] ne voudrai[t] pas en sortir par [lui]-même” (109). But the eponymous protagonist will in fact “sortir du livre.” Indeed, the novel’s denouement curiously mirrors the path of the secondary character-turned-rapist: both of Babyface’s personas will collide, just as the reality of war in Eburnéa will become fiction and fiction will take the place of reality.
In the first version of the culminating political Fragment, before Babyface meets the Muse, Abibi, and Président, he recounts the plot of a Western he recently watched, noting especially the hero, “crépusculaire, tout de noir vêtu, avec une fin de cigarette au coin des lèvres” (153). Babyface then “pénétra dans l’écran au regard troublé des balles, ajusta son chapeau de cow-boy, […] caressa son fusil à canon scié chromé or et […] marcha vers le pont du Renouveau, le quartier général d’Abibi-Saboteur et de la Muse” (161, emphasis added). Babyface transforms into the cowboy protagonist; entering the film, he becomes doubly fictionalized. His subsequent encounter with the Muse, Président, and Abibi, which takes shape as a play replete with character names and stage directions, adds a third layer to this. On the one hand, this theatrical form reflects the spectacular nature of warfare, particularly when viewed through the lens of international media. But more important, I argue, is its excessive foregrounding of fiction. Not only is the fictional quality of the sequence threefold — Journal, film, and theatre —, but the three protagonists repeatedly reference fictional representation:


LA MUSE: C’est vrai que tu es monté sur la scène… Il fallait pas. […] Parce que c’est que du théâtre. Tout ça c’est que du théâtre […].

ABIBI-SABOTEUR: Mais regarde-toi, Pétit! Des vêtements détrempés, des lunettes noires, une machette, il n’y a qu’au théâtre qu’on voit ça… (172, emphasis added)

On this single page, eight references to fictional representation appear; Abibi even describes Babyface as having a “tronche de mauvais film américain” (173). And the parallels continue, Président conceding that the trio wrote the script of the civil war, to which the people ascribed with fervor: “ils ne peuvent le comprendre, ils sont dans le
film. […] Plus aucune distance avec la fiction. Mais nous, nous avons écrit la pièce, ou le film, c’est comme tu veux” (175). Just as Babyface feared, fiction and reality meld to the point of the utter confusion; the political actors write the script for a war that the people, upon reading, bring to life… And yet, the reader discovers this *through theatrical representation*: a vertiginous diegetic twist indeed. More significantly, the war resolves during the space of these twelve pages of theatre. Describing the trio’s intentions in writing the script for the civil war, Président states:

> Il fallait apprendre à ce peuple à vivre sous le toit d’un même danger incarné par la sourde présence *de l’autre*. Il fallait amener les ethnies du Nord, les ethnies du Sud, les ethnies de l’Est, les ethnies de l’Ouest, les ethnies du Centre à plonger […] leurs différences dans le fleuve mêlé de nos sangs versés. Une nation. […] Notre rêve au commencement était d’offrir au peuple une pièce de théâtre écrite dans sa chair, une grandiose catharsis qui accouche de la démocratie au flanc de la nation. (173-174)

To found a sense of national identity, Président and his accomplices first manipulate difference among the country’s ethnic groups, whose shared spilt blood would in turn unify them in the face of some new, absolute Other. If the civil war finds resolution, then, it is because the first phase of Président’s plan has succeeded: “[l]a guerre est finie parce qu'elle a perdu sa mémoire” (171).

On a more abstract level, the idea of “forgotten memory” refers to the inanity of the war itself. In this view, the theatrical sequence would obliquely critique political power — hence Babyface’s incessant questioning, “[o]ù / [q]ui est le mal / qui racle, / qui racle et / qui racle dans nos plaies?” (162). The culprit Babyface settles on is the Muse, whom he holds responsible “de tout. Tout était de sa faute. Le mal venait d’elle” (167). But just *who* is the Muse, anyway? Like the eponymous protagonist, the Muse is an ethereal figure, barely present in *Babyface*. Though the reader learns her given name
(Monique Monastier) and that she was born in Auvergne, France, her role once she enters the political stage amounts to virtually nothing. She passes successively from Babyface’s bed to Président’s and Abibi-Saboteur’s, and ostensibly takes part in writing the script for the civil war. With regard to Président and Abibi, then, she seems to fulfill the muse’s traditional function of providing creative inspiration. The people, however, describe her as a “vraie assoiffée du pouvoir” (165), and nickname her “Petite-queue-de-vache” in an allusion to the proverb “‘La petite queue de vache n’est pas venue pour chasser les mouches mais pour brouter’” (158). The Muse, in their view, enchants to the point of deception; rather than inspire, she beguiles.

The second version of the culminating political Fragment solidifies this view. Here, Babyface evokes a vision he had of his final encounter with the political trio. During this vision, the Muse transforms into a vulture, swallows up Président, and carries him away. After capturing her, Babyface opens the Vulture-Muse’s stomach and finds himself inside an airplane in the company of Président, Abibi, and the Muse herself, who is in the midst of giving birth to a seemingly endless number of tiny soldiers:

\[D\]u ventre de Petite-queue-de-vache sortaient et sortaient et sortaient des flots ininterrompus […] des enfants minuscules, de taille de petits soldats de plomb. Des guerriers. […] Ils étaient blancs, ils étaient noirs, ils étaient filles, ils étaient garçons, et ressemblaient tous, sans exception, soit à Président, soit à Général. (184)

In this fantastical vision the Muse manipulates and seduces both sides of the warring factions; indeed, she breeds hostility — whence, perhaps, her coupling with all three of the men. Moreover, the vision foretells the metamorphosis of the Muse’s head into a vulture, which, once armistice is declared, allows for the second phase of Président’s plan to come to fruition. In effect, the Muse-turned-vulture constitutes the people’s new
common enemy: “la paix ne sera totale que le jour où nous tuerons le vautour. […] Allez et tuez tous les vautours le cœur en fête, car la guerre entre frères et frères, entre sœurs et sœurs, elle, est bel et bien terminée” (189). Killing the vulture-Muse, of course, proves impossible; the shots fired in her direction are interpreted as a reprisal of civil warfare, which is precisely what happens: “la guerre est revenue sur ses pas […], plus forte, plus tentaculaire que jamais, car cette fois-ci elle est absolument sans raison” (190).

However, it is not until the penultimate chapter that the power Babyface affords to fiction comes to a head. After having revealed his “true” identity to Mozati, Babyface absconds from the taxi where they have their decisive conversation and “se dissout dans le mirage” (207) in an ending worthy of any classical Western. Before this cinematic fade-out, he nods to a group of vultures that had been following the taxi from above, who then descend to capture Mozati while “le plus gros et le plus puissant,” which Mozati names “l’Aveugle” (202-203), awaits their return. The blind vulture, which we inevitably interpret to be the Muse, proceeds to rape Mozati, rip out her heart, and leave the others to “la dispute[r] jusqu’à la derrière lamelle de chair” (208). Mozati, of course, does not perish; her first person narration returns in the next paragraph where she speaks from the hospital in which the closing chapter takes place. In this penultimate chapter, then, the division between the political and friend group plotlines breaks down entirely. Fact and fiction — what the novel portrays as real versus what it ascribes to fabrication — exist here in a symbiotic relationship: either the characters of Jérôme’s journal come to life, or the characters of Babyface are swallowed up by the Journal; either way, the two narratives cannot be untangled. Just as Babyface’s initial worry foresaw, fiction and reality are mutually, and potently, imbricated here.
Akin to *La Parole* in *Texaco*, the word harbors a productive power in *Babyface*; like the Biblical word, it has the potential to create something from nothing. In an interview with Gilles Mouëllic, Kwahulé evokes precisely this power, and describes it as running theme throughout his oeuvre:

Peut-être que *Jaz* n’existe pas. Peut-être est-ce une simple fantasmagorie […] comme le héros de *Babyface*. […] Je me dis que le Christ ou Jeanne d’Arc n’ont peut-être pas existé. Mais une parole a surgi dans le monde, une parole tellement forte, tellement dense, qu’elle est devenue chair […]. (33)

In *Babyface*, Kwahulé portrays this power in both negative and positive terms. On the political level, his allegorical depiction of civil war in Ivory Coast, and particularly the genesis of its “script,” acutely critiques the weight nationalist narratives wield. In this view, the Muse would represent less France and the lures of Western culture than all absolutist identity-constructs.21 As a muse that only *bemuses*, and preys on the dead and dying rather than inspires, she warns of the illusory quality of identity narratives — thus her power to seduce all three men. Rather than denigrate absolutist narratives through portraiture, as Boubacar Boris Diop does in his more classically realist but equally arresting *Murambi, le livre des ossements* (2000), Kwahulé unveils the logic driving the civil war through the marvelous. His statement, however, is no less cogent than Diop’s. On the contrary, by occupying the generic instability of magical realism that Slemon points out, Kwahulé brings these “two opposing discursive systems” to the point of coalescence. An early passage describing the self-destruction of a family of three outsiders, referred to as “ces gens-là” (56), makes this amply clear: here, the father immolates the son and cannibalizes himself; the mother gathers the son’s ashes and

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21 Interpreting the Muse as France and Western culture seems a bit facile, and remains within the colonizer-colonized dichotomy. Moreover, *Babyface* only mentions Monique’s French nationality in passing; once transformed into the Muse, and successively into the vulture and the blind vulture, the connection with France is lost.
husband’s remaining bellybutton and heads “ailleurs. Pour chercher humanité” (62). All of this occurs under the people’s incredulous eyes, who remark, “[c]es gens-là ne feront jamais rien comme personne. Ces gens-là sont capables de tout” (62). This brief but poignant scene lays bare the exclusionist logic grounding the civil war; its fantastical nature drives home the point far more clearly than any realist depiction might. And herein lies Kwahulé’s positive portrayal of the word’s power: manipulating the frames through which we grasp the real, Kwahulé reshapes narratives of national belonging; however ironically, he demonstrates that “la guerre est tout sauf une fiction: une chose sérieuse, la seule vraiment réelle” (109) by means, precisely, of fiction.

4.3 – Autobiographical Horizons

Like Chamoiseau’s and Kwahulé’s works, L’Amour, la fantasia leans strongly toward the mode of the historical novel. In re-writing the euro-centric narrative of the war of conquest, Djebar demonstrates her training as professional historian; the reader imagines her consulting and utilizing archival material in a way akin to Arlette Farge’s description in Le Goût de l’archive: detecting conflicting details, constructing a larger narrative, underscoring those stories that might “dérange les certitudes acquises” (113)… And, as Veronika Thiel and Karin Holter have demonstrated, Djebar’s account is more or less faithful to historical records. In re-writing the national narrative of the war of independence, on the other hand, Djebar chooses to rely solely on women’s testimonies. To counter the singular narrative heralded in independent Algeria, or what

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Benjamin Stora calls the “révolution sans visage,” she tells the tales of Berber women’s wartime actions — two of the primary people groups occluded in official discourse. Doing so, Djebar certainly “répond au devoir de la mémoire,” as Rajaa Fathi contends (202), which also brings her work into dialogue with the rise of testimonial literature discussed above. Together, the historical and testimonial components of *L’Amour, la fantasia* sketch out a “version réécrite de l’Histoire, ancrée dans l’histoire hétérogène, capable de révéler des strates occultées d’un passé méconnu dépouvrue d’archives,” as Cécilia Francis cogently argues in “Enjeux poétiques de la littérature-monde” (166).

Nevertheless, the status of these historico-testimonial components remains dubious: on one hand, Djebar’s use of published historical materials cannot be deciphered by reading the text alone, as Thiel also concedes; on the other, the testimonies, by their very nature, cannot be verified, though they ostensibly stem from the interviews Djebar conducted while filming *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*; finally, the historical and testimonial dimensions constitute only two the text’s three main foci. In effect, it is only in relation to the third, autobiographical vein that the historico-testimonial elements gain their full force, and vice versa. As Gafaïti writes in *La Diasporisation de la littérature postcoloniale*, “on ne peut véritablement séparer [le] souci [de Djebar] de l’intérieur et la relation fondamentale que son œuvre entretient avec l’Histoire” (152). This imbrication of the interior and the exterior is paramount. Through it, Djebar ties her

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23 This is the title of Chapter Ten of Stora’s *La Gangrène et l’oubli*, where the historian debunks the idea of a singular, united front against the French colonials propagated by the FLN during and after Algerian independence. As Hayden White points out, “[o]ur explanations of historical structures and processes are […] determined more by what we leave out of our representations than by what we put in” (“The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” 290).

individual story to a broader nexus of national happenings and, by the same token, mitigates the centrality of the autobiographic subject. Her sense of self both materializes and remains masked. It is only in this way that Djebar overcomes the obstacles she faced when writing about herself: “I more or less chose silence,” she tells Zimra, “[a]s if […] to write was to commit suicide” (“Afterward” 169). Like the Arabo-Berber women in *L’Amour, la fantasia*, who neither say *I* nor name their husbands, Djebar cannot write her story following the Western tradition; she must re-conceptualize the autobiography so as to maintain a degree of anonymity. And she does this precisely by weaving together the historical, the testimonial, and the personal — as well as the fictional — into a single tale that, while heterogeneous, nonetheless forms a cohesive, relational unity.

Textual structure, of course, relays this sense of relational unity, leading the reader to draw her own conclusions apropos the juxtaposition between the three main diegetic veins. But other links are more explicit. For instance, the use of titles for the autobiographical segments and roman numerals for the historical segments in Part One, and their reversal in Part Two, implies a congruence between the two diegetic realms, as if the segment-pairs merely presented different versions of the same episode. The appearance of the same word at the closing of one segment and the opening of the next furthers this effect: “un étrange combat de femmes” (24) / “Le combat de Staouéli” (25); “quelque soudaine explosion” (44) / “Explosion du Fort l’Empereur” (45); “autant dire [ils] s’aimaient ouvertement” (58) / “Ouverte la ville plutôt que prise” (59); etc. Similar links also appear in narrative theme, such as the story of the retreat of Assia’s brother into the “montagnes qui flambaient” (116, emphasis added), which follows that of the infamous cave smoke-out, or the segment recounting a botched tribal marriage, which
precedes that of Assia’s own wedding. These juxtapositions bring about unexpected parallels between the autobiographic and the historical realms, and obliquely shed light on Djebar’s individual story. Thus, for instance, the curious correlation drawn between the text’s first two segments, which successively depict Assia’s conquest of the outside world through her initiation into the French school system and the French military’s conquest of Algerian land.

It is arguably the segments entitled “Corps-enlacés,” situated after the second testimonial-autobiographical series in Part Three, that render the logic of interconnection most clearly. As their title implies, these segments entwine bodies and voices. Akin to the lyrical pieces, they ground the otherwise ethereal testimonial voices by describing the women who speak, their homes, and their families. For example: “Lla Zohra, de Bou Semmam, est âgée de plus de quatre-vingts ans. Je franchis le seuil de sa demeure actuelle à la sortie du village de Ménaceur. […] Nous nous embrassons, nous nous touchons, nous nous admirons” (233). Moreover, the “Corps-enlacés” series actualizes historical discourse by bringing historical documentation and oral testimony into a mutually informative space:

Dire à mon tour. Transmettre ce qui a été dit, puis écrit. Propos d’il y a plus de un siècle, comme ceux que nous échangeons aujourd’hui, nous, femmes de la même tribu. / […] / Laghouat, été 1853. Le peintre Eugène Fromentin a séjourné, l’automne et le printemps précédents, dans un Sahel endormi, tel le nôtre aujourd’hui, petite mère. / L’été commence. […] Fromentin (comme moi qui t’écoute tous ces jours) entend son ami raconter: « […] ». (234, emphasis added)

À nouveau un homme parle, un autre écoute, puis écrit. […] [J]e parle ensuite, je vous parle à vous, les veuves de cet autre village de montagne, si éloigné et si proche d’El Aroub! (294, emphasis added)
Here, the synchronic temporality explored in Chapter Two comes to the fore, as the locutions à mon tour, à nouveau, si éloigné et si proche and the terms comme, puis, tel, ensuite suggest. Djebar indeed “édifie un livre de rencontre entre des personnages condamnés à ne jamais se rencontrer,” as Fathi remarks (195). But this meeting extends beyond the temporal dimension; it brings together the past and the present, but also the written and the oral as well as the French and the autochthone. The interlocutors even recognize this: after listening to a tale about one of her compatriots, one auditor retorts, “[o]ù as-tu entendu raconter cela?” — to which Assia responds, “[j]e l’ai lu!” (236). Exchanges such as this one require Djebar to first translate the original, French-language written record into the language of the female audience, which she transmits to them orally. She then translates their exchange back into the written French of the printed text. The storyteller-writer often recognizes the first step of this process, conceding, for instance: “[j]e traduis la relation dans la langue maternelle et je te la rapporte, moi, ta cousine” (237). The author-scribe, in effect, acts as the pivot between the temporal, linguistic, and oral and written registers; she is the agent who occupies the middle ground between these terms and blurs the boundaries between them. Here, the autobiographical je collides with the historian-scribe’s je, the latter providing perhaps a safer means for Assia to express her sense of self. As pivot point within the “Corps-enlacés” series, Djebar takes up a long tradition of women’s storytelling and “assure ainsi la perpétuation du groupe […] et de sa culture” — a key component of the oral tradition in Zumthor’s view (169). Indeed, by linking these divergent yet similar stories, she allows the women to embrace a past hitherto unknown and thus extend their sense of group identity.
Curiously, however, the “Corps-enlacés” series also integrates purely fictional accounts. Breaking with the pattern established in Parts One and Two, Djebar imagines the experiences of an unnamed woman, captured by Saint-Arnaud in the summer of 1843 and sent to France by ship:

Je t’imagine, toi, l’inconnue, dont on parle encore de conteuse à conteuse, au cours de ce siècle qui aboutit à mes années d’enfance. Car je prends place à mon tour dans le cercle d’écoute immuable, près des monts Ménacer… Je te recrée, toi, l’invisible […]! Je te ressuscite, au cours de cette traversée que n’évoquera nulle lettre de guerrier français… (267)

Inventing the story of this unnamed woman, Djebar perhaps fills in the gaps left by historical records. Yet, rather than placing this account in a historical segment, she puts it in the “Corp-enlacés” series, where the historical, testimonial, and autobiographical collide. Doing so, she implies that fiction plays an equal role within this nexus. Accorded the same clout as the archival and the testimonial, the fictional, much as in Kwahulé’s work, harbors the power to alter the collective narrative into which Djebar’s individual tale weaves. It is, after all, the fictional vein that allows the author-scribe to imagine herself witness to the war of conquest, and even a child of 1842. Indeed, Djebar explicitly manipulates the norms of historical writing; using storytelling techniques and the literary imaginary, she crafts a text that “raconte ce qui a été,” as well as “ce qui n’a pas été ou ce qui a été douteux,” blurring that dividing line that, following Barthes, historical discourse purports to maintain (“Le Discours de l’histoire” 71). Doing so, she circumvents the notion of historical veracity entirely; akin to Babyface and Traversée in this regard, narrative “truth” is of little consequence here. What Djebar foregrounds, instead, are the processes through which narratives are forged, whether collective, historical, or individual, and the necessary part fiction plays therein. The abundant use of the lexicon
of spectacle (opéra, ballet, chorégraphie, théâtre, comédie, tragédie, carnaval, even fiction), which denotes at one and the same time the act of fabrication and the gaze, also illustrates this. Invited to watch the show, to use Holter’s metaphor, we are also drawn backstage; we both “visualize” and “question” the narratives unfolding on the page (237).

Thus, on the one hand, it is certainly true that *L’Amour, la fantasia* debunks the anonymous subject of the Algerian war myth, and thus participates in the trend of women’s writing that Miriam Cooke explores in “WO-man, Retelling the War Myth.” Her counternarrative indeed “decenter[s] and fragment[s] hegemonic discourse” (180), and thereby also acts as a pillar for the later generation of Algerian women writers that Susan Ireland discusses in “Voices of Resistance.” But, on the other hand, the socio-cultural picture *L’Amour, la fantasia* paints is multiple and enigmatic, clouded in doubt and bolstered by fabrication. Moreover, it cripples the singular position of authority associated with both historical discourse and the Western conception of autobiography.

As Beïda Chikhi aptly notes, “[p]lus que le dit lui-même, ce qui ravive le mouvement de restitution [de l’Histoire], c’est *la forme que prend ce dit*” (Assia Djebar 64, emphasis added). Emphasizing the autobiographical realm over the historical, Martine Fernandes similarly writes that Djebar’s style “s’éloigne d’une écriture de témoignage, en ce qu’il ne s’agit pas tant de décrire la situation de la femme ou de décrire la guerre mais de faire comprendre à la lectrice la nature de la subjectivité hybride de la femme algérienne” (185). Chikhi and Fernandes make, essentially, the same point, only through different angles; yet it is crucial to grasp these two components simultaneously. By so deftly weaving fiction, history, memory, and autobiography together, Djebar strips the notions

25 While I fully agree that Djebar’s poetics displaces emphasis from content to mode, I cannot espouse the idea that it portrays Algerian women’s subjectivity as hybrid. I will return to this in greater detail in Part III.
of history and the self of their teleological authority, transforming both into malleable and mutually informative substances. This is how she diverts the risk of exposure she evoked in her interview with Zimra, much like she tells the women’s testimonial tales without betraying their ideal of anonymity. This “atypical autobiography,” as Fathi puts it, “s’achemin[e] vers le roman social en finissant dans l’historiographie” (203), and ultimately draws out the “polyphonie d’un nouveau je” (202).26

While certainly specific to Djebar’s project, the polyvocal quality of her autobiographical je nonetheless reflects a broader shift within late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century narrations of the self. Michael Sheringham notes precisely this trend in his study “La figure de l’archive dans l’autobiographie contemporaine.” “Dans le contexte de l’écriture de soi,” Sheringham writes, “qui passe de plus en plus par l’autre, l’archive représente le caractère social et historique de l'expérience individuelle” (33).

Aline Mura-Brunel’s introduction to L’Intime - L’Extime further corroborates this tendency, noting that “[c]’est […] avec le social que se conjugue le nouveau discours de l’intime, écrire sur soi-même impliquant un détour par l’autre et par le monde” (5).

Indeed, this “detour through the other” — this push to locate oneself in the other and the other within oneself27 — informs both Djebar’s and Ernaux’s autobiographical projects.

26 It is perhaps for this reason many scholars have qualified L’Amour, la fantasia as a “collective” or “plural” autobiography. See Patricia Geesey, “Collective Autobiography”; Jane Hiddleston, “The Specific Plurality of Assia Djebar”; Trudy Agar-Mendousse, “Le Sang l’écriture”; and Hafid Gafaiti, Les Femmes dans le roman algérien. For my part, I find Fathi’s formulation the most faithful to the Djebar’s poetics.

27 This trend, moreover, both perpetuates and complicates the longer tradition of female autobiographers’ recognition of otherness that Mary Mason discusses in “The Other Voice.” Studying four seventeenth-century women’s autobiographies, Mason concludes, “the self discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some ‘other’” (210). Of course, psychoanalysis has shown that the self always already constitutes itself vis-à-vis the other through the founding moment of méconnaissance. What is interesting, however, is these early autobiographers’ recognition of this process, and, more recently, contemporary authors’ exploitation of it. For more on otherness within contemporary women’s autobiographies, see also Belle Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, Life/Lines as well as Natalie Edwards, Shifting Subjects.
Like Djebar’s penchant for intertwining her story with Arabo-Berber women’s roles in history, so too does Ernaux continually imbricate a wealth of socio-cultural phenomena and her own intimate story. As Bruno Blanckeman puts it, Ernaux’s writing “consigne sa propre existence comme un témoignage sur l’homme et sa condition” (“Figures intimes/postures extimes” 50). In *Les Années*, however, the logic is reverse: rather than narrating her own experiences as exemplary of broader social realities, here those social realities delineate the contours of the individual story.

As a result, Ernaux’s transpersonal autobiography contains many of the characteristics already discussed in this chapter. The abundance of collective discourse and socio-culturally specific speech patterns, for example, renders her work starkly realist. Hence Siobhán McIlvanney’s argument that language in Ernaux’s oeuvre “ne peut pas être analysé comme un système neutre et autonome — comme le voudrait une approche structuraliste — mais cherche à refléter la situation de celui qui parle” (150). Language, then, acts as Ernaux’s own *madeleine*, where terms and expressions re-emerge and transport her back to the time of their use. Thus, in a passage pertaining to the *elle*’s early twenties, “il lui revient des scènes de son enfance, sa mère lui criant *plus tard tu nous cracheras à la figure*, […] ses devoirs sur la table couverte d’une toile cirée grasse où son père « fait collation »” (1002). The lists of consumer objects, references to pop culture, and descriptions of gatherings with friends and family add to this realist effect, creating, as Danielle Bajomée notes, a “tableau-like” (113) vision of the years in question.28 In this, *Les Années* also acts as a testimonial work of literature, a “témoignage

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28 Ernaux, for her part, describes her portrayal of collective spaces in terms of photography, referring specifically to her estimate journals as “des sortes de photographies de la réalité quotidienne, urbaine, collective” (*L’Écriture comme un couteau* 23).
sociologique et historique de son temps et de son vécu,” as Eylem Aksoy Alp puts it (198).

Yet, in painting these socio-ethnographically realist tableaux, Ernaux has very little recourse to description. On the contrary, her écriture blanche, to borrow the title of Rabaté and Viart’s study, divests the work of those linking agents typically associated with narration. If, then, Les Années functions as a testimony, it diverges remarkably from the narrative forms of testimony and history. As the title Les Années suggests, the act of recording the years seems more important than drawing out any larger narrative of moral significance, a component that defines narrative history in Hayden White’s view. To recapitulate the years, Ernaux adopts the annal or chronicle form of historiography, and flattens lists and descriptions of events and social phenomena onto a single horizontal plane as if to accord them equal importance.29 Ernaux “court-circuite tout point de vue surplombant ou jugement de valeur,” as Montémont keenly writes (125); and yet, her individual story does lend the work a larger narrative coherency. In this regard, Les Années also resembles the chronicle, its “central subject” combining the three possibilities White lists: “the life of an individual, town, or region” (“The Value of Narrativity” 16). The widespread lack of date headings and subtitles further aligns Ernaux’s work with the chronicle mode; its organization of the passing of the years only follows vaguely by topic and decade.30

29 With regard to the annal, White writes that social and natural events “seem to have the same order of importance or unimportance. They seem merely to have occurred, and their importance seems to be indistinguishable from the fact that they were recorded” (“The Value of Narrativity” 8). He opposes this form to “narrativity,” where “we can be sure that morality or a moralizing impulse is present” (22).
30 This lack of organizing principle, as Francine Dugast-Portes notes, “va à l’encontre du discours historique: pas de découpage avec sous-titres, mais des espaces blancs qui scandent les flashes, marquent les pauses par rapport au temps référentiel” (“Les Années” 96).
Chronicling France’s national history has a number of advantages. Through this structure, the reader gains access to the *archéologie du savoir* at the turn of the millennium. By the same token, she witnesses the shifting relations between popular thought and official dictums, notably within the sphere of language. Chronicling the media’s dissemination of neologisms, for instance, *Les Années* provides a twentieth-century history of the French language on par with Henriette Walter’s *Le Français dans tous les sens*, notably Walter’s discussion of the school-system and media. Likewise, by tracing the emergence of new consumerist objects, Ernaux delineates the development of *la société de consommation*, to borrow the title of Baudrillard’s study, though her work only observes, rather than critiques, these changes. Finally, repeated references to the shifting terms surrounding the Algerian War bring Ernaux’s work into dialogue with both Stora’s and Djebar’s: it too illustrates the historically real silence surrounding the war; it, too, breaks that silence by naming the amnesia suffocating its memory. Indeed, Ernaux demonstrates the extent to which these three domains — language, consumer culture, colonial history — coalesce. Thus, for instance, the Evian agreements hold little bearing on the average French person’s everyday life: “[n]e se préoccupait pas de la suite, des pieds-noirs et des harkis là-bas, des Algériens ici. On espérait partir l’été prochain en Espagne, tellement bon marché” (974). The integration of new terminology (*pieds-noirs, harkis, bon marché*) here demonstrates a shift within the average French Metropolitan’s beliefs and behaviors in terms of both the former colony and new consumerist prospects. Contrary to Stora, however, Ernaux doesn’t *interpret* this; she only chronicles the two

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31 I am here following Natalie Froloff, who argues that “on pourrait relire *Les Années* comme un livre d’histoire, une histoire relevant […] de l’archéologie du savoir” (“Formes et enjeux” 23).
32 Stora cites the “euphoria of progress” as a driving factor in this indifference. See Chapter Seven of *Histoire de la guerre d’Algérie*.
developments so as to allow the reader to draw her own conclusions with regard to their juxtaposition.

Testimony, realist portraiture, historical chronicle: *Les Années* is all of this; yet it is still, and fundamentally, an autobiography.³³ To be sure, Ernaux fulfills Lejeune’s seminal autobiographical pact: first, by way of the explicit admission, “[e]lle est cette femme de la photo […] : c’est moi” (1078); and second, via the earlier, albeit more cryptic, inscription of her first name in the description of a photograph taken in 1963: “[a]u dos de la photo: *Cité universitaire. Mont-Saint-Aignan. Juin 63. Brigitte, Alain, Annie, Gérard, Annie, Ferrid*” (979). In terms of Lejeune’s autobiographical pact, however, *Les Années* resonates more strongly with the “nom absent” model, where author-narrator identification is implied but never given. Like for Djebar, it is only those readers familiar with Ernaux’s œuvre that will recognize the presence of autobiographical components. Although minimized, the initiated reader of Ernaux finds references to her mother’s and father’s deaths; the formative scene where father nearly kills her mother;³⁴ her clandestine abortion;³⁵ her romantic liaison with a Russian diplomat;³⁶ her struggle with breast cancer;³⁷ and the death of an unknown elder sister,

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³³ This perhaps accounts for the array of locutions scholars have used to describe the text, which range from the “impersonal autobiography” and the “photographic epopee” (Yilancioğlu 59-60) to the “polyphonic autobiography” (*L’Atelier noir* 30) and an “autobiographie vide” (127).
³⁴ “[C]ette dame majestueuse, atteinte d’Alzheimer, vêtue d’une blouse à fleurs comme les autres pensionnaires de la maison de retraite […]” (927), subject of *Une femme* and *Je ne suis pas sortie de ma nuit*; “l’image de son père à l’agonie, du cadavre habillé du costume qu’il n’avait porté qu’une seule fois, à son mariage à elle” (1003), subject of *La Place*.
³⁵ “[L]e temps s’arrêtait devant un fond de culotte toujours blanc depuis des jours. Il fallait ‘faire passer’ d’une façon — en Suisse pour les riches — ou d’une autre — dans la cuisine d’une femme inconnue sans spécialité sortant une sonde bouillie d’un fait-tout” (976), recounted in *L’Événement*.
³⁶ “[E]lle se pense comme une femme qui a vécu il y a trois ans une passion violente pour un Russe” (1040), impetus behind *Passion simple* and *Se perdre*.
³⁷ “[E]ntre la photo précédente, […] un certain nombre de faits [sont] survenus dont […] un cancer qui semblait s’éveiller dans le sein de toutes les femmes de son âge” (1079), central theme of *L’Usage de la photographie*.
which would not be fully narrated until the posterior publication of *L’Autre fille* (2011).\footnote{“Il y avait des enfants morts dans toutes les familles. D’affections soudaines et sans remède, la diarrhée, les convulsions, la diphtérie. La trace de leur bref passage sur la terre était une tombe en forme de petit lit […] des conversations à mi-voix, presque sereines, qui effrayaient les enfants vivants, se croyant en sursis” (947).}

Even the act of writing of her first published text, *Les Armoires vides*, makes an appearance: “[e]lle a commencé un roman où les images du passé, du présent, les rêves nocturnes et l’imaginaire de l’avenir alternent à l’intérieur d’un « je » qui est le double décollé d’elle-même” (980). But, if *Les Années* constitutes an “implicit recapitulation” of Ernaux’s oeuvre, as Montémont contends (120), it is this implicit quality that matters most. Indeed, Ernaux expressly decentralizes the autobiographical components in favor of the collective dimension of her story, which, as a result, is both everywhere and nowhere at once.

In *Présent, nation, mémoire*, Pierre Nora laments the state of contemporary autobiography and historiography, writing that “une extraordinaire décentralisation de toutes les instances du patrimoine a transformé chaque foyer, chaque individu, en producteur d’archives, en collectionneur de sa propre existence” (109). Djebar’s and Ernaux’s works certainly reflect this tendency, as each embraces personal experiences as vestiges of larger socio-historical realities — thus, perhaps, Ernaux’s recourse to photographs to grasp her individual evolution. Moreover, both works illustrate Nora’s observation that “l’histoire, le roman et […] les formes de récits de soi […] obéissent aujourd’hui, à des titres différents, au pacte mémoriel” (121). Yet, Djebar’s and Ernaux’s works do more than merely echo this shift towards memory; they also reflect evolving conceptions of the life-story — that is, the means by which the individual conceptualizes and narrates her experiences. Both, in effect, belie Lejeune’s claim that “[i]l est
impossible que la vocation autobiographique et la passion de l’anonymat coexistent dans le même être” (Le Pacte autobiographique 33). In fact, if Les Années, published twenty years after L’Amour, la fantasia, is any testament, the anonymous quality of the je is becoming more prominent, a polyvocal, relational, and protean conception of the self supplanting the romantic notion of the all-powerful individual subject. To borrow Natalie Edwards’s locution, the autobiographical subject in these two works is “neither ‘I’ nor ‘we,’ but rather a ‘more than me’” (25).
Part III

From Cultural Site to Relational Script
Chapter Five: Form and the Specificity of the *lieu*

*Il faut partir du lieu et imaginer la totalité-monde.*

– Édouard Glissant¹

*Les modalités de la mise en relation passent par le caractère incontournable du lieu.*

– Édouard Glissant²

“La créolisation,” writes Édouard Glissant in *Traité du Tout-Monde*, “ne conclut pas à la perte de l’identité, à la dilution de l’étant. Elle n’infère pas le renoncement à soi” (25). As the socio-linguistic model for Glissant’s thought on relation, creolization implies being open to the productive potential that resides in each encounter without losing the specificity of self. It is the *lieu* that, in Glissant’s parlance, constitutes this specificity — the ground in which we remain rooted but nonetheless “tend[ons] [nos] branches vers les autres” (*Introduction à une poétique du divers* 132). To bring contemporary relational narratives into mutually informative dialogue, then, it is also necessary to ascertain each text’s *lieu*. On the surface, these specificities seem to lie in narrative content; each author, of course, draws upon distinct socio-cultural and historical realities in composing a body of work. Yet, as the preceding analyses showed, the portrayal of shifting truths in relational narratives renders such an interpretation untenable. Perceiving the *lieu*, rather, means deciphering the more opaque space in which each is grounded and simultaneously open to relation.

¹ *Introduction à une poétique du divers*, 133.
In the passage reproducing the “Noutéka des mornes” in Texaco, Chamoiseau pinpoints precisely the type of reading that perceiving this lieu requires. The term illisible appears eight times over the course of twelve pages, indicating the illegibility of what the reader assumes to be the original document. Relational narratives might likewise seem illegible upon first approach. But much as the Noutéka passage suggests, these texts also incite the reader to make meaning in spite of seeming illegibility; they appeal for her to formulate relational reading strategies. Indeed, it is only by so doing that the reader can accede to a more global understanding of each narrative. To perceive the lieu, the reader must learn to read as she might listen. “Si « entendre », c’est comprendre le sens,” Jean-Luc Nancy writes in À l’écoute, “écouter, c’est être tendu vers un sens possible, et par conséquent non immédiatement accessible” (19). Listening, in Nancy’s view, hinges on the act of communication instead of the message, hence the possibility of meaning rather than its finality. To listen ultimately means to embrace what the Creole language terms “déparler,” “un type de parler qui […] montre qu’il y a de l’indéchiffrable dans la langue, et qu’il ne faut pas croire dans la transparence du langage […], c’est-à-dire ne pas penser qu’on détient la vérité sur le monde” (Jerad in “La Relation et le rhizome” 351). It means accepting opacity in the face of false transparency, and realizing that “[i] [n]’est pas nécessaire de ‘comprendre’ qui que se soit, individu, communauté, peuple, […] pour accepter de vivre avec lui, de bâtir avec lui, de risquer avec lui” (Glissant, Traité du Tout-Monde 29). Listening to these relational narratives, we are able to recognize each text’s lieu without recourse to “la compréhension.”

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3 “Le droit à l’opacité” is a fundamental component of Glissant’s theses on Relation. “Des opacités” he writes in Poétique de la Relation, “peuvent coexister, confluer, tramant des tissus dont la véritable compréhension porterait sur la texture de cette trame et non pas sur la nature des composantes. […] Le droit à l’opacité n’établirait pas l’autisme, il fonderait réellement la Relation” (204).
In his monograph, Dominique Viart argues that François Bon’s poetics “fais[t] saillir le réel” (François Bon, 16). “[L]a réalité,” Viart writes, “est […] saisie à la fois comme un matériau et comme une sorte de « modèle » pour l’écriture” (16). This statement rings particularly true with regard to Sortie d’usine, where, as we saw in Part I, every component of the text, from syntax to the very shape of its paragraphs, communicates some aspect of factory life. If, for instance, there is no core plot, it is because within the everyday of the factory “il y a pas de drame” (Bon, Sortie d’usine 46); likewise, if subject positions and narrative focus shift without warning, it is because of the “mêlé des histoires oubliées, […] poisseuses” (165) that issues forth from the workforce itself. Indeed, the narrative’s disjointed quality perfectly reflects the verbal exchanges between factory workers, whose “récits se heurtent entre eux” (110). Hence, during the strike of the third Week:

[I]ls palabrent pour colmater au nom du fait leurs divergences sans nier ce que disait l’autre, comme de composer les récits pour préserver sa validité de témoin à chaque narrateur en reconnaissant celle de l’autre. Et semblait dominer par-dessus ce bouche à bouche nerveux du fait ressassé, multiplié de versions, un silence gelé sauf le grondement irrégulier de la circulation sur le quai et son écho plus frais, le bruit de l’eau sous les roues. (110, emphasis added)

The laborers share stories in an effort to found a sense of commonality; and yet, each tale seems to echo in a vacuum: the commonality never emerges. On the contrary, silence and the grumbles of machinery dominate in these exchanges. Much as the thwarted communication here, the individual stories recounted in Sortie d’usine hold little valence on their own; they only gain meaning when drawn into a space of mutual resonance.

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4 Bon, Sortie d’usine 50.
Similarly, manipulation of the French language transposes the everyday reality of the factory floor. As the author concedes in *Temps Machine* (1992), published ten years later, the factory begets its own syntax, composing a “grand poème lyrique” (78) that must be rendered in prose in order to be properly recognized:

Ce que les presses camouflent sous leurs capots antibruit éclate lorsqu’on approche des hublots orangés, on n’aperçoit du poinçon que le retrait, l’étoile qui demeure et la bande qu’on sectionne dans l’acier plus épais que le pouce: ce qu’il faudrait faire de mots destinés à le dire. La livraison faite ensuite de l’acier terne aux soixante-dix outils de fraisage pilotés par calculateurs numériques. Et d’où il faudrait tirer la syntaxe qui tienne ceci à bout de bras […]. / L’effort pour tout tenir ensemble et comme il laisse aussi visible, par la grâce et la tension de syntaxe, ce que l’autre expression « à bout de bras » ramène d’une nécessaire implication du corps. (78-79 emphasis added)

In *Sortie d’usine*, “les mots destinés à le dire [l’usine]” achieve precisely the effect that Bon evokes in the later work. To put it in Steen Bille Jorgensen’s terms, “la matérialité du texte souligne « en action » ce que dit le texte” (221). Thus, the abundance of nominal and infinitive form sentences evince not only the laborers’ lack of agency, but also the immediacy of the factory space: as Bon writes in *Mécanique* (2001), “dans cette langue des choses, l’abandon trop souvent des verbes” (46). So too does the frequent placement of relative pronouns and conjunctions at the end of sentences deftly render a feeling of stagnation and fatality. Though frustrating for the reader, who must image the sequences omitted after terms like *que*, *si*, *de*, *comme*, and *mais*, this aberrant grammar depicts the resulting clause as if it were of no consequence: regular operations will continue, regardless of the failure of language to follow its course. Much as the factory space, then,

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5 For example: “des fois que” (23); “pas de leur faute si” (25); “le beau-frère de” (30); “[b]allants comme” (31); “ne jamais tolérer les rides le bouffissement du sien les cernes mais” (37); “dans les deux sens, dis-y que” (121); etc.
“[t]ous les bruits parlent” (50); via language, form, voice, and temporality, the real permeates every page of Sortie d’usine.

It is thus the subjective experience of the factory itself — the factory as a space of corporeal discipline and constrained social interaction — that constitutes the lieu in which this text is grounded, the deep-seated specificity from which it relational poetics ensues. Beyond merely giving voice to the silenced laboring peoples, it gives them voice in a way that is specific to lived experience. In this, Sortie d’usine diverges remarkably from other narratives of the factory, particularly Robert Linhart’s L’Établi, published just two years prior. Though both works draw upon similar themes (laborer subjugation, hyper-regulation of bodies, time, and space, the historical significance of the strike), Linhart’s narrator infiltrates the factory in order to advance a determinate political cause. He is fundamentally an outsider, and the poetics of L’Établi reflects that fact through its conventional style and classical incorporation of dialogue. Bon’s poetics, on the other hand, takes shape from the inside-out, whence its realist effects: the specificities of the experience on the factory floor both inform and drive the narrative; indeed, if “tous les bruits parlent,” it is because the text’s language, form, voice, and temporality converge in a veritable performance of the laborers’ experience. In Bon’s words, “s’accompli[t] enfin la renverse qui bascul[e] l’écriture de l’usine en l’usine comme écriture” (166).

5.2 – “La forme fait voir les choses autrement”

Ernaux’s writing journal L’Atelier noir, published in 2011, frequently underscores the importance the author places on form, highlighting time and again her belief that “il existe pour [s]on sujet une seule forme” (11, emphasis added). Les Années evinces a

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similar concern, when in a sequence pertaining to the first year of the new millennium, the third person subject reflects on how to best to craft her nascent text:

La forme de son livre ne peut [...] surgir que d’une immersion dans les images de sa mémoire pour détailler les signes spécifiques de l’époque [...] , s’efforcer de réentendre les paroles des gens, les commentaires sur les événements et les objets, prélevés dans la masse des discours flottants, cette rumeur qui apporte sans relâche les formulations incessantes de ce que nous sommes et devons être, penser, croire, craindre, espérer. Ce que ce monde a imprimé en elle et ses contemporains, elle s’en servira pour reconstituer un temps commun, [...] pour [...] rendre la dimension vécue de l’Histoire. (1082)

Weaving together personal recollections, exterior signs, and collective discourse, Ernaux achieves precisely this effect. Indeed, if the “temps commun” she evokes does materialize in Les Années, it is thanks to the text’s form, which depicts history, individual, and collective memory as neither mutually exclusive nor coalescing, but as unstable yet mutually informative sources for grasping an entire generation’s experiences.

One of the ways Ernaux so keenly intertwines these dimensions is through her use of juxtaposition, of which the opening and closing sections are exemplary. The opening list, for example, is such a carefully crafted inventory of collective and individual-specific experiences that it blurs the line distinguishing the two. For example:

dans une publicité à la télé, le père essayant vainement, en douce derrière son journal, de lancer en l’air une Picorette et de la rattraper avec la bouche, comme sa petite fille

une maison avec une tonnelle de vigne vierge, qui était un hôtel dans les années soixante, au 90 A, sur les Zattere, à Venise

les centaines de faces pétrifiées, photographiées par l’administration avant le départ pour les camps, sur les murs d’une salle du palais de Tokyo, à Paris, au milieu des années quatre-vingt (929)
Of the three images evoked — a television ad, a Venetian residence, and a photography exhibition — only the second is definitively personal; the first, which falls under the realm of pop culture, and the third, which qualifies as historico-artistic documentation, were likely viewed by vast numbers of people, including Ernaux herself. Listing these disparate images in such a fashion, however, levels them out, conferring each with equal weight. The use of incomplete sentences, as well as the lack of initial capitalization and final punctuation furthers this effect. Each image, in turn, seems to bleed into and out of the others while still maintaining a certain degree of autonomy thanks to the line breaks and indentation. This use of lists continues intermittently throughout the book, particularly in the passages noting historical events and regular activities. Of the early 1980s, for example, Ernaux writes:

[I]l n’y avait jamais eu autant de choses accordées en si peu de mois […].
La peine de mort abolie, l’IVG remboursée, les immigrés clandestins régularisés, l’homosexualité autorisée, les congés rallongés d’une semaine, la semaine de travail diminuée d’une heure, etc. (1019)

Here, the enumeration of six fundamental changes to French jurisprudence, presented in nominal sentence form, takes on the characteristics of a list where each item metonymically illustrates the changing mores and political culture of early Mitterrandism — hence the use of *et cetera* to close the passage. This same practice informs the text’s broader construction, where abrupt switches in theme, separated by page breaks of varying lengths, take the place of the bulleted items in the list, and ultimately paints a skeletal or, in Huglo’s view, a “metonymic” (50) picture of the years in question. But if for Danielle Bajomée this structure creates the impression that “une mémoire, cela se désassemble, se casse, se recommence, dans des lambeaux, des micro-réminiscences”
(110), Ernaux also reconsolidates this memory by bringing the disjointed items together into the single, albeit shifting space of the list.

In the end, only the author’s perspective holds this narrative together. The boundaries of the bookends function much like the boundaries of the skin or of consciousness: akin to the fleeting sensation of corporeal unicity discussed above in Chapter Two, the book houses all of the diverse socio-cultural, historical, and personal components at once, which add together without ever adding up. Thus, on the one hand, the “[Ernaux] accuse davantage les points de rupture que les points de suture avec son moi ancien,” as Adler asserts (“Les Années” 79); and on the other, “les éléments disparates […] prennent une cohérence, […] parce que l’observatrice les fond dans son propre univers intérieur” as Charpentier notes (“Les Années” 87). Adler’s and Charpentier’s seemingly antithetical arguments both hold: periodization, page breaks, discursive and thematic juxtapositions, each conveys the author’s implicit sense of self and its specific intersections with a broader socio-historical community.

Nathalie Froloff has argued that “la question [dans Les Années] n’est pas celle du contenu, où des thèmes traités, mais celle de la méthode, ou plutôt de l’écriture qui donnera forme au réel” (“Formes et enjeux” 24). The “real” about which Froloff speaks is not only socio-historical in nature; it is also deeply personal. And it is precisely the feeling of corporeal unicity that renders this personal dimension and anchors this life narrative in something more stable than the forever shifting domains of social inscriptions and determinations. Writing the body serves as the lieu from which the uniqueness of self is maintained while still acknowledging otherness and impermanence within. In Paul Ricœur’s terms, the body provides a sense of sameness throughout time and thus houses
the notion of self as *idem*; the socio-historic components, in turn, convey the sense of self as alterity, or *ipse.* The body yields a sense of permanence, while the fluctuating socio-historic dimensions yield the impression of constant change. And although these two outlooks never fully coalesce in *Les Années,* both are essential to the narrative Ernaux crafts. Without writing the body, the individual story would be irretrievable, drowned by the shifting landscapes of collective phenomena and discourses; so, too, would our reading of the text would remain within the realm of the sociologically driven interpretations that have dominated Ernaux scholarship. Indeed, we must acknowledge the pervading sense of corporeal unicity if we are to grasp the full force of Ernaux’s poetics. For, while her oeuvre certainly undermines the notion of a coherent self, or identity-as-*idem,* it only does so to promote a more fluid, relational definition that nevertheless remains grounded in a sense of permanency — again, the body acts as Ernaux’s *lieu.* And it is form in *Les Années* form that renders these two components equally visible, and allows the reader to “voir les choses autrement.”

5.3 – *Tellement de tracées pour faire notre seul chemin*°

At the close of the introductory section of *Texaco,* Marie-Sophie sets up her narrative by telling the scribe, “[c]’est sans doute ainsi, Oiseau de Cham, que je commençai à […] raconter [à l’urbaniste] l’histoire de notre Quartier et de notre conquête de l’En-ville, à parler au nom de tous, contant ma vie… / Et si c’est pas comme ça, ça n’a

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7 On this, see *Soi-même comme un autre,* as well as Ricœur’s more concise article “Narrative Identity.”
9 I thus contest Violaine Houdart-Merot’s otherwise pertinent reading of *Les Années,* which, in her view, translates “« l’identité-*idem* »” as an “impossibilité de se sentir soi” (“Altérité et engagement” 92-93). Houdart-Merot fails to consider the importance of the body in Ernaux’s work.
10 Chamoiseau, *Texaco* 117.
pas d’importance…” (41). Detached from the preceding paragraph, this last sentence stands out, pointing to the crucial role form plays in telling this tale. As in Sortie d’usine and Les Années, form in Texaco conveys as much meaning as the words themselves. Indeed, it is form that brings all of those individual and group “tracées” into relation so as to delineate the “seul chemin” from which the Texaco neighborhood takes shape.

Geographically, the traces (from the verb tracer: to draw, but also to make one’s way) are the footpaths that link up homes and villages on the hillside; they “travers[ent] les vies, les intimités, les rêves et les destins,” as Chamoiseau writes in Texaco (355). From this topography, Glissant develops the notion of the trace as symbol of a person’s unique manner of being in the world — her “path home,” so to speak. “La trace,” Glissant states, “c’est manière opaque d’apprendre la branche et le vent: être soi, dérivé à l’autre” (Traité de tout-monde 20). Both well trodden and mutable, the trace is open to infinite interconnection, and thus, relation. Returning to Texaco, then, Chamoiseau inscribes a myriad of individual and group traces that converge, diverge, and interconnect over the course of nearly two hundred years, forming, as Christine Chivallon asserts, “a mass of fleeting moments reconnected by the trace of the trails” (“Éloge de la ‘spatialité’” 120).

Much like Sortie d’usine, Chamoiseau’s prose in Texaco provides a powerful model for grasping interconnectedness. As the wide scope of scholarship on this subject attests, his use of language can be unsettling, and has led a good deal of critics to advance the notion of a hybrid language or of a colonization of French.11 Contrary to one reviewer’s subtitle, however, it is less a movement of reduction — “deux langues en une” (Joubert 18) —, than it is of expansion: de deux langues, trois would be a more accurate

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formulation. In Milan Kundera’s words, “Chamoiseau does not compromise between French and Creole by mixing them up. His language is French, but French transformed — not creolized French (no Martiniquais speaks as he writes), but Chamoisified French” (49). Kundera’s formulation, in fact, reiterates the author’s stance on language and his desire to “résoudre le face à face stérile entre deux absolus qui s’affrontent” (Albouker 142-143). To this end, Chamoiseau brings both languages into relation so as to form a third space; again in his words, he choses to occupy a “positionnement particulier dans la langue française et dans la langue créole et dans la conjonction des deux” (Gauvin, “Un rapport problématique” 41, emphasis added). Moreover, as Noémie Auzas’s insightful analysis shows, Chamoiseau hardly writes in Creole at all! Employing an arsenal of techniques, including agglutination, phonetic modifications, onomatopoeia, and simply inventing terms, he “écri[t] créole sans le créole,” affirms Auzas (203).¹³

Neither French proper nor Creole proper, neither Creolized French nor Frenchified Creole, language in Texaco is the language of Texaco, a language that performs the relation from which the neighborhood eventually materializes. “Le multilinguisme de Chamoiseau,” Gauvin writes, “ne tend pas vers la juxtaposition des langues ni vers l’annulation de leurs différences mais vers une expérimentation continue qui, à l’image de la ville ou du jardin créole, ne table sur rien de fixe ni d’établi” (“Glissements” 23). And herein lies the essential link between language, the Texaco neighborhood, and the lieu in which this text is grounded: Chamoiseau’s prose, in effect, perfectly reflects the interstitial, intercommunicative topography of the Creole space.

¹² For example, one man’s profession is listed as “charpentier-menuisier-serrurier-dépanneur-nettoyeur” (88).
¹³ For a detailed analysis of these techniques, see Part Three, Chapter One of Auzas, Chamoiseau ou les voix de Babel.
From the outside, the neighborhood appears to be a déliran[t] mosaïqu[e]” (429), one which the urban planner must learn to read as a “poème pour les yeux illettrés” (152). “[N]i de la ville ni de la campagne” (336), Texaco is the “mangrove urbaine” (336) born of the relation between the two. Despite its appearance to the unaccustomed eye, the space actualizes a particular vision of unity. Like the urban planner, then, readers of Texaco must take stock of what might initially seem a messy amalgamation of fragments before acceding to the relational space in which each of these fragments coexist, not in autonomous harmony, but in mutually informative ways. Reading Texaco, like reading the neighborhood for the urban planner, requires a certain “mutation d’esprit” (300).

It is the Texaco neighborhood itself, then, that acts as the lieu from which this novel opens up. In a personal interview with Lorna Milne, Chamoiseau suggests one possible explanation for this:

[O]n a toujours eu dans l’imaginaire populaire le sentiment non pas d’être de passage sur cette terre, mais d’être « locataires » de cette terre: c’est toujours la terre du Béké, la terre du Maître, la terre du Blanc, on n’a jamais eu un sentiment de possession pendant longtemps. Et on n’a jamais eu le désir d’inscription dans ce sol, dans cette histoire, dans cette culture. (17)

Claiming land, like claiming the French language, does little to solve the conundrum Chamoiseau evokes. To do so, in effect, is tantamount only to reversing the logic of possession and subjugation — hence the importance of crafting a third space. As McCusker argues, there is a “discursive association between text, ‘architecture’ and identity” at work here (“No Place Like Home?” 43); “the project initiated by Esternome,” McCusker continues — and, I would add, realized by Marie-Sophie —, “proceeds in fits and starts, revealing a scavenging, makeshift, and creative ability to make something new out of the randomly assorted detritus” (52). This is precisely how Chamoiseau crafts his
work: on the level of narrative content, this means inscribing the plethora of stories of those individuals who cross paths with Esternome and Marie-Sophie; on the level of narrative mode, it means stitching together divergent voices, parallel texts, and linguistic modes. The overall effect, as McCusker also concludes, is that “the text becomes a sort of building-site” (54). Texaco the space thus acts as the lieu from which Texaco the novel branches out, embracing past struggles, multiple pathways, and diverging languages and cultures into a single innovative space of interrelation. Symbolized by Marie-Sophie’s narration, in which a “clameur de langues, de peuples, de manières […] se touch[ent] en elles, se mêl[ent], pos[ent] intacte chaque brilliance singulière au scintillement des autres” (426, emphasis added), each element of the text exists in the light of the others; each tracée participates in constructing le seul chemin of Texaco’s creation.

5.4 – “On ne traverse pas la mangrove”14

In Condé’s work the convergence, divergence, and interconnections of the traces also play a decisive role, though the seul chemin is less readily visible. Because the text disallows any definitive answers, it is possible to read these traces as mere impasses. And, read metatextually, the mise en abyme of the book’s title seems to point in this direction: when Sancher reveals the title of his project to Vilma, the latter retorts, “[o]n ne traverse pas la mangrove. On s’empale sur les racines des palétuviers. On s’enterre et on étouffe dans la boue saumâtre” (192). Many critics have read this passage as boding poorly for the text, contending that if one cannot “cross” the mangrove — and Sancher never does complete his “Traversée” —, then Condé’s novel is doomed to the same

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14 Condé, Traversée de la Mangrove, 192.
fate.15 But, in response to Vilma’s apprehension, Sancher counters: “[c]’est ça, c’est justement ça” (192). The negative readings of the mangrove metaphor can thus be turned on their head; indeed, it is less a question of successful passage than it is of the process of crossing, however precarious the conditions may be. Like the mangrove, it’s not possible to “cross” Traversée as one might cross the street; but, also like the mangrove, it is possible to make point-to-point connections, navigating between voices, times, and truths as one might navigate through otherwise obstacle-filled waters. To echo Ruthmarie Mitsch, we must “take a lesson from the mangrove and not look to roots, singular roots, but follow where their multiplicities (their ramifications, their knottings) lead” (62).

It is with this in mind that the traces in Condé’s novel must be approached. Rather than symbolizing the individual life paths they do in Texaco, the traces in Traversée function as pathways of fortuitous encounter. Indeed, Rivière au Sel’s inhabitants frequently stumble upon Sancher in trace-like spaces: Léocadie happens upon his corpse in a trace she seldom takes; Mira stumbles upon him in the ravine; Joby finds him resting on a tree-root; Léocadie, Cyrille, and Dodose each first spot him on a trace; etc. Paths, forest, gullies: each provides transitory places of crossing. Moreover, encountering Sancher incites nearly all of the characters to make some sort of change: Moïse, Aristide, Dinah, and Lucien long to leave Guadeloupe; Mira physically descends the road; both Joby and Carmélien yearn to transgress; Aristide and Dodose speak of new beginnings; and so on. Knowing Sancher — meeting him on the trace — allows the townspeople to open up to something further, to be physically or mentally moved. In Condé’s text, then,

the traces are both physical and metaphysical; they are spaces of crossing that activate the potential for relation.

To grasp the potentiality harbored in these meetings, however, we must return to the question of Sancher’s unsolvable identity. As Chapter Three demonstrated, Sancher’s indeterminate nature makes him an emblem of all identity quests and, as such, an emblem of the past. Yet, his function as catalyst within Rivière au Sel also makes him an emblem of the future. In this light, meeting him on the trace is tantamount to shifting away from the past and towards the future, away from origin-based thought and towards the possibility of something different. “The liberation which is effected through Sancher’s death,” Patrick ffrench writes, “is in effect a liberation from the past, and from a belief that the past determines the present” (101). But the death of a “certain past” ffrench evokes (101) cannot be ascertained through Sancher alone; indeed, another equally elusive figure exists in the text — the mysterious Xantippe. If scholars have paid less attention to this character, it is undoubtedly because of his exceptionally enigmatic status. Xantippe, in effect, is the only of Rivière au Sel’s inhabitants to remain entirely unknown, even more so than Sancher himself. Though nearly every character mentions his name, his story doesn’t appear in full form until the novel’s final subsection, in which he recounts his family’s desecration at the hands of the “les Blancs” (243). Like Sancher, he too symbolizes the past: a “Nègre noir” (202) who lives in and from the forest, he stands as a monument of Africa, slavery, and the maroon. But he also stands as an emblem of the future; proclaiming to have “named” the land and thus brought it into existence, he too harbors a creative potentiality:

J’ai nommé tous les arbres de ce pays. Je suis monté à la tête du morne, j’ai crié leur nom et ils ont répondu. / […] C’est moi aussi qui ai nommé
Sancher and Xantippe are thus equally tied to the past and to the future. Despite their seeming polarity, they are parallel figures who depict a vision of the past that belies the reductionist Black-victim/White-victimizer dichotomy. The “certain past” that ffrench sees dying in *Traversée*, then, is a past that is focused on blame and, by the same token, the quest to establish single-root identity. “Le passé doit être mis à mort. Sinon, c’est lui qui tue,” the protagonist of Condé’s later novel *Les Derniers rois mages* (1992) states (127).

If the inhabitants of Rivière au Sel remain blocked in their search for origins, it is because they carry the weight of this past — hence both Dinah’s and Cyrille’s belief that the “malheurs des enfants sont toujours causés par les fautes cachées des parents” (104, 166). The people in the novel have yet to come to terms with their “multi-rootedness”; they have yet to see entanglement as positive force. Anchored in the *lieu* of the mangrove, however, *Traversée* realizes this very potentiality. Its relational narration, disjointed structure, and disregard for narrative truth perform the mangrove topography, “comme si la mangrove est entrée au cœur même de la prose,” as Kullberg asserts (para. 12). This mangrove-prose, in turn, requires the reader to play an active role in “crossing” it. Indeed, if in Sam Haigh’s view there is “there is no clear way through [Sancher’s] life or through the text” (134), there is nevertheless a way. Just as Sancher acts as a catalyst

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16 In her interviews with Françoise Pfaff, Condé criticizes this very vision of the past, and evokes the need for a new approach: “[c]’est complètement dépassé de toujours diviser le monde en noir et blanc: les Noirs sont les bons, les Blancs sont les méchants, les Noirs sont les victimes, les Blancs sont les bourreaux. Il y a des victimes et des bourreaux dans les deux camps. Il faut avoir une nouvelle approche du monde, un nouveau regard sur le monde” (35-36).

17 As Ruthmarie Mitsch points out, the mangrove is in fact “a rich, diverse environment where the *tangle* of abundant growth is actually the reason for the health of the system” (63).
within Rivière au Sel, putting the town into “ébullition” as Dinah remarks (105), so too does *Traversée* incite the reader to renounce her expectations for transparency and, by so doing, learn to make meaning in a landscape of entwined roots and murky waters.

Crossing the mangrove, then, means recognizing this disarray and making one’s way through it, all the same.

5.5 – “Je suis le cri”\(^{18}\)

“[L]a première réalité-femme,” writes Djebar, “est la voix […]. Par contre un besoin d’effacement s’exerce sur le corps des femmes qu’il faut emmitoufler, enserrer, langer, comme un nourrisson ou comme un cadavre” (255). Faced with this bodily effacement, voice becomes for the female subject the sole means of corporeal expression.\(^{19}\) Vocalizations in the form of song, lamentation, and incantation constitute the vocabulary of the “langage du corps” that Djebar describes as the fourth of Arabo-Berber women’s tongues, alongside French, Arabic, and Libyco-Berber (254). “La voix qui explose dans le cri,” notes Karin Holter, “exprime pour Djebar, plus que les mots, la langue même du corps” (247). The *cri* thus acts as the basic unit or carrier of information in this “language.” “[P]récipité agglutiné dans le corps,” it yields in Djebar’s description an “écharpe écœurant de sons: mélasse de râles morts, guano de hoquets et de suffocations” (164); “saccadé, par spasmes roucoulants” (257), it takes on the animalistic vibrations of a “vrai cri de sauvage” (258); it is even described as bloodshed, as Djebar considers covering her mouth so as to “suspendre […] la perte de ce sang invisible”

\(^{18}\) Djebar, *Vaste est la prison* 339.

\(^{19}\) Djebar affirms this again in her collection of essays *Ces voix qui m’assiègent*: “[c]ette tendance à l’asphyxie du corps amène la seule translation possible: supporter sa vie par le chant, la lamentation, l’incantation par la voix seule libérée” (75).
issuing from her own *cri* (164). Enigmatic yet symbolically charged, the signification of
the *cri* hinges on context. Joyous, triumphant, painful, sorrowful, even simply instinctive,
itself power resides in its capacity to *say without saying* — that is, to convey meaning in and
through opacity. All of *L’Amour, la fantasia* capitalizes on this signifying capacity.

“Nie les gestes dans leur spécificité. Ne laisse subsister que les sons,” Djebar writes, as if
to remind herself of her project (224).

Writing the *cri* thus acts as Djebar’s *lieu*. Yet, because the *cri* has no explicit
referent — and because the printed word cannot convey sound —, it can only materialize
in the text as a total effect. Akin to *Traversée* in this regard, it is the points of contact
created between temporally divergent voices that creates this total effect. Following Réda
Bensmaïa,

La composition de *L’Amour, la fantasia* a été conçue de telle sorte
qu’aucun élément d’une des séries ne puisse être dit ‘subordonné’ ou
‘dépendant’ d’une autre série. S’ils concourent à définir une ‘unité,’ c’est
tout à fait autrement qu’en tant que ‘parties’ d’une ‘totalité’ préconçue ou
‘moments’ d’une synthèse finale. […] C’est, par conséquent, vers un type
tout à fait inédit de ‘Totalité’ et d’‘Unité’ qu’il faut faire appel si l’on veut
‘comprendre’ ce qui se joue dans *L’Amour, la fantasia*. ("L’Amour, la
fantasia” 57)

To ascertain this “other” vision of unity, and thus to recognize the power of the *cri*, the
reader must skew her conception of unity so as to view disjointedness as propitious.

Again, textual structure participates strongly in this. The text’s table of contents, which
presents Parts One and Two in a vertical list but Part Three in cascading indentation,
provides a powerful model for grasping this unity. This graphic disposition fails
nonetheless to capture the breadth of the dynamism, suggesting that all the Movements

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20 The breadth of English translations of the French term *cri*, which include cry, shout, scream, and even
animal call, demonstrates this protean quality. It is for this reason that I opt to employ the original French
form.

21 See Appendix 1.
share the same point of departure. A more faithful arrangement would continue its oscillating displacement increasingly forward to render the slow crescendo movement leading up to the Fifth and closing Movement, the text’s veritable finale. Indeed, tension slowly builds out of the points of harmony and dissonance generated by work’s formal disjointedness. The entirety of L’Amour, la fantasia, in effect, resonates as a piece of music composed in free form—a musical tradition termed, precisely, fantasia. However paradoxically, textual architecture provides the visual means through which the vocal quality of L’Amour, la fantasia resonates.

Much as the rhetorical links discussed in Chapter Two, the imagery Djebar embeds in the love-war couplet creates a distinct tension between the autobiographical and historical segments, linking them together in surprising ways. Just as romantic relations seem to be governed by a bellicose impulse, so too does the conquest of Algeria appear as a sordid love affair: in an “Algérie-femme impossible à apprivoiser” (84), the French-indigenous relation is that of a “coup de foudre mutuel” (17).22 By the same token, the liminal segments constitute key moments of musical development. Acting as veritable points of contact, segments like the “Voix” and “Corps enlacé” series in Part Three interrupt the regular oscillation between autobiographical, historical, and testimonial pieces, thus intensifying the text’s dynamism. Printed in italic characters, the lyrical segments that close Parts One and Two also contribute to this.23 Announcing the structural shift that occurs in Part Three, these segments break with the alternating structure otherwise systematically employed in these two Parts, and bring the reader

22 For socio-cultural and gendered readings of this dynamic, see Agar-Mendousse, “Le Sang de l’écriture,” and Fernandes, “À la guerre comme à la guerre.”
23 Djebar speaks of these segments in similar terms: “pour moi, mes romans sont un peu comme des galops. Lorsque les cavaliers tirent, c’est le moment où l’écriture devient une écriture en italique, où il y a volontairement, mais brièvement, une écriture lyrique” (Mortimer, “Entretien” 202-203).
further into the relational space of the text. The segments just prior these lyrical pieces also prepare the shift, albeit in a more subtle way. The final historical segment of Part One, for example, expressly blurs the historical and the autobiographical realms when the narrating voice compares the “démangeaison de l’écriture [sur la chute d’Alger]” with the “graphorrhée épistolaire des jeunes filles enfermées dans [s]on enfance” (66-67) — the subject of a segment figuring nearly fifty pages earlier. Alternately, the closing historical segment of Part Two reads more like a legend than a historical account. Told through the common knowledge of the people — as “les anciens de la ville le racontent encore” (121), “de bouche à l’oreille” (137) — the story of an Arabo-Berber princess’s botched marriage mentions only briefly an original document, a reference that spuriously surfaces after twenty-five pages of narration.

Part Three, via its structural fracturing and increasingly polyvocal quality, brings this musicality to the fore, and culminates the Fifth Movement — the only Movement to diverge from the “Voix” / “Voix de veuve” pattern — and the closing section, entitled Tzarl-rit (final). Acting as veritable apex of the crescendo movement, these last fifteen odd pages assume considerable weight and provide essential clues for grasping the stakes of Djebar’s relational narrative. In the first segment of the Fifth Movement, the author revisits her arrival in the French colonial school and reflects upon the French language as

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24 The tale ostensibly stems form a book salesman’s account, itself informed by a lieutenant’s written report: “Bérard [le libraire], quand il rédige ses souvenirs, affirme avoir eu connaissance de la relation d’El Gobbi [le lieutenant]. Aurait-il lu une traduction du texte arabe ou aurait-il eu entre les mains une copie de l’original? Celui-ci, pour l’instant, est perdu” (143-144).

25 Other remarkable differences include the use of the past tense in place of the historical present, and the near total lack of narrator-historian intervention situating the story in a precise time and place.

26 The fact that the testimonies found in Part Three were taken from Djebar’s film La Nouba further underscores this, as the term nouba refers to a type of Maghrebi song. The nouba, following Malek Chebel, “se caractérise surtout par une suite de morceaux exécutés selon des rythmes différents, mais […] doit se conformer à un déploiement fixé d’avance: un prélude […], un premier mouvement […], un deuxième mouvement, etc.” (298).
a “poisoned gift.” The terms employed initially seem coarse: the French language is described as “marâtre” (298), “adverse” (300), and “imposée” (301); and yet, Djebar also affirms that she “cohabite avec la langue française” (297), and that a “territoire de langue subsiste entre deux peuples, entre deux mémoires” (299). Pauline’s story, which is the subject of the Finale’s first segment, capitalizes on this intercultural “between.” As a French prisoner banished to Algeria in 1852, then transported between cities before returning to France, Pauline embodies the positive potential of relation. Although she neither assimilates the Arabo-Berber culture nor participates in France’s conquest of the land — on the contrary, “elle ne voit rien, excepté des soldats et ses geôliers” (308) —, Djebar embraces her within a shared community:

> Elle n’a plus quitté l’Algérie sinon pour délirer… Notre pays devient sa fosse: ses véritables héritiers — Chérifa de l’arbre, Lla Zohra errante dans les incendies de campagne, le chœur des veuves anonymes d’aujourd’hui — pourraient pousser, en son honneur, le cri de triomphe ancestral, ce hululement de sororité convulsive! (308-309)

Pauline serves as a bridge between two communities often held as mutually exclusive; she constitutes an essential point of contact, a meeting point of differences that leads to productive change: “[j]’ai rencontré cette femme sur le terrain de son écriture: dans la glaise du glossaire français, elle et moi, nous voici aujourd’hui enlacées. […] / Mots de tendresse d’une femme, en gésine de l’avenir: ils irradient là sous mes yeux et enfin me libèrent” (309, emphasis added). Finally, the closing two segments bring the productive potential of relation to its point of climax. In the first, Djebar retells Eugène Fromentin’s tale of an Algerian woman’s death during an equestrian fantasia. Like Pauline, this woman acts as a link between cultures: “[p]remière Algérienne d’une fiction française à aller et venir, oiseusement, première à respirer en marge et à feindre d’ignorance la
transgression” (311-312). In the final segment, it is Djebar’s writing that serves as a relational link between the French and autochthonous groups. Saluting Fromentin as a “seconde silhouette paternelle” (313), Djebar joins her creative project to his by seizing the amputated hand he describes in another account so as to “lui faire porter le « qalam »” (313). The qalam — Arabic for the French plume —, by way of the amputated hand, tangles up the French writer-painter and the Arabo-Berber author and text into one relational space.27

Recognizing this slow building of tension and crescendo movement means recognizing the power of the cri within L’Amour, la fantaisia — a veritable “art du cri devenu chant,” as Mireille Calle-Gruber succinctly puts it (Assia Djebar ou la résistance de l’écriture 37). Because the cries of love, war, joy, and mourning are often indistinguishable,28 must we turn our attention away from hearing — which implies receiving meaning — towards the act of listening.29 The place accorded to the gaze in L’Amour, la fantasía is thus passed on to the reader; as Chikhi writes, the “opacité du texte, ou sa transparence, dépend de cette disponibilité de l’œil à accéder aux reflets, aux contours, aux formes, aux images, complètes ou fragmentées, que le texte négocie” (Histoires et fantaisies 54). That is, the text’s opacity or transparency depends on the reader’s capacity to read as she might listen. Indeed, it is only by so doing that she can

27 Trudy Agar-Mendousse similarly contends that the “terme arabe […] indique bien son projet de réécriture: il s’agit pour Djebar de partir des archives historiques françaises pour forger une écriture historique qui n’est pas celle épanchée par la plume française mais celle qui coule du qalam algérien pour dire enfin le vécu des Algériens” (37). But Agar-Mendousse relies too heavily on a mutually exclusive, rather than mutually constitutive, thought-model; her argument depicts the plume and the qalam as if they formed a dichotomous relationship, when in fact Djebar’s poetics delineates a third space between these two terms.

28 Even the epigraphs of text’s closing section underscore this polysemy; tzarl-rit, following the definitions taken from two different bilingual dictionaries, refers to both cries of joy and cries of pain (305).

29 In this, I fully espouse Jeanne-Marie Clerc’s argument that Djebar “fait surgir des évidences qui sont ressenties, et non comprises, dans l’abstraction d’une impression purement sensorielle” (135).
recognize the relational unity operative in Djebar’s prose. As one lyrical piece wonders, “la voix prend du corps dans l’espace, quelle voix? Celle de la mère […], des sœurs […], la voix des vieilles du douar […]? […] Est-ce la voix de la fillette [...]” (176-177). The answer, however paradoxically, is all of these voices, at once.

5.6 – “Raconter ça”

Raconter ça: these opening words of Babyface are markedly obscure. Nothing, in the end, elucidates the referent of the demonstrative pronoun; the poem only grows increasingly enigmatic as it expands with the start of each chapter. Indeed, in its final version the ça appears thirteen times:

Raconter ça.
Pas facile.
Se souvient plus.
Pas très bien.
Ça qu’on a ressenti oui.
Ça oui.
Mais ça ça et ça et les détails non
ça non.
S’en souvient oui ça qu’on a ressenti. Mais le reste où quand quoi comment non ça non.
Déjà que raconter ça qu’on a ressenti alors le reste! Juste ça qu’on a ressenti. Parce que c’est-à-dire comment dire ça? Mais faut bien raconter.

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30 Kwahulé, Babyface 9.
Curiously, the demonstrative pronoun seems to have multiple valences here; there is the 
\textit{ça} that must be told, and the \textit{ça} that mustn’t. Curious too is the speaking subject, which 
appears to be collective, or at least anonymous, as the omitted subject pronoun in \textit{s’en souvient} and the \textit{on} in \textit{ça qu’on a ressenti} suggest. Moreover, the elusively vague 
demonstrative pronoun continually surfaces in the first person perspectives as well as in 
Jérôme’s journal fragments. It appears in passages recounting collective folklore to refer 
to an unnamable Other: “[c]es gens-là, \textit{ça} s’assoit sur ses deux fesses et \textit{ça} attend que les 
choses se fassent. Ces gens-là, \textit{ça} passe son temps à juger” (57); during the scene that 
Mozati will later refer to as “[l]e matin de \textit{cette chose là}” (31), it designates the school 
instructor’s exposed penis: “[t]u as déjà vu \textit{ça}? (25); Nolivé also refers to her pregnancy 
via the demonstrative pronoun: “[j]e ne savais pas que c’était \textit{ça}. Je me suis dit Tu 
grosses tu manges trop” (136). In another passage recounting collective folklore, the \textit{ça} 
designates one man’s act of self-cannibalization, and, assuming a theatrical quality, 
invites the reader to witness it:

D’abord le pouce, l’index, le majeur… la main… “Il fait quelque chose. 
Qu’est-ce qu’il fait? \textit{Ça}. Il fait quoi? \textit{Ça}. Ce qu’il fait! Quoi? \textit{Ça}. Il fait 
quelque chose. Que fait-il? \textit{Ça}. Qu’a-t-il fait? \textit{Ça}. A-t-il seulement fait 
queline chose? Il fait quelque chose. Mais quoi? \textit{Ça}. Patience, il ne fait 
que commencer. On finira par voir, par savoir. (60) \textsuperscript{31}

Sexual assault, unwanted pregnancy, acts of self-mutilation, even visceral rejection of 
other people groups… in each of case the \textit{ça} obliquely designates some state of corporeal 
affliction, a common theme in Kwahulé’s oeuvre if we follow Virginie Soubrier’s 
argument. “Corps violés, mutilés, brûlés, excisés,” writes Soubrier, “le corps, dans le

\textsuperscript{31} Emphasis added in all preceding examples.
théâtre de Kwahulé, est toujours un corps absent” (“Une physique de la voix” 25) — hence the ça, which names absence more than it designates any of the acts to which it refers. In this, Kwahulé indeed writes Babyface “à partir [d’une] béance,” as Soubrier argues (Le Théâtre de Koffi Kwahulé 51). Leveling out each of its referents, the ça depicts assault, pregnancy, cannibalism, etc., as if they were commensurate. The demonstrative pronoun seems to bear the weight of all hardships, even the passing of time: “Juillet. Août. Septembre. Octobre. Novembre. Décembre. Puis janvier. Puis février. Puis mars. Avril. Mai. Juin. Puis juillet. Et enfin août. Et puis là et puis ci et puis ça” (110, emphasis added).

Questioning the enigmatic nature of the ça, the reader becomes like the crowd perplexed by the man’s self-immolation: she too asks time and again que fait-il? But to decipher what exactly Kwahulé is “doing” in this text — and it is telling that the question is reformulated six times in the example above —, to fini[r] par voir, par savoir, she must suspend the demand for transparency. To the extent that the meaning of the ça is forever shifting, and that its referent is both unnamable and all-inclusive, “recounting it” cannot proceed in the way one might tell a story. Like Assia Djebar, who can only tell women’s tales and her life story through the symbolic power of the cri, so too must Kwahulé craft a form capable of relaying both the urgency and all-encompassing nature of the ça. And again like Djebar, Kwahulé achieves this by turning away from the transparency of the written word and towards the more enigmatic nature of sound and feeling. Babyface too resonates as might a musical composition. The opening poem, which describes the need to relay feelings rather than details, already points in this direction: “que raconter /ça qu’on a ressenti / alors le reste!” (210, emphasis added).
Contrary to L’Amour, la fantasia, however, the musical quality of Babyface cannot be likened to any specific type of composition. It lacks the structuring movements and crescendo affect yielded in Djebar’s text. Its unpredictable, irregular, and dissonant nature, on the other hand, aligns strongly with the characteristics of jazz improvisation. Indeed, the affinity between Kwahulé’s prose and jazz music has been a central point of scholarly inquiry. One collection of interviews with the author is even titled Frères de son. Koffi Kwahulé et le jazz, likely borrowed from Kwahulé’s belief that “[s]on écriture entretient avec le jazz de très forts liens de parenté, voire de consanguinité. L’un et l’autre sont frères de son” (28). Contrary to his theatre pieces, however, the resonances of jazz in Babyface can only be recognized visually and, in turn, registered internally. The text’s three main interfaces, in this view, would function as three different instruments in a jazz ensemble. “Le lecteur,” notes Philip Amangou Atcha, “est amené à lire non plus un mais trois textes […] construits sur le mode de l’improvisation” (52). The reader can choose to “listen” more closely to one or, conversely, attempt to perceive them simultaneously. The point, however, is that they overlap one another in both harmony and dissonance.

Babyface also incorporates those “changes of speed, rhythmic contradictions, [and] sudden directions” that Catherine Bouko argues “echo the jazz arrangement” in Kwahulé’s theatre pieces (77). These rhythmic accentuations surface typographically thanks to un-conventional spelling and syntax, as well as through the use of repetition and page breaks. Single word sentences and repetition, for instance, create a distinct staccato effect: “[p]uis silence. Soudain. Rien. Vide. Rien. Sensation de silence ouaté;

32 Other titles include Soubrier, Le Théâtre de Koffi Kwahulé: l’utopie d’une écriture-jazz; Bouko, “Jazz musicality in post dramatic theatre and the opacity of auditory signs”; and Mouëllic, “Le Jazz dans l’écriture de Koffi Kwahulé.”
sensation de vide apaisé et plein. Apaisé” (15). Similarly, but yielding the reverse affect, meshing words together lends the sensation of sustained notes:

Jesaisjesaisjesaisjesais
Jesaisdoncqu’ellen’estpas
Sensuelleetpulpeuseetbell
Eetmerveilleuseetfascinanan
Teetunstasdetrucesdansgenre
Tant de disgrâces pourtant
Ne parviennent pas à te rendre laide
À mes yeux
Que je n’ai que pour toi
Tu es la poésie de la banalité
Et la banalité me fascine (52)

Here the bleeding together of words renders palpable Abibi’s disregard for the heap of insults levied against the Muse. Gliding over them in one sustained note, the reader barely registers that the Muse isn’t sensual or beautiful or anything else. The mid-word line breaks furthers this effect, suggesting that rhythm, rather than the words, carries meaning here. “L’enjeu” is indeed to “privilégier le son plutôt que le sens,” as Soubrier contends (Le Théâtre de Koffi Kwahulé 186). Perhaps the most startling rhythmic disruption occurs during the passage recounting the man’s act of self-immolation, where an entire page of text is composed in the form of a calligram replicating the man’s body. The poem, moreover, visually mirrors the man’s act: thus “[b]ras droit mangé” figures on the right side of the page, whereas “bras gauche mangé” is on the left (61). What’s more, the order of the verse reproduces the order of the man’s actions: the extremities and core appear at the top of the page, descending into the parts of the face until finally, at the bottom of the page, “[n]e rest[e] plus que le nombril” (61).33 This typography radically disrupts the flow of reading, and strikingly renders the act of self-violence portrayed.

33 See Appendix 3 to get a clearer picture of this disposition.
The entirety of *Babyface* functions in a similar way: the abrupt foray into theatrical form, the repetition of narrative sequences, the interruptions and reprisals of storylines, the excessive formal ruptures, each contributes to the text’s unfolding as a jazz improvisation. As Soubrier points out, Kwahulé’s writing allies with jazz because it “relève […] de l’anticomposition, laquelle emporte la forme […] vers l’immatériel: le son et le rythme” (*Le Théâtre de Koffi Kwahulé*, 77-78). Indeed, if narrative truth is of such little importance in this text, it is because the text foregrounds the expressive act, rather than the product created, as the primary source of meaning. Babyface himself participates strongly in this musical accentuation. “Insondable, […] une figure vide,” the eponymous character acts as a veritable “improviste,” to employ Soubrier’s clever twist of the French expression (*Le Théâtre de Koffi Kwahulé*, 149). As *l’improviste*, Babyface provides essential clues for grasping the meaning Kwahulé invests in his musical prose — that is, for grasping to what the *ça* might ultimately refer. Following Soubrier’s reasoning:

L’improviste, par l’indécision et l’impuissance fondamentales qui le définissent, est l’instrument grâce auquel l’auteur afro-européen vide le dialogue de ce qu’il contient de lutte et de volonté de domination. (164)

La parole ne circule plus entre deux termes, la scène et la salle, mais entre trois termes: la scène, la salle et cet espace indécidable, à la fois dedans et dehors, où se trouve l’improviste […]. (169)

Though Soubrier’s argument pertains expressly to theatre, the idea that *l’improviste* creates a third space for the negotiation of meaning equally holds in *Babyface*. Everyone and no one at once, Babyface, like Sancher, escapes the binary logic of the Same/Other construct. But to grasp the underlying referent in the enigmatic *raconter ça*, embracing

34 “Jazz is a living material: the performance is the work itself,” André Francis writes in his study of the musical tradition (*Jazz 9*).
Babyface as *l’improviste* does not suffice. Indeed, if the eponymous protagonist so strongly parallels Francis Sancher in *Traversée de la Mangrove*, so too does Kwahulé’s Jérôme coincide with Condé’s Xantippe. Babyface’s role can thus only come to full light when considered within this dynamic. Like Sancher and Xantippe, Babyface and Jérôme initially appear to be polar opposites. Wealthy, White, and established, the French Jérôme contrasts sharply with Babyface’s portrayed identity of the poor, struggling African student. Furthermore, Jérôme embodies the stereotypies of the colonizing White man, not only because he takes an African mate, but more strikingly because he writes *on* Africa and claims it as his own — “*Journal imaginé*… offre […] l’autopsie d’une société, la nôtre” (73) —, and even attempts to pass for an African author: “à quoi riment ces accents africains? Pourquoi faire dans le dialectal? Et d’ailleurs pourquoi tient-il à passer pour un écrivain africain?” (73). Yet, outside of this skeletal framework, the Black-White dichotomy falters. Ultimately, we know little more about Jérôme than we do about Babyface. Questioning his existence, Mozati describes her ex-mate in terms similar to those I’ve used to describe Babyface: “[d]ès fois je me demande s’il existe. […] Il est ni Blanc ni Noir ni Chinois. Il est mon ami, il est mon frère, il est mon père” (85-86). He too is no one and everyone at once; and he too suffers a twist of identitary fate: after his suspicious death, which was nonetheless ruled a heart attack,35 the reader learns that Jérôme was not who we thought, but worked for “les services secrets français, la fameuse DGSE… Son entreprise? Une couverture” (193).

In the end, Jérôme and Babyface resemble each other more than might initially appear. On the surface, the two protagonists appear to reproduce the problematic

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35 “Crise cardiaque dans sa baignoire, a étrangement conclu l’enquête. […] Toujours est-il qu’on distinguierait très nettement sur le cou de Jérôme de traces de strangulation…” (192).
relationship between the West and its Other. In this view, the ça would denote the whole of African history, from slavery and colonization up through neocolonial oppression and the emergence of nationalist cultures so vividly portrayed in narrative content. And yet, because both Babyface and Jérôme defy the logic needed to establish such falsely definitive identities, this interpretation of the ça does not hold. Given the text’s espousal of the marvelous, the two men could very well be one and the same, or, at the least, two versions of the same person. Kwahulé’s refusal to characterize himself as an “African writer” speaks strongly to this dynamic, and even renders Jérôme’s apparent desire to pass off as authentically African laughable. Through this duo, rather, Kwahulé surpasses the White-Black, oppressor-oppressed dichotomy. Introducing a third, indeterminate term — and both Babyface and Jérôme function as improvisists in this respect —, Kwahulé recuperates the state of oppression and extends it to all of humanity. As he tells Chistrophe Konkobo, “[c]’est […] éléver l’expérience noire au rang de l'expérience humaine” (1040). Like Djebar, whose exploitation of the fantasia productively navigates the French/Arabo-Berber schism, so too does Kwahulé mobilize the opaque nature of jazz improvisation so as to gesture towards a commonality that links all living beings: one based on absence and incapacity, but one that is nonetheless able to relate and promote mutual understanding. Jazz, a mode in which “les musiciens s’ouvrent, provoquant des ouvertures,” as Kwahulé describes it to Mouëllic (38), is particularly apt at conveying this. Indeed, if textual fragmentation in Babyface corresponds to the contemporary subject’s experience of herself, our act of reading — of listening to jazz —

36 “Writers or artists who try to be ‘African’,” Kwahulé tells Gener, “in reality accept being fixed in a dated expressions of themselves” (93).
does not amount to putting the subject back together again;\textsuperscript{37} it must rather be open to those same “ouvertures” Kwahulé evokes. Serving as the motif for Kwahulé’s creation,\textsuperscript{38} the çà thus also constitutes the lieu out of which Babyface opens up to relation.

\textsuperscript{37} This is Fanny Le Guen’s argument in “Les Voix de femmes.” “Comme le corps,” Le Guen argues, “le texte est démembré, fragmenté; il devra être remembré” (125).

\textsuperscript{38} “The motif,” Jerry Cooker writes in Improvising Jazz, “is smallest melodic entity from which much of the remainder of the music is written or played” (12).
Chapter Six: Scripts of Relation

*Tous les livres d’Assia Djebar disent cela:*
[...] le récit d’une conquête du récit.

– Mireille Calle-Gruber¹

*Un tel apprentissage ne change pas le contenu de notre esprit, mais le contenant lui-même: l’appareil de perception plutôt que les choses perçues [...].*

– Tzvetan Todorov²

“L’écrivain moderne,” writes Dominique Rabaté in *Poétiques de la voix* “fait don d’une mise en forme” (218). Following suit, contemporary relational narratives “mettent en forme” a radically relational mode of constructing meaning. Shifting the reader’s attention from product to process, these texts perform multi-rootedness in both narrative mode and content. Similarly, relational narratives adumbrate views of the writer, of the text, and of language divorced from their roles as sources of authority. Instead, they entangle the author’s voice with myriad other voices, situate the text within a web of other published works, and allow the French language to echo in and through numerous other tongues. Each of these texts enact the “le récit d’une conquête du récit” that Calle-Gruber notes apropos Djebar’s works; each models a relational life-script with which the reader experiments by way of her interpretation. As Todorov notes above, learning to read these relational narratives instigates a shift in our imaginary structures, a shift that alters not what we perceive in the world, but how we perceive it. To put it in the words of the authors of *Éloge de la Créolité*, contemporary relational narratives activate

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¹ *Assia Djebar ou la résistance de l’écriture*, 35.
² *La Littérature en péril*, 77.
an “attitude intérieure, […] une vigilance, […] une sorte d’enveloppe mentale au mitan de laquelle se bâtira notre monde en pleine conscience du monde” (13).

6.1 – To Orchestrate the Text

“Écrivain?” the people of Rivière au Sel ponder, “[q]u’est-ce qu’un écrivain?” (Traversée 38). To this query, contemporary relational narratives respond with force. As we saw in Chapter One, authorial voice resonates in relational texts at the crossroads of the all-powerful creative genius of the realist novelist and the effacement of the author brought on by the experimental period of the 1950s to 1970s. Authors of relational texts appear as part and parcel of the narratives they necessarily compose; both inside the text and commanding from the outside, the author here assumes the stance of orchestrator. Bon, Djebar, Condé, Chamoiseau, Kwahulé, Ernaux: each acts as the “ethnographer” that Jann Purdy sees in Ernaux’s works; each assumes the same “authorial stance of participant observation” (30). This vision of the author comes to light notably thanks to the deeply self-conscious quality of relational narratives. Following Brian Stonehill, self-conscious novels destroy “the fictional illusion of reality […] so as to remind the reader that the fiction is in fact an illusion” (3). As “fiction[s] about fiction—that is, fiction that includes […] a commentary on its own narrative and/or linguistic identity,” to use Linda Hutcheon’s formulation (Narcissistic Narrative 1), relational narratives continually bring attention to their status as literary artifacts through such techniques as self-referential commentary and intertextual reference. This, in turn, divests the published work of literature of a grain of authority and, by extension, the author as well.

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3 My use of the term intertextuality follows closely Tiphaine Samoyault’s definition. “Au lieu d’obéir à un système codifié très stricte,” Samoyault writes, “l’intertextualité cherche davantage aujourd’hui à montrer
Though *Sortie d’usine* makes little use of metatextual commentary and makes no room for intertextual references, Bon’s role as orchestrator is evident nonetheless. Indeed, to render the factory in such a poignantly realistic way, someone must rise out of it; someone must act as both participant and observer. Bon demonstrates this, but never reverts to explication; instead, he allows the interplay between the two positions to materialize in the prose itself, notably thanks to the flux between the internal and external voices examined in Chapter One. That said, one passage neatly encapsulates the transition. It is tellingly situated between the *il*’s fall during the fourth Week and his subsequent return to the factory. During a sequence reminiscent of a dream-state, the newly formed *je* recounts an out-of-body experience where he approaches a tomb — presumably his own — and realizes his body has become weightless, “sans limite définie, un flou, au toucher” (155). And yet, thanks to heightened perceptive faculties, he is conscious that his body remains intact: “[m]ais corps pourtant, […] lieu indiscutable de ce que je suis, de mes décisions comme de la faculté de percevoir” (155). Though it remains unclear where and when this encounter with death takes place, be it an actual dream, a hallucination resulting from the fall, or simply an allegory, the tomb sequence portrays the passage from the *il* to the *je* as a sort of death that liberates the laborer’s hyper-regulated body. Through this experience, tantamount to a definitive “exit” from the factory, the *il* transforms into the *je*: he gains the exterior perspective that allows him to see “[c]ela qui jamais ne [lui] avait était ainsi visible lorsqu’[il] y travaillai[t] encore” (161). Authorial orchestration depends on this move from inside to outside, and the
capacity to occupy both positions simultaneously: “[r]ien de cela ne dépend de [lui], qui exige pourtant clairement, sans compromis, [s]on activité incessante” (157).

Authorial presence in L’Amour, la fantasia similarly wavers between interior and exterior. If the narrator’s role has been difficult to define thus far, calling for terms as variegated as the autobiographer, the historian, and the critic, it is precisely for this reason. So too have scholars employed a plethora of terms to describe Djebar’s role, including the monteur (Bensmaïa, “L’Amour, la fantasia”), the interpreter (Gafaïti, Les Femmes dans le roman algérien), and the chronicler (Goodman, “L’Écrit et le cri”). But it is less the divergence between these roles than their multiplicity that illustrates the author’s role as orchestrator within the text. As orchestrator, Djebar plays all of these roles, only intermittently. The recourse to intertextual citations and adaptations demonstrates this clearly: by inscribing a multitude of other voices into L’Amour, la fantasia, and by weaving their words almost imperceptibly into and out of her own, Djebar becomes just “one of several of the text’s authors” as Patricia Geesey remarks (165); and yet she remains the pivotal link between text and reader. By writing with French and indigenous combatants, and with Arabo-Berber women, Djebar acts as a vocalist within the choir, thus fulfilling her ambition to “avance[r] ni en diseuse, ni en scripteuse” but rather to “pouvoir chanter” (202).

In Les Années, Ernaux’s role as orchestrator surfaces notably in the detachment she exercises vis-à-vis her life story. In addition to the pivotal choice of the third person pronoun, numerous remarks situate the recollecting voice in a posterior temporal dimension: “[o]n n’aurait su dater quand” (1020); “[p]lus tard les journalistes et les historiens aimeraient se souvenir” (989); “[u]térieurement dans la mémoire il ne resterait”
As orchestrator, authorial voice materializes here in the intermediary space between what official memory recorded and what the sensing subject experienced. Similarly, this same voice also questions the reliability of her memory:

*Peut-être* voit-elle comme une immense étendue le temps de l’école derrière elle […]

*A moins qu’elle* n’ait préféré comme d’habitude les multiples combinaisons de l’imaginaire […]

*Sans doute* rien dans ses pensées des événements politiques et des faits divers, de tout ce qui sera reconnu plus tard comme ayant fait partie du paysage de l’enfance […]

*Il n’y a de sûr que* son désir d’être grande. (944-945, emphasis added)

There is a stark disconnect here between the subject of enunciation — the *elle* as child — and the position of enunciation, which corresponds with the author’s latent yet orchestrating *je*. Both present and held at a bay, authorial voice comes forth only to point to the fallibility of memory and self-narration. To circumvent this fallibility, Ernaux renounces commanding the text from a position of superiority and instead positions herself in the narrative as another relational component. Use of intertextual citation further brings this to the fore. Much as Djebar, Ernaux crafts her narrative from a wealth of other people’s thoughts, words, and creations; indeed, references to literary works, poetry, songs, advertisements, and political speech constitute the bulk of her text. More than grounding the work in its socio-historical context — though this is of course true —, intertextuality illustrates the breadth of discursive sources informing self- and group-identifications, demonstrating, as Elise Hugueny-Léger writes, that each individual is “formé d’un tissu de mots” (“En dehors de la fête” 372). Ernaux’s use of intertextuality,
in effect, defies the authority of the single origin, both on the level of literary creation and in terms of identity-constructs.

Chamoiseau’s role as orchestrator in *Texaco* manifests through the figure of the *marqueur de paroles*, who acts as pivot between the Martinican peoples and the reader. The text’s numerous metatextual passages render this strikingly clear, particularly those that describe the book’s genesis. The reader, in fact, is witness to every stage of the book’s development, from Esternome’s first delivery of his story to Marie-Sophie and her recording it in her notebooks, to her re-telling of the same tale to the urban planner and, finally, to the scribe (though, of course, relational narration frustrates this temporal chain of transmission). Such self-referential passages contribute to the text’s realist effect by leading the reader to believe in the veracity of this process: hence the title of Jolivet’s article, “Les Cahiers de Marie-Sophie Laborieux existent-ils?” But more importantly, they depict Chamoiseau as a mere link in the chain of this transmission — both indispensable and part and parcel of the tale. Indeed, the entire text responds to Esternome’s query, “mais qui va faire un livre sur ça?” (139). Intertextual references serve a similar function, though, contrary to Djebar’s and Ernaux’s works, Chamoiseau’s remain within the realm of the literary canon. By citing Rabelais, Montaigne, Descartes, Racine, Hugo, and Baudelaire — to name a few —, Chamoiseau depicts classic Metropolitan works as formative in Marie-Sophie’s struggle for self-definition (she even lugs a trunk of books around with her when she finally leaves the city!). “Tant de lectures depuis l’enfance,” writes Chamoiseau in *Écrire en pays dominé*, “m’ont laissé mieux que des souvenirs: des sentiments. Mieux qu’une bibliothèque: *une sentimèthèque*” (24). Transposing this belief onto his main protagonist, Chamoiseau weaves intertextual
references into *Texaco* so as to draw out Marie-Sophie’s *sentimenthèque*, and to show reading as another means through which she relates to the world. Doing so, he also places his novel within the nexus of literary works cited, such that it, in turn, might contribute to the reader’s *sentimenthèque*.

*Traversée de la Mangrove*, on the other hand, incorporates neither intertextual citation nor self-referential commentary on its genesis, though the author’s role as orchestrator materializes in the confusion between the internal and external perspectives discussed in Part I. That said, if Condé doesn’t employ intertextual citation in the manner that Djebar, Ernaux, and Chamoiseau do, her text does draw out broader intertextual relations with other literary works, the most evident among these being William Faulkner’s *As I Lay Dying* (1930), whose structural division and narrative focus parallel those found in *Traversée*.

Arguably the most provocative intertextual relationship Condé establishes in *Traversée*, however, is not with another literary text but with the Creolist manifesto *Éloge de la Créolité*, also published in 1989. On the whole, Condé’s relationship with the Creolist school has been wrought with contention; her experiences in Metropolitan France, Africa, and the Americas, as well as her scant command of the Creole language don’t correlate with the authoritarian vision of Creoleness many have read in the premises of *Éloge*. Yet, Condé has also reconciled her project with the Creolists, disclosing to Louise Hardwick that, “malgré tous ces différences [avec les

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4 On this, see Chapter Four of Derek O’Regan, *Postcolonial Echoes and Evocations*. Condé also draws out intertextual relationships with Aimé Césaire’s *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (1939) and Jacques Rouman’s *Gouverneurs de la rosée* (1944). For more on these, see Réjouis, “Le Véto héroïque”; Larrier, “A Roving ‘I’”; and Jonassaint, “For a Caribbean Intertext.”

5 On Condé’s stance vis-à-vis the Creolists, see her essays “Créolité without the Creole Language?” and “The Role of the Writer.” On the — in my view — reductionist reading of *Éloge*, see notably Arnold, “Créolité. Cultural Nation-Building or Cultural Dependence?”; Lucas, “L’Aventure ambiguë d’une certaine Créolité”; and Novivor, “Des discordances au rapprochement entre Édouard Glissant et les créolistes.”
Créolistes], nous disons tous la même chose” (214). It is this “same thing” that Traversée brings to the fore, notably with regard to Chamoiseau, one of the manifesto’s co-authors.

As Parts I and II endeavored to demonstrate, Traversée and Texaco differ more in narrative content than they do in narrative mode. However, by refusing to engage with the historical discourse so prevalent in Chamoiseau’s work, Condé better elucidates the crux of the notion of Creoleness, at least in an alternate understanding of it: rather than the authoritarian vision some scholars propose, Condé’s portrayal of Creoleness in Traversée aligns with Christophe Lamiot’s reading of Éloge. “Creolity,” Lamiot writes, “is not presented as a particular entity (notional or abstract), the contents or configuration of which would be described, but as something requiring a specific approach” (138). In this view, Créolité points only to the Caribbean as exemplary of the productive potential of creolization, which is to say, of relation.6 By denying Traversée the weight the Creolists accord history and language, Condé shifts attention away from Creoleness as product and towards relational modes of making meaning. Rather than “critique” and “deflate” Créolité, as Heather Smyth contends (4), Condé revisits and rewrites it. As Bonnie Thomas has argued, Condé “challenges expectations of what a ‘French Caribbean writer’ should be” (82), and, echoing Emile’s query on how to approach Caribbean history, asks, “[p]ourquoi n’abordait[-on] pas les choses d’une toute autre manière?” (Traversée 235).

Like Traversée, Babyface also establishes a broader intertextual relationship that is key for grasping the vision of writer and text it proposes. Here the vision is particularly lofty, the text with which Kwahulé engages being one of the visions of authority par

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6 Following Mary Gallagher, it seems likely that Bernabé et al. chose the term precisely because it “refers to and enacts in its semantic complexity and confusion a lack of clarity and above all an absence of singularity” (14).
excellence, the Bible. The epigraph, which cites First Corinthian 13:2, clearly sets this up, and elucidates the otherwise perplexing relationship between love and war depicted in narrative content. The verse reads, “quand j’aurai le don de prophétie, la science de tous les mystères et toute la connaissance, quand j’aurais même toute la foi jusqu’à transporter des montagnes, si je n’ai pas l’amour, je ne suis rien” (7, emphasis added). Citing this verse, Kwahulé underscores truth-claims as impotent, and points instead to love as a powerful source of healing. It is the claim for truth itself, however, that Kwahulé criticizes via the intertextual relationship with the Bible. *Babyface* is replete with references to Biblical passages: in the sequence where Mozati discovers Babyface’s “true” identity, “[l]a ville baigne dans une lumière de Genèse” (202); during their drive, the surrounding cars transform into the “bêtes sauvages” that would be found on Noah’s ark — “éléphants, agoutis, lions, mille-pattes, panthères, mygales, rats, serpents, hyènes, antilopes, lycaons, crocodiles, zèbres, autruches, pangolins…” (203); by the end of the scene, “une nuit d’Apocalypse s’abat sur la ville” (208). Similarly, when Nolivé catches sight of Babyface on the streets of Eburnéa, she sees in him Christ himself: “j’ai vu sur son casque j’ai vu sur son front une image le corps du Christ dispersé sur le croix” (144). Nolivé even equates Babyface and Christ when attempting to soothe Mozati’s fragile mental state: “[a]ccepte qu’il soit parti. Accepte qu’il ait disparu. Accepte qu’il soit mort afin qu’il puisse ressusciter. Afin surtout que toi, tu puisses ressusciter” (212).

Nevertheless, if Babyface fulfills a Christ-like function in this narrative, his role is far more ambiguous than Sancher’s is in *Traversée*. In fact, only Nolivé sees in Babyface a source of benediction; vis-à-vis the remaining cast of characters, his role could equally

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7 “Il m’a bénie. J’ai vu Babyface et il m’a bénie. Lui seul a accepté de me bénir. Lui seul a vu combien j’avais besoin de bénédiction” (145).
be that of the Antichrist who brings false promises. Again, it is Babyface’s indeterminate nature that lends him his force. Through this indeterminacy, Kwahulé shifts attention away from the authority of the word and onto the process that founds it as authority.

Indeed, the intertextual relationship drawn out with the Bible extends to include all books:

Tant que l’humanité se contentait du Jardin, […] elle restait la fiction de Dieu. […] En croquant la pomme Ève nous a extraits du Livre […]. Tous nos refus, toutes nos rébellions, toutes nos révoltes, toutes nos révolutions ne sont que des variations tragiquement jubilatoires sur l’acte d’Ève. Jamais nous n’avons été chassés d’Éden, le Livre ment, le Livre essaie de récrire le destin, le Livre essaie de se persuader que même notre révolte fait partie de ses desseins, de sa fiction. […] Depuis tout livre est damné au mensonge, il est l’instrument de Dieu qui a cloné et cloné et cloné le Livre. Autant de livres autant de mensonges. (106-107, emphasis added)

In Babyface’s view, the Bible and the book are thus equally fallacious; both attempt to annex human agency under the aegis of some transcendental power that would recuperate all deeds into a single teleological narrative. What Kwahulé offers in this text, then, is a pastiche of genesis myths: interweaving Biblical references with allegorical depictions of civil war in Ivory Coast, he portrays all intransigent founding myths — religious, national, ethnic, etc. — as dangerous fictions. To “the book’s lies,” he responds with a narrative whose truth is impossible to ascertain, but whose opacity produces a conception of truth that belies the authority of the text and the writer. As James Gilroy points out, this novel is “also a novel about the novel” (627), but one that, through its intertextual relationship with the Bible, also gets outside the novel, thus fulfilling Babyface’s prophecy that, “pour sa survie, le roman doit sortir du roman” (71).
6.2 – The Writing of Multilingualism

The question of language has been notoriously thorny for writers of postcolonial contexts. It has generated volumes of articles penned by scholars, critics, and authors alike who dispute the idea that non-Hexagonal writers of French must choose between the indigenous tongue and the tongue of the other, and has led authors to appropriate the French language by infusing it with allolinguistic terms and expressions, explained in glossaries, footnotes, and in-text definitions.\(^8\) If the recent publication of *Pour une littérature-monde* (2007), in which the vast majority of contributors discuss language rather than world literature proper, is any indication, it is one that continues to afflict authors in the new millennium. A similarly an urgent need to inhabit the French language crops up in contemporary relational narratives. It is perhaps Bon who sums this up most clearly when he writes in *Sortie d’usine*, “il y avait un vrai risque du constat à rassembler et figer ce qui était dispersé, ce qui ne se disait, ne s’affichait, que faute de savoir autrement l’exprimer” (59, emphasis added). Though this passage pertains to the laborers’ patterns of interpersonal communication, it also sheds metatextual light on Bon’s project; indeed, without his manipulation of French discussed in Chapter Four, *Sortie d’usine* would also risk being “assemblé” and “figé,” and thus doing injustice to the experience of the factory on the floor. To counter this, Bon invests literary French

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\(^8\) I have, of course, painted a very summary picture of the strategies through which non-Hexagonal writers of French “seize the language, re-place it in a specific cultural location, and yet maintain the integrity of that Otherness,” to use Ashcroft *et al.*’s formulation in *The Empire Writes Back* (77). These strategies, however, have varied greatly over the course of the past seventy years, and vary greatly between writers and even from one text to the next. Attempting to sketch a broader vision of such inter-linguistic devices thus seems misguided, and framing them through the logic of a linear development, particularly unfortunate, though some scholars have made precisely that move. See, for instance, Jean-Marc Moura, *Les Littératures francophones et théorie postcolonial* (particularly pgs. 110-120) and Pascale DeSouza, “Inscription du créole dans les textes francophones.”
with blue-collar colloquialisms as well as the noises and dynamism that resonate within the factory space.

But if authors of relational narratives participate in the language controversy outlined above, they do so only partially, even somewhat ironically so. By activating multilingualism within their prose, as Bon does with respect to the language of the factory, they in fact circumvent this dilemma. Echoing Bakhtin, who contends that heteroglossia in the novel liberates the “hegemony of a single and unitary language […] as an absolute form of thought” (*The Dialogic Imagination* 367), Glissant maintains that it is no longer possible to write “monolinguistically.” “Nous les partageons [les langues du monde] sans les connaître,” he writes in *Traité du Tout-Monde*, adding, “nous les convions à la langue dont nous usons” (85); and in *Introduction à une poétique du divers*: “le multilinguisme ne suppose pas la coexistence des langues ni la connaissance de plusieurs langues mais la présence des langues du monde dans la pratique de la sienne” (41). For both Bakhtin and Glissant, to write monolingualism “renvoie à un certain type de rapport à la langue […] fondé sur la notion d’absolu,” notes Auzas (232); it means writing as if language gave way to some transcendental meaning. To write multilingualism, on the contrary, means composing with and through opacity, and is inherently tied to the non-authoritarian vision of the writer and the text discussed in the previous section.9 This is a fundamental component of Glissant’s *poétique de la relation* and of contemporary relational narratives, which demonstrate that we can in effect “accéder à la structure d’une œuvre sans connaître réellement son langage,” as Glissant tells Gauvin (15).

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9 I here follow Celia Britton’s argument that “the authority of monologic discourse is not impersonal but derives from its authentication from by the figure of the author in the language-identity equation” (164).
Texaco perhaps most clearly exemplifies this. Within the narrative, the written word is portrayed as harboring a fossilizing tendency; in the scribe’s words, “il faut lutter contre l’écriture: elle transforme en indécence, les indicibles de la parole” (258). It is perhaps for this reason that Milne equates the text’s final section, “Temps béton,” with a period of sterilization. “Comme le béton qui renforce et pourtant fragilise l’habitat,” Milne warns, “l’écrit assure certes l’existence prolongée du récit, mais […] le condamne à l’immutabilité” (141). Milne’s argument, however, dramatizes and metaphorizes the end of the text at the expense the previous four hundred pages. To the contrary, Chamoiseau’s prose, much like Bon’s, inhabits the impermeability of the written word so as to transform it into a more fluid and dynamic substance; it transposes the “langage neuf” that Texaco “speaks.” “La ville créole,” Chamoiseau writes, “parle en secret un langage neuf” (282): “multilingue, multiraciale, multi-historique, ouverte [et] sensible à la diversité du monde” (282). The “Chamoisification of French,” to borrow again Kundera’s formulation, amply participates in this revitalization of language. But this “Chamoisification” takes place within the larger structure of orality, itself the catalyst by which the author transforms monolingualism into multilingualism. Whatever radicalization of French Texaco actualizes passes through the lens of a storyteller, whose rhetoric is characteristically opaque. As Chamoiseau writes in Au temps de l’antan, “le maître sait qu’il [le Conteur] parle, le maître tolère qu’il parle, parfois même le maître entend ce qu’il dit; sa Parole se doit donc d’être opaque, détournée, d’une signification diffractée en mille muettes sybillines” (11).

10 Idem for McCusker’s argument, which equates the cementation of the huts with Martinique’s assimilation with the Metropole. The houses of Texaco, for McCusker, “ha[ve] been collapsed into a static order of definition and of sameness, a state which metonymically gestures towards the assimilated island itself” (“No Place Like Home?” 59).
Why, then, have Marie-Sophie record her tale in a composition notebook, an act that even she equates with death?\textsuperscript{11} If we follow Jolivet, this part of the narrative contradicts Chamoiseau’s declared poetics.\textsuperscript{12} But Jolivet misses the mark in that \textit{Texaco} is not concerned with maintaining the oral tradition as such; its charge, rather, is to occupy the porous zone between the oral and the written, and to destabilize the boundary between the two. As Ménager points out, “il ne s’agit pas de faire de la littérature mais de \textit{s’installer en elle}” (63, emphasis added) — that is, to occupy the French-language prose so as to transform it from within. Faced with the decline of the oral tradition recounted in Chamoiseau’s earlier \textit{Solibo Magnifique} (1988), it seems only the \textit{marqueur de paroles} can sidestep the pitfalls of the written word, and thus produce the very text for which Marie-Sophie pleads: “[une] écriture informée de la parole, des silences, et qui reste vivante, qui bouge en cercle et circule tout le temps, […] sans perdre une unité difficile à nommer” (413). The allolinguistic terms and expressions Chamoiseau incorporates, then, constitute only one aspect of his multilingualism, which also resonates in relational narration, parallel texts, repetition, and, in some cases, lists. And we need not understand the Creole language to recognize this multilingualism, and thus to hear the “langage neuf” that Texaco speaks.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{11} “[J]e commençai à écrire, c’est dire: un peu mourir” (411).
\textsuperscript{12} Jolivet questions, “les cahiers que Marie-Sophie Laborieux confie à l’« Oiseau de Cham » qui les classe, les numérote et va les déposer à la bibliothèque municipale de Fort-de-France ne viennent-ils pas dès lors constituer le témoignage écrit qui fait habituellement le bonheur de l’historien?” (“Les Cahiers de Marie-Sophie Laborieux” 803).
\textsuperscript{13} It is for this reason that viewing Chamoiseau’s prose as subverting French in favor of Creole does the text such a disservice. Indeed, this perspective remains within the monolingual logic Glissant critiques, only in a reverse sense. As Chamoiseau tells Gauvin, “quand on dit « la langue française me colonise, je la colonise », on est dans le même rapport, on reste dans le même schéma: un monde blanc, un monde noir, on me fais ceci, moi je fais cela, la langue m’agresse, moi je la subvertis de l’intérieur” (41).
Condé’s prose, on the other hand, is less radical and seemingly incorporates less of the Creole language than that of her Martinican counterpart. This, of course, does not mean that *Traversée* is not also multilingual. Gingerly mocking the Creolists through the town writer Lucien Évariste, who imagines being interviewed by the Parisian press, Condé writes, “ce roman-là est-il bien guadeloupéen? / […] As-tu pensé en l’écrivant à la langue de ta mère, le créole? / As-tu comme le talentueux martiniquais, Patrick Chamoiseau, déconstruit le français-français?” (228). Through this sly reference to Chamoiseau, Condé draws attention to the Creoleness of her own novel, which inhabits the porous zone between the oral and written traditions as much as *Texaco* does. The indeterminate quality of the narrating voice analyzed in Part I amply demonstrates this: rather than “highlight[ing] the dichotomy between written and oral language,” as Claire Bisdorff contends, the ways in which “Condé weaves oral storytelling techniques into the narrative” in fact undoes any categorical distinction between the two registers (112). But beyond this, the text’s very structure lends *Traversée* a strikingly oral quality. By re-telling the same story through multiple perspectives, Condé underscores narrative form as a living, malleable substance. This, in fact, corresponds precisely with the oral tradition as Raphaël Confiant, coauthor of *Éloge de la Créolité*, defines it:

> Il s’agit de l’habitude que nous avons non seulement de raconter un même fait de trente-douze manières, mais encore de le ressasser comme si on cherchait à en épuiser les significations. À l’écrit, cela produit un récit étoilé et non linéaire qui va à contre-courant de la tradition romanesque occidentale, les branches de l’étoile étant différents ressassements, le centre en étant ce fameux sens que l’auteur cherche désespérément à atteindre. (178-179)

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14 Though her prose is perhaps less jarring than Chamoiseau’s, Condé does incorporate a wealth of Creole terms, expressions, and structures. For a compelling analysis of Condé’s use of the Creole language in *Traversée*, see Delphine Perret, “L’Écriture mosaïque de *Traversée de la Mangrove*.”
To eschew the written word’s monolinguistic tendency, then, Condé refuses the possibility of any singular narrative truth. By the same movement, she infuses multilingualism into her otherwise conventional prose, saturating it with the resonances of Creole orality despite her limited use of allolinguistic terms and expressions — despite not having “déconstruit le français-français,” as she writes mockingly of Chamoiseau.

Contrary to Sortie d’usine, Texaco, and Traversée, L’Amour, la fantasia is replete with commentary on the postcolonial linguistic dilemma. Djebar regularly portrays language as harboring a subversive power — at times creative, at others, destructive. Language acts as a powerful tool when Maghrebi adolescent girls use love letters to evade the sequestered space of the harem,15 or when Assia’s father addresses a postcard directly to his mother. Yet language can also have an adverse effect, as the deaths of the two interpreters during the fall of Algiers suggest: both deaths, in effect, are linked to writing in other’s tongue, as if “[t]oute écriture de l’Autre, transportée, devient fatale, puisque signe de compromission” (52). What’s more, Djebar is unable to express love in either language: “la langue française pouvait tout m’offrir, mais pas un, pas le moindre de ses mots d’amour ne me serait réservé” (43-44); “je vais pour l’épeler [hannoui, terme dialectal de tendresse], une seule fois, le soupirer et m’en délivrer, or, je le suspends” (118). This equivocal portrayal of language likely stems from Djebar’s experiences navigating between the French and Arabo-Berber tongues, which are divided into a “dichotomie de l’espace […]: le dehors et le risque, au lieu de la prison de [ses] semblables” (261). Having acceded to the male-dominated public sphere, mastered the colonial language, and gained the freedom to forgo the customary veil thanks to her

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15 “Jamais, jamais,” says one of the girls, “je ne me laisserai marier un jour à un inconnu qui, en une nuit, aurait le droit de me toucher! C’est pour cela que j’écris!” (24).
education in the French colonial school system, Assia nonetheless remains covered in a “voile symbolique” (181), pushed to “[l]es marges [du harem], ni en dehors tout à fait, ni en son cœur” (181). Paradoxically, French both liberates Assia from anonymity and maintains her within it at once, hence her apprehension of writing in French: “[l]’autobiographie pratiquée dans la langue adverse se tisse comme fiction […]. Croyant « me parcourir », je ne fais que choisir un autre voile” (302).

Admittedly, reflections on language are central to Djebar’s oeuvre, and these surely house “de dimensions identitaires concurrentes, touchant à l'histoire, à la culture, [et] à la mentalité de cultures,” as Cécilia Francis contends (172). But, contrary to the “imaginaire hybride et fusionnel” that Francis reads in the author’s poetics (181), L’Amour, la fantasia offers no idyllic vision of hybridity. Quite the opposite, it is wrought with disquietude at even the notion of métissage: “je consens à cette bâtardise, au seul métissage que la foi ancestrale ne condamne pas: celui de la langue et non celui du sang” (203, emphasis added). To grasp fully the ideological stakes of Djebar’s writings, then, we must thus turn our attention away product and towards process, that is, towards the means through which the author navigates between identities and languages in her prose. To this effect, Djebar’s account of FIS-led terrorism in Algeria during the 1990s, Le Blanc de l’Algérie (1995), provides pertinent clues. Reflecting on the loss of her compatriots, Djebar ponders, “comment — en quelle langue, selon quelle forme esthétique de la dénonciation et de la colère — rendre compte de telles métamorphoses?” (136). The predicament Djebar pinpoints lies not in choosing between languages, but

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rather in how to craft a poetics capable of accounting for the calamities assailing Algeria during this period.

In *L’Amour, la fantasia*, it is too a question of *how*: how to speak of self, how to transmit women’s testimonies, how to account for the colonial past…? Djebar’s response, first and foremost, is to write *with* so as to become a vocalist in the choir; it is also to infuse French-language prose with the resonances of the Arabic and Berber tongues by integrating allolinguistic terms and expressions as well as by twisting syntactical structures so that they render the rhythm of the indigenous languages. More important, however, is the larger musical framework within which this meeting of voices, traditions, and languages takes place. Writing musically, in effect, allows Djebar to downplay the signifying capacity of the word so as to transform the other’s tongue into a mere framework, a “trame de mots français” (113) out of which multilingualism overflows. Writing musically, Djebar navigates the interlingual and intercultural space so as to evade the “le lent scalpel de l’autopsie à vif” that is “l’autobiographie par les *seuls mots français*” (224, emphasis added). Music serves as a semi-transparent shield that discloses without denuding. This, too, is how Djebar succeeds in expressing love: intimately bound up with the half-light the autobiographical and testimonial acts require, the expression of love actually permeates this text — thus the wordplay, “« [I]’amour, ses cris » (« s’écrit »)” (299). Writing the *cri*, then, also means writing love, not in the sense of declaration, but obliquely: “[é]crire devant l’amour. Éclairer le corps, pour l’aider à lever

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17 “Dans ce livre,” Djebar confides to Gauvin, “j’étais dans le rapport entre le français et l’arabe […]. Je n’ai pas eu conscience d’abord que c’était […] la sonorité de la langue maternelle que je tenais à retrouver constamment dans la chair de la langue française” (30). For detailed and compelling analyses of this inter-lingual poetics, see Anne Donadey, “The Multilingual Strategies of Postcolonial Literature,” and Sofiane Laghouati “Assia Djebar: Quand l’écriture est une route à ouvrir.”

18 “Toute parole, trop éclairée,” writes Djebar, “devient voix de forfanterie, et l’aphonie, résistance inentamée” (252); “[e]crire ne tue pas la voix, mais la réveille” (285).
l’interdit, pour dévoiler… Dévoiler et simultanément tenir secret ce qui doit le rester” (91-92). It is not a matter of “ripping off the veil,” as Laurence Huughe affirms, but rather of “making it the instrument of a new language” (875).19

Much like Traversée, Babyface poses little linguistic difficulties for the reader. Though Kwahulé does include a glossary of the allolinguistic terms he employs, its content is sparse (just fifteen entries!) and of little help to the reader, who is too preoccupied with the chaotically unfolding narrative to dwell on a handful of obscure terms and expressions. Except Babyface’s ominous premonition vis-à-vis the power of the Book and a few scant references,20 the postcolonial writer’s predicament with language little surfaces in this narrative. But that’s saying things a bit too quickly. Indeed, Kwahulé’s prose is closer to Bon’s, Chamoiseau’s, Condé’s, and Djebar’s than might initially appear. To faire sortir le roman du roman, as Babyface advises, Kwahulé too must write multilingualism; and his solution, akin to Djebar’s, lies in music. Repetition, page breaks, unconventional syntax, each destabilizes the French-language prose and lends Babyface a jazz-like rhythm much like Bon renders factory rhythm in Sortie d’usine. The remarkable manipulation of typography, moreover, draws the reader into the printed page as if into an organic space. As Soubrier puts it, “la page devient une scène à part entière [et] […] exige du lecteur un engagement physique total” (Le Théâtre de Koffi Kwahulé 197). And akin to Texaco and Traversée, Kwahulé also occupies the porous zone between orality and the written word. Here, however, the paradoxical space is magnified by the improvisational nature of the author’s enterprise: writing jazz, like

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19 Trudy Agar-Mendousse makes a similar argument in “Le Sang de l’écriture” (see particularly section 1.7), though her emphasis on the “Algerianness” of Djebar’s prose, like any emphasis placed on the Creoleness of Chamoiseau’s, is antithetical with the Glissantian notion of multilingualism.

20 Streaker, for instance, declares his love for Mo’Akissi in multiple languages, including German, Congolese, Bambara, Spanish, and English: “il la couvre de baisers en répétant Ich liebe dich Ich liebe dich Ich liebe dich N’bi fê Te quiero Na lingui yo I love you N’cloho Je t’aime” (125).
writing orality, seems to be an oxymoron. But it is for this reason precisely that the author turns to the novel. “[L]e roman” Kwahulé tells Mouëllic, “je dirais que c’est antijazz. C’est pour cela que ce genre littéraire m’intéresse aussi” (45); “le jazz ne s’écrit pas, et finalement mon projet est un projet impossible, mais c’est cette impossibilité qui m’intéresse” (50). Capitalizing on this purported impossibility, Kwahulé too inhabits the French language and transforms it into a multilingual medium; he “ne viole pas la langue française,” as Soubrier notes, but rather “la féconde” (Le Théâtre de Koffi Kwahulé 191).

Finally, though Ernaux’s text doesn’t integrate other-language terms and expressions, it too is profoundly multilingual. Tellingly, Ernaux concedes in Les Années her early aspirations to forge an original language, as well as her ultimate failure to do so:

Quand elle désirait écrire, autrefois, dans sa chambre d’étudiante, elle espérait trouver un langage inconnu qui dévoilerait des choses mystérieuses, à la manière d’une voyant. Elle imaginait aussi le livre fini comme la révélation aux autres de son être profond […]. Par la suite, […] ces rêves l’ont quittée. Il n’y avait pas de monde ineffable surgissant par magie de mots inspirés et elle n’écrirait jamais qu’à l’intérieur de sa langue, celle de tous […]. (1083)

Of course Ernaux cannot fabricate some unique language to convey her experiences; she must work within the French language she speaks. Yet, she too can work against it, or rather, against its monolingual tendencies. By intertwining political discourse, advertisement slogans, lines of poetry, excerpts from a personal diary, slang and popular speech into her fragmentary, metonymic prose, that is precisely what she does. Molding “proper” French so that it might better convey the premise of a transpersonal enterprise, she crafts a space where “la culture d’origine et la culture acquise peuvent co-exister,” as
Lyn Thomas remarks (“« Le Texte-monde de mon enfance »” 32).21 Cathy Jellenik even likens Ernaux to the “victim of colonization who deliberately foregrounds his or her mastery of the language of the colonizer” (113). But Jellenik’s argument, as I noted above with respect to Chamoiseau and Djebar, remains grounded in a monolingual model that does a disservice to Ernaux’s endeavor to write multilingualism. “C’est une façon,” she states in *L’Écriture comme un couteau*, “de relier tous les langages, de montrer qu’il y a autant de « sens » contenu dans une phrase banale que dans la plus élaborée en apparence” (131). By bringing a wide range of registers and discourses into the single, non-hierarchical space of the text, she achieves precisely this, and ultimately produces the very “révélation de son être profond” evoked in the example above, not by forging some new language, but by exploiting the multilingual capacities of the French language at her disposal.

In the end, authors of contemporary relational narratives don’t promote some new logic of language; they simply capitalize on the inherent multilingualism of all languages so as to transform it into a powerful poetic force. The Creole of the French Antilles, the Arabic of the Maghreb, the “French French” of the Metropole, each was born of intercultural contact and cannot but continue to evolve.22 Of course, no language living language can congeal into the stable entity that absolutist ideology wields it as. To circumvent such “rapports de rivalité — de fausse rivalité — entre les langues,” as Djebar puts it to Gauvin (20), authors of relational narratives inhabit that “inter-rhetorical, inter-poetic” space Glissant views as capable of “defeating” diglossia (“La

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21 Scholars have vastly analyzed Ernaux’s navigation of multiple linguistic registers. See for, instance, Christine Fau, “Le Problème du langage chez Annie Ernaux,” and Jérôme Meizoz, “Annie Ernaux, une politique de la forme.”

Relation et le rhizome” 348). Rather than struggling to achieve some sort of internal unity, they occupy multilingualism so as to turn the language dilemma on its head. If this is less apparent in more recent texts — accounting even for the differences between Bon’s and Ernaux’s works of 1982 and 2008 —, it is perhaps because a “dédramatisation des tensions linguistiques” has indeed taken place, as Lise Gauvin conjectures (“Glissements de langues” 23).

6.3 — Relational Life-Scripts

In “Améliorer la lisibilité du monde,” Émile Ollivier writes that “l’écriture n’est pas seulement une affaire de langue” (229). “Le langage, porté à sa limite” Ollivier continues, “peut trouver, comme dit Deleuze, une sorte ‘d’en dehors du langage,’ […] et, finalement, cet en dehors peut donner au lecteur la possibilité de contempler des visions, d’entendre du sens, d’avoir des perceptions qui seraient jusque-là inédites” (229-230). It is this capacity that contemporary relational narratives bring to the fore. Indeed, Ollivier’s reference to Deleuze’s “dire c’est faire” holds particularly well here (“Bégaya-t-il…” 135). Performing relation by way of the reading practices they require, these texts transform the act of “saying” into an act of “doing,” and this doing lies in the actualization of innovative life-scripts. Narratives, Kwame Anthony Appiah argues in The Ethics of Identity, shape our perception of the world and our place in it, and thus provide the scripts through which we negotiate our identities. Approaching identity in terms of narrative, rather than representation,23 is particularly useful for grasping the ideological

23 “While the older interpretation of narrative was limited to that of a representational form,” Margaret Somers writes in “The Narrative Constitution of Identity,” “new approaches […] posit that it is through narrativity that we come to know, understand, and make sense of the social world, and it is through narratives and narrativity that we constitute our social identities” (606).
implications of these contemporary texts, or what they “do,” to return to Deleuze’s parlance. Keeping with Appiah’s formulation, then, these texts provide models for the reader to restructure her own life-scripts in a way that embraces the opaque processes of relation rather than the absolutist logic of the transparent single-root. “[D]e la sphère linguistique à la sphère imaginaire en passant par le sphère littéraire” (Auzas 233), these texts garner considerable ideological weight.

Obviously, the life-scripts that relational narratives enact belie the logic of the Master Narrative; such all-encompassing stories had fallen by the wayside long before. Consequently, they could easily be read as instantiations of group-specific scripts giving voice to previously unheard peoples, and, under the aegis of sociological criticism, they often are. And to a certain extent, these texts do celebrate difference and promote understanding: Sortie d’usine captures the assembly-line laborer’s experience of alienation; L’Amour, la fantasia gives voice to the silenced tales of Arabo-Berber women’s resistance; Texaco conveys the Martinicans’ struggles to establish a sense of self; Traversée demystifies race solidarity among Guadeloupians; Les Années encapsulates an entire generation’s everyday life in the French Metropole; and Babyface allegorically bears witness to Ivorian peoples’ experiences of racism and civil war. Without denigrating the importance of such readings, it is essential to recognize that the life-scripts these narratives enact move beyond the celebration of difference. To fail to do so, in effect, would be to fall into the same ideological traps of the Master Narrative, only here the single script has been fragmented into as many competing ones.

In The Shape of the Signifier, Walter Benn Michaels offers this very critique of the proliferation of differences and their subsequent valuation in identity politics. In
Michaels’ view, embracing the multi-perspectival dissolves the possibility of disagreement, and leads to a relativism that constitutes an intellectual impasse. “The point of the appeal to perspective,” Michaels writes, “is that it eliminates disagreement — to see things differently because we see from different perspectives (through different eyes, from different places) is to see the same thing differently but without contradiction” (31). Still following Michaels, this means that literary interpretation is no longer possible; only the individual’s experience of the book’s effects are valuable when disagreement has been barred. At first glance, contemporary relational narratives might seem a natural target for Michaels, as their lack of definitive truths, multi-perspectival approaches, and identity-specific diegeses suggest. What’s more, perceiving each text’s lieu can only be achieved by registering the larger “effect” of each, as Chapter Five demonstrated. But — and herein lies the difference vis-à-vis Michaels’s thought —, this “effect” requires an act of interpretation in order to come forth: rather than passively register differences in perspective, the reader must actively put them into relation. Unraveling the “orthodox relationship between reader and text,” as Derek O’Regan argues with regard to Traversée (173), these texts not only belie all-encompassing truths, but they also ward off the deadlock Michaels discusses.24 They displace both the absolutism of the Master Narrative and the particularism of micro-narrative, which, ultimately, function according to the same logic.25 Taking a bit of a Glissantian détour, they propose instead life-scripts that

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24 Hence also the fundamental difference between linguistic diversity, which Michaels reads as exemplifying “the nonbiological and nonideological pluralism that liberal nationalism requires” (43), and writing multilingualism, as discussed in the previous section.

25 I of course do not intend to belittle the importance of diversity and of advocating for all peoples’ rights and identities, national, racial, ethnic, gendered, sexual, and so on. Following Glissant, “[l]a théorie de la différence est précieuse. […] Mais la différence elle-même peut encore ménager une réduction au Transparent” (Poétique de la Relation 203-204).
circumvent such dialectical thought, and ask the reader to exercise the power of her imagination so as to think narrativity differently.

This shift is perhaps most evident in the autobiographical and historical narrative projects. As recent work on life-writing has argued, the autobiographical act serves as a site for identitary construction (Ashley et al.), and can be read as a “metaphor of self” (Eakin 227). But more than mere metaphor, autobiographical writings like Ernaux’s and Djebar’s serve as examples of the power of relation when put into the practice of narrating individual and group life-scripts. “[J]e ne pense jamais ‘moi et le monde,’” Ernaux states in “Raisons d’écrire,” “mais ‘moi dans le monde’ et davantage ‘le monde en moi’” (13); “un moi pur, où les autres, les lois, l’histoire, ne serait pas présent est inconcevable” (L’Écriture comme un couteau 152). Ernaux transposes this belief in Les Années primarily through her incorporation of collective discourse and her keen manipulation of subject pronouns, which, together, weave the elle’s voice into and out of a larger chorus.26 The fractal approach Ernaux adopts in her writings, where each text addresses a particular theme or formative period in her life, also demonstrates her relational conception of self. Les Années, in this view, captures the relational nature of Ernaux’s oeuvre as a whole: by putting old fragments to new use,27 the author depicts her life story as a malleable substance. Rather than “unravel” the self entirely, as Fell

26 That said, I cannot espouse the idea that Ernaux seeks to “lose her voice” in the multiplicity of other voices, as Adler argues (180). Ernaux’s voice still resonates in Les Années, but it resonates alongside and within a multitude of others’ voices. It is perhaps Jacques Henric who summarizes this best when he writes, “une vie défile […], une vie faite de plusieurs vies” (77). A life, rather than “Ernaux’s life,” but also many lives and many voices.

27 Even the inclusion of collective discourse harkens back to Ernaux’s “extimate journals,” Journal du dehors (1993), La Vie extérieur (2000), and, more recently, Regarde les lumières mon amour (2014). More explicit, however, are the near verbatim copies of certain passages from her previous works. Compare, for instance, these two excerpts, the first taken from Les Années, the second, from L’Événement (2000): “[d]ans quelques mois, l’assassinat de Kennedy à Dallas la laissera plus indifférente que la mort de Marilyn Monroe l’été d’avant, parce que ses règles ne seront pas venues depuis huit semaines” (981); “Une semaine après, Kennedy a été assassiné à Dallas. Mais ce n’était déjà plus quelque chose qui pouvait m’intéresser” (277).
contends ("Recycling the Past" 69), Ernaux continually poses the same question that haunts her writing journal: “[o]ù est le moi?” (L’Atelier noir 105). To put it in Sheringham’s words, her oeuvre is not “designed to produce an identity, another self-image, but rather to identity the process through which selfhood is constituted” ("Invisible Presences” 24).

In L’Amour, la fantasia, this re-conceptualization might not seem evident; on the contrary, it might seem to go against the grain of the socio-cultural and linguistic themes Djebar treats. But therein lays the text’s genius: despite its portrayal of the continued dominance of single-root thought-constructs in Algeria, the text itself performs relational narrativization. Itdebunks, via textual mode, the dichotomous thought governing Algerian culture and the everyday, putting multiplicity to a use that is both productive and radical. Weaving her voice and story with those of other Arabo-Berber women as well as with French colonizers, the autobiographical components of L’Amour, la fantasia are strikingly fragmentary: at best, enigmatic, at worst, incoherent. But this is the premise of Djebar’s enterprise, whose “unease with autobiography” ultimately produces a life-script that challenges conventional thought-constructs with regard to self, group, and history. As Gafaïti remarks Les Femmes dans le roman algérien, this script “ba[t] en brèche l’autorité du ‘je’ comme illusion fondamentale du projet autobiographique dominé par la transcendance” (169).

28 Ernaux’s own claim that she “fai[t] acte de non identité” in Les Années must thus be taken with a grain of salt (Schwerdner 765). It is more a question of new narration of self than it is of a denial of identity as such.
29 This contention, put forth by Mortimer (“Assia Djebar’s ‘Algerian Quartet’”), Fahti, and Clerc, is certainly tenable given the socio-cultural context out of which Assia Djebar writes. And while I do not deny its relevance — the author evokes this same difficulty in numerous interviews —, I hope to show that Djebar in fact surpasses the “malaise” so as to transform it into a productive force.
In this, Ernaux and Djebar participate in the trend that Natalie Edwards identifies apropos contemporary women autobiographers, who tend, Edwards asserts, “[to] write ‘I’ as a plural construction” (13). But Ernaux’s and Djebar’s autobiographical projects also harken back to Perec’s, whose posthumous *Je suis né* (1990), comprised of ten different autobiographical modes, illustrates his view of autobiography as “oblique, multiple, éclatée et en même temps tournant sans fin autour de l’indicible,” as Philippe Lejeune writes in his preface to the work. In addition to this shared global approach, structural affinities also surface within Ernaux’s, Djebar’s, and Perec’s poetics: Ernaux’s recurrent use of lists, for instance, recalls *Je me souviens* (1978), while Djebar’s use of the oscillating structure, harkens back to *W ou le souvenir d’enfance* (1975). Arguably, then, it is not the fractal, fragmentary, or even sociological components of Ernaux’s and Djebar’s works that lend them their innovative capacity, but rather the ways in which they lead the reader to connect those dimensions in surprising ways.

Indeed, it is only by activating such points of connection that relational narratives surpass the fragmentation characteristic of the Master Narrative’s dissolution into as many competing micro-narratives, and point to the possibility of future life-scripts. In this, the otherwise temporally chaotic texts recover a sense of linearity; but, like the

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30 Ernaux often refers to Perec in relation to her own project, particularly in *L’Atelier noir*, but also in *L’Écriture comme un couteau*. For more detailed analyses on Ernaux’s intertextual relationship with Perec, see Danielle Bajomée, “Penser la mélancolie.”

31 It is perhaps for this reason that many scholars have turned to the palimpsest metaphor to describe both *Les Années* and *L’Amour, la fantasia*. While the palimpsest perhaps illustrates Djebar’s conception of history and the act of writing — “je reçois ce palimpseste pour y inscrire à mon tour la passion calcinée des ancêtres” (115) —, and corresponds to Ernaux’s description of her sensation of corporeal unicity—“[e]lle lui a donné un nom, la sensation palimpseste” (1058) —, I nonetheless contest the term: first, because it is little amenable to the physical space of the printed text; and second, because it implies a logic of hierarchy, where in fact there is none. Shifting from the palimpsest to the more horizontal space of relation simply means drawing up those formally invisible layers of past writings and placing them side-by-side, precisely as these printed works do. On the palimpsest in Djebar’s works, see Donadey, “The Multilingual Strategies of Postcolonial Literature”; Holter, “Histoire et filiation féminine”; and Agar-Mendousse, “Le Sang de l’écriture”; in Ernaux’s works, see Huglo, “En vitesse” and Kiran, “Une Autobiographie et une Identité.”
muted fruition of the \textit{je} in \textit{Sortie d’usine}, this linearity takes shape outside of the plot structure. In \textit{L’Amour, la fantasia}, it issues from the text’s crescendo movement, which places more emphasis on the relational potential depicted in the closing segments. Despite Djebar’s final words, which foresee the “instant immanquable où le coup de sabot à la face renversera toute femme dressée libre” (314), the musical development suggests a hopeful outcome to the identitary impasse portrayed in narrative content.

Similarly, Condé’s work closes with the possibility of a new day. The linear temporal axe formed by the work’s main sections already hints at this, and is further underscored by the passage from darkness when Sancher’s body is discovered to the breaking of dawn, peppered with the Biblical promise of the rainbow, when the townspeople return to their homes at the end of the wake. It is Quentin, however, who most clearly embodies this future potential. As the child born of Mira and Sancher’s relation, Quentin not only symbolizes the future of the community, but also brings together the Sancher, Lameaulnes, and Ramsaran bloodlines (Vilma will soon give birth to his half-brother). Indeed, if Mira is the sole character accorded two subsections in the text, it is because the second projects Quentin’s perspective and imagines his future quest to “know” his father.

If \textit{Babyface} doesn’t achieve any clear linearity by the end of the narrative, its circular structure prefigures new beginnings nonetheless. Although the course of history might well be as cyclical as the opening and the closing of the text suggests, the relational meaning that the text performs also creates room for new voices and new melodies: “[p]oint de résolution ou de happy end,” argues Gilles Mouëllic argues, “mais toujours une lueur d’espoir qui naît du chaos” (“Le Jazz” 155). Like Quentin in \textit{Traversée}, the
arrival of Nolivé’s child symbolizes this very glimmer. But so too does Président’s name, which, as Asaah points out, is a mishmash of Northern (Adama) and Southern (Akan Katajé) Ivorian provenance. “Autant dire,” writes Asaah, “il trahit malgré lui les marqueurs du mélange socio-culturel” (363). Even Babyface incarnates this possibility: both no one and everyone at once, or, as Soubrier puts it, a “personnage qui est un Paradoxe, une Question, un Événement” (Le Théâtre de Koffi Kwahulé, 171), Babyface acts as the blank page upon which new stories might be written. But it is the improvisational quality of the jazz-like composition that points the most clearly towards this aperture. Writing jazz means investing in the multiplicity of its origins, pulling them together in unexpected ways and forging new links. Rather than returning to the past — hence the oblique depiction of Ivorian Civil War —, Kwahulé’s text demonstrates the need to establish new modes of narrativity. Through jazz, Babyface opens a space for dialogue and for recognition of internal differences. It performs a conception of identity as the “shifting […] state of becoming” that Kwahulé understands it to be (Gener 93).

Finally, the potentiality for innovative life-scripts that Texaco draws out takes shape on a slightly different plane. Of course, it too requires relational reading practices, and it too paints a relational picture of the individual and group. But, akin to Bon’s work in this regard, it is the text’s historical realism that lends it its innovative force. Like Marie-Sophie’s tactics when struggling to found the Texaco neighborhood, the novel Texaco executes an act of Glissantian détour. Discussing Chamoiseau’s oeuvre as a whole, Richard Burton compares the author’s poetics to the art of débrouillardise. A fundamental component of Creole folklore, débrouillardise, Burton writes, is “the strength of the weak, the only way in which the chronically disempowered can survive
and turn the system that oppresses them against itself and use it to their own advantage” (468). In Burton’s view, Chamoiseau’s works exploit similar gaps in the system, inhabiting the space between the French and Creole worldviews so as to resist both assimilation and particularism. Though Burton produced his study before Texaco was published, his argument holds particularly well here. Working both in and against dominant power structures, Texaco espouses neither assimilation nor outright rejection; rather, in an ideological movement of détour, pragmatically rendered through the everyday act of débrouillardise, Chamoiseau’s work proposes and performs an entirely different means of constructing narrative meaning.

Ultimately, each of these relational narratives offers the reader an alternate mode of knowledge production — a mode that capitalizes on the unspecified “du sens” rather than “un sens,” as Calle-Gruber notes with regard to L’Amour, la fantasia (Assia Djebar ou la résistance de l’écriture 42). But if Bensmaïa, also reading Djebar’s text, posits that “aucune conception ou vision du monde […] n’est encore parvenue à figurer ou à totaliser” this meaning (60), this seems to be precisely the point. Djebar’s text, like Bon’s, Condé’s, Chamoiseau’s, Ernaux’s, and Kwahulé’s, does provide a model for thinking its otherwise chaotic diegeses. If this model isn’t “totalizing,” it is because its logic is relational and thus antithetical to the very concept of totalization. And therein lies the ideological force of these narratives. Proposing and performing relational life-scripts, each incites change in the imaginary structures through which we organize and understand the world. Of course, relational narratives recognize the plurality of voices and stories that inform our life-scripts; but, more than merely embracing this fact, they switch the reader’s focus from identity as a state to the forever shifting processes by
which identifications, plural more often than singular, take shape. Indeed, by actuating relational modes of narrativization, these texts can have real consequences: “le mot deviendra l’arme par excellence” (Djebar, L’Amour, la fantasia 67).
Conclusions

Il n’y a pas de sens si le sens n’est pas partagé, et cela, non pas parce qu’il y aurait une signification, ultime ou première, que tous les étants auraient en commun, mais parce que le sens est lui-même le partage de l’être.  

– Jean-Luc Nancy

Bemoaning the state of the arts, Babyface declares to Jérôme that contemporary literature “n’a plus rien à dire” (Babyface 70). His comment strangely echoes the popularly held idea that French culture has declined in recent decades, or even “died,” as Donald Morrison contentiously wrote in the December 2007 European edition of Time Magazine, in a piece later republished as a book under the title The Death of French Culture (2010). For Morrison too, it would seem, contemporary French literature no longer has “anything to say,” and would do better to follow the example of those “socially conscious [novels] of the nineteenth century” (30). “[C]ontemporary French novels,” Morrison contends, “can be confusingly experimental, self-occupied, claustrophobic, and […] nombriliste” (29); “[t]he problem,” he adds, “may be the inability of French fiction […] to deal with the real world” (31). Clearly, Morrison has either not come into contact with the many French-language works of prose published over the past three decades that “return to the real,” as Viart and Vercier’s survey demonstrates, or he is unable to alter his expectations of what the “real” might look like.

1 L’Être singulier au pluriel, 20.
The “real” Morrison faults contemporary French literature for ignoring is in fact a fundamental component of relational narratives, only it materializes, as we have seen, in a way in which the reader might not expect. It is ultimately of little consequence whether their focus is telescopic or sweeping, whether they portray real-world phenomena outright or allegorically, or whether they fully inhabit the fictional realm or make accommodations with the autobiographical: relational narratives “deal with” the real through their mode. Following Jacques Dubois’s argument in “Socialité de la fiction,” all works of literature propose “des lectures du monde” (38), but these views pass though the textual medium, not only in terms of mimetic representation, but also on the level of narrative mode: “le mode […] donne à percevoir et à penser le savoir [que le texte] élabore,” asserts Dubois (40). It is this mode that lends contemporary relational narratives their real-world force. Inherently opaque, multiple, contradictory, and shape shifting, relational narratives are productive in their very instability. By beckoning the reader to make meaning out of opacity, they model a conception of knowledge — “une lecture du monde,” to use Dubois’s words —, that moves beyond the absolutist thought of universality and the relativizing tendencies of difference alike. Shifting emphasis from product to process, the worldviews they fashion are not only malleable, but in flux. These are narratives of the real as a becoming, a state that has always already begun and that cannot but continue.

By consequence, contemporary relational narratives project forward and backward at the same time. Looking backwards, they recuperate historical, identitary, and social life-scripts, re-writing the substance and mode of the collective memories with which they engage. Following Maurice Halbwachs, collective memory is sustained by
individual memory; “ce sont […] des individus,” Halbwachs writes, “qui se souviennent, en tant que membre du groupe” (94). Community thus creates the possibility of collective memory. By blurring the boundaries between the individual and the group, as well as those that divide groups among one another, relational narratives pursue memory as a “multidirectional” phenomenon, to use the title of Michael Rothberg’s interdisciplinary history of the Holocaust and of decolonization. They show that “groups do not simply articulate established positions,” as Rothberg asserts, “but actually come into being through their dialogical interactions with others” (5). Like Rothberg’s analysis, relational narratives inhabit group memory as a site of “continual reconstruction” (5). Defying the single-root logic predominant in group narratives, they allow divergent and sometimes competitive memories to mutually relate.2

Looking forward, contemporary relational narratives “impart knowledge” in the way that testimony does in the eyes of Felman and Laub (111). These radically relational texts require a certain type of reading, a reading that all but forces us to experiment with the theory of Relation that so inspired Glissant’s work. They lead us to embrace what cultural critic Homi Bhabha describes as a “supplementary strategy,” where “adding ‘to’ need not ‘add up’ but may disturb calculation” (The Location of Culture 222). By not only celebrating multiplicity but by allowing differences to resonate in both harmony and conflict, relational narratives harbor the power to alter the modes through which we perceive self, group, history, and identity. To borrow the title of the Miami Theory

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2 Of course, the role collective memory plays is more apparent in Ernaux’s, Djebar’s, and Chamoiseau’s works, given their explicit reinvestment of that list of dates, names, and events Halbwachs describes as distinctive of historical discourse (see Chapter Three of La Mémoire collective). Djebar even formulates her project in these terms, writing in L’Amour, la fantasia, “j’offre quoi, sinon neuds d’écorce de la mémoire griffée” (202). Yet, because relational narratives engage with collective memory through mode rather than through content alone, Bon’s, Kwahulé’s, and Condé’s more ethnographic, allegorical, and fictional works equally participate in rewriting its scripts.
Collective’s study, they promote a conception of community “at loose ends,” one which “chart[s] alterative possibilities about what it is for us to be together, about what it means to have in common above all the commonality of our difference” (xxv). Above all, and to return to the epigraph from Jean-Luc Nancy, contemporary relational narratives share these alternative possibilities with the reader who, by way of her active engagement with the texts, participates in constructing new forms of commonality.
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Oui, monsieur.
Je mentais. Parce que je me suis dit que ça lui ferait plaisir que je réponde oui et pas non.
Où?
Derrière notre maison, monsieur.
Je mentais.
Ton père?
Pourquoi il pense que mon père aurait pu... aurait eu le désir de...
Non, monsieur, un autre monsieur.
Comment?
Je passais, il pissait, je ne voulais pas voir, monsieur, mais mes yeux ont vu.
Ça t’a fait quoi?
Je n’ai pas regardé, monsieur.
Ça t'a fait quoi?
Mes yeux ont vu mais je n'ai pas regardé, monsieur.
Ça t'a fait quoi?
Je ne sais pas, monsieur.
Il souriait.
Bois ton Tip-top. Tu veux toucher?
Non, monsieur.
Touche.
Non, monsieur.
Touche!
...
Tu sais à quoi ça sert?
J'ai pensé que ça lui ferait plaisir que je réponde non.
Non, monsieur.
Tu aimerais savoir à quoi ça sert?
Non, monsieur.
Ça sert à avoir des bonnes notes. Tu aimerais avoir des bonnes notes?
Oui, monsieur.
Pourquoi?
Parce que je serai intelligente, monsieur. Parce que mes parents... ma mère sera contente de moi.
Ta mère te grondera quand tu as de mauvaises notes?
Non, mon père.
Cependant, si tu le faisais, ce serait pour ta mère?
Oui, monsieur.
Maintenant tu peux toucher.
Non, monsieur.
Fais-le pour ta mère.
Ma mère me grondera, monsieur.
Il souriait.
C'est avec ça qu'on obtient des bonnes notes.
Appendix 3

Bras droit mangé...
corps gauche mangé...
jambe droite mangée...
bras gauche mangé...
corps droit mangé...
jambe gauche mangée...
cou mangé...
menton mangé...
joue droite mangée...
joue gauche mangée...
oeille droite...
oeil gauche...
niez...
oeil droit...
œil gauche...
front...
cheveux...
nuque...
mangés,
mangés,
mangés...

lèvres mangées...
langue mangée...
cerveau mangé...
dents mangées...
bouche mangée...
mangé
mangé
mangé
mangé tout le père...
tout le père mangé...
Tout le père dans le père.
Ne restait plus que le nombril.
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Patrick Chamoiseau


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Koffi Kwahulé


General


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**Other works consulted**


EDUCATION

**Johns Hopkins University**, Baltimore, MD
The Department of German and Romance Languages and Literatures (GRLL), French section, Ph.D., March 2017
Dissertation: *Relational Narratives: Constructing Meaning in Contemporary Literatures in French*
Advisor: Dr. Derek Schilling
Second Reader: Dr. Jacques Neefs

**Université de Bordeaux 3, Michel de Montaigne**, Bordeaux, France
Maîtrise, Littérature française, Mention très bien, 2009
Thesis: “L’identité et le sujet social dans Les années d’Annie Ernaux”
Advisor: Dr. Jean-Michel Devèsa

**Université de Toulouse 2, Le Mirail**, Toulouse, France
Licence, Sciences du langage, 2010

**Kent State University**, Kent, Ohio

TEACHING EXPERIENCE

**Graduate teaching assistant**, Johns Hopkins University, 2011-2016
Language course titles: French Elements 1 & II, Intermediate French I & II, Advanced Writing and Speaking in French I & II
Duties: collaborating in crafting lesson plans and tests, instructing all courses, grading all assignments, utilizing Blackboard, incorporating media and current events into class sessions

Duties: designing syllabi, planning and conducting all classes, utilizing Blackboard, grading all assignments
English as a Second Language, France, 2006-2011

Instructor in ZEP primary schools in Bordeaux, Millau, and Metz, France
Duties: collaborating with primary classroom instructor, designing immersion-like lessons, crafting nontraditional assessment methods

Teaching assistant in ZEP secondary schools in Millau and Metz, France
Duties: collaborating with primary classroom instructor, holding small-group discussion sessions in an immersion-like setting

Instructor of Undergraduate business English (BAC+2), Centre de Formation Sainte Marie de Saint Sernin, Toulouse, France, 2009-2010; L’Institut Français des Affaires, Metz, France, 2010-2011
Duties: planning and instructing courses, grading assignments, designing assessments in accordance with final examination expectations


Research Interests
20th and 21st century literatures in French; life-writing; memory; colonial history and postcolonial studies; women, gender, and sexuality; linguistics

Conference Presentations
“Créole comme on veut: Relation in Chamoiseau’s and Condé’s Versions of Creoleness.” The Caribbean, melting pot of the Americas: From upheaval to the historical future and its representations, University of the West Indies, Saint Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, October 2016.

“L’amour, la fantasia: Reading a Relational Construct of Self” (invited), Assia Djebar Commemoration, Johns Hopkins University, April 2016.

“Productive Unbelonging: Form and the In-Between in Edwidge Danticat and Dany Laferrière,” Insiders, Outsiders, and In-betweens: Narratives Converging from Within and Without,” University of Washington, April 2016.

“Network Texts, Relational Reading,” “Faire le point: quand la

“The Creole Effect: Producing Relationality in Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco*,” *Networks in Film and Literature*, Rutgers University, March 2014.


“Le toucher chez Annie Ernaux: une expérience originelle de la chair” (invited), *Le débat des cinq sens de l’Antiquité à nos jours*, Université de Bordeaux 3 Michel de Montaigne, October 2012.


**COMMUNITY SERVICE**

**Volunteer for Fields Festival**, a bi-annual festival fostering Baltimore-based artists and musicians, August 2016

**Volunteer for Chilibrew**, annual fundraising event benefiting Baltimore-based non-profit organizations, October 2015.

**Volunteer for Baltimore Clayworks**, a non-profit ceramic art center providing educational and community programming, Baltimore, MA

Installation of community designed mosaic, October 2015

Semi-annual cup-a-thon fundraiser, September 2015, February 2014

Annual gala fundraiser, May 2015

**Member of Lady Brew Baltimore**, a club for women-identified folks to collaborate and craft beer, monthly sessions, 2012 – present

**LANGUAGES**

English, French (native-like), Arabic (intermediate low)