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WRITING THE FINE LINE:
REARTICULATING FRENCH NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE DIVIDES.
A CULTURAL STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY FRENCH NARRATIVE
BY JEWISH, BEUR, AND ANTILLEAN AUTHORS

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate
School of The Ohio State University

By

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*****

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the basis that identity, individual or communal, is a narrative construct, the following study attempts to uncover the ways in which Jewish, Beur, and Antillean narrative is informing French national identity. Identity construction involves the positioning of boundaries, geographical or psychological, and engenders divisions separating human entities. The Jew, the Arab, the black, among others, including the lower classes and women, have traditionally been posited as Other in French national discourse. However, today, in a culturally plural France, Jewish, Arab, and black citizens are challenging inherited notions through their writing, which gives them a voice from the privileged position of narrative subject. Though these new subjectivities have had to speak from within the confinement of stereotypes, their use of narrative strategies succeeds in breaking through traditional discourse and, in effect, transforms it.

Through their testimony on the past, narration of the present, and projection into the future, the works I analyze, respectively Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah and Martine Dugowson’s Mina Tannenbaum, Leïla Sebbar’s Le Chinois vert d’Afrique and Azouz Begag’s Le Gone du Chaâba, and Maryse Condé’s Heremakhonon and Patrick Chamoiseau’s Texaco, are intrinsically concerned with the problematic of identity. Specifically, they engage in recovering the memory of the Shoah, integrating excluded ethnic subjects into the national space, and reconstructing the national idea toward a more
pluralist vision, as opposed to France's traditional policy of assimilation. Their unique practices of cross-cultural hybridization make manifest both the literary and social changes occurring within the French narrative and nation.

Finally, the conclusion explores how these struggles for maintaining cultural specificity within France are reflected on the national level before American economic hegemony. In essence, government officials have adopted their discursive elements in order to defend the diversity of French culture and the vibrancy of its expression against the homogenizing pressures of globalization. The active protection of national culture through government patronage, however, is treading a fine line between reactionary cultural populism and Eurocentric elitism. Ultimately, the future vitality of the French nation may depend on how rigorously the State defends the multiple elements of its culture by fully liberating the voices expressing that diversity.
To Jean Sébastien, Alexandre, and Julien
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INTRODUCTION

The changing face of the French nation has recently generated debate between those who, in one form or another, apprehend the passing of cultural paradigms, from traditional Catholicism to cafés, to Gallic features, or to the Republic's founding principles of liberté, égalité, and fraternité. The following study inquires into the contested notion of French national identity in modern-day France though the perspective of three minority voices: Jewish, Beur, and Antillean. I address not only the challenges that pluralism has posed and is posing to traditional French culture but also the mechanisms of identity construction itself since these three groups, French Jews, Beurs, and Antilleans, who have endured one form of exclusion or another, are actively in search of their identity. In the past two decades their plight has gained a wider audience as France has confronted the legacy of its difficult past, prominently colonialism and the Shoah, in part resurrected by immigration, the rise of the extreme right, and trials for crimes against humanity. The weight of national memory, therefore, and the present cultural preoccupations—among which figure not least of all the challenges before American cultural and economic hegemony and European unification—are the cardinal points along which the French national identity quest is traveling in the dawn of the twenty-first century.
Nations are inherently historico-political conglomerations, united, as the title of a compilation of articles edited by Homi Bhabha asserts, through the power of narrative. Locating the source of national imaginings in the tradition of Romanticism—"... it is from those traditions of political thought and literary language that the nation emerges as a powerful historical idea in the west. An idea whose cultural compulsion lies in the impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force"—Bhabha characterizes the nation foremost as a metaphorical construct (Nation and Narration 1). Benedict Anderson likewise notes its undefinability and analyzes nationality, or nation-ness, and nationalism as "cultural artefacts of a particular kind," that "command... profound emotional legitimacy" (Imagined Communities 4). "Imagined" because "in the minds of each [of its members] lives the image of their communion" and "community" because it is "always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship," or "fraternity," the nation. "Inherently sovereign and limited," states Anderson, transcends inconceivable numbers and spatial distances, the "fraticides" of the past, as well as existing social inequalities and instances of exploitation (6, 7, 199). As an idea, image or complex of relations, with its basis in memory, the nation is, therefore, open to interpretation in the manner of a narrative.

Conversely, national narrative, through its memorial recollection, subjective or territorial conquest, or universal aspirations, proves critical to national analyses for its articulation of identity construction, which is ultimately the mediation of supposed differences in the precarious establishment of boundaries. Bhabha states in kind:

To encounter the nation as it is written displays a temporality of culture and social consciousness more in tune with the partial, overdetermined process by which
textual meaning is produced through the articulation of difference in language; more in keeping with the problem of closure which plays enigmatically in the discourse of the sign. (Nation and Narration 2)

It is this "problem of closure," despite the "overdetermined process" in the production of meaning, that is the problematic of national identity, the focus of this study. Boundaries are integral to human relations: self/other, past/present, male/female, rich/poor, right/left, North/South, East/West, and so on. Yet such human boundaries are not impermeable nor do they enclose immutable entities. There is constant negotiation that occurs at the limits as well as within the given delimitations, which upsets any static notion of identity. The construction of national identity entails rather a constant interplay between individuals within a group and others surrounding, a process that gives rise to notions of power, influence, and persuasion, the bases of conflict or consensus. The fervor of these negotiations intensifies as do the supposed differences between the parties involved. Thus, much of human society can be understood as the building and breaking down of barriers: friendships and alliances, political and military maneuvers, and the construction of a national identity.

In the past century, as for all nations, France has been very much a player in such intense dealings. Migrations of peoples and ideas to and through France's borders have created the current situation—both fascinating and disconcerting—in which national identity has been posited as the stakes of both domestic and international policy. In particular, immigration, regional independence movements, globalization, and historiography have come to the fore of artistic, theoretical, political, and social debate. And with identity being at the core of the negotiations, the legitimacy of the center is
being questioned by the margins. In spite of an assimilationist policy, the Others living within France's national borders are claiming their right to selfhood with religious beliefs, a cultural heritage, a linguistic tradition, and a history-memory different from that of the majority of the population.

In response to the majority's feelings of being besieged on all sides by "foreigners," a misconception since these étrangers are most likely citizens, and the latter's demands for justification, France's governing class has adopted an uncertain tactic. To assuage public anxieties it is giving credence to the current obsessions while reclaiming the ideals of the Revolution as a means to social harmony—a move which finds France in a delicate balance between her founding values, les droits de l'homme, and the active preservation of her cultural identity, bordering dangerously upon exclusionist policy, protectionism and ethnocentric populism. This strategy of offering the proverbial cake and enjoining everyone to eat it may be likened to President Jacques Chirac's promise to locate "la troisième voie," between capitalism and socialism, in order to ensure France's economic future without jeopardizing the public welfare. It also lies at the root of what Julia Kristeva sees as France's paradoxical dealings with the Other. In Etrangers à nous-mêmes (1988), she writes: "Nulle part on n'est plus étranger qu'en France. . . . Et pourtant, nulle part on n'est mieux étranger qu'en France" (57, 58-59). For otherness in this assimilationist, democratic society is at once targeted by essentialist xenophobic discourses and hailed as proof of French tolerance and social equality. Meanwhile, the public imagination is free to indulge in its obsession with the Other, its conscience relieved by the supposed justness and generosity of the system.
Identity politics, as Kristeva demonstrates, can be as much an expression of the national boundaries as a reaction against them. For the Others these psychological, as much as geographical, boundaries exclude from the imagined national space, the process of self-identity implies a struggle against mystifying falsehoods thrust on them by the group. At stake in the negotiation of powers within the national narrative is none other than one’s sovereignty, for at every point of interchange lies the risk of self-effacement. One’s specificity (cultural, religious, linguistic, gendered, etc.), if not altogether obliterated, is susceptible to becoming an instrument of oppression rather than empowerment, a dangerous transfiguration occurring at both the practical and cognitive levels. In theoretical terms, it may be expressed as the othering of the Self.

Through universalizing discourses, one that is alien or different from the speaking subject is transformed into other, witness to one’s articulation in a foreign tongue and subject to another’s conceptual truths. The consequences of this cultural displacement are potentially grave. Not only does the Other endure humiliation before the pretensions of the discourse’s agent, speaking on behalf of a totality (reminiscent of “Man” or “Mankind”) in the name of the “true” or the “real,” but also, in the face of its lost or diminished subjectivity, the Other must struggle to regain its autonomy from within the less advantageous position of “containment.” From this term, borrowed from Edward Said, one may infer the Other’s imprisonment in stereotypes. Entrapped in an undifferentiated “they,” as opposed to the “we” who communicates their difference, the Other becomes an object of “representation,” its very identity a construction of the dominant ideology (*Orientalism* 40). Stripped of its humanity, the Other is formulated as a static entity, a foil for the protagonist, to be enjoyed in escapist musings (the exotic,
for instance) or to be ridiculed or feared. Nineteenth and twentieth-century French
archetypes: the Negro, the Arab, the Jew, the Anglo-Saxon, as well as women, the lower
classes or fringe linguistic groups, fall into one or more of these categories. Such binary
systems as civilized/primitive or masculine/feminine, however, are clearly reductive and
misleading.

As mediator of its identity, the national Self must reconcile the various forces it
recognizes acting upon it or else risk sliding into essentialisms or in the opposite case, in
the absence of bearings, self-negation, leading to the abdication of sovereignty. This dual
process of recognition and reconciliation is essential in order that the nation, in its
identity-building, not fall prey to extremisms and implies a delicate balance between the
acknowledgment of specificities and universal ideals. As the identity crisis of 1930s
France shows, the negotiation process between the French Self and the Other, the latter a
projection of the nation's fears, obsessions, and impulsions, is potentially volatile. The
period between the wars was a time of intense questioning, further perturbed by the social
unrest and political recriminations and allowed its freest expression through, however
creative, nihilistic artistic production. It shook the very foundations of the French nation,
culminating in the advent of Vichy, but can be viewed as a desperate search for cultural
rebirth. Thus the call for renewal, taking one back to the origins, to prehistoric man, to
folklore, and, in the sense that it was a masculine identity crisis, to woman.\textsuperscript{2} Political and
scientific discourse gave rise to a new narrative, that of the primitive, fetishized by the
surrealists and adulated by fascists. Whether the apotheosis of this crisis, the French
military defeat and death of the Third Republic, followed by the slide into extremism of
which the collaboration with Nazi Germany, falls on the side of essentialism or
abdication is debatable. Indeed, there is evidence of both. What is of particular interest
are the processes behind the elaboration of French national identity.

In Gone Primitive (1990) Marianna Torgovnick analyzes the illusive prospect of
surpassing our culturally-informed “intuitive responses” in our dealings with the Other, in
this instance the primitive. Borrowing the example of ethnography in the 1920s and 30s
where Freudian theory and especially his explanation of the human psyche in terms of
sexuality (positing the speaking subject “I” as mediator between the civilizing super-ego
and the primitive libido, or id) held particular sway, she cites the development of a
peculiarly voyeuristic discourse, demonstrated in its use of keyhole vocabulary, which
articulated “truths” about primitive societies, seen as inviolate representatives of the
human species in its origins (7). With the typically male ethnographer in the position of
“I,” the observer, the primitive was transformed into the Other, leaving it vulnerable to
ideological manipulation. Often sexualized as female, it was moreover characterized as
childlike, mystical, sexually animalistic or predatory, or, in its ethnic formulations, Arab,
black, or Jewish. The return to a primeval conception of the French Self in the period
between the two world wars, therefore, ironically coincided with a heightened sense of
French civilization before the nation’s panoply of colonial or immigrant subjects,
constructed in the national imagination as inferior. Thus, the Empire gained legitimacy.
Vichy’s program of Aryanization similarly found an ideological basis of consensus.

Such intuitive constructions, though not necessarily so manifestly extreme, are, as
Sidonie Smith and Gisela Brinker-Gabler assert in their introduction to Writing New
Identities (1997), intrinsic to the national concept. In their overview of nationalism, they
discuss the fallacies of French assimilationism, a unitarian policy with the design of
erasing ethnic difference to ensure social and cultural cohesion. While assimilation
“assumes the resolvability of difference,” they explain, “in the cultural imaginary
differences may never be fully resolvable” (9). Cultural specificity—in behavior, food,
dress, music, etc.—and not least of all physiology oppose the “foreign” to the imagined
national identity. In the same manner, Smith, Brinker-Gabler, and here Elleke Boehmer
in *Motherlands* (1992) argue, nationalism tends toward gendered conceptualizations:
“Nationalism, like patriarchy, favours singleness—one identity, one growth pattern, one
birth and blood for all” (“Stories of Women and Mothers” 7). Historically reinforced by
the existing social patterns, with the bourgeois family and its traditional hierarchy as the
norm, sociopolitical differences within the nation correspondingly placed the male
statesman at its helm. Traditionally in France, therefore, national consciousness was in
its nineteenth-century origins a male and culturally Western construct.

Nationalist discourse would further gather strength from the family metaphor for
its emphasis on natural ties, “natural” because independent of choice. “And this kind of
fatality lies close to the fatality of a ‘femininity’ and ‘motherhood’ aligned almost
exclusively with the natural world,” state Smith and Brinker-Gabler (13). While the
nation often dons a female allegory—Marianne for France—this idealized matriarch,
strong and virtuous, sets a standard for women’s roles within the nation-state that is rich
in symbolic value but nonetheless external to the public national sphere.³ Neocolonial
nationalisms, for example in Algeria or sub-Saharan Africa, the specific focus of
Boehmer’s piece, gave way to even more pronounced patriarchal regimes resulting from
“the history of intersecting patriarchies that was part of colonialism” (7). European
cultural models melded with indigenous traditions to effectively sanction exclusively male power elites. As Boehmer explains, the detested colonial regime retained its exemplary status in the neocolonial nation’s quest for legitimacy as a purified model of masculinity: “In the Manichean allegory that typified the colonial power struggle, dominant, ‘true’ power—that of the coloniser—had been characterised as rational, disciplined, assertive, masculine; while inertia, weakness, the disorderly, was represented as feminine” (7-8). Women, who had fought as equals in battles for national independence, consequently saw a systematic repression of their freedoms upon liberation in return for celebrated recognition as the “mothers of the nation.” Their idolization as the bearers of nationalist sons was generally linked iconographically, in accordance with indigenous traditions, to a respect for the earth, generous and fecund, and women’s representation as such is equally salient in postcolonial nationalist literatures.

Self-representation, likewise, has been adopted as an oppositional strategy by women and minority ethnic groups to combat the unitary perspective of traditional nationalist narrative. As a means of empowerment, writing allows authors to constitute their selfhood through the composition of the subject and, in a greater sense, imagine different communal possibilities. Boehmer also recognizes writing as an act of conquest: “To write is not only to speak for one’s place in the world. It is also to make one’s own place or narrative, to tell the story of oneself, to create an identity. It is in effect to deploy what might be called a typically nationalist strategy” (10). The cumulative effect of such different and manifest expressions has been the opening of the national narrative space, the focus here being on France, to métissage—a term used by Antillanité’s chief theorist
Edouard Glissant and translated by J. Michael Dash as “creolization,” which implies cross-cultural exchange and interdependence, as opposed to hierarchical relations maintained through universalizing discourses. Because resistance narratives are written from within the national tradition, unitary cultural models, epitomized by the French canon, undergo intense, though perhaps dissimulated, scrutiny.

The works I analyze, Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah, Martine Dugowson’s Mina Tannenbaum, Leïla Sebbar’s Le Chinois vert d’Afrique, Azouz Begag’s Le Gone du Chaâba, Maryse Condé’s Heremakhonon, and Patrick Chamoiseau’s Texaco, through the linguistic and subjective diversity they communicate, similarly demonstrate a power to transform the French national narrative, the privileged site of identity’s negotiation. Condé’s perhaps obscure literary premise, whereby “[un] écrivain n’a pas de langue maternelle,” nonetheless suggests a heterogeneity inherent to her situation as a French citoyenne from the former colony turned department of Guadeloupe, which she inscribes into her works (“Où commence et où finit la Caraïbe?” 113). In the same manner, the other authors of this study integrate their subjective specificities into their hybrid French narratives through, respectively, the reclamation of a repressed past, territorial claims on the privileged center of French culture and society, and the canonization of generally overlooked citizens to the status of “national” heroes, though nationhood, in the latter case, remains a contested notion.

As a number of authors have remarked, the Other, in his or her search for freedom from within essentialist discourses (for example, the French citizenship code, the Christian, Judaic, or Islamic traditions, or negritude), promises to transcend the alienating landscapes of traditional nation-building, an issue so relevant today in France, including
its overseas departments and territories where there has been an upsurge of separatist
movements. Indeed, only by reconciling the forces that divide it, may the contemporary
nation secure a vital national identity and a pivotal place in the world. Foremost, the
French will need to face the troubling events of the recent past, collaboration with Nazi
Germany in the extermination of millions of Jews and other undesirables and the
repression of their memory, the Algerian War and the difficult integration of the
subsequent waves of citizens from overseas, and the ongoing decimation of the overseas
departments, which are struggling with the consequences of departmentalization and their
inception into Europe.

At this juncture, it is important to inquire into the meaning of terms, and in
particular those around which turn the notion of French national identity, the subject of
this study. As pivotal points for my chapters, I have chosen the problematics of memory,
space, territorial or subjective, and nation, in its conceptualization. This list is certainly
not exhaustive, but there is a certain correlation between its elements. They could be
examined as possible lieux, in historian Pierre Nora’s sense of the word, these
crystallized spaces where living memory has grown dim, overshadowed by a lost past
turned obsession. According to Nora, with the dawn of the modern industrial age,
memory, in the sense of an oral tradition, disappeared in France. Nonetheless, this living
form of memory, still existing in the form of a “residue,” is retrievable from narratives
that have either been silenced or hidden behind symbols and myths.4

The threat of mythical history engulfing individual memories has made their
inscription, he remarks, in personal testimonies, memoirs, archives, and the like, all the
more urgent. In the increasing need to record oneself for posterity, however, he observes
an important value shift: “Le sacré s’est investi dans la trace qui en est la négation” (“Entre mémoire et histoire” xxvii). This shift has given way, he says, to a feeling of “obligation de redéfinir son identité par la revitalisation de sa propre histoire.” As a result, “le devoir de mémoire fait de chacun l’historien de soi” (xxvii, xxix). What, I will inquire, are the consequences of this semantic and psychological shift in memory’s transmission? The power to name the self, to be both the site of origin and expression rather than inscribed in a long-standing tradition, is both an awesome—sometimes unbearable—responsibility and a chance for unbounded freedom, taking one to uncharted territories that often bear no resemblance to the confined spaces of our social history.

It is also within the context of Nora’s discussion that I situate my use of the term “space,” as relative to the congealed entities that he designates as lieux. These self-contained though not impermeable regions, both geographical and psychological, are where identity politics play out, the site of extreme negotiations being at the boundaries. Gaining access to these spaces does not always imply a free interchange. There are border guards, values, beliefs, and prejudices, if not uncrossable or uncrossed chasms. These spaces may welcome and affirm the subject or reject it as undesirable. Furthermore, there is life and movement within them; they are not sterile chambers.

The spaces I will explore are those central to the narratives animating my discussion. They include living memory and mythical history, or crystallized spaces in the sense of memorials, monuments, or ghettos, and their relationship to illness; language; intellectual and social traditions; photos and cinematic frames; historic and metaphorical figures; and finally culture, in all its semantic and/or reified imaginings: as
race, ethnic group, neighborhood, nation, commodity, continent, and l'esprit. Elucidating the slippages between these terms is of utmost importance in my inquiry into what it means to be French today.

The French nation has traditionally been celebrated for its egalitarian foundations. For the 1789 Revolution brought with it a new national concept, a social contract into which free individuals could enter voluntarily. Usually differentiated from the Germanic model (typified by Volksgeist and based on ethnicity, blood ties, and heredity), the French theory of the nation is offered as a rational, voluntarist model as opposed to a romanticist, essentialist one. However, such dualisms are misleading and conceal subtle or surreptitious shifts. In Etrangers à nous-mêmes, Kristeva retraces the semantic shift from the universal “man” to the political “citizen,” from which the distinction between French and foreigner may have derived, in the founding doctrine of French democracy, La Declaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen (1789). From the initial proclamation in Article I: “Les hommes naissent et demeurent libres et égaux en droits”; to that of Article II which identifies a “political association”’s sole aim as the preservation of these “droits naturels et imprescriptibles de l’homme”; to Article III’s stipulation that “nul corps, nul individu ne peut exercer d’autorité qui n’en émane expressément [from the nation]”; and, finally, to Article VI whereby the law is incumbent upon the will of all “citoyens.” As Kristeva observes: “Loin de proclamer un égalitarisme naturel, la Déclaration inscrit d’emblée l’égalité dans la grille des institutions humaines ‘politiques’ et ‘naturelles,’ et plus précisément dans le registre de la nation. Le corps politique national doit agir pour tous” (221-22). Beyond the explicit declaration of “man”’s exclusive citizenship rights, the semantic break between citizen and universal man, the national and the non-national,
is a disturbing occurrence. Reminiscent of the racist slogan painted into urban graffiti: “La France aux Français,” it may be further likened to the extreme right’s subtle racist politics.

Similar to the nation born from the Revolution, risen to the level of a symbolic space as the privileged land of the Republic’s citizens, the “Hexagon”—adopted as an instructive tool under the colonialist Third Republic and eventually accepted into the French vernacular as a reference to the French homeland—rose like a towering megalith before those problematic non-nationals, namely the inhabitants of the overseas colonies, and continues to do so for the citizens in the overseas departments. Representing the geometric sanctity of metropolitan France’s borders, the perfection of its lines erasing the naturally occurring deviations, *l’hexagone* as a national symbol risks reifying the concept of the French nation itself. Furthermore, within it exist other reified territories: her historically defined regions, for example, but also the socioeconomic ghettos in or surrounding her urban centers. Most recently, the *banlieue* (designating the urban beltway or suburbs, where France’s ethnic and lower-class urban populations are concentrated and where the sense of community has had difficulty taking root) has crystallized as one of these spaces, transfixed by the media and government discourses onto the collective French conscience as the source of the country’s social ills. National and territorial boundaries, while enclosing a political or social entity, potentially reduce it psychologically to a realm evocative of culture or, in the latter’s reified imagining, race.

As Maxim Silverman remarks: “‘Culture,’” often connected through nationalist discourse to a spiritual, moral, or ethical principle, “slides easily, almost imperceptibly, between an essentialist and voluntarist perspective” (*Deconstructing the Nation* 21). The
slippage that occurs in commonly used metaphors ("l'âme," "la gloire," "la patrie") specifically makes culture susceptible to recuperation by racist discourses. In response to Ernest Renan's definition of the nation as "un principe spirituel," Maxim Silverman justifiably investigates the ethical problems of France's assimilationist policies where the essence of the nation, culture or l'esprit as many authors have argued, risks being essentialized, or "racialized" in Silverman's terms, in the treatment of different ethnic groups. As a result, cultural—predominantly linguistic, religious, historical—differences may be seen as incompatible with French culture.

The identity quest of the first half of the twentieth century, marked by its blatant racism, very much revolves around an essentialist, mythical vision of culture, or what Herman Lebovics calls "True France." In his book of the same name, True France: The Wars over Cultural Identity, 1900-1945 (1992), he enumerates the various "facets" of this vision, born, he says, around the turn of the century when French identity became the rallying point for the waning political Right, regretful of the passing of national traditions and the old order. Lebovics describes the discourse of True France as appealing to a lost authentic, organic identity—at its apogee in the classical age—which transcends history and is deeply rooted in idealist, empiricist, Catholic, and formalistic traditions; it celebrates both high culture and regional, rural living, and envisions society as hierarchical in which the particular shares the destiny of the greater and eternal France. Moreover, it inspired, he says, the cultural project of Vichy, which required a complete merging of the political ideology with a cultural style—a dangerous but all too possible blurring of the lines—in order to realize its ethnic cleansing program.
The Left’s centralist ideology and rejection of cosmopolitanism as well as Gaullism and more recently the politics of the extreme right may also be seen as forms of exclusionary cultural politics, in which policy and “culture,” as a crystallized, mythical space, become one. The Gaullist era and its legacy, in particular, have dimmed the collective and particular memories through the State’s practices of historical revisionism and control of the media, and the further subjection of French culture to its Ministry in 1959 with André Malraux as its presiding officer. The mythical and formidable figure of Charles de Gaulle continues to preside over the history and living memories of the Second World War, Algerian independence, and the departmentalization of the former colonies. As a result, attempts to counter Gaullist discourse have contributed enormously to the freedom causes led on a daily basis within the minds of individuals or by collective social groups. For French Jews, held up as a symbol during the Mai 68 cultural revolution (“Nous sommes tous des juifs allemands!,” in reference to student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit’s expulsion from France), many of such gains—supported however reluctantly by the Mitterrand government—include the setting aside of July 16 each year as a day of national remembrance for the rafle du Vel d’Hiv and the 1985 television documentary, Des Terroristes à la retraite, the story of the Manouchian Resistance fighters, for instance. Yet, while such rehabilitations of the past are important, it is just as essential not to lose sight, as Alain Finkielkraut warns us in Le Juif imaginaire, of there being greater, unattainable truths from which one may receive “la grâce transcendante,” in order not to fall prey to new myth-making. Indeed, human life is a continuous negotiation process.
The identity quest necessarily takes one to the boundaries, this obscure space where dichotomies meet, combine, and give way to something else. It is where, today, one may attempt to uncover the elements of a nascent French identity and wherein lies the purpose of this study: to distinguish the prominent actors in contemporary France’s culture wars, taking cover behind deeply trenched and multilayered fronts, many of which having been erected to protect the French nation from internal and external corruption. In the pages that follow, I will attempt to shed light on France’s present predicament, the major and minor players and the narratives that inform them, all the while keeping an eye on the ongoing politics of otherness. While the study of particularisms allows one to elucidate natural, or universal values and themes, an idea hearkening back to Rousseau, it is important never to lose sight of those particularisms, those historic and symbolic events, figures, battles, losses, and victories, on the national and local levels, which are constantly vying for voice and power at the site of negotiations in identity construction.

In this exploration of what it means to be French today, I inquire into not only the various Others who play into the construction of French national identity, but also the existing boundaries that are at the crux of political discussion. Foremost among them are French Jews and the memory of the Shoah, Beurs and the cultural landscape, and French Creoles and their re-elaboration of nationhood from the disadvantaged position of their citizenship status. An overview of France’s history uncovers certain discursive patterns evocative of these constructs—national memory, space, and the national concept—that have in these respective cases become sites of contention. The authors I have chosen
elucidate the particular border conflicts within their works, which are individually unique as discrete expressions of cultural specificity and far-reaching for their greater contributions to France's national narrative.

In chapter 1, I investigate two examples of French Jewish film and their challenge to traditional memorial representations of the Shoah. Claude Lanzmann's highly acclaimed documentary *Shoah* deconstructs popular symbols, or engrained memory sites, of the genocide with the explicit purpose of furthering historical inquiry. In a complementary act to Lanzmann's restitution of oral witness testimony to the historical narrative, Martine Dugowson adopts it as a technique in her fictional drama *Mina Tannenbaum* to underscore, in my view, the dire struggle of her protagonist. In particular, she illustrates the risks of the Shoah's mystification allegorically through its repetition in the lives of her film's contemporary Jewish characters. Together, these authors seem to point to the continuing destruction of European Judaism through the breach of its history-memory, which they each attempt to restore.

Chapter 2 is devoted to Beur subjectivity and its inscription into modern French narrative. Following Algerian independence, the colonial past came to occupy the French mainland through the territorial demarcation of the urban landscape separating most clearly Arab repatriates from traditional citizens. Authors Leïla Sebbar and Azouz Begag take up the difficult question of social integration in the writing of their Beur subjects, whose composite nature as French Arabs is either lived negatively, as in *Le Chinois vert d'Afrique*, or assumed, in Begag's novel, *Le Gone du Chaâba*, as a possibility for creativity. In a larger sense, these works reevaluate the national code of outward cultural
conformity and reveal its deficiencies before the cultural mixing naturally occurring and effectively transforming the national space as well as the literature of its expression.

The third chapter examines the "national" aspirations of two recent Antillean narratives with regard to their cultural imaginings. Given the problematic history of the Antilles, however, marked by slavery, migration, and economic exploitation, the new concepts of nationhood taking shape there unsurprisingly diverge from the traditional French model. In place of a homogeneous cultural project appears a thoroughly pluralist one that rejects universalizing values, with the notable exception of human egalitarianism. In Heremakhonon Maryse Condé infuses her Guadeloupean protagonist with a violent rebelliousness in order to overthrow, figuratively, Africa's absolute hold on the black imagination, reminiscent of negritude, in favor of a more Antillean blend of métissage. By reclaiming and revalorizing the historical origins and culture of Créolité, Martinican author Patrick Chamoiseau creates, through the recorded oral memories of his heroine, a literary vision of the Creole nation he had heralded in his earlier writings: Texaco.

This three-part study leads me to my conclusion where I consider the signs of French identity's creolization. Within my discussion of pluralism's challenges to the traditional imaginings of the French nation, I specifically explore how the threat of American cultural hegemony has placed France in a disadvantaged situation, analogous to that of the three ethnic groups analyzed here, and uncover important discursive slippages. Ranging from the reactionary cultural conservatism of the extreme right to lofty, elitist Eurocentrism, such discourses immediately make apparent the political interests behind identity construction. Most intriguing, perhaps, has been the adoption of
Créolité’s precepts in the rhetoric of French government representatives. The future will bear out, however, whether or not the government’s defense of the nation’s cultural diversity and vibrant cultural expression translates into an increased voice for the members of that diversity.
The following chapter explores the breach in French national history that has come to be remembered as the Shoah, the destruction of European Jewry. Executed by Nazi henchmen with the international assistance of knowing or unknowing, coerced or uncoerced accomplices, the genocide is now an accusatory memory for its implication of past responsibility. France’s historical role in the killings has been gradually uncovered over the past decades. However, the ongoing restoration of this memory to France’s national consciousness has been largely the work of unofficial historiographers, including activist lawyers, writers, and filmmakers. After a brief overview of the difficulties the Shoah has posed to French historical and artistic representation, I specifically analyze the manner in which two cinematic works, Claude Lanzmann’s Shoah (1985) and Martine Dugowson’s Mina Tannenbaum (1993), exploit the audiovisual medium to elicit remembrance and promote historical integrity. In effect, the visual dimension of these filmic narratives interacts with memory’s discourse in order to gauge its faithfulness to historical detail.
More than fifty years after the Allied discovery of the Nazi death camps, the French are still coming to terms with their country's historical role in the seizure, arrest, incarceration, and transport of tens of thousands of Jews from France across their eastern border. For now, after more than fifty years of official proclamations of ignorance, the missing component in French national memory of that period has been restored. The genocide. Vichy officials knowingly sent the Jews, targeted by Germany's fascist regime for extermination, to their certain deaths. The admission of this detail in legal writ and official discourse over the past decade indeed follows a long history of denial and evasion.

While determined survivors and their advocates struggled to break through the French state's silence, others strove to inform the national narrative, film being a medium of choice for its power to captivate. Perhaps ironically, art would come to play an important historical role in instructing the French public of its past. But as Shoshana Felman argues, "the truth does not kill the possibility of art—on the contrary, it requires it for its transmission, for its realization in our consciousness as witnesses" ("The Return of the Voice" 206). However, even in the most laudable works, the memory of the Shoah as it pertained to the French has largely remained on the level of allegory and allusion. Memory is necessarily linked to signs and, therefore, susceptible to metaphor. Despite its power, the latter risks catering to denial by offering a means of escape. Indeed, at the turn of the
century, the full history of the genocide has not yet been integrated into French popular memory. Though it is starting to be recognized in the courts and acknowledged officially, the public mind of which art is moreover a measure is still reluctant to admit it.

The question of whether the extermination of European Jewry belongs more to Jewish history or to the history of European nation-states is meaningful for the discussion it provokes. It may waken some to the realization that the Shoah grew out of Europe’s past and continues to influence European history. Reflections on the Shoah tend to focus on the Jewish victims, perhaps due to their sheer number, and the horrific circumstances of their end in the death camps. However, just as the question “whose history” elicits competing claims of ownership, viewing the Shoah solely as the defining event for Israel and the Jewish diaspora or as the extreme manifestation of Hitler’s Aryanization program, as though it occurred in a Nazi vacuum, severs the past from the present and perpetuates the myth of a “Jewish problem.” The erecting of these mythical barriers may render the Shoah more accessible in that they inscribe it with purpose and furnish it with a beginning and an end. Yet they do no justice to all of the existing memories of that era, many still needing to be reconciled with the present. Nor do they satisfy the requirement of historiography, which is to investigate the past with rigorous scientific inquiry.

In its formulation, the question further proclaims the failure of the Nazi project, ultimately termed the Final Solution, which in the name of Aryan superiority was to eliminate the Jews and all sign of them or their disappearance. In its formulation and substance, therefore, the question does not point to the triumph of Nazism but rather to its material and ideological defeat. Not only did signs survive the destruction of the death camps, but also witnesses and therefore the potential for history and living memory. Herein
lies the challenge the Shoah continues to pose to the descendants of that time. Recording and remembering it—without entombing it in locked vaults or worshipping it as the Holocaust, Auschwitz, the Six Million, “ces quelques vocables majestueux . . . qui, en prétendant tout résumer, conduisent à l’amnésie par la célébration”—requires, as French intellectual Alain Finkielkraut charges, tapping into that potential (L’Avenir d’une négation 94). In order for the Nazi dream to truly remain dead, history and memory must combine in a regenerative process. They are complementary resources in the struggle against denial and myth, which at the very least cloud over facts and induce forgetfulness or fantasy and at the most lead to social injustice or death.

In his introductory essay to Les Lieux de mémoire (1992), Pierre Nora argues that history and memory, though once intimately related in oral tradition, have become estranged in the extremely rationalized and mediatized world of the present. He describes our age as the turning point. “où la conscience de la rupture avec le passé se confond avec le sentiment d’une mémoire déchirée” (“Entre mémoire et histoire” xvii). Our current obsession with history, he goes on to say, stems from this break, which has given rise to timeless and inviolable idols—heroes, origins, myths—or what he calls lieux de mémoire. These may be examined as crystallized spaces, so imbued with the symbolic that living memory (“milieux de mémoire”) dare not come forth. This living memory must be searched out, elicited from often reluctant storytellers or obscure narratives, in order that the here and now, in their relation to the past and elsewhere, find expression—in order that living memory, so crucial to self-identity, will not cease to exist as Nora has suggested.

Recovering and sustaining living memory’s place alongside the history of the Shoah have likewise become a priority for some, whether individuals, institutions, or nations,
foremost Israel. Many have encountered active resistance to their efforts as have historians: unwilling or hostile witnesses, inaccessible archives, censorship, slander, relativist currents, negationism. Persuasion, legal action, secrecy or rebellion has proven most effective against these. Possibly the greatest hindrances to the work of memory conservationists, however, have been unbridgeable gaps in witness testimony, a deficient medium, and a sparse following. For the first and last, history has at times given memory a boost, allowing for connections between the present and the past and favoring remembrance. Nonetheless, the magnitude of the Shoah, which in Hebrew signifies destruction or annihilation, is so foreign to people's concept of humanity that its memory is fragmentary at best. To correct its failings, history has been of further use to memory as a critical check or source for corroboration. But while history can answer the empirical questions on the organization of the genocide and the apparatus that made it possible, only memory, and more specifically living memory, can communicate this reality on a human level and make it come alive. Here, however, arises the problem of the medium. For how may or should death, especially to this degree, be represented to the living?

Just as its unprecedented proportions and moral implications problematize the Shoah's history, the representation of its memory has proven difficult. The Shoah, according to Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, sociologist and author of Frames of Remembrance (1994), has largely humbled historians and scholars in general, who have shown unusual deference to philosophers, theologians, and artists in their approaches to it: "For them [scholars] to admit that, ultimately, understanding is not possible, is to contradict the fundamental rules of scientific inquiry" (30-31). Similarly, the law has struggled, not always satisfactorily, to match the crime and assign responsibility while giving a fair hearing
to the victims. In *La Mémoire vaine* (1989) Finkielkraut exposes what he saw as the failings of the first trial for crimes against humanity in France (the 1987 trial of Klaus Barbie), where there was a disturbing blurring of the lines between the genocide of Jews, the torture and assassination of Resistance members, and the horrors of colonialism, embodied in the counsel for the defense. The specificity of the genocide—where a people was pinpointed for annihilation—was obscured whereas, Finkielkraut argues, all analogy is impossible.

Moreover, survivors have repeatedly communicated the incapacity of language to express what they lived through, and attempts at documenting or dramatizing their experience have disappointed many, left them unmoved or, worse, feeling newly victimized. There is the ever-present risk that shock and entertainment values displace the solemnity of the subject matter and further strip the Jews of their humanity. The disparity between self- and group identity, related to the question “whose history,” leads to additional conflict, not only in Jewish circles but for Europe and the West as a whole. For, it is important to remember, European Jews were not the sole witnesses to the genocide. Nor are their children the sole recipients of that memory. As a result, not least of all because of its politically incendiary nature, the memory of the Shoah remains heavily disputed and susceptible to distortion. The inherent tensions between the past and present, trauma and cognition, subject and object complicate its memory for those who directly experienced the events as well as those who inherit the legacy.

More than fifty years later and with fewer and fewer witnesses remaining, France, which officially collaborated with Nazi Germany during the war, is still struggling to reconcile this history with its collective memory. Following the state-led moratorium on the commemoration of the Occupation period in favor of the Resistance, Mai 68—that
watershed moment—marked the turning point where the past surged through to the present and into the public arena. Such protest slogans as “CRS = SS!” or “Nous sommes tous des juifs allemands!” revived the painful memory of the collaboration and the nation’s disgrace in their aim to shake the collective conscience and the Gaullist regime’s complacency. In this they succeeded. However, in no way was the nation prepared to face fully its responsibility for this past. The 1970s, 80s, and 90s were decades of cautious reevaluation, with periodic bouts of avoidance, denial, negationism, and anti-Semitic hostility, but also investigation and rehabilitation. Determined historians, lawyers, scientists, artists, and civilians persevered in their excavation work despite hedging on the part of the government and judicial system and slanderous attacks against their personal and professional integrity. History was recorded without the aid of the national archives, criminals were pursued though only brought to trial after years of obstruction, and narratives were produced with the tacit or official approval of censors.

Years of cover-up had not put an end to questions but only prolonged the unearthing process. In the 1990s the French continued to be witness to a number of troubling revelations, from President François Mitterrand’s dubious position within the Vichy administration and postwar ties to René Bousquet to the complicity of national museums and banks in the illegal confiscation of Jewish-owned artworks and graft respectively. In July 1995, on the anniversary of the Vel d’Hiv roundup—set aside two years earlier under Mitterrand’s presidency as a national day commemorating “racist and anti-Semitic persecutions committed under the authority of the French State (1940-1944)”—France’s president-elect, Jacques Chirac, became the first State official to publicly acknowledge and apologize for France’s role in the deportation of Jews to German death camps (cited by 27
Moreover, the guilty verdict in the Maurice Papon trial three years later, following Bousquet's untimely assassination (bringing an end to court proceedings against Vichy's former chief of police) and Paul Touvier's conviction (twenty-four years after his case was reopened), pushed the weight of responsibility down the ladder onto the shoulders of a paper-pushing bureaucrat who was simply "following orders." The court's controversial decision publicly declared the unconscionable an affair of conscience.

As is evident in these fresh accusations, the memory of the Shoah still holds relevance for the French today. Its bearing is perceptible in the law, political policy, public discourse and ceremony, and the arts, making its memory central to France's national identity. Yet it may be argued that its treatment and reception remain largely oblique. The country's politicians are traditionally reticent to reopen investigations of the past, sometimes their past, and connections between the responsible French agents and the genocide have only recently been delineated in the courts. It may be argued that the memory of the Shoah has largely depended on artistic production, perhaps beginning with Alain Resnais' renowned documentary *Nuit et brouillard* (1955). Since then, French cinema has produced a great number of films on the Occupation period. Yet, as Naomi Greene argues in her article "La Vie en rose," these have communicated more about the time of their production than of the Occupation itself, moving from the Resistance myth represented in the films of the 1960s to the "ideological void" of the films of the 70s and 80s (including François Truffaut's celebrated *Le Dernier Métro*, 1981), indicating, "above all, a compelling need to deny, repress, the evidence of history" (296). Claude Berri's 1997 film, *Lucie Aubrac*, despite its historical sources (primarily Lucie Aubrac's memoirs, *Ils partiront dans l'ivresse* 1984), may be seen as a continuation of this trend. Whereas Aubrac intimates
her suspicions of the genocide in her memoirs, which delineate her and her husband’s roles in the interior Resistance. Berri expressly portrays the ignorance of the film’s characters, including Lucie herself.

Greene suggests that filmmakers may have left “history and its anguish to documentary filmmakers”; “films set in the Occupation focused, instead, on private dramas, on internal worlds” (291). However, even celebrated documentaries such as Nuit et brouillard have generated some criticism with regard to their political intent. As Resnais shares in a 1985 interview with Charles Krantz for Film History: “The whole point was Algeria” (cited by Williams 369). Similarly, the soixante-huitard Marcel Ophuls’ controversial, though astoundingly revealing—for its revelations on anti-Semitic and fascist ideology in Vichy-era France—Le Chagrin et la pitié (1971) has been attacked for its partisan politics. Clearly, no one medium or genre has shown, in Finkielkraut’s terms, total faithfulness to the past. Imperfect as it is, however, human narrative is our only means of self-expression. Moreover, its limitations, as much as its insights, are profoundly telling.

As a leitmotiv, the Shoah’s memory has risked being lost in generalizations or allusions where the implicit victims, predominantly Jews, may be overshadowed by more pressing concerns, often political. Depending on the context, their emblematic death, representing a repressed history, serves as moral guidance in reference to a vaguely defined past or as a source for creative inspiration. These functions often combine, linking the past to the present and their projection into the future, mirroring the processes of identity construction. Yet, discursively constructed on an ambiguous history and anonymous graves, this identity sounds hollow. Indeed, only through the restoration of the genocide’s historical specificity may its memory lend itself to collective reflection on national responsibility to
the past and the future, where republican values are weighed against the vestiges of national shame. And only then will individuals who proceed to build new narratives on this death, either desecrating it further or honoring it through remembrance, feel the full weight of this past.

The genocide and its memory impelled the creation of the two films under consideration here: Claude Lanzmann’s highly acclaimed *Shoah* (1985) and Martine Dugowson’s lesser-known *Mina Tannenbaum* (1993). In their respective productions, Lanzmann and Dugowson take up the challenge of the Shoah, inquiring into its legacy so that its living memory is not buried with the dead. As their titles indicate the two films differ in scope: one addresses the event of the genocide and the other the contemporary French Jew, for whom assimilation has meant death of another kind. They also grow from distinct cinematic traditions, *Shoah* being a documentary and *Mina Tannenbaum* a fiction. Yet for all their disparities, the two grow from similar historical preoccupations, drawing on witness testimony and the memories of a specific generation. Adopting death as their starting point and then regressing in time to finally come back full circle to their initial point of departure, these artists seemingly accept the threat of Judaism’s total annihilation—both physical and historical—as ongoing and real.

In response, Lanzmann and Dugowson strive to uncover the details of their narrative subjects by retracing every step leading toward the deaths they portray. The journey, topographical in Lanzmann’s film and psychological in Dugowson’s, ultimately culminates in the death chamber itself. The attention to minutiae in these works in no way detracts from their primary focus or their narrative power. In other words, the forest does not get lost for the trees. On the contrary, by stimulating the audience’s imaginary and analytical
frameworks the films entice the observer to participate in the reconstructive process.

However, whether these films succeed in mending the breach in France’s history with respect to the Shoah and the Jews is uncertain. Lanzmann’s charting of the genocide’s legendary landscapes of Poland, while desacralizing them, nonetheless fixes the public’s memory on them. And the narrative creativity of Dugowson’s film possibly asks too much of its audience and impedes understanding. Intrinsic to their weaknesses are the problematic ellipses of narrative and the elusiveness of metaphor.
Lanzmann prefers to call *Shoah* a "fiction du réel," in which the film’s "characters" (victims, perpetrators, and bystanders), all witnesses to the original events, perform the past—reiterate its discourses, reenact its gestures, and emote its drama—against the backdrop of familiar scenery and props ("Le lieu et la parole" 21). Lanzmann invites Simon Srebnik, a survivor of the Chelmno camp, to travel down the Narew River singing the songs he would sing for his German captors. He accompanies Motke Zaïdl and Itzhak Dugin to a forest in Israel, transporting them back in time and space to the site of the mass graves they cleared in Sobibor. After locating the former engineer, Henrik Gawkowski, who drove the death trains into Treblinka, Lanzmann has him retrace the tracks at the controls of a locomotive obtained through the permission of the Polish transportation authority. And he urges Abraham Bomba, who cut the women’s hair inside Treblinka’s gas chamber, to repeat this scene in a rented Tel Aviv barbershop. Such provocative techniques as the latter, many have noted, go beyond cinema vérité. They force the action, nonetheless succeeding in uncovering traces of the past, its "repetitions and resistances," in the present, contributing, Linda Williams argues, to "paradoxically new historicizations" ("Mirrors Without Memories" 15).

The full force of the performances in the film, buoyed by the director’s improvisation, incisive questions, and intelligent montage, stems from its extemporaneity.
and the spontaneous resurgence of history into the present, a realization effected through memory. "'Il a les vingt wagons derrière lui?," Lanzmann has the interpreter ask Gawkowski, the Polish locomotive driver. "'Non, il les a devant soi.' . . . "Il les pousse?" 'Oui'": and the slow approach of the locomotive, filmed from the front, its engine panting and wheels screeching as it comes to a stop in a final exhalation of steam, offers Shoah's spectators the perspective of the bewildered passengers who were "pushed" into the camp of Treblinka. The memory of the witness fills the screen in order that the event may be witnessed anew. However, the observer's memory is also at work, connecting voices to images as well as searching for past knowledge or memory with which to reconcile this new information. In effect, part of Shoah's novelty as a documentary is its consideration of its extranarrative. Memory interacts with history from within and without, cognitively linking events that occur on the screen with their historical precedent, and, in the end, creating a living document that extends beyond Shoah's cinematic frames.

Where there is a perceived hesitation, an opportunity to explore, or the need for clarification, Lanzmann intervenes to induce remembrance. He probes with further questioning or presents his interlocutors with open signs—an intricately carved wooden shutter, a train locomotive, a pair of scissors, a diary—then leaves them to provide the meaning. Depending on their willingness or awareness, the film's participants either furnish an answer, true or not, proclaim ignorance, resist memory, or query further. However, while the audience retains its anonymity, the film's characters do not. They too may be read as open signs and are crucial to the discovery process. Their memory, acting as a conduit, conveys in their responses decipherable traces of the past: its events and ideologies, its lies and exaggerations, its emotions and inhibitions. The film's congruity is derived from the
association of their varied and isolated responses, which as an ensemble evoke a description. Indeed, without its characters, there would be no Shoah, for history without a witness and deprived of its living memory is dead and irretrievable in Lanzmann’s view. The past is past. Yet its living memory, when externalized, produces signs that exist and invite historical interpretation.

Shoah demands, therefore, the combined efforts of Lanzmann, his film’s characters, and the audience, who is asked to connect the narrative threads the director has woven into his nine-and-a-half hour montage. Lanzmann provides his audience with telling details, but does not give them “the alibi of a theoretical knowledge which would absorb the event as a representation,” as Jill Robbins notes. “The film’s way of ‘letting us know’ is to render us responsible . . . to and for the writing of the Holocaust” (“The Writing of the Holocaust” 256). From the start, through Lanzmann’s first-person narrative, the film enters into a dialogue with its spectators, eliciting their interest and participation in the act of remembrance:

L’action commence de nos jours à Chelmno sur Ner, Pologne. . . . Simon Srebnik, survivant de la dernière période, était alors un enfant de treize ans et demi. . . . Les SS l’enrôlèrent dans un des commandos de ‘Juifs du travail’ . . . . C’est en Israël que je l’ai découvert. J’ai convaincu l’enfant chanteur de revenir avec moi à Chelmno. Moreover, by reviving its living memory, brought into the present through the sight and words of Srebnik, Lanzmann succeeds in bringing Chelmno out of its “statistical anonymity”—“à 80 kilomètres au nord-ouest de Lodz . . . le site de la première extermination de Juifs par le gaz . . . . 400 000 Juifs furent assassinés . . . décembre 1941-printemps 1943; juin 1944-janvier 1945. . . . les camions à gaz”—which, by its
impersonality and flatness, creates distance between history and its readers and allows them no access (Robbins 249). As the film progresses, witness testimony gives volume and weight to such facts, and watching becomes a process of knowing through remembering and reorganizing the film's elements into a moving picture.

Yet filming in the present when traces of the past have either grown faint or been erased presents another challenge to memory and knowledge. “Oui, c'est le lieu,” remembers Srebnik upon entering a grassy clearing in a forest near the village of Chelmno where the corpses of four hundred thousand gassed Jews were burned. “On ne peut pas raconter ça. Personne ne peut se représenter ce qui s'est passé ici. Impossible. Et personne ne peut comprendre cela. Et moi-même, aujourd'hui,” he goes on to say. However, as many critics have noted, it is this nothingness seen in the presence of a witness that most profoundly communicates the annihilation of four hundred thousand lives. He picks up a handful of earth and lets it sift through his fingers. “Nous les vidions [bags full of ashes] dans la Ner, ça partait avec l'eau.” Suddenly this pastoral scene is peopled with ghosts, and the shimmering waters of the Narew River reflect a deathly silence. When Srebnik speaks in the opening scenes, it is not immediately clear to whom he is responding. The question is not audible. Yet, his response—“Oui, c'est le lieu”—implies a question and answers the inquiring look of the observer who at first only sees a grassy field.

To the uninitiated many of the sites revisited in Shoah would mean nothing without their designation. Speech gives presence to history when the landscapes cannot speak for themselves. Gestures work in the same way. When Gawkowski, the Polish locomotive driver, draws his finger across his throat, the name of the station he has just pulled into, “Treblinka,” is potentially infused with meaning. Survivor Abraham Bomba’s subtitled
voice-over: “Il y avait un signe, un petit signe, à la gare de Treblinka,” further points to the
gesture’s significance, as opposed to the pancarte’s, in Lanzmann’s translation of the
English “sign.” Some may recognize in Gawkowski’s gesture, combined with his steady
gaze on the (imaginary) cars behind him, the sign of death. At the very least it raises inquiry
in the spectator’s mind, and its reappearance later in the film reactivates its memory and
confirms its importance as a memorial marker.⁹

Likewise, Lanzmann queries its meaning. Richard Glazar, a survivor of Treblinka,
is able to duplicate the gesture once made to him by peasants along the tracks, but expresses
his and other travelers’ inability to understand it.¹⁰ The Polish peasants Lanzmann
interviews, most likely those of Glazar’s memory, furnish its meaning: “que la mort les
attend.” It is an ominous sign made to those—the foreign Jews, who, contrary to Polish
Jews, “did not know,” or did not want to know—inquiring as to their fate. Lanzmann
himself repeats the gesture, drawing laughter from one of the Poles. The answers Lanzmann
receives poignantly illustrate the problems of transmission between the makers and receivers
of signs and their relationship to memory. They, moreover, convey a dispute over different
senses of place and history.

For more knowledgeable observers town markers may actualize their understanding
of history by assigning it a place, as was the case for Lanzmann upon his arrival in
Treblinka. Before making the film, Lanzmann did not necessarily want to go to Poland, “un
non-lieu de la mémoire,” he thought. However, he goes on to say: “... l’acte même de la
nomination, a été un choc inouï... je suis passé de mon savoir théorique, du légendaire qui
pouvait exister dans mon propre imaginaire, à leur confrontation avec le réel” (“Le lieu et la
parole” 21). Similarly, in Shoah he challenges popular myths and desacralizes the genocide
by revisiting its *lieux de mémoire* and liberating its living memory. Immediately, his choice of Chelmno, a lesser-known memory site, rather than Auschwitz for the opening sequences effects a sort of *dépaysement* for its visible void. One sees nothing one would expect. When Auschwitz first appears on the screen, it is the city of Auschwitz, its townspeople remembering and accompanying Lanzmann’s film crew through its Jewish past. Only after this guided tour does the film cut to the former death camp, its well-known entrance fixed in a slow approach over the tracks. This time lapse between name and image gives precedence to the voyage, mental and topographical, and is surely a conscious attempt on the director’s part to inform viewers’ prior knowledge. Only by studying minutiae, the film seems to be saying, may one reconstruct the overall picture.

In its exploration of the genocide, *Shoah* uncovers minute traces that might otherwise be overlooked, expanding the memorial space to unfamiliar, unknown, hidden or invisible sites: former shtetls now inhabited by Poles, abandoned Jewish cemeteries, synagogues-turned-warehouses, a barren lot in Warsaw where only a few remaining street names mark the location of the Jewish ghetto, traincars moving along tracks and pulling into station, a village church that held captured Jews. In addition to Auschwitz and Chelmno, Lanzmann films on the former site of the Treblinka camp a field of towering megaliths, chiseled with the names of towns, and the peaceful countrysides where once existed the camps of Sobibor and Belzec. His voyage moreover leads to the industrial Ruhr valley, the cityscapes of Berlin, Munich, Tel Aviv, New York, and Washington, and the quiet tree-lined neighborhoods of former Nazi camp officials as well as that of Raul Hilberg, world renowned historian of the Shoah, in Vermont. The visuals of the film tell a story in themselves, retracing not only the steps that led up to the genocide but also its afterword.
The audience may read in the Polish landscapes signs of a mythical Jewish past, the lost culture of Eastern European Jewry symbolized by the shtetl. More obvious is its passing, seen in the dispossession of its localities and the disappearance of its inhabitants, which is precisely the tale Shoah claims to recount—how the Jews’ effacement came to pass. The ideology that made the genocide possible is audible in the anti-Semitic discourse of the Polish peasants and townspeople and their displacement of guilt on the Jews as well as the gross disregard for the Jews’ humanity in the German witnesses’ speech. The discovery of Nazi officials living in liberty and relative comfort further underscores the implied insignificance of the Jews’ suffering and death. In stark contrast to the fading physical signs of the Shoah’s history stands the continuing economic might of Germany’s prewar industries (including Sauer, the company the Nazis contracted for the construction of the gas vans), countered, it must be said, by the formidable presence of Raul Hilberg. The stoic facades of the White House, the Capitol building, and Washington’s monuments, captured in traveling shots during Jan Karski’s testimony on Jewish leaders’ failed attempts at enlisting foreign aid, point to the paralysis and indifference of the Allied powers before reports of the genocide.

In this way Lanzmann introduces the film’s audience to the core subject of Shoah, “l’oeil du cyclone,” in his words, which is the annihilation of European Jewry: the squalor and starvation in the ghettos, the never ending transports, the methodical extermination and incineration of thousands of people within hours of their arrival in the camps, the screams, the struggle for air, and finally, all that remains afterward, the silence. Many have praised the film for its success in breaking that silence and reviving the past in order for it to be witnessed again. This quality is especially valued given the Nazis’ ambition to create an
"event without a witness." What becomes apparent, therefore, in witnessing Shoah is the past’s immediacy for the Poles and their continuing uneasiness as complicitous witnesses to the killings. From the purely mechanical reflexes of Abraham Bomba, filmed cutting hair in a Tel Aviv barber shop as he used to do in Treblinka’s gas chamber, one detects the dehumanizing effects of the death camps’ 24-hour operations. His recollection is devoid of emotion ("... imaginez travailler jour et nuit parmi les morts, les cadavres, vos sentiments disparaissaient, vous étiez mort au sentiment, mort à tout.") until, at Lanzmann’s prompting, he breaks down at the memory of the appearance of a fellow barber’s wife and sister.

Lanzmann likewise captures the false witness of Nazi officials interviewed for the record: "Vous n’avez pas de souvenir de ce temps-là?" Lanzmann asks Dr. Franz Grassier, former Nazi commissioner of the Warsaw Ghetto. "Très peu," Dr. Grassier replies. "Dr. Grassier, voici le journal de Czerniakow [Adam Czerniakow, president of the ghetto’s Jewish council]. Il y parle de vous." "Ah, c’est imprimé? Ça existe?" And Czerniakow’s words stand in accusation of memory’s, and therefore history’s, negation.

By contrast, the scene of death, the unspoken center of the narrative, is, contends Lanzmann, "intransmissible" and may only be conveyed through the imagination: a diagram, the filmed images of the actual sites, a model of a gas chamber filled with miniature corpses, which are powerful documents when inscribed by the memories of witnesses. "La fiction est la transgression la plus grave dans une histoire pareille" for its attempt to represent the unrepresentable, he argues. For this reason he took exception to the American miniseries Holocaust (shown on French television in 1979) and Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List (1993). In regard to the former, he says: "Ce sont des images idéalistes qui permettent toutes les identifications consonnantes. Alors que Shoah est tout
sauf consonnant” (“Le lieu et la parole” 19). Instead of fictional reenactments, therefore, the spectator’s conscience is inscribed with the tearful accounts of Jewish witnesses in their acts of remembering the loss of their compatriots or loved ones.

As Lanzmann explains, his personal philosophy and ethics presupposed the intellectual and emotional engagement of the audience in the film’s reconstruction of the past. He explicitly refused using photographs, archival film footage, and newsreels, preferring instead a question-answer format set in the present. “Ce sont juste des images [sans imagination] . . . . ça ne dit rien” (20). Symbols impede understanding, he insists. Their endless repetition dulls memory and diverts the mind’s eye from the greater reality that bore them. Their overexposure and susceptibility to manipulation drain them of their power and truth-value, and, consequently, they emit none of the force of the history they represent. Therefore, there are no traditional images of the Shoah—no people wearing yellow stars, no arms raised in allegiance to the Führer, no emaciated bodies. These symbols might be conjured up through the audience’s imaginary, but full comprehension of the film’s narrative requires active listening and viewing in order to piece together a living picture from many disparate parts.12 For the same reasons, Lanzmann rejected anonymous voice-overs. “Il faut que la construction du film détermine à elle-seule sa propre intelligibilité” (20).

Despite his reservations on the use of historical images, however, Lanzmann nonetheless espouses the values of our visual culture by equating seeing with knowledge:

Il faut savoir et voir, et il faut voir et savoir. Indissolublement. Si vous allez à Auschwitz sans rien savoir sur Auschwitz et l’histoire de ce camp, vous ne voyez
rien, vous ne comprenez rien. De même, si vous savez sans y avoir été, vous ne comprenez pas non plus. Il fallait donc une conjonction des deux. (18)

When asked by Marc Chevrie and Hervé Le Roux of Cahiers du Cinéma whether he had taken into consideration his public’s degree of knowledge as their basis for understanding, Lanzmann responds:

C’était une vraie question et qui se posait d’autant plus que j’avais refusé le commentaire... Qu’est-ce que le public sait? Qu’est-ce qu’il ne sait pas? Jusqu’où peut-on garder le mystère? Finalement, je me suis dit que je n’avais pas à tout dire, que les gens devaient se poser des questions. Le film est fait aussi pour que les gens continuent à travailler. Pendant le déroulement de la projection, mais aussi après. (23)

In Lanzmann’s remarks one may detect a problematic ambiguity, however. While he foresaw Shoah’s potential for generating knowledge and memory during its conception, he dismisses total responsibility to the historical record, moreover leaning on artistic license to legitimate his narrative choices. And despite his condemnation of historical imagery, he does not question his use of symbolism in the film. Shoah is not a documentary, nor were aesthetics among his foremost concerns in its production, he insists (“Seminar” 96, 97). “To decide is to kill... [If] one asks... ‘What is art,’ I would answer... that art for me is precisely to examine the possible and not to make hasty decisions” (82, 83). Drawing on Leibniz’s philosophy (specifically his concept of possibility and compossibility) during an interview delivered before an audience at Yale University, Lanzmann appears to absolve
himself of his innate biases and creative powers as filmmaker. He, Lanzmann contends, “examined all the possibilities,” the film somehow supernaturally dictating its own inner coherence (83).

Further, despite the wealth of his published interviews, Lanzmann does not qualify the influence of his cultural sensibilities—being both Jewish and French—in the film’s production. This express withdrawal of self, certainly meant to maintain the historical integrity of the film, nonetheless raises doubts particularly in view of the absence of French survivors among Shoah’s cast of characters and of France’s memorial sites. Through the moving testimonies Lanzmann elicits, the overwhelming details, delivered both orally and visually, of the Nazi era reemerge, inscribing their pathos in the spectator’s conscience. Yet these details do not (nor could they) give a complete narrative of the history of the genocide. More than witnessing, therefore, the audience must exercise judgment and courageous honesty in the film’s interpretation. It must not only make sense of the sometimes conflicting histories these memories claim to represent, but also morally grapple with what the director chooses to leave silent. This is particularly true for Shoah’s French audience.

Strikingly, there are no French witnesses in the film. Further, by limiting his inquiry to Germany, Poland, Israel, Greece, and the United States, Lanzmann perhaps unwittingly reinforces spatial boundaries that have psychologically relieved the French of the collective guilt felt most painfully by their eastern neighbors. Consequently, the two isolated references to French Jews—Czeslaw Borowi, the Polish peasant from Treblinka, counts them among the transports to the camp and Filip Müller recalls a French prisoner at Auschwitz who was shot for being too exhausted to continue with his work—stand out
prominently. Similarly, Raul Hilberg's iteration of SS Höfle's reply to Jewish council president Czerniakow's question as to where the Warsaw Ghetto's Jews would be sent: "à l'Est," echoes in French collective memory as the unspecified destination for their Jewish deportees. Shoah undeniably combats negationism. Yet the factual history making denial of French collaboration untenable (e.g., among all those trains "sent East" numbered more than eighty French transports containing approximately 76,000 French Jews, of whom only 2,600 would return) is perhaps regrettably absent.

All that Shoah recounts—the roundups and arrests, the Jews' internment in unsanitary and disease-ridden conditions, the torture tactics and summary executions, the deportations, the fearsome presence of the SS and perceived threat of death, the complicitous silence of individuals and the Catholic Church, the outrageous denials of state officials and questionable business transactions—speaks directly to the French imaginary and conscience as historical symbols. Perhaps, the film thrusts on French viewers the moral responsibility to reconcile the distortions of French national memory and, therefore, also of their history. However, because this connection may only be made on the metaphorical level, it risks being missed or avoided. While Shoah's characters potentially stand as living reminders of similar acts of complicity or perpetration committed elsewhere—significantly, a number of French officials were undergoing legal investigation at the time of the film's production—such allegorical links may be lost, as is the risk with all narrative. Like Jan Karski, whose work in the Polish underground led to his clandestine visit of the Warsaw Ghetto, witnesses to the film may prefer not to go back and remember the past.
Shoah is exemplary of efforts from throughout the world and the Jewish diaspora to reinscribe the lost homelands with the memory of those who died there and to hold the responsible parties accountable for that loss. Just as the moral responsibility for the legacy of the Shoah is shared on a global scale, so too is its history-memory. However, for all of its historical strengths, Shoah, hailed as a supreme example of French cinematic production, refrains from directly exploring the question of French guilt, touched on but left untold following witnesses’ references to unseen and unheard French Jews. Lanzmann’s insistence that his film is also a work of art affords him these privileges of authorship. Nonetheless, despite Lanzmann’s declared obsession with the moment of death, Shoah arguably reflects the emotional distancing of the French in their approach to the history of the genocide.

This in mind, it may be argued, as others have done, that Lanzmann’s choice of framing, the questions he poses, and editing decisions convey its historical and memorial significance for the French. Though there is no clear evidence of censorship either on the part of the French State or the author himself, the inclusion of references to French victims in the final edited version speaks loudly of the weight of their memory at the very least on the film’s director. Notably, in the sequence with Müller, Lanzmann emphasizes that the shot prisoner was Jewish in addition to being French, drawing the two realms—often held as separate in anti-Semitic discourse—together, though he does not delve any deeper. In effect, these passages open however slightly another unspoken chapter of the genocide’s history. Though not fully restored, the memories of these French Jews are freed from silence. In more than one way, therefore, including its reservations, the film is an example
of French intellectual production on the Shoah. Its value to history depends in part on its interpretation as a memorial structure, intrinsically French and engagé in the struggle against myth and denial.

Lanzmann may be seen as a French emissary (an Orpheus in Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer’s reading) to the mythical landscapes of the Shoah who returns bearing obscure, though vivid memories, which he translates into his native tongue—“speaking” the genocide, as Lawrence Kritzman states in his introduction to *Auschwitz and After*, into the French collective memory and conscience. “His [Lanzmann’s] symbolic gesture enables him to transform memory into language, so that the silence of guilt may be broken through with oral testimony that is transcribed and finally recuperated in the discourse of French culture” (6). As a result, *Shoah* does pose a challenge to French university historiography, which has for various reasons, not the least of which being the explosive nature of any history relating to the French collaboration, neglected the genocide. The mounting tomes of personal testimonies, memoirs, autobiographical works, film archives, and the like, compound this challenge, moreover testifying to the creative power of the Shoah’s living memory. Their value to history, however, as transmitters of memory depends on the sensibility and diligence of their readers.

It is imperative, Finkielkraut warns, not to

... [réduire] la passion du souvenir à un culte idolâtre et à une prostration de l’intelligence. Mais la fidélité au génocide est plus complexe, plus exigeante que cette caricature . . . . L’impossible refus de l’oubli (cette guerre nécessaire et perdue d’avance) n’est que l’autre nom d’une volonté de savoir, dans son détail et dans son système, ce qui a eu lieu. (*L’Avenir d’une négation* 93)
Finkielkraut’s skepticism, however realistic, may be in recognition of the *mythe du retour* and the impossibility of revisiting the ghettos, reenacting the roundups, or reentering the concentration and death camps as they were. Living memory dies with the witness unless given recourse to secondary memory. Secondary memory, a critical evaluation of primary memory, allows for its perpetuity and “remains faithful” to the past by uniting living memory with the quest for knowledge and corroboratory evidence. It is moreover “the specific task of the historian,” who is in this sense a “secondary witness” to history, as well as the preinscribed role for *Shoah*’s audience (LaCapra 21).

Lanzmann insists that *Shoah* is not a historical film, but rather an “original event” because of its filming in the present, the decade of the film’s production: 1974-1985 (“Le lieu et la parole” 22). Nonetheless, Lanzmann’s historical rigor in seeking confirmation for witnesses’ testimony creates conditions favorable to secondary memory. It is an intelligent narrative in that it works from within its spatial, temporal, and experiential boundaries to reveal the past’s lasting relevance. The details of this past and of the Jews’ disappearance not equally accessible, they must be sought after and decoded, sometimes gotten through deceit or allusion. Its defiance of mystification and evasiveness within its self-defined limits, however, must be mirrored in its extranarrative in order for these limits to be surpassed. Herein lies the film’s challenge. For the Shoah, by its profound evilness, implicates its witnesses, both primary and secondary, presenting, in Irwin-Zarecka’s words, the “ultimate challenge” to both its memory and its history. Indeed, the controversy *Shoah* stirred in Poland, where it was viewed as “an unfairly selective attempt at remembrance,” illustrates this point (190).
Shoah, therefore, creates a potential for memory and history, but depends on the critical work of its readers for the fulfillment of these goals. As Nelly Furman articulates in “The Languages of Pain in Shoah,” Shoah’s challenge presents no simple task. “The result is a film of incomparable reach that tugs at every emotion, displaces our notions of facts, questions our perceptions, our understanding of history—a film that destabilizes our previously held opinions, values, and attitudes” (299). It is as she says a film that “demands that we listen.” Moreover, it morally requires a response, which constitutes its power and its formidableness. Returning to the original question “whose history,” therefore, another problem immediately becomes apparent. Beyond the problem of how history can or should address the genocide to the living, it is important to ask whether the living even care to know, and, if not, what are the consequences of history’s deprivation of an interlocutor? While Shoah offers insight into a possible solution to the former question, the second film under consideration, Martine Dugowson’s Mina Tannenbaum, takes up the latter.
Lanzmann's obsession with death's threshold—"when it was too late"—sent him on its trail, leading him from ghettos to traincars, to unloading ramps, to the gas chambers and ovens, and ultimately to the earth or waterways where the ashes were spread. In *Mina Tannenbaum*, the camera rises from this fertile ground to capture the birth of a baby girl, the granddaughter of Jewish deportees, only to follow her through her personal struggles until she ultimately takes her own life. Dugowson's later film portrays the legacy of the genocide through the life of its protagonist, a tragic young Frenchwoman and artist for whom this past and her Jewishness are the source of her alienation. Like Lanzmann's film, the historical significance of *Mina Tannenbaum* lies in its elaboration of memory and the symbolic. However, its importance is centered in the unsaid, the repressed, and the empty chambers of Mina's conscience, which become *lieux de mémoire* in their own right. Seated on a park bench in the neighborhood of Montmartre with her best friend Ethel, also Jewish, in a repeated scene from their youth, the two engage in the same dialogue: "‘A quoi tu penses?’, inquires Ethel. ‘A la même chose que toi... Quand même, quand y pense,’ ‘quand on y pense,’ ‘quand on y pense, c’est vraiment dégueulasse.’"

Whereas *Shoah* addresses the difficulties of remembering the unimaginable, *Mina Tannenbaum* represents the dangers of forgetting the unspeakable. For the unspecified referent in Mina and Ethel's conversation, appearing to be an indefinite malaise resulting
from the trials of adolescence, points to a deeper possibility. There is a dark shadow cast
over the film, the memory of a past that haunts the images and dialogue and reverberates in
Mina and Ethel’s words. Already the allusion to Mina’s death in the characters’ opening
testimonies gives the story a foreboding tone. It infuses viewer expectations with anxiety,
compounded by the sorrowful notes of the theme music. Then there is her Jewish-sounding
name, Tannenbaum, which ascribes to Mina the cultural baggage of her heritage as
imagined in French collective memory. Little by little as the film’s characters recount and
replay the story of Mina’s life, this heritage—remembered in one significant flashback—
comes to dominate the narrative, gives it shape and direction, to the point where Mina’s
death at the end appears predetermined as the epilogue to the Shoah.

The film’s greater issue of contemporary Jewish identity in France, however, is
generally overlooked by its critical readers who mainly address the accompanying themes of
womanhood and friendship. As an illustration, in her review for TéléObs, where the film’s
qualities are presented in relation to “le cinéma féminin,” Martine Moriconi states: “Martine
Dugowson nous rappelle, à la façon de Cicéron, que ‘les dieux immortels ne nous ont rien
donné de meilleur et de plus doux’ que l’amitié” (5). Moriconi avoids the Jewish
question altogether apart from a passing reference to “l’ombre de leurs [Mina’s and Ethel’s]
familles” (5). Yet, as Ginette Vincendeau intimates, “Mina Tannenbaum’s depiction of the
Jewish petite bourgeoisie of the Montmartre area provoked strong reactions in France.”
French criticism of the film’s treatment of its ethnic subject and specifically the portraits of
the two mothers—traditionally the central figures of Jewish culture and whom Vincendeau
describes as “monsters”—merits investigation, not least of all because of its oversight in
critical works. While Mina’s and Ethel’s characters have depth and complexity, in effect
erasing their ethnicity, the others are largely cardboard figures, undeveloped beyond the Jewish stereotypes assigned them. The film moreover stereotypes its male characters. “While such stereotypes serve to highlight the generation gap,” asserts Vincendeau, “they also occasionally jar with the naturalistic project of the film” (*Sight and Sound* 50). But is this really so? How may stereotyping, which easily bristles its more sensitive audience, be understood as a narrative tool?

To answer this question, it is necessary to inquire into the stereotypes’ potency, which at once draws viewers into the narrative and repels them. What is the stereotypes’ intrinsic threat that some would rather avoid? While many appreciate the film’s humorous moments, the more troubling aspects of its ethos bother them. Ethel’s “Jewish mother”’s indulgent weakness for chocolates is very funny. The guilt with which she torments her daughter, however, is less so. Likewise, Mina’s mother’s oppressive childhood memory of the Occupation still inhabits their somber Parisian apartment and harasses Mina, who rebels in one instance against her mother’s undiscriminating hatred of Germans. As Mireille Rosello suggests in *Declining the Stereotype* (1998): “Sometimes, it is necessary to take the risk of being ‘stereotyped,’ as it were, of being traversed, contaminated, spoken by stereotypes [in order to appropriate some of their power]” (39). It is entirely possible that Dugowson does just that for the explicit purpose of conveying the “invisibility” of her central Jewish characters, Mina and Ethel, more poignantly.

For in many ways, as Alain Finkielkraut elaborates in *Le Juif imaginaire* (1980) and Rosello analyzes in her treatment of ethnic stereotypes in French narrative, the Shoah succeeded in reducing Judaism to a hollow identity.¹⁹ Ethnic invisibility, therefore, has become a contemporary Jewish characteristic ripe for stereotyping. Yet it is potentially an
accusatory stereotype in that it signifies a putting to death, though spiritual rather than physical. In Mina Tannenbaum Dugowson has created a narrative that denounces this death by making it actual. Her protagonist dies. Moreover, by metaphorically portraying it as the dénouement of the Shoah, the recognizable Jewish characters, as signs of Judaism’s passing, potentially speak to the audience’s heavy conscience. Before exploring Dugowson’s film specifically, however, a discussion of the persona Finkielkraut describes in Le Juif imaginaire proves useful for its contextualization of the contemporary French Jew.

More than claiming millions of Jewish lives, asserts Finkielkraut, the genocide wreaked destruction on the culture of European Jewry. “Il ne faut pas mésestimer Hitler, sous prétexte qu’il a été interrompu dans sa tâche et qu’il a perdu la guerre. . . . leur réussite [of the Nazis; though Finkielkraut, like Mina’s mother, uses the term “Germans”] a été qualitative” (Le Juif imaginaire 50). As Finkielkraut, himself the son of survivors, and those interviewed by Dominique Schapper in Jewish Identities in France (1983) recount, the memory of the death camps and the desire to forget led to widespread rejection of Judaism in France following the war. For many assimilated French Jews, who were witness to the dissolution of their rights during the events of 1940, Vichy destroyed their steadfast belief in the ideals of the French Revolution (Schnapper 109). Those who were spared deportation or death endeavored to protect their children from a similar fate by maintaining their heritage, forever tainted by the memory of the Shoah, under strict silence. “Cette catastrophe était un peu comme une césure dans l’histoire: il y avait avant et il y avait après le génocide. . . . Comme un vestige personnel, dont il ne fallait pas encombrer les jeunes générations, ces vaincus gardèrent pour eux le trésor de la Yiddishkeit” (Le Juif imaginaire 133-34). All the
persecutions they as a people had endured for two thousand years, Finkielkraut argues, had not prepared them for the Final Solution, whose unprecedented dimensions succeeded in alienating them from their faith and therefore the substance of their identity.

As a result, for most contemporary French Jews, Judaism is nothing but an empty shell as Finkielkraut expresses so succinctly: "c'est la conscience aiguë d'un manque, une absence entretenue, l'exil où je vis par rapport à une civilisation dont, 'pour mon bien' et parce qu'il y avait eu Auschwitz, mes parents n'ont pas voulu que je sois le dépositaire" (139). Assimilated to French culture as their parents had intended and moreover disinherited of their ethnic identity, the descendants of the Shoah endure the pains of a double exile. The Six Day War in 1967 instilled in many a renewed sense of belonging centered on the State of Israel. However, as Finkielkraut and Schnapper relate, this identification grew more from a political investment in Israel’s survival than from any attachment to the living maxims of the Judaic tradition. Crystallized within the memory of the Shoah, Jewishness has become a dead or “imaginary” ethnicity in France. Those who are inspired to reclaim their heritage have had to struggle to rediscover a lost or forgotten faith. Deprived of Judaism’s spiritual vitality, Finkielkraut maintains, they are left only to worship the image, whose impenetrable mystery has invested it with the wondrous aura of the occult:

... j'avais sur les autres enfants de ma génération une supériorité considérable: le pouvoir de dramatiser ma biographie. ... au plus fort des crises, quand vacillait la conscience de mon identité, je mobilisais cette évidence magique: je suis juif, c'est-à-dire intéressant, mystérieux, singulier ... J'étais ensorcelé par mon image ...
C'est l'interminable liste de tous ces morts que je n'ai pas connus qui faisait ma noblesse. . . . Le lignage faisait de moi le concessionnaire du génocide, son témoin et presque sa victime. (14, 15, 16, 18, 19).

The "Imaginary Jews" of the postwar generation constructed their precious identity—precious for its vulnerability and its status as a minority—not on life, but on death, the history of their victimization.

In Finkielkraut's self-portrait, one may recognize the young protagonist of *Mina Tannenbaum*, a narcissistic, self-consumed being, who bears the weight of the world on her shoulders, but has no real understanding of her heritage. Profoundly aware of her difference despite her mother's desire for her to be like other French children her age, Mina secretly relishes this dubious distinction: "Je me fous de ce que disent les autres. Je fais ce que je veux," she tells Ethel on their way home from ballet class, where she draws laughter from the others for her odd dress and clownish antics. Within the context of the 1970s, in the wake of Mai 68, her feeling of difference translates into her personal battle for sexual liberation, whether defending painted female subjects in her university art class or refusing to be captivated by masculine charm.

Mina's identification with victimhood—which for French Jews of the Mai 68 generation, state Finkielkraut and Schnapper, gave rise to a sense of moral obligation to persecuted peoples everywhere—may, therefore, explain her militant feminism, which becomes a point of disagreement between her and Ethel. On more than one occasion Mina berates her friend's passivity and flirtatious coquetry. However, as Mina's emotional awkwardness and failed relationships make clear, declaration of one's difference and the application of its precepts are not one and the same. Her fear of becoming an object for
male gratification precludes her own pleasure and satisfaction. As Ethel remarks in one of their battles, Mina loves no one—except herself. She is an imaginary feminist, just as she is an “Imaginary Jew.”

In a scene where Mina and Ethel are seated in a café, Mina criticizing her friend’s antifeminist stance, the shadowy figures of Mina dressed as a rabbi reading the Talmud and Ethel as a Jewish Bardot appear beside them. While the two friends quarrel, so do their shadows, and in the end the two indignant Ethels leave both Minas behind to console one another. The analogy drawn between the two characters’ ideological differences and their projected Jewish identities is cause for reflection. Mina and Ethel are assimilated Jews. Their Jewishness, therefore, beyond Mina’s dour self-importance and Ethel’s obsession with her nose or her attempt to please her dying mother’s wish for a Jewish son-in-law, remains an elusive factor in their characterizations. The significance of their shared ethnicity may be understood purely on a metaphorical level as a shadowy presence in all their disputes. While it undoubtedly draws them together, it also drives them apart. “Tu n’es plus un modèle pour moi!,” sputters Ethel in a later scene before Mina’s forbidding of her foreseen marriage to Jacques Dana, the art gallery director with whom Mina is secretly in love. By challenging Mina’s unspoken authority, pictorialized in the figure of the rabbi, the less serious-minded Ethel exposes the vacuousness of the persona Mina so ardently adores.

Some critics question the title of the film, suggesting “Mina and Ethel” as perhaps more appropriate (Kauffmann 30). It is true that the film may schematically be represented as a theater-in-the-round with Mina and Ethel on center stage and the other personages entering and exiting intermittently, the entire action commented on by a chorus of characters. The circling motion of the camera around the bench on the Montmartre square
where Mina and Ethel are often found seated reinforces this image as does the cyclical passage of time, always returning—with the exception of Mai 68—to the month of April. However, by designating Mina as the main protagonist, Dugowson gives precedence to the subject of death and, by extension, the legacy of the Shoah in the contemporary identity crisis of French Jews. Again, Mina’s and Ethel’s Jewishness, as a basis for their similarity and their difference, helps lead one to this conclusion. Mina’s prominence may be explained as a right of inheritance. As an Ashkenazic Jew and the granddaughter of survivors, Mina is a direct heir to the Shoah’s legacy, the bloodlines of her “nobility.” Ethel, on the other hand, born to Sephardic Jews recently emigrated from North Africa, is only its indirect legatee. Her Judaism is more intact, having been spared the ravages of Nazism. Yet her eminence as victim is less. This distinction is written into the narrative and the characterizations, whose metaphorical force recalls the Shoah on multiple levels.

Though at first Mina Tannenbaum seems less far-reaching than Shoah in historical scope, the inscription of dates and important events immediately offsets this impression: April 5, 1958, Mina and Ethel’s birthdate; May 2, 1968, the day of their meeting (though Ethel’s grandfather who appears as an angel in heaven mistakenly believes it to be April—the student uprising appears in passing, captured in a live newscast through an open door); beginning on April 7, 1974, the spring of their first loves; April 15, 1989, the date of Mina’s first art exhibit; and, finally, April 2, 1991, the date of Mina’s death. Another date, April 1942, shown in one isolated flashback, stands out for its singularity. Its centrality, appearing midway through the film between Mina’s adolescence and her maturity, further underscores its significance.
Following Mina's argument with her mother about the young Germans she has invited over—the only direct reference to memories of Occupied France—the camera moves slowly from Mina's position on the balcony, where she has taken refuge, into their Parisian apartment, the furniture and decorations gradually being replaced by period pieces. There is no living presence except a young girl, whom viewers recognize to be Mina's mother, seated alone at the window, the yellow star sewn to her outer garments as though she were ready to leave on a moment's notice. The passage of time as she waits is marked by the film cuts, in the last of which she has fallen asleep, no one having come. Borrowing Lanzmann's term, this scene, its heavy silence conveying all the force of its unseen drama, may be understood as l'œil du cyclone of the film. The narrative's tragedy grows from this definitive moment, buried and unspoken, yet the pivot around which Mina's life and death turn.

In many respects time in this Parisian apartment is permanently set in April 1942. Mina's mother remains this frightened, little Jewish girl, orphaned and alone, and as such personifies the Shoah as it was crystallized in Jewish memory—the Jew as victim. She is moreover the maternal figure in which Mina nourishes her beloved self-image and the reflection of what Mina is to become, however much Mina battles against her. Mina's father is important for his role as the witness to Mina's mystification, which defines her, but also suffocates her. In the end, he, too, is reduced to a stereotype, that of the blithering idiot, forgotten in a mental hospital where, when stirred from his vacant reverie by Mina's only visit, he frightens her away by his mad ravings: "Petite tête, gros cul. Quand tu pètes, on te
voit plus!” In view of his portrayal as the witness, this is perhaps not an innocent reference to gassing. His illness may be understood metaphorically as a result of the debilitating effects of his daily exposure to the Shoah’s ongoing devastation.

Likewise, as the narrative unfolds, Mina’s growing sense of persecution coincides with her increasing isolation from the outside world, offered up to her by her apartment’s large windows, but gone virtually unnoticed. Significantly, Mina’s mother’s decision to sell the apartment and move to the suburbs, accompanied by her break in silence—she appears on a talkshow with other children of survivors—engenders Mina’s disillusionment: “Mina s’est dit qu’elle avait cru aveuglement à ce que lui disaient ses parents quand elle était enfant. Ils disaient qu’ils étaient ses parents, et en fait, ils étaient des étrangers,” comments Mina’s cousin, the film’s main narrative voice. Mina’s apartment, therefore, becomes her sole sanctuary where she may tend to her ailing self-identity, often the subject of her earlier paintings, but now replaced by the French masterpieces she copies as her sole subsistence and the sign of her extreme alienation. Little by little, the hallowed space that was the studio for her art transforms into the chamber of her death.

Investigation of the film’s stereotypes reveals what lies below Mina Tannenbaum’s plot of invisibility: the memory of the Shoah, which is still playing out in the contemporary identity quest of French Jews and Jews everywhere. Similarly, in the film its destructive repercussions are felt by Ethel and her mother. As metaphorical figures, they also have specific roles to play in this contemporary Jewish tragedy. Ethel’s mother, a practicing Jew and, therefore, stricter in her observances than her Ashkenazic counterpart, may be seen as the embodiment of the Judaic tradition. Her invective condemnation of her daughter’s assimilation of French cultural norms communicates the extent of her mental suffering and
the urgency of her pleas. Destroyed by her daughter's failure to marry a Jew, she, too, succumbs to illness and death. Ethel, as a female and later a mother, is, according to tradition, the protectress of the Judaic faith. However, her choice to marry Gérard, a non-Jew, who shows no sensitivity to her ethnic background, as well as the naming of their daughter as Mina, point to an ominous future. In the end an orphan and deprived of her most important friendship, Ethel must nonetheless live on, which is perhaps the greatest challenge Jews have to face in the aftermath of the Shoah. Indeed, history is not so easily shaken. In spite of disregard for its legacy or attempts to silence its memory, its influence is still felt in the lives of its descendants.

In the story of Mina Tannenbaum, Dugowson offers her audience a unique record of the spiritual death of her generation. While not an isolated cataclysmic event, but a gradual destructive process passed on from parents to their children, this death leaves behind no landmarks, no evil agents, no bodies. Rather its remembrance and memorial inscription imply an internal journey through the contemporary Jewish psyche. By writing subliminal markers into her narrative, Dugowson entices her audience to retrace the steps leading up to the death it portrays. Though not so subtle, these markers may leave viewers, particularly those blindsided by the film's other themes, at a loss or troubled as to their meaning. When examined more closely, however, these puzzling or seemingly insignificant details give presence and historical depth to the psychological events they describe. From them, Mina's suicide may be understood to represent a crucial point in the history of the Jews, who, in their identification with the Shoah, have undergone a new instance of persecution and death.

"Serpent à lunettes! Serpent à lunettes! Va-t-en! Va-t-en! Je ne veux pas jouer avec toi!" From the maternity ward an older Mina passes on to the ophthalmologist's office
for an eye exam, followed by a trip to the optician’s where her mother buys her a pair of
glasses. “Tu es très jolie,” reassures the saleswoman. However, among her peers and in this
particular instance a small blond boy in the park, her new glasses are a social stigma and
impede her integration. The Aryan features of Mina’s taunter are perhaps inconsequential,
as it may just be an example of playground name-calling. Yet because it is impossible today
to dissociate Jewish identity from the Shoah and anti-Semitic persecution, symbolism and
stereotypes, or the lack thereof as Rosello argues, take on added meaning. Mina’s glasses
and the little boy’s reaction, therefore, potentially have historical depth and subconscious
bearing. In effect, in the little boy’s jeers, one may read a popular fin de siècle myth: the
Jew as a bestial, often serpentine, creature, and his remarks may be understood as a
conditioned social response to otherness, which gives rise to self-perpetuating cultural
stereotypes. Similarly, Mina’s glasses may be seen as a sign of her difference and
exclusion, her own personal yellow star.

Although Mina is not outwardly a victim of prejudice, her glasses do affect her
emotional development. At once a physical blemish and a protective shield, they create a
barrier between Mina and others. While the (extremely thick) glass lenses are transparent, at
times the light’s reflection creates the illusion of opacity. In a scene with a fellow art
student, with whom she is hopelessly infatuated but too painfully self-conscious to even talk
to, her interior monologue gives the impression that her glasses serve more as a mirror than
as a window to the outside world. When she replaces them with contacts, the change is
immediate. The external barrier is removed. Her eyes convey her inner spark, her
intelligence, and her artistry, and Mina becomes desiring and desirable. On more than one
occasion, others take note of her beautiful eyes. Yet this euphoria, which coincides with her
first and highly successful gallery exhibit, is not to last, for Mina’s obsession with her own self-image continues to blind her. Not too long after, caught up in her own thoughts and oblivious to the changing traffic light, she is struck by a moving van. Her facial scars leave her permanently disfigured, and, again stigmatized by her physical difference, she progressively withdraws into her rooftop apartment in Paris and her painting, cutting herself off from the life and people around her.

Throughout the film, Mina’s marked difference, whether a bad haircut or her facial disfigurement, upsets her romantic project and forces her into isolation. This self-imposed exile, due to her humiliation, serves only to aggravate her persecution complex, however. Nonetheless, her feelings of self-pity do have foundation. Beginning with the ransacking of her schoolbag, from which Ethel takes one of her artworks, and progressing to Ethel’s theft of her identity in order to gain entry to an exclusive interview (the preoccupying thought that was the indirect cause of the accident and Mina’s disfigurement) and, finally, her stealing of Jacques Dana, Mina is wronged time and time again by her most trusted of friends. It is Ethel’s last betrayal that leads to their estrangement and leaves Mina all alone, bereft of her art, her popularity, and her lover, since Serge leaves Mina too on learning of her duplicity. Her mother’s simultaneous decision to move from the city compounds her loss with a feeling of abandonment. Near the end, when Mina, in a final act of resistance, attempts to reestablish contacts—she visits her father and manages a reunion with Ethel—Ethel commits the final injustice by canceling their plans for a week vacation with Gérard.

By symbolically rejecting Mina for a man, a non-Jew no less, Ethel unknowingly gives the final coup de grace. In a fit of despair, Mina swallows a handful of pills and curls up into the fetal position on her apartment’s bare floor. Her suicide, as her final narcissistic
act, seems a fitting end to the narrative. Moreover, the trail leading up to Mina’s death does not lack its warning signs. As Mina draws on her cigarette, the close-up of the burning tobacco and the sound of its consumption portend her fateful end. The sudden appearance of this image in two separate scenes, one where Mina first senses the penetration of the male (the art student François’s) gaze and the other when she learns that Ethel used her name for her own professional advancement, draws a relationship between them. Mina’s vulnerable self-identity, outshone by her mother’s yellow star, is threatened by men just as much as it is threatened by her best friend. This realization leads to a perplexing question, which Mina articulates herself: “Pourquoi tu me fais ça, Ethel?” How could Ethel, whose crimes have historical resonance, have contributed to Mina’s demise?

This incomprehensible breach of trust reflects similar questions that have vexed Jews and French Jews specifically beginning with the first roundups in 1942. How could the Jews have expected the French, who had accorded Jews their civil rights and granted Dreyfus justice, of Vichy? How could the Jewish councils in Europe’s ghettos have aided the Nazis in transporting their fellow Jews to the death camps? How could the Jewish work commandos have watched passively as the massacres continued? How could the Jewish victims not have resisted? How could the Jews have let this happen?

Lanzmann takes up the latter questions in Shoah, where witnesses testify to the hopelessness of the Jews’ situation. The last entry of Czerniakow’s diary is dated the day of his death. Powerless to save the orphans and therefore the future of the Warsaw Ghetto, on July 23, 1942, the day after the first transports to Treblinka, he took his own life. Freddy Hirsch, the spiritual leader of the Czech family camp at Auschwitz-Birkenau, recounts escaped survivor Richard Vrba, chose the same fate: suicide over rebellion, which would
have meant a sure death, most definitely for the children. Similarly, Mina’s salvation would have meant the loss of her identity, that which she had formed as a child and which ultimately consumes her. Furthermore, any chance for deliverance through a renewal of her faith is in no way clear, given the spiritual impoverishment of her surroundings.

As *Mina Tannenbaum* and *Shoah* both testify, the genocide’s surviving victims, lacking the necessary arms and political power, have been left with only one weapon—potent nonetheless—with which to combat the total annihilation symbolized by this death: their testimony, which has since served to shame the world for its silence.\(^{35}\) In effect, *Mina Tannenbaum* bears witness to the death of its protagonist. The main narrating voice of Mina’s cousin, in addition to the testimony of others who knew Mina best, her mother, Serge, Jacques Dana, and Ethel, who speak directly to the camera, recount the memory of Mina’s life, or rather the story of her death. The narrative comes to a close with Ethel’s tears, related by her dead friend’s cousin: “Au début, Mina était toujours vivante. . . . Et puis avec le temps, elle [Ethel] préféra à la présence de son amie le souvenir qu’elle en avait, et même son retour lui aurait fait horreur.” For Ethel, Mina’s death brings an end to a profound, though not idyllic friendship, whose contradictions may be sensed in her reaction. In many ways she had been captivated by Mina’s aura, her daring to be different. Yet she refused to submit to Mina’s dogma of austere self-negation. Ironically, Mina had despised in Ethel that which she envied most: Ethel’s natural exuberance for life. Ethel is a survivor in this story of destruction. However, what her survival will entail will depend, as Mina’s story represents, on Ethel’s “faithfulness” to her friend’s memory.

While Dugowson’s narrative does not explicitly draw a relation between Mina’s death and her Jewishness, an imaginary entity, the film’s details, stereotypes and metaphors,
problematize the invisible thread that connects them. As in *Shoah*, Mina Tannenbaum’s characters and visual or spoken details are open signs to be interpreted by the audience. Their power lies in their familiarity or their element of surprise; they cannot go unnoticed. The spectator may inquire into their appearance, or, as is the case, brush them aside as unnecessary or awkward—easily, perhaps, in view of the supposed fictitiousness of the narrative. Yet the appearance of these signs nonetheless activates memory purposefully in order to implicate it in the storytelling process. The inscription of dates and important events, in particular, is meant to stimulate recollection, especially on the part of the film’s French audience. It gives Mina’s life a retraceable trajectory and identifies her as belonging to the Mai 68 generation, a child of the postwar baby boom. While France’s youth were taking to the barricades, French Jews, like the fictional Mina, were privately struggling against the ghosts of a repressed past in a more dire identity quest.

In many respects, Dugowson as an artist, like her protagonist, may be likened to Charlotte Salomon, a German Jew who documented, in sketches and paintings, her exile in the south of France during the war until she was finally arrested in 1943 and deported to Auschwitz. The title for her artistic ensemble, *Leben oder Theater? Ein Singspiel* ["Life or Theater? An Operetta"], indicates the intimate relationship art holds to life and life to art. By transmitting autobiographical elements into her work, Dugowson, like Salomon, has created a highly personalized form, rich for its insight into the human condition within the events. Their historical value may be derived from what Mary Felstiner calls “inward-turning testimony” in her analysis of Salomon’s illustrated operetta. Just as Salomon’s drawings convey the details of her exile, her loss of name and place, in the dark and abstract human forms inhabiting Mina’s canvasses, one may detect the signs of her alienation. Her
subjects are usually solitary and female. One notable painting is of a little girl enclosed in a frame—perhaps of a mirror?—an immutable image, captive to the viewer’s regard. All of her portraits together may be seen as a desperate search for a missing identity. Moreover, the film, as the ultimate frame for Mina’s story, infuses Mina’s quest with urgency by inscribing an audience in the overlaid narration. Significantly, as Felstiner remarks: “[It is] a phenomenon not uncommon in Holocaust diaries and self-portraits: the invention of a captive audience and of rhetorical devices to keep it there” (“Charlotte Salomon’s Inward-Turning Testimony” 115). Dugowson, like Salomon, incorporates elements, music and commentary, that will appeal to her public and favor understanding.

The invisibility of her subject, however, forced Dugowson to look for alternative narrative strategies—specifically stereotypes, metaphors, suggestive imagery and dialogue—, which points to what Felstiner calls “the paradoxical value of artistic invention as historical evidence: the very constraints on an artwork increase its expressiveness as an artifact” (116). The fact that Mina Tannenbaum’s critics have failed to grasp the greater historical context of Mina’s identity crisis, therefore, further underscores the Jewish catastrophe. For if no one cares to investigate this death, symbolic of the genocide’s ongoing destruction, penetrate its horror, and accept responsibility for its reconstruction, it remains an enigma, a gratuitous violence, and its importance as the shaping force in Mina’s life is overlooked. As Jay Cantor remarks:

Death is the absent guest in most of the images we use to divert ourselves—not death as subject or as spectacle but felt death, our transience, our violence, and our will to end our lives. . . . Our entertainments are often bloody minded, but the violence is usually localized in one kill-crazy hero, rather than experienced as the
force that forms the world we see on (and perhaps off) the screen. And viewers need not quite acknowledge that they, too, imagine the world in the image, and so participate in what it represents; rather, one pretends that one *sees* it. ("Death and the Image" 24)

Similarly, the film seems to anticipate the audience’s uneasiness with its subject. At the very beginning, at the moment of Mina’s birth, her paternal grandmother articulates what she perceives to be her unwanted presence: "Je n’existe plus. Faites comme si je n’étais pas là. D’abord, les vieilles, ça ne compte pas.” Tellingly, Mina’s mother recognizes in her baby daughter the face of her mother-in-law, ravaged by the untold sufferings of her past.

Both films, *Shoah* and *Mina Tannenbaum*, contain signs that convey an obscure, and some say impossible, history. Yet by historically inscribing their narratives and enveloping them with memory-provoking strategies, Lanzmann and Dugowson create the potentiality for history-memory. Sight and audition combine in the narrative process. Within the films themselves, the stories originate and grow from visual identification and dialogue, which as one discovers is essential to their telling. Without them, the stories would perhaps not be told due to the storytellers’ resistance to the narratives they hold, the lack of a listener, the stories’ seeming insignificance as isolated events, or their formidable enormity. The role of witnessing, therefore, is infused with purpose. These two films are moreover living works in that they extend beyond the screen and favor secondary memory by opening their testimony up to critical evaluation. As opposed to overly dramatic or closed narratives, numbing to the senses or claiming ultimate authority, they call on their audiences to become intellectually engaged in what they see and hear. They not only leave loose narrative strands for them to connect, but also rivet their audiences with questions to ponder and investigate.
further. As a result, *Shoah* and *Mina Tannenbaum* invite their spectators to be secondary
witnesses to the stories they reenact and to participate in the historicizing process.

The consequences of this power shift burdens the audience, particularly the films’
French audience, with an awesome—perhaps unbearable—responsibility. Interpreting
defining events for the nation, with which the private self is necessarily entwined, implicates
secondary witnesses in this history and challenges fundamental notions of the self. Their
inextricability from the events may impede their ability to accurately portray them, creating
in Cathy Caruth’s words a “crisis of truth” (*Trauma* 6). Ora Avni remarks a similar
phenomenon resulting from subjectivity’s entrance into the domain of historiography:

> If historiography deals—as indeed it claims to—with precise accounts of specific
> facts and if the truth-value of these accounts depends on the testimonial force and
> credibility of the first narrators, even the most scientific of minds will be hard put to
deny that the first person, although occulted in the name of objectivity and truth,
constitutes the ontological and epistemological foundation of this same discourse
which, out of concern for scientific objectivity, denigrates him. (‘‘Narrative Subject,
Historic Subject’’ 498)

Nonetheless, the private story is an invaluable resource for history. By imparting its unique
or immediate knowledge, it corrects the failures and distortions of collective memory. It
moreover combats contemporary revisionism—which like that of the National Socialist state
dissimulates crimes as they are being committed—by restoring to the event its place in
history. As Pierre Vidal-Naquet warns, “denial can come to power and in this way believe it
is maintaining the fiction of a unified and pure national history” (*The Holocaust’s
Challenge to History* 30).
Indeed, survivor testimony stands apart as perhaps the most threatening challenge to one’s emotional detachment and sense of distance from the past, which explains the shroud of silence over the death camps immediately following the Second World War and emphatically points to the importance of testimony in lifting it. The question “whose history” is not merely rhetorical. It appeals to a fundamental antagonism—signified by the “or”—inherent in any group identity quest where opposing interests vie for control in the construction of collective memory. At stake is the national image in which a country’s citizens see their reflection. Those whose voices are not heard in the historicizing process endure the pain of witnessing their own negation. Those whose external world contradicts their inner experience struggle to make sense of the disparity. As history has shown, such suffering and anguish have the potential of erupting into violence. Powerful collective memories are, as representative of the nation, fundamental to a group’s emotional, ideological, and spiritual adherence to it.

In Twilight Memories (1995) Andreas Huyssen argues:

... all representation—whether in language, narrative, image, or recorded sound—is based on memory. Re-presentation always comes after ... But rather than leading us to some authentic origin or giving us verifiable access to the real, memory, even and especially in its belatedness, is itself based on representation. (2-3)

National memory, as an articulation of the past, signifies national identity. It may be heard in national discourse, sensed in political actions, seen in intellectual and artistic productions. Silence, by contrast, is memory’s and, therefore, a nation’s mortal enemy. In Shoah and Mina Tannenbaum, memory plays a dual role. It is both stimulus and response. It “frames” the narratives, so to speak, in a collaborative movement between the makers and receivers of
The films’ respective meanings and historical relevance depend on the fidelity of this transmission. While the sign makers provide their audience with memorial markers, the receivers may only understand them according to their own memory, or self-representation, of the history these markers claim to represent.

While the implicit goal is recognition, these private acts of memory may be inherently opposed. For memory not only represents history but also the identity of the rememberer, equally important spaces to be explored. Understanding is possible when private and collective memories are in harmony, allowing for the crowning of “masterpieces,” such as Lanzmann’s Shoah. Difficulty arises, however, when they are incongruous. Perhaps graver than dissension between conflicting memories is indifference. For lack of response indicates no recognition, no concern, nothing but a memorial void, such as that which met Dugowson’s Mina Tannenbaum. The ultimate challenge of the Shoah, therefore, lies in our faithfulness to the past and its legacy in the present. We must honor the victims, but we must not overlook the survivors who still have a story to tell.
CHAPTER 2
SPACE

This next chapter takes up the question of the past’s retraceability in the present as pertains to the sociocultural organization of the French national space. The reinstatement of geographical barriers that had formerly segregated the colonized world has created a highly antagonistic social divide within contemporary France. The two authors of this study, Leïla Sebbar and Azouz Begag, explore the consequences of this schism through their respective representations of Beur subjectivity. *Le Chinois vert d’Afrique* (1984) and *Le Gone du Chaâba* (1986). In the narration of the protagonists’ movement between their marginalized locations and the urban French cultural centers of Paris and Lyon, however, these literary works move beyond such dualistic perspectives to elucidate the transformative power of cultural mixing and hybridity. Through the composite identities of their speaking subjects, they specifically reveal the fallacy of France’s assimilationist policy and, at another level, test the supposed imperviousness of the French literary canon. As a first step in their analysis, before turning to the two novels, it is useful to consider the history that grounds the situation they communicate.
3.1 INTRODUCTION

Undoubtedly, after the Shoah, the second most traumatic event in recent French history was the Algerian War—within the overall perplexing national crisis of decolonization—and the arrival of defeated French nationals (pieds-noirs) and Maghrebian migrants from former French Algeria onto the French homeland. Suddenly, many distinct spaces, each with their own history and sentiments with regard to Algerian independence, conjoined. It was a bitter encounter following a national disaster for some, a heartrending separation for others, a cruel deception for others still.

Today, struggling beneath the strains of pluralism consequent to colonialism’s end, the French, of all creeds and colors, are having to rethink the country’s immigration policy and assimilationist tradition in the formation of a new national space. Specifically, they are contending against rival cultural forces that contribute to a general feeling of displacement or disjointedness. the integration of difference being perhaps the greatest challenge of all for a democracy or any society for that matter. As Steven Ungar remarks, postcolonialism has only translated the racial and ethnic divides undergirding colonialist discourse to within France’s national borders: “To refer to France in general terms as postcolonial [is] not merely inaccurate, but misleading in that the adjective suggest[s] a break with a longer history of prejudice grounded in assumptions about and attitudes toward race that had adapted to an evolving national identity” (“The Coluche
These postcolonial times, therefore, can be understood in part as a redrawing of the lines separating the metropolitan French citizens from the colonial Others, often citizens themselves. While the imperial past holds varying significance for the population as a whole, narrative, as a form of mediation, is again proving instrumental in the articulation of what a postcolonial France may become.

As the previous chapter explores, memory, both lived and inherited, is intricately linked to identity. A form of discourse, it allows the past to enter into dialogue with the present in the rememberer's search for a sense of coherence and continuity. This process of articulating the links between past and present may appear impossible, however, due to a distancing of the subject, either through displacement or departure (i.e., some form of a break), from a context that gave rise to memories and, therefore, certain expectations or aspirations. Many writers, including historian Pierre Nora, are apt to express such interruptions in spatial terms. In today's fragmented human experience, Nora argues, memories are assigned a site in the historical narrative space, one that may be revisited but more as a distinct rather than integral part of that space. Clearly, with regard to the Shoah such a sense of fragmentation can hardly be avoided, the genocide being far removed from the usual scope of history one would tell as representative of the self (individual or communal). Nonetheless, as both Claude Lanzmann and Martine Dugowson illustrate through their respective films, one may never completely disconnect oneself or be disconnected from the past. Nor can the repression of its memory entirely relieve one of it. It continues into the present in the form of traces—beliefs, attitudes, emotions—often communicated through speech or actions or still inscribed in the physical landscape as perceptible signs evocative of memories.
Precisely for this reason, Pierre Vidal-Naquet’s main criticism of the *Bibliothèque des histoires* directed by Pierre Nora, its neglect of the historical importance of contemporary revisionism, appears justified. Even repressed history—it is inescapable—has a place in the ongoing narratives of human history. Or, rather than a place, perhaps too discrete a formulation serving the purposes of containment, it may be likened to an “insidious” quality of the memorial and subjective space itself, in the manner of Rosello’s “infiltrator” (*Infiltrating Culture* 1996). Not only are the examples of French intellectual response—beginning with Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Réflexions sur la question juive* (1946), though strikingly he made no mention of the genocide, “because,” as Lanzmann suggests, “the Holocaust is an event [which] no one at the time could grasp in its full scope” (quoted by Kritzman 5)—and survivor accounts steeped in the country’s repressed fascist past, but it has also seeped into non-Holocaust literature and has now finally come to the fore in historicopolitical and litigious discussions.

In the same fashion, the horrors of the Algerian War first incited the intelligentsia (in addition to Sartre, Albert Camus and Simone de Beauvoir, for instance) and others—writers, lawyers, watchdog groups—for whom the Franco-Algerian conflict held personal meaning, to act. As is evident in the delayed condemnation of Paris prefect Maurice Papon for the 1961 drowning of Algerian protesters in the Seine, the French State and historiography have largely left the most troubling aspects of the “guerre sans nom” untouched, in the manner of Henri Alleg’s *La Question* (1958), censored in France.¹ The results of a 1987 survey, cited by historian Charles-Robert Ageron, where only seven percent of respondents considered the Algerian War one of the major events of the twentieth-century in French history, are, therefore, perhaps unsurprising (cited in *Histoire* 72
of the past, even that which one would rather forget, speaks through national narratives and informs their genesis. It is as apparent in the gaps and silences as in the memorials erected to honor it, and it moreover plays a role in the construction of the Other. Today, those gaps and silences are being filled in not least of all through the efforts of those Others, who, in their search for identity, are exploring the past and restoring its memory.

Memory gives rise to inconsistencies, perplexing questions, mysteries, doubts, fears. Within the memorial space, these are most often relegated to a position seen as aberrant, or elsewhere in spatial terms, meaning outside the accepted sphere of individual or national experience. However, as Edward Said reminds us, this other place does not exist but as a discursive construction of the Self’s imagination in an attempt to delimit the latter as extrinsic and regain control over it. He argues this point in the case of the foreign (specifically the “Oriental”), encountered through travel and exploration, which also undergoes psychological distancing.2 The civilizing mission of the French imperial state was indeed based on a supposed disparity, adding a new dimension to the distance already geographically separating metropolitan France from territories explored overseas which missionaries, industrialists, and educators attempted to bridge in order to illumine the darkness of unenlightened minds or souls. Colonialism was justified. Said argues, by a biased knowledge of the subject, approached as intrinsically different from its Western counterpart and formulated through the Western tradition, from ethnology, to comparative anatomy, to philology, history, and literature, all instruments of power (Orientalism 40).
The actual place of the colony, therefore, remained a mystery to the French public whose ignorance was likely deepened by the State’s attempts to inform them, most notably with the colonial expositions of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

By arousing patriotism and specifically masculine fantasy, for sexual gratification or adventure, exhibit organizers hoped above all to instill colonialist fervor in the visitors to Paris’ colonial expositions. Encouraging settlement in the colonies where the European population had been consistently low was the government’s primary concern in the organization of such events. Well-orchestrated spectacles designed to awe and enchant, therefore, the expositions served moreover as vehicles for the scientific discourse of the time, solidly based in the we-they dualism. The very notions of civilized and primitive and their extensions (biological, intellectual, social, political, sexual, artistic, technological, economic, etc.) were clearly delimited as belonging either to the French Hexagon or the colony in question. The French national, granted the role of explorer and observer, saw the foreign through this refractive medium that precluded an actual meeting between the two. Similarly, Catherine Coquery-Vidrovitch, a contributing author to the two-tome *Histoire de la France coloniale* (1990), argues that the 1931 Colonial Exposition—favoring foremost “le consensus autour de l’idée impériale—,... était destinée au mythe: ‘invitation à la curiosité, excitation des sens et introduction à l’imaginaire’” (2: 216). In effect, it, like the other expositions, created a fictionalized narrative space where the main subject was “la France des cinq continents,” meaning France, the colonies being only the inspirational source for the colorful backdrop. Period literature and film performed this imaginative function as well, creating a mythical space for the French audience’s pleasure.
Even for those who did venture abroad, their experience in the colonies never fully coincided with that of the indigenous inhabitants. The intermixing of the two populations was rare or, when it did occur, maintained the symbolic divide between civilized and primitive, clearly demarcated in the colonial landscape where Europeans lived separate from the natives. Authors such as Albert Memmi, theoretically grounded in the master-slave dialectic, have revealed the fundamental antagonism of the colonizer-colonized relationship, belying the French imperial policy of assimilation in particular. Whereas the European model was held up for emulation, difference (translated into the subject's inferiority) directly served the purposes of the colonial regime by giving it legitimacy. And stability, Coquery-Vidrovitch moreover argues, native rebellion making the civilizing mission inherently risky.

Ironically, the primary tool of assimilation and control within the French Empire, the educational system—held up as a means to access higher social spheres, more lucrative employment opportunities or positions of prestige—potentially exacerbated the divide and ultimately led to a political awakening among the oppressed. Particularly in Algeria, where Arabs and Berbers strongly resisted against French instruction, its uneven distribution between the elite (termed "évolués"), trained as intermediaries within the colonial regime, and the greater masses led to a deep schism dividing the indigenous population. Moreover, it eventually worked against the regime itself. The disillusionment of Algerian intellectuals and writers in the 1950s led to a backlash against a system that had estranged them from their native culture while maintaining them under
the tutelage of a racist power. In effect, by teaching the colonial subject the precepts of French civilization, those of a civil society, the colonialist gave him a new base for resistance.

In his inquiry into “cultural colonialism,” Homi Bhabha draws upon the contradictions inherent to mimicry, or assimilation, which grows from the colonialist’s desire for the subject’s recognizability yet insists on his difference and, therefore, leaves room for “hybridization”:

If the effect of colonial power is seen to be the production of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs. The ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority enables a form of subversion, founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention. *(The Location of Culture 112)*

Likewise, with regard to France’s traditional immigration policy of cultural assimilation, newcomers could use this discursive ambivalence as a space for mediation. In the struggle against marginalization, hybridization has allowed immigrants and their descendants some degree of power in order to escape complete cultural domination and enact change. In the overseas territories during the colonial era, the native elite’s political awakening gave legitimacy to the claims of the base, clamoring for independence.

There, the colonialist authority would ultimately be overthrown. The precarious distance between the holders of power and their wards, or in Memmi’s terms the usurpers and the usurped, would ideologically and forcibly be reclaimed by the latter. War was perhaps the inevitable outcome of a violent past. The inherent tension between colonizer
and colonized explains the colonial regime’s severe repression of uprisings, the military combining with the ideological campaign of the school system to destabilize the indigenous identity and group unity, the seeds of native rebellion. However, for the French population at home who rarely read the limited news reports of unrest and military reprisal in the colonies, throughout the war in Indochina and Moroccan and Tunisian crises until the situation in Algeria had decidedly worsened, these unknown places were effectively enwrapped in the pacifist myth of colonialism. This myth is easily debunked when the contradiction between the privileged status of the French settlers and the misery of the indigenous populations, scorned as much as they were feared, is subject to analysis. The colonialist regime belied any possibility for peace, prosperity and freedom being the sole dominion of the colonizer. Similarly, technological advancement and progress translated into the exploitation of the territories’ resources and the destruction of the cultural landscape. The safeguard from rebellious despots and invading colonialist powers held the land’s occupants under curfews and the constant threat of armed conflict. Witnessing this transformation, the colonized grew to despise the colonialist power, deepening the divide into an entrenched line of battle.

Beginning with the rebellion in Madagascar followed by Indochina’s war for independence in 1947, what had been “la plus grande France” began to crumble under the increasing demands for autonomy on the part of the colonized populations. Comprising more than 100 million subjects worldwide and covering more than twelve million square kilometers, the tenuous Union française (established in 1946 as a more democratic alternative to the Empire) was dealt its first definitive blow in Indochina, according to Ageron. It was, he states, “le temps des occasions manquées” (Histoire de la France 77)
Earlier bypassing the possibility for a federation in favor of the traditional policy of assimilation, the builders of the Fourth Republic limited the colonial representatives’ powers to those of deliberation and left no course for change to the overseas territories other than separation (2: 370). When hostilities broke out in Indochina a year later, the failure of Franco-Vietminh negotiations to reach a peaceful agreement on the creation of an Indo-Chinese Federation in a move toward self-government led to outright war.

War rather than peaceful negotiation, particularly in Indochina and subsequently in Algeria, Ageron contends, left “le souvenir traumatisant d’une défaite” regarding the colonial project; the loss of Algeria was felt even more poignantly as a new débâcle (2: 552). Because of the public’s lack of information and misinformation, decolonization was greatly misunderstood at the time it was happening. Its break with rational historical progression led to further bewilderment. Yet, as Ageron shows in his survey of French public opinion, the public’s longing for peace in addition to Charles de Gaulle’s leadership in the pursuit of his decolonization policy, despite the hostile opposition of the army and the OAS (Organisation armée secrète) to Algeria’s independence, led the majority of the French public to the realization that France’s interests were better served through la Coopération (established in 1961 to replace the short-lived Communauté, the latter having superseded l’Union française) rather than colonialism. Much to his credit, de Gaulle succeeded in bringing what started out as disastrous policy to a peaceful conclusion while maintaining France’s geopolitical prestige through a demonstration of generosity in offering financial assistance to the former colonies. Though la Coopération
stirred more enthusiasm among France’s African partners, with the exception of Algeria, than at home. Decolonization, in the end, would not be experienced in France as a catastrophe. What was experienced as catastrophic was the repatriation of more than 1.5 million French nationals and the arrival of at least as many immigrants, the largest migration coming from the Maghreb. Infrastructurally and psychologically, France was prepared for neither. Particularly with the influx following Algeria’s independence in 1962, the lack of adequate housing was exacerbated by the inimical reception on the part of the metropolitan French. For the latter—the bitter memories of the OAS’s acts of terrorism still fresh and the unsettling meeting with the colonial Other unmediated—the reunion was lived as an invasion of the strangely foreign. French Algeria had come home to France, “home” having become a relative term since the conflicts were merely transposed into an as of yet unknown postcolonial reality. Difference was relegated to the margins, literally outside the city centers, the new lines between Self and Other being quickly redrawn. In order to maintain order, what had been the role of the French army was grudgingly though increasingly assumed by the national police or, more terrifyingly, vigilante groups, such as youth gangs or neighborhood militias.

With the passage of formerly colonized populations through the borders of metropolitan France, not only did the French witness a reordering of the urban space, where the majority of these new immigrants settled in search of work, but also, the colonial subject now within the subjective space of the mainland French, a new chapter in the contemporary French narrative had begun. As a result, the corpus would undergo fresh inquiries, giving rise to new problematics and interpretations. Moreover, much of this period having been
subjected to revision and cover-up or met with popular indifference, the historical narrative was ripe for criticism. Writings, depicting the experiences of France's migrant workers—prey to exploitive employment practices and grossly substandard living conditions—for instance, expose the popular myth of France’s “generous” immigration policy, no formal policy, as Ageron points out, having been formulated before the 1970s. Illiterate for the most part, these immigrants did not author narrative accounts. Rather these have been shared with the greater public through journalistic writings as well as biographical essays and novels that detail the hardships they faced. Through these works, readers may follow the protagonists into the maddening depths of racial hatred and the injustices of the system. Their stories give poignant insight into the effects of colonization, its (in the case of Indochina and Algeria) bitter conclusion, and immigration, distancing the subjects—psychologically as well as geographically—from their native origins and history while submitting them anew to a discriminatory regime.

On the other hand, the children of these immigrants, educated in the French system and raised between two cultures, have actively sought creative outlets to express the intercultural tensions unique to their situation, whether through writing, the media (notably independent radio stations), theater, art or music. Their expression may be seen as acts of resistance against the dominant cultural discourse and the contradictions of France’s assimilationist policy, understanding resistance as Bhabha defines it:

Resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the “content” of another culture, as a difference once perceived. It is the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference and
reimplicate them within the deferential relations of colonial power—hierarchy, normalization, marginalization and so forth. (The Location of Culture 110-11)

Given Ungar’s basis for rejecting the term postcolonial, the structures of colonialism having simply undergone spatial displacement, “cultural colonialism,” in Bhabha’s terms, continues on its divisive course today. The power of culturally divergent discourses, such as those of France’s immigrants and their children, is their undermining of the antagonistic workings of differentiation (we/they, self/other). They reveal the French Republic to be a much more complex, plural space where difference is the norm.

The most visible and prolific of these minority youth are the Beurs—an attractive term for its illustration of hybridization in that it originated in Parisian slang (le verlan) from the subversion of the derogatory Arabe. Designating French-born descendants of Muslim immigrants from the Maghreb, Beurs, as Michel Laronde argues in his article “La ‘Mouvance beure’” (1988), have made their entrance into the national narrative. “[Le mouvement beur] a pris une ampleur telle depuis le début des années quatre-vingts, à la fois par l’abondance et, souvent, la qualité de sa production artistique et littéraire qu’il faut d’ores et déjà en tenir compte comme composante nouvelle de la culture française” (684). The French media would adopt the term following a 1983 cross-country youth march against racism and inequality. Moreover, as Laronde shows, Beur identity is above all linked to a form of political awareness: “Etre Beur . . . [c]’est surtout avoir une certaine perception de sa situation ethno-culturelle” (685). Indeed, the Beurs are cited as exemplary protagonists in the modern identity quest, more difficult and deceptive perhaps due to the cultural mixing and changing allegiances of the latter half of the twentieth century.
For writer Leïla Sebbar, herself not a Beure—born in French Algeria to a French mother and Algerian father—but, in Laronde's terms, "écrivain confirmé qui touche au plus près à la spécificité beure," these youths represent most profoundly the conflictual history of French colonialism and postcolonialism (685):

Les enfants de l'immigration feront violence à la France comme elle a fait violence à leurs pères ici et là-bas. Ils sont sans mémoire mais ils n'oublient pas, je crois. Ils auront, avec la France, une histoire d'amour mêlée de haine, perverse et souvent meurtrière. Ils ne sont pas vraiment de leur pays natal, la France, ni du pays natal de leur père et mère. Ils sont dans des banlieues, ils ont un pays: les blocs et les tours de l'immigration, la pauvre jungle des villes… Que feront-ils? Pour moi, d'où je les vois, d'où je les entends (je ne vis pas avec eux), je les voudrais inassimilés, singuliers et violents, forts de leurs particularismes et de leur capacité à saisir la modernité… Ils sont ma mythologie, pour une part, j'ose le dire et l'écrire parce que, plus vieille qu'eux de dix ou vingt ans, loin d'eux et de leur pays d'immigration, toujours à distance …, je sais où je suis comme eux, proche et attentive en dépit de l'âge, du privilège d'être établie, de la différence…. (Lettres parisiennes 59-60)

This portrait closely resembles the main character of her novel *Le Chinois vert d'Afrique* (1984), published in the same year that the preceding excerpt from Sebbar's correspondence with Nancy Huston was written. Momo is an unstable character, trapped in the ambiguous no-man's-land of cultural cleavage that delineates his subjective space. Clearly, he is a hyperbolic representation of the cultural outsider, the embodiment of the troubled youth of France. Though his story grows from the position of marginalization common to Beur
narrative in general, it is nonetheless very different from that of Azouz, the Beur protagonist of the second novel under study, Azouz Begag’s Le Gone du Chaâba (1986). As a cultural intermediary Azouz enters into dialogue with the dominant assimilationist discourse in a move toward integration and ultimately claims a voice of his own. Specifically, by engaging the major obstacle of racism within the central institution of cultural assimilation, the educational system, he successfully crosses the chasm, ironically renegotiating a meeting between the symbolic duo of colonizer-colonized. Studied in conjunction, both novels convey through the idealized characterizations of their Beur protagonists the scope of the French identity quest, which, as has been evident in recent French history—both colonial and postcolonial—, is marked by the inherent tension between war and negotiation.
As Michel de Certeau states in *L’Invention du quotidien* (1980): “Tout récit est un récit de voyage—une pratique de l’espace” (206). Writers have long explored the nature of space in the formulation of the subject, its hold on the subject as well as the possibilities for change by the subject’s gaining mastery over it. More recently, however, authors have shown preference for the processes of negotiation, in which space is a constantly evolving and multifaceted “reality,” depending on the subjects at play from within and without. In her novel *Le Chinois vert d’Afrique*, Lêïla Sebbar creates such a pluralistic space. Not only does she depict the complex spatial configurations of her characters, whether croisés (hybrids, or cross-culturals), immigrants, or Français de souche confronted by the cultural changes induced through immigration, but also their attempts to make sense of the complexity in which they find themselves. Many must face the fear or pain of exile or displacement, or common to both, the sense of a lack of place.

In *Le Chinois vert d’Afrique*, Sebbar creates a cross-cultural who, like her, embraces exile as a means of escape from his everyday reality despite the trials of solitude and misunderstanding. His is a double exile. Marked by the absence of a homeland, estranged from his family and socially marginalized in France, his country of birth, the main protagonist, twelve-year-old Momo, leaves home only to live the transient life of a run-away. The themes of exile as developed by Laronde, obsession with
memory and the search for a personal history, give form to the subjective space of young Mohamed (alias Momo, Mehmet, Hammidou, Hami or Madou), born to a mother of Turkish origin and an Algerian father who is half Vietnamese. One could also add that he symbolizes France’s colonial history, moreover bearing the legacy of the wars for independence and the indelible label of foreigner, being the offspring of undesirable immigrants and an illiterate in the culture of his parents.

Though Sebbar refuses identification with her mostly Beur subjects, she sees in them “le signe, les signes de mon histoire de croisée, de métisse obsédée par sa route et les chemins de traverse, obsédée par la rencontre surréaliste de l’Autre et du Même, par le croisement contre nature et lyrique de la terre et de la ville, de la science et de la chair, de la tradition et de la modernité, de l’Orient et de l’Occident” (*Lettres parisiennes* 126).

In keeping with her words, written at the time of the novel’s publication, *Le Chinois vert d’Afrique* interweaves such diverse spatial entities and imaginings as presented through the subjectivity of its characters—predominantly Momo’s Vietnam, Algeria, and France, but also the Algeria during wartime of Inspector Laruel, who is pursuing Momo, and the Maghreb (Morocco) of Myra (also a croisée), their France, and the France of the numerous other characters. The convergence of these real and imagined spaces produces the complex and conflicting situations within the novel, a reflection of multicultural experiences in France and elsewhere: from the postmodern euphoria resulting from the, at times, dizzying effects of cultural mixing, to interpersonal impasse, to fearful suspicion or coercive hatred. From the Franco-Algerian couple who own the neighborhood café-restaurant Momo frequents, Kader and Simone: he having learned to enjoy his wife’s pâté, rillettes, and rillons, prepared at the family farm, she preparing chorba as good as
her Maghrebian clients’ memory of it, and the circumcision of their son Karim celebrated with a méchoui in Normandy and the traditional Algerian ceremony with Kader presiding in the Parisian banlieue; to Aïda and Mehmet (the Turkish form for Mohamed), mother and son though strangers to one another; to the neighborhood militia on the trail of the young “voyou [arabe] des blocs,“ *Le Chinois vert d’Afrique* communicates the richness and schisms of both modern-day France and the postcolonial world. As an illustration of métissage, the mixing of peoples and cultures, it is a novel of such contradictions, intrinsic, Sebbar says, to her particular form of exile.

Sebbar elucidates these contradictions in the body of her works by exploring in particular the plight of the children of North African immigrants, the primary targets of racism and xenophobia in present-day France. Their entry into French fiction, marking a “rupture,” in Laronde’s terms, with their predecessors who remained attached to their countries of origin, announces a new literary subject and subjective space, that of the croisé. Born into difference, this subject commonly undergoes intense internal strife, his trajectory laden with intercultural conflicts that he must reconcile in order to construct an identity. However, as Sebbar illustrates through the incorporation of many diverse voices into her narrative, the quest for identity is not uniquely a Maghrebian or immigrant problem. The other characters within Momo’s subjective space, whether indisputably French, invisible or conspicuous hybrids, also have to resolve cultural myths with their living reality. In their meetings with the Other, they are blinded by stereotypes, many hateful but some unintentionally injurious (such as Jean-Luc’s fondness for the medieval name Mahom despite Momo’s protests), silently complicitous with the dominant discourse, haunted by ghosts, indiscriminately open, or passive, or, on the contrary,
welcoming. These varied responses, all coping mechanisms, communicate the complexity of the narrative space as well as the diversity of the subjects within it—the novel, set in the Parisian banlieue, being a reflection of a multicultural France.

It is the creative potential of the hybrid and often confused subject, however, that Sebbar finds most rewarding. She herself requires the conceptual distance of living in exile and writing in French in order to practice her craft and, in fact, does not write or speak Arabic (Lettres parisiennes 20-21). Nor has she returned to Algeria since a brief visit in 1962 (she had left for France in 1958 at the age of sixteen). This crossing, and its multiple meanings of hybridization, betrayal, and traversal, literally and figuratively, of the Mediterranean, produces a certain mutability, which she relives in the act of writing, done mostly in the anonymity of cafés on bits of paper, napkins, the margins of a newspaper. “Je crois que la mobilité de l’exil, je la retrouve aussi là, dans ces papiers instables, fébriles, empruntés dans le désordre aux lieux qui me retiennent dans une ville” (10). Likewise, the croisé is given form and volume through the motion and mobility in the novel, not only in the fugue of the protagonist, but also the segmented nature of the narration, overall and within. It may be argued equally as well that the shifting heterogeneity of Momo’s subjective space predetermined the very essence of the narrative style, as the title indicates, and is representative of the overall multicultural space.

By assembling the actual and mental journeys of her characters into a coherent narrative space—divided into segments according each of her characters a voice rather than into self-contained chapters or fragments (an important distinction)—Sebbar reconnects past to present, self to other, and individual histories to one another. The
narrative transcends division through juxtaposition, establishing each voice and its antecedents within an egalitarian relationship. Yet cohesion remains on the level of the extranarrative. Between the characters themselves, there exists little unity if any at all. As Bhabha argues, hybridization exposes the myths of origin and cultural oneness. Culture, like identity, is always becoming as it is constantly renegotiated. At any one moment, it may take the form of the dominant discourse, but “the colonial,” or in other words authoritative, assimilationist, “presence,” Bhabha states. “is always ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition and difference” since it acquires its meaning after an encounter with the Other, withdrawing to “some prior, archaic image or identity” (The Location of Culture 107).

This ambivalence is precisely what *Le Chinois vert d’Afrique* reveals. The multiple narrative voices—whether the xenophobic discourse of Tuilier and his patrolling cohorts, the nostalgérie of Inspector Larue, as well as Emile Cordier’s wistfulness for the past and Momo’s fixation on the Algerian War—govern the inner space of the individual subjects while no consensus is reached. Each narrative segment makes increasingly manifest the lack of negotiation between the characters.

Susceptibility to absolutes in the search for identity, common to all, is clearly the inherent risk of Sebbar’s characterization of the Beur generation: “Ils sont sans mémoire mais ils n’oublient pas.” Firm though untried convictions are potentially very dangerous, even more so perhaps when founded in enmity and violence, in that they threaten the subject’s viability, given its dependence on hypostatization, as well as outward peace (see endnote 15). Indeed, the struggle with cultural ambivalence is central to Momo’s history, and he vacillates between interiority—an idyllic space shaped predominantly by memories
of his Vietnamese grandmother Minh and the summer he spent in Algeria—and the constant flux of his external world. Momo’s personal mythology is moreover shaped by war, specifically the French colonial wars of Indochina and Algeria, and the irony of cross-cultural love grown from conflict as that between his paternal grandparents, Minh and Mohamed, who met in Indochina while his grandfather was a soldier in the French army. These legendary origins are revered in the icons that Momo obsessively protects: a jade marble, a rare picture of Minh, a magazine photo of Algerian villagers (later revealed to be rebels) carrying a coffin under the watchful eye of French soldiers. They are moreover lived out vicariously through his run from the police and neighborhood patrol and secret exchanges with Myra, the Italo-Moroccan croisée with honey blond hair who has captured his imagination.

In effect, Momo dwells in the destructive we-they differentiation grown from colonial tensions and now manifest in the disparities between his parents’ origins and the dominant French culture. Though, as becomes clear in the novel, neither is a pure entity nor exhibits continuity. Momo is dealt violence from both sides in efforts serving to sustain the distinction, whether in police raids of the high-rises where his family and other minorities live or parental remonstrations in face of his occidentalization (his possession of pornographic magazines, for instance). But these tactics only exacerbate Momo’s alienation from both worlds, of which he is a product, though rejected due to his hybrid subversiveness. The outer turbulence to which Momo is subjected may, therefore, explain his flight into a space free from external conflict, a spiritual retreat into his memory and imagination. Nonetheless, his physical traits, dark curly hair and mat complexion, identifying him as an Arab to observers—only those close to him may note
his Asian eyes—impede a complete get-away. He is still visibly tagged as other outside the family unit and prone to surveillance. Nonetheless, he escapes definition, and hence becomes even more suspect to his pursuers, through his assumed exile. To qualify him as a victim, a sort of orphan with a troubled identity, would be misleading. Rather, his personal triumph—"Il court, souple. Souverain."—stems from his full immersion into the persona of an enigma (Le Chinois vert d'Afrique 47).

The ambiguity of his identity reflects, in part, the terrain vague Momo inhabits. His parents emigrated from Algeria to the Parisian banlieue, where, though Maghrebian immigrants and their families are perhaps the majority, the mix of ethnic minorities and absence of cultural markers (a mosque, for instance) prevent the formation of a collective identity. This lack of cultural specificity may account for the variable names assigned by the neighboring working class French to the block of high-rises, conceived of simply as a space of ethnic otherness: "la cité des Indiens" or "la cité des Zoulous" (28). As Eliane Baumfelder points out (see endnote 18), "l'altérité se double d'une assignation à des territoires collectifs où l'unité culturelle ne se refait pas pour autant." His commune's lack of cultural unity, precluding the full enjoyment of his particular strain of otherness and indicating as well the failure of assimilation, also explains Momo's turn to an interior realm formed with respect to his personal history and desire.

As Momo's nickname indicates, le Chinois vert d'Afrique, he as an individual also lacks cultural unity, making the police officers' investigation all the more difficult. With no clear identity, he becomes in their eyes le Sauvage, l'Indien, le Samourai, le Zoulou, perhaps due to the amulets and crude weapons—the handmade bows and arrows, slingshot, wooden saber and sword, and munchaku—that Bonnin and Mercier uncover in
Momo's shed. Momo's writing reveals him to be "un bougnoule" to the detectives; an Arab, corrects Inspector Larue, whose experience in Algeria during the war may have given him a level of sympathy in regard to the young suspect. Later the discovery of the jade marble, however, raises the possibility of him being Vietnamese. Near the conclusion of the novel, the officers finally hear his voice at the end of the seized audiotape tape entitled "Myra," affirming him to be "Le Chinois vert d'Afrique" (226). Momo's signature, like the totality of the objects inventoried by the police, conjoins the disparate parts of his identity into one. However, though Bonnin and Mercier express victory over the identification of the young runaway, as Larue points out, through his flight, Momo continues to escape definition.

Indeed, Momo runs continuously throughout the novel, only returning to his watched shelter at night. While it is clear what he is running from, discovery on the part of the police and the neighborhood militia who are tracking him, what exactly he may be running toward is unclear. In his mind he journeys to his paternal grandfather's village in Algeria where his grandmother lives still. His dear Minh, brought to Algeria during the war of Indochina by his grandfather, relieved from military service due to a leg injury, represents perhaps the ideal of purity in Momo's driven quest for a homeland. Yet this destination remains wholly imagined through Momo's memories and the letters Minh regularly sends him. As Laronde states in his critical work, *Autour du roman beur* (1993): "La grand-mère Minh, témoin d'une histoire privilégiée, veille au maintien du patrimoine culturel qu'elle seule connaît." The disparity between the mental and physical spaces her grandson Mohamed inhabits constitutes what Laronde calls "la rupture des 'croisés,'" the no-man's-land where one may become lost or perhaps, as many hope,
stake a claim. "Il [Momo] ne peut exister que dans ce mouvement

d'apparition/disparition, qui constitue l'identité de ceux qui traversent les lieux et
l'histoire des autres, qui n'ont pas d'appartenance territoriale" (168).19 His dual act of
escaping and searching—for Mohamed's marathon run takes him to many real and
symbolic places—can be seen, therefore, as an urgent struggle for freedom. It is an
attempt to discover his history, reconstitute his memory, and delineate his space.

In her analysis of *Le Chinois vert d'Afrique* as a literary fugue, relative to the
musical genre, Caroline Clifford lauds the novel's harmonization of difference: "The
narration . . . emphasizes alternance rather than hierarchy of elements" (52). Momo’s is
one voice and one story, though the most important, among many others. However, the
themes of exile and the troubled search for identity in the novel do not necessarily
correlate with the "ideal" image of multiculturalism that Clifford suggests. Momo
represents danger to the "unaltered" French, represented by the militia group and officers
Bonnin and Mercier, because as an ethnic outsider he is invading French space and as a
croisé he refuses spatial classification, or external control: he "runs"—"Il court."
Moreover, his sense of homelessness causes him great anguish similar to that expressed
by Sebbar in *Les Lettres parisiennes*, where she states:

... je me sens saisie par l'exil, je le vois partout, il me devient
insupportable. J'ai l'impression que lorsque je ne me pensais pas dans l'exil,
j'étais protégée. M'exposer à moi-même dans cette perte, ce deuil du pays natal,
d'une terre évidente et simple dont j'aurais hérité et que j'aurais juste à

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transmettre..., c'est m'exposer du même coup sans défense à toute malveillance...

... je n'ai pas de lieu, de terre amicale bienveillante et je ne me sens de place nulle part. (121-22)

And Momo: "'J'en ai marre de la vie...' ... 'Je sais qu'ils veulent me tuer, mais je les aurai avant...'' (Le Chinois vert d'Afrique 139). Or the novel's conclusion, a note from Momo to Myra, which she reads aloud: "Myra lit et relit la fin: 'Ils m'auront pas. Je reviendrai, et je les tueraï. Je passerai chez toi avant, peut-être tu joueras du piano, je saurai que tu es là. Quand je reviens, je les tue. M. Le Chinois vert d'Afrique'" (241).

Suffering from his lack of roots to hold him in place, he consequently has no place and, sensing danger in his vulnerability, lashes out against the forces—an unspecified "ils"—that oppress him.

Possibly the ideal Clifford senses is that offered through memory, invoked through sensory stimuli, which transports the novel's characters from the Parisian banlieue to other far away places, imagined geographic spaces such as Algeria or Normandy or romanticized temporal spaces such as youth. Upon sight of the cemetery bordering the concrete towers of his neighborhood during his meanderings, Momo mentally returns to his paternal grandfather's Algerian village that he had visited two years before. The French cemetery repels him for its gray and dismal lifelessness, so different from the Muslim cemetery he and the other children would visit with the women, playing and conversing beneath the olive trees till dusk on Fridays according to tradition. Further on his path toward the abandoned gardening shed serving as his hiding place, the wall of reeds Momo needs to cross transports him to the courtyard in the mountain dwelling near his grandfather's where he first tasted the red figs native to
Algeria. He, “l’enfant de France,” and Mohamed le Vieux crouched behind a similar barrier of reeds, hidden from his teasing cousins’ view, for this initiation rite (28).

Surrounding these idyllic memorial sites, by contrast, are strangely unmemorable or forbidding places. His family’s three-bedroom apartment is mentioned in passing but rarely entered physically and never mentally. An incongruity deserving of attention is the altered status of Aïda, Momo’s mother, between the Algeria he remembers and the France they inhabit. When he thinks of her, she is pictured in such idyllic moments as those spent in the cemetery in Algeria. Their actual relationship, by contrast, is limited to chance meetings, lasting only as long as it takes for Mohamed to escape. By crossing over to France, it appears they lost their common ground. The cultural mores and traditions that give Aïda a place in Momo’s memories hold no meaning in France’s cultural landscape, and, therefore, she is virtually absent from his physical world. Similarly, Slim, Momo’s father, rarely seen otherwise, is portrayed more as Minh and Mohamed’s son rather than a father figure. His traditional authority is effectively undermined in a world operating on codes foreign to his own.

On the other side of the French cemetery lie the low-rise housing units where Momo sometimes spots men dressed in the garb of the French paratroopers in Algeria. “Mohamed se méfie d’eux” as they do him, seen as a trespasser from les blocs (27). Ironically, cold, unvisited tombstones separate the worlds of the ethnically mixed high-rises where Momo’s family lives and the native low-rises, near the public gardens where Momo chooses to hide. The suburban landscape is suggestive of the tension between forgetfulness and remembrance intrinsic to the relationship between France and its former colonies and its new immigrant populations, particularly that from Algeria. The
Algerian War, though repressed in collective French memory, is nonetheless the source of the schism between the native French and the Maghrebian populations, the latter being grouped under the same category, and the all too recurring theme of “us” against “them.” Sebbar reproduces this destructive dichotomy in her novel in the division between les blocs and les pavillons and la cité and les flics that delineate the physical space where Momo lives.

Though confining and antagonistic, boundaries nonetheless offer stability and protection. Attempts at dismantling them, as Kathleen Kirby studies in her chapter entitled “Lost in Space” in Indifferent Boundaries (1996), while promising new cultural possibilities, threaten a “‘crisis’ in subjectivity . . . largely . . . for those subjects who previously were able to establish dominance over their surroundings” (65). In the constantly evolving pluralist (postmodern) space marked by cultural fluidity, boundaries are open to negotiation, a particularly distressing situation for the ethnically “pure” French in Sebbar’s novel or the white, male intellectuals in Kirby’s chapter. Momo, however, given his initial position of powerlessness has never been an integral subject within the French space, where he lives in a constant state of crisis. While he may mentally navigate the cultural fluidity of his family’s past unhindered, he has not as of yet realized this complete freedom of movement in his outer subjective space. More direly, in his withdrawal into a closed interiority, which gives him a locus however imaginary, he renounces a vital place in the cross-cultural negotiations ongoing in the places he visits: Jean-Luc’s and Eve and Rosa’s bookstores, Chez Kader et Simone, the junkyard (“cimetière des voitures”) where he barters with friends, the Arab café (“café chantant”)
or at home with his sister Mélissa. This separation between his mental and physical worlds will ultimately be bridged, however, through a power reversal. Rebellion.

The last third of the novel narrates an inflection in Momo’s trajectory. Momo, while undergoing the identity crisis common to his peers, differs from them, as the immigrant patrons of the Arab café he visits remark, in his inquiries into Algeria’s history and the war in particular. During one visit, an immigrant worker fills in this missing piece of his history. Momo’s emotion upon hearing the story of the Algerian adolescent killed en route to the mountain rebel hideout and his burial, as told by the former rebel, stuns the storyteller.

Il [the storyteller] a souvent remarqué que les jeunes, les enfants des immigrés algériens ne s’intéressent pas à l’histoire de leurs pays, même pas à la guerre de libération. Pour eux c’est de l’histoire ancienne, le passé de leurs parents, presque des ancêtres… Ils n’écoutent pas… Ils ne posent pas de questions. À la fin plus personne ne raconte rien. C’est le silence. (160)

Through the latter’s discourse, Momo, on the other hand, is able to actualize a part of his mythology, represented in the magazine photo of the Algerian funeral procession whose mysterious subject is finally unveiled. Some of the funeral goers, dressed as simple villagers, were in reality rebels hiding their identity from the French military who had surrounded the rural village—a ruse that succeeded in outwitting the soldiers. Momo’s identification with the revolutionaries restores to him a heroic past that has been repressed by his family, including Minh. At this moment, his self-awareness fuses with the image of the young Algerian’s burial, and one may sense a political awareness.
developing within him. Certain elements of French society loathing him as a "bougnoule," or Arab, he embraces the more active or dangerous part of his otherness and turns it against his oppressors.

As Kirby argues, “culture makes sense of our bodies according to their surface features . . . . Becoming politically conscious might mean becoming conscious of one’s own boundaries, feeling the way we live them” (*Indifferent Boundaries* 35). Further on, she states: “Conventional though they may be, it may prove necessary to preserve the bounds of the subject to make political action imaginable” (119). Though Kirby’s critical work primarily deals with feminism, French feminism, often accused of essentialism, nonetheless offers a possible strategy for subjects relegated by the dominant voices to inferior status. Kirby argues, which is “to offer a location, a standpoint, for resistance; not to say what [s/he] is, but to say that [s/he] is” (142). *Le Chinois vert d’Afrique* marks this important stage in the process of insertion of the Beur subject into French literature. Momo ultimately projects himself into the external subjective space through his correspondence with Myra, becoming a literary agent in his political alignment with the Algerian rebels, as problematic as his choice might be. For, in essence, he dons the shroud of the fallen *fella*=gha*, which offers him comfort while threatening his effacement.

Whether Momo’s story will end in violence, as suggested by the novel’s conclusion, is left unseen. However, as history has shown, according postcolonial subjects a voice to negotiate their colonial past gives them a creative outlet through which the ongoing violence may be attenuated. France’s literary tradition has similarly been forced to acknowledge these subjects’ place within the contemporary narrative, as Laronde contends in *L’Ecriture décentrée* (1996). By writing from within French
culture. immigrant and minority authors—previously ghettoized under the label “roman de l’immigration maghrébine”—have created “un nouveau type d’écart dans la littérature contemporaine en France. Parce que le décalage a lieu pour la première fois dans la Culture française, en France, et non à l’extérieur, c’est-à-dire dans le contexte plus général de la francophonie, il s’en prend au canon littéraire de l’intérieur” (8, 7). The second novel under consideration, Azouz Begag’s *Le Gone du Chaâba*, not only further develops the hybrid Beur subject, but also moves toward resolving the we-they schism by reclaiming a conciliatory voice for him within the French narrative. While Momo “runs” frantically in order to escape the boundaries confining him until finally hinting at armed rebellion, young Azouz attempts to renegotiate them intellectually and linguistically.
With this autobiographical novel, Azouz Begag introduces a very bright, sensitive, and insightful young Beur subject. Azouz is a boy from a tight-knit shantytown community on the outskirts of Lyon, who, through his contacts in school and his writing, moves between and ultimately transcends the diametrically opposed geographical and mental spaces of the French urban landscape. Analogous to his family’s move from the closed Arab space of the Chaâba (whose inhabitants are all from the same bled, El-Ouricia, in Algeria) to an apartment within the city limits—ethnically still in the margins but now within the privileged French urban space—, Azouz’s progressive integration translates into a narrative realm where different entities are able to combine and create something new. This realm, delineated by Begag’s childhood memories, not only grows from intricate cultural intermixing but also infuses multilingualism, which the author recreates in a hybrid French that integrates Arabic as well as Lyonnais slang, with meaning. In effect, the novel’s inventiveness works in tandem with the protagonist’s creative self-formulation in order to fashion a viable Beur identity and narrative figure.

Interestingly, the development of this successful Beur subject transpires through the traditionally “assimilationist” institution of the French public school system. For Azouz, assimilation is not achieved. Public education does facilitate his social integration, however. Likewise, in its report entitled *Etre français aujourd’hui et demain*
(1988) and in accordance with assimilation’s intellectual critics, the Commission de la Nationalité recognizes that the term “assimilation” was “regrettable” with regard to France’s immigration and naturalization policy (though one was only formalized in the 1970s, subsequent to the events recounted in Begag’s novel, and moreover closed France’s frontiers to non-Europeans in 1975) and opts for the less problematic “integration”:

[L’assimilation] semble impliquer que les étrangers perdaient leurs caractéristiques d’origine pour devenir seulement des ‘Français,’ comme s’il existait une essence des ‘Français,’ indépendamment de toutes les diversités sociales et régionales. Il serait préférable de dire que ce fut une politique d’intégration, qui visait à ce que les naturalisés et les enfants d’étrangers devenus français participassent à la vie nationale comme les autres, même s’ils gardaient, dans l’ordre du privé, leurs fidélités religieuses ou culturelles. (1: 24)

As this passage suggests, difference, as that naturally comprising French society, may be overcome and social unity achieved through adherence to national principles, which the educational system (in addition to the Catholic Church, the army, labor unions, and the political Left) has traditionally upheld though to a lesser degree today, contends the Commission. However, as the final sentence in the above passage indicates, successful integration within the French national space is dependent on yet another dichotomy, this time between the public and private spheres, the former taking precedence over the latter. Not only does this disparity potentially lead to disjointedness in one’s everyday activity, but it also slides easily into discriminatory practice and discourse.

It is precisely this discrepancy, regardless of terminology, that Momo and Azouz alike must face. To begin, the concepts of public and private hold different meanings within
the different cultural traditions they inherit. While nudity and sexuality are accepted in the French public sphere (visible in the printed and audiovisual media), for instance, they are strictly relegated to the private within Muslim society. Religion is of course the primary basis for such intercultural conflict, Islam being inextricably linked to public life while the French remain intensely attached to the precepts of secularism, or laïcité. This fundamental difference moreover drives intergenerational discord, leading to violence and separation in the case of Momo and his father Slim (following Aïda’s discovery of pornographic magazines in Momo’s possession) or resolved through compromise as between Azouz and Bouzid. Azouz’s father, as the stronghold of Muslim propriety counter French culture’s perceived elements of corruption, occupies a crucial position within the novel. Bouzid’s acceptance of his son, despite Azouz’s deviations from his standard, preserves patriarchal and, therefore, Arab influence. As is seen throughout, Bouzid maintains his son’s respect through an important value shift within the father-son relationship with respect to their country of adoption. Specifically, he demonstrates a certain (perhaps resigned) willingness to accommodate French custom, choosing as the fundamental guide for his son the value of the education Azouz receives at school.

Though Azouz renounces Islam, discernible in his mocking references to Allah and outright rejection of Koranic school, and rebels against his father’s moralizing tirades—against French television, for example, which broadcasts “obscenities” such as a French kiss—Bouzid constitutes for him a life model as concerns the reconciliation of cultural differences. Common to father and son is a hybridization of cultural mores and discourse, serving to empower Azouz while not completely undermining paternal authority. By infusing France’s cultural authorities with his own, Bouzid reformulates a viable paradigm
to which Azouz may adhere. In exchange, by fulfilling his father’s wish for his children’s academic success, Azouz is able to gain the right to practices, such as watching TV, normally falling outside Bouzid’s set limits. In one humorous example, Azouz, having earned the highest composition grade in his class, draws laughter from his father rather than the expected outrage despite Azouz’s blasphemous invocation of Allah, whom he claims to be guiding his hand in turning on the television.

. . . Emma nous a appelés pour manger dans la cuisine. J’ai pris mon assiette dans les mains et je me suis dirigé vers le canapé.

--Où tu vas? A demandé Bouzid.

--Je vais manger en regardant la télévision, ai-je répondu, sûr de moi.

Bouzid a tenté de protester, mais j’ai aussitôt coupé court à son intervention.

--C’est Allah qui guide ma main . . .

En regardant Emma, mon père a dit:

--C’est un vrai diable, cet enfant!

Puis il a éclaté de rire. (Le Gone du Chaâba 226-27)

In a remarkable reversal, television rights—both a financial and ethical compromise on Bouzid’s part—become the customary reward for Azouz’s accomplishments at school once they move to the apartment on rue Terme. In effect, both father and son mold their desires to the cultural possibilities France offers. It is an act that draws them together, school being the privileged site of their accord.

Whereas Momo’s self-discovery is linked to cultural subterfuge and rebellion, Azouz realizes his potential through the, albeit difficult, process of integration. Initially, in the manner of the colonized subject, Azouz qualifies the French model as more desirable.
However, this preference later modulates toward a pragmatic choice and then alters, with the encouragement of M. Loubon, a pied-noir and his teacher in sixième, to include core issues of his identity. Primarily conscious of the disparity between his life at home in the Chaâba (where he lives for the first two-thirds of the novel) and that of his French schoolmates and their comparative academic success, Azouz formulates the goal to emulate the latter early in the novel.


... Je veux prouver que je suis capable d’être comme eux. Mieux qu’eux. Même si j’habite au Chaâba.

... A partir d’aujourd’hui, terminé l’Arabe de la classe. Il faut que je traite d’égal à égal avec les Français. (60, 62)

Immediately, one may detect Azouz’s sense of being different and his desire for assimilation with the stronger, as opposed to the “weaker,” members of his class. One may also see a slippage between his spatial (the private realm of the Chaâba) and ethnic (Arab) identification, moreover connected to socioeconomic status (“les pauvres”). This confusion of the factors of his difference communicates the complexity of the problems of his integration, which are not easily resumed through a public-private distinction. The one still offers a model reflecting dominant cultural norms, serving to create a sense of belonging or exclusion, pride or shame.

As Azouz discovers, certain private practices, such as those of personal hygiene, are subject to public scrutiny, taught in school as behavioral guidelines in addition to politeness,
honesty, and so forth. This invasiveness of the public into the private realm engenders conflict, which in a salient example from the novel spills into interracial hostility. During M. Grand’s civil instruction lessons in Azouz’s CM1 class, where students are expected to master the basics of cleanliness, those who do not are witnesses to their public humiliation. The Arab students seated at the back, headed by Moussaoui, already feel ostracized for their Arabness compounded by their lower social status and refuse to comply with what they sense as unfair discrimination. When asked to remove his socks for inspection, Moussaoui responds indignantly:

“Mes chaussettes, je les enlève pas, moi. Pourquoi que je les enlèverais, d’abord? C’est pas le service d’hygiène ici? Et pis, d’abord, vous êtes pas mon père pour me donner des ordres....

—Tu as les pieds sales. C’est pour ça que tu ne veux pas ôter tes chaussettes, rétorque le maître qui, sans s’en rendre compte, tutoie son élève.

Alors, l’incroyable se produit. Moussaoui, le rire jaune, le foudroie d’un regard méprisant, avant de lui lancer:

—T’es rien qu’un pédé! Je t’emmerde.

... Moussaoui s’enhardit. Il se lève, se place dos à la fenêtre, de profil par rapport au maître, poings serrés, et lui crie:

—Si tu veux te battre, pédé, viens. Moi, tu me fais pas peur! ...

—Continuez! Quand vos parents ne toucheront plus les allocations familiales, vous serez content!
Ces derniers mots assomment Moussaoui. L'argument est de taille. Qu'on l'expulse de l'école, soit, mais qu'on touche au portefeuille de son père parce qu'il ne veut pas montrer ses chaussettes au maître, non! ...

--Vous êtes tous des racistes! hurle-t-il. C'est parce qu'on est des Arabes que vous pouvez pas nous sentir.

M. Grand a les cartes en main. Il attaque:

--Ne cherchez pas à vous défendre comme ça. La vérité, c'est que tu es un fainéant et que les fainéants comme toi ne font jamais rien dans la vie.

... Regardez Azouz... C'est aussi un Arabe et pourtant il est deuxième de la classe... Alors, ne cherchez pas d'alibi. Vous n'êtes qu'un idiot fainéant. (Le Gone du Chaâba 101, 102, 103)

The underlying racial tension between Moussaoui and M. Grand is palpable. While the pedagogical exercise in itself may not be racially biased, the ideological grounds for Moussaoui's rebellion place the student-teacher confrontation on this plane further buttressed by M. Grand's discourse, which easily slips into racial profiling and tutoiement in order to regain control. Once this is accomplished, M. Grand switches back to more neutral, or subtle, argumentation, supporting his expressed views on the exceptional example of Azouz's academic success, which undercuts Moussaoui's claims. Lacking adequate resources to counter M. Grand's authority and its abuses, Moussaoui resorts to violence, only intensifying the racial hostility.

Later, expelled from school, he, like Momo in Le Chinois vert d'Afrique, is relegated to the gray coldness of the streets where his chances for integration are drastically reduced. Azouz, by contrast, endeavors to combat inequality by meeting the
French on their grounds. This spatial and mental crossover—choosing to sit at the front of the class, favoring his French contacts, and demonstrating diligence in his schoolwork—involves a certain duality. Azouz must maintain a delicate balance between his inner and outer selves, and his fear of discovery causes him real anxiety. He, too, hesitates, paralyzed by "une terrible angoisse," before giving up his socks for le maître’s examination (100). Notably, he remarks the stunned silence of the entire class. Yet, beyond the shared fear of being exposed as "sâle," Azouz moreover risks the public disclosure of his being a sâle Arabe. He relaxes upon remembering that his mother gave him a clean pair to wear in the morning. However, in the same scene he must undergo a second instance of distress when singled out by M. Grand as a successful Arab, at once pointing to his Arabness, which he hopes to de-emphasize, and his unusually good academic results, distancing him from Moussaoui and the others. The latter is perhaps the most painful consequence of his double identity as it implies a betrayal of his ethnicity. Despite the shame and embarrassment his Arabness brings upon him, it is clearly the most central fiber of his being.

Like the "reluctant guest" in Rosello’s Declining the Stereotype (1998), Azouz is witness to a disparaging exchange in which a "cousin," or fellow Arab, is the losing party. Moreover, he becomes an unwilling accomplice to Moussaoui’s undoing through M. Grand’s discursive appropriation of him. Aware of the liabilities attached to his visible difference, Azouz must decide how to respond given his sensitive intermediary position: join Moussaoui in rebellion, abandon him through disavowal, or reconcile his own outward desire, acceptance by the dominant group, with his inward allegiance? His choice of the third option necessitates negotiation between his Arabness and his
Frenchness, leaving him vulnerable to exclusion and dispossession respectively. Battling against racial slander, such as that which insidiously penetrates M. Grand’s speech, is, however, a delicate undertaking. As Rosello argues in her study of ethnic stereotypes, all attempts at eradication necessarily fail in view of the stereotype’s contaminative iterativity and ideological power. Only “a politics of grammar” focusing on formal properties, or what she calls “declining,” she concludes, may work to “control” the stereotype and, consequently, harness some of its potency. “‘Declining’ is an ambiguous gesture of refusal and participation at the same time. The trace left by the declining posture is a complex piece of writing where both the stereotype and its critique cohabit so intimately that no safe barrier can be erected between the two” (Declining the Stereotype 13). Similarly, the stereotypical, though perhaps true-to-life, elements in Begag’s narrative do not go unchecked. Rather, Azouz, the hybrid protagonist and narrator, subverts their force through the structure of his discourse.

The young Azouz is already an ambiguous character. His deliberate reorientation draws suspicion from his Arab schoolmates, who call him “fayot” and “Gaouri” [“Français”], or “faux frère.” As his semblables, Azouz’s friends also occupy the middle zone between the private Arab sphere and the public French space where the lines separating “us” from “them” become obscured. The resulting mutability, however, as is seen in the following excerpts from the novel, the dramatic dénouement of the hygiene lesson, is a source of tension, not only between the youths but also internally as it is a destabilizing factor in the construction of self- and group identity. “T’es pas un Arabe, toi!,” accuses Moussaoui. “... ‘Si, je suis un Arabe!’ ‘J’té dis que t’es pas comme nous!’” (Le Gone du Chaâba 94). And, later, Azouz replays the exchange in his mind,
adding this retort: "... Si! Je suis un Arabe et je peux le prouver: j’ai le bout coupé comme eux..." (107). While Azouz’ physical traits align him emotionally and historically with other Arabs, this semantic shift between “we” and “they” underlines his political (the social being reflected in the grammatical) ambivalence. The manner in which he and the others approach the tensions inherent to their dual position, grasping onto smoky absolutes or withstanding this temptation through personal fortitude, ultimately determines who will become polluted by stereotypes and who will rise above them.

*Le Gone du Chaâba* is replete with stereotypical elements, from the filth of the Chaâba (including Uncle Saïd’s outdoor butchery) and the women’s *binouars* to Azouz’s bicycle theft toward the end of the novel. These characterizations, however realistic they may be, echo and seemingly confirm constantly evolving, though equally as harmful connotations that have been attached to Arabs living in France since the 1960s. Did Begag, one may wonder, consciously and deliberately interweave such details into this coming-of-age story to accentuate his hero’s accomplishment while not estranging him from his ethnicity as constructed through personal memories and popular discourse? Azouz is undeniably an Arab, and more precisely a Beur, subject. And it is this Beur subject that breaks through the barriers of poverty and racism to earn the highest mark on a free-writing assignment where his chosen subject is just that—racism. He does not abandon his “brothers,” but joins them in the garbage heap, full of hidden treasures, under the *tahar’s* razor blade in the most excruciating rite of manhood, in the marble tournaments and battles against the prostitutes on the boulevard, and ultimately through his writing.

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Yet this final daring step toward the unification of his inner and outer selves in his construction of a hybrid and, therefore, unique Beur identity, reflected in the writing of the novel itself, is perhaps the most difficult. Azouz's respect for rules, whether those upheld by France's civil institutions or semiotic, in his assimilation of French norms both helps and hinders his development. He must carefully tread the fine line between his bicultural allegiances, and his occasional stumbles throw into doubt his entire trajectory. For in his betrayal of one or the other, Azouz more importantly risks self-betrayal. His "disorientation" before his community's upheaval following the police's discovery of Saïd's butchery, thanks to Azouz's unwitting denunciation of his uncle, may similarly be understood as the result of conflicting loyalties (132). In this example, while Azouz is moved by his regard for the defenders of public order, he may only fulfill their request by disordering the private space of the Chaâba. Afterward, he is left to resolve the paradox. Interestingly, later in the novel when he must choose between his self-interest and conformity to the law, he acts according to the former and commits bicycle theft. This transformation indicates not only his reevaluation of external codes but also the assumption of internal ones, or a reordering of Azouz's subjective space.

Likewise, his family's move within the city limits coincides with a progressive shrinking of the private sphere and withdrawal into the self, with French television and occasional friendly visits serving as windows to the outside. The resulting isolation and loneliness of Azouz and his family contrast sharply with the communal spirit of the Chaâba. Yet, ironically, their integration into the French urban space culminates in a higher degree of agency in Azouz's writing, whose evolution is explored as well as that of the characters. At the beginning of the novel, Azouz's writing assignments at school offer him escape into
another, specifically French, realm. At night, while his elders dream of an idealized elsewhere, specific for some, vague for others, Azouz eagerly anticipates the chance to write. “Les gens dorment. Les femmes rêvent d’évasion; les hommes, du pays. Je pense aux vacances, en espérant que demain sera un jour de composition à l’école” (65).

However, he approaches his first composition topic, the description of a summer day in the country, obliquely by creating an expressly French version, designed to please his “maître,” M. Grand. Despite his academic success, Azouz’s early literary efforts are clearly failed attempts at authorship. His borrowings from an external source, embodied in the imposing figure of his teacher, stifle his potential for originality. His subsequent two teachers fault him for this weakness. However, only one, M. Loubon, opens a creative space in which Azouz may assume his identity outwardly and become a successful Beur subject.

It is in M. Loubon’s composition class that Azouz can finally realize his ambitions as a budding writer. This development follows a difficult year in CM2, corresponding to his transition between the Chaâba and the new apartment and the deepest point of his identity crisis. Caught in a cycle of extreme self-denial and mimicry, even feigning a Jewish identity in his wish for acceptance, Azouz is accused of plagiarism by his teacher Mme Valard, disgusting him with French composition altogether and earning him the reputation of a “malhonnête” and “petit malin” (221). His relatively mediocre academic performance nonetheless permits him entry into the lycée and M. Loubon’s class, an entirely different realm. As a pied-noir and, therefore, an exile in France, M. Loubon helps him—partly, it appears, out of personal desire and nostalgia—to break the pattern of mimicry by integrating Azouz’s Arab cultural background into his instruction of French and, in effect, draws out his hybrid originality. Beyond creating an atmosphere
conducive to cultural exchange. M. Loubon breaks with the traditional curriculum and incorporates lessons on Arabic, the language Azouz uses at home. Both embarrassed and flattered by his teacher’s attentions, Azouz does eventually rediscover his will to write, specifically with the rare opportunity of a free-writing assignment in which he bears his soul in exemplary style.24

Inspired to fulfill his teacher’s expectations and granted the creative freedom to do so, Azouz, by earning the highest grade of the class, ultimately succeeds in surpassing the French standard and realizes the desire he had expressed earlier on: “Je veux prouver que je suis capable d’être comme eux [the French]. Mieux qu’eux.” Moreover, by choosing the risky subject of racism, he tackles the primary obstacle to his integration and the integration of Arabs in France overall. More generally, by addressing the issue of race through the voice of its young narrator, the novel transposes the Beur subject into an active rather than reactive subject. Beyond declining ethnic stereotypes, it breaks through the culturally dominant discourse and rescues its protagonist from the margins, restoring him to the interstices, rather, between the two cultures that make up his identity. In the end, Azouz is not a victim, a malhonnête or a petit malin. Nor is he a traitor to his fellow Arabs. As the novel’s author, he transforms his weaknesses and transgressions into creative strategies in order to reclaim a narrative realm where differences may combine. Through the act of writing his story, Azouz Begag not only assumes the liberties of authorship but also uses them to mediate cultural and identity conflicts.

His act is moreover one of linguistic creativity, for he no more forgets his ethnic and local roots through a conscious subversion of the French vernacular. While the young Azouz recoils in horror at his limitations in French, occasionally slipping into
Arabic, slang, or the broken French of his Chaâbi elders, and prefers to remain silent than expose his ignorance, the adult Begag composes his novel—predominantly the dialogue, but also narration—in this hybrid tongue. This mixing is reflected in the title of the novel, “gone” signifying “kid” in the Lyonnais dialect and “chaâba” “popular” or “of the people” in the Algerian dialect of Azouz’s parents (cited by Mehrez 33-34). The inclusion of two dictionaries, of the Algerian and Lyonnais dialects respectively, at the end of the novel in addition to a guide to his parents’ French (“la phraséologie bouzidienne”), not only enables understanding, but also, as Samia Mehrez observes, further legitimates the narrative’s construction of “a new language that is not simply popular and oral, but literary and written” (“Azouz Begag” 34). She situates her contention within the ongoing debate on Beur literature’s place within the French tradition and its continuing exclusion. Taking issue with the negative classification of “minority” literature and its conflictual status with regard to the canon, Mehrez seeks to highlight the novel’s positive and linguistically innovative move “to trace new territories” and a “new position . . . which seeks to be grounded, and not simply ‘deterritorialized’ or ‘deterritorializing’” (28, 33).

The language does solidly situate Azouz’s story in its geographical, ethnic, and socioeconomic setting and, therefore, counteracts the debilitating effects of exile that limit Momo’s subjective freedom, inciting him to rebellion in Le Chinois vert d’Afrique. In effect, by actively negotiating its protagonist’s narrative power, indeed seizing this right, Le Gone du Chaâba creates a space in which he may articulate the unique issues of his dual identity, a possibility favoring reconciliation. This prerogative is clearly the advantage of first-person narration in a literary subject’s quest for identity. However,
whether or not such license is applicable to the social context is another matter, a disparity that has led to some criticism of the novel and more recently the film (1998), perceived as idealized portrayals. With regard to social harmony, as Kirby asks in her study, one may wonder whether violence is “the necessary price” of leveling hierarchies and destroying boundaries (*Indifferent Boundaries* 117). As this study first postulated, the integration of difference into a coherent space is perhaps the most challenging test for a nation. Beyond general adherence to national principles, its success depends most fundamentally on the degree to which individual voices may be expressed and heard. The joint exploration of Sebbar’s and Begag’s novels gives insight into the French national space by foregrounding just what is at stake in the identity quest of a plural France: social cohesion, intimately linked to shared agency.

*Le Chinois vert d’Afrique* specifically lends itself to the exploration of the crisis of agency, or subjectivity. The conspicuous rarity of direct speech in the novel—as opposed to the predominant use of the *discours indirect libre* to communicate the characters’ dialogue and thoughts, with a few notable exceptions—suggest not only an extreme degree of interiority but also the subjects’ incomplete autonomy. If, indeed, subjectivity and voice are attached to place, it follows that narration acts as a grounding force within the space of the novel. However, in *Le Chinois vert d’Afrique* the inward directed narration implies that little or no common ground exists where its diverse voices may converse. Individually they give dimension to the overall narrative scheme but remain largely segregated. For Momo, the novel’s protagonist and most marginalized character, his limited narrative power is reflected in his nomadic trajectory. Unsettled and conditioned by a history of conflict, his voice easily rises to a combative pitch.
Significantly, in a letter recounting his evening at the opera Tristan et Isolde with Jean-Luc and repeated through the thoughts of his grandmother Minh, Momo’s narrative voice emerges: “Avec Jean-Luc il [Momo] était allé sur la scène à la fin, on voyait Tout. Tout... C’était génial, sublime, Mâ. Dans les coulisses, une femme presque une géante, en robe de scène, il avait reconnu Isolde, il en était sûr, l’avait embrassé... Oui, Mâ, oui Mina” (Le Chinois vert d’Afrique 222). However, this isolated interjection of spontaneous enthusiasm allows only a glimpse into Momo’s unbound subjectivity—escaping both the third person and the author’s quotation marks—that does not reappear until his final frightening note to Myra. At the opera Momo finds a space that moves him to speak of himself, his passion for music, his family, and his past, not only to Minh, but also in his ensuing dialogues with Eve and Rosa and his friends at the Arab café. Sadly, in two separate passages flanking Momo’s opera experience, the members of the neighborhood militia also raise their voices to the narrative level to reinstate the alienating discourse of otherness and racism in their combined account of the neighborhood’s history—which has, they say, taken a turn for the worse with the arrival of the new immigrants, Arabs, Asians, Antilleans, and Black Africans. It is on this rift, it appears, that the novel will close.

In an interesting reversal, however, the narrative power of Félix Lenoir, M. Tuilier, and the others is undercut in both instances by a disinterested or absent interlocutor: Emile Cordier, the Italian immigrant and communist, who through his silent, though recorded protest deadens the weight of their words. Despite its struggling Beur subject, Sebbar’s novel undeniably marks an important change in the French narrative. Traditionally dominant subjects are forced into silence, and those once denied a voice,
though still contending with marginalization, can seize a chance to negotiate, constituting what de Certeau identifies as the primary role of narrative, and specifically the “delinquent” narrative: “Il ouvre un théâtre de légitimité à des actions effectives. Il crée un champ qui autorise des pratiques sociales risquées et contingentes,” and further, “met en jeu le fās [a Latin word de Certeau uses to designate foundation] qui ‘auteurise’ des entreprises et les précède” (L’Invention du quotidien 219, 220). *Le Chinois vert d’Afrique* establishes this foundation, opening a space in which fledgling subjects may operate and effect innovation.

However, it does not completely satisfy de Certeau’s definition of narrative delinquency: “Si le délinquant n’existe qu’en se déplaçant, s’il a pour spécificité de vivre non en marge mais dans les interstices des codes qu’il déjoue et déplace, s’il se caractérise par le privilège du parcours sur l’état, le récit est délinquant” (226). The novel may be seen rather as a nascent form or, in de Certeau’s words, “une délinquance en réserve, ... assez souple pour laisser proliférer cette mobilité contestatrice, irrespectueuse des lieux, tour à tour joueuse et menaçante.” Its protagonist does not succeed in escaping his marginalized position and further succumbs to “l’état,” inhabiting his body, the site of his persecution, as it has been socially defined. Yet through his rebellious movement, he does inscribe a space for himself where his personal history may take form. “L’opaque du corps en mouvement, gestuant, marchant, jouissant, est ce qui organise indéfiniment un ici par rapport à un ailleurs, une ‘familiarité’ par rapport à une ‘étrangeité’” (227).

The narrative limits barring Momo’s full subjective grounding in *Le Chinois vert d’Afrique* are transcended in *Le Gone du Chaâba*. By mediating its Beur subject’s
integration into the echelons of narrative power, the second novel succeeds in creating a viable space for his self-realization. Free to articulate his history, Azouz is less susceptible to myths, whether the myth of origin, as befalls Momo, or that of assimilation. Though both serve as referential markers, Azouz is able to reconcile the two in the creation of his own space. What Sebbar’s and Begag’s novels share in common above all is their challenge to the French myth of cultural unity. The one is threatening for its splintered narrative space, symbolic of multiculturalism and its perceived instability, and the other for its spatial hybridization, implying the loss of traditional cultural identity.

As a result, space and, in a larger sense, the nation lose their defining function, attacking France’s national project, traditionally of universal scope, at its base, the premise of cultural unity: “Etat-nation par excellence, la France, héritière de la centralisation politique et culturelle constituée par la monarchie et renforcée par la légitimité révolutionnaire et la tradition jacobine, imposait que l’unité nationale fût doublée de l’unité culturelle, manifestée par l’emploi d’une même langue et la référence à une même histoire” (Etre français aujourd’hui et demain 1: 24). A rereading and rewriting of this project seem inevitable, not least of all given the contributions, literary and otherwise, of the new immigrants and the integration of their differences into the changing French social fabric and conscience. Maintaining social harmony will require the crossing of boundaries and familiarization with the increasingly diverse subjects who claim the French Republic as home. It is not a facile endeavor and, as Beur literature attests, risks the traveler’s alienation. Yet it is clear that, in the evolution of the French national space, this space will only belong to active participants and not passive witnesses.
This last chapter synthesizes the precepts of national memory and space in an exploration of their possible coherence as the basis for a pluralist nation. To this end, the writings of Antillean authors are of particular interest since the cultural hybridity of their home islands, combined with autonomist impulses against their dependence on the French state, have led to revolutionarily new national imaginings. Counter France’s national premise of cultural conformity, Antillean thinkers have created powerful works on cultural métissage, or creolization, which implies a decentralized union of diverse elements, though bound together through an allegiance to the universal values propounded by human rights. For the moment, this social ideal remains largely that—an ideal. Its political viability will be tested in the immediate future as Europe comes into being. The creation of Europe has likewise sounded an alarm for France’s regional inhabitants, in particular, who in their concession of powers to a greater political body foresee the frightening prospect of being swallowed up into an undiscriminating conglomerate. The inherent tension between cultural specificity and national or continental allegiance, in other words self- and group identity, is here manifest. After giving an historical overview of the region of the French Antilles leading to the culturally formulated principle of Créolité, I consider in my analysis two
narratives. Maryse Condé’s *Heremakhonon* (1976) and Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco* (1992), which uniquely articulate the challenges and risks of the nationalist project from the point of view of the culturally and politically dispossessed.
4.1 INTRODUCTION

For the islands and land-based territories today constituting “la plus grande France,” the concept of nation has always been wrought with ambiguity. As they are tellingly referred to here in this expression of colonial rhetoric—in an adjective clause and, therefore, an embellishment of and subordinate to the noun, within syntactical and ontological proximity yet separated by the expanse of a space—France’s overseas departments (“les DOM”) continue to struggle in their quest for self-empowerment and identity. Centuries of colonial domination, the slave trade, subsequent migrations, French departmentalization, compounded by the total or near extermination of the original indigenous populations or absence of one, have led to the multicolored, multicultural, multilingual, though politically and economically hindered regions that are today Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guinea, and Réunion Island.¹ The contradiction between their status as the scattered possessions of the French state and their living cultural realities has found expression in a growing corpus of works that relate a being in search of collective belonging.

The mixed heritage of these lands, resulting from their imported French and African sources and further informed by Asian, Middle Eastern, and other European additions, has in the past decades engendered narratives and outright cultural manifestos that are distinct from dominant models and strive for local if not international recognition. Calls for literary independence have inspired groundbreaking works particularly in Guadeloupe and
Martinique, both islands in the Caribbean. In these writings the past may be detected in the (generally) black or mulatto subject's primordial struggle against damnation, clearly a consequence of slavery and the class and color codes which have survived in these stratified societies. But beyond inscribing markers designating a subjective space, these works consciously or unconsciously map out that space geographically, sometimes the discrete space of an island, sometimes the navigation routes radiating from it. Though the collective consciousness they speak designates an already existing spatial reality, they give this place, most likely obscure or unknown, a voice and identity.

During the colonial era the remoteness of France's colonized others served to blur the violences committed against them. The French imagination, as a result, was free to indulge in fantasy, which took form in films and novels of the time period. The stream of images to and recreated within metropolitan France displayed the seductive exoticism and adventure of the colonies, as seen through French (male) eyes, against the backdrop of France's civilizing mission. Tellingly, in regard to France's overseas departments and territories, this fantasy continues to linger, though the concept of "civilizing mission" has perhaps been replaced by a financial one. What colonial imagery did not show, and in the case of the DOM-TOM still does not show—alienation due to racial and class prejudice, the resistance of the oppressed populations, and repression on the part of the assimilated regimes—has migrated to the French mainland and is manifest in the present urban problems. However, in yet another instance of French forgetfulness, if not disinterested ignorance, cultivated by spatial distance, the majority of the metropolitan population still remains largely unaware and uninformed as to how the colonial legacy is
playing out in the France overseas. It is in these far-off places, which had given and continue to give the nation the pleasurable distinction of *la plus grande France*, that the national narrative is evolving perhaps most profoundly.

Such a thought seems at the very least ironic given that continued deference to France, condemned by many as culturally irresponsible, continue to thwart community-building initiatives in France’s former colonies-turned-departments. The enduring basis for the whole of Guadeloupean, Martinican, Guianese, and Réunionese societies, traced back to the plantation and its “export logic.” is one of material and ideological dependence on the metropole for whom the territories’ production is solely reserved (Giraud 235). In the “ultra-periphery” of the French nation, from where travel to the center symbolically evokes the traffic of human beings, any sense of national identity is fragmentary at best. “Dominés par leur imaginaire,” France’s citizens overseas, Martinican author Patrick Chamoiseau has argued, are the silent, seemingly acquiescent oppressed. As though by default, therefore, subjection to France has become naturalized. Yet it is nonetheless in these self-forsaken places that innovative theories of nationhood have taken form through contemporary strategies of cultural resistance, or *marronnage*.

This modern practice of marooning, as the cultural source for a burgeoning national consciousness, doubles the irony if that exile, in Timothy Brennan’s words, is “nationalism’s opposite,” “a simultaneous recognition of nationhood and an alienation from it” (“The National Longing for Form” 60, 63). However, Guy Viêt Levilain conceives of postcolonial exile more positively as a potential for change:
... the dialectics of the colonizer and colonized have everywhere resulted in defense systems which, to a certain extent, have enabled the colonized to create and preserve a part of their cultural identity and to hold as exotic—and not as supreme standards of civilization—the values the colonizers tried to force on them. ("Cultural Identity, Negritude, and Decolonization" 7)

Concepts of nationhood for the formerly colonized necessarily grow from such intense negotiations. In order for the nation to first be conceivable, attempts at valorizing indigenous culture have to reconcile the incongruities of the past while neutralizing the colonizing power through ideological abstraction. The viability of the postcolonial nation further depends on its ability to accommodate the demands of an increasingly interdependent world where communication is key to social harmony and economic survival. The coexistence of nationalist expectation, inherited from the West, and internationalist urgency has thus given way to a more fluid concept of collective belonging, succinctly defined by Brennan in "The National Longing for Form":

The idea of nationhood is not only a political plea, but a formal binding together of disparate elements. And out of the multiplicities of culture, race, and political structures, grows also a repeated dialectic of uniformity and specificity: of world culture and national culture, of family and of people. (62)

This mutual defense of cultural specificity and membership to a greater human community is striking for its revival of French egalitarianism. Despite their negative history with the mainland, France’s subject populations have consistently advocated this most radical doctrine of French Jacobinism. Eagerly embraced as a means of liberation from the yoke of
slavery and colonialism, the principle of human rights regardless of ethnicity, class, or political affiliation and an individualism grounded in the community are at the foundation of the national idea in the overseas departments.

The Caribbean's unique history is consonant with this pluralist discourse of which the Caribbean social geography, an archipelago with its mixture of tiny islets and larger land masses, its spattering of languages, cultures, political and economic systems, all traces of their colonial pasts, is particularly emblematic. Indeed, the ebb and flow of Caribbean identity currents—whether following the lines of political affiliation, economic status, physical characteristics, language, and other cultural traits or altering their course—gives a sense of these islands' geopolitical situation. Guadeloupe and Martinique may be within the dominion of France. Yet their natural ties with the rest of the Caribbean and their shared history of "transportation, slavery, colonisation" have made the supposed legitimacy of this status appear deficient if not dubious (Hall 114). It could also be argued that the politics of the Caribbean identity quest outline growing international trends in the face of multiculturalism and globalization. Thus, in view of not only its universal qualities but also its grounded specificity, Antillean narrative is clearly relevant for France.

It is to be noted that the most celebrated writers from the Caribbean are deeply if not militantly engaged in the articulation of identity. The quest for identity, as is traditionally the case for formerly colonized populations, is a negotiation between the desire for autonomy and that for assimilation, further complicated by the economic imperatives of the twenty-first century. Political and ideological resistance against assimilation has always been most significant in Guadeloupe and Martinique, who uneasily reconciled themselves with their departmental status following their inclusion into France in 1946 and likewise
with regionalization pursuant to President François Mitterrand’s decentralization policy of 1981. It remains to be seen whether or not Guadeloupean and Martinican narratives are establishing a foundation on which separatist sentiment may prosper and gain dominance in the public and political spheres. The development of a national consciousness, unlike in Western nationalist traditions, must overcome the absence of a ready myth of cultural origins and the inculcation of a foreign aesthetic and value system. In any case, it seems clear that writers advocating for independence from under France’s tutelage have begun on that quest. They have engaged in the greater project of nationbuilding, at least on the metaphorical level, in the sense of Benedict Anderson’s theorization of “imagined communities.”

Though full members of the French state, the DOM have never been part of l’hexagone, which in common parlance refers to the French mainland in view of its geometrical shape. However, it could easily be argued that l’hexagone, as the historical and ideological center of the nation, refers to the geographical matrix of French national identity with which, as a result, Guadeloupean or Martinican identity, growing from different historical and sociopolitical factors, does not coincide. Their difference, as Mark Kurlansky in *A Continent of Islands* (1992) illustrates, is readily tangible in such nationalistic language. He refers to popular terms used in the French Antilles to refer to an Antillean from mainland France: for instance, “Negropolitan,” meaning a black from the metropole, which has replaced the more pejorative “negrogrecolatin,” a black with a classical education, and the more polite and more recent “Negsagon,” or a black from the hexagon (259-60). “Behind all these words,” Kurlansky states, “is a fundamental problem with the French-Caribbean relationship”: 124
Guadeloupe, Martinique, and French Guiana may be full départements of France and their people full-fledged citizens, but to the French people in the métropole, the fundamental characteristic of these citizens is their blackness. Frenchmen, like Englishmen, are not accustomed to the notion of a black citizen. No matter what his papers say, a black man does not look like a Frenchman in the subconscious opinion of many. (260)

In essentialist definitions of the nation potentially symbolized by the term l’hexagone, France’s overseas citizens could be seen as no more than “Français de papier,” a slogan of the Action Française echoed in the discourse of the New Right today.

A refusal of French identity, however, on the part of Antilleans, whether the use of the derogatory “nègre” is due to a complex of inferiority or self-deprecating humor, can also be detected in the above terms cited by Kurlansky. In fact, as Kurlansky further points out, French Antilleans rarely if ever refer to themselves as French. They identify themselves more readily with their island or the region of the Caribbean. It is precisely this breach in national meaning that has opened a space ripe for narrative “delinquency” in Michel de Certeau’s sense of the word (see the conclusion of chapter 2). How has the national idea evolved, then, in the overseas departments, geographically, historically, and culturally distinct from l’hexagone? Clearly France’s officially stated national project, ensuring national unity through cultural unity, a common language and history, conflicts with the collective experience of its overseas populations. Over fifty years of departmental status have not erased their differences. They have little more sensitized the metropolitan French
to the need for national acknowledgment of those differences. It would be ironic then, indeed, if the nègre's act of declining the stereotype of the French citizen has informed the future direction of the national idea.  

In his exploration of the schism between citizenship and nationality in *Deconstructing the Nation* (1992), Maxim Silverman investigates the historical underpinnings of French nationalist racism, which most afflicts France's new immigrants from the former African colonies. His analysis of the mutual development of the nation and the state, the one pertaining more to a conception of cultural uniformity and the other to a juridico-political conception of nation, is particularly enlightening with regard to the overseas departments. He dates the "nationalization" of French society to the first decades of the Third Republic (1870-1940), when the development of the state gave definition to the areas of "le territoire" and "la population" (28, 29). These previously hazy notions became statistical entities initially with the establishment of the census. Further, industrialization, leading to a "profound institutionalisation of social relations" (e.g., labor unions, social welfare, public education), and, he contends, more poignantly colonialism crystallized definitions of the national, the foreigner, and the natural frontier (Danièle Lochak, cited by Silverman 29). Thus, the creation of the nation-state had perhaps dire consequences for the universalist pretensions of the French Republic. For once the state apparatus gave the French nation measurable perimeters, France's cultural essence, lauded so passionately by the Romantics, acquired a more discernible identity.  

Subsequent additions to the national *territoire* and *population*, easily integrated into the supposed interests of the State, were perhaps less compatible with the nation, transfixed as it was within a certain idea. This incongruity most certainly set the basis for the French
state’s official policy of assimilation, which neutralized the foreignness of the overseas populations and endeared them to the public as the outer bulwarks of French civilization. Thus the departmentalization of Guadeloupe, Martinique, French Guiana, and Réunion Island in 1946, politically reaffirmed with the establishment of *l'Union française* under the Fourth Republic and implemented two years afterward, did not shake the colonialist mindset. Rather the law’s supporters expounded on the Republican imperative of engaging in such a humanitarian mission following the extreme privations endured overseas during the war, in the manner of Léon de Lepervanche in 1947:

> There are two tendencies in our [overseas] territories; on the one hand there are the autonomists, and on the other those who want to be fully French. The autonomists are the big landowners, and all those who profit from the people’s misery and seek to maintain their own privileges. (cited by Hintjens 20)

According to historian Robert-Charles Ageron, the fundamental political changes the law announced were largely unknown by the majority of the metropolitan population:

> L’Empire avait simplement changé de nom, de la même manière que les colonies avaient été rebaptisées territoires ou départements d’outre-mer. En décembre 1949, la simple définition de l’Union française comme entité comprenant à la fois la métropole et les territoires d’outre-mer était encore inconnue de 76% des personnes interrogées. (*Histoire de la France coloniale* 2: 411-12)

Ageron attributes the overwhelming public backing of *l’Union française* to “l’instinct de propriété” more than any ideological stance (2: 412). However, angry denunciations of the “legal fiction” of departmentalization and demands for autonomy or independence on the
part of the black political class quickly succeeded in arousing public indignation, even
spiteful paternalism, aggravating the mental distance between l’hexagone and the overseas
departments (cited by Hintjens 21).

Departmentalization disillusioned a number of Antillean intellectuals, many of
whom were adherents to the growing négritude movement, inspired by Aimé Césaire’s
Cahier d’un retour au pays natal (1939) and its revalorization of Africa for the black
diaspora. Négritude, itself an inheritor of Pan-Africanism, the Harlem and Haitian literary
renaisances, and further informed by French surrealism, sought to return dignity to the
culturally dispossessed and racially vilified populations of the colonized world by
reconnecting them with their ancient roots and restoring to them a system of values with
which they could identify. Elected mayor of Fort-de-France and Martinican député, Césaire
is for several reasons a central historical figure of the era. However, and to the dismay of his
contemporaries, he argued for his island’s departmentalization, declaring it a median step
toward future independence.12 Liberation, the defeat of fascism, and the promise of
communism filled him with optimism before what he believed to be a reformed France.
Abiola Irele, in his introduction to Cahier, interprets Césaire’s action as “a response to the
hopeful signs of the day; in the general perspective of this outlook, far from being a
contradiction in his position, it was indeed in full conformity with the universalism
consistently proclaimed in his poetry” (xxxix). Throughout his career, despite his
disillusionment, Césaire did not abandon this political position that was held by many of his
admirers as a betrayal of his poetic tribute and political allegiance to a Martinique distinct
from France and deserving of recognition as such. His active and eloquent defense of
Antilleans' humanity and dignity nonetheless translated into a political battle for autonomy, whose first aim was the full realization of citizenship rights and economic reconstruction, though he never realized their sovereign independence.

Contrary to Césaire's expectations, Article 73 of the Constitution of the Fourth Republic, allowing legislation to be adapted to the "particular conditions and requirements" of the DOM, contradicted the departments' equality as stipulated by the law and preserved the colonial-era policy of administration by decree (cited by Hintjens 26). In the Caribbean, the promise of full citizenship on an equal basis, importantly aligning wages, benefits, and social programs with those of mainland France, was effectively cut short by the economic concerns of the struggling elite planter classes. The outrage generated by this abusive privileging of the particular over universal rights was met, however, with what could be perceived as nonchalant "surprise" in the métropole in Ageron's analysis:

Apparemment, beaucoup de Français se demandaient alors s'il ne valait pas mieux abandonner à leur sort ces terres dont Césaire assurait qu'elles ne se voulaient plus françaises. D'autres, il est vrai, estimaient que par "ce chantage au séparatisme" les Antillais réclamaient seulement une élévation de leur niveau de vie. (Histoire de la France coloniale 2: 554-55)

If, as Kurlansky asserts, subconscious color codes of French citizenship exist, historically based in the crystallization, or "racialization," of French nationality according to Silverman, such arrogant disregard for the nation's black citizens is not surprising. Slavery had been justified through the dehumanization of black Africans. In order to relieve the French treasury, the "nègres" in the overseas departments were simply cast into a subcategory of citizenship. The Republic's founding document, La Déclaration des droits de l'homme et
du citoyen (1789), had set the precedent by limiting universal human rights to the scope of the nation, dependent on the will of French citizens. The Fourth Republic’s constitutional adjustment of the national body in its determination of eligibility for those rights effectively molded the concept of French citizen to the metropolitan model.

By contrast, the advent of the Fifth Republic in 1958 saw attempts to satisfy both the economic and political demands of the overseas populations. Maintaining a sphere of influence in the Americas had become a Cold War priority for President Charles de Gaulle who vehemently defended French independence from the two superpowers. The space base at Kourou in French Guiana was vital to France’s strategic interests in the region. Therefore, in a move to rejuvenate local support for departmentalization, a number of important reforms were introduced. Decentralizing initiatives were taken, though their effectiveness is debatable since the majority of power remained in the hands of the departmental préfet, an office directly appointed by the president of the Republic. In addition, social expenses were raised to the level enjoyed in mainland France, industrial development became a state priority in response to the agricultural crisis, a migration policy was put into place, and through “la départementalisation adaptée” decreed in 1960, the Conseil Général gained more authority over the distribution of state investment funds. However, despite de Gaulle’s popularity overseas, it was clear that protection of national interests preceded the full realization of citizenship rights in order of importance.

Antillean opponents of departmentalization, followed by regionalization, and now the construction of Europe continue to levy harsh criticism against what they see as the ongoing exploitation and decimation—or ingestion, in Mireille Rosello’s reading—of their islands and cultures. The artificial maintenance of the standard of living has not
only ruined the traditional agricultural economies but also discouraged private investment and industrial development, ultimately increasing material dependence on the French state. Easy migration to France, where better professional opportunities lie, has drained the islands of their human resources, a phenomenon acridly denounced by Césaire as “génocide par substitution” (cited by Ageron 2: 555). In view of the current state of affairs, separatist groups are fighting for what amounts to “political heresy” (Kurlansky 265). Their explicit goal of increasing competitiveness with the independent Caribbean while maintaining spending power has led them to demand a reduction in social benefits, salaries, and benefits, coupled with freedom of trade. European unification, risking to make the French Antilles the Club Med for Europeans and all that implies—the destruction of natural habitats to build concrete highrises, further displacement of the natives, many of whom are poor and illiterate, and the exoticization of their culture for the tourism industry—have made their claims all the more urgent.

However, as Chamoiseau has decried, political pleas to the French state for greater autonomy are empty when elected Antillean officials are absent from crucial inter-Caribbean discussions, with CARICOM, the central organization of the English-speaking Caribbean, for instance. In the same vein, Helen Hintjens, in her article “Constitutional and Political Change in the French Caribbean,” states that:

... virtually no political groupings in the French Caribbean want full sovereignty without a continuing [financial] attachment to France. ... The debate in local politics, therefore, is less about constitutional and political status, as it may appear,
and more about the use to which the present political institutions are put, and the
degree of autonomy from the central administration in Paris. This does not include
demands for financial and technical autonomy; far from it. (31)

While in 1992 Richard Burton hopefully wrote that “more and more Martinicans seem to
be conscious of the need to preserve at all costs, and in a living rather than fossilized-
exoticized form, their distinctive natural and cultural hinterland against the homogenizing
pressures that assault it.” it appears doubtful that full independence is a realistic or even
desirable goal (“Towards 1992” 83-84). Despite recent showings of pro-independence
parties in local elections, the status quo has consistently been the winner overall.

Beneath the politics, however, a movement has been growing against what Burton
calls the “bétonisation—real and metaphorical—of landscape, life-styles and language”
to reclaim the Antillean space for its dispossessed citizens (83). In a move similar to
Césaire’s reconciliation with the nègre, lyricized in his groundbreaking Cahier d’un
retour au pays natal, the proponents of Antillean identity are reclaiming Creole culture,
most vibrant during the otherwise devastating plantation era. By returning to the depths
of the fall, but where the forced mixing of African and French languages, folklore, and
religious beliefs created a vital cultural force, bent on survival due to the mutual hostility
between the two groups, créolistes are endeavoring to retap the original source of black
cultural resistance. To a certain degree la Créolité, since theorized by Jean Bernabé,
Raphaël Confiant, and Chamoiseau, was universal. Its codes were adopted by the white
bébé class and later by newly arrived Eastern Indian, Lebanese, Syrian, and Chinese
indentured workers as a currency of translation, both literal and metaphorical. However,
born from the crisis of enslavement in overloaded ship holds and cramped living quarters
and sustained through the indigence of servitude, it is naturally a culture of opposition, its resilience lying in its capacity for perverting the master’s codes of oppression, as exemplified by the Creole language.

In the manner of the maroons, taking refuge in the densely forested hills of Guadeloupe and Martinique. Creole culture has survived only in isolated pockets. There have, however, been initiatives to restore it to its imagined place as the essence of Antillean society, beginning with the language itself. Creole linguists, and here Marie-Christine Hazaël-Massieux, have continually argued for its intrinsic value to the preservation of Creole culture: “une contribution essentielle pour permettre l’expression plus large, plus objective des spécificités d’une société” (Ecrire en créole 258).

Consequent to regionalization, scholastic programs in Creole were developed to reverse its systematic destruction through the generalization of French instruction, an effect of assimilation. Yet what are in fact the Creoles’ varied vocabularies, phonemes, and syntaxes hinders the establishment of one globally recognized written language. Creole’s limited usage—in the Caribbean it is spoken only in the former French colonies, including Haiti, St. Lucia, St. Martin, and Dominica in addition to Guadeloupe, Martinique, and French Guiana—precludes its elevation to a lingua franca in the region. Though initiatives to formalize Creole promise a stronger linguistic identity for Creole-speaking peoples, the example of Haiti, where the majority of the population, French illiterate, do not understand their government representatives and are furthermore cut off from the greater French-speaking world, poignantly demonstrates the challenges facing aspiring Creole nations. Creole is nonetheless upheld as a cultural symbol of the Antilles.
Just as the formalization of a written language has so far been stuck in an academic quagmire, however, the national aspirations of Creole culture so too risk being confined to theory. The adoption of *la Créolité* as a common cultural signifier has led to attempts at founding a Creole history and literary tradition, political program, and social aesthetic. In its most extreme expression, such as the cultural purism that characterized Guadeloupe’s sociopolitical climate in the 1970s, Creole activism has estranged native Antilleans themselves. The politicalization of culture—of which the actions of the UPLG (Union Populaire pour la Libération de la Guadeloupe) during the 1970s is particularly illustrative—, however attractive a strategy for bringing a people’s specificity to the fore of international discussions for the promotion of autonomy and independence, is counterproductive to this aim. For by making it a matter of policy and thereby subjecting it to the forces of political control, cultural politics remove culture from the grounded processes of everyday life and their natural evolution. The multiplicity of Antilleans’ cultural sources, not limited to their Creole past but rather in constant flux, surpasses any rigid codes a given political body may try to emplace, precisely reflected in the failure of France’s assimilation policy. Only through concrete measures pertaining to the functions of the state, it appears, setting the basis for economic independence for one, may a political or structural change come about.

In a similar fashion, native nationbuilding projects deriving their inspiration from theoretical epithets have alarmed some Antillean thinkers to the dangers of essentialist definitions of identity and nationalist myths, most notably the Guadeloupean author and cultural iconoclast Maryse Condé. She and others, including Patrick Chamoiseau, have insisted on the amorphousness of Antillean identity, favoring *Antillanité*’s eldest
propounder Edouard Glissant’s articulation of la Relation as opposed to the transcendent Etre of the Western tradition. These authors’ writings echo Glissant’s most influential ideas on the intrinsic incoherence of culture, which evades any formulations or claims to authenticity. Likewise, the premise Françoise Lionnet adopts for her textual analyses in “Logiques métisses,” motivated by the controversy surrounding the notion of culture among anthropologists, limits the reach of quantitative cultural classifications, which are only measures of difference. Lionnet concludes:

If “difference” is what makes culture visible to observers, then the emphasis on difference has the merit of underscoring specificities which would be muted and ignored otherwise. But an overemphasis on dissimilarities is likely to lead from racial and biographical determinism into an essentialist impasse. . . . Difference then becomes—on both sides of this binary system [colonizer-colonized]—the reason for exoticizing, “othering,” groups that do not share in this [their] mythic cultural purity. (105)

In other words, culture when conceived of in abstraction risks being restricted to the by-products of differentiation, elements that disunite human beings into unequal factions.

Literature, by contrast, potentially liberates cultural expression by giving the subject place—not through the negativity of difference but the creative processes of being—from where s/he may interact with the world, whether her/his natural environment or elsewhere.

Condé’s Heremakhonon (1976), republished as En attendant le bonheur in 1988, and Chamoiseau’s Texaco (1992) are exemplary of such emancipating narratives, though Heremakhonon’s qualities as such have been greatly misunderstood. Condé’s novel is an exploration of the limits of the cultural paradigms Antilleans have inherited from the past,
while *Texaco* moves past these paradigms in its exaltation of the profound complexity of contemporary Antillean society. Though one could conjecture from the authors' choice of idiom an estrangement from their region's language and culture, both written narratives reflect the composite nature of their subjects who through their hybrid French express their polyvalence. Vibrant cultural expression is possible for non-metropolitan francophone writers, as Lionnet explains:

\[
\ldots \text{the French language is a means of translating into the colonizer's language a different sensibility, a different vision of the world, a means therefore of transforming the dominant conceptions circulated by the more standard idiom. To write in French is thus also to transform French into a language that becomes the writer's own: French is appropriated, made into a vehicle for expressing a hybrid, heteroglot universe. (""Logiques métisses"" 104)}
\]

Similarly, the hybridity these novels communicate is not culturally exclusionary but rather specific to their subjective space. Though resistant to French appropriation, neither engages in outright rebellion against France or in excessive cultural mystification. These are not traditional French narratives. They are uniquely Antillean, consciously or subconsciously practicing what Burton calls "internal *marronnage*, to subvert and circumvent from within" and thereby inform standard notions of French citizen and nation ("Towards 1992" 85).
In Condé’s controversial first novel, her young Guadeloupean heroine returns to the land of her enslaved ancestors in an effort to reconnect with her past and reclaim her roots. A descendant of the plantation system and a mulatto, her African lineage broken by forced exile and the impropriety of a béké, Véronica Mercier is like an orphan looking for a greater family to call her own. In reaction against the French myth of assimilation so completely absorbed by her middle-class parents, she seeks an uncompromised black authenticity in the Africa she first envisioned in her father’s library as a little girl and finds Ibrahima Sory, her “nègre avec aïeux,” an Oronoko of noble blood. This search for authenticity among supposed opposites, as may readily be guessed, fails. She herself poised between French and African cultural models, Véronica’s subjective voice unfortunately becomes the site not of resolution but of bitter altercation between the two. Though seemingly overpowered by clichés and racist epithets, her narration does, however, provide a context and suggests a movement in which her geographical voyage may be understood as a necessary détour in her self-quest. Any hint of a final destination remains unclear at the end of the novel. Yet in her departure, she comes away with the profound realization that her pursuit of an original African majesty, like her family’s blind adherence to French cultural values, has been a vain endeavor. She indicates rather, with characteristic melodrama, that identity comes from within—“Et
moi. me voilà livrée à moi-même. Piégée. A tout jamais. A tout jamais?”—which is a frightening concept but also a liberating possibility as her open question at the end suggests (Heremakhonon 244).

In its substance, Heremakhonon is a demystification of Africa, the spiritual homeland for the majority of Antilleans and imagined black cultural matrix as it was formulated and disseminated through the theory and poetics of negritude. Véronica’s retreat into Heremakhonon. Mwalimwana’s sumptuous presidential estate—translating from Malinké into “waiting for happiness,” from whence comes the novel’s title—, may be seen as an escape into a fiction, indeed the protagonist’s fantasy of finding a “free” black essence in the persona of Ibrahima Sory. the country’s Minister of Defense and the Interior.19 Surrounded by the nativist trappings of a neocolonialist African nation, centenary baobabs, animal skins, and leather poufs. Véronica cannot or refuses to see the consequences of state policy for the citizens beyond the high gate and heavily armed guards. She waits, charmed by the thought of Ibrahima Sory’s return and her musings over the scandal of their affair. However, on the other side of those walls where she is witness to the violent student uprisings and excessive police reprisals, she ultimately cannot ignore the country’s sociopolitical complexities that betray her desire of finding an original and untarnished black magnificence. The events taking place in the city outside infiltrate her daydreams and succeed in eliciting her own personal cri, dissimulated perhaps as one of pleasure, the climax of lovemaking, but “un cri de souffrance. Un cri unique, prolongé comme une plainte” (204).

For Christopher Miller, the Africa Véronica seeks and which she claims as “vital” to her being is “a myth to be exploded” (“After Negation” 179). “The myth of Return is to
blame,” he specifically charges (178). For the protagonist’s flight to Africa is more than an illusory pursuit of happiness and sexual bliss. Ibrahima Sory, however tantalizing a lover, does not maintain his political untouchability before the growing evidence of the human atrocities, foremost Birame III’s rumored death and Saliou’s reported suicide, to which he has been the signatory. In the face of his own program of cultural purification counter these agents of socialism, who are judged a lasting blight from Western occupation, this stately black prince takes on tyrannical dimensions in Véronica’s eyes. His leadership of a newly formed Comité de salut public following the bomb explosion endangering Mwalimwana and fires engulfing the State party headquarters and radio station, draws bitter irony into her account of the public’s abject poverty and helplessness under the regime’s armed—by foreign-produced rifles and tanks—repression. What she imagines lost through European colonization and is moved to regret has, it appears, been regenerated here through a dangerous nationalist fetishism of an idea of Africa, politically constructed and idolized as prior to and different from the West. Véronica’s gained insight into his nation’s sociopolitical situation risks destroying not only all that Ibrahima Sory symbolizes for her but also the cultural icon that Africa represents and negritude propounded for blacks everywhere. Through Véronica’s act of revisiting the source, Heremakhonon becomes, in Miller’s words, “the antidote to negritude and its vision of Africa as One” (178).

Aimé Césaire’s groundbreaking Cahier d’un retour au pays natal and the ensuing negritude movement had given the oppressed voices of the black diaspora a new and invigorating aesthetic with which to subvert Western European discourse. The allegorical figure of Ibrahima Sory initially appears a potential instrument of this discursive battle, as Véronica’s reflections reveal: “J’aime cet homme ou une certaine idée que j’ai besoin, à
travers lui, de me faire de l’Afrique? . . . Quelle est cette idée? . . . Celle d’une Afrique, d’un
monde noir, que l’Europe n’aurait pas réduit en caricature d’elle-même” (Heremakhonon
119). What then drives Véronica to leave Africa and Ibrahima Sory? In response to this
question, she curiously admits to murderous impulses toward him: “C’est-à-dire qu’à ma
manièere, qui pour moi n’est pas moins méprisable et cruelle [than that of the revolution, in
my interpretation], si elle n’est pas sanglante, j’aurais aidé à le tuer. A l’achever. A ce qu’il
ne reste rien de lui. Rien” (244). This evolution from love to hatred, paralleling her mental
and narrative progression from the remembered past to the lived present, derives from a
conscious though reticent engagement as “enquêteur” of the political conflicts that ensnare
her and finally drive her to leave. The reasons for her departure imply a failure of her
touriste. Touriste peut-être. Mais d’une espèce particulière à la découverte de soi-même.
Les paysages, on s’en fout” (20). Ironically, her surroundings in the end upset this quest.
Her disillusionment and outrage before Ibrahima Sory’s totalitarianism, the blind dogmatism
of the revolution, and the public’s seeming indifference to their national crisis awaken her to
a multifaceted Africa that overwhelms her own identity problem. Yet the source of this
hatred bordering at times on condescension grows, as she realizes, from a self-negating
tendency toward comparison. She is, like her family, arrogant in her search for self-
valorization through her sarcastic and ironic mockery of others.20 Her return to Africa
likewise becomes a confounding querelle between the different Africas she encounters, and
she leaves before this contest destroys the myth altogether.

While indebted to negritude for its initial breaking of the silence, Heremakhonon is
among the first of a growing number of Antillean narratives that articulate the need for
emancipation from all totalizing discourses, thus surpassing this monumental precursor. Although Véronica’s narrative voice, seemingly colonized by trite phrases and slogans that indicate a lack of originality or depth, risks being, as Lionnet claims, “caught up in the grammar of her own alienations,” it does progressively communicate her growing doubts until fully released in her plaintive, though dissimulated, *cri* (“Happiness Deferred” 167). She inwardly accuses the regime’s abuse of political power, all the while collaborating with it outwardly in her acquiescence to Ibrahima Sory’s desires. Her guilt-ridden concern for the revolution’s leaders, Saliou and Yéhogul, does not in any way commit her to their struggle. And her vengeful wish for the public’s uprising in which she would join dissolves in the city’s deep slumber the night following Saliou’s suspect death. But her rebelliousness succeeds, as Miller also contends, through her treacherous deceptiveness of ironic detachment. “Véronica’s discursive situation has nothing to do with either silence or failure. Her position is one of power, a means of critique that allows the narrator to present Africa in a certain light” (“After Negation” 178). Through its manipulation of imagery and themes previously developed within negritude and Césaire’s poem specifically, *Heremakhonon* in essence deconstructs this discourse through allegory, in its dismantling of the supposed unity of the African national character.

As the embodiment of her idea of Africa, Ibrahima is attractive to Véronica as a means to transcend her cultural and racial alienation borne from the assimilationism of Guadeloupans. Her choice of lover, however condemnable, indicates a need for a deep and timeless affirmation, *un retour aux sources*, to be bathed in “ce flot noir et montueux” (*Heremakhonon* 65). This need, the basis of her desire, makes the more modern Saliou an imperfect partner in her quest as her thoughts communicate: “Saliou, c’est un Africain, un
homme d’Afrique, qui pour moi ne saurait être l’Afrique et, partant, cristalliser l’amour qu’à travers elle je cherche à me porter” (207). Véronica’s search to restore ties to an ancient and noble lineage is clearly a reaction against a value system that has denigrated the elements of her difference—her skin color and physique, class, education, and gender—and, because inculcated, bred self-contempt. This consciousness of herself, as the constant interplay between past and present suggests, derives from the Guadeloupe of Véronica’s childhood and youth: her father’s disappointment in her, betraying to her his preference for a son, her jealousy of her more favored sisters, who have, like their mother and contrary to her, docilely accepted their destiny in marriage and motherhood, and her humiliation before the lighter complected, finer featured female members of the mulatto gentry who disdain her. This past is the motivational matrix through which her narration of Africa gains meaning. Véronica’s subjectivity transposes her memories of Guadeloupe onto her experiences in Africa sometimes so imperceptibly that one cannot be told from the other, so that, in effect, the two dissolve into one. In this temporal collapse, her mystification of Heremakhonon takes on greater significance as the mirage of a more perfect homeland.

Indeed, at one point in the novel, Véronica does seem to confuse her palace retreat with her native island. when she states: “Heremakhonon, mon île” (129). However, it is an “island” lacking a past and a future. The sterility of her relationship to it through her loveless affair with Ibrahima Sory belies the viability of its illusion:

Mes aïeux. Je ne les ai pas trouvés. Trois siècles et demi m’en ont séparée. Ils ne me reconnaissent pas plus que je ne les reconnais. Je n’ai trouvé qu’un homme avec aïeux qui les garde jalousement pour lui seul, qui ne songe pas à les partager avec moi. Si nous pouvions échanger nos enfances, alors pour moi, plus de salle Anne-
Marie-Javouhey [where she endures her family’s humiliation before the haughty
disdain of the mulatto elite during their vacation in Saint-Claude]. Plus de zombies à
exorciser. Mon père, un vieil ascète au visage entouré d’un voile blanc. Ma mère se
teint les pieds au henné. Sa lèvre est bleue comme l’indigo. Les Blancs? Les
Blancs ne sont que des chiens incirconcis! Oui, mais pour cela, il faut l’Amour.

Similarly, her rejection of her family and of the dual prospect of marriage and maternity
may be interpreted as an allegory for her repudiation of the national project in the traditional
sense. The men through whom she claims to seek liberation, her first, Jean-Marie, a
Guadeloupean mulatto, followed by her French lover Jean-Michel and Ibrahima Sory, are
simply the human instruments of her vengeance against her inherited notion of family, the
source of her alienation. In effect, only Mabo Julie, her family’s housekeeper and
Véronica’s surrogate mother, had imbued its meaning with love, and she died childless,
poignantly symbolizing the painful relationship of the Guadeloupean black woman to her
reviled body. By translating her subjective space to an African context, therefore, Véronica
does not overcome the social ills that plague her in Guadeloupe. She only replaces one
totalitarian regime with another. Guadeloupe’s bâtards with her host nation’s orphans and
child martyrs.

Her initial desire to consummate with her ancestors through Ibrahima Sory may,
therefore, be understood in the sense of the “nationalist impulse” that Abiola Irele detects in
negritude’s poetics: “Africa served as a reference for what must be acknowledged as an
incipient nationalist consciousness” (Introduction to Cahier xxxv). However, similar to
New World blacks whom negritude awakened to the inequities prevalent within their
adopted national families, Véronica’s inclination to look to Africa—whose occultation had
fed this spiritual attachment—as the privileged source of her difference jeopardizes any
aspirations toward realizing a free and sovereign black nation. She, like negritude’s
proponents, is in effect borrowing external signs from one continent and raising them to the
symbolic level of cultural purity to replace those of another. Furthermore, her hope to
discover egalitarian and humanistic foundations beneath this African nation she imagines in
terms external to herself crumbles, since the popular underpinnings of democracy must
necessarily grow from the cultural complexities of a populace. Ultimately, Véronica’s
abandonment of her amorous project, as the climactic end to her dramatization of the
political battle over Africa’s cultural aesthetic, exposes the weaknesses of negritude’s
nationalist fiber.

Véronica does not, however, reject the myth of Africa entirely. Though perhaps in a
diminished state, her departure preserves it as such. The constant interplay between
Véronica’s intense emotional attachment to the idea of Ibrahima Sory and her fearful
suspicions of his hand in tortures and assassinations, mirroring her back and forth movement
between Heremakhonon and the city, makes Heremakhonon a complementary narrative to
negritude in its search for non-totalitarian balance. Anticipating Glissant’s theorization of la
Relation in Le Discours antillais (1981), it renounces transcendence, the fixed and fixating
Etre, through its investigative mode and bitter rejection of mimicry. Consonant with this
discourse and its assertion that, in Glissant’s words, “[la] pulsion mimétique est une
violence insidieuse,” Véronica’s move toward liberation coincides with a progressive self-
investment in her narrative and subsidence in her use of clichés (31). Véronica’s brief
detour in Africa, therefore, may be seen as an active acknowledgment of her diverse cultural
inheritances. What she has gained though this newfound understanding, however, remains unclear since her departure seems to lead nowhere. Her destination of Paris, where Ibrahima Sory reminds her it is springtime, another cliché, occludes her imagined return home.

Stuart Hall's characterization of the third cultural "presence," which in addition to the French and the African for Antillean is the Caribbean, as the "most ambiguous," or "sliding term," sets a basis for understanding Véronica’s failure to return to her particular social geography ("Cultural Identity and Diaspora" 116). As Glissant states: "Le Détour ne mène nulle part, quand sa ruse originelle ne rencontre pas les conditions concrètes d'un dépassement" (Le Discours antillais 34). Alone in her quest, Véronica does not have recourse to a community that would validate her findings and join in her revolt against debilitating distinctions that undermine the sanctity of the very notion of community. She is a wandering exile lacking resettlement options. Imagining the aftermath of what she will have left behind by leaving Africa, Véronica plunges into negativity, proclaiming her emotional detachment while realizing the inanity of her flight: "J’aurai secoué sur ce pays la poussière de mes sandales! Ça, je serai loin! Mais où? Est-ce que cela veut dire que je ne peux plus leur [her family] échapper?" (Heremakhonon 227-28). In the substance of her narrative, however, there does appear to be a solid base from which she projects herself creatively.

In its embrace of ambivalence and ambiguity Heremakhonon is inherently and thoroughly Antillean. The hermetic nature of the narrative, mirroring Véronica’s degree of self-absorption, is generally attributed to the extreme alienation of the protagonist. Indeed, the narrative codes may lessen its apparent internal coherence. But they may
purposefully divert attention to the condition of the speaker, who is, as has been explored elsewhere, a Guadeloupean exile with an identity problem. Further, she is female. If Véronica’s voice is interpreted through the prism of gender, the substance of her ruse becomes palpable, extending beyond her critique of transcendent nationalism. Her expression as a Guadeloupean woman reveals its groundedness in the narrative traditions of her region.

Her seeming “passivity and lack of will,” interpreted by Lionnet as “symptomatic of her colonial background and ambiguous situation . . . within the cultural constellations of the [here, African] ‘other,’” may, in effect, be the keys to unlocking this ruse (“Happiness Deferred” 175). Her intelligence and lucid introspection accuse this relative inaction within the text itself, ironically proclaiming herself to be a character worthy of contempt. It is the blatant contradiction between her understanding of the events and her understanding of her denial of them that belies any blindness on her part. Her action or inaction stems from conscious choices and decisions, and all the while she recounts the details of the real and imagined horrors of a police state. If it can be said that Véronica “fall[s] victim to internalized stereotypes”—though I would limit the reach of this interpretation to the first part of the novel—is it improbable to surmise that she is herself at first a stereotype, the emergent Antillean subject who is still caught between two discourses (Miller 173)?

Véronica’s stammering practice of *la Relation*, audible in the dialogical nature of her narrative, opens her to the currents of the *Divers* very much in the way of Suzanne Césaire’s “l’homme-plante,” a metaphor for the black who abandons himself to the rhythms of life, further echoed in *Cahier*:

146
Eia pour le Kaïlédrat royal!

Eia pour ceux qui n’ont jamais rien inventé
pour ceux qui n’ont jamais rien exploré
pour ceux qui n’ont jamais rien dompté
mais ils s’abandonnent, saisis, à l’essence de toute chose
ignorants des surfaces mais saisis par le mouvement
de toute chose
insoucieux de dompter, mais jouant le jeu du monde (23)

An embodiment of the femme-plante, Véronica sways in the sense of her possibilities, influenced by the intensity of the sun or the obscurity of the night. While the one embarrasses her for its intrusive perspicacity—“Ah! Le soleil! Quel dieu inhumain qui n’abaisse jamais sa paupière. Qui oblige ses suppliants à soutenir son regard.”—, the other opens up to her the intoxicating freedom of covert activity (Heremakhonon 59). It is at night that she and Ibrahima Sory engage in their first sexual encounter. Although at first uncertain, Véronica bares herself completely, both physically and psychologically, in “ce lit profond aux draps bleu nuit” (65). This possession of darkness’ invisible depths chases away “le cheval de Man Hibé,” the specter of her childhood fears.

Three months later, filled with outrage on news of Saliou’s death, she awaits nightfall to take her revenge on Ibrahima Sory’s murderous repression, incapable of leaving him and Heremakhonon beneath the sun’s penetrating gaze that risks uncovering the secrecy of her subterfuge:

Je n’ai pas fui Heremakhonon. Tout simplement parce que je n’en ai pas la force.

Littéralement. Le soleil. Le soleil. Et si je me trompais? Si la ville, le pays tout
entier se changeaient en coulées de lave, les hommes de la terre prenant leur daba,
arrachant les branches des arbres? Evidemment, moi je souhaiterais un carnage
général. Pour leur prouver qu’ils ont fait un mauvais calcul. Oh, très mauvais! Et
que cette mort ne va pas être dérisoire, bénigne, inutile. . . .

Qu’est-ce que j’espère?

Attendons la nuit! Le jour, le soleil est un superflic qui ne laisse rien au

Peut-être qu’elle donnera courage. Peut-être qu’elle donnera force. (238-39)

In this passage, Véronica reveals a treachery reminiscent of slave rebellion. Her outward
passivity conceals the seething force of her inner defiance to this “sun god,” this “cop,” the
latter a term she has already used to designate Ibrahima Sory, a jealous lover. Véronica’s
barrenness moreover echoes the most widely practiced form of revolt of her enslaved
ancestors, depriving the master of self-regenerating bodies of subservience. Similarly,
Véronica’s resistance is an invisible force—like the night’s haunting, otherworldly quality—
that flows through her words, their violence bursting through the façade of acquiescence.

Her evocation of a specifically Antillean metaphor, the volcano, is a potent symbol
of her destructive power against external agents of oppression. Mireille Rosello, who has
analyzed this metaphorical form of resistance in Antillean writings, characterizes it as thus:

La coulée de lave brûlante fournit au poète le matériau imaginaire d’une description
de la parole poétique qui transcende les contradictions de l’assimilation [historically
symbolized by the destruction of Saint-Pierre, Martinique, following the eruption of
Mount Pelée in 1902] . . . . Le long silence qui a précédé l’éruption du volcan
propose un modèle narratif encourageant à ceux et celles que l’on oblige à se taire, il
explique aussi la violence qui se déclenche après un long mutisme et donne au
vomissement poétique un caractère alchimique et spectaculaire débarrassé des
connotations de maladie et d’abjection. (Littérature et identité créole aux Antilles
136, 137)

Indeed, the volcanic metaphor coupled with the release of lava may be traced through
Véronica’s narrative as symbols of her body’s curative or defensive powers. Her
psychological ailments, indicative of a mal-aimée, that compel her to seek remedy in
intimacy with Ibrahima Sory subside in the soothing pleasure of sexual intercourse. “[Ce]
flot noir et montueux” that exudes from the core of her body is strikingly lava-like: “Cet
homme-là qui va me posséder ne sait pas qu’à ma manière je suis vierge. Bien sûr, le pagne
ne sera pas taché de sang et la griotte ne l’exhibera pas fièrement devant la tribu rassurée.
C’est d’un autre sang qu’il s’agit. Plus lourd et plus épais” (Heremakhonon 65). The
surface calm of their relationship is abruptly shattered, however, by a slap. Véronica’s
suddenly voiced accusations of Ibrahima Sory’s dishonesty in his denial of Birame III’s fate
incite him to violent anger, and she responds in kind: “Le sang gicle. De ma vie, je n’avais
jamais éprouvé si violemment l’envie de tuer” (215). “Les contradictions de l’assimilation”
to which Rosello refers above are translatable to the context of Véronica’s self-abnegation in
her continuing loyalty to her lover, who ultimately reveals himself to be the “assassin-du-
peuple” as Birame III first characterized him (55).

Perhaps the most devastating destruction is wrought, however, by her angry torrent
of clichés, spewing forth perhaps all that has been “ingurgité de bonne grâce,” but also
risking to engulf her in its flow (Condé, cited in Littérature et identité créole aux Antilles
137). Her speech in the first part of the novel, where she initially breaks the silence of her
suffering, betrays a stony defiance that she later recognizes as a common trait shared by her ill-fated pupil Birame III: “. . . il n’avait pas peur des clichés. Cliché, cela veut dire quoi? Qu’on est endurci, aguerri aux grandes idées et aux mots qui les expriment. Qu’on en a honte. Qu’ils vous gênerent comme une putain les mots vertu-chasteté-virginité” (Heremakhonon 190). She has likewise been hardened by the hypocrisy of her father’s endless exhortations on the triad “Race-Intelligence-Distinction,” through which she attempts to break by reclaiming for herself racial and gender stereotypes concentrated in the baseness of her sexuality, from Marilisse, the white man’s black slave/whore, to the infertile mulatto (145). Her sexual liberation, moving across color and class lines and intelligence quotas, may, in her relationship to Ibrahima Sory, be further seen as a form of resistance against political association.28 Her rebellious language acts imagine a world far removed from “la nuit utérine” represented by Saliou’s aunt and uncle’s tiny village of Diamfamani, seemingly untouched by European colonization. That this moment of profound and tranquil well-being is an instance of irony seems possible. It is indeed a bow to negritude, itself influenced by surrealism for its call for a return to Mother Africa. Yet in her symbolic embodiment of the volcano, concealing a dormant violence capable of sending forth potentially deadly currents of molten rock without warning, Véronica may also be adapting this maternal imagery to the geographical and sociopolitical realities of her island.

While a superficial reading of the novel possibly leads to the conclusion of its impenetrability. Véronica does, however, shed off the discursive layers of her mystification and alienation to be better positioned to assume an Antillean identity. Her crusty exterior repels attempts, presumed hostile, at probing her inner depths, in order that she may perform her ruse. Her moment of self-recognition and outward transparency, therefore, comes
unexpectedly toward the end of the first part of the novel. Gently rocked by the rhythm of
lovemaking, she recalls a crucial encounter with a nègresse comique et laide, Celia

Theodoros, a girl whom she knew in school:

Celia Theodoros. Elle nous est tombée à la sixième. Fille méritante, venue tout
droit de Grands Fonds Cacao dans ses robes d’indienne passée. Déjà l’on ricanaît à
l’énoncé du lieu de naissance. À la question, profession du père, elle répondit d’une
voix basse et tremblante: cultivateur. Ce fut notre Charbovari. Moi comme les
autres. Qu’est-elle devenue? Nous en fîmes notre souffre-douleur. Nous
l’appelâmes Topsy. Moi comme les autres. En même temps, par une étrange
perversion de mon esprit, je l’aurais souhaitée moqueuse, ironique, brave sous nos
coups. Elle ne le pouvait pas. Elle pensait nous désarmer à force de flatteries. Moi
comme les autres. Je les hais, mais me comporte comme eux. Exactement. (85)

Véronica’s complacency and mean complicity with her fairer skinned and well-to-do
classmates—her reference to Gustave Flaubert’s Emma Bovary underscores this feigned
assimilation—make her hate them and likewise herself. Similarly, her despisement of
Ibrahima Sory is compounded by self-condemnation before her willful blindness and her
inability to act on her better judgment. This reiteration of the scene from the tramway in
Césaire’s poem, Cahier d’un retour au pays natal, gives resonance to Véronica’s alienation
and to the psychological tension behind her creative act of narration. It is doubly resonant
since Césaire’s poem echoes Baudelaire’s poetic metaphor of the albatross, whose
awkwardness on land symbolizes the conditioned exile of the poet. In the company of
others, this strange bird falters, making it the butt of ridicule.29

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This gained power of self-reflection is followed by marked changes in her language, in particular the abatement of her negative use of clichés. While her recuperation of a French poetic symbol may seem to confirm her alienation, she succeeds in bending it to her own design. Her self-expression becomes metaphorically positive, and in her adoption of the volcanic metaphor, she avoids risking further victimization. In spite of the profound significance of this recognition, however, Véronica still remains a controversial figure. For her refusal of inherited prejudices and myths exists purely on the metaphoric level, as she bitterly admits: "... je n'ai pas été capable d'aller au bout de mon refus. Ma révolte, un leurre" (145). She is a fledgling Antillean character, whose failure to spread roots also implies an unsuitability of the ground. Furthermore, she is not a political figure, and, though she indicates a willingness to follow, no one is there to lead her in a collective movement. Her existence, which is a form of survival, transpires in her flight and creative métissage.

Lionnet likens her to the nomadic population of exiled Antilleans, "who, for lack of political self-determination in their own islands ... cannot imagine empowering structures of meaning grounded in the cultural realities of this ‘poussière d’îles’" (‘Happiness Deferred’ 168). This bias for transcendent national narratives threatens to overlook the significance of Véronica’s achievement, however. As the authors of *Lettres créoles* assert in their reevaluation of Aimée Césaire: “La Négritude, en contestant l’ordre colonial, nous restitua quelque chose dont nous avions perdu même l’écho: le cri, le cri originel, surgi des cales du bateau négrier et à la vibration duquel vient s’enraciner notre littérature” (127). Similarly, *Heremakhonon* does not succeed in giving national dimensions to the protagonist’s native island, but it does articulate elements of her native culture in its critique.
By measuring her narrative against transcendent models, critical readers risk undervaluing Véronica's *cri*, which precisely sounds the dangers of cultural essentialism.

Véronica's individualism is perhaps a Western perversion betraying her need to be reconnected with community. But it may be a first step toward her return. In her search for independence, nomadism, or *errance* in Glissant's terms, may be a strategy for finding meaning in an otherwise incoherent situation. Her negative *errance*, negative because lacking place, according to Glissant's definition, may ultimately give way to more positive forms. Her options of flight into a rooted specificity or into the diversity of human culture are both left open, leaving the possibility for establishing a relational cultural base, as opposed to a homogeneous one or no base at all. This idea of rootedness in diversity announces a new notion of being, Glissant's "étant," implying a becoming rather than the more fixed "Etre." Indeed, the illusiveness of assimilation and the shortcomings of negritude have allowed a Creole consciousness to emerge. If this nascent Creole being, understood in the sense of *étant*, is able to mature into a viable collective identity, then by the nature of creolization it would succeed in transcending the myth of origin, any pretensions to cultural supremacy, and geographical or ideological limits. The consequences for the concept of nationhood—in the logic of modern nations—are potentially cataclysmic. The national idea of one land, one people, one language, one system of beliefs and practices, etc., splinters. Patrick Chamoiseau's 1992 novel, *Texaco*, gives expression to such a vibrant cultural force that promises to plant the seeds of national change from within.
4.3 TEXACO

Still greatly misunderstood, *Heremakhonon* by its very opaqueness can be seen nonetheless as a quest for individual freedom. More than a departure from the fictional Heremakhonon where the heroine could not possibly realize the happiness she is seeking, Véronica’s quest symbolically represents a refusal of universality, whether the affected cultural purism of Guadeloupe’s educated social elite or the imagined cultural harmony of a mythical Africa. Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco*, a much better received novel and winner of the Goncourt Prize, grounds this symbolic act in the Martinican community designated in its title. From her home on the slope of a mangrove wood overlooking the bay and Texaco oil reservoirs outside of Fort-de-France, Marie-Sophie Laborieux orally recounts the history, recorded by Chamoiseau, of her neighborhood’s battle for official recognition—a history that extends back to slavery and her ancestors’ pursuit of freedom and equality through Martinique’s departmentalization and bétonisation. Without family, she is, like Véronica, “livrée à [elle]-même.” However, Marie-Sophie’s personal trajectory is different in that it represents the politically engaged Détour in the sense of a collective project, which Glissant describes in *Le Discours antillais*. Though she and her neighbors suffer from racial, socioeconomic, and political exclusion, compounded by the
menaces of the oil company, their successful fight for integration into the municipality heralds the pluralist nation envisioned by Chamoiseau and his co-authors in their celebrated manifesto *Eloge de la Créolité* (1988).

Marie-Sophie’s gift for storytelling and fierce determination in the face of adversity, inherited from her legendary father Estemome Laborieux, infuse her memorial narrative with both a lyricism and a realism that Chamoiseau clearly means to transmit as mythical:

. . . ses sentences m’encourageaient à poursuivre le marquage de cette chronique magicienne. Je voulais qu’il soit chanté quelque part, dans l’écoute des générations à venir, que nous nous étions battus avec l’En-ville, non pour le conquérir (lui qui en fait nous gobait), mais pour nous conquérir nous-mêmes dans l’inédit créole qu’il nous fallait nommer—en nous-mêmes—jusqu’à notre pleine autorité. *(Texaco 427)*

Written in the form of an epic tale, *Texaco* “sings” its protagonists’ search for liberty and equality with the explicit goal of awakening others to the cultural essence—the life approaches, values, and aesthetic—of *Créolité*. Consonant with the storytelling tradition, the history (or histories, stress *Créolité’s* adherents) of this culture is dependent on memory and its transmission, which revives the past, giving resonance and a sense of destiny to the present. Marie-Sophie’s tale gains such historical depth and perspicacity through its faithfulness to the memories of her father Estemome, whose presence is palpable in her speech. She adopts his voice, his Creole enunciation, syntax, and proverbial imagery, but more importantly his life lessons on the means to freedom—“Il vous faut l’arracher”—,
community-building, and survival (111). Combined with his respect for the spiritual
guidance of the Mentô. Esternome’s example influences Marie-Sophie in her struggles and,
specifically, her establishment of Texaco.

Independent of the novel’s religious imagery, Esternome may be seen as a source,
the source of Marie-Sophie’s words, but also her notions of temporality and of life’s
creation. His conception of historical time was marked, recalls Marie-Sophie, by
collective misfortunes. The only calendrical date he remembered was February 24, 1848,
for him the dénouement of France’s Revolution when slavery was legally abolished.
From Ninon, following their ascent up from l’En-ville (Saint-Pierre, before Mount
Pelée’s eruption) to the hillside community of Noutéka, where “notre Texaco
bourgeonnait.” Esternome learned to follow the seasonal patterns of nature and deepened
his knowledge of plants and medicinal herbs. Interestingly, the passing of seasons in this
ethereal place, itself melded into the natural environment, seems suspended in time. In
an excerpt from Marie-Sophie’s notebooks preceding her account of Noutéka, she iterates
Esternome’s reasons for leaving l’En-ville, a béké, or white, stronghold, for what she
calls “le pays neuf”: “Sophie, c’était quitter leurs histoires, pour baille-descendre dans
notre histoire” (138). Beneath the clouds, therefore, Esternome and Ninon joined others
and built a self-supporting community—“Quartier voulait dire: soleil, vent, oeil de dieu
seulement, sol en cavalcade et nègre échappés vrais”—free from the history imposed on
them through enslavement and economic exploitation (145).

Esternome’s telling, as retold by Marie-Sophie, of Noutéka des mornes coincided
with his adoption of the first person as opposed to his usual and more communal “we.” It
was in his memory of this elevated Quartier that he, in Marie-Sophie’s words, “retrouvait
son ardente vanité,” the triumphant “I,” here fully realized, replacing the more woeful tales of the collectively oppressed below (151). Esternome’s evocation of it described a realm where emancipated blacks, in harmonious communion with nature and one another, could live freely and autonomously: “. . . mon Esternome utilisa souvent le terme de noutéka, noutéka, noutéka. C’était une sorte de nous magique. A son sens, il chargeait un destin d’à-plusieurs dessinant ce nous-mêmes qui le bourrelait sur ses années dernières” (139). Within this mystically recounted “we,” a Creole consciousness comes into being for Marie-Sophie, the pure air of the mountain heights breathing life into a newly conceived human being. Frantz Fanon’s anticipation in Les Damnés de la terre (1961) of “un nouveau type d’homme” created through the contemporary epics of oral literatures, which he characterizes as “littérature[s] de combat” by their struggle for existence, finds its realization in Esternome, Marie-Sophie’s model and the spiritual ancestor of Texaco (180). However, in spite of his courage, Esternome could not shake the magnetic pull of l’En-ville, which upset Noutéka’s perfect balance.

Ninon, under the charm of the musician who arose to steal her away, redescended with him to discover the marvels of modern capitalism, railroads, sugar refineries, and the influx of new workers from such places as Portugal, India, and China. Esternome was soon drawn to follow, but in distress, in his vain attempt to save her from the burning lava that had suddenly engulfed the city and its inhabitants. Zombielike, he eventually left the destruction, haunted by visions of a fallen Ninon, and landed in Fort-de-France. His return to l’En-ville suggests perhaps his own fall into the oblivion of French colonial history. However, through his meticulous perseverance, as in Saint-Pierre, Esternome succeeded in changing this alien landscape, populated mainly by mulattos, by rendering it more familiar.
His own practice of *la Relation* transpiring through his two crafts, carpentry and storytelling, successively inscribed him into both *l’En-ville* and instilled them with meaning: “*La Relation n’est pas d’étrangetés, mais de connaissance partagée*” (*Poétique de la Relation* 20).

As a young freed black, Estemome had become skilled in the trade of carpentry and took great pride in his work. For his enslaved compeers, *l’En-ville* was impenetrable, “porteuse d’une mémoire dont ils [the slaves] étaient exclus. . . . c’était une Grand-case. La Grand-case des Grand-cases. Même mystère. Même puissance” (*Texaco* 94). However, joining with another freed black-trained-carpenter, Jean-Raphaël, Estemome could fashion Saint-Pierre’s ongoing construction to their unique vision: “. . . sur les chantiers mon papa Estemome vit comment l’esprit des ouvriers nèg défaisait l’habitat et le réinventait. Ainsi, tout-douce tout-douce, Saint-Pierre dérivait dans des ‘manières et des façons.’ ‘Dans une esthétique espéciale,’ je crois qu’il voulait dire” (91). In the same manner, Estemome’s conception of freedom rested ultimately on the land, in the complex social relations of domination and resistance, reclaiming Richard Burton argues, Martinique’s history for the savanna blacks who have been overshadowed locally by the legend of the maroons. “Les nègres marrons rompaient l’affrontement . . . les nèg-de-terre avaient choisi la terre. La terre pour exister. La terre pour se nourrir. La terre à comprendre, et terre à habiter” (*Texaco* 95, 96). Slaves and the cities’ poor, forced to adapt to the circumstances of their survival, were both the keepers of traditions and the sowers of Martinique’s cultural evolution.

Their part in the process of creolization further distinguished them from the more privileged mulatto class, who abandoned the land in an endeavor to change their destiny.
through naturalization into France. Following the implantation of *l'Usine*, or the sugar industry, which emptied the hill communities of their life source, departmentalization, as the crucial gelling point in their economic dependence on the métropole, would turn Martinicans away from their island and engulf them in the Western world hegemony. The socially excluded populations were thus left to rely on social assistance and sheer *débrouillardise*. Subjected to the system’s built-in need for capital, they would forget the natural rhythms of the earth in their desperate search for *djobs*. As Marie-Sophie foretells early in her tale, “l’Histoire accélérée par les milâtes allait soulever tout le monde des ancrages de cette terre” (96). Counter the ominous signs of this fate, however, Esternome worked the wiles of his memory to gain the affection of Idoménée Lapidaille and establish roots.

Alors Idoménée disait: mais c’est quoi la mémoire?

C’est la colle, c’est l’esprit, c’est la sève, et ça reste. Sans mémoires, pas d’En-ville, pas de Quartiers, pas de Grand-case.


Tu fais aussi l’En-ville par ce que tu y mets, précisait mon Esternome.

C’est tout? s’inquiétait-il. Alors elle continuait…Et la chaleur les nouait.

(197)
Esternome’s gentle and sightless conteuse of Fort-de-France would be the future mother of Marie-Sophie, herself the future matriarch of the Quartier Texaco, triumphantly within l’En-ville.

The “miraculous” conception of their daughter revived the community of Les Misérables after repelling the evil cock of Idoménée’s twin, Adrienne Carmélite, who had initially taken in Esternome with the design of stealing his eyes for her blind sister (207). Adrienne Carmélite’s malefic watch over Idoménée is an enigmatic element to the plot. However, Esternome’s battle against the sinister forces of the Creole spirit world may more deeply symbolize his salvational role. For in his conquest of l’En-ville he was fighting not only against the onslaught of French civilization, but also the self-destructive impulses of Martinicans themselves. Told from the point-of-view of the most disenfranchised of Martinique’s history, this epic tale may be seen as the defiant resurgence of what has been forgotten and silenced. As Chamoiseau and Confiant argue in Lettres créoles (1991): “Nous avons eu ainsi des poches de culture créole maintenues à l’existence par cette production [de survie] qui la sollicitait et qui, aujourd’hui, la sollicite encore,” a project symbolized through Chamoiseau’s literary work (66). Texaco’s telling specifically revives the knowledge of the Creole conteur, a tradition lost with the passing of the plantations and promising to awaken Antilleans to the vibrance of their island’s cultural history. The partial restoration of Idoménée’s sight through her flood of joyous tears during the length of her pregnancy allegorizes this cultural awakening. Likewise, the appearance of volcanic imagery, here life-giving, may be seen to symbolize the indomitability of life over death and sterility, the
birth of Marie-Sophie to her aging parents—"petit sirop de ma [Esternome’s] vieillesse, punch dernier de ma vie..."—a burst of effervescence after a lifetime of fruitless struggle (Texaco 207).

Marie-Sophie would continue this battle under the numbing blows of her experiences in l’En-ville, including the war and her disillusionment with President Charles de Gaulle, but more importantly those, employers and lovers, who would exploit her financial and emotional precariousness to their own selfish, sometimes maniacal, ends. Only as the nanny in the family of Monsieur Gros-Joseph, a rum retailer and landowner who taught her the pleasures of reading and writing, did she enjoy amiable company and the fineries of an easy life. In the employment of Monsieur Alcibiade and his wife Eléonore, by contrast, she would come to know the maddening darkness of solitary confinement shared by her earliest remembered ancestor, her Grand-papa du cachot, a Mentô, punished for poisoning his plantation owner’s livestock, and the father of Esternome. Severely disturbed by the passing of the referendum on departmentalization and Marie-Sophie’s unbridled celebration of it, Monsieur Alcibiade, a fervent autonomist, and his suffragist wife respectively raped and imprisoned her. An unwanted pregnancy, terminated like others before, would leave Marie-Sophie sterile, causing her much anguish later on when in an effort to keep her beloved Félicité Nelta, a Driveur stricken with wanderlust, she tried to conceive.

Yet her misfortune, Marie-Sophie recalls, solidified her resolve to pursue the construction of a Quartier des mornes to counter the destabilizing effects of l’En-ville:

... le sentiment de l’injustice, de ne pas exister, d’être une chienne méprisée, la haine de cet En-ville où je me tournailais seule, livrée aux sept malheurs sans
choisir le chemin. D’avoir été comme ça durant presque deux heures, le jouet flaccide de ce sieur Alcibiade, dut être ce qui m’amena à ne plus jamais me laisser commander par personne, à décider à tout moment, en toute autorité, toute seule, de ce qui était bon pour moi et de ce qu’il fallait faire. (279-80)

Her indignation and rage, specific to her social status and her sex, sharpened her outlook on the landscape of Fort-de-France, which she would ultimately transform through her political and social activism. Hers, however, is an activism deeply rooted in community, courageous and daring, but free from the destructive force of vengeance. Rather, Marie-Sophie would endeavor to create a place for herself and other marginals like her, single mothers, immigrants, drifters or renegades, within the coveted space of l’En-ville without any ulterior motive of displacing its prior inhabitants, though the latter perhaps interpreted it as such. In order to realize her ambitions, Marie-Sophie would furthermore search to reconnect herself spiritually to the wisdom of her ancestors, those who had imagined Noutéka, through the guidance of her own Mentô.

After rescuing her from the Alcibiades, Nelta introduced her to the person who would twice, in Marie-Sophie’s words, return her to her eyes—when she first found refuge in Nelta’s community of Morne Abélard and later following its destruction. It was Papa Totone. “le vieux-nègre de la Doum” and “le dernier Mentô,” who reunited her with the earth and beckoned her to the place where her and her now defunct Estemome’s dreams of freedom, equality, and community could be realized: Texaco. “En fait, Sophie ma Marie, moi-même qui l’ai reçue, je sais que Liberté ne se donne pas, ne doit pas se donner. La liberté donnée ne libère pas ton âme…” (97). Nor is it gained through flight, according to the life lessons Estemome transmitted to his daughter. Its elusiveness could only be
overcome through the method mysteriously communicated in the wake of a group of Mentô who alit upon the plantation where Esternome used to visit his love Ninon: “Liberté n’est pas pomme-cannelle en bout de branche! Il vous faut l’arracher…” (111). In the same vein, Marie-Sophie, undaunted, claimed the “magical” land within grasp of l’En-ville: “Je découvris une pente douce. Un chute de ti-baume et de bois-campêches venait lécher la mer. Sur la pente, je perçus le même vent doux, chargé du monde et de la Caraïbe, et je vis de haut l’éveil de l’En-ville” (325, 326).

As Chamoiseau clarifies in his afterword, borrowing the pluralist imagery with which he imbues Eloge de la Créolité: “Les Mentô avaient de tous temps mobilisé notre imaginaire mosaïque. Ils lui avaient imprimé une covergence—une cohérence” (Texaco 422). Like those whom Esternome chanced encounter, Marie-Sophie’s Mentô led her to the final leg of her conquest. In the journal entry “Paroles du vieux-nègre de la Doum,” Marie-Sophie attempts to record his lessons:

L’En-ville lie et relie, chaque bout est lié à l’autre, pas de ravines, pas de falaises, pas de rivière qui coupe, tout est lié et relié. Ça décoloré ta vie. Ça fait même crabes en sac….

C’est calebasse du destin.
L’En-ville n’est pas à prendre. C’est à savoir….
Toutes les histoires sont là, mais il n’y a pas d’Histoire. Juste un Temps grandiose sans amorce ni finale, sans avant ni après. Monumental.
… Il faudra se méfier de l’En-ville. La gazoline t’offre son berceau jusqu’à prendre l’En-ville et puis lâcher l’En-ville. Mais c’est encore bien loin. Et c’est l’En-ville
qui va changer. Mais l’En-ville ne sait pas encore comment il va changer. C’est
question des destins qu’il entraîne. C’est un goulot mais c’est ouvert. C’est ouvert,
c’est ouvert...

... Par-ici ou par-là, c’est mourir de toute manière. Cherche La Parole, ma fi,
cherche La Parole!...

Dans l’En-Ville on ne parle plus. Conteurs morts ou tombés babilleurs. Mais La
Parole n’est pas parler. Tu as à battre ici. A marronner quand même. La gazoline
t’offre son berceau... (321, 322, 323-24)

According to the Mentô, by investing the culturally diverse spaces of the land with their
histories. Martinique’s poor and outcast populations, who fled the plantations in search of
freedom, may keep alive the centuries’ old wisdom of their survival, ultimately working to
break the neocolonialist, police-enforced, and amnesia-inducing hold of the West.41 “Elle
[La Parole] érigée aussi le Mentô à la source de notre difficultéuse conquête du pays,”
states Marie-Sophie (65). An historical, unwritten, and silent force, La Parole—“Si elle te
porte, c’est La Parole. Si elle te porte seulement et sans une illusion.”—would steady
Marie-Sophie’s regard and fill her with confidence and boundless energy (321).42

Her unflinching determination, she states, caused men to run, reversing the tide of
her victimization. Her legend as the founder of Texaco, destroyed and rebuilt countless
times, grew through her courage, which the epic climax to the tale recounts: through her
tireless leadership against the police raids, her pacification of the murderous fury of Julot-la-
Gale, Texaco’s protector, or Major, her domestication of the shark hunter Iréné, with whom
she spent her final years, and finally her victory over the béké owner of Texaco’s oil
reservoirs. Despite her unfulfilled desire for a child and a family, Marie-Sophie would build a Quartier worthy of Esternome’s Noutéka for its respectful adherence to the architecture of community, which she first discovered in the Morne Abélard:

Avant même la communauté des gens, il y avait celle des cases portées l’une par l’autre, nouées l’une par l’autre à la terre descendante, chacune tirant son équilibre de l’autre selon des lois montées du Noutéka de mon pauvre Esternome. Les rêves se touchaient. Les soupirs s’emmêlaient. Les misères s’épaulaient. Les énergies s’entrechoquaient jusqu’au sang. (304-05)

After gaining the assistance of a mulatto lawyer, who pled for their fundamental human right to existence in the courts, Fort-de-France’s mayor, indeed Césaire himself, and finally the urban planner, their “Christ,” Marie-Sophie lived to see her community assume permanence. Under the remonstrances of Césaire, the CRS (“les cèhêresses”), or riot police, followed the code of law and ceased their indiscriminate razing. The use of cement fortified the buildings’ construction, making them more resistant to the hurricanes and storms. And as a result of the urban planner’s enlightened defense of Texaco, the municipality eventually recognized it, symbolized by the installation of electricity.

The dialogue between Marie-Sophie and the urban planner who came to investigate the tenacious hill community would, in fact, set in motion la Relation on a grand scale, the hoped-for process of Martinique’s creolization announced by Texaco’s inception within l’En-ville:

Il [the urban planner] me dit, en effet, que l’En-ville intégrerait l’âme de Texaco, que tout serait amélioré mais conservé selon sa loi première, avec ses passes, avec ses lieux, avec sa mémoire tellement vieille dont le pays avait besoin. . . . Je lui dis que
cela ne serait pas facile, qu’il y aurait des grincements, des pleurs, des refus, que
nous étions habitués à nous battre, à crier, et que nous allions nous battre avec lui
pour avancer dans ce qu’il nous proposait, mais que l’essentiel était là, que nous
entrerions dans l’En-ville à ses côtés, riches de ce que nous étions, et forts d’une
légende qui nous était de plus en plus limpide. (417)\(^{13}\)

Over the aged rum she served him, Marie-Sophie recounted to l’En-ville’s municipal
representative their history—indeed, the totality of her memory—which she would retell to
Chamoiseau and which announced only the beginning of an ongoing battle that has outlived
the storyteller but not her story. This story, according to Chamoiseau’s intentions as its
recorder, would rise above the official narrative of Martinique’s subjection and serve to
inspire generations of Martinicans in the manner of Césaire’s poem, of which this stanza,
read to Marie-Sophie by her Haitian neighbor Ti-Cirique, succeeded in reviving her matador
spirit at her lowest moment:

\[\ldots\qquad \text{et il est place pour tous au rendez-vous de la conquête et nous savons maintenant}
\]
\[\ldots\qquad \text{que le soleil tourne autour de notre terre, éclairant la parcelle qu’a fixée notre}
\]
\[\ldots\qquad \text{volonté seule et que toute étoile chute de ciel en terre à notre commandement sans}
\]
\[\ldots\qquad \text{limites . . . (cited in Texaco 403)}\]

Similarly, in the epic’s conclusion, Texaco’s brilliance seems to acquire metaphysical
proportions parallel to Marie-Sophie’s aggrandizement: “Pauvre Marqueur de paroles… tu
ne sais rien de ce qu’il faut savoir pour bâtir/conserver de cette cathédrale que la mort a
brisée” (425). The metaphor of Marie-Sophie’s greatness is at once a tribute to and
transcendence of Césaire’s poetry by surpassing its cri to establish La Parole: “[Ma]
négritude n’est ni une tour ni une cathédrale / elle plonge dans la chair rouge du sol / elle
plonge dans la chair ardente du ciel / elle trouve l’assombrissement opaque de sa droite patience” (Cahier 23). In Texaco negritude, in the person of Marie-Sophie Laborieux, rises from the earth and puts its mind, body, and soul to work in order to reclaim this land, build on it, and inhabit it, for the “nègre.”

In effect, Chamoiseau’s work poetically engages in the Retour, the final step in the full realization of the Détour:

Il faut revenir au lieu. Le Détour n’est ruse profitable que si le Retour le féconde: non pas retour au rêve d’origine, à l’Un immobile de l’Etre, mais retour au point d’intrication, dont on s’était détourné par force; c’est là qu’il faut à la fin mettre en œuvre les composantes de la Relation, ou périr. (Le Discours antillais 36)

The project of returning to the land and deciphering its history-memory has likewise impassioned Chamoiseau and his contemporaries. This third stage of Caribbean literary production, writing literature for the preservation of memory, is, according to Glissant, creating a distinct tradition, independent of that of the colonialist powers, “dans la relation des cultures”:

Ainsi les littératures de la Caraïbe, qu’elles soient de langue anglaise, espagnole ou française, introduisent-elles volontiers des épaisseurs et des cassures—comme autant de détours—dans la matière dont elles traitent; mettant en pratique, à la manière des Plantations, des procédés de redoublement, d’essoufflement, de parenthèse, d’immersion du psychologique dans le drame du devenir commun. La symbolique des situations y prévaut sur le raffinement des réalismes, c’est-à-dire qu’elle l’englobe, le dépasse et l’éclaire. . . .
Ainsi encore, . . . les œuvres . . . ont-elles conçu d’abord le paysage comme impliqué dans une histoire, devenant lui aussi personnage parlant.

Ainsi enfin, le marronnage historique a-t-il exercé là, renforcé ensuite dans le temps, un marronnage créateur, dont les multiples expressions ont commencé de fonder une continuité.

. . . C’est dans les prolongements de la plantation, dans ce qu’elle a enfanté au moment même où elle disparaissait comme entité fonctionnelle, que s’est imposée pour nous la recherche d’historicité, cette conjonction de la passion de se définir et de l’obsession du temps, qui est aussi une des ambitions des littératures contemporaines. (Poétique de la Relation 85, 89)

These characteristics, common to Texaco, firmly place it within the tradition Glissant outlines above. Whether or not Texaco is an example of national literature, however, is yet to be determined since the Caribbean nation still remains a nascent idea.

In Eloge de la Créolité Chamoiseau, Jean Barnabé, and Raphaël Confiant had delineated the necessity of excavating—in the manner of anthropologists—an inner creative source that would give rise to a consciousness unique to Martinicans and Antilleans overall. As Chamoiseau states in Texaco’s afterword, hopefully entitled “Résurrection”:

La disparition de nos Mentô révélait (ô silence douleur) la domination de notre esprit selon des formes nouvelles, méconnues des résistances traditionnelles. Les peuples n’étaient plus menacés par la botte, l’épée, le fusil ou les dominations bancaires de l’Etre occidental, mais par l’érosion des différences de leur génie, de leurs goûts, de leurs émois...—de leur imaginaire. (422-23)
This consciousness of a shared destiny, according to Benedict Anderson's study of *Imagined Communities* (1983), is at the basis of nationalist sentiment, itself the invention of writings. Memory’s restoration, therefore, combined with the revalorization of Creole’s multilingual sources and “oraliture,” a new *écriture* based in *oralité* and in essence reconciling present forms of expression with past traditions, would allow, as Hazaël-Massieux argues, to “communiquer avec ceux qui sont éloignés . . . [et] forger un nouveau monde” (*Ecrire en créole* 22, 259). While this world may not come to exist independently of its economic guarantor, its imagining as a cultural force nonetheless promises to influence and ultimately transform the other. Likewise, a theoretical dialogue may be detected between Western cultural theorists and their Antillean counterparts. To illustrate the poetics of *la Relation*, foundational in the evolutionary movement toward new Antillean symbols, Glissant has adopted Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze’s emblems of the taproot and the rhizome in order to illustrate the concepts of “cultures ataviques” and “cultures composites” respectively. “La mangrove urbaine” of Texaco is clearly a manifestation of the latter (*Texaco* 426).

Chamoiseau’s work, therefore, may indicate the future direction of *Créolité* and, more generally, creolization, in the Antilles, in France, and elsewhere where his writings take hold. Specifically, his literary act of inscribing into the colonial legacy the voiceless and displaced, those who live in obscurity overshadowed by the powers of cultural hegemony, has brought them down from the hills into the metropolis as testimony to the richness and resistance of the Creole-speaking world. Identifying Chamoiseau as the exception among authors who use Creole primarily to give an exotic allure to their writing, Hazaël-Massieux praises his promotion of *Créolité* to a literary practice: “Il est
indispensable donc de favoriser pour une langue l'accès à l'écriture qui est la conquête la
plus décisive de l'homme”—and, others would argue, the decisive conquest of a national
space (258). Marie-Sophie’s references to Montaigne, the sixteenth-century erudite and
French author who breaks with the Latin idiom, whom she parallels with her papa
Esternome likewise echo the aspirations of Créolité’s oralivains.

Consonant with his more contemporary compatriots’ enthusiastic pursuit of
authentic cultural expression, Frantz Fanon, in his call to arms to les damnés de la terre
recognizes the intellectual’s role in founding a literature of national scope:

Alors qu’au début l’intellectuel colonisé produisait à l’intention exclusive de
l’opresseur, soit pour le charmer, soit pour le dénoncer à travers des catégories
ethniques ou subjectivistes, il adopte progressivement l’habitude de s’adresser à son
peuple.

C’est seulement à partir de ce moment que l’on peut parler de littérature
nationale. (179)

However, as Fanon warns: “Dans la situation coloniale, la culture privée du double support
de la nation et de l’État dépérit et agonise. La condition d’existence de la culture est donc la
libération nationale, la renaissance de l’État” (182). Without this “cadre d’expression,” he
contends, culture loses it credibility, legitimacy, dynamism, and creativity (183). Similarly,
while remarking Texaco’s innovative powers as a “mangrove urbaine” within the
institutional structures of l’En-ville, in view of his role in the battle, le marqueur de paroles
appears to capitulate when he laments: “l’absorption progressive que faisait l’En-ville de ce
lieu magique me renvoyaient à ma pauvre solitude” (Texaco 426). Indeed, Créolité’s
authors’ projected goal of “l’épanouissement de notre nation,” where the inclusive “we”
simultaneously refers to "notre conscience identitaire" and "l'émergence de nos arts et de notre littérature," situates the national aspirations of these writers in the Caribbean (Eloge de la Créolité 41). However, their search for free cultural expression must be understood as a struggle within their unchanging political status as a French department.

As Richard Burton admits:

... the immediate future of indépendantistes in Martinique would seem to lie in myriad acts, both inward and outward, of opposition to the existing order by islanders operating individually and in association, in the hope of slowly building up a substantial, and eventually majoritarian, body of opinion in favour of breaking all political ties with France... to respond to the spread, since 1981, of the assimilationist plantation by a kind of internal marronnage, to subvert and circumvent from within, now that the 'hors-plantation' is no more. ("Towards 1992" 84, 85)

By, in effect, advancing a cultural program of resistance before the political, Chamoiseau and others like him are attempting to "protéger notre terre, et notre patrimoine, d'affermer notre identité, de préparer une Caraïbe créole et culturelle en attendant la Caraïbe politique et économique que nous ne bâtirons que dans le cadre d'une absolue souveraineté"—in a political vacuum, which perhaps jeopardizes the very legitimacy of their quest (cited in "Towards 1992" 85). More challenging than emancipation from bodily enslavement, perhaps, is the liberation of mind-sets from psychological bondage to the past in order to realize the full enjoyment of economic, social, and political freedoms. Despite the waning of colonialism, many formerly colonized populations still bear the humiliation of ideological and economic occupation and must foremost struggle against themselves before turning against the neocolonialist powers that oppress them.
While the works in this final study, *Heremakhonon* and *Texaco*, may be seen as wholly Antillean, their authors, remark Chamoiseau and Confiant, have struggled within the limited alternatives available to them: "survivre en créole ou exister en français" (*Lettres créoles* 67). Even contemporary Creole scribes like Chamoiseau were first schooled in the French language, and they published in French before publishing in Creole. As a result of their cultural and intellectual isolation, noted by both Leiris and Kurlansky, thus spanning at least half a century, Caribbean scholars and writers often emigrate abroad toward more lucrative teaching positions or publishing markets. Not only is classical French the language of choice for the majority of these writers, but also French publishers offer them more visibility and, therefore, more attractive contracts. As a result, hexagonal France is valorized to the detriment of the home island. Similarly, Chamoiseau’s awarding of France’s Goncourt Prize could be seen, and has been seen by some of *Texaco*’s detractors, as a recuperation of his counterdiscourse.

By contrast, the role of mass media—Creole newspapers, television, and radio—in the Antilles may provide the breakthrough wished for by these authors, eager to increase their audience at home. Indeed, illiteracy continues to pose an obstacle to the establishment of widespread readership. Since Antillean histories, "qui pour nous comprendre sont les plus essentielles," are unwritten, these modern forms of expression may prove to be more appropriate than written literature at this stage (*Texaco* 45). However, once again, the problematic role of historians, oral or written, who in essence speak for the dead in their transmission of national memory, emerges.

Especially in the deliberative context of the project of nation-building, the risks of memory’s distortion are great. This temptation may equally well be detected in *Texaco*. 172
Despite his feigned difficulties in scripturally capturing the force of her words, as the marqueur de paroles, Chamoiseau molds Marie-Sophie’s memories to his purposes, not only literary but also political and philosophical. Her mix of French and Creole and lack of chronology are “arrangés” through the corrections of her scribe, her memories reorganized “autour de l’idée messianique d’un Christ: cette idée respectait bien la déréliction de cette communauté face à cet urbaniste qui sut la décoder,” Chamoiseau asserts (424, 426). As a result, Chamoiseau infuses his nationalist ambitions into the life of his subject and imbues her tale with the powers of myth. Whether or not his appropriation of Marie-Sophie’s fictionalized voice is a betrayal of its expression of Créolité, however, as Burton contends (see endnote 50), is perhaps less important than whether or not Chamoiseau’s narrative accurately conveys the future of a Martinique reunited with its Creole traditions. The degree to which the author remained faithful to the island’s cultural memories in their transcription will become known as Martinican culture evolves.

In any case, such metaphorical acts of revisiting the past underscore the urgency of memory’s requirement, which, in order to engender vibrant cultural discussion, is the ongoing excavation of silenced or inaudible voices—the substance of history itself. The part works, however controversial, such as Heremakhonon and Texaco play is, therefore, crucial in the realization of national aspirations—Antillean, French or otherwise—that hail the universal values of democracy. Condé’s and Chamoiseau’s narratives fundamentally speak to France’s democratic principles in their embrace of human rights and equality and, as a result, inform these ideals of the specificities the novels represent. If France’s democratic foundation is open to this form of métissage, the manner in which the nation
integrates the multiple elements of its culture will ultimately determine the vibrancy of its democracy. Significantly, *Texaco*, through the words of the urban planner, warns against the dangers of the cosmopolitan city:

Mais la ville est un danger; elle devient mégapole et ne s’arrête jamais; elle pétrifie de silences les campagnes comme autrefois les Empires étouffaient l’alentour; sur la ruine de l’Etat-nation, elle s’érige monstrueusement plurinationale, transnationale, supranationale, cosmopolite—créole démente en quelque sorte, et devient l’unique structure déshumanisée de l’espèce humaine. (390)

Counterbalancing this “créole démente,” which “ignore le pays, et dans le pays, l’homme” is memory, which, as Marie-Sophie’s *Mentô* cautions, must not be a source of illusion either (380). National memory must not be used to legitimize calls for a return to cultural archaism. The French nation-state, coming under increasing pressure as a result of globalization, of both capital and culture, and the vestiges of its colonial past, must likewise negotiate the fine line between liberalism and nationalism. The reconciliation of memory’s narrative powers with contemporary cultural influences, in other words “la conscience nationale,” which is not nationalism, is, in Fanon’s words, “la forme la plus élaborée de la culture” (*Les Damnés de la terre* 184).
CHAPTER 5
THE CREOLIZATION OF FRENCH NATIONAL IDENTITY?

My concluding chapter addresses the specific predicament of the French nation as both a cultural power and the perceived victim of American economic and cultural hegemony. The geopolitical changes over the last century have broadened the scope of national consciousness to more international imaginings, an occurrence that is proving equally as threatening as welcoming for the French. In addition to an increasingly global corporate climate, the coming new year specifically announces for the French and their European partners the full enactment of the 1992 Maastricht treaty (which barely passed with 51% of the vote in France), outlining the unification of European monetary policy and currency. Perhaps ironically, a renewed defense of the Republic’s revolutionary ideals before the threat of Americanization has gained ground for not only Europe, but also pluralism. Yet, despite Europe’s promise as a platform for regional identity issues, the defense of French cultural diversity and artistic production clearly borders on more essentialist strains of populist nationalism and intellectual purism. How, I ask, do these new culture wars play out in the national discourse?

Qu’est-ce qu’une nation? The question, raised in Ernest Renan’s famous lecture given at the Sorbonne in Paris more than a century ago, does not elicit an easy answer. The past one hundred years have been witness to war, ethnic cleansing, and institutionalized
discrimination in the name of national identity, assigning to the spirit of nationalism a plethora of ills. Associated through memory to past atrocities, the term nationalism effectively stirs strong emotions in the West, and, perhaps as a result, moral standards underlying notions of nationhood are regularly subject to debate by members of the so-called international community. Especially in this day of state apologies and reparations in recognition of past wrongs, Renan’s purposeful forgetfulness of historical tragedies and unequivocal reverence for the nation’s ancestors draw immediate criticism:

L’oubli, et je dirai même l’erreur historique, sont un facteur essentiel de la création d’une nation, et c’est ainsi que le progrès des études historiques est souvent pour la nationalité un danger . . . . Un passé héroïque, des grands hommes, de la gloire (j’entends de la véritable), voilà le capital social sur lequel on assied une idée nationale. (891, 904).

Despite its inspiring defense of nationhood as a “moral” consciousness as opposed to a racially- or ethnically-based polity, Renan’s speech is problematic in the political climate of today for its promotion of a mythical past to the detriment of pluralism whereby history is a community affair.¹

Given the weight of cultural tradition for the French in general, Renan’s exaltation of the past and the nation’s forebears in a speech that otherwise resoundingly celebrates the Republican ideals of revolutionary France is not surprising.² Yet how can such sentimental declarations on the nation’s history-memory, whose unitarian vision discriminates against divergences, reconcile themselves with an identity expansive enough to encompass all who willingly pledge allegiance to the nation? Concern for historical exactitude clearly butts up against such emotional pleas. So do intra- and international cultural, political, and
geographical differences. What memories should transcend all others? What constitutes genuine greatness, heroism, and glory? It is doubtful whether answers to such questions can avoid appearing arbitrary. However, in the search for national legitimacy, the basis for identity, how can one escape the weight of history-memory from which emerge characters and referents whose lives and functions give volume and meaning to a national space? In the abstract, Renan’s pleas perhaps cause no injury. In practice, they risk alienating the overlooked or forgotten, the undervalued or the scorned.

Another question altogether is whether the more delicate weave of national memory and individual will in Renan’s discourse, if viewed as separate from the historical amnesia he advocates, necessarily subverts the sanctity of French democracy’s most cherished tenets. The nation’s revolutionary past—as it is told—indeed serves to mitigate unspeakable memories or the pain of exile for many of France’s citizens. The voluntary contract, according to which the Republic’s legitimacy lies in its citizens, is perhaps a notion so powerful and profound as to ensure its defense and longevity. National rhetoric of “one and indivisible,” bordering on metaphorical excess, is likewise, through the more diverse voices of the contemporary French nation, promising to acquire a more adequate refrain.

Nonetheless, in order to give political definition to the nation, pluralist maxims, which dispute any claims to superiority, are being recuperated in the establishment of new national symbols. If answers to the question of what a nation is are inherently prone to romanticizations, the question becomes, therefore, how may one avoid crystallizing the nation, France or any other, into one true and inalterable idea, the basis for exclusion, in favor of the revolutionary ideal of voluntary allegiance as it was first imagined?
Perhaps Frantz Fanon is correct in his assertion that fundamental to the essence of nationhood is the struggle for independence—from an oppressive ruler, regime, or influence, which may be extrapolated to include the crystallization of the national idea. Though intended to inspire the colonized to reclaim their nations from under Western authority, Fanon’s words speak more widely about the dangers of the objectification and politicalization of national identity. For the French, this battle partly implies a struggle against inherited notions of a “True France,” which grow from a centralized conceptualization and resist movements toward innovation or evolution that originate external to it. Despite the guiding principles behind the French Republic—a nation of citizens who freely adhere to it, according to the laws of self-governance—, national origin as it is imagined is a determining element in both the ideological abstraction and daily experience of citizenship. The abolishment of aristocratic and ecclesiastical privileges did not free individuals from the constraints of ethnic or bodily difference.

In the Antilles and elsewhere, the nationalist process of naming what is more a sociocultural dynamic than a state has presented the French Republic with a curious paradox. Specifically, notions like Créolité have intensified the voluntarist notion of nationhood all the while exposing the voluntarist nation’s susceptibility to dissolution. Indeed, the autonomist movements in France’s overseas departments have presented a political problem to the centralized French state. Their desire to be independent, forcing them to look within themselves and locate the basis of their difference, or the imagined community of their differences, has led them to reclaim their right to self-determination from a nation whose guiding principles heed and depend on the inviolability of this will. Interestingly, however, and in an unhappy turn of events for some, the tempering of
regionalist autonomy movements through the policy of decentralization is opening the national idea to a future transformation, a Republican-inspired project that transcends the instability of differences by valuing diversity over uniformity—striking for its resemblance to créolisation.

Consequently, greater France, in the colonialist sense, has been witness to an incremental downsizing. Two recent agreements announcing France's relinquishment of territorial claims and juridical powers, one concerning the Pacific territory of New Caledonia and the other the Mediterranean island of Corsica respectively, foretell of future changes in the national body. Motivated not only by violent demonstrations on the part of nationalist groups but also the issue of territorial rights based on ancestral origin and cultural integrity, the 1998 Nouméa Accord and the 2001 Matignon Plan appear to have overturned the centralizing role of the French State. In these two cases, the right to difference, a political principle propounded in the 1980s under Mitterrand, has taken precedence over the traditional premise of French national unity.

Despite opponents' outrage before what they see as the government's buckling to political terrorism in the latter case, Interior Minister Daniel Vaillant, supporter of the Matignon Plan, has called the modification of Corsica's legal status a victory for "local democracy," and Corsica a "laboratory" for decentralization (Libération May 23, 2001). The increased controversy surrounding the Plan since the terrorist attacks against the United States in September 2001, however, and the upcoming elections in March 2002—where "[la] Corse et le cortège de thématiques qu'elle soulève par ricochet (autorité de
l’État, décentralisation, sécurité...) seront au cœur de la présidentielle,” asserts journalist Antoine Guiral—portend imminent political fall out for Prime Minister Lionel Jospin as well as Corsican autonomy (*Libération* August 20, 2001).^5

The fall out for French democracy and the nation, Chamoiseau has argued elsewhere, could be more far-reaching. In an article that had appeared in an earlier edition of *Libération* (November 27-28, 1999), “Enrayer la violence en Corse,” where Chamoiseau called on the French government to consider such a change in Corsica’s legal statute, he declared the risks of political inaction before the regular occurrence of terrorism there potentially too great:

Mais, lorsqu’on entend cela [news of bombings and assassinations] depuis les Antilles, là où palpite encore . . . un reste de fibre nationaliste, on ne peut que se sentir un peu Corse. et même terriblement Corse: je veux dire, frère de cette âme, de cette histoire, de ces traditions, de ce ban d’imaginaire, de ce devenir singulier, qui cherche la voie d’une verticale restauration. . . . Quand les hommes parviennent à de telles extrémités dans un système démocratique, je m’efforce de me dire que ce n’est pas de la pure démence, que c’est un signe, un appel, un espace génésique (et générique) des grands conflits de demain. Je sais aussi que c’est dans ces lieux agités (ces biocénoses imprévisibles) que germent le plus souvent les élans du futur.

Regardless of the causes, the breach in national unity, this “espace génésique” jarred open by violence and the zombielike silence of the oppressed, has inspired Chamoiseau and his counterparts to offer alternative national narratives, more representative of a greater France and the egalitarian principles on which the French nation was built. Chamoiseau states in kind:
Les meilleurs amis de la France sont les indépendantistes de Corse, de Bretagne, des Antilles, de Nouvelle-Calédonie, de la Réunion... car ce sont les seuls qui refusent un rapport de sujétion pour entrer dans la fraternité vraie, le partenariat respectueux, l'échange complexe où l'on se change sans déperdition et sans amputation. Où l'on s'humanise mutuellement.

By forcing open the idea of citizen and nation to the diverse elements of the population, Antilleans and others, including Corsicans in Chamoiseau’s however controversial estimation, are effectively challenging the French state to include them as participants in the shaping of France’s future.

However, despite increased regional authority, many regional inhabitants continue to decry the hegemony of Paris that acts to outshine their localities culturally and underrepresent them politically. Equally as distressing, Chamoiseau has charged, has been the apathy of the metropolitan intelligentsia—French democracy’s usual defenders—before the economic subjugation of the DOM-TOM:

Je suis assez étonné de voir à quel point les intellectuels français, et toute l’intelligentsia parisienne, si sensible aux horreurs du monde, aux domination, aux oppressions diverses, peut s’accommoder aussi facilement de ce sigle-paquetage (Dom-Tom) où l’on a anesthésié (sous opercule démocratique) des peuples entiers. Des peuples échoués dans l’assistanat et la dépendance. Des peuples qui servent de machines à consommer. Peuples déresponsabilisés, gavés de subventions, de protections, de décisions élaborées à des milliers de kilomètres. Un système terrible...
Symbolically evoking economic subjection to France as a sort of capitalist *usine à mort*, Chamoiseau undoubtedly intends to liken the loss of Antillean identity to systematic ethnocide. Similar to the aftermath of the Shoah for French Jews, however, it is an insidious death resulting from history's denial and the advances of assimilation. Counter this cultural annihilation, he and others have become active in inciting instances of remembrance so that the legacy of slavery will not ultimately sever the remaining fiber of Antillean resistance.

Similar to the authors studied in chapter 1, *Créolité*’s proponents appear mindful of the risks inherent to memory’s crystallization: that the breach of a community’s history-memory spells out its destruction. Their questioning of the past and narrative inscription in the present have similarly given shape to a particular condition and subjectivity, whose force has gained with its increasing presence in the national consciousness, where, in effect, a multiplication of voices has given way to a combined articulation of the national space. This is the pluralist ideal. The reality, of course, proves to be much more problematic and complex. Antagonisms growing from a fear of identity loss, the political processes of self-differentiation work to discredit or recuperate potentially threatening discourses. Identity risks conceptualization into a pure, homogeneous unity. As battlefronts increase and competitor levels stiffen, maintaining a form of cultural expression becomes even more vital to the Self’s interests before the ominous danger of self-effacement. This battle description may portray the culture wars within France’s borders. But it moreover represents the war that is being waged without.
Adding to the general sense of traditional French culture’s deterritorialization before a changing population is the threat of foreign infiltration, resulting in part from American cultural hegemony and globalization, where France is a disadvantaged and reluctant player. France’s “exceptional” status in the West during the Cold War, where it was the mediator between the Communist bloc and the United States, dissipated with the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As a result, France has been forced to reevaluate its place in relation to the sole American superpower. The conflicts in Bosnia-Herzegovina and more recently Kosovo and the Middle East have given French leaders a new international platform on which to distinguish their country’s position from US foreign policy. Their championship of human rights worldwide combined with the battle against what is perceived as American economic imperialism at home, however, has led the French to fixate on the menacing figure of the Anglo-American—portrayed in the national discourse as bullying and violent—in the defense of their national culture. As a result, the French state is heavily investing in the protection of the nation’s cultural capital: through French-led political summits and humanitarian campaigns (e.g., defying the no-fly zone in Iraq by airlifting in food and medical supplies), the subsidization of traditional home industries, from agriculture to cinematic production, and the popularization—detractors say “commercialization”—of the national patrimoine (national monuments, historic sites, and cultural traditions).

Alarmingly, the French state’s obsession with “cultural exception” hazards legitimizing the claims of the extreme right, which inherited the conservative identity politics played by the reactionary right in the earlier part of the century. Capitalizing on the fears of a besieged society anxious about the changes occurring in the social fabric
and economy, the Front National succeeded in the 1980s and 90s to rally its electorate around the idea of the need to protect what was quintessentially French. The seemingly benign, however blatantly exclusionary, points of its political platform—defending public instruction of French cultural heritage, the country’s agricultural tradition, public security, and the autonomy of its national markets, for instance—hid much more nefarious designs: the organization of SS-style police brigades, the revoking of naturalized citizens’ rights, and the outright deportation of undesired immigrants. The party’s agenda was already reflected in the reifying practices of the secular State, leading to the expulsions of veiled schoolgirls from public schools (sensationalized in 1989 as “l’affaire du tchador”).

Following France’s liberation from Nazi Occupation in 1945, America, seen as the land holding the future, could not be ignored. However, as much as the United States was admired for its technological and economic might and appreciated for its creativity in the arts, its cinema and jazz in particular, its power was sensed as a threat by the weary and materially dispossessed French. America, and Anglo-America in particular, came to signify materialism, savage capitalism, spiritual emptiness or corruption, and conformism, which French authors and intellectuals—including Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, who each explored the American landscape with hopeful anticipation—were sometimes disappointed to conclude. There was nonetheless a great deal of mauvaise foi, especially in the French state’s manipulation of the collective conscience, at the time. President Charles de Gaulle’s rejection of NATO, a US-led alliance of Western powers designed for communist containment, could be viewed as a
hypocritical denunciation of American imperialism given his position at the head of an expansive colonial empire. According to Kristin Ross in *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies* (1995):

> The peculiar contradictions of France in that period [1950s and 1960s] can be seized only if they are seen as those of an exploiter/exploited country, dominator/dominated, exploiting colonial populations at the same time that it is dominated by, or more precisely, entering more and more into collaboration or fusion with. American capitalism. (7)

Likewise, the French government, in outwardly condemning, if not demonizing American international and domestic monetary policy—decried generally as “le libéralisme anglo-saxon”—and all the while assimilating it into a State-run model, continues this double-sided practice today.

Awe of American strides and innovativeness and yet fear of losing autonomy and incuring the disadvantages of modernization, now globalization (symbolized by the “made in China” label), have characterized the French side of the Franco-American relationship over the past half-century. Today the cross-Atlantic tensions lie primarily in French apprehensions over their culture, their language, and traditions. The image of the speeding car in the title of Ross’s enlightening work, which explores America’s hold on the French imagination in the post-war era, is at once evocative of power and freedom, but also recklessness and rootlessness. Likewise, the building of Europe is in many ways a defense tactic against what has been termed “Americanization,” a form of capitalist-induced cultural amnesia, against which some intellectuals have countered the notion of a uniquely European *esprit*, uniting all Europeans in their shared appreciation of cultural
tradition. Others, including France’s National Assembly, have reclaimed the basic human freedoms and national privileges from which the Republic and to an increasing degree Europe gain meaning. However, the modern French state, like the Vichy and Gaullist regimes before, in its patronage of the nation’s industrial and artistic output is engaging in perhaps an all too dangerous blurring of the lines between culture and political policy.

Despite the valid reasons for protecting France’s political, economic, linguistic, and artistic autonomy, the State’s actions risk reifying the country’s very special nature (its je ne sais quoi) and alienating perhaps still further its dispossessed citizens, who do not necessarily identify with the France the government sponsors. In reaction to the State’s cultural program, the notion of l’esprit has been advanced by the contemporary French thinker Marc Fumaroli to elevate intellectual production over the morass of cultural populisms. Its definition can be traced back to Voltaire’s *Dictionnaire philosophique* (1764):

This word, inasmuch as it signifies a quality of the soul, is one of those vague terms to which all who use them nearly always attach a different meaning: it expresses something different from judgment, genius, taste, talent, penetration, breadth, grace, finesse, and it draws qualities from all of these: it could be defined as *ingenious reason*. (cited by Fumaroli 134)

*L’esprit’s* implied universalism, however, is clearly susceptible to recuperation by essentialist discourses due to its ambiguity. In 1919 Paul Valéry used the term in his antimodernist essay entitled, “La crise de l’esprit,” to express what he saw as Europe’s inherent greatness which distinguished the European (the gendered “Européen”) from the
other less fortunate and backward “races.” In a similar move, Fumaroli, has adopted *l’esprit* as a counterpoint to the opening of French high culture to mass consumption.

Claiming to defend the essence of intellectual freedom against all forms of “national ‘cultural’ ideology,” Fumaroli hails *l’esprit* as Europe’s “refuge . . . [for] artists and professors, poets and honest people,” where one may still enjoy “liberty” and “singularity” (“The State, Culture, and ‘L’Esprit’” 135, 134). However, while his concerns over the politicalization or crystallization of culture are justified, is *l’esprit* in Fumaroli’s sense of it, here extended to the European continent, imaginable for all of France’s and Europe’s citizens, even those who do not adhere to his notion of honest minds and intellects? Furthermore, its supposed qualities are possibly meaningless to those who have a different understanding of the concepts of freedom and individualism. These questions require investigation in view of the problems inherent to identity construction, in particular as regards Fumaroli’s hinted-at escapism from popular culture into an idealized space and, in the second point of inquiry, the particular situation of Moslem women living in the West. In Fumaroli’s discourse one may detect an ambivalence, a tension between his yearning for intellectual autonomy and his own strain of elitist white male Eurocentrism. Similar to the nation’s socio-geographical emblem of the Hexagon, *l’esprit* as the signifier for the most noble qualities of a culture speaks of exclusion.

The perceived menace of cultural globalization, relative to the controversy surrounding the World Trade Organization meetings, has also engendered consternation within the French government. Similar to the debate on the audiovisual clause in the GATT (General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs), the “AMI” agreement (or MAI, the Multilateral
Agreement on Investment, under the auspices of the Organisation for Economic Co-
Operation and Development) stirred vehement condemnation in 1998 when its nearly
completed draft was revealed to the public. Its stipulated goal of protecting the investments
of multinational companies from legal inequities stemming from national industrial interests
specifically threatened the heavily subsidized French film industry, which immediately
criticized the agreement, drawing the government to raise the “cultural exception” issue as it
had with the GATT in 1994.9 "Il nous appartient," concluded Laurent Fabius before
opening the debate on the agreement to the National Assembly. "de susciter les conditions
economiques qui permettent l’expression des créateurs, le libre choix du public, la
sauvegarde des identités culturelles."10 Fabius’ iteration of France’s refusal of cultural
globalization, unanimously applauded, however, perhaps regrettably secured cultural
expression as a project of nationalization.

Ironically, the French struggle against American cultural hegemony could be seen
as analogous to the Antillean identity quest: years of alienation under the American Etre,
the imperialist US, giving rise to the call for a retour aux sources, to France’s original
European esprit, only to then, perhaps, round out this détour toward a more vital and
diverse contemporary national identity, though the latter is still unclear in the public
mind, offering more chance for creativity and a greater wealth of resources. Indeed, the
transcript from the French National Assembly’s debate on MAI reads like a combined
manifesto of Le Discours antillais and Eloge de la créolité: From under the yoke of “les
nouvelles technologies de l’information et de la communication,” France’s
representatives reclaim Republican values in the face of “le libéralisme anglo-saxon,”
which threatens the nation’s “acquis culturels, sociaux et environnementaux.” In so
doing, they celebrate “la diversité face au nivellement, la société civile exclue, le socle républicain mis en cause” (read: le Divers as opposed to l’Un, “les oubliés de la 
Chronique coloniale,” and the “retour au point d’intrication, dont on s’était détourné par force”) (Eloge de la Créolité 40, Le Discours antillais 36).

In adopting the semantics of Antillanité and Créolité, which have breathed life into the separatist movements overseas, it may be seen as a symbolic victory for “les 
damnés de la terre.” However, it may also be seen as another instance of French 
hypocrisy, decrying American corporate imperialism in favor of the State’s dirigiste 
control tactics. The inherent danger is palpable in the missing qualifier of “free” where 
the text speaks of the necessity to provide economic support for “l’expression des 
créateurs” and “la sauvegarde des identités culturelles,” which are subjected to the will of 
the majority. Would not “free expression” be more in line with the text’s defense of “la 
création de l’homme par lui-même” against “la pensée unique?”

Dépeindre l’Etat sous les seuls traits d’une force de contrainte, c’est négliger qu’il 
peut être aussi l’instrument d’une économie partenaire, un moteur de l’éducation 
continuelle, un support de la démocratie et un garant du long terme. . . . La 
priorité aujourd’hui, c’est de nous doter des moyens collectifs de faire prospérer 
un modèle d’organisation sociale et culturelle conforme à nos valeurs et à l’intérêt 
de nos concitoyens. (L’AMI: Actes du Colloque)

As Fumaroli warns, do not Fabius’ words reveal a potential danger of reifying, or 
crystallizing the enigmatic essence of Frenchness into an economically-sound model of 
national culture? As the battle lines are being drawn over the French “cultural 
exception,” what, one may ask, will be the future of cultural expression and culture
altogether as fought out by the dominators and the dominated dominators? As this final illustration makes clear, the creation of the national narrative is an intensely political process, which, in its communal imagining, butts up against the universalistic ideal of uninhibited self-expression. While, as Fanon warns, cultural expression deprived of a sovereign state is doomed, the vibrancy of a democracy depends on the delicate negotiation between the two.

The boundaries. Ultimately they are a mythical space. We may go there to discover or lose ourselves, or, having drifted there unexpectedly, desperately declare ourselves lost. The authors in this study freely sought out these boundary worlds, perhaps coming upon fascinating new territories and losing themselves or perhaps claiming them in a momentary victory. But clearly their subjects did not share the privilege of charting out the initial plans. As such, the latter represent the drifters, unattached and vulnerable to predetermined storm swells that carry them to unfamiliar, pre-inscribed shores. The subjective distances between the texts' characters and their creators most certainly give rise to a contradiction. For how can those in power accurately represent the powerless? It is a problem that flows over into questions of gender, voice, and politics and the assignation of values, namely the symbolic and the real.

The same is true of governments, including self-representative democracies such as France. How can the French state faithfully represent its electorate? Similarly, how can the nation faithfully represent its regions and the present the past? Moreover, how can the dominated dominate without falling into hypocritical practices and discursive slippages that serve to legitimate the very principle they contest elsewhere? Such
questions necessarily animate the present discussions on history and memory, cultural assimilation and hybridization, and the exploitation of the national idea for and by its privileged classes. Such is the predicament of modern-day France, where its minority voices are struggling to free themselves of former shackles, only to face the possibility of being returned into silence by a new generation of cultural wardens, themselves entrenched in battle against real or imagined enemies but who nonetheless possess the keys. If, as Marc Fumaroli maintains, culture is nothing more than an artificial construct, an enticing play of images and slogans designed to appeal to the most basic of human needs in a political move to gain control, how may the dispossessed still find a sense of belonging? Do they play the game? Abstain? Or look for new beginnings?

Now as we are approaching the second millennium, a time in which the world still appears stratified and divided, a global revolution is steadily advancing. Despite the genocides, hate crimes, trade wars, and other human conflicts, there is a mixing of differences more than ever before. Nevertheless, the longstanding French “exception,” running along the dual axis of singularity and exclusion, continues to be a driving force in French politics and intellectual thought. Is France, as Fernand Braudel contends in *L’Identité de la France* (1986), simply too “old” to open herself to change—“open” being the operative word, as change is inevitable? Or will France succeed in maintaining the delicate balance between the essentialist forces at work and its voluntarist tradition, from whence springs its eternal grace? In order for France to remain vital as a nation, its present identity quest must take it to the boundaries. Problematic as they are, they are the site for negotiation and growth.
CHAPTER 1

1 See Tzvetan Todorov, *Nous et les autres: La réflexion française sur la diversité humaine*, in particular the first chapter “L’universel et le relatif,” for his discussion on the French universalist tradition, illustrated by seventeenth and eighteenth-century classicism, which sought to elucidate human nature.

2 Just as Western masculine views on sexuality had informed the colonial project, illustrated by its discourse (from the insemination—some may say rape—of the colonies’ fertile and willing lands) and its controls (the fear of miscegenation led to restrictions on white women settlers), so too France’s identity crisis in the 30s, expressed through cultural icons, surrealist art as well as the fascistic imaginations of Bataille and his generation, transpired through primitive Woman. She was Joan of Arc, France’s patron saint (canonized in historical texts in the 1920s), Joséphine Baker, the “Black Venus,” Nadja, the object of male fantasy, or Laure, Acéphale’s chosen victim to be offered up in sacrifice for society’s renewal. Just like Marianne—emblem of the French Republic—before them, these women became the matrix through which the male subject projected his vision, wrote his narrative, and laid the foundation for his identity quest.

3 Smith and Brinker-Gabler explain the consequences of gendered nationalism on the notion of citizenship: “The opposition of the domestic to the public sphere secures the historical identification of the citizen with the white male subject.” They cite Wendy Brown to support their arguments: “The liberal subject is a man who moves freely between family and civil society, bearing prerogatives in the former and rights in the latter. This person is male rather than generic because his enjoyment of his civil rights is buttressed rather than limited by his relations in the private sphere while the opposite is the case for women.” “Thus,” conclude Smith and Brinker-Gabler, “in what [George] Mosse calls the homosocial bonding that secured new nationalisms, the citizen, as a universalistic conception, was gendered male, and to women was assigned the status of the nonperson, the nonsubject, the noncitizen who inhabits the extralegal domain of the household. Even when citizenship rights were won for women through the suffrage campaigns, the notion of citizenship remained a liberal notion” (14).

4 See Pierre Nora’s introductory essay to *Les Lieux de mémoire*, “Entre mémoire et histoire: la problématique des lieux.”

5 Nora also remarks the reduction of the nation as collective conscience, being displaced by society, to a circumscribed entity: “La nation n’est plus un combat, mais un donné” (“Entre mémoire et histoire” xxiii).
See Maxim Silverman’s analysis of Ernest Renan’s famous lecture “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?,” delivered at the Sorbonne in 1882. Renan’s eloquent defense of a non-racial and democratic theory of the nation is marked with “ambivalence,” argues Silverman, in view of his invocation of the eternal tradition and soul of the French nation. “It is true that Renan’s imagery is not that of a biologistic essentialism but it often seems to verge on a cultural essentialism or absolutism,” observes Silverman (20). Therefore, despite his support of the voluntarist theory of nation, Renan’s discourse was easily appropriated by Maurice Barrès, ideological leader of the racist nationalist movement at the turn of the century.

CHAPTER 2

1 The CRS is the French riot police who put down the student rebellion. The second slogan refers to the government’s deportation of the movement’s symbolic leader, Daniel Cohn-Bendit, a Franco-German Jew.

2 The desecration of the Jewish Cemetery in Carpentras, which shocked the nation in 1990, was attributed to the Front National’s inflammatory politics of hatred and exclusion.

3 In his discussion of the film, Alan Williams remarks Nuit et brouillard’s overall lack of historical specificity, arguing that memory, rather than the Nazi death camps, is the film’s main subject. Perhaps for fear of censorship, he goes on to say, the film “subtly dehistoricizes genocide, turning the viewer’s attention, to a great extent, away from specific victims and specific criminals. This universalizing tendency gives the spectator a great deal of freedom in reading the film, and it becomes a kind of historical Rorschach test” (369).

4 Beginning with the Touvier Affair in 1971, indictments brought against former Vichy officials for crimes against humanity, in conjunction with a new wave of negationism exemplified in the articles by Robert Faurisson appearing in Le Monde in December 1978, brought history-memory to the fore of national debate in addition to rekindling old hatreds. Filmmaker Marcel Orphuls’ Le Chagrin et la pitié added to the controversy. The portrait it depicted of a France “lâche, égoïste, méchante” had provoked condemnation from State officials and passionate response from all sides of the political spectrum (Simone Veil’s comments are cited by Rousso 126). State television executives and government officials, including Veil, blocked its public broadcast until 1981, twelve years after its completion. In 1971 Jean-Jacques de Bresson, chief executive of ORTF, had stated before the Senate Commission on Cultural Affairs that Le Chagrin et la pitié “détruit des mythes dont les Français ont encore besoin” (cited by Rousso 125). In many ways, the varied reactions to the documentary illustrate the hostile climate of post-May 68 France. Gaullists vehemently denounced the conspicuous absence of the great leader of the Free French, General Charles de Gaulle; communists, given their renewed hostility toward the Gaullist camp, praised the film for the same reason; the extreme right enthusiastically responded to its evocation of the National Revolution and its fair representation of Germans; those loyal to Pétain were revolted by the privileged position given Jews in a film which assailed the former head of state; and former resisters feared being caught up in a backlash against the Resistance myth which most of them did not create. According to Henry Rousso, author of Le Syndrome de
Vichy (1987) Ophuls’ film was the “first symptom” in which the trauma and internal tensions of the Occupation period became manifest.

5 Particularly for Lanzmann, this attention to detail with the implicit purpose of elucidating history through the compilation of its evidence was inspired by the work of renowned historian Raul Hilberg, interviewed in the film: “In all my work I have never begun by asking the big questions, because I was always afraid that I would come up with small answers: and I have preferred therefore to address these things which are minutiae or detail in order that I might then be able to put together in a gestalt, a picture which, if not an explanation, is at least a description, a more full description, of what transpired.”

6 This immediate identification with the past is the whole raison d’être of the film: “La distance entre passé et présent était abolie, tout redevenait réel pour moi... Au début, je ne voulais pas y aller [en Pologne]. . . . Puis je suis arrivé à Treblinka . . . . Soudain, ça devenait vrai,” said Lanzmann in an interview for Cahiers du Cinéma (“Le lieu et la parole” 20, 21).

7 In his interview with Cahiers du Cinéma, Lanzmann states: “Le film est d’une rigueur historique absolue. On peut me dire: ‘Vous n’avez pas traité ceci ou cela.’ Je le sais. Mais on ne peut pas me prendre en défaut. Il y a mille choses que j’ai traitées et filmées mais que je n’ai pas montrées. Et il y en a que je n’ai pas traitées pour la simple raison que, dans certains cas, la destruction a réussi et qu’il y a des épisodes entiers pour lesquels il n’y a personne, pas un témoin, rien” (“Le lieu et la parole” 23).


9 Lanzmann calls Gawkowski’s gesture, repeated by others, a “pillar of the film” (“Seminar” 88).

10 In her introduction to Trauma: Explorations in Memory (1995), Cathy Caruth discusses the “impossibility” of history for the traumatized, victims of events so overwhelming to the senses that memory occurs as a delayed reaction. Upon its return the sheer force of the memory inspires disbelief within the traumatized themselves: “... the fact that this scene or thought is not a possessed knowledge but itself possesses, at will, the one it inhabits, often produces a deep uncertainty as to its very truth”—and therefore questions its historicity (6). As a result, “the traumatized, we might say, carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess” (5).

However, the historical “truth” of Richard Glazar’s testimony, though not empirically accurate, may be recuperated from the surviving sign. Similarly, LaCapra states: “Even in its falsifications, repressions, displacements, and denials, memory may nonetheless be informative—not in terms of an accurate empirical representation of its object but in terms of that object’s often anxiety-ridden reception and assimilation by both participants in events and those born later. For example, the prevalent idea among victims and others that Nazis made soap of Jews is empirically false, but it has a figurative value both in terms of the very real Nazi tendency to reduce Jews to objects and in terms of its inversion of Nazi ritual and hygienic anxiety over contamination by Jews” (History and Memory After Auschwitz 19).

11 As Shoshana Felman argues, part of Lanzmann’s function as an interviewer is to “desacralize” death and its silence by liberating testimony (“The Return of the Voice” 219). Moreover, Ora Avni remarks, he reminds his speaking subjects, in this instance Bomba,
that, while it is indeed his own private story, this incomprehensible story is also history and that, as such, it does not belong to him but must be told. ... Shoah thus dramatizes," Avni goes on to say, "the ways in which the speaking subject becomes the subject of history. How does one recount history, when it is also one's own story, a story whose pain makes life unbearable, a story which only one already dead can live through? How does one recount this (hi)story, if to recount it is to perpetuate and reactivate it, and to dedicate one's self to remaining indefinitely its victim? On the other hand, how can one refuse to recount, if this refusal thwarts collective memory and thus bars the lesson of history; if it relegates historical suffering to a personal dimension, to an individual pathos, which one cannot bear alone?" ("Narrative Subject, Historic Subject" 504).

In Jay Cantor's view, symbols are fixed in time and space as though in a snapshot, comfortably seen from the self-possessed distance of the present. Remembering the Shoah, he goes on to say, requires the use of the imagination and active "collaboration" between author and spectator in its conception ("Death and the Image" 24).

While Shoah was being made, the court cases against Paul Touvier, Jean Leguay, and Maurice Papon were being investigated, and in 1978 René Bousquet's role in the deportation of Jews and the Vel d'Hiv roundups was publicly disclosed in an Express interview with Louis Darquier de Pellepoix, Vichy's former minister of Jewish questions. Moreover, Shoah was broadcast on French television during the 1987 trial of Klaus Barbie. Shoah may, therefore, be distinguished from Marcel Ophuls' documentary Le Chagrin et la pitié. While the latter does not recount the history of the death camps, it actively debunks the Resistance myth, depicting the opportunism, anti-Semitism, as well as heroism of average French citizens during the Occupation period. Seen in conjunction, they convey a more complete picture of the genocide's history as seen from France, though important lieux de mémoire (e.g., Drancy, le Vélodrome d'Hiver, etc.) have yet to be explored.

The impressive mass of personal accounts and analyses consists mainly of works by foreign historians such as Michael Marrus and Robert Paxton whose Vichy France: Old Guard and New Order (1940-1944) (1972) first uncovered the extent of France's participation in the Final Solution, or those of nonspecialists, among whom legal experts, biochemists, or historians of ancient Greece like Pierre Vidal-Naquet. Vidal-Naquet characterizes the French school's silence in part as political, since any work on the extermination throws into question France's collaboration with the policy of the Third Reich on all levels; traditional, given the French school's long-standing resistance to treat contemporary historical subjects; and epistemological, as in the case of the Annals school which favors "the duration" over the isolated event ("The Holocaust's Challenge to History" 28).

One may think of the elder Polish women peeking through lace curtains to catch a glimpse of the foreigner in her town; Gawkowski's gesture of drawing his finger across the throat as he turns to look at the imaginary freight cars behind him; cryptic memos from the Nazi administration indicating train schedules or ordering changes to be made on vans used for transporting "cargo"; a fuzzy diagram of the Treblinka camp, filmed secretly in the home of former SS Unterscharführer Franz Suchomel; or the final entry in the diary of Adam Czemiakow: "... The orders are that there must be nine thousand [ready to go] by four o'clock."
Although, as Irwin-Zarecka argues in *Frames of Remembrance* (1994), it may result from inevitable misunderstandings resulting from different cultural sensibilities: “[In Poland] the idea of moral responsibility for the fate of Poland’s Jews was directly linked to [a balance sheet of] facts and figures. As a result, the Catholic Church, for example, the prime target of Lanzmann’s criticism, was exonerated from any blame by citing its record of hiding Jews during the war. . . . For Lanzmann, and indeed for most people reflecting on the Holocaust in the West, the notion of moral responsibility carried an altogether different meaning, both more diffuse and indirect. The Church was to be held responsible for its teachings, over the centuries, that allowed for widespread indifference, if not hostility towards the Jews. Much of *Shoah* spoke to this issue, with great conviction, one should add. The message was very loud and clear, and yet remained so completely outside the intellectual and emotional parameters of Poland’s memory that it was not to be heard” (190).

In Martine Moriconi’s review of *Mina Tannenbaum*, “Amitié féminine,” appearing in *TéléObs* (11-17 September, 1999), she states the following: “Les histoires d’amitié féminine sont rares au cinéma et quand par miracle il en surgit une, c’est souvent un homme qui l’écrit. Mais seule une femme, elle-même ex-adolescente un brin nostalgique et artiste acharnée, pouvait raconter avec autant d’émotion et de finesse cette chronique à deux voix” (5). The film was shown on French television late on 16 September, 1999 as the concluding piece to Canal+’s evening à thème, “Cinéma au féminin” (the two films that preceded it were Laetitia Masson’s *A vendre* and Jeanne Labrune’s *Combat amoureux*). By portraying the film purely as a story about female friendship, Mariconi misses the opportunity to call attention to an even rarer cinematic subject: the ethnic identity of Jews in contemporary France.

With regard to Alain Finkielkraut’s formulation of the “Imaginary Jew,” Mireille Rosello states: “Jewishness . . . continues to remain an elusive signifier in French cultures. Paradoxically, the challenge here may be to question an absence of representation that is easily confused with an absence of stereotyping. The lack of stereotypes can also be the expression of a stereotype of invisibility” (*Declining the Stereotype* 8). The consequences of this invisibility are both positive and negative. While explicitly anti-Semitic depictions are no longer culturally acceptable, in an “overall plot of invisibility, what [Jewish] identity consists of often remains unformulated, metonymically suggested by a few allusions to rituals, a name, or an accent” (9).

Jews making up less than one percent of the French population, of whom approximately one-third identify their ethnic belonging with the practice of Judaism, it is statistically clear that Judaism, the basis for the Jews’ perceived otherness, has become a relatively insignificant element in French society. See Doris Bensimon and Sergio della Pergola, *La Population juive de France: socio-démographique et identité*. According to this 1984 study, the majority of Jews in France derive their ethnic identity from an attachment to non-religious factors: “la réalité juive en dehors de toute signification religieuse” (31%), family traditions (13.8%), the Jewish community (9.7%), historic traditions (7.4%). A small minority (4%) indicate no signification in relation to Jewish identity (241-45).

When he had spoken the same phrase to Mina earlier in a scene from her youth, after her altercation with her mother, she responded to him with laughter and gentle teasing: “Tu es
bête.” Here, her immediate reaction is to run, as the nurse tries to restrain him and bring him under control.

22 The stereotype seems endowed with an almost self-generating nature. Once uttered, a stereotype can be branded in an individual’s mind and start an almost autonomous life as a repeatable unit of ideology. . . . Their memorability is directly linked to their timelessness; a vicious circle develops whereby memorability leads to timelessness, which in turn . . . increases memorability. The alliance between memory and time in this case can be pinpointed as both the cause and the effect of stereotyping practices, what I will call their ‘iterativity’” (Declining the Stereotype 35).

23 In 1791 the National Assembly voted to grant Jews the rights of citizenship, legally instated in 1846 when the more judaico oath was removed. Reversing the course of French history, Vichy revoked their rights of citizenship and moreover violated their basic entitlements as guaranteed by the rights of man. With the installment of an extreme right government, the scale measuring the careful equilibrium between France's national identity and social justice toppled. Rather than counterbalancing the forces of order, the Vichy regime embodied the force of order and practiced a policy of exclusion.

24 In a 1966 book on the 1943 revolt at the Treblinka camp, Jean-François Steiner, a young author of Jewish heritage, first articulated the Jews’ gnawing doubts of the victims being led to slaughter like sheep.

25 Similarly, as Shoah recounts, Filip Müller, moved to join his Czech compatriots in the gas chamber at Auschwitz-Birkenau, escaped death, as a woman had urged him, in order to bear witness to their suffering. Or, as Finkielkraut contends: “Les résistants juifs menaient un combat solitaire et inutile. Les ghettos et les camps sont les seuls lieux où l’on ait eu à choisir de manière aussi tragique la résistance contre l’espoir de survie. La victoire [of the Western Allies] était, pour les insurgés, comme une terre promise à laquelle ils étaient sûrs, en se soulevant, de ne pas accéder. . . . Il fallait pour cela que la volonté de s’en sortir, ou de vaincre, soit moins forte que celle de témoigner afin de faire honte au monde de son apathie face au désastre” (Le Juif imaginaire 66). The uprising of the Warsaw Ghetto is the celebrated exception. As the first witness of the April 19 destruction of the Ghetto, whose Jews had forced the Germans to retreat after a three-day revolt in January 1943, Simha Rottem, a Jewish survivor interviewed in Lanzmann’s film, rearticulates his indomitable resoluteness in this one thought: “Je vais attendre le matin. Je vais attendre les Allemands.”

26 I have borrowed the term from Iwona Irwin-Zarecka, who states: “. . . questions about framing direct our attention to the powers inherent in public articulation of collective memory to influence the private makings of sense. Questions about framing are essentially about limits to the scope of possible interpretations. Their aim is not to freeze one particular ‘reading’ as the correct one, rather, it is to establish the likely range of meanings” (Frames of Remembrance 4).

La Question revealed the systematic practice of torture on both sides during the Algerian War.
2 Julia Kristeva identifies otherness as the common link between self and other: “Etrangement, l’étranger nous habite: il est la face cachée de notre identité, l’espace qui ruine notre demeure, le temps où s’abiment l’entente et la sympathie. De le reconnaître en nous, nous nous épargnons de le détester en lui-même. Symptôme qui rend précisément le ‘nous’ problématique, peut-être impossible, l’étranger commence lorsque surgit la conscience de ma différence et s’achève lorsque nous nous reconnaissions tous étrangers. rebelles aux liens et aux communautés” (Etrangers à nous-mêmes 9). It is important to distinguish the universalistic tenor of Kristeva’s characterization of otherness, in this case the otherness of the self, from the specificity of the other, meaning an individually different being. Otherness is both a psychological projection on one’s surroundings and a unique living experience.

3 The public moved freely through the park, partaking of the exotic and colorful experience of the colonies as they were represented. As Panivong Norindr illustrates, able to wander at will, the fairgoers, and especially of masculine gender, entered into a liminal and “phantasmagoric” space. To explain the traditional male dominion over the colonies, seen primarily as a place of adventure, Norindr adopts the thesis of Alain Buisine on “l’imaginaire masculin de la conquête,” which incites the male to conquer his imaginary vision of the world, or realize his phantasms (Phantasmatic Indochina 74). The implicit goal of the 1931 Colonial Exposition was to transform the fairgoer into a colonialist. The visual pleasures it offered, notably the Arab women dancers, Norindr argues, were especially designed to incite masculine fantasies and attract men to the colonies. As many critics have argued elsewhere, the colonial discourse represented the colonies as feminized spaces to be ravished.

4 Memmi refers to the colonist’s mental torment incurred through his guilt at being an accomplice to the greater colonialist project. Even a colonizer “bienveillant,” he claims, no less manipulated by the ideology of the “maîtres de la colonisation” than the colonized, cannot escape his feelings of culpability: “La mystification [in accepting colonialist rhetoric] réside en ceci que, pour défendre ses intérêts très limités, il en défend d’autres infiniment plus importants, et dont il est par ailleurs la victime. Mais, dupe et victime, il y trouve aussi son compte” (Portrait du colonisé 40, 41). A mixture of fear, guilt, and self-interest, therefore, influenced the colonist’s perception of the colonies and lay at the basis of the closely guarded distance between him and the colonized. As Memmi states: “En vérité, la distance entre le maître et le serviteur n’est jamais assez grande. . . . [The colonizer] est plein de son sujet, qui déchire sa conscience et sa vie. Il cherche à l’écarte de sa pensée, à imaginer la colonie sans le colonisé. . . . Mais le colonialiste se rend compte que, sans le colonisé, la colonie n’aurait plus aucun sens” (96).

5 See Histoire de la France coloniale, where Coquery-Vidrovitch specifically analyzes French narrative of West Africa: “le ton paternaliste demeurait inévitable, et la vision de fonds partout la même: le ‘bon’ Noir, c’était ‘le Noir enfant ou l’enfant noir.’ A partir du moment où il devenait adulte (par l’âge ou par l’instruction), il cessait d’être le ‘bon sauvage’; le Blanc se trouvait pris dans un cercle vicieux: il apporait au Noir la
civilisation pour le sortir de l'enfance et, grâce à son apprentissage même, en le rendant adulte il le rendait ‘mauvais.’” (2: 304).

Modeled after schools in metropolitan France, colonial schools taught the French language as well as math, science, history, and manual skills. Indigenous schools, largely limited to Koranic schools in North Africa, were undermined through financial deprivation, adding to the general discontent (Kelly 26).

The pacifist myth was integral to imperial propaganda. In his opening speech at the 1931 Colonial Exposition in Paris, Marshal Lyautey, General Commissioner, hailed colonialism as “la plus grande oeuvre de paix”: “C’est dans l’action coloniale qu’il [le monde] peut, dès à présent, réaliser une notion de solidarité humaine, acquise péniblement au milieu des déchirements et des ruines. . . . Coloniser, ce n’est pas uniquement, en effet, construire des quais, des usines ou des voies ferrées; c’est aussi gagner à la douceur humaine les cœurs farouches de la savane ou du désert” (Exposition, extrait du prologue). See also Charles-Robert Ageron’s survey of French public opinion during the war in Indochina and Moroccan and Tunisian crises (Histoire de la France coloniale 2: 413-16). For the student population surveyed in a 1949 Gallup poll, for instance: “L’action des médecins et des missionnaires, toujours citée avec éloges, leur paraissait essentielle: administrateurs, soldats et colons n’étaient guère mentionnés et donc vraisemblablement peu considérés par ces jeunes gens. . . . les territoires d’outre-mer avaient, selon eux, essentiellement intérêt à rester unis à la métropole pour les ‘avantages culturels’ et ‘le soutien politique’ que cela leur valait” (2: 416). As Gilbert Meynier remarks, the colonial wars were taught at school on the level of Jeanne d’Arc’s battles against the Bourguignons and were, therefore, considered past conflicts. As a result, colonialism’s benefits of modernization and the advancement of Western civilization could take precedence (2: 164). The metropolitan population’s disillusionment and feelings of defeatism would come later, as Ageron illustrates: “Il fallut la reconnaissance des indépendances du Maroc et de la Tunisie, après celle des établissements français de l’Inde et des États d’Indochine, il fallut aussi l’aggravation de la situation politique et militaire en Algérie pour que l’opinion française comprît enfin la gravité des événements. Un sondage réalisé en avril 1956 montre que 83% des Français percevaient désormais la situation du Maghreb (63%) et celle de l’Union française (20%) comme le problème dominant pour la France. Cela ne signifiait pas toutefois que pour cette majorité la sauvegarde des colonies et d’abord celle d’Algérie fussent devenues ‘le but essentiel’ à assigner à la politique française. Les Français n’étaient en avril 1956 que 17% à mettre cette ‘sauvegarde de l’Union française’ au premier rang des buts possibles de la politique du pays” (2: 421).

The French term débâcle is often used in reference to the French defeat to Nazi Germany in 1940.

Ageron remarks, however, that de Gaulle laid the foundation for Franco-Algerian cooperation: “Dans ces conditions, l’humiliation née de la fin de l’Algérie française est restée limitée et n’a pas été un phénomène d’opinion durable” (Histoire de la France coloniale 2: 545).

Tahar Ben Jelloun raises the contrast between hospitality as he understands it, “un droit réciproque de protection et d’abri,” or as the passive act of receiving, and the actual state of affairs: “La France a opté dès le départ pour une ‘hospitalité contrôlée,’ ce qui est un
non-sens puisque l’“invitation” s’est faite dans la violence [coloniale]” (Hospitalité française 10, 19). For rather than welcoming the new immigrants in as invited guests, as many argue, the French population tolerated them as a necessary evil in the face of the country’s shortage of manpower in the 1960s, relegating them to the outskirts of the major cities and, in extreme cases, subjugating them to a new reign of terror.

See, for instance, Rachid Boudjedra’s Topographie idéale pour une agression caractérisée (Paris: Denoël, 1975).

Laronde explains that in verlan “beur” results from a double reversal of the term “arabe,” giving “rebeu” after one reversal and “beur” after the second.

I have borrowed Michel Laronde’s definition of the term Beur (“La ‘Mouvance beur’”) (685).

Organized by French youth, the majority descendent from immigrant communities, in response to racist incidents of the early 80s (following the victories of the Front National whose adherents denounced the political left’s policies favoring immigration), “la Marche pour l’égalité et contre le racisme” was quickly renamed “la Marche des Beurs” by reporting journalists. In a similar march organized the following year appeared the anti-racist organization S.O.S. Racisme, also run by youth, which, interestingly, advocates social integration modeled on the cultural assimilation of French Jews.

In his article, “La ‘Mouvance beure,’” Laronde cites sociologist Adil Jazouli, who classifies the younger generation of Maghrebian descendents into four groups: a small minority who renounce their Maghrebian identity to assume a French one; a second of the opposite tendency in that they reclaim the cultural identity of their parents; a third, representing the largest proportion of these youth, who suffer from the cultural identity rift and sense of powerlessness which lead many to suicide or delinquency, prostitution, drugs, and crime—we may recognize Momo as belonging to this group; finally, the fourth who celebrate their similarities and differences (ethnic, cultural, religious) with regard to both cultures and construct a new personal identity: “Les vrais ‘Beurs,’ ce sont eux, à travers qui naît peu à peu une culture spécifique à la nouvelle génération maghrébine” (686). Azouz, the protagonist of Begag’s novel, most closely resembles the members of this fourth category.

A 1996 survey compiled by Le Nouvel Observateur, France Inter, and RFI reveals that approximately one-half of the French population admit to racist attitudes, Maghrbiens and their offspring, Beurs, being identified as the principal victims (Weill 10-11). In 1997, Gérard Lemaire, Director of the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences sociales, in collaboration with Jeanne Benbreka and James Jackson, published a report for the European Commission entitled Racisme et xénophobie, ranking France fifth among fifteen European countries for racist sentiments (cited by Belhaddad 52). This report reveals North Africans and to an increasing degree blacks as the primary targets of racial hostility, social exclusion and violence being daily realities for these ethnic minorities.

Interestingly, Sebbar has also made the break, defining herself as a French writer.

Psychotherapist Eliane Baumfelder gives special insight into the situation of cross-cultural (“croisés”) who live in multicultural communities, such as Mohamed in his Parisian commune: “Dans ces communes, . . . l’importance des populations immigrées est d’autant plus impressionnante qu’il y a eu rassemblement de non-Français dans des cités auparavant habitées par des natifs ou des rapatriés. L’altérité se double d’une assignation
à des territoires collectifs où l'unité culturelle ne se refait pas pour autant, puisqu'il s'agit
d'immigrés de toutes sortes d'origines, coupées non seulement les unes des autres, mais
aussi d'une grande part de ce qui faisait leurs points de repère, dont ils mettent toujours
en œuvre la reconstitution partielle, donc insatisfaisante” (“Des violences plus
insidieuses”).
19 Or, in Michel Kokoreff’s words: “‘Bouger’ a valeur d’injonction pour ceux qui n’ont
pas de place à eux et tentent ainsi de s’en sortir” (“L’espace des jeunes”).
20 This fact may be explained by the waning of some of these institutions, namely the
Catholic Church, the army, and labor unions (due to the shrinking of the working class).
Instruction of civil education within the school curriculum has moreover been gradually
reduced.
21 The 1989 “Affaire du foulard” may be seen as a case in point. As its critics have
pointed out, the official barring of Islamic scarves in school based on secular arguments
(in accordance with France’s tradition of laïcité) while Christian crosses (commonly
worn as pendants) aroused no objections can only be seen as discriminatory. The same
may be said for the protestations of feminists, who could hardly criticize women’s
expressed desire to practice this exercise of religious belief without betraying the
fundamental human right to choice, beyond the freedom of religion.
22 Among the declining strategies Rosello cites are “ironic repetitions, carefully framed
quotations, distortions and puns, linguistic alterations, double entendres, and self-
derecrating humor” (Declining the Stereotype 11). Begag makes use of several of these,
most notably quotations, linguistic alterations, and humor.
23 Azouz’s feelings of otherness and alienation culminate in his desire to be recognized as
a Jew, the historical context of the story including the Six Day War. “Si j’avais avoué
que j’étais arabe, tout le monde m’aurait mis en quarantaine . . . Et puis . . . dans le
désert, là-bas, un million d’Israéliens ont mis en déroute plusieurs millions d’Arabes, et je
me sens humilié à l’intérieur. Alors, il valait mieux que je sois juif” (Le Gone du Chaâba
189). His lie to the popular Taboul brothers causes him on one occasion to disown his
mother, who comes to meet him after school dressed in her distinctly Arab garb.
24 Here Azouz’s reference to Allah rings more true, indicating perhaps the depth of his
emotion: “Ce matin, n’ayant prévu aucun programme, le prof proposa un sujet libre de
rédaction à traiter à la maison et nous renvoya à la rue. Allah avait guidé mes pas, car
j’attendais cette chance depuis de longs mois, et un pied-noir me l’offrait sur un plateau.
Le racisme. C’est du racisme qu’il fallait que je parle dans ma rédaction” (Le Gone du
Chaâba 222).
25 In addition to the inclusion of unfamiliar slang or Arabic words and phonetic spellings
of the French of Azouz’s parents, Marc Sourdot, contributing author to Michel Laronde’s
L’Ecriture décentrée (1996), further notes Begag’s use of accents, particularly the
circumflex, to signal the characteristically Lyonnais pronunciation of French (“Un héros
recentré” 110).
26 Mehrez identifies the basis for this exclusion as primarily racist, citing the following
example as a case in point. Le Gone du Chaâba’s award-winning recognition incited two
instructors at one private Lyon school (the lycée Pablo Picasso) to recommend its
incorporation into the curriculum. The ensuing scandal, however, following the
campaign led by parents and leaders of the extreme right against the novel’s
“pornography”—focusing on an isolated scene of innocent sexual curiosity, despite the school’s arguments that many French classics are even more sexually explicit—pressured the principal to reverse his decision and dismiss the teacher who had chosen the novel. Mehrez further remarks the irony of the novel’s censure on the part of Maghrebian immigrants, particularly those of Islamic origin, who criticized the author’s unorthodox views and his negative influence on their children. This dual condemnation only serves to underscore the unfair stereotypes and parental remonstrations that Beur youth face daily.

De Certeau’s concept of perceptual spatialization in literature, in which the novel becomes a space through its reading, again serves as a cultural metaphor: “la lecture est l’espace produit par la pratique du lieu que constitue un système de signes—un écrit” (L’Invention du quotidien 208). The nature of the literary space is dependent on the level of the reader’s participation in the creation of it, and specifically on whether one simply “sees” (“voir”) it or “makes” (“faire”) it by moving through it (“parcours”).

CHAPTER 4

France’s overseas possessions also include its territories (les TOM), which are located in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, in Antarctica, and off the coast of Newfoundland.

According to the CIA’s World Factbook blacks and mulattos make up roughly ninety percent of both Martinique and Guadeloupe’s populations (Martinique’s listing specifies that ninety percent of the Martinican population are African or an African-white-Indian mixture) and sixty-six percent of French Guiana’s population. Amerindians make up a small percentage of French Guiana’s population. Figures were unavailable for Reunion.

These quotes are taken from Patrick Chamoiseau’s article, “Enrayer la violence en Corse,” where he states: “... je ne me suis jamais abandonné au sigle Dom-Tom. Je ne suis pas un Domien. Ni un Tomien. J’ai toujours considéré qu’il fallait une belle dose de mésestime de soi et d’obscurcissement de toute dignité, pour désigner son pays, ses histoires, sa culture, sa projection vers le monde, avec un sigle de cette nature. Je ne me suis jamais considéré non plus comme un ‘ultra périphérique,’ car je sais que tout homme, et encore plus tout peuple, doit charroyer son centre en soi.”

See Timothy Brennan’s “The National Longing for Form,” where he states: “... of course, not all Third World novel about nations are ‘nationalistic.’ The variations range from outright attacks on independence, often mixed with nostalgia for the previous European status quo ... , to vigorously anti-colonial works emphasizing native culture ... , to cosmopolitan explanation of the ‘lower depths,’ or the ‘fantastic unknown’ by writers acquainted with the tastes and interests of dominant culture ...” (63).

Nonetheless, the nation as “the most universally legitimate political ideology of our time” remains a model of reference (Benedict Anderson, paraphrased by Brennan 60).

However, many of nationalism’s theorists have linked it to non-egalitarian foundations. In Imagined Communities, Benedict Anderson argues that early American nationalisms were a consequence of European (metropolitan) discrimination against creoles, here meaning European descendants born in a colony. This new logic of exclusion based on birthrights led to the development of national consciousness both on the North and South American continents. In his discussion on European nationalisms, Brennan argues in kind: “For nationalism is an ideology that, even in its earliest forms in the nineteenth
century, implied unequal development. . . . The markets made possible by European imperial penetration motivated the construction of the nation-state at home. . . . Imperial conquest created the conditions for the fall of Europe’s universal Christian community, but resupplied Europe with a religious sense of mission and self-identity . . .” (“The National Longing for Form” 59).

6 Richard Burton argues that departmentalization, traditionally supported by the political right, and regionalization, advanced by the left, are in essence the same in their political assimilation of Martinique (and other DOM) into the French state. He called the process of regionalization, which rests on state recognition of regional differences, one of “neutralization by officialization” (“Towards 1992” 79).

7 In the Antillean context, autonomy, as opposed to full independence, signifies increased self-government while still under French jurisdiction. Regionalization was initially pursued as a form of autonomy.

8 See my discussion of Mireille Rosello’s work, Declining the Stereotype, in the previous chapter.

9 As the 1996 survey appearing in Le Nouvel Observateur indicates, black Africans are most sensitive to the resurgence of racism: “Ils sont les plus nombreux, parmi les étrangers, à déclarer qu’ils en ont été personnellement victimes (71%). . . . On est tenté de voir là la confirmation de l’émergence d’une “question noire en France,” . . . et peut-être la validation de l’hypothèse qu’avancent plusieurs sociologues: les Noirs d’Afrique, derniers arrivés, seraient progressivement appelés à remplacer les Maghrébins comme cible privilégiée des racistes, en vertu d’une loi ancienne qui veut que chaque nouvelle vague d’immigration focalise haines et préjugés, à mesure que les précédentes se fondent dans le paysage” (the words in italics are those of Elikia M’Bokolo, Professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences sociales, cited by Weill 9-10). Antillean blacks, though more culturally assimilated than their African counterparts, also suffer from racial discrimination, particularly in housing and employment.

10 Referring to articles in the French Code of Nationality that stipulate assimilation as a condition for naturalization, Silverman exposes the limitations of France’s voluntarist model of nationhood: “. . . when the concept of culture was itself not immune to racialised definitions of ‘us’ and ‘them,’ then nationality and citizenship could change swiftly from a gift open to all who settled in France to a possession of the chosen few” (Deconstructing the Nation 32). Article 39 of the French Code of Nationality states that the acquisition of nationality by marriage can be refused due to a “défaut d’assimilation,” and article 69 specifies “sufficient assimilation into the French community” and “adequate knowledge of the French language” as conditions for naturalization (cited by Silverman, endnote 12: 173).

11 According to the opinion poll cited by Ageron, 32% of the 4,193 people surveyed from 200 different communes admitted to total ignorance concerning the colonies, 52% declared their indifference, 27% demonstrated some level of interest, and 53% of the population were unable to give even an incorrect definition of the Union française. Only 24% gave relatively accurate responses (Histoire de la France coloniale 2: 413).

12 Because of Césaire’s rejection of outright and immediate independence, he attracted the disdain of his contemporaries, most notably Frantz Fanon, a longstanding admirer of Césaire’s poetic works in Tropiques. Disillusioned before Césaire’s “yes” vote for the
referendum making Martinique a department, he left the island for Africa where he saw the possibility for revolution. In his founding works, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) and *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961), Fanon battles against the causes of alienation for the black diaspora, who constantly look toward the white European as a model of all that is good and beautiful.

For a more elaborate discussion of feeding metaphors in Antillean narrative, see Mireille Rosello’s article, “De la révolte à la révulsion: les métaphores de l’assimilation chez les poètes antillais.”

According to the CIA’s World Factbook, the unemployment rates in the DOM are double or triple that of metropolitan France: 27.8% in Guadeloupe (a 1998 figure) and 24% in Martinique (a 1997 figure). Figures cited in the CIA’s World Factbook put the export earnings in Guadeloupe and Martinique at 10 to 15% of import costs, the French state making up the difference through credit transfers. According to Kurlansky, despite tax incentives, there has been little private investment—with the exception of some hotel projects, tourism being the most viable industry in the French Antilles—“because these islands, with all their French social programs, are among the most expensive places to operate in the Caribbean” (*A Continent of Islands* 264). Kurlansky quotes separatist Luc Reinette, who said: “Guadeloupeans are against independence because they are accustomed to receiving money and living easily. But a country cannot develop like that.” He also also cites Claude Makouke, leader of the Popular Union for the Liberation of Guadeloupe: “It is a choice people have to make. It is a good social system, but there is a cost and we cannot pay it” (265). The cost, argues Patrick Chamoiseau, is freedom: “Le discours commercial aux Antilles est celui de la mendicité élevée au rang de lucidité économique, de la perfusion sanctifiée ‘projet de développement’” (“Enrayer la violence en Corse”).

See “‘Je me suis réconciliée avec mon île’: une interview de Maryse Condé”: “Si j’avais essayé [de rentrer à la Guadeloupe] quelques années auparavant, dans les années soixante-dix [Condé returned in 1986], j’aurais eu à faire face au racisme, à l’étroitesse d’esprit politique et à l’intolérance et cela n’aurait pas du tout facilité mon séjour dans l’île” (104, 106).

In her interview with VèVè Clark, Condé characterizes the situation in Guadeloupe as thus: “Dans les années soixante-dix, certains Guadeloupéens se battaient pour réaffirmer notre culture. Si vous vous commettez à un tel programme, vous vous devez d’être hostile à tout ce qui est étranger. Ces activistes avaient construit une espèce de barrière culturelle autour de la Guadeloupe pour que personne de l’extérieur ne puisse y entrer. Il y a eu une période où l’UPLG s’efforçait activement d’éveiller la conscience populaire, obligeant souvent les gens à parler Créole. Quand ils ont enfin compris que les orientations qu’ils prenaient avaient de sévères limitations, qu’ils allaient détruire quelque chose d’important—en essayant de protéger trop de choses, ils avaient déjà perdu du terrain. Les gens en avaient assez des conditions que les activistes leur demandaient d’accepter. C’est à ce moment-là que les leaders ont compris qu’ils devaient changer radicalement” (“‘Je me suis réconciliée avec mon île’” 106).

In my analysis of the novel, I will be referring to the reedited version, published in 1988.
The term Détour was adopted by Edouard Glissant in Le Discours Antillais to express the need on the part of Antilleans to separate themselves from their place of exile, often described as sociopolitical given their home island’s departmental status though it could stem from more internalized conceptions of ethnicity, gender, or class, in order to gain a perspective on their situation.

Véronica makes the distinction between nègres and noirs, the latter more authentic not having been trafficked through the language of whites.

Véronica’s problem resoundingly echoes Frantz Fanon’s characterization of the Antillean in Peau noire, masques blancs, where he states: “Les nègres sont comparaison. Première vérité. Ils sont comparaison, c’est-a-dire qu’à tout instant ils se préoccupерont d’auto-valorisation et d’idéal du moi. Chaque fois qu’ils se trouvent en contact avec un autre, il est question de valeur, de mérite. Les Antillais n’ont pas de valeur propre, ils sont toujours tributaires de l’apparition de l’Autre. Il est toujours question de moins intelligent que moi, de plus noir que moi, de moins bien que moi. Toute position de soi, tout ancrage de soi entretient des rapports de dépendance avec l’effondrement de l’autre. C’est sur les ruines de l’entourage que je bâtis ma virilité” (170-71).

The passage of time since Heremakhonon’s publication has not in any way diminished Véronica as a contemporary figure. Despite regionalization, French politics continue to dominate the political scenes, national education the public school systems, and state subsidies the economies of the overseas departments. As a consequence, French culture continues to dominate mentalities. Skin color remains a criterion on the social scale, favoring lighter over darker complexions, as do language, education, and class. Despite at times violent protestation—labor disputes, separatist rebellion, or vehement denunciations on the part of the Caribbean intelligentsia—, societal trends that Michel Leiris had noted in the 1950s in his Contacts de civilisations en Martinique et en Guadeloupe (1955) and Frantz Fanon condemned in his Peau noire, masques blancs (1952) continue up to the present day. Cultural assimilation has advanced, markedly more for the mulatto populations than for the generally black lower classes, through education and marriage, traditionally the vehicles for social ascension. Affluent Antilleans tend to pursue their university study in France, and for the population as a whole educational or professional success in the métropole is a source of prestige.

Irele, adopting Jean-Paul Sartre’s stance in “L’Orphée noir,” states the following with regard to the nationalist aspects of Césaire’s poetry: “. . . Africa served as a reference for what must be acknowledged as an incipient nationalist consciousness, as a maximal symbol in a process of self-differentiation in reaction to the cultural imperialism that sustained the political, as a claim to cultural legitimacy of a distinctive Martinican feeling for life and relation to the world. It is the aspiration toward a sense of a national community grounded in a creative relationship to its environment, to the sense of a homeland in the most intense and meaningful sense of the word, that all Césaire’s work seeks to promote through the suggestive power of poetry” (Cahier xxxv).

With regard to negritude’s inspirational power, a parallel may be drawn here to the hold of local print capitalism on the minds of white creoles in the New World, which Benedict Anderson analyzes in Imagined Communities. Negritude’s failure to articulate a uniquely Antillean social geography, however, limited its scope as a nationalist discourse.
In his introduction to *Le Discours antillais*, Glissant declares: “Effort ‘intellectuel,’ with its pulsations of repetition (repetition is a rhythm), its contradictory moments, its imperfections necessary, its exigencies of a formulation to a schematized limit, very often obscured by its own object. The attempt to approach a reality that is often occulted can’t be immediately organized around a series of clarities. We demand the right to opacity” (11).

To my mind, one of Heremakhonon’s literary sources are the tales of Uncle Remus, where trickery and deception are indeed modes of survival.

Glissant summarizes the signification of his term *Divers* as thus: “Le Divers, who is not the chaotic or sterile, signifies the effort of the human spirit towards a transversal relation, without universalist transcendence. The Divers needs the presence of peoples, no longer as an object to elevate, but as a project to relate. The Same requires the Being, the Divers establishes the Relation” (*Le Discours antillais* 190).

Françoise Lionnet sees in Véronica’s infertility an assimilation of nineteenth-century scientific tenets on mixed breeds. Véronica’s barrenness may also be an allegory for the Antilles as Césaire depicted them in his portrait of Martinique as: “Terre muette et stérile. . . Point de ville. Point d’art. Point de poésie. Point de civilisation, je veux dire cette projection de l’homme sur le monde, ce modelage du monde par l’homme, cette frappe de l’univers à l’effigie de l’homme.” (cited by Irele xxxv). The assertion that Véronica embodies the combination of these seems entirely possible.

As Véronica privately laments before the scrawl of “putain” in red letters on her classroom chalkboard: “Si je comprends bien, dans ce pays, faire l’amour revient à faire un choix politique” (*Heremakhonon* 106).

Interestingly, in her interview with VèVè Clark, Condé refers to her first novel *Heremakhonon*, her favorite, as “le canard boîteux de la famille car,” she goes on to explain, “il n’a eu aucun succès. Il a été abandonné par l’éditeur après deux ans. Il a été si dénaturé par les critiques que j’en suis désolée pour lui.” She also expresses her hope that the novel’s 1988 edition, where in its preface she confronts the major criticisms her work suffered, notably its critique of the African myth, “aidera les lecteurs à comprendre ce roman mieux qu’ils ne l’ont fait par le passé” (“Je me suis réconciliée avec mon Ile” 118, 120).

With regard to metaphorical resistance, Rosello states: “Lutter contre l’assimilation risque toujours de devenir une gageure ou un paradoxe et c’est ce que l’alchimie métaphorique peut nous aider à éviter, peut-être mieux que les discours politiques (coulés dans le moule de l’idéologie dominante) ou que le travail intertextuel, toujours susceptible de récupération” (*Littérature et identité créole aux Antilles* 139).

The original citation, repeated in *Heremakhonon*, is attributed to General Charles de Gaulle, who during a state visit to the French West Indies made reference to the relative insignificance of these islands in French policy.

In “Notes sur un retour au pays natal,” Condé addresses the continuing ties of Guadeloupean exiles to their native island: “Nous étions porteurs d’une culture qui était la culture antillaise que nous portions en nous sans le savoir” (cited in *Littérature et identité créole aux Antilles* 140).

As to the meaning of “l’En-ville,” Chamoiseau states the following: “La langue créole ne dit pas ‘la ville,’ elle dit ‘l’En-ville’ . . . L’En-ville désigne ainsi non pas une
géographie urbaine bien repérable, mais essentiellement un contenu, donc, une sorte de projet. Et ce projet, ici, était d’exister” (Texaco footnote 1: 422).

34 For instance, while discussing the ambitions of the mulatto population, or class, Marie-Sophie states: “en vérité, mon Esteorne disait ‘milâtes,’ alors tu vas le prendre comme ça maintenant” (Texaco 90–91). She also alters proper names, here that of his fellow carpenter Jean-Raphaël, according to her father’s speech: “mon papa disait: An-Afarel, et c’est ce que je vais dire à présent” (87).

35 In his study of Chamoiseau’s valorization of the savanna blacks, Burton states: “En rendant à la plaine la part qui lui appartient dans l’élaboration de l’histoire martiniquaise, Chamoiseau est amené à qualifier celle que tout un discours local se plaît toujours à attribuer aux très hypothétiques nègres marrons qui auraient peuplé les mornes. Sans contester le courage opiniâtre de ceux-ci, Chamoiseau suggère qu’en fuyant l’habitation, ils ont retrouvé moins une ‘liberté libre,’ et encore moins une Afrique de substitution, qu’une espèce de vide où, renfermés sur eux-mêmes sans pour autant échapper aux influences de la plaine, ils sont restés ‘en marge du mouvement général,’ ‘demeurés en esprit dans le pays d’avant,’ en grande partie extérieurs aux processus de créolisation qui se poursuivent sur la plaine” (“Espace urbain et Créolité” 183; Texaco citations 107, 142).

36 The term “créolisation” has overtaken “Créolité” in its transcendence of an implied state of pluralism to take into account the ongoing changes occurring in the region’s demographics, or the process itself. “Créolisation” opens stasis to evolution. In effect, traditional Creole culture, the result of the mixing of black African slaves and European settlers, later altered by the arrival of Indian, Chinese, Syrian, and Lebanese migrant workers, is again undergoing changes with new migrations primarily from Haiti and Europe. Polyphonic stories have broken through the we-they, black-white dichotomies. What, then, may be built on this shifting cultural terrain is the focus of contemporary “nationalist” writings.

37 Patrick Chamoiseau and Raphaël Confiant mark the waning of Creole’s oral culture with the destruction of the plantation system: “Sans que nul s’en aperçoive ni le regrette, l’effondrement du système des habitations va instituer un terrible silence: l’oralité créole va se taire” (Lettres créoles 65).

38 Idoménée’s life signifies, in effect, the fate of Creole culture. Born into slavery, Idoménée lost her sight following its abolition when she left the plantation only to lead a life of wandering. “Idoménée avait échoué en quelque part. Dans ce coin isolé, oublié du soleil, elle vécut à hauteur de la boue. Elle sentit passer des chiens, puis des choses incertaines. Elle sentit des pluies, des vents, des chaleurs, des froidures. Son esprit toucha un fond puis se mit à remonter. Idoménée put retrouver, un jour, la place de ses pieds. Puis, un autre jour, elle trouva le sens de la terre. Elle retrouva un bras, un semblant d’équilibre. Un jour encore, elle sut différencier être-couchée d’être-debout. Alors elle émergea de son trou et avança dans les rues de l’En-ville,” continuing on her circuitous route, surviving on charity, until she was finally found by her sister Adrienne Carmé (Texaco 201).

39 In the epigraph attributed to Hector Bianciotti, Marie-Sophie is said to represent, or more specifically recall, the most disenfranchised of Martinique’s inhabitants: “Que rappellera ici le scribe qui ne rappelle à travers elle le sévère destin de toutes ces femmes
condamnées aux maternités perpétuelles, expertes à déchiffrer les prophéties du vent, des crépuscules ou du halo brumeux qui parfois semble émaner de la lune, pour prévoir le temps de chaque jour et les travaux à entreprendre; ces femmes qui, luttant à l’égal des hommes pour leur subsistance, firent ce qu’on appelle une patrie et que les calendriers réduisent à quelques dates bruyantes, à certaines vanités dont souvent les rues portent le nom?” (Texaco 11).

40 The scene of Marie-Sophie’s spiritual education in the company of Papa Totone reenacts the symbol of l’homme-plante in their harmonious communion with the natural habitat of the Mentô. “au coeur même de la Doum, dans l’âme végétale de notre Texaco…”: “Nous vivions comme deux herbes dans cette demi-pénombre si lumineuse pourtant. . . . Il n’y avait pas de solitude: nous avions pris le rythme de l’eau, la texture des écorces, le mouvement des oiseaux qui se posaient par terre. Les grognements des quatre cochons, le battement d’ailes des poules semblaient lever de nous. Nul besoin de détournar la tête sur ce mangot en dégringole car nous étions en lui; ni sur ce craquement de bois sec: nous étions secs autant” (Texaco 320, 317-18).

Glissant—whom Chamoiseau clearly hearkens, dedicating Texaco to him—breaths the same celebratory note of historical repossession into his Poétique de la Relation (1990): “Dans l’écart que [la Plantation] constituait, l’emmêlement toujours multilingue et souvent multiracial a noué de manière indémêlable le tissu des filiations et cassé par là l’ordonnance claire, linéaire, à laquelle les pensées de l’Occident avaient donné un tel éclat. . . . Et quand enfin tout bougera, ou plutôt s’écroulera, quand le mouvement inarrêtable aura dépeuplé le lieu clos pour amasser dans les marges des villes sa population, ce qui sera resté, ce qui reste, c’est l’obscur de cette mémoire impossible, qui parle plus haut et plus loin que les chroniques et les recensements. . . . le cri de la Plantation, transfiguré en parole du monde” (86, 88). “[Le] métissage culturel,” Glissant further contends, born on the plantation and dictating the laws of the contemporary world by its multilingualism and multiculturalism. “nous occupe tous” (89).

41 Marie-Sophie’s recorded enunciation of La Parole occurs during Charles de Gaulle’s visit. Caught up in Arcadius’ euphoric chase of France’s savior, she recalls: “J’étais perdue dans l’ivresse d’Arcadius. Il allait comme une turbine d’usine et puisait dans la marche l’énergie de marcher. Il parlait sans jamais respirer. Son avalasse de paroles capturait le monde sans points et sans virgules. Alors, je fis comme lui, ramenant du fond de moi l’arrière de la parole et le soufflant en bouche comme cerfs-volants marottes. La parole venait du plus lointain, passait mon Estemome, rejoignait les noirceurs de l’homme du cachot, courait sur des rivages marins, et basculait dans un ventre de bateau où mourir était naître. Je ramenai ce vertige le long de la rue Ernest-Renan, de la rue Perrinon ou de la rue Schoelcher, sous la statue hiératique de Desnambuc et sous celle de notre Impératrice. Et-puis la parole tourbillonna jusqu’au secret de nous-mêmes... ô inconnue... vertige de mondes... une clameur de langues, de peuples, de manières qui se touchaient en elles, se mêlaient, posaient intacte chaque brillance singulièree au scintillement des autres. Ma voix doublait celle d’Arcadius, qui hurlait-à-moué, pleurait, crachait des jours anciens, des questions oportes, des regards de femmes seules et le chaos des îles dans la mer offusquée....” (Texaco 364-65).

43 In a note to Chamoiseau, reprinted within Marie-Sophie’s narrative, the urban planner equates Texaco with the “memory” of the Creole city (Texaco 369).
Glissant identifies the three stages of Caribbean literary production as “acte de survie d’abord [that of the Creole conteur], comme leurre ensuite [in an effort to justify the plantation system], comme effort ou passion de la mémoire enfin” (Poétique de la Relation 82).

In my study of Imagined Communities, I refer to the 1991 reedition of Anderson’s work. In the late 17th to early 18th centuries, Anderson argues, the unequal system of privileges clearly demarcating the geopolitical and subjective space of the colony from that of the metropole led to nationalist movements in the Americas. Print capitalism, or locally printed publications bearing the administrative, economic, and later political realities of what were to become independent nations, he concludes, gave expression to distinct national consciousnesses, arisen out of a certain logic of exclusion yet nonetheless solidified into territorial identities. Nationalist aspirations existing in the Antilles, however, like for nineteenth-century European popular nationalisms, have ready models on which to build. “The ‘nation’ thus became something capable of being consciously aspired to from early on, rather than a slowly sharpening frame of vision [as for the French]” (Anderson 67). And, in a similar vein, language, Creole for Antilleans, has come to be seen as a distinct national trait.

While Anderson expresses regret before the loss of linguistic diversity and of the imagined communities these languages once articulated, in view of history, he asserts: “Print-language is what invents nationalism, not a particular language per se” (Imagined Communities 134).

In reference to Texaco’s internal poetics—where the urban planner becomes a poet in his act of deciphering Marie-Sophie’s community—see Serge Dominique Ménager’s detailed study appearing in The French Review, “Topographie, texte et palimpseste: Texaco de Patrick Chamoiseau.”

In the annex of their manifesto, Chamoiseau, Bamabé, and Confiant state: “. . . pour nous, l’acquisition d’une éventuelle souveraineté mono-insulaire ne saurait être qu’une étape (que nous souhaiterions la plus brève possible) sur la route d’une fédération ou d’une confédération caraïbe, seul moyen de lutter efficacement contre les différents blocs à vocation hégémonique qui se partagent la planète” (Éloge de la Créolité 56).

According to Chamoiseau and Confiant, the Koulis, or Indo-Martinicans, are “le dernier groupe ethnique dans lequel on trouve aujourd’hui des créolophones unilingues” (Lettres créoles 72).

See, for instance, Richard Burton’s chapter in Le Roman marron, entitled “Espace urbain et Créolité dans Texaco de Patrick Chamoiseau,” where he accuses the novel’s simplist and univocal vision: “le ‘Sermon Marie-Sophie Laborieux’ est, pour l’essentiel, le ‘Sermon Chamoiseau,’ la formation de juriste et le rôle de propagandiste indépendantiste l’emportant progressivement sur la vocation d’artiste. Contestant, à juste titre, le binarisme qui consiste à opposer les mornes à la plaine, et surtout à la ville, Texaco propose à sa place un manichéisme binaire entre centre et périphérie, francité et créolité, français et créole, qu’il faut à son tour déconstruire. . . . D’où le paradoxe fondamental de Texaco: cet éloge de la créolité urbaine est on ne peut plus ‘français’ dans la logique binariste qui le sous-tend” (199).
Many private radio stations are sponsored by autonomist or separatist political groups. Mark Kurlansky further reveals religion's role, noting that the first Catholic Mass in Creole was given in 1975 by a Guadeloupean priest (*A Continent of Islands* 263).

Fanon ascribes to the same principles when he states: “Si cette construction [of the nation] est vraie, c’est-à-dire, si elle traduit le vouloir manifeste du peuple, . . . alors la construction nationale s’accompagne nécessairement de la découverte et de la promotion de valeurs universalisantes. . . . C’est au coeur de la conscience nationale que s’élève et se vivifie la conscience internationale” (*Les Damnés de la terre* 185).

CHAPTER 5

1 “L’homme n’est esclave ni de sa race, ni de sa langue, ni de sa religion, ni du cours des fleuves, ni de la direction des chaînes de montagnes. Une grandeagrégation d’hommes, saine d’esprit et chaude de coeur, crée une conscience morale qui s’appelle une nation. Tant que cette conscience morale prouve sa force par les sacrifices qu’exige l’abaisation de l’individu au profit d’une communauté, elle est légitime, elle a le droit d’exister” (“Qu’est-ce qu’un nation?” 906).

2 While the enigmatic “nationalistic” qualities of the speech have drawn detractors and political opportunists, its force resides in its ambiguities as well as its clarifications. Maxim Silverman’s exception to Renan’s revisionist outlook on the past and the nation’s ancestors, their “glory” and “heroic” sacrifices, overlooks Renan’s emphasis on the precedence of the present. “Une nation est donc une grande solidarité, constituée par le sentiment des sacrifices qu’on a faits et de ceux qu’on est disposé à faire encore. Elle suppose un passé; elle se résume pourtant dans le présent par un fait tangible: le consentement, le désir clairement exprimé de continuer la vie commune. L’existence d’une nation est (pardonnez-moi cette métaphore) un plébiscite de tous les jours, comme l’existence de l’individu est une affirmation perpétuelle de vie” (“Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” 904).

3 The signing of the Nouméa Accord in 1998 set a twenty-year process in motion toward New Caledonia’s total independence from France. The progressive transfer of powers from the French State to the New Caledonian government promises, claim the Accord’s proponents, the full restitution of the indigenous Kanak identity by restoring to them the complete control of their islands. The preamble to the agreement explicitly cites Kanak identity and their relationship to their land as the premise for New Caledonia’s right to autonomy: “La colonisation a porté atteinte à la dignité du peuple kanak qu’elle a privé de son identité. Des hommes et des femmes ont perdu dans cette confrontation leur vie ou leurs raisons de vivre. De grandes souffrances en sont résultées. Il convient de faire mémoire de ces moments difficiles, de reconnaître les fautes, de restituer au peuple kanak son identité confisquée, ce qui équivaut pour lui à une reconnaissance de sa souveraineté, préalable à la fondation d’une nouvelle souveraineté, partagée dans un destin commun” (Preamble to the Nouméa Accord).

4 Daniel Vaillant’s comments were cited in Didier Hassoux’s article, entitled: “La Corse rallie gauche et droite. Le projet de loi modifiant le statut de l’île a été adopté hier par 287 voix” (*Libération*’s special report). The Matignon Plan for Corsica anticipates a status of semi-autonomy for the island, which counts 260,000 inhabitants. The local
assembly would be given legislative powers to oversee economic development, in particular real-estate development.

The title of Antoine Guiral’s article: “Corse: le plan Jospin attaqué de tous côtés. Le gouvernement réaffirme sa volonté de poursuivre le processus de Matignon” (taken from Libération’s special report).

Libération’s special report on Corsica. Quel avenir pour la Corse?, has a link to this site: <http://www.liberation.fr/quotidien/debats/novembre99/991127a.html>.

World Company headed by Sylvestre, a Rambo-esque caricature of the American nemesis appearing regularly on Canal +’s “Nulle Part Ailleurs” in the popular political satire “les Guignols.” iconographically represents America’s crass and aggressive image, televised to the French nightly.

In the 1980s and 90s, the Front National party succeeded in consistently garnering up to 15 to 20% of the vote in national elections, winning legislative seats on both the regional and national levels and the control of several municipalities. Its influence was also apparent in the ambivalent tactics of members of the more moderate Right who contracted with the FN for the purpose of winning back the political majority.

The French government moreover raised the issue of “préférence communautaire,” with regard to its fishing, agricultural, transportation, and energy industries, and the unfair precedence of American law in the sanctioning of non-American firms contracting business with Iran, Libya, and Cuba.

Transcripts of the National Assembly’s debate on MAI were taken from the website of the Verts party: <http://www.verts.imaginet.fr/ami/amindex.html>.
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