FAMILY NARRATIVES AND THE TRANSMISSION OF HERITAGE IN TRANSCULTURAL NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

ROBERT AUSTIN SAPP: Family Narratives and the Transmission of Heritage in Transcultural Novels
(Under the Direction of Dominique Fisher)

This dissertation examines the influence of the family on identity formation in Francophone literature. I focus on six novels by twentieth and twenty-first century authors from the Maghreb, the Middle East and Québec. The novels of Leïla Sebbar, Catherine Mavrikakis, Jacques Poulin, Abla Farhoud and Wajdi Mouawad feature the struggles of young, often immigrant, protagonists whose attempts to reconcile past and present within the family reflect on larger social themes of migration and cultural fusion in transcultural contexts. I consider the ambiguous role of the family in maintaining and propagating heritage in each. Specifically, I study the rupture of traditional means of preserving filial ties, such as a shared language and a common history, and examine the impact of this breakdown in transmission on identity formation in these texts. Taking into account sociological treatises on changing forms of the family, theories of immigrant literature and the transcultural exchange at work in twentieth and twenty-first century Francophone communities, I extend these arguments to read the altered representation of the family in Francophone novels as allegory for new conceptions of national identity.
To my daughter, Charlotte
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world modern democracies must face the question of growing cultural hybridity. How individuals and governments choose to deal with increased diversity will have a significant impact on the future. An imperative question for this generation, then, is how to approach and alleviate the tensions that arise from cross-cultural interactions, which inevitably occur within our globalized world. As evidenced in the examples of France and Québec,¹ this is a question that refuses to be ignored and requires immediate attention.

This study examines how literature in contemporary Francophone contexts addresses the tensions that arise from growing cultural diversity. This is especially relevant within a society such as Québec’s which up until the 1960s and the Révolution tranquille, has relied on national unity to defend itself against Anglo-Saxon influence both from Canada and the United States, but also in France whose recent debate on national identity and whose universalist republican ideals reveal an underlying resistance to anything other than assimilation into the dominant culture. I argue that in rewriting traditional representations of Western and non-Western families, Jacques Poulin, Catherine Mavrikakis, Ablah Farhoud,

¹ While France has drawn a hard line preserving l’identité nationale, putting the issue to discussion in a country-wide debate in the Summer of 2010 and recently expulsing Romanian immigrants, Québec’s
Leïla Sebbar and Wajdi Mouawad engage in pertinent criticisms of contemporary democratic societies and how these societies address the issue of increasing cultural diversity. Specifically, this study examines the persistent influence of family in the works of these authors on the individualization of the globalized subject. To this end, the texts chosen are those that bring to light the lost or forgotten traces of heritage within the backdrop of a cosmopolitan society. One line of questioning that drives this inquiry is whether the family in these transcultural contexts adopts some form of cross-cultural exchange or seeks to close itself off in order to preserve its own singular history. While the family continues to play an important role in the formation of cultural identity, this study argues that these authors rewrite the family, not as a site of past worship in which tradition is preserved without question, but as a heterogeneous collective of individuals that consider and scrutinize the past rather than blindly accept its authority on the present.

For many contemporary Francophone authors, the text serves as a means of reinvention, offering a literary space in which walls of self and other break down and creation takes place. This study sets out as an investigation of that space, sounding the limits of the transcultural exchange that Clément Moisan and Renate Hildebrand observe in immigrant narratives. Despite transcultural theories that envision the coalescence of difference and identity in the literature of an increasingly globalized world, the modern subject is no freer to create or reinvent himself ad infinitum. Heritage, be it ethnic, literary, linguistic or historical, maintained and transmitted through the family, continues to play a

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2 The transcultural is a concept that does not see cultures as distinct islands, but offers a framework for considering cultures as relational webs, blurring the presumed borders between cultures and allowing for active interaction and transformation. Cf. Afeï Benessaïh. Ed. Transcultural Americas. Ottawa: U of Ottawa Press. 2010. Print.

3 Here and throughout heritage refers to the collection of cultural and individual traditions received from preexisting generations and passed on through family. In this way heritage engenders an existence in which a formed, completed subject is derived from a single atavistic source.
decisive role in the construction of subjecthood in twentieth and twenty-first century Francophone novels. Metaphorically, heritage serves as the string which simultaneously ties a kite to the ground while permitting it to fly. Severing his connection only causes the kite to plummet. This example evokes the image of tension, in this case, the necessary tension between the subject and his past. The authors selected in this study evoke the tension which arises between the vertiginous, limitless horizon of reinvention offered by the text and the stabilizing, restrictive anchorage point of heritage.

The texts I have chosen examine the importance of personal past, tradition and heritage in narratives from French, Middle Eastern, Québécois and North African origins. By comparing various representations of the family in novels from these regions, this work focuses on aspects of the Western and non-Western family (transmission of linguistic identity, reclamation of transgenerational debt, attempts to break with filial ties, refusal to pass on certain traditions) that have until now received little attention from critics. Ultimately, the focus of this analysis is how the family recognizes a debt to past generations and how this obligation is expressed. The broader implication of these rewritten families is that representations of family in these texts seek to address social tensions that arise in societies where growing cultural diversity collides with essentialist notions of identity. To address this I analyze how different representations of family retain or reject heritage. The family serves as a reservoir for memories, personal histories and traditions from which an individual’s identity can be constructed. I take into account which aspects of identity such as language, ethnicity or nationality, mediated through family, are negotiable and which are indelible.
The project opens with a discussion of growing cultural hybridity in contemporary Francophone societies and the consequences of these cross-cultural encounters. The first chapter then goes on to consider the changing role of family and the efficacy of the family as a metaphor for the nation. The second chapter begins with an examination of the role of family in transmitting linguistic identity in Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues*. The driving force in this text is the narrator’s search for his long lost brother, Théo. As the narrative progresses, the reader discovers that Théo represents an idealization of the Québécois identity that has become corrupted by increased exposure to America. Opening Québécois literature to a broader understanding of its relationship to the North American continent, the text breaks from the survivalist view of an identity derived from and preserved exclusively by family, revealing the inherent otherness at work within this institution.

An immense success in Québec and abroad, the text chronicles the transcontinental journey of a Québécois *de souche*, Jack Watermann and his métisse guide Pitsémíne. The second chapter considers to what extent *Volkswagen Blues* may be considered a transcultural text and where to situate it within Québécois literature. *Volkswagen Blues* expands the debate to a more complicated issue of nationalism in Québec amid growing ethnic diversity in the 1980s. Jack and Pitsémíne’s trans-American journey reveals heterogeneity at work within the North American continent that is contradicted by Théo, a foil to Jack and Pitsémíne’s cross-cultural tolerance. The contrast between Jack and his brother simultaneously exposes the dangers of abandoning personal past while discrediting the family as a single source of linguistic identity formation.
The second chapter also brings to light the otherness at work in the family through the figure of the (br)other in Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues*. This (br)otherness is characterized by a loss of language, territory and history when one brother abandons the traditional heritage transmitted through family. The loss of language between brothers highlights the inherent otherness of language observed by Jacques Derrida in *Le Monolinguisme de l’autre*. The loss of language is accompanied by a subsequent loss of identity. Raising questions about ethnocentric claims to a common sense of self preserved through language, history and territory, the figure of the (br)other in *Volkswagen Blues* challenges the family’s role as a stable source of identity formation and reveals that heritage can be altered by the individual. Thus, heritage not actively appropriated by the individual risks being lost.

Continuing the journey begun by *Volkswagen Blues*, the third chapter examines attempts to break with heritage in two novels by Catherine Mavrikakis: *Ça va aller* (2002) and *Le Ciel de Bay City* (2008). Both novels feature protagonists of immigrant origins who attempt to reconcile past and present within transcultural contexts. Despite attempts by individual members to disrupt the message carried through family, heritage persists. In both novels, a complete cassation with the past is interrupted by forces beyond the protagonists’ control. Ultimately, the transmission of heritage surpasses the family.

While Poulin’s narrative explores the open frontiers of the continent, Catherine Mavrikakis turns her cynical gaze upon the close-knit world of Québécois society in the late twentieth century in *Ça va aller*. Bound to a contemporary Québec that is stifling, the narrator in *Ça va aller* is driven to a betrayal of heritage in hopes of breaking the repetitive

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4 I use this term to highlight the otherness at work within the family, a theme explored by Poulin in *Volkswagen Blues*. The use of the term is discussed further in the second chapter.
cycle of transmitting an unaltered Québécois heritage. In the text, family is responsible for
this monotonous world in that it condemns the individual to a predetermined role. Where
Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues* reveals difference within family through estranged brothers,
Mavrikakis’s *Ça va aller* explores the rift between mother and child. Sappho-Didon
Apostasiasis, the mother and narrator, considers both the obligation to the past and the
responsibility of passing on an incestuous heritage. In order to break the repetitive cycle she
observes, she must betray heritage by halting its transmission to her daughter. In the novel,
blocking the transmission of heritage and prepaying the transgenerational debt are the only
ways that the narrator may liberate her daughter from a suffocating Québécois identity. The
family, then, is depicted as an obstacle to reinvention and individualization, making the
betrayal of heritage necessary.

Six years later, Catherine Mavrikakis revisits the issue of heritage but expands the
Québécois imagination to consider the question of origins in a larger, North American
context in *Le Ciel de Bay City*. Awarded the Montréal prix du roman in 2008 and a finalist
for the *Prix Femina* that same year, *Le Ciel de Bay City* has garnered notoriety both within
Québec and beyond. In this novel, Mavrikakis considers the impact of betrayal and a hidden
family secret on the narrator, Amy, who is born and raised in America. Despite attempts by
her mother and aunt to reinvent themselves in the empty canvas offered by the New World
vision of North America, Amy’s transgenerational debt is reclaimed through the traces of a
forgotten Jewish heritage, violent memories of World War II and the Holocaust that still
haunt her family. The spectral figures of her grandparents, killed in Auschwitz and symbols
of the transmission of traumatic memory, remind the reader that filial ties are not so easily
severed.
The fourth chapter moves beyond Western representations of family to consider the oppressive legacy of silence at work in the Lebanese family in Ablah Farhoud’s *Le bonheur a la queue glissante* (1998). Suad Joseph’s depiction of a relational, fragmented self within Lebanese families provides a theoretical framework for understanding the unique narrative project at work in the novel. Through the disjointed narrative that unites mother and daughter, the novel sets in motion a narrative project that relies on a fragmented, relational narrator and not the autonomous, bounded subject that dominates Western discourse. I argue that Ablah Farhoud’s text recuperates her mother’s oral narratives, memories that would have otherwise been lost in an oppressive patriarchal system. In this example, the possibility of a relational subject within family offers a means of disrupting traditional patriarchal models and finding a voice for the voiceless.

Continuing the study of non-Western families in Western contexts, the fifth chapter brings to light the challenges of overcoming traumatic, unspeakable memories that risk being lost. In Leïla Sebbar’s *Mon cher fils* (2009) traditional family relationships fail to offer a reliable means of transmitting heritage since they do not account for the shared history between France and Algeria, a history that has largely been forgotten or ignored. In *Mon cher fils*, the protagonist Alma actively seeks these shared histories in her meetings with individuals. Her sense of identity derives not from direct family ties but from a broader community, a postmemory, as understood by Marianne Hirsch, whose narratives tell of a shared and forgotten history that is not easily transmitted between generations. Like Farhoud’s *Le bonheur a la queue glissante*, Sebbar’s novel attests to a will to overcome a family legacy of silence. In the act of gathering and transmitting stories, Alma serves as an
intermediary spanning the void of silence between generations at work in the novel. In this way heritage is transmitted outside of the family.

The conclusion considers the impact of traumatic memory on the child of exile. A darker aspect of cross cultural interactions is the violence that erupts between ethnocentrically minded communities and the displacement this sets in motion. In acclaimed playwright Wajdi Mouawad’s first novel, *Visage retrouvé*, traumatic memories of war invade the intimacy of the family and rupture filial ties. A direct witness to the violence in the Middle East, the young protagonist returns home one day to find that he no longer recognizes his mother’s face. Mirroring the experience of exile, the family depicted in the novel fails to offer any familiar landmarks. Because traumatic memory disrupts communication between parent and child, the exiled child must seek out sources of identity beyond the family.

This study calls into question the transcultural framework observed in contemporary societies through an analysis of the representation of the family in various cultural contexts. Jacques Poulin, Catherine Mavrikakis, Ablah Farhoud, Leïla Sebbar and Wajdi Mouawad represent a variety of cultural backgrounds, and their novels bring to light the struggles of protagonists in various transcultural contexts. These protagonists all attempt to resolve a debt to tradition, to the homeland of their parents, while keeping roots in of the countries in which they were born. In this way, the family offers a familiar metaphor through which authors explore the influence of the past on identity formation amid cross-cultural influence.

Using the transcultural dimension of Québécois literature as a springboard, this study nuances the understanding of the family’s role in identity formation within various cultural communities. The transcultural, as opposed to multicultural or intercultural policies, rejects

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5 Cf. Aref Appadurai’s essay, *Fear of Small Numbers*
the view of culture as a fixed, insular entity, which exists independently of other cultures. The transcultural conceives of culture as an interconnected web which does not seek to define cultural boundaries, but rather emphasize the continual interaction and transformation that occurs within increasingly globalized communities. This study offers a critical reading of the transcultural in Francophone communities through an examination of the family’s role in maintaining cultural anchorage points amid the blurring of cultural boundaries.

Beginning with a discussion of the transcultural shift at work in Québécois literature, this study seeks to move the dialogue beyond geopolitical borders to consider the impact of cross-cultural exchange on identity formation from authors throughout the Francophone world. Highlighting the works of Francophone authors from the Maghreb, the Middle East, and Québec, the project considers specific political, cultural, and personal histories, but also different perspective from within the family itself. Be it the inherent otherness at work between brothers, the ruptured communication between parent and child, or the spectral message transmitted between grandparent and grandchild, this study, while respecting these personal, political, and transgeneartaional differences, brings to light the commonalities that run throughout the representations of family in the transcultural novels.

From Greek mythology to psychoanalysis, the family has served as an important allegory to explain the indecipherable aporiae of the human experience. It has even been suggested that the novel, in as much as it projects a tenuous and ambiguous link to reality, finds its roots in the family.⁶ A recurring allegorical device, family also acts as an equally effective image in literature when used to elicit emotion or sympathy. Aristotle explains that

⁶ Le roman familial, a concept introduced by Freud in an introduction to Otto Rank’s study, The Myth of the Birth of the Hero (1909), describes the myth of origin that an individual creates to resolve the crisis brought on by the realization that his parents, and consequently himself, are not the omnipotent super humans he had imagined. Marthe Roberts attributes this desire to impose myth on reality to the genesis of the novel genre.
acts of violence between strangers fail to evoke the same amount of pity as when portrayed within the family. Indeed the family serves as a powerful and effective allegory for understanding and explaining the human experience. Given the importance of the representation of family as a narrative device, it is essential to understand how contemporary authors use the family to address pertinent issues in contemporary societies.

While the institution of the family seems to be universal, its relationship to society has continued to change over time. Some have attributed these changes to far reaching social phenomenon such as the spread of capitalism in Europe. However, to only see family as reactionary to society would be to ignore the differentiating relationship at work between the two. That is, while the institution of the family is certainly influenced by society, the representation of family can have a bearing on the social context in which it functions. Given the efficacy of family as metaphor for the nation and its links to society, the normalization of the dysfunctional family in literature serves as an important literary device for those who would address broader social issues. Specifically, this study argues that family offers a metaphor for the notion of cultural identity, in which questions of diversity within a presumably unified community can be played out.

Francophone authors use the representation of the family to address tensions that arise from growing cultural diversity within societies that seem to continue to define themselves and their citizens through notions of ethnic nationalism. Specifically, I examine how the family functions or dysfunctions in the novels chosen. The texts selected project an

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7 Poetics XIV 8-9

8 Claude Lévi-Straus states that family is present in all human societies: “la vie familiale se présente pratiquement partout dans les sociétés humaines, même dans celles dont les coutumes sexuelles et éducatives sont très éloignées des notres” (Cited in Roudinesco, Familles en désordre 15)

9 Edward Shorter, The Making of the Modern Family
alternative view of belonging to society through the prism of the “dysfunctional” family. I contend that the dysfunctional families these authors represent are symptomatic of a society in which growing cultural diversity calls into question an unfounded, though continually resurging, notion of cultural identity based on an ethnocentric\textsuperscript{10} concept of the nation.

The families in the works selected are dysfunctional in that they criticize patriarchal authority\textsuperscript{11} and fail to propagate a heritage linked to a single origin. Rather, they contest and reaffirm (discussed further below) their heritage in a way that engages the past yet is not subservient to it. Reluctant to depict a site of unquestioned authority to the past, these texts seek to right the family. That is, the families represented and the relationships that function within them depict the decomposition of the traditional family and contest works that attempt to confine the family to a single modality. The texts discussed in this dissertation dismiss or parody patriarchal values by depicting families not how they should be but how they can be within contemporary, transcultural contexts in Francophone regions throughout the world.

Due to its potential as a narrative device, I am interested in how authors make use of the family in contemporary novels. Specifically, this project argues that twentieth and twenty-first century authors in transcultural contexts use the family as a site of contestation for essentialist notions of origin, without ignoring the importance of the past. These

\textsuperscript{10} In his essay \textit{Fear of Small Numbers}, Arjun Appadurai asserts that there is a fundamental, even dangerous ‘national ethnos’ behind the idea of the modern nation state. According to Appadurai, this ethnicist tendency inherent to modern nations is partly due to the increased ethnic violence that coincides with increased globalization.

\textsuperscript{11} Erich Fromm makes a distinction between matriarchal and patriarchal societies based on authority. In the former concept individuals are created equal and are equally deserving of a mother’s love: “the aim of life is the happiness of man and there is nothing more important or dignified than the human existence”. The patriarchal model, however, is based on the father’s implacable authority where: “the principle of equality is replaced by a hierarchical order in society and state ruled by an authority just as the family is dominated by the father” (cited in Anshen, \textit{The Family} 341).
alternative representations of family can be applied to a broader criticism of societies that favor ethnic nationalism as a prerequisite for belonging.

This study also investigates the role that the family plays in the formation of identity within increasingly transcultural societies. For instance, does the family serve as a medium for the transmission between generations of important facets of identity formation such as language, history and cultural traditions? If so, how successful is this transmission? Furthermore, to what extent are these families, within transcultural contexts, critical of the societies in which they operate? Does the family coil in on itself taking a defensive position against the convergence of cultures or does it expand beyond traditional limits of the patriarchal family to embrace diversity? Before we can adequately respond to the questions posed by the family in transcultural contexts, we must first consider the emergence and implications of the transcultural.

Towards the transcultural

Since Edward Saïd mapped out the construction of the oppositional juxtaposition of a presumed unified Oriental and Occidental, the question of the Other has asserted itself at the forefront of studies on the construction of identity. However, current criticism observes a gradual phasing out of the self/other binary in a movement toward the transcultural where the fixed borders of self and other, established and maintained through colonial discourses,

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12 Saïd, Edward. *Orientalism.*

13 In their study on the ethnocultural element at work within the system of Québécois literature, Moisan et Hildebrand recognize transcultural texts as those that go beyond the confrontation of different cultures, but provide a means of expressing this collision, breaking down boundaries of self and other.
are blurred to the point that they fuse into an amorphous hybrid, an “in-between,” that is continually in flux.

For example, in Ces étrangers du dedans, Clément Moisan and Renate Hildebrand consider the influence of néo-québécois\(^{14}\) literature on the Québécois literary system. They establish four different periods of transformation in néo-québécois literature: (1) *l’uniculturel* (1937-1959), (2) *le pluriculturel* (1960-1974), (3) *l’interculturel\(^{15}\)* (1976-1985) and (4) *le transculturel* (1986-1997). Each period marks an increasing openness to other cultures. For instance, while intercultural texts begin to confront and take interest in different cultures, they remain themselves unchanged, whereas a transcultural text goes beyond this encounter to be altered by the other: “[le transculturel] dépasse la mise en présence ou en conflit des cultures pour dégager des passages entre elles et dessiner leur traversé respective” (Moisan and Hildebrand 207). The transcultural shift observed by Moisan and Hildebrand marks a joint literary project which traverses and destabilizes fixed cultural boundaries, broadening the Québécois imagination. In this way literature serves as a portal to alterity for contemporary authors and is imbued with “un véritable *alter égotisme* qui ne se contente pas de recevoir mais de vivre l’autre. Cette attitude est fondée sur la fascination de l’autre et la volonté de le pénétrer, de le faire soi et de se faire lui” (Moisan and Hildebrand 17).

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\(^{14}\) Term first used by Le Comité Ministériel Permanant du Développement Culturel in 1978 to indicate Québécois citizens of immigrant origin it would later be replaced by the idiom *communautés culturelles*. Here it refers to literature produced by authors who are not of French-Canadian origin.

\(^{15}\) Here the term intercultural does not refer to Québec’s political policy toward diversity. As Charles Taylor explains, interculturalism is a policy particular to Québec that differs slightly but significantly from Canada’s Multiculturalism: “the reason why people use the prefix ‘inter’ as against ‘multi’ is that they want to accentuate that exchanges between different cultural groups…(using) the French language within which we all exchange” (in Heinrich 2008). For Moisan and Hildebrand, and for this study the term intercultural refers to a literary phenomenon relevant to a particular period of time. My use of the term transcultural, however, has broader implications than literature and refers to cultural exchange that alters the participants.
However, these transcultural *passages* do not destroy certain links to territory that tie authors to a particular past.\(^\text{16}\)

As Dominique D. Fisher has argued, ties to territory in transcultural texts are not simply effaced but become delocalized. For instance, in Ying Chen’s *L’Ingratitude*, the protagonist’s attempts to break from filial ties to her mother are hindered by latent traces of an altered, but still present, sense of territory. As Fisher explains, “*dans L’Ingratitude, s’arracher à la racine, à l’origine […] reste problématique. En effet, l’ancrage territorial et identitaire continue de fonctionner à vide et à contaminer le quotidien*” (“Vers une littérature-monde?” 20). Even as a ghost, Yan-Zi is unable to break ties to the past. For transcultural writers, the text becomes a new territory where languages and cultures confront each other and in so doing are influenced by the other in a manner similar to Glissant’s understanding of *créolisation*.\(^\text{17}\) Unlike *métissage*, in which the originals are detectible, even predictable in the outcome, creolization is the unpredictable result of multiple cultures permeating each other. Nonetheless, as Fisher reminds us, this new territory does not exclude, “*les ancrages identitaires aux territoires d’origine*” (“Vers une littérature-monde?” 21).

Transculturality attests to an inevitable collision of cultures within modern societies and the resulting multiplicity of experiences. To this end, I propose reading the representation of family in twentieth and twenty-first century Francophone novels as a means of addressing both the “ancrages identitaires” that Fisher sees at work in transculturality as

\(^{16}\) D.D. Fisher, “Vers une ‘littérature monde’? Transfigurations de l’identitaire et du territoire de Marie-Claire Blais à Ying Chen”

\(^{17}\) For Glissant, Creolization is not the product of a single source, but rather it is, “*un mouvement perpetual d’interpénétrabilité culturelle et linguistique qui fait qu’on ne débouche pas sur une définition de l’être*” (Glissant 125). Likewise, the transcultural is a continual movement that resists fixed borders and definitions
well as the valorization of the *local*. In this way, my research furthers current understanding of the limits of cross-cultural exchange in an increasingly globalized world.

**Family and Society in Literature**

Historians such as Edward Shorter have shown that the family is indeed a socially informed institution that is modified by various socio-economic conditions. For instance, in *The Making of the Modern Family*, Shorter traces the evolution of the traditional Western family in North America and Europe across three centuries. Using historical documents from working and middle class families, the author offers a sociological study of the internal relation of traditional households. In the 18th century these households were regulated by normative constraints imposed by society. Using the metaphor of a ship moored to a dock, Shorter maintains that families were inexorably linked to society through a complex network of intertwined connections.

In this way, families did not offer safe havens from the world but were very publicly linked to society. Then, the spread of capitalism brought increased affluence to the middle class. According to Shorter, the affluence brought about by capitalism meant that women could devote themselves to mothering and child care, which shifted the family from a public site of capital production to a private nurturing nest. Finally, during the twentieth century, thanks to increased autonomy gained from financial independence and the sexual liberty

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18 For Alain Mabanckou texts are no longer bound to the idea of a national literature, especially in France were *le crise de l’universalisme*, manifested in the veil affair, riots in the suburbs and more recently partisan rifts that emerged during the nation-wide discussion on national identity, has disrupted long held vestiges of Frenchness. Still, Mabanckou is reluctant to see diversity as a utopic panacea for social ills noting that one ignores the *territoire d’origine* at his own peril: “Jamais il ne sera question d’abandonner son être ou de le vendre au enchères publiques. Je suis conscient et plus que convaincu que c’est en partant du ‘local’ qu’on atteint le monde” (63). The dangers of abandoning the *local*, and consequently of forgetting one’s past are echoed in Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues*, through the image of the protagonist’s brother Théo, which will be discussed further in the second chapter.
offered by legalized contraception, the liberation of women that took place in the 1960s would lead to the collapse of the nuclear family. However, Shorter refutes the death of family, since the majority of couples who divorce later remarry. Shorter sees this next phase of the family, that of the disrupted nest, as the first progression toward the postmodern family. While the institution of the family itself remains intact, Shorter does note some changes, including the individual’s indifference to family identity.

Some critics suggest that while the spread of capitalism seems to be corollary to this shift in the traditional family model, Shorter fails to convincingly show a causal link. Furthermore, using such an overarching economic phenomenon allows him to sweep North America and Europe into a single homogenous entity, ignoring potential cultural differences. For this study, Shorter’s work is important because it explains the rupture first between family and society, and, secondly, the growing apathy of the individual for his family identity. While Shorter works as a social historian, cataloguing and analyzing emergent family forms across hundreds of years from a broad perspective, this study questions the family’s role as a source of identity. Shorter’s study reveals the malleability of the function of family within society but also for the individual. The postmodern family, to which Shorter alludes, no longer acts as a point of origin providing a singular identity, but becomes a point of contestation where past and present collide.

Echoing Shorter’s claim that the institution of the family is not in peril, but in transition, Martin Barthélémy observes a change in attitudes toward family in the twentieth century. While the family remains an important institution to individuals surveyed, the conception of the family has been altered: “Les résultats présentés ici indiquent les grands traits des représentations sociales de la famille. Toujours considérée comme ‘institution
sacrée’ par quatre Français sur cinq, la famille ne renvoie pas l'image d'une institution fondée sur le mariage et la légitimité des enfants” (715). Published in 1986, Barthélémy’s findings demonstrate a rise of individualism within the family and a cassation with the past:

La famille ne représente plus une maison, un nom, une identité ou un lignage. Elle suscite plutôt des représentations directement rapportées à ce qu'on vit et connait soi-même. C'est une cellule de vie qui se définit d'abord au présent, et dont l'identité ne prend corps qu'au travers du seul personnage et événement fondateur que représente l'enfant. C'est avant tout une relation affective entre des personnes vivantes, peu nombreuses et proches. (716)

In this representation of the postmodern family, emphasis is moved from the ancestors to the descendants. The individual looking back upon a family tree does not see himself as a continuation of a historical network. Rather, his gaze is localized on the present.

Barthélémy’s study further reveals that, in recent years, the family no longer functions as a bastion of tradition. On the contrary, he observes diversity at work within the family: “La famille, plus que tout autre symbole, est pensée, parlée et vécue tout autant dans la sphère publique que dans la sphère privée, et par la-même elle recouvre des réalités différentes” (717). However, to ignore the importance of family in the formation of the individual would be to ignore the very socializing function that family serves. After all, the family offers the first appearance of interpersonal relationships. It is through the family that one learns to interact with others. Keeping in mind that the family no longer governs the formation of an individual as it did in the 18th century, it is important to consider what role family still plays in the formation of identity.

Recently, Yuho Chang published a study on the representation of the family as a means of expressing identity in twentieth century Québécois literature: *Famille et identité dans le roman québécois du XXe siècle*. This work offers a depiction of the changes in the Québécois society as seen through the lens of the family. For Chang, the socioeconomic
context in which these novels are situated acts as a framework that explains certain changes in the Québécois experience over the years. His fundamental supposition is that the literary representation of family can adequately represent the collective conscience of Québec in as much as changes in the representation of family pinpoint moments in the continually evolving Québécois identity. He demonstrates how changes within the family (number of children, parental authority, spousal relationship, marriage, relation between siblings) reflect social reactions to economic and historical events.

A sociologist by training, Chang is aware that multiple facets contribute to the cultural construction of an individual. However, he maintains that family is crucial for understanding the broader implications of an individual’s relationship to society for three reasons: (1) family acts as the locus of socialization, (2) family serves as the foundation of a given society, and (3) family itself acts as a micro-society. While Chang argues for the interdependence of family and society, he does not set out to establish a causal relation between the two. For Chang, these entities influence each other, though one does not come to dominate the other: “La structure familiale se modifie avec la culture qui elle-même évolue” (15). The changes he observes in the fictional post-industrial families he studies reflect changes in culture. However, this does not sound the death knell of the family: “Son changement n’anonce pas sa disparition mais montre seulement sa souplesse d’adaptation” (Chang 15). Indeed, it is the plasticity of the institution of the family that makes it such an effective narrative device.

While Famille et identité dans le roman québécois du XXe siècle provides an important foundation for the present study, Chang’s work stops at texts published before 1983 and neglects the political implications of the transcultural exchange discussed by
Clément Moisan and Renate Hildebrand. Transcultural texts are those that go beyond the confrontation of different cultures but provide a means of expressing this collision. In this way, transcultural texts offer a common, polyphonic imagination from which the plurality of cross-cultural exchange can be expressed. My dissertation addresses those transcultural texts that arise from a social context more willing to take on the issue cultural diversity in contemporary societies.

The basis of Chang’s argument is that, “l’image d’un peuple peut s’apercevoir dans l’image da la famille” (17). I am skeptical of such a direct relationship between family and identity. I am more interested in how effective family is in determining personal identity within increasingly transcultural societies. For example, how does the family reconcile the past within a culturally diverse present? Far from ignored, heritage is still preserved within the family. However, its influence over the present is mitigated through the individual. The novels studied destabilize the patriarchal imposition of a heritage in favor of a tradition that must be sought out and constructed. This change in the representation of family is paralleled by a change in society’s view of what constitutes family.

**The Fluctuating Family**

In a chapter appropriately titled “Familles désordonnées” Elisabeth Roudinesco and Jacques Derrida (2001) offer an extensive discussion of how recent developments in biotechnology (such as artificial insemination or in vitro fertilization) have challenged the “traditional” family model. While these technologies discredit the role of heritage in passing on identity to progeny through father and mother coupling and provide a context from which different family forms can arise, such a mise en question should not be considered destructive
or even dangerous to the social institution of family. On the contrary, the disorganization of the family, to which the title of the chapter alludes, refers to the alteration of a fixed notion of what family \textit{should} be. It does not question the idea of family in as far as a family is a social group united around procreation, but rather reevaluates a particular manifestation of the idea of family. Calling the traditional family model into question, new parental pairings expand the horizon of possibilities for how the idea of family might manifest itself differently.

For example, Derrida points out that psychoanalysis, a doctrine firmly rooted in the patriarchal family model, might be altered by an evolving notion of family: “Au-delà de toute interprétation juridique, je me demande surtout comment (et si) le modèle familial, référence très stable et fondatrice pour la théorie psychanalytique, pourra en se transformant, transformer la psychanalyse” (66). Thus, to see the family as the intransigent essence for what would become society is to ignore the \textit{différential}\textsuperscript{19} nature of the rapport between the two. That is, while family certainly informs society,\textsuperscript{20} society inevitably influences the family model. The implication of such a relationship is that society may in turn alter the notion of family, thus acting as a catalyst for a differentiating system continually in flux.

While the family remains an important factor in determining personal identity, it is not taken at face value and should not be seen as an inheritance that is projected upon the beneficiary without question. How do writers negotiate their familial ties? Which aspects are negligible and which ones cannot be ignored? Again, Jacques Derrida offers an interesting

\textsuperscript{19} Here I refer to Derrida’s own notion of \textit{différence} which he first discusses in an article on Antonin Artaud entitled “La parole soufflée.” Contrary to dichotomous binaries \textit{différence} is neither a distinction nor an opposition, but rather “une référence à l’autre, à une hétérogénéité qui n’est pas d’abord oppositionnelle” (Derrida and Roudinesco 43). In this way neither family nor society can subjugate to the other since each one is influenced and altered by the other.

\textsuperscript{20} In her book \textit{Household Politics: Montreal Families and Postwar Reconstruction}, Magda Fahrni, shows how different family politics reflected social expectations and determined government practices in postwar Montreal.
reflection on relating to the past in such a way that it does not come to dominate the present, this réaffirmation of heritage is discussed below.

**Reaffirming the Past**

For Derrida, the reaffirmation of the past refers to a simultaneous recognition and modification of history. In reaffirming the past, it is recreated. In a derridean reaffirmation, heritage resembles less the authoritarian imposition on a passive recipient but rather a negotiation between past and present, both being equal. As a result the beneficiary plays an active role in choosing, altering and negotiating his heritage. However, the presumed positive role of the héritier, even more pronounced in the English term beneficiary, is false, since, according to Derrida he is doubly indebted to his heritage:

> Loin d’un confort assuré qu’on associe un peu vite à ce mot, l’héritier devait toujours répondre à une sorte de double injonction, à une assignation contradictoire: il faut d’abord savoir et savoir réaffirmer ce qui vient ‘avant nous’ et que donc nous recevons avant même de le choisir et de nous comporter à cet égard en sujet libre. (De quoi Demain 15)

From this perspective a heritage is equally invested in the future as well as the past since the recipient is responsible for the transmission of the heritage he “chooses” to receive.

Here I want to emphasize that in “choosing” a heritage one is not completely free to recreate oneself. Réaffirmation is not a revival of the Enlightenment notion of perfectibilité. This conception of heritage does not destroy or deny links with a past that prefigures the present. On the contrary, the relationship with the past is such that it does not impose its will on the future. The transcultural subject is free to reaffirm the unavoidable past in a way that would leave the heritage altered. For Derrida the reaffirmation of that which came before us

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21 In this way reaffirmation espouses the matriarchal concept of society as understood by Fromm (see note 4) in promotes equality and rejects the authoritarian hierarchy of patriarchal society.
is essential to the future of the heritage: “Réaffirmer, qu’est-ce que ça veut dire? Non seulement l’accepter, cet héritage, mais le relancer autrement et le maintenir en vie” (Derrida and Roudinesco 15). Unlike Derrida, Roudinesco22 wonders if a consequence of what she sees as the disruption of the traditional, patriarchal family might provide a unique opportunity for the subject to be constructed independently beyond the reach of family. While Roudinesco is right to hope for a degree of liberation from patriarchal authority, it seems unlikely that such a complete, utopian shift would occur. Réaffirmation, as understood by Derrida, offers an interesting compromise between past and present in which neither consumes the other while recognizing a debt to the past.

To uncover how the debt to the past is communicated through the family in twentieth and twenty-first century transcultural novels, I examine works in which the family, rather than blindly propagating a fixed relation to the past, serves as a site where heritage is contested. Jacques Poulin, Catherine Mavrikakis, Ablah Farhoud, Leïla Sebbar and Wajdi Mouawad emphasize rupture over continuity and call into question the role of family in the transmission of tradition. In this way, family acts as a point of departure from which heritage can be negotiated as opposed to a fixed point of reference. This reevaluation of personal past through the image of the family operates in a manner similar to the reaffirmation of heritage described by Jacques Derrida.

Family can be a great gift or the greatest burden. Sometimes it can be both. Claudie Bernard points out that the family exists simultaneously within two planes, an x-axis spreading laterally among living members and a y-axis that extends at once into past and future (11). While the family creates a sense of solidarity among the present members, it also maintains and communicates a relation to the past. Family provides a unique point of origin

22 Roudinesco, Elisabeth. La famille en désordre.
that is simultaneously framed within a longer continuum, a larger network of individuals to whom one is related. But this relation is not gratuitous. It is steeped in obligation, loaded with the debt of previous generations and the expectation that the family will be maintained and, more importantly, prolonged. Every family carries with it a history, a heritage that must be propagated. Often, such as the case with Amy in Catherine Mavrikakis’s *Le Ciel de Bay City*, the past comes to haunt the present despite attempts to hide it. However, as Amy’s reluctance to take on the burden imposed on her by her spectral grandparents suggests, individuals are not ciphers that transmit an intransigent tradition; they are active participants modifying the heritage they receive. In this way, family plays an important role in the formation of an individual’s sense of self. It is hard to imagine an identity that is not constructed, in some way, through the institution of the family.

We are not born into this world alone. Neither are we born into this world free. Even before our birth, our debt was established to the mother who carried and nourished us, to a father whose name we will bear and to a cohort of relatives whose stories will become our own, shaping us before we have any concept of self. If, as Rousseau suggests, man is born free but everywhere he is in chains, certainly family, that original model for society, offers the first in a lifelong series of fetters.

The need to flee the chains of family, no matter how inescapable it may seem, serve as a defining moment in ones quest for self-actualization. The rigid behavioral codes and burdens of obligation imposed by the family often insight rebellion and serve as a point of departure in a quest of self-discovery. Such is the case of Stephen Dedalus in James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Before setting out to discover his own calling as a

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23 “la plus ancienne de toutes les sociétés et la seule naturelle est celle de la famille” (Rousseau 352)
writer, the protagonist refuses to take on debts made by his ancestors hoping to avoid being ensnared by similar traps:

My ancestors threw off their language and took another, Stephen said. They allowed a handful of foreigners to subject them. Do you fancy I am going to pay in my own life and person debts they made? […] When the soul of a man is born in this country there are nets flung at it to hold it back from flight. You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets. (Joyce 203)

The present study asks whether or not the family ties an individual to a particular identity through the use of such nets as nationality, language and religion? At what cost to the family does one obtain his freedom? These are the questions I ask of the texts selected.

This study examines how novels in a transcultural context call into question the role of the family as a means of framing an individual’s identity. Does the family in these novels, as Yuho Chang has argued, continue to play an important role in the formation of identity and collective conscience? Has the disordered family (*la famille en désordre*), as Elisabeth Roudinesco explains, so altered traditional, patriarchal transmission of heritage that it is possible for the subject to flee the nets cast upon him by the family and construct himself beyond the family sphere?

To answer these questions, I investigate how the family within transcultural contexts makes use of nationality, language, religion and other factors, to influence an individual’s identity, through the reclamation of an inevitable debt to the past. To this end I foreground different manners in which authors like Poulin, Mavrikakis, Farhoud, Sebbar and Mouawad negotiate the burden of transgenerational debt. This questioning of the traditional family in transcultural texts can be applied to a broader treatment of the society in question. Thus, by normalizing the dysfunctionality of the family, these authors project a new vision of a society that is more cognizant of the transcultural reality at work in the world today.
CHAPTER 2

THE BROTHER AS OTHER IN \textit{VOLKSWAGEN BLUES}

The following chapter examines how Jacques Poulin’s novel \textit{Volkswagen Blues} calls into question the importance of heritage in the formation of individual identity within a transcultural North American context. Considering the double-edged threat posed by a past that is overemphasized on one side, and on the other a history effaced through cultural assimilation, this chapter will discuss the role of family narratives in preserving a particular vision of the Québécois identity, then assess to what extent Poulin succeeds in broadening Québec’s literary heritage. From its conception, this closed tradition was propagated in part by the \textit{roman du terroir}\textsuperscript{24} genre, which emphasized an unbroken chain of transmission propagated through family. I argue that the (br)other\textsuperscript{25} in \textit{Volkswagen Blues} challenges the family’s role as the site for the transmission and propagation of heritage, through language. A brief discussion of Québec’s complicated relationship to its past reveals the significance of the rupture between heritage and family in \textit{Volkswagen Blues}.

\textsuperscript{24} Sometimes called le \textit{roman de la terre} or le \textit{roman paysan}, the \textit{roman du terroir}, which depicted the French-Canadian collective as revolving around two main practices (agriculture and Catholicism) acted as a foil to the Romantic works heavily influenced by French writers such as Balzac and Sue and was the backbone of French-Canadian literature production for a century [ex. \textit{La Terre Paternelle} (1846)-\textit{Trente Arpents} (1938)].

\textsuperscript{25} Throughout this chapter I use the term (br)other to refer to the character of Théo, since, as I will show, he calls attention to an inherent otherness at work within filial ties. Théo, the brother as other, attests to a breakdown in patriarchal transmission of heritage.
The Burden of History

Since the Treaty of Paris in 1763 marked the end of *la Nouvelle France* in North America, the question of what constitutes a nation has been at the heart of Québécois society. This moment not only signaled the end of French sovereignty in the New World, but also, in coalescing distinct cultural groups under the British Crown, indirectly challenged the ethnocentric view of nationalism. Divested of its sovereignty in North America, French-Canadian society sought to ensure its survival through the preservation of shared sociological factors such as language, history, and tradition. United under a shared history, language, and culture, French-Canadian society now needed a literature to ensure its posterity.

According to critic Gilles Marcotte, “L’institution littéraire n’est pas un thème nouveau en littérature québécoise. Elle est, au contraire, notre plus vieille idée” (17). Other researchers such as Lise Gauvin have suggested that the notion of French-Canadian literature was never a given, and in fact was at one time discredited by those who would later become part of its canon. The poet Octave Crémazie, exiled to Paris in 1867, maintained a correspondence with Henri-Raymond Casgrain in which the former expressed his doubts to the viability of a French language literature outside of France. Crémazie ultimately concludes that in order for French-Canadians to have their own literature, they must first have their own language. As Gauvin

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26 Drawing a parallel between the secession of the American South and Québec’s movement for political independence, James McPherson distinguishes between ethnic and civic nationality. McPherson understands ethnic nationalism as “the sense of national identity and loyalty shared by a group of people united among themselves and distinguished from others by one or more of the following factors: language; religion; culture, and . . . a belief in the common genetic or biological descent of the group” (31). Civic nationalism is more general and emphasizes political unity rather than recognizing ethnic difference. In this way, civic nationalism considers “the totality of persons born or naturalized in a country and living under the same government” (McPherson 34).

explains, the myth of the langue à soi would play a role throughout the evolution of Québécois culture up until the 1980s (31). Crémazie’s correspondence with Casgrain reveals the perilous situation of a burgeoning French-Canadian literature that saw itself as a foreigner in its own language.

This foreignness had been highlighted thirty years before when the Durham report28 infamously summed up the doomed French-Canadian position, saying, “They are a people with no history and no literature” (Randall 81). Interestingly, as if in response to Lord Durham’s accusation, the roman du terroir would forge a genre in the nineteenth and into the twentieth century that simultaneously ensured a place for French-Canadian literature and preserved its unique history in North America.

The roman du terroir genre sought to provide an accurate representation of the sober, hardworking families in Bas-Canada, distinguishing itself from the more romanticized tales of murder and suicide heavily influenced by the widely popular nineteenth-century French texts in circulation in Canada at the time. Abandoned by la mère patrie in 1763 and left to the victorious English, French-Canadians rallied together upon three basic pillars of their society: the church, agrarian life, and a large family. Through these institutions the enfants abandonnés preserved their cultural ties to French origins for hundreds of years. Contrary to the forty years of placid reticence that followed the British conquest, the political climate that gave rise to the roman du terroir provoked the awakening of a national consciousness throughout Bas-Canada hitherto unseen (Varnasse 10-11).

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28 The Durham report was an investigation into the colonial unrest following the Patriot revolution of 1837 prepared by John George Lambton, the earl of Durham, governor general of Upper and Lower Canada.
The roman du terroir depicts a cultural conservatism that would dominate French-Canadian social and political life until the death of Québec’s premier ministre Maurice Duplessis in 1959. This ideal dictated that French-Canadian identity and indeed its very survival hinged on the preservation of family, tradition, and Catholicism. Québécois literature’s rapport with history had become a burden, impeding the development of a literary system that would reflect a more diversified social reality. However, texts emerging out of the social and political restructuring of Québécois society set in motion by the Quiet Revolution work to preserve a distinct presence in North America while shaking off these survivalist practices.

With the death of Duplessis, Québec would undergo changes at both the political and cultural level. The state began to take responsibility for social services previously administered through the church. In the media, comedians such as Les Cyniques began to take aim at the old figures of patriarchal authority in the church and government. This volatile moment in Québec’s history marked a time in which particulars of the French-Canadian heritage (rural tradition, Catholicism) were called into question by authors, playwrights, and poets. Even le roman du terroir, in its bleak depiction of a society bound to live off the pitiless land in families with countless children, would be parodied in Marie-Claire Blais’s Une Saison dans la vie d’Emmanuel.

Not surprisingly, the institution of family would be altered to some degree. In fact, the social changes put into action during the Quiet Revolution offered work to women outside the home. This newfound economic independence, along with the widespread use of

29 “Les historiens et les sociologues sont d’accord pour imputer en grande partie ce retard [of the economy] à Duplessis qui s’en tient, durant 16 ans, à faire la promotion d’un Québec catholique et rural. La mort de Duplessis en 1959 met fin au conservatism anachronique et donne le signal de départ à une révolution sociale accélérée.” (Chang 143).
contraception, introduced changes in male-female couplings. Although traditional marriage remained the dominant practice, it was now on the decline (Chang 190). However, Yuho Chang notes in his study of the representation of the family in the Québécois novel that parent-child relations remain unshaken: "Mais les liens et la solidarité parentale ne sont pas pour autant relâchés. Malgré la variété des formes sous lesquelles se présente la famille, le lien du sang demeure un charnière entre les membres d’une famille” (191). Such a claim contradicts works written at that time by authors such as Marie-Claire Blais (La belle bête), Jacques Godbout (Salut Galarneau!), and Réjean Ducharm (L’avalée des avalés) which depict alienation from and resentment toward parents. While antipathy between generations was an important theme in these texts, one aspect of French-Canadian heritage that preserved filial ties was that of language.

For example, in her essay “Défence et illustration de la langue Québécoyse,” Michèle Lalonde champions the notion that language is born out of the intimate setting of the family. Two years earlier the importance of the French language in Québec had been acknowledged politically with the acceptance of la Loi 101, which established French as the official language of the law, of the government, and of business in Québec. To emphasize the personal nature of the status of the French language in Québec, Lalonde draws attention to the intimacy of language by way of the family: “[J]e me bornerai pour l’instant à faire remarquer qu’ils [those who would let English overrun the French spoken in Québec] insultent ma famille” (12). Like many Québécois writers of that time, Lalonde resists assimilation into Canadian and North American society by invoking a Québécois identity that is founded on language. She defends the langue-à-ma-mère which she sees as “une version
américaine du français” (20) against the invading *joual*,

a parlance used by working class men and women in Montreal arising from the slow but pervasive invasion of the English language. Thus, for Lalonde, traditions maintained by family are being threatened by the invading other.

Still, Lalonde is aware that Québécois society at this point in time is in a transitional state, and is careful to make a distinction between blind acceptance of heritage and complete abandon of it:

> Si je m’exprime en Français très correct et contemporain de France je risque de bien mal illustrer l’originalité de la langue Québécoise, voire de me ranger droit ceux qui la méprise injustement. Et si au contraire je me tourne la langue sept fois à gauche pour ramasser tous les anglicismes, barbarismes et vices de syntaxe qui font l’orgueil de Kébecway moderne, je risque de prendre parti contre la langue-à-ma-mère. (17-18)

This tightrope walk between conserving and modifying traditions continues to dominate Québécois society as it develops into and beyond the twentieth century, and is a crucial point in understanding Québec’s approach to cultural diversity in the modern world. In an article published in 2010, Yvan Lamonde traces the genesis of such inquiries into universalism and nationalism in Québec to the economic crisis of 1930, during which French-Canadians began to elaborate divergent perspectives on what it meant to be an individual in a cultural community. For many, access to the national began with an analysis of the self and its surroundings. As Lamonde explains: “[I]l s’agissait de ‘commencer’ à s’attacher à une terre, à une histoire, il s’agissait de voir que l’universel devait bien commencer quelque part”

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30In *Écrire pour qui* (2007), Lise Gauvin explains that while Michel Tremblay’s work, which is marked by the use of the working class *joual*, is key in institutionalizing the popular Montreal dialect, it does not seek to replace or even subvert traditional French (82). For Gauvin, Tremblay’s use of *joual* displaces the boundary between the working class quarter of Montreal and traditional French Canadian culture, valorizing both the authenticity of *joual* and the heterogeneity at work in language.
According to Lamonde, from this historical moment, the dialectic between nationalism and universalism has been an important component of *la pensée québécoise*.

Representations of the family play an important role in maintaining tradition at times of crisis in which French-Canadian and subsequently Québécois identity were threatened by outside influence. From the beginning of its history, French-Canadian literature served as a means of combating this invasion through a reassertion of traditional values shared by French speakers in Québec. Michele Lalonde makes use of the family to edify ethnocentric concepts of origin to define the French-Canadian and Québécois collective. However, such practices exclude those who did not have a direct tie to the land or spoke a different variety of French from the Québécois experience. The problematic integration of the immigrant communities into Québécois literature has been documented and analyzed by Clément Moisan and Renate Hildebrand in their study *Ces étrangers du dedans*.

Moisan and Hildebrand have argued that the literary system in Québec has gradually evolved in relation to its incorporation of the immigrant other. The authors demonstrate an increasing openness toward otherness at work in Québec’s literary system that has culminated in its current manifestation: the transcultural. Keeping in mind the significance of the representation of family in imagining the nation for French-Canadian and Québécois authors, it is apparent that if a transcultural shift has indeed taken place, it would have important consequences for the ethnocentric representation of family in Québécois literature. That is, the family would be seen as a community that works toward a future based on integration and reconciliation rather than founding a present that is based on traditions from the past. The family offers such an effective device for configuring the nation because it at

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31 This linguistic variety refers to Francophone immigrants to Québec from around the world, but also Francophone populations outside of Québec in New Brunswick and the Franco-Ontarien population
once invokes a past weighted with tradition and a future whose course is undetermined, yet influenced by these traditions. How it is used is at the discretion of the author.

In fact, a criticism that has been leveled against the authors from the Quiet Revolution is that while they helped to break from a policy of cultural isolation and dominance by the church, creating a pride in being Québécois, their message overshadowed, and consequently ignored, the immigrant community. However, in the wake of the Quiet Revolution, subsequent authors begin to push the pendulum in the other direction, and in so doing, heft off the burden of the national text.

**Shaking off the burden of le texte national**

In the midst of the political upheaval and social reform taking place during the Quiet Revolution, Québécois society brought about important changes on the literary production of this era. As the term revolution suggests, these events were not simply the zeal of a disenfranchised few, but were representative of a desire for real and durable social reform at multiple levels of society. The Quiet Revolution, however, was not fought at barricades with traditional weapons; it was the journalists, authors, poets, and playwrights who would be responsible for the outcome of this movement. Consequently, the literary production at the time was steeped in nationalist sentiment.

As early as 1975, Jacques Godbout criticized the constraints imposed by what he saw as the “service militaire” that was an obligation to Québécois authors of this time. According to Godbout, the situation prevented any individual effort and focused on writing a presumed collective: “Un écrivain québécois ne peut chercher à exister en dehors du texte québécois, il lui faut participer à l’entreprise collective, autrement c’est le néant” (150). The expectations
imposed by the Québécois literary system onto writers severely limited any dialogical practice in its exclusion of those who did not take up flag of ethnocentric nationalism. Some, by nature of their immigrant origin, were excluded from participating. In the same text, Godbout elaborates on the dangers of a literature working in isolation and underlines the inherent otherness in the practice of writing:

Quand en littérature, affleure la xénophobie, quand les écrivains ne sont plus des Survenants, mais des habitants, quand les étrangers se taisent parce qu’on leur reprocherait de parler de ce qu’ils ne savent pas, quand les Louis Hémon et les Gabrielle Roy seraient repoussés, parce que nés ailleurs, en France ou au Manitoba, quand il faut avant de publier porter un serment d’allegiance, . . . quand le cycle du sirop d’érable réapparaît dans les encriers, il est grand temps d’insulter sa mère, de bousculer ses cousins, de négliger l’heure aux horloges grands-pères et d’affirmer qu’écrivain, on n’est pas de la famille, qu’on ne le sera jamais. . . . (195, emphasis mine)

Interestingly, Godbout expresses the writer’s need to break from the restraints imposed by family but also Lalonde’s affirmation of a langue-à-ma-mère. Undoubtedly this is an allusion to the families portrayed in le roman du terroir. Ultimately, Godbout is calling for an ouverture in a national text that has become too isolated.

In an interview from the early 1980s, Jacques Poulin expresses his mistrust for a literature that had become too nationalist. In reference to the literature of the 1960s and 1970s, he says, “Il faut sortir! Parce que je trouve que la littérature québécoise est restée trop longtemps repliée sur elle-même. . . . Je ne me vois pas comme un auteur québécois au sens des années 1960. Je suis un écrivain de l’Amérique qui écrit en langue française” (Sanakar 210). Authors like Jacques Poulin and Jacques Godbout work to broaden the definition of what it means to be Québécois. As Mary Jean Green has observed, “Québécois novels of the 1980s tend to project identity onto a larger map . . . not circumscribed by the territory of Québec itself” (17). In Volkswagen Blues, Poulin subverts notions of tradition tied to the land and language to expand the Québécois experience in North America.
Still, an expansion of the Québécois experience was already taking place from within. Overshadowed by the Quiet Revolution, the immigrant voice was growing louder, threatening to disrupt the historical myths of origin that had been propagated through literature. With the influence of littérature migrante and authors such as Régine Robin and Marco Micone, “the history of Québec was being transformed from a single narrative thread, the heroic survival of a handful of French settlers, into a fabric woven from multiple migrations” (Green 17). Yet, in order for this fabric to be formed, old cloth had to be torn and reworked. Consequently, the immigrant voice was seen by some as a threat to traditional views of Québec’s cultural heritage.32

Not only was the immigrant voice challenging the Québécois identity, the presence of immigrants was seen by some as a threat to their livelihood.33 In their findings from the Commision on Reasonable Accomodations, Charles Taylor and Gérard Bouchard report that most opposition to accommodations came from French-Canadians while Anglophone Quebeckers appear to have been more tolerant.34 Québec’s history can no longer be a family affair in the way the roman du terroir understood family (as a closed community) but must open itself up. As Bouchard and Taylor explain, “[T]he identity inherited from French-Canadian past is perfectly legitimate, but it can no longer occupy alone the Québec identity space. It must hinge on the other identities present” (75). To understand the significance of

32 Guy Bouthillier explains that this threat is justified since, from the beginning, the English laid out plans to wipe out the French-Canadian presence by diluting it through immigration. For a provocative discussion of the British Immigrant strategy, see his book L’Obsession Ethnique.

33 According to a study conducted by Guy Larocque in 2001 for the polling agency SOM, “Les plus vulnérables de la société, ceux dont les revenus sont inférieures à $25,000 semblent continuer de voir les immigrants comme des voleurs de ‘job.’ À la lumière de nos résultats, il apparaît aussi que les Francophones ressent en général méfiants face aux immigrants et face aux minorités” (cited in Chang 192).

34 71.7% of French-Canadians felt that Québec was too tolerant of accommodations while only 35.2 % of Anglophones expressed disapproval (Bouchard and Taylor 22).
this issue\textsuperscript{35} for Québec, it is important to recognize the simultaneous need to retain vestiges of a French-Canadian heritage while incorporating cultural difference and the shifts that cross-cultural exchange will inevitably bring.\textsuperscript{36} An important question for Québec’s literary system is how to resolve these seemingly disparate imperatives.

Thus, in \textit{Le Roman mémorial} (1989), Régine Robin warns against what she sees as two impossible solutions to the question of integration: (1) ghettoization and (2) assimilation. In the first case, communities of immigrants would be established and maintained so rigidly that any influence from the inevitable interaction with other culturally defined groups is impeded, preserving what is seen as the authenticity of that culture. In this way, cultures are preserved like exhibits in a museum of natural history.\textsuperscript{37} As for the later, Robin explains that assimilation would not only be regrettable, but it would be impossible in Québécois society due to an imposing and exclusive collective memory: “[I]l me semble qu’il n’y a pas assez de jeu, de blanc dans l’intertexte québécois pour que les autres y trouvent véritablement une place” (183). For Robin, the literature produced up to that point was too turned in on itself and on the questions of Québécois identity and nationalism. Régine Robin explains that this ethnic obsession lead to the founding of a mythical national text that threatened to dominate Québec’s literary production indefinitely (180). This national text presented an incestuous web of intertext that acted as a dense network of cultural and literary landmarks, excluding

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\textsuperscript{35} The question of how best to incorporate the immigrant population spans party lines, as even self-styled souverainiste Guy Bouthilier wrote in 1997, in the wake of the second referendum, that if the Québécois nation is to come about then it must find a way to incorporate immigrants: “Si le Québec n’est pas né le 30 octobre 1995, ce n’est pas parce que les immigrants et les allophones n’étaient pas au rendez-vous. Au contraire: s’ils n’étaient pas là, c’est que le Québec n’était pas encore né” (207).

\textsuperscript{36} For an in-depth discussion of Québec’s intercultural policy, see Bouchard (2008).

\textsuperscript{37} Similarly Neil Bissoondath harshly criticizes Canada’s Multiculturalist policy claiming that it obliges immigrants to continue an existence that maintains their culture, but inhibits integration into society, leaving them henceforth on the outskirts.
those who did not share the same experience. Here, Robin is suggesting that literature produced in Québec at that time put too much emphasis on rewriting the past and was consequently unable or unwilling to recognize the diversity at work in this transitional moment in Québécois society. To prevent this exclusionary practice, Robin advocates a literary space void of the national text.

According to Gérard Bouchard, the disparity between Québécois and Neo-Québécois is not so extreme. He envisions a cultural integration mediated through the French language. For Bouchard, like Robin, the heart of the issue lies in an uncommon collective memory. However, where Robin opts for the more neutral literary space, Bouchard sees the possibility of opening French-Canadian history to incorporate the other:

Quant au problème posé par le fait que les Canadiens français n’auraient pas d’expérience, de passé commun avec les non-Canadiens français, ce n’est pas tout à fait vrai. . . . Comme on dit : ouvrir le cercle de la nation. Il faut ouvrir le cercle de la mémoire de façon de rendre l’histoire des Canadiens français accessible et intelligible pour les non-Canadiens français. C’est cela le défi : rendre le passé significatif pour ceux avec qui les Canadiens français n’ont pas vraiment d’expérience commune. (431)

For Bouchard, the essential lies not in ignoring the past, but in making it more accessible and consequently more significant to those who do not share in the collective memory. Making the past more accessible means no longer viewing history as a founding myth that ensures the steadfast propagation of a culture whose end was written from the beginning. Opening the past also means calling that history into question and revealing possible discrepancies or origins that are not so pure.

Ultimately what is at stake is the Québécois heritage. The rise of the immigrant voice in littérature migrante in the 1980s forces a re-evaluation of just what that heritage

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38 An example she cites is Marie-Claire Blais’s parody of the roman du terroir in Une saison dans la vie d’Emmanuel.
encompasses. Which history will be transmitted, maintained and propagated through subsequent generations? Who are the beneficiaries of this heritage? Jacques Poulín’s sixth novel, Volkswagen Blues, arises out of this socio-political context. Tracing a tenuous path between accepting historical myths and complete abandon of them, the vieux Volks in the novel carries Jack and Pitsémine on a journey across North America that evaluates the Québécois heritage from both a cultural and literary perspective. In this way, Jack and Pitsémine’s transcontinental journey is at once a quest for the North American frontier and also a testament to the continually expanding horizon of the Québécois heritage.

Problematising the histories that have served as sources of identity for the protagonist Jack Waterman, Volkswagen Blues succeeds in broadening Québec’s collective memory by revealing the fallacy of the myths upon which this ethnocentric conception of identity is based. This takes place through a rewriting of the family in as a heterogeneous entity in which Jack’s brother becomes other.

(Br)otherness in Volkswagen Blues

As this study operates on the principle that the conception of the family must be rewritten to facilitate the transcultural shift in Québécois literature observed by Moisan, Hildebrand, and others,39 this section examines the role of the brother in Volkswagen Blues. First I will briefly consider the seemingly contradictory role of brother as other, or (br)other, before turning solely to the character of Théo in Volkswagen Blues. Jack’s disillusionment at the anticipated encounter with his brother Théo represents a loss of the terre paternelle and re-evaluates what constitutes the Québécois heritage. Théo and Jack’s encounter at the

novel’s climax represents a confrontation of myth and reality that challenges the presumed unity of the family presented by other Québécois texts from the 1980s.

Dissimilarity between brothers is nothing new to the Western literary tradition. Indeed, the notion of brotherhood has become a means of expressing complicity of ideas or beliefs that surpasses the reality of difference at work between biological brothers. Earliest uses of the figure of the brother in narrative have displayed an ambiguous relationship between kinship and difference, emphasizing diversity amongst presumably similar individuals to evoke conflict and elicit sympathy. The story of Cain and Abel, for instance, is the representation *par excellence* of sibling rivalry in which the marked difference between the two brothers moves Cain to jealousy and eventually murder. A common trope in the narrative tradition, this tension between siblings is evoked in many texts produced post-*Révolution Tranquille* in Québec.

Given the preponderance of difference at work in representations of fraternal relations, what is the presumed common ground between brothers? From what area(s) must difference be expelled in order for brothers to maintain their bonds? While some difference is commonplace between brothers, the figure of the (br)other expands the reach of difference to the very notions upon which family, tradition, and heritage are often founded. Thus, (br)otherness exposes difference amongst siblings in areas often used to trace or establish a

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40 The biblical tradition would continue to emphasize the difference between brothers in the story of twin brothers Jacob and Esau, in which the former’s cunning prevails over the latter’s rugged strength to claim the father’s heritage. The differences stressed may be physical (ex. Zeus and Hades), spiritual (Cain and Abel), intellectual (Jacob and Esau), or a myriad of other traits, but rarely ever enough to call into question the common filial thread that unites the brothers.

41 In Marie-Claire Blais’s *La belle bête*, Isabelle-Marie’s envy of preferential treatment for her more comely brother drives her to burn down the family home and her mother with it. The main character in Jacques Godbout’s *Salut Galarneau!* sees his girlfriend stolen by his older brother. The relationship between brother and sister in *L’avalée des avalés*, perhaps the seminal work on heterogeneity within the family in Québécois literature, pits Bérénice against Christian Eisenberg in struggle for the affection of their parents.
common ancestry, such as language, history, or traditions. The (br)other emerges in the midst of *la Révolution tranquille*, a time when self and other distinction were solidified through the reclamation of a unified Québécois identity, to disrupt the presumed causal relation between heritage and identity. Théo’s (br)otherness in *Volkswagen Blues* threatens the family’s role as the site for the transmission and propagation of heritage.

The character of Théo represents as many ideas, concepts, and themes as there are critics who discuss his importance. For Gilles Marcottes, Théo epitomizes the fallen hero, while for Pierre L’Hérault, Théo is the unobtainable Grail at the center of Jack and Pitsémine’s quest for identity. Still, Anne-Marie Miraglia sees Théo as an intertextual reference to Kerouac’s Dean Moriarty signaling the failure of the American dream and serving as a warning to those who would imitate his example (175). This study reads Théo as (br)other. A figure who is simultaneously intimate and foreign, challenging the family as a site of origin in which heritage is predetermined.

The difference at work within (br)otherness is summed up by Saul Bellow when Jack and Pitsémine tell him about their search for Théo: “Quand vous cherchez votre frère, vous cherchez tout le monde” (Poulin 118). Transposing brother for everyone (*tout le monde*), the fictional Bellow effectively refutes the privileged status between brothers while suggesting a universalism at work among all human beings. If a stranger can be like a brother, conversely, a brother can seem like a total stranger. Through the image of the (br)other, incarnated by Théo, Poulin calls into question the role of family heritage in the formation of the individual. However, before any exegesis of the novel, it is imperative to discuss how the text should to be read. Luckily, Poulin leaves specific instructions imbedded in the text, guiding the reader on a textual treasure hunt.
Treasure Hunt on Treasure Island: How to read Volkswagen Blues

The journey begins with a postcard. Effectively a message in a bottle sent to the protagonist Jack Waterman fifteen years previously by his long lost brother Théo, it depicts on one side Gaspésie and on the other the facsimile of an indecipherable message. It soon becomes clear that the meaning of the text is hidden in its indecipherability. That is, the postcard is but the first of many clues that must be uncovered, unraveled, and explained, a charge that Jack and Pitsémine happily undertake—at one point she even refers to him as “Mon Cher Watson” (Poulin 22). Just as Théo leaves a trail for Jack to follow, so the reader is trained to investigate and follow up on the textual scavenger hunt Poulin presents. It seems that both Théo and the novel want to be found. The text is littered with intertextual references to American and Canadian writers, as well as historical treatises, maps and pictures. Each item is a clue that must be scrutinized in order to set the old Volks back out on the trail. As if this were not enough, the textual treasure map is replete with instructions on how it should be read. For instance, at one point Jack tells Pitsémine that one must not read Gabrielle Roy too quickly since the writing is so personal (Poulin 46). For Jack Waterman, whose “penname” refers to his profession as a writer, there is evidently a way in which text should be read. How would he have us read Volkswagen Blues? He seems to be advocating the same meticulous attention that he expects for Roy, taking it a bit further to say that “qui n’a pas relu n’est pas lu” (Poulin 282). The insistence on a second reading only reaffirms the need to pour over the clues that punctuate the text if one is to arrive at the treasure.

42 According to Anne Marie Miraglia, Volkswagen Blues contains more than forty intertextual references in the form of film, song, maps, photos, historical monographs, and novels (121).

43 Waterman is a brand name for fountain pens
Still, the text is skeptical that such a goal-oriented reading can work since, for Jack, writing is not a direct route, but a form of exploration: “[L’]écriture était pour lui non pas un moyen d’expression ou de communication, mais plutôt une forme d’exploration” (Poulin 98-99). Indeed, Gilles Marcotte points out that in Poulin’s fourth novel, Faites de Beaux Rêves, the question of how to conclude a story is already at work. According to Marcotte, the narrator-writer (a staple character of Poulin’s work) struggles with the impossibility to conclude that haunts, not only the writer, but twentieth-century narrative: “[Ils] s’abîment dans une solitude qui est leur inéluctable destin parce qu’ils savent, et refusent d’oublier, qu’à leur époque la défaite du récit est la vérité même du récit” (13). Likewise, Marcotte sees Volkswagen Blues as the acceptance of an endless story: “[L]e roman de l’acceptation, de l’accord enfin obtenu avec une histoire sans fin ni commencement” (17).

Consequently, Volkswagen Blues reads as a treasure map littered with landmarks and specific instructions, but with no “X” to mark the spot. In this way, the text emphasizes the journey over the goal. Ultimately, Jack’s encounter with Théo in such an “exploratory” narrative can rightly be seen, as Susan Rosenstreich has pointed out, as a new beginning. In this continual quest, each clue is both a treasure and a new point of departure. Furthermore, if, as Jean Levasseur has suggested, Volkswagen Blues is a quête d’identité, then it seems this identity will always be on the horizon. Thus, it would be more accurate to assert that Volkswagen Blues is not a quest which culminates in the discovery of identity, but rather that the text presents identity as an eternal quest. In short, the text is not a quête d’identité as much as it is an enquête d’identité.

Each clue leads the protagonists closer to an unknown destination: “Excusez-moi, dit-il mais je trouve qu’on a l’air de deux espèces de zouaves en train de déchiffrer un vieille
carte au trésor!” (Poulin 14). Like most treasure hunters, they are not sure where to find it, but they know what they are looking for. In this case the treasure is Théo. This is an interesting image, for three reasons: (1) it emphasizes the value that Jack places on finding his brother, (2) it highlights Théo’s mythical status in Jack’s eyes, and (3) it prefigures Jack’s disillusionment since there is always the chance that the treasure simply does not exist.

Jack’s quest for his mythical brother is paralleled in the text by the continual retelling of the myth of El Dorado.

This depiction of the new world as a veritable “treasure island,” where gold is so common that it is used to construct entire cities, serves as a reminder that America is not only a continent founded on mythical conceptions but also offers a discourse, removed from Old World enlightenment, in which legends come to life. Indeed, a lingering sense of hope, a trace of the myth at work in Jack, propels him on his quest, hastening him to find his own mythical treasure. In fact, it is Jack who first references and takes comfort in this tale. He retells the story it to soothe Pitsémine at a moment when her own claims of being Native American are exposed as a sham. She confesses that that she is not “une vraie Indienne” (Poulin 29). Not sure how to react, Jack reveals that El Dorado was not actually a city but a man who would cover himself in gold flakes and dive into a lake filling the water with a scintillating glow. Though the story seems innocuous, a ruse to distract Pitsémine from her own worries, Jack uncovers the fallacy of the myth that serves as the impetus for his journey. Furthermore, the juxtaposition of the revisionist retelling of El Dorado with Pitsémine’s métisse origins problematizes her notion of “une vraie Indienne.” The term Indian, initially given to Native Americans is itself based on a misconception: that European explorers had

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45 This mythical New World replete with riches is satirized most notably in Voltaire’s Candide (1789)
found the middle passage to the Orient. A true Indian in America is indeed a mythical concept and a treasure as elusive as a city of gold.

Later, it will be Jack who seeks solace in the legend. Leaving the public library in Toronto, embittered by the librarian’s disparaging comments about Etienne Brûlé (an historical hero\(^{46}\) and euphemism for Théo), Jack glimpses the golden shimmer cast by the setting sun on the windows of the Royal Bank building, and he takes assurance in the myth of *El Dorado*: “C’était comme si tous les rêves étaient encore possible. Et pour Jack, dans le plus grand secret de son cœur, c’était comme si tous les héros du passé étaient encore des héros” (Poulin 85). Here, though Jack debunks the myth of a city of gold, he effectively exchanges the mythical city for an equally impossible hero. Théo is Jack’s *El Dorado*.

The myth is also significant because of its association with the discovery of America. The New World, from its discovery has been fantasized as a virgin\(^{47}\) territory in which the myths such as that of *El Dorado* and the fountain of youth could exist. While this new world certainly offered new economic capital to the old world, it also furnished a blank page upon which myths could become reality. This is precisely the image of the American dream that Jack preserves in tracing the paths of the French Explorers into North America and the pioneers on the Oregon Trail:

L’Amérique! Chaque fois qu’il entendait prononcer ce mot, Jack sentait bouger quelque chose au milieu des brumes qui obscurcissaient son cerveau. . . . Il pensait que, dans l’histoire de l’humanité, la découverte de l’Amérique avait été la réalisation d’un vieux rêve. . . . Il prétendait que depuis le commencement du monde, les gens étaient malheureux parce qu’ils n’arrivaient pas à retrouver le paradis terrestre . . . et lorsqu’ils avaient trouvé

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\(^{46}\) Etienne Brûlé is a problematic hero for Jack since he incarnates both the adventurous *coureur du bois* who lived among Native Americans and could survive in the wild, but also the traitor who in 1629 guided the British on an expedition led by the Kirke Brothers down the St. Lawrence that culminated in the attack and successful capture of Québec City.

\(^{47}\) This image is reinforced by frequent reference by Jack to a historical text etitled *La Pénétration du continent américain par les Canadiens Français.*
l’Amérique, pour eux c’était le vieux rêve qui se réalisait et ils allaient éviter les erreurs du passé. Ils allaient tout recommencer à neuf. (Poulin 109)

In retracing the paths of the French explorers and the early pioneers who opened up the American West, Jack embarks on his own quest for happiness and rediscovery: “et parfois, en traversant l’Amérique, les voyageurs retrouvaient des parcelles du vieux rêve qui avaient été éparpillées ici et là” (Poulin 110). In this way, America and Théo are intrinsically linked. Further analysis of Théo reveals that the image of the (br)other, like America, is continually retold and reimagined to the point that the legend outlives the reality. Thus, the novel itself can be read as a rewriting of the road novel genre made famous by Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Reading *Volkswagen Blues* as a treasure map to Treasure Island highlights Jack’s deception and disillusionment at the final encounter with his (br)other.

**Languages as other: La langue à mon frère**

The notion of hybridity has pervaded contemporary criticism on *Volkswagen Blues*. This concept emphasizes the creative space that comes about from the interaction of different cultures at work within a globalized society. According to Homi Bhabha, the inevitable collision of cultures offers an “interstitial passage between fixed identifications [that] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy” (5). Similarly, Lise Gauvin sees the possibility for a utopist reconciliation of multiple languages under the all-inclusive banner of literature in *Volkswagen Blues* (157) whereas Susan Rosenstrich underlines the importance of “new beginnings” in the novel which extend in a rhizomic manner and are opposed to the notion of a single, traceable

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48 The rhizome is a concept elaborated by Edourad Glissant in *Poétique de la Relation* (1990), to express Creole identity in opposition to atavistic notions of single origins. Glissant borrows the deleuzian concept of rhizome to define identity as a process which evolves in time and space through contact with other cultures. Much like the
origin. While these two critics base their analysis of the ethnocentric element at work in Volkswagen Blues on the nomadic and heterogeneous characters of Jack, the effeminate man, and Pitsémine the Métisse mechanic, they largely ignore the problematic character of Jack’s long lost brother Théo.

Théo, particularly his appropriation of the language of the other (English) and the abandon of his mother tongue (French), serves as a sharp contrast to the plurilingual voyage of Jack and Pitsémine. Indeed, as Gauvin and Rosentstreich suggest, the novel opens itself to a much broader North American experience, emphasizing hybridity, and seems to launch itself toward the transcultural horizon. In this way, Jacques Poulin distinguishes himself from other Québécois writers who emphasis an ethnocentric nationalism. Nonetheless, the utopist vision that some claim to see in Volkswagen Blues is called into question by Théo who warns against the danger of losing oneself, or in this case ones brother, in the other. What role does Jack’s (br)other play in a text that, according to Pierre L’Hérault, “avance sans se nier ou s’arrêter sur une forme donnée, qui traverse et enregistre les discours, les langues les images québécoises, sans pourtant s’enfermer dans une formule figée” (41)? It is precisely in his role as (br)other that Théo, through the loss of his mother tongue, reveals a reluctance to overemphasize the role of language in the transmission of identity. Through this ambiguous figure, who simultaneously incarnates Jack’s hero from Québécois history (Etienne Brûlé) and the complete abandon of such a history, Jacques Poulin debunks the myth of ethnocentric origins. Still, it is evident throughout the text that this re-evaluation of roots of the mangrove tree (Rhizophora mangles), Creoleness draws simultaneously from multiple sources rather than a single, traceable source fixed in both time and space.
history is often painful forcing characters to come face to face with the inherent otherness at work in an institution that for centuries had been a bastion for identity: family.

To this extent, *Volkswagen Blues* calls into question the ethnocentric discourse put into play by writers such as Michèle Lalonde in her essay “Défense et illustration de la langue québécoise,” in which the mother language, *le français*, serves as a means of tracing heritage and national identity. Rather than vindicate ties to heritage through a “langue-à-ma-mère” like Lalonde, Poulin proposes an ambiguous notion of identity based on “la langue-à-mon-frère” which, in this case, implies the language of the other. As opposed to a hierarchical passage from past to future, embedding language with the authority of that which comes before, the relationship to language at work in *Volkswagen Blues* is fraternal. Thus, language continues to inform identity, but in a manner that is non-hierarchical and capable of drawing from multiple sources. Furthermore, it is conceived in a lateral relationship such that all participants have equal access to it. In this way, Théo’s dual nature of brother and other, (br)other, distinguishes *Volkswagen Blues* from ethnocentric concepts elaborated in the 1960s and 1970s in an early attempt to obtain the transcultural.

However, situating the text firmly within Moisan and Hildebrand’s concept of the transcultural proves problematic. First, according to Moisan and Hildebrand the transcultural element begins in 1986. Published in 1984, *Volkswagen Blues* lies at the cusp of the intercultural and transcultural periods, in a moment when cultures interact but do not alter each other. Certainly, as L’Hérault maintains, *Volkswagen Blues* should be classified with “d’autres texts, notamment ceux appartenant à l’écriture immigrante” (42) inasmuch as it resists the tendency to reduce the Québécois experience to a predetermined heritage. Similarly, Pierre Nepveu has noted that Poulin’s work does not define or limit cultures and
society, but can be seen as “recueillante” (216). Consequently, by *welcoming* difference, the text allows for and indeed encourages cultural interaction; however, in the text, this does not often result in the alteration by the other at work in Moisan and Hildebrand’s conception of the transcultural. In fact, Théo’s transformation by the other is such that he no longer recognizes his own brother. This sort of alteration functions less like an exchange and more like oppression from the dominant hegemony. Likewise, while Jack and Pitsémine learn from each other’s different views of history, they remain two distinct figures throughout the journey. L’Hérault suggests that while they share the open road, “chacun est donc isolé dans sa propre mémoire” (31). This brings to mind the scene at the continental divide in which the physical union of Jack and Pitsémine is interrupted by the former’s premature ejaculation. Furthermore, in situating this failed union on the continental divide, the text emphasizes the rift that divides these two characters is often a source of tension. However, at the moment of their separation during a final embrace inside the Volkswagen bus, the two seem to fuse into one: “[C]omme s’ils n’étaient plus qu’une seule personne” (Poulin 320). Although initially opposed as two continental plates, two distinct histories of North America, Jack and Pitsémine coalesce into each other. The journey that Jack and Pitsémine take across the continent facilitates the union of two distinct and disparate visions of history with Jack representing the European conquest and Pitsémine the exploitation and eradication of Native Americans. Thus, the novel anticipates cultural fusion at work in the transcultural novels that Moisan and Hildebrand examine.

So, while *Volksagen Blues* does not fit comfortably in the transcultural category defined by Moisan and Hildebrand, it marks an important shift away from rigid intercultural interaction and envisions the possibility of an eventual transcultural exchange. This shift
cannot take place, however, without some serious alteration to the concept of identity formation. Théo, then, is the necessary sacrifice at the altar of the family. The (br)other mediates the transcultural shift insofar as he simultaneously questions the privileged status of filial ties as sources of origin, subsequently revealing that identity, like language, always come from the other.

Moving across the world, the nomad carries his home in his native language. But, if he were to lose his language or if it were replaced, would he sever himself from his home? Drawing on this new language, could he create a new notion of self, and subsequently a new identity? For the exiled, language may bridge “the unhealable rift . . . between the self and its true home,” described by Edward Saïd (49). While language can operate as a link to an idyllic personal past and a concrete notion of identity, it risks binding the speaker to a finite concept of self linked to language.

In fact this view of language does not take into account the heterogeneous blending of language and culture that one encounters on the transcontinental journey depicted in Volkswagen Blues. Here, Poulin explores the rapport between language and identity that emerges from the collision of Anglophone and Francophone cultures in North America calling into question the notion of a homogeneous self derived from language. The complex rapport between language and identity is thematized in Volkswagen Blues through the use of English by otherwise Francophone characters. Far from innocent, the choice of English is not merely a pragmatic recourse to the langue véhiculaire described by Deleuze and Guattari (43), but a violent refusal of a past that has become unrecognizable.

In Le monolinguisme de l’autre, Jacques Derrida explains that while the impossibility of possessing language permits the discourse between belonging and language,
it becomes necessary to combat these ideologies in order for language to function properly (121). The transient nature of language described by Derrida reveals the plasticity of cultural identity derived from it. Since no person or collective culture can claim ownership of a language, it cannot be responsible for a single, unified notion of identity, nor should it be appropriated as such. Still, while language offers intimate access to previously foreign cultures, it is insufficient as a *carte d’identité*. That is, although a requirement for citizenship in many countries, knowledge of the native language, even the ability to speak it well, is insufficient in terms of belonging to the culture in which it is spoken.

While Derrida maintains that language is insufficient as representative of a single unified sense of belonging, it has been suggested that some aspects of identity cannot be changed. According to Tzvetan Todorov, we are far from the notion, alleged by some Lumières of the eighteenth century, of *perfectebilité* which maintains that the human spirit operated as a *tabula rasa*, capable of distancing itself from its native culture and consequently adopting whatever culture for which it was best suited (22). Certain indelible aspects of identity are linked to our own personal past. However, in an increasingly globalized world, one in which the gap between self and other has diminished, questions of language and identity inevitably arise.

The complex relation between language and identity drives *Volkswagen Blues*. The Volkswagen itself is an ambulatory library that has travelled throughout Europe and now North America crossing geographic and linguistic borders. For Pierre Nepveu, the Volks embodies the new Québécois culture he describes in his essay *L’Ecologie du réel*: “Il faudrait

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49 In Maryse Conde’s *Le Cœur à rire et à pleurer*, the narrator witnesses firsthand the insufficiency of language as means of belonging when a Parisian waiter fails to recognize her family’s presumed “Frenchness” despite their command of the French language: “Pourtant nous sommes aussi français qu’eux, soupirait mon père. Plus français, renchérissait ma mère avec violence. Elle ajoutait en guise d’explication : Nous sommes plus instruits” (13).
peut-être concevoir le vieux Volks de Poulin comme une métaphore même de la nouvelle culture québécoise: indéterminée, voyageuse, en dérive” (217). Still, the vehicle, and the new Québécois culture it represents, bears the traces of a previous life, indelible scars from the past. For example, a citation attributed to Heidegger inscribed in the driver’s side sun visor expresses a particular sentiment with regard to language and identity: *Die Sprache ist das Haus des Seins.* The text, then, does not advocate an abandonment of history, but suggests a particular means of living with the past such that no myth is beyond scrutiny. So, while Jack and Pitsémine move toward the transcultural future, they carry with them traces of the past.

Interestingly, the message etched in the Volkswagen--the means of propulsion for the transcultural journey the protagonists undertake--reaffirms the colonial imposition of language as source of identification that Derrida writes against in *Le monolinguisme de l’autre.* Indeed, while the transcontinental journey Poulin depicts exposes the instability of cultural identity by underscoring the disruptive nature of contact with a different language on a cohesive concept of self, the text, much like the Volkswagen, contains scars of a past which views the other as threatening in that he challenges any notion of identity brokered by language.

In fact, in *Langagement*, Lise Gauvin explores the complex and polemical question of language in Québec and its repercussions on the literature that it has produced. For Gauvin, the Québécois writer is not merely interested in language for language’s sake; rather he is obligated each time he takes up his pen to re-examine and re-conquer the language he is using. Language for the Francophone writer is in no way a simple means of communication. On the contrary, it becomes a constant negotiation between not only the writer and the

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50 “Language is the home of being”
reader, but also the author and his text. Gauvin creates the neologism *surconscience linguistique*\(^{51}\) to explain the obsessive and inherent nature of the relationship between writer and language. Thus, a complete study of Francophone literature must take into account this *surconscience linguistique* and examine how the text makes use of language (*Langagement* 13).

A source of inspiration for Francophone writers, this inescapable *surconscience linguistique*, acts also as a source of suffering. Indeed, for postcolonial literature, the language imposed by the colonizing country is naturally in opposition to the *langue natale* and, subsequently, a remnant of the colonizers’ oppressive patriarchal culture that the colonized people are forced to internalize. Expounding on the claim of ownership evoked with regard to language, Derrida sees the violent imposition of language as a tenet of the colonial practice: “Il peut historiquement, à travers le viol d’une usurpation culturelle, c’est à dire toujours d’essence coloniale, feindre de se l’approprier pour l’imposer comme ‘la sienne’” (*Le Monolinguisme* 45). In *Volkswagen Blues*, the threat of violence is personified in the character of Pitsémine, a young *métisse* who at once evokes the historical aggression inflicted on Native Americans by both French and English colonizers and also the real threat of violence which obligates her to travel with a concealed knife.

Throughout *Volkswagen Blues*, Poulin evokes a disdain for the encroachment of English into French-speaking Canada while concurrently incorporating it into the vernacular of the text. The following proposes an exploration of this simultaneous refusal and appropriation of language by examining which characters makes use of it, in which circumstances it is used, and to what end it is effective.

\(^{51}\) As the name suggests, this *surconscience linguistique* reflects an author’s own acute awareness of the broader implications of language and reveals a desire to draw attention to the function of language in literature not merely as a means of conveying meaning.
For instance, Poulin draws attention to the aforementioned violence inherent to language through his selective use of English throughout the novel. This violence is often contrasted by an appreciation for French. In fact, Poulin’s protagonist Jack Waterman, who is coincidentally a Québécois writer of Francophone novels, thematizes the *surconscience linguistique* of the Francophone writer. In this way Poulin amplifies the already important question of language by bringing the writer into the narration. As a result, Jack Waterman’s fascination (*surconscience linguistique*) with words and specifically the French language are played out within the novel.

Of equal importance is Jack’s knowledge of language. Not merely his ability to speak or write correctly, but the fact that, as Sherry Simon points out, his experience as a bilingual writer reflects a heightened awareness of the ambivalence of language (“Translating and Interlingual” 70). Jack’s partiality for his native tongue, as well as his heightened awareness of its polysemic nature, is revealed in his exchange with a hitchhiking vagabond. Though a native speaker of English, the man communicates with Jack in French pausing only occasionally to search for a word or to ask for a translation. For Jack Waterman, the answer is rarely a simple, one-word transposition. For example, when the old vagabond asks for a translation of the word steep, Jack initially offers *escarpé*, then cannot stop himself from adding *à pic* and *en pente raide* (Poulin 252). Here, it is obvious that Jack, as a writer and a Québécois, wants to celebrate the polysemic potential of his language. However, the inherent ambivalence of language can also evoke tension.

In the following exchange, taken again from the scene with the Anglophone vagabond, the reader detects a palpable tension due to Jack’s refusal of a simple translation that the vagabond seems to be imposing:
Il y avait un mot en anglais pour dire ça et c’était le verbe *to ramble*.
-On peut dire vagabonder, en français, dit Jack.
-C’est vrai, dit le vieux sans grande conviction.
-Ou encore se promener, errer à l’aventure, aller de-ci de-là…
-Hum hum! fit le vieux et Jack n’insista pas. (251-252)

This exchange takes on the form of a competition: the old vagabond proudly enunciates the English verb ‘to ramble,’ which is promptly countered by Jack’s suggestion *vagabonder* and immediately followed by other options alluding to the myriad possibilities that the French language offers. Furthermore, in this example, the vagabond does not even seem to be asking for a translation. In this case, his vocalization of ‘to ramble’ seems to be more pedantic in nature. Jack responds abruptly to this imposition of English. Subsequently, Jack’s prompt suggestion comes across as an insistence on the use of French, a refusal of an English encroachment. The exchange between Jack and the vagabond highlights a disdain for the violent imposition of English, while celebrating the French language.

This love for the French language is evident not only in Jack’s role as a writer, but also his role as a reader. As is the case with most writers, Jack is also an avid reader. In *Volkswagen Blues*, the narrator makes a distinction between the reading practices of Jack and his fellow traveler la Grande Sauterelle/Pitsémine, noting that “tandis que la Grande Sauterelle devorait tous les livres qui lui tombaient sous la main, Jack Waterman était un lecteur inquiet et parcimonieux” (Poulin 42). Jack is evidently a discriminating reader; however, despite his selectivity, Jack’s list of favorite authors also includes some Anglophone and French writers among his fellow Québécois: Hemingway, Ducharme, Roy, Vian, Salinger, and others (Poulin 42). This exhibits Jack’s own, albeit slight, appropriation of English into his development.
Despite his disdain for English, Jack seems unable to avoid it. This is demonstrated elsewhere in the narrative, as the encounter with the vagabond is not his first English encounter. Early in their journey, Jack and Pitsémíne stop at a museum in Gaspé hoping to find information about the indecipherable text that Jack’s brother Théo had sent to him on the back of a postcard fifteen years ago. Yet, just as it seems to be gaining momentum, Jack’s nascent quest is abruptly halted by an apathetic young man sitting behind the information desk reading a comic book. Initially, when questioned about the text, the youth responds in terse French. Finally unable, or unwilling, to offer any help, the exasperated young man, hoping to end the conversation and return to his comic book, answers Jack with a curt, “So what?” (Poulin 16). Poulin’s first use of English in Volkswagen Blues is an expression of exasperation and apathy. Placed in the mouth of the youth, living in the city of Gaspé on the edge of Francophone Canada, the young man’s utterance signals to the reader an encroachment of English into Québec. Anglophone influence is further supported by the young man’s choice of reading material: Superman. Here, Poulin introduces English as a violent means of dealing with an increasingly frustrating situation.

Interestingly, the unreadable text is revealed to be the copy of a sixteenth century document written in French by Jacques Cartier, as opposed to some obscure language. In this case, the young man’s inability to recognize the ancient text on the postcard, presumably the language of his ancestors, elicits a recourse to English. Indeed, the use of English in this example is linked with an effacement of personal history. The young man’s choice of English can be seen as a reference to violence, as a means of threatening Jack into silence, but also as a means of silencing filiation with his ancestral past. The young man’s phrase indicates to
Jack that he is not interested in helping Jack with his current search. His insistence on expressing himself in English represents a willful ignorance to the past.

Not long after the scene in the museum at Gaspé, the text places the same expression in the mouth of Jack Waterman. It comes at a time when the character of Etienne Brûlé, Jack’s childhood hero, is maligned. Making a stop in Toronto in the public library, Jack and Pitsémîne encounter a history student who offers his own opinion of Etienne Brûlé: “Je pense qu’Etienne Brûlé était un bum” (Poulin 76). For Jack, Brûlé represents the epitome of Québécois identity. He incarnated a spirit of adventure and familiarity with other cultures that made him an ideal guide through the “new” continent. The revelation of Etienne Brûlé as a “bum” contradicts the personal history Jack had created destroying the very foundation of his sense of self. Again English, in the form of the word bum, serves as the vehicle through which violence is carried out leaving Jack visibly shaken up: “Il avait l’air assommé, comme un home qui vient de recevoir un mauvaise nouvelle concernant un de ces proches” (Poulin 82).

Interestingly, Jack, who defends the French language against the English imposed by the vagabond, now makes use of it. When Jack is presented with information justifying the student’s claim, revealing the degree of his disillusionment, he instinctively responds in English. Like the young man at the museum when confronted with the illegible text, Jack vocalizes an exasperated “so what?” when forced to face the unexpected realities concerning his hero. Whereas the former was unable to recognize the ancient text, Jack’s use of English stems from a refusal to recognize the implications of the sordid history of Etienne Brûlé narrated to him by Pitsémîne. Jack momentarily draws upon the language of the other to ignore claims that threaten his personal history.
The revelation of Brûlé’s betrayal uproots Jack from a filial connection as well. For Jack, Théo personifies Brûlé who, like the pioneers and *coureurs de bois* depicted in history, was “absolument convaincu qu’il était capable de faire tout ce qu’il voulait” (Poulin 149).

Memories of Théo blend with the history of Etienne Brûlé until the images fuse and are lost in each other. The frontier between truth and reality is unrecognizable. Later Jack admits that Théo is “à moitié vrai est à moitié inventé” (Poulin 149).

In order to understand the significance of this rupture, one must appreciate just what Théo, Jack’s imagined (br)other, represents. Jack creates the imagined half of Théo through a patchwork of memories that punctuate his hazy memory. At one point, Jack remembers a moment when, playing in the back yard of their youth, Théo would pretend to be Etienne Brûlé. Interestingly, it was always Théo who would tell and interpret the exploits of the explorer:

> Il [Théo] racontait l’histoire d’Etienne Brûlé. Il avait une façon spéciale de raconter : il faisait beaucoup de gestes et mimait les événements, alors tout le monde pouvait voir comment Etienne Brûlé, arrivant en Nouvelle-France avec Champlain, avait obtenu la permission de vivre avec les Indiens pour apprendre leur langue et était devenu à 18 ans le premier coureur de bois. (Poulin 70)

Evidently, Théo, like Jack and Pitsémine following the path of the pioneers on the Oregon Trail, was re-creating himself through the retelling of the first explorers. The need to create oneself pervades Poulin’s work. As in nearly all of Poulin’s novels, the characters names are not the names they were given but names they chose for themselves. Pitsémine, for instance, most often goes by the Grande Sauterelle; Jack Watermann is a pseudonym and the only name the reader has for the protagonist. Similarly Théo, etymologically rooted in the Greek *theos* meaning “god,” takes on a mythical character. The mythical figure is the *coureur de bois*, an important figure in the exploration of the New World.
In *The Myth of the Lost Paradise in the Novels of Jacques Poulin*, Paul Socken offers a thorough examination of the attempts to regain lost paradise in Poulin’s first seven novels. In *Volkswagen Blues*, this paradise is understood as the discovery of the New World. Socken explains that in *Volkswagen Blues*, “the opening of the American West, a modern version of the discovery of America, is a form of creation, but it is also an attempt to re-create the lost paradise in the New World” (61). Ultimately it is this theme of continual re-creation that draws Jack to the *coureurs de bois* and the pioneers of early America:

Jack is attracted to the myth of the American West because it expresses a spirit embodied in the pioneers. They were pioneers because they were convinced that they were capable of doing absolutely anything that they wanted. This belief in the power of the individual to shape reality is fundamental to the myth of America and to the Poulian personal myth. (62-63)

Jack’s disillusionment in the final encounter with Théo stems from a loss of the Promised Land and the mythical American continent.

Faced with this unrecognizable history and unwilling to accept it, Jack’s recourse to English operates in reaction to this rupture with tradition. Similarly, in *Le monolinguisme de l’autre*, Derrida observes that in the absence of a stable model of identification a movement is provoked: a need for genealogy (116). While Derrida maintains that all language come from the other, even the native language, Jack’s use of English only highlights his need to re-establish a personal genealogy. Within the language of the other, Jack is able to negotiate the *illisibilité* of the facts that threaten his personal history. In this way, the search for Théo, which started with the deciphering of the unreadable text on a postcard sent to Jack from his estranged brother, is a quest to re-establish genealogical ties that is facilitated and instigated by the otherness of language.
It is not until the confrontation with Théo that Jack’s disillusionment is irrevocably confirmed. Finally, in this long awaited encounter, Jack sees that his brother, who personified the indomitable spirit of adventure, has been reduced to a grey-haired man with a long beard and confined to a wheelchair. However, it is not the sight of Théo that is the most troubling for Jack. When Jack addresses his brother in his langue natale, Théo is unable to recognize him and recoils abruptly, saying, “I don’t know you” (Poulin 314). Much like the young man in the museum when asked to identify an ancient text and Jack when confronted with the treason of Etienne Brûlé, Théo responds in English. Whether, as in the case of the former, he truly did not recognize his brother or, as in the case of the latter, he refused to see the truth before his eyes, Théo’s use of English is significant. It represents a complete rupture of filial ties: he recognizes neither the sound of his native tongue nor the image of his brother. In a reversal of the exchange with the vagabond, Théo rejects Jack’s imposition of French.

Théo’s refusal of the French language marks his own break with his personal history. In short, he renounces the image that Jack remembers while reinventing himself in the new language. For Théo, the appropriation of English signifies a breaking of ties to family heritage. However, any notion of freedom gained from this break is illusory and comes at a cost. Reinventing himself in the language of the other, Théo must dismiss any personal history tied to his native language. Théo adheres to a rigid sense of self in which notions of self are thoroughly invested in the language. Jack, on finding Théo, discovers, with the simple intonation of a sentence in English, that his and his brother’s dreams of a promised land, an America in which identities could be re-created incessantly, have been lost. Confronted with the reality of his (br)other, Jack abandons his quest and returns to Vieux Québec disillusioned.
Contrary to the nomadic thought\textsuperscript{52} that informs Jack and Pitsémine’s use of language, frequently negotiating meaning between at least two different languages throughout their transcontinental journey, Théo represents a fixed notion of language and identity that maintains the dominant binary of self and other. For Théo, appropriation of language is possible because language exists as a unified whole. His use of English only reinforces a codified discourse in which mastery, that is, appropriation, of language demonstrates belonging to the hegemony which imposes it. In Théo’s case, although he has travelled and interacted with otherness such that he has assimilated to Anglo-American culture, he essentially replaces one linguistic system for another while Jack and Pitsémine continually evade codified systems in part through linguistic vagabondage. Consequently, Théo’s pluricultural past is replaced, erased and forgotten. Jack, however, displays a linguistic nomadism which upsets fixed notions of identity. His linguistic mobility, paralleled in the image of the rambling Volkswagen, is contrasted by Théo: an image of death and immobility.

Describing both Jack and Pitsémine’s rupture with the oppressive memory of “mere-patrie,” Susan Rosenstreich observes that “they become conscious instead of a new order of history” (130). Indeed the encounter with Théo reaffirms this “new order of history” as well as a nomadic use of language. Throughout the novel the characters must confront information that is often unrecognizable. That is, their concept of the past does not correspond to the history with which they are presented. It is at these moments, when recognition is not

\textsuperscript{52} The image of the nomad personified, for example, by Isabelle Eberhardt offers means of escaping social norms through physical displacement and proximity with otherness. For Gilles Deleuze, this displacement is not limited to the physical, but can comprise the realm of thought. In an essay on Nietzsche’s influence of philosophical discourse entitled “Nomad Thought,” he explains that nomadic thought attempts to evade highly codified social institutions, to become a “nomadic war machine” whose goal is to “decodify instead of allowing themselves to become overcodified.” Nomadic thought then seeks to “continually evade the codes of settled people” (Deleuze 148, 149).
possible, that Poulin often chooses to place English in the mouths of otherwise Francophone characters. Unable to reconcile the contradiction between a constructed past and suggested reality, the characters make use of the otherness of language in order to refute memories that have become unrecognizable or *illisible*.

The nomadic thought that propels Jack and Pitsémine on their journey across North America represents an image of Québécois culture that traverses linguistic borders opposing the strictly codified, monolingual practices of dominant hegemonies. While the otherness of language allows for a means to re-establish severed historical ties through anamnesis, the complete appropriation of language would only reinforce the dominant hegemony nullifying the very process. To this end the monolingual, sedentary character of Théo serves as a warning against the limits of appropriation.

Sociologist Gérard Bouchard explains the need to open the circle of memory in French-Canadian society so that it might be accessible to a broader, more diverse Québécois community that better reflects today’s multicultural reality. In order to appreciate the significance of such an *ouverture*, it is important considered the socio-political impetus for Québec’s struggle with history. Ironically, Lord Durham’s infamous statement that French-Canadians were a people of no history and no literature would engender a literary system deeply steeped in historical tradition. However, the bond to history, family, and heritage maintained through literature became a burden, creating a national text that was too introverted and inaccessible to the other. In the wake of globalization, the Québécois literary system found itself negotiating between the conservation and modification of traditions. In order for the history-literature link to be altered, changes had to be made in the representation of the family.
Jacques Poulin’s *Volkswagen Blues* attempts the tightrope walk between, on the one hand, accepting memories and tradition and, on the other, revealing the fallacy of the myths that makeup the Québécois heritage. Through the image of the (br)other, incarnated by Théo, Poulin calls into question the role of family heritage in the formation of the individual. At once intimate and foreign, the (br)other disrupts the presumed causal relationship between heritage and identity, revealing an otherness at work within the family. Jack’s rupture with Théo questions the role of language in the transmission of heritage. In this way, the (br)other works to open the circle of Québécois history, revealing the instability of a notion of heritage constructed upon a common language.

With *Volkswagen Blues*, Jacques Poulin marks an important rupture in the Québec’s literary history and its relationship to the past, to the myths transmitted through language and maintained through family. Language, history, and genre are uprooted, recast within a transcultural horizon, and shown to be insufficient means of tracing a single origin. *Volkswagen Blues*, then, stakes claim to a new Québécois experience within an open American plain that offers at once endless possibilities and a perilous terrain in which one can lose himself. As the figure of the (br)other suggests, this ouverture in the Québécois heritage is not without consequences.

Ultimately, the (br)other attests to the inability to maintain homogeneity within the family and imposes an instability which disrupts the transmission of a heritage tied to mythical origins. Théo is an ambivalent character who at once advocates a liberating cassation from the past and warns against the dangers of completely abandoning heritage. His limited mobility and dependence on caretakers serves as a foil to Jack’s ambulatory freedom. Thus, the figure of the (br)other raises new questions with regard to the transmission of
heritage. Ancestral origins can be ignored, but at what cost? What are the consequences of ignoring family? How do these forgotten filial ties resurface? What role, if any does family play in the preservation and transmission of identity? These questions, initially posed by Poulin’s enigmatic (br)other, are extended by Catherine Mavrikakis to immigrant communities, and individuals of immigrant origins, moving beyond the fixed-root conception of Québécois literature and into a transcultural horizon that encompass myriad ways of being Québécois. The following chapter considers the desire to break from heritage in two novels by Catherine Mavrikakis.
CHAPTER 3
NECESSARY BETRAYAL

J’espère simplement que mes
textes feront des petits en
lesquels je reconnaîtrai tout ce
que je n’ai pas pu faire et qui
pourtant me trahiront.

-Catherine Mavrikakis

I can’t think for you, you’ll have
to decide whether Judas Iscariot
had God on his side.

-Bob Dylan

The figure of the traitor is one of the most reviled and perhaps the most
misunderstood in the Western tradition. In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante reserves for Judas,
along with Brutus and Cassius, the cruelest of punishments in the heart of hell: eternal
mastication, head-first in the mouth of Lucifer. The placement of these three traitors, in the
nadir of the inferno, depicts a hierarchy of transgression in which betrayal is presented as the
ultimate sin. But do these traitors merit such treatment? Or was Judas the most loyal of the
disciples? After all, was Judas’s betrayal not a necessary act in the realization of Jesus’s
ministry and the foundation of Christianity? Shakespeare is more sympathetic in his account
of Brutus, who is presented as an honorable man torn between his loyalty to Caesar and his
loyalty to the state.\textsuperscript{53} This historical detour seeks to draw attention to the misinterpreted traitor and call into question a conception of betrayal that ignores the equivocal play between loyalty and treason. Under closer scrutiny, figures such as Judas Iscariot and M. Brutus reveal the necessary role of the traitor as harbingers of change.

It is precisely this tension between loyalty and sedition within the context of the family and the Québécois literary system that Catherine Mavrikakis explores through the protagonist in two of her novels \textit{Ça va aller} (2002) and \textit{Le Ciel de Bay City} (2008). In both texts, disloyalty offers a cassation with the past which leads to new beginnings. Mavrikakis attempts to rehabilitate the status of the traitor within the family, not as a villain but as an indispensable critic of heritage. Thus, the traitor is essential to prevent stagnation in the transmission of heritage and ultimately foster creation within a community susceptible to the influence of the past. Considering the ambiguity between loyalty and treachery, this chapter examines how the betrayal of heritage acts as a necessary means of liberation and eventual reinvention in these two novels.

While Jacques Poulin subjects his characters to the burdensome baggage of history in \textit{Volkswagen Blues}, Catherine Mavrikakis nuances the issue by addressing not only how to reaffirm the heritage\textsuperscript{54} received, but also how it is maintained and passed on to future generations. Consequently, Mavrikakis’s conception of heritage carries with it the responsibility of transmission that is missing in Poulin’s text. The first part of this chapter highlights the protagonist’s need to break from the overpowering burden of Québéc’s literary heritage in \textit{Ça va aller}. In order to escape the incestuous cycle of literary production depicted

\textsuperscript{53} “Not that I loved Caesar less, but that I loved Rome more” (\textit{Julius Caesar}. 3.2.21-22).

\textsuperscript{54} Here and throughout, heritage refers to the collection of cultural and individual traditions received from pre-existing generations and passed on through family. In this way heritage engenders an existence in which a formed, completed subject is derived from a single atavist source.
in the text, the protagonist must betray the heritage she receives so that her daughter might create a new future uninhibited by tradition.

Another important aspect noticeably absent in Volkswagen Blues is the city of Montreal. Simon Harel notes that in bypassing Montreal, a conspicuous detour in the route mapped out by Jack and Pitsémidine, Poulin’s inquiry of the Québécois identity does not get the whole picture. He explains: “C’est que Montréal étant absent symptomatiquement dans ce roman de Poulin, la problématique de l’identité n’est pas éprouvée dans toute la complexité de ses alliances socio-culturelles” (Le Voleur de parcours 165). In Ça va aller, Catherine Mavriakakis restores the missing Montreal and provides a more complete image of the complexity of the Québécois identity ignored by Volkswagen Blues. If, as Harel suggests, Volkswagen Blues succeeds in depicting “une volonté d’appropriation qui est en fait re-découverte d’un territoire déjà arpenté par des explorateurs que font ainsi jouer le fantasme d’une filiation, de la transmission d’un patrimoine,” the omission of Montreal attests to an incomplete evaluation of the Québécois identity (Le Voleur du parcours 174). Thus, Catherine Mavrikakis provides a more comprehensive elaboration of the transmission of heritage initially posed by Poulin.

In the second text examined, Mavrikakis, much like Poulin, expands the question of heritage beyond the borders of Québec to consider the ghosts that haunt the American continent. In Le Ciel de Bay City, a suburban American family of immigrant origins attempts to conceal the traumatic scars of the past in an amnesiac American Dream. However, the ignored ghosts of grandparents murdered in Auschwitz resurface to maintain a tenuous hold on the present. Here, betrayal again serves as a necessary action for Amy, the protagonist, to break filiation and take part in the American Dream which offers new beginnings in a new
world. However, the ghosts of the old world are not so easily placated. For Catherine Mavrikakis, heritage carries with it the responsibility of betrayal. As evidenced by the protagonists in both Ça va aller and Le Ciel d Bay City, in order to take part in the transmission of heritage, the beneficiary must become traitor. Otherwise, heritage acts as a tyrannical, incestuous repetition of the same. This chapter examines the influences of heritage on individualization in two novels by Catherine Mavrikakis and considers the role of betrayal in family narratives framed within transcultural contexts.

The Appropriation of Heritage

We have seen in Volkswagen Blues, a deterioration of the ancestral bond. For Jack Waterman family offers a less reliable source of identity formation. Through the character of Théo, Poulin makes it clear that heritage can be reshaped such that the individual is free to forget. However, the consequences are disastrous: Théo ends up a decrepit old man in a wheel chair who cannot recognize his own brother. In Catherine Mavrikakis’s texts, the appropriation of heritage takes on the form of betrayal. The characters attempt to tip the scales of transmission in favor of a future uninhibited by the past.

According to Jacques Derrida, the réaffirmation of the past involves a simultaneous recognition and a modification of history. Essentially reaffirmation is the interaction with heritage by the benefactor. Unlike the survivalist legacies passed on in the roman du terroir, heritage, in a Derridean reaffirmation, resembles less the authoritarian imposition on a passive recipient, but rather a negotiation. Nonetheless, the beneficiary of the heritage is not free from any obligation. As Derrida says:

Loin d’un confort assuré qu’on associe un peu vite à ce mot, l’héritier devait toujours répondre à une sorte de double injonction, à une assignation
contradictoire: il faut d’abord savoir et savoir réaffirmer ce qui vient ‘avant nous’ et que donc nous recevons avant même de le choisir et de nous comporter à cet égard en sujet libre. (De quoi demain 15)

Derrida explains that while the individual has no choice in his heritage, the beneficiary has a certain responsibility. This responsibility lies in the appropriation and transmission of the heritage: “Réaffirmer, qu’est-ce que ça veut dire? Non seulement l’accepter, cet heritage, mais le relancer autrement et le maintenir en vie” (Derrida and Roudinesco 15). So, heritage is not freely given, but comes with a simultaneous debt to the past and the future. This debt to the past alludes to traditions and histories within a family. Whereas Poulin considered the appropriation of heritage and its role in the individualization of the subject, he fails to consider the debt owed the past that is repaid through transmission of the heritage. Catherine Mavrikakis addresses both the appropriation and transmission of heritage. Thus, Mavrikakis provides a more comprehensive image of the role of heritage in the twenty-first century.

Derrida’s conception of reaffirmation attempts to explain a transmission of tradition that recognizes a debt to both the past and the future. Yet, even in the seemingly limitless horizon of a transcultural context, the characters depicted by Mavrikakis are unable to escape the bonds of heritage.

**Necessary Betrayal**

On the back cover of Catherine Mavrikakis’s most acclaimed novel to date, *Le Ciel de Bay City*, the section about the author is brief but informative: “Catherine Mavrikakis est née à Chicago en 1961 et vit à Montréal depuis toujours. Elle est auteure de récits et d’essais” (Le Ciel Back cover). However, a closer reading reveals an underlying complexity to the paratext. For instance, the first sentence seems contradictory. If she had always lived in Montreal, how is it that she was born in Chicago? Why mention being born in Chicago if she...
has always lived in Montreal? Here, I am not interested in taxing the biographical blurb on the back page for historical accuracy, but rather, considering this as part of the text itself, since, ironically, the back cover is often the first perused by would-be readers. So what does this introduction to the author, itself an imperfect representation, bring to the work of Catherine Mavrikakis?

From this concise description alone, one learns that while the author has spent most of her life in Montreal, her being born in Chicago is important enough to be mentioned. Still, it is not the two cities themselves, nor the geopolitical boundary that divides them, which merits consideration. With this seemingly contradictory sentence, a distinction is being made between the moment of birth (parental origins) and a more prolonged evolution (growing up in Montreal). This creates a palpable tension derived from the encounter between a notion of heritage from family and the cross-cultural exchange of a cosmopolitan city. The tension between family origins and a fragmentary, culturally diverse reappears as an important theme throughout the works of Catherine Mavrikakis.

The second sentence of the author biography describes her as both author and essayist. An acclaimed author and professor at the Université de Montréal in the department of Études littéraires, Catherine Mavrikakis engages simultaneously with the production and criticism of literature. This fact draws attention to a critical awareness, a need to scrutinize the status quo, which becomes thematized in both Ça va aller and Le Ciel de Bay City. For a writer like Poulin, who is neither dramatist, critic, nor essayist, but a writer tout court, writing novels is itself a sufficiently challenging occupation. That is not to say that Poulin’s

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55 In an interview Poulin says: “Mon métier consiste à écrire. C’est un métier difficile et j’essaie de le faire de mon mieux. Je laisse au lecteur le soin d’interpréter mes histoires” (Cloutier et al. 11)
work lacks critical value, nor that Mavrikakis lacks style, but for the latter, the critical edge is more acute, to the point of being provocative.

In fact, it is on this point that some have admonished the heavy-handed invectives against Québec found in one of her earlier novels: *Ça va aller*. Writing for *Le Devoir*, Michel Biron observes “à certains endroits, on croirait presque lire un essai, tant l’argumentation (souvent brillante) y prend le pas sur la narration” (F3). Less flattering in her criticism, Pascale Navarro sees in *Ça va aller* an unsuccessful blending of genres: “Ce roman n’est pas assez convaincant pour nous faire oublier qu’il aurait fait un meilleur pamphlet. . . . Il aurait peut-être fallu choisir clairement un genre: à cheval entre deux, le texte disparaît sous les intentions de l’auteure” (39). More recently, however, Mathieu Arsenault sees Catherine Mavrikakis’s particular approach as salutary to a literary system entrenched in a decrepit notion of nationalism. Commenting on the unique status of her work in Québécois literature, Arsenault describes it as “à cheval entre l’essai et la fiction, le travail de Mavrikakis s’inscrit en périphérie des institutions et de son époque, et cherche à trouver une issue au cynisme dans lequel la pensée de notre temps semble prise” (14). Certainly if there is to be any advancement in a discourse that has become stagnant, it will be through new perspective. It is this perspective that Catherine Mavrikakis “née à Chicago [qui] vit à Montréal . . . auteure de récit et d’essais” brings to Québécois literature.

Interestingly, while neither Biron nor Navarro find fault with the criticisms raised in the text, though Navarro does point out that the observations made are nothing new, they balk at the idea of a political tract trying to pass itself as a novel. Not surprisingly, it is this

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56 While Navarro admits that Mavrikakis is right to criticize the abundance of pre-adolescent narrators in Québécois literature and the unquestioned enthusiasm for Réjean Ducharme and Hubert Aquin, she deplores the lack of “idées fraîches pour expliquer la complaisance des écrivains, de la critique, de l’institution en général” (39).
sort of critical cowardice, a fear of taking a position, that Catherine Mavrikakis deplores in the current state of Québec’s intelligentsia. As an essayist, she condemns the anemic state of criticism in Québec. Not that there is too little, but that it fails to be provocative. In an article entitled “Le critique et la paillasse,” she advocates for more challenging criticism: “Provoquer (‘appeler’ au sens étymologique) une réflexion, une réaction, une discussion n’est pas ce à quoi la critique devrait s’atteler?” (Mavrikakis, “Le critique” 19). But, for Catherine Mavrikakis, provocation is much more than a means of keeping debate alive: it is an essential means of moving discourses forward.

As she explains in an article entitled “Trahir la race: Portrait de l’intellectuel québécois en Judas,” acquisition takes an extreme form, to the point of betrayal. From the title of the article one sees that the theme of betrayal, typically carrying a negative connotation, is at play. The reference to Judas, inasmuch as he facilitated Jesus Christ’s ministry, reveals the necessary, even advantageous, aspect of betrayal. Mavrikakis advocates the need for Québécois intellectuals to run the risk of betraying one’s race, of seeing history for what it is and not blindly accepting a given myth. She explains that such betrayal is essential, not only in order to stimulate debate, but to move discourse, specifically the concept of the nation in Québec, forward and avoid becoming a stagnate and potentially unquestionable dogma.

Her use of the term race is interesting because of its ambiguous meaning in French but also its relationship to the idea of a nation. Nineteenth century authors such as Balzac or

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57 This article is a response to a discussion prompted by the journal Liberté on heritage and whether one is inclined to continually contemplate one’s existence or whether it is received without question, making the individual the porte-parole for who he is. Contributors were asked to respond to this statement: “Penser par soi-même, en effet, suggère que chaque individu soit à même de questionner son héritage et de se le réapproprier, tandis qu’être soi-même suggère plutôt qu’il s’agit d’accepter son héritage, d’y demeurer fidèle, bref, d’en être le porte-parole” (qtd. In Mavrikakis “Trahir la race” 36).
Maupassant, for instance, use the term *la race* to refer to the descendants in a family or a family lineage. At the same time, the burgeoning field of anthropology adopted the term to group physically similar human beings into distinct races. Ania Loomba suggests that the pseudo-scientific grounding of the term *race* not only served as a justification of the West’s civilizing mission but also had important consequences for the concept of the nation. According to Loomba, “[R]aces were now seen to be the expression of a biological (and therefore immutable) hierarchy. . . . Thus, race explained not simply people’s skin color, but also their civilizational and cultural attributes” (62-63). Consequently, race and nation were concepts that developed in correlation with each other (63). In advocating the need to *trahir* *la race*, Mavrikakis simultaneously foregrounds the need to break from an antiquated idea that the Québécois nation like all nations consists of physically and ethnically homogenous individuals and evokes the need to disrupt a family lineage traced back to a single source.

The discourse of the nation is one that continues to thrive in Québec. In his book-length essay *Braconnages identitaires*, Simon Harel explains that while the idea of a nation in Québec is a troublesome issue, it must not be ignored. For Mavrikakis, betrayal offers a means of addressing this problematic issue. Otherwise, unchecked by betrayal, the discourse surrounding the nation in Québec risks becoming tyrannical, silencing any criticism before the authority of History: “Cette fidélité à une histoire ou un patrimoine culturel instaure un régime de terreur où, dès que quelqu’un prend la parole, celui-ci devient suspect du pire et vit sous la menace de sa propre trahison” (“Trahir la race” 40). In this article she refers to other authors who advocate a particular conception of the nation: Friedrich Holderlin (Germany)

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58 “Le discours national représente une aspérité irritante, une nostalgie douce-amère qui résume bien ce qu’est le Québec actuel. A nier cet état de fait, nous nous empêchons précisément de penser la complexité et l’impureté de nos dispositifs cosmopolites” (Braconnages, Harel 28)
and W.B. Yeats (Ireland). Considering the article title’s veiled reference to Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, it is strange that she excludes Joyce whose character Stephen Dedalus also struggles with an oppressive homeland. What is important for both Holderlin’s and Yeats’ conception of the homeland is a formation that passes through the other. That is, they do not see the nation as a homogenous community defining itself in opposition to another, different culture. In fact, Mavrikakis reformulates a question posed by Yeat’s to fellow Irishmen and women at the perceived threat of British culture, to address Québec’s current situation: “[N]e pourrions-nous pas construire une tradition nationale, une nation, qui ne serait pas moins québécoise en esprit d’être anglaise, amérindienne ou musulmane dans certaines de ses manifestations et occurrences?” (“Trahir la race” 43).

For critics like Mavrikakis, if the souverainist movement in Québec is to progress, it must contain its share of “traitors” who are unafraid to show a diversified, discordant Québec: “Trahir comme Judas est un art nécessaire et difficile, et il n’a plus rien à voir avec celui d’un simple agent double” (“Trahir la race” 39). Following Derrida’s conception of réaffirmation, Mavrikakis finds it necessary to betray heritage, such that the heritage is not taken at face value nor allowed to remain immune to scrutiny. In this way, the recipient of a heritage is empowered rather than overpowered by tyrannical tradition. The traitor, then, is a necessary means of transformation: “Celui qui trahit, dans les yeux des autres, peut aussi être celui par qui tout arrive. Si l’on demeure le simple porte-parole de son ethnie, de sa race, de sa classe sociale ou de son genre sexuel, il n’y a plus aucune place pour une transformation, pour le futur” (“Trahir la race” 39).

59 In Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Stephan Dedalus states: “I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church; and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can, using for my defense the only arms I allow myself to use – silence, exile and cunning” (247). Where for Stephan Dedalus, exile serves as a means of escaping oppressive notions of tradition and homeland, Mavrikakis calls for betrayal.
This is in opposition to partisan pundits such as Guy Bouthillier who believe that Québec must first be unified as an established nation separate from Canada before it can allow for diversification. Attributing the marginal victory of the “Non” vote in the 1995 referendum to the lack of immigrant support for the souverainiste cause, Bouthillier explains, “[S]i le Québec n’est pas né le 30 octobre 1995, ce n’est pas parce que les immigrants et les allophones n’étaient pas au rendez-vous. Au contraire : s’ils n’étaient pas là, c’est que le Québec n’était pas encore né” (207). According to Bouthillier, a sovereign Québec predicates immigrant incorporation: “[T]ant que Québec serait une province du Canada, les immigrants seraient de l’autre côté du mur” (61). To the contrary, Mavrikakis argues that these dissenting voices, rather than being sacrificed for the good of the nation, for a mythical concept of history, are necessary to move toward the future. If indeed the nation of Québec is to have a future, then the past must have its share of traitors:

Une nation québécoise qui a un projet et un avenir peut se permettre de ne pas tout accepter de son héritage (pas toujours si vénérable que ça…) et de ne pas être simplement la porte-parole monocorde et monotone d’une identité, somme toute bourgeoise, qui n’arrive pas, malgré tous ses efforts, à se fonder politiquement et qui se donne imaginairement sur le mode mythique. (“Trahir la race” 43-44)

Not only should the past be subject to criticism and betrayal a necessary impetus for the evolution of an identity, but, in this instance, treason should be seen as an obligation.

Mavrikakis calls for a closer evaluation of what it means to be Québécois in the wake of globalization and cultural diversity. How does this political position take shape in her literary works? Considering her advocacy for betrayal, does the notion of heritage, the burden of family past, influence the creation of literary texts? Through betrayal of heritage, does the subject obtain the transcultural horizon upon which a new self can be continually recreated? Both Ça va aller and Le Ciel de Bay City bring to light the role of the benefactor,
the recipient of the heritage (henceforth referred to as *l’héritier*), revealing aspects of the complex relationship between *l’héritier* and heritage.

A recent edition\(^\text{60}\) of the journal *Études françaises* entitled “Figures de l’héritier dans le roman contemporain” considers the figure of *l’héritier* in contemporary novels from France and Québec. Laurent Demanze explains that *l’héritier*, as a postmodern subject, must negotiate breaking from the past while selecting from a fragmented memory to pastiche his own identity, leaving *l’héritier* simultaneously in possession of and dispossessed of his heritage: “L’héritier contemporain est ainsi pris au cœur d’une contradiction, puisque d’une part, il congédie la longue durée du temps généalogique pour s’inventer singulièrement, tandis que de l’autre, il doit se faire le dépositaire des vies ancestrales estompées par l’accélération historique de la modernité” (12). The paradox of *l’héritier*, as understood by Demanze, reveals the problematic dialogue between contemporary novelists and the past. Casting aside collective memory as a repository for the past, these novelists emphasize the individual’s struggle with heritage.

For Catherine Mavrikakis, the relationship between identity and the past is further complicated for the immigrant. Speaking of her own relationship to heritage, she explains: “[F]ille d’immigrants venus dans les années 1950 en Amérique du Nord, je ne peux penser ce qui m’a été légué qu’en termes d’invention ou de réinvention de soi” (“Tahir la race” 36). As a “fille d’immigrants,” she is acutely aware of the disconnection between family history and the present. For the immigrant, this engenders a need to recreate oneself as separate yet linked to their singular history. For Mavrikakis, this reinvention eventually took the form of betrayal. Again she explains, “Il me semble que ma tâche a toujours été celle de trahir, de

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\(^{60}\) “Figures de l’héritier dans le roman contemporain” Martine-Emmanuelle Lapointe and Laurent Demanze Eds. (2009)
traduire en d’autres termes, souvent très peu fidèles, ce qui m’a été confié, afin d’arriver à quelque chose comme une pensée natale ou une terre natale” (“Trahir la race” 36). In both Ça va aller and Le Ciel de Bay City, Mavrikakis addresses the question of the subjectivity and l’héritier amid the smothering presence of the past. For Mavrikakis, betrayal is the means by which this impasse is overcome. Yet, before confronting the ghosts of personal past, Mavrikakis must take on the colossal figure of literary heritage in Québec.

**Disrupting Transmission in Ça va aller**

In Ça va aller, Catherine Mavrikakis takes aim at the literary establishment in Québec. For some Québécois authors, the thematization of the literary establishment in Québec seems to serve as a rite of passage. At some point one is obligated to pay homage to, satirize, or outright attack what Régine Robin refers to as le texte national. But while Robin sees this imposing national narrative as hindrance to the assimilation of “outsiders” and intercultural exchange, for Mavrikakis this literary heritage becomes unbearable oppression and untenable rite of passage that limits subjectivity. Often, this thematization takes on Québécois authors such as Réjean Ducharme.

Elizabeth Nardout-Lafarge explains the importance of the reference to the iconic figure of Réjean Ducharme in Québécois literature:

> La référence à Ducharme est apparue comme un trait générationnel, presque un passage obligé de l’entrée des années en littérature chez les écrivains des années quatre-vingt-dix, pour qui l’œuvre, emblématisée par L’avalée des avalés, appartient aux classiques de la littérature québécoise moderne. (52)

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61 “Il s’agit de tout ce qui est engagé dans la mémoire collective, . . . des mythes, des rituels, des œuvres-clés de la littérature, sacralisées, fétichisées qui marquent pour le meilleur et pour le pire l’identité culturelle et nationale. Ce passé, outre sa charge émotionnelles s’est constitué en texte, le fameux texte national sur lequel la littérature va jouer indéfiniment” (Robin 180).
Like Hugo Roy in *L’Envie* and Monique Proulx in *Le cœur est un muscle involontaire*, Catherine Mavrikakis also recycles Ducharme’s emblematic figure in her second novel, *Ça va aller*.

However, unlike Roy and Proulx who remain rather respectful of the idol, Mavrikakis attacks the image of Ducharme and, to a larger extent, the Québécois literary establishment. Still, this attack is not prompted out of pure spite. In fact, the treacherous *héritier* that Mavrikakis depicts reveals a complicated relationship to a past that has become burdensome. In *Ça va aller*, *l’héritier* has to become a traitor to the past in order to vouchsafe the future. As Michel Biron explains, rather than waiting for change, Catherine Mavrikakis takes things into her own hands:

Plusieurs rêvent toutefois de voir surgir un jour un Thomas Bernhard québécois capable de purger la littérature québécoise d’un ‘nous’ devenu encombrant. A défaut de trouver un tel écrivain dans la réalité, Catherine Mavrikakis invente un personnage de roman qui incarne ce type. (F3)

The following examines *l’héritier* as traitor to Québec’s literary heritage in *Ça va aller* and considers the role of betrayal as a means of appropriating heritage.

The text reads like the intimate journal of the narrator-protagonist Sappho-Didon Apostiasis, a daughter of immigrants, living in Montreal, who recounts her struggle with the oppressive force of Québécois culture and history on her own individualization in an increasingly cosmopolitan world. At times addressing the reader informally, the text conveys the urgency of a message that must be told in its entirety, hiding nothing: “C’est moi l’héroïne de cette histoire, c’est comme ça. C’est à moi de faire mon destin. Bref, pour te simplifier les choses je refoule pas [sic]” (*Ça va aller* 60). The importance of conveying a message is further elaborated in the relationship between the Sappho-Didon and her daughter. In fact, the former devotes much of her spiteful energy to devising a plan that
would block the transmission of the very heritage that has pinned the narrator to what she sees as a futureless Québec: “Me voici chez moi, c’est-à-dire nulle part, à Montréal, sans souvenir et sans avenir” (Ça va aller 98). Though the plan is altered by the end of the novel, the text itself remains as a testament to an attempt at betrayal, the refusal to pass on a heritage. Still, before broaching the topic of transmission, the first half of Ça va aller deals with how heritage is received.

Sappho-Didon Apostasias carries uncomfortably the Greek immigrant status of which her name is a constant reminder. Her name itself invokes the image of a suicidal poetess who defies accepted doctrines. Ironically, rather than reject this predetermined role, Sappho-Didon incarnates the tragic figures to whom her name makes reference. Her family name, Apostasias, is even more telling inasmuch as she seeks to renounce the doctrinal Québécois heritage. So, without even cracking the spine of the text, the reader can have some idea of just what Sappho-Didon represents based on her name alone. Such a fundamental irony, the fact that Sappho-Didon is predestined to disrupt the notion of destiny, reveals that heritage is not a choice. In an interview, Catherine Mavrikakis explains the need to reinsert the tragic, in the classical Greek sense, into a society imbued with choice: “C’est cela la tragédie. Faire ce que l’on n’a pas envie de faire et qui nous tombe dessus sans crier gare. Le Moderne a le choix, toujours trop de choix, pas le tragique qui est coupable malgré lui (c’est le cas d’Œdipe) et qui doit payer pour ce qu’il n’a pas fait ou pas voulu faire” (Arsenault 17). For Mavrikakis, then, if heritage is to be betrayed it must take place at the level of transmission and not appropriation since the tragic figure has no choice in his destiny.

This lack of choice is further elaborated in Sapho-Didon’s obligations both to the past and the future. First, she inherits an obligation to the past from her immigrant parents. The
narrator explains, “Moi, je suis fille d’immigrants. Je ne me suicide pas. Je rate mes sorties. Les enfants d’immigrants n’ont même pas le droit de se supprimer. Leurs parents ont fait tellement de sacrifices pour eux” (Mavrikakis, Ça va aller 75). In this citation, she makes reference to a debt owed to previous generations. That debt is then carried out in the continuation of the family line. The narrator’s immigrant status gives her a perspective on both sides of a heritage, both reception and transmission. But, just as she bears an obligation to the past, she is keenly aware as a mother of the responsibility she has to the future: “C’est horrible de vivre, c’est horrible de penser que tu vas donner cela à quelqu’un d’autre, à quelqu’un à qui justement tu ne veux faire que du bien. La vie est comme cela. C’est un risque terrible, mais il n’y a rien d’autre à léguer que ce risque” (Ça va aller 125). This double obligation of the immigrant is further complicated within the context of a Québécois literary system that is represented as stifling and repetitive for Sappho-Didon.

Since the text mixes reality with fiction, one is tempted to read Ça va aller as a roman à clef. The author weaves fictional characters such as Harold C. McQueen (an American specialist on Québécois literature at UQAM), Umberto (a reference to migrant writers of Italian heritage in Québec), Matt L’Esprit (a singer/songwriter who evokes Jean Leloup), with more tangible icons of Québécois and French culture: Hubert Aquin, Réjean Ducharme, Anne Hebert, Barbara, Serge Gainsbourg. Creating a world that interacts with the social and political reality surrounding the production of the text itself, Mavrikakis confronts the limits of text as a means of creation. The writing process, far from a liberating space in which the author can re-invent herself, becomes asphyxiating amid repetitive cultural references. Tying fictional characters to real-life individuals recognizable to anyone familiar with Québécois literature, Ça va aller reveals the oppressive influence of cultural heritage and proposes a
new means of appropriation through betrayal. Within the suffocating world depicted in Ça va aller, Sappho-Didon Apostasis struggles, hoping to free Québec from a past which seems condemned to repeat indefinitely. According to the narrator, the only way to break the cycle is through action: “Celui qui sauvera le Québec, c’est un artificier, un faiseur de terreur” (Ça va aller 88). However, before she can unburden Québec, she must confront her own historical baggage.

It is not only her status as a second generation immigrant that limits her choices as to her heritage, but also as a narrator. Her own narrative voice can only be understood through the prism of Québec’s literary past. Sappho-Didon’s every word and action only seems to mimic that of Antigone Totenwald, the iconic heroine of Allez, va, alléluiia the novel by Robert Laflamme, which exists only in the world Catherine Mavrikakis creates in Ça va aller.

In Ça va aller, Robert Laflamme is a fictional, idolized, and idyllic author of Québécois literature who is uncannily reminiscent of Réjean Ducharme. Like Ducharme, Laflamme is reclusive, published in Paris, and appears beyond criticism by the public. Still, this could be attributed to many other Québécois authors. The most remarkable similarity lies between the texts attributed to Laflamme and those published by Ducharme. Taken as a classic text within the intradiegetic world of Ça va aller, Robert Laflamme’s Allez va alleluia, depicts an adolescent, cynical Québécoise named Antigone Totenwald and parodies Rejean Ducharme’s L’Avalée des avalés. However, Mavrikakis goes to no great lengths to hide the target behind the new imaginary father of Québécois literature she creates.

62 In another name that evokes Greek tragedy, Mavrikakis draws attention to the heroine Antigone, an early representation of the feminist voice, a voice that resists to authority and, chooses obligation to family over obligation to the law. In this way, Ça va aller highlights the conflict between a self tied to a sense of destiny, as depicted in Greek tragedy, and the modern notion of a self that is unbounded and free to create itself.
In fact, her allusions are far from veiled, preventing the reader from imagining anyone other than Ducharme. For instance, the narrator attributes these lines of Laflamme’s masterpiece: “Tout m’épuise” and later “je suis épuisée” (Ça va aller 10), an obvious reference to Ducharme’s opening line from L’avalée des avalés: “Tout m’avale” (9).63 Moreover, Ducharme also enters the text alongside Robert Laflamme: “C’est envoûtant, les textes de Laflamme, presque autant que ceux de Réjean Ducharme” (Ça va aller 59). This direct comparison to Ducharme discredits any reading of Ça va aller as a pure roman à clef since Laflamme and Ducharme exist in the same diegetic space. Rather, the character Laflamme represents a larger understanding of the Québécois literary system. As Elisabeth Nardout-Lafarge explains, “Il s’agit d’ailleurs moins d’inventer une vie fictive à un écrivain qui existe réellement que de mettre en scène les allégories d’une relation littéraire avec l’œuvre” (53). Reading Laflamme as Ducharme would ignore the broader implications. Indeed, Sappho-Didon’s interaction with Robert Laflamme represents her struggle with a single author, as well as the broader literary establishment in Québec. Ça va aller pushes the self-referential mise en abyme to its extreme when Robert Laflamme publishes another book also titled Ça va aller. This novel published by a fictitious father of Québécois literature bearing the same title as the text in which it appears draws attention to the existence of an incestuous intertext at work within the Québécois literary institution.

Throughout the text her friends remind her that she is exactly like Antigone Totenwald, a fact that only angers Sappho-Didon. In one such outburst, leaving a particularly malicious message on the voicemail of her lover Umberto, she says:

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63 “Tout m’avale. Quand j’ai les yeux fermés, c’est par mon ventre que je suis avalée, c’est dans mon ventre que j’étouffe. Quand j’ai les yeux ouverts, c’est parce que je vois que je suis avalée, c’est dans le ventre de ce que je vois que je suffoque. Je suis avalée par le fleuve trop grand, par le ciel trop haut, par les fleurs trop fragiles, par les papillons trop craintifs, par le visage trop beau de ma mère.” (Ducharme 9)
For Sappho-Didon, her own existence has been subsumed by the character created by Laflamme: Antigone Totenwald. The narrator is powerless to the influence of Québécois literature, which determines her role. According to Sappho-Didon, “Ma vie s’est écrite sans moi, à travers les 450 pages pensées par un autre, à travers une histoire québécoise qui me file entre les doigts” (Ça va aller 90). Interestingly, though she is directly implicated as Antigone, she feels exterior to the story of Québec that is being told. Continually relegated to the status of a pre-existing literary character, the narrator is unable to find her own voice in her own work, so much so that she eventually succumbs to its influence: “Ce que j’écris, c’est d’un confus, cela va dans tous les sens. C’est nul. J’ai lu trop de Laflamme, cela déteint (Ça va aller 33).” The influence of Robert Laflamme on her narrative voice reveals the futility of fighting the heritage received. The futility of the struggle against heritage is an important theme for Catherine Mavrikakis that will come up again in Le Ciel de Bay City.

However, while she is limited in modifying the heritage received, Sappho-Didon demonstrates that the transmission of heritage is more in her control.

Though the narrator seems powerless to escape the role of Laflamme’s iconic Antigone Totenwald, she concocts a plan to disrupt the cycle. As a passive recipient, she betrays the heritage she should pass on. However, in order for her plan to work, she must succumb to her destiny. Interestingly an incestuous relationship with Laflamme, both the symbolic father of Québécois literature and the literary father of Antigone Totenwald, is necessary to disrupt the predetermining system. At this point, Sappho-Didon has submitted to
her destiny, taking on the figure of Antigone Totenwald and becoming Robert Laflamme’s lover: “Oui, Laflamme a gagné. Je veux être Antigone, jusqu’au bout. . . . Je suis donc Antigone, pour te plaire” (Mavrikakis, Ça va aller 44). Out of this monstrous union will emerge a child, Québec’s greatest writer who will disrupt the closed literary circle. But, in order for this to happen according to her plan, she must deny the father and destroy the mother (her own suicide) to leave the child void of origins, and subsequently free of obligations. According to the narrator, this is a necessary betrayal to achieve a future not bent on the past: “Je sais que nous [Sappho-Didon and Laflamme] sommes tous les deux au cœur même de cette folie québécoise, où nous devons faire de nos héritiers et de nous-mêmes, les prophètes-batards d’un lendemain qui chantera” (Ça va aller 110). The method behind Sappho Didon’s betrayal exposes what she perceives as the two most dangerous elements of heritage: (1) the father’s lineage and (2) the mother’s simultaneous love and hatred for her child.

A Mother’s Love

In Ça va aller, the father’s lineage is not so difficult to forget, since, as Sappho-Didon explains, “On a l’habitude du père silencieux, on est au Québec” (Mavrikakis 140). The text continuously refers to the absence of the father. More often this is done through the iconic figure of Hubert Aquin. Aquin is significant for the narrator because his works imagined great things for Québec’s future, but his suicide is an abandonment, a lack of commitment to see these dreams become reality. Aquin offers Québec a hopeless hope, an impossible dream. While the narrator would be happy to share in this euphoria, she knows it would be false:

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64 “Le plus grand auteur québécois, ce sera la fille de Robert Laflamme et d’Antigone Totenwald. Parce que de cet accouplement monstrueux, incestueux, contre nature naîtra mon écrivaine de l’impossible histoire” (117).
“[C]ombien j’aimerais partager le faux espoir québécois . . . mais Aquin est parti en emportant tout futur” (93). Between an absent father (Aquin) and an incestuous one (Laflamme), the betrayal of the paternal lineage is simple, even salutatory. On the contrary, the ties to the mother prove more complicated and dangerous.

In the dedication of Ça va aller, Catherine Mavrikakis writes: “Aux paturientes.” It is no surprise, then, that a significant portion of the text focuses on the relationship between the pregnant mother and her developing child. However, the image that Mavrikakis depicts of this relationship is one of mistrust. The child growing inside her is not a source of love but of discomfort: a suspicious stranger robbing the mother of her life force. Reflecting on her pregnancy, the narrator writes: “Je connais le sadisme des hommes et des femmes. Mais de l’horrible chose, qui se love en moi, je ne sais rien. Du mal qu’elle me fait, du mal qu’elle me fera, je suis totalement vierge. J’ai des envies de trahison” (116). In this way, the text draws attention to the inherent otherness at work even between mother and child. Rather than view her daughter as part of herself, the narrator emphasizes that they are two occupants of the same body vying for life and competing for sustenance: “Mais la très vilaine chose m’a avalée, c’est elle qui m’a globée et gloup, je suis devenue le Jonas de cette baleine qui grandit à l’intérieur de moi, en poussant sur mes intestins, en bloquant mes poumons, en donnant des coups de pied sur ma vessie” (118). The relationship between mother and daughter depicted by Catherine Mavrikakis in Ça va aller is one of opposition and confrontation, a transgenerational mistrust for one’s own offspring inherited from her mother.65

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65 Much like the relationship between brothers in Jacques Poulin’s Volkswagen Blues, the relationship between mother and child in Ça va aller reveals the illusion of intimacy created by family.
Interestingly, the narrator’s own relationship with her mother plays an important role in learning to love her daughter. Still, it is not the fond caresses and affection she received that inspires love for her daughter. On the contrary, her love comes about in opposition to the mistreatment she received from her own mother: “Mon amour pour la salle petite chose [her unborn child] est fait de tous les coups que j’ai reçus, de toutes caresses que je n’ai pas eues, de tous les baisers qui m’ont été refusés, de tous les viols que j’ai subis” (Mavrikakis, Ça va aller 128). The narrator’s love for her daughter is born out of spite for her mother. The text depicts a relationship between mother and daughter that is dangerous and unstable. This only strengthens the narrator’s resolve to break the cycle of love born out of hate that seems to inform the mother-daughter relationship: “Je détruirai ce bonheur incestueux et donnerai à ma fille l’absence de toute famille” (131).

In Ça va aller the eighth chapter is written as a suicide note to the narrator’s daughter, explaining Sappho-Didon’s motivations. The note reveals the extent to which the narrator sees the past as dangerous: “Je pars. Je ne te lègue rien. Il n’y aura pas d’héritage” (Mavrikakis, Ça va aller 145). She also adds: “Tu ne seras pas une héroïne dont la vie est déjà toute écrite” (151). Only by breaking filiation to the past can the narrator achieve her daughter’s freedom, her own fate already determined by a heritage which she did not, indeed could not, choose. Her sacrifice pays a debt to the past that her daughter will never know. Unable to alter her own destiny, Sappho-Didon finds agency in the betrayal of heritage.

However, the novel’s conclusion does not provide the neat ending Sappho-Didon planned when her suicide is prevented. After jumping from Jacques Cartier Bridge, she is saved from the waters of the St. Lawrence River. The ending is open, but not hopeful since the daughter stands to inherit the debt which her mother could not pay. In fact, the ending
further underlines the futility of fighting heritage. After being pulled from the water, Sappho-Didon closes the novel with these words, “Ça va aller…” (Mavrikakis, Ça va aller 156).

While the message seems hopeful, suggesting that things will work out, this statement is also the title of one of Robert Laflamme’s texts. The narrator is still breathing Laflamme. He, a representation of the Québécois literary establishment, is still a part of her. The cycle is not broken.

 Ça va aller offers a nuanced reading of identity formation in Québec. Here, Catherine Mavrikakis considers the stifling environment of Québec’s literary system and its impact on the narrator’s individualization within such a closed, self-referential community. The narrator’s immigrant status offers a valuable perspective on the struggle between an obligation to the past to preserve a heritage while her role as a mother underlines the inherent accountability of transmitting a heritage to the future. In Ça va aller, the past is an unsupportable burden which weighs heavy on the bearer, forcing her to play a predetermined role. She could never be anything other than the literary figure Antigone Totenwald. Her existence has already been written in an oppressive Québécois literary system. Unable to escape her own destiny, she must betray her heritage, refusing an obligation to the past while recognizing her responsibility to the future, so that her daughter might be less encumbered by ancestral baggage. In Ça va aller, this betrayal takes place at the level of transmission. Unable to choose what is received, one can alter what is passed on to subsequent generations. Sappho-Didon’s attempt to block transmission of both the father’s lineage and the mother’s estranged affection can be seen as betrayal to the obligation to propagate heritage. However, the novel’s ending suggests that such whitewashing of the past, a complete memory erase, may be impossible since Sappho-Didon’s plans are ultimately unsuccessful. In fact, the novel
itself serves as a testament to the heritage she attempted to obliterate. Ultimately the open ending casts doubt on the efficacy of the betrayal of heritage, which will be further explored by the author in *Le Ciel de Bay City*.

**Haunted by Heritage in *Le Ciel de Bay City***

Six years after the publication of *Ça va aller*, Catherine Mavrikakis takes up the theme of heritage again in *Le Ciel de Bay City*. Where the former outlines a mother’s betrayal of heritage in an attempt to break out of a claustrophobic society, the latter follows the protagonist, Amy, throughout her life as both daughter and mother and her struggle with the trauma of uncovering a secret past in the open spaces of America. Using the American continent and the New World promise of new beginnings as a backdrop, Mavrikakis depicts betrayal as the falsification and forgetting of a family’s legacy. While *Ça va aller* provides the initial plan for betrayal, *Le Ciel de Bay City* considers the effects of denying familial ties on the individualization of the transcultural subject. In *Le Ciel de Bay City*, Catherine Mavrikakis re-evaluates the complete abandon of heritage that *Ça va aller* set in motion.

Despite cassation with family through betrayal, transgenerational debts are reclaimed by spectral survivors and passed on to future generations. These ghosts from the past transcend space and time (1) debunking the myth of the New World in which histories can be forgotten and recreated as well as (2) impeding with the betrayal of heritage that might free individuals from a debt to the past. Here, Catherine Mavrikakis moves her inquiry beyond Québec’s closed literary circle to consider a broader North American heritage. Interestingly, rather than depict a protagonist who, unburdened by a debt to previous generations, is free to
re-create herself, the novel attests to the intransigent viability of the past even within a continent focused on the future. Though the imagined America seems to offer a means of escaping the burden of heritage for those who hope to forget, the text ultimately calls into question the efficacy of a willful ignorance to the past. Far from innocent, the mythical New World hides its own ghosts that *Le Ciel de Bay City* is willing, if reluctant, to face.

The recipient of a heritage (*l’héritier*) in Mavrikakis’s text carries awkwardly the mantle of traitor since complete betrayal is thwarted by ghosts. Still, this spectral presence in *Le Ciel de Bay City* suggests both an uneasiness toward previous generations and a reluctance to release them, if not a fondness for them. In contrast to Amy’s overt tones of rebellion and rejection toward her mother, aunt, and the suburban American lifestyle they have adopted, the phantoms hidden away in her basement reveal a more complicated relationship to the past that haunts many twentieth century Francophone novels, especially those that take on the issue of filiation. For example, in a special edition of *Études françaises*, Martine-Emanuelle Lapointe and Laurent Demanze consider contemporary novels from both France and Québec that address the figure of *l’héritier*. They suggest that after a long period of disregard for the past, authors are now attempting to deal with the question of heritage and its impact on the individual rather than on the community. According to Lapointe and Demanze, “[L]a littérature d’aujourd’hui s’attache donc moins aux lieux de mémoire et aux communautés préservées qu’à l’inquiétude d’un sujet qui se réapproprie le legs des ascendants et tente d’en reconstruire le récit de manière fragmentaire et fugitive à la fois” (6). Thus, Amy must take on the ghosts of her past alone and learn to live with them.

For Laurent Demanze, the unfinished processing of a loss characterizes the contemporary figure of *l’héritier*. As he explains, “Ne pas faire son deuil, en accueillant en

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66 This was precisely the hope of Sappho-Didon Apostasias in *Ça va aller*. 87
Spirits, these souls that have passed over into death now returned among the living, offer an interesting narrative device through which authors and readers can explore unknown, often forbidden, terrain. However, the invocation of a spirit is not gratuitous. Indeed, the specter cannot be evoked without simultaneously drawing attention to a debt. So, while phantoms bear the traces of an untold story, the discovery comes at a cost. For Homer, these spirits occupy an uncomfortable proximity to the living. Though they have passed beyond the physical realm, they remain strangely attached to the world, their influence on the living simultaneously dreadful and restricted. Due to limited control over the physical world, they
often enter into an exchange with the living, sharing their prescient visions so that their
interlocutors might carry out some unfinished business. While Homer maintains a balance of
*quid pro quo* in the economy between ghosts and the living, for the modern poet, such as
Shakespeare, this exchange becomes markedly one-sided.

Indeed for Shakespeare, spirits often seek justice from those to whom they appear.
The ghost of Banquo, for example, reminds Macbeth of his murderous crime and ultimately
drives him mad with guilt. Another important example is the spirit of Hamlet’s father. The
latter appears to his son to pronounce guilt and demand justice. In this example, the spirit’s
agency in the living world is founded on a transgenerational debt that his son must honor.
Hamlet’s interaction with his father is monitored by obligation rather than equal exchange.
The debt which Hamlet owes to his father’s legacy and his own heritage cannot be ignored.
He must sacrifice his own destiny, his own freedom of choice, to carry out his father’s
vengeance.

This chapter examines the role of the specter in the transmission of heritage and the
consequences of this exchange on the individualization of the subject in Catherine
Mavrikakis’s *Le Ciel de Bay City*. Two important issues raised by the figure of the specter
already underlined are the reclamation of justice and the obligation to the past. With that in
mind, this study examines the untold story that the ghosts of Amy’s grandparents attempt to
transmit and considers the effect of this burden on her individualization. Jacques Derrida’s
*Spectres de Marx*, provides insight on “living with ghosts” that will help to achieve these
aims.

Written in response to those who heralded the end of Marxism with the fall of the
Berlin Wall, Jacques Derrida’s *Spectres de Marx* calls for a rethinking of the presumed death
of ideas and institutions. Still, as Derrida explains, his goal is not to resurrect a dead ideology, but to show the debt owed to Marxism by contemporary cultural and literary theories, including deconstructionism. What is at stake for Derrida is not the survival of Marxism itself, but the combat against tyrannical hegemonies that would seek to preserve a particular version of history: a history that clearly defines heroes and villains and separates them into the victorious and the defeated thereby solidifying the hegemonies’ right to be in power. Putting these ideas and institutions to death renders them impotent historical artifacts from a past that is beyond critical evaluation. These specters of Marx, which Derrida reaffirms, restore agency to an idea whose critical potency continues to haunt Europe.

According to Derrida, one must “apprendre à vivre avec les fantômes” (Spectres de Marx 15) rather than put the past to death. Ironically, Marxism continues to “live” through the spectral traces left behind. However, much like ghosts, these traces only appear to those who reaffirm this debt to the past. That is, those who recognize these traces and subject them to critical scrutiny, internalizing them and recreating them. As discussed earlier, réaffirmation is not a simple repetition, but rather the réaffirmation of Marx simultaneously implies recognition as well as an evaluation of Marxism. For Derrida, living with ghosts means continually calling the past into question. In this way, specters pose a question without offering a concrete response. According to Martine Delvaux, it is this open-ended aspect of phantoms of which writers take advantage to contemplate an idea without closing the discussion or to consider “un vide que l’auteur ne cherche pas à combler” (10). Learning to live with specters, authors interrogate the past without becoming subject to it. That is, they do not seek to put the past to death, but keep it alive through continual investigation.
So, how does one live with phantoms? What are the consequences of this cohabitation? For Martine Delvaux, this takes on the form of an unfinished mourning: “Ce serait là une exigence éthique: ne pas enterrer les morts, ne pas oublier les fantômes, et les laisser nous hanter” (20). In order to address these questions, we will examine the unfinished mourning at work between characters and their past in *Le Ciel de Bay City* and consider the consequences of living with the ghosts on family history.

**America: Hiding the Old World in the New**

Presented with a past that is essentially fiction, Amy must take on the burden of *l’hériter* and the ghosts of her past before she can free herself from it. In *Le Ciel de Bay City*, Amy’s individual struggle with heritage is further complicated by her mother and aunt’s (Babette and Denise) attempts to hide their past in an America that offers an empty canvas, a New World in which histories could be forgotten and rewritten. In the text, the indelible scars of the past, spanning geographies and generations, call into question the imagined America that offers new beginnings and ignores personal histories. Babette and Denise’s initial betrayal of their Jewish heritage forces Amy to take on the myth of the New World. The text is a reminder that this New World myth is a pan-North American phenomenon, just as present in Québec as in the United States.

From the outset, situating the novel within a confined geopolitical category proves difficult. This geopolitical uneasiness is an inherent part of the immigrant heritage that Amy must betray. Awarded the Prix du livre de Montréal, *Le Ciel de Bay City* seems to belong *de facto* in the niche of Québécois literature. However, the narrative itself only briefly leaves the borders of the United States. That is not to say that the setting of any story serves as an
indicator of what label to append to the novel. But, the protagonist’s life, her love for the music of Alice Cooper, her part-time job at K-mart, her suburban home, and the memories of backyard barbecues on the fourth of July (coincidentally the protagonist’s birthday) seem to fit neatly within the imagined frontiers of American culture. Unquestionably written by a Québécois author, the text raises issues that extend to a broader understanding of America unbound by geopolitical borders.

Of course this is not the first novel to explore the American component of the Québécois experience. In the wake of the Révolution tranquille, many Québécois authors have since shifted focus from the survivalist emphasis on church, language and family to explore the broader cultural influences upon a Québécois identity (cf. Rejean Ducharme’s L’avalée des avalés, Jacques Poulin’s Volkswagen Blues, Jacques Godbout’s Une Histoire Américaine). In fact l’américanité (American-ness) is a critical approach that has been elaborated by historians and social critics in Québec to explain the porous relationship between cultures in the North American continent. For instance, historian Yvan Lamonde suggests that the influence of the Catholic Church and France on Québec has been vastly overstated, ignoring the more essential American component. Other researchers such as Gerard Bouchard maintain that the Québec experience has been defined throughout its history by what he sees as American characteristics: individualism, errance, progress, and civic nationalism.

Some critics of l’américanité, such as Joseph Yvon Thériault, see this as reductive, casting Québec’s singular culture and history into a peripheral status with the United States centered model. Thériault calls for a resistance to a homogenizing theory that risks sweeping Québec under the pan-North American rug of l’américanité. Unlike Bouchard, he maintains
that Québec’s history is representative of a society that favors community over the individual. As a part of North America, Québécois culture inevitably retains an American component, but for critics such as Thériault, l’américanité is not determining. While one can understand Thériault’s reluctance to cast Québec into a North American mold that excludes the Francophone community, it would be shortsighted to ignore the reality of the transcultural exchange at work in Québec’s literary system. Still, Thériault raises important questions about the community’s role on individualization. To what extent do an individual’s obligations to a given community become normalizing? This debate on amérïcanït and the role of the community versus the individual in the North American continent is indicative of the position in which Québécois authors and intellectuals find themselves. In Le Ciel de Bay City, Catherine Mavrikakis examines the role of heritage, seen as an obligation to the past, in a continent focused on the future. Is heritage successfully transmitted, or is it lost in the American obsession with new origins?

The image of America as land of continual reinvention and discovery has lost none of its luster through the centuries and continues to inform the America imagined in Le Ciel de Bay City. The protagonist, Amy, is born into the burgeoning suburban America of the 1960s. Amy’s America unfolds among the prefabricated homes and empty lots of Veronica Lane which she describes as “une rue au nom sans histoire, une rue de l’avenir” (Mavrikakis 10). Already, this nondescript street in Bay City seems imbued with this future-focused mentality.

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68 In a short story entitled “Français, Françaises” Monique Proulx highlights the oppressive role of community in Québec: “Dans cet insupportable pays, il n’était pas possible d’échapper à son destin collectif, les écrivains étaient condamnés à ne jamais se sauver seuls, les épaules entravées par le joug de la solidarité et les jambes trébuchant sur les fleurs de lys.” (185).
that has pervaded the continent since its discovery. As the text suggests, this fixation on the future is predicated by an absence of history, an ignored past.

Ignoring any traces of the past, America is seen as an empty canvas upon which individuals, unfettered by chains of heritage or history, are free to reinvent themselves. For Amy, this image is manifest in her aunt’s obsession with purity and ritualistic cleanings. On one occasion, Amy is abruptly awoken by Babette (her aunt) and instinctively rushes to the bathroom thinking she has or will stain the sheets with her menses: her aunt’s mania for cleanliness at work in her. However, she soon realizes this is not the cause: “Il n’y a rien qui s’écoule de moi pour souiller le blanc du papier American Mercantile que j’utilise” (Mavrikakis, Le Ciel 58). This statement is steeped in symbolic figuration, but also showcases the cavalier disdain with which the narrator, Amy, represents the vulgar, the banal, and the sacred. Here, the aunt’s obsession projected onto Amy reveals a complicated relationship between America and personal history.

In this case, the white, unsoiled toilet paper symbolizes America, an empty canvas, but a canvas that once painted upon is spoiled. This obsession with cleanliness betrays an underlying fixation with a spotless past, an origin.69 Amy’s disgust at these false claims of purity of her suburban American life is evoked in the sentence that follows her toilet seat revelation: “Je n’ai malheureusement pas la chance d’être impure” (Mavrikakis, Le Ciel 58). Indeed, Amy’s existence rejects the affected blindness to the past to which her mother and aunt ascribe: “Je me noierais dans ces dejections célestes, mais je préfère m’engloutir dans l’objet que de continuer à faire vivre les chimères de l’oubli de Denise ou de Babette” (131).

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69 Edouard Glissant is critical of such claims at purity: “Il n’y a une seule culture qui puisse prétendre à la purété” (126). He maintains that until this atavique system of thought is changed cultural wars will continue.
However, the break with the past for her mother and aunt is not complete. Guarding some of their French allures, Denise and Babette enjoy the privileged status of being exotic, breathing excitement into the banal suburbia. The sisters’ “Frenchness” is derived and maintained from visual cues. Their clothes offer a sophistication lacking from the other mothers of Veronica Lane, but even more convincing and authoritative is the letter hanging above her mother’s bed: “en 1972, ma mère accroche dans sa chambre, au-dessus de son lit, un cadre qui contient une lettre circulaire d’Yvonne de Gaulle” (Mavrikakis, *Le Ciel* 25). This letter from the former first lady of France thanking everyone for the condolences offered at the death of her husband Charles de Gaulle serves as a certification of quality, an emblem authenticating Denise and Babette’s relation to France: “Ma famille est gaulliste depuis le 18 juin 1940 et l’exil en Amérique ne peut rien changer à cela” (25). Evidently, Denise and Babette continue to choose the memories of the past that will color their American canvas. Embracing the resistance represented by de Gaulle and the deliverance from German occupation, they ignore more painful memories of loved ones lost in Auschwitz to the point of ignoring their own Jewish heritage: “[C]omme ma mère, [Babette] préfère taire le judaïsme de sa tribu. Nous ne parlons jamais de cela. Babette a épousé un vrai catholique, mon oncle, le Brésilien. . . . Babette a ainsi décidé d’effacer en elle toute trace de ‘juiverie’” (20). Direct witnesses of a war-ravaged France, Babette and Denise take refuge in America to re-create themselves, but also “pour donner vie à de petits Américains tout neufs qui leur ferait oublier les rages et les colères de l’Europe guerrière” (11). Relying on the empty canvas image of America, they hope to offer a future for their children free of the past.
But these are merely the visible, the projected images of a past. They only continue a false image of France and of Denise and Babette’s personal histories – a false image made possible in the land void of history:

Depuis leur arrivée en Amérique, Babette et Denise ne sont pas retournées en France. Le pays qu’elles portent en elles est celui de la Second Guerre mondiale et des années qui l’ont suivie. Revoir leur France et leur Normandie détruirait leurs rêves, le monde européen, joyeux vivant qu’elles se sont construit ici en oubliant combien elles y avaient souffert. (Mavrikakis, *Le Ciel* 232-233)

By imagining their past, they are able to impose their own memory on the future in a manner reminiscent of the abuses of memory described by Tzvetan Todorov. *Le Ciel de Bay City* attempts to resolve the forgotten history with the imagined America through spectral traces.

**A Heritage “Made in America”**

From the opening pages of *Le Ciel de Bay City*, the narrator draws attention to America’s forgotten history and the ghosts which haunt the continent. She wonders, “[S]i l’esprit des Indiens hante encore quelque rive sauvage et si le mot Pontiac veut dire autre chose qu’une marque d’automobiles” (Mavrikakis 9). As the citation suggests, America’s past has been hidden under a cheap veneer of materialism in which automobile companies appropriate the names of Native American tribal chiefs. Below the surface, however, lies a vast graveyard that is actively forgotten: “Il [l’Amérique] héberge l’extermination des Amérindiens, abrite les désespoirs et les génocides de tous les exilés venus trouver refuge

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70 In *Volkswagen Blues*, Jacques Poulin depicts a past that is not hidden, but simply tucked away in books waiting to be discovered. This vision of an American past and its palpable influence on the present was the impetus both for Théo and his trackers. Jack and Pitsémine’s journey alludes to the indelible traces of history that scar the American landscape. For Simon Harel, this memoriam to America’s past is a testimony to “l’Amérique ossuaire” (*Le Voleur de parcours* 168). That is, America offers a boneyard which Jack and Pitsémine rummage through on their quest for Théo.
dans le grand cimetière qu’est cette terre” (54). America offers the ideal retreat for those who seek to forget the past. In fact, the text explains the manner in which betrayal of heritage takes place in America. In a society dominated by consumerism, identities are bought like any commercial product. Evidently, for the characters in Le Ciel de Bay City, identities are projected through the objects that one owns. The means of forgetting, then, for those hoping to blot out the past, is to buy a new, American-made heritage. Through each handpicked purchase, Denise and Babette construct their own fictional past.

For example, the house on Veronica Lane in Bay City is the incarnation of this newly acquired heritage. It is a place of singular importance for the narrator and one of the few images she remembers clearly: “De Bay City je ne connais rien. Je ne sais que le K-Mart à un bout de Veronica Lane, la maison de ma tante à l’autre bout et l’autoroute au loin” (Mavrikakis, Le Ciel 10). Delineating her restricted access to America, but also to her own past, la maison de tôle houses all the relics from an imagined heritage (an image of Charles DeGaulle, an icon of holy water from Lourdes) that vouchsafe Denise and Babette’s New World identities. The house itself is made in an American factory and shipped to the location: “La maison avait été construite dans une usine de Flint. Un énorme camion l’avait laissée un jour au bout de Veronica Lane . . . à l’époque, presque toutes les maisons étaient faites pas loin de chez nous” (11). Void of history beyond its construction in a factory in Flint, the house is another empty canvas to be colored by its inhabitants. The assembly line construction attests to the fact that it is a child of America, identical to all the others; no traces of individuality scar its exterior. It comes with the same vapid identity as the rest. On Veronica Lane, amid a sea of indistinguishable houses, identity is created onsite since the
home carries with it no traceable roots. Indeed, the house is a transplant and could easily be moved again.

Thanks to these manufactured suburban bungalows, the immigrant heritage is stripped away and painted over to create an ambiguous, American identity reflected in the objects chosen to decorate the home. It is precisely the amnesiac, empty canvas, beginning offered by these homes that allows Denise and Babette to hide their own Jewish heritage. Decorating the house in a means that projects a particular, even purchased, identity, they are able to ignore traumatic memories of fleeing occupied Paris to escape the Nazi threat. This house, like all the identical houses that line Veronica Lane, and their excessive displays of patriotism on the fourth of July, religious relics, and an autographed letter from Yvonne de Gaulle, provides a means of blocking out traumatic memory, but also a means of hiding, blending in, not being different, and ultimately pledging allegiance to a particular cultural community. Thus, the house on Veronica Lane stifles the transmission of heritage.

Ultimately, 4122 Veronica Lane, that module of prefabricated familial bliss, is a fake. Similarly, the family Uceus, like their factory made home, is a creation of the New World, an artificial construction trying to pass itself off as natural: “Notre maison avait donc été abandonnée sur le sol de Veronica Lane au printemps 1960. On lui avait vite adjoint quelques arbres petits et chétifs. Ceux-ci devaient, avec le temps, octroyer au bungalow un milieu naturel” (Mavrikakis, Le Ciel 11). As this citation suggests, the blank-canvas house must be decorated. How the family chooses to decorate their home projects an identity for the outside world to read. In fact, the information selected often has a target audience. To insure that the projected identity reaches that intended audience, intimacy is compartmentalized in the house.
in such a way that the most private memories are hidden from outsiders while more public
spaced are adorned with the ornaments of the heritage they wish to project.

In the novel, intimacy is arranged around the house in three general locals: the
exterior (swimming pool, patio, garage); the interior (Amy’s room, the t.v. room); and the
basement. Here, these spaces are listed in order of increasing privacy. As public access
decreases, one observes a related decrease in ornamentation. For instance, the swimming
pool is the most public of spaces. It can be seen from the outside and is the locus for parties
where neighbors are invited to socialize with the family. To celebrate Amy’s birthday, the
entire family takes part in the decoration of the house for the festivities:

Devant les voisins [Babette et Denise] veulent se montrer de bonnes
Américaines bien intégrées à la vie de Bay City. Ce soir, ma tante sera
déguisée en statue de la Liberté pour accueillir ses hôtes. Les décorations que
mon oncle doit poser partout dans le jardin et devant le garage seront bleues,
blanches ou rouges aux couleurs de l’Amérique. Un grand drapeau américain
sera accroché par mon cousin Victor sur la porte du garage et les serviettes en
papiers, elles aussi, arboreront l’étendard du pays. Ma tante et sa sœur sont
malgré tout patriotes. Elles croient dans cette nation qui leur a permis
d’oublier le passé, de refaire leur vie. (Mavrikakis, Le Ciel 225)

In a rather sardonic manner, the text draws attention to the spectacle that Amy’s party has
become. Both her aunt and the house are disguised as Americans to obliterate traumatic
memories and live in blissful amnesia. This most public space is also the least authentic.

The interior spaces on the ground floor become more private but no less inauthentic.
The family gathers in the t.v. room to watch Saturday Night Live and other American
television programs while an image of Charles De Gaulle presides over the family’s nightly
viewings:

Dans cette pièce finissent par trôner un grand canapé en skai vert, une
moquette Dupont chlorophyllienne en nylon garanti lavable, une photo du
général de Gaulle et une immense télé couleur qui est allumée à toute heure du
jour et de la nuit et qui donne son nom à la pièce. (Mavrikakis, Le Ciel 18)
Here the continuously illuminated television and the watchful eye of one of France’s former premiers draw attention to a room that is always under surveillance and attempts to ride the fence between at least two cultural identities. As a semi-private space, the t.v. room offers a glimpse of another heritage to any outsiders who may be welcomed in, but also serves as a cue to the other members of the family, to remind them of French origins. Similarly, Amy’s room is eternally lit by the electric glow of Catholicism:

La nuit, dans ma chambre, il fait très clair. . . . A côté de mon petit lit, sur une commode, se dresse une espèce d’autel. Il y a là un portrait du Christ qui me fait peur, une statue de saint Antoine de Padoue une autre de saint Jude . . . et une bouteille d’eau bénite qui a la forme de la vierge Marie et que ma tante a fait rapporter de Lourdes. (21-22)

As the American flag on the garage displays an excessive patriotism which distracts from the sisters’ French nationality, these religious icons draw attention away from the fact that Amy, like her mother and aunt, is Jewish. This hidden truth engenders a pathos in Amy which causes her to feel uncomfortable with the identity she is given. As she explains, “Je suis Juive, une fausse Juive dont on cache encore l’identité, une Juive amputée d’elle-même et qui porte une prothèse de catholicisme” (23). While Amy is ethnically Jewish, she never received her cultural heritage from her mother or aunt. Their betrayal of cultural heritage is successful until the discovery of George and Elsa in the basement. Thus, the ghosts of her grandparents serve as a means of transmitting traumatic memory across generations. At the interior level, where public and private have a limited interaction, the novel bears witness to the conflict that takes place within the individual who is continually reminded of a fabricated heritage yet intuits a hidden past.

Finally the basement, the most intimate level of family exchange and the least adorned with the outward projections of a particular identity, is hidden from sight. Unlike the swimming pool, the basement remains a secret to inquisitive neighbors, known only to the
initiate. It is a safe haven which harbors the family against bad weather: “Au moindre orage, je me retrouve dans le moisi du basement à écouter les histoires d’horreur que les deux sœurs se rappellent et commémorent” (Mavrikakis, Le Ciel 23-24). A place where the family gathers, ostensibly for safety, it is also where the horrors of the Second World War are told. Interestingly, the basement is both a place of safety and great fear. It is no wonder that, for the narrator, the basement takes on the allures of a mass grave: “Ma tante m’avait prévenue : en cas de bombe atomique, il m’était interdit de me rendre au shelter ou du high school, puisque le basement familial devait constituer notre bunker officiel. . . . Elles voulaient donc que je périsse irradiée, mais béate. Dans le basement” (103). The basement is a space in which fears, hopes, and even death are shared by the family.

The basement also hides the truth about their past. Despite Denise’s pathological need for cleanliness, there is a space under the stairs that remains untouched. In this forgotten space, in the recesses of the house, buried in the intimacy of the basement, Amy discovers the ghosts of her grandparents, George and Elsa. The house itself being built as anti-memory, George and Elsa haunt the neglected space under the stairs where the conditions are miserable, “où le plancher est couvert de déjections, où le pot de chambre est plein et nauséabond, où aucune lumière ne pénètre quand la porte est fermée et où la paillasse sale est éventrée” (81). This image calls to mind at once the insalubrious conditions endured by those, like Amy’s grandparents, who suffered and were murdered in concentration camps. The filth of the space they haunt, in comparison to the immaculate condition of the rest of the house, also attests to the neglect they have endured at the hands of their descendants. While Denise devotes much time and attention to cleaning the spaces visible to the outside world,

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71 “Nous torchons, épuissons, dépoussierons, dégraissons, décrottons, détachons, récurons de fond en comble la maison de tôle bleue. Tout, tout y passe, à l’exception du cagibi du basement” (Mavrikakis, Le Ciel 89).
George and Elsa are relegated to a space that has been forgotten and are forced to suffer a second round of neglect in the afterlife.

For Denise and Babette, America offers a land of forgetting. According to the text, they leave Europe for America in order to betray their heritage so that they and their descendants may have an identity that is formed by the future and not by the past. Much like Sappho-Didon in Ça va aller, Babette and Denise hope to give their offspring a future free from history’s burden effectively putting to death certain aspects of their own past. However these ancestral ghosts hidden in the basement ruin the “Made in America” heritage that Amy’s mother and aunt attempt to create for her by leaving an indelible trace on the seemingly immaculate house at 4122 Veronica Lane. Despite the ritualistic cleanings and the exile to America, these ghosts continue to haunt a family on the run from the past. Le Ciel de Bay City attests to the intransigence of specters: despite neglect, they survive until recognized by those willing to reaffirm them. Initially, Amy attempts to take up the responsibility of reaffirmation and allows herself to be haunted by her grandparents.

**Survivor’s Shame**

Face-to-face with her unknown ancestors, Amy discovers her hidden heritage in the spectral figure of her grandparents. Though Babette and Denise wish to hide the truth of her past, the specters in the basement combat oblivion and offer a forgotten chapter in Amy’s family history. Unlike her aunt and mother, Amy initially confronts her spectral grandparents and attempts, as Derrida advocates, to live with them. Evidently, Amy prefers the horrors of the truth to the idyllic lie that her home in Bay City represents. Unable to adopt the attitude

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72 Etymologically, the French word *survivre* is itself imbued with a spectral trace suggesting an existence beyond living.
of willful ignorance embraced by her mother and aunt, Amy confronts the past in a Derridiean réaffirmation that skeptically questions its heritage in order to insure its posterity in the future. However, as Amy discovers, this spectral exchange is far from gratuitous, instilling the pathos of shame in her.

After the discovery of her grandparents in the basement, Amy takes on the burden of the trangenerational debt their memory invokes. Due to her willingness to learn to live with these ghosts, and the rest of the family’s neglect, Amy’s struggle with the past is extremely personal and solitary, as though she is the only survivor. As Laurent Demanze explains, l’héritier in the contemporary Francophone novel often acts as the sole receptacle for the past: “L’héritier est ainsi à lui seul toute la communauté ancestrale, le recueil des êtres disparus : il est synthèse des temps, puisque le présent de l’individu se mêle aux heures anciennes des ancêtres, et palimpseste des identités, puisque les traits d’un se mêlent aux inflexions de l’autre” (14). Consequently Amy’s own existence becomes intertwined with the past that was hidden from her. Far from liberating, this debt is internalized by Amy and engenders a survivor’s guilt that takes the form of shame. As she explains, “[O]n n’en finit jamais de la honte d’exister” (Mavrikakis, Le Ciel 39). Struggling with the palimpsestual interlay of the past onto the present that Demanze sees at work in l’héritier, Amy attempts to dissolve her grandparents into the indifferent sky over Bay City: “Je ne pense qu’à moi, qu’au plaisir fou de les voir sous le ciel mauve de Bay City. Je vais enfin voir le passé et le présent réunis. . . . Le monde aura repris la forme qu’il avait déjà perdue longtemps avant ma naissance” (Mavrikakis, Le Ciel 183-184). As she attempts her plan, her hope is to restore order by releasing the hidden grandparents upon the seemingly endless horizon of America and the future.
It would be difficult to argue that Amy’s grandparents actively haunt her existence, since they are reluctant to leave the decrepit space below the stairs. After all, it is Amy who forces the door open, and Amy who coaxes them out. It seems that Amy is the one haunting her ghostly grandparents: “Je ne sais pas encore qu’il faut laisser les morts en paix. Je ne connais rien du silence que demande l’horreur” (182). Hoping to break the silence of the past, Amy attempts to free her grandparents from the past by incorporating them into the limitless American future. One night Amy draws Elsa and Georges out of the basement and into the mustang of her friend David in an effort to dissolve the past on the American highway. It seems that Amy, unable to resolve the conflict between past and present, has embraced the memory-cleansing American sky that promises an unspoiled future as a final resting place for her grandparents. Initially, rolling at break neck speed across the interstate in David’s mustang with her grandparents in the backseat, the plan seems to work: “David et moi fonçons enivrés vers le vingt et unième siècle. Il faut délivrer mes grands-parents du poids du temps. Il faut effacer la souffrance, l’horreur et les conduire au seuil du futur. . . . Il reste à conquérir l’Amérique. L’oubli sera notre devise” (187-188). For a moment, even Amy believes in a future unscarred by the horrors of the past. However, the scene ends in disillusionment and the realization that ghosts, their very (in)existence, shatter the imagined boundaries of future and past: “Du passé, d’Auschwitz on ne peut guérir” (188). Living with ghosts, then, does not mean solving a problem, or healing a wound, but continually questioning the unanswerable and picking at the scars of the past.
Amy’s willingness to see the specters of her grandparents prevents the blind ignorance to the past that her mother and aunt adopt. Her present is haunted through the reality of her grandparents, true witnesses\(^{73}\) of the horrors of the holocaust:

Mais je ne peux pas oublier. Moi, je n’oublie rien. Au moins quarante-huit membres de ma famille sont morts à Auschwitz ou ailleurs, dans un camp nazi... Mes grands-parents ne peuvent reposer en paix. Depuis des lustres, ils croupissent dans le cagibi de notre sous-sol... Les cauchemars m’oppressent. Ma douleur est inextinguible. Elle ne peut que brûler davantage. (Mavrikakis, Le Ciel 239)

Amy’s attempt to live with the ghosts of her past soils the idyllic, empty-canvas future offered by America. While the discovery of her grandparents was a revelation explaining Amy’s uneasiness growing up in a continent fixed on the future, it also tied her to the past, preventing her from embracing an amnesiac American heritage. With the survivor’s shame comes the responsibility of transmitting a history that could never be accurately told, yet must never be forgotten.

Haunted by the ghosts of the past, Amy is unable to live out an American experience that embodies the spirit of the New World, a land free of origins, bent on the future. The ghosts ruin the empty canvas offered by America:


Amy struggles to resolve the Old and New World conceptions of heritage. The New World, in order to be new, had to be stripped of its past. It is a land of new beginnings in which the

\(^{73}\) In his book *Ce qui reste d’Auschwitz*, Giorgio Agamben discusses the impossibility of truly witnessing the horrors of the Holocaust and how this inherently leaves the transmission of that message flawed. He explains: “Nous n’aurons compris Auschwitz que... lorsqu’ nous aurons appris à regarder avec lui la Gorgone” (Agamben 64). For Agamben, the real witnesses of the Holocaust are those who were murdered in the gas chambers and buried in mass graves. Their story, the true story of the Holocaust, then can never truly be told.
past is intentionally forgotten, sacrificed on the altar of the future. Despite Babette’s betrayal of her own heritage, she is unable to save Amy from the traumatic memory passed on through the specters of George and Elsa.

Realizing that she can neither offer her grandparents the indifferent sky over Bay City nor accept the idyllic lie offered by a heritage made in America, Amy resolves to set her grandparents and the rest of her family free in a purging fire. However, in setting fire to her home, her family, and the vestiges of her past, Amy commits the same error of her mother and aunt by thinking she can blot out the past and start again. Inexplicably, Amy is saved from the flames and is the only survivor. Thinking she has freed herself from the weight of her past, she discovers, years later, that the same specters of her murdered grandparents and now those family members lost in the Bay City fire have come back to haunt her daughter. The spectral cycle remains unbroken and the transgenerational debt is not only passed down but has accrued significant interest.

Catherine Mavrikakis’s *Le Ciel de Bay City* pits the imagined America, a New World void of history, against the reality of a community scarred by traces of the past. For most members of the family depicted in the text, the American continent offers the possibility of a heritage “Made in America.” However, Amy is haunted by the spectral image of her grandparents, killed in Auschwitz. In this way, the past transcends geographical and generational borders to impede the limitless possibilities offered by an American experience. Indeed, the America imagined in *Le Ciel de Bay City* is one full of neglected ghosts who seem content to be left alone, but whose presence recalls a debt to the past that cannot be forgotten. These ghosts are the manifestation of traumatic memory, and the text considers the consequences of living with them. Whether relegated to the hidden spaces of intimacy,
forced to live in dingy basements, or incorporated into the quotidian, these ghosts disrupt
presumed boundaries between past and present. It is precisely this spectral ambivalence
which makes the image of the phantom such an interesting thematic device for authors who
wish to raise questions about origins without coming to a definitive answer. The ghosts in *Le
Ciel de Bay City* allow for an inquiry into the role of heritage on the individualization of the
subject without neglecting or overemphasizing the past.

Drawing attention to the need to betray traumatic memory, the text explores the space
between an ethnocentric past-worship and denial of heritage at work in contemporary
society. The traitor, while serving his own individual interests, unwittingly facilitates the
community betrayed. Though Denise and Babette betray their own heritage and imagine a
new past upon the canvas of America, Amy’s future is remembered through the spectral
image of her grandparents. Despite Amy’s attempt to purge the tortured memory of her
grandparents in a cleansing fire, the same ghosts reappear to haunt her daughter, continuing
an unbroken transmission of heritage. There is no triumphal rebirth. The phoenix does not
rise out of the ashes without being scarred by the fire.

In so doing, the text draws attention to the burden of personal heritage in transcultural
societies, but also advocates a means of living with the past such that it does not come to
dominate the future. The text does not seek to ignore or recreate the past, but rather attempts
to experience it as a spectral haunting. As Derrida understood that the death of Marxism was
attributable to a limited view of history, so Catherine Mavrikakis employ the figure of the
phantom to reveal the complexities at work between heritage and individualization in the
transcultural subject. The heritage represented resists an idyllic reminiscence but reaffirms
the past. Exposing the need to forget traumatic memory while casting doubt on the ability to
do so, *Le Ciel de Bay City* reveals some of the spectral traces that still haunt North America, blighting the image of a New World of new beginnings and destabilizing notions of purity tied to origins.

In two novels by Catherine Mavrikakis, betrayal serves as a means of escape from the past by either actively forgetting traumatic memory or absconding an incestuous literary system condemned to repeat itself. However, in both cases, the escape offered by the betrayal of heritage is incomplete; it does not disrupt the flow of transmission and vouchsafe subsequent generations. In *Ça va aller*, the mother’s plan is thwarted by her botched suicide, whereas in *Le Ciel de Bay City*, the ghosts of grandparents killed in Auschwitz short-circuit the memory block offered by an amnesiac suburban America by transmitting a legacy of trauma. Therefore, betrayal must be seen as an individual action whose effect on the general community is small or negligible. Whether it be the horrific memories of genocide or the stifling oppression of a closed cultural community, the betrayal of heritage then can be seen as an individual’s need to come to terms with a past that has become burdensome. The traitor, then, is not looking to destroy the community he betrays, but attempts to find his own space within that community, effectively broadening his horizon. Thus, the betrayal of family heritage offers a means of negotiating a problematic rapport with the past and is an essential aspect of the expanding cultural horizons brought about through contemporary transcultural encounters.

The first two chapters of this dissertation bear witness to the role specters play in the transmission of heritage in contemporary Québécois novels. Both *Volkswagen Blues* and *Le Ciel de Bay City* consider the spirits that continue to haunt the American continent. In the latter, these spectral figures play a role of singular importance, insuring the transmission of
traumatic memory. The fourth chapter further examines the role of spectrality in the work of an author of non-Western origins. Specifically, it examines how family narratives use spectral figures to negotiate the transmission of traumatic memory in Abla Farhoud’s *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante*. 
CHAPTER 4
NARRATING UNSPOKEN MEMORIES

Heritage transmitted through family is often preserved and passed on via tradition. Yet, heritage is not immune to oblivion. In Le Ciel de Bay City, efforts to whitewash the past in an amnesiac America are overcome through spectral figures accidentally uncovered by the narrator. Whereas Amy’s discovery is unintentional, Myriam, the daughter in Le Bonheur a la queue glissante (1998), must consciously seek out her heritage. This chapter focuses on a daughter’s attempt to narrate her mother’s unspoken memories. Spectralization of the writing subject in the writing of grief, a concept elaborated by Marine Delvaux and further discussed below, serves as a means of preserving the past, making a more mutual transgenerational exchange possible.

Martine Delvaux’s conception of the spectralization of the writing subject in contemporary female literature offers important insight on the unique narrative project at work in Le Bonheur a la queue glissante. In her book Histoires de fantômes: Spectralité dans les récits de femmes contemporains, Delvaux elaborates a conception of spectralization of the subject in the writing of grief. This spectralized subject breaks with classic oppositions between truth and falsehood, fiction and autobiography, presence and absence (Delvaux 8). In her study, Delvaux examines what she calls narratives of rupture. These are subjects who are out of sync with themselves, who relive traumatic events from the past. Interestingly, the
texts she studies do not contain ghosts as characters like the ones that appear in *Le Ciel de Bay City* but spectralized writing subjects.

In *Le Ciel de Bay City*, specters serve as characters who offer a means of dealing with a traumatic past either to be cast away in a forgotten corner of a basement or brought out into the light of an amnesic America. In *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante*, Myriam spectralizes her mother through narrative in order to engage with her memory and access an unspoken heritage that would have inevitably passed into the oblivion of death. The figure of Dounia is spectralized so that the daughter, the other half of the narrative project, can keep her memory alive. In this way, the spectralization of the mother in *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante* provides important insight into the ways in which individuals deal with the past in transcultural communities.

I argue that the spectralized narrator in *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante* provides a means of accessing a mute mother’s memoir. Although the daughter is actually a living being, she serves as ghostwriter for her mother’s unspoken memories, taking over the narrative that her illiterate mother could not possibly write in order to access her own cultural legacy. The Lebanese family depicted by Abla Farhoud, draws attention to tranngenerational difference that arises in Québec’s transcultural context.

If, as Mary Jean Green contends, Québécois literature has become “a site for the exchange of cultural memories” (19), what then has become of the personal, intimate memories shared by family? Does the transcultural context Green observes impede or facilitate the transmission of heritage preserved in memory? Does personal memory survive the transcultural fusion? This issue has been taken up by writers of immigrant origins for whom the notions of identity are destabilized, or revealed as ambivalent through frequent
displacement. In a study of *La Dot de Sara* and *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante*, two novels by Québécois authors of immigrant origin, Patrice Proulx identifies a common trope in first-and second-generation immigrant writers. She observes “the idea of a reconciliation of past and present through an elaboration of memory” (Proulx 127). For Proulx, the narrating of memory is essential in accessing “a new and more authentic identity through the telling of individual and collective stories” (134). Examining the reconciliation of past and present through the narration of memory in *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante*, my aim is to uncover the process by which memory is regulated, selected, and modified in order to be to be told and transmitted to subsequent generations.

Previous chapters of this project argue that in contemporary Québécois novels the family offers a structure in which the role of heritage in identity formation within transcultural communities is called into question. Acclaimed playwright Abla Farhoud’s first novel is no exception. While *Bonheur a la queue glissante* and its emphasis on recovering the past converges thematically with other works discussed it raises questions of filiation and the methods of transmitting a heritage in families of non-Western origin that have largely been ignored by current criticism. My aim is to examine the manner in which heritage is both transmitted and recuperated in the text. Specifically, I will focus on how one daughter overcomes her mother’s silence to narrate the unspoken past.

The novel follows a family’s continual displacement between Lebanon and the outer-lying suburbs of Montreal throughout the mid-to-late twentieth century. The narration of this persistent meandering between cultures is precariously held together through the inner

74 While Lucie Lequin discusses broken filial ties across several of Farhoud’s works, her emphasis is on transmission and neglects the active recuperation at work in *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante*. Cf. “Abla Farhoud et la fragilité du bonheur.”
monologue of Dounia, the silent matriarch of the family. However, closer examination reveals that the narrative project at work in the novel is not as linear as it may seem. Dounia’s supposed inner monologue resembles more of a dialogic, shared memory. In fact, it is her daughter Myriam who takes responsibility for the narration and transmission of these memories. Through this unique narrative approach, Le Bonheur a la queue glissante offers a singular perspective on the role of the transmission and recuperation of heritage in identity formation. This is achieved through the spectralization of the mother’s memoir.

While Dounia exists within the diegetic space of the novel, her illiteracy and refusal to speak of the past render her a “non-existent” narrator of the story being told. The novel itself is recounted through her perspective and her memories, but it is not her voice. Her words are transcribed and altered by her daughter. That is, the character of Dounia as depicted in the text could not possibly relate the story Le Bonheur a la queue glissante presents. This non-existent narrator becomes spectralized, her own memories haunting those of her daughter who records them in her mother’s voice. I argue that Myriam’s writing of Dounia’s story provides a means of preserving memory at risk of being silenced, and simultaneously lends agency to an otherwise absent voice. By taking on her mother’s voice, Myriam preserves her mother’s memory such that it lives on, like a ghost, to influence generations to come.

Shifting the emphasis toward Myriam’s appropriation of her mother’s memory and reading Dounia as a spectral presence offers a nuanced interpretation of Le Bonheur a la queue glissante that not only facilitates comprehension of the narrative project at work in the novel.

75 I use the term dialogic memory to refer to a discussion taking place between past and present. In the novel this dialogic memory is manifest in the transcription of Dounia’s memory by her daughter Myriam. No longer her own words, Dounia’s memories are the product of an exchange. In this case it is a means of transmitting a heritage very much opposed to the authoritarian proverbs taught to and employed by Dounia throughout the novel.
text, but also considers the transmission of heritage within male-dominated, non-Western households to further understand the role of family in identity formation. The spectralization of the mother offers a means of preservation, whereas Myriam’s role as ghostwriter of her mother’s memories allows her to overcome the silence imposed by her life as a woman in a violent patriarchal environment. Beyond the finality of death and the oppressive silence that characterized her life, Dounia tells her untold story through spectral narrative. The spectralization of the mother provides a means of dealing with the past, specifically narrating memory, and raises such questions as how one accesses a silenced heritage, whether that silenced heritage is altered through narration, and to what extent anyone is in possession of a heritage transmitted through memory. Before examining the text itself, it is important to discuss how spectrality comes about in the novel and why it has been neglected by critics.

**Ghostwriting the Unlikely Narrator**

Considering her linguistic limitations and her dependence on proverbs, it is no surprise that a maxim governing Dounia’s relationship with her children adopts the position of stoic resignation: “N’enseigne pas à ton enfant, le destin s’en charge…” (Farhoud 106). However, this deference to destiny is unacceptable for Myriam who seeks out the heritage her mother does not transmit. Next in line in a cycle of silence and submission, Myriam breaks from it, going beyond evasive proverbs to expose her mother’s unspoken past. However, this is not a gratuitous jest, but one that requires Myriam’s active investigation into her mother’s past, an investigation met with resistance.

Myriam forces Dounia out of the comfort of her inner monologue to engage in a shared, dialogic memory: “[Myriam] voulait savoir ce que je ne savais pas, que je me
souvienne de ce que j’avais oublié” (Farhoud 124). It becomes clear that the procedure is uncomfortable for Dounia and that this endeavor is Myriam’s undertaking. Dounia explains: “C’est son livre, pas le mien” (125). Indeed, this mother-daughter narrative project is not a harmonious fusion, since one views death as a respite whereas for the other it represents permanent loss. The need to overcome death prompts the spectralization of both Dounia and Myriam. This relationship resembles two spectral figures identified by Martine Delvaux.

According to Delvaux, the spectralized subject resists classification: “Ce qui hante ces pages, c’est la spectralité en tant qu’elle nomme une certain intraduisibilité de l’expérience subjective, l’impossibilité d’en rendre vraiment compte sans que l’écriture et le sujet n’en soit atteints comme d’une passion” (10). So, the narrator in *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante* should be seen as a subject further fragmented in time, in existence. This unique position offers the spectralized subject a privileged perspective, a limited access to the inaccessible: “On reste en marge, on se tient sur la plateforme, on la hante” (Delvaux 11). For the narrator in *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante*, this perspective refuses to ignore, refuses to let the dead or the forgotten rest in peace. Thus, Myriam can access her mother’s memories even beyond death. In elaborating her concept, Delvaux proposes two spectral figures, borrowed from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, to classify different modalities of spectralization: that of the ghost king and the melancholic son. The relationship between Dounia and Myriam operates in a similar manner.

The ghost king, an invisible phantom, suggests a form of domination; his ever-present eye interferes with every act, even when he is not there. Similarly, Dounia has the tendency to slip in and out of existence: “Souvent mes enfants et petits-enfants parlent de moi comme si je n’étais pas là” (Farhoud 25). This haunting is foreshadowed in the scene where Dounia
sits silently in her daughter’s office, watching as Myriam writes. For Delvaux, this position as unseen is important in defining and identifying “cette loi qui tranche en imposant l’identité: identité définie par le nom du père; identité déterminé par la loi du genre sexué; identité, enfin, arrêtée par la loi qui régit l’écriture du soi — loi d’origine qui dit que soi est soi. . . .” (12). Consequently, the ghost king’s simultaneous presence/absence ensures the transmission of identity and the preservation of tradition. The legacy of proverbs that Dounia passes down to her daughter works as a gendered phenomenon: “Ce sont ici des fantômes de pères et des pères fantômes qui, dans leur présence spectrale, gèrent la lignée, la généalogie, et règlementent la transmission” (Delvaux 12). Dounia is a product of this patriarchal lineage and continues this legacy through proverbs. Yet, with the help of her daughter, she is able to break the oppressive cycle.

The ancillary to the ghost king is that of the melancholic son who refuses to recognize death as the final rupture. Such figures fight against the law of the forgotten, which attempts to bury the dead in history, to erase death and the traces it leaves on the subject. Instead, these writing subjects explore: “[L]e retour perpétuel de ce qui ne sait pas et ne doit pas mourir” (Delvaux 12). In fact, it is a longing to overcome the breach opened by death that evokes these apparitions: “Seuls ceux qui sont prêts à l’accueillir sont aptes à le voir” (15). Similarly, Myriam makes the first move in seeking out her mother’s memories. Early in the text she explains the project that presumably will become the text the reader holds in his hands: “J’aimerais écrire un livre sur toi, mère” (Farhoud 29). With these words, Myriam takes on the task of ghostwriting her mother’s memories.

But, this mother-daughter narrative project is no happy union. The tensions that arise underscore the difficulty of transgenerational communication. As in Ça va aller, the text
draws attention to the antagonistic nature between mother and daughter: “Pour écrire son livre, Myriam me sucerait le sang” (Farhoud 125). In fact, as Dounia explains, the proximity of the two only highlights the difference between them: “Même si je l’aime et qu’elle m’aime, j’ai l’impression parfois d’être en présence d’une étrangère: sa façon d’hésiter quand elle parle arabe, d’y mettre des mots de français et surtout sa manière de penser qui ne ressemble pas à la mienne” (25). Like the relationship between the brothers at work in *Volkswagen Blues*, the mother-daughter relationship does not preclude difference but reveals an intimate otherness stemming from language. For Poulin’s characters, linguistic dexterity is related to mobility and adaptability. Similarly, Myriam’s porous relationship to language leads to a new way of thinking and a new way of approaching the past. She counters Dounia’s inner monologue with a dialogic memory and opposes monolingual proverbs with a bilingual exchange (this may further explain the bilingual glossary of Arab proverbs at the end of the text).

The narrator voices Dounia’s resistance to this exchange and the changes that inevitably result: “C’est qu’elle voulait connaître ma vérité, toujours plus loin, toujours plus au fond, toujours plus au cœur, et en même temps on aurait dit qu’elle voulait la déguiser, la changer, la rendre plus extraordinaire” (Farhoud 124-125). The memories are pulled from Dounia and no longer her own: “Elle me mettait les mots dans la bouche” (124). This exchange threatens to become equally as oppressive as the husband’s appropriation of Dounia’s stories discussed later: “Je veux bien l’aider [avec son livre], pas devenir son esclave!” (125). In life, it is Myriam who is actively producing books, contributing to the community through words, whereas her mother is the ghostly presence. In the novel, they switch roles. At once empowering the mute mother but altering her memories, the story the
narrator tells is neither Dounia’s nor Myriam’s. The result is a narrative haunted by both women.

Indeed, throughout the novel Dounia appears to be narrating events as they unfold. It is not until the end that her true, spectral presence is detected. In the final chapter of the novel, Dounia is reunited with her husband and her children in a postmortem paradise. Choosing to narrate Dounia’s perspective from “the beyond” again emphasizes that death does not oppose life, but is an integral part of it. The phantom’s perspective is essential to understanding this. In witnessing her passage into the beyond, the reader realizes that the Dounia depicting the events of her life is a new form of the mute mother, the unlikely narrator returned. Thus, Dounia must be seen as haunting the narrative at once present and absent, bound to the interstitial status between life and death, experience and memory, truth and fiction.

The spectral writing subject in *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante* opposes the authoritarian implementation of tradition and facilitates an exchange between past and present and the possibility of a reversal of transmission. Myriam maintains a tenuous link between past and present such that it allows for a reversal of transmission, a two-way exchange previously impeded by proverbs. In fact Dounia, a Dounia who has passed beyond and now has the perspective of a phantom, notes how much she learns from her children and grandchildren:

*Avec Abdallah, j’apprends le courage, avec Samira, j’apprends l’ordre, avec Farid, j’apprends le silence, avec Samir, j’apprends à penser à moi, avec Myriam, j’apprends à réfléchir, avec Kaokab, j’apprends à rire, avec Véronique j’apprends l’intelligence, avec David, j’apprends l’amour, avec Amélie, j’apprends l’espérance, avec Julien, j’apprends à jouer, avec Gabriel j’apprends à vivre.* (Farhoud 106)
This exchange would not be possible without the porous engagement with the past made possible through the spectral narrative. In fact, Dounia’s use of words, her role as narrator, is the heritage she receives from Myriam.

While the majority of criticism concerning *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante* focuses on Dounia and her inner monologue, my analysis addresses the absent narrator: the daughter Myriam. That is not to say that Myriam serves as the sole narrator of *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante*. In fact, her role is initially that of a *narrataire* (someone who hears a story), yet Dounia’s capacity to produce a text, her ability to write or relate the novel the reader holds in his hands, is extremely suspect. Her status as unlikely narrator draws attention to the procuring and relating of the past, especially the memories of others. Dounia’s limited communication must be overcome. Essentially, in narrating her mother’s memories, Myriam makes them her own and accesses her mother’s inner dialogue.

**Dounia’s Inner Dialogue**

Many of the articles devoted to Farhoud’s first novel focus Dounia’s inner monologue.\(^7^6\) While the text is told from the first person perspective of Dounia, I argue that reading the narrative as a dialogic exchange between past and present, mediated through the daughter, Myriam reveals how heritage is transmitted to subsequent generations, especially in Arab families where the patriarchal reign of the father is firmly established. Current criticism, relying too heavily on the Western concept of an autonomous, non-relational self,

\(^7^6\) Cf. Dagenais (2003), Dahab (2009), Lequin (2004), and Miraglia (2005)
fails to take into account the process of intimate selving\textsuperscript{77} which Suad Joseph observes at work in Lebanese families.

For many critics, such as Anne Marie Miraglia, Dounia’s inner monologue is an empowering gesture for an otherwise silent figure: “Le monologue intérieur constitue une stratégie narrative tout à fait appropriée à une protagoniste qui se dit analphabète et ‘muette’ et qui essaie de retrouver la parole” (85). Thus, Miraglia attributes the narrative project to Dounia when in fact Myriam, the daughter, is the impetus. Indeed, it is Myriam who initiates this project of recording her mother’s memories, actively cataloguing Dounia’s many proverbs and setting up the interviews so that she can relate her mother’s past. However, this is not the only study that relegates Myriam to a secondary role.\textsuperscript{78}

In her examination of the rapport between exile and space in the text, Natasha Dagenais explains: “La parole et le silence s’avèrent d’autres espaces dans \textit{Le Bonheur a la queue glissante}. Ces espaces, explorés et habités par Dounia (la muette), elle les partage avec Salim (le conteur), leur six enfants et leurs cinq petits-enfants” (138). While she alludes to the shared nature of the narrative, she lumps Myriam into a group with the other children, effectively glossing over Myriam’s role as an active participant in the reception of a heritage. This need to establish two distinct subjects excludes the possibility that they occupy the same narrative space.

\textsuperscript{77} Intimate selving offers a conception of selfhood that does not conform to the hegemonic, individualistic self, but takes into account the importance of roles of kinship in Arab families in identity formation.

\textsuperscript{78} That Myriam is lost in the shadow of her mother can nearly be anticipated from a closer examination of the characters’ names. Dounia, which is Arab for “universe,” obscures Myriam, casting her insignificance into sharp relief. The historical figure of Myriam in the Judeo-Christian heritage, on the other hand, was a female voice in an androcentric community whose authority of the Isralites rivaled that of her younger brothers Aaron and Moses. However, like the Myriam of \textit{Le Bonheur a la queue glissante}, the Biblical Myriam and her role as leader are subsumed within the personal narratives of other figures.
In her article “Abla Farhoud et la fragilité du bonheur” Lucie Lequin examines the voice of the vanquished women who exist in both in Farhoud’s dramatic and prosaic works. She notes a common sense of rupture, an interrupted conversation between generations of women in a male-dominated society: “l'univers farhoudien est marqué par l'autorité, celle de l'homme surtout” (para. 6). Thus, it is from within this repressive structure that these women must attempt to regain that lost agency and re-establish contact with the flow of information between generations.

Lequin expertly identifies the need to restore the broken transmission and the mutual nature of the task required: “Ce passage ne peut se faire par devoir; il n'arrive que par le désir et le respect mutuel; être capable de donner et de recevoir sans attente et sans négation de soi” (para. 15). However, in her attempt to concretely solidify Dounia’s restored agency, she neglects the relational role between mother and daughter to establish Dounia as a whole, autonomous subject. Indeed, according to Lequin, the restoration of communication is the necessary step in becoming an empowered subject: “La reconnaissance de la faille, du fil cassé, s'accompagne de sentiments ambivalents. Le fait de nommer la perte, le mal, fait circuler le sens et la femme qui parle pourra peut-être reprendre le fil de sa vie et alors devenir réellement sujète” (para. 17).

Patrice Proulx, on the other hand, recognizes Myriam’s role as instigator in this narrative project but denies her any further action: “Once engaged in the narrative project proposed by her daughter, Dounia is forced to face her own responsibility in her metamorphosis from speaking subject to one who has been silenced” (132-133). Again, it is the triumphant emergence of the individual that is celebrated in her analysis. Linking agency firmly with subjecthood, these critics exclude the possibility of a mutual, relational exchange.
between mother and daughter, subsequently limiting memory to the realm of the individual. This Western desire for a bounded, autonomous subject is precisely the sort of structured discourse that Suad Joseph attempts to correct in her conception of intimate selving that she observes at work in Lebanese families.

**Intimate selving**

As Suad Joseph explains in her work, *Intimate Selving in Arab Families: Gender, self and identity* (1999), the West has erroneously operated on the idea that a single, autonomous self is the basis for becoming a subject. This Western self is constructed within the nuclear family made up of one father, one mother, and their joint children. Consequently anything that does not conform to this model has been deemed dysfunctional. Such a limited view of selfhood misrepresents cultural difference and hybridity at work in contemporary society and it is precisely this view that limits previous readings of the narrative project in *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante*.

In her study of Lebanese families, Joseph elaborates a conception of selfhood that does not conform to the hegemonic, individualistic self, but takes into account the importance of roles of kinship in Arab families in the selving process. She calls for a new concept of autonomy that would recognize the more communitarian nature of Arab families in a way that does not deny agency. Otherwise, one risks misunderstanding the family’s role in identity formation in Arab families. As Joseph explains, “It is productive to view persons in Arab societies as embedded in relational matrices that shape their sense of self but do not deny them their distinctive initiative and agency” (11). Thus any reading of Arab families must take into consideration the intimate selving which is at work, since, according to Josef,
“[b]y recognizing the multiplicity of culturally legitimate paths to mature selfhood across cultures and within any one culture, one avoids the hazards of ethnocentricism and the essentializing assumptions of cultural relativism as well” (15).

For Joseph, relations of kin in Arab families are intricately linked with a notion of self. This is due to the communitarian nature of the Arab family. Speaking generally about Arabic society, Samir and Roseanne Saad Khalaf describe it as “an overwhelming kinship culture where family ties and loyalties remain resilient sources of psychological well-being, social welfare and economic security” (259). Suad Joseph explains that throughout the Arab world, the sense of community is valued over the individual:

Arab sociocultural systems often have supported the primacy of the family over the person, the family of origin over the family of procreation. Children have been socialized to feel lifelong responsibility for their parents and siblings. Older children, often have been given parental responsibility for younger ones. Men have been encouraged to control and be responsible for their female kin. Women have been called upon to serve and to regard male kin as their protectors. (11)

Despite these communitarian values, Joseph finds that individuals in Arab families construct alternate selves (11). Joseph explains that in such a family-focused society, a relational self is far from dysfunctional, but is in fact the norm:

In societies in which the family or community is as or more valued than the person, in which persons achieve meaning in the context of family or community and in which survival depends upon integration into family or community, such relationality may support the production of what is locally recognized as healthy, responsible and mature persons. Relationality, then, becomes, not an explanation of dysfunctionality but rather a description of a process by which persons are socialized into social systems that value linkage, bonding and sociability. (9)

While she is describing the Arab community in Lebanon, Joseph’s description of a context “in which survival depends upon integration into family or community” reads as description
of Québéc’s current interculturalism policy.\textsuperscript{79} Thus, the concept of intimate selving offers a relevant theoretical framework for a discussion of Québéc’s own cultural diversity.

While Joseph’s observations are interesting and helpful in understanding the mother-daughter narrative team in \textit{Le Bonheur a la queue glissante}, she does not consider Arab families living in Western societies, but rather those enmeshed within the context of Arab communities. The family in Farhoud’s text is anything but enmeshed. The narrative spans a lifetime of displacement. The first occurred when Dounia married Salim at the age of 18, leaving her home to become a foreigner in her husband’s village: “C’est en vivant dans le village de mon mari que j’ai commencé à faire des comparaisons, à voir les différences, à vivre le manque et la nostalgie, à avoir envie d’être ailleurs sans pouvoir y aller, à me sentir étrangère” (Farhoud 45). Interestingly, her first experience as an immigrant took place in the neighboring village. After twelve years of “estrangement” within Lebanon, the family moves to Montreal in the 1950s, where they live for fifteen years. Then they go back to Lebanon for ten years, only to return to Montreal, on the eve of civil war. The family’s listless drifting and the fear of the consequences can be felt in a moment remembered by Dounia, retold by Myriam, in which they are almost forced to spend the night sleeping outside on a bench while their father looks for an apartment: “Ce qui m’inquiétait le plus, ce n’était pas de dormir dehors c’était Abdallah. . . . J’avais peur du mal que ça allait lui causer” (70). The continual displacement of the family in \textit{Le Bonheur a la queue glissante} mirrors Farhoud’s own life.

\textsuperscript{79} In an interview entitled “Québec’s diversity is different, Taylor Says,” Charles Taylor explains how interculturalism differs from Canada’s policy of multiculturalism: “But here [Québec] we’re a société d’acceuil, a society that’s receiving, a society which itself is under pressure, which has to take certain measures to maintain a certain historical line in the (French) language, and so on. . . . The reason why people use the prefix ‘inter’ as against ‘multi’ is that they want to accentuate the exchanges between different cultural groups” (Heinrich).
While migrations in Ablah Farhoud’s life mirror that of the family depicted in the text, she also explains in an interview with Marie-André Chouinard that her own mother, like Dounia, does not write, and speaks little (D2). In fact, she goes on to explain that the original title of the text was going to be Le livre de ma mère (Chouinard D1). This more intimate title at once underlines the dual nature of the narrative, juxtaposing the narrative process and the mother-child relationship. It also draws attention to the author’s own personal relationship to the text. Blurring the lines between the ethnologic studies of Suad Joseph and literature, the autobiographical dimension of Le Bonheur a la queue glissante offers an intimate source of knowledge in understanding the construction of self in the Arab family.

For Joseph, this seemingly contradictory relationship between the emphasis on family and a multiplicity of selves is an integral part of identity construction within Arab communities and is negotiated through a process she calls connectivity. As she explains, “[C]onnectivity entails cultural constructs and structural relations in which persons invite, require and initiate involvement with others in shaping the self” (12). Thus, it is through an active engagement with family relationship that members learn to be individuals in society. This is precisely what Myriam does when she reaches out to “know” her mother through the narrating of her memories. To focus exclusively on Dounia’s becoming a subject, then, would be to neglect Myriam’s role in the process of remembering. The narrative union of Myriam and Dounia represents the interconnectivity of self and other in an intimate family relation that Joseph conceptualizes.

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80 Born in Lebanon in 1945, Farhoud moved with her family to Montreal at the age of six, only to return to Lebanon four years later. She completed the transatlantic passage again in 1973 and has remained in Montreal since.

81 When Myriam first tells her mother about her project to write a book about her, her mother asks why. Myriam’s response is: “J’ai le goût de te connaître” (29).
I will examine the relevance of this concept to the narrative project in *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante*, to understand the transmission of heritage in contemporary family narratives and how that heritage is accessed and expressed in the individual. While Myriam’s retelling of her mother’s memories indeed empowers the voiceless Dounia, it is equally important to understand how, in narrating the past, Myriam may access an unspoken heritage. Reading the narrator as an “intimate self,” whose very existence is tied to others, allows one to consider the possibility of a fragmented, relational narrator at once Dounia and Myriam, creating a dialogic space in which a heritage can be exchanged and discussed between ancestor and descendant.

This division of self allows for a spectralized narrator who occupies both past and present, the physical plane and the beyond. This spectral narrator, at once evoking Myriam, the ghostwriter, and her mother, the non-existent narrator, is necessary to overcome rupture with heritage brought on by Dounia’s silence. First, I will discuss the problem with envisioning Dounia as sole narrator, then how this halts transmission of heritage, and finally how this communication breakdown is overcome through a spectralized narrator.

**The Non-Existent Narrator**

*Le Bonheur a la queue glissante* follows one family through multiple migrations between the villages of Lebanon and the suburbs of Montreal. In response to these cross-cultural displacements at work in the text, many critics take up the issues of exile and otherness evoked in this epitome of *écriture migrante*.\(^8^2\) Yet, equally important to the subject

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\(^8^2\) The term *écriture migrante* was used by Pierre Nepveu in his essay *L’Écologie du réel: Mort et naissance de la littérature québécoise contemporaine*, Montreal, Boréal, 1988, p. 215. In it he describes writers of immigrant origin coming to notoriety in Québec in the early 1980s. To avoid labeling them as “immigrants,” insuring their isolation from Québec’s already restricted literary circle, Nepveu uses the term to focus on the esthetic
matter, the way in which it is related reveals much about the transmission and reception of
eritage in Arab families in transcultural contexts. In this case, each member – the father,
daughters, sons, and grandchildren – their relationships with each other, their frustrations,
their pleasures, and their different lifestyles are cast through the prism of Dounia, the
grandmother. As the central character upon whose memories the novel is structured, it is no
wonder why the majority of criticism focuses on her and her inner monologue. However, this
only exposes half of the process of transmission. In fact, under closer scrutiny, Dounia’s
ability to successfully narrate her own memories becomes suspect.

As the repository of these memories Dounia is at once intimately linked and
inevitably detached from the individuals she depicts. The opening lines of the text, a request
from Dounia to her children, underscore this detachment and set the tone for the novel: “J’ai
dit à mes enfants: ‘Le jour où je ne pourrais plus me suffire à moi-même, mettez-moi dans un
hospice pour vieillards” (Farhoud 9). Interestingly, this novel about family begins with a
reference to the unavoidable fragmentation of family. From the outset, the eventuality of
death, foreshadowed in the mother’s final days in a convalescence home, haunts the text. The
inescapable loss of the matriarch is a reality that is addressed through Myriam’s narrative
project so that she can record these memories and avoid the passage into oblivion. However,
before she can do this, she must draw the memories out of Dounia.

The inevitable detachment between mother and daughter brought on by death is
coupled with a cultural detachment and Dounia’s own distance from the words recorded in
the text. Gathered around the table for dinner, Dounia’s children appear to be strangers.

components of the writing rather than the socio-economic conditions of the writer. Naïm Kattan elaborates on
themes relevant to the migrant writer in “Les écrivains immigrants et les autres,” citing Abla Farhoud’s work as
an example.
Reflecting on them, she notes how different they are from here: “Elle [Myriam] écrit des livres, moi, je sais seulement écrire mon nom” (Farhoud 12). Another daughter, Kaokab, is a professor of languages, her profession is a stark contrast to Dounia’s silence: “[M]oi, je parle à peine ma propre langue et quelques mots de français et d’anglais” (12-13). All of her children possess something she lacks, a proclivity for other cultures that is missing in her. The youngest son travels around the world to places she has never seen: “Je ne sais où se trouvent ces pays, je sais seulement qu’ils sont loin d’ici” (13). Having observed the intimate strangers around the dinner table, the narrator concludes: “Je n’ai pu m’empêcher de me demander s’ils étaient bien mes enfants ou les enfants de la voisine comme on dit” (13).

This uncertainty with regard to the lineage between herself and her own children underlines Dounia’s detachment and questions the efficacy of the transmission of heritage at work in the family. The intergenerational distance reveals itself in one of the many proverbs Dounia employs: "Mon âme est tournée vers celle de mon enfant et l’âme de mon enfant est de pierre…les parents se vouent à leurs enfants et ceux-ci vont faire de même avec leurs enfants, c’est dans l’ordre des choses” (Farhoud 17). The proverb, while its unquestioned wisdom soothes Dounia, refutes her responsibility and dismisses the fact that her own silence, a detachment from words, prompted the distance she observes in her children, a detail she tries to ignore: “Même si, entre eux, ils parlaient une autre langue que la mienne, je ne voyais pas encore l’espace entre nous” (82). This linguistic aloofness further calls into question Dounia’s status as sole narrator of the text.

Like many first-person narrators, Dounia’s reach is limited to speculation concerning the inner emotion of her children and grandchildren. However, Dounia’s limitations are also linked to her status as a woman in a rigid patriarchal environment. Through Dounia, the
reader experiences the restrictive space reserved for women in patriarchal Arab families. Again, her description of the family dinner offers a glimpse of this oppressive space, dominated by her husband: “Salim, mon mari, trônait au bout de la table. Comme d’habitude, il parlait gesticulait, moi, je ne parlais pas j’écoutais” (Farhoud 12). Often, her words, even when she wants to relate an experience that she lived, are appropriated by Salim and the story is told through him (Farhoud 15). Still, she is not angry, but even explains that he modifies the story in a way that draws attention to otherwise insignificant details, ultimately improving the story: “Soudainement, cette petite histoire de rien du tout devient important” (Farhoud 15). Her words, her stories, even her personal experiences are appropriated through the words of the husband. In this system, her life gains importance only through the male-dominated narrative. The husband lends significance and importance to her life story. Even she has incorporated and accepted this idea. Dounia is quick to shift judgment away from her husband: “Si je lui ai cédé ma place, ma langue si rapidement, c’est que j’avais commencé à le faire avant. Mais quand? ” (Farhoud 16). The suggestion here is that her silence is not the product of an individual, but of a broader system that has been in play for ages. Anne Marie Miraglia attributes this submissive role to the traditional patriarchal education transmitted in Lebanon, “qui visait à faire d’elle une femme muette, obéissante et dépendante de la protection des hommes” (Farhoud 83). Thus, the reader is limited to the spaces deemed appropriate for Dounia. Paradoxically, one of these forbidden spaces is that of narrative.

One space in which she is allowed is the kitchen. It is almost cliché that the majority of Dounia’s interactions take place in and around the kitchen. In fact, she explains that she communicates to her family through the food she prepares. For Dounia, this practice goes beyond the quotidiant but is viewed as an intimate exchange between herself and her children:
“Mes mains nues et propres touchent la nourriture que mes enfants vont manger” (Farhoud 15). It is not surprising that she would view the preparation of food as a means of communication since it is the only outlet of expression made available to her. However, it also seems to be the least significant. The family eats rapidly. The meal over which Dounia has spent hours preparing is consumed with a mindless haste by the family. The father attributes this culinary habit to their ancestors, since they would all eat form the same big plate and had to get what they wanted quickly. It is telling of the patriarchal structure of the family in the novel that Dounia is only allowed to communicate in a manner that has, since the ancestors, been neglected or dismissed; the intimacy of her gest in preparing food is lost on everyone.

Thus, despite her many international migrations, Dounia’s experience is limited to the confined spaces of the various apartments the family occupies. However, one room in which Dounia is permitted, even welcomed, is in the office of her daughter. The fact that Myriam’s appartment has an office, a space in her home devoted to earning a living outside of the home, and invasion of the private into the public, testifies to a break from the more traditional views of the father. Mother and daughter meet here to discuss Dounia’s past. It is from within this space that Dounia’s own memories will expand to include forgotten, unspoken events. However, this cannot happen without the help of her daughter Myriam. Still, even in this progressive workspace which seems to afford some liberty, Dounia has a tendency to slip unnoticed into the background: “Myriam ne laisse entrer personne quand elle écrit. Sauf moi. Je suis si discrète qu’elle oublie que je suis là. Je ne lui parle jamais, elle non plus” (Farhoud 26).

83 For further discussion of the spaces, both physical and temporal, in Le Bonheur a la queue glissante, see Natasha Dagenais’s article "L'Espace migrant/l'Espace De La Mémoire."
At once present and absent, Dounia’s position is subordinate but also empowering. In fact, it is her spectral presence that allows her access to this intimate space from which everyone else is excluded. The mother haunts the room in a symbiotic manner: her presence/absence allows Myriam to relate her mother’s memories and she is able to access the silent traces of the past, lending a voice to the unspoken. This special relationship between mother and daughter is crucial in overcoming the breakdown in transmission and will be discussed at length below. At this point, it is important to understand Dounia’s own limited relationship to language itself and how this brings about the rupture of transmission that must be restored.

Though detached, restricted, and ignored, Dounia still offers a somewhat limited potential as narrator. However, it is her relationship to words that truly calls her capacity to tell a story into question. In the diegetic space of *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante*, Dounia is presented as both incapable of using words effectively and rather suspicious of them. Indeed, her role as unique narrator of the text is somewhat problematic since throughout the novel she explains that she is illiterate in both French and Arab (12-13). This handicap continually resurfaces to underline her marginalized status. On the few occasions she leaves the apartment, she relies on her children to speak for her: “Je ne peux rien faire seule” (Farhoud 95). Confined to her apartment and dependent on her children to communicate, Dounia’s silence only augments her isolation, an isolation that pushes her into an ambiguous existence: “Impossible de parler aux vivants, comme de parler aux morts. J’étais seule dans un désert froid” (34). Relegated to a plane of existence somewhere between life and death, Dounia’s presence resembles that of a ghost haunting, “un désert ni chaud ni froid, où je ne sais plus
qui je suis, où je meurs seule sans que personne vienne m’enterrer…où la mort même m’est indifférente…” (85).

The isolation brought on by her silence also bears political ramifications. Dounia feels alienated within her community, and consequently increases her own foreignness with regard to her neighbors: “Les habitants de Terrebonne n’étaient pas habitués à moi. Comment auraient-ils pu? Ils ne me voyaient jamais” (Farhoud 131). The narrator understands that her estrangement is in part due to her own incapacity to be involved in the community of her suburban Montreal neighborhood, to get closer to the other inhabitants. Indeed, Gérard Bouchard and Charles Taylor come to a similar conclusion in their report on reasonable accommodations related to cultural differences in Québec, *Building the Future: A Time for Reconciliation*. In response to the growing islamophobic sentiment prevalent in Québécois society, the authors suggest that the answer is to draw closer to Muslim culture rather than to flee from it, since this would only increase isolation from the community (84). Similarly, Dounia acknowledges that her silence impedes the possibility of overcoming her own alienation and to a broader, social cohesion: “Quand on s’habitue à la différence, ce n’est plus une différence” (Farhoud 131). Dounia’s silence and illiteracy undermine her capacities as a narrator. Yet, it is not only her inabilities but her suspicion for words, especially as texts, that make her aptitude to relate any story more suspect.

These misgivings about text increase the distance between herself and her daughters. Looking around the apartment of her youngest daughter Kaokab, she is amazed by the number of books covering shelves, windowsills, and open surfaces. Faced with even the small collection in her daughter’s apartment, Dounia is overwhelmed by so many texts and the countless words they contain: “Avec tous ces livres, tous ces mots, toutes ces pensées,
toutes ces histoires, pourquoi le monde ne va-t-il pas mieux?” (Farhoud 85). Her daughters’ passion for reading is lost on Dounia; she questions the use of such a leisurely indulgence. In fact, it is not the act of reading itself, but the idea of conveying individual ideas through words and that there can be so many varying perspectives in the world, that is problematic. Still, her wariness of the written word raises interesting questions with regard to the efficacy of any text, consequently implicating the novel the reader holds in his hands. This moment is a bit jarring and draws attention to the shortcomings of memory, the incapacity to perfectly capture the past, and the writer’s need to successfully deal with this issue.

The difficulty of recording these events is precisely what Myriam must address in narrating her mother’s unspoken past. This task is further complicated by Dounia’s silence and her struggle with words. Again Dounia’s skepticism resurfaces when she questions the efficacy of Myriam’s narrative project. With countless other books already written, she wonders what is the point of writing a book about her life: “Comme s’il n’y avait pas déjà assez de livres en ce monde” (Farhoud 125). However, as she continues to work with Myriam, Dounia becomes keenly aware of the manipulative power of text and its authority over the past. As the questions become more invasive and more difficult to evade, Dounia questions her daughter’s motives: “Est-ce que tu écris ce livre pour camaflouer les choses, les ensevelir sous le tapis comme je l’ai fait toute ma vie ou pour montrer le vrai visage de ta mère ?” (Farhoud 126). Through the course of this exchange with her daughter, she realizes the written word’s empire over the past. In an important shift between Dounia the silent mother and Dounia the narrator, she begins to take advantage of this to the point of
appropriating her husband’s words, turning the tables on the patriarchal system which had worked to silence her.  

For instance, after learning of his death, the narrator relates the story of Salim’s first months in Montreal. Estranged from his family, weakened by despair to the point of suicide, this is not the dynamic Salim depicted in the beginning of the text. This time the story does not pass through the father, but through a narrator who is no longer skeptical of words. It is clear that a transition has taken place with regard to the narrator. This shift also bears witness to a belief in the efficacy of text. The formerly word-wary Dounia now signals the saving power of a novel in Salim’s story. She explains that at the nadir of his struggle, determined to end his life, Salim comes across a book that restores his will to live: “On ne sait jamais quand un livre, un mot, une phrase peut tomber au bon moment dans la tête de quelqu’un et l’aider à changer, à vivre…” (Farhoud 158). This may be true for Salim but is also apt for Dounia who has been transformed through the course Mryiam’s narrative project. In a reversal of transmission, narration is a heritage Dounia receives from her daughter, since the only communication she received from her parents was moderated by silence and submission to authority.

**Broken Transmission: A Heritage of silence, submission, and proverbs**

Dounia’s ability to narrate is severely limited by a misuse and mistrust of words. She begins to sense the potential power of communication, however, in overcoming political estrangement and accessing lost or unspoken memories. Still, it is a skill unknown to her because of the heritage received from her father and her husband, a heritage of silence and submission to authority.

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84 For a more in-depth discussion of Dounia’s use of proverbs, see Fisher, Dominique D. “Territoires et frontières du hors dans *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante*.” For Fisher, Dounia discovers her own voice in her use of proverbs but also in preparing the family’s meals.
submission. Thus, the transmission of heritage is blocked and lines of communication are ruptured. Dounia’s limited communication through proverbs works to her advantage, moving her away from the violence of the patriarchal order. While this is a necessary step, it now requires a means of overcoming the silenced heritage.

When remembering her childhood in Lebanon, Dounia refers to herself as an orphan. Though her father was present, her mother had died before Dounia could have any memories; a mother’s affection is unknown to her. Being an orphan for Dounia means being incomplete, waiting for a heritage that will never come, “parce qu'un orphelin ne devient jamais tout à fait un père, une orpheline jamais tout à fait une mère” (Farhoud 41). The heritage she receives from her mother is one of absence. Consequently, this is precisely what she transmits to her own children. For example, when she sees her daughter talking to her granddaughter, she removes herself: “J’essaie de ne plus faire du bruit, de m’effacer. Et très vite ils m’oublient” (103). Her role in the transmission of heritage from one generation to the next is mediated by absence: “Je vivais dans les ténèbres. Je n’ai rien donné à mes enfants” (126). When she does communicate with her children, it is often through impersonal axioms, a heritage she received from her absent mother: “De ma mère il ne me reste que deux phrases et si ma grand-mère ne me les avait pas répétées de temps en temps en me disant qu’elles étaient de ma mère, je les aurais sûrement oubliées” (28). These two proverbs are the only testament left by an absent mother.

Her father, though an active part of her life in Lebanon, is equally parsimonious with regard to the heritage he passes on to Dounia. Unlike her children, Dounia’s childhood is void of books except for the sacred scriptures studied by her father: “Les livres ne tapissaient

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85 “Ne laisse jamais passer les instants de plaisirs; pour rassasier ton corps, un rien suffit” (28).
“Il n’y a pas de souffrance que le sommeil ne sache vaincre” (29).
pas les murs comme chez mes filles” (Farhoud 86). This may explain Dounia’s initial skepticism with regard to the written word. Her father never taught her to read nor insisted that she gain this instruction. The heritage she receives from her father is the oppressive law of silence. This silence is represented in a disturbing scene in which Salim, mounted on horseback, kicks pregnant Dounia in the face when she insists that he stay. Her father, who is accompanying Salim, witnesses this attack, but says nothing and is even reproachful of Dounia’s “impertinence.” While the traces of physical violence heal, it is the emotional pain of her father’s silence that Dounia recalls. Still, silence should not be confused with inaction, since in his gest, or lack thereof, her father simultaneously condones Salim’s violence and condemns Dounia’s attempt to speak against her husband. In this case, silence is the strongest supporter of the patriarchal authority.

Benefactor of a heritage of absence and silence, Dounia risks propagating the same legacy of submission. She is aware that filial lines of communication have been damaged, and she fears the consequences of this rupture: “Mes enfants sont sortis de mon ventre, je les ai nourris de mon sein, c’est sûr, mais à part ce que je ne peux nier, qu’est-ce qui fait que je suis leur mère ?” (Farhoud 83). Dounia suspects that her role as mother means more than giving birth and providing sustenance to her children. She feels the responsibility of transmission but cannot break the cycle of silence on her own: “Je les ai nourris, c’est tout, je ne leur ai pas parlé, nous n’avons jamais parlé ensemble” (103). It is the transmission she receives from her children, specifically Myriam, that awakens the power of words. Up until this moment, Dounia’s interaction with her children is just as limited as the heritage she received. When she does speak to her children, it is through evasive proverbs.
The extent of her father’s investment in Dounia’s formal education can be summed up in the terse advice he gives her on how to learn to read: “Prends un journal et lis” (Farhoud 86). It is a performative utterance that refuses any instruction. Indeed, the only literary legacy he leaves to his daughter is one of proverbs. One Arab axiom she recalls over others is the following: “Que tombe la mosquée mais que la justice ne meure jamais” (87). A noble motto, yet his passive reaction to the unfounded violence committed against his daughter by Salim calls into question his adherence to the proverb and suggests a skewed conception of justice. Dounia’s use of proverbs when communicating with her children reveals the ambiguous nature of the heritage she received and now transmits to the next generation.

The importance of proverbs in *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante* cannot be overstated and is made clear from the beginning. Proverbs set the text in motion, punctuate the narrative, and bring the project to a close. These Arabic aphorisms serve at least two functions: (1) to protect Dounia from Myriam’s increasingly invasive investigation into her past, and consequently (2) to help the narrator pin down the spectral presence of the mother. In a sense her spirit is tied to and lives on through these repeated aphorisms.

The text opens with an epigraph written in Arab, the French translation underneath: Le Bonheur a la queue glissante. The title itself is a proverb and the text includes a glossary, a paratextual bookend, of all the sayings employed by Dounia as well as some that were not used. The inclusion of this glossary, written in dialectical Arabic, does more than satiate a vague curiosity concerning Lebanese culture: it serves as a reference for Myriam, an unfinished map tracing her enigmatic mother. At one point Myriam hastens to record an expression spoken by her mother which she has not yet recorded (Farhoud 23). The fact that
the glossary includes expressions that did not figure in the narrative implies that there was selection – that some expressions were more important than others – but also alludes to the impossibility of capturing the mother, that her complete story can never be told. The glossary then serves as a means of filling in the holes, the gaps left over by the narrative: a raw untouched reference for an unfinished project.

Like the epigraph, the glossary contains the Arab script with the French written underneath. This should not be read as an assimilation of one saying into the other, the implication being that these expressions carry a universal, translatable meaning void of cultural reference, but a recognition that through translation something is inevitably lost. This underlines the shortcoming of each language in capturing the author’s memory of the mother. By presenting both the Arabic and the French, the glossary of proverbs attempts to resolve the different cultures at work in the text without sacrificing individuality. This difficulty of translation is further complicated by the fact that the narrator’s daughter does not speak Lebanese Arabic. This is far from the traditional role of a proverb.

Often, a proverb serves as a link to the past founded on unquestioned authority and serves as means of maintaining tradition.\(^\text{86}\) Transmitted from mother and father, the proverb resembles an ever-present burden. More than just instruction, the proverb is a way of maintaining a link with the past, a heritage maintained through parental authority, passed in one direction that wishes to exclude the possibility of a reverse transmission. However, Dominique Fisher suggests that proverbs work differently in Farhoud’s novel (“Territoires” 30). For Dounia, the proverb serves as a form of resistances, a means of overcoming the

\(^{86}\) An entire chapter in the Bible entitled Proverbs contains many such expressions. The following citation epitomizes the role of the proverb: “My son, keep your father’s commands and do not forsake your mother’s teaching. Bind them upon your heart forever; fasten them around your neck. When you walk, they will guide you; when you sleep, they will watch over you; when you awake, they will speak to you” (Prov. 6.20-22). From this citation it is clear that proverbs provide guidance at a cost.
patriarchal imposition of silence: “Sa langue celle des proverbes et de la nourriture, lui permet ironiquement et de plus en plus, à mesure qu’elle vieillit, de prendre sa revanche sur son mari, Salim, le conteur.” (“Territoires” 28). Dounia makes use of proverbs to find agency in a patriarchal society but also to defend herself against Myriams attempts to appropriate her voice (Fisher “Territoires” 30). Myriam task is to overcome to communication breakdown imposed by Dounia’s use of proverbs.

In an attempt to uncover a deeper understanding of her mother, Myriam begins to write a book about her. To this end she stages a series of interviews with her mother in which she asks her about the past. Often, Dounia relies on proverbs to avoid uncomfortable questions: “Je réponds par un dicton, un proverbe ou une phrase toute faite quand mes enfants me posent une question sur mon passé, c’est plus facile que d’avoir à chercher la vérité, à la dire, à la revivre” (Farhoud 30). Proverbs offer a means of ignoring the traumatic memories of the past. For one, they are not her words. When restating an axiom, Dounia merely repeats what has been said for years. She is not invested in the words; she speaks but effectively says nothing. Removed from the discourse, she can defend herself behind these empty dictums.

Interestingly, it is during one such exchange that Dounia’s use of proverbs shifts from defensive to offensive. As Dounia explains, “[Myriam] a recommencé avec ses questions. Alors, je lui ai sorti le proverbe qu’elle déteste” (Farhoud 125). In this instance the proverb does not offer a dialogue, but, like a linguistic firearm, seeks to end discussion, even provoke Myriam. Remarkably, the same expression that offers Dounia a comforting, stoic resignation, insights anger in Myriam: "Celui qui est né est pris au piège et celui qui meurt se repose” (Farhoud 125). For one death is respite from life’s burden, for the other death is rupture, a
permanent cassation from an unspoken past, the loss of her mother’s memories. Dounia seeks to unload the burden of painful memories in the oblivion of death whereas Myriam hopes to recuperate them.

Despite Myriam’s resistance to proverbs and the silent submission they demand, Dounia goes on to implicate her daughter’s part in this cycle of broken transmission: “Que tu l’aimes ou non, ce proverbe définit ma vie. Si tu veux écrire sur moi, tu ne peux pas passer à côté et faire semblant qu’il n’a pas fait partie de ta nourriture quotidienne à toi aussi!” (Farhoud126). The reference to food harkens back to Dounia’s means of communicating with her children, through the materiality of language. Thus, Myriam must come to terms with her mother’s use of proverbs, as well as the role they play in her life and the heritage she receives. This struggle serves as the impetus for the narrative project at work in the text.

Confined to certain spaces and uncomfortable freely expressing herself, Dounia is an extremely limited narrator. Her incomplete grasp of language and her suspicion of the efficacy of the written word call into question any reality in which she would relate a story and make it difficult to envision Dounia as sole narrator of Le Bonheur a la queue glissante. Her linguistic limitations lead to an inevitable communication breakdown and a rupture in transmission. For Dounia, this transgenerational gap is overcome through proverbs; however, these empty expressions are inadequate, providing yet another stumbling block to communication. These aphorisms succeed in linking with the past but fail to offer meaningful exchange since the bond they maintain is one of domination sustained through a legacy of silence and submission. Dounia’s willingness to hide behind timeless expressions, her reluctance to put herself into her own words, is precisely what Myriam attempts to overcome.
Thus, the narrative project is born out of a need to put words in the mouth of this unlikely narrator.

Rather than attempt to explain Dounia’s inner monologue, I read the narrative project at work in the text as dialogic memory. Heritage is not the property of a single individual but must be, as in Dounia’s case, accessed through a dialogue between present and past, descendant and ancestor. While Lucie Lequin touches on broken transmission at work in several of Farhoud’s texts, she does not take into account the dialogic process, emphasizing instead Dounia’s interior monologue. However, the text is not only the testament to one woman’s resolve faced with unending exile, but evidence of an active exchange between past and present: an interior dialogue.

This dialogic memory follows Suad Joseph’s understanding of intimate selving in Arab families, yet it extends this concept to consider the influence of the transcultural context. This image of a narrator at once divided between past and present, between the living and the dead, may seem a difficult concept for the Western discourse on subjectification. However, a reading of Suad Joseph’s conception of subjectivity in Arab families supports this claim and helps elucidate this unique narrator.

The narrative project at work in *Le Bonheur a la queue glissante* re-establishes a connection to the past hitherto obstructed. To access heritage, the mother’s collective life experience, her silence must be overcome. This is achieved through an appropriation of the mother’s memories by her daughter. Myriam retains her mother’s memories, keeping them alive through spectralization. In fact both Myriam and Dounia become spectralized, the one as a ghostwriter, the other as a spirit who has traversed death and is willing to unload the burden of memory. Through the narrative, both women become something new.
Simultaneously recognizing the past’s influence on the individual, as well as the individual’s influence on the past, the text offers a compromise, a dual transformation which suggests a novel engagement with heritage: a vision of tradition that is malleable.

In narrating her mother’s story, Myriam re-establishes a connection with a heritage lost in her mother’s silence. Recovering the lost, ignored, or untold stories, these family narratives are inevitably modified and reappropriated by the individual making them his own. In this case, the family narrative goes beyond death and is not subservient to the past, preserving the memories while allowing for a mutual exchange.

This division of self, exemplified in Myriam the ghostwriter and Dounia the non-existent narrator, allows for a spectralized narrative. This unique relationship alters both women and presents a writing subject that is at once present and absent. Indeed, in her absence Dounia becomes more present that she had been in the oppressive patriarchal system in which her words are appropriated by her husband. Her agency comes from non-being, a spectral agency. While Myriam succeeds in accessing her mother’s memories, other children are not so fortunate. For the children discussed in the novels below, traumatic memory threatens the transmission of heritage between generations.
CHAPTER 5

SPANNING THE VOID OF SILENCE

Les enfants s’égarent, ils n’écoutent plus, ils n’écoutent rien, ils vivent comme des orphelins, des enfants abandonnés. . . .
-Leïla Sebbar *Mon cher fils*

The daughter of a French mother and Algerian father, Alma, the protagonist in Leïla Sebbar’s *Mon cher fils*, attempts to uncover her past but encounters a void of silence. Alma’s access to heritage is initially obstructed by those direct witnesses of the violence associated with Algerian Independence who are reluctant to relive the horrors of the war. Often the descendants of those who lived through horrific events have difficulty accessing or processing these painful memories. In her book-length study *The Generation of Postmemory*, Marianne Hirsch explains that second-generation survivors, individuals with no direct knowledge or real life experience of the trauma, transgress the traumatic experiences of their parents: “[T]he structure of postmemory clarifies how the multiple ruptures and radical breaks introduced by trauma and catastrophe inflect intra-, inter-, and transgenerational inheritance” (33). Thus, postmemory offers a means of reconciling a fragmentation of collective memory to those who never took part in it.

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87 According to Hirsch, postmemory describes the relationship of second-generation individuals to traumatic experiences that precede their birth that were nonetheless transmitted to them such that a memory is formed.
In Sebbar’s *Mon cher fils*, Alma’s personal struggle thematizes the difficult healing process following Algerian Independence and the desire to gather the past in a piecemeal manner reminiscent of Hirsch’s conception of postmemory. Alma must uncover the untransmitted histories of the war in Algeria as an écrivain public. In her role as public letter writer, the young woman encounters otherwise reticent individuals who are eager to tell their stories to Alma and bridge the gap of silence that separates the generations.

Born to an Arab father and French mother, Leïla Sebbar grew up in Algeria before leaving to complete her studies in France, where she lives today. Her shared heritage lends a unique perspective on the influence of multicultural encounters on identity formation to her many novels and essays. Broadly speaking, her work focuses primarily on the impact of France and Algeria’s interwoven history on the lives of those individuals caught in the middle. In fact, Sebbar herself identifies as une croisée. In a letter to Nancy Huston, as a part of a text that chronicles the correspondence between the two writers, Sebbar writes:

> Je suis là, à la croisée, enfin sereine, à ma place, en somme, puisque je suis une croisée qui cherche une filiation et qui écris dans une lignée, toujours la même, reliée à l’histoire, à la mémoire, à l’identité, à la tradition et à la transmission, je veux dire à la recherche d’une ascendance et d’une descendance, d’une place dans l’histoire d’une famille, d’une communauté, d’un peuple au regard de l’Histoire et de l’univers. (Huston and Sebbar 138)

Ironically, this position between cultures is at once a cause of alienation and a means of facilitating communication between seemingly disparate groups. According to Sebbar, her status as a croisée compels her to trace a lineage, to establish both benefactors and beneficiaries. In her thirteenth novel, *Mon cher fils*, Leïla Sebbar elaborates on the

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88 By referring to herself as croisée, she ostensibly refuses to be labeled as a beur writer. The monicker beur, appropriated from the slang form of the French word arabe, refers to a younger generation of working-class writers who narrate experiences of North African immigrants in France. The term croisée allows Sebbar to construct her “in-between” status beyond politicized topics such as class and immigration.
importance of an intermediary, a go-between, to re-establish severed lines of communication between generations but also to uncover and archive the histories that have become too painful to tell.

As in her previous texts such as Parle mon fils, parle à ta mère (1984) and Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père (2003), Mon cher fils focuses primarily on the broken lines of communication between parent and child and the attempt to repair the rift. In fact, the novel is dedicated to the fathers and sons who are unable to communicate with each other: “Aux pères qui n’ont pas pu parler avec leur fils ; Aux fils qui n’ont pas su parler avec leur père” (Sebbar 9). Yet, much like other works such as La Seine était rouge, Paris, octobre 1961, (1999), Mon cher fils also draws attention to the lives of Algerians living in France while bringing to light the forgotten or ignored memories of a shared history between Algeria and France. 89 When asked in an interview about difficulties faced by children of immigrants in French society, Sebbar attributes the problem to a dearth of memories: “C’est d’abord l’absence d’une mémoire. C’est l’histoire qui donne la conscience, l’intelligence.” (Ballenat 4). For Sebbar, an understanding of history predicates a conception of self. Her novel Mon cher fils not only emphasizes the importance of preserving and transmitting memory, but also suggests a way to do so that circumvents traditional lines of transmission through family.

The title alludes to a letter, started but never finished, from father to son. The father, or le chibani 90 as the text refers to him, left Algeria to work in a Renault automotive plant in

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89 The War of Independence in Algeria remains a sensitive subject for France. It was not until 2001 that France officially recognized the conflict as a war. More recently, in October 2012, François Hollande officially recognized France’s role in the 1961 massacre of Algerians in Paris. The subject has been a taboo topic for French culture due to the civil war nature of the conflict, but also the use of torture by French paratroopers to interrogate prisoners (see further Alleg, Henri. La question. Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1962. Print.).

90 Chibani literally means “white hair” in Algerian Arabic and refers to the Algerian immigrants who arrived in France during the interwar period. In this case, it refers to the old man. Because he remains unnamed throughout the text, I will refer to this character throughout this work as le chibani.
Billancourt on the outskirts of Paris where he and his wife lived with their seven daughters and one son. Now, much later in his life, he has returned to live in Algiers where he meets regularly with un écrivain public who helps the illiterate man draft a letter to his son, Tahar, with whom he has not spoken for years. However, the letter remains unfinished; the father rarely gets further than the introductory “Mon cher fils. . . .” before trailing off. Indeed, in these meetings the man spends hardly any time on the contents of the letter but rather relives memories of friends and family, bemoans the current state of the Algerian economy and the young Algerians’ decadent obsession with technology, or sings the songs of forgotten Arab poets. While le chibani offers a starting point in the form of a letter to his son, the novel’s protagonist is the public writer, Alma, who attempts to help him constitute his ramblings in a fixed form.

In fact this third-person limited narrative is related through the perspective of Alma, the young écrivain public at the post office. The reader hears what she hears and sees what she sees. If the reader is privy to the intimate musings of le chibani or a young, unnamed women in a hijab (another of Alma’s patrons), it is because both are prone to divulge such information whenever they meet with Alma. In her role as écrivain public, Alma discovers the rich and diverse personal histories of Algeria through the men and women who come to her and share their stories. Alma’s own divided personal history, the daughter of an Algerian and a Française de France, fuels a thirst for knowledge of the homeland she hardly knows.

Through the exchange between Alma and le chibani, Mon cher fils offers two distinct perspectives on the family’s role in transmitting a heterogeneous heritage in a transcultural context. These two individuals come to terms with the difficulty of, for one, passing on a heritage and, for the other, putting together a cohesive past from the fragmented traces left
behind. Together the old chibani who remained silent for so long and the young woman eager to learn of France and Algeria’s shared history overcome the rift between generations that imposed silence on father and son.

Alma’s role as écrivain public is essential in repairing this break in transmission. In Mon cher fils, Alma serves as an intermediary to bridge the generational gap, collecting the forgotten histories and piecing the past together to overcome the silence that impedes the transmission of heritage in immigrant families. This chapter examines the failure of the family as a means of transmitting heritage in Mon cher fils and Alma’s personal story, especially her occupation as écrivain public, that makes her an ideal intermediary to repair the rift. Through Alma and her role as intermediary, the text raises important questions about accessing traumatic memory and the transmission of heritage for families in multicultural contexts.

False Promises: Family and Nation

Throughout the novel, the representation of the family and relationships of filiation (such as brother or sister) reveal the failure of such notions as a metaphor for unified communities with shared ideas or beliefs. The novel highlights the use of terms such as patrie and frère by both the French nation and militant Islamic groups. In this way, the text calls attention to the misleading nature of such language and the deleterious consequences. For example, recalling the empty promises of France’s colonial exploits in Algeria, Minna, Alma’s family maid and another source of history for Alma, evokes the specific language used to depict France as an all-inclusive “mère-patrie.” Remembering the Algerian men and women who took up arms with France, defending against the pro-Algerian revolution, she
explains, “‘Rapatriés Français-musulmans’ ils vivent dans un pays inconnu, on leur a raconté qu’ils ont défendu la Mère-Patrie et cette Mère-là ne leur a pas donné l’hospitalité due à des ‘Enfants de la Patrie,’ cette patrie n’a pas été une Patrie” (Sebbar 48). Minna bemoans the situation of those Algerians who were seduced by assurances of a warm welcome into French society through family-specific language, making a critical distinction between patrie and Patrie. The former references the French territory itself while the latter evokes a more grandiose abstract notion of a patriarchal nation-state who ensures the welfare of all its children. From the Latin patria meaning “land of the father,” the term patrie itself evokes a discourse in which family and nation are synonymous. It is this fusion of father and nation that makes the term so politically volatile. Through Minna, the text evokes the memory of les harkis, those Algerians who fought for France during the The War of Independence in Algeria, and their relationship with France. In this example, France did not follow through with the promises of hospitality that the mère-patrie seemed to offer. Referencing France’s neglect of those individuals who had fought for the patrie but never fully integrated into French society, the text expresses mistrust for terms of filiation used in conjunction with the idea of the nation.

Minna’s monologue on the abandoned “enfants de la patrie” makes a direct reference to the opening lines of the French national anthem, La Marseillaise: “Allons enfants de la patrie, le jour de gloire est arrivé.” As enfants de la patrie, those who took up arms with France are recompensed with the promise of honor and glory. However, the

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91 Les harkis were those Algerians, often of Maghreb descent, who fought for the French during the Algerian War for Independence. When French troops left Algeria, les harkis were left behind and suffered mistreatment at the hands of the Algerians in power. It was not until recently that the French nation paid honor to their role in history. In 2001, Jacques Chirac instituted the 25th September as a day to recognize the service of les harkis to France. However, the French nation has yet to “officially” recognize the abandon and subsequent massacre of les harkis that took place in 1962, an electoral promise of Nicolas Sarkozy in 2007.
promises of the *Patrie* were not always kept. Evidently, for Minna, these forgotten children have not received the treatment they deserve from their mother country. The nation never planned to fulfill its role of protective father/mother for *les harkis*. There is no place for them in the French nation. This mistreatment of *les harkis*, who were never considered as equal to the French nationals fighting beside them, highlights the abuses of France’s *mission civilizatrice*. The colonized where not allowed to take part in the *Patrie* as equal members.

If the nation is to be understood through a discourse informed by terms related to the family, the understanding of the family must be altered to include a community that allows for cultural difference. Historically, the term *patrie* has been used to promote views of a rigid, patriarchal society, one in which identity is preserved in the transmission of heritage from father to son. In its most extreme version, Maurice Crouzet explains that the motto under the Vichy government, “*Travail, Famille, Patrie,*” directly abolishes French republican values and favors the preservation of traditional values to the point of creating a myth of an agrarian France: “*Le retour à la terre, l'exaltation des valeurs traditionnelles, le culte des vertus familiales que seule peut conserver une société patriarcale, paysanne ou artisanale. La formule ‘Travail, Famille, Patrie’ remplace la devise républicaine ‘Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité’*” (368). History proves that the term *patrie* can be manipulated to distort a particular vision of nation and identity, of an eternal unchanging France. Such an ideology would have no place for the influence of individuals of Maghreb origins within the French nation.

Elsewhere in the novel, family-specific language is used by religious groups to promote and preserve traditional values. While these forgotten “children,” the abandoned *harkis* mentioned by Minna, suffer at the hands of a negligent nation, they also fall victim to
the fickle fraternal ties promised by Islamic extremist groups. In *Mon cher fils* references to the family through family-specific language entice with the empty promises of unity and glory. The novel also highlights the equally deceptive term *frère* when used to imply solidarity and cohesion among individuals within the Islamic community of believers. In his study of the evolution of various and ideologically distinct Islamic communities in the Middle East over the past 30 years, Bernard Rougier depicts a fragmented ummah[^92] often at odds with itself. According to Rougier, the conflicts that erupt between factions arise out of a greater struggle (6). Furthermore, in his study *L’echec de l’islam politique*, Olivier Roy draws attention to the *Front Islamic du Salut* (FIS), one of many factions within the Muslim community, in order to make an important distinction between the community of believers and an islamic state: “Quelles que soient ses références à l’oumma musulmane, le FIS est un mouvement nationaliste algérien autant qu’islamiste, il faut désormais parler d’islamo-nationaliste” (*L’echec* 165). Roy coins the term islamo-nationalist to refer to extremist political factions such as the FIS and to distinguish between an international Islamic community of believers and local, national fervor.

Nonetheless, important political groups in Algeria, such as the Mulsim Brotherhood (*les frères musulmans*), advocate more international aims. As opposed to islamo-nationalists, Roy insists that for Islamists the ummah and the nation merge. As Roy explains, “Islamists see Islam not as a mere religion, but as a political ideology that should reshape all aspects of society” (*Globalized Islam*, 58). He adds that “[t]o Islamists[,] the Islamic state should unite the ummah as much as possible and not be restricted to a specific nation” (*Globalized Islam* 59). So, societies like the Muslim Brotherhood, which Roy places amongst these

[^92]: The ummah refers globally to the community of believers in the Islamic religion.
transnational groups (*Globalized Islam* 60), proclaim an ambivalent view of nation and religious community. The term *frère* further clouds the distinction between cultural, social and religious communities. As Roy explains, the choice of the term brotherhood emphasizes devotion and loyalty amongst member. However, in *Mon cher fils*, Leïla Sebbar employs the term *frère* ironically to underline the ambiguity of this term outside of the family.

Minna denounces the treatment of those Algeriens who fought for France during the Algerian Revolution and the rejection of the spouses of *les harkis* following the conflict by both French society and the Muslim community in Algeria. She explains, “*[C]es femmes de harkis perdu dans la guerre coloniale, soldats vaincus, accusés de trahison par leur frères en religion qui ne sont plus leurs frères*” (Sebbar 48). Minna’s insistence on the term *frère* underscores its ambiguity: these *frères en religion* no longer act as *frères*. As the citation suggests, the fraternity seemingly offered by religion is one that can be revoked. Claims of cohesion initially pronounced through family specific language can just as easily be revoked.

Similarly, in the last moments of the novel, when *le chibani* discovers that his son has been arrested and is detained in Guantanamo Bay, the father is incredulous. He asks, “*On l’a arrêté, dans quel pays? Il avait dit à sa sœur qu’il irait soigner des Frères, quels Frères?*” (Sebbar 153). Again, the repetition of the term and the father’s question (“*Which brothers?*”) leave the meaning of *Frères Musulmans* ambiguous. In his family, Tahar was the only son; he has no brothers. As with Minna, *so le chibani* recognizes that family-specific language can be used as a manipulative force. In this case, it has led to his son being arrested.

Family related terminology such as *patrie, enfants da la patrie* and *frère* offer a common future, a shared glory, and a community bound by singleness of vision but fail to deliver. In the end, those who believed the empty promises of *la Patrie* are abandoned,
betrayed, or imprisoned. Bringing to light the manipulative power and devastating effects of coupling the family with nationalistic discourse, *Mon cher fils* calls into question the image of family as well as the community of believers (ummah) as a unifying force or an idyllic community. On the contrary, the novel details the economic hardships and social marginalization faced by families in the *banlieues*\(^{93}\) of Paris. Juxtaposing the grandiose concepts of family espoused by the French nation and militant Islamic groups with the stark conditions of daily life for many immigrant families in France, *Mon cher fils* intensifies the deception felt by these forgotten *enfants de la patrie* since the promises of the *mère-patrie* where revealed to be empty.

**A Father’s Legacy: Submission and Silence**

*Mon cher fils* disrupts the cohesive sense of self that national discourse usually conveys. It is clear that these “abandoned children” are skeptical of the family as a source of identity formation. Many of the stories Alma hears are of a family divided between parents and children, tradition, and modernity. Hearing these stories, one has the impression that the daily life in family is regulated by the economic reality surrounding it. Like so many individuals of immigrant origins, *le chibani* tells Alma of his experience working in an automotive plant outside of Paris. Long hours and little pay keep the father away from the home, outside of the family. In *les banlieues*, the struggle to support his family ostracizes the father. In this way, the displaced father creates an ambiguous sense of community, a nebulous family defined by the physical enclosure of the HLM rather than the patriarchal figurehead. As another of Alma’s clients explains, “Dans la cité c’est comme si on avait tous

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\(^{93}\) I use the French term *banlieue* throughout to refer to the region inhabited by the family in the novel because the English term suburb evokes the affluent, homogenous upper-middle class communities located outside American cities and fails to represent the poverty and multicultural element depicted in *Mon cher fils*.
la même mère, le même père, le même bled” (Sebbar 68). Thus, the common socio-economic background breeds a community of similar families. Any individuality that may be passed on from previous generations is oppressed by the gloom of les banlieues. As a result, one is tempted to read these singular stories as representative of a larger community.

The stereotypical family in les banlieues is composed of four principal members: (1) a mostly absent father, as in Mon cher fils, who is either silent or violent and often both; (2) a mother in complete complicity with the father; (3) a son with no future; and (4) a daughter whose future is dictated by tradition. This vision of the family in the banlieue is taken up by many contemporary Francophone authors. In Muslim tradition the father is often depicted as the seat of authority, and also the single source of identity: “[U]n homme peut épouser une non-musulmane chez nous, c’est le père qui donne la religion et l’identité, la nationalité” (Sebbar 89). Ironically, in the context of immigration, these fathers often become silent and withdrawn from the family:

À la fin il revenait à la maison pour se coucher, tard dans la nuit, il ne partageait plus le lit de sa femme, il ne savait plus s’il avait des enfants, il ne les voyait pas et eux pensaient que le père un jour quitterait la maison, ils ne le verraiient plus, ils n’iraient pas au pays pour lui, ils ne sauraient pas qu’il est mort. . . . La même histoire tant de fois répétée. (Sebbar 19)

Powerless, forgotten in their own homes, the silent fathers of les banlieues spend the majority of their time at work. When the father is present, it is often in a scene of violence and anger.94 The mother is a passive, antagonistic element who watches silently as a powerless subaltern in Gayatri Spivak’s, sense: “Vous savez que chez nous les mères sont contre leurs filles” (Sebbar 85).

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94 Le chibani shamefully recalls to Alma a rather violent episode when he has come home early to find his son playing with his daughters, who have dressed the son as a girl. This angers the father and he beats his son (120).
On the other hand, the children are without options. The sons see that the sacrifices of their fathers lead to nothing and are left in a dangerous limbo. They are groups of desperate young men unable to find work and no longer looking (Sebbar 64). The daughters have even less choice than their brothers, as their future has been determined for them: “Mon père avait ouvert un carnet d’épargne pour chacune, avec des jumelles…C’était notre dot. On l’a appris à la majorité, on a pensé toutes les deux ‘Pour nos études’ mon père et ma mère pensaient eux ‘Pour les mariages’” (Sebbar 82-83). The struggle between the parents’ expectations and those of their children reveals a larger conflict between tradition and modernity in the family.

In *Mon cher fils* the conflict between generations is difficult but inevitable:

> Ils ont parlé la langue de leur mère avec le lait de leur mère et puis ils ne l’ont plus parlée avec la rue de la cité et l’autre langue, la langue de l’école, elle a pris les enfants, la langue de la France, le cœur à la maison la tête à l’école, et dans les livres, comment on sépare le cœur, la tête et les mains? Comment on coupe un enfant en trois morceaux?” (Sebbar 70)

The heritage passed on is one of exile. This generation must bear the burden of a life divided between the multiple cultures and different languages of the inhabitants who share les banlieues. Directly linked to both the traditions of their ancestor and the society in which they live, the children of *les banlieues* are never fully accepted by either. It is little surprise that the abandoned *enfants de la Patrie* would pass on the same sense of neglect to their own offspring: “[L]es enfants s’égarent, ils n’écoutent plus, ils n’écoutent rien, ils vivent comme des orphelins, des enfants abandonnés…” (Sebbar 71). In turn, these abandoned children want nothing to do with the heritage passed on by their immigrant fathers.
An Immigrant’s Legacy

The disconnection between generations is brought acutely into focus with the relationship between le chibani and his son, Tahar. First, the father (le chibani) is a man bound by tradition. He left Algeria to work in France. Still, his guiding principles are tied to the customary practice of his native land. As he explains, these traditional values were passed on from his father: “[M]on père disait que les filles c’est la maison, les enfants, le jardin... ni l’école coranique ni l’école française. Les filles qui sont allées à l’école de la France avant l’indépendance ces filles-là n’ont pas respecté nos traditions... elles ont oublié la famille le pays, la langue, tout” (Sebbar 98). He attributes the loss of heritage, specifically language\(^{95}\) and country, to breaking the rigorous rules passed down from this father: a woman’s place is in the home, with the children. Educating women resulted in the collapse of the patriarchal power structure at work in traditional Maghrebian families. In this case, the break from heritage has positive consequences disrupting the father’s tyrannical empire over the family and providing education for the daughters. A vestige of the old patriarchal system passed down from this father, le chibani is a man for whom maintaining tradition is a priority. It is this adhesion to tradition that provokes the conflict between generations.

Tahar sees his father’s submissive adherence to tradition as weakness:“Le Dieu que tu veux pour moi, le même Dieu que le tien, ce Dieu n’est pas le Dieu de la victoire, la résignation...Est-ce que Dieu exige des Fidèles résignés, toujours résignés?” (Sebbar 44). Disgusted with what he sees as a life of quiet acceptance, Tahar sets out to change the traditional role of religion. The consequences of Tahar’s deviation from his father’s religion are revealed at the end of the novel, when the reader discovers that he has been imprisoned in

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\(^{95}\) In other texts, Sebbar explores the disconnect with heritage and culture associated with a loss of language, specifically language that is not passed from parent to child. (cf. *Parle mon fils, parle à ta mère ; Je ne parle pas la langue de mon père*)
Guantanamo as a terrorist suspect. He replaces his father’s quiet submission with religious fanaticism. The rejection of the father’s view of religion is at the heart of this generational conflict and reflects the fragmentation of Islamist groups and their contradicting ideologies as described by Bernard Rougier. In the case of Tahar, while religion passed on, it is altered and, for Tahar, has disastrous consequences.

Like the stereotypical Arab father, *le chibani* is also an absent figure in the family. When his family lived in France, he spent most of his time working at the automotive plant, and had little interaction with his children. This existence was shared by many: “Il a vu tant de pères dans la cité, des fils, plusieurs, jusqu’à cinq, parfois sept, ils savaient à peine que ces garçons étaient leurs fils” (Sebbar 18). Ironically his commitment to the family causes his estrangement from it: “Je travaille pour vous” (Sebbar 37). For the father, the long hours at the factory translate into a message of sacrifice. However, this sacrifice is not well received by his son. Again, Tahar sees his father as submissive to an economy that has exploited immigrant workers throughout history: “Et l’histoire coloniale, on est toujours des pauvres types, pauvres ignorants, exploités, résignés. . . . Alors toutes ces histoires, cette Histoire où on est toujours du mauvais côté, j’en veux pas tu m’entends, j’en veux pas” (Sebbar 115).

Tahar makes a fundamental distinction between himself and his father. At one point he stops mid-sentence, switching from the first person plural to the second person plural when addressing his father: “[M]ême quand on veut nous défendre ou plutôt vous défendre, vous, les immigrés” (16, emphasis mine). Further expanding the rift between father and son is the fact that *le chibani* is an immigrant and Tahar is not. Born and raised in France, disillusioned by his father’s vision of Islam, Tahar is not interested in the immigrant’s heritage. Still, even
if Tahar were more receptive to his past, it is unlikely that his father is capable of transmitting it.

Years later, having engaged the service of l’écrivain public to write a letter to his son, le chibani still struggles to overcome the silence. In fact, it seems that the father is willing to share the past, but is limited as to what he is capable of passing on. As a man tied to tradition, he is unable to speak certain words “forbidden” by cultural norms. Though le chibani avows that he loved his son from the first moment he saw him, he also admits that he never told him. Tradition dictates that he does not have the right to do so. Interestingly, with Alma, separated from his son by physical and temporal distance, he is finally able to tell his son he loves him: “Mais moi, aujourd’hui, la première fois, peut-être la dernière, je t’écris [je t’aime] à mon fils” (Sebbar 152). Adherence to traditional cultural norms restricts communication between father and son, by limiting what can be said.

Another factor blocking the lines of communication between father and son is the father’s experience of exile. Living in France for work, he is cut off from ancestral lands and cultural values. The foreign surroundings make it difficult, if not impossible, for the father to pass on a heritage to his son: “Là [Paris] où il est né il n’y a pas la mer, aucune mer, si j’avais travaillé à Marseille ou à Nantes ou à Bordeaux on serait allés ensemble face à la mer, les bateaux, je lui aurais appris à pêcher et le nom des poissons je les connais tous ” (Sebbar 37). His desire for the coastal cities of France, where his knowledge of fishing would have been useful reveal that his handicap is not derived from cultural differences, but rather he attributes the miscommunication to an unfamiliar geography and economic hardship: “Qu’est-ce que je pouvais faire avec lui dans la cité, qu’est-ce que je lui aurais appris” (Sebbar 37). The father attributes his inability to transmit a heritage to a specific geographic
location: les banlieues of Paris. Throughout the text, les banlieues are often cited as a source of frustration, an impediment to communication and inhospitable. Further highlighting the father’s sense of displacement, the river Seine, the only source of water comparable to the lost seas of his homeland is a vile and deadly space: “une rivière sale où les poissons crèvent” (38). Unlike the sea, la Seine is incapable of supporting life. It is an unnatural space that is harmful, polluted, even deadly.  

Silenced by restrictive tradition and an unfamiliar locale, the father still has a heritage that he would like to pass on to his son. Talking at leisure with Alma, l’écrivain public, he recounts the exploits of Algerians who fought bravely for the French, he sings Kabyle songs passed on by generation of women, and he tells her about the forgotten atrocities committed against Algerians in France. These are the stories, the history he wants to pass on. The man is burdened by the immensity of such an undertaking. The letter he has attempted to have written so many times, never goes beyond the opening salutation: “D’une voix basse, il dit, ‘Mon cher fils…’ Elle écrit ‘Mon cher fils…’ puis plus rien.” (Sebbar 31). Unable to communicate the past, the father raises abandoned children, uprooted from any anchoring sense of identity. So, the father relinquishes his authority: he leaves the heritage in the hands of l’écrivain public: “Ecrivez ce que vous voulez après ‘Mon cher fils,’ oui, écrivez, j’enverrai les lettres comme d’habitude” (Sebbar 38). Evidently, for the exiled father the transmission of heritage it is a task that cannot be done alone.

Mon cher fils exposes a rift between generations with a father who is unable to convey the heritage he wants on one side and a son who rejects the father’s legacy of oppression and submission he receives on the other. However, Alma, in her role as écrivain

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96 See also Sebbar’s treatment of the murder of Algerian protesters whose bodies were cast into the Seine in October 1961 in La Seine était rouge. Paris: Magnier, 1999. Print
public, emerges as a means to repair the rupture. She must span the rift between generation, synthesizing all the father’s stories and relaying to the son what the father could not. Subsequently, in Mon cher fils the transmission of heritage transcends the relay between father to son, and becomes the responsibility of individuals beyond the family. Due to their violent nature or a restrictive tradition of silence, these stories are difficult to transmit directly and must be sought out; this requires an intermediary: the letter and the letter writer. Alma’s role as the bridge between the two generations opens the novel to more complicated issues of monuments to France and Algeria’s shared history and the pain of remembering traumatic memories.

Le Pont de l’Alma

Toward the end of the novel, almost imperceptivity, the narrator briefly draws attention to l’écrivain public’s name explaining that her grandfather, a Latinist, thought it would be appropriate: “Son grand-père aimait le latin c’est lui qui a propose le prénom de sa petite-fille, Alma” (Sebbar 110). Indeed, even more significant, though perhaps only evident to those familiar with Paris or with an encyclopedic memory of French military history, the protagonist shares her namesake with the Alma Bridge in Paris.

Spanning the Seine between the seventh and eighth arrondissements, the Alma Bridge commemorates the French victory at Alma in the Crimean War, specifically the regiment of zouaves who were responsible for the victory. However, most pedestrians,

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97 The Latin origin, meaning “beneficial,” is often used in the term alma mater, which literally means “nourishing mother.” While the Latin roots of her name certainly underscore the constructive role she plays in repairing broken lines of transmission, this is only a subterfuge: a clever decoy by the narrator which aims to elicit interest in the significance of the author’s name only to steer the reader down a dead end. Further investigation into the name Alma reveals an important symbolic reference for French and Algerian history: Le pont de l’Alma.
distracted by the resplendent vista of the Eiffel Tower to the southwest, likely fail to notice
the statue of the soldier located at the base of the bridge: a forgotten monument to a forgotten
battle. *Le zouave du pont de l’Alma,* as the statue is called, represents the characteristic
uniform worn by a special regiment of light infantry in the French army. Interestingly, the
soldiers in the *zouave* regiment were originally recruited from the Kabyle tribe called the
Zouaghas in Algeria. ⁹⁸

The image of the the *zouave* beneath the bridge, ignored monument in the heart of
Paris, represents Alma’s role in the novel while alluding to the greater cause that she
unwittingly serves. Alma spans the rift between generations to overcome the silence imposed
on father and son. Much like Sebbar who identifies herself as a “croisée” (Huston and Sebbar
138), so Alma stands between the two shores, bridging the gap between a son born and raised
in France and his immigrant father. Similarly, the *zouave de l’Alma,* hidden beneath the
bridge, stands below it, allowing for free exchange between the two sides.

The reference to the *zouave du pont de l’Alma* also reveals another aim of the novel:
to uncover the ignored or forgotten traces of Maghreb influence on French society, but the
novel goes about this in a circuitous manner. Sebbar does not explicitly refer to the *zouave*
in *Mon cher fils.* Nonetheless, when a young woman in a hijab who comes to Alma to have
her write a letter to her sister, she remembers precise details of a trip to France, recalling
“mon père roule ses cigarettes avec le papier *Zouave*” (Sebbar 80). Much like the reference to
the Latin origins of Alma’s name, the narrative only touches on the topic briefly and hardly
lends any importance to it. So, while the term *zouave* is known in popular culture as a
commercial, its historical and symbolic meaning are ignored. The effacement of historical

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⁹⁸ The term *zouave* is a Latinization of the Kabyle tribe’s name (*Tresor de la langue française informatisé*). The
original *zouaves* were from Algeria.
referents in favor of a marketable product name further underscores the exploitative nature of France’s colonial practice in Algeria. This seemingly insignificant detail uncovers a much more complex history that risks going unnoticed.

The fact that the connection is so underplayed by the author sends the reader on his own quest for the discovery of the forgotten stories hidden in plain sight. This idea is echoed in Alma’s actions. Throughout the novel, Alma is seeking out stories, photos, and anything else she can find about Algeria and the history of its people. The *zouave du pont de l’Alma* points to other possible hidden monuments commemorating the contribution of Algerians to the history of France, quietly yet persistently staking a claim to the national heritage.

The connection between the protagonist and the monument at *le pont de l’Alma* brings these shared, yet forgotten histories between France and Algeria out in the open. In the novel, Alma’s role is to gather these forgotten or lost stories so that they may be remembered. However, this is difficult since those who took part in it do not always want to remember a traumatic past, especially when the past means the War of Independence in Algeria. Even *le chibani* who seems so willing to reach out to his son stops short of retelling what happened during that troubling time in both French and Algerian history: “[M]ême la guerre d’Algérie, j’ai rien dit, pourtant . . . non, je ne veux pas parler de cette guerre, une autre fois” (Sebbar 38). Remembering is too difficult or too painful. Still, the text is aware of the danger of not remembering. As Alma states, these painful memories go untold and risk being lost or distorted: “On se rappelle ces années de fer, à peine quelques années de cela et on fait comme si la barbarie criminelle s’était exercée ailleurs, dans un autre pays, loin, très loin, un pays inconnu, disparu depuis ou qui n’a jamais figuré sur la carte du monde” (Sebbar 12). Like the Alma Bridge, Alma draws attention to forgotten memories, no matter how
painful they may be. Through the figure of Alma, Sebbar refers to the historical traces of the Maghreb presence in French history both positive and negative.

At one of their meetings, le chibani asks Alma if she knows what happened in Paris on October 17, 1961. The old man then goes on to explain the horrific events that unfolded when Algerian protestors in Paris were murdered and cast into the Seine. In 2001, the French government installed a plaque to remember this tragic even in French and Algerian history. As Julia Kristeva puts it, even fifty years after the event the suffering was still palpable: “De part et d'autre de la Méditerranée, la souffrance est toujours vive et chacun nourrit, envers l'autre, une méfiance qui ne trouve pas d'apaisement.” Indeed, the French government failed to officially recognize importance of the event until October 2012. Even with the plaque, Kristeva doubts that the significance of this event will impact those who see it:

Plus de cinquante pour cent de nos compatriotes ignorent ce qui s'est passé, là, en ce jour d'octobre et ce ne sont pas les mots inscrits sur la plaque de pierre qui leur en apprendront beaucoup plus: "À la mémoire des nombreux Algériens tués lors de la sanglante répression de la manifestation pacifique du 17 octobre 1961[.”] Les passants qui les liront ne sauront ni qui les a tués ni combien d'entre eux moururent. À ce jour, on ne sait toujours pas si c'est une trentaine ou plutôt quelques centaines d'Algériens qui disparurent. (Kristeva)

The events of October 17, 1961, were the subject of Sebbar’s novel La Seine était rouge (1999). In Mon cher fils, the topic is presented as one of many important histories to be passed on. Like La Seine était rouge, Mon cher fils lends voice to the silenced or forgotten memories of France and Algeria’s shared history, drawing attention to a taboo subject that the French government has been slow to recognize. Through Alma’s subtle reference to the forgotten zouave, Mon cher fils shares Kristeva’s uncertainty toward the efficacy of

monuments in preserving history. Instead, the text foregrounds the importance of communication and the need to pass on personal stories. As Kristeva explains in the last citation, the official history – that is, the one recognized by the government – often leaves out details. However, one must consider at what point the details become too painful. The challenge before the novel, and subsequently the preservation of France and Algeria’s shared history, is how to effectively pass on these agonizing memories.

The heritage to be passed on can be painful for those who receive it, but moreso for those who relive it through the retelling. When Alma confronts her own father, who is reticent about their family history, he prefers to explain it to Alma through someone else’s words, an intermediary. Like a book, Alma’s writing provides a cushion of distance between the speaker and the recipient of the heritage numbing the pain of transmission in the form of a letter. According to historian Benjamin Stora, the writing of memory offers a means of overcoming traumatic memory: “The movement from memory to the writing of history permits those who have been traumatized the courage to examine their past, to stop mythologizing, to stop prevaricating. It helps them simply understand” (169). By writing these memories, Alma not only preserves them but offers her interlocutors the chance to work through painful or traumatic memory.

However, Stora also demonstrates that the retelling of certain versions of nostalgic memory is at the heart of the xenophobic propaganda and politics that inform the French extreme right (155). Algeria, according to Stora, was for many French “southerners” equivalent to the American West, a savage territory to be conquered and where heroes made

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100 Stora makes use of language specific to American history to draw parallels between race relations in the United States after the Civil War and in France following Algerian Independence in 1962. French ‘southerners,’ adhere to a vision of French Algeria in which France’s colonial mission compels them to civilize the indigenous population. As a result, the French “southerner” views Algerians as a separate, inferior ethno-racial community.
a name for themselves. This memory of Algeria as an integral part of France and an unfinished America, has been retained and transmitted by the *pied-noirs*, soldiers and former OAS officers creates much resentment for those who see Algeria as a defeat or an unfulfilled destiny: “This transmission may represent resistance to changes affecting France, a memory that relies heavily on the model of *French* Algeria” (Stora 170). Thus, understanding the transmission of the different memories that make up the Algerian experience for both European Algerians and Algerian immigrants is fundamental to address the problems of immigration and integration that face French society today. In this respect two types of memory dominate the discourse on French views of Algeria: colonization (Algerian Immigrants) and an idyllic French Algeria (European Algerians). To move forward, it is important that French society moves beyond these destabilizing memories. Otherwise the conflict threatens to be repeated indefinitely: “Algerian memories that were transmitted contributed to the repetition of the conflict. These violent memories revealed vengeful attitudes and underscored the presence of dangerous desires. The stakes are different for today’s memory of the Algerian conflict that the children and grandchildren of Algerian immigrants safeguard” (170). This continual conflict is to be avoided, and can only be mediated through the second generation. *Mon cher fils* posits Alma as an intermediary. Her role is to bridge the gap between European Algerians and Algerian immigrants while offering a means of transmission through which memories can be retold, disrupting mythologized visions of French Algeria.
L’Écrivain Public: Collecting Communal Histories

As écrivain public, Alma hears the story of Algeria as told by its people and synthesizes the information in the form of a letter to a distant recipient. Though it seems that a letter writer should merely write what she hears, such is not the case for Alma. Her relationship with her clients is unique. Often an individual spends hours with her, telling stories. In fact, one young woman who had not finished her story by closing time insisted that Alma walk home with her and have tea while she told her the rest. Even her most regular client, le chibani, a typically silent man, cannot understand why he is so loquacious with her: “Pourquoi je vous parle de tout ça ? Un homme ne parle pas ainsi de sa maison, sa femme, ses filles…À vous je dis beaucoup” (Sebbar 120). What is it about this young letter writer that causes people to open up?

First, the letter writer offers some distance between the sender and the recipient. This may be why le chibani, who found it difficult to speak to his son in person, now finds more freedom of expression when his words are in the hands of an intermediary. Second, a letter, as opposed to a phone call, or a face-to-face conversation, is only one half of a dialogue with questions unanswered. It is a partial, unfinished conversation. Because there is no chance for an interruption or an argument, the speaker has a chance to “get it all out.” Similarly, the exchange with Alma often takes the form of a monologue, since, as the text explains, her job requires her to remain silent. As Alma states, the public writer is “muet par devoir” (Sebbar 26). In fact it is her silence that enables Le chibani to speak: “[V]ous c’est votre métier de vous taire, avec vous je peux parler” (Sebbar 71). Interestingly, while the father’s silence hinders transmission to his son, Alma’s silence facilitates the transmission of memory. Alma recognizes that her role is to listen attentively to what people tell her: “Alma ne dit rien, ne
In her role as écrivain public, Alma offers the comfort of distance and a receptive, impersonal ear. This allows for those who want to transmit a message that might otherwise be traumatizing or difficult to relate to tell their story with as little interference as possible. Thus, Sebbar depicts the ideal intermediary for transmitting the past through the figure of a young woman who does not attempt to offer answers or solutions, but rather dutifully and silently records what she hears.

However, the text sets Alma apart from others in her profession, explaining that her letters go beyond the status quo. Remembering experiences with other public writers in France, the young woman in the hijab, another of Alma’s recurring clients, says, “[L]eslettres étaient rares, l’écrivain public du café les écrivait pour tous, presque les mêmes il allait vite, des lettres courtes pour dire ‘Tout va bien’ ou ‘Le cousin est à l’hôpital’ ou ‘On arrive le mois prochain’” (Sebbar 67-68). Evidently Alma puts time and attention into the letters she writes, going beyond the form letters other public writers put out. Yet, the novel also implies that Alma herself occasionally falls victim to writing these same formulaic letters and that her usual clients have stopped coming: “Elle écrit des lettres qui l’ennuient. La jeune femme n’écrit plus à sa sœur de France” (Sebbar 109). In fact, the reader is only privy to the exchanges with a few individuals; the majority of her clients are unseen. Clearly, certain stories are more salient than others. What sets Alma apart from other public writers is her personal interest in these two individuals and their past, but why their stories?

More than writing letters, Alma wants to know about the forgotten histories that link France and Algeria. Through le chibani she learns of past injustices ignored or forgotten. As he explains, the indigenous soldiers, les harkis, were “payés à peine pour massacrer des
résistants” (Sebbar 39). She aims to uncover the past that unites these two nations. This is little surprise since the stories they tell, the lives that they lived in an existence divided between Algeria and France, mirror her own shared heritage: Alma’s mother is French and her father is Algerian. Subsequently, Alma is not only acting as a public writer but also as an historian compiling the stories pertinent to her own heritage. Thus her role as l’écrivain public is not only to hear these stories but to collect and synthesize them. Working as an archivist of these personal histories, she seeks out her own nebulous heritage.

Like le chibani and the young woman in the hijab, Alma’s identity draws from multiple sources. However, her access to the two cultures that dominate her past is limited. Consequently, Alma is somewhat ignorant of her own heritage and must seek out stories to fill the gaps. Her mother has left Algeria and is living in France. The only means of communication she has with her is through terse, impersonal post cards: “Elle a juste la place pour dire qu’elle n’oublie pas Alma, sa seule fille, l’unique. Presque le même texte d’une carte à l’autre” (63). With her father it is much the same. Though he lives in close physical proximity to Alma, he remains distant since he is limited in his communication about the past. Interestingly, Alma’s father attributes the rupture in lines of communication to gender: “Parler la même langue ne suffit pas, déjà, un père et sa fille. . . .” (Sebbar 61). He does not finish his thought or explain why, but, apparently, some things are not shared between father and daughter. Sadly, Alma is blocked from her traditional means of transmission: her mother.

Unlike Tahar, who wants to break from his father’s legacy of submission, Alma hopes to uncover the untold stories of her past, whatever they may be. For Alma, the greatest source of information is the legacy of her grandfather’s library. His vast collection of works in English and Arabic includes travel narratives from French officers stationed in Algeria and
other Europeans such as Isabelle Eberhardt and Frédéric Rimbaud (Arthur Rimbaud’s father). Again, the text draws attention to a crossroads, a moment in which French and Algerian history came together and cultures interacted. Asserting the North African influence on French culture, she points out that the canonical, French symbolist poet, Rimbaud, has direct ties to Maghreb culture through his father: “Rimbaud le père parlait très bien l’arabe, il aurait entrepris une traduction du Coran. . . . Son fils a parcouru les déserts Abyssinie dans un autre temps” (Sebbar 28). This is not the first time Rimbaud and Eberhardt have been mentioned together. In fact, in his biography Rimbaud, Pierre Arnoult makes the claim that Isabelle is Rimbaud’s illegitimate daughter. As Hedi Abdel-Jaouad explains, Arnoult’s thesis is based merely on physical resemblance and a common destiny (93). While Arnoult’s assertion seems unlikely, it is interesting to note that he sees destiny as something that might be transmitted from father to daughter. The only unifying force between these individuals is Algeria.101 Rimbaud spent the latter part of life in Africa, and Eberhardt had renounced her bourgeois European society in favor of a life with the nomadic people of Algeria. Sebbar draws attention to a European fascination with Algeria by choosing to put Rimbaud and Eberhardt in the library of Alma’s grandfather. Ostensibly, these accounts of Algeria through European eyes fill the void left by the absence of Alma’s mother. Thanks to the library, “elle apprend tout, presque tout de ce pays du Maghreb . . . ce que sa mère ne lui a pas raconté” (Sebbar 28). Furthermore, they reveal a shared history that has been neglected, ignored, or forgotten. In any case, it has not been passed on.

Alma learns that her shared heritage is not so different from the history of France itself. Alma’s charge is to reveal these untold histories. However, she is wary of relying solely on books: “Les livres sont des esprits imprévisibles, bienfaisants parfois dangereux”

(Sebbar 47). Books have the potential to be beneficial and dangerous. So, Alma supplements her research into her own heritage with the stories of the people she meets in her work as écrivain public. Her father told her that when it comes to traumatic memories, one person cannot tell the entire story: “Personne ne peut tout dire . . . chacun parle comme il peut de ce qui le tourmente” (Sebbar 62). This is why she listens attentively to the multiple stories she receives as écrivain public, compiling the diverse perspective that make up the shared history of France and Algeria.

In *Mon cher fils*, Alma offers a model for the recuperation of untransmitted heritage. The relationship between *le chibani* and Tahar in the novel depicts the breakdown of a direct, patriarchal transmission of heritage and identifies the problems facing direct transmission of heritage in contemporary families in transcultural contexts. As a man bound to tradition, the father’s language is restricted by cultural norms. As an exile, the father’s legacy of the native land is irrelevant to the multicultural reality that the family inhabits. Subsequently, the father only transmits a heritage of silence and submission from which his son rebels.

To overcome this rupture, *Mon cher fils* asserts the need for an intermediary, outside of family, to record the untransmitted heritage. Like her symbolic counterpart *Le pont de l’Alma*, Alma acts simultaneously as a bridge between generations and as a monument to forgotten, shared histories. In her role as écrivain public, Alma offers temporal, geographical, and even narrative distance since the letters she writes are in her own words. In this way heritage is not a direct exchange but requires the intermediary of a letter. However, an intermediary is not sufficient, since the novel suggests that the father and son will not be reunited. One must also possess the will to reclaim one’s heritage. Tahar rejects his

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102 In the final lines the reader learns that Tahar has been imprisoned in Guantanamo Bay, a detention center for suspected terrorists.
father’s heritage and seeks out kinship in *Les Frères Musulmans*. This takes a disastrous turn, leading to the young man’s imprisonment. On the contrary, Alma actively seeks out and collects the traces of a shared history from the individuals she meets. In Leïla Sebbar’s *Mon cher fils*, heritage is not effectively transmitted through family but accessed via an intermediary. Still, that heritage must be sought out. The passive recipient receives nothing. Alma attests to the need to uncover these untransmitted memories lest they be lost.

The figure of Alma provides a unique commentary on the role of the recipient of a heritage in a transcultural context. Traditional family relationships are ineffective since they do not account for the shared experience, the possibility of inhabiting multiple cultures. Alma actively seeks out these shared histories in her meetings with individuals. Her sense of identity derives not from direct family ties, but from a broader community, a postmemory, as Marianne Hirsch explains, whose narratives tell of a shared and forgotten history. The traces of history scattered throughout the novel, like the forgotten or ineffective monuments in Paris, testify to unhealed wounds that require attention, these are stories that must be told but cannot be directly transmitted without suffering. Alma’s role in bridging the gap between generations, collecting and transmitting the traumatic memories of a violent past ends up overcoming the disrupted lines of transmission.
CONCLUSION

FINDING FAMILY IN UNFAMILIAR FACES

They didn’t want to explain to
my generation what had
happened. . . .
Strangers had to tell me my own
story
-Wajdi Mouawad

The novels previously studied offer important insight into the impact of global
displacement and relocation on the family and the relationships at work within it. In closing,
this study looks toward the future to consider the impact of such displacements on the
individuals who will make up the next generation, specifically the representation of the
exiled child in Wajdi Mouawad’s novel *Visage retrouvé* (2002). For Yana Meerzon the
exiled subject is, “someone who either has no clear recollection of his/her native land, or was
never truly exposed to it” (34). Doubly exiled from the homeland and the home, a child
immigrant “loses the very definition of home” because “the act of immigration deconstruct[s]
it (Rokosz-Piejko 179). Often, these exilic children define themselves as separate from the

103 In the past fifteen years, Wajdi Mouawad has emerged as a prominent figure in Francophone theatrical
production. His plays have been acclaimed in both North America and Europe. *Le Sang de promesses* is a
tetralogy written by Wajdi Mouawad between 1997 and 2009. The four plays that make it up are *Littoral, Incendies, Forêts* and *Ciels*. The titles reference four Greek classical elements Earth, Wind, Water, and Fire.
*Littoral* (1999), the first in his four-play cycle, was awarded the Literary Prize of the Governor General of
Canada in 2000. Across the Atlantic, Mouawad received the honor of *Chevalier* in the *Ordre des Arts et des
Lettres* in 2002. He was also awarded a *Prix Molière* in 2005 for best Francophone author but declined to
accept. Recently, Mouawad’s work has received even more exposure following the success of the film
*Incendies* (2010), an adaptation of his play by the same title first performed in 2003, which received a
nomination for both an Oscar and a *César* in the category of best foreign film.
displaced or colonized people that their parents represent while maintaining a connection to
their cultural past.

For Wahab, the young protagonist in Visage retrouvé, the exile both from familial
and host cultures provides a unique perspective through which the child calls into question
the concept of cultural identity. In a detailed analysis of the rapport between artistic
expression and exile, Yana Meerzon suggests that through artistic expression exile may be
mastered: “By conquering the cultural, linguistic, territorial and even moral divide, the
artists, exilic children, build their professional, national and cultural identity” (218).
However, rather than “conquering” the different cultures, I argue that the exiled subject in
Mouawad’s work finds a way to live with diversity and incorporate it into an identity that
embraces difference. Neither subject to nor subjugating the myriad cultural influences that
inform his life, the child of exile attempts to reconcile seemingly disparate forces. Thus, exile
offers a means of constructing identity outside of the traditional family in a way that opens
the individual to a broader understanding of self, not tied to ancestral heritage but rather to a
larger community of memory.

In the novel exile is precipitated by violence. Wahab, the son of immigrants from an
unnamed Middle Eastern region, experiences the horrors of civil war. The direct witness of a
violent buss massacre in his homeland, Wahab carries this scene with him across spatial and
temporal borders. Despite his family’s multiple displacements, he cannot escape this
traumatic memory. Moreover, the vague geographies at work in the novel, the unnamed
homeland, and the blurring of geopolitical borders all contribute to a conception of identity
declared beyond territory.
Ironically it is the traumatic memory that serves as a tenuous anchorage point, at once linking him to his mother and disrupting the transmission of heritage since he no longer recognizes her face. He does not see himself as her son. It is not until his mother’s death at the end of the novel that Wahab realizes the nefarious impact of this traumatic memory on the relationship with her. Wahab, the exiled child, attempts to re-establish a lost link in filiation while elaborating a sense of self that takes into consideration multiple cultural referents. Ultimately the lost mother is rediscovered, but not before the source of rupture is revealed. This break in filiation is tied to traumatic memory.

Wahab witnesses the horrors of war at an early age. In this way he takes part in what Susan Suleiman calls “the 1.5 Generation.” According to her, these are the individuals who were “too young to have had an adult understanding of what was happening to them, but old enough to have been there” (277). As a result, any fixed sense of self is disrupted, “before the formation of stable identity that we associate with adulthood and in some cases before any conscious sense of self” (277). For Mouawad, it is an abundance of traumatic memory that disrupts ties with the mother and a stable sense of self in Visage retrouvé, whereas in Sebbar’s novel, ruptured family ties result from the reluctance to transmit traumatic memory. It is this intergenerational silence that the protagonist must overcome.

While his first novel, Visage retrouvé (2002), has been largely ignored by critics due to his prolific theatrical output, the author himself would attest to the importance of the novel in his journey as a writer. In an interview, he explains that crafting the novel was itself beneficial to his literary development: “Le roman, le travail que j’ai fait sur le texte . . . m’a beaucoup appris à écrire, j’ai appris à couper, à être rigoureux” (Torchi 120). In another
interview from the 63rd Festival d’Avignon in July of 2009, Mouawad states that he feels like a writer exiled in a world of theater:

Je ne me sens pas de ce monde. Je le sentais déjà, mais je découvre que je n’appartiens peut être pas du tout au monde du théâtre. C’est un sentiment surement lié à l’exil et au Liban : j’appartiens à ce pays, mais je ne peux pas dire que je suis libanais. . . . On a plus parlé de la forme, de la manière de traiter et de conter les histoires, mais très peu d’écriture. C’est quelque chose d’étrange pour moi qui suis intéressé avant tout par cela, la poésie de la langue. (Batalla)

To ignore Mouawad’s prose text would be to neglect an important key to understanding the totality of his works. As in his plays, the novel foregrounds exile, the very sense of exile he evokes in the last citation. Like the author’s ambiguous sentiment toward Lebanon, Visage retrouvé is itself exiled, but undeniably linked to Mouawad’s oeuvre.

Written between the creation of Littoral (1999) and Incendies (2003), the novel, much like Mouawad’s theatrical trilogy, depicts an exiled family and the desire for reconciliation with the past. Visage retrouvé is narrated from the perspective of Wahab, a young man who comes home on his fourteenth birthday to discover that he no longer recognizes his mother. Though she treats him as her son, he is convinced that this other woman has taken his mother’s place. Afraid to return to this intimate stranger, he runs away. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that the mother has been disfigured through traumatic memory of war and has become unrecognizable. Much like the author, Wahab and his family have fled a war-torn country. This realization precipitates Wahab’s flight from his home and family and, ironically, his self-discovery. Though unrecognizable, the mother still plays a role in Wahab’s life in a way that he does not realize until the moment of her death at the end of the novel.

Through a blurred conception of time and territory, Wajdi Mouawad’s Visage retrouvé brings to light the crisis of facing an unrecognizable past. The fractured relationship
between Wahab and his mother bears some correlation with individuals in transcultural contexts dealing with traumatic histories. The novel calls into question fixed notions of identity and territory through the ruptured relationship between mother and son. The unrecognizable face of Wahab’s mother reveals a relationship marred with suspicion and contempt between first generation immigrants and their personal history. In this novel, the family initially fails to function as a reliable source of origin, and Wahab is cast adrift, an exile among exiles. Through the continually evolving relationship between mother and son it portrays, *Visage retrouvé* exposes the collapse of family as a source of identity formation for an individual scarred with traumatic memories.

**Remapping Territory and the Geography of Anger**

The thematic elements at work in Mouawad’s *œuvre* draw from a personal history that involves violence and exile from an early age. Indeed, Mouawad’s past influences the experimental theatre he produces. His plays make use of various arts and media to nuance the theatrical genre. Born in Deir El-Kamar, a community south of Beirut, Mouawad was only seven years old when he witnessed the violent massacre of Palestinians on a bus by a Christian militia group in April of 1975 (Dahab 151). This historical event triggered a cycle of retribution between extremist groups that would ravage Lebanon for the next fifteen years and also continue to haunt Mouawad. That year, to escape the mounting danger, his family left Lebanon and relocated to France for eight years until finally settling in Québec in 1983. The violence and the displacements that Mouawad and his family endured resurface throughout his work. His early plays (*Littoral* and *Incendies*) often focus on first-generation

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104 A version of this atrocity appears in several of his works, including *Journée de noces chez les Cromagnons, Visage retrouvé*, and *Incendies*. 
immigrants and their families in Québec piecing together the scattered stories of a broken past and uncovering a lost story of origin.

In a 2008 interview with Martin Morrow, Mouawad recalls the tragic nature of the war in Lebanon and its consequences for families: “It was a very shameful war, where fathers killed sons, where sons killed their brothers, where sons raped their mothers” (Morrow). The war had disastrous consequences for families and shattered the fault lines of a nation whose rich diversity had once earned it the title “Switzerland of the Middle East.” With the war, that utopian dream was shattered: “[T]he civil war involved and affected all the cultural and religious groups populating the country. The conflict raised the issue of religious, political, ethnic, and economic borders and led to a frequent re-mapping of the country’s territory” (Meerzon 214). The war and its “frequent remappings” fractured Lebanon’s cultural, political, and social institutions. The instability offered few anchorage points upon which to build any stable notion of identity. Consequently Mouawad’s works often calls into question conventional notions of identity as rooted to a single source while emphasizing the need to construct some cohesive sense of self. One critic has described him as “Lebanese by blood, French in his way of thinking, and Québécois in his theater poetics” (Meerzon 213). However, such a clean-cut categorization based on national identity ignores the vague geographic boundaries and cultural interplay at work on a child growing up in exile, a subject that Mouawad takes up in *Visage retrouvé*.

Like other novels examined in this study, *Visage retrouvé* bears witness to a further destabilization of the family as a source of identity within a transcultural setting and highlights the need to seek out sources of identity beyond the family. This is achieved through the ruptured relationship between mother and son. The imprecise localization of the
novel and the “remapping” of the mother’s face discussed below allow Mouawad to question the presumed correlation between nation and national identity, and consequently the transmission of heritage across generations. Destabilizing notions of fixed geopolitical borders, the text foreshadows the protagonist’s loss of landmarks (at the age of fourteen he no longer recognizes his mother’s face), with ambiguous reference to geographical locations and a faded a map hanging in his classroom.

From the beginning, Visage retrouvé makes only vague references to geographical locations. The novel is divided into three sections, each one taking place within a different location. There are few dates or familiar landmarks. The few geographical references are, at most, suggestions. For example, in the first part, entitled Avant la lettre, the description of Wahab’s homeland is nebulous: “Mon pays natal n’est pas grand. Les oiseaux le traversent en une seule journée sans se fatiguer. Quand le soleil brille, il brille partout sur lui, et quand il pleut, il pleut sur tous ses habitants.” Later he refers to political disturbances in a country in which multiple languages are spoken: “À la radio, pas de musique, pas de chants. Une voix parle. Des mots que je ne comprends pas. Mon père dit : Ça va s’arranger, ça va s’arranger” (Mouawad 16, 18). The words he does not understand suggest a language different than his mother tongue. While the text vaguely evokes a small war-torn country in which multiple languages are spoken, it never directly implies Lebanon. Even after he has left his home country, he refers to his new home simply as “le pays de mon adolescence” (Mouawad 163).

In this way, the past, present, and future intermesh throughout the novel, ignoring geopolitical boarders. The ambiguous geography is projected in the description of a faded map in Wahab’s classroom:

Les couleurs étaient délavées par les ans; le bleu des océans se confondait avec les lignes blanches dessinant les contours des continents. Le rouge des
pays chauds se perdait dans le jaune des déserts, seules les zones vertes des grandes forêts parvenaient à contraster avec le reste. C’était une carte qui ne se souvenait pas du monde tant elle prenait en compte des pays aujourd’hui disparus, des colonies oubliées et des frontières depuis longtemps effacées. (Mouawad 62)

Through the image of the outdated map, Visage retrouvé calls into question the instability of an identity based on territory, and consequently of the notion of nation. The map’s frontiers have been washed out over time and the territories it depicts have dissolved. The map no longer represents reality. It is an obsolete vestige of a world whose only constant seems to be change.

The faded map reflects what Michel Foucault calls a heterotopia. Foucault defines heterotopia as spaces, such as a cemetery, a brothel, or a nursing home, located at once within and beyond social or institutional spaces. A heterotopia is a space that is simultaneously real and surreal, “une espèce de contestation à la fois mythique et réelle de l’espace où nous vivons: cette description pourrait s’appeler l’hétérotrophie” (Foucault, Des espaces autres, para. 18). Though it is localized in the physical realm, this space exists beyond the “reality” of defined social institutions. To illustrate his concept, Foucault draws on the example of a mirror. While the mirror is fixed in a physical location, it alters the space occupied by the viewer. That is, the distorted image it reflects can only be perceived through the virtual space created by the mirror (Foucault, Des espaces autres, para 17). The virtuality of the heterotopic space perceived in the mirror’s reflection evokes a sense of displacement, “c’est à partir du miroir que je me découvre absent à la place où je suis puisque je me vois là-bas (Foucault, Des espaces autres, para. 17). For Foucault, heterotopias, as opposed to utopias, offer a fractured space in which it is difficult to arrange or order things according to traditional notions of likeness or similarity: “[L]es hétérotopies . . . dessèchent le propos, arrêtent les mots sur eux-mêmes, contestant, dès sa racine, toute possibilité de grammaire;
elles dénouent les mythes et frappent de stérilité le lyrisme des phrases” (*Les mots et les choses* 9-10). Thus, these spaces prevent any possibility of rootedness, of a sense of self based on a fixed origin, since they are defined by displacement. By emphasizing the heterotopic space of the faded map in the classroom, *Visage retrouvé* calls into question the stability of concepts such as national identity, or a conception of identity based on the nation as a homogenous community.

While the map characterizes Wahab’s own displaced experience, it also draws attention to the codifying process at work within the cartographic project itself. In the field of early modern studies, critics have speculated as to the impact of the cartographic revolution on colonial practices in the New World. The abstraction of space, as understood by Henri Lefebvre, leads to a view of space as a commodity to be exploited. Indeed, the map introduced a new concept of space which justified the colonial project in the Americas: “This new spatiality, in turn, supported the territorialization of the non-European world for European purposes” (Padrón 47). This rigid codification inherent to maps is exactly what Mouawad is writing against.

The map Mouawad depicts in the text uncovers the tension between cartographic codification and the “multiplicity” and the “unaccountable events” that Lefebvre observes (85). A map is, at best, a snapshot of a moment in time and does not account for the flux of immigration and cultural interaction continually taking place in the territory. Mouawad’s map no longer reflects a geopolitical reality. With its forgotten colonies and dissolved

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105 In his work *La Production de l’espace* (1974) Lefebvre explains that once geometric, optical, presumably homogenous space becomes the dominant representation of space in the West, everything comes to be understood as either location or object, amenable to systematic understanding, commodification, appropriation, subordination. Still, Lefebvre is critical of any single map’s ability effectively represent space: “The idea that a small number of maps or even a single (and singular) map might be sufficient can only apply in a specialized area of study whose own self-affirmation depends on isolation from its context. . . . We are confronted not by one social space but by many indeed by an unlimited multiplicity or unaccountable set of social spaces” (85)
borders, the faded map represents a fading conception of the world and suggests new ways of conceiving an individual’s relation to space.

In the wake of globalization, one must reconsider how we map the world and what the consequences of this remapping have on identity formation (Pickles 191). Rather than a strictly delineated space, the abstract worldview presented by the cartographic imaginary allows for a less rigid conception of habitus:

[T]he very structure of cartographic reason that—far from inscribing a single determinate line—draws and redraws our world, erases and inscribes again, decodes and recodes, in a ceaseless and complex array of forms of deterritorialization and reterritorialization producing the multiple and shifting identities (or assemblages) we take as ourselves. (Pickles 23)

Rather than offer a reliable representation of a world that can be surveyed and parceled out, the map in Visage retrouvé reveals the possibility of remappings and, subsequently, multiple or shifting identities. Thus, the vague geography in the novel, foreshadowed by the image of the faded map of the world, frames the question of identity formation in the novel: not as a fixed form, but as an assemblage of multiple cultural referents.

It is the codification of space, and the national purity project at work within the cartographic process, that Mouawad writes against. This “national purity project,” or national ethnos, is what Arjun Appadurai contends in his essay “Fear of Small Numbers,” is at the heart of the modern nation state (138). The national ethnos is not a natural, organic phenomenon, but rather it is “produced and naturalized at great cost, through rhetorics of war and sacrifice, through punishing disciplines of educational and linguistic uniformity, and through the subordination of myriad local and regional traditions to produce Indians or Frenchmen or Britons or Indonesians” (Appadurai 138). Mapping is an important means of defining and establishing a rigid conception of national identity. Yet, at the heart of the
national ethnos, according to Appadurai, is a sense of incompleteness and unattainable ideal. The unachievable goal of the national purity project is exacerbated by globalization and the proximity and overlap of multiple cultures and produces a geography of anger:

In every case, the geography of anger is not a simple map of action and reaction, minoritization [sic] and resistance, nested hierarchies of space and site, neat sequences of cause and effect. Rather, these geographies are the spatial outcome of complex interactions between faraway events and proximate feats, between old histories and new provocation, between rewritten borders and unwritten orders. (Appadurai 142-143)

Within the geography of anger, these rewritten borders are not without violent consequences. Thus, under closer scrutiny, the map hanging in the classroom frames a conception of identity based on continual remappings but also anticipates the potential violence between the “majority” and “minority” cultures, two important themes in *Visage retrouvé*.

The map is emblamatic of Wahab’s life, both his own experience growing up in three different countries and the recurring traumatic memory he carries with him across time and space. Heterotopias present a fractured conception of time and space. Like the map, Wahab’s life follows two principles that Foucault attributes to heterotopias: the juxtaposition of incompatible positions in space and in time. The space of contestation offered by heterotopia disrupts any notion of stability, but rather provides a locality in which ideas and identities are continually undone and recoded. Through its blurred boarders and ambiguous territories, the map characterizes Wahab’s experience as an exile, exemplifying a confrontation between minority and majority cultures that Appadurai describes, as well as the continual threat of violence. Wahab is accustomed to the vague geographies and overcomes the most recent and most intimate loss: his mother’s face. In fact, despite a lack of landmarks, Wahab’s resolve to leave home is strengthened. Having made his way outside of

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106 The cemetery exemplifies the heterochronique principle at work in heterotopic spaces, juxtaposing the eventuality moment of death with the ‘quasi-eternal’ present of existence.
the city, he no longer recognizes anything: “Plus de références, pas même le moindre sens de l’orientation. Il ne désespéra pas.” (Mouawad 119). He accepts his sense of disorientation and forges ahead.

*Visage retrouvé’s* use of the map calls into question a particular cartographic imaginary that seeks to fix territory within geopolitical borders. Wahab attests to the struggle of the displaced individual. His sense of uprootedness has pervaded all aspects of his life, culminating in the lost landmark of the mother’s face. The faded map and the heterotopic image of the territory it represents frame the novel’s representation of identity formation and foreshadow the protagonist’s own loss of landmarks within the family. The remapping of his mother’s face reveals that the exiled individual must seek out sources of identity beyond the myth of the family as a stable source of identity.

**Mythic Family Origins**

By all outward appearances, Wahab’s family is fairly conventional. He lives together with his mother, father, brother, and sister. One important exception is that the family has been displaced from their native country due to civil war. The effect of their displacement and the scars of traumatic memory they carry with them eventually manifest in a unique manner for young Wahab. The day of his fourteenth birthday he comes home to find he no longer recognizes his mother or sister. From this moment, the family depicted in *Visage retrouvé* breaks from a tradition of conserving heritage to which their ancestors ascribed. In fact, just before Wahab realizes his mother is a stranger, the text explains that he could trace his family history back to one of his earliest ancestors, the founding member of his line:

Wahab connaissait avec précision les noms et prénoms de chacun de ses oncles et de chacune de ses tantes. . . . Wahab se souvenait de tout cela, des
noms de ses deux grands-pères, de ceux de ses deux grands-mères, il se souvenait des noms de ses arrière-grands-parents et, avec un petit effort, il pouvait retrouver les noms de ses trisaïeuls dont l’un, se prénommant Soulaymâân, avait fait un pèlerinage allant des hautes montagnes jusqu’au sud du pays, à l’endroit où la mer se déchire contre les récifs. (Mouawad 39)

The story of Soulaymâân itself offers some insight into the family’s role in preserving tradition. It is a source of pride for Wahab’s father, a story he has told so many times that it has become legend in the family: “Wahab ressentit la fierté avec laquelle son père faisait le récit de Soulaymâân, il entendit les effets de voix dont il usait pour terminer son histoire, proclamant la dernière phrase, sacrée entre toutes” (39). In the story, the ancestor, Soulaymâân, petitions God to send him a son. In exchange, Soulaymâân will forever change the family name to Moutabbi (which means “fulfilled”) to honor and remember God’s blessing. Bargaining with the fate of his descendants, Soulaymâân makes a deal with God. In telling and retelling the story, Wahab’s father imposes the debt of transmission onto his son. As a male descendant of Soulaymâân, he is obligated to carry on the line. The family name must continue as recognition for the fact that God granted the ancestor’s request.

Origin stories, such as the one Wahab’s father tells, reaffirm core beliefs and values and assert a given understanding of an individual’s identity. Such stories transcend past, present and future. As Wahab’s father explains to him, “Voilà, pourquoi aujourd’hui tu portes le nom de Moutabbi, tout comme moi, tout comme mon père Tanious, mon grand-père Fahd et tout comme les enfants et les enfants de tes enfants porteront aussi ce nom” (Mouawad 39-40). The story of Soulaymâân functions as a family myth. Family myths play a governing and protective role proscribing certain behaviors to individual members that would ensure homeostasis within the family culture (Ferreira 457). Such myths give meaning to the past, define the present, and preserve the future.
Still, the conception of the family promulgated by proponents of the “family myth” is fairly rigid. It presents a cycle from which there is no escape: “The popular assumption that culture is somewhat like a club in which one can choose membership, or choose to be for or against, is a serious misconception. On the contrary, culture, familial or social, constitutes an embedded totality in which individuals participate from birth on” (Seltzer 26-27). The family myth ensures that individuals remain embedded to a certain culture and prohibit transcultural exchange. In the novel, the family myth of Soulaymâân represents the old way, the culture of the country left behind. However, as the novel progresses and Wahab’s cultural landmarks fade away so does the myth’s influence of the family. Wahab’s own crisis and subsequent self-discovery outside his nuclear family suggest that concepts such as family myth fail to preserve heritage in particular contexts.

In the retelling of the story of Soulaymâân, the original ancestor, the text establishes precedence, an idyllic and imaginary notion of the family that is preserved across time. No one, not even in his extended family, was a stranger to Wahab. However, this unbroken chain of filiation is soon shattered, magnifying Wahab’s sense of disillusionment and destabilizing the efficacy of family myth within transcultural contexts.

Lost Landmarks

In Visage retrouvé, Wajdi Mouawad portrays the individual’s rupture with the family as a sudden and unexpected event. On his fourteenth birthday, upon returning home from school Wahab is shocked to hear that he has received a birthday card from his aunt Mathilde (Mouawad 40). Within his encyclopedic knowledge of his family line there is no entry for “Aunt Mathilde.” His initial confusion is carried to complete shock when, walking into the
kitchen, he discovers that the woman who claims to be his mother looks nothing like the mother he remembers: “C’était une petite femme, maigre, pâle, voûtée, avec une longue chevelure blonde descendant jusqu’au milieu du dos. Wahab la contemplais les yeux grands ouverts. Je n’ai jamais vu cette femme de ma vie ! Ce n’est pas ma mère.” From this moment Wahab breaks from the family myth linking him all the way back to Soulaymâân and he enters an identity crisis: “Je suis le sosie d’un garçon de mon âge s’appelant Wahab.” The fact that all his family members recognize him and act as though everything is normal disturbs Wahab even more, prompting his flight from home: “Cette confusion le ramenait sans cesse à la peur de retrouver chez lui la femme à la longue chevelure blonde” (Mouawad 41, 46, 67). Ultimately he cannot return home to face the mother he no longer recognizes.

It is important to note that it is his mother’s face, not her voice, which Wahab hears from the other room before he sees the “imposture,” that serves as the impetus for rupture. It is the face and the memories linked to it that are important to both Wahab and the author. For example, when asked about his creative process, Mouawad explains the importance of visualizing a face, a visage. According to Mouawad, he senses inspiration as a vague presence that eventually takes a form: “A un moment donné, je personalise cette présence, je finis par lui donner un visage” (Torchi 114). His choice of words here is significant, since the first physical form to manifest itself in drafting a text is the face (le visage). In dialoguing with these imaginary faces, Mouawad develops what will eventually become a character in his pieces, drawing from personal details: “Elle [the visage] se sert d’images tirées de mes souvenirs, d’un événement, d’un épisode dans ma vie” (Torchi 114). Coincidentally, in the novel it is the loss of his mother’s face that sets off Wahab’s own identity crisis. Just as in Wajdi Mouawad’s creative process, Wahab has linked specific events of his life and
memories to the image of his mother’s face. Without it he now searches for his own sense of self outside of the family.

The mother’s face serves as a landmark linking Wahab to the past, to the abandoned culture and country. Now that he no longer recognizes her, he is cut adrift. As he explains to his teacher the following day at school, hours before running away, “Je ne sais plus où je suis.” The first night he has run away from home, Wahab imagines meeting his mother again many years later. She begs him to come home, but he explains to her that their relationship has a better chance to flourish outside of the family: “Ne pleure pas! La vie m’a ouvert ses bras et je m’y plonge. Étrangers, nous nous reconnaîtrons mieux mère et fils. Je suis exilé de toi” (Mouawad 65, 84). The break from family offers a chance of reconciliation with the mother beyond the family. Exiled from family, mother and son are able to better recognize each other.

**The New Family: A Community of Sorrow**

Doubly exiled, from his homeland and family, Wahab sets out into the unknown. His flight from home marks the end of *La Peur* and the beginning of *La Beauté*. Yet, he finds beauty from an unexpected source: a new family. After taking a random train in to the countryside and wandering around for a few days, Wahab finally knocks on the door of a farmhouse and enters to find a young girl, Maya, who sees him, says “Tu es revenue!” (Mouawad 124). Eight years prior, Julien, the son of the family who live in the farmhouse, left and never came home. Since his departure, the entire family has suffered from the loss: his sister Maya no longer speaks, the parents leave his room untouched, hoping he will come

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107 *Visage retrouvé* is divided into three sections: *Avant la lettre*, *Premier livre* and *Deuxième Livre*. The section entitled *Premier Livre* has two chapters: *La Peur* and *La Beauté*.  

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home, and the grandfather stays bed-ridden for fear of the wolves that, he is convinced, devoured young Julien. Miraculously, seeing Wahab lifts the curse on the family.

Wahab identifies strongly with this family in the countryside. Ironically, though he cannot recognize his own mother, his face can inspire recognition and give hope to complete strangers. He feels a greater sense of kinship with individuals outside of his family: “Voici qu’un frère disparu avait été reconnu à travers son propre visage. Traces d’un monde ancien. Visage fossiliéré à même son propre visage. Il était cet exile reconnaissant sa terre natale en foulant du pied un pays nouveau” (Mouawad 148-149). At his greatest point of estrangement, Wahab uncovers an unexpected familiarity. The exchange with the family restores some hope of a sense of community, but community based outside of the nuclear family. Surrounded by the grandfather who never leaves his bed for fear of wolves, and Maya the girl who has not spoken since the disappearance of her brother, Wahab discovers a kindred community, united though suffering, working through the unhealed wounds of trauma: “Wahab se tut. L’espace n’existait plus tout à fait pour lui. Il avait à présent une importance secondaire. Une voix nouvelle me parle, pensa-t-il. Maya, lui [the grandfather] et moi, tous trois dans l’obscurité. Une nouvelle famille. Visages immobiles. Je peux compter sur eux” (Mouawad 141).

Through the encounter with his “new family,” the community of suffering, Wahab better understands his own personal trauma, the violent memories of his war-ravaged homeland, and its impact on his life. As a child, he watched as men fired machine guns into a crowded bus and set it ablaze. From this horrific scene was born a monstrous figure that would henceforth haunt his life: la femme aux membres de bois. Staring into the burning bus, Wahab sees her for the first time: “[J]’aperçois la silhouette d’une femme vêtue de noir. . . .
Ses mains et ses bras sont du bois, son visage voilé. Cette femme n’existait pour personne avant. Elle n’avait pas de corps, pas d’âme, rien. Elle est née du feu” (Mouawad 23). This veiled figure materializes throughout the book, terrorizing Wahab wherever he goes, haunting the narrative. She is the manifestation of his childhood trauma symbolizing at once war, his mother and the cancer that will eventually kill her. Throughout his life she hunts him down, traversing time and space. She encapsulates the memory of the bus massacre and reminds him of the inescapable proximity of death, a death that he cheated.

Wahab’s return to his family marks the return to despair and, as he discovers, the return to the traumatic memories associate with la femme aux membres de bois. These memories of the war are closely tied to his family. Wahab explains that the war is a member of the family. “Je suis frère jumeau d’une guerre civile qui a ravagé le pays de ma naissance. Tous deux nous sommes nés à la mi-avril.” (Mouawad 158). In fact, the proximity to these horrific memories is closer than he imagines.

The final chapter of Visave retrouvé takes place six years after his return home and chronicles Wahab’s trajectory to the hospital room where his mother is dying. Surrounded by his family, Wahab watches as his mother, rather the women who has replaced his mother since his fourteenth birthday, passes away. Even at the moment of her death, he still does not recognize her. Returning to the room some time later to get his coat, Wahab comes face to face with the image that has haunted him: la femme aux membres de bois. It is in this moment that Wahab realizes the connection between his mother and la femme aux membres de bois. He is close enough to see through the veil and glimpse her face:

Son visage [la femme aux membres de bois] m’était demeuré caché, ma peur était trop grande pour que je puisse le voir, or, voilà qu’aujourd’hui il se révèle à moi : la femme aux membres de bois a un visage pâle avec une longue chevelure blonde. J’ai vécu si longtemps à ses côtés sans me méfier !
C’était elle! La guerre c’était elle. Le cancer c’était elle! La femme aux membres de bois! (Mouawad 208)

In the end, the face he did not recognize on his mother was of the spirit who had haunted him, the incarnation of his traumatic memories. Through the death of his mother and his own artistic expression in painting, he frees himself from the fear of death that has plagued him since he witnessed the violent death of the young boy on the bus. When the femme aux membres de bois disappears, he turns to his mother’s cadaver and rediscovers the face he had lost so many years ago: “Ma mémoire refait surface. Je regarde le visage de ma mère. Visage de beauté. C’est un visage qui est mort” (206). The trauma Wahab had lived through as a child manifested itself in the disfiguration of his mother such that he could no longer recognize her. Having rediscovered his mother, Wahab leans over her body and whispers, “J’aurais voulu te connaître, mais top de peurs nous ont séparés” (Mouawad 210). Their ruptured relationship is yet another casualty of war.

In Visage retrouvé, Wajdi Mouawad depicts an unstable relationship between mother and son amid a family scarred by the horrors of war. Through the figure of Wahab, the child of exile, the novel examines the consequences of trauma and exile on the individual and on familial relationships. The fluid conception of the geographical space in the novel mimics the exile’s own sense of permanent displacement. By never naming the homeland, Mouawad addresses the question of exile beyond borders. Consequently, the nightmares Wahab witnessed in his homeland are not tied to a specific territory such as Lebanon but follow wherever he goes across time and space. The violence witnessed at such a young age is pervasive, not only afflicting Wahab, but also destabilizing the relationship with his mother. Scarred by the trauma of war, she is unrecognizable to Wahab. Because of this rupture, Wahab no longer identifies with his family and thus breaks with the myth of origin that his
father retells. The novel thus calls into question such myths for families living in exile since these stories of origin are often anchored to territory. As the next generation comes up learning the traditions of the homeland within the family while receiving a very different cultural education in the new country, the family myths are uprooted and come apart.

Ironically, while the memory of personal trauma represented by *la femme aux membres de bois* drives Wahab from his family, the same fear is what links him to his “new family.” In fact, the estrangement from his original family seemed necessary to discover this stronger sense of self. As he describes it, he was an exile discovering his homeland in a new country. In this way, as an exile, Wahab is able to find the familiar within the foreign. Interestingly, although Wahab flees his family, the community in which he finds solace is also a traditional family model. Therefore, it is difficult to argue that the text depicts a collapse of the family model. Instead, it uncovers an underlying problem specific to Wahab’s family: the scars of war. Thus, *Visage retrouvé* does not debunk the family model as a source of identity but rather broadens the definition. In this novel, the family is not defined by a myth of origin or a link between parent and offspring, but within a broader community whose members share a common trait: they are scarred by trauma.

*Visage retrouvé* foregrounds the deleterious consequences of trauma on immediate family and the possible redemption though exile. The relationship between mother and son is so irrevocably torn asunder by the horrors of war that Wahab does not rediscover his mother until her death. For the exiled subject in *Visage retrouvé*, the family does not offer a stable source of identity, but rather serves as a constant reminder of the violence of war. In fact, it is only in leaving his family that Wahab discovers a new community with which he identifies. While the family model remains intact as a source of identity, it must be discovered outside
of one’s original family. In this way Wahab simultaneously breaks with the myth of origin and recreates a new family, one that is not disrupted by the same personal trauma.

Although the locations, languages and cultures surrounding Wahab change the memory of the bus massacre persists. Interestingly, the memory becomes the constant, the defining anchorage point in his life. Juxtaposing vague geographical locations, heterotopic spaces, with this recurring memory the novel brings to light the importance of memory for the exiled subject. Territories are vague and undefined, but the traumatic memory persists. In fact, because this memory imprinted itself on Wahab at such an early age his sense of self is fractured. Susan Suleiman explains that since this traumatic memory occurs at a moment before the individual has an adult understanding of what is happening it disrupts the formation of a stable identity (277). For Wahab, the impact of this haunting memory exceeds local cultures and even disrupts the family’s role in transmitting a heritage. While a traditional heritage of shared cultural or historical referents is prevented, mother and son share a legacy of violence.

Like other authors studied, such as Poulin or Sebbar, Mouawad depicts the disruption of a traditional heritage linked to a common language or common territory. Also, as with Mavrikakis, Mouawad highlights the inescapable aspect of the past, through the haunting image of la femme aux membres de bois. However, Mouawad’s work goes beyond the novels of the authors previously discussed in bringing to light the impact of traumatic memory on the exiled subject. In Visage retrouvé, traumatic memory is the terrifying constant amid blurred cultural and political borders. When traumatic memory is the only link to the homeland, the family and the heritage it presents is viewed as hostile, even threatening, as

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108 At one point Wahab screams at an impolite bus driver in a harangue that combines elements of French, Arabic and Québec specific vocabulary.
evidenced by the recurring figure of *la femme aux membres de bois*. Unlike Alma in Sebbar’s *Mon Cher fils* or Mariam in Farhoud’s *Le bonheur a la queue glissante*, Wahab does not attempt to overcome the lost heritage; he flees from it. In the novel Wahab attempts to get away from the family either running away or, through artistic expression. In this way Mouawad draws attention the pain associated with traumatic heritage. However, the final scene, the moment Wahab rediscovers his mother’s lost face, reveals that a cherished link to the past was always there below the surface, yet unattainable, disfigured by the horrors of war. Again, as with the other authors studied, heritage persists, but is altered, transformed beyond recognition. Mouawad’s work reinforces the need to question the role of family amid transcultural contexts, but also to urges the reader to consider the impact of violence, specifically violence that stems from these cross-cultural blurring.

Despite cultural, historical, and personal differences at work in the novels studied, the family, perhaps the most basic and original of human institutions, maintains a common function throughout. As we have seen, in this study the family continues to be responsible for the transmission of a message: be it a system of cultural values, a language, or a traumatic memory, this message is passed on and preserved across generations. The authors in this study depict a message that is ambivalent, corruptible, fearsome, oppressive but, ultimately, malleable and in the hands of the individual. For these authors, the fate of the family is not governed by destiny but is relegated to the realm of the present. Seen through the perspective of the individual, these families are not edifying but disruptive. The conflict within the individual leads to different, at times contradicting, versions of heritage.

In examining these seven novels, we have seen the emergence of engaging questions including those related to identity formation, the disruption and recuperation of heritage,
traumatic memory, and the burden of the past on individualization. Rewriting traditional representations of the family, these authors call into question rigid, ethnocentric conceptions tied to a common language, history, or territory. Rather than bolster a cycle of repetition in which family maintains and propagates the same heritage, these reveal the plasticity of the message transmitted by family and the impact of the individual in transmitting a heritage.

The representation of the family offers a unique narrative device through which the conflict between the self and the collective, between individualization and classification is brought into sharper focus. Because the family evokes a sense of belonging that exists within individuals but also transcends them, it remains elusive and unfinished. The family, then, is an ongoing process. It is a collective of single subjects whose actions influence the whole but are also subject to it. As a narrative device, the family may be seen as both imposing and supple. This inherent ambiguity makes the family vulnerable to manipulation. For example, a representation of the family across a long period of time seeks to assign characteristic traits, to uncover a single narrative thread. However, the novels studied show that the family as a single source of identity becomes a site of conflict when the heritage the individual receives does not correspond with his own sense of self or the message he hopes to transmit.


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Lamonde, Yvan. “La recherche d’universal et de médiations dans la pensée québécoise.”


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