ABSTRACT

LANGUAGE, HABITUS AND HEALING IN UNE FILLE SANS HISTOIRE

By Julie Hoelle Kempken

In the 1980s, a new genre of literature called *beur* began to emerge in France. Children of North Africa immigrants were writing novels closely tied to their own experiences of living between two cultures: that which was their parents and that of the world around them in France. This thesis explores the two worlds in which these novels exist through a close examination of Tassadit Imache’s novel *Une fille sans histoire*. 
LANGUAGE, \textit{HABITUS} AND HEALING IN
\textit{UNE FILLE SANS HISTOIRE}, BY TASSADIT IMACHE

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# Table of Contents

- Introduction  
  page 1
- Chapter One: Situating *Beur* Culture and Literature  
  page 4
- Chapter Two: Authoritative and persuasive language  
  page 11
- Chapter Three: Understanding *habitus* in *Une fille sans histoire*  
  page 17
- Chapter Four: Healing and Working Through  
  page 32
- Conclusion  
  page 44
- Bibliography  
  page 45
Dedication

For Dan and Frances, the two loves of my life.
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Introduction

It was during my first visit to France in 1991 that I began to understand the cultural differences that divide France and Algeria. I was at a café with some French friends when an Algerian man engaged me in a conversation. Unaware that he was Algerian, and also unaware of my friends’ views towards Algerians, I took part in this friendly conversation, discussing the United States and the purpose of my trip to France. Interrupted by my hosts, I was abruptly informed that we were leaving the café. As we left, one of my friends explained to me that the man was from Algeria, and it was not safe for me to be friendly with any North African immigrant.

This is when my interest in North African culture and literature began. Prior to this trip to France, I had not been educated on France’s long and difficult relationship with Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco. My high school education had only taught me that there were parts of Africa that speak French, but I never questioned why French was spoken there, nor was that part of my educational background up to that point.

The incident at the café was during my first week of a four-month long stay in France. During the following months, I began to uncover the deeply rooted feelings that the French had towards North African immigrants. I also learned a new word in French: Beur. I witnessed racial slurs and incidents of unequal treatment of immigrants by French natives. I became engaged in conversations with young Beurs while taking public transportation or sitting in cafes. Eventually I befriended Julien, whose father was Algerian. Julien and his father provided me with an Algerian’s perspective of living in France. They also educated me on their own cultural heritage, of which I knew nothing.

Upon returning to the States, I began my undergraduate studies in French at Miami University. I took a civilization class which provided me with more cultural and sociological background on Algeria’s relationship with France. However, it was now until my graduate studies that my interest was deepened to the point that I chose to explore Beur literature and culture for my master’s thesis. During my first semester in the graduate program, Azouz Begag came to Miami University as a guest lecturer, thanks to the efforts of Dr. Mark McKinney. Mr. Begag has written several beur novels, which he discussed in his lecture. He also showed a film that he produced, portraying his
childhood in the shantytown in Lyon. He was Algerian while at home, in the shantytown. But at school, he was a serious student and regarded as “French” by his fellow Algerian classmates. He suffered through the teasing of his peers because he was successful student. I left the film asking myself how a child overcomes living through such a division between home and school.

Dr. McKinney also introduced me to Tassadit Imache’s novel, Une fille sans histoire. After reading the novel, the complex identity of Lil, the protagonist, interested me immediately. She begins the novel by searching for her identity, recalling the past in order to do so. Lil’s identity is unique in that she is not born of Algerian immigrants, but she is the child of a French woman and Algerian man. Unlike Begag’s portrayal of the division between home and school, Imache’s character is divided within the home, between father and mother.

I also became interested in the parallels between Lil and Imache herself. Based on interviews with Imache, it appears that certain events in the novel are autobiographical. Imache’s mother is French and her father is Algerian. Like Lil’s parents, Imache’s parents met in the factory where they worked. Imache’s father tried to marry Imache to an Algerian when she was only thirteen. Lil’s mother prevent a marriage from taking place in the novel, again when the child is thirteen. Lil spends the majority of her childhood in boarding schools, away from the trauma at home. Imache’s mother found similar schools for her children to attend. The most striking parallel for me is the family photograph which triggers memories of the past for Lil. Imache possesses a family photograph similar to the one that she describes in the novel. Imache claims she used her family photograph as a model for the novel in an interview with Frederique Chevillot.

As Lil uncovers the traumatic past, I find it important to first understand the wounds that she suffered before understanding the manner in which she heals the wounds. The division of language is demonstrated throughout the novel, that of French and Arab, and the authoritative language used by Lil’s father. Racism is also transmitted and perpetuated through the language that the French use in their verbal abuse towards Huguette, Lil’s mother, and her children.
Other wounds are the result of Lil’s *habitus*, which is shaped by environmental factors such as language. Pierre Bourdieu defines *habitus* as “a system of dispositions acquired by implicit or explicit learning which functions as a system of generative schemes, generates strategies which can be objectively consistent with the objective interests of their authors without having been expressly designed to that end.” (Sociology in Question, p. 76). Through exploring her father’s *habitus*, the reader gains an understanding of his actions, such as his violence. We can also see the effects that his *habitus* has on shaping Lil’s *habitus*.

Healing is possible only when a victim is capable of recalling the past. As Lil studies the photograph from her father’s wallet, it is apparent that she is no longer willing to repress the questions that continue to haunt her from the past. Using writing as her tool for healing, Lil works through the past and represents it in manner that will render it less painful in the present.

By working through the past, I feel that Lil has provided a means of healing for Imache herself. Although Lil’s story is not a direct representation of Imache’s personal history, it serves as a means for her to work through her own identity.

*Une fille sans histoire* does not conclude with a clear future for Lil. But she has exposed the wounds that she has suffered, which begins the healing process for herself, for Imache, and for other stories that are divided between two cultures.
Chapter One: Situating Beur Culture and Literature

The term ”beur” was first used widely in 1981 with the foundation of Radio Beur, a privately operated radio station in Paris. According to Alec Hargreaves, “[Radio Beur]’s appearance marks the first recorded usage of the word Beur … The word initially entered circulation during the 1970s as a mode of self-designation among younger members of the North African immigrant community in the Paris area.” (p. 29). The word itself originates from “verlan”, a type of slang in the French language, “originally [used] by members of the French underworld and more recently by urban youths.” (p. 29). *Verlan* is constructed by “inverting the first and last syllables of words” the word *verlan* itself is an example of the code, it is the inversion of “l’envers”. Hargreaves continues: “Beur is derived by a similar process of the inversion from *Arabe*, as Nacer Kettane, the president of Radio Beur, has explained: ‘Beur vient du mot “arabe” inversé: *arabe* donne *rebe*, qui, à l’envers, donne *ber* et s’écrit *beur*.” (p. 29).

The word itself has provided an opportunity for members of the immigrant community to escape the negative stigma of “*Arabe*” by replacing it with an invention of their own. Hargeaves notes that “[f]ew Frenchmen are aware that many North African immigrants … are not Arabs at all, but Berbers; all are simply seen as Arabs.” (p. 30). Beur is representative of both the Arab and Berber populations that have immigrated to France. Beur has emerged into popular language, with entries in French dictionaries, and in his defense for using the term *beur*, Hargreaves states “no concise alternative exists; used continuously, ‘youths of North African immigrant origin’ and similar periphrases are apt to become wearisome to the reader.” (p. 31).¹

Defining *beur* as a word allows us to begin defining its cultural and literary aspects. *Beur* culture struggles to define itself because as children of immigrants living

¹ Recently Hargreaves has changed his views in using the word *beur* to refer to children of North African immigrants born in France. In “The ‘Beurs’: Between and Beyond National Boundaries”, he states, “By the end of the 1980s, however, the Beur label had come to be rejected by most of those to whom it was applied. The reasons for this were quite complex. They included a widespread feeling that a term originally adapted as a form of resistance by members of a disempowered minority had been hijacked by the mass media and imbued with essentially negative overtones. […] Small wonder if the Beur label is now widely distrusted by those whom it is intended to designate. As the term has become so debased, I no longer use it myself.” (p. 137). *The Arab-African and Islamic Worlds: Interdisciplinary Studies*, Lacey, R. Kevin and Ralph M. Coury, editors. New York, Peter Lang Publishing. 2000.
in France, “every Beur has a foot in two cultures” (Hargreaves, p. 26). Hargreaves continues: “Historically, legally and logically those two cultures are in many respects at odds with each other. They can be reconciled only by the invention of new solutions or comprises. At an everyday level, these may involve white lies or other forms of play-acting. […] To ease the inner conflicts within themselves, the Beurs sometimes practice forms of self deception. […] On an altogether different scale, the creative works of Beur writers and artists may be read as attempts to bridge the gaps and contradictions with characterise their creators’ lives.” (p. 26).

It was during the 1970s that a large number of Beur youth had reached adulthood. With this increase in young adult population, creative works by children of North African immigrants began to emerge at this time. Hargreaves observes that the first creative outlet at this time was amateur theatre, which he notes: “Drama requires literacy of neither performers nor spectators” (p. 27) which is important to note because the Beur population suffered greatly in the French school system. He compares their low achievement in school with those of working-class natives. This may be due in part to the Beur population having disadvantaged backgrounds as far as material objects are concerned; also the majority of parents are “unable to read or write and […] understand little of what goes on in a French school.” (p. 32). The theatre groups of the 1970s gained popularity because they were accessible to a wide audience within the immigrant community. Initially the performances were viewed as “a means of preserving their original culture while articulating grievances over conditions in France.” (p. 27). In time, the youth changed the focus of the plays to address “life’s problems in France” (p. 27), using French as the main language for performances with very little Arabic or Berber. Hargreaves notes that Beur theatrical performance seldom reached beyond the immigrant community.

It was not until 1981 that the first Beur narrative was published, and by 1986, at least seven novels had been published by Beur writers. Included in these seven was Mehdi Charef’s *Le thé au harem d’Archi Ahmed* (1983) which became a best-seller. In 1986 Azouz Begag’s novel *Le gone du Chaâba* was published and received much
attention when a school teacher used the narrative as part of her curriculum.² When Begag’s second novel, *Béni ou le Paradis Privé* was published in 1989, there were at least twenty Beur novels in print since their arrival in 1981. Among these twenty is Tassadit Imache’s *Une fille sans histoire*.

Hargreaves includes Imache in his study of Beur novelists. However, in looking at Imache’s heritage as well as “beur” defined, it becomes problematic to categorize her as *beur*. The New Oxford Companion to Literature in French lists “beur” as: “Popular term denoting a young person brought up in France by North African immigrant parents…It gained general currency in France during the 1980s, when large numbers of children born to North African immigrants, particularly Algerians, began reaching adulthood. A growing number of creative writers have emerged from their ranks.” (p. 90). Hargreaves provides biographical information on these emerging Beur novelists, as well as insight to the Beur culture. He states that “[in] France, commercially published Beur writers are without exception of Algerian descent” (p. 11). According to the above definition of a beur, both parents have to be immigrants of North Africa. Imache was born in France in 1958 to an Algerian father and French mother who met at a factory where they both worked. Imache had lived most of her life in France, with the exception of a year in Greece while she was 20 years old.³ When her first novel, *Une fille sans histoire* was published in 1989, the critics did not consider it as “roman beur”, which pleased both Imache and her editor. However when the novel was released into French bookstores, Imache was shocked to learn that it was not categorized with French literature. Imache explains how she learned about which section French bookstores were placing *Une fille sans histoire* and her reaction to the news in an interview with Frédérique Chevillot:

Lorsque le livre est sorti en librarie, une amie m’a dit: “Tu sais, je n’ai pas trouvé ton livre à la Fnac (sous-entendu, dans la littérature française), alors, à tout hasard, je suis

² Alec G. Hargreaves, *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction*. P. 35. Begag’s novel was criticized by the National Front (right-wing political group in France) for being what it viewed as pornographic. Hargreaves notes that the pages in question describe “the naive efforts of the pre-adolescent protagonist to mime the sexual act.” The complaints by the National Front may have resulted in “bad publicity”, which resulted in increased sales of the novel.

³ Imache interview with Frédérique Chevillot. “Beur suis et beurette ne veux pas toujours être: entretien d’été avec Tassadit Imache.” *The French Review*, vol. 71, no. 4, March 1998. Imache also traveled to Algeria when she was 30 years old. She states in the interview: “Moi, en Algérie, je suis une étrangère.” (p. 635).

Imache identifies herself as French as she reacts to the bookstore’s decision to classify her work as “Maghreb-Proche Orient”. During the interview, Chevillot asks Imache directly what nationality she is. Imache responds, “Je suis française. Je l’ai vérifié deux fois.” (p. 635). She explains her decision to live in Greece, which she viewed as a compromise of her heritage. However, she missed France and returned within one year. The second way that Imache verified her nationality was through a trip to Algeria. While she was in her father’s homeland, she felt like a foreigner and once again returned to France. In the interview, Imache explains that one’s nationality does not always define her identity. She can prove through papers that she is a French citizen, but that does not easily define her as French. She states: “Ma nationalité? Elle est claire, si on s’en tient aux papiers. Est-ce qu’elle coïncide exactement avec mon identité? L’identité d’une personne est mouvante et doit rester vive, sans cesser à construire. L’identité des parents est importante, leur histoire, d’où ils sont partis… Pour avoir à transmettre quelque chose à nos enfants…” (p. 635-6).

As quoted above, Hargreaves argues, “the creative works of Beur writers and artists may be read as attempts to bridge the gaps and contradictions which characterize their creators’ lives.” (p. 26). Imache’s novel easily falls into this classification of Beur literature, as Une fille sans histoire is a story in which the protagonist, Lil, attempts to gain an understanding of her identity in adulthood while examining her past. The “gaps and contradictions” which Beur writers encounter are based on living between two cultures. The culture at home is that of parental heritage, North African, whether Arab or Berber. Outside the home, the young Beurs live in the French culture through school and the everyday life that surrounds them. Hargreaves states: “The Beurs move everyday between the culture which their parents attempt to sustain within the family home and that which they encounter beyond its walls.” (p. 17). For Imache, the contradictions that she faces are arguably different from other Beur novelists, in that she lives with these
contradictions within the walls of the family home. This scenario did not allow for a sharp division to occur, but quite the opposite happened: Imache and her siblings encountered the differences between their mother and father, including cultural and linguistic differences. Her childhood breaks with other Beur writers in that she had to reconcile differences in a manner much differently than her contemporaries.

Hargreaves observes that the main cultural difference that the Beur must face is religious difference. The North African community in France practices Islam, which differs greatly from the predominantly Roman Catholic beliefs of the French, along with the overriding secularism that has emerged recently (p. 19). The Muslim community displays outwardly its beliefs, which are an integral part of daily life, from prayers five times a day facing Mecca to a prescribed diet which dictates the manner in which meat is prepared (p. 18). In North Africa, Hargreaves notes, “[m]ajor aspects of family life are regulated by Islamic law, and since independence the state-controlled schools and mass media have been able to carry the message of the Koran into every classroom and home on a daily basis.” (p. 19). As immigrants living in France, most parents did not have the understanding or the resources to educate their children about Islamic practices. Despite their inability to educate their children about their religion, parents held fast to their religious beliefs, expecting their children to continue in this tradition. Parents and children have had their differences due to the division between the secular society in which the children go to school and the religiously strong home life in which parents demand control in certain decisions, especially those regarding gender differences. Beur school girls often resent the restrictions placed upon them by their Muslim parents, as they feel entitled to the same secular, liberated life that their French schoolmates enjoy. (p. 20).

Imache’s father, just like other Algerian immigrants, expected his children to identify with his Muslim background. When his daughter was thirteen, he arranged her marriage, which she was able to avoid due to her mother’s refusal to allow the ceremony to take place (p. 20) Imache’s mother was also influential concerning her education. In her interview with Chevillot, Imache credits her mother for finding the boarding school that she and her brother attended. In describing her father’s reaction to the school, she states, “[m]on père n’était pas d’accord.” (p. 634).
The opposition among her parents is what marks Imaches as un-Beur or unable to fit nicely into the classification of Beur as stated above. Hargreaves describes the opposition in general among the Beur population: “Where the Beurs are concerned, the split is effectively between two parts different parts of the self: one which identifies with the secular values of contemporary France, and one which, through the family home, remains engaged with the Islamic traditions of North Africa.” (p. 20). Imache’s home was where the division occurred during her childhood. The bridges that Imache must build to close the gap that Hargreaves describes will be markedly different because of where the line of division occurs for her.

Although many Beur narratives are based on the authors’ personal experiences, these works cannot be considered strictly autobiographical. Hargreaves uses Phillipe Lejeune’s definition of autobiography which is, “essentially as that class of retrospective narratives in which the author, narrator and protagonist all share the same name and consequently the same identity.” (p. 41). By defining autobiography through this definition, Imache’s work, along with many others, cannot be considered to fall into this genre. While Une fille sans histoire may closely resemble Imache’s own childhood, the first break from Lejeune’s definition is that the protagonist and narrator’s name, Lil Azhar, is different from the author, Tassadit Imache. As Imache’s novel recounts the protagonist’s life from childhood to early adulthood, like many Beur narratives, many parallels can be drawn between the author’s life and that of Lil (p. 48). However, even Imache herself states in the Chevillot interview that she and Lil are not one in the same: “On me dit souvent qu’Une fille sans histoire est un récit autobiographique déguisé. Je réponds que ce n’est pas un récit, la plupart du temps…même si on trouve des faits similaires dans mon existence. Les personnages de ce roman évoluent sur une parallèle, de l’autre côté. Si je racontais ma vie, il n’y aurait pas ces mots.” (p. 639).

The parallels that Imache and other Beur writers make between their personal histories and their writing does not make their work any less creative. In the case of Imache, by drawing on those parallels, we can gain an understanding of her childhood and the process of healing that she is facing as an adult. Similar to Imache, the protagonist in her novel, Lil, uses writing in her healing process. While it is important to note that parallels between author and protagonist in Beur literature exist, we cannot
simply categorize Beur narratives as autobiographies. According to Hargreaves, “[m]ost, though not all, Beur narratives may be loosely described as autobiographical novels, for there is a strong but never complete resemblance between the stories represented in them and events experienced in real life by their authors.” (p. 42).

Situating Tassadit Imache within Beur literature becomes more difficult after defining “Beur” and classifying the characteristics of Beur literature. Une fille sans histoire resembles other Beur works in that it is a story in which the protagonist is caught between two worlds and must build bridges between them. However, Imache’s story differs from other Beur works based on where these two worlds exist. The divisions that Lil must face are unlike those faces by other Beur protagonists, in which it is home and school that are contradictory. But for Lil, it is her home life that is divided between mother (French, secular) and father (Algerian, Muslim). The point at which these two worlds come together exist in Lil herself, genetically speaking. Later, as an adult, she must learn how to define her identity within two opposing worlds, both literally (Ali and Huguette’s characters are separated in the novel) and metaphorically from a historical position.

Lil’s purpose for writing is to answer questions that haunt her from the past. At the same time, her identity as an adult begins to take shape. Imache has created a complex character who is faced with the task of reconciling the past in ways that other Beur writers do not have to encounter. The novel begins with Lil preparing for a trip to Algeria, but by the end, it is uncertain if she will ever embark on the journey.

The complexities of Lil’s character are what make Imache’s novel profoundly different from other Beur narratives. The divisions that she faces will affect how she uses language, the understanding of how habitus play a role in her actions as an adult, and the process of healing wounds created by a unique and troubling past.
Chapter Two: Authoritative and persuasive language in *Une fille sans histoire*

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, dialogue is what separates novels from other literary genres. In *The Dialogical Imagination*, he states, “… the human being in the novel is first, foremost and always a speaking human being; the novel requires speaking persons bringing with them their own unique ideological discourse, their own language.” (p. 332). If the speaking person is the mark of identity for a novel, then his or her dialogue (or lack of dialogue) will shape the novel. *Une fille sans histoire* has a limited spoken dialogue, that is to say, there are not numerous conversations or quotations that Imache uses in her writing. This spoken dialogue is as equally important as the many spaces of silence between that which is said.

The novel differs from the epic in that the speaker in a novel is capable of expressing his individual characteristics, while in an epic the speaker is representative of the author. Bakhtin observes that “[t]he action and individual act of a character in a novel are essential in order to expose – as well as to test – his ideological position, his discourse.” (p. 334). The characters, both developed and secondary, in Imache’s novel are individualized in this account; each is significant in how his action or discourse will influence others in the novel. The overlying problem is to seek an understanding in how language influences the main character, Lil. As the child of an Algerian father and French mother, Lil as the narrator does not explicitly indicate the language that is spoken in the family home. It is apparent, however, that French has become the language of expression for Lil, as this is the language in which she has written her past. By examining the use of language within the novel, we can gain an understanding of how authoritative language (in this case, French) has been transmitted to Lil and her siblings, to become the persuasive language in which she writes.

Bakhtin argues that “[t]he transmission and assessment of the speech of others, the discourse of another, is one of the most widespread and fundamental topics of human life.” (p. 337). He explains that half of what is said are the words of another, and that “[e]very conversation is full of transmissions and interpretations of other people’s words.” (p. 338). Therefore, the speech of the other is influential in the individual’s speech. Although he does not provide empirical evidence to support that half of what we say are the words of others, Bakhtin’s argument is strengthened by the way in which
dialogue is used in real life. The speaker in this case is not concerned with artistic representation, like the author is in his novel, but instead he is involved in the transmission of information. This transmission influences how one learns his individual, persuasive language.

The two manners in which verbal language is taught in school are “reciting by heart” and “retelling in one’s own words”. (p. 341)

However, when faced with the task of using one’s own words, the language will be influenced by the words of others. Bakhtin continues, “[a]nother’s discourse performs here no longer as information, directions, rules, models and so forth – but strives rather to determine the very bases of our ideological interrelations with the world, the very basis of our behavior; it performs here as authoritative discourse, and an internally persuasive discourse.” (p. 342). For Bakhtin, a single word can occupy the space of both authoritative and persuasive discourse, however, “such unity is rarely a given – it happens more frequently that an individual’s becoming, an ideological process, is characterized precisely by a sharp gap between these two categories[.] […] The struggle and dialogic interrelationship of these categories of ideological discourse are what usually determine the history of an individual ideological consciousness.” (p. 342).

Bakhtin describes the authoritative word as “religious, political, moral; the word of a father, of adults and of teachers, etc.” (p. 342). Pierre Bourdieu identifies this as the “official language”, which he describes as, “[the language] that imposes itself on the whole population as the legitimate language […] Produced by authors who have the authority to write, fixed and codified by grammarians and teachers who are also charged with the task of inculcating its mastery, the language is a code […] in the sense of a system of norms regulating linguistic practices.” (p. 468). According to this definition, it is without difficulty to situate the authoritative, official language that is transmitted to Lil as French. As an Algerian immigrant, it can be assumed that Ali, Lil’s father, speaks Arabic as his native language. She frequents a café with her father, where he meets with other Algerian immigrants, providing at least one environment in which Arabic is the spoken language. However, like other Beur children, Lil is divided between home and school, each location possessing its own authoritative language. Outside of the café and her interactions with Ali, Lil is exposed to the French language through school and on the
street. Overall, French, for Lil, is the dominant language through which she must express herself intellectually at school, as well as the language used in interactions with the dominant culture of the society in which she lives. For Bakhtin, “[a]uthoritative language can not be represented – it is only transmitted.” (p. 344). It is uncertain if Arabic is transmitted from Ali to Lil, while we can be sure that French has become the language in which she expresses herself artistically. Bakhtin also states that “authoritative word demands that we acknowledge it, that we make it our own; it binds us, quite independent of any power it might have to persuade us internally; we encounter it with its authority already fused to it.” (p. 342). The authoritative language that Lil encounters expresses French societal views on Algerian immigrants living in France, as well as its views on inter-racial marriage.

For a child, this authoritative word will influence how language is transmitted from those in power to the next generation. The authoritative language is capable of transmitting religious dogma, scientific truths, or in the case of Lil, political and cultural domination. As a child, Lil did not understand the criticism that her mother received from the French. She reflects on this criticism: “elle s’interrogeait sur la bêtise des gens. Ceux qui disaient que sa mère était ‘une salope, une putain que couchait avec un bicot pour ses mœurs bizarres, et qui s’était fait faire deux bâtards, plus un à venir, en pleine guerre d’Algérie madame!’” (Imache, p. 19). As Lil learns the literal meaning of such words as “salope”, “putain”, “bicot” and “bâtards”, she will remember how each word was used in reference to her family. The authoritative language here conveys a very clear message to Lil, despite her inability to understand the meaning of every word. As she reflects on these words, her confusion is apparent in the narrative. The tone in which the words are delivered to the mother is only apparent through the author’s choice in punctuation, such as using an exclamation point. Both the unfamiliar words as well as the tone are reasons for which Lil remembers so clearly this criticism. We can also assume that this is not an isolated incident, but were words that were hurled often at Huguette.

Lil is exposed to the authoritative language of the French police as she and Ali are returning from the café one evening. There is no reason given for the police stopping

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4 Bakhtin, p. 343.
them, they simply ask to see Ali’s papers. During the incident, a police officer questions Ali about his daughter, who he is holding in his arms. “‘T’es sûr que c’est à toi ça? … Kabyle hein?’ Expliquant aux autres: ‘Faut faire gaffe, y en a qu’ont pas le type, des yeux clairs et blancs de peau… allez rentre chez toi. Si t’es encore là dans une minute, on t’embarque!” (Imache, p. 31). The authoritative language of the police has a two-fold meaning here. First, it demonstrates Ali’s inability to verbally defend himself, as he did not say anything to Lil until after the police left. When he does speak, he says, “Tiens-toi tranquille! On rentre.” (p. 31). For Ali, the authoritative language is already understood, and he also recognizes its power over him as an immigrant. Secondly, the authoritative language of the police officer is an observation of the obvious: Lil looks physically different from her father. At the time, Lil could not understand why the difference in their hair color is a matter that makes her not part of Ali.

Lil begins to understand the authoritative language used by the French, which does not imply that she agrees with it initially. However, she is aware of the manner in which she and her family are different from others. Lil becomes afraid of Ali, she no longer wants to go to the café with him, and she also begins to refer to him as “Monsieur Ali” instead of “Ali” or “papa”.

Another manner in which authoritative language is used in Une fille sans histoire is through the transmission of cultural domination. As a child, Lil and her siblings were sent to a foster home while her mother was hospitalized and Ali was occupied with work. The foster home mainly housed French children, with the exception of the Azhar family (Lil and her siblings). While under foster care, a French boy, Marc, stabbed Lil with an arrow he carved himself. Lil painfully recounts the story to a photographer, as it is an old wound that has left a scar under her eye.

La veille, elle avait regardé [Marc] tailler le morceau de bois avec son canif, mettre à nu la fibre blanche de la flèche, l’arc posé à ses pieds. […] Il avait relevé la tête et il avait dit: “Quand j’aurai fini, on joue à te tuer!” Pourtant, les yeux de Lil étaient aussi clairs que les siens et ses cheveux avaient la même couleur dorée. Comment Marc avait-il deviné qu’elle était une bougnoule! […] Pieds nus, en chemise de nuit, Lil était sortie. La brume avait envahi la forêt. Les arbres se confondaient en un rideau noir, épais. La
This example of authoritative language is disturbing because it is an example of a child’s understanding of racial and cultural differences between himself and another child. As the authoritative language of his parents, teachers, and others in power positions has been successfully transmitted to Marc, he expresses what he has learned through this language. This passage also demonstrates Lil’s understanding of the authoritative word: she questions how Marc knows that she is not French, even though she has the same hair color and light eyes that he does. She does not physically appear to be different from her peer, however Marc has somehow come to understand that he and Lil are different from each other, that he feels that he is the dominant power (the culture in which they live), and that he can inflict harm on the dominated (Lil) without being held accountable for it. The wound is simply dismissed as an accident.

The authoritative language directly influences an individual’s internally persuasive discourse. The precise moment when internally persuasive discourse is shaped is difficult to define, also, this discourse is constantly changing, unlike the authoritative word, which for Bakhtin is rigid and resists change. According to Bakhtin:

[The internally persuasive] discourse is of decisive significance in the evolution of an individual consciousness: consciousness awakens to independent ideological life precisely in a world of alien discourses surrounding it, and from which it cannot initially separate itself; the process of distinguishing between one’s own and another’s discourse, between one’s own and another’s thought, is activated rather late in development. When though begins to work in an independent, experimenting and discriminating way, what first occurs is a separation between internally persuasive discourse and authoritarian enforced discourse, along with a rejection of those congeries of discourses that do not matter to us, that do not touch us. (p. 345).
As Lil’s internally persuasive discourse is shaped, she has removed all discourse that is insignificant to her, while maintaining the discourse which is both hers and authoritarian. Authoritative discourse demands that its authority be recognized, but it does not necessarily become part of one’s individual discourse. The degree to which it does become part of an individual is significant. According to Bakhtin, half of what we say is someone else’s words, “In the everyday rounds of our consciousness, the internally persuasive word is half ours and half someone else’s.” (p. 345).

Lil’s persuasive word will be directly influenced by the authoritative language. However, for individuals, the “persuasive discourse is not finite, it is open; in each of the new contexts that dialogize it, this discourse is able to reveal newer ways to means.” (p. 346). Lil’s language is open to infinite possibilities of change as she is constantly sorting through authoritative discourse.

Language is one of the many factors that shapes habitus, which is also flexible. Language is an environmental factor that influences who we are and how we will act in every situation. In the next pages, I will make a close examination of how the use of language in Une fille sans histoire shapes the habitus.
Chapter Three: Understanding *Habitus* in *Une fille sans histoire*

Home is what can be recalled without effort – so that sometimes we think, oh, that can’t be important. Memories are the blueprints of home. A memoir is a home built from those blueprints. Finding home is crucial to the act of writing. Begin here. With what you know. With the tales that you’ve told dozens of times to friends or a spouse or a lover. With the map you’ve already made in your heart. That’s where the real home is: inside. If we carry that home with us all the time, we’ll be able to take more risks. We can leave on wild excursions, knowing we’ll return.

Georgia Heard, *Writing Toward Home* (p. 2)

Tassadit Imache takes a risk with her novel, *Une fille sans histoire*, that no other Beur writer had take at the time of its publication. Beur literature was just beginning to make its mark in France when Imache’s novel was published in 1989. Her novel is unique in that the protagonist, Lil, is the daughter of a French woman and Algerian man. Lil’s parental heritage provides an opportunity for the author to explore the cultural differences that divide the French from the Algerians at a more intimate level. The two worlds in which most Beur children live are divided between home and school (or daily life on the street outside of the home); Lil’s two worlds collide at home, often in violent eruptions. Imache’s novel provides us with a unique protagonist whose reconciliation with the past will take on methods that differ from other Beur protagonists. Lil’s worlds are divided between father and mother. The point of division is exactly what makes Imache’s novel unique; this differing heritage demands a new and differing way in examining the past in order to make the present bearable for Lil. Lil’s purpose for writing is to explore the past and heal the wounds that lingered since childhood. However, before the healing process can begin, it is important to understand first the various acts that resulted in these wounds. Actions are not random, but rather we are disposed to how we will act in every situation. This is what Pierre Bourdieu calls the *habitus*. Bourdieu describes *habitus* as “a system of dispositions acquired by implicit or explicit learning which functions as a system of generative schemes, generates strategies which can be objectively consistent with the objective interests of their authors without
having been expressly designed to that end.” (Sociology in Question, p. 76). All of the characters in Une fille sans histoire possess a different habitus, which leads to individual actions which can only be performed by a specific individual. With a clear understanding of how the habitus functions in Imache’s novel, we can then explore the healing process that Lil uses in her act of writing. First, we must understand the wounds, as Lil must do, before they can be healed. As Lil mediates between two worlds, the novel lends itself to using two differing discourses to understand its importance. Boudieu’s sociological studies will provide us with an insight to the habitus of the principal characters in the novel. Dominick LaCapra has researched extensively the healing process of Holocaust survivors. His work relies on the psychoanalytic discourse as explores how survivors begin to heal. His research is the most extensive to date on trauma, therefore his theory lends itself well to the analysis of Lil’s unique wounds. As Lil recounts her past, both an objective and subjective analysis takes place, which is precisely why two discourses are necessary to gain access to the importance of Imache’s work.

Une fille sans histoire begins with the main character, Lil, examining a family photograph taken during her childhood. In the examination of this picture, Lil is moved to write, in order to recall the past, to begin the process of working through, in order to make the present more bearable. The photograph serves as Lil’s “blueprint of home”, a reminder of the past that is accessible in the present. This picture also serves as a point of departure for Lil, where her journey to explore the past begins. While examining the photo, Lil writes: “De l’avoir trop scrutée (le corps penché en avant, arrêté par la table où trône la machine à inventer des histoires) il me semble que la famille se décompose. Troublée, je recule de quelque pas. Mes paupières battent. Ma vue se brouille. Un malaise m’envahit.” (p. 11). It is apparent from the beginning of the novel that Lil is troubled by the past, with the uneasiness she feels, and she begins to write her story to gain a better understanding of this past. Through the process of writing, we gain access to Lil’s wounds and her means of healing these wounds.

Lil describes the image of the family as it appears in the photograph. Lil’s image is very clear, however, the other members are not so clear. “Comme vos ombres sont confuses et vraies et comme la mienne est juste, précise. (…) Je vous ai abandonné ainsi, renié, avançant seule dans la lumière.” (p. 10). In her search to uncover the past,
Lil will attempt to bring the other family members into focus, especially her father and mother. Since it is impossible for her to physically change the image of the photograph, Lil will have to gain a clearer image of the family only through her mental images of them. To make the image of her parents more clear, Lil must gain a better understanding of both of them as individuals, of their relationship with one another, and why this relationship began and ended the way it did. Essentially Lil’s journey is one to uncover the history of her life and the lives of her parents. By uncovering this history, Lil will explore her *habitus*, although this is not and explicit goal of hers, in fact it should be understood that Lil does not realize that she is doing this. French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu coined the term *habitus*, defining it as “a product of history, [which] produces individual and collective practices – more history – in accordance with the schemes generated by history.” ([The Logic of Practice](#), p. 54). In order to understand this history, Lil must search for the collectiveness of her past, stemming from both parents’ heritage, in order to understand the present. As I stated above, this does not imply that Lil is consciously aware that this is what she is doing. Bourdieu continues: “The ‘unconscious’, which enables one to dispense with this interrelating, is never anything other than the forgetting of history which history itself produces by realizing the objective structures that it generates in the quasi-natures of *habitus.*” (p. 56). Where history is involved, Bourdieu continues with a citation from Durkheim:

In each one of us, in differing degrees, is contained the person we were yesterday, and indeed, in the nature of things it is even true that our past *personae* predominate in us, since the present is necessarily insignificant when compared with the period of the past because of which we have emerged in the form we have today. It is just that we don’t directly feel the influence of these past selves in precisely because they are so deeply rooted within us. They constitute the unconscious pare of ourselves. Consequently we have a strong tendency not to recognize their existence and to ignore the legitimate demands. By contrast, with the most recent acquisitions of civilization we are vividly aware of them just because they are recent and consequently have not been assimilated into our collective unconscious. (p. 56)
Lil’s past is deeply embedded with what Durkheim call the collective unconscious, in Lil’s case, the collective unconscious is shared by her family. In uncovering the past, she will use her mother, Huguette, and her brother, Thierry, as resources to help with her understanding. Huguette and Thierry are both witnesses to Lil’s past (and the family’s collective past), resources that could prove to be valuable in her search. This proves to be problematic however, because neither Huguette nor Thierry are at the same point in their lives as Lil. This is to say that Lil is ready to face the past and uses the process of working through to overcome the past. However, Huguette and Thierry are unable to begin the working through process, as both are still in the stage of acting out, in which the past is lived in the present.

As Lil attempts to make sense of her own life, her journey will incorporate an exploration of the lives of her parents. This is necessary so that she understand where she is coming from and also where she is going. The first thing that we understand about her parents is that their images are “unclear” to Lil as she looks at the family photograph in adulthood. In the beginning of the novel, we learn that Ali, her father, is dead and Huguette is aging rapidly beyond her years. It is clear that Huguette endured suffering in her past, a suffering which is brought to an end through Ali’s death. Despite the end of her suffering, Huguette is worn out and tired. In describing Huguette’s physical appearance, Lil writes: “Ton crâne, rapetissé sous les taches grises de tes cheveux. La peau de tes mains gonflée et vide de chair. Ta bouche prématurément édentée, figée dans une moue d’étonnement.” (p. 14). Through these words, it is apparent that Lil has pity for her mother. Just prior to displaying this pity, Lil puts into question the acts of her father. “J’avais compris: nous, ses enfants, manquions de tout. J’en avais déduit que pour lui nous ne comptions pas. D’ailleurs, que m’avait-il donné à moi, sa fille, hormis son sang et son nom?” (p. 14). The answer to this question is one of the many things that she will search for in her journey; more importantly, it is the main question for which she will seek an answer. Its response holds the key to understanding the past, therefore defining her habitus.

As the novel changes from first to third-person in Chapter II, Lil begins the chapter by stating: “Oui, tôt Lil avait douté de tout.” (p. 17). This doubt is an indication, a foreshadowing of Lil’s adult life. As a child, she could not have known nor felt this
doubt that she experiences as an adult. Although Lil attempts to gain some distance from her past by recalling it in the third-person, it proves to be difficult to remain as an objective witness to the past. Her subjective feelings in the present are apparent in such statements as the above description of the doubt she felt as a child.

In Chapter II, Lil’s portrayal of Ali ceases to be the bitter one that she had presented in Chapter I, at which point she questioned his worth in her life. Instead, as a child, Lil is very connected to her father; it appears that she is as close to him as she is to her mother. They frequented a café together, father and daughter, where he met with his fellow Algerian immigrants. The café was a place where Lil felt at home with the patrons, where she was comforted and comfortable. The special bond between father and daughter becomes even more apparent when she is left at home and he goes to the café alone. This void (Ali’s absence at home) indicates the tenderness she feels for him. “S’il pleuvait – son père était sorti sans elle, l’avait laissée à la maison – Lil fermait les yeux et priait sa mère de venir la bercer et l’endormir.” (p. 18).

As a child, Lil’s relationship with her mother seems to hold the same tender feeling that she has for her father. As she remembers watching her mother washing the laundry, Lil writes: “Lil regardait sa mère, fascinée…” (p. 18). As an adult, in the present, what has caused Lil’s feelings for Ali and Huguette to change? The events that follow in the novel are an attempt to explain her present feelings as well as an attempt to alleviate any feelings of guilt. In the novel, Chapter II is the first chapter that opens up the past to the reader, and in recounting her childhood, Lil demonstrates almost immediately the criticism that her mother received from the French, which as a child Lil did not understand.

Les poings sous le menton, [Lil] s’interrogeait sur la bêtise des gens. Ceux qui disaient que sa mère était ‘une salope, une putain qui couchait avec un bicot pour ses mœurs bizarres, et qui s’était fait faire deux bâtards, plus un à venir, en pleine guerre d’Algérie madame! Et avec ça, des p’tites gueules blanches et des yeux bleus!’ Lil ne savait pas ce qu’étaient ces ‘mœurs bizarres’ – et peut-être était-ce pour l’apprendre que Thierry, son grand frère, allait à l’école – mais elle avait l’intuition que cela avait quelque chose à voir avec les boîtes de conserve de la cour. (p. 19)
In Lil’s representation of the past, it is apparent that her relationships with both Ali and Huguette change when Lil is only three years old. Physically she begins to change; her appearance begins to favor her mother’s French heritage. “Il arrivait aussi que Lil regardât les choses et les gens en face, en cette année 1961 où elle venait d’avoir trois ans. Le noir de ses pupilles virait alors bleu de l’incrédulité: il y avait de quoi n’en pas croire ses yeux!” (p. 18). Psychologically she changes also. At the age of three, Lil is separated from both of her parents for an extended period of time, without her understanding why they were taken away from her.

Ali is the first one to leave. In the middle of the night, Ali flees the apartment after Huguette warns him that the police have blocked off the neighborhood. The incident is related to a historical event that took place in Paris in October 1961. There were massive demonstrations by the Algerians living in Paris, and as a result some immigrants were deported and several disappeared. The events of October 1961 still leave many unanswered questions, such as how many Algerians were killed during the incident, with reports ranging from two to about two hundred.

In Lil’s representation of the event, Ali disappears from the apartment and Huguette is later taken away by the police for questioning. It is unclear in reading Lil’s account of the event if Ali was arrested and held in police custody, or if he was hiding for the five days that he disappeared. The manner in which he leaves is described by Lil as such: “Il a frappé dans le mur et il est sorti. Sa femme sait qu’il va se saouler et qu’il faudra ne plus bouger ni respirer, juste garder les yeux ouverts et attendre. Attendre l’homme, creuser la surface du carreau.” (p. 21). However, Lil later describes Ali’s experience while held in police custody. “Ils ont gardé Ali cinq jours. Ils n’ont pu faire autrement que de le relâcher.” (p. 39). This recollection indicates the passage of time that Ali was absent from his family. However, the description of the mental wounds he must have suffered continues:

Une ampoule brûlait en permanence. Ils étaient plus d’une trentaine assis dans des flaques d’eau croupie, certains avaient les mains menottées dans le dos. Ali avait retrouvé Ahmed le coiffeur de Bezons. Il était penché au-dessus d’un gamin qui
gargouillait, gémisait: ‘Pas le nez! pas le nez!’ Le visage avait été écrasé par des coups de pied, le nez et les dents cassés, la bouche saignait, gonflée, grotesque. Les yeux disparaissaient sous l’enflure de visage. […] Déjà les flics redescendaient, matraque à la main, certains munis de tuyaux remplis de sable. Il avait fallu se lever et courir autour de la pièce. Les flics les frappaient au passage sur la tête, les bras, les reins. (p. 40-41)

The narrator, Lil, is using not only her own memories of these five days in question, but she must draw on the collective memories that have been acquired through her family. As she recalls the night of October 17, 1961, she also make a representation of the police questioning Huguette. As Huguette is held by the police, again her morality is put into question by the French:

Cent fois les mêmes questions. Sur les réunions chez Slimane elle a dit: “Je ne vais jamais au café. Pour les Algériens, ce n’est pas la place d’une femme.” L’inspecteur a dit: ‘Les bougnoles n’ont pas de femme, il n’y a que des putes pour coucher avec!’ […] il a dit: ‘Ça c’est français? une salope qui se fait sauter par un Arabe pendant qu’ils saignent nos gamis là-bas!’ (p. 35)

The narrator continues to draw on collective memory to piece together the events of that night. She remembers that she and Thierry were at the neighbor’s apartment during the questioning of Huguette. However her story would be incomplete and meaningless to the reader if she did not “invent” the past, as she stated she set out to do with her typewriter, in order to make the events of the past clearer.

Lil’s narration of the past is choppy at times, memories come and go, and are often interrupted by other memories. For example, the memory of the night of October 17 is interrupted by the recollection of Ali and Lil’s most recent visit to the café just prior to October 17. Lil now displays fear of Ali when she writes: “Elle avait eu peur” (p. 29). The confusion of memories from child to adult are also apparent as Lil describes the walk home from the café. During their return home, Ali and Lil are stopped by the police, who ridicule Ali in front of his child. “[C]’est à toi la gosse? … T’es sûr que c’est à toi ça? … Faut faire gaffe, y en a qu'ont pas le type, des yeux clairs et blanc de peau” (p. 30-31).
describing the confusion and ridicule, Lil the narrator has a difficult time separating her emotions as an adult and those of the child she once was. “Elle n’avait plus osé bouger dans l’odeur de l’étranger, ce mélange délicieux et effrayant de sucre et de haine qu’elle avait gardé longtemps sur les doigts avant de s’endormir.” (p. 31)

Lil’s representation of the past continues to be confused between the past childhood and the adult narrator as she describes the relationship of Huguette and Ali. Lil’s parents met in a factory where they worked. Huguette already has two children from a previous marriage, Lil’s two half-sisters that live with Huguette’s parents, two characters that are never developed in the novel. Huguette’s parents keep the children away from their mother. As a child, Huguette was constantly reminded by her own mother that she was nothing but a mistake: “Toute son enfance, Huguette avait entendu Jeanne lui répéter qu’elle n’avait qu’un ‘accident...’ et évidemment Huguette n’avait cessé de la décevoir.” (p. 33). Huguette’s life appears to follow the path that her mother has predicted for her, a life in which she “disappoints” her mother, first through her failed first marriage, now in re-marrying an Algerian man and beginning a new family with him. Although Lil’s narration does not explicitly detail Huguette’s mother’s disapproval of Huguette’s marriage to Ali, the reaction of the French in general implies how her mother must feel. How is it that Huguette meets her mother’s expectations through her various failures? The trajectory that she follows is defined in her habitus, which will determine the outcome of situations according to Bourdieu. For Bourdieu, the habitus is:

Durably installed generative principle of regulated improvisations, produces practices which tend to reproduce the regularities immanent in the objective conditions of the production of their generative principle, while adjusting to the demands inscribed as objective potentialities in the situation, as defined by the cognitive and motivating structures making up the habitus.” (Bourdieu, The Outline of a Theory of Practice, p. 78).

This “durably installed generative principle” is installed in all individuals, whether or not they are aware of it, which is made up of the individual’s environmental factors (which is
also related to the collective); it is what shapes our behaviors. It is thus that Huguette’s \textit{habitus} which has drawn her to the life she now leads. She never received the attention and love that she needed as a child, instead she was told that she was nothing but an “accident”. After one failed marriage, she finds herself in a second marriage with someone who is considered, like herself, an outcast. Ali is an Algerian man living in French society, whose actions are never understood by the French, not even his own wife and children. Perhaps this is the explanation that Lil seeks in understanding her parents’ relationship. Huguette and Ali were seeking refuge in one another, hoping that the other would empathize with the suffering that they each endured.

As an adult, Lil begins to understand that her mother finds relief and happiness in her own pain. At one point, Huguette is hospitalized for an extended period of time for her anemia, and she is the image of someone who is very tired and physically worn out. After Ali’s death, the narrator reflects:

\begin{quote}
\end{quote}

The peace that she finds in Ali’s death is quickly replaced by the \textit{malheur} that is her one true friend. Despite her efforts and the efforts of her children, she is unable to escape this \textit{malheur} which is engraved in her \textit{habitus}.

In order to define Ali’s \textit{habitus}, it is important to gain an understanding of the cultural differences between Ali and the country where he has immigrated. In Pierre Bourdieu and Cultural Theory, Bridget Fowler summarizes Bourdieu’s study in Kabylia and the limiting case of masculine domination within that society. The character, Ali, is from Kabylia, therefore a closer look at Bourdieu’s findings on masculine domination will prove to be useful. Fowler states: “Here masculine domination is the consequence of collective, public organisation, quite unlike its transitory expression within the psychoanalytic cure or poetic licence, through which it perpetuates its subterranean existence in the modern West.” (p. 135). Therefore the masculine domination that Ali
seeks through various acts in the novel, such as violence and control over naming the children, is embedded in his *habitus* through the collective society. In comparison to Western societies, Fowler argues that “masculine domination [in the West] is accomplished by the workings of educational institutions, and particularly through the cultural capital acquired by men.” (p. 135). For Fowler, the masculine domination in the West differs greatly in the manner in which domination is reached. She continues to explore Bourdieu’s studies of domination in Kabylian society.

By contrast, in Kabylia, such domination is the ‘natural attitude’, the common-sense or doxic world view that is anchored in everyday experience within structures in which gender is stringently and elaborately differentiated. For Kabylians it is taken for granted that to be male is to be a universal being, segregated by one’s sense of honour from existence. In turn, women are condemned to see themselves pejoratively, possessing the negative virtues engendered by their exclusion from the *agora* or public sphere and constrained to recognize their purely private and subordinate existence… (p. 135).

Ali’s constant struggle throughout the novel becomes clear once we gain an understanding of that which he is fighting. His collective *habitus* has embedded in him the notion that he is the dominant member of the family, and he struggles to maintain that domination. However, throughout the course of the novel, his resistance is weakened.

While Huguette is questioned by the police in October 1961, she maintains that she knows nothing about his visits to the café. “Cent fois les mêmes questions. Sur les réunions chez Slimane elle a dit: ‘Je ne vais jamais au café. Pour le Algériens, ce n’est pas la place d’une femme.’” (p. 35). After being released by the police, friends of Ali come by the apartment to thank Huguette for maintaining her silence with the police. She responds by saying, “je ne savais rien… Ali ne me dit rien.” (p. 44). At this point in the story it appears that Huguette has accepted the cultural differences that separate her and Ali. With time, she seems less willing to accept the masculine domination that he is struggling to maintain.
Another manner in which Ali asserts his domination is through the naming of the children. He wants the children to be given Arabic names. Huguette insists that they have names that sound French:

[Elle dit: “Thierry mon fils.” Elle avait eu du mal à convaincre Ali au sujet du prénom… Azhar ça ne sonnait pas Arabe… d’ailleurs les gens comprenaient et écrivaient Hasard… on gagnait un peu de temps… mais Farid Azhar… ça ne laissait aucun doute… Thierry se ferait casser la figure à l’école. “C’est ça que tu veux? que ton fils souffre?... quand la guerre sera finie, on verra…” (p. 33).

Ali’s first-born son bears a French name, Thierry, and his first-born daughter is called by a name that sounds more French than Arabic. Lil is in fact a nickname for Lila, her birth name. Ali does win a small battle concerning her name. A few months after the incident in October 1961, she is now called Lila: “Finalement Ali avait bien fait de donner, selon la coutume chez les Azhar, le prénom de sa mère, Lila, à sa première fille.” (p. 45). However, this victory does not outweigh the losses that he must endure. When the third child is born, for example, he has no voice in naming her; Huguette named the child while Ali was not at the hospital. In discussing Huguette and the baby’s release from the hospital, Ali asks about the child:


The narrator criticizes Ali in the final chapter of the novel for his lack of understanding what, or more specifically, who were his people. It is apparent that he associated himself more with fellow Algerians in the café rather than his own family.
Les tiens, tu les cherchais dans les cafés. Si tu y filais si vite, si souvent, c’est qu’on n’était pas les tiens, nous? Tu ne nous reconnaissais pas. Tu avais juste fait semblant. Une fois que tu avais donné le prénom de ton père à ton fils et celui de ta mère à ta fille aînée, tu t’en étais cru tiré à bon compte. Comptes mauvais d’ennemis Monsieur Ali, à te maquer ainsi avec la fille du “bourreau”. Tu avais présumé de la force du sang et de notre courage. Puis usé, à la dernière de tes filles, tu avais cédé: elle était née Francine! (p. 141).

Lil criticizes Ali for giving up on his family, which leaves the children knowing only their French heritage, which surrounds them constantly. The most important battle that Ali lost concerns religion. After Huguette returns from her extended stay at the hospital, her relationship with the children has changed due to the long absence from their mother. At the same time, her relationship with Ali has changed, although she is still willing to endure the obstacles that she and Ali face as an inter-racial couple. However, she decides that she does not want her children to have to struggle through the same obstacles that she has in the past. Lil recounts Huguette’s decision to have the children baptized:

Dans sa solitude de femme d’Algérien, elle n’avait eu peur de rien. Mais un amour maternel forcené l’avait peu à peu acculée à une position extrême. Un matin, elle avait décidé que ses enfants iraient à l’église. Le dimanche, elle avait regardé partir à la messe les trois aînés, baptisés, colognés, missels cachés sous le manteau, ignorante de ce que le chemin pouvait receler d’aventures troublantes. (p. 81).

Huguette makes many important decisions concerning her children without consulting Ali first. She has usurped the masculine domination that Ali is accustomed to exerting in his own society. Although Huguette endures the physical violence that he forces her to suffer, she does not want her children to suffer in the same way that she has. Her suffering not only includes the violence within the apartment, but also the ridicule and verbal abuse that she must tolerate from the French.
Bourdieu has done extensive studies of both Algerian and Western societies, but he fails to explore cases where the two worlds meet as in the case of Ali and Huguette. His theory concerning masculine domination includes studies in Kabylia and in the West, but falls short of studying an Algerian living in France who is married to a French native. The closest example of such a case is Maghrebin families living in France, in which case both parents are immigrants. Their children endure the struggle of living in two differing cultures; their home life maintains the values and customs of their ancestry, while they go to school and work in French society. In *La Misère du Monde* (1993), Abdelmalek Sayad contributes to Bourdieu’s sociological studies in a case titled “L’emancipation”. In this case study, Sayad has interviewed not just one subject, but an entire family of immigrants, the parents and children, to gain a better understanding of how immigration has affected all of the family members. “L’emancipation” is the interview that Sayad held with Farida, the eldest daughter of the family, concerning her role as the first born. Farida suffered the most among the children in the family because she had to lead the way for the others. Just as Ali’s strength had gradually weakened in *Une fille sans histoire*, up to the point that he gave up not only in naming his children but also being a strong influence in their lives, Farida’s father became more lenient with the younger children, his strictness was reduced to allowing Farida’s younger sisters to do things that were never imaginable for her. Sayad asks Farida about her relationship with her father; she responds that he only existed through her mother.

Avec mon père, rien; c’est comme s’il n’existant pas pour moi et pour lui, je pense, c’est comme je n’existaïs pas. C’est curieux; il existe pour moi à travers ma mère, ce que m’en dit ma mère, c’est-à-dire, à peu près, ceci, “ton père m’a dit…, ton père pense que…, ton père veut que…, ton père demande que…, que va penser, que va dire ton père…, fais attention que ton père le sache…, il ne faut pas que ton père sache que…” etc. (*La Misère du Monde*, p. 1332).

Farida’s relationship with her father is non-existent at the time of the interview; even though she continues to visit the family home, she does not communicate with him. Farida continues to support her mother emotionally and she shares (when possible) with
her mother the new-found freedom that she has on her own. “Maintenant je me balade, je voyage, je rentre de nuit, je sors et promène même ma mère, je l’emmène au cinéma, je lui fais faire du tourisme, je l’emmène au restaurant, je lui ai fait prendre le bateau-mouche sur la Seine. (p. 1330).

Although Farida has suffered in the past due to her double *habitus* (one for her family and one for her life in French society) she is now establishing herself in her own world, in which she has not only found work and her individuality, but also the strength to understand and forgive her father for the pain he caused her in the past.

[J’aimerais bien savoir ce qu’il en pense aujourd’hui. Regrette-t-il ou pas? Je ne sais pas. Mais je ne pense pas. Je le connais assez: il a sa morale et il est sûr de sa morale; c’est sa morale qui l’a lâché, c’est pas lui qui va lâcher sa morale, mais alors comment nous voit-il aujourd’hui mes sœurs et moi? Même ma mère, même mes frères, ce n’est pas ce qu’il aurait souhaité. (p. 1330).

Farida’s father, similar to Ali, has lost the masculine domination that is engraved in his native society. This is problematic for both men, on personal levels because they find it difficult to adjust to the society in which they currently live. They are unable to exert their power due to conflicting societal “*morale*” (in the words of Farida). In finding themselves powerless over their wives and children, eventually they give in, instead of continually fighting what appears to be a losing battle.

By gaining a better understanding of Huguette and Ali, Lil’s *habitus* is more easily defined. It is apparent that Lil’s *habitus* is influenced by the French (her mother and also the culture in which they are living), with very little paternal influence. Lil seems critical of Ali’s gradually weakening influence, such as giving up on naming his children. At the same time it appears that she is fighting to have her paternal past play a more important role in shaping her *habitus*, especially in the overarching theme of her trip to Algeria, to visit Ali’s homeland. However, as she finishes her story, it is apparent that she will not embark on the trip to Algeria; instead she finds herself back in Nanterre, the *cité* where she spent her childhood. Lil is beginning to understand that her cultural heritage is more French than Algerian, and that her maternal past has significantly shaped
who she is, more specifically, her *habitus*. In the final chapter of the novel, she briefly describes how both Huguette and Ali influenced her life, thus shaping her *habitus*. “La mère, normale, elle les avait voulu français. *Pareils.* Ils ne l’avaient pas vraiment. […] Elle ne *nous* avait plus quitté des yeux. *Lui*, vaincu, ne nous avait plus parlé, plus touché.” (p. 141).

The trip to Algeria is no longer necessary in the end because it is not within her *habitus* to embark on such a journey to discover her paternal homeland. According to Bourdieu, “the *habitus* tends to protect itself from crises and critical challenges by providing itself with a mileu to which it is as pre-adapted as possible, that is, a relatively constant universe of situations tending to reinforce its dispositions by offering the market most favorable to its products.” (*The Logic of Practice*, p. 61). Therefore it would be outside of the domain in which Lil is comfortable (French society), the domain that she knows and has known all her life, to go to Algeria. Her journey, however, should not be regarded as a failure. She has found her “home” which Georgia Heard describes as the place we can always feel safe and know that we can return. Lil embarked on a journey in which she discovered Algeria within herself, knowing that she could safely return home. This is where she finishes her story, in Nanterre, safe in the company of her brother, Thierry.
Chapter Four: Healing and Working Through

Ne vous inquiétez pas, les enfants oublient vite. – Tant’ Renée, Une fille sans histoire

The wounds that Lil suffered are the result of living between two cultures. The authoritative language has influenced her internally persuasive language as discussed in Chapter Two. Her persuasive language is on of the many environmental factors that make up her habitus. Other factors that shape her habitus are her relationships with her father and mother, as well as the society in which she lives. After closely examining the origin of Lil’s wounds, we are now able to observe her healing process.

The narrator’s primary purpose for writing her past is to heal the wounds caused by the traumatic events in her life. This is evident in the beginning of the novel when she is looking at the family photograph. She begins to feel an uneasiness overcoming her. “De l’avoir trop scrutée (le corps penché en avant, arrêté par la table où trône la machine à inventer des histoires) il me semble que la photo de la famille se décompose. […] Un malaise m’envahit. La petite fille que j’étais, seconde après seconde, me renvoie l’insupportable question: Puis-je aujourd’hui certifier que j’ai survécu sans cesser de vous reconnaître?” (p. 11). Lil identifies her typewriter at the “machine à inventer des histoires.” She recognizes her process of recreating her past: it will be a representation of the past, using her personal memories. The question that keeps returning to Lil (“Puis-je aujourd’hui certifier que j’ai survécu sans cesser de vous reconnaître?”) puts her identity into question. Here she puts into question her relationship with her family. The question that follows concerns Lil’s relationship with her father, who has already died at the time that she is writing: “D’ailleurs, que m’avait-il donné à moi, sa fille, hormis son sang et son nom?” (p. 14). These two questions set the framework of the novel. As she searches through the past to uncover her identity, she will uncover the trauma of her past at the same time. Lil must find answers to these two questions in order for the healing process to be successful for her. These are questions that have haunted her, they will not easily go away. However, as she embarks on her search through the past, she begins the first step of the healing process by recognizing that the past is troubling to her.
As Lil begins to write her past, the perspective of the novel changes. The story begins in the first-person as Lil situates her story. Lil is no longer a child still enduring the traumatic events that now haunt her in adulthood. The opening chapter of the novel informs the reader of two important facts concerning her father. He is an Algerian native and he is dead. She has found his portefeuille holding Ali’s papers. “J’en avais sorti de vieux papiers, une carte de Sécurité sociale… un certificate de résidence… une carte de nationalité algérienne… une lettre de la Caisse d’assurance vieillesse qui informait le père qu’on procédait à la liquidation de ses droits, datée de deux mois avant sa mort… et la photographie.” (p. 9). Lil’s discovery of the portefeuille provides important information that provides the reader immediate access to facts about Ali. It also explains the origin of the family photograph, which leads to the haunting questions about the past.

As Lil continues in the first-person perspective in Chapter I, we learn about Huguette, her mother. Huguette’s nationality is not an issue in this opening chapter, it is not until later in the novel the reader learns that she is French. The images that Lil uses to describe her mother demonstrate the difficult life that Huguette has endured, aging beyond her years. “Je te regarde, ma mère, aujourd’hui. Tu es sauvée. Ton crâne, rapetissé sous les taches grises de tes cheveux. La peau de tes mains gonflée et vide de chair. Ta bouche prématurément édentée, figée dans une moue d’étonnement.” (p. 14). The suffering that Huguette endured is demonstrated throughout the novel, but in the opening chapter it provides pertinent information regarding Lil’s recollection of her parents’ relationship. It also contains other descriptions of Huguette’s suffering, such as: “Elle, derrière sa vitre de souffrance” (p. 11) and “La mère, elle, complice, fixant accablée la pointe de ses chaussures, les larmes sous les cils.” (p. 10-11). The tears that Lil describes here are visible in the photograph that she found in Ali’s portefeuille.

Through writing in the first person, Lil is able to describe her relationship with her family in a more intimate manner. She expresses her feelings about the present, now that Ali is dead. Lil also makes a representation of the past to demonstrate her relationship with Ali when she reflects on his decision to give his Kabylian family the money that he won in the lottery. For her, this decision is indicative of his feelings for Lil, her siblings and Huguette, his wife. She states: “Cette singulière opération s’appelait l’honneur. J’avais compris: nous, ses enfants, manquions de tout. J’en avais
déduit que pour lui nous ne comptions pas.” (p. 14). As Lil contemplates the photograph, it appears that she is preparing for a journey. “Je détache du mur la photographie et je sors la valise du placard.” (p. 11). Her destination is unclear at this point in her story. We will discover later that she is intending to make a trip to Algeria, to visit her father’s homeland.

The perspective of the novel changes in Chapter Two changes from first-person to third-person. The majority of the novel will continue in the third-person perspective, with the exception of Chapter One and the final two chapters, in which the perspective changes between first and third-person without clear transitions. As Lil writes her story in the third-person, she attempts to distance herself from her past in order to become an observer with an objective eye. The narrator becomes a “disinterested party”\(^5\) as a neutral observer of the past, whereas in the first-person perspective she is the victim of the traumatic past. The narrator begins Chapter Two by describing Lil as a child. “Oui, tôt Lil avait douté de tout.” (p. 17). As Lil becomes the narrator of her past, she starts from her earliest memories at the age of three. The narrative will continue in the third-person until Lil reaches adulthood, to the present described in Chapter One, with Lil making preparations to leave for Algeria.

In representing the past, Lil acquires at least two subject-positions through her writing. According to Dominick LaCapra, “a subject-position is at best a partial, problematic identity, and it is intricately bound up with other subject-positions any social individual occupies.” One subject-position that she occupies is that of a victim of a traumatic past. This is evidenced in Chapter One, as she questions her relationships with different family members. The second subject-position is that of an observer of the past, demonstrated by her choice to change from the first to the third-person as she examines the past.

It is important to situate the subject-positions of other primary characters in the novel to gain an understanding of how Lil regards these characters. Ali occupies at least two subject-positions as well. His primary subject-position is that of a perpetrator, as he is the one who abuses Huguette. As a result of the continual abuse, Thierry becomes a victim in his attempts to defend his mother. “[Thierry] avait rapporté un foulard très fin,

\(^5\) Representing the Holocaust, LaCapra, p. 56.
en soie, qu’il gardait en permanence autour du cou. Peut-être était-ce ce foulard qui avait irrité le père. Il avait craché à la figure de la mère ‘qu’il n’y avait pas l’ombre d’une gueule de Berbère au-dessus de morceau de tissu,’ ceci lorsque Thierry s’interposait pour défendre Huguette contre les coups d’Ali.” (p. 103). Shortly after this incident, Thierry leaves for the navy, at which time “il avait à peine de dix-sept ans.” (p. 104).

Ali’s other subject-position is that of victim, as he endures traumatic events as an Algerian immigrant living in France. Ali is a victim of the police in October 1961 as he is taken into police custody along with many other Algerians. Although Ali does not appear to have suffered any physical wounds, he witnessed the police abuse of the Algerians held in custody. The story of Ali’s immigration to France also provides evidence of his subject-position as a victim. “A treize ans, il avait suivi son père dans l’exil pour l’aider à nourrir le reste de la famille. Il avait connu les bidonvilles, les caves, la faim et la solitude, l’alcool. [Huguette] avait saisi ce regard, mélange d’orgueil et de souffrance, de rage et de dignité, et ne l’avait plus lâché.” (p. 49-50). As Ali occupies these two subject-positions, it demonstrates the complex manner in which subject-positions are different from the total identity of a person. It does not excuse Ali’s abuse as Lil portrays him as a victim, rather the reader gains a better understanding of Lil’s conflicting emotions for Ali. At times, she has warm, intimate feelings for him. For example, when Ali does not take her to the café with him, she misses him. “S’il pleuvait – son père était sorti sans elle, l’avait laissée à la maison – Lil fermait les yeux et priait sa mère de venir la bercer et l’endormir.” (p. 18). There are other moments in which her emotions change from tenderness to fear. This is evident after Ali’s return from police custody; Lil does not want to be left alone with him. “Ali s’était assis. Il n’avait rien mangé. Huguette avait dit: ‘Il faut que j’aille chercher Thierry à l’école, Lil, reste avec papa!’ Mais pour une fois, la petite avait voulu venir. Elle avait fait une colère et il avait dit, excédé: “Emmène-la.”” (p. 42). Lil’s conflicting emotions are on of the issues she attempts to work through in the healing process.

The third primary character in the novel is Huguette, Lil’s mother. Huguette occupies only one subject-position, that of victim. Huguette suffered through the many years of her marriage to Ali. But prior to this marriage, she was victim of the abuse within her immediate family. “Toute son enfance, Huguette avait entendu Jeanne lui répéter
qu’elle n’avait été qu’un ‘accident…’ et évidemment Huguette n’avait cessé de la décevoir.” (p. 33). Following Ali’s death, Huguette is able to live in peace, but this is temporary, as she is still consumed by the past.


According to LaCapra, “[c]ertain subject-positions may become especially prominent or even overwhelming, for example, those of victim or perpetrator. But a subject-position becomes a total identity only in cases of extreme ‘acting-out’ wherein one is possessed by the past and tends to repeat it compulsively as if it were fully present. Here identity is imaginary and may be related to pathological disorders.” (p. 12). Huguette has become consumed by the subject-position (victim) which has led her to live in the past as if it were still present. It is evident that she is “acting-out” the past as she returns to the suffering that she has known all her life.

As Lil is not fully consumed by her subject-position as victim, she is capable of transcending “acting-out” as an adult. LaCapra states that “the notion of subject-position is a beginning, not an end-point, in analysis and argument.” (p. 13). Having defined the subject-positions of Lil and her parents, Lil is now in the process of working-through and transference of the past.

Une fille sans histoire is an exploration of wounds that Lil has suffered in the past. These wounds are the result of living between two opposing, differing cultures. The division caused by these wounds has left Lil scarred both physically and psychologically. The physical scar of which we typically think is a mark on the skin where the tissue is torn apart as a result of a wound. The point of entry or exit is left visible on the skin. Once the wound heals, the tissue appears differently from the original surrounding skin. These physical scars remind the victim of the wound once inflicted upon him or her; at the same time it serves as an outward sign to others that the bearer of the scar has
suffered a physical wound. One physical scar, below Lil’s eye, serves as a trace to a past incident with a schoolmate, who stabbed her for being different.

Psychological scars are less easily detected. They are not visibly available for neither the victim nor the observer to witness. However, they are similar to physical scars in that they are an ugly, painful reminder of trauma that occurred in the victim’s past. For the victim, psychological scars are prevalent in memories that are usually repressed until something triggers them to rise to the surface. For the observer, psychological scars are rarely witnessed. An attempt to understand psychological scars can be made through psychoanalysis, or in Lil’s case, through writing.

For victims of trauma, memory becomes problematic. In Lil’s story, it is apparent that most of the adults in her life hope that she (and her siblings) will forget the trauma that they suffered in their childhood. While in the care of Tant’Renée, a woman who provided foster care for the Azhar children while Ali was working and Huguette was hospitalized, Lil was injured by Marc, resulting in the scar under her eye. The narrator does not represent Tant’Renée confronting the issue. The incident was dismissed as an “accident”, and Marc goes unpunished. Later, when talking to Ali, Tant’Renée is hopeful that Lil will not remember the incident. “…Lil n’a pas parlé de cette flèche qu’elle avait faîlle recevoir dans l’œil. D’ailleurs elle avait entendu Tant’Renée dire à Monsieur Ali: “Ne vous inquiétez pas, les enfants oublient vite.” (p. 66). Lil’s representation of the past event is evidence that she has not quickly forgotten the physical wound that she suffered while in the care of Tant’Renée.

Huguette also attempts to protect Lil from the traumatic events which occurred in her childhood. She is responsible for sending the children to live with Tant’Renée. Later she finds a boarding school for Lil and Thierry, providing them with a safe environment, free from Ali’s physical abuse. Lil describes the events that resulted in her departure.

Dans la salle à manger, son père empoignait une chaise et sa mère vociférait avant de finir dans une plainte lugubre et poignante. Les petites pleurnichaient, son frère sautait du lit. Dans sa chemise de nuit trempée, les mâchoires tétanisées, le crâne luisant, Lil invoquait: on doit pouvoir mourir… sans vivre une seconde de plus. S’enfuir.
The actions of Tant’Renée and Huguette are made in an attempt to protect Lil from the reality of the situation in which she lived. However, Lil’s physical and psychological scars serve as reminders to her past. The photograph that she finds in Ali’s *portefeuille* triggers her memories, which is where her journey into the past begins. As Lil occupies the subject-position as observer of the past, she is able to work through the problems of the past. LaCapra states that “[t]o work through problems requires acknowledging them. It also involves an attempt to counteract the tendency to deny, repress, or blindly repeat them, and it enables one to acquire critical perspective, allowing for a measure of control and responsible action, notably including a mode of repetition related to the renewal of life in the present.”

Working through is different than acting out in that one confronts the problems of the past in the process of working through. Huguette is not capable of working through, she is still acting out the past as if it were still fully present. She is not yet capable of recognizing the troubled past to begin working through. As Lil occupies the subject-position of victim, allowing for the process of working through the past to begin. As she writes her past, she is able to select certain troubling events that need to be confronted in order to heal the wounds these events have inflicted. Lil’s story only includes the details necessary for working through, which can be troublesome for the reader at times. However, the abusive, traumatic past is the issue at hand, therefore it is important and essential that she write it. Through the process of writing, Lil represents the past in a manner that makes the present and future more bearable. LaCapra states that “[w]orking through trauma brings out the possibility of counteracting compulsive ‘acting-out’ through a controlled, explicit, critically controlled process of repetition that significantly changes a life by making possible the selective retrieval and modified enactment of unactualized possibilities.” Lil’s story consists of selected, often troubling, memories of the past which are represented through her writing. She controls the memories as she writes them, including only those that are necessary for

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6 *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, LaCapra, p. 54
7 *Representing the Holocaust*, LaCapra, p. 174
her and the reader to understand her healing process. Huguette and Tant’Renée would have preferred if Lil kept these memories repressed, as they express hope that she will forget with time by being removed from the situation. LaCapra asserts that “[w]hat is not confronted critically does not disappear; it tends to return as the repressed.”\textsuperscript{8} The questions that haunt Lil in the beginning of the novel are exemplary of how the repressed does not disappear. The act of working through provides the victim of trauma a means to represent the past which allows for a new beginning. Lil recognizes that she is making a representation of the past as she refers to her typewriter as “la machine à inventer des histoires” at the beginning of the novel. This does not suggest that the events that she recounts in her story are not true, rather this is her personal account of the past. The story does not rely on empirical evidence to represent the events. For example, as she recounts the five days that Ali went missing, she does not inform the reader of all of the events that took place in October 1961. Her representation of the event is recalled through her own eyes, she selects the important details as they affect her as a victim of the past. The significance of this event for Lil was that her father disappeared, and upon his return, their relationship was very much changed. Lil’s representation of this event does not make it less significant for other victims; she selectively recalls it through the eyes of the three-year-old girl whose father was missing.

Lil’s writing is her method of working through. She maintains the third-person perspective until the final two chapters, which are written in both the first- and third-person. This identifies the narrator and the protagonist are one in the same. Lil has returned to the place where her father died. She describes this event: “Plus de dix ans ont passé depuis que nous avions quitté cet appartement de la cité des Canibouts et que notre père avait habité seul quelque mois avant d’en sortir sa valise pour nous rejoindre. À sa mort, nous n’avions pas rendu les clés, ni récupéré ses affaires.” (p. 133). Upon Ali’s death, the family is not ready to mourn him, nor are they prepared to work through the trauma that he inflicted. By not returning to the physical space where the trauma occurred, the family was able to keep these events temporarily repressed. One of Lil’s actions in working through is to return to the cité, perhaps to trigger memories, or to prove to herself that the trauma could have happened anywhere, and now it is over. As

\textsuperscript{8} Representing the Holocaust, LaCapra, p. 65
Lil is gaining a sense of renewal in herself; she also observes the renewal of the cite which has been repainted. She and Thierry initially cannot find the library, a place where they escaped from Ali and home, finding relief in books. As adults, Lil and Thierry are lost in their old neighborhood. Upon finding the library, Thierry is relieved by its presence. “Il a dit sa première phrase: ‘Tu as vu? C’est la bibliothèque.’ Il est soulagé.” (p. 135). Lil and Thierry explore together the old neighborhood, and later return to Thierry’s apartment. Lil is still planning her trip to Algeria, however she has missed her train. Thierry discovers the photograph that Lil is still carrying with her. In this final chapter, she summarizes her process of working through the past. She describes once again the family in the photograph. Lil does not use any scape-goat methods by blaming Ali for all of the trauma that she and her family have suffered. This is evident through her choice of portraying his two subject-positions. Lil also recognizes the family’s method of repression. As she describes the photograph, Lil writes, “La famille se tient à carreau donc. Elle se guinde, elle veut ‘paraître’. Pourquoi? Pour qu’on ne la perde pas de vue? Qu’on ne la jette pas aux oubliettes avec l’Algérien? La famille, elle veut qu’on fasse la lumière une fois pour toutes, mais pas sur ses origines… sur quoi alors? Sur qui?” (p. 140). She recognizes that the family has practiced repression from a very early time; she is no longer able to continue repressing these memories as she has questions that have haunted her from childhood. Lil also recognizes the repression in the family’s choice to bury the past with Ali. “Lui, vaincu, ne nous avait plus parlé, plus touché. Il avait enterré l’affaire de famille. Et la famille avait traité sans lui.” (p. 141-142).

As the novel closes, Thierry and Lil are studying the photograph together as she talks about her plans to go to Algeria. He notices that the photo has been smeared from Lil’s fingers constantly handling it. “Thierry a les yeux fixés sur la photo. Je lui dis: ‘Tu sais, j’irai à Tizi Ouzou… demain ou après-demain, ou l’été prochain.’ Il prend le temps de réfléchir. Puis il n’hésite plus: ‘Tu aurais pu éviter les marques de doigts.’ Et moi, comme dirait Lila: ‘Ce ne sont pas des marques de doigts… ce sont des empreintes digitales.’” (p. 142). Lil asserts that she has simply smeared the photograph, but she has made fingerprints, which helps to identify the family.

Lil is unable to maintain the two subject-positions as the end of the novel which suggests that her identity is becoming defined for her. She has selectively worked
through the traumatic past, although it is uncertain if the process has been successful. Lil has not embarked on her journey to Algeria; as the novel closes, it is unclear if she will ever make the trip. As Lil is writing her past, she suggests that the trip is important in order to completely work through the troubling memories. “Elle sait qu’elle va là-bas non pas tant pour la connaître que pour renoncer à elle, l’Algérie. C’est la dernière chose qu’il lui reste à perdre. Après, elle devrait vivre sans ça.” (p. 128). The trip to Algeria will provide Lil the opportunity to understand her father’s identity as well as her own, rendering the process of working through complete. Working through will not immediately remove the scars of the past, but it will provide a sense of renewal for the present and future. As Lil is in the stage of working through, Huguette is still consumed by the past in her continual acting out. LaCapra asserts that, “[i]n cases of extreme trauma, certain kinds of acting-out may not be entirely overcome, and working-through may itself require the recognition of loss that cannot be made good: scars that will not disappear and even wounds that will not heal.”.⁹ Due to Ali’s death, Lil will never have the opportunity to fully heal the wounds that he has inflicted upon the family. However, through her healing process, she has recognized him as both perpetrator and victim, with the understanding that while he is guilty of the trauma that he perpetrated, he was also a victim of trauma himself.

Lil portrays Ali as a silent victim, as he is never given a voice to demonstrate the traumatic events that he has endured. Lil asserts that Ali has not shared his past or heritage with his French family throughout the novel. He rarely talks about his Algerian roots, even with his wife. As Lil describes the beginning of Huguette and Ali’s relationship, she writes: “Dès leur rencontre à l’usine, au premier regard échangé, elle avait compris. De lui, de sa famille, de son pays, il avait raconté si peu.” (p. 49). Ali also maintains his silence upon his return from police custody. “Sur la chaise il y avait un pantalon et une chemise propres qui attendaient Ali. [Huguette] a voulu l’aider à se déshabiller, il a arrêté ses mains. Il a disparu au fond du grenier. […] Pendant des heures, il n’a rien dit.” (p. 39). Lil’s representation of Ali’s five days is evidence that he must have eventually recounted the events either directly or indirectly to Lil.

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⁹ Representing the Holocaust, LaCapra, p. 66
Another example of Ali’s silence occurs when he is injured at work. He has suffered a physical wound which threatened his usefulness as a manual laborer. Une année qu’il travaillait de nuit à l’usine, il s’était blessé. Sa main avait été happée par la machine. Il était rentré plus tôt, le bras en écharpe. […] Il s’était assis sans un mot. Et ils s’étaient tous penchés au-dessus de sa main. Doucement, elle avait ôté les pansements. […] Leur tête n’avait jamais été aussi proche de la sienne. […] Et parce qu’il n’avait dit rien, ils en avaient conclu qu’il n’avait jamais mal. (p. 112-113).

The family interprets his silence as an outward sign that he is not hurt physically or psychologically. Although Ali is suffering traumatically, he is reduced to silence due to his inability to express this trauma. As an adult, Lil recognizes that Ali was not silent because he was not suffering, but that he was incapable of expressing himself in a manner that his family would understand. She reflects on her father’s silence. “Trop usé par une vie de misères et d’humiliations, trop occupé à gagner leur vie, lui, qui n’avait jamais eu assez de mots français pour leur dire, qui n’avait même plus la force de gueuler. Il avait abandonné. Que pouvait-il contre leur féroce assurance d’enfants décidés à survivre envers et contre tout, et… contre lui?” (p. 111-112).

Lil understands that Ali’s inability to express himself while recognizing that he was not silent because he was not a victim. LaCapra asserts that the “use of language confronts specific difficulties and challenges in the face of limited cases that may reduce one to silence. […] Silence that is not a sign of utter defeat is, however, itself potentially ritual attitude, but in this sense it is a silence survenu intricately bound up with certain uses of language.”

This suggests that Ali’s silence is not only the result of the inability to express himself in French, but also relates to the authoritative language that has been transmitted to him in Algeria. Trauma or a troubling past may not have been expressed by Ali due to cultural and linguistic barriers.

Lil understands as an adult that she cannot keep the past silent as it haunts her through the photograph and the questions she poses at the beginning of the novel. It was easier for Lil to escape the trauma as a child, especially at school, where silence existed,

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10 Representing the Holocaust, LaCapra, p. 65
even in her history class. “Tant de fois elle avait tremblé à l’idée qu’elle put se fender en deux morceaux avides d’en découdre. La France et l’Algérie. Un temps, elle avait cru trouver refuge à l’Ecole, de l’autre côté de la cité. Là où l’Histoire, quand elle est insoutenable, n’est pas écrite dans les manuels.” (p. 123). This suggests that even for the French, silence was a method used in repressing their history with Algeria. Lil is unable to divide herself into two identities, or two pieces, as she hoped to do as a child. In order to find her identity, and the identity of the family, she must understand the heritage of both her father and her mother. It is for this reason that the trip to Algeria is necessary, to gain access to Ali’s heritage.

Although Lil is unable to completely erase the scars of the past, she has completed her process of working through the trauma that had haunted her since childhood. Through the process of writing the past, she was able to select the events that were traumatic for her. Lil took these events and represented them in a manner that will make it possible for her to begin anew in the present. Her healing process is successful in that she found her identity, as the daughter of a French woman and Algerian man. Lil discovers in the end that she does have a story, a very important one. The representation of that story has set her free from the troubling past.
Conclusion

Tassadit Imache’s representation of Lil is a troubling story of a girl who has survived the abuse of her father and the abuse of a society that was not accepting of her family during her childhood. Lil uncovers the wounds of her past without placing the blame on Ali or French society. Instead, she is able to come to terms with the past by examining the nature of the wounds and how they affect her in the present.

Lil, like other Beur children, must learn to build bridges to narrow the gap between the two cultures in which she lives. As her memories of the past are constantly changing with time and the subject-positions that she occupies, she will continually work through the past. Her story, similar to other beur novels, is testimony of the struggles she encountered. Lil’s primary goal for writing her story was to seek her identity and the identity of her family, and the identity of her family. She has successfully found that identity in the end, through her exploration of the past. She can now continue in the present having healed the wounds, making her future more bearable.


